

Red Masquerade eBook

Red Masquerade by Louis Joseph Vance

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Page 1

PLEBEIAN AND PRINCE

The gentleman was not in the least bored who might have been and was seen on that wintry afternoon in Nineteen hundred, lounging with one shoulder to a wall of the dingy salesroom and idly thumbing a catalogue of effects about to be put up at auction; but his insouciance was so unaffected that the inevitable innocent bystander might have been pardoned for perceiving in him a pitiable victim of the utterest ennui.

In point of fact, he was privately relishing life with enviable gusto. In those days he could and did: being alive was the most satisfying pastime he could imagine, or cared to, who was a thundering success in his own conceit and in fact as well; since all the world for whose regard he cared a twopenny-bit admired, respected, and esteemed him in his public status, and admired, respected, and feared him in his private capacity, and paid him heavy tribute to boot.

More than that, he was young, still very young indeed, barely beyond the threshold of his chosen career. To his eagerly exploring eye the future unrolled itself in the likeness of an endless scroll illuminated with adventures all piquant, picturesque, and profitable. With the happy assurance of lucky young impudence he figured the world to himself as his oyster; and if his method of helping himself to the succulent contents of its stubborn shell might have been thought questionable (as unquestionably it was) he was no more conscious of a conscience to give him qualms than he was of pangs of indigestion. Whereas his digestive powers were superb....

This way of killing an empty afternoon, too, was much to his taste. The man adored auctions. To his mind a most delectable flavour of discreet scandal inhered in such collections of shabby properties from anonymous homes. Nothing so piqued his imagination as some well-worn piece of furniture—say an ancient escritoire with ink stains on its green baize writing-bed (dried life-blood of love letters long since dead!) and all its pigeon-holes and little drawers empty of everything but dust and the seductive smell of secrets; or a dressing-table whose bewildered mirror, to-day reflecting surroundings cold and strange, had once been quick and warm to the beauty of eyes brilliant with delight or blurred with tears; or perchance a bed....

And even aside from such stimuli to a lively and ingenious fancy, there was always the chance that one might pick up some priceless treasure at an auction sale, some rare work of art dim with desuetude and the disrespect of ignorance: jewellery of quaintest old-time artistry; a misprized bit of bronze; a book, it might be an overlooked copy of a first edition inscribed by some immortal author to a forgotten love; or even—if one were in rare luck—a picture, its pristine brilliance faded, the signature of the artist illegible beneath the grime of years, evidence of its origin perceptible only to the discerning eye—to such an eye, for instance, as Michael Lanyard boasted. For paintings were his passion.

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Already, indeed, at this early age, he was by way of being something of a celebrity, in England and on the Continent, as a collector of the nicest discrimination.

And then he found unfailing human interest in the attendance attracted by auction sales; in the dealers, gentlemen generally of pronounced idiosyncrasies; in the auctioneers themselves, robust fellows, wielding a sort of rugged wit singular to their calling, masters of deep guile, endowed with intuitions which enabled them at a glance or from the mere intonation of a voice to discriminate between the serious-minded and those frivolous souls who bid without meaning to buy, but as a rule for nothing more than the curious satisfaction of being able to brag that they had been outbid.

But it was in the ranks of the general public that one found most amusement; seldom did a sale pass off undistinguished by at least one incident uniquely revealing or provocative. And for such moments Lanyard was always on the qui vive, but quietly, who knew that nothing so quickly stifles spontaneity as self-consciousness. So, if he studied his company closely, he was studious to do it covertly; as now, when he seemed altogether engrossed in the catalogue, whereas his gaze was freely roving.

Thus far to-day a mere handful of people other than dealers had drifted in to wait for the sale to begin—something for which the weather was largely to blame, for the day was dismal with a clammy drizzle settling from a low and leaden sky—and with a solitary exception these few were commonplace folk.

This one Lanyard had marked down midway across the room, in the foremost row of chairs beneath the salesman's pulpit: by his attire a person of fashion (though his taste might have been thought a trace florid) who carried himself with an air difficult of definition but distinctive enough in its way.

Whoever he was and what his quality, he was unmistakably somebody of consequence in his own reckoning, and sufficiently well-to-do to dress the part he chose to play in life. Certainly he had a conscientious tailor and a busy valet, both saturate with British tradition. Yet the man they served was no Englishman.

Aside from his clothing, everything about him had an exotic tang, though what precisely his racial antecedents might have been was rather a riddle; a habit so thoroughly European went oddly with the hints of Asiatic strain which one thought to detect in his lineaments. Nevertheless, it were difficult otherwise to account for the faintly indicated slant of those little black eyes, the blurred modelling of the nose, the high cheekbones, and the thin thatch of coarse black hair which was plastered down with abundant brilliantine above that mask of pallid features.

The grayish pallor of the man, indeed, was startling, so that Lanyard for some time sought an adjective to suit it, and was content only when he hit on the word *evil*.

Indeed, evil seemed the inevitable and only word; none other could possibly so well fit that strange personality.

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His interest thus fixed, he awaited confidently what could hardly fail to come, a moment of self-betrayal.

That fell more quickly than he had hoped. Of a sudden the decent quiet of King Street, thus far accentuated rather than disturbed by the routine grind of hansoms and four-wheelers, was enlivened by spirited hoofs whose clatter stilled abruptly in front of the auction room.

Turning a speciously languid eye toward the weeping window, Lanyard had a partial view of a handsomely appointed private equipage, a pair of spanking bays, a liveried coachman on the box.

The carriage door slammed with a hollow clap; a footman furled an umbrella and climbed to his place beside the driver. As the vehicle drew away, one caught a glimpse of a crest upon the panel.

Two women entered the auction room.

II

THE PRINCESS SOFIA

These ladies were young, neither much older than Lanyard, both were very much alive, openly betraying an infatuation with existence very like his own, and both were lovely enough to excuse the exquisite insolence of their young vitality.

As is frequently the case in such associations, since a pretty woman seldom courts comparison with another of her own colouring, one was dark, the other fair.

With the first, Lanyard was, like all London, on terms of visual acquaintance. The reigning beauty of the hour, her portrait was enjoying a vogue of its own in the public prints. Furthermore, Lady Diantha Mainwaring was moderately the talk of the town, in those prim, remotely ante-bellum days—thanks to high spirits and a whimsical tendency to flout the late Victorian proprieties; something which, however, had yet to lead her into any prank perilous to her good repute.

The other, a girl whose hair of golden bronze was well set off by Russian sables, Lanyard did not know at all; but he knew at sight that she was far too charming a creature to be neglected if ever opportunity offered to be presented to her. And though the first article of his creed proscribed women of such disastrous attractions as deadly dangerous to his kind, he chose without hesitation to forget all that, and at once began to cudgel his wits for a way to scrape acquaintance with the companion of Lady Diantha.



Their arrival created an interesting bustle, a buzz of comment, a craning of necks—flattery accepted by the young women with ostensible unconcern, a cliché of their caste. As they had entered in a humour keyed to the highest pitch of gaiety consistent with good breeding, so with more half-stifled laughter they settled into chairs well apart from all others but, as it happened, in a direct line between Lanyard and the man whose repellent cast of countenance had first taken his interest.

Thus it was that Lanyard, after eyeing the young women unobserved as long as he liked, lifted his glance to discover upon that face a look that amazed him.

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It wasn't too much to say (he thought) that the man was transfigured by malevolence, so that he blazed with it, so that hatred fairly flowed, an invisible yet manifest current of poisoned fire, between him and the girl with the hair of burnished bronze.

All the evil in him seemed to be concentrated in that glare. And yet its object remained unconscious of it or, if at all sensitive, dissembled superbly. The man was apparently no more present to her perceptions than any other person there, except her companion.

Presently, becoming sensible of Lanyard's intrigued regard, the man looked up, caught him in a stare and, mortally affronted, rewarded him with a look of virulent enmity.

Not to be outdone, Lanyard gave a fleeting smile, a bare curving of lips together with an almost imperceptible narrowing of amused eyes—goaded the other to the last stage of exasperation—then calmly ignored the fellow, returning indifferent attention to the progress of the sale.

Since nothing was being offered at the moment to draw a bid from him, he maintained a semblance of interest solely to cover his thoughts, meanwhile lending a civil ear to the garrulous tongue of a dealer of his acquaintance who, having edged nearer to indulge a failing for gossip, found a ready auditor. For when Lanyard began to heed the sense of the other's words, their subject was the companion of Lady Diantha Mainwaring.

"... Princess Sofia Vassilyevski, you know, the Russian beauty."

Lanyard lifted his eyebrows the fraction of an inch, meaning to say he didn't know but at the same time didn't object to enlightenment.

"But you must have heard of her! For weeks all London has been talking about her jewels, her escapades, her unhappy marriage."

"Married?" Lanyard made a sympathetic mouth. "And so young! Quel dommage!"

"But separated from her husband."

"Ah!" Lanyard brightened up. "And who, may one ask, is the husband?"

"Why, he's here, too—over there in the front row—chap with the waxed moustache and putty-coloured face, staring at her now."

"Oh, that animal! And what right has he got to look like that?"

The buzz of the scandalmonger grew more confidential: "They say he's never forgiven her for leaving him—though the Lord knows she had every reason, if half they tell is true. They say he's mad about her still, gives her no rest, follows her everywhere, is all the time begging her to return to him—"

“But who the deuce is the beast?” Lanyard interrupted, impatiently. “You know, I don’t like his face.”

“Prince Victor,” the whisper pursued with relish—“by-blow, they say, of a Russian grand duke and a Manchu princess—half Russian, half Chinese, all devil!”

Without looking, Lanyard felt that Prince Victor’s stare had again shifted from the women, and that the mongrel son of the alleged grand duke was aware he had become a subject of comment. So the eminent collector of works of art elected to dismiss the subject with a negligent lift of one shoulder.

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“Ah, well! Daresay he can’t help his ugly make-up. All the same, he’s spoiling my afternoon. Be a good fellow, do, and put him out.”

The Briton chuckled a deprecating chuckle; meaning to say, he hoped Lanyard was spoofing; but since one couldn’t be sure, one’s only wise course was to play safe.

“Really, Monsieur Lanyard! I’m afraid one couldn’t quite do *that*, you know!”

III

MONSIEUR QUIXOTE

The sale dragged monotonously. The paintings offered were mostly of mediocre value. The gathering was apathetic.

Lanyard bid in two or three sketches, more out of idleness than because he wanted them, and succeeded admirably in seeming ignorant of the existence of the Princess Sofia and the husband whose surface of a blackguard was so harmonious with his reputation.

In time, however, a change was presaged by an abrupt muting of that murmured conversation between the beautiful Russian and the almost equally beautiful Englishwoman. An inquisitive look discovered the princess sitting slightly forward and intently watching the auctioneer.

The pose of an animated, delightful child, hanging breathlessly upon the progress of some fascinating game: one’s gaze lingered approvingly upon a bewitching profile with half-parted lips, saw that excitement was faintly colouring the cheeks beneath shadowy and enigmatic eyes, remarked the sweet spirit that poised that lovely head.

And then one looked farther, and saw the prince, like the princess, absorbed in the business at the auction block, his slack elegance of the raffish aristocrat forgotten, all his being tense with purpose, strung taut—as taut at least as that soft body, only half-masculine in mould and enervated by loose living, could ever be. One thought of a rather elderly and unfit snake, stirred by the sting of some long-buried passion out of the lassitude of years of slothful self-indulgence, poisoning to strike....

At the elbow of the auctioneer an attendant was placing on exhibition a landscape that was either an excellent example of the work of Corot or an imitation no less excellent. At that distance Lanyard felt inclined to dub it genuine, though he knew well that Europe was sown thick with spurious Corots, and would never have risked his judgment without closer inspection.

He was accordingly perplexed when, after a brief exhortation by the auctioneer, discreetly noncommittal as to the antecedents of the canvas—"attributed to Corot"—Prince Victor, who had been straining forward like a hound in leash, half rose in his eagerness to offer:

"One thousand guineas!"

The entire company stirred as one and sat up sharply. Even the auctioneer was momentarily stricken dumb. And for the first time the Princess Sofia acknowledged the presence of her husband, and got from him that look of white hatred with a sneer of triumph thrown in for good measure.

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Though she affected indifference, Lanyard saw her slender body transiently shaken by a shudder, it might have been of dread. But she was quick to pull herself together, and the auctioneer had scarcely found his tongue—"One thousand guineas for this magnificent canvas attributed to Corot"—when her clear and youthful voice cut in:

"Two thousand guineas!"

This the prince capped with a monosyllable:

"Three!"

Stupefaction settled upon the audience. The auctioneer hesitated, blinked astonished eyes, framed unspoken phrases with halting lips. Prince Victor, again gave his wife the full value of his vindictive snarl. She would not see, but it was plain that she was cruelly dismayed, that it cost her an effort to rise to the topping bid:

"Thirty-five hundred guineas!"

"Four thousand!"

"Four thousand I am offered ..."

The auctioneer faltered, a spasm of honesty shook him, he proceeded:

"It is only fair, ladies and gentlemen, that I should state that this canvas is not put up as an authentic Corot. It very possibly is such, in fact"—the seizure was passing swiftly—"it bears every evidence of having come from the brush of the master. But we cannot guarantee it. There is, however, a gentleman present who is amply qualified to pass upon the merits of this work. With his permission"—his eye sought Lanyard's—"I venture to request the opinion of Monsieur Michael Lanyard, the noted connoisseur!"

Lanyard detached a deprecating smile from the pages of his catalogue, but his contemplated response was cut short by Prince Victor.

"I am not aware," that one said, icily, "that the authenticity of this painting is a material question. Nor have I any need of the opinion of this gentleman, whatever his qualifications. I have bid four thousand guineas, and insist that the sale proceed. If there are no further bids, the canvas is mine."

The auctioneer shrugged, and offered Lanyard an apologetic bow. "I am sorry—" he began.

"Four thousand guineas!" snapped the prince.

Resigned, the auctioneer resumed:

“Four thousand guineas offered. Are there any more bids? Going—”

“Forty-five hundred!”

Beyond reasonable doubt the princess had spurred herself mercilessly to find sufficient courage to make this latest bid. Lanyard saw her in a rigour of despair, hoping against hope. Only too surely something in the picture, some association—heaven knew what!—was more precious to her, almost, than life, though she had gone already to the limit of her means and perhaps a bit beyond. If this bid failed, she was lost. Her anxiety was pitiful.

“Five thousand!”

In the princess something snapped: she recoiled upon herself, sat crushed, head drooping, white-gloved hands working in her lap. One detected an appealing quiver on her lips, and noted, or imagined, a suspicious brightness beneath the long dark lashes that swiftly screened her eyes. Her young bosom moved convulsively. She was beaten, near to tears.

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“Five thousand guineas ... going ... going ...”

The face of the prince was a mocking devil-mask in gray and black. Lanyard found himself loathing it. Impossible to stand idle and see the creature get the better of an unhappy girl ...

“Five thousand one hundred guineas!”

With his wits in a blur of amaze, Lanyard knew the echo of his own voice.

IV

THE FOOL AND HIS MONEY

One reflected rather bitterly on the many and obvious oversights of a putatively all-wise Providence, in especial on its failure so to fashion the body of man as to enable him on occasion to discipline his own flesh in the most ignominious manner imaginable.

Lanyard could have kicked himself; that is to say, he wanted to, and thought it rather a pity he couldn't, and publicly, at that. For the freak he had just indulged was rank quixotism, something which had as much place in the code of a man of his calling as milk of human kindness in the management of a pawnshop.

On second thought, he wasn't so sure. It might have been that quixotism had inspired his infatuate gesture, but it might quite as conceivably have been everyday vanity or plain cussedness: a noble impulse to serve a pretty lady in distress, a spontaneous device to engage her interest, or a low desire to plague a personality as antipathetic to his own as that of a rattlesnake.

In point of simple fact (he decided), his impelling motive had been a mixture of all three.

In all three respects, furthermore, it proved notably successful; in the two last named without delay.

The Princess Sofia at once took note of Lanyard, with wonder, some misgivings, and a hint of admiration. For he was not only a personable person in those days, with a suggestion of devil-may-care in his air that measurably lifted the curse of his superficial foppishness, but he was putting a spoke in Prince Victor's wheel. And whosoever did that, by chance, out of sheer voluptuousness, or with malice prepense, won immediate title to Sofia's favourable regard. If she couldn't thwart Victor herself, she would be much obliged to anybody who could and did; and she was nothing loath to betray her bias by looking kindly upon her self-appointed champion.

A whispered communication from Lady Diantha did nothing to abate her overt approbation.

As for Victor, his face of leaden gray took on a tinge of green; he quaked with rage, and the glare he loosed on Lanyard made that young man wonder if he were mistaken in believing that the eyes of the prince shone in that dusky room with something nearly akin to the phosphorescence to be seen in the eyes of an animal at night.

The notion was amusing: Lanyard paid it the tribute of a quiet smile, in direct acknowledgment of which Prince Victor snarled:

“Six thousand guineas!”

“And a hundred,” Lanyard added.

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Brief pause prefaced a bid designed to squelch him completely:

“Ten thousand!”

In a fatigued voice he uttered: “One hundred more.”

“Fifteen—!”

This time Lanyard contented himself with nodding to the auctioneer; and the lips of the latter had barely parted to parrot the bid when Victor sprang to his feet, his features working, his limbs shaking so that the legs of the chair beside him, whose back he seized, chattered on the floor, while the high-pitched voice broke into a screech:

“Twenty!”

And Lanyard said: “And one.”

“Twenty thousand one hundred guineas!” chanted the auctioneer. “Are there any more bids? You, sir—?” He aimed a respectful bow at Prince Victor, who snubbed him with a sign of fury. “Going—going—gone! Sold to Monsieur Lanyard for twenty thousand and one hundred guineas!”

And Lanyard had the satisfaction of seeing Prince Victor, after a vain effort to master his emotion, snatch up his topper, clap it on his head, and make for the door with footsteps whose stuttering haste was in poor accord with the dignity of his exalted station.

But it was debatable whether this satisfaction plus the possession of a questionable Corot was worth its cost. And Lanyard wasn’t in the humour, now that the heat of contest began to abate, to look to Princess Sofia for promise of further reward. Even if he could have been guilty of such impertinence, indeed, he must have forborne for very shame. After all (he told himself) he hadn’t figured very creditably, permitting petty prejudice to sway him as it had. He felt singularly sure he had played the gratuitous ass in this affair, and he didn’t in the least desire to see the reflection of a like conviction in the eyes of a pretty young woman with a flair for the ridiculous.

He dissembled his diminished self-esteem, however, most successfully, as he proceeded to the desk of the auctioneer’s clerk, filled in a cheque for the amount of his purchase, and gave instructions for its delivery.

Whether by intention or inadvertence, he was followed from the auction room by the Princess Sofia and Lady Diantha Mainwaring; and just outside the entrance he found Prince Victor waiting with all the air of a gentleman impatient for a cab to happen along and pick him up out of the drizzle.

But in view of the fact that he made no overtures to a passing hansom, which swerved in to the curb in response to a signal of Lanyard's cane, this last concluded that the prince was up to his reputedly favourite game of waylaying his rebel wife.

If such were the case, Lanyard had no wish to witness a public wrangle between the two. So he stepped briskly up on the carriage-block, and only hesitated when he saw that the prince, utterly ignoring the presence of the princess and Lady Diantha, was edging forward and cocking an alert ear to catch the address which Lanyard was on the point of giving the cabby.

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Hugely diverted, the adventurer looked round with a quirk of his brows, and amiably commented:

“Monsieur’s interest is so flattering! If he really must know, I’m going home now, to my rooms in Halfmoon Street. Au revoir, monsieur le prince!”

He beamed benignly upon that convulsed countenance, and saw crestfallen Prince Victor slink away, to the music of smothered laughter from the ladies in the doorway—toward which Lanyard was careful not to look.

Then, in high feather with himself, he chirped to the driver and hopped into the hansom.

V

IMPOSTOR

As Lanyard’s cab swung away, the carriage wheeled in to take up the Princess Sofia and Lady Diantha Mainwaring. Observing this, Lanyard poked his stick through the little trap in the roof of the hansom and suggested that the driver pull up, climb down, adjust some imaginary fault with the harness and, when the carriage had passed, follow it with discretion.

Enchanted by sight of a half-sovereign in the palm of his fare, the cabby executed this manoeuvre to admiration; with the upshot that Lanyard got home half an hour later than he would have had he proceeded to his rooms direct, but with information of value to recompense him.

It wasn’t his habit to lose time in those days of his youth. And lest his character be misconstrued (which would be deplorable) it may as well be stated now that he had not laid down upward of twenty thousand good golden guineas for a colourable Corot without having a tolerably clear notion of how he meant to reimburse himself if it should turn out that he had paid too dear for his whistle.

The hint imparted by his garrulous acquaintance of the auction room—to the effect that the Princess Sofia was famous, among other things, for the magnificence of her personal jewellery—had found a good home where it wasn’t in danger of suffering for want of doting interest.

And now one knew where their owner lived, and in what state ...

Alighting at his own door, the adventurer surprised Prince Victor, morosely ambling by, in his vast fatuity no doubt imagining that his passage through Halfmoon Street would go unremarked in the dusk of that early winter evening. He wasn’t at all pleased to find himself mistaken; and though Lanyard did his best with his blandest smile to make

amends for having discomfited the prince by getting home later than he had promised to, his good-natured effort was repaid only by a spiteful scowl.

So he laughed aloud, and went indoors rejoicing.

An hour or so later the painting was delivered by a porter from the auction room. But Lanyard was in his bath at the time and postponed examining his doubtful prize till he had dressed for dinner. For, though it was his whim to dine in his rooms alone, and though he had no fixed plans for the evening, Lanyard was too thoroughly cosmopolitan not to do in Cockaigne as the Cockneys do.

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Besides, in this uncertain life one never knows what the next hour will bring forth; whereas if one is in evening dress after six o'clock, one is armoured against every emergency.

At seven he sat down to the morbid sort of a meal one gets in London lodgings: a calm soup; a segment of vague fish smothered painlessly in a pale pink blanket of sauce; a cut from the joint, rare and lukewarm; potatoes boiled dead; sad sea-kale; nonconformist pudding; conservative biscuit, and radical cheese.

With the aid and abetment of a bottle of excellent Montrachet, however, one contrived to worry through.

Meanwhile, Lanyard inspected his recent purchase, which occupied a place of honour, propped up on the arms of the chair on his right.

It was seldom that Lanyard entertained a guest of such equivocal character. Wagging a reproving head—"My friend," he harangued the canvas, "you are lucky to have been sold. Sorry I can't say as much for myself."

It was really too bad it wasn't a bit better. It wasn't often that one encountered so genuine a counterfeit. The hand of an artist had painted it, but never the hand of Corot. Everything Corot was accustomed to put into his painting was there, except himself. The abode had been prepared in all respects as the master would have had it, but his spirit had not entered into it, it remained without life.

Still, Lanyard concluded, surveying his prize through the illusioning fumes of his cigar, while the waiter cleared away, it wasn't so bad after all, it wouldn't be in the end a total loss. He could afford to cart the thing back to Paris with him and give it room in his private gallery; and some day, doubtless, some rich American would pay a handsome price for it on the strength of its having found place in the collection of Michael Lanyard, even though it lacked the cachet of his guarantee.

But what the devil had made it so precious to the soi-disant Prince Victor and his charming wife?

But for a single circumstance Lanyard would have been tempted to believe he had been craftily rooked by an accomplished chevalier d'industrie and his female confederate; but too much and too real passion had been betrayed in the auction room to countenance that suspicion.

No: he hadn't been rigged; at least, not by design. Something more than its intrinsic value had rendered the canvas priceless in the esteem of those two, something had been at stake more than mere possession of what they might have believed to be a real Corot.

But what?

Perplexed, Lanyard took the picture in his hands—it was not too unwieldy, even in its frame—and examined it with nose so close to the painted surface that he seemed to be smelling it. Then he turned it over and scowled at its reverse. And shook a baffled head.

But when he tapped the face of the picture smartly with a finger-nail, he gave a slight start, passed a hand over it with the palm pressed flat, and suddenly assumed the humanly intelligent expression of a hunting-dog that has hit on a warm scent.

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Strong fingers and a fruit knife quickly extracted the painting from its frame and loosened the canvas from its stretcher, proving that the latter held in fact two canvases instead of one. Between these had been secreted several sheets of notepaper of two kinds, stamped with two crests, all black with closely penned handwriting.

Lanyard gathered them into a sheaf and scanned them cursorily, even with distaste. True enough, it might be argued that he had bought and paid for the right to pry into the secrets they betrayed; but it was not a right he enjoyed exercising. A fairly thoroughgoing state of sophistication, together with some innate instincts of delicacy, worked to render him to a degree immune to such gratification as others might derive from being made privy to an exotic affair of the heart. Revelation of human weakness was no special treat to him. And if his eyebrows mounted as he read, if the corners of his mouth drew down, if once and again he uttered an "*Oh! oh!*" of shocked expostulation, he was (like most of us, incurably an actor in private as well as in public life) merely running through business which convention has designated as appropriate to such circumstances. At bottom he was being stimulated to thought more than to derision.

Putting the letters aside, he bowed his head upon a hand and reflected sagely that love was the very deuce.

He wondered if he could or ever would love or be loved so madly.

He rather hoped not ...

Here, if you please, was the scion of a reigning royal family risking as pretty a scandal as one could well imagine—and all for love! Given a few more days of life, and he would have jeopardized his right of succession and set half-a-dozen European chancelleries by the ears—and all for love! But for his untimely end, that poor, pretty creature would have joined her life to his, consummating at one stroke her freedom from the intolerable conditions of existence with Victor and a diplomatic convulsion which might only too easily have precipitated all Europe into a great war—and all for lawless love!

So once more in history Death had served well the interests of public morality.

After a year these letters alone survived ...

How they had survived, what hands had collected and secreted them, and for what purpose, intrigued the imagination no end. Lanyard inclined to credit Princess Sofia with the indiscretion of saving these souvenirs of a grande passion that had almost made history. There was the sentimental motive to account for such action, and another: the satisfaction of knowing she had concrete proof of her intention to treat Victor as he had treated her.

Then somehow the painting must have passed out of her possession; and in all likelihood she had made frantic and awkward efforts to regain it which had aroused the suspicions of Victor; with the sequel of that afternoon....

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Lanyard's speculations were interrupted by the peremptory telephone. Without premonition he picked up the combination receiver and transmitter. But his memory was still so haunted by echoes of that delightful voice which he had heard in the auction room, he couldn't entertain any doubt that he heard it now.

"Are you there?" it said "Will you be good enough to put me through to Monsieur Lanyard?"

The inspiration to mischief was instantaneous: Lanyard replied promptly in accents as much unlike his own as he could manage:

"Sorry, ma'am; Mister Lanyard dined hout to-night. Would there be any message, ma'am?"

"Oh, how annoying!"

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Do you know when he will be home?"

"If this is the lidy 'e was expectin' to call this evenin'—"

"Yes?" the dulcet voice said, encouragingly.

"—Mister Lanyard sed as 'ow 'e might be quite lite, but 'e'd 'urry all 'e could, ma'am, and would the lidy please wite."

"Thank you so much."

"'Nk-you, ma'am."

Smiling, Lanyard replaced the receiver and rang for the waiter.

When that one answered, the adventurer was hatted and coated and opening his door.

"I'm called out," he said—"can't quite say when I'll be back. But I'm expecting a lady to call. Will you tell the doorman to show her into my rooms, please, and ask her to wait."

VI

THERESE

Posed in a blaze of lights, the Princess Sofia contemplated captiously the charming image reflected in her cheval-glass. One little wrinkle, not precisely of dissatisfaction, rather of enquiry, nestled between her delicately arched brows. A look of misgiving

clouded her wide eyes of a wondering child. The bow of an exquisitely modelled mouth, whose single fault lay in its being perhaps a trace too wide, described a shadowy pout.

She was beautiful: yes. Nobody could question that. *La beauté du diable*, no doubt, to Anglo-Saxon eyes, with that skin of incomparable texture and whiteness relieved by a heavily coiled crown of living bronze, the crimson insolence of that matchless mouth, those luminous and changeable eyes so like the sea, whose green melted into blue with the swiftness of thought, whose blue at times as swiftly shaded into stormy purple-black: but however bizarre and barbaric, beauty none the less, and under the most meticulous examination indisputable.

But was she as radiant as she had been?

On this her birthday she was twenty-five. Appalling age! Five years hence she would be thirty, in ten more—forty! And woman's beauty fades so swiftly: everybody said so. Was the shadow of to-morrow already dimming her loveliness? How could it be otherwise? She had lived so long and so fully, she had begun to live so young. Six years of marriage to Victor—that alone should have been enough, one would think, to metamorphose the fairest face into a blasted battlefield of passions.

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She had a little shiver of voluptuous horror, remembering what she had endured and escaped. The sweet, true lines of her flawlessly made body were transiently undulant within a sheath of shimmering sequins: a daring gown, by British standards of that day, but permissible because she was Russian; foreigners, you know, are so frightfully weird even when they're quite all right.

And yet she was growing old, she was twenty-five! Though she didn't feel in the least like one on the threshold of middle age. Indeed, she had never felt younger, more thrillingly instinct with the power and the will to live extravagantly in one endless riot of youth unquenchable....

Reaction, of course: the swing of the pendulum to its farthest extreme. It was now two years since she had been forced to separate from Victor, finding herself unable longer to countenance and suffer his many-sided beastliness; and a year since the hand of Death had penned an inexorable finis to the too-brief chapter of her one great romance.

For there had never been love in her life with Victor. She had been too young at first to appreciate what love and marriage meant, she had been led to the altar and sacrificed upon it as an animal is led in sacrificial rites—without premonition or understanding, only wondering (perhaps) to find itself so groomed and garlanded, so flattered and adored. She had hardly known Victor before she was given to him in marriage by Imperial ukase ... to get rid of her, probably, for some inscrutable reason related to the mysterious circumstances of her parentage.

And now after six years of hell with her husband and one of mourning in solitude for her love that was lost, she was coming back to life again ... at last!

She lifted up arms that might have been a dream of Phidias chiselled in Parian marble, and stretched them luxuriously. She was superbly alive, indeed—and henceforth she meant to live. Only she must be careful to retain her looks ... If Youth must surely go, Beauty must linger and reign long in its stead.

A maid, a comely creature, trim and smart in black and white, with that vividly coloured prettiness which is too often the omen of premature decline into the fat and florid thirties, fetched a wrap and settled it upon Sofia's shoulders.

Long and dark, it disguised her figure as completely as it covered her toilette. She nodded her satisfaction, and accepted the veil which she had desired to complete her disguise, a thing of Spanish lace, black and ample, like a mantilla. But before donning it she delayed one minute more before the mirror.

"Therese! Am I still beautiful?"

"Madame la princesse is always beautiful."

“As beautiful as I used to be?”

“But madame la princesse grows more lovely every day.”

“Beautiful enough to-night, to keep out of jail, do you think?”

To the mirth in the voice of her mistress the maid responded with a smile demure and discreet.

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“Oh, madame!” was all she said; but the manner of her saying it was rarely eloquent.

Sofia laughed lightly, and affectionately pinched the cheek of the maid.

“And you, my little one,” she said in liquid French—“you yourself are too ravishingly pretty to keep out of trouble. Do you know that?”

Her little one looked more than ever demure as she enquired after the hidden meaning of madame la princesse.

“Because you will marry too soon, Therese—too soon some worthless man will persuade you to dedicate all those charms to him alone.”

“Oh, madame!”

“Is it not so?”

“Who knows, madame?” said Therese, as who should say: “What must be, must.”

“Then there is a man! I suspected as much.”

“But, madame la princesse, is there not always a man?”

“Then beware!”

“Madame la princesse need not fear for me,” Therese replied. “Me, my head is not so easily turned. There is always some man, naturally—there are so many men!—but when I marry, rest assured, it will be for something more.”

With the compressed lips of self-approbation she deftly assisted her mistress to swathe her head in the mantilla-like veil.

“Something more than a man?” Sofia enquired through its folds. “What then?”

“Independence, madame la princesse.”

“What an idea! Marriage and independence: how do you reconcile that paradox?”

“Madame la princesse means love, I think, when she speaks of marriage. But love—that is all over and done with when one marries. One is then ready to settle down; one has put by one’s dot, and marries a worthy, industrious man with a little fortune of his own. With such a husband one collaborates in the maintenance of the menage and the management of a small business, something substantial if small. And so one ends one’s days in comfortable companionship. That, madame la princesse, is the marriage for Therese! It may not sound romantic, madame, but it has this rare virtue—it lasts!”

VII

FAMILY REUNION

The London night was normal: that is to say, wet. Darkness had transformed the streets into vast sheets of black satin shot with golden strands and studded with lamp-posts like sturdy stems for ethereal blooms of golden haze. Within their areas of glow the air teemed with atoms of liquid gold. The ring of hoofs on wet pavements was at once disturbing and inspiring.

Alone in her hired hansom the Princess Sofia sat with the window raised, drinking deep of the soft damp air, finding it as heady as strange wine. Under cover of the veil her eyes were brilliant with awareness of her audacity, her lips were parted with the promise of a smile.

She loved it all, she adored this mood of London: its nights of rain were sheer enchantment, arabesque, nights of secrecy and stealth, mystery, and romance under the rose. On nights such as this lovers prospered, adventures were to the venturesome, brave rewards to the bold.

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For herself she was unafraid, she foretasted entire success. How should it be otherwise? Consider how famously chance had prospered her designs, playing into her hands the information that this Monsieur Lanyard was not at home, might not return till very late, and was expecting a call from somebody whom he desired to await his return in his rooms!

With such an open occasion, how could one fail?

Sofia asked only three minutes alone with the painting....

And if by any mishap she were caught, still she would not be dismayed. The letters were hers, were they not? They had been stolen from her, he had no right title to them who had purchased only the picture which had served as their hiding-place. By all means, let him keep that stupid canvas; he could hardly refuse to let her have her letters, not if she pleaded her prettiest. And even if he should prove obtuse, ungenerous....

Her smile was definite and confident. She was beautiful—and Monsieur Lanyard was aware of that. Had she not, that afternoon, in the auction room, without his knowledge detected admiration in his eyes, a look warm with something more than admiration only?

He was impressionable, then. And it would be no distasteful task to play upon his susceptibilities. He was not only personally attractive ("magnetic" was the catch-word of the period), but if half that Lady Diantha had hinted concerning him were true, to make a conquest of Michael Lanyard would be a feather in the cap of any woman, to attempt it a temptation all but irresistible to one—like Sofia—in whose veins ran the ichor of progenitors to whom the scent of danger had been as breath of life itself. It was hardly conceivable; even now Sofia must smile at her friend's amiable endeavours to identify this mysterious monsieur with a celebrated and preposterous criminal.

It might be true that, as Lady Diantha had declared, wherever Michael Lanyard showed himself in open pursuit of his avowed avocation as a collector of rare works of art—in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, or where-not—there in due sequence the Lone Wolf would consummate one of his fantastic coups.

And it was indisputable that Lanyard was at present living in London, where for some time past the Lone Wolf had been perniciously busy; or else his bad name had been taken in vain by a baffled and exasperated Scotland Yard.

Again: Diantha had insisted that the Lone Wolf was by every evidence completely woman-proof; and there might be something in her contention that such an elusive yet spectacularly successful thief could hardly have won the high place he held in the



annals of criminology and in the esteem of the sensation-loving public, if he were one who maintained normal relations with his kind.

Sooner or later (so ran Diantha's borrowed reasoning) the criminal who has close friends, a wife, a mistress, children, family ties of any sort, or even body-servants, must willy-nilly repose confidence in one of these, and then inevitably will be betrayed. Depend upon envy, jealousy, spite, or plain venal disloyalty, if accident or inadvertence fail, to lay the law-breaker by the heels.

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Therefore (Diantha argued) the Lone Wolf must be a confirmed solitary and misogynist—very much like this Monsieur Lanyard, according to reports which declared the latter to be a man who kept to himself, had many acquaintances and not one intimate, and was positively insulated against wiles of woman.

But—granting all this—it was none the less true that the utmost diligence, spurred by the pique, ill-will, and ambition of the police of all Europe, had failed as yet to forge any link between the supercriminal of the age and the distinguished connoisseur of art. Other than Lady Diantha and the gossips whose arguments she was retailing, never a soul (so far as Sofia knew) had ventured to breathe a breath of suspicion upon the good repute of Monsieur Lanyard.

In short, Diantha's conjectures had been entirely second-hand, and not even meant to be taken seriously.

And yet the suggestion had fastened firm hold upon the imagination of the Princess Sofia.

If it were true ... what an adventure!

There was unaccustomed light of daring in the eyes of the princess, unwonted colour tinted her cheeks.

The hansom stopped, discharged the fairest fare it had ever carried, and rattled off, leaving Sofia just a trifle daunted and dubious, the animation of her anticipations something dashed by the uncompromising respectability, the self-conscious worthiness of Halfmoon Street.

Enfolded in the very heart of Mayfair, its brief length bounded on the north by Curzon Street (its name alone sufficient voucher for its character), on the south by Piccadilly (hereabouts somewhat oppressive with its hedge of stately clubs, membership in any one of which is equivalent to two years' unchallenged credit) Halfmoon Street is largely given over to furnished lodgings. But it doesn't advertise the fact, its landlords are apt to be retired butlers to the nobility and gentry, its lodgers English gentlemen who have brought home livers from India, or assorted disabilities from all known quarters of the globe, and who desire nothing better than to lead steady-paced lives within walking distance of their favourite clubs. So Halfmoon Street remains quietly estimable, a desirable address, and knows it, and doggedly means to hold fast to that repute.

A strange environment (Sofia thought) for an adventurer like the Lone Wolf.

But then—of course!—Diantha's innuendoes had been based on flimsiest hearsay. The chances were that Michael Lanyard was an utterly uninteresting person of blameless life.



So thinking, the Princess Sofia was sensible of a pang of regret, and tried to be prepared against bitter disappointment as she rang the bell. Either she would fail to obtain admittance (perhaps the lady whom he was really expecting had forestalled her) or else Lanyard would fail to come home in time to catch her! Quite probably it would turn out to be a dull and depressing evening, after all....

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The servant who admitted her in manner and appearance lent colour to these forebodings. A creature hopelessly commonplace, resigned, and unemotional, to her enquiry for Monsieur Lanyard he returned the discounted response: Mister Lanyard was hout, 'e might not be 'ome till quite lite, but 'ad left word that if a lidy called she was to be awsked to wite. The princess indicating her desire to wite, the man turned to the nearest door (Lanyard's rooms were on the street level), opened it with a pass-key, stepped inside to make a light, and when Sofia entered silently bowed himself out.

Now when the latch clicked behind him, the Princess Sofia forgot that the simplicity of her success thus far was almost discouraging. Her heart began to beat more quickly, and a little tremor shook the hands that lifted and threw back her veil. After all, she was committing an act of lawless trespass, she was on the errand of a thief; if caught the penalty might prove most painful and humiliating.

Of a sudden she lost appetite entirely for a piquant encounter with the prepossessing tenant of these rooms. Now she desired nothing so dearly as to consummate her business and escape with all possible expedition.

A swift and searching survey of the living-room descried nothing that seemed apt to hinder or detain her. A large room, unusually wide and deep, it had two windows overlooking the street, with a curtained doorway at the back that led (one surmised) to a bedchamber. It was furnished in such excellent taste that one suspected Monsieur Lanyard must have brought in his own belongings on taking possession. The handsome rug, the well-chosen draperies, the several excellent pictures and bronzes, were little in character with the furnished lodgings of the London average, even with those of the better sort.

