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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HUNCHBACK OF WESTMINSTER ***

William Le Queux

"The Hunchback of Westminster"

Preface.

A Word Before Reading.

For many years I have busied myself making a collection of rare and valuable historical documents, and strange indeed are some of the stories and scandals which these ancient, crinkled parchments whisper to me in my hours of leisure.

In France, in Italy, in Russia, in Germany, in Belgium, in all corners of England, this craze of mine has led me, through many adventures, free but captive; and, looking back now, I realise that it has been really through this little-known hobby of mine, the hobby of palaeography, that there have come some of the most suggestive and magical hours I have ever spent in a wandering, erratic life that has never been wholly free from movement, but has often held its time of danger and its resistless, restless passion for change, romance, and adventure.

Perhaps, then, it is not really wonderful that this love of mine for the records of the dead-and-gone ages colours my later stories. Yet, in a sense, it would be strangely odd if it did not, for when an author hears so weird and thrilling a narrative of hidden treasure as this I have here striven to recount it would surely be more than human of him to fail to put it into print.

This "Hunchback of Westminster" is really no idle fiction spun for the entertainment of an idle hour. In many ways, indeed, it is tragically true—particularly that portion which tells how men only a few months ago in this prosaic London of ours fought for a certain treasure worth several millions of pounds.

William Le Queux.

Chapter One.

How Don José Baited His Trap.

It was in the second year of my practice as a private detective that young José Casteno came to my office in Stanton Street, WC, and entrusted me with that strange and terrible mission in regard to which I have really hesitated, in all sincerity, for some days before I could actually nerve myself to take the public into my confidence.

Up to that time, I remember, my big brass plate, with the legend "Mr Hugh Glynn, Secret Investigator," had only succeeded in drawing a very average and ordinary amount of business. True, I had had several profitable cases in which wives wanted to know what happened to their husbands when they didn't come home at the usual hours, and employers were anxious to discover certain leakages through which had disappeared a percentage of their cash; but for the most part my work had been shockingly humdrum, and already I had begun to regret the whim that had prompted me, after reading certain latter-day romances, to throw up my career as a barrister in Gray's Inn to emulate the romancer's heroes in real life.

Indeed, at the rate of progress I was making then, I calculated that it would be exactly forty-seven and a half years before I could save 1000 pounds out of my expenses, and, with that as a nest-egg, dare to ask pretty Doris Napier to marry me; and hence, as such long engagements were no more fashionable then than they are now, I can assure you I often felt a trifle despondent about my future.

Still, that was before José Casteno appeared on the scene in Stanton Street, WC. Afterwards things, as you will see, were different.

Now, of course, there are always plenty of people who do not believe that the great and wonderful things that happen in life come heralded by a sky angry with the glow of blood or by a storm in which the wind seems to range from end to end of the gamut of all human emotion, and to sob and shriek and sigh as though it were possessed by some fugitive spirit stricken with mortal pain. On the contrary, they argue, the biggest things have the smallest beginnings, and hence one never knows what tiny affair betokens crisis. As a matter of fact, I hadn't noticed, I own, any peculiar association of sympathy between Man and Nature until this particular night I write of, but then I do recollect very well it did so happen that I was very late indeed at the office, that there was a most terrifying thunderstorm in London, and that, just about midnight, the darkness was both cavernous and oppressive.

As I close my eyes I can recall the whole scene again—that black, deserted street, the flickering gaslights, the vague suggestion, in the swirl of the rain, of a mighty, impalpable presence that was sweeping through the metropolis rent by passion and terrors which no human imagination could ever give shape to. Then, all at once, a great calm seemed to fall over the night, and as I swung my chair round from the fireplace to see what had happened I became suddenly conscious of a white, haggard face pressed to the window-pane staring at me with wide, dilated eyes that dogged my every movement and seemed to hypnotise all my senses.

For a moment, I admit, I paused, paralysed by a nameless horror. Immediately afterwards the utter absurdity of any serious cause for fright on a ground floor in a thoroughfare not a dozen yards from the never-dying turmoil of the Strand broke upon me. With one bound I sprang to my office door, which I instantly flung far open, and there immediately entered to me, without a word being uttered on either side, a tall, thin, foreign-looking man of about twenty-five. His was the face which I had seen staring at me so eagerly through the window-pane!

"Pardon me coming at this unseasonable hour," he said, with a profound gesture of humility, yet in a gentle, refined accent that suggested the student and the scholar. "Permit me to introduce myself," and, with a flourish, he handed me a large-sized card, on which was engraved the name, in a distinctly foreign hand, "Don José Casteno," but the address was scratched out.

For an instant his eyes met mine in one long, keen, lingering gaze of scrutiny—in that fatal instant, indeed, which follows the coming together of all men destined to do much in common, and which I have always found, in my experience, invariably decides whether we trust or we hate. Strange as his arrival had been, I will say, frankly, I took a liking to him even in that ghostly glare of the firelight; and, motioning him to a chair opposite to my desk, I turned up the gas. Then as he removed a wide-brimmed felt hat and unfastened a shabby black coat with a kind of Inverness cape, most often seen in use by foreign priests, I noticed his pale, intellectual-looking, clean-shaven face, with a mouth as tender and expressive as a girl's.

"My business," he began in a low voice of explanation as soon as he saw me seat myself and take up a pen to follow him, "is by no means a piece of common detective work which I am anxious that you should undertake in my behalf. On the contrary, it deals, Mr Glynn," and now his voice became very grave, "with much that is startling and mysterious—much that spells ugly words like 'treachery' even in London—striking, as it does, at the root of at least one far-reaching unprincipled, foreign intrigue. First of all, then, I must ask you to tell me quite openly and frankly, are you free and prepared to undertake a series of difficult and dangerous missions?"

"I am," I replied after a moment's pause; "but it must be on terms."

"And what are those terms?"

"First, that I am well and punctually paid," and, in spite of myself, I smiled, for I found quite suddenly I had grown quite mercenary after my bitter reflections about Doris.

"Certainly, you shall be promptly remunerated," he returned, and, thrusting a hand into a breast pocket, he withdrew a letter case stuffed with bank notes. "Pray let me put you right on that point at once by placing that in your safe," he added. "Take from it as the work progresses any sums you may reasonably require. When all is over I will call on you to account for the amount. To-night it stands at 750 pounds."

I counted the notes. They were quite new, but perfectly genuine, and of the amount he had stated, and I promptly locked them up in the small strong room that adjoined my office, which, alas! had hitherto seen too little of all such valuables. Then I faced Don José again.

"My next condition," I said slowly, "is that you give me your entire confidence. There must be nothing kept from me. You must tell me all—absolutely all."

"Ah, but—that is impossible," he replied gently. "I simply dare not reveal the details of the secret, which I want you to work on, to any single soul. If I did, my life would be taken within the following four and twenty hours." And all at once he shivered, as though he had himself caught instinctively some eerie presentiment of his doom.

"But how can I hope to work successfully in the dark?" I cried, throwing up my hands.

"Easily enough," he returned. "All you have to do is to carry out my instructions, then nothing need be feared. For instance, here is the first task which I desire you should undertake." And again he put his hand in his breast pocket, and this time he did not produce a pocket-book, but a tiny cutting which he explained came from that evening's *Globe*, and which set out this odd notice:

To be sold—without Reserve—the Library and Effects of a Refugee Spanish priest, lately deceased. Contains many early printed Books, Horae, Liturgical, and other Manuscripts. By Auction to-morrow (Friday) at 3 PM. The Bromley Mart, King's Street, Covent Garden, WC.

Now, almost in spite of myself, I felt flattered by this quaint and unexpected turn of negotiations which dropped so

suddenly a mystery and touched on concrete things.

Let me explain the reason. As a matter of fact, if there was one hobby at that moment that appealed to me more than another it was that connected with old books, old furniture, old silver, old deeds, and charters. Indeed, I admit freely, I had attained already some certain amount of notoriety amongst the well-informed in this direction, acting as I had done for the young Earl of Fotheringay before I became a secret investigator, and at a time when I had leisure to roam from auction mart to curiosity shop, and thence to old country mansions on the eve of important sales—where more bargains in antiques are picked up than most wealthy curio-collectors dream of. But how Don José could have guessed I had any specialist knowledge of this sort I was powerless to explain. None the less, the probability of some romance, or some rare discovery in this sale, tempted me sorely, and the Spaniard, who had been narrowly watching my features, seemed to divine that, to recognise that I was then almost as good as won to his cause, for all at once he lowered his eyes before me, but not before I caught in their deep, dark depths the glint of some conscious triumph.

“So you wish me to bid for these things,” I at length suggested tentatively, laying the cutting on the table and tapping it interrogatively. “All of them or some?” I asked after another moment’s pause.

“One lot. Number 82, a bundle of manuscripts. These are very valuable.” And again his eyes flashed.

“What limit may I go to?”

“2500 pounds,” he answered promptly, and at this I started, for there are few old records in evidence worth so sensational a sum as this. “If the things are knocked down to you,” he went on eagerly, “a draft on a bank to the required amount will be put into your hands at once. As a matter of fact, the Bank of South and Central America have promised to send a special messenger to the mart itself to watch you and to take all the financial responsibilities off your shoulders.” He paused, and looked at me. “But you will never get them,” he added the next second, “of that I am certain,” and, half unconsciously, he gave a low, desponding sigh.

“Oh, that’s absurd,” I cried, although my own brain reeled at the magnitude of the commission, “we must not lose heart at the start. After all, an auction is an auction; money has money’s power the world over. Pay enough—and I feel sure you are bound to triumph.”

“So it would seem. But then you don’t know the secret foes whom you will have against you. Their power—their daring—their resources are marvellous.”

And he rose and paced my office, as though he could not bear even to think.

None the less, I made one further effort. “Why,” questioned I, “should they, or you for the matter of that, struggle for a few old parchment documents of an obscure Spanish priest? What are they to you, or to anyone?”

“Ah, that’s precisely what I cannot tell you. Rest assured, however, that they are, that we shall strive to buy them, and that they are almost practically certain to beat you. Nevertheless, fight for the things just as long as you have the strength. Afterwards, should you be out-classed in the actual sale, fix your mind on the next point in our quest—to discover where those documents are taken. Even if you can only find that simple fact out for me you will, in one sense, amply repay me.”

“But after the sale where shall we meet? Where will you come that I may report to you?” I asked, still in much confusion of mind.

“Here,” said he; “I’ll come to-morrow night at the same hour. Till then, I must beg you, have two watchwords—and two watchwords alone—‘secrecy’ and ‘dispatch.’” And moving forward suddenly he picked up his hat and, with a low bow, crossed to the door.

I, too, rose, but I was not in time. He was too quick for me. All at once he gave me another profound bow, and with a sharp turn of the wrist threw open the door, through which he passed again as swiftly and as mysteriously as he had come.

Not to be beaten, though, I followed him instantly into the street. A thousand questions called to me for answers. I felt I could not let him go in that manner.

By this time the storm had completely died down, the sky had cleared, and was now cloudless and studded with stars. Yet, look where I would, I could not catch a trace of his fleeing shadow, although, by all rules of time and distance, he could not then have covered seven or eight yards at the most. It seemed, indeed, as though the pavement must have opened suddenly and swallowed him up.

Just, however, as I was about to turn indoors again another strange thing happened.

Chapter Two.

Lot Eighty-Two.

Just at that moment a man’s form emerged from the darkness on the opposite side of the street, and a familiar voice called to me in a loud but commanding whisper: “Glynn! Glynn! Is that you? You’re here late, aren’t you?” I wheeled round suddenly, and recognised the speaker. It was Detective-Inspector Naylor of Scotland Yard, with whom in times past I had been engaged in several joint investigations in which society and crime played parts of equally unpleasant prominence.

"Hullo!" I said, puzzled to know what to say, and still bewildered by the unexpected climax to my last interview. "What the deuce are you doing here at this ungodly time of night? Got something good professionally on, eh?"

"Oh, rather a queer job," he answered lightly, bending down and pretending to strike a match on a shop front, wherewith to light the cigar he was carrying. "I'm after a young foreign chap who has just escaped from the monastery where he was a novice, and is accused of the murder of a well-known English nobleman in peculiarly atrocious circumstances. Good-bye. Take care of yourself. I'm a bit late as it is, although I think I've got a splendid clue."

And he, too, vanished just as suddenly into the night.

Luckily my business as a professional investigator of the odd, the queer, and the misunderstood in life had given me a stout nerve and an obedient brain, so, crushing down all the flood of idle speculation that rose in me as to the reason and connection of those two most extraordinary coincidences, I patiently retraced my steps, locked up my rooms, and turned into my bed.

"Enough for the day is the worry thereof," I told myself as I mixed a glass of steaming grog. "I've got the money from this Spaniard, and I've got the commission to go to that auction, and when I am able to answer any or all the puzzling questions that this mysterious visit of Don José Casteno has suggested to me I'll ask them quickly enough—but not before. As for Mr Naylor, well, he's got his troubles. So have I. 'One dog, one bone,' as my old groom used to say when any of the other servants tried to interfere with his prerogatives. I'll stick to my own lines, and that, at present, is nothing more formidable, in spite of his dark hints and tall talk, than the acquisition of these old manuscripts for Don José." And gulping down the hot jorum I had prepared I resolutely threw the bedclothes over my head, and soon was fast asleep.

Next day, however, I turned up punctually at the mart in Covent Garden just before the hour the advertisement specified.

To say I was not anxious about the result of my action would be foolish. I was—for always behind my business, you must remember, lurked those soft, shy, tender eyes of Doris Napier, which I wanted to shine on me alone. All the same, I had no idea of the strange and bewildering acts of trickery in which, contrary to my best efforts, I was destined to become a central figure. Had I known, of course, the sequel to them might have been very different, and maybe, too, this story would never have been written. As it was—but there! let the affair speak for itself. It happened like this:

Directly I arrived in King's Street I found the huge wooden apartment, with its familiar roof of green opaque glass and its big staring advertisements in colour on the walls, known to curio lovers all over the world as the "Brom," crowded from end to end and door to door with foreigners. Now this was extremely unusual. In an ordinary way the same dealers and amateurs turn up at these functions time after time—these people fall into methods of their own of quick and agreeable acquaintance—and the bidding is conducted with certain airs of old-world politeness and decorum, which men who love the work find very delightful and refreshing in themselves, and yet conducive to the best business results.

To-day, however, the whole atmosphere and method of the place were changed as if by magic. A crowd of Jews, Spaniards, and Italians had practically taken entire possession of this huge and rambling mart, and their eager, polyglot conversation recalled nothing less than the Tower of Babel as they chattered, twisted, turned, elbowed, and gesticulated with as much animation as though they had met to devour the effects of a Rothschild instead of the books and goods of a poor, unnamed, dead refugee priest.

Indeed, it was just as much as I could do to elbow my way into the place at all. The crowd didn't actively impede my progress, but they showed no desire to move out of my path; but finally I did, with a free use of my shoulders and knees, squeeze myself into a good position on a packing case, which lifted me high above the crowd, and yet which also gave me a splendid view of the rostrum upon which, as it happened, the auctioneer had just taken his seat.

Even he seemed rather stupefied by this vast, unexpected, and quite unusual assemblage, for no sooner had he called silence with a touch of his mallet on the table than he cleared his throat and said:

"I hope, gentlemen, that you have not been drawn here this afternoon under any misapprehension. This is not really one of the days of our big sales; all we have to dispose of are some two hundred books, a few vestments, and some quaint, old manuscripts belonging to a priest—a father—"

He turned despairingly to his clerk, who consulted his ledger, and supplied the name needed.

"I mean a Father Alphonse Calasanctius, who, I am told, arrived quite mysteriously in Southampton late last week by the royal mail steamer *Tartar*, and was, unfortunately, found dead in the room he took in a private hotel in the Adelphi only the night afterwards.

"My idea, to-day, is to get things over as quickly as possible, and so I will put up the manuscripts first. I confess I don't know myself whether certain of them are of any value, or whether they are some mere monkish jests of some centuries ago when men had more leisure to penetrate long legal-looking hoaxes. I ought to tell you, though, that I took several of them myself to an expert at the British Museum yesterday afternoon, and he was inclined to think they might be exceedingly precious, for he found that they related to some extraordinary secret which certain Jesuit monks in Mexico had taken that means of putting on record. All the same, he said quite frankly, he could not pledge himself on the point, for, as it happened, he could make nothing out of the greater part of the writing on them, which seemed to him, read in the ordinary fashion, mere gibberish, which might take years of patient study and research to unravel, and then be worth nothing in the end."

The sale commenced, and the prices realised by some of the codices that comprised the first lots were ridiculously low. Whoever bought them made magnificent investments. For instance, a fourteenth-century English manuscript of Sower's "Confessio Amantes" on vellum, with eighty-five miniatures—a perfect gem, worth at least the fifteen hundred pounds which the Fountaine copy realised—went for eighteen pounds ten. A French manuscript of the Bible of the same period with a number of ornamental initials and miniatures fetched only sixteen pounds, although, as a collector, I knew it to be worth three hundred at least; while a thirteenth-century manuscript, "De Regimen Principium" of Egidius, written on vellum in double columns, with a beautifully illuminated border on the front page, and bearing the stencil mark of the well-known collector, Sir Thomas Phillips, fetched only twenty-one pounds ten; while a twelfth-century "Decretales Gregorii," an eleventh-century Latin Bible, and a "Biblia Versificata" of the twelfth century, once the property of the Jesuits' College at Heidelberg, fetched equally low prices.

Presently the three manuscripts comprising lot eighty-two were held up for inspection. Each was about a foot square, and was intolerably dirty and stained by damp and time.

"Now, gentlemen, what offers?" cried the auctioneer, and again he brought his hammer down on the table with a sharp knock.

"I'll give ten pounds for them," instantly shouted a voice in the crowd, and all at once I caught sight of the face of the owner thereof, which, to my intense astonishment, proved to be no other than my friend Peter Zouche, that odd-shaped, deformed person who is familiarly known to the rich and learned everywhere as "The Hunchback of Westminster."

Now, how had Peter Zouche, who was reputed to spend his life between Sotheby's, Quaritch's, Dobell's, and Maggs's, and that mysterious den in which he lived, under the shadow of the Houses of Parliament, got wind of these treasures.

Instinctively I felt there was something more in these documents than even Don José had hinted, and so with a quick turn I caught the eye of the auctioneer and nodded briskly again.

"Twenty pounds offered," he said, and he pointed his hammer straight at me, whereat all the crowd appeared to turn and stare suddenly and openly at me with fierce and malevolent looks.

Then, almost in a flash as it were, the real excitement of the gathering broke out.

Before I quite knew what had happened bids had poured in from a hundred eager voices, and the figures had miraculously climbed up, up, up with the rapidity of lightning, so that before I had interposed five times I believe they were actually all trembling on the brink of a thousand pounds!

And this for three dirty, crisp rolls of parchment!

All the same, I must admit that my determination to get possession of those records seemed to have been carefully noted by my rivals. In fact, I was continually made conscious of those looks of veiled hostility which continued to be shot at me from every direction as time after time I topped the bids. Meanwhile, too, a steady hubbub began to arise around me, above which I found it was increasingly difficult to make oneself heard or noted. Also, during a lull in the contest, the crowd appeared to sway and part, and all at once, to my astonishment, I found that the Hunchback of Westminster himself was standing beside me, and with him the dearest friend and fellow-collector I had ever had, the Earl of Fotheringay, and when I came to examine them I was stupefied to find that both men's faces were deadly white.

"For God's sake, for your own sake, Glynn," whispered Lord Fotheringay in my ear impressively, "end this mad rivalry with us; you have no idea what terrible havoc you are making of things by your wild bids at this momentous juncture. Stand down, man, stand down, or you'll ruin all."

But, with my teeth set hard, I glared at him defiantly. "What was my business to him?" Indeed, my blood was up—I knew I was bound in honour—and I nodded again to the auctioneer, who saw me instantly, and repeated aloud: "Mr Glynn says twelve hundred and fifty pounds. Is there any advance?"

The hunchback now turned on me with a snarling expression like a tiger's.

"Fool," he hissed, "you won't be warned," and, raising his arm, he made a sign with his hand.

Almost instantly the crowd appeared to rise up *en masse* and to roll right over us, but as I stumbled backward, headlong from my foothold, I was astonished to see a man, got up to resemble me exactly in every feature, scramble on to my place on the upturned case, and in a voice that seemed my very own, to cry out to the auctioneer: "That, sir, is the most I can do. I now retire." And as a cheer broke out from the crowd he too skipped down instantly out of sight.

"Ah, this is indeed treachery," I told myself. And, gripping my teeth hard, I let my fists go; next, with a mighty effort, I sprang forward to roll the surging human mob out of my path—to make my voice heard, to regain my old position, to take command of the situation again, for I heard the bids still mounting higher, higher, higher.

In vain.

Lord Fotheringay, who, I thought, loved me as a brother, was on me with a bound like a lion's, and catching me by the throat exerted all his force and hurled me backwards.

Next second I found myself caught up in other and even stronger arms, and, before I could utter aught save a muffled curse, I was flung head first into an empty piano case, the heavy lid of which was instantly closed on me—but

not before I heard the hammer fall and the auctioneer call: "The deeds are Mr Peter Zouche's. The price is eighteen hundred pounds." I had been tricked!

Chapter Three.

I Determine to Go Forward.

How long I remained imprisoned in that box whilst the sale of the dead priest's effects went steadily onward I have no knowledge. Certainly, for a time, rage deprived me of all power of reason, and I know I fought and struggled like a madman in those stout wooden walls before I recognised that I was, in truth, fairly beaten, and that the best thing I could do, in such futile circumstances as these, was to wait with what fortitude I could summon for that dramatic moment when it would please my so-called "friends," the Earl of Fotheringay and the hunchback, to arrange my release.

As to their extraordinary conduct, I could not, I admit frankly, bring myself to think. It was, it appeared to me, so brutal, so unfair, so absolutely diabolical. Don José Casteno, as he called himself, had warned me, of course, to expect treachery, and also to be cautious about some mysterious, far-reaching, and sensational intrigue—but not even I, in my wildest moods, could have expected that I should be caught up in a London auction market in broad daylight by a band of foreign mercenaries and that my bids would be put out of competition just at the second that my client demanded all my shrewdness, my intelligence, and my power to fix a hard deal. And the abduction seemed only the more bitter to me because it had been so cunningly engineered by two of my own most particular and intimate "friends!"

Eventually, however, some sounds did penetrate the box wherein I had been concealed. I was conscious of heavy weights being moved along the same floor and of a thump and rattle of noisy chains. Then I heard a sharp crack, as if nails were being driven into the lid of the case in which I had been confined, and the whole structure began to quiver and creak and groan under these blows, until, at length, so loud and terrifying was the noise that my head seemed to split with the rush of blood and the pain.

Fortunately, the hammer ceased sooner than I anticipated, and I became conscious of the case being hoisted through the air, to fall swiftly on to some springy cart or waggon that was doubtless in waiting outside the mart. A few minutes later the box itself began to shake, jolt, and rattle, and then I knew that I was being carried over some of the rough cobbled streets around Covent Garden. In the end, lulled by this movement, that by-and-by became more regular and even, and also worn out by exhaustion from the struggle I had passed through, I must have slept, for when I next came to note my experiences I found that every movement had ceased and that all now was dull and silent as the grave.

What had happened?

Half unconsciously I rose from my crouching posture in the box and placed my hands high above my head. As I did so I was startled to catch the bright gleam of a chisel, that just then was being inserted from the outside, and all at once I heard some fresh blows from a hammer, which made me hope that at length the expected time of my deliverance had come, and that the lid of the case was in process of being forced open to set me free.

A moment afterwards the wooden framework yielded with a crash. A flood of light poured into the box, rendering me for the time quite blind, for the interior of the case had been perfectly dark. Directly, however, I recovered myself from this I sprang out, and, to my chagrin, found that I was only partially released, for I was now in a cellar about twenty feet square, lit in the centre by a ship's lantern which depended from the ceiling by an iron chain. Unfortunately, too, I was not quick enough to see who it was that had struck off the lid, for almost the same second as I emerged an iron door at the far end of the apartment closed with a crash, a key turned in the lock, and I heard a man's footsteps die away in the distance.

Not to be balked, I seized the hammer which he had dropped in his excitement, and with this beat upon the door.

"Let me out," I shouted. "Let me out at once."

A reply came more quickly than I expected.

Almost immediately there followed the sounds of returning footsteps, and to my utter astonishment I heard a familiar voice cry: "Hugh! Hugh!" And the door was flung open, and no other than Doris Napier herself rushed to my arms.

Laughing and crying alternately, she could give me no coherent word of explanation then, but half led, half dragged me out of this strange hiding-place to a large apartment on the floor above, which, from the specific kind of curiosities it contained, I recognised at once as one of the showrooms of Peter Zouche, the Hunchback of Westminster.

"By heaven!" I cried in amazement as I stopped suddenly close to the open door near the street; and almost stupefied I surveyed the apartment in Tufton Street in which I had been so often an honoured visitor, "and so this is the place of the man who has dared to abduct me in the open—is it? The Hunchback of Westminster! Well, now I know with whom I shall have to reckon. He shall not find I am remiss." And I set my teeth hard.

"Don't talk like that," pleaded Doris, laying a gentle detaining hand on my arm and trying to lead me in the direction of the pavement. "Remember Mr Zouche and Lord Fotheringay are both friends of yours, and realise for once that you have had a very narrow escape with your life. You can have no idea of the peril you have been in."

"No doubt," I returned grimly. "But that's scarcely the point just now, is it? You can leave me to deal with them—'friends' as you call them—or foes. What, dearest, I want to hear from you is this"—and I smiled into her eyes—"On what mad pretext were you lured here? How did you, of all the sweet and helpful souls on God's earth, come to learn that I had been kidnapped—"

"Father told me," she replied, with a blush—and she bent her head.

"Colonel Napier! Your father told you," I ejaculated. "But how in the name of fate did he come to be mixed up in this affair, which may end anywhere—even an assize court."

"Lord Fotheringay came and had a private chat with him in our flat at Whitehall Court," she explained. "That was about half-an-hour ago. I don't know, of course, what passed between them, but suddenly father came to me and said that you were in great danger and had been rescued by Mr Zouche's cleverness and the earl's quickness. He added, too, that somehow you had mixed yourself up in some terrible conspiracy which he had promised the earl, when he told him about it in confidence, that he would not reveal to a soul, but that I might, if I cared for you as much as ever, and did really wish to help you, take a hansom here and release you from this cellar and tell you from him that, whatever you do, you must instantly drop all connection with some man he called José Casteno?"

"Thanks, but that's not enough," I answered hotly. "The truth is, I've undertaken certain work for Casteno, and I shall carry it through. Believe me that, after all has been said and explained, it is Colonel Napier who has been made a puppet and not myself."

"Yes," I went on; "I mean Lord Fotheringay and Peter Zouche," and I saw the girl start and her face blanch. "Bah! you can never know what they have dared to do to me." And in a few graphic but incisive sentences I recounted to her all my humiliating and baffling experiences in the mart that afternoon.

"But perhaps," suggested Doris timidly when I had finished my passionate outburst, "they did not mean anything unkind to you after all. Look at the affair outside yourself. Perhaps great issues hang on the recovery of those three old manuscripts, and it is really you who are, as they assert, being made a tool of—to ruin them."

"I don't care whether I am or not." I retorted savagely, pulling my hat tightly across my temples. "I have seen Casteno, and I, who am usually reputed a fine judge of character by voice and face, like him, and I shall not cease my association with him until I prove conclusively that he is not worthy of my trust or assistance."

"Besides, Doris," I went on earnestly, "this particular commission of his means everything that I really value in life—it means you! Don't you recollect, as keenly as I do, how the colonel has forbidden us to be formally engaged until I can point to at least a thousand pounds, which I can tell him truthfully that I have made out of this new fantastic profession of mine as a secret investigator? Well, listen to me. If all goes well I see my way now quite easily to make this amount out of Casteno alone. Already he has handed me seven hundred and fifty pounds, and I can quickly run out other work on his behalf amounting to that extra two fifty. As for Lord Fotheringay, he'll never be of any professional use to me. Ever since he got back from America he's been quite a different man to all of us who were his old friends. Something dreadful must have happened to him there. He's changed hideously for the worse."

And then I stopped suddenly. This casual reference to America recalled something to me (like casual references often do to all of us) that I had quite forgotten. It was nothing less than a connection with America which both Lord Fotheringay and the dead priest, Father Alphonse Calasactius, had in common. Could it—I now asked myself—could it really happen that Don José Casteno had also come from that same South American Republic—the Republic of Mexico? And could those faded parchment rolls relate to some secret which the Earl of Fotheringay had discovered whilst he was in Mexico, and in regard to which he had procured the assistance of Zouche, one of the finest, most noted palaeographers and experts in mediaeval cypher that the British Museum has ever employed?

"I don't care," put in Doris firmly, "I don't care about this point of view of yours. I've a strong intuition that no good will come to you or to me by your association with this foreigner, Casteno. Believe me at least in this, that my father is not a man to speak or to act lightly, and he who really knows all, remember, says most solemnly that you must give this man's friendship up now—at once."

"I won't," I snapped decisively.

"For my sake," she pleaded, and her eyes were lustrous with unshed tears.

"I have given my word," I repeated, throwing my shoulders back with an effort.

"Break it. It was obtained from you by fraud," suggested this gentle casuist. "'Twould be no sin."

"But the money," I cried, and the thought restored my determination to its full strength.

Even Doris wavered. The temptation was indeed cruel.

"The money will do us no good," she replied at length. "I prefer we should wait."

"But I don't," I retorted, setting my chin firmly and clenching my fists. "I am tired of being treated as a little less than your friend, dear heart, and a little more than an acquaintance. I want you—your father—ay, all the world," I went on wildly, "to recognise me as your accepted lover. And inasmuch as José Casteno assists me to that end, I say now, once and for all, that I will not give him up for your father or anybody else. Besides, aren't we told there's a tide in the affairs of men? Well, I now put my intuition boldly against yours—against Colonel Napier's—even against the vamped-up stories of the ugly old Hunchback of Westminster—and I say that this tide of fortune has at last come to me, and that I will take it at the full flood no matter who may raise their hand in protest."

"You are quite determined?" gasped poor Doris, with a little shiver.

"Quite," I answered, and my teeth again closed with a snap.

"Then," said she, with a little gulp of terror, turning towards the door, "I—I must hurry back. I promised father that I would leave you at once if you refused, and I too must keep my word. Let me, however, whisper one word to you."

And still burning with self-righteousness I bent down.

"Mizpah," said she in a low voice, almost like a prayer: "The Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. Only He can protect us both. Please heaven He will." And kissing me hurriedly on the cheek she darted away.

Next instant she had sprung into a passing hansom and had vanished from my sight, leaving me for a second quite dumbfounded.

Chapter Four.

The House at Hampstead.

Thus began my powerful fight for Don José Casteno's rights!

Looking back to-day I, of course, can see quite clearly how very foolish and headstrong I then was, how I refused to be warned, even by the best friend man ever has—the woman who loves him. But there! we can all be wise after the event, can't we?

Oddly enough though, I did not meet Casteno in my offices that day at midnight as we had both so carefully arranged. True, I immediately made my way to Stanton Street, and by then eight o'clock had actually boomed forth from Big Ben, but no sooner did I reach my desk than I found thereon a telegram which had been despatched at 4:30 PM from the Charing Cross Telegraph Office by the mysterious Spaniard, cancelling the appointment, and calling upon me to:

"Come immediately to St. Bruno's, Chantry Road, Hampstead. I know all.—Casteno."

As a consequence of this I was soon speeding half across London in that swift ten-horse Panhard of mine, which had been given to me a month previously in a burst of generosity by a foolish client, an old man, whom I had succeeded in delivering from a gang of needy blackmailers without scandal. Indeed, in less than an hour from receipt of his message, I had reached the long, winding, and secluded thoroughfare which he had specified.

As a matter of fact, too, if anybody sought a spot where he could hide effectually from police and public in London, he could never choose a better or a more suitable district than the aristocratic portions of Hampstead. Much of the wild character of the heath still lingers in those avenues, and the dwellers in those parts are curiously few, select, and quite indifferent to what goes on outside their own ken.

St. Bruno's, I discovered, was one of the finest of the many fine but solitary-looking mansions that still exist in Chantry Road. It stood at the far end of the thoroughfare in a *cul de sac*, in which but one gas lamp burned feebly, throwing into more striking relief the dense, dark character of the surrounding trees and moss-grown pavement. The only entrance to the place I could find was a small oaken door in a lofty wall of stone, like those we see built so often for the vestries of our parish churches, and when I pulled an old and rusty iron bell-ring there was a disquietening pause of some minutes before I heard the movement of any servant. Even then the door itself did not open, but a small panel about nine inches square was thrust apart at a point about the height of the average man and commanding a good view of the stranger's face and form.

"What seek you, my son?" asked a clear, refined voice like a priest's, but when I answered; "Don José Casteno—he has sent for me," all was changed. The space beyond seemed flooded with light—the door itself was thrown open wide—and I found myself being escorted by a man in the habit of a Benedictine monk, across a flagged courtyard to a fine building, the entrance to which was commanded by two huge wooden doors.

"This is the home of the Order of St. Bruno," said my guide, who was old and decrepit, apparently about sixty years of age. His tones were those of courteous conversation as used by a man of culture, and he swung to and fro an old lantern he was carrying to light my path as we both waited patiently for somebody inside the building to unbar this formidable-looking entrance. "We St. Bruno-ites," he added, "have houses in many quarters—in Delhi for instance, in Sydney, in America—but this is our principal place."

"Roman Catholic, of course," I remarked, buttoning up my overcoat, for I felt chilled after my brisk ride. "Or High Church?" I ventured as I saw his bright eyes frown.

"Not at all," the man returned with some asperity. "We are of neither of those sects." But he never explained what their religion was. Just then the doors of the main house opened and we were ushered into a magnificent hall, decorated with dark oak panels, and relieved half-way by a finely-wrought gallery which ran on three sides of this spacious apartment. On the fourth wall was a wrought-iron bracket on which stood an immense statue of a woman carved out of white marble, decorated with rare exotic flowers, and cunningly lit by a series of candles, with reflectors which depressed all the light on features beautiful only with the passionless splendour of a Venus de Milo.

Down the centre of the hall was placed a long table, flanked on either side by forms, and headed by a chair or a small throne fashioned like an abbot's.

As a matter of fact, I had barely time to take these details in before the brother who had first admitted me turned with a low bow and left me. My new guide who had now ushered me in was much younger—about thirty I guessed—but he also was dressed in the same sombre habit of black as the one who had first received me, save that his hood and girdle were white.

No words passed between us, but, in a silence that was almost oppressive in so brilliantly illuminated and furnished a place, he escorted me down a long, richly-carpeted passage, hung with valuable classical pictures of a modern school, to a room at the far end, the door of which stood invitingly open. Here I was left, but as I turned to examine my new surroundings, which suggested the rich, well-furnished library of some bibliophile of a generation ago, I was conscious of somebody stealing up behind me.

I turned quickly.

It was Casteno, who, this time, was dressed in an ordinary Roman cassock, and carried a biretta.

“I’m glad that you have come so quickly,” he said in those smooth, even tones, motioning me to a chair on the opposite side to one in which he sat close to the fireplace. “As I wired you, I was at the auction. I saw you had failed.”

“Then why ever didn’t you bid for the manuscripts yourself?” I cried in amazement. “Why did you let them go without a protest?”

“I didn’t,” he answered quietly. “As a matter of fact, I was the man who was got up to personate you, and I stopped the mad rush of bids, for I was satisfied, when I saw beyond all doubt that it was the Hunchback of Westminster into whose hands those precious documents would fall, we should win our way through in the end. At first I feared it would be the other man.”

“Fotheringay?” I asked.

He nodded.

“But they are intimate friends. They are acting together, hand and glove.”

“They may now, but they won’t long,” he returned significantly, fixing his eyes in a dreamy way upon the fire.

Then he roused himself with an effort.

“Look here,” he went on quickly, as though he had suddenly arrived at a momentous decision, “don’t let’s beat about the bush. Let me come at once to business. Don’t bother me with a lot of questions. I can now see that you are simply exploding to put a lot of interrogatories to me, beginning with a demand for the reason why I came to you at all; how I dared to dress myself up exactly like yourself; what on earth has Colonel Napier to do with this business; and ending with a perfectly legitimate request for my true reasons for having so strong and deadly a hatred against this man Fotheringay, whom I know, before he went out big game shooting, you always believed was your most firm and ardent friend.

“Well, just don’t ask me, that’s all. If you do, I can’t answer you. If you persist it will inevitably mean that you and I will have to part. In the latter case you will never get any nearer the solution of that mystery of lot eighty-two—the three manuscripts which were found in the effects of the dead Father Alphonse Calasanctius—than you are to-night.

“As a matter of fact, I want your aid in deeds, not words. Now, say at once—are you prepared to trust me, and to help me, and not to bother me for a lot of utterly needless explanations that will really—take my word for it—leave you in a bigger fog than ever, or do you feel that you absolutely must have my confidence or turn up the work now, at once? Speak out quite plainly. Don’t be influenced by the thought of cash. Consider the seven-fifty I have handed to you as yours—whatever happens. Now, bed-rock fact!”

For a moment I reflected. My enthusiasm was stirred by his speech, and in turn I mentally defied Doris, the colonel, and even the weird old hunchback.

“I am prepared to trust you,” I answered, holding out my hand, which he clasped with the firm touch of a straightforward, honest man.

“Then take this letter for me,” he said, fumbling in the pocket of his cassock and producing therefrom a formidable-looking document done up with big splashes of red legal-looking wax. “Go to the House of Commons with it, and do not open it until you reach the hall in which Members of Parliament meet any strangers who desire to speak to them. Then read the instructions you will find therein and—” and all at once he stopped and looked confused.

“And what?” I queried, rising from my seat and fixing his eyes with mine.

“Well—you will see,” he answered, with a strange smile, touching a bell, which warned me that our interview was at an end.

Chapter Five.

Introduces the Hunchback.

I left St. Bruno’s and made as hard as my motor would go for Westminster. Under the new rules I knew that the House of Commons did practically no business at all on Saturdays, so that if I missed the opportunity afforded me

that night I realised that I should have to wait until Monday afternoon before I broke the seal.

Luckily, the streets about that hour were practically free from traffic, and my Panhard went pounding along at a pace which, if it were horribly illegal, was certainly mightily pleasant and exhilarating so that by the time I was tearing through Westminster all my doubts as to the strangeness of my reception by this queer-looking monk had vanished and I was quite keen to put this new mission through with rapidity and success.

Now, as most people are aware, the House of Commons is about the most easy place in the world of access if any man or woman has the most flimsy pretext of business with any one of its six hundred or so solemn and dignified members. I sprang from my car, handed it over to the care of a loafer who quickly hurried up, and simply nodded to the constables in the entrance. Then I marched up that long passage, peopled with the statues of dead and gone Parliamentarians, with head erect and heart that beat high with anticipation at some good and sensational development.

As arranged, I stopped in the big hall, where some forty or fifty persons were waiting either for admission to the strangers' gallery or intent on interviews; and, slipping on to one of the leather-covered lounges in a corner, I drew the precious missive from my pocket and broke the heavy seals with which it had been fastened.

As I expected, the package did not all at once yield up its secret. The outer wrapper, of a stout linen cloth similar to those used by the post-office for registered envelopes, merely fell off and revealed two other envelopes, also carefully stamped with red wax. On the top one was written in printed characters, as though the writer were afraid that his handwriting might be recognised:

"To John Cooper-Nassington, Esq, MP, St. Stephen's, Westminster, SW."

"The Bearer waits."

On the other, to my astonishment, I discovered no less an address than this:

Urgent. Private.

"To the Most Hon. Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs."

"Only to be delivered by Mr Hugh Glynn in case Mr Cooper-Nassington should decline."

For a second, I confess, I felt too astonished to say, or to do, or even to think of anything at all. I sat, with these big legal-looking letters in front of me, gazing into space, trying vainly to interpret the meaning of all these extraordinary manoeuvres on the part of a youthful Spaniard who might, it was true, be really a most important envoy of some far-off foreign state, but equally might be also, and with more apparent reason it seemed to me, absolutely nobody at all.

For Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, as all England was aware (in common with our foreign enemies, no matter how big they might be or bullying in tone or aggressive), was the very last man to be trifled with. He it was who, when Lord Garthdown fell, told Germany so sharply to keep out of an African negotiation we had on hand just then or he would apply an English form of the Monroe doctrine to the entire continent of Africa and never allow them to acquire there another foot of space. He had also, when the United States raised some futile question about boundaries that ought to have been fixed up a century ago, told America that he had settled the matter in his own mind; their claim was preposterous; and that, if they wished to enforce it, they had the remedy common to all nations; but he should advise them to remember that once they put foot into European complications they couldn't lift it out. And they, too, I recollect very well, promptly busied themselves about troubles elsewhere.

Not a nice man, perhaps—not even a courteous man—but, at all events, a man whom the House and the country feared, and on whom nobody dared play any game or trick.

Yet here was evidently an urgent private communication to him from Don José Casteno. What was at the bottom of it?—a secret of State or of life?

Like a man in a dream I arose and approached one of those sturdy, well-fed constables who stand ever at the barriers that mark off the sacred corridors of the House from the vulgar footstep of the unelect public.

"Please give that to Mr Cooper-Nassington," I said in a voice that I think had not the slightest resemblance to my natural tones.

My mood now was one of absolute indifference. Whatever happened, I recognised now that I was in for something extraordinary, and I felt I might as well get it over at once as sit on a lounge in that close, stuffy, noisy hall and speculate about a mystery to which I had no clue.

