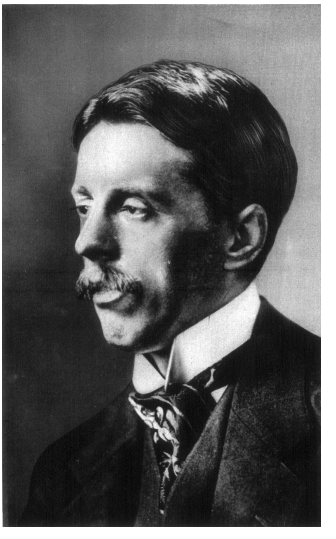
Arnold Bennett (1867–1931)

THE CRIME NOVELS

— gesetzt in XɘLaTeX, Bochum 2021 —



Arnold Bennett

Arnold Bennett was born in Hanley in the Potteries district of Staffordshire. Hanley was one of the Six Towns that were joined together at the beginning of the 20th century as Stoke-on-Trent and are depicted as "the Five Towns" in some of Bennett's novels.

Bennett was employed by his father, a solicitor, but the working relationship failed. At the age of 21 he left his father's practice and went to London as a solicitor's clerk. In 1889 he won a literary competition run by the magazine Tit-Bits and was encouraged to take up journalism full-time; from 1900 he dedicated himself to writing full-time. 1902 he wrote The Hotel Grand Babylon, which today is probably the best known of his novels in Germany. In 1903 he moved to Paris, where other artists from around the world had converged on Montmartre and Montparnasse. He spent the next eight years writing novels and plays, among them the novel The Old Wives' Tales. In 1911 he visited the United States, then returned to England, where The Old Wives' Tale was (and still is) reappraised and hailed as a masterpiece

During the First World War Bennett became Director of Propaganda for France at the Ministry of Information. His appointment was made on the recommendation of Lord Beaverbrook, who also recommended him as Deputy Minister of the Department at the end of the war. Bennett refused a knighthood in 1918.

Bennett separated from his French wife in 1921 and fell in love with the actress Dorothy Cheston (b. 1896), with whom he stayed for the rest

of his life. She changed her last name to Bennett, although they were never married. They had one child, Virginia, born in London in 1926.

In 1923 Bennett won the »James Tait Black Memorial Prize« for his novel Riceyman Steps.

In 1926, again at the suggestion of Lord Beaverbrook, he began writing an influential weekly article on books for the London newspaper The Evening Standard. *Seine Rolle als Kritiker kann kaum überschätzt werden. Hugh Walpole nannte ihn die einzige literarische Figur, die den Erfolg eines Buches über Nacht ausmachen konnte. Unter anderem trug er zum Erfolg von William Faulkner und Theodore Dreiser bei. Bekannter sind indes seine Vorbehalte, besonders die gegenüber Virginia Woolf.*

Bennett died of typhoid at his home in Baker Street, London, on 27 March 1931.

In Queen's Quorum (1951), a survey of crime fiction, Ellery Queen listed Bennett's The Loot of Cities among the 100 most important works in the genre. Although it was "one of his least known works," it was nevertheless "of unusual interest, both as an example of Arnold Bennett's early work and as an early example of dilettante detectivism".

Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Bennett
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Bennett

Contents

The Grand Babylon Hôtel[1]

1. First published in 1902 as a serial in the magazine Golden Penny, the first book edition was by Chatto & Windus, London 1902.

Chapter 1

The Millionaire and the Waiter

"Yes, sir?"

Jules, the celebrated head waiter of the Grand Babylon, was bending formally towards the alert, middle-aged man who had just entered the smoking-room and dropped into a basket-chair in the corner by the conservatory. It was 7.45 on a particularly sultry June night, and dinner was about to be served at the Grand Babylon. Men of all sizes, ages, and nationalities, but every one alike arrayed in faultless evening dress, were dotted about the large, dim apartment. A faint odour of flowers came from the conservatory, and the tinkle of a fountain. The waiters, commanded by Jules, moved softly across the thick Oriental rugs, balancing their trays with the dexterity of jugglers, and receiving and executing orders with that air of profound importance of which only really first-class waiters have the secret. The atmosphere was an atmosphere of serenity and repose, characteristic of the Grand Babylon. It seemed impossible that anything could occur to mar the peaceful, aristocratic monotony of existence in that perfectly-managed establishment. Yet on that night was to happen the mightiest upheaval that the Grand Babylon had ever known.

"Yes, sir?" repeated Jules, and this time there was a shade of august disapproval in his voice: it was not usual for him to have to address a customer twice.

"Oh!" said the alert, middle-aged man, looking up at length. Beautifully ignorant of the identity of the great Jules, he allowed his grey eyes to twinkle as he caught sight of the expression on the waiter's face. "Bring me an Angel Kiss."

"Pardon, sir?"

"Bring me an Angel Kiss, and be good enough to lose no time."

"If it's an American drink, I fear we don't keep it, sir." The voice of Jules fell icily distinct, and several men glanced round uneasily, as if to deprecate the slightest disturbance of their calm. The appearance of the person to whom Jules was speaking, however, reassured them somewhat, for he had all the look of that expert, the travelled Englishman, who can differentiate between one hôtel and another by instinct, and who knows at once where he may make a fuss with propriety, and where it is advisable to behave exactly as at the club. The Grand Babylon was a hôtel in whose smoking-room one behaved as though one was at one's club.

"I didn't suppose you did keep it, but you can mix it, I guess, even in this hôtel."

"This isn't an American hôtel, sir." The calculated insolence of the words was cleverly masked beneath an accent of humble submission.

The alert, middle-aged man sat up straight, and gazed placidly at Jules, who was pulling his famous red side-whiskers.

"Get a *liqueur* glass," he said, half curtly and half with good-humoured tolerance, "pour into it equal quantities of maraschino, cream, and *crême de menthe*. Don't stir it; don't shake it. Bring it to me. And, I say, tell the bar-tender—"

"Bar-tender, sir?"

"Tell the bar-tender to make a note of the recipe, as I shall probably want an Angel Kiss every evening before dinner so long as this weather lasts."

"I will send the drink to you, sir," said Jules distantly. That was his parting shot, by which he indicated that he was not as other waiters are, and that any person who treated him with disrespect did so at his own peril.

A few minutes later, while the alert, middle-aged man was tasting the Angel Kiss, Jules sat in conclave with Miss Spencer, who had charge of the bureau of the Grand Babylon. This bureau was a fairly large chamber, with two sliding glass partitions which overlooked the entrance-hall and the smoking-room. Only a small portion of the clerical work of the great hôtel was performed there. The place served chiefly as the lair of Miss Spencer, who was as well known and as important as Jules himself. Most modern hôtels have a male clerk to superintend the bureau. But the Grand Babylon went its own way. Miss Spencer had been bureau clerk almost since the Grand Babylon had first raised its massive chimneys to heaven, and she remained in her place despite the vagaries of other hôtels. Always admirably dressed in plain black silk, with a small diamond brooch, immaculate wrist-bands, and

frizzed yellow hair, she looked now just as she had looked an indefinite number of years ago. Her age—none knew it, save herself and perhaps one other, and none cared. The gracious and alluring contours of her figure were irreproachable; and in the evenings she was a useful ornament of which any hôtel might be innocently proud. Her knowledge of Bradshaw, of steamship services, and the programmes of theatres and music-halls was unrivalled; yet she never travelled, she never went to a theatre or a music-hall. She seemed to spend the whole of her life in that official lair of hers, imparting information to guests, telephoning to the various departments, or engaged in intimate conversations with her special friends on the staff, as at present.

"Who's Number 107?" Jules asked this black-robed lady.

Miss Spencer examined her ledgers.

"Mr. Theodore Racksole, New York."

"I thought he must be a New Yorker," said Jules, after a brief, significant pause, "but he talks as good English as you or me. Says he wants an 'Angel Kiss'—maraschino and cream, if you please—every night. I'll see he doesn't stop here too long."

Miss Spencer smiled grimly in response. The notion of referring to Theodore Racksole as a "New Yorker" appealed to her sense of humour, a sense in which she was not entirely deficient. She knew, of course, and she knew that Jules knew, that this Theodore Racksole must be the unique and only Theodore Racksole, the third richest man in the United States, and therefore probably in the world. Nevertheless she ranged herself at once on the side of Jules.

Just as there was only one Racksole, so there was only one Jules, and Miss Spencer instinctively shared the latter's indignation at the spectacle of any person whatsoever, millionaire or Emperor, presuming to demand an "Angel Kiss", that unrespectable concoction of maraschino and cream, within the precincts of the Grand Babylon. In the world of hôtels it was currently stated that, next to the proprietor, there were three gods at the Grand Babylon—Jules, the head waiter, Miss Spencer, and, most powerful of all, Rocco, the renowned chef, who earned two thousand a year, and had a chalet on the Lake of Lucerne. All the great hôtels in Northumberland Avenue and on the Thames Embankment had tried to get Rocco away from the Grand Babylon, but without success. Rocco was well aware that even he could rise no higher than the maître hôtel of the Grand Babylon, which, though it never advertised itself, and didn't belong to a limited company, stood an easy first among the hôtels of Europe—first in expensiveness, first in exclusiveness, first in

that mysterious quality known as "style".

Situated on the Embankment, the Grand Babylon, despite its noble proportions, was somewhat dwarfed by several colossal neighbours. It had but three hundred and fifty rooms, whereas there are two hôtels within a quarter of a mile with six hundred and four hundred rooms respectively. On the other hand, the Grand Babylon was the only hôtel in London with a genuine separate entrance for Royal visitors constantly in use. The Grand Babylon counted that day wasted on which it did not entertain, at the lowest, a German prince or the Maharajah of some Indian State. When Felix Babylon—after whom, and not with any reference to London's nickname, the hôtel was christened—when Felix Babylon founded the hôtel in 1869 he had set himself to cater for Royalty, and that was the secret of his triumphant eminence.

The son of a rich Swiss hôtel proprietor and financier, he had contrived to established a connection with the officials of several European Courts, and he had not spared money in that respect. Sundry kings and not a few princesses called him Felix, and spoke familiarly of the hôtel as "Felix's"; and Felix had found that this was very good for trade. The Grand Babylon was managed accordingly. The "note" of its policy was discretion, always discretion, and quietude, simplicity, remoteness. The place was like a palace incognito. There was no gold sign over the roof, not even an explanatory word at the entrance. You walked down a small side street off the Strand, you saw a plain brown building in front of you, with two mahogany swing doors, and an official behind each; the doors opened noiselessly; you entered; you were in Felix's. If you meant to be a guest, you, or your courier, gave your card to Miss Spencer. Upon no consideration did you ask for the tariff. It was not good form to mention prices at the Grand Babylon; the prices were enormous, but you never mentioned them. At the conclusion of your stay a bill was presented, brief and void of dry details, and you paid it without a word. You met with a stately civility, that was all. No one had originally asked you to come; no one expressed the hope that you would come again. The Grand Babylon was far above such manoeuvres; it defied competition by ignoring it; and consequently was nearly always full during the season.

If there was one thing more than another that annoyed the Grand Babylon—put its back up, so to speak—it was to be compared with, or to be mistaken for, an American hôtel. The Grand Babylon was resolutely opposed to American methods of eating, drinking, and lodging—but especially American methods of drinking. The resentment of Jules, on being requested to supply Mr. Theodore Racksole with an Angel Kiss,

will therefore be appreciated.

"Anybody with Mr. Theodore Racksole?" asked Jules, continuing his conversation with Miss Spencer. He put a scornful stress on every syllable of the guest's name.

"Miss Racksole—she's in No. 111."

Jules paused, and stroked his left whisker as it lay on his gleaming white collar.

"She's where?" he queried, with a peculiar emphasis.

"No. 111. I couldn't help it. There was no other room with a bathroom and dressing-room on that floor." Miss Spencer's voice had an appealing tone of excuse.

"Why didn't you tell Mr. Theodore Racksole and Miss Racksole that we were unable to accommodate them?"

"Because Babs was within hearing."

Only three people in the wide world ever dreamt of applying to Mr. Felix Babylon the playful but mean abbreviation—Babs: those three were Jules, Miss Spencer, and Rocco. Jules had invented it. No one but he would have had either the wit or the audacity to do so.

"You'd better see that Miss Racksole changes her room to-night," Jules said after another pause. "Leave it to me: I'll fix it. Au revoir! It's three minutes to eight. I shall take charge of the dining-room myself to-night."

And Jules departed, rubbing his fine white hands slowly and meditatively. It was a trick of his, to rub his hands with a strange, roundabout motion, and the action denoted that some unusual excitement was in the air.

At eight o'clock precisely dinner was served in the immense *salle à manger*, that chaste yet splendid apartment of white and gold. At a small table near one of the windows a young lady sat alone. Her frocks said Paris, but her face unmistakably said New York. It was a self-possessed and bewitching face, the face of a woman thoroughly accustomed to doing exactly what she liked, when she liked, how she liked: the face of a woman who had taught hundreds of gilded young men the true art of fetching and carrying, and who, by twenty years or so of parental spoiling, had come to regard herself as the feminine equivalent of the Tsar of All the Russias. Such women are only made in America, and they only come to their full bloom in Europe, which they imagine to be a continent created by Providence for their diversion.

The young lady by the window glanced disapprovingly at the menu card. Then she looked round the dining-room, and, while admiring the

diners, decided that the room itself was rather small and plain. Then she gazed through the open window, and told herself that though the Thames by twilight was passable enough, it was by no means level with the Hudson, on whose shores her father had a hundred thousand dollar country cottage. Then she returned to the menu, and with a pursing of lovely lips said that there appeared to be nothing to eat.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Nella." It was Mr. Racksole, the intrepid millionaire who had dared to order an Angel Kiss in the smoke-room of the Grand Babylon. Nella—her proper name was Helen—smiled at her parent cautiously, reserving to herself the right to scold if she should feel so inclined.

"You always are late, father," she said.

"Only on a holiday," he added. "What is there to eat?"

"Nothing."

"Then let's have it. I'm hungry. I'm never so hungry as when I'm being seriously idle."

"Consommé Britannia," she began to read out from the menu, "Saumon d"Ecosse, Sauce Genoise, Aspics de Homard. Oh, heavens! Who wants these horrid messes on a night like this?"

"But, Nella, this is the best cooking in Europe," he protested.

"Say, father," she said, with seeming irrelevance, "had you forgotten it's my birthday to-morrow?"

"Have I ever forgotten your birthday, O most costly daughter?"

"On the whole you've been a most satisfactory dad," she answered sweetly, "and to reward you I'll be content this year with the cheapest birthday treat you ever gave me. Only I'll have it to-night."

"Well," he said, with the long-suffering patience, the readiness for any surprise, of a parent whom Nella had thoroughly trained, "what is it?"

"It's this. Let's have filleted steak and a bottle of Bass for dinner to-night. It will be simply exquisite. I shall love it."

"But my dear Nella," he exclaimed, "steak and beer at Felix's! It's impossible! Moreover, young women still under twenty-three cannot be permitted to drink Bass."

"I said steak and Bass, and as for being twenty-three, shall be going in twenty-four to-morrow."

Miss Racksole set her small white teeth.

There was a gentle cough. Jules stood over them. It must have been out of a pure spirit of adventure that he had selected this table for his own services. Usually Jules did not personally wait at dinner. He merely

hovered observant, like a captain on the bridge during the mate's watch. Regular frequenters of the hôtel felt themselves honoured when Jules attached himself to their tables.

Theodore Racksole hesitated one second, and then issued the order with a fine air of carelessness:

"Filleted steak for two, and a bottle of Bass." It was the bravest act of Theodore Racksole's life, and yet at more than one previous crisis a high courage had not been lacking to him.

"It's not in the menu, sir," said Jules the imperturbable.

"Never mind. Get it. We want it."

"Very good, sir."

Jules walked to the service-door, and, merely affecting to look behind, came immediately back again.

"Mr. Rocco's compliments, sir, and he regrets to be unable to serve steak and Bass to-night, sir."

"Mr. Rocco?" questioned Racksole lightly.

"Mr. Rocco," repeated Jules with firmness.

"And who is Mr. Rocco?"

"Mr. Rocco is our chef, sir." Jules had the expression of a man who is asked to explain who Shakespeare was.

The two men looked at each other. It seemed incredible that Theodore Racksole, the ineffable Racksole, who owned a thousand miles of railway, several towns, and sixty votes in Congress, should be defied by a waiter, or even by a whole hôtel. Yet so it was. When Europe's effete back is against the wall not a regiment of millionaires can turn its flank. Jules had the calm expression of a strong man sure of victory. His face said: "You beat me once, but not this time, my New York friend!"

As for Nella, knowing her father, she foresaw interesting events, and waited confidently for the steak. She did not feel hungry, and she could afford to wait.

"Excuse me a moment, Nella," said Theodore Racksole quietly, "I shall be back in about two seconds," and he strode out of the *salle à manger*. No one in the room recognized the millionaire, for he was unknown to London, this being his first visit to Europe for over twenty years. Had anyone done so, and caught the expression on his face, that man might have trembled for an explosion which should have blown the entire Grand Babylon into the Thames.

Jules retired strategically to a corner. He had fired; it was the antagonist's turn. A long and varied experience had taught Jules that a guest

who embarks on the subjugation of a waiter is almost always lost; the waiter has so many advantages in such a contest.

Chapter 2

How Mr. Racksole Obtained His Dinner

Nevertheless, there are men with a confirmed habit of getting their own way, even as guests in an exclusive hôtel: and Theodore Racksole had long since fallen into that useful practice—except when his only daughter Helen, motherless but high-spirited girl, chose to think that his way crossed hers, in which case Theodore capitulated and fell back. But when Theodore and his daughter happened to be going one and the same road, which was pretty often, then Heaven alone might help any obstacle that was so ill-advised as to stand in their path. Jules, great and observant man though he was, had not noticed the terrible projecting chins of both father and daughter, otherwise it is possible he would have reconsidered the question of the steak and Bass.

Theodore Racksole went direct to the entrance-hall of the hôtel, and entered Miss Spencer's sanctum.

"I want to see Mr. Babylon," he said, "without the delay of an instant."

Miss Spencer leisurely raised her flaxen head.

"I am afraid—," she began the usual formula. It was part of her daily duty to discourage guests who desired to see Mr. Babylon.

"No, no," said Racksole quickly, "I don't want any "I'm afraids." This is business. If you had been the ordinary hôtel clerk I should have slipped you a couple of sovereigns into your hand, and the thing would have been done. As you are not—as you are obviously above bribes—I merely say to you, I must see Mr. Babylon at once on an affair of the utmost urgency. My name is Racksole—Theodore Racksole."

"Of New York?" questioned a voice at the door, with a slight foreign accent.

The millionaire turned sharply, and saw a rather short, French-looking man, with a bald head, a grey beard, a long and perfectly-built frock coat, eye-glasses attached to a minute silver chain, and blue eyes that seemed to have the transparent innocence of a maid's.

"There is only one," said Theodore Racksole succinctly.

"You wish to see me?" the new-comer suggested.

"You are Mr. Felix Babylon?"

The man bowed.

"At this moment I wish to see you more than anyone else in the world," said Racksole. "I am consumed and burnt up with a desire to see you, Mr. Babylon. I only want a few minutes' quiet chat. I fancy I can settle my business in that time."

With a gesture Mr. Babylon invited the millionaire down a side corridor, at the end of which was Mr. Babylon's private room, a miracle of Louis XV furniture and tapestry: like most unmarried men with large incomes, Mr. Babylon had "tastes" of a highly expensive sort.

The landlord and his guest sat down opposite each other. Theodore Racksole had met with the usual millionaire's luck in this adventure, for Mr. Babylon made a practice of not allowing himself to be interviewed by his guests, however distinguished, however wealthy, however pertinacious. If he had not chanced to enter Miss Spencer's office at that precise moment, and if he had not been impressed in a somewhat peculiar way by the physiognomy of the millionaire, not all Mr. Racksole's American energy and ingenuity would have availed for a confabulation with the owner of the Grand Babylon Hôtel that night. Theodore Racksole, however, was ignorant that a mere accident had served him. He took all the credit to himself.

"I read in the New York papers some months ago," Theodore started, without even a clearing of the throat, "that this hôtel of yours, Mr. Babylon, was to be sold to a limited company, but it appears that the sale was not carried out."

"It was not," answered Mr. Babylon frankly, "and the reason was that the middle-men between the proposed company and myself wished to make a large secret profit, and I declined to be a party to such a profit. They were firm; I was firm; and so the affair came to nothing."

"The agreed price was satisfactory?"

"Quite."

"May I ask what the price was?"

"Are you a buyer, Mr. Racksole?"

"Are you a seller, Mr. Babylon?"

"I am," said Babylon, "on terms. The price was four hundred thousand pounds, including the leasehold and goodwill. But I sell only on the condition that the buyer does not transfer the property to a limited company at a higher figure."

"I will put one question to you, Mr. Babylon," said the millionaire. "What have your profits averaged during the last four years?"

"Thirty-four thousand pounds per annum."

"I buy," said Theodore Racksole, smiling contentedly; "and we will, if you please, exchange contract-letters on the spot."

"You come quickly to a resolution, Mr. Racksole. But perhaps you have been considering this question for a long time?"

"On the contrary," Racksole looked at his watch, "I have been considering it for six minutes."

Felix Babylon bowed, as one thoroughly accustomed to eccentricity of wealth.

"The beauty of being well-known," Racksole continued, "is that you needn't trouble about preliminary explanations. You, Mr. Babylon, probably know all about me. I know a good deal about you. We can take each other for granted without reference. Really, it is as simple to buy an hôtel or a railroad as it is to buy a watch, provided one is equal to the transaction."

"Precisely," agreed Mr. Babylon smiling. "Shall we draw up the little informal contract? There are details to be thought of. But it occurs to me that you cannot have dined yet, and might prefer to deal with minor questions after dinner."

"I have not dined," said the millionaire, with emphasis, "and in that connexion will you do me a favour? Will you send for Mr. Rocco?"

"You wish to see him, naturally."

"I do," said the millionaire, and added, "about my dinner."

"Rocco is a great man," murmured Mr. Babylon as he touched the bell, ignoring the last words. "My compliments to Mr. Rocco," he said to the page who answered his summons, "and if it is quite convenient I should be glad to see him here for a moment."

"What do you give Rocco?" Racksole inquired.

"Two thousand a year and the treatment of an Ambassador."

"I shall give him the treatment of an Ambassador and three thousand."

"You will be wise," said Felix Babylon.

At that moment Rocco came into the room, very softly—a man of forty, thin, with long, thin hands, and an inordinately long brown silky moustache.

"Rocco," said Felix Babylon, "let me introduce Mr. Theodore Racksole, of New York."

"Sharmed," said Rocco, bowing. "Ze—ze, vat you call it, millionaire?"

"Exactly," Racksole put in, and continued quickly: "Mr. Rocco, I wish to acquaint you before any other person with the fact that I have purchased the Grand Babylon Hôtel. If you think well to afford me the privilege of retaining your services I shall be happy to offer you a remuneration of three thousand a year."

"Tree, you said?"

"Three."

"Sharmed."

"And now, Mr. Rocco, will you oblige me very much by ordering a plain beefsteak and a bottle of Bass to be served by Jules—I particularly desire Jules—at table No. 17 in the dining-room in ten minutes from now? And will you do me the honour of lunching with me to-morrow?"

Mr. Rocco gasped, bowed, muttered something in French, and departed.

Five minutes later the buyer and seller of the Grand Babylon Hôtel had each signed a curt document, scribbled out on the hôtel note-paper. Felix Babylon asked no questions, and it was this heroic absence of curiosity, of surprise on his part, that more than anything else impressed Theodore Racksole. How many hôtel proprietors in the world, Racksole asked himself, would have let that beef-steak and Bass go by without a word of comment.

"From what date do you wish the purchase to take effect?" asked Babylon.

"Oh," said Racksole lightly, "it doesn't matter. Shall we say from to-night?"

"As you will. I have long wished to retire. And now that the moment has come—and so dramatically—I am ready. I shall return to Switzerland. One cannot spend much money there, but it is my native land. I shall be the richest man in Switzerland." He smiled with a kind of sad amusement.

"I suppose you are fairly well off?" said Racksole, in that easy familiar style of his, as though the idea had just occurred to him.

"Besides what I shall receive from you, I have half a million invested."

"Then you will be nearly a millionaire?"

Felix Babylon nodded.

"I congratulate you, my dear sir," said Racksole, in the tone of a judge addressing a newly-admitted barrister. "Nine hundred thousand pounds, expressed in francs, will sound very nice—in Switzerland."

"Of course to you, Mr. Racksole, such a sum would be poverty. Now if one might guess at your own wealth?" Felix Babylon was imitating the other's freedom.

"I do not know, to five millions or so, what I am worth," said Racksole, with sincerity, his tone indicating that he would have been glad to give the information if it were in his power.

"You have had anxieties, Mr. Racksole?"

"Still have them. I am now holiday-making in London with my daughter in order to get rid of them for a time."

"Is the purchase of hôtels your notion of relaxation, then?"

Racksole shrugged his shoulders. "It is a change from railroads," he laughed.

"Ah, my friend, you little know what you have bought."

"Oh! yes I do," returned Racksole; "I have bought just the first hôtel in the world."

"That is true, that is true," Babylon admitted, gazing meditatively at the antique Persian carpet. "There is nothing, anywhere, like my hôtel. But you will regret the purchase, Mr. Racksole. It is no business of mine, of course, but I cannot help repeating that you will regret the purchase."

"I never regret."

"Then you will begin very soon—perhaps to-night."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the Grand Babylon is the Grand Babylon. You think because you control a railroad, or an iron-works, or a line of steamers, therefore you can control anything. But no. Not the Grand Babylon. There is something about the Grand Babylon—" He threw up his hands.

"Servants rob you, of course."

"Of course. I suppose I lose a hundred pounds a week in that way. But it is not that I mean. It is the guests. The guests are too—too distinguished. The great Ambassadors, the great financiers, the great nobles, all the men that move the world, put up under my roof. London is the centre of everything, and my hôtel—your hôtel—is the centre of London. Once I had a King and a Dowager Empress staying here at the same time. Imagine that!"

"A great honour, Mr. Babylon. But wherein lies the difficulty?"

"Mr. Racksole," was the grim reply, "what has become of your shrewdness—that shrewdness which has made your fortune so immense that even you cannot calculate it? Do you not perceive that the roof which habitually shelters all the force, all the authority of the world, must necessarily also shelter nameless and numberless plotters, schemers, evil-doers, and workers of mischief? The thing is as clear as day—and as dark as night. Mr. Racksole, I never know by whom I am surrounded. I never know what is going forward. Only sometimes I get hints, glimpses of strange acts and strange secrets. You mentioned my servants. They are almost all good servants, skilled, competent. But what are they besides? For anything I know my fourth sub-chef may be an agent of some European Government. For anything I know my invaluable Miss Spencer may be in the pay of a court dressmaker or a Frankfort banker. Even Rocco may be someone else in addition to Rocco."

"That makes it all the more interesting," remarked Theodore Racksole.

"What a long time you have been, Father," said Nella, when he returned to table No. 17 in the *salle à manger*.

"Only twenty minutes, my dove."

"But you said two seconds. There is a difference."

"Well, you see, I had to wait for the steak to cook."

"Did you have much trouble in getting my birthday treat?"

"No trouble. But it didn't come quite as cheap as you said."

"What do you mean, Father?"

"Only that I've bought the entire hôtel. But don't split."

"Father, you always were a delicious parent. Shall you give me the hôtel for a birthday present?"

"No. I shall run it—as an amusement. By the way, who is that chair for?"

He noticed that a third cover had been laid at the table.

"That is for a friend of mine who came in about five minutes ago. Of course I told him he must share our steak. He'll be here in a moment."

"May I respectfully inquire his name?"

"Dimmock—Christian name Reginald; profession, English companion to Prince Aribert of Posen. I met him when I was in St. Petersburg with cousin Hetty last fall. Oh; here he is. Mr. Dimmock, this is my dear father. He has succeeded with the steak."

Theodore Racksole found himself confronted by a very young man, with deep black eyes, and a fresh, boyish expression. They began to talk.

Jules approached with the steak. Racksole tried to catch the waiter's eye, but could not. The dinner proceeded.

"Oh, Father!" cried Nella, "what a lot of mustard you have taken!"

"Have I?" he said, and then he happened to glance into a mirror on his left hand between two windows. He saw the reflection of Jules, who stood behind his chair, and he saw Jules give a slow, significant, ominous wink to Mr. Dimmock—Christian name, Reginald.

He examined his mustard in silence. He thought that perhaps he had helped himself rather plenteously to mustard.

Chapter 3

At Three A.M.

Mr. Reginald Dimmoch proved himself, despite his extreme youth, to be a man of the world and of experiences, and a practised talker. Conversation between him and Nella Racksole seemed never to flag. They chattered about St. Petersburg, and the ice on the Neva, and the tenor at the opera who had been exiled to Siberia, and the quality of Russian tea, and the sweetness of Russian champagne, and various other aspects of Muscovite existence. Russia exhausted, Nella lightly outlined her own doings since she had met the young man in the Tsar's capital, and this recital brought the topic round to London, where it stayed till the final piece of steak was eaten. Theodore Racksole noticed that Mr. Dimmock gave very meagre information about his own movements, either past or future. He regarded the youth as a typical hanger-on of Courts, and wondered how he had obtained his post of companion to Prince Aribert of Posen, and who Prince Aribert of Posen might be. The millionaire thought he had once heard of Posen, but he wasn't sure; he rather fancied it was one of those small nondescript German States of which five-sixths of the subjects are Palace officials, and the rest charcoal-burners or innkeepers. Until the meal was nearly over, Racksole said little—perhaps his thoughts were too busy with Jules' wink to Mr. Dimmock, but when ices had been followed by coffee, he decided that it might be as well, in the interests of the hôtel, to discover something about his daughter's friend. He never for an instant questioned her right to possess her own friends; he had always left her in the most amazing liberty, relying on her inherited good sense to keep her out of mischief; but, quite apart from the wink, he was struck by Nella's attitude towards Mr. Dimmock, an attitude in which an amiable scorn was blended with an evident desire to propitiate and please.

"Nella tells me, Mr. Dimmock, that you hold a confidential position with Prince Aribert of Posen," said Racksole. "You will pardon an American's ignorance, but is Prince Aribert a reigning Prince—what, I believe, you call in Europe, a Prince Regnant?"

"His Highness is not a reigning Prince, nor ever likely to be," answered Dimmock. "The Grand Ducal Throne of Posen is occupied by his Highness's nephew, the Grand Duke Eugen."

"Nephew?" cried Nella with astonishment.

"Why not, dear lady?"

"But Prince Aribert is surely very young?"

"The Prince, by one of those vagaries of chance which occur sometimes in the history of families, is precisely the same age as the Grand Duke. The late Grand Duke's father was twice married. Hence this youthfulness on the part of an uncle."

"How delicious to be the uncle of someone as old as yourself! But I suppose it is no fun for Prince Aribert. I suppose he has to be frightfully respectful and obedient, and all that, to his nephew?"

"The Grand Duke and my Serene master are like brothers. At present, of course, Prince Aribert is nominally heir to the throne, but as no doubt you are aware, the Grand Duke will shortly marry a near relative of the Emperor's, and should there be a family—" Mr. Dimmock stopped and shrugged his straight shoulders. "The Grand Duke," he went on, without finishing the last sentence, "would much prefer Prince Aribert to be his successor. He really doesn't want to marry. Between ourselves, strictly between ourselves, he regards marriage as rather a bore. But, of course, being a German Grand Duke, he is bound to marry. He owes it to his country, to Posen."

"How large is Posen?" asked Racksole bluntly.

"Father," Nella interposed laughing, "you shouldn't ask such inconvenient questions. You ought to have guessed that it isn't etiquette to inquire about the size of a German Dukedom."

"I am sure," said Dimmock, with a polite smile, "that the Grand Duke is as much amused as anyone at the size of his territory. I forget the exact acreage, but I remember that once Prince Aribert and myself walked across it and back again in a single day."

"Then the Grand Duke cannot travel very far within his own dominions? You may say that the sun does set on his empire?"

"It does," said Dimmock.

"Unless the weather is cloudy," Nella put in. "Is the Grand Duke content always to stay at home?"

"On the contrary, he is a great traveller, much more so than Prince Aribert.

I may tell you, what no one knows at present, outside this hôtel, that his Royal Highness the Grand Duke, with a small suite, will be here to-morrow."

"In London?" asked Nella.

"Yes."

"In this hôtel?"

"Yes."

"Oh! How lovely!"

"That is why your humble servant is here to-night—a sort of advance guard."

"But I understood," Racksole said, "that you were—er—attached to Prince Aribert, the uncle."

"I am. Prince Aribert will also be here. The Grand Duke and the Prince have business about important investments connected with the Grand Duke's marriage settlement…. In the highest quarters, you understand."

"For so discreet a person," thought Racksole, "you are fairly communicative." Then he said aloud: "Shall we go out on the terrace?"

As they crossed the dining-room Jules stopped Mr. Dimmock and handed him a letter. "Just come, sir, by messenger," said Jules.

Nella dropped behind for a second with her father. "Leave me alone with this boy a little—there's a dear parent," she whispered in his ear.

"I am a mere cypher, an obedient nobody," Racksole replied, pinching her arm surreptitiously. "Treat me as such. Use me as you like. I will go and look after my hôtel" And soon afterwards he disappeared.

Nella and Mr. Dimmock sat together on the terrace, sipping iced drinks. They made a handsome couple, bowered amid plants which blossomed at the command of a Chelsea wholesale florist. People who passed by remarked privately that from the look of things there was the beginning of a romance in that conversation. Perhaps there was, but a more intimate acquaintance with the character of Nella Racksole would have been necessary in order to predict what precise form that romance would take.

Jules himself served the liquids, and at ten o'clock he brought another note. Entreating a thousand pardons, Reginald Dimmock, after he had glanced at the note, excused himself on the plea of urgent business for his Serene master, uncle of the Grand Duke of Posen. He asked if he might fetch Mr. Racksole, or escort Miss Racksole to her father. But

Miss Racksole said gaily that she felt no need of an escort, and should go to bed. She added that her father and herself always endeavoured to be independent of each other.

Just then Theodore Racksole had found his way once more into Mr. Babylon's private room. Before arriving there, however, he had discovered that in some mysterious manner the news of the change of proprietorship had worked its way down to the lowest strata of the hôtel's cosmos. The corridors hummed with it, and even under-servants were to be seen discussing the thing, just as though it mattered to them.

"Have a cigar, Mr. Racksole," said the urbane Mr. Babylon, "and a mouthful of the oldest cognac in all Europe."

In a few minutes these two were talking eagerly, rapidly. Felix Babylon was astonished at Racksole's capacity for absorbing the details of hôtel management. And as for Racksole he soon realized that Felix Babylon must be a prince of hôtel managers. It had never occurred to Racksole before that to manage an hôtel, even a large hôtel, could be a specially interesting affair, or that it could make any excessive demands upon the brains of the manager; but he came to see that he had underrated the possibilities of an hôtel. The business of the Grand Babylon was enormous. It took Racksole, with all his genius for organization, exactly half an hour to master the details of the hôtel laundry-work. And the laundry-work was but one branch of activity amid scores, and not a very large one at that. The machinery of checking supplies, and of establishing a mean ratio between the raw stuff received in the kitchen and the number of meals served in the *salle à manger* and the private rooms, was very complicated and delicate. When Racksole had grasped it, he at once suggested some improvements, and this led to a long theoretical discussion, and the discussion led to digressions, and then Felix Babylon, in a moment of absent-mindedness, yawned.

Racksole looked at the gilt clock on the high mantelpiece.

"Great Scott!" he said. "It's three o'clock. Mr. Babylon, accept my apologies for having kept you up to such an absurd hour."

"I have not spent so pleasant an evening for many years. You have let me ride my hobby to my heart's content. It is I who should apologize."

Racksole rose.

"I should like to ask you one question," said Babylon. "Have you ever had anything to do with hôtels before?"

"Never," said Racksole.

"Then you have missed your vocation. You could have been the greatest of all hôtel-managers. You would have been greater than me, and I am

unequalled, though I keep only one hôtel, and some men have half a dozen. Mr. Racksole, why have you never run an hôtel?"

"Heaven knows," he laughed, "but you flatter me, Mr. Babylon."

"I? Flatter? You do not know me. I flatter no one, except, perhaps, now and then an exceptionally distinguished guest. In which case I give suitable instructions as to the bill."

"Speaking of distinguished guests, I am told that a couple of German princes are coming here to-morrow."

"That is so."

"Does one do anything? Does one receive them formally—stand bowing in the entrance-hall, or anything of that sort?"

"Not necessarily. Not unless one wishes. The modern hôtel proprietor is not like an innkeeper of the Middle Ages, and even princes do not expect to see him unless something should happen to go wrong. As a matter of fact, though the Grand Duke of Posen and Prince Aribert have both honoured me by staying here before, I have never even set eyes on them. You will find all arrangements have been made."

They talked a little longer, and then Racksole said good night. "Let me see you to your room. The lifts will be closed and the place will be deserted.

As for myself, I sleep here," and Mr. Babylon pointed to an inner door.

"No, thanks," said Racksole; "let me explore my own hôtel unaccompanied. I believe I can discover my room." When he got fairly into the passages, Racksole was not so sure that he could discover his own room. The number was 107, but he had forgotten whether it was on the first or second floor.

Travelling in a lift, one is unconscious of floors. He passed several lift-doorways, but he could see no glint of a staircase; in all self-respecting hôtels staircases have gone out of fashion, and though hôtel architects still continue, for old sakes" sake, to build staircases, they are tucked away in remote corners where their presence is not likely to offend the eye of a spoiled and cosmopolitan public. The hôtel seemed vast, uncanny, deserted. An electric light glowed here and there at long intervals. On the thick carpets, Racksole's thinly-shod feet made no sound, and he wandered at ease to and fro, rather amused, rather struck by the peculiar senses of night and mystery which had suddenly come over him. He fancied he could hear a thousand snores peacefully descending from the upper realms. At length he found a staircase, a very dark and narrow one, and presently he was on the first floor. He soon discovered that the numbers of the rooms on this floor did not get beyond seventy.

He encountered another staircase and ascended to the second floor. By the decoration of the walls he recognized this floor as his proper home, and as he strolled through the long corridor he whistled a low, meditative whistle of satisfaction. He thought he heard a step in the transverse corridor, and instinctively he obliterated himself in a recess which held a service-cabinet and a chair. He did hear a step. Peeping cautiously out, he perceived, what he had not perceived previously, that a piece of white ribbon had been tied round the handle of the door of one of the bedrooms. Then a man came round the corner of the transverse corridor, and Racksole drew back. It was Jules—Jules with his hands in his pockets and a slouch hat over his eyes, but in other respects attired as usual.

Racksole, at that instant, remembered with a special vividness what Felix Babylon had said to him at their first interview. He wished he had brought his revolver. He didn't know why he should feel the desirability of a revolver in a London hôtel of the most unimpeachable fair fame, but he did feel the desirability of such an instrument of attack and defence. He privately decided that if Jules went past his recess he would take him by the throat and in that attitude put a few plain questions to this highly dubious waiter. But Jules had stopped. The millionaire made another cautious observation. Jules, with infinite gentleness, was turning the handle of the door to which the white ribbon was attached. The door slowly yielded and Jules disappeared within the room. After a brief interval, the night-prowling Jules reappeared, closed the door as softly as he had opened it, removed the ribbon, returned upon his steps, and vanished down the transverse corridor.

"This is quaint," said Racksole; "quaint to a degree!"

It occurred to him to look at the number of the room, and he stole towards it.

"Well, I'm d—d!" he murmured wonderingly.

The number was 111, his daughter's room! He tried to open it, but the door was locked. Rushing to his own room, No. 107, he seized one of a pair of revolvers (the kind that are made for millionaires) and followed after Jules down the transverse corridor. At the end of this corridor was a window; the window was open; and Jules was innocently gazing out of the window. Ten silent strides, and Theodore Racksole was upon him.

"One word, my friend," the millionaire began, carelessly waving the revolver in the air. Jules was indubitably startled, but by an admir-

able exercise of self-control he recovered possession of his faculties in a second.

"Sir?" said Jules.

"I just want to be informed, what the deuce you were doing in No. 111 a moment ago."

"I had been requested to go there," was the calm response.

"You are a liar, and not a very clever one. That is my daughter's room. Now—out with it, before I decide whether to shoot you or throw you into the street."

"Excuse me, sir, No. 111 is occupied by a gentleman."

"I advise you that it is a serious error of judgement to contradict me, my friend. Don't do it again. We will go to the room together, and you shall prove that the occupant is a gentleman, and not my daughter."

"Impossible, sir," said Jules.

"Scarcely that," said Racksole, and he took Jules by the sleeve. The millionaire knew for a certainty that Nella occupied No. 111, for he had examined the room her, and himself seen that her trunks and her maid and herself had arrived there in safety. "Now open the door," whispered Racksole, when they reached No.111.

"I must knock."

"That is just what you mustn't do. Open it. No doubt you have your pass-key."

Confronted by the revolver, Jules readily obeyed, yet with a deprecatory gesture, as though he would not be responsible for this outrage against the decorum of hôtel life. Racksole entered. The room was brilliantly lighted.

"A visitor, who insists on seeing you, sir," said Jules, and fled.

Mr. Reginald Dimmock, still in evening dress, and smoking a cigarette, rose hurriedly from a table.

"Hello, my dear Mr. Racksole, this is an unexpected—ah—pleasure."

"Where is my daughter? This is her room."

"Did I catch what you said, Mr. Racksole?"

"I venture to remark that this is Miss Racksole's room."

"My good sir," answered Dimmock, "you must be mad to dream of such a thing.

Only my respect for your daughter prevents me from expelling you forcibly, for such an extraordinary suggestion."

A small spot half-way down the bridge of the millionaire's nose turned suddenly white.

"With your permission," he said in a low calm voice, "I will examine the dressing-room and the bath-room."

"Just listen to me a moment," Dimmock urged, in a milder tone.

"I'll listen to you afterwards, my young friend," said Racksole, and he proceeded to search the bath-room, and the dressing-room, without any result whatever. "Lest my attitude might be open to misconstruction, Mr. Dimmock, I may as well tell you that I have the most perfect confidence in my daughter, who is as well able to take care of herself as any woman I ever met, but since you entered it there have been one or two rather mysterious occurrences in this hôtel. That is all." Feeling a draught of air on his shoulder, Racksole turned to the window. "For instance," he added, "I perceive that this window is broken, badly broken, and from the outside.

Now, how could that have occurred?"

"If you will kindly hear reason, Mr. Racksole," said Dimmock in his best diplomatic manner, "I will endeavour to explain things to you. I regarded your first question to me when you entered my room as being offensively put, but I now see that you had some justification." He smiled politely. "I was passing along this corridor about eleven o'clock, when I found Miss Racksole in a difficulty with the hôtel servants. Miss Racksole was retiring to rest in this room when a large stone, which must have been thrown from the Embankment, broke the window, as you see. Apart from the discomfort of the broken window, she did not care to remain in the room. She argued that where one stone had come another might follow. She therefore insisted on her room being changed. The servants said that there was no other room available with a dressing-room and bath-room attached, and your daughter made a point of these matters. I at once offered to exchange apartments with her. She did me the honour to accept my offer. Our respective belongings were moved—and that is all. Miss Racksole is at this moment, I trust, asleep in No. 124."

Theodore Racksole looked at the young man for a few seconds in silence.

There was a faint knock at the door.

"Come in," said Racksole loudly.

Someone pushed open the door, but remained standing on the mat. It was Nella's maid, in a dressing-gown.

"Miss Racksole's compliments, and a thousand excuses, but a book of hers was left on the mantelshelf in this room. She cannot sleep, and wishes to read."

"Mr. Dimmock, I tender my apologies—my formal apologies," said Racksole, when the girl had gone away with the book. "Good night."
"Pray don't mention it," said Dimmock suavely—and bowed him out.

Chapter 4

Entrance Of the Prince

Nevertheless, sundry small things weighed on Racksole's mind. First there was Jules' wink. Then there was the ribbon on the door-handle and Jules' visit to No. 111, and the broken window—broken from the outside. Racksole did not forget that the time was 3 a.m. He slept but little that night, but he was glad that he had bought the Grand Babylon Hôtel. It was an acquisition which seemed to promise fun and diversion.

The next morning he came across Mr. Babylon early. "I have emptied my private room of all personal papers," said Babylon, "and it is now at your disposal.

I purpose, if agreeable to yourself, to stay on in the hôtel as a guest for the present. We have much to settle with regard to the completion of the purchase, and also there are things which you might want to ask me. Also, to tell the truth, I am not anxious to leave the old place with too much suddenness. It will be a wrench to me."

"I shall be delighted if you will stay," said the millionaire, "but it must be as my guest, not as the guest of the hôtel."

"You are very kind."

"As for wishing to consult you, no doubt I shall have need to do so, but I must say that the show seems to run itself."

"Ah!" said Babylon thoughtfully. "I have heard of hôtels that run themselves. If they do, you may be sure that they obey the laws of gravity and run downwards. You will have your hands full. For example, have you yet heard about Miss Spencer?"

"No," said Racksole. "What of her?"

"She has mysteriously vanished during the night, and nobody appears to be able to throw any light on the affair. Her room is empty, her boxes gone.

You will want someone to take her place, and that someone will not be very easy to get."

"H'm!" Racksole said, after a pause. "Hers is not the only post that falls vacant to-day."

A little later, the millionaire installed himself in the late owner's private room and rang the bell.

"I want Jules," he said to the page.

While waiting for Jules, Racksole considered the question of Miss Spencer's disappearance.

"Good morning, Jules," was his cheerful greeting, when the imperturbable waiter arrived.

"Good morning, sir."

"Take a chair."

"Thank you, sir."

"We have met before this morning, Jules."

"Yes, sir, at 3 a.m."

"Rather strange about Miss Spencer's departure, is it not?" suggested Racksole.

"It is remarkable, sir."

"You are aware, of course, that Mr. Babylon has transferred all his interests in this hôtel to me?"

"I have been informed to that effect, sir."

"I suppose you know everything that goes on in the hôtel, Jules?"

"As the head waiter, sir, it is my business to keep a general eye on things."

"You speak very good English for a foreigner, Jules."

"For a foreigner, sir! I am an Englishman, a Hertfordshire man born and bred. Perhaps my name has misled you, sir. I am only called Jules because the head waiter of any really high-class hôtel must have either a French or an Italian name."

"I see," said Racksole. "I think you must be rather a clever person, Jules."

"That is not for me to say, sir."

"How long has the hôtel enjoyed the advantage of your services?"

"A little over twenty years."

"That is a long time to be in one place. Don't you think it's time you got out of the rut? You are still young, and might make a reputation for yourself in another and wider sphere."

Racksole looked at the man steadily, and his glance was steadily returned.

"You aren't satisfied with me, sir?"

"To be frank, Jules, I think—I think you—er—wink too much. And I think that it is regrettable when a head waiter falls into a habit of taking white ribbons from the handles of bedroom doors at three in the morning."

Jules started slightly.

"I see how it is, sir. You wish me to go, and one pretext, if I may use the term, is as good as another. Very well, I can't say that I'm surprised. It sometimes happens that there is incompatibility of temper between a hôtel proprietor and his head waiter, and then, unless one of them goes, the hôtel is likely to suffer. I will go, Mr. Racksole. In fact, I had already thought of giving notice."

The millionaire smiled appreciatively. "What wages do you require in lieu of notice? It is my intention that you leave the hôtel within an hour."

"I require no wages in lieu of notice, sir. I would scorn to accept anything. And I will leave the hôtel in fifteen minutes."

"Good-day, then. You have my good wishes and my admiration, so long as you keep out of my hôtel."

Racksole got up. "Good-day, sir. And thank you."

"By the way, Jules, it will be useless for you to apply to any other first-rate European hôtel for a post, because I shall take measures which will ensure the rejection of any such application."

"Without discussing the question whether or not there aren't at least half a dozen hôtels in London alone that would jump for joy at the chance of getting me," answered Jules, "I may tell you, sir, that I shall retire from my profession."

"Really! You will turn your brains to a different channel."

"No, sir. I shall take rooms in Albemarle Street or Jermyn Street, and just be content to be a man-about-town. I have saved some twenty thousand pounds—a mere trifle, but sufficient for my needs, and I shall now proceed to enjoy it. Pardon me for troubling you with my personal affairs. And good-day again."

That afternoon Racksole went with Felix Babylon first to a firm of solicitors in the City, and then to a stockbroker, in order to carry out the practical details of the purchase of the hôtel.

"I mean to settle in England," said Racksole, as they were coming back. "It is the only country—" and he stopped.

"The only country?"

"The only country where you can invest money and spend money with a feeling of security. In the United States there is nothing worth spending money on, nothing to buy. In France or Italy, there is no real security."

"But surely you are a true American?" questioned Babylon.

"I am a true American," said Racksole, "but my father, who began by being a bedmaker at an Oxford college, and ultimately made ten million dollars out of iron in Pittsburg—my father took the wise precaution of having me educated in England. I had my three years at Oxford, like any son of the upper middle class! It did me good. It has been worth more to me than many successful speculations. It taught me that the English language is different from, and better than, the American language, and that there is something—I haven't yet found out exactly what—in English life that Americans will never get. Why," he added, "in the United States we still bribe our judges and our newspapers. And we talk of the eighteenth century as though it was the beginning of the world. Yes, I shall transfer my securities to London. I shall build a house in Park Lane, and I shall buy some immemorial country seat with a history as long as the A. T. and S. railroad, and I shall calmly and gradually settle down. D'you know—I am rather a good-natured man for a millionaire, and of a social disposition, and yet I haven't six real friends in the whole of New York City. Think of that!"

"And I," said Babylon, "have no friends except the friends of my boyhood in Lausanne. I have spent thirty years in England, and gained nothing but a perfect knowledge of the English language and as much gold coin as would fill a rather large box."

These two plutocrats breathed a simultaneous sigh.

"Talking of gold coin," said Racksole, "how much money should you think Jules has contrived to amass while he has been with you?"

"Oh!" Babylon smiled. "I should not like to guess. He has had unique opportunities—opportunities."

"Should you consider twenty thousand an extraordinary sum under the circumstances?"

"Not at all. Has he been confiding in you?"

"Somewhat. I have dismissed him."

"You have dismissed him?"

"Why not?"

"There is no reason why not. But I have felt inclined to dismiss him for the past ten years, and never found courage to do it."

"It was a perfectly simple proceeding, I assure you. Before I had done with him, I rather liked the fellow."

"Miss Spencer and Jules—both gone in one day!" mused Felix Babylon.

"And no one to take their places," said Racksole. "And yet the hôtel continues its way!"

But when Racksole reached the Grand Babylon he found that Miss Spencer's chair in the bureau was occupied by a stately and imperious girl, dressed becomingly in black.

"Heavens, Nella!" he cried, going to the bureau. "What are you doing here?"

"I am taking Miss Spencer's place. I want to help you with your hôtel, Dad. I fancy I shall make an excellent hôtel clerk. I have arranged with a Miss Selina Smith, one of the typists in the office, to put me up to all the tips and tricks, and I shall do very well."

"But look here, Helen Racksole. We shall have the whole of London talking about this thing—the greatest of all American heiresses a hôtel clerk! And I came here for quiet and rest!"

"I suppose it was for the sake of quiet and rest that you bought the hôtel, Papa?"

"You would insist on the steak," he retorted. "Get out of this, on the instant."

"Here I am, here to stay," said Nella, and deliberately laughed at her parent.

Just then the face of a fair-haired man of about thirty years appeared at the bureau window. He was very well-dressed, very aristocratic in his pose, and he seemed rather angry.

He looked fixedly at Nella and started back.

"Ach!" he exclaimed. "You!"

"Yes, your Highness, it is indeed I. Father, this is his Serene Highness Prince Aribert of Posen—one of our most esteemed customers."

"You know my name, *Fräulein*?" the new-comer murmured in German.

"Certainly, Prince," Nella replied sweetly. "You were plain Count Steenbock last spring in Paris—doubtless travelling incognito—"

"Silence," he entreated, with a wave of the hand, and his forehead went as white as paper.

Chapter 5

What Occurred To Reginald Dimmock

In another moment they were all three talking quite nicely, and with at any rate an appearance of being natural. Prince Aribert became suave, even deferential to Nella, and more friendly towards Nella's father than their respective positions demanded. The latter amused himself by studying this sprig of royalty, the first with whom he had ever come into contact. He decided that the young fellow was personable enough, "had no frills on him," and would make an exceptionally good commercial traveller for a first-class firm. Such was Theodore Racksole's preliminary estimate of the man who might one day be the reigning Grand Duke of Posen.

It occurred to Nella, and she smiled at the idea, that the bureau of the hôtel was scarcely the correct place in which to receive this august young man. There he stood, with his head half-way through the bureau window, negligently leaning against the woodwork, just as though he were a stockbroker or the manager of a New York burlesque company.

"Is your Highness travelling quite alone?" she asked.

"By a series of accidents I am," he said. "My equerry was to have met me at Charing Cross, but he failed to do so—I cannot imagine why."

"Mr. Dimmock?" questioned Racksole.

"Yes, Dimmock. I do not remember that he ever missed an appointment before.

You know him? He has been here?"

"He dined with us last night," said Racksole—"on Nella's invitation," he added maliciously; "but to-day we have seen nothing of him. I know,

however, that he has engaged the State apartments, and also a suite adjoining the State apartments—No. 55. That is so, isn't it, Nella?"

"Yes, Papa," she said, having first demurely examined a ledger. "Your Highness would doubtless like to be conducted to your room—apartments I mean." Then Nella laughed deliberately at the Prince, and said, "I don't know who is the proper person to conduct you, and that's a fact. The truth is that Papa and I are rather raw yet in the hôtel line. You see, we only bought the place last night."

"You have bought the hôtel!" exclaimed the Prince.

"That's so," said Racksole.

"And Felix Babylon has gone?"

"He is going, if he has not already gone."

"Ah! I see," said the Prince; "this is one of your American 'strokes.' You have bought to sell again, is that not it? You are on your holidays, but you cannot resist making a few thousands by way of relaxation. I have heard of such things."

"We sha'n't sell again, Prince, until we are tired of our bargain. Sometimes we tire very quickly, and sometimes we don't. It depends—eh? What?"

Racksole broke off suddenly to attend to a servant in livery who had quietly entered the bureau and was making urgent mysterious signs to him.

"If you please, sir," the man by frantic gestures implored Mr. Theodore Racksole to come out.

"Pray don't let me detain you, Mr. Racksole," said the Prince, and therefore the proprietor of the Grand Babylon departed after the servant, with a queer, curt little bow to Prince Aribert.

"Mayn't I come inside?" said the Prince to Nella immediately the millionaire had gone.

"Impossible, Prince," Nella laughed. "The rule against visitors entering this bureau is frightfully strict."

"How do you know the rule is so strict if you only came into possession last night?"

"I know because I made the rule myself this morning, your Highness."

"But seriously, Miss Racksole, I want to talk to you."

"Do you want to talk to me as Prince Aribert or as the friend—the acquaintance—whom I knew in Paris last year?"

"As the friend, dear lady, if I may use the term."

"And you are sure that you would not like first to be conducted to your apartments?"

"Not yet. I will wait till Dimmock comes; he cannot fail to be here soon."

"Then we will have tea served in father's private room—the proprietor's private room, you know."

"Good!" he said.

Nella talked through a telephone, and rang several bells, and behaved generally in a manner calculated to prove to Princes and to whomever it might concern that she was a young woman of business instincts and training, and then she stepped down from her chair of office, emerged from the bureau, and, preceded by two menials, led Prince Aribert to the Louis XV chamber in which her father and Felix Babylon had had their long confabulation on the previous evening.

"What do you want to talk to me about?" she asked her companion, as she poured out for him a second cup of tea. The Prince looked at her for a moment as he took the proffered cup, and being a young man of sane, healthy, instincts, he could think of nothing for the moment except her loveliness.

Nella was indeed beautiful that afternoon. The beauty of even the most beautiful woman ebbs and flows from hour to hour. Nella's this afternoon was at the flood. Vivacious, alert, imperious, and yet ineffably sweet, she seemed to radiate the very joy and exuberance of life.

"I have forgotten," he said.

"You have forgotten! That is surely very wrong of you? You gave me to understand that it was something terribly important. But of course I knew it couldn't be, because no man, and especially no Prince, ever discussed anything really important with a woman."

"Recollect, Miss Racksole, that this afternoon, here, I am not the Prince."

"You are Count Steenbock, is that it?"

He started. "For you only," he said, unconsciously lowering his voice. "Miss Racksole, I particularly wish that no one here should know that I was in Paris last spring."

"An affair of State?" she smiled.

"An affair of State," he replied soberly. "Even Dimmock doesn't know. It was strange that we should be fellow guests at that quiet out-of-the-way hôtel—strange but delightful. I shall never forget that rainy afternoon that we spent together in the Museum of the Trocadéro. Let us talk about that."

"About the rain, or the museum?"

"I shall never forget that afternoon," he repeated, ignoring the lightness of her question.

"Nor I," she murmured corresponding to his mood.

"You, too enjoyed it?" he said eagerly.

"The sculptures were magnificent," she replied, hastily glancing at the ceiling.

"Ah! So they were! Tell me, Miss Racksole, how did you discover my identity."

"I must not say," she answered. "That is my secret. Do not seek to penetrate it. Who knows what horrors you might discover if you probed too far?" She laughed, but she laughed alone. The Prince remained pensive—as it were brooding.

"I never hoped to see you again," he said.

"Why not?"

"One never sees again those whom one wishes to see."

"As for me, I was perfectly convinced that we should meet again."

"Why?"

"Because I always get what I want."

"Then you wanted to see me again?"

"Certainly. You interested me extremely. I have never met another man who could talk so well about sculpture as the Count Steenbock."

"Do you really always get what you want, Miss Racksole?"

"Of course."

"That is because your father is so rich, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, it isn't!" she said. "It's simply because I always do get what I want. It's got nothing to do with Father at all."

"But Mr. Racksole is extremely wealthy?"

"Wealthy isn't the word, Count. There is no word. It's positively awful the amount of dollars poor Papa makes. And the worst of it is he can't help it. He told me once that when a man had made ten millions no power on earth could stop those ten millions from growing into twenty. And so it continues. I spend what I can, but I can't come near coping with it; and of course Papa is no use whatever at spending."

"And you have no mother?"

"Who told you I had no mother?" she asked quietly.

"I—er—inquired about you," he said, with equal candour and humility.

"In spite of the fact that you never hoped to see me again?"

"Yes, in spite of that."

"How funny!" she said, and lapsed into a meditative silence.

"Yours must be a wonderful existence," said the Prince. "I envy you."

"You envy me—what? My father's wealth?"

"No," he said; "your freedom and your responsibilities."

"I have no responsibilities," she remarked.

"Pardon me," he said; "you have, and the time is coming when you will feel them."

"I'm only a girl," she murmured with sudden simplicity. "As for you, Count, surely you have sufficient responsibilities of your own?"

"I?" he said sadly. "I have no responsibilities. I am a nobody—a Serene Highness who has to pretend to be very important, always taking immense care never to do anything that a Serene Highness ought not to do. Bah!"

"But if your nephew, Prince Eugen, were to die, would you not come to the throne, and would you not then have these responsibilities which you so much desire?"

"Eugen die?" said Prince Aribert, in a curious tone. "Impossible. He is the perfection of health. In three months he will be married. No, I shall never be anything but a Serene Highness, the most despicable of God's creatures."

"But what about the State secret which you mentioned? Is not that a responsibility?"

"Ah!" he said. "That is over. That belongs to the past. It was an accident in my dull career. I shall never be Count Steenbock again."

"Who knows?" she said. "By the way, is not Prince Eugen coming here to-day? Mr. Dimmock told us so."

"See!" answered the Prince, standing up and bending over her. "I am going to confide in you. I don't know why, but I am."

"Don't betray State secrets," she warned him, smiling into his face.

But just then the door of the room was unceremoniously opened.

"Go right in," said a voice sharply. It was Theodore Racksole's. Two men entered, bearing a prone form on a stretcher, and Racksole followed them.

Nella sprang up. Racksole stared to see his daughter.

"I didn't know you were in here, Nell. Here," to the two men, "out again."

"Why!" exclaimed Nella, gazing fearfully at the form on the stretcher, "it's Mr. Dimmock!"

"It is," her father acquiesced. "He's dead," he added laconically. "I'd have broken it to you more gently had I known. Your pardon, Prince." There was a pause.

"Dimmock dead!" Prince Aribert whispered under his breath, and he kneeled down by the side of the stretcher. "What does this mean?"

The poor fellow was just walking across the quadrangle towards the portico when he fell down. A commissionaire who saw him says he was walking very quickly. At first I thought it was sunstroke, but it couldn't have been, though the weather certainly is rather warm. It must be heart disease. But anyhow, he's dead. We did what we could. I've sent for a doctor, and for the police. I suppose there'll have to be an inquest."

Theodore Racksole stopped, and in an awkward solemn silence they all gazed at the dead youth. His features were slightly drawn, and his eyes closed; that was all. He might have been asleep.

"My poor Dimmock!" exclaimed the Prince, his voice broken. "And I was angry because the lad did not meet me at Charing Cross!"

"Are you sure he is dead, Father?" Nella said.

