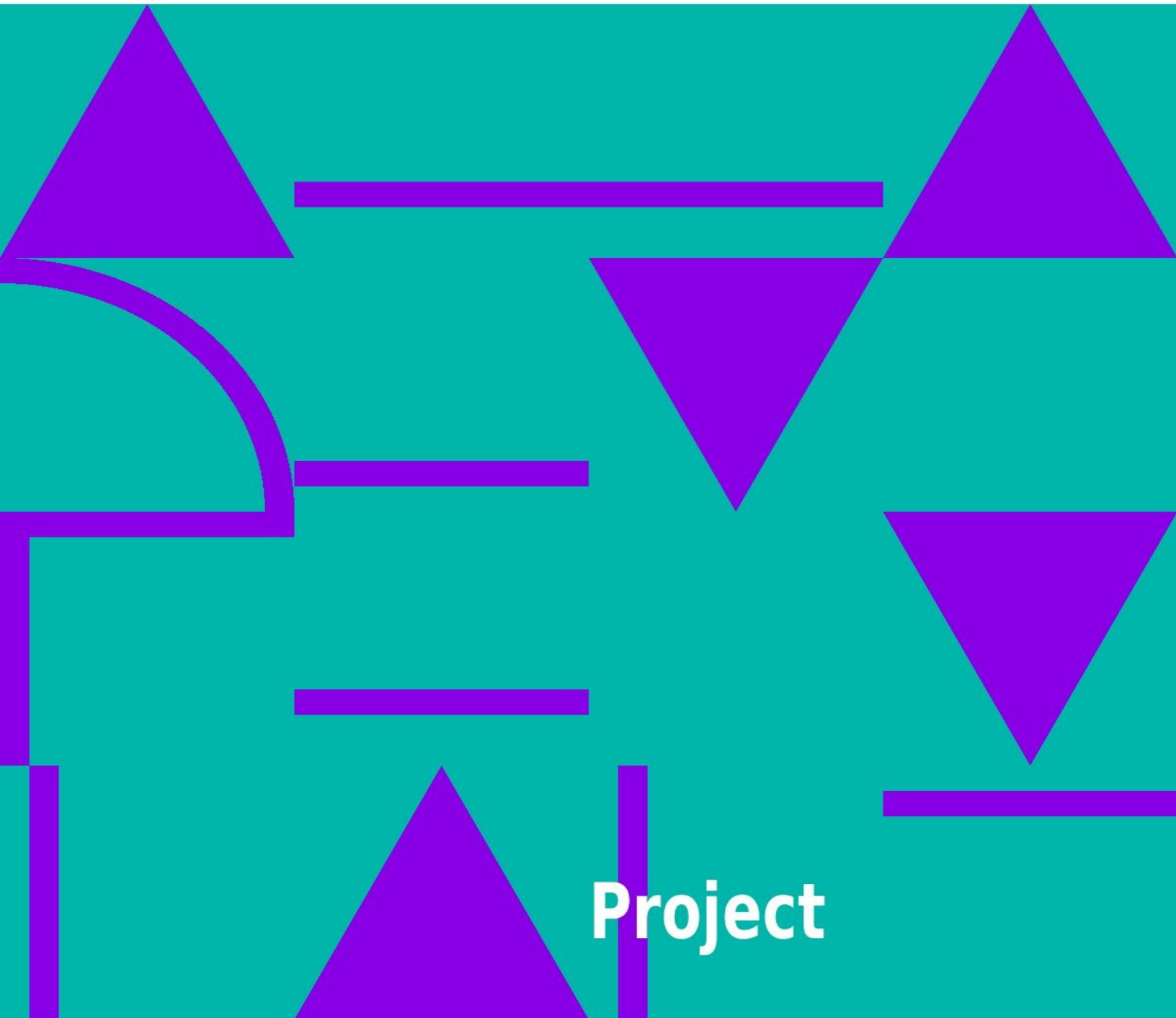
Affairs of State

Being an Account of Certain Surprising Adventures Which Befell an American Family in the Land of Windmills

Burton Egbert Stevenson



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AFFAIRS OF STATE

Being an Account of Certain Surprising Adventures Which

Befell an American Family in the Land of Windmills

BY

BURTON E. STEVENSON

AUTHOR OF "THE MARATHON MYSTERY," "THE HOLLADAY CASE," ETC.

With Illustrations by F. VAUX WILSON

1906

TO G. H. T.:

OLD FRIEND

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"EEF MONSIEUR PLEASE"

"IT WAS MY GREAT GOOD FORTUNE," SAID THE STRANGER, BOWING, "TO BE OF SERVICE TO A COMPATRIOT"

"OH!" SHE CRIED, WITH A LITTLE START, "THERE HE IS NOW, ALMOST NEAR ENOUGH TO HEAR!"

"WHAT IS IT?" SHE DEMANDED. "DON'T YOU SEE WE ARE ALL WAITING?"

AFFAIRS OF STATE

CHAPTER I

The Wiles of Womankind

Archibald Rushford, tall, lean, the embodiment of energy, stood at the window, hands in pockets, and stared disgustedly out at the dreary vista of sand-dunes and bathing-machines, closed in the distance by a stretch of gray sea mounting toward a horizon scarcely discernible through the drifting mist which hung above the water.

"Though why you wanted to come here at all," he continued, presumably addressing two young ladies in the room behind him, "or why you want to stay, now you *are* here, passes my comprehension. One might as well be buried alive, and be done with it. The sensations, I should imagine, are about the same."

"Oh, come, dad!" protested one of the girls, laughing, "you know it isn't so bad as that! There's plenty of life—not just at this hour of the morning, perhaps,"—with a fleeting glance at the empty landscape,—"but the hour is unfashionable."

"As everything seasonable and sensible seems to be here," put in her father, grimly.

"And such interesting life, too," added the other girl.

"Interesting! Bah! When I want to see monkeys and peacocks, I'll go to a menagerie."

"But you never do go to the menagerie, at home, you know, dad."

"No—because I don't care for monkeys or peacocks—in fact, I particularly detest them!"

"But lions, dad! There are lions—"

"In the menagerie at home, perhaps."

"Yes, and in this one—bigger lions than you ever dreamed of, dad!—perfect monsters of lions!"

"Oh, no, there aren't, Susie," dissented Rushford. "You don't know the species. You've mistaken a bray for a roar, just as a lot of people always do, if the bray is only loud enough. Come, now, let me know the worst. How much longer do you propose to stay here?"

"Well, dad, you see the season won't be at its height for fully a month yet—"

"A month!" echoed Rushford, in dismay. "Well, Susie, you and Nell may be able to stand it for a month, but long ere that I'll be dead—ossified, fossilised, dried up, and blown away! Maybe you girls enjoy it, though I didn't think it of you—but what can *I* do? I'm tired of reading day-before-yesterday's newspaper and of being two days behind the market. Two days! Think what may have happened to steel since I've heard from it! It's enough to drive a man mad!"

He got out a cigar, lighted it, and stood puffing it nervously, appalled at the vision his own words had conjured up.

"But, dad," Sue pointed out, coming to his side and taking his arm coaxingly, "you know it was just to get away from all that worry—from those horrid stocks and things—that you consented to come with us."

"Don't call the stocks hard names, Susie. Don't go back on your best friends!" protested Rushford. "Don't forget what they've done for you!"

"But, dear, you remember how strongly Doctor Samuels insisted on your taking a rest; how necessary he said it was?"

"Oh, perfectly!" responded Rushford, drily. "I've suspected right along that Samuels took his orders from you."

"From me, dad!" cried Sue, indignantly, but her eyes were shining in a most suspicious manner. "A man of his standing—"

"It doesn't matter," broke in her father, with a wave of his arm. "I'm willing to grant, for the sake of argument, that Samuels was perfectly sincere. But I still protest that there is no reason why we should conceal ourselves here. We haven't done anything—the police aren't after us—I can speak for myself, at least."

"This seemed to be such a nice, quiet place for you, dad," explained Nell, perching herself upon a table near the window and gazing pensively out at the shimmering water, which told that the sun was winning a decisive victory over the mist, and that the day would be a fine one.

"For me!" repeated her father, turning and staring at her. "You don't mean to say you chose this place on *my* account!"

Nell nodded, but she winked at Susie.

"And then, you know," she added, "we have always wanted to get a glimpse of a real Dutch watering-place."

"I don't believe this *is* a real Dutch watering-place. Nobody here speaks anything but French. Why, it's even got a French name!"

"Only two-thirds French, dad," Sue corrected.

"And everything is priced in francs."

"That is true of all Europe," asserted Nell, with superb aplomb.

"Well, Dutch, French, or Hindoo, you've had your glimpse, haven't you? Suppose we move on and get a glimpse or two of something worth seeing."

"Oh, but we've seen it all only from the outside! We've been like the audience at a show—we haven't had any part in it. And it's so much more interesting behind the scenes!"

"It's dull enough from in front, heaven knows!" agreed Rushford. "If I had my way, I'd ring down the curtain and close the show up this minute. It's the worst I ever saw! And I very much doubt if a respectable American family has any business behind the scenes!"

"You're jaundiced, dad," laughed Sue. "You're looking at the place through a

yellow film of prejudice. One must enter into the spirit of the thing!"

Rushford groaned.

"I'm afraid I'm too set in my ways, Susie," he said, dismally. "I've lived in America too long. You might as well ask me to dance the can-can, and be done with it!"

"Besides," continued Sue, "it's just as Nell says. We're on the outside—we haven't got a foothold. There's something the matter."

"Maybe they think I'm that Chicago cashier who got away with a million, not long ago. On second thought, though, I don't believe that would make any difference. That fellow would find a very congenial circle here. He wouldn't have any difficulty in getting behind the scenes!"

"Sue and I have been thinking it over," said Nell, "and we've concluded that it must be something about the hotel. We seem to have picked out the wrong one."

"The place *is* empty, and that's a fact," agreed Rushford.

"It's unnaturally so," said Sue. "Something's the matter with it. It's taboo for some reason."

"Well, it's good enough for me," remarked her father. "After all, there isn't much difference in prisons! But I want to repeat, as emphatically as possible, that I can't keep on loafing here for a month and preserve my sanity. Don't you see how much whiter my hair's getting? I'm willing to do anything in reason to oblige you, and I fully realise the importance of your sociological and ethnological studies—"

Sue's hand on his mouth stopped him.

"Take a breath, dad," she cautioned him. "Take a breath. Those were mighty long words."

"As I was about to remark," continued Rushford, calmly, taking the hand away, "I am, of course, a doting parent—who would not be with two such children? But, candidly, I don't just see where I come in. I tell you, girls, I've got to have some excitement."

"There's plenty of excitement at the Casino, dad."

"Oh, yes—faro excitement; roulette excitement. I never cared for that kind. I've always had the sense to keep out of sure-thing games, even on Wall Street."

"But the people—"

"The people! French apes in fancy waistcoats; Dutch dandies in corsets; women with painted cheeks and pencilled eyebrows whom you're ashamed to look at!"

"Some of them are respectable, dad," laughed Sue.

"One would never suspect it!"

"Oh, yes, dad; some of them belong to the nobility."

"That's no certificate of character—rather the reverse, if one may believe the papers."

"Gossip, dad; nothing but gossip. And you know how you've always hated gossip. You've told us never to believe it."

"It may be; but one could believe anything of most of the women one sees around here. My only chance for amusement is to get up a flirtation with some of them. I don't think it would be difficult—they don't seem a bit shy. Only," he added, with a sigh, "I'm getting too old."

"Yes, dad; I'm afraid you are," agreed Susie. "You wouldn't really enjoy it."

'"My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone!'"

quoted Nell, in a solemn voice.

"Don't you be too sure!" retorted her father, threateningly, wheeling around upon her. "There's no telling what I may be driven to, if I'm kept imprisoned here much longer! 'Though I look old,'—"

"'Yet I am strong and lusty,'" finished Sue. "Of course you are, dad, and you don't look old, either. Why," gazing up at him critically, "you don't look a day over forty!"

"Don't try to bamboozle your Pa, Susie," laughed Rushford. "I can see through you! You'll be trying to make me believe next that you want a stepmother."

"I would if it would make you any happier, dad."

Her father gazed down for an instant into her pseudo-serious face, then caught her in his arms and squeezed her.

"What're you up to?" he demanded. "Trying to make a fool of your old dad? Why, Susie, own up,—you'd scratch out the eyes of the best woman in the world if she dared to look twice at me!"

"Of course I would!" admitted Susie, instantly. "You know as well as I do, dad, that even the best woman in the world isn't good enough for you."

"Let's go across to the other hotel, dad," suggested Nell, with a nonchalance intended to conceal the fact that this was the point she and Susie had been aiming at from the very first.

Her father released Susie and stared at his other daughter in amazement.

"What on earth for?" he demanded.

"Oh, everybody seems to be over there—you've noticed—"

"Yes, I've noticed that it's running over with the rag-tag and bob-tail of all Europe! If you think I'll butt into that Bedlam, my dear child, you're badly mistaken. I'd rather live with the freaks in a museum."

"But it's so quiet here."

"I'm glad of it! Besides, I thought you wanted quiet?"

"Only for your sake—don't you see, we're trying our best to please you. A moment ago, you said you wanted excitement."

"I do; but it must be excitement with an object. I haven't got any use for the infernal, purposeless chattering I hear all around me every time I go out on the dyke. Damn a man, anyhow, who can't find anything better to do than to run around to summer-resorts and flirt with other men's wives! I tell you, girls, I want to get back to New York!"

"Give us another month, dad!" pleaded Sue, catching his arm again, as he stamped up and down. "You know that you promised to stay with us two months, at the very least. We can't go around without a chaperon."

Her father's face relaxed as he looked down at her, and he smiled grimly.

"So we get down to the real reason, at last, do we?" he queried. "I thought all this solicitude for my health was a trifle unnatural. I'm useful as a chaperon, am I? See here, girls, I can put in my time more profitably at the stock exchange, and have a heap more fun. I'll hire a chaperon for you, or half a dozen, if you want them, and pull out for New York. What do you say? I don't know the first principles of the business, anyway."

"Oh, yes, you do, dad!" protested Susie. "You're a perfectly ideal chaperon."

"I am? The ideal chaperon, then, must be one who never does any chaperoning!"

"That's it, exactly!" cried Nell, clapping her hands delightedly. "How quickly you see things, dad!"

"So that's it!" and he stood for a moment looking darkly at his offspring. "Well, you girls are old enough to take care of yourselves. If you can't, it's high time you were learning how!"

"Oh, we're perfectly able to take care of ourselves," Sue assured him. "You mustn't worry about us for a moment, dad."

"I'm not likely to. But, in that case, why do you want me along at all?"

"Why, don't you see, dad, it's you who give us the odour of respectability. By ourselves, we should be social outcasts, impossible, not to be spoken to—except by men. It isn't convenable."

"Oh, I see," said Rushford. "The first great principle of European society seems

to be, 'Think the worst of every one.'"

"Not precisely, dad; but no unmarried woman may venture outside the circumference of the family circle. That's the great European convention—the basic principle of her social order."

"A sort of 'tag, you're it,' game, isn't it? The family circle is a kind of dead line—the ring of fire which keeps out the wild beasts. Step over, and you're lost!"

"Of course," said Nell, "it is only to unmarried women that the rule applies."

"Oh, certainly," assented her father. "Married women are allowed more latitude—in fact, from such French novels as I've read, I should infer that they usually swing clear around the circle! It's a reaction, I suppose; a sort of compensation for the privations of their youth. I don't like it. Let's go home!"

"But your promise, dad!" pleaded Sue, permitting the faintest suspicion of moisture to appear in her dark eyes. "And you know you really do need a vacation."

Her father looked down at her, saw the moisture, and surrendered.

"You're a humbug," he said; "and this vacation business is another. A man spends two or three months loafing around because somebody tells him he's looking badly and ought to take a rest; and before he knows it, he's accumulated so much rust in his system that he never gets it all out again. His machinery creaks more or less for the rest of his life. The wise man postpones his vacation to the next world."

"Well, let's call it a jaunt," suggested Susie. "A jaunt somehow implies hurry and bustle, with plenty of exercise."

"And I don't know which is the bigger fool," pursued her father, not heeding her; "the fellow who takes a vacation every year on his own hook, or the one who permits his daughters to drag him away from his comfortable home and his morning paper and the business which gives him his interest in life, and maroon him in a desert of a Dutch watering-place, where there's absolutely nothing for a self-respecting man to do but smoke himself to death and wait for a paper which never comes till day after to-morrow!"

"It sounds terribly involved, but I'll help you reason it out, dad, any time you like," said Susie, obligingly. "And you'll stay, won't you, dear?"

"Oh, I'll stay, since your heart's so set upon it. I'll try to bear up and find a diversion of some kind and not rust out any more than I can help. I might dig in the sand or make mud pies or play mumbly-peg. But I draw the line at plunging into that whirlpool across the street. My bed here is nearly as comfortable as the one at home, and the grub's first-rate."

"Very well, dad," agreed Susie, instantly seizing the concession, but speaking as though it were she who was making it, "we'll stay here, then. Only I *do* wish there were a few more people," she added, with a sigh. "I hate to sit down in that big, empty dining-room. I imagine I'm at an Egyptian banquet, and that there are horrid, rattly skeletons sitting in all those high, covered chairs."

"What you need is some fresh air," said her father. "You girls get your hats and go for a walk. You're growing morbid. If you think of skeletons again, I'll give you a liver pill."

"Won't you come, dad?"

"No; you know you don't want me. Besides, I see the panjandrum who brings the mail coming up the dyke down yonder."

He stood gazing down the Digue until his womenkind reappeared, bedight, ready for the walk.

"You'll do," he said, looking them over critically. "In fact, my dears, if I wasn't afraid of making you conceited, I'd say I'd never seen two handsomer girls in my life."

"Now it's you who are blarneying, dad!" cried Susie, but she dimpled with pleasure nevertheless, and so did Nell.

"No I'm not," retorted Rushford; "and I dare say there are plenty of other men, even in this Dutch limbo, who have an eye for beauty; let them break their hearts, if they have any, but keep your own hearts whole, my dears."

They were laughing in earnest, now, as they looked up in his face, which had grown suddenly serious.

"Why, dad, what ails you?" questioned Sue. "I think it is you who need the pill!"

Rushford's face cleared; they were heart-whole thus far—there could be no doubt of that.

"Perhaps I do," he agreed. "Or perhaps it's only that I'm beginning to feel the responsibilities of my position."

"Your position?"

"As chaperon," he explained.

"Dear dad!" cried Susie, and squeezed his arm. "Do you suppose that as long as we have you, either of us will ever think of another man?"

"I don't know," said her father, dubiously. "I scarcely believe I'm so fascinating as all that. But I just wanted to remind you, girls, that there's plenty of nice boys at home—boys whom you can trust, through and through—boys who are clean, and honest, and worth loving. If you *must* lose your hearts—and I suppose it's inevitable, some day—please do me the favour of choosing two of them. I'll sleep better at night and breathe easier by day!"

CHAPTER II

The Rôle of Good Angel

Rushford waved them good-bye from the door as they sallied forth into the bright sunlight, paused a moment to look after them admiringly, and then turned slowly back into the hotel, smiling softly to himself. He sauntered through the deserted vestibule, and its emptiness struck him as it had never done before.

"Really," he said to himself, "we seem to be the only patrons the house has got. I'll have to look over my bill."

He went on to the desk and demanded his letters of the boy in resplendent uniform who presided there.

"There are none, monsieur," answered that individual, blandly.

"What!" cried Rushford, his smile vanished in an instant. "Are you sure?"

The boy answered with a shrug and a significant gesture toward the letter-rack on the wall. It was visibly, incontestably empty.

Rushford turned away in disgust.

"Those fellows at the office are assuming altogether too much responsibility," he muttered savagely, as he wandered on into the smoking-room. "I told them I didn't want to be bothered with little things, but I certainly expected to hear from them once in a while. If I don't look out, they'll reduce me to the status of a rubber stamp! I'll have to stir them up," and he gloomily extracted from the rack the newly-arrived, two-days-old London paper, brought by the little rickety train which struggled through at uncertain and infrequent intervals from Zunderburg to Weet-sur-Mer, lighted a fresh cigar, and sat down to a perusal of the news.

He proceeded in the most leisurely manner, for he knew that he had plenty of time. Indeed, the paper once finished, the remainder of the day would stretch before him an empty wilderness—a waste as monotonous and bare as the beach he had grown so weary of gazing at. So he gave careful and minute attention to every item. He was in the midst of a long and wholly uninteresting account of a charity bazaar, which the Princess of Wales had opened, and where the Duchess of Blank-Blank had made a tremendous hit and much money for a worthy cause, by selling her kisses for a guinea each, when his attention was attracted by a discreet shuffling of feet on the floor beside his chair. He looked up to see standing there the little fat Alsatian-German-French proprietor of the hotel.

"Why, hello, Pelletan," he said. "Want to speak to me?"

"Eef monsieur please," and Pelletan rubbed his chubby hands together in visible embarrassment.

"All right; sit down."

Monsieur Pelletan coughed deprecatingly and deposited his plump body on the extreme edge of a chair. It was easy to see that he was much depressed—his usually rosy cheeks hung flaccid, his mustachios drooped limply, his little black eyes were suffused and needed frequent wiping—a service performed by a hand that was none too steady.

"Eet iss a matter of pusiness, monsieur," he began, falteringly. "You haf perhaps perceive' t'at our custom hass fallen off."

Rushford glanced about the deserted smoking-room.

"No," he said; "I haven't seen any to fall off. I've been wondering how you managed to pay out."

"Ah, monsieur," cried Pelletan, wringing his hands, "t'at iss eet—I haf been paying out unt paying out until t'e las' franc iss gone. I wass at no time reech, monsieur; at t'is moment I am in ruins!"

And, indeed, he looked the part.

"You mean you'll have to shut up shop?" inquired Rushford.

"Eet preaks my heart to say eet, monsieur; but I fear eet will come to t'at, unless —"

"Unless what?" asked Rushford, eyeing him as he hesitated.

"Unless I shall pe able to interes' monsieur—"

Rushford grunted and stared out of the window at the dunes, puffing his cigar meditatively. He thought of the comfortable bed, of the admirable cuisine—he would hate to give them up. It would mean going to the other hotel, and the mere idea made him shiver. Anything but that!

His host watched him in an agony of apprehension.

"What does it cost a day to run this shebang?" asked the American at last.

Monsieur Pelletan, with feverish haste, produced a paper from his pocket.

"I haf anticipate' monsieur's question; t'is statement will show heem."

Rushford took it and glanced at the total.

"Hmmmm. Four hundred and eighty francs—say a hundred dollars."

"T'at, monsieur," explained Pelletan, "iss based upon our present custom. As pusiness increase', so do t'e expense increase."

"Of course."

"But not in t'e same ratio as t'e receipts. A full house wins so much as six hundret francs t'e tay."

"Yes," assented Rushford, "a full house is a mighty nice thing. But now you seem to be holding only a bob-tail."

"A pop-tail?"

"No matter—go ahead with the story. You say it costs you a hundred dollars a day to keep your doors open. What's the heaviest item?"

"T'e greates' item at present iss t'e chef. He iss a fery goot one—I haf feared to

let heem go."

"That was right. You'd better not let him go if you want to keep us here. How many rooms have you?"

Pelletan produced a second slip of paper.

"For t'at, also, I wass prepared, my tear Monsieur Rushford," he said. "T'e tariff of charges iss also t'ere."

Rushford looked it over with some care. Then he stared out across the sands again, the corners of his mouth twitching. Evidently the proposal appealed to his sense of humour.

"See here, Pelletan," he said, abruptly, turning back, "is there a hoodoo on the house, or what's the matter?"

"A—I peg monsieur's pardon," stammered Pelletan.

"How does it happen that the hotel over there is full and this one's empty?"

"Eet iss t'is way, monsieur," explained the Frenchman, eagerly. "For many year, long pefore t'is new part off t'e house wass puilt, we enjoyed t'e confidence unt patronage of Hiss Highness, t'e Prince of Zeit-Zeit, who spent at least two month in efery season here. While t'e Prince wass here, we were crowded—oh, to t'e smalles' room!—efen at ot'er times, we tid well, for he gafe t'e house a prestige. But last vinter he die, unt hiss heir, hiss son, despite t'e care of heem which we haf taken, t'e anxieties he hass cause' us, yet which we haf cheerfully porne—t'at ingrate hass t'e pad taste to prefer t'e ot'er house! Our ot'er customers haf followed heem—like sheep! Eet iss as t'ough we had lost our star!"

"Your star?"

"In t'e guide-book off Monsieur Karl," Pelletan explained.

"Is that such a tragedy?"

"I haf always t'ought it t'e fery worst t'at could happen," said Pelletan, "but t'is iss as pad."

It was only by a supreme effort that Rushford managed to choke back the chuckle which rose in his throat.

"Is Zeit-Zeit the little purblind, monkey-faced fellow who is wheeled around in a big red chair every day?"

"T'e fery same, monsieur—a great Highness."

Rushford made a grimace of disgust.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked. "Does he only need a bath, or is it more than skin deep?"

"Eet iss an hereditary trait, monsieur."

"Hereditary taint, you mean! You're better off without him; why, he'd infect the whole house, Pelletan."

Pelletan gazed at him aghast.

"Monsieur is choking!" he said.

"I'm in deadly earnest, but I don't expect you to understand, for you've got an hereditary taint, too, Pelletan, which shows itself principally in your spine."

Pelletan turned pale.

"I assure you, monsieur," he stammered, "I am fery—"

"No matter," broke in Rushford. "All European inn-keepers have it, and it has never been known to result fatally, so don't worry. But why did you think I'd take hold of this thing?"

"I haf heard so much," explained Pelletan, "of t'e enterprise of t'e Americans, t'at I t'ought perhaps you might—"

"Win back Zeit-Zeit? Not on your life! If he comes, I go! But I tell you what I'll do, Pelletan. I'll make you a proposition."

"Proceed, monsieur," and the other's face began to beam anticipatively.

"For one month I'll pay all the expenses of this hostelry, rent included, and allow you one hundred francs a day for your services. I take all the receipts. At the end of that time, I withdraw and leave you to your own devices. What do you say?"

Monsieur Pelletan reflected. At least, it was postponing the inevitable for a month, and in a month what may not happen? Besides, at the end of the month, he would be richer by three thousand francs.

"I accept, monsieur," he said, with fervour. "I am t'ankful a t'ousand time!"

"All right; I take possession at once. We can have a notary draw up a formal agreement. Now let's run over this schedule of prices," and he turned to Pelletan's carefully prepared statement.

"Fery well, monsieur."

"I see you have two apartments de luxe at one hundred francs a day. Hereafter they will be two hundred francs."

Pelletan gasped.

"From t'at, off course, t'ere will be a tiscount?" he stammered.

"Not a cent; not the tenth of a cent. Two hundred francs net."

"But, monsieur, efen at t'e old price, we haf always gif a tiscount! It iss only Americans who pay t'e full price. Ot'er people expec'—"

Rushford waved his hand.

"I don't care what they expect. Besides, there's going to be one hotel in Europe where Americans get a square deal. If your compatriots don't want to patronise my house, they can go to that low-down lunatic asylum across the street. By the way, what's its name?"

"T'e Grand Hôtel Splendide," answered Pelletan, glowing with delight at his companion's power of invective.

"H—m," said the latter; "the worse a hotel is, the bigger name it seems to have. But about the discount. Let me repeat for you, Pelletan, a business axiom. To

give a discount is to admit that your goods are not worth the price you ask for them, and that you're willing to cheat anybody who doesn't know enough to beat you down. All the business of Europe seems to be run in just that way, but ours won't be. Our goods are worth the price!"

"But," began Pelletan, humbly, "efen at Ostend—"

"This is not Ostend. This is Weet-sur-Mer—a place more home-like, more comfortable, preferable in every way, and with greater natural advantages than Ostend ever had or ever will have. Only a fool would go to Ostend when he could come to Weet-sur-Mer and stop at the Grand Hôtel Royal."

Pelletan rubbed his hands in delight.

"You really t'ink so, monsieur?" he murmured.

"No matter what I think. Besides, you can go back to your old schedule, if you want to, at the end of the month. But I'm fixing this new schedule to suit myself, and I don't want to be interrupted. These ordinary apartments will be thirty to forty francs, according to size. Single rooms will be ten francs. Breakfast will be four francs, dinner ten francs—in a word, we double our income without increasing our expenses. That's the secret of all high finance, my friend."

"But, monsieur," stammered Pelletan, more and more astounded, "eef t'ere iss no one to pay, what does it matter?"

"There *will* be some one to pay—leave that to me. You don't understand American enterprise, Pelletan. I'm going to astonish you. Now mind one thing—if Zeit-Zeit comes over here and wants an apartment, you're to shut him out—I won't have him in the house—not at any price!"

