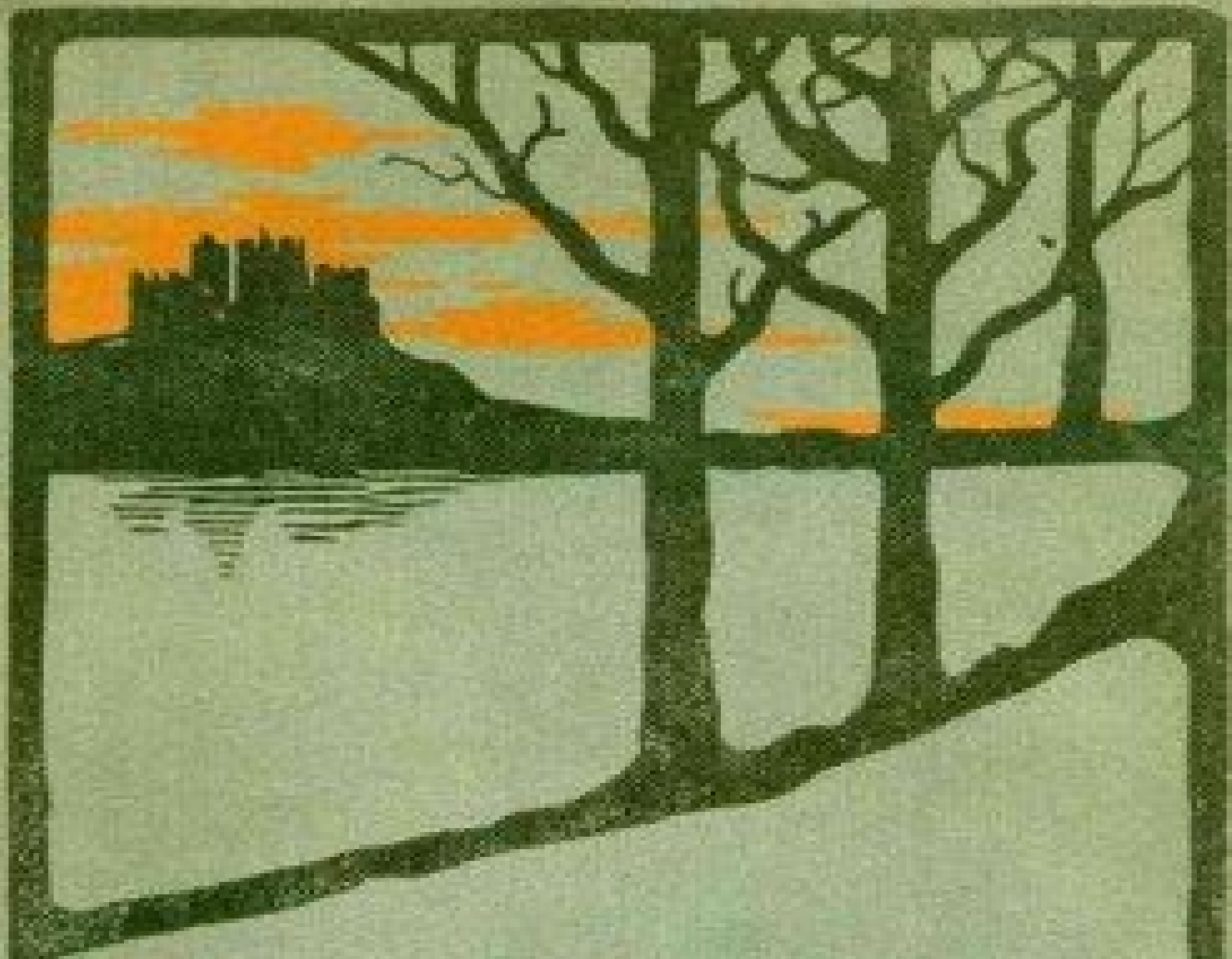

The Castle of the Shadows

Mrs C. N. Williamson

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THE CASTLE OF THE SHADOWS

Books by
C. N. and A. M. WILLIAMSON

THE LIGHTNING CONDUCTOR
THE PRINCESS PASSES
MY FRIEND THE CHAUFFEUR
LADY BETTY ACROSS THE WATER
ROSEMARY IN SEARCH OF A FATHER
MY LADY CINDERELLA
THE CAR OF DESTINY
THE CHAPERON
THE PRINCESS VIRGINIA
SET IN SILVER
ETC., ETC.