"You'd better go away, Nella," was Racksole's only reply; but the girl stood still, and began to sob quietly. On the previous night she had secretly made fun of Reginald Dimmock. She had deliberately set herself to get information from him on a topic in which she happened to be specially interested and she had got it, laughing the while at his youthful crudities—his vanity, his transparent cunning, his absurd airs. She had not liked him; she had even distrusted him, and decided that he was not "nice". But now, as he lay on the stretcher, these things were forgotten. She went so far as to reproach herself for them. Such is the strange commanding power of death.

"Oblige me by taking the poor fellow to my apartments," said the Prince, with a gesture to the attendants. "Surely it is time the doctor came."

Racksole felt suddenly at that moment he was nothing but a mere hôtel proprietor with an awkward affair on his hands. For a fraction of a second he wished he had never bought the Grand Babylon.

A quarter of an hour later Prince Aribert, Theodore Racksole, a doctor, and an inspector of police were in the Prince's reception-room. They had just come from an ante-chamber, in which lay the mortal remains of Reginald Dimmock.

"Well?" said Racksole, glancing at the doctor.

The doctor was a big, boyish-looking man, with keen, quizzical eyes.

"It is not heart disease," said the doctor.

"Not heart disease?"

"No."

"Then what is it?" asked the Prince.

"I may be able to answer that question after the post-mortem," said the doctor. "I certainly can't answer it now. The symptoms are unusual to a degree."

The inspector of police began to write in a note-book.

Chapter 6

In the Gold Room

At the Grand Babylon a great ball was given that night in the Gold Room, a huge saloon attached to the hôtel, though scarcely part of it, and certainly less exclusive than the hôtel itself. Theodore Racksole knew nothing of the affair, except that it was an entertainment offered by a Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi to their friends. Who Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi were he did not know, nor could anyone tell him anything about them except that Mr. Sampson Levi was a prominent member of that part of the Stock Exchange familiarly called the Kaffir Circus, and that his wife was a stout lady with an aquiline nose and many diamonds, and that they were very rich and very hospitable. Theodore Racksole did not want a ball in his hôtel that evening, and just before dinner he had almost a mind to issue a decree that the Gold Room was to be closed and the ball forbidden, and Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi might name the amount of damages suffered by them. His reasons for such a course were threefold—first, he felt depressed and uneasy; second, he didn't like the name of Sampson Levi; and, third, he had a desire to show these so-called plutocrats that their wealth was nothing to him, that they could not do what they chose with Theodore Racksole, and that for two pins Theodore Racksole would buy them up, and the whole Kaffir Circus to boot. But something warned him that though such a high-handed proceeding might be tolerated in America, that land of freedom, it would never be tolerated in England. He felt instinctively that in England there are things you can't do, and that this particular thing was one of them. So the ball went forward, and neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sampson Levi had ever the least suspicion what a narrow escape they had had of looking very foolish in the eyes of the thousand or so

guests invited by them to the Gold Room of the Grand Babylon that evening.

The Gold Room of the Grand Babylon was built for a ballroom. A balcony, supported by arches faced with gilt and lapis-lazulo, ran around it, and from this vantage men and maidens and chaperons who could not or would not dance might survey the scene. Everyone knew this, and most people took advantage of it. What everyone did not know—what no one knew—was that higher up than the balcony there was a little barred window in the end wall from which the hôtel authorities might keep a watchful eye, not only on the dancers, but on the occupants of the balcony itself.

It may seem incredible to the uninitiated that the guests at any social gathering held in so gorgeous and renowned an apartment as the Gold Room of the Grand Babylon should need the observation of a watchful eye. Yet so it was. Strange matters and unexpected faces had been descried from the little window, and more than one European detective had kept vigil there with the most eminently satisfactory results.

At eleven o'clock Theodore Racksole, afflicted by vexation of spirit, found himself gazing idly through the little barred window. Nella was with him.

Together they had been wandering about the corridors of the hôtel, still strange to them both, and it was quite by accident that they had lighted upon the small room which had a surreptitious view of Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi's ball. Except for the light of the chandelier of the ballroom the little cubicle was in darkness. Nella was looking through the window; her father stood behind.

"I wonder which is Mrs. Sampson Levi?" Nella said, "and whether she matches her name. Wouldn't you love to have a name like that, Father—something that people could take hold of—instead of Racksole?"

The sound of violins and a confused murmur of voices rose gently up to them.

"Umphl" said Theodore. "Curse those evening papers!" he added, inconsequently but with sincerity.

"Father, you're very horrid to-night. What have the evening papers been doing?"

"Well, my young madame, they've got me in for one, and you for another; and they're manufacturing mysteries like fun. It's young Dimmock's death that has started 'em."

"Well, Father, you surely didn't expect to keep yourself out of the papers. Besides, as regards newspapers, you ought to be glad you aren't

in New York. Just fancy what the dear old HERALD would have made out of a little transaction like yours of last night."

"That's true," assented Racksole. "But it'll be all over New York tomorrow morning, all the same. The worst of it is that Babylon has gone off to Switzerland."

"Why?"

"Don't know. Sudden fancy, I guess, for his native heath."

"What difference does it make to you?"

"None. Only I feel sort of lonesome. I feel I want someone to lean up against in running this hôtel."

"Father, if you have that feeling you must be getting ill."

"Yes," he sighed, "I admit it's unusual with me. But perhaps you haven't grasped the fact, Nella, that we"re in the middle of a rather queer business."

"You mean about poor Mr. Dimmock?"

"Partly Dimmock and partly other things. First of all, that Miss Spencer, or whatever her wretched name is, mysteriously disappears. Then there was the stone thrown into your bedroom. Then I caught that rascal Jules conspiring with Dimmock at three o'clock in the morning. Then your precious Prince Aribert arrives without any suite—which I believe is a most peculiar and wicked thing for a Prince to do—and moreover I find my daughter on very intimate terms with the said Prince. Then young Dimmock goes and dies, and there is to be an inquest; then Prince Eugen and his suite, who were expected here for dinner, fail to turn up at all—"

"Prince Eugen has not come?"

"He has not; and Uncle Aribert is in a deuce of a stew about him, and telegraphing all over Europe. Altogether, things are working up pretty lively."

"Do you really think, Dad, there was anything between Jules and poor Mr. Dimmock?"

"Think! I know! I tell you I saw that scamp give Dimmock a wink last night at dinner that might have meant—well!"

"So you caught that wink, did you, Dad?"

"Why, did you?"

"Of course, Dad. I was going to tell you about it."

The millionaire grunted.

"Look here, Father," Nella whispered suddenly, and pointed to the balcony immediately below them. "Who's that?" She indicated a man with a bald patch on the back of his head, who was propping himself

up against the railing of the balcony and gazing immovable into the ball-room.

"Well, who is it?"

"Isn't it Jules?"

"Gemini! By the beard of the prophet, it is!"

"Perhaps Mr. Jules is a guest of Mrs. Sampson Levi."

"Guest or no guest, he goes out of this hôtel, even if I have to throw him out myself."

Theodore Racksole disappeared without another word, and Nella followed him.

But when the millionaire arrived on the balcony floor he could see nothing of Jules, neither there nor in the ball-room itself. Saying no word aloud, but quietly whispering wicked expletives, he searched everywhere in vain, and then, at last, by tortuous stairways and corridors returned to his original post of observation, that he might survey the place anew from the vantage ground. To his surprise he found a man in the dark little room, watching the scene of the ball as intently as he himself had been doing a few minutes before. Hearing footsteps, the man turned with a start.

It was Jules.

The two exchanged glances in the half light for a second.

"Good evening, Mr. Racksole," said Jules calmly. "I must apologize for being here."

"Force of habit, I suppose," said Theodore Racksole drily.

"Just so, sir."

"I fancied I had forbidden you to re-enter this hôtel?"

"I thought your order applied only to my professional capacity. I am here to-night as the guest of Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi."

"In your new rôle of man-about-town, eh?"

"Exactly."

"But I don't allow men-about-town up here, my friend."

"For being up here I have already apologized."

"Then, having apologized, you had better depart; that is my disinterested advice to you."

"Good night, sir."

"And, I say, Mr. Jules, if Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi, or any other Hebrews or Christians, should again invite you to my hôtel you will oblige me by declining the invitation. You'll find that will be the safest course for you."

"Good night, sir."

Before midnight struck Theodore Racksole had ascertained that the invitation-list of Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levi, though a somewhat lengthy one, contained no reference to any such person as Jules.

He sat up very late. To be precise, he sat up all night. He was a man who, by dint of training, could comfortably dispense with sleep when he felt so inclined, or when circumstances made such a course advisable. He walked to and fro in his room, and cogitated as few people beside Theodore Racksole could cogitate. At 6 a.m. he took a stroll round the business part of his premises, and watched the supplies come in from Covent Garden, from Smithfield, from Billingsgate, and from other strange places. He found the proceedings of the kitchen department quite interesting, and made mental notes of things that he would have altered, of men whose wages he would increase and men whose wages he would reduce. At 7 a.m. he happened to be standing near the luggage lift, and witnessed the descent of vast quantities of luggage, and its disappearance into a Carter Paterson van.

"Whose luggage is that?" he inquired peremptorily.

The luggage clerk, with an aggrieved expression, explained to him that it was the luggage of nobody in particular, that it belonged to various guests, and was bound for various destinations; that it was, in fact, "expressed" luggage despatched in advance, and that a similar quantity of it left the hôtel every morning about that hour.

Theodore Racksole walked away, and breakfasted upon one cup of tea and half a slice of toast.

At ten o'clock he was informed that the inspector of police desired to see him. The inspector had come, he said, to superintend the removal of the body of Reginald Dimmock to the mortuary adjoining the place of inquest, and a suitable vehicle waited at the back entrance of the hôtel.

The inspector had also brought subpoenas for himself and Prince Aribert of Posen and the commissionaire to attend the inquest.

"I thought Mr. Dimmock's remains were removed last night," said Racksole wearily.

"No, sir. The fact is the van was engaged on another job."

The inspector gave the least hint of a professional smile, and Racksole, disgusted, told him curtly to go and perform his duties.

In a few minutes a message came from the inspector requesting Mr. Racksole to be good enough to come to him on the first floor. Racksole went. In the ante-room, where the body of Reginald Dimmock had

originally been placed, were the inspector and Prince Aribert, and two policemen.

"Well?" said Racksole, after he and the Prince had exchanged bows. Then he saw a coffin laid across two chairs. "I see a coffin has been obtained," he remarked. "Quite right" He approached it. "It's empty," he observed unthinkingly.

"Just so," said the inspector. "The body of the deceased has disappeared. And his Serene Highness Prince Aribert informs me that though he has occupied a room immediately opposite, on the other side of the corridor, he can throw no light on the affair."

"Indeed, I cannot!" said the Prince, and though he spoke with sufficient calmness and dignity, you could see that he was deeply pained, even distressed.

"Well, I'm—" murmured Racksole, and stopped.

Chapter 7

Nella and the Prince

It appeared impossible to Theodore Racksole that so cumbrous an article as a corpse could be removed out of his hôtel, with no trace, no hint, no clue as to the time or the manner of the performance of the deed. After the first feeling of surprise, Racksole grew coldly and severely angry. He had a mind to dismiss the entire staff of the hôtel. He personally examined the night-watchman, the chambermaids and all other persons who by chance might or ought to know something of the affair; but without avail. The corpse of Reginald Dimmock had vanished utterly—disappeared like a fleshless spirit.

Of course there were the police. But Theodore Racksole held the police in sorry esteem. He acquainted them with the facts, answered their queries with a patient weariness, and expected nothing whatever from that quarter. He also had several interviews with Prince Aribert of Posen, but though the Prince was suavity itself and beyond doubt genuinely concerned about the fate of his dead attendant, yet it seemed to Racksole that he was keeping something back, that he hesitated to say all he knew. Racksole, with characteristic insight, decided that the death of Reginald Dimmock was only a minor event, which had occurred, as it were, on the fringe of some far more profound mystery. And, therefore, he decided to wait, with his eyes very wide open, until something else happened that would throw light on the business. At the moment he took only one measure—he arranged that the theft of Dimmock's body should not appear in the newspapers. It is astonishing how well a secret can be kept, when the possessors of the secret are handled with the proper mixture of firmness and persuasion. Racksole managed this very neatly. It was a complicated job, and his success in it rather pleased him.

At the same time he was conscious of being temporarily worsted by an unknown group of schemers, in which he felt convinced that Jules was an important item. He could scarcely look Nella in the eyes. The girl had evidently expected him to unmask this conspiracy at once, with a single stroke of the millionaire's magic wand. She was thoroughly accustomed, in the land of her birth, to seeing him achieve impossible feats. Over there he was a "boss"; men trembled before his name; when he wished a thing to happen—well, it happened; if he desired to know a thing, he just knew it. But here, in London, Theodore Racksole was not quite the same Theodore Racksole. He dominated New York; but London, for the most part, seemed not to take much interest in him; and there were certainly various persons in London who were capable of snapping their fingers at him—at Theodore Racksole. Neither he nor his daughter could get used to that fact.

As for Nella, she concerned herself for a little with the ordinary business of the bureau, and watched the incomings and outgoings of Prince Aribert with a kindly interest. She perceived, what her father had failed to perceive, that His Highness had assumed an attitude of reserve merely to hide the secret distraction and dismay which consumed him. She saw that the poor fellow had no settled plan in his head, and that he was troubled by something which, so far, he had confided to nobody. It came to her knowledge that each morning he walked to and fro on the Victoria Embankment, alone, and apparently with no object. On the third morning she decided that driving exercise on the Embankment would be good for her health, and thereupon ordered a carriage and issued forth, arrayed in a miraculous putty-coloured gown. Near Blackfriars Bridge she met the Prince, and the carriage was drawn up by the pavement.

"Good morning, Prince," she greeted him. "Are you mistaking this for Hyde Park?"

He bowed and smiled.

"I usually walk here in the mornings," he said.

"You surprise me," she returned. "I thought I was the only person in London who preferred the Embankment, with this view of the river, to the dustiness of Hyde Park. I can't imagine how it is that London will never take exercise anywhere except in that ridiculous Park. Now, if they had Central Park—"

"I think the Embankment is the finest spot in all London," he said.

She leaned a little out of the landau, bringing her face nearer to his.

"I do believe we are kindred spirits, you and I," she murmured; and then, "*Au revoir*, Prince!"

"One moment, Miss Racksole." His quick tones had a note of entreaty.

"I am in a hurry," she fibbed; "I am not merely taking exercise this morning. You have no idea how busy we are."

"Ah! then I will not trouble you. But I leave the Grand Babylon tonight."

"Do you?" she said. "Then will your Highness do me the honour of lunching with me today in Father's room? Father will be out—he is having a day in the City with some stockbroking persons."

"I shall be charmed," said the Prince, and his face showed that he meant it.

Nella drove off.

If the lunch was a success that result was due partly to Rocco, and partly to Nella. The Prince said little beyond what the ordinary rules of the conversational game demanded. His hostess talked much and talked well, but she failed to rouse her guest. When they had had coffee he took a rather formal leave of her.

"Good-bye, Prince," she said, "but I thought—that is, no I didn't.

Good-bye."

"You thought I wished to discuss something with you. I did; but I have decided that I have no right to burden your mind with my affairs."

"But suppose—suppose I wish to be burdened?"

"That is your good nature."

"Sit down," she said abruptly, "and tell me everything; mind, everything. I adore secrets."

Almost before he knew it he was talking to her, rapidly, eagerly.

"Why should I weary you with my confidences?" he said. "I don't know, I cannot tell; but I feel that I must. I feel that you will understand me better than anyone else in the world. And yet why should you understand me? Again, I don't know. Miss Racksole, I will disclose to you the whole trouble in a word. Prince Eugen, the hereditary Grand Duke of Posen, has disappeared. Four days ago I was to have met him at Ostend. He had affairs in London. He wished me to come with him. I sent Dimmock on in front, and waited for Eugen. He did not arrive. I telegraphed back to Cologne, his last stopping-place, and I learned that he had left there in accordance with his programme; I learned also that he had passed through Brussels. It must have been between Brussels and

the railway station at Ostend Quay that he disappeared. He was travelling with a single equerry, and the equerry, too, has vanished. I need not explain to you, Miss Racksole, that when a person of the importance of my nephew contrives to get lost one must proceed cautiously. One cannot advertise for him in the London Times. Such a disappearance must be kept secret. The people at Posen and at Berlin believe that Eugen is in London, here, at this hôtel; or, rather, they did so believe. But this morning I received a cypher telegram from—from His Majesty the Emperor, a very peculiar telegram, asking when Eugen might be expected to return to Posen, and requesting that he should go first to Berlin. That telegram was addressed to myself. Now, if the Emperor thought that Eugen was here, why should he have caused the telegram to be addressed to me? I have hesitated for three days, but I can hesitate no longer. I must myself go to the Emperor and acquaint him with the facts."

"I suppose you've just got to keep straight with him?" Nella was on the point of saying, but she checked herself and substituted, "The Emperor is your chief, is he not? "First among equals", you call him."

"His Majesty is our over-lord," said Aribert quietly.

"Why do you not take immediate steps to inquire as to the whereabouts of your Royal nephew?" she asked simply. The affair seemed to her just then so plain and straightforward.

"Because one of two things may have happened. Either Eugen may have been, in plain language, abducted, or he may have had his own reasons for changing his programme and keeping in the background—out of reach of telegraph and post and railways."

"What sort of reasons?"

"Do not ask me. In the history of every family there are passages—" He stopped.

"And what was Prince Eugen's object in coming to London?"

Aribert hesitated.

"Money," he said at length. "As a family we are very poor—poorer than anyone in Berlin suspects."

"Prince Aribert," Nella said, "shall I tell you what I think?" She leaned back in her chair, and looked at him out of half-closed eyes. His pale, thin, distinguished face held her gaze as if by some fascination. There could be no mistaking this man for anything else but a Prince.

"If you will," he said.

"Prince Eugen is the victim of a plot."

"You think so?"

"I am perfectly convinced of it."

"But why? What can be the object of a plot against him?"

"That is a point of which you should know more than me," she remarked drily.

"Ah! Perhaps, perhaps," he said. "But, dear Miss Racksole, why are you so sure?"

"There are several reasons, and they are connected with Mr. Dimmock. Did you ever suspect, your Highness, that that poor young man was not entirely loyal to you?"

"He was absolutely loyal," said the Prince, with all the earnestness of conviction.

"A thousand pardons, but he was not."

"Miss Racksole, if any other than yourself made that assertion, I would—I would—"

"Consign them to the deepest dungeon in Posen?" she laughed, lightly.

"Listen." And she told him of the incidents which had occurred in the night preceding his arrival in the hôtel.

"Do you mean, Miss Racksole, that there was an understanding between poor Dimmock and this fellow Jules?"

"There was an understanding."

"Impossible!"

"Your Highness, the man who wishes to probe a mystery to its root never uses the word "impossible". But I will say this for young Mr. Dimmock. I think he repented, and I think that it was because he repented that he—er—died so suddenly, and that his body was spirited away."

"Why has no one told me these things before?" Aribert exclaimed.

"Princes seldom hear the truth," she said.

He was astonished at her coolness, her firmness of assertion, her air of complete acquaintance with the world.

"Miss Racksole," he said, "if you will permit me to say it, I have never in my life met a woman like you. May I rely on your sympathy—your support?"

"My support, Prince? But how?"

"I do not know," he replied. "But you could help me if you would. A woman, when she has brain, always has more brain than a man."

"Ah!" she said ruefully, "I have no brains, but I do believe I could help you."

What prompted her to make that assertion she could not have explained, even to herself. But she made it, and she had a suspicion—a prescience—that it would be justified, though by what means, through what good fortune, was still a mystery to her.

"Go to Berlin," she said. "I see that you must do that; you have no alternative. As for the rest, we shall see. Something will occur. I shall be here. My father will be here. You must count us as your friends."

He kissed her hand when he left, and afterwards, when she was alone, she kissed the spot his lips had touched again and again. Now, thinking the matter out in the calmness of solitude, all seemed strange, unreal, uncertain to her. Were conspiracies actually possible nowadays? Did queer things actually happen in Europe? And did they actually happen in London hôtels? She dined with her father that night.

"I hear Prince Aribert has left," said Theodore Racksole.

"Yes," she assented. She said not a word about their interview.

Chapter 8

Arrival and Departure of the Baroness

On the following morning, just before lunch, a lady, accompanied by a maid and a considerable quantity of luggage, came to the Grand Babylon Hôtel. She was a plump, little old lady, with white hair and an old-fashioned bonnet, and she had a quaint, simple smile of surprise at everything in general.

Nevertheless, she gave the impression of belonging to some aristocracy, though not the English aristocracy. Her tone to her maid, whom she addressed in broken English—the girl being apparently English—was distinctly insolent, with the calm, unconscious insolence peculiar to a certain type of Continental nobility. The name on the lady's card ran thus: "Baroness Zerlinski". She desired rooms on the third floor. It happened that Nella was in the bureau.

"On the third floor, madam?" questioned Nella, in her best clerkly manner.

"I did say on de tird floor," said the plump little old lady.

"We have accommodation on the second floor."

"I wish to be high up, out of de dust and in de light," explained the Baroness.

"We have no suites on the third floor, madam."

"Never mind, no mattaire! Have you not two rooms that communicate?"

Nella consulted her books, rather awkwardly.

"Numbers 122 and 123 communicate."

"Or is it 121 and 122?" the little old lady remarked quickly, and then bit her lip.

"I beg your pardon. I should have said 121 and 122."

At the moment Nella regarded the Baroness's correction of her figures as a curious chance, but afterwards, when the Baroness had ascended in the lift, the thing struck her as somewhat strange. Perhaps the Baroness Zerlinski had stayed at the hôtel before. For the sake of convenience an index of visitors to the hôtel was kept and the index extended back for thirty years. Nella examined it, but it did not contain the name of Zerlinski. Then it was that Nella began to imagine, what had swiftly crossed her mind when first the Baroness presented herself at the bureau, that the features of the Baroness were remotely familiar to her. She thought, not that she had seen the old lady's face before, but that she had seen somewhere, some time, a face of a similar cast. It occurred to Nella to look at the "Almanach de Gotha"—that record of all the mazes of Continental blue blood; but the "Almanach de Gotha" made no reference to any barony of Zerlinski. Nella inquired where the Baroness meant to take lunch, and was informed that a table had been reserved for her in the dining-room, and she at once decided to lunch in the dining-room herself. Seated in a corner, half-hidden by a pillar, she could survey all the guests, and watch each group as it entered or left. Presently the Baroness appeared, dressed in black, with a tiny lace shawl, despite the June warmth; very stately, very quaint, and gently smiling. Nella observed her intently. The lady ate heartily, working without haste and without delay through the elaborate menu of the luncheon. Nella noticed that she had beautiful white teeth. Then a remarkable thing happened. A cream puff was served to the Baroness by way of sweets, and Nella was astonished to see the little lady remove the top, and with a spoon quietly take something from the interior which looked like a piece of folded paper. No one who had not been watching with the eye of a lynx would have noticed anything extraordinary in the action; indeed, the chances were nine hundred and ninety-nine to one that it would pass unheeded. But, unfortunately for the Baroness, it was the thousandth chance that happened. Nella jumped up, and walking over to the Baroness, said to her: "I'm afraid that the tart is not quite nice, your ladyship."

"Thanks, it is delightful," said the Baroness coldly; her smile had vanished. "Who are you? I thought you were de bureau clerk."

"My father is the owner of this hôtel. I thought there was something in the tart which ought not to have been there."

Nella looked the Baroness full in the face. The piece of folded paper, to

which a little cream had attached itself, lay under the edge of a plate.

"No, thanks." The Baroness smiled her simple smile.

Nella departed. She had noticed one trifling thing besides the paper—namely, that the Baroness could pronounce the English "th" sound if she chose.

That afternoon, in her own room, Nella sat meditating at the window for long time, and then she suddenly sprang up, her eyes brightening.

"I know," she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "It's Miss Spencer, disguised!

Why didn't I think of that before?" Her thoughts ran instantly to Prince Aribert. "Perhaps I can help him," she said to herself, and gave a little sigh. She went down to the office and inquired whether the Baroness had given any instructions about dinner. She felt that some plan must be formulated. She wanted to get hold of Rocco, and put him in the rack. She knew now that Rocco, the unequalled, was also concerned in this mysterious affair.

"The Baroness Zerlinski has left, about a quarter of an hour ago," said the attendant.

"But she only arrived this morning."

"The Baroness's maid said that her mistress had received a telegram and must leave at once. The Baroness paid the bill, and went away in a four-wheeler."

"Where to?"

"The trunks were labelled for Ostend."

Perhaps it was instinct, perhaps it was the mere spirit of adventure; but that evening Nella was to be seen of all men on the steamer for Ostend which leaves Dover at 11 p.m. She told no one of her intentions—not even her father, who was not in the hôtel when she left. She had scribbled a brief note to him to expect her back in a day or two, and had posted this at Dover. The steamer was the ›Marie Henriette,‹ a large and luxurious boat, whose state-rooms on deck vie with the glories of the Cunard and White Star liners. One of these state-rooms, the best, was evidently occupied, for every curtain of its windows was carefully drawn. Nella did not hope that the Baroness was on board; it was quite possible for the Baroness to have caught the eight o'clock steamer, and it was also possible for the Baroness not to have gone to Ostend at all, but to some other place in an entirely different direction. Nevertheless, Nella had a faint hope that the lady who called herself Zerlinski might be in that curtained stateroom, and throughout the smooth

moonlit voyage she never once relaxed her observation of its doors and its windows.

The Maria Henriette arrived in Ostend Harbour punctually at 2 a.m. in the morning. There was the usual heterogeneous, gesticulating crowd on the quay.

Nella kept her post near the door of the state-room, and at length she was rewarded by seeing it open. Four middle-aged Englishmen issued from it. From a glimpse of the interior Nella saw that they had spent the voyage in card-playing.

It would not be too much to say that she was distinctly annoyed. She pretended to be annoyed with circumstances, but really she was annoyed with Nella Racksole. At two in the morning, without luggage, without any companionship, and without a plan of campaign, she found herself in a strange foreign port—a port of evil repute, possessing some of the worst-managed hôtels in Europe. She strolled on the quay for a few minutes, and then she saw the smoke of another steamer in the offing. She inquired from an official what that steamer might be, and was told that it was the eight o'clock from Dover, which had broken down, put into Calais for some slight necessary repairs, and was arriving at its destination nearly four hours late. Her mercurial spirits rose again. A minute ago she was regarding herself as no better than a ninny engaged in a wild-goose chase. Now she felt that after all she had been very sagacious and cunning. She was morally sure that she would find the Zerlinski woman on this second steamer, and she took all the credit to herself in advance. Such is human nature.

The steamer seemed interminably slow in coming into harbour. Nella walked on the Digue for a few minutes to watch it the better. The town was silent and almost deserted. It had a false and sinister aspect. She remembered tales which she had heard of this glittering resort, which in the season holds more scoundrels than any place in Europe, save only Monte Carlo. She remembered that the gilded adventures of every nation under the sun forgathered there either for business or pleasure, and that some of the most wonderful crimes of the latter half of the century had been schemed and matured in that haunt of cosmopolitan iniquity.

When the second steamer arrived Nella stood at the end of the gangway, close to the ticket-collector. The first person to step on shore was—not the Baroness Zerlinski, but Miss Spencer herself! Nella turned aside instantly, hiding her face, and Miss Spencer, carrying a small bag, hurried with assured footsteps to the Custom House. It seemed as if she

knew the port of Ostend fairly well. The moon shone like day, and Nella had full opportunity to observe her quarry. She could see now quite plainly that the Baroness Zerlinski had been only Miss Spencer in disguise. There was the same gait, the same movement of the head and of the hips; the white hair was easily to be accounted for by a wig, and the wrinkles by a paint brush and some grease paints. Miss Spencer, whose hair was now its old accustomed yellow, got through the Custom House without difficulty, and Nella saw her call a closed carriage and say something to the driver. The vehicle drove off. Nella jumped into the next carriage—an open one—that came up.

"Follow that carriage," she said succinctly to the driver in French.

"*Bien, madame*!" The driver whipped up his horse, and the animal shot forward with a terrific clatter over the cobbles. It appeared that this driver was quite accustomed to following other carriages.

"Now I am fairly in for it!" said Nella to herself. She laughed unsteadily, but her heart was beating with an extraordinary thump.

For some time the pursued vehicle kept well in front. It crossed the town nearly from end to end, and plunged into a maze of small streets far on the south side of the Kursaal. Then gradually Nella's equipage began to overtake it. The first carriage stopped with a jerk before a tall dark house, and Miss Spencer emerged. Nella called to her driver to stop, but he, determined to be in at the death, was engaged in whipping his horse, and he completely ignored her commands. He drew up triumphantly at the tall dark house just at the moment when Miss Spencer disappeared into it. The other carriage drove away. Nella, uncertain what to do, stepped down from her carriage and gave the driver some money. At the same moment a man reopened the door of the house, which had closed on Miss Spencer.

"I want to see Miss Spencer," said Nella impulsively. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Miss Spencer?"

"Yes; she's just arrived."

"It's O.K., I suppose," said the man.

"I guess so," said Nella, and she walked past him into the house. She was astonished at her own audacity.

Miss Spencer was just going into a room off the narrow hall. Nella followed her into the apartment, which was shabbily furnished in the Belgian lodging-house style.

"Well, Miss Spencer," she greeted the former Baroness Zerlinski, "I guess you didn't expect to see me. You left our hôtel very suddenly this af-

ternoon, and you left it very suddenly a few days ago; and so I've just called to make a few inquiries."

To do the lady justice, Miss Spencer bore the surprising ordeal very well.

She did not flinch; she betrayed no emotion. The sole sign of perturbation was in her hurried breathing.

"You have ceased to be the Baroness Zerlinski," Nella continued. "May I sit down?"

"Certainly, sit down," said Miss Spencer, copying the girl's tone. "You are a fairly smart young woman, that I will say. What do you want? Weren't my books all straight?"

"Your books were all straight. I haven't come about your books. I have come about the murder of Reginald Dimmock, the disappearance of his corpse, and the disappearance of Prince Eugen of Posen. I thought you might be able to help me in some investigations which I am making."

Miss Spencer's eyes gleamed, and she stood up and moved swiftly to the mantelpiece.

"You may be a Yankee, but you're a fool," she said.

She took hold of the bell-rope.

"Don't ring that bell if you value your life," said Nella.

"If what?" Miss Spencer remarked.

"If you value your life," said Nella calmly, and with the words she pulled from her pocket a very neat and dainty little revolver.

Chapter 9

Two Women and the Revolver

You—you're only doing that to frighten me," stammered Miss Spencer, in a low, quavering voice.

"Am I?" Nella replied, as firmly as she could, though her hand shook violently with excitement, could Miss Spencer but have observed it. "Am I? You said just now that I might be a Yankee girl, but I was a fool. Well, I am a Yankee girl, as you call it; and in my country, if they don't teach revolver-shooting in boarding-schools, there are at least a lot of girls who can handle a revolver. I happen to be one of them. I tell you that if you ring that bell you will suffer."

Most of this was simple bluff on Nella's part, and she trembled lest Miss Spencer should perceive that it was simple bluff. Happily for her, Miss Spencer belonged to that order of women who have every sort of courage except physical courage. Miss Spencer could have withstood successfully any moral trial, but persuade her that her skin was in danger, and she would succumb. Nella at once divined this useful fact, and proceeded accordingly, hiding the strangeness of her own sensations as well as she could.

"You had better sit down now," said Nella, "and I will ask you a few questions."

And Miss Spencer obediently sat down, rather white, and trying to screw her lips into a formal smile.

"Why did you leave the Grand Babylon that night?" Nella began her examination, putting on a stern, barrister-like expression.

"I had orders to, Miss Racksole."

"Whose orders?"

"Well, I'm—I'm—the fact is, I'm a married woman, and it was my husband's orders."

"Who is your husband?"

"Tom Jackson—Jules, you know, head waiter at the Grand Babylon."

"So Jules's real name is Tom Jackson? Why did he want you to leave without giving notice?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Miss Racksole. I swear I don't know. He's my husband, and, of course, I do what he tells me, as you will some day do what your husband tells you. Please heaven you'll get a better husband than mine!"

Miss Spencer showed a sign of tears.

Nella fingered the revolver, and put it at full cock. "Well," she repeated, "why did he want you to leave?" She was tremendously surprised at her own coolness, and somewhat pleased with it, too.

"I can't tell you, I can't tell you."

"You've just got to," Nella said, in a terrible, remorseless tone.

"He—he wished me to come over here to Ostend. Something had gone wrong.

Oh! he's a fearful man, is Tom. If I told you, he"d—"

"Had something gone wrong in the hôtel, or over here?"

"Both."

"Was it about Prince Eugen of Posen?"

"I don't know—that is, yes, I think so."

"What has your husband to do with Prince Eugen?"

"I believe he has some—some sort of business with him, some money business."

"And was Mr. Dimmock in this business?"

"I fancy so, Miss Racksole. I'm telling you all I know, that I swear."

"Did your husband and Mr. Dimmock have a quarrel that night in Room 111?"

"They had some difficulty."

"And the result of that was that you came to Ostend instantly?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

"And what were you to do in Ostend? What were your instructions from this husband of yours?"

Miss Spencer's head dropped on her arms on the table which separated her from Nella, and she appeared to sob violently.

"Have pity on me," she murmured, "I can't tell you any more."

"Why?"

"He"d kill me if he knew."

"You're wandering from the subject," observed Nella coldly. "This is the last time I shall warn you. Let me tell you plainly I've got the best reasons for being desperate, and if anything happens to you I shall say I did it in self-defence. Now, what were you to do in Ostend?"

"I shall die for this anyhow," whined Miss Spencer, and then, with a sort of fierce despair, "I had to keep watch on Prince Eugen."

"Where? In this house?"

Miss Spencer nodded, and, looking up, Nella could see the traces of tears in her face.

"Then Prince Eugen was a prisoner? Some one had captured him at the instigation of Jules?"

"Yes, if you must have it."

"Why was it necessary for you specially to come to Ostend?"

"Oh! Tom trusts me. You see, I know Ostend. Before I took that place at the Grand Babylon I had travelled over Europe, and Tom knew that I knew a thing or two."

"Why did you take the place at the Grand Babylon?"

"Because Tom told me to. He said I should be useful to him there."

"Is your husband an Anarchist, or something of that kind, Miss Spencer?"

"I don't know. I'd tell you in a minute if I knew. But he's one of those that keep themselves to themselves."

"Do you know if he has ever committed a murder?"

"Never!" said Miss Spencer, with righteous repudiation of the mere idea.

"But Mr. Dimmock was murdered. He was poisoned. If he had not been poisoned why was his body stolen? It must have been stolen to prevent inquiry, to hide traces. Tell me about that."

"I take my dying oath," said Miss Spencer, standing up a little way from the table, "I take my dying oath I didn't know Mr. Dimmock was dead till I saw it in the newspaper."

"You swear you had no suspicion of it?"

"I swear I hadn't."

Nella was inclined to believe the statement. The woman and the girl looked at each other in the tawdry, frowsy, lamp-lit room. Miss Spencer nervously patted her yellow hair into shape, as if gradually recovering her composure and equanimity. The whole affair seemed like a dream to Nella, a disturbing, sinister nightmare. She was a little uncertain what to say. She felt that she had not yet got hold of any very definite information. "Where is Prince Eugen now?" she asked at length.

"I don't know, miss."

"He isn't in this house?"

"No, miss."

"Ah! We will see presently."

"They took him away, Miss Racksole."

"Who took him away? Some of your husband's friends?"

"Some of his—acquaintances."

"Then there is a gang of you?"

"A gang of us—a gang! I don't know what you mean," Miss Spencer quavered.

"Oh, but you must know," smiled Nella calmly. "You can't possibly be so innocent as all that, Mrs. Tom Jackson. You can't play games with me. You've just got to remember that I'm what you call a Yankee girl. There's one thing that I mean to find out, within the next five minutes, and that is—how your charming husband kidnapped Prince Eugen, and why he kidnapped him. Let us begin with the second question. You have evaded it once."

Miss Spencer looked into Nella's face, and then her eyes dropped, and her fingers worked nervously with the tablecloth.

"How can I tell you," she said, "when I don't know? You've got the whip-hand of me, and you're tormenting me for your own pleasure." She wore an expression of persecuted innocence.

"Did Mr. Tom Jackson want to get some money out of Prince Eugen?"

"Money! Not he! Tom's never short of money."

"But I mean a lot of money—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands?"

"Tom never wanted money from anyone," said Miss Spencer doggedly.

"Then had he some reason for wishing to prevent Prince Eugen from coming to London?"

"Perhaps he had. I don't know. If you kill me, I don't know." Nella stopped to reflect. Then she raised the revolver. It was a mechanical, unintentional sort of action, and certainly she had no intention of using the weapon, but, strange to say, Miss Spencer again cowered before it. Even at that moment Nella wondered that a woman like Miss Spencer could be so simple as to think the revolver would actually be used. Having absolutely no physical cowardice herself, Nella had the greatest difficulty in imagining that other people could be at the mercy of a bodily fear. Still, she saw her advantage, and used it relentlessly, and with as much theatrical gesture as she could command. She raised the revolver till it was level with Miss Spencer's face, and suddenly a

new, queer feeling took hold of her. She knew that she would indeed use that revolver now, if the miserable woman before her drove her too far. She felt afraid—afraid of herself; she was in the grasp of a savage, primeval instinct. In a flash she saw Miss Spencer dead at her feet—the police—a court of justice—the scaffold. It was horrible.

"Speak," she said hoarsely, and Miss Spencer's face went whiter.

"Tom did say," the woman whispered rapidly, awesomely, "that if Prince Eugen got to London it would upset his scheme."

"What scheme? What scheme? Answer me."

"Heaven help me, I don't know." Miss Spencer sank into a chair. "He said Mr. Dimmock had turned tail, and he should have to settle him and then Rocco—"

"Rocco! What about Rocco?" Nella could scarcely hear herself. Her grip of the revolver tightened.

Miss Spencer's eyes opened wider; she gazed at Nella with a glassy stare.

"Don't ask me. It's death!" Her eyes were fixed as if in horror.

"It is," said Nella, and the sound of her voice seemed to her to issue from the lips of some third person.

"It's death," repeated Miss Spencer, and gradually her head and shoulders sank back, and hung loosely over the chair. Nella was conscious of a sudden revulsion. The woman had surely fainted. Dropping the revolver she ran round the table. She was herself again—feminine, sympathetic, the old Nella. She felt immensely relieved that this had happened. But at the same instant Miss Spencer sprang up from the chair like a cat, seized the revolver, and with a wild movement of the arm flung it against the window. It crashed through the glass, exploding as it went, and there was a tense silence.

"I told you that you were a fool," remarked Miss Spencer slowly, "coming here like a sort of female Jack Sheppard, and trying to get the best of me. We are on equal terms now. You frightened me, but I knew I was a cleverer woman than you, and that in the end, if I kept on long enough, I should win. Now it will be my turn."

Dumbfounded, and overcome with a miserable sense of the truth of Miss Spencer's words, Nella stood still. The idea of her colossal foolishness swept through her like a flood. She felt almost ashamed. But even at this juncture she had no fear. She faced the woman bravely, her mind leaping about in search of some plan. She could think of nothing but a bribe—an enormous bribe.

"I admit you've won," she said, "but I've not finished yet. Just listen."

Miss Spencer folded her arms, and glanced at the door, smiling bitterly.

"You know my father is a millionaire; perhaps you know that he is one of the richest men in the world. If I give you my word of honour not to reveal anything that you've told me, what will you take to let me go free?"

"What sum do you suggest?" asked Miss Spencer carelessly.

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Nella promptly. She had begun to regard the affair as a business operation.

Miss Spencer's lip curled.

"A hundred thousand."

Again Miss Spencer's lip curled.

"Well, say a million. I can rely on my father, and so may you."

"You think you are worth a million to him?"

"I do," said Nella.

"And you think we could trust you to see that it was paid?"

"Of course you could."

"And we should not suffer afterwards in any way?"

"I would give you my word, and my father's word."

"Bah!" exclaimed Miss Spencer: "how do you know I wouldn't let you go free for nothing? You are only a rash, silly girl."

"I know you wouldn't. I can read your face too well."

"You are right," Miss Spencer replied slowly. "I wouldn't. I wouldn't let you go for all the dollars in America."

Nella felt cold down the spine, and sat down again in her chair. A draught of air from the broken window blew on her cheek. Steps sounded in the passage; the door opened, but Nella did not turn round. She could not move her eyes from Miss Spencer's. There was a noise of rushing water in her ears. She lost consciousness, and slipped limply to the ground.

Chapter 10

At Sea

It seemed to Nella that she was being rocked gently in a vast cradle, which swayed to and fro with a motion at once slow and incredibly gentle. This sensation continued for some time, and there was added to it the sound of a quick, quiet, muffled beat. Soft, exhilarating breezes wafted her forward in spite of herself, and yet she remained in a delicious calm. She wondered if her mother was kneeling by her side, whispering some lullaby in her childish ears. Then strange colours swam before her eyes, her eyelids wavered, and at last she awoke. For a few moments her gaze travelled to and fro in a vain search for some clue to her surroundings, was aware of nothing except sense of repose and a feeling of relief that some mighty and fatal struggle was over; she cared not whether she had conquered or suffered defeat in the struggle of her soul with some other soul; it was finished, done with, and the consciousness of its conclusion satisfied and contented her. Gradually her brain, recovering from its obsession, began to grasp the phenomena of her surroundings, and she saw that she was on a yacht, and that the yacht was moving. The motion of the cradle was the smooth rolling of the vessel; the beat was the beat of its screw; the strange colours were the cloud tints thrown by the sun as it rose over a distant and receding shore in the wake of the yacht; her mother's lullaby was the crooned song of the man at the wheel. Nella all through her life had had many experiences of yachting. From the waters of the River Hudson to those bluer tides of the Mediterranean Sea, she had yachted in all seasons and all weathers. She loved the water, and now it seemed deliciously right and proper that she should be on the water again. She raised her head to look round, and then let it sink back: she was fatigued, enervated; she desired only solitude and calm; she had no care, no anxiety, no re-

sponsibility: a hundred years might have passed since her meeting with Miss Spencer, and the memory of that meeting appeared to have faded into the remotest background of her mind.

It was a small yacht, and her practised eye at once told that it belonged to the highest aristocracy of pleasure craft. As she reclined in the deck-chair (it did not occur to her at that moment to speculate as to the identity of the person who had led her therein) she examined all visible details of the vessel. The deck was as white and smooth as her own hand, and the seams ran along its length like blue veins. All the brass-work, from the band round the slender funnel to the concave surface of the binnacle, shone like gold.

The tapered masts stretched upwards at a rakish angle, and the rigging seemed like spun silk. No sails were set; the yacht was under steam, and doing about seven or eight knots. She judged that it was a boat of a hundred tons or so, probably Clyde-built, and not more than two or three years old.

No one was to be seen on deck except the man at the wheel: this man wore a blue jersey; but there was neither name nor initial on the jersey, nor was there a name on the white life-buoys lashed to the main rigging, nor on the polished dinghy which hung on the starboard davits. She called to the man, and called again, in a feeble voice, but the steerer took no notice of her, and continued his quiet song as though nothing else existed in the universe save the yacht, the sea, the sun, and himself.

Then her eyes swept the outline of the land from which they were hastening, and she could just distinguish a lighthouse and a great white irregular dome, which she recognized as the Kursaal at Ostend, that gorgeous rival of the gaming palace at Monte Carlo. So she was leaving Ostend. The rays of the sun fell on her caressingly, like a restorative. All around the water was changing from wonderful greys and dark blues to still more wonderful pinks and translucent unearthly greens; the magic kaleidoscope of dawn was going forward in its accustomed way, regardless of the vicissitudes of mortals.

Here and there in the distance she descried a sail—the brown sail of some Ostend fishing-boat returning home after a night's trawling. Then the beat of paddles caught her ear, and a steamer blundered past, wallowing clumsily among the waves like a tortoise. It was the Swallow from London. She could see some of its passengers leaning curiously over the aft-rail. A girl in a mackintosh signalled to her, and mechanically she answered the salute with her arm. The officer of the bridge of the Swallow hailed the yacht, but the man at the wheel offered no reply.

In another minute the Swallow was nothing but a blot in the distance.

Nella tried to sit straight in the deck-chair, but she found herself unable to do so. Throwing off the rug which covered her, she discovered that she had been tied to the chair by means of a piece of broad webbing. Instantly she was alert, awake, angry; she knew that her perils were not over; she felt that possibly they had scarcely yet begun. Her lazy contentment, her dreamy sense of peace and repose, vanished utterly, and she steeled herself to meet the dangers of a grave and difficult situation.

Just at that moment a man came up from below. He was a man of forty or so, clad in irreproachable blue, with a peaked yachting cap. He raised the cap politely.

"Good morning," he said. "Beautiful sunrise, isn't it?" The clever and calculated insolence of his tone cut her like a lash as she lay bound in the chair. Like all people who have lived easy and joyous lives in those fair regions where gold smoothes every crease and law keeps a tight hand on disorder, she found it hard to realize that there were other regions where gold was useless and law without power. Twenty-four hours ago she would have declared it impossible that such an experience as she had suffered could happen to anyone; she would have talked airily about civilization and the nineteenth century, and progress and the police. But her experience was teaching her that human nature remains always the same, and that beneath the thin crust of security on which we good citizens exist the dark and secret forces of crime continue to move, just as they did in the days when you couldn't go from Cheapside to Chelsea without being set upon by thieves. Her experience was in a fair way to teach her this lesson better than she could have learnt it even in the bureaux of the detective police of Paris, London, and St. Petersburg.

"Good morning," the man repeated, and she glanced at him with a sullen, angry gaze.

"You!" she exclaimed, "You, Mr. Thomas Jackson, if that is your name! Loose me from this chair, and I will talk to you." Her eyes flashed as she spoke, and the contempt in them added mightily to her beauty. Mr. Thomas Jackson, otherwise Jules, erstwhile head waiter at the Grand Babylon, considered himself a connoisseur in feminine loveliness, and the vision of Nella Racksole smote him like an exquisite blow.

"With pleasure," he replied. "I had forgotten that to prevent you from falling I had secured you to the chair"; and with a quick movement he unfastened the band. Nella stood up, quivering with fiery annoyance and scorn.

"Now," she said, fronting him, "what is the meaning of this?"

"You fainted," he replied imperturbably. "Perhaps you don't remember."

The man offered her a deck-chair with a characteristic gesture. Nella was obliged to acknowledge, in spite of herself, that the fellow had distinction, an air of breeding. No one would have guessed that for twenty years he had been an hôtel waiter. His long, lithe figure, and easy, careless carriage seemed to be the figure and carriage of an aristocrat, and his voice was quiet, restrained, and authoritative.

"That has nothing to do with my being carried off in this yacht of yours."

"It is not my yacht," he said, "but that is a minor detail. As to the more important matter, forgive me that I remind you that only a few hours ago you were threatening a lady in my house with a revolver."

"Then it was your house?"

"Why not? May I not possess a house?" He smiled.

"I must request you to put the yacht about at once, instantly, and take me back." She tried to speak firmly.

"Ah!" he said, "I am afraid that's impossible. I didn't put out to sea with the intention of returning at once, instantly." In the last words he gave a faint imitation of her tone.

"When I do get back," she said, "when my father gets to know of this affair, it will be an exceedingly bad day for you, Mr. Jackson."

"But supposing your father doesn't hear of it—"

"What?"

"Supposing you never get back?"

"Do you mean, then, to have my murder on your conscience?"

"Talking of murder," he said, "you came very near to murdering my friend, Miss Spencer. At least, so she tells me."

"Is Miss Spencer on board?" Nella asked, seeing perhaps a faint ray of hope in the possible presence of a woman.

"Miss Spencer is not on board. There is no one on board except you and myself and a small crew—a very discreet crew, I may add."

"I will have nothing more to say to you. You must take your own course."

"Thanks for the permission," he said. "I will send you up some breakfast."

He went to the saloon stairs and whistled, and a Negro boy appeared with a tray of chocolate. Nella took it, and, without the slightest hesitation, threw it overboard. Mr. Jackson walked away a few steps and then returned.

"You have spirit," he said, "and I admire spirit. It is a rare quality."

She made no reply. "Why did you mix yourself up in my affairs at all?" he went on. Again she made no reply, but the question set her thinking: why had she mixed herself up in this mysterious business? It was quite at variance with the usual methods of her gay and butterfly existence to meddle at all with serious things. Had she acted merely from a desire to see justice done and wickedness punished? Or was it the desire of adventure? Or was it, perhaps, the desire to be of service to His Serene Highness Prince Aribert? "It is no fault of mine that you are in this fix," Jules continued. "I didn't bring you into it. You brought yourself into it. You and your father—you have been moving along at a pace which is rather too rapid."

"That remains to be seen," she put in coldly.

"It does," he admitted. "And I repeat that I can't help admiring you—that is, when you aren't interfering with my private affairs. That is a proceeding which I have never tolerated from anyone—not even from a millionaire, nor even from a beautiful woman." He bowed. "I will tell you what I propose to do. I propose to escort you to a place of safety, and to keep you there till my operations are concluded, and the possibility of interference entirely removed. You spoke just now of murder. What a crude notion that was of yours! It is only the amateur who practises murder—"

"What about Reginald Dimmock?" she interjected quickly.

He paused gravely.

"Reginald Dimmock," he repeated. "I had imagined his was a case of heart disease. Let me send you up some more chocolate. I'm sure you're hungry."

"I will starve before I touch your food," she said.

"Gallant creature!" he murmured, and his eyes roved over her face. Her superb, supercilious beauty overcame him. "Ah!" he said, "what a wife you would make!" He approached nearer to her. "You and I, Miss Racksole, your beauty and wealth and my brains—we could conquer the world. Few men are worthy of you, but I am one of the few. Listen! You might do worse. Marry me. I am a great man; I shall be greater. I adore you. Marry me, and I will save your life. All shall be well. I will begin again. The past shall be as though there had been no past."

"This is somewhat sudden—Jules," she said with biting contempt.

"Did you expect me to be conventional?" he retorted. "I love you."

"Granted," she said, for the sake of the argument. "Then what will occur to your present wife?"

"My present wife?"

"Yes, Miss Spencer, as she is called."

"She told you I was her husband?"

"Incidentally she did."

"She isn't."

"Perhaps she isn't. But, nevertheless, I think I won't marry you." Nella stood like a statue of scorn before him.

He went still nearer to her. "Give me a kiss, then; one kiss—I won't ask for more; one kiss from those lips, and you shall go free. Men have ruined themselves for a kiss. I will."

"Coward!" she ejaculated.

"Coward!" he repeated. "Coward, am I? Then I'll be a coward, and you shall kiss me whether you will or not."

He put a hand on her shoulder. As she shrank back from his lustrous eyes, with an involuntary scream, a figure sprang out of the dinghy a few feet away. With a single blow, neatly directed to Mr. Jackson's ear, Mr. Jackson was stretched senseless on the deck. Prince Aribert of Posen stood over him with a revolver. It was probably the greatest surprise of Mr. Jackson's whole life.

"Don't be alarmed," said the Prince to Nella, "my being here is the simplest thing in the world, and I will explain it as soon as I have finished with this fellow."

Nella could think of nothing to say, but she noticed the revolver in the Prince's hand.

"Why," she remarked, "that's my revolver."

"It is," he said, "and I will explain that, too."

The man at the wheel gave no heed whatever to the scene.

Chapter 11

The Court Pawnbroker

"Mr. Sampson Levi wishes to see you, sir."

These words, spoken by a servant to Theodore Racksole, aroused the millionaire from a reverie which had been the reverse of pleasant. The fact was, and it is necessary to insist on it, that Mr. Racksole, owner of the Grand Babylon Hôtel, was by no means in a state of self-satisfaction. A mystery had attached itself to his hôtel, and with all his acumen and knowledge of things in general he was unable to solve that mystery. He laughed at the fruitless efforts of the police, but he could not honestly say that his own efforts had been less barren. The public was talking, for, after all, the disappearance of poor Dimmock's body had got noised abroad in an indirect sort of way, and Theodore Racksole did not like the idea of his impeccable hôtel being the subject of sinister rumours. He wondered, grimly, what the public and the Sunday newspapers would say if they were aware of all the other phenomena, not yet common property: of Miss Spencer's disappearance, of Jules' strange visits, and of the non-arrival of Prince Eugen of Posen. Theodore Racksole had worried his brain without result. He had conducted an elaborate private investigation without result, and he had spent a certain amount of money without result. The police said that they had a clue; but Racksole remarked that it was always the business of the police to have a clue, that they seldom had more than a clue, and that a clue without some sequel to it was a pretty stupid business. The only sure thing in the whole affair was that a cloud rested over his hôtel, his beautiful new toy, the finest of its kind. The cloud was not interfering with business, but, nevertheless, it was a cloud, and he fiercely resented its presence; perhaps it would be more correct to say that he fiercely resented his inability to dissipate it.

"Mr. Sampson Levi wishes to see you, sir," the servant repeated, having received no sign that his master had heard him.

"So I hear," said Racksole. "Does he want to see me, personally?"

"He asked for you, sir."

"Perhaps it is Rocco he wants to see, about a menu or something of that kind?"

"I will inquire, sir," and the servant made a move to withdraw.

"Stop," Racksole commanded suddenly. "Desire Mr. Sampson Levi to step this way."

The great stockbroker of the "Kaffir Circus" entered with a simple unassuming air. He was a rather short, florid man, dressed like a typical Hebraic financier, with too much watch-chain and too little waistcoat. In his fat hand he held a gold-headed cane, and an absolutely new silk hat—for it was Friday, and Mr. Levi purchased a new hat every Friday of his life, holiday times only excepted. He breathed heavily and sniffed through his nose a good deal, as though he had just performed some Herculean physical labour. He glanced at the American millionaire with an expression in which a slight embarrassment might have been detected, but at the same time his round, red face disclosed a certain frank admiration and good nature.

"Mr. Racksole, I believe—Mr. Theodore Racksole. Proud to meet you, sir."

Such were the first words of Mr. Sampson Levi. In form they were the greeting of a third-rate chimney-sweep, but, strangely enough, Theodore Racksole liked their tone. He said to himself that here, precisely where no one would have expected to find one, was an honest man.

"Good day," said Racksole briefly. "To what do I owe the pleasure—"

"I expect your time is limited," answered Sampson Levi. "Anyhow, mine is, and so I'll come straight to the point, Mr. Racksole. I'm a plain man. I don't pretend to be a gentleman or any nonsense of that kind. I'm a stockbroker, that's what I am, and I don't care who knows it. The other night I had a ball in this hôtel. It cost me a couple of thousand and odd pounds, and, by the way, I wrote out a cheque for your bill this morning. I don't like balls, but they're useful to me, and my little wife likes 'em, and so we give 'em. Now, I've nothing to say against the hôtel management as regards that ball: it was very decently done, very decently, but what I want to know is this—Why did you have a private detective among my guests?"

"A private detective?" exclaimed Racksole, somewhat surprised at this charge.

"Yes," Mr. Sampson Levi said firmly, fanning himself in his chair, and gazing at Theodore Racksole with the direct earnest expression of a man having a grievance. "Yes; a private detective. It's a small matter, I know, and I dare say you think you've got a right, as proprietor of the show, to do what you like in that line; but I've just called to tell you that I object. I've called as a matter of principle. I'm not angry; it's the principle of the thing."

"My dear Mr. Levi," said Racksole, "I assure you that, having let the Gold Room to a private individual for a private entertainment, I should never dream of doing what you suggest."

"Straight?" asked Mr. Sampson Levi, using his own picturesque language.

"Straight," said Racksole smiling.

"There was a gent present at my ball that I didn't ask. I've got a wonderful memory for faces, and I know. Several fellows asked me afterwards what he was doing there. I was told by someone that he was one of your waiters, but I didn't believe that. I know nothing of the Grand Babylon; it's not quite my style of tavern, but I don't think you'd send one of your own waiters to watch my guests—unless, of course, you sent him as a waiter; and this chap didn't do any waiting, though he did his share of drinking."

"Perhaps I can throw some light on this mystery," said Racksole. "I may tell you that I was already aware that man had attended your ball uninvited."

"How did you get to know?"

"By pure chance, Mr. Levi, and not by inquiry. That man was a former waiter at this hôtel—the head waiter, in fact—Jules. No doubt you have heard of him."

"Not I," said Mr. Levi positively.

"Ah!" said Racksole, "I was informed that everyone knew Jules, but it appears not. Well, be that as it may, previously to the night of your ball, I had dismissed Jules. I had ordered him never to enter the Babylon again. But on that evening I encountered him here—not in the Gold Room, but in the hôtel itself. I asked him to explain his presence, and he stated he was your guest. That is all I know of the matter, Mr. Levi, and I am extremely sorry that you should have thought me capable of the enormity of placing a private detective among your guests."

"This is perfectly satisfactory to me," Mr. Sampson Levi said, after a pause.

"I only wanted an explanation, and I've got it. I was told by some pals of mine in the City I might rely on Mr. Theodore Racksole going straight to the point, and I'm glad they were right. Now as to that feller Jules, I shall make my own inquiries as to him. Might I ask you why you dismissed him?"

"I don't know why I dismissed him."

"You don't know? Oh! come now! I'm only asking because I thought you might be able to give me a hint why he turned up uninvited at my ball. Sorry if I'm too inquisitive."

"Not at all, Mr. Levi; but I really don't know. I only sort of felt that he was a suspicious character. I dismissed him on instinct, as it were. See?"

Without answering this question Mr. Levi asked another. "If this Jules is such a well-known person," he said, "how could the feller hope to come to my ball without being recognized?"

"Give it up," said Racksole promptly.

"Well, I'll be moving on," was Mr. Sampson Levi's next remark. "Good day, and thank ye. I suppose you aren't doing anything in Kaffirs?"

Mr. Racksole smiled a negative.

"I thought not," said Levi. "Well, I never touch American rails myself, and so I reckon we sha'n't come across each other. Good day."

"Good day," said Racksole politely, following Mr. Sampson Levi to the door.

With his hand on the handle of the door, Mr. Levi stopped, and, gazing at Theodore Racksole with a shrewd, quizzical expression, remarked: "Strange things been going on here lately, eh?"

The two men looked very hard at each other for several seconds.

"Yes," Racksole assented. "Know anything about them?"

"Well—no, not exactly," said Mr. Levi. "But I had a fancy you and I might be useful to each other; I had a kind of fancy to that effect."

"Come back and sit down again, Mr. Levi," Racksole said, attracted by the evident straightforwardness of the man's tone. "Now, how can we be of service to each other? I flatter myself I'm something of a judge of character, especially financial character, and I tell you—if you'll put your cards on the table, I'll do ditto with mine."

"Agreed," said Mr. Sampson Levi. "I'll begin by explaining my interest in your hôtel. I have been expecting to receive a summons from a certain Prince Eugen of Posen to attend him here, and that summons hasn't arrived. It appears that Prince Eugen hasn't come to London at all.

Now, I could have taken my dying davy that he would have been here yesterday at the latest."

"Why were you so sure?"

"Question for question," said Levi. "Let's clear the ground first, Mr. Racksole. Why did you buy this hôtel? That's a conundrum that's been puzzling a lot of our fellows in the City for some days past. Why did you buy the Grand Babylon? And what is the next move to be?"

"There is no next move," answered Racksole candidly, "and I will tell you why I bought the hôtel; there need be no secret about it. I bought it because of a whim." And then Theodore Racksole gave this little Jew, whom he had begun to respect, a faithful account of the transaction with Mr. Felix Babylon. "I suppose," he added, "you find a difficulty in appreciating my state of mind when I did the deal."

"Not a bit," said Mr. Levi. "I once bought an electric launch on the Thames in a very similar way, and it turned out to be one of the most satisfactory purchases I ever made. Then it's a simple accident that you own this hôtel at the present moment?"

"A simple accident—all because of a beefsteak and a bottle of Bass."

"Um!" grunted Mr. Sampson Levi, stroking his triple chin.

"To return to Prince Eugen," Racksole resumed. "I was expecting His Highness here. The State apartments had been prepared for him. He was due on the very afternoon that young Dimmock died. But he never came, and I have not heard why he has failed to arrive; nor have I seen his name in the papers. What his business was in London, I don't know."

"I will tell you," said Mr. Sampson Levi, "he was coming to arrange a loan."

"A State loan?"

"No—a private loan."

"Whom from?"

"From me, Sampson Levi. You look surprised. If you'd lived in London a little longer, you'd know that I was just the person the Prince would come to. Perhaps you aren't aware that down Throgmorton Street way I'm called 'The Court Pawnbroker,' because I arrange loans for the minor, second-class Princes of Europe. I'm a stockbroker, but my real business is financing some of the little Courts of Europe. Now, I may tell you that the Hereditary Prince of Posen particularly wanted a million, and he wanted it by a certain date, and he knew that if the affair wasn't fixed up by a certain time here he wouldn't be able to get it by that certain date. That's why I'm surprised he isn't in London."

"What did he need a million for?"

"Debts," answered Sampson Levi laconically.

"His own?"

"Certainly."

"But he isn't thirty years of age?"

"What of that? He isn't the only European Prince who has run up a million of debts in a dozen years. To a Prince the thing is as easy as eating a sandwich."

"And why has he taken this sudden resolution to liquidate them?"

"Because the Emperor and the lady's parents won't let him marry till he has done so! And quite right, too! He's got to show a clean sheet, or the Princess Anna of Eckstein-Schwartzburg will never be Princess of Posen. Even now the Emperor has no idea how much Prince Eugen's debts amount to. If he had—!"

