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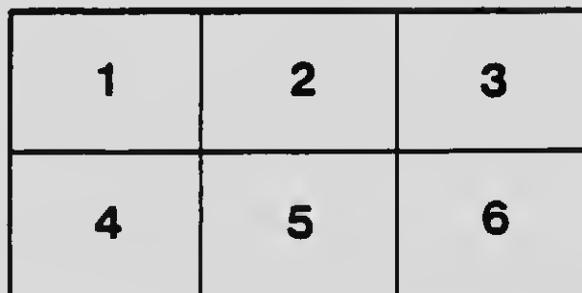
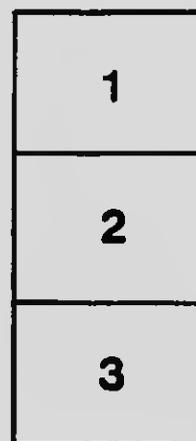
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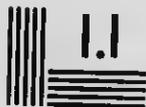
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**VIGOROUS DAUNT
BILLIONAIRE**

AMBROSE PRATT

Et maures, avec les
meilleures et wharfs de sam-
b. etc

Leur



**VIGOROUS DAUNT :
BILLIONAIRE**

8

VIGOROUS DAUNT: BILLIONAIRE

BY
AMBROSE PRATT

AUTHOR OF
"THE GREAT 'PUSH' EXPERIMENT," "FRANKS: DUELLIST," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STANLEY L. WOOD

TORONTO
THE MUSSON BOOK CO., LIMITED

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CHAPTER I

MY FIRST MEETING WITH VIGOROUS DAUNT

THE life of a gentleman courier and interpreter to tourists abroad is not always a rose-strewn pathway to fortune, and so I, Rupert Granville, found to my cost.

After bear-stringing Bethesda Carson, the Chicago pig merchant, his wife and daughter, half over Europe, I was summarily dismissed because, forsooth, Miss eighteen-year-old Sophia Carlotta Victoria Carson had chosen to construe my constant attitude of respectful attention to her entire family into a passive declaration of devotion for herself and her bread-and-butter charms. Her romantic imagination endowed me with sentiments and heroically unselfish attributes which I was far from possessing, and in a burst of generous emotion she assured me one night of her appreciation of my nobility. "I have read of men like you," she cried (we were strolling by moonlight in Berlin), "great, high-souled creatures, who will eat their hearts out in silence, fearing to say the word that may bring

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them happiness lest their motives should be misconceived."

Her artlessness caused me genuine surprise, and left me speechless. She presently resumed, "But you are wrong, Rupert; have you never thought that the woman you love may be as generous as yourself? Money! What is money—mere dross beside sincere affection. It is not a crime to be poor; it may be cruel to be proud. Have you never thought that your silence may wrong, your pride wound, your watchful coldness break a heart that is tenderly attached to you?"

The young woman had without doubt recently steeped her mind in literature of a particularly romantic type, and I vaguely recognised the language she employed. But what was there for me to do except succumb to an attack so barefaced and yet so innocent? The girl was scarcely eighteen, and charming in her way, uniting in her person the face of a babe with the physical perfections of a Venus. I responded in similar wise, and grandiosely exclaimed "Sweet angel that you are to send such gracious balm to a starving spirit."

"I knew it!" she muttered, tragically extending her arms. "I knew it!"

"But," said I, carefully modulating my voice to the properly effective tone of ardent melancholy, "my silence has been prompted by something more than mere pride. Your parents have confided in my honour; they have informed me it is their ambition that you should marry some person of

exalted rank. They trusted me. Therefore my lips were sealed, and though my heart broke inch by inch I should never have betrayed their confidence."

"You would have allowed me to be sacrificed to their ambition?" she asked reproachfully.

"Ah! my angel, I was without hope that you could have reciprocated the passion which consumed me!"

It was at this point that I suggested the propriety of returning to the hotel, where her parents would be expecting her. She murmuringly assented, and on the road thither brightly assured me that she "knew how to manage her 'poppa.'"

"You must leave everything to me, dear Rupert. When poppa knows how utterly I love you he will consent; he would never break his Sophie's heart."

I ventured to mildly disagree with her, for I had formed another opinion of Carson *père*, and shrewdly judged him to be a resolute and unrelenting tuft-hunter.

My misgivings were more than justified. Three days afterwards I received an excited but perfectly intelligible and peremptory *congé*, and departed from the hotel in gloomy dignity, leaving behind me an hysterical mother, a weeping maiden, and a vociferously abusive father, carrying in my hand, however, as solatium, five Bank of England notes. I feel sure that Sophia Carlotta Victoria thought to see me throw the filthy lucre with magnificent disdain in her father's face, but I really could not

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afford to oblige her expectations. Indeed, poverty induced me to regard the pig merchant with a sentiment of actual gratitude; he had not behaved ungenerously, in spite of his indignant rage, since I was not entitled to receive more than ten pounds.

I lingered on for the next three months in Berlin, eking out a bare existence. Berlin is a bad place for a penniless man to starve in—to my thinking the worst on earth—and I have had a wide and vicarious experience of every capital in Europe. In London or Paris one can depend, however poor, on at least keeping body and soul together, even without approaching a charitable institution, but in Berlin—it is different.

For forty-eight hours I subsisted on water; then, discovering that such a diet only served to whet an already imperious appetite, I bethought myself of Baron Hochstuhl, who had just been appointed Minister of the Interior. I had not seen him for sixteen years, but we had been friends and fellow students at Heidelberg, so I thought he might be worth a dinner and a passage across the frontier.

I scarcely recognised Hochstuhl when I at last saw him—after dangling about in his ante-room for a solid hour—in sixteen years he had so aged and hardened.

“Who are you?” he demanded, indifferently glancing at my pasteboard. “I know no Rupert Grossburg!”

“Pardon, Baron,” said I, “we were friends at Heidelberg.”



" 'Who are you?' he demanded."

Vigorous Daunt: Billionaire

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"Ha!— You are Captain Rupert Granville!"

"Was," I corrected.

"Ah! So! What is your business?"

"A moment's private chat."

He looked at his secretary and said "Go!"

The young man immediately departed.

"Well?"

"I am starving."

"Well?"

"I have tasted nothing for two whole days."

"Indeed."

He eyed me keenly for a moment. "Was it not you who gained the Luckstadt medal for modern languages?"

"It was I."

"You subsequently entered the English Army; became a sapper, a Captain of Engineers; later you drifted into the Diplomatic Service. Later still you resigned, and were made bankrupt in the London Courts. Since then you have lived where and how you best could, calling yourself in England Granville, in France de Granville, here Grossburg! Am I right?"

"You are qualified to act as my biographer," I replied, with sarcasm.

"Not quite. I require to know the why and wherefore of your retirement, the reason of your ruin. Will you enlighten me?"

"You are interested in my affairs? Baron, you overwhelm me!"

"You will do well to confide in me, if, indeed,

your condition be as desperate as you have hinted. Wasn't there a rumour of some misplaced dispatches—eh?"

I smiled at him very sweetly and replied, "My dear Hochstuhl, I quite understand you. You are lying in order to test me. Such a rumour never existed except in your fertile imagination."

He looked a little disconcerted, then laughed. "Ah, well, who knows what might have been?"

"Had Reinhardt Hochstuhl been in my place?" I suggested.

He frowned. "You say you are starving?"

"Yes."

"You seek employment, you would enter my service, perhaps?"

"Anything; but dinner first."

He smiled and abstracted five golden coins from his pocket. "Permit me to make you an advance on account of your salary."

I pocketed the money with what grace I could collect, and inquired nonchalantly, "What are my duties?"

"First feed yourself. Return here to-morrow evening at 11.30. Good-day to you."

Scarcely sparing time to reply to his salutation, I adjourned, and five minutes afterwards was busy astonishing the waiters at the Kurfurst restaurant by the prodigious nature of my appetite. It was a glorious dinner, the finest of my life.

At the appointed hour of the next day I was again ushered into Baron Hochstuhl's private audience

chamber. This time he was waiting to receive me, and made some pretence at cordiality, even offering me a hand.

"Ho, ho!" thought I, "he wants me, then." Aloud I said, "Well, Baron, I await your orders."

"You are of a businesslike spirit."

"Does it offend?"

"By no means. H'm! H'm!" He cleared his throat. "In entering my service, Granville, you will be employed by the Emperor himself."

"Ah!"

"Even so."

"You mean?"

"It is a matter of State."

"Secret?"

"Entirely."

"Reputable?"

"Of course."

"England?"

"No, France."

"Fire away then," said I.

He fixed me with his keenly measuring eyes and murmured, "France has just arranged a new disposition of her frontier forces extending from Dunkirk to Belfort in the province of Haut Saone——" he paused, hesitating.

"I have heard of it," said I.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It has come to our intelligence that a further change, long foreseen by us, is now in progress."

"Ah! And what may that be?"

"A re-establishment of fresh methods of the frontier garrisons, and an enormous increase of defensive and offensive artillery. Half the navy vote has been applied to this purpose."

"France prepares herself, it would seem. But what has all this to do with me?"

"Much; you are an Englishman, but you speak French perfectly."

"I was born in Paris."

"So much the better. You are also an engineer. I wish you at once to set out and obtain for me sketches of the outer works of all major fortifications between Sedan and Belfort; also the number of garrisons, the position and weight of guns."

"A large order, Baron."

"You will be well paid."

"But what if I am caught?"

"You would probably be shot; certainly imprisoned."

I stroked my moustache. "You would not object to the plans being coloured?"

"No, but why?"

"I daub. I could pose as an artist. What are your terms?"

"Four thousand francs down, ten times that amount if you are successful. What do you say?"

"Not much; I know a man in Paris who would give me four thousand francs for a report of this conversation."

Baron Hochstuhl surveyed me with a fierce stare. "Yesterday, you were starving," he said icily.

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"To-day," I replied with a smile, "my appetite is satisfied."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Six thousand francs now, sixty thousand when I return. Really, Baron, the mission is perilous and I am by no means tired of life."

He considered the proposition for the space of several minutes, then at last, seemingly resolved, nodded his head and murmured, "Very well, I accept."

* * * * *

Three days afterwards I was in Sedan, armed with much French money, a paint-box, easel, palettes, brushes, and many rolls of canvas. My name was Rupert de Grandville, and I was a poor beggar of an artist fresh from the Latin Quarter seeking subjects for the Academie. It was a jolly life that I led for the next few weeks, always in the open air, often camping out like a gipsy, with the turf for my couch, the stars for a canopy, the world for my bed-chamber. I enjoyed it to the top of my bent, the spice of danger in my occupation robbing me of all thought of ennui, giving a spur to my energies, and investing the work itself with a species of intoxicating and irresistible fascination. My progress was slow, but sure. I accomplished much without arousing the least suspicion, and despatched many canvases to an old friend in London, whom I begged in accompanying letters to keep them safely until I arrived to claim them.

On the twenty-eighth day of my wanderings I reached the little village of Maconae—which is perched in the heart of the Vosges Mountains, and is within ten minutes' walk of the most formidable and impregnable fortress that exists perhaps in the world, not excepting even Gibraltar. I refer to the fort of St. Corbec, or, as the French soldiers call it, the "Gate to the Mercies of God," since two ancient military roads unite before its doors, and it commands on the one hand Strasburg, on the other Lorraine. I knew that Hochstuhl would require some special information concerning this spot, so, determining not to hurry myself, I engaged a comfortable room at the little inn, and settled down to rest and quietly spy out the lay of the land before commencing work in real earnest. By the evening of the second day I had discovered a craggy eyrie high up on the crest of a neighbouring mountain which afforded a magnificent view of the surrounding country and a perfectly strategic prospect of St. Corbec. It was approached by a winding road defended by two Creusot guns of large calibre.

Judging an open course to be best, I waited upon the commandant of the fortress, and asked his permission to paint a landscape which would include the fort. He seemed astonished at my naïveté, but glad enough probably to see a stranger, was so kind as to ask me to dine, and I left him very late that night with a rather buzzing head and an indulgence to paint wheresoever and whatsoever I pleased, so long as St. Corbec did not appear in the picture.

"For," he explained, "I have now an income of 14,000 francs, but in that case I should have nothing, and you would not wish to have it on your mind that you had undone a good fellow who is glad of your company." "On the contrary," I assured him, and next morning found me on the Mount of Stars sketching the vast and imposing valleys, before an audience of noisy, gaping officers, who watched the picture grow without in the least suspecting that certain patches of brown and green and yellow on the waste margin were faithful representations of their beloved fortifications, sectionally detached.

There was among these officers a small brown-clad civilian, who spoke little but watched me unceasingly. On the second day he came alone, stood by my easel for two hours without opening his mouth and then made off. After lunch he returned and repeated his silent scrutiny, but now he combined another employment and smoked cigarette after cigarette. I commenced to grow uneasy under his regard and to observe him more acutely. When I looked at him he smiled, always smiled, and he contrived to make his smile appear gracious and agreeable. He was ugly; small, but not insignificant; elegant in his dress; apparently good tempered. His head was very large and his nose rather shapely. His features were strangely flexible, and each moment by some subtle move imparted to his face a new expression. His eyes were large, grey, and singularly profound.

"The deuce!" thought I. "Is he dumb?" It appeared so.

"Monsieur," said I at last, quite unable to stand any longer the strain of his intolerable demeanour, which seemed to me to conceal impertinence behind a mask of graciousness, guile behind an affectation of simplicity, "Monsieur, why do you stare at me so?"

"I beg your pardon," he replied, apologetically enough, "I shall look away." And he did so.

I painted on for another half-an-hour and then he moved behind me. "For whom are you working?" he demanded suddenly.

The question took me by surprise. "For whom-ever will buy," I responded, after a pause.

"How much do you ask for this picture?"

I considered. "Five hundred francs, monsieur."

"Good, it is mine!" and he poured a mass of French notes on my knee, which he had evidently been sorting out behind my back.

"But, monsieur," I stammered, "this is as yet only a sketch; it is quite unfinished."

"It will do admirably for what I want," he cried, and commenced to unpin the canvas from my easel.

Presently he had finished, and quite heedless of wet paint, tucked the rolled up picture under his arm. His extraordinary action and energy put me quite at a loss, but after a few minutes' thought I extracted a second canvas and arranged it on the easel.

"Monsieur, you intend to paint another picture?" he asked.

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"Yes."

"Similar to the last?"

"Have you any objection?"

"None!" and without another word he abruptly departed.

The following day he made his appearance an hour after noon and solemnly inspected my work.

"You paint quickly," he remarked.

"Yes, but poorly. I have, I fear, very little talent."

"But you have great perseverance. How much do you ask for this picture?"

This was, however, too much of a good thing. I did not want to stay on at St. Corbec all my life painting pictures for a madman. I determined to demand a prohibitive price. "A thousand francs," I replied.

"Good!" said he, "here is your mon" and while speaking he produced a large and bulging pocket book, from which he took notes representing the sum I had named, and after handing them to me immediately tore my dainty sketch from the boards, and tucking it under his arm strolled away, leaving me dumb with amazement. By evening, however, I was well under weigh with a third picture.

That night I feasted a number of the garrison officers of St. Corbec at my little inn of Maconae, and after dinner I told them of my good business with the little brown man, willing to ascertain whom he might be or anything else concerning him

I could, for he had deeply piqued my curiosity. The officers were much amused at my story and loud in their congratulations.

"Keep on painting," cried Lieutenant Persigny. "Paint a picture every day, and always double the price; soon you will be quite a rich man, and we shall come to you when we are short. Only fair, is it not, since we introduced you to this golden-egg-laying goose?"

"But," I objected, "that is just what I complain of; you have done no such thing. I do not even know his name."

Every one laughed, and Persigny cried out, "Is that possible? Why, de Grandville, you have chanced upon an angel—a veritable angel. He is the mad billionaire."

"But his name?"

"And you from Paris! Vigorous Daunt, to be sure!"

"That sounds English."

"Why not, since he is an Australian?"

"But he speaks French perfectly! Where does he live?"

"At the fort. He is our commandant's guest."

"Tell me of him."

"With pleasure; his faults first. He drinks sparingly; he never plays cards; he is an Englishman. For the rest he is amiable, witty; to judge from his discourse an intriguer, and anything but austere. He knows the world and the good things therein. He is vain and self-satisfied, clever, but

liberal minded. He speaks little of himself. He is brave, frivolous, and sweet tempered. He dresses elegantly, although always in brown, and is as ugly as the devil. He fences like a master, and can assume at will the boorishness of an *Anglais*, or the manners of a prince. In a word, he is infamous but exquisite; and, to conclude, is a marvellous musician, and an extraordinarily perfect mimic."

"He is a man of 'parts,'" I commented drily, and changed the conversation, for I thought that Persigny was inclined to mock my innocence.

Next morning I painted with a queer sub-conscious conviction that I was being watched. I could not account for the feeling, but it made me so nervous and ill at ease that to relieve my mind I carefully searched my more immediate neighbourhood. But nothing uncommon could I discover. The gun houses were securely locked, not another living soul was on the ledge, and all was quiet as the grave. Behind the huge earthworks of the fort, which extended along the mountain ridges for three miles to right and left, sappers in caps and shirt-sleeves were engaged at their various duties, while in the wide quadrangle of St. Corbec itself a regiment was drawn up on parade, its arms and accoutrements flashing gloriously in the sunlight. More contented from my examination, I returned to my task, and was presently joined by the little brown man, who came upon me suddenly and without noise, like a spectre.

"Good morning, monsieur," said I.

He glanced at the picture. "What, another!" he cried. "Monsieur, you will ruin me! What do you want for this?"

"It is not for sale."

"Ah! now we come to the point."

"What do you mean?"

He looked me straight in the eyes. "You are a spy!" he said.

My heart thrilled at his words, but I took care not to betray the least emotion. "What makes you think that?" I asked.

He pointed to a portion of my painting with his cane. "That," he observed, "is where St. Corbec should rest; you have drawn a jagged and rocky eminence superheaped with clouds, but the form of the fortress is carefully preserved while carefully concealed. The line of fortifications is not suggested, but trees grow wherever a masked battery exists. I have given the matter my attention, and congratulate you upon your cleverness and accuracy. I am not an engineer, but it appears to me that your landscape strives more for mathematical precision than artistic effect. Moreover——" he paused.

I confess that my tongue had grown quite parched as he proceeded, and it was only with an effort that I could speak. "Moreover——" I suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows. "Those marks"—he indicated a mass of brush strokes on the edge of the canvas outside

the scope of the picture—"appear at first sight to be merely random splashes; separated and applied, however, they may assume the form of bastions, redoubts, mounds, angles, and entrenchments. They confused me for some time, but last night, with the aid of your two other pictures, I solved the riddle."

"Accept my compliments, monsieur," I answered with sarcasm. "You are a man of powerful imagination." I saw that he held my fate in his hands, and though prepared to fight him to the last gasp, I knew that he must win the battle of words, at any rate.

"Penetration is the word," he corrected, coolly. "You are a German, are you not?"

"No," I snapped.

"Austrian?"

"No."

"What; a Frenchman, and a traitor!" His voice was ineffably scornful.

I looked about me, but no one was in sight. I had half resolved to strangle the little man, but he read my purpose, and his hand strayed to his inner pocket. "I am armed," he said, smiling, and stepped back a few paces. "Are you French?"

"What the devil is that to you?" I muttered gloomily.

"I thought it possible you might be English."

Disregarding this attack, I tried to collect my thoughts. "What do you intend to do?" I demanded at length.

"That will depend upon yourself and the way you answer my questions. Whatever country you belong to you are not employed by England, of that I am sure. Pray enlighten me, monsieur. You work for Germany, do you not?"

"Have you a cigarette about you?"

He tossed me his case and I lighted a weed, offering him thereafter the box, but he stepped back. "Throw it to me!"

I obeyed, privately cursing his suspiciousness, for I thought to surprise and attack him thus, before he could draw his revolver.

He laughed aloud at my black face. "Ah, monsieur," he cried, "I am so small that I must be careful. You see, if you once got hold of me you could crush me so easily."

I sat down upon my camp stool and deliberately surveyed him, while he continued to smile in sheer self-satisfaction.

"You are amused," I muttered, presently.

"You enjoy yourself; my distress pleases you."

"You confess?" he cried.

I shrugged my shoulders. "My life is in your hands. It is useless to deny it."

At this moment I heard a grating sound behind me, and, turning, saw the door of the nearest gun-house open wide, and the Commandant of St. Corbec emerge therefrom, accompanied by two subalterns.

"You are my prisoner," said the Commandant. "I have heard everything!"

Overcome with dismay and rage, I sprang to my feet and tried to throw myself upon the little brown man who had so cleverly worked my undoing. At moments of extreme excitement one always reverts to the mother tongue, which is the language also of the inner thoughts. He eluded me, and I was presently a prisoner, but I flooded him with angry and, I fear, intemperate abuse, and called him all the names that I could think of during my progress to the fortress. It was the only consolation I had left. He walked beside me chuckling like a demon, and translated my remarks for the benefit of my captors, who laughed and uproariously applauded him. As we approached St. Corbec I grew more composed, and he addressed me in French :

“ You are an Englishman, then, after all ? ”

“ So are you—you cursed mischief-maker ! ”
I retorted hotly.

“ Bah ! ” he sneered. “ One cannot help one’s birth ; one is not consulted in the matter. At heart I am a cosmopolitan.”

“ And a cad to boot ! ” I cried, to which insult he returned no answer.

He was present at my subsequent examination, and listened with the greatest attention to every word that fell from my lips. The Commandant subjected me to a vigorous questioning with the idea of discovering the nationality of my employers. I took pains, however, to deceive him, and although he by turns threatened, promised, and implored

me to confess I was a German agent, I protested that I was an Englishman, and no one's servant, that I had set out on the mission in which I had been detected merely in the hope of acquiring information which might prove of use to England.

"But England has no interest in learning our German frontier dispositions!" cried the Colonel very angrily. "Do you think that we shall swallow such rubbish as that?"

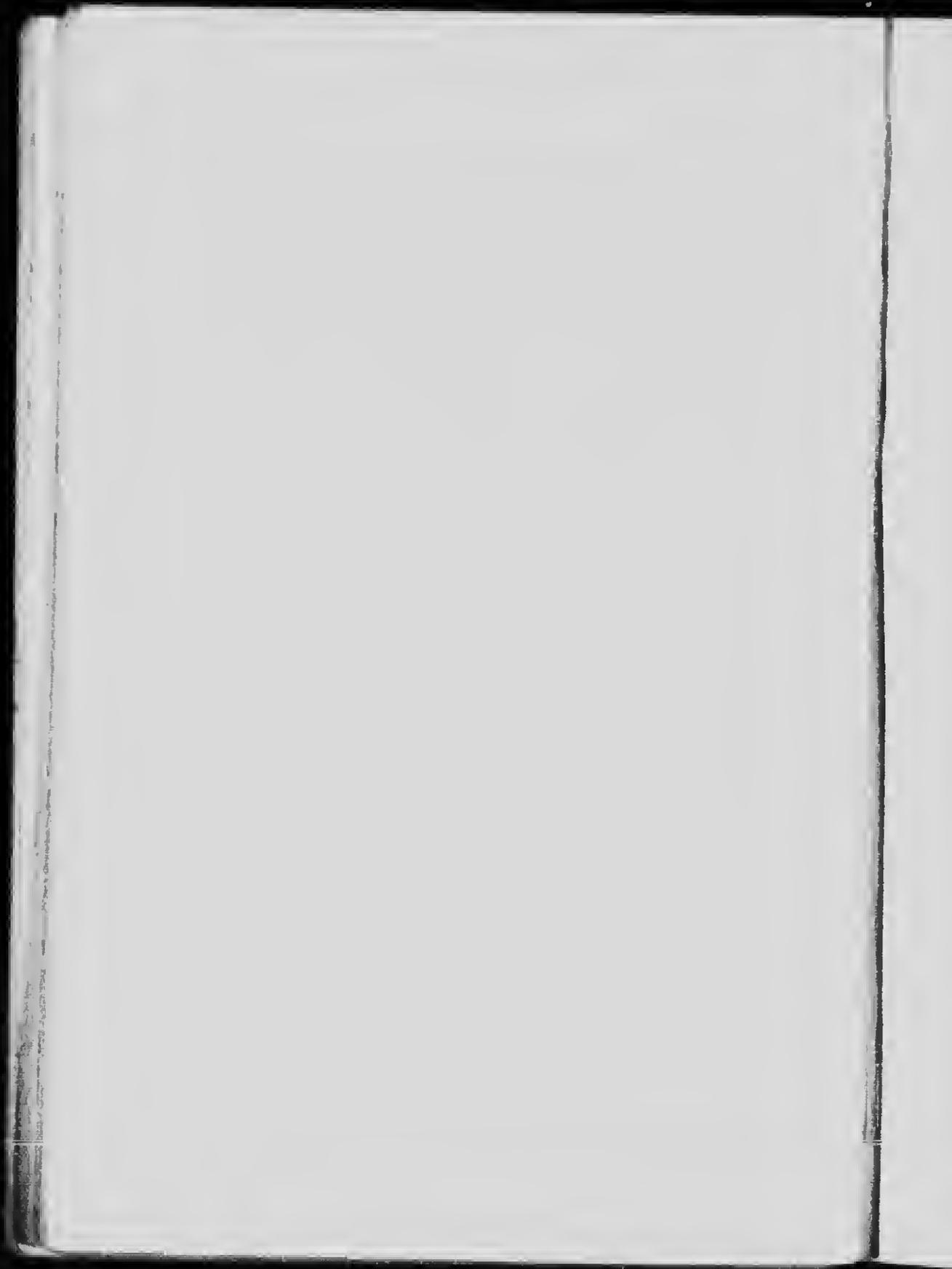
I replied with cool dignity, "On the contrary, monsieur, England has the greatest interest in watching closely your proceedings, since her own coast defence scheme is largely modelled upon the example of the greatest military nation on earth. I fancy if you could see the plans of the greater English fortresses you would stand aghast at their similarity to your own. I am by profession a military engineer, therefore I speak with authority."

He remained incredulous in spite of my specious flattery, but his conviction was somewhat shaken by my immobility, for from the position I had taken up I never swerved one iota. This, for two reasons. Firstly, honour forbade me to betray Baron Hochstuhl; secondly, I fancied that France would be less likely to resort to extreme measures in my punishment if she thought me a free-lance Englishman rather than a German spy.

The following morning I was despatched under strong escort on the road to Paris, and the last thing I saw at St. Corbec was the little brown man,

MY FIRST MEETING WITH DAUNT 27

who stood upon a bastion derisively waving a pocket handkerchief in token of farewell. I cursed him. Ten days afterwards my sentence, privately determined on, and secretly decreed, was announced to me by the Military Governor of Paris as I lay heavily ironed in the guard-room of the d'Orsay barracks. The proceedings of my trial had been conducted with the utmost reserve. Several officials, including the Minister of War, visited my cell at different times and examined me at length, each one adopting a different course and approaching me with a different threat or promise. But I returned to all the same answers that I had given the commandant of St. Corbec. I was arraigned before no formal tribunal, but doubtless one was held, for the Governor spoke slightingly of a president's qualmishness, and ironically assured me that I was lucky to have been judged by so merciful a man. Merciful indeed! I was condemned to transportation and to penal servitude for life on Devil's Island.



CHAPTER II

A FRIEND IN NEED

THE pronouncement appalled me to such a degree that when the Governor departed I fell into a lized stupor lasting for several hours—the stupor of despair. Some hours after nightfall I was aroused and escorted from the guard-house and informed that I might stretch my limbs in the courtyard of the barracks, a huge parallelogram closed in and commanded by high walls pierced by triple tiers of narrow windows. I looked about me with a sad curiosity, for I felt that in all human probability this was the last night I should ever spend in Paris, since I was to be deported an hour after midnight to a river steamboat and carried down the Seine to Havre, where a corvette was in waiting to take me to Guiana. Once set out upon that journey I knew myself as good as dead ; it was not by any means a pleasant prospect, and I found it hard to view my future philosophically. Up and down the flagged yard I strode, my leg irons clanking in spite of all precautions. There seemed to be only one entrance to the barracks, that by a large

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arched portal, which extended through the front of the main building directly above the guard-house. This arch led to the celebrated Quai d'Orsay, opening thereon by immense metal doors, and was defended on the inner side by a double iron grille. Before the grille armed sentries were posted, while perhaps half a hundred soldiers off duty were gathered near the gateway chatting and joking. Occasionally a little door in the grille would open and a man pass through, giving a countersign as he entered. The night was pitch dark and the courtyard very badly lighted by a few scattered gas lamps. I felt miserably lonely and abandoned, and after a while drew near to the soldiers for the sake of companionship, but they took not the slightest notice of me. I might have been a block of stone. As time proceeded numbers of persons passed though the grille, and I distinctly heard the countersign "Arcole." I thought once or twice of escape, but soon recognising the absurdity of the idea, tried to become resigned and set myself to listen to the conversation of the soldiers, who were now gathering in a great group about an old sergeant, who wore a cross upon his breast and spoke of the Emperor Napoleon I.

"I tell you, my children," said he, "it is to-day that the soldiers of France should wear a black cockade. As for myself, you perceive that my arm is banded with crepe." And he stretched forth his arm, that all who wished might see.

"But why?" cried several in a breath. "Would

you have us mourn in the commemoration of a victory?"

"It was a victory that lost to us Napoleon," returned the sergeant.

With a start I remembered the date, and that it was the anniversary of Waterloo, which the French still persist in claiming as their battle. I was, however, far too mournful to be amused at the conceit of these fellows.

"I wonder where he is now!" observed a young man whose peculiar accent proclaimed him a native of Vendée. Many laughed. One said: "Wherever he is, to be sure he is a soldier."

"A general," corrected the sergeant.

"When we are dead, we are dead," observed the Vendéen sententiously.

"Who knows?" replied the sergeant; "it is said that his spirit walks once a year at St. Helena. Listen, my comrades, and I will tell you a story——"

But at that instant a cloaked figure detached itself from the shadows of the main building, and approached the group.

"Hist! here comes the lieutenant," said Duprât.

"Who cares?" said the sergeant. "It was from an officer that I heard the story which I am about to relate to you. A captain of cuirassiers, whose uncle was one of those who attended the Emperor in his exile——" He broke off shortly here, for all his companions had grown suddenly preoccupied and were staring intently at the approaching officer, who appeared to be searching

for some one. I turned also to observe him, and as I moved my leg irons loudly clanked. As if reassured at the sound, the officer started forward and crossed the zone of light before the portal twenty paces distant, then plunged into the shadows in which we stood. But we saw in that second a small, stout figure, wearing a cocked hat and shrouded to the eyes in a wide military cloak.

"The devil!" muttered the sergeant, after casting a glance over his shoulder. "Do you wish to hear my story? What are you staring at, stupids that you are? It is only Lieutenant Bruckner coming to see that his prisoner is safe. Bah! As if he could escape from here! Well, my comrades, it was this way. The great Emperor—just before his death——"

But again the old man was constrained to pause for lack of his auditors' attention, and this time, grunting with all the disgust of a baulked *raconteur*, he turned completely round in order to discover and perhaps quarrel with the cause of interruption. I followed his glance, to see solemnly regarding us, at the distance of no more than five paces, the ghost of Napoleon Bonaparte, first Emperor of the French nation. The apparition stood in a characteristic attitude, one arm holding his cloak across his chest, the other nursing his under lip. He was dressed in a green surtout, white doeskin trousers and high-top boots. I gazed at him in sheer astonishment, but having forced myself to analyse his features, there presently dawned upon me a sort

of superstitious terror. I saw the wide, high forehead over which the cocked hat frowned, the arched, imperious brows, from under which the large, deep, lustrous steel-blue eyes peered forth upon us with a seer-like stare, the straight and shapely nose, the sensuous, nervous mouth, the predominant and commanding chin—features which once united to form the countenance of earth's greatest soldier and most wicked genius—a face which in the past was known to all the world, and which has been familiarised to succeeding generations by the counterfeit presentments of art. The deep shadow in which he stood was lightened about him with a strange and most unearthly radiance, a pale bluish glow which seemed to emanate from his person for the especial purpose of his revelation, for it extended not a yard beyond him. I felt that I looked upon a creature from another world, and, spellbound, could do naught but gaze. The soldiers, like myself, were dumb-stricken and still as marble, the whole courtyard was wrapped in silence and in deep impenetrable gloom save for that one luminous figure, for as if on a given signal all the barrack lamps had inexplicably become extinguished.

The ghost of Napoleon regarded us for the space of three minutes without moving, then, suddenly swaying a little forward, it spoke; its voice was hollow, muffled and inexpressibly melancholy.

“My children, attention!” At the words the soldiers behind me with a sharp rush of sounds

sprang to their positions and saluted. The ghost appeared to smile with approbation.

"That is well, my children," it sonorously muttered. "Give this message to France from its Emperor. Remember Waterloo! Revenge! Down with the English! Right about face! Forward, march!"

I heard the measured tramp of feet behind me, and filled with a sudden panic fear of being left alone with the spirit, I, too, turned and attempted to fly. But I had forgotten my anklets. In my haste I stumbled and pitched headlong to the ground. While attempting to rise a voice whispered in my ear these words: "Be of good cheer, comrade; on embarking from the pier to-night throw yourself fearlessly into the water; trust the rest to fate."

I looked around me utterly bewildered, but the ghost had disappeared. I was alone. In a few seconds lights flashed from all parts of the courtyard, and it seemed that a keen search had been instituted, a search, however, which revealed nothing. Officers came quickly upon the scene and listened to the wild and frantic stories of the soldiers, according to each of whom the ghost of Napoleon had said something widely different. One had heard it predict the downfall of England, another the destruction of Germany, a third the French conquest of the world. All were indescribably excited and chattered and jabbered like a flock of magpies. I have never heard such a row in my life, nor witnessed among disciplined men such a state

of abandon and confusion. I was taken to the guard-house and questioned in my turn, but although I no longer believed in the preternatural aspect of the visitation, it suited me to pretend otherwise, and I narrated the facts much as they had occurred, affecting to be quite overwhelmed and aghast. But my heart was all the while trembling with hope; a thin, visionary hope enough, perhaps, inspired by a few words which had been whispered in my ears by a ghost, but sufficient to set my pulses throbbing, my nerves tingling, at the thought of escape. Whom the spectre might be I did not pause to investigate. I was much too confused to even hazard a guess, but I felt in my bones it was a friendly ghost, and for the first time in a very gloomy fortnight I saw my future less obscure and dulled with clouds.

How the next few hours passed I do not know. Indeed, I remember clearly nothing that intervened between my fall in the courtyard and the moment that I stood upon the gangway which led from the Quai d'Orsay to a boat beside the pier, a boat that was crammed with soldiers. An officer presided over my embarkation. I was preceded and followed by guards. When I reached the centre of the plank I gave one glance at the pitch blackness of the water, one upward look at the tenebrous and starless sky, then, without further hesitation, handcuffed and chained as I was, I threw myself into the river between the boat and the quay. I sank like a stone, but my fingers almost

immediately encountered a mass of netting, and I clung involuntarily to the meshes. This netting, as I grasped it, seemed to become endowed with life. It moved in one direction, and drew me in its train with incredible rapidity. I held my breath, as long as possible, then, utterly exhausted, endeavoured to seek the surface, but the netting seemed to have encompassed all my limbs. I was powerless, and drowning. For a moment I endured the sharp torture of approaching death, then came merciful oblivion.

* * * * *

When next I opened my eyes it was to find myself in a luxurious apartment, the rhythmic, oscillating motion of which informed me that I was on the sea! My hand-cuffs and leg-irons had disappeared. I seemed to be quite free.

“Where am I?” I demanded.

“Lie still,” replied a quiet and strangely-familiar voice, and a hand thrust me back upon the cushions. I looked up to meet the malicious and inquiring eyes of the little brown man who had accomplished my arrest at St. Corbec.

“Mr. Daunt!” I cried out in amazement.

“At your service!” said he. “But you are ill; you should go to sleep.”

“Sleep!” I cried indignantly, and would have sprang up, but he thrust me down again with quite unlooked-for strength.

“Patience!” he commanded. “If you lie still and listen you shall soon have the whole story.”

He spoke in nervous, jerky sentences, pausing a second between each; his manner was so imperious that I humoured him.

"At Maconae I thought you were German. I hate Germans. I watched you, discovered you, arrested you. Too late I found you to be an Englishman. I am an Englishman myself; Australians are Englishmen. Having ruined you, it was my duty to reinstate you. Good! But how? I followed you to Paris. Luckily I am rich. I bought the police. Your trial was military; the police are jealous of the army; it was easy to buy the police. I found out where you were, your sentence, and date of transportation. I formed a plan, which, however, it was necessary for you to learn. It was my part to communicate to you this plan. I knew an officer at the d'Orsay barracks. I looked him up and fêted him. In return I induced him to invite me to his mess this evening. I made him drunk. I made his friends drunk. I persuaded them to let me try my powers of mimicry upon the soldiers. I impersonated Napoleon, scared the soldiers out of their wits, and warned you. That is all. Very simple, is it not?"

"But when I fell into the river?" I cried out, being only half satisfied.

"Bah! That was for the police. You fell into a drag net, in which they pulled you down the river, where their boat lay in hiding. It was quite easy."

"Where am I now?"

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"On board my yacht."

"Proceeding where?"

"England."

With this consolation I settled myself in the cushions with a sigh of absolute delight, and closed my eyes, to think and try to realise that after all I was not going to rot in a living death upon Devil's Island. Happiness is after all a matter of comparisons. At that moment I did not possess a penny in all the world, and was hopelessly uncertain of the future, but at least I was not to spend it on Devil's Island, and that reflection made me happy as a king.

"Are you tired?" demanded Mr. Daunt, presently.

"What a question! No! I am as strong as a lion!"

"Sit up, then!"

I did so.

"Have a glass of champagne?"

"Thanks."

"Do you know you are the most incomprehensible person. It seems to me that I have taken a deal of trouble over you, saved your life, in fact, and you have made me no acknowledgment. But when I offered you just now a paltry glass of wine you said 'thanks!'"

He spoke grumblingly.

"Behold the reason," I answered swiftly. "That word is the only one which may be used in either case; in the first it is hopelessly inadequate."

"Not bad!" he commented, and stared at me a moment, then sighed. "You might have reminded me that I got you into the mess. What a big man you are! How old are you?"

"Thirty-five."

"A gentleman by birth?"

"Yes."

"What did you think when you saw me as Napoleon?"

"I thought you were a real spectre," I replied.

He laughed, and rubbed his hands together, his whole face bubbling with delight and triumphant conceit.

"As an actor, I am magnificent," he calmly announced. His tones tinged with a supreme of vanity that shocked me. But he was sharp as a knife, and correctly read my thoughts.

"Bah!" he cried. "You think me vain; at least, I am not so without cause, therefore do not attempt with your sneers to disturb my self-esteem; it affords me a certain pleasure which I do not wish to lose. Not that you could affect me; do not think it; but a sarcastic glance irritates me more than a bitter speech."

Here was an enigma—a man incomparably vain, but intelligent enough to understand his own weakness, philosopher enough to apply it to his comfort and advantage.

I commenced to regard him with an indescribable confusion of ideas. But, wishing to please him, I replied, "Really, Mr. Daunt, you are mis-

taken; I am not in the least disposed to sneer. I daresay that I am at heart just as conceited as you are, and, perhaps, with less reason. But *candid* self-appreciation is so rare that your words surprised me, that is all."

He smiled at me most genially, and cried, "I *love* clever people! Don't tell me that you are married, Granville?"

"The Lord forbid!"

"Have you any money?"

"Not a penny. I was stripped at St. Corbec.

"Good; but you have a private income?"

"I wish you would tell me something about it then."

"Better and better. Do you want a job?"

"Rather."

"Are you game to risk your life occasionally?"

"Well, didn't I do that an hour ago when I threw myself overboard at your word? It is true that I can swim, but I was ironed hand and foot."

Mr. Vigorous Daunt put his feet on the arm of his berth and lay down as if he had suddenly grown weary. Presently he muttered in a sleepy voice.

"It is all right, Granville, you'll do for me. Consider yourself my secretary, companion and factotum. Salary to start five hundred pounds per annum. Wake me when we get to Newhaven. Good-night!"

Thus did I make the acquaintance of Vigorous Daunt, with whom, though I knew it not at the time, I was destined to share many a strange peril

and adventure and face life and death in various and alarming forms ; thus did I join forces with one whom I was fated to learn to love one minute and hate the next, one whose existence was to shape mine for happiness or despair, as the mood might take him. And the exciting, weird and unusual happenings that befel us I shall here faithfully set forth without fear or favour. And when it suited him, Vigorous Daunt was a lover of the truth.

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CHAPTER III

IN WHICH DAUNT AND I FACE A STRANGE FOE

ONE of the chief idiosyncrasies of my little master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt, which even rivalled his ineradicable dislike of every colour save brown, or his sentimental aversion for the fair sex, was the extraordinary tenderness and interest he at all times manifested for people of the Asiatic race. Many times had I wonderingly remarked this peculiar susceptibility, yet, strange to say, something had always prevented me from inquiring as to the cause of it, until one memorable night in the early autumn of the year 189—. We had dined and spent the earlier portion of that evening in company with several other notabilities at the house of a prominent politician. One of the people we had met at our host's table was Prince Ming, of Burmah.

My master had apparently conceived an instantaneous fancy for the Burmese Prince, and, as far as I could judge, the liking had been reciprocated. The two men had gravitated by mutual impulse; and after dinner had adjourned to a quiet corner and

carried on quite a cabinet confab until nearly eleven, at which hour Prince Ming bade us good-night. The Prince had not been gone more than five minutes when Vigorous Daunt also took his leave (and mine).

My master decided to walk home. "It's a fine night and we have been four hours seated," he explained.

We fell into step, and our conversation turned upon our strange companion of the evening, Prince Ming, and my master's strange predilection for the Yellow races.

Vigorous Daunt suddenly stopped short. He peered into my eyes, a favourite trick of his, very sharply, but I saw (we stood beneath a street lamp) that he was intently preoccupied. All his faculties were strained to listen. Presently he swung round and stared in a particular direction.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Hush!" he whispered.

I looked about me. Beside us ran a stout brick wall, its summit crusted with glass, about eight feet high and a hundred paces long. At either end it was intersected by other walls of similar proportions, which combined to enclose a large square of ground rising sharply from the road; but so high were the walls, that I could see nothing but the tops of a closely-set plantation, and in the far distance the roof of a big stone house, emerging from the trees. Daunt was gazing earnestly at this housetop. The place gave me a singular impression of seclusion and privacy, for though other houses adjoined, none

overlooked it. A man dwelling within those walls could live like a hermit if he chose.

"What do you make of this place?" asked Daunt, abruptly.

"A private hospital or a lunatic asylum," said I.

"But what drew your attention to it?"

"That!" he lifted his hand for silence, and, on the instant, I heard a long, low wail as of some creature in pain.

"It is a lunatic asylum," I said, shivering involuntarily.

"No," said my master; "that was the cry of an animal."

He at once hurried to the gate, some thirty paces off. I followed leisurely. The gate was but a foot lower than the wall, and constructed of solid oak; its top was prickly with spikes; upon it were printed the words "Dingle Lodge."

Daunt stood for a moment and glared at the boards vindictively.

"I've a good mind to go in," he cried.

"It would be trespass; what excuse could you offer?"

"Excuse!" he exclaimed, "I'm a member of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals."

He forthwith turned the handle, but the gate was locked. The wail rang out again, thin, but piercing. Daunt set his teeth with a snap. After glancing up and down the deserted road, he gave a sudden spring and caught hold of some of the spikes on top of the gate. In a second he had

drawn himself up and with inimitable agility clambered over. I heard the thud of his descent, then the lock grated and the gate creaked open. "Come in," he said.

I obeyed, and my master shut the gate behind me. We stood in a narrow path, running in zig-zag fashion through the jungle-like plantation, every tree of which was covered with a thick undergrowth of ivy and other creepers. The view was completely shut in by vegetation, and not until we had traversed five turns of the zig-zag did we behold the house. It was a great square structure, overgrown with ivy and surrounded by tall trees—elms, beeches and silver oaks. If I had thought it secluded from the road, how much more now, when a bare ten paces distant, I could little more than discern its outlines through the interlacing branches. It was dark, not a light gleamed from its windows, and although we cautiously prospected on all sides we could only discover that it was wrapped in gloom and as silent as the grave. Its rear was as dark and deserted as its front; and just as defended from the curiosity of the outside world by trees which grew to within a yard of the very door. It possessed neither courtyard nor external offices. I had never encountered such a house.

"We had better go, sir," I said at last to my master. "This place is deserted; the sound that disturbed us could not have come from here."

As if to rebuke my speech, hardly had I ceased speaking, when a deep, growling wail issued from

somewhere close at hand—indeed, to my perturbation it seemed to come from beneath our feet. We were standing by an angle of the building and within a yard of a small iron grating in the ground beside the wall. Daunt instantly sank on his knees and peered through the bars.

“Come here!” he muttered.

I knelt beside him and immediately my nostrils were greeted with a queer, pungent odour that was strangely but bafflingly familiar. I could, however, see nothing.

“What is that smell,” I asked.

My master shook his head. The silence was for several moments intense, then suddenly we heard the rattle of a chain and the sound of a deep yawn.

“There’s a dog chained up in that cellar,” I muttered. Daunt rose slowly to his feet.

“No,” he said. “A tiger or a leopard! Now for the owner of the animal.”

“Sir,” I protested, “remember the hour, it is after midnight—we have no excuse for disturbing him.”

“Rupert Granville,” he retorted mockingly, “are you afraid! Follow me!”

We proceeded to the front door; it was a massive door with a large bronze handle in its centre. There was an old-fashioned bell-pull beside the lintel. Daunt tugged at it vigorously and we heard a far-off clang of bells. But though we waited long and rang again, no answer came. Being rather weary, I leaned at last against the door, when, to my

astonishment, it gave way, and I toppled over headlong into the hall of this mysterious house. Scrambling to my feet, I would have hurried out, but the path was barred by Daunt. "Stop!"

"It's burglary," I gasped. "We have no right here!"

My master laughed softly and struck a match. We saw before us a wide hall leading back into gloom. It was richly furnished in the Eastern style; silken hangings splashed with silver work festooned the walls; the parquet floor was covered with Indian grass cloths, and two fine tiger skins were spread over a pair of bamboo-framed, couch-like ottomans. Daunt stared about him for a moment, then shouted at the top of his voice. The echoes reverberated through the building, then gradually faded into silence. We tried door after door; all, however, were locked except the last, the one nearest the rear of the house.

This yielding, we entered a roomy kitchen. My master lighted a gas jet and we saw that the place was furnished with a gas stove, a large cooking range, a meat safe, two bamboo stools, and a large dresser replete with pots, pans and crockery. A small pot stood upon the range, containing a savory-scented curry, but pot and range were cold. A huge rib of beef—cooked, but cold—rested in an enamelled dish upon the dresser. Having examined these things, Daunt made his way to an inner-door. Throwing this open, there issued forth a hollow moan, a human cry of pain. Darting forward,

we beheld a small, turbaned, white-clad Hindoo, very wrinkled and very old, stretched upon a straw mattress in one corner of the cupboard-like room; beside him yawned the black mouth of a deep cell, the door of which stood wide. As the old Hindoo groaned, the most fearsome sounds ascended from the pit—savage growls, sharp roars and the clank of straining chains. I expected each second to see some terrible shape spring from the hole to attack and perhaps devour us. Daunt, however, without the least hesitation entered the cupboard, and striking a match, set the gas ablaze. The Hindoo, whose eyes were shut, groaned fearfully, writhing as he lay, and, as if in sympathy, pandemonium itself broke loose in the pit. My master, stretching over the hole, shut the trap-door with a crash, and smothered thereby one set of sounds. Looking down at the Hindoo, he said sternly, "Stop that noise, my friend, and tell me what I can do for you—are you ill?"

At the sound of his voice the Hindoo started up as though he had been galvanised, but fell back almost as quickly, stifling a shriek of pain; but his eyes were now open—tiny, glittering beads of jet, with which he earnestly regarded us.

"Are you ill?" repeated Daunt.

The old man for answer drew apart his robes, and disclosed to us his naked body. Never shall I forget the sight. From head to heel he was covered with bleeding, festering sores. It seemed as though he

had been stung by a myriad serpents, and the blood streaming from his wounds had turned to poison. I fell back horrified and ill.

"What is the nature of your disease?" Daunt asked quickly.

"You cannot be my enemy and ask me that," replied the Hindoo; his voice was weak and hoarse. Even as he spoke a terrific tumult broke out in the cellar beneath us. The old Hindoo uttered a shrill call, and cried out some words in his native language, whereupon the tumult ceased. "Ah!" he murmured, "my poor cat is hungry, and he fears for me besides; he knows that I am ill. Would you, Sahib, bless me with a service? In the next room is some cooked meat on a dish. Give this to my cat, and earn the benediction of a dying man."

I instantly slipped into the kitchen, and, seizing the ribs of beef, returned. Daunt raised the trap-door, and I sent dish and meat clattering below. There was a hoarse roar, a clank of chains, and then a deep rumbling purr of satisfaction. The animal had seized upon its prey; my master let the trap-door fall.

"Buddha reward you!" sighed the old man.

Daunt stood up. "What do you suffer from?" he demanded.

"The cruelty of my enemies."

"Confide in me—if you wish for my assistance."

"Sahib," said the old man, "your face is kind. Listen to my story. Eight and twenty hours since, my enemies, who for fourteen years have dogged

my steps, fell upon me unprepared. It is my custom to sleep always guarded by my cat, whom you have just fed. But yester evening I was ill and weak ; I am so old. Night fell, and a cursed cramp struck me in the back—before I could lead forth my cat and chain him in the room beyond. While I lay here—overcome with pain, my enemies, whom may Buddha blight, came upon me. Ah ! I pray you, a little water, I am faint.” I flew to supply his need. After a draught, the old fellow proceeded : “ They came upon me—they tortured me, they filled my mantle with the green ants which they had brought from Burmah. These sores your eyes have beheld ” —he writhed and groaned—“ Ah ! they held me down with iron sticks—though I fought like a demon—the insects clawed and bit my skin ; my veins coursed biting flames. I shrieked out in my agony, and my poor cat mingled his screams with mine ; but the chains held, and my enemies laughed and triumphed over me. But they got nothing for their pains—thanks be to Buddha—nothing, nothing ! Through all, they cried out to me, ‘ Deliver up the Gnaga-Gna, oh, Tau-Kis, and your pains shall cease ! ’ But Buddha heard my prayers, and I fainted—my mouth still sealed ! ” The old fellow’s voice had gradually dwindled to a whisper. With the last word his eyes closed : he had swooned.

Daunt and I set to work to restore him. We carried him—he was but a feather’s weight—to the kitchen. There we quickly had a fire alight and a kettle on the boil. Daunt despatched me for a

physician, and when an hour later, after great trouble, I returned from fulfilling my errand, it was to find the old fellow awake again and in comparative comfort, for my master had washed his terrible sores and tended him as though he were his own brother. The physician I had brought, a young and energetic man, smeared cooling unguent all over the old man's frame and swathed him in bandages. Tau-Kis, for such was the Hindoo's name, blessed us continually. When all was done he pointed to a drawer in the dresser, in which we found a curiously-wrought and heavy little metal casket. Tau-Kis opened this before our eyes, doubtless to prove his faith in us, and we saw that it was filled with bank-notes and English gold. From his store he paid the doctor for his services, who presently departed.

We, too, would have gone, but the old fellow so piteously implored us to keep him company till dawn that we complied.

The doctor had forbidden us to converse, so for an hour deep silence reigned, but after that the Hindoo slept.

Daunt and I, seated on bamboo stools, perceiving it, glanced at each other. He whispered to me, "The tiger is asleep too."

"Thank Heaven!"

"What do you think of this, Rupert, eh?"

"I suppose he is a member of some Hindoo Secret Society, and has committed some crime against the Order."

Daunt shook his head. "He is not a Hindoo. He is a Burmese native—a gentleman, probably, of high rank.

"How do you make that out?"

"I use my brains."

"Who do you suppose are the enemies who have so maltreated him?"

Daunt shook his head. "Go to sleep and let me think."

I did as I was bid, laying myself down noiselessly upon the floor, where I was soon sleeping dreamlessly. When I awoke day had already come. The gas stove was lighted, and a most tempting smell issued from a pot stewing on the bars. Daunt, with his sleeves tucked up, was acting as cook. Tau-Kis was still asleep. I got up, but in doing so unhappily kicked over a stool. Tau-Kis started up, and, weak though he still must have been, he was on his feet before me, and like a flash had darted to the inner room. I heard the trap-door open, and a deep, smothered growl. Tau-Kis had gone to his tiger.

Daunt swung round and stared at me. We heard the sound of chains clanking against wood, amid a continued roar of purrs. Presently the noise grew louder, so loud, indeed, that on a simultaneous impulse we sprang to the outer door. Conceive our dismay to find that, though not locked, it was fast—doubtless made so at the instance of some secret mechanism put in motion by Tau-Kis. We darted to the windows. One glance showed us we

were trapped. They were barred like the windows of a gaol. Daunt caught up a chair, I seized a knife that lay upon the dresser, and so armed we retreated to the farthest corner of the room. We had not long to wait. A magnificent, full-grown tiger, purring the while like a regiment of cats, advanced into the kitchen from the closet—not threateningly, however; the brute was entirely engrossed with fawning on his master. Tau-Kis, immediately behind him, actually kicked him forward for awhile; but presently, either by scent or sight, he detected our presence. Of a sudden the beautiful creature went rigid—his hair seemed to stand erect. With a graceful sweep, too swift to follow, his head turned and he surveyed us half over his shoulder through narrow slits of eyes, that glinted with an evil, golden light. With incredible speed he moved to face us, and dropped crouching to the floor in the very act of springing. Fascinated with fear, I could not move a muscle; but Daunt spoke.

“Do gentlemen in Burmah feed their friends and good Samaritans to cats?” Daunt’s voice rang in me with scorn.

“Sahib. Oh, Sahib!” cried the chief Burmese. For a second he tottered, and seemed about to fall. Next instant, however, he threw himself upon the tiger’s neck, and caressing the brute, reeled out a mass of gibberish talk—in which I could only distinguish one word, “Woon,” from its frequent repetition. I waited, my nerves tingling with apprehension, but Tau-Kis prevailed. The tiger recom-



Stanley Wood, 1901 -

"Daunt caught up a chair, I seized a knife."

