

Alias the Lone Wolf eBook

Alias the Lone Wolf by Louis Joseph Vance

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WALKING PAPERS

Through the suave, warm radiance of that afternoon of Spring in England a gentleman of modest and commonly amiable deportment bore a rueful countenance down Piccadilly and into Halfmoon street, where presently he introduced it to one whom he found awaiting him in his lodgings, much at ease in his easiest chair, making free with his whiskey and tobacco, and reading a slender brown volume selected from his shelves.

This degage person was patently an Englishman, though there were traces of Oriental ancestry in his cast. The other, he of the doleful habit, was as unmistakably of Gallic pattern, though he dressed and carried himself in a thoroughly Anglo-Saxon fashion, and even seemed a trace intrigued when greeted by a name distinctively French.

For the Englishman, rousing from his appropriated ease, dropped his book to the floor beside the chair, uprose and extended a cordial hand, exclaiming: "H'are ye, Monsieur Duchemin?"

To this the other responded, after a slight pause, obscurely enough: "Oh! ancient history, eh? Well, for the matter of that: How are you, Mister Wertheimer?"

Their hands fell apart, and Monsieur Duchemin proceeded to do away his hat and stick and chamois gloves; while his friend, straddling in front of a cold grate and extending his hands to an imaginary blaze, covered with a mild complaint the curiosity excited by a brief study of that face of melancholy.

"Pretty way you've got of making your friends wait on your pleasure. Here I've wasted upwards of two hours of His Majesty's time..."

"How was I to know you'd have the cheek to force your way in here in my absence and help yourself to my few poor consolations?" Duchemin retorted, helping himself to them in turn. "But then one never does know what fresh indignity Fate has in store..."

"After you with that whiskey, by your leave. I say: I'd give something to know where you ignorant furriners come by this precious pre-War stuff." But without waiting to be denied this information, Mr. Wertheimer continued: "Going on the evidence of your looks and temper, you've been down to Tilbury Docks this afternoon to see Karslake and Sonia off."

"A few such flashes of intelligence applied professionally, my friend, should carry you far."

"And the experience has left you feeling a bit down, what?"

"I imagine even you do not esteem parting with those whom one loves an exhilarating pastime."

"But when it's so obviously for their own good..."

"Oh, I know!" Duchemin agreed without enthusiasm. "If anything should happen to Karlake now, it would break Sonia's heart, but..."

"And after the part he played in that Vassilyevski show his lease of life wouldn't be apt to be prolonged by staying on in England."

"I agree; but still—!" sighed Duchemin, throwing himself heavily into a chair.

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"Which," Wertheimer continued, standing, "is why we arranged to give him that billet with the British Legation in Peking."

"Didn't know you had a hand in that," observed Duchemin, after favouring the other with a morose stare.

"Oh, you can't trust me! When you get to know me better you'll find I'm always like that—forever flitting hither and yon, bestowing benefits and boons on the ungrateful, like any other giddy Providence."

"But one is not ungrateful," Duchemin insisted. "God knows I would gladly have sped Karslake's emigration with Sonia to Van Dieman's Land or Patagonia or where you will, if it promised to keep him out of the way long enough for the Smolny Institute to forget him."

"Since the said Smolny inconsiderately persists in failing to collapse, as per the daily predictions of the hopeful."

"Just so."

"But aren't you forgetting you yourself have given that Smolny lot the same and quite as much reason for holding your name anathema?"

"Ah!" Duchemin growled—"as for me, I can take care of myself, thank you. My trouble is, I want somebody else to take care of. I had a daughter once, for a few weeks, long enough to make me strangely fond of the responsibilities of a father; and then Karslake took her away, leaving me nothing to do with my life but twiddle futile thumbs and contemplate the approach of middle age." "Middle age? Why flatter yourself? With a daughter married, too!"

"Sonia's only eighteen..."

"She was born when you were twenty. That makes you nearly forty, and that's next door to second childhood, Man!" the Englishman declared solemnly—"you're superannuated."

"I know; and so long as I feel my years, even you can abuse me with impunity."

But Wertheimer would not hear him. "Odd," he mused, "I never thought of it before, that you were growing old. And I've been wondering, too, what it was that has been making you so precious slow and cautious and cranky of late. You're just doddering—and I thought you were simply tired out and needed a holiday."

"Perhaps I am and do," said Duchemin patiently. "One feels one has earned a holiday, if ever anybody did in your blessed S. S."

“Ah! You think so?”

“You’d think so if you’d been mucking round the East End all Winter with your life in your hands.”

“Still—at your age—I’d be thinking about retiring instead of asking for a rest.”

Although Duchemin knew very well that he was merely being ragged in that way of deadly seriousness which so often amuses the English, he chose to suggest sourly:

“My resignation is at your disposal any time you wish it.”

“Accepted,” said Wertheimer airily, “to take effect at once.”

To this Duchemin merely grunted, as who should say he didn’t consider this turn of conversation desperately amusing. And Wertheimer resuming his chair, the two remained for some moments in silence, a silence so doggedly maintained on both sides that Duchemin was presently aware of dull gnawings of curiosity. It occurred to him that his caller should have found plenty to do in his bureau in the War Office....

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“And to what,” he enquired with the tedious irony of ennui, “is one indebted for this unexpected honour on the part of the First Under-Secretary of the British Secret Service? Or whatever your high-sounding official title is...”

“Oh!” Wertheimer replied lazily—and knocked out his pipe—“I merely dropped in to say good-bye.”

Duchemin discovered symptoms of more animation.

“Hello! Where are you off to?”

“Nowhere—worse luck! I mean I’m here to bid you farewell and Godspeed and what not on the eve of your departure from the British Isles.”

“And where, pray, am I going?”

“That’s for you to say.”

Monsieur Duchemin meditated briefly. “I see,” he announced: “I’m to have a roving commission.”

“Worse than that: none at all.”

Duchemin opened his eyes wide.

“‘The wind bloweth where it listeth,’” Wertheimer affirmed. “How do I know whither you’ll blow, now you’re a free agent again, entirely on your own? I’ve got no control over your movements.”

“The S. S. has.”

“Never no more. Didn’t you tender me your resignation a moment ago? Wasn’t it promptly accepted?”

“Look here: What the devil——!”

“Well, if you must know,” the Englishman interrupted hastily, “my instructions were to give you your walking papers if you refused to resign. So your connection with the S. S. is from this hour severed. And if you ain’t out of England within twenty-four hours, we’ll jolly well deport you. And that’s that.”

“One perceives one has served England not wisely but too well.”

“Shrewd lad!” Wertheimer laughed. “You see, old soul, we admire you no end, and we’re determined to save your life. Word has leaked through from Petrograd that your

name has been triple-starred on the Smolny's Index Expurgatorius. Karlake's too. An honour legitimately earned by your pernicious collaboration in the Vassilyevski bust. Karlake's already taken care of, but you're still in the limelight, and that makes you a public nuisance. If you linger here much longer the verdict will undoubtedly be: Violent death at the hands of some person or persons unknown. So here are passports and a goodish bit of money. If you run through all of it before this blows over, we'll find a way, of course, to get more to you. You understand: No price too high that buys good riddance of you. And there will be a destroyer waiting at Portsmouth to-night with instructions to put ashore secretly anywhere you like across the Channel. After that—as far as the British Empire is concerned—your blood be on your own head."

The other nodded, investigating the envelope which his late chief had handed him, then from his letter of credit and passports looked up with a reminiscent smile.

"It isn't the first time you've vouched for me by this style. Remember?"

"Well, you've earned as fair title to the name of Duchemin as I ever did to that of Wertheimer."

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But the smile was fading from the eyes of the man whom England preferred to recognize as Andre Duchemin.

“But where on earth is one to go?” “Don’t ask me,” the Englishman protested. “And above all, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. Since I’ve been on this job, I’ve learned to believe in telepathy and mind reading and witchcraft and all manner of unholy rot. And I don’t want you to come to a sudden end through somebody’s establishing illicit intercourse with my subconscious mind.”

He took his leave shortly after that; and Monsieur Duchemin settled down in the chair which his guest had quitted to grapple with his problem: where under Heaven to go?

After a wasted while, he picked up in abstraction the book which Wertheimer had been reading—and wondered if, by any chance, he had left it there on purpose, so strong seemed the hint. It was Stevenson’s ‘Travels with a Donkey.’ Duchemin was familiar enough with the work, and had no need to dip anew into its pages to know it offered one fair solution to his quandary.

If—he assured himself—there were any place in Europe where one might count on being reasonably secure from the solicitous attentions of the grudge-bearing Bolsheviks, it was the Cevennes, those little-known hills in the south of France, well inland from the sea.

II

ONE WALKS

A little place called Le Monastier, in a pleasant highland valley fifteen miles from Le Puy ... notable for the making of lace, for drunkenness, for freedom of language, and for unparalleled political dissension was Mr. Stevenson’s point of departure on his Travels with a Donkey. Monsieur Duchemin made it his as well; and on the fourth morning of his hegira from England set out from Le Monastier afoot, a volume of Montaigne in his pocket, a stout stick in his fist—the fat rucksack strapped to his shoulders enabling this latter-day traveller to dispense with the society of another donkey.

The weather was fine, his heart high, he was happy to be out of harness and again his own man. More than once he laughed a little to think of the vain question of his whereabouts which was being mooted in the underworld of Europe, where (as well he knew) men and women spat when they named him. For his route from the Channel coast to Le Monastier had been sufficiently discreet and devious to persuade him that his escape had been as cleanly executed as it was timely instigated.

Thus for upwards of a fortnight he fared southward in the footsteps of Mr. Stevenson; and much good profit had he of the adventure. For it was his common practice to go to



bed with the birds and rise with the sun; and more often than not he lodged in the inn of the silver moon, with moss for a couch, leafy boughs for a canopy and the stars for night-lights—accommodations infinitely more agreeable than those afforded by the grubby and malodorous auberge of the wayside average. And between sun and sun he punished his boots famously.

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Constant exercise tuned up muscles gone slack and soft with easy living, upland winds cleansed the man of the reek of cities and made his appetite a thing appalling. A keen sun darkened his face and hands, brushed up in his cheeks a warmer glow than they had shown in many a year, and faded out the heavier lines with which Time had marked his countenance. Moreover, because this was France, where one may affect a whisker without losing face, he neglected his razors; and though this was not his first thought, a fair disguise it proved. For when, toward the end of the second week, he submitted that wanton luxuriance to be tamed by a barber of Florac, he hardly knew the trimly bearded mask of bronze that looked back at him from a mirror.

Not that it mattered to Monsieur Duchemin. From the first he met few of any sort and none at all whom a lively and exacting distrust reckoned a likely factor in his affairs. It was a wild, bold land he traversed, and thinly peopled; at pains to avoid the larger towns, he sought by choice the loneliest paths that looped its quiet hills; such as passed the time of day with him were few and for the most part peasants, a dull, dour lot, taciturn to a degree that pleased him well. So that he soon forgot to be forever alert for the crack of an ambushed pistol or the pattering footfalls of an assassin with a knife.

It was at Florac, on the Tarnon, that he parted company with the trail of Stevenson. Here that one had turned east to Alais, whereas Duchemin had been lost to the world not nearly long enough, he was minded to wander on till weary. The weather held, there was sunshine in golden floods, and by night moonlight like molten silver. Between beetling ramparts of stone, terraced, crenellated and battlemented in motley strata of pink and brown and yellow and black, the river Tarn had gouged out for itself a canyon through which its waters swept and tumbled, as green as translucent jade in sunlight, profound emerald in shadow, cream white in churning rapids. The lofty profiles of its cliffs were fringed with stunted growths of pine and ash, a ragged stubble, while here and there chateaux, forsaken as a rule, and crumbling, reared ruined silhouettes against the blue. Eighteen hundred feet below, it might be more, the Tarn threaded lush bottom-lands, tilled fields, goodly orchards, plantations of walnut and Spanish chestnut, and infrequent, tiny villages that clung to precarious footholds between cliffs and water.

On high again, beyond the cliffs, stretched the Causses, vast, arid and barren plateaux, flat and featureless save for an occasional low, rounded mound, a menhir or a dolmen, and (if such may be termed features) great pits that opened in the earth like cold craters, which the countryfolk termed avens. A strange, bleak land, inhospitable, wind-harried, haunted, the home of seven howling devils of desolation...

Rain at length interned the traveller for three days in a little place called Meyrueis, which lies sweetly in the valley of the Jonte, at its confluence with the Butezon, long leagues remote from railroads and the world they stitch together—that world of unrest, uncertainty and intrigue which in those days seemed no better than a madhouse.

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The break in the monotony of daily footfaring proved agreeable. It suited one well to camp for a space in that quaint town, isolate in the heart of an enchanted land, with which one was in turn enchanted, and contemplate soberly the grave issues of Life and Death.

Here (said Duchemin) nothing can disturb me; and it is high time for me to be considering what I am to make of the remainder of my days. Too many of them have been wasted, too great a portion of my span has been sacrificed to vanities. One must not forget one is in a fair way to become a grandfather; it is plainly an urgent duty to reconcile oneself to that estate and cultivate its proper gravity and decorum. Yet a little while and one must bid adieu to that Youth which one has so heedlessly squandered, a last adieu to Youth with its days of high adventure, its carefree heart, its susceptibility to the infinite seductions of Romance.

Quite seriously the adventurer entertained a premonition of his to-morrow, a vision of himself in skull-cap and seedy clothing (the trousers well-bagged at the knees) with rather more than a mere hint of an equator emphasized by grease-spots on his waistcoat, presiding over the fortunes of one of those dingy little Parisian shops wherein debatable antiques accumulate dust till they fetch the ducats of the credulous; and of a Sunday walking out, in a shiny frock-coat with his ribbon of the Legion in the buttonhole, a ratty topper crowning his placid brows, a humid grandchild adhering to his hand: a thrifty and respectable bourgeois, the final avatar of a rolling stone!

Yes: it is amusing, but quite true; though it would need a deal of contriving, something little short of a revolution to bring it about, to precisely such a future as that did Duchemin most seriously propose to dedicate himself.

But always, they say, it is God who disposes....

And for all this mood of premature resignation to the bourgeois virtues Duchemin was glad enough when his fourth day in Meyrueis dawned fair, and by eight was up and away, purposing a round day's tramp across the Causse Noir to Montpellier-le-Vieux (concerning which one heard curious tales), then on by way of the gorge of the Dourbie to Millau for the night.

Nor would he heed the dubious head shaken by his host of Meyrueis, who earnestly advised a guide. The Causses, he declared, were treacherous; men sometimes lost their way upon those lofty plains and were never heard of more. Duchemin didn't in the least mind getting lost, that is to say failing to make his final objective; at worst he could depend upon a good memory and an unfailing sense of direction to lead him back the way he had come.

He was to learn there is nothing more unpalatable than the repentance of the headstrong....

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He found it a stiffish climb up out of the valley of the Jonte. By the time he had managed it, the sun had already robbed all vegetation of its ephemeral jewellery, the Causse itself showed few signs of a downpour which had drenched it for seventy-two hours on end. To that porous limestone formation water in whatever quantity is as beer to a boche. Only, if one paused to listen on the brink of an aven, there were odd and disturbing noises to be heard underfoot, liquid whisperings, grim chuckles, horrible gurgles, that told of subterranean streams in spate, coursing in darkness to destinations unknown, unguessable.

His path (there was no trace of road) ran snakily through a dense miniature forest of dwarfed, gnarled pines, of a peculiarly sombre green, ever and again in some scant clearing losing itself in a web of similar paths that converged from all points of the compass; so that the wayfarer was fain to steer by the sun—and at one time found himself abruptly on the brink of a ravine that gashed the earth like a cruel wound. He worked his way to an elevation which showed him plainly that—unless by a debatable detour of several miles—there was no way to the farther side but through the depths of the ravine itself.

If that descent was a desperate business, the subsequent climb was heartbreaking. He needed a long rest before he was able to plod on, now conceiving the sun in the guise of a personal enemy. The sweat that streamed from his face was brine upon his lips. For hours it was thus with Duchemin, and in all that time he met never a soul. Once he saw from a distance a lonely chateau overhanging another ravine; but it was apparently only one more of the many ruins indigenous to that land, and he took no step toward closer acquaintance.

Long after noon, sheer fool's luck led him to a hamlet whose mean auberge served him bread and cheese with a wine singularly thin and acid. Here he enquired for a guide, but the one able-bodied man in evidence, a hulking, surly animal, on learning that Duchemin wished to visit Montpellier-le-Vieux, refused with a growl to have anything to do with him. Several times during the course of luncheon he caught the fellow eyeing him strangely, he thought, from a window of the auberge. In the end the peasant girl who waited on him grudgingly consented to put him on his way.

In a rocky gorge, called the Rajol, a spot as inhumanly grotesque as a nightmare of Gustave Dore's, with the heat of a pit in Tophet, he laboured for hours. The hush of evening and its long shadows were on the land when finally he scrambled out to the Causse again. Then he lost his path another time, missed entirely the village of Maubert, where he had thought to find a conveyance, or at least a guide, and in the silver and purple mystery of a perfect moonlight night found himself looking down from a hilltop upon Montpellier-le-Vieux.

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Rumour had prepared him to know the place when he saw it, nothing for its stupendous lunacy. Heaven knows what convulsion or measured process of Nature accomplished this thing. For his part Duchemin was unable to accept any possible scientific explanation, and will go to his grave believing that some half-witted cyclops, back beyond the dimmest dawn of Time, created Montpellier-le-Vieux in an hour of idleness, building him a play city of titanic monoliths, then wandered away and forgot it altogether.

He saw what seemed to be a city at least two miles in length, more than half as wide, a huddle of dwellings of every shape and size, a labyrinth of narrow, tortuous streets broken here and there by wide and stately avenues, with public squares and vast cirques (of such amphitheatres he counted no less than six) and walls commanded by a citadel.

But never door or window broke the face of any building, no chimney exhaled a breath of smoke, neither wheel nor foot disturbed these grass-grown thoroughfares.... Montpellier-the-Old indeed! Duchemin reflected; but rather Montpellier-the-Dead—dead with the utter deadness of that which has never lived.

Marvelling, he went down into the city of stone and passed through its desolate ways, shaping a course for the southern limits, where he thought to find the road to Millau. Fatigue alone dictated this choice of the short cut. But for that, he confesses he might have gone the long way round; he was no more prone to childish terrors than any other man, but to his mind there was something sinister in the portentous immobility of the place; in its silence, its want of excuse for being, a sense of age-old evil like an inarticulate menace.

Out of this mood he failed to laugh himself. Time and again he would catch himself listening for he knew not what, approaching warily the corner of the next huge monolith as if thinking to surprise behind it some ghoulish rite, glancing apprehensively down the corridors he passed, or oversoulder for some nameless thing that stalked him and was never there when he looked, but ever lurked impishly just beyond the tail of his eye.

So that, when abruptly a man moved from behind a rock some thirty or forty paces ahead, Duchemin stopped short, with jangled nerves and a barely smothered exclamation. Possibly a shape of spectral terror would have been less startling; in that weird place and hour humanity seemed more incongruous than the supernatural. It was at once apparent that the man had neither knowledge of nor concern with the stranger. For an instant he stood with his back to the latter, peering intently down the aisle which Duchemin had been following, a stout body filling out too well the uniform of a private soldier in the American Expeditionary Forces—that most ungainly, inutile, unbecoming costume that ever graced the form of man.

Then he half turned, beckoned hastily to one invisible to the observer, and furtively moved on. As furtively his signal was answered by a fellow who wore the nondescript

garments of a peasant. And as suddenly as they had come into sight, the two slipped round a rocky shoulder, and the street of monoliths was empty.

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III

MEETING BY MOONLIGHT

Now granting that a soldier should be free to spend his leave where he will, unchallenged, it remained true that the last of the A.E.F. had long since said farewell to the shores of France, while the Tarn country seemed a far cry from the banks of the Rhine, in those days still under occupation by forces of the United States Regular Army. Then, too, it was a fact within the knowledge of Monsieur Duchemin that the uniform of the Americans had more than frequently been used by those ancient acquaintances of his, the Apaches of Paris, as a cloak for their own misdoings. So it didn't need the air of stealth that marked this business to persuade him there was mischief in the brew.

But indeed he got in motion to investigate without stopping to debate an excuse for so doing, and several seconds before he heard the woman's cries.

Of these the first sounded, shrill with alarm, as Duchemin turned the corner where the prowlers had gone from sight. But a high wall of rock alone met his vision, and he broke into a run that carried him round still another corner and then plumped him headlong into the theatre of villainy.

This was open ground, a breadth of turf bordering on one of the great cirques—a rudely oval pit at a guess little less than seven hundred feet in its narrowest diameter and something like four hundred in depth, a vast black well against whose darkness the blue-white moonflare etched a strange grouping of figures, seven in all.

On his one hand Duchemin saw a woman in mourning clasping to her bosom a terrified young girl, the author of the screams; on the other, three men close-locked in grimmiest combat, one defending himself against two with indifferent success; while in between stood a third woman with her back to and perilously near the chasm, shrinking from the threat of a pistol in the hands of the fourth man.

This last was the one nearest Duchemin, who was upon him so suddenly that it would be difficult to say which was the more surprised when Duchemin's stick struck down the pistol hand of the other with such force as must have broken his wrist. The weapon fell, he uttered an oath as he swung round, clutching the maimed member; and then, seeing his assailant for the first time, he swooped down to recover the weapon so swiftly that it was in his left hand and spitting vicious tongues of orange flame before Duchemin was able to get in a second blow.

But there was the abrupt end of that passage. Smitten cruelly between the eyes, the fellow grunted thickly and went over backwards like a bundle of rags, head and shoulders jutting out over the brink of the precipice so far that, though his body checked perceptibly as it struck the ground, his own weight carried him on, he shot out into

space and vanished as though some unseen hand had lifted up from these dark depths and plucked him down to annihilation.

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The young girl shrieked again, the woman gave a gasp of horror, Duchemin himself knew a sickish qualm. But he had no time to spare for that: it was going ill with the man contending against two. The adventurer's stick might have been bewitched that night, so magical was its work; a single blow on the nearest head (but believe it was selected with care!) and instantaneously that knot of contention was resolved into its three several parts.

The smitten clapped hands to his hurt, moaning. His brother scoundrel started back with staring eyes in which rage gave place to dismay as he grasped the change in the situation and saw the stick swinging for his head in turn. He ducked neatly; the stick whistled through thin air; and before Duchemin could recover the other had turned and was running for dear life.

Duchemin delayed a bare instant; but manifestly his assistance was no more needed here. In a breath he who had been so recently outmatched recollected his wits and took the initiative with admirable address. Duchemin saw him fly furiously at his late opponent, trip and lay him on his back; then turned and gave chase to the fugitive.

This was the masquerader in the American uniform; and an amazingly fleet pair of heels he showed, taking into account his heaviness of body. Already he had a fair lead; and had he maintained for long the pace he set in the first few hundred yards he must have won away scot-free. But whether he lacked staying powers or confidence, he made the mistake of adopting another and less fatiguing means of locomotion. Duchemin saw him swerve from his first course and steer for a vehicle standing at some distance—evidently the conveyance which had brought the sightseers to view the spectacle of Montpellier-le-Vieux by moonlight.

Waiting in the middle of a broad avenue of misshapen obelisks, a dilapidated barouche with a low body sagging the lower for debilitated springs, on either side its pole drooped two sorry specimens of crowbait. And their pained amazement was so unfeigned that Duchemin laughed aloud when the fat rogue bounded to the box, snatched up reins and whip and curled a cruel lash round their bony flanks. From this one inferred that he was indifferently acquainted with the animals, certainly not their accustomed driver. And since it took them some moments to come to their senses and appreciate that all this was not an evil dream, Duchemin's hands were clutching for the back of the carriage when the horses broke suddenly into an awkward, lumbering gallop and whisked it out of reach.

But not for long. Extending himself, Duchemin caught the folded top, jumped, and began to clamber in.

The man on the box was tugging fretfully at something wedged in the hip-pocket of his breeches; proof enough that he was not the original tenant of the uniform, since it fitted too snugly to permit ready extraction of a pistol in an emergency.

But he got no chance whatever to use the weapon; for the moment Duchemin found his own feet in the swaying vehicle he leaped on the shoulders of the other and dragged him backwards from the box.

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What followed was not very clear to him, a melange of impressions. The mock-American fought like a devil unchained, cursing Duchemin fluently in the purest and foulest argot of Belleville—which is not in the French vocabulary of the doughboy. The animals at the pole caught fire of this madness and ran away in good earnest, that wretched barouche rolled and pitched like a rudderless shell in a crazy sea, the two men floundered in its well like fish in a pail.

They fought by no rules, with no science, but bit and kicked and gouged and wrenched and struck as occasion offered and each to the best of his ability. Duchemin caught glimpses of a face like a Chinese devil-mask, hideously distorted with working features and disfigured with smears of soot through which insane eyeballs rolled and glared in the moonlight. Then a hand like a vice gripped his windpipe, he was on his back, his head overhanging the edge of the floor, a thumb was feeling for one of his eyes. Yet it could not have been much later when he and his opponent were standing and swaying as one, locked in an embrace of wrestlers.

Still, Duchemin knew as many tricks of hand-to-hand fighting as the other, perhaps a few more. And then he was, no doubt, in far better condition. At all events the fellow was presently at his mercy, in a hold that gave one the privilege of breaking his back at will. A man of mistaken scruples, Duchemin failed to do so, but held the other helpless only long enough to find his hip-pocket and rip out the pistol—a deadly Luger. Then a thrust and a kick, which he enjoyed infinitely, sent the brute spinning out to land on his head.

The fall should have broken his neck. At the worst it should have stunned him. Evidently it didn't. When Duchemin had scrambled up to the box, captured the reins and brought the nags to a stop—no great feat that; they were quite sated with the voluptuousness of running away and well content to heed the hand and voice of authority—and when, finally, he swung them round and drove back toward the cirque, he saw no sign of his Apache by the roadside.

So he congratulated himself on the forethought which had possessed him of the pistol. Otherwise the assassin, since he had retained sufficient wit and strength to crawl into hiding, could and assuredly would have potted Monsieur Duchemin with neither difficulty nor compunction.

Not five figures but four only were waiting beside the cirque when, wheeling the barouche as near the group as the lay of the ground permitted, he climbed down. A man lay at length in the coarse grass, his head pillowed in the lap of one woman. Another woman stood aside, trembling and wringing aged hands. The third knelt beside the supine man, but rose quickly as Duchemin drew near, and came to meet him.

In this one he recognised her to whose salvation Chance had first led him, and now found time to appreciate a face of pallid loveliness, intelligent and composed, while she

addressed him quietly and directly to the point in a voice whose timbre was, he fancied, out of character with the excellent accent of its French. An exquisite voice, nevertheless. English, he guessed, or possibly American, but much at home in France....

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“Monsieur d’Aubrac has been wounded, a knife thrust. It will be necessary to get him to a surgeon as quickly as possible. I fancy there will be none nearer than Nant. Do you know the way?”

“One can doubtless find it,” said Duchemin modestly. “But I myself am not without knowledge of wounds. Perhaps...”

“If monsieur would be so good.”

Duchemin knelt beside the man, who welcomed him with open eyes and a wry smile that was almost as faint as his voice.

“It is nothing, monsieur—a clean cut in the arm, with some loss of blood.”

“But let me see.”

The young girl in whose lap rested the head of Monsieur d’Aubrac sat back and watched Duchemin with curious, grave eyes in which traces of moisture glimmered.

“Had the animal at my mercy, I thought,” d’Aubrac apologised, “when suddenly he drew that knife, stuck me and broke away.”

“I understand,” Duchemin replied. “But don’t talk. You’ll want all your strength, my friend.”

With his pocket-knife he laid open the sodden sleeves of coat and shirt, exposing an upper arm stained dark with blood that welled in ugly jets from a cut both wide and deep.

“Artery severed,” he announced, and straightened up and looked about, at a loss. “My pack—?”

One’s actions in moments of excitement are apt to be largely directed by the subconscious, he knew; still he found it hard to believe that he could unwittingly have unshipped and dropped his rucksack while making ready to pursue the American uniform. Nevertheless, it seemed, that was just what he had done.

The woman who had spoken to him found and fetched it from no great distance; and its contents enabled Duchemin to improvise a tourniquet, and when the flow of blood was checked, a bandage. During the operation d’Aubrac unostentatiously fainted.

The young girl caught her breath, a fluttering hiss.

“Don’t be alarmed, mademoiselle,” Duchemin soothed her. “He will come round presently, he will do splendidly now till we get him to bed; and then his convalescence will be merely the matter of a while of rest.”

He slipped his arms beneath the unconscious man, gathered him up bodily and bore him to the carriage—and, thanks to man’s amusing amour propre, made far less of the effort than it cost him. Then, with d’Aubrac disposed as comfortably as might be on the back seat, once again pillowed in a fashion to make any man envious, Duchemin turned to find the other women at his elbow. To the eldest he offered a bow suited to her condition and a hand to help her into the barouche.

“Madame ...”

Her agitation had measurably subsided. The gentle inclination of the aged head which acknowledged his courtesy was as eloquent of her quality as he found the name which she gave him in quavering accents.

“Madame de Sevenie, monsieur.”

“With madame’s permission: I am Andre Duchemin.”

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“Monsieur Duchemin has placed us all deeply in his debt. Louise ...” The girl in the carriage looked up and bowed, murmuring. “Mademoiselle de Montalais, monsieur: my granddaughter. And Eve ...” She turned to the third, to her whose voice of delightful accent was not in Duchemin’s notion wholly French: “Madame de Montalais, my daughter by adoption, widow of my grandson, who died gloriously for his country at La Fere-Champenoise.”

IV

EVE

When she had graciously permitted Duchemin to assist her to a place in the carriage, Madame Sevenie turned immediately to comfort her granddaughter. It was easy to divine an attachment there, between d’Aubrac and Louise de Montalais; Duchemin fancied (and, as it turned out, rightly) the two were betrothed.

But Madame de Montalais was claiming his attention.

“Monsieur thinks—?” she enquired in a guarded tone, taking advantage of the diversion provided by the elder lady to delay a little before entering the barouche.

“Monsieur d’Aubrac is in no immediate danger. Still, the services of a good surgeon, as soon as may be ...”

“Will it be dangerous to wait till we get to Nant?”

“How far is that, madame?”

“Twelve miles.”

Duchemin looked aside at the decrepit conveyance with its unhappy horses, and summed up a conclusion in a shrug.

“Millau is nearer, is it not, madame?”

“But Nant is not far from the Chateau de Montalais; and at La Roque-Sainte-Marguerite our automobile is waiting, less than two miles below. The chauffeur advised against bringing over the road from La Roque to Montpellier; it is too rough and very steep.”

“Oh!” said Duchemin, as one who catches a glimmering of light.

“Pardon, monsieur?”

“Madame’s chauffeur is waiting with the automobile, no doubt?”

“But assuredly, monsieur.”

He recollected himself. “We shall see what we shall see, then, at La Roque. With an automobile at your disposal, Nant is little more distant than Millau, certainly. Nevertheless, let us not delay.”

“Monsieur is too good.”

Momentarily a hand slender and firm and cool rested in his own. Then its owner was setting into place beside Madame de Sevenie, and Duchemin clambering up to his on the box.

The road proved quite as rough and declivitous as its reputation. One surmised that the Spring rains had found it in a bad way and done nothing to better its condition. Deep ruts and a liberal sprinkling of small boulders collaborated to keep the horses stumbling, plunging and pitching as they strained back against the singletrees. Duchemin was grateful for the moonlight which alone enabled him to keep the road and avoid the worst of the going—until he remembered that without the moon there would have been no expedition that night to view the mock ruins of Montpellier by its unearthly light, and consequently no adventure to entangle him.

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Upon this reflection he swore softly but most fervently into his becoming beard. He was well fed up with adventures, thank you, and could have done very well without this latest. And especially at a time when he desired nothing so much as to be permitted to remain the footloose wanderer in a strange land, a bird of passage without ties or responsibilities.

He thought it devilish hard that one may never do a service to another without incurring a burden of irksome obligations to the served; that bonds of interest forged in moments of unpremeditated and generous impulse are never readily to be broken.

Now because Chance had seen fit to put him in the way of saving a hapless party of sightseers from robbery or worse, he found himself hopelessly committed to take a continuing interest in them. It appeared that their home was a chateau somewhere in the vicinity of Nant. Well, after their shocking experience, and with the wounded man on their hands—and especially if La Roque-Sainte-Marguerite told the story one confidently expected—Duchemin could hardly avoid offering to see them safely as far as Nant. And once there he would be definitely in the toils. He would have to stop in the town overnight; and in the morning he would be able neither in common decency to slip away without calling to enquire after the welfare of d'Aubrac and the tranquillity of the ladies, nor in discretion to take himself out of the way of the civil investigation which would inevitably follow the report of what had happened in Montpellier.

No: having despatched a bandit to an end well-earned, it now devolved upon Andre Duchemin to satisfy Society and the State that he had done so only with the most amiable motives, on due provocation, to save his own life and possibly the lives of others.

He had premonitions of endless delays while provincial authorities wondered, doubted, criticised, procrastinated, investigated, reported, and—repeated.

And then there was every chance that the story, thanks to the prominence of the persons involved, for one made no doubt that the names of Sevenie and Montalais and d'Aubrac ranked high in that part of the world—the story would get into the newspapers of the larger towns in the department. And what then of the comfortable pseudonymity of Andre Duchemin? Posed in an inescapable glare of publicity, how long might he hope to escape recognition by some acquaintance, friend or enemy? Heaven knew he had enough of both sorts scattered widely over the face of Europe!

It seemed hard, indeed....

But it was—of course! he assured himself grimly—all a matter of fatality with him. Never for him the slippered ease of middle age, the pursuit of bourgeois virtues, of which he had so fondly dreamed in Meyrueis. Adventures were his portion, as surely as humdrum and eventless days were many another's. Wars might come and wars might

go: but his mere presence in its neighbourhood would prove enough to turn the Palace of Peace itself into Action Front.

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Or so it seemed to him, in the bitterness of his spirit.

Nor would he for an instant grant that his lot was not without its own, peculiar compensations.

At La Roque, a tiny hamlet huddled in the shadow of Montpellier and living almost exclusively upon the tourists that pass that way, it was as Duchemin had foreseen, remembering the American uniform and the face smudged with soot—that favourite device of the French criminal of the lower class fearing recognition. For there it appeared that, whereas the motor car was waiting safe and sound enough, its chauffeur had vanished into thin air. Not a soul could be found who recalled seeing the man after the barouche Tiad left the village. Whereupon Duchemin asked whether the chauffeur had been a stout man, and being informed that it was so, considered the case complete. Mesdames de Sevenie et de Montalais, he suggested, might as well then and there give up all hope of ever again seeing that particular chauffeur—unless by some mischance entirely out of the reckoning of the latter. The landlord of the auberge, a surly sot, who had supplied the barouche with the man to act as driver and guide in one, took with ill grace the charge that his employee had been in league with the bandits. But this was true on the word of Madame de Montalais; it was their guide, she said, whom Duchemin had driven over the cliff. And (as Duchemin had anticipated) her name alone proved enough to silence the landlord's virtuous protestations. One could not always avoid being deceived, he declared; he knew nothing of the dead man more than that he had come well recommended. With which he said no more, but lent an efficient if sullen hand to the task of transferring d'Aubrac to the motor car.

D'Aubrac came to, while this was being accomplished, begged feebly for water, was given it with a little brandy to boot and, comfortably settled in the rear seat, between Louise de Montalais and her grandmother, relapsed once more into unconsciousness.

Learning that Madame de Montalais would drive, Duchemin dissembled a sigh of relief and, standing beside the car, doffed his cap to say good-bye. He was only too happy to have been of such slight service as the circumstances had permitted; and if at any time he could do more, a line addressed to him at Nimes, poste restante

"But if Monsieur Duchemin would be good enough," Madame de Sevenie interposed in a fretful quaver—"and if it would not be taking him too far out of his way—it is night, anything may happen, the car might break down, and I am an old woman, monsieur, with sorely tried nerves—"

Looking down at him from her place at the wheel, Madame de Montalais added: "It would be an act of charity, I think, monsieur, if it does not inconvenience you too greatly."

“On the contrary,” he fabricated without blushing, “you will be obliging a weary man by putting him several miles on his way.”

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He had no cause to regret his complaisance. Seated beside Madame de Montalais, he watched her operate the car with skilful hands, making the best of a highway none too good, if a city boulevard in comparison with that which they had covered in the barouche.

Following the meandering Dourbie, it ran snakily from patches of staring moonlight to patches of inky shadows, now on narrow ledges high over the brawling stream, now dipping so low that the tyres were almost level with the plane of broken waters.

The sweep of night air in his face was sweet and smooth, not cold—for a marvel in that altitude—and stroked his eyelids with touches as bland as caresses of a pretty woman's fingers. He was sensible of drowsiness, a surrender to fatigue, to which the motion of the motor car, swung seemingly on velvet springs, and the shifting, blending chiaroscuro of the magic night were likewise conducive. So that there came a lessening of the tension of resentment in his humour.

It was true that Life would never let him rest in the quiet byways of his desire; but after all, unrest was Life; and it was good to be alive tonight, alive and weary and not ill-content with self, in a motor car swinging swiftly and silently along a river road in the hills of Southern France, with a woman lovely, soignee and mysterious at the wheel.

Perhaps instinctively sensible of the regard that dwelt, warm with wonder, on the fair curve of her cheek, the perfect modelling of her nose and mouth, she looked swiftly askance, after a time, surprised his admiration, and as if not displeased smiled faintly as she returned attention to the road.

Duchemin was conscious of something like a shock of emotion, a sudden surging of some hunger that had long lain dormant in his being, unsuspected, how long he could not surmise, gaining strength in latency, waiting to be awakened and set free by one careless, sidelong look and smile of a strange woman.

"Eve," he whispered, unheard, "Eve de Montalais ..."

Then of a sudden he caught himself up sharply. It was natural enough that one should be susceptible to gentler impulses, at such a time, under circumstances so strange, so unforeseen, so romantic; but he must not, dared not, would not yield. That way danger lay.

Not that he feared danger; for like most of mankind he loved it well.

But here the danger held potentialities if not the certainty of pain—pain, it might be, not for one alone.

Besides, it was too absurd

V

Phinuit & co.

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In the upshot, however, the necessity of his dismal forebodings had nothing to do with the length of time devoted by Monsieur Duchemin to kicking idle heels in the town of Nant; where the civil authorities proved considerate in a degree that—even making allowance for the local prestige of the house of Montalais—gratified and surprised the confirmed Parisian. For that was just what the good man was at heart and would be till he died, the form in which environment of younger years had moulded him: less French than Parisian, sharing the almost insular ignorance of life in the provinces characteristic of the native boulevardier; to whom the sun is truly nothing more or less than a spotlight focussed exclusively on Paris, leaving the rest of France in a sort of crepuscular gloom, the world besides steeped in eternal night.

The driver-guide of La Roque turned out to have been a thorough-paced scamp, well and ill-known to the gendarmerie; the wound sustained by Monsieur d'Aubrac bore testimony to the gravity of the affair, amply excusing Duchemin's interference and its fatal sequel; while the statements of Mesdames de Sevenie et de Montalais, duly becoming public property, bade fair to exalt the local reputation of Andre Duchemin to heroic stature. And, naturally, his papers were unimpeachable.

So that he found himself, before his acquaintance with Nant was thirty-six hours of age, free once more to humour the dictates of his own sweet will, to go on to Nimes (his professed objective) or to the devil if he liked. A freedom which, consistent with the native inconsistency of man, he exercised by electing to stop over in Nant for another day or two, at least; assuring himself that he found the town altogether charming, more so even than Meyrueis—and sometimes believing this fiction for as much as twenty minutes at a stretch.

Besides, the weather was unsettled

The inn, which went by the unpretending style of the Grand Hotel de l'Univers, he found clean, comfortable, and as to its cuisine praiseworthy. The windows of the cubicle in which he had been lodged—one of ten which sufficed for the demands of the itinerant Universe—not only overlooked the public square and its amusing life of a minor market town, but commanded as well a splendid vista of the valley of the Dourbie, with its piquant contrast of luxuriant alluvial verdure and grim scarps of rock that ran up, on either side the wanton, glimmering river, into two opposed and overshadowing pinnacles of crag, the Roc Nantais and the Roc de Saint Alban—peaks each a rendezvous just then for hosts of cloud that scowled forbiddingly down upon the peaceful, sun-drenched valley.

Moreover, even from the terrasse of the cafe below, one needed only to lift one's eyes to see, afar, perched high upon a smiling slope of green, with the highway to Millau at its foot and a beetling cliff behind, the Chateau de Montalais. Seated on that terrasse, late in the afternoon of his second day in Nant, discussing a Picon and a villainous caporal cigarette of the Regie (to whose products a rugged constitution was growing slowly

reconciled anew) Duchemin let his vision dwell upon the distant chateau almost as constantly as his thoughts.

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He was to dine there that very evening. Even taking into account the signal service Duchemin had rendered, this wasn't easy to believe when one remembered the tradition of social conservatism among French gentlefolk. Still, it was true: Duchemin of the open road was bidden to dine en famille at the Chateau de Montalais. In his pocket lay the invitation, penned in the crabbed antique hand of Madame de Sevenie and fetched to the hotel by a servitor quite as crabbed and antique: Monsieur Duchemin would confer a true pleasure by enabling the ladies of the chateau to testify, even so inadequately, to their sense of obligation, *etc.*; with a postscript to say that Monsieur d'Aubrac was resting easily, his wound mending as rapidly as heart could wish.

Of course Duchemin was going, had in fact already despatched his acceptance by the hand of the same messenger. Equally of course he knew that he ought not to go. For a man of his years he was, as a matter of training and habit, amazingly honest with himself. He knew quite well what bent his inclination toward visiting the Chateau de Montalais just once before effecting, what he was resolved upon, a complete evanishment from the ken of its people. He had yet to hold one minute of private conversation with Eve de Montalais, he had of her no sign to warrant his thinking her anything but utterly indifferent to him; and yet....

No; he wasn't ass enough to dream that he was in love with the woman; to the contrary, he was wise enough, knew himself well enough, to know that he could be, easily, and would be, given half a chance to lose his head.

His warning had been clear beyond mistake, in that hour in the motor car on the road from La Roque to Nant, when Nature, as she sometimes will, incautiously had shown her hand to one whom she herself had schooled to read shrewdly, letting him discern what was her will with him, the snare that was laid for his feet and in which he must soon find himself trapped beyond extrication ... always providing he lacked the wit and resolution to fly his peril, who knew through bitterest of learning that love was never for him.

Now he had seen Madame de Montalais another time, and had found that she fitted to the sweetest detail of perfection his ideal of Woman.

On the previous afternoon, meeting the ladies of the chateau by arrangement in the bureau of the maire, Duchemin had sat opposite and watched and listened to Eve de Montalais for upwards of two hours—as completely devoted to covert study of her as if she had been the one woman in the room, as if the girl Louise, Madame de Sevenie, and the officials and functionaries of Nant had not existed in the same world with her. And in that tedious and constrained time of formalities he had learned much about her, but first of all, thanks to the uncompromising light of day that filled the cheerless room, that moonlight had not enhanced but rather tempered the charms of person which had the night before so stirred his pulses.

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Posed with consummate grace in a comfortless chair, a figure of slender elegance in her half-mourning, she had narrated quietly her version of last night's misadventure, an occasional tremor of humour lightening the moving modulations of her voice. A deep and vibrant voice, contralto in quality, hinting at hidden treasures of strength in the woman whose superficial mind it expressed. A fair woman, slim but round, with brown eyes level and calm, a translucent skin of matchless texture, hair the hue of bronze laced with intimations of gold ...

Her story told, and taken down in longhand by a withered clerk, she supplied without reluctance or trace of embarrassment such intimate personal information as was necessary in order that her signature to the document might be acceptable to the State.

Her age, she said, was twenty-nine; her birthplace, the City of New York; her parents, Edmund Anstruther, once of Bath, England, but at the time of her birth a naturalised citizen of the United States, and Eve Marie Anstruther, nee Legendre, of Paris. Both were dead. In June 1914 she had married, in Paris, Victor Maurice de Montalais, who had been killed in action at La Fere-Champenoise on the ninth of September following. Her home? The Chateau de Montalais.

On the hand she stripped in order to sign her deposition Duchemin saw a blue diamond of such superb water that this amateur of precious stones caught his breath for sheer wonder at its beauty and excellence and worth. Such jewels, he knew, were few and far to seek outside the collections of princes.

Out of these simple elements imagination reconstructed a tragedy, a tragedy of life singularly close to the truth as he later came to learn it, a story not at all calculated to lessen his interest in the woman.

Such women, he knew, are the product of a cultivation seldom to be achieved by poverty. This one had been made before, and not by, her marriage. Her father, then, had commanded riches. And when one knew, as Duchemin knew, what delights New York has for young women of wealth and fashion, one perceived a radiant and many-coloured background for this drab life of a recluse, expatriate from the high world of her inheritance, which Eve de Montalais must lead, and for the six years of her premature widowhood must have led, in that lonely chateau, buried deep in the loneliest hills of all France, the sole companion and comfort of her husband's bereaved sister and grandmother, chained by sorrow to their sorrow, by an inexorable reluctance to give them pain by seeming to slight the memory of the husband, brother and grandson through turning her face toward the world of life and light and gaiety of which she was so essentially a part, isolate from which she was so inevitably a thing existing without purpose or effect.

How often, Duchemin wondered, had she in hours of solitude and restlessness felt her spirit yearning toward Paris, the nearest gateway to her world, and had cried out: How long, O Lord! how long?...

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The mellow resonance of a two-toned automobile horn, disturbing the early evening hush and at the same time Duchemin's meditations, recalled him to Nant in time to see a touring car of majestic proportions and mien which, coming from the south, from the direction of the railroad and Nimes, was sweeping a fine curve round two sides of the public square. Arriving in front of the Hotel de l'Univers it executed a full stop and stood curbed yet palpitant, purring heavily: an impressive brute of a car, all shining silver plate and lustrous green paint and gold, the newest model of the costliest and best automobile manufactured in France.

Instantly, as the wheels ceased to turn, a young man in the smartest livery imaginable, green garnished with gold, leaped smartly from the driver's seat, with military precision opened the door of the tonneau and, holding it, immobilised himself into the semblance of a waxwork image with the dispassionate eye, the firm mouth, and the closely razored, square jowls of the model chauffeur. Rustics and townsfolk were already gathering, a gaping audience, when from the tonneau descended first a long and painfully emaciated gentleman, whose face was a cadaverous mask of settled melancholy and his chosen toilette for motoring (as might be seen through the open and flapping front of his ulster) a tightly tailored light grey cutaway coat and trousers, with a double-breasted white waistcoat, a black satin Ascot scarf transfixed by a single splendid pearl, and spotless white spats.

His hand, as gaunt as a skeleton's, assisted to alight a young woman whose brilliant blonde beauty, viewed for the first time in evening shadows, was like a shaft of sunlight in a darkened room. A well-made creature, becomingly and modishly gowned for motoring, spirited yet dignified in carriage, she was like a vision of, as she was palpably a visitation from, the rue de la Paix.

Following her, a third passenger presented the well-nourished, indeed rotund, person of a Frenchman of thirty devoted to "le Sport"; as witness his aggressively English tweeds and the single glass screwed into his right eye-socket. His face was chubby, pink and white, his look was merry, he was magnificently self-conscious and debonnaire.

Like shapes from some superbly costumed pageant of High Life in the Twentieth Century this trio drifted, rather than merely walked like mortals, across the terrasse and into the Cafe de l'Univers (which seemed suddenly to shrink in proportion as if reminded of its comparative insignificance in the Scheme of Things) where an awed staff of waiters, led by the overpowered proprietaires, monsieur et madame themselves, welcomed these apparitions from Another and A Better World with bowings and scrapings and a vast bustle and movement of chairs and tables; while all Nant, all of it, that is, that was accustomed to foregather in the cafe at this the hour of the aperitif, looked on with awed and envious eyes.

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It was all very theatrical and inspiring—to Monsieur Duchemin, too; who, lost in the shuffle of Nant and content to be so, murmured to himself that serviceable and comforting word of the time, “Profiteers!” and contemplated with some satisfaction his personal superiority to such as these.

But there was more and better to come.

There remained in the car a mere average man, undistinguished but by a lack of especial distinction, sober of habit, economical of gesture, dressed in a simple lounge suit such as anybody might wear, beneath a rough and ready-made motorcoat. When the car stopped he had stood up in his place beside the chauffeur as if meaning to get out, but rather remained motionless, resting a hand on the windshield and thoughtfully gazing northwards along the road that, skirting the grounds of the Chateau de Montalais, disappeared from view round the sleek shoulder of a hill.

Now as the pattern chauffeur shut the door to the tonneau with the properly arrogant slam, the man who lingered in the car nodded gravely to some private thought, unlatched the door, got down, and turned toward the cafe, but before following his companions of more brilliant plumage paused for a quiet word with the chauffeur.

“We dine here, Jules,” he announced in English.

Settling into place behind the wheel Jules saluted with fine finish and deference.

“Very good, Mr. Phinuit, sir,” he said meekly, in the same tongue. To this he added, coolly, without the least flicker of a glance aside, without moving one muscle other than those involved by the act of speech, and in precisely the tone of respect that became his livery: “What’s the awful idea, you big stiff?”

Mr. Phinuit betrayed not the slightest sense of anything untoward in this mode of address, but looked round to the chauffeur with a slow, not unfriendly smile.

“Why,” he said pleasantly—“you misbegotten garage hound—why do you ask?”

In the same manner Jules replied: “Can’t you see it’s going to rain?”

Mr. Phinuit cocked a calm, observant eye heavenwards. Involuntarily but unobtrusively, under cover of the little tubbed trees that hedged the terrasse apart from the square, Duchemin did likewise, and so discovered, or for the first time appreciated, the cause of the uncommonly early dusk that loomed over Nant.

Between the sentinel peaks that towered above the valley black battalions of storm cloud were fraternising, joining forces, coalescing into a vast and formidable army of ominous aspect.

“So it is,” Mr. Phinuit commented amiably; indeed, not without a certain hint of satisfaction. “Blessed if you don’t see everything!”

“Well, then: what about it?”

“Why, / should say you’d better find a place to put the car under cover in case it comes on to storm before we’re finished—and put up the top.”

“You don’t mean to go on in the rain?” Jules protested—yet studiously in no tone of protest.

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“But naturally...”

“How do you get that way? Do you want us all to get soaked to our skins?”

“My dear Jules!” Mr. Phinuit returned with a winning smile—“I don’t give a tupenny damn if we do.” With that he went to join his company; while Jules, once the other’s back was turned, permitted himself, for the sake of his own respect and the effect upon the assembled audience, the luxury of a shrug that outrivalled words in expression of his personal opinion of the madness that contemplated further travel on such a night as this promised to be.

Then, like the well-trained servant that he was not, he meshed gears silently and swung the car away to seek shelter, taking with him the sympathy as well as the wonder of the one witness of this bit of by-play who had been able to understand the tongue in which it was couched; and who, knowing too well what rain in those hills could mean, was beginning to regret that his invitation to the chateau had not been for another night.

As for the somewhat unusual tone of the passage to which he had just listened, his nimble wits could invent half a dozen plausible explanations. It was quite possible, indeed when one judged Mr. Phinuit by his sobriety in contrast with the gaiety of the others it seemed quite plausible, that he was equally with Jules a paid employee of those ostensible nouveaux riches: and that the two, the chauffeur and the courier (or whatever Mr. Phinuit was in his subordinate social rating) were accustomed to amuse themselves by indulging in reciprocal abuse.

But what Duchemin could by no means fathom was the reason why Phinuit should choose, and how he should rule the choice of his party, in the face of such threatening weather, to stop in Nant for an early dinner—with Millau only an hour away and the chances fair that before the storm broke the automobile would reach the latter city with its superior hotel and restaurant accommodations.

But it was after all none of the business of Andre Duchemin. He lighted another cigarette, observing the group of strangers in Nant with an open inquisitiveness wholly Gallic, therefore inconspicuous. The entire clientele of the Cafe de l’Univers was doing the same; Mr. Phinuit’s party was the focal point of between twenty and thirty pair of staring eyes, and was enduring this with much equanimity.

Mr. Phinuit was conferring earnestly over the menu with madame la proprietaire. The others were ordering aperitifs of a waiter. Through the clatter of tongues that filled the cafe one caught the phrase “veeskysoda” uttered by the monsieur in tweeds. Then the tall man consulted the beautiful lady as to her preference, and Duchemin caught the words “madame la comtesse” spoken in the rasping nasal drawl of an American.

Evidently a person of rich humour, the speaker: “madame la comtesse” was abruptly convulsed with laughter; the chubby gentleman roared; Mr. Phinuit looked up from the carte with an enquiring, receptive smile; the waiter grinned broadly. But the cause of all this merriment wore only an expression of slightly pained bewilderment on his death-mask of a face.

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At that moment arrived the caleche which Duchemin had commanded to drive him to the chateau; and with a ride of two miles before him and rain imminent, he had no more time to waste.

VI

VISITATION

Dinner was served in a vast and sombre hall whose darkly panelled walls and high-beamed ceiling bred a multitude of shadows that danced about the table a weird, spasmodic saraband, without meaning or end, restlessly advancing and retreating as the candles flickered, failed and flared in the gusty draughts.

There was (Duchemin learned) no other means of illumination but by candle-light in the entire chateau. The time-old structure had been thoroughly renovated and modernised in most respects, it was furnished with taste and reverence (one could guess whose the taste and purse) but Madame de Sevenie remained its undisputed chatelaine, a belated spirit of the ancien regime, stubbornly set against the conveniences of this degenerate age. Electric lighting she would never countenance. The telephone she esteemed a convenience for tradespeople and vulgarians in general, beneath the dignity of leisured quality. The motor car she disapproved yet tolerated because, for all her years, she was of a brisk and active turn and liked to get about, whereas since the War good horseflesh was difficult to find in France and men to care for it more scarce still.

So much, and more besides, she communicated to Duchemin at intervals during the meal, comporting herself toward him with graciousness not altogether innocent of a certain faded coquetry. Having spoken of herself as one born too late for her time, she paused and eyed him keenly, a gleam of light malice in her bright old eyes.

"And you, too, monsieur," she added suddenly. "But you, I think, belong to an even earlier day..."

"I, madame? And why do you say that?"

"I should have been guillotined under the Terror; but you, monsieur, you should have been hanged long before that—hanged for a buccaneer on the Spanish Main."

"Madame may be right," said Duchemin, amused. "And quite possibly I was, you know."

Then he wondered a little, and began to cultivate some respect for the shrewdness of her intuitions.

He sat on her left, the place of honour going by custom immemorial to monsieur le cure of Nant. For all that, Duchemin declined to feel slighted. Was he not on the right of Eve de Montalais?

The girl Louise was placed between the cure and her sister-in-law. Duchemia could not have been guilty of the offence of ignoring her; but the truth is that, save when courtesy demanded that he pay her some attention, he hardly saw her. She was pretty enough, but very quiet and self-absorbed, a slender, nervous creature with that pathetically eager look peculiar to her age and caste in France, starving for the life she might not live till marriage should set her free.