Pelletan grew pale at the thought.

"Refuse t'e Prince of Zeit-Zeit!" he stammered.

"Yes—if you let him in, I'll kick him out. And another thing—the service has got to be first-class—the best in Europe—nothing gaudy, you understand, but a quiet elegance that will make us talked about. Do you think you can accomplish it?"

"I vill do my pest, monsieur," promised Pelletan.

"The place, of course, I'll have to take as I find it," went on Rushford, with a glance around, "though it's littered up with gewgaws and dinkey furniture which ought to be made into a bonfire. If I had a little more time, I'd re-decorate the whole house. Those imitation marble pillars over there are an insult to the intelligence."

"T'ey haf peen t'ought fery beautiful, monsieur," murmured Pelletan, humbly.

"Yes—I've noticed that Europeans have a weakness for imitations. It's a defect of character, I suppose. But there's one thing you *can* do—and right away. Send that boy at the desk up to his room and tell him to rip all that gold braid off his coat. To look at him, you'd think he was a major-general."

Pelletan stared at his partner to see if he was in earnest.

"Oh, I know it will be a deprivation," said the American, a glint of humour in his eyes. "You can raise his wages a franc a day to make up for it."

"Fery well, monsieur," and Pelletan crossed over to the desk and gave the boy his commands. The latter dragged away up the stair with a countenance in which grief and joy struggled for the mastery. "Anyt'ing else, monsieur?" asked the Frenchman, coming back.

"No, I don't think of anything just at this moment. But you do your part and I'll do mine. Now suppose you go out and get the notary, while I work my brain a bit."

Pelletan staggered rather than walked to the door, his head in his hands, fairly overwhelmed. A moment later, Rushford saw him hurrying down the street. He got out a third cigar and settled back in his chair with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Maybe I'll get some fun out of this thing, after all," he said. "It'll offer a little diversion, anyway. Now, how shall we begin to advertise?"

"M. le Propriétaire, is he here?" inquired a voice, and Rushford looked around to see a man in resplendent uniform standing at the door.

"That's me, I reckon," he said.

"This is my first day," explained the man; "I will know monsieur hereafter. I

have a telegram," and he produced it. "Monsieur will make acknowledgment here," he added, and held out a narrow white slip of paper.

Rushford signed his name mechanically, dropped a franc into the itching palm, and waited till the messenger went out. Then he looked at the address on the envelope. It was:

Proprietor Grand Hôtel Royal, Weet-sur-Mer.

"Well," he said, "it's mine—I guess there's no question of that—I'm the proprietor—pro tem," and he tore the envelope open. A low whistle escaped him as he read the message. Then he slapped his leg and laughed. "It's a freak of the market," he cried. "A freak of the market! And it's just my luck to be in on the ground floor!"

He folded the telegram and placed it carefully in his pocket. Then he fell again into a meditation punctuated by frequent chuckles. But at the end of a very few minutes, Monsieur Pelletan was back again, with a thin little notary in tow, and the necessary papers were soon drawn up.

"You have only to sign, monsieur," said the notary, after he had finished reading them aloud, and he handed his formidable pen to Rushford.

Monsieur Pelletan rubbed his hands together nervously as the American hesitated and looked at him.

"It's not too late to draw out," remarked Rushford. "If you're not satisfied—"

"I haf no tesire to traw out, monsieur," protested Pelletan, quickly. "I am entirely satisfied!"

"I have one other condition to make," added the American.

"What iss eet, monsieur?" questioned Pelletan, looking at him apprehensively.

"You understand I'm to be a silent partner in this thing."

"**A—?**"

"A silent partner—in other words, nobody's to know I'm backing you unless I

choose to tell them—absolutely no one. Do you agree?"

"Oh, gladly, monsieur!" cried Pelletan, with a deep breath of relief. After all, is not glory the next best thing to riches?

"And your friend?"

The notary nodded a solemn promise of secrecy.

"All right," and Rushford signed. Pelletan hastily affixed his signature, and the thing was done. "Now, my friend," continued the American, "which is the swellest suite of rooms you've got in the house?"

"De luxe A," responded Pelletan. "Monsieur wishes—"

"I wish you to get it ready at once—"

"Monsieur will occupy it himself, no toubt?"

"No, I won't; I'll stay right where I am. But between seven and eight o'clock to-morrow morning, there will arrive an English ship of war—"

"A sheep-of-t'e-war!" echoed Pelletan, growing pale.

"Certainly, a ship of war, and from it there will disembark a man named Vernon and his suite of four or five people. You will give him apartment A."

Pelletan caught his breath.

"Monsieur Vernon iss, I suppose, a friend?" he stammered.

"No," said Rushford, "I've never seen him. But we'll have to treat him well. He's the head of the British foreign office, Pelletan; and one of the high nobility. Beside him, Zeit-Zeit will look like thirty cents!"

CHAPTER III

Distinguished arrivals at Weet-sur-Mer

Even at this unaccustomed hour of the morning, the beach was black with people. It was not to bathe that they had come, for a chill north wind was blowing; nor was it to promenade, for they were not promenading; indeed, it was the fashionable hour for neither of these things, and no one ever dreamed of doing them at any hour other than the fashionable one. It was rather the fashionable hour to turn painfully over in one's bed, and ring the bell, and signify that coffee and rolls would be acceptable.

This morning there had been scant time for such refreshment, or for that preliminary stretching which is so grateful to bodies wearied by late hours and too-rapid living. Instead, nearly all the sojourners at Weet-sur-Mer had arisen aching from their beds, had hurried forth to the beach, and stood there now, facing unanimously seawards, staring toward the dim horizon, only moving convulsively from time to time in the effort to keep warm. Those who had glasses used them; those who had none, strained nature's binoculars to the limit of vision. From all of which it will be seen that the notary had done his work well, and that neither had Monsieur Pelletan been backward in spreading the great news of the unparalleled occurrence which was about to happen.

"He iss to arrive between t'e hours of seven unt eight," he had announced. "Hiss Highness, pe it understood, Lord Vernon, t'e great Englishman. He comes in a special vessel—a sheep-of-t'e-war," he added with a triumphant flourish. "He could pring mit' him t'e whole nafy of England, if he wish'!" Ah, what an honour for Weet-sur-Mer! And what a blow for the Grand Hôtel Splendide across the way!

Yet Monsieur Pelletan did not in the least understand how it had come to pass; he suspected his partner of some sort of clairvoyance, of some supernatural

power of compelling events, and his admiration for him had deepened to awe. But into this question he did not permit himself to enter deeply; he was content to know that fame and prosperity were returning with a rush to the Grand Hôtel Royal. Already there had been a score of applicants for rooms; the corridors were again assuming that air of liveliness and gaiety which had characterised them in those golden days when the August Prince of Zeit-Zeit had been his annual guest. He was no longer ashamed to meet the proprietor of the Grand Hôtel Splendide face to face in the full day; he was a different person from the despairing individual of the day before; in a word, he was no longer in ruins! He had been restored, as so many ruins are, by the hand of an American!

At this moment he held the centre of the stage, and it was easy to read in his bearing the consciousness that he deserved the limelight. A strip of crimson carpet had been stretched across the sand to the very water's edge; on either side of it a dozen decorous footmen were aligned, and between them Monsieur Pelletan proudly marched, his head in air, his back very straight, preceding a big, hooded invalid's chair.

Immediately a murmur arose.

"He is ill then!"

"Why the chair?"

"He is coming to take the baths."

The murmur no doubt penetrated to the ears of the little Alsatian, but he made no sign. He was aware that the envious eyes of the proprietor of the Grand Hôtel Splendide were upon him; he would show him that here was a guest more majestic, more worthy of honour than even the Prince of Zeit-Zeit!—a Highness, in short, so extraordinary as to cause that August personage to resemble, in some incomprehensible way, the sum of one franc fifty centimes! Otherwise there would have been no carpet, for the sand was hard and dry. Otherwise, too, perhaps, Monsieur Pelletan would have been content to permit his major-domo to represent him at the water's edge, for he was not accustomed to exposing himself thus to the sharp airs of the morning. His fat red cheeks and plump nose were turning a dull purple—ah, how good would a glass of cognac taste!—but he bore this discomfort with the greatest fortitude, for, after all, an occasion such as this was worth some sacrifice.

And, be it said, his was not the only purple nose in evidence. There were many men who stared straight before them, daring to look neither to the right nor left; and many women who were thankful for the heavy veils they had had the forethought to put on. Even rouge, however cunningly applied, cannot hide certain ugly lines in the face in the clear, cruel light of the morning!

Strange how the same breeze will give to some cheeks a dull repulsiveness and to others an entrancing glow! A word to lovers: Would you test your mistress's blood and spirit, persuade her to a walk some sharp day in winter; or, if she will not be persuaded, use a little artifice. Then, after wind and frost have had their will of her for half an hour, take a look at her. Are her cheeks glowing, are her eyes bright, is she having a good time? If not, take heed!

There were four cheeks upon the beach at Weet-sur-Mer that morning glowing as I would have your true love's glow; drawing men's eyes and women's, too—the one in admiration, the other in envy. Yes, envy! though more than one shivering fair spoke a low, slurring word about "those coarse Americans!"

Both Pelletan and the notary had been careful to respect Rushford's wish that his connection with the hotel be kept to themselves; in all their boastings, rejoicings, explanations, his name had not been whispered; and not even to his daughters had that gentleman confided the secret of his plan to get the excitement he had craved so badly. He had feared, perhaps, that they would not enter thoroughly into the spirit of the thing—women, even American women, are sometimes strangely deficient in the sense of humour. But they had both been struck by their host's impressive obsequiousness—a very orgasm of servility, which Pelletan had hitherto reserved for personages of the blood royal.

"What ails the man?" Susie had asked at dinner the night before, her eyes on Monsieur Pelletan's writhing form. "He seems to have the stomach-ache."

"He is probably fishing for a tip," said Nell. "It seems to me that
I've seen those symptoms before in a less violent form."

"Don't you tip him," commanded their father. "I'll attend to all that," and he beckoned to Pelletan with his finger and whispered a rapid sentence in his ear.

"What did you say to him, dad?" inquired Sue, gazing in some astonishment after their host's retreating coat-tails.

"I told him to go 'way back and sit down," answered Rushford, going calmly on with his meal.

"Dad, is it true that Lord Vernon is to arrive to-morrow morning?"

"I suppose so."

"In a ship of war?"

"Yes—I've heard that, too."

"You'll take us down to the beach, won't you, dad?"

"What! A free-born American citizen go toadying after the English aristocracy!"

"But we'll need a cicérone, dad."

"What for, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, what are cicérones always for? To get us a good place, to be sure!"

So here he was, in the forefront of the crowd, with his womenkind beside him, and no doubt the discerning reader has already guessed that it was to their cheeks I referred some pages back. There were many grandes dames upon the beach that morning—some the real thing, a little plain, a little faded, rather touching to look upon—others, for the most part articles de Paris, very tall and plump and even handsome, if one likes the gorgeous type, with gowns created by the great costumers and paid for heaven knows how! But I always think with a little warmth of pride and admiration of those two American girls standing there, wind-blown and radiant. Coarse, madame! Ah, what would you not give for a little of that coarseness! After all, freshness is a woman's greatest charm, as you very well know, madame, though you try your best to think otherwise; and, alas, you are fast losing yours! For, as you have found—as untold thousands have found before you, and will yet find—one can't squander one's youth and keep it, too! Aye, more than that. The sins of the night stare at one from one's glass on the morrow, and will not be massaged away. Take your baths, madame, in milk, or wine, or perfumed water; summon your masseuse, your beauty-doctor. Let them rub you and knead you and pinch you, coat you with cold cream or grease you with oil of olives. Redden cheeks and lips, whiten hands and shoulders, polish nails, pencil eyebrows, squeeze in the waist, pad out the hips—swallow, at

the last, that little tablet which you slip from the jewelled case at your wrist. It is all in vain. You deceive no man nor woman. They look into your eyes and smile, but behind the smile there is a shudder!

Nell and Susie Rushford, with the wind playing in their hair and kissing their cheeks, that morning, were miracles of freshness; two divine messages, two phantoms of delight, sent from the New World to the Old.

> And one was dark, with tints of violet
> In hair and eyes, and one was blond as she
> Who rose—a second daybreak—from the sea,
> Gold-tressed and azure-eyed.

Nell, the elder, was tall and fair, like her father, rather sedate, with not quite the sparkle of Susie, two years her junior, the counterpart of the little mother whom she had never seen. And both were erect and bright-eyed as only American girls seem to know completely how to be; visibly healthy, happy, and pure-minded. I should like to pause and look at them a moment longer, for I have always been a little in love with them myself; I should like to add to the verses of our own dear poet certain lines of Wordsworth, of Burns, of Byron—but you, dear reader, will recall them readily, especially if you belong, as I hope you do, to the great and glorious fraternity of true lovers; if your heart burns and your pulses leap at mention of a certain name, at sight of a dear face—

There came a sudden hum of excitement from the crowd.

"Look, look!" cried Susie. "There it is!" and she clapped her glasses to her eyes again.

Far out against the horizon appeared a smudge of smoke, which grew and spread until those with glasses could perceive beneath it the low, dark lines of a man-of-war. It was true then! Some had permitted themselves to doubt the story spread so industriously by Monsieur Pelletan and his friend, the notary—the proprietor of the Grand Hôtel Splendide had counselled scepticism. Now they could doubt no longer, and they drew a deep breath. A ship of war at Weet-sur-Mer!

Straight toward the beach she steamed, looming larger and ever larger; then her speed slackened, slackened, until at last she lay rolling quietly a quarter of a mile off-shore. A shrill piping came over the water as the crew was mustered amidships and the boarding-stairs lowered.

"Well, he *must* be a swell!" said Sue, "or they wouldn't take all that trouble. There goes the boat."

And splash it went into the water, the crew tumbled in, and two men slowly helped another down the stairs, while the crew stood at attention. Some baggage was lowered, then the oars dipped together and a little spurt of foam appeared under the bow.

"Why, it's like a moving-picture machine!" cried Susie, with a little gasp of enjoyment. "Or a comic opera!" she added, wrestling with her glasses to get them focussed on the moving boat. "The hero's sitting in the stern," she announced. "He's all wrapped up and there's another man holding him. I can't see anything of him but his eyes, for he's got a handkerchief or something over the lower part of his face. He must be awfully ill, poor fellow!"

"Probably got the grip," observed her father, practically. "Wants to keep out the damp air. I think he'd be better off at home in bed."

"Oh, but then," protested Nell—

"Then we shouldn't have this show," said her father, and laughed grimly at the thought that neither would fortune have smiled so promptly on the Grand Hôtel Royal.

The oars flashed suddenly upright; two men sprang from the bow, with a fine disregard of a wetting, and pulled the boat far in. Then the bemuffled figure was lifted tenderly and carried to the waiting chair, where Monsieur Pelletan was bowing with his head almost touching the carpet. The invalid was started toward the hotel without delay, three men accompanying him, under the leadership of Pelletan; the baggage was heaped on the beach and taken in charge by the hotel porters. A moment later the boat shoved off.

A few waited to watch it make its way back to the ship, which immediately steamed away toward the horizon; others followed the procession headed by the invalid's chair; still others hurried ahead to confer their patronage upon the Grand Hôtel Royal; but the greater part hastened back to their rooms to get something hot and bracing. From one end to the other, the place was a-buzz with wagging tongues. Why should the foreign secretary of the British Empire have chosen Weet-sur-Mer as his abiding place? Merely because he was ill and wished to rest? Bah! To believe that would be to show a mind the most

credulous, would be to evince an ignorance of high diplomacy the most profound. Again, why should he have made the journey from England in a ship of war? Depend upon it, there was a mystery here; a mystery not to be solved in a moment even by such eminent amateurs as those assembled at Weet-sur-Mer. It would take time—it would take study. But it was worth it! There was something behind all this-something more than appeared on the surface —in a word, a Plot! And the best place to study it,—the only place, indeed,—was the Grand Hôtel Royal.

So, instantly, there was a great packing of luggage, a despatching of couriers, an engaging of rooms, a settling of bills which drove the proprietor of the Splendide half mad with chagrin. He protested, he swore, he offered concessions the most unheard of—all in vain. His day was over!

Rushford, his work as cicérone des dames accomplished, returned leisurely to the hotel, while the girls started for their accustomed walk. He smiled grimly to himself as he entered the office, the scene was so different from that of yesterday. For the moment, all was excitement. Monsieur Pelletan and his assistants were busy attending to the wants of their distinguished guest; down in the kitchen, the chef was cursing the stupidity of the unfortunate menials under him and striving madly to prove himself worthy the occasion—the greatest of his life! Every moment, a porter toiled up to the door with a load of luggage; every moment some one arrived demanding a room—and not one murmured at the tariff! The lift groaned and creaked under the unaccustomed weights put upon it and moved more slowly than ever. Pelletan, as he hurried past, mopping his perspiring brow, had time only for a single glance at his good angel—but what a glance! Such a glance, no doubt, Columbus caught from his lieutenants at the cry of "Land Ho!"

Rushford, leaning over the desk, watching the confusion with an amusement which had banished every trace of ennui, felt his arm touched. He turned and recognised the be-gilt messenger of the day before.

"A second telegram for monsieur," said that functionary, with an amiable grin, and produced the message.

There was no time for hesitation. Rushford took it, signed the blank, and fished up the expected tip.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave!" he murmured, and looked at the address on the little white envelope. It read:

_M. le Propriétaire,

Grand Hôtel Royal,

Weet-sur-Mer._

"The plot thickens!" he murmured. "Well, it's really for me. Let's see," and he tore it open. He whistled again as he read the message; then he called the nearest boy. "Tell Monsieur Pelletan to come here at once," he said. "Tell him I must speak to him on a matter of importance."

At the end of a moment, the little man puffed down the stair, exhausted, radiant!

"Iss eet not grand!" he cried. "What a change from yesterday! T'ough how you haf accomplishe' eet, monsieur—"

"No matter," interrupted Rushford. "Which is the next best of your apartments, Pelletan?"

"T'e nex' best? Why, apartment B, monsieur. Eet iss t'e counterpart of apartment A, only on t'e nort' side of t'e house instead of t'e sout'."

"And it is still empty?"

"At two hundret francs t'e tay? Oh, yess, monsieur; only a Prince can afford eet now."

"Well, you will prepare it at once—"

"Ah, monsieur himself will take eet! T'at iss just! I shall pe too happy—"

"No, no; you've just said that only a Prince can afford it and it's my business to produce him! Let's see—it's nearly nine—well, at ten o'clock, there will arrive in a special train—"

Monsieur Pelletan had turned pale.

"Een a special train?" he faltered. "What! Some one else?"

"Yes—at ten o'clock—"

"Who iss eet will arrive, monsieur?" questioned Pelletan faintly.

"His Highness, Prince Frederick of Markeld, ambassador from the court of Schloshold-Markheim," answered Rushford, dwelling upon every word. "We will give him apartment B."

CHAPTER IV

An Adventure and a Rescue

It was not until Rushford opened his paper an hour later that he fully understood the remarkable situation of which the Grand Hôtel Royal had, by the merest chance, become the centre.

"It is extremely unfortunate [said the *Times*] that Lord Vernon should have been taken ill at just this time, when the question of the succession of Schloshold-Markheim is hanging in the balance. Lord Vernon is the only man in the cabinet capable of dealing with the situation, which is as delicate as can be imagined. On the one side are arrayed the sympathies of our reigning house and perhaps even our own honour; on the other, the plainly expressed desires of the German Emperor.

"The late Prince Christian left no direct heirs, so that, in any event, the succession must be through a collateral branch. The claims of the rivals, Prince George, of Schloshold, and Prince Ferdinand, of Markheim, are therefore evenly balanced. On one side of the scale, however, the German Emperor has thrown the weight of his influence. On the other side is the moral influence of practically all the rest of Europe, but this will scarcely be of any value to Prince Ferdinand unless he can enlist the active support of Great Britain, which, it may be, Lord Vernon, though reluctant to withhold, will find impossible to give. It is not to be denied that, from a disinterested view-point, Prince Ferdinand seems by far the more worthy of the two claimants.

"Lord Vernon is suffering with a very severe attack of influenza, which has been developing for some days, and which has, at last, become so serious that his physicians have commanded a complete rest for a week or ten days. One may well conceive Lord Vernon's reluctance to heed this advice, but he has

very wisely decided to do so. The little seaside resort of Weet-sur-Mer, on the Dutch coast, has been selected as the place for his sojourn, and he will be taken there to-morrow on H. M. S. *Dauntless*. Sir John Scaddam, his physician, and two of his secretaries, Mr. Arthur Collins and Mr. George Blake, will accompany him, although work of any kind has been absolutely forbidden him for at least a week. It is believed that the bracing atmosphere of Weet-sur-Mer will effect a cure in that time.

"Weet-sur-Mer is comparatively little known, at least in England. It is really the old Dutch fishing-village of Weet-zurlindenhofen; but a number of years ago it was exploited as a watering-place and re-christened Weet-sur-Mer by some enthusiast more anxious to advertise the fact that one may bathe there than to observe the rules of etymology. It is rather out of the way, and the route by rail is so circuitous and uncertain that it was judged best to spare Lord Vernon the fatigue of such a journey by conveying him directly thither upon the *Dauntless*. He hopes to find there a quiet and seclusion which would be impossible at any of the larger resorts.

"We understand that Prince George is with the German Emperor at Berlin, and that Prince Ferdinand, who is at Markheim, has commissioned his cousin, Prince Frederick, of Markeld, to place his claims before our foreign office. His reception at this time can hardly fail to cause acute embarrassment."

There was a half-column more of comment and veiled suggestion that perhaps the wisest course for the foreign office to pursue, now that Lord Vernon's guiding hand was for the moment withdrawn, would be to let affairs take their course; though it was difficult to see how this could consistently be done if Prince Frederick succeeded in gaining a formal audience and placing his case before the government. Already, it seemed, the jingo papers were taunting the administration with undue truckling to the wishes of Germany, with a lack of stamina and backbone in short—with something like treachery toward Prince Ferdinand and treason toward the royal family, with which the Prince was distantly allied.

Rushford gave a long whistle of astonishment; then he laid the paper on his knees and stared thoughtfully out across the sands for some minutes.

"Of course, Markeld has followed Vernon here," he said, at last. "I rather admire

his pluck. And I'd like to be present at the interview—it'll be interesting. Why, hello, Pelletan," he added, as the latter approached him humbly, as a slave approaches the Sultan. "Want to speak to me?" "Eef monsieur please," answered the little Frenchman, who was plainly labouring under deep excitement.

"All right; what is it?"

"Wass monsieur serious in hees command t'at I exclude t'e Prince of Zeit-Zeit?"

"Never more serious in my life. He's barred! We take only human beings—not monstrosities. Has he applied?"

"Yess, monsieur; he tesires hees old apartment."

"Which was that?"

"Apartment A, monsieur; he hass always had t'e pest in t'e house when he come here mit' hees fat'er."

"Well, apartment A's already taken; even if it were empty, he shouldn't have it. Where's your nerve, Pelletan—here's your chance for revenge!"

"But to refuse a Prince!" murmured Pelletan. "Eet iss somet'ing unheard of!"

"It will make you famous! It's a big ad for the house! 'The Grand Hôtel Royal refuses to receive the Prince of Zeit-Zeit.' Think what a stir that will make! Besides, you have no choice—I require it!"

"Fery well, monsieur," agreed Pelletan, with a gesture of despairing obedience. "T'ere iss one t'ing more—I haf an idea."

"That's good; let's have it," said Rushford, encouragingly. "There's nothing like ideas."

"Monsieur will remember," began Pelletan, in a voice carefully lowered, "t'at we agreed to touble t'e price of entertainment."

"Yes—what of it? Anybody been kicking?"

"No—au contraire, monsieur—t'e house iss full—efery leetle room."

"You see you don't need Zeit-Zeit; it's quite like the old times, isn't it?"

"Yess—only petter, monsieur; far petter. Oh, eet iss wunderschön!"

"Well, go ahead; what's the idea?"

"Since t'e house iss full," said Pelletan, impressively, "and t'ere are many more asking for rooms—oh, temanding t'em—t'e Prince among t'e number!—why may not we again touble t'e price?" and he leaned back in his chair, looking triumphantly at his partner. But his face fell as the latter shook his head. "No?" he asked. "Eet will not do?"

"No," said Rushford, slowly; "I'm afraid it won't do. You see it would be a kind of ex post facto proceeding—"

"A—I ton't quite comprehen', monsieur."

"No matter—trust me—see what's happened since yesterday," and he waved his hand at the busy corridor.

"Oh, eet iss kolossal!" cried Pelletan. "I shall nefer cease to atmire monsieur. Perhaps," he suggested timidly, "since he hass peen so successful, monsieur may pe tempted to remain permanently. Surely he would pe one great success! In a year—two year—we would eclipse Ostend—monsieur himself hass said eet!"

"No," laughed the other, "I don't think I'd care to remain. Though, of course," he added, "the possibility of great success is always fascinating."

"Oh, eet iss more t'an a possibility," cried Pelletan. "Eet is a certainty."

"A certainty is not so fascinating as a possibility," the American pointed out, his eyes twinkling.

"Unt t'en," continued Pelletan, persuasively, fancying, no doubt, that he saw some signs of yielding in his partner's face, "eef monsieur remains, he can haf t'e house done ofer to suit heem; he can t'row away t'e furniture he does not like; he can paint out t'e marble columns; he can cause all t'e servants to pe tressed to hees taste. He would make one grand sensation! T'e house would pe t'e talk of

Europe, tint we would soon pe reech—oh, reech!" and the little Frenchman stretched his arms wide to indicate the vast extent of the wealth that was awaiting them.

But Rushford shook his head.

"No, Pelletan," he said; "no, I really can't do it. It's utterly impossible, or your impassioned eloquence would certainly prevail. There's nothing I'd like better than to show the hotel-keepers of Europe a thing or two—they are more conceited with less reason for being so than any other class of men I know. But I've got to go back to America before long to look after my business there. Besides, I don't really feel that hotel-keeping is my lifework. I'm afraid it would pall upon me after a time. But I tell you what I'll do, if you wish, Pelletan. I'll tear up the agreement and say no more about it. You may have all the profits."

"Oh!" cried the Frenchman, dazzled by this munificence, by the golden vision which danced before his eyes. Then he hesitated. With his partner's marvellous influence withdrawn, might not the whole wonderful structure come tumbling about his ears? It would be like pulling out the foundation! What would prevent his guests from packing up and leaving to-morrow? "No, monsieur," he said, slowly, at last, "I prefer eet as eet iss."

"Very well," and Rushford laughed again; it was not the first time his partners in business had been afraid to do without him! "Let it be that way, then. Have you got that agreement with you?"

"Yess, monsieur; eet iss here," and he produced it from an inner pocket.

"Let me have it a minute."

Pelletan gave it to him with trembling hand. His partner opened it, got out his fountain-pen, and changed a word in the contract.

"There," he said, "that's more fair, Pelletan."

Pelletan paled as he looked at the paper and his eyes grew misty. Instead of one hundred francs daily, he would receive two hundred. Ah, these magnificent Americans!

The interview to which the *Times* looked forward with so much apprehension

was, it seemed, indefinitely postponed. The Prince of Markeld had, indeed, immediately upon his arrival, caused his presence to be formally announced to Lord Vernon, but the latter had responded that he was, for the present, under the orders of his physician, who forbade him to see any one or to transact business of any kind. Whereat the Prince had twisted his mustachios fiercely (with an accompaniment, no doubt, of sub voce profanity) and had proceeded to amuse himself until luncheon with an exceedingly ugly bulldog he had brought with him.

He had luncheon in his apartment, smoked a cigarette or two, despatched a telegram describing the state of affairs to Prince Ferdinand, and then, looking from his window and perceiving that all the world was abroad, prepared for a walk along the beach. At the door, he happened to look back and caught his dog's eyes fixed wistfully upon him.

"Ah, Jax, old boy," he said, "it is unfair to leave you shut up here with only Glück for company. Like to come along?"

Jax wriggled his delight.

"And you'll behave yourself?"

Jax promised as clearly as a dog could.

"Very well, then," and the Prince went down the stair, with Jax, half-delirious with joy, behind him.

Now the Prince was a very good-looking fellow, erect and clean, as German noblemen have a way of being—besides, he was a Prince, a commander of favours from the world and women, not a mere suitor for them as most poor mortals are—and more than one pair of eyes gazed at him languishingly from under pencilled brows as he strolled moodily along the beach, golden yellow in the sunlight; more than one crimson mouth shaped itself to an entrancing smile; more than one sullied heart beat high at thought of a brilliant future.