Vigorous Daunt: Billionaire

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menced to purr. On that the old man arose, and staggered to the wall; with a deep sigh, he slipped a guarded hook, to which his grim pet's chain was attached, into a steel ring bolt fastened there. We were safe, for the room was wide and the chain was not more than six feet long.

Tau-Kis came forward, and cast himself at my master's feet. "Sahib—Sahib—my friend of friends—forgive me," he wailed.

"What possessed you?" demanded Vigorous Daunt.

"I awoke—Buddha remember me—I forgot—I thought myself again beset by my enemies. It seems to me I dreamed."

"Say no more about it," said Daunt. "If you will pull your bed away from your cat's reach and lie down, I will give you something to eat. I have warmed up this curry for you. This evening, if you wish it, we will visit you again—and see that you want for nothing." The old man made no reply, but he obeyed in all, and so resolutely did he keep his face hidden from us that I was sure his eyes were wet.

Having seen him comfortable and provided for, Daunt asked whether he might send some one to wait upon the old man's needs. But on that Tau-Kis found his voice.

"God forbid, Sahib!" he protested, and his brown face grew pasty, with some emotion much like fear, and his eyes darkened with suspicion. "This house is mine. For fourteen years I have lived here, and

never have my doors been darkened, until last night, except by my shadow and the shadows of my enemies."

"But your wants—you surely must be supplied by tradesmen?"

"I go abroad—I go abroad—my wants are few. I need no servants."

"But to-day you are still weak—your tiger—he will want his food. I dare swear that even now he is hungry."

"Like me, Woon is old, old. He is patient; he can wait. When I have eaten I shall be strong—I shall go forth and supply his needs. My enemies are only dangerous when darkness falls. In the daylight I am safe."

Daunt shrugged his shoulders. "Well—well—Tau-Kis—we shall leave you, but first you must open the door for us; it is fast."

"Sahib, pardon—press the handle downwards—the lock is cunning, but thus it will yield to you. You will return to-night, and with you perhaps your friend?"

"Yes."

"Ah—you are kind—you will find my gate open, my door ajar. But, I pray you, fail me not; my enemies are watchful. Should they come first I am undone."

"We shall be here by ten o'clock at latest";

"Buddha bless and keep you, Sahib—and your friend."

On reaching the street my master assumed his manner of action, and addressed me as a corporal would a recruit.

"Attention!"

I saluted.

"Go at once to the hotel. Dress—and proceed to number 218, Preston Square. My compliments to Prince Ming—and will he dine with me to-night. Return with his reply to the hotel, and await me."

I saluted, and sought a cab. I did not again see Daunt until, armed with a favourable reply to his invitation from the Prince's secretary, I returned to the Colonnade Hotel. My master, clad in dressing gown and slippers, was just commencing lunch, seated in his private drawing-room. He invited me to join him, and nodded briskly when I delivered the Prince's message.

"Good! My mission was almost as successful as yours."

"Your mission?"

"Yes. I made inquiries concerning Tau-Kis of the Hampstead tradesfolk. They call him 'The little old nigger of Dingle Lodge.' He owns the place, and has resided there for fourteen years. He is regarded as a harmless lunatic. He does all his own shopping, will not allow a tradesman to call at the Lodge, and pays for everything in cash. Some believe that his tiger is a lion. He keeps two butchers going to feed the brute. He has a reputation for charity."

"Is that all?"

"All."

"I suppose you intend to sound Prince Ming to-night?"

Vigorous Daunt shrugged his shoulders. "Ming may know nothing; on the other hand, he may know too much. I shall be guided by circumstances."

Punctually at eight Prince Ming presented himself at our rooms, where a wonderful dinner had been prepared, under Daunt's personal supervision, for his entertainment. Prince Ming, though bred a Buddhist, was a man of the world who had long ago laid aside the prejudices of caste. Tall, fat and rather sleepy-looking, he possessed, nevertheless, an intelligent and rather benignant type of countenance. Dressed in regulation western garb, save for the dark hue of his skin, he might easily have passed for a European. He was clean shaved, his forehead was broad and lofty, his nose aquiline and extremely well shaped, his eyes were long and heavy-lidded. The lower portion of his face, however, was unsatisfactory. His mouth was thick-lipped and sensual, his chin merged into rolls of fat that overlapped his collar. I could have liked him except for his mouth, which I thought contained a sleeping power of cruelty, and he had a trick of suddenly lifting his heavy eyelids, under the influence of emotion or surprise, and thereby disclosing an unsuspected width of ghastly yellow blackshot eyeball. He proved a good, though cynical, conversationalist, and the dinner went off very gaily—

in spite of the fact that some of his stories were rather more brutal than witty.

Vigorous Daunt attacked him on the advent of coffee. The Prince had just remarked that he contemplated leaving England for Burmah on the following day, when I saw my master's eyes flash.

"Ah! Your Highness intends to travel by the P. and O.?"

"No, Mr. Daunt. I have my own yacht."

"From what port do you sail?"

"Gravesend."

Vigorous Daunt looked thoughtful. "What do you say to a last evening at a music hall?" he asked, much to my surprise.

"Unfortunately, I am engaged. At ten I have an appointment which I cannot break."

My master bowed, then said with a smile, "Now that I reflect, I have also an appointment. Perhaps we shall meet."

"I think not—my engagement is not a social one," replied the Prince with a curious droop of his heavy eyelids, which gave him, for a second, the appearance of a cat.

Daunt changed the conversation. "I paid a visit to Boulton, my jeweller, to-day," he observed, "and was shown some fine rubies. Are you fond of rubies, Prince?"

His Highness lifted his lids in the manner I have mentioned. His dull eyes gleamed, but he answered quite indifferently, "Not particularly, sir."

"My jeweller gave me the history of one stone in which you should be interested."

"Indeed! What stone is that?"

"One that was stolen some years ago from King Theebaw; I forget its name for the moment."

Prince Ming sat up abruptly in his chair. "Was it the Gnaga-Gna?"

"That was it," cried Daunt, "I never can remember names."

I held my breath, for on the previous evening the old man had mentioned that very name, "Gnaga-Gna."

"What did your jeweller tell you?" demanded the Prince. His manner was now by no means indifferent.

"Oh, very little, but the tale was amusing. He said that the Gnaga-Gna—by the way, what do those words mean?"

"Dragon King."

"Well, he said that this stone was discovered somewhere in a mine in Upper Burmah by a miner named Soong, a hundred years ago, and it was given to King Mindoon Min. King Tharawadis subsequently gave it to the youngest of his daughters, who had it cut. It was then supposed to weigh 50 carats and to be worth £100,000. Its owner did not live long; she was assassinated by her husband, who fled with the stone to India. He in his turn was assassinated by his son, who brought it back to Burmah, where he was, however, obliged to surrender it to King Theebaw. Some fourteen or

fifteen years ago it was mysteriously abstracted from the Royal Palace, by whom, no one knows, and where it now is no one has the faintest idea. Boulton told me he saw the stone while visiting Burmah in 1880, and he declares that it is the most magnificent ruby for its size and colour in the world."

"So it is!" gasped the Prince, who had listened to the story with breathless attention. "Moreover, it is full of magic. It has been bathed in the life blood of three!"

Vigorous Daunt raised his brows. "What are its magic properties?"

Prince Ming shifted uneasily in his chair. "It is said—that a ruby, having caused the death of three persons, will thenceforth preserve the lives of its future holders for so long as they can keep it?"

"You are not superstitious, are you, Prince?"

The Prince's eyes gleamed. "Not usually," he muttered, and he rose to go.

"By the way," said Daunt, "do you remember the name of the man from whom King Theebaw obtained the Gnaga-Gna? Boulton did not know it."

"Mindoon Tau-Kis," replied the Prince.

"I should not at all wonder if he were the mysterious thief who stole the ruby from King Theebaw," said Vigorous Daunt, quietly. "He would probably have considered himself entitled to it, having slain his own father to possess it. But—no, of course

not—how could he be? Mindoon Tau-Kis must have died of old age years ago.”

The Prince gave a peculiar smile. “The ruby—has magic properties,” he said as he left us.

When he had gone Vigorous Daunt and I stared at each other.

“Tau-Kis is an old man,” I muttered.

“Change your clothes as quickly as possible,” said Daunt, “and put a revolver in your pocket. Prince Ming has a yacht at Gravesend. He sails to-morrow. He has an engagement to-night.”

“You think——?”

“I know.”

CHAPTER IV

A DUEL TO THE DEATH

AN hour later we stood before the gate of Dingle Lodge. It was ajar; we locked it behind us and approached the house. The front door stood wide open. We locked that, too. Presently my master knocked at the kitchen door.

"Enter!" cried a voice.

We obeyed. The tiger, still chained to the wall, faced us, guarding the inner door, which was closed; otherwise the room was empty. The tiger stood up, his fur bristling, his tail switching, and growling fiercely. We kept very close to the door.

"Tau-Kis!" cried my master.

The inner door opened. "Who is there?" demanded the voice of Tau-Kis.

"I—Vigorous Daunt, and my friend, Rupert Granville," shouted my master; "for Heaven's sake, make your cat cease his noise."

The old man spoke to the tiger, who instantly stopped growling, and presently he made his appearance.

"Welcome, welcome, Sahibs," he cried. "See, I have prepared for your reception." He pointed

to the dresser, whereon were spread some cheese, butter, bread, and two bottles of champagne. Coming forth, he begged us to be seated, and himself squatted cross-legged on his mattress. "It was kind of you to come," he said.

I took a stool, but my master remained standing. "We have come on business, not pleasure," Daunt announced—"to help you if we can."

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "As Buddha pleases," he muttered.

"I think your life is in danger," said Daunt.

The old man smiled. "Buddha protects me," he murmured. "While Woon lives my life is safe."

"Do you know Prince Ming?"

Tau-Kis started violently, and his brown face turned a queer yellow colour. "My enemy," he gasped.

"Ah!" said my master. "I thought so. Tell me, is it to him you owe the wounds I washed last night?"

"Ah—and more, much more. Listen to me, Sahib! For fourteen years he and his servants have persecuted and misused me. For fourteen years I have defied them. Once they beat me in the open street nigh to death. Twice have their knives been buried in my side. You know how they last served me. But still, thanks to Buddha, I survive."

"You give thanks to Buddha, but what of the magic of the Gnaga-Gna?"

Tau-Kis sprang to his feet and glared at Vigorous



"At that instant there was a crash of glass behind."

Figorous Duast: Billionaire

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Daunt as though he sought to read his soul. The tiger also, who had been lying down, got up and ominously growled.

"You know!" gasped Tau-Kis. "How much?"

"That you stole the ruby from your nephew—Theebaw. That you fled to England for safety. That here you have lived in comparative peace, although often your enemies have sought to wring from you the secret of the jewel's hiding-place; so much I know and more."

Tau-Kis stepped back, and his hand sought the tiger's chain; he retreated gradually to the wall, with what evil purpose I could guess—but Daunt stopped him with a word.

"Wait, Tau-Kis. I am your friend. To-night, I think Prince Ming designs another attack upon you. In my eyes the ruby of right belongs to you. I am therefore here to offer you my help."

"You want the ruby," growled the old man, his eyes ablaze.

"My poor fellow," said Vigorous Daunt, "the Gnaga-Gna would be of no manner of use to me. If I wanted—I could buy twenty such stones."

"Not like the Gnaga-Gna," grated Tau-Kis. "The Dragon King is lord of life and death."

"Keep it," said my master scornfully, "and be lord of the lord of life and death!"

What answer Tau-Kis would have made I know not, but at that instant there was a crash of glass behind me, and a great volume of fluid was dis-

charged into the room through the broken panes in the direction of the tiger. The brute gave a terrible, snarling roar, and leaped into the air, overturning his master as he rose. Vigorous Daunt seized my arm and pulled me back from the door just as another volume of fluid was cast, as though from a bucket, into the apartment. My master darted to the second window, his revolver in his hand. With the butt he smashed the glass, and pressed his face into the orifice, breathing hard. Only then I understood. The fluid was chloroform. The place so reeked with the fumes that already my head was dizzy and my senses swam. I staggered to the window almost overcome, and would even then have fallen had not Daunt supported me. I remember a terrible confusion of sounds, savage roars, the heavy snap and clank of chains, the report of a pistol, finally a long, rending, tearing crash as though a door were beaten in. I then embarked upon a most charming and delightful voyage. I swam over seas of light and sweet bowers of roses ; over the upturned and most joyous faces of a million blessed people who smiled at me and wished me "bon voyage," swinging golden censers and singing like the angels. But, alas, I left such pleasant scenes at last, and ushered by a noise of rushing waters, I swam into the dark.

When I awoke it was broad daylight. I found myself lying upon the closed cellar-flap of Tau-Kis' inner room. Vigorous Daunt was bending over me,

chafing my hands and face. The air still reeked with chloroform, but a strong breeze blew into the place, which soon restored me to myself. Assisted by my master, I got to my feet, feeling, however, horribly nauseated and uncertain. Looking into the kitchen, I beheld the tiger, crouched on its haunches, not two paces off, eyeing us with venomous watchfulness. Both windows were broken, and through the bars beyond the frames the wind whistled shrilly, blowing half a gale. The kitchen's outer door, burst from its hinges, lay upon the floor, and through the opening so made, looking slantwise, I perceived that the back door of the house was also dismantled and had fallen in. Truly the enemies of Tau-Kis had carried matters with a high hand—but what of Tau-Kis? He was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is the old man?” I demanded, turning sharply on my master.

Vigorous Daunt shook his head. “They took him off, Prince Ming and his men. Doubtless he is on Ming's yacht and far beyond our reach by now; maybe, tortured to death and buried—unless, to save his life, he yielded up the ruby.”

“What happened after I swooned?”

“I am a very little wiser than yourself. The fumes were too strong for me. I fainted just as they burst in the door, nor did I see a soul, though with the last of my senses I fired my pistol. But it is easy to guess what happened. They came in and found us all unconscious, including the tiger.

They carried off poor Tau-Kis, but before they left they brought us in here, so that even when we recovered we could not escape because of the brute, for they knew that the tiger must awake before us, and that he would guard us! Oh, I give the Prince my compliments; he is a very clever man!"

"Did they take your pistol?"

"It is gone; so is yours!"

"We are prisoners, then!" I gasped.

"Well," said Daunt, drily, "we must pass the tiger to escape. Do you feel like trying?"

I looked into the evil brute's yellow eyes and shuddered. "No," I said; "but there is the cellar. We may find a means of egress there!"

"If we do not," said Daunt, "we are likely to rot here, unless the tiger starves to death before us. These walls are all solid stone, and we've had pretty convincing proof that no one ever visits here. Why, last night enough noise was made to wake the dead, and yet no one seems to have heard. We could yell ourselves deaf and yet attract no attention."

"Let's try the cellar."

"With all my heart!"

Raising the flap, we descended a broad flight of stairs into the dark. Luckily, our enemies had left us matches. The cellar was easy to explore. A chamber about fifteen feet square, it was, and twelve feet high. It contained at first sight, nothing but a heap of bones and a huge ring bolt let into the stone floor, to which, no doubt, Tau-Kis had been wont to secure his tiger.

Air was admitted through a small but massive iron grating in the roof, the very grating by means of which we had first made acquaintance with the cat of Tau-Kis. An examination of this killed all hope of escape by this means, for the bars were set deeply in the surrounding stone, which was granite.

"Surely to goodness," cried Vigorous Daunt, "the old man must have had some weapon or other; he could not have depended for protection entirely on his tiger. Search."

I took one side of the cellar, and Daunt the other. We proceeded inch by inch, feeling the dust-littered floor with our feet, searching by match-light every crevice in the walls. Suddenly my master uttered a cry of joy. I darted to his side just in time to see him extract from a dark slit in the masonry a Colt's revolver and a slender jewel-hilted sword.

"Hurrah," I cried, "we are saved!"

We rushed upstairs to examine the treasure, but our delight was quickly tempered. The revolver was empty. The sword, however, was an elegant weapon—well balanced, and of perfect steel. The blade was about two feet long, and though rather rusted it was sharp, and rang true to every test we made.

We looked at one another, and a sorry pair we were; our clothes covered with dust, our faces dirty and perspiring. Vigorous Daunt's eyes were very grim.

"Who is it to be?" he demanded.

"I am twice your size, sir—and twice as strong as you."

come, my eyes quite dazzled, I stared at it and gasped. "What does this mean?"

Vigorous Daunt did not heed me. With a rapt look on his face he was gazing at the ruby and muttering over and over: "Oh, clever old man, the cunning, clever, besotted old man!"

"Who?" I cried at last. "Who is your clever old man?"

"Tau-Kis," he returned. "Tau-Kis. He stole the stone and sewed it up in the neck of this tiger Woon. That was fourteen years ago; no doubt Woon was then a cub. Oh! the cunning, clever old man! Thus did he preserve his treasure, his heart's delight; thus did he defy and beat his enemies! Who would have thought of searching in a tiger's throat for the Gnaga-Gna?"

"Is that the Gnaga-Gna?" I gasped, half stupid with astonishment.

"It is the Gnaga-Gna, the Dragon King. The ruby that has bathed in the life-blood of three, and caused the death of a fourth. The ruby whose precious beauties have sent so many souls to perdition."

"Poor old Tau-Kis," I muttered.

"Bah!" cried Daunt. "He deserved his fate, the insensate fool he was. For the mere pride of possession of this bauble he braved imprisonment and death, he led for fourteen years an existence of loveless solitude, joyless, terror-haunted misery; he endured tortures unspeakable, and has finally sacrificed his life, if, indeed, he has been allowed



“If he pits himself against me, I'll break him like a reed.”

Vigorous Daunt - Billionaire

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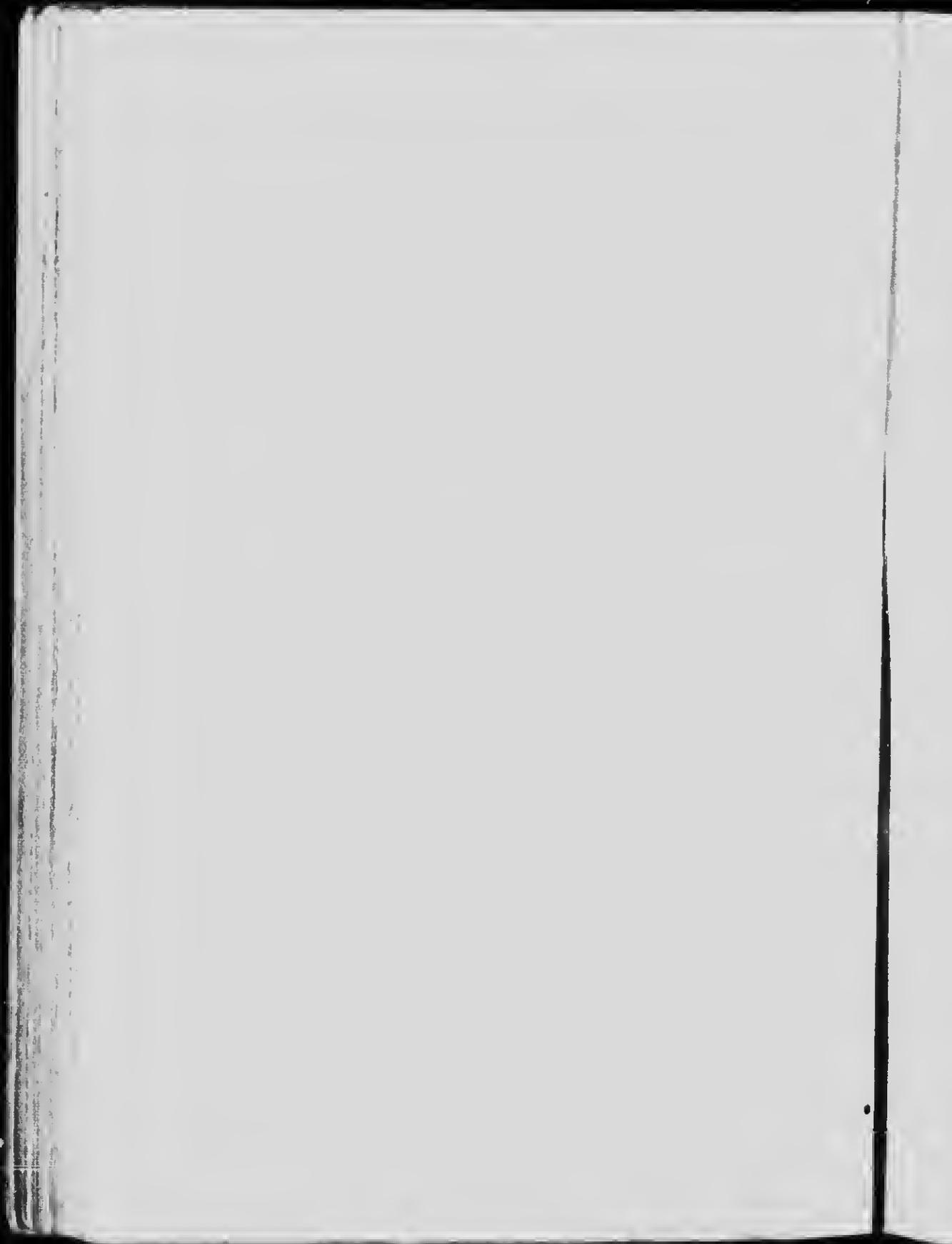
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CHAPTER V

VIGOROUS DAUNT'S LITTLE DEBT

ALTHOUGH Mr. Vigorous Daunt was essentially a cosmopolitan, and extolled favourably at great length upon the characteristics of the various nations, I soon found that there was one country which did not find favour in his eyes. In this solitary instance he carried his prejudice to the extreme, and denied its inhabitants a single saving grace—politically, nationally, mentally or morally. This country, for many reasons which will be presently perceived, I shall call by the fictitious name "Parhalia." He lost no opportunity of railing against it, during our voyage to Malta upon his private yacht, after our sensational experience with the mysterious Hindoo, Tau-Kis, of Hampstead, and the Gnaga-Gna ruby, and I soon commenced to suspect that he possessed some private reason for so constantly decrying Parhalia.

When we had been at Valetta three days, I questioned him directly: "Look here, sir, you are eternally vilifying Parhalia; what on earth have the Parhalians done to you?" We were on the balcony of his room at the Royal Hotel at the time,

lounging on easy chairs, our feet on the railing, and smoking.

He took his cigar from his mouth, and closely regarded the glowing tip for some moments in silence, then answered: "When I was quite a young man I suffered a great and unmerited indignity at the hands of Parhalia. Would you like to hear about it?"

"Nothing would at this moment give me greater pleasure."

"It was before I made my fortune," said Vigorous Daunt. "I was travelling in Europe trying to influence capitalists to buy or invest in a large wolfram mine which I had discovered in Queensland. I, of course, gave England the first chance of acquiring it. You perhaps know that wolfram is a rare mineral which is principally used for hardening steel, and is invaluable in the manufacture of guns and armour-plating, for no other substance yields such satisfactory results. My mine, at that time, seemed to me a matter of national moment, for its possession would give an immeasurable advantage to any country possessing it. The whole world's supply is only some two thousand tons yearly; well, in my property at that time some fifty thousand tons of ore were actually in sight. However, England failed to recognise the importance of the concern, and after wasting some months in fruitless negotiations with the Admiralty and War Office, I was constrained to set out for the Continent. In Parhalia I was very courteously

received, and I found the Government not only willing but anxious to do business with me. I was presented to the king, who made me a handsome present—a golden cigarette case, studded with diamonds—and within a week a proposal was made which appeared to me exceedingly advantageous. Before I had signed the contract with the Government of Parhalia, however, a private English firm telegraphed me a better offer still, and as I was, at that time, nothing if not patriotic, I accepted it. The Parhalian Government was very wroth indeed on learning of my determination. They beheld a coveted prize slipping from their grasp, and finding me obdurate to all their solicitations—I may say they tried to bribe me—they resolved upon revenge. I was arrested on the charge of stealing the king's gift—the gold cigarette case."

"Great Scott!" I ejaculated.

Vigorous Daunt smiled. "Petty, wasn't it? But so it was. They put me in gaol and treated me like a convict for over a week. At last I got a word to the British Minister, and he kicked up a great fuss, I can tell you. The king then came forward and ordered my release, pretending that the whole affair was a mistake. With that I was obliged to be content. I was too poor and insignificant for two great nations to quarrel about, you see, but the cigarette case was never returned to me and I never even received the satisfaction of an apology. Now do you wonder that I dislike Parhalia?"

"Not a bit," said I. "Is that the end of the story?"

"Not quite, Mr. Granville—at least, I hope not. I never forgive an injury, nor forget an insult. By the way, we set off to-morrow for Fiargo."

"Indeed."

"Yes. The King of Parhalia is wintering there with his family; queer coincidence, isn't it?"

I agreed, but somehow I did not believe it was a matter of pure coincidence, although I did not say so.

Six days afterwards we dropped anchor in the harbour of Fiargo, and having landed in the yacht's electric launch, Vigorous Daunt led me at the head of two ship's cooks, three stewards and his two valets (who were all laden with luggage) to a beautiful villa which was perched upon a promontory overlooking the city and the sea. We found the place in the hands of caretakers, who had prepared it for our reception. The little brown man promptly dismissed them all and informed me that I was at liberty to do as I pleased for the next week, as he would be busy for at least that period with some private work—study, he called it.

I occupied my holiday in variously exploring the town, which I visited then for the first time, or wandering in the gardens of the villa, which were both extensive and beautiful. A high wall separated our grounds on the eastern side from those of a large and pretentious, almost palatial, residence, a huge, two-storeyed building, built in the Doric

style, with high porticos and covered esplanades, back and front, and surrounded by a wide and carefully-established park. It was evidently the abode of some great potentate, for guards perambulated before the massive iron gates, and mounted soldiers accompanied the closed carriage which occasionally carried a middle-aged gentleman back and forth to the city. This same gentleman I sometimes observed from the window of my room, strolling about his gardens. He was at such times attended by a stout, but handsome, woman, whom I judged to be his wife, an extremely beautiful girl of seventeen or eighteen, two well-grown lads and a grey-haired, soldierly-looking man, who appeared to be a secretary or servitor of some sort, for he walked in the rear of the party unless addressed, when he moved respectfully forward, but always retired to his former position immediately the colloquy was over.

My curiosity was piqued concerning this family, from two reasons. One was the singular resemblance which the gentleman bore to a reigning European monarch, the other was the extraordinary beauty of the girl who so often accompanied his rambles. Once looking up she met my eyes as I surveyed her, and though she blushed at my frankly admiring gaze, she nevertheless drew herself up with an expression so haughty and reserved as to rebuke my impertinence sufficiently. That one glance was sufficient to inform me that I had regarded a person of most exalted rank, and I took

care in future to conduct my observations with more decorum. I needed then no further assurance that my neighbours were none other than the King of Parhalia and his family, and I shrewdly guessed that the little brown man, my master, had not chosen the villa of Petticola for his residence without some object more or less sinister to the king, his old enemy. This reflection filled me with excitement not unmixed with uneasiness, for the king did not appear a person to be played with. His massive features were stern and strong, his expression was rather forbidding, and he seemed to me a man of quick and keen intelligence.

For several days I saw but little of Vigorous Daunt, for my bedroom was on the ground-floor of the villa, while he dwelt on the floor above me and allowed nothing to disturb his privacy. We only met—and then rarely—at meals, and on such occasions he was preoccupied and uncommunicative; he ate quickly, and returned as soon as he could to his own apartments, preserving always an air of mystery and meditation that I found excessively provoking. On the evening of the sixth day of our stay at Fiargo, I dined alone, and afterwards strolled for a while in the shrubbery, smoking a cigar and trying to make up my mind to visit an opera or music hall, since I had grown sick of my own company. When the cigar was consumed I threw away the stump and moved towards the house, but had not proceeded a dozen paces when I came face to face with the King of Parhalia.

My first sentiment was one of shocked amazement that his Majesty should have entered our grounds and unattended. He regarded me with an expression of quiet curiosity, and said in a manner of courteous interrogation: "Good evening, sir. May I inquire who lives here?"

I swung off my hat, and answered on impulse: "Mr. Vigorous Daunt, your Majesty!" He slightly smiled, suavely thanked me, and turning walked slowly, and with a queer, halting gait, down the pathway towards the gate.

"Aha!" thought I. "The king has recognised Daunt. I had better put the little brown man on his guard!" With that I hurried into the villa and to my master's apartments, but to my surprise could not find him. His study door, however, stood open, and I entered. It was a large room and strangely furnished. The walls were hung with a hundred recently-taken and unframed portraits of the King of Parhalia, representing his Majesty in almost every conceivable posture and attitude. In the centre of the room stood a large Japanese three-fly mirror, so arranged as to reflect every part of any person standing before it in a certain position. Beside it stood a table covered with paints, powders and cosmetics, and a rack stand adorned with manifold wigs, beards and moustaches of almost every conceivable style and colour. There was not a chair or table in the room. I glanced out of the windows and found that they all commanded the gardens of the royal palace, but

beyond that I could see nothing, for the night was dark, though starry. I confess that I had already commenced to entertain a rather uncomfortable suspicion that the king I had just conversed with was only a counterfeit monarch. I hurried out again into the garden and sought the high road, but ten minutes' tramp discovered nothing. The sentries were perambulating before the royal gates as usual, and the palace was quite quiet and peaceful. Returning to the villa, I skirted the dividing wall, anxious to find a place where I might scale it and so gain a closer view of the palace. A clump of mimosa trees which grew near the wall at the farthest corner of our grounds seemed to offer a favourable point of vantage, so to them I proceeded, but when still twenty feet off the foliage parted and the King of Parhalia emerged from what seemed a regular hiding-place.

"What have you been doing?" I demanded.

Daunt's natural voice answered me. He was laughing quietly, but very happily. "I deceived you, Granville, and I deceived the guards. What do you think of my disguise?"

"Very good! But for what purpose have you assumed it?"

"To amuse myself: no; to be quite candid with you—I intend something else. I am going to pay back the King of Parhalia in his own coin, I can tell you!"

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see. Wait till I get him in my clutches."

"You are not going the right way to work, then. The guards did not see the king go out; they are sure to mention that they saw you enter the gates and——"

"Bosh, man, I didn't," he interrupted. "After you had gone I slipped round here and climbed the wall, then strolled over to the guards and had a quiet chat with them."

"How did you get back again?"

"There is a ladder, a nice little ladder, hidden in those bushes."

"Ha! you are playing a dangerous game, sir!"

"Danger is the spice of life. No occupation or pleasure is enjoyable if it is not associated with a strong element of peril. My keenest delight in the business I have in hand is the comfortable conviction that I'll be shot or imprisoned for life if I am discovered."

"Queer taste!"

"You share it," cried he

I could not deny the impeachment, for I found the situation as full of charm as it was of risk; I simply longed to join in the affair and play a leading part. "When do you strike?" I asked; "and what are your plans. Do I share in them?"

He replied laconically: "To-morrow night I strike; you will help me!"

"But your plans?"

"Rupert Granville, a captain should never make a confidant of his lieutenant. That is the reason why the best-laid schemes oftentimes miscarry. If

I were a general and contemplated giving battle to an enemy, I would apportion to each of my subordinates a certain task and tell him nothing except the thing that I expected him to do. He would then have a single responsibility to incur, a single duty to perform, and nothing else to trouble about in the wide world. My chances of victory would thuswise be enormously increased, for I should have only the enemy to combat instead of, as in the other case, the counsels of my officers. Now, in the present instance I represent the general, you my army, the king the enemy. To-morrow I shall give him battle; well, before the fight commences you will receive your orders: you understand?"

"Perfectly!" and drawing myself up, I saluted. The little brown man was now disclosing himself to me in a new aspect and one that as a soldier I could entirely respect. He spoke quickly but lucidly, and every word he uttered was pregnant with decision and command. I could not help feeling that he was a capable man and would succeed in his design whatever it might be.

I spent the greater part of the next day in a fever of impatience waiting for my promised instructions, but not until an hour before midnight did Vigorous Daunt send for me. I found him in his workroom putting the completing touches upon his make-up, and though I saw him in a very strong artificial light I was lost in astonishment before a startling and life-like presentment of the King of Parhalia. He had increased his stature by at least two inches

to make up for his deficiency in height, and although he moved rather haltingly in consequence his carriage was a perfect imitation of that of his enemy. He did not appear the least nervous or anxious, only a little excited, and his eyes were alight with enthusiasm.

"Ha!" he cried, as soon as he observed me; "is that you, Granville?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

He laughed, and pointed to a coil of rope upon the floor. "Take that, and go downstairs, put out all the lights, in the halls, stairways and corridors, then wait for me in the mimosa bushes where you found me last night."

"Good!" I saluted and departed, crying him to the letter. He followed me in a few moments and showed me his ladder, which he directed me to place against the wall. Climbing up, he sat astride the coping and softly called to me to follow. I did so, and shifted the ladder to the other side for him to descend; all our movements were screened from observation by trees and the darkness.

Standing on the rungs, he whispered in my ear: "If I return I shall bring with me the king, whom I shall give into your hands. You will take him by force, if necessary, into my villa to the room which is opposite my workroom. It is a padded cell especially prepared for his reception. Wait with him until I come; give him nothing to eat or drink; you understand?"

"Perfectly."

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“Good-bye then.” In a moment he had disappeared and I was alone, but I shall chronicle his doings as he afterwards narrated them, exactly as they took place.

CHAPTER VI

HOW DAUNT'S DEBT WAS PAID

VIGOROUS DAUNT marched to the front door of the palace and tapped softly on the panels. The door was opened by a soldier; within the portico stood three others, and at a little distance a Parhalian officer of high rank was leaning against a marble vase smoking a cigarette. The King of Parhalia was a man of regular habits, who, when on a holiday, as then, retired each night at the same hour—half-past-ten. The guards, who imagined his Majesty long in bed, sprang instantly to attention on perceiving, to their thinking, their king so unexpectedly before them, while the officer, lost in surprise, threw down his cigarette and started forward.

Vigorous Daunt affected to be unwell. "I felt a little faint," he muttered, "and not wishing to disturb any one, I descended quietly and entered the garden by a side door. Kindly help me to my room," then beckoning the officer with an imperious gesture, he took his arm.

The officer made no remark, but tenderly assisted the counterfeit monarch upstairs to the open door of an ante-chamber, before which stood two drowsy

soldiers, who instantly woke up and stared at the king with the greatest astonishment. Here Daunt dismissed his guide with a whispered command ; " Say nothing of this to any one, sir ! Good-night."

The officer bowed deeply and immediately retreated.

Daunt, without wasting time, entered and crossed the ante-room, his heart in his mouth lest the door of the king's chamber should prove to be fastened. It was, however, ajar ; without a backward glance he crossed the threshold and quietly closed the door behind him. He found himself in a large and dimly-illuminated room, whose appointments were massive but on the whole very plain. The principal article of furniture was a large carved oak four-poster bed, erected on a sort of dais beneath a silk canopy that depended from the centre of the ceiling. On this the King of Parhalia was lying, apparently in a sound sleep. Vigorous Daunt's first act was to undo his own vest and unwind from his body a stout silken cord, which he proceeded to knot at intervals throughout its length. This done, he noiselessly raised the window sash and peered forth into the garden. Reassured, he approached the king's bed, and while watching his victim saturated a handkerchief with chloroform from a bottle which he had taken from his pocket. The king was sleeping with his mouth wide open and breathing deeply ; he was swathed in a red flannel night-gown and his arms rested upon the coverlet. His usually fierce twisted moustaches had become

dank and uncoiled, and his face was smeared with some cream-like cosmetic. Altogether Vigorous Daunt was much more like the king than the king was like himself. The little brown man could hardly keep from chuckling aloud at the thought, but perceiving the recklessness of such an indulgence he restrained himself and held the handkerchief just beneath the king's nose, taking care, however, not to touch his Majesty's face. The king felt the effects of the drug without waking, and quite unconsciously attempted to escape the nuisance by turning. But Daunt, persistent as fate, followed him, and when he judged it safe covered his victim's mouth and nostrils with the bandage until he had produced complete anæsthesia. He then played the lackey with speed and precision. He removed the king's night-gown, wrapped him in a dressing-robe, and put slippers on his feet. Taking up the silken rope, Daunt twisted an end round the king's body and knotted it beneath his arms. He next carried him gently to the window ledge, where, fearing the effects of fresh air, Daunt administered another dose of chloroform. That done he gently lowered the insensible monarch to the garden below, and tying the free end of his rope to the nearest bed-post got out of the window and slipped down the cord hand over hand. He found the king still unconscious, but showing unmistakable signs of returning intelligence. Not anxious to carry a man larger than himself all the way to where I waited, some two hundred yards distant, Vigorous Daunt

assisted his victim's recovery with a nitrate of amyl capsule, taking care, however, to prevent any sudden outcry by previously inserting a prepared gag in the king's mouth. His Majesty of Parhalia's feelings on awakening would no doubt be worthy of recording, but, unfortunately, they were not revealed then or subsequently, and can therefore remain only a matter of speculation. He opened his eyes to see his own image and likeness holding a revolver to his forehead, to hear his own voice command him to arise and walk. Perhaps the king thought that he had died in his sleep. At any rate, he obeyed without question, and, supported on Vigorous Daunt's arm, traversed the park without pause or protest, and was presently given silently into my keeping. We got him over the wall with much difficulty, for he was weak, unnerved and almost helpless from the drug, but the feat was at last accomplished. Vigorous Daunt then left me and immediately returned to the palace, into which he penetrated by means of the rope which still dangled from the window of the king's chamber. No alarm had been given, everything was silent and peaceful. The counterfeit king concealed the rope on his person and then opened the door of the ante-chamber. He passed through, to the renewed surprise of the guards, and descending the stairs made his way into the great hall before the porch. The officer was no longer there, but the soldiers still guarded the entrance of the palace. He said to them: "I have indigestion, I cannot sleep. I

shall walk a little in the garden. Kindly open the door." The soldiers would have escorted him, but he waved them aside and issued into the park. Once concealed from observation by the darkness, he hurried swiftly to the gates, which he commanded the sentries to open. They raised some demur, but dared not disobey. He passed through, and moved in the direction of the city. One of the soldiers followed him, the other hastened to the palace to acquaint his officer of the king's sudden and singular freak. Vigorous Daunt, aware that he was pursued, quickened his pace. The soldier, now seriously alarmed, and believing the king gone mad (the spectre of insanity haunts most European royal families), gave chase. Two hundred yards from the gates Vigorous Daunt stopped and allowed himself to be overtaken.

"Come here, fellow!" he commanded, angrily. The soldier very sheepishly approached him.

"How dare you follow your king?" demanded Vigorous Daunt.

"Your Majesty—I—I——" stammered the fellow.

"Silence, sir! Right about turn!" The soldier instinctively obeyed the order. Vigorous Daunt stepped up close behind him, but the soldier, not daring to turn, stood stock still.

Vigorous Daunt without hesitation struck him sharply over the ear with the butt of his revolver, and the poor wretch tumbled to the ground completely stunned. The little brown man immediately took to his heels, and running like a deer down the

high road passed the deserted gates of the palace at a safe distance and presently entered his own grounds. Three minutes afterwards an officer and several men appeared at the palace gates, and commenced to search for their wandering king. They only found, however, the body of the soldier lying insensible on the dusty roadway.

After Vigorous Daunt had effectually silenced the soldier, he hurried to the Villa Petticola and presented himself before the King of Parhalia and myself. Following my master's instructions, I had taken or rather forced his Majesty to accompany me to the padded chamber which had been arranged for his reception. It was just such a room as might be found in any private lunatic asylum, and was designed to smother any wild outcry made by a noisy and desperate prisoner. Its furniture consisted merely of a mattress and two wooden chairs, which were screwed firmly to the floor. It possessed no window, and was lighted by a single electric glow lamp half-submerged in the ceiling. Heaven preserve me from ever being compelled to inhabit such a refuge !

Vigorous Daunt when he entered was the picture of delight and exultation. He tore off his disguise before the eyes of the astonished king, removing wig, eyebrows and moustaches with a few swift touches. Thrusting his face forward, Daunt then demanded : " Does your Majesty recognise me now ? "

The training of princes imparts to their outward

governance an incomparable superiority over the rest of humanity, a dignity that no lesser men may hope to rival, a supreme composure of mind and feature that cannot elsewhere be attained. The King of Parhalia, attired simply in dressing-gown and slippers, a costume sufficient to render any ordinary person ill at ease, preserved a demeanour of unruffled calm, and remained a king in spite of circumstances. He stepped back with a gesture and pose of body eloquent of lofty pride and unapproachable dignity.

"Sir," he said, coldly, "I have never seen you before. Be good enough to let me pass."

Vigorous Daunt frowned at the rebuke; he drew himself up to his full height and answered: "Your Majesty is mistaken, we have met before and on an occasion when your Majesty was good enough to present me with a jewelled gold cigarette case."

"Ah!" said the king, gazing thoughtfully at his captor, "your name is Daunt."

"Quite so." Vigorous Daunt bowed, and smiled. "Your Majesty has such an excellent memory that you will perhaps be able to recall the fact that I was arrested and imprisoned on a charge of stealing your Majesty's gracious gift."

"Indeed!" observed the king, raising his eyebrows.

"Your Majesty does not remember?"

"Not in the least."

"I implore your Majesty to think. Let me review the circumstances. I visited Parhalia in

order to dispose of a wolfram mine situated in Australia. Your Majesty's Government made me a certain offer which I was on the point of accepting when a patriotic motive intervened. I sold the mine to my own countrymen and regretfully informed your ministers of the fact. My decision appeared to give dissatisfaction. I was by turns cajoled and threatened. Annoyed by this treatment, I cut short my stay in Parhalia, but on entering the train I was arrested on the charge I have named. A week later your Majesty was good enough to inform the British Minister that the whole thing was a mistake, in consequence of which assurance I was at last released."

"Well?" observed the king, inquiringly.

"Your Majesty does not remember?"

"I remember nothing," answered the king, sternly, "except that you have committed an unwarrantable outrage on my person. If you wish to avert a terrible requital you will at once release me."

"Ah!" cried Daunt; "your Majesty's memory will improve with time. I shall furnish you with opportunity for reflection."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"This, sire: you unjustly confined me and compelled me to subsist on prison fare like a common felon. You are a king, but a man as well. I am a man, and I take my revenge man for man, that is all."

"You would dare——"

"Your Majesty dared."

"Insolent!" The king frowned.

Vigorous Daunt bowed low. "Your Majesty, I was much injured at your hands. I received neither satisfaction nor apology. I was indubitably entitled to both."

"What is it you wish?"

"That your Majesty will condescend to allow me to entertain you at a banquet, and thereafter further deign to express your regret for the treatment meted out to me some sixteen years ago."

"Sir!" said the king, icily, "you forget that I am a king."

"Sire!" retorted Daunt; "sixteen years ago you forgot the same thing. I have the honour to wish your Majesty good-night."

With this retort the little brown man pushed me before him from the room and locked the door in the king's face. We stood for a long moment staring at each other. I remember that I was trembling all over with excitement, but Vigorous Daunt appeared thoughtful and quite unmoved. He shook me slowly by the hand and pointed to the staircase: "Go—and sleep," he said quietly. The man was such a superlative mimic that he had unconsciously assumed the royal manner of his prisoner, and I foresaw that his repertoire of characters was about to become, if it were not already, extended.

The next morning, overcome with a very natural

curiosity, I narrowly observed the king's palace from our own windows, taking pains the while not to display myself unnecessarily. There was nevertheless not much to be seen. The regular number of guards patrolled before the gates, and the house appeared just as quietly occupied as usual. The grounds were, however, quite deserted, and at frequent intervals mounted messengers arrived from the city, or departed citywards. Before long it became evident that a strong hand was controlling affairs, for no confusion was apparent, and the keenest observer could not detect a sign of the catastrophe which the night had brought about. Twenty telegrams arrived each hour, but the faces of the messengers, surveyed through a powerful field-glass, betrayed no trace of surprise or preoccupation. The king's disappearance was plainly being kept a close secret from outsiders. Vigorous Daunt, whom I did not see until late in the afternoon, shared in my opinion. He told me that he had been to the city but had heard nothing disquieting, and that the evening newspapers were just as uninteresting as usual.

"What do you think will be done?" I demanded.

Vigorous Daunt shrugged his shoulders. "We are not in Parhalia, Granville. The King of Parhalia is here regarded as a foreigner. What can be done? Doubtless the city authorities know and are already searching for the king. Very likely by to-morrow Parhalian ministers and skilled detec-

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tives will arrive in Fiargo, and a vigorous but secret inquiry will be instituted."

"What if they search the Villa Pettola?"

"Bah," he replied with cool indifference, "that is not likely. The last thing seen of his Majesty last night he was on his way to the city."

"How long do you intend to keep the king prisoner?" I asked.

"Until he complies with my requirements. Come and see him."

We found his Majesty feverishly pacing his chamber. On our entrance he stopped, directed at us a terrible glance, and said: "You have come to inform me that this farce is at an end."

"On the contrary, sire," replied Daunt, "we have come to invite you to the banquet which I spoke of last night."

The king's face assumed an expression of cold, concentrated rage. It was less the anger of a man than the wrath of a ruler of men, for his self-control was absolute, and his voice did not tremble or increase in volume when he spoke. "Sirs, I am now within your power, but do not delude yourselves with the idea that this state of things can long continue. The disappearance of a king is an affair to idsturb the world——"

"It is the man I deal with!" retorted Daunt.

The king, with an almost imperceptible gesture of annoyance, made my master sensible of the impertinence he had committed. Vigorous Daunt humbly bowed in apology; his Majesty proceeded

unmoved. "Be advised and release me. I am at present disposed to deal mercifully with you, but should this outrage longer continue my disposition will become relentless: your punishment will be proportionate to your offence."

Vigorous Daunt made a low reverence. "I thank your Majesty for your gracious advice. I would point out the fact that your Majesty will be at liberty to depart when you have complied with the request I have ventured to propound. Sire, the banquet waits."

"I would eat," said the king.

Vigorous Daunt, who was standing by the door, slightly opened it, and, extending one hand through the aperture, pressed an electric button beside the wainscotting of the corridor. In less than two minutes his valets appeared bearing between them a small table spread with a cloth of gold. On this table was a solitary silver plate containing oatmeal; beside the plate stood a glass of water, a square crust of brown bread and a silver dessert spoon. The valets placed the table before one of the chairs and instantly departed.

"I entreat your Majesty to be seated," said Daunt.

The king glanced at him with open scorn. "Is this your banquet?" he demanded, folding his arms.

"Sire," said Daunt, "when I was incarcerated in your Majesty's prison, I had straw to sleep on; I had nothing to eat but stale bread and oatmeal served upon a dirty tin plate, which was cast upon

the floor as though I were a dog ; nothing to drink but water contained in a filthy stone jug. Nevertheless, when one hungers one eats, when one thirsts one drinks. Your Majesty is better provided : your chamber is sweet ; you have a mattress to rest upon ; you have porridge to eat, but it is served upon a polished silver vessel ; water to drink, but it is contained in a clean glass "

The king regarded him for a moment with a slow, illegible smile. I could discern no anger in his glance but some other emotion which was too subtle and intangible for my comprehension to determine. His Majesty answered softly, but with a manner of infinite pride : " I have tasted oatmeal before this, Vigorous Daunt, and would not scruple to do so again, since many of my subjects are maintained upon the substance. But I cannot be constrained."

Daunt nodded. " I starved for three days," he replied ; " your Majesty has not fasted half that time. Come, Granville, assist me to carry out this table."

I started forward, and did as I was bid. We then departed from the room, leaving the king staring at the floor, lost in meditation. His extraordinary dignity and calmness weighed upon me like a nightmare, and from that moment I felt that I participated in a crime ; but the little brown man was in the best spirits possible, and proved that night so jolly a companion that with the second bottle of champagne the more acute part of my remorse incontinently vanished.

The following day passed uneventfully. The royal palace and grounds preserved much the same appearance as on the previous day, and not once did I catch a glimpse of the Princess or Princes of Parhalia. Several carriages called at the palace, but their visits were accounted for by the fact that the morning papers contained an account of the king's sudden illness. This was the excuse put forward to explain to the world his non-appearance. No one approached the Villa Petticola, and apparently the King's whereabouts had not been suspected.

I did not see Vigorous Daunt until dinner, when he informed me that his Majesty was still obdurate. The little brown man was, however, just as unconcerned as ever, and just as hopeful. In answer to a question he replied : "The king is breaking up ; he is half famished, and accepted this afternoon a glass of water. To-morrow he will give way. Hunger is a hard task-master, a mighty leveller. The king will presently become a man."

At six o'clock on the ensuing evening Vigorous Daunt sent for me and we entered the prisoner's chamber together, carrying the table between us. The King of Parhalia had wonderfully changed since I had last seen him. His eyes were now bloodshot and wild, his cheeks were pallid and drawn. He was in fact less a king than a starving beggar, but in spite of the pangs he undoubtedly endured, his manner was still strangely grand and self-contained. Only his feelings were more apparent. It was plain

that he was angry, plain that he regarded us with an intensity of odium the more deadly because restrained. Vigorous Daunt set the table before him and bowed, not mockingly, but deferentially, for he had grown to respect his prisoner.

"Will your Majesty be pleased to eat?"

"Yes!" said the king, and with a sudden brusque movement he started forward and took up the spoon. Then followed an exhibition of the extraordinary dominion which a man's will may acquire over his brutal parts. The starving king ate the porridge slowly, pausing for half a minute between each mouthful. When he had finished and the plate was quite clean, he arose and coldly inquired: "Are you satisfied?"

"Your Majesty," said Vigorous Daunt, "I unreservedly apologise for the indignity to which you have been subjected. I am sure that your Majesty will be magnanimous enough to express a similar regret in my regard."

The king bit his lip and pressed his hand to his left side; he seemed to force himself to speak, and his voice sounded harsher than usual. "I had nothing to do with your imprisonment, sir. As soon as I became aware of it I ordered your release."

"If your Majesty had told me that three days ago, you would not have been detained by me an hour."

The king smiled bitterly "I presume you do not wish to murder me. I am ill."

"I am at your Majesty's orders," muttered Vigorous Daunt.

"Send to my house and inform its inmates of my whereabouts."

"We have your Majesty's permission to retire?"

"Go!"

We backed out of the room, leaving the door wide open, and my last glimpse of the king was a man standing stiffly upright, his arms tightly folded, his face set and stern, his eyes staring vacantly at the floor. What his thoughts were no man may know.

* * * * *

Half-an-hour later Vigorous Daunt and I stood on the bridge of his yacht watching the lights of Fiargo fading into distance. Presently the little brown man turned to me.

"What do you think, Granville?"

I pointed towards Fiargo. "I'm sorry for it all," I replied, quietly; "he is a fine fellow."

Vigorous Daunt thoughtfully shook his head. "There's a lot in blood and breeding after all, isn't there? I wish to goodness I had been born a king. But never mind, there's no use crying over spilt milk; let us go down and eat. There is nothing so comforting as a good dinner."

CHAPTER VII

VIGOROUS DAUNT SIGNS A CHEQUE

WE first met Signor Nicolo Ferati while enjoying the hospitality of our common host Paul, Count Visconti, in the famous Palazzo Visconti, which is situated a short distance from the city of Padua. I remember him there as a melancholy nondescript, and an uninteresting composite of Spanish and Italian blood. In his person, the languors, graces and vices of one unmistakably decadent race seemed to overbear and oppress the newly found vigour of that allied type which, however, is now surely slowly awakening from the sleep of centuries. The result was melancholia. Signor Ferati's company, even in small doses, irritated and depressed me. His deep-set, dull-black eyes, which always seemed to brood upon the darkest problems of the universe; his long, interminable nose, whose aquiline and dominating cast was negated by the excessive thinness of its nostrils; the weakness of the chin beneath—a weakness ill-concealed by a spare pointed beard—the very smile, ironical yet sad, which haunted his fine Italian lips: indeed everything about the man jarred upon my nerves. He was too handsome, too indo-

lent, too causelessly satirical, too young for his mature years, yet too old for his youthful seeming. In order to escape hating, I avoided, him. Not so my master, Vigorous Daunt; the little brown man cultivated his society. At first I wondered why, but soon I understood. The aristocratic half-breed had divined the one great flaw in my master's character, his overweening vanity, and subtly Ferati played upon it, deriving from the exercise a certain selfish and gloomy joy. He listened to my master's stories with unfaltering attention. He soon affected to regard the little man as something superhuman, and the half-breed even went so far as to array himself in brown, and once he declared in my hearing, that he never would, by choice, don another colour. I imagined at first that there must be some deep motive for this conduct, but, watching keenly, my suspicions were lulled to rest. Under the circumstances I was glad when we left Padua, so much had I come to detest Ferati.

Early one morning in June, three months later, Daunt and I boarded his yacht, the *Narcissus*, which was anchored off Cowes. We had just arrived from Hamburg, travelling all night, and I had not slept at all. Vigorous Daunt immediately retired to his cabin in order to digest the contents of a great mass of letters and telegrams that awaited him. I resolved upon a bath. Having thrown off my clothes and donned a suit of pyjamas, I was proceeding along the deck towards the bath-room at the stern, when with whom should I come face

to face but Signor Ferati. The unlooked-for encounter startled me so much that I scarcely replied to his gracious bow. The half-breed was even more sombre a person than when I had last seen him. He was carefully attired in the deepest black; his top hat and the left arm of his frock-coat were bandaged with crape; his deep black eyes were absolutely lustreless, his long pale face was as bloodless as that of a corpse, his old saturnine smile had departed from his lips, which now met in a fine straight line. A mute, contemplating his own funeral, could not have looked more gloomy.

As ever, his presence made my spirits sink, but I managed to mutter, "Good-morning, signor."

He bowed again. "I have come from Italy to see Vigorous Daunt," he said, softly. "I have been awaiting his arrival in Cowes, now, since eight days. My business is of great, to me terrible, importance. May I see him?"

I immediately called a steward and put Signor Ferati in his charge.

After an icy needle bath, and a cup of chocolate, I felt so much refreshed that I abandoned my first intention to woo sleep, and, after dressing, went on deck. Curiosity concerning Ferati's business with my master had something to do with my change of mind. A glance over the side showed me the half-breed's boat still waiting; he had therefore not departed. For about ten minutes I paced the deck, and then a steward approached me. "Vigorous Daunt's compliments, Captain Granville, and will

you be good enough to go to him?—he is in the saloon.”

