Cynthia's Chauffeur

By LOUIS TRACY

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(Continued)

"Thank you, madam," said Medenham, rousing himself from a reverie "I prefer to remain here. The hotel people will look after my slight wants, as I dislike the notion of anyone tampering with the engine while I am absent."

"Is it so delicate, then?" asked Cynthia, with a smile that he hardly understood, since he could not know how thoroughly he had routed Mrs. Devar's theories of the previous night.

"No, far from it. But its very simplicity challenges examination, and an inquisitive clodhopper can effect more damage in a minute than I can repair in an hour."

His gruff tone was music in Mrs. Devar's ears. She actually sighed her relief, but explained the lapse instantly.

"I do hope there is something nice to eat," she said. "This wonderful air makes one dreadfully hungry. When our tour is ended, Cynthia, I shall have to Brant for months."

The fare was excellent. Under its stimulating influence Miss Vanrenen forgot her vapors and elected for the front seat during the run to Glastonbury. Medenham thawed, too. By chance their talk turned to wayside flowers ,and he let the Mercury creep through a high-banked lane, all ablaze with wild roses and honeysuckle, while he pointed out the blue field scabious, the pink and cream meadowsweet, the samphire, the milk-wort and the columbine, the campions in the cornland, and the yellow vetchling that ran up the hillside towards one of the wooded "islands" peculiar to the center of Somerset.

Cynthia listened, and, if she marveled, betrayed no hint of surprise that a chauffeur should have such a store of woodman's craft. Medenham, aware only of a rapt audience of one threw disguise to the breeze created by the car when the pace quickened. He told of the Glastonbury Thorn, and how it was brought to the west country by no less a gardener than Joseph of Arimathea, and how St. Patrick was born in the Isle of Avallon, so called because its apple-orchards bore golden fruit, and how the very name of Glastonbury is derived from the crystal water that hemmed the isle——

"Please let me intrude one little question," mumured the girl. "I am very ignorant of some things. What has 'Avallon' got to do with 'apples'?"

"Ha!" cried Medenham, warming to his subject and retarding speed again, "that opens up a wide field. In Celtic mythology Avallon is Ynys yr Afallon, the Island of Apples. It is the Land of the Blessed, where Morgana holds her court. Great heroes like King Arthur and Ogier le Dane were carried there after death, and, as apples were the only first-rate fruit known to the northern nations, a place where they grew in luscious abundance came to be regarded as the soul-kingdom. Merlin says that fairyland is full of apple trees——"

"I believe it is," cried Cynthia, nodding his arm and pointing to an orchard in full bloom.

Mrs. Devar could hear little and understand less of what they were saying; but the nudge was eloquent; her steel-blue eyes narrowed, and she thrust her face between them.

"We mustn't dawdle on the road, Fitzroy. Bristol is still a long way off, and we have so much to see—Glastonbury, Wells, Cheddar."

Though Cynthia was vexed by the interruption she did not show it. Indeed, she was aware of her companion's strange reiteration of the towns to be visited, since Mrs. Devar had already admitted a special weakness in geography, and during the trip from Brighton to Bournemouth was quite unable to name a town, a county, or a landmark. But the queer thought of a moment was dispelled by sight of the ruins of St. Dunstan's monastery appearing above a low wall. In front of the broken arches and tottering walls grew some apple trees so old and worn that no blossoms decked their gnarled branches. Unbidden tears glistened in the girl's eyes.

"If I lived here I would plant a new orchard," she said tremulously. "I think Guinevere would like it, and you say she is buried with her king in St. Joseph's Chapel."

Medenham had suddenly grown stern again. He glanced at her, and then made great business with brakes and levers, for Mrs. Devar was still inquisitive.

"That is a fine old Pilgrims' Inn, the George, in the main street," he said jerkily. "I propose to stop there; the entrance to the Abbey is exactly opposite. In the George they will show you a room in which Henry the Eighth slept, and I would recommend you to get a guide for half an hour at least."

"Must we walk?" demanded Mrs Devar plaintively.

"Yes, if you wish to see anything. But one could throw a stone over the chief show places, they are so close together."