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A pale and ineffective wraith beside Eve, whose beauty, relieved in candleglow against the background of melting darkness, burned like some rare exotic flower set before a screen of lustreless black velvet. And like a flower to the sun she responded to the homage of his admiration—which he was none the less studious to preserve from the sin of obviousness. For he was well aware that her response was impersonal; it was not his but any admiration that she craved as a parched land wants rain.

Less than three months a wife, more than five years a widow, still young and ardent, nearing the noontide of her womanhood, and immolated in this house of perennial mourning, making vain oblation of her youth, her beauty, the rich wine of life that coursed so lustily through her being, upon the altar of a memory whose high priestess was only an old, old woman....

He perceived that it would be quite possible for him, did he yield to the bent of his sympathies, to dislike Madame de Sevenie most intensely.

Not that he was apt to have much opportunity to encourage such a gratuitous aversion: to-morrow would see him on the road again, his back forever turned to the Chateau de Montalais....

Or, if not to-morrow, then as soon as the storm abated.

It was raging now as if it would never weaken and had the will to raze the chateau though it were the task of a thousand years. From time to time the shock of some great blast of air would seem to rock upon its foundations even that ancient pile, those heavy walls of hewn stone builded in times of honest workmanship by forgotten Sieurs de Montalais who had meant their home to outlast the ages.

Rain in sheets sluiced the windows without rest. Round turrets and gables the wind raved and moaned like a famished wild thing denied its kill. Occasionally a venturesome gust with the spirit of a minor demon would find its way down the chimney to the drawing-room fire and send sparks in volleys against the screen, with thin puffs of wood smoke that lingered in the air like acrid ghosts.

At such times the cure, sitting at piquet with Madame de Sevenie, after dinner, would cough distressingly and, reminded that he had a bed to reach somehow through all this welter, anathematise the elements, help himself to a pinch of snuff, and proceed with his play.

Duchemin sat at a little distance, talking with Madame de Montalais over their cigarettes. To smoking, curiously enough, Madame de Sevenie offered no objection. Women had not smoked in her day, and she for her part would never. But Eve might: it

was “done”; even in those circles of hidebound conservatism, the society of the Faubourg St. Germain, ladies of this day smoked unrebuked.

Louise had excused herself—to sit, Duchemin had no doubt, by the bedside of d’Aubrac, under the duenna-like eye of an old nurse of the family.

Being duly encouraged, Duchemin talked about himself, of his wanderings and adventures, all with discretion, with the neatest expurgations, and with an object, leading cunningly round to the subject of New York.

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At mention of it he saw a new light kindle in Eve's eyes. Her breath came more quickly, gentle emotion agitated her bosom.

Monsieur knew New York?

But well: he had been there as a boy, again as a young man; and then later, in the year when America entered the Great War; not since ...

"It is my home," said Eve de Montalais softly, looking away.

(One noted that she said "is"—not "was.")

So Duchemin had understood. Madame had not visited her home recently?

Not in many years; not in fact since nineteen-thirteen. She assumed the city must have changed greatly.

Duchemin thought it was never the same, but forever changing itself overnight, so to speak; and yet always itself, always like no other city in the world, fascinating....

"Fascinating? But irresistible! How I long for it!" She was distraught for an instant. "My New York! Monsieur—would you believe?—I dream of it!"

He had found a key to one chamber in the mansion of her confidence. As much to herself as to him, unconsciously dropping into English, she began to talk of her life "at home"....

Her father had been a partner in a great jewellery house, Cottier's, of Paris, London, and New York. (So that explained it! She was wearing the blue diamond again tonight, with other jewels worth, in the judgment of a keen connoisseur, a king's ransom.) Schooled at an exclusive establishment for the daughters of people of fashion, Eve at an early age had made her debut; but within the year her father died, and her mother, whose heart had always been in the city of her nativity, closed the house on East Fifty-seventh street and removed with her daughter to Paris. There Eve had met her future husband. Shortly after, her mother died. Eve returned to New York to attend to some business in connection with her estate, remaining only a few weeks, leaving almost reluctantly; but the new love was very sweet, she had looked forward joyfully to the final transplanting of her affections.

And then the War, the short month of long, long days in the apartment on the avenue des Champs-Élysées, waiting, waiting, while the earth trembled to the tramp of armed men and the tireless rumbling of caissons and camions, and the air was vibrant with the savage dialogue of cannon, ever louder, daily more near....

She fell silent, sitting with bowed head and gaze remote.

From the splendid jewels that adorned the fingers twisting together in her lap, the firelight struck coruscant gleams.

“Now I hate Paris, I wish never to see it again.”

Duchemin uttered a sympathetic murmur.

“But New York—?”

“Ah, but sometimes I think I would give anything to be there once more!”

The animation with which this confession was delivered proved transient.

“Then I remind myself I have no one there—a few friends, yes, acquaintances; but no family ties, no one dear to me.”

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“But—pardon—you stay here?”

“It is beautiful here, monsieur.”

“But such solitude, such isolation—for you, madame!”

“I know. Still, I am fond of the life here; it was here I found myself again, after my grief. And I am fond of my adopted mother and Louise, too, and they of me. Indeed, I am all they have left. Louise, of course, will marry before long, Georges”—she used d’Aubrac’s given name—“will take her away, then Madame de Sevenie will have nobody but me. And at her age, it would be too sad...”

Across the drawing-room that lady looked up from her cards and sharply interrogated a manservant who had silently presented himself to her attention.

“What is it you want, Jean?”

The servant mumbled his justification: An automobile had broken down on the highroad near the chateau, the chauffeur was unable to move the car or make any repairs in the storm, a gentleman had come to the door to ask....

He moved aside, indicating the doorway to the entrance hall, beyond which Mr. Phinuit was to be seen, standing with cap in hand, tiny rivulets running from the folds of his motor-coat and forming pools on the polished flooring. As in concerted movement Madame de Sevenie, Eve de Montalais, the cure and Duchemin approached, his cool, intelligent, good-humoured glance surveyed them swiftly, each in turn, and with unerring instinct settled on the first as the one to whom he must address himself.

But the bow with which he also acknowledged the presence of Eve was hardly less profound; Duchemin himself, at his best, could hardly have bettered it. His manner, in fact, left nothing to be desired; and the French in which immediately he begged a thousand pardons for the intrusion was so admirable that it seemed hard to believe he was the same man who had, only a few hours earlier, composedly traded the slang of the States with a chauffeur in front of the Cafe de l’Univers.

Mr. Phinuit was desolated to think he might be imposing on madame’s good nature, but the accident was positive, the night truly inclement, madame la comtesse was already suffering from the cold, and if one might beg shelter for her and the gentlemen of the party while one telephoned or sent to Nant for another automobile....

But monsieur might feel very sure Madame de Sevenie would never forgive herself if the hospitality of the Chateau de Montalais failed at such a time. She would send servants to the car at once with lights, wraps, umbrellas....



There was no necessity for that. The remainder of the party had, it seemed, presumed upon her courtesy in anticipation, and was not far from the heels of its ambassador. Even while madame was speaking, Jean was opening the great front doors to those who proved—formal introductions being duly effect by Mr. Phinuit—to be Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes, monsieur le comte, her husband (this was the well-fed body in tweeds) and Mr. Whitaker Monk, of New York.

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These personages were really not at all in a bad way. Their wraps were well peppered with rain, they were chilly, the footgear of madame la comtesse was wet and needed changing. But that was the worst of their plight. And when Mr. Phinuit, learning that there was no telephone, had accepted an offer of the Montalais motor car to tow the other under cover and so enable Jules to make repairs, and Eve de Montalais had carried madame la comtesse off to her own apartment to change her shoes and stockings, the gentlemen trooped to the drawing-room fire, at the instance of Madame de Sevenie, and grew quite cheerful under the combined influence of warmth and wine and biscuits; Duchemin standing by with a half-rejected doubt to preoccupy him, vaguely disturbed by the oddness of this rencontre considered in relation to that injudicious stop for dinner at Nant in the face of the impending storm, and with Mr. Phinuit's declaration that he didn't give a tupenny damn if they did all get soaked to their skins.

It seemed far-fetched and ridiculous to imagine that people of their intelligence—and they were most of them unusually intelligent and alert, if demeanour and utterances might be taken as criterion—should adopt any such elaborate machinery of mystification and duplicity in order to gain an introduction to the Chateau de Montalais. With what possible motive...?

But there was the devil of having a mind like Duchemin's: once it conceived a notion like that, it was all but impossible for him to dislodge it unless or until something happened to persuade him of his stupidity.

Now to make his suspicions seem at all reasonable, a motive was lacking. And that worried the man hugely. He desired most earnestly to justify his captiousness; and to this end exercised a power of conscientious observation on his new acquaintances.

Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes he was disposed to pass at face value, as an innocuous being, good natured enough but none too brilliant, with much of the disposition of an overgrown boy and a rather boyish tendency to admire and imitate in others qualities which he did not himself possess.

Mr. Phinuit had not returned, so there was no present opportunity to take further note of him; though Duchemin first inferred from Mr. Monk's manner, and later learned through a chance remark of his, that Phinuit was his secretary.

Upon this Mr. Monk Duchemin concentrated close attention, satisfied that he had here to do with an extraordinary personality, if not one unique.

Mr. Whitaker Monk might have been any age between thirty-five and fifty-five, so non-committal was that lantern-jawed countenance of a droll, with its heavy, black, eloquent eyebrows, its high and narrow forehead merging into an extensive bald spot fringed with

greyish hair, its rather small, blue, illegible eyes, its high-bridged nose and prominent nostrils, its wide and thin-lipped mouth, its rather startling pallor.

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Taller by a head than anybody in the room except Duchemin, his figure was remarkably thin, yet not ill-proportioned. Neither was Mr. Monk ill at ease or ungraceful in his actions. Clothed in that extravagantly correct costume—correct, at least, for a drawing-room, if never for motoring—he had all the appearance of a comedian fresh from the hands of his dresser. One naturally expected of him mere grotesqueries—and found simply the courteous demeanour of a gentleman of the world. So much for externals. But what more? Nature herself had cast Mr. Monk in the very mould of a masquerader. What manner of man was hidden behind the mask? His words and deeds alone would tell; Duchemin could only weigh the one and await the other.

In the meantime Mr. Monk was sketching rapidly for the benefit of Madame de Sevenie the excuse for his present plight.

A chance meeting at Monte Carlo, he said, with his old friends, the Comte et Comtesse de Lorgnes, had resulted in their yielding to his insistence that they tour with him back to Paris by this roundabout way.

“A whim of my age, madame.” Somehow the nasal intonation of the American suited singularly well his fluent French; he seemed to have less trouble with his R’s than most Anglo-Saxons. “As a young man—a younger man—ah, well, in Ninety-four, then—I explored this country on a walking tour, inspired by Stevenson. You know, perhaps, his diverting *Travels with a Donkey*? But I daresay its spirit would hardly have survived translation.... At all events, I had the whim to revisit some of those well-remembered scenes. I say some, for naturally it would be impossible, even with the vastly improved roads of to-day, for my automobile to penetrate everywhere I wandered afoot. Nor would I wish it to; a few disappointments, a few failures to recapture something of that first fine careless rapture, would instill a lyric melancholy; but too many would make one morbid.... Well, then: at Nant, in those old days, I once had a famous dinner; and naturally, returning, I must try to duplicate it, even though it meant going on to Millau in the rain. But alas! the Cafe de l’Univers is no more what it was—or I am grown over critical.”

What now of Duchemin’s doubts? To tell the sad truth, they were just as strong as ever. The man was somehow prejudiced: he found Monk’s story entirely too glib, and knew a mean sense of gratification when the cure interposed a gentle correction.

“But in Ninety-four, monsieur, there was no Cafe de l’Univers in Nant.”

Astonished eyebrows climbed the forehead of Mr. Monk.

“No, monsieur le cure? Truly not? Then it must have been another. How one’s memory will play one false!”

“How strange, then, is coincidence,” Madame de Sevenie suggested. “You who made a walking tour of this country so long ago, monsieur, regard there that good Monsieur Duchemin, himself engaged upon just such an undertaking.”

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Duchemin acknowledged with a humorous little nod Mr. Monk's look of moderate amazement at this so strange coincidence.

"A whim of my age, monsieur," he said—"a project I have entertained since youth but always, till of late, lacked leisure to put into execution."

"But is there anything more wonderful than the workings of the good God?" madame pursued. "Observe that, if Monsieur Duchemin had been suffered to indulge his inclination in youth, we should all, I, my daughter, my grand-daughter, even poor Georges d'Aubrac, would quite probably be lying dead at the bottom of a cirque at Montpellier-le-Vieux."

Naturally the strangers required to know about that, and Madame de Sevenie would talk, in fact doted on telling the tale of that great adventure. Duchemin made a face of resignation, and heard himself extolled as a paladin for strength, address and valour; the truth being that he was not at all resigned and would infinitely liefer have been left out of the limelight. The more he was represented as a person of consequence, the less fair his chance to study these others at his leisure, in the comfortable obscurity of their indifference.

Now the enigmatic eyes of Monk were boring into him, seeking to search his soul, with a question in their stare which he could not read and, quite likely, would have declined to answer if he could. Also the eyes of Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes were very round and constant to him. And before Madame de Sevenie was finished, Phinuit strolled in and heard enough to make him subject Duchemin to a not unfriendly, steady and open inspection.

And when the trumpets had been flourished finally for Duchemin, and he had dutifully assured madame that she was too generous and had acknowledged congratulations on his exploit, Phinuit strolled over and offered a hand.

"Good work," he said in English. "Seen you before, haven't I, somewhere, Mr. Duchemin?"

Under other circumstances Duchemin, not at all hoodwinked by this too obvious stratagem, would have taken mean pleasure in looking blank and begging monsieur to interpret himself in French. But, with or without cunning, Phinuit's question was well-timed: Eve de Montalais was at that moment entering the drawing-room with Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes, and she knew very well that Duchemin's English was quite as good as his French.

"At the Cafe de l'Univers, this afternoon," he replied frankly.



"I remember. You drove away, just before the storm broke, in a ramshackle rig that must have come out of the Ark."

"To come here, Mr. Phinuit."

"Funny," said Phinuit, with hesitation, "your being there, and then our turning up here."

Duchemin thought he knew what was on the other's mind. "I was immensely entertained—do you mind my saying so?—to hear the way your chauffeur talked to you, monsieur. Tell me: Is it the custom in your country—?"

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"Oh, Jules!" said Phinuit, and laughed. "Jules is my younger brother. When he was demobilised his job was gone, back home, and I wished him on Mr. Monk as a chauffeur. We're always kidding each other like that."

Now what could be more reasonable? Duchemin wondered, and concluded that, if anything, it would be the truth. But he did not pretend to himself that he wasn't, quite illogically and with no provocation whatsoever, most vilely prejudiced against the lot of them.

"But you must know America, to speak the language as well as you do."

Duchemin nodded: "But very slightly, monsieur."

"I was wondering ... Somehow I can't get it out of my head I've seen you somewhere before to-day."

"It is quite possible: when one moves about the world, one is visible—n'est-ce pas, monsieur? But my home," Duchemin added, "is Paris."

"I guess," said Phinuit in a tone of singular disappointment, "it must have been there I saw you."

Duchemin's bow signified that he was content to let it go at that. Moreover, Monk was signalling to Phinuit with his expressive eyebrows.

"What about the car, Phin?"

Examining his wrist watch, Phinuit drew near his employer. "Jules should not need more than half an hour now, monsieur."

Was there, in this employment of French to respond to a question couched in English, the suggestion of a subtle correction? From employe to employer? If not, why must Duchemin have thought so? If so, why did Monk, without betraying a sign of feeling the reproof, continue in French?

"Did Jules say half an hour?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"My God!" Monk addressed the company: "If I were pressed for time, I would rather have one of Jules' half-hours than anybody else's hour and a half."

"Let us hope, however," the Comtesse de Lorgnes interposed sweetly, "by that time this so dreadful tempest will have moderated."

“One has that hope,” her husband uttered in a sepulchral voice.

“But, if the storm continue,” Madame de Sevenie said, “you must not think of travelling farther—on such a night. The chateau is large, there is ample accommodation for all...”

There was a negligible pause, during which Duchemin saw the long lashes of the Comtesse de Lorgnes curtain momentarily her disastrous violet eyes: it was a sign of assent. Immediately it was followed by the least of negative movements of her head. She was looking directly at Phinuit, who, so far as Duchemin could see, made no sign of any sort, who neither spoke nor acted on the signals which, indubitably, he had received. On the other hand, it was Monk who acknowledged the proffered courtesy.

“Madame de Sevenie is too good, but we could not dream of imposing ... No, but truly, madame, I am obliged to ask my guests to proceed with me to Millau to-night regardless of the weather. Important despatches concerning my business await me there; I must consider them and reply by cable to-night without fail. It is really of the most pressing necessity. Otherwise we should be honoured...”

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Madame de Sevenie inclined her head. "It must be as monsieur thinks best."

"But Monsieur Monk!" madame la comtesse exclaimed with vivacity: "do you know what I have just discovered? You and Madame de Montalais are compatriots. She is of your New York. You must know each other."

"I have been wondering," Monk admitted, bowing to Eve, "if it were possible I could be misled by a strong resemblance."

Eve turned to him with a look of surprise. "Yes, monsieur?"

"It is many years ago, you were a young girl then, if it was truly you, madame; but I have a keen eye for beauty, I do not soon forget it ... I was in the private office of my friend, Edmund Anstruther, of Cottier's, one afternoon, selecting a trinket with his advice, and —"

"That was my father, monsieur."

"Then it was you, madame; I felt sure of it. You came in unannounced, to see your father. He made me known to you as a friend of his, and requested you to wait in an adjoining office. But that was not necessary, I had already made up my mind, I left almost immediately. Do you by any chance remember?"

The effort of the memory knitted Eve's brows; but in the end she shook her head. "I am sorry, monsieur—"

"But why should you be? Why should you have remembered me? You were a young girl, then, as I say, and I already a man of middle age. You saw me once, for perhaps two minutes. It would have been a miracle had I remained in your memory for as long as a single day. Nevertheless, I remembered."

"I am so glad to meet a friend of my father's, monsieur."

"And I to recall myself to his daughter. I have often wondered ... Would you mind telling me something, Madame de Montalais?"

"If I can..."

"Your father and I entertained one passion in common, one which he was better able than I to gratify, for good diamonds and emeralds. I have often wondered what became of his collection. He had some superb stones."

"I inherited them, monsieur."

"They did not find their way into Cottier's stock, then?"

The Comtesse de Lorgnes gave a gesture of excitement. "But what a fortunate woman! You truly have those magnificent emeralds, those almost matchless diamonds, of which one has heard—the Anstruther collection?"

"I have them, Madame la Comtesse," said Eve with a smiling nod—"yes."

"But, one presumes, in Paris, in some impregnable strong-box."

"No, madame, here."

"But not here, Madame de Montalais!" To this Eve gave another nod and smile. "But are you not afraid—?"

"Of what, madame? That they will be stolen? No. They have been in my possession for years—indeed, I should be unhappy otherwise, for I have inherited my father's fondness for them—and nobody has ever even attempted to steal them."

"But what of the affair at Montpellier the other night?" enquired the Comte de Lorgnes—"that terrible attack upon you of which Madame de Sevenie has just told us? Surely you would call that an attempt to steal."

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"Simple highway robbery, if you like, monsieur le comte. But even had it proved successful, I had very few jewels with me. All that mattered, all that I would have minded losing, were here, in a safe place."

"Nevertheless," said Monk—"if you will permit me to offer a word of advice—I think you are very unwise."

"It may be, monsieur."

"Nonsense!" Madame de Sevenie declared. "Who would dare attempt to burglarise the Chateau de Montalais? Such a thing was never heard of."

"There is always the first time for everything, Madame," Monk suggested gently. "I fancy it was your first experience of the sort, at Montpellier."

"A rascally chauffeur from Paris, a few low characters of the department. Since the war things are not as they were."

"That is the very reason why I suggest, madame—"

"But, monsieur, I assure you all my life I have lived at Montalais. Monsieur le cure will tell you I know every face hereabouts. And I know that these poor country-folk, these good-natured dolts of peasants have not the imagination, much less the courage—"

"But what of criminals from outside, from the great cities, from London and Paris and Berlin? They have the imagination, the courage, the skill; and if they ever get wind of the fortune Madame de Montalais keeps locked up here..."

"What of the Lone Wolf?" the Comtesse de Lorgnes added. "I have heard that one is once more in France."

Duchemin blinked incredulously at the speaker. "But when did you hear that, madame la comtesse?"

"Quite recently, monsieur."

"I had understood that the monsieur in question had long since retired."

"Only for the duration of the war, monsieur, I am afraid."

"It is true, according to all reports," the Comte de Lorgnes said: "Monsieur Lanyard—that was the name, was it not?"

"If memory serves, monsieur le comte," Duchemin agreed.

“Yes.” The count screwed his chubby features into a laughable mask of gravity. “Now one remembers quite well. He passed as a collector of objets d’art, especially of fine paintings, in Paris, for years before the War—this Monsieur Michael Lanyard. Then he disappeared. It was rumoured that he was of good service to the Allies as a spy, acting independently; and after the Armistice, I have heard, he did well for England in the matter of a Bolshevik conspiracy over there. But not long ago, according to my information, Monsieur the Lone Wolf resigned from the British Secret Service and returned to France—doubtless to resume his old practices.”

“Perhaps not,” Duchemin suggested. “Possibly his reformation was genuine and lasting.”

The Comtesse de Lorgnes laughed that laugh of light derision which is almost exclusively the laugh of the Parisienne of a certain class. Remarking this, Duchemin eyed her mildly.

“Madame la Comtesse does not believe that. Well—who knows?—perhaps she is right. Possibly she knows more of the nature and habits of the criminal classes than we, sharing as she does, no doubt, the apparently accurate and precise sources of information of monsieur le comte.”

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"At all events," Phinuit put in promptly, "I know what I would do if I possessed a little fortune in jewels, and learned that a thief of the ability of this Lone Wolf was at large in France: I would charter an armoured train to convey the loot to the strongest safe deposit vault in Paris."

"Thereby advertising to the Lone Wolf the exact location of the jewels, monsieur, so that he might at his leisure make his plans perfect to burglarise the vaults?"

"Is that likely?" Phinuit jeered.

Duchemin gave a slight shrug.

"One has heard that the fellow had real ability," he said.

The servant Jean came in, caught the eye of Madame de Sevenie, and announced:

"The chauffeur of Monsieur Monk wishes me to say he has completed repairs on the automobile, and the rain has ceased."

VII

TURN ABOUT

Duchemin took back with him to Nant, that night, not only monsieur le cure in the hired caleche, but food in plenty for thought, together with a nebulous notion, which by the time he woke up next morning had taken shape as a fixed conviction, that he had better resign himself to stop on indefinitely at the Grand Hotel de l'Univers and ... see what he should see.

That fatality on which he had so bitterly reflected when; acting as emergency coachman en route from Montpellier-le-Vieux to La Roque-Sainte-Marguerite, had him now fairly by the heels, as it were his very shadow, something as tenacious, as inescapable. Or he had been given every excuse for believing that such was the case. Impossible—and the more so the longer he pondered it—to credit to mere coincidence the innuendoes uttered at the chateau by Mr. Monk and his party.

No: there had been malice in that, Duchemin was satisfied, if not some darker purpose which perplexed the most patient scrutiny.

Now malice without incentive is unthinkable. But Duchemin searched his memory in vain for anything he could have said or done to make anybody desire to discredit him in the sight of the ladies of the Chateau de Montalais. Still the attempt so to do had been unmistakable: the Lone Wolf had been lugged into the conversation literally by his legendary ears.

Surely, one would think, that nocturnal prowler of pre-War Paris had been so long dead and buried even the most ghoulish gossip should respect his poor remains and not disinter them merely to demonstrate that the Past can never wholly die!

Had he, then, some enemy of old hidden under one of those sleek surfaces?

An excellent visual memory reviewed successively the physical characteristics of Messieurs Monk, Phinuit and de Lorgnes, and their chauffeur Jules; with the upshot that Duchemin could have sworn that he had never before known any of these.

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And Madame la Comtesse? In respect of that one memory again drew a blank, but remained unsatisfied. When one thought of her some remote, faint chord of reminiscence thrilled and hummed, but never recognisably. Not that there was anything remarkable in this: if one cared to look for them, the world was thronged with women such as she, handsome, spirited, well-groomed animals endued with some little distinction of manner, native or acquired, with every appeal to the senses and more or less, generally spurious, to the intelligence. They made the theatre possible in France, leavened the social life of the half-world, fluttered conspicuously and often disastrously through circles of more sedate society, had their portraits in every Salon, their photographs in every issue of the fashionable journals. Some made history, others fiction: either would be insufferably dull lacking their influence. But they were as much alike as so many peas, out of their several shells, and the man who saw one inevitably remembered all.

Setting aside then the theory of positive personal animus, what other reason could there be for the effort to fasten upon Duchemin suspicion of identity with the late Lone Wolf?

A sinister consideration, if any, and one, Duchemin suspected, not unconnected with the much-talked-about jewels of Madame de Montalais...

But it was absurd to believe that persons fostering a design of such nature would so deliberately and obviously advertise their purpose!

Cheerfully admitting that he was an imbecile to think of such a thing, Duchemin set his mental alarm for six the following morning, rose at that hour, and by eight had tramped the five miles between Nant and the nearest railway station, Combe-Redonde; where he despatched a code telegram to London, requesting any information it might have or be able to obtain concerning Mr. Whitaker Monk of New York and the several members of his party; the said information to be forwarded in code to await the arrival of Andre Duchemin at the Hotel du Commerce, Millau.

And then, partly to kill time, partly to get himself in trim for to-morrow's trip, which he meant to make strictly in character as the pedestrian tourist, he walked round three sides of a square in returning to Nant—by way, that is, of Sauclieres and the upper valley of the Dourbie.

In the rich sunshine that fell from a cloudless sky—even the twin peaks that stood sentinel over Nant had shamelessly put off their yashmaks for the day—the rain-fresh world was sweet to see; and Duchemin found himself consuming leagues with heels strangely light; or he thought their lightness strange until he discovered the buoyance of his heart, which wasn't strange at all. He knew too well the cause of that; and had given over fretting about the inevitable. The sum of his philosophy was now: *What must be, must*. It would have been difficult to be unhappy in the knowledge that one retained still

the capacity to love generously, honourably, expecting nothing, exacting nothing, regretting nothing, not even in anticipation of the ultimate, inevitable heartache.

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Toward mid-afternoon a solitary mischance threw a passing shadow upon his content. As he trudged along the river road, on the last lap of his journey—Nant almost in sight—he heard a curious, intermittent rumble on a steep hillside whose foot was skirted by the road, and sought its cause barely in time to leap for life out of the path of a great boulder that, dislodged from its bed, possibly by last night's deluge, was hurtling downhill with such momentum that it must have crushed Duchemin to a pulp had he been less alert.

Striking the road with an impact that left a deep, saucer-shaped dent, with one final bound the huge stone, amid vast splashings, found its last resting place in the river.

Duchemin moved out of the way of the miniature avalanche that followed, and for some minutes stood reviewing with a truculent eye the face of the hillside. But nothing moved thereon, it was quite bare of good cover, little more than a slant of naked earth and shale, dotted manywhere with boulders, cousins to that which sought his life—none, however, so large. If human agency had moved it, the stone had come from the high skyline of the hill; and by the time one could climb to this last, Duchemin was sure, there would be nobody there to find.

The remainder of the afternoon was wasted utterly on the terrasse of the Cafe de l'Univers, with the chateau ever in view, wishing it were convenable to make one's duty call without more delay. But it wasn't; not to wait a decent interval would be self-betraying, since Duchemin had no longer any immediate intention of moving on from Nant; finally, he rather hoped to get news at Millau that would strengthen a prayer to Eve de Montalais to be sensible and remove her jewels to a place of safe-keeping before it was too late.

Millau, however, disappointed. At the end of a twenty-mile walk on a day of suffocating heat, Duchemin plodded wearily into the Hotel du Commerce, engaged a room for the night, and was given a telegram from London which rewarded decoding to some such effect as this:

"Monk American independent means good repute no information as to others have asked Surete concerning Lorgnes would give something to know what mischief you are meddling with this trip and why the deuce you must."

Few things are better calculated to curdle the milk of human kindness than to find that one's fellow-man has meanly contrived to keep his reputation fair when one is satisfied it should be otherwise. Duchemin used bitter language in strict confidence with himself, disliked his dinner and, after conscientiously loathing the sights of Millau for an hour or two, sought his bed in the devil's own humour.

Though he waited till eleven of the following forenoon, there was no supplementary telegram: London evidently meant him to understand that the Surete in Paris had

communicated nothing to the discredit of Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes and his consort.

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Enquiry of the administration of the Hotel de Commerce elicited the information that the Monk party had stopped there on the night of the storm, doubled back in the morning to visit Montpellier-le-Vieux, returning for midday dejeuner, and had then proceeded for Paris, just like any other well-behaved company of tourists.

There was nothing more to be done but go back to Nant and—what made it even more disgusting—nothing to be done there except ... wait...

Thoroughly disgruntled, more than half persuaded he had staked a claim for a mare's-nest, he took the road in the heat of a day even more oppressive than its yesterday. In the valley of the Dourbie the air was stagnant, lifeless. After eight miles of it Duchemin was guilty of two mistakes of desperation.

In the first instance he paused in La Roque-Sainte-Marguerite and, tormented by thirst, refreshed himself at the auberge where the barouche and guide had been hired to convey the party from Montalais on to Montpellier. The landlord remembered Duchemin and made believe he didn't, serving the wayfarer with a surly grace the only drink he would admit he had to sell, an atrociously acid cider fit to render the last stage of thirst worse than the first.

Duchemin, however, thought it safer than the water of the place, when he had spied out the associations of the well.

He drank sitting on a bench outside the door of the auberge. He could hear the voice of the landlord inside, grumbling and growling, to what purport he couldn't determine. But it wasn't difficult to guess; and before Duchemin was finished he had testimony to the rightness of his surmise, finding himself the cynosure of more than a few pair of eyes set in the ill-favoured faces of natives of La Roque.

One gathered that the dead guide had enjoyed a fair amount of local popularity.

While Duchemin drank and smoked and pored over a pocket-map of the department, a lout of a lad shambled out of the auberge wearing a fixed scowl in no degree mitigated by the sight of the customer. In the dooryard, which was also the stableyard, the boy caught and saddled a dreary animal, apparently a horse designed by a Gothic architect, mounted, and rode off in the direction of Nant.

Then Duchemin committed his second error of judgment, which consisted in thinking to find better and cooler air on the heights of the Causse Larzac, across the river, together with a shorter way to Nant—indicated on the pocket-map as a by-road running in a tolerably direct line across the plateau—than that which followed the windings of the stream.

Accordingly he crossed the Dourbie, toiled up a zig-zag path cut in the face of the frowning cliff, reached the top in a bath of sweat, and sat down to cool and breathe himself.

The view was splendid, almost worth the climb. Duchemin could see for miles up and down the valley, a panorama wildly picturesque and limned like a rainbow. Across the way La Roque-Sainte-Marguerite stood out prominently and with such definition in that clear air that Duchemin identified the figure of the landlord, standing in the door of the auberge with arms raised and elbows thrust out on a level with his eyes: the pose of a man using field-glasses.

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Duchemin wondered if he ought to feel complimented. Then he looked up the valley and saw, far off, a tiny cloud of dust kicked up by the heels of the horse ridden by the boy from the auberge, making good time on the highway to Nant. And again Duchemin wondered...

Having rested, he picked himself up, found his road, a mere trail of wagon tracks, and mindful of the cooling drinks to be had in the Cafe de l'Univers, put his best foot foremost.

After a time something, call it instinct, impelled him to look back the way he had come. Half a mile distant he saw the figure of a peasant following the same road. Duchemin stopped and waited for the other to come up, thinking to get a better look at him, perhaps some definite information about the road and in particular as to his chances of finding drinkable water. But when he stopped the man stopped, sat him down upon a rock, filled a pipe, and conspicuously rested.

Duchemin gave an impatient gesture and moved on. After another mile he glanced oversoulder again. The same peasant occupied the same relative distance from him.

But if the fellow were following him with a purpose, he could readily lose himself in that wild land before Duchemin could run him down; and if, on the contrary, he proved to be only a peaceable wayfarer, he was bound to be a dull companion on the road, and an unsavory one to boot. So Duchemin did nothing to discourage his voluntary shadow; but looking back from time to time, never failed to see that squat, round-shouldered figure in the middle distance of the landscape, following him with the doggedness of Fate. Toward evening, however, of a sudden—between two glances—the fellow disappeared as completely and mysteriously as if he had fallen or dived into an aven.

Thus definite mental irritation was added to the physical discomforts he suffered. For if anything it was hotter on the high causee than it had been in the valley. An intermittent breeze imitated to vicious perfection draughts from a furnace. And if this were a short cut to Nant, Duchemin's judgment was gravely at fault.

Otherwise the journey was not unlike an exaggerated version of his walk from Meyrueis to Montpellier-le-Vieux, except that the road was clearly marked and he found less climbing to do. He saw neither hamlets nor farmsteads, and found no water. By the middle of the afternoon his thirst had become sheer torture.

In dusk of evening he stumbled down into the valley again and struck the river road about midway between the Chateau de Montalais and Nant. At this junction several dwellings clustered, in that fading light dark masses on either side of the road. Duchemin noticed a few shadowy shapes loitering about, but was too far gone in fatigue and thirst to pay them any heed. He had no thought but to stop at the first house and beg a cup of water. As he lifted a hand to knock the door he was attacked.

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With no more warning than a cry, the signal for the onslaught, and the sudden scuffling noise of several pair of feet, he wheeled, found himself already closely pressed by a number of men, and struck out at random. His stick landed on somebody's head with a resounding thump followed by a yell of pain. Then three men were grappling with him, two more seeking to aid them, and another lay in the roadway clutching a fractured skull and spitting oaths and groans.

His stick was seized and wrenched away, he was over-whelmed by numbers. The knot of struggling figures toppled and went to the dust, Duchemin underneath, so weighed down that he could not for the moment move a hand toward his pistol.

Half-stifled by the reek of unwashed flesh, he heard broken phrases growled in voices hoarse with effort and excitement:

"The knife!" ... "Hold him!" ... "Stand clear and let me—!" ... "The knife!"

Struggling madly, he worked a leg free and kicked with all his might. One of his assailants howled aloud and fell back to nurse a broken shin. Two others scrambled out of the way, leaving one to pin him down with knees upon his chest, another to wield the knife.

Staring eyes caught a warning gleam on descending steel. Duchemin squirmed frantically to one side, and felt cold metal kiss the skin over his ribs as the blade penetrated his clothing, close under the armpit.

Before the man with the knife could strike again, Duchemin, roused to a mightier effort, threw off the ruffian on his chest, got on his knees and, raining blows right and left as the others closed in again, somehow managed to scramble to his feet.

Fist-work told. For an instant he stood quite free, the centre of a circle of uncertain assassins whose cowardice gave him time to whip out his pistol. But before he could level it a man was on his back, his wrist was seized and the weapon twisted from his grasp.

A cry of triumph was echoed by exclamations of alarm as, disarmed, Duchemin was again left free, the thugs standing back to let the pistol do its work. In that instant a broad sword of light swung round a nearby corner and smote the group: the twin, glaring eyes of a motor car flooded with blue-white radiance that tableau of one man at bay in the middle of the road, in a ring of merciless enemies.

Duchemin's cry for help was uttered only an instant before his pistol exploded in alien hands. The headlights showed him distinctly the face of the man who fired, the same face of fat features black with soot that he had seen by moonlight at Montpellier-le-Vieux.

But the bullet went wild, and the automobile did not stop, but drove directly at the group and so swiftly that the flash of the shot was still vivid in Duchemin's vision when the car swept between him and those others, scattering them like chickens.

Simultaneously the brakes were set, the dark bulk began to slide with locked wheels to a stop, and a voice cried: "Quickly, monsieur, quickly!"—the voice of Eve de Montalais.

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In two bounds Duchemin overtook the car and before it had come to a standstill leaped upon the running-board and grasped the side. He had one glimpse of the set white face of Eve, en profile, as she bent forward, manipulating the gear-shift. Then the pistol spat again, its bullet struck him a blow of sickening agony in the side.

Aware that he was dangerously wounded, he put all that he had left of strength and will into one final effort, throwing his body across the door. As he fell sprawling into the tonneau consciousness departed like a light withdrawn.

VIII

In re Amor et Al.

In the course of two weeks or so Duchemin was able to navigate a wheeled chair, bask on the little balcony outside his bedchamber windows in the Chateau de Montalais, and even—strictly against orders—take experimental strolls.

The wound in his side still hurt like the very deuce at every ill-considered movement; but Duchemin was ever the least patient of men unless the will that coerced him was his own; constraint to another's, however reasonable, irked him to exasperation; so that these falterings in forbidden ways were really (as he assured Eve de Montalais when, one day, she caught him creeping round his room, one hand pressed against the wall for support, the other to his side) in the nature of a sop to his self-respect.

"You've only got to tell me not to do a thing often enough," he commented as she led him back to his chair, "to fill me with unholy desire to do it if I die in the attempt."

"Isn't that a rather common human failing?" she asked, wheeling the invalid chair through one of the french windows to the balcony.

"That's what makes it all seem so unfair."

Smiling, the woman turned the back of the chair to the brightest glare of sunshine, draped a light rug over the invalid's knees, and seated herself in a wicker chair, facing him.

"Makes all what seem so unfair?"

"The indignity of being born human." He accepted a cigarette and waxed didactic: "The one thing that the ego can find to reconcile it with existence is belief in its own uniqueness."

"I don't think," she interrupted with a severe face belied by amused eyes, "that sounds quite nice."

“Uniquity? Because it sounds like iniquity? They are not unrelated. What makes iniquity seem attractive is as a rule its departure from the commonplace.”

“But you were saying—?”

“Merely it’s our personal belief that our emotions and sensations and ways of thought are peculiar to ourselves, individually, that sometimes makes the game seem worth the scandal.”

“Yes: one presumes we all do think that...”

“But no sooner does one get firmly established in that particular phase of self-complacency than along comes Life, grinning like a gamin, and kicks over our pretty house of cards—shows us up to ourselves by revealing our pet, exclusive idiosyncrasies as simple infirmities all mortal flesh is heir to.”



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"Monsieur is cynic..."

"Madame means obvious. Well: if I patter platitudes it is to conceal a sense of gratification." Eve arched her eyebrows. "I mean, you have shown me that I share at least one quality with you: instinctive resentment of the voice of reason."

She pronounced a plaintive "Mon Dieu!" and appealing to Heaven for compassion declared: "He means again to wrestle spiritually with me about the proper disposition of my jewels."

"No, madame: pardon. I am contemplating a long series of exhaustive arguments designed to prove it your duty to leave your jewels where they are, in all their noble insecurity. This in the firm belief that to plead with you long enough to adopt this course will result in your going and doing otherwise out of sheer..."

"Perversity, monsieur?"

"Humanity, madame!"

Eve de Montalais laughed the charming, low-keyed laugh of a happily diverted woman.

"But spare yourself, monsieur. I surrender at discretion: I will do as you wish."

"Truly? Rather than listen to my discourse, you actually agree to remove your jewels to a safe place?"

"Even so, monsieur. As soon as you are able to get about, and the Chateau de Montalais lacks a guest, I will leave Louise to take care of madame ma mere for a few days while I journey to Paris—"

"Alone?"

"But naturally."

"Taking your jewels with you?"

"Why else do I go?"

"But, madame, you must not—"

"And why?"

"You, a woman! travel alone to Paris with a treasure in jewels? Ah, no! I should say not!"

"Monsieur is emphatic," Eve suggested demurely.

“Monsieur means to be. Rather than let you run such a risk I would steal the jewels myself, convey them to Paris, put them in safe keeping, and send you the receipt.”

“What a lot of trouble monsieur would save me, if he would only be so kind as to do as he threatens.”

“And how amusing if he were arrested en route,” Duchemin supplemented with a wry smile.

“I am quite confident of your ability to elude the police, monsieur.”

“Do I hear you compliment me?”

“If you take it so...”

“But suppose you were not confident of my good will?”

“Impossible.”

“Madame is too flattering; one is sure she is too wise to put so great a temptation in the way of any man.”

“Monsieur is the reverse of flattering; he implies that one does not know where one can repose trust.”

“I must warn madame there are those in this world who would call her faith misplaced.”

“Doubtless. But what of that? Am I to distrust you because others might who do not know you so well?”

“But—madame—you can hardly claim to know me well.

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"Listen, my friend." Eve de Montalais flicked away her cigarette and sat forward, elbows on knees, hands laced, her level gaze holding his. "It is true, our acquaintance is barely three weeks old; but you do injustice to my insight if you assume I have learned nothing about you in all that time. You have not been secretive with me. The mask you hold between yourself and the world, lest it pry into what does not concern it, has been lowered when you have talked with me; and I have had eyes to see what was revealed —"

"Ah, madame!"

"—the nature of a man of honour, monsieur, simple of heart and generous, as faithful as he is brave."

Eve had spoken impulsively, with warmth of feeling unrealised until too late. Now slow colour mantled her cheeks. But her eyes remained steadfast, candid, unashamed. It was Duchemin who dropped his gaze, abashed.

And though nothing had any sense in his understanding other than the words which he had just heard from the lips of the woman who held his love—as he had known now these many days—some freak of dual consciousness made him see, for the first time, in that moment, how oddly bleached and wasted seemed the powerful, nervous, brown hands that rested on his knees. And he thought: It will be long before I am strong again.

With a troubled smile he said: "I would give much to be worthy of what you think of me, madame. And I would be a poor thing indeed if I failed to try to live up to your faith."

"You will not fail," she replied. "What you are, you were before my faith was, and will be afterwards, when..."

She did not finish, but of a sudden recollected herself, lounged back in her chair, and laughed quietly, with humorous appeal to his sympathy.

"So, that is settled: I am not to be permitted to take my jewels to Paris alone. What then, monsieur?"

"I would suggest you write your bankers," said Duchemin seriously, "and tell them that you contemplate bringing to Paris some valuables to entrust to their care. Say that you prefer not to travel without protection, and request them to send you two trusted men—detectives, they may call them—to guard you on the way. They will do so without hesitation, and you may then feel entirely at ease."

"Not otherwise, you think?"

"Not otherwise, I feel sure."



“But why? You have been so persistent about this matter, monsieur. Ever since that night when those curious people stopped here in the rain.... Can it be that you suspect them of evil designs upon my trinkets?” Duchemin shrugged. “Who knows, madame, what they were? You call them ‘curious’; for my part I find the adjective apt.”

“I fancy I know what you thought about them...”

“And that is—?”

“That they rather led the conversation to the subject of my jewels.”

“Such was my thought, indeed.”

“Perhaps you were right. If so, they learned all they needed to know.”

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"Except possibly the precise location of your strong box."

"They may have learned even that."

"How, madame?"

"I don't know; but if they were what you suspect they were, they were clever people, far more clever than poor provincials like us." She took a moment for thought. "But I am puzzled by their harping on the subject of—I think they called him the Lone Wolf. Now why should they do that?"

Duchemin was constrained to take refuge in another shrug. "Who knows?" he iterated. "If they were as clever as we assume, doubtless they were clever enough to have a motive even for that."

"He really existed, this Lone Wolf? He was more than a creature of fable?"

"Assuredly, madame. For years he was the nightmare and the scourge of people of wealth in every capital of Europe."

"Why did they call him the Lone Wolf, do you know?"

"I believe some imaginative Parisian journalist fixed that sobriquet on him, in recognition of the theory upon which, apparently, he operated."

"And that was—?"

"That a criminal, at least a thief, to be successful must be absolutely anonymous and friendless; in which case nobody can betray him. As madame probably understands, criminals above a certain level of intelligence are seldom caught by the police except through the treachery of accomplices. The Lone Wolf seems to have exercised a fair amount of ingenuity and prudence in making his coups; and inasmuch as he had no confederates, not a living soul in his confidence, there was no one who could sell him to the authorities."

"Still, in the end—?"

"Oh, no, madame. He was never caught. He simply ceased to thief."

"I wonder why..."

"I believe because he fell in love and considered good faith with the object of his affections incompatible with a career of crime."

“So he gave up crime. How romantic! And the woman: did she appreciate the sacrifice?”

“While she lived, yes, madame. Or so they say. Unfortunately, she died.”

“And then—?”

“So far as is known the converted enemy to Society did not backslide; the Lone Wolf never prowled again.”

“An extraordinary story.”

“But is not every story that has to do with the workings of the human soul? What one of us has not buried in him a story quite as strange? Even you—”

“Monsieur deceives himself. I am simply—what you see.”

“But what I see is not simple, but complex and intriguing beyond expression. A woman of your sort walling herself up in a wilderness, renouncing the world, renouncing life itself in its very heyday—!”

“But hardly that, monsieur.”

“Then I am stupid...”

“I will explain.” The sleekly coiffured brown head bent low over hands that played absently with their jewels. “To a woman of my sort, monsieur, life is not life without love. I lived once for a little time, then love was taken out of my life. When my sorrow had spent itself, I knew that I must find love again if I were to go on living. What was I to do? I knew that love is not found through seeking. So I waited...”

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"Such philosophy is rare, madame."

"Philosophy? No: I will not call it that. It was knowledge—the heart wise in its own wisdom, surpassing mine, telling me that if I would but be patient love would one day seek me out again, wherever I might wait, and give me once more—life."

She rose and went to the window, paused there, turning back to Duchemin a face composed but fairer for a deepened flush.

"But this is not writing to my bankers, monsieur," she said in a changed but steady voice. "I must do that at once if I am to get the letter in to-day's post."

"If madame will accept the advice of one not without some experience..."

"What else does monsieur imagine I am doing?"

"Then you will write privately and burn your blotting paper; after which you will post the letter with your own hands, letting nobody see the address."

"And when shall I say I will make the journey?"

"As soon as your bankers can send their people to the Chateau de Montalais."

"That will be in three days..."

"Or less."

"As soon as your bankers can send their people to the Chateau de Montalais."

"That will be in three days..."

"Or less." "But you will not be strong enough to leave us within another week."

"What has that to do—?"

"This: that I refuse positively to go away while you are our guest, monsieur. Somebody must watch over you and see that you come to no harm."

"But madame—!"

"No: I am quite resolved. Monsieur has too rare a genius for getting in the way of danger. I shall not leave the chateau before you do. So I shall set this day week for the date of my journey."

IX

BLIND MAN'S BUFF

In short, Monsieur Duchemin considered convalescence at the Chateau de Montalais one of the most agreeable of human estates, and counted the cost of admission thereunto by no means dear; and with all his grouching (in respect of which he was conscientious, holding it at once a duty and a perquisite of his disability) he was at heart in no haste whatever to be discharged as whole and hale. The plain truth is, the man malingered shamelessly and even took a certain pride in the low cunning which enabled him to pose on as the impatient patient when he was so very well content to take his ease, be waited on and catered to, and listen for the footsteps of Eve de Montalais and the accents of her delightful voice.

These last he heard not often enough by half. Still, he seldom lacked company in the long hours when Eve was busy with the petty duties of her days, and left him lorn. Madame de Sevenie had taken a flattering fancy to him, and frequently came to gossip beside his bed or chair. He found her tremendously entertaining, endowed as she was with an excellent and well-stored memory, a gift of caustic characterization and a pretty taste in the scandal of her bygone day and generation, as well as with a mind still active and better informed on the affairs of to-day than that of many a Parisienne of the haute monde and half her age.

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During the first bedridden week, Georges d'Aubrac visited Duchemin at least once each day to compare wounds and opinions concerning the inefficiency of the local gendarmerie. For that body accomplished nothing toward laying by the heels the authors of the attacks on d'Aubrac and Duchemin, but (for all Duchemin can say to the contrary) is still following "clues" with the fruitless diligence of so many American police detectives on the trail of a bank messenger accused of stealing bonds.

A decent, likable chap, this d'Aubrac, as reticent as any Englishman concerning his part in the Great War. Duchemin had to talk round the subject for days before d'Aubrac confessed that his record in the French air service had won him the title of Ace; and this only when Duchemin found out that d'Aubrac was at present, in his civilian capacity, managing director of an establishment manufacturing airplanes.

At the end of that week he left to go back to his business; and Louise de Montalais replaced him at Duchemin's side, where she would sit by the hour reading aloud to him in a voice as colourless as her unformed personality. Nevertheless Duchemin was grateful, and with the young girl as guide for the *nth* time sailed with d'Artagnan to Newcastle and rode with him toward Belle Isle, with him frustrated the machinations of overweening Aramis and yawned over the insufferable virtues of that most precious prig of all Romance, Raoul, Vicomte de Bragelonne.

But the third week found Duchemin mending all too rapidly; the time came too soon when the word "to-morrow" held for him all the dread significance, he assured himself, that it holds for a condemned man on the eve of execution.

To-morrow the detectives commissioned by Madame de Montalais's bankers would arrive. To-morrow Eve would set out on her journey to Paris. To-morrow Andre Duchemin must walk forth from the Chateau de Montalais and turn his back on all that was most dear to him in life.

On that last day he saw even less of Eve than usual. She was naturally busy with preparations for her trip, a trifle excited, too; it would be only the third time she had left the chateau for as long as overnight since returning to it after her husband's death. When Duchemin did see her, she seemed at once exhilarated and subdued, and he thought to detect in her attitude toward him a trace of apprehensiveness.

She knew, of course; Duchemin at thirty-eight was too well versed in lore of women to dream he had succeeded in keeping his secret from the fine intuition of one of thirty. But—he told himself a bit bitterly—she ought to know him well enough by this time to know more, that she need not fear he would ever speak his heart to her. The social gulf that set their lives apart was all too wide to be spanned but by a miracle of love required; and he had too much humility and naivete of soul to presume that such a thing could ever come to pass. And even if it should, there remained the insuperable barrier

of her fortune, in the face of which the pretensions of a penniless adventurer could only seem silly...

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He was permitted to be about the house in the afternoon and to dine with Eve and Louise in the draughty, shadow-haunted dining hall. Madame de Sevenie was indisposed and kept to her room; she suffered from time to time from an affection of the heart, nothing remarkable in one of her advanced age and so no excuse for unusual misgivings. But the presence of the young girl in some measure, and the emotions of the others in greater, lent the conversation a constraint against which Duchemin's attempts at levity could not prevail. The talk languished and revived fitfully only when some indifferent, impersonal topic offered itself. The weather, for example, enjoyed unwonted vogue. It happened to be drizzling; Eve was afraid of a rainy morrow. She confessed to a minor superstition, she did not really like to start a journey in the rain...

She smoked only one cigarette with Duchemin in the drawing-room after dinner, then excused herself to wait on Madame de Sevenie and finish her packing. It was time, too, for Duchemin to remember he was still an invalid and subject to a regime prescribed by his surgeon: he must go early to his bed.

"I am sorry, mon ami," the woman said, hesitating after she had left her chair before the fire; whose play of broken light was, perhaps, responsible for some of the softness of her eyes as she faced Duchemin and gave him her hand—"sorry our last evening together must be so brief. I am in the mood to sit and talk with you for hours to-night..."

"If you could only manage even one, madame!" She shook her head gently, with a wistful smile. "There will never be another night..."

"I know, I know; and the knowledge makes me very sad. I have enjoyed knowing you, monsieur, even under such distressing circumstances..."

"My wound? You tempt me to seek another!"

"Don't be absurd." He was still holding her hand, and she made no move to free it, but seeming forgetful of it altogether, lingered on. "I shall miss you, monsieur. The chateau will seem lonely when I return, I shall feel its loneliness more than I have ever felt it."

"And the world, madame," said Duchemin—"the world into which I must go—it, too, will seem a lonely place,—a desert, haunted..."

"You will soon forget ... Chateau de Montalais."

"Forget! when all I shall have will be my memories—!"

"Yes," she said, "we shall both have memories..." And suddenly the rich, deep voice quoted in English: "Memories like almighty wine."

She offered to disengage her hand, but Duchemin tightened gently the pressure of his fingers, bowing over it and, as he looked up for her answer, murmuring: "With

permission?" She gave the slightest inclination of her head. His lips touched her hand for a moment; then he released it. She went swiftly to the door, faltered, turned.

"We shall see each other in the morning—to say au revoir. With us, monsieur, it must never be adieu."

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She was gone; but she had left Duchemin with a singing heart that would not let him sleep when he had gone to bed, stared blankly at the last chapter of Bragelonne for an hour, and put out his candle.

Till long after midnight he tossed restlessly, bedevilled alternately by melancholy and exhilaration, or lay staring blindly into the darkness, striving to focus his thoughts upon the abstract, a hopeless effort; trying to think where to go to-morrow, whither to turn his feet when the gates of Paradise had closed behind him, and knowing it did not matter, he did not care, that hereafter one place and another would be the same to him, so that they were not the place of her abode.

The chateau was as still as any castle of enchantment; only an old clock in the drawing room, two floors below, tolled the slow hours; and through the open windows came the mournful murmur of the river, a voice of utter desolation in the night.

He heard the clock strike two, and shortly after, in a fit of exasperation, thinking to discipline his mind with reading, lighted the candle on the bedside stand, found his book, and fumbled vainly in the little silver casket beside the candlestick for a cigarette.

Now a sincere smoker can do without smoking for hours on end, as long as the deprivation is voluntary. But let him be without the wherewithal to smoke if he have the mind to, and he must procure it instantly though the heavens fall. It was so then with Duchemin. And what greater folly could there be than to want a cigarette and do without one when there were plenty in the drawing-room, to be had for the taking?

He rose, girdled about him his dressing-gown, took up the candlestick, opened his door. The hallway was as empty and silent as he had expected to find it. He had no fear of disturbing the household, for his slippers were of felt and silent and the stairs were of stone and creakless.

Shielding the candle flame with his hand, and somewhat dazzled by the light thus cast into his face, he passed the floor on which the three ladies of the chateau had each her separate suite of rooms, and gained the drawing-room as noiselessly as any ghost.

The fire had died down till only embers glowed, faint under films of ash, like an old anger growing cold with age.

The cigarettes were not where he had expected to find them, near one end of a certain table. Duchemin put down the candlestick and moved toward the other end, discovering the box he sought as soon as his back was turned to the light. In the same breath this last went out.

He stood for a moment transfixed in astonishment. There were no windows open, no draughts that he could feel, nothing to account for the flame expiring as it had, suddenly,

without one flicker of warning. An insane thing to happen to one, at such an hour, in such a place...

Involuntarily memory harked back to the night of his first dinner in the chateau, when the shadows had danced so weirdly, and the strange notion had come to him that they were like famished spectres, greedy of the lights, yearning to spring and snatch and feed upon them, as wolves might snatch at chops.

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A mad fancy...

When he turned back to relight the candle, it was gone.

At least he must have been mistaken as to the exact spot where he had placed it. Perplexed, he pawed over all that end of the table. But no candlestick was there.

He straightened up sharply, and stood quite still, listening. No sound...

His vision spent itself fruitlessly against the blackness, which the closed window draperies rendered absolute but for those dull, sardonic eyes of dying embers.