She had no time, however, to squander on appreciation of artistic atmosphere, however pleasing, and needed to waste none searching for the object of her desires. It faced her, distant not six paces from the door—that shameless little “Corot”!—resting on the arms of a straight-backed chair.

A low laugh of delight on her lips, she went swiftly to the chair and laid hold of the picture by its frame. In that act she checked, startled, transfixed, the laugh freezing into a gasp of alarm.

Brass rings slithered on a pole supporting the portieres at the back of the room. These parted. Through them a man emerged.

Her grasp on the picture relaxed. It struck a corner against the chair and clattered on the floor—the canvas on its stretcher simultaneously flying out of the frame.

“Victor!”

“Sweet of you to remember me!”

He advanced slowly with that noiseless, cat-like tread of his which she had always hated, perceiving in it a true index to his character: the prowl of a beast of prey, furtive, cowardly, cruel. It was so: Victor was as feline and as vicious as a jungle-cat. Watching him with this thought in mind, one could almost credit old tales of beasts bewitched and walking in human guise.

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Near by he paused, alertly poised, prepared to spring. The slotted black eyes glimmered malignantly. His lips drew back in mockery from his teeth. His hands were hidden in the pockets of his dinner-coat; but she could guess how they were held, like claws, in that concealment, claws itching for her throat. She dared not stir lest she feel them there, digging deep into her soft white flesh.

Witless, in the extremity of her terror, she stammered: "What do you want?"

A nod indicated the picture that lay between them, at their feet.

"My errand," the man said in a silken tone that gloved grimmest menace, "is much the same as yours—quite naturally—but more fortunate; for I shall get not only what I came for, but something more."

"What—?"

"The opportunity to plead with you, face to face. I think you will hardly refuse to listen to me now."

"How—how did you get in?"

"Oh, secretly! By the window, if you must know; but quite unseen. You see, I had no invitation."

"I never thought you had—"

"Nor did I think you had—till now."

Puzzled, she faltered: "I don't understand—"

"Surely you don't wish me to believe my pretty Sofia has turned thief?"

That stung her pride. She drew upon an unsuspected store of spirit, confronting him bravely.

"What is it to me, what you choose to think?"

"I refuse to think that of you. My reason will not let me believe it."

She saw that he was shaking with rage; so she shrugged and drawled: "Oh, your *reason*—!"

"It tells me you for one did not come here to-night uninvited." He was rapidly losing grip on his temper. "Oh, it's plain enough! I was a fool not to understand, there in the auction room, when my face was slapped with proof of your liaison with this Lanyard!"

She said in mild expostulation: "But you are quite mad."

"Perhaps—but not so as to be blind to the truth. You had him there this afternoon to bid that picture in for you if your own means failed. Why else should the man, who knows pictures as I know you, pay twenty thousand guineas for a footling copy of a Corot that wouldn't deceive a—a Royal Academician! Yes: he bid it in for you—the sorry fool!—bought with his own money the evidence of your infatuation for his predecessor in your affections—and expects you here to-night to receive it from him and—pay him *his* price! Ah, don't try to deny it!"

He growled like a very animal, beside himself. "Why else should you be admitted to these rooms without question in his absence?"

Without visible resentment, the Princess Sofia nodded thoughtfully into those distorted features.

"Yes," she commented: "quite, quite mad."

As if she had offered without warning to strike him, Victor recoiled and for an instant stood gibbering. And she took advantage of this moment in one lithe bound to put the table between them.

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The manoeuvre sobered him. He did not move, but in two breaths forced himself to cease to tremble, and subdued every symptom of his passion. Only his face remained sinister.

“Graceful creature!” he observed, sardonic. “Such agility! But what good will that do you, do you think? Eh? Tell me that!”

It was her turn to shiver, and inwardly she did, who was never quite able to combat the fear which Victor could inspire in her by such demonstrations of the power of his will. The self-control which he had always at his command was something that passed her understanding; it seemed inhuman, it terrified her.

Nevertheless, so exigent was this strait, she continued to confront him with a face of unflinching defiance.

In a voice whose steadiness surprised her she declared: “The letters are mine. You shan’t have them.”

“Undeceive yourself: I’ll have them though you never leave this room alive.”

More to give herself time to think than in any hope of moving him, she began to plead:

“Let me have them, Victor—let me go.”

Smiling darkly, he shook his head.

“The letters mean nothing to you. What good—?”

He interrupted impatiently: “I shall publish them.”

“Impossible—!”

“But I shall.”

Aghast, she protested: “You can’t mean that!”

“Why not? The world shall know your true reason for leaving me—that you were the mistress of another man—and who that man was!”

Staring, she uttered in a low voice: “Never!”

“Or,” he amended, deliberately, “you may keep them, burn them, do what you will with them—on fair terms—*my* terms.”



She said nothing, but her dilate eyes held fixedly to his. He moved a pace or two nearer, his voice dropped to a lower key, the light she had learned to loathe flickered in the depths of his eyes.

“Come back to me, Sofia! I can’t live without you ...”

Her lips moved to deny him, but made no sound. Now it was revealed to her, the way.

“Come back to me, Sofia!”

His hand crept along the edge of the table and lifted, quivering, to capture hers. She steeled herself to endure its touch, against sickening repulsion she fought to achieve a smile that would carry a suggestion of at least forgetfulness.

“And if I do—?” she murmured.

He gave a violent start, blood suffused his face darkly, his arms leapt out to enfold her. She stepped back, evading him with a movement of coquetry that served, as it was intended, to inflame him the more.

“Wait!” she insisted. “Answer me first: If I return to you—then what?”

“Everything shall be as you wish—everything forgotten—I will think of nothing but how to make you happy—”

“And I may have my letters?”

He nodded, swallowing hard, as if the concession well-nigh choked him.

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Under his gloating gaze her flesh crawled. Only by supreme effort did she succeed in resisting a mad impulse to risk a rush for door or windows, and whipped her will into maintaining what seemed to be frank response.

“Very well,” she said; “I agree.”

Again he offered to touch her, again she moved slightly, eluding him.

“No,” she stipulated with an arch glance—“not yet! First prove you mean to make good your word.”

“How?”

“Let me go—with my letters—and call on me to-morrow.”

His look clouded. “Can I trust you?” He was putting the question to himself more than to her. “Dare I?” He added in a tone colourless and flat: “I’ve half a mind to take you at your word. Only—forgive my doubts—appearances are against you—you seem almost too keen for the bargain. How can I know—?”

“What proof do you want?”

“Something definite.... You pledge yourself to me?” A movement of her head assented. “You will give yourself back to me?” He came nearer, but she contrived to repeat the sign of assent. “Wholly, without reserve?”

An invincible disgust shook her as the full sense of his insistence struck home. Still she whipped herself to play out the scene—and win!

“As you say, Victor, as you will....”

He moved still nearer. She became conscious of his nearness as if a palpable aura of vileness emanated from his person.

“Then give me proof—here and now.”

“How?”

He laughed a throaty, evil laugh. “Need you ask? Not much, my Sofia ... only a little ... something on account...” Suddenly she could no more: memories unspeakable rose like disturbed dregs to the surface of her consciousness. Involuntarily, not knowing what she did, she flung out an arm and struck down his hands.

“You—leper!”



The epithet was like a knout cutting through the decayed fibre of the man and raising a livid welt on his diseased soul. Galled beyond endurance, his countenance convulsed with fury, he struck wickedly; and the vicious blow of his open palm across her mouth brought flecks of blood to the lips as her teeth cut into the tender flesh.

It did far more, it shattered at one stroke the brittle casing of self-command with which centuries of civilization had sought to veneer the Slav. In a trice a woman whose existence neither of them had suspected was revealed, a fury incarnate flew at the dismayed prince, clawing, tearing, raining blows upon his face and bosom. Overcome by surprise, blinded, dazed, staggered, he gave ground, stumbled, caught at a chair to steady himself.

As abruptly as it had begun, the assault ceased. Panting and frantic, the girl fell back, paused, renewed her grasp upon herself, gazed momentarily in contempt on that dashed and quaking figure, then swiftly swooped down to retrieve the picture, and madly pelted toward the door.

In an instant, Victor was after her. His clutching fingers barely missed her shoulder but caught a flying end of the veil that swathed her throat and head. With finger-tips touching the door-knob Sofia was checked and twitched back so violently that she was all but thrown off her feet.

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She tried desperately to regain her balance, but the pressure round her throat, tightening, bade fair to suffocate her; and reeling, while her hands tore ineffectually at the folds of the veil, she was drawn back and back, and tripped, falling half on, half off the table.

Already her vision was darkening, her lungs were labouring painfully, her head throbbed with the revolt of strangulated arteries as if sledge hammers were seeking to smash through her skull.

Through closing shadows she saw that savage mask which hovered over her, moping and mowing, as Victor twisted and drew ever more tight the murderous bindings round her throat.

A groping hand encountered something on the table, a lump of metal, cold and heavy. She seized and dashed it brutally into that hateful face, saw his head jerk back and heard him grunt with pain, and struck again, blindly, with all her might.

Instantly the pressure upon her throat was eased. She heard a groan, a fall ...

VIII

GREEK VS. GREEK

She found herself standing, partly resting upon the table. Great, tearing sobs racked her slight young body—but at least she was breathing, there was no more constriction of her windpipe; Her head still ached, however, her neck felt stiff and sore, and she remained somewhat giddy and confused.

She eyed rather wildly her hands. One held torn and ragged folds of the veil ripped from her throat, the other the weapon with which she had cheated death: a bronze paperweight, probably a miniature copy of a Barye, an elephant trumpeting. The up-flung trunk was darkly stained and sticky...

With a shudder she dropped the bronze, and looked down. Victor lay at her feet, supine, grotesquely asprawl. His face was bruised and livid; the cheek laid open by the bronze was smeared with scarlet, accentuating the leaden colour of his skin. His mouth was ajar; his eyes, half closed, hideously revealed slender slits of white. More blood discoloured his right temple, welling from under the matted, coarse black hair.

He was terribly motionless. If he breathed, Sofia could detect no sign of it.

In panic she knelt beside the body, threw back Victor's dinner-coat, and laid an ear above his heart.

At first, in her mad anxiety, she could hear nothing. But presently a beating registered, slow and harsh but steady-paced.

With a sob of relief she sat back on her heels, and after a little while got unsteadily to her feet.

The house door closed with a dull bang, and from the entrance hallway came a sound of voices. She stood petrified in dread till the voices fell and she heard stairs creak under an ascending tread.

Thus reminded that Lanyard's return might occur at any moment, she made all haste to patch up the disarray of veil and coiffure. Fortunately her costume, protected by the cloak of heavy and sturdy stuff, was quite undamaged.

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Not till on the point of leaving did she remember the painting. It lay unharmed where it had fallen when Victor seized her veil. She was calm enough now to consider herself fortunate in finding it so poorly secured in its frame; without the latter it would be far easier to smuggle the canvas away under her cloak.

In the final glance she bent upon Victor's beaten and insensible body there was no pity, no regret, no trace of compunction. What he had suffered he had ten times—no, a hundred, a thousand—earned. Long before she left him Sofia had lost count of the blows she had taken at his hands, the insults worse than blows, the lesser indignities innumerable.

But in those abolished days she had never once struck back, she had been faint of heart, cowed and terrified, and had lacked what two years of separation had given her, that spiritual independence which never before had been able to realize itself, lift up its head, and grow strong in the assurance of its own integrity.

Two years ago she would not have dared to lift a hand to Victor, no matter how sore the provocation. To-night—if she had one regret it was that she had struck so feebly: not that she desired his death, but that she knew it was now her life or his. She knew the man too well to flatter herself that he would rest before he had compassed such revenge as the baseness of his degenerate soul would deem adequate. Half the world were not too much to put between them if she were now to sleep of nights in comfortable consciousness of security from his quenchless hatred.

Callously enough she switched off the lights and left him lying there, in darkness but for the ash-dimmed glimmer of a dying fire.

In the entrance hallway she hesitated, coldly composed and alert. But seemingly the noise of their struggle had not carried beyond the door. There was no one about.

With neither haste nor faltering, without the least misadventure, she let herself quietly out into the empty, silent, rain-swept street, and scurried toward the lights of Piccadilly.

Before long a cruising four-wheeler overhauled her. In its obscure and stuffy refuge she sat hugging her precious canvas and pondering her plight.

It was borne in upon her that she would do well to leave London, yes, and England, too, before Victor recovered sufficiently to scheme and put a watch upon her movements.

She had need henceforth to be swift and wary and shrewd...

A singular elation began to colour her temper, a quickening sense of emancipation. Necessity at a stroke had set her free. Because she must fly and hide to save her life, society had no more hold upon her, she need no longer fight to keep up appearances in

spite of her status as a woman living apart from her husband, little better than a divorcee—an estate anathema to the English of those days.

She experienced, through the play of her imagination upon this new and startling conception of life, an intoxicating prelibation of freedom such as she had never dreamed to savour.

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That waywardness which was a legitimate inheritance from generations of wilful forebears, impatient of all those restraints which a fixed environment imposes upon the individual, an impatience which had always been hers though it slumbered in unsuspected latency, asserted itself of a sudden, possessed her wholly, and warmed, her being like forbidden wine.

In this humour she was set down at her door.

None saw her enter. In a moment of vaguely prophetic foresight she had bidden Therese not to wait up for her and to tell the other servants there was no necessity for their doing so. She might be detained, Heaven alone knew how late she might be; but she had her latch-key and was quite competent to undress and put herself to bed.

And Therese had taken her at her word.

She was glad of that. In event that anything should leak out and be printed by the newspapers concerning the theft of Monsieur Lanyard's famous "Corot" by a strange, closely veiled woman, it was just as well that none of the servants was about to see her come in with the canvas clumsily hidden under her cloak.

So she exercised much circumspection in shutting and bolting the door, mounted the stairs without making any unnecessary stir, and at the door of her boudoir waited, listening, for several moments, in the course of which she heard, or fancied she heard, a slight noise on the far side of the door which made her suspect Therese might after all still be up and about.

The sound was not repeated, but to make sure Sofia slipped out of her cloak and wrapped it round the canvas before she went in; which last she did sharply, with head up and eyes flashing ominously beneath scowling brows—prepared to give Therese a rare taste of temper if she found she had been disobeyed.

But though the maid had left the lights on, she was nowhere to be seen. Nor did she answer from the bedchamber when the princess called her.

With a sigh of relief that ran into the chuckle of a child absorbed in mischief, Sofia threw the cloak across a chaise-longue, and bore her prize in triumph to the escritoire.

It was her intention to rip the canvas off with a knife, to get at the letters; and a long, thin-bladed Spanish dagger that now did service as a paper-knife was actually in her hand when she noticed how slightly the painting was tacked to its stretcher, and for the first time was visited by premonition.

Dropping the knife, she caught a loose edge of the canvas and with one swift tug stripped it clear of the unpainted fabric beneath.

The cry that disappointment wrung from her was bitter with protest and chagrin.

Fortune had failed her, then, the jade had tricked her heartlessly. With success within her grasp, it had trickled like quicksilver through her fingers. Victor had been beforehand with her, had purloined the letters and restored the canvas to its frame. She might have suspected as much if she had only had the wit to draw a natural inference from the way the painting had parted company with its frame when she dropped it.

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So the letters for which she had risked and suffered so much must be back there, in Lanyard's lodgings, in Victor's possession—lost irretrievably, since she would never find the courage to go back for them, even if she dared assume that Victor had not yet recovered and escaped or that Lanyard had not yet come home.

If only she had thought to rifle Victor's pockets ...

"Too late," she uttered in despair.

"Ah, madame, never say that!"

She swung round but, shocked as she was to the verge of stupefaction, made no outcry.

The intruder stood within arm's-length, collected, amiable, debonair, nothing threatening in his attitude, merely an easy and at the same time quite respectful suggestion of interest.

"Monsieur Lanyard!"

His bow was humorous without mockery: "Madame la princesse does me much honour."

She was silent another instant, in a wide stare comprehending the incredible, the utterly impossible fact of his presence there. The one conceivable explanation voiced itself without her volition:

"The Lone Wolf!"

"Oh, come now!" he remonstrated, indulgently—"that's downright flattery."

She moved aside, lifting a hand toward the bell-cord.

"Wait!"

Involuntarily she deferred, her arm dropped. Then, appreciating that she had yielded where he had no right to command, she mutinied.

"Why?" she demanded, resentfully.

"Why ring?" he countered, smiling.

"To call my servants—to have them call in the police."

"But surely madame la princesse must appreciate the police might be at a loss to know which housebreaker to arrest."

He cocked an eye of mocking significance toward the purloined “Corot,” and in sharp revulsion of feeling Sofia had need to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She hesitated. He was right and reasonable enough, this impudent and imperturbable young elegant. Yet she could not afford to concede so much to him. She was quick to accept his gage.

“Who knows,” she enquired, obliquely, “why Monsieur the Lone Wolf brought with him this counterfeit Corot when he broke in to steal—”

“The counterfeit jewels of a titled adventuress!”

An interruption brusque enough to silence her; or else it was its innuendo that struck the princess dumb with indignation. Lanyard’s laugh offered amends for the rudeness, as if he said: “Sorry—but you asked for it, you know.” He stepped aside, caught up a handful of her jewels that had been left, a tempting heap, openly exposed on her dressing-table (as much her own carelessness as anybody’s, Sofia admitted) and tossed them lightly upon the face of the fraudulent canvas.

“Birds of a feather,” was his comment, whimsical; “coals to Newcastle!”

“My jewels!” The princess gathered them up tenderly and faced him, blazing with resentment. He returned a twisted smile, an apologetic shrug.

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"Madame la princesse didn't know? I'm so sorry."

"How dare you say they're paste?"

"I'm sorry," he repeated; "but somebody seems to have taken advantage of madame's confidence. Excellent imitations, I grant you, but articles de Paris none the less."

"It isn't true!" she stormed, near to tears.

"But really, you must believe me. A knowledge of jewels is one of my hobbies: *I know!*"

She looked down in consternation at the exquisite trinkets he had condemned so bluntly. Then in a fit of temper she flung them from her with all her might, threw herself upon the chaise-longue, and wept passionately into its cushions. Then the young man proved himself tolerably instructed in the ways of womankind. He said nothing more, made no offer to comfort her by those futile and empty pats on the shoulder which are instinctive with man on such occasions, but simply sat him down and waited.

In time the tempest passed, Sofia sat up and dabbed her eyes with a web of lace and linen. Then she looked round with a tentative smile that was wholly captivating. She was one of those rare women who can afford to cry.

"It's so humiliating!" she protested with racial ingenuousness—one of her most compelling charms. "But it's ridiculous, too. I was so sure no one would ever know."

"No one but an expert ever would, madame."

"You see"—apparently she had forgotten that Lanyard was anything but a lifelong friend—"I needed money so badly, I had them reproduced and sold the originals."

"Madame la princesse—if she will permit—commands my profound sympathy."

"But," she remembered, drying her eyes, "you called me an adventuress, too!"

"But," he contended, gravely, "you had already called me the Lone Wolf."

"But what do you expect, monsieur, when I find you in my rooms—?"

"But what does madame la princesse expect when I find she had been to mine—and brought something valuable away with her, too!"

"I had a reason—"

"So had I."

"What was it?"



“Perhaps it was to see madame la princesse alone—secretly—without exciting the jealousy, which I understand is supernatural, of monsieur le prince.”

“But why should you wish to see me alone?” she demanded, with widening eyes.

“Perhaps to beg madame’s permission to offer her what may possibly prove some slight consolation.”

She weighed his words in dark distrust. What was this consolation? What his game? His attitude remained consistently too deferential and punctilious for one to suspect that by consolation he meant love-making.

“But how did you get in?”

“By the front door, madame. I find it ajar—one assumes, through oversight on the part of one of the servants—it opens to a touch, I walk in—et voila!”

His levity was infectious. In spite of herself, she smiled in sympathy.

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"And what, pray, is this wonderful consolation you would offer me?"

He produced from a pocket a packet of papers.

"I think madame la princesse is interested in these," he said. "If she will be so amiable as to accept them from me, with my compliments and one little word of advice...."

"Ah, monsieur!" Look and tone thanked him more than words could ever. "You are too kind! And your advice—?"

"They tell too much, madame, those letters. And I see you have a fire in the grate ..."

"Monsieur has reason...."

She rose, went to the fireplace and, half kneeling, thrust the letters one by one into the incandescent bed of coals. A ceremony of sentiment at any other time, but not now: her thoughts were far from the man with whose memory these letters were linked, they were in fact not wholly articulate. Just what was passing through her mind she herself would have found it hard to define; she was mainly conscious of a flooding emotion of gratitude to Lanyard; but there was something more, a feeling not unakin to tenderness....

The reaction of her vital young body from a desperate physical conflict, the rapid play of her passions from anger and despair through triumph and delight to gratification and content, from the bitterest sense of frustration and peril to one of security; the uprush of those strange instincts which had lain dormant till roused by the knowledge that she was free at length from the maddening stupidity of social life, together with her recent, implicit self-dedication to a life in all things its converse: these influences were working upon her so strongly as to render her mood more dangerous than she guessed.

Disturbed in her formless reverie, an aimless groping through a bewildering maze of emotions but vaguely apprehended, she started up, faced round and saw Lanyard, topcoat over arm and hat in hand, about to open the door.

"Monsieur!"

He looked back, coolly quizzical. "Madame?"

"What are you doing?"

"Taking my unobtrusive departure, madame la princesse, by the way I came."

"But—wait—come back!"



He shrugged agreeably, released the door-knob, and stood before her, or rather over her—for he was the taller by a good five inches—looking down, quietly at her service.

“I haven’t thanked you.”

“For what, madame? For treating myself to an amusing adventure?”

“It has cost you dear!”

“The fortunes of war ...”

Her hands rose unconsciously, with an uncertain movement. Her face was soft with an elusive bloom of unwonted feeling. Her eyes held a puzzled look, as if she did not quite understand what was moving her so deeply.

“You are a strange man, monsieur...”

“And what shall one say of madame la princesse?”

She could but laugh; and laughter rings the death-knell of constraint.

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But Lanyard remembered uneasily that somebody—Solomon or some other who must have led an interesting life—had remarked that the lips of a strange woman are smoother than oil.

“None the less, monsieur, I am deeply in your debt.”

His smile of impersonal courtesy failed. He was becoming more sensitive than he liked to her charm and the warm sentiment she was giving out to him. This strange access in her of haunting loveliness, the gentle shadows that lay beneath her wide—yet languorous eyes, the almost imperceptible tremor of her sweetly fashioned lips, all troubled him profoundly. He exerted himself to break the spell upon his senses which this woman, wittingly or not, was weaving. But the effort was at best half-hearted.

“I am well repaid,” he said a bit stiffly, “by the knowledge that the honour of madame la princesse is safe.”

Sofia laughed breathlessly. Somehow her hands had found the way to his. Her glance wavered and fell.

“But is it?” she asked in a tone so intimate that it was barely audible. And she laughed once more. “I am not so sure ... as long as monsieur is here.”

Lanyard’s mouth twitched, slow colour mounted in his face, the light in his eyes was lambent. He found himself looking deep into other eyes that were like pools of violet shadow troubled by a deep surge and resurgence of feeling for which there was no name. Aware that they revealed more than he ought to know, he sought to escape them by bending his lips to Sofia’s hands.

Sighing softly, she resigned them to his kisses.

IX

PAID IN FULL

It was late when Lanyard got home, but not too late: when he entered his living-room enough life lingered in the embers in the grate to betray to him a feline shape on all-fours creeping toward his bedchamber door. As he switched up the lights it bounded to its feet and dived through the portieres with such celerity that he saw little more of it than coat-tails level on the wind.

Dropping hat and canvas, Lanyard gave chase and overhauled the marauder as he was clambering out through the open window, where a firm hand on his collar checked his preparations to drop half a dozen feet to the flagged court.

Victor swore fretfully and lashed out a random fist, which struck Lanyard's cheek a glancing blow that carried just enough sting to kindle resentment. So the virtuous householder was rather more than unceremonious about yanking the princely housebreaker inside and lending him a foot to accelerate his return to the living-room; where Victor brought up, on all-fours again, in almost precisely the spot from which he had risen.

He bounced up, however, with a surprising amount of animation and ambition, and flew back to the offensive with flailing fists. In this his judgment was grievously in fault. Lanyard sidestepped, nipped a wrist, twitched it smartly up between the man's shoulder-blades (with a wrench that won a grunt of agony), caught the other arm from behind by the hollow of its elbow, and held his victim helpless—though ill-advised enough to continue to hiss and spit and squirm and kick.

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A heel that struck Lanyard's shin earned Victor a shaking so thoroughgoing that he felt the teeth rattle in his jaws. When it was suspended, he was breathless but thoughtful, and offered no objection to being searched. Lanyard relieved him of a revolver and a dirk, then with a push sent Victor reeling to the table, where he stood panting, quivering, and glaring murder, while his captor put the dagger away and examined the firearm.

"Wicked thing," he commented—"loaded, too. Really, monsieur le prince should be more careful. One of these fine days, if you don't stop playing with such weapons, one of these will go off right in your hand—and the next high-light in your history will be when the judge says: 'And may the Lord have mercy on your soul!'"

Victor confided his sentiments to a handkerchief with which he was mopping his face. Lanyard sat down and wagged a reproving head.

"Didn't catch," he said; "perhaps it's just as well, though; sounded like bad words. Hope I'm mistaken, of course: princes ought to set impressionable plebeians a better pattern."

He cocked a critical eye. "You're a sight, if you don't mind my saying so—look as if the sky had caved in on you. May one ask what happened? Did it stub its toe and fall?"

Victor suspended operations with the handkerchief to bend upon his tormentor a louring, distrustful stare. His head was still heavy, hot, and painful, his mental processes thick with lees of coma; but now he began to appreciate, what naturally seemed apparent, that Lanyard must be unacquainted with the cause of his injuries.

A searching look round the room confirmed him in this error. The canvas lay where Lanyard had dropped it on entering, not in the spot where Victor remembered seeing it last, but where conceivably an unheeded kick might have sent it in the course of his struggle with Sofia. She must have forgotten it, then, when she fled from what she probably thought was murder, and what might well have been.

He was much too sore and shaken to be subtle; and the general trend of his conjectures was perfectly legible to Lanyard, who without delay set himself to conjure away any lingering suspicion of his guilelessness.

"Not squiffy, are you, by any chance?" he enquired with the kindest interest. "You look as if you'd wound up a spree by picking a fight with a bobby. Your cheek's cut and all (shall we say, in deference to the well-known prejudices of the dear B.P.?) ensanguined. Sit down and pull yourself together before you try to explain to what I owe this honour—and so forth."

He got up, clapped a hand on Prince Victor's shoulder, and steered him into an easy chair.

“Anything more I can do to put you at your ease? Would a brandy and soda help, do you think?”

The suggestion was acceptable: Victor signified as much with an ungracious mumble. Lanyard fetched glasses, a decanter, a siphon-bottle, and supplied his guest with a liberal hand before helping himself.

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Victor took the drink without a word of thanks and gulped it down noisily. Lanyard drank sparingly, then crossed the room to a bell-push. Seeing his finger on it Prince Victor started from his chair, but Lanyard hospitably waved him back.

"Don't go yet," he pleaded. "You've only just dropped in, we haven't had half a chance to chat. Besides, you mustn't forget I've got your pistol and your dirk and the upper hand and a sustaining sense of moral superiority and no end of other advantages over you."

"Why," the prince demanded, nervously—"why did you ring?"

"To call a cab for you, of course. I don't imagine you want to walk home—do you?—in your present state of shocking disrepair. Of course, if you'd rather ... But do sit down: compose yourself."

"Let me be," the other snapped as Lanyard offered good-naturedly to thrust him back into the chair. "I am—quite composed."

"That's good! Excellent! Hand steady enough to write me a cheque, do you think?"

"What the devil!"

"Oh, come now! Don't go off your bat so easily. I'm only going to do you a service—"

"Damn your impudence! I want no services of you!"

"Oh, yes you do!" Lanyard insisted, unabashed—"or you will when you learn what a kind heart I've got. Now do be nice and stop protesting! You see, you've touched my heart. I'd no idea you were so passionate about that painting. If I had for one instant imagined you cared enough about it to burglarize my rooms ... But now that I do understand, my dear fellow, I wouldn't deny you for worlds; I make you a free present of it, at the price I paid—twenty thousand and one hundred guineas—exactng no bonus or commission whatever. You'll find blank cheques in the upper right-hand drawer of my desk there; fill in one to my order, and the Corot's yours."

For a moment longer the prince stared, hate and perplexity in equal measure tincturing his regard. Then slowly the look of doubt gave way to the ghost of a crafty smile.

What a blazing fool the fellow was (he thought) to accept a cheque on which payment could be stopped before banking hours in the morning—!

Such fatuity seemed incredible. Yet there it was, egregious, indisputable. Why not profit by it, turn it to his own advantage? To secure what he had sought, the letters concealed between the canvases, and turn them against Sofia, and to play this Lanyard for a fool, all at one stroke—the opportunity was too rich to be slighted.

He dissembled his exultation—or plumed himself on doing so.

“Very well,” he mumbled, sulkily. “I’ll draw the cheque.”

“That’s the right spirit!” Lanyard declared, and escorted him to the desk.

A knock sounded. Lanyard called: “Come in!” A sleepy manservant, half-dressed and warm from his bed, entered.

“You rang, sir?”

“Yes, Harris.” Lanyard tossed him a sovereign. “Sorry to rout you out so late, but I need a cab. Whistle up a growler, will you?”

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"Nk-you, sir."

The man retired cheerfully, rewarded for many a night of broken slumber. Prince Victor got up from the desk and proffered Lanyard the cheque.

"I fancy," he said with a leer, "you'll find that all right."

Lanyard scrutinized the cheque minutely, nodded his satisfaction.

"Thanks ever so ... No, not a word!" He forbade inflexibly a wholly imaginary interposition on the part of Prince Victor. "You don't know how to thank me—do you? Then why try? I know I'm too good, but I really can't help it, it's my nature—and there you are! So what's the good of bickering about it?... Now where did you leave your coat and hat? On my bed, as you came in?"

He smiled charmingly and darted through the portieres, returning with the articles in question. "Do let me help you."

The prince struggled into the coat and grunted an acknowledgment of the service. Lanyard pressed the hat into his hand, picked up the canvas, replaced it in its frame, and tucked both under the princely arm.

Another knock: Harris returned.

"The four-wheeler is w'iting, sir."

"Thanks, Harris. Half a moment: I want a word with you. You see this gentleman?" Lanyard caught Victor's look of angry resentment and interrupted himself. "Don't forget yourself, monsieur le prince. Remember ..."

He patted significantly the pocket which held the revolver, and turned back to Harris.

"This gentleman," he said, consulting the signature to the cheque, "is Prince Victor Vassilyevski. Please remember him. You may have to bear witness against him in court."

"What insolence is this?" Victor demanded, hotly.

"Calm yourself, monsieur le prince." Lanyard repeated the warning gesture. "He is a nobleman of Russia, or says he is, and—strangely enough, Harris!—a burglar. I caught him burglarizing my rooms when I came home just now. You may judge from his appearance what difficulty I had in subduing him."

"E do seem fair used up, sir," Harris admitted, eyeing Victor indignantly. "Would you wish me to call a bobby and give 'im in charge?"

“Thanks, no. Prince Victor and I have compromised. He doesn’t relish going to jail, and I’ve no particular desire to send him there. But he does want what he broke in to steal—that painting you see under his arm—and I’ve agreed to sell it to him. Here’s the cheque he has just given me. Providing payment is not stopped on it, Harris, you will hear no more of this incident. But if by any chance the cheque should come back from his bank—I may ask you to testify to what you have seen and heard here to-night.”

“It is a lie!” Prince Victor shrilled. “You brought me in with you, assaulted me, blackmailed that cheque out of me! Nobody saw us—”

“Sorry,” Lanyard cut in; “but it so happens, that the gentleman who has the rooms immediately above came in when I did, and can testify that I was alone. That’s all, monsieur le prince. Your carriage waits.”

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Harris opened the door. Choking with rage, the prince shuffled out, Lanyard politely escorting him to the curb. There, with a foot lifted to enter the four-wheeler, Prince Victor turned, shaking an impassioned hand in Lanyard's face.

"You'll pay me for this!" he spluttered. "I'll square accounts with you, Lanyard, if I have to follow you to the gates of hell!"

"Better not," Lanyard warned him fairly, "if you do, I'll push you in ... Bon soir, monsieur le prince!"

BOOK II

THE LONE WOLF'S DAUGHTER

I

THE GIRL SOFIA

She sat all day long—from noon, that is, till late at night—on a high stool behind the tall, pulpit-like desk of the caisse; flanked on one hand by the swing door of green baize which communicated with the kitchen, on the other by a hideous black walnut buffet on which fruits of the season were displayed, more or less temptingly, to the taste of Mama Therese.

But for these articles of furniture, the buffet, the desk, and the door to the kitchen quarters, uninterrupted rows of tables, square, with composition-marble tops, lined three walls of the room. The fourth was mainly plate-glass window, one on either side of the main entrance.

Back of the tables were wall-seats upholstered in red plush, dusty and threadbare; and, above, a frieze of mirrors. The floor of the restaurant was a patternless mosaic of small hexagonal tiles, bare in warm weather, in the winter covered by a thick but well-worn Brussels carpet of peculiarly repulsive design. The windows wore half-curtains of net which, after nightfall, were reinforced by ruffled draperies of rep silk. Through the net curtains, by day, the name of the restaurant was shadowed in reverse by plain white-enamel letters glued to the glass:

CAFE DES EXILES

The girl stared so constantly at these letters, during the off hours of the day, that she sometimes wondered if they were not indelibly stamped upon her brain, like this:

[Reverse: CAFE DES EXILES]

She gazed in the direction of the windows as a matter of habit, because Mama Therese objected to her reading at the desk (all the same, sometimes she did it on the sly) because the glimpses she caught, above the half-curtains, of heads of passersby gave her idle imagination something to play with, but mostly because it was difficult otherwise to seem unconscious of the stares that converged toward her from every table occupied by a masculine patron, whether regular or casual—unless the patron happened to be accompanied by a lady, in which unhappy event he had to content himself with furtive, sidelong glances, not always furtive enough by half.

The feminine patrons stared, too, but from quite another angle of view.

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Sofia knew why. If she hadn't, the mirror across the room would have enlightened even a woman without vanity; which paradox this thoroughly human young person was not.

She was, indeed, healthily vain; and when she wasn't focussing dream-dark eyes upon the windows, or verifying additions and making change, she was as likely as not to be stealing consultations with the mirror opposite, making sure she hadn't, in the last few minutes, gone off in her looks. Not that her comeliness bade fair ever to prove the cause of any real excitement. Mama Therese made a first-rate dragon: she was very much on the job of discouraging enterprising young men, and this without respect for union hours or overtime. And when she wasn't functioning as the ubiquitous wet-blanket, Papa Dupont understudied for her, and did it most efficiently, too. If anything he was more vigilant and enthusiastic when it came to administering the snub sufficient than even Mama Therese; in Sofia's sight, indeed, he betrayed some personal feeling in the business; he seemed to consider alien admiration of his charge an encroachment upon his private prerogatives, to be resented accordingly.

Sofia understood. At eighteen—thanks to the comprehensive visual education in the business of life which she could hardly have failed to assimilate from a coign of vantage overlooking every table of a Soho restaurant—there were precious few things she didn't understand. But her insight into Papa Dupont's mind in respect of herself was wholly devoid of sympathy. She was just a little bit afraid of him, and she despised him without measure. And this contempt was founded on something more than his weakness for taking numerous and surreptitious nips (surreptitious, at least, until they became numerous) while presiding over the zinc in the pantry between the restaurant proper and the kitchen; and on something more than his reluctance to let Mama Therese make an honest man of him, although these two had squabbled openly for so many years that most of the house staff believed them to be married hard and fast enough.

For the matter of that, Sofia herself might have been the dupe of this popular delusion—which Mama Therese did her best to encourage by never referring to Dupont save as "mon mari"—had they been less imprudent in recriminations which had passed between them in private when Sofia was of an age so tender that she was presumed to be safely immature of mind. Whereas she had always been precocious, if rather a self-contained child. Almost from infancy she had been conversant with many things which she knew it wouldn't do to talk about.

Such sympathy as Sofia wasted on the couple was all for Mama Therese. What with keeping an eye on Papa Dupont that prevented his drinking himself to death seven times per calendar week, and an eye on Sofia that was fondly credited with being largely responsible for her failure to run away with each and every presentable man who ogled her, and browbeating the waiters and frustrating their attempts to cheat the house out of its fair dues, and supervising the marketing and the cuisine: believe it or not, Mama Therese led a tolerably busy life and deserved whatever gratification she got out

of it, to say nothing of highest commendation for industry, fidelity, and frugality. But that did nothing to prevent Sofia from not liking her.

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Her inability to play up to the relationship in which she stood to Mama Therese in the manner prescribed by sentimentalists worried Sofia more than a little. She was as hungry to give affection as to receive it; and surely she ought to be fond of Mama Therese, who (Sofia was forever being reminded) had in the goodness of her great heart adopted her as the orphaned offspring of a cousin far-removed, and had brought her up at her own expense, expecting no return (excepting humility, gratitude, unquestioning affection, and uncomplaining acceptance of a life of incessant toil at tasks uncongenial when not downright unsavoury, without spending money or hours of untrammelled liberty in which to spend it).

Surely such nobility ought to be requited with nothing less than love!

Nevertheless, the plain, and to Sofia disquieting, truth was: it wasn't.

She was fond of Mama Therese after a fashion. No one was ever more ready to acknowledge the woman's good qualities. But her faults, which included avarice, bad temper, gluttony, native cruelty of inclination, and simple inability to give a damn for anybody but herself, forbade satisfaction of Sofia's yearnings to give her affections freely through bestowing them upon the abundant and florid person of Mama Therese.

Still, she made no murmur. There was more than a trace of fatalism in the composition of her spirit. As she conceived it, in this life either things were or they were not; and as a rule they uncompromisingly were not: one couldn't have everything.

She was not happy, it would be stretching the truth to say she was content, but she was resigned, she was patient, she waited not altogether without confidence....

All the same, sometimes, as she sat, day in day out, on her high stool, looking down on familiar aspects of life's fermentation as it manifests in public restaurants, or peering out of the windows to catch tantalizing glimpses of its freer, ampler, and—alas!—more recondite phases—sometimes Sofia wondered whether there were not grimly cynic innuendo in those three words which the mystery of choice had affixed to the window-panes and graven so deep into her soul.

CAFE DES EXILES

For surely she was in exile there, an exile from all the fun and frolic and, fury of life, marooned in weary isolation, on a high stool, in a frowsty table d'hote, in the living heart of London.

II

MASKS AND FACES

Quite naturally she became acquainted with Faces....

She grew adept at a game which consisted mostly in keeping close watch upon those who for this reason or that engaged her attention, without giving them the slightest reason to suspect she was doing anything of the sort.

One could not always be staring in abstraction at nothing in particular as it passed to and fro on the sidewalk in front of the Cafe des Exiles; one could not often or for long at a time succeed in reading a book held open in one's lap, below the level of the cashier's desk, Mama Therese was too brisk for that; one had to do something with one's mind; and it was sometimes diverting to watch and speculate about people who looked interesting.