But on this occasion, none of the sirens won an answering glance, for the Prince was in no mood for flirtation—and, besides, he was used to sirens. So he strolled on, deep in thought. This affair of state, which rested upon his shoulders, promised to go badly; if Lord Vernon persisted in his refusal to see him, he was checkmated at the start, before he had opportunity to make a move. Delay meant

ruin, and his cousin had trusted everything to him. He knew very well that the Emperor would not delay; that he would use every minute to strengthen his position; that he would compel events, not dance attendance on them. He, the Prince, must see Lord Vernon at any cost; he must demand an audience; he must appeal to his patriotism, his sense of honour, the love of fair play which every Englishman possesses; he must make refusal impossible—

He paused and looked up, conscious of a sudden commotion on the beach just ahead of him. Then he saw his dog dancing frantically about a young lady who held in her arms a little white spaniel, which she had evidently just snatched up from annihilation.

Markeld started forward with a leap, but at that instant a tall figure emerged from a hooded chair nearby, and with a quick and well-directed kick, sent the dog spinning.

"Oh, thank you!" cried Susie Rushford, looking up into a very handsome face.

"It was my great good fortune," said the stranger, bowing, "to be of service to a compatriot."

"Oh, you are an American?"

"No; an Englishman; but at least we speak the same language! I don't know the word for it"

"Neither do I—compatriot will do. You were just in time!"

"And you did it very neatly," added Nell, admiringly, glancing at the discomfited Jax, who was looking about him dazedly.

"Thank you," and the stranger, checking the words which were evidently upon his lips, bowed again, turned quickly back to his chair, buried himself in its recesses, and retired behind a newspaper.

"Well!" gasped Sue, meeting her sister's astonished eyes, "I must say—"

But what she must have said will remain forever a mystery, for just then the Prince of Markeld came hurrying up.

"I hope there is no damage," he said, speaking with just the slightest accent. "He is my dog," he added, seeing their questioning glance. "I am very sorry. I was a little preoccupied and was not noticing him. He is usually a very good dog. I cannot understand why he should have attacked yours."

"He isn't mine," laughed Susie, patting the spaniel upon his silky head; "he just ran to me for refuge."

"Evidently a most intelligent dog," observed the Prince, gravely.

"You think so?" asked Susie, her colour deepening just the faintest bit. "Ah, here is the owner, now," she added, as a little faded old woman came panting up.

"Oh, thank you, mademoiselle!" cried the newcomer, snatching the dog from Susie's arms. "Thank you! He was a bad boy—he run away!" and she held him close against her heart.

"It was nothing," protested Susie. "I am very glad I happened to be just here. Though I don't suppose that either I or the dog was in danger of being eaten," she added to Markeld, as the little old woman trotted tremulously away. "Your dog doesn't look especially ferocious."

"Still, I beg a thousand pardons," repeated the Prince. "I should have kept my eye on him. Come here, Jax," he called, "and make your apologies to the ladies."

Jax crawled up very humbly and Susie stooped and patted his head.

"Poor Jax," she said. "It wasn't your fault, I know. I'm sure that little spaniel insulted you!"

Jax licked her hand gratefully, and the Prince looked on with an admiration he did not attempt to conceal.

"Would you like him?" he asked, eagerly.

Susie started up with crimsoning cheeks.

"No, thank you," she said, and taking her sister's arm, she walked on, chin in air.

The Prince gazed after her, wide-eyed, for a moment, then turned resolutely and

continued on his way.

"Well," began Nell, at the end of a minute, "he quite took my breath away!"

"Which he?" queried Sue.

"Both of them; but the first especially. That kick bespoke football training."

"And he has evidently kept in condition," added Sue. "The owner of the dog wasn't a bad-looking fellow, either—interesting, too, I haven't a doubt, and I do like interesting people! But the nerve of him—offering me his dog! I'm afraid we need a chaperon, after all, my dear."

"Yes," agreed Nell, "perhaps we do. But it would be an awful bother."

They walked on to the end of the beach, then mounted to the Digue and strolled slowly back toward the hotel, enjoying the breeze, the colour, the sunshine, the strange and varied life of the place.

Stretching along the landward side of the dyke stood a row of little houses, green and pink and white, with tile roofs mounting steeply upward, their red surfaces broken by innumerable dormers. These had once been the homes of honest and industrious fishermen, but time had changed all that. They had been remodelled to suit the demands of business, and every house had now on the lower floor an expensive little shop with monsieur sitting complacently at the door and madame, fat and voluble, at the money-drawer, and on the floor above, a still more expensive suite of rooms to let—rooms panelled in white and gold, resplendent with rococo mouldings, and crowded with abominable furniture, intended to be coquettish—gilt chairs, scalloped tables, embroidered lambrequins, ottomans smothered in plush and fringe, beds draped with curtains until they were all but air-tight—in effect more French than France.

Here and there between the houses, a glimpse might be had of the low country beyond, with its sluggish canal choked with rushes, a dingy windmill here and there, and stretching away on either side the flat meadows crinkling with yellow grain, and the green pastures dotted with huge black-and-white cattle. A narrow road, straight as a line in Euclid, and bordered by a row of trees each the counterpart of all the others, mounted toward the horizon, leading, principally, to a low, yellow house about a mile away, displaying above its door the appropriate motto, "Lust en Rust." There, either in the cool, vine-shaded garden, in the long,

low-ceilinged dining-room, or in some smaller and more ornate apartment, one might breakfast, dine, what not, in the fashion of the country—which, for the most part, meant the drinking of a muddy liquid with an unpronounceable name and the eating of wafelen and poffertjes, and of little cheeses calculated to appal the strongest stomach.

The shops and the landscape—the cosmopolitan crowd with its Babel of many tongues—the great hotels, built of stucco in the nouveau-riche style so rasping to sensitive nerves—the striped awnings, the low balconies, the gaudy house-fronts—all these our heroines looked at and commented on and revelled in with the joy of fresh and unspoiled youth. It was life they were tasting—strange, interesting, intoxicating life—and they drank deep of it.

As they neared the hotel entrance, they saw coming from the other direction, pushed by two men, an invalid chair. They stood aside to let it pass, and its occupant, carefully wrapped in a great steamer-rug, glanced up at them with a quizzical light in his eyes.

They shrank back together against the wall with a simultaneous gasp of dismay, for the invalid was their athletic rescuer of an hour before.

The chair went on to the desk, where it paused, while its occupant wrote a hasty sentence on a slip of paper, which he tore from his notebook. A moment later, it was presented to Susie by one of his attendants. She took it mechanically, and, with a low bow, the messenger hurried back to the chair.

"What in the world," she began dazedly; then she unfolded the paper and read:

"Lord Vernon will be deeply grateful if he is not mentioned in connection with today's adventure."

CHAPTER V

Tellier Takes a Hand

The Prince continued his walk to the limits of the beach, with Jax trotting humbly at his heels; then he returned slowly to the hotel and mounted to his apartment.

"That will do, Glück," he said, as he gave him his hat and gloves.
"Don't let me be disturbed."

And Glück, with his imperturbable mahogany face, silently withdrew to mount guard without the door.

The Prince sat down, lighted a cigarette, and stared moodily out of the window, down upon the shifting crowd which still thronged the beach. His hand, hanging inert by his side, became suddenly the receptacle for a moist nose.

"Ah, Jax; and did she pat you on the head, old boy?" he asked. "And are you properly proud?"

Jax wiggled his remnant of a tail.

"Would you like to belong to her, Jax, and get patted every day? Yet she wouldn't take you—snapped me off short as that stump of yours when I offered you to her. Why was that, Jax?"

Jax couldn't say, not being familiar with the ways of fair Americans, and the Prince patted him softly on his nobbly crown.

"Just the same, she was a beauty, Jax; slim, straight, full of fire—a thoroughbred; and with a sense of humour, my dear, which you will find in not many women.

Did you notice her cheeks, Jax, and her eyes? But of course not; you were very properly grovelling before her. And I owe you eternal gratitude, old boy; but for you, I'd have stalked past without seeing her. That would have been a pity, wouldn't it?"

There was a knock at the door and Glück's head appeared.

"I thought I told you," began the Prince—

"Your Highness will pardon me," explained Glück, quickly, "but there is a man here who insists that Your Highness will see him."

"Who is he?"

"This is his card, Your Highness," and Glück entered the room. "I have sent it back once, saying that Your Highness was not to be disturbed. He returned it, insisting—"

Markeld took the card, glanced at it, and read:

"M. André Tellier, Paris. Agent du Service de Sûreté"

Beneath this was a pencilled line—"Concerning the question of the succession."

The Prince stared at it a moment in some astonishment, not unmixed with irritation. What could this fellow know concerning the succession? It was most probably simply an impertinence. The Paris police were famous for impertinences.

Glück started for the door; since his master's boyhood, he had watched over him, attended him—he could read his countenance like an open book. The Prince glanced up.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"I go to tell the imbecile that Your Highness will not see him," responded Glück, impassively, his hand on the knob.

The Prince smiled. He had a great fondness for his old retainer.

"Wait," he said. "We must not permit ourselves to be governed by first impressions, nor swayed by prejudice. It is just possible that this fellow has something to tell me which I ought to hear. I can't afford to disregard any chance. So inform M. Tellier that I will see him," and he lighted a fresh cigarette resignedly.

As he watched the smoke turn gray in the sunlight, it suddenly occurred to him that, in some unaccountable manner, the question of the succession had receded somewhat into the background; it no longer seemed to him of such overwhelming consequence; at least, he had not been thinking of it a moment before, but of something very different—

There appeared at the door a figure which drew a stare of surprise from Markeld, accustomed as he was to eccentric habiliment. It was arrayed in a long, mouse-gray frock coat and shiny black trousers; a hand gloved in lavender kid carried a top hat, while the other caressed, from time to time, the carefully-waxed mustachios and imperial adorning a countenance which was a singular mixture of craft and vanity. The little eyes were half-concealed under drooping, baggy lids, the nose was long and sharp, the lips very thin and severe, though at this moment parted in a smile meant to be ingratiating. The figure entered and bowed profoundly, disclosing Glück's disgusted face in the doorway.

"Monsieur Tellier?" asked the Prince.

Tellier bowed again, and the Prince noticed the white line of scalp leading, with geometrical precision, from the brow to the bald spot on the crown, and then on down the back of the head. It reminded him, somehow, of the Lake of Constance, with the Rhine flowing through it.

"You have something to communicate?" he continued, repressing a smile.

"Something of the first importance, Your Highness," said the Frenchman; "otherwise I should not have taken the liberty of disturbing Your Highness."

"Very well," and the Prince motioned him to a chair. "Sit down. I shall be glad to hear you."

"It is something," said the Frenchman, with a glance at the open door, "which should be communicated, if Your Highness please, in confidence."

"Glück, shut the door," commanded the Prince. "Now, my dear sir, proceed."

"Your Highness is, of course, aware," began the detective, sitting down with a back very straight, and drooping his lids until his eyes were almost closed, "that France is deeply interested in this question of the succession, and that its sympathies are wholly with Prince Ferdinand, the cousin of Your Highness, and whom, I understand, Your Highness represents."

Markeld nodded.

"We should naturally expect France's sympathy," he said.

"France," proclaimed Tellier, raising his chin proudly, "is always on the side of justice and decency."

"More especially," continued the Prince, drily, "when the Emperor of Germany happens to be on the other side. Come now, confess—if the Emperor were for us, you would be against us—is it not so?"

Tellier permitted the faintest shadow of a smile to flicker across his lips.

"Your Highness speaks with a bluntness disconcerting," he said, deprecatingly.

"I wished merely to clear the air," said the Prince, "and to prick at the outset the bubble with which you were trying to dazzle me. Let me assure you that we thoroughly understand France's attitude in this matter. She is on our side simply because she sees an opportunity of humiliating, through us, an old enemy."

"'At least," said Tellier, "Your Highness agrees that we are on your side—the reasons for this attitude do not concern me. I only know that we are anxious to do all we can to help Your Highnesses cause. Consequently, when it was learned that Lord Vernon was coming to this place, the Department of State, fearing some duplicity, asked that a competent man be sent here to—to—"

"Keep an eye out for developments," said the Prince, seeing that the other hesitated for a word, "and to watch for an opportunity of forcing England's hand."

"Precisely, Your Highness; and my superiors did me the honour of selecting me for this delicate task."

"A wise choice, I do not doubt," said the Prince, gravely. That Tellier had any important revelation to make he did not in the least believe; but there seemed a chance of extracting some amusement from the situation—and time was hanging heavily on his hands—would hang heavily until the hour of the promenade to-morrow.

"I hope to prove it so, Your Highness!" cried the detective, flushing with pleasure at the compliment. "In fact, I think that I may say I have already proved it so!"

"Ah!" said the Prince, and lighted another cigarette.

"I arrived soon after Your Highness; I took a wagon from Zunderburg, rather than lose precious time by waiting for the train of this afternoon. I was very weary, for the journey from Paris is a trying one; but before seeking repose, indeed without even permitting myself to think of my own fatigue, I ascertained that Lord Vernon occupied apartment A de luxe, and Your Highness apartment B de luxe, in this hotel."

"Indeed!" said the Prince.

"I naturally took care at once to secure a room here, since it was of the first importance that I should be in a position to see everything that might occur."

"Naturally," agreed the Prince.

"Though it was very difficult, since every room was taken. For another man, it would have been impossible."

"But for you, I see, nothing is impossible," observed the Prince.

"Very few things, Your Highness," agreed Tellier, modestly. "In this case I had but to speak a single word," and he paused with an air of triumph.

"Wonderful!" cried the Prince, and clapped his hands softly. "Some day I must get you to teach me that word. It must be very useful. Well, what next?"

"An hour's rest," Tellier continued, "and I was myself again. I soon made the acquaintance of a chamber-maid—a girl who keeps her eyes open—and I learned many things—"

"It was not to tell me them that you came here, I trust," interposed the Prince. "I care little for backstairs gossip."

"Oh, not at all! As Your Highness says, they would, most probably, not interest you. But to one in my profession, no fact is uninteresting; no occurrence is too trivial to be noticed."

"Well, get on to your story, then," said the Prince, with some impatience.

"Just after luncheon today, Your Highness walked on the beach," said Tellier, "accompanied by the dog yonder."

Jax growled softly as he caught the Frenchman's eye, which pleased him no more than it had Glück.

"That is true," agreed the Prince. "What of it?"

"The dog attacked a small spaniel, which sought refuge with two ladies, one of whom picked it up."

"All ancient history, I assure you, Monsieur Tellier. Yet, wait a moment. Do you happen to know who the ladies were?"

"They are sisters," said Tellier. "Their name is Rushford; their father is a tall American, who incessantly smokes a cigar and reads a newspaper in the office of the hotel. If Your Highness wishes, I can make further inquiries."

"Not at all!" cried the Prince, violently. "I won't countenance such impertinence! Go on with the story."

Tellier bowed to indicate the most implicit obedience.

"It happened that I was near by," he said, "at the moment of the encounter. I had taken my stand near a large beach-chair, which, for reasons, interested me. I was nonchalant, impassive; alert, without seeming to be so. Many of the women passing I had met upon the boulevards under circumstances the most peculiar; concerning many of the men I knew more than they would wish the world to know. Seeing me standing there, some of them turned pale, others grew red with emotion. Some went by endeavouring to appear not to have seen me; others threw me appealing glances. Never, by the quiver of a lash, did I show that I

recognised them. I stood and waited—like the Sphinx."

"For what?" inquired the Prince, whose sense of humour had returned to him.

"For the dénouement, Your Highness. I knew that, sooner or later, it would come. I knew it could not escape me, Tellier—the evidence of duplicity which I was seeking."

"But," objected the Prince, "what duplicity can there be? If Lord Vernon is ill—"

"Your Highness will pardon me for interrupting; but much depends upon that 'if.' If, on the other hand, the illness is only for the moment assumed—"

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Markeld. "What reason could he have for assuming illness? That would be childish!"

The Frenchman smiled a self-satisfied smile, as he softly caressed his imperial, and his little eyes glowed with anticipated triumph.

"Let us deal with the facts first, if Your Highness will permit, and with reasons afterwards. I was, then, standing by the chair in the attitude which I have described, when your dog appeared and attacked the spaniel. As the young lady stooped and picked it up, your dog sprang against her, frightening her so that she cried aloud."

"And you stood by without offering to assist her?" demanded the Prince, with some indignation.

"There was no need, Your Highness," responded Tellier, easily. "In the first place, she was, of course, in no real danger. In the second place, I perceived instantly that fate was playing into my hands. In fact, the incident could not have been more à propos if it had been arranged by my guardian angel. For from the chair beside which I was stationed a man sprang out and kicked the dog away. Your Highness must have remarked his agility and strength—may even have seen his face."

"No," said the Prince. "I was not near enough to see it distinctly."

"I saw it, Your Highness, very distinctly, and I assure you that it was that of a man in the full enjoyment of health. Even from his agility, Your Highness could

doubtless judge whether the man was seriously ill."

The Prince hitched about in his chair a little impatiently. He was beginning to find the Frenchman tedious.

"Most certainly he was not seriously ill," he agreed; "nor, I should say, even slightly so. What is that to me? Pray have done with this mystery!"

Tellier's face was glowing with all a Frenchman's pride in a coup de théâtre—his moment of triumph had arrived.

"Of all the eyes which witnessed that episode, seemingly so slight and so unimportant," he said, proudly, "mine were the only ones which saw its full significance. Your Highness will, no doubt, be surprised when I inform you that this gentleman, so agile and so athletic, was no other than Lord Vernon!"

CHAPTER VI

The Path Grows Crooked

In the sitting-room of apartment A, in the south wing of the Grand Hôtel Royal, Lord Vernon was tramping nervously up and down while his companions regarded him with evident anxiety.

"I tell you fellows," he was saying, "it can't be kept up—I thought so from the first, but all the rest of you seemed to think it would be so infernally easy that I was ashamed to say anything. I knew something was sure to happen to give us away, and something has happened. What was I to do? Sit there like a mummy and allow that dog to frighten those girls to death? What the deuce are you laughing at, Collins?"

"I'm laughing at your tragic tone. No, you couldn't have sat still—though I don't suppose the young ladies were in any serious danger. They were pretty, no doubt?"

"Ah!" said Vernon, with a mental smacking of the lips at the entrancing picture the words called up.

"That, of course, made it doubly impossible to sit still. Did they know you?"

"Oh, no; never saw me before; hadn't the slightest suspicion that they were talking to such a famous personage. They said they were Americans."

"Then I don't see that any harm has been done."

"Unfortunately, when I was coming back, all bundled up in my chair, we ran right into them down here at the door, and they recognised me instantly—I could tell that by their gasp of amazement as they shrank back against the wall."

"Still, if you preserved a cold and haughty demeanour, they may have concluded they were mistaken."

"Cold and haughty nothing!" broke in the third man. "I was there and I'll swear he winked."

"No, I didn't wink," laughed Vernon. "Though perhaps I should if I'd dared—they're mighty taking girls!"

"Well, what *did* you do?" demanded Collins, with just a trace of impatience.

Again Vernon laughed.

"I sent 'em back a note asking 'em not to tell," he said.

Collins threw up his hands in horror and the third man grinned sardonically. Vernon looked at them and kept on laughing.

"You two fellows take it too seriously," he added. "I don't believe they'll tell."

"I thought you knew women better than that," said Collins, reproachfully.

"I do know them—better than any dried-up diplomat, at least,—and I believe we can trust these two—for a few days, anyway. How much time do we need?"

"A week, at the very least. Fancy asking a woman to keep a secret for a week! And as for taking it too seriously, you know how much depends on it."

"Yes," observed Vernon, sarcastically, "you fellows seem to think the peace of Europe depends on it."

"I should say that would not be overstating it in the least," said Collins, with a solemnity almost religious.

"Oh, nonsense; you diplomatic fellows make mountains out of molehills; you see a storm in every cloud; you imagine the lightning's going to strike you every time it flashes! You're all nerves!"

"Anyway, you agreed—"

"Yes, I know I agreed," interrupted Vernon, irritably, "and I was a fool to do it."

"Besides," added Blake, "we've got to play very close, since it happens that Markeld is in this very hotel. We supposed, of course, that he would go on to London. I must say that I think he showed exceedingly poor taste in following us here."

"Oh, I don't know," said Vernon. "I think it was rather enterprising. I only wish we could treat the poor devil fairly."

"Well, since he is here," continued Blake, "there's only one thing for you to do, and that is to stay under cover."

"But, confound it!" protested Vernon, "I can't stay cooped up here in these rooms all the time!"

"That's the only safe way," observed Collins. "Suppose Markeld should find out how the land lies! The fat would be in the fire for sure; and we'd be in a mighty awkward position! Suppose the jingoes got hold of it!" and he turned pale at the thought.

"Well, I won't stay shut up, that's certain," said Vernon, doggedly.
"As for the jingoes, let them rave!"

"That's easy to say," retorted Collins, with irony, "when some one else has to bear the brunt of it."

Vernon snorted impatiently.

"You may frighten yourself whenever you please," he said, "but you can't frighten me. I've heard the cry of 'Wolf! Wolf!' entirely too often."

"But the wolf came at last," Blake pointed out.

"Well, it isn't coming this time; and I don't care if it is. I repeat, categorically and imperatively, *I won't stay shut up!"*

"You agreed to obey our instructions, you know."

"Every one has the right to rebel against a tyrant!"

"At least," said Collins, yielding the ground grudgingly, "you must remember

always to keep on your sick-togs when you do go out, and to try to look a little less scandalously healthy than you are. Now, if you'd kept on your wraps when you jumped out of the chair—"

"How was I to kick a dog with a rug around my legs? You fellows don't give me credit for what I did do. I'd just got into a most interesting conversation with those girls, when up came a fellow whom I knew instinctively to be Markeld."

He stopped as he caught the others' astounded gaze.

"Yes, Markeld!" he repeated, defiantly. "I've an idea that he is the owner of the dog. I suppose I should have sent James to inquire who the dog belonged to before I ventured forth!"

"No matter," said Collins, impatiently. "What did you do?"

"I was guilty of unpardonable rudeness," answered Vernon. "I broke away from those girls as though they had the plague, jumped into my chair, and buried myself behind my newspaper. They must have thought I'd escaped from somewhere."

"So Markeld didn't see you, it doesn't matter what they thought," remarked Collins.

"Oh, doesn't it?"

"Surely you're not going to run any further risks for the sake of a girl more or less!"

"My dear Collins!" said Vernon, with chill politeness; "I have always suspected that a course in diplomacy sucked the blood out of a man and substituted ice-water in its stead. Now I know it. Permit me to add that you have not seen the girl—either girl—though I don't suppose that would make the slightest difference."

"May I inquire what you propose to do?" asked Collins, flushing a little.

"I propose to cultivate the acquaintance of the beautiful Americans in every way I can. After all, what does it matter to me who rules over a little twopenny duchy called Schloshold-Markheim?"

"I suppose your promise is of equal indifference to you!"

"Damn my promise! See here, Collins; don't push me too far; the worm will turn. Of course, I'll keep my promise; but don't irritate me. I'm all on edge over this thing now—a little more, and I'll be capable of doing something—"

A tap at the door interrupted him, and he disappeared between two curtains into the inner room, where an invalid chair, buried in wraps, stood by the window. Near it was a little table covered with medicine bottles, glasses, spoons—in a word, all the paraphernalia of prolonged and serious illness.

Blake opened the door and took the card that was presented to him.

"The Prince of Markeld," he said, looking at it. "Ah, yes; you will tell His Highness that there has been no change in the condition of Lord Vernon, who thanks him for his kind inquiries."

He closed the door and turned back into the room.

"Now, what do you think that means?" he asked, of Collins. "That's the second time today. He's getting importunate."

Collins stared out of the window gloomily.

"Perhaps he suspects already," he said. "I've been told he's a clever fellow—in fact, he's proved it once or twice."

"Suppose he does suspect—what shall we do?"

"Convince him to the contrary. Where's Scaddam?"

"In his room, I suppose."

"Better send for him."

"May I come out?" inquired a voice from the inner room.

"Yes, come ahead," called Collins, and Vernon reappeared. "Now, my friend," he continued rapidly, "you'd better go in and put on your war-togs." Vernon groaned. "Put 'em on thick. I believe Markeld suspects the trick we're playing,

and we've got to fool him—we've got to show him what a sick man you are."

"How *could* he suspect?" demanded Vernon, incredulously. "Even if he saw me, he couldn't recognise me—he doesn't know me."

"Perhaps those girls have already given you away."

"Nonsense! You fellows are afraid of your own shadows. He can't suspect!"

"Just the same, we've got to be prepared for emergencies. Have you got plenty of pepper?"

Vernon groaned again.

"Plenty! I tell you fellows I'll ruin my health if I keep this up much longer. I might easily burst a blood-vessel. People often do when they sneeze."

"Well, we'll have to take the risk," said Blake, with grim complacency.

"Much risk you take! In fact, I saw you sprinkling pepper on my handkerchief this morning, when there wasn't the slightest need of it."

"Now, see here," protested Collins, sharply, "what's the use of all this argument? We've got to see this thing through, whether we like it or not. I've sent for Scaddam, so he'll be on the scene in case of emergencies—"

"You mean, if I break a blood-vessel?" inquired Vernon, politely.

"Oh, break your grandmother! I tell you—"

There was a second tap on the door and Vernon again made a dive for the inner room. This time, a note was handed in. Collins closed the door, tore open the envelope nervously, and ran his eyes quickly over the contents.

"Come out here, you beggar," he called, and Vernon reappeared on the threshold. "Take a look at this," he added, and held out the note. "Maybe you won't be so cocksure hereafter that diplomats are always making mountains out of mole-hills."

Vernon took the paper and read it slowly, his face growing blanker and more

blank as he proceeded. Then he went back to the beginning and read it aloud:

"The Prince of Markeld admired greatly Lord Vernon's recent prompt and chivalrous action, which he had the privilege of witnessing. He is sure, however, that His Lordship's illness cannot be so serious as represented, and hopes that His Lordship will not persist in refusing him an audience. Such a course would be neither ingenuous nor fair."

For a moment, no one spoke, then Blake gave vent to a low whistle.

"Well," he said, dazedly; "so the cat's out of the bag! What's to be done?"

"There's only one thing that can be done," Collins said sharply. "I've already pointed out what that is," and he sat down at the table and wrote a rapid message. "How will this do? 'Lord Vernon will be pleased to see the Prince of Markeld at five o'clock this afternoon. He has no recollection of having recently performed any prompt or chivalrous action. The Prince has doubtless been misinformed.' That gives us half an hour—neither too much time, nor too little."

"But that's folly!" protested Blake; "how can you carry it through?"

"Leave that to me. I've got out of tighter places than this one. And," he added, turning to Vernon, "if you ever looked ill in your life, prepare to do it now."

Vernon was looking dreamily over Markeld's note.

"He uses adjectives well, doesn't he?" he asked. "'Such a course would be neither ingenuous nor fair.' 'Pon my word, I quite agree with him!"

"Remember, you're under orders," said Collins, sternly.

"Under reasonable orders, perhaps," admitted Vernon, quietly, with a little tightening of the muscles of the face. "I don't admit that either you or Blake is infallible. What is it you propose to do?"

"We propose, in the first place, to send Markeld this note."

Vernon took it and read it at a glance.

"A note which is, of course, a lie," he observed, dispassionately, as he handed it

back.

"It is not a lie!" retorted Collins, flushing hotly. "It is, on the contrary, the absolute truth."

"There are many ways of lying," remarked Vernon, still more coolly. "It isn't so much the letter as the spirit which constitutes a lie."

"This is scarcely the time," put in Blake, "for a lecture upon ethics."

"And it would, in any event," added Vernon, "be entirely wasted upon the present audience. Well, what next?"

"I think you understand your part," answered Collins, curtly. "The only question is, are you prepared to play it?"

Vernon hesitated for an instant, his hands trembling slightly.

"I feel the veriest scoundrel," he said, bitterly. "It sickens me—but you've got me fast."

"Yes," agreed Collins, with a malicious grin, "we've got you fast."

"Though not quite as fast as you think, perhaps," added Vernon, quietly. "I warn you that I will break the bonds if they become too galling. I see that I'm going to owe Prince Frederick a hearty apology before this thing is over."

"Oh, I shan't interfere with your apology when the time conies," retorted Collins.

"I should hope not," said Vernon, still more quietly; then he turned and entered the inner room.

"You mustn't push him too hard, Arthur," said Blake, in a low tone, "or he'll kick over the traces. Remember, he is devilish high-spirited. And he won't lie."

"It takes a firm hand to keep him under control; but I'll be careful. And he won't have to lie. It's confoundedly unfortunate Markeld couldn't have left his dog at home! Just see how small a thing may affect the fate of nations!"