The Castle of the Shadows

By

MRS. C. N. WILLIAMSON

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1909

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DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & CO.

TO
A GOOD MARCHESE
THIS STORY OF
A WICKED MARCHESE

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THE CASTLE OF THE SHADOWS

The Castle of the Shadows

CHAPTER I

WHERE DREAMLAND BEGAN

According to the calendar it was winter; but between Mentone and the frontier town of Ventimiglia, on the white road inlaid like a strip of ivory on dark rocks above the sapphire of the Mediterranean, it was fierce summer in the sunshine. A girl riding between two men, reined in her chestnut mare at a cross-road which led into the jade-green twilight of an olive grove. The men pulled up their horses also, and all three came to a sudden halt at a bridge flung across a swift but shallow river, whose stony bed cleft the valley.

The afternoon sunshine poured down upon them, burnishing the coils of the girl's hair to gold, and giving a dazzling brilliancy to a complexion which for twenty years to come need not fear the light of day. She was gazing up the valley shut in on either side with thickly wooded hills, their rugged heads still gilded, their shoulders already half in shadow; but the eyes of the men rested only upon her. One was English, the other Italian; and it was the Italian whose look devoured her beauty, moving hungrily from the shining tendrils of gold that curled at the back of her white neck, up to the small pink ear almost hidden with a thick, rippling wave of hair; so to the piquant profile which to those who loved Virginia Beverly, was dearer than cold perfection.

"Oh, the olive woods!" she exclaimed. "How sweet they are! See the way the sunshine touches the old, gnarled trunks, and what a lovely light filters through the leaves. One never sees it anywhere except in an olive grove. I should like to live in one."

"Well, why not?" laughed the Englishman. "What prevents you from buying two or three? But you would soon tire of them, my child, as you do of everything as soon as it belongs to you."

"That's not fair," replied the girl. "Besides, if it were, who has helped to spoil me? I *will* buy an olive grove, and you shall see if I tire of it. Come, let's ride up the valley, and find out if there are any for sale. It looks heavenly cool after this heat."

"You'll soon discover that it's too cool," said the Italian, in perfect English. "The

sun is only in these valleys for a few hours, and it's gone for the day now. Besides, there's nothing interesting here. One sees the best from where we stand."

Virginia Beverly turned her eyes upon him, and let them dwell on his face questioningly. "Of course, you must know every inch of this country," she said, "as you used to live just across the Italian border."

For once he did not answer her look. "I haven't spent much time here for several years. Paris has absorbed me," he said evasively. "One forgets a good deal; but if you want to see a really charming valley, we had better go farther on. Then I think I can show you one."

Virginia's pretty brows, which were many shades darker than her hair, drew together. "But I don't want to go farther," she said. "And I like this valley."

"Spoilt child!" ejaculated the Englishman, who claimed rights of cousinship, though by birth Virginia was American.

At that moment two members of the riding party, who had contrived to be left behind, came leisurely up. One was a very handsome, dark woman, who succeeded in looking not more than thirty, the other a young man of twenty-five, enough like Virginia to suggest that they were brother and sister.

"What are you stopping for?" inquired Lady Gardiner, who would not have been sorry to keep her friends in advance.

"Waiting for you," said Virginia promptly. "I want to explore this valley."