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There were so many Faces, they came and went so constantly, like bubbles in a tideway, that to Sofia most of them seemed indistinguishable one from another, mere blurs of flesh colour studded with staring eyes and slitted by apertures which automatically and alternately gaped to receive gobbets of food and goblets of drink and closed to gulp them down. A man needed to be remarkable for something in his looks, not necessarily pulchritude, or for uncommon individuality, for Sofia to favour him with more than one of her seemingly casual glances or to remember him if he visited the cafe a second time.

But those there were who stood out from the rank and file, for whom she watched, whom she missed if they failed to put in appearance at their accustomed hours, about whom her idle but able imagination wove wonderful fantasies, enduing them with histories and environments as far removed from fact as the drab dreams of the realists are from the picturesque commonplaces of everyday.

And there were others who came once and never again, but whom she never forgot. But for some of these last, indeed, she would never have remembered some of the former. The brown-eyed youngster with the sentimental expression and the funny little moustache, for example, lurked in the ruck a long time before the one and only visit of a bird of passage dignified him in the sight of the girl on the high stool.

On the occasion of his first appearance (but that was long ago, Sofia couldn't remember how long) the slender young man with the soulful eyes and the insignificant moustache had commended himself to her somewhat derisive attention by seeming uncommonly exquisite for that atmosphere.

The Cafe des Exiles was little haunted by the world of fashion; its diner a prix fixe (2/6), although excellent, surprisingly well done for the money, did not much seduce the clientele of the Carlton and the Ritz. Now and again its remoteness, promising freedom from embarrassing encounters save through unlikely mischance, would bring it the custom of a clandestine couple from the West End, who would for a time make it an almost daily rendezvous, meeting nervously, sitting if possible in the most shadowy corner, the farthest from the door, and holding hands when they mistakenly assumed that nobody was looking—until the affair languished or some contretemps frightened them away.

Aside from such visitations, however, the great world coldly passed the cafe by; although it couldn't complain for lack of patronage, and in fact prospered exceedingly if without ostentation on the half-crowns of loyal Soho and more fickle suburbia.

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The Sohobohemian on its native heath and the City clerk on the loose, however, were not prone to such vestments as young Mr. Karlake affected. It wasn't that he overdressed; even the ribald would have hesitated to libel him with the name of a "nut"—which is Cockney for what the United States knows as a "fancy (or swell) dresser"; it was simply that he was always irreproachably turned out, whatever the form of dress he thought appropriate to the time of day; and that his wardrobe was so complete and varied that he seldom appeared twice in the same suit of clothes—except, of course, after nightfall; though his visits to the Cafe des Exiles for dinner or afterward were so infrequent that each attained (after Sofia began to notice him at all) the importance of an occasion. Luncheon was his time, and those empty hours at the end of the afternoon which London fills in with tea and Soho with drinks.

He seemed to have a very wide and catholic acquaintance among people of all ranks and stations in life; one could hardly call them friendships, for he lunched or sipped an apertif not often with the same person twice in a blue moon. And whether his companion were a curate or some ragged wastrel of the quarter; painted young person from the chorus of the newest revue or proper matron from Bayswater; keen adventurer from Fleet Street or solid merchant from the City, his attitude was much the same: easy, impersonal, unaffected, courteous, detached. He was as apt as not (going on his facial expression) to be mooning about Sofia when his guest was gesticulating wildly and uttering three hundred words a minute. When he spoke it was modestly, in a voice of agreeable cadences but pitched so low that Sofia never but twice heard anything he said; and his manner was not characterized by brisk decision. All the same, one noticed that he had, as a rule, the last word, that what he said left his hearer either satisfied or pensive.

He was unmistakably silly about Sofia; though that didn't impress her, too many of the regulars were just as hard hit, one more or less didn't count. But he never stared to the point of rudeness, and it always seemed to make him hugely uncomfortable if she appeared in the least aware of his adoration; and Mama Therese and Papa Dupont never even noticed him, so circumspect was he. Still, Sofia saw, and sometimes wondered, just as she wondered now and then about most of the possible men who seemed disposed to be sentimental about her.

For there were times when she felt she could do with a little more first-hand experience and a little less second-hand knowledge.

Love (she supposed) must be a very agreeable frame of mind to be in, it was so generally vogue....

What first led her to think that Mr. Karlake might be an interesting person to know, entirely aside from his admiration, happened on an afternoon in June, a warm day for England, when a temperature of some 81 degrees was responsible for "heat-wave" broadsides issued by the evening papers.

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At about tea time, Mr. Karlake, faultlessly arrayed, ambled in, selected a table diagonally across the room from the caisse, exchanged pleasantries with the waiter who served him a picon, and used a copy of The Evening Standard & St. James's Gazette as a cover for his wistful admiration of Sofia.

Presently he was joined by a gentleman twice his age, if not older, whose conservative smartness was such that one wondered if he hadn't strayed out of bounds through inadvertence. One would have thought his place was in the clubs of Piccadilly if not (at that particular hour) at a tea table on the river terrace of the Houses of Parliament. On the other hand, there wasn't a trace of self-importance in his habit, it achieved distinction solely through the unpretending dignity of a decent self-esteem.

Sofia tried to fix what it was that made her think him the handsomest man she had ever seen. She failed. He wasn't at all handsome in the smug fashion associated with the popular interpretation of that term; his features were engagingly irregular of conformation, but the impression they conveyed was of a singular strength together with as rare a fineness of spirit. A mobile and expressive face, stamped with a history of strange ordeals; but this must not be interpreted as meaning that it was haggard or prematurely aged; on the contrary, it had youthful colour and was but lightly scored with wrinkles, its sole confession of advancing years was in the gray at either temple. The eyes, perhaps, told more than anything else of trials endured and memories that would never rest.

Once they had looked into hers (but that came later) Sofia was sure she would never forget those eyes. And as she saw them then, she never did forget them. But the next time she saw them she did not know them at all.

The newcomer hailed Mr. Karlake by his name (which was the first time Sofia had heard it), sat down on the wall-seat beside him and, when the waiter came, desired an absinthe.

He had used two languages already, English to Karlake, French to the waiter; Sofia understood both and spoke them to perfection. So it was rather exasperating when, his absinthe having been served and the customary platitudes passed on the weather and their respective states of health, the conversation was continued in a tongue with which Sofia was not only unacquainted but which sounded like none she had ever heard spoken. This seemed the more annoying because there were few people in the restaurant to drown with chatter the sound of those two voices and because, in spite of their guarded tones, their table was one so situated that some freak of acoustics carried every syllable uttered at it, even though whispered, to the quick ears at the cashier's desk. A circumstance which had treated Sofia to many a moment of covert entertainment and not a few that threatened to shatter what slender illusions had survived eighteen years of Mama Therese. But nobody else (with the possible

exception of the last) was acquainted with this secret of the restaurant, and Sofia was careful never to mention it.

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Now it so happened that Mr. Karslake had never before sat at that particular table.

The language spoken at it to-day intrigued Sofia extravagantly. It was rich in labials, gutturals, and odd sibilances. She was positive it was not a European tongue, though she thought it might possibly be Russian, because it sounded rather like Russian print looks; it might just as well have been Arabic or Choctaw, for all Sofia could say to the contrary. But his fluent ease in it impressed her with the notion that young Mr. Karslake might not, after all, be as negligible a person as he looked and as she indifferently had assumed.

She determined to study him more attentively.

It was rather a long confabulation, too, and one that both men seemed to take very seriously—though its upshot was apparently quite acceptable to both—and terminated abruptly with Mr. Karslake announcing, in English, with every evidence of satisfaction:

“Good! Then that’s settled.”

To this the older man dissented tolerantly.

“Pardon: nothing is settled; it is proposed, merely.”

“Well,” said Karslake with a little laugh that to Sofia sounded empty, “at all events it ought to be amusing.”

The other lifted one eyebrow and smiled remotely.

“You think so?”

“To be ordering you about, sir? I should say so!” But his companion wasn’t listening or chose purposely to ignore that accent of respect.

“You are right, my friend,” he said, abstractedly: “it will be amusing. But what in life is not? I fancy that is why most of us go on, because we find the play entertaining in spite of ourselves. And even when we think of Death ... there’s the possibility that on the other side of the curtain, where the unseen audience sits, whose hisses and applause we never hear ... over there it may be more entertaining still!”

Karslake was inquisitively watching his face.

“You would say that,” he commented, deference and admiration in his voice. “By all accounts you’ve had a most amusing life.”

"I have found it so." The other nodded with glimmering eyes. "Not always at the time, of course. But when I look back, especially at my beginnings, at the times that seemed hardest and most intolerable ..."

He was thoughtful for a moment, glancing interestedly round the room.

"It takes one back."

"What does?"

"This cafe, my friend."

"To your beginnings, you mean?"

"Yes. It is very like the cafe at Troyon's, at this hour especially, when there are so few English about."

"Troyon's?"

"A restaurant in Paris. Famous in its day. Several years ago—before the war—it burned down one night, cremating many memories. While it stood I hated it, now I miss it; Paris without it is no more the Paris that I knew."

"Why did you hate it, sir?"

"Because I suffered there."

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He indicated a weedy young Alsatian across the room, a depressed and pimply creature in a waiter's jacket and apron, who was shambling from table to table and collecting used glasses and saucers.

"You see that omnibus yonder? What he is to-day, that was I in mine—omnibus, scullion, valet-de-chambre, butt and scapegoat-in-general to the establishment, scavenger of food that no one else would eat.... I suffered there, at Troyon's."

"You, sir?" Karslake exclaimed in astonishment. "Whoever would have thought that you ... How did you escape?"

"It occurred to me, one day, I was less than half alive and never would be better while I stayed on in that servitude. So I walked out—into life."

"I wish you'd tell me, sir," Karslake ventured, eagerly.

"Some day, perhaps, when I get back. But now"—he looked at his watch—"I've got just time enough to taxi to my hotel, pack, and catch the boat train."

"Don't wait for me," Karslake suggested, signalling the waiter.

"Perhaps it would be as well if I didn't."

They shook hands, and the older man got up, secured his hat and stick, and started out toward the door, moving leisurely, still looking about him with the narrowed eyes and smile of reminiscence.

Of a sudden that look was abolished utterly. He had caught sight of Sofia.

Her interest had been so excited by the singular confidences she had overheard that the girl had quite forgotten herself and her professional pose of blank neutrality. She was bending forward a little, forearms resting on the desk, frankly staring.

The man's stride checked, his smile faded, his eyes grew wide and cloudy with bewilderment. For a moment Sofia thought him on the point of bowing, as one might on unexpectedly encountering an acquaintance after many years: there was that hint of impulse hindered by uncertainty. And in that moment the girl was conscious of a singular sensation of breathlessness, as if something impended whose issue might change all the courses of her life. A feeling quite insane and unaccountable, to be sure; and nothing came of it whatever. With a readiness so instant that the break in his walk must have been imperceptible to anybody but Sofia, the man recollected himself, composed his face, and proceeded to the door.

Confounded with inexplicable disappointment, Sofia sat unstirring.

In the open doorway the man turned and looked back, not at her, but at Karslake, as if of half a mind to return and say something more to the younger man. But he didn't.

He never came back.

III

THE AGONY COLUMN

Sofia dated from that afternoon the first stirrings of a discontent which grew in her throughout the summer till everything related to her lot seemed abominable in her sight.

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Even without this subjective inquietude it would have been an unpleasant summer. All the world was at sixes and sevens, the social unrest stirred up by the war showed no signs of subsiding, but indeed, quite the contrary, there was trouble in the very air—ominous portents of a storm whose dull, grim growling down the horizon could be heard only too clearly by those who did not wilfully close their ears, grin fatuous complacency, and bleat like brainless sheep: “All’s well!”

High-spirited youth and witless wealth a-lust for strange new pleasures turned from the long strain of conflict to indulgence in endless orgies of extravagance like nothing ever witnessed by a world long since surfeited with contemplation of weird excesses: daily that wild dance of death attained wilder stages of saturnalia, the bands blaring ever louder to drown the mutter of savage elemental forces working underneath the crust.

And ever and anon a lull would fall and the world would shudder to the iteration of a word that spelled calamity to all things fair and sweet and lovable in life, the word *Bolshevism*....

In the Cafe des Exiles there was endless discord and strife.

For several reasons trade was not what it had been, even for the slack season of summer it was poor. The cost of everything had gone up, waiters were insubordinate and unreasonable in their demands, Mama Therese had been constrained to increase the fixed price of the dinner, old customers took umbrage at this and their patronage elsewhere.

Mama Therese cultivated a temper that grew day by day more vile, Papa Dupont displayed new artfulness in the matter of sneaking his daily toll of drink and showed it; the two squabbled incessantly.

One of the chefs, surmising the irregularity of their relations and foreseeing an imminent break, sought to turn it to his own profit by making amorous overtures to Mama Therese, who for reasons of her own, probably hoping to make Papa Dupont jealous, encouraged the idiot. And, as if this were not sickening enough, Papa Dupont, far from resenting this menace to the pseudo-peace of the menage, ignored if he did not welcome it, and daily displayed new tenderness for Sofia. He kept near her as constantly as he could, he would even interrupt a wrangle with Mama Therese to favour the girl with a languishing glance or a term of endearment; he was forever caressing her disgustingly with his eyes.

The swing door between the cafe and the pantry had warped on its hinges and would not stay quite shut. Normally it stuck in a position which permitted whoever was at the zinc an uninterrupted view of the desk of la dame du comptoir. Instead of having it fixed, Papa Dupont put off that duty from day to day and developed a fond attachment for the place at the zinc. For hours on end Sofia, on her high stool, would be conscious

of his gloating regard, his glances that lingered on the sweet lines of her throat, the roundness of her pretty arms.

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She dared make no sign to show that she knew and resented, to do so would be merely to draw upon herself the spite of Mama Therese.

But she simmered with indignation, and contemplated futile plans—especially in the long, empty hours of the afternoon, between luncheon and the hour of the apertifs—countless vain plans for abolishing these intolerable conditions.

She thought a great deal of the strange man who had talked with young Mr. Karslake, and wondered about him. Somehow she seemed unable to forget him; never before had any one she didn't know made such a lasting impression upon her imagination.

Sometimes she wasted time trying to explain to herself why the man had seemed, for that brief instant, to think he knew her, only to dismiss such speculations eventually with the assurance that she probably resembled in moderate degree somebody whom he had once known.

But mostly she was preoccupied with pondering the strangeness of it, that he who seemed so brilliant and brave a figure of the great world should, according to his own confession, have risen from beginnings as lowly as her own. All that he had suffered in the days of his youth, in that place in Paris which he called Troyon's, Sofia had suffered here and in large part continued to suffer without prospect of alleviation or hope of escape. And remembering what he had said, that his own trials had come to an end only when he awakened to the fact that he was, as he had put it, "less than half alive" there at Troyon's, and had simply "walked out into life," she was persuaded that the cure for her own discomfort and discontent would never be found in any other way. But she lacked courage to adventure it.

To say "walk out and make an end of it" was all very well; but assuming that she ever should muster up spirit enough to do it—what then? Which way should she turn, once she had passed out through the doors? What could she do? She had neither means nor friends, and she was much too thoroughly conversant with the common way of the world with a woman alone to imagine that, by taking her life in her own hands, she would accomplish much more than exchange the irk of the frying pan for the fury of the fire.

All the same, she knew that she must one day do it and chance the consequences. Things couldn't go on as they were.

And even granting that the outcome of any effort at self-assertion must be unhappy, she grew impatient.

Meanwhile, she did nothing, she sat quietly on her perch, looked with stony composure over the heads of the multitude, indifferent alike to admiration and the uncharitable esteem of her own sex, and waited with a burning heart.



Mr. Karslake ran true to form. He drifted in and out casually, always idle and degage and elegant, he continued his irregular conferences with ill-assorted companions, he worshipped discreetly and evidently without the faintest hope, he seemed more than ever a trifling and immaterial creature. Chance did not again lead him to the table where he had sat with the man whom Sofia could not forget, and only the memory of that conversation held any place for Karslake in the consideration of the girl.

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Even at that she didn't consider him seriously, she looked for him and missed him when he didn't appear solely because of a secret hope that some day that other one would come back to meet him in the cafe.

Why she held fast to that hope Sofia could not have said.

Toward the middle of summer Mr. Karslake absented himself for several weeks, and when he showed up again his visits were fewer and more widely spaced.

On an afternoon late in August, a hot and weary day, he sauntered in with his habitual air of having in particular nothing to do and all the time there was to do it in, and found a man waiting for him.

This was a person whom Sofia had quite overlooked after one glance had classified and pigeon-holed him. A single glance had been enough. They do some things better in England; a man cast for any particular role in life, for example, is apt to conform himself, mentally, physically, and even as to his outer habiliments, so nicely to the mould that he is forever unmistakably what he is even to the most casual observer. So this man was a butler, he had been born and bred a butler, he lived by butting, a butler he would die; not a pompous, turkeycock butler, such as the American stage will offer you when it takes up English fashionable life in a serious way, but a mild-mannered, decent body, with plain side-whiskers, chopped short on a line with the lobes of his ears, otherwise clean-shaven, his hair pathetically dyed, a colourless cast of countenance, eyes meek and mild.

He was soberly dressed in black coat and waistcoat, the latter showing a white triangle of hard-polished shirt and a black bow tie, with indefinite gray trousers and square-toed boots by no means new. His middle was crossed by a thick silver watch-chain, and curious, old-fashioned buttons of agate set in square frames of gold fastened his round stiff cuffs of yesterday. He carried a well-brushed bowler as unfashionable as unseasonable.

When Mr. Karslake entered, the polished pattern of a young gentleman of means, slenderly well set-up in an exquisitely tailored brown lounge suit, wearing a boater and carrying a slender malacca stick in one chamois-gloved hand, the butler stood up at his table, quietly acknowledged his greeting—"Ah, Nogam! you here already?"—and waited for the younger man to be seated before resuming his own chair: a stoop-shouldered symbol of self-respecting respectability, not too intelligent, subdued by definite and unresentful acceptance of "his place."

Their table was the one immediately beyond the buffet; and the cafe was very quiet, with only three other patrons, two of whom were playing chess while the third was reading an old issue of the Echo de Paris. So Sofia could, if she had cared to

eavesdrop, have overheard everything that passed between Mr. Karlake and the man Nogam. But she didn't; their first few speeches failed to excite her curiosity in the least.

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She heard Mr. Karlake, who was becomingly affable to one of inferior station, express the perfunctory hope that he hadn't kept Nogam waiting long, and Nogam reply to the simple effect of "Oh, not at all, sir." To this he added that he 'oped there had been no 'itch, he was most heager to be installed in his new situation, and would do his best to give satisfaction. Karlake replied airily that he was sure Nogam would do famously, and Nogam said "Thank you, sir." Then Karlake announced they must bustle along, because they were expected by some person unnamed, but just the same he meant to have a drink before he budged a foot. And he called a waiter and requested a whiskey and soda for himself and some beer for Nogam.... And Sofia turned her attention to other things.

The murmur of their talk meant nothing to her after that, and she forgot them entirely till they got up to leave, and then wasted only a moment in wondering why Mr. Karlake, if he were, as he seemed to be, engaging a butler for some friend or employer, should have arranged to meet the man in a cafe of Soho. But it didn't matter, and she dismissed the incident from her mind.

What did matter was that she was to-day more than ever galled by the deadly circumstances of her existence. If they were to continue to obtain, she felt, life would grow simply unendurable, and she would do something reckless to get a little relief from the tedium and the ugliness of it all.

She was fed up with everything, the shrewishness of Mama Therese, the drunkenness of Papa Dupont, the hideous dullness of the cafe, the smell of food, the fumes of tobacco, the reek of wines.

She was fed up with the leers of Papa Dupont, the scowls of Mama Therese, the grimaces of waiters, the stares of customers, the very sight of herself in the mirror across the room.

She was fed up with being fed up, she wanted to do something lunatic, she wanted to kick and scream and drum on the floor with her heels.

And all the while, beyond the threshold, life in the street was flowing by, a restless stream, and the voice of it was a siren call to her hungry heart, whispering of freedom, laughing low of love, roaring robustly of brave adventures.

And she sat there with folded hands, mutinous yet impotent, afraid, a useless thing with sullen eyes ... wasted ...

As was her custom, between six and seven, before the busy hours of the evening, she had her dinner fetched to a table near by.



Somebody had left a copy of a morning paper on the wall-seat. Sofia glanced through it without much interest. None the less, when she had finished, she took the sheet back to the caisse with her and intermittently, as occasion offered, read snatches of it quite openly, so bored that she didn't care if Mama Therese did catch her at this forbidden practice; a good row would be almost welcome ... anything to break the monotony....

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When she had digested without edification every item of news, she devoured the advertisements of the shops, then turned to the Agony Column, which she had saved up for a savoury.

She read the appeal of the widow of the English army officer who wanted some kind-hearted and soft-headed person to finance her in setting up an establishment for “paying guests.”

She read the card of the young gentleman of good family but impoverished means who admitted that he had every grace and talent heart could desire and who, in frantic effort to escape going to work for his living, threw himself bodily upon the generosity of an unknown, and as yet non-existent, benefactor, hinting darkly at suicide if nothing came of this last attempt to get himself luxuriously maintained in indolence.

She read the advertisements of money-lenders who yearned to advance fabulous sums to the nobility and gentry on their simple notes of hand.

She read the thinly disguised professional cards of lonely ladies whose unhappy lot could be mitigated only by congenial male companionship.

She read the ingenuous matrimonial bids.

She read the announcement of the lady of (deleted) title who was willing, for a substantial consideration, to introduce gentlefolk of means and their daughters to the most exclusive social circles.

She read the naive solicitation of the alleged ex-officer of the B.E.F., who had won through the war with every known decoration except the Double Cross of the Order of St. Gall and with nothing of his anatomy left whole except his cheek, begging some great-hearted soul to buy him a barrel organ to play in the streets.

And then her eye was arrested by the appearance of her own name in the text of a brief advertisement, which she read naturally, with heightened interest:

IF MICHAEL LANYARD will communicate privately he will hear news of Sofia his daughter. Address Secretan & Sypher, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, W.C. 3

IV

MUTINY

Sofia had never heard the name of Michael Lanyard. Neither did the firm style of Messrs. Secretan & Sypher, Solicitors, mean anything to her. Notwithstanding, she wasted more time than she knew trying to picture to herself a man who looked like

Michael Lanyard sounded, and wishing (no matter what his looks might be) that she were his long-lost daughter Sofia, and that he would see the advertisement, and communicate privately as requested, and hear news of her, and come speeding in a Rolls-Royce to the Cafe des Exiles, and walk in and humble Papa Dupont with a look of hauteur and confound Mama Therese with a peremptory word, and take Sofia by the hand and lead her out and induct her into such an environment as suited her rightful station: said environment necessarily comprising a town house if not on Park Lane at least nearly adjacent to it, and a country house sitting, in the mellowed beauty of its Seventeenth Century architecture, amid lordly acres of velvet lawn and private park.

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She hoped the country house would be within sight of the sea, and that the family garage would run to a comfortable little town-car for her personal use when she went shopping in Bond Street, or to pay calls or leave cards, or to concerts and matinees....

At about this stage her chateaux en Espagne began to rock upon their foundations; a seismic phenomenon due to the appearance of Mama Therese and Papa Dupont, coming from zinc and kitchen for their dinner, which meal they habitually consumed in the cafe when the evening rush was over, the tables undressed, and the establishment had settled down to drowse away the dull hours till closing time.

Thus reminded that it was nine o'clock or thereabouts of a stuffy evening in a stodgy world where nothing ever happened that hadn't wearily happened the day before and the day before that and so back to the beginning of Time, and wasn't scheduled tediously to continue happening to-morrow and the day after and so on to the end of Eternity, Sofia sighed and shook herself and put away the vanity of dreams.

But her beauty, as she sat brooding, was as sultry as the night.

In the rear of the room Mama Therese and Papa Dupont wrangled sourly over their food; not with impassioned rancour but in the natural order of things—as others might discuss the book of the moment or the play of the year or scandal or Charlie Chaplin or the thundering fiasco of Versailles—these two discussed each other's failings with utmost candour and freedom of expression: handling their subjects without gloves; never hesitating to touch upon topics not commonly mentioned in civil intercourse or to use the apt, unprintable word; never dreaming of politely terming a damned old hoe a spade; tossing the ball of recrimination to and fro with masterly ease.

Their preoccupation with this pastime was so thoroughgoing that Mama Therese even failed to notice the passage of the postman on his last round of the day. Ordinarily, for reasons best known to herself and which Sofia had never thought to question, Mama Therese preferred personally to receive all letters and contrived to be on hand at the postman's customary hours of call. But to-night she only realized that he had come and gone when, happening to glance toward the caisse, she saw Sofia shuffling the half-dozen envelopes which had been left with her.

Immediately Mama Therese pushed back the table and got up, wiping chin and moustache with her napkin as she rolled toward the desk.

But she was too late. Already Sofia had sorted out and was staring in blank wonder at an envelope addressed to Mama Therese and bearing in its upper left-hand corner the imprint of its origin:

*Secretan & Sypher
Solicitors*

*Lincoln's Inn
Fields London, W.C. 3.*

As yet she was simply startled by the coincidence, her brain had not had time to absorb its full significance—that Mama Therese should receive a communication from these distinctively named solicitors on the evening of the very day on which they advertised concerning a young woman named Sofia!—when the letter was snatched out of her hand, a torrent of objurgation was loosed upon her devoted head, and she looked into the black scowl of the Frenchwoman.

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“Sneak! Spying little cat! How dare you pry into my letters?”

“But, Mama Therese—!”

“Be still, you! Has one asked you to speak? Give me those others”—Mama Therese with a vast show of violence appropriated them from Sofia’s unresisting grasp—“and after this keep your nose of a mouchard out of what doesn’t concern you!”

“But, Mama Therese!—”

“Hold your tongue. I wish to hear nothing from you, I hear too much—yes, and see too much, too! Oh, don’t flatter yourself I am like that fat dolt of a Dupont, to be taken in by a pair of round eyes and innocent ways. I know your sort, I know *you*, mam’selle, too well! Me, I am nobody’s fool, least of all yours, young woman. What goes on under my nose, I see; and if you imagine otherwise you are a bigger simpleton that you take me for.”

She snapped her fingers viciously in Sofia’s crimsoned face, uttered a contemptuous “*Zut!*” and waddled off, shaking her head and growling to herself.

Sofia felt stunned. The offensive had been launched so swiftly, she was conscious of having done so little to invite it, she had been taken unprepared, thrown into confusion, her feeble objections silenced and overwhelmed by that deluge of abuse, publicly disgraced....

Her face was burning, and tears started in her eyes; but she winked them back, she would not let them fall. Conscious of the grins of the handful of patrons, and the leers of the waiters, she steeled herself to suppress every betrayal of the mortification in which her soul was writhing, she made no sign but stared on stonily at the blackness of the night that peered in at the open doors.

Then indignation came to her rescue, the flaming colour ebbed from her face and left it unnaturally white, the mists before her eyes dissipated and their look grew fixed and hard, even her lips took on a grim, unyielding set. Beneath the desk her hands clenched into small fists. But she did not move.

The sensation stirred up by the outbreak of Mama Therese subsided, the domino players resumed their game, the old gentleman reading *Le Rire* turned a page and read on with a knowing smile, lovers returned to their low-voiced love-making, waiters yawned behind their hands, all was as it had been save that, at their table (Sofia could see by the mirror, without looking directly) Mama Therese and Papa Dupont seemed to have declared an armistice and were gobbling down the rest of their meal in silence and indecorous haste.

Presently they got up and sought their living quarters. To do this they had to pass the caisse and through the green baize door. Mama Therese marched ahead with forbidding frown and quivering chins, with the militant carriage of misprized and affronted rectitude. To her, it was obvious, Sofia for the time being did not exist. At her heels Papa Dupont shambled uneasily, hanging the head of deep thoughtfulness, avoiding Sofia's gaze. It was his part to pretend that all was well and always would be; only he lacked the effrontery, just then, for his usual smirk.

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When they had disappeared Sofia began to think.

There was something more in this affair than mere coincidence, there was mystery, a sinister question.

Her countenance grew as dark as the complexion of her reverie. Athwart the field of her abstracted vision drifted the figure of young Mr. Karslake. She was barely conscious of it.

He seated himself with plain premeditation directly opposite the caisse, staring openly. But Sofia did not heed him at all. An odd smile shadowed his lips, an expression half eager, half apprehensive; there was a hint of puzzlement in his scrutiny. It was rather as if he had unexpectedly found some new reason for thinking the girl an exceptionally interesting personality. But she continued all unaware.

Shortly after being served with a drink which he ordered but made no offer to taste, he moved as if minded to rise and cross to Sofia, sat up and edged forward on the wall-seat with a singular air of timidity and embarrassment. But whatever his intention, he reconsidered and sat back, glancing round the room to see if anybody were watching him. He could not see that anybody was. Not even Sofia. Relieved, he settled back, found a handsome gold case in the waistcoat of his dinner jacket, extracted a cigarette, nipped it between his lips—and forgot to light it.

Of a sudden Sofia had arrived at a decision; and with every expression of it in her manner she slipped down from the high stool and left the caisse to take care of itself. Turning to the swing door she barged through with a high head and fire of determination illuminating her face. She had had enough of riddles.

Behind the zinc an elderly and trusted waiter was nodding. The kitchen was cold and dark for the night. Papa Dupont, then, would be upstairs, closeted with the genius of the establishment.

From the pantry a narrow staircase led up to the apartment above the restaurant. Sofia mounted rapidly, with a firm tread that was nevertheless practically noiseless, thanks to the paper-thin soles of well-worn slippers. She could hear voices bickering above.

At the top there was a short, dark corridor, with three doors. Two of these were closed on sleeping-rooms; the third door, to a sort of combination office and living-room, stood open, letting out a stream of light.

Sofia approached on tiptoe, though the altercation going on within had reached a stage so acute that it was doubtful whether either of the disputants would have heard had she stumped like a navvy.

The point of dissension was not at first apparent, because Mama Therese was speaking, and what she said had exclusively to do with her estimate of Dupont's character, the mettle of his spirit, the stuff of his mentality, the authenticity of his pedigree (with especial reference to the virtue of his maternal ancestry) and the circumstances of his upbringing; which estimate in sum was low but by no means so low as the terms in which Mama Therese was inspired to couch it.

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Papa Dupont did not seem to be greatly interested. He had heard all this before, many a time, with insignificant phraseological variations. Sofia, pausing unseen and unsuspected in the darkness just outside the doorway, could see him slouching deep in his chair, to one side of the table, his soft fat hands deep in the pockets of his trousers, his chin sunken on his chest, something dogged in the louring frown which he was bending upon nothing, something of genuine indifference in his passive attitude toward the blowsy virago who was leaning across the table the better to spit vituperation at him.

And he waited with singular patience until she had to stop for want of breath. Then he shrugged and said heavily:

“Still, I don’t see what else you propose to do, my old one.”

Apparently his old one was as poor in expedient as he. “It is for nothing,” she said, acidly, “that one looks to you!”

“I have said my say. If you have anything better to suggest....” He made a rhetorical pause for reply, but Mama Therese was well blown and sulky for the moment. “I am not old, not so old as you, and I have reason to believe the girl is not indifferent to my person.”

“Drooling old pig,” Mama Therese observed with reason: “if you dream she would trouble to look twice at you—!”

“That remains to be seen. And I, for one, fail to see how else we are to hold her. All this money that has been coming in, paid on the dot every quarter—that means there is more, much more to come to her. Are you ready to give it up?”

“Never!” Mama Therese thumped the table vehemently. “It is mine by rights, I have earned it. Look at the way I have slaved for her, the tender care I have lavished upon her, ever since she was a little one in my arms.”

“By all means,” Papa Dupont agreed, “look at it, but don’t talk about it to her. She might not understand you. Also, do not depend upon her to endorse any claim you might set up based upon such assertions.”

“She is an ungrateful baggage!”

“Possibly; but she is human, she has a memory—”

“Are you going to be sentimental about her again?” Mama Therese demanded. “Pitiful old goat!”

“But I am not in the least sentimental,” Papa Dupont disclaimed. “It is rather I who am practical, you who are sentimental. I ask you: Is there any way we can hold on to that

money unless I marry Sofia? You do not answer. Why? Because there *is* no other way. Then I am practical. But you will not admit that. And why? Because we have lived together for a number of years through force of habit, because once, very long ago, we were lovers, you and I—so long ago that you have forgotten you ever had a softer name for me than pig or goat. Who is the sentimentalist now—eh?”

“Shut your face!” Mama Therese growled. “You annoy me. I have a presentiment I shall one day murder you.”

“You would have done that long ago,” Papa Dupont pointed out, “if you had had the courage. Enough! I am silent. But when you are tired trying to think out another way, reflect on my solution. Meantime, let me have another look at that accursed letter.”

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Mama Therese did not respond, she offered no objection when Dupont took up the sheet of paper that lay between them, but ground the heels of her hands into her fat cheeks and sat glowering vindictively while he read aloud, slowly, with the labour of one to whom reading is unaccustomed dissipation:

DEAR MADAM:

Herewith we beg to enclose our cheque to your order in the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds, being the quarterly payment in advance due you from the estate of our deceased client, the Princess Sofia Vassilyevski, for your care of her daughter. We further beg to advise that, pursuant to the provisions of her will, we begin to-day, on the eighteenth birthday of the young Princess Sofia, a search for her father with the object of apprising him of his daughter's existence. Therefore we would request you to make arrangements to have the young Princess Sofia brought to England forthwith from the convent in France where we understand she is finishing her education. We take leave, however, to advise that, pending the outcome of our enquiries, the question of her father's existence be not discussed with the young princess. In event of his death being established or of failure to find him within six months, the Princess Sofia is to enter without more delay or formality into possession of her mother's estate.

Papa Dupont put down the letter. "It is plain enough," he expounded: "if this father is found, we can whistle for our money; whereas if I were married to Sofia, as her husband I would control—"

He broke off sharply, and added in consternation: "One million thunders!"

Sofia stood between them.

And yet she wasn't the Sofia they knew, but another person altogether, a transfigured and exalted Sofia, aflame with righteous wrath and contemptuous with the pride of birth which had leaped into full being a moment since.

A princess, born the daughter of a princess, now she knew and looked it.

All thought of fear or deference was gone, she had nothing left but scorn for these two despicable creatures, the fat harpy and her crapulent consort who had battered so long upon her misery, who had held her in bondage to the most menial tasks of their wretched restaurant while they filched and hoarded the money paid them for giving her the care and the advantages that were her due.

And something of this new-found dignity, to which her title was so unquestionable, which set her upon a level from which she could not but look down on these two paltry frauds, so abashed the Frenchwoman that the phrases of invective and vilification which

gushed instinctively from the foul springs of her temper stuck in her throat, she couldn't utter them, and she well-nigh choked with impotent fury and fear as the girl spoke.

"You swindlers!" Sofia said, deliberately. "You poor cheats! To pocket a thousand pounds a year of my mother's money—and make me slave for you in your wretched cafe! And for eighteen years! For eighteen years you have been robbing me of every right I had in the world, robbing me of everything I've needed and longed and prayed for, everything you were paid to give me—while I drudged for you and endured your ill-temper and your abuse and the contamination of association with you!... Give me that letter."

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She possessed herself of it unopposed. But now Mama Therese found her tongue.

“What—what do you mean?” she gasped, livid with fright. Was not a fortune slipping through her avaricious fingers? “What are you going to do?”

“Do?” Sofia cried. “I don’t know, more than this: I’m not going to stay another hour under this roof, I’m going to leave to-night—now— immediately! That’s what I’m going to do!”

“Where are you going?”

The question halted Sofia in the doorway.

“To find my father—wherever he is!”

She left the two staring at each other, dumbfounded and aghast.

At the far end of the passage she flung open her bedchamber door, entered, turned up the light, and snatched her cloak and hat from pegs beneath the curtained shelf that held her scanty wardrobe.

Adjusting these before the mirror she could hear Therese bawling at Dupont to follow and stop her. Sofia had little fear he would find heart to attempt that, none the less she hurried. Once her hat was adjusted there was nothing to detain her; the best she had she stood in; no sentimental associations invested that room, the tomb of her defrauded childhood, the prison of her maltreated youth, to make her linger there, but only hateful ones to speed her going.

She turned and fled.

Stumbling on the stairs, she heard Therese still screaming imprecations and commands at Dupont, then the clumping of the man’s feet as, yielding at length, he started in pursuit.

Through the green baize door she burst into the cafe like a young tornado. Every head turned her way with gaping mouths and protruding eyes of astonishment as she stopped at the caisse and brazenly, in the face of them all, plundered the till.

This was a matter of necessity. Sofia had not one shilling of her own. But those two had robbed her, what she took was not so much as a thousandth part of the money of which they had despoiled her. Moreover, she dared not go out penniless to face London.

Snatching a handful of loose coin, she made for the door. But the delay had been fatal. Dupont was now at her heels, and displaying extraordinary agility in a man of his years of dissipation and sedentary habits. And Therese was not far behind.

Seeing coins trickling through the fingers of the fugitive and falling to ring and spin upon the floor, the Frenchwoman raised an anguished shriek of "*Thief! Stop thief!*"—and such part of the audience as had remained in its seats rose up as one man.

In the same instant Dupont's fingers clamped down on Sofia's shoulder. She screamed, and he chuckled and dragged her back. Then his arm was struck up by a deft hand, the girl slipped from his hold and darted out through the doors.

Roaring with rage (now that his blood was up, his heart in the chase) Dupont turned upon the meddler. This was young Mr. Karlake. Dupont did not know him except by sight, but that slender, boyish figure and the semi-apologetic smile on Karlake's lips did not inspire respect. Blindly and with all his might Dupont swung his right to the other's head, only to find it wasn't there.

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The weight of the unexpended blow carried Dupont off his feet. He fell in a heap, and Mama Therese, charging wildly after Sofia, tripped on his body and deposited fourteen stone of solid flesh squarely in the small of Dupont's back with a force that drove the breath out of him in one agonized blast.

Karslake laughed aloud: it was all as good as a cinema. Then he followed Sofia.

It was a dark and silent street by night, little used, a mere link between two main thoroughfares. Sofia, running for dear life, was still far from the nearest corner. Karslake doubled nimbly across the street to the only vehicle in sight, an impressive Rolls-Royce town-car. Jumping on the running-board he pointed out the fleeing shadow to the chauffeur.

"Lay alongside that young woman before she makes the corner, Albert!"

Without delay the car began to move.

Meanwhile, the Cafe des Exiles was erupting antic shapes, waiters, customers, Dupont, Therese. The quiet hour was made hideous by their yells.

"Stop thief!" "A la voleuse!" "L'arretez!" "A la voleuse!" "Stop thief!"

An entirely superfluous bobby weathered the corner, discovered Sofia in flight across the street, came about, and shaped a diagonal course to cut across her bows. She saw him coming and stopped short with a gasp of dismay. Simultaneously the Rolls-Royce slid smoothly in between them and Karslake hopped down. Sofia uttered a small cry, more of surprise than fright, and hung back, trying to free the arm by which he was trying to guide her to the open door.

"It's our only chance," he warned her, coolly. "We're between two fires. Better not delay!"

She yielded and tumbled in. Karslake followed and slammed the door. The car shot away and rounded into the cross street before the bobby could collect himself enough to look at its license plate. He made after it, but when he had reached the corner it had turned another and was lost.

At the second turning Karslake looked round from the window with a reassuring laugh, and settled back beside Sofia.

"So that ends that!"