Even John Cooper-Nassington, millionaire, was no small legislative lion to tackle. In the days when South American industries were booming on the Stock Exchange he had appeared with the most wonderful options for railways in the different states—here, there, everywhere—and in three years he had emerged from the pit of speculation with hands cleaner and pockets heavier than most. Ever since he had been regarded as a great authority on things South American. Whenever Chili and Peru had a set-to, which they did regularly once in two years, or Venezuela grew offensive to its friends, or Mexico wanted to swell itself a little, John Cooper-Nassington was sent for by one side or the other; yet, alas, his enemies said he had more pleasure in putting down half-a-million to pay the expenses of a revolution in which five or six thousand innocent varlets were burnt or blown into eternity than he had in subsequently floating a costly war loan, three parts of which usually meandered into his own pocket.

Still, John Cooper-Nassington, when all was said and done, was but a penny pictorial paper kind of Boanerges

compared with the quick, Napoleonic qualities of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson who, by the way, had a curious personal resemblance to the First Consul, and was certainly not more than thirty-five years of age. Nassington, now, was a big, heavy-jawed man of about fifty, with a head and beard of iron-grey hair and a brawny, hairy, massive fist that would have felled a man at a blow; yet, as he suddenly projected himself through the swing doors that divided the lobby from the hall to meet me, I saw that he was carrying the letter I had sent carefully closed in his hands still but that his face was white and his looks strangely agitated.

"Ah, Mr Glynn," he said as I advanced to meet him, handing him my card, "this is an extraordinary business, isn't it?" And he wrung my hand with a vigour that suggested a high degree of excitement and nervous tension.

"I am but an ambassador, sir," I replied, falling into step with his, and commencing to pace up and down the corridor that led into the street. "I have no knowledge of the contents of the communication which I handed to you."

"Quite so. Quite so," he returned hurriedly. "I gathered as much from what was said by the writer to me. Still, I am told I can make what use of you I think fit, and, truth to say, that is one of the things that puzzle me. Shall I take you with me or shall I send you back?"

"Does that, sir, mean you decline?" I queried, remembering the superscription on the other envelope I was treasuring in a secret pocket within my vest.

"Good heavens, man, no!" he thundered. "Do you think I am a born fool or idiot, or what? Why, that terrible man Cuthbertson would give five years of his life, or one of his hands, to have a magnificent chance of a sensational *coup* such as this may prove to be if we are right and have a quarter of an ounce of luck. Just get this clear, will you? I accept—I accept—I accept." And he enforced his words with a grip on my arm that almost crushed the flesh into the bones.

A pause followed; and then, stopping dead, he fixed me with his eyes. I could see that, shrewd, clever man of the world as he was, he was taking my measure before he came to any deliberate resolution, and I met his gaze with a glance as steadfast and as fearless as his own. After all, what had I to be ashamed of in six feet of lithe, clean figure, an athletic step, and features that my worst friends would say, although my mouth was hidden by a heavy black moustache like a cavalryman's, were honest-looking and reliable?

"All right," he said in that sharp, decisive way of his; "I won't beat about the bush any longer. You shall go with me, and if, between us, we don't make some of these fiends sit up, and do a fine stroke of business for the old flag, I'll sit down and let that man I hate so cordially—Lord Cyril Cuthbertson—have a shot at it. But I won't—I won't—I won't." And once again he stretched out that vice-like hand of his to enforce his words on my over-slow imagination. But this time I was too quick for him—I slipped on one side—and he broke into a hearty laugh.

"You'll do," he said admiringly, giving me a hearty slap on the back. "Just meet me at the main entrance to the House in thirty minutes, will you? Then we'll go straight on."

But as he hastened back I could not help two questions recurring to me with startling distinctness: What "fiends" were those we had got to face?

And why should an insignificant-looking fellow like José Casteno so well understand the bitter personal rivalries that spring up between strong men on the same party side in the British Houses of Parliament as to be able to play what looked like a game of childish see-saw between two such redoubtable antagonists as Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and John Cooper-Nassington, uncrowned Emperor of Greater South America?

Both problems, however, were destined to be answered much more rapidly and sensationally than ever I expected when I left the House that night. I drove my Panhard at break-neck rate back to its garage in St. Martin's Lane, Charing Cross, snatched a hurried meal, and tore back in a hansom to St. Stephen's.

One thing was soon evident—Cooper-Nassington was a man of his word. As a matter of fact, I hadn't been waiting three minutes by those large and imposing gates that mark the main entrance to the Houses of Parliament before his *coupé* and handsome pair of bays clattered across the courtyard, and pulled up with a jerk close to the kerb, and he thrust his head out of the carriage and bade me enter.

In response, I took a vacant seat beside him, and without a word being exchanged between footman and master, the servant mounted the box again, and the carriage was driven rapidly away.

Now did I confess here that I was anxious as to our destination, worried as to what would happen, timid as to the safety of myself and my companion even after my grim and provoking experiences in the auction mart, I should not put down what was the fact. In truth, I never felt less concerned about the issue of any adventure in the whole course of my career. Indeed, one had only to be in the company of Cooper-Nassington to catch some of the wonderful vitality, assurance, and resource of this most extraordinary individual. The very presence of the man braced up the nerves, and insensibly one acquired some of that strong, masterful habit of mind and that breadth of outlook which seemed to make him feel that, whatever mischances befell some of God's creatures, he, at least, was one destined to pass on—ever successful, always victorious.

As it happened, the journey we went was in itself short. Barely had we passed half-way along Millbank Street than we made a sharp turn to the left, and before I had time to utter an expression of recognition, the carriage drew up with a jerk outside the old, dingy curiosity shop in Tufton Street in which I had earlier in the day been imprisoned,—the retreat of that uncanny man, Peter Zouche, the Hunchback of Westminster.

Choking down any feeling of surprise I had on the subject, I meekly descended from the brougham at the heels of my

companion and without a word of protest heard him tell his coachman: "Home." It seemed to me then that we were both walking into the lion's den together, and that, if anything untoward happened, much the same fate would befall us both.

The carriage rolled away, and as its red lights disappeared round the bend of the street, which seemed strangely silent and deserted, I was rather startled to hear my companion muffle something uncommonly like a sigh of regret. To think, of course, that he was a bit nervous about the upshot of our mission was nothing short of treason. None the less, as he advanced to the side door, and gave three peculiar taps on the woodwork, I found my hand travelling instinctively to that small pocket of mine in which rested a revolver.

Almost instantly his summons was answered, and there appeared, framed in the entrance, the grotesque figure of the hunchback, a man about four feet high, with a tiny head and face that instinctively recalled the profile of an eagle. He was carrying a candle in a heavy brass candlestick, and as he raised this above his head the light streamed full upon our features.

For a second he paused, uncertain what to do. Then a derisive smile curled around his toothless gums, and, with a sneer that I knew only too well from old and bitter experiences meant mischief, he said:

"Oh, it's you, Nassington, also Glynn—is it? Well, come in. It's as cheap inside as out, and not so deuced unpleasant." And he backed up against the wall as we picked our way through the passage into a tiny parlour at the back of the shop.

The hunchback closed, locked, and bolted the door and followed us into the room, placing the candle, with great deliberation, on the mantelpiece. Then, rubbing his hands together and still sneering, he turned and faced us.

"And now, gentlemen," he said, never attempting to ask us to be seated, "perhaps you will be as good as to tell me to what I owe the honour of this visit? Myself, I should have thought that my young friend here, Hugh Glynn, had had enough of Peter Zouche and his shop and of his way of paying out silly fellows who try to upset his plans."

Cooper-Nassington took a step forward and interposed his big brawny frame between myself and the hunchback.

"Look here, Zouche," he said in that strong, masterful way of his, "leave those tricks of nastiness for children, who may, perhaps, fly into a temper over them, and lose sight of the object of their visits, but we sha'n't." And he flung his hat deliberately on the table, and, dragging forward the most comfortable chair in the room, he coolly seated himself therein, pulled out a cigar case, extracted a weed therefrom, and began to smoke.

"As for you, Glynn," he cried to me in a pause between the puffs, "you make yourself at home too. Have a cigar," handing me the case and a box of vestas, "but don't let that old scoundrel, Zouche, have one. It all depends on his behaviour whether we ever leave him again now we've taken up our quarters in this musty old den of his." And he reached for a decanter of whiskey and a glass which were standing near, but the hunchback, who was now pallid with rage, made a grab for him and dragged them out of his grasp.

"You brute!" he hissed. "The same old brute too. Tell me your business, and get you gone."

"Ah, now you're talking sense," said my companion, whose object evidently had been to get the hunchback into a rage, "and I'll repay your compliment by emulating your example and talking to the point too. As you guess, I have come about those three old manuscripts which you purchased at the sale of the effects of a certain Father Alphonse Calasanctius. You have had time to decipher them since, and you know they are of precious importance to the gentleman who is employing Mr Glynn here, to that young idiot, Lord Fotheringay, and, also incidentally, to myself. Now, what did they contain?"

And he fixed Peter Zouche with those terrible eyes of his.

To me, a plain onlooker, it was, of course, obvious that there must be some strong, secret bond between the hunchback and the millionaire. Nobody else, I was certain, would have dared to defy Peter Zouche like this, for, whatever might be his faults, the old curio dealer lacked neither position in the world, the respect of his fellows, nor wealth, that was sometimes spoken of as almost fabulous. True, he had all that petty spite, that malevolence, that ache for sinister mischief that somehow one almost always finds with people who have been deformed from birth, but that night none of these obvious defects were uppermost. His attitude, on the contrary, suggested a man who had been brought to bay much against his will—that of one who was faced by two dread alternatives—either to fight to the bitter end an associate of old who had some most uncanny and far-reaching hold over him, or to meekly yield up some secret which he valued almost as highly as his life.

Who would triumph?

One—two—three—four—five minutes went by. Half instinctively I watched the clock on the mantelpiece; and still the hunchback made no sign, but stood half huddled over the fire, his gaze obstinately fixed on the flames.

I remember now how breathlessly I watched that terrific conflict between those two men of extraordinary position, influence, and power,—and I remember, too, thinking how it was all the more deadly and impressive because it was all so silent. One heard nothing, absolutely nothing, in that old back parlour but the steady tick-tick of antique clocks in the shop adjacent, the puff of the MP's cigar, and the quick, laboured breathing of the grotesque figure poised near the fender.

The Sacred Secret.

Had I ever been tempted, indeed, to think that the mission which Don José Casteno had confided to me was some small matter of a collector's gain, I should not have done so after the part I played as sole witness of this wordless drama. The very atmosphere of the room was pregnant with mysterious suggestion of the tremendous issues that were hanging then in the balance. I knew at last, with as much certainty as though I had read the documents themselves, that these manuscripts that had dropped so carelessly from the hands of a dead monk into all the hurly-burly of a commonplace auction room were precious records that affected the lives, the happiness, the fortunes of thousands.

Again the problem stated itself: Who would triumph? And again I had to wait, for neither Peter Zouche nor John Cooper-Nassington would make any sign.

Suddenly, though, the dwarf stood up and fixed his eager, burning, avaricious eyes on me. "You, Mr Glynn," he snapped, "are a man who knows as much about old manuscripts as most folks. I have seen your collection, and, for one who has had no means to speak of, you have done exceedingly well. Why don't you tell this big, bullying, aggressive friend of ours what those three deeds contained? You were employed by some peculiar people to get possession of them, no matter what the cost might be. You received very explicit instructions about them. You made a clever fight for them."

"And," I broke in sternly, "you, sir, filled the room with a 'knock out' of dirty, hungry aliens from Whitechapel; and, when I grew dangerous, you and your friends did not scruple to hound me down and kidnap me. That was the way you put me out of competition and snatched your beggarly triumph, but you know as well as I do that I am ignorant of the precise contents or qualities of the documents which I was employed to make such a strenuous battle for."

"But, sir," he sneered, rolling back his lips and showing his toothless gums, "think of that beautiful sign outside your office: 'Mr Hugh Glynn, Secret Investigator!' why, nothing should be hidden from you!" And he threw out his hands with a gesture of infinite comprehensiveness and burst into a loud and offensive mocking laugh.

"Nor will this thing be a mystery to me long," I retorted boldly, rising and striking the top of the table with my clenched fist. "You, Peter Zouche, understand that! At present I am merely a private soldier obeying the orders of a superior officer, but, by heaven! if it were not so, and I were free to handle this affair in the manner that suited me best, do you fancy you would be able to play with me like you did at the auction mart in Covent Garden, that I would walk meekly out of your shop after I had been kicked and buffeted and imprisoned, and that I would come here almost immediately afterwards and let you do your level best to jeer at me and sneer at me and treat me as a dolt or a child? No!" I thundered, "ten thousand thousand times no!"

"Luckily," I went on in a more subdued voice, "fate has given me a share in this mystery, and as soon as I am free of all the honourable obligations which I have undertaken you may be sure I shall be here to be reckoned with. Sooner or later I will make you bitterly regret this cheap scoffing of yours at my qualifications as a professional detective. I know that wonderful secrets about buried treasures and compacts between states and churches and individuals, lie hidden in those old manuscript deeds that are often left kicking about as so much idle lumber in garret and cellar and office. Nobody in London, indeed, knows better; and I will track this precious secret of yours down—"

"Enough," struck in Cooper-Nassington in his most terrible tones. "You, Glynn, have now justified yourself. It's the hunchback's turn. Once again I demand of him: What has he deciphered from those three queer-looking manuscripts which he purchased this afternoon?"

Peter Zouche faltered; to my astonishment I saw that he had been conquered.

"You know well enough what they contain," he snarled, "or you would not be here at this hour, and in this mood!"

"And so do you, you wicked old cripple," roared my friend, "or you would never have spent all that money on packing that auction mart with your gang of foreign mercenaries to effect a knock-out of the manuscripts; you are not the kind of philanthropist who throws away two or three thousand pounds on the relatives of a poor Spanish priest whom you have never set eyes on. So speak out without any more fuss. Are they what I have been led to expect?"

"They are," the hunchback muttered, licking his dry and feverish lips; "but it will take me two or three weeks to decode them. I was looking at them when you came and knocked at the door with that cursed all-compelling signal of yours. Why the deuce didn't you leave me in peace for a time?"

"Because I wanted to be sure I had been correctly informed, of course," retorted the Member of Parliament gaily, rising and brushing the cigar ash off his waistcoat. "In fact, in a word, I shall assume now that you have got possession of the documents that give the key to the position and the drainage of the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano, which was for centuries the depository of the treasures of the original tribes of Mexico, and which has been believed always, upon quite credible evidence, to contain gold and precious stones to the amount of many millions sterling."

"Yes; that is so," conceded Zouche, with a sigh.

"What!" I cried, unable to stifle my excitement at hearing this extraordinary piece of news. "Do you mean to say there has been discovered at last that wonderful Mexican lake over which England nearly went to war with Spain in the days of Elizabeth, a secret that was supposed to be known only to the Jesuits, who lost in some miraculous fashion all the documents bearing on the subject nearly three hundred years ago?"

"I do," replied the hunchback. "What did you think when I took such extraordinary precautions at the auction this afternoon?—that I was simply playing up for some quaint and curious cryptogram? Bah! men of my reputation don't

fling one thousand eight hundred pounds about for childish puzzles like those.”

“So I might have guessed,” I added to myself a little bitterly. “I ought to have realised something of the sort was afoot, but, as you know, we collectors of manuscripts have known so long about these wonderful missing records that we have actually grown tired of looking out for them, and some of the best and wisest of us have gone so far as to doubt their very existence.”

“Well, you need not,” observed the Member of Parliament genially, fixing his hat upon his head firmly. “Prescott, in his ‘Conquest of Mexico,’ sets out the facts about the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano with great clearness. I remember, very well, he explains that it must be somewhere about the centre of the uninhabited portion of Mexico and that its dimensions are not too formidable to tackle for unwatering, being about only one thousand two hundred feet long by one thousand feet wide on the surface, but the greatest depth has not been fathomed. It is known to stand at a height of about ten thousand feet above sea level. Indeed, its depths are reputed to have been regarded as sacred to their gods by a numerous aboriginal population long before the appearance of the Jesuits in that part of the world.”

“But why,” I queried, “is the value of its treasure always so firmly insisted on?”

“Because,” replied he, “in connection with their religious rites the aboriginals habitually made offerings to the deities of the lake in the form of gold dust, golden images, and emeralds, the most famous emerald mines of the world being situated in the heart of Mexico. Indeed, Prescott says that this particular gem was held as sacred by the early tribes inhabiting Mexico as being the emblem of the sun, they themselves being sun-worshippers. More than that, their king, who was also their pontiff, was in the habit of being completely covered with gold dust so applied as to cause him to shine with great lustre like the rays of the sun. In brief, he was the real ‘El Dorado’ of whom we have heard so much and seen so little; and, as his principal religious ceremony, he was wont to perform his ablutions from a raft in the centre of the lake, until the whole of the precious metal was washed away. This accomplished, the king, and the chiefs who were with him, made a rule of throwing costly offerings into the water.”

“Better than that,” struck in the hunchback, almost with enthusiasm, “I have just been turning over an article in the *South American Journal* on this very subject, and I read there that the multitude of worshippers, thereupon, likewise cast in their humbler contributions in the midst of singing and dancing and to the sound of such musical instruments as were available. When the ‘bearded men’ reached the country it is stated that the Indians, to put their treasure beyond the power of the ruthless invaders, threw it into the waters of the lake to a vast value; and, indeed, an attempt was made by the Spaniards to unwater it, so as to get at the submerged accumulation of gold dust and precious stones. They were not able to reach the bottom, but succeeded in lowering the water to such an extent as to expose a portion of the margins of the lake, whence they obtained sufficient to pay to the Spanish Government one hundred and seventy thousand dollars, equivalent to three per cent, on a total recovered of five millions six hundred thousand dollars. There were also emeralds, one of which realised seventy thousand dollars in Madrid. Further progress was arrested by the sides of the cutting on the lip of the lake-cup falling in with a tremendous crash. The water poured into the mouth of an adjacent volcano, and a terrible earthquake resulted, before which the Spaniards and their Jesuit friends fled in terror. A proper record was, however, made later on of the exact position of the lake, but, as Mr Cooper-Nassington explained, it was lost.”

“And you have recovered it,” I burst out.

“That is so; but although repeated expeditions were made to the district, which is largely of volcanic origin, to discover it without the key I possess, they all failed; and as the years slipped on they grew fewer and fewer in number until, as you have heard for yourself, the whole thing has just become a will-o’-the-wisp of the manuscript hunter who, of course, has mostly grown to feel he is as likely to discover the missing documents as he is to find the title-deeds of the temple of David.

“But,” said the hunchback, suddenly changing his tone and confronting my companion with an angry look, “none of this is to the point. It is, in a way, all so much ancient history and as familiar to men like yourself, who rule Mexico through the Stock Exchange or our British Foreign Office, as your alphabet. What I want to know is: What business is it of yours what I have bought and what I have discovered? You have no share in this find. You have no right to information. By what right do you come here demanding to know what I have learned, and shall learn, with infinite patience, expense, and labour?”

“All that in good time, my dear sir,” calmly returned Cooper-Nassington. “For the present it must be sufficient for you that I have a very real and vital stake in what you have found, and you had better treat me well over the business when I come to you again after you have deciphered the manuscripts, or you’ll live to regret the day I was born.”

For a second the two men stood glaring at each other in angry defiance, but again I saw that the millionaire won. Whatever was the mysterious hold he had over the hunchback there was no doubt but that it was a very potent and a very effective one, and that, however much Zouche might kick and threaten, in the end he was bound to come to the other’s heel.

“All right. Come to me in a fortnight’s time,” he growled, “and I’ll see then what can be done. Don’t fancy, though, that this business is simply fitting out a yacht with a party of Cornish miners and engineers and going to take possession of the loot.”

“I don’t,” said the Member of Parliament coolly; “there are the Jesuits to reckon with.”

“Yes; but that’s not the worst,” retorted Zouche; “there are others.”

“Others!” cried the man in astonishment. “What do you mean?”

"Well, first, who was the man that put you on the track of my discovery, eh? What, for instance, is the name or position of Mr Glynn's employer?"

In spite of myself I flushed and started. Should I now hear who Don José Casteno really was, if he were really a friend of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, and why he was a resident at that home of mystery, St. Bruno's. Alas! no. I was doomed to disappointment.

"We decline to tell you," said my companion with great firmness.

"I shall find out for myself," roared the dwarf.

"Do, if you can," returned the man coolly. "For the present, stick to the point we are discussing. Who else have we to fear?"

"The cut-throats who did this," snarled the hunchback, stepping quickly across the room and taking down a cloak from the walls. Then he spread the garment out on the table and indicated certain bullet holes in the back. "They did this to me this afternoon as I walked homeward," he added. "The shots came just as I was crossing Westminster Bridge. I searched everywhere for a sight of the man, who must have done it with some new-fangled air-gun. I could find none at all.

"Nor is that all," he proceeded the next moment; "just cast a glance in this direction, will you?" He stumbled across the parlour to a point where stood an old oaken chest about two feet high, the lid of which he threw back with a bang. "Do you see that fine mastiff in there?" pointing to the shadowy form of a huge dog in the depths of the chest. "Well, an hour ago he was poisoned. By whom? For what? I have lived here in this house, in this neighbourhood, for five and forty years and nothing of the sort has ever occurred before.

"Ten minutes before your carriage rattled up I had another weird experience. Explain it if you can—I can't. I was seated at this very table poring over one of those precious manuscripts, which I hide in a place practically inaccessible to anybody except myself, when I became conscious I was not alone. Somebody, I felt certain, had come mysteriously on the scene and was watching me intently. I glanced up suddenly, and found there, at that small casement window which opens on the street, and which is usually guarded by the shutter you now see placed in position, the face of a man. 'What do you want?' I cried angrily, and darted across the room to fling the shutter back into position with all the force I could exert. But he was much too swift for me. With incredible rapidity he flung an envelope through the opening and darted off, and the shutter and window slammed together, as I intended, but with an empty bang. The scoundrel had escaped!

"Well, by that time I was accustomed to surprises, and so I took up the envelope, which was of a cheap, inferior make, similar to those sold by small stationers in poor districts. It had no address upon it, but it was sealed. I tore it open, and found inside a piece of paper bearing this message." After fumbling behind an ornament on the mantelpiece he produced a slip that had been evidently torn out of some child's exercise book, and upon which was written in feigned handwriting to resemble a schoolboy's:

"Your secret is known. At the right moment I shall come to you and claim it for its lawful owner. Meanwhile, breathe not a word to a soul as you value your property and your life."

"Of course," added the hunchback, with a shrug of the shoulders, "all this sounds the merest melodrama, and so it may be. But you and I know quite enough of the importance of those manuscripts to understand how many rich and extraordinary personages in England, in Spain, in Mexico have the keenest interest in their contents, their recovery, and their translation. Your Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, for one," shot out Zouche, glancing at the millionaire with eyes full of meaning, yet bright with the springs of his own hidden resentment.

The Member of Parliament bit his lip. "Maybe, maybe," he said, but I could see the shot went home and that inwardly he was much perturbed. "Still, you must do your best, that's all. Personally, I should say it is your friend, Lord Fotheringay, who feels he can't trust you, but, really, it is your lookout. Come along, Glynn." And he led the way impatiently down the passage, and, before the dwarf could say another word, he had hurried me out into Tufton Street, which seemed still to be as deserted as the grave.

As we stepped out we heard the door close behind us; and, remembering the mysterious letter which Don José had instructed me to hand to Lord Cuthbertson in the case of certain eventualities, I resolved on a bold step of my own.

"Why," said I suddenly to my companion, "do you fear the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs getting wind of this discovery of yours?"

Never shall I forget the effect of this apparently innocent question of mine!

Never!

Chapter Seven.

In Stanton Street.

"Why am I afraid that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs may get wind of the discovery of those manuscripts which locate the exact whereabouts of the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Mexico?" repeated the Member of Parliament fiercely; and he came to a dead stop at the corner of the turning into Peter Street.

"For the best of all reasons," he snapped. "He is the one man in the world I hate with all the force I am capable of. He

has proved himself my evil genius. In politics, in preferment, in marriage he has beaten me every time we have come into conflict; and if he could only recover this possession for England—for, as you will find, this lake really belongs to this country and not to Mexico or to Spain or to the Jesuits—he would make himself that great, popular hero he is ever striving to become. How? you ask. In the most simple fashion. He would merely use all those millions that are to be recovered from its depths as baits for the electors, baits for payers of income-tax, men who drink spirits, enthusiasts about old-age pensions, better houses for the poor. Indeed, there is no end to the crazy ambition of this pinchbeck Napoleon. He lives simply to become the idol of the mob in such a way as England's history with all her Gladstones, her Beaconsfields, and other political leaders of real note, has never known—never. Even the popularity of the throne is not safe with so terrible a pride as his! He cares nothing for any personage or any institution. His one colossal lust is to lift himself so high that no man shall be his equal, but that his word shall travel through the Empire with a power which Bismarck never aimed at and even the German Emperor has never felt competent to aspire to.

"I know the man like nobody else does in the House. Once we were friends—before appeared the inevitable woman. I was his one confidant. We occupied the same house; we sat side by side, night after night, over the dinner-table, building the same castles in the air; but, as we laid our plans, and he waxed strong, the power to will and to achieve in this muddy, political life of England came also to me. Hence, while we quarrelled and hated like only one-time bosom companions can, we have ever carried on a terrific underground fight which has been all the more deadly because it was hidden. Few expected it; and none of the fools around me ever realised that a humble, insignificant member like myself was hugging the idea of the eventual overthrow of this wonderful strong man, who had risen up, phoenix-like, from the ashes of a dismembered and distrusted party in the State and had brought back to Parliament the misty legend of a leader who directed the attack by the sheer magic of his own inherent will.

"But there!" added Mr Cooper-Nassington, suddenly changing his tone as, away in the distance, he caught the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. "I am sure I don't know why I ramble on like this—to you. After all, those manuscripts are the real object of our expedition, aren't they? and in regard to them I suppose we have done the best that could be done in such a bewildering set of circumstances. You had better return now to the man who sent you and report to him all that has transpired since you fetched me out of the House. He will understand, particularly if you add two words to your narrative."

"Yes," said I eagerly; "and what must those be?"

"In reparation," he returned, "in reparation." And, signalling to a belated hansom, he held out his hand to me.

"Good-night, Mr Glynn," he said; "I have trusted you to-night more than anybody else in my life. I can't tell you why, but I have, and I am sure you will not make use of anything I have said to my disadvantage. Doubtless, we shall meet again over this strange, wild quest. If we do—nay, whatever happens—remember I am your friend; but for your actual employer I repeat I have only one message, 'in reparation!'" And, squeezing my hand, he sprang into the cab, crying to the driver: "Ashley Gardens." The next instant the cab had gone and I had started to find my way home on foot.

Unfortunately, that was not destined to be the last of my adventures that night, although I was tired and worn by the stirring scenes I had passed through. I don't think Mr Cooper-Nassington had left me a minute before I was conscious of that ugly sensation of being followed. At first I tried to believe it was a mere phantom of my imagination—that my nerves had got a trifle upset by the things which the hunchback had shown to us in the way of tricks that had been played upon him since he had obtained those manuscripts.

Thus I didn't attempt to look behind me, but went on my way whistling merrily, making the pavements re-echo with my noisy steps, for by that time the streets were practically empty. All the same, I couldn't rid myself of my suspicion that I was being shadowed, and, finally, feeling that the chase was getting intolerable, I decided on a rather curious ruse. I had reached Westminster Bridge, and, walk to near the centre, suddenly stopped and turned my face towards the swirling waters that were eddying past the buttresses beneath.

Next instant I staggered back in the fickle light of the lamp, and, throwing my coat off my shoulders, cried in a muffled, stifled kind of voice: "Ah! I can bear it no longer. I must do it. Good-bye, good-bye." And with a frantic bound I leaped on to the parapet by the aid of a lamp-post and threw my arms upward with a wild, convulsive movement, as though the next second must be my last, and that I had but to take one downward glance to hurl myself into the turgid torrent beneath.

Just as I expected, my pursuer rushed pell-mell into the trap that I had baited for him. No sooner did he catch a glimpse of what he thought were my preparations for a sudden and effective suicide than he instantly abandoned all pretence of concealing his presence, darted out of the shadows in which he had been lurking, and raced as swiftly as a greyhound towards me and caught me by the sleeve and dragged me backward.

"You fool," he cried, "what are you up to now?" And in a flash I recognised who it was—Detective-Inspector Naylor.

With a quick spring I reached the pavement again and turned a face full of merriment towards the officer.

"Ah," said I, picking up my coat, "so it was you who was stalking me, was it? I thought my little trick would fetch you much more rapidly and effectively than if I had turned round and tried to pick you up. Now, what's your game dogging my footsteps, eh? You don't think I'm a young monk who has got spoiled in the making, do you? No; you've some deeper, deadlier design than that, so you might as well own up at once."

"I can't," he returned, and his face, now he realised how I had duped him, was a study in rage and mortification. "I—I am out on business just as much as you are. You play your hand, I'll play mine. Only take care what you are up to—that's all. When we at Scotland Yard take up a case we usually make some inquiries into the good faith and past history of our clients. It's a pity you don't do the same. Good-night." And with a nod full of meaning he strolled off towards the embankment, leaving me to digest his enigmatic remark in silence and alone.

With a good-humoured laugh I took my way homeward and tried to shake off the effects of his ominous words, which, I own, caused me a certain amount of disquietude, for, after all, I hadn't a ghost of an idea then as to the real identity or object of Don José Casteno. For a time, I own, I felt rather fearful. But first one thing and then another engaged my attention. For instance, I had to find out whether I was still being followed. I decided I was not. I had also to dodge the human night-bird of London intent on rows or alms. Finally, by the time I had reached Trafalgar Square the ill effects of the detective's warning had quite disappeared. All I thought of was a good night's rest, to be followed by another ride on my motor car to Hampstead, and another entrance to that mysterious home of the Order of St. Bruno.

When, however, I reached the street in which my offices were situate I was surprised to see the thoroughfare presented anything but its usual drab and sombre appearance. Something extraordinary was certainly in progress therein. Instead of the place being deserted and silent like the neighbouring streets, no fewer than three carriages with flashing lamps and horses in glittering harness were drawn up by one side of the curb, and near a door stood quite a group of footmen, and loafers and policemen drawn thither by the unusual assemblage.

As I got nearer I was even more surprised to find that this strange gathering was centred round the door of my own offices, which I was stupefied to see were brilliantly lit up. "What on earth can have happened?" I gasped, and, quickening my steps, I half ran towards the tiny crowd gathered round the door, which seemed somehow to be expecting me, and gave way instinctively at my approach.

Another moment and I had thrust open my office door. The place was half filled by tobacco smoke, but through the mist I was astounded to see three persons had calmly seated themselves in my room to await my return—Lord Fotheringay, Colonel Napier, and a stranger who, as he turned his determined but forbidding looking features upon me, I recognised instantly as Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

"You must excuse us, Glynn," Fotheringay began almost at once. "I own I had no right to come here at all at this hour and open your office. Most of all, I oughtn't to have put on your hearth two friends without your consent. Only, as perhaps you guessed from the scene at the auction, we live in rather stirring times just now, and we had no margin left in which we could observe the ordinary courtesies. With Colonel Napier you are, of course, well acquainted. Let me introduce to you another distinguished man." And he made a movement in the direction of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, who rose and bowed.

"Pray be seated," I hastened to exclaim as I took the chair at my desk and faced the trio. "I mustn't say, of course, I expected this honour, because, after the way Fotheringay sprang at me in the auction market, I certainly got the impression he had no particular friendliness for me left—but—"

"But that is precisely what we have come about," interposed the earl eagerly. "Those three old manuscripts which we made so terrific a fight over—"

My lips closed, and a new look of resolution came into my face.

"I see," I replied. "Then, as it is a matter of business, I beg you tell me what you desire in a plain, business-like fashion."

There was an awkward pause; and then Lord Cyril began: "I understand, Mr Glynn," he said in his most seductive tones, "from no less an authority than the earl here, that you have been retained to get possession of three historical documents that were found among the effects of a certain dead refugee priest who called himself Alphonse Calasanctius. Now, are you aware to what those deeds relate?"

I nodded, and the two men exchanged a quick look of intelligence. "That being so," proceeded Lord Cuthbertson, "you will doubtless realise how important it is that His Majesty's Government, and not an enemy of this country, should obtain possession of them."

"Quite," I returned, determining to meet the statesman's strategy with diplomacy as far-reaching as his own.

"And may I take it that you are prepared, as far as lies in your power, to assist His Majesty's Government in this direction?"

"That is hardly necessary," I said, with a smile. "I have not got the documents at all. They are in the hands of a man with whom I am but little acquainted—Mr Zouche. Wouldn't it be better if pressure were placed on him?"

"I can hardly agree in that," said the Foreign Secretary softly, and I saw I had countered but not defeated him. "In the first place, Mr Zouche is not an English subject, like yourself. He is Spanish, with all the absurd notions of the average Spaniard as to the future glories and magnificence of Spain. In the second place, he and Lord Fotheringay have had this very point over between them, and the hunchback has absolutely refused to assist us or the earl, who really put him on the track of the documents, and who is now trying, in vain, unfortunately, to frighten him out of them."

"In other words," I remarked sternly, "Lord Fotheringay first of all threw in his lot with the hunchback, who went off with the plunder, and won't divide it. Thereupon he bethought himself of his patriotism, and has said to you: 'Here is a matter of the honour and fair fame and fortune of England. Come, let us sink all our personal greed and differences and recover those deeds in the name and for the sake of our common brotherhood of kin and blood.' My lord, it won't answer with me. When I wanted help Fotheringay would not raise a finger for me, but rather studied how he could throw me back. Now he's in trouble, let him get out of it; but let him be a man over it, and don't let him bleat about the needs of England when he really means his own greed."

"There's a good deal in what you say," remarked Lord Cuthbertson, "but not everything. Bear with me a minute, and I will explain. I have no doubt you are under the impression that when Fotheringay went to Mexico he went simply because he'd got a lot of spare cash, and wanted a change, and to bag some big game. As a matter of fact, he had

no thought of the sort. He went as a special and a private spy of the Foreign Office; and his business was, under the harmless guise of an enthusiastic sportsman, to investigate certain rumours we had heard as to the discovery of these Jesuit plans of the sacred Lake of Treasure which really belongs to England. Well, he did so, and so cleverly did he manage that he penetrated the very monastery in which they were hidden, and he got at the very prior of the Order—a member of which had held them in his possession. A certain bargain was struck between the prior and himself, but before the Foreign Office could send the big sum of money required to ratify it this Father Alphonse Calasanctius ran away with the documents to England, but was, we have reason to believe, poisoned on his arrival by some compatriot or relative who knew nothing of the value of the manuscripts, and thought only of the forced sale of the goods which you and the earl attended. Therefore I beg you don't judge your old companion unfairly and harshly. We all of us do many things for England in our public capacity that we should not dare, or even wish, to do for ourselves in our own private business. His sole blunder was to get Zouche to help him, because Zouche is really a villain who would dare any crime or fraud to help his country, Spain. So it, of course, has happened as might have been expected. Zouche has repudiated the earl, and unless you can give us a hand England is going to lose this sacred lake and its millions and Zouche."

"He may not necessarily triumph," I answered.

"There are probably other people hot on the track of those manuscripts. To-day there have been one or two attempts to make Zouche disgorge from a source which is truly bold and daring and resourceful; I'll assume, after what you say, it is the earl. Well, let the earl continue his pressure. He may frighten him out of them, but I doubt it—I doubt it very much. Then there is my employer."

"You must give that man up, Hugh," cut in Colonel Napier, who had not hitherto spoken. "He's a scoundrel of the first water. I know all about him. He escaped from that Mexican monastery at the same time as Father Alphonse Calasanctius, but not before he killed Earl Fotheringay's companion, young Sutton."

"That is false," suddenly interrupted a strange voice, "and the police of London and Mexico know it, for the deed was done by Calasanctius himself, and not by the novice at all." And to everybody's astonishment the doors of my big cupboard were flung open, and there stepped therefrom no less a personage than Don José Casteno himself.

Chapter Eight.

Some Grave Suspicions.

For a moment all was confusion. Colonel Napier sprang to his feet with an angry gesture, and even Lord Cyril Cuthbertson rose and crossed over to the place where Fotheringay was sitting near the fire, and consulted him in low and anxious tones.

Curiously enough, Casteno appeared to be the least perturbed of any of us, although he had made such a dramatic entry. Somehow he seemed to take his position in that conference as a matter of right, and when he saw that none of the others were prepared to talk to him on any terms, but were determined to treat him as a bold, impertinent interloper, he swung round from them and stepped up to my desk, where I sat idly playing with a pen.

"It is not true that I am the wretch whom Colonel Napier has spoken of," he said to me very simply, looking me straight in the eyes. "It is not true that I am an enemy of England, such as Lord Cuthbertson has suggested. It is not true that I am engaged in any dishonourable or unpatriotic enterprise; nor was it begun, as they pretend, by my flight from a monastery in Mexico coincident with the disappearance of Father Calasanctius; nor did it include in its train the killing of that exceedingly foolish and indiscreet personage, Sutton. On the contrary, I assert here that all and each of those allegations are false; and what is perhaps the more intolerable is the fact that Lord Cyril knows it, has on his file at the Foreign Office a full report of the affair, coupled with a diplomatic request that the man should be found and returned to his friends."

And he turned and faced the Secretary for Foreign Affairs with a striking look of defiance; but that nobleman would not take up his challenge. He merely drew a little closer to the earl, who was now standing listening to him with an expression of the most grave concern, and the shot went wide.

In no sense disconcerted, however, Don José confronted me again.

"You see," he said significantly, "Lord Cuthbertson's striking change of manner when I am here to face him out. I repeat to you that he dare not deny what I have just told you, although it suited his purpose well enough to blacken my name when I was not here to speak up for myself. The point for you now to consider," he went on in a lower tone, "is, as a man of honour, not whether you can take up the cause of Lord Cuthbertson but if you can throw me over on such flimsy, unsubstantial talk as this has been."

"If he doesn't, Doris shall never speak to him again," cut in Colonel Napier, who was an old Anglo-Indian, and nothing if not a most persistent fire-eater.

Don José turned as swiftly as though he had been stung by a snake. "Colonel, that is not worthy of you," he cried. "I beg you withdraw it for your own sake, for I warn you most solemnly that before a day has gone you will regret it."

"And I, as an Englishman, jealous of my country's success, refuse," thundered the old soldier. "Let it be enough that I have spoken. Mr Glynn can make his own choice." And throwing back his shoulders he stalked impressively out of the room.

Almost unobserved, too, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Earl Fotheringay had also manoeuvred their steps

towards the doorway; and now, when Casteno tried to speak with them, they took advantage of a pause created by the sudden rattle of the colonel's carriage as he drove towards the Strand to slip out of the room. A minute later there arose the sound of a loud commotion, as of doors banged and of horses urged to a gallop, and both of their broughams followed hard in the old soldier's wake.

"You see," said Don José to me, with a little bitterness, "they are not men big enough to face me out over this matter. They prefer to fling their poisoned darts at me and to leave them to work their own mischief, whilst they scuttle off like naughty children who have thrown some stones through a window and are quite content with the sight of the damage they have done, without a thought of the anguish of the householder. Well, well! all this is the trouble which you will no doubt remember that I, at least, expected and warned you against when I asked you to join forces with me. I must not now rail against my own fate, but I do appeal to you—give me a fair chance, do not desert me."

For an instant I wavered. This quest now had assumed truly gigantic dimensions. Even Cooper-Nassington seemed only a dim, far-off figure against the overwhelming personality of Cuthbertson. More than that, I knew if I clung to Casteno I should have one of the most stern fights with Colonel Napier, who would stop at nothing to keep Doris apart from me.

None the less, I had my own notions of honour likewise, and it did not concern me much that they differed from Earl Fotheringay's or Lord Cyril Cuthbertson's. After all, had I not taken my fee from Don José? Had he not paid me all that I asked? Had I not passed him the sacred pledge of my word? And so, at last, I gave my decision.

"I have seen nothing in your life, your behaviour, or your conduct," I cried, "to warrant me in throwing you over in the way those men have suggested. Until I find some good reason to believe that your intentions are dishonourable, that your career has been criminal, that your desires are hostile to England, I cannot desert you."

"Well spoken," replied Don José earnestly. "Your determination does you credit. Believe me, you shall find no cause to make you ashamed that you ever allied yourself with me. On the contrary, as you go deeper into this business you will realise that you have done well to stick to me, however baffling and perplexing may seem some of the adventures I may have to ask you to undertake. And that reminds me of the real business we have in hand to-night! How did you get on at the House of Commons with Cooper-Nassington?"

"Very much better than I could have dared to expect," I replied with frankness, and returning him his sealed packet addressed to Cuthbertson. In a few graphic sentences I described to him how I had gone to the house of the hunchback with the Member of Parliament, and the extraordinary adventures we had undergone there. Instead, however, of being pleased with the result of the quest, I could see that the Spaniard was greatly disturbed at something that had happened on that occasion. At first he would not tell why we ought not to congratulate ourselves that Zouche had promised to decipher those manuscripts and communicate their contents within a fortnight to Mr Cooper-Nassington. He tried to put me off with commonplace expressions like "Time will prove," "Never count your chickens," and "Trust no man further than you can throw him;" but when he realised that I was not going to be denied he admitted that my news about the attempts on the hunchback's life was much more serious than anybody had any idea of, because they might terrify Zouche and make him do things he would not otherwise dream of.