"Don't get philosophical," advised Blake. "There isn't time. Are you going to

send that note?"

Collins sealed the missive.

"It's our only chance," he said, decidedly. "Don't you see; we've got to brazen this thing through. We're in a corner, and there's only one way out." He went to the door and opened it. "For the Prince of Markeld," he said, as he handed the note to the man who stood outside.

CHAPTER VII

An Appeal for Aid

One can easily guess with what delicious precipitation the Misses Rushford, having read the note sent to them by Lord Vernon and having recovered somewhat from the paralysis of amazement into which it had thrown them, hurried up the stair and sought the privacy of their own apartment. Here, evidently, was a full-fledged mystery enacting under their very noses, no trumpery neighbourhood mystery, either, but one of national—aye, even international—importance! It made them gasp to think of it; they were even a little frightened. By the touch of a finger the stage-door had been opened; they had been admitted behind the scenes—to the inside, as they had longed to be. And the experience was even more interesting and exciting than they had dared to hope! They were playing a part, however humble, in the great drama of European politics!

"But what can it mean?" Nell demanded, as she read the note for perhaps the twentieth time. "What can it possibly mean? Why should Lord Vernon wish to appear ill when he isn't?"

"I don't suppose he's doing it for fun," observed Susie, sagely.

"No, of course not," agreed Nell. "There isn't any fun in it that I can see. But it seems a very remarkable course of action. Some great affair of state must depend upon it," she added in a tone slightly awe-struck, for her imagination was beginning to be affected. "He seems awfully young to hold such an important place," she added.

"These English statesmen always look younger than they are," said Sue. "From his pictures, I always imagined that Chamberlain was a comparatively young man, and here I read somewhere the other day that he's nearly seventy!"

"At any rate," concluded Nell, "since it was for our sake Lord Vernon threw off the mask, so to speak, it is only fair, on our part, to keep quiet about it. Why do you think he ran away so quickly? It was almost rude."

"I thought it quite entirely rude," asserted Sue. "But maybe he saw somebody coming whom he wished to avoid."

And then both gasped simultaneously:

"The owner of the dog!"

"Of course!"

"How dense we were!"

"But who is the owner of the dog? Not an Englishman!"

"No—a German, I should say."

"Yes—did you notice his accent? And then he is tall and blond."

"Distinguished looking; and with an air about him—an autocratic manner—which makes me think he's a Somebody. He's evidently not used to being snubbed."

"It's perfectly maddening!" exclaimed Nell, with brows most becomingly wrinkled. "If we only knew something of English politics, we might be able to guess what it is all about."

"Dad could see through it in a minute," sighed Susie, "but that poor dear will never have the chance, because, of course, we can't tell even him. And he likes this sort of thing, too; it would give him just the excitement he's been sighing for!"

And yet fate willed that he was to have the chance, for half an hour later, after a short conference with Monsieur Pelletan, a gentleman whom we have met before in the apartment of Lord Vernon approached him where he sat in the smoking-room, drew up a chair, and sat down beside him.

"This is Mr. Rushford, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes; that's my name," and the American looked him over in some surprise.

"My name is Collins," went on the other. "I am secretary to Lord Vernon."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Collins," and the American held out his hand. "I hope Lord Vernon's getting along all right."

"As well as could be expected, thank you; but there has been a little unforeseen —er—complication—"

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Well, yes; to be quite frank, Mr. Rushford, I think it decidedly serious."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Rushford, with genuine feeling. "We Americans have always taken a special pride in Lord Vernon's career—his mother was an American girl, you know—and his death would be almost a personal loss to us."

"His death?" echoed Collins, staring.

"There's no immediate danger, then? I'm glad of that. Still, if the complication is as serious as you think—"

"My dear sir," broke in the Englishman, "you have misunderstood me. Lord Vernon's health is—er—quite satisfactory, all things considered. The complication is in—er—a rather delicate affair of state, which—which—"

"Anything I can do?" asked Rushford, encouragingly, as the other stammered and broke down.

"Yes, there is, Mr. Rushford," answered Collins, quickly, taking his courage in both hands. "Or, rather, there's something your daughters can do."

"My daughters?" Rushford looked at him again, a growing suspicion in his eyes. "I don't quite understand. You'll have to be more explicit, Mr. Collins. I don't see how my daughters can have anything to do with your affairs of state."

"I am going to be as explicit as I can," Collins assured him, "but it's such an infernally delicate matter that one hardly knows where to begin. Of course, what

I have to tell you must be told in confidence."

"All right," said the American, with a little pucker of the brow which told that he did not wholly like Mr. Collins. 'Fire ahead."

"First, if you don't mind," said the Englishman, looking about him, "I think we'd better get out of this crowd."

"Suppose we go up to my rooms," suggested Rushford, rising. "We'll be free from interruption there, and can thresh the whole thing out."

"Thank you," assented Collins. "Of course, I understand," he continued, in a louder voice, as they started toward the door, "that the question of stocks is always a very complicated one, and very difficult for a layman to understand, but a man of your experience—"

The door of the elevator-car closed behind them, and he stopped.

"Whose benefit was that for?" asked Rushford.

"For the benefit of a French police spy, who was trying his best to overhear our conversation."

"A police spy? Did you know him?"

"I know his class; it's impossible to mistake it. They all look alike—it's a type which even the comic opera has been unable to burlesque. You probably noticed him—all moustache, imperial, and lavender gloves."

"Oh, him? Yes, I've seen him. And I've been rather itching to apply my boot to his coat-tails. I thought he was a cheap actor—a ten, twenty, thirty, as we say in America. Do you suppose Pelletan knows him?"

"Oh, undoubtedly! He's probably boarding him for nothing. These French police have a way with them."

Rushford bit his moustache savagely and resolved to have an explanation with Monsieur Pelletan.

The car stopped.

"Here we are," he said, stepping out into the corridor. "You see our apartment is just over Lord Vernon's. I don't believe even a French detective can disturb us here," and he locked the door after them as they entered. "Besides, my daughters will be handy if we decide to call them in."

Yet, in spite of the plural pronoun, it was quite evident that he was the one who proposed to do the deciding.

"Thank you," said Collins, again. "I hope to show you the necessity of calling them in. In fact, the principal favour I want to ask of you is an introduction to them. They can, if they will, save Lord Vernon, and incidentally the government, a lot of trouble."

Rushford looked at him with a little stare.

"In what way?" he asked, motioning him to a chair.

"It happens," answered Collins, "that, by chance, they hold in their hands the key to a very important affair of state—nothing less than the succession to Schloshold-Markheim. They could, if they wished, involve the government in difficulties of the most serious nature."

Rushford stared at him yet a moment. Then he settled back in his chair.

"Have a cigar?" he asked. "No? You won't mind my smoking? I can think better when I smoke. Now let's have the story; I'm anxious to hear what those girls have been up to. I'm afraid they need a chaperon, after all!"

CHAPTER VIII

Pride has a fall

Shortly before six o'clock that evening, the door of Lord Vernon's apartment opened, and the Prince of Markeld appeared on the threshold, bowed out in the politest manner possible by Blake, Collins, and Sir John. He crossed the corridor, paused irresolutely at the stairhead, then went on toward his own rooms, his head bent, his face expressing the liveliest dissatisfaction: an expression which deepened to disgust when, on opening his door, he perceived Tellier awaiting him within.

"He would come in," explained Glück, after a glance at his master's countenance. "He lied; he said Your Highness was expecting him. Shall I throw him out?"

"No," said the Prince, "not yet," and Glück retired to a convenient distance, confident that his hour would yet arrive.

The detective, apparently, had no uneasiness concerning the result of the interview, for his face was beaming with self-importance and he greeted the Prince with a confidence born of certainty. His eyes asked the question which his lips were too well-governed and discreet to articulate.

"Tellier," began the Prince, abruptly, looking at him with a fiery glance, "you are either a knave or a fool—a fool, doubtless, since you seem too stupid to be a knave—and you very nearly made me appear another!"

The detective's face dropped suddenly from triumph to humility.

"I do not understand," he faltered. "Does Your Highness mean—"

"I mean that that story of yours was a ridiculous lie!" responded the Prince, brutally, being, indeed, greatly overwrought. "How do I know," he added, suddenly, "that you did not intentionally deceive me? I have only your word—what is that worth? How do I know that it was not a trick—a trick on the part of your government to involve me with England? That would be like you!" and his hands clenched and unclenched in a most threatening manner.

"I swear to Your Highness," protested Tellier, his cheeks livid, his lips quivering convulsively, "that I told only the truth! On my heart, I swear it—on my soul—on the grave of my mother. Otherwise, pardieu, would I have been so imprudent as to remain here awaiting the return of Your Highness?"

The Prince's face relaxed a little as he looked at him.

"No," he agreed, grimly, after a moment. "I don't believe you would. Yes, you are a fool and not a knave. For I have just seen Lord Vernon with my own eyes—he is truly ill—sneezing as though his head would burst, gasping for breath, his eyes running water, cursing even the friends who nurse him! It was some one else who kicked my dog away. You have been deceived."

Tellier was walking up and down the room, tugging at his imperial, at his hair, biting his nails, shaking his clenched hands at the ceiling in a very ecstasy of bewilderment.

"Impossible!" he murmured, hoarsely. "Impossible!"

"How impossible!" cried the Prince, violently. "Do you presume to contradict me? Do you dare to dispute my word when I tell you that I myself have seen Lord Vernon; when I describe his condition to you? He was most courteous, though he could not speak above a whisper—he treated me more kindly than I deserved, when one considers the wording of that note I sent to him, for which I was glad to apologise! One could see he was in no condition to give me audience—to discuss business of any kind! He could scarcely sit erect!"

"Oh, there is some knavery!" cried Tellier, his face purple. "I know it!
I scent it!"

"You are, then, infallible, I suppose!" retorted the Prince. "His physician assured me that in a week Lord Vernon would be much better—nearly well; he suggested that for a week I do not press my business."

"But you did not agree!" screamed Tellier. "Your Highness did not agree!"

"Most certainly I agreed. Not to agree would have been to insult them yet a second time!"

"A week!" groaned Tellier, throwing up his hands, with a gesture of despair. "Then all is lost!"

"How lost?" demanded Markeld, red with anger. "In what way lost? Have a care of what you say!"

Tellier controlled himself by a mighty effort and managed to speak with some approach to calmness.

"The German Emperor will not waste a week, Your Highness. That is not his way, as you very well know. He will be at work every hour—every minute!"

"What can he accomplish, if the British foreign office will do nothing? Will he take the affair into his own hands? He will not dare!"

"He might dare, Your Highness; he has dared things more perilous than that. But how do we know the British foreign office will do nothing?"

"I tell you," repeated the Prince, hotly, "that Lord Vernon is a gentleman—something you do not seem to understand; that he is ill— something you seem to doubt!"

"In diplomacy, Your Highness, even a gentleman may sometimes lie, or, at least, disguise the truth. Perhaps even before this, he has hinted to the Emperor that he will not interfere, if he acts promptly—perhaps this illness is merely a ruse to avoid a situation the most awkward."

It was the Prince's turn to stride up and down, to pluck at his moustache, to go red and white.

"If I thought so!" he murmured hoarsely. "If I thought so!"

"There is some underhand work in progress," cried Tellier, growing more and more excited; "some trap, some piece of trickery—I know not what—but I am certain—I will find out!"

"If I thought so!" said the Prince again, and his face was not pleasant to look upon.

"For I repeat to Your Highness that I could not have been mistaken. It is impossible that I should have been mistaken. I saw Lord Vernon leap from his chair; I was as near it as I am to you at this moment; I saw him return to it and hide himself behind his paper, when he saw you approaching; I waited, and saw his lackeys come after him and lift him to the invalid chair. If I had not been certain before, I was certain then! I followed him back to the hotel. Yes!" he added, with sudden excitement, "and there was another circumstance which will confirm me!"

"Go on!" commanded Markeld, yielding somewhat before this torrent of proof.

"At the door he met the young ladies whom he had rescued—the Americans; they recognised him—I could see their look of astonishment at perceiving him in the chair of an invalid, buried in rugs. They stared after him—the chair stopped—he wrote a few words on a piece of paper and sent it back to them. They read it with eyes even more astonished."

"Did you, by any chance, read it also?" inquired the Prince, with a deceptive calmness.

"No, Your Highness," Tellier replied, simply, quite unconscious of his danger. "I saw no way of doing that, unfortunately. I thought of snatching it away, but that would have created a turmoil, which is always to be avoided if possible. But Your Highness might easily gain possession of the note—"

The Prince stopped him with a fierce gesture of repugnance.

"Do you know what it is that you have the effrontery to propose to me?" he demanded.

The Frenchman paused in mid-sentence and swallowed with difficulty, his face very red.

"I am certain," he said, after a moment, "that those young ladies know it was Lord Vernon who rescued them. They would no doubt confirm this, if Your Highness would inquire—"

The Prince strode to the door and flung it open.

"Do not come back till you can speak without insulting me," he said, sternly.

"One moment, Your Highness!" cried Tellier. "But a moment! I have another proof. Oh, you are wrong not to believe me! You are wrong to yield to your anger!"

"The proof!" broke in the Prince, sharply, realising, perhaps, the justice of the reproach. "The proof! What is it? Speak quickly!"

"It is this, Your Highness," answered the detective, striving desperately to steady his voice, to speak intelligibly. "But an hour ago, the secretary of Lord Vernon was in conference with the father of those young ladies. He approached him in the smoking-room; he introduced himself; he sat down; he began a conversation. I should have overheard everything, but that, unfortunately, he was more clever than I thought. He suspected me. They went together to Monsieur Rushford's apartment—I followed, I listened at the keyhole; but they went on into an inner room, and the outer door was locked, so I could not—"

The Prince, who had listened to all this with blazing eyes, suddenly raised his arm with a furious gesture.

"Glück!" he shouted.

That faithful servitor appeared on the instant, his face alight with anticipation.

"But if there should be a plot!" protested Tellier, hesitating, even yet, on the threshold.

"If there is a plot," said the Prince, sternly, "someone shall suffer for it, depend upon that! But against gentlemen, the proof must be conclusive. Glück, show him out," and he shut the door upon the unhappy spy.

"It would have been well," observed Glück, calmly, coming back after a moment, "to have thrown him out in the first place."

"I agree with you," said his master. "You may do so whenever you find him here again, my friend," and for an instant Glück almost smiled.

"Will Your Highness dine in your apartment tonight?" he asked.

The Prince hesitated; then his face relaxed as at some pleasant thought.

"No, Glück," he said, "I will dine downstairs. Get my bath ready."

CHAPTER IX

Pelletan's Skeleton

As he left the dining-room that evening, Rushford crooked an imperious finger at Monsieur Pelletan.

"I want a word with you," he said in his ear.

"In private, monsieur?" asked the little Frenchman, with some trepidation.

"Yes, I think it would better be in private—that is, if you can accomplish it in this bedlam."

"Oh, I haf a place, monsieur, where no one will intrude," and Pelletan led the way through the hotel office to a little door back of the desk. "T'is iss my—vat you call eet in English?—my sty, my kennel—"

"Your den."

"Iss t'ere a difference?" asked Pelletan, fumbling with the lock.

"A sty is for pigs and a kennel for dogs," Rushford explained. "A den is for wild beasts. These niceties of the English language are not for you, Pelletan."

"Still," persisted Pelletan, "a man iss no more a wild beast t'an he iss a dog or a pig."

"Not nearly so much so, very often," agreed Rushford, heartily. "You have me there, Pelletan. Sty would undoubtedly be the right word in many cases."

"Fery well, t'en," said Pelletan, proudly, opening the door, "pehold my sty!" and he stood aside that his companion might enter.

It was a little square box of a room jammed with such a litter of bric-à-brac as is to be picked up only on the boulevards—trifles in Bohemian glass, a lizard stuffed with straw, carved fragments of jade and ivory, a Sèvres vase bearing the portrait of Du Barry, an Indian chibook, a pink-cheeked Dresden shepherdess, a sabre of the time of Napoleon, a leering Hindoo idol, a hideous dragon in Japanese bronze grimacing furiously at a Barye lion—all of them huddled together without order or arrangement, as they would have been in an auction room or an antique shop. In one corner stood a low table of Italian mosaic, bearing a somewhat battered statuette of Saint Geneviève plying her distaff, and the walls were fairly covered with photographs— photographs, for the most part, of women more anxious to display their charms of person to an admiring world than to observe the rigour of convention.

Rushford dropped into one of the two chairs, got out a cigar, lighted it, and sat for some moments looking around at this wilderness of gimcracks.

"Pelletan, you're a humbug," he said at last. "You came to me yesterday and said your last franc was gone."

"Unt so it wass, monsieur."

"But this collection ought to be worth something."

"Monsieur means t'at it might pe sold?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But monsieur does not know—does not understand. Tis—all t'is—iss my life; eet iss here t'at I liff—not out t'ere," with a gesture of disgust toward the door. "I could no more liff wit'out t'is t'an wit'out my head!"

Rushford, looking at him curiously, saw that he was in deadly earnest.

"Really," he said, "you surprise me, Pelletan. I had never suspected in you such depth of soul."

"Besides, monsieur," added Pelletan, leaning forward, "t'ese t'ings are not all what t'ey seem—t'is dragon, par exemple, ees not off bronze, but off t'e plaster of Paris—yet I lofe eet none t'e less—more, perhaps, because off t'at fery fact."

"And these—ah—females," said Rushford, and waved his hand at the serried photographs, "I suppose even they are necessary to your existence."

"I lofe to look at t'em, monsieur," confessed Pelletan.

"Personal acquaintances, perhaps."

"Not all of t'em, monsieur; but t'ey haf about t'em t'e flavour off Paris—off t'at tear Paris off which I tream each night; t'ey recall t'e tays off my yout'!"

"Oh, are you a Parisian? I should never have suspected it. Your accent—"

"I am off Elsass, monsieur. It wass, perhaps, for t'at reason t'at Paris so won my heart."

"If I were as fond of the place as all that," observed Rushford, laughing, "I'd have stayed there."

"It proke my heart to leafe," murmured Pelletan. "T'at is why I lofe all t'is," and he motioned to the walls, and kissed his hand to a voluptuous siren with red hair. "T'at is Ernes tine. Tonight she will take her part at t'e Alcazar; at t'e toor a friend will meet her unt t'ey will go toget'er down t'e Champs-Elysées to t'e grand boulevard, where t'ey sit in front of Pousset's and trink t'eir wine unt eau sucree. T'ey will watch t'e crowds, t'ey will greet t'eir friends, t'ey will exchange t'e tay's news. T'en t'ey will go to tinner—six or eight of t'em toget'er—een a leetle room at Maxime's, where t'ey can make so much noise as pleases t'em—only I will not pe t'ere—in all t'at great city, nowhere will I pe! Unt I am missed, monsieur, no more t'an iss a grain of sand from t'e peach out yonder!"

His voice trembled and broke, and he ran his hands through his hair in a very agony of despair.

"There, there," said Rushford, soothingly, repressing an inclination to laugh at the grotesque figure before him. "Don't take it so much to heart. I dare say they drink your health oftener than you imagine."

"Do you really t'ink so, monsieur?" asked Pelletan, brightening.

"And, depend upon it, you'll get back to them some day," continued the American. "Only stay here a year or two until you've made your fortune, as

you're certain to do now."

"Yess, monsieur," agreed Pelletan, huskily. "T'anks to you!"

"In the meantime," added Rushford, smiling, "keep the ladies, if you like to look at them. Your little foibles are no affair of mine. What I wanted to speak to you about was a matter of business. There's a blatant, detestable French spy in the house who has got to get out. He even had the impudence to ogle my girls at dinner this evening. Shall I kick him out, or will you attend to the matter?"

Pelletan had grown paler at every word until he was fairly livid.

"Iss eet Monsieur Tellier to whom monsieur refers?" he stammered.

"I don't know his name, but he looks like a freak from the wax-works.
He's got to go—he's nearly as bad as Zeit-Zeit."

Pelletan mopped his shining forehead and groaned dismally.

"What is it, man?" demanded the American. "Don't tell me that this rascal has a hold on you!"

Pelletan groaned again, more dismally than before.

"I was told this afternoon," added Rushford, grimly, "that he was probably staying here at my expense."

"Eet iss not so!" cried Pelletan, his eyes flashing. "I pay for heem—efery tay I charge myself mit' twenty franc for hees account."

"But what on earth for?" demanded Rushford. "What have you done—robbed a bank or committed murder?"

Pelletan glanced around to assure himself that the door was tightly closed, then drew his chair nearer to his patron.

"I haf a wife," he said, slowly, in a sepulchral tone.

"Well, what of it? Is that a crime in France? I could almost believe it!"

"I could not liff mit' her no longer," continued Pelletan. "She wass a teufel! I

leafe her!"

"Oh, that's it—so you ran away?"

"Yess, monsieur, I ran avay—avay from Paris—avay from France—I t'ought efen of going to Amérique."

"Was she so bad as all that?" asked Rushford, sympathetically.

For answer, Pelletan went to the statue of Saint Geneviève, lifted it, and took from beneath it a photograph.

"T'is iss she, monsieur," he said, and handed the photograph to Rushford.

The latter took one look at it and passed it back.

"Not guilty!" he said. "You have my profound sympathy, Pelletan. How did you happen to get caught? You must have been exceedingly young!"

"I wass, monsieur," admitted Pelletan, with a sigh. "I wass just from t'e province—my head wass full of treams. Unt she wass petter-looking, t'en, monsieur; she wass almost slim. She wass a widow—unt besides she had a leetle pâtisserie which her man had left her."

"I see—avarice was your undoing. And you caught a tartar!"

"A teufel!" repeated Pelletan. "A fiend! Oh, what an end to t'e tream! I worked—oh, how hard I worked—sweating at t'e ovens, efery hour of t'e twenty-four—for t'e ovens must not pe allowed to cool. She sat at t'e money-drawer unt grows fat; I wass soon so weak t'at she tid not hesitate to—to—"

The little man's face was bathed in sweat at the memory of that degradation, which his tongue refused to describe.

"I endured eet to t'e last moment," he added, thickly. "T'en I fled!"

"You seem to have alighted on your feet," remarked Rushford.

"We had made a success of t'e pusiness," Pelletan explained, "unt I brought mit

me my share of t'e profits, which seemed only fair, since I, py my labour, had earned t'em. Unt t'en I took a lease of t'is place, unt did well until t'is year. T'at iss my whole history, monsieur. T'at iss why I dare not return to Paris, efen for a small visit in winter when pusiness here iss pad. Eef she so much as caught one leetle glimpse of me, she would murder me!" and he mopped his face again.

"Still," said the American, "I don't see where Tellier comes in."

Pelletan carefully replaced the photograph under the statuette and then reseated himself opposite his companion.

"Tellier knows her," he explained, simply.

"Met her professionally, perhaps," suggested Rushford. "Well, what of it?"

"Eef I offend heem, he gifes her my attress!" continued Pelletan, hoarsely, and his forehead glistened again at the thought. "He t'reatened as much when he arrife here unt I tol' him t'e house wass full."

"Hm!" commented Rushford. "I see. All right; I'll stand by you. I dare say I can stomach Tellier for a day or two."

Pelletan breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Tat iss kind," he stammered; "I—I—"

"There, there," and the American waved him to silence. "And you needn't charge yourself with his keep. But I hope you haven't any more skeletons in the closet, my friend."

"Skeletons, monsieur?"

"Such as Madame Pelletan."

"Oh," said the Frenchman, naively, "Madame Pelletan iss quite t'e opposite off a skeleton, monsieur!"

* * * * *

Rushford paused at the hotel door and looked out along the Digue. It was

thronged with people hurrying toward the Casino, eager for the night's excitement. But the American turned in the opposite direction, and sauntered slowly along, breathing in the cool breeze from the ocean. At last he paused, and, leaning against the balustrade, stood gazing out across the moonlit water, smiling to himself at thought of Pelletan's vicissitudes.

He was roused by the sound of voices on the beach below him. He looked down mechanically, but for a moment saw no one. Then, deep in the shadow of the wall, he descried two figures walking slowly side by side. One was a man and the other a woman. They were talking in a French so rapid and idiomatic that Rushford could distinguish no word of it, except that the man addressed his companion as Julie.

There was something strangely familiar about the figure of the man, and as Rushford stared down at him, his vision seemed suddenly too clear and he perceived that it was the French detective.

"Tellier prosecutes his loves," he murmured, smiling grimly to himself, and turned back toward the hotel. There he stopped, struck by a sudden thought. "Julie," he repeated. "Julie—where have I heard that name recently? Oh, I remember—Julie is our maid at the hotel. I wonder—"

He went back abruptly to the parapet and looked over, but Tellier and his companion had disappeared.

CHAPTER X

An Introduction and a Promenade

Warm and fair dawned the morning; and having, at its leisure, duly arisen, bathed and breakfasted, the unemployed population of Weet-sur-Mer, male and female, sallied forth to throng the beach and Digue, to inhale the fresh air, to shake off so far as possible the effects of the evening's dissipations, and to exchange such toadstool growths of gossip as had sprung up over night.

To join this parade there presently came Lord Vernon, reclining languidly in his invalid chair, and muffled in many rugs; but his eyes were eagerly alert and he gazed with evident anticipation down the long promenade of the Digue. He was attended by Blake, Collins, and Sir John, all of them determined, no doubt, to prevent a second contretemps. But Sir John presently descried a learned fellow-Aesculapian and stopped for a chat with him; while Blake soon afterward succumbed to the glance and smile of a red-cheeked English beauty. Collins, however, stuck grimly to his post, being above—or below—such human weaknesses.

"There they are!" cried Vernon, suddenly, with brightening eyes.

"Who?" asked Collins, following his gaze. "Oh, the Rush ford girls. I suppose it will be polite to show our gratitude. I think we owe them a vote of thinks, don't you?"

"I certainly do," agreed Vernon, straightening himself in his chair with a vigour which had nothing of the invalid about it. "Will you introduce me?"

"If I can snare them without being too intrusive," assented Collins, who, since the success of his stratagem of the afternoon before, had been in an unusually complaisant mood.

But fate willed that they should be snared without any effort on his part whatever, for just then a porter came by with a truck piled high with luggage, and it and the invalid chair combined to form an impasse from which there was no escaping. Not that either of the young ladies displayed any very evident anxiety to escape.

"Good-morning," said Collins, in his best manner. "My lord," he continued, turning to his companion, "these are the Misses Rushford, to whom we owe so much. I hope I may introduce Lord Vernon to you," he added.

Both of them were laughing as they took, in turn, the hand which Vernon rather eagerly held out.

"I'm awfully glad to meet you," he said, looking from one to the other and trying to decide which was the prettier. "I feel that we *do* owe you a great deal. When Collins came back yesterday afternoon and told me what he'd had the impudence to ask you, I was—I was—"

"Very wrathy, to put it mildly," said Collins. "But I took it meekly; it was in a good cause."

"And we didn't think it impudent at all," said Sue. "Since we had caused all the trouble, it was only fair that we should bear a part of it. Besides, it wasn't by any means so difficult as Mr. Collins thought it would be."

"You don't mean that Markeld actually asked you! I didn't believe he'd do that, despite Collins's prophecy. He seemed to have too much of high politeness about him."

"I was sure he would," put in Collins, triumphantly. "He couldn't afford to neglect such an obvious way of making certain, and he's much too clever to have overlooked it."

"You were quite right, Lord Vernon," said Susie, very quietly, though there was a dangerous sparkle in her eyes. "The Prince did not ask us—but a French creature did—a detective—"

"One of his emissaries," suggested Collins. "I know him—his name is Tellier."

"I have no reason to think him an emissary," retorted Susie, curtly, beginning to dislike the secretary. "I don't in the least believe the Prince would choose such a one. Dad pointed him out to us in the dining-room last night—a thing of mustachios and eyes—just the kind one sees at the vaudeville, but which I hadn't the least idea existed in real life.—Oh!" she cried, with a little start, "there he is now, almost near enough to hear!"

Collins swore softly between his teeth, for there, indeed, Monsieur Tellier was, leaning with elaborate negligence against the balustrade, apparently intent upon the crowd below. His countenance was quite inscrutable—calm as a summer day—which might mean much or nothing, for he had an immense pride in keeping it always so. Vernon took him in with a quick glance.