I found my master seated at the table ; opposite him stood Signor Ferati. The pallor of his face was absolutely fish-like, but his eyes now glowed like live coals in the twilight of the room. Some violent emotion seemed to possess him, for he trembled like an aspen leaf and one hand was pressed tightly to his heart.

Vigorous Daunt looked the picture of sympathy ; in a subdued voice he asked me to close the door, then softly addressed me.

“Sit down Granville—my poor friend Signor Ferati has been of late unmeritedly overwhelmed with misfortunes. The bank of which he is the senior partner has failed for over a million sterling. He has come to ask our assistance.”

“To implore,” cried Ferati. “Ah, signors, you behold me afflicted, more grievously afflicted than Job of old ; my life, my fate—my heart are in your hands !”

Vigorous Daunt inclined his head. “Signor Ferati has recently lost his wife,” he murmured.

The Italian again broke in : “The shock of my financial ruin killed her ! Alas ! had she survived another week—she would be still alive. Three days after her death I recovered the bulk of my fortune by means of an almost forgotten investment which successfully resulted. Alas ! My wife ! My poor wife !”

Tears now coursed down his cheeks, and the

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man's evidently profound misery affected me in spite of my dislike of him.

Vigorous Daunt proceeded gently : " The signor's son-in-law, and late partner, the Count Geromino Lesculi, was unhappily implicated in the failure of the bank ; he——"

" Do not seek to spare my feelings," gasped Ferati, " Lesculli was the cause of my affliction— Ah!—swindler!—robber!" he buried his face in his hands, and his breast heaved.

" He has paid the penalty of his crimes," murmured my master. " He committed suicide on the day the bank suspended payment. Signor Ferati, in order to save his name from shame, surrendered his private fortune to the bank's creditors ; but, even then, relentless fate pursued him. The Countess Lesculi, Signor Ferati's daughter and only child, who tenderly loved her husband, has since his death lost her reason ! "

Ferati sank into a chair, and groaned aloud.

I was dumb ; such an accumulation of misfortunes invested this man whom I instinctively disliked with a distinction that removed him from the scope of ordinary judgment. I experienced for him a deep pity.

Vigorous Daunt gravely continued : " The poor lady's mental disease is of an extremely serious description. She has sunk into a condition of abandoned melancholia ! She does not believe that her husband is dead, but is labouring under the idea that her father, Signor Ferati, hates her, and

is keeping her apart from her husband. In consequence she manifests a most terrible aversion to her father, and has already in her paroxysms twice attempted his life ! ”

The cry that wailed from poor Ferati's lips cut me to the heart : “ My Giuletta—my pretty Giuletta,” he moaned.

“ Of late,” pursued my master, “ the Countess has resolutely refused all nourishment, and grave fears are entertained for her life ! The physicians say, Granville, that the Countess's one hope of life, or restoration to reason, consists in the humouring of her sad delusion. They have advised Signor Ferati at all costs to employ the services of some person, some actor who can impersonate her husband. It is in this regard that Signor Ferati begs our assistance ! ”

“ But how ? ” I gasped.

Ferati answered me. Snatching up a card which lay face downwards on the table, he cried, “ Look ! look ! ”

Conceive my astonishment to perceive a photograph of myself—Rupert Granville ! Each feature was mine, each line, mark, and wrinkle of the skin ! I thought that it exactly resembled a photograph which I had had taken some six months previously in Wolverhampton, except for one particular, it bore the name of a photographic firm in Milan ! I had never been photographed in Milan.

I stared at it stupidly a while, then muttered out my thought, “ I have never been photographed

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in Milan: some one must have got hold of my picture and had it copied there!"

Vigorous Daunt silently handed me a second card.

It was one of the pictures of myself which I had bought in Wolverhampton. I compared the two and instantly perceived that in the Wolverhampton picture I was represented without a moustache; in the other I had one. Since the Wolverhampton photo was taken I had allowed the hair on my upper lip to grow; therefore the Milan picture was now the more faithful portrait! Next I compared the clothes—but the Milan picture was here no faithful guide: the clothes were poorly outlined and sunk in shadows.

Perfectly confounded, I looked up. My companions were watching me intently. "What does it mean?" I demanded.

Ferati touched the Milan picture with a trembling finger. "That is the last photograph taken of my late son-in-law, the late Count Lesculi," he uttered, brokenly. "You now understand the reason I am here, your humble suppliant!"

Ferati continued: "When the physicians pronounced their decree, my thoughts flew to you and Mr. Daunt; your wonderful resemblance to my son-in-law, guided by the wisdom of Mr. Daunt, can work my daughter's cure. I know it! I feel it! I said to myself, I shall follow them over the world until I find them, and even if Captain Granville refuses me his aid, why then Mr. Daunt, some of

whose brilliant exploits I have heard from his own tongue, will be kind and not turn from me! I said to myself, he at least will consent to personate my son-in-law; he will exercise his genius to save my daughter's life! Ah! signors! I have followed you here, I have found you. Do not refuse the prayer of a desolate, heart-broken father!"

Profoundly moved, I got to my feet and took one of the poor fellow's hands. Vigorous Daunt grasped the other. "What I can do, I shall," I cried.

"Heaven grant that we may arrive in time," said Vigorous Daunt impressively; "in that case your daughter is surely saved!"

Signor Ferati, with an inarticulate exclamation, bent his streaming eyes heavenwards, and, sinking upon his knees, commenced to pray!

Thirty hours later we had reached Milan, and were galloping in a closed carriage along the road to Monza—half-way between which village and Milan was situate the house of the Feratis. The first glimpse I caught of the Palazzo Ventura, for so Signor Ferati called his residence, inspired me with a curious sensation of approaching ill. Its walls were bleak and bare, utterly unlike the usual ornate structures of modern Italian architecture, and yet the place did not seem old. It was erected in the centre of a wide, circular depression, some two miles from the main road, and the view was so begirt and confined by the surrounding treeless

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rise of country, that its solitariness was unnecessarily pronounced. Not another habitation or sign of life relieved the sight, once the descent into the hollow was begun. As we approached the great square building my spirits became, in spite of me, more and more sombre. I do not know why, but its grey mass of stone wall, its square windows and forbidding, close-shut portal, and the silence of the place, made me regard it as a monstrous skull, an emblem of gloom and death, and yet it lay before us bathed in the glorious sunlight of a fine spring morning.

Vigorous Daunt appeared to share my impression of the place. "A perfect death-trap!" he muttered with a slight shiver. "What can have induced you, signor, to build a house in such a spot?"

Signor Ferati, whose agitation as we neared the end of our journey increased each moment, replied, "Ah, signor, the fault is not mine! Yonder has been the home of my family for thirteen generations."

"It looks new!" returned Daunt.

"Once it was a castle," said Ferati, "but my father, a man of sombre taste, rebuilt and altered the exterior, but inside—it is not so bad!"

He spoke truly. The portal thrown wide open, we entered an immense lofty hall which seemed to extend across the building. A magnificent white marble staircase, bifurcating a few feet from the floor, led in duplicate tiers of terraces to the rooms above, while innumerable doors opened on the

hall. A double row of Doric columns ran down the great apartment, supporting arches of polished alabaster, and beneath the arches palms and orange trees were growing in huge marble pots, air and light for their sustenance being admitted through a splendid glass dome in the roof, sixty feet above our heads.

Our host led us up the staircase to a room on the first floor, where a tempting meal was spread. Inviting us to partake, but excusing himself, he hurried off, doubtless to see his daughter. The old serving man, Jacopo, who had admitted us to the mansion, remained to wait upon our needs. Vigorous Daunt at once asked him concerning the Countess, but the fellow shook his head and pointed to his mouth : he was dumb. I understood then why Ferati had not questioned him when we arrived.

The room in which we were was small and ill-furnished ; not a picture graced the walls. It contained merely a table and half a dozen dilapidated leather chairs.

Being hungry, we sat down and ate unsparingly ; thirsty, we drank deeply of the light Italian wine which Jacopo set before us.

Three minutes after we had finished, Vigorous Daunt, without any warning fell to the floor, where he lay writhing as if in a fit. I sprang to his assistance, but as I stooped to raise him, I pitched forward helplessly myself, all my muscles having of a sudden grown limp and flaccid. Rolling over the body of my master, I brought up beside him,

lying on my back. I was conscious, but I could not move so much as a finger, nor an eyelid, strive how I would. I experienced no pain, only an enthralling and ever-increasing sense of languor.

So potent were the effects of the poison I had taken, that although I knew we had both been drugged, I felt neither surprise nor anger, merely a great desire for rest, for sleep! My last recollection was of old Jacopo's evil face bending over me. I now perceived that the fellow possessed a cruel and vicious type of countenance; his receding forehead and malevolent smile caused me to marvel lazily that I had not noted the fact before. Then sleep fell upon me like a silken mantle—sleep, soft, dreamful and delicious, but deep almost as the sleep of death.

I awoke to find myself in a standing posture. I was, however, completely enervated, and for a long while could not conjecture rightly how it was I came to maintain myself erect. Sensation gradually returning, I felt that I was bound to a column with a multiplicity of cords. Neither hand nor foot could I stir, and my very head had no more than an inch of freedom. The room in which I was imprisoned seemed to have been designed as a sculptor's studio, for the walls were without windows, though the roof was entirely composed of glass. Through this glass the sunlight streamed, but so slanting-wise, that I judged it was quite early morning. The studio was destitute of furniture, but pieces of

sculpture in various stages of completion abounded, and the stone floor was strewn here and there with implements, such as chisels squares, mallets and the like. All were, however, thickly encrusted with dust, and some parched and crumbling clay models that I saw convinced me that the place had long been deserted and given over to decay. My wandering senses were suddenly collected by an unlooked-for sound—a hollow voice greeted me with the words—

“Good-morning, Granville!”

Darting my startled eyes in the direction whence this voice proceeded, I perceived that immediately opposed to me, a few feet away, Vigorous Daunt stood, his back against a column, securely fastened thereto, even as I was bound. My unsuspecting dreamy first glance had previously passed him by, for he rested in a shadow. His face was wan and lined, he looked sick and careworn, but his eyes were undaunted.

I gasped out “Good-morning, sir!” from sheer force of habit.

“I warn you,” he said quickly, “that any conversation we indulge in must be overheard. For that reason only can we have been placed so far apart. Guard your words, then!”

“What does it all mean?” I cried.

“Have you not considered?”

“No.”

“H’m—give me your attention!” He smiled grimly. “First, Nicolo Ferati is a scoundrel;

secondly, Niccio Ferati is a superlatively perfect actor; he must have got hold of one of your photographs while we were the guests of Paul Visconti; when his bank failed he conceived the idea to retrieve his fortunes out of my purse! He had your photograph altered and copied in Milan. He then followed us to England, and there spun us that brilliant story of his son-in-law's suicide, his wife's death, and his daughter's madness, which, together with his marvellously simulated grief, so worked upon our sympathies! Now!—excuse me, Granville, don't speak, I read your mind like an open book; you are about to say, 'I always regarded Ferati as a rascal!' or 'I told you so.' It is useless to deny it. I warn you to control the intention. If you dare to presume upon this solitary instance of your perspicuity in order to belittle my repute, much as I like you, our friendship ceases and our relations terminate!"

"You are mistaken," I returned coldly. Indeed he was, for I had been too shocked to consider such paltry details, and now my master's unextinguishable vanity made me disgusted. It was only with an effort that I contrived to be civil to him.

"What do you expect will be Ferati's next move?"

"He will starve us into submission!"

"To what end?"

"A considerable sum of money; and having extorted this from me he will probably murder us."

I see no other course open for him to follow, for he knows me well enough to feel sure that once released he will never enjoy another comfortable hour!"

At that instant we heard a clicking sound, a door concealed behind a group of statuary near Vigorous Daunt opened, and Signor Ferati made his appearance. He bowed gravely to each of us in turn. His saturnine face was just as gloomy as ever, nor was it enlivened by even the smallest trace of triumph, or elation; his manner was cold and strained.

"I have overheard your conversation, signors," he remarked. "Let me relieve your minds; my purpose is not to murder you—there will be no need of that!"

"Thanks," said Daunt, drily, "you are kind!"

Ferati nodded gravely. "I have to propose to Mr. Vigorous Daunt a partnership. My late partner, the Count Lesculi is dead; as you know, he committed suicide! In order to continue my business on the old lines, it is requisite that my credit should be re-established. I must confess to you that I am at the end of my resources; when I told you of the successful investment which had recovered me, I lied. I spent my last scudo in my recent journey to England. You perceive, therefore, that I am in a desperate condition, and that I must win this—my last stake." He paused.

"Go on!" said my master, impatiently.

"I must speak of my position. It is quite true that I sacrificed my private fortune to my creditors—

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even this house is no longer mine, but I have no debts! I possess the sympathy of my bank's old customers and of the public. With a sufficient sum at my disposal I could to-morrow re-commence business, and my old friends and customers, who at present keep aloof because I am ruined, would then flock around me; they have proved me to be honest; they would be glad to entrust me with their affairs. I, therefore, have now the honour to invite you to enter into partnership with me; the deeds are already prepared—you have merely to sign them. Captain Granville will sign as one of the three necessary witnesses! Adopt this course, and within a week you shall be set at liberty."

Vigorous Daunt's eyes glittered.

"How much money do you propose that I should invest in your business?" he demanded.

Signor Ferati shrugged his shoulders. "A mere bagatelle; in your English money say £250,000. You are a billionaire, you can easily afford the sum; besides, your money will be well invested. I am an honest man. All profits, I need scarcely inform you, shall be equally divided between us!"

"And if I refuse?" inquired my master.

"Ah! in that case," sighed Ferati, "I fear that you will seriously quarrel with the fare that I shall give you!"

"You mean that you would starve us?"

Ferati spread out his hands. "I am so very poor," he said.

"You will give us time to reflect?"

The banker nodded his head. "As long as you please, signor; but as I have said, I am *poor*, so *poor*. This morning my fresh-water supply is very low. There is scarcely sufficient for my poor daughter's needs. And she is ill—so ill! But you shall have bread to eat—as much as you require. *Au revoir*, signors! when you are prepared to sign the deeds, call out the word. I shall no doubt be near enough to hear you!" He bowed to us with melancholy gravity and departed.

"That man is clever, he provides for everything," remarked my master, after Ferati had left us. "If I sign that deed and give him my cheque, we can thereafter do nothing; we shall be bound by our signatures, and no one would afterwards believe how we were induced to sign. Doubtless also, he will have some of his creatures, who will swear anything at his bidding; besides, we are in Italy and we are Englishmen! The sympathy of Italian magistrates will inevitably be on the side of Ferati. However much we tried to upset the deed of partnership, we should fail utterly!"

"We are caught like rats in a trap," said I.

"H'm," said my master. "Let me think!"

Five minutes later Jacopo entered with a plate of black bread cut in slices. The wicked old mute offered to feed us both, in turn, but my stomach revolted at the sight of such uninviting food, and Vigorous Daunt also refused to eat.

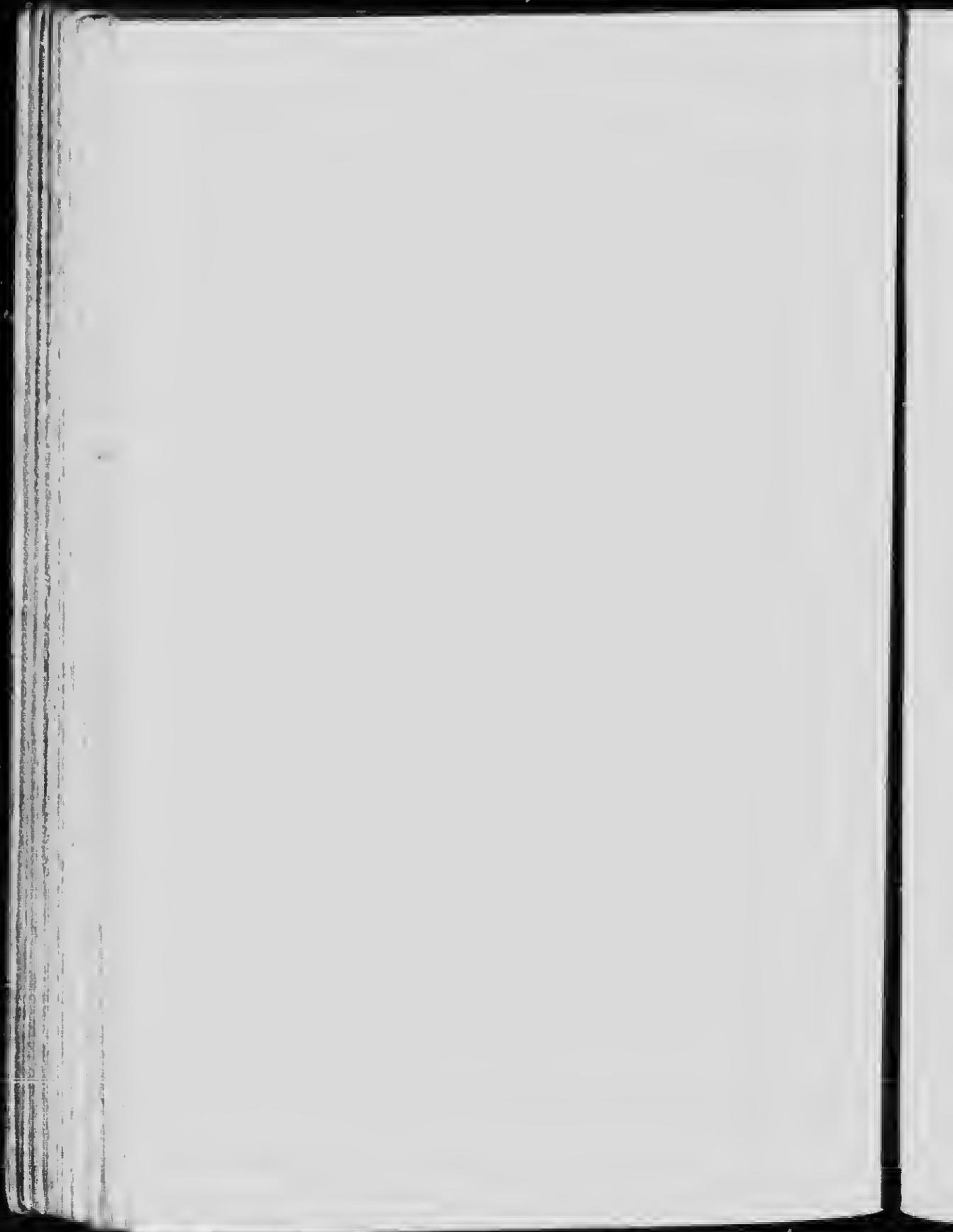
Struck with an idea, I attempted to bribe Jacopo,



"'We are caught like rats in a trap,' said I."

Fig. 105 Daunt : Billionaire)

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but this time he pointed to his ears. I did not, however, believe he was deaf, and persisted in my efforts. He vanished, leering horribly, while I was still addressing him.

Vigorous Daunt's comment was just then particularly hard to endure. "You must imagine Ferati is as great a fool as yourself," he observed.

"Great genius," I rapped out. "Do better yourself! Please release me; I am tired of my position!"

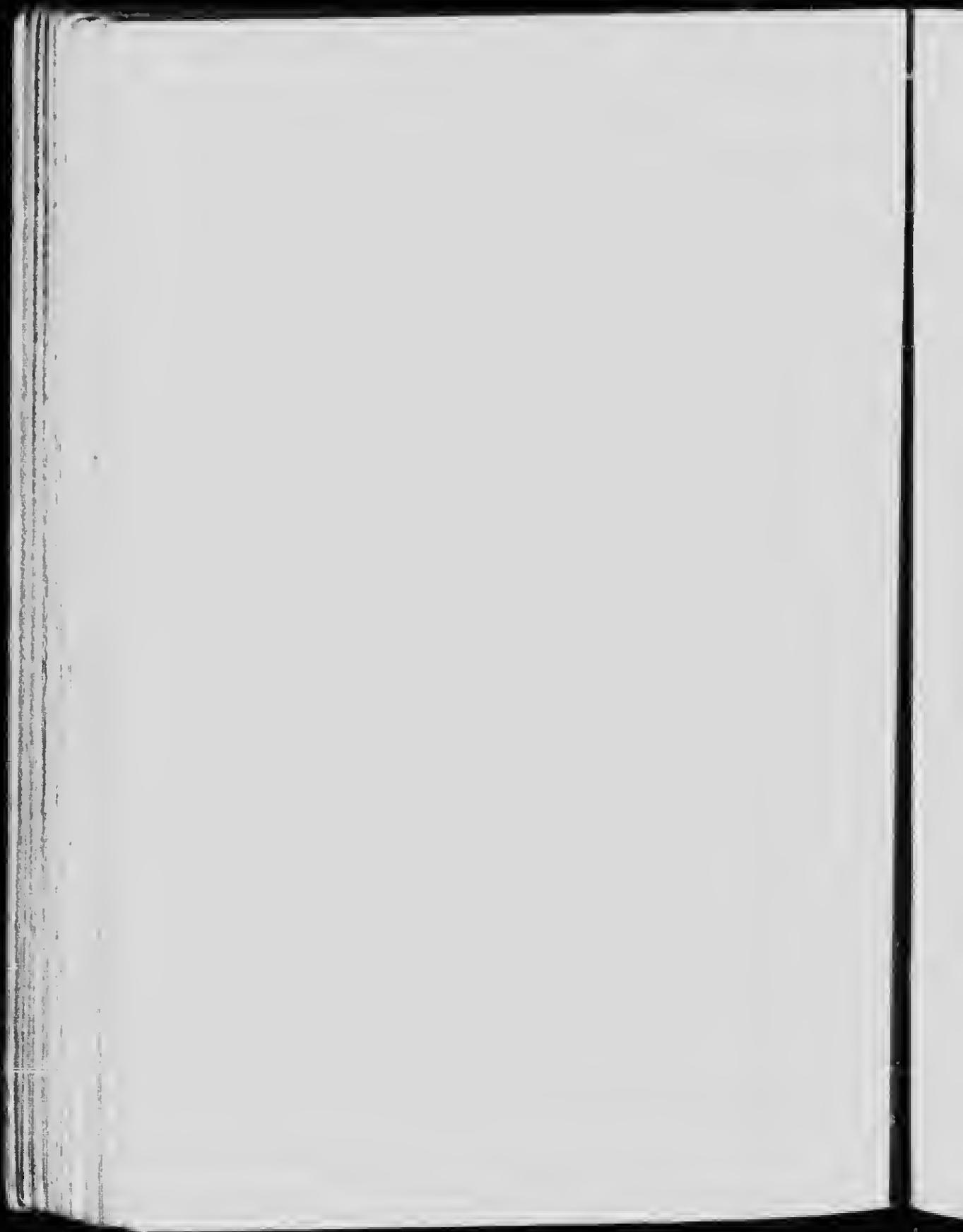
"So am I," he retorted, calmly; "moreover, I am extremely thirsty."

"My mouth is parched, and I am ready to faint."

"Would you like a glass of water?"

I glared at him speechless with rage.

He laughed derisively, then suddenly cried out at the top of his voice: "Ferati—Ferati—I consent!"



CHAPTER VIII

"EVENS" AGAIN

I WAS thunderstruck! That my master, usually so brave, so invincibly determined, should so soon surrender was almost inconceivable! I wildly wondered what had become of his pride, his vanity—which until that moment I had regarded as an unfathomable quantity; his face was as illegible as a mask. He resolutely refused to meet my eyes.

In my bewilderment I hurled at him an insult. "Coward!" I cried.

He went white as death. "You asked me to release you!" he protested.

"By the exercise of brains, not pusillanimous surrender," I grated out.

Vigorous Daunt bit his lips until they bled. The sight of those thin red drops brought me to my senses. They taught me that my master was playing a part which cost him very dearly. "Bah," he muttered. "What is the use of kicking against the pricks? A fool fights to the death, a wise man knows when he is beaten."

Signor Ferati glided from behind a column; no sound had heralded his approach; he must have

heard all that he had said, but his dull eyes were full of suspicion. "You have given in quickly," he murmured, staring hard at Vigorous Daunt. "I am very thirsty; moreover, I am ill," returned my master; "I have severe pains in my head and stomach; if you do not wish to murder me, you will let me sign the deeds at once, and put me straight to bed!"

Signor Ferati, for answer, stamped twice upon the floor. Almost immediately a small, sharp-featured young gentleman entered the room, accompanied by a tall, raw-boned old hag, who nevertheless looked strong enough to carry a house upon her shoulders. I noted a strong resemblance between the little gentleman and Signor Ferati.

The latter bowed civilly to Vigorous Daunt. "My son Filippo!—Vigorous Daunt!" said Ferati.

My master nodded curtly.

Filippo Ferati executed a deep reverence. "Pleased to meet my father's future partner," he said, suavely. He then opened a bag which he carried and took from it a double sheet of parchment, whose outer page at least was covered with fine manuscript! "My son is a notary," observed Signor Ferati.

Vigorous Daunt nodded again and a second time Filippo revered. It was all like the scene out of a play.

"Shall I read the deed of partnership to you, signor?" politely inquired the young man.

"Spare yourself and me!" entreated Vigorous

Daunt; "I have implicit confidence in your good faith!"

Filippo, bending double, swept the floor with his parchment. "Ten thousand thanks!" he cried.

I longed to kick the obsequious little hypocrite.

Signor Ferati, wearing a slightly troubled frown, beckoned to the hag, and with her, approached my master. After considerable fumbling they unloosened Daunt's right hand, but only sufficiently to enable him to sign the fateful document. Filippo Ferati meanwhile strutted about the room, apparently searching for something; presently he darted into a corner and returned bearing a drawing board; this he requested the hag to hold before my master. She obeying, he placed upon the board the parchment, and handed a fountain pen to Vigorous Daunt.

"Sign here, if you please," the elder Ferati commanded, "and here."

Signor Ferati, taking a cheque-book from his pocket, tore off a blank form, which he also put upon the board, "And here," he continued, sternly.

"Afterwards?" queried my master.

"You shall find me in all things a man of honour!"

Vigorous Daunt nodded. "Good," he said, "I trust you!"

Without hesitation Daunt signed his name where he was bid. Next my right hand was freed—and I subscribed to the deed as a witness.

Filippo Ferati presently departed, bearing off

both parchment and cheque. His father and the hag immediately set to work with the ropes that confined us ; in ten minutes we were free to walk, but our right hands and arms were tied to our sides in such a manner as to forbid hope of escape, although our left hands were left unbound.

Our gaolers led us then to a room furnished with two massive wooden bedsteads separated by at least twelve feet of space. These beds had been screwed firmly to the floor. Passing steel chains through our bonds, they secured us with stout nickel padlocks to the bedsteads. The chains gave us liberty to lie down at ease or even to sit up, or stand beside the beds, but no more. Having satisfied themselves of our combined comfort and helplessness our captors took leave, promising, however, to send Jacopo with our breakfast, without delay. They kept their promise handsomely, and presently I drowned my sorrows in champagne.

Vigorous Daunt, on the other hand, drank only water, and ate nothing. He cast himself upon his bed and commenced to groan. I asked him twice in Russian if he was really ill, but he made no reply. Thoroughly conversant with his weakness, I made sure that his pride had been severely wounded by my calling him "coward."

After Jacopo had gone, I resolved to sacrifice truth upon the altar of friendship. I said to him : "My dear master, I hope you did not mistake me when I taunted you awhile ago. I instantly perceived that you had formed a plan, and aware

that our conversation was overheard, I pretended to lose my temper in order to further your intention."

Vigorous Daunt sat up and favoured me with a piercing stare.

"Is that true?" he demanded.

"Well," said I, "if I had wished to insult you—could I not have spoken as I speak now, in Russian? I am not exactly the ungrateful boor you seem to think."

My injured tones convinced him. "You must forgive me, lad," he replied, "but for the last hour I have been too ill to weigh matters properly; it is the effect of that drug."

"You are really ill?" I cried.

"I am suffering great pain, but it is not so bad now as it was. I think I'll be better after a good rest. I shall try to sleep"; he lay down again, and closed his eyes. Soon he fell into a fitful slumber, in which he often groaned.

I occupied myself in examining our prison. It was a square chamber, possessing one door and two frosted windows. The latter were closed and defended with stout iron grilles. The walls were composed of blank, unpapered stone; the floor was uncarpeted, highly polished, and perfectly clean. I searched it carefully, and could not discover, even in the corners, a single speck of dust. I spent three hours convincing myself that there was no possibility of loosening our bonds without assistance. Jacopo then entered with our lunch. Vigorous

Daunt awoke much refreshed from his sleep, and evidently hungry, for he ate heartily.

We were obliged to tear our food with our hands and teeth, for neither knife, nor fork, nor spoon was supplied to us. Jacopo watched us throughout with the most scrupulous attention. Our plates and cups were made of tin. Had I been provided with a glass I should have contrived to smash it, in the hope of concealing a fragment which I might subsequently use as a knife, but our captors had thought of everything.

After Jacopo had gone Vigorous Daunt composed himself to sleep again, saying to me: "Rest as much as you can, for to-night we must endeavour to escape."

I, however, had lost hope, and spent a silent, wretched day.

After supper, came Signor Ferati. He was, as ever, gloomy and dejected; he spoke but little, but he supplied us with a cigarette apiece, which he watched us smoke and then made Jacopo collect and carry off our smouldering butts. The fellow trusted nothing to chance. He even again carefully examined our bonds. He subsequently announced that his son had set out for England in order to cash Daunt's cheque, and that as soon as a satisfactory cablegram arrived we should be set at liberty. He then apologetically warned us that we should probably be disturbed during the night by his daughter's outcries; she had been quiet during the day; but was now each moment growing most

violent. I almost pitied him when he spoke of his daughter; his affection for her was so manifestly intense, his grief for her condition so profound. I could not forbear asking him "Is there no hope for her recovery?"

"None," he replied.

"Do you fear for her life?"

He sadly shook his head. "She will probably outlive me, but she will always be a maniac; her disease is inherited, her mother died insane."

"You have a fearful cross to bear," said Vigorous Daunt, his voice, to my surprise, quite sympathetic.

Signor Ferati turned as he reached the door. "I am the most miserable man on earth," he said, feelingly, and with a groan he departed.

"Poor fellow," sighed my master, "had he come to me honestly and asked my help I should not have withheld it."

"Vigorous Daunt," said I, "will that cheque you signed be cashed?"

He shook his head. "Search your pockets," he returned.

"I have."

"They have robbed you of everything?" he asked.

"They have left me only my purse; if only I had a match," I sighed.

"Come," said he, "your purse is something—mine is gone; how much does yours contain?"

"Seven pounds and a little silver!"

It was growing dark. I observed my master suddenly sit up. With his left hand he removed his false

teeth from his mouth, and, placing the plate upon the floor, he stamped upon it.

The plate instantly snapped in twain ! He tossed one half to me. " We have now each of us a knife," he said.

With a cry of joy I set to work on the most conveniently situated of my bonds, and to my delight discovered that the ragged edge of the improvised blade was thin and sharp enough to work effectively !

" Mr. Daunt !" I murmured, for I was overcome with admiration, " the man who pits himself against you has my sincere pity !"

" And mine !" said Vigorous Daunt.

For two hours we worked hard in the gathering gloom, resting at intervals, however, in despite of our will, for the left hand is to most men a comparatively useless machine—awkward, and easily wearied—and neither my master nor I was ambidextrous.

We were suddenly startled by a series of the most terrible screams, which sounded so wild and awful, and appeared so close at hand, that I shuddered to hear them, thrilled to the depths of my being. They lasted for about ten minutes, gradually growing fainter in volume until at last they died away, as though the woman who uttered them had expended her strength in the fearful exercise.

When I returned to my work, my wretched hand

was trembling like a leaf, and it was long before I could control my shaken nerves.

Vigorous Daunt was the first to gain his liberty. I heard him heave a great sigh, and presently, with many a stretch and quiver of his muscles, he noiselessly approached me. Five minutes later I, too, was free, and we then occupied a full half hour in rubbing each other's cramped limbs, and restoring the circulation to our frames.

We had scarcely satisfied ourselves when, without warning, the maniac's shrieks broke out again, this time more piercing, more insanely violent than before. I shut my ears to keep out the horrible sounds, but I believe had I been deaf I should have heard them. Great beads of perspiration stood out on my forehead and rolled down my face and hands. Before silence reigned again, I was drenched and shivering as with an ague. Vigorous Daunt, in a hollow voice, bade me be prepared.

Placing me beside the door, he retired to his bed and stamped loudly on the floor. After several minutes of this exercise, I heard footsteps approaching. Presently the lock was shot aside, the door opened, and a narrow bar of light shot into the room.

Signor Ferati stood upon the threshold, a lamp in one hand and a revolver in the other. His face was white and drawn, but his eyes were blazing with anger.

Quick as an adder I threw myself upon him. I seized and wrenched the weapon from his grasp

and tried to clutch him, but, dropping the lamp, he eluded me, and fled down the passage yelling like a demon.

The lamp broke in its fall, and was luckily extinguished, for I smelt the fumes of the paraffin, which must have been scattered far and wide. The next second my master stood beside me. I pressed the revolver into his hand, not only because he was smaller than I, but mostly because my short encounter had given me a desire for more. I anticipated a struggle, and I longed to give some one a taste of my fists in payment for my late confinement.

The passage before us was long and badly lighted, but it was empty! I rushed along it, taking the lead. Soon I heard a hum of voices, which quickly grew louder. Not pausing to reflect, and unheeding a command of my master to stop—for my blood was up—I came to the door and the corridor's conclusion.

The door was ajar; I burst it open and dashed into a great ante-room brilliantly illuminated, beyond which through an open archway, I beheld the staircase! Five men confronted me, Signor Ferati and four peasant-clad snarling Italians, armed with knives and pistols. One fired, and I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder.

Crack! spoke Vigorous Daunt's revolver, and a peasant fell moaning to the floor.

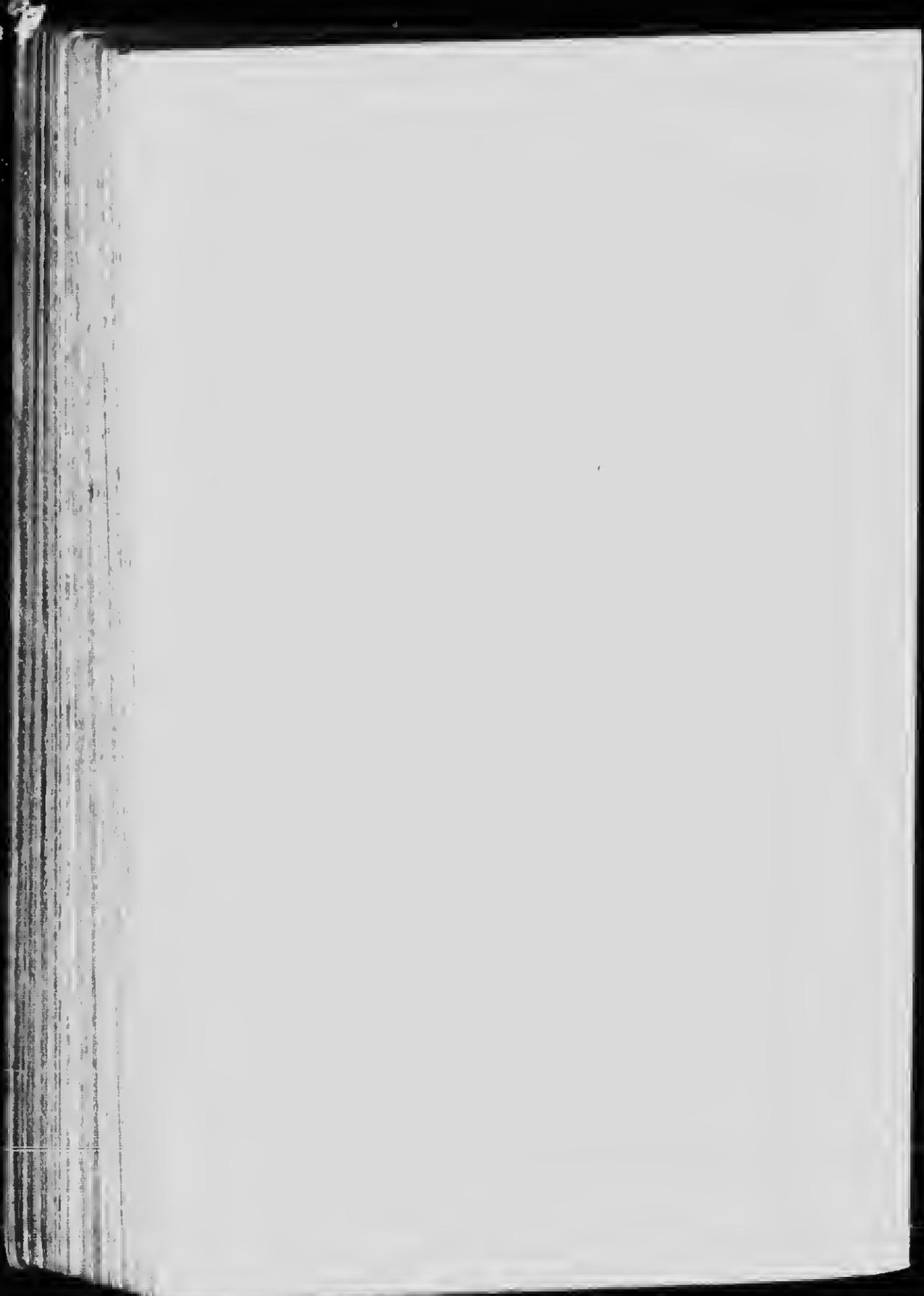
With a growl of rage I sprang at Ferati's throat; he went down before a left-hander delivered straight



"Crack!" spoke Vigorous Daunt's revolver."

[Vigorous Daunt: Billionaire]

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from the shoulder. In a moment it was a wild mêlée. Borne up with a passion of exultation I struck out right and left, strong brutal blows! I saw the flash of knives. I heard shrieks and oaths—then a terrific report.

For a second darkness came, the next the place was lit up with roaring flames, flames everywhere! The great central lamp had been smashed and the Palazzo Ventura was on fire.

Suddenly I felt weak and exhausted. I became conscious that blood was dripping from my shoulder, that my hands and arms were slashed, that a knife was buried in my side. With a monstrous effort I staggered to the staircase and down the splendid marble steps. Noise and confusion were behind me. Peace was before! I staggered on, and sank at last upon a cushioned lounge in the great hall, beneath a beautiful waving palm. I saw two men rush past me, throw open the door and vanish into the night. I vaguely wondered why they went so quickly. Soon a curious group descended the stairs—the great raw-boned serving woman, Vigorous Daunt, Jacopo and Signor Ferati. Between them they half carried half dragged, a writhing female figure, clad in a thin robe of clinging white. Twice I saw her face. It was as beautiful as a dream, but tortured by all the evil passions of the universe into an expression of awful, malicious fury. She struggled like a demon, and so terrible was her strength that presently, tearing herself free, she darted before them, her hand outstretched like talons, screaming and shrieking.

Her cries will ring in my ears for ever. Speeding like a hare across the hall, she vanished where the two peasants had preceded her—into the night!

She was followed by all save my master. He came to me. "Come!" he said. "It is time to go, all the upper storey is ablaze!"

I pointed to the knife in my side. "Take it out," I said.

He sank on his knees beside me, withdrew the knife and tended my hurts as gently as a woman, binding them up with silken hangings that he tore from the wall. While he was engaged thus the beautiful maniac returned whence she had gone, still screaming horribly. Close on her heels ran Ferati, his face purple, his eyes starting out of his head, the breath coming from his lips in fearful panting gasps.

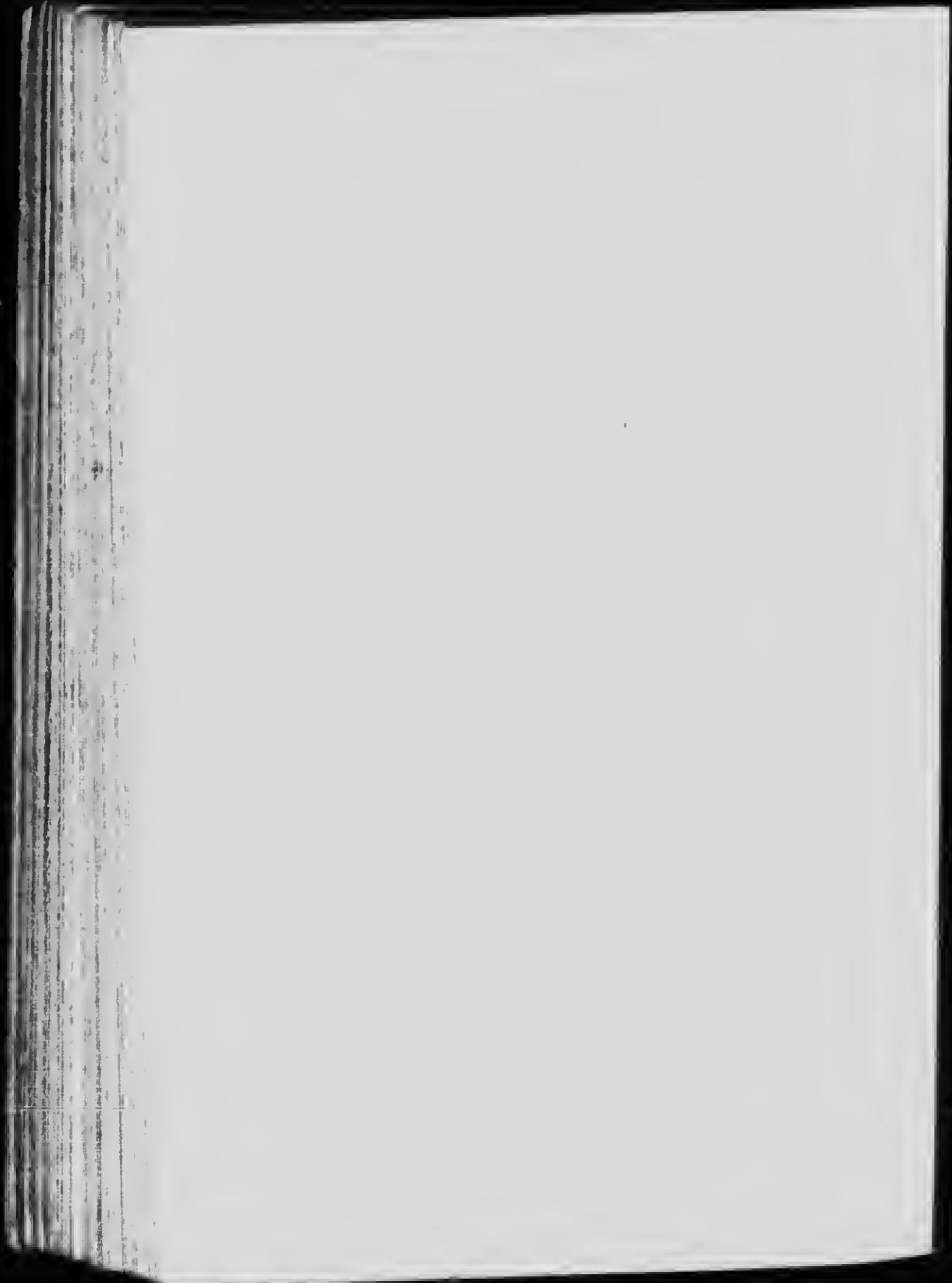
The maniac sprang up the stairs and plunged into a sea of fire—her father followed her. Daunt tore up the stairs and strove to save them, but he was too late. Ferati and his daughter perished in the flames.

* * * * *

There was an inquest, but we came out of it all right. It was proved that Ferati was almost as mad as his daughter. At any rate, he was a vicious criminal, and his accomplices were bandits. There is no doubt that they would have shared Daunt's money between them. The old woman confessed the plot!

Filippo Ferati escaped! He presented the cheque

at Daunt's bank in London, and when he found he could not cash it—Daunt had stopped payment by cable—he smelt a rat and disappeared! The Milan police are anxiously awaiting him, but the son of such a father will allow them to wait in vain. He will never return to Italy!



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CHAPTER IX
*INTRODUCES SALEM HARDCASTLE,
TRUST MAGNATE*

SO diverse, multitudinous and extravagant have been the accounts published the wide world over of the motives that induced Britain's greatest enemy, Mr. Salem Hardcastle—to the wonder of the universe—to forgo and abandon the inhuman campaign that he had successfully instituted against our lives and national prosperity, and moreover in so many foreign quarters is it still (in spite of repeated denials) believed and taught that our Imperial England stooped so low as to purchase the merciful complaisance of her enemy, that I, Rupert Granville, in contemplation of the continued silence of the principal actors in that dreadful drama, feel myself impelled by patriotic motives to speak and for the first time publicly reveal the truth. For only thus may false reports be dissipated, false opinions be corrected, and the dignity of England—so long blown upon by jealous and malicious controversialists—be washed of foul suspicion. I do not propose to relate in detail the open history

of that dreadful winter, the darkest in England's annals—for no circumstance thereof can be forgotten in our own or any age, but I shall unveil the means employed—secretly and unheeded of the world, by that greatest philanthropist of any race or time—my master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt—to break the will and bend the purpose of a monster to whose merciless heart the cries of starving hundreds had appealed in vain.

On the evening of November 21 of that fateful and disastrous year, Mr. Vigorous Daunt and I, Rupert Granville, were flying with great speed in the Paris express towards Calais, seated in a private compartment which money had converted for the nonce into a dining-room. My master was morose and uncommunicative. After dinner I assumed an air of indifference, and wrapping myself up in a rug, pretended to sleep. As I had hoped, Mr. Daunt became immediately exasperated. Nothing provoked him so much as a display of indifference.

“For Heaven's sake, Granville,” he cried, “are you a stick, a stone, or a gluttoned animal?”

I sat up lazily. “Well, what do you want—to play cards?”

His eyes glittered. “You act badly,” he cried. “Curiosity is eating you.”

I yawned. “You say so,” I observed.

“What is taking us to London?” he demanded.

“A fair chance,” I muttered, and yawned again. “London is my favourite city——” I lay back in the corner and closed my eyes.

"Granville!" he thundered.

"Eh!" I started up, affecting surprise. "You said?— I beg your pardon!"

He bit his lip, then smiled. "A conference," he suggested.

"I am at your service."

"Salem Hardcastle is in London," said Mr. Daunt.

"The Yankee millionaire and trust magnate?"

"The same."

"He is a friend of yours, perhaps?"

The little brown man sprang to his feet and crashed his clenched right hand on the open palm of his left.

"Such a friend!" he hissed. "Ah! such a friend!"

I gazed at him in great astonishment, for his eyes were burning and his face was livid.

"How you can hate!" I muttered. "Our mission is of vengeance, then?"

"Yes!" His look was terrible.

"Whatever has Salem Hardcastle done to you?" I asked.

Mr. Daunt stared at me for a long moment, then, drawing a deep breath, he resumed his seat, and with a hand that trembled poured out a glass of champagne.

"I'll tell you," he said in a low voice, "but, mind you, no remarks!"

I nodded my head in assent.

He swallowed the wine at a gulp. "It goes

back to the late seventies," he muttered. "We were fellow clerks in a stockbroker's office in New York. We loved the same woman—Silence!"

I had not spoken—but I bowed my head.

Mr. Daunt's eyes were like coals of fire.

"She preferred me," he declared.

"Naturally," I murmured.

The little brown man bent quickly forward and, with a look of lively affection, put his hand upon my knee. "Ay! naturally," he agreed—"but he, he wanted, as well as herself, her money—for she was an heiress!"

"Ah!"

"He was my superior. One morning some valuable bonds were found to be missing from our employer's safe. Suspicion, without my knowledge, fell on me, for even then, although scarcely twenty-two, I speculated, and I was at the moment in difficulties, having purchased some stocks unwisely for a fall that never came to pass. Pshaw!" (He waved his hand.) "He worked the matter very prettily, that is certain. The very next day I had to settle, but my largest creditor was a friend who trusted and believed in me. Entirely unconscious of the fact that I was suspected of stealing the bonds, I asked for and obtained an hour's liberty and proceeded to my friend's office, intending to request a few days' convenience, for I had other irons in the fire and only wanted time. I was arrested as I was about to enter his office, and whirled off to a police station, where they

searched me!" Mr. Daunt paused and put his hands up to his throat; he seemed to be choking. "The bonds," he proceeded in a hollow voice, "were found in the breast pocket of my coat. That coat a few moments before had been hanging up in that room of my employer's office shared between Hardcastle and myself. I changed to go out. You see?"

"My God!" I cried.

My master groaned. "I was tried and convicted. I could not defend myself—because in order to show a motive for my enemy's infernal treachery I must have dragged *her* name through the courts. I served twelve months in gaol!"

"But afterwards—afterwards!" I cried.

"I came out of prison a broken man, worn with disease, to find that she had married him. Ah!"

"What did you do?"

"He was rich. I was penniless. I changed my name and went to Australia."

"Then your real name is not 'Vigorous Daunt.'"

"Bah!" said my master, frowning disdainfully.

"Since then have you never crossed his path? Never tried for revenge?"

The little brown man's face went almost purple. "I have not been a billionaire so very long!" he grated. "For the past five years I have been waiting for him to leave America, waiting, waiting; while he kept to New York I could only hurt his

pocket—and I desire another revenge. I might by chance get him into my power there, but it is true that I tried twice and failed. He is never to be found without a following—because he is so hated, having wronged so many that he fears assassination. Moreover, there he has me at this disadvantage: were he to recognize me before the right moment, he could reveal my identity, proclaim me a convicted thief, and effect my social ruin.”

“But now he is in London.”

“And we shall be there to-morrow.”

“Have you any plan?”

“Only this. He is staying at the Continental. We shall be there, too. I shall disguise myself and pass as your valet. For the rest we must wait for circumstances.”

“What is his business in England?”

“*The American Herald*, in which I read of his whereabouts, hints that he is at the head of a trust of millionaires that has been formed to corner the world's supply of wheat, with the object of forcing up the price of bread in England. It may be so; at any rate, it is pretty certain that such a trust exists, and it must have been for some months already hard at work, for two days ago the price of bread in London was suddenly raised to sixpence a loaf.”

“Impossible!” I exclaimed.

“No,” said Mr. Daunt. “But see for yourself!” He took a paper from his pocket and tossed it to me. I read and was convinced—for

the facts were authoritatively announced. Nevertheless I was incredulous.

"No trust could possibly succeed in such an enterprise!" I declared.

"Sixpence a loaf!" said Mr. Daunt.

"Except temporarily; it would require——"

"Pshaw!" interrupted my master. "With enough money one could easily starve England, which depends entirely for its food upon foreign supplies. It is merely a question of buying and holding."

"Why, God bless my soul," I cried, "with bread at sixpence a loaf for a month, half England would be in the poorhouse."

"Well?"

"There would be riots—riots, do I say—a revolution!"

"Well?" repeated my master.

"War, perhaps."

"Perhaps—but would all that, riots, revolution, war, help England? Can one buy for threepence what is only for sale at sixpence?"

"Yes, if the vendor be in the purchaser's power."

"You assume too much!" said Mr. Daunt.

"England is a free country, and her laws lovingly regard trust magnates. But enough; my head aches and I am weary. Let us rest."

While crossing from Calais to Dover Mr. Daunt mysteriously disappeared, but I became, in exchange for a master, possessed of a dapper little French valet, who introduced himself to my service

as the steamer approached the landing-stage at Dover.

"Good-day, *M'sieur*," said he. "I hope zat you haf not had ze *mal de mer*. As for me—I haf been eel. Ah! horrible!"

Glancing at the person who accosted me, I beheld a small, pale face, framed with coal-black hair and ornamented with a pointed beard and curled moustaches.

"Thanks," I answered, icily. "I am never sea-sick—but I am sorry that you have suffered so much!"

"One—word—in your ear, *M'sieur*." The little Frenchman glanced suspiciously about him, then lowered his voice. "Ze fact ees, I haf not you ad-dress—not on purr-pose. Zere is a man on zis sheep—here, zat speak of you—not nice—vat you call eet—onfriendlee. I put you on guard. I hope I not offend."

"You are very good!" I stammered in reply, half-annoyed, half-amused. "What did he say?"

"He say—*M'sieur*—zat your valet ees—a clevailr, vair clevailr man. But you—*pardon, M'sieur*—he say zat you are ze blind bat—a fool!"

"You are mistaken," I said, coldly. "I have no valet."

With that I turned my back upon the little creature, for I was exasperated, but a chuckle that I recognized made me swiftly turn again and stare into his face.

I was met with a derisive wink.

"Confound you!" I muttered, wrathfully, but Mr. Daunt, for it was he, dissolved in chuckles, and until we reached London I had to endure an unceasing stream of raillery.

Arrived at the Hotel Continental, by Mr. Daunt's command I engaged, in my own name, a handsome suite on the second floor, consisting of three bedrooms and a drawing-room, that adjoined those apartments occupied by the American millionaire, Mr. Hardcastle, and his family.

But, although the little brown man was apparently my valet, he immediately showed me that I was only a pawn in the game he was resolved to play.

"Look here, Granville!" said he, "while my task is to make friends with Salem Hardcastle's servants and pump them concerning their master, it is your part to make the acquaintance of Hardcastle himself, his wife and family, and if possible, win their confidence. You understand?"

"I understand, but the task you set me is rather difficult."

"The more credit for you to achieve it. Now I will give you a few words of advice. Hardcastle is an inveterate gambler—that is his weak spot. Mrs. Hardcastle—who is his second wife——"

"What!" I gasped.

Mr. Daunt frowned. "The lady for whose sake he ruined me is dead," he muttered; "she died soon after the birth of her child—Mr. Hardcastle's eldest daughter, who is at this moment,

perhaps, within fifty paces of where we stand."

"Yes, sir."

"The present Mrs. Hardcastle is by all accounts a vain woman, and a vainer mother. She has three children—a boy and two girls, ranging in age from five to fourteen. You will realize that flattery should succeed in that quarter."

"I see—and the eldest daughter?"

"Miss Hardcastle is reputed a beauty, but I have never seen her. She is about four-and-twenty years of age——"

I twirled my moustache, but Mr. Daunt noted the gesture and his eyes flashed.

"Idiot!" he growled. "Dukes have paid their court to her in vain. She is one of the richest heiresses on earth."

"If only I had a letter of introduction to some of them," I sighed.

"You are a fool," said Mr. Daunt. "You know the American ambassador, don't you?"

I sprang to my feet and hurried to the door.

"Put on a frock-coat!" advised my master, drily. He thought of everything.

An hour later I returned from the American Embassy equipped with the desired letter. Mr. Daunt was pacing up and down his bedroom in a fume.