As she spoke she gave her mare a little pat on the velvety neck. The animal, which was Virginia's own, brought from her namesake state, had never known the touch of the whip, but understood the language of hand and voice. She went off at a trot up the shadowed road; and the Marchese Loria was the first to follow. But he bit his lip under the black moustache, pointed in military fashion at the ends, and appeared more annoyed than he need because a pretty girl had insisted upon having her own way.

It was not yet cold, as he had prophesied, but it was many degrees cooler than in the sunshine; and as they rode on the valley narrowed, the soft darkness of the olive grove closing in the white road that overhung the rock-bed of the river.

The hills rose higher, shutting out the day, and there was a brooding silence, only

intensified by the hushed whisper of the water among its pebbles.

The shoulders of the heights were losing their gold glitter now; and Virginia had a curious sensation of leaving reality behind and entering a mysterious dreamland.

For a long time they rode without speaking. Then Virginia broke the spell of constraint which had fallen upon them.

"Where are the persons who gather the olives?" she asked of the Italian, who rode almost sullenly beside her.

"This isn't the time of year for that," he replied, more abruptly than was his custom in speaking to her.

"I never saw such a deserted place!" exclaimed the girl. "We have ridden ever so far into the valley now—two miles at least—and there hasn't been a sign of human habitation; not a person, not a house, except the little ruined tower we passed a few minutes ago, and that old château almost at the top of the hill. Look! the last rays of the sun are touching its windows before saying good-bye to the valley. Aren't they like the fiery eyes of some fierce animal glaring watchfully down at us out of the dusk?"

Pointing upward, she turned to him for approval of her fancy, and to her surprise saw him pale, as if he had been attacked with sudden illness.

"What is the matter?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing at all," he replied. "A slight chill, perhaps."

"No, there is more than that," Virginia said slowly. "I'm sure of it. I've been sure ever since we stood on the bridge looking up this valley. You wanted to go on. You could hardly bear to stop, and when I proposed riding in you made excuses."

"Only for your sake, fearing you might catch cold."

"Yet you suggested going on to another valley. Would it have been warmer than this? Oh, Marchese, I don't like you when you are subtle and secretive. It reminds me that we are of different countries—as different as the north can be from the south. Do tell me what is really in your mind. Why do you hate this valley? Why has coming into it tied your tongue, and made you look as if you

had seen a ghost?"

"You exaggerate, Miss Beverly," said Loria. "But if you care to know the precise truth you shall, on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you turn your horse's head and consent to go out into the sunshine again. When we are there I will tell you."

"No. If I hear your story, and think it worth turning back for, I will. I mean to have a nearer glimpse of that château. It must have a lovely view over the tops of the olive trees."

She touched the mare, who changed from a trot into a gallop. In five minutes more they would be under the castle; but almost instantly Loria, obliged to follow, had caught up with her again.

"One of the greatest sorrows of my life is connected with this valley," he answered desperately. "Now will you take pity upon me and turn round?"

Virginia hesitated. The man's voice shook. She did not know whether to yield or to feel contempt because he showed emotion so much more readily than her English and American friends. But while she hesitated they were joined by her cousin, Sir Roger Broom, who had been riding behind with her half-brother, George Trent, and Lady Gardiner.

"Look here, Loria," he exclaimed, with a certain excitement underlying his tone; "it has just occurred to me that this is—er—the place that's been nicknamed for the last few years the 'Valley of the Shadow.'"

"You are right," answered Loria. "That is why I didn't wish to come in."

Sir Roger nodded toward the château, which now loomed over them, gray, desolate, one half in ruins, yet picturesquely beautiful both in position and architecture. "Then that is——" he began, but the Italian cut him short.

"Yes. And won't you help me persuade Miss Beverly that we've seen enough of this valley now?"

"Why, the castle's for *sale*!" cried Virginia suddenly, before Roger Broom had had time to speak.

She pointed to one of the tall gate-posts at the foot of the hill, close to the road, which showed a notice-board announcing in both French and Italian that the Château de la Roche was to be sold, permission to view being obtainable within.