In spite of himself he knew a moment when flesh crawled and the hair seemed to stir upon the scalp; for Duchemin knew he was not alone; there was something else in the room with him, something nameless, stealthy, silent, sinister; having knowledge of him, where he stood and what he was, while he knew nothing of it, only that it was there, keeping surveillance over him, itself unseen in its cloak of darkness.

Then with a resolute effort of will he mastered his imagination, reminding himself that spirits gifted in the matter of moving material objects such as candlesticks, frequent only the booths of seance mediums.

Without a sound he stepped back one pace, then two to one side, away from the table. They were long strides; when he paused he was well away from the spot where he had stood when the light was extinguished and where, consequently, a hostile move might be expected to develop. Otherwise his plight was little bettered; he did not quite know where he was in relation to the doors and the pieces which furnished the room. That old-time habit of memorising the arrangement of furniture in a room immediately on entering it had failed through disuse in course of years. He was acquainted with the plot of this drawing-room in a general way but by no means with such accuracy as was needed to serve him now.

So he waited, straining to cheat that opaque pall of night of one little hint as to his whereabouts who had removed the light. Resurrecting another old trick, he measured time by pulse-beats, and stood unstirring and all but breathless for three full minutes. But perceptions stimulated to extra sensibility by apprehension of danger detected nothing. And his hearing was so keen, he told himself, no breath could have been drawn in that time without his having knowledge of it. Still, he knew he was not alone. Somewhere in that encompassing murk an alien and inimical intelligence skulked.

Baffled by powers of patience and immobility that mocked his own, he moved again, edging toward the entrance-hall, a progress so gradual he could have sworn it must be imperceptible. Yet he had a feeling, a suspicion, perhaps merely a fear, that he did not stir a finger without the other's knowledge.

A hand extended about a foot encountered the back of an upholstered chair, which he identified by touch. Assuming the chair to be occupying its usual position, he need only continue in a line parallel with the line of its back to find the entrance-hall in about six paces.

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Within three he stopped dead, as if paralysed by sudden instinctive perception of that other presence close by.

Whether he had drawn near to it, inch by inch, or whether it, seeing him about to make good his escape, had crept up on him, he could not say. He only knew that it was there, within arm's-length, waiting, tense, prepared, and somehow deadly in its animosity.

Digging the nails deep into the palms of his hands, until the pain relieved his nervous tension, he waited once more, one minute, two, three.

But nothing ...

Then very slowly he lifted an arm, and swept it before him right and left. At one point of the arc, a trifle to his left, his finger-tips brushed something. He thought he detected a stir in the darkness, a stifled sound, stepped forward quickly, clawing the air, and caught between his fingers a wisp of some material, like silk, sheer and glaze, a portion of some garment.

Simultaneously he heard a smothered cry, of anger or alarm, and the night seemed to split and be rent into fragments by a thousand shooting needles of coloured flame.

Smitten brutally on the point of the jaw, his head jerked back, he reeled and fell against a chair, which went to the floor with a muffled crash.

X

But as A Mustard Seed...

Duchemin woke up in his bed, glare of sunlight in his eyes.

From the latter circumstance he reckoned, rather groggily, it must be about the middle of the forenoon; for not till about that time did the sun work round to the windows.

Still heavy with lees of slumber, his wits occupied themselves sluggishly with questions concerning the enervation that oppressed him, the reason for his oversleeping, why he had not been called. Then, reminded that noon was the hour set for Eve's departure, fear lest she get away without his bon voyage brought him sharply up in a sitting position.

He groaned aloud and with both hands clutched temples that promised to split with pain that crashed between them, stroke upon stroke, like blows of a mighty hammer.

A neatly fastened bandage held in place, above one ear, a wad of cotton once saturated with arnica, now dry. Duchemin removed these and with gingerly fingers explored, discovering a noble swelling on the side of his head, where the cotton had been placed.

Also, his jaw was stiff, and developed a protesting ache whenever he opened his mouth.

Then Duchemin remembered ... That is to say, he recalled clearly all that had led up to that vicious blow from out of the darkness which had found his jaw with such surprising accuracy; and he was visited by one or two rather indefinite memories of subsequent events.

He remembered labouring up the stairs, half walking, half supported by the strong arms of the footman, Jean, who was in shirt, trousers and slippers only, while in front of them moved the shape of Madame de Montalais en negligee, carrying a lighted candle and constantly looking back.

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Then he had an impression of being lifted into his bed by Jean, and of having his head and shoulders raised by the same arms some time later, so that he might drink a draught of some concoction with a pleasant aromatic taste and odour, in a glass held to his lips by Eve de Montalais.

And then (Duchemin had a faint smile of appreciation for a mental parallel to the technique of the cinema) a singularly vivid and disturbing memory of her face of loveliness, exquisitely tender and compassionate, bended so near to his, faded away into a dense blank of sleep ...

Somewhat to his surprise he found the watch on his wrist ticking away as callously as though its owner had not experienced a prolonged lapse of consciousness. It told him that Eve would leave the chateau within another hour.

He got up hastily, grunting a bit—though his headache was no longer so acute; or else he was growing accustomed to it—and ringing for the valet-de-chambre ordered his petit déjeuner. Before this was served he spent several thrilling minutes under an icy shower and emerged feeling more on terms with himself and the world.

The valet-de-chambre brought with his tray the announcement that Madame de Montalais presented her compliments and would be glad to see monsieur at his convenience in the grand salon. So Duchemin made short work of his dressing, his cafe-au-lait and half a roll, and hurried down to the drawing-room.

Seated in an easy chair, in the tempered light of an awninged window which stood open on the terrasse, nothing in her pose—she was waiting quietly, hands folded in her lap—and nothing in her countenance, in the un-lined brow, the grave, serene eyes, lent any colour to his apprehensions. And yet in his heart he had known that he would find her thus, and alone, no matter what had happened....

Her profound reverie disturbed by his approach, she rose quickly, advancing to meet Duchemin with both hands offered in sympathy.

“My dear friend! You are suffering—?”

He met this with a smiling denial. “Not now; at first, yes; but since my bath and coffee, I’m as right as a trivet. And you, madame?”

“A little weary, monsieur, otherwise quite well.”

She resumed her chair, signing to Duchemin to take one nearby. He drew it closer before sitting down.

“But madame is not dressed for her journey!”

“No, monsieur. I have postponed it—” a slight pause prefaced one more word—
“indefinitely.”

At this confirmation of the fears which had been haunting him, Duchemin nodded slightly.

“But the men sent here by your bankers—?”

“They have not yet arrived; we may expect them at any moment now.”

“I see,” said Duchemin thoughtfully; and then—“May I suggest that we continue our conversation in English. One never knows who may overhear...”

Her eyebrows lifted a little, but she adopted the suggestion without other demur.

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"The servants?"

He nodded: "Or anybody."

"Then you have guessed—?"

"Broadly speaking, everything, I fancy. Not in any detail, naturally. But one puts two and two together ... I may as well tell you to begin with: I was wakeful last night, and finding no cigarettes in my room, came down here to get some. I left my candle on the table—there. As soon as my back was turned, somebody took it away and put it out. A few minutes later, while I was trying to steal out of the room, I ran into a fist..."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully; and with some hesitation added: "I, too, found it not easy to sleep. But I heard nothing till that chair crashed. Then I got up to investigate ... and found you lying there, senseless. In falling your head must have struck the leg of the table."

"You came down here—alone?"

"I listened first, heard no sound, saw no light; but I had to know what the noise meant..."

"Still, you came downstairs alone!"

"But naturally, monsieur."

"I don't believe," said Duchemin sincerely, "the world holds a woman your peer for courage."

"Or curiosity?" she laughed. "At all events, I found you, but could do nothing to rouse you. So I called Jean, and he helped me get you upstairs again."

"Where does Jean sleep?"

"In the servants' quarters, on the third floor, in the rear of the house."

"It must have taken you some time..."

"Several minutes, I fancy. Jean sleeps soundly."

"When you came back with him—or at any time—did you see or hear—?"

"Nothing out of the normal—nobody. Indeed, I at first believed you had somehow managed to overexert yourself and had fainted—or had tripped on something and, falling, hurt your head."

"Later, then, you found reason to revise that theory?"



“Not till early this morning.”

“Please tell me...”

“Well, you see ... It all seemed so strange, I couldn’t sleep when I went back to bed, I lay awake, puzzled, uneasy. It was broad daylight before I noticed that the screen which stands in front of my safe was out of place. The safe is built into the solid wall, you know. I got up then, and found the safe door an inch or so ajar. Whoever opened it last night, closed it hastily and neglected to shoot the bolts.”

“And your jewels, of course—?”

She pronounced with unbroken composure: “They have left me nothing, monsieur.”

Duchemin groaned and hung his head. “I knew it!” he declared. “No credit to me, however. Naturally, whoever stole my candle and knocked me out didn’t break into the house for the fun of it ... I imagine that, what with finding me insensible, waking Jean up, and getting me back in my room, you must have been away from yours fully half an hour.”

“Quite that long.”

“It couldn’t have been better arranged for the thieves,” he declared. “If only I had stayed in my room—!”

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"If you had, it might possibly have been worse—mightn't it? The burglar—or burglars—knew precisely the location of the safe. They were coming to my room, and if they had found me awake ... I think it quite possible, my friend, that your appetite for cigarettes may have saved my life."

"There's consolation in that," he confessed—"if it's any to you, who have lost so much."

"But perhaps I shall get my jewellery back."

"What makes you think that?"

"There's always the chance, isn't there? And I believe I have a clue, as they call it, an indefinite one but something to work from, perhaps."

"What is that?"

"It seems to me it must have been what the police at home call 'an inside job'; because whoever it was apparently knew the combination of the safe."

"You mean it wasn't broken open. That signifies nothing. I've never seen yours, but I know something about safes, and I'll undertake to open it without the combination within ten minutes."

"You, Monsieur Duchemin?"

He nodded gloomily. "It's no great trick, once one knows it; with an ordinary safe, that is, such as you're apt to find in a private home. Have you looked for finger-prints?"

"Not yet."

"Have you any idea how the thieves broke in?"

"Through this very window, I imagine. You see, I was up early and, in my agitation, dressed hurriedly and came downstairs hours before I usually do. The servants were already up, but hadn't opened the living rooms for the day. I myself found this window unlatched. The fastening is insecure, you see; it has been out of order for some time."

Duchemin was on his feet, examining the latch. "True," he said; "but might not the wind —?"

"There was no wind to speak of last night, monsieur, and what there was didn't blow from that quarter." She added as Duchemin stepped out through the window: "Where are you going?"

“To look for footprints on the tiling. It was misting when I went to bed, and with the mud —”

“But there was a heavy shower just before daybreak. If the thieves had left any tracks on the terrasse, the rain must have washed them clean away. I have already looked.”

With a baffled gesture, Duchemin turned back to her side.

“You have communicated with the police, of course.”

She interrupted with an accent almost of impatience: “I have told nobody but you, monsieur, not even my mother and Louise.”

“But why?”

“I wanted to consult you first, and...” She broke off sharply to ask: “Yes, Jean: what is it?”

The footman had entered to bring her cards over which Eve de Montalais arched her brows.

“Show the gentlemen in, please.”

The servant retired.

“The men from Paris, madame?”

“Yes. You will excuse me—?”

Duchemin bowed. “But one word: You can hardly do better than put the case in the hands of these gentlemen. They are apt to be of a good order of intelligence when selected to serve bankers, you know.”

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"I understand," she replied in her cool, sweet voice.

She went to meet the men in the middle of the room. Duchemin turned back to the window, where, standing in the recess, with the light behind him, he could watch and reflect without his interest or emotions, becoming too apparent. And he was grateful for that moment of respite in which to compose and prepare himself. Within an hour, he knew, within a day or so at most, he must be under arrest, charged with the theft of the Montalais jewels, damned by his yesterday as much as by every turn of circumstantial evidence....

The men whom Jean ushered in proved to be, outwardly, what Duchemin had expected: of a class only too well-known to him, plain men of the people, unassuming, well-trained and informed, sceptical; not improbably shrewd hands in the game of thief-taking.

Saluting Madame de Montalais with calculated ceremony, one acting as spokesman offered to present their credentials. Duchemin had a start of surprise to dissemble when he saw the woman wave these aside.

"It is not necessary, messieurs," she said. "I regret very much to have inconvenienced you, although of course it will make no difference in your bill; but I have brought you here to no purpose. The necessity for my contemplated journey no longer exists."

There were expressions of surprise to which she put an end with the words, accompanied by a charming smile: "Frankly, messieurs, I am afraid you will have to make allowances for the traditional inconsistency of my sex: I have simply changed my mind."

There was nothing more to be said. Openly more than a little mystified, the men withdrew.

The smile with which she dismissed them lingered, delightful and enigmatic, as Eve recognised the stupefaction with which Duchemin moved to remonstrate with her.

"Madame!" he cried in a low voice of wonder and protest—"why did you do that? Why let them go without telling them—?"

"I must have had a reason, don't you think, Monsieur Duchemin?"

"I don't understand you, madame. You treat the loss of jewels as if it must be a secret private to ourselves, to you and to me!"

"Possibly that is my wish, monsieur." He gave a gesture of bewilderment. "Perhaps," she continued, meeting his blank stare with eyes in which amusement gave place to a look almost apologetic yet utterly kind—"perhaps I have more faith in you..."

Duchemin bowed his head over hands so tightly knitted that the knuckles were white with strain.

“You would not have faith,” he said in a low voice, “if you knew—”

She interrupted in a gentle voice: “Are you sure?”

“—What I must tell you!”

“My friend,” she said: “tell me nothing that would distress you.”

He did not immediately reply; the struggle going on within him was only too plainly betrayed by engorged veins upon his forehead and exceeding pallor of countenance.

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"If you had told those detectives," he said at length, without looking up, "you must have known very soon. They must have found me out without too much delay. And who in the world would ever believe anybody else guilty when they learned that Andre Duchemin, your guest for three weeks, was only an alias for Michael Lanyard, otherwise the Lone Wolf?"

"But you are wrong, monsieur," she replied, without the long pause of surprise he had anticipated. "I should not have believed you guilty."

Dumb with wonder, he showed her a haggard face. And she had for him, in the agony and the abasement of his soul, still quivering from the rack of emotion that alone could have extorted his confession—she had for him the half-smile, tender and compassionate, that it is given to most men to see but once in a lifetime on the lips and in the eyes of the woman beloved. "Then you knew—!"

"I suspected."

"How long—?"

"Since the night those strange people were here and tried to make you unhappy with their stupid talk of the Lone Wolf. I suspected, then; and when I came to know you better, I felt quite sure..."

"And now you *know*—yet hesitate to turn me over to the police!"

"No such thought has ever entered my head. You see—I'm afraid you don't quite understand me—I have faith in you."

"But why?"

She shook her head. "You mustn't ask me that."

At the end of a long moment he said in a broken voice: "Very well: I won't ... Not yet awhile ... But this great gift of faith in me—I can't accept that without trying to repay it."

"If you accept, my friend, you repay."

"No," said Michael Lanyard—"that's not enough. Your jewels must come back to you, if I go to the ends of the earth to find them. And"—man's undying vanity would out—"if there's anyone living who can find them for you, it is I."

XI

AU REVOIR

Early in the afternoon Eve de Montalais made it possible for Lanyard to examine the safe in her boudoir without exciting comment in the household. He was nearly an hour thus engaged, but brought back to the drawing-room, in addition to the heavy magnifying glass which he had requisitioned to eke out his eyesight, only a face of disappointment.

“Nothing,” he retorted to Eve. “Evidently a gentleman of rigidly formal habits, our friend of last night—wouldn’t dream of calling at any hour without his gloves on.... I’ve been over every inch of the safe, outside and in, and the frame of the screen too, but—nothing. However, I’ve been thinking a bit as well, I hope to some purpose.”

The woman nodded intently as he drew up his chair and sat down.

“You have made a plan,” she stated rather than enquired.

“I won’t call it that, not yet. We’ve got too little to go on. But one or two things seem fairly obvious, therefore must not be left out of consideration. Assuming for the sake of argument that Mr. Whitaker Monk and his lot had a hand in this—”

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“Ah! you think that?”

“I admit I’m unfair. But first they quarrel with my sense of the normal by being too confoundedly picturesque, too rich and brilliant, too sharp and smart and glib, too—well! —theatrical; like characters from the cast of what your American theatre calls a crook melodrama. And then, if their intentions were so blessed pure and praiseworthy, what right had they to make so many ambiguous gestures?”

“Leading the talk up to my jewels, you mean?”

“I mean every move they made: all too suspiciously smooth, too well rehearsed in effect. That stop to dine in Nant with the storm coming on, when they could easily have made Millau before it broke: what else was that for but to stage a ‘break-down’ at your door at a time when it would be reasonable to beg the shelter and hospitality of your roof? Then Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes—whoever *she* is—must get her feet wet, an excellent excuse for asking to be introduced to your boudoir, so she may change her shoes and stockings and incidentally spy out the precise location of your safe. And when their ear is hauled into the garage, Mr. Phinuit must go to help, which gives him a chance to stroll at leisure through the lower part of the house and note every easy way of breaking in. Mr. Monk casually notes your likeness to the little girl he once met, *he* says, in your father’s office; something you tell me you don’t recall at all. And that places you as the veritable owner of the Anstruther jewels, and no mistake. Then—Madame de Lorgnes guiding the conversation by secret signals which I intercept—somebody recognises me as the Lone Wolf, in spite of the work of years and a new-grown beard; and you are obliquely warned that, if your jewels should happen to disappear it’s more than likely the Lone Wolf will prove to be the guilty party. At any rate, they will be ever so much obliged if you’ll believe he is, it’ll save so much trouble all around. Finally: when your ex-chauffeur—what’s his name—?” “Albert Dupont.”

“A name as unique in France as John Smith is in England ... When Albert Dupont tries to take my life, as a simple and natural act of vendetta—”

“You really think it was that?”

“I recognised the beast when he let off that pistol at my head. I was in his way here, and he owed me one besides for my interference at Montpellier that night.... When Dupont half murders me and I’m laid up on your hands for nearly a month, our friends with designs on your jewels thoughtfully wait before they strike till I am able to be up and about, consequently in a position to be accused of a crime which no one would put past the Lone Wolf. Oh, I think we can fairly count Mr. Monk and his friends in on this coup!”

“I am sure of it,” said Eve de Montalais. “But Albert: is he one of them, their employee or confrere?”

“Dupont? I fancy not. I may be wrong, but I believe he is entirely on his own—quite independent of the Monk party.”

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"But his attack on us at Montpellier, and later on you here, coming at about the same time as their visit—"

"Coincidence, if you ask me. The weight of probability is against any collusion between the two parties."

"Please explain..."

"Dupont is an Apache of Paris. The language he used to me when we fought in that carriage at Montpellier was the slang of the lowest order of Parisian criminal, used spontaneously, under stress of great excitement, with no intent to mislead. These other people were—if anything but poor misjudged lambs—swell mobsmen, the elite of the criminal world. The two castes never work together because they can't trust each other. The swell mobsmen works with his head and only kills when cornered. The Apache kills first, as a matter of instinct, and then thinks—to the best of his ability. The Apache knows the swell mobsmen can outwit him. The swell mobsmen knows the Apache will assassinate him at the first hint of a suspicion of his good faith. So they rarely if ever make use of each other."

"You say 'rarely.' But possibly in this instance?"

"I think not. Dupont was employed as your chauffeur, you've told me, upwards of a month. He had ample opportunity to familiarise himself with the premises and pass the information on, if acting in connivance with those others. But we know he didn't, or they would never have shown themselves here in order to secure information they couldn't have got otherwise."

"I see, monsieur," said the woman. "Then you think the thief may have been any one of the Monk party—"

"Or several of them acting in concert," Lanyard interrupted, smiling.

"Or Albert."

"Not Dupont. Unless I underestimate him gravely he is incapable of such finesse. He is a thug first, a thief afterwards. He would have killed me out of hand if it had been he who had me at his mercy, down here, in the dark. Nor would he have been able to open the safe without using an explosive. That, indeed, is why, as I understand him, Dupont attacked you at Montpellier. If he could have disposed of you there, he would have returned here to work upon the safe and blow it at his leisure, fobbing the servants off with some yarn, or if they proved too troublesome intimidating them, killing one or two if necessary."

"But why has he made no other attempt—?"

“You forget the police have been making the neighbourhood fairly warm for him. Besides, he wanted me out of the way before he tried housebreaking. If he had succeeded in murdering me that night, I don’t doubt he would have burglarised the chateau soon after. But he failed; the police were stirred up to renewed activity; and if Monsieur Dupont is not now safely back in Paris, hiding in some warren of Montmartre or Belleville, I am much mistaken in the man—a type I know well.”

“Eliminating Albert then—”

“There remains the Monk lot.”

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"You are satisfied that one or all of its members committed the theft last night?"

"Not less than two, probably; say Phinuit, at a venture, and his alleged brother, Jules, the chauffeur, both Americans, adventurous, intelligent and resourceful. Yes; I believe that."

"And your plan of campaign is based on this conclusion?"

"That's a big name"—Lanyard's smile was diffident, a plea for suspended judgment on his lack of inventiveness—"for a lame idea. I believe our only course is to let them believe they have been successful in every way, and so lull them into carelessness with a false sense of security."

A wrinkle appeared between the woman's eyebrows. "How do you propose to accomplish that?" she asked in a voice that betrayed ready antagonism to what her intuition foresaw.

"Very simply. They hoped to shift suspicion on to my shoulders. Well, let them believe they have done so."

The waiting hostility developed in a sharp negative: "Ah, no!"

"But yes," Lanyard insisted. "It's so simple. Nobody here knows as yet that your jewels have been stolen, only you and I. Very well: you will not discover your loss and announce it till to-morrow morning. By that time Andre Duchemin will have disappeared mysteriously. The room to which he will retire to-night will be found vacant in the morning, his bed unslept in. Obviously the scoundrel would not fly the chateau between two suns without a motive. Inform the police of the fact and let them draw their own conclusions: before evening all France will know that Andre Duchemin is suspected of stealing the Montalais jewels, and is a fugitive from justice."

"No, monsieur," the woman iterated decidedly.

"You will observe," he continued, lightly persuasive, "it is Andre Duchemin who will be accused, madame, not Michael Lanyard, never the Lone Wolf! The heart of man is in truth a dark forest, and vanity the only light to guide us through its mazes. I confess I am jealous of my reputation as a reformed character. But Andre Duchemin is merely a name, a nom de guerre; you may saddle him with all the crimes in the calendar if you like, and welcome. For when I say he will disappear to-night, I mean it quite literally: Andre Duchemin will nevermore be heard of in this world."

She had a smile quivering on her lips, yet shook her head.

"Monsieur forgets I learned to know him under the name of Duchemin."

“Ah, madame! do not make me think too kindly of the poor fellow; for whether we like it or not, he is doomed. And if madame, in her charity, means to continue to know me, it must be Michael Lanyard whom she suffers to claim a little portion of her friendship.”

Her smile grew wistful, with a tenderness he had the grace not to recognise. Abashed, incredulous, he turned aside his gaze. Then without warning he found her hand at rest in his. “More than a little, monsieur, more than a little friendship only!”

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He closed the hand in both his own.

“Then be kind to me, madame, be still more kind; give me this chance to find and restore your jewels. It is the only way, this plan of mine. If we adopt it no one will suffer, only an old alias that is no longer useful. If we do not adopt it, I may not succeed, for the true authors of this crime may prove too wary for me; and the end will be that my best friends will believe the worst of me; even you, madame, even you will not be sure your faith was not misplaced.”

“Enough!” the woman begged in a stifled voice. “It shall be as you wish—if you will have it so.”

She sought to take away her hand; but Lanyard kissed it before he let it go. And immediately she rose with a murmured, half articulate excuse, and went from the room, leaving him to struggle with himself and that which was in him which was stronger than himself, his hunger for her love, to deny stubbornly the evidence of his senses and end by persuading himself against his will that he was nothing to her more than an object of common kindness such as she would extend to anyone in similar plight.

Because he never could be more....

Those few last hours in the chateau passed swiftly enough, most of them in making plans for his “escape,” something which demanded a deal of puzzling over maps and railway guides in the seclusion of his room. Since the next noon must find Andre Duchemin a criminal published and proscribed, he had need to utilise every shred of cunning at his command if he were to reach Paris without being arrested and without undue loss of time.

To take a train at Millau would be simply to invite pursuit; for that was the likeliest point an escaping criminal would strike for, a stopping place for all trains north and southbound. Telegraphic advices would cause every such train to be searched to a certainty. Furthermore, Lanyard had no desire to enter Paris by the direct route from Millau. Not the police alone, but others, enemies even more dangerous, might be expecting him by that route.

On the other hand, the nearest railway station, Combe-Redonde, was equally out of the question, since to gain it one must pass through Nant, where Andre Duchemin was known, and risk being seen, while at Combe-Redonde itself the station people would be apt to remember the monsieur who had recently created a sensation by despatching a code telegram to London.

There was nothing for it, then, but a twenty-mile walk due west across the Causse Larzac by night to Tournemire, where one could get trains in any one of four directions.

Constraint marked that last dinner with Eve de Montalais. They were alone. Louise was dining by the bedside of Madame de Sevenie, who remained indisposed, a shade more so than yesterday. The ill health of this poor lady, indeed, was the excuse Eve had given for putting off her trip to Paris.

Their talk was framed in stilted phrases, inconsecutive. They dared not converse naturally, each fearing to say too little or too much. For the memory of that surge of emotion, transient though it had been, in which their discussion had culminated, that afternoon, stood between them like a warning ghost, an implacable finger sealing its lips and theirs with the sign of silence.

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But talk they must, for the benefit of the servants, and talk they did after an uneasy fashion, making specious arrangements for Lanyard's departure on the morrow, when Eve was to drive him to Millau to catch the afternoon rapide for Paris.

Nor was it much better after dinner in the drawing-room. Consciousness of each other and consciousness of self, as each fought to master the emotions inspired by thoughts of their near parting, drove both into the refuge of a dry, insincere, cool impersonality. Lanyard communicated nothing of his plans, though aware his failure to do so might be misconstrued, instil an instinctive if possibly unconscious resentment to render the situation still more difficult. The truth was, he could barely trust himself to speak lest mere words work on his guard like tiny streams that sap the strength of the dike till it breaks and looses the pent and devastating seas.

At half past nine, ending a long silence, Lanyard sat forward in his chair, hesitated, and covered his hesitation by lighting a cigarette.

"I must go now," he said, puffing out the match.

He was aware of her almost imperceptible start of surprise.

"So soon?" she breathed.

"The moon rises not long after ten, and I want to get away without being seen either by the servants or by—anybody who might happen to be passing. You understand."

She nodded. He lingered, frowning at his cigarette.

"With permission, I will write..."

"Please."

"When I have anything to report."

She turned her head full face to him, letting him see her fluttering, indulgent smile.

"You must wait for that?"

"Perhaps," he faltered—"at least, I hope—it won't be long."

"You must wait for that?"

"Perhaps," he faltered—"at least, I hope—it won't be long." "I shall be waiting," she told him simply—"watching every post for word from you. I shan't worry, only for you."

He got up slowly from his chair, and stood half choking with unutterable words.

"I know no way to thank you," he managed to say at last.

"For what?"

"For everything—kindness, charity, sympathy—"

"What are those things?" she demanded with a nervous little laugh. "Words! Just words that you and I use to hide behind, like timid children..." She rose suddenly and offered him her hand. "But I don't think it's any use, my friend, I'm quite sure that neither of us is deceived. No: say nothing more; the time is not yet and—we both can wait. Only know I understand ... Go now"—her fingers tightened round his—"but don't stay away any longer than you must, don't be influenced by silly traditions, false and foolish standards when you think of me. Go now"—she freed her hand and turned away—"but oh, come safely back to me, my dear!"

XII

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TRAVELS WITH AN ASSASSIN

Under a sky whose misty silver pulsed with waves of violet light and dim glimmerings of gold, Lanyard, grey with the dust and weariness of twenty leagues of heavy walking, trudged into the sleeping streets of the town of Tournemire.

In the railway station—whose buvette served him such listless refreshment as one may find at railway lunch-counters and nowhere else the world over—a train was waiting with an apathetic crew and a sprinkling of sleepy passengers, for the most part farm and village folk of the department. There was nowhere in evidence any figure resembling that of an agent de police.

Lanyard made enquiry, found that the train was destined for Le Vigan, on the eastern slope of the Cevennes, and purchased a ticket for that point.

Making himself as comfortable as might be in a depressingly third-rate second-class compartment (there was no first class, and the third was far too richly flavoured for his stomach) he cultivated a doze as the train pulled out. But, driven as provincial trains habitually are, in a high spirit of devil-may-care, its first stop woke him up with a series of savage, back-breaking jolts which were translated into jerks when it started on again and fiendishly reiterated at every suspicion of a way-station on the course. So that he presently abandoned all hope of sleep and sought solace in tobacco and the shifting views afforded by the windows. Penetrating the upper valley of the Cernon, the railroad skirted the southern boundary of the Causse Larzac, then laboriously climbed up to the plateau itself; and Lanyard roused to the fact that he was approaching familiar ground from a new angle: the next stop would be Combe-Redonde.

The day was still in its infancy when that halt was made. Aside from the station agent, not a soul waited upon the platform. But one or two passengers were set down and, as the engine began to snort anew, a man darted from behind the tiny structure that housed ticket-office and waiting-room, galloped heavily across the platform, and with nothing to spare threw himself into the compartment immediately behind that wherein Lanyard sat alone.

This manoeuvre was performed so briskly and unexpectedly that Lanyard caught barely a glimpse of the fellow; but one glimpse was enough to convince him he had been wrong in assuming that Monsieur Albert Dupont had sneaked back to Paris to hide from the authorities after failing to assassinate Andre Duchemin more than three weeks ago.

But why—assuming one were not misled by a chance likeness to that heavy but athletic figure so well-remembered—why had Dupont lingered so long in the neighbourhood, in hourly peril of arrest? And why this sudden departure in the chill break of dawn, a move so timed and executed that it wore every sign of haste and fear?

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No reasonable explanation offered in solution of either of these riddles; unless, indeed, it were reasonable to believe that lust for vengeance was the ruling passion in the Dupont nature, that the creature had hung about the chateau in hope of getting another chance at Duchemin, and had decided to give it up only on discovering—inexplicably, at this hour—that the latter had stolen away under cover of night. But Lanyard didn't believe that. Neither did he believe that Dupont had had any hand in the robbery of night before last, and was now in tardy flight. In truth, he didn't know what to think, and the wildest flights of an imagination provoked by this mystery were tame and timid in contrast with the truth as he was later to learn it.

To an amateur in sensations there was true piquancy in the thought that one was travelling in company with a thug who had already had two tries for one's life and would not hesitate to essay a third; in the same coach, separated only by the thin partition between the compartments, safe only in the thug's unconsciousness of one's proximity! And this without the privilege of denouncing the man to the police; for to do so now would be to enmesh in the toils of the law not only Albert Dupont, would-be assassin, but Andre Duchemin, charged with stealing the Montalais jewels.

Lanyard would have given something for a peep-hole in the partition, to be able to study the countenance of Dupont unaware that he was under scrutiny. But he had to content himself with keeping vigil at the windows, making sure that Dupont did not drop off at some one of those many way-stations which the train was so scrupulous never to slight.

Monsieur Dupont, however, did not budge a foot out of his compartment before the end of the run; and then Lanyard, purposely delaying, saw Dupont get down from the compartment astern and make for the booking-office at Le Vigan without a glance to right or left—evidencing not the remotest interest in his late company on the train, but rather a complete indifference, an absolute assurance that he had nothing now to fear, and with this a preoccupation of mind so thoroughgoing that Lanyard was able to edge up behind him, when he paused at the guichet, and eavesdrop on his consultation with the clerk of the ticket bureau.

Dupont desired ardently to proceed to Lyons with the least avoidable delay. Under such conditions, according to the Indicateur des Chemins de Fer, his best available route was via Nimes, where the next express from Le Vigan made close connection with a northbound train rapide, due to arrive in Lyons late in the afternoon.

There was, however, this drawback; or so the clerk declared after a dubious summing up of the disreputable Dupont ensemble: whereas one might travel any class as far as Nimes, the rapide for Lyons carried only passengers of the first class.

But, said Dupont, with other blasphemy, all the world knew that the sacred rapides had no sacred accommodations for sacred passengers of the second and third class. Was he not the peer of any sacred first-class pig that ever travelled by train in France? If not,

he proved the contrary to his own satisfaction by paying for his ticket from an imposing accumulation of French bank-notes.

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Then, with half an hour to wait, he lumbered into the buvette and gorged, while Lanyard—having secured his own transportation for Lyons by the same route—skulked in the offing and kept a close eye on the gourmand.

Having eaten ferociously, Dupont came out, slouched into a seat on a bench and, his thick limbs a-sprawl, consumed cigarette after cigarette in most absolute abstraction of mind.

Observed thus, off his guard and at tolerably close range, with his face clean of soot, he projected a personality so forbidding that Lanyard marvelled at the guilelessness which must have influenced the ladies of Chateau de Montalais to accept the man at his own valuation and give him a place in their household.

The face of fat features was of porcine cast; the forehead low and slanted sharply back into bristles of black hair, the snout long and blunt, the lips flabby, the chin retreating, the jowls pendulous; the eyes a pig's, little, cunning, and predaceous; the complexion sallow and pimply from unholy living, with an incongruous over-layer of sunburn. A type to inspire distrust, one would think, at sight; a nature as repellant as a snake's, and ten times as deadly; in every line and lineament, in every move and gesture, an Apache of the Apaches...

As for the baleful reflections with which Dupont was patently concerned to the exclusion of all considerations of either surveillance or environment, Lanyard found himself so inquisitive that he had never a thought but to follow and study the fellow till he surprised his secret, if possible—at least so long as it might seem safe to do so.

Moreover, nothing could have suited his own purpose better than to proceed to Paris by way of Lyons.

Nothing hindered the carrying out of his design. Still lost in thought and inattentive, Dupont entrained for Nimes and at that station changed to the rapide for Lyons, where duly at four o'clock—with Lanyard still a discreet shadow—he alighted in the Gare de Perrache.

Here again fortune favoured the voluntary sleuth. The station was well thronged, a circumstance which enabled him to keep inconspicuously close to his victim. Furthermore, Dupont was obviously looking for somebody, and so distracted. Presently a shabby, furtive little rat of a man nudged his elbow, and Dupont followed him to a corner, where they confabulated in undertones for many minutes; while Lanyard loitered just outside their normal range of vision. An unnecessary precaution: they were unafraid of observation, interested only in their private concerns. The little man did most of the talking; Dupont seeming content with a listening role, and gratified by what he heard. He nodded frequently, and once or twice a grim smile enhanced the ugliness

of his mouth, a smile terrible in its contained savagery, fit to make one's blood run cold, that cruelly relished in anticipation the success of some evil scheme.

Not to be able to hear a word was exasperating to a degree....

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The smaller villain produced something—a slip of paper—from a waistcoat pocket, and handed it to Dupont, who examined it with disfavour, shaking his head repeatedly to the other's recommendations. Of a sudden he ended the argument by thrusting the slip back into the hands of the jackal, growled a few words of imperative instruction, jerked his thumb toward the ticket bureau, and without more ado turned and strode from the terminus.

Alone, the little man rolled appealing eyes heavenward. Then he shrugged in resignation, and trotted over to the guichet. Lanyard, now with no fear of being recognised, ranged alongside and listened openly.

It seemed that, booked for Paris on the rapide to leave at one-twelve in the morning, this lesser rascal had been assigned a certain sleeping-car berth. Business of displaying the ticket: identified by Lanyard as the object over which the conference had split. Now, however, it appeared that a friend was to journey to Paris by the same train, but in another sleeping-car. It was greatly desired by both that they be separated no farther than necessity might dictate, that this reservation might be exchanged for another in the same carriage with the friend.

Thus far without interruption from the clerk of the ticket bureau. But here ensued inevitably the violent French altercation between the two human beings on either side of the guichet. Then, as suddenly as it had arisen, the squall blew over, an amicable settlement was arrived at, the exchange of reservation was effected, the small scoundrel, with ten thousand thanks and profuse assurances of deathless esteem, departed grinning.

Lanyard secured the rejected berth and went about his business profoundly mystified, but not downhearted. Beyond shadow of fair doubt Dupont was up to some new devilment, but Lanyard would be surprised if its nature failed to develop on the train or at latest upon its arrival in Paris the next morning. For the present he was weary of the sight of the fat Apache, glad to believe he had seen the last of him for some hours; he had much to do on his own part, nothing less in fact than utterly to obliterate from human ken the personality of Andre Duchemin.

This affair involved several purchases; for he was travelling light indeed, having left even his rucksack at the Chateau de Montalais. Nevertheless it was no later than seven in the evening when he left a room which he had engaged in a hotel so pretentious and heavily patronised that he was lost in its ebb and flow of life, an inconsiderable and unconsidered bit of flotsam—and left it a changed man.

The pointed beard of Monsieur Duchemin was no more; and a little stain, artfully applied, had toned the newly exposed flesh to match the tan of the rest. The rough tweed walking-suit had been replaced by a modest and commonplace blue serge, the cap and heavy brown boots by a straw boater and plain black shoes, the loose-throated

flannel shirt by one of plain linen with stiff cuffs and a fold collar and neat foulard tie. So easily was Madame de Sevenie's buccaneer metamorphosed into the semblance of a Government clerk!

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But this was by no means all. The papers of Andre Duchemin were crisp black ashes in the fireplace of the room which Lanyard had just quitted, all but the letter of credit; and this last was enclosed in an envelope, to be sent to London by registered post with a covering note to request that the unpaid balance be forwarded in French bank-notes to Monsieur Paul Martin, poste restante, Paris; Paul Martin being the name which appeared on an entirely new set of papers of identification which Lanyard had thoughtfully secreted in the lining of the tweed coat before leaving London.

If Lanyard wanted better testimony than that supplied by his bedroom mirror to the thoroughness of the transformation in his looks, he had it unsought, and that twice within an hour.

The first time was when, leaving the hotel to seek the post office and despatch his letter to London, he found himself suddenly face to face with Dupont, who was seated at a cafe table near the hotel entrance and narrowly scrutinising all who passed in and out; covering this occupation with affected interest in the gossip of his companion, the little rat man of the Gare de Perrache.

At this rencontre Lanyard knew a momentary shock of doubt; perhaps he hadn't been so clever as he had thought himself in trailing Dupont all the way from Combe-Re-donde to Lyons. But the beady little eyes of a pig comprehended him in a glance, and rejected him as of positively no interest to Albert Dupont, a complete stranger and a cheap one at that. So he fared serenely on his way, and Dupont gave him never another thought.

Returning, Lanyard was favoured with even less attention; an error in judgment which enabled him to remark that Dupont was in an ugly temper, sullen and snappy, it might be because of a disappointment of some sort, possibly in consequence of the liberal potations indicated by the tall stack of little saucers at his elbow. As for the lesser villain, he was already silly with drink.

One would have been glad of a chance to eavesdrop again upon those two; but there was no vacant place within earshot of their table. Besides Lanyard wanted his dinner. So he re-entered the hotel and sought its restaurant, where the untiring Long Arm of Coincidence took him by the hand and led him to a table immediately adjoining one occupied exclusively by Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes.

And this one in turn looked Lanyard up and down but, detecting in him not the remotest flavour of reminiscence, returned divided attention to a soup and the door of the restaurant, which he was watching just as closely and impatiently as Dupont, outside, was watching the main entrance, and apparently with as little reward for his pains.

But now, Lanyard told himself, one knew what had dragged Dupont in such hot haste to Lyons. Somehow word had reached him, probably by telegraph, that monsieur le comte

was waiting there to keep a rendezvous. And if you asked him, Lanyard would confess his firm conviction that the other party to the rendezvous would prove to be the person (or persons) who had effected the burglary at Chateau de Montalais.

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So he settled to keep an eye on monsieur le comte, and promised himself an interesting evening.

But as time passed it became evident that there had been a hitch somewhere; de Lorgnes was only human, he couldn't rendezvous all by himself alone, and nobody turned up to help him out. He was fretting when Lanyard first saw him; before his dinner was half served his nerve was giving way. Continually his distracted gaze sought the door only to turn back in disappointment to his plate. Everlastingly he consulted his watch. His appetite failed, the hand that too often carried a glass to his lips shook so that drops of wine spattered the cloth like blood; he could not even keep a cigarette alive, but burned more matches than tobacco. A heavy sweat bedewed his forehead; the ruddy colour of that plump countenance grew sadly faded, the good-natured features drawn and pinched with worry. By nine o'clock the man was hag-ridden by fear of the unknown, by terror of learning what fault had developed in the calculations of his confreres.

Efforts to fix his mind on an evening newspaper failed miserably. And this was not for lack of interest in the news it published to the citizens of Lyons. For Lanyard had a copy of the same sheet, and knew that Eve had loyally kept her promise; a brief despatch from Millau told of the simultaneous disappearance of one Andre Duchemin and the jewels of Madame de Montalais, and added that the police were already active in the case.

At length, unable longer to endure the growing tension of anxiety and keep up a pretence of eating, de Lorgnes called for his addition and fled the restaurant. Lanyard finished his own meal in haste, and arrived in the foyer of the hotel in time to see de Lorgnes settle his account at the bureau and hear him instruct a porter to have his luggage ready for the one-twelve rapide for Paris. In the meantime, anybody who might enquire for Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes should be directed to seek him in the cafe.

Thither Lanyard dutifully repaired; and wasted the rest of that evening, which he had thought would prove so amusing, watching Dupont and company watch de Lorgnes, to whom Dupont's barely dissembled interest plainly meant nothing at all, but whose mental anguish grew to be all but unbearable. Nor did the quantities of veeskysoda consumed by the unhappy nobleman help him bear it, though undoubtedly he assured himself it did. By midnight he was more than half-fuddled and wholly in despair. Half an hour later he finished his eighth veeskysoda and wove an unsteady but most dignified way back to the foyer of the hotel.

Immediately Dupont and his fellow, both markedly the worse for wear, paid and left the cafe.

Lanyard returned to his room to get a new-bought travelling bag, and started for the train afoot, a neat brown paper parcel under one arm. On the way he made occasion to

cross the Saone by one of its dozen bridges, and paused in the middle of the span to meditate upon the witchery of the night. When he moved on the brown paper parcel was bearing merrily downstream the mortal remains of Andre Duchemin, that is to say his discarded clothing.

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In the Gare de Perrache Lanyard witnessed an affecting farewell scene between the little man and Dupont. Not much to his surprise he discovered that the former was not travelling to Paris that night, after all; it was on Dupont's account alone that he had taken so much trouble to secure the change of reservation.

And when Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes had wavered through the gateway in tow of a luggage-laden porter; and Dupont had torn himself away from his fond familiar and lurched after the count; and Lanyard, after a little wait, had followed in turn: he was able to see for himself that Dupont had contrived to be berthed in the same carriage with de Lorgnes; proving that he did not mean to let the count out of sight, day or night.

Well weary, Lanyard proceeded to his own compartment, in the car ahead, and turned in. A busy day, and not altogether unprofitable; whatever expectations had been thwarted in this mild outcome, one had learned much; and to-morrow one would resume the chase anew and, one rather fancied, learn a deal more.

But he was not of those who sleep well on trains. In spite of his extreme fatigue he woke up every time the rapide stopped. He was awake at Dijon, at four in the morning, and again at Laroche, about a quarter after six. There, peering out of the window to identify the station, he was startled to see the broad, round-shouldered back of Albert Dupont making away across the rails—leaving the train!

It was not feasible to dress and pursue, even had it been wise. And Lanyard was vexed. Dupont, he felt, was hardly playing fair, after giving one every reason to believe he meant to go through to Paris. And what under heaven did the brute think to accomplish in Laroche? Was he still after the Comte de Lorgnes? Then the latter must likewise have fled the train! Or else ...

Something sinister in the slant of the Dupont shoulders, as he vanished, something indescribably evil in his furtive yet heavy tread of a beast of prey, struck a thrill of horror into the mind of Lanyard. He shuddered, and warned himself he must learn to hold his imagination in better check.

The newspapers of Paris, that day, had a sensation that crushed into insignificance the news from Chateau de Montalais: in a compartment which he had occupied alone on the night rapide from Lyons, a man had been found with his throat cut, his clothing ripped to rags, even his luggage slashed to ribbons.

Whether through chance or intention, every possible clue to the victim's identity was missing.

XIII

ATHENAIS

In London, about noon of that day, a gentleman whom Lanyard most often thought of by the name of Wertheimer deciphered a code message whose contempt for customary telegraphic brevity was quite characteristic of the sender, indeed a better voucher for his bona fides than the initials appended in place of a signature. With some editing in the way of punctuation, it follows:

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“Dear old bean:—Please advise Prefecture de Police without revealing your source of information, unidentified man found murdered on rapide arriving Gare de Lyon eight-thirty this morning stopped yesterday Hotel Terminus, Lyons, under name of Comte de Lorgnes. During entire evening before entraining he was shadowed by two Apaches, one of whom, passing as Albert Dupont—probably recent and temporary alias—booked through to Paris occupying berth in same carriage with Lorgnes, but detrained Laroche six-fifteen, murder remaining undiscovered till arrival in Paris. [An admirably succinct sketch of the physical Dupont is here deleted.] ’In return for gift of this opportunity to place Prefecture under obligations, please do me a service. As stranger in Paris I crave passionately to review Night Life of Great City but am naturally timid about going about alone after dark. Only society of beautiful, accomplished, well-informed and agreeable lady of proved discretion can put me thoroughly at ease. If you can recommend one such to me by telegraph, stipulating her amiability must begin to function this evening, you may depend on my not hesitating to ask further favours as occasion may arise. Presume you have heard your old friend Duchemin, now missing, is suspected of looting jewels of Madame de Montalais, Chateau de Montalais, near Millau. He counts on your discretion to preserve secret of his innocence pending further advices. Paul Martin here stopping Hotel Chatham. Toodle-oo.

“M. L.”

A telegram from London addressed to M. Paul Martin, Hotel Chatham, Paris, was delivered late in the afternoon:

“Prefecture tipped off. Many thanks. Heartfelt regrets poor Duchemin’s success keeping out of gaol. Uneasy about him as long as he remains at large. Fully appreciate you cannot trust yourself alone in the dark. Therefore cheerfully delegating preservation your virtue while in Paris to *Mlle*. Athenais Reneaux, maiden lady mature charms whom I beg you will respect as you would my sister. Wishing you enjoyable intellectual evening—

“W.”

It needed receipt of a petit-bleu, while he was dressing for dinner, to cure Lanyard of an attack of premonitory shivers brought on by recollection of the awful truth that one is never really safe in trifling with an Englishman’s sense of humour. “Dear monsieur Martin:—It is too sweet of you to remember your promise to ask me to dine the first time you came to Paris. Since you leave it to me, shall we say the Ritz, at half past seven? In case your memory for faces is poor—it has been a long time since we met, hasn’t it? —I shall be wearing the conventional fast black with my very best ingenue expression; and my feather fan will be flame-coloured.

“Always to you—

“Athenais Reneaux.”

Now that sounded more like ...

Only it was a bit debilitating to contemplate, as the mirror insisted one must, the shortcomings of machine-made evening clothes, whose obviously exorbitant cost as a post-War luxury did nothing to make amends for their utter want of personal feeling. For one needs sympathy in a dress-coat quite as much as cloth.

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Still, it was a tolerably personable figure that suffered Lanyard's critical inspection. And an emergency is an emergency. Those readily serviceable clothes were of more value than the most superbly tailored garments that could possibly have been made up for him in any reasonable length of time. For to-morrow night it might, and as Lanyard held surely would, be too late to accomplish what he hoped to accomplish to-night, and for whose accomplishment evening dress was indispensable. Since Wertheimer had passed the word on, the name of the Comte de Lorgnes would be published to the world in the morning papers, and by evening the birds, if they were wise, would be in full flight. Whereas to-night, while still that poor mutilated body lay nameless in the Morgue...

Mademoiselle Athenais Reneaux lived up in most gratifying fashion to the tone of her note. In the very beginning she demonstrated excellent discretion by failing to be on hand and eager when Lanyard strolled into the Ritz on the minute of their appointment. To the contrary she was all of twenty-five minutes late; a circumstance so consistently feminine as to rob their meeting of any taint of the extraordinary; they might have been simple sweethearts meeting to dine remote from jealous or censorious eyes, rather than one of the most useful Parisian agents of the British Secret Service under orders to put her talents at the disposition of a man who was to her nothing more than an everyday name.

She swept spiritedly into the lounge of the Ritz, a tall, fair girl, very good-looking indeed and brilliantly costumed, and placed Monsieur Paul Martin in one glance, on the instant of his calculated start of recognition. At once her face lighted up with a charming smile—few women could boast teeth as white and fine—and almost before Lanyard could extricate himself from his chair she was at pause before him, holding his hand.

"Paul!" she cried in lilting accents. "I'm so glad! It's been simply ages.... And looking so well! I don't believe you've changed a bit."

The nicely judged pitch of her voice, neither so high nor so low as to attract more than passing attention, won approval which Lanyard put into the pressure of his lips upon her hand and the bow, at once punctilious and intimate, that accompanied it.

"And you, Athenais, always exquisite, but to-day... Truly one has never seen you looking better."

"Flattery," she commented. "But I love it!"

Meanwhile her gaze, that seemed so constant to his eyes, reviewed other people in the lounge in one swift, searching glance, and returned to Lanyard with a droop of the lashes, imperceptible to all but him, that signified there was no one present likely in her esteem to prove dangerous to their peace of mind.

“Flattery? To you? But impossible!”

He delighted her, and she showed it openly. But her lips said only: “Have I kept you waiting a frightfully long time, poor boy?”

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"Let your appetite accuse you, Athenais."

"But I am starving!"

"Then, as I take it, nothing on earth can prevent our going in to dinner."

Lanyard had already consulted with the maitre d'hotel over the menu and the reservation. As the two settled down at a table on the side of the room, not conspicuously far from any other in use, and at the same time comfortably detached, their iced melon was waiting to be served.

"Always the most thoughtful of men," Mademoiselle Reneaux declared. "No fussing with the carte, no thrusting it into one's hand and saying: 'See anything you'd like, my dear? I rather fancy the boeuf-a-la-mode for myself!' That's why I'd adore dining with you, Paul, even if I didn't adore you for yourself."

"One is well repaid when one's modest efforts are so well appreciated."

"Blague, my friend, sheer blague. You know you relish a good dinner of your own ordering far more than anybody's appreciation, even mine."

The waiters had retired, leaving them alone in a momentary oasis of public isolation.

"Mademoiselle," said Lanyard in more formal vein, "I am sure, underestimates my capacity for appreciation. May one venture to compliment mademoiselle, who is marvellous in so many bewitching ways?"

"Why not, monsieur? Was ever music sweeter?" The girl laughed; then her eyes sobered while her features retained their appearance of complete amusement. "Monsieur received a telegram this afternoon?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. And you?"

"It is here—since I am. May I see yours?"

With a gay gesture she handed over her telegram from London and took his in exchange.

The ordinary cipher of the B. S. S. was as readily intelligible to both as if the messages had been couched in open French or English.

Lanyard read:

"Kindly place yourself beginning with dinner to-night and for duration his stay in Paris at the commands of Paul Martin, Hotel Chatham, lunatic but harmless and of great value

to us. He seems to be at present concerned with some affair outside our knowledge, but presumably desperate, else he would not be interested. Please exert best endeavours to get him out of France alive as soon as possible.”

The girl was laughing as she returned Lanyard’s telegram and received her own.

“‘Mature charms’!” she pouted. “‘Enjoyable intellectual evening’! Oh, how depressing! Poor Paul! but you must have felt discouraged.”

“I did—at first.”

“And afterwards—?”

“Disappointed.”

“And are you going to obey that injunction to treat me as somebody’s sister?”

“Never in my life!”

“How then?”

“As anybody’s wife.” Perplexity knitted a little pucker in her delicately lined brows.

“Paul! you couldn’t speak French so well and be an Englishman!”

“I assure you, Athenais, I am—mentally—a native of France.”

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She sighed luxuriously. "What an amusing prospect! And this is the sort of man at whose commands I am required to place myself."

"Not required, Athenais, requested—begged, besought!"

"I like that better. And," she enquired demurely, "may one ask what are monsieur's commands?"

"First: you will continue to flirt with me as at present—outrageously."

"Even when you make it so difficult?"

"And then, to waste an evening in my society."

"Must it be wasted?"

"That will be as it falls out."

"And what do we do with this evening of such questionable value?"

"We finish dinner here at our leisure; we smoke and chat a while in the lounge, if you like, or if nothing better offers we go to a play; and then you will take me by the hand, if you please, mademoiselle..."

"In the maternal manner appropriate to mature charms, I presume?"

"Precisely."

"What then?"

"You will—always remembering that my interest in such things is merely academic—you will then lead me hither and yon, as your whim lists, and show me how Paris amuses itself in these days of its nocturnal decadence. You will dutifully pretend to drink much more champagne than is good for you and to be enjoying yourself as you seldom have before. If I discover an interest in people I may chance to see, you will be good enough to tell me who they are and—other details concerning their ways of life."

"If I know."

"But I am sure you know everyone worth knowing in Paris, Athenais."

"Then—if I am right in assuming you are looking for some person in particular—"

"You have reason, mademoiselle."

"I run the risk of losing an entertaining evening."

“Not necessarily. Besides, there are many evenings. Are you not at my commands for the duration of my stay in Paris?”

“True. So I will have to chance my perilous question.... I presume one can’t help being true to the traditions of one’s sex.”

“Inquisitive, you mean? But what else is every thinking creature, male or female? What are men of science? What—?”

“But it was Eve who first—”

“Ah! raking up old scandal, eh? But I’ll wager something it was really Adam who—taking a purely scientific interest in the business—egged Eve on to try a bite of apple, asserting that the domestic menu lacked variety, telling himself if she died of it, it would only cost him another rib to replace her, and cheap at the price.”

“Paul: you are too gallant. Wait till I try to find out something about you, directly or indirectly, and see what you will then have to say about the curiosity of women.”

“But I shouldn’t mind, it would be too flattering. So dig away.”

“I will. Who is it you’re looking for in Paris after midnight?”

“Anyone of several people.” “Perhaps I know them. It might save time if you would give me their names.”

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"Now it is you who ask me to risk losing an enjoyable evening. But so be it. Le Comte de Lorgnes?"

Mademoiselle Reneaux looked blank.

"Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes?"

The young woman shook her head.

"Both of a class sure to be conspicuous in such places as Maxim's," Lanyard explained. "The names, then, are probably fictitious."

"If you could describe them, perhaps—?"

"Useless, I am afraid; neither is an uncommon type. Any word picture of either would probably fit anyone of a score of people of the same life. Are you then acquainted with a man named Phinuit—given name unknown—an American?"

"No."

"Mr. Whitaker Monk, of New York?"

"The millionaire?"

"That is quite possible."

"He made his money in munitions, I believe," the girl reflected—"or perhaps it was oil."

"Then you do know him?"

"I met him one night, or rather one morning several weeks ago, with a gay party that joined ours at breakfast at Pre-Catelan."