"But would not the Emperor know of this proposed loan?"

"Not necessarily at once. It could be so managed. Twig?" Mr. Sampson Levi laughed. "I've carried these little affairs through before. After marriage it might be allowed to leak out. And you know the Princess Anna's fortune is pretty big! Now, Mr. Racksole," he added, abruptly changing his tone, "where do you suppose Prince Eugen has disappeared to? Because if he doesn't turn up to-day he can't have that million. To-day is the last day. To-morrow the money will be appropriated, elsewhere. Of course, I'm not alone in this business, and my friends have something to say."

"You ask me where I think Prince Eugen has disappeared to?"

"I do."

"Then you think it's a disappearance?"

Sampson Levi nodded. "Putting two and two together," he said, "I do. The Dimmock business is very peculiar—very peculiar, indeed. Dimmock was a left-handed relation of the Posen family. Twig? Scarcely anyone knows that.

He was made secretary and companion to Prince Aribert, just to keep him in the domestic circle. His mother was an Irishwoman, whose misfortune was that she was too beautiful. Twig?" (Mr. Sampson Levi always used this extraordinary word when he was in a communicative mood.) "My belief is that Dimmock's death has something to do with the disappearance of Prince Eugen. The only thing that passes me is this: Why should anyone want to make Prince Eugen disappear? The poor little Prince hasn't an enemy in the world. If he's been 'copped,' as they say, why has he been 'copped'? It won't do anyone any good."

"Won't it?" repeated Racksole, with a sudden flash.

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Levi.

"I mean this: Suppose some other European pauper Prince was anxious to marry Princess Anna and her fortune, wouldn't that Prince have an interest in stopping this loan of yours to Prince Eugen? Wouldn't he have an interest in causing Prince Eugen to disappear—at any rate, for a time?"

Sampson Levi thought hard for a few moments.

"Mr. Theodore Racksole," he said at length, "I do believe you have hit on something."

Chapter 12

Rocco and Room No. 111

On the afternoon of the same day—the interview just described had occurred in the morning—Racksole was visited by another idea, and he said to himself that he ought to have thought of it before. The conversation with Mr. Sampson Levi had continued for a considerable time, and the two men had exchanged various notions, and agreed to meet again, but the theory that Reginald Dimmock had probably been a traitor to his family—a traitor whose repentance had caused his death—had not been thoroughly discussed; the talk had tended rather to Continental politics, with a view to discovering what princely family might have an interest in the temporary disappearance of Prince Eugen. Now, as Racksole considered in detail the particular affair of Reginald Dimmock, deceased, he was struck by one point especially, to wit: Why had Dimmock and Jules manoeuvred to turn Nella Racksole out of Room No. 111 on that first night? That they had so manoeuvred, that the broken window-pane was not a mere accident, Racksole felt perfectly sure. He had felt perfectly sure all along; but the significance of the facts had not struck him. It was plain to him now that there must be something of extraordinary and peculiar importance about Room No. 111. After lunch he wandered quietly upstairs and looked at Room No. 111; that is to say, he looked at the outside of it; it happened to be occupied, but the guest was leaving that evening. The thought crossed his mind that there could be no object in gazing blankly at the outside of a room; yet he gazed; then he wandered quickly down again to the next floor, and in passing along the corridor of that floor he stopped, and with an involuntary gesture stamped his foot.

"Great Scott!" he said, "I've got hold of something—No. 111 is exactly over the State apartments."

He went to the bureau, and issued instructions that No. 111 was not to be re-let to anyone until further orders. At the bureau they gave him Nella's note, which ran thus:

Dearest Papa,

I am going away for a day or two on the trail of a clue.

If I'm not back in three days, begin to inquire for me at Ostend. Till then leave me alone.

Your sagacious daughter,
Nell.

These few words, in Nella's large scrawling hand, filled one side of the paper. At the bottom was a P.T.O. He turned over, and read the sentence, underlined,

P.S.—Keep an eye on Rocco.

"I wonder what the little creature is up to?" he murmured, as he tore the letter into small fragments, and threw them into the waste-paper basket.

Then, without any delay, he took the lift down to the basement, with the object of making a preliminary inspection of Rocco in his lair. He could scarcely bring himself to believe that this suave and stately gentleman, this enthusiast of gastronomy, was concerned in the machinations of Jules and other rascals unknown. Nevertheless, from habit, he obeyed his daughter, giving her credit for a certain amount of perspicuity and cleverness.

The kitchens of the Grand Babylon Hôtel are one of the wonders of Europe.

Only three years before the events now under narration Felix Babylon had had them newly installed with every device and patent that the ingenuity of two continents could supply. They covered nearly an acre of superficial space.

They were walled and floored from end to end with tiles and marble, which enabled them to be washed down every morning like the deck of a man-of-war.

Visitors were sometimes taken to see the potato-paring machine, the patent plate-dryer, the Babylon-spit (a contrivance of Felix Babylon's own), the silver-grill, the system of connected stock-pots, and other

amazing phenomena of the department. Sometimes, if they were fortunate, they might also see the artist who sculptured ice into forms of men and beasts for table ornaments, or the first napkin-folder in London, or the man who daily invented fresh designs for pastry and blancmanges. Twelve chefs pursued their labours in those kitchens, helped by ninety assistant chefs, and a further army of unconsidered menials. Over all these was Rocco, supreme and unapproachable. Half-way along the suite of kitchens, Rocco had an apartment of his own, wherein he thought out those magnificent combinations, those marvellous feats of succulence and originality, which had given him his fame. Visitors never caught a glimpse of Rocco in the kitchens, though sometimes, on a special night, he would stroll nonchalantly through the dining-room, like the great man he was, to receive the compliments of the hôtel habitués—people of insight who recognized his uniqueness.

Theodore Racksole's sudden and unusual appearance in the kitchen caused a little stir. He nodded to some of the chefs, but said nothing to anyone, merely wandering about amid the maze of copper utensils, and white-capped workers. At length he saw Rocco, surrounded by several admiring chefs. Rocco was bending over a freshly-roasted partridge which lay on a blue dish. He plunged a long fork into the back of the bird, and raised it in the air with his left hand. In his right he held a long glittering carving-knife. He was giving one of his world-famous exhibitions of carving. In four swift, unerring, delicate, perfect strokes he cleanly severed the limbs of the partridge. It was a wonderful achievement—how wondrous none but the really skilful carver can properly appreciate. The chefs emitted a hum of applause, and Rocco, long, lean, and graceful, retired to his own apartment. Racksole followed him. Rocco sat in a chair, one hand over his eyes; he had not noticed Theodore Racksole.

"What are you doing, M. Rocco?" the millionaire asked smiling. "Ah!" exclaimed Rocco, starting up with an apology. "Pardon! I was inventing a new mayonnaise, which I shall need for a certain menu next week."

"Do you invent these things without materials, then?" questioned Racksole.

"Certainly. I do dem in my mind. I tink dem. Why should I want materials? I know all flavours. I tink, and tink, and tink, and it is done. I write down.

I give the recipe to my best chef—dere you are. I need not even taste, I know how it will taste. It is like composing music. De great composers do not compose at de piano."

"I see," said Racksole.

"It is because I work like dat dat you pay me three thousand a year," Rocco added gravely.

"Heard about Jules?" said Racksole abruptly.

"Jules?"

"Yes. He's been arrested in Ostend," the millionaire continued, lying cleverly at a venture. "They say that he and several others are implicated in a murder case—the murder of Reginald Dimmock."

"Truly?" drawled Rocco, scarcely hiding a yawn. His indifference was so superb, so gorgeous, that Racksole instantly divined that it was assumed for the occasion.

"It seems that, after all, the police are good for something. But this is the first time I ever knew them to be worth their salt. There is to be a thorough and systematic search of the hôtel to-morrow," Racksole went on. "I have mentioned it to you to warn you that so far as you are concerned the search is of course merely a matter of form. You will not object to the detectives looking through your rooms?"

"Certainly not," and Rocco shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall ask you to say nothing about this to anyone," said Racksole. "The news of Jules' arrest is quite private to myself. The papers know nothing of it. You comprehend?"

Rocco smiled in his grand manner, and Rocco's master thereupon went away.

Racksole was very well satisfied with the little conversation. It was perhaps dangerous to tell a series of mere lies to a clever fellow like Rocco, and Racksole wondered how he should ultimately explain them to this great master-chef if his and Nella's suspicions should be unfounded, and nothing came of them. Nevertheless, Rocco's manner, a strange elusive something in the man's eyes, had nearly convinced Racksole that he was somehow implicated in Jules' schemes—and probably in the death of Reginald Dimmock and the disappearance of Prince Eugen of Posen.

That night, or rather about half-past one the next morning, when the last noises of the hôtel's life had died down, Racksole made his way to Room 111 on the second floor. He locked the door on the inside, and proceeded to examine the place, square foot by square foot. Every now and then some creak or other sound startled him, and he listened intently for a few seconds. The bedroom was furnished in the ordinary splendid style of bedrooms at the Grand Babylon Hôtel, and in that respect called for no remark. What most interested Racksole was the

flooring. He pulled up the thick Oriental carpet, and peered along every plank, but could discover nothing unusual.

Then he went to the dressing-room, and finally to the bathroom, both of which opened out of the main room. But in neither of these smaller chambers was he any more successful than in the bedroom itself. Finally he came to the bath, which was enclosed in a panelled casing of polished wood, after the manner of baths. Some baths have a cupboard beneath the taps, with a door at the side, but this one appeared to have none. He tapped the panels, but not a single one of them gave forth that "curious hollow sound" which usually betokens a secret place. Idly he turned the cold-tap of the bath, and the water began to rush in. He turned off the cold-tap and turned on the waste-tap, and as he did so his knee, which was pressing against the panelling, slipped forward. The panelling had given way, and he saw that one large panel was hinged from the inside, and caught with a hasp, also on the inside. A large space within the casing of the end of the bath was thus revealed. Before doing anything else, Racksole tried to repeat the trick with the waste-tap, but he failed; it would not work again, nor could he in any way perceive that there was any connection between the rod of the waste-tap and the hasp of the panel. Racksole could not see into the cavity within the casing, and the electric light was fixed, and could not be moved about like a candle. He felt in his pockets, and fortunately discovered a box of matches. Aided by these, he looked into the cavity, and saw nothing; nothing except a rather large hole at the far end—some three feet from the casing. With some difficulty he squeezed himself through the open panel, and took a half-kneeling, half-sitting posture within. There he struck a match, and it was a most unfortunate thing that in striking, the box being half open, he set fire to all the matches, and was half smothered in the atrocious stink of phosphorus which resulted. One match burned clear on the floor of the cavity, and, rubbing his eyes, Racksole picked it up, and looked down the hole which he had previously descried. It was a hole apparently bottomless, and about eighteen inches square. The curious part about the hole was that a rope-ladder hung down it. When he saw that rope-ladder Racksole smiled the smile of a happy man.

The match went out.

Should he make a long journey, perhaps to some distant corner of the hôtel, for a fresh box of matches, or should he attempt to descend that rope-ladder in the dark? He decided on the latter course, and he was the more strongly moved thereto as he could now distinguish a faint, a very faint tinge of light at the bottom of the hole.

With infinite care he compressed himself into the well-like hole, and descended the latter. At length he arrived on firm ground, perspiring, but quite safe and quite excited. He saw now that the tinge of light came through a small hole in the wood. He put his eye to the wood, and found that he had a fine view of the State bathroom, and through the door of the State bathroom into the State bedroom. At the massive marble-topped washstand in the State bedroom a man was visible, bending over some object which lay thereon.

The man was Rocco!

Chapter 13

In the State Bedroom

It was of course plain to Racksole that the peculiar passageway which he had, at great personal inconvenience, discovered between the bathroom of No. 111 and the State bathroom on the floor below must have been specially designed by some person or persons for the purpose of keeping a nefarious watch upon the occupants of the State suite of apartments. It was a means of communication at once simple and ingenious. At that moment he could not be sure of the precise method employed for it, but he surmised that the casing of the waterpipes had been used as a "well", while space for the pipes themselves had been found in the thickness of the ample brick walls of the Grand Babylon. The eye-hole, through which he now had a view of the bedroom, was a very minute one, and probably would scarcely be noticed from the exterior. One thing he observed concerning it, namely, that it had been made for a man somewhat taller than himself; he was obliged to stand on tiptoe in order to get his eye in the correct position. He remembered that both Jules and Rocco were distinctly above the average height; also that they were both thin men, and could have descended the well with comparative ease. Theodore Racksole, though not stout, was a well-set man with large bones.

These things flashed through his mind as he gazed, spellbound, at the mysterious movements of Rocco. The door between the bathroom and the bedroom was wide open, and his own situation was such that his view embraced a considerable portion of the bedroom, including the whole of the immense and gorgeously-upholstered bedstead, but not including the whole of the marble washstand. He could see only half of the washstand, and at intervals Rocco passed out of sight as his lithe hands moved over the object which lay on the marble. At first Theodore

Racksole could not decide what this object was, but after a time, as his eyes grew accustomed to the position and the light, he made it out.

It was the body of a man. Or, rather, to be more exact, Racksole could discern the legs of a man on that half of the table which was visible to him. Involuntarily he shuddered, as the conviction forced itself upon him that Rocco had some unconscious human being helpless on that cold marble surface. The legs never moved. Therefore, the hapless creature was either asleep or under the influence of an anaesthetic—or (horrible thought!) dead.

Racksole wanted to call out, to stop by some means or other the dreadful midnight activity which was proceeding before his astonished eyes; but fortunately he restrained himself.

On the washstand he could see certain strangely-shaped utensils and instruments which Rocco used from time to time. The work seemed to Racksole to continue for interminable hours, and then at last Rocco ceased, gave a sign of satisfaction, whistled several bars from "Cavalleria Rusticana", and came into the bath-room, where he took off his coat, and very quietly washed his hands. As he stood calmly and leisurely wiping those long fingers of his, he was less than four feet from Racksole, and the cooped-up millionaire trembled, holding his breath, lest Rocco should detect his presence behind the woodwork. But nothing happened, and Rocco returned unsuspectingly to the bedroom. Racksole saw him place some sort of white flannel garment over the prone form on the table, and then lift it bodily on to the great bed, where it lay awfully still. The hidden watcher was sure now that it was a corpse upon which Rocco had been exercising his mysterious and sinister functions.

But whose corpse? And what functions? Could this be a West End hôtel, Racksole's own hôtel, in the very heart of London, the best-policed city in the world? It seemed incredible, impossible; yet so it was. Once more he remembered what Felix Babylon had said to him and realized the truth of the saying anew. The proprietor of a vast and complicated establishment like the Grand Babylon could never know a tithe of the extraordinary and queer occurrences which happened daily under his very nose; the atmosphere of such a caravanserai must necessarily be an atmosphere of mystery and problems apparently inexplicable. Nevertheless, Racksole thought that Fate was carrying things with rather a high hand when she permitted his chef to spend the night hours over a man's corpse in his State bedroom, this sacred apartment which was supposed to be occupied only by individuals of Royal Blood. Rack-

sole would not have objected to a certain amount of mystery, but he decidedly thought that there was a little too much mystery here for his taste. He thought that even Felix Babylon would have been surprised at this.

The electric chandelier in the centre of the ceiling was not lighted; only the two lights on either side of the washstand were switched on, and these did not sufficiently illuminate the features of the man on the bed to enable Racksole to see them clearly. In vain the millionaire strained his eyes; he could only make out that the corpse was probably that of a young man. Just as he was wondering what would be the best course of action to pursue, he saw Rocco with a square-shaped black box in his hand. Then the chef switched off the two electric lights, and the State bedroom was in darkness. In that swift darkness Racksole heard Rocco spring on to the bed. Another half-dozen moments of suspense, and there was a blinding flash of white, which endured for several seconds, and showed Rocco standing like an evil spirit over the corpse, the black box in one hand and a burning piece of aluminium wire in the other. The aluminium wire burnt out, and darkness followed blacker than before.

Rocco had photographed the corpse by flashlight.

But the dazzling flare which had disclosed the features of the dead man to the insensible lens of the camera had disclosed them also to Theodore Racksole. The dead man was Reginald Dimmock!

Stung into action by this discovery, Racksole tried to find the exit from his place of concealment. He felt sure that there existed some way out into the State bathroom, but he sought for it fruitlessly, groping with both hands and feet. Then he decided that he must ascend the rope-ladder, make haste for the first-floor corridor, and intercept Rocco when he left the State apartments. It was a painful and difficult business to ascend that thin and yielding ladder in such a confined space, but Racksole was managing it very nicely, and had nearly reached the top, when, by some untoward freak of chance, the ladder broke above his weight, and he slipped ignominiously down to the bottom of the wooden tube. Smothering an excusable curse, Racksole crouched, baffled. Then he saw that the force of his fall had somehow opened a trap-door at his feet. He squeezed through, pushed open another tiny door, and in another second stood in the State bathroom. He was dishevelled, perspiring, rather bewildered; but he was there. In the next second he had resumed absolute command of all his faculties.

Strange to say, he had moved so quietly that Rocco had apparently not heard him. He stepped noiselessly to the door between the bathroom

and the bedroom, and stood there in silence. Rocco had switched on again the lights over the washstand and was busy with his utensils. Racksole deliberately coughed.

Chapter 14

Rocco Answers Some Questions

Rocco turned round with the swiftness of a startled tiger, and gave Theodore Racksole one long piercing glance.

"D—n!" said Rocco, with as pure an Anglo-Saxon accent and intonation as Racksole himself could have accomplished.

The most extraordinary thing about the situation was that at this juncture Theodore Racksole did not know what to say. He was so dumbfounded by the affair, and especially by Rocco's absolute and sublime calm, that both speech and thought failed him.

"I give in," said Rocco. "From the moment you entered this cursed hôtel I was afraid of you. I told Jules I was afraid of you. I knew there would be trouble with a man of your kidney, and I was right; confound it! I tell you I give in. I know when I'm beaten. I've got no revolver and no weapons of any kind. I surrender. Do what you like."

And with that Rocco sat down on a chair. It was magnificently done. Only a truly great man could have done it. Rocco actually kept his dignity.

For answer, Racksole walked slowly into the vast apartment, seized a chair, and, dragging it up to Rocco's chair, sat down opposite to him. Thus they faced each other, their knees almost touching, both in evening dress. On Rocco's right hand was the bed, with the corpse of Reginald Dimmock. On Racksole's right hand, and a little behind him, was the marble washstand, still littered with Rocco's implements. The electric light shone on Rocco's left cheek, leaving the other side of his face in shadow. Racksole tapped him on the knee twice.

"So you're another Englishman masquerading as a foreigner in my hôtel,"

Racksole remarked, by way of commencing the interrogation.

"I'm not," answered Rocco quietly. "I'm a citizen of the United States."

"The deuce you are!" Racksole exclaimed.

"Yes, I was born at West Orange, New Jersey, New York State. I call myself an Italian because it was in Italy that I first made a name as a chef—at Rome. It is better for a great chef like me to be a foreigner. Imagine a great chef named Elihu P. Rucker. You can't imagine it. I changed my nationality for the same reason that my friend and colleague, Jules, otherwise Mr. Jackson, changed his."

"So Jules is your friend and colleague, is he?"

"He was, but from this moment he is no longer. I began to disapprove of his methods no less than a week ago, and my disapproval will now take active form."

"Will it?" said Racksole. "I calculate it just won't, Mr. Elihu P. Rucker, citizen of the United States. Before you are very much older you'll be in the kind hands of the police, and your activities, in no matter what direction, will come to an abrupt conclusion."

"It is possible," sighed Rocco.

"In the meantime, I'll ask you one or two questions for my own private satisfaction. You've acknowledged that the game is up, and you may as well answer them with as much candour as you feel yourself capable of. See?"

"I see," replied Rocco calmly, "but I guess I can't answer all questions. I'll do what I can."

"Well," said Racksole, clearing his throat, "what's the scheme all about? Tell me in a word."

"Not in a thousand words. It isn't my secret, you know."

"Why was poor little Dimmock poisoned?" The millionaire's voice softened as he looked for an instant at the corpse of the unfortunate young man.

"I don't know," said Rocco. "I don't mind informing you that I objected to that part of the business. I wasn't made aware of it till after it was done, and then I tell you it got my dander up considerable."

"You mean to say you don't know why Dimmock was done to death?"

"I mean to say I couldn't see the sense of it. Of course he—er—died, because he sort of cried off the scheme, having previously taken a share of it. I don't mind saying that much, because you probably guessed it

for yourself. But I solemnly state that I have a conscientious objection to murder."

"Then it was murder?"

"It was a kind of murder," Rocco admitted.

"Who did it?"

"Unfair question," said Rocco.

"Who else is in this precious scheme besides Jules and yourself?"

"Don't know, on my honour."

"Well, then, tell me this. What have you been doing to Dimmock's body?"

"How long were you in that bathroom?" Rocco parried with sublime impudence.

"Don't question me, Mr. Rucker," said Theodore Racksole. "I feel very much inclined to break your back across my knee. Therefore I advise you not to irritate me. What have you been doing to Dimmock's body?"

"I've been embalming it."

"Em—balming it."

"Certainly; Richardson's system of arterial fluid injection, as improved by myself. You weren't aware that I included the art of embalming among my accomplishments. Nevertheless, it is so."

"But why?" asked Racksole, more mystified than ever. "Why should you trouble to embalm the poor chap's corpse?"

"Can't you see? Doesn't it strike you? That corpse has to be taken care of. It contains, or rather, it did contain, very serious evidence against some person or persons unknown to the police. It may be necessary to move it about from place to place. A corpse can't be hidden for long; a corpse betrays itself. One couldn't throw it in the Thames, for it would have been found inside twelve hours. One couldn't bury it—it wasn't safe. The only thing was to keep it handy and movable, ready for emergencies. I needn't inform you that, without embalming, you can't keep a corpse handy and movable for more than four or five days. It's the kind of thing that won't keep. And so it was suggested that I should embalm it, and I did. Mind you, I still objected to the murder, but I couldn't go back on a colleague, you understand. You do understand that, don't you? Well, here you are, and here it is, and that's all."

Rocco leaned back in his chair as though he had said everything that ought to be said. He closed his eyes to indicate that so far as he was concerned the conversation was also closed. Theodore Racksole stood up.

"I hope," said Rocco, suddenly opening his eyes, "I hope you'll call in the police without any delay. It's getting late, and I don't like going without my night's rest."

"Where do you suppose you'll get a night's rest?" Racksole asked.

"In the cells, of course. Haven't I told you I know when I'm beaten. I'm not so blind as not to be able to see that there's at any rate a prima facie case against me. I expect I shall get off with a year or two's imprisonment as accessory after the fact—I think that's what they call it. Anyhow, I shall be in a position to prove that I am not implicated in the murder of this unfortunate nincompoop." He pointed, with a strange, scornful gesture of his elbow, to the bed. "And now, shall we go? Everyone is asleep, but there will be a policeman within call of the watchman in the portico. I am at your service. Let us go down together, Mr. Racksole. I give you my word to go quietly."

"Stay a moment," said Theodore Racksole curtly; "there is no hurry. It won't do you any harm to forego another hour's sleep, especially as you will have no work to do to-morrow. I have one or two more questions to put to you."

"Well?" Rocco murmured, with an air of tired resignation, as if to say, "What must be must be."

"Where has Dimmock's corpse been during the last three or four days, since he—died?"

"Oh!" answered Rocco, apparently surprised at the simplicity of the question. "It's been in my room, and one night it was on the roof; once it went out of the hôtel as luggage, but it came back the next day as a case of Demerara sugar. I forget where else it has been, but it's been kept perfectly safe and treated with every consideration."

"And who contrived all these manoeuvres?" asked Racksole as calmly as he could.

"I did. That is to say, I invented them and I saw that they were carried out. You see, the suspicions of your police obliged me to be particularly spry."

"And who carried them out?"

"Ah! that would be telling tales. But I don't mind assuring you that my accomplices were innocent accomplices. It is absurdly easy for a man like me to impose on underlings—absurdly easy."

"What did you intend to do with the corpse ultimately?" Racksole pursued his inquiry with immovable countenance.

"Who knows?" said Rocco, twisting his beautiful moustache. "That would have depended on several things—on your police, for instance.

But probably in the end we should have restored this mortal clay"—again he jerked his elbow—"to the man's sorrowing relatives."

"Do you know who the relatives are?"

"Certainly. Don't you? If you don't I need only hint that Dimmock had a Prince for his father."

"It seems to me," said Racksole, with cold sarcasm, "that you behaved rather clumsily in choosing this bedroom as the scene of your operations."

"Not at all," said Rocco. "There was no other apartment so suitable in the whole hôtel. Who would have guessed that anything was going on here? It was the very place for me."

"I guessed," said Racksole succinctly.

"Yes, you guessed, Mr. Racksole. But I had not counted on you. You are the only smart man in the business. You are an American citizen, and I hadn't reckoned to have to deal with that class of person."

"Apparently I frightened you this afternoon?"

"Not in the least."

"You were not afraid of a search?"

"I knew that no search was intended. I knew that you were trying to frighten me. You must really credit me with a little sagacity and insight, Mr. Racksole. Immediately you began to talk to me in the kitchen this afternoon I felt you were on the track. But I was not frightened. I merely decided that there was no time to be lost—that I must act quickly. I did act quickly, but, it seems, not quickly enough. I grant that your rapidity exceeded mine. Let us go downstairs, I beg."

Rocco rose and moved towards the door. With an instinctive action Racksole rushed forward and seized him by the shoulder.

"No tricks!" said Racksole. "You're in my custody and don't forget it."

Rocco turned on his employer a look of gentle, dignified scorn. "Have I not informed you," he said, "that I have the intention of going quietly?"

Racksole felt almost ashamed for the moment. It flashed across him that a man can be great, even in crime.

"What an ineffable fool you were," said Racksole, stopping him at the threshold, "with your talents, your unique talents, to get yourself mixed up in an affair of this kind. You are ruined. And, by Jove! you were a great man in your own line."

"Mr. Racksole," said Rocco very quickly, "that is the truest word you have spoken this night. I was a great man in my own line. And I am an ineffable fool. Alas!" He brought his long arms to his sides with a thud.

"Why did you do it?"

"I was fascinated—fascinated by Jules. He, too, is a great man. We had great opportunities, here in the Grand Babylon. It was a great game. It was worth the candle. The prizes were enormous. You would admit these things if you knew the facts. Perhaps some day you will know them, for you are a fairly clever person at getting to the root of a matter. Yes, I was blinded, hypnotized."

"And now you are ruined."

"Not ruined, not ruined. Afterwards, in a few years, I shall come up again.

A man of genius like me is never ruined till he is dead. Genius is always forgiven. I shall be forgiven. Suppose I am sent to prison. When I emerge I shall be no gaol-bird. I shall be Rocco—the great Rocco. And half the hôtels in Europe will invite me to join them."

"Let me tell you, as man to man, that you have achieved your own degradation. There is no excuse."

"I know it," said Rocco. "Let us go."

Racksole was distinctly and notably impressed by this man—by this master spirit to whom he was to have paid a salary at the rate of three thousand pounds a year. He even felt sorry for him. And so, side by side, the captor and the captured, they passed into the vast deserted corridor of the hôtel.

Rocco stopped at the grating of the first lift.

"It will be locked," said Racksole. "We must use the stairs to-night."

"But I have a key. I always carry one," said Rocco, and he pulled one out of his pocket, and, unfastening the iron screen, pushed it open. Racksole smiled at his readiness and aplomb.

"After you," said Rocco, bowing in his finest manner, and Racksole stepped into the lift.

With the swiftness of lighting Rocco pushed forward the iron screen, which locked itself automatically. Theodore Racksole was hopelessly a prisoner within the lift, while Rocco stood free in the corridor.

"Good-bye, Mr. Racksole," he remarked suavely, bowing again, lower than before. "Good-bye: I hate to take a mean advantage of you in this fashion, but really you must allow that you have been very simple. You are a clever man, as I have already said, up to a certain point. It is past that point that my own cleverness comes in. Again, good-bye. After all, I shall have no rest to-night, but perhaps even that will be better that sleeping in a police cell. If you make a great noise you may wake someone and ultimately get released from this lift. But I advise you to

compose yourself, and wait till morning. It will be more dignified. For the third time, good-bye."

And with that Rocco, without hastening, walked down the corridor and so out of sight.

Racksole said never a word. He was too disgusted with himself to speak. He clenched his fists, and put his teeth together, and held his breath. In the silence he could hear the dwindling sound of Rocco's footsteps on the thick carpet.

It was the greatest blow of Racksole's life.

The next morning the high-born guests of the Grand Babylon were aroused by a rumour that by some accident the millionaire proprietor of the hôtel had remained all night locked up in the lift. It was also stated that Rocco had quarrelled with his new master and incontinently left the place. A duchess said that Rocco's departure would mean the ruin of the hôtel, whereupon her husband advised her not to talk nonsense.

As for Racksole, he sent a message for the detective in charge of the Dimmock affair, and bravely told him the happenings of the previous night.

The narration was a decided ordeal to a man of Racksole's temperament.

"A strange story!" commented Detective Marshall, and he could not avoid a smile. "The climax was unfortunate, but you have certainly got some valuable facts."

Racksole said nothing.

"I myself have a clue," added the detective. "When your message arrived I was just coming up to see you. I want you to accompany me to a certain spot not far from here. Will you come, now, at once?"

"With pleasure," said Racksole.

At that moment a page entered with a telegram. Racksole opened it read:

> Please come instantly. Nella. Hôtel Wellington, Ostend.

He looked at his watch.

"I can't come," he said to the detective. I'm going to Ostend."

"To Ostend?"

"Yes, now."

"But really, Mr. Racksole," protested the detective. "My business is urgent."

"So's mine," said Racksole.

In ten minutes he was on his way to Victoria Station.

Chapter 15

End of the Yacht Adventure

We must now return to Nella Racksole and Prince Aribert of Posen on board the yacht without a name. The Prince's first business was to make Jules, otherwise Mr. Tom Jackson, perfectly secure by means of several pieces of rope. Although Mr. Jackson had been stunned into a complete unconsciousness, and there was a contused wound under his ear, no one could say how soon he might not come to himself and get very violent. So the Prince, having tied his arms and legs, made him fast to a stanchion.

"I hope he won't die," said Nella. "He looks very white."

"The Mr. Jacksons of this world," said Prince Aribert sententiously, "never die till they are hung. By the way, I wonder how it is that no one has interfered with us. Perhaps they are discreetly afraid of my revolver—of your revolver, I mean."

Both he and Nella glanced up at the imperturbable steersman, who kept the yacht's head straight out to sea. By this time they were about a couple of miles from the Belgian shore.

Addressing him in French, the Prince ordered the sailor to put the yacht about, and make again for Ostend Harbour, but the fellow took no notice whatever of the summons. The Prince raised the revolver, with the idea of frightening the steersman, and then the man began to talk rapidly in a mixture of French and Flemish. He said that he had received Jules' strict orders not to interfere in any way, no matter what might happen on the deck of the yacht. He was the captain of the yacht, and he had to make for a certain English port, the name of which he could not divulge: he was to keep the vessel at full steam ahead under any and all circumstances. He seemed to be a very big, a very strong, and a very determined man, and the Prince was at a loss what course of action to

pursue. He asked several more questions, but the only effect of them was to render the man taciturn and ill-humoured.

In vain Prince Aribert explained that Miss Nella Racksole, daughter of millionaire Racksole, had been abducted by Mr. Tom Jackson; in vain he flourished the revolver threateningly; the surly but courageous captain said merely that that had nothing to do with him; he had instructions, and he should carry them out. He sarcastically begged to remind his interlocutor that he was the captain of the yacht.

"It won't do to shoot him, I suppose," said the Prince to Nella. "I might bore a hole into his leg, or something of that kind."

"It's rather risky, and rather hard on the poor captain, with his extraordinary sense of duty," said Nella. "And, besides, the whole crew might turn on us. No, we must think of something else."

"I wonder where the crew is," said the Prince.

Just then Mr. Jackson, prone and bound on the deck, showed signs of recovering from his swoon. His eyes opened, and he gazed vacantly around. At length he caught sight of the Prince, who approached him with the revolver well in view.

"It's you, is it?" he murmured faintly. "What are you doing on board? Who's tied me up like this?"

"See here!" replied the Prince, "I don't want to have any arguments, but this yacht must return to Ostend at once, where you will be given up to the authorities."

"Really!" snarled Mr. Tom Jackson. "Shall I!" Then he called out in French to the man at the wheel, "Hi André! let these two be put off in the dinghy."

It was a peculiar situation. Certain of nothing but the possession of Nella's revolver, the Prince scarcely knew whether to carry the argument further, and with stronger measures, or to accept the situation with as much dignity as the circumstances would permit.

"Let us take the dinghy," said Nella; "we can row ashore in an hour."

He felt that she was right. To leave the yacht in such a manner seemed somewhat ignominious, and it certainly involved the escape of that profound villain, Mr. Thomas Jackson. But what else could be done? The Prince and Nella constituted one party on the vessel; they knew their own strength, but they did not know the strength of their opponents. They held the hostile ringleader bound and captive, but this man had proved himself capable of giving orders, and even to gag him would not help them if the captain of the yacht persisted in his obstinate course. Moreover, there was a distinct objection to promiscuous shooting. The

Prince felt that there was no knowing how promiscuous shooting might end.

"We will take the dinghy," said the Prince quickly, to the captain.

A bell rang below, and a sailor and the Negro boy appeared on deck. The pulsations of the screw grew less rapid. The yacht stopped. The dinghy was lowered. As the Prince and Nella prepared to descend into the little cock-boat Mr. Tom Jackson addressed Nella, all bound as he lay.

"Good-bye," he said, "I shall see you again, never fear.".

In another moment they were in the dinghy, and the dinghy was adrift. The yacht's screw churned the water, and the beautiful vessel slipped away from them. As it receded a figure appeared at the stem. It was Mr. Thomas Jackson.

He had been released by his minions. He held a white handkerchief to his ear, and offered a calm, enigmatic smile to the two forlorn but victorious occupants of the dinghy. Jules had been defeated for once in his life; or perhaps it would be more just to say that he had been out-manoeuvred. Men like Jules are incapable of being defeated. It was characteristic of his luck that now, in the very hour when he had been caught red-handed in a serious crime against society, he should be effecting a leisurely escape—an escape which left no clue behind.

The sea was utterly calm and blue in the morning sun. The dinghy rocked itself lazily in the swell of the yacht's departure. As the mist cleared away the outline of the shore became more distinct, and it appeared as if Ostend was distant scarcely a cable's length. The white dome of the great Kursaal glittered in the pale turquoise sky, and the smoke of steamers in the harbour could be plainly distinguished. On the offing was a crowd of brown-sailed fishing luggers returning with the night's catch. The many-hued bathing-vans could be counted on the distant beach. Everything seemed perfectly normal. It was difficult for either Nella or her companion to realize that anything extraordinary had happened within the last hour. Yet there was the yacht, not a mile off, to prove to them that something very extraordinary had, in fact, happened. The yacht was no vision, nor was that sinister watching figure at its stern a vision, either.

"I suppose Jules was too surprised and too feeble to inquire how I came to be on board his yacht," said the Prince, taking the oars.

"Oh! How did you?" asked Nella, her face lighting up. "Really, I had almost forgotten that part of the affair."

"I must begin at the beginning and it will take some time," answered the Prince. "Had we not better postpone the recital till we get ashore?"

"I will row and you shall talk," said Nella. "I want to know now."

He smiled happily at her, but gently declined to yield up the oars.

"Is it not sufficient that I am here?" he said.

"It is sufficient, yes," she replied, "but I want to know."

With a long, easy stroke he was pulling the dinghy shorewards. She sat in the stern-sheets.

"There is no rudder," he remarked, "so you must direct me. Keep the boat's head on the lighthouse. The tide seems to be running in strongly; that will help us. The people on shore will think that we have only been for a little early morning excursion."

"Will you kindly tell me how it came about that you were able to save my life, Prince?" she said.

"Save your life, Miss Racksole? I didn't save your life; I merely knocked a man down."

"You saved my life," she repeated. "That villain would have stopped at nothing. I saw it in his eye."

"Then you were a brave woman, for you showed no fear of death." His admiring gaze rested full on her. For a moment the oars ceased to move.

She gave a gesture of impatience.

"It happened that I saw you last night in your carriage," he said. "The fact is, I had not had the audacity to go to Berlin with my story. I stopped in Ostend to see whether I could do a little detective work on my own account.

It was a piece of good luck that I saw you. I followed the carriage as quickly as I could, and I just caught a glimpse of you as you entered that awful house. I knew that Jules had something to do with that house. I guessed what you were doing. I was afraid for you. Fortunately I had surveyed the house pretty thoroughly. There is an entrance to it at the back, from a narrow lane. I made my way there. I got into the yard at the back, and I stood under the window of the room where you had the interview with Miss Spencer. I heard everything that was said. It was a courageous enterprise on your part to follow Miss Spencer from the Grand Babylon to Ostend. Well, I dared not force an entrance, lest I might precipitate matters too suddenly, and involve both of us in a difficulty. I merely kept watch. Ah, Miss Racksole! you were magnificent with Miss Spencer; as I say, I could hear every word, for the window was slightly open. I felt that you needed no assistance from

me. And then she cheated you with a trick, and the revolver came flying through the window. I picked it up, I thought it would probably be useful. There was a silence. I did not guess at first that you had fainted. I thought that you had escaped. When I found out the truth it was too late for me to intervene. There were two men, both desperate, besides Miss Spencer—"

"Who was the other man?" asked Nella.

"I do not know. It was dark. They drove away with you to the harbour. Again I followed. I saw them carry you on board. Before the yacht weighed anchor I managed to climb unobserved into the dinghy. I lay down full length in it, and no one suspected that I was there. I think you know the rest."

"Was the yacht all ready for sea?"

"The yacht was all ready for sea. The captain fellow was on the bridge, and steam was up."

"Then they expected me! How could that be?"

"They expected some one. I do not think they expected you."

"Did the second man go on board?"

"He helped to carry you along the gangway, but he came back again to the carriage. He was the driver."

"And no one else saw the business?"

"The quay was deserted. You see, the last steamer had arrived for the night."

There was a brief silence, and then Nella ejaculated, under her breath.

"Truly, it is a wonderful world!"

And it was a wonderful world for them, though scarcely perhaps, in the sense which Nella Racksole had intended. They had just emerged from a highly disconcerting experience. Among other minor inconveniences, they had had no breakfast. They were out in the sea in a tiny boat. Neither of them knew what the day might bring forth. The man, at least, had the most serious anxieties for the safety of his Royal nephew. And yet—and yet—neither of them wished that that voyage of the little boat on the summer tide should come to an end. Each, perhaps unconsciously, had a vague desire that it might last for ever, he lazily pulling, she directing his course at intervals by a movement of her distractingly pretty head. How was this condition of affairs to be explained? Well, they were both young; they both had superb health, and all the ardour of youth; and—they were together.

The boat was very small indeed; her face was scarcely a yard from his. She, in his eyes, surrounded by the glamour of beauty and vast wealth;

he, in her eyes, surrounded by the glamour of masculine intrepidity and the brilliance of a throne.

But all voyages come to an end, either at the shore or at the bottom of the sea, and at length the dinghy passed between the stone jetties of the harbour. The Prince rowed to the nearest steps, tied up the boat, and they landed. It was six o'clock in the morning, and a day of gorgeous sunlight had opened. Few people were about at that early hour.

"And now, what next?" said the Prince. "I must take you to an hôtel."

"I am in your hands," she acquiesced, with a smile which sent the blood racing through his veins. He perceived now that she was tired and overcome, suffering from a sudden and natural reaction.

At the Hôtel Wellington the Prince told the sleepy door-keeper that they had come by the early train from Bruges, and wanted breakfast at once. It was absurdly early, but a common English sovereign will work wonders in any Belgian hôtel, and in a very brief time Nella and the Prince were breakfasting on the verandah of the hôtel upon chocolate that had been specially and hastily brewed for them.

"I never tasted such excellent chocolate," claimed the Prince.

The statement was wildly untrue, for the Hôtel Wellington is not celebrated for its chocolate. Nevertheless Nella replied enthusiastically, "Nor I."

Then there was a silence, and Nella, feeling possibly that she had been too ecstatic, remarked in a very matter-of-fact tone: "I must telegraph to Papa instantly."

Thus it was that Theodore Racksole received the telegram which drew him away from Detective Marshall.

Chapter 16

The Woman with the Red Hat

"There is one thing, Prince, that we have just got to settle straight off," said Theodore Racksole.

They were all three seated—Racksole, his daughter, and Prince Aribert—round a dinner table in a private room at the Hôtel Wellington. Racksole had duly arrived by the afternoon boat, and had been met on the quay by the other two. They had dined early, and Racksole had heard the full story of the adventures by sea and land of Nella and the Prince. As to his own adventure of the previous night he said very little, merely explaining, with as little detail as possible, that Dimmock's body had come to light.

"What is that?" asked the Prince, in answer to Racksole's remark.

"We have got to settle whether we shall tell the police at once all that has occurred, or whether we shall proceed on our own responsibility. There can be no doubt as to which course we ought to pursue. Every consideration of prudence points to the advisability of taking the police into our confidence, and leaving the matter entirely in their hands."

"Oh, Papa!" Nella burst out in her pouting, impulsive way. "You surely can't think of such a thing. Why, the fun has only just begun."

"Do you call last night fun?" questioned Racksole, gazing at her solemnly.

"Yes, I do," she said promptly. "Now."

"Well, I don't," was the millionaire's laconic response; but perhaps he was thinking of his own situation in the lift.

"Do you not think we might investigate a little further," said the Prince judiciously, as he cracked a walnut, "just a little further—and then, if we fail to accomplish anything, there would still be ample opportunity to consult the police?"

"How do you suggest we should begin?" asked Racksole.

"Well, there is the house which Miss Racksole so intrepidly entered last evening"—he gave her the homage of an admiring glance; "you and I, Mr. Racksole, might examine that abode in detail."

"To-night?"

"Certainly. We might do something."

"We might do too much."

"For example?"

"We might shoot someone, or get ourselves mistaken for burglars. If we outstepped the law, it would be no excuse for us that we had been acting in a good cause."

"True," said the Prince. "Nevertheless—" He stopped.

"Nevertheless you have a distaste for bringing the police into the business.

You want the hunt all to yourself. You are on fire with the ardour of the chase. Is not that it? Accept the advice of an older man, Prince, and sleep on this affair. I have little fancy for nocturnal escapades two nights together. As for you, Nella, off with you to bed. The Prince and I will have a yarn over such fluids as can be obtained in this hole."

"Papa," she said, "you are perfectly horrid to-night."

"Perhaps I am," he said. "Decidedly I am very cross with you for coming over here all alone. It was monstrous. If I didn't happen to be the most foolish of parents—There! Good-night. It's nine o'clock. The Prince, I am sure, will excuse you."

If Nella had not really been very tired Prince Aribert might have been the witness of a good-natured but stubborn conflict between the millionaire and his spirited offspring. As it was, Nella departed with surprising docility, and the two men were left alone.

"Now," said Racksole suddenly, changing his tone, "I fancy that after all I'm your man for a little amateur investigation to-night. And, if I must speak the exact truth, I think that to sleep on this affair would be about the very worst thing we could do. But I was anxious to keep Nella out of harm's way at any rate till to-morrow. She is a very difficult creature to manage, Prince, and I may warn you," he laughed grimly, "that if we do succeed in doing anything to-night we shall catch it from her ladyship in the morning. Are you ready to take that risk?"

"I am," the Prince smiled. "But Miss Racksole is a young lady of quite remarkable nerve."

"She is," said Racksole drily. "I wish sometimes she had less."

"I have the highest admiration for Miss Racksole," said the Prince, and he looked Miss Racksole's father full in the face.

"You honour us, Prince," Racksole observed. "Let us come to business. Am I right in assuming that you have a reason for keeping the police out of this business, if it can possibly be done?"

"Yes," said the Prince, and his brow clouded. "I am very much afraid that my poor nephew has involved himself in some scrape that he would wish not to be divulged."

"Then you do not believe that he is the victim of foul play?"

"I do not."

"And the reason, if I may ask it?"

"Mr. Racksole, we speak in confidence—is it not so? Some years ago my foolish nephew had an affair—an affair with a feminine star of the Berlin stage. For anything I know, the lady may have been the very pattern of her sex, but where a reigning Prince is concerned scandal cannot be avoided in such a matter. I had thought that the affair was quite at an end, since my nephew's betrothal to Princess Anna of Eckstein-Schwartzburg is shortly to be announced. But yesterday I saw the lady to whom I have referred driving on the Digue. The coincidence of her presence here with my nephew's disappearance is too extraordinary to be disregarded."

"But how does this theory square with the murder of Reginald Dimmock?"

"It does not square with it. My idea is that the murder of poor Dimmock and the disappearance of my nephew are entirely unconnected—unless, indeed, this Berlin actress is playing into the hands of the murderers. I had not thought of that."

"Then what do you propose to do to-night?"

"I propose to enter the house which Miss Racksole entered last night and to find out something definite."

"I concur," said Racksole. "I shall heartily enjoy it. But let me tell you, Prince, and pardon me for speaking bluntly, your surmise is incorrect. I would wager a hundred thousand dollars that Prince Eugen has been kidnapped."

"What grounds have you for being so sure?"

"Ah! said Racksole, "that is a long story. Let me begin by asking you this.

Are you aware that your nephew, Prince Eugen, owes a million of money?"

"A million of money!" cried Prince Aribert astonished. "It is impossible!"

"Nevertheless, he does," said Racksole calmly. Then he told him all he had learnt from Mr. Sampson Levi.

"What have you to say to that?" Racksole ended. Prince Aribert made no reply.

"What have you to say to that?" Racksole insisted.

"Merely that Eugen is ruined, even if he is alive."

"Not at all," Racksole returned with cheerfulness. "Not at all. We shall see about that. The special thing that I want to know just now from you is this:

Has any previous application ever been made for the hand of the Princess Anna?"

"Yes. Last year. The King of Bosnia sued for it, but his proposal was declined."

"Why?"

"Because my nephew was considered to be a more suitable match for her."

"Not because the personal character of his Majesty of Bosnia is scarcely of the brightest?"

"No. Unfortunately it is usually impossible to consider questions of personal character when a royal match is concerned."

"Then, if for any reason the marriage of Princess Anna with your nephew was frustrated, the King of Bosnia would have a fair chance in that quarter?"

"He would. The political aspect of things would be perfectly satisfactory."

"Thanks!" said Racksole. "I will wager another hundred thousand dollars that someone in Bosnia—I don't accuse the King himself—is at the bottom of this business. The methods of Balkan politicians have always been half-Oriental. Let us go."

"Where?"

"To this precious house of Nella's adventure."

"But surely it is too early?"

"So it is," said Racksole, "and we shall want a few things, too. For instance, a dark lantern. I think I will go out and forage for a lantern."

"And a revolver?" suggested Prince Aribert.

"Does it mean revolvers?" The millionaire laughed. "It may come to that. – Here you are, then, my friend," said Racksole, and he pulled one out of his hip pocket. "And yours?"

"I," said the Prince, "I have your daughter's."

"The deuce you have!" murmured Racksole to himself.

It was then half past nine. They decided that it would be impolitic to begin their operations till after midnight. There were three hours to spare.

"Let us go and see the gambling," Racksole suggested. "We might encounter the Berlin lady."

The suggestion, in the first instance, was not made seriously, but it appeared to both men that they might do worse than spend the intervening time in the gorgeous saloon of the Kursaal, where, in the season, as much money is won and lost as at Monte Carlo. It was striking ten o'clock as they entered the rooms. There was a large company present—a company which included some of the most notorious persons in Europe. In that multifarious assemblage all were equal. The electric light shone coldly and impartially on the just and on the unjust, on the fool and the knave, on the European and the Asiatic. As usual, women monopolized the best places at the tables.

The scene was familiar enough to Prince Aribert, who had witnessed it frequently at Monaco, but Theodore Racksole had never before entered any European gaming palace; he had only the haziest idea of the rules of play, and he was at once interested. For some time they watched the play at the table which happened to be nearest to them. Racksole never moved his lips.

With his eyes glued on the table, and ears open for every remark, of the players and the croupier, he took his first lesson in roulette. He saw a mere youth win fifteen thousand francs, which were stolen in the most barefaced manner by a rouged girl scarcely older than the youth; he saw two old gamesters stake their coins, and lose, and walk quietly out of the place; he saw the bank win fifty thousand francs at a single turn.

"This is rather good fun," he said at length, "but the stakes are too small to make it really exciting. I'll try my luck, just for the experience. I'm bound to win."

"Why?" asked the Prince.

"Because I always do, in games of chance," Racksole answered with gay confidence. "It is my fate. Then to-night, you must remember, I shall be a beginner, and you know the tyro's luck."

In ten minutes the croupier of that table was obliged to suspend operations pending the arrival of a further supply of coin.

"What did I tell you?" said Racksole, leading the way to another table further up the room. A hundred curious glances went after him. One old woman, whose gay attire suggested a false youthfulness, begged him in French to stake a five-franc piece for her. She offered him the coin. He took it, and gave her a hundred-franc note in exchange. She clutched the crisp rustling paper, and with hysterical haste scuttled back to her own table.

At the second table there was a considerable air of excitement. In the forefront of the players was a woman in a low-cut evening dress of black silk and a large red picture hat. Her age appeared to be about twenty-eight; she had dark eyes, full lips, and a distinctly Jewish nose. She was handsome, but her beauty was of that forbidding, sinister order which is often called Junoesque. This woman was the centre of attraction. People said to each other that she had won a hundred and sixty thousand francs that day at the table.

"You were right," Prince Aribert whispered to Theodore Racksole; "that is the Berlin lady."

"The deuce she is! Has she seen you? Will she know you?"

"She would probably know me, but she hasn't looked up yet."

"Keep behind her, then. I propose to find her a little occupation." By dint of a carefully-exercised diplomacy, Racksole manoeuvred himself into a seat opposite to the lady in the red hat. The fame of his success at the other table had followed him, and people regarded him as a serious and formidable player. In the first turn the lady put a thousand francs on double zero; Racksole put a hundred on number nineteen and a thousand on the odd numbers.

Nineteen won. Racksole received four thousand four hundred francs. Nine times in succession Racksole backed number nineteen and the odd numbers; nine times the lady backed double zero. Nine times Racksole won and the lady lost. The other players, perceiving that the affair had resolved itself into a duel, stood back for the most part and watched those two. Prince Aribert never stirred from his position behind the great red hat. The game continued. Racksole lost trifles from time to time, but ninety-nine hundredths of the luck was with him. As an English spectator at the table remarked, "he couldn't do wrong." When midnight struck the lady in the red hat was reduced to a thousand francs. Then she fell into a winning vein for half an hour, but at one o'clock her resources were exhausted. Of the hundred and sixty thousand francs

which she was reputed to have had early in the evening, Racksole held about ninety thousand, and the bank had the rest.

It was a calamity for the Juno of the red hat. She jumped up, stamped her foot, and hurried from the room. At a discreet distance Racksole and the Prince pursued her.

"It might be well to ascertain her movements," said Racksole.

Outside, in the glare of the great arc lights, and within sound of the surf which beats always at the very foot of the Kursaal, the Juno of the red hat summoned a fiacre and drove rapidly away. Racksole and the Prince took an open carriage and started in pursuit. They had not, however, travelled more than half a mile when Prince Aribert stopped the carriage, and, bidding Racksole get out, paid the driver and dismissed him.

"I feel sure I know where she is going," he explained, "and it will be better for us to follow on foot."

"You mean she is making for the scene of last night's affair?" said Racksole.

"Exactly. We shall—what you call, kill two birds with one stone."

Prince Aribert's guess was correct. The lady's carriage stopped in front of the house where Nella Racksole and Miss Spencer had had their interview on the previous evening, and the lady vanished into the building just as the two men appeared at the end of the street. Instead of proceeding along that street, the Prince led Racksole to the lane which gave on to the backs of the houses, and he counted the houses as they went up the lane. In a few minutes they had burglariously climbed over a wall, and crept, with infinite caution, up a long, narrow piece of ground—half garden, half paved yard, till they crouched under a window—a window which was shielded by curtains, but which had been left open a little.

"Listen," said the Prince in his lightest whisper, "they are talking."

"Who?"

"The Berlin lady and Miss Spencer. I'm sure it's Miss Spencer's voice."

Racksole boldly pushed the french window a little wider open, and put his ear to the aperture, through which came a beam of yellow light.

"Take my place," he whispered to the Prince, "they're talking German. You'll understand better."

Silently they exchanged places under the window, and the Prince listened intently.

"Then you refuse?" Miss Spencer's visitor was saying.

There was no answer from Miss Spencer.

"Not even a thousand francs? I tell you I've lost the whole twenty-five thousand."

Again no answer.

"Then I'll tell the whole story," the lady went on, in an angry rush of words. "I did what I promised to do. I enticed him here, and you've got him safe in your vile cellar, poor little man, and you won't give me a paltry thousand francs."

"You have already had your price." The words were Miss Spencer's. They fell cold and calm on the night air.

"I want another thousand."

"I haven't it."

"Then we'll see."

Prince Aribert heard a rustle of flying skirts; then another movement—a door banged, and the beam of light through the aperture of the window suddenly disappeared. He pushed the window wide open. The room was in darkness, and apparently empty.

"Now for that lantern of yours," he said eagerly to Theodore Racksole, after he had translated to him the conversation of the two women, Racksole produced the dark lantern from the capacious pocket of his dust coat, and lighted it. The ray flashed about the ground.

"What is it?" exclaimed Prince Aribert with a swift cry, pointing to the ground. The lantern threw its light on a perpendicular grating at their feet, through which could be discerned a cellar. They both knelt down, and peered into the subterranean chamber. On a broken chair a young man sat listlessly with closed eyes, his head leaning heavily forward on his chest.

In the feeble light of the lantern he had the livid and ghastly appearance of a corpse.

"Who can it be?" said Racksole.

"It is Eugen," was the Prince's low answer.

Chapter 17

The Release of Prince Eugen

Eugen," Prince Aribert called softly. At the sound of his own name the young man in the cellar feebly raised his head and stared up at the grating which separated him from his two rescuers. But his features showed no recognition. He gazed in an aimless, vague, silly manner for a few seconds, his eyes blinking under the glare of the lantern, and then his head slowly drooped again on to his chest. He was dressed in a dark tweed travelling suit, and Racksole observed that one sleeve—the left—was torn across the upper part of the cuff, and that there were stains of dirt on the left shoulder. A soiled linen collar, which had lost all its starch and was half unbuttoned, partially encircled the captive's neck; his brown boots were unlaced; a cap, a handkerchief, a portion of a watch-chain, and a few gold coins lay on the floor. Racksole flashed the lantern into the corners of the cellar, but he could discover no other furniture except the chair on which the Hereditary Prince of Posen sat and a small deal table on which were a plate and a cup.

"Eugen," cried Prince Aribert once more, but this time his forlorn nephew made no response whatever, and then Aribert added in a low voice to Racksole: "Perhaps he cannot see us clearly."

"But he must surely recognize your voice," said Racksole, in a hard, gloomy tone. There was a pause, and the two men above ground looked at each other hesitatingly. Each knew that they must enter that cellar and get Prince Eugen out of it, and each was somehow afraid to take the next step.

"Thank God he is not dead!" said Aribert.

"He may be worse than dead!" Racksole replied.

"Worse than—What do you mean?"

"I mean—he may be mad."

"Come," Aribert almost shouted, with a sudden access of energy—a wild impulse for action. And, snatching the lantern from Racksole, he rushed into the dark room where they had heard the conversation of Miss Spencer and the lady in the red hat. For a moment Racksole did not stir from the threshold of the window. "Come," Prince Aribert repeated, and there was an imperious command in his utterance. "What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know," said Racksole, feeling stupid and queer; "I don't know."

Then he marched heavily after Prince Aribert into the room. On the mantelpiece were a couple of candles which had been blown out, and in a mechanical, unthinking way, Racksole lighted them, and the two men glanced round the room. It presented no peculiar features: it was just an ordinary room, rather small, rather mean, rather shabby, with an ugly wallpaper and ugly pictures in ugly frames. Thrown over a chair was a man's evening-dress jacket. The door was closed. Prince Aribert turned the knob, but he could not open it.

"It's locked," he said. "Evidently they know we"re here."

"Nonsense," said Racksole brusquely; "how can they know?" And, taking hold of the knob, he violently shook the door, and it opened. "I told you it wasn't locked," he added, and this small success of opening the door seemed to steady the man. It was a curious psychological effect, this terrorizing (for it amounted to that) of two courageous full-grown men by the mere apparition of a helpless creature in a cellar. Gradually they both recovered from it. The next moment they were out in the passage which led to the front door of the house. The front door stood open. They looked into the street, up and down, but there was not a soul in sight. The street, lighted by three gas-lamps only, seemed strangely sinister and mysterious.

"She has gone, that's clear," said Racksole, meaning the woman with the red hat.

"And Miss Spencer after her, do you think?" questioned Aribert.

"No. She would stay. She would never dare to leave. Let us find the cellar steps."

The cellar steps were happily not difficult to discover, for in moving a pace backwards Prince Aribert had a narrow escape of precipitating himself to the bottom of them. The lantern showed that they were built on a curve.

Silently Racksole resumed possession of the lantern and went first, the Prince close behind him. At the foot was a short passage, and in this passage crouched the figure of a woman. Her eyes threw back the rays

of the lantern, shining like a cat's at midnight. Then, as the men went nearer, they saw that it was Miss Spencer who barred their way. She seemed half to kneel on the stone floor, and in one hand she held what at first appeared to be a dagger, but which proved to be nothing more romantic than a rather long bread-knife.

"I heard you, I heard you," she exclaimed. "Get back; you mustn't come here."

There was a desperate and dangerous look on her face, and her form shook with scarcely controlled passionate energy.

"Now see here, Miss Spencer," Racksole said calmly, "I guess we've had enough of this fandango. You'd better get up and clear out, or we'll just have to drag you off."

He went calmly up to her, the lantern in his hand. Without another word she struck the knife into his arm, and the lantern fell extinguished. Racksole gave a cry, rather of angry surprise than of pain, and retreated a few steps. In the darkness they could still perceive the glint of her eyes.

"I told you you mustn't come here," the woman said. "Now get back."

Racksole positively laughed. It was a queer laugh, but he laughed, and he could not help it. The idea of this woman, this bureau clerk, stopping his progress and that of Prince Aribert by means of a bread-knife aroused his sense of humour. He struck a match, relighted the candle, and faced Miss Spencer once more.

"I'll do it again," she said, with a note of hard resolve.

"Oh, no, you won't, my girl," said Racksole; and he pulled out his revolver, cocked it, raised his hand.

"Put down that plaything of yours," he said firmly.

"No," she answered.

"I shall shoot."

She pressed her lips together.

"I shall shoot," he repeated. "One—two—three."

Bang, bang! He had fired twice, purposely missing her. Miss Spencer never blenched. Racksole was tremendously surprised—and he would have been a thousandfold more surprised could he have contrasted her behaviour now with her abject terror on the previous evening when Nella had threatened her.

"You've got a bit of pluck," he said, "but it won't help you. Why won't you let us pass?"

As a matter of fact, pluck was just what she had not, really; she had merely subordinated one terror to another. She was desperately afraid of Racksole's revolver, but she was much more afraid of something else.

"Why won't you let us pass?"

"I daren't," she said, with a plaintive tremor; "Tom put me in charge."

That was all. The men could see tears running down her poor wrinkled face.

Theodore Racksole began to take off his light overcoat.

"I see I must take my coat off to you," he said, and he almost smiled. Then, with a quick movement, he threw the coat over Miss Spencer's head and flew at her, seizing both her arms, while Prince Aribert assisted.

Her struggles ceased—she was beaten.

"That's all right," said Racksole: "I could never have used that revolver—to mean business with it, of course."

They carried her, unresisting, upstairs and on to the upper floor, where they locked her in a bedroom. She lay in the bed as if exhausted.

"Now for my poor Eugen," said Prince Aribert.

"Don't you think we'd better search the house first?" Racksole suggested; "it will be safer to know just how we stand. We can't afford any ambushes or things of that kind, you know."

The Prince agreed, and they searched the house from top to bottom, but found no one. Then, having locked the front door and the french window of the sitting-room, they proceeded again to the cellar.

Here a new obstacle confronted them. The cellar door was, of course, locked; there was no sign of a key, and it appeared to be a heavy door. They were compelled to return to the bedroom where Miss Spencer was incarcerated, in order to demand the key of the cellar from her. She still lay without movement on the bed.

"Tom's got it," she replied, faintly, to their question: "Tom's got it, I swear to you. He took it for safety."

"Then how do you feed your prisoner?" Racksole asked sharply.

"Through the grating," she answered.

Both men shuddered. They felt she was speaking the truth. For the third time they went to the cellar door. In vain Racksole thrust himself against it; he could do no more than shake it.

"Let's try both together," said Prince Aribert. "Now!" There was a crack.

"Again," said Prince Aribert. There was another crack, and then the upper hinge gave way. The rest was easy. Over the wreck of the door they entered Prince Eugen's prison.

The captive still sat on his chair. The terrific noise and bustle of breaking down the door seemed not to have aroused him from his lethargy, but when Prince Aribert spoke to him in German he looked at his uncle.