"Poor people; they must have been reduced to sad straits indeed!" murmured Sir Roger, looking at the board with its faded lettering, half defaced by time and weather.

"Yes, it was all very unfortunate, very miserable," Loria said hastily. "Shall we go back?"

The Englishman seemed hardly to hear. "I'd seen photographs of the valley, but I'd quite forgotten, until suddenly it began to look familiar. Then, all in a flash, I remembered."

"What do you remember; and why do you call this the Valley of the Shadow?" demanded Virginia. "You are both very mysterious. But perhaps it's the influence of the place. Everything seems mysterious here."

Roger Broom sighed, and roused himself with an effort from his reverie. "Queer that we should have drifted here by accident," he said—"especially with *you*, Loria."

"Why especially with me?" the other asked with a certain sharpness.

"You were the poor fellow's friend. Oh, Virginia, forgive me for not answering you. This place is reminiscent of tragedy. A man whom I used to know slightly, and Loria intimately, lived here. That grim old house perched up on the hillside has been the home of his ancestors for hundreds of years. Now, you see, it is for sale. But it's likely to remain so. Who would buy it?"

"Why not?" asked Virginia. "Is it haunted?"

"Only by melancholy thoughts of a family ruined, a man cut off from life at its best and brightest, to be sent into exile worse than death. By the way, Loria, do you know what became of the sister?"

"I have heard that she still lives here with an aunt and one old servant," answered the Italian, his face gray-white in the greenish dusk of the olive woods.

"Is it possible? What a life for a girl! I suppose that there is absolutely not money enough to keep up another establishment, no matter how small. Why, were there

no relatives—no one to help?"

"The relatives all believed in her brother's guilt, and she would have nothing to do with them. As for help, her family is a difficult one to help. Of course it would be a good thing for her to sell the château."

Virginia sat her horse between the two others, impatient and curious. It was easy to see how distasteful the conversation was to the Marchese Loria. He answered Sir Roger's questions only by an effort; and as for her cousin, even he was moved out of the imperturbable *sang-froid* which sometimes pleased, sometimes irritated Virginia, according to her mood.

"Was it because of this young man's guilt that the place was called the Valley of the Shadow?" she asked again.

"Yes. A mere nickname, of course, though an ominous one," said Roger. "You see, the Dalahaides used to keep open house, and spend a great deal of money at one time, so that their ruin threw a gloom over the country even colder than the evening shadows. The father took his own life in shame and despair, the mother died of grief, and only a girl is left of the four who used to be so happy together."

"But what of the fourth—the brother?" In spite of herself, Virginia's voice sank, and the penetrating chill of the valley crept into her spirit.

"He is worse than dead," answered Roger evasively. "By Jove! Loria is right. It *is* cold here. Let us turn back."

"I should like to buy that château,"

announced the American girl, as calmly as if she had spoken of acquiring a new brooch.

"Good gracious! What next?" exclaimed Sir Roger. "But you're not in earnest, of course."

"I am in earnest," said she. "I should love to have it. It's an ideal house, set on that great rocky hill, and ringed round with olive groves. Though the sun is gone so soon from the bottom of the valley, where we are, the château windows are still bright. The place fascinates me. I am going to ride in and ask to see the house. Who will come with me?"

Virginia looked at the Marchese with a half-smiling challenge; but he did not

speak, and Lady Gardiner's black eye gave out a flash. She was as poor as she was handsome and well-born, and her life as the American girl's chaperon was an easy one. The thought that Virginia Beverly might make up her mind to become the Marchesa Loria was disagreeable to Kate Gardiner, and she was glad that the Italian should displease the spoilt beauty.

"I'll go with you, dear, if you are really bent on the adventure," said the elder woman.

"Forgive me, Miss Beverly. But I—once knew these people. I could not go into their house on such an errand. They would think I had come to spy on their misfortune," protested Loria miserably.

"I knew them too," said Roger Broom, "and I'll stay down here and keep Loria company."

