

EUROPE IS WONDERFUL

How John Mitchael Found Romance in the World of Business

By WARD MUIR. in *Cassell's Magazine*

"EUROPE is wonderful," said Mitchael. "All Americans say that," I ventured. "It's a mere phrase with most of us," he retorted. "We generally cap it by an assertion that America is more wonderful still." "What made you discover Europe's wonderfulness?" I asked.

"Asia," he answered, strangely. I looked at Mitchael as he lay back in the club chair and sucked at a cigar. He was still young; he represented, immensely, the American type; but there lurked in his eyes a kind of smouldering knowledge of things.

How to describe him? I cannot. Yet he was worth describing, this master of a vast fortune and an intricate business. New York respected, in him, the sole chief of "the Mitchael firm," as it was generally called; an exceedingly old banking, money-lending association, originally Jewish, now Americanized. Mitchael's grandfather had had Hebrew blood in his veins; Mitchael's father betrayed it less markedly; Mitchael himself not at all. He was an American to his finger-tips—I, who am an Englishman, can but vaguely define what I imply by "American," though its outward seeming is plain enough to me—and had begun his business career in the office in Broadway. He had not liked it. There was a streak of the artist in him. He read poetry, he admired pictures—he was, in short, by no means the normal business man. So he had fretted, chained to his desk. But his grandfather—his father died young—only shrugged his shoulders. "You will grow accustomed to it, John," he reiterated. "Give yourself a year or two, and if at the end you still want to leave the firm I will let you off and find another successor."

John Mitchael agreed to the bargain, and studied hard at economics—the economics of the commercial world. His grandfather always spoke of "Finance," and one felt that he used a capital F for the word. Grandfather Mitchael made no "corners" in anything; he had never wrecked a railroad or created a Trust. His transactions were far subtler than those of the "magnates" whose exploits flared daily in the press. He negotiated important loans, moved stupendous sums of money, like chessmen, about the globe, from Japan to Russia, from Russia to Japan, and then back to Belgium or Peru. This was the trade to which he wished to train young John Mitchael, his grandson.

The latter, in the end, had taken to it with zest. What was the cause of his change? "Europe," said John Mitchael. In the New York club lounge, over a cigar and a cocktail, he told me the following story:

There was no romance in business, I thought (said Mitchael). The alleged romance which I read about in the sensational papers nauseated me—the romance of preposterous fortunes made by gambling or by what was little better than robbery and fraud. My grandfather's business differed, it is true, from these, but it did not appeal to me. Still, when he said that he proposed to send me to his London office for a year, I was pleased. I had never been in England before, though I had visited Italy.

An antique Scotsman, MacBrayne by name, ruled the London office; the shrewdest man I think I have ever met. He was kind to me; took me into companionship immediately, with a disarming frankness. He may have been acting on instructions from my grandfather. At any rate, I was flattered and grateful.

He knew everybody worth knowing, in the City of London—not the little people, but the big ones, the really tremendous men, whose names were a by-word throughout the world. MacBrayne stood on friendly terms with them all; he lunched daily with millionaires—and not the sort of millionaires with whom one can lunch—but with whom one doesn't in the least want to lunch—in New York. MacBrayne took me with him, often, to his club.

It was on one of these occasions that we met Salmon.

He came along the aisle between the tables—a tall, thin man with a neatly trimmed brown beard, streaked with grey—beautifully dressed in a frock coat, and carrying a silk hat.

MacBrayne beckoned to him, and he nodded and joined us at our table. Having given his hat to a waiter, he shook hands and sat down. I was introduced.

"So you're Mitchael's grandson?" he said. "Welcome to London."

He had turned to the menu and now ordered a very frugal meal.

"You have already entered your grandfather's business?" he continued, addressing me. "It is a fine business—oh, a fine business."

Only then did I notice that his English was not that of an Englishman. What his nationality was I did not then know. His face told no tale. It was sallow, a shade Jewish-looking, perhaps; the eyes were large and dark, and their pupils tinged with blue. He talked easily and well, was particularly gracious to me, and invited me to call at his house in Bayswater.

I went, and spent several quiet but indefinitely agreeable evenings with him. Seemingly he was not married; no wife or child appeared on these occasions. But he "did me well," as you say, and after dinner we had a game of billiards and smoked the finest cigars I have ever met. On one occasion he took me to the opera, where he rented a box. On another we went to a music hall; and I met him almost daily in the city.

Picture to yourself this man, please: a tall, well-dressed financier of the city of London; coming from Bayswater to the bank in his automobile, dining at his club, spending the evening at the theatre. Outwardly orthodox, except for this touch of foreignness; a man you might see hundreds to match in Lombard Street to-morrow.

MacBrayne, plied with questions by me, could tell me little about him. "A big man, Salmon," was all he said. "Has Eastern interests. Is worth a million, at least. A Jew? I don't think so. Armenian, perhaps."

THE summer was passing, and on the whole I was happy enough in London. It was two months since I had left New York. Already I had begun to catch a faint inkling of the meaning of Europe, the profound difference there lies between, for instance, London and New York. But business was not interesting me much, and MacBrayne, for all his trouble, could not rouse my enthusiasm. I followed politics and the money market closely, and fairly conscientiously; but my heart was not in it.