She stared wide-eyed through the shadows. She knew him now, she was not in the least afraid, but she was confused beyond measure.



“Why—why—” she faltered—“what—who are you and where are you taking me?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon!” said the young man, contritely. “I forgot. One ought to introduce one’s self before rescuing ladies in distress—but there really wasn’t time, you know. If you’ll overlook the informality, my name’s Karlake, Roger Karlake, Princess Sofia, and I’m taking you to your father.”

V

HOUSE OF THE WOLF

This startling announcement Sofia received without comment and with a composure quite as surprising. The life which had made her what she was, a young woman singularly unillusioned, well-poised, and well-informed, had brought out in her nature a strong vein of scepticism. She was not easily to be impressed. The more remarkable the circumstance in question, the less inclined was she to exclaim about it, the stronger was her propensity to look shrewdly into the matter and find out for herself just what it was that made it seem so odd.

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She didn't repose much faith in those striking synchronizations which apparently unrelated influences sometimes effect with related events, and which we are accustomed to term coincidences. She distrusted their specious seeming of spontaneity, she suspected a deep design behind them all.

For example: Up to the moment of her flight from the Cafe des Exiles there had been, as Sofia saw it, nothing extraordinary or inexplicable in the chapter of happenings which had made her acquainted, as abruptly as tardily, with certain facts concerning her parentage.

You might, if you felt like it, call it a strange coincidence that she should have read the advertisement of Messrs. Secretan & Sypher just before their letter was delivered and Mama Therese by her intemperate conduct warmed Sofia's simmering suspicions to the boiling point. But then Sofia read the Agony Column every time it came into her hands: she would have been more surprised had she missed noticing her given name in print, and downright ashamed of herself if she had failed to associate the letter with the advertisement.

If you asked her, she called it Fate, the foreordained workings of occult forces charged with dominion over human affairs. Sooner or later she must somehow have learned the truth about her right place in the world; and to her way of thinking it was no more astonishing that she should have learned it through accident supplemented by the acute inferences of a sharply stimulated imagination, rather than through being waited upon by a delegation of legal gentlemen commissioned with the duty of enlightening her. And the colossal set-piece of the evening having been duly exploded, no sequel whatever could expect anything better than relegation to the cheerless limbo of anticlimax.

Thus when young Mr. Karslake explained his uninvited if timely intervention by stating that he was conducting her to the parent of whose existence she had so recently been informed, he succeeded—not to put too fine a point upon it—only in making it all seem a bit thick.

So for the time being Sofia contented herself with silent study of his face as fitfully revealed by the passing lights of Shaftesbury Avenue.

A nice face (she thought) open and naive, perhaps a trace too much so; but, viewed at close quarters, by no means so child-like as she had thought it, and by no means wanting in evidences of quiet strength if one forgave the funny little moustache which (now one came to, observe it seriously) was precisely what lent that possibly deceptive look of innocence and inconsequence, positively weakening the character of what might otherwise have been a countenance to foster confidence.

As for Mr. Karlake, he endured this candid scrutiny with a faintly apprehensive smile, but volunteered nothing more; so that, when the silence in time acquired an accent of constraint, it was Sofia who had to break it, not Mr. Karlake.

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"I'm wondering about you," she explained quite gravely.

"One fancied as much, Princess Sofia."

She liked his way of saying that; the title seemed to fall naturally from his lips, without a trace of irony. None the less, it wouldn't do to be too readily influenced in his favour.

"Do you really know my father?"

"Rather!" said Mr. Karslake. "You see, I'm his secretary."

"How long—"

"Upward of eighteen months now."

"And how long have you known I was his daughter?"

Mr. Karslake, consulting a wrist-watch, permitted himself a quiet smile.

"Thirty-eight minutes," he announced—"say, thirty-nine."

"But how did you find out—?"

"Your father called me up—can't say from where—said he'd just learned you were acting as cashier at the Cafe des Exiles, and would I be good enough to take you firmly by the hand and lead you home."

"And how did he learn—?"

"That he didn't say. 'Fraid you'll have to ask him, Princess Sofia."

Genuinely diverted by the cross-examination, he awaited with unruffled good humour the next question to be put by this amazingly collected and direct young person. But Sofia hesitated. She didn't want to be rude, and Karslake seemed to be telling a tolerably straight story; still, she couldn't altogether believe in him as yet. She couldn't help it if his visit to the restaurant had been a shade too opportune, his account of himself too confoundedly pat.

No: she wasn't in the least afraid. Even if she were being kidnapped, she wasn't afraid. She was so young, so absurdly confident in her ability to take care of herself. On the other hand, intuition kept admonishing her that in real life things simply didn't happen like this, so smoothly, so fortunately; somehow, somewhere, in this curious affair, something must be wrong.

"Please: what is my father's name?"

“Prince Victor Vassilyevski.”

“You’re sure it isn’t Michael Lanyard?”

Now Mr. Karlake was genuinely startled and showed it. Sofia remarked that he eyed her uneasily.

“My sainted aunt! Where did you get hold of that name?”

“Isn’t it my father’s?”

“Ye-es,” the young man admitted, reluctantly; at least with something strongly resembling reluctance. “But he doesn’t use it any more.”

“Why not?”

Mr. Karlake was silent, thoughtful. Sofia felt that she had scored and with determination pressed her point.

“Do you mind telling me why he doesn’t use that name, if it’s his?”

“See here, Princess Sofia”—Karlake slewed round to face her squarely with his most earnest and persuasive manner—“I am merely Prince Victor’s secretary, I’m not supposed to know all his secrets, and those I do know I’m supposed not to talk about. I’d much rather you put that question to Prince Victor yourself.”

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"I shall," Sofia announced with decision. "When am I to see him? To-night?"

"Of course. That is, I presume you will. I mean to say, Prince Victor wasn't at home when I left, but if I know him he's sure to be when we arrive. And I'm taking you there as directly as a motor can travel in this blessed town."

Sofia looked out of the window. The car, having turned down Regent Street from Piccadilly Circus, was now traversing sedate Pall Mall; and in another moment it swung into the passage between St. James's Palace and Marlborough House Chapel; and then they were in The Mall, with the Victoria Memorial ahead, glowing against the dingy backing of Buckingham Palace.

Now, since all Sofia's reading had inculcated the belief that the enterprising kidnapper always made off with his victim by way of dark bystreets and unsavoury neighbourhoods, she felt somewhat reassured.

"Have we very far to go?"

"We're almost there now—Queen Anne's Gate."

A good enough address. Though that proved nothing. There was still plenty of time, anything might happen....

Sofia shrugged, and settled back to await developments.

But there was nothing to warrant misgivings in the aspect of the dwelling before which the car presently drew up. If it wasn't the palace Sofia had unconsciously been looking forward to, it owned a solid, dull-faced dignity that suited well the town-house of a person of quality, it measured up quite acceptably to Sofia's notion of what was becoming to the condition of a prince in exile—who naturally would live quietly, in view of the recent revolution in Russia.

Without augmented fears, then, though still on the alert for anything that might seem questionable, and more agitated with excitement than she let him suspect, Sofia permitted Mr. Karlake to conduct her to the door.

He had barely touched the bell-button when this door opened, revealing a vista of spacious entrance-hall.

To one side stood a manservant to whom Sofia paid no attention till the sound of his name on Karlake's tongue struck an echo from her memory. "Thanks, Nogam. Prince Victor home yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

“Tell him, please, when he comes in, we’re waiting in the study.”

“Nk-you, sir.”

The servant was the man whom Karlake had met in the Cafe des Exiles only a few hours before. Catching Sofia’s quick, questioning glance, Nogam paused at respectful attention. And, even then, she was struck again with his fidelity to the role in the social system for which Life had cast him. In the cafe, that afternoon, he had cut a mildly incongruous figure, unpretending but alien to that atmosphere; here, in the plain evening-dress livery of his station, he blended perfectly into the picture.

Karlake gave his hat and stick to the man, then opened one wing of a great double doorway, and with a bow invited Sofia to precede him. She faltered, hazily conceiving that threshold in the guise of an inglorious Rubicon. But she had already gone too far into this adventure to draw back now without forfeiting her self-respect. With a deceptively firm step she entered a room to wonder at.

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Sombre shadows masked much of its magnificent proportions, but what Sofia could see suggested less the study of a man of everyday interests than the private museum of an Orientalist whose wealth knew no limits.

The air was warm and close, aromatic with the ghosts of ten thousand perished perfumes. The quiet, when Karlake had closed the door, was oppressive, as if some dark enchantment here had power to tame and silence the growl of London that was never elsewhere in all the city for an instant still.

On a great table of black teakwood inlaid with mother of pearl burned a solitary lamp, a curious affair in filigree of brass, furnishing what illumination there was. Its closely shaded rays made vaguely visible walls dark with books, tier upon tier climbing to the ceiling; chairs of odd shape, screens of glowing lacquer; tables and stands supporting caskets of burning cinnabar, of ivory, of gold, of kaleidoscopic cloisonne; trays heaped high with unset jewels; cabinets crowded with rare objects of Eastern art; squat shapes of neglected gods brandishing weird weapons; grotesque devil masks ferociously a-grin; chests of strange woods strangely fashioned, strangely carved, and decorated with inlays of precious metals, banded with huge straps of black iron, from which gushed in rainbow profusion silks and brocades stiff with barbaric embroideries in gold- and silver-thread and precious stones.

Confused by the impact upon her perceptions of so much that was unexpected and bizarre, the girl looked round with an uncertain smile, and found Karlake watching her with a manner of peculiar gravity and concern.

"Prince Victor is an extraordinary man," Karlake replied to her unspoken comment; "probably the most learned Orientalist alive. Sometimes I think the East has never had a secret he doesn't know."

He paused and drew nearer, with added earnestness in his regard.

"Princess Sofia," said he, diffidently, "if I may say something without meaning to seem disrespectful—"

Perplexed, she encouraged him with one word: "Please."

"I'm afraid," Karlake ventured, "you will have many strange experiences in this new life. Some of them, I fancy, you won't immediately understand, some things may seem wrong to you, you may find yourself confronted with conditions hard to accept ..."

He rested as if in doubt, and she fancied that he was listening intently, almost apprehensively, for some signal of warning. But on her part Sofia heard no sound.

Impressed and puzzled, she uttered a prompting "Yes?"

“I only want to say”—he employed a tone so low that she could barely hear him—“if you don’t mind—whatever happens—I’d be awf’ly glad if you’d think of me as one who sincerely wants to be your friend.”

“Why,” she said in wonder—“thank you. I shall be glad—”

She checked in astonishment: a man was approaching from the general direction of the door by which they had entered.

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The effect was uncanny, as if the figure had materialized before her very eyes, out of clear air, as if one of those many shadows had taken on shape and substance while she looked.

The man himself was nothing unusual in general aspect, of no remarkable stature, neither tall nor small, neither robust nor slender. His evening clothes were without fault, but as much might be said of ten thousand men who might be seen any night in the public rendezvous of leisured London. His carriage had special distinction only in that he moved with a sort of feline grace. Still, something elusive made him unlike any other man Sofia had ever met, something arresting and not altogether prepossessing.

As he drew nearer and his features became more clearly defined by the light, she was sensible of gazing into a face of unique cast. Of an odd grayish pallor accentuated by hair so black that it might have been painted on his skull with india-ink, the skin seemed to be as soft and smooth as a child's, beardless and wholly without lustre. The mouth was sensuous yet firm, with hard, full lips. Leaden pouches hung beneath heavy-lidded eyes set at a noticeable angle. The eyes themselves were as black as night and as lightless; the rays of the lamp struck no gleam from them; in spite of this they were compelling, masterful, and disconcerting.

Karslake at once fell back, with a bow so low it was little less than an obeisance.

"Prince Victor!"

The man nodded acknowledgment of this greeting without detaching attention from the girl. His voice, slightly tremulous with emotion, uttered her name: "Sofia?"

She collected herself with an effort. "I am Sofia," she replied almost mechanically.

"And I, your father ..."

Prince Victor lifted hands of singular delicacy, slender and tapering, whose long fingers were dressed with many curious rings.

A reluctance she could not understand hindered Sofia from going gladly into those arms. She had to make herself yield. They tightened hungrily about her. She closed her eyes and experienced a slight, invincible shudder.

"My child!"

The lips that touched her forehead astonished her with their warmth. Instinctively she had expected them to be cool, as frigid as the effect of that strange mask of which they formed a part.

Then, held at arm's-length, she submitted to an inspection whose sum was enunciated with a strange smile of gratification:

"You are beautiful."

In embarrassment she murmured: "I am glad you think so—father."

"As beautiful as your mother—in her time the most beautiful creature in the world—her image, a flawless reproduction, even to her colouring, the shade of the hair, the eyes—so like the sea!"

"I am glad," the girl repeated, nervously.

"And until to-night I did not know you lived!"

She mustered up courage enough to ask: "How—?"

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The heavy lids drooped lower over the illegible eyes. "My attention was called to a newspaper advertisement signed by a firm of solicitors. I got in touch with them—a matter of some difficulty, since it was after business hours—and found out where to look for you. Then, prevented from acting as quickly as I wished, myself, I sent Karslake here to bring you to me."

"But, according to their letter, the solicitors thought I was in France, in a convent!"

"When they advertised for me—yes. But by the time I enquired they were better informed."

"But the advertisement was addressed to Michael Lanyard!"

The thin lips formed a faint smile. "That was once my name. I no longer use it."

Against a feeling that she was adopting an attitude both undutiful and unbecoming, Sofia persisted.

"Why?"

Prince Victor Vassilyevski gave a gesture of pain and reluctance.

"Must I tell you? Why not? You must know some day, as well now as later, perhaps. Twenty years ago the name of Michael Lanyard was famous throughout Europe—or shall I say infamous?—the name of the greatest thief of modern times, otherwise known as 'The Lone Wolf'."

Involuntarily, Sofia stepped back, as if some shape of horror had been suddenly thrust before her face.

"The Lone Wolf!" she echoed in a voice of dismay. "A thief! You!"

The man who called himself her father replied with a series of slow, affirmative nods.

"That startles you?" he said in an indulgent voice. "Naturally. But you will soon grow accustomed to the thought, you will condone that chapter in my history, remembering I am no longer that man, no longer a thief, that for many years now my record has been without reproach. You will remember that there is more joy in Heaven over the one sinner who repents ... You will forgive the father, if only for your mother's sake."

"For my mother's sake—?"

"What the Lone Wolf was in his day, your mother was in hers—the most brilliant adventuress Europe ever knew."

“Oh!” cried the girl in semi-hysterical protest. “Oh, no, no! Impossible!”

“I assure you, it is quite true. Some day I may tell you her history—and mine. For the present, you will do well to think no more about what I have confessed. Repining can never mend the past. It is to-day and to-morrow you must think of: that you are restored to me, and that I have not only the means but a great hunger to make you happy, to gratify your slightest whim.”

“I want nothing!” Sofia insisted, wildly.

“You want sleep,” Prince Victor corrected, fondly—“you want it badly. You are nervous, overstrung, in no condition to understand the great good fortune that has befallen you. But to-morrow you will see things in a rosier light.”

Apparently he had manipulated some signal unremarked by Sofia. The door opened, framing the figure of the man Nogam. Without looking round, but with an inscrutable smile, Prince Victor took the girl in his arms again and held her close.

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"You rang, sir?"

"Oh, are you there, Nogam? Is the apartment ready for the Princess Sofia?"

"Quite ready, sir."

"Be good enough to conduct her to it." Again Prince Victor kissed Sofia's forehead, then let her go. "Good-night, my child."

Moving slowly toward the door, drooping, Sofia made inarticulate response. She felt suddenly stupefied with fatigue. To think meant an effort that mocked her flagging powers. A vast lassitude was weighing upon her, body and spirit were faint in the enervation of an inexorable disconsolation.

VI

THE MUMMER

Alone with his secretary, Prince Victor Vassilyevski dropped indifferently the guise of manner with which he had clothed himself for the benefit of the woman whom he claimed as his own child. That semblance of shy affection coloured by regrets for the past and modified by the native nobility of a prince in exile—so becoming in a parent to whose bosom a daughter whom he had never seen was suddenly restored—being of no more service for the present, was incontinently discarded. In its stead Victor favoured Karslake with a slow smile of understanding that broadened into an insuppressible grin of successful malice, a grimace of crude exultation through which peered out the impish savage mutinously imprisoned within a flimsy husk of modern manner.

Suspecting this self-betrayal, he erased the grin swiftly, but not so swiftly that Karslake failed to note it. And the young man, smiling amiably and respectfully in return, was sensible of a thrill: yet another glimpse had been given him into the mystery that slept behind that countenance normally so impenetrable.

But he was studious to show nothing of his own emotion. It was his part to be merely a mirror, to reflect rather than to feel, to be an instrument infinitely supple and unfailing, never an independent intelligence. Not otherwise could he count on holding his place in Victor's favour.

"You were quicker than I hoped."

"I had no trouble, sir," Karslake returned, cheerfully. "Things rather played into my hands."



Victor dropped into a chair beside the table and lifted the lid of a small golden casket. Helping himself to one of its store of cigarettes, he made Karslake free of the remainder with a gracious hand. The secretary demurred, producing his pocket case.

"If you don't mind, sir ..."

Victor moved a supercilious eyebrow. "Woodbines again?"

"Sorry, sir; I know they're pretty awful and all that, but they were all I could get in France, and I contracted a taste for them I can't seem to cure. I remember, while I lay in a hospital, hardly a whole bone in my body, thanks to the Boche and his flying circus—it was that lot sent me crashing, you know—the nurses used to tempt me with the finest Turkish; but somehow I couldn't go them; I'd beg for Woodbines."

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Prince Victor dismissed the subject curtly. "I am waiting to hear about Sofia."

"Not much to tell, sir. There seemed to be a storm of sorts brewing when I got there. The young woman was at her desk with a face like a thundercloud. While I was trying to make up my mind what would be my best approach, she jumped down, flew upstairs and, I gathered, kicked up a holy row. You see, she'd seen that advertisement of Secretan & Sypher's, and smelt a rat."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing definite, sir: seemed to understand she was the daughter of Princess Sofia Vassilyevski, only she objected to her father being anybody but Michael Lanyard."

"Go on."

"After a bit she stampeded downstairs again, with the old girl and that swine of a Dupont at her heels. I blocked him and gave Sofia a chance to get outside. The whole establishment boiled out into the street after us, yelling like fun, but I got the girl into the car ... and here we are."

But Prince Victor seemed to have lost interest. The glow ebbing from his face, his lips tightening, the thick lids drooping low over his eyes, he sat in apparent abstraction, aping the impassivity of the graven idols that graced his study.

"I don't mind owning, sir," the younger man resumed, nervously, "she had me sparring for wind when she put it to me point-blank her father's name was Michael Lanyard."

Without moving Victor enquired in a dull voice: "What did you tell her?"

"That it was a name you had once used, sir, but.... Well, what you told her, all except the Lone Wolf business. Don't mind telling you I was in a rare funk till you capped my story so neatly."

He laughed and ventured with a hesitation quite boyish: "I say, Prince Victor—if it's not an impertinent question—was there any truth in that? I mean about your having been the Lone Wolf twenty years ago."

"Not a syllable," said Victor, dryly.

"Then your name never was Michael Lanyard?"

"Never, but ..."

During a long pause the secretary fidgeted inwardly but had the wisdom to refrain from showing further inquisitiveness. He could see that strong passions were working in

Victor: a hand, extended upon the table, unclosed and closed with a peculiar clutching action; the muscles contracted round mouth and eyes, moulding the face into a cast of disquieting malevolence. The voice, when at length it resumed, was bitter.

“But Michael Lanyard was my enemy ... and is to-day.... He became a lover of Sofia’s mother, he had a hand in overturning plans I had made, he humiliated, mocked me.... And to-day he is interfering again.... But ...”

Victor sank back in his chair. Suddenly that unholy grin of his flashed and faded.

“But now his impertinence fails, his insolence over-reaches itself. Now I have the whip-hand and ... I shall use it!”

Vindictiveness that could find relief only in action mastered the man.

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"Be good enough to take this dictation."

Karslake turned to the table and opened a portfolio of illuminated Spanish leather.

"Ready, sir," he said, with pencil poised.

"To Michael Lanyard, Intelligence Division, the War Office, Whitehall. Sir: Your daughter Sofia is now with me. Permit me to suggest that, in consideration of this situation, you cease to meddle with my affairs. Your own intelligence must tell you nothing could be more fatal than an attempt to communicate with her."

"Sign on the typewriter with the initial V."

"Yes, sir."

"Type it on plain paper, use a plain envelope, be sure that neither has a watermark, and get it off to-night without fail. Take a taxi to St. Pancras station and post it there. If you make haste you can get it in a pillar-box before the last collection."

"I shan't lose a minute, sir."

Karslake straightened up, folding the paper, and made for the door.

"One moment, Karslake.... This man, Nogam: where did you pick him up?"

"He used to buttle for my father, sir, but got into trouble—some domestic unpleasantness, I believe—needed money, and raised a cheque. The old boy let him off easy; but I've got the cheque, and Nogam knows it. The fellow's perfectly trained and absolutely dependable, knows his place and his duties and not another blessed thing. I'll send him in if you like."

Prince Victor uttered with dry accent: "Why?"

"Thought you might care to have a talk with him, sir."

"I have."

"Oh!" Mr. Karslake exclaimed—"I didn't know."

"Quite so," commented Prince Victor. "I shan't need you again to-night, Karslake."

"Good-night, sir."

When the secretary had gone, Victor sat motionless, so still that his breathing scarcely stirred his body, with a face absolutely imperturbable, steadfastly gazing into that darkness which shrouded the workings of his mind.

On the doorstep a shrill whistle sounded: Nogam calling Karslake's taxi. Victor heard the vehicle roll in and stand panting at the curb, then the slam of its door, the diminishing rumble of its departure.

The house door closed, and after a little the study door opened, and Nogam halted on the threshold.

Unstirring Victor enquired: "What is it, Nogam?"

"I wished to enquire would there be anything more to-night, sir."

"Nothing."

"Nk you, sir."

"But Nogam: in this house, regardless of the custom which may have obtained in other establishments where you have served, you will always knock before entering a room, and never enter until you obtain permission."

"But if I'm sure the room is empty, sir, and get no answer—?"

"Then you may enter any room but this. Never this, unless I am here—or Mr. Karslake is—and you get leave."

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"Nk you, sir."

"Good-night."

As the door closed Victor extended a thin, effeminate hand to a casket of ivory, searched with sensitive finger-tips its exquisite tracery until a cunningly hidden spring responded and the lid, splitting in two, sank down into its walls. In the pocket thus revealed were many pills, apparently hand-moulded, of a grayish-brown substance, putty-soft.

Slowly Victor selected three, placed one after another upon his tongue, and swallowed them.

He shut the casket and sat waiting.

Slowly the keenness of his countenance became blurred, as if the hand of an unseen sculptor were rubbing down its features, doing away the veneer with which Europe had overlaid the primitive Asiatic, which now showed on the surface, in every detail of coarsely modelled nose, oblique eyes of animal cunning, pendulous lips cruel and sensual.

By degrees a faint trace of colour began to flush Victor's cheeks, a smile modified the set of his mouth, the heavy-lidded eyes lost their lustreless opacity and glimmered with uncanny light.

He breathed deeply, evenly, with an evident relish. The action of the opium was visibly renewing his powers. His expression, softening, became terrible with brute tenderness and longing. Gazing into shadows in which he saw that which he wished ardently to see, he stretched forth his arms, and his lips moved, shaping a name:

"Sofia!"

As those syllables, freighted with that undying passion which consumed the man, sounded upon the stillness, Victor turned sharply, with a gesture of irritation, looking aside, listening.

Instantaneously the Asiatic disappeared, thrust back into its habitual latency within the prison of European: Prince Victor was as he had been, as always to the world, cool, composed, and crafty, master, never creature, of his emotions.

A faint buzzing was audible, broken by muffled clicks.

Rising, Victor approached a table in a corner and with a key from his pocket ring unlocked a heavy casket of bronze. As he raised its cover a small electric bulb illuminated the interior, focussing on the paper-covered face of a mechanical writing

device, upon which a pencil with a broad flat lead operated by a metal arm was tracing characters resembling the hieroglyphics of the Chinese.

When the clicking ceased and the pencil was at rest, Victor caught an end of the paper and pulled it forward until a blank surface again occupied the writing-bed. Upon this with another pencil he inscribed a reply, then closed and relocked the casket.

Back at the table with the lamp, the message just received became crisp black ash on a brazen tray.

From a locked chest Victor produced an inverness and a soft hat of black felt. Wearing these he moved quietly out of the lamp's radius of light, and made himself one with the shadows that crowded one another round the walls. He did not leave by the hall door; but of a sudden the room was untenanted.

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VII

THE FANTASTICS

Downstream from The Pool, a little way below Shadwell, an uncouth row of dilapidated dwellings in those days stood—or, better, squatted, like a mute company of draggletail crones—atop a river-wall whose ancient blocks, all ropy with the slime of centuries, peered dimly out through groups of crazy spiles at the restless pageant of Thames-life.

Viewed by day, say from the deck of a river steamer, the spectacle they offered was, according to bias of mood and disposition, unlovely and drear or colourful and romantic: Whistler might have etched these houses, Dickens have staged therein a lowly tragedy, Thomas Burke have made of one a frame for some vignette unforgettable of Limehouse life.

Built of stone or brick or both as to their landward faces, without exception they presented to the river false backs of wooden framework which overhung the water. Ordinarily, their windows were tight-shut, the panes opaque with accumulated grime—many were broken and boarded. Their look was dismal, their squalor desperate.

Below, by day, heavy wherries swung moored to the ooze-clad spiles or, when the tide was out, sprawled upon stinking mud-flats with a gesture of pathetic helplessness peculiar to stranded watercraft. Seldom was one observed in use: to all seeming they existed for purposes of atmosphere alone.

More seldom still did any dwelling betray evidence of inhabitation beyond faint wisps of smoke, like ghosts of famine, drifting from the chimneypots, or—perhaps—some unabashed exhibit of red flannel hung out to dry with wrist or ankle-bands nipped between a window-sash and sill.

By night, however, a stir of furtive life was to be surmised from cryptic lights that flared and faded behind the crusted window-glass or fell through opened floor-traps to the thick black element that swirled about the spiles, and from guarded calls as well, inarticulate cries of hate and love and pain, rumours of close and crude carousal.

And ever and again the belated riverfarer would encounter one of the wherries, its long oars swung by brawny arms and backs, stealing secretly across the inky waters on some errand no less dark.

On land the buildings lined a cobbled street, from dawn to dark a thoroughfare for thundering lorries and, twice daily, in murk of early morning and gloom of early night, scoured by a nondescript rabble employed in the vast dockyards whose man-made forests of masts and cordage, funnels and cranes, on either hand lifted angular black silhouettes against the misty silver of the sky.

Black and white and yellow and brown, men of every race and skin, they came and went, their brief hours loud with babel of strange tongues and a scuffling of countless feet like the sound of surf; and their goings left the street strangely hushed, a way of sinister reticences, its winding length ill-lighted by infrequent corner-lamps, its mephitic glooms enlivened by windows of public houses all saffron with specious promise of purchasable good-fellowship.

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One of these, the Red Moon, faced the row of waterfront houses, standing at the intersection of a street which struck inland to the pulsing heart of Limehouse. A retired bully of the prize-ring ruled with a high hand over its several bars and many patrons, yellow men and white girls, deck-hands and dock-workers, pugilistic and criminal celebrities of the quarter, and their sycophants. Its revels rendered the nights cacophonous, its portals sucked in streams of sweethearts and more impersonal lovers of life and laughter, and spewed out sots close-locked in embraces of maudlin affection or brutal combat. Bobbies kept an eye on the Red Moon, a respectful one: interference with the time-hallowed customs and prerogatives of its clientele was something to be adventured with extreme discretion.

Out of the hinterland of Limehouse, a tall man came to the Red Moon that night, walking with long, loose-jointed strides, holding his head high and looking over the heads of all he passed with a fixed, far gaze. He had a hatchet-face, sallow, with lantern jaws, a petulant mouth, hot eyes that showed too much white above their pupils. A lank black mane greased his collar. His garments, shoddy but whole, were stained and bleached in spots, apparently the work of acids, and so wrinkled and shapeless as to suggest that their owner slept without undressing as a matter of habit. The pockets of his coat bulged noticeably.

Shouldering heedlessly into the saloon-bar, he found it deserted except for a chinless potman: the liveliest evening trade was always plied in the cheaper bars adjacent.

One glance sufficed to identify him: with a surly nod the potman ducked behind a partition to call the proprietor. Drinks were in order when this last appeared; and a brief conference in undertones ended when, having made careful reconnaissance, the publican nodded shortly to the patron, a jerk of his thumb designating a small door let into the wall to one side of the bar proper.

Through this the tall man passed to find himself upon a dark stairway, at the foot of which another door admitted to an underground chamber where an apparently exclusive social gathering was in session of Saturnalia.

In one corner a long-suffering piano was taking cruel punishment at the hands of a flashily dressed, sharp-faced man of horsey type. Flanking him, two young women of the world, with that insouciance which appertains—in Limehouse—to sweet sixteen, were chanting shrilly to his accompaniment: both more than comfortably drunk. In the middle of the room assorted lawbreakers gathered round a table were playing fan-tan at the top of their lungs. At smaller tables men and women sat consuming poisons of which they were obviously in no crying need; while in bunks builded against one wall devotees of the pipe reclined in various stages of beatitude. The air was hot, and foul with cigarette smoke, sickening fumes of sizzling opium, effluvia of beer and spirits, sour reek of sweating flesh.

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Incurious glances greeted the newcomer: none paid him more heed than an indifferent nod. On his part, brief but comprehensive survey having deepened the stamp of scorn upon his features, he ignored them all and, proceeding directly to a bunk of the lowermost tier, aroused its occupant with a smart tap on the shoulder.

The ostensible drug-addict looked up dreamily, then opened his eyes wide, with surprising docility rolled out and, uttering no word, lurched to the fan-tan table. The tall man took his place, lay down, and drew together the unclean curtains of sleazy stuff provided to afford privacy to shrinking souls. This done, he turned on his side and knuckled in peculiar rhythm the back of the bunk, a solid panel which slipped smoothly to one side, permitting the man to tumble out into still another room, a cheerless place, with floor of stone and the smell of a vault.

When the panel had slipped back into place, closing out the bunk, the man stood in night absolute. But after a minute a slender beam of golden light struck suddenly athwart the darkness and found his face. This he endured impassively, only lifting a hand to describe an obscure sign. Immediately the light was shut off, a door opened in the wall opposite, dull light from behind disclosed the silhouette of a man in Chinese robes, his head inclined in a bow of courteous dignity.

In good English but with musical Eastern inflection a voice gave greeting:

“Good evening, Thirteen. You are awaited—and welcome!”

“Good evening, Shaik Tsin,” the European replied in heavy un-English accents.
“Number One is here, yes?”

“Not yet. But we have just received a telautographic message saying he is on his way.”

Nodding impatiently, Thirteen passed through the door, which the Chinaman quickly closed and barred.

The chamber to which one gained admittance by ways so devious and fantastic was large—exactly how large it was difficult to guess, since all its walls were screened by black silk panels upon which golden dragons writhed and crawled. A thick carpet of black covered every inch of visible floor space, a black silk canopy hid the ceiling, and all the room was in deep shadow save the space immediately beneath a great lamp of opalescent glass, likewise draped in black.

Here stood an octagonal table of black teakwood, on seven sides of which seven chairs were placed. When Thirteen had taken his seat all these were occupied. On the eighth side an eighth chair stood empty on a low dais, the heavy carving of its high back, its massive arms and legs, picked out with gold.

The six who had anticipated Thirteen at this bizarre rendezvous hailed him as a familiar, according to their several idiosyncrasies, brusquely, indifferently, or with some semblance of cordiality. They made a motley crew.

Two were Englishman in appearance, though the figure of languid elegance in evening dress that might have graced the lounge of a West End club had a voice soft with Celtic brogue. The other owned a gross body clothed in loud checks and, with his mean blue eyes, his mottled complexion, and cunning leer, would not have seemed out of place in a betting-ring.

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Aside from these there were a moon-faced Bengali babu, a dark Italian with flashing eyes and teeth, and a stout person of bovine Teutonic cast—the type that is sage, shrewd, easy-going when unopposed, but capable under provocation of exhibiting the most conscienceless brutality.

From this last Thirteen got his warmest welcome.

“You are late, mine friend.”

“In good time, however,” Thirteen responded with a nod toward the vacant chair. “More than that, the summons was handed me only twenty minutes ago.”

“How was that?” the babu asked. “It was sent at six o’clock.”

“I was at work in the laboratory and had left orders I was not to be disturbed. But for one thing”—the petulance of Thirteen’s habitual expression was lightened by a flash of self-gratulation, and his voice shook a little with excitement—“I might not have received the summons before morning.”

“And that one thing?”

“Success, comrades! At last—after months of experimentation—I have been successful!”

“Ow?” dryly demanded the man in the checked suit.

“I have discovered a great secret—discovered, perfected, adapted it to common means at our command. Comrades, I tell you, to-night we hold all England in the hollow of our hands!”

With an incoherent exclamation and eyes afire the Russian sat forward. Unconsciously the others imitated his action. Only the man in evening dress made a show of remaining unimpressed.

“It’s fine, fat words you’re after using,” he commented. “‘All England in the hollow of our hands!’ If they mean anything at all, comrade, they mean—”

“Everything!” Thirteen cut in with arrogant assertiveness; “all we’ve been waiting for, hoping for, praying for—the end of the ruling classes, extinction of the accursed aristocrats, subjugation of the thrice-damned bourgeois, the triumph of the proletariat, all at a single stroke, swift, subtle, and sure! Freedom for Ireland, freedom for India, freedom for England, the speedy spreading of that red dawn which lights the Russian skies to-day, till all the wide world basks in its warm radiance and acclaims us, comrades, its redeemers!”

“Lieber Gott!” the German breathed. “Colossal!”

“‘Ear, ‘ear!” the Englishman applauded, perfunctory and skeptical. “Bli’me if you didn’t make me forget where I was—’ad me thinking I was in ‘Yde Park, you did, listening to a bloody horator on a box.”

“You may laugh,” Thirteen replied with a sour glance; “but when you have heard, you will not laugh. I am not boasting—I am telling you.”

“Not a great deal,” the Irishman suggested. “Your mouth is full of sounds and fury, but till you tell us more you’ll have told us nothing.”

The face of Thirteen grew darker still, and for a moment he seemed to meditate an angry retort; but he thought better of it, contenting himself with an impatient movement and a mutter: “All in good time; Number One is not here yet.”

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"W'y wyste time w'itin' for 'im?" demanded the Englishman. "'E's no good, 'e's done."

Thirteen's eyes narrowed. "How so?"

"'E's done, Number One is—finished, counted out, napoo! 'E's 'ad 'is d'y, and a pretty mess 'e's mide of it—and it's 'igh time, I say, for 'im to step down and let a better man tike 'old."

Growls in chorus endorsed this declaration of mutiny; but suddenly were stilled by a voice, sonorous and calm, from outside the circle:

"You think so, Seven? Well—who knows?—perhaps you are right."

VIII

COUNCIL OF THE GODLESS

Someone exclaimed in an accent of alarm: "Number One!"

With a concerted turning of startled heads, a hasty thrusting back of chairs, the gathering rose in involuntary deference. That is, five rose as one; and, after a moment during which his spirit of insubordination faltered and failed, the Englishman got awkwardly to his feet and stood abashed and sullen.

The one to remain seated was the Irishman so well turned out by Conduit Street; who made no move more than slightly to elevate supercilious brows and slouch a little lower in his chair, glancing from face to face of the circle, then back to the cold countenance presented by the author of the abrupt interruption.

This last stood quietly beside the eighth chair, a hand on its carved arm, one foot on the edge of the dais. A long robe of black silk enveloped him; on its bosom a Chinese unicorn was embroidered. His girdle clasp was of Imperial jade set with rubies. The girdle itself was yellow. A great ruby button, nearly an inch in diameter, set in a mounting of worked gold, crowned a hat like an inverted round bowl. His black silk shoes were heavy with golden embroidery, and had white soles an inch thick. Authority lent inches to his stature, so that he seemed to dominate his company physically as well as spiritually.

A pace or two in the rear Shaik Tsin, with impassive face and arms folded in voluminous sleeves, waited as might a bodyguard.

A sardonic glimmer in eyes half visible under heavy lids alone betrayed relish of the situation, the homage commanded and the sensation created by this inopportune and unheralded arrival: deliberately Number One mounted the dais and posed himself in

the throne-like chair. Then, as his look read face after face, he smiled with twitching and disdainful nostrils.

“Gentlemen of the Council,” he said, slowly, “I bow to you all. Pray be seated.”

In confounded silence the six resumed their seats, while the seventh—who had not moved—lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and through a veil of smoke continued to regard Number One with insolent eyes.

“I fear my arrival was ill-timed, gentlemen. Seven had the floor, and I confess to finding what I happened to overhear extremely interesting. If he will be good enough to continue ...”

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The Irishman gave a light, derisive laugh. Shifting uneasily in his chair, the man in the checked suit flushed darkly, then stiffened his spine, hardened his eyes, set his jaw, and faced Number One defiantly.

"You 'eard ... I 'olds by w'at I said."

"I am to understand, then, you think it time for me to abdicate and let another lead you in my stead?"

The Englishman assented with an inarticulate monosyllable and a surly nod.

"And may one ask why?"

"Blue's plice in Pekin Street was r'idid this afternoon," Seven announced truculently. "But per'aps you didn't know—"

"Not until some time before the news reached you," One replied, pleasantly. "And what of it?"

"Three fycers in a week, Gov'ner—anybody'll tell you that's comin' it a bit thick."

"Granted. What then?"

"That's only part of it. Tike last week: Eighteen pinched, the queer plant in 'lgh Street pulled by the coppers—"

"I know, I know. To your point!"

Seven hesitated under that steely stare. "I leave it to you, Gov'ner," he continued to stammer at length. "S'y you was me and I was Number One—w'at would you think?"

"Why, quite naturally, that some superior intelligence has latterly been collaborating with Scotland Yard."

"Aren't you a bit behindhand in arriving at that conclusion?" the Irishman suggested with an ill-dissembled sneer.

"No, Eleven," Number One replied, mildly, "since I arrived at it some time since."

"But took no measures—"

"You are in a position to state that as a fact?"

Eleven shrugged lightly. "Need I be? Does not our situation speak for itself?"

“Since you cannot be as thoroughly acquainted as I am with the situation, and since it seems I am required to account for my leadership or surrender it to you, Eleven ... I believe you have selected yourself to replace me as Number One, have you not?—that is to say, in the improbable event of my abdication.”

“Improbable?” repeated the Irishman. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

“You are right,” Number One assented, gravely: “unthinkable is the word. But you haven’t answered my question.”

“Oh, as for that, if the Council should see fit to appoint me Number One, I’d naturally do my best.”

“And most noble of you, I’m sure. But rather than bring down any such disaster upon this organization, I will say now that measures have already been taken, and I am tonight in a position to promise you that the new spirit in Scotland Yard will no longer be a factor in our calculations.”

“That wants proving,” Eleven contended.

A spasm of anger shook the figure in the throne-like chair, but only for an instant; immediately the iron will of the man imposed rigid self-control; almost without pause he proceeded in level and civil accents:

“I think I can satisfy you and—this once—I consent to do so. But first, a question: Have you yourself formed any theory as to the identity of this hostile intelligence which has so hindered us of late?”