"I recognise the type," he said. "Can't we go on, Miss Rushford? Collins might form a rear guard. And James is blind, deaf, and dumb toward everything that doesn't concern him," he added, as she glanced at the stalwart footman behind the chair. "I'm very anxious to hear the story. But, of course, if it's asking too much—"

"It isn't," answered Susie, promptly, and fell in beside the chair, while Collins and her sister followed at a distance of a few paces. "Now, I think, we can talk without fear of being overheard by Monsieur Tellier. But there is really very little to tell. He sent up his card just before dinner yesterday evening; we sent it back. Then, being persistent and not easily snubbed, he sent up a note which asked 'Are the Misses Rushford acquainted with the gentleman who came to their assistance this afternoon?' To which the Misses Rushford added a line, 'They are not,' and sent it back to him. It was too absurd. It reminded me of the agony column in the *Herald*."

"The agony column?"

"Yes—'Will the lady dressed in blue, who took a Broadway car yesterday,'—and so on."

"Oh," said Vernon, with a smile. "Yes—we have the same thing in England."

"And, after all," continued Susie, "our reply was the exact and literal truth—of a kind which, I should imagine, is well known to diplomats."

The occupant of the chair had quite made up his mind that Susie was the prettier.

"It is their favourite kind," he assured her; "nothing delights them more than to lie while telling the truth."

"Them? But aren't you a diplomat?"

"There are many who doubt it. Perhaps they will doubt it more than ever before we are out of this tangle. It's awfully good of you and your sister to take an interest in it."

"But of course we'd take an interest!"

"And keep a secret."

"Ah—well, perhaps that *is* a little unusual."

"Especially after my rudeness," he added.

"Your rudeness?"

"In running away and hiding behind my paper. What did you think of me?"

"We didn't know what to think," admitted Susie, candidly; "though, of course, afterwards we were able to guess."

"And I am pardoned?"

"Oh, quite; you had to escape, you know. It's a perfectly delightful muddle, isn't it? Dad understood it at once."

"Did he?" The occupant of the chair moved a little uneasily.

"Yes—we talked it over, you know, after Mr. Collins left. But then dad is up on politics and we are not. Only it's a little rough on the Prince of Markeld, don't you think?"

"Yes, it *is* rough on him, but—well, it would be rougher to turn him down—rougher on all concerned!"

"You'd have to turn him down? But there; I mustn't meddle with affairs of state!"

"Sentiment hasn't much show in the foreign office," said Vernon, with some bitterness; "not even the sentiment of friendship. We're trying to find the easiest way out."

Susie nodded, her eyes sparkling. This was a new and delicious experience, this weighing the fate of nations, as it were. She even skipped a little, unconscious of Lord Vernon's eyes upon her glowing face.

"Of course," she agreed, judicially, "I suppose one must always try to find the easiest way out. Only dad seemed to think—"

She hesitated.

"Go ahead," he encouraged her. "I don't doubt that your father was entirely right."

"Well, then, dad seemed to think that Prince Ferdinand is much the better of the two men."

"There is no question of that," assented Lord Vernon, gloomily. "But let me put a case, Miss Rushford. Suppose your best friend were set upon by thieves and just as you started to help him, another thief came up behind you and, putting a pistol to your head, commanded you to stand still. What would you do?"

"I'd stand still," laughed Sue.

"Yes; but your friend can't see the thief behind you, and when he sees you standing there, not offering to help him, he thinks you are a coward and a traitor. Perhaps he tells you so in the most emphatic language at his command."

"It would be a very difficult position," agreed Sue, still laughing at the picture presented by the words. "On second thought, I don't believe I'd stand still for long; I'd try to give my thief a knock-out blow and then go help my friend."

"But you would have to wait till your thief was off his guard. Well, that is pretty much the position that England is in, as I understand it. Prince Ferdinand is our friend, but we've got to wait till the man with the pistol makes a false move. We're doing the best we can—and in the meantime, Prince Ferdinand's misguided friends are calling us hard names."

"But," inquired Susie, "who is the man with the pistol? He must be a pretty big fellow to be able to hold you prisoner, and yet I must confess that I'm like Prince Ferdinand—I can't perceive him, either."

Lord Vernon hesitated a moment.

"I'm afraid, Miss Rushford," he said, slowly, at last, "that I can't tell you, just yet. I'd like to, but if I did, I'd have all these diplomatic sharps down on me in short order. I thought maybe you could guess."

"Oh, don't apologise!" cried Susie. "I hadn't any right to ask.
Though," she added, regretfully, "I'm not at all good at guessing."

Lord Vernon smiled as he looked at her.

"I don't think we'll have any more trouble," he said. "Markeld and I have called a truce for a week, and by that time—"

He paused again, evidently on the verge of another indiscretion. Chance saved him the necessity of going on, for at that moment a tall, military figure loomed ahead, approached, hesitated, stopped, and uncovered.

"I hope I see you better this morning, Lord Vernon," said a pleasant voice.

"Why, yes, thank you, Your Highness," answered Vernon, colouring a little. "I feel much better. Let me introduce to you Miss Rushford," he added, catching the other's admiring glance and interpreting it aright. "Miss Rushford, this is the Prince of Markeld."

CHAPTER XI

The Prince Gains an Ally

So it presently came to pass that Susie Rushford found herself walking on with the Prince of Markeld, while Nell took her place beside the invalid's chair. Five minutes later, Vernon had revised his judgment and decided that Nell was far the handsomer—she had the air, somehow, which one associates with duchesses, but which, alas! is, in reality, so seldom theirs. She was just a little regal, just a little awe-inspiring, so that to win a smile impressed one as, in a way, an achievement. Vernon had won several before they had been long together, and felt his heart growing strangely, deliciously warm within him.

As to Sue—if we may pause to analyse her feelings—she, too, had been for the first moment impressed. The Prince was so visibly a Highness; every line of him expressed it, not consciously, but inevitably, from the blood out. So, after a glance or two, she walked along beside him rather humbly and very silent, not in the least as the proverbial American girl should have done! Then she stole another glance at him and saw that he was twisting his moustache in evident perplexity.

"You may have perceived," he said, at last, with that slight formality of utterance which Sue thought very taking, "that I was most desirous of meeting you, Miss Rushford."

"I believe I *did* discern a sort of royal command in your eye," assented Susie, feeling suddenly at ease with him. He was evidently a mere man, even though he were a prince.

"Yes," he continued, "I felt that I owed you and your sister a more complete apology than it was possible for me to make yesterday without impertinence. You see I am unaccompanied to-day."

"Poor Jax!" laughed Susie.

"I suspect," the Prince continued, "that I somehow offended you when I offered you the dog."

"Oh, you perceived it, did you?" and she flashed an ironic glance upon him.

"Yes—though I could not in the least guess in what the offence consisted."

"My dear sir," said Sue, tartly, "American girls are not in the habit of accepting gifts from utter strangers."

"Not even from—from—"

He stopped, at a loss for a word which would express his meaning without absurdity.

"No, not even from Royal Highnesses," she added, interpreting his thought. "Besides, you know, in America we haven't any."

The Prince walked on in silence for a moment, his brow knit in meditation.

"Your last sentence explains it," he said, at last. "You have in America no class whose prerogative it is to bestow gifts, and, in consequence, you do not accept them as a matter of course. With us a gift is a conventional thing, like shaking hands."

"I wasn't trying to explain it," said Susie, with a little sigh of despair, "or to defend it—but let it go." Then, with a flash of mischief,—"Are you frequently called upon?"

"There are occasions almost every day which demand them of us," answered the Prince, soberly, missing the glance.

"Poor man! And the affair of yesterday was one of them? Forgive me if I am rude; but it is all so new and interesting!"

"It seemed only right," explained the Prince, "that I should compensate you in some way for the annoyance I had caused you."

The words were said so candidly and simply that the ironical smile faded from Susie's lips and she was silent for a moment.

"I think the American way the nicer," she said at last, decisively. "An American would have considered an apology ample reparation. With us a gift means something—it has a sentimental value. Besides, girls are never permitted to accept gifts of value. Flowers are the only things which may be given them."

"Flowers!" repeated the Prince, eagerly, looking at her.

"And only by their nearest, dearest friends," added Susie, hastily.

"Well, it is a very different point of view," said the Prince, the light fading from his face. "I have even heard that in America there are workmen who consider a tip an insult."

"It's unthinkable, isn't it? And yet, I'm proud to say, it's true. I may add that many Americans feel humiliated when they offer a tip to a man—it's like branding him with a badge of servility."

"I must confess," said the Prince, "that such an attitude seems to me absurd. What other badge than that of servility shall the servant wear?"

"He need wear no badge, if he does his work honestly and well," retorted Susie, hotly. "There is nothing disgraceful in service."

"No," agreed the Prince, with some hesitation, "perhaps not; nor, for that matter, is there anything disgraceful in a badge. But I have not said what I wished to say, which was that I hope you believe my offence was wholly unintentional and that you pardon me."

"I am not vindictive," answered Sue, smiling at his earnest tone, "and therefore you are pardoned. But it seems unjust that Jax should suffer imprisonment."

"Oh, he will get his outing, but with Glück, who is less absent-minded. Yesterday, I had much to occupy me."

"And to-day?"

"Not so much. I am resting on my oars."

"Yes," said Susie, and contented herself with the monosyllable. She was keenly on the alert; determined not to betray Lord Vernon's confidence, yet, at the same time, desirous of helping, in some way, her companion. She distinctly approved of him. Then, too, she had somehow got the impression that the other side was not playing fairly, and her whole American spirit revolted against unfairness.

"I should like to tell you about it," he began, with a sudden burst of confidence. "But perhaps you know?"

"I know some of it. I can guess that it means a great deal to you."

"It does—more than you can guess; I think. Not so much to me, personally, as to our people. I believe that I am speaking only the exact truth when I say that it will be much better for the people of Schloshold-Markheim if our branch of the house is recognised and not the other. Our branch has been, in a way, for many years, progressive; the other is and always has been—well—conservative."

He had the air of searching for a word that would not go beyond the truth; Susie, glancing at him, decided that he had chosen one which fell far short of it.

"We have a certain claim of kinship and friendship upon England," he added, "and we are very anxious to enlist her aid, even though we lose this time; for there may soon be another vacancy. The head of the other branch has no heir and is not well."

He might have added that the August Prince George, of Schloshold, was hovering on the verge of dissolution as the result of forty years' corruption—a corruption of which not all the waters of the Empire could cleanse him; but there are some things which are better left unsaid.

"Who is it that is opposed to you in all this?" asked Sue.

"The German Emperor," said the Prince, simply. "He is not always in sympathy with—ah—progress."

"So he is the man with the pistol!" said Susie, thoughtfully.

"The—I beg your pardon," and the Prince looked at her in some surprise.

"It is nothing," said Susie, hastily, colouring under his eyes. "I was merely

thinking aloud—thinking of a story. Pardon me. Will you tell me some more?"

"There is not much more to tell. Only, we fear that if we are not given an opportunity to present our claims this time, we may be forgotten the next. Prince George might possibly try to name a successor—we have even understood that he already considers doing so—that this, indeed, is the price he has agreed to pay the Emperor for his support—though this, of course, is strictly entre nous. You see I am trusting you."

"Thank you," answered Susie, simply; but there was that in her voice and glance which told how she would deserve the confidence. And, on the instant, a great yearning leaped warm into her heart. If she could help this people to the ruler they needed most; if she could somehow turn the scale, so delicately balanced! There would be a task worth doing; an achievement to be proud of all her life! And she trembled a little at the thought that to her, Susie Rushford, fate had given such an opportunity!

But Markeld, apparently, had had enough of high politics, or perhaps he found it difficult to keep his mind on them with Susie's dark eyes looking up at him. He was no novice in womankind; he had known many, high and low; but there was in his companion something different, something appealing, something fresh, invigorating, which he had felt from the first, in a vague way, without quite understanding. Princes may be outspoken when they please, and he was so at this moment.

"I was glad of to-day's meeting not only that I might apologise," he said, with a calmness which rather took his companion's breath away, "but because you interested me. I have heard much of American women, but all that I have heretofore been privileged to meet seemed to me to resent being called Americans. You and your sister, on the other hand, appear to be rather proud of it."

"I don't know whether that is intended as a compliment or the reverse," said Susie, "but it is undoubtedly true."

"It was that which interested me," he went on. "It indicated such an unspoiled point of view—a freshness which I fear the Old World is losing."

"Thank you," retorted Susie, gasping a little. "You have honoured us, I see, with a very careful study. I can respond by saying that there is in your manner a

certain freshness which I do not like," and she shot him a fiery glance. At the moment, he was rather too evidently the Prince.

"I am sorry you find me displeasing," he said, looking at her gravely. Perhaps she was, at the moment, just the merest shade too evidently the American girl. "I hope the impression is one which will change when you know me better."

"Am I to have that pleasure?"

"I intend to ask your father if I may call upon you."

Susie gasped again. She felt that she was being swept beyond her depth by a current which she was powerless to resist; that she was beating with bare hands against a wall of incredible height and thickness—the wall of Old World convention, of class imperturbability. And she felt a little frightened, for almost the first time in her life.

"Do," she said faintly, realising that her companion was waiting for her to speak.

"I think that I shall like him," he added.

"Oh, do you know him?"

"'I was looking at him last night at dinner," he explained, calmly. "He seems a very interesting man. I looked at all of you a great deal—more than was perhaps quite polite. I feared you had perceived it."

"No," murmured Susie, desperately, telling a white lie.

"Tellier told me you were Americans—but I should have known it anyway."

"Tellier!" she repeated, turning upon him fiercely, welcoming the opportunity to create a diversion. "Then he *was* your emissary! And to think that I defended you!"

"My emissary?" he stammered. "Defended me?"

"Yes, when—when—some one said you had sent him to us—"

"Sent him to you!" he cried, flushing darkly. "Do you mean to say that he has been annoying you?"

"It was almost that."

"Ah!" he said. "Ah!" and he grasped his stick in a way that boded ill for Monsieur Tellier.

Susie, glancing up at him, thought it very fine. He was such a volcano, and there was such a fearful pleasure in stirring him up—in skipping over the thin crust with a lively consciousness of the boiling lava beneath!

"Then you didn't send him?" she inquired, sweetly.

"Send him! Miss Rushford, do you think for a moment that I would be so rude, so impertinent? Tell me you do not think so!"

"I *didn't* think so," said Sue, biting her lip, a little fearfully. "I even defended you, as I have said. But now—"

"But now—"

His eyes seemed to burn her; she dared not look up and meet them. She even regretted that she had begun to play with fire.

"But now," he repeated, insistently, imperatively.

"No, I don't think so now," she said, with a little catch of the breath. Then she glanced up at him, and instantly looked away. He should not act so; every one would notice; it was very embarrassing!

"That is kind of you," he said, in a low voice.

"Though," she added, reprovingly, glad to find a joint in his armour, "I am surprised that you should discuss me in any way whatever with that creature!"

"You are right!" he agreed, flushing hotly. "You are quite right. But the temptation was very great, and I wanted to know so badly. I beg you to believe that I regretted it an instant later. I do not want that you should think of me as like that!"

"Perhaps I would better not think of you at all," ventured Sue. Ah, what a fascination there is in fire!

"That would be still more unbearable!" he protested; his eyes were very bright and he was bending down a little that he might the better see the face under the broad hat.

"The view from here, I think, is very beautiful," she remarked, incoherently.

"No doubt," agreed the Prince, but he didn't take the trouble to look at it.

"He's a survival of the dark ages," said Susie to herself, "when they just snatched up girls and ran off with them!" Then aloud, "Have you ever been here before?"

"Never before."

"Do you like it?"

"Oh, very much!" His eyes would have told her why; but she could guess without looking.

"I suppose you usually go to one of the larger places?"

"It is one of the traditions of our family that at least a month must be spent at Ostend."

"What a shame that the tradition should be broken!"

"On the contrary, I bless the circumstance that shattered it. Do you know, Miss Rushford, I have never before realised what a tremendously lucky fellow I am? I must pour a libation to the god of chance!"

"It's a goddess, isn't it?" she asked, and regretted the question the next instant.

"You are right," he agreed, his eyes blazing. "A goddess! You have found the word. A goddess! And such a goddess!"

Fortunately, they had reached the end of the promenade, and as they paused at the balustrade, Nell and Lord Vernon joined them, saving Susie from a situation which had slipped entirely beyond her control.

Evidently Nell, too, had been having her difficulties, for she telegraphed her sister a desire to change places. So, on the homeward journey, despite the very apparent unwillingness of the men, Sue walked beside the invalid chair and Nell accompanied the Prince; and while both seemed gay enough—even unnaturally gay, perhaps—I dare say they found that the situation had lost a certain interest; for every danger has its fascination, every hazard its piquancy.

"I am not sure," observed Susie, reflectively, as they went up the stair together, "that I approve of princes. They are too self-assured; they carry things with too high a hand. They are evidently too much accustomed to having their own way."

"It seems to be a characteristic of lords, also," said Nell, with a little sigh.

"What they need is a vigorous calling down. Well, that ought not to be so difficult!" and the dark eyes snapped ominously.

"Though, perhaps, it's hardly worth the trouble," suggested Nell.

"Perhaps not," assented her sister; but half an hour later she waylaid her father to give him her commands. "Dad," she said, "if the Prince of Markeld asks you for permission to call, you'll tell him he may. It's just one of these odious Old World customs."

"So I judged," smiled her father. "He seems a nice fellow, and so when he asked me ten minutes ago, I told him we'd be glad to see him."

"Did—did he mention any particular time?" faltered Sue.

"Why, yes, now I think of it, I believe he said something about this evening."

"Oh!" gasped Susie, and then closed her lips tightly together. "Well," she said to herself, as she turned away, "he hasn't lost any time, to be sure! I'm afraid he's worse than I thought!"

CHAPTER XII

Events of the Night

Life at Weet-sur-Mer, as at most other places of its class, swung in a round prescribed by custom, as fixed and predestined as the courses of the stars. In the late morning occurred the promenade, taken as a brisk constitutional by a few, but by the great majority as a languid stroll designed to create an appetite for luncheon. That meal was followed by a period of torpor, then every one sought the beach—the high, the low; the rich, the poor; the dowdy and the well-dressed; the virgin in white and the cocotte in scarlet; the thin and the obese; the French, the Dutch, the Italian—yea, and the angular English, for Weet-sur-Mer attracted a crowd as hybrid as its name! There they amused themselves each after his own fashion, with dignity or abandon, as the case might be. They could not be said to mingle in the way that an American crowd would have done under like circumstances—the elements of society in an aristocratic country are as incapable of mingling as oil and water. The oil floated placidly on top, while the water disported itself contentedly beneath.

The oil, to preserve the simile, consisted, in the first place, of a number of self-important individuals stalking solemnly up and down, seemingly unconscious of the fact that they were not as solitary as Crusoe; and, in the second place, of certain solid, cohesive groups, presenting to the world a front as impenetrable and threatening as any Austrian phalanx, and guarding in their midst two or three young girls who must, at any hazard, be kept unspotted from the world. Strange to say, the girls appeared contented, even happy; the position seemed to them, no doubt, the normal one for them to occupy—and they could, of course, look forward with certainty to the opening of the prison door when a marriage should be arranged for them. They order this matter better in Europe; or, at least, differently, for there, as a discerning observer has pointed out, marriage means always that a woman is taken down from the shelf, while with us, alas, too often! that she is placed upon it, never to be removed!

To this class, too, belonged certain obese women and emaciated men sitting, in couples, under the gay sunshades with which the beach was bright. The women were dressed always in gowns which, however ornate, were not quite new, not quite fresh, not quite clean; and the black coats of the men were a little shiny at the elbow, a little faded at the seams. But madame still took care to preserve such figure as unkind fate had left her; and monsieur still kept his moustaches waxed to a needle's point; and they sat there together, quite immovable, for hours at a time, staring drearily out toward the horizon, meditating, no doubt, over past glories, or arranging some coup by which their fortunes might be retrieved. Pride will slip from them gradually, as the years pass; madame will abandon her figure and monsieur his moustaches, and they will end their days miserably in some second- or third-rate pension—even, perhaps, the Maison Vauquer!

The water was more interesting, being at once more natural and lively. With it there was no question of maintaining the equilibrium of its position; there was no need of air or artifice; there was none of that heartburning with which the latest Pontifical Princess smilingly swallows the insolence of the descendant (à la main gauche) of the Great Henri, happy to have been noticed, even though to be noticed meant inevitably to be snubbed. There was a freedom about the water, an honest vulgarity, a quality as of Rabelais, refreshingly in contrast with the hot-house manners and morals of the haute noblesse. Madame need not hesitate to cross her legs, if she found that attitude comfortable; monsieur could at once remove coat, waist-coat, collar, cuffs, if he found the weather warm.

Families whose size testified to their bourgeois respectability, lolled in happy promiscuity upon the sands; the children constructed forts or canals, the women tore some neighbour's reputation to pieces, the men lay back lazily and smoked and kept an eye out for the bathers.

There were always many scores of them, belonging principally to that strange and tragic half-world which hangs suspended, like Mahomet's coffin, between earth and heaven, or, at least, between mass and class, and which stretches out its tentacles and sucks nourishment from both. These with a regularity almost religious, spent an hour of every day, weather permitting, splashing in the gentle surf or posing on the beach in costumes more or less revealing, according to the contour of the wearer. The climax of the afternoon, the coup-de-théâtre which all awaited, was the appearance of Mlle. Paul, late of the Variétés. This was such a masterpiece in its way that it is worth pausing a moment to describe.

Suddenly the door of her bathing-machine, which has been drawn just to the water's edge, is flung open, and she appears on the threshold, wrapped in a white sheet with a red border, producing a toga-like effect not ungraceful. She hesitates an instant, and casts a startled glance over the crowd of onlookers, then trips modestly down the steps. With a little frisson, she casts the sheet from her and stands revealed—well, perhaps not quite as Eve was to Adam, but so nearly so that the difference is scarcely worth remarking. She glances down at her shapely legs and then again at the entranced spectators.

"C'est convenable, j'espère hein?" she murmurs, and her bald-headed cicisbeo, who has taken possession of her sheet, hastens to assure her that all is well.

Whereupon, her doubts thus happily set at rest, she wades out to the diving-board, mounts it leisurely, stands poised for an instant at the outermost end, and then dives gracefully into the expectant billows. This she does at intervals for perhaps an hour, the supreme instant for the onlookers being that in which her glowing body, shimmering white through its single clinging garment, is outlined in mid-air against the sky. But finally Mademoiselle grows weary and returns to her machine, where the gallant and attentive gentleman previously referred to patiently awaits her—deus ex machina in more senses than one! The other bathers gradually disappear and the crowd melts imperceptibly away. The show is over.

But though all this was no doubt sufficiently diverting, Weet-sur-Mer was never gloriously, aggressively awake until the sun went down. The diversions of the day depended wholly upon the weather—a dash of rain, a wind from the north, and, pouf! they were not thought of.

Not so the festivities of the night. Nothing short of an earthquake could interfere with them. It was for the night that most of the sojourners at Weet-sur-Mer existed; it was for them, in turn, that the place itself existed! With these worthies, the first serious business of the day was dressing for dinner. As darkness came, a stir of life thrilled through the place from end to end. Rows and clusters of electric lights, many-sized and many-coloured, flashed out at the Casino, in the hotels, along the Digue. Women donned their evening gowns, thankful for handsome shoulders; got out their diamonds, real and paste, their rouge, cosmetics, what not; prepared to go forth and conquer, to play the old, old game which, by the calm light of the morning, seems so flat and savourless! Oh, what would it be without wine and lights and jewels and soft gowns, without warmth

and music and perfume, without the suggestive, sensual darkness closing it in!

At the Casino presently spins the wheel of fortune—named in very mockery!—and it is there that one may gaze unrebuked into the most alluring eyes, may see the reddest lips and whitest shoulders;—crème de la crème of all in that smaller room upstairs, arranged for those whose jaded appetites demand some extra tickling; where no wager may be laid for less than a hundred francs, and for as much more as you please, monsieur, madame, provided only that you have it with you! Too bad that the immortal soul has no longer a money value, or how many would ornament that crowded table in the course of an evening's play!

But there; let a single glimpse of this tawdry, perfumed, fevered hell suffice us, even as it did Archibald Rushford on the first night of his stay at Weet-sur-Mer, and let us go out, as he did, into the pure night, and stand uncovered under the bright stars until the cool breeze from the ocean has washed us clean again, and turning our backs forever upon the Casino and its habitués, retrace our steps along the Digue to the Grand Hôtel Royal.

In apartment A de luxe, a man with flushed face and rumpled hair was stamping nervously up and down. It required a second glance to recognise in him that usually well-groomed and self-possessed individual known as Lord Vernon. Two others were watching his movements with scarcely concealed anxiety—Collins leaning against the window with folded arms, Blake seated at a table with an open despatch-box before him.

"Hang it all, fellows," he was saying, "don't you see what a pickle it puts me in? I was a fool to fall in with the idea—I was actually silly enough to think it would be fun!"

"Of course," put in Collins, in his smoothest tone, "nobody could foresee the presence of this American Diana."

Vernon shot him a quick glance.

"Be mighty careful what you say, my friend," he warned him, "or I'll chuck the whole thing."

"Oh, you can't do that!" protested Blake. "You've got to carry it through! You can't back out now!"

"Can't I?" said Vernon, with a grim little laugh. "Don't be too certain! Suppose she finds it out? Pretty figure I'll cut, won't I?"

"But how *can* she find it out? In four or five days, you can tell her the whole story—you'll figure as a sort of hero of romance—"

"Yes—penny-dreadful romance—backstairs romance. The more I think of it, the less I like it. Diplomacy or no diplomacy, we're playing Markeld a dirty trick—that's the only expression that describes it. He's a nice fellow and we ought to treat him fairly."

Collins shrugged his shoulders as he turned away to the window and lighted a cigarette.

"You said something of the same sort yesterday, I believe," he remarked, negligently.

"Yes—and I meant it then" as I mean it now. Markeld has the right to expect decent treatment at our hands."

"Rather late in the day to take that ground," retorted Collins.

"Late or not, I do take it," answered Vernon, pausing an instant in his walk to emphasise the words.

"I see," said Collins, drily, "it's a sort of moral awakening—a quickening of conscience—the kind of thing we are all so proud of displaying. Pity it didn't come before we started for this place."

Vernon did not reply, only clasped and unclasped his hands nervously.

Collins wheeled around upon him abruptly, his face very stern.

"Come," he demanded, "let's have it out, once for all. I'm sick of this shilly-shally. Why can't you let Markeld take care of himself?"

"Because you're not playing fairly."

"What do you mean by fairly?"

"I mean openly, honestly—as gentlemen should."

"You forget that this is diplomacy—and that we don't live in the Golden Age. We fight with such weapons as come to hand. It's the game."

"Yes—as you understand it. A gang of cutthroats might say the same thing."

Collins flushed a little, but managed to keep his temper.

"I understand it as all diplomats understand it. I take no advantage that every diplomat would not take."

"Then God save me from diplomats!" retorted Vernon.

Collins flushed again, more deeply, and his eyes flashed with sudden fire.

"Your words verge upon the insulting," he said, after a moment. "I warn you not to try my patience too far. Perhaps, after this, you will see fit to choose other company—company more in accord with your really absurd ideals. But I would remind you of one thing—your career depends upon this affair. If it succeeds, you succeed. If it fails through any fault of yours, you are ruined. I assure you the fault will not be overlooked nor extenuated. You will pay for it!"

Vernon looked at him without answering, but his glance was full of meaning. Then he turned and left the room.

For a moment his companions stared after him—they had read his glance aright.

"We'll have to look sharp," said Collins, at last, "or he'll cause us trouble—he's ripe for it, confound him! We'd better wire the home office to hurry things up."

"Yes," agreed Blake, "there's no reasoning with a man in love."

"Nor frightening him," added Collins. "I'm afraid I made a mistake taking that tack. I'll go down and get off a message."

As he opened the door, he fancied that a figure melted into the shadow at the end of the hall. But his attention was distracted from it, for an instant later, he heard a step on the stair, and the Prince of Markeld mounted from the floor below, passed him with the slightest possible inclination of the head, and continued

upward. Collins, staring after him, standing still as death, heard him enter the apartment of the Rushfords.

He remained a moment where he was, his heart heavy with foreboding, then he descended slowly to the office, his head bent, deep in thought. So preoccupied was he that he did not see the sleek face which leered at him from the shadow into which the dim figure had vanished.

The spy listened a moment intently; then, with a tread soft as a cat's, mounted the stair to the floor above.

* * * * *

"Of course, dad," Susie had said, in the early evening, "you will have to stay at home to-night since the Prince is coming to see you."

"Oh, it's not I he's coming to see," rejoined Rushford, easily. "In fact, he'll probably be tickled to death to find me out."

"He's not going to find you out," retorted Susie, firmly. "You're going to stay right here."

"Nonsense, my dear! Why, when I was courting your mother—"

"What has that to do with it?" demanded Sue, very crimson. "Do you mean to say that someone is courting someone around here?"

"Of course, every man may be mistaken at times."