"What now?" I demanded.

"Did you obtain that letter?"

"Yes."

"Then you have had better luck than I. The

fellow has a crowd of servants, but they are all as suspicious as the evil one himself. They can't be persuaded to talk, and I dared not bribe them."

"Have you learned anything?"

"Not from them. From the hotel servants this: Hardcastle does not leave his rooms. His wife and daughter go out frequently, but he never. He neither entertains nor receives social visits. He keeps himself invisible and even has his meals served privately. One of his rooms has been fitted up as an office and provided with a telephone. In this a secretary and four clerks are kept constantly at work receiving cables from all parts of the globe and replying to them. It will be impossible to abduct him, for he is always accompanied, and his valet, an old servant, sleeps in his ante-room."

"But he must go out sometimes, even for the sake of his health."

"Not so—he exercises an hour, morning and evening, at foils with his secretary. In my opinion he does not propose to stay here long. But you have been out; what is the talk of the streets?"

"The price of bread. No one seems to be able to speak of anything else. Do you think Hardcastle has anything to do with it?"

"I would stake my life that he is head of the trust. His extraordinary precautions are sufficient proof."

"Shall I present my introduction at once?"

"Not until after dinner this evening. Go out

now and engage a suite of half-a-dozen rooms—no, better still, take—on lease if necessary—a small two-storeyed house in the poorest part of the East End, somewhere between Whitechapel and the London Docks.”

“What!” I cried, aghast.

“Pay a month’s rent in advance, and secure the keys immediately, then furnish the place plainly and meanly. Provide for three bedrooms and a dining-room—no carpets or frills of any kind, you understand.”

I stood stock still, surprised out of my wits. Mr. Daunt proceeded musingly: “Have the windows of one of the bedrooms barred in such a manner that not even a child could escape; also see that the door of that room is stout, and furnished with a new lock. That is all, I think. You may go!”

I left the hotel bewildered, but nevertheless I transacted my commission with energy. I secured, after some search, a little brick house, incomparably old and dirty, situated within a gunshot of the Fish Market. Other houses similar in structure and appearance surrounded it, and the neighbourhood was mean and poverty-stricken to an appalling extent. During my wanderings in search of furniture and a locksmith I could not help being struck with the fact that the inhabitants of the locality were strangely preoccupied. My appearance (I was dressed in fashionable morning costume) excited neither comment nor attention, and although I feel sure that under ordinary circum-

stances I should have been followed by crowds of beggars and children, not a soul accosted me. Men were collected in groups at every corner, conversing in hushed tones or not speaking at all. The women stood at their doors in knots of twos and threes, many nursing babes in arms, staring at each other. Business even seemed at a standstill, and the very costers had left their carts and gathered in half-silent clusters on the pavements. Never had I seen so much poverty, such pinched and hungry-looking children, such lowering and ominous faces. Occasionally glances of contempt and hate were cast at me, and every group was silent as I passed. Policemen were to be met with every hundred yards. There was a sort of desperation in the air, an ill-omened calmness that oppressed and disturbed me. I was glad to finish my business and return to the West End, but even there, in the busy whirl of the traffic and among the flaunting splendours of prosperity, I could not forget what I had seen, nor throw off the gloomy impression that had been produced. I felt like a man who has seen a ghost.

I found Mr. Daunt seated in the drawing-room, absorbing the contents of the morning papers. He listened gravely to my report, then said, "This is only the second day. Wait a week! The papers report that the wheat market has been absolutely cornered. No supplies can be obtained except through certain channels. We are on the eve of a great national calamity."

"What about the Government?" I asked.

"The usual thing; they are making inquiries and, meanwhile, promises. They advise the people not to take alarm. Bah! By the way, give me your letter and I shall take it with your card to Mr. Hardcastle and request an appointment."

I handed it to him, and a few minutes later he returned with a message that the millionaire would be glad to see me at nine o'clock that evening.

Mr. Daunt thereupon disappeared, and I was left to my own devices until the dinner hour, when he entered the room and curtly directed me not to make my visit with empty pockets. Punctually at nine o'clock I knocked at Mr. Hardcastle's door. A servant admitted me to an ante-room, whence I was ushered by a gentlemanly-looking young man to a large inner apartment furnished as a reception room.

At one end of this a young lady in full evening dress was seated before a tiny desk, writing; her back was turned to me.

She did not move even when my name was announced; but a large and striking-looking man seated in an arm-chair in the middle of the room immediately rose and advanced with outstretched hand in my direction.

"I am glad to meet you, Captain Granville," he declared in a rather pompous voice.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hardcastle," I returned.

Then we looked at each other. The trust mag-

nate was of medium height, a big-boned man, immaculately attired. His eyes were of a peculiar bluish grey tint, hard and metallic; his forehead, surmounted with an iron-grey, close-cropped stubble, was at the same time prominent and receding. He wore a short and bristling, but thick, moustache that half concealed his mouth. His nose was broad but strong, his chin was prominent, square and somewhat brutish. The face was, in fact, intelligent, full of character and strength. He was evidently not a man to be trifled with. His eyes measured me for a moment with a cold and calculating stare, then he said, "Your business is?—eh?"

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled, but before I spoke an inspiration occurred to me. This man—I thought—however rich he may be, if he is really concerned in this monstrous wheat deal that is now exercising the world's attention, will nevertheless not turn up his nose at money.

"Well—" I drawled, "in the first place I have for some time been ambitious to know you, socially, don't you know."

"Next!" he cut in, quick as a flash.

"In the second place I have a little spare cash to invest, and er—I have been told——"

"How much?" interrupted the millionaire.

I took the plunge. "A million or so," I answered, calmly.

Mr. Hardcastle's eyes glittered. "Dollars?"

"No; pounds; sterling, don't you know?"

Mr. Hardcastle's eyes were like gimlets.

"How is it that I have never heard of you?" he demanded.

"Oh, the cash is not mine," I drawled. "I'm only an agent; but I have full authority. The fact is, I am acting for Mr. Vigorous Daunt—you have heard of him, perhaps?"

"What! the billionaire!" cried Mr. Hardcastle; "who has not—though I have never met him! But has he sent you to me?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"In Paris, laid up with a broken leg. He heard that you are managing the wheat trust and he wants to be in the deal if he can."

Mr. Hardcastle pursed up his lips, but though he tried he could not conceal his delight.

"Well, well," he said, "who knows—we may do business. You are in no great hurry, I suppose."

"None."

A rap sounded suddenly on a far door, which opened slightly to disclose the head and shoulders of a sharp-looking young man.

"Cable, sir," he said in a high-pitched nasal voice.

Mr. Hardcastle nodded, and his attendant vanished. "Ellen!" cried the millionaire.

The young lady who had been writing when I entered the room got to her feet and faced us.

"Yes, father."

She was beautiful both in face and form, rarely

beautiful, and her voice sounded like a silver bell.

"This is Captain Granville," said Mr. Hardcastle.

"Entertain him until I return! You'll excuse me, Captain?"

But he did not wait for an answer, nor did I make one because already I had forgotten him. Miss Hardcastle approached me with an indescribably graceful undulating gait. She was tall—and fashioned according to no ungenerous mould, but yet so perfect were her proportions that she seemed to be rather small than large. My first impression was of a Madonna face—holy, grave and serious. But that was because her eyes were cast down. Next second they opened wide; great, eloquent eyes, brown and most unfriendly. Then I noticed her chin—it was strong and resolute, though her mouth was exquisitely kind.

Pausing three paces from where I stood, she bowed to me with slow and stately grace; she then indicated a chair, and sank into another herself.

"I muttered, "How d'ye do?"

Without removing her eyes from my face, she pointed to the distant grate where a bright fire was burning.

"It is warm and comfortable here," she said, "but, oh, so cold and bleak outside. There are people in England starving to-night, Captain Granville."

I thought of the people I had seen that afternoon and involuntarily shivered. "And bread is six-

pence a loaf," I said, musingly. The second after I could have bitten off my tongue in remorse for my thoughtless speech, but it was too late. Miss Hardcastle flushed and drew back haughtily.

"I take shame for that!" she exclaimed, "but the fault is not mine."

"God forbid!" I cried. "I did not mean——" But she cut my protestation short.

"I heard you tell my father, sir, that you have a million pounds to spare. I heard you suggest to him that he should use it for a certain purpose."

"That is true, Miss Hardcastle."

"Ah!" She looked at me fixedly, with a sort of horror in her eyes that she made no effort to conceal. "So you are one of those men—monsters—who, already rich beyond the dreams of avarice, wish to swell their useless stores by starving, murdering the most helpless of your fellow creatures." Her voice sank to a whisper and her eyes conveyed a terrible accusation. "*Women, children, babes!*" she said.

I was overwhelmed with astonishment to hear such words from the trust magnate's daughter—but also I felt indignant at being so addressed.

"Do I look a murderer?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "But—does my father?"

"You surely except him."

Her eyes narrowed. "If he succeeds in his plans—God help England!" she replied.

"Is he so hard?"

She stood up. "Yes—but you—you are an

Englishman; will you help him to ruin your country?"

I was about to utter a passionate denial, but as the words trembled on my tongue I saw the door behind her slightly move. Instantly suspecting a trap, I shrugged my shoulders and answered quietly, "You must excuse me, Miss Hardcastle, but I am a man of business—and er—don't you think you take rather an emotional view of the case?"

"Quite right!" thundered the voice of Mr. Hardcastle—and he entered the room as he spoke. "That is what I have told my daughter a hundred times!"

"So," thought I, "it was a trap," and I looked at the lady. But her expression smothered the suspicion. She gave me a glance so contemptuous and yet so profoundly sad that I was thrilled to my very marrow.

"Great Heaven!" I cried to myself. "Is it possible that so noble a woman can be the daughter of so base a man?"

I said aloud, "Business is business, Mr. Hardcastle."

Miss Hardcastle swept towards the door, cold and stately as an icicle, but before she reached it her father cried out, "Ellen."

She paused and looked back. "Yes, father."

"Where are you going?"

"With Mrs. Hardcastle to the theatre."

"No!" he said, commandingly; "no more

nocturnal ramblings, my dear. The streets are growing dangerous. Send your mother to me."

Evidently this man ruled his family with a rod of iron, for Miss Hardcastle obeyed without hesitation, almost meekly. I flew to the door and opened it for her. She passed me with averted face. She did not return, but a moment later Mrs. Hardcastle entered the room. She was a handsome, but rather poorly-preserved, woman of thirty-five or six, egotistical, vain and shallow, a somewhat ponderous coquette. A few compliments and inquiries as to her children, of whom she was evidently proud, put us on the best of terms. We chatted for half-an-hour, during which Mr. Hardcastle only intermittently favoured us with his company, for every few moments he was called from the room by the curt announcement "Cable, sir!"

At the end of that time the trust magnate coolly dismissed his wife and suggested to me a game of picquet, an invitation that I accepted gladly. We played by arrangement until midnight, when I arose, my pockets lightened of seven hundred pounds of my master's money. Mr. Hardcastle was a cheerful winner. He shook me vigorously by the hand and said—

"Good-night, Captain. I enjoyed the game immensely. Dine with me *en famille* to-morrow night, eight sharp, and afterwards we'll play again."

"And concerning business?" I asked.

"I have already cabled your proposition to my partners. You have credentials, I suppose."

"I shall produce them to you to-morrow."

"Good!" said he, and I left him.

Mr. Vigorous Daunt made me relate every detail of what had passed, and confess every impression of what had occurred to me. Afterwards he said—

"H'm! A man of steel—but the girl belongs to her dead mother, even in name. We must not hurt her. H'm! H'm! You have done well, Granville, but to-morrow night you must recover that seven hundred pounds. Now go to bed!"

I was thankful for the permission and in a few moments I slept. But in spite of my weariness I dreamed always of those lean, hungry faces I had seen in the East End.

The following day I spent at various clubs, but no one seemed able to converse on anything but the bread trust. I was bored to death. I saw nothing of my master until late in the evening when I was dressing for dinner. He entered in a whirl and thrust into my hands a letter signed by the manager of the Bank of England. It was addressed to me, and ran as follows:—

"DEAR SIR,—I beg to inform you that I have been instructed by Mr. Vigorous Daunt to honour your drafts to the extent of £2,500,000 (two million five hundred thousand pounds)."

"That should satisfy our quarry as to your *bona fides*," said Mr. Daunt.

"Ay—but suppose he takes me on the hop—and accepts you as a partner."

"In that case propose conditions that will create delay."

"I see. What have you been doing all day?"

"Storing supplies in the Dial Street house, and feeding the poor."

He hurried off—where, I could not guess, and I sauntered to Mr. Hardcastle's door. The magnate was in his drawing-room, alone, and I immediately presented him with the banker's letter.

Mr. Hardcastle read it, nodding gravely. Returning it to me he said, "Not enough, Captain, not even by half—if you want to be a full partner."

"Ah—how much would be required for that?"

"Judge for yourself. Mackellar, Wallis, Herne, Gillies and Porsberg have each put up seven millions."

"And you?"

"I have a controlling interest," he answered, pompously.

"I shall communicate at once with Mr. Daunt," said I.

"No need," he retorted. "On the 30th I leave here for Paris to meet my partners. I can see Mr. Daunt there myself. You might let him know."

"Certainly I shall do that. Will you be absent long?"

The trust magnate smiled inscrutably. "I don't propose to return to London," he replied.

"Indeed! May I ask why?"

"Waal!" he drawled, affectedly, "my name

will be mud here soon—and I guess I'll be safer across the Channel."

"Ah! Then bread will shortly take another rise?"

"You have struck it," said Mr. Hardcastle.

"But let's drop shop and eat; dinner is waiting!"

The millionaire's dinner party was a constrained and dreary function. A poor conversationalist himself, he nevertheless demanded the attention of all. I was curtly presented to his two younger daughters, pretty little girls, and his son, a boy of seven. Afterwards these juniors did not open their lips except to eat; but at that I should not have been displeased were it not for the evident awe with which they regarded their father. Mrs. Hardcastle chatted brightly at intervals, but her manner was nervous, and her talk entirely frivolous. Miss Hardcastle sat like a statue, and though she bowed to me when we met she resolutely declined to be drawn into conversation, and replied to all my attempts with monosyllables. Not once did she meet my eyes.

After dinner the children were taken away by their mother, presumably to bed, and as the millionaire was called to his office on some business, I was left for a moment in the drawing-room alone with Miss Hardcastle.

On impulse I approached her, and said, "Miss Hardcastle, you disapprove of me!"

She looked up startled, and at last our eyes met.

"Yes," she said, "you know why."

"Then why do you countenance your father's operations?"

"I do not," she answered, simply. "I would do anything to move him from his purpose."

"Anything?" I repeated, meaningly.

"Yes!"

"But you cannot?"

"No—his heart—ah, but his heart is of stone!"

"If—if one were to move that heart of stone?"

"Impossible!"

"For the sake of argument, say possible—would you assist?"

Her great eyes glowed— "With my heart's blood!" she cried.

"Will you help me?"

"No!"

"Why?"

"I do not trust you!"

Speaking, she gave me a glance so honest, so disdainful and so melancholy that I was cut to the quick.

"You are unjust!" I muttered, angrily. But she left me like a queen in coldest dignity, and I swore to myself that I should not rest until she had repented of her words. But I was obliged to recognize her frank nobility of character, and though I bitterly felt her injustice, I could not think of her with anything but admiration. That night I won eleven hundred pounds from Mr. Hardcastle. He proved a bad loser and parted with his money with outspoken curses on his luck.

The next week passed without incident to me, for I was kept to the hotel by my master's orders, although he went out continually. But they were bad days for England. In all the great cities of the kingdom famine had attacked the poorer classes. People were starving in hundreds, and already several riots had occurred. I gleaned all my news from the daily papers, for Mr. Daunt, who was maturing his plans, had put on an impregnable armour of reserve, and when we met only spoke to give me his commands, which were contained in three words: "Watch—listen—pump!"

All day long I played the spy on Mr. Hardcastle's apartments, mounting guard behind the door of my own room, that I kept always slightly ajar. Mr. Daunt's fear was that the trust magnate would slip away and secretly leave England, and so I was obliged to scrutinize every soul who visited or left his rooms.

Every evening I visited the magnate and played cards with him, winning and losing by turns. It became an established custom. Sometimes Miss Hardcastle remained in the room while we played, but she seldom spoke to me, though whenever I looked up I was sure to meet her eyes. She was watching me, I think.

On the evening of November 29, the magnate bade me farewell. "I leave London to-morrow morning," he said. "Perhaps you will accompany me?"

But I had my orders from Mr. Daunt. "Thanks,"

I replied, "I should like to, but I must stay here yet a few days. You won't forget to look up Mr. Daunt. He is at the Hôtel de Louvre."

"I'll not forget."

"You will be accompanied by your family, I suppose?"

"Of course! Good-bye!"

We shook hands and I made my way to my master's room. Mr. Daunt was pacing up and down in a state of feverish excitement. But immediately he saw me he grew calm.

"They leave to-morrow morning," I announced.

My master nodded. "Good!" he muttered; "the time has come to act. Wait here!" He darted into his bedroom, where I heard him stamping about for some minutes. Then the door opened and on the threshold stood a figure that made me cry out with astonishment. A hirsute, fat and ponderous Dutchman confronted me; his head was covered with a great brown bell-topper, under whose rim peeped a wealth of greasy, yellow curls. His chin was sunk upon his massive chest. In one hand he held a large paper-covered bundle, in the other he carried an enormous pipe, at which he drew composedly. His eyes blinked at me through horned spectacles; his coat tails almost reached the floor.

"Will I do?" asked Mr. Daunt's voice.

"You are an artist!" I cried, admiringly.

"Your disguise is perfect."

"What is the time?" he demanded.

I glanced at my watch. "Five minutes past twelve! What do you propose to do?"

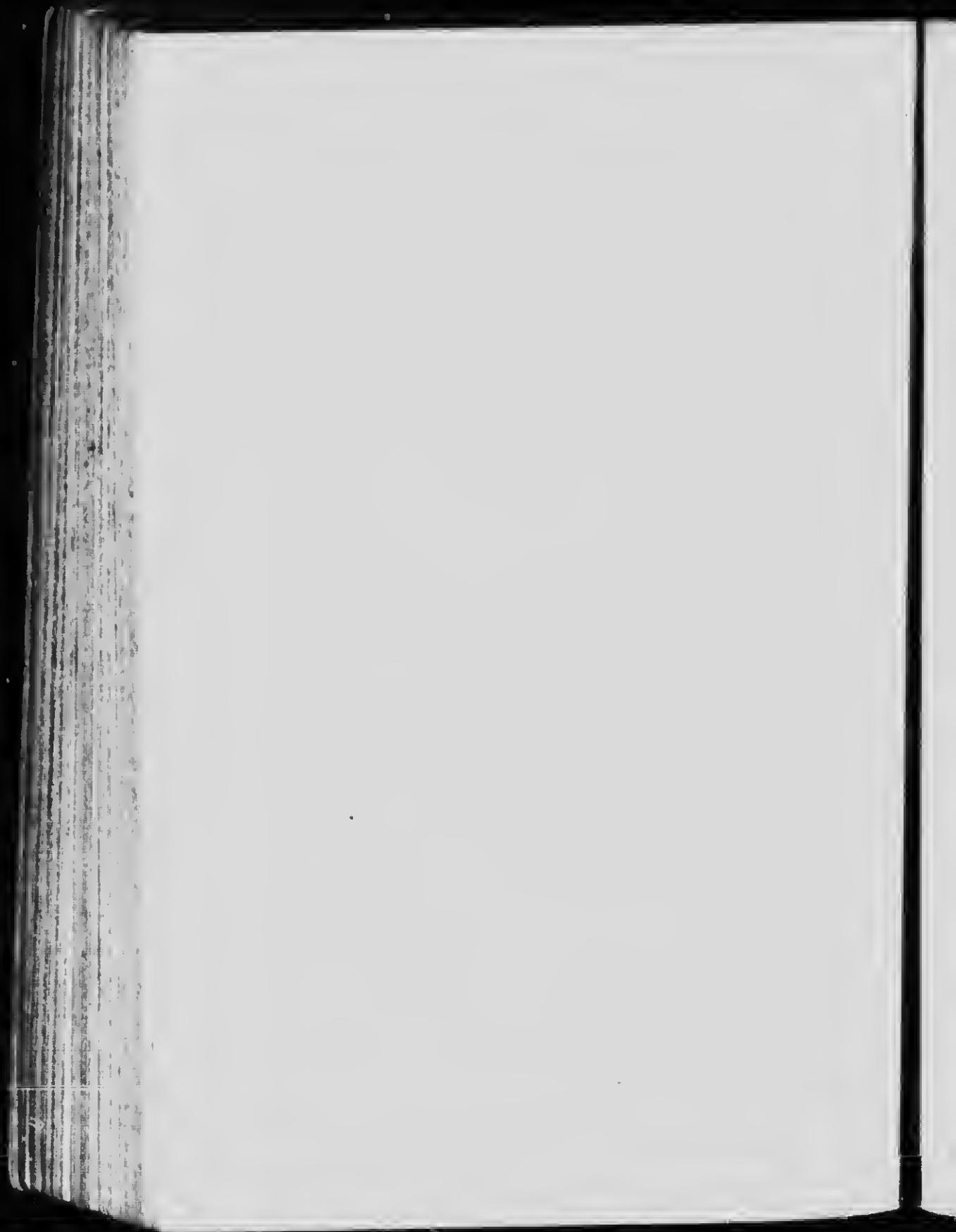
My master looked me in the eyes. "I am about to sacrifice my private revenge for the sake of England," he replied.

"God bless you, sir," I cried in heartfelt admiration. "You are going to fight the trust."

"With its own weapons," he said, smiling strangely. "Listen. My name is Van Sommeren. I arrived here to-night from Amsterdam. I have taken a room down the passage on this floor. I am going to it now, but not to sleep. In five minutes the hotel will be on fire—not really, but on smoke. In ten minutes I shall return here, giving the alarm as I come. You will rush out and awaken your friends, the Hardcastles. The rest is for me. Now open the door and see if the coast is clear!"

I obeyed, trembling with excitement. "The corridor is deserted," I whispered.

My master, without a word, slipped out and marched softly down the passage.



CHAPTER X

"FIRE!"

I SHUT the door behind Mr. Daunt, and sat down to wait for the prescribed signal, my nerves on edge. My watch informed me of nine lagging minutes, but each one appeared an age. Suddenly I heard a wild, but distant, cry:—

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

I rushed into the corridor. It was filled with smoke and resounded with the noise of approaching footsteps. "Fire! Fire! Fire!" screamed the voice of Mr. Daunt.

I darted to Mr. Hardcastle's door and thundered on the panels. Already the building was in an uproar. Mr. Daunt passed me, running like a hare and screaming as he ran. The door presently opened and a servant's frightened face appeared. "Fire! Fire!" I shouted. "Awaken your master instantly, the ladies and the children. The hotel is ablaze!"

With the speed of magic, Mr. Hardcastle, in dressing-gown and slippers, followed by a crowd of half-clad clerks, secretaries and servants, hurried



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out into the corridor. The smoke now was very dense and choking. Figures loomed up through the haze seemingly double their natural size, and all Bedlam seemed to be let loose. I seized the trust magnate's arm. He seemed completely dazed, and stood like a stoek. "Your family! Save the children!" I shouted.

He uttered a choking cry—"My son!"—and hurried baek into his rooms. A moment later he reappeared followed by Mrs. and Miss Hardcastle, some female servants and his little girls. He was carrying the boy, pressed convulsively to his breast.

"To the street—to the street!" yelled a voice behind me, the voice of my master. A rush was made on the instant to the stairease. Panie seized on all, and the men, forgetting their manhood, fled, yelling like madmen, fighting and scrambling to escape. I caught up Mr. Hardcastle's youngest daughter in my arms, and taking the other by the hand hurried after the crowd, closely followed by Miss Hardeastle and the magnate's wife. But the lights were suddenly extinguished and an awful howl went up. Next moment Pandemonium reigned supreme. Mrs. Hardcastle and the female servants shrieked and screamed, the children wailed; the men fighting at the stairease shouted and snarled. Then came a fearful falling shambling sound and a storm of curses. I struck a match and by its gleam beheld a dozen terror-maddened men rolling down the stairs. The stairease presently was clear.

Lighting match after match I guided my *protégés* to the first floor and then down a second flight to the main hall of the building that opened on the street. Here was gathered a great crowd and the scene was brilliantly lit up. Mr. Hardcastle's cowardly servants, already stricken with shame, on seeing the ladies, came to meet us. Mr. Daunt was not to be seen, but Mr. Hardcastle was lying on a couch, stunned and apparently insensible. His wife flew to his side at once, and I, giving my charges to Miss Hardcastle, searched with my eyes for the boy. But, like my master, he had vanished.

Satisfied of this, I returned to Miss Hardcastle and was about to address her when a hotel official came running down the stairs, and halting at the foot, shouted out—assuring us that the alarm of fire was false and that the smoke had been caused by a mass of chemicals burning in the grate of a visitor's room. Others immediately confirmed this assurance and within a few minutes something like order was restored. The manager thereupon invited any gentlemen to visit the scene of the supposed fire and give testimony to the crowd. I immediately volunteered—being glad to escape, and on my return my bravery was chcered!

Very soon the guests filed off to their rooms again and I had the honour of escorting Miss Hardcastle to hers. Her father was carried before us by his servants, still unconscious, and no one as yet had missed the boy—not even his mother. On bidding farewell to Miss Hardcastle she offered

me for the first time her hand, and her eyes were for the first time kind to me.

"I shall never forget your goodness," she said, softly.

I could not reply because I was overwhelmed with shame, and I thought, too, of the sorrow she would experience a little later.

There was no rest for me that night. I had barely entered my room when Mr. Hardcastle's secretary rushed after me. The boy had been missed. I assisted in the search with him.

Mr. Hardcastle's tale was a wild one. He had been attacked in the dark while carefully groping his way through the smoke, and struck insensible as he reached the foot of the first flight of stairs, and the boy had been wrenched from him by his assailant, who then fled. Nevertheless, we searched the whole building room by room, but without result. The trust magnate rushed about offering enormous rewards, and behaving like a maniac.

I left him at last interviewing the police in the office of the hotel. Morning had already dawned. I found Mr. Daunt seated before the blazing asbestos gas fire in his bedroom, smoking a cigarette.

He looked up and said irrelevantly, "She is the image of her mother, Granville."

"Miss Hardcastle?" I cried.

"Yes!" His eyes of a sudden gleamed. "I have a good mind to marry her!" he said.

I was spellbound. "You—marry her!" I gasped.

"Why not?" he answered, coolly.

I shook my head. " An incongruity," I muttered. " Where is the boy ? "

" At the house in Dial Street, bound and gagged. After stunning his father, I put him into an immense carpet bag and took him to Whitechapel by stages in seven different cabs. They will never trace us."

" Poor child ! " I muttered. " What is the next step ? "

" After breakfast you must bid the Hardcastles good-bye, and then hey for our new home."

" Our new home," I repeated stupidly, " where is that ? "

" At the house in Dial Street, of course ! Where are your wits ? Considering Ellen Hardcastle, I suppose."

I started back and looked him in the eyes. " What do you mean by that ? " I cried.

" What I say. Dare you tell me that you have met that woman daily for a week without falling victim to her quiver ? "

" Yes ! "

He stood up and approached me, his eyes glittering.

" On your honour, Granville—man to man ! "

For the first time I hesitated. Something possessed me. I wanted to repeat my protestation, but could not.

" You love her ! " cried my jealous little master in a voice of fury.

" No."

“Are you sure?”

A light swam before my eyes. As in a vision I saw again Miss Hardcastle as she had appeared when she said—“I shall never forget your goodness, Captain Granville!”

“Confound you!” I cried suddenly. “Because you have fallen in love at sight, don’t conclude that I am in my dotage, too!” The evasion saved me further persecution. Mr. Daunt bit his lips, then burst out laughing. “All right, my boy,” he said, “I’ll pay you for that.” And to my joy he changed the conversation.

At nine o’clock, I called upon Mr. Hardcastle. I was admitted immediately. His wife and Miss Hardcastle were with him. He looked very ill, old, careworn and haggard. Mrs. Hardcastle was weeping, and even the young lady seemed deeply moved. I hastily stated my business, anxious to be gone, but the trust magnate, instead of saying good-bye, thrust a letter into my hands.

“It came by the post,” he said. “Read.”

The letter was undated and unsigned. It was written in an evidently disguised hand, and ran:—

“MONSTER,—Your son shall suffer the same privations as the poorest wretch in England until you loose your talons from the people’s food. Your actions shall guide mine.

“‘An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.’”

I looked at the millionaire, and marvelled to :

that his face was set in an expression of inflexible determination.

"What will you do?" I asked.

He answered through closed teeth. "I shall reply to that threat with deeds, not words. Look in to-morrow morning's papers."

"Do you leave London as you intended to-day?"

"No."

Here Mrs. Hardcastle broke into wails. "Oh, my boy, my boy!" she cried. "They will torture him. They will kill him! I shall never see him alive again!"

Those cries pierced my heart, and though the magnate silenced his wife with a single look, I could endure no more. Taking a hasty leave, I hurried from the room, but in the passage I encountered Ellen Hardcastle, who had escaped by another door.

She gave me both her hands. "Help us!" she said, and tears were in her eyes.

Feeling a hypocrite to the core, I answered, "Yes," then kissed her hands in reverent contrition.

An hour later my master and I entered our new abode, the house in Dial Street. My duty was to act as gaoler to the child, for Mr. Daunt's hatred of the father embraced the son, and he refused to see his prisoner.

The trust magnate's son was a bright and winsome little lad, and he soon made friends with me. I treated him as well as possible under the circumstances, but they were harsh, unhappily for him.

It was above all things necessary to keep his presence in that house unsuspected by any, therefore each time I left him I was obliged to gag the poor boy and bind him to the bed, but those were his only sufferings. Mr. Daunt, it is true, ordered me to starve him, but that I could not do, and for the first time I deceived my master, and without remorse.

The next day's papers informed the world that the price of bread in the United Kingdom would thenceforth be one shilling a loaf. Such was the magnate's stern reply to the hidden enemy who had kidnapped his son. But the fact that the magnate's son had been kidnapped was not publicly announced. I searched every paper, but no word of that calamity appeared in any. Evidently Mr. Hardcastle had determined to conceal his domestic trouble from the world, perhaps in order to prevent hope from entering the people's hearts.

The public history of the days that followed is known to the whole world. On December 2, four hundred London bakers' shops were closed, their owners having been already ruined. On December 10, riots occurred all over the kingdom. The Government entered into negotiations with the trust magnate, and it is said attempted to purchase his complaisancy. On the 11th of that fatal month a starving mob consisting of two hundred thousand men and women invaded the West End, and wrecked scores of shops before they were dispersed. On the 12th a mob attacked the Hotel Continental with

the frantic idea of seizing and lynching the trust magnate. The military were called out, and two hundred rioters were killed in the struggle.

On the 13th, surely the blackest day in England's history, the price of bread was raised to 2s. 6d. per loaf. An armed mob attacked the Bank of England, and martial law was proclaimed in London. On that night a return was tabled in the House of Commons stating that six million people in Great Britain and Ireland were in daily receipt of Government relief, and that 12,000 had actually perished of starvation.

My master, his prisoner and I, had then been lying a whole fortnight in hiding in the house in Dial Street, but though hidden we had not been idle. Mr. Daunt each day privately communicated with the Government, and forwarded a cheque for £100,000 for the relief of the starving poor, and each night, too, we posted a letter to the trust magnate calculated to harrow his heart and bend his will if he possessed the feelings of a father.

But at last it became convincingly apparent that Mr. Hardcastle had resolved to sacrifice his son to his ambition, and on December 16 we despaired to move him. That afternoon we left the house and walked abroad together. The main streets were quiet because in the occupation of the military, but the side streets, lanes and by-ways were thronged with groaning people, and were the scenes of incomparable misery. Business was entirely suspended, stores of every kind were closed and shuttered, and

the traffic consisted entirely of omnibuses and hearses, and a few carts. My master and I, clad like ordinary artisans, passed about without exciting notice, but our hearts were heavy within us at the sights we were obliged to witness. England had already suffered at the hands of one man more than she might have done from the march of a devastating army of invasion.

At last I turned to Mr. Daunt. "Let us go back!" I said; "I can't bear any more!"

My partner's face was grey. He pointed to the sky.

"A fog!" I cried.

"Thank God!" said he—and we hurried homewards.

I shall never forget my master's expression when next I saw his face. His jaws were locked together, and there was a fiend in his eyes.

"You have a plan!" I cried.

"Dress!" he commanded. "Dress quickly in evening clothes—we are about to call on Salern Hardcastle!"

In ten minutes I was ready; but my master took much longer to prepare himself. He came at last, however, and if I had not known the thing to be impossible I should have thought Mr. Hardcastle himself was before me. Even so I could not repress a cry, so startling was the likeness.

"To the child!" said Mr. Daunt. "Go first and remove his gag, but do not free him!"

I did as I was commanded, and the next moment

Mr. Daunt entered the room. At sight of him the boy uttered an enraptured cry.

" Father, father ! " he shouted.

Mr. Daunt stared at his prisoner and then at me. " Traitor ! " he said. He took a lozenge from his pocket and put it into the boy's mouth. " Eat ! " he commanded, and the child obeyed.

He turned to me. " Gag him again ! " I did so.

" Now follow me ! "

Two hours later we stood in the porch of the Hotel Continental, having made our way thither through the soldiers by virtue of an order that my all-foreseeing master had procured from the Government, for under martial law no one was permitted to journey from one district to another after night-fall.

A company of infantry with fixed bayonets was stationed before the doors of the hotel—but these, on the production of our order, permitted us to pass. The hotel servants recognized us instantly. Mr. Daunt they took of course for the trust magnate, and he was favoured with glances of open hate. We climbed the stairs and marched straight to Mr. Hardcastle's rooms, my master in advance. At the first door he knocked softly, and it was opened by the secretary himself. The man started back in amazement, but my master put his finger to his lips. " Hush ! " he whispered—" not a word."

The astonished secretary stepped aside and we entered the anteroom, closing the door behind us. Two other men were there, evidently on guard, for

they were armed with pistols. They looked blankly surprised on seeing us.

"Where is my wife?" whispered Mr. Daunt.

"In her room, sir," replied the secretary.

"And my daughter?"

"I—I—thought she was with you at dinner, sir."

"Good. Stay here! Permit no one to enter. Come, Granville!"

We advanced into the drawing-room, which was deserted. Mr. Daunt closed the door of the ante-room and locked it with infinite and noiseless care.

"I have timed the matter well," he muttered in my ear. "Now for business!"

He drew a revolver from his pocket and put it at full cock. "Lead me to the dining-room!" he commanded—"Softly—Granville—softly."

I crossed the apartment on tip-toe and gently pushed open the proper door, which was happily ajar.

The trust magnate was seated at the head of the table, Miss Hardcastle on his left hand. Behind the magnate's chair stood a portly butler. No other person was in the room. Miss Hardcastle looked deathly ill—she was toying with some fruit and staring straight before her with unseeing eyes; evidently dinner was almost over. The deepest silence reigned. Mr. Hardcastle was sipping at a glass of some liqueur. He looked much the same as ever, but there were new lines graven deep about his eyes, and his mask-like face was disfigured with an unhealthy yellow-tinted pallor.

We stared at them a while ourselves unseen, then Mr. Daunt drew back and glanced at me. " I'm afraid we'll have to take the girl as well," he breathed. " You must manage the waiter. Stun him ! Here, take this ! " He handed me a small leaden-knobbed club.

I nodded. Mr. Daunt made an urgent sign—and in obedience I threw the door wide open and marched into the room.

" What, Granville ! " cried the magnate.

Miss Hardcastle's eyes dilated and her pale cheeks were flooded with a sudden colour.

" Captain Granville ! " she exclaimed and started to her feet. They both gazed spell-bound at my companion, who, pushing past me, marched straight up to his enemy and thrust the revolver in his face.

" One word of alarm," muttered my master, " and you die ! "

I strode up to the waiter, who stood gazing at Mr. Daunt in witless astonishment, and struck him with my club above the temple. He uttered a gasping sigh and threw out his hands, but I caught him ere he fell and laid him softly on the floor—where he lay like a log.

I stood up then to meet the eyes of Ellen Hardcastle—they regarded me with horror. " Do you want to save your brother's life ? " I asked her quietly.

She shuddered and muttered " Yes."

" Then trust me and obey me, or more than he will die to-night ! "

She swayed and seemed about to fall, but as I moved to help—she recovered and, in sheer horror of my touch, it seemed to me, she shrank away. "Traitor!" she said.

"So be it!" I muttered, bitterly—"God knows you misjudge me!"

I turned then to the others, the chief actors in the drama. They were deathly silent, but battling like Titans with their eyes.

"What you do want?" asked Mr. Hardcastle at last.

"You must come with me," said my master.

"Where?"

"To your son's bedside."

"And if I refuse?"

"You die here and now, and your son within an hour!"

"Who are you?"

My master put up his left hand to his face and with a swift movement removed both wig and moustache.

"Do you know me now?" he hissed, showing his teeth like an angry dog.

I watched the trust magnate keenly. After a long breathless second there came into his eyes a look of dreadful fear and hate and perfect recognition.

"Oh! Oh!" he said, and suddenly groaned out "My son, my son."

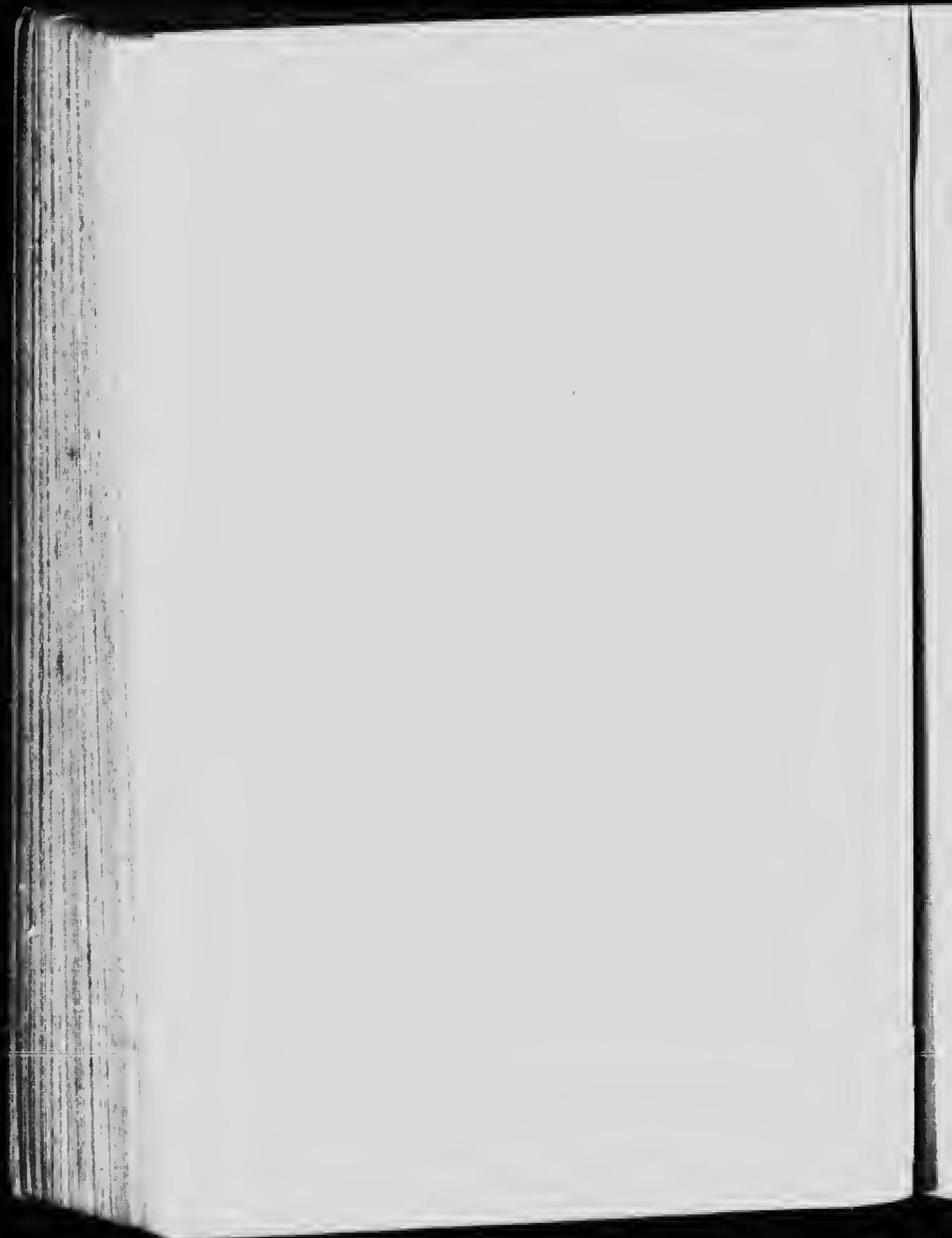
At that moment something made me look at Miss Hardcastle. She was swaying to and fro. I sprang forward and clasped her in my arms. In



"I sprang forward, and clasped her in my arms."

Vicious Daunt: Billionaire.

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time, for she had swooned. I bore her to a couch, then forced myself to leave her, for the crisis was at hand.

" Will you come with me ? " asked Mr. Daunt.

The magnate's eyes had grown bloodshot, his face was the hue of lead.

" You will murder me in any case. "

" No ! "

" Swear it. "

" Ay—by the memory of Ellen Greaves. I'd keep no other oath with you. Now give me the pistol in your pocket. "

The magnate obeyed, then tottered to his feet.

" I must get my hat and coat, " he muttered.

Mr. Daunt laughed grimly and tossed him a cap.

" You must do without a coat ! " he said. " Now lead on—and remember at the first sign of treachery I shall blow your brains out. "

But the trust magnate was a beaten man. He led us to the anteroom and through his servants without a word, even brushing aside his astonished secretary, who sought to bar his progress. In the same silence we descended the stairs, departed from the hotel and gained the street. A soldier procured us a four-wheeler and in this we were whirled off towards our destination, along the Strand. After frequent stoppages to satisfy the various sentries of the legality of our errand we passed through Whitechapel and entered the more famine-smitten quarters of the city. On leaving the main thoroughfares our progress was slower than ever, for

although the fog had lifted, the narrow, ill-lit streets were thronged with people who made way for us grudgingly and with sullen execrations.

Here for the first time my master broke the silence. "If those people were to learn your name, my enemy," he muttered, "they would tear you limb from limb."

Mr. Hardcastle's shudderings shook the carriage, but he spoke no word. The night was full of sighs and groans and wails. These rose to a hideous pitch at intervals, then sank into an awful stillness, only to be renewed again and again.

When finally we reached our destination we had to carry out our prisoner, for he was half inanimate. Mr. Daunt ordered the driver of the cab to wait. Once within the house he revived his enemy with kicks, then turning to me, said curtly, "Wait here, but when I call bring this loving father to witness the tortures he has inflicted on his son."

We waited in breathless silence for a period that seemed interminable. Once a childish scream resounded through the building; afterwards all was still. Mr. Hardcastle shivered like a man taken with ague. On hearing his son's cry he threw out his hands and his lurid eyes implored mine. But I could not pity him. "He is only one of thousands, and your victims all!" I said sternly.

"Granville!" shouted my master at last.

The trust magnate uttered a groan of relief and tottered to the door. We climbed the stairs and, guided by the light, entered the prison chamber.

The magnate's son was lying silent upon a plank bedstead, covered with a filthy ragged blanket. The boy was either in a drugged sleep, or insensible from pain, for his eyes were closed. A dirty bandage was tied round his head. His face was that of a living skeleton, for every bone seemed, in the dim candlelight, to stand out in bold relief from dark blue interlining cavities.

My master stood close beside him, holding in one hand his revolver, while his other fist was tightly clenched.

Mr. Hardcastle stood for a moment spell-bound—then with a blood-curdling shriek he sprang towards his son, but at the second step he was met with the muzzle of my master's pistol.

"Back!" said Mr. Daunt. "Back! Back!"

"My boy! My boy!" groaned the magnate as, shuddering violently, he buried his face in his hands to hide the fearful sight that attracted his eyes against his will. "Spare him! For God's sake, spare him!" he wailed.

"Not until we have come to terms."

"What do you want?"

"First you must sign a paper that I have prepared confessing your sole authorship and guilt of the crime for which I suffered six-and-twenty years ago." Mr. Daunt gnashed his teeth and hissed out the words like a spitting serpent.

The trust magnate bent his head before that storm. "Yes," he muttered, "yes."

"Afterwards—you will return to your hotel and

instantly efface—as far as may be—the ruin you have caused in this fair land! You must pay, moreover, by way of fine, a portion of your ill-gotten profits—say £4,000,000—to the British Government to-morrow morning.”

“Ah!” The trust magnate raised his head and eyed his enemy with looks of fierce hate. But Mr. Daunt returned his stare with interest and coldly said: “If you fail in this and if in three days’ time the price of bread has not fallen to its normal level your son shall die. This I swear by the Almighty!”

“But—but afterwards—you will restore him to me?”

“Only when I am satisfied of your good faith—when your cursed trust is dead.”

“How can I trust you?”

“As best you may. Choose, but choose quickly. Your son has eaten nothing since yesterday at noon!”

“I agree to anything! anything!” The magnate was shivering like a leaf. “Only give him to me!”

But my master, with a cruel snarl, raised his pistol and drove the magnate before him from the room and down the stairs.

I picked up the boy and, carrying him, followed them.

In the dining-room the trust magnate signed the confession that my master had spoken of, and immediately afterwards we left the house and all entered the four-wheeler, I still carrying the child.

As the carriage started, Mr. Hardcastle, in a

strained and intense voice, asked—“ Where are you going with me ? ”

“ Wait, and you shall see,” replied my master.

For long thereafter nothing was to be heard but the trundling of the wheels and the occasional broken lamentations of the famished populace. At length, however, we left the slums and entered the Commercial Road. Here we were presently halted by a patrol, and my master produced his invaluable order.

“ How far to the next picket ? ” he asked the soldier, who returned him the document.

“ Half-a-mile.”

“ Thanks ! Drive on,” said Mr. Daunt.

But before a quarter-of-a-mile was traversed my master stopped the carriage, and opening the door compelled the trust magnate to alight.

“ I leave you now to your own devices,” he said, coolly. “ Good-night to you.”

“ But I have no pass. I shall be arrested ! ” cried Mr. Hardcastle.

“ Without doubt,” responded Mr. Daunt, “ but that is what I wish ; you will certainly spend the night in gaol. Meanwhile, we shall make good our escape, and cover our tracks as well—not that I fear you, for I do not believe that there is a man in England who would raise his hand to serve you. Whip up your horse, driver ! ”

We left the magnate stranded in the middle of the road, furious with rage, but helpless as a babe. Half-an-hour later we alighted at Trafalgar Square

and dismissed the cabman with a liberal tip. Thence we walked to our rooms at The Colonnade Hotel—our home whenever we were in London.

Mr. Vigorous Daunt had not really tortured the trust magnate's son. The lozenge which he had obliged the child to eat in my presence contained a powerful opiate that had induced insensibility. For the rest, the boy's famished and skeleton-like appearance had been produced by nothing more terrible than a skilful application of coloured chalks. But that mummery served its purpose well. On the following day, December 17, Mr. Salem Hardcastle, to the astonishment and consternation of the universe, placed the enormous sum of £4,000,000 at the unreserved disposal of the British Government for the relief of those who had most suffered by his trust—and moreover he announced in the evening papers the immediate relinquishment of his infernal war against humanity.

Two days later bread fell in price from 2s. 6d. to 3d. a loaf, and the Wheat Trust, an organization the most monstrous and evilly powerful that the world has ever known, came to an end.

On the afternoon of December 24, I called, at my master's command, on Mr. Hardcastle, and informed him that Mr. Daunt would deliver up his son to his eldest daughter, but to no other person. Miss Hardcastle thereupon accompanied me to the Colonnade Hotel, and we resigned her brother to her care as safe and well as on the day that he had been kidnapped.

CHAPTER XI

VIGOROUS DAUNT : MISOGAMIST

EXACTLY what circumstances attracted the fickle fancy of my master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt, to the person of the Hon. Edgar Vale I have never been able to determine. The mystery, however, of his subsequent attachment to that handsome young Englishman is not so hard to fathom. We saw Vale for the first time at the Casino at Monte Carlo. Mr. Daunt instantly singled him out from the crowd, and we watched him lose some £5,000 to the bank in a single afternoon. The little brown man openly admired the Hon. Edgar's style of losing his money. Three successive times he said to me "He loses like a prince. I could not do it better myself." Now the fact is that Vigorous Daunt, though many times a millionaire, loses very badly indeed, for which reason (he is wise as a serpent and is intimately acquainted with his own limitations) he very seldom gambles. Indeed, he affects on moral grounds altogether to disapprove of gambling. When Mr. Vale, having played his last stake, rose from the table and sought the gardens, we followed him. That is to say, Vigorous

Daunt followed Vale, and I followed Vigorous Daunt,

The Hon. Edgar's magnificent indifference to his ill luck had completely deceived the bank and its attendants, also myself. My master, however, subsequently assured me that he had read Vale's mind like an open book. We came upon the young man, after a smart chase, somewhat abruptly. He was seated on a bench in a lonely little glade gazing down the barrel of a six-shooter. The glint of moonbeams flashing on the bright fittings of the weapon enlivened my intelligence.

Vigorous Daunt halted two paces off and immediately addressed him. "There must be some other way out?" he asked.

The Hon. Edgar looked up languidly; he was a very lethargic young man indeed. Tall, broad-shouldered and good to look upon, it seemed a shame for him to perish before his time. I had leisure to observe and admire the indolent grace of his demeanour, his finely chiselled though substantial features, and the perfect cut and fit of his clothes, before he condescended to reply.

"Who the deuce are you?" he asked at last. His language was vigorous, but not his voice. That was indifferent to the last degree. He did not move so much as a hair's-breadth except to glance up at his interlocutor.

"Vigorous Daunt, at your service," replied the little brown man.

"Oh! the millionaire?"

"I am a millionaire," said my master humbly.

His humility, however, was a mock. He is the vainest man on earth.

"Well, well," said the Hon. Edgar. "It doesn't matter; please go away, you disturb me."

Vigorous Daunt laughed cheerfully. "There is another way out, Edgar Vale," he said.

Mr. Vale rested his revolver on his knee. "Well!" he drawled, but his voice was interested.

"What do you say to a trip on my yacht; it's out there in the bay. We start at daylight?"

"Where for?"

My master chuckled. "Any place you please."

Mr. Vale shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he muttered. "Fancy I'd better chuck the sponge up now. I might not have the nerve another time."

"Rot!" said Vigorous Daunt. "What's the trouble; money?"

"No—that is, not particularly."

"A woman, then?"

"Ah'm," he cleared his throat.

"Hang and curse the whole sex!" cried Vigorous Daunt in a sudden burst of rage. The little brown man is a confirmed misogynist and the mere mention of a woman irritates him. To my astonishment, the Hon. Edgar, however, did not agree. On the contrary, he sprang to his feet, galvanized into sudden energetic life, and savagely confronted my master.

"How dare you?" he demanded. "How dare you, sir. I've a mind to punch your head."

In his excitement the revolver fell unheeded to the gravel path.

Vigorous Daunt fell back quite disconcerted.

"A woman brought you to this by your own confession," he gasped.

"A woman? An angel!" growled the Hon. Edgar, indescribable scorn and fury struggling for expression in his savage tones.

"H'm," observed my master doubtfully, "I spoke of a woman; of course my remarks bore no application to angels."

"A princess!" cried the young man, and at the word, reverently swinging off his hat, he stood before her, as handsome, brave and devoted a figure as any woman, princess or peasant, could wish to win for her lover. I liked him then and there, ay, and pitied him and admired him, too, in spite of the business we had caught him contemplating. He was every inch a man and desperately in love. He disregarded my master's sneer. I doubt if he had heard it, he seemed indeed to have forgotten our existence, to be wrapped in dreaming of his lady love.

"A princess!" sniffed Vigorous Daunt.

Mr. Vale returned suddenly to earth. Like all men abruptly called from dreamland wandering, he was annoyed, nor did he trouble to conceal his feelings.

"Well," he cried, "what the deuce has that to do with you?"

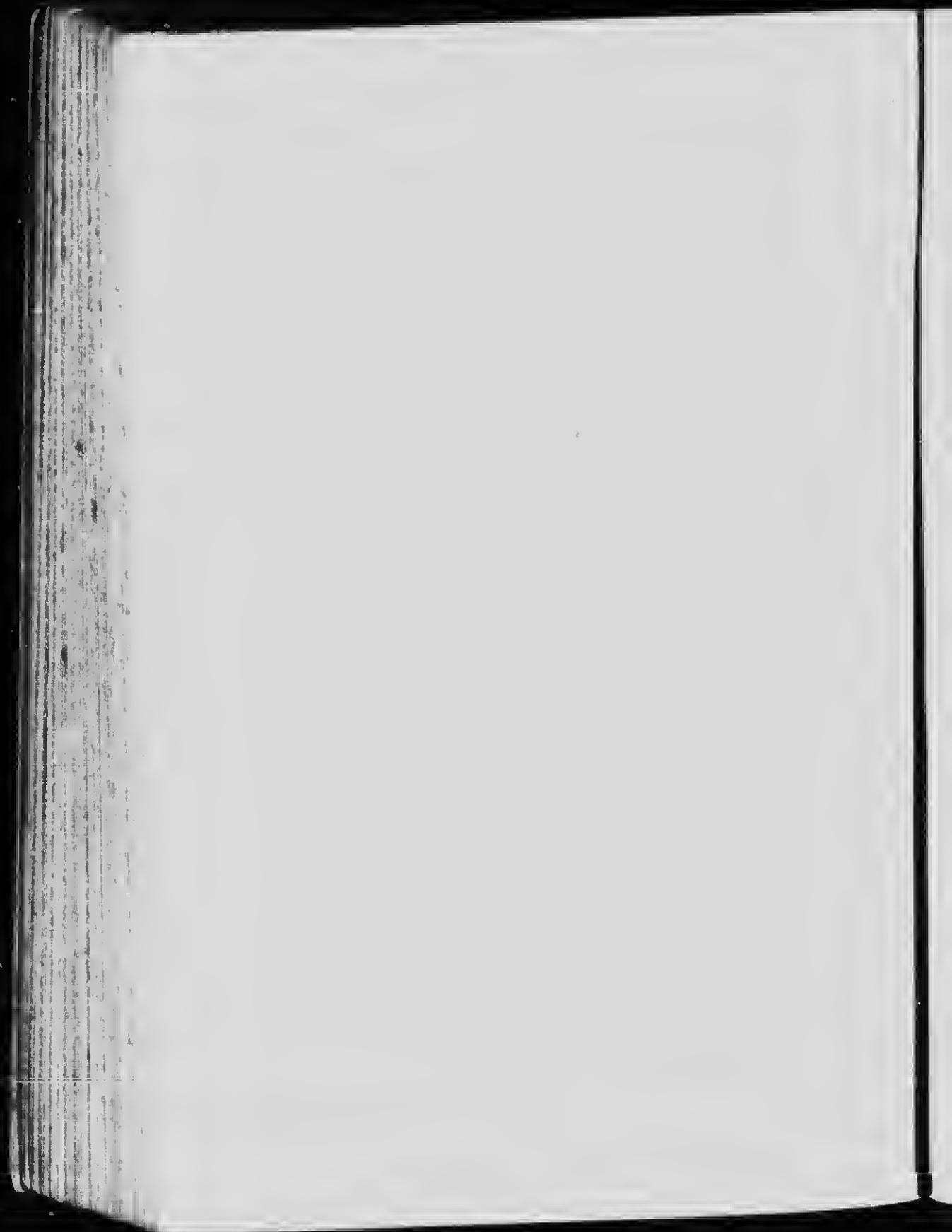
"Nothing, thank heaven," responded Vigorous



" Mr. Vale clenched his hands, and advanced a step "

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Daunt devoutly. "I know one princess, but she is a woman. May the Lord preserve me now and always from the sex. By-the-by, I presume that your princess is defunct?"