So Cynthia was shown the Alfred Jewel, and Celtic dice-boxes carefully loaded for the despoiling of Roman legionarie or an unwary Phœnician and heard the story of the Holy Grail from the lip of an ancient who lent credence to the legend by his venerable appearance. Mixed up with the imposing ruins and the glory of St. Joseph's Chapel was a visit to the butcher's at the corner of the street, where the veteran proudly exhibited a duck with four feet. He then called Cynthia's attention to the carved panles of the George Hotel, and pointed out a fine window, bayed on each successive story. She had almost forgotten the wrteched duck when he mentioned a two-headed calf which was on view at a neighboring dairy.

Mrs. Devar showed signs of interest, so Cynthia tipped the old man hurriedly, and ran to the car.

"I shall come here—some other time," she gasped, and it thrilled her to believe that Fitzroy understood, though he had heard no word of quadruped fowl or bicipital monster.

At Wells Medenham pitied her. He bribed a policeman to guard the Mercury, and when Mrs. Devar saw that more walking was expected of her she elected to sit in the tonneau and admire the west front of the cathedral.

"Lady Porthcawl tells me it is a masterpiece," she chirped shrilly, "so I want to take it in at my leisure."

Once more, therefore, did Medenham allow himself a half hour of real abandonment. He warned Cynthia that she must not endeavor to appreciate the architecture; with the hauteur of conscious genius, Wells refuses to allow anyone to absorb its true grandeur until it has been seen many times and in all lights.

So he hied her to the exquisite Lady Chapel, and to the Chapter-House Stairs, and to Peter Lightfoot's quaint old clock in the transept. Then, by some alchemy worked on a lodge-keeper, he led her to the garden of the Bishop's palace, and showed her the real Glastonbury Thorn, and even persuaded one of the swans in the moat to ring the bell attached to the wall whereby each morning for many a year the royal birds have obtained their breakfast.

There is no lovelier garden in England than that of Wells Palace, and Cynthia was so rapt in it that even Medenham had to pull out his watch and remind her of dusty roads leading to far-off Bristol.

Mrs. Devar looked so sour when they came from an inspection of one of the seven wells to which the town owes it name that Cynthia weakened and sat by her side. Thereupon Medenham made amends for lost time by exceeding the speed limit along every inch of the run to cheddar.

Of course he had to crawl through the narrow streets of the little town, above which the bare crests of the Mendips give such slight promise of the glorious gorge that cuts through their massiveness from south to north. Even at the very lip of the magnificent canyon the outlook is deceptive. Perhaps it is that the eye is caught by the flaring advertisements of the stalactite caves, or that baser emotions are awakened by the sight of cozy teagardens—of one in particular, where a cascade tumbles headlong from the black rocks, and a tree-shaded lawn offers rest and coolness after hours passed in the hot sun.

Be that as it may, "tea" had a welcome sound, and Medenham, who had lunched on read and beer and pickles, was glad to halt at the entrance of the inn that boasted a waterfall in its grounds.

The road was narrow, and packed with chars-a-bancs awaiting their hordes of noisy trippers. Some of the men were tipsy, and Medenham feared for the Mercury's paint. To the left of the hotel lay a spacious yard that looked inviting. He backed in there when the ladies had alighted, and ran alongside an automobile on which "Paris" and "speed" were written in characters legible to the motorist.

A chauffeur was lounging against the stable wall and smoking.

"Hello," said Medenham affably, "what sort of car is that?"

"A 59 Du Vallon," was the answer. Then the man's face lit up with curiosity.

"Yours is a New Mercury, isn't it?" he cried. "Was that car at Brighton on Wednesday night?"

"Yes," growled Medenham; he knew what to expect, and his face was grim beneath the tan.

"But you were not driving it," said the other.

"A chap named Dale was in charge then."

"Oh, is that it? You've brought two ladies here just now?"

"Yes."

"Good! My guv'nor's on the lookout for 'em. He didn't tell me so, but he made sure they hadn't passed this way when he turned up."

"And when was that?" asked Medenham, feeling unaccountably sick at heart.

"Soon after lunch. Ran here from Bristol. There's a bad bit of road over the Mendips, but the rest is fine. I s'pose we'll all be hiking back there to-night?"

"Most probably," agreed Medenham, who said least when he was most disturbed; at that moment he could cheerfully have wrung Count Edouard Marigny's neck.

CHAPTER. V.

A Flurry on the Mendips.