"Will you not come with us, Eugen?" said Prince Aribert; "you needn't stay here any longer, you know."

"Leave me alone," was the strange reply; "leave me alone. What do you want?"

"We are here to get you out of this scrape," said Aribert gently. Racksole stood aside.

"Who is that fellow?" said Eugen sharply.

"That is my friend Mr. Racksole, an Englishman—or rather, I should say, an American—to whom we owe a great deal. Come and have supper, Eugen."

"I won't," answered Eugen doggedly. "I'm waiting here for her. You didn't think anyone had kept me here, did you, against my will? I tell you I'm waiting for her. She said she"d come."

"Who is she?" Aribert asked, humouring him.

"She! Why, you know! I forgot, of course, you don't know. You mustn't ask.

Don't pry, Uncle Aribert. She was wearing a red hat."

"I'll take you to her, my dear Eugen." Prince Aribert put his hands on the other's shoulder, but Eugen shook him off violently, stood up, and then sat down again.

Aribert looked at Racksole, and they both looked at Prince Eugen. The latter's face was flushed, and Racksole observed that the left pupil was more dilated than the right. The man started, muttered odd, fragmentary scraps of sentences, now grumbling, now whining.

"His mind is unhinged," Racksole whispered in English.

"Hush!" said Prince Aribert. "He understands English." But Prince Eugen took no notice of the brief colloquy.

"We had better get him upstairs, somehow," said Racksole.

"Yes," Aribert assented. "Eugen, the lady with the red hat, the lady you are waiting for, is upstairs. She has sent us down to ask you to come up. Won't you come?"

"*Himmel!*" the poor fellow exclaimed, with a kind of weak anger. "Why did you not say this before?"

He rose, staggered towards Aribert, and fell headlong on the floor. He had swooned. The two men raised him, carried him up the stone steps, and laid him with infinite care on a sofa. He lay, breathing queerly through the nostrils, his eyes closed, his fingers contracted; every now and then a convulsion ran through his frame.

"One of us must fetch a doctor," said Prince Aribert.

"I will," said Racksole. At that moment there was a quick, curt rap on the french window, and both Racksole and the Prince glanced round startled. A girl's face was pressed against the large window-pane. It was Nella's.

Racksole unfastened the catch, and she entered.

"I have found you," she said lightly; "you might have told me. I couldn't sleep. I inquired from the hôtel-folks if you had retired, and they said no; so I slipped out. I guessed where you were." Racksole interrupted her with a question as to what she meant by this escapade, but she stopped him with a careless gesture. "What's this?" She pointed to the form on the sofa.

"That is my nephew, Prince Eugen," said Aribert.

"Hurt?" she inquired coldly. "I hope not."

"He is ill," said Racksole, "his brain is turned."

Nella began to examine the unconscious Prince with the expert movements of a girl who had passed through the best hospital course to be obtained in New York.

"He has got brain fever," she said. "That is all, but it will be enough. Do you know if there is a bed anywhere in this remarkable house?"

Chapter 18

In the Night-Time

"He must on no account be moved," said the dark little Belgian doctor, whose eyes seemed to peer so quizzically through his spectacles; and he said it with much positiveness.

That pronouncement rather settled their plans for them. It was certainly a professional triumph for Nella, who, previous to the doctor's arrival, had told them the very same thing. Considerable argument had passed before the doctor was sent for. Prince Aribert was for keeping the whole affair a deep secret among their three selves. Theodore Racksole agreed so far, but he suggested further that at no matter what risk they should transport the patient over to England at once. Racksole had an idea that he should feel safer in that hôtel of his, and better able to deal with any situation that might arise. Nella scorned the idea. In her quality of an amateur nurse, she assured them that Prince Eugen was much more seriously ill than either of them suspected, and she urged that they should take absolute possession of the house, and keep possession till Prince Eugen was convalescent.

"But what about the Spencer female?" Racksole had said.

"Keep her where she is. Keep her a prisoner. And hold the house against all comers. If Jules should come back, simply defy him to enter—that is all.

There are two of you, so you must keep an eye on the former occupiers, if they return, and on Miss Spencer, while I nurse the patient. But first, you must send for a doctor."

"Doctor!" Prince Aribert had said, alarmed. "Will it not be necessary to make some awkward explanation to the doctor?"

"Not at all!" she replied. "Why should it be? In a place like Ostend doctors are far too discreet to ask questions; they see too much to retain

their curiosity. Besides, do you want your nephew to die?"

Both the men were somewhat taken aback by the girl's sagacious grasp of the situation, and it came about that they began to obey her like subordinates.

She told her father to sally forth in search of a doctor, and he went. She gave Prince Aribert certain other orders, and he promptly executed them.

By the evening of the following day, everything was going smoothly. The doctor came and departed several times, and sent medicine, and seemed fairly optimistic as to the issue of the illness. An old woman had been induced to come in and cook and clean. Miss Spencer was kept out of sight on the attic floor, pending some decision as to what to do with her. And no one outside the house had asked any questions. The inhabitants of that particular street must have been accustomed to strange behaviour on the part of their neighbours, unaccountable appearances and disappearances, strange flittings and arrivals. This strong-minded and active trio—Racksole, Nella, and Prince Aribert—might have been the lawful and accustomed tenants of the house, for any outward evidence to the contrary.

On the afternoon of the third day Prince Eugen was distinctly and seriously worse. Nella had sat up with him the previous night and throughout the day.

Her father had spent the morning at the hôtel, and Prince Aribert had kept watch. The two men were never absent from the house at the same time, and one of them always did duty as sentinel at night. On this afternoon Prince Aribert and Nella sat together in the patient's bedroom. The doctor had just left. Theodore Racksole was downstairs reading the New York Herald. The Prince and Nella were near the window, which looked on to the back-garden.

It was a queer shabby little bedroom to shelter the august body of a European personage like Prince Eugen of Posen. Curiously enough, both Nella and her father, ardent democrats though they were, had been somehow impressed by the royalty and importance of the fever-stricken Prince—impressed as they had never been by Aribert. They had both felt that here, under their care, was a species of individuality quite new to them, and different from anything they had previously encountered. Even the gestures and tones of his delirium had an air of abrupt yet condescending command—an imposing mixture of suavity and haughtiness. As for Nella, she had been first struck by the beautiful "E" over a crown on the sleeves of his linen, and by the signet ring on his pale,

emaciated hand. After all, these trifling outward signs are at least as effective as others of deeper but less obtrusive significance. The Racksoles, too, duly marked the attitude of Prince Aribert to his nephew: it was at once paternal and reverential; it disclosed clearly that Prince Aribert continued, in spite of everything, to regard his nephew as his sovereign lord and master, as a being surrounded by a natural and inevitable pomp and awe. This attitude, at the beginning, seemed false and unreal to the Americans; it seemed to them to be assumed; but gradually they came to perceive that they were mistaken, and that though America might have cast out "the monarchial superstition", nevertheless that "superstition" had vigorously survived in another part of the world.

"You and Mr. Racksole have been extraordinarily kind to me," said Prince Aribert very quietly, after the two had sat some time in silence.

"Why? How?" she asked unaffectedly. "We are interested in this affair ourselves, you know. It began at our hôtel—you mustn't forget that, Prince."

"I don't," he said. "I forget nothing. But I cannot help feeling that I have led you into a strange entanglement. Why should you and Mr. Racksole be here—you who are supposed to be on a holiday!—hiding in a strange house in a foreign country, subject to all sorts of annoyances and all sorts of risks, simply because I am anxious to avoid scandal, to avoid any sort of talk, in connection with my misguided nephew? It is nothing to you that the Hereditary Prince of Posen should be liable to a public disgrace. What will it matter to you if the throne of Posen becomes the laughing-stock of Europe?"

"I really don't know, Prince," Nella smiled roguishly. "But we Americans have, a habit of going right through with anything we have begun."

"Ah!" he said, "who knows how this thing will end? All our trouble, our anxieties, our watchfulness, may come to nothing. I tell you that when I see Eugen lying there, and think that we cannot learn his story until he recovers, I am ready to go mad. We might be arranging things, making matters smooth, preparing for the future, if only we knew—knew what he can tell us. I tell you that I am ready to go mad. If anything should happen to you, Miss Racksole, I would kill myself."

"But why?" she questioned. "Supposing, that is, that anything could happen to me—which it can't."

"Because I have dragged you into this," he replied, gazing at her. "It is nothing to you. You are only being kind."

"How do you know it is nothing to me, Prince?" she asked him quickly.

Just then the sick man made a convulsive movement, and Nella flew to the bed and soothed him. From the head of the bed she looked over at Prince Aribert, and he returned her bright, excited glance. She was in her travelling-frock, with a large white Belgian apron tied over it. Large dark circles of fatigue and sleeplessness surrounded her eyes, and to the Prince her cheek seemed hollow and thin; her hair lay thick over the temples, half covering the ears. Aribert gave no answer to her query—merely gazed at her with melancholy intensity.

"I think I will go and rest," she said at last. "You will know all about the medicine."

"Sleep well," he said, as he softly opened the door for her. And then he was alone with Eugen. It was his turn that night to watch, for they still half-expected some strange, sudden visit, or onslaught, or move of one kind or another from Jules. Racksole slept in the parlour on the ground floor.

Nella had the front bedroom on the first floor; Miss Spencer was immured in the attic; the last-named lady had been singularly quiet and incurious, taking her food from Nella and asking no questions, the old woman went at nights to her own abode in the purlieus of the harbour. Hour after hour Aribert sat silent by his nephew's bed-side, attending mechanically to his wants, and every now and then gazing hard into the vacant, anguished face, as if trying to extort from that mask the secrets which it held. Aribert was tortured by the idea that if he could have only half an hour's, only a quarter of an hour's, rational speech with Prince Eugen, all might be cleared up and put right, and by the fact that that rational talk was absolutely impossible on Eugen's part until the fever had run its course. As the minutes crept on to midnight the watcher, made nervous by the intense, electrical atmosphere which seems always to surround a person who is dangerously ill, grew more and more a prey to vague and terrible apprehensions. His mind dwelt hysterically on the most fatal possibilities.

He wondered what would occur if by any ill-chance Eugen should die in that bed—how he would explain the affair to Posen and to the Emperor, how he would justify himself. He saw himself being tried for murder, sentenced (him—a Prince of the blood!), led to the scaffold… a scene unparalleled in Europe for over a century! … Then he gazed anew at the sick man, and thought he saw death in every drawn feature of that agonized face. He could have screamed aloud. His ears heard a peculiar resonant boom. He started—it was nothing but the city clock striking twelve. But there was another sound—a mysterious shuffle at the door.

He listened; then jumped from his chair. Nothing now! Nothing! But still he felt drawn to the door, and after what seemed an interminable interval he went and opened it, his heart beating furiously. Nella lay in a heap on the door mat. She was fully dressed, but had apparently lost consciousness. He clutched at her slender body, picked her up, carried her to the chair by the fire-place, and laid her in it. He had forgotten all about Eugen.

"What is it, my angel?" he whispered, and then he kissed her—kissed her twice. He could only look at her; he did not know what to do to succour her.

At last she opened her eyes and sighed.

"Where am I?" she asked vaguely, in a tremulous tone as she recognized him. "Is it you? Did I do anything silly? Did I faint?"

"What has happened? Were you ill?" he questioned anxiously. He was kneeling at her feet, holding her hand tight.

"I saw Jules by the side of my bed," she murmured; "I'm sure I saw him; he laughed at me. I had not undressed. I sprang up, frightened, but he had gone, and then I ran downstairs—to you."

"You were dreaming," he soothed her.

"Was I?"

"You must have been. I have not heard a sound. No one could have entered.

But if you like I will wake Mr. Racksole."

"Perhaps I was dreaming," she admitted. "How foolish!"

"You were over-tired," he said, still unconsciously holding her hand. They gazed at each other. She smiled at him.

"You kissed me," she said suddenly, and he blushed red and stood up before her. "Why did you kiss me?"

"Ah! Miss Racksole," he murmured, hurrying the words out. "Forgive me. It is unforgivable, but forgive me. I was overpowered by my feelings. I did not know what I was doing."

"Why did you kiss me?" she repeated.

"Because—Nella! I love you. I have no right to say it."

"Why have you no right to say it?"

"If Eugen dies, I shall owe a duty to Posen—I shall be its ruler."

"Well!" she said calmly, with an adorable confidence. "Papa is worth forty millions. Would you not abdicate?"

"Ah!" he gave a low cry. "Will you force me to say these things? I could not shirk my duty to Posen, and the reigning Prince of Posen can only marry a Princess."

"But Prince Eugen will live," she said positively, "and if he lives—"

"Then I shall be free. I would renounce all my rights to make you mine, if—if—"

"If what, Prince?"

"If you would deign to accept my hand."

"Am I, then, rich enough?"

"Nella!" He bent down to her.

Then there was a crash of breaking glass. Aribert went to the window and opened it. In the starlit gloom he could see that a ladder had been raised against the back of the house. He thought he heard footsteps at the end of the garden.

"It was Jules," he exclaimed to Nella, and without another word rushed upstairs to the attic. The attic was empty. Miss Spencer had mysteriously vanished.

Chapter 19

Royalty at the Grand Babylon

The Royal apartments at the Grand Babylon are famous in the world of hôtels, and indeed elsewhere, as being, in their own way, unsurpassed. Some of the palaces of Germany, and in particular those of the mad Ludwig of Bavaria, may possess rooms and saloons which outshine them in gorgeous luxury and the mere wild fairy-like extravagance of wealth; but there is nothing, anywhere, even on Eighth Avenue, New York, which can fairly be called more complete, more perfect, more enticing, or—not least important—more comfortable.

The suite consists of six chambers—the ante-room, the saloon or audience chamber, the dining-room, the yellow drawing-room (where Royalty receives its friends), the library, and the State bedroom—to the last of which we have already been introduced. The most important and most impressive of these is, of course, the audience chamber, an apartment fifty feet long by forty feet broad, with a superb outlook over the Thames, the Shot Tower, and the higher signals of the South-Western Railway. The decoration of this room is mainly in the German taste, since four out of every six of its Royal occupants are of Teutonic blood; but its chief glory is its French ceiling, a masterpiece by Fragonard, taken bodily from a certain famous palace on the Loire. The walls are of panelled oak, with an eight-foot dado of Arras cloth imitated from unique Continental examples. The carpet, woven in one piece, is an antique specimen of the finest Turkish work, and it was obtained, a bargain, by Felix Babylon, from an impecunious Roumanian Prince. The silver candelabra, now fitted with electric light, came from the Rhine, and each had a separate history. The Royal chair—it is not etiquette to call it a throne, though it amounts to a throne—was looted by Napoleon from an Austrian city, and bought by Felix Babylon at the sale

of a French collector. At each corner of the room stands a gigantic grotesque vase of German faïence of the sixteenth century. These were presented to Felix Babylon by William the First of Germany, upon the conclusion of his first incognito visit to London in connection with the French trouble of 1875.

There is only one picture in the audience chamber. It is a portrait of the luckless but noble Dom Pedro, Emperor of the Brazils. Given to Felix Babylon by Dom Pedro himself, it hangs there solitary and sublime as a reminder to Kings and Princes that Empires may pass away and greatness fall. A certain Prince who was occupying the suite during the Jubilee of 1887—when the Grand Babylon had seven persons of Royal blood under its roof—sent a curt message to Felix that the portrait must be removed. Felix respectfully declined to remove it, and the Prince left for another hôtel, where he was robbed of two thousand pounds' worth of jewellery. The Royal audience chamber of the Grand Babylon, if people only knew it, is one of the sights of London, but it is never shown, and if you ask the hôtel servants about its wonders they will tell you only foolish facts concerning it, as that the Turkey carpet costs fifty pounds to clean, and that one of the great vases is cracked across the pedestal, owing to the rough treatment accorded to it during a riotous game of Blind Man's Buff, played one night by four young Princesses, a Balkan King, and his aides-de-camp.

In one of the window recesses of this magnificent apartment, on a certain afternoon in late July, stood Prince Aribert of Posen. He was faultlessly dressed in the conventional frock-coat of English civilization, with a gardenia in his button-hole, and the indispensable crease down the front of the trousers. He seemed to be fairly amused, and also to expect someone, for at frequent intervals he looked rapidly over his shoulder in the direction of the door behind the Royal chair. At last a little wizened, stooping old man, with a distinctly German cast of countenance, appeared through the door, and laid some papers on a small table by the side of the chair.

"Ah, Hans, my old friend!" said Aribert, approaching the old man. "I must have a little talk with you about one or two matters. How do you find His Royal Highness?"

The old man saluted, military fashion. "Not very well, your Highness," he answered. "I've been valet to your Highness's nephew since his majority, and I was valet to his Royal father before him, but I never saw—" He stopped, and threw up his wrinkled hands deprecatingly.

"You never saw what?" Aribert smiled affectionately on the old fellow.

You could perceive that these two, so sharply differentiated in rank, had been intimate in the past, and would be intimate again.

"Do you know, my Prince," said the old man, "that we are to receive the financier, Sampson Levi—is that his name?—in the audience chamber? Surely, if I may humbly suggest, the library would have been good enough for a financier?"

"One would have thought so," agreed Prince Aribert, "but perhaps your master has a special reason. Tell me," he went on, changing the subject quickly, "how came it that you left the Prince, my nephew, at Ostend, and returned to Posen?"

"His orders, Prince," and old Hans, who had had a wide experience of Royal whims and knew half the secrets of the Courts of Europe, gave Aribert a look which might have meant anything. "He sent me back on an—an errand, your Highness."

"And you were to rejoin him here?"

"Just so, Highness. And I did rejoin him here, although, to tell the truth, I had begun to fear that I might never see my master again."

"The Prince has been very ill in Ostend, Hans."

"So I have gathered," Hans responded drily, slowly rubbing his hands together. "And his Highness is not yet perfectly recovered."

"Not yet. We despaired of his life, Hans, at one time, but thanks to an excellent constitution, he came safely through the ordeal."

"We must take care of him, your Highness."

"Yes, indeed," said Aribert solemnly, "his life is very precious to Posen."

At that moment, Eugen, Hereditary Prince of Posen, entered the audience chamber. He was pale and languid, and his uniform seemed to be a trouble to him. His hair had been slightly ruffled, and there was a look of uneasiness, almost of alarmed unrest, in his fine dark eyes. He was like a man who is afraid to look behind him lest he should see something there which ought not to be there. But at the same time, here beyond doubt was Royalty. Nothing could have been more striking than the contrast between Eugen, a sick man in the shabby house at Ostend, and this Prince Eugen in the Royal apartments of the Grand Babylon Hôtel, surrounded by the luxury and pomp which modern civilization can offer to those born in high places. All the desperate episode of Ostend was now hidden, passed over. It was supposed never to have occurred. It existed only like a secret shame in the hearts of those who had witnessed it. Prince Eugen had recovered; at any rate, he was convalescent, and he had been removed to London, where he took up again the

dropped thread of his princely life. The lady with the red hat, the incorruptible and savage Miss Spencer, the unscrupulous and brilliant Jules, the dark, damp cellar, the horrible little bedroom—these things were over. Thanks to Prince Aribert and the Racksoles, he had emerged from them in safety. He was able to resume his public and official career. The Emperor had been informed of his safe arrival in London, after an unavoidable delay in Ostend; his name once more figured in the Court chronicle of the newspapers. In short, everything was smothered over. Only—only Jules, Rocco, and Miss Spencer were still at large; and the body of Reginald Dimmock lay buried in the domestic mausoleum of the palace at Posen; and Prince Eugen had still to interview Mr. Sampson Levi.

That various matters lay heavy on the mind of Prince Eugen was beyond question. He seemed to have withdrawn within himself. Despite the extraordinary experiences through which he had recently passed, events which called aloud for explanations and confidence between the nephew and the uncle, he would say scarcely a word to Prince Aribert. Any allusion, however direct, to the days at Ostend, was ignored by him with more or less ingenuity, and Prince Aribert was really no nearer a full solution of the mystery of Jules' plot than he had been on the night when he and Racksole visited the gaming tables at Ostend. Eugen was well aware that he had been kidnapped through the agency of the woman in the red hat, but, doubtless ashamed at having been her dupe, he would not proceed in any way with the clearing-up of the matter.

"You will receive in this room, Eugen?" Aribert questioned him.

"Yes," was the answer, given pettishly. "Why not? Even if I have no proper retinue here, surely that is no reason why I should not hold audience in a proper manner?... Hans, you can go." The old valet promptly disappeared.

"Aribert," the Hereditary Prince continued, when they were alone in the chamber, "you think I am mad."

"My dear Eugen," said Prince Aribert, startled in spite of himself. "Don't be absurd."

"I say you think I am mad. You think that that attack of brain fever has left its permanent mark on me. Well, perhaps I am mad. Who can tell? God knows that I have been through enough lately to drive me mad."

Aribert made no reply. As a matter of strict fact, the thought had crossed his mind that Eugen's brain had not yet recovered its normal tone and activity. This speech of his nephew's, however, had the effect of immediately restoring his belief in the latter's entire sanity. He felt

convinced that if only he could regain his nephew's confidence, the old brotherly confidence which had existed between them since the years when they played together as boys, all might yet be well. But at present there appeared to be no sign that Eugen meant to give his confidence to anyone.

The young Prince had come up out of the valley of the shadow of death, but some of the valley's shadow had clung to him, and it seemed he was unable to dissipate it.

"By the way," said Eugen suddenly, "I must reward these Racksoles, I suppose. I am indeed grateful to them. If I gave the girl a bracelet, and the father a thousand guineas—how would that meet the case?"

"My dear Eugen!" exclaimed Aribert aghast. "A thousand guineas! Do you know that Theodore Racksole could buy up all Posen from end to end without making himself a pauper. A thousand guineas! You might as well offer him sixpence."

"Then what must I offer?"

"Nothing, except your thanks. Anything else would be an insult. These are no ordinary hôtel people."

"Can't I give the little girl a bracelet?" Prince Eugen gave a sinister laugh.

Aribert looked at him steadily. "No," he said.

"Why did you kiss her—that night?" asked Prince Eugen carelessly.

"Kiss whom?" said Aribert, blushing and angry, despite his most determined efforts to keep calm and unconcerned.

"The Racksole girl."

"When do you mean?"

"I mean," said Prince Eugen, "that night in Ostend when I was ill. You thought I was in a delirium. Perhaps I was. But somehow I remember that with extraordinary distinctness. I remember raising my head for a fraction of an instant, and just in that fraction of an instant you kissed her. Oh, Uncle Aribert!"

"Listen, Eugen, for God's sake. I love Nella Racksole. I shall marry her."

"You!" There was a long pause, and then Eugen laughed. "Ah!" he said. "They all talk like that to start with. I have talked like that myself, dear uncle; it sounds nice, and it means nothing."

"In this case it means everything, Eugen," said Aribert quietly. Some accent of determination in the latter's tone made Eugen rather more serious.

"You can't marry her," he said. "The Emperor won't permit a morganatic marriage."

"The Emperor has nothing to do with the affair. I shall renounce my rights. I shall become a plain citizen."

"In which case you will have no fortune to speak of."

"But my wife will have a fortune. Knowing the sacrifices which I shall have made in order to marry her, she will not hesitate to place that fortune in my hands for our mutual use," said Aribert stiffly.

"You will decidedly be rich," mused Eugen, as his ideas dwelt on Theodore Racksole's reputed wealth. "But have you thought of this," he asked, and his mild eyes glowed again in a sort of madness. "Have you thought that I am unmarried, and might die at any moment, and then the throne will descend to you—to you, Aribert?"

"The throne will never descend to me, Eugen," said Aribert softly, "for you will live. You are thoroughly convalescent. You have nothing to fear."

"It is the next seven days that I fear," said Eugen.

"The next seven days! Why?"

"I do not know. But I fear them. If I can survive them—"

"Mr. Sampson Levi, *sire*," Hans announced in a loud tone.

Chapter 20

Mr. Sampson Levi Bids Prince Eugen Good Morning

Prince Eugen started. "I will see him," he said, with a gesture to Hans as if to indicate that Mr. Sampson Levi might enter at once.

"I beg one moment first," said Aribert, laying a hand gently on his nephew's arm, and giving old Hans a glance which had the effect of precipitating that admirably trained servant through the doorway.

"What is it?" asked Prince Eugen crossly. "Why this sudden seriousness? Don't forget that I have an appointment with Mr. Sampson Levi, and must not keep him waiting. Someone said that punctuality is the politeness of princes."

"Eugen," said Aribert, "I wish you to be as serious as I am. Why cannot we have faith in each other? I want to help you. I have helped you. You are my titular Sovereign; but on the other hand I have the honour to be your uncle:

I have the honour to be the same age as you, and to have been your companion from youth up. Give me your confidence. I thought you had given it me years ago, but I have lately discovered that you had your secrets, even then. And now, since your illness, you are still more secretive."

"What do you mean, Aribert?" said Eugen, in a tone which might have been either inimical or friendly. "What do you want to say?"

"Well, in the first place, I want to say that you will not succeed with the estimable Mr. Sampson Levi."

"Shall I not?" said Eugen lightly. "How do you know what my business is with him?"

"Suffice it to say that I know. You will never get that million pounds out of him."

Prince Eugen gasped, and then swallowed his excitement. "Who has been talking? What million?" His eyes wandered uneasily round the room. "Ah!" he said, pretending to laugh. "I see how it is. I have been chattering in my delirium. You mustn't take any notice of that, Aribert. When one has a fever one's ideas become grotesque and fanciful."

"You never talked in your delirium," Aribert replied; "at least not about yourself. I knew about this projected loan before I saw you in Ostend."

"Who told you?" demanded Eugen fiercely.

"Then you admit that you are trying to raise a loan?"

"I admit nothing. Who told you?"

"Theodore Racksole, the millionaire. These rich men have no secrets from each other. They form a coterie, closer than any coterie of ours. Eugen, and far more powerful. They talk, and in talking they rule the world, these millionaires. They are the real monarchs."

"Curse them!" said Eugen.

"Yes, perhaps so. But let me return to your case. Imagine my shame, my disgust, when I found that Racksole could tell me more about your affairs than I knew myself. Happily, he is a good fellow; one can trust him; otherwise I should have been tempted to do something desperate when I discovered that all your private history was in his hands. Eugen, let us come to the point; why do you want that million? Is it actually true that you are so deeply in debt? I have no desire to improve the occasion. I merely ask."

"And what if I do owe a million?" said Prince Eugen with assumed valour.

"Oh, nothing, my dear Eugen, nothing. Only it is rather a large sum to have scattered in ten years, is it not? How did you manage it?"

"Don't ask me, Aribert. I've been a fool. But I swear to you that the woman whom you call "the lady in the red hat" is the last of my follies. I am about to take a wife, and become a respectable Prince."

"Then the engagement with Princess Anna is an accomplished fact?"

"Practically so. As soon as I have settled with Levi, all will be smooth.

Aribert, I wouldn't lose Anna for the Imperial throne. She is a good and pure woman, and I love her as a man might love an angel."

"And yet you would deceive her as to your debts, Eugen?"

"Not her, but her absurd parents, and perhaps the Emperor. They have heard rumours, and I must set those rumours at rest by presenting to them a clean sheet."

"I am glad you have been frank with me, Eugen," said Prince Aribert, "but I will be plain with you. You will never marry the Princess Anna."

"And why?" said Eugen, supercilious again.

"Because her parents will not permit it. Because you will not be able to present a clean sheet to them. Because this Sampson Levi will never lend you a million."

"Explain yourself."

"I propose to do so. You were kidnapped—it is a horrid word, but we must use it—in Ostend."

"True."

"Do you know why?"

"I suppose because that vile old red-hatted woman and her accomplices wanted to get some money out of me. Fortunately, thanks to you, they didn't."

"Not at all," said Aribert. "They wanted no money from you. They knew well enough that you had no money. They knew you were the naughty schoolboy among European Princes, with no sense of responsibility or of duty towards your kingdom. Shall I tell you why they kidnapped you?"

"When you have done abusing me, my dear uncle."

"They kidnapped you merely to keep you out of England for a few days, merely to compel you to fail in your appointment with Sampson Levi. And it appears to me that they succeeded. Assuming that you don't obtain the money from Levi, is there another financier in all Europe from whom you can get it—on such strange security as you have to offer?"

"Possibly there is not," said Prince Eugen calmly. "But, you see, I shall get it from Sampson Levi. Levi promised it, and I know from other sources that he is a man of his word. He said that the money, subject to certain formalities, would be available till—"

"Till?"

"Till the end of June."

"And it is now the end of July."

"Well, what is a month? He is only too glad to lend the money. He will get excellent interest. How on earth have you got into your sage old

head this notion of a plot against me? The idea is ridiculous. A plot against me? What for?"

"Have you ever thought of Bosnia?" asked Aribert coldly.

"What of Bosnia?"

"I need not tell you that the King of Bosnia is naturally under obligations to Austria, to whom he owes his crown. Austria is anxious for him to make a good influential marriage."

"Well, let him."

"He is going to. He is going to marry the Princess Anna."

"Not while I live. He made overtures there a year ago, and was rebuffed."

"Yes; but he will make overtures again, and this time he will not be rebuffed. Oh, Eugen! can't you see that this plot against you is being engineered by some persons who know all about your affairs, and whose desire is to prevent your marriage with Princess Anna? Only one man in Europe can have any motive for wishing to prevent your marriage with Princess Anna, and that is the man who means to marry her himself." Eugen went very pale.

"Then, Aribert, do you mean to convey to me that my detention in Ostend was contrived by the agents of the King of Bosnia?"

"I do."

"With a view to stopping my negotiations with Sampson Levi, and so putting an end to the possibility of my marriage with Anna?"

Aribert nodded.

"You are a good friend to me, Aribert. You mean well. But you are mistaken.

You have been worrying about nothing."

"Have you forgotten about Reginald Dimmock?"

"I remember you said that he had died."

"I said nothing of the sort. I said that he had been assassinated. That was part of it, my poor Eugen."

"Pooh!" said Eugen. "I don't believe he was assassinated. And as for Sampson Levi, I will bet you a thousand marks that he and I come to terms this morning, and that the million is in my hands before I leave London." Aribert shook his head.

"You seem to be pretty sure of Mr. Levi's character. Have you had much to do with him before?"

"Well," Eugen hesitated a second, "a little. What young man in my position hasn't had something to do with Mr. Sampson Levi at one time or another?"

"I haven't," said Aribert.

"You! You are a fossil." He rang a silver bell. "Hans! I will receive Mr. Sampson Levi."

Whereupon Aribert discreetly departed, and Prince Eugen sat down in the great velvet chair, and began to look at the papers which Hans had previously placed upon the table.

"Good morning, your Royal Highness," said Sampson Levi, bowing as he entered. "I trust your Royal Highness is well."

"Moderately, thanks," returned the Prince.

In spite of the fact that he had had as much to do with people of Royal blood as any plain man in Europe, Sampson Levi had never yet learned how to be at ease with these exalted individuals during the first few minutes of an interview. Afterwards, he resumed command of himself and his faculties, but at the beginning he was invariably flustered, scarlet of face, and inclined to perspiration.

"We will proceed to business at once," said Prince Eugen. "Will you take a seat, Mr. Levi?"

"I thank your Royal Highness."

"Now as to that loan which we had already practically arranged—a million, I think it was," said the Prince airily.

"A million," Levi acquiesced, toying with his enormous watch chain.

"Everything is now in order. Here are the papers and I should like to finish the matter up at once."

"Exactly, your Highness, but—"

"But what? You months ago expressed the warmest satisfaction at the security, though I am quite prepared to admit that the security, is of rather an unusual nature. You also agreed to the rate of interest. It is not everyone, Mr. Levi, who can lend out a million at 5½ per cent. And in ten years the whole amount will be paid back. I—er—I believe I informed you that the fortune of Princess Anna, who is about to accept my hand, will ultimately amount to something like fifty millions of marks, which is over two million pounds in your English money." Prince Eugen stopped. He had no fancy for talking in this confidential manner to financiers, but he felt that circumstances demanded it.

"You see, it's like this, your Royal Highness," began Mr. Sampson Levi, in his homely English idiom. "It's like this. I said I could keep that bit of money available till the end of June, and you were to give me an interview here before that date. Not having heard from your Highness, and not knowing your Highness's address, though my German

agents made every inquiry, I concluded, that you had made other arrangements, money being so cheap this last few months."

"I was unfortunately detained at Ostend," said Prince Eugen, with as much haughtiness as he could assume, "by—by important business. I have made no other arrangements, and I shall have need of the million. If you will be so good as to pay it to my London bankers—"

"I'm very sorry," said Mr. Sampson Levi, with a tremendous and dazzling air of politeness, which surprised even himself, "but my syndicate has now lent the money elsewhere. It's in South America—I don't mind telling your Highness that we've lent it to the Chilean Government."

"Hang the Chilean Government, Mr. Levi," exclaimed the Prince, and he went white. "I must have that million. It was an arrangement."

"It was an arrangement, I admit," said Mr. Sampson Levi, "but your Highness broke the arrangement."

There was a long silence.

"Do you mean to say," began the Prince with tense calmness, "that you are not in a position to let me have that million?"

"I could let your Highness have a million in a couple of years' time."

The Prince made a gesture of annoyance. "Mr. Levi," he said, "if you do not place the money in my hands to-morrow you will ruin one of the oldest of reigning families, and, incidentally, you will alter the map of Europe. You are not keeping faith, and I had relied on you."

"Pardon me, your Highness," said little Levi, rising in resentment, "it is not I who have not kept faith. I beg to repeat that the money is no longer at my disposal, and to bid your Highness good morning."

And Mr. Sampson Levi left the audience chamber with an awkward, aggrieved bow. It was a scene characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century—an overfed, commonplace, pursy little man who had been born in a Brixton semi-detached villa, and whose highest idea of pleasure was a Sunday up the river in an expensive electric launch, confronting and utterly routing, in a hôtel belonging to an American millionaire, the representative of a race of men who had fingered every page of European history for centuries, and who still, in their native castles, were surrounded with every outward circumstance of pomp and power.

"Aribert," said Prince Eugen, a little later, "you were right. It is all over. I have only one refuge—"

"You don't mean—" Aribert stopped, dumbfounded.

"Yes, I do," he said quickly. "I can manage it so that it will look like an accident."

Chapter 21

The Return of Félix Babylon

On the evening of Prince Eugen's fateful interview with Mr. Sampson Levi, Theodore Racksole was wandering somewhat aimlessly and uneasily about the entrance hail and adjacent corridors of the Grand Babylon. He had returned from Ostend only a day or two previously, and had endeavoured with all his might to forget the affair which had carried him there—to regard it, in fact, as done with. But he found himself unable to do so. In vain he remarked, under his breath, that there were some things which were best left alone: if his experience as a manipulator of markets, a contriver of gigantic schemes in New York, had taught him anything at all, it should surely have taught him that. Yet he could not feel reconciled to such a position. The mere presence of the princes in his hôtel roused the fighting instincts of this man, who had never in his whole career been beaten. He had, as it were, taken up arms on their side, and if the princes of Posen would not continue their own battle, nevertheless he, Theodore Racksole, wanted to continue it for them. To a certain extent, of course, the battle had been won, for Prince Eugen had been rescued from an extremely difficult and dangerous position, and the enemy—consisting of Jules, Rocco, Miss Spencer, and perhaps others—had been put to flight. But that, he conceived, was not enough; it was very far from being enough. That the criminals, for criminals they decidedly were, should still be at large, he regarded as an absurd anomaly. And there was another point: he had said nothing to the police of all that had occurred. He disdained the police, but he could scarcely fail to perceive that if the police should by accident gain a clue to the real state of the case he might be placed rather awkwardly, for the simple reason that in the eyes of the law it amounted to a misdemeanour to conceal as much as he

had concealed. He asked himself, for the thousandth time, why he had adopted a policy of concealment from the police, why he had become in any way interested in the Posen matter, and why, at this present moment, he should be so anxious to prosecute it further? To the first two questions he replied, rather lamely, that he had been influenced by Nella, and also by a natural spirit of adventure; to the third he replied that he had always been in the habit of carrying things through, and was now actuated by a mere childish, obstinate desire to carry this one through. Moreover, he was splendidly conscious of his perfect ability to carry it through. One additional impulse he had, though he did not admit it to himself, being by nature adverse to big words, and that was an abstract love of justice, the Anglo-Saxon's deep-found instinct for helping the right side to conquer, even when grave risks must thereby be run, with no corresponding advantage.

He was turning these things over in his mind as he walked about the vast hôtel on that evening of the last day in July. The Society papers had been stating for a week past that London was empty, but, in spite of the Society papers, London persisted in seeming to be just as full as ever. The Grand Babylon was certainly not as crowded as it had been a month earlier, but it was doing a very passable business. At the close of the season the gay butterflies of the social community have a habit of hovering for a day or two in the big hôtels before they flutter away to castle and country-house, meadow and moor, lake and stream. The great basket-chairs in the portico were well filled by old and middle-aged gentlemen engaged in enjoying the varied delights of liqueurs, cigars, and the full moon which floated so serenely above the Thames. Here and there a pretty woman on the arm of a cavalier in immaculate attire swept her train as she turned to and fro in the promenade of the terrace. Waiters and uniformed commissionaires and gold-braided doorkeepers moved noiselessly about; at short intervals the chief of the doorkeepers blew his shrill whistle and hansoms drove up with tinkling bell to take away a pair of butterflies to some place of amusement or boredom; occasionally a private carriage drawn by expensive and self-conscious horses put the hansoms to shame by its mere outward glory. It was a hot night, a night for the summer woods, and save for the vehicles there was no rapid movement of any kind. It seemed as though the world—the world, that is to say, of the Grand Babylon—was fully engaged in the solemn processes of digestion and small-talk. Even the long row of the Embankment gas-lamps, stretching right and left, scarcely trembled in the still, warm, caressing air. The stars overhead looked down with many blinkings upon the enormous pile of the

Grand Babylon, and the moon regarded it with bland and changeless face; what they thought of it and its inhabitants cannot, unfortunately, be recorded. What Theodore Racksole thought of the moon can be recorded: he thought it was a nuisance. It somehow fascinated his gaze with its silly stare, and so interfered with his complex meditations. He glanced round at the well-dressed and satisfied people—his guests, his customers. They appeared to ignore him absolutely.

Probably only a very small percentage of them had the least idea that this tall spare man, with the iron-grey hair and the thin, firm, resolute face, who wore his American-cut evening clothes with such careless ease, was the sole proprietor of the Grand Babylon, and possibly the richest man in Europe. As has already been stated, Racksole was not a celebrity in England.

The guests of the Grand Babylon saw merely a restless male person, whose restlessness was rather a disturber of their quietude, but with whom, to judge by his countenance, it would be inadvisable to remonstrate. Therefore Theodore Racksole continued his perambulations unchallenged, and kept saying to himself, "I must do something." But what? He could think of no course to pursue.

At last he walked straight through the hôtel and out at the other entrance, and so up the little unassuming side street into the roaring torrent of the narrow and crowded Strand. He jumped on a Putney bus, and paid his fair to Putney, fivepence, and then, finding that the humble occupants of the vehicle stared at the spectacle of a man in evening dress but without a dustcoat, he jumped off again, oblivious of the fact that the conductor jerked a thumb towards him and winked at the passengers as who should say, "There goes a lunatic." He went into a tobacconist's shop and asked for a cigar. The shopman mildly inquired what price.

"What are the best you've got?" asked Theodore Racksole.

"Five shillings each, sir," said the man promptly.

"Give me a penny one," was Theodore Racksole's laconic request, and he walked out of the shop smoking the penny cigar. It was a new sensation for him.

He was inhaling the aromatic odours of Eugène Rimmel's establishment for the sale of scents when a gentleman, walking slowly in the opposite direction, accosted him with a quiet, "Good evening, Mr. Racksole." The millionaire did not at first recognize his interlocutor, who wore a travelling overcoat, and was carrying a handbag. Then a slight, pleased smile passed over his features, and he held out his hand.

"Well, Mr. Babylon," he greeted the other, "of all persons in the wide world you are the man I would most have wished to meet."

"You flatter me," said the little Anglicized Swiss.

"No, I don't," answered Racksole; "it isn't my custom, any more than it's yours. I wanted to have a real good long yarn with you, and lo! here you are! Where have you sprung from?"

"From Lausanne," said Felix Babylon. "I had finished my duties there, I had nothing else to do, and I felt homesick. I felt the nostalgia of London, and so I came over, just as you see," and he raised the handbag for Racksole's notice. "One toothbrush, one razor, two slippers, eh?" He laughed. "I was wondering as I walked along where I should stay—me, Felix Babylon, homeless in London."

"I should advise you to stay at the Grand Babylon," Racksole laughed back. "It is a good hôtel, and I know the proprietor personally."

"Rather expensive, is it not?" said Babylon.

"To you, sir," answered Racksole, "the inclusive terms will be exactly half a crown a week. Do you accept?"

"I accept," said Babylon, and added, "You are very good, Mr. Racksole."

They strolled together back to the hôtel, saying nothing in particular, but feeling very content with each other's company.

"Many customers?" asked Felix Babylon.

"Very tolerable," said Racksole, assuming as much of the air of the professional hôtel proprietor as he could. "I think I may say in the storekeeper's phrase, that if there is any business about I am doing it.

To-night the people are all on the terrace in the portico—it's so confoundedly hot—and the consumption of ice is simply enormous—nearly as large as it would be in New York."

"In that case," said Babylon politely, "let me offer you another cigar."

"But I have not finished this one."

"That is just why I wish to offer you another one. A cigar such as yours, my good friend, ought never to be smoked within the precincts of the Grand Babylon, not even by the proprietor of the Grand Babylon, and especially when all the guests are assembled in the portico. The fumes of it would ruin any hôtel."

Theodore Racksole laughingly lighted the Rothschild Havana which Babylon gave him, and they entered the hôtel arm in arm. But no sooner had they mounted the steps than little Felix became the object of numberless greetings. It appeared that he had been highly popular among his quondam guests. At last they reached the managerial room, where

Babylon was regaled on a chicken, and Racksole assisted him in the consumption of a bottle of Heidsieck Monopole, Carte d'Or.

"This chicken is almost perfectly grilled," said Babylon at length. "It is a credit to the house. But why, my dear Racksole, why in the name of Heaven did you quarrel with Rocco?"

"Then you have heard?"

"Heard! My dear friend, it was in every newspaper on the Continent. Some journals prophesied that the Grand Babylon would have to close its doors within half a year now that Rocco had deserted it. But of course I knew better. I knew that you must have a good reason for allowing Rocco to depart, and that you must have made arrangements in advance for a substitute."

"As a matter of fact, I had not made arrangements in advance," said Theodore Racksole, a little ruefully; "but happily we have found in our second *sous-chef* an artist inferior only to Rocco himself. That, however, was mere good fortune."

"Surely," said Babylon, "it was indiscreet to trust to mere good fortune in such a serious matter?"

"I didn't trust to mere good fortune. I didn't trust to anything except Rocco, and he deceived me."

"But why did you quarrel with him?"

"I didn't quarrel with him. I found him embalming a corpse in the State bedroom one night—"

"You what?" Babylon almost screamed.

"I found him embalming a corpse in the State bedroom," repeated Racksole in his quietest tones.

The two men gazed at each other, and then Racksole replenished Babylon's glass.

"Tell me," said Babylon, settling himself deep in an easy chair and lighting a cigar.

And Racksole thereupon recounted to him the whole of the Posen episode, with every circumstantial detail so far as he knew it. It was a long and complicated recital, and occupied about an hour. During that time little Felix never spoke a word, scarcely moved a muscle; only his small eyes gazed through the bluish haze of smoke. The clock on the mantelpiece tinkled midnight.

"Time for whisky and soda," said Racksole, and got up as if to ring the bell; but Babylon waved him back.

"You have told me that this Sampson Levi had an audience of Prince Eugen to-day, but you have not told me the result of that audience," said Babylon.

"Because I do not yet know it. But I shall doubtless know to-morrow. In the meantime, I feel fairly sure that Levi declined to produce Prince Eugen's required million. I have reason to believe that the money was lent elsewhere."

"H'm!" mused Babylon; and then, carelessly, "I am not at all surprised at that arrangement for spying through the bathroom of the State apartments."

"Why are you not surprised?"

"Oh!" said Babylon, "it is such an obvious dodge—so easy to carry out. As for me, I took special care never to involve myself in these affairs. I knew they existed; I somehow felt that they existed. But I also felt that they lay outside my sphere. My business was to provide board and lodging of the most sumptuous kind to those who didn't mind paying for it; and I did my business. If anything else went on in the hôtel, under the rose, I long determined to ignore it unless it should happen to be brought before my notice; and it never was brought before my notice. However, I admit that there is a certain pleasurable excitement in this kind of affair and doubtless you have experienced that."

"I have," said Racksole simply, "though I believe you are laughing at me."

"By no means," Babylon replied. "Now what, if I may ask the question, is going to be your next step?"

"That is just what I desire to know myself," said Theodore Racksole.

"Well," said Babylon, after a pause, "let us begin. In the first place, it is possible you may be interested to hear that I happened to see Jules to-day."

"You did!" Racksole remarked with much calmness. "Where?"

"Well, it was early this morning, in Paris, just before I left there. The meeting was quite accidental, and Jules seemed rather surprised at meeting me. He respectfully inquired where I was going, and I said that I was going to Switzerland. At that moment I thought I was going to Switzerland. It had occurred to me that after all I should be happier there, and that I had better turn back and not see London any more. However, I changed my mind once again, and decided to come on to London, and accept the risks of being miserable there without my hôtel. Then I asked Jules whither he was bound, and he told me that he was off to Constantinople, being interested in a new French hôtel there. I wished him good luck, and we parted."

"Constantinople, eh!" said Racksole. "A highly suitable place for him, I should say."

"But," Babylon resumed, "I caught sight of him again."

"Where?"

"At Charing Cross, a few minutes before I had the pleasure of meeting you.

Mr. Jules had not gone to Constantinople after all. He did not see me, or I should have suggested to him that in going from Paris to Constantinople it is not usual to travel via London."

"The cheek of the fellow!" exclaimed Theodore Racksole. "The gorgeous and colossal cheek of the fellow!"

Chapter 22

In the Wine Cellars of the Grand Babylon

Do you know anything of the antecedents of this Jules," asked Theodore Racksole, helping himself to whisky.

"Nothing whatever," said Babylon. "Until you told me, I don't think I was aware that his true name was Thomas Jackson, though of course I knew that it was not Jules. I certainly was not aware that Miss Spencer was his wife, but I had long suspected that their relations were somewhat more intimate than the nature of their respective duties in the hôtel absolutely demanded. All that I do know of Jules—he will always be called Jules—is that he gradually, by some mysterious personal force, acquired a prominent position in the hôtel. Decidedly he was the cleverest and most intellectual waiter I have ever known, and he was specially skilled in the difficult task of retaining his own dignity while not interfering with that of other people. I'm afraid this information is a little too vague to be of any practical assistance in the present difficulty."

"What is the present difficulty?" Racksole queried, with a simple air.

"I should imagine that the present difficulty is to account for the man's presence in London."

"That is easily accounted for," said Racksole.

"How? Do you suppose he is anxious to give himself up to justice, or that the chains of habit bind him to the hôtel?"

"Neither," said Racksole. "Jules is going to have another try—that's all."

"Another try at what?"

"At Prince Eugen. Either at his life or his liberty. Most probably the former this time; almost certainly the former. He has guessed that we

are somewhat handicapped by our anxiety to keep Prince Eugen's predicament quite quiet, and he is taking advantage, of that fact. As he already is fairly rich, on his own admission, the reward which has been offered to him must be enormous, and he is absolutely determined to get it. He has several times recently proved himself to be a daring fellow; unless I am mistaken he will shortly prove himself to be still more daring."

"But what can he do? Surely you don't suggest that he will attempt the life of Prince Eugen in this hôtel?"

"Why not? If Reginald Dimmock fell on mere suspicion that he would turn out unfaithful to the conspiracy, why not Prince Eugen?"

"But it would be an unspeakable crime, and do infinite harm to the hôtel!"

"True!" Racksole admitted, smiling. Little Felix Babylon seemed to brace himself for the grasping of his monstrous idea.

"How could it possibly be done?" he asked at length.

"Dimmock was poisoned."

"Yes, but you had Rocco here then, and Rocco was in the plot. It is conceivable that Rocco could have managed it—barely conceivable. But without Rocco I cannot think it possible. I cannot even think that Jules would attempt it. You see, in a place like the Grand Babylon, as probably I needn't point out to you, food has to pass through so many hands that to poison one person without killing perhaps fifty would be a most delicate operation. Moreover, Prince Eugen, unless he has changed his habits, is always served by his own attendant, old Hans, and therefore any attempt to tamper with a cooked dish immediately before serving would be hazardous in the extreme."

"Granted," said Racksole. "The wine, however, might be more easily got at. Had you thought of that?"

"I had not," Babylon admitted. "You are an ingenious theorist, but I happen to know that Prince Eugen always has his wine opened in his own presence. No doubt it would be opened by Hans. Therefore the wine theory is not tenable, my friend."

"I do not see why," said Racksole. "I know nothing of wine as an expert, and I very seldom drink it, but it seems to me that a bottle of wine might be tampered with while it was still in the cellar, especially if there was an accomplice in the hôtel."

"You think, then, that you are not yet rid of all your conspirators?"

"I think that Jules might still have an accomplice within the building."

"And that a bottle of wine could be opened and recorked without leaving any trace of the operation?" Babylon was a trifle sarcastic.

"I don't see the necessity of opening the bottle in order to poison the wine," said Racksole. "I have never tried to poison anybody by means of a bottle of wine, and I don't lay claim to any natural talent as a poisoner, but I think I could devise several ways of managing the trick. Of course, I admit I may be entirely mistaken as to Jules' intentions."

"Ah!" said Felix Babylon. "The wine cellars beneath us are one of the wonders of London. I hope you are aware, Mr. Racksole, that when you bought the Grand Babylon you bought what is probably the finest stock of wines in England, if not in Europe. In the valuation I reckoned them at sixty thousand pounds. And I may say that I always took care that the cellars were properly guarded. Even Jules would experience a serious difficulty in breaking into the cellars without the connivance of the wine-clerk, and the wine-clerk is, or was, incorruptible."

"I am ashamed to say that I have not yet inspected my wines," smiled Racksole; "I have never given them a thought. Once or twice I have taken the trouble to make a tour of the hôtel, but I omitted the cellars in my excursions."

"Impossible, my dear fellow!" said Babylon, amused at such a confession, to him—a great connoisseur and lover of fine wines—almost incredible. "But really you must see them to-morrow. If I may, I will accompany you."

"Why not to-night?" Racksole suggested, calmly.

"To-night! It is very late: Hubbard will have gone to bed."

"And may I ask who is Hubbard? I remember the name but dimly."

"Hubbard is the wine-clerk of the Grand Babylon," said Felix, with a certain emphasis. "A sedate man of forty. He has the keys of the cellars. He knows every bottle of every bin, its date, its qualities, its value. And he's a teetotaler. Hubbard is a curiosity. No wine can leave the cellars without his knowledge, and no person can enter the cellars without his knowledge. At least, that is how it was in my time," Babylon added.

"We will wake him," said Racksole.

"But it is one o'clock in the morning," Babylon protested.

"Never mind—that is, if you consent to accompany me. A cellar is the same by night as by day. Therefore, why not now?"

Babylon shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish," he agreed, with his indestructible politeness.

"And now to find this Mr. Hubbard, with his key of the cupboard," said Racksole, as they walked out of the room together. Although the hour

was so late, the hôtel was not, of course, closed for the night. A few guests still remained about in the public rooms, and a few fatigued waiters were still in attendance. One of these latter was despatched in search of the singular Mr. Hubbard, and it fortunately turned out that this gentleman had not actually retired, though he was on the point of doing so. He brought the keys to Mr. Racksole in person, and after he had had a little chat with his former master, the proprietor and the ex-proprietor of the Grand Babylon Hôtel proceeded on their way to the cellars.

These cellars extend over, or rather under, quite half the superficial areas of the whole hôtel—the longitudinal half which lies next to the Strand.

Owing to the fact that the ground slopes sharply from the Strand to the river, the Grand Babylon is, so to speak, deeper near the Strand than it is near the Thames. Towards the Thames there is, below the entrance level, a basement and a sub-basement. Towards the Strand there is basement, sub-basement, and the huge wine cellars beneath all. After descending the four flights of the service stairs, and traversing a long passage running parallel with the kitchen, the two found themselves opposite a door, which, on being unlocked, gave access to another flight of stairs. At the foot of this was the main entrance to the cellars. Outside the entrance was the wine-lift, for the ascension of delicious fluids to the upper floors, and, opposite, Mr. Hubbard's little office. There was electric light everywhere.

Babylon, who, as being most accustomed to them, held the bunch of keys, opened the great door, and then they were in the first cellar—the first of a suite of five. Racksole was struck not only by the icy coolness of the place, but also by its vastness. Babylon had seized a portable electric handlight, attached to a long wire, which lay handy, and, waving it about, disclosed the dimensions of the place. By that flashing illumination the subterranean chamber looked unutterably weird and mysterious, with its rows of numbered bins, stretching away into the distance till the radiance was reduced to the occasional far gleam of the light on the shoulder of a bottle. Then Babylon switched on the fixed electric lights, and Theodore Racksole entered upon a personally-conducted tour of what was quite the most interesting part of his own property.

To see the innocent enthusiasm of Felix Babylon for these stores of ex-hilarating liquid was what is called in the North "a sight for sair een".

He displayed to Racksole's bewildered gaze, in their due order, all the wines of three continents—nay, of four, for the superb and luscious

Constantia wine of Cape Colony was not wanting in that most catholic collection of vintages. Beginning with the unsurpassed products of Burgundy, he continued with the clarets of Médoc, Bordeaux, and Sauterne; then to the champagnes of Ay, Hautvilliers, and Pierry; then to the hocks and moselles of Germany, and the brilliant imitation champagnes of Main, Neckar, and Naumburg; then to the famous and adorable Tokay of Hungary, and all the Austrian varieties of French wines, including Carlowitz and Somlauer; then to the dry sherries of Spain, including purest Manzanilla, and Amontillado, and Vino de Pasto; then to the wines of Malaga, both sweet and dry, and all the "Spanish reds" from Catalonia, including the dark "Tent" so often used sacramentally; then to the renowned port of Oporto. Then he proceeded to the Italian cellar, and descanted upon the excellence of Barolo from Piedmont, of Chianti from Tuscany, of Orvieto from the Roman States, of the "Tears of Christ" from Naples, and the commoner Marsala from Sicily. And so on, to an extent and with a fullness of detail which cannot be rendered here.

At the end of the suite of cellars there was a glazed door, which, as could be seen, gave access to a supplemental and smaller cellar, an apartment about fifteen or sixteen feet square.

"Anything special in there?" asked Racksole curiously, as they stood before the door, and looked within at the seined ends of bottles.

"Ah!" exclaimed Babylon, almost smacking his lips, "therein lies the cream of all."

"The best champagne, I suppose?" said Racksole.

"Yes," said Babylon, "the best champagne is there—a very special Sillery, as exquisite as you will find anywhere. But I see, my friend, that you fall into the common error of putting champagne first among wines. That distinction belongs to Burgundy. You have old Burgundy in that cellar, Mr. Racksole, which cost me—how much do you think?—eighty pounds a bottle.

Probably it will never be drunk," he added with a sigh. "It is too expensive even for princes and plutocrats."

"Yes, it will," said Racksole quickly. "You and I will have a bottle up to-morrow."

"Then," continued Babylon, still riding his hobby-horse, "there is a sample of the Rhine wine dated 1706 which caused such a sensation at the Vienna Exhibition of 1873. There is also a singularly glorious Persian wine from Shiraz, the like of which I have never seen elsewhere. Also there is an unrivalled vintage of *Romanée-Conti*, greatest of all

modern Burgundies. If I remember right Prince Eugen invariably has a bottle when he comes to stay here. It is not on the hôtel wine list, of course, and only a few customers know of it. We do not precisely hawk it about the dining-room."

"Indeed!" said Racksole. "Let us go inside."

They entered the stone apartment, rendered almost sacred by the preciousness of its contents, and Racksole looked round with a strangely intent and curious air. At the far side was a grating, through which came a feeble light.

"What is that?" asked the millionaire sharply.

"That is merely a ventilation grating. Good ventilation is absolutely essential."

"Looks broken, doesn't it?" Racksole suggested and then, putting a finger quickly on Babylon's shoulder, "there's someone in the cellar. Can't you hear breathing, down there, behind that bin?"

The two men stood tense and silent for a while, listening, under the ray of the single electric light in the ceiling. Half the cellar was involved in gloom. At length Racksole walked firmly down the central passage-way between the bins and turned to the corner at the right.

"Come out, you villain!" he said in a low, well-nigh vicious tone, and dragged up a cowering figure.

He had expected to find a man, but it was his own daughter, Nella Racksole, upon whom he had laid angry hands.

Chapter 23

Further Events in the Cellar

Well, Father," Nella greeted her astounded parent. "You should make sure that you have got hold of the right person before you use all that terrible muscular force of yours. I do believe you have broken my shoulder bone." She rubbed her shoulder with a comical expression of pain, and then stood up before the two men. The skirt of her dark grey dress was torn and dirty, and the usually trim Nella looked as though she had been shot down a canvas fire-escape. Mechanically she smoothed her frock, and gave a straightening touch to her hair.

"Good evening, Miss Racksole," said Felix Babylon, bowing formally. "This is an unexpected pleasure." Felix's drawing-room manners never deserted him upon any occasion whatever.

"May I inquire what you are doing in my wine cellar, Nella Racksole?" said the millionaire a little stiffly He was certainly somewhat annoyed at having mistaken his daughter for a criminal; moreover, he hated to be surprised, and upon this occasion he had been surprised beyond any ordinary surprise; lastly, he was not at all pleased that Nella should be observed in that strange predicament by a stranger.

"I will tell you," said Nella. "I had been reading rather late in my room—the night was so close. I heard Big Ben strike half-past twelve, and then I put the book down, and went out on to the balcony of my window for a little fresh air before going to bed. I leaned over the balcony very quietly—you will remember that I am on the third floor now—and looked down below into the little sunk yard which separates the wall of the hôtel from Salisbury Lane. I was rather astonished to see a figure creeping across the yard. I knew there was no entrance into the hôtel from that yard, and besides, it is fifteen or twenty feet below the level of the street. So I watched. The figure went close up against the wall, and

disappeared from my view. I leaned over the balcony as far as I dared, but I couldn't see him. I could hear him, however."

"What could you hear?" questioned Racksole sharply.

"It sounded like a sawing noise," said Nella; "and it went on for quite a long time—nearly a quarter of an hour, I should think—a rasping sort of noise."

"Why on earth didn't you come and warn me or someone else in the hôtel?" asked Racksole.

"Oh, I don't know, Dad," she replied sweetly. "I had got interested in it, and I thought I would see it out myself. Well, as I was saying, Mr. Babylon," she continued, addressing her remarks to Felix, with a dazzling smile, "that noise went on for quite a long time. At last it stopped, and the figure reappeared from under the wall, crossed the yard, climbed up the opposite wall by some means or other, and so over the railings into Salisbury Lane. I felt rather relieved then, because I knew he hadn't actually broken into the hôtel. He walked down Salisbury Lane very slowly. A policeman was just coming up. "Goodnight, officer," I heard him say to the policeman, and he asked him for a match. The policeman supplied the match, and the other man lighted a cigarette, and proceeded further down the lane. By cricking your neck from my window, Mr. Babylon, you can get a glimpse of the Embankment and the river. I saw the man cross the Embankment, and lean over the river wall, where he seemed to be talking to some one. He then walked along the Embankment to Westminster and that was the last I saw of him. I waited a minute or two for him to come back, but he didn't come back, and so I thought it was about time I began to make inquiries into the affair. I went downstairs instantly, and out of the hôtel, through the quadrangle, into Salisbury Lane, and I looked over those railings. There was a ladder on the other side, by which it was perfectly easy—once you had got over the railings—to climb down into the yard. I was horribly afraid lest someone might walk up Salisbury Lane and catch me in the act of negotiating those railings, but no one did, and I surmounted them, with no worse damage than a torn skirt. I crossed the yard on tiptoe, and I found that in the wall, close to the ground and almost exactly under my window, there was an iron grating, about one foot by fourteen inches. I suspected, as there was no other ironwork near, that the mysterious visitor must have been sawing at this grating for private purposes of his own. I gave it a good shake, and I was not at all surprised that a good part of it came off in my hand, leaving just enough room for a person to creep through. I decided that I would creep

through, and now wish I hadn't. I don't know, Mr. Babylon, whether you have ever tried to creep through a small hole with a skirt on. Have you?"

"I have not had that pleasure," said little Felix, bowing again, and absently taking up a bottle which lay to his hand.

"Well, you are fortunate," the imperturbable Nella resumed. "For quite three minutes I thought I should perish in that grating, Dad, with my shoulder inside and the rest of me outside. However, at last, by the most amazing and agonizing efforts, I pulled myself through and fell into this extraordinary cellar more dead than alive. Then I wondered what I should do next. Should I wait for the mysterious visitor to return, and stab him with my pocket scissors if he tried to enter, or should I raise an alarm? First of all I replaced the broken grating, then I struck a match, and I saw that I had got landed in a wilderness of bottles. The match went out, and I hadn't another one. So I sat down in the corner to think. I had just decided to wait and see if the visitor returned, when I heard footsteps, and then voices; and then you came in. I must say I was rather taken aback, especially as I recognized the voice of Mr. Babylon. You see, I didn't want to frighten you. If I had bobbed up from behind the bottles and said 'Booh!' you would have had a serious shock. I wanted to think of a way of breaking my presence gently to you. But you saved me the trouble, Dad. Was I really breathing so loudly that you could hear me?"

