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SECRET SERVICE;

OR,

A BANK CLERK'S DREAM.

In which there was a strange jumble of shadow and substance.

BY BRACEBRIDGE HEMYNG.

"There is more in heaven and earth, Horatio.
Than is dreamt of in thy philosophy."
—SHAKESPEARE.

After being ten years in a London counting-house or city office, without realizing the ambitious dreams of youth, and improving in any material or perceptible degree the position with which one started in life, the temper is apt to get a little soured, and castles in the air lose their attractiveness, as the nature of their unsubstantial fabric becomes apparent to an eye which will take nothing upon trust, though in its early days all was gold that glittered.

My parents were poor. They had not always been so, but they lost a considerable portion of their fortune in a bank failure. The bank was resuscitated, and they recovered sufficient out of the fire to buy them a small annuity on their joint lives. The banker, who was not to blame in the matter of the failure, which was brought about by a monetary crisis in the city, had known my father for some years. It was as a matter of friendship that my father deposited in his bank the hard-earned savings of his life; and in order to relieve him in some slight way, the banker offered to take me into the bank, at a salary of a hundred a year, with an occasional increase if I conducted myself well.

This is how I happened to become a clerk in the well-known house of Simpson, Deal, Mason and Co., Birchin lane, Cornhill.

It amuses me now to look back upon the time when I first came to London, and to think how sanguine I was that I could do so much upon so very little. I was expected to dress like a gentleman and live like one, upon a salary certainly not much in excess of that of a mechanic. I was to be punctual in my attendance at the bank, scrupulously exact in my accounts— a human machine, in fact, warranted always to be in perfect working order, and, after ten years' service, I came to the conclusion that I was very cheap at the price.

It is extremely difficult, however, to get out of a groove when you have once allowed yourself to slide into it, and, though several of my acquaintances with whom I was in the habit of spending the evening with a pipe occasionally, talked rather grandly about the colonies and the value of emigration, I knew very well that there was little or no opening abroad for education, and that there were hundreds in London who envied us, and were willing to take our places.

So I went on day after day, handling the crisp bank notes, shovelling the glittering gold about, and asking customers, not always in the civilist tones:

"How they would take it?"

My parents continued to reside out of London, which condemned me to a life in lodgings, though I should have much preferred the home comforts which they could have conferred upon me.

About once a quarter, the banker in whose employ I was, invited me to dinner at his house, which was situated at Twickenham, on the banks of the Thames, and was certainly one of the prettiest little places in the vicinity of London.

Though the firm was nominally Simpson, Deal Mason and Co., the two first had been dead many years, and Mr. Mortimer Mason was the sole representative of the business. He had but one daughter; and I must confess that, from the first moment I saw her, I liked her. She was much younger than me. At the time the incidents I am going to relate to you took place, I was thirty, and she not more than two-and twenty, so that when I first knew her she was quite a child.

My fondness for her, as a child, ripened into a feeling of strong affection and love as she grew up; but I did all I could to stifle this passion, because I knew that it was positive madness for me with no expectations, and a beggarly salary of a hundred and fifty pounds a year, to dream of marrying my employer's daughter. Nevertheless, I did dream of it, and I rather liked the madness.

Matilda was a pretty, amiable creature, with sweet blue eyes and long flaxen hair, such as painters give the angels. I was vain enough sometimes to think, when I had the privilege of being in her society, that she was pleased with my company and conversation; but, after all, she might not have been more civil to me than she was with her father's other guests.

So much did I think of Matilda Mason, and to such an extent did my thoughts run upon her that I never could be civil to any other woman; and I made a vow, secretly, that I would remain single for her sake, and worship her at a distance, even when, as I supposed she would some day, become the wife of another.

I had a formidable rival in the field, who did not bestow a thought upon me. Probably I was too contemptible in his eyes.