"And do we still drive out to Pre-Catelan to milk the cows after an adventurous night, mademoiselle?" She nodded; and Lanyard sighed: "It is true, then: man ages, his follies never."

"A quaint little stupid," the girl mused.

"Pardon, mademoiselle?"

"I was thinking of Whitaker Monk."

"Quaint, I grant you. But hardly little, or stupid. A tall man, as thin as a diet, with a face like a comic mask of tragedy..."

“Paul dear,” said Athenais Reneaux more in sorrow than in anger: “somebody has been taking advantage of your trusting nature. Whitaker Monk is short, hopelessly stout, and the most commonplace person imaginable.”

“Then it would appear,” Lanyard commented ruefully, “one did wisely to telegraph London for a keeper. Let us get hence, if you don’t mind, and endeavour to forget my shame in strong drink and the indecorous dances of an unregenerate generation.”

XIV

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

Lanyard and Athenais Reneaux had dawdled over dinner and coffee and cigarettes with so much tacit deliberation that, by the time Lanyard suggested they might move on, it was too late for a play and still a bit too early to begin the contemplated round of all-night restaurants. Also, it was too warm for a music-hall.

So they killed another hour at the Ambassadeurs, where they were fortunate in getting good places and the entertainment imposed no strain upon the attention; where, too, the audience, though heterogeneous, was sufficiently well-dressed and well-mannered to impart to a beautiful lady and her squire a pleasant consciousness of being left very much to themselves in an amusing expression of a civilisation cynical and self-sufficient.

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But that was so wherever they went that night; and, in a sense, they went everywhere. In no city in the world is the doctrine of go-as-you-please-but-mind-your-own-business more studiously inculcated by example than in Paris, especially in its hours of relaxation. Lanyard had not been so long an exile as to have forgotten his way about entirely, and with what was new since his time Mademoiselle Reneaux was thoroughly acquainted. And if he felt himself rather a ghost revisiting glimpses of a forgotten moon, if all the odalisques were new to his vision and all the sultans strange, if never an eye that scanned his face turned back for a second look in uncertain reminiscence, he had to console him the company of a young woman whom everybody seemed to know and admire and like. In none of the resorts they visited did she fail to greet or be hailed by a handful of acquaintances. Yet they were generously let alone.

As to that, Lanyard could not complain. The truth was that, despite the dark thread of sober purpose which ran through those tolerably purple hours, he was being excellently entertained. Not by this sad business of scampering from one place of dubious fame to another; not by any reckless sense of rejuvenation to be distilled from the practice of buying champagne at each stop—and leaving every bottle barely tasted; not by those colourful, dissolving tableaux, always much the same in composition if set against various backgrounds, of under-dressed women sitting with concupiscent men and swallowing cold poisons in quantities calculated to spur them into the frenzy of semi-orgiastic dances: by none of these, but simply by the society of a woman of a type perhaps not unique but novel in his experience and intriguing to his understanding.

If there were anybody or thing a girl of her age—Athenais was about twenty-five—shouldn't know, she knew him, her or it; if there were any place she shouldn't go, she either went or had been there; if there were anything she shouldn't do or say or think or countenance, those things she—within limitations—did and said and thought and accepted or passed over as matters of fact and no consequence. And though she observed scrupulously certain self-imposed limitations she never made this obvious, she simply avoided what she chose to consider bad taste with a deftness and tact that would have seemed admirable in a woman of the great world twice her age. And with it all she preserved a sort of champagne effervescence of youthful spirits and an easy-going camaraderie incomprehensible when one took into consideration the disillusioning circumstances of her life, her vocation as a paid government spy, trusted with secrets and worthy of her trust, dedicated to days of adventure always dangerous, generally sordid, and like at any time to prove deadly.

Young, beautiful, admirably poised, accomplished and intelligent, she should by rights have been wrapped up in love of some man her peer in all these attributes. But she wasn't; or she said she wasn't in one of those moments of gravity which served to throw into higher relief the light-heartedness of her badinage with Lanyard; asserting an entirely willing disposition to stand aside and play the pensive, amused, indulgent spectator in the masque of love danced by a world mad for it, grasping for love greedily even in its cheapest shapes and guises.

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"If it comes," she sighed, "it will find me waiting, and not unwilling. But it will have to come in another form than those I know about."

"My dear," said Lanyard, "be unafraid: it always does."

She called herself Athenais Reneaux, but she didn't pretend to Lanyard that she had no better title to another name. Her French was of the purest, a delight to listen to, yet she was in fact less French than English. Her paternal forebears to the third generation had lived in England and married Englishwomen, she said; and more than this much about herself, nothing; perhaps deriving some gratification from leaving such broad fields of conjecture open to the interest which an enigmatic personality never failed to excite.

"But I think you're quite as much of a mystery as you pretend to see in me. It's rather nice, don't you think? At least, it gives us an interest in each other aside from sentiment. Some day, perhaps, we'll each know All."

"Now God forbid!"

"Are you so afraid of learning my girlish secrets then? I don't believe you. I don't believe you'd even care to hear—"

"Athenais!" Lanyard protested in a hollow voice.

"Non, mon ami." She judged him shrewdly with narrowed, smiling eyes. "You flirt with far too much finish, you know. It can't be done to such perfection when the heart's truly involved. But for one thing—and if only you'd be a little more tragic about your disappointments to-night; for you haven't yet asked me a single question about anybody we've met—"

"No: thus far we've drawn every cover blank," he groaned; for it was after three in the morning.

"Very well. But for this and that, I'd be tempted to think you were sleuthing on the trail of some female fair but faithless. But you're taking all with entirely too much resignation; there's a contented glow in the back of your eyes—"

"I'm having a good time."

"It's pretty of you to tell me so. But that's not the reason for your self-complacence."

"See here," Lanyard interrupted, sitting up and signalling to the waiter for his bill: "if I let you run on the way you're heading, you'll presently be telling me something you've found out about me and I don't want to hear."

“Oh, very well,” she sighed. “I’m sure I don’t wish to embarrass you. But I will say this: Men of your uncertain age don’t go round with such contented eyes unless they’re prosperously in love.”

“Oh, come along!” Lanyard growled, offering to rise. “You know too confounded much.” He waited a moment, and then as she did nothing but sit and glimmer at him mischievously, he added: “Shall we go?”

“Where now?” she enquired without stirring.

He had a shrug of distaste. “Maxim’s, I presume. Unless you can suggest some other place, more likely and less tedious.”

“No,” she replied after taking thought; “I can’t. We’ve covered Paris pretty thoroughly to-night; all except the tourist places.”

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"No good wasting time on them."

"Then let's stop on here till it's time to milk the cows."

"Pre-Catelan? But there's Maxim's left—"

"Only another tourist show nowadays. And frightfully rowdy."

"Sounds like the lot I'm after. Come along."

She shook her head vigorously. "Shan't!" His eyebrows rose in mute enquiry. "Because I don't want to," she explained with childlike candour. "I'm tired of being dragged around and plied with drink. Do you realise I've had as much as two and a half glasses of champagne to-night, out of the countless bottles you've ordered? Well, I have, and they're doing their work: I feel the spirit of independence surging in my midst. I mutiny and defy you!" A peal of laughter rewarded the instinctive glance with which he sought to judge how far he was justified in taking her seriously. "Not only that, but you're neglecting me. I want to dance, and you haven't asked me in fully half an hour; and you're a heavenly dancer—and so am I!" She thrust back her end of their wall table and rose. "If you please, monsieur."

One could hardly resent such charming impertinence. Lanyard drew a long face of mock patience, sighed an heroic sigh, and followed her through the huddled tables to the dancing floor. A bewildering look rewarded him as they swung into the first movement of a tango.

"Do you know you are a dangerous man, Monsieur Paul Martin?"

"Oh, mademoiselle!"

"Such fortitude, such forbearance—when I ought to be slapped—enchants, disarms, makes me remember I am a woman, foredoomed always to yield. I abjure my boasted independence, monsieur, I submit. It shall be as you wish: on to Maxim's—after this one dance. You know, it's the last really good music we'll have to dance to—our last dance together, perhaps—who knows?—forever!"

She pretended to be overcome; the lithe body in his embrace sketched a fugitive seizure of sadness, drooping with a wistful languour well suited to the swooning measures to which they swayed and postured.

His hand was pressed convulsively. She seemed momentarily about to become a burden in his grasp, yet ever to recover just on the instant of failing, buoyed up by the steely resilience of her lithe and slender body. Impossible to say how much was pretence, how much impulsive confession of true feeling! Perplexed, perturbed, Lanyard gazed down into that richly tinted face which, with eyes half-curtained and lips



half-parted, seemed to betray so much, yet to his next glance was wholly illegible and provoking. Aware that with such women man's vanity misleads him woefully, and aware that she was equally awake to this masculine weakness, he wondered, afraid even to guess, telling himself he were an ass to believe, a fool to deny....

Then suddenly he saw her lashes sweep up to unveil eyes at once mirthful and admonitory; her hungry mouth murmured incongruously an edged warning. "Play up, Paul—play up to me! We dance too well together not to be watched; and if I'm not mistaken, someone you're interested in has just come in. No: don't look yet, just remember we're madly enamoured, you and I—and don't care a rap who sees it."

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Strung by her words into a spirit of emulation, Lanyard achieved an adequate seeming of response to the passion, feigned or real, with which the woman infused the patterned coquetry of their steps.

Between lips that stirred so little their movement must have been indiscernible, he asked: "Who?"

In the same manner, but in accents fraught with an emotion indecipherable but intense the reply came: "Don't talk! This is too divine ... Just dance!"

He obeyed, deliberately shut out of his thoughts the warning she had given him, and let himself go, body and mind, so that, a sway to the sensuous strains of that most sensuous of dances, the girl and the man for a space seemed one with music that throbbed of love and longing, desire and denial, pursuit and retreat, surrender and conquest....

On a sonorous phrase it ceased. A flutter of applause ran round the tables. Lanyard mastered a sense of daze that he saw reflected in the opening eyes of the woman as she slipped from his arms. In an instant they were themselves once more, two completely self-contained children of sophistication, with superb insouciance making nothing of their public triumph in a rare and difficult performance.

On the way to their table they were intercepted by a woman who, with two cavaliers, had since the moment of her entrance been standing near the door of the restaurant, apparently spellbound with admiration. Through a rising clatter of tongues her voice cut clearly but not at all unpleasantly.

"Athenais! It is I—Liane."

Inured as he was to the manners of an age which counts its women not dressed if they are not half undressed, and with his sensibilities further calloused by a night devoted to restaurants the entree to which, for women, seemed to be conditioned on at least semi-nudity, Lanyard was none the less inclined to think he had never seen, this side of footlights, a gown quite so daring as that which revealed the admirably turned person of the lady who named herself Liane. There was so little of it that, he reflected, its cost must have been something enormous. But in vain that scantiness of drapery: the white body rose splendidly out of its ineffective wrappings only to be overwhelmed by an incredible incrustation of jewellery: only here and there did bare hand's-breadths of flesh unadorned succeed in making themselves visible.

At the sound of her name Athenais turned with a perfectly indicated start of surprise which she promptly translated into a little, joyful cry. The living pillar of ivory, satin and precious stones ran into her arms, embraced her ardently, and kissed both her cheeks, then releasing her half-turned to Lanyard.

Glints of trifling malice winked behind the open interest of troubling, rounded eyes of violet. Lanyard knew himself known.

So he had sacrificed for nothing his beautiful beard!

He uttered a private but heartfelt “Damn!” and bowed profoundly as the woman, tapping Athenais on the arm with a fan crusted with diamonds, demanded:

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"Present instantly, my dear, this gentleman who tangoes as I have never seen the tango danced before!"

Forestalling Athenais, Lanyard replied with a whimsical grimace: "Is one, then, so unfortunate as to have been forgotten by Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes?"

With any other woman than Athenais Reneaux he would have hesitated to deal so bold an offensive stroke; but his confidence in her quickness of apprehension and her unshakable self-possession was both implicit and well-placed. For she received this overt notification of the success of his quest without one sign other than a look of dawning puzzlement.

"Madame la comtesse...?" she murmured with a rising inflection.

"But monsieur is mistaken," the other stammered, biting her lip.

"Surely one cannot have been so stupid!" Lanyard apologised.

"But this is Mademoiselle Delorme," Athenais said ... "Monsieur Paul Martin."

Liane Delorme! Those syllables were like a spoken spell to break the power of dark enchantment which had hampered Lanyard's memory ever since first sight of this woman in the Cafe de l'Univers at Nant. A great light began to flood his understanding, but he was denied time to advantage himself immediately of its illumination: Liane Delorme was quick to parry and riposte.

"How strange monsieur should think he had ever known me by a name ... What was it? But no matter! For now I look more closely, I myself cannot get over the impression that I have known Monsieur—Martin, did you say?—somewhere, sometime ... But Paul Martin? Not unless monsieur has more than one name."

"Then it would seem that mademoiselle and I are both in error. The loss is mine."

That gun spiked, Lanyard began to breathe more freely. "It is not too late to make up that loss, monsieur." Liane Delorme was actually chuckling in appreciation of his readiness, pleased with him even in the moment of her own discomfiture; her eyes twinkling merrily at him above the fan with which she hid a convulsed countenance. "Surely two people so possessed with regret at never having known each other should lose no time improving their acquaintance! Dear Athenais: do ask us to sit at your table."

While the waiter fetched additional chairs, the woman made her escorts known: Messieurs Benouville et Le Brun, two extravagantly insignificant young men, exquisitely groomed and presumably wealthy, who were making the bravest efforts to seem unaware that to be seen with Liane Delorme conferred an unimpeachable cachet.

Lanyard remarked, however, that neither ventured to assume proprietorial airs; while Liane's attitude toward them was generally indulgent, if occasionally patronising and sometimes impatient.

Champagne frothed into fresh glasses. As soon as the band struck up another dance, Athenais drifted away in the arms of Monsieur Le Brun. Liane gazed round the room, acknowledged the salutations of several friends, signalled gaily to a pair of mercenaries on the far side of the dancing floor, and issued peremptory orders to Benouville.

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“Go, Chu-chu, and ask Angele to dance with you. She is being left to bore herself while Victor dances with Constance. Moreover, I desire to afflict Monsieur Martin with my confidences.”

With the utmost docility Benouville effaced himself.

“Eh, bien, Monsieur Duchemin!”

“Eh, bien, madame la comtesse?” Liane sipped at her champagne, making impudent eyes at Lanyard over the brim of her glass.

“By what appears, you have at last torn yourself away from the charming society of the Chateau de Montalais.”

“As you see.”

“That was a long visit you made at the chateau, my old one?”

“Madame la comtesse is well informed,” Lanyard returned, phlegmatic.

“One hears what one hears.”

“One had the misfortune to fall foul of an assassin,” Lanyard took the trouble to explain.

“An assassin!”

“The same Apache who attacked—with others—the party from Montalais at Montpellier-le-Vieux.”

“And you were wounded?”

Lanyard assented. The lady made a shocked face and uttered appropriate noises. “As you know,” Lanyard added.

Liane Delorme pretended not to hear that last. “And the ladies of the chateau,” she enquired—“they were sympathetic, one feels sure?”

“They were most kind.”

“It was not serious, this wound—no?”

“Mademoiselle may judge when she knows I was unable to leave my bed for nearly three weeks.”

“But what atrocity! And this Apache—?”



"Remains at large."

"Ah, these police!" And the lady described a sign of contempt that was wholly unladylike. "Still, you are well recovered, by the way you dance."

"One cannot complain."

"What an experience! Still—" Liane again buried her nose in her glass and regarded Lanyard with a look of mysterious understanding. Re-emerging, she resumed: "Still, not without its compensations, eh, mon ami?"

"That is as one regards it, mademoiselle."

"Oh! oh!" There was any amount of deep significance in these exclamations. "One may regard that in more ways than one."

"Indeed," Lanyard agreed with his most winning manner: "One may for instance remember that I recovered speedily enough to be in Paris to-night and meet mademoiselle without losing time."

"Monsieur wishes me to flatter myself into thinking he did me the honour of desiring to find me to-night?"

"Or any other. Do not depreciate the potency of your charms, mademoiselle. Who, having seen you once, could help hoping to see you again?"

"My friend," said Liane, with a pursed, judgmental mouth, "I think you are much too amiable."

"But I assure you, never a day has passed, no, nor yet a night, that I have not dwelt upon the thought of you, since you made so effective an entrance to the chateau, a vision of radiant beauty, out of that night of tempest and fury."

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Liane drooped a coy head. "Monsieur compliments me too much."

"Impossible!"

"Is one, then, to understand that monsieur is making love to me?"

Lanyard pronounced coolly: "No."

That won another laugh of personal appreciation. "What then, mon ami?"

"Figure to yourself that one may often dream of the unattainable without aspiring to possess it."

"Unattainable?" Liane repeated in a liquid voice: "What a dismal word, monsieur!" "It means what it means, mademoiselle."

"To the contrary, monsieur, it means what you wish it to mean. You should revise your lexicon."

"Now it is mademoiselle who is too flattering. And where is that good Monsieur Monk to-night?"

The woman overlooked the innuendo; or, rather, buried it under a landslide of emotional acting.

"Ah, monsieur! but I am desolated, inconsolable. He has gone away!"

"Monsieur Monk?" Lanyard opened his eyes wide.

"Who else? He has left France, he has returned to his barbarous America, with his beautiful motor car, his kind heart, and all his millions!"

"And the excellent Phinuit?"

"That one as well."

"How long ago?"

"A week to-morrow they did sail from Cherbourg. It is a week since anyone has heard me laugh."

Lanyard compassionately fished a bottle out of the cooler and refilled her glass.

"Accept, mademoiselle, every assurance of my profound sympathy."

“You have a heart, my friend,” she said, and drank with the feverish passion of the disconsolate.

“And one very truly at mademoiselle’s service.”

Liane sniffed mournfully and dabbed at her nose with a ridiculous travesty of a handkerchief. “Be so kind,” she said in a tearful voice, though her eyes were quite dry and, if one looked closely, calculating—“a cigarette.”

One inferred that the storm was over. Lanyard tendered his cigarette case, and then a match, wondering what next. What he had reason to anticipate was sure to come, the only question was when. Not that it mattered when; he was ready for it at any time. And there was no hurry: Athenais, finding herself paired with an un-commonly good dancer in Le Brun, was considerably making good use of this pretext for remaining on the floor—there were two bands to furnish practically continuous music—and leave Lanyard to finish uninterrupted what she perfectly understood to be a conversation of considerable moment.

As for Benouville, he was much too well trained to dream of returning without being bidden by Liane Delorme.

“But it is wonderful,” murmured that one, pensive.

And there was that in her tone to make Lanyard mentally prick forward his ears. He sketched a point of interrogation.

“To encounter so much understanding in one who is a complete stranger.”

(“Complete’?” Lanyard considered. “I think it’s coming...”)

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"Monsieur must not think me unappreciative."

"Ah, mademoiselle!" he protested sadly—"but you forget so easily."

"That we have met before, when I term you a complete stranger?"

"Well... yes."

"It is because I would not be in monsieur's debt!"

"Pardon?"

"I will repay sympathy with sympathy. I have already forgotten that I ever visited the Chateau de Montalais. So how should I remember I met monsieur there under the name of... but I forget."

"The name of Duchemin?"

"I never knew there was such a name—I swear!—before I saw it in type to-day."

"In type?"

"Monsieur does not read the papers?"

"Not all of them, mademoiselle."

"It appeared in Le Matin to-day, this quaint name Duchemin, in a despatch from Millau stating that a person of that name, a guest of the Chateau de Montalais, had disappeared without taking formal leave of his hosts."

"One gathers that he took something else?"

"Nothing less than the world-known Anstruther collection of jewels, the property of Madame de Montalais nee Anstruther."

"But I am recently from the Chateau de Montalais, and in a position to assure mademoiselle that this poor fellow, Duchemin, is unjustly accused."

"Oh, ho, ho!"

He heard again that laugh of broad derision which had seemed so out of character with a great lady when he had heard it first, that night now nearly a month old.

"Mademoiselle does not believe?"

"I think monsieur must be a good friend to this Monsieur Duchemin."

"I confess I entertain a sneaking fondness for his memory."

"You can hardly call yourself an impartial judge—"

"It is nevertheless true he did not steal the jewels."

"Then tell me who did take them."

"Unfortunately for Duchemin, that remains a mystery."

"Rather, I should say, fortunately for him."

"You would wrong him, then."

"But why, if innocent, did he run away?"

"I imagine, because he knew he would surely be accused, in which case ancient history would be revived to prove him guilty beyond a question in the mind of any sane court."

"Does one understand he had a history?"

"I have heard it intimated such was the case."

"But I remain in the dark. The theft presumably was not discovered till after his disappearance. Yet, according to your contention, he must have known of it in advance. How do you account for that?"

"Mademoiselle would make a famous juge d'instruction."

"That does not answer my argument."

"How is one to answer it? Who knows how Duchemin discovered the theft before the ladies of the chateau did?"

"Do you know what you make me think? That he was not as innocent as you assert."

"Mademoiselle will explain?"

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"I have a suspicion that this Monsieur Duchemin was guilty in intention; but when it came to put his intention into execution, he found he had been anticipated."

"Mademoiselle is too clever for me. Now I should never have thought of that."

"He would have been wiser to stay and fight it out. The very fact of his flight confesses his guilt."

"Perhaps he did not remember that until too late."

"And now nothing can clear him. How sad for him! A chance meeting with one who is not his friend, a whispered word to the Prefecture, or the nearest agent de police, and within an hour he finds himself in the Sante."

"Poor chap!" said Lanyard with a doleful shake of the head.

"I, too, pity him," the woman declared. "Monsieur: against my prejudice, your faith in Duchemin has persuaded me. I am convinced that he is innocent."

"How good you are!" "It makes me glad I have so well forgotten ever meeting him. I do not believe I should know him if I found him here, in this very restaurant, even seated by my side."

"It is mademoiselle now whose heart is great and kind."

"You may believe it well."

"And does mademoiselle's forgetfulness, perhaps, extend even farther into the so dead past?"

"But, monsieur, I was a mere child when I first came to Paris, before the War. How could anyone reasonably expect my memory of those innocent girlish days to be exact? Regard that, even then, I met people by hundreds, as a young girl studying for the stage must. Is it likely one face would stand out in my memory more than another?"

"Quite, if you ask me," said Lanyard dryly—"quite likely, if any circumstance connected with that face were at all memorable."

"But I assure you I was in those days much too self-absorbed to pay much attention to others. It is that way, you know, in maiden days."

"Mademoiselle does injustice to her memory," Lanyard insisted in polite astonishment. "In some ways it is wonderful."

The woman looked suddenly aside, so that he could not see her face; but he perceived, with an astonishment which he made no attempt to hide, that she was quaking bodily with some unconfessed emotion. And when she faced again his unbroken look of grave bewilderment, he discovered that she was really capable of tears.

“Monsieur,” she gasped, “believe it or not, never before have I met one with whom I was so completely en rapport. And instantaneously! It is priceless, this! We must see more of one another.”

“Much more,” Lanyard assented gravely. “A great deal more,” she supplemented with significance. “I am sure we shall get along together famously.”

“Mademoiselle offers me great honour—”

“Nothing less than my friendship.”

“I would be indeed an ingrate to refuse it. But a question: Will not people talk?”

“What!” Amusement shook her again. “How talk? What more can they say about Liane Delorme?”

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“Ah!” said Lanyard—“but about Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes...”

“My friend: that was a good joke once; but now you must forget that name as utterly as I have forgotten another.”

“Impossible.”

“What do you say?” She frowned a little. “Is it possible you misunderstood? De Lorgnes was nothing to me.”

“I never thought he was.”

“You had reason. Because we were thrown together, and our names were something alike in sound, it amused us—not the two of us alone, but all our party—to pretend I was madame la comtesse.”

“He was really a count?”

“Who knows? It was the style by which he had always passed with us.”

“Alas!” sighed Lanyard, and bent a sombre gaze upon his glass.

Without looking he was aware of a questioning gesture of the woman’s head. He said no more, but shook his own.

“What is this?” she asked sharply. “You know something about de Lorgnes?”

“Had you not heard?” he countered, looking up in surprise.

“Heard—?” He saw her eyes stabbed by fear, and knew himself justified of his surmises. All day she had been expecting de Lorgnes, or word from him, all day and all this night. One could imagine the hourly augmented strain of care and foreboding; indeed its evidence were only too clearly betrayed in her face and manner of that moment: she was on the rack.

But there was no pity in Lanyard’s heart. He knew her of old, what she was, what evil she had done; and in his hearing still sounded the echoes of those words with which, obliquely enough but without misunderstanding on the part of either, she had threatened to expose him to the police unless he consented to some sort of an alliance with her, a collaboration whose nature could not but be dishonourable if it were nothing more than a simple conspiracy of mutual silence.

And purposely he delayed his answer till her patience gave way and she was clutching his arm with frantic hands.

“What is the matter? Why do you look at me like that? Why don’t you tell me—if there is anything to tell—?”

“I was hesitating to shock you, Liane.”

“Never mind me. What has happened to de Lorgnes?”

“It is in all the evening newspapers—the murder mystery of the Lyons rapide.”

“De Lorgnes—?”

Lanyard inclined his head. The woman breathed an invocation to the Deity and sank back against the wall, her face ghastly beneath its paint.

“You know this?”

“I was a passenger aboard the rapide, and saw the body before it was removed.”

Liane Delorme made an effort to speak, but only her breath rustled harshly on her dry lips. She swallowed convulsively, turned to her glass, and found it empty. Lanyard hastened to refill it. She took the wine at a gulp, muttered a word of thanks, and offered the glass to be filled anew; but when this had been done sat unconscious of it, staring witlessly at nothing, so lost to her surroundings that all the muscles of her face relaxed and her years peered out through that mask of artifice which alone preserved for her the illusion and repute of beauty.

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Thus the face of an evil woman of middle-age, debauched beyond hope of redemption, was hideously revealed. Lanyard knew a qualm at seeing it, and looked hastily away.

Beyond the rank of tables which stood between him and the dancing floor he saw Athenais Reneaux with Le Brun sweeping past in the suave movement of a waltz. The girl's face wore a startled expression, her gaze was direct to the woman at Lanyard's side; then it shifted enquiringly to him. With a look Lanyard warned her to compose herself, then lifted an eyebrow and glanced meaningly toward the doors. The least of nods answered him before Le Brun swung Athenais toward the middle of the floor and other couples intervened.

Liane Delorme stirred abruptly.

"The assassin?" she demanded—"is there any clue?"

"I believe he is known by description, but missing."

"But you, my friend—what do you know?"

"As much as anybody, I fancy—except the author of the murder."

"Tell me."

Quietly, briefly, Lanyard told her of seeing the Comte de Lorgnes at dinner in Lyons; of the uneasiness he manifested, and the cumulative feeling of frustration and failure he so plainly betrayed as the last hours of his life wore on; of the Apaches who watched de Lorgnes in the cafe and the fact that one of them had contrived to secure a berth in the same carriage with his victim; of seeing the presumptive murderer slinking away from the train at Laroche; and of the discovery of the body, on the arrival of the rapide at the Gare de Lyon.

Absorbed, with eyes abstracted and intent, and a mouth whose essential selfishness and cruelty was unconsciously stressed by the compression of her lips: the woman heard him as he might have been a disembodied voice. Now and again, however, she nodded intently and, when he finished, had a pertinent question ready.

"You say a description of this assassin exists?"

"Have I not communicated it to you?"

"But to the police—?"

"Is it likely?" The woman gave him a blank stare.

“Pardon, mademoiselle: but is it likely that the late Andre Duchemin would have more to do with the police than he could avoid?”

“You would see a cold-blooded crime go unavenged—?”

“Rather than dedicate the remainder of my days to seeing the world through prison bars? I should say yes!—seeing that this assassination does not concern me, and I am guiltless of the crime with which I myself am charged. But you who were a friend to de Lorgnes know the facts, and nothing hinders your communicating them to the Prefecture.... Though I will confess it would be gracious of you to keep my name out of the affair.”

But Lanyard was not dicing with Chance when he made this suggestion: he knew very well Liane Delorme would not go to the police.

“That for the Prefecture!” She clicked a finger-nail against her teeth. “What does it know? What does it do when it knows anything?”

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"I agree with mademoiselle entirely."

"Ah!" she mused bitterly—"if only we knew the name of that sale cochon!"

"We do."

"We—monsieur?"

"I, at least, know one of the many names doubtless employed by the assassin."

"And you hesitate to tell me!"

"Why should I? No, but an effort of memory..." Lanyard measured a silence, seeming lost in thought, in reality timing the blow and preparing to note its effect. Then, snapping his fingers as one who says: I have it!—"Albert Dupont," he announced abruptly.

Unquestionably the name meant nothing to the woman. She curled a lip: "But that is any name!" Then thoughtfully: "You heard his companion of the cafe call him that?"

"No, mademoiselle. But I recognised the animal as Albert Dupont when he boarded the train at Combe-Rendonde that morning and, unnoticed by him, travelled with him all the way to Lyons."

"You recognised him?"

"I believe it well."

"When had you known him?"

"First when I fought with him at Montpellier-le-Vieux, later when he sought to do me in on the outskirts of Nant. He was the fugitive chauffeur of the Chateau de Montalais."

"But—name of a sacred name!—what had that one to do with de Lorgnes?"

"If you will tell me that, there will be no more mystery in this sad affair."

The woman brooded heavily for a moment. "But if it had been you he was after, I might understand..." He caught the sidelong glimmer of her eye upon him, dark with an unuttered question.

But the waltz was at an end, Athenais and Le Brun were threading their way through the intervening tables.

The interruption could not have been better timed; Lanyard was keen to get away. He had learned all that he could reasonably have hoped to learn from Liane Delorme in one night. He knew that she and de Lorgnes had been mutually interested in the business

that took the latter to Lyons. He had the testimony of his own perceptions to prove that news of the murder had come as a great shock to her. On that same testimony he was prepared to swear that, whatever the part, if any, she had played in the robbery, she knew nothing of "Albert Dupont," at least by that name, and nothing of his activities as chauffeur at the Chateau de Montalais.

Yet one thing more Lanyard knew: that Liane suspected him of knowing more than he had told her. But he wasn't sorry she should think that; it gave him a continuing claim upon her interest. Henceforth she might be wary of him, but she would never lose touch with him if she could help it.

Now Athenais was pausing beside the table, and saying with a smile as weary as it was charming:

"Come, Monsieur Paul, if you please, and take me home! I've danced till I'm ready to drop."

Annoyed by the prospect of being obliged to let Lanyard out of her sight so soon, before she had time to mature her plans with respect to him, Liane Delorme pulled herself together.

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“Go home?” she protested with a vivacity so forced it drew a curious stare even from the empty Le Brun. “So early! My dear! what are you thinking of?” “I’ve been on the go all day long,” Athenais explained sweetly; “and now I’ve got nothing left to keep up on.”

“Zut!” the Delorme insisted. “Have more champagne and—”

“Thank you, no, dearest. My head is swimming with it already. I really must go. Surely you don’t mind?”

But Liane did mind, and the wine she had drunk had left her only a remnant of sobriety, not enough for good control of her temper.

“Mind?” she echoed rudely. “Why should I mind whether you stay or go? It’s your affair, not mine.” She made a scornful mouth; and the look with which she coupled Lanyard and Athenais in innuendo was in itself almost actionable. “But me,” she pursued with shrill vivacity—“I shan’t go yet, I’m not drunk enough by half. Get more champagne, Fred”—this to Le Brun as she turned a gleaming shoulder to the others—“quantities of it—and tell Chu-chu to bring Angele over, and Constance and Victor, too. Thanks to the good God, they at least know they are still alive!”

XV

ADIEU

Ever since the fall of evening, whose clear gloaming had seemed to promise a fair night of moonlight, the skies had been thickening slowly over Paris. While still at the Ambassadeurs Lanyard had noticed that the moon was being blotted out. By midnight its paling disk had become totally eclipsed, the clouds hung low over the city, a dense blanket imprisoning heat which was oppressive even in the open and stifling in the ill-ventilated restaurants.

Now from the shelter of the cafe canopy Lanyard and Athenais Reneaux looked out upon a pave like a river of jet ribboned with gently glowing lights and running between the low banks of sidewalks no less black: both deserted but for a few belated prowlers lurching homeward through the drizzle, and a rank of private cars waiting near the entrance.

The bedizened porter whistled fatuously at a passing taxicab, which though fareless held steadfast to its way, while the driver acknowledged the signal only with jeers and disgraceful gestures, after the manner of his kind. So that Lanyard, remembering how frequently similar experiences had befallen him in pre-War Paris, reflected sadly that the great conflict had, after all, worked little change in human hearts—charitably assuming the bosoms of French taxi-bandits to be so furnished.

Presently, however, the persistent whistle conjured from round a corner a rakish hansom that—like the creature between its shafts and the driver on its lofty box, with his face in full bloom and his bleary eyes, his double-breasted box-coat and high hat of oilcloth—had doubtless been brisk with young ambition in the golden time of the Nineteen-Naughties.

But unmistakably of the vintage of the Nineteen-Twenties was the avarice of the driver. For when he had been given the address of the Athenais' apartment, he announced with vinous truculence that his whim inclined to precisely the opposite direction, gathered up the reins, clucked in peremptory fashion to the nag (which sagely paid no attention to him whatsoever) and consented only to change his mind when promised a fabulous fare.

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Even then he grumbled profanely while Lanyard helped Athenais to climb in and took the place by her side.

The rue Pigalle was as dark and still as any street in a deserted village. From its gloomy walls the halting clatter of hoofs struck empty echoes that rang in Lanyard's heart like a refrain from some old song. To that very tune had the gay world gone about its affairs in younger years, when the Lone Wolf was a living fact and not a fading memory in the minds of men...

He sighed heavily.

"Monsieur is sentimental," commented Athenais Reneaux lightly. "Beware! Sentimentalists come always to some sad end."

"One has found that true ... But you are young to know it, Athenais."

"A woman is never young—after a certain age—save when she loves, my friend."

"That, too, is true. But still you are overyoung to have learned it."

"One learns life's lessons not in any fixed and predetermined order, Paul, with no sort of sequence whatever, but as and when Life chooses to teach them."

"Quel dommage!" Lanyard murmured, and subsided into another silence.

The girl grew restive. "But tell me, my dear Don Juan," she protested: "Do all your conquests affect you in this morbid fashion?"

"Conquests?"

"You seemed to get on very well with Liane Delorme."

"Pardon. If I am sentimental, it is because old memories have been awakened to-night, memories of forfeit days when one thought well of oneself, here in Paris."

"Days in which, no doubt, Liane played a part?"

"A very minor role, Athenais ... But are you doing me the honour to be jealous?"

"Perhaps, petit Monsieur Paul..."

In the broken light of passing lamps her quiet smile was as illegible as her shadowed eyes.

After a moment Lanyard laughed a little, caught up her hand, patted it indulgently, and with gentle decision replaced it in her lap.

"It isn't fair, my dear, to be putting foolish notions into elderly heads merely because you know you can do it. Show a little respect for my grey hairs, of which there are far too many."

"They're most becoming," said Athenais Reneaux demurely. "But tell me about Liane, if it isn't a secret."

"Oh! that was so long ago and such a trifling thing, one wonders at remembering it at all.... I happened, one night, to be where I had no right to be. That was rather a habit of mine, I'm afraid. And so I discovered, in another man's apartment, a young woman, hardly more than a child, trying to commit suicide. You may believe I put a stop to that.... Later, for in those days I had some little influence in certain quarters, I got her place in the chorus at the Varietes. She made up a name for the stage: Liane Delorme. And that is all. You see, it was very simple."

"And she was grateful?"

"Not oppressively. She was quite normal about it all."

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"Still, she has not forgotten."

"But remind yourself that the chemistry of years is such that inevitably a sense of obligation in due course turns into a grudge. It is true, Liane has not forgotten, but I am by no means sure she has forgiven me for saving her to life."

"There may be something in that, seeing what she has made of her life."

"Now there is where you can instruct me. I have been long in exile."

"But you know how Liane graduated from the chorus of the Varietes, became first a principal there, then the rage of all the music halls with her way of singing rhymed indecencies."

"One has heard something of that."

"On the peak of her success she retired, saying she had worked long enough, made enough money. That, too, knows itself. But Liane retired only from the stage... You understand?"

"Perfectly."

"She continued to make many dear friends, some of them among the greatest personages of Europe. So that gradually she became what she is to-day," Athenais Reneaux pronounced soberly: "as I think, the most dangerous woman on the Continent."

"How—'dangerous'?"

"Covetous, grasping, utterly unscrupulous and corrupt, and weirdly powerful. She has a strange influence in the highest places."

"Blackmail?"

"God knows! It was, at all events, strong enough to save her from being shot during the war. I was assigned to watch her then. There was a suspicion in England that she was in communication with the enemy. I found it to be quite true. She knew Bolo Pasha intimately, Caillaux, too. Other women, many of them, fled the country, or went to St. Lazare for the duration of the war, or faced firing squads at dawn for doing infinitely less than she did to betray France and her Allies; but Liane Delorme got off scot-free. I happen to know that England made the strongest representations to the French government about her. I know personally of two young French officers who had been on friendly terms with Liane, and who shot themselves, one dramatically on her very doorstep. And why did they do that, if not in remorse for betraying to her secrets which afterwards somehow found their way to the enemy?... But nothing was ever done about

it, she was never in the least molested, and nightly you might see her at Maxim's or L'Abbaye, making love to officers, while at the Front men were being slaughtered by the hundreds, thanks to her treachery.... Ah, monsieur, I tell you I know that woman too well!"

The girl's voice quavered with indignation.

"So that was how you came to know her," Lanyard commented as if he had found nothing else of interest. "I wondered..."

"Yes: we were bosom friends—almost—for a time. It wasn't nice, but the job had to be done. Then Liane grew suspicious, and our friendship cooled. One night I had a narrow escape from some Apaches. I recognised Liane's hand in that. She was afraid I knew something. So I did. But she didn't dream how much I knew. If she had there would have been a second attempt of that sort minus the escape. Then the armistice came to cool our passions, and Liane found other things to think about ... God knows what other mischief to do in time of peace!"

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"I think," Lanyard suggested, recalling that conversation in the grand salon of the Chateau de Montalais, "you had better look to yourself, Athenais, as far as Liane is concerned, after to-night. She only needed to see you with me to have confirmed any suspicions she may previously have had concerning your relations with the B. S. S."

"I will remember that," the girl said calmly. "Many thanks, dear friend.... But what is it you are doing all the time? What is it you see?"

As the hansom swung round the dark pile of the Trinite, Lanyard had for the third time twisted round in his seat, to peep back up the rue Pigalle through the little window in the rear.

"As I thought!" He let the leather flap fall over the peep-hole and sat back. "Liane doesn't trust me," he sighed, disconsolate.

"We are followed?"

"By a motor-car of some sort, creeping along without lights, probably one of the private cars that were waiting when we came out."

"I have a pistol, if you need one," Athenais offered, matter-of-fact.

"Then you were more sensible than I."

Lanyard held a thoughtful silence for some minutes, while the cab jogged sedately down the rue St. Lazare, then had another look back through the little window.

"No mistake about that," he reported; and bending forward began to peer intently right and left into the dark throats of several minor streets they passed after leaving the Hotel Terminus behind and heading down the rue de la Pepiniere. "The deuce of it is," he complained, "this inhuman loneliness! If there were only something like a crowd in the streets as there must have been earlier in the evening..."

"What are you thinking of, monsieur?"

"But naturally of ridding you of an embarrassing and perhaps dangerous companion."

"If you mean you're planning to jump down and run for it," Athenais replied, "you're a fool. You'll not get far with a motor car pursuing you and sergents de ville abnormally on the qui vive because the crime wave that followed demobilisation as yet shows no signs of subsiding."

"But, mademoiselle, it makes me so unhappy to have any shadow but my own."

"Then rest tranquil here with me. It isn't much farther to my apartment."

“Possibly it would be better to drop you there first—”

“Nothing of the sort; but positively the contrary.”

“My dear child! if I were to do as you wish they would think—”

“My dear Paul, I don’t give a damn what they think. Remember I am specially charged with the preservation of your life while in Paris. Besides, my apartment is the most discreet little rez-de-chaussee one could wish. There is more than one way in and out. And once they think you are placed for the night, it’s more than likely they won’t even set a watch, but will trot off to report. Then you can slip away when you will....” He stared, knowing a moment of doubt to which a hard little laugh put a period.

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“Oh, you needn’t be so thoughtful of my reputation! If this were the worst that could be said of me—”

Lanyard laughed in turn, quietly tolerant, and squeezed her hand again.

“You are a dear,” he said, “but you need to be a far better actress to deceive me about such matters.”

“Don’t be stupid!” her sulky voice retorted.

“I’m not.”

He bent forward again, folding his arms on the ledge of the apron, studying the streets and consulting an astonishingly accurate mental map of Paris which more than once had stood him in good stead in other times.

After a little the girl’s hand crept along his arm, took possession of his hand and used it as a lever to swing him back to face her.

In the stronger lighting of the Boulevard Haussmann her face seemed oddly childlike, oddly luminous with appeal.

“Please, petit Monsieur Paul! I ask it of you, I wish it.... To please me?”

“O Lord!” Lanyard sighed—“how is one to resist when you plead so prettily to be compromised?”

“Since that’s settled”—of a sudden the imploring child was replaced by self-possessed Mademoiselle Athenais Reneaux—“you may have your hand back again. I assure you I have no more use for it.”

The hansom turned off the boulevard, affording Lanyard an opportunity to look back through the side window.

“Still on the trail,” he announced. “But they’ve got the lights on now.”

With a profound sigh from the heart the horse stopped in front of a corner apartment building and later, with a groan almost human, responded to the whip and jingled the hansom away, leaving Lanyard the poorer by the exorbitant fare he had promised and something more.

Athenais was already at the main entrance, ringing for the concierge. Lanyard hastened to join her, but before he could cross the sidewalk a motor-car poked its nose round the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann, a short block away, and bore swiftly their way, seeming to search the street suspiciously with its blank, lidless eyes of glare.

“Peste!” breathed the girl. “I have a private entrance and my own key. We could have used that had I imagined this sacred pig of a concierge—!”

The latch clicked. She thrust the door open and slipped into dense darkness. Lanyard lingered another instant. The car was slowing down, and the street lamp on the corner revealed plainly a masculine arm resting on its window-sill; but the spying face above the arm was only a blur.

“Come, monsieur!”

Lanyard stepped in and shut the door. A hand with which he was beginning to feel fairly well acquainted found his and led him through the dead obscurity to another pause. A key grated in a lock, the hand drew him on again, a second door closed behind him.

“We are chez moi,” said a voice in the dark.

“One could do with a light.”

“Wait. This way.”

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The hand guided him across a room of moderate size, avoiding its furniture with almost uncanny ease, then again brought him to a halt. Brass rings clashed softly on a pole, a gap opened in heavy draperies curtaining a window, a shaft of street light threw the girl's profile into soft relief. She drew him to her till their shoulders touched.

"You see..."

He bent his head close to hers, conscious of a caressing tendril of hair that touched his cheek, and the sweet warmth and fragrance of her; and peering through the draperies saw their pursuing motor car at pause, not at the curb, but in the middle of the street before the house. The man's arm still rested on the sill of the window; the pale oval of the face above it was still vague. Abruptly both disappeared, a door slammed on the far side of the car, and the car itself, after a moment's wait, gathered way with whining gears and vanished, leaving nothing human visible in the quiet street.

"What did that mean? Did they pick somebody up?"

"But quite otherwise, mademoiselle."

"Then what has become of him?"

"In the shadow of the door across the way: don't you see the deeper shadow of his figure in the corner, to this side. And there ... Ah, dolt!"

The man in the doorway had moved, cautiously thrusting one hand out of the shadow far enough for the street lights to shine upon the dial of his wrist-watch. Instantly it was withdrawn; but his betrayal was accomplished.

"That's enough," said Lanyard, drawing the draperies close again. "No trouble to make a fool of that one, God has so nobly prepared the soil." The girl said nothing. They no longer touched, and she was for the time so still that he might almost have fancied himself alone. But in that quiet room he could hear her breathing close beside him, not heavily but with a rapid accent hinting at an agitation which her voice bore out when she answered his wondering: "Mademoiselle?" "J'y suis, petit Monsieur Paul."

"Is anything the matter?"

"No ... no: there is nothing the matter."

"I'm afraid I have tired you out to-night."

"I do not deny I am a little weary."

"Forgive me."

“There is nothing to forgive, not yet, petit Monsieur Paul.” A trace of hard humour crept into her tone: “It is all in the night’s work, as the saying should be in Paris.”

“Three favours more; then I will do you one in return.”

“Ask...”

“Be so kind as to make a light and find me a pocket flash-lamp if you have one.”

“I can do the latter without the former. It is better that we show no light; one stray gleam through the curtains would tell too much. Wait.”

A noise of light footsteps muffled by a rug, high heels tapping on uncovered floor, the scrape of a drawer pulled out: and she returned to give him a little nickelled electric torch.

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“And then—?”

“Liane’s address, if you know it.”

The girl named a number on an avenue not far distant. Lanyard remarked this.

“Yes; you can walk there in less than five minutes. And finally?”

“Show me the way out.” Again she made no response. He pursued in some constraint: “Thus you will enable me to make you my only inadequate return—leave you to your rest.”

Yet another space of silence; then a gusty little laugh. “That is a great favour, truly, petit Monsieur Paul! So give me your hand once more.” But she no longer clung to it as before; the clasp of her fingers was light, cool, impersonal to the point of indifference. Vexed, resentful of her resentment, Lanyard suffered her guidance through the darkness of another room, a short corridor, and then a third room, where she left him for a moment.

He heard again the clash of curtain rings. The dim violet rectangle of a window appeared in the darkness, the figure of the woman in vague silhouette against it. A sash was lifted noiselessly, rain-sweet air breathed into the apartment. Athenais returned to his side, pressed into his palm a key.

“That window opens on a court. The drop from the sill is no more than four feet. In the wall immediately opposite you will find a door. This key opens it. Lock the door behind you, and at your first opportunity throw away the key: I have several copies. You will find yourself in a corridor leading to the entrance of the apartment house in the rear of this, facing on the next street. Demand the cordon of the concierge as if you were a late guest leaving one of the apartments. He will make no difficulty about opening.... I think that is all.”

“Not quite. There remains for me to attempt the impossible, to prove my gratitude, Athenais, in mere, unmeaning words.”

“Don’t try, Paul.” The voice was softened once more, its accents broken. “Words cannot serve us, you and me! There is one way only, and that, I know, is ... rue Barre!” Her sad laugh fluttered, she crept into his arms. “But still, petit Monsieur Paul, *she* will not care if ... only once!”

She clung to him for a long, long moment, then released his lips.

“Men have kissed me, yes, not a few,” she whispered, resting her face on his bosom, “but you alone have known my kiss. Go now, my dear, while I have strength to let you go, and ... make me one little promise...”



“Whatever you ask, Athenais....”

“Never come back, unless you need me; for I shall not have so much strength another time.”

Alone, she rested a burning forehead against the lifted window-sash, straining her vision to follow his shadow as it moved through the murk of the court below and lost itself in the deeper gloom of the opposing wall.

XVI

THE HOUSE OF LILITH

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It stood four-square and massive on a corner between the avenues de Friedland et des Champs-Elysees, near their junction at the Place de l'Etoile: a solid stone pile of a town-house in the most modern mode, without architectural beauty, boasting little attempt at exterior embellishment, but smelling aloud of Money; just such a maison de ville as a decent bourgeois banker might be expected to build him when he contemplates retiring after doing the Rothschilds a wicked one in the eye.

It was like Liane's impudence, too. Lanyard smiled at the thought as he studied the mansion from the backwards of a dark doorway in the diagonally opposed block of dwellings. Her kind was always sure to seek, once its fortunes were on firm footing, to establish itself, as here, in the very heart of an exclusive residential district; as if thinking to absorb social sanctity through the simple act of rubbing shoulders with it; or else, as was more likely to be the case with a woman of Liane Delorme's temper, desiring more to affront a world from which she was outcast than to lay siege to its favour.

It seemed, however, truly deplorable that Liane should have proved so conventional-minded in this particular respect. It rendered one's pet project much too difficult of execution. Earnestly as one desired to have a look at the inside of that house without the knowledge of its inmates, its aspect was forbidding and discouraging in the utmost extreme.

Heavy gates of wrought bronze guarded the front doors. The single side or service-door was similarly protected if more simply. And stout grilles of bronze barred every window on the level of the street.

Now none of these could have withstood the attack of a man of ingenuity with a little time at his disposal. But Lanyard could count on only the few remaining minutes of true night. Retarded though it might be by shrouded skies, dawn must come all too soon for his comfort. Yet he was conscious of no choice in the matter: he must and in spite of everything would know to-night what was going on behind that blank screen of stone. To-morrow night would be too late. Tonight, if there were any warrant for his suspicions, the jewels of Eve de Montalais lay in the dwelling of Liane Delorme; or if they were not there, the secret of their hiding was. But to-morrow both, and more than likely Liane as well, would be on the wing; or Lanyard had been sorely mistaken in seeing in her as badly frightened a woman as he had ever known, when she had learned of the assassination of de Lorgnes.

It was possible, he thought it extremely probable, that Liane Delorme was as powerful as Athenais Reneaux had asserted; influential, that is, with the State, with the dealers in its laws and the dispensers of its protection. But now she had not to reckon with such as these, but with enemies of her own sort, with an antagonism as reckless of law and order as she herself. And she was afraid of that, infinitely

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more disturbed in mind and spirit than she would have been in the face of any threat on the part of the police. The Prefecture was a known and measured force, an engine that ran as it were on mapped lines of rail; its moves might be forecast, guarded against, watched, evaded. But this other force worked in the dark, this hostile power personified in the creature who had called himself Albert Dupont; the very composition of its being was cloaked in a secrecy impenetrable and terrifying, its intentions and its workings could not be surmised or opposed until it struck and the success or failure of the stroke revealed its origin and aim.

Liane—or one misjudged her—would never sit still and wait for the blow to fall. She was too high-strung, too much in love with life. She must either strike first in self-defence—and, in such case, strike at what?—or remove beyond the range of the enemy's malice. Lanyard was confident she would choose the latter course.

But confidence was not knowledge....

He transferred his attention from the formidable defences of the lower storey to the second. Here all the windows were of the type called french, and opened inward from shallow balconies with wrought bronze railings. Lanyard was acquainted with every form of fastening used for such windows; all were simple, none could resist his persuasions, provided he stood upon one of those balconies. Nor did he count it a difficult matter for a man of his activity and strength to scale the front of the house as far as the second storey; its walls were builded of heavy blocks of dressed stone with deep horizontal channels between each tier. These grooves would be greasy with rain; otherwise one could hardly ask for better footholds. A climb of some twelve or fifteen feet to the balcony: one should be able to make that within two minutes, granted freedom from interruption. The rub was there; the quarter seemed quite fast asleep; in the five minutes which had elapsed since Lanyard had ensconced himself in the doorway no motor car had passed, not a footfall had disturbed the stillness, never a sound of any sort had come to his attention other than one distant blare of a two-toned automobile horn from the neighbourhood of the Arc de Triomphe. But one dared not count on long continuance of such conditions. Already the sky showed a lighter shade above the profile of the roofs. And one wakeful watcher at a nearby window would spell ruin.

Nevertheless he must adventure the consequences....

Poised to leave his shelter and dart across the street, with his point of attack already selected, his thoughts already busy with consideration of steps to follow—he checked and fell still farther back into the shadow. Something was happening in the house across the way.

A man had opened the service-door and paused behind the bronze gate. There was no light behind him, and the gloom and intervening strips of metal rendered his figure indistinct. Lanyard's high-keyed perceptions had none the less been instant to remark that slight movement and the accompanying change in the texture of the darkness barred by the gate.

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Following a little wait, it swung slowly out, perhaps eighteen inches, the man advancing with it and again halting to peer up and down the street. Then quickly, as if alarmed, he withdrew, shut the gate, and disappeared, closing the service-door behind him.

Listening intently, Lanyard heard no click of latch, such as should have been audible in that dead hour of hush. Evidently the fellow had neglected to make fast the gate. Possibly he had been similarly remiss about fastening the door. But what was he up to? Why this furtive appearance, why the retreat so abruptly executed?

By way of answer came the soft drone of a high-powered motor; then the car itself rolled into view, a stately limousine coming from the direction of the avenue de Friedland. Before the corner house it stopped. A lackey alighted with an umbrella and ran to hold the door; but Liane Delorme would not wait for him. The car had not stopped when she threw the door open; on the instant when its wheels ceased to turn she jumped down and ran toward the house, heedless of the rain.

At the same time one side of the great front doors swung inward, and a footman ran out to open the gates. The lackey with the umbrella, though he moved briskly, failed to catch up with Liane before she sped up the steps. So he closed the umbrella and trotted back to his place beside the chauffeur. The footman shut gates and door as the limousine moved away: it had not been sixty seconds at rest. In fifteen more street and house were both as they had been, save that a light now shone through the plate glass of the latter's great doors. And that was soon extinguished.

Conceiving that the man who had appeared at the service entrance was the same who had admitted Liane, Lanyard told himself he understood: impatient for his bed, the fellow had gone to the service gate to spy out for signs of madame's return. Now if only it were true that he had failed to close it securely——!

It proved so. The gate gave readily to Lanyard's pull. The knob of the small door turned silently. He stepped across the threshold, and shut himself into an unlighted hall, thoughtfully apeing the negligence of the servant and leaving the door barely on the latch by way of provision against a forced retreat.

So far, good. He felt for his pocket torch, then sharply fell back into the nearest corner and made himself as inconspicuous as might be. Footsteps were sounding on the other side of an unseen wall. He waited, breathless, stirless.

A latch rattled, and at about three yards' distance a narrow door opened, marked by a widening glow of light. A liveried footman—beyond a doubt he who admitted the mistress of the house—entered, carrying an electric candle, yawned with a superstitious hand before his mouth and, looking to neither right nor left, turned away from Lanyard and trudged wearily back to the household offices. At the far end of the long hallway a door closed behind him—and Lanyard moved swiftly.

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The door which had let the footman into the hall admitted to a spacious foyer which set apart the entrance and—as the play of the electric torch disclosed—a deep and richly furnished dining-room. To one side a broad flight of stairs ascended: Lanyard went up with the activity of a cat, making no more noise.

The second floor proved to be devoted mainly to a drawing-room, a lounge, and a library, all furnished in a weird, inchoate sort of magnificence, with money rather than with taste, if one might judge fairly by the fitful and guarded beam of the torch. The taste may have been less questionable than Lanyard thought; but the evidences of luxurious tendencies and wealth recklessly wasted in their gratification were irrefutable.

Lights were burning on the floor above, and a rumour of feminine voices drifted down, interrupted by an occasional sibilant rustle of silk, or a brief patter of high-heeled feet: noises which bore out the conjecture that madame's maid was undressing and putting her to bed; a ceremony apt to consume a considerable time with a woman of Liane's age and disposition, passionately bent on preserving to the grave a semblance of freshness in her charms. Lanyard reckoned on anything from fifteen minutes to an hour before her couching would be accomplished and the maid out of the way. Ten minutes more, and Liane ought to be asleep. If it turned out otherwise—well, one would have to deal with her awake. No need to be gravely concerned about that: to envisage the contingency was to be prepared against it.