"But we two are men with brains, hands, resolution," I interjected. "Why need we stand by and let other people like Fotheringay come in and benefit by our labours? Let us mount guard over Zouche until he has got through his task of deciphering the documents."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," returned Casteno, "but it is not so easy to do as it seems. For one thing, Zouche would not let us act in the capacity of his guardians if he knew we had any aspirations at all for that office. Another thing—where can we hide ourselves? And then," he added after a significant pause, "I wanted you to be busy on another mission. I had a particular reason for wishing that you should go down to Southampton to-morrow afternoon, when the royal mail steamer *Atrato* is expected. A lady whom I want you to meet is coming by that boat. As a matter of fact, she is bringing certain valuable documents for me and for the Order of St. Bruno, and she will need all the protection you can give her between the Solent and the Thames if she isn't kidnapped by some friends of Fotheringay, who, when he was in Mexico, learnt all about her treasures."

"In that case you must watch the hunchback," I said decisively, "whilst I run down from Waterloo to Southampton. The whole business won't take me more than ten hours from London to dock and dock to London."

"But how on earth shall I watch Zouche? How shall I gain admission to his shop without his knowledge? And where can I hide myself without any undue risk of being found out?"

"A house like his, full of the most extraordinary curiosities, is the best hiding-place one could have," I replied. "The only trouble is to get inside it, but I am sure if I go with you and help you, and we watch our chance, say whilst his man is taking down the shutters, we can both slip in and run up to the first-floor showroom, which is over the parlour. Once there I will help you to conceal yourself, and also open up for you a peep-hole in the ceiling of the room where the hunchback does his research work, without the slightest fear you will be pounced on. Why, old curiosity shops in London are never disturbed or dusted! Dust is part of the stock-in-trade. Most dealers seem perfectly satisfied if they sell one thing out of each room per week—and often that one thing may be merely a miniature or a coin!"

"All right, I'll leave the arrangements with you," answered the Spaniard, with a laugh. "For the present, however, the most important thing for you at least seems to be sleep. I propose, therefore, that before we make another move of any kind you turn in and get a few hours' sleep whilst I mount guard."

"Yes, I'm tired," I admitted, with a half-smothered yawn; "and, after all, we can do nothing at the hunchback's until about nine o'clock, so I think I will do as you suggest." And placing some more coal on the fire I wished him good-night and made my way to my adjacent bedroom, where, throwing myself on the sofa, I closed my eyes and endeavoured to push myself off into a soft, dreamless slumber.

Now it is a curious thing that, whereas in the ordinary way I am about one of the heaviest and solidest sleepers you could meet in a day's journey, when danger threatens me or my interests I seem to have some special intuition which keeps me awake and sensitive to the slightest omen or sound. I can't explain it. There it is. Ever since I was a boy I have possessed it, and not once has it failed to warn me when I ought to be up and about.

And the odd part of it was that it made itself most painfully evident this night on which Don José Casteno proffered to look after me. In vain I heard his own soft and regular breathing as I crept to the half-open door noiselessly and listened to his movements. In vain I drew the clothes right over my head and conjured up sheep jumping over a stile; pigs elbowing each other through a half-open gate; dogs passing in endless procession, each with a most plaintive look of entreaty that I should wear my brain out counting them for some unseen but remorseless master-calculator—I could not go to sleep. Even the Brahmin magic word "O—om," which I repeated slowly twice a minute, expelling the air each time most completely from my lungs, failed to hypnotise me. And then all at once I heard something—a slow grating sound that seemed to suggest treachery and mischief.

With all my senses painfully alert I wriggled off my bed and went on hands and knees, dressed only in my trousers and shirt, to the door of my outer office. To my surprise I found Casteno, crouching on his knees also, in front of the fire, which threw a powerful rosy glare on his clean-shaven features. He had pulled a long evil-looking dagger out of a belt hidden near his waist and was sharpening its edge on the hearthstone!

He meant mischief. To whom?

Suddenly, before I had time to think, he rose, and taking up his clerical-looking hat he stepped noiselessly across the office and hastened off down the street, a look of terrible resolution on his face.

Whither was he bound?

Had he heard something that had put him on his guard as he sat crouched over the fire in my arm-chair? Had he seen something or somebody that meant mischief to me? Or had he suddenly resolved to take advantage of those early morning hours to avenge himself on some enemy who lived near at hand? That was where I felt myself as up against a solid wall; it was so hard to divine what was at the back of a foreign stranger with a past that might have been crowded with duel and vendetta and adventure that had given birth to a dozen most deadly hatreds and lusts for revenge.

Half mechanically I went to the doorway and peered through the early morning haze up and down Stanton Street. I could see no one—nothing suspicious—nothing suggestive at all. I was just about to return to my bedroom when I was startled by something playing about my feet. In a flash I looked down, and to my astonishment found Colonel Napier's clumber spaniel gazing at me with the most appealing eyes.

"Hulloa, Fate!" I said, giving him his customary but oddly suggestive name. "Where have you sprung from? What are you doing here? Did you run after your master's carriage when the colonel came with Lord Cuthbertson and get locked in some cupboard in the office here, or did you fall asleep on a pile of papers?"

The dog looked up, wagging his tail. Then all at once he gave a sharp bark, and swinging round he tore through the open door down the street as hard as he could pelt. For an instant I was quite astonished. As a rule the dog would stop and fuss with me and play several tricks. Now his manner was so curious that I decided at last he must have expected I should follow him.

"But that must be a long time yet," I told myself, with a sigh. "I can never see Doris now until I have cleared up this mystery of the manuscripts for Don José." And, shrugging my shoulders, I made my way back to the bedroom where, feeling sleep was out of the question, and that I must try in real earnest to solve the mystery of the expedition of the Spaniard, I had a tub, and made a hurried toilet, and then set to work to get myself some breakfast.

In about half-an-hour's time, however, Don José returned, and when he caught sight of me up and dressed he gave such a start of terror I thought that he would drop on the floor in a fit.

"Well," I said lightly. "You didn't expect to see me about, did you? Fact was, I couldn't sleep, so I got up to make myself a cup of tea. Where have you been to at this ungodly hour?"

"To a friend's," he stammered. "A friend's in Whitehall Court. Just a call—a friendly call. A man I know in Whitehall Court."

"In Whitehall Court," I repeated, bending over some toast I was buttering. "Why, that's where Colonel Napier lives! Did you happen to see a clumber spaniel heading in that direction? He was here a few minutes ago, but suddenly he bolted for his home in great distress, and I thought that—"

But I never completed the sentence.

All at once I was startled by the sound of a loud fall.

I looked round.

To my surprise I found that Don José Casteno had dropped to the floor in a dead faint.

Chapter Nine.

The Hunchback Tries a New Ruse.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, as the sequel must determine, Don José Casteno's attack of faintness was not of long duration. Almost, indeed, as I snatched up a flask of brandy from my travelling case and darted across the office to his assistance, he gave a long deep sigh, his eyelids fluttered, and the next moment he sat up, gazing in a bewildered fashion round the room. He took, however, a deep draught of the spirit when I pressed it upon him, but when I ventured to inquire what it was that had caused him to collapse after his walk through the streets from the Embankment to the Strand his eyes grew large and troubled, although he made a tremendous effort to hide his agitation.

"Really, nothing happened to me," he said in a quick, disjointed fashion. "I visited the man at Whitehall I wished to see, and then, fearing I had done wrong in leaving you unprotected as you slept trusting to my presence, I ran as hard as I could back to your office. The fact is, I must have got rather out of condition of late, and the exertion took more out of me than I intended. You must forgive me this time, and I'll be more careful in future."

"Then you didn't see anything of Colonel Napier's clumber spaniel?" I queried, and in spite of myself there arose a certain accent of suspicion in my tones.

"No, I didn't," he replied, but he kept his gaze steadily averted from mine. "No doubt I ran too fast to notice anything. Besides, I always keep my head down." And, pretending to yawn, he rose unsteadily to his feet and took a seat near the table, whereon I had laid breakfast for us both.

Of course, I should like to have asked him about the knife which I had watched him sharpen with so much diabolical care, but I realised that for some secret reason this innocent-looking Spaniard was not really telling me the truth about his early morning mission; and, not wanting to be filled up with any more fables, I decided to hold my tongue about the matter, for a time at all events. The incident, however, had put me thoroughly on my guard, and, without letting him become conscious of what was, after all, a rather subtle change of front, I kept a much closer watch than usual on him right through the meal, when we chatted a lot of commonplaces.

All the same, he seemed to feel that we had little time to waste when breakfast was finished and we had started our cigarettes. As the seconds slipped on, and I showed no unusual haste to be off, his manner grew jerky and nervous, and finally he gave the signal to rise with a quick apology to me.

"Really, we must be off," he said. "I feel quite anxious about what is happening at the hunchback's. Do let us get into some secure place of concealment before Lord Fotheringay or his envoy appears again on the scene."

With a great affectation of laziness I rose and followed him down Stanton Street; and this time I put a double safety-lock on my office, to save me from any more surprise visits from men like Lord Cyril Cuthbertson. Now, as it happens, the quickest route from Stanton Street to the Strand is by way of a long, dark, narrow passage, and although Casteno hurried past I made him retrace his steps for a few yards and walk with me through this. At first I imagined I had done this from purely British obstinacy and habit, but all at once I became conscious that some deeper influence and habit must have been at work, for on rounding a bend I was startled to come across a group of early printers' boys and charwomen gathered excitedly around some object that lay on the ground. This tiny crowd instinctively parted at our approach, and as we passed into their midst I was horrified to see Colonel Napier's clumber spaniel Fate stretched on the path, with a great gaping cut over its heart!

"Some brute has stabbed it," said one of the boys, who had been kneeling beside it endeavouring to stop the flow of blood with his dirty handkerchief. "I did my best for him, but he was too far gone. He's almost dead." But suddenly the dog seemed to rouse himself—to lift his head—then, catching sight of Casteno, he gave a low growl and made a movement as if he would snap at his legs.

The Spaniard jumped back nimbly, and one of the women exclaimed: "Why, mister, he seems to know you."

"He doesn't. I have never seen him before," cried Casteno. And just then death convulsions seized the poor brute, and as the crowd watched the dog die the incident passed rapidly out of mind. I did not, however, forget it totally, nor the fact that Fate was one in a thousand for sagacity and faithfulness. But what, perhaps, impressed me the most was the shape and size of the wound in the dog's side. I could have sworn that it had been made by the dagger I had seen Don José sharpen in the glare of my office fire!

Unfortunately, up to that point I had nothing definite to go upon except the most wild and improbable suspicion. After all, why should the Spaniard kill Colonel Napier's dog? Nothing was to be gained by a piece of petty revenge such as that. As a consequence, I did not worry myself about the incident further, but contented myself by giving the boy who had spoken to me first a shilling to wheel the dead dog to Whitehall Court, and then Casteno and I hastened along Parliament Street and soon appeared outside the closed curio shop.

To all appearances, then, nothing unusual had happened to Peter Zouche or to his premises. The street in which the old curiosity store stood was just as silent and deserted as it had been the previous night when Mr Cooper-Nassington and I drove up and had that memorable interview with the hunchback about the contents of the manuscripts. Nobody seemed astir, no detective appeared on the watch.

Like shadows we crossed the road, inspected the shutters, and gently but noiselessly tried the handle of the door. We soon saw that there was no chance of gaining admission by these methods, but a moment later I caught sight of a long iron pipe that ran from the roof to the ground by the side of the door.

"Can you climb?" I whispered to the Spaniard, recalling, all at once, the favourite method of the portico thief.

He nodded. "I served as a sailor once," he returned.

"Then follow me," I said, and seizing this pipe I travelled up by hands and knees until I reached the level of the first-

floor window-sill. Then out I whipped my knife, and, forcing back the catch, I raised the sash, with the result that in less than twenty seconds after I had hit on this ruse the window had been closed again, and both of us stood inside the hunchback's stronghold in perfect freedom and safety.

"This is better than waiting until the assistant comes to open the shop," I said. "After all, he might have given us some trouble, whereas here we are landed all right before he appears at all. Now to explore and to get into position where you can see, without being seen, all that Master Zouche is up to."

And we turned and picked our way carefully through the maze of curios with which the place was littered—the antique chests, the old carved cabinets, dainty pieces of Chippendale and Sheraton, with here and there a heathen idol or an Egyptian mummy case flanked by vessels and candelabra torn from holy places in Christian churches. All were flung pell-mell together, as though the man who owned them despised them, and had deposited them there as so much lumber, instead of being, as they really were, worth thousands and thousands of pounds.

Right at the back part of the room we were delighted to find a trap-door let into the floor, and raising this we dropped into a clean, if small, recess, which in times past had doubtless been used for storing valuable old pictures, for in different places we found several canvases that had been taken out of their frames and carefully deposited and packed with their faces to the wall. From the position of a tiny window that had been let into the far end I gathered that at length we had reached a position over the parlour in which I felt sure we should come upon the hunchback. So, closing the trap-door upon us, we went down on our hands and knees and set to bore experimental holes between the rafters, to see whether we could distinguish our exact whereabouts.

After two or three disappointments we succeeded in locating the room I was in search of, and, to our delight, found Peter Zouche there, curled up in the great chair-bedstead which he ordinarily used as an arm-chair near the fire. He had evidently just awoke and lit his fire, for he sat huddled over the burning sticks near a tiny kettle which was steaming merrily, his eyes fixed blankly in space, as though his mind were lost in the maze of some profound speculation.

For some minutes he did not move at all. Then suddenly he seemed to come to some rapid decision, for he sprang out of the chair and went hurriedly to an old Dutch cupboard in a recess, from which he took a big square steel box, like a Foreign Office despatch box, painted mahogany colour, with heavy brass clamps at the corners.

"The manuscripts!" whispered Casteno excitedly as he saw the old man thrust a long skinny hand into his trouser pocket and produce therefrom a bunch of jangling keys. But I shook my head. I remembered the hunchback's boast to Mr Cooper-Nassington that he had hidden those precious documents in a place where they could be found only by himself. That ordinary-looking safe would attract the attention of the most careless and superficial of burglars.

As it chanced, there were three or four padlocks attached to the case, and each one had to be opened by a separate key, so that over a minute elapsed before the Hunchback succeeded in raising the lid and in disclosing to view what the box really contained—a neat-fitting wig of black and a beard. These he fitted on his head and face, giving him the appearance of some Polish Jew who had but newly arrived on these hospitable shores.

"What on earth can he be up to?" interjected Casteno, who was really now worked up to a painful degree of nervous tension.

"Nothing good, I'm certain," I returned rather grimly. "My experience has always been that, when men are ashamed of their own features in the ordinary business of life, they are also ashamed of the deeds which they propose to do with a false countenance."

All this time, however, old Peter was busy in putting the finishing touches to his disguise—in changing his coat and vest, in donning some greasy rags, which he rounded off by a muffler, a coat green with age, and a slouch hat so dirty and worn that few would venture to pick it up from the street, much less place it on their own heads. Finally, after a long and narrow inspection in a beautiful old Venetian mirror that hung on the wall, he seemed satisfied with the change he had effected in his appearance, for he stepped briskly to the mantelpiece and touched a small electric bell, which sounded somewhere high above our heads.

For a moment it looked as though the summons would not be answered. But only for a moment. Later we caught the sounds of tired feet clamping heavily down the wooden stairs until they reached the shop level, then the door of the parlour (I can call it nothing else, it was so typical of its middle-class namesake), was thrust open, and a youth entered bearing a most extraordinary resemblance to my companion Don José Casteno!

Unfortunately, I hadn't time to remark on this further before the hunchback himself began to speak, and I had to bend all my energies and senses to catching the drift of the conversation, which was carried on in a low foreign-sounding tone.

"Well, Paul," began the hunchback briskly, "I have taken your advice, like a good father, and have disguised myself in the costume you suggested. What do you think of the transformation? Is it a success?"

"It will do all right," said the tired-looking youth sullenly. "Only take care how you hold your shoulders. Most people give themselves away by the fashion in which they carry themselves, and you, as a hunchback, worst of all."

Zouche, like most deformed persons, was painfully sensitive, but to my surprise he did not seem to resent the youth's bluntness. "Any other advice?" he proceeded, "mind, I want all your tips. I may be gone for a long time."

"No," said the youth he called Paul, slowly and critically. "There's not much to find fault with just at present. Don't get excited, though, whatever happens. Train your hands not to reveal your true feelings, and, above all, distort that tell-tale voice of yours. Pal in with some foreigner for a day or two, and pick up his trick of speech and intonation."

"I will, I will," replied the hunchback. "And now for those manuscripts. Have you prepared those dummies?"

"Yes," answered Paul. "Here they are—the three of them—and I've taken so much pains with the writing which I have faked on them that I would defy anybody to tell, under a day's examination with microscope and acid, that they are not the real, genuine article you bought for one thousand eight hundred pounds at the sale of Father Calasancius' effects at the auction mart."

"Good," cried Zouche, rubbing his hands together in the most approved method of the Jewish pedlar. "Pass them over to me." And the youth produced from a leather case which he had been carrying unperceived by his side three documents so exactly like the real thing I had fought for that I could have sworn myself that they were in real truth the three coveted manuscripts of the sacred lake!

The hunchback, however, did not pass them lightly. He took each one over to the window and examined it with great care, and only when he had assured himself that certain marks were present on each one of them, that all alike presented the same appearance of age and use and treatment, did he place them carefully in the steel box from which he had taken his wig and beard. Then he turned the keys in the locks, and, mounting a chair, he thrust open a secret panel in the rafters, pushed inside this hiding-place the box with the forged documents—as it happened, within two feet of the exact spot where we were stretched, full length, listening to his conversation.

Then he got down and turned again to Paul. "That is all right," he said gaily. "That is a good thing done, and I shouldn't be surprised if in a critical moment it doesn't save both my life and my fortune. Now you have got your lesson by heart, haven't you? You know what to do when any of those men like Hugh Glynn or the Earl of Fotheringay, or any of those Jesuit spies, come pottering about here! You play the avaricious fool, do you see? Pretend that you know a lot, and that you could tell them a lot if it were only made worth your while, and bleed each one of them for all the cash you can, in return for the information that I have vanished, and also for permission to turn this shop upside down to find the manuscripts, which you can hint you are certain are concealed somewhere about here."

"All right, I'm game," said the youth, and his eyes gleamed with malice and wickedness.

"When you've made all you can out of the dolts sell those forgeries to the highest bidder. My own idea is that the Jesuits will pay you better than anybody else, but perhaps Lord Cyril Cuthbertson may play you up too closely with the aid of some Scotland Yard detectives. In that case, let him have the honour of buying the spurious deeds, do you see? It's a pity these foolish Britishers don't roll over in the mud of their own cleverness sometimes."

The conversation ended, and I turned rapidly to the Spaniard.

"It's no good for you to stay here, as we have arranged," I whispered to Casteno, who now gazed at me appealingly with eyes large with nervousness and apprehension. "The hunchback won't be seen at Westminster for some time to come. He intends to disappear—as you've heard, the same as myself—but he must disappear in company with one of us. Now, who is it to be? You or I?"

"I must go," quickly returned the Spaniard. "Don't you remember you have to rush off this afternoon to Southampton to meet the royal mail steamer *Atrato* and to escort in safety to London a girl named Camille Velasquon, who is bringing some valuable papers from Mexico for me and for the Order of St. Bruno? I have already telegraphed to her to Plymouth to expect you. It is impossible for you to back out."

"But are you any good at shadowing a man as artful and slippery and suspicious as Zouche?" I questioned sternly. "Think for a moment what it means to your own future if you fail."

"I shall not fail," said Casteno decisively, starting to make a bee line for the trap-door, through which he had entered the recess. "I have tracked scores of men in my time in the old, wild days in Mexico, when to be discovered as a spy meant that you were caught up by a lasso and strung to the nearest tree, whilst sympathising neighbours took potshots at you out of their revolvers. Just trust to me, and go and conduct Camille Velasquon from the vessel I mentioned to St. Bruno's in Hampstead—that will require all your nerve, your daring, and your resolution!"

"But how shall I know how you get on? When shall I hear from you? Through what channel can we arrange a course of combined action?" I queried.

"I will communicate with you on your return from Southampton at your office in Stanton Street. If I can write to you I will. Otherwise I will have recourse to the telegraph office. But have no fear. I know the hunchback too well of old to let this slippery card pass through my fingers a moment sooner than I intend he should." And with these strangely suggestive words he waved me an adieu, and next second had disappeared.

Time, too, was much too precious to waste. Already, as the Spaniard had engaged me in this conversation, I had caught the sounds of movement and consultation in the room beneath, and, although I would have dearly liked to learn how he could ever have met Zouche in such intimate circumstances as he indicated, and also what was the secret of his startling likeness to Paul, that wicked-looking youth beneath, I realised that I needed every second to watch the chief actor in our drama, the hunchback. So again I bent over the hole in the ceiling, and again I peered into the misty depths of the parlour and watched what this pair of scoundrels were up to.

By this time it seemed that Zouche had nearly completed all his preparations for departure, and was merely filling in the last few seconds by cramming a few sandwiches into the capacious pockets of his overcoat, whilst the tired-looking youth emptied some whiskey from the bottle on the sideboard into a flask.

The next moment the hunchback pulled his felt hat down tightly over his forehead, practically concealing the whole of his features, and snatching the flask, which was now full, he nodded a quick farewell to his companion and then

hurried off. Almost immediately afterwards I heard the side door bang, and I realised that the dwarf had really gone, and I was free to set off on that curious trip to Southampton.

Chapter Ten.

The Lady from Mexico.

As I rose, however, from my crouching position quite a startling climax to that morning's adventure occurred. All at once I caught sight of the recess in which was concealed the steel box containing the manuscript forgeries, and I saw in a flash what an excellent move it would be for me to remove the thing to a place where I could conveniently lay hands upon it whenever I wanted it. In imagination I pictured the surprise of the Jesuit spies, for instance, when they had disgorged large sums to Master Paul downstairs, only to find, when the youth reached out for the deeds, they had vanished! Indeed, I am afraid I chuckled quite loudly when I whipped out my jack-knife and attacked the thin boarding that shut me off from this imitation treasure, so excellent did I conceive this act as a piece of pure inoffensive humour. Fate, too, aided me in the business, for in less than five minutes I had not only got at the precious casket but had forced the steel lid, taken out the forgeries and wrapped them up in a piece of canvas, which I placed in my pocket, and pushed the box back, but I had actually slipped out of my hiding-place and crept down the stairs to the shop, the front door of which luckily stood open.

In fact, it was not until I had got into a cab and was whirling away in the direction of Lambeth Bridge that I really appreciated what a daring thing I had done. Then I lay back in my seat and chuckled loudly.

Waterloo Station, as usual, was crowded with people hastening to one or other race meeting, a river excursion, or a boat special, but I managed to get a cosy corner in a first-class carriage of the express for Southampton, and was soon clattering through Vauxhall and Clapham Junction, hard on my journey to the Solent.

At first I admit I was too excited by the stirring scenes I had passed through to think of anything else—even Casteno's mysterious sharpening of his dagger, his disappearance from my office, and the brutal slaughter of Colonel Napier's spaniel. But the steady roar of the train, the ceaseless throb of the engine, soon calmed my mind and steadied my nerve, and I caught himself wondering what kind of girl could be this Camille Velasquon whom I had undertaken to meet. She could scarcely be an ordinary type of girl, I was certain, to be associated in any measure with José Casteno.

In point of fact, I eventually decided that she must be a very extraordinary girl altogether to cross from Mexico to England merely with certain valuable papers for that weird organisation of monks, the Order of St. Bruno. Further than that I don't think I was able to make up my mind. All that suggested danger to her, an attempt at abduction, and so forth—which, remember, Casteno had warned me against—I own I could not appreciate. It is always hard to believe that perils like those lurk in this calm, peaceful England of ours. Yet they do, as I was destined to find very soon to my cost.

After this I supposed I must have napped for a time, for when next I looked out of the carriage window I found that the train was slowing its speed preparatory to entering Southampton. Luckily, the carriage I was in contained no other passengers, and I was able to pull myself together and munch a few biscuits before I had to hasten across the road outside the station and to march through the big dock gates, guarded by a burly constable, to that corner where incoming royal mail steamers are always berthed.

As it happened, the *Atrato* had not yet put in an appearance, and there were the usual crowds of anxious relatives, husbands, sweethearts, and loafers on the dock side, some brimming over with enjoyment at the prospect of near meetings with their loved ones, others looking nervous and fretful, as though they were the bearers of bad tidings to the returned exiles, or at all events feared the news which the incoming friends were carrying.

One woman in particular attracted my attention—a tall, commanding figure in black, in widow's weeds, but with two of the most evil-looking eyes I had ever seen. Somehow this creature fascinated me. Her walk; her hands, which, luckily, were destitute of gloves; her expression on her thin, tightly-pressed lips; the cut of her chin when she raised her veil to get a better view of the approaching vessel, all told their striking yet deeply suggestive tale of character revealed by externals. And the tale was in every respect the same: the woman was bad, through and through.

"Who on earth can she have come to meet?" I asked myself, with the curiosity that besets most observant folk in crowds when an awkward pause has come and there is nothing to do but to wait with what patience one can find, eager to pick up any casual amusement. "Not a husband, certainly, nor a lover, for in that case she would never parade those sable garments with so much unction. It must be a friend of some sort, but then who would, or could, be a friend to so diabolical a creature as that is, even to look at?"

Just then the excitement of the boat's arrival caught up the crowd, and I had all my attention engaged in my own work, in piloting myself well to the front, in rushing across the gangway on to the vessel, and by a judicious bribe of half-a-sovereign getting one of the stewards to conduct me straight away to the girl I was in search of—Miss Camille Velasquon—who greeted me with one of the prettiest and most honest of Spanish faces I had ever seen, and who shook my hand as warmly as though we had been friends in the long ago, for years and years. In age she could not, certainly, have been more than twenty, but there was a certain air of good style about her and her clothes that suggested wealth and a consciousness of considerable social importance.

"José telegraphed me and told me to rely on you," she whispered in a low voice, "and I will. As a matter of fact, I have carefully studied all the other first-class passengers and there is no one amongst them whom we need fear, so we must look for enemies amongst the people on the dock side."

"I think I can protect you all right," I replied, with a smile as bright and infectious as her own. "But take my arm, look as though you belonged to me, as if we were brother and sister, in point of fact. What about your luggage?"

"That will be sent on," she returned quickly, stepping out bravely beside me. "I arranged all that with the stewardess, who for the time will treat it as her own. I knew time pressed, and so I did all I could to facilitate my departure."

"Then let us make the most of your foresight," I said, and elbowing our way through the crowd the pair of us passed quickly out of the dock and soon hid ourselves in the refreshment room of the station, from which we passed rapidly to a slow train, which a porter explained would eventually land us in London, but would take four hours over the process.

"It is safety before speed we must study at this point," I whispered to my companion; and we were just congratulating ourselves that we had got the carriage to ourselves as the guard's whistle sounded, and had slipped out of Southampton with great discretion, when a most unexpected thing happened.

The carriage door opened suddenly, and in there stepped that evil-looking woman in black I had noted on the dock side.

The next instant the train rumbled off.

"Confound it," I said to Miss Velasquon, "I never bargained for this. I think we had better change at the next station."

Evidently the stranger heard my whisper, for she looked up.

"You may change, sir," she said icily, "and I advise you to do so, but your companion won't." And her hands came together with a vicious snap.

"How—what the dickens do you mean?" I blurted out, and my eyes flashed fire.

"This," the woman answered: "Miss Camille Velasquon, as it happens, is in my, not your, charge. Unfortunately, she is an escaped criminal lunatic, and it is my business, with the aid of some friends in the adjacent compartment, to convey her at once to Broadmoor Asylum."

Chapter Eleven.

What Happened to us.

For a moment I own that I was dismayed by this evil-looking woman's line of attack. If there be one act of grave injustice in England easier to manage than another it is this: to trump up some false charge of lunacy against a sane but unconscious person. If, in addition, you can assert that the alleged maniac is one fleeing from justice, or, worse still, consigned to some living tomb of convicted criminals like Broadmoor, you are pretty sure to get public sympathy and support on your side, for the vast majority of persons fear the insane with a wild, unreasoning kind of panic, and are only too glad to interpose the burly forms of keepers and doctors between themselves and the objects they dread.

Doubtless this wretched creature knew this, for her tones were those of an absolute mistress of herself and of that most perplexing situation. Her attitude, too, suggested a consciousness of triumph, for she just looked at Camille Velasquon with a look of gravity and warning that she must be careful if she wished to have any peace or kindness hereafter, whereas for me she had nothing but hot scorn or an icy contempt.

"Did you say you had other keepers with you?" I queried at length, more anxious to gain time before I showed my real hand than to elicit information.

"Yes; I did. There are two assistant warders. I am the principal."

"Women, I suppose?"

"Both women!"

"Both women! Where do they come from?"

"From Broadmoor, like myself." And she turned her head in the direction of the carriage window, as though she were tired of the conversation and desired me for the rest of the time to mind my own business.

Camille Velasquon now plucked me nervously by the arm. "This woman's story is a tissue of lies," she whispered. "I am no criminal and no lunatic. Why, I never set foot in England till I got off the ship on to Southampton Dock with you a few minutes ago!"

"Of course you didn't," I replied in a low tone, which, luckily, the rattle of the wheels prevented that grim-looking figure in the corner making the true sense. "Don't you see that this is the plot Don José Casteno warned you against? Indeed, this is why I came down to meet you, to protect you. The trouble is, I don't know who has put her up to this crowning piece of impudence. If it is just some obscure enemy of Casteno or of the Order of St. Bruno it's all right, I'll rescue you; but if it has some diplomatic importance, and behind this creature stands some great personage who is playing some game of European importance, it won't be so easy as it might seem. Money may have been spent like water, and, at a pinch, they may prove to be really warders sent from Broadmoor with false instructions about you, and a false scent."

"But you will save me, won't you?" pleaded the girl, her eyes lustrous with tears. "Don't leave me near that dreadful creature. We women can read women much more rapidly than men can, even the cleverest; and I am sure she has never occupied any official position at an asylum—she looks more like a murderess herself!"

"Well, I will certainly do my best," I replied soothingly, turning again and facing Miss Velasquon. England is a queer place, and it is very easy to get a crowd together and to weep to them and to stuff them with a lot of lies. Many wicked people get the better of the innocent by cheap and foolish tricks like those.

I stood up and piloted myself to a position opposite to the stranger. "As you can see," I began quietly but firmly, moving my head in the direction of my companion, "Miss Velasquon and I are together. Your information has distressed me very much. I was under the impression that my friend was quite a different personage to the one you make out. All the same, I don't want to do anything that might seem to you unnecessarily hostile. You say you have two other warders with you. Do you mind, now that the train is stopping, inviting them to come into this carriage?"

For the first time the woman's eyes fell. She could not divine what I was up to. Somehow she felt herself being pushed into a position, but she could not foresee where it would terminate.

"I don't see the need," she blurted out at length.

"But the authorities at Broadmoor did. That is why they sent them with you, you know. Believe me, you will incur a very grave responsibility if you don't let them do their duty now that I have pointed out how extremely important it is that they should. Suppose Miss Velasquon grew dangerous, for instance, and sprang out of the carriage window on to the metals before you could lift a hand to stop her, what would the railway people say, the asylum authorities, the police, the coroner? Why, I should hurry forward to give evidence against you, madam, and you would be convicted of nothing less than manslaughter by neglect." And to add irritation to my words I broke into a low mocking laugh, while poor Camille Velasquon, who knew I was up to some trick, but couldn't see what it was, gave way to a fit of tears.

"Yours is a pretty picture," the woman snapped, and now she looked more evil than ever, "but it's too melodramatic for my taste. Just get out of this carriage yourself, then I can manage the patient all right. If anything happens it will be your fault, not mine."

"I am not so sure about that," I retorted blithely. "But am I to understand you decline my suggestion? If so, I can only say you have told me an untruth for some purpose of your own, which it will be my duty to ferret out. I can tell you openly that you have no warders with you."

"I have."

"Produce them."

"I can."

"Produce them," I replied, and I made a movement as though I would signal to some porters who were standing near and would call upon them to judge between me and herself.

The ruse succeeded. With a muttered curse the woman placed a small silver whistle to her lips and blew thereon a curious signal, rather low, but very penetrating and distinctive. The next moment she was answered. Two women in the uniform of hospital nurses appeared suddenly at the window, and, obeying a sign from their superior, they sprang into the carriage and took seats, one on one side of, and the other opposite to, Camille Velasquon, who, now fearing that I had muddled everything, began to cry in sober earnest.

Undaunted, I held on to the course I had marked out for myself when I started. Turning to the woman, as the train once again steamed off, I said with ironical politeness: "I must really apologise for the scepticism with which I treated you. I see, now, that you have two assistants from Broadmoor, but why don't they wear Broadmoor uniforms?"

"They do," she cried, and then she stopped and bit her lip. All at once she realised she had fallen into the pit I had dug so carelessly in front of her.

"Oh no, indeed, they do not," I answered sweetly. "The uniforms which these women have on are only worn by nurses at Guy's Hospital. The fact is, I have been often to Broadmoor myself, and I know the nurses there wear a totally different garb." And I shot a glance out of the corner of my eyes at the pseudo-nurses themselves. One had flushed crimson, the other had gone deathly white, and was playing nervously with her pocket-handkerchief. They were impostors, I am certain.

The woman in black, however, rose with magnificent impudence to the occasion. "You, sir," she said, "have been good enough to brand me with falsehood, and I have borne it without a murmur, striving only to prove to you, in the discharge of my duty, that I spoke fairly and truthfully. Now, however, you go too far when you attack my assistants. I repeat they are dressed properly, and I say that your statement that you have been often in our asylum, is so much fudge. Only doctors and police and inspectors from the Home Office go there as a regular rule."

I waited for a moment before I answered, like a clever actor pauses before he puts in his most effective point.

"You are impetuous, madam," I said, taking out my snuff-box with studied deliberation and pretending to take a pinch; "very impetuous. You ought to have asked who I was before you branded me, too, as an impostor. As a matter of fact, I do belong to the police. Here is my card." And I quietly produced a card of Detective-Inspector Naylor's which I happened to have in my waistcoat pocket.

The effect of my act was almost magical. The woman in front of me started violently and shivered. Then with a great

effort she recovered herself and gave me another look of defiance. "I see," she said, taking the piece of cardboard I handed to her with apparent carelessness. "I suppose you have been sent to look after Miss Velasquon by some friend of hers who does not know her real identity or crimes. It's a pity, a great pity, for you will have your journey wasted. The patient, of course, is now in our care, and must go with us."

"I don't know so much about that," I returned, although I admit I was startled with the daring and resource which this woman was showing, and which proved that she was up to every trick and turn and corner of those wretched lunacy laws of ours. "Do you mind showing me the authority under which you are acting?"

"Not at all," she said in her most patronising and offensive tones, and feeling in a reticule that depended from her waist she produced this strange communication:

By Royal Authority.

Criminal Lunatic Asylum, Broadmoor.

To all whom it may concern.

This is to Certify that the Bearer of this warrant, Joan Virtue Hand, is a principal warder in the above Institution, and is now absent on a mission to recover possession of a particularly daring and dangerous inmate, named Camille Velasquon, who has escaped therefrom, although she is a fully certified lunatic and has been incarcerated here in the above Institution on a lawful warrant from His Majesty's judge sitting at the Central Criminal Court, whereat she was charged with the killing and slaying of two of her sisters, aged five and seven respectively.

All good and law-abiding citizens, and particularly members of the police force, station-masters, porters, sailors, shipmasters, cab proprietors, lodging-house keepers, and hotel managers, are requested to give her every assistance in conveying her patient to the above Institution. And all persons are warned against impeding the said Joan Virtue Hand in the execution of her mission, for by so doing they render themselves liable to the Lunacy Act 1875, c vii s 5, 6, ss 3, and on conviction may be punished by a term of imprisonment not exceeding six calendar months.

(Signed) Douglas Llewelyn, *Chief Registrar.*

Very carefully I read this document through three or four times before I made any comment, any remark, about it at all. I could feel, of course, that the woman was watching me and every second was growing more and more uneasy under the stress of my unexpected recourse to silence. But still I said nothing to her; and at last she could bear it no longer.

"Now, Mr Naylor," she said, speaking to me in my assumed name, but her voice was shrill with apprehension, "perhaps you will have the goodness to admit that you have been playing a very dangerous game with me and that if I liked I could make it very awkward for you at Scotland Yard for interfering between a warder and an escaped lunatic without proper inquiry or warrant."

"Humph," I returned coldly, "I don't know so much about that." And before she could have the slightest notion what I was up to I coolly lowered the carriage window, and tearing her authority quickly into three or four pieces I flung the fragments out on to the railway as the train was whirling along at a rate of about twenty miles an hour.

"Man," she stormed, as soon as she saw what I had done, springing to her feet and grabbing me by the arm, "are you mad?"

"I hope not," I said courteously. "I try to keep sane, although I admit it is hard sometimes when one meets such odd people."

"But do you realise what you have done? You have torn up my warrant."

"I know," I returned sadly. "But then it was no good, you see. It was a fraud. It had no more to do with Broadmoor than yonder telegraph post. It was designed to mislead people, and so, to save misconception, I destroyed it." And with a sardonic smile I threw myself back in my seat and folded my arms.

"Oh! you shall pay for this," she hissed, her features working convulsively. "Dearly, dearly shall you pay for this! This girl shall never escape me—never!" And she shot out a threatening finger in the direction of poor Camille.

"Unfortunately, my dear Mrs Hand," I said in my most lofty tone, "you have come upon the scene a trifle late for heroics like these. As a matter of fact, you are in the awkward position, not I at all. On the whole you have been precipitate, very precipitate, I regret to observe. Thus you never got to know by what right I met Miss Velasquon. You never inquired, indeed. Even when I handed you my card you did not pause and ask yourself whether you were not going just a trifle too far in your rudeness to me and your interference with my good wishes."

"Good wishes? Rubbish," she snapped!

"My good wishes, I repeat," I said with a good deal of firmness, for was I not about to play my last and most triumphant trump card? "As a matter of fact, those good wishes of mine are very important to you and to these two disguised females whom you drag about with you," and I casually nodded in the direction of the pseudo-nurses, "for long before any of you appeared on the scene I had arrested Camille Velasquon! She was a prisoner, and you have all rendered yourselves liable to punishment for attempting to get her out of my hands!"

"Oh, that's impossible," Joan Hand cried; but there was no conviction in her tones, and her two confederates sprang up and made as though they would slip out of the carriage forthwith.

In an instant I planted myself between them and the door—the only door that remained unlocked. “Excuse me, ladies,” I said; “I cannot permit you to leave me in this unceremonious fashion.”

“Why, we’ve done nothing,” one of them gasped. “We are free.”

“Not at all,” I blithely observed, “you are all three my prisoners. I charge all of you with falsely representing yourselves to be nurses engaged at the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum, and, whilst doing so, endeavouring to rescue a prisoner lawfully in my custody on the charge of a series of frauds in the Mexican Republic,—a girl whom I am taking to the Extradition Court at Bow Street to await the arrival of the necessary papers; and I warn you all to be careful what you say to me. Any remark you happen to make now I shall use in evidence against you, and if the lot of you don’t get put away for a long term of penal servitude it will be mighty odd to me. You are certainly the wickedest gang of females I have ever struck.”

“And I’ll strike you, you wretch,” screamed the woman Hand, and before I could turn the woman in black caught me a blow on the side of the head that sent me crashing to my seat.

That was the only chance they had, but they took it almost in a flash. Just then the train was drawing into Vauxhall, and like lightning they tore open the door of the carriage and sprang on to the platform, to disappear instantly in a bewildering network of waiting-rooms.

For my own part, I was rather relieved than otherwise at their flight, and I turned to congratulate Camille Velasquon on the skill with which we had managed to outwit them.

But she, too, had disappeared!

Chapter Twelve.

What the Papers Said.

With a startled exclamation I began to search up and down.

At first, I own, I did not know what to do.

True, the mystery of how that carriage door had been unlocked was quickly elucidated, for directly I looked out I saw that the engine had drawn us along a single set of metals to a point in the station where platforms stood quite close to the solitary track. There were plenty of porters on either side of the compartment, and it was no doubt the easiest thing in the world for the girl to beckon one to her assistance and to slip off as I was seeking to discover what became of that sham warderess from Broadmoor and her confederates.

But why should she go at all? At that point she was perfectly safe. I had beaten off the attempt to abduct her. So far as either of us could foresee she would be able to go to her refuge at the headquarters of the Order of St. Bruno with perfect safety and ease. And yet, just as I had secured this, she had vanished! What excuse could I make to José Casteno? And could it have been a sudden freak or, after all, had somebody got the better of me when my back was turned, and, in spite of the woman Hand, had kidnapped the girl in the flash of a moment?

For my own part, I confess I could not believe that in a busy and crowded station like Vauxhall she could have been whipped off so suddenly through a locked carriage door without a sound if only she had had any desire to remain. Perhaps, too, her secret instructions from Casteno were to travel to South London only and then to part company with me. Now I came to think of it I remembered how very vague the Spaniard had been about the entire business, particularly as to what was to happen when the journey was over.

In the end I seemed compelled to decide that the girl had gone off through her own free will, but in order to make quite certain that no mischief was afoot I leaped out of the train just as the whistle sounded for its departure and searched the station through and through. Not a sign of my charge could I discover.

Then I did what, perhaps, I ought to have done in the first place. I bribed one of the porters to interrogate his comrades on the subject, and finally got word from one of the station hands what appeared to be the real truth. A portly but distinguished looking stranger, who carried himself with a military air and was exceedingly well dressed, was observed to step forward to the carriage in which Miss Velasquon was seated as soon as the train drew to a standstill and to pass her a small card on which he had written something in very great haste. The girl nodded instantly she read his message. Thereon, the man whipped out a train key, and in a flash threw open the doorway, through which the girl slipped like a shadow, linking her arm in the stranger’s as though he were some old, intimate, and highly-trusted friend. Next instant they were lost in the maze of people on the platform; but a news lad, who sold papers outside the main exit close to the trams, came forward, and he declared that he recollected seeing the couple quite well, and that they entered a carriage that was waiting near at hand and drove off in the direction of Victoria.