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"I'd be a raw fool if I hadn't," the Irishman retorted. "We know the Lone Wolf has been hand-in-glove with the authorities ever since the British Secret Service used him during the war."

"You think, then, it is Lanyard—?"

"It's a wise saying: 'Set a thief to catch a thief.' I believe there's no man in England but Lanyard who has the wit and vision and audacity to fight us on our ground and win."

"I agree entirely. Therefore, I have this day tied the hands of the Lone Wolf; he will not again dare to contend against us."

Eleven sat up with a startled gesture.

"Are you meaning you've got the girl?"

Number One indulged a remote and chilly smile.

"Then you, too, noticed the advertisement? Accept my compliments, Eleven. Decidedly you might prove a dangerous rival—were I in a temper to countenance competition.... But it is true: I have the girl Sofia—the Lone Wolf's daughter."

"Where?"

The smile faded; the man on the dais looked down loftily.

"It is enough for you to know I have proved far-sighted and unfailing in my fidelity to our common cause."

"So *you* say ..."

Though the Irishman winced and fell silent under the cold glare of the other's eyes, the voice that answered him was level and passionless.

"I am not here to have my word challenged—or my authority. If any one of you imagines I am even thinking of surrendering the latter, under any conceivable circumstances, he is mad. And if any one of you doubts my power to enforce my will, I promise him ample proof of it before the night is ended.... Let us now proceed to business, the question held over from our last meeting. If Comrade Four will consult his minutes"—a nod singled out the babu, who, beaming with importance, produced a notebook—"they will show we adjourned to consider overtures made by the Smolny Institute of Petrograd, seeking our coeoperation toward accelerating the social revolution in England."

"Thatt," the Bengali affirmed, "is true bill of factt."

“If the temper in which you received those proposals is fair criterion,” Number One resumed, “there can be little doubt as to our decision. Speaking for myself, I think it would be suicidal to reject the overtures of the Soviet Government in Russia. Let me state why.”

He bowed his forehead upon a hand and continued with thoughtful gaze downcast:

“England is ripe for revolution. The social discontent resulting from the war has reached an acute stage. Only a spark is needed. It remains for us to decide whether to permit Russia to bring about the explosion or—bring it about ourselves. The soviet movement is irresistible, it will sweep England eventually as it has swept Russia, as it is now sweeping Germany, Hungary, Austria, Italy, as it must soon sweep France and Spain. Our power in England is great; even so, we could hope to do no

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more than delay the soviet movement were we to set ourselves against it—we could never hope to stop it. It would seem, then, self-preservation to set ourselves at the head of it, seize with our own hands—in the name of the British Soviet—the symbols of power now held by an antiquated and doddering Government. So shall we become to England what the Smolny Institute is to Russia. Otherwise, in the end, we must be crushed.”

“If we adopt the indicated course, there will be an end forever to this hole-and-corner business which so hampers us, we will be able to work in the open, the police will become our tools rather than weapons in the hands of our enemies; our power will be without limits, Soviet Russia itself must bow to our dictation.”

He paused and lifted his head, looking round the circle of intent faces.

“If I am wrong or too sanguine, I am ready to be corrected.”

He heard only a murmur of admiration, never a note of dissent; and a smile of gratification, yet half satiric, curved his thin lips.

“I take it, then, the Council endorses my decision to proceed with the negotiations instituted by Soviet Russia; to accept its proposals and pledge our cooperation in every way?”

This time there was no mistaking the accuracy with which he had gauged the minds of his associates.

“One thing remains to be decided: a plan of action, something which will demand all that we have of imagination, ingenuity, common sense, and far prevision. We can afford to waste not a single ounce of strength: the blow, when we strike, must be sudden, sharp, merciless—irresistible. But if Thirteen is not over-confident of the discovery which he says he has to-day perfected, the means to deal just such a blow is ready to our hands.... Thirteen?”

A nod and gracious smile invited that one to speak. He rose, trembling a little with excitement, bowed to Number One and, delving into capacious pockets, produced a number of small tin canisters together with three sealed bottles of brown glass. Surveying these, as he arranged them on the teakwood table before him, he smiled a little to himself: the stars, it seemed to him, were warring in their courses in his behalf; this was to prove his hour of hours.

He began to speak in a quivering voice which soon grew more steady.

“It is true, Excellency—it is true, comrades—I have perfected a discovery which I offer as a free gift to the cause, and by means of which, intelligently employed, we can, if we will, make all London a graveyard. Put the resources of this organization at my command, give me a week to make the essential preparations, select a time of national crisis when the Houses of Parliament are sitting and the Cabinet meets in Downing Street with the King attending or in Buckingham Palace ...”

He paused and held the pause with a keen feeling for dramatic effect, his eyes seeking in turn the faces of his fellow conspirators, an insuppressible grin of malicious exultation twisting his scornful and mutinous mouth.

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"Let this be done," he concluded, "and by means of these few tins and bottles which you see before you, in one brief hour the ruling classes will have perished almost to a man, there will be no more government of a tyrannical bourgeoisie to grind down the proletariat, a bloodless revolution will have made England the cradle of the new liberty!"

"Bloodless?" the man on the dais repeated; and even he was seen perceptibly to shudder at the prospect unfolded to the vision of his mind. "Yes—but more terrible than the massacre of the Huguenots, more savage than the French Revolution!"

"But I believe," the inventor commented, "your Excellency said we required the means to deal a 'blow sudden, sharp, merciless—irresistible'."

"Surely now," the Irishman suggested, mockingly—where a wiser man would have held his tongue—"you'll not be sticking at a small matter like wholesale murder if it's to make us masters of England?"

"Of England?" the German echoed. "Herr Gott! Of the world!"

"And you, Excellency, our master," the inventor added, shrewdly.

A sign at once impatient and imperative demanded silence, and for a few minutes it obtained unbroken, while the gathering, keyed to high tension, studied closely the face of their leader and found it altogether illegible.

On his part he seemed forgetful of the existence of anybody but himself, forgetful almost of himself as well: sitting low in his great chair, his body as stirless as it were bound by some spell of black magic, his far gaze probing unfathomable remotenesses of thought.

Slowly he recalled himself to his surroundings; with a suggestion of weariness he sat up and reviewed the little company that hung so breathlessly upon the issue of his judgment. The shadow of that satiric smile returned.

"If the thing be feasible," he promised, "it shall be done. It remains for Thirteen to be more explicit."

With an extravagant flourish the inventor whipped from his breastpocket a folded paper, and spread it out face uppermost on the table.

"A map of London," he announced, "based on the latest Ordnance Survey and coloured to show the districts supplied by the mains of each individual gas depot. Thus you will observe"—what his long, bony finger indicated—"the district supplied by the mains of the Westminster gas works, comprising Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, the War Office, and the Admiralty, Downing Street, the homes of hundreds of the aristocracy. All these we can at will turn into the deadliest of death traps."

A tense voice interrupted with the demand: “How?”

“Quite easily, comrade: with the ramifications of our power throughout London, all under the control of his Excellency”—the inventor bowed to Number One—“it should be an easy matter to place a few trustworthy men with the Westminster gas works.”

“It can readily be done,” Number One affirmed. “And then—?”

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“While this is being done means must be found to smuggle other men, in the guise of servants, into the various buildings selected, or to corrupt those already so employed therein. At the designated hour—”

The words dried upon his lips as somewhere a hidden bell stabbed the quiet with short, sharp thrills of sound, a code that spelled a message of terrifying significance. The inventor started violently, but no more so than every man about the table. Even Number One, shocked out of his lounging pose, grasped the arms of his throne with convulsive hands.

Quietly and without a hint of hurry, the Chinese, Shaik Tsin, moved back into the shadows and, unnoticed, disappeared behind a screen.

For a moment, when the bell had ceased, nobody spoke; but pallid face consulted face and eyes grown wide with dread sought eyes that winced in terror.

Then the Bengali leaped from his chair, jabbering with bloodless lips.

“Police! Raid! We are betrayed!”

He made an uncertain turn, as if thinking to seek safety in flight but doubting which way to choose; and the movement struck panic into the minds and hearts of his fellows. In a twinkling all were on their feet. But before one could move a step the lamp in the ceiling winked out, the room was left in darkness unrelieved, and the accents of Number One were heard, coldly imperative.

“Gentlemen! be good enough to resume your places—let no one move before there is light again. We are in no immediate danger: Shaik Tsin will show you out by a secret way long before the police can hope to find and break into this chamber. In the meantime—”

The infuriated voice of the Englishman interrupted:

“And ’oo’re you to give us orders?—you ’oo talked so big about ’avin’ tied the ’ands of the Lone Wolf and Scotland Yard! You blarsted blow’ard! Bli’me if I don’t believe it’s you ’oo—”

“Quietly, Seven! Have you forgotten you have a bad heart?—that excitement may mean your sudden death?”

The rage of the Englishman ran out in a gasp and a whisper.

“In the meantime,” Number One resumed as if there had been no break, “I promised that, before the night was out, you should have proof of my ability to enforce my will.”

A groan of agony answered him, followed by an oath of witless fear. From a distance the voice, now thin but still sonorous, added:

“Thirteen will hold himself ready to wait on me when I send for him to-morrow. Gentlemen of the Council, I bow to you all.”

Again silence held for a long minute during which no man stirred or spoke. Then overhead the lamp burned bright again, discovering six frightened men upon their feet and one who, still seated, did not stir, and never would again.

His head fallen forward, chin resting on his chest, mouth ajar, inert arms dangling over the arms of the chair, heavy legs lax, the Englishman sat quite dead, dead without a sign to show how death had come to him.



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Number One had disappeared.

There was a remote rumour of cries and shouts, the muffled sound of axes crashing into woodwork....

IX

MRS. WARING

Late in the forenoon a pencil of golden light found a chink in jealously drawn draperies, and groped the rich dusk of the bedchamber till it came to rest, as if happy that its search had found so lovely a reward, upon the face of a young girl who lay sleeping in a bed whose exquisite adornment must have flattered even the exalted person of a princess.

With a swift but silent movement another girl, who had been sitting patiently on a low stool near by, rose and put herself in the way of the sunbeam. But too late: already long lashes were a-flutter upon the delicately modelled cheeks of the sleeper.

A gentle sigh brushed parting lips; the sweet body stirred luxuriously; unclouded by any shadow of misgiving, the blue eyes of the Princess Sofia looked out upon the first day of her new world.

Then they grew wide with wonder, comprehending the sleek, pretty face of a Chinese girl of about her own age who, with eyes downcast, demure mouth and folded hands, submissively awaited recognition.

"Who are you?" Sofia demanded in a breath.

A bob of courtesy, wholly charming, prefaced a reply pattered in English of quaintest accent:

"You' handmaiden—Chou Nu is my name."

"My handmaiden!"

"Les, Plincess Sofia."

"But I don't understand. How—when—?"

"Las' night Numbe' One he send for me, but when I come you go-sleep."

"Number One?"

Surprise coloured faintly the explanation: “Plince Victo’, honol’ble fathe’ of Plincess Sofia. You like get up now, take bath, have blekfuss?”

The smile was irresistibly ingratiating: Sofia could not but return it. Delighted, Chou Nu ran to the windows, threw wide their draperies, and darted into the bathroom.

Autumnal sunlight kindled to burning beauty the golden-bronze tresses coiled upon the pillows where Sofia lay unstirring, like a princess enchanted—as indeed she was. Surely nothing less potent than magic had wrought this metamorphosis in the fabric of her life! And whether the magic were white or black—what matter? Its work was good.

No more the Cafe des Exiles, no more the deadly tedium of daily service at the desk of the caisse, no more the shrewish tongue of Mama Therese, the odious oglings of Papa Dupont, the ceaseless cark of discontent....

Incredible!

As one who moves in a dream, Sofia rose presently and bathed, then, robed in a ravishing negligee of rare brocade, breakfasted on melon, tea, and toast from a service of eggshell china.

In a long mirror she saw and watched but did not know herself. Like Goody Twoshoes of nursery fame she could have cried: Lawkamercy! this is never !!

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The presence of Chou Nu served merely to stress the sense of unreality: for, obviously, only the heroine of a true fairy tale could have broken from a chrysalis stage of sordid Soho to the brilliant butterfly existence of a Russian princess domiciled in the most aristocratic quarter of London and attended by a Chinese maid!

And Chou Nu proved a delight. Once satisfied she need fear neither ill-temper nor arrogance from her new mistress, she indulged an even and constant flow of artless high spirits, her amusing, clipped English affording Sofia considerable entertainment together with not a little food for thought.

Thus one learned that the main body of the service staff was Chinese under a major domo named Shaik Tsin—Chou Nu's "second-uncle"—who enjoyed Prince Victor's completest confidence and was, second to the latter only, the real head of the establishment, its presiding genius. The front of the house alone was dressed with a handful of English servants nominally under the man Nogam, but actually, like him, answerable in the last instance to Shaik Tsin.

Why this should be Chou Nu couldn't say. Sofia supposed it was because Prince Victor thought his Occidental guests would feel more at ease with English servants; or perhaps he himself preferred them, when it came to the question of personal attendance.

No success rewarded efforts to extract from Chou Nu her reason for referring to Victor as "Number One." She stated simply that all Chinamans in London called him that; and being pressed further added, with as near an approach to impatience as her gentle nature could muster, that it was obviously because Plince Victo' was Numbe' One: ev'-body knew *that*.

A knock at the door interrupted Sofia's questioning. Answering, Chou brought back word that the honourable father of Princess Sofia submitted his august felicitations and solicited the immediate favour of her serene attendance in his study.

Hasty search failed to locate the garments discarded on going to bed and, in the indifference of depression and fatigue, left in a tumble on the floor. All had vanished while Sofia slept; Chou Nu professed blank ignorance of their fate; and apparently nothing had been provided in their stead but Chinese robes, of sumptuous vestments well suited to one of high estate. With these, then, and with Chou Nu's guidance as to choice and ceremonious arrangement, Sofia was obliged to make shift; and anything but unbecoming she found them—or truly it was a shape of dream that looked out from her mirror.

Yet it was with reluctant feet that she left her room, descended the broad staircase to the entrance hall, and addressed herself to the study door. It had been so beautiful, that

waking dream the sequel to her night of dreamless sleep, too beautiful to be foregone without regret.

For Sofia had not forgotten, she could never forget, she had merely been successful temporarily in banishing from mind that bitter disillusionment which had poisoned what should have been her time of greatest joy.

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To be told, by the father of whose dear existence one had only learned within the hour, that one was the child of a notorious thief and an adventuress ...

It needed more than common fortitude to face renewed reminder of that shame.

Oddly enough, it seemed to help a bit, somehow to lend her courage and assurance, to pass the man Nogam in the hall and acknowledge his bow and smile. Sofia wondered vaguely what it was that made his smile seem so kind; it was entirely respectful, there was nothing more in it that she could fix on; and yet ...

She was able to offer Victor a composed, almost a happy countenance, and to return cheerful assurances to punctilious enquiries after her well-being and her comfort overnight. To the real affection in which he held her, the warmth of his embrace, and the lingering pressure of his lips gave convincing testimony; and in time, no doubt, as she grew to know him better, her response would become more spontaneous and true. Indeed, she insisted, it must; she would school herself, if need be, to remember that this strange man was the author of her being, the natural object of her affections—deserving all her love if only because of that nobility which had enabled him to renounce those evil ways of years long dead.

But to-day—and this, of course, she couldn't understand—a slight but invincible shiver, perceptible to herself alone, attended her submission to paternal caresses; and the eyes were too dispassionate with which she saw Prince Victor. Still, they found little to which fair exception might be taken. If Life had thus far been callously frank with Sofia as to its broader aspects, the niceties of its technique remained measurably a mystery, she was insufficiently instructed to perceive that Victor's morning coat (for example) had been cut a shade too cleverly, or that the ensemble of his raiment was a trace ornate; and where a mind more mondain would have marked ponderable constraint in his manner, she saw only dignity and reserve. But for all that she recognized intuitively a lack of something in the man, the sum of this second impression of him was formless disappointment, she felt somehow cheated, disheartened, chilled.

That she was able at all to dissemble this sense of dashed expectations was thanks in the main to a third party, a stranger whose presence she overlooked on entering, when Prince Victor met her near the door, while the other remained aside, half hidden in the recess of a window.

Directly, however, that Victor half turned away, saying "I have found a friend for you, my dear," Sofia, following his glance, discovered a woman whose every detail of dress and deportment was unmistakably of the fashionable world and whose face carried souvenirs of loveliness as unmistakable.

Smiling and offering her hands, she approached, while Victor's voice of heavy modulations uttered formally:

“Sybil, permit me to present my daughter. Sofia, Mrs. Waring has graciously offered to sponsor your introduction to Society, to guide and instruct you and be in every way your mentor.”

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"My dear!" the woman exclaimed, holding Sofia's hands and kissing her cheek. And then, looking aside to Victor, "But how very like!" she added with the air of tender reminiscence.

"Oh!" Sofia cried, "you knew my mother?"

"Indeed—and loved her." Sofia never dreamed to question the woman's sincerity; and her charm of manner was irresistible. "You must try to like me a little for her sake—"

"As if one could help liking you for your own, Mrs. Waring!"

"Prettily said, my dear. You have inherited more from your mother than your good looks alone. Is it not so, mon prince?"

"Much more." Victor's enigmatic smile gave place to a look of regret and uneasiness. "Let us hope, however, not too much. Heredity," he mused in sombre mood, "is a force of such fatality in our lives...."

He gave a gesture of solicitude and continued with characteristic deliberation, and that preciseness of diction which he seemed never able to forget, even though deeply moved.

"More than ever, now that Sofia is restored to me, I could wish the past other than what it was, that she might start life with a handicap less cruel of inherited tendencies. But when I reflect that both her parents—"

"Please!" Sofia begged, piteous. "Oh, please!"

"I am sorry, my dear." Victor closed tender hands over those which the girl had lifted in appeal. "It is for your own good only I give myself this pain of warning you against your worst enemy, I mean yourself, the self that is so strange a compound of hereditary weaknesses.... Please remember always that, no matter what may happen, however far you may be led into transgression of the social codes, I shall never reproach you, on the contrary, you may count implicitly on my sympathetic understanding. Never forget, I, too, have known, have suffered and fought myself—and in the end won at a cost I am not yet finished paying, nor will be, I fear, this side my grave."

He sighed from his heart, and bowing a stricken head, seemed to lose himself in disconsolate reverie—but not so far as to suffer the interruption which Sofia made to offer and which he stayed with an eloquent hand.

"You do not understand? But naturally. Let me explain. No: there is no reason why Sybil—Mrs. Waring—should not hear. She is a dear friend of long years, she understands."

With a quiet murmur—"Oh, quite!"—Mrs. Waring ran an affectionate arm round Sofia's shoulders and gently held the girl to her.

"When I determined to forsake the bad old ways," Victor pursued—"this you must know, my dear—I had friends—of a sort—who resented my defection, set themselves against my will and, when they found they could not swerve me from my purpose, became my enemies. That was long ago, but to this day some of them persist in their enmity—I have to be constantly on my guard."

"You mean there is danger?" Sofia asked in quick anxiety. "Your life—?"

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"Always," Victor assented, gravely. With a shrug he added: "It is nothing; for myself, I am used to it, I do not greatly care. But for you—that is another matter altogether. I have a great fear for you, my child. That, indeed, is why I never tried to find you till yesterday—believing, as I mistakenly did, you were in good hands, well cared for, happy—lest my enemies seek to strike at me through you. But when I saw that unfortunate advertisement I dared delay not another hour about bringing you within the compass of my protection. Even now, untiring as my care for you shall ever be, I know my enemies will be as tireless in endeavours to rob me of you. You will be followed, hounded, importuned, lied to, threatened—all without rest. If they cannot take you from me bodily, they will seek to poison your mind against me. Therefore, rather than keep you practically a prisoner in your home, I feel obliged to require a promise of you."

Deeply stirred by the melancholy gravity that informed his pose, the girl protested earnestly: "Anything—I will promise anything, rather than be an anxiety to one who is so kind."

"Kind? To my own daughter?" Victor smiled sadly. "But I love you, little Sofia. Nor is it much that I must ask of you: merely that you never go out alone, but only in the company of Mrs. Waring or Mr. Karslake or, preferably, both."

"Oh, I promise that—"

"But there is more: If by any accident you should ever find yourself left alone in public, do not let strangers speak to you, refuse to listen to them."

"I promise."

"And finally: If anybody should ever seek to turn you against me, come to me instantly and tell me about it."

"But naturally I would do that, father."

"Good. I rely upon your discretion and loyalty. At another time I will explain matters in more detail. For the present—enough of an unpleasant subject. You have a busy day before you. At my request Mrs. Waring has arranged to have various tradespeople wait upon you this morning to take your orders for the beginnings of a wardrobe. If you can find something ready-made to wear you will want, no doubt, to spend the afternoon shopping. A car will be at your disposal, and I give you carte blanche. I wish you never to know an unsatisfied need or desire. Still, I am selfish enough to reserve for myself the happiness of selecting your jewels."

"Oh!" Sofia cried, breathlessly. Victor was holding his arms open; and how should she deny him? "You are too good to me," she murmured. "How can I ever show my gratitude?"



Holding her close, Victor smiled a singular smile.

“Some day I may tell you. But to-day—no more. I am much preoccupied with affairs; but Mrs. Waring will take care of you till evening, when I promise myself the pleasure of dining with you both.”

At the sound of a knock he put Sofia gently from him, and said in a strong voice:

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“Enter.”

The door opened, Nogam announced:

“Mr. Sturm.”

Hard on the echo of his name a man swung into the room with an air at once nervous and aggressive—a tall man shabbily dressed, holding his head high—and at sight of Sofia and Mrs. Waring, where he had doubtless thought to find Prince Victor alone, stopped short, betraying disconcertion in the way he instinctively assumed the stand of a soldier at attention, bringing his heels together with an undeniable click, straightening his shoulders, stiffening both arms to rigidity at his sides. And for a bare thought his eyes rolled almost wildly in their deep sockets. Then he bowed twice, from the hips, with mechanical precision, profoundly to Victor, with deep respect to the women.

Victor smothered an exclamation of annoyance.

Unbidden, a word shaped in Sofia’s consciousness, a French monosyllable into which the war had packed every shade and gradation of hatred and contempt, the epithet *Boche*.

Immediately erasing every sign of irritation, Victor greeted the man with casual suavity. “Oh, there you are, eh, Sturm?” Then, as Sofia and Mrs. Waring turned to go, he added quickly: “A moment, please. Since Mr. Sturm to-day becomes a member of the household, acting as my assistant in some research work which I am undertaking, I may as well present him now. Mrs. Waring, permit me: Mr. Sturm. And the Princess Sofia Vassilyevski, my daughter ...”

Mumbling their names after Victor, the man Sturm executed two more bows. At the same time he seemed to remind himself that his soldierly carriage was perhaps injudicious, and forthwith abandoned it for a studied slouch which, in Sofia’s sight, was little less than insolent. And unmistakably there was something nearly resembling insolence in the eyes that boldly sought hers: a look equivocal at best and, intentionally or no, wholly offensive in essence; as if the fellow were asserting their partnership in some secret understanding; or as if he knew something by no means to Sofia’s credit....

Her acknowledgment of his salute was accordingly cool, and she was glad when a nod from Prince Victor gave her leave to go.

X

VICTOR ET AL

Those first few weeks of emancipation from the ennui of existence at the Cafe des Exiles were so replete with wonders that Sofia lived largely in a beatific state of breathless excitement, devoting the best part of her days to thoughtless flying from delight to new delight, and going nightly to her bed so healthily tired that she slept like a top and never once awakened to memories of disturbing dreams.

Perhaps her pleasure burned the brighter for its dark, ambiguous background—those many questions which Prince Victor persisted in leaving unanswered. Sofia knew bad times of perplexity and depression, when the price of translation from drudge to princess seemed a sore price to pay.

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And yet, required to state the cost to her in terms explicit, she must have hesitated lest she appear ungrateful in complaining, who hardly needed to express a wish to have it granted, who indeed knew many a wish realized in fact before she was fully aware of its inception in her private thoughts.

All those lovely material things of life which her famished girlhood had ached for so hopelessly now were hers in abundant measure, and all the less tangible things, too, so requisite to the happiness of women in a worldly world—or nearly all. Frocks she had, with furs and furbelows no end; flowers and flattery and frivolities; freedom within limitations as yet not irksome; jewels that would have graced an imperial diadem—everything but the single essential without which everything is hollow nothing and life itself only the dreaming of a dream.

The one lack known to the Sofia of those days was the lack of Love.

She had gone so long longing to love, questing blindly and vainly for some human being to whom her affection would mean something vital and dear—it seemed cruel that her longing must be still denied. As it had been with Mama Therese, it was now with the romantic father so newly self-declared. She wanted desperately and tried her best to love Victor as his daughter should; and that he cared for her profoundly she knew and never questioned; yet when she searched her secret heart Sofia discovered no feeling for the man other than a singular form of fear. His look, his tone, his manner, his presence altogether, inspired a nameless sort of shrinking, inarticulate apprehensions, and mistrust which the girl found at once utterly unaccountable and dismally disappointing; so that, with every wish and will to do otherwise, she found herself involuntarily making excuse of trivial interests to keep out of Victor's way and, when there was no escaping, sitting silent and ill at ease in his society, or seizing on some slender pretext, it didn't matter what, to inveigle into their company a third somebody, it didn't matter whom—Mrs. Waring, Karlake, even the unspeakable Sturm.

Nevertheless, there were times, far too many of them, too, when of a sudden Victor would forsake his occult preoccupations and, unceremoniously upsetting whatever arrangements Sofia might have made with Mrs. Waring or Karlake, would find other pleasures of his own invention for her to share with him alone: long motor jaunts through the English countryside, apparently his favourite recreation; a box all to themselves at a theatre, where Victor would sit watching the girl with a fascination only rivalled by her fascination with the traffic of the boards; curiously constrained little dinners a deux in fashionable restaurants; morning rides in Rotten Row, where it oddly appeared that Victor knew everybody, whereas not one in five hundred seemed to know him—or to care to know him.

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Sofia, indeed, was often puzzled to account for what to her appeared to be an almost pathetic eagerness on the part of Victor, in strange accord with his lofty pretensions, to claim acquaintanceship with and win the recognition even of persons of the utmost inconsequence. And she remarked, too, that his temper was apt to be raw in sequel to their excursions into the haunts of the well-known. But it was for other reasons altogether that she came to dread them most.

For one thing, Victor's conversation was ordinarily rather dull; at best, the reverse of exhilarating. And in spite of her unquestioning acceptance of him as her father, he remained to Sofia actually a new acquaintance; in effect, a strange man. And from strangers, more than from relatives with whose minds one is presumably on terms of close intimacy, one is warranted in expecting something in the way of mutual stimulation through the opening of new perspectives of experience, thought, and feeling. Whereas—with Sofia, at least—Victor seemed unable to talk on more than two subjects, one or the other of which was constantly uppermost in his thoughts.

He never wearied of warning Sofia against the dangers of those moral infirmities which he asserted were hers by legitimate inheritance; and which, if Victor were right in his contentions, she could hardly hope to overcome without a desperate struggle. She would have to be forever on guard, he insisted, lest the temptation of some moment, not to be foreseen, prove too strong for her latent weakness of character, and commit her, through some unpremeditated act of defiance to the law—most probably an act of theft—to the life of a social outcast.

To do her justice, the girl was consciously not much impressed by this alleged peril. She had never been aware of any failing such as Victor would have endowed her with; so far as she could remember she had never been tempted to commit more venial sins than inhered in lying to Mama Therese now and then in order to escape unmerited disciplining at the heavy hands of that industrious virago; and as for thieving, the very thought of anything of that sort was detestable to Sofia.

But unconsciously, no doubt, the everlasting iteration of Victor's admonitions had its purposed effect upon that sensitive and impressionable spirit.

Then, too, by degrees, but all too soon, it became manifest that the memory of his passionate attachment for her mother possessed Victor to the point of monomania. It was only with an effort that he could force himself to talk to Sofia on other subjects. He thought of nothing else while with her; if she read his eyes aright, often glimpses of weird light flickering in their opaque depths, like heat lightning of a murky summer's night, fairly frightened her, and she knew a shuddering perception of the possibility that Victor was at times in danger of confusing the daughter with the mother.

"Never was there such resemblance," he once uttered, in a stare. "You are more like her than she herself!"

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Sofia was pardonably puzzled, and looked it.

"I mean, you re-create my vision of the woman I loved and lost—the woman I saw in her, not the woman she was."

"Lost?" the girl murmured.

The gray countenance took on an added shade of sombre passion. "She never understood me, she treated me badly. Once, in a fit of pique, she ran away. I did everything—everything, I tell you!—to win her back, but—"

He choked on bitter recollections—and Sofia was painfully reminded of the Chinese devil-masks in Victor's study. But the likeness faded even as she saw it, under her gaze the twisted features were ironed back into their accustomed cast of austerity.

"Before I could persuade her, you were born.... Then she died."

Sensible though she was of the ellipsis, and afraid it would never be filled in if she interrupted, Sofia could not help uttering a sound of regret and pity for the lot of the mother she had never seen, whose untimely death had ended a life accounted unendurable as Victor's wife, for reasons unknown but none the less, to the daughter, vaguely and lamentably understandable.

For Sofia by now had passed the stage of pretending to herself that she was not happier away from her father.

Victor mistook the nature of the feeling that swayed the girl—took to himself the sympathy excited by his revelations.

"But do not grieve on my account. Is not that which was lost restored again to me? In you my old love lives once more ... little Sofia!"

He caught and pressed a hand that rested on the cloth between them. (They happened that night to be dining at the Ritz.) And Sofia re-experienced that inevitable, hateful flinching with which she was growing too familiar.

She dropped her head that her eyes might not betray her.

"People will see ..."

"What if they do? Those who know us will hardly see any wrong in my squeezing the hand of my own daughter; and the others—not that they matter—will only think me the luckiest dog alive—as I am!"

Chuckle and smirk both were indescribably odious, reminding Sofia of the creature Sturm; *he* had a laugh like that for her, on the rare occasion when chance propinquity encouraged the Boche to begin one of his uncouth essays in flirtation.

Sturm's attitude, in truth, perplexed Sofia to exasperation; that is to say, as much as it offended her. For Victor the man seemed to entertain an exaggerated yet deeply rooted respect, approaching actual awe, which he tried his best to carry off with a swagger; for to hold anybody in any degree of deference was, one judged, somehow deplorable, even shameful, in the code of Sturm; but in Victor's presence the fellow's bravado would quickly wilt into hopeless servility, he would cringe and crawl like a dog currying the favour of a harsh master.

Nevertheless, Victor's daughter seemed to be no more than fair game, in Sturm's understanding, and a source of supercilious amusement but thinly veiled or not at all. Alone with the girl, Sturm put on the airs of a Prussianized pasha condescending to a new odalisque.

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Sofia held the animal in a deadly loathing which, betrayed in word or look or gesture, animated in him only a spirit of derision. In the absence of Victor, Sturm's eyes were ever ironic, his bows and leers mocking, his speeches flavoured with clumsy sarcasm; from which it resulted that the girl never quite forgot the impression which he had managed to convey in those few moments of their first encounter, that Sturm knew something she ought to know but didn't, and was meanly jeering at her in his sleeve.

What virtues Victor Vassilyevski perceived in the man passed comprehension. But so did most of Victor's whims and ways. What riddle more obscure than that portentous business which permeated the atmosphere of the establishment with the taint of stealth and terror?—the famous "research work" that kept Victor closeted with Sturm in his study daily for hours at a time, often in confabulation with others of like ilk, men of furtive and unprepossessing cast who came and went by appointment at all hours, but as a rule late at night!

Into these conferences, Sofia observed, Karslake was never summoned. She wondered why. He was, as she saw him, so unquestionably the better man, everything that Sturm was not, open of countenance, fair of temper and tongue, well-bred and well-mannered, light of heart and high spirited, and at the same time dependable, with metal of sincerity and earnestness like tempered steel in his character—or Sofia misread him woefully.

She had been quick to see the man behind the misleading little moustache. And already she was beginning to count that amusement tame which Karslake did not share.

Mrs. Waring was undeniably a dear. Sofia could hardly be grateful enough to the happy chance which had cast that lady for the role of her chaperone; lacking her guidance the girl must have been innocently guilty of many a gaucherie in ways new and strange to untried, faltering feet. And it was to her alone that Sofia owed the slow but constant widening of her social horizon. For Sybil Waring, it seemed, quite literally "knew everybody"; and Sofia soon learned to count it an off day when Sybil failed to present her protegee to the notice of somebody of position and influence.

Most of these persons were women with sounding names and the solid backing of much money conspicuously in evidence—matrons of the younger and more giddy generation which was just then so busily engaged in providing material for the most hectic chapters of London's post-war social history. But Sofia was scarcely qualified to be critical or to guess that they were climbers equally with herself, and that if their footing had been of older establishment the name of Vassilyevski would have rung sinister echoes in their memories, deafening them to the rich allure inherent in the title of princess.

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So she was fain to accept them all at their own valuation, and thought most of them entirely charming. And though she had hardly had time as yet to progress beyond the introductory stages of chance meetings and informal little teas in public, she began clearly to descry enchanting vistas of better days to come, when the Princess Sofia Vassilyevski would have not only teas but dinners and dances given in her honour, and would be asked to spend gay week-ends in the country houses of the people with whom she contracted the stronger friendships.

But for the immediate present, and especially in the paramount business of having a good time, Karslake was fairly a necessity. He thought of everything and forgot nothing, was ever fertile of fresh expedient if the pastime of a moment began to pall, and was capable of sustained fits of irresponsible gaiety which enchanted Sofia, so well did they chime with her own eagerness for sheer fun.

Decidedly she would have been lost without Sybil Waring; but without Karslake she would have been forlorn.

XI

HEARTBREAK

Not yet prepared to admit it even to herself, in her heart Sofia knew she prized the companionship of Karslake for something more than the mere amusement it afforded her: there was a deeper feeling she would not name. For all that, her times of solitude knew dreams quick and warm with the thought of Karslake, his words and ways, the gracious little attentions he had accustomed her to expect of him and which his manner subtly invested with a personal flavour inexpressibly delightful, indispensably sweet.

Nor did she ever quite forget how long he had worshipped with unostentatious devotion at her lowly shrine of the caisse in the Cafe des Exiles, and how shabbily she had rewarded his admiration—never once, in those many months, with so much as a smile—and how unresentful had been his acceptance of her half-feigned, half-real indifference to his existence.

But whenever her reflections took that back-turning she would recall the man who had talked to Karslake in the cafe, that day so long ago, of his own humble past as a 'bus-boy in Troyon's in Paris, and who on leaving had given Sofia herself that odd look of half-recognition tempered by bewilderment.

She tried once to draw Karslake about this acquaintance of his, but Karslake's memory proved unusually sluggish.

“No-o,” he drawled after a tolerably long pause for thought—“can’t say I place the chap you mean, can’t seem somehow to think back that far, you know. One meets such a lot of people, first and last, they talk such a lot of tosh—”

“But it couldn’t have been only tosh you were talking,” the girl persisted, “because—I remember—you were so keen about keeping what you said secret, you spoke the strangest language together most of the time. I could hear every word”—she had already explained about the freak acoustics of the Cafe des Exiles—“and not one meant anything to me.”

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“Stupid of me, but I simply can’t think what it could have been.”

“I can—now.”

Karslake looked askance at Sofia.

“Since I’ve heard so much Chinese spoken by the servants—now I come to think of it”—Sofia’s eyes grew bright with triumph—“I’m sure it must have been Chinese you were speaking to the man I mean.”

“Impossible,” Karslake pronounced calmly.

“But you do know Chinese, don’t you?”

“Not a syllable.”

Sofia opened her lips to protest, but delayed to study Karslake’s face intently. He didn’t try to escape her scrutiny, he even seemed to court it; but there was a curious, quizzical look in his eyes, those half-smiling lips had a whimsical droop.

“Mr. Karslake!” Sofia announced, severely, “you’re fibbing.”

“Nice thing to say to me.”

“You do speak Chinese—confess.”

“My dear Princess Sofia,” Karslake protested: “if I had known one word of Chinese I could never have landed my job with your father.”

“Why not?”

“He expressly stipulated that I should be ignorant of that language.”

“What a silly condition to make!”

“Still, I daresay Prince Victor had his reasons.”

“I can’t imagine what ...”

“Possibly preferred a secretary who couldn’t understand everything he said to the servants. I’ve never pretended to know all Prince Victor’s secrets, you know.”

After a little pause Sofia asked gently: “Did you really need the job so badly, Mr. Karslake?”

“To get it meant more to me than I can tell you—almost as much as to hold on to it does to-day.”

Sofia turned her eyes away at this, and for the rest of the ride—they were homeward bound from a matinee, having dropped Sybil Waring at her flat in Mayfair—kept her thoughts to herself.

Only the most perfunctory civilities passed between them, in fact, until they had been ushered into the study by Nogam, who advised them that Prince Victor had ordered tea to be served there and had promised to be home in good time for it.

The tea service was already set out on a little table beside the fireplace in that room of secrets, whose normal atmosphere of brooding gloom was now the darker for the deepening dusk. Only the tea itself remained to be served, a special rite never performed in that household by hands more profane than those of the major-domo, Shaik Tsin himself. And this last could be counted upon not to put in appearance until Nogam took him word that Victor was waiting.

So, having laid aside her furs and satisfied herself, by a seemingly aimless but in fact exacting survey, that the abominable Sturm was not skulking anywhere in the shadows, Sofia established herself on a lounge that faced the fireplace, while Karlake stood before the fire, looking down with an expectant smile of which she was but half aware.

“Aren’t you going to forgive me?” he asked, quietly, after a time.

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Sofia withdrew a pensive gaze from the ruddy bed of coals.

“For what?”

“You were kind enough to call it merely fibbing.”

“I’m still thinking about that.”

In fact, she had been thinking of nothing else. There was so much to be considered. Imprimis, that Karlake had been guilty of practising a deception upon her father. Deceit in itself was one form of treachery. And how often had Victor stressed to her the dangers of his position, surrounded by nameless but implacable enemies who would stick at no infamy to compass his ruin!

But if she told him that Karlake understood Chinese she would lose her friend forever—no question about that. Victor would not hesitate an instant—indeed, Sofia felt sure he was only waiting for some such pretext to get rid of his secretary. She was anything but unobserving, this child of Soho, whose wits had been sharpened in the sophisticated atmosphere of a French restaurant; and more than once she had seen Victor’s face duplicate the expression Papa Dupont’s had so often assumed on his discovering that some patron of the cafe was taking too personal an interest in the pretty young dame du comptoir. A look of insensate jealousy ...

To risk forfeiting the comradeship that had grown to be so dear? Or to be constructively derelict in her duty as a daughter?

A difficult choice to make; but Sofia made it honestly. In point of fact, she assured herself, coldly, there was no choice, there was only one thing she could do under the circumstances. And she hardened her heart and eyes as she rose to face Karlake on more equal terms.

But when she saw him waiting patiently, with that friendly smile of his she knew so well, she hesitated long enough to permit his anticipating her with a quiet question:

“Well, Princess Sofia?”

And then, amazingly, her tongue betrayed her, the phrases she had framed so carefully vanished utterly from out her mind; and she heard herself saying in rather tremulous accents:

“It’s all right. I shan’t tell.”

“About my understanding Chinese?”

“Yes—about that.”



“Then you do care—?”