It is a contrariety of human nature that men devoted to venturesome forms of sport should often be tender hearted as children. Lord Medenham who had done some slaying in his time, once risked his life to save a favorite horse from a Ganges quicksand, and his right arm still bore the furrows plowed in it by claws that would have torn his spaniel to pieces in a Kashmir gully had he not thrust the empty barrels of a .450 Express rifle down the throat of an enraged bear. In each case, a moment's delay to secure his own safety meant the sacrifice of a friend, but safety won at such a price would have galled him worse than the spinning of a coin with death.

Wholly apart from considerations that he was strangely unwilling to acknowledge, even to his own heart he now resented Marigny's cold-blooded pursuit of an unsuspecting girl mainly because of its unfairness. Were Cynthia Vanrenen no more to him than the hundreds of pretty women he would meet during a brief London season he would still have wished to rescue her from the money-hunting gang which had marked her down as an easy prey. But he had been vouchsafed glimpses into her white soul That night at Brighton, and again to day in the cloistered depths of the cathedral at Wells, she had admitted him to the rare intimacy of those who commune deeply in silence.

It was not that he dared yet to think of a 'ove confessed and reciprocated. The prince in disguise is al very well in a fairy tale; in England of the twentieth century he is an anachronism; and Medenham would as soon think of shearing a lamb as of profiting by the chance that threw Cynthia in his way. Of course, a less scrupulous wooer might have devised a hundred plausible methods of revealing his identity—was not Mrs. Devar marriage-broker and adroit sycophant ready to hand and purchasable?—and there was small room for doubt that a girl's natural vanity would be flattered into a blaze of romance by learning that her chauffeur was heir to an old and well-endowed peerage. But honor forbade, nor might he dream of winning her affections while flying false colors. True, it would not be his fault if they did not come together again in the near future. He meant to forestall any breach of con dence on the part of Simmonds by writing a full explanation of events to Cynthia herself. If his harmless escapade were presented in its proper light, their next meeting should be fraught with laughter rather than reproaches; and then—well, then, he might urge a timid plea that his repute as a careful pilot during those three memorable days was no bad recommendation for permanency!

But now, in a flash, the entire perspective had changed. The Frenchman and Mrs. Devar, between them, threatened to upset his best-laid plans. It was one thing to guess the nature of the sordid compact revealed at Brighton; it was quite another to be brought face to face with its active development at Cheddar. The intervening hours had disintegrated all his pet theories. In a word, the difference lay in himself—before and after close companionship with Cynthia.

It must not be imagined that Medenham indulged in this series of self-analysis while fetching a pail of water to replace the wastage from the condenser. He was merely in a very bad temper, and could not trust himself to speak until he had tended to his beloved engine.

He determined to set doubt at rest forthwith by the simple expedient of finding Miss Vanrenen, and seeing whether or not Marigny had waylaid her already.

"Keep and eye on my machine for a minute," he said to the guardian of the Du Vallon. "By the way, is Captain Devar here?" he added, since Devar's presence might affect his own actions.

"Oh, you know him, do you?" cried the other. "No, he didn't come with us. We left him at Bristol. He's a bird, the captain. Played some johnny at billiards last night for a quid, and won. He told the guv'nor this morning that there is another game fixed for to-day, and you ought to have seen him wink. It's long odds again' the Bristol gent, or I'm very much mistaken. Yes, I'll keep any amatoor paws off your car, and off my own as well, you bet."

To pass from the stable yard to the garden it was not necessary to enter the hotel. A short path, shaded by trelis-laden creepers and climbing roses, led to a rustic bridge over the stream. When Medenham had gone halfway he saw the two women sitting with Marigny at a table placed well apart from other groups of tea-drinkers. They were talking animatedly, the Count smiling and profuse of gesture, while Cynthia listened with interest to what was seemingly a convincing statement of the fortunate hazard that led to his appearance at Cheddar. The Frenchman was too skilled a stalker of shy game to pretend a second time that the meeting was accidental.

Mrs. Devar's shrill accents traveled clearly across the lawn.

"Just fancy that . . . finding James at Bath, and persuading him to come to Bristol on the chance that we might all dine together to-night! Naughty boy he is—why didn't he run out here in your car?"

Count Edouard said something.

"Business!" she cackled, "I am glad to hear of it. James is too much of a gad-about to earn money, but people are always asking him to their houses, He is a dear fellow. I am sure you will like him, Cynthia."

Medenham had heard enough. He noted that the table was gay with cut flowers, and a neat waitress had evidently been detailed by the management to look after these distinguished guests; Marigny's stage setting for his decisive move was undoubtedly well contrived. It was delightfully pastoral—a charming bit of rural England—and, as such, eminently calculated to impress an American visitor.