"Well, take my word for it, you're badly mistaken this time."

"Oh!" said her father, with assumed astonishment. "Am I? Then what is all this about?"

"And even if they were," continued Susie, a little unsteadily, "they do it differently from the American way."

"How do they do it, for heaven's sake?"

"Why, dad, how should I know?"

"You seem to have considerable information on the subject."

"I have enough information to know," retorted Sue, with some heat, "that in Europe, a young man calls upon the head of the family, and not upon any of its younger female members."

"I have always understood that Europe was behind the times," observed her father, "but I never suspected it was as bad as that. However, I take your word for it—I always do, you know. I suppose you and Nell will have to stay in your rooms."

"Oh, no," said Sue, "we may be present, so long as our chaperon is there."

"So I'm to do some chaperoning at last, am I?" queried her father. "The job has ceased to be a sinecure. I suppose I'll have to do all the talking, since young girls, of course, may only speak when spoken to and then must answer with a yes or no. Really, my dear, you're setting yourself an exceedingly difficult part!"

"Where did you learn so much about it, dad?"

"I'm reasoning by deduction—all this follows from what you've already told me. Well, I'll do my best to entertain this Dutchman. What does he talk about? Wiener-wurst and sauerkraut?"

"Oh, no," said Susie, with a reminiscent smile and a heightened colour; "he talks

about things much more interesting than those."

And, indeed, the first moments past, Rushford found the Prince an entertaining fellow, with a fund of anecdote and experience decidedly unusual. But conversations of this sort are rarely worth recording; the less so in this instance, since the Prince had taken care to seat himself where he had a good view of the enchanting Susie, and that vision more than once caused his thoughts to wander. Still, they discussed America and Europe, art, nature, the universe—none of which has anything to do with this story—everything, in short, except the warm, palpitating human heart, with which we are principally concerned—and it was very late before the Prince finally arose to go.

Sue whispered her thanks as she kissed her father good-night.

"Good old daddy!" she said, and patted him on the cheek. "And it wasn't such a trial, after all, was it?"

Her father looked down at her quizzically.

"No, my dear," he answered. "In fact, I rather enjoyed it. I fancy he'd be a mighty interesting talker if there weren't any distractions around. Not that I blame him," he added, hastily. "I was that way myself once upon a time," and he bent and kissed her tenderly again.

Susie, before her glass, stared at herself long and earnestly, then took down her hair and proceeded to arrange it in various ways. At last, she got out a diamond bracelet, placed it tiara-wise upon her head, and studied the effect. She was thus engaged when an agitated tap at the door gave her a mighty start, and she had just time to snatch off the decoration when Nell burst in, her face white with emotion.

"Why, what is it, Nellie?" cried her sister, springing up.

"I—I've lost it!" gasped Nell, sinking limply into a chair, and trembling convulsively. "I'm sure—it's been stolen!"

"Lost it!" echoed Sue, reviewing in one quick mental flash Nell's most valuable possessions. "Not the diamond necklace!"

"Oh, Sue!" wailed Nell. "How can you be so mercenary? Oh, I wish it was the

necklace! But it isn't! It's the note!"

It was Sue's turn to gasp, to turn pale, to sink into a chair.

"The note!" she echoed, hoarsely. "Not Lord Vernon's!"

Nell nodded mutely, her face a study for the Tragic Muse.

"But I thought you destroyed it," said Sue. "You said you were going to!"

"I know—but I didn't," answered Nell, a faint tinge of pink in her pallid cheeks. "I—I didn't see the need of destroying it. I supposed nobody knew, and I—I thought I'd keep it as a—a souvenir, you know. I had it in my desk. I am sure I locked it before I came down this evening, but just now I found it open and the note gone."

"Well, and what did you do then?"

"I looked all through the desk—I thought maybe it had slipped out of sight somehow—but it hadn't—it wasn't there. Then I called the maid, Julie, and told her something had been stolen. She swore no one had entered the room since I left it—that no one could have entered it. Of course, I couldn't tell her about the note, so I sent her away and came to you. I—I feel like a traitor. I don't know what to do!"

Susie went to her and put her arms about her and drew her close.

"We can't do anything to-night, dear," she said; "that's certain.
To-morrow you must tell Lord Vernon."

She felt Nell quiver at the words and drew her closer still, with intimate understanding.

"I don't believe he will care so much," she went on, comfortingly. "Perhaps the note isn't so important as we think. I suppose we should have destroyed it at once."

"Yes," said Nell, drearily, "I suppose we should. But who could have foreseen anything like this!"

"The best thing to do now is to go to bed," added Sue, practically, and she raised her sister and led her back to her room. "In the morning we can make a thorough search for the note. Perhaps, after all, you overlooked it."

"I couldn't have overlooked it," answered Nell. "I remember perfectly placing it in this drawer," she continued, going to the desk and opening it, "here, just under this pile of note-paper."

"Perhaps it slipped in between the sheets," suggested Sue.

"I thought of that," said Nell, but nevertheless she began mechanically to open sheet after sheet. As she opened the third one, a little slip of paper fluttered to the floor.

She sprang upon it with a cry of joy, opened it, glanced at it.

"Thank God!" she said, thickly. "It's all right—it's—"

And she fell forward into Susie's arms.

CHAPTER XIII

The Second Promenade

Again the sun rose clear and bright, and again, having dispelled the mist and chill of the early morning, it lured forth for the inevitable promenade such of the sojourners at Weet-sur-Mer as had managed to get to bed before dawn. Prince Markeld, descending with the earliest, left nothing this time to chance, but took his station at the stairfoot, and waited there with a patience really exemplary. From which it will be seen that Princes in love are much as other men.

And presently, descending toward him, he descried the Misses Rushford; Susie radiant as the morning, Nell a trifle paler than her wont, but more beautiful, if anything, because of it. The Prince hastened forward to greet them.

"Which way shall we go?" he asked, with the comfortable certainty of including himself in their plans. "Good-morning," he added, to the occupant of an invalid chair which was standing just outside the door.

"Good-morning," replied Lord Vernon, his eyes on Nell's. "My outing yesterday was such a pleasant one that I was hoping it might be repeated."

"Going or coming?" queried Sue, with a quizzical curve of the lips.

"Both ways," answered Vernon, promptly; but his eyes were still on Nell.

Markeld also looked excellently satisfied.

"Very well," he said, in his autocratic way, "we will proceed as we did yesterday," and he led Susie away. Strange to relate, she followed quite meekly. Somehow, when the moment came, it seemed exceedingly difficult to snub him.

"Do you know," he was saying, "I fell quite in love with your father last night. His point of view is so fresh and so full of humour. Though," he added, "I must confess that sometimes I did not entirely understand him."

"Didn't you?" laughed Susie. "Dad *does* use a good deal of slang. It's an American failing."

"So I have heard. I know my aunt will like him, too—the Dowager Duchess of Markheim, you know."

"No," said Sue, a little faintly, "I didn't know." She had never before considered the possibility of the Prince having any women relatives; her heart fell as she thought what dreadful creatures they would probably prove to be.

"My aunt is the head of the family," explained the Prince, calmly, unconscious of his companion's perturbation. "She rules us with a rod of iron. But you will like her and I know she will like you. She adores anything with fire in it."

"Oh," said Susie, to herself, "and how does he know I've any fire in me?" But she judged it wisest not to utter the question aloud.

"She worships spirit," added the Prince. "She is very fond of quoting a line of your poet, Browning. 'What have I on earth to do,' she will demand, 'with the slothful, with the mawkish, the unmanly?' Sometimes, I fear, she aims the adjectives at me."

Susie felt her heart softening, for she liked that line, too.

"I don't believe you deserve the adjectives," she said.

"Do you not?" he asked, eagerly, with brightened eyes.

"And I should like to meet your aunt," she continued, hastily.

"So you shall, most certainly," he assented, instantly. "As soon as it can be arranged."

"Oh, does it have to be arranged?" inquired Susie, in some dismay.

"Not in that sense—she is very democratic—she likes people for what they are.

But until this question of the succession is concluded you will readily understand that, through anxiety, she is not in the best of humours—not quite herself."

"Is she, then, here?" asked Susie.

"Here? Oh, no; she is at Markheim—at the post of duty. That is another reason—until this affair is settled, I cannot ask her to join me here."

"You will ask her to do that?"

"Certainly; she can stop here very well on her way to Ostend. She would be at Ostend now but for this affair. Perhaps that is another reason why she is ill-humoured. She is so fond of life and gaiety, and in summer Markheim is rather dull. Besides, there is the tradition to maintain."

"How do you know that she is in an ill-humour," questioned Sue, "if you have not seen her?"

"Oh, she writes to me—I had a letter from her this morning. I can see she is not well-pleased—quite the opposite, in fact!—at the way things are going."

"And how are they going?"

"They seem to be going against us," said the Prince, with a touch of bitterness.

"But how *can* they be? I thought things were at a stand-still until Lord Vernon got—got well enough to take them up again."

"So did I—that is what one would naturally suppose. Yet it seems that an undercurrent has set in against us. I fear that I made a mistake," he added, gloomily, "in agreeing with Lord Vernon not to proceed further for a week, though, under the circumstances, I could scarcely refuse. He seems well enough," and he glanced around, "to hear what I have to say."

"He *is* well enough!" cried Sue, indignantly; and certainly at that moment, talking eagerly to Nell, that gentleman appeared quite the reverse of an invalid. "*I* will speak to him—I am under no promise—I believe—"

She stopped, fearing that she might say too much—after all, she could not betray Lord Vernon; she could only appeal to him, warn him.

"Yes?" her companion encouraged her, his eyes on her face.

"I believe that I can help you," she concluded, a little lamely. "I want to help—the people. Of course, we Americans believe that a people ought to choose their own rulers—but where that isn't possible, the next best thing is to give them the best available. I should be proud to help do that!"

"But you are taking my word for it," he protested. "You ought to hear the other side. Perhaps they might convince you—"

"No, they wouldn't!" cried Susie. "Your word is all I need; you've explained things so clearly."

"Thank you," he said, in a vibrant voice, still looking at her.

"Besides," she added, with a glance upward, "dad agrees with you, and I've a great deal of faith in dad."

"I shall be very glad of your help on any terms," he said, refusing to be cast down.

"And you will tell me if anything unexpected happens? I may be able to help you more than you think."

"Yes," he promised, "I will tell you the moment I have any news."

"You haven't any real news—about the undercurrent, I mean? You don't *really* know—"

"No; it is just in the air; I do not know where the rumours come from, but my aunt has heard them also. There is a vague impression that we are losing."

"But you shan't lose!" cried Susie. "You shan't lose; not even if I have to—to—"

"Not even if you have to—?" prompted the Prince, eagerly, as she stammered and stopped.

"To play my trump card," she finished, with a little unsteady laugh. "Don't ask me what it is, but it's a good one!"

* * * * *

Meanwhile, as she walked beside the invalid chair, Nell was making her confession.

"Lord Vernon," she began, in a low voice, "for a time last night, I feared that I had utterly ruined your cause."

He glanced up at her quickly.

"In what way?" he asked.

"You remember the note you wrote m—us the first day?"

"Perfectly," he answered, noting the stammer, and understanding it, with a quick leap of the heart.

"I should, no doubt, have destroyed it at once, but I thought it would be perfectly safe in my desk."

"And it was stolen? No matter, Miss Rushford. It isn't worth worrying about. I'm sick of the whole affair, anyway—I shall rather welcome the catastrophe. You've lost sleep over it," he continued, looking at her keenly. "It has made you almost ill! I shall never forgive myself!"

"Thank you," she said, softly, her lips trembling, her eyes very bright. "It is beautiful of you to be so generous. But fortunately the note was not stolen. I found it afterwards among some note-paper, where it had somehow found its way."

"And you destroyed it?"

"No," she said, and took it from her bosom. "I thought I would better restore it to you, so that you yourself could destroy it. Here it is," and she held it out to him with fingers not wholly steady.

He took it, his eyes still on her face.

"It has caused us enough trouble," he said, and made as though to tear it into bits.

But Nell laid her hand upon his arm.

"Without looking at it?" she protested.

"You are right," he agreed, and opened it and glanced at the contents.

His hands were trembling slightly as he folded it again.

"On second thought," he said, and there was a certain thickness in the words which Nell was too agitated to notice, "I believe that I shall keep it. It is the only souvenir I have, you know, of our first meeting."

And he smiled up at her—such a smile as Meïamoun must have bent upon Cleopatra as he drained the poisoned cup.

CHAPTER XIV

A Bearding of the Lion

Susie Rushford was of that temperament which, so far from avoiding difficulties, rather rushes to meet them, welcoming "each rebuff that turns earth's smoothness rough," to quote again from her favourite poet.

So, when they reached the end of the promenade, it was she who commanded a change of partners and who took her place resolutely beside the invalid chair. Perhaps Lord Vernon scented danger, or it may be that he merely resented the change of companions: at any rate, as they started back, he contented himself with a dignified silence. But Sue was not to be so easily put off.

"The Prince of Markeld has been telling me a few things about the succession," she began, resolutely. "You will pardon me, Lord Vernon, when I say I don't think you're treating him quite fairly."

"I don't think so myself, Miss Rushford," returned the occupant of the chair, curtly.

"His branch of the house seems to be really, in every way, the more deserving."

"I haven't the least doubt of it."

"And the one which the people of Schloshold-Markheim prefer."

"That, too, is very probably the case. We threshed all that out yesterday, didn't we?"

"Not so thoroughly as I should like to do," said Susie. "I've been thinking over the story you told me yesterday, and I believe I've guessed who the man with the

pistol is."

"I thought very probably you would guess."

"Did you? Then you won't mind telling me if I've guessed rightly. It's the German Emperor, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Thank you. But I'm awfully obtuse, for I must confess that I haven't as yet been able to perceive the pistol."

"Haven't you? I thought you'd guess that, too. I had forgotten that American women aren't interested in public events."

"Now you're growing sarcastic!" cried Susie. "You see, I never before knew how interesting they were," she added, in self-defence. "I'm trying to turn over a new leaf—"

"And you want my help?"

"I always like to understand things. Even as a child I hated riddles. And I think, too, that nations ought to be like individuals—only more so—always ready, anxious even, to help their friends."

"Even to the point of disregarding the pistol?"

"You'll have to show me the pistol."

"I'll try to, Miss Rushford," said Vernon, with the air of a man staking his last louis, "since you seem to doubt that it exists. Let us look at the matter for a moment from the outside, without question of our personal likes or dislikes. England, just at this moment, has her hands full in South Africa, and it isn't in the least unlikely that the German Emperor would put a finger in that pie, if we gave him an excuse—a great many of his advisers are trying to get him to interfere without waiting for the excuse, but he's not quite willing to go that far. So our business is not to give him any excuse—not even the very slightest. Suppose we meddle in this affair of Schloshold-Markheim, which is really his dependency—don't you see, he might easily, and quite logically, claim that as a precedent for meddling in the affairs of the Transvaal, which we claim as our

dependency. Now I hope that you perceive the pistol, and see, too, that it isn't in the least a toy affair, but a very dangerous and effective weapon."

"I do see," said Susie, quickly.

"Besides," Vernon added, anxious to vindicate himself still further, since, after all, Susie was Nell's sister, "Schloshold-Markheim is a very insignificant corner of this earth; not so big, in fact, as many of our English shires. Self-preservation is the first law of nations. Why should England imperil herself? You see, the whole question reduces itself to that old, heartless, but very sane doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number."

"Why not say all that frankly to the Prince of Markeld?" suggested Sue.

"Because, my dear young lady, before we can say anything, we have to give him a chance to say his say. And he would very probably state certain truths which it would be very embarrassing for us to hear, and still more embarrassing to answer. All Europe would be listening. We're between the devil and the deep sea."

"Well, and what are you going to do about it?" asked Susie, plump out.

"We're going to wait," said Lord Vernon, gloomily.

"To wait?"

"Yes—until the sea subsides a little or the devil gets tired and goes away and gives us a chance to escape. We dare neither fight the devil nor brave the ocean. Our hands are tied."

Susie walked along a moment in silence, trying to distinguish the wrong and the right of this very intricate question.

"All that you have been telling me may be true," she said, at last; "I haven't the least doubt that it is true; but yet it doesn't quite excuse tricking the Prince of Markeld as you are doing."

"I know it doesn't," admitted Vernon, instantly. "It doesn't excuse it in the least. I don't like it any more than you do, Miss Rushford. But the ways of diplomacy are devious past understanding; and then, again, when one has entered upon a

line of action, it is sometimes very hard to change it or let go. It's like a hot iron or a charged wire—one never realises one's mistake until it is too late. After all, a few days will end it."

"A few days! Then the Prince was right!"

"Right?"

"He told me that an undercurrent of some sort seemed to be setting in against him. I warn you, Lord Vernon, that I have become his ally."

"Even to the point of giving me away?" he inquired, half humourously, looking at her in evident enjoyment.

"Even to the point of giving you away, if you don't play fairly," she answered, in deadly earnest. "At your suggestion, he consented to a truce for a week—"

"It was Collins who suggested it."

"No matter; it is all the same; the proposal came from your side. One can't honourably employ a truce in laying mines for one's enemy."

Lord Vernon was looking straight ahead. There was now no trace of amusement in his face.

"You are quite right, Miss Rushford," he said. "I release you from any engagement with either me or Collins to keep our secret. Let me tell you, I've protested more than once, but I'm no longer a free agent in regard to this thing, and I have to see it through. The very worst moment of all was when Markeld came up to my rooms and apologised for suspecting me. I tell you, I felt like a worm, and a particularly nasty one, at that. It will be my turn to apologise before long; and I won't feel quite easy in my conscience till I do."

Susie had listened wide-eyed, and had stolen a glance, once or twice, at his set face. There could be no doubting his utter sincerity, and it softened her, as sincerity always softens a woman.

"Of course," she said, more gently, "I shan't give you away unless I see that the Prince is being treated unfairly. Let things drift for a week, since he has consented to a truce—don't do anything against him." The words were spoken

almost pleadingly.

"Oh, it isn't I who will do anything," retorted Lord Vernon, sharply. "I'm not quite such a cur as that. Don't you understand, Miss Rushford—the thing is out of my hands—is quite beyond my control. I'm not the one responsible for the undercurrent, if there is one. If anything happens, it won't be through any act of mine—it will be in spite of me."

"But I thought—"

"You thought the foreign secretary was the whole thing? Well, he isn't! There's a dozen other members of the cabinet, more or less, to mix in, and, when all's said, the premier has to approve, and after that the Queen. And all of us are more or less afraid of the press, to say nothing of the House of Commons, where the opposition is always trying to put us in an awkward corner. So our motives are usually pretty mixed, and it's very rarely that we can do just as we'd like to do."

"Then," said Susie, slowly, "I think that I must tell the Prince."

"Do so, by all means," retorted her companion, a little impatiently. "I give you full permission, if you care to take the responsibility. But, I assure you, it's a heavy one."

"Oh, not so awfully heavy!" said Susie, sceptically. "You have already told me what a little place Schloshold-Markheim is."

"It *is* little; but so is the pivot that a great piece of machinery swings on. Collins said yesterday that the peace of Europe may hang upon this question. I laughed at him then, but it's not at all impossible that he may be right. Of course, with a little thing like the peace of Europe, every schoolgirl has the right to meddle! A million of human beings, more or less—what do they amount to? Let us slaughter them, maim them, outrage them, burn their houses, destroy their crops! Let us put great armies in the field, and fight great battles and think only of the glory! Don't look at the shapeless things beneath the hoofs of the horses, nor think of the women waiting at home—waiting for the lists of dead and missing! Let us release the spring that will set all this in motion—it requires only a touch, the merest touch! And think, we should be making history! Besides, our honour requires it! We must be jealous of our honour—it is of so much more importance than the peace of Europe!"

And Vernon, having arrived at the hotel entrance, bade them good-bye and was wheeled to the lift, leaving his companion rather breathless.

CHAPTER XV

"Be Bold, Be Bold"

Lord Vernon, no doubt, would have spoken with less acerbity but for the fact that his nerves were jangling badly. The lift was started promptly, but it required all his self-control to remain seated in his chair during the slow progress upward of the great machine of which Monsieur Pelletan was so proud. Scarcely had the door of his apartment closed behind him, when he threw aside the invalid wrappings with a perfect fury, sprang from his chair, and hastened into the inner room. Collins and Blake were seated at a table there, labouring with a telegram in cipher.

"What's the matter now?" demanded Collins, sharply, as he looked up and saw Vernon's disordered face.

For answer, Vernon took from his pocket a folded paper and tossed it on the table.

Collins picked it up, opened it, and read its contents.

"Well?" he said, looking up with a sigh of relief. "If this is the note you wrote those Rushford girls, I must say I think you've done a mighty wise thing to get it back. It was a dangerous thing to have lying around. Have you had a quarrel?" and he grinned a little maliciously.

"Collins," said Vernon, coldly, "you have the poorest conception of good taste of any man I know, and I know some awful bounders. But I won't quarrel with you now, for you'll be grinning on the other side of that ugly mouth of yours anyway in about a minute. Will you kindly examine this piece of paper?" and he tore a leaf from his notebook.

Collins, biting his lips until they bled, took it and looked it over with frowning and puzzled countenance.

"Well?" he asked, at last.

"The note I sent the Misses Rushford," said Vernon, quietly, "was written on a leaf from the notebook, which I tore out just as I did that one you have in your hand," and he sat down and stared out the window, across the gray dunes and the gray sea to the gray horizon.

Collins, with compressed lips, held the two pieces of paper up to the light and compared their texture. Then he got out a small pocket magnifying glass and examined through it the writing on the note.

"It's a tracing," he said, at last, "and a mighty clever piece of work.
The paper, too, is very like."

"But it's not the same," put in Vernon.

"Oh, no, it's not the same."

"Do you mean this is a forgery?" burst out Blake, hoarsely, snatching up the note and staring at it.

"Undoubtedly," answered Collins, coolly, but his face was very dark. "The forger, clever as he was, could scarcely expect to be so fortunate as to duplicate the paper. And then, of course, he couldn't foresee that it would be turned over to you. But he did very well. Now let's have the story."

"Miss Rushford had the note in her desk," said Vernon, shortly. "She missed it last night and went to tell her sister of the theft. When she returned to her room and began a systematic search, she found it slipped among some note-paper in the drawer where she had placed it. She returned it to me this morning."

"Without suspecting that it was a forgery?"

"Certainly."

"And you didn't tell her?"

"No."

Collins sat for a moment staring down at the note.

"Which reminds me," he remarked, at last, "that Markeld spent the evening with the Rushfords."

"Well, what of it?" demanded Vernon, sharply, wheeling around. "What is it you mean to insinuate?"

"My dear sir," answered Collins, suavely, "I insinuate nothing. I was merely remarking upon the coincidence. If I did not happen to know all the circumstances, I might have been led to suggest that, as only one Miss Rushford is devoted to you—"

Vernon sprang to his feet with such wrath in his face that Collins stopped abruptly.

"It was well you stopped," said Vernon, savagely. "Another word, and by heaven —"

"Don't be a fool!" Collins broke in. "I'm not afraid of you nor your threats. This forgery, of course, is the work of that French spy—"

A servant tapped at the door and handed in a card.

Collins took it, glanced at it, and looked up with a little smile of satisfaction.

"It's Tellier," he said. "I was expecting him; he was certain to come to us. Leave him to me," and he went out, closing the door behind him.

Monsieur Tellier was even more effulgent than usual. There was upon his face a smile of supreme self-satisfaction. He had reason to believe that he had achieved a good stroke, and he was resolved to make the most of it. He had dreamed dreams and seen visions—one vision in particular which included within the same circumference himself and a certain frail fairy of the Robinière who had always regarded him with disdain. Now all that was to be changed! So he greeted Collins with a self-assurance and aplomb quite removed from his

ordinary manner.

Collins confronted him with the card still between his fingers, and returned his greeting with the utmost coldness.

"You wished to see me?" he asked.

"Pardon," corrected Tellier, "it is Lord Vernon I wish to see."

"Lord Vernon is ill and sees no one."

Tellier gave his mustachios a supercilious twirl.

"You still maintain that farce?" he queried. "I assure you that for me it has long since lost its novelty."

Collins took a step toward the door.

"Shall I show you out?" he asked.

"No—not yet," and Tellier smiled provokingly.

"You would really better let me show you out," said Collins, quietly.
"In another moment, I shall probably kick you out."

Tellier's face turned a deep purple and his white teeth gleamed behind his moustache.

"Have a care!" he said, hoarsely. "That expression will cost you dear!"

Collins smiled contemptuously.

"Oh," he retorted; "so it's blackmail! I might have known from your appearance. Well, my dear sir, you have mistaken your men. You have nothing which we care to buy. You would better go."

A purple vein stood out across Tellier's forehead, as he came a step nearer.

"Do not be too sure, monsieur," he said. "You play a bold game, but it does not for an instant deceive me. Lord Vernon is no more ill than I. It is useless to deny it—I have that here which proves it—written with his own hand—yes, pardie,

written in my presence!" and with trembling fingers he took from his pocketbook a folded slip of paper.

"Indeed?" said Collins, with mild curiosity. "This is truly wonderful," and he held out his hand.

But Tellier drew back a step, unfolded the note and held it open between his fingers.

"You may read it," he said, his eyes flashing with triumph. "But come no nearer."

Collins leisurely got out his monocle, polished it with his handkerchief, adjusted it, and scanned the note.

"Really," he said, "unless you can hold it a little steadier, I fear I can't read it."

Tellier steadied his hand by a mighty effort, and watched him, his eyes shining. But the face of the Englishman did not change—not in a single line, not by the merest shadow.

"Very interesting, no doubt," said Collins, dropping his glass, "to those who care for backstairs intrigue. Is it this note that you wish to sell?"

"Oh, not that," corrected Tellier, with a little offended gesture, his self-assurance back in an instant. "You mistake me—I am not of that sort at all. On the other hand, it is friendship for you which has brought me here. I have no wish to injure you, monsieur, and you yourself, of course, perceive fully what a disaster it would be should this note be placed in certain hands."

"To what adventure does the note refer?" queried Collins.

"It refers to the adventure of Lord Vernon with the two Americans on the afternoon of his arrival. He has, no doubt, mentioned it to you."

"Lord Vernon has had no adventure since his arrival here," retorted Collins, coldly. "But go ahead with your story."

"As I was saying," continued Tellier, "I am a poor man. I have my future to consider—I cannot afford to throw away this opportunity which chance has placed in my hands. I will be reasonable, however—I will not ask too much—a

hundred thousand francs—"

"Tellier," Collins interrupted, with a gesture of weariness, "I have not the least idea what you mean. But I do know that you have been hoaxed, that you are the victim of some deception, that somebody is making a fool of you. A hundred thousand francs! And for that note! Why, man, you are mad or very, very drunk! We don't want the note. We have no concern in it!"

"No concern in it!" shrieked Tellier. "When it is written by Lord Vernon!"

"Lord Vernon did not write it," retorted Collins, coolly.

"I saw it—with my own eyes I saw it!"

"Then your eyes deceived you. Evidently you are not acquainted with Lord Vernon's writing, my friend. Shall I show you a sample? Wait."

He went to a desk, got out a despatch-box, unlocked it, and ran rapidly through its contents, while Tellier watched him with bloodshot eyes.

"This will do," Collins said, at last. "A note to Monsieur Delcassé, with which you are perhaps familiar, since it has recently been made public. Look at it."

Tellier almost snatched it—one glance was enough. There was absolutely no resemblance between that tall, angular hand and the writing of the note. He looked at the signature, at the seal—there could be no doubting them. His lips were quivering, his fat cheeks hanging flaccid, as he handed the paper back.

"You are playing with me," he said, thickly. "What I have seen, I have seen. What I know, I know. You cannot trick me. I will go to the Prince of Markeld—to Prince Ferdinand himself—"

"To whomever you please," interrupted Collins, "only go at once," and he snatched open the door.

Tellier hesitated an instant, glanced at the other's face, and went.

And Collins, closing the door behind him, mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Well done, my friend," he said; "exceedingly well done!"

And with that, he turned back to the inner room.

* * * * *

"Dad," began Susie Rushford, that evening, gently but firmly taking away the paper over which her father was engaged, "I wish you would devote that massive brain of yours to this Schloshold-Markheim muddle for a few moments, and give me the benefit. It's quite beyond me, and I'm nearly worried to death over it. I want your advice. Now, in the first place, why should Lord Vernon play off sick? It seems such a little thing to do."

'"Tall oaks from little acorns grow,'" quoted her father. "This little thing may have big consequences."

"I didn't mean little that way," explained Susie. "I meant little in a moral way."