With that I had to be content. Whether it *was* good or bad I had no means then to determine. I could only hope that things had turned out as well as they ought to have done. Inwardly, however, I registered a vow that I would get more at the mind of my employer the next time he sent me tearing half across England to the rescue of a girl, no matter how fascinating she might be, or in what peril. Then I bought a copy of one of the evening papers, and hailing a hansom directed the driver to take me back to my offices in Stanton Street, where Don José had promised to telegraph to me.

For a time I sat well back in the soft, well-upholstered cab and let my thoughts run riot on the extraordinary series of adventures that had befallen since I had made that fierce fight in the auction room. Have you ever noticed that there

is something mysterious in the mere fact that one has purchased a copy of the last edition of a paper that makes one a prey to retrospect? Nine times out of the ten on which I purchase an evening journal I never glance at the columns. But once let me omit to provide myself with a damp, evilly-folded sheet, and I am wretched. All my nerves are on the alert. I can think of nothing to interest me. The shortest journey seems of intolerable length. I finish up fagged, irritable, and stupid.

As a matter of fact, I am certain I should never have looked at that particular copy that particular night had not two leather-lunged paper "runners," who live on Metropolitan sensations, suddenly loomed up on either side of the cab as we rattled past the site of the old Millbank Prison and waved their papers in front of me. "Horrible tragedy in Whitehall Court!" they roared.

The driver whipped up his horse, and the hansom shot past them into the gathering blackness, but the echo of their words rang through my brain. "Horrible tragedy in Whitehall Court." Why, I recollected suddenly that was where Doris lived! Could something—oh, no, it was ridiculous; this flight of Camille Velasquon had made me nervous. None the less, I made a frantic grab at my paper—it was a *Globe*, I remember—somehow one always notes such trifles in a supreme crisis—and with trembling fingers I turned to the fifth page, where, I knew from old experience, I should find the latest and most important intelligence given.

Ah! I was not mistaken. Here it was:

MURDER IN WHITEHALL COURT

ANOTHER MYSTERIOUS CRIME

But what was that? Familiar names? People, scenes, circumstances I recalled as though they were my own! With a great gasp I held the pink sheet close to the cab lamp, and as we were whirling madly along Parliament Street, close to the actual scene of the crime itself, I read this account of what had happened whilst I that morning had tried to snatch but a few hours of broken slumber.

"About half-past six this morning a murder of a peculiarly atrocious character was discovered in that block of flats known as Embankment Mansions in Whitehall Court. It seems that Colonel Napier's valet, a man named Richardson, who was early awake in consequence of an attack of toothache, was startled by hearing what he believed was a shout for help proceeding from his master's room. He went at once to the door and knocked, and, on getting no reply, he turned the handle and entered, when he was horrified to see Colonel Napier stretched on the bed, with a great dagger-thrust in the region of his heart, and quite dead. An open window showed at once the means chosen by the murderer to effect an entrance, which was rendered all the more easy by the fact that an iron pipe ran past it on its way from the roof to the earth. The valet sprang at once to the window, but he could see no sign of any person, and darting to an inner room he turned on a district messenger-call for the police. Then he ran back to the bedroom. The colonel could not then have been dead many seconds. Everything pointed to that. Nor was it clear why the crime had been committed. Nothing had been removed from the bedroom—nothing at all. Detective-Inspector Naylor and other officers were quickly on the scene, but although they searched they could not find any trace of the murderer or of the weapon with which the terrible deed was accomplished. At the time of writing, indeed, the crime is enveloped in mystery, for Colonel Napier, who was formerly Member of Parliament for Hereford, and had won high recognition for services on the Indian frontier, was considered by all a most popular man. He was a widower, and leaves only one child, a daughter, who, luckily, at the time of the tragedy was away on a visit."

For a few moments after reading this I confess I felt at a loss to speak, to move, even to think—the thing was so hideous, so appalling, so complete. The horror of it all seemed so acute that it crushed me beneath its weight.

I could only sit with eyes that, look where they would, perceived nothing but the dread scene in the death chamber—that man I had a keen affection for stricken to the heart.

Maybe some of us who suffer such awful shocks get curiously clairvoyant in the moments of our greatest trial. I cannot tell. I only know I descended from that cab, paid the man his fare, and entered my office in Stanton Street, like one in a trance. All the time my brain was beating through a cloud of horror, doubt, and suspicion; but, finally, as I flung myself into a chair in front of the fire, every point appeared to clear for me as though by magic. Then one terrible question stared up at me with awe-inspiring distinctness:

Was this crime the work of José Casteno?

Somehow the problem, when I had once stated it to myself and had taken it for ever out of that dim region of intangible speculation, did not surprise me very greatly. Instinctively I recalled how significant had been the Spaniard's appeal to the colonel when he threatened to compel Doris to hold no further communication with me. "I beg you withdraw that, withdraw it this day, or you will regret your determination." Then I saw again Don José as he had looked when he knelt, just where I was sitting at that moment, with the sullen glare of the flames on his upturned face and his dagger poised to catch the light on the edge that he had just finished sharpening with so much intensity and precision.

After all, it was quite possible that the lust of murder had seized him in those seconds, the desire to make good his own words both to the colonel and to myself. It would appear so easy to commit a crime when all London slept; and, alas! it had been easy, painfully, pitilessly easy, to put an end to that gallant old soldier as he lay slumbering in his bed. Certainly one great damning fact stood out against Casteno—the killing of the colonel's dog Fate. Who else could have any interest in the stabbing of that poor, faithful brute than the murderer of his master? And who else could have made that ugly gash in his side save José Casteno?

Nor, indeed, was that the only solid link in the chain of guilt I was forging against the Spaniard. All at once I recalled how carefully he had avoided the passage where the spaniel had been stricken down. Was that accident—or

conscience? Also the agility he had shown in scrambling up that iron pipe outside the hunchback's shop when we went to spy on Zouche from that upstairs room. He had told me, of course, he had learned the trick at sea. He may have done that; but might he not also have acquired some recent practice outside Embankment Mansions which it seemed pretty clear the murderer entered by the same method?

Stung to desperation at my own foul success in linking my employer up with this awful crime I resolved that I would lose no time in tracking the man down, and his guilt. What did the Lake of Sacred Treasure in far-off Mexico matter to me in an hour red with blood as that was—the blood of one of my best and truest friends? Let the Earl of Fotheringay and Lord Cyril Cuthbertson plot and plan. Let Mr Cooper-Nassington ferret out Peter Zouche and drag from him the secret of the cipher manuscripts. Ay, let the Jesuits send their most trusty spies, I at least would take no hand in the struggle again until I had torn the mask from this villain.

Rising impatiently, I began striding rapidly up and down the room. Hitherto the minutes had gone by on the wings of the wind. I had not been conscious of the flight of time, although the hands on the travelling clock in front of me had travelled round the dial two, if not three, times. Now the seconds seemed made of lead. They would not pass. They hung about me, and fretted me. Again and again I asked myself: "Why does not José Casteno telegraph me as he had promised and tell me where he is and how he has fared since he slipped off on the track of the hunchback?" It was no good. No answer came, and bit by bit there formed in my mind a new suspicion, a new dread. What if the Spaniard had taken fright at the publicity the crime had obtained and had left his chase of Zouche to secure his own safety in some far-off land, where he would never be suspected and where he could never be found? I might wait, then, until the crack of doom: Colonel Napier would remain unavenged.

Feverishly I tore out into the streets and bought up all the late editions of the evening papers which I could lay my hands on. This mysterious crime had impressed the stolid imagination of Londoners so well accustomed to horrors that end in nothingness to a degree that was quite unusual; and all the journals had launched out into lurid descriptions of the dead man and the manner of his passing so that a horrid sense of nausea seized on me, and I cursed journalism and all its loathsome enterprise; albeit it I was most eager myself at the same moment to take advantage of its discoveries.

One paper, however, had got a paragraph that threw a new light on the occurrence—the *Star*—and I read it with throbbing eagerness:

A STARTLING THEORY

"Latest inquiries to-night tend to show that there is a good deal behind the death of Colonel Napier. The police are certain that the murderer has some other object than theft, at which task it was said that he must have been disturbed by the sudden tapping on the door by the valet, Richardson. It is rumoured that the appearance of Detective Naylor on the scene was of set design. Naylor, as was stated in the papers a few days ago, has the warrant in hand for the arrest of the murderer of young George Sutton, a man who, it will be remembered, fled to this country from a monastery in Mexico after he had committed the deed. Now the two crimes are connected in the minds of the police for some reason they will not divulge; and it is whispered freely at Scotland Yard that a man who puts his hands on the murderer of Sutton will at the same time arrest the assassin of brave Colonel Napier. Unfortunately, the quest is highly complicated, and at the clubs there are some wild, romantic stories afloat, which connect the deaths with stories of vast, hidden treasures and diplomatic intrigues, party jealousies, and mystery-loving Mexicans. For our own part, we advise the public to take little heed of these wild romances until they contain something which looks a trifle more substantial. A milkman, for instance, has been found who declares he was passing Whitehall Court about the time the murder must have been committed, and he swears positively that he saw a young, dark-looking foreigner, aged about twenty-five, run from the direction of Embankment Mansions and disappear up Northumberland Avenue. He says, also, that he saw the man's features quite distinctly, and that he will be able to recognise them again in any circumstances and after any lapse of time. Now clues like these are worth a thousand of the utterly preposterous yarns they are whispering in Clubland to-night about Jesuits and parliamentary personages who are much too busy to be mixed up with all the numberless scandals and tarradiddles that affect the House of Commons under its present party *régime*."

Surely, if this theory pointed to anyone it did most certainly to José Casteno!

Further speculation, however, was cut short by the arrival of a telegraph messenger. With trembling fingers I tore open the envelope, and found that, after all, the Spaniard had kept his word and had wired me, most fully, news of his whereabouts and wishes:

To Hugh Glynn, 99 Stanton Street, London, WC.

"Have accompanied our good friend to Green Dragon Hotel, Shrewsbury. At Birmingham he met a clever but needy aeronaut named Captain Sparhawk. This man has invented a flying machine which he has arranged to show at Great Shropshire Floral Fête here on Monday. Z. has promised to finance him and to ascend with him to test the machine's capacities. Two other seats were on sale in the town at twenty pounds each. I have bought them, and propose you and I ascend with them disguised as military men in undress uniform of engineers; otherwise fear, if the machine travels far, Z. may do a bolt to some other district. If you don't wire me, c/o Post Office, shall assume you will come.—C."

"Certainly I will come," I said to myself grimly as I folded up the message and placed it in my pocket-book. "It would be a pity for you, Master José, to undertake any fresh adventures without my personal assistance. You might come to some harm before we had cleared up the mystery of the death of Colonel Napier, and that would be a pity, a great pity, indeed."

And snatching up the travelling-bag which I always kept ready packed for such emergencies I dashed off to a

costumier I knew who lived near, in Wellington Street. Then I made for Euston, and catching the night mail to the Midlands, contrived such a good use of my time, that, before church time, I found myself in Shrewsbury, scrambling up the hill that led from the main railway station to the far-famed Green Dragon Hotel, where I understood both Zouche and Casteno were.

On the way down, however, I had effected certain changes in my appearance. A dark wig was on my head. A black moustache hid my mouth. My plain civilian clothes had given place at the costumier's to the uniform of a sergeant of royal engineers. I had done this to deceive the hunchback, and to satisfy Casteno I had brought no disguise for the Spaniard.

I did not think he would need one after I had finished my first conversation with him!

And as I turned into the courtyard of the hotel he came out and met me with outstretched hand.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Two Brothers.

There was nothing in the way Casteno received me to suggest a man with a guilty secret. On the contrary, as I advanced through the doorway that led to the Green Dragon he stepped out boldly towards me the instant he recognised me beneath the disguise which he himself had suggested. "Welcome, my good friend," he said in a bluff and hearty fashion, stretching out his hand; "Welcome!"

I took the greeting he proffered, although I turned my head away and would not let him detect my real feelings. At first I was sorely tempted to take him by surprise and to denounce him there and then as the man who had stolen into Whitehall Court in those early morning hours, climbed through that open bedroom window, and had killed poor Colonel Napier, one of the truest and most loyal soldiers that ever lived. But I crushed all those temptations down. There was much for me to discover before I could show my suspicions so plainly as that. I had to go very slowly and carefully to work.

"I am glad to see you," I answered at length, and that sentiment, indeed, was true. I was glad—more glad than he could guess. "Let the porter carry my luggage in, and let you and I have a walk."

"Excellent," said he, "that was just what I was going to propose if you were not too tired." And giving the necessary directions to the hotel servants he calmly linked his arm in mine, and led me down the street towards the river, whither all the passers-by seemed to be hastening on their way homeward after service at church.

"Well, and how did you get on with Miss Velasquon?" he asked later.

"Very badly," I returned. "I lost her at Vauxhall Bridge Station."

"Oh, never mind about that," he replied lightly. "Your duty ended as soon as you arrived with her in London. As a matter of fact, I sent a friend to intercept her at that point. He didn't quite understand whether he could trust you or not, so he hit on that ruse by which she slipped out of the carriage whilst you were looking out at an opposite platform. She wired me, however, that you had had some extraordinary adventure on the way up. What was that?"

"Oh, merely some women tried to lure her off to Broadmoor Lunatic Asylum," I snapped. "Why on earth didn't you tell me I was safe when we reached town? Do you know, I searched the station from top to bottom before I decided your friend had come to no harm."

"No, I don't. In fact, I am very sorry about what the man whom I sent did. I was, however, under the impression that I had told you not to worry after she had reached town. The real danger existed on the way up. I had most specific warning that it was on the actual journey from Southampton Lord Fotheringay would make the semi-criminal effort he did to get her out of my hands."

"Why should he?" I demanded, stopping suddenly and gazing fixedly at the speaker.

"Why should two men ever strive after the same sweetheart?" Casteno answered, his features flushing crimson. "Call it Life—Fate—Providence—Luck—Destiny—what you like. There it is. It often happens. The whole truth is, the earl and I are both in love with Camille Velasquon. She prefers me, hence his quest for the documents is mixed up in a thirst for personal revenge."

"And the documents you asked her to bring?" I cut in suddenly, "what of those? Are they love letters?" And a quiet smile of derision showed itself at the corners of my mouth. "Do you want them, or are they to go into the archives of the Order of St. Bruno as quaint but interesting curiosities?"

"Neither," said Casteno simply. "They are more important, much more important, than lovers' effusions. They give the keys to various ciphers used by the Jesuits in the early days of their Order in Mexico. Is there anything else you would like to ask?" Then seeing he had put me to some confusion he went on with great earnestness: "Look here, man, why don't you trust me a little more? Don't you see that there must, in a quest like this we are engaged upon, be a hundred details about which I cannot give you my confidence? Why not be content to labour in the dark until the time for the light comes? As it is just at present, I satisfy you for a day easily and perfectly enough, but it is only for a day. Something you don't expect happens, and lo! I find about me a cloud of distrust, suspicion, and unpleasant suggestion that takes out of me every bit of heart and pluck."

"Is not that your own fault?" I blurted out. "Are not your actions calculated to excite distrust? Carry your memory

back to the last time you were in my office in Stanton Street. What happened then?"

"Nothing of great account." But now he went very pale.

"Are you quite sure of that?" I queried in the gravest tones. "Think again. Examine your conscience again. What about that dagger of yours? Why did you get up and sharpen it on the hearthstone directly you thought I should not see you?"

The Spaniard started, and recovered himself with an effort. "Because I had had a fright," he stammered. "In an idle moment I had looked through the window and there I saw a man who had vowed to take my life."

"I cannot believe you," I cried. "You must convince me. Tell me who was this foe?"

"My own brother," he muttered, turning away from me with an impatient gesture and quickening his steps. "You have seen him yourself. The hunchback called him Paul—"

"Then," I gasped in amazement, "you—you are the hunchback's son?"

"Of course I am," he retorted. "I thought you guessed that directly you saw Paul when we were up in that recess watching my father put on his disguise. The relationship seemed so evident that I did not feel there was any necessity to explain it."

"But you call yourself Casteno?"

"No; I changed my name after I had quarrelled with my father some years ago and got employment in the Royal Household of Spain. I purchased the right to do so—"

"Then you talk English like a native."

"So does the hunchback."

"And when that morning you saw your brother," I went on, breaking away on a new tack, "why did you go after him?"

"To make peace if I could. As it was doubtful I prepared myself also for war."

"And did you find him?"

"No; he was too quick for me. I slipped as hard as I could to his chambers in Embankment Mansions in Whitehall Court, but he was not in them. They were closed and locked."

"Embankment Mansions in Whitehall Court," I repeated. "That is where Colonel Napier lives." And as I uttered the name of the dead officer I scrutinised every line on Casteno's face.

"Of course it is," he responded, and not the smallest sign of excitement did he exhibit. "Paul, for some years, has had a set of chambers over the flat occupied by Colonel Napier. He has got one of those wild, hopeless passions that sometimes seize the lowly born for girls in the higher ranks of life, for Miss Napier."

"Not Miss Doris Napier!" I interjected.

"Oh yes, Miss Doris. The thing is almost laughable—except for Paul, who is absolutely crazy on the subject, and who has often told me that on the day you are formally engaged to her he will shoot you like a dog."

"Pleasant for me," I observed, "extremely pleasant. Your father and I are old friends; how is it he didn't warn me?"

"He always hoped that Paul would come to his senses. He was ashamed of the lad's madness. He trusted that some other girl would appear on the scene to fascinate Paul. Besides, he did tell Colonel Napier about it. The colonel and he are related, as a matter of fact. Both of them married step-sisters; but my mother died many years ago."

"I had no idea of this."

"No doubt," returned the Spaniard courteously. "Lovers don't usually trouble to inquire as to the relations of the girls they love until after marriage. If they did, cynics say that they would spare themselves a good many highly unpleasant surprises. The colonel, of course, was equally annoyed about this infatuation, and I am told that only a few days ago he met Paul on the stairs of the flat and gave him a good beating with his cane for daring to send Miss Napier a bunch of flowers. Perhaps, however, this is only idle gossip. I heard it from a servant whom my father had recently dismissed. He said that Paul was so incensed at this outrage that he would have stabbed the colonel dead on the spot if he had had his dagger with him. Luckily, he had forgotten that morning to fasten it on—"

"I am not so sure about that," I answered slowly and with great distinctness, "although, now I came to think of it, I did recollect that in the old days Doris had told me a good deal about the persecutions she had suffered from the ridiculous attentions of a foreign boy who lived in the set of rooms above theirs—attentions, I am sorry to say, I had only laughed to scorn."

"Not so sure!" echoed my companion in tones of genuine disgust and horror. "Why, would you, Mr Glynn, have liked my brother to make an attempt on his uncle's life?"

"That would have been better than what happened," I returned meaningly.

"Why, what was that?" cried the Spaniard in alarm.

"Somebody crept into his bedroom as the colonel slept and stabbed him to the heart—to be precise, the exact hour you left me to search for Paul."

"Good heavens!" gasped Casteno, falling back. "Then the wretched boy has broken loose from his reason and carried out his insane idea of revenge! Ah! now I see it all. That was why I caught him lurking about your office! He had tracked Colonel Napier there earlier, and had no notion that he had returned to Whitehall Court until he saw a strange figure at your door."

"Even that doesn't explain who killed the clumber spaniel Fate."

"I think it does," urged Casteno stoutly. "The dog knew, somehow, he had done wrong to his master and would not leave him. In a fit of passion and terror Paul whipped out his knife and stabbed him."

"But that would happen near Whitehall Court. How came the dog to die in a passage near Stanton Street?"

"He must have been making for your office: remember all dogs have odd gleams of foresight at times."

For a few moments we walked on in silence. The duel had been a sharp one and a long one, but already I was possessed with an uncomfortable suspicion that the Spaniard had won. Even as I surveyed the ruins of my theories I was conscious that little was left to connect Casteno with the murder.

"But do you think your brother Paul will be discovered?" I asked.

"I cannot tell," said Casteno, and I could see now he was sincerely grieved at the disastrous intelligence I had communicated to him. "There are sure to be plenty of people in Embankment Mansions who will remember the caning which the lad had from the colonel on the stairs. They will be certain, when they recover their wits, to give the police the details of that affray; also there is that discharged servant I spoke of—the man Butterworth. He hates Paul like poison. He will leave no stone unturned, I am certain, to connect the lad with the crime."

"Still, mere suspicion is one thing, and evidence strong enough to warrant arrest is another," he added after a moment's careful consideration. "Perhaps, after all, I am wrong. Somebody else may have done it. We shall see."

"Whoever it is I shall do my best to bring them to justice," I cried hotly. "I don't care whether it is Paul Zouche—"

"Of course not," replied Casteno with much dignity. "I have no doubt you will communicate all I have repeated to you to Scotland Yard. Indeed, I never had any two opinions on that score. At the same time you must excuse me if I don't evince any keen desire to debate the matter further."

"I never asked you to do so," I retorted, anxious not to be outdone in courtesy by the Spaniard. "All your statements to me were practically volunteered."

"True," said Casteno. "As a matter of fact, I felt they were honestly due to you. I saw that my absence from your rooms at the time when the colonel was murdered looked very ugly for me. Very ugly, indeed."

"Particularly after you had warned the man only an hour previously that if he didn't do a certain thing, which he subsequently declined to do for you, he would regret his action before four and twenty hours had passed."

"Quite so. Quite so. All the same, that was but a figure of speech. Myself, I had no idea of violence or revenge. My sole impression was of his gross injustice to yourself, which I felt Time himself would most quickly avenge."

"Still," he went on, and now his tones were particularly grave, "don't let us go on debating this business further. It is very awful—it is dreadfully tragic—and it seems to strike right at the heart of the family life of us both. Let us leave it where it stands. I am sure myself a crime like that, in the heart of London, can't remain hidden for many days, particularly with such assistance as you will be able to give the police when you have a few moments to spare to write or to wire to the headquarters staff at Scotland Yard. Therefore don't pursue the matter with me any longer. Realise that you, and I too, are engaged on a business of gigantic international importance. Aren't you curious to hear what I have arranged since I sent you that telegram informing you my father, as I suppose I must now call the hunchback when I speak of him to you, had picked up with this flying machine inventor, Sparhawk, and had actually determined to go on a journey through the air with him to-morrow in a brand new flying machine?"

"I am very curious," I admitted. "I had no idea old Peter had such adventurous tastes."

"Nor have any of his friends. Yet such is the fact. He has really two natures—the student's and the explorer's,—always at work within him; and I never knew him have a big job on, like the deciphering of those three manuscripts relating to the Lake of Sacred Treasure, that he has not eased the strain on his brain, caused by the hours of close attention which the work demands, by going on some wild excursion of this sort. Curiously enough, too, he has always believed in flying machines. It has been one of the dreams of his life to patent one which he could present to Spain for use in warfare. Indeed, all the time Santos-Dumont was making those daring ascents of his in Paris he haunted the French capital in the hope he might pick up some tips for his own models, which he keeps in a disused stable near the Crystal Palace, and which he works on every Sunday after he has heard Mass in that impressive-looking church in Spanish Place."

"But how about his studies?" I asked.

"Oh, he doesn't find Shrewsbury hotel life agree with him. He and Sparhawk are only waiting here until the fête to-morrow, and then they'll career off; and wherever they drop, even if it is only in a village seven miles away, they will not trouble to come back here. They've quite resolved to cut off to some other part of England, but where, I can't for the life of me find out. Still, I think I have done very well to book up the only two seats they offered for sale to the

public, don't you? We shall have to be careful, of course, or they will see through our disguises. At all events, they'll find it hard to shake us off—"

"Unless the apparatus goes wrong and drops us to earth."

"Well, we must take all those risks, mustn't we? And, by Jove, talking of angels, here we can see two of them—at least, there are Captain Sparhawk and the worthy hunchback walking off together up the street yonder. Let's follow them. By the way in which they've put their heads together they're up to no good I am certain. Just before you came I peered through the keyhole of my father's room, and I saw him hard at work on the manuscripts. Now, what on earth can have happened to have made him give it up so suddenly and dress himself up as though he were going for a long journey?"

"He may have discovered something startling and strange," I answered, a great fear now in my heart. "Those documents may have yielded up their secret to him. See! he's going in the direction of the railway station. He may be going back to town."

"Or to the shed where Sparhawk keeps his flying machine. It lies in this direction—in a street parallel with the railway station. Luckily, we have not far to go before we shall see what they are up to. Personally, I don't like the look of things at all." And we both of us quickened our pace.

Outside a fence that skirted a long and rambling garden they were joined by a third companion—a girl attired in a bright summer costume, who chatted with them gaily as they marched steadily forward.

"Who can that be?" cried Casteno, much puzzled. "I did not know my father had any woman friends."

"Well, let's slip to the other side of the street," I suggested. "Then we can catch a glimpse of her face. The figure certainly seems very familiar to me, although my short sight often plays me the strangest of pranks."

We stepped quickly across the road, and with a few strategic movements materially lessened the space between us and the trio in front.

A moment later the girl turned her face in the direction of the hunchback, evidently to exchange some jest with him, for her features were wreathed in smiles.

I stopped short in astonishment.

It was no other than Doris Napier!

Casteno recognised her almost at the same moment that I did. The effect upon him was just as great, for he, too, halted and gazed at me with an expression of vague but sincere concern.

"This is odd—very odd!" he muttered. "I had no idea that Miss Napier was out of London. I wonder, now, how she came to have missed all news of her father's death? Can she have mixed herself up in this manuscript hunt—under pressure from Lord Cyril Cuthbertson or the Earl of Fotheringay, for instance? I remember, now, that she was a great patriot at one time—used to speak for the Primrose League and organisations like that. It would have been a masterly stroke on their part to get hold of her—to work on my father—for he has had always a very soft corner in his heart for her, and in the old days the colonel used to say there was nothing he would refuse her. What do you think, Glynn?" he added, turning suddenly to me. "Is it your idea that she has come under some lofty notion that England's interests are in peril both from the Jesuits and from Spain, and if she doesn't circumvent these enemies the Lake of Sacred Treasure will be lost to this country for ever?"

But I refused to be drawn. Her appearance was sudden, too unexpected. "I don't know," I answered. "I can't even guess. The thing may be a ruse on the part of the wretch that killed her father. He may fear the effect of her disclosures. I must wait; just now I cannot see."

"At all events, I am sure the hunchback is no partisan to any move like that last one you mention," returned Casteno stoutly, with something resembling offended family pride vibrating through his voice. "Indeed, I am certain that as yet he knows nothing, absolutely nothing, about the tragedy at Whitehall Court. He has been too busy trying to decipher the manuscripts to have had any time or strength to glance at the Saturday night or Sunday morning papers. As for Captain Sparhawk, like all enthusiastic inventors, he is a man of one idea. He can think of nothing, talk of nothing, dream of nothing, read of nothing but the flying machine which he is going to try to-morrow in the Quarry at the great floral fête."

With a nod that might mean anything or nothing I fell into step with my companion. By this time Doris, the hunchback, and the aeronaut had got quite a considerable distance ahead. As a matter of fact, I was just then struggling with a fierce desire to rush forward—to see Doris face to face—to speak with her—to tell her all that had happened—to warn her of her dangers—to assure her and myself that nothing on earth could part us. Hence it was I could not carry on any conversation no matter how important. I had first to conquer myself. Haste would ruin all.

Unfortunately, we had not proceeded many yards before the worst we could have anticipated happened. All at once the three whom we were pursuing stopped at a gate which led, by way of a drive, up to a large, superior-looking house. A tall, interesting stranger with the clear-cut features of a typical barrister, who has not been down long enough from 'Varsity life to forget all the graces, stepped up to them, and then the entire party moved round and went into the house, the door of which closed behind them.

"Confound it! we shall learn nothing like this," snapped Casteno, biting his lips in his annoyance. "I thought I knew my father's habits and methods pretty well, but ever since I have been down here at Shrewsbury he has managed to

throw me out of my reckoning continually. Now, what are we to do, Glynn? Had we better grin and bear it, or ought we to try if we can't find out for ourselves what is happening in this place?"

I turned round stolidly and motioned to a boy who was passing, his eyes fixed in admiration on the uniform I was wearing—that of a sergeant in the Royal Engineers. "Who lives in this house?" I asked, and a sixpenny piece travelled from my palm to his.

"Nobody—often," answered the lad, with a smile. "As a matter of fact, it belongs to the Earl of Fotheringay, like the most of the property does hereabout. He came down here late last night. I know, because I serve him with milk." And with a self-conscious nod the juvenile tradesman pulled himself together and passed on.

"There! What did I tell you?" asked Casteno. "Didn't I suggest Miss Napier had been inveigled into this business to help Lord Fotheringay out of his difficulties? You mark my words. This walk of theirs—this meeting—this encounter outside these gates—are all a plant—a trap designed to get the hunchback into the Government's clutches. Our duty now is clear. We must find our way inside and checkmate any of their moves at once."

"Steadily," I replied, "steadily," pulling the excited Spaniard down a long, narrow, leaf-covered passage that ran by the side of a wall which skirted the limit of the grounds attached to the house. "It is all very well to pull up these theories in this fashion; but there is one great helper of ours always ready to checkmate both Fotheringay and Cuthbertson, and him you have quite forgotten. Now, remembering the existence of Mr Cooper-Nassington, why should we go and put our necks in jeopardy, eh?" And out of the corner of an eye I shot a quick glance at Casteno. It had been long on my mind to find out what that Honourable Member was up to, and I realised that this was a most favourable chance. After all, we had to wait for a decent interval. There was just a possibility that the trio might reappear and return to the Green Dragon.

Casteno, however, seemed to be on this occasion perfectly frank. "Cooper-Nassington," he explained, "is by no means idle. He is as hard at work as you or I. As a matter of fact, he has run up to Whitby, in Yorkshire, where he has an interest in a shipbuilding yard and an iron mine, and he is fitting out an expedition for Mexico, which will leave immediately we get wind of the exact spot where the Lake of Sacred Treasure may be found."

"And he does all this for England, and so do you?"

"Yes—in a way—yes," the Spaniard replied hesitatingly. "There is a lot of things to explain which I can't explain yet. But that's the substantial fact."

"Then why do you fight the hunchback, you a Spaniard," I queried, "when all the benefit will go to England if you succeed, not to Spain?"

Casteno never flinched. "That's another thing which I can't make clear to you just now; but perhaps it may be enough for you if I say the whole thing turns on my quarrel with my father and my love for Camille Velasquon. But stop," he went on in a different voice; "we can't go on exchanging confidences like this or we shall never get down to business at all. What do you say to slipping over this wall and stealing across the grounds? Often most valuable clues can be picked up by spies who get beneath windows and peer in at the corners at critical times."

"All right. Time presses. Let's see what we can manage," I said. After all, I had now no love for Lord Fotheringay. I was just as glad of an opportunity of upsetting his little schemes as was Casteno. Besides, did not every move I made then take me just a little nearer to the solution of that mysterious appearance of Doris?

Selecting a point where the wall stood but seven or eight feet from the ground we quietly scrambled to the top by the aid of some projecting stones and then dropped on the other side to the turf at that extremity of the garden. Between ourselves and the house lay a belt of thick, high shrubs, then a long stretch of greensward, and afterwards two or three terraces flanked by urns, in which geraniums and other gaudily-coloured flowers had been planted. In the deepening shadows we flitted like two spectres—swiftly and silently—until at length we found beneath our feet the beds of plants which blossomed outside the quaint old mullioned windows in the front of the house.

Stealthily we crept from point to point, intent on hearing the voices of the trio we sought, or at least of catching some token of their presence. Time after time we raised our heads above the level of the window-sills and peered into the interiors, so cool, so fresh, so tastefully furnished. Nothing but disappointment seemed to dog our footsteps. We could not catch a glimpse of a single living person in the entire ground floor of that house.

At last Casteno stopped. "Look here!" he said in that quick, decisive way of his. "We can't go on like this. The more I examine this place the more convinced I am that there is something radically wrong about it and in that arrangement between Fotheringay and the hunchback. Now the point is this: will you make a bold stand if I do? You are in disguise; so am I. If we are caught, let us pretend that we are sweethearts of two of the servants who, we regret to find, have left—but, at all events, let us slip through these rooms and see what we can discover."

"Very well," I answered. "But if we are to have any success, we must have no pride. First of all, we must take off our boots and carry them."

Chapter Fourteen.

Which Contains a Fresh Development.

The Spaniard made a slight grimace, but, quickly recovering himself, he did as he was bidden, and we scrambled headlong into one of the reception-rooms without another moment's hesitation.

This apartment was furnished in a light and modern style, but it bore no trace of recent occupation. Consequently, we did not waste any unnecessary time in its examination but made at once for the hall on to which it abutted. One of those noble staircases we seldom if ever find in a town mansion led to the rooms above; and at a nod from me Casteno stepped boldly upward to a door that stood slightly ajar.

Placing a warning finger on his lips he dropped to his hands and knees almost as soon as I reached the topmost stair and peered through the aperture. I also stretched over him and peeped at the interior, and even as we did so we both started back. For there, in a room fitted up like a boudoir, was the poor but over-venturesome aeronaut, Sparhawk, firmly fixed on a high-backed oaken chair with his hands tied securely behind him, his mouth tied with a handkerchief, while a piece of rope held his neck tightly pressed against the wood.

Another moment, and I am sure that, whatever might have been the consequences, we should have darted in and released him had not another object in the room caught and held our attention. That was no other than Doris herself, who had evidently been put on guard over the too venturesome captain, and was now promenading up and down the room, with a loaded revolver, trying to look fierce and commanding and well accustomed to firearms, but failing, I am bound to own, most miserably in the attempt.

Obedying a touch from the Spaniard I drew back down a few of the stairs and held a hurried consultation with him. "It seems to me," he said, with a sly chuckle, "as though the worthy captain showed a little fight when he found that he had been trapped and that some of our friends thought it would be better if they kept him quiet for a little while so that they could fix things up with my father in comparative peace. For a time, at all events, I propose we leave him with Miss Doris."

"So do I," I said. "We have really no business with him except to go on that journey in his flying machine, and if he doesn't come up to time we can always tell the committee of the fête where to find him. Now, let's push on. As I turned away for the door of the room in which he is confined I think I saw the entrance to an oratory or chapel, and once I am almost certain I caught the sounds of voices. Let us go and explore that next."

And I turned my face about and made for the end of the passage where I had noticed a big pair of folding doors, on the panels of which had been carved the sacred monogram and a cross about two feet in height. As I had suspected, this was the place to which the hunchback had been taken. True, the doors had been shut, but there was no key in the lock, and the first glance through the hole revealed to us the interior of a family chapel that had been turned into a kind of assembly hall, for a long oaken table ran down the centre, flanked by rows of stalls on either side that, no doubt, had occupied honoured positions in the chancel. At the top end of this table sat no less a personage than His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, with a quill in his hand, busily writing on some large blue official-looking paper. To the right of Lord Cyril sat Lord Fotheringay, who was also bending over some documents, while opposite to him was the lawyer we had seen outside the gate—the man who had first of all spoken to Doris and her companions—and he was reading aloud from a large book in front of him a queer, legal jargon that suggested some Act of Parliament that had been for centuries on the statute-book.

For a moment the object of all this attention eluded us, but only for a moment. Suddenly, the lawyer stopped, and Lord Cyril Cuthbertson looked up, an expression of annoyance on his firm but forbidding features. Then we saw the hunchback spring to the bottom of the table, on which he laid a fist trembling with passion.

"This is monstrous," he cried, "monstrous! I repeat, I am no more an Englishman than is the Holy Father at Rome or the Emperor Nicholas, or my own beloved King Alphonso. I, therefore, deny your right to detain me here—to threaten me with penalties—to torture me with the knowledge that you have determined to stop at nothing to gain possession of those three manuscripts relating to the Lake of Sacred Treasure."

"Then give them up, my good man," replied Lord Cyril Cuthbertson suavely. "I have told you I will compensate you for them richly. It shall be no question of what they have cost you but of what they may mean to you."

"And I refuse," repeated the man doggedly. "I refuse. I have refused—I shall always refuse!"

"Why?" persisted the Foreign Secretary, fixing two piercing eyes on the Spaniard. "Don't think we English politicians are fools, because, in a word, we are not. I know there is an idea abroad on the Continent that because our Secret Service Fund is so small it is utterly ineffective. But that is not true. We have been quite sharp enough to know that ever since you set foot in London you have acted as one of the spies of Spain, and in pursuance of instructions from Madrid you have often bribed some of our men to do worse things than even Alfred Dreyfus was accused of, and have often brought yourself within the meshes of our criminal law. Don't presume too far on British complacency and good humour. We will go far, very far, to preserve the amenities of diplomacy, but over these manuscripts, with your bloodthirsty dreams of a great new Spanish empire that will sack London, you are pushing us a little too hard. Nor is that the worst. We have got your favourite son Paul in our hands at last. We have only to lift a finger and he, too, will be utterly crushed."

As it happened, however, the hunchback seemed to think but lightly of this threat against his favourite son, or he was certainly one of the cleverest actors in real life I had ever seen. "We are all in the hands of the British Government, Lord Cuthbertson," he said, with a quick assumption of dignity that matched but ill with the Foreign Secretary's high and overbearing tones. "Paul Zouche is no coward; and whatever blows Fate has in store for him he will meet them with a courage that befits a son of Spain in exile from his native land."

"No doubt, no doubt," cut in Lord Fotheringay, as though he were anxious no more should be said on the subject of Paul's guilt just at that moment. "We all of us trust that he will, although at present things which you don't seem to have any knowledge of look very black against him. Still, that is not the point we invited you into this assembly hall of mine to discuss."

"Scarcely invited!" echoed the hunchback with an ill-repressed sneer. "Say, rather, tricked by the aid of a niece of

mine. What did you do to poor Sparhawk when he got hot and angry and struck out in my defence?"

"Well, say 'tricked,' then," observed Lord Cuthbertson. "What of that? We are all of us playing for high stakes, and in a game affecting national interests we can't rely on everyday rules that do very well for ordinary men at ordinary times. Will you answer our plain question?—will you give up those manuscripts to the British Government, or will you not?"

"I will not," retorted the hunchback proudly.

"They are mine. I have bought them. I shall do with them exactly as I please."

"I am not so sure about that," remarked the Foreign Secretary meditatively, bending forward and pressing the button of an electric bell fixed on the table in front of him. "At all events, for a time your movements must be hampered, for I see here, amongst the documents that have just been sent down from Downing Street to me for signature, is a copy of a warrant for your arrest from the Home Office on a charge of bribery of certain officials now employed at Woolwich Arsenal. My idea is that it ought to be put into effect at once."

"Oh, but that is preposterous!" snorted the hunchback, going very white. "I shall resist it. I shall appeal to the Spanish Ambassador. I will let the public know how I've been tricked here in Shrewsbury whilst I was engaged on one of the most peaceable of missions—the financing and development of a new flying machine."

"Quite so; I should," said the Foreign Secretary, writing busily, as though he were utterly indifferent to what the hunchback said, did, or thought. "Our dear British public loves revelations of all sorts—the more sensational the better. I only hope the press won't praise me for the part I have taken in the business and call me one of the nation's patriots for setting the nation's needs above the ordinary rules of criminal procedure. You really can have no idea of how keen they have become on stringing up traitors of all nationalities since some of our grim experiences in the South African War."

"I'm not a traitor," thundered the hunchback. "No?" said Lord Cuthbertson, all the inquiry in his assent.

"I am a Spaniard."

"Quite so." And again there was silence, during which the hunchback shuffled uneasily, for, although he was brave enough in conflict, silence tried him, like it does all highly-strung men.

Another footstep made itself heard, and through the keyhole Casteno and I caught sight of the burly proportions of Detective-Inspector Naylor standing in front of the Foreign Secretary, his hand raised at the salute.

"What orders, my lord," he asked.

"Oh!" replied the Foreign Secretary carelessly, still going on with his correspondence, "I think you will find a man there at the end of the table standing quite close to you. His name is Peter Zanch or Zouch, or something foreign and uncanny like that. The Home Office has issued a warrant for his arrest on some serious charges. Put a pair of handcuffs on him and take him up to Bow Street, will you? Be very careful, too, how you search him. He has got three old, valuable manuscripts somewhere—either in his pockets, amongst his luggage at the Green Dragon Hotel, or hidden in the rooms in which he is in temporary occupation. Arrange for a careful search for those before you leave Shropshire."

"I will, my lord," returned Naylor, stretching out a muscular hand and taking a firm hold of the hunchback. "As a matter of fact, I know this man very well. I have been to his shop in Westminster scores of times!" And he took a step forward, as though he would move Zouche promptly out of the room.

Now, as I have hinted before, the hunchback had plenty of pride, and as he felt this coarse-grained Briton attempt to drag him unceremoniously away from the table at which Lord Cuthbertson, Lord Fotheringay, and the lawyer still sat immovable and unconcerned, as though no such person as himself existed within a radius of one hundred miles of them, his rage mastered him.

"I will never go, never!" he shrieked, and he whipped out a revolver and actually levelled it at the officer and fired it, but Naylor was too quick for him, and in a flash knocked the muzzle of the revolver upward.

"Humph! a dangerous customer, I see," exclaimed the detective coolly. "Well, you can't be left to go as a gentleman, that's all. I must treat you as a criminal." And whipping out his handcuffs he had them snapped on Zouche's wrists in a couple of seconds.