She was panicky with knowledge that somehow her emotions had managed to slip their moorings and get beyond her handling. It didn’t help or mend matters much to hear her own voice stammering:

“Yes, of course, I—I don’t want you to—to have to go away—”

Oh, the vanity of trying to hoodwink him who knew so well what she was now for the first time realizing!

“Because you like me a little, Princess Sofia?”

“Why—yes—of course I do—”

“Because you know I love you, dear.”

And then she found herself clinging to Karslake; and his lips were warm upon her hands ...

So suddenly and at long last it came to Sofia, that Love for which all her days had been one long weariness of waiting, Love that brimmed with raptures what had been only aching emptiness and made the desert places to blossom as the rose. And the joy of it proved overmastering, sweeping her off her feet and dazing her, leaving her breathless and thoughtless but for the all-obscuring thought—at length she loved, and the one whom she loved loved her!

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And for a space she existed in an iridescent dream of happiness, without sense of relation to a material world, forgetful of the flight of time, lost to everything but her lover's arms and voice and lips.

It might have been five minutes, it might have been sixty, before she became aware that Karslake was gently disengaging her hands. "Dearest, dearest!" she heard him say. "We must be sensible. That was the front door, I'm afraid."

The meaning in his insistence presently began to penetrate, if vaguely, and she suffered him to go from her a pace or two. But, still a little blind with the beauty of the revelation that had been granted unto her, nothing that met her gaze seemed to be in true focus except her lover's face: even the countenance of Victor swam into her ken as if blurred by veils of mist, its dour, forbidding look had no significance to her intelligence. Victor himself, for that matter, was a figure without real consequence other than as a symbol of the old order, the tedious old ways of the world from which she had magically escaped.

A ring of sarcastic apology provided the only clue she got to the import of Victor's words. Sobered a trifle, her mental processes somewhat less incoherent, still she knew she would hardly regain her poise until she was alone. And breathing an excuse, she left the room with such dignity as she could muster.

In the hall, with the closed door behind her, she paused to collect herself. Then she missed furs and gloves and handbag and, remembering that she had left them in the study, for some obscure reason imagined she must have them before proceeding to her room.

Much more mistress of herself by now, it never occurred to Sofia that there could be any reason why she should hesitate about returning or feel embarrassed before Victor. True, he had surprised them, Sofia was not at all sure he hadn't actually seen her in Karslake's arms. But what of that? Love like hers was nothing to be ashamed of; and that Victor could reasonably object to her giving her heart to one of his secretaries was something far from her thought just then.

She put a hand to the knob, turned it, and swung the door open—all on impulse—then faltered, transfixed by the tableau before the fireplace.

The door was silent on its hinges, and Karslake's back was to her. Victor, on the other hand, facing both Karslake and the door, unquestionably saw Sofia, but pretended not to, and had his say out with Karslake in a manner bitterly cynical.

"... sadly in error if you flatter yourself I pay you a wage to make love to Sofia behind my back."

“Sorry, sir.” Karlake’s tone was level, respectful but firm. “Your instructions were, I believe, to win her confidence. Well—I have always found love the one sure key to a woman’s confidence. Of course, if I had understood you cared one way or the other—”

Sofia heard no more: unconsciously she had closed the door, at one and the same time shutting from her sight Victor’s exultant sneer and from her hearing the words with which the man whom she loved had damned himself irretrievably and dashed her spirit from radiant pinnacles of ecstasy into the profoundest black abyss of shame and despair.

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Primitive instinct bade the stricken girl seek her room and hide her suffering there; but the shock had stunned her to the point of physical weakness. Already a hand was pressed above her heart, that ached cruelly; and as she moved to cross to the foot of the staircase her knees gave under her. She clutched the newel-post for support, waiting to find strength for the ascent.

From the shadowed back part of the hall the man Nogam moved hastily into view, his features twisted in a grimace of concern as he recognized the bleak misery of Sofia's face. His voice sounded strangely thin and remote.

"Is there anything the matter, miss?—anything I can do?"

She contrived to shake her head slightly and utter an inarticulate sound of negation, then began slowly to mount the stairs.

Below, Nogam stood watching, in a pose of indecision, as if tempted to follow and offer the support of an arm lest she fall, restrained only by fear of a rebuff. But Sofia's leaden limbs carried her safely to the upper landing, then on to the blessed shelter of her room, where she collapsed upon a chaise-longue and there lay in a stirless huddle, dry of eye but deaf to the plaintive entreaties of Chou Nu and numb to all sensation but the anguish of her humiliated heart.

XII

SUSPECT

Toward mid-evening the man Victor Vassilyevski and his creature Sturm sat where the lamp of hand-wrought brass made the top of the teakwood table an oasis of light amid a waste of shadows, their heads together over a vast glut of books and papers—maps printed and sketched, curious diagrams, works of reference, documents all dark with columns of figures and cabalistic writings intelligible only to initiated eyes.

They had the study all to themselves. Nevertheless, when they spoke it was in the discreet pitch of those who deal in fatal secrets. At a distance of two paces only a lip-reader could have caught the substance of their communications, and even such a one must have failed unless equally at home in German and in English.

Aside from these occasional and circumspect voices, and the busy rustle of a steel pen in the hand of Sturm, the quiet of the room had a tolerably constant background of sound in a subdued whisper punctuated by muffled clicks, emanating from the bronze casket that housed the telautographic apparatus.

From time to time, as this noise temporarily suspended, Victor would get up, read what the mechanical stylus had inscribed, tear off the paper, and return to his chair.

Some of the messages thus received he made known to Sturm, who invariably acknowledged this courtesy with effusive gratitude, sometimes adding a few words of contented comment. Other messages Victor chose to keep to himself, silently setting fire to them and adding their brittle ashes to those of their predecessors on the brazen tray provided for the purpose. At such times Sturm would bend lower over his work. But Victor was well able to guess what resentment glimmered in the eyes so studiously averted; and his cold, sardonic smile more than once commented, unknown to Sturm, upon the accuracy with which he read the mean workings of his “secretary’s” mind.

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The buzz of a muted bell presently interrupted the even tenor of their industry, causing Sturm to start sharply, drop his pen, and slue round in his chair, turning to Victor a livid face in which his dark eyes of a fanatic were live embers of excitement.

Without a sign to show he shared or even was aware of Sturm's emotion, Victor deliberately fished from beneath the table a telephone instrument, unhooked the receiver, and pronounced a conventional phrase of greeting. To this he added a short "Yes," and after listening quietly for some seconds, "Very good—in twenty minutes, then." Wasting no more time on the author of the call, he hung up, returned the telephone to its place of concealment, and helped himself to a cigarette before deigning to acknowledge Sturm's persistent stare.

Then, elevating his eyebrows in mild impatience, he made the laconic announcement:

"Eleven."

Sturm's mouth twitched nervously, his eyes burned with a keener fire.

"Coming here? To-night?"

"Yes."

"Then"—a gaunt hand described a gesture of agitation—"the hour strikes!"

Victor looked bored.

"Who knows?" he replied, as who should say: "Does it matter?"

"But—Gott in Himmel—!"

"Sturm," Victor interposed, critically, "if you Bolsheviki were a trifle more consistent, one might repose greater faith in your sincerity. But when one hears you deny the Deity in one breath and call on him by name in the next—!"

"A mere mode of speech," Sturm muttered.

"If you must invoke a spiritual patron, why not Satan? Or don't you believe in the Powers of Darkness, either?"

"I believe in you."

"As temporal viceroy of Lucifer? Many thanks! But you were about to say—?"

"Nothing. That is—I was envying your poise, Excellency. You take things so coolly."

"Why not?"

“With Eleven coming here to tell us when we are to strike?”

“Why not?” Victor repeated. “We are prepared to strike at any hour. What matters whether to-night or a week from to-night—since we cannot fail?”

“If that were only certain!”

“It rests with you.”

“That’s just it,” Sturm doubted moodily. “Suppose I fail?”

“Why, then—I suppose—you will die.”

“I know. And so will all of us, Excellency.”

“Oh, no. Undeceive yourself, my friend. I shall survive. You will surely die, and perhaps many others with you; but I would not be Number One if I had turned my hand to this scheme without discounting failure first of all. My way of escape is sure.”

“I believe you,” Sturm grumbled.

With a languid hand Victor found and pressed a button embedded in the table near the edge.

“You have reason. Whatever my shortcomings, my good Sturm, they do not include hypocrisy; I do not pretend, like your noble Bolsheviki, I am in this business for the sake of humanity or anything but my own selfish ends—power, plunder”—a slight wait prefaced one final word, spoken in a key of sombre passion—“revenge.”

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"Revenge?" Sturm echoed, staring.

"I have more than one score to pay out before I can cry even with life ... one above all!"

Studying intently that darkened face, and misled by its look of abstraction, Sturm was guilty of the indiscretion of his malicious smile.

"The Lone Wolf?"

Victor turned weary eyes his way, and under their black and lustreless regard the smile merged swiftly into a grin of nervous apology.

"You are shrewd," Victor observed, thoughtfully. "Be careful: it is a dangerous gift."

The man Nogam gently opened the door and approached the table, stopping just outside the area of illumination shed by the shaded lamp. But since Victor continued to smoke absently, paying no attention, Nogam resigned himself to wait with entire patience: the perfect pattern of a servant tempered by long servitude to the erratic winds of employers' whims; efficient, assiduous, mute unless required to speak, long-suffering.

Victor addressed him suddenly, in a sharp voice that drew from Sturm a glitter of eager spite.

"Nogam!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Where is the Princess Sofia?"

"In 'er apartment, sir."

"And Mr. Karlake?"

"In 'is."

"Then be good enough to send Shaik Tsin to me."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Nogam!"—the servant checked in the act of turning—"I shan't need you again to-night."

"Nk you, sir."

When Nogam had left the room, Sturm, remarking the slight frown that knitted Victor's brows, ventured an impertinence couched in a form of respectful enquiry:

"Excellency, perhaps you trust that fellow too much, hein?"

"You think so?"

"He is too perfect, if you ask me—never makes a false move."

"Either he is what he seems, in which event a false move would be against nature; or he is not, and knows one slip would mean his death."

"Still, I maintain you trust him too much."

"With what?"

"The freedom of your house, the opportunity to spy, to get to know who comes to see you and when, to listen at doors."

"You have caught him listening at doors?"

"Not yet. But in time—"

"I think not. I don't think he has to."

"You mean," Sturm stammered, perturbed, "you think he knows—suspects?"

"I think he is one thing or the other: merely Nogam, or one of the greatest of living actors. In either case he is flawless—thus far. But if not merely Nogam, he will have a subtler means of eavesdropping than by listening at doors."

"The dictograph?"

"Make your mind easy about that. This room is searched regularly by Shaik Tsin. So is Nogam's. It is certain there is neither a dictograph installed here nor any means at Nogam's disposal for connecting with a dictograph installation. Indeed, so closely is Nogam watched, and by more cunning eyes than mine—sometimes I begin to be afraid he is simply what he seems."

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"Then you do suspect him!"

"My good Sturm, I suspect everybody."

Sturm pondered this before pressing his point again.

"Karlsruhe found the fellow for you," he suggested at length.

"True."

"And Karlsruhe—"

"Has been guilty of nothing more treacherous than falling in love with Sofia."

"Your daughter, Excellency!"

"The young woman seems content to call herself that.... Can't say I blame Karlsruhe."

"But do you forgive him?"

"Ah, that is another matter. Mine is not a forgiving nature, Sturm—not even toward excessive shrewdness."

Victor took up a docket of papers, and Sturm, mumbling an apology, gave himself up to jealous brooding till he forgot the broad hint he had received.

"If I can satisfy you that Nogam is untrustworthy—" he began, meaning to continue: *Karlsruhe will stand his proved accomplice.*

But Victor would not let him finish. "Nothing could please me more," he interrupted. "Do so, by all means—if you can—and earn my everlasting gratitude."

Sturm questioned him with puzzled eyes.

"I ask no greater service of any man," Victor elucidated with a smile that made Sturm shiver, "than proof that Nogam is what I suspect him of being." A hand extended upon the table unclosed and closed slowly, with fingers tensed, like a murderous claw. "I want no greater favour of Heaven or Hell—!"

He broke off abruptly. Having entered noiselessly in his padded shoes, Shaik Tsin now stood before Victor, offering a low obeisance.

"You took your time," Victor grumbled. And Shaik Tsin smiled serenely. "I want you to tend the door to-night," Victor pursued. "Eleven is expected at any moment. You need not announce him, simply show him in."



“Hearing is obedience.”

“Wait”—as the Chinaman began to bow himself out—“Karslake is still in his room, I suppose?”

“Yes, master.”

“And Nogam?”

“Has just gone to his.”

“When did you last search their quarters?”

“During dinner.”

“And of course found nothing?” Shaik Tsin bowed. “Make sure neither leaves his room to-night. Set a watch outside each door.”

“I have done so.”

Victor gave a sign of dismissal.

XIII

THE TURNIP

In a spacious chamber beneath the eaves, hideously papered and furnished with cheerless, massive relics of the early Victorian era, the man Nogam pursued methodical preparations for bed.

Spying eyes, had there been any—and for all Nogam knew, there were—would have seen him follow step by step a programme from whose order he had departed by scarcely as much as a single gesture on any night since his first installation in the house near Queen Anne’s Gate.

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Loosening the waistcoat of his evening livery, he freed the heavy silver watchchain from its buttonhole, drew from its pocket an old-fashioned silver watch of that obese style which first earned the portable timepiece its nickname of “turnip,” and opening its back inserted a key attached to the other end of the chain. Its winding was a laborious process, prodigiously noisy. Once finished, Nogam shut the back with a loud click, and reverently deposited the watch on the marble slab of the black walnut bureau.

Then he hung coat and waistcoat over the back of a chair which stood between the foot of his bed and the door. Sheer chance may have decreed selection of this chair for the purpose on Nogam’s first night in the room; whether or no, it was not in character that, having established this precedent, Nogam should depart from it. And in any event, the coat-draped chair effectually eclipsed a possible keyhole view of the room.

Notwithstanding, Nogam pursued his bedtime rites with precisely the same deliberation and absence of perceptible self-consciousness as before. One never knew: there might be other peepholes in the walls.

His trousers, neatly folded, he laid out on the seat of the chair. Then he pulled off square-toed boots with elastic inserts in their uppers, put on a pair of worn slippers, carried the boots to the door and set them outside, closed the door, and turned the key in its lock.

If aware that, by so doing, he made his privacy just as secure as if he had fastened the door with a bent hair-pin, he gave evidence of no uneasiness in the knowledge. A clear conscience is the best of nerve tonics.

Throughout, his features preserved their mild, subdued, dull habit with which the household was familiar. Nogam off duty was in no way different from the unthinking creature of habit who performed downstairs the prescribed functions of his office.

Having donned a nightshirt of coarse cotton, he knelt for several minutes in a devout attitude by the side of his bed, then rising opened the window, took the turnip from the bureau, and snuggled it beneath his pillow, inserted his bare shanks between the sheets, and opened at a marked place a Bible bound in black cloth.

On the table by his shoulder a battered electric standard with a frayed cord and a dingy shade remained alight long enough to permit Nogam to spell out a short chapter. Then he put the Bible aside, yawned wearily, and switched out the lamp.

Profound darkness now possessed the room, immaterially modified by the light-struck sky beyond the windows. And in this grateful obscurity Nogam permitted himself the luxury of ceasing to be Nogam. A light suddenly flashed upon his face would have discovered a keen and alert intelligence transfiguring the apathetic mask of every day.

Also, it would have rendered Nogam's probable duration of life an interesting speculation.

Under cover of the darkness, furthermore, he did a number of things which Nogam, qua Nogam, would never have dreamed of doing.

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His first act was to withdraw from under his pillow the turnip, his next to re-open the back of its silver case and then the inner lid—something which a deft thumbnail accomplished without a sound.

From the roomy interior of the case—whose bulky ancient works had been replaced by a wafer-thin modern movement, leaving much useful space back of the dial—sensitive fingers extracted a metal disk about the size and thickness of a silver dollar. One face of this disk was generously perforated, the other, solid, boasted a short blunt post round which several feet of extremely fine wire had been coiled.

Unwinding the wire and bending the free end into the form of a rude hook, the man attached this last to the cord of his bedside lamp at a point, located by sense of touch, where a minute section of electric light wire had been left naked by defective insulation.

Direct connection now being established with a microphone secreted in the base of the brass lamp on the study table, three floors below, and the perforated side of the microphone detector serving as an earpiece, one could hear every word uttered by the conspirators.

The man in bed contributed a broad smile to the kind darkness—sheer luxury to facial muscles cramped and constrained to the cast of Nogam for eighteen hours a day. He was now at last to reap the reward of three months of preparation and three weeks of ingenious, but necessarily spasmodic, and at all times desperately dangerous, tampering with the house wiring system.

He lay very still for a long time, listening ...

XIV

CONFERENCE OF THE DAMNED

An Irish voice was making the hush of the study musical with mellow cadences.

“This week-end sure, your Excellency—within the next three nights—the little Welshman will be after summoning the Cabinet to sit in secret in Downing Street, with His Most Gracious Majesty attending in person; the emergency extraordinary being thoughtfully provided by this shindig me amiable but spirited fellow-countrymen are kicking up across the Channel—God bless the work!”

The speaker laughed lightly, flashing white teeth at Prince Victor across the width of the paper-strewn table.

“In more Parliamentary language, by the Irish Question. But we’ll hear no more of that, I’m thinking, once we’ve proclaimed the Soviet Government of England.”

Victor bowed in grave assent.

“You have my word as to that,” he said; and after a moment of thoughtful consideration: “You speak, no doubt, from the facts?”

“I do that. It’s straight I’ve come from the House of Commons to bring you the news without an hour’s delay. There’s more than one advantage in being an Irish Member these days.”

“On the other hand, Eleven”—Victor stressed the numeral as if to remind the Irishman that even a Member of Parliament for Ireland held no higher standing in his esteem than any other underling in his association of anonymous conspirators—“even so, it appears you are uncertain as to the night.”

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"I'm after telling you it'll be to-morrow night or more likely Saturday—Sunday at the latest." A mildly impatient accent alone betrayed resentment of the snub. "I'll know in good time, long before the hour appointed; and that ought to do, providing you on your part are prepared."

"An hour's notice will be ample," Victor agreed. "We have been ready for days, needing only the knowledge you bring us—or will, when you have it definitely."

The Irishman chuckled.

"It's hard to believe. Not that I'd dream of doubting your statement, sir—but yourself won't be denying you must have worked fast to organize England for revolution in less than three weeks."

"I have been busy," Victor admitted. "But the work was not so difficult ... Seeds of revolution are easily sown in land thoroughly tilled by forces of discontent. And what land has been better tilled? To vary the figure: England is all seething beneath a thin crust of custom and established habit whose integrity a conservative and reactionary government has ever since the war been struggling desperately to preserve. The blow we shall strike within three days will shatter that crust in a hundred places."

"And let Hell loose!" the Irishman added with a nervous laugh.

In a dry voice Victor commented: "Precisely."

"Omelettes," Sturm interjected, assertively, "are not made without breaking eggs."

"And all rivers, no doubt, flow to the sea? What a lot you know, Herr Sturm! Is it the Portfolio of the Minister of Education you've picked out for your very own, after the explosion comes off—if it's a fair question?"

"You Irish are all mad," the German complained, sourly—"mad about laughing. Even me you will laugh at, while you trust your very life to me, while you trust to my genius to make Soviet England possible and Ireland free."

"Faith! you're away off there, me friend. If it was you and your genius I had to trust, it's meself would turn violent reactionary and advise Ireland to be a good dog and come to England's heel and lick England's hand and live off England's leavings. I'll trust nobody in this black business but himself—Number One."

"You have changed your tune since that night at the Red Moon," Sturm reminded him, angrily.

"I had me lesson then and there," Eleven agreed, cheerfully. "And I don't mind telling you, the next time I'm taken with a fancy to call me soul me own, I'll be after asking himself first for a license."

Victor put a period to the passage with a dispassionate "By your leave, gentlemen—that will do." To the Irishman he added: "You understand the danger, I believe, of remaining within the condemned area—that is to say, except in the open air?"

"Can't say I do, altogether."

"It is simple: no person in any house supplied by the mains of the Westminster gas works will be safe for hours after the formula of Thirteen has begun its work. My advice to you is to keep out of the district entirely."

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"Faith, and I'll do that! But how about yourself in this house?"

"I shall spend the week-end outside of London," Victor replied, "not too far away, of course, and"—the shadow of his satiric smile was briefly visible—"prepared at any moment to answer the call of my stricken country.... The few who remain here will be provided with the essentials for their protection. Furthermore, a general warning will be sent out to all who can be trusted."

"And the others—?"

"With them it must be as Fate wills."

"Women and children, potential sympathizers and supporters of all classes?" the Irishman persisted in incredulous horror—"all?"

"All," Victor affirmed, coldly. "We who deal in the elemental passions that make revolutions, that is to say, in Life and Death, cannot afford qualms and scruples. What are a few lives more or less in London? These British breed like rabbits."

"I see," said Eleven, indistinctly. He stared a moment and swallowed hard, then glanced hastily at his watch. "I'll be after bidding you good-night," he said, "and pleasant dreams. For meself, I'm a fool if I go to bed this night sober enough to dream at all, at all!"

Victor rang for Shaik Tsin to show him out.

"One question more, if you won't take it amiss," Eleven suggested, lingering. And Victor inclined a gracious head. "Have you thought of failure?"

"I have thought of everything."

"Well, and if we do fail—?"

"How, for example?"

"How do I know what hellish accident may kick our plans into a cocked hat? Anything might happen. There's your friend, the Lone Wolf, for instance ..."

"Have you not forgotten him yet?" Victor enquired in simulated surprise. "Have you neglected to remark that since the blunderer failed to find the Council Chamber that night, when his raid at the Red Moon netted him only a handful of coolie gamblers and drug-addicts, he has left us to our own devices?"

"That's what makes me wonder what the divvle's up to. His sort are never so dangerous as when apparently discouraged." "Be reassured. I promised you three

weeks ago his interference would not continue beyond that night. It has not. Lanyard knows I have his daughter, that any blow aimed at me must first strike her.”

“Doubtless yourself knows best....”

With the Irishman gone, Prince Victor turned to Sturm.

“You will want a good night’s sleep,” he suggested with pointed solicitude. “Who knows but that to-morrow will bring your night of nights, my friend?”

He lapsed immediately into remote abstraction, sitting with chin bent to the tips of his joined fingers, his eyes downcast, motionless.

Disgruntled, but afraid to show it, the German cleared away the litter of papers, assorting them into huge portfolios, and took himself off. Shaik Tsin replaced him, moving noiselessly about the room, restoring the reference books to the shelves and stowing the portfolios away in a massive safe hidden behind a lacquered screen. This done, he stationed himself before his master, awaiting his attention, a shape of affable placidity, intelligent, at ease; his attitude not entirely lacking a suggestion of familiarity.

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Without changing his pose by so much as the lifting of an eyelash, Victor spoke in Chinese:

"To-morrow afternoon, late, I shall motor down into the country with the girl Sofia. I shall be gone three days—perhaps. I will leave a telephone number with you, to be used only in emergency. As soon as I have left, you will dismiss all the English servants, with a quarter's wage in advance in lieu of notice. Karslake will provide the money."

"He does not accompany you?"

"No."

"And the man Nogam?"

Victor appeared to hesitate. "What do you think?" he enquired at length.

"What I have always thought."

"That he is a spy?"

"Yes."

"But with no tangible support for your suspicions?"

"None."

"You have not failed to watch him closely?"

"As a cat watches a mouse."

"But—nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Yet I agree with you entirely, Shaik Tsin. I smell treachery."

"And I."

"Nogam shall go with me as my bodyservant. Thus I shall be able to keep an eye on him. Let Chou Nu be prepared to accompany us as maid to the girl Sofia. In my absence you will be guided by such further instructions as I may leave with you. These failing, consider the man Sturm, my personal representative. In the contingency you know of, Sturm will warn you in time to clear the house."

"Of everybody?"



"Of all servants except those whom you may need to guard the man Karlake. These and yourself will be provided with means of self-protection by Sturm."

"And Karlake?"

"I have not yet made up my mind."

"Hearing is obedience."

Victor relapsed into another reverie which lasted so long that even the patience of Shaik Tsin bade fair to fail. In the end the silence was broken by two words:

"The crystal."

From a cabinet at the end of the room Shaik Tsin brought a crystal ball supported on the backs of three golden dragons standing tail to tail, superbly wrought examples of Chinese goldsmithing. This he placed carefully on the black teakwood surface at Victor's elbow.

"And now, inform the girl Sofia I wish to see her."

"And if she again sends her excuses?"

"Say, in that event, I shall be obliged to come to her room."

XV

INTUITION

She had not thought, of course, of going down to dinner; she had, instead, sent Victor word simply that she begged to be excused from joining him for that meal. Then, unable longer to endure Chou Nu's efforts to comfort or distract her, Sofia had stepped out of her street frock and into a negligee and, dismissing the maid, returned to the chaise-longue upon which, in vain hope of being able to cry out the wretchedness of her heart, she had thrown herself on first gaining the sanctuary of her room.

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For hours, she did not guess how many, she scarcely stirred. Neither was the blessed boon of tears granted unto her. Alone with her immense and immitigable misery, she lay in darkness tempered only by the dim skyshine that filtered through the window draperies; hating life, that had no mercy; hating the duplicity that had led Karslake into making untrue love to her, but inexplicably not hating Karslake himself, or the enshrined image that wore his name; hating herself for her facile readiness to give love where all but the guise of love was lacking, and for knowing this deep hurt where she should have felt only scorn and anger; but hating, most of all, or rather for the first time discovering how well she hated, him to whom unerring intuition told her she owed this brimming measure of heartbreak and humiliation, the man who called himself her father.

For if Karslake had done her a cruel wrong in winning her avowal of the love that had been growing in her heart these many weeks, while he was merely amusing himself or serving a secret purpose—whose was the initial blame for that?

Who had egged Karslake on, as he had asserted, “to win her confidence,” leaving to him the choice of means to that end?

And—*why*?

The formulation of this question marked the turning point in Sofia’s descent toward the nadir of shame and anguish; from the moment its significance was clearly apprehended (but it took her long to reach this stage) the complexion of her thoughts took on another colour, and the smart of chagrin was soothed even as the irritation excited by critical examination of Victor’s conduct grew more acute.

Why should the self-styled author of her being have thought it necessary, or even wise or kind, to commission a paid employee to win his daughter’s confidence?

What had rendered the conquest of her confidence so needful in his sight?

What had made him think Sofia would prove loath to resign it to him, or more likely to give it to another?

Why had Victor hesitated to bid for her confidence with his own tongue, on his own merits?

One would think that, if he were her father—

If!

Was he?

Sofia sat up sharply, her young body as taut as her temper. Pulses and breathing quickened, intent eyes probed the shadows as if she thought to wrest from them a clue to the mystery of her status in the household of Victor Vassilyevski.

What proof had she that he was her father?

None but his word.... Well, and Karslake's.... None that would stand the test of skepticism, none that either sentiment or reason could offer and support. Certainly she resembled Prince Victor in no respect that she could think of, not in person, not in mould of character, not in ways of thought. From the very first she had been perplexed, and indeed saddened, by her failure, her sheer inability, to react emotionally

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to their alleged relationship. And surely there must exist between parent and child some sort of spiritual bond or affinity, something to draw them together—even if neither had never known the other. Whereas she on her part had never been conscious of any sense of sympathy with Victor, but only of timidity and reluctance which had latterly manifested in unquestionable aversion. And then there was his attitude toward her, raising a question so repugnant to her understanding that never before to-night had Sofia admitted its existence and given it the freedom of her thoughts.

She had seen men, in the Cafe des Exiles, toast their mistresses with such looks as Victor Vassilyevski reserved for the girl whom he claimed as his child.

What, then, if he were not her father?

What if he had only pretended to paternal rights in furtherance of some deep scheme of his?—perhaps thinking to use her as a pawn in that dark plot which he was forever brewing in his study (with canaille like Sturm for collaborators!) that mysterious “research work” that flavoured the atmosphere of the house with a miasmatic reek of intrigue, stealth, and fear—perhaps (more simply and terribly) designing in his own time and way to avenge himself upon the daughter for the admitted slights he had suffered at the hands of the mother, that poor dead woman whose fame he never ceased to blacken while still her memory was potent to kindle fires in those eyes otherwise so opaque, impenetrable, and lightless!

Now Sofia found herself unable to sit still; only through action of some sort could she hope to win any measure of ease for brain and nerves. A thought was shaping, claiming precedence over all others, the thought of flight; bred of the feeling that, as long as she remained in ignorance of the exact truth concerning their relationship, it was impossible for her to remain longer under Victor’s roof, eating his bread and salt, schooling herself to suffer his endearments whose good faith she could not help challenging, who inspired in her only antipathy, fear, and distrust.

It seemed clear beyond dispute that she must leave his protection, this very night, before he could guess her mind and move to check her.

Sofia swung her feet down to the floor. One of her silken mules had fallen off. Semi-consciously she groped for it with stockinged toes. As the inanimate will, the mule eluded recapture with impish ease. But beneath her foot something rustled and crackled lightly. She bent over and picked it up: a square white envelope, sealed.

Switching on a lamp near by, she examined her find. It carried no address. How it could have got there she could not imagine ... unless Chou Nu had dropped it by inadvertence, which seemed as far-fetched as to suppose she had left it there by

design; for that would mean Chou Nu had been bribed to convey a surreptitious note to her mistress; and Sofia knew that the Chinese girl was at once too loyal to her “second-uncle,” and too much in awe of “Number One,” to be corruptible.

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None the less, there the envelope was; and nobody but Chou Nu had entered the room since Sofia had come straight from the study to it, late in the afternoon.

It was just possible, however—Sofia's eyes measured the distance—that a deft hand and a strong wrist might have slipped the envelope under the door and sent it skimming across the floor to the foot of the chaise-longue.

But nobody would have dared do that without a powerful motive for wishing to communicate secretly with Sofia.

She tore the flap and withdrew a single sheet of notepaper penned in a hand she knew too well. Her heart leapt....

I implore you, of your charity, do not condemn me without a hearing because of anything you may have overheard me say. After you left us in the study I saw his eyes watching the door while we talked, and knew from his look that something to please him had happened behind my back. And in the temper he was in only one thing could possibly have pleased him.

I said what I said to him, dear, because I had to—or lose the right, dearer to me than life, to be near you, to serve and protect you. I lied to him because I loved you. But I have never lied to you about my love—and only once, through necessity, about anything else. Perhaps you can guess what that lie was, somehow I rather think you do; at least, I am sure, you are beginning to wonder if I told the truth—or knew it, then.

If this sound cryptic, I can only beg you to be patient and charitable until I find opportunity to clear away this one lie which stands between us—and which is, by comparison, almost immaterial, since all that matters is the one great truth in my life, that I love you beyond all telling.

R.K.

If questions trouble your mind, I beg you do not let him know it. Your only safety now lies in his continuing to believe that you are unsuspecting. Above all, do your best to seem to fall in with his wishes, however strange or unreasonable they may seem. It will be only a few days more before I can claim you for my own, and laugh at his pretensions.

A curious love-letter; yet it was Sofia's first. If it made her thoughtful, it made her illogically happy as well. If it put the issue to her squarely, of loyalty to Prince Victor or loyalty to Karlake, she was unaware that she had any choice of courses. When Shaik Tsin thumped the panels of her door, she crushed the note into the bosom of her negligee before answering.

When one is of an age to love, it is never the parent who gets the benefit of a doubt.

XVI

THE CRYSTAL

Like some shy, sad shade summoned up by the malign genius of a haunted chamber, a slender shape of pallor in softly flowing draperies slipped through the silent door and, advancing a few reluctant steps into the soundless gloom, paused and in apprehensive diffidence awaited the welcome that was for a time withheld.

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For minutes Victor gave no sign or stir; and in all the room nothing moved but ghostly whorls of smoke writhing slowly upward from a pungent censer of beaten gold.

The great lamp of brass was dark, and there was no other light than a solitary bulb, whose hooded rays were concentrated upon the crystal ball, so that the latter shone with a dead-white glare, somehow baleful, like an elfin moon deeply lost in a sea of sombre enchantment.

Bending forward in his chair, an elbow planted on the table, his forehead resting upon the tips of long, white fingers, Victor's gaze was steadfast to the crystal. Refracted light sculptured with curious shadows that saturnine face intent to immobility.

Too young, too inexperienced and sensitive to be insusceptible to the spell of the theatrical, the girl was conscious of a steady ebb of her new-found store of fortitude, skepticism, and defiance, together with an equally steady inflow of timidity and uneasiness. That sinister figure at the table, absorbed in study of the inscrutable sphere—what did he see there, to hold his faculties in such deep eclipse? Adept in black arts of the Orient as he was said to be, what wizardry was he brewing with the aid of that traditional tool of the necromancer? What spectacle of divination was in those pellucid depths unfolding to his rapt vision? And what had this consultation of the occult to do with the man's mind concerning herself?

Sofia was shaken by a tremor of dread....

And as if her emotion were somehow communicated, arousing him to knowledge of her presence, Victor started, sat back, and with a sigh passed a hand across his eyes. When the hand fell, his face wore its habitual look for Sofia, modified by a slightly apologetic and weary smile.

"My child!" he exclaimed in accents of contrite surprise, "have I kept you waiting long?"

"Only a few minutes. It doesn't matter."

But her voice seemed sadly small and thin in comparison with Victor's rotund and measured intonations.

"Forgive me." Victor rose, nodding to indicate the shining crystal. "I have been consulting my familiar," he said with a light laugh. "You have heard of crystal-gazing? A fascinating art that languishes in undeserved neglect. The ancients were more wise, they knew there was more in Heaven and Earth.... You are incredulous? But I assure you, I myself, though far from proficient, have caught strange glimpses of unborn events in the heart of that transparent enigma."

He took her hands and cuddled them in his own.

She quivered irrepressibly to his touch.

“But you are trembling!” he protested, solicitous, looking down into her face—“you are wan and sad, my dear. Tell me you are not ill.”

“It is nothing,” Sofia replied—again in that faint, stifled voice. She added in determined effort to subdue her trembling and turn their talk to essentials: “You sent for me—I am here.”

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"I am so sorry. If I had guessed ..." Enlightenment seemed to dawn all at once. "But surely it isn't because of that stupid business with Karslake? Surely you didn't take him seriously?"

"How should I—?"

"It is too absurd. The poor fool misconstrued my instructions to make himself agreeable—I am so taken up with the gravest matters at present, I didn't want you to feel lonely or neglected—and, it appears, felt it incumbent upon him to flirt with you as a matter of duty. I am out of temper with him, but not unreasonable; I shan't dispense with his services altogether, without more provocation, but will find other work to keep him busy and out of your way. You need fear no more annoyance from that quarter."

"I was not annoyed," Sofia found heart to contend. "I—like him."

"Nonsense!" Victor's laugh was rich with derision. "Don't ask me to believe you were actually touched by the fellow's play-acting. You—my daughter—wasting emotion on a mere commoner! The thing is too ridiculous. Oblige me by thinking no more about it. I have better things in store for you."

"Better than—love?" the girl questioned with grave eyes.

"When the time comes for that, you shall find a worthier parti than poor Karslake, well-meaning though he may be. Moreover, you heard—forgive me for reminding you—there was not an ounce of sincerity in all his philandering for you to hold in sentimental recollection. So—forget Karslake, please. It is a duty you owe your own pride and my dignity; it is, furthermore, my wish."

She bowed her head, that he might not see the reflection in her face of the glow that warmed her bosom, where Karslake's letter nestled. But Victor took the nod for the word of submission, and patted her shoulder with an indulgent hand, guiding her to a chair close by his.

"Sit down, my dear. I want to explain why I asked you to come to me at this late hour—never dreaming my message would find you so overwrought.... You quite see how needless it was to permit yourself to be upset by such a trifling matter, don't you?"

"Oh, quite," Sofia murmured, with gaze fixed on the interlacing fingers in her lap.

"That is sensible." Offering her shoulder one last accolade of approbation, Victor moved toward his own chair. "And now that you are here, we may as well have our little talk out," he continued, but broke off to stipulate: "If, that is, you are sure you feel up to it?"

"Yes," Sofia assented, but without moving.

“I am not so sure. Perhaps a glass of wine might do you good.”

“Oh, no!” the girl protested—“I don’t need it, really.”

But Victor wouldn’t listen; and disappearing into shadowed distances, returned presently with a brimming goblet.

“Drink this, dear. It will make you feel quite fit again.”

Obediently, Sofia raised the goblet to her lips.

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"You have never tasted a wine like that," Victor insisted, smiling down at her.

It was true enough, what he claimed; though it had something of character of a sound old Madeira, this wine had more, a surpassing richness, a fruitiness in no way cloying, a peculiarly aromatic taste and fragrance, elusive and provoking, with a hint of bitterness never to be analyzed by the most experienced palate.

"What is it?" Sofia asked after her first sip.

"You like it, eh? An old wine of China, unknown to Western Europe." Victor gave it a musical name in what Sofia took to be Chinese. "Outside my cellars, I'll wager there's not another bottle of it this side of Constantinople. Drink it all. It will do you good."

He seated himself. "And now my reason for wishing to talk with you to-night.... A note came by the last delivery from Lady Randolph West. You met her, I understand, through Sybil Waring, a few days ago. She was apparently much taken with you."

"She is very kind."

Victor had found a sheet of notepaper and, bending to the light, was searching its scrawled lines with narrowed eyes.

"'Too lovely,' she calls you—and quite justly, my dear. Yes; here it is: 'Too lovely for words.' And she wants me to bring my 'charming daughter' down to Frampton Court for this week-end."

Sofia said nothing, but put her half-empty glass aside. The wine had done her good, she thought. She felt better, stronger, mentally more alert, and at the same time curiously soothed.

Victor refolded the note and tapped the table with it, holding Sofia with speculative eyes.

"It should be amusing," he said, thoughtfully, "a new experience for you. Elaine—I mean Lady Randolph West, of course—is a charming hostess, and never fails to fill Frampton Court with delightful people."

"I'm sure I should love it."

"I am sure you would. And yet ... I may have been a little premature, since I have already written accepting the invitation." He indicated an addressed envelope face up on the table. "But on second thoughts, it seemed perhaps wiser to consult you first."

"But if it is your wish, I must go," Sofia replied, mindful of Karlake's injunction not to oppose Victor. "What have I to say—?"

“Everything about whether we accept or do not—or if not everything, at least the final word. I must abide by your decision.”

“But I shall be only too glad—”

“Think a moment. It might be wiser not to go. You alone can say.”

“I don’t quite understand ...”

Victor sighed. “It is a painful subject,” he said, slowly—“one I hesitate to reopen. But we can never profit by closing our minds to facts; I mean, to the reality of the danger which is always with us, since it is within us.”

“What danger?” Sofia enquired, sullenly, knowing the answer too well before it was spoken.

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“The danger of sudden temptation to indulge the lawless appetites with which heredity has endued us—me from the nameless forebears whom I never knew, you directly from parents both of whom boasted criminal records.”

“I don’t believe it!” Sofia declared, passionately—“I can’t believe it, I won’t! Even if you are—”

She was going on to say “if you are my father,” but caught herself in time. Had not Karlake warned her in his note: “*Your only safety now lies in his continuing to believe that you are unsuspecting.*” She continued in a tempest of expostulation whose fury covered her break:

“Even if you were once a thief and my mother—my mother!—everything vile, as you persist in trying to make me believe—God knows why!—it is possible I may still have failed to inherit your criminal tendencies; and not only possible, but true, if I know myself at all. For I have never felt the temptation to steal that you insist I must have inherited from you—nor any other inclination toward things as mean, contemptible, and dishonourable as they are dishonest!”