"Well, my dear," said her father, reflectively, "everything is fair in love, war, and diplomacy. Your diplomat, when he is busy at his trade, seems to lose sight of fine moral distinctions. Even the greatest of them have sometimes stooped to acts decidedly small, and yet in private life they were doubtless honourable men. It's a good deal like a political campaign in the United States, where men who are usually honest will lie about the other side, without any twinges of conscience—there's even a loop-hole in the libel law for them to crawl through, made, it would seem, especially for their benefit. So, I think, we may pass up the moral objection."

"But what does he hope to accomplish, dad?" persisted Susie. "What *can* he accomplish by merely sitting still?"

"A great many things may be accomplished by sitting still," said her father, puffing his cigar reflectively. "It is one of those simple things which are sometimes very difficult to do. I've found that out, more than once, in the course of my checkered career."

"Now that we are through with precept, let us pass on to example, you dear old philosophical thing!" laughed Susie. "What should you say Lord Vernon hoped to accomplish in this instance?"

"It seems very plain," said Rushford, "though, of course, I may be mistaken. But I fancy he believes that while he is playing 'possum here, Emperor William, who is not especially renowned for patience, will settle the question of the succession without asking any one's advice—as, I must say, he seems to have a perfect right to do. In that case, it would, of course, be too late for England to interfere; she could only express her regrets to Prince Ferdinand, and send her congratulations to Prince George. So if Markeld doesn't get a chance to say his little speech within the next two or three days, I don't believe he'll ever get a chance."

Susie nodded thoughtfully.

"The Prince ought to be able to reason that out for himself, oughtn't he?"

"I should think so, if he can see farther than his own nose. Were you thinking of going to his assistance? Take my advice, my dear, and refrain. You and Nell are altogether too deep in it, as it is."

Again Susie nodded.

"Thank you, dear," she said, and taking him by either ear, she kissed him between the eyes. "Now, I think I'll go to bed. I've a mighty knotty problem on hand and I've got to work it out right away."

"Can I help any more?"

"No," and she shook her head decidedly. "This is one of those odious problems which a person has to work out alone. It reminds me of our school examinations, where we were on honour not to ask any help. Only," she added, with a sigh, "this is far more serious. Good-night."

"Good-night," said her father, and watched her until the door closed behind her. Then he turned again to his paper.

Susie, alone in her own room, sat with her head in her hands, staring out across the moonlit beach. Away in the distance, she could see the little breakers washing white upon the sand; to the left stretched the long, brilliant promenade of the Digue, ending in the glare of light which marked the Casino.

"The peace of Europe!" she murmured.

"The peace of Europe! I wonder if he was merely trying to frighten me?"

And she shivered a little at the remembrance of Lord Vernon's words, as she arose to go to bed.

CHAPTER XVI

A Prince and His Ideals

By what process of telepathy the Dowager Duchess of Markheim, dwelling in one corner of that gloomy old fortress which had sheltered so many generations of the family, learned of the danger threatening her nephew it would be impossible to say. She had been skilled for many years in telling which way the wind was blowing; nay, more, in foreseeing from which quarter it would presently blow; so perhaps the two or three casual references to the American girls which she had gleaned from the letters which the Prince dutifully wrote her had been enough to awaken her suspicions. Or, it may be, that some one of the many persons at Weet-sur-Mer who had observed with interest the Prince's comings and goings, deemed it a duty to society to send the duchess a discreet word of warning.

Any one who knew the duchess knew also that a single word would be all-sufficient. Her reputation for worldly astuteness surpassed that of any other old woman in Europe, though it was, perhaps, not altogether deserved. Forty years before, she had been a healthy and happy girl, whose experience of the world had been confined to the family estate near Gemünden. And the estate was a small one, for the family, though of blood the bluest, was very poor.

One tragedy had marked her early girlhood. She was curled up, one evening, in the window-seat at the stairhead watching the moon rise over the great trees of the park, when she heard loud voices in the hall below, and peeping down, saw her father strike another man heavily across the mouth. A sudden silence fell, and she stole away frightened to her bed, where she sobbed herself to sleep. In the gray of the morning, her mother had awakened her, had carried her to a window, and knelt with her there, staring out toward the park and calling upon God to have mercy. Through the streaming mist, there came presently toward them two dim figures, carrying a third—what need to go on? After that, the

house became a cloister.

It chanced, one day when she was nearly twenty, that the eye of her cousin of Markheim fell upon her. He had never married; he had been too busy with his pleasures. But he had arrived at an age when it was necessary to think of an heir; at an age, too, when the uneasy consciousness began to grow within him that if he desired an heir, there was no time to be lost. So he looked at his blooming cousin, noting the evidences of vigorous health which glowed in eye and lip and cheek. He knew that the girl would have no dot, but he had reached a place where he was perfectly aware that if he wanted youth and beauty, he must take them unadorned. So he made up his mind at once, and in due time the marriage was arranged.

In pity, we will not dwell upon it. Those who saw the bride's face as she entered the carriage with her husband will never forget its expression of horror, disgust, and abject fear. A year later, the desired heir arrived, a microcephalous idiot, to whom a merciful providence allowed but eighteen months of life; and in due time, the August Prince himself was gathered to his fathers.

During her period of martyrdom, the duchess had pressed her cross to her bosom with the religious enthusiasm of a devotee hugging his barbed instrument of torture. The consciousness that she was suffering for her family's sake as became a daughter of the Caesars was the only thing which enabled her to endure her shame and degradation. She donned her widow's weeds with such depth of thankfulness as few mortals know, and settled herself to the enjoyment of her position.

She found it on the whole a good position, unassailable, with many desirable perquisites. She decided, no doubt, that life owed her such tremendous arrears of happiness that she could never hope to collect them except by devoting her whole time to it; and devote her whole time to it she did, in good earnest. The years, in their passage, erased certain lines from her face and restored the curves to her figure—indeed, it came to be much more than a restoration!—but they could not restore the colour to her hair nor the lightness to her heart. She looked at mankind from a cynical altitude of worldly wisdom; her wit grew keen and swift as d'Artagnan's rapier; her bon-mots had a way of passing into proverbs, or of being stolen by more distinguished contemporaries. She took her revenge upon society as completely as she could, yet without bitterness. Indeed, it is probable that, could she have ordered her life anew, she would not have ordered

it differently.

Such, then, was the Dowager Duchess of Markheim, as she sat gazing thoughtfully from her window, pondering the situation. She was fully alive to the fact that American girls are always a menace to the peace of noble families; besides, she was not at all satisfied with the progress—or, rather, lack of progress—which the Prince had made in the delicate negotiation entrusted to his hands. In a word, she decided that, from every point of view, it were wise for her to be herself upon the scene—and so much nearer her beloved Ostend! Therefore, being of that superior order of woman who never has to make up her mind but once, she forthwith gave orders for the departure.

It consequently happened, on the morning following the events narrated in the previous chapter, that there was another distinguished arrival at the Grand Hôtel Royal, to the delight and despair of Monsieur Pelletan.

"I shall need an apartment of at least five rooms, not higher than the second floor," announced the duchess.

"If Madame la Duchesse had only notified us of t'is honour!" protested Pelletan, with upraised hands. "I swear t'at I haff not'ing— not'ing—not one single apartment wort'y off madame—not efen one leetle room up under t'e gutters."

"Nonsense!" she interrupted, vigorously. "I have heard all that a hundred times at least. Which apartment has my nephew?"

"Madame's nephew?"

"Certainly, imbecile! Monsieur le Prince de Markeld."

"Oh," cried Pelletan. "Monsieur le Prince hass apartment B de luxe."

"And so has twice as much room as he needs, of course. Well, take my luggage up there, wherever it is. At my age, one is beyond the reach of scandal, even at a Dutch bathing-resort. Where is Monsieur le Prince?"

"Monsieur le Prince iss taking t'e promenade," explained Pelletan.

"Very well; I have my toilette to make. When he returns, send him up to me at once. Here, boy, apartment B," and followed by her maid, she started up the

stair, leaving Monsieur Pelletan staring, open-mouthed.

"But t'ere iss a lift, madame!" he cried, regaining his breath.

"A lift!" retorted the duchess. "At my age! What is the man thinking of! En avant, boy!" and she went on up the stair.

* * * * *

The watches of the night had not brought that final solution of the problem which Susie Rushford had hoped for, and she did not know whether to be glad or sorry when she found the Prince at the stairfoot awaiting her. There could be no doubt that he was wholly, undividedly glad—one glance at his face told her that—and he greeted her in a way that sent a little thrill to her heart. After all, she told herself, perhaps she would better let things drift; one more day could make no difference. And there was no reason why she should take the affair more seriously than did the principal person concerned in it.

Outside the door, as usual, was the invalid chair; and while Lord Vernon did not forget to say good-morning, it was not upon her his eyes rested. Nell, at least, was perplexed by no problems, and was unaffectedly gay. Susie almost envied her; and yet problems were interesting, too.

And then there was Collins. As she acknowledged his bow, she was struck anew with the concentrated secretiveness of his appearance. There was a new look in his eyes this morning, a look as though he were watching her, and it made her vaguely uneasy. But the feeling passed as they turned eastward along the promenade, and she soon forgot all about him, for—quite exceptionally—her companion was talking of himself.

"I do not want that you should exaggerate the importance of this little dispute," he was saying. "Seen thus close at hand, it looms rather large; but it really matters very little to the great world. Even I can get far enough away from it to see that."

"And yet," rejoined Susie, "I have heard it said that it might possibly endanger the peace of Europe."

The Prince smiled at the words as at an old acquaintance.

"The peace of Europe," he said, "is a kind of bugaboo which diplomats use to frighten each other with, and even to frighten themselves with. I do not believe that the peace of Europe hangs on any such delicate balance as they pretend. Though, of course," he added, more gravely, "there are certain circumstances under which this question of the succession might become very unpleasant to the Powers."

"Ah!" breathed Susie, who had been listening eagerly. "You admit that, then?"

"Admit it? Certainly—why not? But, intrinsically, it amounts to little. So it is with us Markelds—our lineage is as long as that of any house in Europe, and we hold our heads very high, but we are really of not much importance. We keep up a certain state, we live in a castle, if you will; but we really do nothing worth while, principally, I suppose, because we are so poor."

"So poor?" echoed Susie, open-eyed.

"You are thinking of the apartment de luxe," said the Prince, with a smile; "of the special train. But, do you not see, those are the very things which make me poor. I have no use for seven rooms; in the special train, I can occupy but a single seat. All the rest is waste, which does me no good—rather the reverse, indeed, since it serves to impress people with an exaggerated idea of my importance and so pave the way for fresh extravagances. I did not mean that I am poor absolutely; I do not suppose that I shall ever want for food and clothing and a place to sleep. It is only as a Prince that I am poor—that we Markelds are all poor."

"But one would think there were many things worth while which a man in your position could do," said Susie, earnestly, "even if you aren't rich."

"Oh," he explained, looking down at her with a laugh in his eyes, "I would not have you think that I am always wholly idle. I am colonel of a dragoon regiment, and I inspect it, sometimes, or ride in front of it at a general review. I hunt. I attend various functions of the court. I even sometimes act as the representative of my house, as I am doing now."

"None of which," said Susie, "except perhaps the last, is in the least worth while."

"I agree with you, unreservedly," he assented; "but it is about what most men in my position do."

"So I have heard," said Sue, "but I never really believed it. I thought it an invention of the society reporters."

"It is true, nevertheless. You see there is no incentive, for most of us, to do anything else. Of course, we cannot work, nor engage in trade."

"I don't admit the 'of course.' But leaving that aside for the moment, aren't there any exceptions?"

"Yes—a few at whom the rest of us look rather askance. You see, there is the tradition to be maintained."

"The tradition?"

"Of royalty—of divine right. We must do nothing to spoil the tradition, or weaken it, or our people may find out that we are not really necessary, after all, just as the Americans have done."

Susie glanced at him to see if he was in earnest; but he appeared to be entirely so.

"Do the exceptions mind being looked askance at?" she questioned.

"No, I do not think they mind in the least. Most of them are too busy to pay any heed to what other people are thinking about them. Besides, the cause of the exception is usually a woman, who takes up most of the exception's leisure time."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Let me explain. You see, when one of us marries a woman of his own class —'Prinzessen, Comtessen, Serene English Altessen,' as Svengali called them— he usually gets a partner more—ah—hidebound, I think you call it—than himself—a greater stickler for precedent and tradition and position and etiquette and elegant leisure, and all that sort of thing. Whatever liberal ideas he may have had, he finds he must abandon or, at least, suppress, if there is to be peace between his wife and him. It is only those who are so fortunate as to meet and win exactly the right woman *out* of their class who get the incentive. You understand, now?"

"Yes," said Susie, with a queer catch in her voice. "Yes, I think I do."

"So," he added, with a little bitter laugh, "you see why we others look askance at these exceptions. In the first place they have preferred to step down out of their rank for a wife—that deals a blow at the tradition, and every blow weakens it; in the second place, they have left some noble lady husbandless, for your noble ladies seldom so far forget their rank as to marry out of it, though that may be because the men never permit them to—again an injury to us as a class; and, finally, they are mixing with the world, they are meeting other men face to face, as equals, they are claiming no merit because of birth, no authority because of rank; they are, perhaps, even working with their hands. Whereas our business is to keep aloof from the world, to maintain a barrier of caste between ourselves and other men, for they must not suspect that we are as imperfect as they—that we have the same appetites and passions, the same defects and meannesses. Our business is to rule over them, to require their obedience because God so wills it. We tremble when we see the apostates cast aside their rank and descend into the world's arena, for we fear that the people, finding them at close view only human, may come at last to believe that the right by which we rule is not, after all, divine. Then they will tear down the barrier of caste, strip us of the privileges of rank, and proclaim the absurdity that all men are equal. And I might add, we are jealous of the exceptions, because they are happy. Marriages of state are seldom love matches; the kind which furnish the incentives are always so."

To all of which Susie had listened with bated breath, only glancing up once or twice to study her companion's face. It was a lifting of the curtain, a revelation of the heart, which left her deeply moved.

"You don't seem to care for the tradition," she said, at last.

"Oh, yes, I do; it would be untrue to pretend otherwise. Only, it has occurred to me quite recently that merely to inherit a position is not quite enough. A man should try to deserve it"

"And you're going to try?" asked Susie, looking at him with something very like adoration in her eyes.

"I am going to try—yes," he answered. "But I shall need help—I am afraid I should not make a success of it by myself."

And then he fell silent, for they had reached the end of the promenade, where the

others joined them.

CHAPTER XVII

The Duchess to the Rescue

It may be that Lord Vernon had been so fortunate as to find a topic of conversation equally absorbing; at any rate, Nell entered the hotel with her sister rather subdued and tremulous, and they mounted to their rooms in silence. A week before, they would probably have thrown themselves into each other's arms and kissed each other and cuddled each other and cried over each other, without precisely knowing why, or, at least, without troubling to put the reason into words. But the events of the past few days had, imperceptibly, wrought a change in their relations. An impalpable veil had come between them, a subtle dissonance in point of view. They were pledged, as it were, to rival interests.

A woman who has no other confidante will, invariably, seek counsel and sympathy of her own reflected self; and if so it was in this case, for each of our two heroines went straight to her room, and locked the door, and sat down before her glass, and, chin in hands, communed long and earnestly with the image pictured there, gazing deep into its eyes, and thinking unutterable thoughts, which completely defy transcription.

At the same moment, to Archibald Rushford, sitting immersed in his morning newspaper, wholly unsuspicious of all this, the Prince of Markeld's card was handed. It may be noted in passing that, with the influx of patrons to the house, the American had found it necessary to retire to the privacy of his own apartment in order to enjoy the paper undisturbed.

"All rights show him up," he said, when he had glanced at the card; and almost immediately the Prince himself appeared.

Rushford started up with hand outstretched.

"Glad to see you, Prince," he said. "I was just figuring on looking you up and wondering how I'd better go about it—I didn't quite know what the etiquette of the thing was."

The Prince laughed.

"The etiquette is simple." he answered. "You have only to come to my door and knock."

"Refreshingly democratic!" and Rushford's eyes danced. "That would appeal to my countrymen. But my ignorance was natural enough. You see, we never have the chance, at home, to hobnob with Highnesses. That's the reason so many of us come abroad. But we're not the real thing—the genuine, simon-pure American stays at home and looks after his business."

"And no doubt gets along very well without Highnesses," laughed Markeld, gripping the proffered fingers with a warmth which pleased their owner. The latter found himself admiring, too, the erect figure, the clean face, the clear eyes; he told himself with pleasure that the Prince looked as well by daylight as by gaslight—a tribute to his youth and the way he had employed it.

"Sit down, won't you?" he asked cordially.

"Yes, the people of the States manage to worry along some way without any nobility. In fact, they've rather got a prejudice against that sort of thing. You see, the only Highnesses they've had to judge by are the fortune-hunters who come over after our girls. Now I've always believed that it isn't any fairer to judge European nobility by those specimens than it is to judge us Americans by the expatriated idiots one finds here in Europe—it's like judging a bin of apples by the rotten ones."

"You are doubtless right," agreed the Prince, who had followed these remarks with an anxiety almost painful. "And I am glad to hear you speak in that way. I infer that you do not object to international marriages."

"Not at all, per se. Other things being equal, I see no reason why a Highness shouldn't make as good a husband as a plain American. There's only one reason for marriage, sir—mutual affection. Where that exists, nothing else matters. Where it doesn't exist—well, marriage becomes simply a convenient arrangement for perpetuating a family, or restoring its estates, or accomplishing

some less laudable purpose. But there—shut me off—don't let me preach at you!"

"No, no," protested the Prince. "All that you say interests me deeply—more deeply than you suspect. In fact, I hope to marry an American girl myself."

"Ah," said Mr. Rushford, swallowing with sudden difficulty. "Oh! You mean—"

"I mean that I wish to propose to you for the hand of your daughter," explained the Prince, quite simply.

Rushford was not a man easily astonished, but there was no denying his amazement at this moment. Despite his playful words to Susie, he had never really suspected the direction in which events were trending; besides, the lightning-flash, even though expected, is always a shock.

But the Prince bore his gaze imperturbably.

"I do not wonder that you are surprised," he said. "You have known me so short a time. But we Markelds always know our own minds. I have thought the matter over very carefully and I am sure that I am acting wisely. Whether you would act wisely in giving her to me is another question, for though I am a Prince, I am a very small one, though with income sufficient, I trust, to maintain a wife at least comfortably. I shall be glad to send my solicitors to talk it over with you, and explain anything about me which you may care to know—"

Mr. Rushford's face had gradually relaxed during this harangue, until it was positively smiling.

"My dear sir," he interrupted, "if there's anything about you I want to know, I'll ask *you*. But that is hardly necessary as yet; for you're taking hold of the matter by the wrong end. We of America don't give our daughters away, they choose their own husbands—subject, of course, to their parents' approval. Now, my daughter—by the way, you haven't specified which one you're after."

"It is Miss Sue that I want," said the Prince.

"Ah—Susie. Well, she's perfectly capable of choosing for herself, and will probably insist upon doing so. Have you spoken to her on the subject?"

"Oh, most certainly not!" stammered the Prince.

"Well, suppose you take it up with her," suggested Mr. Rushford, encouragingly. "If she wants you, it'll be all right with me. I may even say that I'll be very glad to see you get her—I like you better than I ever imagined I should like a nobleman."

The Prince was on his feet in an instant with outstretched hands.

"Thank you, my dear sir!" he cried. "A thousand thanks! I have, then, your permission to speak to Miss Rushford?"

"My permission—yes. And my best wishes. And, Prince," he added, as the latter turned away, "don't worry about the matter of income. Susie will be able to help you out a little."

Whether the Prince heard or not I do not know, for, as he hurried from the room, he collided with Monsieur Pelletan, who clutched his coat as he would have hastened past.

"Oh, Monsieur le Prince!" gasped the little man. "I haf eferywhere been searching for you. Madame la Duchesse de Markheim arrived some hours ago and awaits you wit' t'e greates' impatience."

"Where is she?"

"She iss in monsieur's apartment. She insiste' t'at I—"

"Very well; I will go to her," said the Prince, and bounded down the stair. A moment later, he was kissing his aunt's extended hand, white and soft as in the days of her maidenhood, though with an added plumpness. "My dear aunt!" he cried. "I but this moment heard that you were here."

"You see I have made myself comfortable, my dear Fritz," smiled the old lady, her impatience forgotten the moment her eyes rested upon his handsome face. "And I have not been lonesome—Monsieur Tellier has been relating to me a number of very interesting things."

"Tellier!" The Prince started round as the detective arose, smirked, and bowed in his humblest manner. "I can't say that I congratulate you on your choice of a

companion, madame!"

"Don't put on your grand manner with me, Fritz," she protested, still laughing. "I am very glad that Monsieur Tellier sought me out. But what is the matter with that creature of yours hovering in the background?"

The Prince turned and beheld Glück, evidently expecting orders to accomplish an assault upon the detective's person.

"Oh," he explained, "I told Glück he might throw Tellier out the next time he tried to get in here. I'm afraid you'll have to wait a few minutes, my friend," he added, and Glück retired, visibly disappointed.

"Let me tell you," said the duchess, emphatically, as the door closed behind him, "that your prejudice against Monsieur Tellier is wholly unwarranted and very foolish. He has discovered many things which you seem to have overlooked."

"Perhaps," admitted the Prince; "but he has discovered them in a way that no gentleman could countenance. Which reminds me," he added, suddenly turning a fiery countenance upon the unhappy Frenchman, "that I have an account of my own to settle with him. How dared you annoy—"

But the duchess held up her hand.

"One moment, Fritz," she interrupted, sternly. "Don't begin throwing stones until you are quite sure you are not yourself in a glass house. As I have said, Monsieur Tellier had many things of interest to relate."

"Well, my dear aunt," retorted the Prince, "now that he has related them, I trust we may dispense with his company. I will settle my account with him another time."

"First," said the duchess, with cold irony, "tell me what progress you have made with your embassy, Fritz!"

"Very little, I am sorry to say, madame. But in three days, Lord Vernon has promised to consider the matter."

"Three days! And do you imagine all the rest of the world will stand still at your command, Fritz, and wait for you? Are you another Joshua?"

The Prince flushed. There was no denying the justice of the taunt.

"But that aside for the moment," continued the duchess. "Tell me something of this American girl you have met here, and with whom you have grown so fond of making the promenade."

"I hope soon to have the pleasure of presenting her to you, madame," said the Prince, flushing still more. "I believe you will find her admirable."

"Perhaps," said the duchess, sceptically. "Is it really necessary that I should meet her?"

"That, of course, will be as madame pleases. I thought you would naturally wish to meet the woman whom it is my intention to marry."

The duchess fairly jumped in her chair.

"To marry!" she cried. "To marry! What nonsense!"

"You will see," continued the Prince, calmly, "how unwise it was to begin the conversation in the presence of this—gentleman."

"No!" cried the duchess. "It was more than ever wise! Do you happen to know who this woman is?"

"I refuse to discuss my affairs further," said the Prince, "until we are alone."

"But do you know who she is? She has no dot! Perhaps you will say that is nothing, that you expected none, though it seems to me it is your duty to repair the fortunes of our house. But it is even worse than that—she is the daughter of an inn-keeper."

"I refuse to believe it," answered the Prince, quietly.

"Monsieur Tellier, relate to him—"

"If Tellier so much as moves a finger, I will kick him down the stairs," added the Prince, still more calmly.

"But he has the papers from the notary!"

"That is nothing to me."

The duchess made a gesture of despair.

"Yet, after all," she cried, "that is a little thing beside this other. Look at this," and she snatched a folded paper from the table at her elbow. "She is a traitor to you—she has been playing with you—she has been assisting these Englishmen to deceive you! You who are such a stickler for honour in women no less than men! Look at this!"

"What is this paper?" asked the Prince, making no motion to take it from her eager hand.

"It is a note which this impostor wrote to her and to her sister."

"And obtained how?" he questioned, a little pale, but keeping himself well in hand.

"Obtained by Monsieur Tellier," replied the duchess. "It does not matter how."

"No," said the Prince, "perhaps not; yet one can easily guess. By bribing the chambermaid, perhaps; by forcing a lock; by rifling her desk, examining her private papers. Oh, it is abominable!" and he turned upon the Frenchman, fury in his eyes.

"No, no, Monsieur le Prince!" protested Tellier. "It was none of these—I swear it! She left the note lying quite carelessly—"

But the Prince was upon him. With one hand at the back of his neck, he steered him, sputtering, to the door.

"Glück!" he cried, and pitched the Frenchman into the arms of the faithful servant. The duchess, sitting within the room, caught the sound of a scuffle, of fierce swearing; then a succession of dull bumps sounded through the apartment. The Prince closed the door and turned back to her.

"But, my dear Fritz!" she protested. "It may be true that Tellier is abominable, yet sometimes one must use such instruments—surely, at this moment, we are justified in using any instrument. I have paid him, thank heaven! You must listen to reason. You have been fooled—we have all been fooled—they have been

playing with us—laughing at us behind our backs for our simplicity—the girl as well as the others."

"No!" he said, fiercely. "No!"

"Fritz," she cried, her voice trembling, a mist before her eyes as she looked at him, "you believe that I love you, do you not—oh, better than anything else in the world. You believe that I desire your happiness! But it must be happiness with honour, Fritz, as becomes a Markeld. You have your name to consider, your house. You know that I would rather—oh, a hundred times!—wound myself than wound you! You must listen, then, when I tell you that this girl is not worthy of you; when I tell you that this note proves it!"

"Read it!" he commanded, in a hoarse voice. "Read it, then!"

"'Lord Vernon will be deeply grateful,'" she read, "'if he is not mentioned in connection with to-day's adventure.' To-day's adventure—when he kicked Jax away from her. Can you doubt? Can you be so stupid as to doubt? These Americans—they have no sense of honour!"

He turned to the window without answering, but his face was drawn and white.

CHAPTER XVIII

Man's perfidy

To Archibald Rushford, sitting ruminant in his room, staring absently out at the dunes and the sea, his paper forgotten, there entered presently Susie—a rather subdued Susie, as he noted from the corner of his eye—who drew up a chair very close to his and sat down and propped her chin in her hands and looked up at him.

It came to him in a flash of revelation that, did she have a mother, it was to her she would have gone at this moment, and not to him, and his eyes were a little misty as he looked down at her. That she and her sister should have grown, motherless, to such sweet, triumphant womanhood struck him in this instant as a kind of miracle—he had never thought of it before. He had taken their beauty, their wit, their sanity, as matters of course; he had never looked at them, clearly, from the outside; he had never quite thoroughly appreciated them. They had come this far, guideless, in the journey of life, and had done well and bravely; but now Susie, at least, had reached a point in the path where she needed help and counsel. She had come to him for it and he must give her the best he had.

"Dad," she began, a little tremulously, "would you mind so *very* much if I should m-marry and live in Europe? Of course," she added, hastily, to break the force of the blow, "you would come over very often and stay with us, and we would go over very often to see you."

"So he *has* spoken to you, has he?" laughed her father. "He told me he hadn't."

"Spoken! You know about it? Oh, dad, what do you mean?"

"I mean that a certain William Frederick Albert, of Markeld—I believe that's his name—or most of it—was in here a while ago and had the impudence to ask me

to give you to him."

"Oh!" gasped Susie, with flaming cheeks, and sank back in her chair and I dare say cried a little; but her father didn't see her, for his own eyes were full of tears. The moment passed, the tears were wiped away—"Tell me about it, dad," she said.

"Tell you about it? I have told you!"

"About what he said. How did he look?"

"I dare say he looked about as he always does—a little pale around the gills, perhaps, as one usually does when one's performing an unpleasant duty!"

"Dad!"

"You don't mean to say you think he enjoyed it?"

"They—they always have to do it in Europe," faltered Sue.

"So I understand. But he said he hadn't told you."

"He hasn't—he hasn't said a word."

"Oh—*you* just sort of scented it in the air, I suppose—sort of saw it coming."

"Every woman can tell when a man is in l-love with her," explained Susie, with dignity, but boggling a little at the crucial word. "What did you tell him, dad?"

"I told him to take you and welcome."

"Now, dad, you mustn't tease!"

"Well, then, I told him he'd better see you first, since you're the party principally concerned."

"But you like him?"

"Immensely!"

Susie's arms were about his neck, and her cheek was against his cheek, and a

pearly tear plashed down upon his shirt-front.

"Oh, you dear dad!" she cried. "I knew you'd like him!"

"He seems a pretty straight sort of fellow," observed her father, "he looks clean, and he talks like a man."

"And you won't mind so very much?"

"Not if it makes you happy, my dear. All girls have to marry sometime, I suppose. You'll be rather farther away from me than I could wish, but I dare say the Prince will let me come over and stay in his castle occasionally, and eat at the second table—"

"*Let* you! Why, he'll *beg* you to. Why couldn't you come over and live with us, dad?"