This was Mr. Hiram Strangeways, our manager. He was thoroughly in the confidence of Mr. Mason, who thought a great deal of him, and gave him eight hundred a year. From what I saw of Mr. Strangeways, I thought he spent much more than that. He drank champagne at dinner, and smoked sixpenny cigars. Of course it was no business of mine; still, I did not like the man, and was always forming an injurious estimate of his character.

Frequently my heart burned with bitter envy and jealousy when Mr. Mason took him home with him in the brougham to Twickenham to have a bit of dinner, talk over business, and take a bed at the house.

The feeling of enmity was mutual. If Strangeways could find fault with me, he did not neglect the opportunity, though I seldom gave him occasion, as I was a good accountant and very particular. Moreover, I had the esteem of my employer, who always treated me kindly, and as the son of an old friend, rather than one whom he hired to do his work.

One day in the autumn I had to stay after hours to make up some heavy accounts, and every one went away, leaving me in the counting-house.

I felt unaccountably drowsy, and going into Mr. Mason's private room, I sat down in his arm-chair to rest awhile, and indulge in my favorite reverie.

The reader already knows my weakness. I deluded myself with the insane idea that I had confessed my love to Matilda, who had thrown herself, blushing, into my arms. Mr. Mason was reconciled to the union, and offered me a share in the business, which I gladly accepted, and the name was altered to Simpson, Deal, Mason and Marlowe—that being my patronymic.

How long this reverie lasted, I don't know; but it was roused by the entrance of some one, bearing a candle in his hand.

A glance sufficed to show me that this was Mr. Mason. What he came back to the bank for, after six, I had to learn; and he did not keep me long in suspense, though I fancied there was a shade of displeasure on his face finding me dozing, as it were, in his chair.

"Ah, Marlowe," he said, "here you are. Finished your work I suppose? But that don't matter now," he added to my infinite relief. "Since I left the bank this afternoon I have made arrangements with Van Raalte and Co.—you know Van Raalte's, of Cornhill—to send a box of bullion over to their Paris house to-night."

"To-night, sir!" I said. "That will be rather quick work, will it not?"

"It will; yet it must be done, as they have certain specie payments to make early to morrow. I heard from Strangeways that you were here, and have resolved to let you undertake this secret service. Strangeways is now in the vaults arranging the quantity of bars that will be necessary for you to take with you."

"I am ready to start at once, sir," I replied; "and I think you know me sufficiently well to be sure that I shall execute the confidential mission with which you have entrusted me to the best of my ability."

"I am satisfied of that," he rejoined, "or I should not have selected you for such an important journey. Just be good enough to step down and speak to Mr. Strangeways while I write some letters for you to take with you. The mail leaves London bridge at 8:45; it is now past six. You have plenty of time, but none to lose."

Much surprised, yet flattered in no small degree, at being singled out for such an expedition, I sought the staircase leading to the vaults, where Mr. Strangeways, aided by the porter—an old Crimea hero, who always slept on the premises—was arranging the bars of gold in a common deal packing case.

The vault which to some extent resembled an ordinary wine cellar without the bins and bottles, was lighted by a lamp and a candle. In one corner were nearly fifty bags containing sovereigns. In another were tin cases, belonging to customers of the bank; some holding valuable papers, the others jewels, while more than one plate-chest occupied space in another direction.

"Lend a hand, Marlowe," exclaimed Mr. Strangeways, as I appeared in the doorway. "Give me a couple more of those bars, will you?—the ones marked H. B.—and that will make our complement."

I did as he requested, and assisted him to securely fasten the lid of the box containing the treasure. He rose from his knees, rubbed his hands together, as if he was afraid of the gold dust clinging to them, and between us we managed to carry the precious burden up stairs, and deposit it on the floor of the counting-house, and then, by the exercise of another violent effort, we placed it on the pay-cash counter, ready to be removed into the four-wheeled cab when it was time to start.

Mr. Strangeways repeated that everything was ready, and Mr. Mason emerged from his private room with two letters in his hand; he had just moistened the adhesive mixture, and was closing the envelope.