Lady Gardiner looked at George Trent, with whom she was having an amusing flirtation, which would certainly have been more than amusing if he had been only a quarter as rich as his half-sister.

"I'll take you and Virgie up to the door, anyhow," he responded to the look, and springing from his horse, he pushed open the tall gate of rusty iron.

Then, mounting again, the three passed between the gray stone gate-posts with an ancient carved escutcheon obliterated with moss and lichen. They rode along the grass-grown avenue which wound up the hill among the cypresses and olive trees, coming out at last, as they neared the château, from shadow into a pale, chastened sunshine which among the gray-green trees had somewhat the effect of moonlight.

"Have you ever heard of the Dalahaides?" Virginia demanded of her chaperon.

"If I have, I've forgotten," said Lady Gardiner. "And yet there does seem to be a dim memory of something strange hovering at the back of my brain."

They were above the grove now, on a terrace with a perspective of ruined garden, whence the battered faces of ancient statues peeped out, yellow-white from behind overgrown rose bushes and heliotrope. The château was before them, the windows still reflecting the sunlight; but this borrowed glitter was all the brightness it had. Once beautiful, the old battlemented house had an air of proud desolation, as if scorning pity, since it could no longer win admiration.

"You would have to spend thousands of pounds in restoring this old ruin if you should really buy it, Virginia," said Lady Gardiner.

"Well, wouldn't it be worth while to spend them?" asked the girl. "I certainly ——" She stopped in the midst of her sentence, a bright flush springing to her face; for turning a corner of the avenue which brought them close to the château, they came suddenly upon a young woman, dressed in black, who must have heard their last words.

Instantly George Trent had his hat in his hand, and before Virginia could speak he had dismounted and plunged into explanations. He begged pardon for the intrusion, and said that, as they had seen the announcement that the château was for sale, they had ventured to ride up in the hope of being allowed to see the house. As he spoke, in fairly good though rather laboured French, he smiled on the girl in black with a charming smile, very like Virginia's. And Lady Gardiner looked from one to the other gravely. She was not as pleased as she had been that George Trent had come here with them, for the girl in the shabby black dress had a curiously arresting, if not beautiful face, and her surroundings, the background of the desolate castle, and the circumstances of the meeting, framed her in romance.

Lady Gardiner did not like the alacrity with which Trent had snatched off his hat and sprung from his horse, nor did she approve of the expression in his eyes, though Virginia's were just as eager.

To the surprise of all three, the girl answered in English; not the English of a French *jeune fille*, instructed by an imported "Miss," but the English of an Englishwoman, pure and sweet, though the voice was sad and lifeless. Her melancholy dark eyes, deep and sombre as mountain tarns, wandered from the brother's handsome face to the beautiful one of the sister.

"Pray don't speak of an intrusion," she said. "Our servant will be glad to show you through the house, and afterward, if you really think of buying the place, he will give you the address of an agent in Mentone who can tell you everything."

"Then shan't we find you again when we have seen the château?" asked Virginia wistfully.

The girl smiled for the first time, but there was no brightness in the smile. "I shall be very pleased to speak with you before you go if there is anything you care to say to me," she replied, mechanically raising the great bunch of

heliotrope she had been gathering to her lips.

"Now I will call our servant. He will put up your horses while you go in; though I'm afraid that we have no very good accommodation for them, as our stables have been empty for a long time."

"Oh, thank you, we needn't give him that trouble," said Trent. "I can fasten the horses' bridles to some tree or other, and they will be all right."

The girl disappeared, a slender, youthful figure in the plain black gown, yet her step, though it was not slow, had none of the lithsomeness of youth. She seemed to have lost all joy of life, though she could scarcely have been more than twenty-two or three.

"Another mystery!" Virginia said in a low voice. "How comes she to be English? Is she the girl they were talking about down below, or is she a companion?"

"She looks like a banished princess," said Trent. "I never saw such wonderful eyes. Deep as a well, reflecting a night of stars."