Cynthia poured out a cup of tea, heaped a plate with cakes and bread and butter, and gave some instructions to the waitress. Medenham knew what that meant. He hurried back by the way he had come, and found that Marigny's chauffeur had lifted the bonnet off the Mercury.

"More I see of this engine the more I like it—What's your h.p.?" asked the man, who clearly reguarded the Mercury's driver as a brother in the craft.

"38."

"Looks a sixty, every inch. I wonder if you could hold my car at Brooklands?"

"Perhaps not, but I may give you some dust to swallow over the mendips."

The chauffeur grinned.

"Of course you'd say that, but it all depends on what the guvnor means to do. He's a dare-devil at the wheel, I can tell you, an' never says a word to me to let things rip. But he's up to some game to-day. He's fair crazy about that girl you have in tow—what's her name? Vanrenen, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Medenham, replacing the hood after a critical glance at the wires, though he hardly thought this sturdy mechanic would play any tricks on him.

"Which of you men is called Fitzroy?" demanded a serving-maid, carrying a tray.

"I," said Medenham.

"Here, Miss," broke in the other, "my name's Smith, plain Smith, but I can do with a sup o' tea as well as anybody."

"Ask Miss Venrenen to give you another cup for Count Marigny's chauffeur," said Medenham to the girl.

"Oh, he's a count, is he?" said the waitress saucily. "My, isn't he mashed on the young one?"

"Who wouldn't be?" declared Smith. "She's the sort of girl a fellow 'ud leave home for."

"Fine feathers go a long way. There's as good as her in the world," came the retort, not without a favorable glance at Medenham.

"Meanwhile the tea is getting cold," said he.

"Dear me, you needn't hurry. Her ma is goin' to write half-a-dozen picture postcards. But what a voice! The old girl drowns the waterfall."

The waitress flounced off. She was pretty, and no wandering chauffeur had ever before turned aside the arrows of her bright eyes so heedlessly.

"Then you have seen Miss Vanrenen?" inquired Medenham, sipping his tea.

"Ra-ther!" said Smith. "Saw her in Paris, at the Ritz, when my people sent me over there to learn the mechanism of this car. The Count was always hanging about, and I thought he wanted the old man to buy a Du Vallon, but it's all Lombard Street to a china orange that he was after the daughter the whole time. But you ought to know best. How do you get on with her?"

"Capitally."

"Why did Dale and you swop jobs?"

"Oh, a mere matter of arrangement," said Medenham, who realized that Smith would blurt out every item of information that he possessed if allowed to talk.

"He's a corker, is Dale," mused the other. "I can do with a pint or two myself when the day's work is finished an' the car safely locked up for the night. But that Dale, he's a walkin' beer-barrel. Lord love a duck! what a soakin' he giv' me in Brighton. Some lah-di-dah toff swaggered into the garage that evenin,' and handed Dale a fiver—five golden quidlets, if you please—which my nibs had won on a horse at Epsom. I must say, though, Dale did the thing handsome—quart bottles o' Bass opened every ten minutes. Thank you, my dear"—this to the waitress, "next to beer give me tea. Now, my boss, bein' a Frenchy, won't touch eether—wine an' coffee are his specials."

He seemed to be enjoying his tea when I caught sight of him in the garden a little while ago," said Medenham.

"That's his artfulness, my boy. You wait a bit. You'll see something before you reach Bristol to-night; anyway, you'll hear something, which amounts to pretty much the same in the end."

"They're just off to the caves," put in the girl.

"While Mrs. Devar writes her postcards, I suppose?" said Medenham innocently.

"What! Is that the old party with the hair? I thought she was the young lady's mother. She's gone with them. She looks that sort of meddler—not half. Two's company an' three's none is my motto, cave or no cave."

She tried her most betwitching smile on Medenham this time. It was a novel experience to be the recipient of a serving-maid's marked favor, and it embarrassed him. Smith, his mouth full of currant bun, spluttered with laughter.

"A fair offer," he cried. "You two dodge outside and see which cave the aristocracy chooses. Then you can take a turn round the other one. I'll watch the cars all right."

The girl suddenly blushed and looked demure. A sweet voice said quietly:

"We shall remain here half an hour or more, Fitzroy. I thought I would tell you in case you wished to smoke—or occupy you time in any other way."