Mr. Vale clenched his hands and advanced a step; Vigorous Daunt retreated a similar distance.

"How dare you!" stammered the young man.

"You said she was an angel," protested my master.

Mr. Vale ground his teeth. I confess I sympathised with him. "You impertinent little cad," he grated out.

Vigorous Daunt airily waved his hand. "Come, come, my lad. I only asked in order to assure myself. I perceive that your angel's wings are not entirely feathered yet. Now in my experience until they can fly such creatures are always to be won—if they are wanted sufficiently. You would perhaps like to wed your—ahem—angel?"

Mr. Vale gazed at his tormentor for a moment, but made no reply; instead, he relapsed into his former state of blank dejection. Returning to the bench, he sat down; he even picked up his pistol and gazed at it—a picture of despair.

Vigorous Daunt suddenly advanced, and put a hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"My poor boy," he said—his tones gentle, fatherly and infinitely kind.

"For God's sake leave me," groaned Mr. Vale.

"Did she disdain you?"

"No," he flashed—then groaned again. "God bless her. I was mad. She——," he faltered and hung his head.

"She is a princess—ay?"

"Sir," cried the young man miserably. "Why do you bait me like this?" He suddenly perceived me. "Ah, I see; you are amusing yourself and your friend at my expense." He started wildly to his feet. "But—by ——, you'll pay for it." He cocked and raised his revolver.

"Allow me to present my confidential secretary, Captain Rupert Granville—the Hon. Edgar Vale," said Vigorous Daunt. I advanced from the alcove which had shadowed me, and bowed courteously to the desperate young man.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Vale," I said. "Let me assure you of my respect and sympathy. I am as anxious to assist your cause as is my master, whose interest you have been fortunate enough to excite. Let me further assure you that my august master's patronage once enlisted on your side, your cause is by no means so hopeless as you appear to think."

"Well said!" cried Vigorous Daunt. "Granville, you are positively intelligent at times."

The young man stared at us, inexpressibly bewildered, but to my relief he lowered the muzzle of his weapon, which until then had pointed at my heart.

"You—you offer to help me?" he gasped.

"I do," said Vigorous Daunt.

"But what can you do? What can any one do? Oh, the thing is hopeless."

"Permit me to remind you that my name is Vigorous Daunt!" The little brown man drew himself up with an expression of such owl-like dignity that I had much ado to smother a laugh. I succeeded, however, and added on my own account: "Allow me to inform you, Mr. Vale, lest in your innocence you slight a boon sent direct to you by Providence, that you are offered an ally at whose nod before this a great monarch has submitted to untold indignity. To whatever task my august master addresses his determination, he applies such forces of genius, wealth and super-human ingenuity that he has long ere this abolished the word 'fail' from his vocabulary."

This pompous declaration, delivered with all the impressiveness that I could master, reduced the Hon. Edgar to a condition of dumb surprise and put the cap to his bewilderment. Moreover, it touched my vain little master to the heart. Tears of gratification welled up to his eyes, tears, however, which he blinked away with his long lashes, fearing lest his weakness be perceived.

"My dear Rupert," he muttered, "you are almost too outspoken!"

"Not half enough," I protested.

Vigorous Daunt turned to the young man. "Well what say you?" he demanded.

"I—I'm hanged—I'm blessed if I know!" gasped the Hon. Edgar.

Vigorous Daunt interpreted this dubious acknowledgment in the manner that pleased him best.

"What is the name of the father of the princess?" he queried sharply.

"Eisslingen," said Vale, but next second he bit his lips and turned crimson with mortification. I perceived that the word had slipped from his lips without intention.

"So," observed my master. "The Grand Duke of Eisslingen, I know him. Then your divinity is the Princess Beatrice. H'm, the Grand Duke is a widower, the Baroness Solstein, his sister, guards the fold; an old dragon—but no matter. Where are they now?"

"They left here this morning for Genoa."

"So. Well, we shall leave here for Genoa at daylight to-morrow. They have only one day the advantage of us."

"But," gasped Mr. Vale, "you don't know—the Grand Duke knows—everything—he has forbidden me to address the—the Princess. I was not even allowed to say good-bye to her. She—she (he groaned) went off without a word. At the station she cut me dead."

The young man's tones were despairing, but his eyes were full of piteous entreaty. I saw that he had already commenced to hope.

"So much the better," cried my master cheerily. "A cut direct is a splend'id sign."

"But," sighed Mr. Vale, this time his voice utterly hopeless, "still, you don't know all. A marriage

has been arranged for her with the Grand Duke of Savony—he is with the party. She dislikes him, but she must obey her father and the Emperor. You see, if she married without the Kaiser's consent the succession would be barred. She is the only child. Oh, it's hopeless, utterly hopeless."

"What do you want," demanded Vigorous Daunt very sharply, "the woman or the succession? Don't dare tell me you would ever exchange your birth-right to be a petty little foreign princeling."

"Oh, there's no chance of that," groaned Mr. Vale. "They wouldn't have me if I was made of diamonds."

"Rot! What I want to know is this. If I marry you to the Princess, is there anything that could persuade you to become a German?"

The young man wavered. I knew in my heart that he would always do whatever the Princess wished, but I liked the fellow and wished to help him. If he had said "yes," my master would have washed his hands of him then and there, for Vigorous Daunt, though he pretends to be a cosmopolitan, is at bottom a pugnacious little islander and has a whole-souled contempt for foreigners. Therefore I caught Vale's eye and made a sign to him. Luckily he read it aright—he was waking up.

"Nothing," he cried. "Nothing on earth!"

"Then," said my master with a cynical laugh, "in a month you will be married to your princess. Now, attention. Return immediately to your hotel, pack up your traps and bring them to the

pier. We shall await you there. For the present, good-bye—forward—march !”

Mr. Vale put his revolver in his pocket, saluted and departed. All traces of dejection had vanished from his person. He strode off a new man, full of vigour, life and hope. Vigorous Daunt turned presently to me. “Ah,” he murmured, heaving a deep sigh, “at present that young fellow regards me as his saviour. Six months hence he will class me with his cruellest enemies. Oh, woman, woman !”

The Hon. Edgar Vale very soon gave evidence that nature had not been niggardly in supplying him with brains, and this fact surprised me, for though I am personally readily susceptible to the charms of the fair sex, I had always previously regarded a man capable of losing his head in a love affair as something like an imbecile. The Hon. Edgar, however, had not spent a day aboard the *Narcissus* before he had thoroughly taken stock of his surroundings, gauged my status and my influence over Vigorous Daunt, and had fairly accurately divined the character of my master himself. He proceeded to act accordingly. He first made friendship with me (I may state that I yielded him my friendship quite ungrudgingly) and then, on my advice, he set himself resolutely to work to ingratiate himself with Vigorous Daunt.

He patiently pandered to all the little brown man's whims and idiosyncrasies and invented oppor-

tunities to feed his hungry vanity. Vigorous Daunt accepted these attentions suspiciously at first, but he could not long resist the young man's artless and frankly uttered flatteries, nor remain proof against his evidently sincere desire to please. In spite of himself he gradually thawed, and when Mr. Vale came down to dinner clad from head to heel in *brown* the compliment to his colour predilection so enchanted him that he took the young man to his heart, metaphorically—*bien entendu*. Thenceforward the voyage passed for the most part like a pleasant dream without a single unpleasant incident. For although Mr. Vale was not by any means happy—he was so deeply in love, so lately rescued from despair—yet he contrived to appear so gay when Vigorous Daunt was present that my respect for him hourly increased. When alone with me it is true that he sometimes surrendered to despondent fits. Once, indeed, he gave way completely and wept like an infant, but I soothed him at such times with tales of my master's wonderful achievements, and inspired him with such faith in the little brown man's undoubted genius that these fits grew rapidly less frequent. His chief trouble was that Vigorous Daunt not only forbade all mention of the subject which now engaged all our thoughts, but also resolutely declined to disclose or discuss the plan of campaign which he intended presently to institute. I am inclined to believe that my master divined the young man's secret agony of impatience, and perhaps revelled

in the importance of a position he had assumed which so ministered to his vanity. But Vale's self-control was so complete that his liking for him developed in three days to a positive affection, for next to genius the little brown man admired, above all things, strength of mind. Nevertheless, he did not once relent, and we arrived in Genoa in absolute ignorance of Vigorous Daunt's intentions. We, I say advisedly, because in the light of after events I believe that my master had so far formed no plan at all, but had resolved to trust chance with the furthering of his new friend's interests.

An hour after we had dropped anchor the little brown man went ashore accompanied by his cook, three valets, and a great mass of baggage, having ordered us to await his commands on board the yacht. The next four-and-twenty hours comprised a period to which I assign an important place in the list of my unpleasant recollections.

The Hon. Edgar fretted and fumed to such an extent, indeed, he behaved so much in the fashion of an ungoverned child, that I not only lost my night's rest, but several times we were on the verge of quarrelling, and he would have broken into open revolt, defied Vigorous Daunt's orders and gone ashore, had I not informed him very plainly that in such case he had far better have committed suicide in Monaco, since thereby he would not have made my master his enemy. His reply was most intemperate, but considering his state of mind I excused him, and to do him justice he subsequently

made me a most handsome apology. Next morning, an hour before noon, there came to the yacht a messenger with a letter from Vigorous Daunt. Never was a visitor as welcome. In very gratitude and relief (my temper was by that time worn to shreds) I treated the fellow to champagne and then, retiring with Mr. Vale to my cabin, opened the letter. not a difficult matter, for it was unfastened.

It ran as follows :—

To the Hon. The Earl of Killiecrankie.

MY LORD,

I have taken for your Lordship the best ville I could discover for your Lordship's purpose. It is situated on Spianola Hill, and immediately overlooks the villa of His Grace, the Duca di Spezzia, who is at present entertaining the party of His Highness the Grand Duke of Eisslingen. I have faithfully obeyed your Lordship's order to maintain the incognito of H.R.H. (these letters were half erased) the Hon. the Earl of Beaufort, but I regret to inform your Lordship that a whisper of his identity has got abroad. Last evening I was unfortunate enough to meet the Grand Duke of Eisslingen face to face, and he, taxing me on the matter, I fear has been confirmed in his suspicions by my prevarications. I implore your Lordship to excuse me, but, unless by deliberate falsehood, the matter could not have been evaded. The messenger who bears this letter to your Lordship is a servant of the Grand Duke whom he has kindly lent me. I

have the honour to inform you that the Villa Spianola will be quite prepared to receive your Lordship within an hour of the courier's departure from the yacht. I have ordered a closed carriage to await your Lordship's convenience at the Seneca Quay, aware that your Lordship's desire is to avoid publicity (this last sentence was scrawled in Russian). I have the honour to be,

Your Lordship's humble servant and secretary,
VIGOROUS DAUNT.

After reading this precious epistle aloud, I glanced at Mr. Vale. The poor young man was gasping like a fish out of water.

"What does it all mean, Granville?" he demanded. "Has the man gone mad?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Vale, my name is Killiecrankie. Will you do me the favour not to forget it, and the fact that I am an earl—a belted earl."

He glared at me, dazed clean out of his wits. "You're mad, too," he growled.

"Read between the lines, use your brains, man, use your brains," I cried. Vigorous Daunt had often addressed me in just such language. I now comprehended his delight in doing so. I also understood the reason why a man who is kicked by his master, if he can, consoles himself by kicking an understrapper. At that moment I experienced one of the purest joys on earth.

Mr. Vale snatched the letter from my hands, and pored over it for many minutes. In the mean-

time I went out and directed our courier to be put immediately ashore. On my return Mr. Vale appeared preoccupied but intelligent.

"Well?" I demanded.

He turned to me, his great blue eyes open wide.

"I see," he cried.

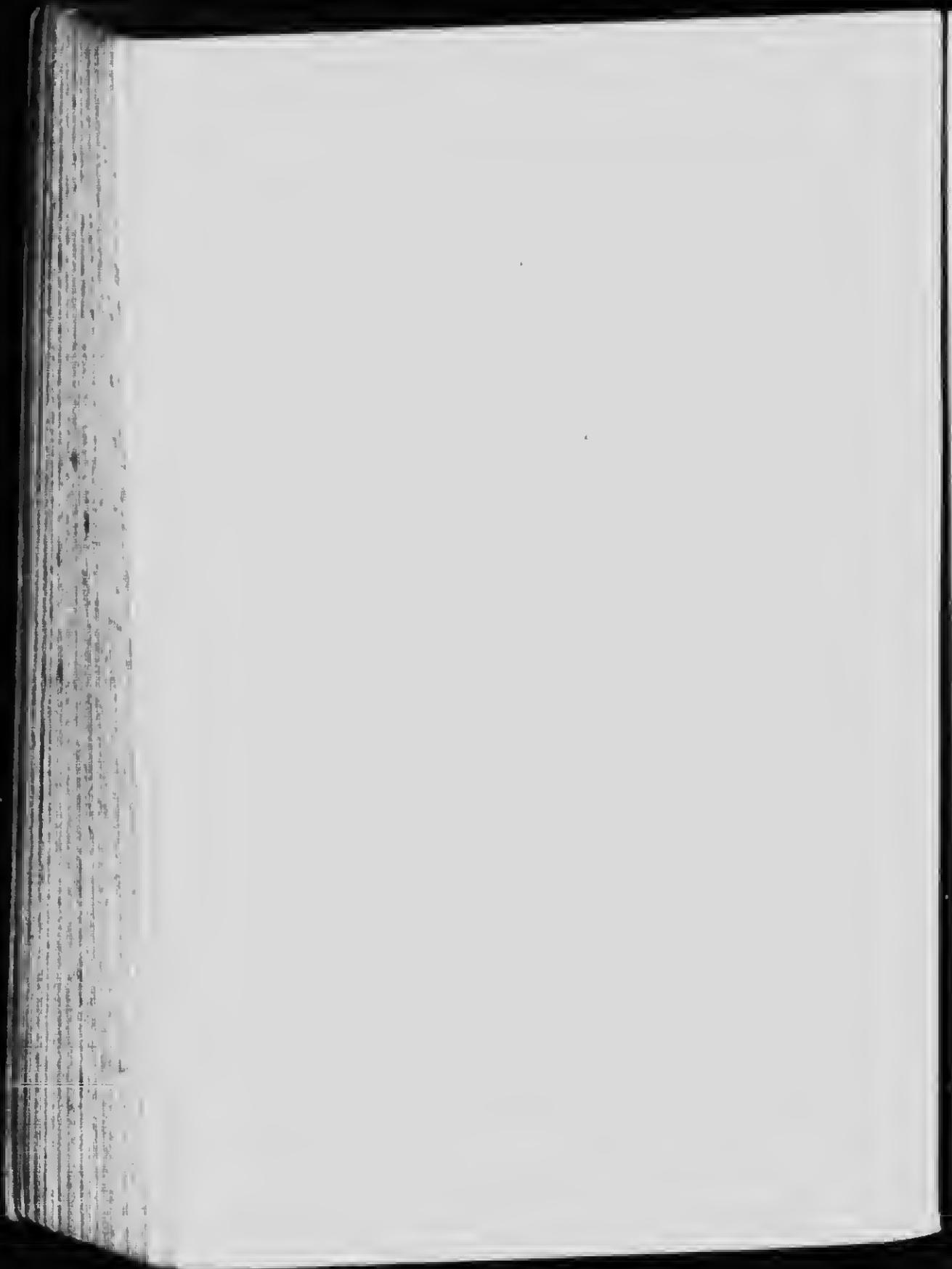
"Indeed, what?"

"You are to personate an earl. Vigorous Daunt will be by turns himself—that is to say your secretary—and some royal or princely personage. Am I right?"

"Perfectly. I make you my compliments on your sagacity."

"But where do I come in?"

"You will be—the Hon. Edgar Vale—my guest, and the friend of that same royal or princely personage."



CHAPTER XII
*VIGOROUS DAUNT ASSISTS AT AN
ELOPEMENT*

SOME hours later, I, the Earl of Killiecrankie, entertained at lunch in my villa on Spianola Hill my friend, the Hon. Edgar Vale, and my secretary, Mr. Vigorous Daunt. It was a silent function. Vigorous Daunt only once opened his lips—he said, addressing me, “My lord, it was reported in yesterday’s local papers that His Royal Highness Prince Schlesinger, being rather poorly, has left the capital for Scotland, where he intends to remain for an indefinite period. This morning’s telegrams have confirmed the report.”

I looked up and met the little brown man’s eyes. He was smiling meaningly. I understood and shrugged my shoulders in response. Mr. Vale also grasped the situation, but quite unused to such ideas the poor young man seemed ready to expire from terror, and during the remainder of the meal he did little else but mop his brow, which was always dripping with perspiration, from the nervous fires of trepidation that consumed him.

After lunch Vigorous Daunt took my arm and

led me to the garden. The Villa Spianola occupied the entire crest of one of those beautiful though bare hills that overlook Genoa and its harbour. Adjoining the grounds and magnificent gardens of the Villa, on the south was perched, on the knees of the hill, a large and pretentious mansion, decorated on the exterior with all the florid forms of the Florentine school of architecture. Vigorous Daunt indicated this mansion with a nod. "It is the Villa Spezzia," he remarked, significantly.

"I had guessed it," I replied. "But where is Vale?"

"Probably pacing his room like a lion in his cage."

"You must treat him tenderly; his patience is exhausted."

"H'm. Did he give you much trouble after I left the yacht?"

"He did; can't you manage to confide in him a little?"

"No—he is too impetuous. He would inevitably spoil my plans."

"May I know your plans?"

"This much of them: you and Vale must obey me implicitly. No more. By the way, the Duke of Spezzia, the Grand Duke of Savony and the Grand Duke of Eisslingen will call here at four o'clock to visit you and pay their respects to the Earl of Beaufort."

"So soon."

"You will be good enough to invite them here

this evening. I shall play picquet with Eisslingen, you must entertain the others with baccarat ; contrive to lose. I wish them to like you."

"Very good, but what of Vale?"

"He shall enter the room on my arm. I shall attend to him."

Vigorous Daunt then left me, and I spent a very pleasant hour enjoying the scene and an excellent cigar. I subsequently returned to the house and spent a correspondingly unpleasant period instructing Vale in the arts of patience and obedience. Proximity to his fiancée had inspired him with an unreasoning mania of restlessness, and it required an almost saintly charity to forbear with him.

At four precisely our princely visitors arrived. The Grand Duke of Eisslingen was a little old man who rejoiced in a luxuriant white moustache and long Dundreary whiskers. I read him as a man of the old school, intemperate of habit, choleric of disposition and proud as Lucifer. The Duke of Spezzia was a long and lean middle-aged Italian, chiefly remarkable for his elegant manners, and an affectation of excessive sprightliness. In reality he was a thoughtful creature who had written a text book on metaphysics, and had already buried four wives. The Grand Duke of Savony was not remarkable at all. A small, portly German, with a heavy face and bleared eyes, he exhibited no indication of his princely birth, but looked what he was, a roué and dissolute young man of twenty-nine. One glance at him inspired me with a pro-

found pity for the Princess Beatrice. With such a man for a prospective husband, any sensitive young woman could be excused for eloping with a decent-looking groom.

Vigorous Daunt, *in propria personâ*, presented my guests to me in the drawing-room, a stately chamber, fully sixty feet long by thirty wide.

I flatter myself that no belted earl living could have received them with finer tact, or have more nicely observed and marked in his manner the distinctions in their respective age and rank. I bore myself so well, indeed, that one and all unmistakably approved me. Their inquiries concerning "His Royal Highness" I replied to in such a way as to establish their preconceived convictions, even though I corrected their speech and emphatically protested that my friend the Earl of Beaufort was nothing more than a plain English gentleman. My visitors stayed only long enough to accept my invitation (which they regarded as a command) for the evening, and to refresh themselves, whereupon they immediately retired.

During the remainder of that afternoon Vigorous Daunt appeared no more, and Vale and I were even constrained to dine without him. The Hon. Edgar, I regret to say, drank a great deal of champagne, and though his spirits were thereby enlivened, he still remained so excessively nervous and irritable that I was hard put to it to manage him. At eight forty-five Vigorous Daunt sent for him, leaving me to receive our guests alone.

They arrived punctually and I led them to the card-room, where, however, I could prevail upon no one to be seated. Vigorous Daunt kept us waiting about five minutes.

When finally he entered the room, leaning confidentially upon the Hon. Edgar's arm, in spite of my previous acquaintance with his intention I could scarcely suppress a cry of admiration and astonishment. It was Prince Schlesinger himself. Indeed, seldom, if ever, could the Prince have appeared as like his fabled self, so princely, so royally condescending, so graciously good humoured. My guests verbally respected his incognito, but they paid him every attention exigible by Royalty. His Royal Highness speedily put them all at ease and proved that the world-famed reports of his marvelously retentive memory were by no means exaggerated. "Come, come," he said at last, "this is a card party; let us have done with chattering and get to work." He turned to Eisslingen. "Your Highness" (he emphasised the title), "it runs in my head that you owe me some reparation at picquet. Am I not right?"

"I shall be charmed—my lord," stammered the old Duke.

"Good. Edgar, will you score for us?" This to Vale.

The Hon. Edgar, who had so far remained in the background, came forward. "I'd rather play, old chap, if you don't mind," he answered. His face was a little flushed, but on the whole he ap-

peared self-confident and he spoke without hesitation. I had never hoped that he would make so fine an actor; evidently my master had given him a sharp talking to. His "old chap" made the whole room stare. The Grand Duke of Eisslingen was rigid with astonishment and positively glared at the young fellow.

"Come, come," protested the counterfeit Prince. "You are too fond of play; a night off will do you good, you young rascal."

"My dear Albert, a night off would do you no harm," retorted Vale with consummate insolence. If the ducal party were before surprised, they were now aghast.

Conceive their state of mind when the Prince replied, "Perhaps you are right, lad, but then I haven't your bad luck, and even if I had, my means could not support it. Come, lad, score for us to please me!" Vale gave way with the worst grace possible, and even seated himself before the Prince.

My master smiled at me over his shoulder. "Well, Cranky, what about the others; baccarat, eh?"

I bowed deeply and invited Savony and Spezzia to be seated. I heard my master observe to Eisslingen: "A splendid fellow, Killiecrankie, one of the best. I call him 'Cranky' because he is excessively good-tempered."

The little brown man need not have counselled me to lose; I was so keen set on observing the picquet party that if my adversaries had not been

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similarly interested I should have lost a fortune, for the stakes were high.

From the first Vigorous Daunt commenced to win. This fact established his good humour. His sparkling spirits kept every one engaged. He chaffed Vale mercilessly at intervals, told several racy stories and ceaselessly tossed the ball of conversation up and down the room. The Hon. Edgar wore the only gloomy face. He sat as sulky and silent as a bear, and several times was insolently familiar with the Prince. Gradually, however, he, too, thawed, and at last joined in the general mirth excited by a story recounted by my wonderful little master. On this the counterfeit Prince patted his arm affectionately and told him he was a "good, forgiving creature." Shortly afterwards the Grand Duke of Eisslingen, probably overcome by the brandies he continually absorbed, was unable to persist in enmity with a man so kindly considered by a prince of blood. He actually addressed Vale, and before midnight they seemed the best friends in the world. At one o'clock my master arose, and assuming the privilege of royalty, retired before my guests, after bidding them all dine with us on the following evening and especially requesting Eisslingen to bring his daughter, the Princess Beatrice, whose acquaintance he declared he wished to make.

When I visited Vigorous Daunt he met me with these words: "How much did you lose?"

"Two hundred pounds," said I.

"Enough," he cried, "lose no more. This adventure will cost me dearer than any yet! How much do you think young Vale is worth?"

"I have no idea."

"Scarcely a sou—a bare £300 a year, and he dared make love to a princess! If it were not for the sake of my democratic principles and my hatred of women I'd drop him like a hot coal."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, he's a younger son and can never hope to get the title. My only recompense in this affair is the consciousness of doing good. These confounded aristocrats! I'll teach them! I'll level their pride a little. I'll marry their daughter princess to a common pauper!"

"Supposing the Princess declines?" I queried. I was not disturbed by his threat. I knew that he would treat Vale handsomely.

"She won't. Vale showed me her letters. She wants him—curse her! He's too good for her, much too good. Did you mark the way he shaped to-night? The fellow has brains, I tell you."

"You haven't seen the Princess," I objected.

"Isn't she a woman?"

"Why do you hate the sex so bitterly?"

"Good-night, Granville. Go to bed."

I disobeyed my master. Instead of going to bed I went to Vale and said to him, "Write a letter to your Princess, Vale, and implore her to come here to-morrow night dressed in brown; it's most im-

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portant that Daunt's first impression of her flatters him."

Vale wrung my hand and wrote the letter. It cost me five pounds to ensure its private safe delivery. The whole of the next day Vigorous Daunt spent in the city of Genoa engaged in some mysterious business, while I ministered to the anxieties of a disconsolate young lover. As the hour appointed for the eventful dinner party approached poor Vale's distress of mind increased to the point of agony. I was obliged to button his collar and fix his tie, his trembling hands having refused the office. As we proceeded to the reception room I thought he would faint, but no one had yet arrived. We found, however, the counterfeit Prince awaiting us. Noticing Vale's agitation, my master addressed him very sternly and with effect, indeed, his biting words would have stung a frog to indignation.

I watched Vigorous Daunt's face as the Princess entered. I noted that he slightly started and his eyes flashed suddenly. Glancing then at the Princess I became lost to all else.

She was clad from head to heel in brown and wore a sprig of wallflower in her hair. She was lovely and lovable rather than beautiful; a trifle under the medium height, she nevertheless carried herself with distinction. Her figure was absolutely perfect. Her face was pure but passionate. I saw a broad low brow, a full sweet mouth, a small imperfect nose, an adorable dimpled chin; I withstood these attractions; I confess her ivory complexion dis-

turbed my fortitude, but I surrendered to her eyes. They were large and langorous, exquisitely shaped, and their colour was molten gold, though sepia bars radiated from the pupils.

The Prince took her in to dinner. I gave my arm to the Baroness Solstein, a fat and too-well-preserved old woman of fifty-five. The Hon. Edgar held the door open for the Princess to pass through. I watched her keenly, she did not look at her lover, but for a moment she was white as death.

Had she merely blushed I should not have been half satisfied. I now felt sure that Vale was loved. The dinner passed as I imagine such functions must at truly royal tables. To my mind it was rather dull, although my master exerted himself to please, and I seconded his efforts to the extent of my ability. The fact was, secret counter influences were at work which I easily divined and detected. The Baroness highly disapproved of Mr. Vale. The Grand Duke of Eisslingen was preoccupied and uneasy; he, no doubt, had been rated beforehand for his folly in countenancing Vale after cutting his acquaintance. Vale himself was unable to tear his eyes from the Princess's face, and the Princess, though apparently composed, betrayed the agitation of her thoughts by frequently blushing and paling. The conversation was confined to the Prince, Savony, Spezzia and myself. The others listened and dutifully laughed as the occasion demanded. I was inexpressibly relieved when the banquet came to an end. The ladies did not retire before us, but

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we all unceremoniously repaired to the card-room, where the counterfeit Prince declared for baccarat and directly challenged the Baroness to play. It is said that all old women are gamblers—certainly the Baroness proved no exception to the rule. She acquiesced and took a chair regardless of her protégée, who, declining to play, asked leave to watch the game. My master, when about to deal the cards, looked suddenly at Vale.

“My dear Edgar,” he said sternly, “I must say I admire your chivalry. Are you such a gambler that you prefer to play with us old fogies, pardon me Baroness (he bowed laughingly to her) to entertaining our beautiful young friend here, who would doubtless enjoy a stroll on the terraces by moonlight? Be off with you this instant, sir!”

The speech was a bombshell. The Baroness turned pale. The Grand Duke turned purple. Even the sluggish-blooded Savony changed colour. But the counterfeit Prince noticed nothing. His victims were like rats caught in a trap. No escape was possible. Vale got up and offered the Princess his arm. The Baroness looked daggers at the pair and declared that the Princess would catch cold. She was the only one who even dared to protest, but my master laughingly overruled her and Vale hurried his charge off. They were absent the greater part of an hour, and when they returned, my master, who had lost £400, threw up the game. Spezzia, who had won largely, begged the Prince and myself to dine next evening at the Villa Spezzia, promising

then to give the Prince his revenge, but I noticed he did not include Vale in the invitation. I attended our princely guests as far as the gate; even before I took my leave the Baroness had commenced in a whisper to scold the Princess, and one glance at Eisslingen's face assured me that the poor lady could expect little quarter from him.

Returning to the house I found Vigorous Daunt and the Hon. Edgar most unamiably confronted. My master turned furiously to me.

"Do you know what this young idiot, this ingrate, has done?" he cried.

I shook my head.

"He has taken the matter out of my hands! Clipped my wings and made a fool of me!"

"How?"

"He has asked the Princess to elope with him."

"And she?" I asked, utterly confounded.

"Has agreed to feign illness and meet him during the dinner hour to-morrow night, whereupon she will fly to the yacht with him.

"Well, well," I gasped, "that, after all, is not so bad. It seems we are emerging from the wood. What is there to grumble at?"

Tears of rage stood in my master's eyes. His voice broke. "Don't you see," he wailed, "the wretched creatures have anticipated ME. It was my plan, *mine*—now—he—he—" (he fairly shrieked the words) "will get all the credit. The Princess will look upon me merely as a servant in the matter."

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Here Mr. Vale spoke out excitedly. "That is nonsense. I told her it was your wish. Besides—"

"Bah," snapped Vigorous Daunt. "She is in love; don't you assume to flatter my intelligence. I know that she'll attribute all the glory to you."

I attempted to pour oil on the waters. "After all," I murmured, "she is only a woman, sir. You don't really care what she thinks!"

"You shut up," he roared. "As for you, Edgar Vane, you'll bitterly repent your insolent presumption. The girl's a dashed sight too good for you," he inconsequently added.

"She's an angel," sighed Vale in a whisper.

"If she weds—you—IF, I say—she will avenge me—but I'll punish you in any case myself."

"How?"

"Wait—you'll know to-morrow night. Leave me!"

"Excuse me, sir," the young man hesitated, "have I—er—permission to proceed with—YOUR plan?"

Vigorous Daunt's eyes softened, but not his manner. "You have," he growled.

"Sir," said Vale, "I thank you from the bottom of my soul. Good-night."

"Go!" said Vigorous Daunt. When the door had closed, my master turned to me.

"Have you," he muttered, "ever seen a finer, a better-matched couple? No, I'll be sworn you haven't. Nevertheless, the fellow is a rascal. I'll see he does her justice—ay—to the letter. I'll make him!"

I could not repress a sneer. "Misogynist!" I muttered.

Vigorous Daunt blushed furiously, then burst out laughing. "That's why I loathe the sex, Rupert, lad. They can do anything with me. Why, hang it, I'm ready to marry that girl myself."

"God forbid!" I cried. "I don't want to lose my master yet."

He looked me in the eyes, smiling kindly. "No, nor I you, boy."

It was at moments such as this that I best loved the little brown man.

Next day Vigorous Daunt went to the city and visited his yacht. Mr. Vale shut himself up in his bedroom, and I saw him only at meals. He was extremely gloomy and taciturn, and refused my twice-proffered company. I spent a quiet time, smoking and reading until about four, when a servant informed me that the Grand Duke of Savony requested private audience.

Wondering what on earth that dull and dreary person required of me, I proceeded to the reception room. Savony was nervous and hesitating, but quickly tiring of his polite inquiries and weather-drivel, I drove him to the issue. "What is the matter?" I demanded suddenly. "You haven't come here to discuss meteorology."

He turned positively pale and stammered, "It's Mr. Vale—my lord."

"Well, what of him?"

He floundered hopelessly awhile, nor did I assist him, but presently he blurted out, "We—that is, Eisslingen and the—Baroness—don't want him. The fact is—he—he—some time ago—he insulted the Princess—and since then——" words failed him.

"Well?"

"We—that is, Eisslingen thinks—you see he is such a friend of the Prince—they imagine that His Royal Highness might (unacquainted with the facts) take him to the Villa Spezzia this evening."

"Ah."

"So—they thought that if I spoke to you—I beg your pardon, my lord, for reflecting on a guest and possibly a friend of yours—but you see how I am situated."

"Perfectly, your Highness; please say no more. I shall arrange the matter to your satisfaction and without annoying His Royal Highness, who has a great affection for Mr. Vale. Will that content you?"

"My lord, I am greatly your debtor."

"I shall make an excuse to send Mr. Vale to Ripalo by this evening's train. Fortunately, it will be easy, as His Royal Highness proceeds there to-morrow; he will thus be quite out of the way."

The Grand Duke's dreary face became perceptibly less somnolent. He protested his gratitude and made an early excuse to leave, doubtless anxious to convey such good news to his friends. When I informed Vigorous Daunt of this interview he was

highly pleased and belauded my discretion to the skies.

My master spent an hour in private converse with Mr. Vale, and at eight o'clock presented himself with me at the door of the Villa Spezzia. Our noble hosts received us with so exaggerated a display of ceremonious courtesies that I became vaguely disquieted. I could not tell why, but it seemed to me that the atmosphere was ironically tainted. My master, however, appeared absolutely at his ease, and with an effort I imitated his unconcerned demeanour. The Baroness in particular excited my attention by her slavish deference to the counterfeit Prince. Twice I caught her eyes, and their glance was hostile. I confess I grew alarmed. I became conscious that every word my master uttered, every movement he made, was observed and criticised, so also, but in a minor fashion, with myself. I prepared myself for battle and vainly longed to give Vigorous Daunt a hint to do likewise, but not once could I catch his eyes. He laughed and jested with each in turn and bore himself as if he had not a care in the world; only me he ignored. He took the Baroness in to dinner, and exerting all his genius to please, for the first half hour kept the table in an uproar of mirth, no inconsiderable feat when it is remembered that three of the party were stolid Germans, whose suspicions, I felt in my heart, were wide awake.

The Princess Beatrice was absent, but no one accounted therefor, and my master seemed to have

forgotten her existence. The first lull occurred with the arrival of the *pièce de résistance*. Against all courtly precedent, a lackey entered and presented, on a golden salver, a telegram to the Baroness. Muttering an apology to the Prince, she tore it open, glanced at its contents and then passed it to the Grand Duke of Eisslingen.

"The bolt is about to fall," I muttered, and glanced at the Baroness. She, in common with the rest of the table, was gazing at my master

She opened her lips to speak. The bolt fell. "My dear sir," she said smoothly, "I have learned from indisputable authority that His Royal Highness Prince Schlesinger is on his way to accept and enjoy the hospitality of Cannes. You are not the Earl of Beaufort, there is no such person; your friend (she bowed to me) is not the Earl of Killiecrankie, there is no such person. Will you, then, be good enough to inform us whom we have the honour to entertain?"

The Grand Dukes of Eisslingen and Savony rose to their feet. There was no mistake about their hostility now, their eyes were fairly on fire. My master waved his hand and pointed to the servants. The Duke of Spezzia gave a sharp order, getting to his feet as he spoke. Instantly the room was cleared. The three men glared at my master, waiting, tremulous with rage, for him to speak.

My master turned to me. "I am a misogynist again!" he murmured. His coolness was sublime.

The Baroness, appropriating the sneer, coloured through her rouge.

My master pointed his index finger at the Grand Duke of Eisslingen. "Permit me to remind you, sir," he haughtily exclaimed, "that I am still seated!"

His ringing accents, stern yet cold, more than that, his superlative assurance, absolutely petrified his audience. The silence that followed was of the tomb.

My master broke it. "Must I remind you again?" he demanded. His eyes dominated theirs. They changed colour—they sat down, incredible as it may appear—they sat down! My master immediately stood up. He looked every inch a king. The whole table, even the Baroness, deferentially arose.

"His Royal Highness Prince Schlesinger," said my master, icily, "is now on his way to Cannes, where, for the benefit of stupid people, he will emerge from his incognito. He is accompanied by his friend, Mr. Rupert Granville, who, he has promised, shall one day be the Earl—yes, madam—(he looked the Baroness in the face) the Earl Killiecrankie. Cranky, man,"—he gave me a sweet smile—"your arm!"

I hurried to his side. Taking my arm, after nodding curtly to the astounded assembly, my master walked me to the door. Instantly a storm of protestations arose. Eisslingen, old as he was, flew to the door and put his back against it. The

Baroness burst out sobbing ; Savony shook like a blancmange. Spezzia called upon God to witness—more stupidities than I can recollect. My master calmly asked me the time, then ironically observing that the hour was not yet, permitted himself to be mollified.

The Baroness kissed his hand and entreated pardon. He sat down again, and like the genius he was and is, without a second's pause plunged into the relation of a story, which, from its monstrous absurdity, would have moved an anchorite to tears. His marvellous ability was once more demonstrated when an hour later we rose from the table. He then declined all invitations to play and took leave of his guests in such a manner as to oblige them to perceive that although he had pardoned their offence, he had by no means forgotten it. Their slavish adulation, their abject contrition I shall not forget till the last hour of my life. We found upon inquiry at the Villa Spianola that Mr. Vale had long departed in a carriage for the yacht. We therefore immediately followed his example. I perceived as we rowed off that the yacht's anchor was raised and that she was under steam. In the saloon were seated at one end the Hon. Edgar and the Princess Beatrice ; at the other an Italian priest paced up and down reading his breviary.

The Princess, who was clad in brown velvet, was very pale, but her eyes glowed brilliantly.

Vale watched her hungrily from a little distance, an indescribable expression of love, longing and

anxiety upon his face. On our entrance he looked up and started crouchingly, every muscle strained as though about to spring at our throats. A revolver rested near him on the lounge, but concealed by his body from the Princess. He reminded me of a jealous tiger defending his mate.

My master closed and locked the door behind him, then, pushing past the priest, he advanced straight to the Princess.

"Madam," he said, "have you considered the consequences of your act?"

She smiled brightly, looking him bravely in the eyes. "I have," she replied.

"You will forfeit the succession," said Vigorous Daunt. "You will lose father, friends, fortune, state!"

"It is true," she said.

My master frowned. "You resign these things—for what?"

The Princess extended her left hand to Vale. "For my husband's love," she answered proudly.

My master's frown grew black as night; he pointed at Vale and in a withering voice cried out: "Your husband will be a pauper. He is deeply in debt—he has barely £300 a year. Retract before it is too late. If you wed him you will starve! Remember, you are a Princess!"

The Princess drew herself to her full height, her glorious eyes flashed.

"Once!" she cried, "but I am now a woman!"

Vale uttered an inarticulate cry; he sprang to

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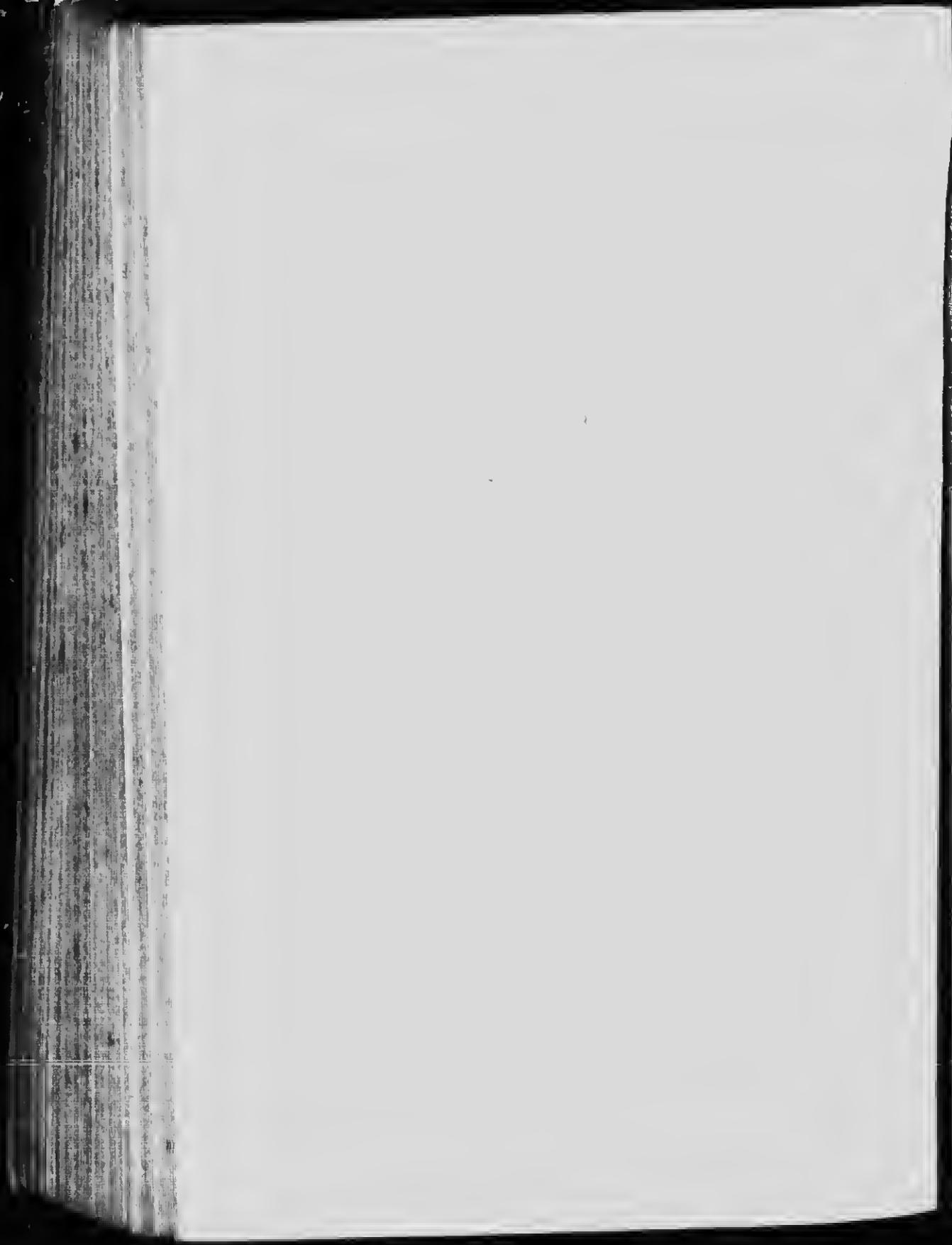
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"The Princess drew herself up to her full height."

[Famous Danut : Billionaire]

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his feet and put an arm about his fiancée's waist. "An angel, whose shoes I am not fit to kiss," he muttered brokenly.

"But whom you aspire to marry!" snapped Vigorous Daunt. He turned to the Princess. "I see what it is, madam, you rely upon my protection, my generosity. You think I am Prince Schlesinger and that I shall intercede for you and accomplish your father's pardon." With a swift gesture he tore off his wig and beard. "Perceive now your mistake! I am plain Mr. Daunt, a nobody!"

The Princess smiled. "I knew," she said. Suddenly she withdrew from her lover and swiftly advancing put both her hands upon my master's shoulders. "But do not say a nobody, dear Mr. Daunt—you are my husband's friend, and my dear friend; dear friend indeed, since to you I owe—my happiness!"

The little brown man for a moment stood stock still as if stupefied, then of a sudden, rudely starting back, he turned and glared at Vale. "Very good, young sir," he grated out in English, "you have tricked and mocked me. Have your laugh; I shall laugh afterwards. Let me tell you this—this woman will avenge me. Wait—wait, I say, until you want a night out!" With this dreadful threat and a hollow laugh my master swung on his heel and beckoned to the priest, who hurried up. "Marry them! Marry them!" he growled in Italian, "and no furbelows on the ceremony! Make haste!"

The lovers sank on their knees; the priest set to work, and in ten minutes the Princess Beatrice was Mrs. Vale, and her marriage lines were bestowed in the bosom of her gown.

The Hon. Edgar would have taken her in his arms, but my master was before him. The little brown man pushed him aside, and bending over the girl he kissed her on the forehead. "My dear," he said gravely, "I wish you every happiness." The Princess stood up, her face rosy, her eyes alight. I heaved a sigh to see her, she was so lovely, so altogether desirable a creature

Vigorous Daunt offered her an envelope. "It is my wedding gift," he said and moved away.

The girl, with a little delighted cry, tore it open, looked and read. Suddenly, tears came into her eyes, her hands fell to her sides and a paper fluttered to the floor.

I picked it up and handed it to Vale. It was a cheque for £50,000.

The young man made an effort, a gallant effort, to restrain himself, then failing, turned his back, his big frame heaving with sobs. The Princess stood petrified, gazing through her tears after my master, who had already reached the door. There he turned and addressed Vale. "Mr Vale, you start in five minutes for Malta," he announced. "When you have done with my yacht, a month or two hence, kindly cable me to the Colonnade in London. Come, Granville!" I started forward and accompanied my master from the room. Vale never moved. My

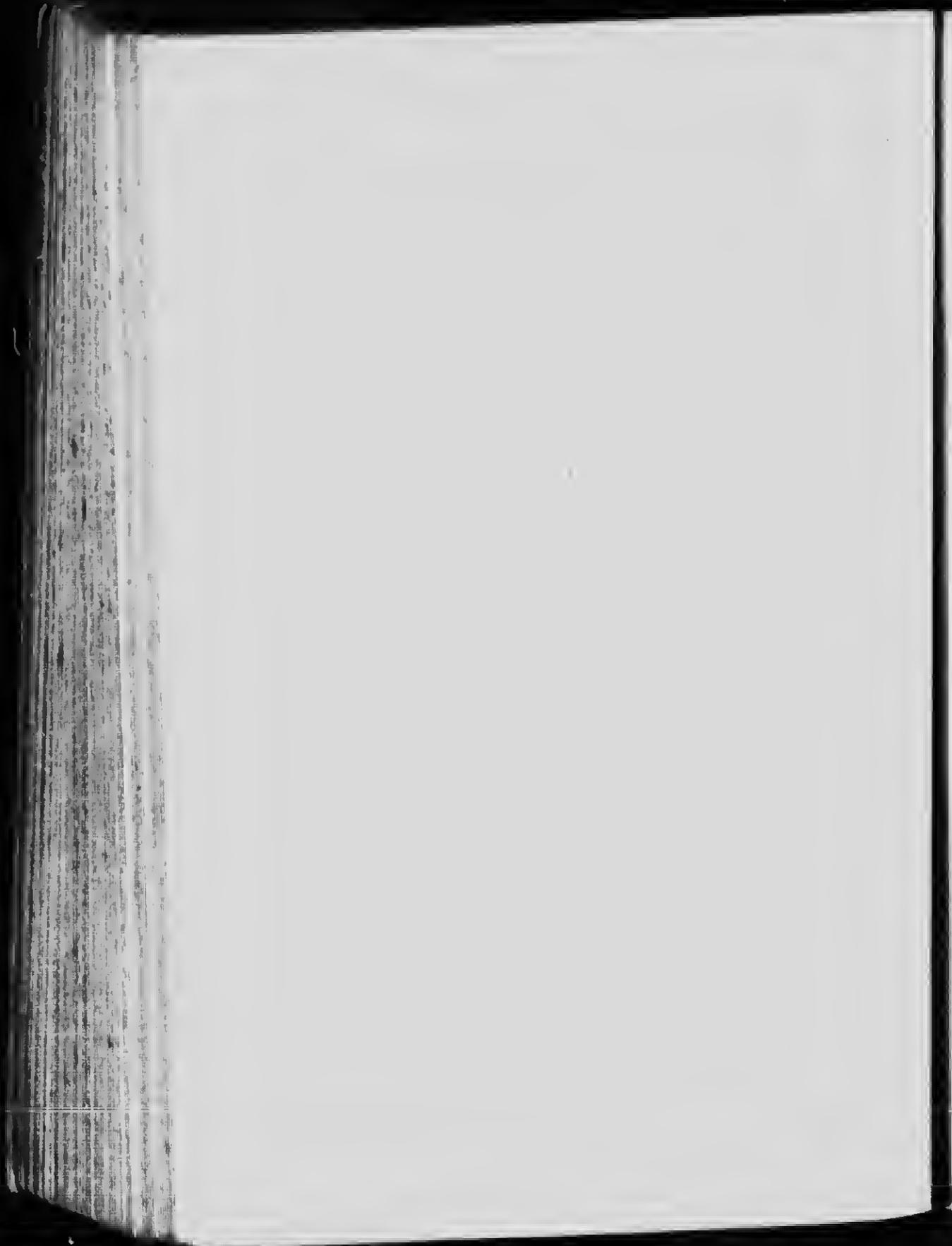
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last glimpse of the Princess showed me a sight I had never hoped to see, a woman speechless—from gratitude!

Next morning Mr. Vigorous Daunt informed the distracted Grand Dukes of Eisslingen and Savony, who had called to see us at the Villa Spianolo, that the Earl of Beaufort was a monstrous swindler, whose crimes, he hoped, would shortly be expiated on the scaffold.

Within an hour thereafter we departed in a special train for Rome, on our way to Cairo, I disguised as a venerable serving man.

Some years have passed since then. I have reluctantly to record the fact that Edgar Vale is now a naturalised German subject, and that he principally resides in the castle of his wife's father, which is, I believe, situated somewhere adjacent to the town of Eisslingen. Vigorous Daunt has forbidden me to name him in his presence.



CHAPTER XIII

MR. DAUNT IN LOVE

WHEN my master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt, first informed me of his intention to marry Miss Ellen Hardcastle, the beautiful daughter of his dead love, Ellen Greaves, and his ancient enemy, Mr. Salem Hardcastle, the American millionaire and trust magnate, I regarded the announcement with cynical composure, being unable to believe that he seriously contemplated resigning that existence of adventure, peril and excitement necessitated by his unconquerably restless and neurotic disposition. At first I listened tranquilly to what I thought were vain and love-sick vapourings. But not for long. My master was one of those men whose complex natures defy analysis and who most surprise those who know them best. Before a month had elapsed I began to realise that Mr. Vigorous Daunt had embarked his heart and soul upon his latest enterprise, and this is how the knowledge came to me.

Miss Hardcastle, who had quarrelled with and separated from her father for reasons that redounded to her own credit, was at that time residing at De

Vere Gardens, Kensington, where she had taken a flat in a private hotel, under the chaperonage of an aristocratic but improverished old maiden relative, Lady Frances Robertson. The young lady was able to live as pleased her without having recourse to her father for assistance, since she had inherited on attaining her majority a considerable fortune from her mother. From the moment that Miss Hardcastle took up her abode at Kensington my master commenced to pay her his court, but with such address did he mask his intentions that although he continued to see her every day, Miss Hardcastle did not regard him as a suitor but rather as a friend who overwhelmed her with kind attentions for the sake of her dead mother. As for me, a similar blindness afflicted my intelligence. The fact is, I hated so much to consider my master serious that I believed what I wished and shut my eyes to signs. Lady Frances, however, saw and saw clearly. Her wits were sharpened by self-interest. She was a thin-faced clever woman of over forty years of age, and since childhood she had been obliged to support herself on a paltry pittance of £80 a year. Miss Hardcastle allowed her a salary of £200, therefore she enjoyed then for the first time in her life a measure of comparative luxury, and quite naturally she desired such a pleasant state of things to continue as long as possible.

Mr. Daunt called her privately "the Dragon," because she fulfilled her duties as chaperone with unrelaxing watchfulness, and, I know now, because

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he divined that she suspected and disapproved of his designs. The evening that my eyes were opened my master had invited us all to the theatre, but, astute general that he was, when he arrived at the Garrick he coolly informed us that he had been unable to secure a box and that even our stalls were separated by some rows. Thus it came to pass that Lady Frances and I were obliged to spend the evening together, while Mr. Daunt enjoyed himself with Miss Hardcastle, freed from "the Dragon's" immediate espionage. I saw very little of the play that night, for as soon as we took our seats Lady Frances proceeded to instruct me.

"What do you think of my charge? Beautiful, is she not?"

"Miss Hardcastle?"

"Yes."

"I have no original ideas concerning her. The world says that she is very beautiful, and the world is right."

"Indeed, yes. Her skin is perfect, her features are so regular—and who has ever seen such big, such exquisitely expressive eyes? Mr. Daunt loves their colour."

"He loves everything that is brown," I answered irritably.

"That is why Ellen is dressed in brown velvet to-night," cooed Lady Frances.

"Oh!"

"She is naturally anxious to please him. He is so good, so kind, and such an old friend of the family

How strange it is that he was once her mother's lover. Ellen is so proud of the fact that he has remained single out of devotion to her mother's memory."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, she feels that she cannot do enough to make up to him for his unmerited suffering. You know the story, don't you? Mr. Daunt was engaged—oh, centuries ago—to Ellen's mother, but Mr. Hardcastle, Ellen's father, played him a dastardly trick and poor Mr. Daunt was innocently convicted of robbery or something and he was sent to gaol. Was it not dreadful? Then, while the poor man was in prison, Mr. Hardcastle married Ellen's mother. I never heard of anything so romantic in my life. When Ellen knew of it she immediately parted with her father in consequence; she is so romantic and high-minded; the dear girl!"