Oddly enough, what threats, persuasions, offers of bribes, actual violence had failed to win the touch of that cold steel accomplished. Personally, I have seen the same thing happen scores of times, but, to the general public, the moral power of the silent handcuff must ever rank as one of the greatest of the modern noiseless miracles. Certainly it was so in the case of the hunchback. No sooner did he find himself really captured than all his braggadocio left him—dropped from him like a moth-eaten mantle.

"I give in, Lord Cuthbertson, I give in!" he cried. "Order this man to take off these absurd bracelets. I'll do as you wish—throw in my lot with the British Government. Send him away, and let us discuss the terms."

The Foreign Secretary lifted his eyes lazily from his papers and pretended to yawn. "I beg your pardon," he said politely. "I was busy putting the finishing touches to a despatch. What was that you said?"

"I will sell the manuscripts to the British Government. I will give you the benefit of my services as translator," repeated the hunchback.

Lord Cuthbertson yawned again. "Make a note of that offer, Fotheringay, will you?" he said, turning to the earl, "and speak to me about it when I've got a little more time. At present I'm too busy to think of these things as carefully as I ought." And, rising, he nodded to Naylor, but the hunchback stood his ground.

"My lord," said he warningly, "it's now or never. Don't play with me. Don't push me too far. I will be with you now, but if not now I'll be against you and your Government for ever, so be careful how you treat me."

To my mind there was no question that Lord Cuthbertson never meant to let the hunchback leave that chapel; thus, as an outsider watching every feint and move in that closely-contested duel of wit and nerve, I recognised that all he did was pose—bluff—strategy of the lowest bullying type. All the same, I am not sure whether, if I had been in Peter Zouche's shoes, I should have seen through the sharp practice of this pinchbeck Napoleon so easily. Indeed, I might as easily have been taken in as he was, for was there not at work that strange, compelling moral suasion of the handcuff?

"Very well, then," said Lord Cuthbertson after a suitable pause. "I am, I repeat, very busy, very busy indeed, but I will see whether I can't do as you ask. Naylor, take off those wristlets, and go out of the room for a few minutes; and you, Mr Zouche, come here quite close to us so that we can be quite certain that the terms of our understanding are not overheard by any of the other detectives we brought down from Scotland Yard to Shrewsbury last night." The detective disappeared with the handcuffs, and the hunchback went close to the table and engaged in confidential conversation with the Foreign Secretary and the earl for nearly a quarter of an hour.

In vain Casteno and I worked and edged and wriggled. All of the men round the table spoke so low and so earnestly that we could not catch a single word of what they were saying, and we might just as well have gone back to the hotel, and there awaited the hunchback's return, as have prowled so uneasily on the far side of those doors for all the good we did to our cause, until I had an idea which I put immediately into effect.

"Look here," I whispered suddenly to my companion, "you come here instead of me and take a turn at peeping through the keyhole!"

"Why?" he queried in a thin, complaining voice. "Your eyes are better than mine, and your ears. You hear things twice as quickly as I do!"

"That isn't it," I returned. "I don't want you to listen at all on this occasion."

"Well, my back is tired. I am sick of stooping down."

"But it won't be for long," I persisted. "Just take this turn at the keyhole to oblige me, will you? Directly you have discovered what I want you to find—and, mark! only you can find it out—we need not wait another minute. We can get off to the Green Dragon and eat our dinner in peace."

"Well, what is it?" he asked, bending down in front of the door, his curiosity at last faintly excited. "Don't you see that the old man is on the point of selling us and that in a few minutes both Cooper-Nassington and I will be done as brown as the proverbial berries?"

"That's just it," I replied. "I want you to study your father's face very carefully whilst he is talking to Cuthbertson. Examine every feature in it, every turn, every line, in the light of all your previous experience of him, and see whether or not he is telling those men the truth."

"By George! what a stupid I was not to think of that before? What a splendid idea! Of course, he has no love for them. It would be the most natural thing in the world for him to trick them. Look what careful preparations he made with Paul just before he left and how he hid those forged manuscripts in that steel box to throw every manner of inquiry off the scent! Why, he is the last man in the world not to burn to pay anybody out who gets the best of him. And yes!" he whispered, "I am certain he is lying to them. I can see it," and the Spaniard dragged me down level with the keyhole so that I, too, could follow what was happening in the interior of the chapel. "Don't you observe that very curious trick he is doing quite unconsciously—standing first on one foot and then on another and then rubbing the ankle of one with the toe of the other? Well, he always did that to customers in the old days when we were poor and he had not got such a fine sense of honour about the sale of a spurious antique as he had when times became more prosperous for us!"

"Well, if you are satisfied, so am I," I returned. "We need not spy about this creepy old mansion any longer. We have discovered all we have set out to find, and now I propose we get back to the Green Dragon Hotel, whither, doubtless, he and Captain Sparhawk will return."

"And how about Miss Napier?" queried Casteno slyly.

"Oh! Miss Napier will probably come back with her uncle to the same place. He, doubtless, to keep up the deception that he is going straight now for England and English interests, will forgive her that piece of trickery which landed him right into Cuthbertson's net; and she, to see that he does keep straight, will let herself be deceived by him, and will watch him as far as she dare without exciting his suspicions. At all events, it is useless for me to think of making any move with regard to her just at this moment. In the first place, she has her hands full watching her prisoner, Sparhawk, and if I showed up now in this disguise she might put a bullet through the pair of us. Certainly she would raise an alarm, and there would be endless trouble and difficulties before we managed to explain, at all satisfactorily, what we were doing here without an invitation when so many vital national issues were being settled. In the second place, I can't make out her ignorance of the death of her father. Is it real, or assumed? Something very odd must have happened to make her behave like this at this mournful crisis in the family fortunes. Now, what can that be? So far as I can see there is only one source here in Shrewsbury which can possibly supply any sort of key to the mystery without asking the girl herself. That is, a Sunday special edition of one of the Sunday papers—the *People*, *Lloyd's*, or

some journal like that. The only place where we can find that with any degree of certainty is the Green Dragon, so, naturally, I am all eagerness to hasten back there and to look over its columns!"

"I see you're right," replied Casteno, as, springing to his feet, he snatched up his boots and hastened as rapidly as he could down the stairs, with the result that in a few seconds we had crossed the lawn and reached the shelter of the belt of trees near the boundary wall by which we had effected our entrance. Here we set to work, and quickly removed all traces of our adventures; then, hoisting ourselves over the wall that divided us from the side lane, we raced back as hard as we could in the direction of the town.

"We must eat," he argued; "eat to live. Everything just now depends on us keeping in the pink of condition. To do that we must never neglect our food."

Happily, after moments that seemed as long as hours, the paper I sought did materialise at last. It was a newly-arrived copy of the *Weekly Dispatch*, I remember, and no sooner did I glance at the first page than I saw from the headlines that some startling developments in the case had occurred since I turned my face from London towards the west. As a matter of fact, quite a new complexion had been put on the tragedy, and the latest report now ran as follows:—

THE MYSTERY OF WHITEHALL COURT

WHO IS THE DEAD MAN?

STRANGE STORY OF A VALET

"Quite a new turn has been given to the tragedy in Embankment Mansions, full particulars of the discovery of which appear on an inside page. Firstly, the valet Richardson has now had time to examine the body which was found in Colonel Napier's bedroom, and he says unhesitatingly that it is *not that of his master* at all but of a stranger who at first sight resembles him strongly. This view is borne out by two old friends of Colonel Napier who have also seen the corpse—the Rev. Richard Jennings, the vicar of St. Helen's, Palace Street, Westminster, and Colonel Goring-Richmond, who some years ago was on the most intimate terms with the deceased and spent the summer with him in the Austrian Tyrol. Secondly, if this be true, there is no doubt that not only Colonel Napier, but also his daughter Doris, have suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. All their affairs, it seems, have been left in the uttermost confusion, and it looks as though, if there has not been foul play in their lives in one direction, there has been in another. Close inquiries amongst their friends reveal no intention on their part to be absent from home. Their servants also are astounded at their disappearance, and all the machinery of their social life has been brought suddenly to a standstill; while letters and telegrams of inquiry and visits from friends, who have read accounts which purport to explain Colonel Napier's sudden demise, plunge their departure into a mingled atmosphere of tragedy and mystery, which it seems impossible to-night to break through. Meanwhile, everybody is asking: Who is the man who has been found stabbed to death in Colonel Napier's bed? The police are certainly powerless to explain; while common people dare not suggest a most terrible answer which will occur to everybody who reads these lines for fear of the law of libel."

Chapter Fifteen.

In Search of the Secret.

For once Casteno was full of sympathy with me.

No sooner did I explain to him the extraordinary development of that mystery at Whitehall Court than he was all eagerness, all attention, all resource to prove to me that I must think the best and not the worst of Colonel Napier's disappearance.

At first, I own, I was not at all inclined to take help from such a quarter; I had not forgotten those suspicious circumstances in which he left my office at the time the murder was committed. Nevertheless, before we had finished our dinner in that quaint old Shrewsbury hotel he had practically won me over to his way of looking at the occurrence.

"After all," said he, as he drained his last glass of wine, "you can certainly rely on the impression that Colonel Napier has come to no harm. If he had, Miss Doris would not be here at all as she is, as bright and gay as a lark, and as keen as a hawk on getting the benefit of those manuscripts for Lord Cuthbertson. Neither he nor Lord Fotheringay would dare to keep bad news from her. They are, after all, both of them gentlemen, whatever may happen to be the Chauvinistic tactics they adopt to push themselves forward in their own particular little intrigues in politics. Silence in such a crisis would be monstrous—utterly monstrous."

"But where can he be?" I cried helplessly. "What is he doing? Why doesn't he come forward and tell the police as much as he knows of the affair?"

"Perhaps he has," said Casteno significantly, dealing with my last question first. "Who knows? Naylor has dropped his part in the search, you see, and if that means anything at all it means that the murder has precious little to do with this wild chase after the old parchment records. My own impression is that the daughter is not the only member of the Napier family who has taken sides against us in this hunt for the submerged treasure. When the truth is told I think you will find both father and daughter have determined, in a perfectly friendly way, to work against me, just to prove to you how foolish and futile you have been not to take their advice. Hence Colonel Napier may have been despatched in one direction to circumvent us and Miss Doris in another. That disposition of their forces would be quite fair, you know, and might have most important results."

"And the man found dead in the colonel's bed?"

"Any theory could account for his presence," said the Spaniard, shrugging his shoulders and walking towards the window as though heartily tired of my objections. "One is that he was some burglar who had got the office that the colonel had left the flat, and had disguised himself to resemble the master, had walked in at the front door and personated him over-night, and had been assassinated in error. Such cases of impersonation are much more common than people imagine, but they have such ludicrous, as well as tragic, results that they seldom, if ever, get into the police courts. Another theory—and to me not at all a bad one—is that the whole business has been engineered by some secret society for a purpose that will eventually become apparent. As you know, there are plenty of secret organisations in London that do not content themselves with mystic signs and passwords and occasional extravagances in the shape of nitro-glycerine and dynamite. I know there is a branch of the Spanish 'Friends of Liberty' in England, for instance; and I am sure if they have got some hint from Mexico about the discovery of those manuscripts they will stop at nothing—not even a crime like this—to frighten off Colonel Napier."

"Well, I had better leave it," I said at last, with a sigh, throwing the paper on to the floor and joining my companion at the casement. "After all, you are really the leader of this expedition, and you have a right to require of me that I shall pay some attention to your conclusions."

"Yes; leave it," repeated Casteno. "Remember, you are only one man with one brain and one pair of hands. You can't do everything in a maze that has such extraordinary ramifications as this. I tried alone, remember, and failed; and, first, I had to get your help, and then Mr Cooper-Nassington's, and heaven alone knows where we shall end. But this brings me to another point, Glynn," he went on, with increasing earnestness. "I want you not to approach Miss Doris until this flying machine experiment is over. It is quite natural of you to wish to do so, I admit, but I want you to consider my interests a little for a day or two, and to refrain."

"I see," I said meditatively. "You are afraid something might happen, some injudicious word of hers, some careless act, which might scare off some of the people we want to keep blind to our movements, eh?"

"Yes," answered Casteno; "but that's not all. You must recollect, too, that the people who are not for us are against us. It is not really to the Napier interest that your side should win. They are fighting, in my opinion, on the side of the authorities as represented by the Foreign Secretary and the earl. Well, let them, that's all, and only when we've won let us put our heads above the hedge."

Some other conversation followed, but in the end I agreed to do as José Casteno wished. As a consequence, we kept quite quiet in our rooms until we had got word from a friendly waiter that the hunchback, Miss Doris, and Captain Sparhawk had returned to the hotel, apparently on good terms again, and then in the darkness of night we slipped off and had a good tramp about the ancient streets and by-ways of Shrewsbury, rising next morning as fresh and as sturdy as ever. For a time, it is true, we feared that after his compact to help Lord Cyril Cuthbertson the hunchback might deem it prudent to avoid the excursion. As a matter of fact, I was the one who thought so. Casteno didn't, because, in the first place, he was sure that his father would never in any circumstances help England against Spain; and in the second, the dwarf was too keen on flying machines and their commercial and military possibilities to let Sparhawk slip through his fingers when he had got hold of a really serviceable invention that would take seven or eight people careering through the air at will. And, as it turned out, Casteno was correct, and I wasn't. The hunchback did turn up in the flying machine enclosure at the great floral fête, all prepared for the expedition, and, oddly enough, he brought with him as companion—he seemed to have quite forgiven all her previous day's tricks—my own Doris, who looked as bright and gay as though a trip in a flying machine were one of the most enjoyable things in existence.

Captain Sparhawk himself, now that the critical day of trial had dawned, looked, I must confess, very nervous and overwrought. Attired in a costume that proved to be a compromise between what is usually adopted by the driver of a fast motor car and the captain of a penny steamboat, he flitted about from point to point in the enclosure, the personification of anxiety and restlessness.

"First we must think of the weather, Miss Doris," we caught him saying as, disguised in the uniform of sergeants in the Royal Engineers, we showed our tickets which entitled us to the trip in his company and joined the mob of experts and committeemen who buzzed about him like so many noisy and curious bees. As for our features, they were works of art—the art of the painter and the art of the wig-maker—while our voices had developed a military bluntness and roughness, which left our throats lined with something like sandpaper every time we opened our mouths.

"It all depends on the wind," he repeated, and he directed her gaze anxiously to the sky, as though she could see at a glance whether the wind were likely at the time of the ascent to blow forty miles an hour, or four. "You see, I have got the inflation well advanced," he went on, pointing to the huge, slowly-swelling monster, which lay like a gigantic but quarter-filled balloon of fishlike shape on the greensward as men in mechanics' clothes hastened here and there pulling a hose straight, slackening a rope, or dragging out the folds of the silk as if they were so many sheets of lead. "This particular machine is Number 9 of my series, two ahead of Santos-Dumont. As you are going with us to-day," at which news both Casteno and I started, for we had not bargained for that, "I crave your permission to name it the 'Doris.'"

"By all means," said the girl, beaming with pleasure; "and I trust it will have the best of good luck, and bring all connected with it fame and fortune!" Whereat the little mob I have mentioned broke into a loud cheer, which was taken up by the thousands who lined the ropes that marked off the enclosures, and amongst whom the news of the machine's informal christening passed like so much wildfire.

At this point somebody—I think it was the chairman of the fête—appeared bearing three or four magnums of champagne, which were opened, and the contents passed amongst the select coterie gathered around the inventor. Thus encouraged, the gallant captain went further.

"You need not really fear the trip, Miss Napier," he said, raising the glass with a proud gesture to his lips. "Nor you two gentlemen," he added, nodding in the direction of Casteno and myself, who had been pointed out to him by the gatekeeper as his two paying fellow-passengers. "As for Mr Zouche here," now he included the hunchback, "he is a practical aeronaut like myself. I always say, where he would lead I would follow; but, for to-day, we have reversed things a bit, although my opinion of his skill and knowledge remains just the same."

"Then you think the machine is perfectly safe?" said a voice in the crowd.

"It's as safe as going to heaven in a rocking-chair," promptly answered the captain, like an oracle. "The fact is," he proceeded in a lower tone, "I have had the thing well tested. In the first place, I had it filled with air and coal gas, for the purpose of arranging the rigging, and then I took a little trip with it myself with proper hydrogen, and the petroleum motor hard at work, and it sailed aloft like a bird. In form, of course, it is similar to the balloon, 'La France,' experimented with as long ago as 1834 by some French officers at Meudon—that is, it is shaped like a plaiice—the front end being larger than the rear; while it is provided with a compensating ballonnet, which is inflated with air by means of a fan controlled from the motor. The two cars, to hold three passengers each, like the motor, are supported by a pine framework, and are suspended at a distance of fifteen feet under the balloon. The propeller is an exceptionally large and strong one, and resembles a fish's tail, a mackerel's, for I contend we find all our true air affinities in the sea. It turns at the rate of two hundred and fifty revolutions a minute, and the whole apparatus is strong enough to let us take a fair amount of ballast; for the secret of my success in my invention does not turn on lightness, where so many flying-machine inventors have gone wrong of late, but on weight—weight to subdue the pressure of the wind, to conquer the dead force of the air, and to answer the power of the motor to get up anything approaching a decent speed."

The enthusiast stopped. Some detail in the rigging as the great aerial monster rose higher and higher suddenly required his attention; and for the next few minutes none of us spoke at all, as the captain moved hither and thither, directing his subordinates, and getting everything into working order. Curiously enough, all his feverishness left him like magic directly there was any serious work to do. For that time he might have been quite alone in his workshop. He moved and spoke and acted as one who had perfect confidence in himself and in the issue of the daring experiment which he was about to undertake.

Chapter Sixteen.

Above the Clouds.

At last everything seemed in readiness.

The beautiful grounds of the Quarry were black with thousands upon thousands of anxious spectators, and at a signal from the aeronaut Casteno and I, amidst loud cheers from the mob in the enclosure, took our places first in the car. There was room for a third passenger, and for a few seconds the Spaniard and I debated eagerly whether we should have Doris or the hunchback as the last party in the trio, and, if so, what line we ought to take with them lest they should suspect we were not those harmless members of a curious section of the public which we had given ourselves out to be. Unfortunately, as it happened, we were destined to have as travelling companion a total stranger to both of us. All at once we saw Doris beckon to the captain, and when he approached she introduced him to a tall venerable-looking figure with a long white beard.

"This is the Professor Stephen Leopardi of the Meteorological Office, whom I mentioned to you," she said in her clear, ringing tones. "He is an old friend of my father and myself from London, but just now he happens to be staying near the Wrekin, and he is very anxious, if you will take him, to make the ascent with you. He is a man of science too, of considerable reputation, and any testimony he can bear to the uses of your invention must, in the natural course of things, be very valuable to you."

"Quite so! Quite so!" rejoined both Captain Sparhawk and the hunchback, whose eyes gleamed with avarice at the prospect of getting so famous an expert to go with them and to speak up for them without a fee. "We shall really be only too delighted if the professor will make the sixth in our party—if he will consent to do so. There is a very nice seat vacant in the car we have reserved for independent passengers. Will he honour us by occupying that?" And with a good many flourishes and bows on both sides the scientist, to our profound disgust, was hoisted on to a seat next to Casteno and myself, thus cutting off for good all chance of our carrying on any private conversation or of giving each other any confidential hints.

A few minutes later Doris and the hunchback entered the adjacent car. Captain Sparhawk shook hands warmly with some of his more prominent supporters and friends on the committee and followed them, and the next moment he blew a shrill call on a small whistle attached to the motor, close to which he had taken up his position, ready to set all the machinery at work.

There was a loud crash of cannon, an ear-splitting salvo of cheers as one by one the guide-ropes slipped out of their blocks, and finally the air-ship "Doris" rose free from her moorings and went sailing like a bird across the river Severn in the direction of Welshpool.

At first the sensation was delightful. The earth and its people and features dropped away from us, until we seemed to have risen out of the hollow of a basin. There was no sense of ascent at all. The world slipped away from us, and not we away from the world. One by one the sounds died out, until at last we could only catch the hoarse barking of some sheep-dogs which must have seen us with those keen eyes of theirs and thought mischief was astir. Clouds, too, began to rush swiftly towards us, and soon we found ourselves enveloped in a soft, clinging, whitish mist, which blotted out all sight of the earth we had left behind us.

We were now being carried upward with a terrific force, and insensibly all of us turned our eyes towards Captain Sparhawk to see how he was going to acquit himself and his machine now the time of real trial had come. After all, any balloon could rise like this had done. Indeed, all balloons had been able to accomplish as much since the days of the Brothers Montgolfier. It was on the steering—directing—descent that the fame of the “Doris” and all modern flying machines had to rest. How would the vessel behave in a wild upward dash like ours?

Alas! we had not long to wait for an answer.

All at once we saw Captain Sparhawk stagger and throw up his arms. The wind had blown his coat, which he had carelessly left unfastened, against the motor, and the petroleum ignition had set the dry woollen material on fire. In vain he tried to extinguish the flames. They spread with hideous rapidity, and at last, frantic with pain, he scrambled on to the framework, and dashed headlong to the earth, a seething mass of fire.

For a moment, I believe, all our hearts stood still with terror.

Freed, too, from the burden of Captain Sparhawk’s weight, the air-ship shot upward at a most amazing rate of speed. At first it gave two great violent lurches, as though the loss of that twelve or fourteen stone of ballast would send it heeling over, with its cars at a crazy angle ’twixt earth and heaven, but, luckily, in our consternation we all made various movements that served to right the vessel, and later we found ourselves safe, at all events for the moment, but perfectly helpless. By this time, too, there was not a trace of the world to be seen. We were simply surrounded with clouds, which seethed about us in white, clinging vapour and wrapped themselves about our clothes and faces as though we had been overtaken in a mist on some Scottish moor.

“Something will have to be done,” said the professor sternly, turning suddenly to Casteno and myself, his sole travelling companions in that car. “We can expect no assistance from that old hunchback or that girl, Miss Napier, in the other compartment. Do either of you gentlemen understand anything about air-ships?” And he gave a quick, scrutinising gaze at our uniforms, as though he could find thereon some badge which showed we belonged to the ballooning section of the Royal Engineers.

“We know nothing whatever,” replied José quietly, stamping up and down to keep his feet warm. “We have come, for pleasure we thought it, and here is the result.”

“Besides, professor,” I cut in, “are not you really the one to take charge of operations at this juncture? I understand that you come from the Meteorological Office and that ventures like this fall under your review in your department. Surely you know enough of ballooning by which, even if you couldn’t make the machine perform like the inventor intended it should, you could at least take us back to the earth.”

“I am not so sure about that,” said the man quickly, and then all at once he stopped and bit his lip. It was obvious that he had said a little more than he intended, and a new suspicion about him gathered shape and force in my mind. Suppose he were not the Professor Stephen Leopardi that Doris had pretended but some other spy sent by Cuthbertson to keep an eye on the hunchback?

“Well, at all events, we can’t go blindly to death like this,” I snapped. “Look, there is Miss Napier making signals to us with her handkerchief? Where, though, is the hunchback? Ah! I see. The fright has been too much for him. He has collapsed, fainted, and dropped like a log to the seat on the side of the car. We must do something or she will grow frantic.” And waving a hand to her I, half unconscious of what I had myself resolved upon, scrambled on to the stays of the machine and began to crawl like a monkey towards the tiny platform from which poor Captain Sparhawk had fallen, and on which stood the motor and the different cords and levers that controlled the machine.

“Come back! Come back!” Casteno shouted. “Are you mad, man? Don’t you understand that in a cold, rarefied atmosphere like this the gas in the balloon is bound to condense, and that, as surely as an apple drops from a tree to the earth instead of the sky, by the law of gravitation, we must land on terra firma again?”

But his appeal fell on ears that were deaf to all save one voice. Above the swirl and the wind I had heard Doris call to us, and nought else mattered. Doris was frightened. Doris wanted somebody near to her besides that senseless Spaniard. Doris dreaded what might happen. That must not be, and so, with eyes fixed resolutely on her graceful figure standing silhouetted against the clouds, I shut my lips tightly and crept along that dizzy path that separated me from her. What if she did not know me in that disguise? I, at least, knew her, and, should the need come, I would, I swore to myself, cheerfully lay down my life to save her from harm.

That passage from the car to the platform could not have occupied more than seven or eight seconds. To me it seemed as though hours had passed before I got to that platform and stood up by that complicated series of levers, with hands firmly gripped to the steel rails that ran round on three sides, the bulky outline of the motor shutting in the fourth. At length, however, I stood there, and realised I had not reached it one instant too soon, for just at that moment the air-ship struck a warmer strata of atmosphere and began to move on a dizzy and bewildering course, now shooting upward like a rocket, then striking a cold wind, and collapsing like a stricken bird.

“Pull some of those levers, man. Get the rudder at work,” shouted the professor through his hands as the machine commenced to career sideways through the air like a torpedo. “These cars will be flattened out if you don’t accomplish something soon.”

But my blood was up after my dizzy crawl through space, and I felt I could not brook interference. “Throw that idiot out if he says another word,” I shouted to Casteno. Then I turned to Doris. “Don’t be frightened, Miss Napier,” I cried, “just trust me, and, if all goes well, we shall before five minutes are over be safe on land again.” And then I bent down and studied the machinery by which I was surrounded.

A ship’s compass warned me of the position of the levers that controlled the rudder, and after three or four

experimental turns of the latter I got the great monster in hand. Indeed, so queerly constituted are we men who love adventure that, no sooner did I find the air-ship obey my movements, than I promptly forgot all the dangers of my position, and, almost with boyish joy, I began to manoeuvre the vessel, first in one direction and then in another, until in the end I found I could make it head on whatever course I wished.

Unfortunately, none of those movements brought the machine any nearer to the earth, and I had to turn to try other levers, the objects of which were not quite so apparent. My first experiment shut off the control of the motor. My second extinguished the electrical ignition altogether, and I found that as the screw ceased to revolve we began to fall to the earth at a tremendous pace.

What was I to do? For a second, I confess, I had the wildest thoughts of throwing everything portable overboard and trusting to luck to get everything started again. Then, all at once, something seemed to whisper to me: "The motor has stopped. Now the thing is no longer a flying machine but a balloon; treat it as a balloon. Find the cord that controls the valves in the top of the bag and pull those, and let all the gas escape, and come down to earth like a bird that is spent and tired."

Like a man dazed I threw out my hands and gripped what ropes I could that looked at all like guide-ropes. The first I seized sent my platform heeling over sideways, and it was nothing less than a miracle that I did not fall off its inclined surface so sudden was the change of balance. Happily, the second I snatched controlled the valves in the top of the balloon. It answered to a touch, and the gas went roaring through the aperture like a typhoon.

"Throw yourselves into the bottom of the cars," I shouted to the occupants of the two compartments. "We are racing towards the earth at a terrific pace. In a few seconds we shall reach it. We shall strike it gently enough because of the law of gravity and of the compensating ballonet we carry above the propeller, but I don't want one of you to get frightened and to leap out of the ship before all the gas is exhausted, otherwise we shall go careering up again, and the entire ship then will fall and dash itself and us into pieces. Trust to its steady collapse." And seizing an anchor that was fastened to the guide-rails of the platform I flung this over the side, and then crouched myself on a kind of huge buoy that hung just above the platform, through which all the different ropes of the machine seemed to pass.

Fortunately, everybody was too impressed by the way in which I had guided the ship in the first instance to have noticed how badly I had managed in the second in stopping the use of the motor, and so at my words they dropped down amongst the ballast in the bottom of the cars, and with teeth clenched and hands gripping the framework they awaited the inevitable crash.

Down—down—down we went—down into space!

The clouds shot past us as though they were driven out of our path by some tornado. The wind roared in our ears.

We caught sight of the earth, and it rushed up to meet us as if it would there and then pulverise us into a million atoms.

Next instant everything appeared to change like magic. Instead of one wild, dizzy, headlong flight to the ground we seemed to be upborne on some mighty pinions that were moving with great force but steadiness as we dropped, tired and glad, into our native sphere.

Slowly, steadily, like a bird coming to rest, we touched the earth again on a wide expanse of grassland. Then women and children started up about us, and, before we knew what had happened, we heard about us the thunders of British cheers, and found ourselves caught up in the arms of eager and excited admirers; whilst once again the good ship "Doris" lay on its side on the ground, slowly panting out from its shrunken ribs the gas that had lifted us to such dizzy dangers and heights.

For myself, I own, I should have been strongly tempted to yield to that joyous sensation of peace and safety again, and have done like Doris, the hunchback, and Professor Leopardi, and dropped promptly into blissful unconsciousness, had not Casteno fought his way towards me as soon as the excitement and the mob permitted and caught me tightly by the arm.

"Look here," he whispered. "This, remember, is the real time of our trial, not up there above the clouds. Make one false move here and you'll ruin everything."

"How? What do you mean?" I muttered, blinking my eyes.

"Why, Leopardi is a spy, and so is Miss Napier. They are following the hunchback, and with good reason. They are keeping watch on those three manuscripts which he probably carries on his person. Neither Lord Cyril nor they intend that he shall keep them."

"Well, what of that?" I murmured, for the fall through space had dulled the edge of my brain.

"Well, they will steal them at the first opportunity. The deeds no longer belong to my father, remember, but to the British Government, who have purchased them, and who are only letting him retain them now so that he may not give the fact of their existence away until they have got their other diplomatic arrangements complete. The pretence that they want him to translate them or to decipher them is all fudge. They have two or three experts in cipher at the Foreign Office whose business it is to decode all secret messages, plans, documents, and treaties of which the Secret Service obtains possession. Now, those are the men whom they will trust to handle them, not the keeper of a curiosity shop in Westminster."

"Admitted," I said testily; "but what's that to do with us at this precise moment, when none of us know whether we are quite dead or alive? Let the Government try to get them first, then we can act. We can either side with your

father, the hunchback, or with the authorities; but, for heaven's sake, don't worry about it now, here amongst all this crowd who want to treat us like conquering heroes or half-dead voyagers, and who won't be put off with a bow, but will want to hear all about us, and all about our adventures, and how the deuce we managed to arrive in safety at this point at all."

"They must be tricked," whispered Casteno, with a savage oath. "Tricked, do you see? You and I have too big a job on just now to pose as popular heroes. We must take those manuscripts from the hunchback whilst he is unconscious, and we must get away with them before he or Miss Napier can have any idea that they or we have gone."

"But that would be a theft," I gasped.

"Not a bit of it," returned Casteno. "Those documents never really belonged to the hunchback at all, for the dead priest in whose possession they were found had no title to them."

"Then to whom do they belong?" I questioned.

"Why, to the Order in Mexico, of course," replied the Spaniard. "Now you are warned, be ready, and keep close to me." And he turned a smiling face to the crowd who had drawn back from us in respectful sympathy, thinking, doubtless, that we wished to condole with each other on the unfortunate state of our companions. In an instant, too, he seized on this last pretext and acted on it. "Will some of you gentlemen," he cried in those clear, ringing tones of his, "carry our three senseless friends here to some place where they can be left in perfect safety and quietness? We have come on this flying machine trip from the floral fête at Shrewsbury, but, unfortunately, our leader got burned to death, and we have all had a terrible shock."

"Poor things! Poor things!" murmured some of the bystanders nearest to us, and instantly the demeanour of the crowd changed, for they realised something of the horror of poor Captain Sparhawk's end.

In silence an avenue was opened out for us, a waggonette with a pair of horses was driven up to the side of the fallen machine, and, tenderly and carefully, Doris, the hunchback, and the professor were lifted on to the sides and borne to a farm outbuilding about two hundred yards distant. Here the five of us were left alone, whilst the two or three strangers who had constituted themselves our chief helpers closed the place upon us as they sallied forth to find us doctors and some suitable refreshments.

"Now," cried Casteno to me immediately I had seen that Doris was safe and was comfortably placed on a great heap of hay, "understand, we have not a moment to lose. Any second they may return, or some daring and inquisitive journalist may force his way in to interview us or to describe our battered condition. You pretend to be holding your flask to my father's lips, whilst I search his clothes. Then if one of them comes to their senses or one of our newly-made friends return it won't look at all suspicious." And, as half mechanically I did as he had directed, he flung himself on his knees beside the prostrate hunchback and passed his hands rapidly over his clothes.

Evidently he knew a good deal of Peter Zouche's methods, for I don't think his search lasted ten seconds. All at once his fingers closed over a tiny bag, something like a Catholic scapular, that had been slung around the hunchback's neck. With trembling fingers he tore this open, and disclosed to view the three precious manuscripts, which he instantly seized and packed away in his pocket.

Then he made the bag look as natural as he could, and restored it to its position under the old man's singlet. As he rose to his feet again I saw that his face was ghastly white, and his teeth chattered like a man stricken with ague.

"My God," he muttered, wiping the great beads of perspiration that had gathered about his temples, "isn't this chase stern—awful? I doubt if even I should have dared to have tried a terrible move like this had I not known that there, at St. Bruno's at Hampstead, was the key to these documents awaiting me. But I felt I could not falter now when Camille Velasquon had braved so much in bringing it from Mexico to London for me. But, bah! what cowards we are all of us sometimes." And he reeled, and I am sure he would have fainted had I not instantly caught him myself and pressed the flask to his lips.

"Now to be off—to be off," he said wildly a moment later, pushing me aside and staggering towards the exit from the tent. "I feel I can't breathe here now that I have got these documents. Every nerve I have seems standing on end urging me to be off."

I turned to look at Doris lying so peacefully in that corner, and then, half distracted, turned to follow him, but as I did so somebody started up and confronted us. It was the Professor Stephen Leopardi! His aspect now was wild and threatening, but we thought merely that the terrible experiences he had been through above the clouds had temporarily disturbed the balance of his senses and that we could soothe him like a child.

"You must not go," he panted, his eyes rolling and his fingers clawing the empty air. "You must stay with me, I want you. I have seen you. There is much to explain."

"Quite so," I returned lightly, "but just now we are not in a mood for conversation, are we? Wait until our companions recover themselves and my friend and I have had a little fresh air, will you? Then we can all meet and discuss things, but at present—"

"At present you would steal from that poor man the most precious things he has," thundered the old fellow, and to our horror he sprang between us and the exit and then pointed to the prostrate form of the hunchback. "Oh! never, never shall you escape like that." And before we realised what he was up to he raised his voice and shrieked: "Help! help! help!"

Chapter Seventeen.

The Mysteries of St. Bruno's.

There was not a second to spare. Casteno shot at me a look of mingled entreaty and command to leave the frenzied professor to do his worst. The persons we had to fear were not, he motioned, in that tent at all but outside, scouring the grounds for medical assistance, and spreading everywhere news of our wonderful appearance out of the rain-clouds. Only let them hear this maniac's wild cries for assistance and they would hasten back to us, and then all hope, all chance of escape, for either of us would be cut off.

Nevertheless, I thought of Doris lying there so weak, helpless, and friendless; and I hesitated. I felt I had already stifled Love so often for Duty that I could repress it no longer. Indeed, I took a step in her direction to make myself known to her, but, misconceiving my object, thinking I had no idea but one—to flee—Leopardi seized me in a grip of iron. "You shall not go," he panted—"never! You are a thief, and you shall pay for your crime."

His touch, however, was quite enough. What Casteno had failed to accomplish it brought about in a flash. All the hot, strenuous instincts of my manhood rose in rebellion at this degradation.

"You are mad," I hissed, and with one huge effort I sprang on the scientist and, catching him by the middle, whirled him over my head and sent him crashing a moment later on to some grain bags that stood piled up in a corner.

As I did so his wig fell off and with it his beard, and I staggered backward in amazement. The so-called expert from the Meteorological Office was, as the Spaniard had contended, a spy—perhaps sent by the Foreign Office, for it was a man we instantly recognised—no other than Colonel Napier himself.

Personally, I would have stood my ground then and defied him; but Casteno was too quick for me. As I reeled back breathless from the impact he caught me by the shoulder and with a quick turn twisted me through the narrow door of the barn.

"This is no time for heroics, Glynn," he whispered. "We have won. Now let us be off." And he doubled behind some other buildings and then dived headlong into a clump of bushes, through which he wriggled his way on hands and knees like a snake.

Almost instinctively I followed him, for on the still summer breeze I could hear Colonel Napier's voice raised in angry shouts, the thunder of hurrying feet, and all the mysterious sounds and movements which betokened that at last the crowd had taken alarm, and that an organised pursuit of us could, at the most now, be only a matter of a few seconds.

The branches tore our clothes and made sad havoc of our disguises, but this last accident proved a blessing in disguise, for it made us stop at a pond and restore to our faces their natural resemblance.

"But we must not be caught," I returned, deftly rolling up the wigs and secreting them in the branch of a tree, where they looked like a new kind of bird's nest. "Look through that opening there between those willows. Don't you see the molten gleam of water under the summer sun?"

"Yes," replied Casteno joyously, rising on his knees and stretching his neck. "It's a stream sure enough—perhaps a river—with plenty of water space, for I am sure I distinguish a current in it running steady and strong."

"Now let us make for that, then," I urged, "and hail the first boat that passes. Let us pretend we are soldiers, and have overstayed our leave, and that we shall get fined if we don't hasten pell-mell back to the town."

"What town?" queried Casteno ruefully; whereat we both laughed. It certainly did seem preposterous for us not to know the name of the country we were in. Yet, truthfully enough, we didn't—we hadn't the ghost of an idea.

As luck would have it, however, we found several boats moored close to the trees by the side of the water, and in charge of them was a sharp-looking lad about fourteen years of age.

"Got any tubs for hire, sonny," said Casteno cheerfully, walking up to the youngster and tapping him familiarly on the shoulder.

"What does your mother want to wash?" promptly returned the lad, and in a moment the three of us were on the best of terms.

Acting on an impulse of my own I took charge of the conversation, and pretended that we were soldiers who had got sick of barrack life, and had deserted from some important depot, and were anxious to get into hiding in the nearest town. Now in most lads there exists a very genuine sympathy with the hunted of all descriptions, and a loyalty, too, which no ordinary bribe or threat would cause them to break. As a consequence, he promised to take us off in one of the boats and to hide us under some cushions and sail sheets as he punted us down stream to "a capital nest I know," he explained, "behind the kilns of the porcelain works."

"But the town—what is its name?" I queried, with a grimace.

"Why, Worcester, of course," the lad replied. "Didn't you see it on the milestones?"

"We were in too great a hurry to look," chimed in the Spaniard at once. "Why, we don't even know what all those thousands of people are doing here in these grounds. We have simply bolted as hard as we could through the streets."

"Then you didn't even see the flying machine fall?" cried the lad, his eyes wide with excitement.

"Not a bit of it," returned I, with more truth than the boy possibly could have expected.

"Then I'm sorry for you," observed the lad slowly, "for it was the most lovely thing I ever saw in my life. Four men and one girl were dashed to pieces, and they've had to stop the race meeting—for this is Worcester Races on the Pitchcroft—whilst they look for the remains of the poor victims who are supposed to have come all the way from the Crystal Palace with Mr Santos-Dumont, who, luckily, made his escape in the parachute before the thing fell."

Neither Casteno nor I, however, troubled to enlighten the lad as to the true facts. For one thing, it amused us slightly to discover for ourselves how strangely the news of our arrival had travelled, and in what a small degree the good citizens of Worcester were wont to mix the naked truth with their carefully-compounded stories of breathless adventure. For another, we were desperately anxious to get away from the neighbourhood of that racecourse. Any second the hue-and-cry might spread to the point at which we were. Indeed, it seemed little short of madness to loiter, and we sprang into the punt immediately we could get the lad to cast her off, and almost before he quite understood how quickly we had acted we had got ourselves concealed and the boy hard at work punting us down the stream.

Happily, the Severn covers but a few hundred yards in its passage from the racecourse to the city of Worcester itself, and so excited were the crowd over the fall and appearance of our air-ship that we contrived to slip away quite unobserved, to glide under the bridge that cut off Worcester from its suburbs, and to float past the cathedral, close to which stand the grey, old monastic ruins. Here we insisted on disembarking, because we found these remains were walled in and really furnished an ideal place of concealment, but we did not dismiss our guide.

"Go, sonny, and buy us two suits of rough blue serge," I said, handing the lad four glittering sovereigns. "If they ask you any inconvenient questions say they are for your father, who is employed on a coal barge, and has had his duds stolen, a thing that often happens, I'm told. If there is any change remaining over, keep it, but whatever you do, hurry—hurry like mad."

The boy, who had now quite entered into the humour of the adventure, and thought what a fine thing it was to be outwitting the police under their very noses as it were, tore off, leaving us in charge of the punt. And such good use did he make of his time, his opportunities, and the shopping facilities of the immediate district that, in less than half-an-hour, he returned with the things we had ordered. Very soon we bade him good-bye and gave him half-a-sovereign for his trouble; and, waiting until he had disappeared round a bend of the river, we scaled the wall that shut off the cathedral school ground from the ruins, and then plunged into an ancient recess in the wall where, in the half darkness, we threw off our uniforms and put on our serge suits.

Nobody who has not stood in some deadly peril of this sort can guess the relief we felt as we got back once again into fairly decent clothes, that did not make us appear much different to what we really were, and gave us the advantage of our own speech and looks. One takes up a disguise glibly enough, even if at first it presents an arduous strain to the nerves; but after a time the thing becomes a veritable Frankenstein to one, and seems to absorb every ounce of one's brain and strength. Casteno literally danced with joy as he flung his uniform into a corner as far as he could.

"Thank goodness, now we can walk and talk like other folk," he cried. "For my own part, I don't care who we meet or what is said to us. I feel powerful enough to deny anything."

"But surely," I gasped, "you don't mean to show yourself in public until night is fallen? Think—think of the risks!"