"You may occupy your time in any way you wish, Fitzroy," said Cynthia.

The pause was eloquent. Cynthia had heard.

"Thank you, Miss Vanrenen," he said, affecting to glance at his watch.

He felt thoroughly nonplussed. She would surely think he had been flirting with this rosy-cheeked servant, and he might never have an opportunity of telling her that his sole reason for encouraging the conversation lay in his anxiety to learn as much as possible about Marigny and his associates.

"My, ain't she smart!" said the girl when Cynthia had gone.

Medenham put his hand in his pocket and gave her half-a-crown.

"They have forgotten to tip you, Gertie," he said. Without heeding a stare of astonishment strongly tinctured with indignation, he stooped in unnecessary scrutiny of the Mercury's tires. The minx tossed her head.

"Some folks are as grand as their missusses," she remarked, and went back to her garden.

But Smith looked puzzled. Medenham, no good actor at any time, had dropped too quickly the air of camaraderie which had been a successful passport hitherto. His voice, his manner, the courtly insolence of the maid's dismissal, evoked vague memories in Smith's mind. The square-shouldered, soldierly figure did not quite fit into the picture, but he seemed to hear that same authoritative voice speaking to Dale in the Brighton garage.

The conceit was absurd, of course. Chauffeurs do not swagger through the world dressing for dinner each night and distributing gold in their leisure moments. But Smith's bump of inquisitiveness was well developed, as the phrenologists say, and he was already impressed by the fact that no firm could afford to send out for hire a car like Medenham's.

"Funny thing," he said at last. "I seem to have met you somewhere or other. Who do you work for?"

"Myself."

Medenham caught the note of bewilderment, and was warned. He straightened himself with a smile, though it cost him an effort to look cheerful.

"Have a cigarette?" he said.

"Don't mind if I do. Thanks." Then, after a pause, and some puffing tasting: "Sorry, old man, but this baccy ain't my sort. It tastes queer. What is it? Flor de Cabbagio? Here, take one of mine!"

Medenham, in chastened mood, accepted a "five a penny" cigarette, and saw Smith throw away the exquisite brand that Sevastpolo, of Bond Street, supplied to those customers only who knew the price paid by connoisseurs for the leaf grown on one small hillside above the sun-steeped bay of Salonika.

"Yes," he agreed, bravely poisoning the helpless atmosphere, "this is better suited to the occasion."

"A bit of all right, eh? I can't stand the Count's cigarettes eether—French rubbish, you know. An' the money they run into—well, there!"

"But if he is a rich man——"

"Rich!. Smith exploded with merriment. "If he had what he owes he might worry along for a year or so, but, you mark my words, if he doesn't—Well, it's no business of mine, only just keep your eyes open. You're going through with this tour?"

"I—believe so," said Medenham slowly—and thus he took the great resolution which till that moment was dim in his mind.

"In that case we'll be having a jaw some other time,-and then, mebbe, we'll both be older an' wiser."

Notwithstanding the community of taste established by Smith's weeds, the man was still furtively racking his brains to account for certain discrepancies in his new acquaintance's bearing and address. Medenham's hands, for instance, were too well kept. Hiss boots were of too good a quality. His reinder driving gloves discarded and lying on the front seat, were far too costly. The disreputable line coat might hide many details, but not these. Every now and then Smith wanted to say "sir," and he wondered why.

Medenham was sure that at the back of Smith's head lay some scheme some arranged trick, some artifice of intrigue that would find its opportunity between Cheddar and Bristol. The distance was not great—perhaps eighteen miles—by a fairly direct second-class road, and on this fine June evening it was still safe to count on three hours of daylight. It was doubly irritating, therefore, to think that by his own lack of diplomacy he had almost forfeited Smith's confidence. Twice had the man been on the very brink of revelation, for he was one of those happy-go-lucky beings not fitted for the safeguarding of secrets, yet on each occasion his tongue faltered in subconscious knowledge that he was about to betray his master's affairs.

Feeling that Dale would have managed this part of the day's adventures far better than himself , Medenham took his seat and touched the switch.

"We have to make Bristol gy seven o'clock, so I shall pull out in front; I suppose Count Marigny will give the ladies the road?" he remarked casually.

Smith was listening to the engine.

"Runs like a watch, don't it?" was his admiring cry.