The girl ended her strange recital, and there was a moment's silence in the cellar. Racksole merely nodded an affirmative to her concluding question.

"Well, Nell, my girl," said the millionaire at length, "we are much obliged for your gymnastic efforts—very much obliged. But now, I think you had better go off to bed. There is going to be some serious trouble here, I'll lay my last dollar on that!"

"But if there is to be a burglary I should so like to see it, Dad," Nella pleaded. "I've never seen a burglar caught red-handed."

"This isn't a burglary, my dear. I calculate it's something far worse than a burglary."

"What?" she cried. "Murder? Arson? Dynamite plot? How perfectly splendid!"

"Mr. Babylon informs me that Jules is in London," said Racksole quietly.

"Jules!" she exclaimed under her breath, and her tone changed instantly to the utmost seriousness. "Switch off the light, quick!" Springing to the switch, she put the cellar in darkness.

"What's that for?" said her father.

"If he comes back he would see the light, and be frightened away," said Nella. "That wouldn't do at all."

"It wouldn't, Miss Racksole," said Babylon, and there was in his voice a note of admiration for the girl's sagacity which Racksole heard with high paternal pride.

"Listen, Nella," said the latter, drawing his daughter to him in the profound gloom of the cellar. "We fancy that Jules may be trying to tamper with a certain bottle of wine—a bottle which might possibly be drunk by Prince Eugen. Now do you think that the man you saw might have been Jules?"

"I hadn't previously thought of him as being Jules, but immediately you mentioned the name I somehow knew that he was. Yes, I am sure it was Jules."

"Well, just hear what I have to say. There is no time to lose. If he is coming at all he will be here very soon—and you can help." Racksole explained what he thought Jules' tactics might be. He proposed that if the man returned he should not be interfered with, but merely watched from the other side of the glass door.

"You want, as it were, to catch Mr. Jules alive?" said Babylon, who seemed rather taken aback at this novel method of dealing with criminals. "Surely," he added, "it would be simpler and easier to inform the police of your suspicion, and to leave everything to them."

"My dear fellow," said Racksole, "we have already gone much too far without the police to make it advisable for us to call them in at this somewhat advanced stage of the proceedings. Besides, if you must know it, I have a particular desire to capture the scoundrel myself. I will leave you and Nella here, since Nella insists on seeing everything, and I will arrange things so that once he has entered the cellar Jules will not get out of it again—at any rate through the grating. You had better place yourselves on the other side of the glass door, in the big cellar; you will be in a position to observe from there, I will skip off at once. All you have to do is to take note of what the fellow does. If he has any accomplices within the hôtel we shall probably be able by that means to discover who the accomplice is."

Lighting a match and shading it with his hands, Racksole showed them both out of the little cellar. "Now if you lock this glass door on the outside he can't escape this way: the panes of glass are too small, and the woodwork too stout. So, if he comes into the trap, you two will have

the pleasure of actually seeing him frantically writhe therein, without any personal danger; but perhaps you'd better not show yourselves."

In another moment Felix Babylon and Nella were left to themselves in the darkness of the cellar, listening to the receding footfalls of Theodore Racksole. But the sound of these footfalls had not died away before another sound greeted their ears—the grating of the small cellar was being removed.

"I hope your father will be in time," whispered Felix

"Hush!" the girl warned him, and they stooped side by side in tense silence.

A man cautiously but very neatly wormed his body through the aperture of the grating. The watchers could only see his form indistinctly in the darkness.

Then, being fairly within the cellar, he walked without the least hesitation to the electric switch and turned on the light. It was unmistakably Jules, and he knew the geography of the cellar very well. Babylon could with difficulty repress a start as he saw this bold and unscrupulous ex-waiter moving with such an air of assurance and determination about the precious cellar. Jules went directly to a small bin which was numbered 17, and took there from the topmost bottle.

"The Romanee-Conti—Prince Eugen's wine!" Babylon exclaimed under his breath.

Jules neatly and quickly removed the seal with an instrument which he had clearly brought for the purpose. He then took a little flat box from his pocket, which seemed to contain a sort of black salve. Rubbing his finger in this, he smeared the top of the neck of the bottle with it, just where the cork came against the glass. In another instant he had deftly replaced the seal and restored the bottle to its position. He then turned off the light, and made for the aperture. When he was half-way through Nella exclaimed, "He will escape, after all. Dad has not had time—we must stop him."

But Babylon, that embodiment of caution, forcibly, but nevertheless politely, restrained this Yankee girl, whom he deemed so rash and imprudent, and before she could free herself the lithe form of Jules had disappeared.

Chapter 24

The Bottle of Wine

As regards Theodore Racksole, who was to have caught his man from the outside of the cellar, he made his way as rapidly as possible from the wine-cellars, up to the ground floor, out of the hôtel by the quadrangle, through the quadrangle, and out into the top of Salisbury Lane. Now, owing to the vastness of the structure of the Grand Babylon, the mere distance thus to be traversed amounted to a little short of a quarter of a mile, and, as it included a number of stairs, about two dozen turnings, and several passages which at that time of night were in darkness more or less complete, Racksole could not have been expected to accomplish the journey in less than five minutes. As a matter of fact, six minutes had elapsed before he reached the top of Salisbury Lane, because he had been delayed nearly a minute by some questions addressed to him by a muddled and whisky-laden guest who had got lost in the corridors. As everybody knows, there is a sharp short bend in Salisbury Lane near the top. Racksole ran round this at good racing speed, but he was unfortunate enough to run straight up against the very policeman who had not long before so courteously supplied Jules with a match. The policeman seemed to be scarcely in so pliant a mood just then.

"Hullo!" he said, his naturally suspicious nature being doubtless aroused by the spectacle of a bareheaded man in evening dress running violently down the lane. "What's this? Where are you for in such a hurry?" and he forcibly detained Theodore Racksole for a moment and scrutinized his face.

"Now, officer," said Racksole quietly, "none of your larks, if you please. I've no time to lose."

"Beg your pardon, sir," the policeman remarked, though hesitatingly and not quite with good temper, and Racksole was allowed to proceed on his way. The millionaire's scheme for trapping Jules was to get down into the little sunk yard by means of the ladder, and then to secrete himself behind some convenient abutment of brickwork until Mr. Tom Jackson should have got into the cellar. He therefore nimbly surmounted the railings—the railings of his own hôtel—and was gingerly descending the ladder, when lo! a rough hand seized him by the coat-collar and with a ferocious jerk urged him backwards. The fact was, Theodore Racksole had counted without the policeman. That guardian of the peace, mistrusting Racksole's manner, quietly followed him down the lane. The sight of the millionaire climbing the railings had put him on his mettle, and the result was the ignominious capture of Racksole. In vain Theodore expostulated, explained, anathematized. Only one thing would satisfy the stolid policeman—namely, that Racksole should return with him to the hôtel and there establish his identity. If Racksole then proved to be Racksole, owner of the Grand Babylon, well and good—the policeman promised to apologize. So Theodore had no alternative but to accept the suggestion. To prove his identity was, of course, the work of only a few minutes, after which Racksole, annoyed, but cool as ever, returned to his railings, while the policeman went off to another part of his beat, where he would be likely to meet a comrade and have a chat.

In the meantime, our friend Jules, sublimely unconscious of the altercation going on outside, and of the special risk which he ran, was of course actually in the cellar, which he had reached before Racksole got to the railings for the first time. It was, indeed, a happy chance for Jules that his exit from the cellar coincided with the period during which Racksole was absent from the railings. As Racksole came down the lane for the second time, he saw a figure walking about fifty yards in front of him towards the Embankment. Instantly he divined that it was Jules, and that the policeman had thrown him just too late. He ran, and Jules, hearing the noise of pursuit, ran also. The ex-waiter was fleet; he made direct for a certain spot in the Embankment wall, and, to the intense astonishment of Racksole, jumped clean over the wall, as it seemed, into the river. "Is he so desperate as to commit suicide?" Racksole exclaimed as he ran, but a second later the puff and snort of a steam launch told him that Jules was not quite driven to suicide. As the millionaire crossed the Embankment roadway he saw the funnel of the launch move out from under the river-wall. It swerved into midstream and headed towards London Bridge. There was a silent mist over the river. Racksole was helpless….

Although Racksole had now been twice worsted in a contest of wits within the precincts of the Grand Babylon, once by Rocco and once by Jules, he could not fairly blame himself for the present miscarriage of his plans—a miscarriage due to the meddlesomeness of an extraneous person, combined with pure ill-fortune. He did not, therefore, permit the accident to interfere with his sleep that night.

On the following day he sought out Prince Aribert, between whom and himself there now existed a feeling of unmistakable, frank friendship, and disclosed to him the happenings of the previous night, and particularly the tampering with the bottle of *Romanée-Conti*.

"I believe you dined with Prince Eugen last night?"

"I did. And curiously enough we had a bottle of *Romanée-Conti*, an admirable wine, of which Eugen is passionately fond."

"And you will dine with him to-night?"

"Most probably. To-day will, I fear, be our last day here. Eugen wishes to return to Posen early to-morrow."

"Has it struck you, Prince," said Racksole, "that if Jules had succeeded in poisoning your nephew, he would probably have succeeded also in poisoning you?"

"I had not thought of it," laughed Aribert, "but it would seem so. It appears that so long as he brings down his particular quarry, Jules is careless of anything else that may be accidentally involved in the destruction. However, we need have no fear on that score now. You know the bottle, and you can destroy it at once."

"But I do not propose to destroy it," said Racksole calmly. "If Prince Eugen asks for *Romanée-Conti* to be served to-night, as he probably will, I propose that that precise bottle shall be served to him—and to you."

"Then you would poison us in spite of ourselves?"

"Scarcely," Racksole smiled. "My notion is to discover the accomplices within the hôtel. I have already inquired as to the wine-clerk, Hubbard. Now does it not occur to you as extraordinary that on this particular day Mr. Hubbard should be ill in bed? Hubbard, I am informed, is suffering from an attack of stomach poisoning, which has supervened during the night. He says that he does not know what can have caused it. His place in the wine cellars will be taken to-day by his assistant, a mere youth, but to all appearances a fairly smart youth. I need not say that we shall keep an eye on that youth."

"One moment," Prince Aribert interrupted. "I do not quite understand how you think the poisoning was to have been effected."

"The bottle is now under examination by an expert, who has instructions to remove as little as possible of the stuff which Jules put on the rim of the mouth of it. It will be secretly replaced in its bin during the day. My idea is that by the mere action of pouring out the wine takes up some of the poison, which I deem to be very strong, and thus becomes fatal as it enters the glass."

"But surely the servant in attendance would wipe the mouth of the bottle?"

"Very carelessly, perhaps. And moreover he would be extremely unlikely to wipe off all the stuff; some of it has been ingeniously placed just on the inside edge of the rim. Besides, suppose he forgot to wipe the bottle?"

"Prince Eugen is always served at dinner by Hans. It is an honour which the faithful old fellow reserves for himself."

"But suppose Hans—" Racksole stopped.

"Hans an accomplice! My dear Racksole, the suggestion is wildly impossible."

That night Prince Aribert dined with his august nephew in the superb dining-room of the Royal apartments. Hans served, the dishes being brought to the door by other servants. Aribert found his nephew despondent and taciturn. On the previous day, when, after the futile interview with Sampson Levi, Prince Eugen had despairingly threatened to commit suicide, in such a manner as to make it "look like an accident", Aribert had compelled him to give his word of honour not to do so.

"What wine will your Royal Highness take?" asked old Hans in his soothing tones, when the soup was served.

"Sherry," was Prince Eugen's curt order.

"And *Romanée-Conti* afterwards?" said Hans. Aribert looked up quickly.

"No, not to-night. I'll try Sillery to-night," said Prince Eugen.

"I think I'll have *Romanée-Conti*, Hans, after all," he said. "It suits me better than champagne."

The famous and unsurpassable Burgundy was served with the roast. Old Hans brought it tenderly in its wicker cradle, inserted the corkscrew with mathematical precision, and drew the cork, which he offered for his master's inspection. Eugen nodded, and told him to put it down. Aribert watched with intense interest. He could not for an instant believe that Hans was not the very soul of fidelity, and yet, despite himself, Racksole's words had caused him a certain uneasiness. At that moment Prince Eugen murmured across the table: "Aribert, I withdraw

my promise. Observe that, I withdraw it." Aribert shook his head emphatically, without removing his gaze from Hans. The white-haired servant perfunctorily dusted his napkin round the neck of the bottle of *Romanée-Conti*, and poured out a glass. Aribert trembled from head to foot.

Eugen took up the glass and held it to the light.

"Don't drink it," said Aribert very quietly. "It is poisoned."

"Poisoned!" exclaimed Prince Eugen.

"Poisoned, *sire*!" exclaimed old Hans, with an air of profound amazement and concern, and he seized the glass. "Impossible, *sire*. I myself opened the bottle. No one else has touched it, and the cork was perfect."

"I tell you it is poisoned," Aribert repeated.

"Your Highness will pardon an old man," said Hans, "but to say that this wine is poison is to say that I am a murderer. I will prove to you that it is not poisoned. I will drink it." And he raised the glass to his trembling lips. In that moment Aribert saw that old Hans, at any rate, was not an accomplice of Jules. Springing up from his seat, he knocked the glass from the aged servitor's hands, and the fragments of it fell with a light tinkling crash partly on the table and partly on the floor. The Prince and the servant gazed at one another in a distressing and terrible silence.

There was a slight noise, and Aribert looked aside. He saw that Eugen's body had slipped forward limply over the left arm of his chair; the Prince's arms hung straight and lifeless; his eyes were closed; he was unconscious.

"Hans!" murmured Aribert. "Hans! What is this?"

Chapter 25

The Steam Launch

Mr. Tom Jackson's notion of making good his escape from the hôtel by means of a steam launch was an excellent one, so far as it went, but Theodore Racksole, for his part, did not consider that it went quite far enough.

Theodore Racksole opined, with peculiar glee, that he now had a tangible and definite clue for the catching of the Grand Babylon's ex-waiter. He knew nothing of the Port of London, but he happened to know a good deal of the far more complicated, though somewhat smaller, Port of New York, and he was sure there ought to be no extraordinary difficulty in getting hold of Jules' steam launch. To those who are not thoroughly familiar with it the River Thames and its docks, from London Bridge to Gravesend, seems a vast and uncharted wilderness of craft—a wilderness in which it would be perfectly easy to hide even a three-master successfully. To such people the idea of looking for a steam launch on the river would be about equivalent to the idea of looking for a needle in a bundle of hay. But the fact is, there are hundreds of men between St. Katherine's Wharf and Blackwall who literally know the Thames as the suburban householder knows his back-garden—who can recognize thousands of ships and put a name to them at a distance of half a mile, who are informed as to every movement of vessels on the great stream, who know all the captains, all the engineers, all the lightermen, all the pilots, all the licensed watermen, and all the unlicensed scoundrels from the Tower to Gravesend, and a lot further. By these experts of the Thames the slightest unusual event on the water is noticed and discussed—a wherry cannot change hands but they will guess shrewdly upon the price paid and the intentions of the new owner with regard to it. They have a habit of watching the river for the mere

interest of the sight, and they talk about everything like housewives gathered of an evening round the cottage door. If the first mate of a Castle Liner gets the sack they will be able to tell you what he said to the captain, what the old man said to him, and what both said to the Board, and having finished off that affair they will cheerfully turn to discussing whether Bill Stevens sank his barge outside the West Indian No.2 by accident or on purpose.

Theodore Racksole had no satisfactory means of identifying the steam launch which carried away Mr. Tom Jackson. The sky had clouded over soon after midnight, and there was also a slight mist, and he had only been able to make out that it was a low craft, about sixty feet long, probably painted black. He had personally kept a watch all through the night on vessels going upstream, and during the next morning he had a man to take his place who warned him whenever a steam launch went towards Westminster. At noon, after his conversation with Prince Aribert, he went down the river in a hired row-boat as far as the Custom House, and poked about everywhere, in search of any vessel which could by any possibility be the one he was in search of.

But he found nothing. He was, therefore, tolerably sure that the mysterious launch lay somewhere below the Custom House. At the Custom House stairs, he landed, and asked for a very high official—an official inferior only to a Commissioner—whom he had entertained once in New York, and who had met him in London on business at Lloyd's. In the large but dingy office of this great man a long conversation took place—a conversation in which Racksole had to exercise a certain amount of persuasive power, and which ultimately ended in the high official ringing his bell.

"Desire Mr. Hazell—room No. 332—to speak to me," said the official to the boy who answered the summons, and then, turning to Racksole: "I need hardly repeat, my dear Mr. Racksole, that this is strictly unofficial."

"Agreed, of course," said Racksole.

Mr. Hazell entered. He was a young man of about thirty, dressed in blue serge, with a pale, keen face, a brown moustache and a rather handsome brown beard.

"Mr. Hazell," said the high official, "let me introduce you to Mr. Theodore Racksole—you will doubtless be familiar with his name. Mr. Hazell," he went on to Racksole, "is one of our outdoor staff—what we call an examining officer. Just now he is doing night duty. He has a boat on the river and a couple of men, and the right to board and examine any craft whatever. What Mr. Hazell and his crew don't know about

the Thames between here and Gravesend isn't knowledge."

"Glad to meet you, sir," said Racksole simply, and they shook hands.

Racksole observed with satisfaction that Mr. Hazell was entirely at his ease.

"Now, Hazell," the high official continued, "Mr. Racksole wants you to help in a little private expedition on the river to-night. I will give you a night's leave. I sent for you partly because I thought you would enjoy the affair and partly because I think I can rely on you to regard it as entirely unofficial and not to talk about it. You understand? I dare say you will have no cause to regret having obliged Mr. Racksole."

"I think I grasp the situation," said Hazell, with a slight smile.

"And, by the way," added the high official, "although the business is unofficial, it might be well if you wore your official overcoat. See?"

"Decidedly," said Hazell; "I should have done so in any case."

"And now, Mr. Hazell," said Racksole, "will you do me the pleasure of lunching with me? If you agree, I should like to lunch at the place you usually frequent."

So it came to pass that Theodore Racksole and George Hazell, outdoor clerk in the Customs, lunched together at "Thomas's Chop-House", in the city of London, upon mutton-chops and coffee. The millionaire soon discovered that he had got hold of a keen-witted man and a person of much insight.

"Tell me," said Hazell, when they had reached the cigarette stage, "are the magazine writers anything like correct?"

"What do you mean?" asked Racksole, mystified.

"Well, you're a millionaire—'one of the best,' I believe. One often sees articles on and interviews with millionaires, which describe their private railroad cars, their steam yachts on the Hudson, their marble stables, and so on, and so on. Do you happen to have those things?"

"I have a private car on the New York Central, and I have a two thousand ton schooner-yacht—though it isn't on the Hudson. It happens just now to be on East River. And I am bound to admit that the stables of my uptown place are fitted with marble." Racksole laughed.

"Ah!" said Hazell. "Now I can believe that I am lunching with a millionaire. It's strange how facts like those—unimportant in themselves—appeal to the imagination. You seem to me a real millionaire now. You've given me some personal information; I'll give you some in return. I earn three hundred a year, and perhaps sixty pounds a year extra for overtime. I live by myself in two rooms in Muscovy Court. I've as much money as I need, and I always do exactly what I like outside office.

As regards the office, I do as little work as I can, on principle—it's a fight between us and the Commissioners who shall get the best. They try to do us down, and we try to do them down—it's pretty even on the whole. All's fair in war, you know, and there ain't no ten commandments in a Government office."

Racksole laughed. "Can you get off this afternoon?" he asked.

"Certainly," said Hazell; "I'll get one of my pals to sign on for me, and then I shall be free."

"Well," said Racksole, "I should like you to come down with me to the Grand Babylon. Then we can talk over my little affair at length. And may we go on your boat? I want to meet your crew."

"That will be all right," Hazell remarked. "My two men are the idlest, most soul-less chaps you ever saw. They eat too much, and they have an enormous appetite for beer; but they know the river, and they know their business, and they will do anything within the fair game if they are paid for it, and aren't asked to hurry."

That night, just after dark, Theodore Racksole embarked with his new friend George Hazell in one of the black-painted Customs wherries, manned by a crew of two men—both the later freemen of the river, a distinction which carries with it certain privileges unfamiliar to the mere landsman. It was a cloudy and oppressive evening, not a star showing to illumine the slow tide, now just past its flood. The vast forms of steamers at anchor—chiefly those of the General Steam Navigation and the Aberdeen Line—heaved themselves high out of the water, straining sluggishly at their mooring buoys. On either side the naked walls of warehouses rose like grey precipices from the stream, holding forth quaint arms of steam-cranes. To the west the Tower Bridge spanned the river with its formidable arch, and above that its suspended footpath—a hundred and fifty feet from earth.

Down towards the east and the Pool of London a forest of funnels and masts was dimly outlined against the sinister sky. Huge barges, each steered by a single man at the end of a pair of giant oars, lumbered and swirled down-stream at all angles. Occasionally a tug snorted busily past, flashing its red and green signals and dragging an unwieldy tail of barges in its wake. Then a Margate passenger steamer, its electric lights gleaming from every porthole, swerved round to anchor, with its load of two thousand fatigued excursionists. Over everything brooded an air of mystery—a spirit and feeling of strangeness, remoteness, and the inexplicable. As the broad flat little boat bobbed its way under the shadow of enormous hulks, beneath stretched hawsers, and past buoys

covered with green slime, Racksole could scarcely believe that he was in the very heart of London—the most prosaic city in the world. He had a queer idea that almost anything might happen in this seeming waste of waters at this weird hour of ten o'clock. It appeared incredible to him that only a mile or two away people were sitting in theatres applauding farces, and that at Cannon Street Station, a few yards off, other people were calmly taking the train to various highly respectable suburbs whose names he was gradually learning. He had the uplifting sensation of being in another world which comes to us sometimes amid surroundings violently different from our usual surroundings. The most ordinary noises—of men calling, of a chain running through a slot, of a distant siren—translated themselves to his ears into terrible and haunting sounds, full of portentous significance. He looked over the side of the boat into the brown water, and asked himself what frightful secrets lay hidden in its depth. Then he put his hand into his hip-pocket and touched the stock of his Colt revolver—that familiar substance comforted him.

The oarsmen had instructions to drop slowly down to the Pool, as the wide reach below the Tower is called. These two men had not been previously informed of the precise object of the expedition, but now that they were safely afloat Hazell judged it expedient to give them some notion of it. "We expect to come across a rather suspicious steam launch," he said. "My friend here is very anxious to get a sight of her, and until he has seen her nothing definite can be done."

"What sort of a craft is she, sir?" asked the stroke oar, a fat-faced man who seemed absolutely incapable of any serious exertion.

"I don't know," Racksole replied; "but as near as I can judge, she's about sixty feet in length, and painted black. I fancy I shall recognize her when I see her."

"Not much to go by, that," exclaimed the other man curtly. But he said no more. He, as well as his mate, had received from Theodore Racksole one English sovereign as a kind of preliminary fee, and an English sovereign will do a lot towards silencing the natural sarcastic tendencies and free speech of a Thames waterman.

"There's one thing I noticed," said Racksole suddenly, "and I forgot to tell you of it, Mr. Hazell. Her screw seemed to move with a rather irregular, lame sort of beat."

Both watermen burst into a laugh.

"Oh," said the fat rower, "I know what you're after, sir—it's Jack Everett's launch, commonly called ›Squirm.‹ She's got a four-bladed propeller,

and one blade is broken off short."

"Ay, that's it, sure enough," agreed the man in the bows. "And if it's her you want, I seed her lying up against Cherry Gardens Pier this very morning."

"Let us go to Cherry Gardens Pier by all means, as soon as possible,"

Racksole said, and the boat swung across stream and then began to creep down by the right bank, feeling its way past wharves, many of which, even at that hour, were still busy with their cranes, that descended empty into the bellies of ships and came up full. As the two watermen gingerly manoeuvred the boat on the ebbing tide, Hazell explained to the millionaire that the ›Squirm‹ was one of the most notorious craft on the river. It appeared that when anyone had a nefarious or underhand scheme afoot which necessitated river work Everett's launch was always available for a suitable monetary consideration. The ›Squirm‹ had got itself into a thousand scrapes, and out of those scrapes again with safety, if not precisely with honour. The river police kept a watchful eye on it, and the chief marvel about the whole thing was that old Everett, the owner, had never yet been seriously compromised in any illegal escapade. Not once had the officer of the law been able to prove anything definite against the proprietor of the ›Squirm‹, though several of its quondam hirers were at that very moment in various of Her Majesty's prisons throughout the country. Latterly, however, the launch, with its damaged propeller, which Everett consistently refused to have repaired, had acquired an evil reputation, even among evil-doers, and this fraternity had gradually come to abandon it for less easily recognizable craft.

"Your friend, Mr. Tom Jackson," said Hazell to Racksole, "committed an error of discretion when he hired the ›Squirm.‹ A scoundrel of his experience and calibre ought certainly to have known better than that. You cannot fail to get a clue now."

By this time the boat was approaching Cherry Gardens Pier, but unfortunately a thin night-fog had swept over the river, and objects could not be discerned with any clearness beyond a distance of thirty yards. As the Customs boat scraped down past the pier all its occupants strained eyes for a glimpse of the mysterious launch, but nothing could be seen of it. The boat continued to float idly down-stream, the men resting on their oars.

Then they narrowly escaped bumping a large Norwegian sailing vessel at anchor with her stem pointing down-stream. This ship they passed on the port side. Just as they got clear of her bowsprit the fat man

cried out excitedly, "There's her nose!" and he put the boat about and began to pull back against the tide. And surely the missing ›Squirm‹ was comfortably anchored on the starboard quarter of the Norwegian ship, hidden neatly between the ship and the shore. The men pulled very quietly alongside.

Chapter 26

The Night Chase and the Mudlark

I'll board her to start with," said Hazell, whispering to Racksole. "I'll make out that I suspect they've got dutiable goods on board, and that will give me a chance to have a good look at her."

Dressed in his official overcoat and peaked cap, he stepped, rather jauntily as Racksole thought, on to the low deck of the launch. "Anyone aboard?"

Racksole heard him cry out, and a woman's voice answered. "I'm a Customs examining officer, and I want to search the launch," Hazell shouted, and then disappeared down into the little saloon amidships, and Racksole heard no more. It seemed to the millionaire that Hazell had been gone hours, but at length he returned.

"Can't find anything," he said, as he jumped into the boat, and then privately to Racksole: "There's a woman on board. Looks as if she might coincide with your description of Miss Spencer. Steam's up, but there's no engineer. I asked where the engineer was, and she inquired what business that was of mine, and requested me to get through with my own business and clear off. Seems rather a smart sort. I poked my nose into everything, but I saw no sign of any one else. Perhaps we'd better pull away and lie near for a bit, just to see if anything queer occurs."

"You're quite sure he isn't on board?" Racksole asked.

"Quite," said Hazell positively: "I know how to search a vessel. See this," and he handed to Racksole a sort of steel skewer, about two feet long, with a wooden handle. "That," he said, "is one of the Customs' aids to searching."

"I suppose it wouldn't do to go on board and carry off the lady?" Racksole suggested doubtfully.

"Well," Hazell began, with equal doubtfulness, "as for that—"

"Where's 'e orf?" It was the man in the bows who interrupted Hazell.

Following the direction of the man's finger, both Hazell and Racksole saw with more or less distinctness a dinghy slip away from the forefoot of the Norwegian vessel and disappear downstream into the mist.

"It's Jules, I'll swear," cried Racksole. "After him, men. Ten pounds apiece if we overtake him!"

"Lay down to it now, boys!" said Hazell, and the heavy Customs boat shot out in pursuit.

"This is going to be a lark," Racksole remarked.

"Depends on what you call a lark," said Hazell; "it's not much of a lark tearing down midstream like this in a fog. You never know when you mayn't be in kingdom come with all these barges knocking around. I expect that chap hid in the dinghy when he first caught sight of us, and then slipped his painter as soon as I'd gone."

The boat was moving at a rapid pace with the tide. Steering was a matter of luck and instinct more than anything else. Every now and then Hazell, who held the lines, was obliged to jerk the boat's head sharply round to avoid a barge or an anchored vessel. It seemed to Racksole that vessels were anchored all over the stream. He looked about him anxiously, but for a long time he could see nothing but mist and vague nautical forms. Then suddenly he said, quietly enough, "We're on the right road; I can see him ahead. We're gaining on him." In another minute the dinghy was plainly visible, not twenty yards away, and the sculler—sculling frantically now—was unmistakably Jules—Jules in a light tweed suit and a bowler hat.

"You were right," Hazell said; "this is a lark. I believe I'm getting quite excited. It's more exciting than playing the trombone in an orchestra. I'll run him down, eh?—and then we can drag the chap in from the water."

Racksole nodded, but at that moment a barge, with her red sails set, stood out of the fog clean across the bows of the Customs boat, which narrowly escaped instant destruction. When they got clear, and the usual interchange of calm, nonchalant swearing was over, the dinghy was barely to be discerned in the mist, and the fat man was breathing in such a manner that his sighs might almost have been heard on the banks. Racksole wanted violently to do something, but there was

nothing to do; he could only sit supine by Hazell's side in the sternsheets. Gradually they began again to overtake the dinghy, whose one-man crew was evidently tiring. As they came up, hand over fist, the dinghy's nose swerved aside, and the tiny craft passed down a water-lane between two anchored mineral barges, which lay black and deserted about fifty yards from the Surrey shore. "To starboard," said Racksole. "No, man!"

Hazell replied; "we can't get through there. He's bound to come out below; it's only a feint. I'll keep our nose straight ahead."

And they went on, the fat man pounding away, with a face which glistened even in the thick gloom. It was an empty dinghy which emerged from between the two barges and went drifting and revolving down towards Greenwich.

The fat man gasped a word to his comrade, and the Customs boat stopped dead.

"'E's all right," said the man in the bows. "If it's 'im you want, 'e's on one o' them barges, so you've only got to step on and take 'im orf."

"That's all," said a voice out of the depths of the nearest barge, and it was the voice of Jules, otherwise known as Mr. Tom Jackson.

"'ear 'im?" said the fat man smiling. "'E's a good 'un, 'e is. But if I was you, Mr. Hazell, or you, sir, I shouldn't step on to that barge so quick as all that."

They backed the boat under the stem of the nearest barge and gazed upwards.

"It's all right," said Racksole to Hazell; "I've got a revolver. How can I clamber up there?"

"Yes, I dare say you've got a revolver all right," Hazell replied sharply. "But you mustn't use it. There mustn't be any noise. We should have the river police down on us in a twinkling if there was a revolver shot, and it would be the ruin of me. If an inquiry was held the Commissioners wouldn't take any official notice of the fact that my superior officer had put me on to this job, and I should be requested to leave the service."

"Have no fear on that score," said Racksole. "I shall, of course, take all responsibility."

"It wouldn't matter how much responsibility you took," Hazell retorted; "you wouldn't put me back into the service, and my career would be at an end."

"But there are other careers," said Racksole, who was really anxious to lame his ex-waiter by means of a judiciously-aimed bullet. "There are other careers."

"The Customs is my career," said Hazell, "so let's have no shooting. We'll wait about a bit; he can't escape. You can have my skewer if you like"—and he gave Racksole his searching instrument. "And you can do what you please, provided you do it neatly and don't make a row over it."

For a few moments the four men were passive in the boat, surrounded by swirling mist, with black water beneath them, and towering above them a half-loaded barge with a desperate and resourceful man on board. Suddenly the mist parted and shrivelled away in patches, as though before the breath of some monster. The sky was visible; it was a clear sky, and the moon was shining. The transformation was just one of those meteorological quick-changes which happen most frequently on a great river.

"That's a sight better," said the fat man. At the same moment a head appeared over the edge of the barge. It was Jules' face—dark, sinister and leering.

"Is it Mr. Racksole in that boat?" he inquired calmly; "because if so, let Mr. Racksole step up. Mr. Racksole has caught me, and he can have me for the asking. Here I am." He stood up to his full height on the barge, tall against the night sky, and all the occupants of the boat could see that he held firmly clasped in his right hand a short dagger. "Now, Mr. Racksole, you've been after me for a long time," he continued; "here I am. Why don't you step up? If you haven't got the pluck yourself, persuade someone else to step up in your place … the same fair treatment will be accorded to all." And Jules laughed a low, penetrating laugh.

He was in the midst of this laugh when he lurched suddenly forward.

"What 'r' you doing of aboard my barge? Off you goes!" It was a boy's small shrill voice that sounded in the night. A ragged boy's small form had appeared silently behind Jules, and two small arms with a vicious shove precipitated him into the water. He fell with a fine gurgling splash. It was at once obvious that swimming was not among Jules' accomplishments. He floundered wildly and sank. When he reappeared he was dragged into the Customs boat. Rope was produced, and in a minute or two the man lay ignominiously bound in the bottom of the boat. With the aid of a mudlark—a mere barge boy, who probably had no more right on the barge than Jules himself—Racksole had won his game. For the first time for several weeks the millionaire experienced a sensation of equanimity and satisfaction. He leaned over the prostrate form of Jules, Hazell's professional skewer in his hand.

"What are you going to do with him now?" asked Hazell.

"We'll row up to the landing steps in front of the Grand Babylon. He shall be well lodged at my hôtel, I promise him."

Jules spoke no word.

Before Racksole parted company with the Customs man that night Jules had been safely transported into the Grand Babylon Hôtel and the two watermen had received their £10 apiece.

"You will sleep here?" said the millionaire to Mr. George Hazell. "It is late."

"With pleasure," said Hazell. The next morning he found a sumptuous breakfast awaiting him, and in his table-napkin was a Bank of England note for a hundred pounds. But, though he did not hear of them till much later, many things had happened before Hazell consumed that sumptuous breakfast.

Chapter 27

The Confession of Mr. Tom Jackson

It happened that the small bedroom occupied by Jules during the years he was head-waiter at the Grand Babylon had remained empty since his sudden dismissal by Theodore Racksole. No other head-waiter had been formally appointed in his place; and, indeed, the absence of one man—even the unique Jules—could scarcely have been noticed in the enormous staff of a place like the Grand Babylon. The functions of a head-waiter are generally more ornamental, spectacular, and morally impressive than useful, and it was so at the great hôtel on the Embankment. Racksole accordingly had the excellent idea of transporting his prisoner, with as much secrecy as possible, to this empty bedroom. There proved to be no difficulty in doing so; Jules showed himself perfectly amenable to a show of superior force.

Racksole took upstairs with him an old commissionaire who had been attached to the outdoor service of the hôtel for many years—a grey-haired man, wiry as a terrier and strong as a mastiff. Entering the bedroom with Jules, whose hands were bound, he told the commissionaire to remain outside the door.

Jules' bedroom was quite an ordinary apartment, though perhaps slightly superior to the usual accommodation provided for servants in the caravanserais of the West End. It was about fourteen by twelve. It was furnished with a bedstead, a small wardrobe, a small washstand and dressing-table, and two chairs. There were two hooks behind the door, a strip of carpet by the bed, and some cheap ornaments on the iron mantelpiece. There was also one electric light. The window was a little square one, high up from the floor, and it looked on the inner

quadrangle.

The room was on the top storey—the eighth—and from it you had a view sheer to the ground. Twenty feet below ran a narrow cornice about a foot wide; three feet or so above the window another and wider cornice jutted out, and above that was the high steep roof of the hôtel, though you could not see it from the window. As Racksole examined the window and the outlook, he said to himself that Jules could not escape by that exit, at any rate. He gave a glance up the chimney, and saw that the flue was far too small to admit a man's body.

Then he called in the commissionaire, and together they bound Jules firmly to the bedstead, allowing him, however, to lie down. All the while the captive never opened his mouth—merely smiled a smile of disdain. Finally Racksole removed the ornaments, the carpet, the chairs and the hooks, and wrenched away the switch of the electric light. Then he and the commissionaire left the room, and Racksole locked the door on the outside and put the key in his pocket.

"You will keep watch here," he said to the commissionaire, "through the night. You can sit on this chair. Don't go to sleep. If you hear the slightest noise in the room blow your cab-whistle; I will arrange to answer the signal. If there is no noise do nothing whatever. I don't want this talked about, you understand. I shall trust you; you can trust me."

"But the servants will see me here when they get up to-morrow," said the commissionaire, with a faint smile, "and they will be pretty certain to ask what I'm doing of up here. What shall I say to 'em?"

"You've been a soldier, haven't you?" asked Racksole.

"I've seen three campaigns, sir," was the reply, and, with a gesture of pardonable pride, the grey-haired fellow pointed to the medals on his breast.

"Well, supposing you were on sentry duty and some meddlesome person in camp asked you what you were doing—what should you say?"

"I should tell him to clear off or take the consequences, and pretty quick too."

"Do that to-morrow morning, then, if necessary," said Racksole, and departed.

It was then about one o'clock a.m. The millionaire retired to bed—not his own bed, but a bed on the seventh storey. He did not, however, sleep very long. Shortly after dawn he was wide awake, and thinking busily about Jules.

He was, indeed, very curious to know Jules' story, and he determined, if the thing could be done at all, by persuasion or otherwise, to extract it from him. With a man of Theodore Racksole's temperament there is no time like the present, and at six o'clock, as the bright morning sun brought gaiety into the window, he dressed and went upstairs again to the eighth storey. The commissionaire sat stolid, but alert on his chair, and, at the sight of his master, rose and saluted.

"Anything happened?" Racksole asked.

"Nothing, sir."

"Servants say anything?"

"Only a dozen or so of 'em are up yet, sir. One of 'em asked what I was playing at, and so I told her I was looking after a bull bitch and a litter of pups that you was very particular about, sir."

"Good," said Racksole, as he unlocked the door and entered the room. All was exactly as he had left it, except that Jules who had been lying on his back, had somehow turned over and was now lying on his face. He gazed silently, scowling at the millionaire. Racksole greeted him and ostentatiously took a revolver from his hip-pocket and laid it on the dressing-table. Then he seated himself on the dressing-table by the side of the revolver, his legs dangling an inch or two above the floor.

"I want to have a talk to you, Jackson," he began.

"You can talk to me as much as you like," said Jules. "I shan't interfere, you may bet on that."

"I should like you to answer some questions."

"That's different," said Jules. "I'm not going to answer any questions while I'm tied up like this. You may bet on that, too."

"It will pay you to be reasonable," said Racksole.

"I'm not going to answer any questions while I'm tied up."

"I'll unfasten your legs, if you like," Racksole suggested politely, "then you can sit up. It's no use you pretending you've been uncomfortable, because I know you haven't. I calculate you've been treated very handsomely, my son. There you are!" and he loosened the lower extremities of his prisoner from their bonds. "Now I repeat you may as well be reasonable. You may as well admit that you've been fairly beaten in the game and act accordingly. I was determined to beat you, by myself, without the police, and I've done it."

"You've done yourself," retorted Jules. "You've gone against the law. If you'd had any sense you wouldn't have meddled; you'd have left everything to the police. They'd have muddled about for a year or two, and then done nothing. Who's going to tell the police now? Are you?

Are you going to give me up to 'em, and say, 'Here, I've caught him for you.' If you do they'll ask you to explain several things, and then you'll look foolish. One crime doesn't excuse another, and you'll find that out."

With unerring insight, Jules had perceived exactly the difficulty of Racksole's position, and it was certainly a difficulty which Racksole did not attempt to minimize to himself. He knew well that it would have to be faced. He did not, however, allow Jules to guess his thoughts.

"Meanwhile," he said calmly to the other, "you're here and my prisoner. You've committed a variegated assortment of crimes, and among them is murder. You are due to be hung. You know that. There is no reason why I should call in the police at all. It will be perfectly easy for me to finish you off, as you deserve, myself. I shall only be carrying out justice, and robbing the hangman of his fee. Precisely as I brought you into the hôtel, I can take you out again. A few days ago you borrowed or stole a steam yacht at Ostend. What you have done with it I don't know, nor do I care. But I strongly suspect that my daughter had a narrow escape of being murdered on your steam yacht. Now I have a steam yacht of my own. Suppose I use it as you used yours! Suppose I smuggle you on to it, steam out to sea, and then ask you to step off it into the ocean one night. Such things have been done. Such things will be done again. If I acted so, I should at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that I had relieved society from the incubus of a scoundrel."

"But you won't," Jules murmured.

"No," said Racksole steadily, "I won't—if you behave yourself this morning. But I swear to you that if you don't I will never rest till you are dead, police or no police. You don't know Theodore Racksole."

"I believe you mean it," Jules exclaimed, with an air of surprised interest, as though he had discovered something of importance.

"I believe I do," Racksole resumed. "Now listen. At the best, you will be given up to the police. At the worst, I shall deal with you myself. With the police you may have a chance—you may get off with twenty years' penal servitude, because, though it is absolutely certain that you murdered Reginald Dimmock, it would be a little difficult to prove the case against you. But with me you would have no chance whatever. I have a few questions to put to you, and it will depend on how you answer them whether I give you up to the police or take the law into my own hands. And let me tell you that the latter course would be much simpler for me. And I would take it, too, did I not feel that you were a very clever and exceptional man; did I not have a sort of sneaking

admiration for your detestable skill and ingenuity."

"You think, then, that I am clever?" said Jules. "You are right. I am. I should have been much too clever for you if luck had not been against me. You owe your victory, not to skill, but to luck."

"That is what the vanquished always say. Waterloo was a bit of pure luck for the English, no doubt, but it was Waterloo all the same."

Jules yawned elaborately. "What do you want to know?" he inquired, with politeness.

"First and foremost, I want to know the names of your accomplices inside this hôtel."

"I have no more," said Jules. "Rocco was the last."

"Don't begin by lying to me. If you had no accomplice, how did you contrive that one particular bottle of *Romanée-Conti* should be served to his Highness Prince Eugen?"

"Then you discovered that in time, did you?" said Jules. "I was afraid so. Let me explain that that needed no accomplice. The bottle was topmost in the bin, and naturally it would be taken. Moreover, I left it sticking out a little further than the rest."

"You did not arrange, then, that Hubbard should be taken ill the night before last?"

"I had no idea," said Jules, "that the excellent Hubbard was not enjoying his accustomed health."

"Tell me," said Racksole, "who or what is the origin of your vendetta against the life of Prince Eugen?"

"I had no vendetta against the life of Prince Eugen," said Jules, "at least, not to begin with. I merely undertook, for a consideration, to see that Prince Eugen did not have an interview with a certain Mr. Sampson Levi in London before a certain date, that was all. It seemed simple enough. I had been engaged in far more complicated transactions before. I was convinced that I could manage it, with the help of Rocco and Em—and Miss Spencer."

"Is that woman your wife?"

"She would like to be," he sneered. "Please don't interrupt. I had completed my arrangements, when you so inconsiderately bought the hôtel. I don't mind admitting now that from the very moment when you came across me that night in the corridor I was secretly afraid of you, though I scarcely admitted the fact even to myself then. I thought it safer to shift the scene of our operations to Ostend. I had meant to deal with Prince Eugen in this hôtel, but I decided, then, to intercept him on the Continent, and I despatched Miss Spencer with some instructions. Troubles

never come singly, and it happened that just then that fool Dimmock, who had been in the swim with us, chose to prove refractory. The slightest hitch would have upset everything, and I was obliged to—to clear him off the scene. He wanted to back out—he had a bad attack of conscience, and violent measures were essential. I regret his untimely decease, but he brought it on himself. Well, everything was going serenely when you and your brilliant daughter, apparently determined to meddle, turned up again among us at Ostend. Only twenty-four hours, however, had to elapse before the date which had been mentioned to me by my employers. I kept poor little Eugen for the allotted time, and then you managed to get hold of him. I do not deny that you scored there, though, according to my original instructions, you scored too late. The time had passed, and so, so far as I knew, it didn't matter a pin whether Prince Eugen saw Mr. Sampson Levi or not. But my employers were still uneasy. They were uneasy even after little Eugen had lain ill in Ostend for several weeks. It appears that they feared that even at that date an interview between Prince Eugen and Mr. Sampson Levi might work harm to them. So they applied to me again. This time they wanted Prince Eugen to be—em—finished off entirely. They offered high terms."

"What terms?"

"I had received fifty thousand pounds for the first job, of which Rocco had half. Rocco was also to be made a member of a certain famous European order, if things went right. That was what he coveted far more than the money—the vain fellow! For the second job I was offered a hundred thousand. A tolerably large sum. I regret that I have not been able to earn it."

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Racksole, horror-struck by this calm confession, in spite of his previous knowledge, "that you were offered a hundred thousand pounds to poison Prince Eugen?"

"You put it rather crudely," said Jules in reply. "I prefer to say that I was offered a hundred thousand pounds if Prince Eugen should die within a reasonable time."

"And who were your damnable employers?"

"That, honestly, I do not know."

"You know, I suppose, who paid you the first fifty thousand pounds, and who promised you the hundred thousand."

"Well," said Jules, "I know vaguely. I know that he came via Vienna from—em—Bosnia. My impression was that the affair had some bearing, direct or indirect, on the projected marriage of the King of Bosnia. He is a young monarch, scarcely out of political leading-strings, as it were,

and doubtless his Ministers thought that they had better arrange his marriage for him. They tried last year, and failed because the Princess whom they had in mind had cast her sparkling eyes on another Prince. That Prince happened to be Prince Eugen of Posen. The Ministers of the King of Bosnia knew exactly the circumstances of Prince Eugen. They knew that he could not marry without liquidating his debts, and they knew that he could only liquidate his debts through this Jew, Sampson Levi. Unfortunately for me, they ultimately wanted to make too sure of Prince Eugen. They were afraid he might after all arrange his marriage without the aid of Mr. Sampson Levi, and so—well, you know the rest …. It is a pity that the poor little innocent King of Bosnia can't have the Princess of his Ministers' choice."

"Then you think that the King himself had no part in this abominable crime?"

"I think decidedly not."

"I am glad of that," said Racksole simply. "And now, the name of your immediate employer."

"He was merely an agent. He called himself Sleszak—S-l-e-s-z-a-k. But I imagine that that wasn't his real name. I don't know his real name. An old man, he often used to be found at the Hôtel Ritz, Paris."

"Mr. Sleszak and I will meet," said Racksole.

"Not in this world," said Jules quickly. "He is dead. I heard only last night—just before our little tussle."

There was a silence.

"It is well," said Racksole at length. "Prince Eugen lives, despite all plots. After all, justice is done."

"Mr. Racksole is here, but he can see no one, Miss." The words came from behind the door, and the voice was the commissionaire's. Racksole started up, and went towards the door.

"Nonsense," was the curt reply, in feminine tones. "Move aside instantly."

The door opened, and Nella entered. There were tears in her eyes.

"Oh! Dad," she exclaimed, "I've only just heard you were in the hôtel. We looked for you everywhere. Come at once, Prince Eugen is dying—"

Then she saw the man sitting on the bed, and stopped.

Later, when Jules was alone again, he remarked to himself, "I may get that hundred thousand."

Chapter 28

The State Bedroom Once More

When, immediately after the episode of the bottle of *Romanée-Conti* in the State dining-room, Prince Aribert and old Hans found that Prince Eugen had sunk in an unconscious heap over his chair, both the former thought, at the first instant, that Eugen must have already tasted the poisoned wine. But a moment's reflection showed that this was not possible. If the Hereditary Prince of Posen was dying or dead, his condition was due to some other agency than the *Romanée-Conti*. Aribert bent over him, and a powerful odour from the man's lips at once disclosed the cause of the disaster: it was the odour of laudanum. Indeed, the smell of that sinister drug seemed now to float heavily over the whole table. Across Aribert's mind there flashed then the true explanation. Prince Eugen, taking advantage of Aribert's attention being momentarily diverted; and yielding to a sudden impulse of despair, had decided to poison himself, and had carried out his intention on the spot. The laudanum must have been already in his pocket, and this fact went to prove that the unfortunate Prince had previously contemplated such a proceeding, even after his definite promise. Aribert remembered now with painful vividness his nephew's words: "I withdraw my promise. Observe that—I withdraw it." It must have been instantly after the utterance of that formal withdrawal that Eugen attempted to destroy himself.

"It's laudanum, Hans," Aribert exclaimed, rather helplessly.

"Surely his Highness has not taken poison?" said Hans. "It is impossible!"

"I fear it is only too possible," said the other. "It's laudanum. What are we to do? Quick, man!"

"His Highness must be roused, Prince. He must have an emetic. We had better carry him to the bedroom."

They did, and laid him on the great bed; and then Aribert mixed an emetic of mustard and water, and administered it, but without any effect. The sufferer lay motionless, with every muscle relaxed. His skin was ice-cold to the touch, and the eyelids, half-drawn, showed that the pupils were painfully contracted.

"Go out, and send for a doctor, Hans. Say that Prince Eugen has been suddenly taken ill, but that it isn't serious. The truth must never be known."

"He must be roused, *sire*," Hans said again, as he hurried from the room.

Aribert lifted his nephew from the bed, shook him, pinched him, flicked him cruelly, shouted at him, dragged him about, but to no avail. At length he desisted, from mere physical fatigue, and laid the Prince back again on the bed. Every minute that elapsed seemed an hour. Alone with the unconscious organism in the silence of the great stately chamber, under the cold yellow glare of the electric lights, Aribert became a prey to the most despairing thoughts. The tragedy of his nephew's career forced itself upon him, and it occurred to him that an early and shameful death had all along been inevitable for this good-natured, weak-purposed, unhappy child of a historic throne. A little good fortune, and his character, so evenly balanced between right and wrong, might have followed the proper path, and Eugen might have figured at any rate with dignity on the European stage. But now it appeared that all was over, the last stroke played. And in this disaster Aribert saw the ruin of his own hopes. For Aribert would have to occupy his nephew's throne, and he felt instinctively that nature had not cut him out for a throne. By a natural impulse he inwardly rebelled against the prospect of monarchy. Monarchy meant so much for which he knew himself to be entirely unfitted. It meant a political marriage, which means a forced marriage, a union against inclination. And then what of Nella—Nella!

Hans returned. "I have sent for the nearest doctor, and also for a specialist," he said.

"Good," said Aribert. "I hope they will hurry." Then he sat down and wrote a card. "Take this yourself to Miss Racksole. If she is out of the hôtel, ascertain where she is and follow her. Understand, it is of the first importance."

Hans bowed, and departed for the second time, and Aribert was alone again.

He gazed at Eugen, and made another frantic attempt to rouse him from the deadly stupor, but it was useless. He walked away to the window: through the opened casement he could hear the tinkle of passing

hansoms on the Embankment below, whistles of door-keepers, and the hoot of steam tugs on the river. The world went on as usual, it appeared. It was an absurd world.

He desired nothing better than to abandon his princely title, and live as a plain man, the husband of the finest woman on earth.... But now!...

Pah! How selfish he was, to be thinking of himself when Eugen lay dying. Yet—Nella!

The door opened, and a man entered, who was obviously the doctor. A few curt questions, and he had grasped the essentials of the case. "Oblige me by ringing the bell, Prince. I shall want some hot water, and an able-bodied man and a nurse."

"Who wants a nurse?" said a voice, and Nella came quietly in. "I am a nurse," she added to the doctor, "and at your orders."

The next two hours were a struggle between life and death. The first doctor, a specialist who followed him, Nella, Prince Aribert, and old Hans formed, as it were, a league to save the dying man. None else in the hôtel knew the real seriousness of the case. When a Prince falls ill, and especially by his own act, the precise truth is not issued broadcast to the universe.

According to official intelligence, a Prince is never seriously ill until he is dead. Such is statecraft.

The worst feature of Prince Eugen's case was that emetics proved futile.

Neither of the doctors could explain their failure, but it was only too apparent. The league was reduced to helplessness. At last the great specialist from Manchester Square gave it out that there was no chance for Prince Eugen unless the natural vigour of his constitution should prove capable of throwing off the poison unaided by scientific assistance, as a drunkard can sleep off his potion. Everything had been tried, even to artificial respiration and the injection of hot coffee. Having emitted this pronouncement, the great specialist from Manchester Square left. It was one o'clock in the morning. By one of those strange and futile coincidences which sometimes startle us by their subtle significance, the specialist met Theodore Racksole and his captive as they were entering the hôtel. Neither had the least suspicion of the other's business.

In the State bedroom the small group of watchers surrounded the bed. The slow minutes filed away in dreary procession. Another hour passed. Then the figure on the bed, hitherto so motionless, twitched and moved; the lips parted.

"There is hope," said the doctor, and administered a stimulant which was handed to him by Nella.

In a quarter of an hour the patient had regained consciousness. For the ten thousandth time in the history of medicine a sound constitution had accomplished a miracle impossible to the accumulated medical skill of centuries.

In due course the doctor left, saying that Prince Eugen was "on the high road to recovery," and promising to come again within a few hours. Morning had dawned. Nella drew the great curtains, and let in a flood of sunlight.

Old Hans, overcome by fatigue, dozed in a chair in a far corner of the room.

The reaction had been too much for him. Nella and Prince Aribert looked at each other. They had not exchanged a word about themselves, yet each knew what the other had been thinking. They clasped hands with a perfect understanding. Their brief love-making had been of the silent kind, and it was silent now. No word was uttered. A shadow had passed from over them, but only their eyes expressed relief and joy.

"Aribert!" The faint call came from the bed. Aribert went to the bedside, while Nella remained near the window.

"What is it, Eugen?" he said. "You are better now."

"You think so?" murmured the other. "I want you to forgive me for all this, Aribert. I must have caused you an intolerable trouble. I did it so clumsily; that is what annoys me. Laudanum was a feeble expedient; but I could think of nothing else, and I daren't ask anyone for advice. I was obliged to go out and buy the stuff for myself. It was all very awkward. But, thank goodness, it has not been ineffectual."

"What do you mean, Eugen? You are better. In a day or so you will be perfectly recovered."

"I am dying," said Eugen quietly. "Do not be deceived. I die because I wish to die. It is bound to be so. I know by the feel of my heart. In a few hours it will be over. The throne of Posen will be yours, Aribert. You will fill it more worthily than I have done. Don't let them know over there that I poisoned myself. Swear Hans to secrecy; swear the doctors to secrecy; and breathe no word yourself. I have been a fool, but I do not wish it to be known that I was also a coward. Perhaps it is not cowardice; perhaps it is courage, after all—courage to cut the knot. I could not have survived the disgrace of any revelations, Aribert, and revelations would have been sure to come. I have made a fool of myself, but I am ready to pay for it. We of Posen—we always pay—everything except our debts. Ah! those debts! Had it not been for those I could have faced her who was to have been my wife, to have shared

my throne. I could have hidden my past, and begun again. With her help I really could have begun again. But Fate has been against me—always! always! By the way, what was that plot against me, Aribert? I forget, I forget."

His eyes closed. There was a sudden noise. Old Hans had slipped from his chair to the floor. He picked himself up, dazed, and crept shamefacedly out of the room.

Aribert took his nephew's hand.

"Nonsense, Eugen! You are dreaming. You will be all right soon. Pull yourself together."

"All because of a million," the sick man moaned. "One miserable million English pounds. The national debt of Posen is fifty millions, and I, the Prince of Posen, couldn't borrow one. If I could have got it, I might have held my head up again. Good-bye, Aribert.... Who is that girl?"

Aribert looked up. Nella was standing silent at the foot of the bed, her eyes moist. She came round to the bedside, and put her hand on the patient's heart. Scarcely could she feel its pulsation, and to Aribert her eyes expressed a sudden despair.

At that moment Hans re-entered the room and beckoned to her.

"I have heard that Herr Racksole has returned to the hôtel," he whispered, "and that he has captured that man Jules, who they say is such a villain."

Several times during the night Nella inquired for her father, but could gain no knowledge of his whereabouts. Now, at half-past six in the morning, a rumour had mysteriously spread among the servants of the hôtel about the happenings of the night before. How it had originated no one could have determined, but it had originated.

"Where is my father?" Nella asked of Hans.

He shrugged his shoulders, and pointed upwards. "Somewhere at the top, they say."

Nella almost ran out of the room. Her interruption of the interview between Jules and Theodore Racksole has already been described. As she came downstairs with her father she said again, "Prince Eugen is dying—but I think you can save him."

"I?" exclaimed Theodore.

"Yes," she repeated positively. "I will tell you what I want you to do, and you must do it."

Chapter 29

Theodore Is Called to the Rescue

As Nella passed downstairs from the top storey with her father—the lifts had not yet begun to work—she drew him into her own room, and closed the door.

"What's this all about?" he asked, somewhat mystified, and even alarmed by the extreme seriousness of her face.

"Dad," the girl began, "you are very rich, aren't you? very, very rich?" She smiled anxiously, timidly. He did not remember to have seen that expression on her face before. He wanted to make a facetious reply, but checked himself.

"Yes," he said, "I am. You ought to know that by this time."

"How soon could you realize a million pounds?"

"A million—what?" he cried. Even he was staggered by her calm reference to this gigantic sum. "What on earth are you driving at?"

"A million pounds, I said. That is to say, five million dollars. How soon could you realize as much as that?"

"Oh!" he answered, "in about a month, if I went about it neatly enough. I could unload as much as that in a month without scaring Wall Street and other places. But it would want some arrangement."

"Useless!" she exclaimed. "Couldn't you do it quicker, if you really had to?"

"If I really had to, I could fix it in a week, but it would make things lively, and I should lose on the job."

"Couldn't you," she persisted, "couldn't you go down this morning and raise a million, somehow, if it was a matter of life and death?"

He hesitated. "Look here, Nella," he said, "what is it you've got up your sleeve?"

"Just answer my question, Dad, and try not to think that I'm a stark, staring lunatic."

"I rather expect I could get a million this morning, even in London. But it would cost pretty dear. It might cost me fifty thousand pounds, and there would be the dickens of an upset in New York—a sort of grand universal slump in my holdings."

"Why should New York know anything about it?"

"Why should New York know anything about it!" he repeated. "My girl, when anyone borrows a million sovereigns the whole world knows about it. Do you reckon that I can go up to the Governors of the Bank of England and say, "Look here, lend Theodore Racksole a million for a few weeks, and he'll give you an IOU[1] and a covering note on stocks"?"

"But you could get it?" she asked again.

"If there's a million in London I guess I could handle it," he replied.

"Well, Dad," and she put her arms round his neck, "you've just got to go out and fix it. See? It's for me. I've never asked you for anything really big before. But I do now. And I want it so badly."

He stared at her. "I award you the prize," he said, at length. "You deserve it for colossal and immense coolness. Now you can tell me the true inward meaning of all this rigmarole. What is it?"

"I want it for Prince Eugen," she began, at first hesitatingly, with pauses.

"He's ruined unless he can get a million to pay off his debts. He's dreadfully in love with a Princess, and he can't marry her because of this.

Her parents wouldn't allow it. He was to have got it from Sampson Levi, but he arrived too late—owing to Jules."

"I know all about that—perhaps more than you do. But I don't see how it affects you or me."

"The point is this, Dad," Nella continued. "He's tried to commit suicide—he's so hipped. Yes, real suicide. He took laudanum last night. It didn't kill him straight off—he's got over the first shock, but he's in a very weak state, and he means to die. And I truly believe he will die. Now, if you could let him have that million, Dad, you would save his life."

Nella's item of news was a considerable and disconcerting surprise to Racksole, but he hid his feelings fairly well.

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1. Ein Schuldschein. Das Kürzel IOU steht für "I owe you." Abkürzungen dieser Art sind also nicht erst eine Erfindung des Handy-Zeitalters.

"I haven't the least desire to save his life, Nell. I don't overmuch respect your Prince Eugen. I've done what I could for him—but only for the sake of seeing fair play, and because I object to conspiracies and secret murders. It's a different thing if he wants to kill himself. What I say is: Let him. Who is responsible for his being in debt to the tune of a million pounds? He's only got himself and his bad habits to thank for that. I suppose if he does happen to peg out, the throne of Posen will go to Prince Aribert. And a good thing, too! Aribert is worth twenty of his nephew."

"That's just it, Dad," she said, eagerly following up her chance. "I want you to save Prince Eugen just because Aribert—Prince Aribert—doesn't wish to occupy the throne. He"d much prefer not to have it."

"Much prefer not to have it! Don't talk nonsense. If he's honest with himself, he'll admit that he'll be jolly glad to have it. Thrones are in his blood, so to speak."

"You are wrong, Father. And the reason is this: If Prince Aribert ascended the throne of Posen he would be compelled to marry a Princess."

"Well! A Prince ought to marry a Princess."

"But he doesn't want to. He wants to give up all his royal rights, and live as a subject. He wants to marry a woman who isn't a Princess."

"Is she rich?"

"Her father is," said the girl. "Oh, Dad! can't you guess? He—he loves me." Her head fell on Theodore's shoulder and she began to cry.

The millionaire whistled a very high note. "Nell!" he said at length. "And you? Do you sort of cling to him?"

"Dad," she answered, "you are stupid. Do you imagine I should worry myself like this if I didn't?" She smiled through her tears. She knew from her father's tone that she had accomplished a victory.

"It's a mighty queer arrangement," Theodore remarked. "But of course if you think it'll be of any use, you had better go down and tell your Prince Eugen that that million can be fixed up, if he really needs it. I expect there'll be decent security, or Sampson Levi wouldn't have mixed himself up in it."

"Thanks, Dad. Don't come with me; I may manage better alone."