"Do you think that separation will be for ever?"

"I am sure of it. Mr. Daunt hates Mr. Hardcastle, you know."

"But why should Mr. Daunt's feelings affect the matter? Mr. Hardcastle, whatever he may have done, is, after all, her father."

"True; but you know what the Bible says, Captain, with regard to the duties of wives to their husbands; and Ellen—sweet girl—is so religious!"

I felt as if a cold hand was gripping my heart. "What is that? I—I beg your pardon, Lady Frances," I gasped.

She watched me as a cat would a mouse. "Is

it possible that you have not seen?" she muttered.

"You think that—Mr. Daunt—that she——"
I stammered.

Lady Frances curled her lip. "Think!" she replied disdainfully; "I know. He worships the ground she walks upon."

"But she?"

Lady Frances slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"He is a billionaire!"

"But does she love him?"

Lady Frances gave me a look of frank contempt.

"Love!" she sneered. "You *are* old-fashioned, Captain Granville, as old-fashioned as Ellen is herself!"

"You think that she will marry him?"

"Certainly—unless——!" she paused.

"Yes!" I muttered feverishly. "Yes—unless?"

"Unless one of them dies or a miracle occurs. You are likely to lose your occupation soon, Captain, for Mr. Daunt will of necessity change his ways—after marriage. But hush—the curtain is going up. Bless my soul, this must be the second act!"

She directed her attention to the play. I also gazed at the stage, but unseeingly, for my brain was tortured with thought. I no longer doubted my master's intentions, for the remarks of Lady Frances had completely undeceived me.

He was determined, then, to marry. Face to face with that conviction, my faculties were for a moment stunned, but soon reviving, I came to a

resolve, and silently with all my force I vowed that I would frustrate the little brown man's hopes and wishes. Ungrateful I may have been, for he had ever been to me not only a generous and princely master but a kind and indulgent friend, nevertheless there are times in the life of every man when he must, unless he be a saint, consider his own happiness and welfare above those of every other living being, and such a time had come for me. Two urgent reasons irresistibly impelled me to my resolve. In the first place, if Mr. Daunt were to marry, I should, without doubt, presently be cast upon my own resources. It is true that at the moment I was, comparatively speaking, a wealthy man, having saved from my salary—aided by various gifts made me by my master—the comfortable sum of £20,000, but still I hoped to make myself much richer in his service, rich enough, say, in a few years' time myself to marry—without being considered a fortune hunter—a lady whose fortune amounted to £5,000 per year. Miss Hardcastle's income was exactly that.

In the second place I, too, as well as my master, wished to marry Miss Ellen Hardcastle, and only then did I fully realise how utterly was my happiness involved in thwarting his suit and advancing my own. My determination inspired me with a kind of fear when I remembered the sort of man he was whose plans it was henceforth my fate to combat, and with reflection this fear, like a rolling snowball, increased in magnitude. True, he was vain

and sensible to flattery, the vainest man, perhaps, on earth, but that was his only weakness—and it was equally true that once committed to any undertaking he never permitted his vanity to cloud his judgment one iota. Moreover, I had never known my master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt, to allow a scruple as to means to interfere with the achievement of his object. His motto was—"Succeed! Honestly if you can—but—succeed!" And this very unscrupulousness now chiefly disturbed and dismayed me, for, although it had seemed well enough—almost admirable, certainly pardonable—while we fought together, we were at length in opposition—and, well, my views were changed.

I was aroused from a deep reverie by the voice of Lady Frances.

"Really, Captain Granville, I commence to believe that you are deaf. I have addressed you three times."

"I beg your pardon, Lady Frances," I answered humbly. "I was thinking and did not hear."

"I can guess your thoughts," she said, and our eyes met. Hers sparkled with a light of eerie intelligence. "You dislike the idea of Mr. Daunt marrying. Is it not so?"

I answered quickly and boldly. "And you—you dislike the idea of Miss Hardcastle marrying; is it not so?"

She forced a smile. "Why should that be? Naturally I desire my grand-niece's happiness. As the wife of Mr. Daunt, her future would be

brilliantly assured. But, well, to be frank, I like you Captain—and, if you will forgive me saying so, I am sorry for you.”

“ May I ask why you pity me ? ”

“ Did I say pity ?—that is an ugly, patronising word.”

“ You said that you were sorry for me. I should like to know why ? ”

Lady Frances cast down her eyes. “ Because you are a man of heart,” she murmured.

I experienced a sudden sense of choking, and felt myself turn pale with rage at her assurance ; but strive as I might I could not speak.

“ You must not be angry with me for speaking so plainly,” sighed Lady Frances. “ I am a romantic old woman, I know, but I like you and I would help you if I could.”

“ Help me ! ” I gasped. “ To what ? ”

“ To win your heart’s desire.”

I swallowed an oath, but she proceeded softly, “ Ellen likes you, I know—but her heart is in the grave. Two years ago she was engaged to a man whom she loved devotedly—ah, such a fine, handsome fellow—Douglas Bryan was his name. He was an eligible husband in all respects, but—only a month before the wedding he was over here on a visit and he killed a man. They said it was accidental, but for all that he was sent to gaol—for life. Dreadful, wasn’t it ? Since then she has not been the same girl. She used to be so fond of society—but after that she gave up everything and lived

like a recluse. Even yet, as you know, she does not care at all for the pleasures that delight other girls of her age. Only the other evening she told me she felt certain that she could never love again. That is why I am so sure that she will marry Mr. Daunt. She admires him, you know—and, besides, she feels that he has a claim upon her for her dead mother's sake."

"Has she made up her mind?" I asked. I did not recognise my own voice, it was so harsh and strained.

Lady Frances shook her head and smiled. "Would you believe it, Captain, she does not suspect his intentions yet. Do you know what I would do if I were in your place, a strong, clever man like you?"

"No."

"I would contrive some plan to take him from her side, to get him out of England and keep him away from her, even if only for a few months. I have been studying Mr. Daunt's character. He is very headstrong, and very obstinate, but he is, at heart, where women are concerned, at all events, as fickle as the wind. In six months' time, if my advice were followed properly, he would scout the idea of marriage as ardently as he now embraces it."

"Yes," thought I to myself, "that is very possible; but even were I successful, at the end of that six months I should in all likelihood return from bear-leading my master to find Miss Hardcastle engaged or married to another man."

I said aloud, "An excellent idea, Lady Frances, but I fear impracticable."

She shrugged her shoulders, then arose, for the play was over. As I draped her cloak about her she whispered, "I have a plan that might do. Tomorrow evening I shall be free, for Ellen will be engaged with her dressmaker."

In my astonishment I gasped, "Indeed!"

We moved together towards the corridor, but Lady Frances was not to be evaded.

"Five minutes would do," she muttered.

My master, the little brown man, walked immediately beside us, looking radiant. Miss Hardcastle's hand was resting on his arm.

"Five minutes would do?" I repeated stupidly, for my wits were wandering.

"Not at the flat, the corner of the street—no, let us say Queen's Gate," whispered Lady Frances.

I bent my head, tearing my eyes from Miss Hardcastle's face.

"Yes, Queen's Gate," I muttered, absently.

"At nine!"

"Nine!" I did not speak, but it seemed to me that some one had echoed my companion's last word.

I looked sharply round and met my master's eyes, but he gave me a friendly smile.

"A capital play, my boy!" he cried, cheerily.

"Most enjoyable," cooed Lady Frances.

"First rate," said I.

Miss Hardcastle seemed tired, and I was passion-

ately glad to note her weariness. "Mr. Daunt has bored her," was my thought.

Presently we reached the vestibule, and my master's carriage was loudly called for by an obsequious attendant. But—and here my good angel served me well—it was by some accident detained. How it came to pass I scarcely understand, the crowd at the door certainly swayed and surged as crowds will, but there was another agency at work, undoubtedly, for in a few seconds I found myself standing on the pavement widely separated from my master and Lady Frances, and face to face with Ellen Hardcastle.

"You look ill!" I said anxiously—for she was very pale.

"I feel a little faint," she replied. "I shall be better presently! How good the fresh air is after that hot place! Ah!"

"You are ill!" I cried, for she had swayed.

"No—no!" she answered, but she took my proffered arm and leaned upon it heavily, half closing her eyes.

I thought of a sudden to do a bold thing, and the very thought carried me away. Glancing back I saw Lady Frances, but Mr. Daunt was invisible, for, a small man, he was overtopped by the crowd. Next second I was hurrying along the pavement, half leading half supporting my companion. I hailed the first hansom we encountered, lifted Miss Hardcastle to a seat and sprang in after her.

"Where to?" asked the driver.

Mr. Daunt had engaged us all to sup at the Savoy—but what mattered that to me? “De Vere Gardens, Kensington!” I cried, and off we whirled.

Miss Hardcastle did not swoon although she had partially lost possession of her senses. Very soon the keen, rushing air revived her, and with a sigh she sat erect and looked at me. “Where are—the others?” she inquired.

“You almost fainted. I could not reach them for the crowd, so I put you in this cab. Lady Frances saw me—no doubt they will follow us.”

“Not to supper. I could not—ah! how stupid of me to behave like this!”

“We are going home,” I said quietly. “I hope you will forgive me for presuming so far—but I thought it best.”

“You are very good,” she answered gratefully.

“You presumed to be kind to me.”

“To myself,” I muttered, but she heard and her big eyes opened wide.

“I did not mean you to hear,” I said in reply to her look of wonder. “But since you have heard—I repeat—to myself.”

“How can that be?” she asked. “I have spoiled your evening, surely?”

“Say—rather you have crowned it.”

“I do not understand”

My heart for a second almost stopped beating, but then the blood commenced to sing wildly in my ears, for a sudden fit of recklessness had possessed

my mind and overwhelmed my control. "You would understand," I muttered hoarsely, "if you knew how deeply, how utterly I love you!"

She started back, her eyes dilating, and a wave of warm colour suffused her cheeks, but she did not look away. Indeed she could not, for I think that my passionate gaze held and mastered hers.

"See how selfish I am," I proceeded quickly, "since I can bless your illness because it has given me the unexpected happiness of serving you. And I am unashamed of that because my selfishness must show you my sincerity."

"But not your gentleness—not your courtesy. Captain Granville, I am under your protection," she replied.

"Do I abuse your confidence? God knows, I have not even sought to touch your hand," I cried.

"Say the word and I shall leave you!"

"Please be silent! Let me think!"

She withdrew from me as far as possible and looked steadily before her. I watched her hungrily, conscious that my fate was swinging on a pendulum of thought. I obeyed her wish, but it was hard, for my whole nature was crying out on me to speak, to protest, to plead, to urge my claims on her consideration. Time was flying. The suspense consumed my patience and overcame my fortitude. I cried out in a trembling voice at last:

"Deny me, Ellen, if you must, but, in God's name, speak!"

She sighed and slowly turned her head. But

we had left the brighter thoroughfares, and I could not see her eyes.

"What is it that you wish?" she asked; her tones were low, but grave and intensely earnest.

"Your love!" I answered boldly, for a hope had come to me, inspired by her words.

She shuddered and replied, "You say you love me, and yet——" she paused and then with sudden passion she cried out, "Captain Granville, what have I done that you should dare insult me so?"

I was dazed. The blow was so swift and unexpected. That she should refuse me was not strange. To speak truly, I had not dared to hope too much. But I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that she would spurn me in such injurious fashion—she, a lady to her finger tips and kinder than most women, for she had always seemed to be tenderly regardful of the feelings of others. "Good God!" I thought, "what right has she to despise me?" Following this train of thought, I muttered brokenly, "The worst and best of men alike honour whom they love by the act itself of loving, which is homage reverent and absolute. You judge differently, however, for you say I have insulted you. It must be that I have unconsciously incurred your contempt. Why do you hate me?"

"I do not hate you."

"You despise me, then?"

"You have obliged me to by your own actions to-night. I did not wish to!"

"Do you consider me a fortune hunter? I am not a pauper, Miss Hardcastle."

"Why prolong the discussion?" she asked wearily. "Ah—thank Heaven!"

Her exclamation was prompted by the sudden stoppage of the cab. We had reached her home.

I sprang out, and assisted her to alight. Strangely enough, she did not decline my aid. She passed before me up the steps and into the hotel. I smothered my pride and followed, because I wished to bid her a farewell that I thought would be eternal.

We climbed the stairs and entered her flat, the outer door of which stood wide. She spoke some words to her maid, who vanished, taking her cloak, and then she turned to me.

She was very pale, but very beautiful. Her wonderful eyes were proud, and yet unutterably sad. "Good-night, Captain Granville," she said softly, and then she whispered, "Let us forget," and offered me her hand.

But I drew back. "Good-bye," I answered gravely, "that is the proper word."

"You mean——" her face grew even more pallid still.

"That I at least cannot forget."

"We might have been friends," she murmured, "if—if——"

"If I had not insulted you," I muttered bitterly. She gazed at me for a long instant, then moved—

nay, rather tottered—to a lounge, into which she sank weakly, with a long, deep-drawn sigh.

I strode from the room without a backward glance, and from the house. It was long after midnight when I reached the Colonnade Hotel, for I walked all the way, battling with myself for strength and resignation.

I found my master sitting before the fire in my room. He was clad in a brown velvet dressing gown, and held a lighted cigarette between his lips.

"Hullo, Rupert!" he cried, as I entered, "I've been waiting up for you to give you the good news."

"That was kind of you, sir," I replied, with all the cordiality I could muster. "What, then, is the good news?"

"You know that some time ago I decided to marry."

"Yes, sir."

The little man's eyes twinkled, and he watched me keenly. "Don't funk the light, man!" he cried, "I want your congratulations, but I want more to see for myself that they are hearty."

I swung round and faced him. "You have proposed?" I demanded.

"I have done better than that, boy. I fixed to-night the date of my marriage."

My soul was on the rack. I felt like springing at my master's throat and crushing the life out of his slender carcass, but instead I forced myself to smile and say, "An early date, I'll be bound, sir!"

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Stanley Wood
1903

"Mr. Daunt stood some paces off, a cocked pistol in his hand."
[Vigorous Daunt: Billionaire]



"Right you are," he chuckled, "a month from to-day. Now congratulate me!"

His eyes pierced me like steel, uncanny, inquisitive and full of knowledge; his lips were twisted in a cruel, malicious grin. I had never known the true meaning of torture until that moment. I suffered the most indescribable anguish as I replied, "I wish you every happiness, sir."

Quick as a flash he cried, "Heaven forgive you for a liar, Granville!"

"A liar!" I started back and stared at him, trying to realise where I stood. My head began to ache, my face to swell. A blur came over my eyes, a blur of blood.

"Take care, man, you'll have a fit," chuckled the little brown man.

Of a sudden I could see again, but a murderous rage possessed me. I uttered a strangled cry and darted forward, my hands outstretched to seize. Then a strange thing happened. The floor slid from beneath my feet, and I fell heavily. A fearful weight crashed on my temple, and I almost lost consciousness. But somehow I struggled to my feet and stood glaring round me, dazed and half witless. Mr. Daunt stood some paces off, a cocked pistol in his hand, smiling, nay, leering like a little fiend. I could not understand.

My master spoke. "Let me explain," he chuckled. "You see that string." He pointed to the floor. "It is attached to the mat upon which you were standing. In anticipation of your attack

I greased the floor before you arrived. I had therefore only to pull the string and down you went like a ninepin."

I put up my hands to my head. He laughed again. "I gave you a little tap just to cool your blood."

"Why—why—why?" I groaned.

He flung aside his laughing mask and faced me with a frown—stern, grim, alert.

"Because you needed a lesson," he grated out. "Because—fool that you are—you have dared, in your folly, not to pit your wits against mine, but to dream of doing so. Have you forgotten who I am—what I am? Madman, do you not know that I can master and bend to my will whomsoever I choose—even be he the greatest person living on this earth and possessed of, next to my own, the greatest measure of intelligence? Have I shown you my powers so often for so little purpose that you can forget, and in your mad vanity, rate them below their proper value? Fool! Clown-head! Idiot, know that I perceive and mark every working, every movement of your paltry brain, that I read and know every emotion of your purblind spirit. Not once have you deceived me. But you shall judge. Listen! You love the woman whom I propose to exalt, to make my wife. But until to-night you did not believe that I really intended to exalt her. Lady Frances Robertson opened your eyes at the theatre and the knowledge maddened you. Afterwards you drove Miss Hard-

castle home in a cab, and took the opportunity to confess to her the impious passion that consumes you. And she," his eyes glittered, "she spurned you. Is it not so?"

I threw out my hands with a gesture of supplication. "Have done, for pity's sake!" I cried.

"Why?" He hurled the question at me.

"You have won," I groaned, "while I have lost everything."

To my astonishment, his piercing eyes became instantly both mild and kind.

"You have yourself to blame," he said gravely.

"I concealed nothing from you. You knew my intentions from the first. But you—you tried to deceive me."

"I have suffered for it."

"Rightly so. You must now make me amends."

"How?"

"Yonder is a table. It is provided with paper, ink, pens. Sit down and write to Miss Hardcastle at my dictation a letter of apology for the insult you have paid her."

"Insult!" I cried. "I have not insulted her, and I shall write her no such letter."

"Write!"

"No."

Our eyes met, and our wills fought a fierce battle, but mine was not defeated. Presently my master shrugged his shoulders.

"So be it," he snarled. "You choose to remain a rebel?"

"No, but I shall not confess to a crime I have not committed, and would not commit to save my life."

"Is it as bad with you as all that, boy?" The surprising little man suddenly advanced and put his hand affectionately on my shoulder.

But with a choking feeling in my throat I shook it off, and turned away. Presently the inner door was sharply closed, and when next I looked round Mr. Daunt had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV

*THE MAGNANIMITY OF VIGOROUS
DAUNT*

I AWOKE next morning after a dream-haunted and, for the most part, sleepless night, to find my master standing fully dressed beside my bed.

"Miss Hardcastle and I are driving this morning out to Windsor for lunch," he said genially. "I have come to bid you good-bye."

"For ever?" I gasped.

"What nonsense is in your head?"

"But after last night!"

"What of last night?"

"You surely cannot wish me to continue in your service!"

He gave me a look of fierce rage and cried, "Granville, man, would you part with me so readily? Is your regard for me so brittle?"

"What of yours for me?" I demanded.

"I would rather lose my right hand!" he cried; and I had never seen him look more serious.

"But in a month you will marry," I persisted.

"What difference can that make to you or me? Confound you, man, you'll drive me mad. Here I

am sacrificing myself and marrying a woman in order to save you from making a fool of yourself and parting us for ever, and your gratitude is to tell me that we must part when my sacrifice is complete. Another word on that head, and I'll put you in a lunatic asylum ! ”

With a look of dreadful fury, he crashed his hands together, then swinging on his heel, darted from the room, leaving me speechless and spell-bound. I asked myself was it possible that my master had spoken the truth. Had he really determined to marry Miss Hardcastle for the purpose he had stated, prompted by a jealous fear that I might win her hand and leave his service unless he acted so. I could not believe it. The thing was too improbable, the selfishness implied too monstrous and inhuman ! But failing to divine or recognise his true motives in such a tangle, I commenced to suspect my master's sanity, for has it not been said that genius is allied to madness ?

I passed a miserable day, the abandoned prey of rage, uncertainty and wretchedness. Mr. Daunt returned to the hotel late in the afternoon, but he shut himself up in his room and refused to see me. It was not until dinner that I remembered my appointment with Lady Frances Robertson, which in my troubled state I had utterly forgotten. I hated the thought of keeping it, for the die was cast, Miss Hardcastle was now my master's promised wife, and as an honourable man my hands were henceforth tied. But although nothing could result

therefrom, except pain and heartburning, it was too late to excuse myself, even by telegram. Mr. Daunt did not appear at table; so after a lonely meal I left a message for him and drove out to Kensington. I reached Queen's Gate, the rendezvous, a few moments before nine o'clock, but Lady Frances was already there. She was cloaked in a flowing black robe, and her face was covered with a veil, but I recognised her instantly from her trick of carriage, and hurried to her side muttering excuses that I should have permitted her to wait for me—but she cut me short. "Give me your arm, Captain Granville, and let us walk down to Great Cromwell Road," she said, "You have no reason to apologise. The fault is mine, for I came early. I have a bad cold, and I want to get back home as quickly as I can."

"I am sorry for that," I said. "But why should we walk anywhere? I need not detain you."

"Why?"

"What is the use? Mr. Daunt has declared himself and has been accepted. You have heard, of course?"

"Yes, but what of it? They are not married yet!"

"They are engaged."

"True, but engagements may be broken."

"Not this one, I think."

Lady Frances sighed. "Youth is so cocksure of everything," she murmured. "Would you believe it, Captain, I have been at various times in

my younger days engaged to scores of men, once to an earl."

I bowed civilly. "I am not at all surprised, Lady Frances. But your case is not to the point. You doubtless remained single because you preferred to."

"Exactly. I merely referred to my case by the way. Now, listen to me. Ellen does not love Mr. Daunt—she does not love anybody. She has accepted him, but more out of gratitude than anything, and because she thinks it is her duty to make up to him for the great wrong her father did him so many years ago. But Ellen Hardcastle is a singularly high-minded and noble-souled woman. She does not care for money, and his enormous wealth does not weigh an ounce in her consideration. At present she sincerely admires and respects Mr. Daunt, and she believes that he is a mirror of all the virtues. But once let her think otherwise, once allow her to see him as he is, the selfish, unscrupulous, vicious, vain-glorious little monster that you and I know him to be—and, believe me, she would dismiss him on the instant."

Lady Frances had described my master in such venomous emphasis that I started back in sheer astonishment.

"Come, come," I protested; "Mr. Daunt does not deserve such hard words. He may be vain—but——"

"Don't excuse him," she interrupted imperiously. "I know the man. He is a little monster. Now,

here is your chance. You must know something of him to his discredit. Indeed, I know you do, for a whisper has come to my ears of some of his doings. What of that affair at Nicosia, in Sicily, where a mysterious duel was fought and Mr. Howard Ash was killed ! ”

“ My God ! ” I cried. “ How did you hear of that ? ”

“ That is my business. I heard of it but not in detail. I want you to give me the details now. Tell me the true history of that affair, and I give you my word of honour that before two days are over, this engagement will be at an end ! ”

“ You want me to betray my master ! ” I gasped.

“ He shall never know a word of it, ” she muttered insidiously.

“ No—no—no ! ” I cried, gazing at my temptress with unaffected horror.

“ You will be doing the woman you love a true service, ” she went on remorselessly. “ Do you think that such a man as Mr. Daunt could ever make her happy ? In a month he would tire of her. Excitement, adventure, action—those are necessities to him. He would neglect her and she would be miserable. Now consider the other picture. Her engagement broken she will be free, free to be wooed and won by a better man, yourself for instance. Oh, and I would help you. I could do much. She likes you—”

“ Madam ! ” I interrupted fiercely. “ Be kind

enough to say no more, and suffer me to bid you good-night ! ”

“ You refuse ! ” she gasped.

“ Absolutely ! ”

“ Why ? ”

“ Because I am not the scoundrel for whom you have mistaken me. I wish you good-bye ! ”

I made a sweeping bow to her, then strode off, my ears ringing with the scornful word she hissed after me—“ Fool ! ”

Strolling back to the hotel I entered my own room, wondering in what sort of mood I should find my master, or whether indeed he would still refuse to see me. I knocked at his door, which was locked, but received no response. There was a letter on my table addressed in a lady’s hand unknown to me. I picked it up carelessly and tore open the wrapper, then, my heart beating with a sudden painful emotion, I read these words :—

DEAR CAPTAIN GRANVILLE—

Mr. Daunt had so earnestly assured me of your remorse and sorrow of last night’s unhappy incident that I am willing to believe that your conduct was not inspired by lack of due respect for me. I beg to assure you that as I write I blot its recollection from my mind.

Believe me, Yours sincerely,

ELLEN HARCROFT.

I tore the note to fragments and cast the pieces to the flames.

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"What is this woman," I cried aloud in my anger, "who treats as an insolent affront the honest proffer of a man's affection? The deuce take me, but she must be as vain as Mr. Daunt himself. A well-matched pair they'll make, by heaven!"

"They will indeed," commented a thin female voice behind me.

I turned quickly as thought to see, standing in the doorway of Mr. Daunt's chamber, Lady Frances Robertson, whom, an hour earlier, I had left at Queen's Gate.

I thought I dreamed, and rubbed my eyes to make sure I was awake. But yes, there she stood, regarding me through her veil with a quizzical, half-malicious smile.

"Lady Frances!" I gasped. "How did you come here?"

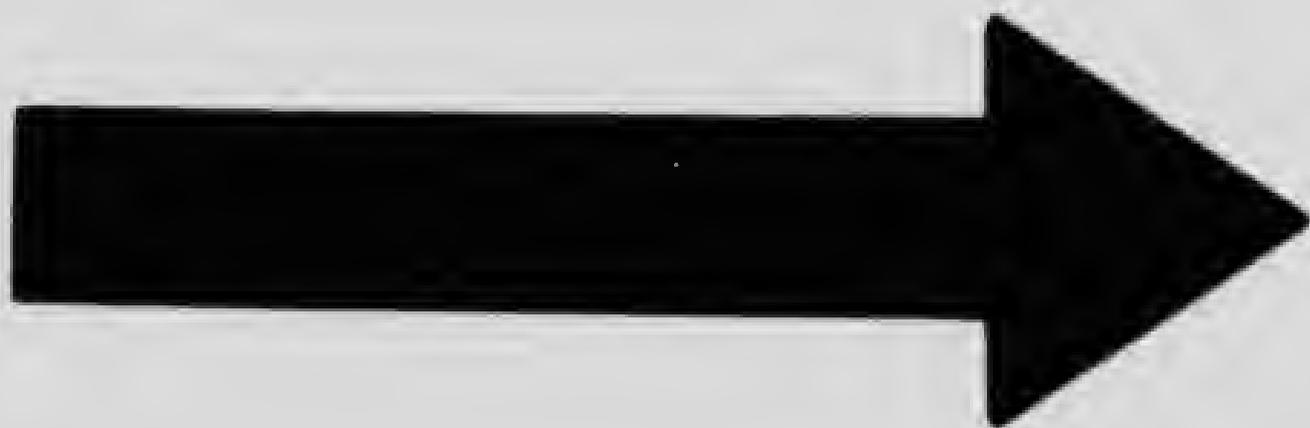
"So!" Of a sudden she threw aside her cloak and revealed to me the familiar figure of a man clad in a brown silk dinner suit. Next she put up her hands with a swift gesture to her head and drew away at one stroke the veil, bonnet and woman's grey wig.

"The deuce!" I ejaculated hoarsely.

"No, no, you honour me too much! Not him, but Vigorous Daunt, at your service," he replied, with a sardonic chuckle.

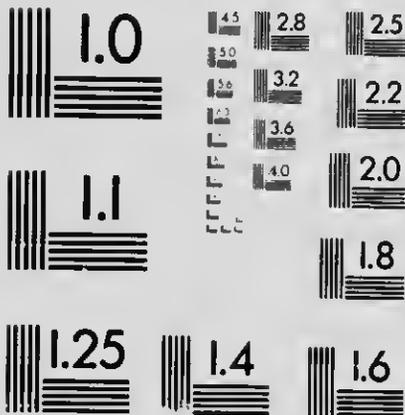
I stared at him dumbly, still unable to realize that it was truly he.

Between his chuckles he condescended to explain. "I overheard you make an appointment with Lady Frances last night. I guessed its purpose



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immediately, and resolved to take her place. It was quite easy. I sent her a telegram this morning in your name, advising her of your inability to attend. The rest was child's play, merely a matter of making up and imitating her voice. By Gad, Rupert, you gave me a splendid laugh. Never shall I forget your dramatic departure. 'Because, madam, I am not the scoundrel for whom you have mistaken me!' Ha! ha! ha!"

He imitated my voice and gestures so perfectly that I was utterly confounded. Of a sudden he pointed at me with his finger and his brows contracted in a frown. "Well it was for you, young man, that you did not listen to temptation. Well, indeed, that you decided to give up your first intention and keep faith with me. Are you commencing to understand how easily I can foil and break all who contend against me? If you had persisted even until this evening in your folly where would you be now?"

I shrugged my shoulders and bit my lips. "You are a great man," I growled, "but you weary me with your fantastic cleverness."

"You want to quarrel with me," he cried. "I shall not allow you."

"I must do something or I shall go mad. "I'm boiling in here." I pointed to my breast.

He nodded understandingly. "I know," he said. "I know. My heart is aching, too."

"Yours!" I gasped.

"Yes, to-day she told me her story; she was once

engaged to a young fellow named Douglas Bryan. You must remember his case. He was sentenced to penal servitude for life, because in a fit of passion he struck and killed a man who had insulted him. Well, she loves him still. By-the-by, Rupert, I owe you an apology."

"What for?"

"I lied to her about you. The fact is I was stupid enough to fear your rivalry and I took precautions accordingly. After this never call me a conceited man again! I told her that you are married but living separated from your wife."

"My God!" I cried, "that is why she treated my proposal as an insult."

"Tut, tut!" observed my master. "She does not care a fig for you. That is why I have confessed."

His amazing callousness so overpowered my wits that I forgot I had a right to be indignant. All I could do was to gaze at him in open-mouthed excess of wonder.

"She loves that fellow still," pursued the little brown man, with a hideous grimace. "She does not think so, but she does all the same. She is wearing her heart out over him."

"You must be kind to her," I muttered.

"Never fear," said Mr. Daunt. Suddenly he hid his face and groaned aloud. "It's the devil, the very devil!" he cried. "Give me your hand, Rupert, boy, we're in the soup together."

There was a grim humour in the situation, but I was too miserable to appreciate it properly.

For a moment we stood convulsively wringing each other's hands and gazing silently into each other's eyes ; then two big tears rolled down my master's cheeks.

" We must do the right thing, boy," he groaned.

" What do you mean ? "

" We must make her happy."

" But how ? "

He dropped my hands, and straightening his back dashed the moisture from his face.

" Pack your traps, immediately, then get what sleep you can. To-morrow morning at daylight we leave London by special train for Devon."

I saluted again. " Anything else, sir ? "

" No, I have provided for *everything*, as far as a mortal man can."

The following day, after a long but uneventful journey, passed in absolute silence, for my master sternly refused to speak, we arrived a little before dark at —— and took up our quarters at the Grand Hotel. I could only guess at Mr. Daunt's intentions, for, as was usual with him whenever engaged in an affair of moment, he had donned a mask of sudden and invincible reserve. Not only did he decline to discuss his plans with me, but he furiously resented every attempt to broach the subject that engrossed his thoughts, and he even flew into a rage if I thoughtlessly ventured to address him without permission.

That evening he was even more bearish than

usual, and only once did he open his lips to me. It was when we were leaving the saloon after dinner.

"I am going out," he said curtly; "as for you—do not leave the hotel!"

He did not return until after midnight. I waited up for him in the smoking-room, but he passed me as though I were a stranger and retired, without speaking, to his bed-chamber. Next morning the situation was unaltered, and I commenced to chafe and fume at the inaction. As, however, I was about to sit down to a solitary lunch, Mr. Daunt suddenly appeared, and to my surprise his countenance was beaming.

"You have had some good news?" I cried.

"No," said he, "but what I have been waiting for has come to pass. A snowstorm. Hi, waiter!"

"Yes, sir." A servant hurried up.

"My compliments to the manager and ask him to see me at once."

"Yes, sir!" The waiter vanished, and in a moment or two the manager approached us.

"Good-day!" said my master. "I have sent for you in order to inform you that I expect my valet, John Williams, by this afternoon's express from London. The man is an old servant and has lately suffered from a severe illness. I want a room prepared for him next to my own. And as I shall be out when he arrives, I wish you to be kind enough to have him shown to his room at once."

"Certainly, Mr. Daunt."

I bit my lips to suppress an exclamation, for my master had never possessed any such servant.

"He will have no luggage, as his traps are included with my own," continued the little man.

"Just so, sir. Can I serve you in any other fashion, sir?"

"Yes. Procure me two good saddle hacks at once. Captain Granville and I wish to ride out and inspect the gaol."

"It is snowing hard, Mr. Daunt."

"We shall not melt. We should like to start at three sharp."

"The horses will be punctually at your disposal."

"Thank you."

The manager bowed himself away, and I looked inquiringly at my master.

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "We have only an hour to lunch and dress," he said. "Hurry is the word!"

I obeyed at the risk of my digestion, and ten minutes later arose from my chair.

Mr. Daunt nodded approvingly and followed my example. We hurried upstairs and betook ourselves to our rooms to change our clothes.

At five minutes to three my master entered my room clad in a riding suit so much too large for him that I could hardly restrain a smile at his appearance. In his hand he carried a small patent leather dressing-bag, but this he quickly concealed beneath the folds of his voluminous riding cloak.

"Come," said he.

We left the room and descended the stairs. In the street our horses already awaited us. Mounting hastily, we clattered through the town at a smart hand gallop in the face of a heavy snowstorm. In two minutes we looked like a pair of mounted "Jack Frosts," for we were white from head to foot. In another five we had left the town behind us and were trotting across the deserted moors. At a certain point, my master, without warning, struck sharply aside at right angles from the road, and spurring his horse across a ditch, galloped to the shelter of a tree that seemed to have been recently struck by lightning, for its trunk was scarred and dead. Glancing about him in all directions, he suddenly unbuttoned his cloak and produced his dressing bag, which he dropped at the foot of the blazed tree. In a few seconds the bag had disappeared under a covering of snow.

"Mark well this spot!" said Mr. Daunt. "Imprint it on your memory."

I nodded and pointed to the tree.

"Only a fool could forget that," I said.

"Good! Forward!" he cried, and set off at a gallop back to the road again.

As we proceeded on our journey the sky became darker and more lowering, and save for the glitter of the snow, we should have been at odds to distinguish our route. At last, however, the great gloomy walls of England's fortress-like and stoutest prison loomed up before us, and on sight of them my master broke his long silence.

"A tough nut to crack, that, Granville!" he said gaily, pointing at the prison with his whip. At this, the first intimation I had received of his ultimate purpose, I could not contain my astonishment and dismay.

"You do not dream of anything so desperate!" I cried.

"Fools dream!" he answered curtly. "Wise men act. Now silence!"

Some moments later we dismounted, and, having secured our horses in the shelter of the wall, we marched up to the great gate and my master vigorously rang the bell.

Presently an iron grating in the door was slipped aside, and a man's face peered out at us through the bars.

"Who rings?" asked a deep voice. "This is not a visitors' day," he added gruffly.

"My business is with the Governor," replied my master. "It is urgent. I carry a letter to him from the Comptroller-General of Prisons. Admit us quickly, man—we are nearly frozen!"

"One moment!" said the turnkey.

The grating was shot back, and an unpleasant interval of waiting ensued. At length, however, we heard a harsh clang of shooting bolts, and the massive gate groaned open. Two men in uniform stood in the passage, but one of them, apparently satisfied by a glance, gave passage.

"Come this way!" he commanded.

We followed him through a deep, hollow archway

across a stone-paved courtyard, and thence into a comfortable, roomy office, which appeared all the more pleasant after our stormy ride, because it was brightly lighted and furnished with a glowing fire.

"Take a seat," invited our guide. "The Governor will see you soon. Just now he is engaged."

Mr. Daunt slipped a sovereign into the man's hand. "At once," he urged.

The officer nodded and vanished, but almost immediately returned.

"This way, if you please, sirs!" he said.

We were ushered into a second room, tenanted by a handsome, somewhat elderly gentleman, who was seated before a large pedestal desk littered heavily with papers and great books. He looked up inquiringly as we entered.

"The Governor?" asked my master.

"Yes."

My master pointed to me. "This is my secretary, Captain Granville. I am Vigorous Daunt, the billionaire. It is possible that you have heard of me?"

The Governor sprang to his feet. "I thought I recognised your face!" he cried. "I have seen your photograph——"

"Not under unpleasant circumstances, I trust."

"No, no," stammered the Governor. "In a periodical it was, I think. I am delighted to meet you, Mr Daunt. What can I do for you?"

My master handed him a letter "You might

read that," he replied; "it is from the Comptroller-General."

The Governor tore open the letter, read it, frowned a little, then said, "I am invited to enable you to hold half-an-hour's private conversation with a certain prisoner. It is against the regulations, Mr. Daunt."

"That letter is your warranty for contravening them."

"Not exactly, sir. I am invited, *not* directed. I should like to know your purpose."

My master smiled and said, "Allow me to explain—I can, of course, rely upon your discretion—the matter I would treat of is of a strictly private nature."

"Most certainly." The Governor made a sign, and the officer who had escorted us left the room.

"Thanks!" said Mr. Daunt. "You, doubtless, are acquainted with the public history of this prisoner, Mr. Douglas Bryan?"

"Yes, I remember it perfectly."

"Are you aware that at the time of his crime he was engaged to marry Miss Ellen Hardcastle, the eldest daughter of Salem Hardcastle, the American millionaire and trust magnate?"

"I have heard that such was the case."

"Well, sir, you will be surprised to learn that Miss Hardcastle still considers herself bound by that engagement. Between themselves it has never been expressly terminated, and she is a woman of such extraordinary character that in default of

his releasing her from her promise she will remain single all her life, although she has long ago ceased to care for him. Now, sir, I wish to marry the lady, and I believe that she has only one objection to my suit, the one I have stated. It is therefore my wish to see this young man privately with the object of persuading him to do his duty and make Miss Hardcastle a present of her freedom. I need scarcely say that I shall consider myself deeply indebted to you if you will furnish me with the means to my desire."

My master concluded his long speech with a stately bow. The Governor returned his reverence and arose from his chair.

"My dear Mr. Daunt," said he, "I am much honoured by your confidence. I shall do all I can to help you. Would you like the prisoner brought here immediately?"

"No, no. That would be straining the rules excessively. But if you will be so kind, please order that I may be conducted to his cell."

"I shall be delighted to conduct you there myself," and they 't the room together.

I was left alone, but very soon the Governor returned and we chatted together on indifferent topics for the better part of twenty minutes. A knock then sounded on one of the doors, which opened to admit a warder, who carried a huge bunch of keys, and my master.

I gazed at Mr. Daunt in the utmost astonishment,

for he had forgotten his manners. His riding cap was planted firmly on his head and the lapels covering his ears were fastened beneath his chin. Somehow, too, he appeared to have grown taller. His cloak was wrapped closely about him and was buttoned to the neck. He frowned and scowled so fearfully that his features were scarcely recognisable; indeed, he seemed to be in a perfect paroxysm of fury, and oblivious of our presence he stamped his feet and switched about him with his riding whip.

The Governor exchanged a meaning glance with me; then said, politely, but with sarcasm, "I gather, Mr. Daunt, that your mission has not been a success."

My master stamped his foot. "Curse him! Curse him!" he grated out. "Ach! I must go—or I shall burst! Good day to you! I'll—I'll see you again!"

With that he strode to the door, and passed out, followed by the astonished warder. I lingered a moment in order to apologise to the Governor, who was justly incensed at such cavalier behaviour. But so rapid had been my master's progress, that he was already outside the gaol and about to mount his horse when I overtook him. We set out in a strained silence for the town, riding at the full speed of our beasts, my master slightly in advance. It gradually dawned upon my mind that some passion other than rage possessed Mr. Daunt's soul. He glanced behind each second like a man expecting pursuit, and he constantly urged on his horse with both

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"Halt!" he commanded."

Victims Danut: Bill's on fire



whip and spur. Thus for long, but suddenly he stopped, reining in his horse so violently that the animal was forced to its haunches.

"Halt!" he commanded.

I pulled up as soon as I could, and returned to him. "Guide me to the bag," he said.

I could not see his face, for the sun had already set, and the snow was still falling thickly. But I could have taken an oath that I was not addressed by Mr. Vigorous Daunt, and a wild suspicion darted into my brain.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"One hundred and one," replied a strange voice.

"Douglas Bryan!" I gasped.

"Once—long ago. But for God's sake lead on. The alarm may be sounded any second. The bag! the bag!" His voice trailed off into an imperious, entreating shriek.

But I was dazed. "My master?" I cried.

"He told me to demand your obedience in his name. Curse you—be quick!"

I saw light suddenly, and turning my horse spurred him again into a gallop, the blasted tree my objective. Arrived there I dismounted and, kicking the snow aside, revealed the bag. It contained a suit of grey clothes, patently too large for Mr. Daunt's small frame, also a dark cloth overcoat. The escaped prisoner watched me, tearing off his clothes the while with frantic speed, heedless of the bitter cold and the driving snow.

"Hurry!" said I. "The express arrives at half-past four, it is four already."

He did not reply, but presently having stripped naked save for his shirt, he seized the suit that I had taken from the bag and commenced to dress himself.

"I presume that your name is John Williams, Mr. Daunt's valet, who is to arrive by the express?" I asked.

"Yes!" he hurled the word in my teeth. I picked up his discarded clothes, and thrust them into the bag. By that time my companion was fully dressed. He sprang at his horse and threw the reins over its neck, but instead of mounting he gave the poor animal two vicious slashes with the whip and sent it careering wildly over the moor.

"Return to the gaol," he cried to me, and as he spoke he snatched from my hand the bag I held and set off at a smart run towards the town.

"A capable, quick-brained fellow, but infernally unceremonious," I muttered, with a sort of grudging admiration. Then I mounted and started on my return to the prison, conning over the story I should have to tell the Governor. I rode the whole way at a walk, expecting every second to hear the alarm bell sound. And it did sound at last, but not until I had alighted before the gates. A mighty clamour it created. "Boom! Boom! Boom!" The notes thrilled me through and through in sympathy for the man into whose beating heart I knew they would instil their way, and resound there like knells of doom. 1

had no need to knock at the prison gates. They were opened before me. I was seized like a malefactor, and dragged before the Governor, who paced his office raging like a maniac. My master, the little brown man, was lying on a couch before the fire, clad in a suit stamped abundantly with the hideous broad arrow. His forehead was disfigured with a dreadful bruise.

The Governor cross-examined me as though I were a criminal. I told him as best I could the story I had concocted during my ride back to the gaol. How, half-way to the town, the man who I had believed was Mr. Daunt had of a sudden stopped his horse, and savagely attacked me with his hunting crop. How in trying to elude the blows he rained at me I had slipped from the saddle and fallen to the ground. How he had then galloped at full speed in a northerly direction, and finally how I had guessed the imposture and returned to the gaol to give the alarm.

I had just finished relating in detail this story for the second time when my master arose from the couch on which he had been reclining, and unsteadily approached us.

"You waste time," he said hoarsely—addressing the Governor. "Send—send after him before he gets too far away."

"Twenty men are after him," growled the Governor. "I know my business, thank you all the same."

Mr. Daunt grasped the back of a chair, and using it as a support turned on me. "You—idiot!" he

hissed—in a voice of fiery scorn. “Where were your wits? The whole fault of his escape is yours! The Governor saw me to-day for the first time. But you—you have been my secretary for years, and yet you did not perceive that the fellow is a good six inches taller than I am. Look at me, you fool! See how splendidly his clothes fit me!”

I stared at him—shivering under his words. It was indeed true what he had said. The prison suit he wore was ludicrously large for him.

He had your clothes on,” I stammered; “and his face was covered with your cap. How could I guess?”

The little man gnashed his teeth. “You were always a fool!” he snarled. “But I’ll put up with you no longer. I’ll pay you off to-morrow!” He swung round and faced the Governor.

“I must ask you to lend me some clothes, sir—and find me a carriage. I must get back to my hotel, for urgent business calls me to London to-morrow morning.”

“But—but Mr. Daunt, stammered the Governor, “there will be an inquiry and I shall need your presence here.”

“Fear nothing,” growled my master; “I would travel a thousand miles to hang that ruffian. You must charge him with attempting to murder me. I shall support the charge. Look at my head!” He touched his forehead with his fingers and uttered a hollow moan. “A wire to the Colonnade Hotel will always find me,” he continued, “and see here,

sir, if he is not caught before daylight, offer a reward in my name. I shall pay £1,000 to the man who captures him alive, £10,000 to the man who *kills him!*”

The last words were uttered with an animosity so venomous that the Governor shuddered and shook his head. But Mr. Daunt made a fierce gesture of impatience, and the old gentleman thereupon offered him his arm and led him from the room. Within two hours of that moment my master and I were seated together in a private dining-room at the Grand Hotel, discussing an early dinner, for we were both very hungry, and Mr. Daunt was enraptured at the success that had attended his plans. My master's new valet, John Williams, served us at table in place of a hotel waiter; and an excellent servant he proved to be. He had only one blemish—he was excessively nervous; he started and shook like an aspen at every unexpected sound, and once when a servant entered with some dishes he spilt half-a-pint of wine into my lap.

Next morning, after several interviews with the police, in which it is needless to say John Williams took no part, we left the town in a special train, but not for London. We went first to Southampton, and thence to Cowes, off which charming spot lay my master's magnificent steam yacht, the *Calliope*.

An electric launch conveyed us to her side, and there we were greeted by Miss Ellen Hardcastle. “Oh, Douglas, Douglas!” she cried—and the sound of that cry brought scalding tears to more eyes than mine.

An hour later the *Calliope* glided from the roadstead, and Mr. Daunt and I watched her stately sailing—standing on the balcony of the Squadron Club-house.

When she had disappeared he turned to me and said, "She kissed me, Rupert; think of it, boy—she kissed me!"

"God bless her!" I muttered.

He seized and wrung my hand, then cried out in a choking voice, "I feel so happy—happy as a boy. Come and have a drink!"

They were married at Lisbon.

CHAPTER XV

*ELLEN HARDCASTLE RE-ENTERS OUR
STORY*

ENTERING the coffee room of the Colonnade Hotel one morning somewhat earlier than usual, I perceived beside my master's plate a bulky letter whose wrapper was so profusely covered with superscriptions, post-marks and erasions that I could not help remarking it. Mr. Vigorous Daunt and I had returned to London three days before from a rambling tour on the Continent, during which we had paid flying visits to quite a score of cities. A cursory examination of the envelope revealed the fact that this particular letter had followed us persistently from place to place, with the result that its first address had been smothered and almost stamped out, and scarcely a speck of white on either surface showed through the maze of scrawls. The word "Urgent" printed in one corner explained the motive of its vain wanderings, for it had been originally addressed to the Colonnade Hotel.

I conceived a strange interest in the letter, and the more I looked at it the stronger my curiosity

became. I cannot explain why, but I felt increasingly persuaded that it contained matter which was destined to exercise an influence upon our lives, therefore I awaited my master with uncommon impatience. He was by habit an early riser, but that morning he broke his rule and did not appear until nine o'clock, a full thirty minutes later than his customary breakfast hour. Absurd as it may seem, the circumstance confirmed my superstitious regard of the letter, and yet I am not an extraordinarily superstitious man.

Mr. Daunt's expression was morose. He looked gloomy and out of sorts.

"Morning, Granville," he said curtly. "I am late—you should not have waited."

"Liver?" I inquired, with sympathy.

"Liver be hanged!" he snapped.

"Insomnia, perhaps?"

His brows met over scowling eyes. "No!" he growled. "Be kind enough to stop guessing and mind your own business!"

Though somewhat nettled at his tone, I accepted his advice and applied myself to a fried sole, but I watched him nevertheless.

Presently his eyes lighted on the letter. Taking it up he examined it as I had done—turning it over and over in his hands. At length he glanced at me and said:

"It's two months old, but I'd have received it three days earlier if the fools had kept it for me here."

"It is marked *urgent*," I suggested.

"H'm! Do you hold a brief for this hotel?"

"I thought it was liver," I muttered.

"Then you were wrong!" he snapped. "It was : dream!"

"A dream!" I repeated triumphantly. "Ask any doctor——"

But my master raised his hand. "There are dreams and dreams," he said coldly. "I dreamed last night of Ellen Hardcastle—or rather Ellen Bryan, as she is now. No fit of biliousness inspired that dream. Ha! you change colour—sneer at me now, confound you!"

"I beg your pardon!" I muttered.

"So you should," said my master, "if you have a spark of romance in your composition."

"The dream?" I asked.

"An evil one!" he cried. "The woman I love, the woman we both love, appeared to me as in a vision and besought me for help!" He crashed his fist suddenly on the table. "Granville! It was a warning! For ten months we have not heard from her, and never before have I dreamed like that. She needs my help!"

His words had thrilled me, but I shook my head. "She has her husband," I muttered. "The husband you gave her!"

The little brown man looked me in the eyes. "An escaped convict," he said grimly, "a man with a reward upon his head! A man we know nothing of!"

"Except that she loves him!"

He bit his lips, then with an effort shrugged his shoulders. "You are right," he muttered. "But it was an awful dream. It has marked me. I feel years older."

"You'll soon forget it," I answered cheerfully; then artfully suggested, "Your correspondence will assist you?"

Mr. Daunt tore open the letter; it was a bulky document consisting of four pages of foolscap, which were, however, inscribed only upon one side. My master held the pages before his face. I watched the blank backs of the paper for a moment with a feeling of inexplicable wonder and excitement, then Mr. Daunt's hands fell, and I saw his face. It was white to the lips, but his eyes were glowing like coals.

"What is it?" I gasped.

"It—it is from her!" he said hoarsely.

"From Ellen?"

"Yes!"

I started to my feet. "Heavens! What a coincidence!" I cried.

"Sit down!" he commanded sternly. "You know nothing yet!"

"What do you know?"

"That she needs my help. I feel it."

"Read!" I cried. "Read!"

"No, you—my eyes are dazed. Read it aloud."

He thrust the letter across the table. I seized it and read:—

RHODES,

— . 18— .

MY DEAR BENEFACTOR,—

My letter sent from Tunis seven months ago has already made known to you the infirm condition of my poor husband's health. I have not written since because I had determined not to sadden and weary you with the monotonous accounts of our unceasing misfortunes. But my resolve has wasted with my strength, and at length I cannot longer conceal from you, my best of friends, the hopeless misery in which I am plunged. After leaving Tunis we went to Constantinople, and there before long Douglas fell ill with a fever which not only increased the ravages of his consumption, but left him afterwards in a condition bordering upon mental imbecility. His old besetting fear of recapture and imprisonment became redoubled—nay, a thousand times intensified. He beheld in every stranger a disguised English police emissary—and it was often impossible for me to soothe his alarms. His one desire in life at that time was to fly from civilisation, to bury himself in some unknown and unapproachable place and there await the end, for he knew that he was doomed. In this melancholy quest we departed from Stamboul and travelled through Armenia. The country, however, was in a fearfully unsettled, wild condition and overrun with Turkish troops, who massacred the inhabitants without mercy. Frequently our own lives were imperilled—and finally we were obliged to retrace

our steps and take refuge in Beyrout. There we met and were protected by an Admiral of the Turkish Navy, who had gained a dreadful reputation for cruelty. He showed us every kindness, yet from the first I feared and distrusted him. But my poor husband, whose reason was already unhinged, conceived a blind attachment for the man, I think chiefly because he saw that he was powerful and willing to protect us. They became great friends. Oblivious of my warnings and my wishes, my husband even went so far as to confide to the Admiral our history. Mustapha Hamdi Buluk Bey—such is his name—pretended for Douglas the greatest pity and affection, and for a time even I was deceived by his protestations. He proposed that we should accompany him to the island of Rhodes—where he possessed great estates and a castle. He persuaded us that once lodged in that castle—and he offered us his endless hospitality—Douglas would be for all time secure from his haunting terror of pursuit, and able to spend his last days in ease and comfort. My poor husband caught so eagerly at the idea, and evinced such excessive joy in its anticipation, that I had not the courage to oppose it. Buluk Bey carried us in his warship to Rhodes, and installed us in his castle. Since then he has been kind, too kind—for his kindness is inspired by the basest selfishness. He knows that Douglas is dying—and he waits impatiently for that day. Already he has spoken to me. He wishes to make me his wife—in the European way,

he says. Perhaps it is true, for he knows that I am not without fortune. But, oh! I hate him so! And Douglas; Douglas is slowly, but, ah, so surely—dying—and his mind is gone—gone! He no longer recognises even me. Day after day he passes seated in an armchair before a fire—babbling meaningless soliloquies—and coughing, coughing, coughing! He is a shadow—a ghost! He cannot move without aid—his only emotion is an unreasoning, ceaseless, unspoken terror! I have died a thousand deaths in watching him. Buluk says he watches me! He is a snake!—a basilisk! I tear him from the bottom of my soul. His presence sickens me. Oh, my friend, I tremble for the future. God knows what will become of me. Douglas cannot live for many days—and then I shall be alone. If you can and will—come to me—save me! I ask you in my dead mother's name—my mother whom you loved.

ELLEN BRYAN.

I folded up the manuscript and glanced at Mr. Daunt. The light in his eyes flashed and faded, then flashed again. His teeth chattered, and he gripped the table with both hands in an iron clutch.

"Control yourself, sir; you'll frighten the waiters," I said in a low voice.

He nodded, bit his lips, and with a great effort regained self-mastery.

"Granville, you must go to her. You may take my yacht."

"No, sir, I can reach the place more quickly by travelling overland."

"I shall, however, send the yacht after you. My purse is at your disposal."

"Come with me!" I implored.

"No," he answered firmly. "You had better start immediately. Give me that daily paper." I handed it to him and stood up.

"Any commands?" I asked.

"None. You may go!"

I hurried to my room and commenced with feverish haste to pack a trunk, but within five minutes the door opened and Mr. Daunt crossed the threshold.

"Stop packing!" he commanded curtly. "Your labour is in vain."

"Why?"

"Read that paragraph!" He handed me the paper and pointed to a certain column. Then, with slow and measured steps, he marched to the fireplace, and, setting his back against the mantel, curiously surveyed me. His face was like a mask, rigid, expressionless; his eyes were the hue of lead.

I looked at the paper and read:—

PAINFUL TRAGEDY AT CONSTANTINOPLE

(From Our Special Correspondent.)

Constantinople, Tuesday Morning

Last night, Mrs. Ellen Williams—née Hardcastle—who, it is said, is the eldest daughter of Mr.

ELLEN HARDCASTLE RE-ENTERS 277

Salem Hardcastle, the notorious American millionaire and trust magnate, committed suicide by leaping overboard from the deck of the Turkish cruiser, *Abdul Mehmed*, while being conveyed here from the island of Rhodes. Her body has not been recovered.

Later.