"And almost as quietly, so you heard what I said."

"Oh, I hear lots, but I reckon it a good plan to keep my mouth shut," grinned the other.

"Exactly what you have failed to do," thought Medenham, though he nodded pleasantly, and, with a "so long!" passed out of the yard. The man's face wore a good-humored sneer. It was as though he said:

"You wait a bit, my dandy shuffer—you ain't through with his Countship yet—not by any manner o' means."

And Medenham did wait, till nearly seven o'clock. He saw Cynthia and her companions come out of Gough's Cave and enter Cox's. These fairy grottoes of nature's own contriving were well worthy of close inspection, he knew. Nowhere else in the world can stalactites that droop from the roof, stalagmites that spring from the floor, be seen in such perfection of form and tint. But he fretted and fumed because Cynthia was immured too long in their ice-cold recesses, and when, at last, she reappeared from the second cavern and halted near a stall to purchase some curios, impatience mastered him, and he brought the car slowly on until she turned and looked at him.

He raised his cap.

"The gorge is the finest thing in Cheddar, Miss Vanrenen," he said. "You ought to see it while the light is strong."

"We are going now," she answered coldly. "Monsieur Marigny will take me to Bristol, and you will follow with Mrs. Devar."

He did not flinch from her steadfast gaze, though those blue eyes of hers seemed definitely to forbid any expression of opinion. Yet there was a challenge in them, too, and he accepted it meekly.

"I was hoping that I might have the pleasure of driving you this evening," he said. "The run through the pass is very interesting, and I know every inch of it."

He fancied that she was conscious of some mistake, and eager to atone if in the wrong.

She hesitated, yielded almost, but Mrs. Devar broke in angrily:

"We have decided differently, Fitzroy. I have some postcards to dispatch, and Count Marigny has kindly promised to run slowly up the hill until we overtake him."

"Yes, you ought to have waited in the yard of the inn for orders," said the ever-smiling Marigny. "My car can hardly pass yours in this narrow road. Back a bit to one side, there's a good fellow, and, when we have gone, pull up to the door. Come, Miss Vanrenen. I am fierce to show you the paces of a Du Vallon."

The concluding sentences were in French, but Count Edouard spoke idiomatic English fluently and with a rather fascinating accent.

Cynthia, slightly ruffled by her own singular lack of purpose, made no further demur. The three walked off down the hill, and Medenham could only obey in a chill rage that, were Marigny able to guage its intensity, might have given him "furiously to think."

In a few minutes the Du Vallon scurried by. Smith was driving, and there was a curious smirk on his red face as he glanced at Medenham. Cynthia sat in the tonneau with the Frenchman, who drew her attention to the limestone cliffs in such wise that she did not even see the Mercury as she passed.

Medenham muttered something under his breath, and reversed slowly back to the inn. He consulted his watch.

"I'll give the postcard writer ten minutes—then I shall jar her nerves badly," he promised himself.

Those minutes were slow-footed, but at last he closed the watch with a snap. He called to a waitress visible at the end of a long passage. The girl happened to be his friend of teatime.

"Would you like to earn another half crown?" he asked.

She had wit enough to grasp essentials, and it was abundantly clear that this man was not her lawful quarry.

"Yes—sir," she said.

"Take it, then, and tell the elderly lady belonging to my party—she is somewhere inside—that Fitzroy says he cannot wait any longer. Use those exact words—and be quick!"

The girl vanished. An irate yet dignified Mrs. Devar came out.

"Do I understand——" she began wrathfully.

"I hope so, madam. Unless you get in at once I intend going to Bristol, or elsewhere, without you."

"Or elsewhere?" she gasped, though some of her high color fled under his cold glance.

"Precisely. I do not intend to abandon Miss Vanrenen."

"How dare you speak to me in this manner, you vulgar person?"

For answer Medenham set the engine going.

"I said 'At once,'" he replied, and looked Mrs. Devar squarely in the eyes.

She had her fair share of that wisdom of the serpent which is indispensable to evildoers, and had learnt early in life that whereas many men say they will do that which they really will do if put to the test, other men, rare but dominant, can be trusted to make good their words no matter what the cost. So she accepted the unavoidable; quivering with indignation, she entered the car.

"Drive me to the Post-office," she said, with as much of acid repose as she could master to her aid.