Believing he must possess his soul in patience for an indeterminable wait, he was casting about for a place to secrete himself, when a change in the tenor of the talk between mistress and maid was conveyed by a sudden lift of half an octave in the latter's voice, sounding a sharp note of protest, to be answered by Liane in accent of overbearing anger.

One simply could not rest without knowing what that meant: Lanyard mounted the second flight of stairs as swiftly, surely, and soundlessly as he had the first. But just below a landing, where the staircase had an angle, he paused, crouching low, flat to the steps, his head lifted just enough to permit him to see, above the edge of the topmost, a section of glowing, rose-pink wall—it would be rose-pink!

He could see nothing more; and Liane had already silenced the maid, or rather reduced her to responses feebly submissive, and, consonant with the nature of her kind, was rubbing it in.

“And why should you not go with me to that America if I wish it?” Lanyard heard her say. “Is it likely I would leave you behind to spread scandal concerning me with that gabbling tongue in your head of an overgrown cabbage? It is some lover, then, who has inspired this folly in you? Tell him from me, if you please, the day you leave my service without my consent, it will be a sorry sweetheart that comes to him.”

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"It is well, madame. I say no more. I will go."

"I believe it well—you will go! You were mad ever to dream otherwise. Fetch my jewel-case—the large one, of steel, with the American lock."

"Madame takes all her jewels, then?" the maid enquired, moving about the room.

"But naturally. What do you think? That I leave them here for the scullery-maids to give their maquereaux? I shall pack them tonight, before I sleep."

("Damnation!"—from Lanyard, beneath his breath. More delay!)

"And we leave to-morrow, madame, at what time?"

"It matters not, so we are in Cherbourg by midnight. I may decide to make the trip by automobile."

"And madame's packing?"

"You know well what to pack, better than I. Get my boxes up the first thing in the morning and use your own judgment. If there are questions to be asked, save them until I wake up. I shall sleep till noon."

"That is all, madame?"

"That is all. You may go."

"Good-night, madame."

"Good-night, Marthe."

The stairway was no place to stop. Lanyard slipped like a shadow to the floor below, and took shelter behind a jog in the wall of the grand salon where, standing in deep darkness, he commanded a view of the hall.

The maid came down, carrying an electric candle like the footman's. Its rays illumined from below one of those faces of crude comeliness common to her class, the face of an animal not unintelligent but first and last an animal. With a hand on the lower newel-post she hesitated, looking up toward the room of her mistress, as if lost in thought. Poised thus, her lifted face partly turned away from Lanyard, its half-seen expression was hopelessly ambiguous. But some secret thought amused the woman, a shadow deepened in the visible corner of her full-lipped mouth. One fancied something sardonic in that covert smile.

She went on down. A latch on the ground floor clicked as the door to the service hallway was gently closed. Lanyard came out of hiding with a fresh enterprise abroad.

One must kill time somehow, Liane would be at least another half an hour busy with her jewellery, and the thought presented itself that the library, immediately beneath her room, should be worthy an investigation. In such establishments it is a tradition that the household safe shall be located somewhere in the library; and such strong-boxes are apt to be naive contrivances. Lanyard did not hope to find the Montalais jewels stored away in such a place, Liane would surely take better care of them than that; assuming they were in her possession they would be under her hand, if not confused with her own treasures; still it could do no harm to make sure.

Confident of being warned at need by his hearing, which was normally supersensitive and, when he was engaged as now, keyed to preterhuman acuteness, he went coolly about the business, and at his first step found a portable reading-lamp on a long cord and coolly switched on its hooded light.

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The library was furnished with bulky old Italian pieces of carved oak, not especially well selected, but suitable enough with one exception, a ponderous buffet, an exquisite bit of workmanship both in design and in detail but completely out of place in a room of that character. At least nine feet in length, it stood out four from the wall. Three heavy doors guarded by modern locks gave access to the body beneath its tier of drawers. But—this drew a frowning stare—there was a key in the lock of the middle door.

“There’s such a thing as too much luck,” Lanyard communed. “First the service gate and door, and now this, ready to my hand——!”

He swung sharply round and searched every shadow in the room with the glare of the portable lamp; but that was work of supererogation: he had already made sure he was alone on that floor.

Placing the lamp on the floor and adjusting its hood so that it focussed squarely upon the middle section of the buffet, he turned the key and discovered, behind the door, a small safe.

The run of luck did not hold in respect to this; there was no key; and the combination dial was smug with ill-grounded confidence in its own inviolable integrity. Still (Lanyard told it) it could hardly be expected to know, it had yet to be dealt with by the shade of the Lone Wolf.

Amused by the conceit, Lanyard laid hold of the knob with steady, delicate fingertips that had not yet, in spite of years of honourable idleness, forgotten their cunning. Then he flattened an ear to the cold face of the safe. To his informed manipulation the dial whirled, paused, reversed, turned all but imperceptibly, while the hidden mechanism clicked, ground and thudded softly, speaking a living language to his hearing. In three minutes he sat back on his heels, grasped the T-handle, turned it, had the satisfaction of hearing the bolts slide back into their sockets, and opened the door wide.

But the racked pigeonholes held nothing to interest him whose one aim was the recovery of the Montalais jewels. The safe was, in fact, dedicated simply to the storage of documents.

“Love letters!” Lanyard mused with a grimace of weariness. “And each believed, no doubt, she cared too much for him to hold her power to compromise him. Good Lord! what vanity is man’s!”

Then the consideration offered that property of real value might be hidden behind those sheaves of papers. He selected a pigeonhole at hazard, and emptied it of several bundles of letters, all neatly bound with tape or faded ribbon and clearly docketed. It held nothing else whatever. But his eye was caught by a great name endorsed on the face of one of the packages; and reading what else was written there his brows rose

high while his lips shaped a soundless whistle. If an inference were fair, Liane had kept not only such documents as gave her power over others. Lanyard wondered if it were possible he held in his hand an instrument to bend the woman to his will....

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Suddenly he put out a hand and switched off the light, a gesture quite involuntary, simple reaction to the muffled thump of a chair overturned on the floor above.

Sounds of scuffling followed, as if Liane were dancing to no music with a heavy-footed partner. Then a groan....

His hands moved so rapidly and deftly that, although he seemed to rise without a second's delay, the safe was closed and the combination locked when he did so, the buffet door was shut and its key in his pocket.

This time Lanyard ascended the stairs without heeding what noise he made. Nevertheless his actions were never awkward or ill-timed; his approach was not heard, his arrival on the upper landing was unnoticed.

In an instantaneous pause he looked into the rose-pink room and saw Liane Delorme, in a negligee like a cobweb over a nightdress even more sheer, kneeling and clawing at her throat, round which a heavy silk handkerchief was slowly tightening; her face already purple with strangulation, her eyes bulging from their sockets, her tongue protruding between swollen lips.

A thick knee was planted between her shoulder-blades. The ends of the handkerchief were in the sinewy hands of Albert Dupont.

XVII

CHEZ LIANE

Conceivably even a journeyman strangler may know the thrill of professional pride in a good job well done: Dupont was grinning at his work, and so intent upon it that his first intimation of any interference came when Lanyard took him from behind, broke his hold upon the woman (and lamentably failed to break his back at the same time) whirled him round with a jerk that all but unsocketed an arm and, before the thug could regain his balance, placed surely on the heel of his jaw, just below the ear, a blow that, coming straight from the shoulder and carrying all Lanyard had of weight and force and will to punish, in spite of Dupont's heaviness fairly lifted him from his feet and dropped him backwards across a chaise-longue, from which he slipped senseless to the floor.

It was just like that, a crowded, breathless business....

With bruised and aching knuckles to prove that the blow had been one to stun an ox, Lanyard believed it safe to count Dupont hors de combat, for a time at least. In any event, the risk had to be chanced: Liane Delorme was in a plight demanding immediate relief.

In all likelihood she had lost consciousness some moments before Lanyard's intervention. Released, she had fallen positively inert, and lay semi-prostrate on a shoulder, with limbs grotesquely slack and awry, as if in unpleasant mimicry of a broken doll. Only the whites of bloodshot eyes showed in her livid and distorted countenance. Arms and legs twitched spasmodically, the ample torso was violently shaken by labouring lungs.

The twisted handkerchief round her throat had loosened, but not enough to give relief. Lanyard removed it, turned her over so that she lay supine, wedged silken pillows from the chaise-longue beneath her head and shoulders, then reached across her body, took from her dressing table a toilet-water flask of lovely Italian glass, and drenched her face and bosom with its pungent contents.

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She gasped, started convulsively, and began to breathe with less effort. That dreadful rattling in her throat was stilled. Heavy lids curtailed her eyes.

Lanyard continued to apply the scented water with a lavish hand. In time the woman shuddered, sighed profoundly, and looked up with a witless stare.

Man is measurably a creature of gestures stereotyped when the world was young: Lanyard patted the woman's hand as one might comfort an abused child. "It is all right now, Liane," he said in a reassuring voice. "Rest tranquilly. You will soon be yourself again. But wait: I will find you a drink."

She said nothing, her look continued cloudy; but the dazed eyes followed him as he got up and cast about for a glass of water.

But then he remembered Dupont, and decided that Liane could wait another minute while he made it impossible for the Apache to do more mischief.

He moved round the chaise-longue and paused, looking down thoughtfully. Since his fall Dupont had made neither moan nor stir. No crescent irides showed beneath the half-shut lids. He was so motionless, he seemed scarcely to breathe. Lanyard dug the toe of a boot into his ribs none too gently, but without satisfaction of any doubts. The fellow gave no sign of sensibility, but lay utterly relaxed, with the look of one dead.

Lanyard frowned uneasily. He had seen men drop dead from blows less powerful than his, and though this one had well earned a death swift and merciless, Lanyard experienced a twinge of horror at the thought. Often enough it had been his lot in times of peace and war to be forced to fight for life, and more than once to kill in defence of it; but that had never happened, never could happen, without his suffering the bitterest regret. Even now, in the case of this bloody-handed butcher, this ruthless garroter....

Dropping to his knees, Lanyard bent over the body to search for symptoms of animation. He perceived them instantly. With inconceivable suddenness Dupont demonstrated that he was very much alive. An arm like the flexible limb of a tree wound itself affectionately round Lanyard's neck, clipped his head to Dupont's yearning bosom, ground his face into the flannel folds of a foul-scented shirt. Simultaneously the huge body heaved prodigiously, and after a brief interval of fantastic floppings, like a young mountain fell on top of Lanyard.

But that was the full measure of Dupont's success in this stratagem. If hopelessly victimized and taken by surprise, Lanyard should have been better remembered by the man who had fought him at Montpellier-le-Vieux and again, with others assisting, on the road to Nant; though it is quite possible, of course, that Dupont failed to recognise his ancient enemy in clean-shaven Monsieur Paul Martin of the damp and bedraggled evening clothes.

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However that may have been, in the question of brute courage Dupont had yet to prove lacking. His every instinct was an Apache's: left to himself he would strike always from behind, and run like a cur to cover. But cornered, or exasperated by opposition to his vast powers—something which he seemed quite unable to understand—he could fight like a maniac. He was hardly better now, when he found himself thrown off and attacked in turn at a time when he believed his antagonist to be pinned down, helpless, at the mercy of the weapon for which he was fumbling. And the murderous fury which animated him then more than made up for want of science, cool-headedness and imagination.

They fought for their most deeply-rooted passions, he to kill, Lanyard to live, Dupont to batter Lanyard into conceding a moment of respite in which a weapon might be used, Lanyard to prevent that very thing from happening. Even as animals in a pit they fought, now on their knees straining each to break the other's hold, now wallowing together on the floor, now on their feet, slogging like bruisers of the old school.

Dupont took punishment in heroic doses, and asked for more. Shedding frightful blows with only an angry shake of his head, he would lower it and charge as a wild boar charges, while his huge arms flew like lunatic connecting-rods. The cleverest footwork could not always elude his tremendous rushes, the coolest ducking and dodging could not wholly escape that frantic shower of fists.

Time and again Lanyard suffered blows that jarred him to his heels, time and again was fain to give ground to an onslaught that drove him back till his shoulders touched a wall. And more than once toward the end he felt his knees buckle beneath him and saw his shrewdest efforts fail for want of force. The sweat of his brows stung and dimmed his eyes, his dry tongue tasted its salt. He staggered in the drunkenness of fatigue, and suffered agonies of pain; for his exertions had strained the newly knitted tissues of the wound in his side, and the hurt of this was wholly hellish.

But always he contrived somehow, strangely to him, to escape annihilation and find enough in reserve to fly back at Dupont's throat upon the first indication of desire on the part of the latter to yield the offensive. To do less were to permit him to find and use his weapon, whatever it might be—whether knife or pistol was besides the issue.

Chairs, the chaise-longue, tables were overturned and kicked about. Priceless bits of porcelain and glass, lamps, vases, the fittings of the dressing-table were cast down in fragments to the floor.

Constrained to look to herself or be trampled underfoot, and galvanized with terror, the woman struggled up and tottered hither and yon like a bewildered child, in the beginning too bemused to be able to keep out of the way of the combatants. If she crouched against a wall, battling bodies brushed her away from it. Did she take refuge in a corner she must abandon it else be crushed. Once she stumbled between the two, and before

Lanyard could thrust her aside Dupont had fallen back half a dozen feet and worried a pistol out of his clothing.

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He fired first from the hip, and the shot shattered the mirror of the dressing-table. Trying for better aim, he lifted and levelled the weapon with a trembling arm which he sought to steady by cupping the elbow in his left hand. But the second bullet ploughed into the ceiling as Lanyard in desperation executed a coup de pied in la savate, and narrowly succeeded in kicking the pistol from Dupont's grasp.

Bereft thus of his last hope—they were too evenly matched, and both too far spent for either to force a victory with his naked hands—the Apache swung round and ran, at the same time throwing a heavy chair over on its back in the path of pursuit. Unable to avoid it, Lanyard tried to hurdle it, caught a foot on one of its legs and, as Dupont threw himself headlong down the stairs, crashed to the floor with an impact that shook its beams.

Main will-power lifted him to his knees before he collapsed, his last ounce of endurance wasted. Then the woman, with flying draperies, a figure like a fury, sped to the banister rail and leaning over emptied the several shots remaining in Dupont's automatic down the well of the staircase. It is doubtful if she saw anything to aim at or accomplished more than to wing the Apache's flight. Dupont had gained the second storey while Lanyard was still fighting up from his fall. The last report and the crash of the front door slammed behind Dupont were as one heartbeat to the next.

Lanyard pillowed his head on a forearm and lay sobbing for breath. Liane Delorme turned and ran to the front of the house.

Presently she came back drooping, sank into a chair and with lacklustre eyes regarded the man at her feet.

"He got away," she said superfluously, in a faint voice. "I saw him in the street ... staggering like a sot..."

At that moment Lanyard could not have mustered a show of interest had he been told Dupont was returning at the head of a horde. He closed his tired eyes and envied the lucky dead whose rest was independent of bruised flesh and aching bones. Neither, he supposed, were dreams poisoned by chagrin when what was mortal no longer mattered.... Three times had he come to grips with Dupont and, though he had been outnumbered on the road to Nant, in Lanyard's sight the honours were far from easy. Neither would they be while yet the other lived or was at large...

The bitterness of failure and defeat had so rank a flavour in his thoughts that nothing else in life concerned him now. He had forgotten Liane Delorme for minutes when her arm passed beneath his shoulders and tried to lift them from the floor. He looked up then with listless eyes, and saw her on one knee by his side, giving him in his turn that confident and reassuring smile with which he had greeted her reviving senses ... a long, long time ago, it seemed.

“Come!” she said—“sit up, monsieur, and take this drink. It will lend you strength. You need it.”

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God knew he did! His throat was like a furnace flue, his mouth held the taste of leather. But for that thirst, indeed, he could hardly have found the energy to aid her efforts and lurch upon an elbow. A white-hot lancet pierced his wound, and though he locked his teeth against it a groan forced out between them. The woman cried out at the rapid ebb of colour from his face.

"But you are suffering!"

He forced a grey smile. "It is nothing," he whispered hoarsely—"it will pass. If you please—that drink——"

She put a knee behind his shoulders for support, and he rested his head back upon it and drank deep from the glass which she held to his lips. Nectar of Olympus was never more divine than that deep draught of brandy and soda. He thought he quaffed Life itself in its distilled quintessence, its pure elixir. His look of gratitude had almost the spirit and the vigour of himself renewed.

"My thanks, mademoiselle..."

"Your thanks!"—she laughed with indulgent scorn—"your thanks to me!"

He offered to rise, but was restrained by kindly hands.

"No: rest there a little longer, give yourself a little time before you try to get up."

"But I shall tire you..."

"No. And if you did, what of that? It seems to me, my friend, I owe to you my life."

"To me it seems you do," he agreed. "But such a debt is always the first to be forgotten, is it not?"

"You reproach me?"

"No, mademoiselle; not you, but the hearts of men... We are all very much alike, I think."

"No," the woman insisted: "you do reproach me. In your heart you have said: 'She has forgotten that, but for me, she would have been dead long years ago. This service, too, she will presently forget.' But you are wrong, my friend. It is true, the years between had made that other time a little vague with old remoteness in my memory; but to-night has brought it all back and—a renewed memory never fades."

"So one is told. But trust self-interest at need to black it out."

"You have no faith in me!" she said bitterly.

Lanyard gave her a weary smile. "Why should I not? And as for that: Why should I have faith in you, Liane? Our ways run leagues apart."

"They can be one."

She met his perplexed stare with an emphatic nod, with eyes that he could have sworn were abrim with tenderness. He shook his head as if to shake off a ridiculous plaguing notion, and grinned broadly. "That was a drink!" he declared. "I assure you, it was too much for my elderly head. Let me up."

The cruel agony stabbed his side again and again as he—not unaided—got upon his feet; and though he managed to gulp down his groans, no grinding of his teeth could mitigate his recurrent pallor or the pained contractions of his eyes. Furthermore, he wavered when he tried to walk, and was glad to subside into a chair to which the woman guided him. Then she fetched him another brandy and soda, put a lighted cigarette between his lips, picked up a chair for herself, and sat down, so close to him that their elbows almost touched.



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"It is better, that pain, monsieur?"

He replied with an uncertain nod, pressing a careful hand to his side. "... wound that animal gave me a month ago."

"Which animal?"

"Monsieur of the garotte, Liane; recently the assassin of de Lorgnes; before that the ex-chauffeur of the Chateau de Montalais."

"Albert Dupont?"

"As you say, it is not a name."

"The same?" Her old terror revived. "My God! what have I ever done to that one that he should seek my life?"

"What had de Lorgnes?"

Her eyes turned away, she sat for a moment in silent thought, started suddenly to speak but checked the words before one passed her lips, and—as Lanyard saw quite plainly—hastened to substitute others.

"No: I do not understand at all! What do you think?"

Lanyard indicated a shrug with sufficient clearness, meaning to say, she probably knew as much as if not more than he.

"But how did he get in? I had not one suspicion I was not alone until that handkerchief _____"

"Naturally."

"And you, my friend?"

"I saw him enter, and followed."

This was strictly within the truth: Lanyard had now no doubt Dupont and the man who had reconnoitered from the service-door were one. But it was no part of his mind to tell the whole truth to Liane. She might be as grateful as she ought to be, but she was still ... Liane Delorme ... a woman to be tested rather than trusted.

"I must tell you. But perhaps you knew there were agents de police in the restaurant to-night?"

Liane's head described a negative; her violet eyes were limpid pools of candour.

"I am so much a stranger in Paris," Lanyard pursued, "I would not know them. But I thought you, perhaps——"

"No, no, my friend, I have nothing to do with the police, I know little about them. Not only that, but I was so interested in our talk, and then inexpressibly shocked, I paid attention to nothing else."

"I understand. Otherwise you must have noticed who followed me."

"You were followed?"

And she had found the effrontery to chide him for lack of faith in her! He was in pain: for all that, the moment seemed amusing.

"We are followed, I assure you," Lanyard replied gravely. "One man or two—I don't know how many—in a town-car."

"But you are sure?"

"All we could get was a hansom drawn by a snail. The automobile, running without lights, went no faster, kept a certain distance behind us all the way from the Place Pigalle to the apartment of Mademoiselle Reneaux. What have you to say to that? Furthermore, when Mademoiselle Reneaux had persuaded me to take refuge in her apartment—who knew what they designed?—one man left the automobile as it passed her door and stood on watch across the way. Could one require proof that one was followed?"

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"Then you think somebody of the Prefecture recognized Duchemin in you?"

"Who knows? I know I was followed, watched. If you ask me, I think Paris is not a healthy place for me."

"But all that," Liane objected, "does not bring you here!"

"Patience: I am well on my way."

Lanyard paused to sip his brandy and soda, and, under cover of that, summon ingenuity to the fore; here a little hand-made fabrication was indicated.

"We waited till about half an hour ago. So did the spy. Mademoiselle Reneaux then let me out by a private way. I started to walk to my hotel, the Chatham. There wasn't a taxi to be had, you understand. Presently I looked back and saw I was being followed again. To make sure, I ran—and the spy ran after me. I twisted and doubled all through this quarter, and at last succeeded in shaking him off. Then I turned down this street, hoping to pick up a cab in the Champ-Elysees. Of a sudden I see Dupont. He is crossing the street toward this house. He does not know me, but quickens his pace, and hastily lets himself in at the service entrance.... Incidentally, if I were you, Liane, I would give my staff of servants a bad quarter of an hour in the morning. The door and gate were not locked; I am sure Dupont used no key. Some person of this establishment was careless or—worse."

"Trust me to look into that."

"Enfin! in his haste, Dupont leaves the door as he found it. I take a moment's thought; it is plain he is here for no good purpose. I follow him in... The state of this room tells the rest."

"It is no matter." The woman reviewed the ruins of her boudoir with an apathetic glance which was, however, anything but apathetic when she turned it back to Lanyard's face. Bending forward, she closed a hand upon his arm. Emotion troubled her accents. "My friend, my dear friend: tell me what I can do to repay you?"

"Help me," said Lanyard simply, holding her eyes.

"How is that—help you?"

"To make my honour clear." Speaking rapidly and with unfeigned feeling, he threw himself upon her generosity: "You know I am no more what I was once, in this Paris—when you first knew me. You know I have given up all that. For years I have fought an uphill fight to live down that evil fame in which I once rejoiced. Now I stand accused of two crimes."

“Two!”

“Two in one, I hardly know which is the greater: that of stealing, or that of violating the hospitality and confidence of those good ladies of the Chateau de Montalais. I cannot rest while they think me guilty... and not they alone, but all my friends, and I have made good friends, in France and England. So, if you think you owe me anything, Liane, help me to find and restore the Montalais jewels.”

Liane Delorme sat back, her hand lifted from his arm and fell with a helpless gesture. Her eyes mirrored no more guile than a child's. Yet her accent was that of one who remonstrates, but with forbearance, against unreasonable demands.

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"How can I do that?"

And she had protested her gratitude to him! He knew that she was lying. Anger welled in Lanyard's heart, but he was able to hold it in leash and let no sign of it show in manner or expression.

"You have much influence," he suggested, "here in Paris, with people of many classes. A word from you here, a question there, pressure exerted in certain quarters, will help me more than all the powers of Prefecture and Surete combined. You know that."

"Let me think." She was staring at the floor. "You must give me time. I will do what I can, I promise you that. Perhaps"—she met his gaze again, but he saw something crafty in her smile—"I have a scheme already in mind. We will discuss that in the morning, when I have slept on it."

"You give me new hope." Lanyard finished his drink and made as if to rise, but relapsed, a spasm of pain knotting his face. "Afraid I must have a cab," he said in a low voice. "And if you could lend me a coat of some sort to cover these rags...."

And indeed his ready-made evening clothes had fared badly in their first social adventure.

"But if you think I dream of letting you leave this house—in pain and perhaps to run into the arms of the police—you little know me, Monsieur Michael Lanyard!"

"Paul Martin, if you don't mind."

"The guest rooms are there." She waved a hand to indicate the front part of the house on that floor. "You will find everything you need to make you comfortable for to-night, and in the morning I will send to the Chatham for your things.... Or perhaps it would be wiser to wait till we are sure the police are not watching there for your return. But if they are, it will be a simple matter to find suitable clothing for you. Meanwhile we will have arrived at an understanding.... You comprehend, monsieur, I am resolved, this affair is now arranged?"

"I am well content, Liane."

And that was true enough; whatever she had in mind for him, she was only playing into his hands when she proposed to keep him near her. He managed to get out of the chair, and accepted the offer of her arm, but held back for a moment.

"But your servants..."

"Well, monsieur, what of them?"

“For one thing, they sleep sincerely.”

“There are sound-proof walls between their part of the house and this. More than that, they are forbidden to intrude, no matter what may happen, unless I summon them.”

“But in the morning, Liane, when they regard this wreckage... I am afraid they will think me a tempestuous lover!”

“They will find me a tempestuous mistress,” promised Liane Delorme, “when I question them about that open door.”

XVIII

BROTHER AND SISTER

The storm had passed off, an ardent noonday sun was collaborating with a coquettish breeze to make gay the window awnings of the chamber where Lanyard, in borrowed pyjamas and dressing-gown of silk, lay luxuriously bedded, listening to the purr of wide-awake Paris and, with an excellent cigar to chew on, ruminating upon the problematic issue of his latest turn of fortune, and not in the least downhearted about it.

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Before turning in he had soaked and steamed most of the ache out of bone and muscle in the hottest water his flesh would suffer; and six hours unbroken slumber had done wonders toward lessening the distress his exertions last night had occasioned in the frail new tissues of his wound. Now, fresh from a cold shower following a second hot bath, and further comforted by a petit déjeuner served in bed, he felt measurably sane again, and sound in wind and limb as well, barring a few deep bruises whose soreness would need several days to heal.

A pleasant languour, like a light opiate, infused his consciousness; yet he was by no means mentally inactive.

The morning papers were scattered over the counterpane. Lanyard had diligently scanned all the stories that told of the identification of the murdered man of the Lyons rapide as the Comte de Lorgnes; and inasmuch as these were of one voice in praising the Prefecture for that famous feat of detective work, and not one line suggested that it did not deserve undivided credit, Lanyard had nothing to complain of there.

As for the Montalais robbery it was not even mentioned. The restricted size imposed upon French newspapers by the paper shortage of those days crowded out of their columns everything but news in true sense, and there could be none of that in connection with the Montalais affair until either Andre Duchemin had been arrested or the jewels recovered from the real thief or thieves. And Lanyard was human enough to be almost as willing to have the first happen as the last, if it were not given to him to be the prime factor in their restoration.

For the time being—if he must confess the truth—he was actually rather enjoying himself, rather exhilarated than otherwise by the swiftly shifting scenes and characters of his unfolding investigations and by the brisk sword-play of wits in which he was called upon constantly to engage; both essential ingredients of the wine of life according to the one recipe he knew.

And then a review of recent events seemed to warrant the belief that, all things considered, he had thus far made fair progress toward his goal.

While it was true he did not as yet know what had become of the Montalais jewels, he had gathered together an accumulation of evidence which, however circumstantial and hypothetical, established acceptably to his intelligence a number of interesting inferences, to wit:

That Dupont had not left the neighbourhood of the Chateau de Montalais, after haunting it for upwards of a month, without definite knowledge that he would gain nothing by staying on, or without an equally definite objective, some motive more inspiring than such simple sensuousness as he might find in assassinating inoffensive folk indiscriminately.

That his attempt upon the life of Liane Delorme within twenty-four hours of the murder of de Lorgnes indicated conviction on his part that the two were coupled in some enterprise inimical to his personal interests.

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That in spite of his mask of a stupid pig Dumont was proving himself mentally as well as physically an adversary worthy of all respect, and was—what was worse—still to be reckoned with.

That, as Lanyard had suspected all along, the Monk party had been visited upon the Chateau de Montalais through no vagary of chance whatever but as part of a deliberate design whose ulterior motive had transpired only with the disappearance of the jewels—to Dupont's vast but understandable vexation of spirit.

That the several members of the Monk party had been working in entire accord, as a close corporation; in which case the person whom the Comte de Lorgnes had expected to meet in Lyons must have been Monk Phinuit or Jules.

Consequently that at least one of the three last named had been the actual perpetrator of the robbery; and by the same token, that Liane had lied in asserting that Monk and retinue had sailed for America nearly a week prior to its commission.

That Liane herself had not so suddenly decided to leave France, where she was after a fashion somebody, and journey to America, where she would be nobody, except in stress of mortal fear lest the fate that had befallen de Lorgnes befall her in turn—as would surely have been the case last night but for Lanyard.

That she must therefore have had a tolerably accurate knowledge either of Dupont's identity or of the opposition interests which that one so ably represented; and thus was better informed than poor de Lorgnes, to whom Dupont had been unknown; which argued that Liane's role in the intrigue was that of a principal, whereas de Lorgnes had figured only as a subordinate.

That even if the woman did mean well toward Lanyard she was bound by stronger ties to others, whom she must consider first, and who were hardly likely to prove so well disposed; that her protestations of friendship and gratitude must be valued accordingly.

Summing up, Lanyard told himself he could hardly be said to have let grass grow under his feet since leaving Chateau de Montalais.

Now he found himself with a solitary care to nurse, the question: What had her pillow advised Liane Delorme?

He was going to be exceedingly interested to learn what she, in the maturity of her judgement, had decided to do about this man who ingenuously suggested that she requite him for saving her life by helping him recover the Montalais jewels.

On the other hand, since Lanyard had quite decided what he meant to do about Liane in any event, her decision really didn't matter much; and he refused to fret himself trying to forecast it. Whatever it might turn out to be, it would find him prepared, he couldn't be

surprised. There Lanyard was wrong. Liane was amply able to surprise him, and did. Ultimately he felt constrained to concede a touch to genius in the woman; her methods were her own and never poor in boldness and imagination.

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It was without ceremony that she walked in on him at length, having kept him waiting so long that he had begun to wonder if she meant to try on anything as crude as abandoning him, and posting off to Cherbourg without a word to seek fancied immunity in New York, while he remained in an empty house without money, papers of identification, or even fit clothing for the street; for, on coming out of his bath, Lanyard had found all of these things missing, the valet de chambre presumably having made off with his evening clothes, to have them pressed and repaired.

Liane was dressed for travelling, becomingly if with a sobriety that went oddly with her cultivated *beaute du diable*, and wore besides a habit of preoccupation which, one was left to assume, excused the informality of her unannounced entrance.

"Well, my dear friend!" she said gravely, halting by the bedside.

"It's about time," Lanyard retorted.

"I was afraid you might be growing impatient," she confessed. "I have had so much to do..."

"No doubt. But if you had neglected me much longer I should have come to look for you regardless of consequences."

"How is that?" she enquired with knitted brows—"regardless of what consequences?"

"Any damage one might do to the morale of your menage by toddling about in the voluptuous *deshabille* in which you behold me—my sole present apology for a wardrobe."

She found only the shadow of a smile for such frivolity. "I have sent for clothing for you," she said absently. "It should be here any minute now. We only wait for that."

"You mean you have sent to the Chatham for my things?"

"But certainly not, monsieur!" Liane Delorme lied without perceptible effort. "That would have been too injudicious. It appears you were not mistaken in thinking you were recognized as Andre Duchemin last night. Agents of the Prefecture have been all day watching at the Chatham, awaiting your return."

"How sad for them!" In as much as he had every reason to believe this to be outright falsehood, Lanyard didn't feel called upon to seem downcast. "But if my clothing there is unavailable, I hardly see..."

"But naturally I have commissioned a person of good judgement to outfit you from the shops. Your dress clothes—which seemed to suit you very well last night—gave us

your measurements. The rest is simplicity; my orders were to get you everything you could possibly require.”

“It’s awfully sporting of you,” Lanyard insisted. “Although it makes one feel—you know—not quite respectable. However, if you will be so gracious as to suggest that your valet de chambre return my pocketbook and passports...”

“I have them here.” The woman turned over the missing articles. “But,” she demanded with an interest which was undissembled if tardy in finding expression, “how are you feeling to-day?”

“Oh, quite fit, thank you.”

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"In good spirits, I know. But that wound—?"

Lanyard chose to make more of that than it deserved; one couldn't tell when an interesting disability might prove useful. "I have to be a bit careful," he confessed, covering the seat of injury with a tender hand, "but it's nothing like so troublesome as it was last night."

"I am glad. You feel able to travel?"

"Travel?" Lanyard made a face of dismay. "But one is so delightfully at ease here, and since the Prefecture cannot possibly suspect... Are you then in such haste to be rid of me, Liane?"

"Not at all. It is my wish and intention to accompany you."

"Well, let us trust the world will be broad-minded about it. And—pardon my not rising—won't you sit down and tell me what it is all about."

"I have so little time, so many things to attend to."

Nevertheless, Liane found herself a chair and accepted a cigarette.

"Does one infer that we start on our travels to-day?"

"Within the hour; in fact, as soon as you are decently clothed."

"And where do we go, mademoiselle?"

"To Cherbourg, there to take steamer for New York."

Fortunately it was Lanyard's cue to register shock; it would have cost him something to have kept secret his stupefaction. He sank back upon his pillows and waggled feeble hands, while his respect for Liane grew by bounds. She had succeeded in startling and mystifying him beyond expression.

What dodge was this that cloaked itself in such anomalous semblance of good faith? She had not known he was acquainted with her plan to leave France; he had discounted a hundred devices to keep it from his knowledge. And now she not only confessed it openly, but invited him to go with her! In the name of unreason—why? She knew, for he had owned, his possessing purpose. He did not for an instant believe Liane Delorme would fly France and leave behind the Montalais jewels. Did she think he did not suspect her of knowing more about them than she had chosen to admit? Did she imagine that he was one of those who can see only that which is in the distance? Did she do him the injustice to believe him incapable of actually smelling out the jewels if ever he got within range of them?

But conjecture was too idle, Liane was too deep for him; her intent would declare itself when she willed it, not before, unless he could lull her into a false sense of faith in him, trick her into betraying herself by inadvertence.

“But, my dear friend, why America?”

“You recall asking me to help you last night? Did I not promise to do what I could? Well, I am not one to forget my promise. I know something, monsieur.”

“I believe you do!”

“You gave me credit for having some little influence in this world of Paris. I have used it. What I have learned—I shall not tell you how, specifically—enables me to assure you that the Montalais jewels are on their way to America.”

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“And I am to believe you make this journey to help me regain them?”

“What do you think, then?”

“I do not know what to think, mademoiselle. I am overwhelmed—abashed and humbled by contemplation of such generosity.”

“You see, you do not know me, monsieur. But you shall know me better before we are finished.”

“One does not question that.” Nor did one! “But if I am to sail for America to-day—”

“To-morrow, from Cherbourg, at eight in the morning.”

“Well, to-morrow, then: but how am I to get my passport viséd?”

“I have seen to that. If you will look over your papers, monsieur, you will see that you are no longer Paul Martin alias Andre Duchemin, but Paul Delorme, my invalid brother, still suffering from honourable wounds sustained in the Great War and ordered abroad for his health.”

To this Lanyard, hastily verifying her statement by running an eye through the passport, found nothing more appropriate than a wondering “Mon dieu!”

“So you see, everything is arranged. What have you to say?”

“Only that mademoiselle sweeps one off one’s feet.”

“Do you complain about that? You no longer doubt my devotion, my gratitude?”

“Do not believe me capable of such stupidity!”

“That is very well, then. Now I must run.” Liane Delorme threw away her cigarette and rose. “I have a thousand things to do.... And, you understand, we leave as soon as you are dressed?”

“Perfectly. By what train?”

“By no train. Don’t you know there is a strike to-day? What have you been reading in those newspapers? It is necessary that we motor to Cherbourg.”

“That is no little journey, dear sister.”

“Three hundred and seventy kilometres?” Liane Delorme held this equivalent of two-hundred and thirty English miles in supreme contempt. “We shall make it in eight

hours. We leave at four at latest, possibly earlier; at midnight we are in Cherbourg. You shall see."

"If I survive..."

"Have no fear. My chauffeur drives superbly."

She was at the door when Lanyard stayed her with "One moment, Liane!" With fingers resting lightly on the knob she turned.

"Speak English," he requested briefly. "What about Dupont?"

Simple mention of the man was enough to make the woman wince and lose colour. Before she replied Lanyard saw the tip of her tongue furtively moisten her lips.

"Well, and what of him?"

"Do you imagine he has had enough?"

"Who knows? I for one shall feel safe from him only when I knew he is in the Sante or his grave."

"Suppose he tries to follow us to Cherbourg or to stop us on the way..."

"How should he know?"

"Tell me who left the doors open for him last night, and I will answer that question." The woman looked more than ever frightened, but shook her head. "You didn't fail to question the servants this morning, yet learned nothing?"

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"It was impossible to fix the blame..."

"Have you used all your intelligence, I wonder?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you reflected that, since Dupont got in after you came home, his accomplice in your household is most probably one of those who were up at that hour. Who were they?"

"Only two. The footman, Leon..."

"You trust him?"

"Not altogether. Now you make me think, I shall discharge him when I leave, without notice."

"Wait. Who else?"

"Marthe, my maid."

"You have confidence in her loyalty?"

"Implicit. She has been with me for years."

Lanyard said "Open that door!" in a tone sharp with such authority that Liane Delorme instinctively obeyed, and the woman whom Lanyard had seen that morning coming down the stairs with the lighted candle entered rather precipitately, carrying over one arm an evening wrap of gold brocade and fur.

"Pardon, madame," she murmured, and paused. Aside from the awkwardness of her entrance, she betrayed no confusion. "I was about to knock and ask if madame wished me to pack this..."

"You know very well I shall need it," Liane said ominously. A look from Lanyard checked a tirade, or more exactly compressed it into a single word: "Imbecile!"

"Yes, madame."

Marthe hinted at rather than executed a courtesy and withdrew. Liane shut the door behind her, and reapproached the bed, trembling with an anger that rendered her forgetful, so that she relapsed into French.

"You think she was listening?"

"English, please!" To this Lanyard added a slight shrug..

"It is hard to believe," Liane averred unhappily. "After all these years... I have been kind to that one, too!"

"Ah, well! At least you know now she will bear watching. You mean to take her with you?"

"I did, until this happened. We quarrelled about it, last night. I think she has a lover here in Paris and doesn't want to leave him."

"And now will you tell me that Dupont knows nothing of your intention to motor to Cherbourg today?"

"No..." Disconsolate, Liane sank down into the chair and, resting an elbow on the arm, clipped her chin in one hand. "Now I dare not go," she mused aloud. "Yet I must!... What am I to do?"

"Courage, little sister! It is I who have an idea." Liane lifted a gaze of mute enquiry. "I think we are now agreed it rests between Marthe and the footman Leon, this treachery." She assented. "Very well. Then let them run the risks any further disloyalty may have prepared for us."

"I do not understand..."

"What automobile are you using for our trip this afternoon?"

"My limousine for you and me."

"And Marthe: how is she to make the journey?"

"In the touring car, which follows us with our luggage."

"It is fast, this touring car?"

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"The best money can buy."

"Now tell me what you know about the chauffeur who drives the limousine?"

"He is absolutely to be trusted."

"You have had him long in your employ?"

The woman hesitated, looked aside, bit her lip.

"As a matter of fact, monsieur," she said hastily, trying to cover her loss of countenance with rapid speech—"it is the boy who drove us through the Cevennes. Monsieur Monk asked me to keep him pending his return to France, You understand, he is not to be away long—Monsieur Monk—only a few weeks; so it would have been extravagant to take Jules back to America for that little time. You see?"

Lanyard had the grace to keep a straight face. He nodded gravely.

"You make it all perfectly clear, little sister. And the driver of the touring car: are you sure of him?"

"I think so. But you do not tell me what you have in mind."

"Simply this: At the last moment you will decide to take Leon with you. Give him no more time than he needs to pack a handbag. Trump up some excuse and let him follow with Marthe..."

"No difficulty about that. He is an excellent driver, Leon; he served me as chauffeur—and made a good one, too—for a year before I took him into the house, at his request; he said he was tired of driving. But if the man I had meant to use is indisposed—trust me to see that he is—I can call on Leon to take care of Marthe and our luggage in the touring car."

"Excellent. Now presuming Dupont to be well informed, we may safely bank on his attempting nothing before nightfall. Road traps can be too easily perceived at a distance by daylight. Toward evening then, we will let the touring car catch up. You will express a desire to continue in it, because—because of any excuse that comes into your head. At all events, we will exchange cars with Marthe and Leon, leaving the latter to bring on the limousine while Jules drives for us. Whatever happens then, we may feel sure the touring car will get off lightly; for whether they're involved with Dupont or not, Leon and Marthe are small fry, not the fish he's angling for."

"But will not Leon and Marthe suspect and refuse to follow?"

“Perhaps they may suspect, but they will follow out of curiosity, to see how we fare, if for nothing else. You may lose a limousine, but you can afford to risk that as long as you are not in it—eh, little long-lost sister?”

“My dear brother!” Liane cried, deeply moved. She leaned forward and caressed Lanyard’s hand with sisterly warmth, in her admiration and gratification loosing upon him the full candle-power of the violet eyes in their most disastrous smile. “What a head to have in the family!”

“Take care!” Lanyard admonished. “I admit it’s not half bad at times, but if this battered old headpiece of mine is to be of any further service to us, Liane, you must be careful not to turn it!”

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XIX

SIX BOTTLES OF CHAMPAGNE

Once decided upon a course of action, Liane Delorme demonstrated that she could move with energy and decision uncommon in her kind. Under her masterly supervision, preparations accomplished themselves, as it were, by magic.

It was, for example, nearer three than four o'clock when the expedition for Cherbourg left the door of her town-house and Paris by way of the Porte de Neuilly; the limousine leading with that polished pattern of a chauffeur, Jules, at its wheel, as spick and span, firm of jaw and imperturbable of eye as when Lanyard had first noticed him in Nant; the touring car trailing, with the footman Leon as driver, and not at all happy to find himself drafted in that capacity, if one might judge by a sullen sort of uneasiness in his look.

Nothing was to be expected in the streets or suburbs, neither speed nor any indication of the intentions (if any) of Dupont. Lanyard spared himself the thankless trouble of watching to see if they were followed—having little doubt they were—and took his ease by the side of Liane Delorme.

Chatting of old times, or sitting in grateful silence when Liane relapsed into abstraction—something which she did with a frequency which testified to the heavy pressure of her thoughts—he kept an appreciative eye on Jules, conceding at length that Liane's adjective, superb, had been fitly applied to his driving. So long as he remained at the wheel, they were not only in safe hands but might be sure of losing nothing on the road.

It was in St. Germain-en-Laye that Lanyard first noticed the grey touring car. But for mental selection of St. Germain as the likeliest spot for Dupont to lay in waiting, and thanks also to an error of judgment on the part of that one, he must have missed it; for there was nothing strikingly sinister in the aspect of that long-bodied grey car with the capacious hood betokening a motor of great power. But it stood incongruously round the corner, in a mean side street, as if anxious to escape observation; its juxtaposition to the door of a wine shop of the lowest class was noticeable in a car of such high caste; and, what was finally damning, the rat-faced man of Lyons was lounging in the door of the wine shop, sucking at a cigarette and watching the traffic with an all too listless eye shaded by the visor of a shabby cap.

Lanyard said nothing at the time, but later, when a long stretch of straight road gave him the chance, verified his suspicions by looking back to see the grey car lurking not less than a mile and a half astern; the Delorme touring car driven by Leon keeping a quarter of a mile in the rear of the limousine.

These relative positions remained approximately unchanged during most of the light hours of that long evening, despite the terrific pace which Jules set in the open country.

Lanyard, keeping an eye on the indicator, saw its hand register the equivalent of sixty English miles an hour more frequently than not. It seldom dropped below fifty except when passing through towns or villages. And more often than he liked Lanyard watched it creep up to and past the mark seventy.

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With such driving he was quite willing to believe that they would see Cherbourg or Heaven by midnight if not before; always, of course, providing...

For the first three hours Leon stood the pace well. Then nerves or physical endurance began to fail, he dropped back, and the Delorme touring car was thereafter seldom visible.

No more, for that matter, was the grey shadow. Lanyard's forecast seemed to be borne out by its conduct: Dupont was biding his time and would undoubtedly attempt nothing before nightfall. In the meantime he was making no effort to do more than keep step with the limousine, but at a decent distance. Only occasionally when, for this reason or that, Jules was obliged to run at reduced speed for several minutes on end, the grey car would draw into sight, always, however, about a mile behind the Delorme touring car.

At about seven they dined on the wing, from the hamper which, with Liane's jewel case in its leather disguise of a simple travelling bag, constituted all the limousine's load of luggage. Lanyard passed sandwiches through the front window to Jules, who munched them while driving like a speed maniac, and with the same appalling nonchalance washed them down with a tumbler of champagne. Then he discovered some manner of sorcerous power over matches in the wind, lighted a cigarette, and signalised his sense of refreshment by smoothly edging the indicator needle up toward the eighty notch, where he held it stationary until Lanyard and Liane with one accord begged him to consider their appetites.

At eight o'clock they were passing through Lisieux, one hundred and eighteen miles from Paris.

Lanyard made mental calculations.

"The light will hold till after nine," he informed Liane. "By that time we shall have left Caen behind."

"I understand," she said coolly; "it will be, then, after Caen."

"Presumably."

"Another hour of peace of mind!" She yawned delicately. "I think—I am bored by this speed—I think I shall have a nap."

Composedly she arranged pillows, put her pretty feet upon the jewel case and, turning her face from Lanyard, dozed.

"I think," he reflected, "that the world is more rich in remarkable women than in remarkable men!"

A luminous lilac twilight vied with the street lamps of Caen when the limousine rolled through the city at moderate speed. Lanyard utilized this occasion to confer with Jules through the window.

“Beyond the town,” he said, “you will stop just round the first suitable turning, so that we can’t be seen before the corner is turned. Draw off to the side of the road and—I think it would be advisable to have a little engine trouble.”

“Very good, sir,” said Jules without looking round. Then he added in a voice of complete respect: “Pardon, sir, but—madame’s orders?”

“If they are not”—Lanyard was nettled—“she will countermand them.”

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"Quite so, sir. And—if you don't mind my asking—what's the idea?"

"I presume you set some value on your skin?"

"Plumb crazy about it."

"Mademoiselle Delorme and I are afflicted with the same idiosyncrasy. We want to save our lives, and we don't mind saving yours at the same time."

"That's more than fair with me. But is that all I'm to know?"

"If the information is any comfort to you: in a grey car which has been following us ever since we left St. Germain, is the man who—I believe—murdered Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes on the Lyons rapide, and who—I know—tried last night to murder Mademoiselle Delorme."

"And I suppose that, in his big-hearted, wholesaler's way, he wouldn't mind making a bag of the lot of us tonight."

"I'm afraid you have reason..."

"If you're planning to put a crimp in his ambitions, sir, I've got a pistol I know how to use."

"Better have it handy, though I don't think we'll need it yet. Our present plan is merely to change cars with Leon and Marthe; the grey car will pass and go on ahead before we make the shift; then you, mademoiselle and I follow in the touring car, the others in the limousine. If there's a trap, as we have every reason to anticipate there will, the touring car will get through—or we'll hope so."

"Ah-h!" Jules used the tone of one who perceives enlightenment as a blinding flash.

"Marthe and Leon are in on the dirty work too, eh?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Putting two and two together—what you've just told me with what I've been noticing and wondering about."

"Then you think those two—"

"Marthe and Leon," Jules pronounced with deliberation, "are two very bad eggs, if you ask me. I shan't shed a solitary tear if something sad happens to them in this 'bus to-night."



There was no time then to delve into his reasons for this statement of feeling. The outskirts of Caen were dropping behind. Providentially, the first bend in the road to Bayeux afforded good cover on the side toward the town. Jules shut off the power as he made the turn, and braked to a dead stop in lee of a row of outhouses. Lanyard was on the ground as soon as the wheels ceased to turn, Jules almost as quickly.

"Now for your engine trouble," Lanyard instructed. "Nothing serious, you understand—simply an adjustment to excuse a few minutes' delay and lend colour to our impatience."

"Got you the first time," Jules replied, unlatching and raising one wing of the hood.

Lanyard moved toward the middle of the road and flagged the Delorme touring car as it rounded the turn, a few seconds later, at such speed that Leon was put to it to stop the car fifty yards beyond the limousine. The man jumped down and, followed by the maid, ran back, but before he reached the limousine was obliged to jump aside to escape the grey car which, tooled by a crack racing hand, took the corner on two wheels, then straightened out and tore past in a smother of dust, with its muffler cut out and the exhaust bellowing like a machine-gun.

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Lanyard counted four figures, two on the front seat, two in the tonneau. More than this, the headlong speed and the failing light rendered it impossible to see—though had the one been less and the other stronger, he could have gained little more information from inspection of those four shapes shrouded in dust coats and masked with goggles.

Watching its rear light dwindle, he fancied that the grey shadow was slowing down; but one could not be sure about that.

“There is something wrong, monsieur?”

The man Leon was at his elbow. Lanyard replied with the curt nod of a disgruntled motorist.

“Something—Jules can tell you,” he said shortly.

“Meanwhile, Mademoiselle Delorme and I have decided not to wait. We’ve got no time to spare. We will take your car and go on.”

“But, monsieur, I—” Leon began to expostulate.

The icy accents of Liane Delorme cut it: “Well, Leon: what is your objection?”

“Objection, madame?” the fellow faltered. “Pardon—but it is not for me to object. I—I was merely startled.”

“Then get over that at once,” he was advised; “and bring my jewelcase—Marthe will point it out to you—to the touring-car.”

“Yes, madame, immediately.”

“Also the lunch-hamper, if you please.”

“Assuredly, monsieur.”

Leon departed hastily for the limousine, where Marthe joined him, while Lanyard and Liane Delorme proceeded to the touring car.

“But what on earth do you want with that hamper, monsieur?”

“Hush, little sister, not so loud! Brother thinks he has another idea.”

“Then Heaven forbid that I should interfere!”

Staggering under its weight, Leon shouldered the jewelcase and carried it to the touring car, where Liane superintended its disposal in the luggage-jammed tonneau. A second trip, less laborious, brought them the hamper. Liane uttered perfunctory thanks and

called to Jules, who was still tinkering at the limousine engine with the aid of an electric torch.

“Come, Jules! Leave Leon to attend to what is required there.”

“Very good, madame.”

Jules strolled over to the touring car and settled down at the wheel. Liane Delorme had the seat beside him.

Lanyard had established himself in a debatable space in the tonneau to which his right was disputed by bags and boxes of every shape, size and description.

“How long, Jules, will Leon need—?”

“Five minutes, madame, if he takes his time about it.”

“Then let us hasten.”

They drew away from the limousine so quickly that in thirty seconds its headlights were all that marked its stand.

Lanyard studied the phosphorescent dial of his wristwatch. From first to last the transaction had consumed little more than three minutes.

Liane slewed round to talk over the back of the seat.

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"What time is it, monsieur?"

"Ten after nine. In an hour precisely the moon will rise."

"It will be in this hour of darkness, then..."

A bend in the road blotted out the stationary lights of the limousine. There was no tail-light visible on the road before them. Lanyard touched Jules on the shoulder.

"Switch off your lights," he said—"all of them. Then find a place where we can turn off and wait till Leon and Marthe pass us."

In sudden blindness the car moved on slowly, groping its way for a few hundred yards. Then Jules picked out the mouth of a narrow lane, overshadowed by dense foliage, ran past, stopped, and backed into it.

In four minutes by Lanyard's watch the pulse of the limousine began to beat upon the stillness of that sleepy countryside. A blue-white glare like naked and hungry steel leapt quivering past the bend, swept in a wide arc as the lamps themselves became visible, and lay horizontal with the road as the car bored past.

"Evidently Leon feels quite lost without us," Lanyard commented. "Shoot, Jules—follow his rear lamp, and *don't* cut out your muffler. Can you manage without headlights for a while?"

"I drove an ambulance for four years, sir."

The car swung out into the main highway. Far ahead the red sardonic eye in the rear of the limousine leered as if mocking their hopes of keeping it in sight. Jules, however, proved unresentful; and he was marvellously competent.

"To anybody who's ever piloted a load of casualties through eighteen inches of mud, dodging shell holes and shells on their way to make new holes, in a black rainstorm at midnight—this sort of thing," Jules announced—"a hard, smooth road under a clear sky—is simple pie."

So it may have seemed to him. But to Lanyard and Liane Delorme, hurled along a road they could not see at anywhere from forty to sixty miles an hour, with no manner of guidance other than an elusive tail-lamp which was forever whisking round corners and remaining invisible till Jules found his way round in turn, by instinct or second sight or intuition—whatever it was, it proved unfailing—it was a nervous time.

And there was half an hour of it...

They were swooping down a long grade with a sharp turn at the bottom, as they knew from the fact that the red eye had just winked out, somewhere on ahead, there sounded a grinding crash, the noise of a stout fabric rent and crushed with the clash and clatter of shivered glass.

“Easy,” Lanyard cautioned—“and ready with the lights!”

Both warnings were superfluous. Jules had already disengaged the gears. Gravity carried the car round the curve, slowly, smoothly, silently; under constraint of its brakes it slid to a pause on a steep though brief descent, and hung there like an animal poised to spring, purring softly.

Below, at the foot of the hill, the headlights of another car, standing at some distance and to the right of the road, furnished lurid illumination to the theatre of disaster.

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Something, its nature just then mysterious, had apparently caused Leon to lose control of the heavy car, so that it had skidded into a ditch and capsized. Four men, crude shapes of nightmare in enveloping dust-coats and disfiguring goggles, were swarming round the wreck. Two were helping the driver out, two others having their gallantry in performing like service for the maid rewarded by a torrent of vituperative denunciation, half hysterical and wholly infuriated.

By the freedom of her gestures, which was rivalled only by that of her language, the dishevelled, storming figure of Marthe was manifestly uninjured. And in another moment it was seen, as Leon found his feet and limped toward the others, that he had suffered only slight damage at the worst.

Lanyard drew attention to a dark serpentine line that lay like a dead snake upon the lighted surface of the road. Jules grunted in token of comprehension. Liane Delorme breathlessly demanded: "What is it?"

"An old trick," Lanyard explained: "A wire cable stretched between trees diagonally across the road, about as high as the middle of the windshield. The impetus of the limousine broke it, but not before it had slewed the car off toward the ditch, wrenching the wheel out of the driver's hands."

He fondled the pistol which Jules had handed him, slipped the safety catch, and said: "Now before they wake up, Jules—give her all she's got!"

Jules released the brakes and, as the car gathered way, noiselessly slipped the gear shift into the fourth speed and bore heavily on the accelerator. They were making forty miles an hour when they struck the level and thundered past the group.

A glimpse of startled faces, the scream of a man who had strayed incautiously into the roadway and stopped there, apparently petrified by the peril that bore down upon him without lights or any other warning, until one of the forward fenders struck and hurled him aside like a straw—and only the night of the open road lay before them. Jules touched the headlight switch and opened the exhaust. Above the roaring of the latter Lanyard fancied he could hear a faint rattling sound. He looked back and smiled grimly. Sharp, short flames of orange and scarlet were stabbing the darkness. Somebody had opened fire with an automatic pistol.... Sheer waste of ammunition!