"Marlowe," he exclaimed, withdrawing his hand; "these letters are for the partners in the firm of Morangis, Dufour and Co.; one for each. The address is on the envelope—Boulevard du Capucines. You will put your own card on the box simply, and oblige me by not taking your eyes off it once during the whole journey. The treasure you have in your charge consists of £40,000 in bar gold, on which Messieurs Morangis and Dufour will obtain an immediate advance from the Bank of France, and so save their credit, which is threatened. This mode is adopted, as the rate of exchange is rather against the English sovereign at present. Here are ten pounds to defray your expenses; you will not stint yourself, but do not allow yourself to be betrayed into extravagance. To-day is Tuesday; I shall expect to see you in your place as usual on Thursday morning, when you will account to me for the ten pounds, and hand me the balance in my favor, if any."

I took the ten pounds, seeing that I should have more glory than profit out of the transaction; and assuring Mr. Mason that I quite understood what I was to do, proceeded to put on my great coat and comforter, and possess myself of my *umbrella*.

It was a cold, raw day, and a drizzling rain had just set in, which made the streets wet and muddy. The porter went out to fetch a cab, and was fortunate enough to see one crawling by, which he hailed. The damp air swept into the bank, and made me shiver, while I concluded that I should have a disagreeable journey, that part of it which consisted in crossing the Channel threatening to be particularly so.

Mr. Strangeways had affixed my card to the box with some tin tacks, and the porter, with the cabman's help, deposited my luggage on the front seat.

I shook hands with the banker, and with Mr. Strangeways, who both wished me a pleasant passage, and I started for London bridge. As I went down King William street, I saw some shops open, and stopping the cabman, sent him in to buy me a travelling cap at one place and some cigars at another.

It was eight o'clock only when I reached the London bridge station, and I found that I had three-quarters of an hour to wait, which was extremely disagreeable. I had the box of bullion placed on a porter's truck and wheeled into the waiting-room, where I sat till the clock indicated, by a sharp click, that it had arrived at the half hour.

Finding another porter, I retained his services by a bribe, and got him to wheel the box after me, while I took my ticket—first-class return from London to Paris—and I proceeded to the platform to wait for the appearance of the mail train to Dover; another bribe to the guard when the train came up, obtained the permission to take my luggage, as I called it, into the carriage with me. I chose a seat with my back to the engine, placed my feet upon the box, bought some illustrated papers, and thought myself tolerably lucky so far. There was only one vacant seat in the carriage, and that was just opposite me.

I could hear the hoarse panting of the engine and the shrill scream of the steam as it escaped through the waste-pipe—the hurry-skurry of the porter—the voices of travellers—the cries of the newsboys, and the numerous sounds which are familiar to all railway passengers.

The whistle of the guard had been blown, and we were expecting to move every second, when the door opened, and a voice I knew exclaimed:

"Room here, guard! Put me in here! Mind the box! That will do!"

And in a moment a box exactly similar to mine was pushed inside, while a gentleman followed it, whom I recognized as Mr. Hiram Strangeways.

He took his seat facing me. The guard blew his whistle again, and we were off. Spreading a comfortable travelling rug over his knees, Mr. Strangeways smiled pleasantly and said:

"Rather a surprise to see me, eh, Marlowe?"

"Rather, sir," I answered, not knowing what to make of it.

"Soon explain," he went on, in his curt way. "Van Raalte came over just after you'd gone, and asked us to double the credit, as a telegram had been received from Morangis and Dufour, asking for more money, as they have to pay the coupons of some Belgian railway the day after to-morrow; so I started after you with another lot of gold, and you will have the pleasure of a travelling companion."

This seemed to me very odd and unbusiness-like on the part of Van Raalte & Co., but it was not for me to find fault with the manager of the bank in which I was simply clerk. However, I suggested that I could take charge of both boxes, and that he might, after proceeding as far as Dover, go back again if he liked. But he did not like. Mr. Strangeways had set his mind upon a visit to the French capital, and thought the journey would do him good.