Medenham seemed to be suddenly afflicted with deafness. After negotiating a line of vehicles, the Mercury leaped past the caves of Gough and Cox as though the drip of lime-laden water within those amazin gdepths were reeling off centuries in a frenzy of haste instead of measuring time so slowly that no appreciable change has been noted in the tiniest stalactite during fifty years. Mrs. Devar then grew genuinely alarmed, since even a designing woman may be a timid one. She bore with the pace until the car seemed to be on the verge of rushing full tilt against a jutting rock. She could endure the strain no longer, but stood up and screamed.

Medenham slackened sped. When the curving road opened sufficiently to show a clear furlong ahead, he turned and spoke to the limp, shrieking creature clinging to the back of his seat.

"You are not in the slightest danger," he assured her, "but if you wish it I will drop you here. The village is barely half a mile away. Otherwise, should you decide to remain, you must put up with a rapid speed."

"But why, why?" she almost wailed. "Have you gone mad, to drive like that?"

"Again I pledge my word that there is no risk. I mean to overtake Miss Vanrenen before the light fails—that is all."

"You conduct is positively outrageous," she gasped.

"Please yourself, madam. Do you go, or stay?"

She collaspsed into the comfortable upholstery with a gesture of impotent despair. Medenham was sure she would not dare to leave him. What wretched project she and Marigny had concocted he knew not, but its successful outcome evidently depended on Mrs. Devar's safe arrival in Bristol. Moreover, it was a paramount condition that he should be delayed at Cheddar, and his chief interest lay in defeating that part of the programme. Without another word, he released the brakes, and the car sped onward.

Now they were plunging into a magnificent defile shadowed by sheer cliffs that on the western side rose to a height of five hundred feet. Fluttering rock pigeons circled far up in the azure riband that spanned the opposing precipices. From many a towering pinnacle, carved by the ages into fantastic imageries of a castle, a pulpit, a lion, or a lance, came the loud, clear calling of innumerable jack-daws. It was dark and gloomy most terrifying to Mrs. Devar, down there on the twining road where the car boomed ever on like some relentless monster rushing from its lair. But the Cheddar gorge, though majestic and awe-inspiring, is not of great extent. Soon the valley widened, the road took longer sweeps to round each frowning buttress, and at last emerged, with a quality of inanimate breathlessness, on to the bleak and desolate tableland of the Mendips.

At this point had Cynthia been there, Medenham would have stopped for a while, so that she might admire the far-flung panorama of the "island valley of Avallon" that stretched below the ravine. Out of the green pastures in the middle distance rose the ruined towers of Glanstonbury. The purple and gold of Sedgemoor, relieved by the soft outlines of the Polden hills, the grim summits of Taunton Dean and the Blackdown range, the wooded Quantocks dipping to the Severn, and the giant mass of Exmoor bounding the far horizon,—these great splashes of color, softened and blended by belts of farmland and the blue smoke of clustering hamlets, formed a picture that not even Britain's storehouse of natural beauty can match too often to sate the eyes of those who love a charming landscape.

He had, as it were, jealously guarded this vista all day, said not a word of it, even when Cynthia and he discussed the route, so that it might come at last in one supreme moment of revelation. And now that it was here, Cynthia was hidden somewhere in the gray distance, and Medenham was frowning at a flying strip of white road, with his every facutly intent on exacting the last ounce of power from the superb machine he controlled.

The miles rolled beneath, yet there was no token of the Du Vallon that was to "run slowly up the hill" until overtaken by the industrious writer of postcards. At the utmost, the French car was given some twelve or thirteen minutes' start which meant seven or eight miles to a high-powered automobile urged forward with the determination Medenham himself was displaying. Marigny's chauffeur, therefore, must have dashed through that Titanic cleft in the limestone at a speed utterly incompatible with his employer's excuse of sightseeing. Of coure, it would be an easy matter for Marigny to enlist Miss Vanrenen's sympathies in the effort of a first-rate engine to conquer the adverse gradient. She would hardly realize the rate of progress, and, from where she was seated, the speed indicator would be invisible unless she leaned forward for the express purpose of reading it. Medenham was sure that the Mercury would catch the Du Vallon long before Bristol was reached, but when the last ample fold of the bleak plateau spread itself in front, and hunter's eyes could discern no cloud of dust lingering in the still air where the road dipped over the horizon, he began to doubt, to question, to solve grotesque problems that were discarded ere they had well taken shape.