The pace waxed terrific on a road, like so many roads of France, apparently interminable and straight. On either hand endless ranks of poplars rattled like loose palings of some tremendous picket fence. And yet, long before the road turned, Lanyard, staring astern as he knelt on the rear seat with arms crossed on the folded top, saw the two white eyes of the grey car swing into view and start in pursuit. Quick work, he called it.

He crawled forward and communicated his news, shouting to make himself heard.

“Don’t ease up unless you have to,” he counselled; “don’t think we dare give them an inch.”

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Back at his post of observation, he watched, hoping against hope, while the car lunged and tore like a mad thing through the night, snoring up grades, screaming down them, drumming across the levels, clattering wildly through villages and hamlets; while the moon rose and gathered strength and made the road a streaming river of milk and ink; while his heart sank as minute succeeded minute, mile followed mile, and ever the lights of the pursuing car, lost to sight from time to time, reappeared with a brighter, fiercer glow, and conviction forced itself home that they were being gradually but surely overhauled.

He took this intelligence to the ear of Jules. The chauffeur answered only with a worried shake of his head that said too plainly he was doing his best, extracting every ounce of power from the engine.

Ill luck ambushed them in the streets of a sizable town, its name unknown to Lanyard, where another car, driven inexpertly, rolled out of a side street and stalled in their path. The emergency brake saved them a collision; but there were not six inches between the two when the touring car stopped dead; and minutes were lost before the other got under way and they were able to proceed.

Less than three hundred yards separated pursued and pursuer as they raced out through open fields once more. And foot by foot this lead was being inexorably cut down.

In the seat beside the driver of the grey car a man rose and, steadying himself by holding onto the windshield, poured out the contents of an automatic, presumably hoping to puncture the tires of the quarry. A bullet bored a neat hole through the windshield between the heads of Liane Delorme and Jules. The woman slipped down upon the floor and Jules crouched over the wheel. Lanyard fingered his automatic but held its fire against a moment when he could be more sure of his arm.

Instead, he turned to the lunch hamper and opened it. Liane's provisioning had been ample for a party thrice their number. In the bottom of the basket lay six pint bottles of champagne, four of them unopened. Lanyard took them to the rear seat—and found the grey car had drawn up to within fifty yards of its prey. Making a pace better than seventy miles per hour, it would not dare swerve.

The first empty bottle broke to one side, the second squarely between the front wheels. He grasped the first full bottle by the neck and felt that its weight promised more accuracy, but ducked before attempting to throw it as a volley of shots sought to discourage him. At the first lull he rose and cast the bottle with the overhand action employed in grenade throwing. It crashed fairly beneath the nearer forward wheel of the grey car, but without effect, other than to draw another volley in retaliation. This he risked; the emergency had grown too desperate for more paltering; the lead had been abridged to thirty yards; in two minutes more it would be nothing.

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The fourth bottle went wild, but the fifth exploded six inches in front of the offside wheel and its jagged fragments ripped out the heart of the tire. On the instant of the accompanying blow-out the grey car shied like a frightened horse and swerved off the road, hurtling headlong into a clump of trees. The subsequent crash was like the detonation of a great bomb. Deep shadows masked that tragedy beneath the trees. Lanyard saw the beam of the headlights lift and drill perpendicularly into the zenith before it was blacked out.

He turned and yelled in the ear of Jules: "Slow down! Take your time! They've quit!"

Liane Delorme rose from her cramped position on the floor, and stared incredulously back along the empty, moonlit road.

"What has become of them?"

Lanyard offered a vague gesture. "... tried to climb a tree," he replied wearily, and dropping back on the rear seat began to worry the cork out of the last pint bottle of champagne.

He reckoned he had earned a drink if anybody ever had.

XX

THE SYBARITES

Without disclaiming any credit that was rightly his due for making the performance possible, Lanyard felt obliged to concede that Liane's Delorme's confidence had been well reposed in the ability of Jules to drive by the clock. For when the touring car made, on a quayside of Cherbourg's avant port, what was for its passengers its last stop of the night, the hour of eight bells was being sounded aboard the countless vessels that shouldered one another in the twin basins of the commercial harbour or rode at anchor between its granite jetties and the distant bulwark of the Digue.

Nor was Jules disposed to deny himself well-earned applause. Receiving none immediately when he got down from his seat and indulged in one luxurious stretch, "I'll disseminate the information to the terrestrial universe," he volunteered, "that was travelling!"

"And now that you have done so," Liane Delorme suggested, "perhaps you will be good enough to let the stewards know we are waiting."

If the grin was impudent, the salute she got in acknowledgment was perfection; Jules faced about like a military automaton, strode off briskly, stopped at some distance to light a cigarette, and in effect faded out with the flame of the match.

Lanyard didn't try to keep track of his going. Committed as he stood to follow the lead of Liane Delorme to the end of this chapter of intrigue (and with his mind at ease as to Monsieur Dupont, for the time being at least) he was largely indifferent to intervening developments.

He had asked no questions of Liane, and his knowledge of Cherbourg was limited to a memory of passing through the place as a boy, with a case-hardened criminal as guide and police at their heels. But assuming that Liane had booked passages for New York by a Cunarder, a White Star or American Line Boat—all three touched regularly at Cherbourg, west bound from Southampton—he expected presently to go aboard a tender and be ferried out to one of the steamers whose riding lights were to be seen in the roadstead. Meanwhile he was lazily content....

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Mellow voices of bell metal swelled and died on the midnight air while, lounging against the motor car—with Liane at his side registering more impatience than he thought the occasion called for—Lanyard listened, stared, wondered, the breath of the sea sweet in his nostrils, its flavour in his throat, his vision lost in the tangled web of masts and cordage and funnels that stencilled the moon-pale sky: the witching glamour of salt water binding all his senses with its time-old spell.

It was quiet there upon the quay. Somewhere a winch rattled drowsily and weary tackle whined; more near at hand, funnels were snoring and pumps chugging with a constant, monotonous noise of splashing. On the landward side, from wine shops across the way, came blurred gusts of laughter and the wailing of an accordeon. The footfalls of a watchman, or perhaps a sergent de ville, had lonely echoes. The high electric arcs were motionless, and the shadows cast by their steel-blue glare lay on the pave as if painted in lampblack.

Dupont, the road to Paris, seemed figments of some dream dreamed long ago...

The tip of a pretty slipper, tapping restlessly, continued to betray Liane's temper. But she said nothing. Privately Lanyard yawned. Then Jules, tagged by three men with the fair white jackets and shuffling gait of stewards, sauntered into view from behind two mountains of freight, and announced: "All ready, madame." Liane nodded curtly, lingered to watch the stewards attack the jumble of luggage, saw her jewel case shouldered, and followed the bearer, Lanyard at her elbow, Jules remaining with the car.

The steward trotted through winding aisles of bales and crates, turned a corner, darted up a gangplank to the main-deck of a small steam vessel, so excessively neat and smart with shining brightwork that Lanyard thought it one uncommon tender indeed, and surmised a martinet in command. It seemed curious that there were not more passengers on the tender's deck; but perhaps he and Liane were among the first to come aboard; after all, they were not to sail before morning, according to the women. He apprehended a tedious time of waiting before he gained his berth. He noticed, too, a life ring lettered *sybarite*, and thought this an odd name for a vessel of commercial utility. Then he found himself descending a wide companionway to one of the handsomest saloons he had ever entered, a living room that, aside from its concessions to marine architecture, might have graced a residence on Park Lane or on Fifth avenue in the Sixties.

Lanyard stopped short with his hand on the mahogany handrail.

"I say, Liane! haven't we stumbled into the wrong pew?"

"Wrong pew?" The woman subsided gracefully into a cushioned arm-chair, crossed her knees, and smiled at his perplexity. "But I do not know what is that 'wrong pew.'"

“I mean to say... this is no tender, and it unquestionably isn’t an Atlantic liner.”

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"I should hope not. Did I promise you a—what do you say?—tender or Atlantic liner? But no: I do not think I told you what sort of vessel we would sail upon for that America. You did not ask."

"True, little sister. But you might have prepared me. This is a private yacht."

"Are you disappointed?"

"I won't say that..."

"It is the little ship of a dear friend, monsieur, who generously permits... But patience! very soon you shall know."

To himself Lanyard commented: "I believe it well!" A door had opened in the after partition, two men had entered. Above a lank, well-poised body clothed in the white tunic and trousers of a ship's officer, he recognised the tragicomic mask of the soi-disant Mr. Whitaker Monk. At his shoulder shone the bland, intelligent countenance of Mr. Phinuit, who seemed much at home in the blue serge and white flannels of the average amateur yachtsman.

From this last Lanyard received a good-natured nod, while Monk, with a great deal of empressement, proceeded directly to Liane Delorme and bowed low over the hand which she languidly lifted to be saluted.

"My dear friend!" he said in his sonorous voice. "In another hour I should have begun to grow anxious about you."

"You would have had good reason, monsieur. It is not two hours since one has escaped death—and that for the second time in a single day—by the slenderest margin, and thanks solely to this gentleman here."

Monk consented to see Lanyard, and immediately offered him a profound salute, which was punctiliously returned. His eyebrows mounted to the roots of his hair.

"Ah! that good Monsieur Duchemin."

"But no!" Liane laughed. "It is true, the resemblance is striking; I do not say that, if Paul would consent to grow a beard, it would not be extraordinary. But—permit me, Captain Monk, to present my brother, Paul Delorme."

"Your brother, mademoiselle?" The educated eyebrows expressed any number of emotions. Monk's hand was cordially extended. "But I am enchanted, Monsieur Delorme, to welcome on board the Sybarite the brother of your charming sister."

Lanyard resigned limp fingers to his clasp.

“And most public-spirited of you, I’m sure, Captain Monk... I believe I understood Liane to say Captain Monk?” The captain bowed. “Captain Whitaker Monk?” Another bow. Lanyard looked to Liane: “Forgive me if I seem confused, but I thought you told me Mister Whitaker Monk had sailed for America a week ago.”

“And so he did,” the captain agreed blandly, while Liane confirmed his statement with many rapid and emphatic nods. “Mr. Monk, the owner, is my first cousin. Fortune has been less kind to me in a worldly way; consequently you see in me merely the skipper of my wealthy kinsman’s yacht.”

“And your two names are the same—yours and your cousin’s? You’re both Whitaker Monks?”

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"It is a favourite name in our family, monsieur."

Lanyard wagged his head in solemn admiration.

Phinuit had come to his side, and was offering his hand in turn.

"It's all gospel, Mr. Lanyard," he declared, with a cheerful informality which Lanyard found more engaging than Monk's sometimes laboured mannerisms. "He's sure-enough Captain Whitaker Monk, skipper of the good ship Sybarite, Mister Whitaker Monk, owner. And my name is really Phinuit, and I'm honest-to-goodness secretary to Mr. Monk. You see, the owner got a hurry call from New York, last week, and sailed from Southampton, leaving us to bring his pretty ship safely home."

"That makes it all so clear!"

"Well, anyway, I'm glad to meet you to your bare face. I've heard a lot about you, and—if it matters to you—thought a lot more."

"If it comes to that, Mr. Phinuit, I have devoted some thought to you."

"Oh, daresay. And now—if mademoiselle is agreeable—suppose we adjourn to the skipper's quarters, where we can improve one another's acquaintance without some snooping steward getting an unwelcome earful. We need to know many things you alone can tell us—and I'll wager you could do with a drink. What?"

"But I assure you, monsieur, I find your reception sufficiently refreshing."

"Well," said Phinuit, momentarily but very slightly discountenanced—"you've been uncommon' damn' useful, you know... I mean, according to mademoiselle."

"Useful?" Lanyard enquired politely.

"He calls it that," Liane Delorme exclaimed, "when I tell him you have saved my life!" She swept indignantly through the door by which Monk and Phinuit had come to greet them. Two ceremonious bows induced Lanyard to follow her. Monk and Phinuit brought up the rear. "Yes," the woman pursued—"twice he has saved it!"

"In the same place?" Phinuit enquired innocently, shutting the door.

"But no! Once in my home in Paris, this morning, and again to-night on the road to Cherbourg. The last time he saved his life, too, and Jules's."

"It was nothing," said the modest hero.

“It was nothing!” Liane echoed tragically. “You save my life twice, and he calls it ‘useful,’ and you call it ‘nothing!’ My God! I tell you, I find this English a funny language!”

“But if you will tell us about it...” Monk suggested, placing a chair for her at one end of a small table on which was spread an appetising cold supper.

Lanyard remarked that there were places laid for four. He had been expected, then. Or had the fourth place been meant for Jules? One inclined to credit the first theory. It seemed highly probable that Liane should have telegraphed her intentions before leaving Paris. Indeed, there was every evidence that she had. Neither Monk nor Phinuit had betrayed the least surprise on seeing Lanyard; and Phinuit had not even troubled to recognise the fiction which Liane had uttered in accounting for him. It was very much as if he had said: That long-lost brother stuff is all very well for the authorities, for entry in the ship’s papers if necessary; but it’s wasted between ourselves, we understand one another; so let’s get down to brass tacks... An encouraging symptom; though one had already used the better word, refreshing....

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Spacious, furnished in a way of rich sobriety, tasteful in every appointment, the captain's quarters were quite as sybaritic as the saloon of the Sybarite. A bedroom and private bath adjoined, and the open door enabled one to perceive that this rude old sea dog slept in a real bed of massive brass. His sitting-room, or private office, had a studious atmosphere. Its built-in-bookcases were stocked with handsome bindings. The panels were, like those in the saloon, sea-scapes from the hands of modern masters: Lanyard knew good painting when he saw it. The captain's desk was a substantial affair in mahogany. Most of the chairs were of the overstuffed lounge sort. The rug was a Persian of rare lustre.

Monk was following with a twinkle the journeys of Lanyard's observant eye.

"Do myself pretty well, don't you think?" he observed quietly, in a break in Liane's dramatic narrative; perforce the lady must now and again pause for breath.

Lanyard smiled in return. "I can't see you've much to complain of."

The captain nodded, but permitted a shade of gravity to become visible in his expression. He sighed a philosophic sigh:

"But man is never satisfied..."

Liane had got her second wind and was playing variations on the theme of the famous six bottles of champagne. Lanyard lounged in his easy chair and let his bored thoughts wander. He was weary of being talked about, wanted one thing only, fulfillment of the promise that had been implicit in Phinuit's manner. He was aware of Phinuit's sympathetic eye.

The woman sent the grey car crashing again into the tree, repeated Lanyard's quaint report of the business, and launched into a vein of panegyric.

"Regard him, then, sitting there, making nothing of it all—!"

"Sheer swank," Phinuit commented. "He's just letting on; privately he thinks he's a heluva fellow. Don't you, Lanyard?"

"But naturally," Lanyard gave Phinuit a grateful look. "That is understood. But what really interests me, at present, is the question: Who is Dupont, and why?"

"If you're asking me," Monk replied, "I'll say—going on mademoiselle's story—Monsieur Dupont is by now a ghost."

"One would be glad to be sure of that," Lanyard murmured.

"By all accounts," said Phinuit, "he takes a deal of killing."

“But all this begs my question,” Lanyard objected. “Who is Dupont, and why?”

“I think I can answer that question, monsieur.” This was Liane Delorme. “But first, I would ask Captain Monk to set guards to see that nobody comes aboard this ship before she sails.”

“Pity you didn’t think of that sooner,” Phinuit observed in friendly sarcasm. “Better late than never, of course, but still—!”

The woman appealed to Monk directly, since he did not move. “But I assure you, monsieur, I am afraid, I am terrified of that one! I shall not sleep until I am sure he has not succeeded in smuggling himself on board—”

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"Be tranquil, mademoiselle," Monk begged. "What you ask is already done. I gave the orders you ask as soon as I received your telegram, this morning. You need not fear that even a rat has found his way aboard since then, or can before we sail, without my knowledge."

"Thank God!" Liane breathed—and instantly found a new question to fret about. "But your men, Captain Monk—your officers and crew—can you be sure of them?"

"Absolutely."

"You haven't signed on any new men here in Cherbourg?" Lanyard asked.

Monk worked his eyebrows to signify that the question was ridiculous. "No such fool, thanks," he added.

"Yet they may have been corrupted while here in port," Liane insisted.

"No fear."

"That is what I would have said of my maid and footman, twenty-four hours ago. Yet I now know better."

"I tell you only what I know, mademoiselle. If any of my officers and crew have been tampered with, I don't know anything about it, and can't and won't until the truth comes out."

"And you sit there calmly to tell me that!" Liane rolled her lovely eyes in appeal to the deck beams overhead. "But you are impossible!"

"But, my dear lady," Monk protested, "I am perfectly willing to go into hysterics if you think it will do any good. As it happens, I don't. I haven't been idle or fatuous in that matter, I have taken every possible precaution against miscarriage of our plans. If anything goes wrong now, it can't be charged to my discredit."

"It will be an act of God," Phinuit declared: "one of the unavoidable risks of the business."

"The business!" Liane echoed with scorn. "I assure you I wish I were well out of 'the business'!"

"And so say we all of us," Phinuit assured her patiently; and Monk intoned a fervent "Amen!"

"But who is Dupont?" Lanyard reiterated stubbornly.

“An Apache, monsieur,” Liane responded sulkily—“a leader of Apaches.”

“Thank you for nothing.”

“Patience: I am telling you all I know. I recognised him this morning, when you were struggling with him. His name is Popinot.”

“Ah!”

“Why do you say ‘Ah!’ monsieur?”

“There was a Popinot in Paris in my day; they nicknamed him the Prince of the Apaches. But he was an older man, and died by the guillotine. This Popinot who calls himself Dupont, then, must be his son.”

“That is true, monsieur.”

“Well, then, if he has inherited his father’s power—!”

“It is not so bad as all that. I have heard that the elder Popinot was a true prince, in his way, I mean as to his power with the Apaches. His son is hardly that; he has a following, but new powers were established with his father’s death, and they remain stronger than he.”

“All of which brings us to the second part of my question, Liane: Why Dupont?”

Liane shrugged and studied her bedizened fingers. The heavy black brows circumflexed Monk’s eyes, and he drew down the corners of his wide mouth. Phinuit fixed an amused gaze on a distant corner of the room and chewed his cigar.

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"Why did Dupont—or Popinot," Lanyard persisted—"murder de Lorgnes? Why did he try to murder Mademoiselle Delorme? Why did he seek to prevent our reaching Cherbourg?"

"Give you three guesses," Phinuit offered amiably. "But I warn you if you use more than one you'll forfeit my respect forever. And just to show what a good sport I am, I'll ask you a few leading questions. Why did Popinot pull off that little affair at Montpellier-le-Vieux? Why did he try to put you out of his way a few days later?"

"Because he wanted to steal the jewels of Madame de Montalais, naturally."

"I knew you'd guess it."

"You admit, then, you have the jewels?"

"Why not?" Phinuit enquired coolly. "We took trouble enough to get them, don't you think? You're taking trouble enough to get them away from us, aren't you? You don't want us to think you so stupid as to be wasting your time, do you?"

His imperturbable effrontery was so amusing that Lanyard laughed outright. Then, turning to Liane, he offered her a grateful inclination of the head.

"Mademoiselle, you have kept your promise. Many thanks."

"Hello!" cried Phinuit. "What promise?"

"Monsieur Lanyard desired a favour of me," Liane explained, her good humour restored; "in return for saving me from assassination by Popinot this morning, he begged me to help him find the jewels of Madame de Montalais. It appears that he—or Andre Duchemin—is accused of having stolen those jewels; so it becomes a point of honour with him to find and restore them to Madame de Montalais."

"He told you that?" Monk queried, studiously eliminating from his tone the jeer implied by the words alone.

"But surely. And what could I do? He spoke so earnestly, I was touched. Regard, moreover, how deeply I am indebted to him. So I promised I would do my best. Et voila! I have brought him to the jewels; the rest is—how do you say—up to him. Are you satisfied with the way I keep my word, monsieur?"

"It's hard to see how he can have any kick coming," Phinuit commented with some acidity.

Lanyard addressed himself to Liane: "Do I understand the jewels are on this vessel?"

"In this room."

Lanyard sat up and took intelligent notice of the room. Phinuit chuckled, and consulted Monk in the tone of one reasonable man to his peer.

"I say, skipper: don't you think we ought to be liberal with Monsieur Lanyard? He's an awfully good sort—and look't all the services he has done us."

Monk set the eyebrows to consider the proposition.

"I am emphatically of your mind, Phin," he pronounced at length, oracular.

"It's plain to be seen he wants those jewels—means to have 'em. Do you know any way we can keep them from him?"

Monk moved his head slowly from side to side: "None."

"Then you agree with me, it would save us all a heap of trouble to let him have them without any more stalling?"

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By way of answer Monk bent over and quietly opened a false door, made to resemble the fronts of three drawers, in a pedestal of his desk. Lanyard couldn't see the face of the built-in safe, but he could hear the spinning of the combination manipulated by Monk's long and bony fingers. And presently he saw Monk straighten up with a sizable steel dispatch-box in his hands, place this upon the desk, and unlock it with a key on his pocket ring.

"There," he announced with an easy gesture.

Lanyard rose and stood over the desk, investigating the contents of the dispatch-box. The collection of magnificent stones seemed to tally accurately with his mental memoranda of the descriptions furnished by Eve de Montalais.

"This seems to be right," he said quietly, and closed the box. The automatic lock snapped fast.

"Now what do you say, brother dear?"

"Your debt to me is fully discharged, Liane. But, messieurs, one question: Knowing I am determined to restore these jewels to their owner, why this open handedness?"

"Cards on the table," said Phinuit. "It's the only way to deal with the likes of you."

"In other words," Monk interpreted: "you have under your hand proof of our bona fides."

"And what is to prevent me from going ashore with these at once?"

"Nothing," said Phinuit.

"But this is too much!"

"Nothing," Phinuit elaborated, "but your own good sense."

"Ah!" said Lanyard—"ah!"—and looked from face to face.

Monk adjusted his eyebrows to an angle of earnestness and sincerity.

"The difficulty is, Mr. Lanyard," he said persuasively, "they have cost us so much, those jewels, in time and money and exertion, we can hardly be expected to sit still and see you walk off with them and say never a word in protection of our own interests. Therefore I must warn you, in the most friendly spirit: if you succeed in making your escape from the Sybarite with the jewels, as you quite possibly may, it will be my duty as a law-abiding man to inform the police that Andre Duchemin is at large with his loot from the Chateau de Montalais. And I don't think you'd get very far, then, or that your fantastic story about meaning to return them would gain much credence. D'ye see?"

“But distinctly! If, however, I leave the jewels and lay an information against you with the police——?”

“To do that you would have to go ashore....”

“Do I understand I am to consider myself your prisoner?”

“Oh, dear, no!” said Captain Monk, inexpressibly pained by such crudity. “But I do wish you’d consider favourably an invitation to be our honoured guest on the voyage to New York. You won’t? It would be so agreeable of you.”

“Sorry I must decline. A prior engagement....”

“But you see, Lanyard,” Phinuit urged earnestly, “we’ve taken no end of a fancy to you. We like you, really, for yourself alone. And with that feeling the outgrowth of our very abbreviated acquaintance—think what a friendship might come of a real opportunity to get to know one another well.”

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"Some other time, messieurs..."

"But please!" Phinuit persisted—"just think for one moment—and do forget that pistol I know you've got in a handy pocket. We're all unarmed here, Mademoiselle Delorme, the skipper and I. We can't stop your going, if you insist, and we know too much to try. But there are those aboard who might. Jules, for instance: if he saw you making a getaway and knew it might mean a term in a French prison for him.... And if I do say it as shouldn't of my kid brother, Jules is a dead shot. Then there are others. There'd surely be a scrimmage on the decks; and how could we explain that to the police, who, I am able to assure you from personal observation, are within hail? Why, that you had been caught trying to stow away with your loot, which you dropped in making your escape. D'ye see how bad it would look for you?"

To this there was no immediate response. Sitting with bowed head and sombre eyes, Lanyard thought the matter over a little, indifferent to the looks of triumph being exchanged above his head.

"Obviously, it would seem, you have not gone to all this trouble—lured me aboard this yacht—merely to amuse yourselves at my expense and then knock me on the head."

"Absurd!" Liane declared indignantly. "As if I would permit such a thing, who owe you so much!"

"Or look at it this way, monsieur," Monk put in with a courtly gesture: "When one has an adversary whom one respects, one wisely prefers to have him where one can watch him."

"That's just it," Phinuit amended: "Out of our sight, you'd be on our nerves, forever pulling the Popinot stunt, springing some dirty surprise on us. But here, as our guest —!"

"More than that," said Liane with her most killing glance for Lanyard: "a dear friend."

But Lanyard was not to be put off by fair words and flattery.

"No," he said gravely: "but there is some deeper motive..."

He sought Phinuit's eyes, and Phinuit unexpectedly gave him an open-faced return.

"There is," he stated frankly.

"Then why not tell me—?"

"All in good time. And there'll be plenty of that; the Sybarite is no Mauretania. When you know us better and have learned to like us..."



“I make no promises.”

“We ask none. Only your pistol...”

“Well, monsieur: my pistol?”

“It makes our association seem so formal—don’t you think?—so constrained. Come, Mr. Lanyard! be reasonable. What is a pistol between friends?”

Lanyard shrugged, sighed, and produced the weapon.

“Really!” he said, handing it over to Monk—“how could anyone resist such disarming expressions?”

The captain thanked him solemnly and put the weapon away in his safe, together with the steel despatch-box and Liane Delorme’s personal treasure of precious stones.

XXI

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SOUNDINGS

With characteristic abruptness Liane Delorme announced that she was sleepy, it had been for her a most fatiguing day. Captain Monk rang for the stewardess and gallantly escorted the lady to her door. Lanyard got up with Phinuit to bow her out, but instead of following her suit helped himself to a long whiskey and soda, with loving deliberation selected, trimmed and lighted a cigar, and settled down into his chair as one prepared to make a night of it.

"You never sleep, no?" Phinuit enquired in a spirit of civil solicitude.

"Desolated if I discommode you, monsieur," Lanyard replied with entire amiability—"but not to-night, not at least until I know those jewels have no more chance to go ashore without me."

He tasted his drink with open relish. "Prime Scotch," he judged. "One grows momentarily more reconciled to the prospect of a long voyage."

"Make the most of it," Phinuit counselled. "Remember our next port of call is the Great American Desert. After all, the despised camel seems to have had the right idea all along."

He gaped enormously behind a superstitious hand. Monk, returning, published an elaborate if silent supercilious comment on the tableau.

"He has no faith at all in our good intentions," Phinuit explained, eyeing Lanyard with mild reproach. "It's most discouraging."

"Monsieur suffers from insomnia?" Monk asked in his turn.

"Under certain circumstances."

"Ever take anything for it?"

"To-night it would require nothing less than possession of the Montalais jewels to put me to sleep."

"Well, if you manage to lay hands on them without our consent," Phinuit promised genially, "you'll be put to sleep all right."

"But don't let me keep you up, messieurs."

Captain Monk consulted the chronometer. "It's not worth while turning in," he said: "we sail soon after day-break."

“Far be it from me to play the giddy crab, then.” Phinuit busied himself with the decanter, glasses and siphon. “Let’s make it a regular party; we’ll have all to-morrow to sleep it off in. If I try to hop on your shoulder and sing, call a steward and have him lead me to my innocent white cot; but take a fool’s advice, Lanyard, and don’t try to drink the skipper under the table. On the word of one who’s tried and repented, it can not be done.”

“But it is I who would go under the table,” Lanyard said. “I have a poor head for whiskey.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“Pardon?”

“I mean to say,” Phinuit explained, “I’m glad to have another weakness of yours to bear in mind.”

“You are interested in the weaknesses of others, monsieur?”

“They’re my hobby.”

“Knowledge,” Monk quoted, sententious, “is power.”

“May I ask what other entries you have made in my dossier, Mr. Phinuit?”

“You won’t get shirty?”

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"But surely not."

"Well ... can't be positive till I know you better.... I'm afraid you've got a tendency to overestimate the gullibility of people in general. It's either that, or.... No: I don't believe you're intentionally hypocritical, or self-deceived, either."

"But I don't understand...."

"Remember your promise.... But you seem to think it easy to put it over on us, mademoiselle, the skipper and me."

"But I assure you I have never had any such thought."

"Then why this funny story of yours—told with a straight face, too!—about wanting to get hold of the Montalais loot simply to slip it back to its owner?"

Lanyard felt with a spasm of anger constrict his throat; and knew that the restraint he imposed upon his temper was betrayed in a reddened face. Nevertheless his courteous smile persisted, his polite conversational tone was unchanged.

"Now you remind me of something. I presume, Captain Monk, it's not too late to send a note ashore to be posted?"

"Oh!" Monk's eyebrows protested violently—"a note!"

"On plain paper, in a plain envelope—and I don't in the least mind your reading it."

The eyebrows appealed to Phinuit, and that worthy ruled: "Under those conditions, I don't see we can possibly object."

Monk shrugged his brows back into place, found paper of the sort desired, even went so far as to dip the pen for Lanyard.

"You will sit at my desk, monsieur?"

"Many thanks."

Under no more heading than the date, Lanyard wrote:

"Dear Madame de Montalais:"

"I have not forgotten my promise, but my days have been full since I left the chateau. And even now I must be brief: within an hour I sail for America, within a fortnight you may look for telegraphic advices from me, stating that your jewels are in my possession, and when I hope to be able to restore them to you."

“Believe me, dear madame,”

“Devotedly your servant,

“Michael Lanyard.”

Monk read and in silence passed this communication over to Phinuit, while Lanyard addressed the envelope.

“Quite in order,” was Phinuit’s verdict, accompanied by a yawn.

Lanyard folded the note, sealed it in the envelope, and affixed a stamp supplied by Monk, who meanwhile rang for a steward.

“Take this ashore and post it at once,” he told the man who answered his summons.

“But seriously, Lanyard!” Phinuit protested with a pained expression.... “No: I don’t get you at all. What’s the use?”

“I have not deceived you, then?”

“Not so’s you’d notice it.”

“Alas!”—Lanyard affected a sigh—“for misspent effort!”

“Oh, all’s fair outside the law. We don’t blame you for trying it on. Only we value your respect too much to let you go on thinking we have fallen for that hokum.”

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"You see," Monk expounded—solemn ass that he was beneath his thin veneer of pretentiousness—"when we know how the British Government kicked you out of its Secret Service as soon as it had no further use for you, we can understand and sympathise with your natural reaction to such treatment at the hands of Society."

"But one didn't know you knew so much, monsieur le capitaine."

"And then," said Phinuit, "when we know you steered a direct course from London for the Chateau de Montalais, and made yourself persona grata there—Oh, persona very much grata, if I'm any judge!—you can hardly ask us to believe you didn't mean to do it, it all just happened so."

"Monsieur sees too clearly...."

"Why, if it comes to that—what were you up to that night, pussyfooting about the chateau at two in the morning?"

"But this is positively uncanny! Monsieur knows everything."

"Why shouldn't I know about that?" Vanity rang in Phinuit's self-conscious chuckle. "Who'd you think laid you out that night?"

"Monsieur is not telling me——!"

"I guess I owe you an apology," Phinuit admitted. "But you'll admit that in our situation there was nothing else for it. I'd have given anything if we'd been able to get by any other way; but you're such an unexpected customer.... Well! when I felt you catch hold of my shirt sleeve, that night, I thought we were done for and struck out blindly. It was a lucky blow, no credit to me. Hope I didn't jar you too much."

"No," said Lanyard, reflective—"no, I was quite all right in the morning. But I think I owe you one."

"Afraid you do; and it's going to be my duty and pleasure to cheat you out of your revenge if fast footwork will do it."

"But where was Captain Monk all the while?"

"Right here," Monk answered for himself; "sitting tight and saying nothing, and duly grateful that the blue prints and specifications of the Great Architect didn't design me for second-storey work."

"Then it was Jules——?"

"No; Jules doesn't know enough. It was de Lorgnes, of course. I thought you'd guess that."

"How should I?"

"Didn't you know he was the premier cracksman of France? That is, going on Mademoiselle Delorme's account of him; she says there was never anybody like that poor devil for putting the comether on a safe—barring yourself, Monsieur le Loup Seul, in your palmy days. And she ought to know; those two have been working together since the Lord knows when. A sound, conservative bird, de Lorgnes; very discreet, tight-mouthed even when drunk—which was too often."

"But—this is most interesting—how did you get separated, you and de Lorgnes?"

"Bad luck, a black night, and—I guess there's no more question about this—your friend, Popinot-Dupont. I'll say this for that blighter: as a self-made spoil-sport, he sure did give service!"

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Phinuit gave his whiskey and soda a reminiscent grin.

“And we thought we were being bright, at that! We’d figured every move to the third decimal point. The only uncertain factor in our calculations, as we thought, was you. But with you disposed of, dead to the world, and Madame de Montalais off in another part of the chateau calling the servants to help, leaving her rooms wide open to us—the job didn’t take five minutes. The way de Lorgnes made that safe give up all its secrets, you’d have thought he had raised it by hand! We stuffed the loot into a grip I’d brought for the purpose, and beat it—slipped out through the drawing-room window one second before Madame de Montalais came back with that doddering footman of hers. But they never even looked our way. I bet they never knew there’d been a robbery till the next morning. Do I lose?”

“No, monsieur; you are quite right.”

“Well, then: We had left our machine—we had driven over from Millau—just over the brow of the hill, standing on the down-grade, headed for Nant, with the gears meshed in third, so she would start without a sound as soon as we released the emergency brake. But when we got there, it wasn’t. The frantic way we looked for it made me think of you pawing that table for your candle, after de Lorgnes had lifted it behind your back. And then of a sudden they jumped us, Popinot and his crew; though we didn’t know who in hell; it might have been the chateau people. In fact, at first I thought it was....

“I lost de Lorgnes in the shuffle immediately, never did know what had become of him till we got Liane’s wire this morning. I was having all I could do to take care of myself, thank you. I happened to be carrying the grip, and that helped a bit. Somebody’s head got in the way of its swings, and I guess the guy hasn’t forgotten it yet. Then I slipped through their fingers—I’ll never tell you how; it was black as pitch, that night—and beat it blind. I’d lost my flashlamp and had no more idea where I was heading than an owl at noon of a sunny day. But they—the Popinot outfit—seemed to be able to see in the dark all right; or else I was looney with fright. Every once in a while somebody or something would make a pass at me in the night, and I’d duck and double and run another way.

“After a while I found myself climbing a steep, rocky slope, and guessed it must be the cliff behind the chateau. It was a sort of zig-zag path, which I couldn’t see, only guess at. I was scared stiff; but they were still after me, or I thought they were, so I floundered on. The path, if it was a path, was slimy with mud, and about every third step I’d slip and go sprawling. I can’t tell you how many times I felt my legs shoot out into nothing, and dug my fingers into the muck, or broke my nails on rocks and caught clumps of grass with my teeth, to keep from going over ... and all the while that all-gone feeling in the pit of my stomach....

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“However, I got to the top in the end, and crawled into a hollow and lay down behind some bushes, and panted as if my heart would break, and hoped I’d die and get over with it. But nobody came to bother me, so I got up when the first streak of light showed in the sky—there’d been a young cloud-burst just before that, and I was soaked to my skin—and struck off across the cause for God-knew-where. De Lorgnes and I had fixed that, if anything did happen to separate us, we’d each strike for Lyons and the one who got there first would wait for the other at the Hotel Terminus. But before I could do that, I had to find a railroad, and I didn’t dare go Millau-way, I thought, because the chances were the gendarmes would be waiting there to nab the first bird that blew in all covered with mud and carrying a bag full of diamonds.

“I’d managed to hold onto the grip through it all, you see; but before that day was done I wished I’d lost it. The damned thing got heavier and heavier till it must have weighed a gross ton. It galled my hands and rubbed my legs till they were sore.... I was sore all over, anyway, inside and out....

“Sometime during the morning I climbed one of those bum mounds they call couronnes to see if I could sight any place to get food and drink, preferably drink. The sun had dried my clothes on my back and then gone on to make it a good job by soaking up all the moisture in my system. I figured I was losing eleven pounds an hour by evaporation alone, and expected to arrive wherever I did arrive, if I ever arrived anywhere looking like an Early Egyptian prune....

“The view from the couronne didn’t show me anything I wanted to see, only a number of men in the distance, spread out over the face of the cause and quartering it like beagles. I reckoned I knew what sort of game they were hunting, and slid down from that couronne and travelled. But they’d seen me, and somebody sounded the view-halloo. It was grand exercise for me and great sport for them. When I couldn’t totter another yard I fell into a hole into the ground—one of those avens—and crawled into a sort of little cave, and lay there listening, to the suck and gurgle of millions of gallons of nice cool water running to waste under my feet, and me dying the death of a dog with thirst.

“After a while I couldn’t stand it any longer. I crawled out, prepared to surrender, give up the plunder, and lick the boots of any man who’d slip me a cup of water. But for some reason they’d given up the chase. I saw no more of them, whoever they were. And a little later I found a peasant’s hut, and watered myself till I swelled up like a poisoned pup. They gave me a brush-down, there, and something to eat besides, and put me on my way to Millau. It seemed that I was a hundred miles from anywhere else, so it was Millau for mine if it meant a life sentence in a French prison.

“I sneaked into the town after dark, and took the first train north. Nobody took any notice of me. I couldn’t see the use of going all round Robin Hood’s barn, as I’d have

had to in order to make Lyons. By the time I'd got there, de Lorgnes would have given up and gone on to Paris."

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Phinuit finished his drink. "I'll say it was a gay young party. The next time I feel the call to crime, believe me! I'm going out and snatch nursing bottles from kids asleep in their prams.... But they *must* be asleep."

Monk lifted himself by sections from his chair.

"It was a good yarn first time I heard it," he mused aloud. "But now, I notice, even the Sybarite is getting restless."

In the course of Phinuit's narrative the black disks of night framed by the polished brass circles of the stern ports had faded out into dusky violet, then into a lighter lilac, finally into a warm yet tender blue. Now the main deck overhead was a sounding-board for thumps and rustle of many hurried feet.

"Pilot come aboard, you think?" Phinuit enquired; and added, as Monk nodded and cast about for the visored white cap of his office: "Didn't know pilots were such early birds."

"They're not, as a rule. But if you treat 'em right, they'll listen to reason."

The captain graphically rubbed a thumb over two fingers, donned his cap, buttoned up his tunic, and strode forth with an impressive gait.

"Still wakeful?" Phinuit hinted hopefully.

"And shall be till we drop the pilot, thanks."

"If I hadn't seen de Lorgnes make that safe sit up and speak, and didn't know you were his master, I'd be tempted to bat an eye or two. However...." Phinuit sighed despondently. "What can I do now to entertain you, dear sir?"

"You might have pity on my benighted curiosity...."

"Meaning this outfit?" Lanyard assented, and Phinuit deliberated over the question. "I don't know as I ought in the absence of my esteemed associates.... But what's bothering you most?"

"I have seen something of the world, monsieur, and as you are aware not a little of the underside of it; but never have I met with a combination of such peculiar elements as this possesses. Regard it, if you will, from my view-point, that of an outsider, for one moment."

Phinuit grinned. "It must give you furiously to think—as you'd say."

"But assuredly! Take, for example, yourself, a man of unusual intelligence, such as one is not accustomed to find lending himself to the schemes of ordinary criminals."

“But you have just admitted that we’re anything but ordinary.”

“Then Mademoiselle Delorme. One knows what the world knows of her, that she has for many years meddled with high affairs, that she had been for many years more a sort of queen of the demi-monde of Paris; but now you tell me she has stopped to profit by association with a professional burglar.”

“Profit? I’ll say she did. According to my information, it was she who mapped out the campaigns for de Lorgnes; she was G.H.Q. and he merely the high private in the front line trenches; with this difference, that in this instance G.H.Q. was perfectly willing to let the man at the front cop all the glory.... She took the cash and let the credit go, nor heeded rumblings of the distant drum!”

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"Then your picturesque confrere, Captain Monk; and the singular circumstance that he owns a wealthy cousin of the same name; and this beautiful little yacht which you seem so free to utilize for the furtherance of your purposes. Is it strange, then, that one's curiosity is provoked, one's imagination alternately stimulated and baffled?"

"No; I suppose not," Phinuit conceded thoughtfully. "Still, it's far simpler than you'd think."

"One has found that true of most mysteries, monsieur."

"I don't mind telling you all I feel at liberty to.... You seem to have a pretty good line on mademoiselle, and I've told you what I know about de Lorgnes. As for the skipper, he's the black sheep of a good old New England family. Ran away to sea as a boy, and was disowned, and grew up in a rough school. It would take all night to name half the jobs he's had a hand in, mostly of a shady nature, in every quarter of the seven seas: gun running, pearl poaching, what not—even a little slaving, I suspect, in his early days. He's a pompous old bluff in repose, but nobody's fool, and a bad actor when his mad is up. He tells me he fell in with the Delorme a long time ago, while acting as personal escort for a fugitive South American potentate who crossed the borders of his native land with the national treasury in one hand and his other in Monk's, and of course—they all do—made a bee line for Paris. That's how we came to make her acquaintance, my revered employer, Mister Monk, and I—through the skipper, I mean."

Phinuit paused to consider, and ended with a whimsical grimace.

"I'm talking too much; but it doesn't matter, seein's it's you. Strictly between ourselves, the said revered employer is an annointed fraud. Publicly he's the pillar of the respectable house of Monk. Privately, he's not above profiteering, foreclosing the mortgage on the old homestead, and swearing to an odoriferous income-tax return. And when he thinks he's far enough away from home—my land, how that little man do carry on!

"The War made him more money than he ever thought there was; so he bought this yacht ready-made and started on the grand tour, but never got any farther than Paris—naturally his first stop. News from home to the effect that somebody was threatening to do him out of a few nickels sent him hightailing back to put a stop to it. But before that happened, he wanted to see life with a large L; and Cousin Whitaker gave him a good start by introducing him to little ingenue Liane. And then she put the smuggling bee in his bonnet."

"Smuggling!"

Lanyard began to experience glimpses....

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"Champagne. If ever all the truth comes out, I fancy it will transpire that Liane's getting a rake-off from some vintner. You see, Friend Employer was displaying a cultivated taste in vintage champagnes, but he'd been culpably negligent in not laying down a large stock for private consumption before the Great Drought set in. The Delorme found that out, then that his ancestral acres bordered on Long Island Sound, and finally that the Sybarite was loafing its head off. What could be more simple, she suggested, than that monsieur should ballast his private yacht with champagne on the homeward voyage, make his landfall some night in the dark of the moon, and put the stuff ashore on his own property before morning. Did he fall for it? Well, I just guess he did!"

"This is all most interesting, monsieur, but..." "Where do Monk and I come in? Oh, like master, like men. Liane was too wise to crab her act by proposing anything really wicked to the Owner, and wise enough to know nothing could shock the skipper. And I was wise enough not to let him get away with anything unless I sat in on the deal.

"Mademoiselle played all her cards face upwards with us. She and de Lorgnes, she said, were losing money by disposing of their loot this side, especially with European currency at its present stage of depreciation. And so long as the owner was doing a little dirty work, why shouldn't we get together and do something for ourselves on the side? If champagne could be so easily smuggled into the States, why not diamonds? We formed a joint-stock company on the spot."

"And made your first coup at the Chateau de Montalais!"

"Not the first, but the biggest. De Lorgnes' mouth had been watering for the Montalais stuff for a long time, it seems. My boss had private business of a nature we won't enter into, in London, and gave me a week off and the use of his car. We made up the party, toured down the Rhone valley, and then back by way of the Cevennes, just to get the lay of the land. I don't think there can be much more you need to know."

"Monsieur is too modest."

"Oh, about me? Why, I guess I'm not an uncommon phenomenon of the times. I was a good citizen before the War, law-abiding and everything. If you'd told me then I'd be in this galley to-day, I'd probably have knocked you for a goal. I had a flourishing young business of my own and was engaged to be married... When I got back from hell over here, I found my girl married to another man, my business wrecked, what was left of it crippled by extortionate taxation to support a government that was wasting money like a drunken sailor and too cynical to keep its solemn promises to the men who had fought for it. I had to take a job as secretary to a man I couldn't respect, and now... Well, if I can get a bit of my own back by defrauding the government or classing myself with the unorganised leeches on Society, nothing I know is going to stop my doing it!"

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Phinuit knocked the ashes out of a cold pipe at which he had been sucking for some time, rose, and stretched.

"The worst of it is," he said in a serious turn—"I mean, looking at the thing from my bourgeois viewpoint of 1914—the War, but more particularly the antics of the various governments after the War, turned out several million of men in my frame of mind the world over. We went into the thing deluded by patriotic bunk and the promise that it was a war to end war; we came out to find the old men more firmly entrenched in the seats of the mighty than ever and stubbornly bent on perpetuating precisely the same rotten conditions that make wars inevitable. What Germany did to the treaty that guaranteed Belgium's neutrality was child's-play compared to what the governments of the warring nations have done to their covenants with their own people. And if anybody should ask you, you can safely promise them that several million soreheads like myself are what the politicians call 'a menace to the established social order'."

Clear daylight filled the ports. The traffic on deck nearly deserved the name of din. Commands and calls were being bawled in English, French, and polyglot profanity. A donkey-engine was rumbling, a winch clattering, a capstan-pawl clanking. Alongside a tug was panting hoarsely. The engine room telegraph jangled furiously, the fabric of the Sybarite shuddered and gathered way.

"We're off," yawned Phinuit. "Now will you be reasonable and go to bed?"

"You may, monsieur," said Lanyard, getting up. "For my part, I shall go on deck, if you don't mind, and stop there till the pilot leaves us."

"Fair enough!"

"But one moment more. You have been extraordinarily frank, but you have forgotten one element, to me of some importance: you have not told me what my part is in this insane adventure."

"That's not my business to tell you," Phinuit replied promptly. "When anything as important as that comes out, it won't be through my babbling. Anyhow, Liane may have changed her mind since last reports. And so, as far as I'm concerned, your present status is simply that of her pet protege. What it is to be hereafter you'll learn from her, I suppose, soon enough.... Le's go!"

XXII

OUT OF SOUNDINGS

When finally Lanyard did consent to seek his stateroom—with the pilot dropped and the Sybarite footing it fealty over Channel waters to airs piped by a freshening breeze—it

was to sleep once round the clock and something more; for it was nearly six in the afternoon when he came on deck again.

The quarterdeck, a place of Epicurean ease for idle passengers, was deserted but for a couple of deckhands engaged in furling the awning. Lanyard lounged on the rail, revelling in a sense of perfect physical refreshment intensified by the gracious motion of the vessel, the friendly, rhythmic chant of her engines, the sweeping ocean air and the song it sang in the rigging, the vision of blue seas snow-plumed and mirroring in a myriad facets the red gold of the westering sun, and the lift and dip of a far horizon whose banks of violet mist were the fading shores of France.

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In these circumstances of the sea he loved so well there was certain anodyne for those twinges of chagrin which he must suffer when reminded of the sorry figure he had cut overnight.

Still there were compensations—of a more material nature, too, than this delight which he had of being once again at sea. To have cheapened himself in the estimation of Liane Delorme and Phinuit and Monk was really to his advantage; for to persuade an adversary to under-estimate one is to make him almost an ally. Also, Lanyard now had no more need to question the fate of the Montalais jewels, no more blank spaces remained to be filled in his hypothetical explanation of the intrigues which had enmeshed the Chateau de Montalais, its lady and his honour.

He knew now all he needed to know, he could put his hand on the jewels when he would; and he had a fair fortnight (the probable duration of their voyage, according to Monk) in which to revolve plans for making away with them at minimum cost to himself in exertion and exposure to reprisals.

Plans? He had none as yet, he would begin to formulate and ponder them only when he had better acquaintance with the ship and her company and had learned more about that ambiguous landfall which she was to make (as Phinuit had put it) “in the dark of the moon.”

Not that he made the mistake of despising those two social malcontents, Phinuit and Jules, that rogue adventurer Monk, that grasping courtesan Liane Delorme.

Individually and collectively Lanyard accounted that quartet uncommonly clever, resourceful, audacious, unscrupulous, and potentially ruthless, utterly callous to compunctions when their interests were jeopardised. But it was inconceivable that he should fail to outwit and frustrate them, who had the love and faith of Eve de Montalais to honour, cherish, and requite.

Growing insight into the idiosyncrasies of the men left him undismayed. He perceived the steel of inflexible purpose beneath the windy egotism of Phinuit. The pompous histrionism of Monk, he knew, was merely a shell for the cold, calculating, undeviating selfishness that too frequently comes with advancing years. Nevertheless these two were factors whose functionings might be predicted.

It was Liane Delorme who provided the erratic equation. Her woman's mind was not only the directing intelligence, it was as eccentric as quicksilver, infinitely supple and corrupt, Oriental in its trickishness and impenetrability. Already it had conceived some project involving him which he could by no means divine or even guess at without a sense of wasting time.

Trying to put himself in her place, Lanyard believed that he would never have neglected the opportunity that, so far as she knew, had been hers, to steal away from Paris while he slept and leave an enemy in his way quite as dangerous as “Dupont” to gnaw his nails in the mortification of defeat. Why she had not done so, why she had permitted Monk and Phinuit to play their comedy of offering him the jewels, passed understanding.

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But of one thing Lanyard felt reasonably assured: now that she had him to all intents and purposes her foiled and harmless captive aboard the Sybarite, Liane would not keep him waiting long for enlightenment as to her intentions.

He had to wait, however, that night and the next three before the woman showed herself. She was reported ill with mal-de-mer. Lanyard thought it quite likely that she was; before she was out of the Channel the Sybarite was contesting a moderate gale from the Southwest. On the other hand, he imagined that Liane might sensibly be making seasickness an excuse to get thoroughly rested and settled in her mind as to her course with him.

So he schooled himself to be patient, and put in his time to good profit taking the measures of his shipmates and learning his way about ship.

The Sybarite seemed unnecessarily large for a pleasure boat. Captain Monk had designated her a ship of nine hundred tons. Certainly she had room and to spare on deck as well as below for the accommodation of many guests in addition to the crew of thirty required for her navigation and their comfort. A good all-weather boat, very steady in a seaway, her lines were nevertheless fine, nothing in her appearance in the least suggested a vessel of commercial character—"all yacht" was what Monk called her.

The first mate, a Mr. Swain, was a sturdy Britisher with a very red face and cool blue eyes, not easily impressed; if Lanyard were not in error, Mr. Swain entertained a private opinion of the lot of them, Captain Monk included, decidedly uncomplimentary. But he was a civil sort, though deficient in sense of humour and inclined to be a bit abrupt in a preoccupied fashion.

Mr. Collison, the second mate, was another kind entirely, an American with the drawl of the South in his voice, a dark, slender man with eyes quick and shrewd. His manners were excellent, his reserve notable, though he seemed to derive considerable amusement from what he saw of the passengers, going on his habit of indulging quiet smiles as he listened to their communications. He talked very little and played an excellent game of poker.

The chief engineer was a Mr. Mussey, stout, affable, and cynic, a heavy drinker, untidy about his person and exacting about his engine-room, a veteran of his trade and—it was said—an ancient croney of Monk's. There was, at all events, a complete understanding evident between these two, though now and again, especially at table, when Monk was putting on something more than his customary amount of side, Lanyard would observe Mussey's eyes fixed in contemplation upon his superior officer, with a look in them that wanted reading. He was nobody's fool, certainly not Monk's, and at such times Lanyard would have given more than a penny for Mussey's thoughts.

Existing in daily contact, more or less close, with these gentlemen, observing them as they went to and fro upon their lawful occasions, Lanyard often speculated as to their attitude toward this lawless errand of the Sybarite's, of which they could hardly be unsuspicious even if they were not intimate with its true nature. And remembering what penalties attach to apprehension in the act of smuggling, even though it be only a few cases of champagne, he thought it a wild risk for them to run for the sake of their daily wage.

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Something to this effect he intimated to Phinuit.

"Don't worry about this lot," that one replied. "They're wise birds, tough as they make 'em, ready for anything; hand-picked down to the last coal-passer. The skipper isn't a man to take fool chances, and when he recruited this crew, he took nobody he couldn't answer for. They're more than well paid, and they'll do as they're told and keep their traps as tight as clams'."

"But, I take it, they were signed on before this present voyage was thought of; while you seem to imply that Captain Monk anticipated having to depend upon these good fellows in unlawful enterprises."

"Maybe he did, at that," Phinuit promptly surmised, with a bland eye. "I wouldn't put it past him. The skipper's deep, and I'll never tell you what he had in the back of his mind when he let Friend Boss persuade him to take command of a pleasure yacht. Because I don't know. If it comes to that, the owner himself never confided in me just what the large idea was in buying this ark for a plaything. Yachting for fun is one thing; running a young floating hotel is something else again."

"Then you don't believe the grandiose illusions due to sudden wealth were alone responsible?"

"I don't know. That little man has a mind of his own, and even if I do figure on his payroll as confidential secretary, he doesn't tell me everything he knows."

"Still," said Lanyard drily, "one cannot think you can complain that he has hesitated to repose his trust in you."

To this Phinuit made no reply other than a non-committal grunt; and presently Lanyard added:

"It is hardly possible—eh?—that the officers and crew know nothing of what is intended with all the champagne you have recently taken aboard."

"They're no fools. They know there's enough of the stuff on board to do a Cunarder for the next ten years, and they know, too, there's no lawful way of getting it into the States."

"So, then! They know that. How much more may they not know?"

Phinuit turned a startled face to him. "What's that?" he demanded sharply.

"May they not have exercised their wits as well on the subject of your secret project, my friend?"

“What are you getting at?”

“One is wondering what these ‘wise birds, as tough as they make them’ would do if they thought you were—as you say—getting away with something at their expense as well as the owner’s.”

“What have you seen or heard?”

“Positively nothing. This is merely idle speculation.”

“Well!” Phinuit sighed sibilantly and relaxed. “Let’s hope they never find out.”

By dawn of the fourth day the gale had spent its greatest strength; what was left of it subsided steadily till, as the seafaring phrase has it, the wind went down with the sun. Calm ensued. Lanyard woke up the next morning to view from his stateroom deadlights vistas illimitable of flat blue flawed by hardly a wrinkle; only by watching the horizon was one aware of the slow swell of the sea, its sole perceptible motion. And all day long the Sybarite trudged on an even keel with only the wind of her way to flutter the gay awnings of the quarterdeck, while the waters sheared by her stem ran down her sides hissing resentment of this violation of their absolute tranquillity.

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Also, the sun made itself felt, electric fans buzzed everywhere, and perspiring in utter indolence beneath the awnings, one thought in sympathy of those damned souls below, in the hell of the stoke-hole.

At luncheon Liane Delorme appeared in a summery toilette that would have made its mark on the beach of Deauville.

Voluntary or enforced, her period of retreat had done her good. Making every allowance for the aid of art, the woman looked years younger than when Lanyard had last seen her. Nobody would ever have believed her a day older than twenty-five, no one, that is to say, who had not watched youth ebb from her face and leave it grey and waste with premature winter, as Lanyard had that morning when he told her of the death of de Lorgnes in the restaurant of the Buttes Montmartre.