Inquiries have elicited the fact that Mrs. Williams and her late husband have been spending the last few months as the guests of Rear-Admiral Hamdi Buluk Bey, at that gentleman's private residence on the Island of Rhodes. Mr. Williams died there last Friday of phthisis, and it is supposed that the unfortunate lady destroyed herself during a fit of temporary insanity occasioned by grief at her husband's death. It will be remembered that Admiral Buluk Bey has been selected by the Porte to represent the Turkish fleet in the forthcoming British Naval Review at Spithead. He proceeds thither in his flagship, the *Abdul Mehmed*, almost immediately

Later.

Rear-Admiral Buluk Bey has given orders that a splendid memorial in marble be erected to the memory of his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Williams, on his estate at Rhodes.

Williams was the name that Douglas Bryan had assumed after my master had effected his escape from an English prison.

Having read the paragraph, I felt strangely weak, and fumbled my way to a chair.

"She is dead!" I muttered.

"Yes!" My master nodded and blinked his eyes; then very calmly he took out his case, selected and lighted a cigarette.

"She is dead!" I repeated, hoarsely. "Ellen Hardcastle is dead!"

"Ellen Bryan!" he corrected, gravely.

Something like a hand was clutching at my throat. "I can't think!" I choked out.

"It is not your province," said my master, drily. "It will be sufficient if you act. Bear up, Rupert. Be a man! Look at me, I loved her, too!"

But he was choking as well, and he blinked his eyes with furious energy.

"She is dead—dead!" I groaned.

"Listen to me! Look at me!"

"Yes!" I obeyed, but I could not see him.

"She died to save herself!" he said quietly.

"Great Heaven!" I exclaimed. "No—impossible!"

"Fool!" he growled. "It is I—Vigorous Daunt—who tell you so! Have you read her letter, and can you doubt? Buluk Bey is a Turk, and she—the most beautiful woman on earth—was in his power! What more need be said?"

"Revenge!" I shouted, springing to my feet. "He is coming to England!"

My master smiled, but his dull eyes of a sudden sprang into flame. "In all this the hand of fate

is clearly revealed," he said, in a low, intense voice. "By the way, Rupert, how far do you feel disposed to go in securing your revenge?"

"As far as you——"

Mr. Daunt lifted his right hand, and with the index finger gently stroked his throat.

"Will you risk—the halter?"

"Yes!"

"Good boy! We understand each other."

"We must first make sure of his guilt?"

"Naturally; I would not kill a dog on suspicion. Now to business. Go at once to the Admiralty and find out for me all you can of the *Abdul Mehmed*, her equipment, armament and so forth. On your way send a telegram to Denton—he is staying at St. Ernin's—and request him to lunch with me to-day."

Denton was the new captain of my master's steam yacht, the *Calliope*.

"What do you want with Denton?" I asked.

But Mr. Daunt turned on me like an adder, his brow knitted, his eyes flashing fire. "Insolent!" he shouted. "Take your hat!"

I obeyed.

"Now go!"

I left the room in silence, and proceeded to execute my errands.

Returning four hours later (for the information needed took me long to acquire) I found my master already seated at lunch with Captain Denton.

Mr. Daunt, scarcely heeding my arrival, at once resumed the conversation that my entrance had interrupted.

"I want you to understand, Denton, that I want to know that if occasion arises, you will obey my orders unhesitatingly?"

"To the death!"

"And your men?"

"They would uphold me to the death. All are devoted to your service. Have no fear, sir—they will do as they are told. I promise it!"

Mr. Daunt nodded and looked at me. "Have you executed your commission, Granville?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Report, then."

"The *Abdul Mehmed* is an iron-clad unarmoured cruiser of an obsolete type, with a displacement of 3,500 tons. She was built in '86."

"Good! Her armament?"

"She carries four 8.2, eight 4.7 Krupp guns and also six machine guns; she is provided with torpedo tubes."

"Her speed?"

"Fifteen knots."

"You hear, Denton?" cried my master.

The Captain nodded.

Mr. Daunt gazed at him piercingly. "The odds are heavy," he said slowly. "Remember the *Calliope* is only a yacht."

"But she is very strong, and built of the best steel."

"True—but she has only two guns—and they are toys compared with the Turk's."

"But the *Abdul Mehmed*, as Captain Granville has told us, is an old ship and, though iron-clad, unarmoured. We need not fight with guns—our speed is superior—we could ram her with ease."

My master clapped his hands. "Good!" he cried, his eyes sparkling. "That is the talk I like to hear. Now listen. The Turk will be at Spithead for the review. The *Calliope* will be there, too, in your command. The Turkish Admiral is my most deadly enemy. I propose to revenge myself upon him while he is in England—but if I fail" (he gnashed his teeth) "then I must depend on the *Calliope* and you. We shall in that case follow the Turk when he leaves England, follow him like his shadow, and once in the open waters away from observation—strike; and strike to kill! I give you now an opportunity to withdraw. If you are afraid—speak!"

Denton shrugged his shoulders. "We could arrange the affair so that it might appear to be an accident," he answered quietly. "Offer to race him—and ram him as we run."

"Good! You may go. Set out to-night for Cowes and take the *Calliope* as soon as possible to Portsmouth."

"I obey, sir."

Denton rose, bowed and sallied forth on his errand.

Mr. Daunt and I looked at each other. Staring

into my eyes he said slowly, as though speaking to himself, "I have now to wait for Buluk Bey's arrival. Then I must make his acquaintance and win his confidence and friendship. To do the latter, as he is a Turk, it would be as well to first impress him with my wealth and social importance—but how? He will doubtless stay at Portsmouth. Ha! I have it! Granville!"

"Sir!"

"Take this evening's train to Portsmouth. Engage in my name a suite of at least ten rooms—in the best hotel. Afterwards call—for me—upon all the notabilities and leave my cards with them. Pay particular attention to the naval people—officers of the fleet and so on."

"Yes, sir."

"They will all return your calls, for to-morrow my name shall be famous in the land. I intend to give England a first-class cruiser, or rather the money to procure one. I shall send a cheque to the Admiralty this very afternoon."

"Good Lord, sir!" I gasped, "your revenge is likely to cost you dear. The price of a first-class cruiser is at least three quarters of a million!"

"A mere bagatelle!" he replied, with a contemptuous shrug. "The money will be well spent. But to resume. To all who return your calls issue invitations, on parchment scrolls with gold clasps, for a naval ball to be held on the last evening of the week preceding the review. Engage for that some large hall—and make your arrangements on

a scale suitable to my reputation. I mean to say spare no expense—and remember that, although I wish the affair to be well attended, it must be brilliantly fashionable. If you manage well, and advertise my name judiciously, you will be sued for invitations and able to pick and choose as you please.”

“I shall do my best, sir!”

“Report to me every day by mail. That is all.”

On the following day and for many days thereafter, all England rang with the name of Vigorous Daunt, for he carried out his intention and presented the nation with the greatest gift that had ever been received from the hands of a private individual. But I did not see my master for the next month, nor did I hear from him although I communicated with him regularly. During that time I worked like an engine in his service, and my labours were crowned with success. The Billionaire's forthcoming grand naval ball was the universal topic of public and private conversation throughout Portsmouth from the moment the invitations were issued, and I contrived that the enthusiasm so created should not diminish for lack of stimulus. I engaged the Town Hall for the function and arranged with a firm of caterers to supply supper for five hundred guests at the rate of fifteen guineas per head. I paid another firm £10,000 for flowers to be used in decorating the building, while the invitations themselves, printed upon parchment,

clasped with miniature battleships made of eighteen-carat gold, cost £2,000. These facts I suffered to be extracted from me by subtle interviewers, and they were exaggerated in their subsequent relation. It will therefore be conceded that I fulfilled my little master's instructions to the letter.

How Mr. Daunt occupied himself during those three weeks I can guess ; and although he refused to satisfy my curiosity, I dare swear that he passed not many idle moments, for this reason : when he rejoined me he could speak the Turkish tongue with passable accent and fluency, but at the time we parted he knew as little of it as an East End costermonger.

He burst in on me like a whirlwind on the evening preceding that fixed for the ball, while I was dressing for dinner.

Seizing both my hands he wrung them violently and cried, "Rupert, I have seen him !"

"Him—whom ?" I gasped.

"Buluk Bey !"

"Where ?"

"In London, at the Turkish Embassy. He left his flagship at Naples twelve days ago and travelled overland here—on State business it is said—but I know better. He came here to be treated surgically. I have heard privately that he met with an accident while cleaning a pistol and was shot through the palm of his right hand. My informant told me that he is horribly afraid of tetanus. He has been in London a week, three days of which

he passed in bed. He is now recovered, but he still wears his arm in a sling."

"Have you—spoken to him?"

"We are the best of friends. He will attend the ball to-morrow night. His ship was expected to arrive here to-day."

"It has arrived," I cried; "this morning—soon after daylight. The salutes awoke me."

"So much the better," said Mr. Daunt. "But dinner must be ready and I have yet to dress.
Au revoir!"

Next day I was obliged to do so much and work so hard that I was wearied out by evening fall, and even a needle bath failed to properly revive my energies. But my master was indefatigable. Punctually at the appointed hour he waited to receive his guests, looking, as sailors say, fresh as paint. Contrary to his custom he wore that evening a suit of dead black. I had not seen him wear any colour save brown for years (except for the purposes of disguise) and the circumstance more than anything else proved to me how deeply he mourned the dead lady—since out of respect to her memory he had put aside his most cherished affectation.

The ball was a memorable success. It was not only attended by a great number of the most fashionable people of London society, but by the majority of the more important officers of the assembled British fleet. To each guest was presented at supper a memento of the occasion consisting of an

engraved menu card composed of solid gold. The cotillon presents were also my master's gifts: golden anchor brooches, sprinkled liberally with diamonds. All these he had brought with him from London in order to supplement and crown my efforts. An orchestra of a hundred violins, twenty harps, ten flutes and five cornets, provided us with music. The walls and ceiling of the great hall were completely concealed by banked masses of the rarest hothouse flowers, arranged in naval devices and to represent battleships in action. Ten thousand tiny multi-coloured electric glow lights, peeping through their petals, lighted up the place, and when the room was thronged with a multitude of brilliantly attired men and women, the scene was one of unparalleled and unforgettable magnificence.

Mr. Vigorous Daunt was in his element. He moved about among his guests with a regally condescending air; and where he went he was followed by reverential eyes, which seemed to say, "You are a spendthrift, but we cannot quite despise you because of your princely gift to England, because we are indebted to you for this, and because we worship your inexhaustible resources." His manners were perfect. No prince born to the purple could have surpassed him. When he spoke he smiled, and with such a genial grace that his condescension was immediately forgotten and an impression of charm as instantly created. I watched him, and although I knew him well, nevertheless I won-

dered at him more and more, and often I said to myself, "Mr. Daunt, you may be, indeed you are, the vainest little inan on earth, but after all there is a substantial foundation for your tremendous self-esteem. You are great—great even in your vanity!" I am sure that night he thought himself a king, for much homage was paid him, and he always lived for the most part in his imagination.

Buluk Bey was late. He did not arrive until eleven, and I did not see him enter. But my master brought him to me soon. His right hand was in a sling, and I was glad for I could not have taken it in mine.

"Granville," said my master, "permit me to present you to my dear friend Admiral Hamdi Buluk Bey. Admiral, this is my secretary, Captain Rupert Granville. Granville, His Excellency does not dance, therefore you must not allow him to feel bored. I leave him in your hands."

"A thousand thanks!" I murmured. "Your Excellency, I am really grateful to you, you have provided me with a legitimate excuse to refrain from dancing."

"You dislike dancing then?" he asked, in perfect English. His voice was low-pitched, but of a curiously thrilling metallic timbre.

"No, but I am weary."

To my surprise the Admiral was not a rascal in appearance. He was a stoutly built man of about the middle height, attired, of course, in uni-

form. His skin was dark and sallow, but his features were regular and even handsome. A long, thin, black moustache lined his upper lip and trailed upwards past his curved nostrils; his chin was not shaven, but naturally hairless. He seemed about five-and-forty years of age. I found fault chiefly with his eyes. They were black, impenetrable, inscrutable; the eyes of an Oriental, beautiful in their way, but sensual and cruel. His mouth was well-shaped, but the lips were somewhat thick. His hair was black, streaked with grey, and very curly. It flashed into my mind that there was African blood in his veins.

Quite unconsciously I stared at him longer than I should have done, and he said quietly:

"You should not readily forget me, Captain Granville."

"I beg your Excellency's pardon," I muttered, hastily; "I forgot my manners in seeking to recall your face."

"It is familiar to you?"

"You strangely resemble an intimate and long dead friend," I lied.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I should prefer to resemble a living one. I am superstitious."

"Ten thousand pardons, I hope your Excellency will excuse my repeated blunders. Ah, I see the Duchess of——, she wishes me to present you to her. May I have the honour?"

"With much pleasure!"

Thereafter I hovered near him, waiting on him

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like a servant, watching his every gesture and expression. On bidding Mr. Daunt good-night, he accepted an invitation to lunch on the following day.



CHAPTER XVI

THE TURK WHO CAUGHT A TARTAR

I SHALL never forget that luncheon. It took place in my master's private dining-room. Buluk Bey, subtly encouraged by the little brown man, conversationally expanded and unctuously recounted for our edification stories of his exploits in the boudoir and on the battlefield, which sufficiently proved him to be a treacherous and cold-blooded savage. Although a professed Mohammedan, he drank wine, and drank deeply. He gave us, indeed, so little opportunity to respect him that it was a positive relief to me when at last a waiter informed Mr. Daunt that a man urgently desired to see him. My master desired the servant to discover the visitor's name.

"He is a common sailor," replied the waiter, "a waterman I think. He refused to give his name, but says he has a message for you."

"Ask him to give you his message."

The waiter bowed and departed; presently he returned carrying a small flat square parcel wrapped in tissue paper that seemed damp.

"He told me to give you this, sir—and he said he will wait for the reward."

"Reward!" repeated my master. "What reward?"

"I don't know, sir."

Mr. Daunt looked at his guest. "Will your Excellency kindly allow me to investigate the contents of this package?"

"My dear sir, certainly," replied the Turk.

My master hastily removed the paper covering of the parcel and disclosed to view a piece of folded linen resembling a serviette. It was moist and discoloured and smelled strongly of sea-water.

"What the deuce is this?" he exclaimed. Then clearing a space before him he unfolded and spread out the linen upon the table.

Buluk Bey lighted a cigarette and made some trivial remark to me; but his eyes wandered to my master's occupation. His breeding was hardly skin deep. I did not reply to him.

Mr. Daunt put both his elbows on the table, leaned his head on his hands and gazed steadfastly at the linen. So he remained for fully two minutes, then he sat up and glanced at the waiter. "Bring the man here, immediately!" he commanded.

"Yes, sir."

My master looked at the Turk and smiled.

"I suspect that some lady has attempted a

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practical joke on your Excellency," he said. "This linen—it is a serviette, has an absurd message sewn into it with red silk thread, addressed to me. It is evidently a woman's work, it is so neat."

Buluk Bey uttered a curious guttural exclamation. "Allah! and the message?" he cried.

"Listen! 'Vigorous Daunt richly reward finder.' That is the heading. Underneath are sewn these words, 'Imprisoned—ship—Buluk Bey. Help!' Below those again is a large capital letter 'E' and what looks like a small 'e'. Probably the writer, or rather the sempstress, intended to inscribe her name but changed her mind. What does your Excellency think of it?"

The Turkish Admiral without answering stretched out his hand and rudely snatching up the serviette held it before his face as though to examine it. Some strong emotion possessed him for his hand trembled violently.

At that moment the waiter returned accompanied by a red-faced, rather jolly-looking young seaman, who stared about him with open-mouthed surprise and embarrassment, lurching as he walked.

"This is the man, sir," said the waiter, with a bow.

My master nodded, and the sailor clumsily saluted by pulling his forelock.

"What is your name?" demanded Mr. Daunt.

"Reuben Ferrar, sir, if you please, sir—I'm a waterman, sir."

"You brought me this cloth." He pointed

gravely to the linen with which the Turk still concealed his face.

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you get it?"

"If you please, sir, I picked it up in the sea, sir. I'd taken a fare—a furrin gentleman—out to that Turkish man-o'-war, sir—and while I were waiting alongside, sir, for him to come off, that there wiper, sir, were pitched out er one er the ports, sir. Well, sir, it floated by my boat, so I fished it out, and bein' as how I can read a bit—not so to say a scholar, sir—I thought as how, sir—seein' how the wiper was writ with your name, an' hearing as how you was a stayin' here—as I'd oughter bring it to yer, sir." He ducked his head and pulled his forelock.

"Quite right, my man," said Mr. Daunt. "Rupert, kindly give Mr. Ferrar a sovereign."

I obeyed and the waterman visibly swelled out with delight.

"Thankee, sir. I'll drink your honour's health," he stammered.

"Good-bye, Mr. Ferrar," and Mr. Daunt signed to the waiter, who at once let out our visitor.

When he had gone Buluk Bey put down the serviette and looked at Mr. Daunt. His face was calm, indifferent, expressionless.

"You were foolish to tip the fellow, Mr. Daunt," he said quietly, "because thereby you encouraged his dishonest ingenuity. This is an old trick of

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sailormen to extort money from the credulous. I have heard of it scores of times."

"Your Excellency should have warned me!" cried my master. "I would have given the rascal in charge."

The Turk shrugged his shoulders. "The fact is I have a weakness for sailors. I am a sailor myself. I should not have cared to have been the cause of his punishment."

Mr. Daunt smiled, and recovering the serviette, rolled it up and put it in his pocket. "By the way, Admiral," said he, "I am most anxious to inspect your flagship. Would it be possible to do so this afternoon?"

Buluk Day repressed a start. "I am sincerely distressed to disoblige you, Mr. Daunt, but the fact is I leave to-night for Stamboul. I have been unexpectedly recalled by the Sublime Porte."

"You will not wait for the review?"

"Unhappily I cannot, my commands are definite and urgent. Under the circumstances I must ask you to excuse me—even now—for I have still to pay my respects to, and take leave of, the Port Commandant and the Admiral of the British Fleet."

My master regarded the Turk with a curious smile. "It is strange that you did not mention the matter before," he remarked; "your suddenness overwhelms me. You are jesting with me, surely."

"Indeed, no."

"Then, of course, your Excellency, I shall not

detain you." Mr. Daunt rose to his feet and bowed deeply to the Turk. "By the way, your Excellency, are you acquainted with the German language?" he asked suddenly.

Buluk Bey looked extremely surprised. "Why, no," he replied—"why do you ask?"

My master laughed lightly. "I am so annoyed that you are going away that I want to swear at my secretary, of course without transgressing too far the laws of good breeding."

Having said this, with the speed of thought, he turned on me the face of a fury.

"*Strafe mich Helle!*" he shouted in German. "Get up, Rupert, and stun for me this man. *Donner und blitzen!* You have only a second before the waiter returns. *Donnerwetter! Hein!*"

For a moment I was dumbfounded with astonishment; then perceiving my cue I sprang to my feet.

"Your Excellency," I cried, "for Heaven's sake intercede for me! Mr. Daunt threatens to discharge me because you are going away so soon. He says it is my fault!"

As I poured out the words I approached the Admiral who stood stupidly looking from one to the other of us.

"What is it? Am I dreaming—or have you suddenly gone mad?" he cried.

"This is the explanation," I replied, and struck him with my clenched fist between his eyes, with all the strength of my body.

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He toppled over insensible on the instant, but I caught him ere he fell. My master stood with his back against the door, rubbing his hands and chuckling like a little demon. "Carry him into my room and put him on the bed. Then lock the outer door," he commanded.

I obeyed in silence but with difficulty, for the Turk was a heavy man. As I entered the bedroom I heard my master's voice giving some directions to the waiter, and presently he followed me, closing and locking the door behind him.

I faced him, breathing hard from my exertions.

"What does it all mean?" I demanded.

"It means that Ellen Hardcastle was not drowned. Buluk Bey fathered that report to suit his own purposes. She is alive and confined as a prisoner on board his flagship. She sewed that message on the serviette, sewed it with her own hands and cast it overboard—hoping it would reach me. Thank God it has, and in time! This pig of a Turk will rue the day he lifted his eyes to her. I swear it, by God! He lied when he said he had been recalled to Turkey. Though, but for me, he would have gone to-night. He suddenly divined that I suspected him. It was fear that made him lie, fear that would have made him fly from me! But he is in my power now, and we shall see, we shall see!"

I gazed at my master spell-bound with surprise and joy and admiration.

"Ah!" I gasped, "how quickly you think! How marvellously you penetrate to the bottom of things! You are a great man!"

"The greatest on earth," he answered, with inimitable conceit. But I was so overjoyed to consider there was a possibility of Ellen Hardcastle being still alive that I heartily agreed with him, because he had shown me that possibility.

"Yes, you are the greatest on earth, the very greatest!" I exclaimed.

"Give your prisoner another tap behind the ear, then strip him."

"Yes, sir."

Ten minutes later Mr. Daunt had changed clothes with Buluk Bey and was hard at work before a mirror making up his face to resemble that of the Turk. I kept our prisoner in an unconscious condition for a further period of half an hour by occasionally dealing him a sharp blow upon various parts of his cranium. By that time my master so perfectly resembled his Excellency in every detail of both face and form that even Buluk Bey's mother would have failed to distinguish between them. We then bound the Turk with cords so that he could not move so much as a finger, and gagged him so tightly that he could not have uttered a sound to save his life.

Satisfied on these points, Mr. Daunt covered his body with a counterpane—turned to me and said, "I have sent the waiter out to buy me a large Saratoga trunk! It should arrive presently. You

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must receive it and drag it in here. The waiter must not enter!"

A knock sounded on the door as he spoke.

It was the waiter with the trunk.

"Granville," cried my master in a loud voice as I opened the door, "tell the waiter to send up two men in about ten minutes to carry this trunk downstairs again for you when you have packed it. I want you to send it aboard the *Calliope*—to Captain Denton."

"Very good, Mr. Daunt," I replied.

"You heard?" I asked the waiter.

"Yes, sir; I'll send two men up at once, sir." He hurried off.

I dragged the trunk into the room. It was large and bound with iron. "What next?" I asked.

"Silence!" hissed my master. "Work! do not speak! Put the Turk in the box and jam his body tight with pillows?" I obeyed.

Mr. Daunt presently opened one of his own trunks and produced a tool box. Selecting from this a gimlet he bored several holes in the lid of the Turk's coffin; he then closed and locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

Afterwards he sat down before his desk and rapidly scrawled off a letter.

There came a knock at the door and he sprang to his feet.

"You will find the *Calliope's* steam launch waiting at the quay," he said quickly. "Give the officer in charge the box and this letter. Tell him

to take both to Captain Denton immediately. Return here as soon as you can, and pay our hotel bill. Tell the manager to send our things on to London to-morrow if we don't return here to night, as we may go for a cruise in the *Calliope*."

He vanished into the next room as I opened the outer door. Two men in livery thereupon entered, who, at my directions, bore out the trunk, but not without previously protesting at its weight. It would not fit into a cab, so I was obliged to hire a van, and follow myself in a hansom. The drive seemed painfully protracted. But at last we reached the launch, and I thankfully completed my unpleasant task. Hastening back to the hotel, I paid our bill, and repaired to my master's room. On calling out my name he opened the door and, silently pointing to a chair, placed his finger on his lips. I sat down, and he, having relocked the door, cast himself upon a lounge. Thus we remained until dusk commenced to fall. At the stroke of six Mr. Daunt arose, put on Admiral Buluk Bey's cocked hat and marched to the door. "Come!" he said.

We left the hotel arm in arm, and drove swiftly to the waterside. The Turkish Commander's launch was in waiting. My master strode towards it with the gait of a drunken man, and obliged me to assist him aboard.

"Your commands, Excellency?" asked a middy in Turkish, saluting as he spoke.

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My master replied in a thick, drunken voice, his words interspersed with hiccoughs, "To the flagship, curse you!" I discovered then for the first time that he could speak Turkish.

The midshipman saluted and spoke to his men. The launch thereupon pushed out from the quay, and within a minute we were speeding towards the warships.

An hour later we brought up alongside the Turkish ironclad; but the counterfeit Buluk Bey was by that time apparently so intoxicated that the midshipman and I had much trouble to get him up the side of the vessel. Once on the deck he seized with his free hand the arm of a lieutenant who received us. "Take me to my cabin," he muttered, in Turkish. "I feel very unwell; my friend is a doctor—he will attend to me."

The officer smiled sarcastically, but he immediately obeyed, and between us we dragged my master along the deck, then down some steps, until finally we reached the private cabin of Admiral Buluk Bey.

It was a large, airy room, luxuriously furnished, being one of a group that seemingly was entirely devoted to the Commander's use.

My master sat down heavily upon a chair that was placed before a desk, then shading his eyes with his hand, he stared solemnly at the lieutenant, swaying from side to side the while.

"Bring me—the white woman!" he commanded huskily.

"Excellency!" exclaimed the officer in an angry tone. "Shall I send Hassim to you?"

"Yes!"

He saluted haughtily, and left the cabin. Presently an old negro entered, smirking and salaaming to the floor.

"The white woman!" growled Mr. Daunt.

"Master," said the negro, "may your shadow never grow less."

"Bring me the woman!"

"My life is yours!"

The old man backed out of the room. We heard the sounds without of a snapping lock and the altercation of subdued male and female voices. Presently the negro returned followed by a heavily veiled figure of a woman clad in conventional Turkish attire, and behind her an old and hideous negress.

My master pointed at the negro. "Go!" he commanded, "and take with you the other slave! Shut the door after you!"

Next moment we were alone with the veiled figure.

Mr. Daunt hid his face in his hands. "Look at her, Granville!" he gasped, "I am choking!"

I sprang to her side, and raising her veil gazed into the beautiful eyes of Ellen Hardcastle. More of her face I could not see, for her mouth was bandaged; her arms, too, were bound to her side.

But in a moment she was free. She threw herself with a strangled cry into my arms. "Ah!

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Thank God! Thank God! You have come to save me! God bless you!"

She had recognised me instantly, but not my master,

He stood up, and she clung to me shuddering. "Don't let him touch me," she moaned.

"It is Mr. Daunt," I muttered. "He has disguised himself as Buluk Bey in order to effect your escape."

She drew herself away from me and gazed at him spell-bound. "Is it possible?" she gasped.

"Has this man treated you kindly?" said Mr. Daunt.

"He has treated me horribly!" she said slowly—"horribly! He wants me to be his wife. He intended, after we left England, to force a marriage upon me according to the European rites, because he knows I am rich, and he wants my money. He brought a priest here to the ship at Naples on our way, and he threatened me with death if I refused—but I seized a knife and struck him through the hand—I tried to kill him. He is a coward. He thought he would get lock-jaw so he left the ship to be treated ashore, and I did not see him again until yesterday. But his servants, those dreadful negroes, beat me terribly at his command, before he left, with sticks; and again they beat me yesterday until I fainted, because I threw a piece of linen out of the porthole. I had sewn a message on it, hoping that fate would send it to you, but they did not know that!"

"I got it," said my master. "Until then I thought you were dead. It has brought me to your side."

The girl clasped her hands. "Thank God!" she said. "It was all I could do, for ever since I have been here I have been kept gagged. They would not let me write, but they allowed me to sew—until yesterday."

"Providence directed you!" said my master, solemnly. "But silence now! Hide your face with your veil. We have yet to escape! Hassim!" he shouted of a sudden.

"Master," the door opened, and the negro appeared.

"I am going for a trip in the launch with this woman and my friend here. Order it to be made ready immediately."

The negro's eyes almost bulged out of his head. "Master!" he gasped.

"Go! curse you!" growled Mr. Daunt.

The old fellow vanished, groaning with surprise.

"Come!" said Mr. Daunt, and striding forward he offered the lady his arm.

Next moment we were on deck. Two more saw us all bestowed without accident in the launch.

"Where to, Excellency?" asked the officer in charge.

"To the yacht of the Englishman, Vigorous Daunt, the *Caliope*!"

"Yes, Excellency!"

"You can uncock your pistol, Granville!" said

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my master to me in English. "We are quite safe now!"

It was indeed as he had said. Half-an-hour later we were received aboard my master's yacht by Captain Denton and conducted to the saloon.

In the middle of the floor stood a large Saratoga trunk.

"Captain," said Mr. Daunt, "is steam up?"

"Yes! But is it really you, sir?"

"Certainly—you received my letter, did you not?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"We shall start in less than half-an-hour. You may leave us. See that we are not disturbed."

The Captain departed, and Mr. Daunt, striding up to the box, unlocked it and raised the lid. At a sign I helped him to drag out the Turk.

"Free him," said my master curtly.

I slashed his bonds with my sheath knife, and Buluk Bey, after several painful efforts, contrived to stand erect. He looked dazed and very unwell, a most unsightly figure in my little master's clothes, which were much too small for him. He stared at his counterfeit as if unable to believe his eyes, but presently catching sight of the lady, his escaped victim, he uttered a fierce oath.

Mr. Daunt drew off his false moustache and rubbed his face with a kerchief.

"Do you recognise me now?" he demanded.

"You—are—Vigorous Daunt!"

"I am!"

"May you burn for all eternity!"

"Thanks, your Excellency; thank you kindly!"
He turned to the lady. "Ellen," he said, "prescribe this man's punishment. Shall I give him up to the law?"

"No—oh, no!" she cried. "My name—would be at his mercy! It would be ruined!"

My master, smiling strangely, bent his knee before her. "Mine is at your service, dear!" he said.

"Or mine!" I cried.

She looked from one to the other of us and slowly shook her head. "My friends," she murmured in a low, sad voice, "I can never thank you properly—for your kindness and your chivalry. Indeed, I shall not have the time, for I am a doomed woman. I am dying of consumption—dying fast! Look at me!"

We looked, and realised the truth of her words. The beautiful woman we had known and loved was a wreck; the merest shadow of her former gracious loveliness remained. My heart ached bitterly to see her, and I had to fight hard for self-control—but tears rolled unchecked down my little master's cheeks.

Our preoccupation afforded Buluk Bey an opportunity. Of a sudden he darted to the table and, seizing the knife which I had carelessly laid there, after cutting his bonds, he hurled himself at Ellen Hardcastle, a murderous purpose in his gleaming eyes. But my master, quick as he, interposed his body to save the lady. They collided violently

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and both came to the floor together. I sprang forward to assist, but I was too late. The little brown man, wriggling uppermost like an eel, wrenched the knife from his enemy's hand (the Turk was weak from his long confinement in the trunk), then coolly seating himself upon the chest of the prostrate Admiral looked up frowningly at me. "Take Ellen to her cabin," he commanded. She came with me unquestioningly; indeed, she was half swooning, and so ill that it was long before I could leave her. When I returned to the saloon my master's vengeance was complete. Admiral Hamdi Mustapha Buluk Bey and Mr. Vigorous Daunt, were strangely confronted. The Turk was lying upon a couch breathing heavily through his open mouth, and my master, holding a reeking knife, stood beside him. They were glaring into each other's eyes with an exchange of hatred inexpressible of speech. But I scarcely recognised the Admiral, for his hawk-like nose had disappeared, and in its place was a broad, flat piece of court plaster. I rubbed my eyes, and looked again. His face was bathed in blood.

"Great Heavens, sir, what have you done?" I cried, shuddering involuntarily.

Mr. Daunt slowly turned his head and glanced at me, grinning like a dog and showing all his teeth.

"I have been talking to a Turk in his own language!" he answered grimly. "Call the Captain Rupert, and have this brute put aboard his own launch!"

Ten minutes afterwards we were steaming south

at the rate of twenty knots an hour, bound for Teneriffe. Ellen Hardcastle died of heart failure on the voyage out, and we buried her at sea. She died peacefully, holding our hands in hers, happy to go, I think, in the hope of meeting her husband in the unknown land across the Great Divide.

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CHAPTER XVII

AN EXPERIMENT WITH POVERTY

IT once pleased my master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt, to anticipate in his imagination a calamitous, and complete destruction of his fortune. "It would be as well," he declared, "to experiment beforehand with our merely natural resources in order to discover how we are likely to fare in the struggle for existence, if by some fatal stroke we should be once and for all deprived of those stores of wealth with which Providence has been hitherto so kind as to entrust me."

The little brown man's idea was to lock up his cheque book and mine, to wander forth into the world without a penny in either of our pockets, and thenceforth to trust to our native ingenuity, or the labour of our hands, for the furnishing of our wants. Now, above all things, I am a lover of comfort, of that peculiar state of ease with dignity which so appealed to the good old Latin philosophers. It is true that I delight in occasionally spicing even so excellent a dish with a dash of danger, adventure or excitement, yet I contend that

even this disposition is philosophical, for a continual diet of partridge spoils the most perfect palate. Besides, never in my moments of deepest *ennui*, nor in my wildest dreams, had I contemplated the voluntary relinquishment of those conditions which most render life endurable in order to indulge in the vicarious and comfortless existence of a pauper.

It was, however, quite in vain that I argued, pleaded and protested; equally in vain that I opposed my experience to his imaginings. I had known what it was to starve; to look for work and find none; to beg and be refused. Mr. Daunt had only experienced the pangs of hunger through accident. Nevertheless, my description of the horrors of poverty merely served to inflame his purpose.

"What you say, Granville," he cried at last, "decides me. To tell you the bare truth, I am sick to death of being a billionaire. If we encounter a tithe of the hardships you paint so feelingly, perhaps I shall be reconciled to my lot."

My last expedient was to quarrel with him. His answer was to assume his grandest manner and invite me to choose between his service and my own. But here my affection prevailed and I sacrificed myself upon the altar of friendship. That evening, we started from the Colonnade Hotel on foot, clad in our oldest clothes, and absolutely penniless. Fortunately it was summer, for we were obliged to spend the night under a hedge, some twelve miles

on the road to Dover, having been refused a lodging at the last farmhouse that we passed. In the early morning, while lying awake and blinking lazily up at the paling stars, I conceived a brilliant idea, which I proceeded to exploit with all the address I could command immediately my master awoke.

"Good-morning, sir," said I.

"Good-morning, Granville," he yawned. "Eh! By Jove, I never slept better in my life. How did you fare?"

"Pretty well. I've been thinking."

"Thinking. This is not the time for thinking, lad. Look about you—see that field of gorgeous poppies—the rising sun—the pretty farmhouse—that cow yonder—and the sheep browsing in that covert. Why, bless my soul, I feel young, a boy again!"

"I have an idea!" I announced, dismissing with a glance the beauties of nature. "A brilliant idea!"

He turned to me. "Will your idea earn us a meal? I am as hungry as a horse."

"It might—who knows."

"Let us hear it, then."

"Mr. Daunt, during the last five years in which I have served you as secretary and companion——"

"And friend," put in my master.

"Thank you, sir. Well, during those five years, you have conferred many benefits upon mankind at large, but a great many more upon individuals.

Let me see" (I counted on my fingers), "there is Valentine Peterson, the mortgage on whose property which you released, he lives in Hampshire ; Greville Sands, whose defalcations you made good, he manages a bank at Margate ; John Ilby, whose gambling debts you paid to save him being posted, he lives at Cowes ; Edgar Vale, whom you married to a princess, he lives in Dresden ; Lord Peter Auld, whose life you saved in Algiers, he lives at Cannes ; James——"

"Hold on !" broke in my master. "We'll take the list as told—what of them ?"

"Just this. Would it not be a fine thing to present ourselves in turn to these people, who owe you so much, as a pauper ! To pretend to them that you have lost your all, and are obliged to cast yourself and me upon their *gratitude*. Hey, what do you think of my plan ? Here is an adventure for us—a magnificent adventure. Consider how diverting it will be to discover their true characters. How delightful it will be for you subsequently to reward perhaps those who prove worthy ; to despise and confound those who display ingratitude."

Mentally I had resolved that if I could manage it all would prove openly hospitable at all events, whatever their private dispositions, for, to speak truly, I was already heartily sick of my master's latest freak. Conceive my dismay when Mr. Daunt, whose flashing eyes had led me to suppose that he was smitten with my plan, presently shook his head and replied :

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"It is a good plan, but look behind it, Rupert Granville. There is little charity in it, lad, but much malice. We know, all intelligent people know, that the bulk of mankind is ungrateful. Why should we then unnecessarily seek to confirm our convictions? Only ill would come of it. No, we'll just keep our way. Ah, by jove, there's a man standing at the door of yonder farmhouse. Let's try to win our breakfast." In a second he was through the hedge and off. I followed leisurely, muttering such expressions as usually occur to the lips of fowlers when their snares have caught but failed to hold their prey. I foresaw an indefinite existence of toil and discomfort, and the only hope that remained to me was in the chance of an adventure turning up which might interest my master sufficiently to abstract him from his purpose.

It would occupy weeks of space and reams of paper to detail our doings of the next two months. I shall content myself by observing that my gloomy forebodings were realised. We tramped the southern counties of England as far as Portsmouth, living from hand to mouth, often working like labourers for our bread, sometimes going for long periods a-hungred, frequently sleeping in the open fields for lack of better lodging. Mr. Daunt endured all the hardships we encountered with such indomitable cheerfulness and patience, that I, for very shame's sake, dared not repine before him, though in secret I cursed his folly every hour. Yet I was obliged to respect and admire him as time passed more and

more, for every day in providing for our needs he displayed some fresh evidence of those extraordinary qualities of intelligence and will-power, which had made him, even before the meridian of life, one of the richest inhabitants of the universe. Moreover, during the jaunt, he appeared to exercise some species of restraint upon his matchless vanity. I do not mean to say that he was less vain, but his manner was less aggressive than formerly, nor did he require me to feed him constantly with flatteries. Had he done so, indeed, I fear that I should have openly revolted. Perhaps he perceived this and thereby again instanced his marvellous mental penetration, for I am certain he did not wish to lose my company.

At Portsmouth I raised the wind to the tune of three half-crowns, by matching my skill with the rifle against that of a country bumpkin at a shooting gallery, and with this money we crossed the Channel in a fishing smack, landing penniless in France. There we fared much better than in England. This was not, I believe, because Frenchmen are more charitable than Englishmen, but because they are, generally speaking, more credulous and vain, and my master with an almost diabolical skill played on the weakness of all whom he thought might serve our ends.

Our movements ruled for the most part by the purest chance, we came at last to a little coast town of Brittany, which, for various reasons, I shall call by the fictitious name—Cyprés. This place we

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entered on a balmy twilight evening in September. It was a pretty town—nicely planted with trees, most of which were cypress. Its houses were quaintly constructed, and they seemed centuries old. The streets were filled with chattering and smiling people, clad in gala costumes, and the joy-bells were ringing right merrily, for the whole town was *en fête*. Why, I could not guess, for the day was neither a saint's day, nor any great anniversary that I remembered.

Our finances were for the moment quite respectable. We had, I believe, almost forty francs between us—the combined fruits of a week's toil in a peasant's vineyard, and one night's gambling in a tavern. I was unusually good-humoured, in consideration of a prospective good dinner and comfortable bed, for it was our intention to put up at a hotel. But my master suffered from a headache, and was rather depressed in consequence. I was inclined to linger, although hungry, in order to observe the quaint manners and gay doings of the crowd, but Mr. Daunt urged me quickly through the throng, and we entered the first tavern we encountered.

It was a commodious two-storeyed house, stone built, covered with a monstrous gabled roof, and pleasantly situated at a little distance from the street in the midst of a grove of poplar trees. Before it were spread some two score tables, encircled with stools and benches, on which twice as many guests of both sexes were seated, laughing, chatting

and drinking wine or sipping *cau sucré* "rough straws. So picturesque, happy and inconsequent the scene appeared that I was quite enchanted. I should have dearly liked to have eaten my dinner *al fresco* with the careless crowd, but my master with an impatient exclamation pushed through them and strode into the house. Many stares followed us, and many outspoken comments on our cavalier behaviour—which corresponded so ill with our work-worn half-tattered garments. The host, a fat and jolly little creature, stopped us as we would have entered the public dining-room.

"We could not go in there—it was engaged—by people of quality," he said. "But only wait a moment and he would spread for us a table on the lawn—where he would serve us as we chose—with a dinner fit for—M. the President himself,—and wine—such wine!—or, did we prefer it, bread, black or white, and cheese—such cheese! Egad! we should see for ourselves—that he dispensed the best cheese in France!"

Mr. Daunt listened quite civilly, then commanded him to put before us his best dinner and his best wine, in the dining-room! Whereupon, heedless of his protestations, he pushed our host aside and entered the forbidden chamber with the mien of a prince.

I followed, disgusted, but impotent. My master advanced, selected a table, and sat down. There were only three other people in the room, two gentlemen and a lady, who occupied a table within

six feet of my master. As I took my seat I flashed a glance at them. They were silently regarding us, but their glances manifested both displeasure and contempt—that is to say, the glances of the men—the lady, who was young and handsome—seemed to me to have recently been weeping, for her pale cheeks glistened in the lamplight, and she was unmistakably discomposed. After the first look she kept her eyes fixed resolutely on her plate, though she made no pretence of eating, for her hands were folded in her lap, and her dinner was untouched. So much I observed, then turned to my master.

“Really, sir,” I muttered, “it would be pleasanter to dine outside.”

“With those cursed bells going!” he answered angrily. “Bah, even here it is bad enough. Mahomed never spoke more truly than when he called a bell the Devil’s musical instrument.”

Though looking at my master, I could not help observing that both the gentlemen upon whose privacy we had intruded started at these words—started violently indeed. One of them got immediately to his feet and surveyed us, upon his face a curious expression of commingled hesitation, doubt, expectancy and pride. He was tall, elegantly dressed and of noble bearing; unmistakably an aristocrat. His eyes were large and very black, and they protruded in the fashion so admired by the French. His nose was long and aquiline; his chin was strong, almost too predominant; his forehead square and broad. Altogether he seemed

a person of uncommon character and consequence. At first he made a gesture as if to address my master, but stopping short stood biting the ends of his short black moustache, a picture of haughty embarrassment and irresolution.

The little brown man looked him fully in the face, and I perceived in his swiftly kindling eyes the dawn of some esoteric purpose. He had evidently scented an adventure and his quick intelligence was wide awake. He made presently a slight obeisance to the standing gentleman. His *vis-a-vis* nodded and shrugged his shoulders with a gesture that was condescending, yet contemptuous.

"Well?" said my master.

"You spoke of Mahommed!"

"True!"

"Are you——?" the gentleman paused.

"I am I," responded Mr. Daunt.

The gentleman looked him up and down, his glance lingering disdainfully on my master's worn apparel. "I expected—I confess—some one slightly more presentable," he muttered rudely.

Mr. Daunt flushed crimson. "It is unsafe to judge by appearances," he retorted. "Until you spoke, I mistook you for a gentleman!"

The gentleman started back as though he had been struck. "I am the Marquis de St. Hilaire!" he cried, frowning blackly.

My master shrugged his shoulders. "In that case, m'sieur, I am at your service!"

The Marquis, with a perceptible effort, controlled

his rage. "You come from Paris?" he demanded.

"Not immediately. I have travelled far."

"So! You were followed then?"

"No—I did not wish to be. No one has guessed at my identity. Else perhaps—" he shrugged again.

"Who is your companion?"

"My secretary."

The Marquis laughed ironically. "So! you have a secretary! Well, so much the better!"

Vigorous Daunt, with perfect coolness, prepared to eat his dinner, which was at that moment brought in by a waiter. When the fellow had departed, however, the Marquis again demanded our attention.

"You have not yet paid your respects to Monsieur!" he cried sharply.

Mr. Daunt looked up and glanced at the Marquis's male companion, whom he gravely saluted. "Monsieur" was a short, rotund gentleman attired in regulation riding dress. His countenance was bloated and sensual, but yet self-possessed and intelligent. He possessed a pair of prominent, pale grey eyes, a large flabby nose, a high bold forehead, a weak indulgent mouth, and a pointed chin which was almost buried in rolls of fat. He returned my master's bow with an enchanting smile that lighted up his face and transfigured his expression. "A glass of wine with you, M. Lebeau," said he with marked condescension.

Mr. Daunt bowed respectfully, and raised his glass. "To your good health, Monsieur."

"To the success of our enterprise, M. Lebeau. May your eye be as true, your hand as cunning, as we have been induced to believe." Monsieur spoke so commandingly and with a demeanour so dignified that I at once concluded he must be a great personage.

My master's manner confirmed my impression. He drank his wine and waited seemingly for permission to resume his meal.

Monsieur saw, and said smilingly, "Eat, M. Lebeau. After dinner we have much to do."

"Thanks," muttered Mr. Daunt. Without more ado we fell to and made a hearty meal.

The Marquis and Monsieur meanwhile conversed together in low tones, and the lady, their companion, gazed as ever silently into her plate, seemingly sunk in profound and melancholy thought. Before we had finished I discovered that I was regarding this young woman with much sympathy and curiosity. Her condition seemed so sad, and so contemptuously was she, in spite of her beauty, neglected by the others, who never once addressed her, nor sought to persuade her into tasting her untouched meal.

My master gave me a sign with his eyes at last and we both stood up. Monsieur and the Marquis followed our example.

"Are you ready?" demanded the Marquis.

"At your service" replied Mr. Daunt.

The Marquis turned to the lady. "Come, mademoiselle," he said, his voice harsh and peremptory.

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The time has come when you must put a period to your folly. M. Lebeau, you will take charge of Mademoiselle de St. Hilaire ; I need scarcely remind you that you will be held responsible for the safety of her person ; but you will remember in all things to treat her with the respect due to her rank."

My master bowed. The lady stood up and gazed wildly around her. In so doing she met my eyes, and for a moment her regard lingered. Next second, blushing hotly, she looked away. I confess that I tingled all over from the effect of that lingering glance. Her eyes were very beautiful, and in them I read so much proud humiliation and piteous entreaty, that I determined to serve her if I could. The Marquis, however, striding forward, offered her his arm, Monsieur led the way—not through the door by which we had entered, but another that was situated at the rear of the saloon. In the hall without we encountered the landlord, who, to my surprise and secret satisfaction, made no effort to exact payment for our entertainment, but bowing and smiling like a jackanapes, ushered us through the house to the courtyard beyond. Here we found a gate leading into a back street, and beside the gate was drawn up a handsome equipage, a landau and pair, with coachman and footman seated on the box ; while two fine, prancing saddle-horses were held by ostlers close at hand. We could see all these things very plainly, for although the sun had long ago set, a brilliant moon almost at the full was by this time shining in an unclouded sky.

The Marquis assisted Mademoiselle into the carriage, and signed to Mr. Daunt and myself to follow. He then, and Monsieur, mounted the waiting saddle horses, and after giving a muttered order to the driver of our landau, rode off at a canter. Our carriage immediately set out, but in the opposite direction. Half wild with curiosity, I gazed at my master, but he put his finger to his lips. The lady, our charge and companion, sat upon one seat; Mr. Daunt and I occupied the other. Mademoiselle drew down her veil, and with a deep sigh settled herself back in the cushions. We drove for some time through a maze of deserted back streets, and gradually approached the outskirts of the town. Soon we were rolling through the open country. At first we climbed, and our progress was slow, but in an hour, with a sensible increase of speed, we took our way along a fairly level road that skirted the edges of the cliffs and afforded us on one side a magnificent prospect of sea and sky and on the other an extended view of undulous and rather rugged country sparsely planted with trees, and almost destitute of habitation.

I was commencing to grow bitterly impatient of my master's continued silence, when of a sudden he spoke. Bending forward and bowing deeply to the lady, he said, courteously: "Mademoiselle de St. Hilaire, I beg to inform you——"

But the lady started up, and lifting her veil showed us a face so haughtily and coldly insolent, that he paused.

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"Monsieur Lebeau," she said, icily, "my brother is privileged to insult me, but, if I remember rightly, he commended you to treat me with respect."

"Mademoiselle, I——"

"Silence, monsieur!"

Mr. Daunt frowned. "I beg you to listen to me. I am not what I seem. You doubtless imagine that I am your brother's instrument. In that case, you share in his mistake. I am Vigorous Daunt, the billionaire; my friend here is Captain Rupert Granville. We are English gentlemen amusing ourselves by touring France."

"Ah!" cried the lady, gazing at him spell-bound.

The little man continued. "Our fortune—nay, say rather destiny—led us this evening to the inn from which we have so recently set forth. A chance remark of mine, concerning Mahommed, evidently induced your brother and his companion to believe me some one—some agent or servant personally unknown to them, but whom they expected to meet and discover by the use of that expression. In a spirit of adventure I allowed them to persist in their mistake. Now I rejoice that I so acted, for I divine that you are the victim of some piece of tyranny, and I believe that Providence has sent me to your aid. Mademoiselle, our services are at your disposal."

He made her a very courtly reverence.

The lady had listened like one in a dream; as he concluded, she gasped for breath.

"My God!" she cried in a broken voice. "Ah! if I could but believe you. But no, it is impossible. This is one of St. Hilaire's designs, the most cursed, the cruellest trick he has played me yet."

"Trust me, mademoiselle. I am incapable of injuring a woman. Confide in me and I shall help you to the utmost of my power."

The lady pressed her hands to her forehead. "Trust! Confide!" she cried, her voice ringing with scorn. "That is Henry's parrot cry."

"Mademoiselle," said my master, "you believe that I am a person called Lebeau; now this man, what would his profession be—a gaoler, a spy?"

"An assassin—a paid assassin!" cried the lady, and throwing out her hands she gazed at us distractedly.

My master nodded. "So," he said. "But then a paid assassin would of necessity be a reduced and desperate creature, a man sunk in vice and crime. Do I look such a one? Does my friend here?"

The lady's eyes fastened on us piercingly. On meeting mine the colour crept into her pale cheeks, perhaps because of my too ardent gaze. She was silent.

"Such a one, moreover, would be poor," said Mr. Daunt. "Now look you here."

With a sudden movement, he rolled up the sleeve covering his left arm, and displayed to us, just above the elbow, a leathern band encircling his arm, constructed in the manner of those service

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watch bracelets which army officers wear upon their wrists. Instead, however, of a watch, there peeped out of the opening in Mr. Daunt's bracelet the face of an enormous ruby that glimmered at us through the dusk of the carriage with a wonderful uncanny light of intelligence, like a gleaming blood-coloured eye.

"The Gnaga-Gna!" I muttered. It was the ruby which had come to my master's hands in the remarkable manner I have already described. It was supposed to possess magical properties, and my master had religiously worn it, from the day it had first come into his possession, as an amulet, perhaps induced thereto by some superstition.

"This ruby," said he, "is worth an emperor's ransom. Now consider, Mademoiselle, would any man in his senses possessing it hire himself out as an assassin?"

The lady shook her head. "Is it a ruby?" she asked suspiciously.

My master shrugged his shoulders and turned down his sleeve. "It is hard to convince you, but perhaps you will propose a test yourself!"

The lady looked out of the window. We were then skirting a huge craggy mound of rocks, which, topped with a grove of pines, rose abruptly from the roadside. "Yonder is the chateau—my prison-house," she said.

We strained our eyes, but could perceive no form of human dwelling.

"Where?" I asked.

The lady looked me in the eyes. "It is behind that hill, monsieur," she answered softly. For a long while there was silence between us, but at last I summoned courage to speak.

"If it is your prison-house, why need we go there?" I demanded.

"Because my husband will be there; perhaps even now he is awaiting me!"

"Your husband!" I gasped.

She gazed at me as if lost to all other considerations, her lips a little parted and her eyes curiously glowing. And yet there was no trace of coquetry about her. She was beautiful, but not strictly so, perhaps, if regularity of feature be taken as a guide of beauty. But her countenance had an extraordinary power of expression; the features were mobile and marvellously sensitive. Her hair was dark gold, almost auburn; her brows beneath were broad and low, her nose was straight and shapely, though perhaps too small; her lips were fine and apt to curl with pride; and her face was of a pure oval shape. In form she was generously fashioned, tall, lithe, full-bosomed; and her dress was rich and elegant and fitted like a glove.

I repeated the words, "Your husband."

"My husband that is, and my husband that is to be!" said the lady gently, and, speaking, she removed her eyes. The charm was broken. I started as though awakened from a trance and saw my master curiously watching me. Moreover, the carriage had stopped. A feeling of wild un-

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reality possessed me. The door was opened by a footman. Scarcely knowing what I did, I sprang from the carriage and assisted the lady to alight. Mr. Daunt followed us. We stood in a small quadrangle enclosed by the walls of a massive castellated building, fully a hundred feet in height. We had evidently entered through a great portcullised archway which was now closed. The quadrangle was illuminated by a number of lanthorns resting on the paving stones about us. Two or three grooms were busily engaged attending to the horses. Before us, twenty paces off, a great double door stood wide open; beyond was a fairy scene of light, and there came to us therefrom a hum of voices, shouts, laughter and sounds of revelry.

I said to myself, "This is all a dream." Then I was thrilled by the lady's hand that of a sudden clutched my arm. She was shuddering, shuddering violently; her face was ghastly pale. I was about to speak, but my master interposed.

"Madame," he said in a low, stern voice, "there is yet time for you to confide in us." It was true, for apparently none of the revellers within was aware of our arrival.

The lady glanced at my master, then turned to me. "Monsieur," she cried, her voice intense and passionate, "swear to me by God, by your mother's soul and your own, that you are not deceiving me."

I bowed low. "Madame," I replied, "I swear," and I lifted my hand.

"Good! then I shall trust you."

"And me," queried Mr. Daunt, his face dark with jealousy. The little brown man had never played second lead before, and his vanity was wounded to the quick.

"My master," I said softly. "Madame, Mr. Daunt is my master."

She looked at him and smiled. She gave him her hand, and his frown fled under the magic of her smile. "My friends," she murmured, "I have great need of you. But come, we cannot linger here. Remember I am your prisoner. I shall precede you now to the apartments which my brother has kindly placed at my disposal. Come, messieurs, guard me well."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PLOT THAT FAILED

MADEMOISELLE DE ST. HILAIRE approached the chateau and we followed her closely. We entered a blazing hall, where, round a table, twenty gentlemen were seated at their wine. They sprang to their feet on our entrance and bowed before the lady. She passed them without acknowledgment, her face set like stone. We marched behind her like soldiers. She led us to a staircase, which we climbed, thence along a dusky corridor to a wide and stately reception chamber, brilliantly illuminated. Here was a table spread with spirits and liqueurs. Madame cast herself into a chair, and directed us to close the door. At a sign I brought her a glass of wine. She took off her hat, and, casting it aside, drank deeply of the wine. We stood before her waiting for her to speak, our nerves on edge.