Until one day there arose the question of the Asia Minor Development Syndicate.

MacBrayne was intensely occupied with the details of this project. German money was in it—that was the cant phrase; but to people like my grandfather and MacBrayne there is no nationality in money—no "German" money any more than there is "American" money—there is only money itself, and the raising of it. We might, or might not, be involved in the Asia Minor Syndicate. It behoved MacBrayne to study the situation very closely and cunningly.

Presently it appeared—at least, so he told me—that the value or otherwise of the scheme turned entirely on the length of the projected railway. Some of it was already built; some more was planned; but unless the railway was carried on to an inland town called Schief, its value, according to MacBrayne, would be negligible.

"Why shouldn't they continue it to Schief, if they can get the money?" I asked.

"Because between Schief and Benra lies the Holy City of Kem," said MacBrayne.

"Holy City?"

"There are more Holy Cities in the Near East than Mecca and Medina," explained MacBrayne. "The fanatics may think it a defilement to have the railroad carried past Kem. If they do, there'll be trouble. If we could find out definitely whether the road can be carried on—well, it would make a lot of difference in the firm's policy toward the Asia Minor Syndicate."

He reflected for a space. "Salmon knows," he said at last.

"How do you know he knows?"

"He's sure to know. He has got Asia Minor in his pocket, has Salmon. If I could only find out what his opinion is—"

Rather idiotically I said, "Why not ask him?"

MacBrayne looked at me hard. Suddenly he slapped his thigh. "Why not ask him?" he shouted. "After all, why not? Laddie, you have a genius for simplicity. Go and ask him yourself. Never mind whether he tells you the truth or not—just

ask him, and as you value your life, remember precisely what he says in reply, and come and repeat it to me."

I was amused. It did not seem to me a very difficult task to go and ask Salmon whether the railroad would be continued to Schief or would stop off at Benra. I put on my hat and went into the city to Salmon's office.

I remember noticing anew the little differences between London and New York, and thinking: "After all, New York is better. I am beginning to tire of London." Then I thought of my lunch, and where I would go for it, and wondered how long Salmon would keep me. "In half an hour I shall be back with MacBrayne," I thought.

But it was almost a month before I saw MacBrayne again.

Salmon was not at his office.

His chief clerk saw me. "Mr. Salmon has gone to Constantinople," he said. "We do not know the date of his return."

To Constantinople! The name was delicious. Imagine going to Constantinople! I felt inclined to laugh outright.

"We have a branch at Constantinople," the clerk went on, "and Mr. Salmon has a private residence there."

A private residence at Constantinople! I thought of Salmon's private residence at Bayswater—and vaguely pictured it planted down on the shores of the Bosphorus.

"He will probably remain in Constantinople several weeks," said the clerk.

I thanked him, and moved out into the roaring street. And suddenly I chuckled. I stepped into the nearest telephone box and rang up MacBrayne.

"Salmon's gone to Constantinople," I said. "Shall I follow him?"

I heard MacBrayne snigger. "All right."

If he had been there I could have fallen on his neck and kissed him.

"Catch the 2.20 Folkestone train," I heard him saying. "You can get the Orient Express at Paris. Don't book direct to Constantinople; go to Kustendji, on the Black Sea, and thence by the mailboat. I've always found it saved several hours."

So MacBrayne had been in Constantinople. Funny that I never realized that he must have travelled.

"I'll send down some money to the train," his voice went on. "If you want more, go to Metaltopos in Constantinople; he'll supply you. But don't come back till you've seen Salmon."

He rang off. I sprang into a cab and drove round to my rooms to pack a bag. At two o'clock I was at Charing Cross.

It was great fun to be going to Constantinople.

Four days later I was looking down on Constantinople from the Pera Palace Hotel. A fabulous sight. Here was something really new, something that America could not show. The East! We have our China towns, our Asiatic quarters; they are mere squalid adaptations of America. This was the real thing—and four days from Lombard Street! Europe is wonderful, I said to myself.

What a city! What a devil of a mess of a place! And what a mystery to Western eyes. I came back to that again and again—what a mystery.

Behind those crumbling walls, those secretive windows—what was going on? Did human beings live within? Of course, but what had they in common with John Mitchael of New York and London? Look at the streets—their squalor, their dust and dogs and sunshine and stinks—is this street, is the Galata Bridge, on the same planet as Broadway or the Strand? Incredible!

THE heat was tremendous. Boyishly I rejoiced in it, and having changed my clothes, went forth accompanied by an individual who had been provided as my guide by the hotel proprietor. My "dragoman," I ought to say. "Dragoman!" a fine word, to be sure. My guide's—no, my dragoman's—name was Ali. He was a magnificent rogue, and faithful, withal.

Salmon's place of business, surrounding a cool courtyard and quaintly different from his London office, was soon found. Another chief clerk received me most courteously. Mr. Salmon had gone.

Where?

He had gone to Damascus.

I nearly guffawed. To think of anybody going to Damascus. In Biblical days—yes; but in the days of telegraphs and the turbine—oh, it was great. Damascus! I rolled the name on my tongue.

Would Mr. Salmon make a long stay in Damascus?

Probably, said the clerk. Mr. Salmon generally went to Damascus at this time of year. Mr. Salmon had a house at Damascus.

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