Oddly enough, there came no more expostulations from Mrs. Devar. Like the majority of nervous people, she quelled by the need of placing complete trust in one who understood his work. While Medenham was still searching the sky-line for signs of the vanished car, she did show some interest in his quest. He felt, since he could not see, that she half rose and looked over his head, bent low behind the partial shelter afforded by a glass screen. Then she settled back in the seat, and drew a rug comfortably around her knees. For some reason, she was strangely content.

The incident supplied food for active thought. So she felt safe! That which she dreaded as the result of a too strenuous pursuit could not now happen! Then what was it? Medenham swept aside the fantasy that Mrs. Devar knew the country well enough to ge able to say precisely when and where she might be sure of his failure to snatch Cynthia from that hidden evil of his nature of which he could only guess at. Her world was the artificial one of hotels, and shops and numbered streets—in the real world, of which the lonely wastes of the Mendips provided no meager sample, she was a profound ignoramus, a fat little automaton equipped with atrophied senses. But she blundered badly in composing herself so cozily for the remainder of the run to Bristol. Medenham had dwelt many months at a time in lands where just such simple indications of mood on the part of man or beast had meant to him all the difference between life and death. So now, if ever, he became doubly alert; his eyes were strained, eager, peering; his body still as the wild creatures which he knew to be skulking unseen behind many a rock and grass tuft passed on the way.

This desolate land, given over to stones interspersed with patches of wiry grass on which browsed some hardy sheep, resembled a disturbed ocean suddenly made solid. It was not level, but ran in long, almost regular undulations. In the trough bteween two of these rounded ridges the road bifurcated, the way to Bristol trending to the left, and a less important thoroughfare glancing off to the right.

There was no sign-post, but a child could scarce have erred is asked to choose the track that led to a big town. Medenham having consulted the map earlier in the day, swung to the left without hesitation. The car literally flew up the next incline, and the dark lines of trees and hedges in the distance proved that tilled land was being neared. Now he was absolutely sure that he had managed somehow, to miss the Du Vallon—unless, indeed, its redoubtable mechanism was of a caliber he had not yet come across in the highways and byways of Europe.

With him, to decide was to act. The Mercury slowed up so promptly that Mrs. Devar became alarmed again.

"What is it?—a tire gone?" she cried.

"No, I am on the wrong road—that is all."

"But there is no other. That turning we passed was a mere lane."

The car stopped where his watchful glance noted a carpet of sand left by the last shower of rain. He sprang out and examined the marks of recent traffic. Marigny's vehicle carried non-skid covers with studs arranged in peculiar groups, and their imprint was plain to be seen. But they had followed that road once only. It was impossible to determine offhand whether they had come or gone, but if they came from Bristol, then most certainly they had not returned.

Medenham took nothing for granted Dusk was advancing , and he must make no mistake at this stage. He ran the Mercury slowly ahead, not taking his gaze off the telltale signs At last he found what he was looking for. The broad scars left by a heavy cart crossed the studs, and had crossed after the passage of the car. Thus he eliminated the vagaries of chance Marigny had not taken the road to Bristol—he must get on the other one—since no cart was in sight.

Medenham backed and turned. Mrs. Devar, of course, grew agitated.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

Medenham resolved to end this farce of pretense, else he would not be answerable for the manner of his speech.

"I mean to find Miss Vanrenen," he said. "Pray let that suffice for the hour. Any further explanation you may require can be given at Bristol and in her presence."

Mrs. Devar began to sob. He heard her, and of all things that he hated it was to become the cause of a woman's tears. But his lips closed in a thin seam, and he drove fast to the forkfork in the roads. Another halt here, and the briefest scrutiny showed that his judgement had not erred. Du Vallon had passed this point twice. If it came from Bristol in the first instance it had gone now to some unfamiliar wilderness that skirted the whole northeastern slopes of the Mendips.

He leaped back to the driving seat, and Mrs. Devar made one more despairing effort to regain control of a situation that had slipped from her grasp nearly an hour ago.

"Please be sensible, Fitzroy!" she almost screamed. "Even if he has made a mistake in a turning, Count Marigny will take every care of Miss Vanrenen——"

It was useless. She was appealing to a man of stone, and, indeed, Medenham could not pay heed to her then in any circumstances, for the road surface quickly became very rough, and it needed all his skill to guide his highly-strung car over its inequalities without inflicting an injury that might prove disastrous.

(To be continued)