"I have, and I mean to take them. Nobody in Worcester can identify us now with the two soldiers who took passages in the air-ship at Shrewsbury. Remember, even if Colonel Napier could be quite sure it was us who had played him such a scurvy trick, he dare not say so. In the first place, people will think the fall and the shock have given him softening of the brain if we stick up to him and deny him with all the lung violence we are capable of. Secondly, you forget he is Professor Stephen Leopardi, the expert of the Meteorological Office, to the world just at present. He is the fraud, not us, and we have only got to unmask him to the hunchback, or to get inquiries made about him in London, where the police want him for his mysterious disappearance from Whitehall Court, and where the Meteorological people would have him instantly arrested for his impersonation, to put him utterly to confusion. Hence we have no cause to fear him or anyone here. We are free—free as air." And again he capered about the ruins, overcome with glee.

"Then you mean actually to walk off to the railway station with all the Worcester police on the alert and to take the next express up to town?" I questioned. "You think we shall escape without any trouble!"

"Of course I do. Is it not race time, and is not the city full of strangers? Besides, you seem to have forgotten the most important thing of all. I have these manuscripts in my possession, and Camille Velasquon has brought the key to them all the way from Mexico. Now all we have got to do is to compare the two—and then?"

He stopped and looked straight at me, as we stood with the ruins silhouetted against the old cathedral chapter-house. My gaze met his.

"And then?" I repeated; and I stopped, and instinctively my hands clenched.

"I will do what is right to England, Glynn," he cried in tones of intense emotion, stretching out his hands to me. "Good heavens, man! don't stare at me like that! I'm a creature of flesh and blood like yourself. I have feelings and a sense of honour just as you have. I have not gone into this business simply to feather my own nest. I have not fought my father—Fotheringay—Cuthbertson—I have not besought powerful assistance, such as Cooper-Nassington's, to sell this country to some Continental enemies—no."

"I take your word—I believe you have not," I replied slowly. "The point is whether the Order of St. Bruno has, for it seems to me that they are the principals in this treasure hunt and not yourself."

"Well, come with me and see," replied Casteno, averting his eyes. "I have pledged myself, but you will not take my word. You doubt—you hint—you mistrust me."

"I do," I gasped. "I can't help it."

"Then, come." And without another word he turned away, and, seizing the ivy that grew in rich profusion on both sides of the wall, he climbed up by this support, closely followed by myself. The drop on the far side was only a matter of some ten feet, and, aided by similar branches, we passed into the playground again, and soon found ourselves heading for the chief station in Worcester—Shrub Hill.

As Casteno, however, had predicted, we found the streets thronged with all manner of queer characters hastening to or from the races, and we managed to secure places in a "race special," which was timed to run to Paddington with only four stops on the road. There were, we saw for ourselves, plenty of detectives in the station, and they had evidently got wind of us and our flight, for every wretched soldier who swaggered into the building was stopped and cross-examined, and we actually saw two poor privates in the engineer uniform, who had had a little beer, and were inclined to be cheeky and not to answer questions, bundled into a cab and driven off to the city police station.

Punctually, however, at the time appointed the train left with us. As it happened, by judicious tips we secured not only a first-class carriage to ourselves but copies of the London papers, which we had failed to get in Shrewsbury before we had to hurry off to the fête to look after our seats in the air-ship.

José, plainly, was fagged out, and no sooner did the train move off than he stretched himself across the seat and composed himself for a nap. I, however, was strung up to the highest pitch of excitement, not by the perils we had just passed through, but by the prospect of getting to the heart of the mysteries of that most mysterious Order of St. Bruno, which had all the ways and uniforms of regular monks without their recognised symbolism. Indeed, I had not forgotten what my guide said when I had walked across the courtyard of their house at Chantry Road, Hampstead—"We are neither Roman Catholics nor Anglicans"—and yet if they did not belong to one or other of these two persuasions to which sect did they belong, and what was the object of their banding together, with houses in Delhi, Sydney, London, and Mexico? And why, as José pretended, should they have any patriotic notions for England in preference to Spain—or France, or Russia, or Mexico for that matter? If the manuscripts really belonged to them, as the Spaniard declared, why didn't they desire to get them, to keep them, and to recover the Lake of Sacred Treasure for themselves?

Try as I would, I could not, as the train rattled through the fragrant orchards and hopfields of Worcestershire, bring myself to believe that my companion had told me the whole of the truth about this mysterious Order and the part it played in the life of our times. Like most private investigators I had grown to realise that "'tis not the habit that bespeaks the monk," and that often under the most simple and impressive guises there lurked secret forces that meant treachery and villainy of the worst description.

"One thing I do promise myself," I thought to myself rather firmly, "I will not rest whilst I am at St. Bruno's until I have got to know all about these mysterious people—all. Señor Casteno may try as he will to put me off with explanations that only leave things more difficult and puzzling and hard to understand, but this time I will stand my ground. I will be the spy on this occasion, and if I find the Spaniard or his friends in the Order up to any mischief I will not hesitate a second—I will strike for England, cost what it will."

Sinking back, I took up one of the papers I had purchased, and began to glance carelessly down its columns. I had not forgotten that these news sheets might contain some further news about that discovery of a murdered man in the Napier's flat, but seeing that I had had a Sunday special edition of a London paper I was not expecting to learn anything really new just then about the tragedy that had stricken the West End with a sense of painful impotence and danger; I felt the police and the press had not had sufficient time.

Nevertheless, something fresh had been discovered by one of the most enterprising of the younger papers—the *Daily Graphic*—which, unlike its contemporaries, did not reprint the old story about a man unknown being found stabbed to the heart in the colonel's bed, but boldly ventured forth into big type with this extraordinary statement:

THE MYSTERY AT WHITEHALL

IDENTITY OF THE DEAD MAN

"The man who was found murdered in Colonel Napier's flat in Embankment Mansions has been identified by an official of the Foreign Office from a description and photograph that were hurriedly circulated by Scotland Yard last night. The victim is no other than a gentleman occupying a responsible position in the Treaty Department of the Foreign Office, and the papers found in his desk tend to show that the crime was the work of some secret society which has its headquarters in London, and which had decreed his end because he, as a member, was supposed to have communicated some of its secrets to Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs. How he came to be in Colonel Napier's flat—and bed—remains, however, to be explained. He certainly bears an extraordinary resemblance to the missing colonel."

By this time the day had begun to close in. The sun had sunk, leaving, as it sometimes does, even in the height of an English summer, the sky grey with mystery and suggestion of on-coming disaster. The paper itself slipped from my fingers as I dropped back into my seat and let my eyes wander over the landscape that, all of a sudden, seemed to have taken on itself the colour of my own thoughts, which were now troubled and perplexed with a dozen doubts and emotions which ever evaded me but none the less filled me with unrest and pain.

With an effort I recovered myself and looked curiously at José Casteno. He had curled himself up in an attitude that struck me as being too strained and unnatural to be comfortable, but, to all appearances, he was sleeping gently like an over-tired child. Strangely enough, it was the first time that I had seen his features in such absolute repose, and I caught myself examining each one of them with that careful minuteness and patience a geologist may bestow on a half-identified specimen—the lines at the corners of his mouth, the shape and setting of his chin, the high yet thin cheek-bones, the curl of the nostrils, and those hollow jaws of his, that seemed to be accentuated by curves of baleful but elusive significance. I had lived quite long enough, and had suffered disillusion sufficient, not to make the error into which fall so many earnest amateur disciples of Lavater, to pin my faith on any one of these features. In imagination I tried to add each point of elucidation to another, so that I might arrive at a just estimate of the true balance of his vices and virtues, for, believe me, no man is without some vice held in abeyance or left to flourish in riotous luxuriance.

On the whole, I realised that the head, large and powerful as it was, had qualities that might make for the highest intelligence and ambition, but now the face seemed weighed down with anxiety and grief of mind, and in its present expression there was just a touch of remorse, or was it some hidden consciousness of guilt? Keen observers who have lived much in solitude, and have not been perplexed by the sight of too many strange, eager, and passionate faces, say that every human being's countenance resembles in some degree some animal's. I tried to apply this rough-and-ready method of mental measurement to the Spaniard, fettered as I was by the fact that those two great glowing eyes of his, like twin black lamps that flashed so often with suppressed fire, were closed, and could not, therefore, give me any clue. Somehow I caught the impression of a panther, forest bred, highly strung, but held in leash by some strong sentiment: was it love for Camille Velasquon?

All the warnings I had had against this man, the impassioned appeal Doris had made to me when she released me from the hunchback's, the hot scorn poured on my championship by old Zouche himself—the man's father, be it remembered—even Fotheringay's appeal to me to cease my association with him, lest worse befall me—all these things started up to bear witness against him. These had no reference to the tragic sequence of events—concrete things that had followed my engagement to him and had culminated in this mystery in Whitehall Court with the cruel slaying of an unnamed official of the Foreign Office by some secret brotherhood, which, as likely as not, might be the very order of St. Bruno, to whose headquarters I was hastening without a thought of my own safety or freedom.

Could I, therefore, trust him? Was I discreet to rely on him when great stakes, not only mine but England's, hung in the balance?

On and on sped the train through hamlet, village and township. The twilight faded slowly into night, and as the gas lamps above my head flamed coarsely upward a terrible temptation assailed me and kept knocking on the doors of my brain in form something like this:

1. Why be a merely passive instrument in this great struggle between nations and persons for this Lake of Sacred Treasure?
2. Casteno stole the documents from the hunchback as he lay in the tent at Worcester senseless; why don't you take them from Casteno now he is senseless? Then you would be quite certain England would get her just rights.
3. You need not fear what the Spaniard might say or do to you if he caught you in the act. After all, you have got those clever imitations of the real thing which the hunchback and Paul Zouche prepared, and at a pinch you could substitute for the true manuscripts the false, and get clear away from St. Bruno's to the protection of the Foreign Office before the fraud were discovered.

Everybody is a potential scoundrel in some great crisis of his career. "Opportunity makes the thief," says one old school of cynics; and I was, I admit, sore beset to do this deed, with some excuse for my own conscience that after all it was but the doing of a patriot and that it had the sanction of a sacred national need.

But as I toyed with the temptation compromise came and sat beside me and told me that, if I didn't do the trick then, I could do it some other moment, when I was the more convinced of Casteno's *mala fides*. Fate also took a hand in the struggle between conscience and duty and a sense of honour.

Chapter Eighteen.

London Again.

Suddenly Casteno roused himself and sat upright, and with him went quite irrevocably all opportunity of taking the three fatal manuscripts from him by stealth during that journey up to Paddington. For his hunger was infectious and the meal he had provided excellent, and so it came about that in quite a few moments the pair of us were devouring roast chicken and ham and pledging each other in glasses of quite passable railway-station claret. Indeed, the tedium of the ride vanished like magic, and before we had finished the commonplaces of conversation we found ourselves back again in dear old smoke-begrimed London. That night we slept at Paddington Hotel, for we had had an exciting day, and did not feel inclined for a further journey to Stanton Street. Whence next day Chantry Road, Hampstead, was reached in an incredibly short time, and once again I found myself standing at the tiny door in the wall with its suggestive peep-hole. Only this time there seemed to be no delay in answering our summons, and we passed with great rapidity from the public street into the courtyard that shut the home of St. Bruno's off the porter's box at the entrance, and then we made our way, without any black-robed guide, to the huge hall with its great flower-decked statue of a woman, heroic in size but incommunicably fair.

Somehow I was conscious that our arrival had caused quite a thrill of excitement through the community, even in the various offices of the house itself. As Casteno and I stood there and waited for the prior, for whom he had asked

immediately we had crossed the threshold, various figures of men and youths of various ages flitted in and out on obvious and childish pretexts to snatch the opportunity of a whispered word or handshake with my companion, who seemed to me a most popular personage, and whose return now began to take the form of a kind of triumphal progress. All these visitors, however, wore the same habit, and all had the same peculiar way of looking at one, like the members of some brotherhood that held the same tie very closely in common, and by practice and method had grown to resemble each other more nearly than do many members of the same families in our great, cheating, bustling world outside.

What could these monks be?

In vain I looked about the hall in the hope that it would give some clue to their practice or their faith. I could discover nothing to help me more than one would find in the refectory of some large public college except this same beautiful statue I have spoken of, with its floral offerings and candles. All the same, the expression on this sculptured woman's face was not one of benignity or of sweetness at all but of a remote passionless beauty for beauty's sake, as it were—something that had been wrought without any ethical ideal behind it or hope of moral change or influence in the beholder. Soon I decided quite finally that there was no religious tie at St. Bruno's—none at all. Their secret of organisation was not, I was persuaded, one of a common faith or of devotion to a concrete and well-defined Church. They had some other bond which might be as strong as death, but it had nothing to do with the hereafter.

Now was that bond good or evil?

Abruptly I was aroused from my meditations by the arrival of the Prior, a powerful-looking, hooded figure in a robe of black, whose face at first was kept carefully concealed, but who wore around his neck one mark of distinction not possessed by his fellows—a thin chain of gold, at the end of which dangled a compass set around with some gold ornamentation, on which was inscribed a well-worn truism: "I point always to the north."

"Welcome, Mr Glynn," he said in a voice which somehow had a familiar ring in it but which I could not then recognise. "Our mutual friend, José Casteno, has kept us of St. Bruno's well posted as to the earnest way in which you have laboured for the rightful recovery of the documents relating to the whereabouts of the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano, and I am glad to see you here—to thank you."

I bowed, and in return murmured something conventional—that the pleasure was mutual. Inwardly I was assailed with one question: "Where had I heard that voice before?"

"You are, of course, quite a free agent," the Prior proceeded, "and any moment you choose to leave or to set about other business you are at liberty to do so. Personally, however, I hope you will stay with us whilst we decipher these documents. You are, I understand, quite a palaeographic expert yourself, and it may well happen that your experience or your knowledge may prove of infinite value to us."

"I am quite at your service," I returned coldly.

"Indeed, the understanding between us is," broke in José eagerly, "that he shall have our full confidence over this matter. I have promised him that we shall do nothing in the dark. Every step we take shall be accompanied by him."

"Quite so, quite so," exclaimed the Prior vaguely, but rather impatiently I thought. "But there is much to be done before we can say that anything wonderful will happen in regard to these discoveries. Now, Mr Glynn," he said, turning to me as though he were anxious to bring an awkward development of the conversation to an end, "shall I show you your rooms?"

But I threw my shoulders back and stood my ground. I was not, I felt, a pawn on their chessboard, to be pushed forward as a mere gambit to cover other and more subtle forms of attack. "Excuse me, Prior," I said firmly, "but have we not met before?"

The figure in front of me shook either with merriment or with annoyance, whilst José himself averted his face lest there I should discover too much.

"Yes," he said, after a pause, in painfully noncommittal tones; "we have."

"Where?" I queried.

"Can't you recollect?"

"No; I can't."

"Think."

"I have—I cannot."

The man took a step forward and threw back his hood.

He was no other than the man whom Casteno had sent me that night to consult in the House of Commons—John Cooper-Nassington.

I started back amazed.

"You, Mr Cooper-Nassington!" I cried. "You here, in this office, and in this house! What on earth, then, can this Order of St. Bruno be?"

An awkward pause followed. We both stood and stared at each other, and neither of us spoke.

"Well, at all events," said the Honourable Member, at length summoning up a faint smile to his lips, "you can see now for yourself that in this matter of the manuscripts England is quite safe. I shall do nothing—I shall tolerate nothing—that will hurt our mother country or her interests. On the contrary, all of us here are fighting for her, and will do so until our last breath. We may not have particular faith in unscrupulous office-seekers and popularity-mongers of the type of Lord Cyril Cuthbertson or that precious but exceedingly foolish ally of his, the Earl of Fotheringay, but we have faith in the righteousness of Britain's claims and her needs. Hence we are going to see that, as this Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano really belongs to her, it is not snapped from her by Spain, by the Jesuits, or by a lot of needy foreign adventurers who have begged, borrowed, and stolen all manner of concessions from the Mexican Republic, and who even to-day may have got wind of the existence of these documents and may be moving heaven and earth, and the diabolical powers under the earth, to get hold of them!"

"That may be so—no doubt it is so," I returned doggedly—"but there has been too much foul play in this hidden treasure hunt, as witness that murder in Whitehall Court, to content me or to let me take as gospel everything you choose to tell me and to treat as wisdom everything you like to leave untold. I must insist on my rights as an individual in this matter before we go any further or any deeper into mutual obligations which later all of us may find it difficult to free ourselves from, however much we may desire to do so. To-day I am my own master—I can stay or I can go. My decision now will rest on one consideration alone. What is this Order of St. Bruno?"

"I cannot tell you," said the Prior, and his strong face looked out at me without one shadow of hesitancy or fear.

"Casteno," I went on, turning to the Spaniard, "you are in a different position to Mr Cooper-Nassington. You are not an officer of this sect, this institution, this organisation, this brotherhood. You are a plain member, free to speak or to hold your tongue. I ask you to remember your pledge to me—to reveal to me all that it is necessary for me to know in this business to satisfy my own conscience, and, remembering this, to tell me what tie binds these people together."

"I cannot," he answered, and clasped his hands.

"Why?" I demanded sternly, pointing an accusing finger at him. "Why do you refuse? If a man is a monk—a Dominican, a Franciscan, a Norbertine—ay, of any Order you like, even of one of the great silent, enclosed orders like the Trappists or the Cistercians—he does not hesitate to admit his kind and to explain under what rule he lives. Why should you people, here in the very heart of a busy modern city like London, not practise the same candour? Why should you cloak yourselves in mystery, in doubt, in veiled hints, in suspicion? Your reticence is not meaningless. You have some cause for it. What is the reason of it? Why won't you tell me?"

"Because we are all alike bound by an oath," he muttered, and he moved away from me as though the mere acknowledgment of that secret bond had set up a new barrier, an unseen gulf, between us. "We cannot tell anyone what we have in mind."

"Still there is one way out of the difficulty," put in the MP, speaking now with marked care and deliberation, "which, fortunately, rests with you whether it is acted upon. It is this: While it is quite true we cannot reveal the secrets of our existence to outsiders, no such bar rests against any communications or confidences between members themselves. Why, therefore, Glynn, don't you apply yourself for admission to the Order of St. Bruno?"

"Impossible," I cried. "I have no wish to join the Order."

"Well," said Cooper-Nassington, "I can't pledge the Order, of course—I have no power to—but I am almost certain that they would take you in."

"But for what purpose?" I demanded. "Don't you see we are arguing in a circle and that we have arrived again at the point why the Order exists?"

"I do. But that can't be helped. Will you join?"

"I don't know," I said lamely after a moment's reflection. "Answer me one question before I decide, and answer it to me with the most solemn truth: Do all the candidates join you in as deep ignorance as I?"

"All," cried José and the Prior in one breath. "That is the essence of our union—this appalling ignorance of what we commit ourselves to."

"Then I'll risk it," I cried. "Propose me at once for initiation."

"And you will stand the tests?" demanded the Prior, now drawing back and giving me a most searching look. "Remember, this is no child's play—we are men with men's purposes."

"I will undergo any test," I returned recklessly, for all at once I had seen that if I were to continue on the track of those three manuscripts I must stand by St. Bruno's whether I wanted to or not. Hence, now I had got the chance of joining the society, I was resolved to let no foolish scruples stand in the way but to go into the thing heart and soul till the whole mystery of its existence stood clearly out.

The Prior and Casteno now drew together and conferred for a few minutes in whispers. Afterwards the Spaniard approached me as the MP hurried off, and said: "If you will go into an ante-room at the end of the passage the Order will be called together here and their pleasure about you instantly ascertained. If they decide to admit you your initiation will be proceeded with at once." And thereon he conducted me to a small, barely-furnished waiting-room and, closing the door upon me, left me to my own reflections, which, now the critical moment had come, were, I regret to state, none of the most pleasant.

Nor was that feeling of apprehension removed when, about twenty minutes later, Casteno reappeared and told me that the Order had approved me and that I was about to become a St. Bruno-ite. All at once I realised that this initiation upon which I had decided to venture with so much foolhardy pluck might be a most serious business for me and for my future.

Chapter Nineteen.

Reveals the Secret of the Order.

There are, of course, many strange and weird methods used for the initiation of novices into secret societies. As the years have rolled on it has fallen to my lot to belong to a large number of these quaint organisations; and I have been always impressed by one fact about them—whether they were rowdy and very humanly convivial, or whether they were wholly serious and oppressed by a lot of ill-digested moral earnestness—they all aimed at one thing in their entrance ceremonies. They strove to impress the new-comer by all the resources they had at their command with the majestic wonder and glory and weight of the brotherhood to which he had been privileged to enter on the payment of the usual entrance fees.

Now sometimes, of course, these resources I have mentioned are purely ridiculous, as witness that noble and ancient Order which directs its initiates, when they are blindfold, to crawl step by step up a flight of stairs, only to fall with a splash from the top into an artfully-arranged tank of lukewarm water at the bottom. Also, there is a body of apparently sane men in existence who have come together in the sacred name of charity and who find the climax of artistic realism in the disguise of themselves in long white beards and cloaks and in a profound darkness, which leaves them free to play practical jokes of the most stupid description on the strangers within their gates.

On the other hand, by the use of waxen effigies and coffins and other symbols of the shortness of life, there are associations which try the nerves of the candidate in the most severe fashion.

I am no enemy of secret societies and no friend. Possibly, with two or three exceptions, they are none of them very much good either to the men who belong to them or to the cause they espouse. All these early tests are justified by one and the same plea—that they serve to reveal the real character of the man who comes before them for reception. So they do. But decent people find it hard to be heroic when they feel themselves thrown suddenly on their backs, and have a revolver pressed to their temples, and, in language of flowing periods that recall the noblest efforts of Burke and John B. Gough, are told they are traitors and spies and deserve to be blown into atoms!

One graceless scamp I knew subjected to this test jumped up unexpectedly and yelled blue murder, then let out his fist with a haste that surprised, and much pained, the apoplectic warden who was exhorting him to confession and repentance, and whose mouth never resumed its natural position after this truly lamentable occurrence. As a rule, though, candidates suffer these things according to their temperaments and the measure of their fortitude, and they receive the joy of their reward at the sight of, and part in the initiation of, their dearest and their best friends.

Personally, I was too old a hand at the entrance to a secret organisation to feel much trepidation when José came to me in that tiny waiting-room in the London quarters of the Order of St. Bruno and told me the decision of the brethren.

“After all,” I reasoned within myself, “in a few moments I shall know the best and worst about these quaintly-garbed people. It is useless to anticipate. So far as I know there is only one rule to guide a man at a moment like this, and that was given me by a man who had money and much leisure coupled with the mania to belong to all the secret societies in existence. He it was who said: ‘Whatever they ask you to do, do it; whatever they ask you to say, say it; whatever they ask you to believe, believe it.’ In one word, reverence is the true keynote to all these initiations, and possessed of this every man may go forward with confidence and good will, certain that by its use he will flatter his fellow-members and save himself a good deal of confusion and shamefacedness.”

Hence I arose immediately I was bidden and, signifying my willingness to proceed, followed the Spaniard down the corridor, which all at once had grown strangely silent and gloomy-looking, for the gas lights had now been lowered to a tiny blue glimmer, and as I moved forward I caught the sound of a low dirge-like chant that might well have passed for an Office of the Dead.

Now music at such a moment is a very curious and powerful agent. Indeed, I don’t know what some secret societies would do without it. Although I had quite made up my mind not to be impressed by this initiation but to keep every nerve and sense on the alert to see if treachery were afoot regarding that Lake of Sacred Treasure, I caught myself again and again giving way to a shiver. Indeed, now and then the sounds would break from a plain chant into a long, low mournful wail of anguish inexpressibly pitiful and sad, summoning at a note, as it were, all the grisly, ghostly spectres of the hearer’s dead and gone memories and making friends walk in imagination that had long since gathered their tired muscles together and stretched their weary limbs out in a last sleep from which no human hand should ever awaken them.

At length, with nerves strung up to a painful tension, I was led into a tiny vault-like cell, and the door suddenly closed upon me. At first, so abrupt was the change, that I could see nothing. But after a time my eyes managed to pierce the gloom, and through the half lights I saw in front of me an old monk seated at a table poring over a huge and musty volume.

For two or three minutes he took no notice of me at all. Then suddenly, when I least expected it, he looked up at me, and his expression was calm, benign, yet dignified.

“I understand,” he began in a rich, penetrating voice that had a wonderful melody in it, “that you have, for some

selfish reason of your own, decided to seek election in our Order of St. Bruno. You are no stranger to secret societies or their methods, and you think it a cheap and an easy way to get at certain facts which you are anxious to possess."

He stopped and gazed searchingly at me, as though he would read the deepest secret of my heart, and I flushed scarlet. I had not expected this form of address, and his charge threw my mind off its usual balance.

"Indeed, sir," I broke out hotly, "I have done—I have suggested nothing of the sort."

"Are you quite sure of that?" he returned softly, bending down and searching for something amongst his papers on the table. "Do you not deceive yourself rather than me? Have you not made a bit of a mistake in that contention? Just look at that a moment, and study what you see there, and tell me whether my surmise is not really correct." He handed me a small silver casket about ten inches square, and as I pulled open the lid a light suddenly flashed in the depths of the box, and I caught the reflection of my own features in the mirror that had been artfully concealed at the bottom. For a second—but only for a second—I was inclined to be very angry, very angry indeed. Then I checked myself. Why, after all, should I fall into that very common error and get enraged with the truth?

"You are quite right," I said, suddenly closing up the casket and passing this portable mirror back to him. "I have decided to join you for the cause you have told me. I am sorry if it is likely to give you or the other members of the Order any annoyance, but remember, my face has spoken where I have been silent and revealed the truth to you—"

"And as a matter of fact," he interposed gently, "you are no worse and no better than nine-tenths of the men we have here through our hands, and we reject them because they are not fit to be of us.

"Still," he went on with increasing earnestness, "we have no wish to lose the value of your powerful personality and influence from the Order. On the contrary, indeed, we welcome the prospect of your adhesion, and we only hope that you will succeed in going through the tests we shall be bound to set you before we can receive you with credit to ourselves, and hope for your own peace of mind and happiness. As a matter of fact, we have long had you in view as a possible candidate for the Order of St. Bruno—longer, much longer, than you can even imagine. Perhaps you may think it was chance, a whim, a case of peculiar personal artfulness, that led our young friend Casteno to seek your offices in Stanton Street, to pay you a sum down, and to trust you so blindly with the secret of those manuscripts, on the fate and translation of which hangs the disposal of several millions of pounds. Indeed, indeed, it was nothing of the sort. By that time the Order of St. Bruno had got its point of view about you, was anxious to have you in the midst of it, and so it sent Casteno to you, and not a thing you have said to him, not a deed you have done with him, has it failed to hear and to weigh.

"Why do I tell you these things? you may perhaps ask. Is it to frighten you? Is it to make you wish to join a body that can, in a time when nearly every man throws out his hands like a wild beast and grabs what seems to him to be the largest, the finest thing and the best, lay its plans with so much patience, far-sightedness, and care? Or do I explain this to you as a wise friend will teach an ignorant, not in vain-glory or boastfulness, but with an honest desire to reveal what is best and highest in himself? Well, of all these things I leave you to judge. Choose the answer that seems best to you, and let me fortify you with this assurance—the Order of St. Bruno requires no forced men. At any point in the tests that will be put to you, you can retire from your candidature and from the house. It will make no difference to us. It will cause us no grief, no surprise, no annoyance. We shall be always friendly disposed towards you—and any day you like you can visit us—and we shall only ask you to give us one assurance."

"And what is that?" I questioned with great eagerness, for my curiosity now was aroused to the highest pitch. Never, never had I known a secret society conducted like this.

"That you will not reveal without our permission any of the things that we communicate to you in the course of this initiation?"

"I will not." I answered, and I held up my hand.

"This is a serious matter. You must swear it," said my mentor.

"I swear it," I replied, and a sound like a mighty crash of thunder followed, and for a moment great eccentric streaks of lightning seem to flash on all sides of the cave.

"That is a token that your word has been accepted by the brethren, who, quite unknown to you, are gathered around the cell listening very carefully and observantly to your words, and particularly to the tones in which they are uttered. Thus encouraged, I am at liberty to proceed; and, first, I must tell you why the Order of St. Bruno came into existence. Not many years ago there was no such body of men in any country in the world. Now we number over two thousand adherents, and every day witnesses fresh accessions to our membership. The idea at the root of our brotherhood is a very curious, but also a very powerful one. It owes its origin to a man named Bruno Delganni, who was for many years a translator in one of our Government offices—the Foreign Office—and who suddenly inherited a large sum of money—nearly half-a-million, I believe. As it happened, his years of servitude to red tape had given him a very hearty disgust for, and contempt with, the ordinary Government servants. His idea was that they are all machine-made dummies, and he trembled to think what would happen to England should she ever get involved in a really serious quarrel with the European Powers. These men, he argued, are for the most part worse than useless in their present positions. Picture an invasion of England by a large armed force—where would they be? At their desks probably, sorting their papers and indexing their previous performances. Not a dozen of them have in them the making of a strong man in an emergency, for the system on which we train our Government servants in every department is to stamp out of them all the fine, heroic, unselfish qualities and to leave them mere calculating or recording machines. As a consequence, all the business of the country would be at a deadlock. The chaos would be awful to contemplate.

"Spurred on by these reflections," proceeded the old monk, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands on his

knees, "Bruno Delganni resolved to found with his fortune a secret society which would silently, noiselessly, but none the less resistlessly, band together all the real patriots in every corner of the British Empire. Their names, he resolved should never be known unless England was actually invaded, and then the St. Bruno-ites should spring up like magic everywhere—in the War Office, in Parliament, in every hole and corner of the Empire—and should take the helm of affairs with one determination and one determination alone—to make Britain the greatest, grandest, and noblest Empire ever seen since the days of Imperial Rome. Nobody in his organisation was to be afraid of place, of power, of enemies or of this wonderful birthright. All diplomatists may be born cowards, this Bruno Delganni argued, but all St. Bruno-ites should be strong in the faith of the possibilities of the Greater British Empire, and should march towards the light of the world domination of the Anglo-Saxon race with the belief that this was the only way to secure the 'peace on earth and goodwill towards men' which all sincere philanthropists and rulers, no matter to what nationality they belong, really crave.

"Well," continued the speaker after a significant pause, "as, perhaps, you will agree, this was really the dream of a most wonderful patriot with a breadth of vision that puts each and all of our statesmen of to-day to everlasting shame, for look in the House of Commons now and tell me is there one—ay, only one—of its members—who would dare to get up in his place in Parliament to-day and even declare as a matter of righteous sentiment that England should rule the earth to safeguard the world's destinies and peace?"

"There is not one," I answered, and half instinctively I bowed my head.

"No!" proceeded the old monk sadly, "they are all as flabby to-day, as prone to compromise, as eager to renounce the destinies of the Empire as they were that day when Bruno Delganni left the Foreign Office and determined to strike a blow for an ideal he hoped might change the entire face of the history of the world. Had Bruno, of course, not been ground down by this Government system he might have been another Napoleon. As it was, the man of action in him was sunk in the man of thought, and so he set to work to build his dreams on paper, so that when they stood fully erect they would be there all ready to become material forces when the hour struck. I won't weary you now with all the reverses he met, all the wild and disappointing experiences he went through. It is, we know, an easy thing, to feel patriotic when one is shouting the national anthem or reading the carefully-turned periods of a party leader; and quite another, and a different thing, to be a real, copper-bottomed, oak-through-and-through kind of patriot whom no storm can disturb and no question of family, money, or self-interest can alter, but with whom 'God' and 'Fatherland' are the only two watchwords that matter, and all the other facts of life are mere subsidiary shadows of the two same great all—dominant themes.

"Many and heartbreaking were the reverses dealt out to him before he got hold of the right ideas to find out patriots and to weld them together in a union that could never be broken; but, as these ideas will form your tests as a candidate for admission to the Order, I must not now reveal them to you. I have really only one more duty left to me to do now I have sketched out to you the broad reason which governs our existence. It is this: Do you, Hugh Glynn, feel that you are a good enough Englishman to say 'there is no country like mine, no Empire so fine, no laws, no people so beneficent. I am determined that everywhere she goes, in everything she does, my own Motherland should triumph, and as long as I have breath, as long as I can stretch out my hands or use my brains, I will never, if words or deeds of mine can avail her anything, suffer her to fall behind her enemies, but everywhere, in everything, I will cherish one ideal—"God prosper England."'"

"Indeed I am," I cried in eager enthusiasm.

"Then you may safely advance to the first stage of your initiation!" said the old monk, but, to my surprise, his face was now very grave. "Don't be alarmed at what is going to happen, but be warned in time, for many men, I must tell you, have been just as keen and as loyal, apparently, as yourself and have failed to be worthy of the name of Englishmen—have miserably failed!" And he gave a great sigh.

I should have liked to ask him what he meant, but dared not.

Already I was conscious of extraordinary things happening about me, and it was as much as I could do to stand still and to keep my courage from oozing through my hands.

Chapter Twenty.

More Mystery.

Slowly, very slowly, the walls of that hermit's cell seemed to fade out of sight.

The darkness of the place did not appear to grow more profound, but the light became greyer in tone, more misty in character, so that at length I felt I was standing in a kind of opalescent vapour, which would not let me distinguish objects more than two or three feet distant from the point where I stood, lost in profound amazement at the changes that came upon me from every quarter.

Something went moaning and sighing past me with eyes so huge and luminous that they gleamed like lamps of fire. Then I caught the sound of a woman crying—not with heartrending sobs that would tear to atoms the grief that had caused that outburst of emotion—but slowly, regularly, resistlessly, as though sorrow had touched the centre of her being and her tears flowed with every single throb of her heart.

Afterwards a scene formed itself in front of me, but whether it was a piece of clever stage realism or the free use of a panorama and a cinematograph I could never discover. All at once the light grew soft and rosy like that of early summer dawn, and I saw, apparently, stretched in front of me a sandy waste of country, across which the old monk, who had just been speaking to me was walking, footsore and bowed with age and weariness. Then came a shrill blast

on a horn, and before one could utter even a sound a horde of savages in their war paint swept across the landscape and seized the old man and demanded something from him which he refused to yield. In a flash they caught him up amongst them, and there I saw inflicted on him such hideous atrocity and torture that I found myself reeling backward sick with the smell of burning flesh and faint with the sight of that flow of human blood.

Fortunately, the scene at length faded—everything went completely black—and out of a silence, so still that it could be felt almost, there arose the shrill whistle of an Arctic blast that pierced me through and through with cold. Sharper and sharper grew the frost about me. Eventually I became conscious of something that bit and stung which was falling on my hands, my face, my shoulders with ever-increasing swiftness, till, stretching out my fingers, I seemed to be in the centre of a bitter and searching snowstorm, above which the moon appeared to rise and to exhibit in front of me a man clad in the uniform of a Canadian letter-carrier. Almost as soon as he became visible I could see that the man was well-nigh spent and broken with the cold, but, as he toiled on and on in front of me I saw him sink deeper and deeper into the drift, until at length, absolutely exhausted, he threw up his arms and fell face downwards in the snow. Oh! how I toiled to reach him as the snow fell faster and faster, rapidly blocking his form out of sight. Somehow something seemed to force me perpetually to take a wrong direction—I became conscious of inhaling something uncommonly like chloroform—and I, too, fell.

When I next opened my eyes the scene had changed. Instead of snowclad plain and a wind that howled and whistled and cut through me like a newly-sharpened knife, I seemed to find myself in a brilliantly-furnished throne-room hung with rich tapestries and candelabra of gold, whilst dotted about the floor were pieces of gilded furniture of the days of Louis Seize. At the far end of this magnificent apartment were folding doors, and as, all sick and dizzy, like a man newly recovered from a surgical operation, I arose from the lounge on which in some miraculous fashion I had become stretched I saw these flung wide open. A stately march broke from an organ in a hidden gallery above, and there entered a procession of pages, who, taking no notice of my presence, ranged themselves, in their picturesque costumes of a bygone court period, on all sides of the room.

The music now became more jubilant as other figures loomed up in the doorway—figures of courtiers, jesters, ecclesiastics—until at length the apartment was almost filled with people, all conversing eagerly in that melodious Spanish tongue which I recognised but could not follow, although my knowledge of Latin was really profound enough to qualify me for a priest. Suddenly, however, the music stopped—all sounds of conversation ceased as if by magic—and all present appeared to take up their allotted positions. The next moment there entered two ecclesiastics in scarlet cassocks and cottas, carrying their birettas in their hands, whilst close behind there came a thin, white-faced cardinal, clad in the purple of the Roman Church, with the traditional skull cap at the back of his head.

Very low bent the assemblage at his approach to the throne, and no sooner was he seated than the smell of incense, cast on braziers full of burning charcoal in the corners of the room, arose, in clouds of smoke that had a most stimulating, instead of an oppressive, feeling upon me. I felt so bright, so strong so elastic that I could run, jump, anything, and I could barely contain myself as supplicant after supplicant entered the throne-room, and besought, in Spanish, some favour from the cardinal, who, I gathered, from the constant repetition of the phrase, could be no less a dignitary than the Cardinal-Archbishop of Toledo. Priests came—country curés, apparently newly arrived from remote mountain districts; pale-faced, humble-looking mother superiors, whose clothes and bearing bore eloquent evidence of their faithfulness to their vows of poverty and obedience; interspersed with which would now and then figure some crafty, oily scrivener; or, again, a fat, well-clad merchant, who seemed to bring the very trafficking of his shop into his language, his gestures, and attitude.

To my surprise, the last comers of all proved to be no less a personage than the very Prior of the Order of St. Bruno, clad in the Benedictine garb he affected, accompanied by José Casteno and two or three of the brethren. Apparently they had to pay some dues, for a table, crossed like a draught-board, and a pair of balances were brought in and fixed up before the cardinal, and from stout leather bags carried by the brethren were poured diamonds and rubies and emeralds that must have been worth thousands of pounds. Yet, large as their value looked, the Cardinal-Archbishop did not seem satisfied. He rose impatiently from his seat on the throne, his thin, ascetic, shrunken figure towering wrathfully over Mr Cooper-Nassington, who this time looked a prey to acute nervousness, and, shaking a warning finger at the pile of jewels, His Eminence spoke, in the quick, fiery Spanish tongue, some words that seemed to cause the St. Bruno-ites to cower and shiver as though they were being severely whipped.

A moment later they were hurried out of the audience chamber, and as the crowd of courtiers and ecclesiastics, who had drawn nearer to the throne during the altercation, settled themselves once again in their accustomed places I saw the Cardinal beckon to one of his chamberlains, to whom he whispered for a few seconds, looking the while, for the first time, in my direction.

The man bowed very low at the close of his instructions, and, taking up his wand of office, he marched with measured and dignified step in my direction, the crowd stopping suddenly their whispers and watching his movements with obvious interest. No sooner did he draw level with me than he spoke:

“His Eminence desires that you should approach him, Mr Hugh Glynn,” he said in excellent English, although his tone was decidedly that of a Spaniard. “He has some offer to make to you which he believes it is well for you to consider. Pray follow me.” And he turned about and led me right to the steps of the throne itself.

By this time the effect of the incense had very largely passed from me. In a way I was under the influence of the drugs in the sense that I was conscious of a high degree of exaltation and moral fervour, but the lust for action had gone and left in its place a consciousness of extraordinary importance and power.

Very low I bent before the bowed figure in front of me, and after the customary salutation: “Pax vobiscum,” to which I found myself answering quite mechanically: “Et cum spiritu tuo,” the cardinal addressed me, in rather laboured accents, in my own tongue.

"I have had you brought here, Mr Glynn," he said slowly and with great care, "in a rather curious fashion, it is true, but none the less effective, although I won't stop now to explain it, for two special and momentous reasons. The first relates to the Order of St. Bruno, from which I had you rescued in the moment of your initiation, for a cause that will quickly appear to all obvious enough. You have seen for yourself how the Prior and his brethren have come before me. They are, as a body, in my debt to an extent that would appal you, and yet, although I am probably one of the most lenient lenders in the world, you have seen for yourself how they attempt to evade payment by presents of costly jewels and of precious stones. Knowing this, I ask you, was it wise of you to want to link yourself with them? Remember, once you join them you become liable *ipso facto* for as much money as they happen to owe and cannot afford to pay for themselves. As a man who has been trained as a lawyer—nay, as one who intends shortly to incur all the sacred obligations of matrimony—is it wise of you to rush blindfold into this zone of debt and difficulty you can have no certain knowledge of, no appreciation? Take time to consider it while I put before you the second reason why you have been bidden here to this audience chamber.

"As a matter of fact," he went on with increasing earnestness, "you stand at present in the most important city of Spain—Toledo—which possesses one of the most valuable collections of ancient historical manuscripts that have remained untranscribed since centuries and centuries before the days of the ill-fated Armada. In the minds of the rulers, however, the time has come for these documents to be disinterred from the chests in which they have lain from time immemorial, to be deciphered, and to be given to the world at the discretion of the head curator. Now, that place of head curator is vacant, and, although it is decided that only a Spaniard can fill it, I can easily get you letters of naturalisation, for I am empowered to offer you that position—a life appointment—at a salary of 2000 pounds English each year."

In spite of myself I gasped at the munificence of this offer. In a flash I saw all the magnificent possibilities of a position of eminence and of usefulness such as that—to practise as a means of livelihood the finest and most fascinating hobby man who loved history ever had—and I own I was just on the point of accepting it when I felt instinctively the prick of the thorn hidden beneath the rose. I had to renounce my rights as an Englishman! I had to disavow my birthright! I had to throw aside the thing I treasured most—pride of race and birth! How could I do this with those burning words of the old hermit in his cell ringing even then in my ears? The Order of St. Bruno might be a gang of spendthrifts, they might have as officers adventurers who exploited the poor puffed-up patriots they caught in the meshes of their sophistries and vanity of their habits, but, after all, their ideal was too noble to cast aside just for money alone.