"Besides," he added, "I am interested in a company which is about to start. We want to introduce joint stock banking into France, and I mean to sound some of the big men over there—kill two birds with one stone. Business and pleasure will go hand in hand."

"There will not be time for much pleasure, I am afraid," I remarked, dismally.

Mr. Strangeways thought differently. We could have a drive, and a French dinner, and see some of the sights, if we expended our time judiciously.

"Nothing like a proper economy of time, Marlowe," he added. "If you waste the minutes, the hours are no good to you. Minutes are like pence, and should be well looked to.

I acquiesced in the dictum, and we lighted our cigars. No one in the carriage took any notice of us, and the fact of our having a small fortune at our feet did not seem to strike our fellow-travellers.

We reached Dover without any accident, and embarked on board the steamer Samphire. The deck was wet and slippery with the rain, which still descended pitilessly. The ocean was somewhat tumultuous, owing to a gale of the previous day, though there was little or no wind when he got on board.

Being a wretched sailor, I went below, where a few men had preceded me. The number of passengers was not large; the majority looked like business men, who were travelling because they were obliged to. Foreseeing a rough passage, they made themselves as comfortable as possible, and we followed their example, having our boxes on the carpet, close to the seat, on which we had stretched ourselves.

When the Samphire got out of the harbor, she began to pitch and toss in a manner that made me feel very miserable.

Strangeways, who was more used to the sea, or, at all events, to crossing the Channel, than I was, made light of my suffering, called the steward, and pressed me to take some brandy, which I did.

Half an hour elapsed, and I felt so miserably ill that I do not think I could have stirred hand or foot if anyone had announced his intention of robbing me of my gold and throwing it overboard; but bending my head in its direction, I kept my eyes fixed glassily upon the boxes, which had a fascination for me, causing me, in some slight degree, to rise superior to physical suffering.

Strangeways seemed very anxious to get me to go off to sleep; but though feeling rather drowsy—it was about my usual bed-time—I resisted the inclination, replying to his solicitations with a shake of the head and a melancholy smile.

At last he drew a bottle from his pocket, and poured some of the contents on a handkerchief, which he extended to me. I was *instantly* conscious of a pungent though sickly odor, which filled the part of the cabin in which we were. It was not disagreeable to the senses; but a strange and unaccountable instinct told me I ought not to inhale it.

I struggled to get up, but my head swam so dreadfully that I could only rise on my elbow, and, with one hand extended, I deprecated the kindness which I fancied he was going to offer.

The steamer at that moment gave a lurch sideways, and had it not been for Strangeways, I should have fallen on the floor of the cabin. He caught me, and pushed me back into the position I occupied before, saying. "Lie still, and let me put this to your nose; it is the finest thing you can possibly have. I don't know what it is, but I bought it of a chemist in Gracechurch street, who assured me it was an infallible specific against sea-sickness."

The next moment, overcoming my resistance, he had pressed the handkerchief to my face. I was forced to inhale the fumes of his drug, whether noxious or not, because my respiration would have been impeded, to the imminent danger of suffocation had I remained obstinate.

I experienced the oldest sensations. I fancied that I was in the shaft of a well, the slimy bottom of which I could see, but which receded as I neared it. Some irresistible power was holding me, head downwards, and swinging me by my heels round and round with a terrible and even increasing velocity.

At length I became unconscious, and knew nothing more until I heard Strangeways voice. He was speaking to the steward, and saying, "I shall want one of your men to carry our baggage—two boxes only, though rather heavy—to the *gare*. My friend will come to, directly. He was very ill, and would dose himself with a mixture of chloroform and some other stuff."

I felt inclined to contradict this statement, but I had not strength sufficient to do so. I recovered my senses rapidly, when they once began to return. I contrived to sit up, though I felt somewhat faint and dizzy.

"Come to, at last, Marlowe!" exclaimed Strangeways. "My mixture was a little too strong for you, but it got you over your troubles. It blew big guns when we got near Calais, and it was touch and go, whether we were able to cross the bar. Here we are, however, and have just time for a basin of soup at the restaurant of the Station, before we start again."