With only his slow, forbearing smile by way of comment, Victor heard her out, but when she paused to reassort her thoughts, lifted a temporizing hand.

“Not yet, perhaps,” he said, gently. “There is always the first time with every rebel against man-made laws. But, where the predisposition so indubitably exists, it is inevitable, soon or late it must come to you, my dear—the time when the will is too weak, temptation too strong. Against it we must be forever on our guard.”

“I am not afraid,” Sofia contended.

“Naturally; you will not be before the hour of ordeal which shall prove your strength or your weakness, your confidence in yourself, or my loving fears for you.”

Sofia gave a gesture of weariness and confusion. What did it matter? If he would have it so, let him: it couldn’t affect the issue in any way, what he believed, or for his own purposes pretended to believe. Had not Karlake promised ...

She tried to recall precisely what it was that Karlake had promised, but found her memory of a sudden singularly sluggish. In fact, her mind seemed to have lost its marvellous clarity of those first moments after tasting the wine of China. Small wonder, when one remembered the emotional strain she had experienced since early evening!

“Still,” she argued, stubbornly, “I don’t see what all this has to do with Lady Randolph West’s invitation.”

“Only that to accept means to expose you to the greatest temptation one can well imagine.”

Sofia stared blankly. Her wits were working even more slowly and heavily than before. And the glare in her eyes from the luminous sphere of crystal was irritating. Almost without thinking, she lifted her glass again; when she put it down it was empty.

“The jewels of Lady Randolph West,” Victor went on to explain without her prompting, “are considered the most wonderful in England; always excepting, of course, the Crown jewels.”

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“What is that to me?”

Resentment sounded in her tone. She was thinking more readily once more, thanks to that second magical draught, but was nevertheless conscious of a general failing of powers drained by her great fatigue. She wished devoutly that Victor would have done and let her go....

“Elaine is very careless, leaves her jewels scattered about, hardly troubles to put them away securely at night. If you should be tempted to appropriate anything, she might not discover her loss for days; and then, again, she might. And if you were caught—consider what shame and disgrace!”

“I think I see,” the girl said, slowly, after some difficult thinking. “You don’t want me to go.”

“To the contrary, I do—but I want more than anything else in the world that my daughter should be sure of herself and fall into no irreparable error.”

“But I am sure of myself—I have told you that.”

“Then let us fret no more about it, but accept, and go prepared to enjoy ourselves. I will send the letter.”

Victor rang, and Shaik Tsin presented himself so quickly that Sofia wondered dully where he could have been waiting. In the room with them, perhaps? It wasn’t impossible. The Chinaman’s thick soles of felt enabled him to move about without making the least noise.

“Have this posted immediately.”

Shaik Tsin bowed deeply, and backed away with the letter. Unless she turned to watch him, Sofia could not say whether he left the room or not.

She offered to rise.

“If that is all ...”

“Not quite. There are certain details to be arranged; and I may not see you again before we leave to-morrow afternoon. We will motor down to Frampton Court—it’s not far, little more than an hour by train—starting about half after four, if you can be ready.”

“Oh, yes.”



“Sybil Waring will tell you what to take, and Chou Nu will see to your packing. Both, by the way, will accompany us. Sybil’s maid will follow by train. For myself, I am taking Nogam—having found that English servants do not take kindly to my Chinese valet.”

“Yes ...” Sofia uttered, listlessly, wondering why this information should be considered of interest to her.

“And one thing more: I am forgiven? You are not cross with me?”

“Why should I be?”

“Because of what happened this afternoon—when I scolded Karslake for making love to you.”

“Oh,” said Sofia with a good show of indifference—she was so tired—“that!”

“Believe me, little Sofia”—Victor put out a hand to hers, and held her eyes with a compelling gaze—“boy-and-girl romance is all very well, but there is a greater destiny reserved for you than marriage to a hired secretary, however amiable, personable, and well-meaning. You must prepare yourself to move in a world beyond and above the common hearthstone of bourgeois domesticity.”



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The girl shook a bewildered head.

"It is a riddle?" she asked, wearily.

"A riddle?" Victor echoed. "Why, one may safely term it that. Is not the Future always a riddle? Nature knows the Future as the Past, but Nature holds it secret, lest man go mad with too much knowledge. Only to the few, the favoured, does she grant rare glimpses through media which she has provided for the use of the initiate—such as this crystal here, in which I was studying your future, when you came in, the high future I plan for you."

"And—you won't tell me?"

"I may not. It is forbidden. Nature deals unkindly with those who violate her confidence. But—who knows?"

He checked himself as if struck by a new turn of thought, and studied the girl's face intently.

"Who knows?" he repeated, as if to himself.

"What—?"

"It is quite within the bounds of possibility," Victor mused, "that you should have inherited some of the psychic power which was born in me. Perhaps—who knows?—to you as well Nature will be supple and disclose her secrets.... If you care to seek her favour?"

"But—how?"

"By consulting the crystal."

Sofia's eyes sought that coldly burning stone. Her head was so heavy, she hesitated, oppressed by misgivings without shape that she could name, phases of formless timidity having rise in some source which she was too tired to search out.

But she lingered and continued to stare at the crystal.

"Why not?" Victor's accents were gently persuasive. "At worst, you can only fail. And if you do not fail, it will make me happy to think that you have been given a little insight into my dreams for you."

"Yes," Sofia assented in a whisper—"why not?"

Victor drew her forward by the hand.

“Look,” he said “look deep! Divest your mind as nearly as you can of all thought—let the crystal give up its message to a mind devoid of prejudice, its receptiveness unimpaired. Think of nothing, if you can manage it—simply look and see.”

Automatically to a degree the girl obeyed, already in a phase of crepuscular hypnosis, her surface senses dulled by the potent “wine of China.” And watching her closely, Victor permitted himself a smile of satisfaction as he noted the rapidity with which she yielded to the hypnogenic spell of the translucent quartz; how her breathing quickened, then took on a measured tempo like that of a sleeper; how a faint flush warmed the unnatural pallor of her cheeks, how her dilate eyes grew fixed in an unwinking stare, and slightly glassed....

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Under her regard the goblin sphere took on with bewildering rapidity changing guises. Its rotundity was first lost, it assumed the semblance of a featureless disk of pallid light, which swiftly widened till it obscured all else, then seemed to advance upon and envelope her bodily, so that she became spiritually a part of it, an atom of identity engulfed in a limpid world of glareless light, light that had had no rays and issued from no source but was circumambient and universal. Then in its remote heart a weird glow of rose began to burn and grow, pulsing through all the colours of the spectrum and beyond. Toward this she felt herself being drawn swiftly, attracted by an irresistible magnetism, riding the wings of a great wind, whose voice boomed without ceasing, like a heavy surf thunderously reiterating one syllable, "*Sleep!*" ... And in this flight through illimitable space toward a goal unattainable, consciousness grew faint and flickered out like a candle in the wind.

Behind her chair the placid yellow face of Shaik Tsin appeared, as if materialized bodily out of the shadows. With folded arms he waited, dispassionately observant. Presently Prince Victor nodded to him over the head of the girl. Immediately the Chinaman moved round her chair and, employing both hands, in one instant switched off the hooded bulb and reilluminated the lamp of brass.

As the light died out in the crystal Sofia sighed heavily, and relaxed. Leaden eyelids closed down over her staring eyes, she sank back into the chair, simultaneously into plumbless depths....

Victor made a sound of gratification. Shaik Tsin enquired briefly:

"It is accomplished, then?"

Victor nodded. "She yielded more quickly than I had hoped—worn out emotionally, of course."

"She sleeps—"

"In hypnosis, in absolute suspense of every faculty and function save those concerned solely with the maintenance of existence—in a state, that is, comparable only to the pre-natal life of a child."

"It is most interesting," Shaik Tsin admitted. "But what is the use? That is what interests me."

"Wait and see."

Bending close to the girl, Victor called in a strong voice of command: "Sofia! Sofia! It is I, Prince Victor, your father. Waken and attend!"

A slight spasm shook the slender body, the lips parted, respiration became hurried and broken, the long lashes fluttered on the cheeks.

“Do you hear me? I, Victor, command you: Waken and attend!”

Another struggle, more brief and sharp, ended with the opening of the eyes, which sought and remained steadfast to Victor’s, yet without intelligence or animation.

“Do you hear me, Sofia?”

A voice like a sigh rustled on the parted lips, whose stir was imperceptible:

“I hear you....”

“Then heed what I say. My will is your law. You know that?”

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Faintly the voice breathed: "Yes."

"Tell me what it is you know."

"Your will is my law."

"You will not resist my will, you cannot. Tell me that."

"I will not resist your will, I cannot."

"Good. I, Prince Victor Vassilyevski, am your father. You believe that. Do you understand? Tell me what you believe."

"I believe that you, Prince Victor Vassilyevski, are my father."

"You will not forget these things?"

"I shall not forget."

"In all things."

"I will obey you in all things."

"Without question or faltering."

"Without question or faltering."

"You recall what arrangements we made this afternoon for to-morrow?"

"I remember."

"Listen carefully. Memorize my wishes with respect to our visit to Frampton Court, remembering that I communicate my will, which you must obey."

The girl remained silent, waiting. Victor took a moment to marshall his thoughts, then proceeded:

"After arriving at Frampton Court, you will make occasion quietly to find out how your room is situated in relation to the boudoir of Lady Randolph West. You will do this without knowing why you do it. You understand?"

"Yes."

"At night, on going to bed, you will go promptly to sleep. After an hour you will wake up, put on a dressing gown and slippers, and proceed to Lady Randolph West's boudoir, taking care not to be observed. Is that clear?"

“Yes.”

“Once in the boudoir, you will proceed to the safe where Lady Randolph West keeps her jewels. It will not be locked, she is careless in such matters. Having found the safe, you will open it, take whatever jewels you find therein, and return to your room. All this you will perform with utmost circumspection, taking all pains not to make any noise. In your room you will hide the jewels in your dressing-case. Then you will go back to bed and to sleep. Have you committed all this to memory?”

The sleeping girl answered in the affirmative. Then, to the injunction, “Tell me what you are to do to-morrow night?” she repeated in a toneless voice every item of the programme outlined for her, while Victor nodded in undisguised delight, and Shaik Tsin grinned blandly over her head.

“On waking up to-morrow morning, you will remember nothing of my instructions, but you will carry them precisely as memorized in your subconsciousness, and you will carry them out without thought of opposition to my will, understanding that you are without will of your own in this matter. Finally, on waking up on the morning following your abstraction of the jewels, you will remember nothing of the affair until reminded of it by me, and then only this much: That in obedience to irresistible impulse, you stole the jewels. Is that clear? Repeat ...”

Without a mistake the woman in hypnosis iterated the commands imposed upon her.

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The impish grin of the latent savage broke through the habitual austerity of Victor's countenance.

"There is no more," he said, "but this: Sleep now, and do not waken before noon tomorrow—*sleep!*"

With a quavering sigh, the girl reclosed her eyes and instantly relapsed into the sleep of trance which was insensibly in the course of the night to merge into natural slumber.

Victor ironed out his grimace, and signed to Shaik Tsin.

"Bear her back to her room. Instruct Chou Nu to put her to bed and not to wake her up before noon."

"Hearing is obedience."

The Chinaman bent over, gathered the inert body into his arms, and without perceptible effort stood erect. But in the act of turning away he paused and, continuing to hold the girl as easily as if she weighed no more than a child, interrogated the man he served.

"You believe she will do all you have ordered?"

"I know she will."

"Without error?"

"Barring accidents, without flaw from beginning to end."

"And in event of accidents—discovery—?"

"So much the better."

"That would please you, to have her caught?"

"Excellently."

Shaik Tsin nodded in grave yet humorous comprehension. "Now I begin to understand. If she is caught, that gives you a power over her?"

"Precisely."

"And if she is not, when the robbery becomes known, your power over her will be still more strong?"

"And over yet another stronger still."

“The Lone Wolf?”

Victor inclined his head. “To what lengths will he not go to cover up his daughter’s shame, if it threatens to become public that she is a thief? I do nothing without purpose, Shaik Tsin.”

“That is to say, you have to-night taken out insurance against punishment if this other business fails.”

“If it fail, others may suffer, but if necessary the Lone Wolf himself will arrange my escape from England.”

“To serve so wise a man is an honour my unworthiness can never hope to merit.”

“As to that, Shaik Tsin,” Victor said without a smile, “our minds are one. Go now. Good-night.”

XVII

THE RAISED CHEQUE

While the Princess Sofia, Sybil Waring, and Prince Victor motored down from London in the lilac dusk of that dim September day, and the maid Chou Nu accompanied them, riding in front beside a newly engaged Chinese chauffeur, the man Nogam made the journey to Frampton Court by train, and alone.

Alone, at least, in the finer shading of that adjective; aside from the usual assortment of self-contained fellow-travellers in the third-class carriage, he had no company other than his thoughts; a gray and meagre crew, if that pathetic face of middle-age furnished trustworthy reflection of his mind.... So absolute was the submergence of that ardent adventurer who, overnight, had lain awake for hours, a dictograph receiver glued to his ear, eavesdropping upon the traffic of those malevolent intelligences assembled in Prince Victor’s study, and alternately chuckling and cursing beneath his breath, aflame with indignation and chilled by inklings of atrocities unspeakable abrew!

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If he surmised that he travelled alone in appearance only, it was with no evident concern or astonishment. If his mind was uneasy, oppressed by a nightmarish burden of half-knowledge, guesses, and premonition, it was not apparent to the general observer. His most eloquent gesture was when, from time to time, he tamped an ancient wooden pipe with a fingertip that wasn't as calloused as he could have wished, philosophically sucked in strangling fumes of rankest shag and, ignoring his company in the carriage as became a British-made manservant, returned jaded, gentle eyes to those darkling vistas of autumnal landscape that were forever radiating away from the window like spokes of a gigantic wheel.

Alighting in the first dark of evening at the station for Frampton Court, he suffered himself to be herded, with a half-score more, into the omnibus provided for other bodyservants to arriving guests. Even to these compeers he found little to say: a loud lot, imbued with the rowdy spirit of the new day; whereas Nogam was hopelessly of the old school—in the new word, he dated—though his form was admittedly unimpeachable. And if because of this he was made fun of more or less openly, to an extent that added shades of resignation to his countenance, secretly he commanded considerable respect.

Neither was Victor, with all the ill-will in the world, able to find fault with Nogam's services in his new office. The most finished of self-effacing valets, he knew just what to do and did it without being told; and when he spoke it was only because he had been spoken to or commissioned to convey a message.

Victor watched him from every angle, overt and covert, but had his trouble for his pains; Nogam, observed in a mirror, when Victor's back was turned, went about his business with no more betrayal of personal feeling or independent mentality than when waiting upon his master face to face. Victor could have kicked him for sheer resentment of his pattern virtues. When all was said and done, it was damned irritating. . . .

In the servants' hall he religiously kept his ears open and his mouth shut. And, listening, he learned. For some things said in his hearing were distinctly not pretty, and made one wonder if Prince Victor's deep-rooted confidence in an England mortally cankered with social discontent were not grounded in a surprising familiarity with backstairs morale. Other observations, again, were merely ribald, some were humorous, while all were enlightening.

Not a few of the company had seen domestic service in great houses before the war; they knew what was what and—more to the point—what wasn't. One gathered that this pretentious country home fell within the latter classification. Here, it was stated, anybody could buy his way into favour: the more bounding the bounder the brighter his chances of success at Frampton Court.

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War, the ironic, had caused this noble property to pass into the keeping of a distant and degenerate branch of an old and honoured house; and its present lord and lady, having failed to win the social welcome they had counted on too confidently, were doing their silly, shabby best to squander a princely fortune and dedicate a great name to lasting disrepute by fraternizing with a motley ruffraff of profiteering nouveaux riches. Other than bad manners and worse morals, the one genuine thing in the whole establishment was, it seemed, the historic collection of family jewels.

This information explained away much of Nogam's perplexity on one score.

After dinner, when the house party began to settle into its stride, he made occasion, aping the other servants, to peep in at a door of the great ballroom, where an impromptu dance had been organized; and was rewarded by sight of the Princess Sofia circling the floor in the arms of a boldly good-looking young man whose taste was as poor in flirtation as in self-adornment.

To Nogam the young girl looked wan and wistful—as if she were missing somebody. And he wondered if Mr. Karslake knew what a lucky young devil he was.

He wondered still more about the present whereabouts and welfare of Mr. Karslake. Prince Victor must have contrived some devious errand to get the young man out and away early that day; for by the time Nogam had looked for him in the morning, Karslake was nowhere to be found; neither had he returned when the party left for Frampton Court—a circumstance which Nogam regretted most bitterly. Watched as he was, it hadn't been possible, that is to say it would have been fatally ill-advised, to have left any sort of message or to have attempted communication through secret channels; and all the while, hours heavy with, it might be, the destiny of England were wasting swiftly into history.

Perhaps it was nervousness bred of this anxiety that, in the end, made Nogam's hand slip. Or perhaps the impatient nature of the man who lay so closely secret within the husk of Nogam decided him upon a desperate gamble. In either event, this befell:

About the middle of the evening Prince Victor happened to look up from an interesting tete-a-tete in the brilliant drawing-room with his handsome and liberal-minded hostess opportunely to espy Nogam staring at him from the remote recesses of the entrance hall.

It was the merest of glimpses; for Victor's casual glance had barely identified the servant when Nogam started guiltily and in a twinkling disappeared; but a glimpse was enough for eyes and a mind alike quick with distrust, enough to assure Victor that Nogam's face had worn an indescribably furtive and hangdog expression, most unlike its ordinary look of amiable stupidity, and widely incongruous with the veniality of his fault.

What the deuce, then, was the fellow up to, that he should glower and dodge like a sleuth in a play?

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Promptly Victor became deaf, blind, and numb to the fascinations so generously paraded by Lady Randolph West; and presently excusing himself, left her and sought his rooms.

As he went up the stairs, he saw the door to his bedchamber cautiously opened far enough to permit one eye to spy out and discover his approach. Immediately then the door swung wide, and Nogam ambled into view with an envelope on a salver and an air of childlike innocence, an assumption of ease so transparent, indeed, that only the vision of a child could have been cheated by it.

“Just coming to look for you, sir,” he announced, glibly. “Telegram, sir—just harrived.”

“Thanks,” said Victor, shortly, taking the envelope and marching on into his rooms.

His manner toward his servants was always abrupt. No need to be alarmed by this manifestation of it. Blinking mildly, Nogam trotted at his heels.

Seating himself at an *escritoire*, Victor opened the envelope with a display of languid interest. Curiosity about the contents of a telegram is ordinarily acute. Victor, on the contrary, sat for a long moment staring thoughtfully at nothing and absently turning the envelope over and over in his hands; while Nogam with specious nonchalance found something unimportant to do in another quarter of the room.

The envelope was damp and warm to the touch. True: nightfall had brought with it a thick drizzle, and Frampton Court was more than a mile from the post-office. On the other hand, the night was as cold as charity; and an envelope recently steamed open might be expected to hold the heat for a few minutes.

Victor thumbed the flap. It lifted readily, without tearing, its gum was wet and more abundant than usual—in fact, it felt confoundedly like library paste, a pot of which, in an ornamental holder, was among the fittings of the *escritoire*. On the desk pad of blotting paper, too, Victor detected marks of fresh paste defining the contour of the flap.

With a countenance whose inscrutability alone was a threat, Victor took out and conned the telegraph form.

“CONSULTATION SET FOR MIDNIGHT TO-NIGHT TAKING YOUR ADVICE SHALL NOT ATTEND BUT LEAVE FOR BRIGHTON ELEVEN P.M.”

A message ostensibly so open and aboveboard that it hadn’t been thought worth while to hide its wording under the cloak of a code.

There was no signature—unless one were clever or wise enough to transpose the two final letters and take them in relation to the word immediately preceding. “Eleven, M.P.”, however, could mean nothing to anybody but Victor—except a body clever enough to

hide a dictograph detector in a turnip. So Victor saw no reason to believe that Nogam, although undoubtedly guilty of the sin of prying, had been able to read the meaning below the surface of this communication.

Nevertheless, undue inquisitiveness on the part of a servant in the pay of Victor Vassilyevski could have but one reward.

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"Nogam!"

"Sir?"

"Fetch me an A-B-C."

"Very good, sir."

With Nogam out of the way, Victor enclosed the telegram in a new envelope and addressed it simply to "*Mr. Sturm—by hand.*" Then he took a sheet of the stamped notepaper of Frampton Court, tore it roughly, at the fold, and on the unstamped half inscribed several characters in Chinese, using a pencil with a fat, soft lead for this purpose. This message sealed into a second envelope without superscription, he lighted a cigarette and sat smiling with anticipative relish through its smoke, a smile swiftly abolished as the door re-opened; though Nogam found him in what seemed to be a mood of rare sweet temper.

Taking the railway guide, Victor ruffled its pages, and after brief study of the proper table remarked:

"Afraid I must ask you to run up to town for me to-night, Nogam. If you don't mind ..."

"Only too glad to oblige, sir."

"I find I have left important papers behind. Give this to Shaik Tsin"—he handed over the blank envelope—"and he will find them for you. You can catch the ten-fifteen up, and return by the twelve-three from Charing Cross."

"Very good, sir."

"Oh—and see that Mr. Sturm gets this, too, will you? If he isn't in, give it to Shaik Tsin to hand to him. Say it's urgent."

"Quite so, sir."

"That is all. But don't fail to catch the twelve-three back. I must have the papers to-night."

"I shan't fail you, sir—D.V."

"Deo volente? You are a religious man, Nogam?"

"I 'umbly 'ope so, sir, and do my best to be, accordin' to my lights."

"Glad to hear it. Now cut along, or you'll miss the up train."

Long after Nogam had left the memory of their talk continued to afford Victor an infinite amount of private entertainment.

“A religious man!” he would jeer to himself. “Then—may your God help you, Nogam!”

Some thought of the same sort may well have troubled Nogam’s mind as he sat in an otherwise untenanted third-class compartment blinking owlishly over the example of Victor’s command of the intricacies of Chinese writing.

He was happily free of surveillance for the first time in his waking hours of many days. The Chinese chauffeur had driven him to the station, and had furthermore lingered to see that Nogam did not fail to board it. And Nogam felt reasonably safe in assuming that he would not approach the house near Queen Anne’s Gate without seeing (for the mere trouble of looking) a second and an entirely gratuitous shadow attach itself to him with the intention of sticking as tenaciously as that which God had given him. But the next hour was all his own.

His study of the Chinese phonograms at length resulted in the transformation of his careworn face by a slowly dawning smile, the gleeful smile of a mischief-loving child. And when he had worked for a while on the message, touching up the skillfully drawn characters with a pencil the mate to that which Victor had used, he sat back and laughed aloud over the result of his labours, with some appreciation of the glow that warms the cockles of the artist’s heart when his deft pen has raised a cheque from tens to thousands, and he reviews a good job well done.

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The torn envelope which had held the message to Shaik Tsin lay at his feet. Nogam had not bothered to worry it open so carefully that it might be resealed without inviting comment; though that need not have been a difficult matter, thanks to the dampness of the night air.

Of the envelope addressed to Sturm, however, he was more considerate; to violate its integrity and seal it up again was an undertaking that required the nicest handling. Nor was it accomplished much before the train drew into Charing Cross.

Outside the station taxis were few and drivers arrogant; and all the 'buses were packed to the guards with law-abiding Londoners homeward bound from theatres and halls. So Nogam dived into the Underground, to come to the surface again at St. James's Park station, whence he trotted all the way to Queen Anne's Gate, arriving at his destination in a phase of semi-prostration which a person of advancing years and doddering habits might have anticipated.

Such fidelity in characterization deserved good reward, and had in it a rare stroke of fortune; for as he drew up to it, the door opened, and Sturm came out, saw Nogam, and stopped short.

"Thank 'Eaven, sir, I got 'ere in time," the butler panted. "If I'd missed you, Prince Victor wouldn't 'ave been in 'arf a wax. 'E told me I must find you to-night if I 'ad to turn all Lunnnon inside out."

Pressing the message into Sturm's hand, he rested wearily against the casing of the door, his body shaken by laboured breathing, and—while Sturm, with an exclamation of excitement, ripped open the envelope—surveyed the dark and rain-wet street out of the corners of his eyes.

Across the way a slinking shadow left the sidewalk and blended indistinguishably with the crowded shadows of an areaway.

In a voice more than commonly rich with accent, Sturm demanded sharply:

"What is this? I do not understand!"

He shook in Nogam's face the half-sheet of notepaper on which the Chinese phonograms were drawn.

"Sorry, sir, but I 'aven't any hidea. Prince Victor didn't tell me anything except there would be no answer, and I was to 'urry right back to Frampton Court." Nogam peered myopically at the paper. "It might be 'Ebrew, sir," he hazarded, helpfully—"by the looks of it, I mean. I suppose some private message, 'e thought you'd understand."

"Hebrew, you fool! Damn your impudence! Do you take me for a Jew?"

“Beg pardon, sir—no ‘arm meant.”

“No,” Sturm declared, “it’s Chinese.”

“Then likely Prince Victor meant you to ask Shaik Tsin to translate it for you, sir.”

“Probably,” Sturm muttered. “I’ll see.”

“Yes, sir. Good-night, sir.”

Without acknowledging this civility, Sturm turned back into the house and slammed the door. Nogam lingered another moment, then shuffled wearily down the steps and toward the nearest corner.

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Across the street the voluntary shadow detached itself from cover in the areaway, and skulked after him. He paid no heed. But when the shadow rounded the corner, it saw only a dark and empty street, and pulled up with a grunt of doubt. Simultaneously something not unlike a thunderbolt for force and fury was launched, from the dark shelter of a doorway near by, at its devoted head. And as if by magic the shadow took on form and substance to receive the onslaught. A fist, that carried twelve stone of bone and sinew jubilant with realization of the hour for action so long deferred, found shrewdly the heel of a jawbone, just beneath the ear. Its victim dropped without a cry, but the impact of the blow was loud in the nocturnal stillness of that bystreet, and was echoed in magnified volume by the crack of a skull in collision with a convenient lamppost.

Followed a swift patter of fugitive feet.

Tempered by veils of mist, the lamplight fell upon a face upturned from a murmurous gutter, a yellow face, wide and flat, with lips grinning back from locked teeth and eyes frozen in a staring question to which no living man has ever known the answer.

The pattering footsteps grew faint in distance and died away, the street was still once more, as still as Death....

In the study of Prince Victor Vassilyevski the man Sturm put an impatient question:

"Well? What you make of it—hein?"

Shaik Tsin looked up from a paper which he had been silently examining by the light of the brazen lamp.

"Number One says," he reported, smiling sweetly, while his yellow forefinger moved from symbol to symbol of the picturesque writing: *"The blow falls to-night. Proceed at once to the gas works and do that which you know is to be done."*

"At last!" The voice of the Prussian was full and vibrant with exultancy. He threw back his head with a loud laugh, and his arm described a wild, dramatic gesture.

"At last—der Tag! To-night the Fatherland shall be avenged!"

Shaik Tsin beamed with friendliest sympathy Sturm turned to go, took three hurried steps toward the door, and felt himself jerked back by a silken cord which, descending from nowhere, looped his lean neck between chin and Adam's apple. His cry of protest was the last articulate sound he uttered. And the last sounds he heard, as he lay with face hideously congested and empurpled, eyeballs starting from their deep sockets, and swollen tongue protruding, were words spoken by Shaik Tsin as that one knelt over him, one hand holding fast the ends of the bowstring that had cut off forever the blessed breath of life, the other flourishing a half-sheet of notepaper.

“Fool! Look, fool, and read what vengeance visits a fool who is fool enough to play the spy!”

He brandished the papers before those glazing eyeballs.

In an eldritch cackle he translated:

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"He who bears this message is a Prussian dog, police trained, a spy. Let his death be a dog's, cruel and swift.—Number One."

XVIII

ORDEAL

Reviewing the day, as she undressed and prepared for bed, Sofia told herself she had never yet lived through one so wearing, and thought the history of its irksome hours all too legible in the lack-lustre face that looked back from the mirror when Chou Nu uncoiled her hair and brushed its burnished tresses.

Though she had slept late, in fact till noon and something after, her sleep had been queerly haunted and unhappy, she could not remember how or why, and she had awakened already ennuye, with a mind incoherently oppressed, without relish for the promise of the day—in a mood altogether as drear as the daylight that waited upon her unclosing eyes.

Main strength of will had not availed to dispel these vapours, neither did their melancholy yield to the distraction provided by first acquaintance with ways of a world unique alike in Sofia's esteem and her experience.

She who had theretofore known only in day-dreams the life of light frivolity and fashion which found feverish and trumpery reflection at Frampton Court, was neither equipped nor disposed to be hypercritical in the first hours of her debut there; and at any other time, in any other temper, she knew, she must have been swept off her feet by its exciting appeal to her innate love of luxury and sensation. But the sad truth was, it all seemed to her unillusioned vision an elaborate sham built up of tinsel, paste, and paint; and the warmth of her welcome at the hands, indeed in the very arms, of Lady Randolph West, and the success her youth and beauty scored for her—commanding in all envy, admiration, cupidity, or jealousy, according to age, sex, and temporal state of servitude—did nothing to mitigate the harshness of those first impressions.

If anything her depression grew more perversely morbid the more she was catered to, courted, flattered, and cajoled. Something had happened, she could never guess what, perhaps some mysterious reaction effected through the chemistry of last night's slumber, to turn her vivid zest in life to ashes in her mouth, so that nothing seemed to matter any more.

Thoughts of Karslake as her lover, recollection of her first deep joy in his avowal and her subsequent passion of shame and regret, re-perusal of his note, that last night had seemed so sweet a thing, precious beyond compare—found her indifferent to-day, and left her so. Try as she would, she failed to recapture any sense of the reality of those

first raptures. And yet, somehow, she didn't doubt he loved her or that, buried deep beneath this inexplicable apathy, love for Karslake burned on in her heart; but she knew no sort of comfort in such confidence, their love seemed as remote and immaterial an issue as the menu for day after to-morrow's dinner. Nothing mattered!

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She was able even to meet Prince Victor without her customary shiver of aversion; and when she recalled the persistence and enthusiasm with which she had reasoned herself into believing, last night, that he might be another than her father, she came as near to mirth as she was to come that day; but it was mirth bitter with self-derision. Of course he was her father, she had been a ninny ever to dream contrariwise, or that it mattered.

Nor had she met with more success in efforts to find a cause for this drab humour; unless, indeed, it were simply the farthest swing of the pendulum from yesterday's emotional crises, a long swing out of sunlit spaces swept by the brave winds of young romance into a gloomy zone of brooding torpor, whose calm was false, surcharged with unseizable disquiet, its atmosphere electrical with formless apprehensions, its sad twilight shot with lurid gleams no sooner glimpsed than gone.

In this state Sofia's sensibilities were less benumbed than bound in a palsy of suspense not wholly destitute of dread; beneath the lethargic shallows of consciousness lay soundless deeps troubled by sinister premonitions....

Now, retracing stage by stage the record of the day, Sofia became aware that its most poignant moment for her was actually the present, with its keen wonder that she had contrived to survive such exquisite tedium.

She perceived that she had moved throughout like an automaton swayed by a will outside its own; functioning rather than living; performing appointed business, executing prescribed gestures, uttering foreordained observations, and making dictated responses, all without suggestion of spontaneity, and all without meaning other than as means to bridge an empty space of waiting.

Waiting for what?

Sofia could not guess....

She went to bed presently, hoping only to find surcease of boredom; and her head no sooner touched the pillow than oblivion closed down upon her faculties like a dense, dark cloud.

Discreet and well-instructed, Chou Nu turned the night-light down to a glimmer, placed on and under a chair adjacent to the bed a robe of cashmere that wouldn't rustle, and slippers of fine felt with soles of soft leather, in which footfalls must be inaudible—and glided gently from the room.

For sixty minutes its deep hush was unbroken; the even respiration of the girl made no sound, she rested without tossing, without moving a finger.

Then, sleep having held her for precisely one hour by the clock, Sofia opened her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and at once sat up on the side of the bed.



The memory of that hour was not to leave the girl while life was in her; nor was the question it raised ever to be answered in a fashion satisfactory to her intelligence. When later she heard it stated with authority, by men reputed to be versed in psychic knowledge, that a subject in hypnosis cannot be willed to act contrary to the instincts of his or her better nature, she held her peace, but wondered. Was Victor right, then, and the crime he had willed her to commit in final analysis not repugnant to her instincts? Or was it some secret faculty of the soul, telepathy or of its kin, that roused and sent her to keep her rendezvous with destiny?

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A riddle never to be read: Sofia only knew that, finding herself awake, she got up, donned negligee and slippers, and set her feet upon the way appointed without its occurring to her that the way was strange, without stopping to question why or whether.

If independent volition, sensible or subliminal, were absent, it could hardly have been apparent. Sofia herself was not aware of its suspense or supersession. She knew quite well what she was doing, her every action was direct and decided, the goal alone remained obscure. She only knew that somewhere, somehow, something was going wrong without her, and her presence was required to set it right.

Letting herself out into the corridor, she drew the door to behind her, but left it unlatched; with what object, she did not know. But the lateness of the hour, the stillness of the sleeping household, made it seem quite in order that she should pause to look cautiously this way and that and make sure that nobody else was astir to spy upon her or challenge the purpose of this as yet aimless nocturnal flitting.

There was nobody that she could see.

Down the corridor, then, never asking why that way, like a ghost in haste she sped, but as she drew near to a certain door found her pace faltering. Sofia knew that door; through it Lady Randolph West herself had introduced the girl to her boudoir, not two hours since, when chance, or Fate, or the smooth working out of malicious mortal machinations had moved the two women simultaneously to seek their quarters for the night. And in the boudoir Sofia had spent the quarter of an hour before going on to her own room and bed, civilly attending to vapid chatter and admiring as in duty bound the admirable jewels of the family.

Now she saw the door a few inches ajar with, beyond it, a dim glow. The circumstance seemed singular, because—now that she remembered—when Sofia had expressed perfunctory curiosity concerning what precautions were taken to safeguard the jewels, Lady Randolph West had airily informed her that she considered insurance to their appraised value plus a stout lock on the boudoir door better than any strong-box as yet devised by the ingenuity of man.

“There’s the safe they’re kept in, of course,” the lady had declared—“but, my dear, a cardboard box will do as well when any burglar who knows his business makes up his mind to get at my trinkets. I never even trouble to lock the thing. I’d rather lose the jewels—and collect the insurance money—than be frightened out of my wits by hearing it blown open. No, thanks ever so: any cracksman skillful enough to pick the lock on the door may bag his loot and go in peace for all of me!”

Impulse, at least she called it that, moved Sofia to approach and cautiously open the door still wider.

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Upon the antique writing-desk that housed the safe burned a single lamp of low candle-power. A door that led to the adjoining bedchamber was tightly shut. Sofia's mistrustful eyes reconnoitred every corner of the room, and reckoned it empty. Again obedient to undisputed impulse, she stepped inside and shut the door. The spring-latch of the American lock found its socket with a soft click. Thereafter, silence, no sound in the boudoir, none from the room beyond. But to Sofia the hurried beating of her heart reverberated on the stillness like the rolling of a drum.

Without clear appreciation of how she had got there, she found herself standing over the writing-desk, and discovered what the indifferent light had till now kept hidden, that a false panel in the front of the desk had been thrust back, exposing the face of the safe, and that this last was not even closed.

At the same time she grew conscious that her hands were shaking violently, that her every limb, her whole body indeed, was agitated by desperate trembling. And dully asked herself why this should be ... But didn't hesitate.

Her actions now more than ever resembled those of an unthinking puppet, although she knew quite well what she was doing; and her gestures might have been the fruit of long lessoning at the hands of some master of stage melodrama, so true were they to theatrical convention.

With furtive, frightened glances toward both doors, Sofia dropped to her knees before the safe....

When she stood up again her hands were filled with jewellery, her two hands held a treasure of incalculable price in precious stones.

She paused for a little, staring at them with dilate eyes dark in a pale, rapt face. Her lips were parted, but only her quickened breathing whispered past them. She was trembling more painfully than ever. But she seemed unable to think of anything but the jewels, her gaze was held in fascination by their coruscant loveliness as revealed by the light of the little lamp.

Hers for the taking!

Then, without warning, a tremendous convulsion laid hold on her body and soul, and she was racked and shaken by it, and at its crisis her outstretched hands opened and showered the top of the desk with jewels, then flew to her head and clutched her throbbing temples.

She cried out in a low voice of suffering: "*No!*"

And of a sudden she was reeling back from the desk, toward the corridor door, repeating over and over on an ascending scale: "*No! no! no! no! no!*"

Her quaking legs blundered against a chair, her knees gave, she tottered to fall; strong arms caught her, held her safe, a voice she knew yet didn't know in its guarded key muttered in her ear: "Thank God!"

She made no struggle, but her eyes of pain and terror sought the speaker's face, and saw that he was the man Nogam. In extremity of amazement she spoke his name. He shook his head.

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"No longer Nogam," he said in the same low accents, and smiled—"but your father, Michael Lanyard!"

XIX

UNMASKING

One more instant the girl rested passive in uncomprehending astonishment; then abruptly she exerted herself to break free from the supporting embrace, but found the effort wasted for lack of opposition, so that her own violence sent her reeling away half a dozen paces, to bring up against the desk; while Lanyard, making no move more than to drop his rejected arms, remained where she had left him, and requited her indignant stare with a broken smile of understanding, a smile at once tender, tolerant, and sympathetic, with a little quirk of rueful humour for good measure.

"My father!" Sofia repeated in a gasp of disdain—"you!"

He gave a slight shrug.

"Such, it appears, is your sad fortune."

"A servant!"

"And not the proud prince you were promised? Rather a come down, one must admit." Lanyard laughed low, and moved nearer. "I'm sorry, I mean I might be (for myself, too) if Nogam were less a fraud than that pretentious mountebank, Prince Victor—or for the matter of that, if you were as poor of spirit as you would seem on your own valuation, if you were not at heart your mother's daughter, and mine, my child by a woman whom I loved well, and who long ago loved me!"

He paused deliberately to let her grasp the full sense of his words, then pursued:

"It may help you get your bearings to know that I am truly the Michael Lanyard to whom Messieurs Secretan & Sypher addressed their advertisement—you remember—as this should prove."

He offered a slip of paper, and after another moment of dumb staring, the girl took it and read aloud the message which Victor had dictated following Sofia's flight to him from the Cafe des Exiles.

"To Michael Lanyard, Intelligence Division, the War Office, Whitehall—"

"That is to say," Lanyard interpreted, "of the British Secret Service."

“You!”

He bowed in light irony. “One regrets one is at present unable to offer better social standing. To-morrow, it may be ... But who knows?”

Sofia shook her head impatiently, and in a murmur of deepening amazement resumed her reading of the note:

“Your daughter Sofia is now with me.. Your own intelligence must tell you nothing could be more fatal than an attempt to communicate with her”

To the interrogation eloquent in her eyes Lanyard replied:

“Dictated by Victor to Karslake, who passed it on to me, the night he brought you to the house from the Cafe des Exiles.”

“You knew—you, who claim to be my father—yet permitted him—?”