She gave a formal little curtsey and disappeared. Racksole, who had the talent, so necessary to millionaires, of attending to several matters at once, the large with the small, went off to give orders about the breakfast and the remuneration of his assistant of the evening before, Mr. George Hazell. He then sent an invitation to Mr. Felix Babylon's room, asking that gentleman to take breakfast with him. After he had related

to Babylon the history of Jules' capture, and had a long discussion with him upon several points of hôtel management, and especially as to the guarding of wine-cellars, Racksole put on his hat, sallied forth into the Strand, hailed a hansom, and was driven to the City. The order and nature of his operations there were too complex and technical to be described here.

When Nella returned to the State bedroom both the doctor and the great specialist were again in attendance. The two physicians moved away from the bedside as she entered, and began to talk quietly together in the embrasure of the window.

"A curious case!" said the specialist.

"Yes. Of course, as you say, it's a neurotic temperament that's at the bottom of the trouble. When you've got that and a vigorous constitution working one against the other, the results are apt to be distinctly curious. Do you consider there is any hope, Sir Charles?"

"If I had seen him when he recovered consciousness I should have said there was hope. Frankly, when I left last night, or rather this morning, I didn't expect to see the Prince alive again—let alone conscious, and able to talk. According to all the rules of the game, he ought to get over the shock to the system with perfect ease and certainty. But I don't think he will. I don't think he wants to. And moreover, I think he is still under the influence of suicidal mania. If he had a razor he would cut his throat. You must keep his strength up. Inject, if necessary. I will come in this afternoon. I am due now at St. James's Palace." And the specialist hurried away, with an elaborate bow and a few hasty words of polite reassurances to Prince Aribert.

When he had gone Prince Aribert took the other doctor aside. "Forget everything, doctor," he said, "except that I am one man and you are another, and tell me the truth. Shall you be able to save his Highness? Tell me the truth."

"There is no truth," was the doctor's reply. "The future is not in our hands, Prince."

"But you are hopeful? Yes or no."

The doctor looked at Prince Aribert. "No!" he said shortly. "I am not. I am never hopeful when the patient is not on my side."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that his Royal Highness has no desire to live. You must have observed that."

"Only too well," said Aribert.

"And you are aware of the cause?"

Aribert nodded an affirmative.

"But cannot remove it?"

"No," said Aribert. He felt a touch on his sleeve. It was Nella's finger.

With a gesture she beckoned him towards the ante-room.

"If you choose," she said, when they were alone, "Prince Eugen can be saved. I have arranged it."

"You have arranged it?" He bent over her, almost with an air of alarm. "Go and tell him that the million pounds which is so necessary to his happiness will be forthcoming. Tell him that it will be forthcoming today, if that will be any satisfaction to him."

"But what do you mean by this, Nella?"

"I mean what I say, Aribert," and she sought his hand and took it in hers. "Just what I say. If a million pounds will save Prince Eugen's life, it is at his disposal."

"But how—how have you managed it? By what miracle?"

"My father," she replied softly, "will do anything that I ask him. Do not let us waste time. Go and tell Eugen it is arranged, that all will be well. Go!"

"But we cannot accept this—this enormous, this incredible favour. It is impossible."

"Aribert," she said quickly, "remember you are not in Posen holding a Court reception. You are in England and you are talking to an American girl who has always been in the habit of having her own way."

The Prince threw up his hands and went back in to the bedroom. The doctor was at a table writing out a prescription. Aribert approached the bedside, his heart beating furiously. Eugen greeted him with a faint, fatigued smile.

"Eugen," he whispered, "listen carefully to me. I have news. With the assistance of friends I have arranged to borrow that million for you. It is quite settled, and you may rely on it. But you must get better. Do you hear me?"

Eugen almost sat up in bed. "Tell me I am not delirious," he exclaimed.

"Of course you aren't," Aribert replied. "But you mustn't sit up. You must take care of yourself."

"Who will lend the money?" Eugen asked in a feeble, happy whisper.

"Never mind. You shall hear later. Devote yourself now to getting better."

The change in the patient's face was extraordinary. His mind seemed to have put on an entirely different aspect. The doctor was startled

to hear him murmur a request for food. As for Aribert, he sat down, overcome by the turmoil of his own thoughts. Till that moment he felt that he had never appreciated the value and the marvellous power of mere money, of the lucre which philosophers pretend to despise and men sell their souls for. His heart almost burst in its admiration for that extraordinary Nella, who by mere personal force had raised two men out of the deepest slough of despair to the blissful heights of hope and happiness. "These Anglo-Saxons," he said to himself, "what a race!"

By the afternoon Eugen was noticeably and distinctly better. The physicians, puzzled for the third time by the progress of the case, announced now that all danger was past. The tone of the announcement seemed to Aribert to imply that the fortunate issue was due wholly to unrivalled medical skill, but perhaps Aribert was mistaken. Anyhow, he was in a most charitable mood, and prepared to forgive anything.

"Nella," he said a little later, when they were by themselves again in the ante-chamber, "what am I to say to you? How can I thank you? How can I thank your father?"

"You had better not thank my father," she said. "Dad will affect to regard the thing as a purely business transaction, as, of course, it is. As for me, you can—you can—"

"Well?"

"Kiss me," she said. "There! Are you sure you've formally proposed to me, *mon prince*?"

"Ah! Nell!" he exclaimed, putting his arms round her again. "Be mine! That is all I want!"

"You'll find," she said, "that you'll want Dad's consent too!"

"Will he make difficulties? He could not, Nell—not with you!"

"Better ask him," she said sweetly.

A moment later Racksole himself entered the room. "Going on all right?" he enquired, pointing to the bedroom. "Excellently," the lovers answered together, and they both blushed.

"Ah!" said Racksole. "Then, if that's so, and you can spare a minute, I've something to show you, Prince."

Chapter 30

Conclusion

"I've a great deal to tell you, Prince," Racksole began, as soon as they were out of the room, "and also, as I said, something to show you. Will you come to my room? We will talk there first. The whole hôtel is humming with excitement."

"With pleasure," said Aribert.

"Glad his Highness Prince Eugen is recovering," Racksole said, urged by considerations of politeness.

"Ah! As to that—" Aribert began. "If you don't mind, we'll discuss that later, Prince," Racksole interrupted him.

They were in the proprietor's private room.

"I want to tell you all about last night," Racksole resumed, "about my capture of Jules, and my examination of him this morning." And he launched into a full account of the whole thing, down to the least details. "You see," he concluded, "that our suspicions as to Bosnia were tolerably correct. But as regards Bosnia, the more I think about it, the surer I feel that nothing can be done to bring their criminal politicians to justice."

"And as to Jules, what do you propose to do?"

"Come this way," said Racksole, and led Aribert to another room. A sofa in this room was covered with a linen cloth. Racksole lifted the cloth—he could never deny himself a dramatic moment—and disclosed the body of a dead man.

It was Jules, dead, but without a scratch or mark on him.

"I have sent for the police—not a street constable, but an official from Scotland Yard," said Racksole.

"How did this happen?" Aribert asked, amazed and startled. "I understood you to say that he was safely immured in the bedroom."

"So he was," Racksole replied. "I went up there this afternoon, chiefly to take him some food. The commissionaire was on guard at the door. He had heard no noise, nothing unusual. Yet when I entered the room Jules was gone.

He had by some means or other loosened his fastenings; he had then managed to take the door off the wardrobe. He had moved the bed in front of the window, and by pushing the wardrobe door three parts out of the window and lodging the inside end of it under the rail at the head of the bed, he had provided himself with a sort of insecure platform outside the window. All this he did without making the least sound. He must then have got through the window, and stood on the little platform. With his fingers he would just be able to reach the outer edge of the wide cornice under the roof of the hôtel. By main strength of arms he had swung himself on to this cornice, and so got on to the roof proper. He would then have the run of the whole roof.

At the side of the building facing Salisbury Lane there is an iron fire-escape, which runs right down from the ridge of the roof into a little sunk yard level with the cellars. Jules must have thought that his escape was accomplished. But it unfortunately happened that one rung in the iron escape-ladder had rusted rotten through being badly painted. It gave way, and Jules, not expecting anything of the kind, fell to the ground. That was the end of all his cleverness and ingenuity."

As Racksole ceased, speaking he replaced the linen cloth with a gesture from which reverence was not wholly absent.

When the grave had closed over the dark and tempestuous career of Tom Jackson, once the pride of the Grand Babylon, there was little trouble for the people whose adventures we have described. Miss Spencer, that yellow-haired, faithful slave and attendant of a brilliant scoundrel, was never heard of again. Possibly to this day she survives, a mystery to her fellow-creatures, in the pension of some cheap foreign boarding-house. As for Rocco, he certainly was heard of again. Several years after the events set down, it came to the knowledge of Felix Babylon that the unrivalled Rocco had reached Buenos Aires, and by his culinary skill was there making the fortune of a new and splendid hôtel. Babylon transmitted the information to Theodore Racksole, and Racksole might, had he chosen, have put the forces of the law in motion against him. But Racksole, seeing that everything pointed to the fact that Rocco was now pursuing his vocation honestly, decided to leave him alone. The one difficulty which Racksole experienced after the demise of Jules—and it was a difficulty which he had, of course,

anticipated—was connected with the police. The police, very properly, wanted to know things. They desired to be informed what Racksole had been doing in the Dimmock affair, between his first visit to Ostend and his sending for them to take charge of Jules' dead body. And Racksole was by no means inclined to tell them everything. Beyond question he had transgressed the laws of England, and possibly also the laws of Belgium; and the moral excellence of his motives in doing so was, of course, in the eyes of legal justice, no excuse for such conduct. The inquest upon Jules aroused some bother; and about ninety-and-nine separate and distinct rumours. In the end, however, a compromise was arrived at. Racksole's first aim was to pacify the inspector whose clue, which by the way was a false one, he had so curtly declined to follow up. That done, the rest needed only tact and patience. He proved to the satisfaction of the authorities that he had acted in a perfectly honest spirit, though with a high hand, and that substantial justice had been done. Also, he subtly indicated that, if it came to the point, he should defy them to do their worst. Lastly, he was able, through the medium of the United States Ambassador, to bring certain soothing influences to bear upon the situation.

One afternoon, a fortnight after the recovery of the Hereditary Prince of Posen, Aribert, who was still staying at the Grand Babylon, expressed a wish to hold converse with the millionaire. Prince Eugen, accompanied by Hans and some Court officials whom he had sent for, had departed with immense éclat, armed with the comfortable million, to arrange formally for his betrothal.

Touching the million, Eugen had given satisfactory personal security, and the money was to be paid off in fifteen years.

"You wish to talk to me, Prince," said Racksole to Aribert, when they were seated together in the former's room.

"I wish to tell you," replied Aribert, "that it is my intention to renounce all my rights and titles as a Royal Prince of Posen, and to be known in future as Count Hartz—a rank to which I am entitled through my mother. Also that I have a private income of ten thousand pounds a year, and a *château* and a town house in Posen. I tell you this because I am here to ask the hand of your daughter in marriage. I love her, and I am vain enough to believe that she loves me. I have already asked her to be my wife, and she has consented. We await your approval."

"You honour us, Prince," said Racksole with a slight smile, "and in more ways than one. May I ask your reason for renouncing your princely titles?"

"Simply because the idea of a morganatic marriage would be as repugnant to me as it would be to yourself and to Nella."

"That is good." The Prince laughed. "I suppose it has occurred to you that ten thousand pounds per annum, for a man in your position, is a somewhat small income. Nella is frightfully extravagant. I have known her to spend sixty thousand dollars in a single year, and have nothing to show for it at the end. Why! she would ruin you in twelve months."

"Nella must reform her ways," Aribert said.

"If she is content to do so," Racksole went on, "well and good! I consent."

"In her name and my own, I thank you," said Aribert gravely.

"And," the millionaire continued, "so that she may not have to reform too fiercely, I shall settle on her absolutely, with reversion to your children, if you have any, a lump sum of fifty million dollars, that is to say, ten million pounds, in sound, selected railway stock. I reckon that is about half my fortune. Nella and I have always shared equally."

Aribert made no reply. The two men shook hands in silence, and then it happened that Nella entered the room.

That night, after dinner, Racksole and his friend Felix Babylon were walking together on the terrace of the Grand Babylon Hôtel.

Felix had begun the conversation.

"I suppose, Racksole," he had said, "you aren't getting tired of the Grand Babylon?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I am getting tired of doing without it. A thousand times since I sold it to you I have wished I could undo the bargain. I can't bear idleness. Will you sell?"

"I might," said Racksole, "I might be induced to sell."

"What will you take, my friend?" asked Felix

"What I gave," was the quick answer.

"Eh!" Felix exclaimed. "I sell you my hôtel with Jules, with Rocco, with Miss Spencer. You go and lose all those three inestimable servants, and then offer me the hôtel without them at the same price! It is monstrous."

The little man laughed heartily at his own wit. "Nevertheless," he added, "we will not quarrel about the price. I accept your terms."

And so was brought to a close the complex chain of events which had begun when Theodore Racksole ordered a steak and a bottle of Bass at the *table d'hôtel* of the Grand Babylon Hôtel.

Midnight at the Babylon Hôtel

0. Published as one of seven short stories in the 1917 edition of »The Loot of Cities.«

I.

Well, said the doctor, you say I've been very secretive lately. Perhaps I have. However, I don't mind telling you—just you fellows—the whole history of the affair that has preoccupied me. I shan't assert that it's the most curious case in all my experience. My experience has been pretty varied, and pretty lively, as you know, and cases are curious in such different ways. Still, a poisoning business is always a bit curious, and this one was extremely so. It isn't often that a person who means to commit murder by poison calls in a physician to assist him and deliberately uses the unconscious medico as his tool. Yet that is exactly what happened. It isn't often that a poisoner contrives to hit on a poison which is at once original, almost untraceable, and to be obtained from any chemist without a doctor's prescription. Yet that, too, is exactly what happened. I can assure you that the entire episode was a lesson to me. It opened my eyes to the possibilities which lie ready to the hand of a really intelligent murderer in this twentieth century. People talk about the masterpieces of poisoning in the middle ages. Pooh! Second-rate! They didn't know enough in the middle ages to achieve anything which a modern poisoner with genius would deem first-rate; they simply didn't know enough. Another point in the matter which forcibly struck me was the singular usefulness of a big London hotel to a talented criminal. You can do precisely what you please in a big hotel, and nobody takes the least notice. You wander in, you wander out, and who cares? You are only an item in a crowd. And when you have reached the upper corridors you are as lost to pursuit and observation as a needle in a haystack. You may take two rooms, one after the other, in different names, and in different parts of the hotel; the servants and officials will be none the wiser, because the second floor knows not the third, nor the third the fourth; you may oscillate between those two rooms in a manner to puzzle Inspector Anderson himself. And you are just as secure in your apartments as a mediaeval baron in his castle—yes, and more! On that night there were over a thousand guests in the Grand Babylon Hotel (there was a ball in the Gold Rooms, and a couple of banquets); and in the midst of all that diverse humanity, unperceived, unsuspected, a poignant and terrible drama was going on, and things so occurred that I tumbled right into it. Well, I'll tell you.

II.

I was called in to the Grand Babylon about nine p.m.; suite No. 63, second floor, name of Russell. The outer door of the suite was opened for me by a well-dressed woman of thirty or so, slim, with a face expressive and intelligent rather than handsome. I liked her face—I was attracted by its look of honesty and alert good-nature.

"Good evening, doctor," she said. She had a charming low voice, as she led me into a highly-luxurious drawing-room. "My name is Russell, and I wish you to see a young friend of mine who is not well." She hesitated and turned to an old bald-headed man, who stood looking out of the window at the twilight panorama of the Thames. "My friend's solicitor, Mr. Dancer," she explained.

We bowed, Mr. Dancer and I.

"Nothing serious, I hope," I remarked.

"No, no! " said Miss Russell.

Nevertheless, she seemed to me to be extremely nervous and anxious, as she preceded me into the bedroom, a chamber quite as magnificent as the drawing-room.

On the bed lay a beautiful young girl. Yes, you may laugh, you fellows, but she was genuinely beautiful. She smiled faintly as we entered. Her features had an ashy tint, and tiny drops of cold perspiration stood on the forehead. However, she certainly wasn't very ill—I could see that in a moment, and I fixed my conversational tone accordingly.

"Do you feel as if you could breathe freely, but that if you did it would kill you?" I inquired, after I had examined her. And she nodded, smiling again. Miss Russell also smiled, evidently pleased that I'had diagnosed the case so quickly.

My patient was suffering from a mild attack of pseudo-angina, nothing worse. Not *angina pectoris*, you know—that's usually associated with old age. Pseudo-angina is a different thing. With a weak heart, it may be caused by indigestion. The symptoms are cardiac spasms, acute pain in the chest, a strong disinclination to make even the smallest movement, and a state of mental depression, together with that queer fancy about breathing. The girl had these symptoms, and she also had a headache and a dicrotism of the pulse—two pulsations instead of one, not unusual. I found that she had been eating a too hearty dinner, and that she had suffered from several similar attacks in the immediate past.

"You had a doctor in before?" I asked.

"Yes," said Miss Russell. "But he was unable to come to-night, and as your house is so near we sent for you."

"There is no danger whatever—no real cause for anxiety," I summed up. "I will have some medicine made up instantly."

"Trinitrin?" demanded Miss Russell.

"Yes," I answered, a little astonished at this readiness. "Your regular physician prescribed it?"

(I should explain to you that trinitrin is nothing but nitro-glycerine in a non-explosive form.)

"I think it was trinitrin," Miss Russell replied, with an appearance of doubtfulness. "Perhaps you will write the prescription and I will despatch a messenger at once. I should be obliged, doctor, if you would remain with us until—if you would remain with us."

"Decidedly! " I said. "I will remain with pleasure. But do accept my assurance," I added, gazing at her face, so anxious and apprehensive, "that there is no cause for alarm."

She smiled and concurred. But I could see that I had not convinced her. And I began to suspect that she was not after all so intelligent as I had imagined. My patient, who was not now in any pain, lay calmly, with closed eyes.

III.

Do not forget the old bald-headed lawyer in the drawing-room.

"I suppose you are often summoned to the Grand Babylon, sir, living, as you do, just round the corner," he remarked to me somewhat pompously. He had a big nose and a habit of staring at you over his eyeglasses with his mouth wide-open, after having spoken. We were alone together in the drawing-room. I was waiting for the arrival of the medicine, and he was waiting for—I didn't know what he was waiting for.

"Occasionally. Not often," I responded. "I am called more frequently to the ›Majestic‹, over the way."

"Ah, just so, just so," he murmured.

I could see that he meant to be polite in his high and dry antique legal style; and I could see also that he was very bored in that hotel drawing-room. So I proceeded to explain the case to him, and to question him discreetly about my patient and Miss Russell.

"You are, of course, aware, sir, that the young lady is Miss Spanton, Miss Adelaide Spanton?" he said.

"What? Not ***the*** Spanton?"

"Precisely, sir. The daughter of Edgar Spanton, my late client, the great newspaper proprietor."

"And this Miss Russell?"

"Miss Russell was formerly Miss Adelaide's governess. She is now her friend, and profoundly attached to the young lady; a disinterested attachment, so far as I can judge, though naturally many people will think otherwise. Miss Adelaide is of a very shy and retiring disposition; she has no other friends, and she has no near relatives. Save for Miss Russell she is, sir, if I may so phrase it, alone in the world."

"But Miss Spanton is surely very wealthy?"

"You come to the point, sir. If my young client reaches her twenty-first birthday she will be the absolute mistress of the whole of her father's fortune. You may have noticed in the public press that I swore his estate at more than three millions."

"And how far is Miss Spanton from her twenty-first birthday?" I demanded.

The old lawyer glanced at his watch.

"Something less than three hours. At midnight she will have legally entered on her 22nd year."

"I see," I said. "Now I can understand Miss Russell's anxiety, which refuses to be relieved even by my positive assurance. No doubt Miss Russell has worked herself up into a highly nervous condition. And may I inquire what will happen—I mean, what would have happened, if Miss Spanton had not reached her majority?"

"The entire estate would have passed to a cousin, a Mr. Samuel Grist, of Melbourne. I daresay you know the name. Mr. Grist is understood to be the leading theatrical manager in Australia. Speaking as one professional man to another, sir, I may venture to remark that Mr. Grist's reputation is more than a little doubtful—you may have heard—many transactions and adventures. Ha, ha! Still, he is my late client's sole surviving relative, except Miss Adelaide. I have never had the pleasure of meeting him; he confines himself exclusively to Australia."

"This night then," I laughed, "will see the end of any hopes which Mr. Grist may have entertained."

"Exactly, sir," the lawyer agreed. "It will also see the end of Miss Russell's immediate anxieties. Upon my word, since Mr. Spanton's regrettable death, she has been both father and mother to my lonely young client. A practical woman, sir, Miss Russell! And the excessiveness of her apprehensions, if I may so phrase it, must be excused. She has

begged me to remain here till midnight, in order that I may witness to Miss Spanton's—er—vitality, and also in order to obtain Miss Spanton's signature to certain necessary documents. I should not be surprised, sir, if she requested you also to remain. She is not a woman to omit precautions."

"I'm afraid I can't stop till twelve," I said.

The conversation ceased, and I fell into meditation.

I do not mind admitting that I was deeply impressed by what I will call the romantic quality of the situation. I thought of old Spanton, who had begun with something less than nothing and died virtually the owner of three daily papers and twenty-five Weeklies and monthlies. I thought of Spantons, Ltd., and their colossal offices spreading half round Salisbury Square. Why, I even had a copy of the extra special edition of the Evening Gazette in my pocket! Do any of you fellows remember Spanton starting the Evening Gazette? He sold three hundred thousand the first day. And now old Spanton was dead—you know he died of drink, and there was nothing left of the Spanton blood except this girl lying there on the bed, and the man in Australia. And all the Spanton editors, and the Spanton sub-editors, and the Spanton artists, and the Spanton reporters and compositors, and the Spanton rotary presses, and the Spanton paper mills, and the Spanton cyclists, were slaving and toiling to put eighty thousand a year into this girl's purse. And there she was, feeble and depressed, and solitary, except for Miss Russell, and the man in Australia perhaps hoping she would die; and there was Miss Russell, worrying and fussing and apprehending and fearing. And the entire hotel oblivious of the romantic, I could almost say the pathetic, situation. And then I thought of Miss Spanton's future, burdened with those three millions, and I wondered if those three millions would buy her happiness.

"Here is the medicine, doctor," said Miss Russell, entering the drawing-room hurriedly, and handing me the bottle with the chemist's label on it. I went with her into the bedroom. The beautiful Adelaide Spanton was already better, and she admitted as much when I administered the medicine—two minims of a one per cent. solution of trinitrin, otherwise nitro-glycerine, the usual remedy for pseudo-angina.

Miss Russell took the bottle from my hand, corked it and placed it on the dressing-table. Shortly afterwards I left the hotel. The lawyer had been right in supposing that Miss Russell would ask me to stay, but I was unable to do so. I promised, however, to return in an hour, all the while insisting that there was not the slightest danger for the patient.

IV.

It was 10.30 when I came back.

"Second floor!" I said carelessly to the lift boy, and he whirled me upwards; the Grand Babylon lifts travel very fast.

"Here you are, sir," he murmured respectfully, and I stepped out.

"Is this the second floor?" I asked suddenly.

"Beg pardon! I thought you said seventh, sir."

"It's time you were in bed, my lad!" was my retort, and I was just reentering the lift when I caught sight of Miss Russell in the corridor. I called to her, thinking she would perhaps descend with me, but she did not hear, and so I followed her down the corridor, wondering what was her business on the seventh floor. She opened a door and disappeared into a room.

"Well?" I heard a sinister voice exclaim within the room, and then the door was pushed to; it was not latched.

"I did say the seventh!" I called to the lift-boy, and he vanished with his machine.

The voice within the room startled me. It gave me furiously to think, as the French say. With a sort of instinctive unpremeditated action I pressed gently against the door till it stood ajar about an inch. And I listened.

"It's'a confounded mysterious case to me!" the voice was saying, "that that dose the other day didn't finish her. We're running it a dashed sight too close! Here, take this—it's all ready, label and everything. Substitute the bottles. I'll run no risks this time. One dose will do the trick inside half an hour, and on that I'll bet my boots!"

"Very well," said Miss Russell, quite calmly. "It's pure trinitrin, is it?"

"You're the coolest customer that I ever struck!" the voice exclaimed, in an admiring tone. "Yes, it's pure trinitrin—beautiful, convenient stuff! Looks like water, no taste, very little smell, and so volatile that all the doctors on the Medical Council couldn't trace it at a post-mortem. Besides the doctor prescribed a solution of trinitrin, and you got it from the chemist, and in case there's a rumpus we can shove the mistake on to the chemist's dispenser, and a fine old row he'll get into. By the way, what's the new doctor like?"

"Oh! So-so! " said Miss Russell, in her even tones.

"It's a good thing on the whole, perhaps, that I arranged that carriage accident for the first one!" the hard, sinister voice remarked. "One

never knows. Get along now at once, and don't look so anxious. Your face belies your voice. Give us a kiss! "

"To-morrow! " said Miss Russell.

I hurried away, as it were drunk, overwhelmed with horror and amazement, and turning a corner so as to avoid discovery, reached the second floor by the staircase. I did not wish to meet Miss Russell in the lift.

My first thought was not one of alarm for Adelaide Spanton—of course, I knew I could prevent the murder-but of profound sorrow that Miss Russell should have proved to be a woman so unspeakably wicked. I swore never to trust a woman's face again. I had liked her face. Then I dwelt on the chance, the mere chance, my careless pronunciation, a lift-boy's error, which had saved the life of the poor millionaire girl. And lastly I marvelled at the combined simplicity and ingenuity of the plot. The scoundrel upstairs—possibly Samuel Grist himself—had taken the cleverest advantage of Miss Spanton's tendency to pseudo-angina. What could be more clever than to poison with the physician's own medicine? Very probably the girl's present attack had been induced by an artful appeal to her appetite; young women afflicted as she was are frequently just a little greedy. And I perceived that the villain was correct in assuming that nitro-glycerine would never be traced at a post-mortem save in the smallest possible quantity—just such a quantity as I had myself prescribed. He was also right in his assumption that the pure drug would infallibly kill in half an hour.

I pulled myself together, and having surreptitiously watched Miss Russell into Suite No. 63, I followed her. When I arrived at the bedroom she was pouring medicine from a bottle; a maid stood at the foot of the bed.

"I am just giving the second dose," said Miss Russell easily to me.

"What a nerve! " I said to myself, and aloud: "By all means!"

She measured the dose, and approached the bed without a tremor. Adelaide Spanton opened her mouth.

"Stop!" I cried firmly. "We'll delay that dose for half an hour. Kindly give me the glass! " I took the glass from Miss Russell's passive fingers. "And I would like to have a word with you now, Miss Russell!" I added.

The maid went swiftly from the room.

V.

The old bald-headed lawyer had gone down to the hotel smoking-saloon for a little diversion, and we faced each other in the drawing-room—

Miss Russell and I. The glass was still in my hand.

"And the new doctor is so-so, eh?" I remarked.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"I think you know what I mean," I retorted. "I need only tell you that by a sheer chance I stumbled upon your atrocious plot—the plot of that scoundrel upstairs. All you had to do was to exchange the bottles, and administer pure trinitrin instead of my prescribed solution of it, and Miss Spanton would be dead in half an hour. The three millions would go to the Australian cousin, and you would doubtless have your reward—say, a cool hundred thousand, or perhaps marriage. And you were about to give the poison when I stopped you."

"I was not!" she cried. And she fell into a chair, and hid her face in her hands, and then looked, as it were longingly, towards the bedroom.

"Miss Spanton is in no danger," I said sneeringly. "She will be quite well to-morrow. So you were not going to give the poison, after all?"

I laughed.

"I beg you to listen, doctor," she said at length, standing up. "I am in a most invidious position. Nevertheless, I think I can convince you that your suspicions against me are unfounded."

I laughed again. But secretly I admired her for acting the part so well.

"Doubtless!" I interjected sarcastically, in the pause.

"The man upstairs is Samuel Grist, supposed to be in Australia. It is four months ago since I, who am Adelaide Spanton's sole friend, discovered that he was scheming her death. The skill of his methods appalled me. There was nothing to put before the police, and yet I had a horrible fear of the worst. I felt that he would stop at nothing—absolutely at nothing. I felt that, if we ran away, he would follow us. I had a presentiment that he would infallibly succeed, and I was haunted by it day and night. Then an idea occurred to me—I would pretend to be his accomplice. And I saw suddenly that that was the surest way—the sole way, of defeating him. I approached him and he accepted the bait. I carried out all his instructions, except the fatal instructions. It is by his orders, and for his purposes, that we are staying in this hotel. Heavens! To make certain of saving my darling Adelaide, I have even gone through the farce of promising to marry him!"

"And do you seriously expect me to believe this?" I asked coldly.

"Should I have had the solicitor here?" she demanded, "if I had really meant—meant to—"

She sobbed momentarily, and then regained control of herself.

"I don't know," I said, "but it occurs to me that the brain that was capable of deliberately arranging a murder to take place in the presence of the doctor might have some hidden purpose in securing also the presence of the solicitor at the performance."

"Mr. Grist is unaware that the solicitor is here. He has been informed that Mr. Dancer is my uncle, and favourable to the—to the—" she stopped, apparently overcome.

"Oh, indeed!" I ejaculated, adding: "And after all you did not mean to administer this poison! I suppose you meant to withdraw the glass at the last instant?"

"It is not poison," she replied.

"Not poison?"

"No. I did not exchange the bottles. I only pretended to."

"There seems to have been a good deal of pretending," I observed. "By the way, may I ask why you were giving this stuff, whether it is poison or not, to my patient? I do not recollect that I ordered a second dose."

"For the same reason that I pretended to change the bottle. For the benefit of the maid whom we saw just now in the bedroom."

"And why for the benefit of the maid?"

"Because I found out this morning that she is in the pay of Grist. That discovery accounts for my nervousness to-night about Adelaide. By this time the maid has probably told Mr. Grist what has taken place, and, and—I shall rely on your help if anything should happen, doctor. Surely, surely, you believe me?"

"I regret to say, madam," I answered, "that I find myself unable to believe you at present. But there is a simple way of giving credence to your story. You state that you did not exchange the bottles. This liquid, then, is the medicine prescribed by me, and it is harmless. Oblige me by drinking it."

And I held the glass towards her.

She took it.

"Fool!" I said to myself, as soon as her fingers had grasped it. "She will drop it on the floor, and an invaluable piece of evidence will be destroyed."

But she did not drop it on the floor. She drank it at one gulp, and looked me in the eyes, and murmured, "Now do you believe me?"

"Yes," I said. And I did.

At the same moment her face changed colour, and she sank to the ground. "What have I drunk? " she moaned. The glass rolled on the carpet, unbroken.

Miss Russell had in fact drunk a full dose of pure trinitrin. I recognised all the symptoms at once. I rang for assistance. I got a stomach pump. I got ice, and sent for ergot and for atropine. I injected six minims of the *Injectis Ergotini Hypodermica.* I despaired of saving her; but I saved her, after four injections. I need not describe to you all the details. Let it suffice that she recovered.

"Then you did exchange the bottles? " I could not help putting this question to her as soon as she was in a fit state to hear it.

"I swear to you that I had not meant to," she whispered. "In my nervousness I must have confused them. You have saved Adelaide's life."

"I have saved yours, anyway," I said.

"But you believe me?"

"Yes," I said; and the curious thing is that I did believe her. I was convinced, and I am convinced, that she did not mean to exchange the bottles.

"Listen!" she exclaimed. We could hear Big Ben striking twelve.

"Midnight," I said.

She clutched my hand with a swift movement.

"Go and see that my Adelaide lives," she cried almost hysterically.

I opened the door between the two rooms and went into the sleeping chamber.

"Miss Spanton is dozing quietly," I said, on my return.

"Thank God!" Miss Russell murmured.

And then old bald-headed Mr. Dancer came into the room, blandly unconscious of all that had passed during his sojourn in the smoking saloon.

When I left the precincts of the Grand Babylon at one o'clock, the guests were beginning to leave the Gold Rooms, and the great courtyard was a scene of flashing lights, and champing horses, and pretty laughing women.

"What a queer place a hotel is!" I thought.

Neither Mr. Grist nor the mysterious maid was seen again in London. Possibly they consoled each other. The beautiful Adelaide Spanton—under my care, ahem!—is completely restored to health.

Yes, I am going to marry her. No, not the beautiful Adelaide, you duffers—besides she is too young for my middle age—but Miss Russell.

Her Christian name is Ethel. Do you not like it? As for the beautiful Adelaide, there is now a viscount in the case.

The Loot of Cities[1]

1. First published as a serial in the Windsor magazine 1902. The first book edition was by Alston Rivers, London 1904.

Pensa, lettor, se quel che qui s'inizia
non procedesse, come tu avresti
di più savere angosciosa carizia;

Denk, Leser, würd ich jetzt dir unterdrücken
Den Schlussbericht, wie quälte dich mit Pein
Der Wunsch, in der Erzählung fortzurücken.

Dante, Göttliche Komödie: Paradies, 5, 109–11.
Dt. Übersetzung: Richard Zoozmann
(im Original nur der italienische Text)

Chapter 1

The Fire of London

I.

"You're wanted on the telephone, sir."

Mr. Bruce Bowring, managing director of the Consolidated Mining and Investment Corporation, Limited (capital two millions, in one-pound shares, which stood at twenty-seven-and-six), turned and gazed querulously across the electric-lit spaces of his superb private offiice at the confidential clerk who addressed him. Mr. Bowring, in shirt-sleeves before a Florentine mirror, was brushing his hair with the solicitude of a mother who has failed to rear most of a large family.

"Who is it?" he asked, as if that demand for him were the last straw but one. "Nearly seven on Friday evening!" he added, martyrised.

"I think a friend, sir."

The middle-aged financier dropped his gold-mounted brush and, wading through the deep pile of the Oriental carpet, passed into the telephone-cabinet and shut the door.

"Hallo!" he accosted the transmitter, resolved not to be angry with it. "Hallo! Are you there? Yes, I'm Bowring. Who are you?"

"*Nrrrr*," the faint, unhuman voice of the receiver whispered in his ear. "*Nrrnr. Cluck.* I'm a friend."

"What name?"

"No name. I thought you might like to know that a determined robbery is going to be attempted to-night at your house in Lowndes Square, a robbery of cash—and before nine o'clock. *Nrrrr.* I thought you might like to know."

"Ah!" said Mr. Bowring to the transmitter.

The feeble exclamation was all he could achieve at first. In the confined, hot silence of the telephone-cabinet this message, coming to him mysteriously out of the vast unknown of London, struck him with a sudden sick fear that perhaps his wondrously organised scheme might yet miscarry, even at the final moment. Why that night of all nights? And why before nine o'clock? Could it be that the secret was out, then?

"Any further interesting details?" he inquired, bracing himself to an assumption of imperturbable and gay coolness.

But there was no answer. And when after some difficulty he got the exchange-girl to disclose the number which had rung him up, he found that his interlocutor had been using a public call-office in Oxford Street. He returned to his room, donned his frock-coat, took a large envelope from a locked drawer and put it in his pocket, and sat down to think a little.

At that time Mr. Bruce Bowring was one of the most famous conjurers in the City. He had begun, ten years earlier, with nothing but a silk hat; and out of that empty hat had been produced, first the Hoop-La Limited, a South African gold-mine of numerous stamps and frequent dividends, then the Hoop-La No. 2 Limited, a mine with as many reincarnations as Buddha, and then a dazzling succession of mines and combination of mines. The more the hat emptied itself, the more it was full; and the emerging objects (which now included the house in Lowndes Square and a perfect dream of a place in Hampshire) grew constantly larger, and the conjurer more impressive and persuasive, and the audience more enthusiastic in its applause. At last, with a unique flourish, and a new turning-up of sleeves to prove that there was no deception, had come out of the hat the C.M.I.C., a sort of incredibly enormous Union Jack, which enwrapped all the other objects in its splendid folds. The shares of the C.M.I.C. were affectionately known in the Kaffir circus as "Solids"; they yielded handsome though irregular dividends, earned chiefly by flotation and speculation; the circus believed in them. And in view of the annual meeting of shareholders to be held on the following Tuesday afternoon (the conjurer in the chair and his hat on the table), the market price, after a period of depression, had stiffened.

Mr. Bowring's meditations were soon interrupted by a telegram. He opened it and read:

> Cook drunk again. Will dine with you Devonshire, seven-thirty. Impossible here. Have arranged about luggage.—Marie.

Marie was Mr. Bowring's wife. He told himself that he felt greatly relieved by that telegram; he clutched at it; and his spirits seemed to rise.

At any rate, since he would not now go near Lowndes Square, he could certainly laugh at the threatened robbery. He thought what a wonderful thing Providence was, after all.

"Just look at that," he said to his clerk, showing the telegram with a humorous affectation of dismay.

"Tut, tut," said the clerk, discreetly sympathetic towards his employer thus victimised by debauched cooks. "I suppose you're going down to Hampshire to-night as usual, sir?"

Mr. howring replied that he was, and that everything appeared to be in order for the meeting, and that he should be back on Monday afternoon or at the latest very early on Tuesday.

Then, with a few parting instructions, and with that eagle glance round his own room and into circumjacent rooms which a truly efficient head of affairs never omits on leaving business for the week-end, Mr. Bowring sedately, yet magnificently, departed from the noble registered offices of the C.M.I.C.

"Why didn't Marie telephone instead of wiring?" he mused, as his pair of greys whirled him and his coachman and his footman off to the Devonshire.

II.

The Devonshire Mansion, a bright edifice of eleven storeys in the Foster and Dicksee style, constructional ironwork by Homan, lifts by Waygood, decorations by Waring, and terra-cotta by the rood, is situated on the edge of Hyde Park. It is a composite building. Its foundations are firmly fixed in the Tube railway; above that comes the wine cellarage, then the vast laundry, and then (a row of windows scarcely level with the street) a sporting club, a billiard-room, a grill-room, and a cigarette-merchant whose name ends in "-opoulos." On the first floor is the renowned ›Devonshire Mansion Restaurant.‹ Always, in London, there is just one restaurant where, if you are an entirely correct person, "you can get a decent meal." The place changes from season to season, but there is never more than one of it at a time. That season it happened to be the Devonshire. (The *chef* of the Devonshire had invented tripe suppers, *tripes à la mode de Caen*, and these suppers—seven-and-six—had been the rage.) Consequently all entirely correct people fed as a matter of course at the Devonshire, since there was no other place fit to go to. The vogue of the restaurant favourably affected the vogue of the nine floors of furnished suites above the restaurant; they were always

full; and the heavenward attics, where the servants took off their smart liveries and became human, held much wealth. The vogue of the restaurant also exercised a beneficial influence over the status of the Kitcat Club, which was a cock-and-hen club of the latest pattern and had its "house" on the third floor.

It was a little after half-past seven when Mr. Bruce Bowring haughtily ascended the grand staircase of this resort of opulence, and paused for an instant near the immense fireplace at the summit (September was inclement, and a fire burned nicely) to inquire from the head-waiter whether Mrs. Bowring had secured a table. But Marie had not arrived—Marie, who was never late! Uneasy and chagrined, he proceeded, under the escort of the head-waiter, to the glittering *Salle Louis Quatorze* and selected, because of his morning attire, a table half-hidden behind an onyx pillar. The great room was moderately full of fair women and possessive men, despite the month. Immediately afterwards a youngish couple (the man handsomer and better dressed than the woman) took the table on the other side of the pillar. Mr. Bowring waited five minutes, then he ordered *Sole Mornay* and a bottle of *Romanée-Conti*, and then he waited another five minutes. He went somewhat in fear of his wife, and did not care to begin without her.

"Can't you read?" It was the youngish man at the next table speaking in a raised voice to a squinting lackey with a telegraph form in his hand. "'Solids! Solids,' my friend. '*Sell — Solids — to — any — amount — to-morrow — and — Monday.*' Got it? Well, send it off at once."

"Quite clear, my lord," said the lackey, and fled. The youngish man gazed fixedly but absently at Mr. Bowring and seemed to see through him to the tapestry behind. Mr. Bowring, to his own keen annoyance, reddened. Partly to conceal the blush, and partly because it was a quarter to eight and there was the train to catch, he lowered his face, and began upon the sole. A few minutes later the lackey returned, gave some change to the youngish man, and surprised Mr. Bowring by advancing towards him and handing him an envelope—an envelope which bore on its flap the legend "Kitcat Club." The note within was scribbled in pencil in his wife's handwriting, and ran:

> *Just arrived. Delayed by luggage. I'm too nervous to face the restaurant, and am eating a chop here alone. The place is fortunately empty. Come and fetch me as soon as you're ready.*

Mr. Bowring sighed angrily. He hated his wife's club, and this succession of messages telephonic, telegraphic, and calligraphic was exasperating him.

"No answer!" he ejaculated, and then he beckoned the lackey closer. "Who's that gentleman at the next table with the lady?" he murmured.

"I'm not rightly sure, sir," was the whispered reply. "Some authorities say he's the strong man at the Hippodrome, while others affirm he's a sort of American millionaire."

"But you addressed him as 'my lord.'"

"Just then I thought he was the strong man, sir," said the lackey, retiring.

"My bill!" Mr. Bowring demanded fiercely of the waiter, and at the same time the youngish gentleman and his companion rose and departed.

At the lift Mr. Bowring found the squinting lackey in charge.

"You're the liftman, too?"

"To-night, sir, I am many things. The fact is, the regular liftman has got a couple of hours off—being the recent father of twins."

"Well—Kitcat Club."

The lift seemed to shoot far upwards, and Mr. Bowring thought the lackey had mistaken the floor, but on gaining the corridor he saw across the portals in front of him the remembered gold sign, "Kitcat Club. Members only." He pushed the door open and went in.

III.

Instead of the familiar vestibule of his wife's club, Mr. Bowring discovered a small ante-chamber, and beyond, through a doorway half-screened by a *portiére*, he had glimpses of a rich, rose-lit drawing-room. In the doorway, With one hand raised to the *portiére*, stood the youngish man who had forced him to blush in the restaurant.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Bowring, stiflly—"is this the Kitcat Club?"

The other man advanced to the outer door, his brilliant eyes fixed on Mr. BoWring's; his arm-crept round the cheek of the door and came back bearing the gold sign; then he shut the door and locked it. "No, this isn't the Kitcat Club at all," he replied. "It is my flat. Come and sit down. I was expecting you."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Bowring disdainfully.

"But when I tell you that I know you are going to decamp to-night, Mr. Bowring—"

The youngish man smiled affably.

"Decamp?" The spine of the financier suddenly grew flaccid.

"I used the word."

"Who the devil are you?" snapped the financier, forcing his spine to rigidity.

"I am the 'friend' on the telephone. I specially wanted you at the Devonshire to-night, and I thought that the fear of a robbery at Lowndes Square might make your arrival here more certain. I am he who devised the story of the inebriated cook and favoured you with a telegram signed 'Marie.' I am the humorist who pretended in a loud voice to send off telegraphic instructions to sell 'Solids,' in order to watch your demeanour under the test. I am the expert who forged your wife's handwriting in a note from the Kitcat. I am the patron of the cross-eyed menial who gave you the note and who afterwards raised you too high in the lift. I am the artificer of this gold sign, an exact duplicate of the genuine one two floors below, which induced you to visit me. The sign alone cost me nine-and-six; the servant's livery came to two pounds fifteen. But I never consider expense when, by dint of a generous outlay, I can avoid violence. I hate violence." He gently waved the sign to and fro.

"Then my wife—" Mr. Bowring stammered in a panic rage.

"Is probably at Lowndes Square, wondering what on earth has happened to you."

Mr. Bowring took breath, remembered that he was a great man, and steadied himself.

"You must be mad," he remarked quietly. "Open this door at once."

"Perhaps," the stranger judicially admitted. "Perhaps a sort of madness. But do come and sit down. We have no time to lose."

Mr. Bowring gazed at that handsome face, with the fine nostrils, large mouth, and square clean chin, and the dark eyes, the black hair, and long, black moustache; and he noticed the long, thin hands. "Decadent!" he decided. Nevertheless, and though it was with the air of indulging the caprice of a lunatic, he did in fact obey the stranger's request.

It was a beautiful Chippendale drawing-room that he entered. Near the hearth, to which a morsel of fire gave cheerfulness, were two easy-chairs, and between them a small table. Behind was extended a fourfold draught-screen.

"I can give you just five minutes," said Mr. Bowring, magisterially sitting down.

"They will suffice," the stranger responded, sitting down also. "You have in your pocket, Mr. Bowring—probably your breast-pocket-fifty Bank of England notes for a thousand pounds each, and a number of smaller notes amounting to another ten thousand."

"Well?"

"I must demand from you the first-named fifty."

Mr. Bowring, in the silence of the rose-lit drawing-room, thought of all the Devonshire Mansion, with its endless corridors and innumerable rooms, its acres of carpets, its forests of furniture, its gold and silver, and its jewels and its Wines, its pretty Women and possessive men—the whole humming microcosm founded on a unanimous pretence that the sacredness of property was a natural law. And he thought how disconcerting it was that he should be trapped there, helpless, in the very middle of the vast pretence, and forced to admit that the sacredness of property was a purely artificial convention.

"By What right do you make this demand?" he inquired, bravely sarcastic.

"By the right of my unique knowledge," said the stranger, with a bright smile. "Listen to What you and I alone know. You are at the end of the tether. The Consolidated is at the same spot. You have a past consisting chiefly of nineteen fraudulent flotations. You have paid dividends out of capital till there is no capital left. You have speculated and lost. You have cooked balance-sheets to a turn and ruined the eyesight of auditors with dust. You have lived like ten lords. Your houses are mortgaged. You own an unrivalled collection of unreceipted bills. You are worse than a common thief. (Excuse these personalities.)"

"My dear, good sir—" Mr. Bowring interrupted, grandly.

"Permit me. What is more serious, your self-confidence has been gradually deserting you. At last, perceiving that some blundering person was bound soon to put his foot through the brittle shell of your ostentation and tread on nothing, and foreseeing for yourself an immediate future consisting chiefly of Holloway, you have by a supreme effort of your genius, borrowed £60,000 from a bank on C.M.I.C. scrip, for a week (eh ?), and you have arranged, you and your wife, to—melt into thin air. You will affect to set out as usual for your country place in Hampshire, but it is Southampton that will see you to-night, and Havre will see you to-morrow. You may run over to Paris to change some notes, but by Monday you will be on your way to—frankly, I don't know where; perhaps Monte Video. Of course you take the risk of extradition, but the risk is preferable to the certainty that awaits you in England. I think you will elude extradition. If I thought otherwise, I should not have had you here to-night, because, once extradited, you might begin to amuse yourself by talking about me."

"So it's blackmail," said Mr. Bowring, grim.

The dark eyes opposite to him sparkled gaily.

"It desolates me," the youngish man observed, "to have to commit you to the deep with only ten thousand. But, really, not less than fifty thousand will requite me for the brain-tissue which I have expended in the study of your interesting situation."

Mr. Bowring consulted his watch.

"Come, now," he said. huskily; "I'll give you ten thousand. I flatter myself I can look facts in the face, and so I'll give you ten thousand."

"My friend," answered the spider, "you are a judge of character. Do you honestly think I don't mean precisely what I say—to sixpence? It is eight-thirty. You are, if I may be allowed the remark, running it rather fine."

"And suppose I refuse to part?" said Mr. Bowring, after reflection. "What then?"

"I have confessed to you that I hate violence. You would therefore leave this room unmolested but you wouldn't step off the island."

Mr. Bowring scanned the agreeable features of the stranger. Then, while the lifts were ascending and descending, and the wine was sparkling, and the jewels flashing, and the gold chinking, and the pretty women being pretty, in all the four quarters of the Devonshire, Mr. Bruce Bowring in the silent parlour counted out fifty notes on to the table. After all, it was a fortune, that little pile of white on the crimson polished wood.

"*Bon voyage*!" said the stranger. "Don't imagine that I am not full of sympathy for you. I am. You have only been unfortunate. *Bon voyage*"

"No! By Heaven!" Mr. Bowring almost shouted, rushing back from the door, and drawing a revolver from his hip pocket. "It's too much! I didn't mean to—but confound it! What's a revolver for?"

The youngish man jumped up quickly and put his hands on the notes.

"Violence is always foolish, Mr. Bowring," he murmured.

"Will you give them up, or won't you?"

"I won't."

The stranger's fine eyes seemed to glint with joy in the drama.

"Then—"

The revolver was raised, but in the same instant a tiny hand snatched it from the hand of Mr. Bowring, who turned and beheld by his side a woman. The huge screen sank slowly and noiselessly to the floor in the surprising manner peculiar to screens that have been overset.

Mr. Bowring cursed. "An accomplice! I might have guessed!" he grumbled in final disgust.

He ran to the door, unlocked it, and was no more seen.

IV.

The lady was aged twenty-seven or so; of medium height, and slim, with a plain, very intelligent and expressive face, lighted by courageous, grey eyes and crowned with loose, abundant, fluffy hair. Perhaps it was the fluffy hair, perhaps it was the mouth that twitched as she dropped the revolver—who can say?—but the whole atmosphere of the rose-lit chamber was suddenly changed. The incalculable had invaded it.

"You seem surprised, Miss Fincastle," said the possessor of the bank-notes, laughing gaily.

"Surprised!" echoed the lady, controlling that mouth. "My dear Mr. Thorold, when, strictly as a journalist, I accepted your invitation, I did not anticipate this sequel; frankly I did not."

She tried to speak coldly and evenly, on the assumption that a journalist has no sex during business hours. But just then she happened to be neither less nor more a woman than a woman always is.

Ïf I have had the misfortune to annoy you—" Thorold threw up his arms in gallant despair.

"Annoy is not the word," said Miss Fincastle, nervously smiling. May I sit down? Thanks. Let us recount. You arrive in England, from somewhere, as the son and heir of the late Ahasverus Thorold, the New York operator, who died worth six million dollars. It becomes known that while in Algiers in the spring you stayed at the Hotel St. James, famous as the scene of what is called the 'Algiers Mystery,' familiar to English newspaper-readers since last April. The editor of my journal therefore instructs me to obtain an interview with you. I do so. The first thing I discover is that, though an American, you have no American accent. You explain this by saying that since infancy you have always lived in Europe with your mother."

"But surely you do not doubt that I am Cecil Thorold!" said the man. Their faces were approximate over the table.

"Of course not. I merely recount. To continue. I interview you as to the Algerian mystery, and get some new items concerning it. Then you regale me with tea and your opinions, and my questions grow more personal. So it comes about that, strictly on behalf of my paper, I inquire what your recreations are. And suddenly you answer: 'Ah!My

recreations! Come to dinner to-night, quite informally, and I will show you how I amuse myself!' I come. I dine. I am stuck behind that screen and told to listen. And—and—the millionaire proves to be nothing but a blackmailer."

"You must understand, my dear lady-"

"I understand everything, Mr. Thorold, except your object in admitting me to the scene."

"A whim!" cried Thorold vivaciously, "a freak of mine! Possibly due to the eternal and universal desire of man to show off before woman."

The journalist tried to smile, but something in her face caused Thorold to run to a chiffonier.

"Drink this," he said, returning with a glass.

"I need nothing." The voice was a whisper.

"Oblige me."

Miss Fincastle drank and coughed.

"Why did you do it?" she asked sadly, looking at the notes.

"You don't mean to say," Thorold burst out, "that you are feeling sorry for Mr. Bruce Bowring? He has merely parted with what he stole. And the people from whom he stole, stole. All the activities which centre about the Stock Exchange are simply various manifestations of one primeval instinct. Suppose I had not—had not interfered. No one would have been a penny the better off except Mr. Bruce Bowring. Whereas—"

"You intend to restore this money to the Consolidated?" said Miss Fincastle eagerly.

"Not quite! The Consolidated doesn't deserve it. You must not regard its shareholders as a set of innocent shorn lambs. They knew the game. They went in for what they could get. Besides, how could I restore the money without giving myself away? I want the money myself."

"But you are a millionaire."

"It is precisely because I am a millionaire that I want more. All millionaires are like that."

"I am sorry to find you a thief, Mr. Thorold."

"A thief! No. I am only direct, I only avoid the middleman. At dinner, Miss Fincastle, you displayed somewhat advanced views about property, marriage, and the aristocracy of brains. You said that labels were for the stupid majority, and that the wise minority examined the ideas behind the labels. You label me a thief, but examine the idea, and you Will perceive that you might as Well call yourself a thief. Your newspaper every day suppresses the truth about the City, and it does so in

order to live. In other words, it touches the pitch, it participates in the game. To-day it has a fifty-line advertisement of a false balance-sheet of the Consolidated, at two shillings a line. That five pounds, part of the loot of a great city, will help to pay for your account of our interview this afternoon."

"Our interview to-night," Miss Fincastle corrected him stiffly, "and all that I have seen and heard."

At these words she stood up, and as Cecil Thorold gazed at her his face changed.

"I shall begin to wish," he said slowly, "that I had deprived myself of the pleasure of your company this evening."

"You might have been a dead man had you done so," Miss Fincastle retorted, and observing his blank countenance she touched the revolver.

"Have you forgotten already?" she asked tartly.

"Of course it wasn't loaded," he remarked. "Of course I had seen to that earlier in the day. I am not such a bungler—"

"Then I didn't save your life?"

"You force me to say that you did not, and to remind you that you gave me your word not to emerge from behind the screen. However, seeing the motive, I can only thank you for that lapse. The pity is that it hopelessly compromises you."

"Me?" exclaimed Miss Fincastle.

"You. Can't you see that you are in it, in this robbery, to give the thing a label. You were alone with the robber. You succoured the robber at a critical moment … 'Accomplice,' Mr. Bowring himself said. My dear journalist, the episode of the revolver, empty though the revolver was, seals your lips."

Miss Fincastle laughed rather hysterically, leaning over the table with her hands on it.

"My dear millionaire," she said-rapidly, "you don't know the new journalism to which I have the honour to belong. You would know it better had you lived more in New York. All I have to announce is that, compromised or not, a full account of this affair will appear in my paper tomorrow morning. No, I shall not inform the police. I am a journalist simply, but a journalist I ***am***."

"And your promise, which you gave me before going behind the screen, your solemn promise that you would reveal nothing? I was loth to mention it."

"Some promises, Mr. Thorold, it is a duty to break, and it is my duty to break this one. I should never have git en it had I had the slightest idea of the nature of your recreations."

Thorold still smiled, though faintly.

"Really, you know," he murmured, "this is getting just a little serious."

"It is very serious," she stammered.

And then Thorold noticed that the new journalist was softly weeping.

V.

The door opened.

"Miss Kitty Sartorius," said the erstwhile liftman, who was now in plain clothes and had mysteriously ceased to squint.

A beautiful girl, a girl who had remarkable loveliness and was aware of it (one of the prettiest women of the Devonshire), ran impulsively into the room and caught Miss Fincastle by the hand.

"My dearest Eve, you're crying. What's the matter?"

"Lecky," said Thorold aside to the servant. "I told you to admit no one."

The beautiful blonde turned sharply to Thorold.

"I told him I wished to enter," she said imperiously, half closing her eyes.

"Yes, sir," said Lecky. "That was it. The lady wished to enter."

Thorold bowed.

"It was sufficient," he said. "That will do, Lecky."

"Yes, sir."

"But I say, Lecky, when next you address me publicly, try to remember that I am not in the peerage."

The servant squinted.

"Certainly, sir." And he retired.

"Now we are alone," said Miss Sartorius. "Introduce us, Eve, and explain."

Miss Fincastle, having regained self-control, introduced her dear friend the radiant star of the Regency Theatre, and her acquaintance the millionaire.

"Eve didn't feel ***quite*** sure of you," the actress stated; "and so we arranged that if she wasn't up at my flat by nine o'clock, I was to come down and reconnoitre. What have you been doing to make Eve cry?"

"Unintentional, I assure you—" Thorold began.

"There's something between you two," said Kitty Sartorius sagaciously, in significant accents. "What is it?"

She sat down, touched her picture hat, smoothed her white gown, and tapped her foot.

"What is it, now? Mr. Thorold, I think you had better tell me."

Thorold raised his eyebrows and obediently commenced the narration, standing with his back to the fire.

"How perfectly splendid!" Kitty exclaimed. "I'm so glad you cornered Mr. Bowring. I met him one night and I thought he was horrid. And these are the notes? Well, of all the—!"

Thorold proceeded with his story.

"Oh, but you can't do that, Eve!" said Kitty, suddenly serious. "You can't go and split! It would mean all sorts of bother; your wretched newspaper would be sure to keep you hanging about in London, and we shouldn't be able to start on our holiday to-morrow. Eve and I are starting on quite a long tour to-morrow, Mr. Thorold; We begin with Ostend."

"Indeed!" said Thorold. "I, too, am going in that direction soon. Perhaps we may meet."

"I hope so," Kitty smiled, and then she looked at Eve Fincastle. "You really mustn't do that, Eve," she said.

"I must, I must!" Miss Fincastle insisted, clenching her hands.

"And she will," said Kitty tragically, after considering her friend's face. "She will, and our holiday's ruined. I see it—I see it plainly. She's in one of her stupid conscientious moods. She's fearfully advanced and careless and unconventional in theory, Eve is; but when it comes to practice—! Mr. Thorold, you have just got everything into a dreadful knot. Why did you want those notes so very particularly?"

"I don't want them so very particularly."

"Well, anyhow, it's a most peculiar predicament. Mr. Bowring doesn't count, and this Consolidated thingummy isn't any the worse off. Nobody suffers who oughtn't to suffer. It's your unlawful gain that's wrong. Why not pitch the wretched notes in the fire?" Kitty laughed at her own playful humour.

"Certainly," said Thorold. And with a quick movement he put the fifty trifles in the grate, where they made a bluish yellow flame.

Both the women screamed and sprang up.

"Mr. Thorold!"

"Mr. ***Thorold***!" ("He's adorable!" Kitty breathed.)

"The incident, I venture to hope, is now closed," said Thorold calmly, but with his dark eyes sparkling. "I must thank you both for a very enjoyable evening. Some day, perhaps, I may have an opportunity of further explaining my philosophy to you."

Chapter 2

A Comedy on the Gold Coast

I.

It was five o'clock on an afternoon in mid-September, and a couple of American millionaires (they abounded that year, did millionaires) sat chatting together on the wide terrace which separates the entrance to the Kursaal from the promenade. Some yards away, against the balustrade of the terrace, in the natural, unconsidered attitude of one to whom short frocks are a matter of history, certainly, but very recent history, stood a charming and imperious girl; you could see that she was eating chocolate while meditating upon the riddle of life. The elder millionaire glanced at every pretty woman within view, excepting only the girl; but his companion seemed to be intent on counting the chocolates.

The immense crystal dome of the Kursaal dominated the gold coast, and on either side of the great building were stretched out in a straight line the hotels, the restaurants, the *cafés*, the shops, the theatres, the concert-halls, and the pawnbrokers of the City of Pleasure—Ostend. At one extremity of that long array of ornate white architecture (which resembled the icing on a bridecake more than the roofs of men) was the palace of a king; at the other were the lighthouse and the railway signals which guided into the city the continuously arriving cargoes of wealth, beauty, and desire. In front, the ocean, grey and lethargic, idly beat up a little genteel foam under the promenade for the wetting of pink feet and stylish bathing-costumes. And after a hard day's work, the sun, by arrangement with the authorities during August and September, was setting over the sea exactly opposite the superb portals of the Kursaal.

The younger of the millionaires was Cecil Thorold. The other, a man

fifty-five or so, was Simeon Rainshore, father of the girl at the balustrade, and president of the famous Dry Goods Trust, of exciting memory. The contrast between the two men, alike only in extreme riches, was remarkable: Cecil still youthful, slim, dark, languid of movement, with delicate features, eyes almost Spanish, and an accent of purest English; and Rainshore with his nasal twang, his stout frame, his rounded, bluish-red chin, his little eyes, and that demeanour of false briskness by means of which ageing men seek to prove to themselves that they are as young as ever they were. Simeon had been a friend and opponent of Cecil's father; in former days those twain had victimised other for colossal sums. Consequently Simeon had been glad to meet the son of his dead antagonist, and, in less than a week of Ostend repose, despite a fundamental disparity of temperament, the formidable president and the Europeanised wanderer had achieved a sort of intimacy, intimacy which was about to be intensified. equivalent to announcing that the rest of the world had better look out for itself.

"The difference between you and me is this," Cecil was saying. "You exhaust yourself by making money among men who are all bent on making money, in a place specially set apart for the purpose. I amuse myself by making money; among men who, having made or inherited money, are bent on spending it, in places specially set apart for the purpose. I take people off their guard. They don't precisely see me coming. I don't rent an office and put up a sign which is equivalent to announcing that the rest of the world had better lookout for itself. Our codes are the same, but is not my way more original and more diverting? Look at this place. Half the wealth of Europe is collected here; the other I half is at Trouville. The entire coast reeks of money; the sands are golden with it. You've' only to put out your hand—so!"

"So?" ejaculated Rainshore, quizzical "How? Show me!"

"Ah! That would be telling."

"I guess you wouldn't get much out of Simeon—not as much as your father did."

"Do you imagine I should try?" said Cecil gravely. "My amusements are always discreet."

"But you confess you are often bored. Now, on Wall Street we are never bored."

"Yes," Cecil admitted. "I embarked on these—these enterprises mainly to escape boredom."