I asked feebly for some brandy, which was given me, and I looked anxiously at the floor. The boxes preserved their relative positions, and my charge was safe. This of itself was sufficient to invigorate me, and leaning on Strangeways' arm, we followed the porter with the luggage, which he had wheeled into the refreshment room.

Here Strangeways left me. "Keep an eye on the bullion, old fellow," he exclaimed. "I want to inquire if there is any message for us from London."

While he was gone, I drank some thin soup and eat a snipe, cold, which I settled with a pint of sparkling wine, and was in better trim on Strangeways' return, than I had been at his departure.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, as he approached me, "who would have thought it? I found a message from the governor, calling me home at once. He says he wants me to-morrow, and you can take your box on to Paris, while I am to bring mine back, as Van Raalte hears from Morangis and Dufour that they can do without the second lot."

"That's not business," said I, very gravely.

"No, it's not," he replied, quite as seriously. "But, you see, there has been a panic on the Paris Bourse, and some of the fellows over there scarcely know how they stand. The Emperor's health is precarious, and speculators have only to raise a report that he is worse, for everything to go down, and then there is the deuce to pay: that is how it is."

That might have been how it was, but Mr. Hiram Strangeways' reasons did not appear at all satisfactory to me. I asked him to let me look at the telegram, and he said he had dropped it. This was suspicious.

"It's a great bore, though," he continued; "I had set my mind on a bit of fun in Paris, and I have been dragged here, and lost my night's rest, for nothing. I hate doing business with these foreign houses. They always humbug you, somehow or another. I shall have to go to-morrow to the 'Solferino,' or some place, and fancy I am dining with you in the Palais Royal. Rather a stretch of the imagination, eh, Marlowe?"

I agreed with him here, and felt sorry at losing his society.

There was nothing for me, however, but obedience to the orders of my superior; so I asked him how he proposed to get back to England. He replied, that he should catch the tidal train to Boulogne, and so cross over to Folkestone, reaching London about ten, and in time for business.

A bell rang within the station, which was a signal for passengers to Paris to get themselves in readiness to start.

"Where's our porter?" exclaimed Strangeways. "I'll leave my bullion here, and see you to the train. Oh, it's safe enough; no one knows what's inside," he added, in reply to an expostulation of mine.

Presently the porter came for the luggage; and I was soon once more safely ensconced in a first-class carriage, with the box of treasure as my foot-stool.

"Good-bye. *Bon voyage*," said Strangeways. "I'll tell the governor you were all right when I left you. Keep your eyes open, and mind that you know what isn't trifled with."

"Never fear," replied I, with a confident smile. Almost directly, the train started; and Strangeways, waving his hand pleasantly, grew gradually indistinct, as the distance increased, and we drew away from the platform.

The rain had ceased, and the wind rose, blowing the black, heavy clouds before it. The chloroform which Hiram Strangeways had made me inhale caused me to feel drowsy, and I slept until we reached Creil. Waking with a start, I looked for my box, and found it where I had left it. All my fellow passengers were asleep, or pretended to be so. I lighted a cigar, and kept awake through the gray dawn of the morning, until we reached Paris.

It was now a few minutes past six; and, having assured the excise officer that I had *rien a declarer*, I got into a fly, and was driven to the Boulevard des Capucines; where, early as it was, I found Monsieur Dufour waiting my arrival. He was the active partner, Morangis being old, and seldom appearing at the office till the middle of the day.

Monsieur Dufour spoke English and welcomed me warmly, as I assisted the driver and the house-porter to carry in the box of bullion, which was placed on a table in a private room.

When Monsieur Dufour had read the letters I brought with me, he exclaimed, "We will first verify the contents of the box with the invoice, sir, and I will give you a receipt, as you will doubtless be desirous of retiring to your hotel, to recover from the fatigue of your journey."

"By all means," I answered.