“You were in the house before I knew I had a daughter; Karslake had no chance to consult me before fetching you. Furthermore, if he had hesitated to carry out Victor’s orders just then, not only would he have nullified all our preparations to secure evidence enough to convict the man, or at least run him out of England—”

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“Prince Victor? What was he doing, that you should—?”

“Dabbling in all manner of infamy, from financing a thieves’ fence to organizing an association of common criminals to bring it business; from maintaining a corps of agitators to foment social discontent to fostering this last, most imbecile scheme of all, which comes to naught to-night, an attempt to overthrow the British Empire and set up in its stead a Soviet England, with Victor Vassilyevski in the dual role of Trotsky and Lenine!”

The girl made a sign of bewilderment and incredulity.

“What are you telling me? Are you mad?”

“No—but Victor is, mad with lust for power, insane with illusions of personal aggrandizement. You don’t believe? Listen to me, then, appreciate to what demoniac lengths he was prepared to go to flatter his insane ambitions:”

“Sturm has invented a new poison gas, odourless, colourless, the most deadly known, and easily manufactured in vast quantities by adding simple ingredients to ordinary illuminating gas. Fanatic Bolshevik that he was, Sturm offered his formula to Victor, to be used to clear the way for social revolution; and Victor jumped at the offer—has spent vast sums preparing to employ it. His money paid for the recent strike at the Westminster works of the Gas Light and Coke Company, by means of which Victor was able to smuggle a round number of his creatures into its service. His money has corrupted servants employed in Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament, in the homes of the nobility, even in Buckingham Palace itself, men ready at a given signal secretly to turn on gas jets in remote corners and flood the buildings with the very breath of Death itself. And that signal was to have been given to-night. Well, it will not be.”

“But could any scheme be more grotesquely diabolical? Do you ask more proof of the man’s madness? Do you require more excuse for my permitting you to be deceived by Victor for a few weeks, rather than wreck our plans to frustrate his, when all the while Karlake and I were near you, watching over you, learning to love you—he in his fashion, I as your father—and both ready at all times to die in your protection, if it had ever come to that?”

Lanyard had drawn so near that only a few inches separated them, and had his voice in such control that at three paces’ distance a vague and inarticulate murmur at most might have been heard; but in Sofia’s hearing his accents rang with passionate sincerity, persuading her against the reason which would have rejected his indictment of Victor as too fantastic, too imaginative, and too hopelessly overdrawn to be given credence. She believed him, knowing in her heart that he believed his statements to the last word; and knowing more, that he was surely what he represented himself to be, her father.



Inscrutable the processes of human hearts: even as from the very first Sofia had instinctively yet unconsciously recognized the intrinsic falsity of Victor's pretensions, so now she perceived the integral honesty that informed Lanyard's every word and nuance of expression, and accepted him without further inquisition.

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To his insistent “Have I made you understand?” she returned a wan wraith of a smile, pitiful with entreaty, while one of her hands found the way to his.

“I think so,” she replied in halting apology—“at least, I believe you. But be a little patient with me. It is all so new and strange, what you tell me, it’s hard at first to grasp, there’s so much I must accept on faith alone, so much I don’t understand ...”

“I know.” Lanyard pressed her hand gently.

“But try to have faith; I promise you it shall be fairly rewarded. Only a little longer now, an hour or two at most, and Karlake will be here to prove the truth of all I have asserted. You will believe him, at least.”

“Of course,” the girl said, simply. “I love him. You knew that?”

“I guessed, and I am glad, glad for both of you.”

“But he is safe?” Sofia demanded in sudden access of alarm so strong that her voice rose above the pitch of discretion.

“Quietly. Yes, he is safe enough.”

“You know that for a fact? How do you know—?”

“I’ve seen him to-night, talked with him—not two hours since.”

“You have been in London?” she questioned—“to-night?”

“Rather! Victor sent me.” Lanyard laughed lightly. “You didn’t know, of course, but—well, I gave him reason to suspect me, so he sent me up to be assassinated by Shaik Tsin. As it turned out, however, Herr Sturm most obligingly understudied for me.... Before coming back, I looked Karlake up. He’d been busy, playing a lone hand, ever since Victor trumped up an errand to keep him out of your way all day. No need to go into tedious details; I found Karlake had matters well in hand: the gas works surrounded by a cordon of troops, the house under close watch, and—best of all—a sworn confession from an Irish Member of Parliament whom Victor had managed to buy with a promise to free Ireland once Soviet England was an accomplished fact. So I left Karlake to wind up loose ends in London, and posted back with my heart in my mouth for fear I’d be too late.”

“Too late?” Sofia queried with arching brows.

“Need I remind you where we are?”

A sweep of Lanyard's hand indicated the boudoir; and Sofia started sharply in perplexity and alarm.

"Where we are!" she echoed in a frightened whisper.

Of a sudden memory returned of what had passed in that room before Lanyard had revealed himself to her, and knowledge of her peril so narrowly escaped drove home like a knife to her heart.

"What am I doing here?" she breathed in horror. "What have I done?"

"Nothing more dreadful than prove yourself as true as you are fine, by revolting in the end against the most powerful force known to man, the force of suggestion implanted in hypnotism. You couldn't know that it was hypnotic not natural sleep you passed into last night, when Victor tricked you with that damned crystal, or that, while you slept, he willed you to do here to-night what, when it came to the final test, your nature would not let you do."

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"But he so often told me I had the instincts of a thief—!"

"So often—I know—that you were, against your will and reason, by dint of the very iteration of it, coming to accept that lie as a truth whose power there was no contesting. That is why, that you might prove yourself by your own acts, I had to let you undergo your ordeal here to-night, only standing by to make sure no ill came of it. Otherwise you might have carried to your grave the fear instilled into your soul by that blackguard. But now you know he lied, and will never doubt again—or reproach your father for the dark record of his younger years."

He checked, lifting hands of desolate appeal, then let them fall.

"Dear, if you knew you would not judge me harshly. If only you could know what I have fought up from, a foundling without a name abandoned in a third-rate Parisian hotel, reared a scullion, butt and scapegoat, with associates only of the lowest, scullions, beggars, pickpockets, Apaches, and worse—!"

"As if that mattered!"

The girl turned a softly suffused face with shining eyes to Lanyard's. Now at last she knew him, now the romance of her dreams of yesterday came true: through the mean masquerade of Nogam the man emerged, identifying himself in her sight unmistakably with that splendid stranger whom she had never quite forgotten since that old-time afternoon when he had met Karlake in the Cafe des Exiles and talked so intimately of his antecedents, hinting at a history of youthful years strangely analogous with her own.

Involuntarily her arms lifted and settled upon his shoulders.

"I am so proud to think—"

A shrill scream drowned out her words, a woman's voice ranging swiftly the staccato gamut of terror and cracking discordantly on its most piercing note.

Then with a bang that shook the flooring and must have been heard in the farthest corners of the house, the bedchamber door was slammed behind their backs. But beyond it the screaming went on in volume imperceptibly muffled by its barrier, one ear-splitting caterwaul following another with such continuity that the wonder was where Lady Randolph West found breath to keep up that atrocious row, and whether any dozen women of average lung-power could have rivalled it.

In one sharp movement Lanyard and Sofia disengaged and fell apart, their eyes consulting, hers in dismay, his in mixed exasperation and remorse.

"I ought to be shot," he declared, bitterly—"who knew better!—to have delayed here, exposing you to this danger—!"



“It couldn’t be helped,” Sofia insisted; “you had to make me understand. Besides, if I hurry back—”

In quick strides Lanyard crossed to the corridor door, unlatched and opened it an inch, peered out, and gave the sum of what he saw in a gesture of finality, then leaving the door ajar turned swiftly back to the girl.

“Too late,” he said: “they’re swarming out into the hall like bees. In another minute ...”

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Of a sudden he closed with Sofia, roughly clasping her body to him.

“Struggle with me!” he pleaded—“get me by the throat, throw me back across the desk —”

“What do you mean? Let me go!”

In answer to her efforts to wrench away, Lanyard only tightened his hold and swung her toward the desk.

“Do as I bid you! It’s the only way out. Let them think you heard a noise, got up to investigate, found me here, rifling the safe—”

“No,” she insisted—“no! Why should I save myself at your expense?—betray you—my father—!”

“Then give me the obedience of a daughter ... or let Victor succeed in branding you a thief, the daughter of a thief!”

He stilled the protest she would have uttered by placing fingers over her lips.

“Listen!”

In the corridor an angry rumour of voices, alarmed calls and cries, with thumps and scuffles of hasty feet, in the bedchamber the shrieks persisting without the least hint of failing: as a damned soul might bawl upon its bed of coals ...

“Sofia, I implore you!”

Still she hesitated.

“But you—?”

“Never fear for me, remember that I am of the Secret Service: two minutes after I see the inside of the nearest police station, I shall be free—and happy in the assurance that your name is without stain. Then Karslake will come for you, bring you to me ... Now!”

Lanyard caught the girl’s two wrists together and, throwing himself bodily backward across the desk, carried her hands to his throat.

With a simultaneous crash the door was flung back to the wall. Led by Victor Vassilyevski a dozen men, guests and servants, in various stages of dishabille, streamed into the room.

XX

THE DEVIL TO PAY

When it was all over, when the gravelled drive no longer crunched to wheels that bore away the man Nogam to answer for his misdeeds, when the household had quieted down and the most indefatigable sensation-monger had wearied of singing the praises of the Princess Sofia and, tossing off a final whiskey-and-soda, had paddled sleepily back to bed, lights burned on brightly in two parts only of Frampton Court, in the bedchambers tenanted respectively by Prince Victor Vassilyevski and his reputed daughter.

Alone, Prince Victor sat at the desk where he had, four hours earlier, inscribed those characters which should have hurried Nogam into a premature grave. That they had failed of their mission was something that fretted Victor Vassilyevski, his mind and nerves, to a pitch of exacerbation all but unendurable.

What had become of that sentence to death? And what of that other, the telegram which, forwarded by Nogam's hand to Sturm, should long since have set in motion the organized machinery of murder and demolition?

Had Nogam, as he had meekly insisted on being questioned subsequent to his subjugation, truly delivered the two messages as directed and, miraculously escaping his fate decreed, returned to Frampton Court by the twelve-three, likewise in strict conformance with instructions?

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This statement Nogam had neglected to amplify, and Victor had been chary of too close questioning, lest it elicit too much in the hearing of others. Once overpowered, Nogam had been philosophic about his bad luck; but the eyes in his face of a stoic had held a gleam that Victor didn't altogether like, a light that seemed suspiciously malicious, a suggestion of spirited humour deplorable to say the least in a self-confessed sneak-thief caught in the very act, deplorable and disturbing; in Victor's sight a look constructively indicative of more knowledge than Nogam had any right to possess. Take it any way you pleased, something to think about ...

Still more disquieting Victor thought the circumstance that nobody else had seemed to notice that anomalous light in Nogam's eyes; which of course might mean merely that Victor had worked himself into such a state of nerves that he was seeing things, but equally well that the look was one reserved for Victor alone, intentionally or not holding for him a message, if he had but had the wit to read it, of peculiarly personal import.

It might have implied, for example, that Victor's half-hearted and paltering distrust of Nogam had all along been only too well warranted. In which case, the fat was already in the fire with a vengeance, and Victor's probable duration of life was dependent wholly upon the speed with which he could quit Frampton Court and hurl his motor-car through the night to the lower reaches of the Thames.

Envisagement of the worst at its blackest being part of the holy duty of self-preservation, Victor sat fully dressed, with every other provision made for flight at the first flash of warning, only waiting to make sure, and with what impatience was apparent in the working of paste-coloured features, the wincing and shifting of slotted eyes, the incessant shutting and unclosing of tensed fingers.

All rested with the telephone that stood mockingly mute at the man's elbow, callous alike to his anxiety and the rancorous regard in which he held it. His call for the house near Queen Anne's Gate had now been in for more than forty minutes; in that interval he had no less than three times pleaded its urgency to the trunk-line operator. And still the muffled bell beneath the desk was dumb.

And the worst of it was, fatal though the delay might prove, he dared not stir a hand to save himself until he *knew*....

In the taut torment of those long-drawn minutes a sound of circumspect scratching was enough to bring Victor to his feet in one startled bound.

He stood for a moment, a-twitch, but intent upon the corridor door, then composed himself with indifferent success, approached and opened the door. The girl Chou Nu slipped in, offered a timid courtesy, and awaited his leave to speak.

"Well? What is it?"

“Excellency: the Princess Sofia refuses to let me stay in the room with her.”

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"Why? Don't you know?"

"I think she means to run away. She would not go back to her bed, but walked up and down, till I ventured to urge her to take rest, when she turned on me in a rage and bade me be gone. Then I came to you."

Victor took thought and finished with a dour nod.

"You have done well. Return, keep watch, let me know if she leaves—"

"The door is locked, Excellency: she will not let me in."

"Spy through the keyhole, then; or hide in one of the empty rooms across the corridor, and watch—"

A muted mutter from the direction of the desk dried speech on Victor's lips. He started hastily toward the source of the sound, midway wheeled, and dismissed the maid with a brusque hand and monosyllable—"Go!"—then fairly pounced upon the telephone.

But all he heard, in the course of the ensuing five minutes, was the voice of the trunk-line operator advising him, to begin with, that she was ready to put him through to Westminster, then maddeningly punctuating the buzz and whine of the empty wire with her call of a talking doll—"Are you theah?... Are you theah?... Are you theah?"

At length, however, the connection was established; and Victor, hearing the falsetto of Chou Nu's second-uncle cheerily respond to the operator's query, unceremoniously broke in:

"Shaik Tsin? It is I, Number One. And the devil's own time I've had getting through. Why didn't you answer more promptly? What's the matter? Has anything gone wrong?"

"All is well, Excellency, as well as you could wish, knowing what you know."

Profound relief found voice in a sigh from Victor's heart.

"You got my messages, then? Nogam delivered them?"

"So I understand. I myself did not see him, Excellency. The man Sturm—"

On that name the voice died away in what Victor fancied was a gasp that might have been of either fright or pain.

"Hello!" he prompted. "Are you there, Shaik Tsin? I say! Are you there? Why don't you answer?"

He paused: no sound for seconds that dragged like so many minutes, then of a sudden a deadened noise like the slam of a door heard afar—or a pistol shot at some distance from the telephone in the study.

Further and frantic importuning of the cold and unresponsive wire presently was silenced by a new voice, little like that of Shaik Tsin.

“Hello? Who’s there? I say: that you, Prince Victor?”

Involuntarily Victor cried: “Karslake!” “What gorgeous luck! I’ve been wanting a word with you all evening.”

“What has happened? Why did Shaik Tsin—?”

“Oh, most unfortunate about him—frightfully sorry, but it really couldn’t be helped, if he hadn’t fought back we wouldn’t have had to shoot him. You see, the old devil murdered Sturm to-night, for some reason I daresay you understand better than I: we found a paper on the beggar, written in Chinese, apparently an order for his assassination signed by you. Half a mo’: I’ll read it to you ...”

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But if Karslake translated Victor's message, as edited by the hand of Nogam, it was to a wire as deaf as it was dumb.

XXI

VENTRE A TERRE

With exceeding care to avoid noise, Sofia unlocked the door and for the second time since midnight let herself stealthily out into the darkened corridor; but now with the difference that she did what she did in full command of all her wits and faculties, with no subjective war of wills to hinder and confuse her, and with a definite object clearly visioned—a goal no less distant than the railway station.

Lanyard had promised that Karslake should come for her within an hour or two and take her away with him, back to London and the arms of the father whom, although so recently revealed and accepted, she had already begun to love; if indeed it were not true that she had in filial sense fallen in love with Lanyard at first sight, through intuition, that afternoon in the Cafe des Exiles so long, so very long ago!

Well: she might as well await Karslake at the station. It would be simpler, she would be more at ease there, would breathe more freely once she turned her back on Frampton Court and all its hateful associations. Where Victor was, she could not rest.

If she had feared the man before, now she hated him; but hatred had added to her fear instead of replacing it, she remained afraid, desperately afraid, so that even the thought of continuing under the same roof with him was enough to make her prefer to tramp unknown roads alone in the mirk of that storm-swept night.

Though she went in trembling, she felt sure nobody spied upon her going; and in this confidence crept to the great staircase, down to the entrance hall, and on to the front doors; and a good omen it seemed to find these not locked, but simply on the latch. And if the night into which she peered was dark and loud with wind and rain, its countenance seemed kindlier, more friendly far than that of the world she was putting behind her. Without misgivings Sofia stepped out.

It was like stepping over the edge of the universe into the eternal night that bides beyond the stars. Neither did waiting seem to habituate her vision to the lack of light.

Still, the feel of gravel underfoot ought to guide her down the drive to the great gateway; and once outside the park, clear of its overshadowing trees, one would surely find mitigation of darkness sufficient to show the public road.

She took one tentative step out of the recessed doorway and into Victor's arms.

That they were Victor's she knew instantly, as much by the crawling of her flesh as by the choking terror that stifled the scream in her throat and froze body and limbs with its paralyzing touch.

And then his ironic accents:

"So good of you to spare me the trouble of coming for you!"

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Before she could reply or even think, other hands than his were busy with her. A folded cloth was whipped over the lower half of her face, sealing her lips, and knotted at the nape of her neck. Stout arms clipped her knees and swung her off her feet, leaving her body helpless in Victor's tight embrace. And despite her tardy recovery and efforts to struggle, she was carried swiftly away, a dozen paces or so, then tumbled bodily in upon the floor of a motor-car.

The door closed as she tried to pick herself up, the smooth purring of the motor became a leonine roar while she was still on her knees, gears clashed, and the car leaped with a jerk that drove her headlong against the cushions of the seat. Then the dome light was switched on, and she saw Victor with a bleak face sitting over her, an automatic pistol naked in his hand.

"Get up!" he said, grimly, "and if there's any thought of fight left in you, think better of it, remember your mother paid with her life the price of defying me, and yours means even less to me. Up with you and sit quietly beside me—do you hear?"

He lent her a hand that wrenched her arm brutally and wrung a cry which Victor mocked as Sofia fell upon the seat and cringed back into the corner.

For perhaps thirty seconds, while the car raced away down the drive, he continued to hold her in the venom of her sneer; then his gaze veered sharply, and leaning over he switched off the light.

With the body of the car again the dwelling-place of darkness, objects beyond its rain-gemmed glass—the heads of the Chinese maid and chauffeur, the twin piers of the nearing gateway—attained dense relief against the blue-white glare of two broad headlight beams, that of the limousine boring through the gateway to intersect at right angles that of another car approaching on the highroad but as yet hidden by the wall of the park.

In one breath and the same the lights of the second car swerved in toward the gateway, and consternation seized hold of Sofia's intelligence and wiped it clear of all coherence.

Already the strange lamps were staring blankly in between the piers—and the momentum of Victor's car was too great to be arrested within the distance. The girl cried out, but didn't know it, and crouched low; the horn added a squawk of frenzy to a wild clamour of yells; all prefatory to a scrunching, rending crash as, in the very mouth of the gateway, a front fender of the incoming car ripped through the rear fender above which Sofia was sitting. Thrown heavily against Victor, then instantly back to her place, she felt the car, with brakes set fast, turn broadside to the road, skid crabwise, and lurch sickeningly into the ditch on the farther side.

For an interminable time, while the ponderous fabric rocked and toppled, threatening very instant to crash upon its side, the rear wheels spun madly and the chain-bound tires tore in vain at greasy road metal.

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Without clear comprehension of what was happening, Sofia heard shouts from the other car, now at a standstill, and an oddly syncopated popping. The window in the door on Victor's side rang like a cracked bell, shivered, and fell inward, clashing. With a growl of rage, Victor bent forward and levelled an arm through the opening. From his hand truncated tongues of orange flame, half a dozen of them, stabbed the gloom to an accompaniment of as many short and savage barks.

Then the chains at last bit through to a purchase, the car scrambled to the crown of the road and lunged precipitately away; and the lights of the other dropped astern in the space of a rest between heartbeats.

Sitting back, Victor turned on the dome light again, and extracting an empty magazine clip from the butt of his automatic pistol, replaced it with another, loaded.

From this occupation he looked up with lips curling in contempt of Sofia's terror.

"Your friends," he observed, "were a thought behindhand, eh? When you come to know me better, my dear, you'll find they invariably are—with me."

Aftermath of fright made her tongue inarticulate; and Victor's sneer took on a colour of mean amusement.

"Something on your mind?"

She twisted her hands together till the laced fingers hurt.

"Wha-what are you go-going to do with me?"

"Make good use of you, dear child," he laughed: "be sure of that!"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know ..."

"Really not? But there I think you do injustice to your admirable intelligence."

The jeering laugh sounded as he put out the light again, in darkness the derisive voice pursued:

"If you must know in so many words—well, I mean to keep you by me till the final curtain falls. As long as it lasts, yours will be an interesting life—I give my word."

"And you call yourself my father!"

“Oh, no! No, indeed: that’s all over and done with, the farce is played out; and while I’m aware my role in it wasn’t heroic, I shan’t play the purblind fool in the afterpiece—pure drama—upon which the curtain is now rising. Neither need you. Oh, I’ll be frank with you, if you wish, lay all my cards on the table.”

A deliberate pause ended in a chuckle.

“I have at present precisely two uses for my precious little Sofia: She will serve excellently as insurance against further persecution on the part of her accomplished and energetic father—with whom I shall deal in my good leisure—and ... But need one be crudely explicit?”

Sofia answered nothing to that, for a long time she said nothing, but sat pondering....

And Victor was speedily provided with another interest which engrossed him to the exclusion of further efforts to bait a victim defenseless against his insolence.

When for the third time after that narrow scrape at the gates the man roused up to peer back through the rear window of the limousine, Sofia heard a harshly sibilant intake of breath between shut teeth, and surmised the discovery that the car which had so narrowly missed blocking their escape had picked up the trail, and was now in hot chase.

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Even youth, however, could distill but slender hope from this. The pace was too terrific at which Victor's car was thundering through the night-bound countryside, it seemed idle to dream that another could overhaul it, even though driven with as much skill and maniacal recklessness. And Sofia returned to thoughts to which Victor's innuendo had given definite shape and colour, if with an effect far from that of his intention. Threatened, the spirit of the girl responded much as sane young flesh will to a cold plunge. She had forgotten to tremble, and though still tense-strung in every fibre was able to sit still, look steadily into the face of peril, and calculate her chances of cheating it.

Presently, in a tone so even it won begrudged admiration, she asked:

"Where are you taking me?"

"Do you really care?"

"Enough to ask."

"But why should I tell you?"

"No reason. I presume it doesn't really matter, I'll know soon enough."

"Then I don't mind enlightening you. We're bound for the Continent by way of Limehouse. A launch is waiting for us in Limehouse Reach, a yacht off Gravesend. Oh, I have forgotten nothing! By daybreak we'll be at sea."

"We?"

"You and I."

"You deceive yourself, Prince Victor. I shan't accompany you."

"How amusing! And is it a secret, how you propose to stand against my will?"

Sofia was silent for a little; then, "I can kill myself," she said, quietly.

"To be sure you can! And when I tire of you, perhaps I'll humour your morbid inclinations—if they still exist."

"You are a fool," Sofia returned, bluntly, "if you think I shall go aboard that yacht alive."

"Brava!" Victor laughed, and clapped his hands. "Brava! brava!"

He sat up for another look out of the rear window, sucked at his breath even more sharply than before, and snatching up the speaking-tube pronounced urgent words in Chinese.

The head of the chauffeur, in stark silhouette against the leading glow, bent toward the tube, and nodded rapidly. And to the deep-throated roar of an unmuffled exhaust, the heavy car leaped, like a spirited animal stung by whip and spur, and settled into a stride to which what had gone before was as a preliminary canter to the heartbreaking drive down to the home-stretch.

Lights began to dot the roadside. Widely spaced at first, unbroken ranks were soon streaking past the tear-blind windows. Outskirts of London were being traversed; but neither driving sheets of rain against which human vision failed, nor the chance of encountering belated traffic, worked any slackening of the pace. Only when a corner had to be negotiated did the car slow down, and then never to the point of sanity; and the turn once rounded, its flight would again become headlong, lunatic, suicidal.

The stringed lamps wove a wavering luminous ribbon without end; a breeze laden with the wet fragrance of London drove great gusts of rain in stringing showers through the broken window. Turns and twists grew more frequent, apparently favouring the pursuit.

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Victor now knelt constantly on the back seat, his face in the fitful play of light and shadow uncannily resembling that of a hunted jungle cat. On the polished steel of his pistol sinister gleams winked and faded. From his snarling lips foul oaths fell, a steady stream, black blasphemies spewed up from the darkest dives of the Orient—most of them happily couched in the tongues of their origin and so unintelligible to his one auditor. As it was, she heard and understood enough, too much.

Nevertheless, the man was not too completely absorbed in watching the shifting fortunes of the race to be unmindful of the girl. And when once she sat up to ease cramped limbs, he misread her intention and, catching her viciously by an arm, threw her back into her corner and advised her not to play the giddy little fool.

After that Sofia was at pains to stir as seldom as possible, and bided her time quietly enough, but never for an instant relaxed her watchfulness or lost heart.

The shouldering houses that hedged their course discovered a profile, ragged, black against a sky whose purple dimness held the first dull presage of dawn.

In the wild rush of a marauding tomcat the car crossed a broad public square and sped up the graded approach to a bridge. The smell of the Thames was unmistakable, the far-flung lamps of the Embankment were pearls aglow upon violet velvet.

Leaving the bridge, the limousine took a turn on two wheels, and immediately something happened, seemingly some attempt to stop it was made. Vociferous voices hailed it, only to induce an augmented bellow of the exhaust with an instantaneous acceleration of impetus. Then something was struck and tossed aside as a bull might toss a dog—a dark shape whirling and flopping hideously; and an agonized screaming made the girl cower, sick with horror, and cover her ears with her hands.

Before she was able to forget those qualms many more minutes of frantic driving had flung to the rear many a mile of silent streets.

Of a sudden she heard an inhuman cry and, looking up, saw Victor dash the butt of his pistol through the glass, then reversing the weapon pour through the opening a fusillade whose effect was presumably gratifying, for he laughed to himself when the pistol was empty, laughed briefly but with vicious glee.

That laugh levelled the last barrier of doubt and fear and nerved Sofia finally to test the forlorn hope she had been nursing ever since Victor had let her see a little way into his mind as to her fate.

Until he could reload, only the tradition of the sexes lent him theoretical superiority; whereas he was in fact a man well on the thither side of middle-age, his virility sapped

by long indulgence of unbridled appetites; while Sofia was a woman in the fullest flush of her first mature powers.

Gathering herself together, she inched forward and made ready to spring, bear him down, overpower him—by some or any means put him hors de combat long enough for her to fling a door open and herself out into the street....

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With squealing brakes the car shaved an acute corner and slid on locked wheels to a dead halt so unexpected that it was Sofia who plunged floundering to the floor, while Victor only by a minor miracle escaped catapulting through the front windows.

The next instant, as Sofia struggled to her knees, the door behind her was wrenched open from without and, at a sign from Victor, rough hands laid hold of the girl and dragged her out bodily.

In a passion of despair, she lost her senses for a time and like a madwoman fought, shrieking, biting, kicking, clawing, scratching....

With returning lucidity she found herself, panting and dishevelled, arms pinned to her sides, struggling on for all that, being hustled by some half a dozen men across a narrow sidewalk of uneven flagstones.

Simultaneously the shutter of perceptions snapped, photographing permanently upon the super-sensitized film of conscious memory the glimpsed vista of a grim, mean street whose repellent uglinesses grinned through the boding twilight like lineaments of some monstrous mask of evil.

Then she tripped on a low stone step, stumbled, and was half-carried, half-thrown into a narrow and malodorous hallway.

Between her and the sweet liberty of the rain-washed air a door crashed like the crack of doom.

XXII

THE SEVEN BRASS HINGES

Into a space perhaps four feet in width from wall to wall and seven deep from the front door to the foot of a cramped flight of crazy wooden stairs, some ten people were crowded, Sofia and the maid Chou Nu in a knot of excited men.

In the saffron glow of an ill-trimmed paraffin lamp smoking in a wall bracket, desperate faces, yellow and brown and white, consulted one another with rolling eyeballs and strange tongues clamorous. Sofia heard the broken rustling of heavy respirations; she saw uncouth gesticulations carve the shadows; her nostrils were revolted by effluvia of unclean bodies, garments saturate with opium smoke and curious cookery, breaths sour with alcohol.

Two were busy at the door, under the direction of Prince Victor, setting stout bars into iron sockets. When they had finished, Victor elbowed them out of his way and thrust back the slide of a narrow horizontal peephole, through which he reconnoitred.

The tall, thin body stiffened as he looked, and without turning he flung an open hand behind him and snapped a demand in Chinese. Somebody slipped a revolver into his palm. Levelling it he sent a volley crashing through the peephole. Yells responded, and in the hush that fell upon the final shot a noise of fugitive feet scraping and stumbling on cobbles. A bullet struck the door a sounding thump and all but penetrated, raising a bump on the inner face of its thick oaken panels; and Victor shut the slide and turned back.

Subservient silence saluted him. He spoke in Chinese, issuing (Sofia gathered) instructions for the defense of the house. One by one the men designated dropped out of the group about her. Three shuffled off into a room adjoining the hallway. Two others ran briskly up the stairs. A sixth Victor directed to stand by the barred door. His chauffeur and another Chinaman he told off for his personal attendance.

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The maid Chou Nu was left to shift for herself, and while Sofia could see her she did not shift a finger from her pose of terror, flattened to the wall. When Sofia came back that way, the girl had vanished, however. Nor was she seen again alive.

Her arms held fast, Sofia was partly led and partly dragged down the hall, Victor herding the group on past the staircase and into a bare room at the back of the house, where a solitary lamp burning on a deal table discovered for all other furnishing broken chairs, coils of tarred rope, a rack of ponderous oars and boat-hooks, a display of shapeless oilskins and sou'westers on pegs. The windows were boarded up from sills to lintels, the air was close and dank with the stale flavour of foul tidal waters.

Here Victor took charge of Sofia, the chauffeur holding the lamp to light the other Chinaman at his labours with a trap-door in the floor, a slab of woodwork so massive that, when its iron bolts had been drawn, it needed every whit of the man's strength to lift and throw it back upon its hinges; and its crashing fall made all the timbers quake and groan.

Through the square opening thus discovered Sofia saw a ladder of several slimy steps washed by black, oily waters that sucked and swirled sluggishly round spiles green with weed and ooze.

Down these steps the Chinaman crept gingerly, but halfway paused with a cry, then cringed back to the head of the ladder, yellow face blanched, slant eyes piteous with fear, as he exhibited an end of stout mooring line whose other end was made fast to a ring bolt in one of the joists.

With a smothered oath Victor snatched the rope's end from the trembling hand and examined it closely. Even Sofia could see that it had been cleanly severed by a knife.

Victor's countenance was ablaze as he dropped the rope. Before the tempest of his wrath the Chinaman bent like a reed, with faint, protesting bleats and feebly weaving hands.

But in full tide the tirade faltered, Victor seemed to forget his anger or else to remind himself it was puerile in contrast with the mortal issues that now confronted him.

He turned to Sofia eyes of cold fire in a wintry countenance.

"So," he pronounced, slowly, "it appears you are to have your way, after all, and more speedily than either of us reckoned. You are to die, and so am I, this day—you in my arms. Well, it is time, I daresay, when I permit myself to be duped and overreached by police spies like your persevering father and lover. Yes; I am ready to pay the price of my fatuity—but not until they had paid me for their victory—and dearly. Come!"

He motioned to the Chinese to reclose and fasten the trap-door, and grasping Sofia's wrist with cruel fingers hurried her back through the hallway.

Repeated breaks of pistol-fire guided them to the front room, a racket echoed in diminished volume from the street.



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In an atmosphere already thick with acrid fumes of smokeless powder two men held the windows, firing through loopholes in iron-bound blinds of oak. At their feet a third squatted, reloading for them as occasion required. As Sofia and Victor entered one man dropped his weapon and, grunting, fell back from his window to nurse a shattered hand. Releasing the girl without another word, Victor caught up the pistol and took the vacant post.

Instantly, on peering out, he fired once, then again. Evidently missing both shots, he settled to await a better target, eyes intent to the loophole. In the course of the next few minutes he changed position but once, when, after firing several more shots, he tossed the empty weapon to the man on the floor and received a loaded one in exchange.

Seeing him thus employed, altogether forgetful, Sofia began to back toward the hall, step by cautious step, keeping her attention fixed to Victor throughout. But he seemed to be completely preoccupied with his marksmanship, and paid her no heed.

Nevertheless, when she at length found courage to swing and dart away through the door, Victor flung three curt words to the fellow at his feet, who grunted, rose, and glided from the room in close chase.

The guard at the front door was not so busy as Sofia had hoped to find him, not too interested in the progress of siege operations outside to note her approach and look round from his peephole with a menacing grin of welcome; and his unmistakable readiness, as pistol in hand he took a single step toward her, drove the girl back to the foot of the stairs.

Then the other came swiftly after her, and Sofia swung in panic and stumbled up the steps. There were others up above, two to her certain knowledge, possibly many more of Victor's creatures; but if only she could find some sort of refuge in the uppermost fastnesses of the rookery, perhaps ...

Like a shape of smoke wind-driven, she sped up the first flight, then the second, only pausing at the head of the third and last flight to throw hunted glances right, left, and behind her.

Overhead a skylight with dingy panes diffused a dull blue glimmer which discovered a yawning door at her elbow, a pocket of black mystery beyond, and on the uppermost steps of the staircase her patient yellow shadow, his upturned eyes inscrutable but potentially revolting with their very concealment of the intent behind them.

Impossible that a worse thing could await her beyond that dark threshold....

She crossed it in one stride, swung the door to, and set her shoulders against it.

Outside she heard the shuffling footfalls pause. The knob rattled. But instead of the inward thrust against which she stood braced, there came the least of outward pulls, as if to make sure that the latch had caught; and after a brief pause a key grated in the lock, was withdrawn, and the slippered feet withdrew in turn.

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When her lungs ceased to labour painfully, she took her courage in both hands and began to explore, groping blindly through darkness, encountering nothing till she blundered into a table which held a glass lamp for paraffin oil, like those in use below.

Fumbling over the top of the table, she found matches, struck one, and set its fire to the wick.

The flame waxed and grew steady in a crusted chimney, revealing a room with a slant ceiling and two dormer windows, boarded; in one corner a cot-bed with tumbled blankets, near this a low wooden stand, with a pipe, spirit lamp, and other paraphernalia of an opium smoker—no chairs, not another stick of furniture of any kind.

Removing the lamp, the girl set it on the floor, and pushed the table over against the door. By not so long as half a minute would its reinforcement delay Victor when he made up his mind to get in. But in such emergencies the human kind is not impatient of the most futile expedients.

There was nothing more she could do. She stood still, listening. The rattle of pistol fire three floors below continued in fits and starts, but the sound of it was oddly unreal, resembling more stammering explosions of a string of firecrackers than snaps of the whiplash of Death.

She tried one of the windows without encouragement, but at the other found a board with a loose end, which she pried aside, till through begrimed glass she could see a ghastly, weeping sky of daybreak and, by craning her neck, peer down into the dark gully of the street.

At first she thought it empty; but presently her straining vision made out two huddled shapes upon the farther sidewalk, close under the walls of a public house whose sign she could just barely decipher: the Red Moon.

Then, about to draw back from the window, she saw five men, oddly foreshortened figures from that lofty coign of view, leave the Red Moon by one of its bar entrances, bearing between them a heavy beam of wood, and with this improvised battering-ram aimed at the door to the besieged house, charge awkwardly across the cobbles.

The house spat fire from door and windows, a withering blast. In the middle of the street the beam was abandoned, three of its fool-hardy bearers took to their heels, each shaping an individual course, while one lay still upon the wet black stones, and another, apparently wounded in the legs, sought pitifully to drag himself by his arms, inch by inch, out of the zone of fire. But presently his efforts grew feeble, then he, too, lay stirless, prone in the sluicing rain.

The girl shrank back from the window, hiding her eyes as if to blot out that picture.

The light, that is to say the absence of it in true sense, the angle of view, and the distance, all had conspired to prevent her from making sure that neither her father nor Karlake were of those four whose broken bodies cluttered the street. But the fear and uncertainty were maddening....

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She wheeled suddenly toward the door: the ancient stairs were creaking beneath a measured tread. She made an offer to add her weight to that of the table, but checked and fell back immediately, seeing the folly of sacrificing her strength, the wisdom of saving it to serve her when finally....

The creaking ceased, the wards of the lock grated, the knob turned, the door was thrust open—the table offering little hindrance if any. From the threshold Victor eyed the girl with a twitching grin.

“The time is at hand,” he announced with a parody of punctilio. “We have beaten them off in the street, but they have found the tunnel from the cellar of the Red Moon, and are attacking from the river besides. So, my dear, it ends for us....”

In silence, shoulders to the wall farthest from the door, Sofia watched him unwinking. The lamp at her feet painted the tensely poised young body and bloodless face with quaint, stagey shadows.

Victor’s glance ranged the cheerless room.

“I think you understand me,” he said.

She might have been a waxwork dummy out of Madame Tussaud’s.

A white blaze of madness transfigured Victor’s countenance. He took one step toward Sofia.

In movements so precisely coordinated that they seemed one and instantaneous, the girl stooped, caught up the lamp, and threw it with all her might. Victor ducked his head. The lamp sailed on, described a descending curve through the open doorway into the well of the staircase, struck, and exploded. In the clutches of the maniac, Sofia was aware of the lurid glare, momentarily gaining strength, that filled the rectangle of the doorway.

In through this last, while iron hands tightened on her throat and consciousness grew dark with closing shadows, a man’s shape passed, then another....

The grip on her throat grew lax, the hands left it free. She reeled, but somebody caught her up and bore her swiftly from the room, leaving two who fought together like beasts on the floor, locked in each other’s arms, rolling and squirming, rearing and flopping....

The scorch of flames stung her cheek, but she forgot that when their broken light made visible the features of Karslake above the arms wherein she lay cradled.

Turning aside from the staircase, Karslake bore her to the ladder leading to the skylight, whose broken glass crunched beneath his heels at every step.

In the open air he pulled up for a moment's rest, but continued to hold Sofia in his arms. The wind raved about them, buffeted them, tore their breath away, rain pelted them like birdshot; but they clung to each other and were unaware of reason for complaint.

Presently, however, Karslake remembered, and anxiously endeavoured to disengage from these tenacious arms.

"Let me go, dearest," he muttered. "I must go back—I left your father to take care of Victor, and—"

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As if evoked by his very solicitude Lanyard emerged from the skylight hatch, waved a hand in gay salute, then turned to stare down into the flaming pit from which he had climbed.

After a little he fell back a pace. Then slowly, with the laboured movements of exhaustion, Victor worked head and shoulders through the opening and dragged himself out upon the roof.

On all fours he held in doubt, his head moving from side to side like the head of a stricken beast, seeking his enemy with dazzled eyes. Then he made Lanyard out and, pulling himself together for the supreme effort, launched at his throat with the pounce of a great cat.

Lanyard met him halfway, caught him in the middle of his bound, wound wiry arms round the man and held him helpless.

His voice rang clear above the crackle of flames:

“Victor! have you forgotten how you threatened one night, twenty years ago, to follow me to the very gates of Hell, and what I promised you—that, if you did, I’d push you inside? Or did you think I would forget?”

He cast the man from him, backward, down into the hungry maw of that inferno....