Presently she began. "Listen, gentlemen. Four years ago, I, Helene de St. Hilaire, then a girl of twenty, married, at the command of my brother, the great banker M. de Brianceau, who is, as doubtless you are aware, a millionaire, the richest and

nigh the oldest man in France. My wishes were not consulted in the matter. It was for my brother to command, for me to obey. I obeyed him, and since that time I have resided with M. de Brianceau in his Chateau de Rougy, which is situated some fifteen miles from this spot. Early this morning, in answer to an urgent message from my brother, I set out from my husband's house and found him awaiting me in the town of Cyprés, at a tavern where you subsequently encountered me. My brother, who had feigned an illness in order to entrap me within his power, on my arrival decoyed me to his room and there he kept me a close prisoner until an hour before you came. There he made known to me his designs. Ah, gentlemen, even yet I tremble to disclose to you his villainy." She paused and gazed at my master, then at me.

"You may trust us, madame," I muttered.

She shivered. "I must, monsieur," she said, then crimsoned because of the ungracious words. "Listen!" she cried, and proceeded in a burst of words. "You must know that my brother is deeply engaged in politics. He is full of ambition, his heart knows no remorse. It is his purpose to change again the government of this poor country; those gentlemen below are of his counsels, his co-conspirators. They have great names, great offices. Some of them are members of the State, chiefs of the Army. They are very wicked men. They wish to disturb the peace of the world, to give a king to France."

Mr. Daunt and I stared into each other's eyes.

"Monsieur——!" I gasped. My master nodded. Madame de Brianceau interpreted our looks.

"I see, gentlemen, that you have guessed the secret of Monsieur's identity. Let us not name him. He it is whom my brother seeks to put upon a throne. But to do this money is needed, much money. Monsieur is comparatively poor, my brother has eaten up his fortune, his fellow conspirators have little to lose, everything to gain. In order, therefore, to obtain funds necessary to carry out the *coup d'état* they contemplate, my brother has resolved to sacrifice me upon the altar of his ambition. But lately, Monsieur's consort, he tells me, has expired. It is my brother's intention to murder my husband, poor M. de Brianceau, this very night, and within the hour of his murder to make me the new wife of Monsieur, so that my husband's fortune, the bulk of which he has left by will to me, may thus be placed at Monsieur's disposal. This marriage will of necessity be kept secret, but my person will be henceforth strictly guarded so that I may not only not have a chance to escape, but also that I may not divert any portion of my poor husband's fortune from the direction which my brother has decreed."

I cried out in horror, but Mr. Daunt, whose eyes were glittering, demanded quickly—

"Pray explain to us, madame, how your brother proposes to keep the murder of your husband secret."

"Ah!" said the lady, "you shall now perceive

the man my brother is ; the ingenious manner in which he has thought out his plans. One of his fellow conspirators, who fortunately is not present here to-night—he is a man high in power, a Minister of State, indeed—some time since it appears agreed to despatch hither from Paris a vile creature, a miserable criminal, over whose head is hanging the fear of the guillotine, by name Lebeau—the man, indeed, whom you, M. Daunt, now personate. Ah, how could I ever have thought you were really he ? ” (My master blushed to the eyes.) “ This man, Lebeau, was to have been the instrument of my husband’s murder. The plot was and is this : my brother and Monsieur, after they left me in your charge, have ridden over to the Chateau Rougy. On some pretext they will induce M. de Brianceau to accompany them here. They will arrive, if they ride fast, by midnight. M. de Brianceau will be given a glass of drugged wine. While he sleeps in his chair, Lebeau—the vile Lebeau (thank God you are not he—thank God for the happy chance which put the word Manommed in your mouth). Ah ! while my husband sleeps, Lebeau, who is supposed to have escaped from prison—Lebeau the housebreaker, the forger, the burglar, the informer (so my brother has described him)—will descend the stairs and slay my husband with a dagger. My brother and three of his friends will witness the vile deed. Subsequently they will swear Lebeau killed my husband in an encounter, that he dashed through their ranks and

escaped. They will scour the country for him."

"But," cut in my master, "the servants who brought us here—the coachman and footman, the grooms without?"

"Are in the plot—they are all royalists, monsieur.

Well, as I said when you interrupted me, my brother will scour the country for Lebeau; he will offer a reward for his arrest. But, meanwhile, Lebeau, with his pockets full of gold, will be steaming away from France in Monsieur's yacht, which is lying now in the bay beneath this castle, awaiting Monsieur and Lebeau. Well, gentlemen, what think you of my brother's plans?"

"Horrible!" I cried. "He is a fiend incarnate!"

Madame's fine lip curled. "He is on the contrary a clever and ambitious man, monsieur, and he intends to be presently the High Constable of France!"

"Madame!" said I, looking at her very keenly.

"Forgive me if I pain you, but answer me this question: you are no doubt tenderly attached to M. de Brianceau?"

The lady blushed deeply and cast down her eyes.

"My husband is a good man," she murmured.

"I honour his grey hairs. I would save him if I could!"

I turned to Mr. Daunt. The little man was looking about with an air of grave preoccupation, apparently searching for something.

"What is it?" I demanded.

He looked at Madame, unheeding me, and pointed



to a door in the farthest wall. "There is a room yonder, madame, what is it?"

"A bedroom—my future prison chamber. Like this room, its windows overlook a precipice."

"H'm!" He strode to the window and looked out. "The yacht you speak of is under steam, madame."

Madame shrugged her shoulders. "Gentlemen!" she said, "I have confided in you. What prospect can you give me of deliverance? Is there any hope for me, for—for my husband?" Her face went deathly pale.

"Be easy, madame," said my master; "I shall deliver you, but you must accord me your assistance. Moreover, you must implicitly obey me. Do you agree?"

"Anything!" she cried. "Only save that good old man; he has been to me the kindest of friends—"

"Silence!" said Mr. Daunt. Madame started up at his stern tones, but he eyed her with dominating gravity. "Pardon," he said, gently, "but you have promised to obey me."

Like many another who had encountered Mr. Daunt in his mood of action, Madame recognised a spirit of extraordinary power. I saw her eyes gleam as her will fought his; I saw the light fade as his inevitably prevailed, but, though mastered, there came upon her face an expression of awakened confidence and hope.

"I have promised," she said, submissively, a

peculiar sweetness in her hands, monsieur."

"It is well, madame. N sympathise in this movement?"

"I, monsieur!" she shut—no. Think of the blood stream I would give my right hand to

Mr. Daunt seemed well he cried. "I honour you for th Ha! by the way, you have per madame, a powder puff?"

Madame smiled and blushed said.

"Give it to me!"

Wonderingly, she extracted her gown a little golden-mouthed which she handed to him. M took it and marched to the bed he opened and passed through sently, bearing a small dish of he emptied the powder and comm mass into a paste. This done, mirror and, for a while, grimaced he wrapped a great kerchief about and applied some of the paste to and cheeks. Suddenly with a grin round and confronted us.

Madame uttered a loud cry of even I, though perfectly acquainted ter's wonderful powers of imperson

strained to exclaim in very surprise. Before us, to the life, stood Monsieur——Pretender to the throne of France ! Mr. Daunt, in everything except his clothes, had vanished. We examined him feature by feature. We beheld Monsieur's flabby nose, his pasty complexion, his baggy cheeks, his weak sensual mouth, his pointed chin, his protruding eyes. We gazed spellbound and speechless.

Suddenly in the distance, we heard the sound of steel-shod hoofs clattering on stone. My master sprang to the mirror and wiped his face. Next moment he turned to us, himself again. His eye, roving round the apartment, examined everything in a flash. Like a cat, he presently darted towards a great corded ottoman in a far corner. Watching like people fascinated, we saw him whip out a knife, plunge it into the cushion, and then tear the cords from the lounge with a fierce ripping sound. In a moment there lay upon the floor a considerable length of twisted silken rope. Only then I divined his intention, and rushed to his aid, but he waved me aside. "The poker, the door!" he muttered. I hurried to the fireplace; I seized a poker, then with a spring took up my stand behind the door, so that I should be concealed from any person who sought entrance. "Strike hard, but take care not to kill!" hissed my master.

Hardly had he spoken when a loud rap sounded on the panels.

"Enter!" shouted Mr. Daunt.

The door opened and the Marquis de St. Hilaire

crossed the threshold. He closed the door without turning his back: he did not see me.

My master waved his hand. I hated my task, but I fulfilled it. With a sweep I brought the poker down upon St. Hilaire's undefended head. He did not utter the least cry, and I caught him in my arms before he could fall. Madame, who watched all spellbound with horror, uttered a groan as I dragged her brother into the bedroom and laid him on the bed. In three minutes the Marquis was bound hand and foot, tied to the bed and firmly gagged. Leaving him there still unconscious, we returned to the outer room. Madame lay curled up on a lounge, her hands over her face, sobbing softly to herself. I wished to comfort her, but I dared not, for I was on duty and my commanding officer was the sternest martinet in the world. Mr. Daunt opened the outer door and beckoned me. Standing together on the threshold we held our breath to listen. Perhaps ten minutes passed thus. At first we heard much loud laughter and the clink of glasses, but these sounds soon diminished. At last a gong distinctly sounded through the corridor—once, twice, thrice, and all was still. "It must be the signal," said my master. He at once advanced a few paces into the passage and shouted at the top of his voice, "Monsieur! Monsieur! One moment. Helene needs you!"

"Is that you, St. Hilaire?" responded a distant voice.

"Yes, monsieur. I need you one moment."

"I come then."

Footsteps sounded on the staircase. My master darted back into the room and pulled me after him, but we left the door ajar. The footsteps approached. The door was pushed open and Monsieur's voice said, "Where are you, St. Hilaire?"

We were behind the door, we dared not speak, for fear of alarming our quarry. But at that moment of suspense Madame came to our aid. Her voice rang out, "It is I who need you, monsieur," she said.

Monsieur unsuspectingly advanced into the room bowing profoundly and flourishing his hat. There was venom in the blow I dealt him, for the thought was in my mind, "Villain, you aspire to make Madame your wife against her will, do you!"

He fell like a log into my master's arms. Between us we bore him into the bedroom, and casting him, despite his princely blood, upon the floor, quickly despoiled him of his clothes. Mr. Daunt thereupon divesting himself of his own, donned Monsieur's attire, which, with the aid of a small feather cushion and some of the bed linen, fitted him presently to a charm. We had not sufficient rope to bind Monsieur, but I made shift with a rent sheet to render him helpless for some hours to come. Returning to the outer room, I locked the door and bestowed the key in my pocket. Mr. Daunt experimented for some while before the mirror, but at length satisfied, he turned to us. "Will I do?"

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"Gentlemen," he growled, . . . "our plot has failed . . ."
[Vigorous Daunt: Billiardaire]

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he demanded. I can give him no higher praise than to affirm in all truth that he was Monsieur's counterpart, even to his voice. We assured him he was perfect. He smiled, and with a courtly bow offered his arm to Madame. "Come madame," he said. "Say nothing, but leave all to me. We are about to quit this castle and embark with your husband upon Monsieur's yacht. Granville, you will kindly attend us!"

With stately steps my master marched from the room, Madame clinging to his arm. I followed them closely. Descending the stairs, my master led us to the dining hall. Before the table were seated, at one side, a very old man, who was propped up fast asleep in an armchair; on the other, three of M. de St. Hilaire's co-conspirators. Elegant gentlemen they were, all clad in evening dress, their faces flushed with the wine they had consumed. These latter sprang to their feet exclaiming loudly as we came upon them. My master advanced to the table and crashed upon it with his shut fist in such a manner as to make the glasses dance.

"Gentlemen," he growled, in a low, savage voice, "our plot has failed. We must begone! Lebeau has betrayed us. But for this man, who is a true Frenchman" (he pointed to me), "I should have been caught like a rat in a trap. Within an hour the place will be surrounded with soldiers. But there is yet time to escape, and, by Heavens! I'll take with me a hostage. Do you gentlemen

between you carry M. de Brianceau to my yacht. I'll then away to Belgium, where I shall await a better hour!"

His audience listened spellbound, and it must be recorded that while he spoke his audience had increased. There were now fully twenty gentlemen gathered in the room. They broke into a storm of cries and exclamations. Then of a sudden one demanded, "St. Hilaire, where is St. Hilaire?"

My master raised his hand again, and silence fell. "St. Hilaire," he said, "is dead! Lebeau stabbed him!"

A storm of execrations followed. "Lebeau!" they cried, and "Revenge!"

My master raised his hand again. "Lebeau is dead!" he said, sternly. "St. Hilaire is fully avenged!"

The gentlemen glanced at one another with looks of terror, then gazed upon my master. His voice rang out again, pregnant with command:

"Come, friends, there is no time to lose; we must away. Those of you who wish, get instantly to horse. Those who will, are welcome to a passage on my yacht!"

"I!" cried one, "And I!" "And I!" shouted half-a-dozen others.

My master nodded. "Come, then, to the yacht! You, monsieur, and you!" (he singled out two) "carry M. de Brianceau. But make haste, make haste! Nay, go before me. There is no time for ceremony now!"

THE PLOT THAT FAILED

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The assembly melted like shadows. Two gentlemen caught up the form of poor old de Brianceau and staggered off, panting under their burden. We followed them. Mr. Daunt grasped in his right hand a revolver which he had found in one of Monsieur's pockets. Madame clung to his left arm. We left the chateau by a postern gate, we traversed a drawbridge over a deep, hollow moat, and gained the road. As we crossed this, a man on horseback came towards the castle at a gallop. He was upon us in a second. My master's face was plainly apparent in the moonlight, also the man's. He was a black-visaged creature, and plainly not a gentleman. Mr. Daunt, in a low tone, commanded the bearers of M. de Brianceau to hurry on. We stopped, and the man accosted us, swinging off his hat.

"Good-night, monsieur," he said, then, stooping over his saddle, he muttered the word "Mahomed!"

Mr. Daunt gave a grim smile.

"Ah, M. Lebeau," he said, "M. de St. Hilaire awaits you in the castle. Make haste within!"

The fellow bowed deeply and urged on his horse. We thereupon hurried after the others at a run, and as we came up with them, my master cried out:

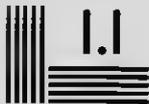
"It is all right, only one of St. Hilaire's servants! Hurry! Hurry!"

The path was rugged and precipitous. It led us a wild scramble down three hundred feet of cliff to a small sandy haven far below. We arrived



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there at last panting and blown from our exertions. The bearers deposited M. de Brianceau upon the beach and commenced to wipe their faces. Eight gentlemen were grouped together, a few paces from a small yacht's launch, which floated near the beach. Four sailors were seated at the oars, another, standing up to his knees in the surf, kept the boat steady. The yacht itself lay about a mile out in the bay. Mr. Daunt immediately directed his companions to place M. de Brianceau in the stern-sheets of the launch, and when this was done, at a sign from him, I gathered Madame in my arms and wading boldly into the water was assisted aboard by the sailors. My master followed. Climbing into the boat, he stood erect and turned to the oarsmen.

"Give way, my children!" he commanded sharply. "Row for your lives!"

I caught a quick glimpse of eight astonished faces on the beach, then, even before the sailors could comply with my master's orders, the gentlemen ashore who had respectfully allowed us to precede them, perceiving that they were about to be deserted, as on a signal darted in a body for the boat, uttering the wildest maledictions. Vigorous Daunt, with a snarling laugh, struck viciously at the first that reached him and the man dropped into the water. Another made a spring, but missed, for the boat was already receding from the shore. The rest halted up to their waists in the sea, shaking their fists and cursing like madmen.

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"Vigorous Daunt, . . . struck viciously at the first that reached him."
[Vigorous Daunt: Billionaire]



Mr. Daunt addressed them :

"Gentlemen!" he said derisively, "when a plot fails it is every man for himself and the Devil for us all. I commend you to the Devil, for I have no room for you aboard my yacht. I trust, however, that you will be able to escape the clutches of the law. A last word of advice to you. France does not want a king! Farewell!"

* * * * *

We gained the yacht without further mishap, and landed safely at Plymouth on the evening of the ensuing day, and thence set out immediately for London, accompanied by M. de Brianceau, who was very ill, and Madame, his wife.

So ended the little brown man's capricious experiment with poverty.



CHAPTER XIX

"*HIS BRILLIANCY*"

IT was my bad fortune to fall desperately ill at the time when my master, Mr. Vigorous Daunt, most needed the exercise of some strong yet kindly restraining influence to persuade him from the wild excesses which made his name a by-word in the land, and which were prompted by his brilliant yet already deranged intelligence.

For two months I lay at the point of death, raving in the delirium of rheumatic fever, in a private ward of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Even when I recovered consciousness and the crisis was past, another seven weeks elapsed before I could be removed. During all that period I neither saw nor received any communication from my master, and the most painful circumstance of my convalescence consisted in the fact of his unkind and continued silence. I was so deeply attached to the little brown man that his neglect occasioned me real grief, and I fretted so much in consequence that my recovery was retarded. The nurses and surgeons who attended me replied each day to my inquiries with the utmost sympathy, assuring

me that Mr. Daunt was most probably out of England.

But as I improved in health I conceived a fancy that they were concealing something from me concerning him. And I was right. The first paper I was permitted to see contained an extraordinary account of a marvellous marble palace that was then being erected under his personal supervision in St. John's Wood. It seemed that about the time I had fallen ill he had purchased a square tract of land. This he had immediately denuded of houses and surrounded with a continuous wall, twenty feet high, and within the enclosure so made there was then in process of construction, and already almost completed, a mansion the description of whose size, design and materials read like a story from the *Arabian Nights Entertainments*. The perusal of this article and the speculation it evoked threw me into such a fever of excitement that I understood the motives which had actuated my kind attendants in previously withholding from me the news. I suffered a relapse, and many days passed before I was allowed to converse, much less read, again, and even then for long I was forbidden to talk on subjects that excited me. But at length, on one splendid June morning, I left the hospital and was conveyed in an ambulance to the Colonnade Hotel.

Needless to say, my first inquiry on arrival there was for my master, but the servants informed me that he had taken up his residence in his palace.

I had despatched to him from the hospital many telegrams that he had not condescended to answer, but I was so anxious to see him that I sank my pride and sent another. A like fate attended it. I waited in vain three days for a reply, and then by my physieian's orders I journeyed to Margate, hoping to regain my old strength with the aid of the salt sea breezes there. During the four weeks that I remained at the seaside I sent to my master five letters and as many telegrams, but never an answer did he vouchsafe me. The London papers, however, were full of his doings, and from their pages I learned much that both alarmed and disturbed me. Whole columns were devoted to descriptions of his entertainments, his guards, his suite, his servants and his court. Oftentimes I could scarcely credit my eyes and thought I must be dreaming as I read.

This intelligence shortened my stay at Margate ; for, to be frank, I could not stifle the jealous curiosity that had long been steadily eating up my store of patience. Although still feeble, I returned straightway to London, and the following morning, at eleven o'clock, I drove out to St. John's Wood. My first impression of my master's palaece was that of disappointment. A high castellated red brick wall fronted the pavement, and beyond its tiny turrets was reared an immense four-storeyed square structure of grey stone, covering some aeres of ground. Its walls were pierced with an infinite number of small-paned stained glass Gothic win-

dows that caught and flashed back the sunlight in a thousand tints of rose and purple.

Save for that latter circumstance, there was nothing about the exterior of the place except its gigantic size that could satisfactorily account for the extraordinary public interest that its erection had caused, nor even to distinguish it from scores of other large houses in the vicinity.

My cab bore me slowly past a great line of waiting carriages, through an arched gateway into a circular stone-flagged drive that ran between flanking overtopping walls to an inner porch defended with an enormous carved bronze door. There I alighted. The porch was filled with men, seemingly soldiers, for they were clad in fantastic, bejewelled, brown velvet uniforms, and although they did not carry arms they stood like statues stiffly at attention.

A gentleman wearing large gold epaulettes received me at the threshold.

"Your name!" he demanded, speaking with a strong foreign accent.

"Captain Rupert Granville!"

"Your business?"

"I wish to see Mr. Vigorous Daunt."

The officer raised his eyebrows. "Have you a card of *entrée*?" he inquired.

I bit my lips, for I was cut to the quick to perceive that my name was unknown. "At least," thought I, "my master might have instructed his servants in my regard."

"I have no card," I said aloud, "but I am an old friend of Mr. Daunt."

The officer again raised his brows. "Does His Brilliancy expect you?" he demanded.

"His what?" I gasped.

"His Brilliancy." He frowned and gave me an insolent stare.

I drew a deep breath. "N—no," I stammered, "but if you will be good enough to send my card to His—ahem—His Brilliancy, you might do yourself a worse service."

The officer took the card I offered between the tips of his gloved forefingers, and handed it to one of his men, whom he directed in Spanish to carry my request.

Meanwhile I sat down upon a great carved oaken bench and looked at the soldiers about me. I waited, fuming with impatience, but I cannot declare that the delay lacked interest, for every minute there arrived, and were admitted where entrance to me was denied, people of note and fashion, amongst whom I recognised some of the noblest in the land.

At length, however, the soldier who had taken my card returned, and, saluting his officer, muttered some words in his ear that I could not catch.

The officer thereupon addressed me with a sudden show of courtesy. "His Brilliancy will receive you, Captain Granville. Will you be good enough to step this way?"

I got to my feet and followed him through those curtains where the others had passed before me.

I found myself in a large ante-chamber filled with gorgeously dressed ushers and pages. To one of these the officer spoke in Spanish—a dark-eyed, olive-skinned lad. He bowed and signed that I should follow him. I did so, slipping more than once on the highly polished *parquet* floor. We passed through another ante-chamber, larger than the first, into a spacious and magnificently furnished hall to the foot of a staircase whose proportions were prodigious. It was fully thirty feet wide; the steps were composed of enamelled porphyry, the balustrade of marble, and it was supported upon a double row of fluted Doric columns made of gleaming alabaster. It circled the hall, forming a balcony of about twenty feet in height, and it opened at the topmost tier upon an enormous apartment arranged as a conservatory.

At every few steps of the staircase stood a pair of pages, while half a dozen loitered at the top. My conductor resigned his office at the foot to one of the pages there stationed. He in turn changed with another at the next landing, and so often was this inane ceremony repeated that by the time I had mounted to the first floor I had passed through the hands of seven different guides. I was thence escorted through a maze of palms and flower-spangled shrubs to a long, richly carpeted ante-chamber that was thronged with gentlemen and ladies dispersed in smiling and chattering groups. This possessed two arched, heavily curtained doorways. Before one stood an equerry, a handsome

dark-whiskered Spaniard, who received guest after guest and ushered them into a room beyond. The other was guarded by two giant soldiers who wore casque-like gilt helmets and morions, and who barred the passage with drawn swords. Between them stood a man I knew—Valdos de Guira—the erstwhile captain of my master's yacht *Calliope*. I gazed at him in the utmost astonishment. His uniform was composed of brown velvet with heavy gold facings. A pair of gold epaulettes sprang from his shoulders. His legs were encased in golden topped boots, and glittering golden spurs graced his heels. His breast was crossed with a band made of hinged gold plates set with splendid rubies. His scabbard was of solid gold, and his sword hilt was thickly encrusted with emeralds.

He lazily twirled his moustachios with one hand and gazed about him with a proud, insolent smile, as handsome and splendid a figure as I have ever looked upon. Many ladies appeared to think so, too, for admiring glances flashed at him continually.

I stood for a moment almost dazed at his magnificence, then collecting my thoughts I strode to his side.

"De Guira!" I exclaimed.

He surveyed me a second, then calmly nodded his head. "Ah, Captain, back again I see. You look a little worse for wear; your illness has pulled you down!"

"Mr Daunt!" I said. "Where is he?"

De Guira raised his eyebrows in a sort of protest, much as the officer at the porch had done.

"Hush!" he whispered, then aloud, and laying a marked emphasis on his first words, "*His Brilliancy* is engaged. He will see you presently."

"His Brilliancy!" I repeated, my voice hoarse with rage. Then I cried in Spanish, "What the deuce does all this mean; this gilded pageantry, this mimic royalty, this mummery of words?"

De Guira frowned and stared me in the eyes. "You and I have never been friends, Captain!" he muttered, "but for all that I shall give you a piece of friendly advice. Don't address His Brilliancy in the tone you have used to me!"

"And why not?" I demanded haughtily.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Because, if you do—you will regret it. That is all."

After a few minutes' waiting, the curtains before which De Guira stood parted, and an equerry emerged, who cried out in a loud voice, "Captain Rupert Granville!"

"Here!" said I.

"His Brilliancy will receive you. Kindly step this way!"

I followed him, my heart palpitating with excitement, into an octagonal room about thirty feet in diameter. This was encased in brown velvet hangings interspersed with mirrors and carpeted with the same rich material. A brown oak wood-desk stood in the centre of the floor and seated

before it was my master. He was clad from head to heel in brown, but in garments of another age. A Louis Quinze coat, vest and doublet, trimmed with coffee coloured lace, covered his body, the buttons of which were composed of enormous rubies. He wore knee breeches, brown silk stockings, and antique high-heeled shoes, clasped with golden buckles set with diamonds worthy of an emperor's crown. Upon his head he wore a brown curled wig, furnished with a long queue. His expression was intensely gloomy, stern and forbidding; his eyes, however, glittered like points of light; they diffused an impression of sardonic, almost diabolic, intelligence. They were the eyes of a soul in torment, but of a soul passionately scornful of things, even of his own pain. They arrested me some paces from his desk. He gazed at me fixedly while one might have counted two score, and even before he removed his gaze I understood that the master I had served for so many years had given place to a man I knew nothing of. His stare was mesmeric, and at its termination I awoke as from a trance.

He raised his hand and pointed at his equerry. "Go!" he commanded.

The equerry vanished. Mr. Daunt turned to me.

"Well?" he said. "What do you want?" His voice cut the air like a sweeping blade.

Involuntarily I shivered. "I—I—have come back, sir!" I muttered.

"So! What for?"

I found my voice and answered with dignity, "You have not yet dismissed me from your service?"

"Will you wear a uniform?"

"No!"

Vigorous Daunt frowned blackly at me, but in another moment his face relaxed. "I'm glad you are back, Granville. I have saved a suite for you next my own! Ugh!" He uttered a little moan—and sitting on the edge of the chair buried his face in his hands.

"What is it?" I cried, approaching him, "are you ill, sir?"

"No!" He raised his head, and fixing me with his eyes, opened his mouth and lolled out his tongue, making the while a series of hideous grimaces.

Stupefied with surprise I stared at him. "Block! Block! Block!" he gurgled—"Oh! oh! Ouch! Block!"

"Are you mad?" I gasped.

At the word a dreadful expression crossed his face, his grimaces instantly ceased, and he regarded me with a look of ferocious hate.

"You—you—saw!" he whispered. "Curse you!"

"I saw that you were ill, sir."

"What else?" he hissed.

"Nothing."

"You lie!"

"Mr. Daunt!" I cried.

He shook his head, then quite suddenly the fire died out of his eyes and he placed his right hand on my shoulder.

"Forgive me, boy!" he said softly. "I don't mind you—but the others must not know. I am suffering from a horrible complaint—it will kill me. But there, I'll tell you all afterwards. Come with me now—I must hold my court."

He pressed an electric button set in the table, and next moment the equerry appeared.

"Your Brilliancy!" he said.

My master drew himself up. "Public audience!" he answered curtly.

The equerry bowed and pulled a silken rope hanging from the ceiling. Instantly a marvelously sweet-toned peal of bells began to chime.

Mr. Daunt marched across the room to a door set in the opposite wall, that opened before him seemingly of its own volition. I followed him lost in amaze, and a second later we entered a room the like of which I had never seen before. It was fully two hundred feet long by a hundred broad and fifty high. It was roofed with a majestic dome of stained glass supported upon alabaster columns with brazen bases and gilded capitals. The walls and floor were entirely composed of large plate-glass mirrors, cunningly interwoven in thin frames of burnished steel. Their effect was to extend the scene into an endless vista of depth and distance and to multiply the gorgeous crowd assembled on the floor into a countless and illimitable host. On

my master's entrance the waiting people parted and offered him passage between their ranks. He took my arm and led me down this causeway to a raised glass dais, situated near the farther end of the room, upon which stood a throne chair composed of ivory and gold. Behind the dais a score of soldiers with drawn swords mounted guard, and upon its steps, forming an avenue of approach, stood several magnificently appalled household officers. Mr. Daunt strode along, his chin high in the air, his eyes sweeping the gathering with flashing disdainful glances. The people silently and reverently inclined before him, but as he mounted the dais and took his place upon the throne, a long sigh went up. He made presently a sweeping gesture with his hand. On the signal a procession was instituted, and the guests, approaching one by one, men and women alike, passed the dais, and saluted their host with the smiling formula: "Long live your Brilliancy, King of Gold!"

Each one then took from an enormous salver held by two negro servants who stood at one corner of the dais a small flat yellow disc, and retired with his trophy to mingle with the crowd, which very soon was split up into scores of whispering groups.

When the last one had passed the throne my master made a signal to a herald who stood beside him. The fellow immediately blew a loud blast through his trumpet, and having thus secured universal attention, he cried out, "Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! His Brilliancy desires all those who may be

unable or unwilling to attend his banquet of this evening to return their coins of invitation forthwith!"

He paused, but not a soul moved.

Then a mighty thunder of plaudits resounded through the room, and a hundred voices shouted, "Long live your Brilliancy! King of Gold!"

Mr. Daunt stood up, and acknowledged the applause of his guests with a curt nod. He then beckoned me, and, stepping from the dais, made his exit, marching from the apartment to the music of a splendid, unseen orchestra, that filled the place with a stirring volume of sound. The audience was over. I followed at his heels, curiously observing as I went the facial expressions of the crowd. The men appeared critical, amused, yet admiring; but the ladies, with few exceptions, were alight with enthusiasm, and as my master disappeared a maze of tiny handkerchiefs fluttered in farewell.

Mr. Daunt led me through a number of chambers into a small room fitted as a library, that looked out upon the street. He locked the door behind us, and sank with a weary sigh into a chair.

"What do you think, Granville?" he asked, gloomily.

"A pretty scene the last," I replied. "But what is your game?"

"Wait till to-night, boy. You'll know then!"

"No; you promised to confide in me after the audience!"

He knitted his brows. "I did, but please me, and do not insist!"

"I must!" I answered.

He stood up and folded his arms; then, quite suddenly, without uttering a word, he commenced to dance, without, however, shifting his position, but throwing out his feet and legs sideways in swift succession, in the manner of a marionette. He continued this exercise for several minutes, his face working and grimacing horribly, and only the white of his eyes visible.

I gazed at him so overcome with astonishment and a growing, nameless sort of fear that I was rooted to the floor. At length he ceased to move his feet, and after a strong, convulsive shudder that ran like a paroxysm up and down his frame, he stood still. His eyes opened and he looked at me. He then bent a little forward, his hands clutching the arms of his chair, and stared me in the face. I dared not meet his eyes, but looked at the chair; I noticed that the arms pressed by his fingers were covered with little knobs of ivory.

"I read your mind now," he said presently. "You think I am mad. I'm afraid I shall have to kill you, Rupert." He uttered the words with a sort of melancholy thoughtfulness, tinged with regret. I fell back in my chair, sick and half-swooning—so weak that I could not have resisted had he sought to slay me there and then.

" You will betray me if I don't, and try to shut me up in Bedlam ! " he pursued.

" No—no ! " I muttered ; a mist swam before my eyes, blinding me.

" Oh, yes, I know everything. Nothing is concealed from me. But I shall not kill you just yet. You can't escape me, Rupert ! "

Suddenly I experienced a horrible sensation of falling. The floor beneath me rocked and swayed and seemed to be sinking. A rush of air revived me in some measure and I opened my eyes, but upon pitch darkness. Stretching forth my hand I touched rough hewn stone that grated swiftly past my fingers, rasping off the skin. Then the motion ceased and the rushing air was still. A deathly silence followed.

Overcome with terror I uttered a sharp scream for help ! A voice answered me from beside my chair, that of Mr. Daunt. " Be quiet, boy, no one can hear you but I. You waste your breath. " A light flared up as he spoke, and I perceived that a whole section of the floor of the room containing my master's chair as well as my own, had sunk to the bottom of a deep shaft through the walls of the palace, worked doubtless by hydraulic machinery. Before us was an open archway, and beyond a long, empty hollow chamber, walled and roofed with solid masonry, and leading into blackness.

Mr. Daunt held in his right hand a cocked revolver that was pointed at my heart.

"Get up," he said curtly. "March forward ten paces, then stand!"

I managed to obey.

"Good-bye," said he. Before I could turn he had disappeared. The light, too, faded, and all I could hear was the soft sucking sound of well-oiled machinery in motion.

Presently I sat down in the gloom upon the floor and tried to collect my thoughts, that had been scattered and shattered by the awful revelation that my master was mad. For a long while I failed utterly to realise what had come to pass, or to grasp the fact of my own peril. At last, however, I commenced to shiver with the cold that struck into my frame from the cold stone on which I sat. That and the oppressive silence of the place aroused me to a sense of fear, and with fear came fuller understanding. I got to my feet and struck a match. By its dim light I peered at my surroundings. Before me stretched a widely separated maze of arches, supporting a massive stone ceiling, fully twelve feet overhead. Striking match after match, I followed the right wall from chamber to chamber. All were empty, chill and desolate, with never a break in the masonry above, to the side, or below. I reached at last the end in a blank wall, and retracing my steps returned to my commencing point. A search along the left wall was attended with a similar fate. Evidently then my prison consisted of a chain of cellars underneath the palace, possessing no means of communication with the world except the secret

lift leading to my master's private room. As my store of lucifers dwindled I became more cautious in their use. I wandered from chamber to chamber feeling my way in the dark, and in each I shouted myself hoarse and stamped on the walls with my boot heels.

But my labour was in vain. Not a sound reached me but the mocking echoes of my own voice and of the noises I myself created. Desisting at length in despair I paced up and down for hours before the well shaft until my feet were weary, my body exhausted with fatigue and hunger, and my brain ached with thought. Then I lay down upon the floor and almost immediately sank into a fitful slumber that was made hideous with dreams. I was awakened by a flash of light, and opened my eyes to see standing beside me the gorgeous figure of Valdos de Guira.

"You!" I gasped, starting up.

"Hush!" he replied in Spanish, "speak softly."

Before us was the lift—a circular area of carpeted floor containing a revolving bookcase, a small table furnished with an electric reading-lamp, and two chairs.

"What is it?" I demanded. "You have come to save me?"

De Guira nodded, but with a meaning gesture he extended his right hand, and I saw that he held a revolver.

"On conditions," he replied.

"Name them!"

"Señor Daunt, as you have doubtless already discovered, is a lunatic, eh?"

"You know that?"

"I am not blind, Capitano. During your illness I have, more or less, supplied your place in his confidence. I tell you this, he is not only mad, but he is dangerous. In my opinion he is now planning some terrible, diabolical act!"

"Oh! Against whom?"

"It matters not. Listen to me. Sooner or later his state of mind will be discovered and he will be arrested and shut up. In that case we shall lose our positions. Now, for me, I am not rich, and that will not suit me unless I make myself rich at c. ce. You understand?"

"Perfectly; you intend to rob Mr. Daunt."

"That is it, with your help. In return I save your life. Make no mistake. Señor Daunt intends to kill you. I listened at the keyhole while you talked a while ago."

"How can I help you?" I gasped.

"I come to that, you see——"

"Be quick!" I urged.

He shrugged his shoulders. "No need, Capitano. He is now at the banquet with his guests, he cannot leave them. It is this way. The Señor, our master, has, in this place, a strong room filled with gold. But it has only one key, and that he always keeps on his watch chain. To-night he will come here intending to kill you. But if I leave you my pistol, and you wait there behind that pillar, you kill him

first, see. You will take his keys and sit in that chair and press that little button; then up will go the floor to the room above, quick. I shall wait for you there. No one else will hear or know, for no one is permitted to come near his little room but me. You understand! Then we shall take away the gold, quite silently, and fly.

"The others will wait and wait, but they will suspect nothing, for the secret of this lift is not known to any. We shall destroy the chair before we go, and then nobody can ever find out. What do you think?"

"A pretty scheme!" I muttered. "You wish me to murder my master!"

"In order to save your life! Else you will die—yes, by the Heaven above us! Agree, and I save you. Refuse, and I laugh in your face."

"You rascal!" I gasped.

"It is true," he returned, shrugging, and smiling with the utmost nonchalance.

I looked in his eyes, they were hard as steel and his handsome face was set like a mask.

"Very well," I said, "give me the pistol."

He bowed, and stepping upon the lift, sat down in my master's chair. The floor commenced slowly to ascend, but when only a small aperture was left through which I could see him it stopped, and, bending down, de Guira gazed at me. "Remember," he muttered, "to-night you must obey my bidding in all things. Else I shall kill you like a dog! *Au revoir!*"

The revolver fell at my feet as he finished speaking, and the lift sprang upwards like a bird, leaving me in total darkness.

I struck a match, and examined the pistol. It was loaded only in one chamber, why I could not guess. The hours that followed were the most acutely miserable of my life. The fact is, sane or mad, I was devotedly attached to my little master, and the knowledge that in order to save my own life it was necessary to take his, was insupportably bitter. And there was nothing comforting in the reflection that after I had slain Mr. Daunt, unless a miracle intervened, I should be in the power, temporarily at all events, of an unscrupulous villain and obliged to assist him rob the dead. An eternity seemed to have elapsed before I heard the machinery again in motion. My heart in my mouth, I hastily lit a match and slipped behind the first arch. Presently a blaze of light struck past me, stabbing at the darkness beyond.

"Granville!" cried my master's voice. "Where are you?"

I made no reply. A breathless silence followed that lasted a full minute. Then I heard a clicking sound I recognised. Softly I cocked my own pistol, and waited. The bar of light broadened, though I heard no sound. Next instant I peered into my master's face. Our revolvers cracked simultaneously, but he staggered and fell backwards to the floor, while I was unhurt. Trembling in every

limb I lit a match, for the electric lamp, shattered by its fall, was extinguished. Mr. Daunt lay at full length on his back.

"God forgive me!" I groaned, and stooping I caught up the smoking pistol that lay beside him. It was still loaded in five chambers. I thought then of de Guira and his threat. I was armed now to oppose him it was true, but I was so weak, so ill, so little fitted to encounter a strong and determined man that in very desperation I removed my master's watch chain from his vest, and staggered to the lift. Sinking into his chair I pressed the button on its arm, that de Guira had shown me, and the floor shot swiftly upwards. At the end of that rapid journey I looked into the muzzles of five revolvers. Valdos de Guira, attended by four satellites, faced me. All had discarded their former fantastic attire, and were dressed in ordinary European costumes. All were Spaniards.

"Hand over your revolver!" hissed de Guira. I obeyed, and he examined it. "It's the señor's," he cried, "where is your own?"

"I left it below," I responded wearily.

"Search him, Pascuale!"

A man stepped forward and felt me with his hand from head to foot, forcing me to stand.

"He is unarmed, Capitano," he said presently.

"Give me the key!" commanded de Guira.

I handed him my master's watch chain, and he uttered a cry of delight. Darting to a certain

wall, he tore aside some curtains, and revealed a large iron door. Inserting the key, he twisted it in the lock, turned a handle and dragged the door open. I had been growing weaker by swift degrees for long, and at that moment I swooned.

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CHAPTER XX
MASTER AND SERVANT

WHEN I awoke the room was hot, and filled with smoke. The air resounded with stifled shrieks and cries, and curses, loud explosions and crashes, and every species of dreadful noise; indeed, pandemonium reigned supreme. I pulled myself erect with the aid of a chair, and staggered to the door. It was locked, and moreover, flames licked their way towards me through crevices. I turned and gazed wildly about me.

The room had no other outlet. I tottered to the strong room. It was empty save for some glittering yellow coins scattered over the floor; but it offered no means of escape.

I remembered then the lift, and the cellars beneath the palace. If I could reach them—they were stout and strong, built of solid stone—even if the whole building were afire, there I might be safe—with the body of my master! That thought made me writhe, but the smoke quickly increasing in volume pricked me into action. I looked for my master's chair, whose knobs controlled the machinery

of the lift. It was in fragments, but a dozen cloth-covered wires, proceeding from a small hole in the floor streamed in all directions. I gave myself up for lost at that, and for a while I stood gazing mutely at the ruin before me overwhelmed with despair. Then came inspiration, and a flash of hope.

Kneeling down I gathered up the wires, and one after another applied their naked ends together. Five minutes passed in that occupation, during which the smoke grew so dense that breathing was a torture, and my eyes were almost blinded. The door, too, was eaten through in places by the fire, and a great, deafening, crackling roar of rushing air and flames added to the horrors of my situation. Combination after combination I tried in vain, but at last I succeeded. The floor sank from beneath me with a sudden, sickening speed, and glancing up I saw the shaft's mouth ablaze. My hair was singed, my face was scorched and my clothes were smouldering, but I was safe, snatched from the very jaws of a dreadful death. A few seconds later I was plunged into the gloom of night, and motion ceased. Far overhead was a dim, red glow elsewise blackness profound and impenetrable. Clenching my teeth I prepared to look again upon my master's corpse, and struck a match. Holding it above me, I stepped into the cavern. But imagine my surprise and consternation. The body had vanished. A small pool of blood showed me where it had lain, but it was gone. A hundred wild

thoughts quivered through my brain. Was there another secret entrance to the cellars? Had his body been discovered and removed thereby? Or had I after all failed to kill him, and was he lurking in the shelter of some arch, wounded, but alive?

My hair standing on end, I moved forward on tip-toe, peering into the shadows. The match burned my fingers, sputtered and went out. I struck another and crept from chamber to chamber. Suddenly the silence of the place, until then intense and absolute, was marred by a distant confusion of echoing reverberations. Pausing to listen, I presently distinguished shouts and cries, which appeared to issue from a certain direction—on my left. I turned my steps thitherwards, and circling an arch came in fifty steps (the sounds growing louder as I proceeded) to another arch, and beyond that a wall slashed with a thin perpendicular bar of dim light. Uttering a cry of joy I sprang forward, and my last match showed me a immense stone block hung on a pivot, and standing, propped by a piece of wood, some inches ajar. I forced it wide open, and next second emerged into the open air, whereupon the stone crashed into place behind me. I stood in a deep, narrow basement passage fringing the foundations of the building. Before me was a flight of steps. Climbing these, I found myself at the rear of the palace, in a space railed off as a shrubbery between the building itself and the street wall. A fine rain was falling, and the cloud-curtained sky was emblazoned with a lurid crimson glare. No

living being was in sight, but a loud babel of voices from the street informed me of a great crowd collected there, hidden from me by the wall. Setting forth at a run I hurried eastwards through the shubbery, but came presently to an iron rail too tall to climb. Darting back again, I repassed the basement, and, turning an angle, I reached at length a little causeway leading between one of many side entrances of the palace and a grated gate in the wall opening upon the road.

The fire had not yet extended to that part of the building, and the causeway was thronged with bright-helmeted firemen, who passed and repassed each other in two separate streams, one entering the palace empty-handed, the other returning laden with furniture and valuables into the street. I joined the latter and gained the road. It was a side street narrow as a lane, densely crowded with curious sightseers, who, however, were restrained from approaching the gate by a rope circle guarded by firemen and police. I was so exhausted both mentally and physically from all I had endured that my only thought was to escape as speedily as possible and return to my hotel. The general confusion assisted my purpose. Slipping under the rope I mingled with the crowd and gradually writhed my way towards the end of the street unquestioned and unnoticed. But my evil star even then did not desert me. I had scarcely emerged from the outskirts of the crowd when I came face to face with Valdos de Guira. He was standing

under a lamp-post, two of his satellites beside him, gazing at the burning palace. His face was almost concealed by a heavy fur cap, and a long black waterproof, buttoned up to the chin, fell over his feet. He saw me on the instant, and uttered a cry of surprise. Before I could collect my wits he had seized my arm, and I felt a hard point pressed against my ribs. "One word!" he hissed in my ear, "and I shall kill you! Come!"

I suffered myself to be dragged forward in silence, for I did not doubt that he would keep his promise, and I knew that the hard point I felt was a muzzle of a revolver that he held concealed beneath his cloak. Presently we came to the end of the street and entered Finchley Road. Fifty paces from the corner a large covered two-horse waggon was drawn up beside the pavement. One of the men raised the back flap, and de Guira forced me to climb the steps. He followed me closely, and next moment we sat side by side upon the floor of the cart. "Drive on—you know where!" he cried to his followers in Spanish—and the waggon immediately set off at a good round trot, in what direction I could not guess, for my view was completely barred by the covering, and all was as dark as Erebus about me. For more than an hour nothing was to be heard save the rumbling of the waggon, and at last I became aware of a curious shuddering, trembling motion in my companion's body, and a series of smothered sounds—that strangely resembled suppressed chuckles.

"Where are you taking me?" I muttered in Spanish.

"Silence!" he replied, "or do you wish to die?"

But on that I was inspired with a rage that made me reckless.

"A fig for your threats!" I cried. "You infernal scoundrel, you have once attempted my life to-night, but you dare not murder me in the streets. Were you to fire your revolver you would be stopped and arrested."

"I have a dagger!"

"Make the least move!" I retorted, "and I shall shout for help!"

"Be silent, you fool! I intend you no harm. But force my hand, and I'll kill you as I would a dog. I'm a desperate man!"

I bit my lips and was still; but presently he asked in a whisper, "How did I attempt your life to-night. What did you mean?"

"You shut me up in Mr. Daunt's study, locked the door and set the place afire—after smashing up his chair so that I could not escape by the lift."

"Oh! did I?" he muttered. "Then how did you escape?"

"You forgot to cut the wires that controlled the machinery of the lift. I pieced them together!"

"Oho! That was smart of you—and the lift worked. I see! But how did you get out of the cellars?"

"I found a stone door in the wall open."

"Ah! I thought I shut it!" he exclaimed.

"De Guira!" I said suddenly. "You have done a bad night's work for yourself. Mr. Daunt is not dead!"

"Not dead!"

"No! I could not find his body in the cellar—and the fact of that pivot door being open is proof positive that he escaped. The bullet must have only grazed his skull and stunned him. Believe me, he will soon discover your treachery, and he will follow you for his revenge to the world's end!"

"Bah!" retorted de Guira, "you rave! I never miss—I blew his brains out!"

"What!" I gasped.

"Just that!"

"You—how—when?" I gasped. My brain commenced to reel. "I thought——"

De Guira interrupted me with a chuckle. "I discovered another entrance to the cellar through the armoury, days ago, and when he went to his room after the banquet I slipped down that way and shot him just as he was about to kill you. You should thank me for saving your life!"

So great was my surprise in hearing these words that I was deprived of speech—and before I could collect my thoughts the waggon came to a sudden standstill. Almost instantly unseen hands raised the back flap—and de Guira starting up forced me to descend. The dawn was not yet come, but the earth was wrapped in a soft, misty twilight. Glancing curiously about I saw that we were in the grounds

of a large country house—situated on the crest of a sloping hill. Far below us sparkled the lights of London, and radiant glare in the south-eastern sky topped with massed black clouds of smoke showed me the position of my master's blazing palace—and evidenced the distance we had travelled. I judged that I had been brought to a place somewhere to the north-west of Hampstead, but de Guira permitted me no opportunity to make a prolonged recognisance. Giving some sharp orders to his satellites—my hands were seized and I was dragged up a flight of steps and into the hall of an old half-ruined mansion-house. I commenced to experience for the Spaniard a sort of grudging admiration. Rascal as he was, the man was clever and had laid his plans well. He had no doubt hired this place as a refuge for his booty long beforehand, and I could not but commend his choice, for during my short examination of it from without I had been unable to discover another house within a considerable distance. I was taken to a large, poorly furnished room on the ground floor—lighted with a single tallow candle, and compelled to wait there attended by two guards, while de Guira and the others carried in from the waggon, and disposed upon the floor—the clinking bags of gold that they had looted from my master's strong room. From their number and apparent weight I guessed that the plunder amounted to a great sum—at least two hundred thousand pounds. After the last was brought in de Guira and his two unoccupied assis-

tants vanished, but some moments later they reappeared bearing between them the body of a man, whose face was covered with a blood-stained cloth. At the sight I was seized with horror, for I thought it was the body of my master.

Having laid it down beside the bags of gold—de Guira, standing erect, drew his revolver and cocked it.

“Now my friends,” he said in Spanish, “we must dispose of our prisoners. Be good enough to stand yonder—against the wall—in line, so!”

His satellites fell back obediently.

“Captain Granville!” said de Guira in a hollow voice, “uncover that face so that we all may gaze upon it! Come, be quick,—if you value your life!”

Confronted with his threatening muzzle—protest was useless. Shaking in every limb I moved forward and drew aside the cloth—But it was not Mr. Daunt’s face that my action revealed. We looked upon the corpse of a dark, olive-skinned man. His skull had been smashed above the temple by a blow from some heavy instrument. But incredible as it may appear the face was the face of Valdós de Guira and no other. I could never mistake that broad brow, that hawk-like nose, that cloven chin, and the sweeping black moustachios covering his gaping mouth. I uttered a groaning exclamation that was echoed by the men standing against the wall—then starting up I gazed at the man with the pistol. Who then was he? But during our preoccupation

—a marvellous transformation had occurred in his appearance. His cloak was unbuttoned and between its folds peeped out a figure clad from head to heel in brown. His moustaches had been removed and lay upon the floor at his feet. His cap was gone—and across his scalp was traced a long, thin, bloody weal, covered with court plaster.

“Mr. Daunt!” I gasped.

He nodded and pointed to the corpse of de Guira. “And this is my would-be murderer! Does he deserve his fate or not?”

The men standing against the wall gazed at my master, petrified with surprise and terror. I caught at a straw of hope. My master had without doubt made a strange mistake. He evidently believed that de Guira’s hand had aimed that blow at his life which mine had directed.

Well, believing so, he might not feel so revengefully inclined against me, as otherwise he must. Perhaps—he might even spare my life!

“He richly deserves his fate!” I cried.

Mr. Daunt nodded. “Good!” he said in English. “I expected you to agree with me, Rupert. And now—a compact. Help me—and——”

“Yes, yes?”

“We may resume our old ways. I intended to kill you to-night, it is true, because you thought me mad. But after such evidence of my sanity as this (he pointed to the corpse), you would be a fool to doubt! Eh? Am I not a genius? Ha! ha! ha!”

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"I expected you to agree with me, Rupert"
Vigorous Daunt, Billionaire

"You are indeed! How did you do it?" I muttered.

"So: the bullet stunned me, but when I awoke, I saw everything as plainly as day. I slipped out of the cellar through the pivot door that you know of, and re-entered the palace by a secret way known only to myself, and, of course, went straight to my rooms and armed myself. De Guira's men had gone off with the gold, but I soon found them. He was quietly engaged in setting fire to the palace. I killed him with the butt end of my pistol, and then, wishing for a little amusement, I wrapped myself up in his cloak, made myself up to resemble him, and went to his men—those beauties yonder. Well, I got them to return to the palace and bear him out to the waggon—they thought it was I! Ha! ha! ha! When I met you, I was looking for some police to give them in charge, but when I saw you I altered my plans. I thought to myself: I shall arrest you, and then carry out the whole affair as de Guira had intended—in his place. Then if you proved a fool and persisted in believing me mad, I would kill you. If not, we could have a good laugh at the expense of these silly statues. Oh, Rupert, look at their faces! Ha! ha! ha! Tfu! I have a stitch—I'll die of laughter. Ha! ha! ha!

De Guira's satellites, however, did not furnish me with food for mirth. Already awakening from their astonishment, their expressions were growing wild and desperate, and only my master's pistol shaking in their faces restrained them from springing

at our throats. But he saw—and instantly became calm.

“Slaves!” he grated out in Spanish, “throw your weapons on the floor, or die!”

Slowly they obeyed. At my master’s nod I caught up their pistols, and they broke down.

“Mercy! Spare our lives!” they cried.

The little brown man nodded. “More than that,” he replied. “Do as I bid you, and I shall give you your freedom and every penny in those bags!”

They glanced at each other in extravagant amazement, and even I was dumbfounded.

“Well?” shouted my master, “do you agree?”

“Gladly, your Brilliancy!” they cried.

The little brown man smiled. “Good, then go about the house, collect and bring here all the wood you can find, put this corpse on the top, set fire to the pile and then to the house. You understand? Afterwards you can carry out your gold, put it aboard your waggon, and go to the deuce for all I care.”

The men sprang to obey, and soon a great mass of wooden furniture, sashes, broken tables and chairs was littered up in a heap in the middle of the room. Over this one poured a can of kerosene oil, and the others lifted up de Guira’s corpse and laid it on the top. Working with nervous speed, they next removed the bags of coin from the room and from the building. Returning again, some set fire to the house in different places, and finally applied

a lighted match to de Guira's funeral pile. Instantly it shot up in a tremendous blaze, and we all retired precipitately from the house, slamming the door behind us.

My master caught my arm and led me quickly towards the gates, without speaking a word of farewell to the robbers, whom we left bundling with desperate haste the money bags into their waggon. After quitting the grounds, Mr. Daunt quickened his steps to a run, and I was forced to the same gait, for he did not relinquish his nervous clutch upon my sleeve. But at the foot of the hill he slackened pace and we proceeded more soberly, though still at a fast walk towards London. As soon as I recovered breath I gave expression to a wonder that was consuming me.

"Why did you give those scoundrels your money?" I panted. "Good Heavens, what a haul; they will be rich men for the rest of their lives!"

"Not so rich," replied my master, with a chuckle. "You see," he added in explanation, I have long suspected de Guira's fidelity, though with all my acuteness I never dreamed he would proceed to the lengths he did and attempt my life. I expected at the most that he would rob me, and I gave him every chance to do so; but what do you think those bags contain?"

"Sovereigns."

"You ought to know me better," he muttered reproachfully. "Did I not tell you that I expected de Guira to rob me?"

"What then?" I demanded.

He burst into a loud, hoarse laugh. "Brand new—halfpennies—straight from the Mint," he cried; then he stopped, and, swinging me round, stood before me, his back to the hill.

"Now, Granville, face to face, man to man, tell me—am I mad?"

His eyes glared at me through the twilight, shining like coals of fire, and above his head I saw the glow of de Guira's funeral pile already painting the hilltop with a blaze of red. I shuddered in my soul; but his pistol confronted me, and I knew that my life depended on my answer.

"Nonsense," I said fervently. "You mad? You are the sanest, the wisest man on earth!"

He laughed a laugh of maniacal vanity, put up his pistol, and seizing my hands, wrung them violently. "Bless you, Rupert!" he cried; "from this moment we are no longer master and servant, but friends—friends. Only death shall part us!"

It was a prophecy that time and my evil fate fulfilled.

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