Lady Gardiner's lips tightened a little. She was rather vain of her eyes. "I think the girl would appear a very ordinary young person," she remarked, "if one saw her anywhere but here."

George lifted her down from the horse without answering, but Virginia did not wait to be helped. She sprang to the ground, and by the time that George had tethered the horses an old man in a faded livery came limping out from the side door through which the girl in black had lately disappeared.

Almost crippled with rheumatism, he had still all the dignity of a trusted servant of an ancient house, and his old eyes seemed gravely to defy these prosperous young people to criticize his threadbare clothing.

"Mademoiselle" had desired him to take monsieur and mesdames over the château, he politely announced in French, and went on to beg that they would give themselves the trouble of being conducted to the door at the front, that they might go in by the great hall. He also regretted that the visitors had not arrived earlier in the day, as the rooms could not be seen at their best advantage so near to sunset.

Virginia's heart began to beat oddly as she entered the house. She had still the feeling of having left realities behind and strayed into dreamland; but with the

opening of the heavy door it seemed to her that the dream was about to change into a vision which would mean something for her future.

Of course it was all nonsense, she told herself, as the old man led them across the shadowy, tapestry-hung hall, and from one huge, dim, wainscotted or frescoed room to another; yet always, as they approached a doorway, she caught herself thinking—"Now a strange thing is going to happen."

"This is the state drawing-room; this is the library; this is the chapel; this is the bride's suite," the servant announced laconically. But though the castle was evidently very ancient and must have a private history of its own, centuries old, he offered no garrulous details of past grandeur, as most servants would. As they walked through a dining-room of magnificent proportions, but meagrely furnished, they passed a half-open door, and Virginia had a glimpse of a charming little room with a huge projecting window. Mechanically she paused, then drew away quickly as she saw that mademoiselle was seated at a table arranging the flowers she had gathered in the melancholy garden. The old man hobbled on, as if the door had not existed, and Virginia would have followed, had not the girl in black stepped forward and invited them in, with a certain proud humility.

"This is our sitting-room—my aunt's and mine," she said. "My aunt is not here now, so come in, if you will. It is a small room; still, it is one of the brightest and most home-like we have left."

She held open the door, and the three visitors obeyed her gesture of invitation; but suddenly the girl's face changed. The blood streamed up to her forehead, then ebbed again, leaving her marble-pale. She gave a slight start, as if she would have changed her mind and kept the strangers from entering; yet she made no motion to arrest them.

"She has just remembered something in this room that she doesn't wish us to see," thought Virginia; but it was too late to retreat, without drawing attention to an act which she could not explain. They all went in, the others apparently suspecting nothing; but in a second Virginia instinctively guessed the reason of her hostess's sudden constraint, and the sympathetic thrill that ran through her own veins surprised her. In a panel of the darkly wainscotted and curiously gilded wall was placed a life-size portrait of a man. It was an oil-painting, defective in technique, perhaps, but so spirited, so extraordinarily lifelike as to give an effect, at first glance in the twilight, as if a handsome young man were

just stepping in through an open door. Virginia seemed to meet the brilliant, audacious eyes; the frank, almost boyish smile was for her; and—whether because of the half-told story of this strange house, or because of the brave young splendour of the figure in the portrait—her heart gave a bound such as it had never yet given for a man.

She did not need to be told that this was the counterfeit presentment of him who, in some mysterious way, had brought ruin upon those who loved him; and suddenly she understood the full meaning of Loria's words when he had said, "The relatives all believed in his guilt, so his sister would have nothing to do with them."

Virginia Beverly, headstrong, wilful, passionate, was only superficially spoilt by the flattery which had been her daily diet as a great beauty and a great heiress. She was impulsive, but her impulses were true and often unselfish. Now her warm heart went out to meet the loyal heart of the pale, sad girl in black, whom an hour ago she had never seen, whose very name she had not known. "She is right to believe in him," Virginia said to herself. "Loyalty is the finest virtue of all. I believe in him too. Whatever crime they say he committed, I'm sure he was innocent. What—a criminal, with that face? It's not possible, and I wish I could tell her so."