Liane herself had long since put quite out of mind that mauvais quart d'heure. Her present serenity was as flawless as the sea's, though, unlike the sea, she sparkled. She was as gay as any school-girl—though any school-girl guilty, or even capable, of a scintilla of the amusing impropriety of her badinage would have merited and won instant expulsion.

She inaugurated without any delay a campaign of conquest extremely diverting to observe. To Lanyard it seemed that her methods were crude and obvious enough; but it did something toward mitigating the long-drawn boredom of the cruise to watch them work out, as they seemed to invariably, with entire success; and then remark the insouciance with which, another raw scalp dangling from her belt, Liane would address herself to the next victim.

Mr. Swain was the first to fall, mainly because he happened to be present at luncheon, it being Mr. Collison's watch on the bridge. Under the warmth of violet eyes which sought his constantly, drawn by what one was left to infer was an irresistible attraction, his reserve melted rapidly, his remote blue stare grew infinitely less distant; and though he blushed furiously at some of the more audacious of Liane's sallies, he was quick to take his cue when she expressed curiosity concerning the duties of the officer of the watch. And coming up at about two bells for a turn round the deck and a few breaths of fresh air before dressing for dinner, Lanyard saw them on the bridge, their heads together over the binnacle—to the open disgust of the man at the wheel.

Liane hailed him, with vivacious gestures commanded his attendance. As a brother in good standing, one could hardly do less than humour her gracefully; so Lanyard trotted up to the companion ladder, and Liane, resting a hand of sisterly affection upon his arm, besought him to make clear to her feminine stupidity Swain's hopelessly technical explanation of the compass and binnacle.

Obligingly Mr. Swain repeated his lecture, and Lanyard, learning for himself with considerable surprise what a highly complicated instrument of precision is the modern compass, and that the binnacle has essential functions entirely aside from supporting the compass and housing it from the weather, could hardly blame his sister for being confused.

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Indeed, he grew so interested in Swain's exposition of deviation and variation and magnetic attraction and the various devices employed to counteract these influences, the Flinders bars, the soft-iron spheres, and the system of adjustable magnets located in the pedestal of the binnacle, that he had to be reminded by a mild exhibition of sisterly temper that she hadn't summoned him to the bridge for his private edification.

"So then!" he said after due show of contrition—"it is like this: the magnetic needle is susceptible to many attractions aside from that of the pole; it is influenced by juxtaposition to other pieces or masses of magnetized metal. The iron ship itself, for example, is one great magnet. Then there are dissociated masses of iron within the ship, each possessing an individual power of magnetism sufficient to drag the needle far from its normal fidelity to the pole. So the scientific mariner, when he installs a compass on board his ship, measures these several forces, their influence upon the needle, and installs others to correct them—on the principle of like cures like.

"Let us put it in a figure: The compass is the husband, the pole the wife. Now it is well known that husbands are for all that human beings, able to perceive attractions in persons other than those to whom they are married. The wise wife, then, studies the charms of mind or person which in others appeal to her husband, and makes them her own; or if that is impossible cultivates other qualities quite as potent to distract him. It results from this, that the wise wife becomes, as they say 'all women to one man.' Now here the binnacle represents the arts by which that wise wife, the pole, keeps her husband true by surrounding him with charms and qualities—these magnets—sufficiently powerful to counteract the attractions of others. Do I make myself clear?"

"But perfectly!" Liane nodded emphatically. "What a mind to have in the family!" she appealed to Mr. Swain. "Do you know, monsieur, it happens often to me to wonder how I should have so clever a brother?"

"It is like that with me, too," Lanyard insisted warmly.

He made an early excuse to get away, having something new to think about.

Mr. Mussey put up a stiffer fight than Mr. Swain, since an avowed cynic is necessarily a Man Who Knows About Women. He gave Liane flatly to understand that he saw through her and couldn't be taken in by all her blandishments. At the end of twenty-four hours, however, the conviction seemed somehow to have insidiously penetrated that only a man of his ripe wisdom and disillusionment could possibly have any appeal to a woman like Liane Delorme. It wasn't long after that the engine room was illuminated by Liane's pretty ankles and Mr. Mussey was beginning to comprehend that there was in this world one woman at least who could take an intelligent interest in machinery.

Mr. Collison succumbed without a struggle. True to the tradition of Southern chivalry, he ambled up to the block, laid his head upon it, and asked for the axe. Nor was he kept long waiting...

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On the seventh day the course pricked on the chart placed the Sybarite's position at noon as approximately in mid-Atlantic. Contemplating a prospect of seven days more of such emptiness, Lanyard's very soul yawned.

And nothing could induce Captain Monk to hasten the passage. Mr. Mussey asserted that his engines could at a pinch deliver twenty knots an hour; yet day in and day out the Sybarite poked along at little better than half that speed. It was no secret that Liane Delorme's panic flight from Popinot had hurried the yacht out of Cherbourg harbour four days earlier than her proposed sailing date, whereas the Sybarite had a rendezvous to keep with her owner at a certain hour of a certain night, an appointment carefully calculated with consideration for the phase of the moon and the height of the tide, therefore not readily to be altered.

After dinner on that seventh day, a meal much too long drawn out for Lanyard's liking, and marked to boot by the consumption of much too much champagne, he left the main saloon the arena of an impromptu poker party, repaired to the quarterdeck, and finding a wicker lounge chair by the taffrail subsided into it with a sigh of gratitude for this fragrant solitude of night, so soothing and serene.

The Sybarite, making easy way through a slight sea, with what wind there was—not much—on the port bow, rolled but slightly, and her deliberate and graceful fore-and-aft motion, as she swung from crest to crest of the endless head-on swells, caused the stars to stream above her mast-heads, a boundless river of broken light. The pulsing of the engines, unceasing, unrelenting, ran through her fabric in ceaseless succession of gentle tremors, while the rumble of their revolutions resembled the refrain of an old, quiet song. The mechanism of the patent log hummed and clicked more obtrusively. Directly underfoot the screw churned a softly clashing wake. From the saloon companionway drifted intermittently a confusion of voices, Liane's light laughter, muted clatter of chips, now and then the sound of a popping cork. Forward the ship's bell sounded two double strokes, then a single, followed by a wail in minor key: "Five bells and all's well!" ... And of a sudden Lanyard suffered the melancholy oppression of knowing his littleness of body and soul, the relative insignificance even of the ship, that impertinent atom of human organization which traversed with unabashed effrontery the waters of the ages, beneath the shining constellations of eternity. In profound psychical enervation he perceived with bitterness and despair the enormous futility of all things mortal, the hopelessness of effort, the certain black defeat that waits upon even what men term success.

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He felt crushed, spiritually invertebrate, destitute of object in existence, bereft of all hope. What mattered it whether he won or lost in this stupid contest whose prize was possession of a few trinkets set with bits of glittering stone? If he won, of what avail? What could it profit his soul to make good a vain boast to Eve de Montalais? Would it matter to her what success or failure meant to him? Lanyard doubted it, he doubted her, himself, all things within the compass of his understanding, and knew appalling glimpses of that everlasting truth, too passionless to be cynical, that the hopes of man and his fears, his loves and hates, his strivings and passivity, are all one in the measured and immutable processes of Time....

The pressure of a hand upon his own roused him to discover the Liane Delorme had seated herself beside him, in a chair that looked the other way, so that her face was not far from his; and he could scarcely be unaware of its hinted beauty, now wan and glimmering in starlight, enigmatic with soft, close shadows.

"I must have been dreaming," he said, apologetic. "You startled me."

"One could see that, my friend."

The woman spoke in quiet accents and let her hand linger upon his with its insistent reminder of the warm, living presence whose rich colouring was disguised by the gloom that encompassed both.

Four strokes in duplicate on the ship's bell, then the call: "*Eight bells and a-a-all's well!*"

Lanyard muttered: "No idea it was so late."

A slender white shape, Mr. Collison emerged from his quarters in the deck-house beneath the bridge and ran up the ladder to relieve Mr. Swain. At the same time a seaman came from forward and ascended by the other ladder. Later Mr. Swain and the man whose trick at the wheel was ended left the bridge, the latter to go forward to his rest, Mr. Swain to turn into his room in the deck-house.

The hot glow of the saloon skylights became a dim refulgence, aside from which, and its glimmer in the mouth of the companionway, no lights were visible in the whole length of the ship except the shuttered window of Mr. Swain's room, which presently was darkened, and odd glimpses of the binnacle light to be had when the helmsman shifted his stand.

A profound hush closed down upon the ship, whose progress across the face of the waters seemed to acquire a new significance of stealth, so that the two seated by the taffrail, above the throbbing screws and rushing torrent of the wake, talked in lowered accents without thinking why.

"It is that one grows bored, eh, cher ami?"

“Perhaps, Liane.”

“Or perhaps that one’s thought are constantly with one’s heart, elsewhere?”

“You think so?”

“At the Chateau de Montalais, conceivably.”

“It amuses you, then, to shoot arrows into the air?”

“But naturally, I seek the reason, when I see you distrait and am conscious of your neglect.”

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"I think it is for me to complain of that!"

"How can you say such things?"

"One has seen what one has seen, these last few days. I think you are what that original Phinuit would call 'a fast worker,' Liane."

"What stupidity! If I seek to make myself liked, you know well it is with a purpose."

"One hardly questions that."

"You judge harshly ... Michael."

Lanyard spent a look of astonishment on the darkness. He could not remember that Liane had ever before called him by that name.

"Do I? Sorry...." His tone was listless. "But does it matter?"

"You know that to me nothing else matters."

Lanyard checked off on his fingers: "Swain, Collison, Mussey. Who next? Why not I, as well as another?"

"Do you imagine for an instant that I class you with such riffraff?"

"Why, if you really want to know what I think, Liane: it seems to me that all men in your sight are much the same, good for one thing only, to be used to serve your ends. And who am I that you should hold me in higher rating than any other man?"

"You should know I do," the woman breathed, so low he barely caught the words and uttered an involuntary "Pardon?" before he knew he had understood. So that she iterated in a clearer tone of protest: "You should know I do—that I do esteem you as something more than other men. Think what I owe to you, Michael; and then consider this, that of all men whom I have known you alone have never asked for love."

He gave a quiet laugh. "There is too much humility in my heart."

"No," she said in a dull voice—"but you despise me. Do not deny it!" She shifted impatiently in her chair. "I know what I know. I am no fool, whatever you think of me.... No," she went on with emotion under restraint: "I am a creature of fatality, me—I cannot hope to escape my fate!"

He was silent a little in perplexed consideration of this. What did she wish him to believe?

“But one imagines nobody can escape his fate.”

“Men can, some of them; men such as you, rare as you are, know how to cheat destiny; but women never. It is the fate of all women that each shall some time love some man to desperation, and be despised. It is my fate to have learned too late to love you, Michael——”

“Ah, Liane, Liane!”

“But you hold me in too much contempt to be willing to recognise the truth.”

“On the contrary, I admire you extremely, I think you are an incomparable actress.”

“You see!” She offered a despairing gesture to the stars. “It is not true what I say? I lay bare my heart to him, and he tells me that I act!”

“But my dear girl! surely you do not expect me to think otherwise?”

“I was a fool to expect anything from you,” she returned bitterly—“you know too much about me. I cannot find it in my heart to blame you, since I am what I am, what the life you saved me to so long ago has made me. Why should you believe in me? Why should you credit the sincerity of this confession, which costs me so much humiliation? That would be too good for me, too much to ask of life!”

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"I think you cannot fairly complain of life, Liane. What have you asked of it that you have failed to get? Success, money, power, adulation——"

"Never love."

"The world would find it difficult to believe that."

"Ah, love of a sort, yes: the love that is the desire to possess and that possession satisfies."

"Have you asked for any other sort?"

"I ask it now. I know what the love is that longs to give, to give and give again, asking no return but kindness, understanding, even toleration merely. It is such love as this I bear you, Michael. But you do not believe...."

Divided between annoyance and distaste, he was silent. And all at once she threw herself half across the joined arms of their chairs, catching his shoulders with her hands, so that her half-clothed body rested on his bosom, and its scented warmth assailed his senses with the seduction whose power she knew so well.

"Ah, Michael, my Michael!" she cried—"if you but knew, if only you could believe! It is so real to me, so true, so overwhelming, the greatest thing of all! How can it be otherwise to you?... No: do not think I complain, do not think I blame you or have room in my heart for any resentment. But, oh my dear! were I only able to make you understand, think what life could be to us, to you and me. What could it withhold that we desired? You with your wit, your strength, your skill, your poise—I with my great love to inspire and sustain you—what a pair we should make! what happiness would be ours! Think, Michael—think!"

"I have thought, Liane," he returned in accents as kind as the hands that held her. "I have thought well..."

"Yes?" She lifted her face so near that their breaths mingled, and he was conscious of the allure of tremulous and parted lips. "You have thought and.... Tell me your thought, my Michael."

"Why, I think two things," said Lanyard: "First, that you deserve to be soundly kissed." He kissed her, but with discretion, and firmly put her from him. "Then"—his tone took on a note of earnestness—"that if what you have said is true, it is a pity, and I am sorry, Liane, very sorry. And, if it is not true, that the comedy was well played. Shall we let it rest at that, my dear?"

Half lifting her, he helped her back into her chair, and as she turned her face away, struggling for mastery of her emotion, true or feigned, he sat back, found his cigarette case, and clipping a cigarette between his lips, cast about for a match.

He had none in his pockets, but knew that there was a stand on one of the wicker tables nearby. Rising, he found it, and as he struck the light heard a sudden, soft swish of draperies as the woman rose.

Moving toward the saloon companionway, she passed him swiftly, without a word, her head bended, a hand pressing a handkerchief to her lips. Forgetful, he followed her swaying figure with puzzled gaze till admonished by the flame that crept toward his fingertips. Then dropping the match he struck another and put it to his cigarette. At the second puff he heard a choking gasp, and looked up again.

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The woman stood alone, en silhouette against the glow of the companionway, her arms thrust out as if to ward off some threatened danger. A second cry broke from her lips, shrill with terror, she tottered and fell as, dropping his cigarette, Lanyard ran to her.

His vision dazzled by the flame of the match, he sought in vain for any cause for her apparent fright. For all he could see, the deck was as empty as he had presumed it to be all through their conversation.

He found her in a faint unmistakably unaffected. Footfalls sounded on the deck as he knelt, making superficial examination. Collison had heard her cries and witnessed her fall from the bridge and was coming to investigate.

“What in blazes——!”

Lanyard replied with a gesture of bewilderment: “She was just going below. I’d stopped to light a cigarette, saw nothing to account for this. Wait: I’ll fetch water.”

He darted down the companionway, filled a glass from a silver thermos carafe, and hurried back. As he arrived at the top of steps, Collison announced: “It’s all right. She’s coming to.”

Supported in the arms of the second mate, Liane was beginning to breathe deeply and looking round with dazed eyes. Lanyard dropped on a knee and set the glass to her lips. She gulped twice, mechanically, her gaze fixed to his face. Then suddenly memory cleared, and she uttered a bubbling gasp of returning dread.

“Popinot!” she cried, as Lanyard hastily took the glass away. “Popinot—he was there—I saw him—standing there!”

A trembling arm indicated the starboard deck just forward of the companion housing. But of course, when Lanyard looked, there was no one there ... if there had ever been....

XXIII

THE CIGARETTE

Lanyard found himself exchanging looks of mystification with Collison, and heard his own voice make the flat statement: “But there is nobody...” Collison muttered words which he took to be: No, and never was. “But you must have seen him from the bridge,” Lanyard insisted blankly, “if....”

“I looked around as soon as I heard her call out,” Collison replied; “but I didn’t see anybody, only mademoiselle here—and you, of course, with that match.”

“Please help me up,” Liane Delorme asked in a faint voice. Collison lent a hand. In the support and shelter of Lanyard’s arm the woman’s body quivered like that of a frightened child. “I must go to my stateroom,” she sighed uncertainly. “But I am afraid...”

“Do not be. Remember Mr. Collison and I... Besides, you know, there was nobody...”

The assertion seemed to exasperate her; her voice discovered new strength and violence.

“But I am telling you I saw ... that assassin!”—she shuddered again—“standing there, in the shadow, glaring at me as if I had surprised him and he did not know what next to do. I think he must have been spying down through the skylight; it was the glow from it that showed me his red, dirty face of a pig.”

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"You came aft on the port side, didn't you?" Lanyard enquired of the second mate.

Collison nodded. "Running," he said—"couldn't imagine what was up."

"It is easy not to see what one is not looking for," Lanyard mused, staring forward along the starboard side. "If a man had dropped flat and squirmed along until in the shelter of the engine-room ventilators, he could have run forward—bending low, you know—without your seeing him."

"But you were standing here, to starboard!"

"I tell you, that match was blinding me," Lanyard affirmed irritably. "Besides, I wasn't looking—except at my sister—wondering what was the matter."

Collison started. "Excuse me," he said, reminded—"if mademoiselle's all right, I ought to get back to the bridge."

"Take me below," Liane begged. "I must speak with Captain Monk."

Monk and Phinuit were taking their ease plus nightcaps in the captain's sitting-room. A knock brought a prompt invitation to "Come in!" Lanyard thrust the door open and curtly addressed Monk: "Mademoiselle Delorme wishes to see you." The eloquent eyebrows indicated surprise and resignation, and Monk got up and inserted himself into his white linen tunic. Phinuit, more sensitive to the accent of something amiss, hurried out in unceremonious shirt sleeves. "What's up?" he demanded, looking from Lanyard's grave face to Liane's face of pallor and distress. Lanyard informed him in a few words.

"Impossible!" Phinuit commented.

"Nonsense," Monk added, speaking directly to Liane. "You imagined it all."

She had recovered much of her composure, enough to enable her to shrug her disdain of such stupidity.

"I tell you only what my two eyes saw."

"To be sure," Monk agreed with a specious air of being wide open to conviction. "What became of him, then?"

"You ask me that, knowing that in stress of terror I fainted!"

The eyebrows achieved an effect of studied weariness. "And you saw nobody, monsieur? And Collison didn't, either?"

Lanyard shook his head to each question. "Still, it is possible——."

Monk cut him short impatiently. “All gammon—all in her eye! No man bigger than a cockroach could have smuggled himself aboard this yacht without my being told. I know my ship, I know my men, I know what I’m talking about.”

“Presently,” Liane prophesied darkly, “you may be talking about nothing.”

At a loss, Monk muttered: “Don’t get you....”

“When you find yourself, some fine morning, with your throat cut in your sleep, like poor de Lorgnes—or garroted, as I might have been.”

“I’m not going to lose any sleep.....” Monk began.

“Lose none before you have the vessel searched,” Liane pleaded, with a change of tone. “You know, messieurs, I am not a woman given to hallucinations. I saw ... And I tell you, while that assassin is at liberty aboard this yacht, not one of our lives is worth a sou—no, not one!”

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"Oh, you shall have your search." Monk gave in as one who indulges a childish whim. "But I can tell you now what we'll find—or won't."

"Then Heaven help us all!" Liane went swiftly to the door of her room, but there hesitated, looking back in appeal to Lanyard. "I am afraid...."

"Let me have a look round first."

And when Lanyard had satisfied himself there was nobody concealed in any part of Liane's suite, and had been rewarded with a glance of gratitude—"I shall lock myself in, of course," the woman said from the threshold—"and I have my pistol, too."

"But I assure you," Monk commented in heavy sarcasm, "our intentions are those of honourable men."

The door slammed, and the sound of the key turning in the lock followed. Monk trained the eyebrows into a look of long-suffering patience.

"A glass too much... Seein' things!"

"No," Lanyard voiced shortly his belief; "you are wrong. Liane saw something."

"Nobody questions that," Phinuit yawned. "What one does question is whether she saw a man or a figment of her imagination—some effect of the shadows that momentarily suggested a man."

"Shadows do play queer tricks at night, at sea," Monk agreed. "I remember once—"

"Then let us look the ground over and see if we can make that explanation acceptable to our own intelligences," Lanyard cut in.

"No harm in that."

Phinuit fetched a pocket flash-lamp, and the three reconnoitred exhaustively the quarters of the deck in which the apparition had manifested itself to the woman. By no strain of credulity could the imagination be made to accept the effect of shadows at the designated spot as the shape of somebody standing there. On the other hand, when Phinuit obligingly posed himself between the mouth of the companionway and the skylight, it had to be admitted that the glow from either side provided fairly good cover for one who might wish to linger there, observing and unobserved.

"Still, I don't believe she saw anything," Monk persisted—"a phantom Popinot, if anything."

"But wait. What is it we have here?"

Lanyard, scrutinising the deck with the flashlamp, stooped, picked up something, and offered it on an outspread palm upon which he trained the clear electric beam.

“Cigarette stub?” Monk said, and sniffed. “That’s a famous find!”

“A cigarette manufactured by the French Regie.”

“And well stepped on, too,” Phinuit observed. “Well, what about it?”

“Who that uses this part of the deck would be apt to insult his palate with such a cigarette? No one of us—hardly any one of the officers or stewards.”

“Some deck-hand might have sneaked aft for a look-see, expecting to find the quarterdeck deserted at this hour.”

“Even ordinary seamen avoid, when they can, what the Regie sells under the name of tobacco. Nor is it likely such a one would risk the consequences of defying Captain Monk’s celebrated discipline.”

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"Then you believe it was Popinot, too?"

"I believe you would do well to make the search you have promised thorough and immediate."

"Plenty of time," Monk replied wearily. "I'll turn this old tub inside out, if you insist, in the morning."

"But why, monsieur, do you remain so obstinately incredulous?"

"Well," Monk drawled, "I've known the pretty lady a number of years, and if you ask me she's quite up to playing little games all her own."

"Pretending, you mean—for private ends?"

The eyebrows offered a gesture urbane and sceptical.

Whether or not sleep brought Monk better counsel, the morning's ransacking of the vessel and the examination of her crew proved more painstaking than Lanyard had expected. And the upshot was precisely as Monk had foretold, precisely negative. He reported drily to this effect at an informal conference in his quarters after luncheon. He himself had supervised the entire search and had made a good part of it in person, he said. No nook or cranny of the yacht had been overlooked.

"I trust mademoiselle is satisfied," he concluded with a mockingly civil movement of eyebrows toward Liane.

His reply was the slightest of shrugs executed by perfect shoulders beneath a gown of cynical transparency. Lanyard was aware that the violet eyes, large with apprehension, flashed transiently his way, as if in hope that he might submit some helpful suggestion. But he had none to offer. If the manner in which the search had been conducted were open to criticism, that would have to be made by a mind better informed than his in respect of things maritime. And he avoided acknowledging that glance by even so much as seeming aware of it. And in point of fact, coldly reviewed in dispassionate daylight, the thing seemed preposterous to him, to be asked to believe that Popinot had contrived to secrete himself beyond finding on board the Sybarite.

Without his participation the discussion continued.

He heard Phinuit's voice utter in accents of malicious amusement: "Barring, of course, the possibility of connivance on the part of officers or crew."

"Don't be an ass!" Monk snapped.

"Don't be unreasonable: I am simply as God made me."

“Well, it was a nasty job of work.”

“Now, listen.” Phinuit rose to leave, as one considering the conference at an end. “If you persist in picking on me, skipper, I’ll ravish you of those magnificent eyebrows with a safety razor, some time when you’re asleep, and leave you as dumb as a Wop peddler who’s lost both arms.”

Liane followed him out in silence, but her carriage was that of a queen of tragedy. Lanyard got up in turn, and to his amazement found the eyebrows signalling confidentially to him.

“What the devil!” he exclaimed, in an open stare.

Immediately the eyebrows became conciliatory.

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"Well, monsieur, and what is your opinion?"

"Why, to me it would seem there might be something in the suggestion of Monsieur Phinuit."

"Ridiculous!" Monk dismissed it finally. "Do you know, I rather fancy my own.... Liane's up to something," he added, explanatory; and then, as Lanyard said nothing—"You haven't told me yet what she was talking to you about last night just before her—alleged fright."

Lanyard contrived a successful offensive with his own eyebrows.

"Oh?" he said, "haven't I?" and walked out.

Here was a new angle to consider. Monk's attitude hinted at a possible rift in the entente cordiale of the conspirators. Why else should he mistrust Liane's sincerity in asserting that she had seen Popinot? Aside from the question of what he imagined she could possibly gain by making a scene out of nothing—a riddle unreadable—one wondered consumedly what had happened to render Monk suspicious of her good faith.

The explanation, when it was finally revealed to Lanyard by the most trivial of incidents, made even his own blindness seem laughable.

For three more days the life of the ship followed in unruffled tranquillity its ordered course. Liane Delorme was afflicted with no more visions, as the captain would have called them; though by common consent the subject had been dropped upon the failure of the search, and to all seeming was rapidly fading from the minds of everybody but Liane herself and Lanyard. This last continued to plague himself with the mystery and, maintaining always an open mind, was prepared at any time to be shockingly enlightened; that is, to discover that Liane had not cried wolf without substantial reason. For he had learned this much at least of life, that everything is always possible.

As for Liane, she made no secret of her unabated timidity, yet suffered it with such fortitude as could not fail to win admiration. If she was a bit more subdued, a trifle less high-spirited than was her habit, if she refused positively to sit with her back to any door or to retire for the night until her quarters had been examined, if (as Lanyard suspected) she was never unarmed for a moment, day or night, she permitted no signs of mental strain to mar the serenity of her countenance or betray the studied graciousness of her gestures.

Toward Lanyard she bore herself precisely as though nothing had happened to disturb the even adjustment of their personal relations; or, perhaps, as if she considered everything had happened, so that their rapport had become absolute; at all events, with a pleasing absence of constraint. He really couldn't make her out. Sometimes he

thought she wished him to believe she was not as other women and could make rational allowance for his poor response to her naive overtures. But that seemed so abnormal, he felt forced to fall back on the theory that her declaration had been nothing more than a minor gambit in whatever game she was playing, and that consequently she bore no malice because of its failure. No matter which explanation was the true one, no matter which keyed her temper toward him, Lanyard found himself liking the woman better, not as a woman but as another human being, than he had ever thought to. Say what you liked, in this humour she was charming.

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But he never for an instant imagined she was meekly accepting defeat at his hands instead of biding her time to resume the attack from a new quarter. So he wasn't at all surprised when, one evening, quite early after dinner, she contrived another tete-a-tete, and with good conversational generalship led their talk presently into a channel of amiable personalities.

"And have you been thinking about what we said—or what I said, my friend—that night—so long ago it seems!—three nights ago?"

"But inevitably, Liane."

"You have not forgotten my stupidity, then."

"I have forgotten nothing."

She made a pretty mouth of doubt. "Would it not have been more kind to forget?"

"Such compliments are not easily forgotten."

"You are sure, quite sure it was a compliment?"

"No-o; by no means sure. Still, I am a man, and I am giving you the full benefit of every doubt."

She laughed, not ill-pleased. "But what a man! how blessed of the gods to be able to laugh at yourself as well as at me."

"Undeceive yourself: I could never laugh at you, Liane. Even if one did not believe you to be a great natural comedienne at will, one would always wonder what your purpose was—oh yes! with deep respect one would wonder about that."

"And you have been wondering these last three days? Well, tell me what you think my purpose was in abandoning all maidenly reserve and throwing myself at your head."

"Why," said Lanyard with a look of childlike candour, "you might, you know, have been uncontrollably swayed by some passionate impulses of the heart."

"But otherwise—?" she prompted, hugely amused.

"Oh, if you had a low motive in trying to make a fool of me, you know too well how to hide your motive from such a fool."

In a fugitive seizure of thoughtfulness the violet eyes lost all their impishness. She sighed, the bright head drooped a little toward the gleaming bosom, a hand stole out to rest lightly upon his once again.

“It was not acting, Michael—I tell you that frankly—at least, not all acting.”

“Meaning, I take it, you know love too well to make it artlessly.”

“I’m afraid so, my dear,” said Liane Delorme with another sigh. “You know: I am afraid of you. You see everything so clearly...”

“It’s a vast pity. I wish I could outgrow it. One misses so many amusing emotions when one sees too clearly.”

During another brief pause, Lanyard saw Monk come on deck, pause, and search them out, in the chairs they occupied near the taffrail, much as on that other historic night. Not that he experienced any difficulty in locating them; for this time the decklights were burning clearly. Nevertheless, Captain Monk confessed emotion at sight of those two in a quite perceptible start; and Lanyard saw the eyebrows tremendously agitated as their manipulator moved aft.

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Unconscious of all this, Liane ended her pensive moment by leaning toward Lanyard and making demoralizing eyes, while the hand left his and stole with a caressing gesture up his forearm.

"Is love, then, distasteful to you unless it be truly artless, Michael?"

"There's so much to be said about that, Liane," he evaded.

Monk was standing over them, a towering figure in white with the most forbidding eyebrows Lanyard had ever seen.

"Might one suggest," he did suggest in iced accents, "that the quarter-deck is a fairly conspicuous place for this exhibition of family affection?"

Liane Delorme turned up an enquiring look, tinged slightly with an impatience which all at once proved too much for her.

"Oh, go to the devil!" she snapped in that harsh voice of the sidewalks which she was able to use and discard at will.

For a moment Monk made no reply; and Lanyard remarked a curious quivering of that excessively tall, excessively attenuated body, a real trembling, and suddenly understood that the absurd creature was being shaken by jealousy, by an enormous passion of jealousy, quite beyond his control, that shook him very much as a cat might shake a mouse.

It was too funny to be laughable, it was comic in a way to make one want to weep. So that Lanyard, who refused to weep in public, could merely gape in speechless and transfixed rapture. And perhaps this was fortunate; otherwise Monk must have seen that his idiotic secret was out, the sport of ribald mirth, and the situation must have been precipitated with a vengeance and an outcome impossible to predict. As it was, absorbed in his inner torment, Monk was insensible to the peril that threatened his stilted but precious dignity, which he proceeded to parade, as it were underlining it with the eyebrows, to lend emphasis to his words.

"So long as this entertaining fiction of brother-and-sister is thought worth while," he said with infuriated condescension, "it might be judicious not to indulge in inconsistent and unseemly demonstrations of affection within view of my officers and crew. Suppose we..." He choked a little. "In short, I came to invite you to a little conference in my rooms, with Mr. Phinuit."

"Conference?" Liane enquired coolly, without stirring. "I know nothing of this conference."

“Mr. Phinuit and I are agreed that Monsieur Lanyard is entitled to know more about our intentions while he has time to weigh them carefully. We have only four more days at sea...”

Unable longer to contain himself, Lanyard left his chair with alacrity. “But this is so delightful! You’ve no idea, really, monsieur, how I have looked forward to this moment.” And to Liane: “Do come, and see how I take it, this revelation of my preordained fate. It will be, I trust sincerely, like a man.”

With momentary hesitation, and in a temper precluding any sympathy, with his humour, the woman rose and silently followed with him that long-legged figure whose stalk held so much dramatic significance as he led to the companionway.

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After that it was refreshing to find unromantic Mr. Phinuit lounging beside the captain's desk with crossed feet overhanging one corner of it and mind intent on the prosaic business of paring his fingernails. Lanyard nodded to him with great good temper and—while Phinuit lowered his feet and put away his penknife—considerately placed a chair for Liane in the position in which she preferred to sit, with her face turned a little from the light. Nor would his appreciation of the formality which seemed demanded by Monk's solemn manner, permit him to sit before the captain had taken his own chair behind the desk.

Then, however, he discovered the engaging spontaneity of a schoolboy at a pantomime, and drawing up a chair sat on the edge of it and addressed himself with unaffected eagerness to the most portentous eyebrows in captivity.

"Now," he announced with a little bow, "for what, one imagines, Mr. Phinuit would term the Elaborate Idea!"

XXIV

HISTORIC REPETITION

Phinuit grinned, then smothered a little yawn. Liane Delorme gave a small, disdainful movement of shoulders, and posed herself becomingly, resting an elbow on the arm of her chair and inclining her cheek upon two fingers of a jewelled hand. Thus she sat somewhat turned from Monk and Phinuit, but facing Lanyard, to whom her grave but friendly eyes gave undivided heed, for all the world as if there were no others present: she seemed to wait to hear him speak again rather than to care in the least what Monk would find to say.

Captain Monk filled in that pause with an impressive arrangement of eyebrows. Then, fixing his gaze, not upon Lanyard, but upon the point of a pencil with which his incredibly thin fingers traced elaborate but empty designs upon the blotter, he opened his lips, hemmed in warning that he was about to speak, and seemed tremendously upset to find that Liane was inconsiderately forestalling him.

Her voice was at its most musical pitch, rather low for her, fluting, infinitely disarming and seductive.

"Let me say to you, mon ami, that—naturally I know what is coming—I disapprove absolutely of this method of treating with you."

"But it is such an honour to be considered important enough to be treated with at all!"

"You have the true gift for sarcasm: a pity to waste it on an audience two-thirds incapable of appreciation."

“Oh, you’re wrong!” Phinuit declared earnestly. “I’m appreciative, I think the dear man’s immense.”

“Might I suggest”—the unctuous tones of Captain Monk issued from under mildly wounded eyebrows—“if any one of us were unappreciative of Monsieur Lanyard’s undoubted talents, he would not be with us tonight.”

“You might suggest it,” Phinuit assented, “but that wouldn’t make it so, it is to mademoiselle’s appreciation that you and I owe this treat, and you know it. Now quit cocking those automatic eyebrows at me; you’ve been doing that ever since we met, and they haven’t gone off yet, not once.”

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Irrepressible, Liane's laughter pealed; and though he couldn't help smiling, Lanyard hastened to offer up himself on the altar of peace.

"But—messieurs!—you interest me so much. Won't you tell me quickly what possible value my poor talents can have found in your sight?"

"You tell him, Monk," Phinuit said irreverently—"I'm no tale-bearer."

Monk elevated his eyebrows above recognition of the impertinence, and offered Lanyard a bow of formidable courtesy.

"They are such, monsieur," he said with that deliberation which becomes a diplomatic personage—"your talents are such that you can, if you will, become invaluable to us."

Phinuit chuckled outright at Lanyard's look of polite obtuseness.

"Never sail a straight course—can you skipper?—when you can get there by tacking. Here: I'm a plain-spoken guy, let me act as an interpreter. Mr. Lanyard: this giddy association of malefactors here present has the honour to invite you to become a full-fledged working member and stockholder of equal interest with the rest of us, participating in all benefits of the organization, including police protection. And as added inducement we're willing to waive initiation fee and dues. Do I make myself clear?"

"But perfectly."

"It's like this: I've told you how we came together, the five of us, including Jules and Monsieur le Comte de Lorgnes. Now we expect this venture, our first, to pan out handsomely. There'll be a juicy melon cut when we get to New York. There's a lot more—I think you understand—than the Montalais plunder to whack up on. We'll make the average get-rich-quick scheme look like playing store in the back-yard with two pins the top price for anything on the shelves. And there isn't any sane reason why we need stop at that. In fact, we don't mean to. The Sybarite will make more voyages, and if anything should happen to stop it, there are other means of making the U. S. Customs look foolish. Each of us contributes valuable and essential services, mademoiselle, the skipper, my kid-brother, even I—and I pull a strong oar with the New York Police Department into the bargain. But there's a vacancy in our ranks, the opening left by the death of de Lorgnes, an opening that nobody could hope to fill so well as you. So we put it up to you squarely: If you'll sign on and work with us, we'll turn over to you a round fifth share of the profits of this voyage as well as everything that comes after. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"But more than fair, monsieur."

"Well, it's true you've done nothing to earn a fifth interest in the first division..."

“Then, too, I am here, quite helpless in your hands.”

“Oh, we don’t look at it that way——”

“Which,” Liane sweetly interrupted, “is the one rational gesture you have yet offered in this conference, Monsieur Phinuit.”

“Meaning, I suppose, Mr. Lanyard is far from being what he says, helpless in our hands.”

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“Nor ever will be, my poor friend, while he breathes and thinks.”

“But, Liane!” Lanyard deprecated, modestly casting down his eyes—“you overwhelm me.”

“I don’t believe you,” Liane retorted coolly.

For some moments Lanyard continued to stare reflectively at his feet. Nothing whatever of his thought was to be gathered from his countenance, though eyes more shrewd to read than those of Phinuit or Monk were watching it intently.

“Well, Mr. Lanyard, what do you say?”

Lanyard lifted his meditative gaze to the face of Phinuit. “But surely there is more....” he suggested in a puzzled way.

“More what?”

“I find something lacking.... You have shown me but one side of the coin. What is the reverse? I appreciate the honour you do me, I comprehend fully the strong inducements I am offered. But you have neglected—an odd oversight on the part of the plain-spoken man you profess to be—you have forgotten to name the penalty which would attach to a possible refusal.”

“I guess it’s safe to leave that to your imagination.”

“There would be a penalty, however?”

“Well, naturally, if you’re not with us, you’re against us. And to take that stand would oblige us, as a simple matter of self-preservation, to defend ourselves with every means at our command.”

“Means which,” Lanyard murmured, “you prefer not to name.”

“Well, one doesn’t like to be crude.”

“I have my answer, monsieur—and many thanks. The parallel is complete.”

With a dim smile playing in his eyes and twitching at the corners of his lips, Lanyard leaned back and studied the deck beams. Liane Delorme sat up with a movement of sharp uneasiness.

“Of what, my friend, are you thinking?”

“I am marvelling at something everybody knows—that history does repeat itself.”

The woman made a sudden hissing sound, of breath drawn shortly between closed teeth. "I hope not!" she sighed.

Lanyard opened his eyes wide at her. "You hope not, Liane?"

"I hope this time history will not altogether repeat itself. You see, my friend, I think I know what is in your mind, memories of old times...."

"True: I am thinking of those days when the Pack hunted the Lone Wolf in Paris, ran him to earth at last, and made him much the same offer as you have made to-night.... The Pack, you should know, messieurs, was the name assumed by an association of Parisian criminals, ambitious like you, who had grown envious of the Lone Wolf's success, and wished to persuade him to run with them."

"And what happened?" Phinuit enquired.

"Why it so happened that they chose the time when I had made up my mind to be good for the rest of my days. It was all most unfortunate."

"What answer did you give them, then?"

"As memory serves, I told them they could all go plumb to hell."



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"So I hope history will not repeat, this time," Liane interjected.

"And did they go?" Monk asked.

"Presently, some of them, ultimately all; for some lingered a few years in French prisons, like that great Popinot, the father of monsieur who has caused us so much trouble."

"And you——?"

"Why," Lanyard laughed, "I have managed to keep out of jail, so I presume I must have kept my vow to be good."

"And no backsliding?" Phinuit suggested with a leer.

"Ah! you must not ask me to tell you everything. That is a matter between me and my conscience."

"Well," Phinuit hazarded with a good show of confidence, "I guess you won't tell us to go plumb to hell, will you?"

"No; I promise to be more original than that."

"Then you refuse!" Liane breathed tensely.

"Oh, I haven't said that! You must give me time to think this over."

"I knew that would be his answer," Monk proclaimed, pride in his perspicuity shaping the set of his eyebrows. "That is why I was firm that we should wait no longer. You have four days in which to make up your mind, monsieur."

"I shall need them."

"I don't see why," Phinuit argued: "it's an open and shut proposition, if ever there was one."

"But you are asking me to renounce something upon which I have set much store for many years, monsieur. I can't be expected to do that in an hour or even a day."

You shall have your answer, I promise you, by the time we make our landfall—perhaps before."

"The sooner, the better."

"Are you sure, monsieur? But one thought it was the tortoise who won the famous race."

“Take all the time you need,” Captain Monk conceded generously, “to come to a sensible decision.”

“But how good you are to me, monsieur!”

XXV

THE MALCONTENT

Singular though the statement may seem, when one remembers the conditions that circumscribed his freedom of action on board the Sybarite, that he stood utterly alone in that company of conspirators and their creatures, alone and unarmed, with never a friend to guard his back or even to whisper him one word of counsel, warning or encouragement, with only his naked wits and hands to fortify and sustain his heart: it is still no exaggeration to say that Lanyard got an extraordinary amount of private diversion out of those last few days.

From the hour when Liane Delorme, Phinuit and Captain Monk, in conclave solemnly assembled at the instance of the one last-named, communicated their collective mind in respect of his interesting self, the man was conscious of implicit confidence in a happy outcome of the business, with a conscientiousness less rational than simply felt, a sort of bubbling exhilaration in his mood that found its most intelligible expression in the phrase, which he was wont often to iterate to himself: *Ca va bien*—that goes well!

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That—the progressive involution of this insane imbroglio—went very well indeed, in Lanyard's reckoning; he could hardly wish, he could not reasonably demand that it should go better.

He knew now with what design Liane Delorme had made him a party to this sea adventure and intimate with every detail of the conspiracy; and he knew to boot why she had offered him the free gift of her love; doubt as to the one, scruples inspired by the other—that reluctance which man cannot but feel to do a hurt to a heart that holds him dear, however scanty his response to its passion—could no longer influence him to palter in dealing with the woman. The revelation had in effect stricken shackles from Lanyard's wrists, now when he struck it would be with neither hesitation nor compunction.

As to that stroke alone, its hour and place and fashion, he remained without decision. He had made a hundred plans for its delivery, and one of them, that seemed the wildest, he thought of seriously, as something really feasible. But single-handed! That made it difficult. If only one could devise some way to be in two places at one time and the same! An impossibility? He wouldn't deny that. But Lanyard had never been one to be discouraged by the grim, hard face of an impossibility. He had known too many such to dissipate utterly, vanish into empty air, when subjected to a bold and resolute assault. He wouldn't say die.

Never that while he could lift hand or invent stratagem, never that so long as fools played their game into his hands, as this lot wished to and did. What imbecility! What an escape had been his when, in that time long since, he had made up his mind to have done with crime once and for all time! But for that moment of clear vision and high resolve he might be to-day even as these who had won such clear title to his contempt, who stultified themselves with vain imaginings and the everlasting concoction of schemes whose sheer intrinsic puerility foredoomed them to farcical failure.

Lanyard trod the decks for hours at a time, searching the stars for an answer to the question: What made the Law by whose decree man may garner only punishment and disaster where he has husbanded in iniquity? That Law implacable, inexorable in its ordained and methodic workings, through which invariably it comes to pass that failure and remorse shall canker in the heart even of success ill-gained....

But if he moralized it was with a cheerful countenance, and his sermons were for himself alone. He kept his counsel and spoke all men fairly, giving nowhere any manner of offense: for could he tell in what unlikely guise might wait the instrument he needed wherewith to work out his unfaltering purpose?

And all the while they were watching him and wondering what was in his mind. Well, he gave no sign. Let them watch and wonder to their heart's content; they must wait until

the time he had appointed for the rendering of his decision, when the Sybarite made her landfall.

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Winds blew and fell, the sea rose and subsided, the Sybarite trudged on into dull weather. The sky grew overcast; and Lanyard, daily scanning the very heavens for a sign, accepted this for one, and prayed it might hold. Nothing could be more calculated to nullify his efforts than to have the landfall happen on a clear, calm night of stars.

He went to bed, the last night out, leaving a noisy gathering in the saloon, and read himself drowsy. Then turning out his light he slept. Sometime later he found himself instantaneously awake, and alert, with a clear head and every faculty on the qui vive—much as a man might grope for a time in a dark strange room, then find a door and step out into broad daylight.

Only there was no light other than in the luminous clarity of his mind. Even the illumination in the saloon had been dimmed down for the night, as he could tell by the tarnished gleam beneath his stateroom door.

Still, not everyone had gone to bed. The very manner of his waking informed him that he was not alone; for the life Lanyard had led had taught him to need no better alarm than the entrance of another person into the place where he lay sleeping. All animals are like that, whose lives hang on their vigilance.

Able to see nothing, he still felt a presence, and knew that it waited, stirless, within arm's-length of his head. Without much concern, he thought of Popinot, that "phantom Popinot" of Monk's derisive naming.

Well, if the vision Liane had seen on deck had taken material form here in his stateroom, Lanyard presumed it meant another fight, and the last, to a finish, that is to say, to a death.

Without making a sound, he gathered himself together, ready for a trap, and as noiselessly lifted a hand toward the switch for the electric light, set in the wall near the head of the bed. But in the same breath he heard a whisper, or rather a mutter, a voice he could not place in its present pitch.

"Awake, Monsieur Delorme?" it said. "Hush! Don't make a row, and never mind the light."

His astonishment was so overpowering that instinctively his tensed muscles relaxed and his hand fell back upon the bedding.

"Who the deuce——?"

"Not so loud. It's me—Mussey."

Lanyard echoed witlessly: "Mussey?"

“Yes. I don’t wonder you’re surprised, but if you’ll be easy you’ll understand pretty soon why I had to have a bit of a talk with you without anybody’s catching on.”

“Well,” Lanyard said, “I’m damned!”

“I say!” The subdued mutter took on a note of anxiety. “It’s all right, isn’t it? I mean, you aren’t going to kick up a rumpus and spill the beans? I guess you must think I’ve got a hell of a gall, coming in on you like this, and I don’t know as I blame you, but... Well, time’s getting short, only two more days at sea, and I couldn’t wait any longer for a chance to have a few minutes’ chin with you.”

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The mutter ceased and held an expectant pause. Lanyard said nothing. But he was conscious that the speaker occupied a chair by the bed, and knew that he was bending near to catch his answer; for the air was tainted with vinous breath. Yes: one required no stronger identification, it was beyond any doubt the chief engineer of the Sybarite.

"Say it's all right, won't you?" the mutter pleaded.

"I am listening," Lanyard replied—"as you perceive."

"I'll say it's decent of you—damned decent. Blowed if I'd take it as calm as you, if I waked up to find somebody in my room."

"I believe," said Lanyard pointedly, "you stipulated for a few minutes' chin with me. Time passes, Mr. Mussey. Get to your business, or let me go to sleep again."

"Sharp, you are," commented the mutter. "I've noticed it in you. You'd be surprised if you knew how much notice I've been taking of you."

"And flattered, I'm sure."

"Look here..." The mutter stumbled. "I want to ask a personal question. Daresay you'll think it impertinent."

"If I do, be sure I shan't answer it."

"Well... it's this: Is or isn't your right name Lanyard, Michael Lanyard?"

This time it was Lanyard who, thinking rapidly, held the pause so long that his querist's uneasiness could not contain itself.

"Is that my answer? I mean, does your silence—?"

"That's an unusual name, Michael Lanyard," cautiously replied its proprietor. "How did you get hold of it?"

"They say it's the right name of the Lone Wolf. Guess I don't have to tell you who the Lone Wolf is."

"'They say'? Who, please, are 'they'?"

"Oh, there's a lot of talk going around the ship. You know how it is, a crew will gossip. And God knows they've got enough excuse this cruise."

This was constructively evasive. Lanyard wondered who had betrayed him. Phinuit? The tongue of that plain-spoken man was hinged in the middle; but one couldn't feel

certain. Liane Delorme had made much of the chief engineer; though she seemed less likely to talk too much than anyone of the ship's company but Lanyard himself. But then (one remembered of a sudden) Monk and Mussey were by reputation old cronies; it wasn't inconceivable that Monk might have let something slip...

"And what, Mr. Mussey, if I should admit I am Michael Lanyard?"

"Then I'll have something to say to you, something I think'll interest you."

"Why not run the risk of interesting me, whoever I may be?"

Mussey breathed heavily in the stillness: the breathing of a cautious man loath to commit himself.

"No," he said at length, in the clearest enunciation he had thus far used. "No. If you're not Lanyard, I'd rather say nothing more—I'll just ask you to pardon me for intruding and clear out."

"But you say there is some gossip. And where there is smoke, there must be fire. It would seem safe to assume I am the man gossip says I am."

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"Michael Lanyard?" the mutter persisted—"the Lone Wolf?"

"Yes, yes! What then?"

"I suppose the best way's to put it to you straight..."

"I warn you, you'll gain nothing if you don't."

"Then... to begin at the beginning... I've known Whit Monk a good long time. Years I've known him. We've sailed together off and on ever since we took to the sea; we've gone through some nasty scrapes together, and done things that don't bear telling, and always shared the thick and the thin of everything. Before this, if anybody had ever told me Whit Monk would do a pal dirt, I'd've punched his head and thought no more about it. But now..."

The mutter faltered. Lanyard preserved a sympathetic silence—a silence, at least, which he hoped would pass as sympathetic. In reality, he was struggling to suppress any betrayal of the exultation that was beginning to take hold of him. Premature this might prove to be, but it seemed impossible to misunderstand the emotion under which the chief engineer was labouring or to underestimate its potential value to Lanyard. Surely it would seem that his faith in his star had been well-placed: was it not now—or all signs failed—delivering into his hand the forged tool he had so desperately needed, for which he had so earnestly prayed?

A heavy sigh issued upon the stillness, freighted with a deep and desolating melancholy. For, it appeared, like all cynics, Mr. Mussey was a sentimentalist at heart. And in the darkness that disembodied voice took up its tale anew.

"I don't have to tell you what's going on between Whit and that lot he's so thick with nowadays. You know, or you wouldn't be here."

"Isn't that conclusion what you Americans would call a little previous?"

"Previous?" The mutter took a moment to con the full significance of that adjective.

"No: I wouldn't call it that. You see, on a voyage like this—well, talk goes on, things get about, things are said aloud that shouldn't be and get overheard and passed along; and the man who sits back and listens and sifts what he hears is pretty likely to get a tolerably good line on what's what. Of course there's never been any secret about what the owner means to do with all this wine he's shipped. We all know we're playing a risky game, but we're for the owner—he isn't a bad sort, when you get to know him—and we'll go through with it and take what's coming to us win or lose. Partly, of course, because it'll mean something handsome for every man if we make it without getting caught. But if you want to know what I think... I'll tell you something..."

"But truly I am all attention."

“I think Whit Monk and Phinuit and mam’selle have framed the owner between them.”

“Can’t say I quite follow...”

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"I think they cooked up this smuggling business and kidded him into it just to get the use of his yacht for their own purposes and at the same time get him where he can't put up a howl if he finds out the truth. Suppose he does..." The mutter became momentarily a deep-throated chuckle of malice. "He's in so deep on the booze smuggling side he dassent say a word, and that puts him in worse yet, makes him accessory before the fact of criminal practices that'd made his hair stand on end. Then, suppose they want to go on with the game, looting in Europe and sneaking the goods into America with the use of his yacht: what's he going to say, how's he going to stop them?"

Accepting these questions as purely rhetorical, Lanyard offered no comment. After a moment the mutter resumed:

"Well, what do you think? Am I right or am I wrong?"

"Who knows, Mr. Mussey? One can only say, you seem to know something."

"I'll say I know something! A sight more than Whit Monk dreams I know—as he'll find out to his sorrow before he's finished with Tom Mussey."

"But"—obliquely Lanyard struck again at the heart of the mystery which he found so baffling—"you seem so well satisfied with the bona fides of your informant?"

There was a sound of stertorous breathing as the intelligence behind the mutter grappled with this utterance. Then, as if the hint had proved too fine—"I'm playing my hand face up with you, Mr. Lanyard. I guess you can tell I know what I'm talking about."

"But what I cannot see is why you should talk about it to me, monsieur."

"Why, because I and you are both in the same boat, in a manner of speaking. We're both on the outside—shut out—looking in."

In a sort of mental aside, Lanyard reflected that mixed bathing for metaphors was apparently countenanced under the code of cynics.

"Does one gather that you feel aggrieved with Captain Monk for not making you a partner in his new associations?"

"For trying to put one over on me, an old pal... stood by him through thick and thin... would've gone through fire for Whit Monk, and in my way I have, many's the time. And now he hooks up with Phinuit and this Delorme woman, and leaves me to shuffle my feet on the doormat... and thinks I'll let him get away with it."

The voice in the dark gave a grunt of infinite contempt: "Like hell..."

"I understand your feelings, monsieur; and I ask you to believe in my sympathy. But you said—if I remember—that we were in the same boat, you and I; whereas I assure you Captain Monk has not abused my friendship, since he has never had it."

"I know that well enough," said the mutter. "I don't mean you've got my reasons for feeling sore; but I do mean you've got reason enough of your own—"

"On what grounds do you say that?"

Another deliberate pause prefaced the reply: "You said a while ago I knew something. Well—you said it. I and you've both been frozen out of this deal and we're both meaning to take a hand whether they like it or not. If that don't put us in the same boat I don't know..."

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Perceiving he would get no more satisfaction, Lanyard schooled himself to be politic for the time being.

“Say it is so, then... But I think you have something to propose.”

“It’s simple enough: When two people find themselves in the same boat they’ve got to pull together if they want to get anywhere.”

“You propose, then, an alliance?”

“That’s the answer. Without you I can’t do anything but kick over the applecart for Whit Monk; and that sort of revenge is mighty unsatisfactory. Without me—well: what can you do? I know you can get that tin safe of Whit’s open, when you feel like it, get the jewels and all; but what show do you stand to get away with them? That is, unless you’ve got somebody working in with you on board the ship. See here...”

The mutter sank into a husky whisper, and in order to be heard the speaker bent so low over Lanyard that fumes of whiskey almost suffocated the poor man in his bed.

“You’ve got a head, you’ve had experience, you know how... Well, go to it: make your plans, consult with me, get everything fixed, lift the loot; I’ll stand by, fix up everything so’s your work will go through slick, see that you don’t get hurt, stow the jewels where they won’t be found; and when it’s all over, we’ll split fifty-fifty. What d’you say?”

“Extremely ingenious, monsieur, but unfortunately impracticable.”

“That’s the last thing,” stated the disappointed whisper, “I ever thought a man like you would say.”

“But it is obvious. We do not know each other.”

“You mean, you can’t trust me?”

“For that matter: how can you be sure you can trust me?”

“Oh, I guess I can size up a square guy when I see him.”

“Many thanks. But why should I trust you, when you will not even be quite frank with me?”

“How’s that? Haven’t I——”

“One moment: you refuse to name the source of your astonishingly detailed information concerning this affair—myself included. You wish me to believe you simply assume I am at odds with Captain Monk and his friends. I admit it is true. But how should you

know it? Ah, no, my friend! either you will tell me how you learned this secret, or I must beg you to let me get my sleep."

"That's easy. I heard Whit and Phinuit talking about you the other night, on deck, when they didn't think anybody was listening."

Lanyard smiled into the darkness: no need to fret about fair play toward this one! The truth was not in him, and by the same token the traditional honour that obtains among thieves could not be.

He said, as if content, in the manner of a practical man dismissing all immaterial considerations:

"As you say, the time is brief..."

"It'll have to be pulled off to-morrow night or not at all," the mutter urged with an eager accent.

"My thought, precisely. For then we come to land, do we not?"

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"Yes, and it'll have to be not long after dark. We ought to drop the hook at midnight. Then"—the mutter was broken with hopeful anxiety—"then you've decided you'll stand in with me, Mr. Lanyard?"

"But of course! What else can one do? As you have so fairly pointed out: what is either of us without the other?"

"And it's understood: you're to lift the stuff, I'm to take care of it till we can slip ashore, we're to make our getaway together—and the split's to be fifty-fifty, fair and square?"

"I ask nothing better."

"Where's your hand?"