"And die of ennui in a year? Not much. I'll go home and make some more money for you—you see, I'd never figured on having to finance a Princess!"

"Dad," very softly.

"Well, what?"

"Do you know, I don't believe he suspects I'm to have any money."

"Neither do I. That's one thing I like about him."

"But you really might come and live with us, dad."

"Oh, no, I mightn't. Besides, there's Nell—What!" he cried, interpreting the sudden pressure of her arms, "you don't mean that she's gone and done it, too!"

"I don't know, dad, but Lord Vernon has been very attentive to her. She hasn't told me anything; I'm only guessing."

Her father gave a long, low whistle.

"Well!" he said. "You've been hustling things up with a vengeance, I must say! There must be something in the atmosphere. It'll be a little lonely in that big New York house without you, Susie."

"I know it will, dear dad. And if you say the word, I won't leave you—not for a long, long time. It will be a long time anyway, you know—a year, at least—there will be so much to do."

"And a year is quite long enough to keep two lovers apart. Youth goes faster than you think, my dear. No, no; it'll be all right, Susie. You don't suppose I'm as selfish as all that!"

"No, dad; that's just what I'm afraid of; you're not selfish enough.
It's I who am selfish."

"Nonsense! Everybody in this world has a right to happiness, Susie; why, that's one of the foundation-stones of the Declaration of Independence. And, I take it, a woman's great chance of happiness is in marrying the man she loves. That's what every woman has a right to do, and nobody has the right to raise a finger to prevent her. I'll give you to Markeld with a clear conscience, my dear, when the time comes, and bless you both. That is, if you really love him."

"Oh, dad!" she cried and hid her face; there is one light in the eyes which none but a lover may see!

"Quite sure?" he persisted.

"Quite sure!" she said, softly.

"You're sure you're not jumping in the dark; it isn't the Prince you're in love with?"

"No, dad; it's the man. That seems an awfully bold thing for a girl to say, doesn't it? But he—he's such a nice fellow!"

"Yes, I believe he is," agreed her father.

"He's been telling me about himself, you know; about what he wants to do in the world," added Susie, looking up at him.

"Has he?" and her father laughed. "The same old game—effective as ever!
We all do it—why, I remember, Susie—"

He stopped suddenly, with a little tremor in his voice.

"Yes, dad," very softly.

She was leaning forward on his knee, looking up at him. He put his arm around her and drew her close.

"You're like your mother, Susie," was all he dared trust himself to say, his arms tight around her.

They sat so a moment, lost in memory, until a knock at the door brought Susie to her feet. A page handed in a little package.

"For Mademoiselle Rushford," he said.

"Thank you," said Susie, and closed the door. "For me?" she repeated, as she turned back into the room. "What do you suppose it is?"

"The quickest way to find out is to open it, my dear," suggested her father, drily.

Susie ripped the paper off in an instant, and disclosed a little book bound in flexible red leather.

"'Who's Who,'" she read, looking at the title, and just then a card fell out. She stooped and picked it up. "Why, it's from that odious French detective! Listen, dad—'With the compliments of M. André Tellier, who is sure of Mademoiselle Rushford's gratitude.'"

"Send it back to him," said her father. "Or here, give it to me—I'll go down and smash his face with it. I ought to have kicked him out of the house yesterday—I'd have done it but for Pelletan."

"Wait a minute, dad; here's a page turned down. Maybe there's something he wanted me to see. Oh, yes; it's about Lord Vernon—he meant the book for Nell—I'll call her," and she started toward the open door into the inner room.

"Wait," said her father, instantly. "What about Vernon? Read it."

She stopped, struck by the tone of his voice.

"What do you mean, dad?" she asked, paling a little. "Surely, you don't mean—"

"Read it," he repeated, sternly.

She opened the book with hands suddenly tremulous.

"'Vernon, fifth earl of (created 1703),'" she read, in a low voice. "'George Henry Augustus Gardner, K. G., K. T., P. C., F. R. S., F. S. A.; baronet 1628; Viscount Vernon, Baron Dalberry, 1710; Viscount Cranford, 1712; Baron Vernon, 1829; trustee of Imperial Institute; born tenth of May, 1859; son of Lord Henry Augustus Gardner, M. P., son of fourth Earl and Mary, daughter of Richard Chaloner, Boston, U. S. A.; married, Catherine—'"

"Married!" cried her father, and then restrained himself, though his face turned crimson. "But go on—perhaps she's dead."

"No, she isn't dead!" said Sue, reading a line or two farther. Then she closed the book. "I don't understand," she said, dazedly. "I can't understand. He didn't seem that kind of man at all, dad!"

"No," said a hoarse voice from the door. "No, he didn't."

"Nell! Nellie dear!" cried Sue, and in an instant her arms were about her.

"It—it doesn't matter," said Nell, steadying herself against the door, striving to still a sudden convulsive shuddering. "I was a f-fool to think he—he cared. Of course he—he was only amusing himself!" and then her self-control suddenly gave way, and her head fell forward upon her sister's shoulder. But only for a moment; that high queenliness was not on the surface, merely, but in the heart, as well. "I think I'm getting tired of Weet-sur-Mer, dad," she said, quite steadily, with a wan little smile. "I seem to be hungering for New York again; wouldn't you like to go home?"

"We'll go, of course, at once, dad," commanded Sue. "That's the only thing to do. Oh!" she cried, her eyes flashing, "I could murder such a man—cut him to pieces, inch by inch—and gloat over the deed!"

Rushford was very pale and his hands were trembling a little as he started for the door.

"Yes, I'll order the trunks packed," he said, incoherently. "I'll have to hurry—I'll try to—"

Something in his voice caught Susie's ear; she turned her head and looked at him.

"Dad!" she called.

He paused with his hand on the knob.

"Dad, come here."

He came back reluctantly.

"We're to go away quietly, you know, without telling any one; there's to be no fuss—we couldn't bear that—"

A tap on the door interrupted her. Rushford opened it. A man stood without, a German with complexion like mahogany. He bowed silently and handed in a note. Rushford took it and closed the door.

"It's from Markeld," he said, looking at the crest; "thought he hadn't made his case quite emphatic enough, I guess," and he glanced at Susie's blushing face and smiled. "Of course, we'll have to tell him," he added, as he tore open the envelope and unfolded the sheet of paper it contained. "He has a sort of right—"

He stopped.

Susie saw his face turn gray again…. A great fear fell upon her heart—a cold, still fear that gripped her and left her shivering.

"What is it, dad?" she asked quietly, through clenched teeth.

"Nothing," answered her father, looking at her vaguely. "It's nothing. It's—it's merely a matter of business, Susie."

"Come, dad," she said, still quietly, "don't try to deceive me. Tell me—no matter what it is, I can bear it. Do you think I haven't any pluck, dad?"

"Yes, I know you've got pluck, Susie," he said. "We've simply made a mistake, my dear, in believing these blackguards honourable men. Let's think no more about them."

"Read what he says, dad."

He hesitated still, but her eyes compelled him, and he read:

'"The Prince of Markeld begs to withdraw his proposal for the hand of Miss Rushford.'"

"And that is all?"

"That is all, Susie."

"It couldn't be!" she said, a little hoarsely. "His aunt is here—Monsieur Pelletan told me—and she has pointed out to him the folly of it! I was silly to think it could come true! But, oh—" and she dropped sobbing into a chair.

Her father stood for a moment watching the heaving shoulders. Then, with a face hard as iron, he opened the door and closed it softly behind him.

CHAPTER XIX

An American Opinion of European Morals

"I tell you fellows for the last time," Lord Vernon was saying, "that we can't keep this thing up any longer. Miss Rushford has served notice on me that she's going to tell, and dashed if I blame her. Besides, there's the note."

"The note can't hurt us—I've extracted its sting. As for Miss Rushford, I might see her again," suggested Collins, who had been pacing nervously up and down the room.

"See her? Nonsense! You'll do nothing of the sort! What right have we to bother her? She'd probably send you about your business, anyway. She's got a heart—something that diplomats know nothing about and never take into account."

"We didn't take it into account in your case, that's true!" retorted Collins, with covert irony.

"No, you didn't!" said the other, wheeling short around upon him. "Nor did I take into account what a damned scoundrelly thing it was I was persuaded into undertaking. I tell you, some of us will have to get down and eat dirt before this thing is over!"

"Pshaw!" and Collins smiled loftily. "Before a petty German princeling?"

Vernon turned red with anger at the words, but as he opened his mouth to reply, there came a sharp knock at the door.

"Come in!" he shouted, before the others could draw breath. "No, I'm not going to hide!" he added, in answer to Collins's gesture. "That farce is finished!"

The door opened and Monsieur Pelletan appeared on the threshold.

"Monsieur le Prince de Markeld!" he announced, and bowed low, as the Prince advanced past him into the room. In the shadows of the hall, Glück's erect figure was dimly visible.

For a moment no one spoke, but Vernon's face was flushing under the ironical gaze bent upon it.

"So," said the Prince, at last. "It appears that you are not ill. You have been tricking me all the time!"

"Yes," answered Vernon, not attempting for an instant to evade the question. "Tricking you—that is the word. I am glad she has told you."

"Do you think it was quite the course for a gentleman to pursue?" continued the Prince, in a voice singularly even.

"No," said Vernon, quietly. "I do not."

"Nor do I!" said the Prince.

Again there was a moment's silence. It was Vernon who broke it.

"When I went into this thing," he began quite steadily, "I had no thought that it would result as it has. It seemed to me an innocent deception, warranted by reasons of state. We could not, of course, foresee that you would follow us here, instead of going on to London. For some time I have found the rôle unbearable; but, until a moment ago, I fancied I might be able to explain to you the course I have taken."

"Explain!" repeated the Prince, with bitter emphasis.

"Now, of course," went on Vernon, evenly, "I see that no explanations are possible—that no apology, even, which I might make, would excuse me. I don't in the least believe in duelling—I have always thought that I would be the last person in the world to be entangled in that way—but this seems to be one of those situations which have no other solution. I am quite willing, anxious even, to give you any satisfaction you may demand. It is your right."

"I agree with you," said the Prince. "It is my right. My friends will wait upon you," and he turned toward the door.

"But this is folly!" protested Collins, his face very red. "We are living on the verge of the twentieth century, gentlemen; not in the seventeenth. I won't countenance this madness for an instant."

"Who asks you to countenance it?" demanded Vernon, sternly. "I repeat, I am at the Prince's service. I am glad that it is within my power to offer him this reparation."

"Very well," said the Prince, bowing, and again turned to the door; but Vernon stopped him with a gesture.

"Before you go, before I can meet you, even," he said, quietly, "there is a further explanation due you—"

"I have no wish to hear it," the Prince broke in.

"It is one which you must, nevertheless, listen to," went on Vernon, coldly. "Confession would, perhaps, be a better word for it. Miss Rushford did not know the whole truth."

"So!" said the Prince, with irony. "You acted unfairly, then, even with your co-conspirators!"

Vernon flushed hotly, but kept himself in hand.

"The retort is unworthy of you," he said. "I assure you that Miss Rushford was not in any sense a co-conspirator."

"Do you mean that she was ignorant of the deception you were playing?" demanded the Prince, quickly.

"No; she was not ignorant of that; but she—"

The Prince held up his hand with an imperious gesture.

"No more," he said; "if this is the explanation—confession—what you will—I repeat that I do not care to hear it."

"This is not it."

"It cannot, in any event, alter matters."

"I have no wish that it should alter matters, Your Highness!" retorted Vernon, proudly. "When I have offered you the greatest reparation in my power, it is ungenerous that you should—"

Again a knock interrupted him.

"Come in!" he called, recklessly.

The door opened and Archibald Rushford entered. He closed the door carefully behind him and advanced to the middle of the room.

Vernon started forward.

"Why, how are you, Mr. Rushford?" he began, with outstretched hand. "I'm very glad to see you."

"Oh, you are?" inquired the American, keeping his own hands firmly behind his back. "I suppose *you're* glad to see me, too?" he added, turning to the Prince.

"I know of no reason why I should avoid you," returned the Prince, proudly.

"Perhaps not," assented Rushford, drily. "The standards of gentlemanly conduct seem to be different in the Old World and in the New. I'm glad, however, that I've caught you two together. I suppose that little farce of pretended illness was played only for the benefit of outsiders!"

"I assure you, Mr. Rushford," began Vernon quickly, but the American stopped him with a gesture.

"I don't care to hear," he said. "I care nothing for your two-by-four conspiracies and intrigues. But, I repeat, I'm glad I caught both of you together. It enables me to tell, in the same breath, what I think of both of you, and I am very anxious to tell you, fully and completely, for I suppose you have been surrounded all your lives by toadies who were afraid to tell you the truth about yourselves, or who were so like you that they couldn't see the truth—products of the same code of morals—a code truly European! In a word, then, I think you are both

blackguards—blackguards of the most nasty and contemptible kind—the kind that preys upon women! I may add that you have deeply shaken my faith in human nature, for, to look at you, one would mistake you for gentlemen!"

The words were uttered quietly, evenly, deliberately; each one given its full value. There was a certain dignity in Rushford's aspect which made interruption impossible; but neither man offered to interrupt. The Prince was biting his lips desperately; Vernon turned red and white and red again in evident amazement.

"And having said this," concluded the American, "as emphatically as possible, I will very gladly leave you to yourselves."

"Oh, no, you won't!" cried Vernon, fiercely, in a voice hoarse with emotion. "I, at least, demand an explanation."

"An explanation?" and Rushford laughed, a little mocking laugh. "Can't your conscience give you an explanation? Or is it too deadened to do that?"

"No!" said Vernon, boldly. "My conscience gives me no explanation, which would in any degree warrant the words you have used to me, and which I am sure you will some day regret. It is true that my conduct here has not been wholly straightforward; but it is Prince Frederick I have wronged and not you in any degree. Your daughter—to whom, I presume, you referred—knew all—"

"All?" repeated Rushford, with irony.

"Perhaps not all, but I had intended waiting upon you this afternoon and explaining to you—"

"Oh! So you thought I was entitled to an explanation! Yes, my lord, it seems to me that your actions will require a great deal of explaining—more, certainly, than I have the patience to listen to. So I pray you will spare me. I don't know anything in God's wide world more contemptible than a married man who poses as single!"

"Married!" shrieked his lordship. "Poses! Oh!"

The door opened and Pelletan's head appeared.

"I knocked," he explained, obsequiously, "once—twice—and when none

answered, Mees Rushford insiste'—"

"Miss Rushford!" cried Vernon.

"Yes, monsieur, Mees Rushford," and Pelletan stepped to one side, disclosing Sue.

CHAPTER XX

The Dowager's Bombshell

She came no farther than the threshold and looked only at her father, though her eyes were shining with the consciousness of some one else's presence in the room—some one whom she had not in the least expected to find there.

"Come, dad," she said. "Don't waste your time here. They're not worth it," and she held out her hand to him.

But Vernon flung himself between them.

"He shall not go," he cried, "until he has heard me. It is all a mistake—I see now where this detestable adventure in diplomacy has led me. My dear sir, if I were what you think me, I should deserve every word you have uttered to me—and more. But I am not married—I have never been married—I had hoped—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Rushford. "Don't go too fast. Come here, Susie, and help me to understand."

Could Sue, as she came forward, have seen the gaze which Prince Frederick bent upon her, her heart might have relented a little toward him; but she did not see—she had eyes only for her father.

"Now go ahead," said he, when he had his arm safely around her, "and be careful, sir," he added. "We want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"That is what you shall have," said Vernon, and passed his hand across his forehead.

"It occurs to me," put in Collins, icily, "that the story is not wholly yours to tell."

"It isn't?" cried Vernon, turning upon him fiercely. "I suppose I'm to permit myself to remain in this damnable position for the sake of a lot of third-rate diplomats in our foreign office! They can go hang, for all I care. I chuck the whole thing! Do you hear? Do you understand? The whole thing!"

Collins turned away with a shrug of despair. The situation had got beyond his control.

"It is an explanation which I owe to the Prince of Markeld as well as to yourself, Mr. Rushford," went on Vernon, more slowly, speaking calmly by a great effort, "and which I was just about to make to him when you came in. I am not Lord Vernon—I am merely his younger brother. I bear a certain resemblance to him, and a lot of paper-diplomats persuaded me to impersonate him here in order to leave him free to carry out the negotiations for the succession to Schloshold-Markheim without being embarrassed by the representations of either side. I recall how half-heartedly he approved of the scheme, which had its origin in the fertile brain of Mr. Collins there. I see the reason now, though I didn't suspect it then. As to the succession, Monsieur le Prince, for all I know, the whole thing may by this time be settled. Collins could probably tell you, if he would—"

"It is not settled," muttered Collins.

"So you see," went on Vernon without heeding him, "I have done you an even greater wrong than you imagined."

"Yes," said the Prince, in a hoarse voice, "you have."

"But settled or not," said the other, "I wash my hands of it! I've had enough!"

Rushford held out his hand with a quick gesture.

"I beg your pardon," he said, simply. "I see that I was not mistaken in my first estimate of you, after all—I am very glad."

"I was coming to you this afternoon," added the Englishman, taking the outstretched hand, eagerly, "to tell you that I am merely Viscount Cranford and not Lord Vernon—a very insignificant fellow, not a great one—and to ask for your daughter, Miss Nell. I ask you now. Though first let me make it clear to you

that the title is of little importance."

"The only title we Americans care about," responded Rushford, slowly, "is that of gentleman. My daughter's husband need have no other—but he must have that. We don't give our daughters away, sir, as I've already explained to—"

Susie pinched his arm viciously in an agony of alarm. Then she pulled his head down to her, her eyes shining, and whispered a quick sentence in his ear.

"Yes, that's it!" he nodded. "Nell is waiting for us—our apartment is just up the stair. You'd better go tell her the story, young man! Knock at the door, make her admit you, make her listen! Oh, a lover should know how—yes, I see you do! And God bless you!" he added, as Cranford wrung his hand, flung open the door, and disappeared along the hall.

"And we must go too, dad," said Sue, in a low voice. "At once. Come."

"Yes," assented her father. "Yes—yet wait a minute, Susie," and he stopped, his eyes on Markeld. "I'd hate to think I'd done any other man the same injustice I did that young Englishman. Perhaps the Prince of Markeld has also an explanation. If so, I shall be very glad to hear it."

Susie's hand trembled on her father's arm, and she caught her breath with a little gasp; but she kept her eyes steadily on the floor—she had pride enough for that. Oh, she rejoiced that she had pride enough for that!

The Prince gazed at her a moment, then, with face ashy gray, he shook his head.

"I have none," he said, in a low voice, and Susie shivered at the words.

"But I have!" cried some one from the door; and, turning, they beheld there on the threshold a handsome old lady, with hair snowy white, figure erect, face imperious—the Dowager Duchess of Markheim. Behind her, in the twilight of the hall, could be dimly seen the mustachios of Monsieur Tellier, with Glück's face glaring at him. "I am not so proud," she went on, advancing into the room. "I am quite willing to give my reasons for breaking off the match. Is this the girl?" she asked, abruptly.

Susie looked at her with fiery eyes; their glances crossed; one almost expected to see the sparks fly as of two blades meeting.

"I am not hard-hearted," continued the duchess, after a moment. "But there are certain affairs of state which must always take precedence of any mere personal inclination. Did *I* marry to please myself?" and her voice shook a little. "By no means—it is no secret. Yet I was faithful to my husband and to my house. I have never regretted it. Now all that I have left to love is that boy yonder, and I intend to see that he makes a match which is worthy of him. Yes, I love him—but he must not degrade his name—not even for his happiness. It was solicitude for him that brought me here—I feared—"

Her voice broke; perhaps she had a vision of that tragedy fifty years ago, when, at her mother's side, she had stared out through the mists of the morning—

"But no matter," she added, hastily.

"May I ask, madame," inquired Rushford, "how marriage with my daughter would degrade your nephew?"

"It is impossible, in the first place," she answered, readily, "that he should marry the daughter of an inn-keeper."

"Of an inn-keeper?" repeated Rushford, in a puzzled tone.

"You are the proprietor of this inn, are you not?" demanded the duchess. "Tellier, here has the papers. Come forward, Tellier."

"Oh, I understand," and Rushford laughed, not pleasantly. "No, I didn't tell you, Susie," he added, catching his daughter's astonished glance. "It was merely an escapade of mine. I was bored, and so I arranged with Pelletan to have a little fun by backing the hotel for a month—Pelletan had reached the end of his resources. He'd have had to shut up shop, and I didn't want to move. I assure you, madame, that at home I am not an inn-keeper. If I was, I shouldn't be in the least ashamed of it, unless I were a bad one. Suppose we pass on to the next count."

There was a movement at the door and Nell came running to her father and threw her arms about him. Cranford followed her and held out his hands.

"Congratulate me," he said, simply, but with shining face.

"I do," said Rushford, and kissed his daughter. "It seems we've got your

difficulty happily settled, Nell; but we've another on hand which seems considerably more complicated. Now, madame, if you will proceed with the indictment."

The duchess seemed a little shaken; after all, a man who could play with great hotels demanded some consideration!

"The second reason is even more serious," she said, "at least, my nephew seemed to so consider it. He laughed at the first one; he is still young; he still believes in the nonsense of the romancers."

"Does he?" commented Rushford. "That's one point in his favour, certainly. So he would have married my daughter, would he, even though I did keep a hotel! That was kind of him! What's the next count, madame?"

"It is that your daughter, while pretending to be his advocate, was really in the plot against him—a double traitor to him because posing as his friend."

"In the plot?" cried Cranford. "But that's absurd! She was not in the plot!"

"Is it the head of the plot who is addressing me?" inquired the duchess, icily. "No doubt my nephew has already told you—"

The Prince stopped her.

"The Viscount Cranford answers to me," he said, briefly.

The duchess paled as she looked at him.

"Not that, Fritz!" she cried. "Not that!"

"Too late, madame," he said. "My honour demands it."

The duchess shivered, and her face seemed suddenly to shrink and age. Then she stood proudly upright. What honour demanded she would be the last to evade.

"Perhaps monsieur will deny," she said, looking at Cranford, coldly, "that he wrote this note to her and her sister the very first day of his sojourn here?" and she held out to him the slip of paper.

Cranford took it and read it at a glance, while Nell stared at it with starting eyes.

"No," he said, "I don't deny that I wrote it; but—"

"And perhaps mademoiselle herself will deny that she asserted to Monsieur Tellier that she did not know her rescuer? Here are her words," and she produced a second note.

"I deny nothing," said Susie, proudly, and she looked the duchess unflinchingly in the face.

Cranford walked straight over to the Prince of Markeld.

"Wasn't it Miss Rushford who told you?" he asked.

"No, it was the note," answered the Prince, fiercely.

"Which Tellier stole from Miss Rushford's desk," added Cranford, sternly, "leaving this tracing in its stead," and he took from his pocketbook a slip of paper. "Such methods are doubtless characteristic of the Paris police, but they seem to me almost as unworthy as those employed by us."

"You are right," agreed the Prince, his face livid. "That dog shall pay for it!"

"My nephew had nothing whatever to do with it," broke in the duchess, sharply. "It was I who secured the note, who persuaded him to—"

But the Prince stopped her with a gesture.

"Miss Rushford was not in the plot," continued Cranford, earnestly. "I hope you will believe me. That it should have come so near wrecking my own life was bad enough; that it should wreck another's—an innocent person's—that would be frightful! She warned me explicitly that she would no longer be a party to the deception, that she was going to tell you—I thought she had told you. I remember well how warmly she spoke of your cause; how she detested the course I was pursuing—how she made me ashamed of myself—ashamed to look at her. I suppose some mistaken notion of honour held her back from telling, since it was in her service and her sister's that I had disclosed myself—"

"A message for His Lordship," said Pelletan from the door.

Cranford took it.

"You will pardon me," he said. "It is marked urgent," and he tore it open. His face brightened as he read it. "Monsieur le Prince," he said, warmly, turning to Markeld, "I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart!" and he handed him the message.

Markeld took the paper and glanced at it, then, with beaming eyes, held out his hand. And the duchess, looking on, grew suddenly young again!

"What is it?" she demanded. "Don't you see we are all waiting?"

"'Prince George, of Schloshold, has just died of an apoplexy,'" the Prince read. "'You will inform the Prince of Markeld that we will support his house to the limit of our power. Vernon,'"

"God be praised!" cried the duchess. "God be praised," and she caught at the door to keep herself from falling. "He was a bad man," she added in another tone. "Therefore he needs our prayers!"

"I give Monsieur le Prince the congratulations of France," said an oily voice, and Monsieur Tellier bowed low.

"Oh!" cried Nell, and shrank away from him.

"Is that the scoundrel?" demanded Cranford. And he started across the room.

"One moment," interposed the Prince, "don't soil your hands on him. Glück!" he called, raising his voice.

And Glück appeared on the instant.

His master indicated Tellier with the motion of a finger.

It was wonderful to see how Glück's face brightened—almost into a smile—as he laid his hand on Tellier's shoulder.

"Canaille!" hissed the latter, and shook the hand away. "Do not touch me—do not defile me with those dirty fingers. Oh, I will go! I have my task accomplished! And you are fools, imbeciles—all—all—from that fat Dutchman,

who thinks his wife still living—"

But Glück was again upon him, this time not to be shaken off, and an instant later he and his victim disappeared together into the shadows of the hall.

"Just the same," shrieked Tellier's voice hoarsely from the distance, "it was I who was right! In every detail! A veritable triumph! A success of—"

The voice sank into a gurgle and was still.

Pelletan, his face livid, clutching blindly at the wall for support, stumbled forth into the hall, along the corridor, down the stair, until at last he found Tellier, his face purple, rearranging his cravat before a mirror in the hotel office.

"Iss she not lifing?" he asked, huskily.

"Living!" echoed Tellier, whirling upon him fiercely. "No, pig-head, she has been dead these three years! But you are no more a pig-head than those others. Oh, they shall answer, they shall repay, they shall atone! I will have my revenge —"

But Pelletan did not stop to listen. He groped his way across the room, his eyes shining, his lips trembling, repeating over and over a single word—

"Paris! Paris! Paris!"

Behind the desk he stumbled, through the little door, and dropped to his knees before Saint Genevieve, the protector of the city which he loved.

"You haf done eet!" he murmured, looking up at her with limpid eyes.
"You haf seen how I suffered, unt you haf taken pity. Gott sie dank!
Gott sie dank!"

CHAPTER XXI

Pardon

As Tellier's voice died away along the hall, a silence fell upon the room which he had left—a silence from which the duchess was the first to rouse herself.

"Come, Fritz," she said, "we must go. We have work to do," and she held out her hand to him.

He took a step toward her, hesitated, stopped.

"In a moment, madame," said he. "Before I go, I have an apology to make and a pardon to crave."

"Of whom?" demanded the duchess.

For answer, the Prince turned to Susie, so near that he almost touched her—so near that she could see the trembling of his hands, the throbbing of his heart.

"Miss Rushford," he said, in a voice low, carefully repressed, but vibrant with emotion, "I know that I have played the scoundrel; I know that I have no right whatever to address you; I know that I have done everything I could to forfeit your respect. Believe me, the cup is bitter—the more so, since I myself prepared it!"

His voice was trembling so that for the moment he could not go on.

"No, no!" cried the duchess, from the door, "you wrong yourself, Fritz.
It was I prepared it—it is I who am to blame!"

But he motioned her to silence.

"It was I prepared it," he repeated, "by my unjust suspicions and ungentlemanly action. I shall drain it with what manhood I have. And I hope, mademoiselle, that you will, in time, find it in your heart to pardon me and to think of me with kindness. I can only repeat to you what I have already told your father—that I love you truly and deeply—with my whole heart—as I shall always love you—always—Oh, if I had not been a fool!"

The duchess, looking on from the door, felt a sudden wave of tenderness sweep over her. Perhaps she recalled her own youth—perhaps it was not quite the truth that she had never regretted—perhaps she was softened by the emotions of the moment. She came to Susie and took her hand in hers.

"Mademoiselle," she said, softly, "I also ask pardon—you will not bear ill-will against an old woman, who imagined that she was acting wisely. I feel that I am going to love you. You have spirit—you are worthy to be even a Markeld. You must forgive that poor boy yonder."

"I think I shall put him on probation," said Susie, glancing up with bright eyes into the eager face beside her.

The Prince sank to his knee, his face suddenly radiant with joy, caught her hand and covered it with kisses.

"Six months, a year, ten years!" he cried. "I shall be content!"

"Ten years! Nonsense!" cried the duchess. "Ten days, mademoiselle. You do not love him if you make it an instant longer!"

"No, not ten days, madame," corrected Susie, with a laugh that was half a sob. "Let us say ten minutes!"

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