She could scarcely tear her eyes from the portrait, though she feared to let her interest be observed, lest it should unjustly be put down to vulgar curiosity. And when the old man who conducted them, having met and answered a quick glance from his mistress, invited the visitors to continue their tour of inspection, Virginia left her thoughts behind in the room of the portrait, walking as in a dream through the series of lofty, half-dismantled apartments which still remained to be visited.

She hoped that, when they should see their hostess again for the promised leave-taking, it would be in the same room as before. But she was doomed to disappointment. Mademoiselle met the party in the great hall, and, hearing from George Trent that his sister thought seriously of buying the château, gave them the address of an estate agent in Mentone.

Virginia was not a self-centred girl, and at any other time she would have been surprised at the encouragement given to this new whim of hers by her half-brother; she would have sought some underlying cause, for George Trent—who was her mother's son by a first marriage—was nearly five years older than she,

and rather piqued himself upon influencing her to ways of wisdom. But now, though he extolled the charms of the Château de la Roche, and made light of the expenses of restoration, as they rode down the avenue under the olive trees, Virginia was too much occupied with the mystery of the house and the portrait's original to observe the young man's manner. It did not escape Lady Gardiner's observation, however, and her thoughts were troubled.

She was thirty-six and George Trent was ten years younger; but she confessed to twenty-nine, and really did not look more, except when certain worries, which she usually kept in the background, pressed heavily upon her. For a year, ever since Virginia had left America for England and the Continent, she had lived with the sister and brother, and had been reaping a harvest almost literally of gold and diamonds. She did not want Virginia to marry and free herself from chaperonage; and if she could not marry George Trent herself, since he was neither old enough nor rich enough, she could not bear the thought that he might forget his passing admiration for her, and fall seriously in love with some one else.

She, too, was curious concerning mademoiselle and her past, but with a very different curiosity from Virginia's, and she determined to learn the story of the Dalahaides and their château above the Valley of the Shadow. She did not, however, wish to appear curious before Virginia or her brother, and hoped that the American girl, with her wonted audacity, would at once approach the topic when they had rejoined Sir Roger Broom and the Marchese Loria. But Virginia asked no questions, contenting herself with answering those of her cousin, which for some reason confined themselves entirely to the château. Lady Gardiner was sure, since he admitted having known the Dalahaides, that, being human, Roger would have liked to hear something of the girl who lived there like Mariana in the Moated Grange; and it would have been interesting to know why he refrained from mentioning her.

As they rode through the valley, dark and sad now, in the chill of its early dusk, she brought her horse to Virginia's side in so narrow a defile of the road that Roger, who was with the girl, dropped behind.

"Have you noticed that the Marchese hasn't asked us a single question about your château?" she remarked. "He is a changed man since we came into this valley. I wonder if there was ever anything between him and that tragic-looking girl up there? Perhaps Sir Roger knows, and that's the reason he didn't speak of her."

"Perhaps," echoed Virginia listlessly, and Kate Gardiner said no more.

An odd restraint seemed to have settled on the whole party, which had started out so gaily in the sunshine. Each one was sunk deep in his or her own thoughts, as if the twilight had touched them with its delicate melancholy.

They were stopping at the Cap Martin hotel, high on the hill in its beautiful garden, and among its pines; and there was a dance that night, for which Virginia had promised Loria several waltzes; but she complained that the ride had tired her.

Instead of dancing she went after dinner to the private sitting-room which she and Lady Gardiner shared, having quietly asked Roger Broom if he would come to her there for a few minutes. He found her, not in the room, but on the balcony, in floods of moonlight, which gave her beauty an unearthly charm as she lay on a *chaise longue*, wrapped in an evening cloak of white and silver brocade.

"You don't mind leaving the dance a little while—for me?" she asked.