Two hands found each other blindly and exchanged a firm and inspiring clasp—while Lanyard gave thanks for the night that saved his face from betraying his mind.

Another deep sigh sounded a note of apprehensions at an end. A gruff chuckle followed.

"Whit Monk! He'll learn something about the way to treat old friends." And all at once the mutter merged into a vindictive hiss: "Him with his airs and graces, his fine clothes and greasy manners, putting on the lah-de-dah over them that's stood by him when he hadn't a red and was glad to cadge drinks off spiggoties in hells like the Colonel's at Colon—him!"

But Lanyard had been listening only with his ears; he hadn't the slightest interest in Mr. Mussey's resentment of the affectations of Captain Monk. For now his mad scheme had suddenly assumed a complexion of comparative simplicity; given the co-operation of the chief engineer, all Lanyard would need to contribute would be a little headwork, a little physical exertion, a little daring—and complete indifference, which was both well warranted and already his, to abusing the confidence of Mr. Mussey.

"But about this affair to-morrow night," he interrupted impatiently: "attend to me a little, if you please, my friend. Can you give me any idea where we are, or will, approximately, at midnight to-night?"

"What's that go to do——?"

"Perhaps I ask only for my own information. But it may be that I have a plan. If we are to work together harmoniously, Mr. Mussey, you must learn to have a little confidence in me."

"Beg your pardon," said an humble mutter. "We ought to be somewhere off Nantucket Shoals Lightship."

“And the weather: have you sufficient acquaintance with these latitudes to foretell it, even roughly?”

“Born and brought up in Edgartown, made my first voyage on a tramp out of New Bedford: guess I know something about the weather in these latitudes! The wind’s been hauling round from sou’west to south all day. If it goes on to sou’east, it’ll likely be thick to-morrow, with little wind, no sea to speak of, and either rain or fog.”

“So! Now to do what I will have to do, I must have ten minutes of absolute darkness. Can that be arranged?”

“Absolute darkness?” The mutter had a rising inflexion of dubiety. “How d’you mean?”

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“Complete extinguishing of every light on the ship.”

“My God!” the mutter protested. “Do you know what that means? No lights at night, under way, in main-travelled waters! Why, by nightfall we ought to be off Block Island, in traffic as heavy as on Fifth Avenue! No: that’s too much.”

“Too bad,” Lanyard uttered, philosophic. “And the thing could have been done.”

“Isn’t there some other way?”

“Not with lights to hamper my operations. But if some temporary accident were to put the dynamos out of commission—figure to yourself what would happen.”

“There’d be hell to pay.”

“Ah! but what else?”

“The engines would have to be slowed down so as to give no more than steerage-way until oil lamps could be substituted for the binnacle, masthead, and side-lights, also for the engine room.”

“And there would be excitement and confusion, eh? Everybody would make for the deck, even the captain would leave his cabin unguarded long enough...”

“I get you”—with a sigh. “It’s wrong, all wrong, but—well, I suppose it’s got to be done.”

Lanyard treated himself to a smile of triumph, there in the darkness.

XXVI

THE BINNACLE

It would have been ungrateful (Lanyard reflected over his breakfast) to complain of a life so replete with experiences of piquant contrast.

It happened to one to lie for hours in a cubicle of blinding night, hearkening to a voice like that of some nightmare weirdly become articulate, a ghostly mutter that rose and fell and droned, broken by sighs, grunts, stifled oaths, mean chuckles, with intervals of husky whispering and lapses filled with a noise of wheezing respiration, all wheedling and cajoling, lying, intimating and evading, complaining, snarling, rambling, threatening, protesting, promising, and in the end proposing an unholy compact for treachery and evil-doing—a voice that might have issued out of some damned soul escaped for a little space of time from the Pits of Torment, so utterly inhuman it sounded, so completely discarnate and divorced from all relationship to any mortal personality that even that

reek of whiskey in the air, even that one contact with a hard, hot hand, could not make it seem real.

And then it ceased and was no more but as a thing of dream that had passed. And one came awake to a light and wholesome world furnished with such solidly comforting facts as soaps and razors and hot and cold saltwater taps; and subsequently one left one's stateroom to see, at the breakfast table, leaden-eyed and flushed of countenance, an amorphous lump of humid flesh in shapeless garments of soiled white duck, the author of that mutter in the dark; who, lounging over a plate of broken food and lifting a coffee cup in the tremulous hand of an alcoholic, looked up with lacklustre gaze, gave a surly nod, and mumbled the customary matutinal greeting:

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"Morning, Monseer Delorme."

It was all too weird....

To add to this, the chief engineer paid Lanyard no further heed at all, though they were alone at table, and having noisily consumed his coffee, rubbed his stubbled lips and chin with an egg-stained napkin, rose, and without word or glance rolled heavily up the companionway.

The conduct of a careful man, accustomed to mind his eye. And indisputably correct. One never knew who might be watching, what slightest sign of secret understanding might not be seized upon and read. Furthermore, Mr. Mussey had not stilled his mutter in the night until their joint and individual lines of action had been elaborately mapped out and agreed upon down to the smallest detail. It now remained only for Lanyard to fill in somehow the waste time that lay between breakfast and the hour appointed, then take due advantage of the opportunity promised him.

He found the day making good Mr. Mussey's forecast. Under a dull, thick sky the sea ran in heavy swells, greasy and grey. The wind was in the south, and light and shift. The horizon was vague. Captain Monk, encountered on the quarterdeck, had an uneasy eye, and cursed the weather roundly when Lanyard made civil enquiry as to the outlook. *Ca va bien!*

Lanyard killed an hour or two in the chartroom, acquainting himself with the coast they were approaching and tracing the Sybarite's probable course toward the spot selected from the smuggling transaction. His notion of the precise location of the owner's estate was rather indefinite; he had gathered from gossip that it was on the Connecticut shore of Long Island Sound, between New London and New Haven, where a group of small islands—also the property of Mister Whitaker Monk—provided fair anchorage between Sound and shore as well as a good screen from offshore observation.

It was not vital to know more: Lanyard had neither hope nor fear of ever seeing that harbour. It was the approach alone that interested him; and when he had puzzled out that there were only two practicable courses for the Sybarite to take—both bearing in a general north-westerly direction from Nantucket Shoals Light Vessel, one entering Block Island Sound from the east, between Point Judith and Block Island, the other entering the same body of water from the south, between Block Island and Montauk Point—and had satisfied himself that manifold perils to navigation hedged about both courses, more especially their prolongation into Long Island Sound by way of The Race: Lanyard told himself it would be strange indeed if his plans miscarried ... always providing that Mr. Mussey could be trusted to hold to his overnight agreement.

But as to that, one entertained few fears. One felt quite sure that Mr. Mussey would perform duly to the letter of his covenant. It had required only an hour of weighing and

analysing with a clear head his overtures and utterances as a whole, to persuade Lanyard that he himself, no less than the chief engineer, in the phrase of the latter's boast, "knew something."

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It seemed unbelievably stupid and childish, what he imagined was behind the gratuitous intermeddling of Mr. Mussey; but then, he reminded himself, if there is anything more stupid than to plot a criminal act, it is to permit oneself to be influenced by that criminal stupidity whose other name is jealousy.

Well, whether he were right or wrong, the night would declare it; and in any event there was no excuse whatever for refusing to profit by the stupidity of men whose minds are bent on vicious mischief....

The weather thickened as the day grew older. Towards noon the wind, as if weary and discouraged with vain endeavour to make up its mind to blow from this quarter or that, died away altogether. At the same time the horizon appeared to close in perceptibly; what little definition it had had in earlier hours was erased; and the Sybarite, shearing the oily and lifeless waters of a dead calm, seemed less to make progress than to struggle sullenly in a pool of quicksilver at the bottom of a slowly revolving sphere of clouded glass, mutinously aware that all her labouring wrought no sort of gain.

After an hour of this, Captain Monk, on the bridge with Mr. Swain, arrived at a decision of exasperation. Through the engine-room ventilators a long jingle of the telegraph was heard; and directly the Sybarite's pulses began to beat in quicker tempo, while darker volutes of smoke rolled in dense volume from her funnel and streamed away astern, resting low and preserving their individuality as long as visible, like a streak of oxidization on a field of frosted silver. For the first time since she had left the harbour of Cherbourg the yacht was doing herself something like justice in the matter of speed—and this contrary to all ethics of seamanship, on such a day.

At the luncheon table, Phinuit ventured a light-headed comment on this dangerous procedure; whereupon Monk turned on him in a cold fury.

"As long as I'm master of this vessel, sir, I'll sail her according to the counsels of my own discretion—and thank you to keep your animadversions to yourself!"

"Animadversions!" Phinuit echoed, and made round, shocked eyes. "Oh, I never! At least, I didn't mean anything naughty, skipper dear."

Monk snorted, and grumbled over his food throughout the remainder of the meal; but later, coming upon a group composed of Liane Delorme, Lanyard and Phinuit, in the saloon, he paused, looked this way and that to make sure none of the stewards was within eavesdropping distance, and graciously unbent a little.

"I'm making the best time we can while we can see at all," he volunteered. "No telling when this misbegotten fog will close in and force us to slow down to half-speed or less—in crowded waters, too!"

“And very sensible, I’m sure,” Phinuit agreed heartily. “Whatever happens, we musn’t be late for our date with Friend Boss, must we?”

“We’ll keep it,” Monk promised grimly, “if we have to feel every inch of our way in with the lead. I don’t mind telling you, this fog may save our skins at that. Wireless has been picking up chatter all morning between a regular school of revenue cutters patrolling this coast on the lookout for just such idiots as we are. So we’ll carry on and trust to luck till we make Monk Harbour or break our fool necks.”



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Liane Delorme gave a start of dismay.

"There is danger, then?"

"Only if we run afoul of a cutter, Liane." Monk tried to speak reassuringly. "And that's not likely in this weather. As for the fog, it's a dirty nuisance to any navigator but, as I said, may quite possibly prove our salvation. I know these waters like a book, I've sailed them ever since I was old enough to tell a tiller from a mainsheet. I can smell my way in, if it comes to that, through the blindest fog the Atlantic ever brewed."

"Then you do things with your nostrils, too?" Phinuit enquired innocently. "I've often wondered if all the intellect was located in the eyebrows."

Monk glared, growled, and hastily sought the air of the deck. Liane Delorme eyed Phinuit with amused reproach.

"Really, my young friend!"

"I can't help it, mademoiselle," Phinuit asserted sulkily. "Too much is enough. I've watched him making faces with the top of his head so long I dream of geometrical diagrams laid out in eyebrows—and wake up screaming. And they call this a pleasure craft!"

With an aggrieved air he sucked at his pipe for a few minutes. "Besides," he added suddenly, "somebody's got to be comic relief, and I don't notice anybody else in a sweat to be the Life and Soul of the ship."

He favoured Lanyard with a morose stare. "Why don't you ever put your shoulder to the wheel, Lanyard? Why leave it all to me? Come on; be a sport, cut a caper, crack a wheeze, do something to get a giggle!"

"But I am by no means sure you do not laugh at me too much, as it is."

"Rot!... Tell you what." Phinuit sat up with a gleaming eye of inspiration. "You can entertain mademoiselle and me no end, if you like. Spill the glad tidings."

"Glad tidings?"

"Now don't monkey with the eyebrows—*please!* It gives me the willies... I merely mean to point out, to-day's the day you promised to come through with the awful decision. And there's no use waiting for Monk to join us; he's too much worried about his nice little ship. Tell mademoiselle and me now."

Lanyard shook his head, smiling. "But the time I set was when we made our landfall."



"Well, what's the matter with Martha's Vineyard over there? You could see if it was a clear day."

"But it is not a clear day."

"Suppose it gets thicker, a sure-enough fog? We may not see land before midnight."

"Then till midnight we must wait. No, Monsieur Phinuit, I will not be hurried. I have been thinking, I am still thinking, and there is still much to be said before I can come to any decision that will be fair to you, mademoiselle, the captain on the one hand, myself on the other."

"But at midnight, if the skipper's promise holds good, we'll be going ashore."

"The objection is well taken. My answer will be communicated when we see land or at eleven o'clock to-night, whichever is the earlier event."

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Some further effort at either persuasion or impudence—nobody but Phinuit ever knew which—was drowned out by the first heart-broken bellow of the whistle sounding the fog signal.

Liane Delorme bounded out of her chair, clapping hands to ears, and uttered an unheard cry of protest; and when, the noise suspending temporarily, she learned that it was to be repeated at intervals of two minutes as long as the fog lasted and the yacht was under way, she flung up piteous hands to an uncompassionate heaven and fled to her stateroom, slamming the door as if she thought thereby to shut out the offending din.

One fancied something inhumanly derisive in the prolonged hoot which replied.

Rather than languish under the burden of Mr. Phinuit's spirited conversation for the rest of the afternoon, Lanyard imitated Liane's example, and wasted the next hour and a half flat on his bed, with eyes closed but mind very much alive. Now and again he consulted his watch, as one might with an important appointment to keep. At two minutes to four he left his stateroom, and as the first stroke of eight bells rang out—in one of the measured intervals between blasts of the whistle—ending the afternoon watch, he stepped out on deck, and paused for a survey of the weather conditions.

There was no perceptible motion in the air, witnessing that the wind had come in from astern, that is to say approximately from the southeast, and was blowing at about the speed made by the yacht itself. The fog clung about the vessel, Lanyard thought, like dull grey cotton wool. Yet, if the shuddering of her fabric were fair criterion, the pace of the Sybarite was unabated, she was ploughing headlong through that dense obscurity using the utmost power of her engines. From time to time, when the whistle was still, the calls of seamen operating the sounding machine could be heard; but their reports were monotonously uniform, the waters were not yet shoal enough for the lead to find bottom at that pace.

The watch was being changed as Lanyard started forward, with the tail of an eye on the bridge. Mr. Collison relieved Mr. Swain, and the latter came down the companion-ladder just in time to save Lanyard a nasty spill as his feet slipped on planking greasy with globules of fog. There's no telling how bad a fall he might not have suffered had not Mr. Swain been there for him to catch at; and for a moment or two Lanyard was, as Mr. Swain put it with great good-nature, all over him, clinging to the first officer in a most demonstrative manner; and it was with some difficulty that he at length recovered his equilibrium. Then, however, he laid hold of the rail for insurance against further mishaps, thanked Mr. Swain heartily, added his apologies, and the two parted with expressions of mutual esteem.

The incident seemed to have dampened Lanyard's ardour for exercise. He made a rather gingerly way back to the quarterdeck, loafed restlessly in a deck-chair for a little while, then went below once more.

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Some time after, supine again upon his bed, he heard Mr. Swain in the saloon querulously interrogating one of the stewards. It appeared that Mr. Swain had unaccountably mislaid his keys, and he wanted to know if the steward had seen anything of them. The steward hadn't, he said; and Lanyard for one knew that he spake sooth, since at that moment the missing keys were resting on the bottom of the sea several miles astern—all but one.

There was no dressing for dinner that night. Liane Delorme, her nerves rasped almost beyond endurance by the relentless fog signal, preferred the seclusion of her stateroom. Lanyard wasn't really sorry; the bosom of a white shirt is calculated to make some impression upon the human retina even on the darkest night; whereas his plain lounge suit of blue serge was sure to prove entirely inconspicuous. So, if he missed the feminine influence at table, he bore up with good fortitude.

And after dinner he segregated himself as usual in his favourite chair near the taffrail. The fog, if anything denser than before, manufactured an early dusk of a peculiarly depressing violet shade. Nevertheless, evenings are long in that season of the year, and to Lanyard it seemed that the twilight would never quite fade out completely, true night would never come.

Long before it did, speed was slackened: the yacht was at last in soundings; the calls of the leadsmen were as monotonous as the whistle blasts, and almost as frequent. Lanyard could have done without both, if the ship could not. He remarked a steadily intensified exacerbation of nerves, and told himself he was growing old and no mistake. He could remember the time when he could have endured a strain of waiting comparable to that which he must suffer now, and have turned never a hair.

How long ago it seemed!...

Another sign that the Sybarite had entered what are technically classified as inland waters, where special rules of the road apply, was to be remarked in the fact that the fog signal was now roaring once each minute, whereas Lanyard had grown accustomed to timing the intervals between the sounding of the ship's bell, upon which all his interest hung, at the rate of fifteen blasts to the half hour.

If you asked him, once a minute seemed rather too much of a good thing, even in busy lanes of sea traffic. Still, it was better perhaps than unpremeditated disaster; one was not keen about having the Sybarite ground on a sandbank, pile up on a rock, or dash her brains out against the bulk of another vessel—before eleven o'clock at earliest.

In retrospect he counted those two hours between dinner and ten-thirty longer than the fortnight which had prefaced them. So is the heart of man ever impatient when the journey's-end draws near, though that end be but the beginning, as well, of that longer journey which men call Death.



Lest he betray his impatience by keeping the tips of his cigarette too bright (one never knows when one is not watched) he smoked sparingly. But on the twenty-eighth blare of the whistle after the ringing of four bells, he drew out his cigarette case and, as the thirtieth raved out, synchronous with two double strokes and a single on brazen metal, he placed a cigarette between his lips.

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At the same time he saw Captain Monk, who had been on the bridge with the officer of the watch for several hours, come aft with weary shoulders sagging, and go below by the saloon companionway. And Lanyard smiled knowingly and assured himself that went well—*ca va bien!*—his star held still in the ascendant.

There remained on the bridge only Mr. Collison and the man at the wheel.

At the fourth blast after five bells Lanyard put a match to his cigarette. But he did not puff more than to get the tobacco well alight. He even held his breath, and felt his body shaken by the pulsations of his anxious heart precisely as the body of the Sybarite was shaken by the pulsations of her engines.

With the next succeeding fog signal darkness absolute descended upon the vessel, shrouding it from stem to stern like a vast blanket of blackness.

Mr. Mussey had not failed to keep his pact of treachery.

Lanyard was out of his chair before the first call of excited remonstrance rang out on deck—to be echoed in clamour. His cigarette stopped behind, on the taffrail, carefully placed at precisely the height of his head, its little glowing tip the only spot of light on the decks. No matter whether or not it were noted; no precaution is too insignificant to be important when life and death are at issue.

There was nothing of that afternoon's unsureness of foot in the way Lanyard moved forward. Passing the engine-room ventilators he heard the telegraph give a single stroke; Mr. Collison had only then recovered from, his astonishment sufficiently to signal to slow down. A squeal of the speaking-tube whistle followed instantly; and Lanyard set foot upon the bridge in time to hear Mr. Collison demanding to know what the sanguinary hades had happened down there. Whatever reply he got seemed to exasperate him into incoherence. He stuttered with rage, gasped, and addressed the man at the wheel.

"I've got a flash-lamp in my cabin. That'll show us the compass card at least. Stand by while I run down and get it."

The man mumbled an "Aye, aye, sir." Retreating footsteps were just audible.

Neither speaker had been visible to Lanyard. By putting out a hand he could have touched the helmsman, but his body made not even the shadow of a silhouette against the sky. The fog was rendering the night the simple and unqualified negation of light.

And in that time of Stygian gloom violence was done swiftly, surely, and without mercy; with pity, yes, and with regret. Lanyard was sorry for the man at the wheel. But what was to be done could not be done in any other way.

The surprise aided him, for the fellow offered barely a show of opposition. His astounded faculties had no more than recognised the call for resistance when he was powerless in Lanyard's hands. Swung bodily away from the wheel, he went over the rail to the forward deck like a bag of sugar. Immediately Lanyard turned to the binnacle.

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Sensitive fingers located the key-hole in the pedestal, the one key saved from the ring which Mr. Swain had so unfortunately and unaccountably lost opened the door—the key, of course, that Mr. Swain had used under Lanyard's eyes when demonstrating the functions of the binnacle to Liane Delorme.

Thrusting a hand into the opening, Lanyard groped for the adjustable magnets in their racks, and one by one removed and dropped them to the grating at the foot of the binnacle.

He worked with hands amazingly nimble and sure, and was closing and relocking the door when Mr. Collison tumbled up the ladder with his flash-light. So when the second mate arrived upon the bridge, Lanyard was waiting for him; and in consequence of a second act of deplorable violence, Mr. Collison returned to the deck backwards and lay quite still while Lanyard returned to the wheel.

Collecting the abstracted magnets he carried them to the rail, cast them into the sea and threw in the key to the little door to keep them company. Then, back at the binnacle, he unscrewed the brass caps of the cylindrical brass tube which housed the Flinders bar, removed that also, replaced the caps, and consigned the bar to the sea in its turn.

By choice he would have made a good job of it and abolished the quadrantal correctors as well; but he judged he had done mischief enough to secure his ends, as it was. The compass ought now to be just as constant to the magnetic pole as a humming-bird to one especial rose.

Guiding himself by a hand that lightly touched the rail, Lanyard regained his chair, carefully composing himself in the position in which he had been resting when the lights went out. His cigarette was still aglow; good Turkish has this virtue among many others, that left to itself it will burn on to the end of its roll.

The next instant, however, he was on his feet again. A beam of light had swept across the saloon skylight, coming from below, the beam of a portable electric torch. It might have been the signal for the first piercing scream of Liane Delorme. A pistol shot with a vicious accent cut short the scream. After a brief pause several more shots rippled in the saloon. A man shouted angrily. Then the torch-light found and steadied upon the mouth of the companionway. Against that glare, a burly figure was instantaneously relieved, running up to the deck. As it gained the topmost step a final report sounded in the saloon, and the figure checked, revolved slowly on a heel, tottered, and plunged headforemost down the steps again.

A moment later (incredible that the stipulated ten minutes should have passed so swiftly!) the lights came on, and with a still-fuming stump of cigarette between his fingers Lanyard went below.



His bewildered gaze discovered first Liane Delorme, drawn up rigidly—she seemed for some reason to be standing tiptoe—against the starboard partition, near her stateroom door. Her fingers were clawing her cheeks, her eyes widely dilate with horror and fright, her mouth was agape, and from it issued, as by some mechanical impulse, shriek upon hollow shriek—cries wholly flat and meaningless, having no character of any sort, mere automatic reflexes of hysteria.

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On the opposite side of the saloon, not far from the door to his own quarters, Monk lay semi-prone with a purple face and protruding eyeballs, far gone toward death through strangulation. Phinuit, on his knees, was removing a silk handkerchief that had been twisted about that scrawney throat.

At the foot of the companionway steps, Popinot, no phantom but the veritable Apache himself, was writhing and heaving convulsively; and even as Lanyard looked, the huge body of the creature lifted from the floor in one last, heroic spasm, then collapsed, and moved no more.

Viewing this hideous tableau, appreciating what it meant—that Popinot, forearmed with advice from a trusted quarter, had stationed himself outside the door to Monk's stateroom, to waylay and garotte the man whom he expected to emerge therefrom laden with the plunder of Monk's safe—Lanyard appreciated further that he had done Mr. Mussey a great wrong.

For he had all the time believed that the chief engineer was laying a trap for him on behalf of his ancient shipmate, that unhappy victim of groundless jealousy, Captain Whitaker Monk.

XXVII

CA VA BIEN!

Fearful lest, left to herself, Liane Delorme would do an injury to his eardrums as well as to her own vocal chords, Lanyard stepped across the dead bulk of the Apache and planted himself squarely in front of the woman. Seizing her forearms with his two hands, he used force to drag them down to the level of her waist, and purposely made his grasp so strong that his fingers sank deep into the soft flesh. At the same time, staring fixedly into her vacant eyes, he smiled his most winning smile, but with the muscles of his mouth alone, and said quietly:

"Shut up, Liane! Stop making a fool of yourself! Shut up—do you hear?"

The incongruity of his brutal grasp with his smile, added to the incongruity of an ordinary conversational tone with his peremptory and savage phrases had the expected effect.

Sanity began to inform the violet eyes, a shrill, empty scream was cut sharply in two, the woman stared for an instant with a look of confusion; then her lashes drooped, her body relaxed, she fell limply against the partition and was quiet save for fits of trembling that shook her body from head to foot; still, each successive seizure was sensibly less severe. Lanyard let go her wrists.

“There!” he said—“that’s over, Liane. The beast is done for—no more to fear from him. Now forget him—brace up, and realise the debt you owe good Monsieur Phinuit.”

With a grin, that gentleman looked up from his efforts to revive Captain Monk.

“I’m a shy, retiring violet,” he stated somewhat superfluously, “but if the world will kindly lend its ears, I’ll inform it coyly that was *some* shootin’. Have a look, will you, Lanyard, like a good fellow, and make sure our little friend over there isn’t playing ’possum on us. Seems to me I’ve heard of his doing something like that before—maybe you remember. And, mademoiselle, if you’ll be kind enough to fetch me that carafe of ice water, I’ll see if we can’t bring the skipper to his senses, such as they are.”

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His tone was sufficiently urgent to rouse Liane out of the lassitude into which reaction from terror had let her slip. She passed a hand over still dazed eyes, looked uncertainly about, then with perceptible exertion of will power collected herself, stood away from the partition and picked up the carafe.

Lanyard adopted the sensible suggestion of Phinuit, dropping on a knee to rest his hand above the heart of Popinot. To his complete satisfaction, if not at all to his surprise, no least flutter of life was to be detected in that barrel-like chest.

A moment longer he lingered, looking the corpse over with inquisitive eyes. No sign that he could see suggested that Popinot had suffered hardship during his two weeks of close sequestration; he seemed to have fared well as to food and drink, and his clothing, if nothing to boast of in respect of cut or cloth, and though wrinkled and stretched with constant wear, was tolerably clean—unstained by bilge, grease, or coal smuts, as it must have been had the man been hiding in the hold or bunkers, those traditional refuges of your simon-pure stowaway.

No: Monsieur Popinot had been well taken care of—and Lanyard could name an officer of prestige ponderable enough to secure his quarters, wherein presumably Popinot had lain perdu, against search when the yacht has been “turned inside out,” according to its commander.

So this was the source of Mr. Mussey’s exact understanding of the business!

As to the question of how the Apache had been smuggled aboard, and when, Lanyard never learned the truth. Circumstances were to prevent his interrogating Mr. Mussey, and he could only assume that—since Popinot could hardly have been in the motor car wrecked on the road from Paris—he must have left that pursuit to trusted confreres, and, anticipating their possible failure, have hurried on to Cherbourg by another route to make precautionary arrangements with Mr. Mussey.

Ah, well! no fault could be found with the fellow for lack of determination and tenacity. On the point of rising, Lanyard reconsidered and, bending over the body, ran clever hands rapidly through the clothing, turning out every pocket and heaping the miscellany of rubbish thus brought to light upon the floor—with a single exception; Popinot had possessed a pistol, an excellent automatic. Why he hadn’t used it to protect himself, Heaven only knew. Presumably he had been too thoroughly engrossed in the exercise of his favourite sport to think of the weapon up to the time when Phinuit had opened fire on him; and then, thrown into panic, he had been able to entertain one thought only, that of escape.

Lanyard entertained for a moment a vivid imaginary picture of the scene in the saloon when Phinuit had surprised the Apache in the act of strangling Monk; a picture that Phinuit subsequently confirmed substantially in every detail....

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One saw the garroter creeping through the blackness of the saloon from his hiding place, forward in the cabin of the chief engineer; stationing himself at the door to Monk's quarters, with his chosen weapon, that deadly handkerchief of his trade, ready for the throat of the Lone Wolf when he should emerge, in accordance with his agreement with Mr. Mussey, the spoils of the captain's safe in his hands. Then one saw Monk, alarmed by the sudden failure of the lights, hurrying out to return to the bridge, the pantherish spring upon the victim's back, the swift, dextrous noosing of the handkerchief about his windpipe, the merciless tightening of it—all abruptly illuminated by the white glare of Phinuit's electric torch. And then the truncated crimson of the first pistol flash, the frantic effort to escape, the hunting of that gross shape of flesh by the beam of light and the bullets as Popinot doubled and twisted round the saloon like a rat in a pit, the last mad plunge for the companionway, the flight up its steps that had by the narrowest margin failed to save him...

Phinuit and Liane Delorme were too busy to heed; quietly Lanyard slipped the pistol into a pocket and got to his feet. Then Swain came charging down the steps to find out what all the row was about, and to report—which he did as soon as Monk was sufficiently recovered to understand—those outrageous and darkly mysterious assaults upon the helmsman and Mr. Collison. Both men, he stated, were unfit for further duty that night, though neither (Lanyard was happy to learn) had suffered any permanent injury.

But what—in the name of insanity!—could have inspired such a meaningless atrocity? What could its perpetrator have hoped to gain? What—!

Monk, stretched out upon a leather couch in his sitting-room, levelled eyebrows of suspicion at Lanyard, who countered with a guilelessness so perfect as to make it appear that he did not even comprehend the insinuation.

"If I may offer a suggestion..." he said with becoming diffidence.

"Well?" Monk demanded with a snap, despite his languors. "What's on your mind?"

"It would seem to a benevolent neutral like myself... You understand I was in my deck-chair by the taffrail throughout all this affair. The men at the sounding machine nearby can tell you I did not move before the shots in the saloon——"

"How the devil could they know that in the dark?"

"I was smoking, monsieur; they must, if they looked, have seen the fire of my cigarette... As I was about to suggest: It would seem to me that there must be some obscure but not necessarily unfathomable connection between the three events; else how should they synchronise so perfectly? How did Popinot know the lights would go out a few minutes after five bells? He was prepared, he lost no time. How did the other



miscreant, whoever he was, know it would be safe to commit that wickedness, whatever its purpose, upon the bridge at precisely that time? For plainly he, too, was prepared to act upon the instant—that is, if I understand Mr. Swain's report correctly. And how did it happen that the dynamo went out of commission just then? What *did* happen in the engine-room? Does anybody know? I think, messieurs, if you find out the answer to that last question you will have gone some way toward solving your mystery.”

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Captain Monk addressed Mr. Swain curtly: "It's the chief's watch in the engine-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll have a talk with him presently, and go further into this affair. In the meantime, how does she stand?"

"Under steerage way only"—Mr. Swain consulted the tell-tale compass affixed to the deck-beam overhead—"sou'west-by-south, sir."

"Must've swung off during that cursed dark spell. When I came below, two or three minutes before, we were heading into The Race, west-nor'west, having left Cerberus Shoal whistling buoy to port about fifteen minutes earlier. Get her back on that course, if you please, Mr. Swain, and proceed at half-speed. Don't neglect your soundings. I'll join you as soon as I feel fit."

"Very good, sir."

Mr. Swain withdrew. Captain Monk let his head sink back on its pillows and shut his eyes. Liane Delorme solicitously stroked his forehead. The captain opened his eyes long enough to register adoration with the able assistance of the eyebrows. Liane smiled down upon him divinely. Lanyard thought that affection was a beautiful thing, but preserved a duly concerned countenance.

"I could do with a whiskey and soda," Monk confessed feebly. "No, not you, please"—as Liane offered to withdraw the compassionate hand—"Phin isn't busy."

Mr. Phinuit hastened to make himself useful.

A muted echo of the engine-room telegraph was audible then, and the engines took up again their tireless chant. Lanyard cocked a sly eye at the tell-tale; it designated their course as west-by-north a quarter west. He was cheered to think that his labours at the binnacle were bearing fruit, and grateful that Monk was so busy being an invalid waited upon and pitied by a beautiful volunteer nurse that he was willing to trust the navigation to Mr. Swain and had no time to observe by the tell-tale whether or not the course he had prescribed was being followed.

Liane's exquisite and tender arm supported the suffering head of Captain Monk as he absorbed the nourishment served by Phinuit. The eyebrows made an affectingly faint try at a gesture of gratitude. The eyes closed, once more Monk's head reposed upon the pillow. He sighed like a weary child.

From the saloon came sounds of shuffling feet and mumbling voices as seamen carried away all that was mortal of Monsieur Popinot.

Between roars of the fog signal, six bells vibrated on the air. Phinuit cocked his head intelligently to one side, ransacked his memory, and looked brightly to Lanyard.

“Ar-har!” he murmured—“the fatal hour!”

Lanyard gave him a gracious smile.

In attenuated accents Captain Monk, without opening his eyes or stirring under the caresses of that lovely hand, enquired:

“What say, Phin?”

“I was just reminding Monsieur Lanyard the fatal hour has struck, old thing.”

The eyebrows knitted in painful effort to understand. When one has narrowly escaped death by strangulation one may be pardoned some slight mental haziness. Besides, it makes to retain sympathy, not to be too confoundedly clear-headed.

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"Fatal hour?"

"The dear man promised to turn in his answer to our unselfish little proposition at six bells to-night and not later."

"Really?" The voice was interested, and so were the eyebrows; but Monk was at pains not to move. "And has he?"

"Not yet, old egg."

Monk opened expectant eyes and fixed them upon Lanyard's face, the eyebrows acquiring a slant of amiable enquiry.

"There is much to be said," Lanyard temporised. "That is, if you feel strong enough..."

"Oh, quite," Monk assured him in tones barely audible.

"Must it be a blow to the poor dear?" Phinuit enquired.

"I hope not, very truly."

(The tell-tale now betrayed a course northwest-by-north. Had the binnacle compass, then, gone out of its head altogether, on finding itself bereft of its accustomed court of counter-attractions?)

"Well, here we all are, sitting forward on the edges of our chairs, holding onto the seats with both hands, ears pricked forward, eyes shining... The suspense," Phinuit avowed, "is something fierce!"

"I am sorry."

"What d'you mean, you're sorry? You're not going to back out?"

"Having never walked into the arrangement you propose, it would be difficult to back out—would it not?"

Monk forgot that he was suffering acutely, forgot even the beautiful and precious hand that was soothing his fevered brow, and rudely shaking it off, sat up suddenly. The eyebrows were distinctly minatory above eyes that loosed ugly gleams.

"You refuse?"

Lanyard slowly inclined his head: "I regret I must beg to be excused."

"You damned fool!"

“Pardon, monsieur?”

A look of fury convulsed Liane’s face. Phinuit, too, was glaring, no longer a humourist. Monk’s mouth was working, and his eyebrows had got out of hand altogether.

“I said you were a damned fool—”

“But is not that a matter of personal viewpoint? At least, the question would seem to be open to debate.”

“If you think arguments will satisfy us—!”

“But, my dear Captain Monk, I am really not at all concerned to satisfy you. However, if you wish to know my reasons for declining the honour you would thrust upon me, they are at your service.”

“I’ll be glad to hear them,” said Monk grimly.

“One, I fancy, will do as well as a dozen. It is, then, my considered judgment that, were I in the least inclined to resume the evil ways of my past—as I am not—I would be, as you so vividly put it, a damned fool to associate myself with people of a low grade of intelligence, wanting even enough to hold fast that which they have thieved!”

“By God!” Monk brought down a thumping fist. “What are you getting at?”

“Your hopeless inefficiency, monsieur.... Forgive my bluntness.”

“Come through,” Phinuit advised in a dangerous voice. “Just what do you mean?”

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"I mean that you, knowing I have but one object in submitting to association with you in any way, to wit, the recovery of the jewels of Madame de Montalais and their restoration to that lady, have not had sufficient wit to prevent my securing those jewels under your very noses."

"You mean to say you've stolen them?"

Lanyard nodded. "They are at present in my possession—if that confesses an act of theft."

Monk laughed discordantly. "Then I say you're a liar, Monsieur the Lone Wolf, as well as a fool!" His fist smote the desk again. "The Montalais jewels are here."

Lanyard shrugged.

"When did you lift them?" Phinuit demanded with sarcasm. "Tell us that!"

Lanyard smiled an exasperating smile, lounged low in his chair, and looked at the deck beams—taking occasion to note that the tell-tale had swung to true northwest. *Ca va bien!*

"Why, you insane impostor!" Monk stormed—"I had that box in my own hands no later than this afternoon."

Without moving, Lanyard directed his voice toward the ceiling.

"Did you by any chance open it and see what was inside?"

There was no answer, and though he was careful not to betray any interest by watching them, he was well aware that looks of alarm and suspicion were being exchanged by those three. So much for enjoying the prestige of a stupendously successful criminal past! A single thought was in the mind of Liane Delorme, Captain Monk, and Mr. Phinuit: With the Lone Wolf, nothing was impossible.

Liane Delorme said abruptly, in a choking voice: "Open the safe, please, Captain Monk."

"I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Go on," Phinuit advised—"make sure. If it's true, we get them back, don't we? If it isn't, we show him up for a pitiful bluff."

"It's a dodge," Monk declared, "to get the jewels where he can lay hands on them. The safe stays shut."

“Open it, I beg you!” Liane implored in tremulous accents.

“No—”

“Why not?” Phinuit argued. “What can he do? I’ve got him covered.”

“And I,” Lanyard interjected softly, “as you all know, am unarmed.”

“Please!” Liane insisted.

There was a pause which ended in a sullen grunt from Monk. Lanyard smiled cheerfully and sat up in his chair, watching the captain while he unlocked the door in the pedestal and with shaking fingers manipulated the combination dial. Liane Delorme left her chair to stand nearby, in undissembled anxiety. Only Phinuit remained as he had been, lounging back and watching Lanyard narrowly, his automatic pistol dangling between his knees.

Lanyard offered him a pleasant smile. Phinuit scowled forbiddingly in response.

Monk swung open the safe-door, seized the metal despatch-box by the handle, and set it upon the desk with a bang. Then, extracting his pocket key-ring, he selected the proper key and made several attempts to insert it in the slot of the lock. But his confidence was so shaken, his morale so impaired by Lanyard’s sublime effrontery added to his recent shocking experience, that the gaunt hands trembled beyond his control, and it was several seconds before he succeeded.

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Lanyard gave no sign, but his heart sank. He had exhausted his last resource to gain time, he was now at his wits' ends. Only his star could save him now...

Monk turned the keys, but all at once forgot his purpose, and with hands stayed upon the lid of the box paused and cocked his ears attentively to rumours of excitement and confusion on the deck. The instinct of the seafaring man uppermost, Monk stiffened, grew rigid from head to foot.

One heard hurried feet, outcries, a sudden jangle of the engine-room telegraph...

"Monsieur! monsieur!" Liane implored. "Open that box!"

The words were on her lips when she was thrown off her feet by a frightful shock which stopped the Sybarite dead in full career, before the screw, reversed in obedience to the telegraph, could grip the water and lessen her momentum. The woman cannoned against Monk, shouldering him bodily aside. Instinctively snatching at the box, Monk succeeded only in dragging it to the edge of the desk before a second shock, accompanied by a grinding crash of steel and timbers, seemed to make the yacht leap like a live thing stricken mortally. She heeled heavily to starboard, the despatch-box went to the floor with a thump lost in the greater din, Liane Delorme was propelled headlong into a corner, Monk thrown to his knees, Phinuit lifted out of his chair and flung sprawling into the arms of Lanyard, who, pinned down by the other's weight in his own chair, felt this last slide backwards to starboard and bring up against a partition with a bang that drove the breath out of him in one enormous gust.

He retained, however, sufficient presence of mind neatly to disarm Phinuit before that one guessed what he was about.

After that second blow, the Sybarite remained at a standstill, but the continued beating of her engines caused her to quiver painfully from trucks to keelson, as if in agonies of death such as those which had marked the end of Popinot. Of a sudden the engines ceased, and there was no more movement of any sort, only an appalling repose with silence more dreadful still.

Lanyard had no means to measure how long that dumb suspense lasted which was imposed by the stunned faculties of all on board. It seemed interminable. Eventually he saw Monk pick himself up and, making strange moaning noises, like a wounded animal, throw himself upon the door, jerk it open, and dash out.

As if he had only needed that vision of action to animate him, Lanyard threw Phinuit off, so that he staggered across the slanting floor toward the door. When he brought himself up by catching hold of its frame, he was under the threat of his own pistol in Lanyard's hands. He lingered for a moment, showing Lanyard a distraught and vacant face, then apparently realising his danger faded away into the saloon.

With a roughness dictated by the desperate extremity, Lanyard strode over to Liane Delorme, where she still crouched in her corner, staring witlessly, caught her by one arm, fairly jerked her to her feet, and thrust her stumbling out into the saloon. Closing the door behind her, he shot its bolts.

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He went to work swiftly then, in a fever of haste. In his ears the clamour of the shipwrecked men upon the decks was only a distant droning, hardly recognised for what it was by him who had not one thought other than to make all possible advantage of every precious instant; and so with the roar of steam from the escape-valves.

Stripping off coat and waistcoat, he took from the pocket of the latter the wallet that held his papers, then ripped open his shirt and unbuckled the money belt round his waist. Its pockets were ample and fitted with trustworthy fastenings; and all but one, that held a few English sovereigns, were empty. The jewels of Madame de Montalais went into them as rapidly as his fingers could move.

Thus engaged, he heard a pistol explode in the saloon, and saw the polished writing-bed of the captain's desk scored by a bullet. His gaze shifting to the door, he discovered a neat round hole in one of its rosewood panels. At the same time, to the tune of another report, a second hole appeared, and the bullet, winging above the desk, buried itself in the after-bulkhead, between the dead-lights. A stream of bullets followed, one after another boring the stout panels as if their consistency had been that of cheese.

Lanyard stepped out of their path and hugged the partition while he finished stuffing the jewels into the belt and, placing the thin wallet beneath it, strapped it tightly round him once more....

That would be Phinuit out there, no doubt, disdaining to waste time breaking in the door, or perhaps fearing his reception once it was down. An innocent and harmless amusement, if he enjoyed it, that it seemed a pity to interrupt. At the same time it grew annoying. The door was taking on the look of a sieve, and the neighbourhood of the deadlights, Lanyard's sole avenue of escape, was being well peppered. Something would have to be done about it...

Lanyard completed his preparations by kicking off his shoes and taking up another notch in the belt that supported his trousers. If the swim before him proved a long one, he could get rid of his garments in the water readily enough; if on the other hand the shore proved to be close at hand, it would be more convenient to land at least half clothed.

Then—the fusillade continuing without intermission save when the man outside stopped long enough to extract an empty clip and replace it with one loaded—Lanyard edged along the partition to the door, calculated the stand of the lunatic in the saloon from the angle at which the bullets were coming through, and emptied the pistol he had taken from Phinuit at the panels as fast as he could pull trigger.

There was no more firing...



He tossed aside the empty weapon, made sure of Popinot's on his hip, approached one of the deadlights, placed a chair, climbed upon it, and with infinite pains managed to wriggle and squirm head and shoulders through the opening. It was very fortunate for him indeed that the Sybarite happened to have been built for pleasure yachting, with deadlights uncommonly large for the sake of air and light, else he would have been obliged to run the risk of opening the door to the saloon and fighting his way out and up to the deck.

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As it was, the business was difficult enough. He had to work one of his arms out after his shoulders and then, twisting round, strain and claw at the smooth overhang of the stern until able to catch the outer lip of the scuppers above.

After that he had to lift and drag the rest of him out through the deadlight and, hanging by fingertips, work his way round, inch by inch, until it seemed possible to drop into the sea and escape hitting the screw.

In point of fact, he barely missed splitting himself in two on the thing, and on coming to the surface clung to it while taking such observations as one might in that befogged blackness.

Impossible to guess which way to strike out: the fog hung low upon the water, greying its smooth, gently heaving black surface, he could see nothing on either beam.

At length, however, he heard through the hissing uproar of escaping steam a mournful bell somewhere off to port, which he at first took for a buoy, then perceived to be tolling with a regularity inconsistent with the eccentric action of waves. Timed by pulsebeats, it struck once every fifteen seconds or thereabouts: undoubtedly the fog signal of some minor light-house.

In confirmation of this conclusion, Lanyard heard, from the deck above, the resonant accents of Captain Monk, clearly articulate in that riot of voices, apparently storming at hapless Mr. Swain.

“Don’t you hear that bell, you ass? Doesn’t that tell you what you’ve done? You’ve piled us on the rocks off the eastern end of Plum Island. And God in Heaven only knows how you managed to get so far off the course!”

Breathing to the night air thanks which would have driven Captain Monk mad could he have heard them, Lanyard let go the bronze blade and struck out for the melancholy bell.

Ten minutes later the fingers of one hand—he was swimming on his side—at the bottom of its stroke touched pebbles.

He lowered his feet and waded through extensive shallows to a wide and sandy beach.

XXVIII

FINALE

The window of the living-room in his suite at the Walpole, set high in cliff-like walls, commanded a southward vista of Fifth Avenue whose enchantment, clothed in ever

changing guises of light and shade, was so potent that Lanyard, on the first day of his tenancy, thought it could never tire. Yet by noon of the third he was viewing it with the eyes of soul-destroying ennui, though the disfavour it had so quickly won in his sight was, he knew, due less to cloying familiarity than to the uncertainty and discontent that were eating out his heart.

Three days before, immediately on arriving in New York and installing himself in this hotel, to whose management he was well known from other days, he had cabled Eve de Montalais and Wertheimer.

The response to the latter—a cheerful request that credit be arranged for him by cable—was as prompt and satisfactory as he had expected it to be.

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But from Madame de Montalais he heard nothing.

“Mission successful,” he had wired—“returning France by La Savoie in five days having arranged safe transportation your property—please advise if you can meet me in Paris to receive same or your commands otherwise.”

And to this, silence only!—silence to him to whom words of her dictation, however few and terse and filtered through no matter how many indifferent mediums of intelligence, would have been precious beyond expression.

So it was that, as hour followed hour and the tale of them lengthened into days, he fell into a temper of morbid brooding that was little like the man, and instead of faring abroad and seeking what amusement he might find in the most carefree city of the post-War world, shut himself up in his rooms and moped, indifferent to all things but the knocks at his door, the stridulation of the telephone bell that might announce the arrival of the desired message.

And so it was that, when the telephone did ring—at last!—towards noon of that third day, he fairly stumbled over himself in his haste to reach the instrument. But the animation with which he answered the professional voice at the other end of the wire faded very quickly, the look of weariness returned, his accents voiced an indifference fairly desolating.

“Yes?...Oh, yes...Very well...Yes, at once.”

He returned to his view from the window, and was hating it with all his heart when a stout knuckling on his door announced his callers.

They filed into the room with a cheerfulness of mien in striking contrast to the weary courtesy with which Lanyard received them: Liane Delorme first, then Monk, then Phinuit, rather bleached of colour and wearing one arm in a sling; all very smart in clothes conspicuously new and as costly as the Avenue afforded, striking figures of contentment in prosperity.

“It is a pleasure indeed,” Lanyard gravely acknowledged their several salutations—“not, I must confess, altogether unexpected, but a pleasure none the less.”

“So you didn’t think we’d be long spotting you in the good little old town?” Phinuit enquired. “Had a notion you thought the best way to lose us would be to put up at this well-known home of the highest prices.”

“No,” Lanyard replied. “I never thought to be rid of you without one more meeting—”

“Then there’s good in the old bean yet,” Phinuit interrupted in wasted irony.



“One cherishes that hope, monsieur....But the trail I left for you to follow! I would be an ass indeed if I thought you would fail to find it. When one borrows a rowboat at Plum Island Light without asking permission—government property, too—and leaves it moored to a dock on the Greenport waterfront; when one arrives in Greenport clothed in shirt and trousers only, and has to bribe its pardonably suspicious inhabitants with handfuls of British gold—which they are the more loath to accept in view of its present depreciation—in order to secure a slopchest coat and shoes and transportation by railway to New York; when a taxicab chauffeur refuses a sovereign for his fare from the Pennsylvania Station to this hotel, and one is constrained to borrow from the management—why, I should say the trail was fairly broad and well blazed, mes amis.”

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“Be that as it may,” said Phinuit—“here in a manner of speaking we all are, at least, the happy family reunited and ready to talk business.”

“And no hard feelings, Monsieur Phinuit?”

“There will be none”—Monk’s eyebrows were at once sardonic and self-satisfied; which speaks volumes for their versatility—“at least, none on our side—when we are finished.”

“That makes me more happy still. And you, Liane?”

The woman gave a negligent movement of pretty shoulders.

“One begins to see how very right you are, Michael,” she said wearily—“and always were, for that matter. If one wishes to do wrong, one should do it all alone... and escape being bored to death by the... Oh! the unpardonable stupidity of associates.

“But no, messieurs!” she insisted with temper as Monk and Phinuit simultaneously flew signals of resentment. “I mean what I say. I wish I had never seen any of you, I am sick of you all! What did I tell you when you insisted on coming here to see Monsieur Lanyard? That you would gain nothing and perhaps lose much. But you would not listen to me, you found it impossible to believe there could be in all the world a man who keeps his word, not only to others but to himself. You are so lost in admiration of your own cleverness in backing that poor little ship off the rocks and letting her fill and sink, so that there could be no evidence of wrong-doing against you, that you must try to prove your wits once more where they have always failed”—she illustrated with a dramatic gesture—“against his! You say to yourselves: Since we are wrong, he must be wrong; and since that is now clearly proved, that he is as wrong in every way as we, then it follows naturally that he will heed our threats and surrender to us those jewels...Those jewels!” she declared bitterly, “which we would have been fortunate never to have heard of!”

She threw herself back in her chair and showed them a scornful shoulder, compressing indignant lips to a straight, unlovely line, and beating out the devil’s tattoo with her slipper.

Lanyard watched her with a puzzled smile. How much of this was acting? How much, if anything, an expression of true feeling? Was she actually persuaded it was waste of time to contend against him? Or was she shrewdly playing upon his not unfriendly disposition toward her in the hope that it would spare her in the hour of the grand debacle?

He could be sure of one thing only: since she was a woman, he would never know...

Monk had been making ominous motions with the eyebrows, but Phinuit made haste to be beforehand with him.

“You said one thing, mademoiselle, one thing anyway that meant something: that Monsieur Lanyard would give up those jewels to us. That’s all arranged.”

Lanyard turned to him with genuine amusement. “Indeed, monsieur?”

“Indeed and everything! We don’t want to pull any rough stuff on you, Lanyard, and we won’t unless you force us to—”

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“Rough stuff, monsieur? You mean, physical force?”

“Not exactly. But I think you’ll recall my telling you I stand in well with the Police Department in the old home town. Maybe you thought that was swank. Likely you did. But it wasn’t. I’ve got a couple of friends of mine from Headquarters waiting downstairs this very minute, ready and willing to cop out the honour of putting the Lone Wolf under arrest for stealing the Montalais jewels.”

“But is it possible,” Lanyard protested, “you still do not understand me? Is it possible you still believe I am a thief at heart and interested in those jewels only to turn them to my own profit?”

He stared unbelievably at the frosty eyes of Monk beneath their fatuously stubborn brows, at the hard, unyielding eyes of Phinuit.

“You said it,” this last replied with brevity.

“It was a good bluff while it lasted, Monsieur Lanyard,” Monk added; “but it couldn’t last forever. You can’t get away with it. Why not give in gracefully, admit you’re licked for once, be a good fellow?”

“My God!” Lanyard pronounced in comic despair—“it passes understanding! It is true, then—and true especially of such as you are to-day, as I was in my yesterday—that ‘Whom Fortune wishes to destroy she first makes mad’! For, I give you my word of honour, you seem to me quite mad, messieurs, too mad to be allowed at large. And in proof of my sincerity, I propose that you shall not longer remain at large.”

“What’s that?” Monk demanded, startled.

“Why, you have not hesitated to threaten me with the police. So now I, in my turn, have the honour to inform you that, anticipating this call, I have had relays of detectives waiting in this hotel day and night, with instructions to guard the doors as soon as you were shown up to my rooms. Be advised, Mr. Phinuit, and forget your pistol. Even to show it in this city would make matters infinitely worse for you than they are.”

“He’s lying,” Monk insisted, putting a restraining hand on Phinuit’s arm as that one started from his chair in rage and panic. “He wouldn’t dare.”

“Would I not? Then, since you believe nothing till it is proved to you, messieurs, permit me...”

Lanyard crossed rapidly to the hall door and flung it open—and fell back a pace with a cry of amazement.

At the threshold stood, not the detective whom he had expected to see, but a woman with a cable message form in one hand, the other lifted to knock.

“Madame!” Lanyard gasped—“Madame de Montalais!”

The cable-form fluttered to the floor as she entered with a gladness in her face that was carried out by the impulsive gesture with which she gave him her hands.

“My dear friend!” she cried happily—“I am so glad! And to think we have been guests of the same hotel for three livelong days and never knew it. I arrived by La Touraine Saturday, but your message, telegraphed back from Combe-Redonde, reached me not five minutes ago. I telephoned the desk, they told me the number of your room and—here I am!”

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"But I cannot believe my senses!"

With unanimous consent Jules, Phinuit and Monk uprose and made for the door, only to find it blocked by the substantial form of a plain citizen with his hands in his pockets and understanding in his eyes.

"Steady, gents!" he counselled coolly. "Orders are to let everybody in and nobody out without Mr. Lanyard says so."

For a moment they hung in doubt and consternation, consulting one another with dismayed stares. Then Phinuit made as if to shoulder the man aside. But for the sake of the moral effect the latter casually exhibited a pistol; and the moral effect of that was stupendous. Mr. Phinuit disconsolately slouched back into the room.

Grasping the situation, Eve de Montalais turned to the quartet eyes that glimmered in a face otherwise quite composed.

"But how surprising!" she declared. "Madame la Comtesse de Lorgnes—Monsieur Monk—Mr. Phinuit—how delightful to see you all again!"

The civility met with inadequate appreciation.

"Nothing could be more opportune," Lanyard declared; "for it is to this lady, Madame de Montalais, and to these gentlemen that you owe the recovery of your jewels."

"Truly?"

"As I am telling you. But for them, their charming hospitality in inviting me to cruise aboard their yacht, but for the assistance they lent me, though sometimes unconsciously, I admit—I should never have been able to say to you to-day: Your jewels are in a safe place, madame, immediately at your disposal."

"But how can I thank them?"

"Well," said Lanyard, "if you ask me, I think we have detained them long enough, I believe they would be most grateful to be permitted to leave and keep their numerous and pressing appointments elsewhere."

"I am entirely of your mind, monsieur."

Lanyard nodded to the man in the doorway—"All right, Mr. Murray"—and he stood indifferently aside.

In silence the three men moved to the door and out, Phinuit with a brazen swagger, Jules without emotion visible, Monk with eyebrows adroop and flapping.

But Lanyard interposed when Liane Delorme would have followed.

“A moment, Liane, if you will be so good.”

She paused, regarding him with a sombre and inscrutable face while he produced from his coat-pocket a fat envelope without endorsement.

“This is yours.”

The woman murmured blankly: “Mine?”

He said in a guarded voice: “Papers I found in the safe in your library, that night. I had to take them for use in event of need. Now...they are useless. But you are unwise to keep such papers, Liane. Good-bye.”

The envelope was unsealed. Lifting the flap, the woman half withdrew the enclosure, recognised it at a glance, and crushed it in a convulsive grasp, while the blood, ebbing swiftly from her face, threw her rouge into livid relief. For an instant she seemed about to speak, then bowed her head in dumb acknowledgment, and left the room.

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Lanyard nodded to Mr. Murray, who amiably closed the door, keeping himself on the outside of it.

Eve de Montalais was eyeing him with an indulgent and amused glance. As he turned to her, she shook her head slowly in mockery of reproof.

“That woman loves you, monsieur,” she stated quietly.

He succeeded admirably in looking as if the thought was strange to him.

“One is sure madame must be mistaken.”

“Ah, but I am not!” said Eve de Montalais. “Who should know better the signs that tell of woman’s love for you, my dear?”

THE END