"You ought to marry," said Rainshore pointedly. "You ought to marry, my friend."

"I have my yacht."

"No doubt. And she's a beauty, and feminine too; but not feminine enough. You ought to marry. Now, I'll—"

Mr. Rainshore paused. His daughter had suddenly ceased to eat chocolates and was leaning over the balustrade in order to converse with a tall, young man whose fair, tanned face and white hat overtopped the carved masonry and were thus visible to the millionaires. The latter glanced at one another and then glanced away, each slightly self-conscious.

"I thought Mr. Vaux-Lowry had left?" said Cecil.

"He came back last night," Rainshore replied curtly. "And he leaves again to-night."

"Then—then it's a match after all!" Cecil ventured.

"Who says that? " was Simeon's sharp inquiry.

"The birds of the air whisper it. One heard it at every corner three days ago."

Rainshore turned his chair a little towards Cecil's. "You'll allow I ought to know something about it," he said. "Well, I tell you it's a lie."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," Cecil apologised.

"Not at all," said Simeon, stroking his chin. "I'm glad you did. Because now you can just tell all the birds of the air direct from me that in this particular case there isn't going to be the usual alliance between the beauty and dollars of America and the aristocratic blood of Great Britain. Listen right here," he continued confidentially, like a man whose secret feelings have been inconveniencing him for several hours. "This young spark—mind, I've nothing against him!—asks me to consent to his engagement with Geraldine. I tell him that I intend to settle half a million dollars on my daughter, and that the man she marries must cover that half-million with another. He says he has a thousand a year of his own, pounds—just nice for Geraldine's gloves and candy!—and that he is the heir of his uncle, Lord Lowry; and that there is an entail; and that Lord Lowry is very rich, very old, and very unmarried; but that, being also very peculiar, he won't come down with any money. It occurs to me to remark: 'Suppose Lord Lowry marries and develops into the father of a man-child, where do you come in, Mr. Vaux-Lowry?' 'Oho! Lord Lowry marry! Impossible! Laughable!' Then Geraldine begins to worry at me, and her mother too. And so I kind of issue an ultimatum —namely, I will consent to an engagement without a settlement if, on the marriage, Lord Lowry will give a note of hand for half a million dollars to Geraldine, payable on his marriage. See? My lord's

nephew goes off to persuade my lord, and returns with my lord's answer in an envelope sealed with the great seal. I open it and I read—this is what I read: '*To Mr. S. Rainshore, American draper. Sir—As a humorist you rank high. Accept the admiration of Your obedient servant, Lowry.*' "

The millionaire laughed.

"Oh! It's clever enough!" said Rainshore. "It's very English and grand. Dashed if I don't admire it! All the same, I've requested Mr. Vaux-Lowry, under the circumstances, to quit this town. I didn't show him the letter—no. I spared his delicate feelings. I merely told him Lord Lowry had refused, and that I would be ready to consider his application favourably any time when he happened to have half a million dollars in his pocket."

"And Miss Geraldine?"

"She's flying the red flag, but she knows when my back's against the wall. She knows her father. She'll recover. Great Scott! She's eighteen, he's twenty-one; the whole affair is a high farce. And, moreover, I guess I want Geraldine to marry an American, after all."

"And if she elopes?" Cecil murmured as if to himself, gazing at the set features of the girl, who was now alone once more.

"***Elopes?***"

Rainshore's face reddened as his mood shifted suddenly from indulgent cynicism to profound anger. Cecil was amazed at the transformation, until he remembered to have heard long ago that Simeon himself had eloped.

"It was just a fancy that flashed into my mind," Cecil smiled diplomatically.

"I should let it flash out again if I were you," said Rainshore, with a certain grimness. And Cecil perceived the truth of the maxim that a parent can never forgive his own fault in his child.

II.

"You've come to sympathise with me," said Geraldine Rainshore calmly, as Cecil, leaving the father for a few moments, strolled across the terrace towards the daughter.

"It s my honest, kindly face that gives me away," he responded lightly. "But what am I to sympathise with you about?"

"You know what," the girl said briefly.

They stood together near the balustrade, looking out over the sea into the crimson eye of the sun; and all the afternoon activities of Ostend were surging round them—the muffled sound of musical instruments from within the Kursaal, the shrill cries of late bathers from the shore, the toot of a tramway-horn to the left, the roar of a siren to the right, and everywhere the ceaseless hum of an existence at once gay, feverish, and futile; but Cecil was conscious of nothing but the individuality by his side. Some women, he reflected, are older at eighteen than they are at thirty-eight, and Geraldine was one of those. She happened to be very young and very old at the same time. She might be immature, crude, even gawky in her girlishness; but she was just then in the first flush of mentally realising the absolute independence of the human spirit. She had force, and she had also the enterprise to act on it.

As Cecil glanced at her intelligent, expressive face, he thought of her playing with life as a child plays with a razor.

"You mean—?" he inquired.

"I mean that father has been talking about me to you. I could tell by his eyes. Well?"

"Your directness unnerves me," he smiled.

"Pull yourself together, then, Mr. Thorold. Be a man."

"Will you let me treat you as a friend?"

"Why, yes," she said, "if you'll promise not to tell me I'm only eighteen."

"I am incapable of such rudeness," Cecil replied. "A woman is as old as she feels. You feel at least thirty; therefore you are at least thirty. This being understood, I am going to suggest, as a friend, that if you and Mr. Vaux-Lowry are—perhaps pardonably—contemplating any extreme step—"

"Extreme step, Mr. Thorold?"

"Anything rash."

"And suppose we are?" Geraldine demanded, raising her chin scornfully and defiantly and dangling her parasol.

"I should respectfully and confidentially advise you to refrain. Be content to wait, my dear middle-aged woman. Your father may relent. And also, I have a notion that I may be able to—to—"

"Help us?"

"Possibly."

"You are real good," said Geraldine coldly. "But what gave you the idea that Harry and I were meaning to—?"

"Something in your eyes-your fine, daring eyes. I read you as you read your father, you see?"

"Well, then, Mr. Thorold, there'a something wrong with my fine, daring eyes. I'm just the last girl in all America to do anything-rash. Why! if I did anything rash, I'm sure I should feel ever afterwards as if I wanted to be excused off the very face of the earth. I'm that sort of girl. Do you think I don't know that father will give way? I guess he's just got to. With time and hammering, you can knock sense into the head of any parent."

"I apologise," said Cecil, both startled and convinced. "And I congratulate Mr. Vaux-Lowry."

"Say. You like Harry, don't you?"

"Very much. He's the ideal type of Englishman."

Geraldine nodded sweetly. "And so obedient! He does everything I tell him. He is leaving for England to-night, not because father asked him to, but because I did. I'm going to take mother to Brussels for a few days' shopping—lace, you know. That will give father an opportunity to meditate in solitude on his own greatness. Tell me, Mr. Thorold, do you consider that Harry and I would be justified in corresponding secretly?"

Cecil assumed a pose of judicial gravity.

"I think you would," he decided. "But don't tell anyone I said so."

"Not even Harry?"

She ran off into the Kursaal, saying she must seek her mother. But instead of seeking her mother, Geraldine passed straight through the concert-hall, where a thousand and one wondrously attired women were doing fancy needle-work to the accompaniment of a band of music, into the maze of corridors beyond, and so to the rear entrance of the Kursaal on the Boulevard van Isoghem. Here she met Mr. Harry Vaux-Lowry, who was most obviously waiting for her. They crossed the road to the empty tramway waiting-room and entered it and sat down; and by the mere act of looking into each other's eyes, these two—the stiff, simple, honest-faced young Englishman with "Oxford" written all over him, and the charming child of a civilisation equally proud, but with fewer conventions, suddenly transformed the little bureau into a Cupid's bower.

"It's just as I thought, you darling boy," Geraldine began to talk rapidly. "Father's the least bit in the world scared; and when he's scared, he's bound to confide in someone; and he's confided in that sweet Mr. Thorold. And Mr. Thorold has been requested to reason with me and advise me to be a good girl and wait. I know what that means. It means that

father thinks we shall soon forget each other, my poor Harry. And I do believe it means that father wants me to marry Mr. Thorold."

"What did you say to him, dear?" the lover demanded, pale.

"Trust me to fool him, Harry. I simply walked round him. He thinks we are going to be very good and wait patiently. As if father ever would give way until he was forced!"

She laughed disdainfully. "So we're perfectly safe so long as we act with discretion. Now let's clearly understand. To-day's Monday. You return to England to-night."

"Yes. And I'll arrange about the licence and things."

"Your cousin Mary is just as important as the licence, Harry," said Geraldine primly.

"She will come. You may rely on her being at Ostend with me on Thursday."

"Very well. In the meantime, I behave as if life were a blank. Brussels will put them off the scent. Mother and I will return from there on Thursday afternoon. That night there is a *soirée dansante* at the Kursaal. Mother will say she is too tired to go to it, but she will have to go all the same. I will dance before all men till a quarter to ten—I will even dance with Mr. Thorold. What a pity I can't dance before father, but he's certain to be in the gambling-rooms then, winning money; he always is at that hour! At a quarter to ten I will slip out, and you'll be here at this back door with a carriage. We drive to the quay and just catch the 11.5 steamer, and I meet your cousin Mary. On Friday morning we are married; and then, then We shall be in a position to talk to father. He'll pretend to be furious, but he can't say much, because he eloped himself. Didn't you know?"

"I didn't," said Harry, with a certain dryness.

"Oh, yes! It's in the family! But you needn't look so starched, my English lord." He took her hand. "You're sure your uncle won't disinherit you, or anything horrid of that kind?"

"He can't," said Harry.

"What a perfectly lovely country England is!" Geraldine exclaimed. "Fancy the poor old thing not being able to disinherit you! Why, it's just too delicious for words!"

And for some reason or other he kissed her violently.

Then an official entered the bureau and asked them if they wanted to go to Blankenburghe; because, if so, the tram was awaiting their distinguished pleasure. They looked at each other foolishly and sidled out, and the bureau ceased to be Cupid's bower.

III.

By Simeon's request, Cecil dined with the Rainshores that night at the Continental. After dinner they all sat out on the balcony and sustained themselves with coffee while watching the gay traffic of the Digue, the brilliant illumination of the Kursaal, and the distant lights on the invisible but murmuring sea. Geraldine was in one of her moods of philosophic pessimism, and would persist in dwelling on the uncertainty of riches and the vicissitudes of millionaires. She found a text in the famous Bowring case, of which the newspaper contained many interesting details.

"I wonder if he'll be caught?" she remarked.

"I wonder," said Cecil.

"What do you think, father?"

"I think you had better go to bed," Simeon replied.

The chit rose and kissed him duteously.

"Good night," she said. "Aren't you glad the sea keeps so calm?"

"Why?"

"Can you ask? Mr. Vaux-Lowry crosses to-night, and he's a dreadfully bad sailor. Come along, mother. Mr. Thorold, when mother and I return from Brussels, we shall expect to be taken for a cruise in the ›Claribel‹."

Simeon sighed with relief upon the departure of his family and began a fresh cigar. On the whole, his day had been rather too domestic. He was quite pleased when Cecil, having apparently by accident broached the subject of the Dry Goods Trust, proceeded to exhibit a minute curiosity concerning the past, the present, and the future of the greatest of all the Rainshore enterprises.

"Are you thinking of coming in?" Simeon demanded at length, pricking up his ears.

"No," said Cecil, "I'm thinking of going out. The fact is, I haven't mentioned it before, but I'm ready to sell a very large block of shares."

"The deuce you are!" Simeon exclaimed. "And what do you call a very large block?"

"Well," said Cecil, "it would cost me nearly half a million to take them up now."

"Dollars?"

"Pounds sterling. Twenty-five thousand shares, at 95⅜."

Rainshore whistled two bars of "Follow me!" from "The Belle of New York."

"Is this how you amuse yourself at Ostend?" he inquired.

Cecil smiled: "This is quite an exceptional transaction. And not too profitable, either."

"But you can't dump that lot on the market," Simeon protested.

"Yes, I can," said Cecil. "I must, and I will. There are reasons. You yourself wouldn't care to handle it, I suppose?"

The president of the Trust pondered.

"I'd handle it at 93⅜," he answered quietly.

"Oh, come! That's dropping two points!" said Cecil, shocked. "A minute ago you were prophesying a further rise."

Rainshore's face gleamed out momentarily in the darkness as he puffed at his cigar.

"If you must unload," he remarked, as if addressing the red end of the cigar, "I'm your man at 93⅜."

Cecil argued: but Simeon Rainshore never argued—it was not his method. In a quarter of an hour the younger man had contracted to sell twenty-five thousand shares of a hundred dollars each in the United States Dry Goods Trust at two points below the current market quotation, and six and five—eighths points below par. The hoot of an outgoing steamer sounded across the city.

"I must go," said Cecil.

"You're in a mighty hurry," Simeon complained.

IV.

Five minutes later Cecil was in his own rooms at the Hotel de la Plage. Soon there was a discreet knock at the door.

"Come in, Lecky," he said.

It was his servant who entered, the small, thin man with very mobile eyes and of no particular age, who, in various capacities and incarnations—now as liftman, now as financial agent, now as no matter what—assisted Cecil in his diversions.

"Mr. Vaux-Lowry really did go by the boat, sir."

"Good. And you have given directions about the yacht?"

"The affair is in order."

"And you've procured one of Mr. Rainshore's Homburg hats?"

"It is in your dressing-room. There was no mark of identification on it. So, in order to smooth the difficulties of the police when they find it on

the beach, I have taken the liberty of writing Mr. Rainshore's name on the lining."

"A kindly thought," said Cecil. "You'll catch the special G.S.N. steamer direct for London at 1 a.m. That will get you into town before two o'clock to-morrow afternoon. Things have turned out as I expected, and I've nothing else to say to you; but, before leaving me, perhaps you had better repeat your instructions."

"With pleasure, sir," said Lecky. "Tuesday afternoon.—I call at Cloak Lane and intimate that we want to sell Dry Goods shares. I ineffectually try to conceal a secret cause for alarm, and I gradually disclose the fact that we are very anxious indeed to sell really a lot of Dry Goods shares, in a hurry. I permit myself to be pumped, and the information is wormed out of me that Mr. Simeon Rainshore has disappeared, has possibly committed suicide; but that, at present, no one is aware of this except ourselves. I express doubts as to the soundness of the Trust, and I remark on the unfortunateness of this disappearance so soon after the lamentable panic connected with the lately vanished Bruce Bowring and his companies. I send our friends on 'Change with orders to see what they can do and to report. I then go to Birchin Lane and repeat the performance there without variation. Then I call at the City office of the Evening Messenger and talk privily in a despondent vein with the financial editor concerning the Trust, but I breathe not a word as to Mr. Rainshore's disappearance. Wednesday morning.—The rot in Dry Goods has set in sharply, but I am now, very foolishly, disposed to haggle about the selling price. Our friends urge me to accept what I can get, and I leave them, saying that I must telegraph to you. Wednesday afternoon.—I see a reporter of the Morning journal and let out that Simeon Rainshore has disappeared. The journal will wire to Ostend for confirmation, which confirmation it will receive. Thursday morning.—The bottom is knocked out of the price of Dry Goods shares. Then I am to call on our other friends in Throgmorton Street and tell them to buy, buy, buy, in London, New York, Paris, everywhere."

"Go in peace," said Cecil. "If we are lucky, the price will drop to seventy."

V.

"I see, Mr. Thorold," said Geraldine Rainshore, "that you are about to ask me for the next dance. It is yours."

"You are the queen of diviners," Cecil replied, bowing.

It was precisely half-past nine on Thursday evening, and they had met in a corner of the pillared and balconied *salle de danse*, in the Kursaal behind the concert-hall. The slippery, glittering floor was crowded with dancers—the men in ordinary evening dress, the women very variously attired, save that nearly all wore picture-hats. Geraldine was in a white frock, high at the neck, with a large hat of black velvet; and amidst that brilliant, multicoloured, light-hearted throng, lit by the blaze of the electric chandeliers and swayed by the irresistible melody of the "Doctrinen" waltz, the young girl, simply dressed as she was, easily held her own.

"So you've come back from Brussels?" Cecil said, taking her arm and waist.

"Yes. We arrived just on time for dinner. But what have you been doing with father? We've seen nothing of him."

"Ah!" said Cecil mysteriously. "We've been on a little voyage, and, like you, we've only just returned."

"In the ›Claribel‹?"

He nodded.

"You might have waited," she pouted.

"Perhaps you wouldn't have liked it. Things happened, you know."

"Why, what? Do tell me."

"Well, you left your poor father alone, and he was moping all day on Tuesday. So on Tuesday night I had the happy idea of going out in the yacht to witness a sham night attack by the French Channel Squadron on Calais. I caught your honoured parent just as he was retiring to bed, and we went. He was only too glad. But we hadn't left the harbour much more than an hour and a half when our engines broke down."

"What fun! And at night, too!"

"Yes. Wasn't it? The shaft was broken. So we didn't see much of any night attack on Calais. Fortunately the weather was all that the weather ought to be when a ship's engines break down. Still, it took us over forty hours to repair—over forty hours!I'm proud we were able to do the thing without being ignominiously towed into port. But I fear your father may have grown a little impatient, though we had excellent views of Ostend and Dunkirk, and the passing vessels were a constant diversion."

"Was there plenty to eat?" Geraldine asked simply.

"Ample."

"Then father wouldn't really mind. When did you land?"

"About an hour ago. Your father did not expect you to-night, I fancy. He dressed and went straight to the tables. He has to make up for a night lost, you see."

They danced in silence for a few moments, and then suddenly Geraldine said—"Will you excuse me? I feel tired. Good night."

The clock under the orchestra showed seventeen minutes to ten.

"Instantly?" Cecil queried.

"Instantly." And the girl added, with a hint of mischief in her voice, as she shook hands: "I look on you as quite a friend since our last little talk; so you will excuse this abruptness, won't you?"

He was about to answer when a sort of commotion arose near behind them. Still holding her hand he turned to look.

"Why!" he said. "It's your mother! She must be unwell!"

Mrs. Rainshore, stout, and robed, as always, in tight, sumptuous black, sat among a little bevy of chaperons. She held a newspaper in trembling hands, and she was uttering a succession of staccato "Oh-oh's," While everyone in the vicinity gazed at her with alarm. Then she dropped the paper, and, murmuring, "Simeon's dead!" sank gently to the polished floor just as Cecil and Geraldine approached.

Geraldine's first instinctive move was to seize the newspaper, which was that day's Paris edition of the New York Herald. She read the headlines in a flash:

> "Strange disappearance of Simeon Rainshore. Suicide feared. Takes advantage of his family's absence. Heavy drop in Dry Goods. Shares at 72 and still falling."

VI.

"My good Rebecca, I assure you that I am alive."

This was Mr. Rainshore's attempt to calm the hysteric sobbing of his wife, who had recovered from her short swoon in the little retreat of the person who sold Tauchnitzes[1], picture-postcards, and French novels, between the main corridor and the reading-rooms. Geraldine and Cecil were also in the tiny chamber.

"As for this," Simeon continued, kicking the newspaper, "it's a singular thing that a man can't take a couple of days off without upsetting the entire universe. What should you do in my place, Thorold? This is the fault of your shaft."

---

1. Muss recherchiert werden!

"I should buy Dry Goods shares," said Cecil. "And I will."
There was an imperative knock at the door. An official of police entered.
"*Monsieur* Ryneshor?"
"The same."
"We have received telegraphs from New York and Londres to demand if you are dead."
"I am not. I still live."
"But *Monsieur*'s hat has been found on the beach."
"My hat?"
"It carries *Monsieur*'s name."
"Then it isn't mine, sir."
"*Mais comment donc*—?"
"I tell you it isn't mine, sir."
"Don't be angry, Simeon," his wife pleaded between her sobs.
The exit of the official was immediately followed by another summons for admission, even more imperative. A lady entered and handed to Simeon a card:

Miss Eve Fincastle.
The Morning journal.

"My paper-" she began.
"You wish to know if I exist, madam!" said Simeon.
"I—" Miss Fincastle caught sight of Cecil Thorold, paused, and bowed stiffiy. Cecil bowed; he also blushed.
"I continue to exist, madam," Simeon proceeded. "I have not killed myself. But homicide of some sort is not improbable if—In short, madam, good night!"
Miss Fincastle, with a long, searching, silent look at Cecil, departed.
"Bolt that door," said Simeon to his daughter. Then there was a third knock, followed by a hammering.
"Go away!" Simeon commanded.
"Open the door!" pleaded a muffled voice.
"It's Harry! " Geraldine whispered solemnly in Cecil's ear. "Please go and calm him. Tell him I say it's too late to-night."
Cecil Went, astounded.
"What's happened to Geraldine? " cried the boy, extremely excited, in the corridor. "There are all sorts of rumours. Is she ill?"

Cecil gave an explanation, and in his turn asked for another one. "You look unnerved," he said."What are you doing here? What is it? Come and have a drink. And tell me all, my young friend." And when, over cognac, he had learned the details of a scheme which had no connection with his own, he exclaimed, with the utmost sincerity : "The minx!The minx!"

"What do you mean?" inquired Harry Vaux-Lowry.

"I mean that you and the minx have had the nearest possible shave of ruining your united careers. Listen to me. Give it up, my boy. I'll try to arrange things. You delivered a letter to the father-in-law of your desire a few days ago. I'll give you another one to deliver, and I fancy the result will be, different."

The letter which Cecil wrote ran thus:

> *Dear Rainshore,*
>
> *I enclose a cheque for £ 100,000. It represents parts of the gold that can be picked up on the gold coast by putting out one's hand-so! You will observe that it is dated the day after the next settling-day of the London Stock Exchange. I contracted on Monday last to sell you 25,000 shares of a certain Trust at 93%, I did not possess the shares then, but my agents have to-day bought them for me at an average price of 72. I stand to realise, therefore, rather more than half a million dollars. The round half million Mr. Vaux-Lowry happens to bring you in his pocket; you will not forget your promise to him that when he did so you would consider his application favourably. I wish to make no profit out of the little transaction, but I will venture to keep the balance for out-of-pocket expenses, such as mending the Clarabel's shaft. (How convenient it is to have a yacht that will break down when required!) The shares will doubtless recover in due course, and I hope the reputation of the Trust may not suffer, and that for the sake of old times with my father you will regard the episode in its proper light and bear me no ill-will.*
>
> *Yours sincerely,*
> *C. Thorold.*

The next day the engagement of Mr. Harry Nigel Selincourt Vaux-Lowry and Miss Geraldine Rainshore was announced to two continents.

Chapter 3

A Bracelet at Bruges[1]

I.

The bracelet had fallen into the canal. And the fact that the canal was the most picturesque canal in the old flemish city of Bruges, and that the ripples caused by the splash of the bracelet had disturbed reflections of wondrous belfries, towers, steeples, and other unique examples of Gothic architecture, did nothing whatever to assuage the sudden agony of that disappearance. For the bracelet had been given to Kitty Sartorius by her grateful and lordly manager, Lionel Belmont (U. S. A.), upon the completion of the unexampled run of "The Delmonico Doll," at the Regency Theatre, London. And its diamonds were worth five hundred pounds, to say nothing of the gold.

The beautiful Kitty, and her friend Eve Fincastle, the journalist, having exhausted Ostend, had duly arrived at Bruges in the course of their holiday tour. The question of Kitty's jewellery had arisen at the start. Kitty had insisted that she must travel with all her jewels, according to the custom of the theatrical stars of great magnitude. Eve had equally insisted that Kitty must travel without jewels, and had exhorted her to remember the days of her simplicity. They compromised. Kitty was allowed to bring the bracelet, but nothing else save the usual half-dozen rings. The ravishing creature could not have persuaded herself to leave the bracelet behind, because it was so recent a gift and still new and strange and heavenly to her. But, since prudence forbade even Kitty

1. Dieses Kapitel wurde von Sir Hugh Greenes in seine berühmte Anthologie »The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes« aufgenommen und erschien dann in den Siebziger Jahren mit dieser auch in deutscher Sprache.

to let the trifle lie about in hotel bedrooms, she was obliged always to wear it. And she had been wearing it this bright afternoon in early October, when the girls, during a stroll, had met one of their new friends, *Madame* Lawrence, on the world-famous *Quai du Rosaire*, just at the back of the *Hotel de Ville* and the *Halles*.

Madame Lawrence resided permanently in Bruges. She was between twenty-five and forty-five, dark, with the air of continually subduing a natural instinct to dash, and well dressed in black. Equally interested in the peerage and in the poor, she had made the acquaintance of Eve and Kitty at the *Hotel de la Grande Place*, where she called from time to time to induce English travellers to buy genuine Bruges lace, wrought under her own supervision by her own paupers. She was Belgian by birth, and when complimented on her fluent and correct English, she gave all the praise to her deceased husband, an English barrister. She had settled in Bruges like many people settle there, because Bruges is inexpensive, picturesque, and inordinately respectable. Besides an English church and chaplain, it has two cathedrals and an episcopal palace, with a real bishop in it.

"What an exquisite bracelet! May I look at it?"

It was these simple but ecstatic words, spoken with *Madame* Lawrence's charming foreign accent, which had begun the tragedy. The three women had stopped to admire the always admirable view from the little quay, and they were leaning over the rails when Kitty unclasped the bracelet for the inspection of the widow. The next instant there was a *plop*, an affrighted exclamation from *Madame* Lawrence in her native tongue, and the bracelet was engulfed before the very eyes of all three.

The three looked at each other non-plussed. Then they looked around, but not a single person was in sight. Then, for some reason which, doubtless, psychology can explain, they stared hard at the water, though the water there was just as black and foul as it is everywhere else in the canal system of Bruges.

"Surely you've not dropped it!" Eve Fincastle exclaimed in a voice of horror. Yet she knew positively that *Madame* Lawrence had.

The delinquent took a handkerchief from her muff and sobbed into it. And between her sobs she murmured : "We must inform the police."

"Yes, of course," said Kitty, with the lightness of one to whom a five-hundred-pound bracelet is a bagatelle. "They'll fish it up in no time."

"Well," Eve decided, "you go to the police at once, Kitty; and *Madame* Lawrence will go with you, because she speaks French, and I'll stay here to mark the exact spot."

The other two started, but *Madame* Lawrence, after a few steps, put her hand to her side. "I can't," she sighed, pale. "I am too upset. I cannot walk. You go with Miss Sartorius," she said to Eve, "and I will stay," and she leaned heavily against the railings.

Eve and Kitty ran off, just as if it was an affair of seconds, and the bracelet had to be saved from drowning. But they had scarcely turned the corner, thirty yards away, when they reappeared in company with a high official of police, whom, by the most lucky chance in the world, they had encountered in the covered passage leading to the *Place du Bourg*. This official, instantly enslaved by Kitty's beauty, proved to be the very mirror of politeness and optimism. He took their names and addresses, and a full description of the bracelet, and informed them that at that place the canal was nine feet deep. He said that the bracelet should undoubtedly be recovered on the morrow, but that, as dusk was imminent, it would be futile to commence angling that night. In the meantime the loss should be kept secret; and to make all sure, a succession of gendarmes should guard the spot during the night.

Kitty grew radiant, and rewarded the gallant oficer with smiles; Eve was satisfied, and the face of *Madame* Lawrence wore a less mournful hue.

"And now," said Kitty to *Madame*, when everything had been arranged, and the first of the gendarmes was duly installed at the exact spot against the railings, "you must come and take tea with us in our winter garden; and be gay! Smile: I insist. And I insist that you don't worry."

Madame Lawrence tried feebly to smile.

"You are very good-natured," she stammered.

Which was decidedly true.

II

The winter-garden of the *Hotel de la Grande Place*, referred to in all the hotel's advertisements, was merely the inner court of the hotel, roofed in by glass at the height of the first storey. Cane flourished there, in the shape of lounge-chairs, but no other plant. One of the lounge-chairs was occupied when, just as the carillon in the belfry at the other end of the Place began to play Gounod's "Nazareth," indicating the hour of five o'clock, the three ladies entered the winter-garden. Apparently the toilettes of two of them had been adjusted and embellished as for a somewhat ceremonious occasion.

"Lo!" cried Kitty Sartorius, when she perceived the occupant of the chair, "the millionaire! Mr. Thorold, how charming of you to reappear like this! I invite you to tea."

Cecil Thorold rose with appropriate eagerness.

"Delighted!" he said, smiling, and then explained that he had arrived from Ostend about two hours before and had taken rooms in the hotel.

"You knew we were staying here?" Eve asked as he shook hands with her.

"No," he replied; "but I am very glad to find you again."

"Are you?" She spoke languidly, but her colour heightened and those eyes of hers sparkled.

"*Madame* Lawrence," Kitty chirruped, "let me present Mr. Cecil Thorold. He is appallingly rich, but we mustn't let that frighten us."

From a mouth less adorable than the mouth of Miss Sartorius such an introduction might have been judged lacking in the elements of good form, but for more than two years now Kitty had known that whatever she did or said was perfectly correct because she did or said it. The new acquaintances laughed amiably, and a certain intimacy was at once established.

"Shall I order tea, dear?" Eve suggested.

"No, dear," said Kitty quietly. "We will wait for the Count."

"The Count?" demanded Cecil Thorold.

"The *Comte d'Avrec*," Kitty explained. "He is staying here."

"A French nobleman, doubtless?"

"Yes," said Kitty; and she added, "you will like him. He is an archaeologist, and a musician—oh, and lots of things!"

"If I am one minute late, I entreat pardon," said a fine tenor voice at the door.

It was the Count. After he had been introduced to *Madame* Lawrence, and Cecil Thorold had been introduced to him, tea was served.

Now, the *Comte d'Avrec* was everything that a French count ought to be. As dark as Cecil Thorold, and even handsomer, he was a little older and a little taller than the millionaire, and a short, pointed, black beard, exquisitely trimmed, gave him an appearance of staid reliability which Cecil lacked. His bow was a vertebrate poem, his smile a consolation for all misfortunes, and he managed his hat, stick, gloves, and cup with the dazzling assurance of a conjurer. To observe him at afternoon tea was to be convinced that he had been specially created to shine gloriously in drawing-rooms, winter-gardens, and *tables d'hôte*. He was

one of those men who always do the right thing at the right moment, who are capable of speaking an indefinite number of languages with absolute purity of accent (he spoke English much better than *Madame* Lawrence), and who can and do discourse with verve and accuracy on all sciences, arts, sports, and religions. In short, he was a phoenix of a count; and this was certainly the opinion of Miss Kitty Sartorius and of Miss Eve Fincastle, both of whom reckoned that what they did not know about men might be ignored. Kitty and the Count, it soon became evident, were mutually attracted; their souls were approaching each other with a velocity which increased inversely as the square of the lessening distance between them. And Eve was watching this approximation with undisguised interest and relish.

Nothing of the least importance occurred, save the Count's marvellous exhibition of how to behave at afternoon tea, until the refection was nearly over; and then, during a brief pause in the talk, Cecil, who was sitting to the left of *Madame* Lawrence, looked sharply round at the right shoulder of his tweed coat; he repeated the gesture a second and yet a third time.

"What is the matter with the man?" asked Eve Fincastle. Both she and Kitty were extremely bright, animated, and even excited.

"Nothing. I thought I saw something on my shoulder, that's all," said Cecil. "Ah! It's only a bit of thread." And he picked off the thread with his left hand and held it before *Madame* Lawrence. "See! It's a piece of thin black silk, knotted. At first I took it for an insect—you know how queer things look out of the corner of your eye. Pardon!" He had dropped the fragment on to *Madame* Lawrence's black silk dress. "Now it's lost."

"If you will excuse me, kind friends," said *Madame* Lawrence, "I will go." She spoke hurriedly, and as though in mental distress.

"Poor thing!" Kitty Sartorius exclaimed when the widow had gone. "She's still dreadfully upset"; and Kitty and Eve proceeded jointly to relate the story of the diamond bracelet, upon which hitherto they had kept silence (though with difficulty), out of regard for *Madame* Lawrence's feelings.

Cecil made almost no comment.

The Count, with the sympathetic excitability of his race, walked up and down the winter-garden, asseverating earnestly that such clumsiness amounted to a crime; then he grew calm and confessed that he shared the optimism of the police as to the recovery of the bracelet; lastly he complimented Kitty on her equable demeanour under this affliction.

"Do you know, Count," said Cecil Thorold, later, after they had all four ascended to the drawing-room overlooking the *Grande Place*, "I was quite surprised when I saw at tea that you had to be introduced to *Madame* Lawrence."

"Why so, my dear Mr. Thorold?" the Count inquired suavely.

"I thought I had seen you together in Ostend a few days ago."

The Count shook his wonderful head.

"Perhaps you have a brother—?" Cecil paused.

"No," said the Count. "But it is a favourite theory of mine that everyone has his double somewhere in the world." Previously the Count had been discussing *Planchette*—he was a great authority on the supernatural, the sub-conscious, and the subliminal. He now deviated gracefully to the discussion of the theory of doubles.

"I suppose you aren't going out for a Walk, dear, before dinner?" said Eve to Kitty.

"No, dear," said Kitty, positively.

"I think I shall," said Eve.

And her glance at Cecil Thorold intimated in the plainest possible manner that she wished not only to have a companion for a stroll, but to leave Kitty and the Count in dual solitude.

"I shouldn't, if I were you, Miss Fincastle," Cecil remarked, with calm and studied blindness. "It's risky here in the evenings—with these canals exhaling miasma and mosquitoes and bracelets and all sorts of things."

"I will take the risk, thank you," said Eve, in an icy tone, and she haughtily departed; she would not cower before Cecil's millions. As for Cecil, he joined in the discussion of the theory of doubles.

III.

On the next afternoon but one, policemen were still fishing, Without success, for the bracelet, and raising from the ancient duct long-buried odours which threatened to destroy the inhabitants of the quay. (When Kitty Sartorius had hinted that perhaps the authorities might see their way to drawing off the water from the canal, the authorities had intimated that the death-rate of Bruges was already as high as convenient.) Nevertheless, though nothing had happened, the situation had somehow developed, and in such a manner that the bracelet itself was in

danger of being partially forgotten; and of all places in Bruges, the situation had developed on the top of the renowned Belfry which dominates the *Grande Place* in particular and the city in general.

The summit of the Belfry is three hundred and fifty feet high, and it is reached by four hundred and two winding stone steps, each a separate menace to life and limb. Eve Fincastle had climbed those steps alone, perhaps in quest of the view at the top, perhaps in quest of spiritual calm. She had not been leaning over the parapet more than a minute before Cecil Thorold had appeared, his field-glasses slung over his shoulder. They had begun to talk a little, but nervously and only in snatches. The wind blew free up there among the forty-eight bells, but the social atmosphere was oppressive.

"The Count is a most charming man," Eve was saying, as if in defence of the Count.

"He is," said Cecil; "I agree with you."

"Oh, no, you don't, Mr. Thorold! Oh, no, you don't!"

Then there was a pause, and the twain looked down upon Bruges, with its venerable streets, its grass-grown squares, its waterways, and its innumerable monuments, spread out maplike beneath them in the mellow October sunshine. Citizens passed along the thoroughfare in the semblance of tiny dwarfs.

"If you didn't hate him," said Eve, "you wouldn't behave as you do."

"How do I behave, then?"

Eve schooled her voice to an imitation of jocularity—

"All Tuesday evening, and all day yesterday, you couldn't leave them alone. You know you couldn't."

Five minutes later the conversation had shifted.

"You actually saw the bracelet fall into the canal?" said Cecil.

"I actually saw the bracelet fall into the canal. And no one could have got it out while Kitty and I were away, because we weren't away half a minute."

But they could not dismiss the subject of the Count, and presently he was again the topic.

"Naturally it would be a good match for the Count—for any man," said Eve; "but then it would also be a good match for Kitty. Of course, he is not so rich as some people, but he is rich."

Cecil examined the horizon with his glasses, and then the streets near the *Grande Place*.

"Rich, is he? I'm glad of it. By the by, he's gone to Ghent for the day, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he went by the 9.27, and returns by the 4.38."

Another pause.

"Well," said Cecil at length, handing the glasses to Eve Fincastle, "kindly glance down there. Follow the line of the Rue St. Nicolas. You see the cream-coloured house with the enclosed courtyard? Now, do you see two figures standing together near a door—a man and a woman, the woman on the steps? Who are they?"

"I can't see very well," said Eve.

"Oh, yes, my dear lady, you can," said Cecil. "These glasses are the very best. Try again."

"They look like the *Comte d'Avrec* and *Madame* Lawrence," Eve murmured.

"But the Count is on his Way from Ghent! I see the steam of the 4.38 over there. The curious thing is that the Count entered the house of *Madame* Lawrence, to whom he was introduced for the first time the day before yesterday, at ten o'clock this morning. Yes, it would be a very good match for the Count. When one comes to think of it, it usually is that sort of man that contrives to marry a brilliant and successful actress. There! He's just leaving, isn't he? Now let us descend and listen to the recital of his day's doings in Ghent—shall we?"

"You mean to insinuate," Eve burst out in sudden wrath, "that the Count is an—an adventurer, and that *Madame* Lawrence—Oh! Mr. Thorold!" She laughed condescendingly. "This jealousy is too absurd. Do you suppose I haven't noticed how impressed you were with Kitty at the Devonshire Mansion that night, and again at Ostend, and again here? You're simply carried away by jealousy; and you think because you are a millionaire you must have all you want. I haven't the slightest doubt that the Count—"

"Anyhow," said Cecil, "let us go down and hear about Ghent."

His eyes made a number of remarks (indulgent, angry, amused, protective, admiring, perspicacious, puzzled), too subtle for the medium of words.

They groped their way down to earth in silence, and it was in silence that they crossed the *Grande Place*. The Count was seated on the terrasse in front of the hotel, with a liqueur glass before him, and he was making graceful and expressive signs to Kitty Sartorius, who leaned her marvellous beauty out of a first-storey window. He greeted Cecil Thorold and Eve with an equal grace.

"And how is Ghent?" Cecil inquired.

"Did you go to Ghent, after all, Count?" Eve put in. The *Comte d'Avrec* looked from one to another, and then, instead of replying, he sipped at his glass. "No," he said, "I didn't go. The rather curious fact is that I happened to meet *Madame* Lawrence, who offered to show me her collection of lace. I have been an amateur of lace for some years, and really *Madame* Lawrence's collection is amazing. You have seen it? No? You should do so. I'm afraid I have spent most of the day there."

When the Count had gone to join Kitty in the drawing-room, Eve Fincastle looked victoriously at Cecil, as if to demand of him: "Will you apologise?"

"My dear journalist," Cecil remarked simply, "you gave the show away."

That evening the continued obstinacy of the bracelet, which still refused to be caught, began at last to disturb the birdlike mind of Kitty Sartorius. Moreover, the secret was out, and the whole town of Bruges was discussing the episode and the chances of success.

"Let us consult *Planchette*," said the Count. The proposal was received with enthusiasm by Kitty. Eve had disappeared.

Planchette was produced; and when asked if the bracelet would be recovered, it wrote, under the hands of Kitty and the Count, a trembling "Yes." When asked: "By Whom?" it wrote a Word which faintly resembled "Avrec."

The Count stated that he should personally commence dragging operations at sunrise. "You will see," he said, "I shall succeed."

"Let me try this toy, may I?" Cecil asked blandly, and, upon Kitty agreeing, he addressed *Planchette* in a clear voice: "Now, *Planchette*, who will restore the bracelet to its owner?"

And *Planchette* wrote "Thorold," but in characters as firm and regular as those of a copy-book.

"Mr. Thorold is laughing at us," observed the Count, imperturbably bland.

"How horrid you are, Mr. Thorold!" Kitty exclaimed.

IV.

Of the four persons more or less interested in the affair, three were secretly active that night, in and out of the hotel. Only Kitty Sartorius, chief mourner for the bracelet, slept placidly in her bed. It was towards three o'clock in the morning that a sort of preliminary crisis was reached.

From the multiplicity of doors which ventilate its rooms, one would imagine that the average foreign hotel must have been designed immediately after its architect had been to see a *Palais Royal* farce, in which every room opens into every other room in every act. The *Hotel de la Grande Place* was not peculiar in this respect; it abounded in doors. All the chambers on the second storey, over the public rooms, fronting the Place, communicated one with the next, but naturally most of the communicating doors were locked. Cecil Thorold and the *Comte d'Avrec* had each a bedroom and a sitting-room on that floor. The Count's sitting-room adjoined Cecil's; and the door between was locked, and the key in the possession of the landlord.

Nevertheless, at three a.m. this particular door opened noiselessly from Cecil's side, and Cecil entered the domain of the Count. The moon shone, and Cecil could plainly see not only the silhouette of the Belfry across the Place, but also the principal objects within the room. He noticed the table in the middle, the large easy-chair turned towards the hearth, the old-fashioned sofa; but not a single article did he perceive which might have been the personal property of the Count. He cautiously passed across the room through the moonlight to the door of the Count's bedroom, which apparently, to his immense surprise, was not only shut, but locked, and the key in the lock on the sitting-room side. Silently unlocking it, he entered the bedroom and disappeared …

In less than five minutes he crept back into the Count's sitting-room, closed the door and locked it.

"Odd!" he murmured reflectively; but he seemed quite happy.

There was a sudden movement in the region of the hearth, and a form rose from the armchair. Cecil rushed to the switch and turned on the electric light. Eve Fincastle stood before him. They faced each other.

"What are you doing here at this time, Miss Fincastle?" he asked, sternly. "You can talk freely; the Count will not waken."

"I may ask you the same question," Eve replied, with cold bitterness.

"Excuse me. You may not. You are a Woman. This is the Count's room—"

"You are in error," she interrupted him. "It is not the Count's room. It is mine. Last night I told the Count I had some important writing to do, and I asked him as a favour to relinquish this room to me for twenty-four hours. He very kindly consented. He removed his belongings, handed me the key of that door, and the transfer was made in the hotel books. And now," she added, "may I inquire, Mr. Thorold, what you are doing in my room?"

"I—I thought it was the Count's," Cecil faltered, decidedly at a loss for a moment. "In offering my humblest apologies, permit me to say that I admire you, Miss Fincastle."

"I wish I could return the compliment," Eve exclaimed, and she repeated with almost plaintive sincerity: "I do wish I could."

Cecil raised his arms and let them fall to his side.

"You meant to catch me," he said. "You suspected something, then? The 'important writing' was an invention." And he added, with a faint smile: "You really ought not to have fallen asleep. Suppose I had not wakened you?"

"Please don't laugh, Mr. Thorold. Yes, I did suspect. There was something in the demeanour of your servant Lecky that gave me the idea … I did mean to catch you. Why you, a millionaire, should be a burglar, I cannot understand. I never understood that incident at the Devonshire Mansion; it was beyond me. I am by no means sure that you didn't have a great deal to do with the Rainshore affair at Ostend. But that you should have stooped to slander is the worst. I confess you are a mystery. I confess that I can make no guess at the nature of your present scheme. And what I shall do, now that I have caught you, I don't know. I can't decide; I must think. If, however, anything is missing to-morrow morning, I shall be bound in any case to denounce you. You grasp that?"

"I grasp it perfectly, my dear journalist," Cecil replied. "And something will not improbably be missing. But take the advice of a burglar and a mystery, and go to bed, it is half-past three."

And Eve went. And Cecil bowed her out and then retired to his own rooms. And the Count's apartment was left to the moonlight.

V.

"*Planchette* is a very safe prophet," said to Kitty Sartorius the next morning, "provided it has firm guidance."

They were at breakfast.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that *Planchette* prophesied last night that I should restore to you your bracelet. I do."

He took the lovely gewgaw from his pocket and handed it to Kitty.

"Ho-ow did you find it, you dear thing?" Kitty stammered, trembling under the shock of joy.

"I fished it up out—out of the mire by a contrivance of my own."

"But when?"

"Oh! Very early. At three o'clock a.m. You see, I was determined to be first."

"In the dark, then?"

"I had a light. Don't you think I'm rather clever?"

Kitty's scene of ecstatic gratitude does not come into the story. Suffice it to say that not until the moment of its restoration did she realise how precious the bracelet was to her.

It was ten o'clock before Eve descended. She had breakfasted in her room, and Kitty had already exhibited to her the prodigal bracelet.

"I particularly want you to go up the Belfry with me, Miss Fincastle," Cecil greeted her; and his tone was so serious and so urgent that she consented. They left Kitty playing waltzes on the piano in the drawing-room.

"And now, O man of mystery? " Eve questioned, when they had toiled to the summit, and saw the city and its dwarfs beneath them.

"We are in no danger of being disturbed here," Cecil began; "but I will make my explanation—the explanation which I certainly owe you—as brief as possible. Your *Comte d'Avrec* is an adventurer (please don't be angry), and your *Madame* Lawrence is an adventuress. I knew that I had seen them together. They work in concert, and for the most part make a living on the gaming-tables of Europe. *Madame* Lawrence was expelled from Monte Carlo last year for being too intimate with a croupier. You may be aware that at a roulette-table one can do a great deal with the aid of the croupier. *Madame* Lawrence appropriated the bracelet 'on her own,' as it were. The Count (he may be a real Count, for anything I know) heard first of that enterprise from the lips of Miss Sartorius. He was annoyed, angry—because he was really a little in love with your friend, and he saw golden prospects. It is just this fact—the Count's genuine passion for Miss Sartorius—that renders the case psychologically interesting. To proceed, *Madame* Lawrence became jealous. The Count spent six hours yesterday in trying to get the bracelet from her, and failed. He tried again last night, and succeeded, but not too easily, for he did not re-enter the hotel till after one o'clock. At first I thought he had succeeded in the daytime, and I had arranged accordingly, for I did not see why he should have the honour and glory of restoring the bracelet to its owner. Lecky and I fixed up a sleeping-draught for him. The minor details were simple. When you caught me this morning, the bracelet was in my pocket, and in its stead I had left a brief note for the perusal of the Count, which has had the singular effect of inducing him

to decamp; probably he has not gone alone. But isn't it amusing that, since you so elaborately took his sitting-room, he will be convinced that you are a party to his undoing—you, his staunchest defender?"

Eve's face gradually broke into an embarrassed smile.

"You haven't explained," she said, "how *Madame* Lawrence got the bracelet."

"Come over here," Cecil answered. "Take these glasses and look down at the *Quai du Rosaire*. You see everything plainly?" Eve could, in fact, see on the quay the little mounds of mud which had been extracted from the canal in the quest of the bracelet. Cecil continued : "On my arrival in Bruges on Monday, I had a fancy to climb the Belfry at once. I witnessed the whole scene between you and Miss Sartorius and *Madame* Lawrence, through my glasses. Immediately your backs were turned, *Madame* Lawrence, her hands behind her, and her back against the railing, began to make a sort of rapid, drawing up motion with her forearms. Then I saw a momentary glitter ... Considerably mystified, I visited the spot after you had left it, chatted with the gendarme on duty and got round him, and then it dawned on me that a robbery had been planned, prepared, and executed with extraordinary originality and ingenuity. A long, thin thread of black silk must have been ready tied to the railing, with perhaps a hook at the other end. As soon as *Madame* Lawrence held the bracelet she attached the hook to it and dropped it. The silk, especially as it was the last thing in the world you would look for, would be as good as invisible. When you went for the police, *Madame* retrieved the bracelet, hid it in her muff, and broke off the silk. Only, in her haste, she left a bit of silk tied to the railing. That fragment I carried to the hotel. All along she must have been a little uneasy about me ... And that's all. Except that I wonder you thought I was jealous of the Count's attentions to your friend." He gazed at her admiringly.

"I'm glad you are not a thief, Mr. Thorold," said Eve.

"Well," Cecil smiled, "as for that, I left him a couple of *louis* for fares, and I shall pay his hotel bill."

"Why?"

"There were notes for nearly ten thousand francs with the bracelet. Ill-gotten gains, I am sure. A trifle, but the only reward I shall have for my trouble. I shall put them to good use." He laughed, serenely gay.

Chapter 4

A Solution of the Algiers Mystery

I.

"And the launch?"

"I am unaware of the precise technical term, sir, but the launch awaits you. Perhaps I should have said it is alongside."

The reliable Lecky hated the sea; and when his master's excursions became marine, he always squinted more formidably and suddenly than usual, and added to his reliability a certain quality of ironic bitterness.

"My overcoat, please," said Cecil Thorold, who was in evening dress.

The apartment, large and low, was panelled with bird's-eye maple; divans ran along the walls, and above the divans orange curtains were drawn; the floor was hidden by the skins of wild African animals; in one corner was a Steinway piano, with the score of "The Orchid " open on the music-stand; in another lay a large, flat bowl filled with blossoms that do not bloom in England; the illumination, soft and yellow, came from behind the cornice of the room, being reflected therefrom downwards by the cream-coloured ceiling. Only by a faintly-heard tremor of some gigantic but repressed force, and by a very slight unsteadiness on the part of the floor, could you have guessed that you were aboard a steam-yacht and not in a large, luxurious house.

Lecky, having arrayed the millionaire in overcoat, muffler, crush-hat, and white gloves, drew aside a *portiére* and followed him up a flight of stairs. They stood on deck, surrounded by the mild but treacherous Algerian night. From the white double funnels a thin smoke oozed. On the white bridge, the second mate, a spectral figure, was testing

the engine-room signals, and the sharp noise of the bell. seemed to desecrate the mysterious silence of the bay; but there was no other sign of life; the waiting launch was completely hidden under the high bows of the ›Claribel‹. In distant regions of the deck, glimmering beams came oddly up from below, throwing into relief some part of a boat on its davits or a section of a mast.

Cecil looked about him, at the serried lights of the *Boulevard Carnot*, and the riding lanterns of the vessels in the harbour. Away to the left on the hill, a few gleams showed *Mustapha Superieure*, where the great English hotels are; and ten miles further east, the lighthouse on Cape Matifou flashed its eternal message to the Mediterranean. He was on the verge of feeling poetic.

"Suppose anything happens while you are at this dance, sir?"

Lecky jerked his thumb in the direction of a small steamer which lay moored scarcely a cable's length away, under the eastern jetty. "Suppose—?" He jerked his thumb again in exactly the same direction. His tone was still pessimistic and cynical.

"You had better fire our beautiful brass cannon," Cecil replied. "Have it fired three times. I shall hear it well enough up at Mustapha."

He descended carefully into the launch, and was whisked puffingly over the dark surface of the bay to the landing-stage, where he summoned a fiacre.

"Hotel St. James," he instructed the driver.

And the driver smiled joyously; everyone who went to the Hotel St. James was rich and lordly, and paid well, because the hill was long and steep and so hard on the poor Algerian horses.

II.

Every hotel up at *Mustapha Supérieure* has the finest view, the finest hygienic installation, and the finest cooking in Algeria; in other words, each is better than all the others. Hence the Hotel St. James could not be called "first among equals," since there are no equals, and one must be content to describe it as first among the unequalled. First it undoubtedly was—and perhaps will be again. Although it was new, it had what one visitor termed "that indefinable thing—*cachet*." It was frequented by the best people—namely, the richest people, the idlest people, the most arrogant people, the most bored people, the most titled people—that came to the southern shores of the Mediterranean in search of what

they would never find—an escape from themselves. It was a vast building, planned on a scale of spaciousness only possible in a district where commercial crises have depressed the value of land, and it stood in the midst of a vast garden of oranges, lemons, and medlars. Every room—and there were three storeys and two hundred rooms—faced south: this was charged for in the bill. The public rooms, Oriental in character, were immense and complete. They included a dining-room, a drawing-room, a reading-room, a smoking-room, a billiard-room, a bridge-room, a ping-pong-room, a concert-room (with resident orchestra), and a room where Aissouias, negroes, and other curiosities from the native town might perform before select parties. Thus it was entirely self-sufficient, and lacked nothing which is necessary to the proper existence of the best people. On Thursday nights, throughout the season, there was a five-franc dance in the concert-hall. You paid five francs, and ate and drank as much as you could while standing up at the supper-tables arrayed in the dining-room.

On a certain Thursday night in early January, this Anglo-Saxon microcosm, set so haughtily in a French colony between the Mediterranean and the Djujura Mountains (with the Sahara behind), was at its most brilliant. The hotel was crammed, the prices were high, and everybody was supremely conscious of doing the correct thing. The dance had begun somewhat earlier than usual, because the eagerness of the younger guests could not be restrained. And the orchestra seemed gayer, and the electric lights brighter, and the toilettes more resplendent that night. Of course, guests came in from the other hotels. Indeed, they came in to such an extent that to dance in the ballroom was an affair of compromise and ingenuity. And the other rooms were occupied, too. The bridge players recked not of Terpsichore, the cheerful sound of ping-pong came regularly from the ping-pong-room; the retired Indian judge was giving points as usual in the billiard-room; and in the reading-room the steadfast intellectuals were studying the World and the Paris New York Herald.

And all was English and American, pure Anglo-Saxon in thought and speech and gesture—save the manager of the hotel, who was Italian, the waiters, who were anything, and the wonderful concierge, who was everything.

As Cecil passed through the imposing suite of public rooms, he saw in the reading-room—posted so that no arrival could escape her eye—the elegant form of Mrs. Macalister, and, by way of a wild, impulsive freak, he stopped and talked to her, and ultimately sat down by her side. Mrs. Macalister was one of those English-women that are to be found only

in large and fashionable hotels. Everything about her was mysterious, except the fact that she was in search of a second husband. She was tall, pretty, dashing, daring, well-dressed, well-informed, and, perhaps thirty-four. But no one had known her husband or her family, and no one knew her county, or the origin of her income, or how she got herself into the best cliques in the hotel. She had the air of being the merriest person in Algiers; really, she was one of the saddest, for the reason that every day left her older, and harder, and less likely to hook—well, to hook a millionaire. She had met Cecil Thorold at the dance of the previous week, and had clung to him so artfully that the coteries talked of it for three days, as Cecil well knew. And to-night he thought he might, as well as not, give Mrs. Macalister an hour's excitement of the chase, and the coteries another three days' employment.

So he sat down beside her, and they talked.

First she asked him whether he slept on his yacht or in the hotel; and he replied, sometimes in the hotel and sometimes on the yacht. Then she asked him where his bedroom was, and he said it was on the second floor, and she settled that it must be three doors from her own. Then they discussed bridge, the fiscal Inquiry, the weather, dancing, food, the responsibilities of great wealth, Algerian railway-travelling, Cannes, gambling, Mr. Morley's »Life of Gladstone,« and the extraordinary success of the hotel. Thus, quite inevitably, they reached the subject of the Algiers Mystery. During the season, at any rate, no two guests in the hotel ever talked small-talk for more than ten minutes without reaching the subject of the Algiers Mystery.

For the hotel had itself been the scene of the Algiers Mystery, and the Algiers Mystery was at once the simplest, the most charming, and the most perplexing mystery in the world. One morning, the first of April in the previous year, an honest John Bull of a guest had come down to the hotel-office, and laying a five—pound note before the head clerk, had exclaimed: "I found that lying on my dressing-table. It isn't mine. It looks good enough, but I expect it's someone's joke." Seven other people that day confessed that they had found five-pound notes in their rooms, or pieces of paper that resembled five- pound notes. They compared these notes, and then the eight went off in a body down to an agency in the *Boulevard de la République*, and without the least demur the notes were changed for gold. On the second of April, twelve more people found five-pound notes in their rooms, now prominent on the bed, now secreted—as, for instance, under a candlestick. Cecil himself had been a recipient. Watches were set, but with no result whatever. In a week nearly seven hundred pounds had been distributed amongst the guests

by the generous, invisible ghosts. It was magnificent, and it was very soon in every newspaper in England and America. Some of the guests did not "care" for it; thought it "queer," and "uncanny," and not "nice," and these left. But the majority cared for it very much indeed, and remained till the utmost limit of the season.

The rainfall of notes had not recommenced so far, in the present season. Nevertheless, the hotel had been thoroughly well patronised from November onwards, and there was scarcely a guest but who went to sleep at night hoping to descry a fiver in the morning.

"Advertisement!" said some perspicacious individuals. Of course, the explanation was an obvious one. But the manager had indignantly and honestly denied all knowledge of the business, and, moreover, not a single guest had caught a single note in the act of settling down. Further, the hotel changed hands and that manager left. The mystery, therefore, remained, a delightful topic always at hand for discussion.

After having chatted, Cecil Thorold and Mrs. Macalister danced—two dances. And the hotel began audibly to wonder that Cecil could be such a fool. When, at midnight, he retired to bed, many mothers of daughters and daughters of mothers were justifiably angry, and consoled themselves by saying that he had disappeared in order to hide the shame which must have suddenly overtaken him. As for Mrs. Macalister, she was radiant.

Safely in his room, Cecil locked and wedged the door, and opened the window and looked out from the balcony at the starry night. He could hear cats playing on the roof. He smiled when he thought of the things Mrs. Macalister had said, and of the ardour of her glances. Then he felt sorry for her. Perhaps it was the whisky-and-soda which he had just drunk that momentarily warmed his heart towards the lonely creature. Only one item of her artless gossip had interested him—a statement that the new Italian manager had been ill in bed all day.

He emptied his pockets, and, standing on a chair, he put his pocket-book on the top of the wardrobe, where no Algerian marauder would think of looking for it; his revolver he tucked under his pillow. In three minutes he was asleep.

III.

He was awakened by a vigorous pulling and shaking of his arm; and he, who usually woke wide at the least noise, came to his senses with difficulty. He looked up. The electric light had been turned on.

"There's a ghost in my room, Mr. Thorold! You'll forgive me—but I'm so—"

It was Mrs. Macalister, dishevelled and in white, who stood over him.

"This is really a bit too thick," he thought vaguely and sleepily, regretting his impulsive flirtation of the previous evening. Then he collected himself and said sternly, severely, that if Mrs. Macalister would retire to the corridor, he would follow in a moment; he added that she might leave the door open if she felt afraid. Mrs. Macalister retired, sobbing, and Cecil arose. He went first to consult his watch; it was gone—a chronometer worth a couple of hundred pounds.

He whistled, climbed on to a chair, and discovered that his pocket-book was no longer in a place of safety on the top of the wardrobe; it had contained something over five hundred pounds in a highly negotiable form. Picking up his overcoat, which lay on the floor, he found that the fur lining—a millionaire's fancy, which had cost him nearly a hundred and fifty pounds—had been cut away, and was no more to be seen. Even the revolver had departed from under his pillow!

"Well!" he murmured, "this is decidedly the grand manner."

Quite suddenly it occurred to him, as he noticed a peculiar taste in his mouth, that the whisky-and-soda had contained more than whisky-and-soda—he had been drugged! He tried to recall the face of the waiter who had served him. Eyeing the window and the door, he argued that the thief had entered by the former and departed by the latter. "But the pocket-book!" he mused. "I must have been watched!"

Mrs. Macalister, stripped now of all dash and all daring, could be heard in the corridor.

"Can she—?" He speculated for a moment, and then decided positively in the negative. Mrs. Macalister could have no design on anything but a bachelor's freedom.

He assumed his dressing-gown and slippers and went to her. The corridor was in darkness, but she stood in the light of his doorway.

"Now," he said, "this ghost of yours, dear lady!"

"You must gofirst," she whimpered. "I daren't. It—was white … but with a black face. It was at the window."

Cecil, getting a candle, obeyed. And having penetrated alone into the lady's chamber, he perceived, to begin with, that a pane had been pushed out of the window by the old, noiseless device of a sheet of treacled paper, and then, examining the Window more closely, he saw that, outside, a silk ladder depended from the roof and trailed in the balcony.

"Come in without fear," he said to the trembling widow. "It must have been someone with more appetite than a ghost that you saw. Perhaps an Arab."

She came in, femininely trusting to him; and between them they ascertained that she had lost a watch, sixteen rings, an opal necklace, and some money. Mrs. Macalister would not say how much money. "My resources are slight," she remarked. "I was expecting remittances."

Cecil thought: "This is not merely in the grand manner. If it fulfils its promise, it will prove to be one of the greatest things of the age."

He asked her to keep cool, not to be afraid, and to dress herself. Then he returned to his room and dressed as quickly as he could. The hotel was absolutely quiet, but out of the depths below came the sound of a clock striking four. When, adequately but not aesthetically attired, he opened his door again, another door near by also opened, and Cecil saw a man's head.

"I say," drawled the man's head, "excuse me, but have you noticed anything?"

"Why? What?"

"Well, I've been robbed!"

The Englishman laughed awkwardly, apologetically, as though ashamed to have to confess that he had been victimised.

"Much?" Cecil inquired.

"Two hundred or so. No joke, you know."

"So have I been robbed," said; Cecil. "Let us go downstairs. Got a candle? These corridors are usually lighted all night."

"Perhaps our thief has been at the switches," said the Englishman.

"Say our thieves," Cecil corrected.

"You think there was more than one?"

"I think there were more than half a dozen," Cecil replied.

The Englishman was dressed, and the two descended together, candles in hand, forgetting the lone lady. But the lone lady had no intention of being forgotten, and she came after them, almost screaming. They had not reached the ground floor before three other doors had opened and three other victims proclaimed themselves.

Cecil led the way through the splendid saloons, now so ghostly in their elegance, which only three hours before had been the illuminated scene of such polite revelry. Ere he reached the entrance-hall, where a solitary jet was burning, the assistant-concierge (one of those officials who seem

never to sleep) advanced towards him, demanding in his broken English what was the matter.

"There have been thieves in the hotel," said Cecil. "Waken the concierge."