The porter in attendance brought a hammer and chisel, by means of which the lid was prised off.—On the lid was my card, fixed as Mr. Strangeways had affixed it at starting; and I began to congratulate myself that I had successfully concluded a risky sort of business, which might have resulted in the loss of a large sum had I been less careful and zealous.

All at once M. Dufour's countenance fell; and rushing upon me he seized my collar, exclaiming, "What is this, sir,—what is the meaning of this?"

I followed the direction of his eyes, and felt sick and ill at heart; for instead of beholding glittering bars of gold within the box, I saw nothing but dull and tarnished blocks of lead.

"Good heaven!" I ejaculated, dumbfounded and terror-stricken.

"Answer me!" continued the little and excited Frenchman, shaking me again, as a terrier dog does a rat. "Tell me how this has happened? Our credit is at stake; and is it thus your employer trifles with us? *Ma foi*, it is a bad joke!"

I could not resent the attack of the Frenchman, for I was as much concerned as he at the discovery he had made. Mechanically I turned over block after block of lead, in the vain hope of discovering some gold amidst the dross.

There was not an ounce.

"Speak!" thundered the Frenchman. "You are a thief! Where is my money? You have robbed me!"

Hurt at his unjust suspicions, I endeavored to allay his wrath, and gave him the history of my journey from London, assuring him that the gold was in the box when I started, and that I could only suppose Mr. Strangeways had, during the passage across the Channel, substituted a box of lead for box of gold.

"We sent no second telegram to Van Raalte," answered M. Dufour; "and it is not reasonable to suppose that a man in the position of a manager would do such a thing. No, you are a thief, and I shall give you to the police, while inquiries are being made in London. I say this—Jules Dufour!"

The little man drew himself up to his full height, swelling with indignation and disappointment. The non-arrival of the gold was a dreadful blow to him, and threatened to result in positive ruin. I felt that I was in no position to protest against the course he proposed to adopt, and was sure that Strangeways was the actual robber, and that he had cleverly changed his box for mine in the cabin of the steamer while I was insensible, and that my innocence must become apparent when proper inquiries were made.

"M. Dufour," I answered, calmly, "I am innocent of any wish even to defraud you. I am not guilty; and, pending inquiries, I shall not dispute your right to do as you think fit."

Almost stupified at the alarming discovery he had made, he was not capable of immediate action, but sat with his face buried in his hands, while he collected his thoughts.

At length he rose and apologized to me, saying that he had perhaps been too hasty; the circumstances were suspicious, I must own, which I did. He should communicate with the police and, I should be under their surveillance till he had he had an understanding with Simpson, Deal, Mason and Company, and so clear the matter up.

I made no objection whatever to this plan, merely begging that he would in his dispatches to Mr. Mason, state the full particulars of Mr. Strangeways' companionship from London bridge to Calais, which I had unreservedly confided to him.

He promised compliance with my request, and a *sergeant de ville* accompanied me to a hotel, which he strongly recommended, and where I went to bed in a wretched frame of mind, to recover from the fatigue of the journey.

When I rose from an uneasy and unrefreshing slumber, it was past noon, and a messenger from M. Dufour informed me that an answer had been received from London, to the effect that my story was false from beginning to end. Mr. Strangeways, who was represented as a highly respectable man, had not quitted town; he could prove that he slept in his bed as usual, and breakfasted at his lodgings, appearing at the bank at half-past ten, as was his custom.

This intelligence disconcerted me utterly. I had no confession to make, though one was urged upon me; and with a feeling of utter despair weighing me down to the ground, I submitted to the thraldom of the police, and was taken to prison.

Hiram Strangeways had been too clever for me; that he was the thief I did not doubt, and I was equally certain that he had so contrived everything as to throw the blame upon me of a night's work by which he made forty thousand pounds.

My case was hopeless. I could see no possible means of escape. Worn out and broken-hearted, I sank to sleep in the cold and cheerless cell into which I had been hurriedly thrust.

Adieu to all my ambitious schemes; no more