"Must—must this curator be a Spaniard?" I cried, stretching out my hands.

"He must," came the inexorable answer.

"Then I am deeply honoured by the trouble you have taken, the kindly interest you have shown in me," I replied slowly, "but the thing is frankly impossible—I cannot give up my nationality at a word in the the way you stipulate."

There was a sudden shout, so loud that it sent me staggering backward with my hands pressed closely to the drums of my ears. The Cardinal-Archbishop appeared to bound from his throne like a man who had been shot, and once again, as something soft, diaphanous, and white was waved in front of me, I caught the sickly, sticky smell of chloroform, which overpowered me so quickly that almost as soon as it reached me I dropped to a lounge like a man dead with sleep.

When next I came to my senses I was astounded to find myself stretched on the floor in that same hermit's cell from which I had started. The old monk who had first explained to me the secret that held men together in the Order of St. Bruno was bending over me, bathing my temples with some aromatic preparation from a small silver ewer that stood on the floor beside him, whilst I found my head resting on the only evidence of luxury in the place—a beautifully—embroidered silken cushion, that insensibly recalled to me all the glories of the palace of the Cardinal-Archbishop of Toledo.

Weak and trembling, like a man who had just recovered from a long and debilitating illness, I scrambled to my feet, and, aided by my companion, I seated myself on a chair that was standing near the table.

"Tell me," I said, passing a tremulous hand over my throbbing forehead, "what has happened? Have you had a serious accident here while I have been in this cell?"

"No," he said, with a grave shake of his head; "nothing has occurred here—nothing at all."

"Did something hit me, or was I all of a sudden stricken with a fit?"

"Neither," he replied; "all through you have been a free and a conscious agent."

"Then, I didn't dream! I didn't rave! I have actually seen the things I have pictured?" I stammered, thoroughly bewildered by the man's steady and truthful gaze. "Oh! I have it," I cried suddenly again, "you have hypnotised me! You made me believe that I was first at the foot of a mountain in far-off Africa then on the snowclad wastes of Canada, and afterwards in a noble throne-room in Spain, where an offer was made that tempted me most sorely."

"That is not so," he answered coldly. "I am not a hypnotist! I do not understand mesmerism, and, if I did, I wouldn't practise it. I consider it is based on a malign perversion of some beneficent law of Nature.

"No," he went on, reaching out a hand and turning up the light that hung above his head; "there has been no occult influence at work here—none at all. All that you have seen has happened, fairly enough, but with this distinction—it has all happened round about this room.

"As a matter of fact, you must always remember this," he proceeded, "the founder of our order, the Bruno Delganni,

had a most marvellous knowledge of stage mechanics and effects, and when he found it so hard to discover whether the men who wished to join him were really patriots or not he turned this knowledge to the use you have seen. He erected in every monastery that he established huge theatrical machinery and properties, with the result that the brethren there are able to carry out any kind of test they wish.

“In your case, the plan agreed on was a very simple but an effective one. The first idea was to give you a fright, and then to take you off on all manner of excursions, so that you would not realise when the supreme test came what and which it was. Hence the deaths on the mountain and in the snowstorm. The real trial came when we played with all the force we could on the one string we knew held you like a vice—your love of manuscripts. Would you respond to this and renounce your birthright, or not?”

“Luckily, you did not, although we bent every energy we had, every trick we knew, to lure you into the trap, using hasheesh, chloroform, anything that suited our purpose, to make our stage scenes seem to you the more vital, the more real. In the end you made the supreme refusal—you would not cease to be an Englishman. Therefore all our show ended as suddenly as it had begun. We had tested you, and we had found you were really the patriot you had always pretended to be to José Casteno when any question arose of the safety or the use of those three manuscripts that gave the whereabouts of the Lake of Sacred Treasure.

“We wanted to learn no more then. We decided there and then that you were the kind of novice which the Order of St. Bruno required, and we hastened back to our proper garbs again, anxious only now to bring the ceremony of initiation to an end. Hence it has come about that only one other test remains to be applied to you, and then you will be free to enter forthwith on all the rights and privileges of our brotherhood, which are, I am to explain, very numerous, far-reaching, and valuable.

“Do not fear it. In character, in effect, it is totally different to any experience you have been through; but our noble founder, Bruno Delganni, held it to be a very precious expedient to practise, and in his institutes, which we follow with scrupulous exactness, he lays it down in the clearest fashion that on no account must we omit it, however enthusiastic we may feel at the conduct of our novice in the other and more theatrical tests we have applied to him.”

“Very well,” I said resignedly. “I am prepared. Do with me as you will.” And taking the glass of wine he pressed on me I drained it, and then seated myself once more in the chair to await developments, although in my inmost heart I felt so upset and confused that I hardly knew how to speak.

With a stately inclination of the head the old monk passed through the doorway and left me.

Slowly, very very slowly, the light faded, and then I became surrounded by soft greyish darkness that afflicted me with a sense of intense mournfulness.

Chapter Twenty One.

The Use of the Image.

For several seconds I felt that I could not bear the strain and suspense of this fresh test; already I had suffered so much I had grown weak and nervous. I wanted to be quiet, to sit still for a few minutes, and to think out all the extraordinary things I had heard and witnessed. Yet here I was caught up in this weird kaleidoscope of sensation. I no longer felt my feet on solid earth, but all at once I recognised that I had become the prey of some elements that defied all the ordinary laws of reason, and might, if I gave way to childish or unreasoning panic, send me practically demented.

In vain I told myself that the whole movement about me was but the insane jest of some crazy stage craftsman. In vain I held myself tightly together, and with all the vigour I was capable of anathematised Delganni for his preposterous notions of finding out the true metal of a man and what, in apparently grave moments of physical distress, he might be capable of. The hideousness of the scene afflicted me with a sense of intolerable vertigo. First there were ear-piercing screams, then long lurid intervals of silence in which some red light burned angrily in the background, and I saw the walls about me and the ceiling above me bend and crack and stoop; there appeared to be nothing—nothing to prevent them falling with a crash upon me and dashing me to instant annihilation.

The culminating horror of it all was reached when even the chair on which I sat, the table against which I rested, began to slowly revolve. The movements of the floor were steady, well ordered and rhythmical, but, as loud sonorous sounds were struck, afar off, on some brazen instruments, the framework seemed to rock and roll, as though the very earth were shaken by some subterranean power.

I verily believe that the physical strain of saving myself from being pitched forward kept me sane in these moments. I know I began by extending my rage to all secret societies, and then I passed on to swearing at myself for being so rash and foolish as to submit myself to these indignities—I, a free-born Englishman, upon whom, if I had confined myself to the ordinary walk of life, nobody dared lay a hand so grim and preposterous as this was.

Finally, as the movement grew more erratic, I was content to hang on, and I hung on so effectually that my tortures all at once ceased to torture me, the movements in the hermit's cell stopped as though by magic, the light grew larger, rounder, more luminous, and suddenly Casteno appeared through the gloom in the doorway with a hand stretched out in welcome.

“I congratulate you, Glynn,” he said. “You have gone through all the tests required with flying colours. Now, come with me and receive your reward.”

Stiff, sick, and sore, I rose unsteadily from the chair and grabbed his arm. "I'll come with you all right," I panted, "but the kind of reward I feel interested in just at this minute is to give somebody such a thrashing that will relieve my feelings and teach my good friends at St. Bruno's the danger of banging and bewildering a man in the way I have been."

"Well," conceded José, with a pleasant smile, "some of us do hold that this ceremony of initiation into the Order is rather foolish; but, after all, we don't quite know how we can get out of it. In the first place, we see that Delganni was really a most wonderful man. Years before we had all this babble and talk and political trickery about a wise imperialism for England, and a Greater Britain, and the responsibilities of empire and so forth, he saw the eternal mission of our country, and he saw it clearly. More than that, he did, with all those fantastic methods of his, manage to institute this brotherhood and to get a very fine and reliable nucleus of workers together. That being so, who are we, his disciples as it were, to judge him? We are glad enough to take up his burden and his dream just when he laid them down. Then, if we put away this ceremony of initiation of his, what ceremony could we devise to take its place?"

"Anything," I snapped, "anything but the one you have." And with him I began to walk down the corridor.

"I am not so sure about that," answered Casteno. "There will, I suppose, be always adventurers attracted to a cause by loaves and fishes, and it is highly necessary for the ideal we cherish that such should be weeded out. Anything that stops these sharks is useful, very useful. Why, we have had both Lord Cyril Cuthbertson and Lord Fotheringay up before us for examination, and we played so well on their weak points, as we tried to play on yours, over the place of curator at Toledo, that we actually got them to say they would renounce their nationality as Englishmen! No wonder, then, we won't trust them with the deeds that would show the whereabouts of the Lake of Sacred Treasure. In our opinion, they are nothing more than the most pestilential parasites England has ever bred—I mean political patriots!"

I halted in amazement. "Then," I stammered, "am I to take it that the Order is so rich and so powerful that even His Majesty's Secretary for Foreign Affairs tried to get within its ranks?"

"Indeed it is," answered Casteno earnestly. "Why, it is true Bruno Delganni only left about a million, but that million he left was in land near Leeds which had not at the time been exploited. Since his death it has been opened up, developed, and sold with remarkable care and skill, with the result that, aided by other benefactions, the Order today is enormously wealthy. It was computed a short time ago that if we divided the property amongst the members for any reason, say a terrific European war with England where the cash might in a patriotic sense be useful, we should each receive about seventy-five thousand pounds.

"And perhaps, what is more to the point just now, you will now become entitled to a share of that amount. In fact, we St. Bruno-ites boast and know we shall never want money for any good purpose either for ourselves or our friends. We have only to apply to the three rulers we have, whom we call the Council of Three, to get it.

"For instance, when I am married I shall ask their assistance, and I am sure they will yield it to me with great pleasure, and that they will allot my bride and myself such a handsome wedding portion that neither she nor I will ever want the means of keeping up a perfectly respectable and well-balanced position in society. Why, there are today five or six members of Parliament who are St. Bruno-ites, and where do you think they get the means from to win their different constituencies and to keep up their seats? From the Order, of course; and yet they never set foot inside these walls or write a line to the Council of Three from year's end to year's end. The money they require is put to their credit at their particular bank regularly every quarter, and all they do is to send to the Council of Three every New Year's Day a small slip bearing the words: 'Ready, ay ready,' with the date, and their ordinary signatures."

"And shall I be entitled to similar consideration?" I queried, blundering into a foolish, selfish question out of sheer nervousness.

"Of course you will," answered Casteno, smilingly; "all are equal in this house—there are no favourites. The idea is that everybody wants everybody else to be perfectly happy and comfortable. You can come when you like; you can go when you like. Once in the house, of course, as a resident you have to submit yourself to the semi-monastic rule we affect, but you will find even that very good and helpful to you—yes, even the strikingly distinctive dress we wear—for it will serve to recall to you the sacred duties of patriotism which you have undertaken. It will accustom you, in a way, to your own ideal."

"But why is the place so unlike a monastery?" I asked, stopping suddenly and pointing to some of the beautiful modern pictures which adorned the walls. "Look at these lovely works of art! There is nothing grim, nothing austere, nothing of self-sacrifice in these."

"Of course there isn't," returned Casteno gaily. "We want our men to be as bright, as cheerful, and as ardent lovers of beauty and goodness as we can. We never interfere with their religions. That is their affair. Ours, we own, is a frankly worldly organisation, which, although it is under divine favour, we hope, as witness our watchwords: 'God' and 'England,' does really work to a worldly and an obvious conclusion. Therefore we make use of all the best things of the world, and amongst those we place beauty and things of beauty as of the highest therapeutic importance!"

"Is that why you have that statue in the entrance hall?" I questioned—"that wonderful figure of a woman, with the face of a Greek goddess, which stands on a pedestal, and before which there seem to be constant offerings of flowers and candles."

José stopped at the mere suggestion, and laughed quite loudly. "Good gracious, no, man!" he replied so soon as he recovered his breath, "that statue has nothing to do with the members—nothing at all. You must know that poor old Bruno Delganni, although he really was a patriotic genius, had also a strangely poetic and romantic vein in his composition. Hence, when he found that the dream of his life, the Order of St. Bruno, did actually take form and substance and become a living organism powerful for great historical ends and occasions, he bethought himself of

another vision of his youth—the woman who would not marry him.

“Of course, this idol of his, like all women with these faces of perfect beauty of form and expression, had no soul and no heart. In my opinion all those women in history who inspired noble resolves were like the idol of poor Bruno Delganni—Dante’s Beatrice, I mean, Paolo’s Francesca, Werther’s Charlotte, and so forth—mere mirrors in which great men saw depicted their own great possibilities.

“At all events, the woman in question married Bruno’s elder brother, because he was the better off, but Bruno never forgot her, and on his deathbed he ordered that her statue should be carved from an old photograph of her that he had in his possession and that a replica of that work of art should be placed in the refectory of each house connected with the Order of St. Bruno and duly and regularly adorned with so many candles and flowers.

“Unfortunately, we graceless bachelors, when we feel particularly irreverent, say that our founder had the image placed there as a fearful warning to us against pretty women, as a dumb but forcible appeal to each one of us to remember that ‘handsome is as handsome does,’ that ‘beauty is only skin deep,’ and that as the flowers around the statue fade so does woman’s charm. But it means nothing beyond this—nothing whatever.” And he caught me by one arm and stayed my steps opposite to one of the doors let into the wall.

“But here we are,” he went on in a more restrained tone. “When I open this you will find yourself in the presence of the brotherhood, all of whom, absolutely without exception, are eager to welcome you as one of themselves. Don’t be frightened of them. You have got through all the tests, and nothing but a joyous reception of you as a fine adherent to Brunoism now remains to be gone through. They all of them know about the manuscripts and the Lake of Sacred Treasure in Tangikano, and all you have done to assist me, so you can talk to anyone with the utmost freedom. When this is over I will get you to come with me and we will tackle the translation of the deeds with the aid of the key to the Jesuits’ cipher which Miss Velasquon has brought from Mexico; but at present your formal recognition as a Bruno-ite is the thing in hand, so follow me.”

He raised his hand to tap on the door, but I stopped him. “Just one question,” I muttered, “before I go in—only one. Why *Saint* Bruno if you have no religious object and significance? Why didn’t you call yourselves something less Catholic, more indicative of your real object?”

“Oh! we had nothing to do with it,” retorted Casteno lightly. “Delganni, I’m told, was a Catholic, and he christened the Order after his own notion. His institutes say that he had a great devotion to his name saint, and so he called the Order after him to pay him honour, and perhaps, what is more to the point to-day, to throw inquisitive persons off the scent as to our real motive, for they jump at once to the idea that we are some very wicked yet very religious brotherhood, and, therefore, leave us severely alone.”

I nodded. Almost in spite of my own subtle, suspicious self I was satisfied. The next moment the door was flung open and Casteno marched me through an avenue of black-habited brethren to a dais at the far end of the room, on which the Prior stood with hand outstretched to greet me.

“Welcome, brother Hugh, welcome!” he cried in those rich sonorous tones of his. “My duty to-day is a very simple yet a very pleasant one; again I bid you welcome. Here in this book I hand to you are the institutes of the Order of St. Bruno, the rules which govern our organisation, and the explanation thereof as supplied by our founder, good Bruno Delganni, on whom, we say, may the earth rest very lightly, for he has done England much good! Take them; study them at your convenience. They will prove to you we are not quite so black here as our habit would seem to indicate. Here, also, is the scroll which testifies that this day you have become a member with us and are entitled to all the rights, privileges, and appurtenances of that distinguished and cherished position. It is written in cypher numerals, as you will observe—another idea and protection of our founder’s—but if you take page one of the institutes you will find that is the key to the riddle and that the numbers stand as references to the particular letters of the first few lines.

“Thus you will observe the first word on page one is ‘The.’ Hence in the cipher document the letter ‘t’ will be marked by the number ‘one,’ the letter ‘h’ by the number ‘two,’ and the letter ‘e’ by the number ‘three.’ Indeed, this is the cipher code we always make use of when we write to our members and communicate with each other in confidence, so I advise you, if you don’t want to carry the institutes about with you constantly, to learn by heart the first few lines of the handbook, and then you will have in your mind the key to the cryptic language we make use of.

“Here, also, is a small spring gold bracelet which I must ask you to wear on your right arm above the elbow,” he went on. “It serves various purposes—for one, to remind you that you are a Bruno-ite, and of your ceaseless duty of high and dignified patriotism. Its catch, also, is, as you may observe, key shape, and can be used as a key to penetrate the most secret archives of the Order, should you ever feel suspicious, or fancy that you have any ground for discontent, or that you are not being as fairly treated as your fellow-members, for in this Order we are all equal, and only take personal favours from the Council of Three. Any day or hour you are free to overhaul our records and to call the brethren together should you find any ground of complaint. Should you be away some time from the house and want to know whether the stranger you meet is a Bruno-ite or not, take the bracelet off your forearm and put it on your wrist. Then call the man’s attention to the inscription engraved on it: ‘For God and England.’ If he be a Bruno-ite he will answer immediately: ‘May we be worthy of both.’ If he does not, pass it off with some jest, and at the right moment return the bracelet to its original place. Other tests you will find in the institutes. They consist of phrases to learn and answers to give to them, but all these must be disclosed with discretion. We in the Order have no fear of you, your courage, or your zeal. On the contrary, we believe you will be a shining light of patriotism, and so we receive you with open arms and say:—”

“Welcome! Ten thousand welcomes!” cried the brethren in one united voice.

“And now,” said the Prior, beckoning to two assistants, who came forward with the habit, “it only remains for me to garb you as becometh a good and loyal follower of Bruno Delganni.” And in a few moments I found myself arrayed

like my companions in the uniform of a black friar, and monstrosly comfortable, I own, I found it.

Then a bell rang, and we all trooped into the refectory to a banquet. The place was certainly liberty hall, for, although I was placed in the seat of honour to the right of the Prior, everybody insisted on talking to me, and to my intense amazement I found gathered in this Order many of the most distinguished men I knew in the literary, the artistic, and the legal life of London.

Over all reigned a spirit of the uttermost joyousness, and not until the meal was quite over did José, the Prior, and I make our way to a study in a far part of the building and spread out before us those three fateful manuscripts relating to the sacred treasures and the conflicting claims of England and the Jesuits.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Jesuits' Cipher.

Directly I saw the half-faded parchments I recognised that the cipher which those early Jesuit writers had used was a very simple one. This, I may explain to the uninitiated, is not so difficult a matter to observe as they might perhaps think. Some very simple considerations guided me to this conclusion. For instance, unlike the cipher in use by the founder of St. Bruno, there were practically no figures in the manuscripts, and by that I gathered the cipher was complete in the alphabet in use, and did not refer to any book, like the institutes of St. Bruno. The one thing that does puzzle and sometimes confound experts is to adopt a book, as Bruno Delganni had done, and then to put in the record simply figures that related to letters in this volume.

That, however, is not always quite safe. The expert looks in the manuscript for the letter that appears most often, and he decides, perhaps, that that is "e," the second "i," and so on according to the letters that are most frequently used in the language in which he believes the document to be written, and by this simple means he can often construct the entire code alphabet.

On some such method I too proceeded with the inspection of the manuscripts in question, and found that the letter that appeared the most often therein was a certain letter that was not often used in any language. I, therefore, turned the alphabet round thus:

ZYXWVUTSRQP

abcdefghijkl

It was, unfortunately, useless. Later I tried the alphabet in Portuguese form, and I saw with joy that we need not trouble at all about the rolls of explanation which Camille Velasquon had brought, and which were laid on the table beside us, but that I had really hit on the right solution—at the very start—without a glance at those cipher keys that had come to us from Mexico. The Jesuits had first merely reversed the order of the letters, and instead of writing "A" when they should have done, they had put "Z" in its place, and so on right through the alphabet, making the language of the base Portuguese, and not Spanish or English, as we had all expected at first.

The cunning old sons of St. Ignatius of Loyola had, however, not left their secret quite so plain as that. They had also added to it, to disguise it the better, a trick which most of us learn when we are boys at school. This consisted in adding to every syllable another rhyming with it but beginning with "p." Thus to put "Venha Ca" (come here) they wrote "Venpenhapa Capa," or if in English, "comepum herepere," and this, when written to any extent, is really quite bewildering to any student of manuscripts unaccustomed to it.

Luckily, I was well up to it, and so there and then I caught hold of the first manuscript that came to hand, and although I was as ignorant of Portuguese as the man in the street I managed in a very few hours to write out the text of the documents, and this in turn was translated by Mr Cooper-Nassington, who had, it seemed, learned the language when a youth, his father having been consul in Lisbon.

To our surprise the communication turned out to be a letter from the Father Provincial of the Monastery of St. Stanislaus in the city of Mexico, and was addressed to a firm of merchants in the interior, at Xingu, a settlement we found marked on a map. As it is a very good specimen of Jesuit composition and politeness I will give here the English translation of it. Thus:

"AMDG.

"*Friends and Gentlemen, Loyal Sons of the Church.*

"*From many years' experience of your methods, and from much pleasant and profitable intercourse with your honourable and honoured house, I know that it is always agreeable for you to have an opportunity of showing your hospitable and generous feelings towards strangers in general, and more particularly to those who visit our country for the purpose of making discoveries and of extending the sphere of their knowledge. I do not hesitate, therefore, to take advantage of the opportunity which the journey of our good Father Thomas Bonaventure and his three worthy companions presents to recommend them to your friendship and protection in the scientific and business enterprise which they have undertaken, in order to obtain those natural productions and wealth which render our province a classic land in the history of animals and plants, no less than in the record of hardly-won gold.*

"*Hence it comes about that in this illustrious enterprise to Tangikano, which the illustrious (élites) travellers have undertaken, I much wish that they may find in you all that the limited resources of the place allow, not only that whatever difficulties they encounter may be removed, but that you may be able to render less irksome the labours*

and privations which they must necessarily endure. Indeed, for men like them, devoted to our Holy Faith, stars of knowledge, pioneers of fortune to be used for the good of the souls of others, it must in a country like ours be easy to find amongst our most exquisite productions means to gratify them.

"I, therefore, hope, and above all pray, that you may be led to fulfil my wishes in the attentions you pay to Father Thomas Bonaventure and his three companions, and thus give me another proof of your esteem and friendship.

"So I remain, Your friend and obedient Servant, João (Father Provincial), LDS."

"Well, there is not much in that, is there?" said José, with a queer little grimace as he finished taking down the translation from the Prior's rapid and incisive dictation.

"No," I observed; "it only shows that the Jesuits got wind of the existence of great wealth at Tangikano, and so, with their customary subtlety, they fitted out an expedition to recover it under the guise of a noble quest for science. Still, that is something, isn't it? It proves to us the thing was thought worth doing centuries ago by men on the spot who must have had a better knowledge of what the district contained than any of us to-day can have."

"True," replied the Prior thoughtfully, passing a hand reflectively across his forehead. "It shows us, too, that we are on the right track, and that their musty-looking old manuscripts may have a very real message about the sacred lake, so I vote that, although the night is so very far advanced, we push on with our researches. Do you agree, Glynn?"

"Yes," I replied at once, for my interest too was now most keenly excited, and thereupon we all three of us bent down to work again and tackled the next document.

This proved to be an account of the journey of the same Father Thomas Bonaventure and his three companions mentioned in the letter when they had passed Xingu and had drawn within a few miles of the wonderful lake itself. It was written in the same kind of cipher as the other and in the same florid terms. In our opinion it was put on record at the Monastery of St. Stanislaus in the city of Mexico at the same time as the Father Provincial's letter.

Stripped of its verbiage, it related how the four explorers had duly arrived at the village of Tangikano, and, in order not to excite suspicion, had pretended they had come for a missionary effort which would last several weeks. By this means they won the entire confidence of the settlement, the population of which consisted of about forty persons, of whom twenty were slaves, and the remainder free Indians and negroes in the employ of the principal resident, a Spaniard named Pedro Barra, who kept them engaged attending to a large number of cattle and horses.

The priests, indeed, gave a very pretty picture of the state of things in existence on this estate. It was as follows:—

"The slaves appeared contented and happy, as slaves generally do. Every evening at sunset they came to bid good-night to Senhor Pedro and ourselves, a similar salutation taking place when they first met us in the morning. As a rule, the master would be seated in a comfortable easy-chair on the verandah, and each passed with a salutation suited to his age or station. The Indians would be generally content with 'Boa noite' (good-night), the younger ones and most of the women and children, both Indians and slaves, would hold out their hand, saying: 'Sua benção' (your blessing), to which he would reply, 'Deos te benços' (God bless you) making at the same time the sign of the cross. Others—and these were mostly the old negroes—would gravely repeat: 'Louvado seja of nome do Senhor Jesu Christo' (Blessed be the name of the Lord Jesus Christ), to which he would reply with equal gravity: 'Para sempre' (for ever). Children of all classes here (they went on) never meet their parents in the morning or leave them at night without in the same manner asking their blessing, and they do the same invariably of every stranger who enters the house. In fact, it is there the common salutation of children and inferiors, and has a very pleasing effect."

But all the time they lingered here, however, it was easy to see that the four Jesuits ached to be off to the sacred lake. Even when they described these idyllic scenes they harked off to this one all-absorbing subject, and recounted their conviction what fine guides these same slaves would make, and, later, told openly how they hastened to bargain with the Senhor Pedro Barra for the services of some of them to row them in a canoe up the river that led to the foot of the lake itself. Even the sight of this muddy and pestilential stream stirred in them emotions of admiration and awe. They might have been near the Amazon itself, have gazed on the stream of this mighty and far-famed river, and have let their imaginations wander to its sources in the distant Andes, to the Peruvian Incas of old, to the silver mountains of Potosi, and the gold-seeking Spaniards and wild Indians who once inhabited the country about its thousand sources rather than the sluggish stream of Tangikano.

"Yet this is all proof of what fabulous wealth they were sure the lake contained," argued Casteno. "Let's bear with the laboured way they recount their adventures. After all, if what we have heard here in England is true there were riches enough ahead of them to justify all their impatience and enthusiasm."

So we bent to the rather tedious work of translation again, and learned how at length Father Thomas Bonaventure and his companions, having arrived at the height of the dry season, heard that at length the waters of the sacred lake were sufficiently low to justify them to travel thither on an excursion, the ostensible reason of which was to kill alligators. They found that there were two ways to reach the place—overland in nearly a direct line, or by a zigzag course up the river, which way was the one they chose.

Accordingly, they were aroused at midnight, and got into the canoe with three negroes, who worked their craft steadily day after day, until at length they reached the narrowest part of the stream. Hitherto they had been charmed with the beauty of the vegetation, which surpassed everything they had ever seen before. Here is the description:

"At the water's edge were numerous flowering shrubs, often completely covered with convolvuli and passion flowers, whilst every dead or half rotten tree was clothed with parasites of singular forms or bearing beautiful flowers. Nor were there wanting animated figures to complete the picture, for brilliant scarlet and yellow macaws flew continually

overhead, while screaming parrots and paroquets were passing from branch to branch in search of food.

"Now, however, the scenery was much more gloomy; the tall trees closed overhead so as to keep out every sunbeam. Even the palms were twisted and bent in various contortions, so that we sometimes could hardly pass beneath, and sunken logs often lay across from bank to bank, compelling us to get out of the canoe and to use all our exertions to force our clumsy craft over.

"After some hours and hours of very hard and disagreeable work we reached the end of the navigable water. Then we left the negroes and immediately set off on foot over an extensive plain, which was in some places completely bare, and in others thinly clothed with low trees. There could not have been a greater contrast than between the scene on the river and that which we then entered upon. The one was all luxuriance and verdure, the other as brown and as barren as could be—a marsh now parched up by the burning sun and covered with tufts of a wiry grass, with here and there rushes and prickly, sensitive plants and a few pretty little flowers occasionally growing up amongst them.

"In the end we arrived at the lake just as the day was fading. The only building there was a small reed shed, and this we promptly took possession of, unfastening the baggage we carried and piecing together a hand-dredger. We were now half frantic with excitement to put to the test all the wonderful stories we had heard about the bed of the lake, and so we immediately set to work on its slimy depths, and quickly passed our net arrangement over a space of a hundred yards at a point where the water seemed to have receded the most. Then we drew up and examined our captures.

"To our amazement and delight we discovered that we had, amongst other things of course, actually retrieved a number of golden ornaments of a very ancient pattern, including a frontlet and a tiny statue, which the most casual examination showed was wrought out of solid gold!"

So the information they had had was really true! The Lake of Sacred Treasure was really worthy of its name, and in its slimy depths were actually deposited the riches of countless generations of ignorant yet devoted heathens!

Breathless with delight, they again fitted up their apparatus. Again they essayed to test the wonders of that strange and silent pool, but they got no farther than the brink of the water.

All at once, the parchment record stated, a loud commanding voice rang out across its misty expanse, and an Englishman suddenly appeared in the twilight in front of them in a magnificent boat rowed from stem to stern by Indians.

"Begone! begone!" he cried; "all this water is mine. I have bought it. I will let none of you touch it—no, not one!"

And before the Jesuits could utter a word in answer they found themselves suddenly surrounded by Indians, who had crept up to them unawares, and they were dragged rapidly into the depths of a dark, and seemingly impenetrable, network of caves some distance off.

And that was the last they saw of the lake of submerged treasure.

Chapter Twenty Three.

In which Further Facts are Deciphered.

Mr Cooper-Nassington was the first to realise the importance of this climax to the adventures of the four Jesuits.

For my own part, I learnt of their sudden removal from the Lake of Sacred Treasure, just when they had seen for themselves evidence of its possibilities of Utopian wealth, with feelings of mingled dismay and bewilderment. Then, argued I, we may be just as far off now as ever from absolute evidence as to what this extraordinary water really contains and to whom, in serious international law, it actually belongs. Even José shared my disappointment, and rose from his task of writing with an exclamation of chagrin and annoyance.

Only the Prior's eyes danced with gratification and suppressed excitement; and when at length we both turned on him rather angrily and suggested that, after all, he might have a little sense of decent consideration about the matter and keep his mirth silent till we had got over the valueless character of the manuscripts, he absolutely laughed quite loudly and openly.

"Just read on," he cried in that great, bluff, hearty fashion of his; "just read on. In my opinion nothing could be finer for the friends of England than this plain, unvarnished story of Father Thomas Bonaventure and his three companions. Why? do you ask. In my opinion for the most obvious of reasons. This document furnishes an absolute proof that when it was written—some centuries ago—the sacred lake belonged to an Englishman. Well, the point will next arise—can anybody else, or any other country, produce an earlier proof of ownership? If not, the issue is certain. The British Crown will seize it as the property of one of its subjects who died intestate; and, however much the good people of Mexico may writhe and wriggle—however much Spain may talk of the rights of pre-emption and other legal subtleties—backed up by our friends the Jesuits we shall stand as firm as a rock. 'The lake is ours,' we shall assert. 'We shall find it and exploit it, and anybody who dares to oppose us will be swept out of our path.'"

Now this certainly was quite a new view of the uses of the documents, and I am bound to say that no sooner was it put before us in these terms than we realised its significance. Neither Casteno nor I was one of those obstinate, stiff-necked, thin-lipped individuals who take about six hours to see any point which they have not chanced to hit on for themselves. As a matter of fact, we were quite willing to admit that we had both of us got so lost in the actual story

of the Jesuits' travels as to forget the bearing of their discoveries on to-day's events and hopes.

As a consequence, we turned again to the work of translating with quite a new object and aspect, not to discover so much whether good luck attended Father Thomas and his friends, now we knew that the waters did really contain much valuable buried treasure, as to see where England came in and how her claims would stand the light of a dispassionate examination.

As we proceeded we found the writer recorded that the Indians did not leave the four Jesuits very long in those caves, bound hand to foot, so that not one of them could move either to free himself or to help his companions. They were simply confined there until daybreak, and then the Indians returned with a lumbering bullock waggon, and, after giving their prisoners a meal of fish mixed with beans and a little rice, lifted the white men into this crazy vehicle, and, blindfolding them with great care, drove them all that day and the next night over a rough track, which nearly broke every bone they had.

The poor Jesuits themselves were in two minds as to the meanings of this attention. At times they would comfort themselves with the idea that it would be all right in the end and that the noble-looking Englishman they had seen in the boat on the lake would take care that no harm came to them. At other moments despair would reign, for, try as they would, they could not get a word out of their captors, good, bad, or indifferent, and this, they were sometimes certain, presaged evil fortune to them, and indicated that they were being taken away to play unpleasantly prominent parts in some hideous rites of human sacrifice.

Suddenly, however, their bandages were removed, and to their surprise they found that they were entering a town, pleasantly situated on a slope that inclined to the stream of a river, with a hill at either end guarded by a fort. The houses were neat and the streets regular, but, owing probably to there being so few wheeled vehicles, they were overgrown with grass. In due course they passed a church—a handsome building with a fine tower. The houses themselves were mostly coloured white or yellow, but in the very centre stood a magnificent building of white marble, in style something like a mosque. This proved to be the residence of the Englishman, for no sooner did they arrive in front of its portals than he came out and greeted them.

To cut a rather long and tedious story short, it appeared that his name was Joseph Beckworth, a well-known traveller of his time, who was supposed to have been lost in the interior some years earlier. As a matter of fact, he had purposely disappeared, through a disappointment in a love affair, wherein a girl refused to marry him because he was so poor. Vowing hatred against his race he had obtained a written concession of all that country thereabouts, including the ownership of the sacred lake itself, and with the aid of some Indians and negroes he had founded that town, the position of which he would not tell them. Then with wealth secretly obtained from the lake (whose sacred virtues he made all his allies pay golden tribute to) he had made the place what it was.

As it happened, he had none of the ideas of an autocrat. He was anxious that the town should flourish after his death, and so he had founded a proper executive government, consisting of a "Commandante Militare," who had charge of the forts and of a small regiment of soldiers; the "Commandante dos trabelhadores," who superintended the Indians engaged in any public service; the "Juiz de direito," who acted as the civil and criminal judge of the district; and the "Delegardo de policia," who had the management of the Indian police who guarded the sacred lake, and who had warned him quite early of the approach of the Jesuits; the "Vicario" or priest, and a few subordinate officers. Every night these men were wont to meet in one room in his house, in an airy situation, overlooking the river, and there they would sit for two or three hours over some native drink that was supplied to them and discuss all the day's events and plans.

None the less, it came out quite clearly that Joseph Beckworth was the landlord in quite a feudal English sense, and even the Jesuits were constrained to record that, when they slyly suggested he should let them come and settle there and help to educate the children of the place, he promptly refused.

"After all," said he, "this is a corner of old England even though it has been dropped in the heart of Mexico, and I'll have no man here cleverer than myself." And the next minute he led them into the market square and showed them a great stone obelisk he had erected there, and on which he had engraved the Royal Arms of England and the following inscription:—

This Town,
To which I have given the Name of Londini,
Is the Capital of My Province of Tangikano;
And which, together with the famous sacred lake, known to all history,
is hereby dedicated British soil for ever!

Long live the Old Country, which never has room for its best or its bravest sons, but never fails to call them back in tender accents no British-born heart can refuse.

Joseph Beckworth.

This practically closed the interest of that particular record so far as we were concerned, for it furnished the absolute proof we sought. The rest of the manuscript was taken up by a description of the fine hospitality which Joseph Beckworth extended to the Jesuits, on whom, however, he was quite discreet enough to keep a very watchful eye, so that they never managed to learn more than he chose to tell them, and, although they tried very hard, they never discovered any kind of dissatisfaction with him. On their giving a promise that neither they nor any members of their Order would ever attempt to return there, or would even send to him spies or rival nationalities or missionaries, he very frankly told them the latitude and longitude of this town of his.

These most important facts were recorded on the third and the last of the manuscripts, together with many quaint and interesting directions as to the best way to reach the district, the best stores to take, the most useful medicines,

and many curious phrases, not Portuguese, made use of by the Indians and negroes of the district, the repetition of which caused either feelings of hostility towards strangers, or of friendship.

This last was headed: "To those whom it may concern," but, lacking the casuistry of the trained Jesuit, we found it difficult to imagine whom the whereabouts of Londini might concern at the time the record was penned, particularly after that solemn pledge of Father Thomas Bonaventure and his three faithful companions, which, we were bound to admit, the Jesuits in Mexico seemed to regard as quite binding—and none of the community were suggested to have raised any protest against it.

"And, indeed, it is a very good thing for everyone," said Cooper-Nassington, who was in reality an ardent Catholic, "that they did not let Father Thomas Bonaventure's experiences in the matter pass into mere spoken legend. Look at the strength which their painstaking record will give now to the case for England! By their letting the facts be treasured up then they will help the truth to be known now, and the cause of justice to flourish! After all, they might have had some dim notions of disputes that might arise in the hereafter, and so they determined to write these documents—"

"As they did many others," put in Casteno gently, "which have proved priceless benefits to history and poor, puzzled humanity."

I said nothing, for I knew nothing of these subjects, and my brain was not clear enough to discuss the points then, for it was dazzled by our good fortune. The Prior and the Spaniard soon came back, too, to the matter in hand—how best to utilise these documents. After all, we had not forgotten that Lord Cyril Cuthbertson and Earl Fotheringay were close upon them, and that directly they got a suspicion where they were lodged they would leave absolutely no stone unturned, with the aid of poor, misguided Doris and her father, to recover possession of them. The hunchback, too, was sure to want a hand in the game as well as the Jesuits, so it, therefore, behoved us to proceed with the greatest caution, and not to give our plans away until they were too well laid to be upset.

But what were those plans to be?

Mr Cooper-Nassington was all in favour of action.

"Look here," he said in that great purposeful way of his, "while you fellows have been going up and down the face of the earth after the hunchback, and doing yeoman service I will admit, I've been up at Whitby fitting out a yacht. The stores are on board. The crew is engaged. I've arranged with the ironstone mine manager to draft off a certain number of his miners to Mexico immediately I give the word. Now why shouldn't we three slip off to the Great Northern terminus at King's Cross and take the next express for York and Middlesborough and steam off? In a few weeks we can land in Mexico, and after we have located the lake we can take formal possession of it, and if anybody upsets us we can appeal to the British Government for aid."

"That sounds right enough," I conceded, "but it loses sight of certain very material facts. In the first place, you forget that we should be followed by all the different enemies we have as hard as steamers could carry them. In a lawless interior like Mexico they would have us all, more or less, at their mercy, and ten to one they'd raise up religious fanaticism against us amongst the tribes who live around the lake, and, after a stern fight, they'd steal a march upon us."

"More than that, Prior," interjected Casteno, "you forget that the lake does not really belong to us, any more than it does to President Diaz, not even as much. By what right should we seize it? Because it belongs to England? Well, we have no authority to act for England in a nice diplomatic matter like this—none at all. There would be an instant reference by the authorities in Mexico to the British Foreign Office. What would happen then? Would Lord Cyril Cuthbertson forgive you all the old enmities—the bad quarters of an hour he has suffered from you since he and you quarrelled? Not a bit of it. He would rejoice at your fate being delivered into his hands in this fashion, and he would instantly repudiate your rights, denounce your authority, and might even go so far as to leave us all subject to the Mexican law, to be tried and treated as traitors only one degree cleaner than the Jameson raiders."

"Then what would be the most discreet step to take?" queried the Honourable Member rather helplessly. "We can't sit down and wait for something opportune to happen. It seems to me that we must move, and move at once!"

"That's so," I replied after a moment's pause. "But we need not go quite as far as you suggest. There are several vital matters to clear up before we can dare to appeal to the public with clean hands. For instance, that mystery of Whitehall Court must be sifted to the very bottom. The police have yet to discover who murdered the Foreign Office clerk."

"You mean Bernard Delganni?" remarked Casteno.

"Delganni!" I echoed. "Was that his name? What! that's the name also of your founder. Surely, then, they were related, and the crime had some connection with the brotherhood!"

The Prior and Casteno saw my look of amazement, and, rightly interpreting it, exchanged looks of mutual intelligence.

"Tell him," said Cooper-Nassington, with a commanding nod.

"I will," returned the Spaniard, and now he faced me. "Since I have arrived here, Glynn," he went on, "I have heard all about that crime, and very quickly now the truth will be given to the public. This Bernard Delganni, who was found stabbed to the heart in Colonel Napier's flat in Embankment Mansions, was really a nephew and heir-at-law of our founder, Bruno Delganni. He was in the Foreign Office service as translator to the treaty department, but he never got over the fact that he was left practically penniless in order to endow this Order of St. Bruno, and for years and

years and years strove with might and main to do us all the injury he could, not only with the permanent heads of the Foreign Office, but also with the officials in India and Australia and South Africa, where we had founded houses.

“Quite a short time ago, however, he changed his tactics. He had got mixed up with a music-hall actress, who had bled him right and left for cash, and had finally driven him to some most disgraceful expedients to raise money, which were bound to be revealed unless he got nearly fifty thousand pounds to clear himself before they were discovered. In desperation he came to us, but not by way of a supplicant. ‘Pay me this sum,’ said he, half frantic with rage and fear and the bitter passions of revenge which he had cherished ever since he realised he had been disinherited, ‘or I’ll show you up to the world!’ We met; we debated about him. In the end we refused to be blackmailed. ‘Do your worst’ we said, in effect.

“Well, as you know yourself, he was a friend of Colonel Napier’s, and so he hit on that foul scheme of mystery and suicide and impersonation you have read about. He rightly saw if he blew out his brains in a plain, straightforward kind of way nobody would talk about him or worry about him but that the thing would be hushed up as soon as possible. Whereas, if he pretended to be a man of note like the colonel, and was mistaken for him, and then proved to be somebody else, all London would talk, as it did. No doubt, amongst his papers he has left some hints that we were the cause of the crime. By that means he probably hoped suspicion would be diverted from his disgraceful expedients, and he would save his name from shame at the expense of ours. We shall see. All in due time will be made clear. But it can’t really affect us. We know too much about him and the actress to suffer. At the right moment we will communicate the real facts to the police.”