From that point, events succeeded each other in a sort of complex rapidity. Mrs. Macalister fainted at the door of the billiard-room and was laid out on a billiard-table, with a white ball between her shoulders. The head concierge was not in his narrow bed in the alcove by the main entrance, and he could not be found. Nor could the Italian manager be found (though he was supposed to be ill in bed), nor the Italian manager's wife. Two stablemen were searched out from somewhere; also a cook. And then the Englishman who had lost two hundred or so went forth into the Algerian night to bring a gendarme from the post in the *Rue d'Isly*.

Cecil Thorold contented himself with talking to people as, in ones and twos, and in various stages of incorrectness, they came into the public rooms, now brilliantly lighted. All who came had been robbed. What surprised him was the slowness of the hotel to wake up. There were two hundred and twenty guests in the place. Of these, in a quarter of an hour, perhaps fifteen had risen. The remainder were apparently oblivious of the fact that something very extraordinary, and something probably very interesting to them personally, had occurred and was occurring.

"Why! It's a conspiracy, sir. It's a conspiracy, that's what it is! " decided the Indian judge.

"Gang is a shorter word," Cecil observed, and a young girl in a macintosh giggled.

Sleepy employés now began to appear, and the rumour ran that six waiters and a chambermaid were missing. Mrs. Macalister rallied from the billiard table and came into the drawing-room, where most of the company had gathered. Cecil yawned (the influence of the drug was still upon him) as she approached him and weakly spoke. He answered absently; he was engaged in watching the demeanour of these idlers on the face of the earth—how incapable they seemed of any initiative, and yet with what magnificent Britannic phlegm they endured the strange situation! The talking was neither loud nor impassioned.

Then the low, distant sound of a cannon was heard. Once, twice, thrice.

Silence ensued.

"Heavens!" sighed Mrs. Macalister, swaying towards Cecil. "What can that be?"

He avoided her, hurried out of the room, and snatched somebody else's hat from the hat-racks in the hall. But just as he was turning the handle of the main door of the hotel, the Englishman who had lost two hundred or so returned out of the Algerian night with an inspector of police. The latter courteously requested Cecil not to leave the building, as he must open the inquiry (*ouvrir l'enquête*) at once. Cecil was obliged, regretfully, to comply.

The inspector of police then commenced his labours. He telephoned (no one had thought of the telephone) for assistance and asked the Central Bureau to watch the railway station, the port, and the stage coaches. He acquired the names and addresses of *tout le monde*. He made catalogues of articles. He locked all the servants in the ping-pong-room. He took down narratives, beginning with Cecil's. And while the functionary was engaged with Mrs. Macalister, Cecil quietly but firmly disappeared.

After his departure, the affair loomed larger and larger in mere magnitude, but nothing that came to light altered its leading characteristics. A wholesale robbery had been planned with the most minute care and knowledge, and executed with the most daring skill. Some ten persons—the manager and his wife, a chambermaid, six waiters, and the concierge—seemed to have been concerned in the enterprise, excluding Mrs. Macalister's Arab and no doubt other assistants. (The guests suddenly remembered how superior the concierge and the waiters had been to the ordinary concierge and waiter!) At a quarter-past five o'clock the police had ascertained that a hundred rooms had been entered, and horrified guests were still descending! The occupants of many rooms, however, made no response to a summons to awake. These, it was discovered afterwards, had either, like Cecil, received a sedative unawares, or they had been neatly gagged and bound. In the result, the list of missing valuables comprised nearly two hundred watches, eight hundred rings, a hundred and fifty other articles of jewellery, several thousand pounds' worth of furs, three thousand pounds in coin, and twenty-one thousand pounds in banknotes and other forms of currency. One lady, a doctor's wife, said she had been robbed of eight hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, but her story obtained little credit; other tales of enormous loss, chiefly by women, were also taken with salt. When the dawn began, at about six o'clock, an official examination of the façade of the hotel indicated that nearly every room had been invaded by the balconied window, either from the roof or from the ground. But the stone flags of the terrace, and the beautifully asphalted pathways of the garden disclosed no trace of the plunderers.

"I guess your British habit of sleeping with the window open don't cut

much ice to-day, anyhow!" said an American from Indianapolis to the company.

That morning no omnibus from the hotel arrived at the station to catch the six-thirty train which takes two days to ramble to Tunis and to Biskra. And all the liveried porters talked together in excited Swiss-German.

IV.

"My compliments to Captain Black," said Cecil Thorold, "and repeat to him that all I want him to do is to keep her in sight. He needn't overhaul her too much."

"Precisely, sir." Lecky bowed; he was pale.

"And you had better lie down."

"I thank you, sir, but I find a recumbent position inconvenient. Perpetual motion seems more agreeable."

Cecil was back in the large, low room panelled with bird's-eye maple. Below him the power of two thousand horses drove through the nocturnal Mediterranean swell his ›Claribel‹ of a thousand tons. Thirty men were awake and active on board her, and twenty slept-in the vast, clean forecastle, with electric lights blazing six inches above their noses. He lit a cigarette, and going to the piano, struck a few chords from "The Orchid "; but since the music would not remain on the stand, he abandoned that attempt and lay down on a divan to think.

He had reached the harbour, from the hotel, in twenty minutes, partly on foot at racing speed, and partly in an Arab cart, also at racing speed. The ›Claribel‹'s launch awaited him, and in another five minutes the launch was slung to her davits, and the ›Claribel‹ under way. He learnt that the small and sinister vessel, the ›Perroquet Vert‹ (of Oran), which he and his men had been watching for several days, had slipped unostentatiously between the southern and eastern jetties, had stopped for a few minutes to hold converse with a boat that had put off from the neighbourhood of Lower Mustapha, and had then pointed her head north-west, as though for some port in the province of Oran or in Morocco.

And in the rings of cigarette smoke which he made, Cecil seemed now to see clearly the whole business. He had never relaxed his interest in the affair of the five-pound notes. He had vaguely suspected it to be part of some large scheme; he had presumed, on slight grounds, a connection between the ›Perroguet Vert‹ and the Italian manager of the

hotel. Nay, more, he had felt sure that some great stroke was about to be accomplished. But of precise knowledge, of satisfactory theory, of definite expectation, he had had none—until Mrs. Macalister, that unconscious and man-hunting agent of Destiny, had fortunately wakened him in the nick of time. Had it not been for his flirtation of the previous evening, he might still be asleep in his bed at the hotel … He perceived the entire plan. The five-pound notes had been mysteriously scattered, certainly to advertise the hotel, but only to advertise it for a particular and colossal end, to fill it full and overflowing with fat victims. The situation had been thoroughly studied in all its details, and the task had been divided and allotted to various brains. Every room must have been examined, watched, and separately plotted against; the habits and idiosyncrasy of every victim must have been individually weighed and considered. Nothing, no trifle, could have been forgotten. And then some supreme intelligence had drawn the threads together and woven. them swiftly into the pattern of a single night, almost a single hour! … And the loot (Cecil could estimate it pretty accurately) had been transported down the hill to *Mustapha Inférieure*, tossed into a boat, and so to the ›Parroguet Vert‹. And the ›Perroquet Vert‹, with loot and looters on board, was bound, probably, for one of those obscure and infamous ports of Oran or Morocco——Tenez, Mostaganem, Beni Sar, Melilla, or the city of Oran, or Tangier itself! He knew something of the Spanish and Maltese dens of Oran and Tangier, the clearing-houses for stolen goods of two continents, and the impregnable refuge of scores of ingenious villains.

And when he reflected upon the grandeur and immensity of the scheme, so simple in its essence, and so leisurely in its achievement, like most grand schemes; when he reflected upon the imagination which had been necessary even to conceive it, and the generalship which had been necessary to its successful conclusion, he murmured admiringly—

"The man who thought of that and did it may be a scoundrel; but he is also an artist, and a great one!"

And just because he, Cecil Thorold, was a millionaire, and possessed a hundred-thousand-pound toy, which could do nineteen knots an hour, and cost fifteen hundred pounds a month to run, he was about to defeat that great artist and nullify that great scheme, and incidentally to retrieve his watch, his revolver, his fur, and his five hundred pounds. He had only to follow, and to warn one of the French torpedo-boats which are always patrolling the coast between Algiers and Oran, and the bubble would burst!

He sighed for ‘the doomed artist; and he wondered what that victimised crowd of European loungers, who lounged sadly round the Mediterranean in winter, and sadly round northern Europe in summer, had done in their languid and luxurious lives that they should be saved, after all, from the pillage to which the great artist in theft had subjected them!

Then Lecky re-entered the state room.

“We shall have a difficulty in keeping the ›Perroquet Vert‹ in sight, sir.”

“What!” exclaimed Cecil. “That tub! That coffin! You don’t mean she can do twenty knots?”

“Exactly, sir. Coffin! It—I mean she-is sinking.”

Cecil ran on deck. Dawn was breaking over Matifou, and a faint, cold, grey light touched here and there the heaving sea. His captain spoke and pointed. Ahead, right ahead, less than a mile away, the ›Perroquet Vert‹ was sinking by the stern, and even as they gazed at her, a little boat detached itself from her side in the haze of the morning mist; and she sank, disappeared, vanished amid a cloud of escaping steam. They were four miles north-east of Cape Caxine. Two miles further westward, a big Dominion liner, bound direct for Algiers from the New World, was approaching and had observed the catastrophe—for she altered her course. In a few minutes, the ›Claribel‹ picked up the boat of the ›Perroquet Vert‹. It contained three Arabs.

V.

The tale told by the Arabs (two of them were brothers, and all three came from Oran) fully sustained Cecil Thorold’s theory of the spoliation of the hotel. Naturally they pretended at first to an entire innocence concerning the schemes of those who had charge of the ›Perroquet Vert‹. The two brothers, who were black with coal-dust when rescued, swore that they had been physically forced to work in the stokehold; but ultimately all three had to admit a knowledge of things which was decidedly incriminating, and all three got three years’ imprisonment. The only part of the Algiers Mystery which remained a mystery was the cause of the sinking of the ›Perroquet Vert‹. Whether she was thoroughly unseaworthy (she had been picked up cheap at Melilla), or whether someone (not on board) had deliberately arranged her destruction, perhaps to satisfy a Moorish vengeance, was not ascertained. The three Arabs could only be persuaded to say that there had been eleven

Europeans and seven natives on the ship, and that they alone, by the mercy of Allah, had escaped from the swift catastrophe.

The hotel underwent an acute crisis, from which, however, it is emerging. For over a week a number of the pillaged guests discussed a diving enterprise of salvage. But the estimates were too high, and it came to nothing. So they all, Cecil included, began to get used to the idea of possessing irrecoverable property to the value of forty thousand pounds in the Mediterranean. A superb business in telegraphed remittances was done for several days. The fifteen beings who had accompanied the ›Perroquet Vert‹ to the bottom were scarcely thought of, for it was almost universally agreed. that the way of transgressors is, and ought to be, hard.

As for Cecil Thorold, the adventure, at first so full of the promise of joy, left him melancholy, until an unexpected sequel diverted the channel of his thoughts.

VI.[1]

Mrs. Macalister turned with sudden eagerness and alarm towards Cecil Thorold—the crowd on the lawn in front of the railings was so dense that only heads could be moved—and she said excitedly—

"I'm sure I can see my ghost across there!"

She indicated with her agreeable snub nose the opposite side of the course.

"Your ghost?" Cecil questioned, puzzled for a moment by this extraordinary remark.

Then the Arab horsemen swept by in a cloud of dust and of thunder, and monopolised the attention of the lawn and the grand stand, and the *élite* of Biskra crammed thereon and therein. They had one more lap to accomplish for the *Prix de la Ville.*

Biskra is an oasis in the desert, and the capital of the Algerian Sahara. Two days' journey by train from Algiers, over the Djujura Ranges, it is the last outpost of the Algerian State Railways. It has a hundred and sixty thousand palm trees; but the first symptom of Biskra to be

1. Der zweite Teil der Erzählung formte – zweifelsohne aufgrund der Erstveröffentlichung als Zeitschriftenserie – ein eigenständiges Kapitel unter dem Titel »In the Capital of the Sahara«, wodurch das Ende des ersten Teils doch sehr unbefriedigend bleibt. Ich habe daher für diese Ausgabe die beiden Hälften (wieder?) zu einem Ganzen zusammengefügt.

observed from the approaching first-class carriage is the chimney of the electric light plant. Besides the hundred and sixty thousand palm trees, it possesses half a dozen large hotels, five native villages, a fort, a huge barracks, a very ornamental town hall, shops for photographic materials, a whole street of dancing-girls, the finest winter climate in all Africa, and a gambling Casino. It is a unique thing in oases. It completely upsets the conventional idea of an oasis as a pool of water bordered with a few date palms, and the limitless desert all round! Nevertheless, though Biskra as much resembles Paris as it resembles the conventional idea of an oasis, it is genuine enough, and the limitless desert is, in fact, all around. You may walk out into the desert—and meet a motor-car manoeuvring in the sand; but the sand remains the sand, and the desert remains the desert, and the Sahara, more majestic than the sea itself, refuses to be cheapened by the pneumatic tyres of a Mercedes, or the blue rays of the electric light, or the feet of English, French, and Germans wandering in search of novelty—it persists in being august.

Once a year, in February, Biskra becomes really and excessively excited, and the occasion is its annual two-day race-meeting. Then the tribes and their chieftains and their horses and their camels arrive magically out of the four corners of the desert and fill the oasis. And the English, French, and Germans arrive from the Mediterranean coast, with their trunks and their civilisation, and crowd the hotels till beds in Biskra are precious beyond rubies. And under the tropical sun, East and West meet magnificently in the afternoon on the racecourse to the north of the European reserve. And the tribesmen, their scraggy steeds trailing superb horsecloths, are arranged in hundreds behind the motor-cars and landaus, with the *pari-mutuel* in full swing twenty yards away. And the dancing-girls, the renowned Ouled-Nails, covered with gold coins and with muslin in high, crude, violent purples, greens, vermilions, shriek and whinny on their benches just opposite the grand stand, where the Western women, arrayed in the toilettes of Worth, Doucet, and Redfern, quiz them through their glasses. And, fringing all, is a crowd of the adventurers and rascals of two continents, the dark and the light. And in the background the palms wave eternally in the breeze. And to the east the Aures mountains, snow-capped, rise in hues of saffron and pale rose, like stage mountains, against the sapphire sky. And to the south a line of telegraph poles lessens and disappears over the verge into the inmost heart of the mysterious and unchangeable Sahara.

It was amid this singular scene that Mrs. Macalister made to Cecil Thorold her bizarre remark about a ghost.

"What ghost?" the millionaire repeated, when the horsemen had passed.

Then he remembered that on the famous night, now nearly a month ago, when the Hotel St. James at Algiers was literally sacked by an organised band of depredators, and valuables to the tune of forty thousand pounds disappeared, Mrs. Macalister had given the first alarm by crying out that there was a ghost in her room.

"Ah!" He smiled easily, condescendingly, to this pertinacious widow, who had been pursuing him, so fruitlessly, for four mortal weeks, from Algiers to Tunis, from Tunis back to Constantine, and from Constantine here to Biskra. "All Arabs look more or less alike, you know."

"But—"

"Yes," he said again. "They all look alike, to us, like Chinamen."

Considering that he himself, from his own yacht, had witnessed the total loss in the Mediterranean of the vessel which contained the plunder and the fleeing band of thieves; considering that his own yacht had rescued the only three survivors of that shipwreck, and that these survivors had made a full confession, and had, only two days since, been duly sentenced by the criminal court at Algiers—he did not feel inclined to minister to Mrs. Macalister's feminine fancies.

"Did you ever see an Arab with a mole on his chin?" asked Mrs. Macalister.

"No, I never did."

"Well, my Arab had a mole on his chin, and that is why I am sure it was he that I saw a minute ago—over there. No, he's gone now!"

The competing horsemen appeared round the bend for the last time, the dancing-girls whinnied in their high treble, the crowd roared, and the *Prix de la Ville* was won and lost. It was the final race on the card, and in the *mêlée* which followed, Cecil became separated from his adorer. She was to depart on the morrow by the six a.m. train. "Urgent business," she said. She had given up the chase of the millionaire. "Perhaps she's out of funds, poor thing!" he reflected. "Anyhow,I hope I may never see her again." As a matter of fact he never did see her again. She passed out of his life as casually as she had come into it.

He strolled slowly towards the hotel through the perturbed crowd of Arabs, Europeans, carriages, camels, horses and motor-cars. The mounted tribesmen were in a state of intense excitement, and were continually burning powder in that mad fashion which seems to afford a peculiar joy to the Arab soul. From time to time a tribesman would break out of the ranks of his clan, and, spurring his horse and dropping the reins on

the animal's neck, would fire revolvers from both hands as he flew over the rough ground. It was unrivalled horsemanship, and Cecil admired immensely the manner in which, at the end of the frenzied performance, these men, drunk with powder, would wheel their horses sharply while at full gallop, and stop dead.

And then, as one man, who had passed him like a hurricane, turned, paused, and jogged back to his tribe, Cecil saw that he had a mole on his chin. He stood still to watch the splendid fellow, and he noticed something far more important than the mole—he perceived that the revolver in the man's right hand had a chased butt.

"I can't swear to it," Cecil mused. "But if that isn't my revolver, stolen from under my pillow at the Hotel St. James, Algiers, on the tenth of January last, my name is Norval, and not Thorold."

And the whole edifice of his ideas concerning the robbery at the Hotel St. James[2] began to shake.

"That revolver ought to be at the bottom of the Mediterranean," he said to himself; "and so ought Mrs. Macallister's man with the mole, according to the accepted theory of the crime and the story of the survivors of the shipwreck of the ›Perroquet Vert‹."

He walked on, keeping the man in sight.

"Suppose," he murmured—"suppose all that stuff isn't at the bottom of the Mediterranean after all?"

A hundred yards further on, he happened to meet one of the white-clad native guides attached to the Royal Hotel, Where he had lunched. The guide saluted and offered service, as all the Biskra guides do on all occasions. Cecil's reply was to point out the man with the mole.

"You see him, Mahomet," said Cecil. "Make no mistake. find out what tribe he belongs to, where he comes from, and where he sleeps in Biskra, and I will give you a sovereign. Meet me at the Casino to-night at ten."

Mahomet grinned an honest grin and promised to earn the sovereign.

Cecil stopped an empty landau and drove hurriedly to the station to meet the afternoon train from civilisation. He had arrived in Biskra that morning by road from El Kantara, and Lecky was coming by the afternoon train with the luggage. On seeing him, he gave that invaluable factotum some surprising orders.

In addition to Lecky, the millionaire observed among the passengers descending from the train two other people who were known to him; but he carefully hid himself from these ladies. In three minutes he had

2. Im Original: *Hotel de Paris.*

disappeared into the nocturnal whirl and uproar of Biskra, solely bent on proving or disproving the truth of a brand-new theory concerning the historic sack of the Hotel St. James.

But that night he waited in vain for Mahomet at the packed Casino, where the Arab Chieftains and the English gentlemen, alike in their tremendous calm, were losing money at *petits chevaux* with all the imperturbability of stone statues.

VII.

Nor did Cecil see anything of Mahomet during the next day, and he had reasons for not making inquiries about him at the Royal Hotel. But at night, as he was crossing the deserted market, Mahornet came up to him suddenly out of nowhere, and, grinning the eternal, honest, foolish grin, said in his odd English—

"I have found—him."

"Where?"

"Come," said Mahomet, mysteriously. The Eastern guide loves to be mysterious. Cecil followed him far down the carnivalesque street of the Ouled-Nails, Where tom-toms and nameless instruments of music sounded from every other house, and the *premières danseuses* of the Sahara showed themselves gorgeously behind grilles, like beautiful animals in cages. Then Mahomet entered a crowded *café*, passed through it, and pushing aside a suspended mat at the other end, bade Cecil proceed further. Cecil touched his revolver (his new revolver), to make sure of its company, and proceeded further. He found himself in a low Oriental room, lighted by an odorous English lamp with a circular wick, and furnished with a fine carpet and two bedroom chairs certainly made in Curtain Road, Shoreditch—a room characteristic of Biskra. Cn one chair sat a man. But this person was not Mrs. Macalister's man with a mole. He was obviously a Frenchman, by his dress, gestures, and speech. He greeted the millionaire in French and then dropped into English—excellently grammatical and often idiomatic English, spoken with a strong French accent. He was rather a little man, thin, grey, and vivacious.

"Give yourself the pain of sitting down," said the Frenchman. "I am glad to see you. You may be able to help us."

"You have the advantage of me," Cecil replied, smiling.

"Perhaps," said the Frenchman. "You came to Biskra yesterday, Mr. Thorold, with the intention of staying at the Royal Hotel, Where rooms

were engaged for you. But yesterday afternoon you went to the station to meet your servant, and you ordered him to return to Constantine with your luggage and to await your instructions there. You then took a handbag and went to the Casino Hotel, and you managed, by means of diplomacy and of money, to get a bed in the *salle à manger*. It was all they could do for you. You gave the name of Collins. Biskra, therefore, is not officially aware of the presence of Mr. Cecil Thorold, the millionaire; while Mr. Collins is free to carry on his researches, to appear and to disappear as it pleases him."

"Yes," Cecil remarked. "You have got that fairly right. But may I ask—"

"Let us come to business at once," said the Frenchman, politely interrupting him. "Is this your watch?"

He dramatically pulled a watch and chain from his pocket.

"It is," said Cecil quietly. He refrained from embroidering the affirmative with exclamations. "It was stolen from my bedroom at the Hotel St. James, with my revolver, some fur, and a quantity of money, on the tenth of January."

"You are surprised to find it is not sunk in the Mediterranean?"

"Thirty hours ago I should have been surprised," said Cecil. "Now I am not."

"And why not now?"

"Because I have formed a new theory. But have the goodness to give me the watch."

"I cannot," said the Frenchman graciously. "Not at present."

There was a pause. The sound of music was heard from the *café*.

"But, my dear sir, I insist." Cecil spoke positively.

The Frenchman laughed. "I will be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Thorold. Your cleverness in forming a new theory of the great robbery merits all my candour. My name is Sylvain, and I am head of the detective force of Algiers, *chef de la sureté*. You will perceive that I cannot part with the watch without proper formalities. Mr. Thorold, the robbery at the Hotel St. James was a work of the highest criminal art. Possibly I had better tell you the nature of our recent discoveries."

"I always thought well of the robbery," Cecil observed, "and my opinion of it is rising. Pray continue."

"According to your new theory, Mr. Thorold, how many persons were on board the ›Perroquet Vert‹ when she began to sink?"

"Three," said Cecil promptly, as though answering a conundrum.

The Frenchman beamed. "You are admirable," he exclaimed. "Yes, instead of eighteen, there were three. The wreck of the ›Perroquet Vert‹ was carefully pre-arranged; the visit of the boat to the ›Perroquet Vert‹ off *Mustapha Inferieure* was what you call, I believe, a 'plant.' The stolen goods never left dry land. There were three Arabs only on the ›Perroquet Vert‹—one to steer her, and the other two in the engine-room. And these three were very careful to get themselves saved. They scuttled their ship in sight of your yacht and of another vessel. There is no doubt, Mr. Thorold," the Frenchman smiled with a hint of irony, "that the thieves were fully *au courant* of your doings on the ›Claribel‹. The shipwreck was done deliberately, with you and your yacht for an audience. It was a masterly stroke," he proceeded, almost enthusiastically, "for it had the effect, not merely of drawing away suspicion from the true direction, but of putting an end to all further inquiries. Were not the goods at the bottom of the sea, and the thieves drowned? What motive could the police have for further activity? In six months—nay, three months all the notes and securities could be safely negotiated, because no measures would have to be taken to stop them. Why take measures to stop notes that are at the bottom of the sea?"

"But the three survivors who are now in prison," Cecil said. "Their behaviour, their lying, needs some accounting for."

"Quite simple," the Frenchman went on. "They are in prison for three years. What is that to an Arab? He will suffer it with stoicism. Say that ten thousand francs are deposited with each of their families. When they come out, they are rich for life. At a cost of thirty thousand francs and the price of the ship—say another thirty thousand—the thieves reasonably expected to obtain absolute security."

"It was a heroic idea!" said Cecil.

"It was," said the Frenchman. "But it has failed."

"Evidently. But why?"

"Can you ask? You know as well as I do! It has failed, partly because there were too many persons in the secret, partly because of the Arab love of display on great occasions, and partly because of a mole on a man's chin."

"By the way, that was the man I came here to see," Cecil remarked.

"He is arrested," said the Frenchman curtly, and then he sighed. "The booty was not guarded with sufficient restrictions. It was not kept in bulk. One thief probably said: 'I cannot do without this lovely watch.' And another said: 'What a revolver! I must have it.' Ah! The Arab, the

Arab! The Europeans ought to have provided for that. That is where they were foolish—the idiots! The idiots!" he repeated angrily.

"You seem annoyed."

"Mr. Thorold, I'm a poet in these things. It annoys me to see a fine composition ruined by bad construction in the fifth act … However, as chief of the surety, I rejoice."

"You have located the thieves and the plunder?"

"I think I have. Certainly I have captured two of the thieves and several articles. The bulk lies at—" He stopped and looked round.

"Mr. Thorold, may I rely on you? I know, perhaps more than you think, of your powers. May I rely on you?"

"You may," said Cecil.

"You will hold yourself at my disposition during to-morrow, to assist me?"

"With pleasure."

"Then let us take coffee. In the morning, I shall have acquired certain precise information which at the moment I lack. Let us take coffee."

VIII.

On the following morning, somewhat early, while walking near Mecid, one of the tiny outlying villages of the oasis, Cecil met Eve Fincastle and Kitty Sartorius, whom he had not spoken with since the affair of the bracelet at Bruges, though he had heard from them and had, indeed, seen them at the station two days before. Eve Fincastle had fallen rather seriously ill at Mentone, and the holiday of the two girls, which should have finished before the end of the year, was prolonged. Financially, the enforced leisure was a matter of trifling importance to Kitty Sartorius, who had insisted on remaining with her friend, much to the disgust of her London manager. But the journalist's resources were less royal, and Eve considered herself fortunate that she had obtained from her newspaper some special descriptive correspondence in Algeria. It was this commission which had brought her, and Kitty with her, in the natural course of an Algerian tour, to Biskra.

Cecil was charmed to see his acquaintances; for Eve interested him, and Kitty's beauty (it goes without saying) dazzled him. Nevertheless, he had been, as it were, hiding himself, and, in his character as an amateur of the loot of cities, he would have preferred to have met them on some morning other than that particular morning.

"You will go with us to Sidi Okba, won't you, to-day?" said Kitty, after they had talked a while. "We've secured a carriage, and I'm dying for a drive in the real, true desert."

"Sorry I can't," said Cecil.

"Oh, but—" Eve Fincastle began, and stopped.

"Of course you can," said Kitty imperiously. "You must. We leave to-morrow—we're only here for two days—for Algiers and France. Another two days in Paris, and then London, my darling London, and work! So it's understood?"

"It desolates me," said Cecil. "But I can't go with you to Sidi Okba to-day."

They both saw that he meant to refuse them.

"That settles it, then," Eve agreed quietly.

"You're horrid, Mr. Thorold," said the bewitehing actress. "And if you imagine for a single moment we haven't seen that you've been keeping out of our Way, you're mistaken. You must have noticed us at the station. Eve thinks you've got another of your—"

"No, I don't, Kitty," said Eve quickly.

"If Miss Fincastle suspects that I've got another of my—" he paused humorously, "Miss Fincastle is right. I have got another of my—— I throw myself on your magnanimity. I am staying in Biskra under the name of Collins, and my time, like my name, is not my own."

"In that case," Eve remarked, "we will pass on."

And they shook hands, with a certain frigidity on the part of the two girls.

During the morning, M. Sylvain made no sign, and Cecil lunched in solitude at the Dar Eef, adjoining the Casino. The races being over, streams of natives, with their tents and their quadrupeds, were leaving Biskra for the desert; they made an interminable procession which could be seen from the window of the Dar Eef coffee room. Cecil was idly watching this procession, when a hand touched his shoulder. He turned and saw a gendarme.

"*Monsieur* Collang?" questioned the gendarme.

Cecil assented.

"*Voulez-vous avoir l'obligeance de me suivre, monsieur*?"

Cecil obediently followed, and found in the street M. Sylvain well wrapped up, and seated in an open carriage.

"I have need of you," said M. Sylvain. "Can you come at once?"

"Certainly."

In two minutes they were driving away together into the desert.

"Our destination is Sidi Okba," said M. Sylvain. "A curious place."

The road (so called) led across the Biskra River (so called), and then in a straight line eastwards. The river had about the depth of a dinner plate. As for the road, in some parts it not only merely failed to be a road—it was nothing but virgin desert, intact; at its best it was a heaving and treacherous mixture of sand and pebbles, through which, and not over which, the two unhappy horses had to drag M. Sylvain's unfortunate open carriage.

M. Sylvain himself drove.

"I am well acquainted with this part of the desert," he said. "We have strange cases sometimes. And when I am on important business, I never trust an Arab. By the way, you have a revolver? I do not anticipate danger, but?"

"I have one," said Cecil.

"And it is loaded?"

Cecil took the weapon from his hip pocket and examined it.

"It is loaded," he said.

"Good!" exclaimed the Frenchman, and then he turned to the gendarme, who was sitting as impassively as the leaps and bounds of the carriage would allow, on a small seat immediately behind the other two, and demanded of him in French whether his revolver also was loaded. The man gave a respectful affirmative. "Good!" exclaimed M. Sylvain again, and launched into a description of the wondrous gardens of the *Comte* Landon, whose walls, on the confines of the oasis, they were just passing.

Straight in front could be seen a short line of palm trees, waving in the desert breeze under the desert sun, and Cecil asked what they were.

"Sidi Okba," replied M. Sylvain. "The hundred and eighty thousand palms of the desert city of Sidi Okba. They seem near to you, no doubt, but We shall travel twenty kilometres before we reach them. The effect of nearness is due to the singular quality of the atmosphere. It is a two hours' journey."

"Then do we return in the dark?" Cecil inquired.

"If we are lucky, we may return at once, and arrive in Biskra at dusk. If not—well, we shall spend the night in Sidi Okba. You object?"

"Not at all."

"A curious place," observed M. Sylvain.

Soon they had left behind all trace of the oasis, and were in the "real, true desert." They met and passed native equipages and strings of camels, and from time to time on either hand at short distances from the road could be seen the encampments of wandering tribes. And after interminable joltings, in which M. Sylvain, his guest, and his gendarme were frequently hurled at each other's heads with excessive violence, the short line of palm trees began to seem a little nearer and to occupy a little more of the horizon. And then they could descry the wall of the city. And at last they reached its gate and the beggars squatting within its gate.

"Descend!" M. Sylvain ordered his subordinate.

The man disappeared, and M. Sylvain and Cecil drove into the city; they met several carriages of Biskra visitors just setting forth on their return journey.

In insisting that Sidi Okba was a curious place, M. Sylvain did not exaggerate. It is an Eastern town of the most antique sort, built solely of mud, with the simplicity, the foulness, the smells, and the avowed and the secret horrors which might be expected in a community which has not altered its habits in any particular for a thousand years. During several months of each year it is visited daily by Europeans (its mosque is the oldest Mohammedan building in Africa, therefore no respectable tourist dares to miss it), and yet it remains absolutely uninfluenced by European notions. The European person must take his food with him; he is allowed to eat it in the garden of a *café* which is European as far as its sign and its counter, but no further; he could not eat it in the *café* itself. This *café* is the mark which civilisation has succeeded in making on Sidi Okba in ten centuries.

As Cecil drove with M. Sylvain through the narrow, winding street, he acutely felt the East closing in upon him; and, since the sun was getting low over the palm trees, he was glad to have the detective by his side.

They arrived at the wretched *café*. A pair-horse vehicle, with the horses' heads towards Biskra, was waiting at the door. Unspeakable lanes, fetid, winding, sinister, and strangely peopled, led away in several directions.

M. Sylvain glanced about him.

"We shall succeed," he murmured cheerfully. "Follow me."

And they went into the mark of civilisation, and saw the counter, and a female creature behind the bar, and, through another door, a glimpse of the garden beyond.

"Follow me," murmured M. Sylvain again, opening another door to the left into a dark passage. "Straight on. There is a room at the other end."

They vanished.

In a few seconds M. Sylvain returned into the *café*.

IX.

Now, in the garden were Eve Fincastle and Kitty Sartorius, tying up some wraps preparatory to their departure for Biskra. They caught sight of Cecil Thorold and his companion entering the *café*, and they were surprised to find the millionaire in Sidi Okba after his refusal to accompany them.

Through the back door of the café they saw Cecil's companion reappear out of the passage. They saw the creature behind the counter stoop and produce a revolver and then offer it to the Frenchman with a furtive movement. They saw that the Frenchman declined it, and drew another revolver from his own pocket and winked. And the character of the wink given by the Frenchman to the woman made them turn pale under the sudden, knife-like thrust of an awful suspicion.

The Frenchman looked up and perceived the girls in the garden, and one glance at Kitty's beauty was not enough for him.

"Can you keep him here a minute while I warn Mr. Thorold?" said Eve quickly.

Kitty Sartorius nodded and began to smile on the Frenchman; she then lifted her finger beckoningly. If millions had depended on his refusal, it is doubtful whether he would have resisted that charming gesture. (Not for nothing did Kitty Sartorius receive a hundred a week at the Regency Theatre.) In a moment the Frenchman was talking to her, and she had enveloped him in a golden mist of enchantment.

Guided by a profound instinct, Eve ran up the passage and into the room where Cecil was awaiting the return of his M. Sylvain.

"Come out," she whispered passionately, as if between violent anger and dreadful alarm. "You are trapped—you, with your schemes!"

"Trapped!" he exclaimed, smiling. "Not at all. I have my revolver!" His hand touched his pocket. "By Jove! I haven't! It's gone!"

The miraculous change in his face was of the highest interest.

"Come out!" she cried. "Our carriage is waiting!"

In the *café*, Kitty Sartorius was talking to the Frenchman. She stroked his sleeve with her gloved hand, and he, the Frenchman, still held the revolver which he had displayed to the woman of the counter.

Hier ist spätestens in der Buchausgabe eine längere Textpassage ausgefallen, in der beschrieben wird, wie der von Kitty umgarnte M. Sylvain überwältigt und in die Flucht geschlagen wird. Sicher rennt daraufhin auch "the creature behind the counter" davon, um ihre Komplizen zu alarmieren. – *B.L.*

Inspired by the consummate and swiftly aroused emotion of that moment, Cecil snatched at the revolver. The three friends walked hastily to the street, jumped into the carriage, and drove away. Already as they approached the city gate, they could see the white tower of the Royal Hotel at Biskra shining across the desert like a promise of security … .

The whole episode had lasted perhaps two minutes, but they were minutes of such intense and blinding revelation as Cecil had never before experienced. He sighed with relief as he lay back in the carriage.

"And that's the man," he meditated, astounded, "who must have planned the robbery of the Hotel St. James! And I never suspected it! I never suspected that his gendarme was a sham! I wonder whether his murder of me would have been as leisurely and artistic as his method of trapping me! I wonder! … Well, this time I have certainly enjoyed myself."

Then he gazed at Eve Fincastle.

The women said nothing for a long time, and even then the talk was of trifles.

X.

Eve Fincastle had gone up on to the vast, flat roof of the Royal Hotel, and Cecil, knowing that she was there, followed. The sun had just set, and Biskra lay spread out below them in the rich evening light which already, eastwards, had turned to sapphire. They could still see the line of the palm trees of Sidi Okba, and in another direction, the long, lonely road to Figuig, stretching across the desert like a rope which had been flung from heaven on the waste of sand. The Aurés mountains were black and jagged. Nearer, immediately under them, was the various life of the great oasis, and the sounds of that life—human speech, the rattle of carriages, the grunts of camels in the camel enclosure, the whistling of an engine at the station, the melancholy wails of hawkers—ascended softly in the twilight of the Sahara.

Cecil approached her, but she did not turn towards him.

"I want to thank you," he started.

She made no movement, and then suddenly she burst out. "Why do you continue with these shameful plots and schemes?" she demanded, looking always steadily away from him. "Why do you disgrace yourself? Was this another theft, another blackmailing, another affair like that at Ostend? Why—" She stopped, deeply disturbed, unable to control herself.

"My dear journalist," he said quietly, "you don't understand. Let me tell you."

He gave her his history from the night summons by Mrs. Macalister to that same afternoon.

She faced him.

"I'm so glad," she murmured. "You can't imagine—"

"I Want to thank you for saving my life," he said again.

She began to cry; her body shook; she hid her face.

"But—" he stammered awkwardly.

"It wasn't I who saved your life," she said, sobbing passionately. "I wasn't beautiful enough. Only Kitty could have done it. Qnly a beautiful woman could have kept that man—"

"I know all about it, my dear girl," Cecil silenced her disavowal. Something moved him to take her hand. She smiled sadly, not resisting. "You must excuse me," she murmured. "I'm not myself to-night ... It's because of the excitement ... Anyhow, I'm glad you haven't taken any 'loot' this time."

"But I have," he protested. (He was surprised to find his voice trembling.)

"What?"

"This." He pressed her hand tenderly.

"That? " She looked at her hand, lying in his, as though she had never seen it before.

"Eve," he whispered.

A.B.

About two-thirds of the loot of the Hotel St. Iames was ultimately recovered; not at Sidi Okba, but in the cellars of the Hotel St. James itself. From first to last that robbery was a masterpiece of audacity. Its originator, the *soidisant* M. Sylvain, head of the Algiers detective force, is still at large.

Chapter 5

"Lo! 'twas a Gala Night!"

I.

Paris. And not merely Paris, but Paris *en féte*, Paris decorated, Paris idle, Paris determined to enjoy itself, and succeeding brilliantly. Venetian masts of red and gold lined the gay pavements of the *grand boulevard* and the *Avenue de l'Opéra*; and suspended from these in every direction, transverse and lateral, hung garlands of flowers whose petals were of coloured paper, and whose hearts were electric globes that in the evening would burst into flame. The effect of the city's toilette reached the extreme of opulence, for no expense had been spared. Paris was welcoming monarchs, and had spent two million francs in obedience to the maxim that what is worth doing at all is worth doing well.

The Grand Hotel, with its eight hundred rooms full of English and Americans, at the upper end of the *Avenue de l'Opéra*, looked down at the *Grand Hotel du Louvre*, with its four hundred rooms full of English and Americans, at the lower end of the *Avenue de l'Opéra* These two establishments had the best views in the whole city; and perhaps the finest view of all was that obtainable from a certain second floor window of the Grand Hotel, precisely at the corner of the *Boulevard des Capucines* and the *Rue Auber*. From this Window one could see the boulevards in both directions, the *Opéra*, the *Place de l'Opéra*, the *Avenue de l'Opéra*, the *Rue du Quatre Septembre*, and the multitudinous life of the vivid thorough-fares—the glittering *cafés*, the dazzling shops, the painted kiosks, the lumbering omnibuses, the gliding trams, the hooting automobiles, the swift and careless cabs, the private carriages, the suicidal bicycles, the newsmen, the toysellers, the touts, the beggars,

and all the holiday crowd, sombre men and radiant women, chattering, laughing, bustling, staring, drinking, under the innumerable tricolours and garlands of paper flowers.

That particular view was a millionaire's view, and it happened to be the temporary property of Cecil Thorold, who was enjoying it and the afternoon sun at the open window, with three companions. Eve Fincastle looked at it with the analytic eye of the journalist, while Kitty Sartorius, as was quite proper for an actress, deemed it a sort of frame for herself, as she leaned over the balcony like a Juliet on the stage. The third guest in Cecil's sitting-room was Lionel Belmont, the Napoleonic Anglo-American theatrical manager, in whose crown Kitty herself was the chief star. Mr. Belmont, a big, burly, good-humoured, shrewd man of something over forty, said he had come to Paris on business. But for two days the business had been solely to look after Kitty Sartorius and minister to her caprices. At the present moment his share of the view consisted mainly of Kitty; in the same way Cecil's share of the view consisted mainly of Eve Fincastle; but this at least was right and decorous, for the betrothal of the millionaire and the journalist had been definitely announced. Otherwise Eve would have been back at work in Fleet Street a week ago.

"The gala performance is to-night, isn't it?" said Eve, gazing at the vast and superbly ornamented Opera House.

"Yes," said Cecil.

"What a pity we can't be there! I should so have liked to see the young Queen in evening dress. And they say the interior decorations—"

"Nothing simpler," said Cecil. "If you want to go, dear, let us go."

Kitty Sartorius looked round quickly. "Mr. Belmont has tried to get seats, and can't. Haven't you, Bel? You know the whole audience is invited. The invitations are issued by the Minister of fine Arts."

"Still, in Paris, anything can be got by paying for it," Cecil insisted.

"My dear young friend," said Lionel Belmont, "I guess if seats were to be had, I should have struck one or two yesterday. I put no limit on the price, and I reckon I ought to know what theatre prices run to. Over at the Metropolitan in New York I've seen a box change hands at two thousand dollars, for one night."

"Nevertheless—" Cecil began again.

"And the performance starting in six hours from now! " Lionel Belmont exclaimed. "Not much!"

But Cecil persisted.

"Seen the Herald to-day?" Belmont questioned. "No? Well, listen. This will interest you." He drew a paper from his pocket and read:

> Seats for the Opéra Gala. The traffic in seats for the gala performance at the Opéra during the last Royal Visit to Paris aroused considerable comment and not a little dissatisfaction. Nothing, however, was done, and the traffic in seats for to-night's spectacle, at which the President and their Imperial Majesties will be present, has, it is said, amounted to a scandal. Of course, the offer so suddenly made, five days ago, by *Madame Félise* and *Mademoiselle Malva*, the two greatest living dramatic sopranos, to take part in the performance, immediately and enormously intensified interest in the affair, for never yet have these two supreme artists appeared in the same theatre on the same night. No theatre could afford the luxury. Our readers may remember that in our columns and in the columns of the Figaro there appeared four days ago an advertisement to the following effect: 'A box, also two orchestra stalls, for the Opera Gala, to be disposed of, owing to illness. Apply, 155, Rue de la Paix.' We sent four several reporters to answer that advertisement. The first was offered a stage-box for seven thousand five hundred francs, and two orchestra stalls in the second row for twelve hundred and fifty francs. The second was offered a box opposite the stage on the second tier, and two stalls in the seventh row. The third had the chance of four stalls in the back row and a small box just behind them; the fourth was offered something else. The thing was obviously, therefore, a regular agency. Everybody is asking: 'How were these seats obtained? From the Ministry of fine Arts, or from the invites?' Echo answers 'How?' The authorities, however, are stated to have interfered at last, and to have put an end to this buying and selling of what should be an honourable distinction.

"Bravo!" said Cecil.

"And that's so!" Belmont remarked, dropping the paper. "I went to 155, *Rue de la Paix* myself yesterday, and was told that nothing whatever was to be had, not at any price."

"Perhaps you didn't offer enough," said Cecil.

"Moreover, I notice the advertisement does not appear to-day. I guess the authorities have crumpled it up."

"Still—" Cecil went on monotonously.

"Look here," said Belmont, grim and a little nettled. "Just to cut it short, I'll bet you a two-hundred-dollar dinner at Paillard's that you can't get seats for to-night—not even two, let alone four."

"You really want to bet?"

"Well," drawled Belmont, with a certain irony, slightly imitating Cecil's manner, "it means something to eat for these ladies."

"I accept," said Cecil. And he rang the bell.

II.

"Lecky," Cecil said to his valet, who had entered the room, "I want you to go to No. 155, *Rue de la Paix*, and find out on which floor they are disposing of seats for the Opéra to-night. When you have found out, I want you to get me four seats—preferably a box. Understand?"

The servant stared at his master, squinting violently for a few seconds. Then he replied suddenly, as though light had just dawned on him.

"Exactly, sir. You intend to be present at the gala performance?"

"You have successfully grasped my intention," said Cecil. "Present my card." He scribbled a word or two on a card and gave it to the man.

"And the price, sir?"

"You still have that blank cheque on the *Credit Lyonnais* that I gave you yesterday morning. Use that."

"Yes, sir. Then there is the question of my French, sir, my feeble French——a delicate plant."

"My friend," Belmont put in. "I will accompany you as interpreter. I should like to see this thing through."

Lecky bowed and gave up squinting.

In three minutes (for they had only to go round the corner), Lionel Belmont and Lecky were in a room on the fourth floor of 15 5, *Rue de la Paix*. It had the appearance of an ordinary drawing-room, save that it contained an office table; at this table sat a young man, French.

"You Wish, *messieurs*?" said the young man.

"Have the goodness to interpret for me," said Lecky to the Napoleon of Anglo-Saxon theatres. "Mr. Cecil Thorold, of the Devonshire Mansion, London, the Grand Hotel, Paris, the Hotel Continental, Rome, and the Ghezireh Palace Hotel, Cairo, presents his compliments, and wishes a box for the gala performance at the Opéra to-night."

Belmont translated, while Lecky handed the card.

"Owing to the unfortunate indisposition of a Minister and his wife," replied the young man gravely, having perused the card, "it happens that I have a stage-box on the second tier."

"You told me yesterday—" Belmont began.

"I will take it," said Lecky in a sort of French, interrupting his interpreter. "The price? And a pen."

"The price is twenty-five thousand francs."

"Gemini!" Belmont exclaimed in American. "This is Paris, and no mistake!"

"Yes," said Lecky, as he filled up the blank cheque, "Paris still succeeds in being Paris. I have noticed it before, Mr. Belmont, if you will pardon the liberty."

The young man opened a drawer and handed to Lecky a magnificent gilt card, signed by the Minister of fine Arts, which Lecky hid within his breast.

"That signature of the Minister is genuine, eh?" Belmont asked the young man.

"I answer for it," said the young man, smiling imperturbably.

"The deuce you do!" Belmont murmured.

So the four friends dined at Paillard's at the rate of about a dollar and a-half a mouthful, and the mystified Belmont, who was not in the habit of being mystified, and so felt it, had the ecstasy of paying the bill.

III.

It was nine o'clock when they entered the magnificent precincts of the Opéra House. Like everybody else, they went very early»—the performance was not to commence until nine-thirty—in order to see and be seen to the fullest possible extent. A week had elapsed since the two girls had arrived from Algiers in Paris, under the escort of Cecil Thorold, and in that time they had not been idle. Kitty Sartorius had spent tolerable sums at the best *modistes*, in the *Rue de la Paix* and the establishments in the *Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin*, while Eve had bought one frock (a dream, needless to say), and had also been nearly covered with jewellery by her betrothed. That afternoon, between the bet and the dinner, Cecil had made more than one mysterious disappearance. He finally came back with a diamond tiara for his dear journalist. "You ridiculous thing!" exclaimed the dear journalist, kissing him. It thus occurred that Eve, usually so severe of aspect, had more jewels than she could wear, while Kitty, accustomed to display, had practically nothing but her famous bracelet. Eve insisted on pooling the lot, and dividing equally, for the gala.

Consequently, the party presented a very pretty appearance as it ascended the celebrated grand staircase of the *Opéra*, wreathed to-night

in flowers. Lionel Belmont, with Kitty on his arm, was in high spirits, uplifted, joyous; but Cecil himself seemed to be a little nervous, and this nervousness communicated itself to Eve Fincastle—or perhaps Eve was rather overpowered by her tiara. At the head of the staircase was a notice requesting everyone to be seated at nine-twenty-five, previous to the arrival of the President and the Imperial guests of the Republic.

The row of officials at the *controle* took the expensive gilt card from Cecil, examined it, returned it, and bowed low with an intimation that he should turn to the right and climb two floors; and the party proceeded further into the interior of the great building. The immense corridors and *foyers* and stairs were crowded with a collection of the best-known people in Paris. It was a gathering of all the renowns. The garish, gorgeous *Opéra* seemed to be changed that night into something new and strange. Even those shabby old harridans, the box-openers, the *ouvreuses*, wore bows of red, white and blue, and smiled effusively in expectation of tips inconceivably large.

"*Tiens*!" exclaimed the box-opener who had taken charge of Cecil's party, as she unlocked the door of the box. And well might she exclaim, for the box (No. 74—no possible error) was already occupied by a lady and two gentlemen, who were talking rather loudly in French! Cecil undoubtedly turned pale, while Lionel Belmont laughed within his moustache.

"These people have made a mistake," Cecil was saying to the *ouvreuse*, when a male official in evening dress approached him with an air of importance.

"Pardon, *monsieur*. You are *Monsieur* Cecil Thorold?"

"I am," said Cecil.

"Will you kindly follow me? *Monsieur* the *Directeur* wishes to see you."

"You are expected, evidently," said Lionel Belmont. The girls kept apart, as girls should in these crises between men.

"I have a ticket for this box," Cecil remarked to the official. "And I wish first to take possession of it."

"It is precisely that point which *Monsieur* the *Directeur* wishes to discuss with *Monsieur*," rejoined the official, ineffably suave. He turned with a wonderful bow to the girls, and added with that politeness of which the French alone have the secret: "Perhaps, in the meantime, these ladies would like to see the view of the *Avenue de l'Opéra* from the balcony? The illuminations have begun, and the effect is certainly charming."

Cecil bit his lip.

"Yes," he said. "Belmont, take them."

So, while Lionel Belmont escorted the girls to the balcony, there to discuss the startling situation and to watch the Imperial party drive up the resplendent, fairy-like, and unique avenue, Cecil followed the official.

He was guided along various passages and round unnumbered corners to the rear part of the colossal building. There, in a sumptuous bureau, the official introduced him to a still higher official, the *Directeur*, who had a decoration and a long, white moustache.

"*Monsieur*," said this latter, "I am desolated to have to inform you that the Minister of Fine Arts has withdrawn his original invitation for Box No. 74 to-night."

"I have received no intimation of the withdrawal," Cecil replied.

"No. Because the original invitation was not issued to you," said the *Directeur*, excited and nervous. "The Minister of fine Arts instructs me to inform you that his invitation to meet the President and their Imperial Majesties cannot be bought and sold."

"But is it not notorious that many such invitations have been bought and sold?"

"It is, unfortunately, too notorious."

Here the *Directeur* looked at his watch and rang a bell impatiently.

"Then why am I singled out?"

The *Directeur* gazed blandly at Cecil. "The reason, perhaps, is best known to yourself," said he, and he rang the bell again.

"I appear to incommode you," Cecil remarked. "Permit me to retire."

"Not at all, I assure you," said the *Directeur*. "On the contrary. I am a little agitated on account of the non-arrival of *Mademoiselle Malva*."

A minor functionary entered.

"She has come?"

"No, *Monsieur* the *Directeur*."

"And it is nine-fifteen. *Sapristi*!"

The functionary departed.

"The invitation to Box No. 74," proceeded the *Directeur*, commanding himself, "was sold for two thousand francs. Allow me to hand you notes for the amount, dear *monsieur*."

"But I paid twenty-five thousand," said Cecil, smiling.

"It is conceivable. But the Minister can only concern himself with the original figure. You refuse the notes?"

"By no means," said Cecil, accepting them. "But I have brought here to-night three guests, including two ladies. Imagine my position."

"I imagine it," the *Directeur* responded. "But you will not deny that the Minister has always the right to cancel an invitation. Seats ought to be sold subject to the contingency of that right being exercised."

At that moment still another official plunged into the room.

"She is not here yet!" he sighed, as if in extremity.

"It is unfortunate," Cecil sympathetically put in.

"It is more than unfortunate, dear *monsieur*," said the *Directeur*, gesticulating. "It is unthinkable. The performance must begin at nine-thirty, and it must begin with the garden scene from 'Faust,' in which *Mademoiselle Malva* takes Marguerite."

"Why not change the order?" Cecil suggested.

"Impossible. There are only two other items. The first act of 'Lohengrin,' with *Madame* Félise, and the ballet 'Sylvia.' We cannot commence with the ballet. No one ever heard of such a thing. And do you suppose that Félise will sing before Malva? Not for millions. Not for a throne. The etiquette of sopranos is stricter than that of Courts. Besides, to-night we cannot have a German opera preceding a French one."

"Then the President and their Majesties will have to wait a little, till Malva arrives," Cecil said.

"Their Majestics wait! Impossible!"

"Impossible!" echoed the other official, aghast.

Two more officials entered. And the atmosphere of alarm, of being scotched, of being up a tree of incredible height, the atmosphere which at that moment permeated the whole of the vast region behind the scenes of the Paris Opéra, seemed to rush with then; into the bureau of the *Directeur* and to concentrate itself there.

"Nine-twenty! And she couldn't dress in less than fifteen minutes."

"You have sent to the *Hotel du Louvre*?" the *Directeur* questioned despairingly.

"Yes, *Monsieur* the *Directeur*. She left there two hours ago."

Cecil coughed.

"I could have told you as much," he remarked, very distinctly.

"What!" cried the *Directeur*. "You know *Mademoiselle Malva*?"

"She is among my intimate friends," said Cecil smoothly.

"Perhaps you know where she is?"

"I have a most accurate idea," said Cecil.

"Where?"

"I will tell you when I am seated in my box with my friends," Cecil answered.

"Dear *monsieur*," panted the *Directeur*, "tell us at once!I give you my word of honour that you shall have your box."

Cecil bowed.

"Certainly," he said. "I may remark that I had gathered information which led me to anticipate this difficulty with the Minister of fine Arts—"

"But Malva, Malva—where is she?"

"Be at ease. It is only nine-twenty-three, and *Mademoiselle Malva* is less than three minutes away, and ready dressed. I was observing that I had gathered information which led me to anticipate this difficulty with the Minister of fine Arts, and accordingly I took measures to protect myself. There is no such thing as absolute arbitrary power, dear *Directeur*, even in a Republic, and I have proved it. *Mademoiselle Malva* is in room No. 429 at the Grand Hotel, across the road …. Stay, she will not come without this note."

He handed out a small, folded letter from his waistcoat pocket. Then he added: "Adieu, *Monsieur* the *Directeur*. You have just time to reach the State entrance in order to welcome the Presidential and Imperial party."

At nine-thirty, Cecil and his friends were ushered by a trinity of subservient officials into their box, which had been mysteriously emptied of its previous occupants. And at the same moment the monarchs, with monarchical punctuality, accompanied by the President, entered the Presidential box in the middle of the grand tier of the superb auditorium. The distinguished and dazzling audience rose to its feet, and the band played the National Anthem.

"You fixed it up then?" Belmont whispered under cover of the National Anthem. He was beaten, after all.

"Oh, yes!" said Cecil lightly. "A trivial misconception, nothing more. And I have made a little out of it, too."

"Indeed! Much?"

"No, not much! Two thousand francs. But you must remember that I have been less than half an hour in making them."

The curtain rose on the garden scene from "Faust."

IV.

"My dear," said Eve.

When a woman has been definitely linked with a man, either by betrothal or by marriage, there are moments, especially at the commencement, when she assumes an air and a tone of absolute exclusive possession of him. It is a wonderful trick, which no male can successfully imitate, try how he will. One of these moments had arrived in the history of Eve Fincastle and her millionaire lover. They sat in a large, deserted public room, all gold, of the Grand Hotel. It was midnight less a quarter, and they had just returned, somewhat excited and flushed, from the glories of the gala performances. During the latter part of the evening, Eve had been absent from Cecil's box for nearly half an hour.

Kitty Sartorius and Lionel Belmont were conversing in an adjoining salon.

"Yes," said Cecil.

"Are you quite, quite sure that you love me?"

Only one answer is possible to such a question. Cecil gave it.

"That is all very well," Eve pursued with equal gravity and charm. "But it was really tremendously sudden, wasn't it? I can't think what you see in me, dearest."

"My dear Eve," Cecil observed, holding her hand, "the best things, the most enduring things, very often occur suddenly."

"Say you love me," she persisted.

So he said it, this time. Then her gravity deepened, though she smiled.

"You've given up all those—those schemes and things of yours, haven't you?" she questioned.

"Absolutely," he replied.

"My dear, I'm so glad. I never could understand why—"

"Listen," he said. "What was I to do? I was rich. I was bored. I had no great attainments. I was interested in life and in the arts, but not desperately, not vitally. You may, perhaps, say I should have taken up philanthropy. Well, I'm not built that way. I can't help it, but I'm not a born philanthropist, and the philanthropist without a gift for philanthropy usually does vastly more harm than good. I might have gone into business. Well, I should only have doubled my millions, while boring myself all the time.

Yet the instinct which I inherited from my father, the great American instinct to be a little cleverer and smarter than someone else, drove me to action. It was part of my character, and one can't get away from one's character. So finally I took to these rather original 'schemes,' as you call them. They had the advantage of being exciting and sometimes

dangerous, and though they were often profitable, they were not too profitable.

In short, they amused me and gave me joy. They also gave me you."

Eve smiled again, but without committing herself.

"But you have abandoned them now completely?" she said.

"Oh, yes," he answered.

"Then what about this Opéra affair tonight?" She sprang the question on him sharply. She did her best to look severe, but the endeavour ended with a laugh.

"I meant to tell you," he said. "But how—how did you know? How did you guess?"

"You forget that I am still a journalist," she replied, "and still on the staff of my paper. I wished to interview Malva to-night for the journal, and I did so. It was she who let out things. She thought I knew all about it; and when she saw that I didn't she stopped and advised me mysteriously to consult you for details."

"It was the scandal at the gala performance last autumn that gave me an action for making a corner in seats at the very next gala performance that should ever occur at the Paris Opéra," Cecil began his confession. "I knew that seats could be got direct from more or less minor officials at the Ministry of fine Arts, and also that a large proportion of the people invited to these performances were prepared to sell their seats. You can't imagine how venal certain circles are in Paris. It just happened that the details and date of to-night's performance were announced on the day we arrived here. I could not resist the chance. Now you comprehend sundry strange absences of mine during the week. I went to a reporter on the Echo de Paris whom I knew, and who knows everybody. And we got out a list of the people likely to be invited and likely to be willing to sell their seats. We also opened negotiations at the Ministry."

"How on earth do these ideas occur to you?" asked Eve.

"How can I tell? " Cecil answered. "It is because they occur to me that I am I—you see. Well, in twenty-four hours my reporter and two of his friends had interviewed half the interviewable people in Paris, and the Minister of fine Arts had sent out his invitations, and I had obtained the refusal of over three hundred seats, at a total cost of about seventy-five thousand francs. Then I saw that my friend the incomparable Malva was staying at the Ritz, and the keystone idea of the entire affair presented itself to me. I got her to offer to sing. Of course, her rival Félise could not be behind her in a patriotic desire to cement the friendliness of two

great nations. The gala performance blossomed into a terrific boom. We took a kind of office in the *Rue de la Paix*. We advertised very discreetly. Every evening, after bidding you ‘Good-night,’ I saw my reporter and Lecky, and arranged the development of the campaign. In three days we had sold all our seats, except one box, which I kept, for something like two hundred thousand francs.”

“Then this afternoon you merely bought the box from yourself?”

“Exactly, my love. I had meant the surprise of getting a box to come a little later than it did—say at dinner; but you and Belmont, between you, forced it on.”

“And that is all?”

“Not quite. The minions of the Minister of fine Arts were extremely cross. And they meant to revenge themselves on me by depriving me of my box at the last moment. However, I got wind of that, and by the simplest possible arrangement with Malva I protected myself. The scheme—my last bachelor fling, Eve—has been a great success, and the official world of Paris has been taught a lesson which may lead to excellent results.”

“And you have cleared a hundred and twenty-five thousand francs?”

“By no means. The profits of these undertakings are the least part of them. The expenses are heavy. I reckon the expenses will be nearly forty thousand francs. Then I must give Malva a necklace, and that necklace must cost twenty-five thousand francs.”

“That leaves sixty thousand clear?” said Eve.

“Say sixty-two thousand.”

“Why?”

“I was forgetting an extra two thousand made this evening.”

“And your other ‘schemes’?” Eve continued her cross-examination. “How much have they yielded?”

“The Devonshire House scheme was a dead loss. My dear, why did you lead me to destroy that fifty thousand pounds? Waste not, want not. There may come a day when we shall need that fifty thousand pounds, and then—”

“Don’t be funny,” said Eve. “I am serious—very serious.”

“Well, Ostend and Mr. Rainshore yielded twenty-one thousand pounds net. Bruges and the bracelet yielded nine thousand five hundred francs. Algiers and Biskra resulted in a loss of—”

“Never mind the losses,” Eve interrupted. “Are there any more gains?”

"Yes, a few. At Rome last year I somehow managed to clear fifty thousand francs. Then there was an episode at the Chancellory at Berlin. And—"

"Tell me the total gains, my love," said Eve—"the gross gains."

Cecil consulted a pocket-book.

"A trifle," he answered. "Between thirty-eight and forty thousand pounds."

"My dear Cecil," the girl said, "call it forty thousand—a million francs—and give me a cheque. Do you mind?"

"I shall be charmed, my darling."

"And when we get to London," Eve finished, "I will hand it over to the hospitals anonymously."

He paused, gazed at her, and kissed her.

Then Kitty Sartorius entered, a marvellous vision, with Belmont in her wake. Kitty glanced hesitatingly at the massive and good-humoured Lionel.

"The fact is—" said Kitty, and paused.

"We are engaged," said Lionel. "You aren't surprised?"

"Our warmest congratulations!" Cecil observed. "No. We can't truthfully say that we are staggered. It is in the secret nature of things that a leading lady must marry her manager—a universal law that may not be transgressed."

"Moreover," said Eve later, in Cecil's private ear, as they were separating for the night, "we might have guessed much earlier. Theatrical managers don't go scattering five-hundred-pound bracelets all over the place merely for business reasons."

"But he only scattered one, my dear," Cecil murmured.

"Yes, Well. That's what I mean."

The End