“Indeed, already we have done so. I went to Scotland Yard myself,” said the Prior. “Believe me, to-morrow’s papers will put all perfectly clear.”

“Then I can see what we ought to do,” I cried, and in a few graphic sentences I sketched out a plan of action that met with instant approval from both my companions.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Reveals a Scheme.

This, in a few words, was my scheme.

For my own part, I was certain that one or other of the many parties who were after the deeds—the Foreign Office, the Jesuits, the representatives of Spain, or the company promoters—would, somehow, make a desperate effort to seize them. Therefore our first duty was clear—to hide them so effectually that none could find them.

Where, then, should they be placed? Both Cooper-Nassington and José Casteno had various suggestions to make in this respect. One was in favour of secreting them under a certain tree in the garden of St. Bruno’s. The other suggested that they should be tied to the clapper in the great iron bell that hung in a dome on the roof. But in the end, for good or for evil, my notion was adopted. We all repaired to the entrance hall, which happened, luckily, to be quite deserted, and there, at the back of the statue of the poor misguided idol of the founder, in a little opening in the pedestal which the base of the figure left uncovered, we bestowed those most precious documents.

Afterwards we returned to the study, and then I produced those three most excellent forgeries of the real deeds which Paul Zouche had made at the hunchback’s request, and by which that precious pair of worthies hoped to throw all unpleasantly close inquirers off the scent when the chase got too hot at the curiosity shop in Westminster.

“It’s a pity that these should not have a chance of showing what they can do in the direction of baffling the inquisitive and the unprincipled,” I observed, with a sly smile, adding the particulars of how and when I got possession of them. “What do you say to labelling these quite openly: ‘Documents *re* Sacred Lake,’ and placing them in the safe of the Order of St. Bruno, the first place thieves will search if they have come after the deeds?”

“A most excellent suggestion!” exclaimed Cooper-Nassington, with an approving nod.

“And I move,” added Casteno, “that we act on it at once.”

So we did. The Prior himself fetched a lantern, which he lit, and with many a merry smile and jest we three monk-like figures, our black habits making us appear in that dim radiance like ghostly visitants from another sphere, took our way down the flight of stone steps that led from the main corridor of the building to the cellars, where a strong room had been built to hold the archives of the Order. In a whisper, my companion showed me where the keys of the inner door (I had the outer on my armlet), were always hung ready for any member who chose to go and take them down to inspect the contents of the treasure-room. Also they explained that the word to which the lock was always set was “Clytie,” the name of the lady of the statue, as the Council of Three felt certain that only the initiated would remember the circumstances of that lady’s career and her rather occult association with the destinies of the Order.

The door swung open quite easily, and as the Prior deposited the forgeries in a rather accessible position I caught a glimpse of the interior, with its row upon row of huge brass-bound ledgers, its bundle upon bundle of deeds and share certificates and documents in parchment, with many heavily-sealed bags of leather, which, I was told, contained gold or precious stones. Of the increasing value of the latter, I was told, Bruno Delganni had a quite childish faith, hence his investments in them.

Cases, too, were piled on the floor. These contained bullion direct from the Bank of England, to be used only when it was necessary for any political or other purposes to send remittances to the branch houses in Delhi, Sydney, or any other far-off corner of the earth, where transactions through a local bank might attract an unnecessary amount of

attention and speculation.

Later, we returned upstairs, and there I expounded what was, after all, the crucial point in my plan—the reconciliation of the principal different interests that were now fighting us with so much deadly bitterness and precision.

“What I suggest,” I said, gazing very determinedly at the two men in front of me, “is nothing more and nothing less than a round-table conference between the lot of us—Lord Cyril Cuthbertson, Earl Fotheringay, the Napiers, the hunchback, ourselves!”

“Why, that’s preposterous!” snapped the Prior, and his eyes flashed, but I would not be gainsaid.

“I am sure it is not,” I retorted with great firmness. “After all, what is it, really, that makes them all so bitter against us? It is no mere dream of making themselves rich—no stupid desire to rob anyone. It is simply pride, when the whole facts are reduced to their proper level, mistaken pride, and, being that, I am convinced it can, in a full and free discussion, be eliminated from this contest between us.”

“I will never meet Cuthbertson,” interposed the Member of Parliament, “never! You forget: our cause of difference is too deep for words to remove!”

“That may be,” I reasoned; “but, after all, are you not patriots first, and men with mere human passions like jealousy and revenge afterwards?”

“And I will not meet Peter Zouche,” declared José, drawing himself up to his full height and folding his arms. “He is my father, but he has not been a father to me. He drove me from my home, and made me a wanderer all over the earth, because I loved England and things English and rejoiced in the fact that, because I was born here, I was able to claim the rights of an Englishman.”

“More than that,” artfully added the Prior, “you, Glynn, forget how badly Fotheringay has treated you. He has made use of you, taken you up and flung you down, and finally had you carted about, as though you were a piece of furniture in his drawing-room. You could not say to him, like I sent word to Casteno, ‘In reparation’ for old unkindnesses with which I treated him when first he wanted to join the Order, and, later, to wed that charming little ward of mine, Camille Velasquon, who, by the way, I myself in panic abducted from you at Vauxhall Station.”

“Indeed I could,” I answered boldly. “We are not one of us as black as the others pretend to make out. Naturally, perhaps, we all want to shine and to become famous over the discovery and translation of those manuscripts. But at present we are all engaged in the amiable task of cutting each other’s throats. Why go on? After all, if England is going to get hold of all those millions and millions now lying in treasure at the bottom of that sacred lake, we must really pull together. The task, even from the diplomatic standpoint, is no easy one. It will test us all to the uttermost. Then why fight amongst ourselves?”

“We sha’n’t,” corrected the Prior; “they will fight us!”

“No, they won’t. They will all come to my round-table conference,” I said gaily. “You see? Now how shall we manage it?” I pretended to stop for a moment to think, and then I went on. “Oh, I see. Its simple enough. We Avili call the gathering together at my office to-morrow night at half-past ten, when we three ringleaders will assemble. For 10:45 we invite Cuthbertson. In half-an-hour we ought to persuade him that his interest lies in the same direction as ours, so at 11:15 we will bid the hunchback to the conference. Give him half-an-hour too, for he is a stubborn old man,” I observed, with a jocular nod in the direction of Casteno, “and then issue invitations to Colonel Napier and his daughter for 11:30, and Lord Fotheringay, who really seems to have less to do with the business than anyone, for 11:45.”

“And, pray, how,” queried Casteno, with obvious incredulity, “shall you communicate with them? Call on them, and ask them? Why, not one of them will see you, or, if he does, he will do it only to discover whether he can’t have you arrested for one or other of our recent pranks.”

“Why, we will telegraph, of course,” I cried snatching up some forms that happened to lie on a davenport close within my reach. “Look here, both of you, how will this do, to be sent to each one’s last known place of address?” And I bent down and scribbled rapidly the following invitation:—

“Please come to-morrow night to the Glynn’s Inquiry Offices, Stanton Street, WC. Manuscripts have been found and decoded. Will put before you a scheme that will ensure success for all.—John Cooper—Nassington, José Casteno, Hugh Glynn.”

“There!” I added. “All we’ve got to do now is to make four copies of these and address each one to the different conspirators, and in each instance put the time we have fixed for our interview with them.”

“I’ll be hanged if I put my name to a meek and mild bread-and-butter come-and-let-us-all-be-friends message like that,” roared the Prior.

“And I’ll be shot if I bribe the pater to do anything for me!” stormed Casteno.

But even then I would not be gainsaid. In the end I carried my point, and the telegrams were despatched by special messenger to St. Martins-le-Grand, so that the recipients could not guess their place of origin.

Then, worn out with the adventures of the day, we all retired to our beds, and not until the morning was far advanced did José come to my room, and, whilst I struggled on the border line between sleep and consciousness, shake me violently by the shoulder.

"Wake up, wake up, thou sluggard!" he cried with a gaiety that was most refreshing and infectious. "While thou art dozing all manner of strange things are happening at these monastery gates. Wake up, I say, and devour this breakfast of hot coffee and grilled chops that one of the lay brethren has brought you. In truth, you will need all the physical support it is possible for man to receive from a well-lined stomach, for outside some most tremendous surprises await you."

"What the dickens do you mean?" I growled, sitting suddenly bolt upright in the bed and gazing at him with the most rueful countenance. "Why puzzle with riddles a man that is but half aroused? What's up?" And I made a grab for the cup of coffee that stood on the tray on a chair by the side of my bed, and took therefrom a tremendous draught.

None the less, Casteno would not give in. He perched himself in his monk's robes at the foot of my bed, and with the aid of many a merry jest and joke at my expense he induced me to devour the good things that had been brought so thoughtfully to the room for me. It was not, indeed, till I had bolted to the bathroom, had a most refreshing tub, and arrayed myself in my own ordinary clothes that he would be persuaded to speak about the events that lay nearest to our hearts. Then he caught me affectionately by the arm and half led, half dragged me down a long corridor to a large lancet-shaped window at the end. This commanded a view of the Chantry Road, the only public thoroughfare that gave any access to St. Bruno's, and also a sight of some of the fields that were ranged around the monastery grounds.

"Now, my brother Hugh," he said, with a comprehensive theatrical gesture, "just take some observations for yourself, will you? Then tell me if when I came to you first I exaggerated the gravity of the situation!"

Without a word I turned and gazed over the scene upon which a bright morning sun, aided by a clear sky and the gentlest of breezes, poured down its wealth of golden light. At regular intervals I espied the figures of men who had been posted there, right round the house, for some very obvious purpose. Some were strolling aimlessly up and down, as though they were strangers taking the morning breeze for the good of their healths. Others, according to their character and mood, were lurking behind trees or hedges, or half concealed behind neighbouring walls. But all alike bore the stamp—the same brand of Cain that literally shouted their occupation to the most careless of observers. They could not, any one of them, rid themselves of their military gait or bearing, and I saw at once, just as Casteno had, that they were policemen in plain clothes.

"Humph! Detectives!" I observed, turning away from my post of observation with a shrug.

"Quite so, brother Hugh, quite so," repeated Casteno, with a triumphant grin. "You have guessed the melancholy truth the first time. They are detectives, engaged in preventing anyone leaving this noble mansion without their knowledge and permission. If you had remained at the window a trifle longer you would doubtless have seen for yourself their most noble leader. As a matter of fact, he is a friend of yours—"

"And pray who is that?" I snapped, for I felt too tired to join in this vein of merriment. "What friend have I in the force?" I asked.

"A gentleman named Naylor, very much at your service," replied Casteno.

"How? What do you mean?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing at all," airily continued my companion. "Only at 5 AM he rang the bell at our gate, and after courteously wishing our janitor a very nice 'good-morning' he ventured to inquire whether you, brother Hugh, were within. On being told, with our customary truth, that you were he promptly disavowed all desire to interfere with your beauty sleep, and blandly offered to wait outside till it should please the fates to restore to you a sense of your own importance and the necessity for action. Our gate custodian, being a bit of a humourist, agreed that, on the whole, he would find it nicer and warmer outside St. Bruno's than it was in, but vouchsafed to promise that, when you did arise, he would certainly inform you that so noble and so illustrious-looking a gentleman desired the honour of a few minutes private conversation with you."

"Oh I shut up that rubbish," I retorted pettishly, for I saw that Casteno's florid periods really covered a move of a very grave and far-reaching importance. "The point is not a joke as you pretend. What we have got to decide is the best thing for me to do now Scotland Yard has put these men on my heels! I don't want this round-table conference to-night to go wrong. I want to be free to be present at it. Indeed, we don't want any scandal or newspaper publicity just at present. We should be able to imitate moles—moles that work in the dark."

"That is true," said a voice suddenly behind me, and wheeling round I found that we had been joined by the Prior. "Would you care to slip off?" he queried after a moment's painful pause. "I could find you a good disguise as a woman, with a thick black veil, too. We have a passage that runs from this house to a little clump of bushes in a distant field. You could easily dart through that and make your way off without being caught."

"I am afraid that would only leave you all here in a worse pickle," I replied after some reflection. "Naylor, after all, will only wait a certain length of time, and if he finds then that I don't materialise, as our brother at the gate promised, he will be quite wild enough to organise a raid on the place; and remember, after all, it does contain those three precious manuscripts. No; it looks as though I must face the worst after all."

"But what on earth can he want with you?" cried Casteno petulantly.

"That's just it," I said. "I have got to go out and see. Well, it's no good beating about the bush. If I have to face this unpleasant and inquisitive individual, I have to, I suppose, and the sooner I get it over the better for all of us. You two must keep a sharp watch on me, that's all, and if you find I am hauled off to the police station on any pretence you must follow me up and try to bail me out."

"And, failing all else, I will go down to the House of Commons this very afternoon and make a personal appeal for you to both Cuthbertson and the Home Secretary," cried the Member of Parliament vigorously, for now he too seemed to be quite upset at the line things were taking.

"All right," I said bravely. "I won't thank you. We are all now too good friends, and too closely allied, to make use of conventional expressions of gratitude. I trust you—that's sufficient—and I'll step out and meet this turn of affairs with all the courage I can muster."

With a curt nod I turned and left them and made my way down the staircase to the hall, and thence I passed rapidly to the door that shut off the monastery grounds from the public thoroughfare. This last was thrown open at my approach, and I proceeded to the roadway, which for a moment after I entered it looked quite deserted. Determined to carry the interview through with a high hand, however, I stepped out promptly, as though Whitehall at least was my destination, and then it was that Naylor, as I expected, found himself compelled to step from behind a tree and to show himself, which he did with an ugly twinkle of triumph in his small beady black eyes.

"Ah, you've come, then?" he said with a grunt, disdaining all conventional expressions of greeting.

"Yes; I've come," I answered with equal discourtesy. "What do you want, eh?" And I stepped quite close to him and faced him.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Held in Bondage.

Long afterwards, when the bitterness of that moment had ceased to rankle in my heart, the Prior and Casteno related how eagerly they had watched me from that long lancet-shaped window while I boldly advanced to the detective. For their own part, they were sure Naylor meant mischief to me, but as to the means he would employ they were all at sea, and so they were for the time all strain and attention.

Luckily, I, too, was well on my guard, and so I did not show any undignified haste in the negotiations. Indeed, I purposely asked the inspector to explain why he had sent so earnest a message to me, and, finally cornered, he began the serious part of the conversation.

"I suppose you guess," he said, looking aimlessly first to one side of him and then to the other, "why I've brought a posse of men with me and surrounded that queer place I found you in?" And with a wave of the hand he indicated the monastery.

"In truth, I don't," I answered promptly, "unless," and here I paused rather effectively, "unless, Naylor, you have taken leave of your senses."

The man tried to smile, but it was a sickly effort, fated to failure.

"Ah," he observed, "you always were a hot 'un, Mr Glynn, in any game of 'bluff' but it won't do this time—you've gone a bit too far for your own comfort—and we're going to see you worsted."

"Well, that's all right," I responded cheerfully. "You won't object to that, will you? It isn't love for me that's making you look so precious uneasy, now, is it? Well, then, get on with your work, I shan't object." And producing my cigarette case I opened it and passed it carelessly to my companion, who pushed it rather petulantly on one side.

"I don't want to smoke—I am much too serious for that," he snapped.

"Oh," I rejoined. "Well, I am not." And I struck a match and lit a cigarette.

"I don't think I ought to beat about the bush any longer," he proceeded after an irritated glance at my magnificent assumption of carelessness. "The fact is just this, I hold warrants for the arrest of yourself and that young Spanish adventurer, José Casteno, or to give him his proper name, Joseph Zouche."

"Indeed," said I, trying to look politely interested, "that's news if you like. On what charge, pray?"

"Robbery, with violence, on Worcester Racecourse—three old manuscripts, the property of Mr Peter Zouche, the hunchback, who held them as bailee!"

"You surprise me," I remarked. "Really, you do. Where does Worcester happen to be?" And I gave him a look of mild and innocent inquiry that I believe would have done credit to a child of six.

"You will find out all the geography you care to learn in the police station," he said, stiffly repressing a very obvious temptation to swear roundly; "for the present you must consider yourself under arrest." And he beckoned one of his men from a distance and told him to go to St. Bruno's and to ask for José Casteno, who joined us a few moments later, clad in ordinary clothes, and was then told of the charge against us, whilst I perched myself on the root of a fallen tree and went on puffing away at my cigarette.

"Now," said Naylor in conclusion, much impressed by the manner of his own eloquence, "if you two gentlemen don't mind, one of my mates will fetch a four-wheeler, and we'll drive off to Bow Street."

"Do," I put in, "it will be warmer there than it is here." And I pretended to shiver as I added: "It seems to me, Naylor, there is always a cold streak in the air on Hampstead Heath; don't you think so?"

The man shot me a look charged with malice and uncharitableness. But he did not take the bait. "I have," he went on with a certain amount of hesitation, "a search warrant, duly executed to go over that house there—St. Bruno's. Of course, I don't want to make myself needlessly unpleasant, so if you would like to hand over the manuscripts, the subjects of the charge against you, I will not put it into execution."

José looked at me, and I looked at him. We would both of us have dearly liked to have palmed off those forgeries upon this short-tempered individual; but it would not do.

"We know nothing about your business," I said slowly, and, taking my cue, my friend nodded in support. "You must do really what strikes you as the best; but," and the inspector's eyes glittered, expecting some concession or admission, "don't—don't ask us any questions," I added sweetly, "for that is beyond your duty and outside your place."

With a muffled curse Naylor turned on his heel and despatched a messenger for the cab he had mentioned. Then he summoned two or three other constables, handed them certain documents, and whispered to them quickly certain instructions. Afterwards a four-wheeler drove up, and giving our words that we would make no effort to escape, the three of us stepped inside, and began that long and tedious journey to Bow Street.

The most weary rides, however, come to an end some time—and so did this. At length the police station was reached, and we all walked boldly into the charge office, where the warrant was read over to us, to which we made no reply, of course; and, pending our formal remand by a magistrate, I begged and obtained permission that we should be both placed in the same cell. In answer to the usual question: Did we wish to communicate with any legal advisers or friends? both Casteno and I said: "Yes." After a whispered consultation we decided on this plan of action. I sent this telegram:

"Cooper-Nassington, *House of Commons, SW.*

"Casteno and I have been arrested on extraordinary charge of robbery with violence, and lodged at Bow Street. Please see hunchback and explain error, and do your best to secure our immediate release.—Hugh Glynn."

"It will not, then, be my fault if the round-table conference fails to come off," I reasoned. But at the bottom of my heart, I own, I felt strangely disturbed at the turn affairs had taken. I could not rid myself of some curious suspicion that Lord Fotheringay and his friends had got some new trick to work, and that, after all, we might be now, quite unconsciously, riding for a nasty fall.

Casteno himself elected to appeal to Lord Cyril, and after we had been both searched and had all our valuables taken from us he was permitted to take a sheet of notepaper and to write as follows:—

"*Bow Street Police Station.*

"Dear Lord Cyril,—The matter is too serious for me to stand on any ceremony with you, and, therefore, I write quite straightforwardly to you, to report what you will doubtless hear in the course of your official duties—that Mr Hugh Glynn, the Secret Investigator, and myself have been arrested, and are now detained at the above address on some trumped-up charge of stealing certain manuscripts from my father on Worcester Racecourse.

"This action of the authorities, of course, quite precludes all chance of our meeting you and Colonel and Miss Napier and Lord Fotheringay at Stanton Street to-night. I put it to you now quite pointedly whether it is to the welfare of England that this interview should not take place?

"I suggest that you see the Home Secretary and get this action quashed. Otherwise, please regard our offer to treat with you as withdrawn, and, if necessary, we shall appeal to His Majesty the King himself, to see that there is no party jugglery with so vital a national issue as this recovery of the sacred lake of Tangikano. As to the charge of theft and assault, that, of course, is absurd, and must fail.

"Yours obediently, José Zouche Casteno."

This note was read very carefully by the officers in charge of the station. But they had evidently received some secret instructions about us, for they pretended to treat it quite as an ordinary and commonplace communication, and permitted Casteno himself to enclose it in an envelope and hand it to a constable to carry to the Foreign Office.

Then we were conducted to a cell and left to our own devices, and for a time we kept ourselves lively enough, speculating on what would be the issue of the strong commanding line we had taken.

But as hour after hour slipped by and we received no sign from the outer world our hearts began to sink within us. Maybe, too, the atmosphere of that small, tightly-barred cell, with its narrow walls and depressing suggestions, had its baneful effect upon us. At all events, a sensation of fear seemed to seize us. We felt caged—bound—removed from the live, throbbing world of action to which we had grown so accustomed, and then, thus deprived of movement, we insensibly began to languish. All at once we realised what freedom really means—that it yields of itself a thousand pleasures, as a fish is surrounded by the unconscious sustenances of the sea.

Finally, as the night began to close in, a heavy step was heard in the whitewashed passage outside, and the wicket door was thrust open.

"Here is tea for two," cried a gruff voice, "also a letter for José Casteno." And I hastened to the entrance and received a tray on which stood two coarse mugs of tea and three or four huge slabs of real police-station bread and butter.

Trembling with excitement Casteno seized the letter that had been brought for him and tore open the envelope, on the flap of which was embossed in red the Royal Arms, with the words "Foreign Office" let into the outer circle. Then

he unfolded the note, which, in response to a gesture from him, I read over his shoulder.

"Foreign Office, Whitehall, SW.

"Sir,—I am desired by His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to acknowledge your letter of this day's date and to inform you that the subject-matter thereof has no connection with him in either a personal or official capacity.

"I have the honour to remain, Sir, Your most obedient servant, Reginald Wyke, Assistant Secretary.

"To José Zouche Casteno, The Police Station, Bow Street, WC."

"What a terrible snub," I cried, pushing the tray on to the wooden bedstead. "What can it mean?"

"They've done us, that's all," panted Casteno, his eyes flashing with indignation. "Either they've got hold of the manuscripts when they searched St. Bruno's, or we've been sold in some fashion we least expect."

"Is it Cooper-Nassington?" I hazarded. "Remember, I have had no reply to my telegram!"

"I don't know," said the Spaniard, gloomily beginning to pace up and down the cell. "We must wait, I suppose, before we can see. At present we've played our cards to the bitter end, and we've got nowhere."

"How about the king?" I queried nervously.

"We can do nothing there until we see what Cooper-Nassington has developed into." He relapsed into moody reflection. For a few minutes we did not exchange a word, and then, stopping his restless promenade suddenly, he gripped me excitedly by the arm. "I've got it," he cried, "I've got it. Deserted by all, we'll try the Jesuits."

"And sell England, I suppose," I answered coldly. "Not a bit of it."

"Oh no. We shall thus procure even more powerful adherents for England than even Lord Cyril is. We will strike a bargain with them, to side with us."

"You won't succeed," I said.

"I will," he thundered, and he caught the chain attached to a prisoner's bell and rung it violently.

"Mind," I returned impressively, "you do this thing against my better judgment, and when you know for a fact that the Jesuits have been as keen almost to get hold of these documents as we have. Bad as our plight is now, I am sure it will be a thousand times worse after you have entrusted our secrets to these subtle sons of St. Ignatius. Make no mistake. Understand you have been warned, and that you do this thing with your eyes wide open."

"I understand perfectly," he rejoined. "But I am at the last ditch. I shall turn now and fight ruffians of the stamp of Cuthbertson with his own weapons. He has insulted me grossly in that last letter of his, penned by an assistant secretary, I see, and I will repay him 'a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye, burning for burning!'" And his hands clenched, and upon his features there glowered a look of diabolical rage.

I would have said more, but just then a police sergeant answered his summons, and at his request brought him a fresh sheet of notepaper and an envelope, as well as pad, pen, ink, and blotting paper. Thereon he sat down once again on the side of the bed and wrote as under:

"Bow Street Police Station, Cell 12,973.

"To The Rev. Father Provincial of the Society of Jesus, Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, Berkeley Square, W.

"Rev. Father,—As one who was for some years as a small boy educated at your society's Stoneyhurst College, I beg to crave your assistance. A friend and I have been arrested on a perfectly frivolous and futile charge for grave purposes of the State, connected with the disappearance of three manuscripts relating to the sacred lake of Tangikano, in which I understand your society has a very real and vital interest. Can you, therefore, make it convenient to come and see me on the matter, or at least send a representative to me who is capable of giving me the best and most disinterested advice at this juncture? If so, words will fail to express my gratitude to you.

"Your distracted servant, José Zouche Casteno."

"Please have that sent at once," he said, passing the letter open for the officer to read.

"Any answer?" replied the man, taking the note and preparing to leave.

"Yes; pray tell the constable to wait," returned Casteno, and the sergeant disappeared, and once more we were alone.

For my own part, I was too disgusted then to wrangle any further with the Spaniard. In a swift comprehensive fashion I realised that it was too late to upbraid, the mischief now was done, and that all I could do was to stand by and fight as best I could for the welfare of my own country independent of any adventurers like Cuthbertson on the one hand or of the Jesuits on the other.

After all, I saw, if I became too vocal, Casteno was in no mood to brook lectures from me. He always had a remedy against me—he could ask to be placed in a separate cell, and then I should be in a worse position than ever. I should know nothing of what he was doing to injure England, nothing at all.

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Words of Father Ganton.

The answer to his letter, too, came much sooner than I expected. I don't believe the note had been despatched half-an-hour before the clatter of several men was heard outside the cell again. The door was thrust open, and the sergeant announced: "A father from the Jesuits' house in Farm Street."

It was something more than idle curiosity that prompted me to turn as the Jesuit father entered and to examine his features closely. After all, I was bound to admit to myself, although I had read a lot and had heard a lot about the members of the redoubtable Society of Jesus, I had never hitherto to my knowledge seen one in the flesh. Of course, I had a vague idea of what one of their priests would be like—tall and thin and sleek, pallid, austere, mysterious, with eyes that never looked straight at you, and a voice so carefully modulated that it never failed to give the precise shade of meaning, so precise, indeed, that it left nothing to the imagination at all.

Nevertheless, I welcomed the opportunity of examining one of these cunning ministers of the papacy for myself. With a pardonable touch of egotism, I preferred my own estimate of strangers to other people's, and I wanted to discover for myself what there was in a Jesuit's education, discipline, and code of ethics that made them such powerful and resourceful soldiers of the Vatican, while at the same time they were, in practically every country on the globe, objects of such intense suspicion, jealousy, or most active dislike.

"Benedicamus Domino," said the priest, with a grave salutation to us both as the heavy iron door of the cell closed upon him.

"Deo gratias," responded Casteno, and at once I saw the effect of his Stoneyhurst training in the way in which he pulled himself together and assumed a bearing of reverent submissiveness I had never known him exhibit to any other person.

As for the Jesuit himself, I admit I was completely astounded at his appearance. As he bent down and fumbled in his pocket for the letter which Casteno had sent to the Father Provincial I had a splendid opportunity of examining his features, for then the light from the high tightly-barred window streamed full upon him.

To my surprise I discovered in this man of fifty, with the square shoulders, the unblinking eye, the clean-shaven mouth that expressed kindness, mirth, as well as iron resolution, none of the littleness I had credited him with. His broad forehead and black hair, now rapidly turning white, showed that he must have studied and studied hard, but not in any narrow sectarian school; his chin and lower jaw, too, were broad and massive but never cruel; while his hands were strong but also frank and free in movement; and his smile, as he searched his pockets through for the letter he had evidently forgotten, was one of the brightest and sunniest things we had seen in our prison-house. Finally, with a half foreign gesture of apology, he gave up his quest.

"I am so sorry," he said at length, "but I quite forgot to bring with me your letter which the Father Provincial handed to me. As a matter of fact, I must introduce myself too. I am Father Ganton, one of the priests attached to the Farm Street Church of the Immaculate Conception."

We both of us bowed gravely. And he went on: "Of course, we read your letter with great grief that any Stoneyhurst lad should get into a trouble such as this, but, really, we were astounded that any one of our pupils could make so ludicrous a blunder as you seem to have done about us. You, my son," turning to Casteno, "must have mixed with many and strange folks since you were under the care of our priests in Lancashire to get the odd and crazy notion into your head that we are conspirators and politicians, and all that silly nonsense some papers delight to print about us. I can assure you both that all that stupid idea that we mix ourselves up in government, or schemes of government, is fudge—mere fudge. We are simply a strong militant Order for the Church of Rome, and, broadly speaking, we don't care who is in power so long as we are free to practise our religion, and religious interests don't suffer."

"Now about those manuscripts I wrote about—the manuscripts that are supposed to relate to the sacred lake of Tangikano," questioned Casteno. "What about those?"

"You can't deny you have made most strenuous efforts," cried I in triumph, "to get hold of those!"

"I don't know," said the Jesuit readily. "It all depends, too, what you call 'strenuous' efforts. I will tell you quite frankly all we know about them. Centuries ago I understand our Order in Mexico did try to get hold of this sacred lake, but the treasure in it was not the ultimate object. We had had such grievous representations made to us by Catholic missionaries in the district of the evil effect of that heathen practice of casting treasure into that sacred water, with that ceremonial of a pagan pontiff, that we primarily desired to drain the lake right away and only leave in its place barren land. As a matter of fact, few of us nowadays ever gave a thought to the custom, until the other day a well-known dealer in manuscripts came to our house in Farm Street and told us that three most valuable documents affecting the history of our Order in Mexico were about to come under the hammer in London. He asked us to bid for them, knowing that many of our fathers were historians of no mean eminence and that the archives of our society were richly endowed with precious manuscripts that went right back into the twilight of civilised history. Then he gave a hint that they were supposed to relate to the lake, and so after some haggling and discussion we authorised him to bid up to sixty pounds—"

"Sixty pounds," echoed Casteno. "Oh, never!"

"Yes; that was as much as we could afford, and as much as we desired to give," returned Father Ganton. "Doubtless,

the man made a great fuss about the commission to frighten other people off and to advertise his own importance; but that, as he will tell you, was our limit. One thing, however, I ought to put right at once, and I hope if either of you gentlemen gets the chance you will do this for the Society of Jesus in England. Had we had any ghost of a suspicion at the time that that dealer came to us that those manuscripts had any diplomatic importance whatever we should not have arranged to offer one penny for them. Our work, as our founder, St. Ignatius, lays down in the first of his spiritual exercises, is the salvation of souls, not the 'sick hurry, the divided arms, the hearts o'ertaxed, the palsied arms,' as Matthew Arnold points out, of the man of the world, eager only about fortune. We don't want, we would not have, any distractions from this object; and I beg you to believe that, and so in your small way help to put public opinion right about the Jesuits of England."

"One question," I interrupted earnestly as the priest held out his hand in farewell to us. "Don't be annoyed, please, if I ask it. I admit it may sound horribly rude, but, indeed, I don't mean it to be so in that way at all. Why are you Jesuits so heartily disliked, not only in England, but in Italy, in Spain, in France, in Germany, and also in South America?"

The priest turned and looked at me with a frank and sincere expression.

"Excuse me," he said, "but do you ask that question as a man without any sectarian bias, as one with a genuine desire for information, and to learn only the truth?"

"Indeed I do," I returned, and I gazed at him straight in the face.

"Well, I will answer it, then," he responded, "and I will answer it in the way which we Jesuits answer it when we fall to talking about the hostility we read about but really seldom encounter. The point admits of two solutions, and of two solutions alone. One, either we are bad, mischievous people, who deserve expulsion and hatred; or, two, God really did answer that early prayer of our founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola, that we should be a persecuted and misunderstood Order as long as time should last, so that we should be always kept united, resolute, and efficient. Now of those two replies you can take your choice. Each one is sufficient in itself—each will give you an excellent and a thoroughly adequate reason—and in both Christian and heathen will find their points of view meet with equal consideration and tolerance!" And with a grave bow to me and a hand that made the sign of the cross over Casteno he turned away and left our cell.

For some minutes afterwards we neither of us uttered a word. Both sat and looked at each other, and I am sure I don't know who was the more puzzled or confounded.

"That rules the Jesuits out," I said at length, kicking the bedstead viciously with my foot.

"Quite," said Casteno. "Unfortunately, it also limits our possibilities of assistance." Then after a pause he added: "I wonder if Miss Napier will hear of the hole we are in!"

"Why?" I queried fiercely, flushing rosy crimson, for deep in my heart, alas! all my thoughts were still of her.

"Oh! nothing," he answered.

"That's rubbish," I interposed rudely. "You meant something. What was it?"

"Only this: Miss Napier is the kind of champion we want just now," said Casteno humbly. "You see, we can't get about for ourselves. We're cornered. We need somebody with brain and charm to approach people in high places!"

"What about Cooper-Nassington," I said sternly. "You sent me to him. You relied on him. Look at the result!"

"You forget, though, that he may be in prison like ourselves! Remember, Naylor had a warrant to search St. Bruno's. Well, as likely as not, he had orders to take up some of the leaders of the Order too. Indeed, at a pinch, they might have arrested the lot of them."

That was quite possible. I saw it immediately the Spaniard had spoken, and I did not attempt to controvert it.

"We shall have to wait, that's all," said Casteno at length, with something uncommonly like a groan.

And wait we did—but certainly not as long as we expected—for just when ten o'clock was about to strike we caught the sounds of a loud scuffling in the corridor, a burst of jovial laughter, and the next second the door of our cell was flung violently open, and two people literally raced into our prison—no other than Doris herself and Cooper-Nassington.

"Joy! joy!" cried the burly legislator, waving a pile of documents and newspapers. "Lord Cyril has suddenly resigned from the Government, and my old friend the Marquis of Penarth has taken his place; more than that, I've put the whole matter of the sacred lake before the marquis, and not only have I got an order from the Home Office for the immediate release of both of you, but I've arranged such terms that England will win—win at every point."

And, laughing and crying with excitement, Doris sprang to my arms.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

At the Present Moment.

Overjoyed at this news, the four of us swept out of the police station. Even the inspectors and sergeants seemed to catch some of our enthusiasm, or was it the sight of Mr Cooper-Nassington and of the order from the Home Secretary

that brought about so miraculous a change in their manner towards us? At all events, they led us quite in triumph out into Bow Street, and from thence, at a word from the Member of Parliament, we took our way to the Hotel Cecil, where, in a private room where a delightful supper had been spread, we found Colonel Napier awaiting us, apparently none the worse in temper or appearance for his bewildering experiences on the racecourse at Worcester.

Then, as we discussed the meal, with many a merry jest and many a toast in the best champagne the hotel could produce, all the news poured about us like an avalanche.

"First," said Cooper-Nassington, who by unanimous request had taken the head of the table, with Doris and I on his right hand and Casteno on his left and the colonel to the front of him, "you are both, no doubt, literally dying to know how Lord Cyril came to tumble from his pinnacle as Foreign Secretary in a day as it were. Well, don't trouble to look at the papers. They are full of lies, as usual. They pretend it is failing health, that the strain of European complications has been too much for him, that he's threatened with softening of the brain; but all that is really nonsense. I got at the great man myself, and I *made* him resign!" And, swelling with pride and importance, the Member of Parliament rose and gazed delightedly upon us.

"You actually did!" we cried in a breath; but he waved our dissent aside.

"Yes; I contrived it all," he went on. "As a matter of fact, I did it by bluff, sheer bluff; but I knew my man, and I knew where to hit him. He had tried to crush us, and I recognised that the time had come when, if we didn't wish to be totally exterminated, we must fall upon him and demolish him."

And we both nodded, recalling that cruel letter of his to José.

The Member of Parliament paused for a moment theatrically, and then went on in a more grave and earnest tone. At the bottom we could see he was really profoundly touched by the turn events had taken and by our own good fortune, but, British like, he sought to hide it by a jocularly and levity he was very far, indeed, from feeling.

"I got a private interview with him at the Foreign Office this afternoon," he said, "just after he had announced to a delighted House all about the wonderful discovery he had made of documents that proved that the sacred lake belonged to England, and that a mission would be despatched forthwith to take possession of it. This he did on the strength of the forged manuscripts which Naylor found in the safe when he searched St. Bruno's from top to bottom. 'Cuthbertson,' I began very firmly, 'you've been fooled, fooled completely. Those are not the documents you want at all. They are forgeries, as your experts will rapidly discover; forgeries made by the hunchback's good-for-nothing second son.' He stormed and he raved, and he sent for old Peter Zouche and his son Paul, who, of course, had to admit the truth of what I said, and then he lost nerve completely, begged my pardon, and tried to come to terms with me. 'Let me have the real things,' he pleaded, 'and I'll release your friends. I'll give you a share of the credit of the discovery, and at the first opportunity I have I'll find you a snug place in the Government.'

"Now," proceeded the Member of Parliament, "tempting as those terms were, I refused them. For one thing, I knew my man, and I knew he was but a pinchbeck, unstable, untruthful kind of genius. For another, I realised that, as Foreign Secretary, he was a terrible danger to England, so I stuck to the line I had marked out for myself, without any thought or hope of my own advancement. 'You've got to resign,' I returned—'nothing else will satisfy me or save you from the ridicule I have arranged to pour upon you. I have prepared a careful account of the whole business as we know it from the inside, ay, even of the way you must have helped Fotheringay to send those sham nurses, and tomorrow I shall telegraph it to every newspaper of importance. I will swear an affidavit of its truth, and join the opposition, and between us we will contrive to literally *laugh* you out of power.' A terrible scene, of course, followed. He grew abusive, he tried more bribes, he threatened to have me flung into prison like yourselves—there wasn't, in fact, a trick or a dodge which a man in his powerful position could resort to that he didn't in turn practise on me.

"Luckily, I am pretty obstinate," he went on, "and I won, hands down. Straight away he got two or three doctor friends together, and they cooked up a certificate about the state of his health; he rushed off to Buckingham Palace and handed over his resignation to the king, who, fortunately, happened to be in town; and, after various audiences, the Premier about an hour ago appointed the Marquis of Penarth in his place. In the Cabinet it is pretty well known how I managed it, but nobody regrets Cuthbertson's downfall. He was too proud, too overbearing, too insolent for the position, and all the members of the House whom I have spoken to seem to be relieved at his resignation and hurried departure to that old castle of his up in Galloway."

"And what," asked José, "has become of my father and brother?" And his face was pale and his eyes full of tears.

"I am sorry to say they have both bolted. The Home Secretary sent after them regarding the loss of certain plans from the Woolwich Arsenal, but they took fright over the forgeries and Cuthbertson's threats and slipped off to Greenwich, from which they got a tramp steamer to take them to some foreign port, whence they can flee up country and gain a quasi kind of protection, which it won't pay England to fight—probably in Portugal or Spain, or even in Greece, with which country, I understand, we have no extradition treaty whatever."

"And you, colonel," I asked, turning to Napier. "How did you come to forgive us?" I queried.

The old soldier broke into a hearty laugh. "Oh! that wasn't difficult when such a magician as Cooper-Nassington set to work. He told me the whole of the facts, whereas Fotheringay had only explained to me half!"

And under the table-cloth Doris' small hand found mine, and gave me a sweet little token of satisfaction, trust, and content. Already I felt more than repaid for the misunderstanding I had suffered.

Little more remains to be told.

Only next day the papers came out with the true account of Bernard Delganni's suicide, and there is no doubt in my mind now that he was the man who stabbed the colonel's spaniel, which was said to sleep usually in the colonel's room.

Soon after this the expedition to Mexico set sail, and now any day we may hear that, with the aid of the old Jesuits' chart and the information contained in the yellow parchments, Beckworth's sacred lake has actually been drained off and England in possession of a practically inexhaustible mine of wealth. Every day I open my newspaper I look for this welcome intelligence, and every day I am certain brings us nearer the consummation of this discovery. One day before long the sacred lake, which is already located and has been sounded, will be run dry by a tunnel which is being cut through a small mountain, and when this is accomplished it will bring joy and solid relief to the heart of every taxpayer and Englishman. The wealth known to be in the bed of the lake is enormous, and some of the gems and gold ornaments recovered are already in London. That Fotheringay has got a place in the expedition gives me no concern. He was never really bad, and chances of redemption should be given to all, although Casteno has really never forgiven him that trick with the sham nurses.

The Order of St. Bruno still flourishes under Mr Cooper-Nassington's guidance, and anyone who desires to join it should address my friend, the Member of Parliament, at the House of Commons. I have but thinly disguised his identity in these chapters, and any serious patriot could discover his real name by a little judicious inquiry, say from the chairman of the Press Gallery, who knows twice as much of the secret history of our legislative establishment as, notwithstanding what croakers over press morality assert, ever finds its way into print.

The Order has, I am compelled to record, lost two of its active members. One, José Casteno, who has married that very charming girl, Camille Velasquon, and set sail for Mexico, hot on the heels of the British expedition to Tangikano, and also to see that Fotheringay goes straight. The other, my poor, graceless self, who, now that Doris has become my wife, no longer figures in Stanton Street, WC, as a secret investigator, but lives out at Redhill, and goes daily to his chambers in the Temple—Lawyers' Land—to lay the foundation of a barrister's practice, aided by poor Naylor, who was retired compulsorily from Scotland Yard upon a small pension, but who, I find, makes an admirable clerk when it comes to a hand-to-hand tussle with solicitors, who ever want more than their true pound of flesh.

And so for the present, with the others, I must make my adieu!

When England is startled, as she will be one day ere long, by the announcement of the recovery of the enormous treasure of Tangikano, the emeralds and rubies unequalled in the world, and the wonderful images and utensils of solid gold that have been hidden for ages in the slime beneath those silent waters, then will you, perhaps, recollect the chapters of an eventful history which I have recorded in the foregoing pages, and remember what part in the modern drama of London life was played by the man once known to connoisseurs and collectors as the Hunchback of Westminster.

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