Roger smiled his quiet, pleasant smile. "There's nothing in the world I would mind leaving for you, Virginia," he said, "and I think you know that very well."

"Sometimes I believe it's true. I should like to believe it to-night," she answered, "because I need your help. There's a secret, and I must find it out."

As the girl spoke there was a slight sound in the room beyond the big, open window.

"What's that?" exclaimed Roger. "Who is there?"

"Nobody," said Virginia. "It must be a log of olive-wood falling in the fireplace."

CHAPTER II

THE STORY TOLD BY TWO

Roger waited. He knew that Virginia was gathering her forces together, and that he might expect the unexpected.

"I want you to tell me all about that girl in mourning who lives at the Château de la Roche," she said after a moment; "and what her brother did."

Roger was slow in answering. "It's not a pleasant story for your ears. I was sorry this afternoon that I had spoken even as freely as I did about it before you. Loria took me to task rather, after you'd gone up to the château, and he was right. By Jove! Virginia, I believe that if I'd said nothing, the idea of buying the place would never have occurred to you."

"Perhaps not," she admitted. "But it *has* occurred to me, and once I have an idea in my head I keep it tenaciously—as all my long-suffering friends know to their sorrow. Will you go to-morrow to the agent whose address I have and make inquiries?"

"Certainly, if you wish."

"Oh, you think if no one thwarts me, I'll get over the fancy. But I won't! I'm going to have that château among the olive trees for mine if it costs me fifty thousand pounds (which it won't, I know), even if I only live in it for one month out of five years. The thing is, to feel it's my own. So now, you see, as the place is practically my property, naturally I'd like to know something of the people who have been its owners."

"I don't see why. When one buys a house one doesn't usually agitate oneself much about the family history of one's predecessors."

"Roger, you know this is different. I want you and no one to else tell me. Still, if you won't——"

"Oh, if you insist you must be gratified, I suppose, up to certain limits. What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"H'm! Rather too large an order, my child. However, to begin with, the Dalahaides of the Château de la Roche were English in the last generation, but the family is of French origin. When the last member of the French branch died, a banker in London was the next heir. He gave the château and the Dalahaide house in Paris as a wedding present to his son, who was about to be married. The bride and bridegroom came over on their honeymoon, and took such a fancy to the château that they made their home there, or rather between it and the old house in Paris. This young couple had in time a son, and then a daughter. Perhaps you saw the daughter to-day?"

"Yes, it was she. You didn't ask me about her before."

"No; the fact is, I thought that further conversation on the subject would be too painful for poor Loria. You must have seen that he was upset."

"I couldn't help seeing. But go on."

"Well, the father and mother and their two children were a most devoted family. They were all handsome and clever and popular, and if they were not millionaires, they were extravagant, for they gave delightful entertainments here and in Paris, and their purses were open for any one who wished to dip in his fingers.

"The son Maxime, always called Max, inherited his father's generous, reckless, extravagant ways. He was drawn into the fastest set in Paris, and lost a lot of money at baccarat. That wouldn't have mattered much, perhaps, if at the same time some large investments of the father's hadn't gone wrong and crippled the family resources. Then, as misfortunes generally come in crowds, there was a slight earthquake along this part of the coast, and the château was partly ruined, as you saw to-day, for they were not able then to have it restored. 'Next year,' they said; but there was no next year for the Dalahaides. Only a few months after the first two blows came the third, which was to crush the family for ever. Max Dalahaide was accused of murder, tried, and condemned."

"What—he is *dead*, then? I thought you said—I——" Virginia's heart gave so sudden and violent a bound that she stammered, and grew red and white under the revealing moonlight. She was thinking of the portrait—seeing it again, looking into the eyes which had seemed to speak. Dead! Executed as a murderer! The thought was horrible; it stifled her.

"No, he is not dead," answered Roger gravely; "at least, if he is I haven't heard of it. But—if he still exists—one can't call it living—he must have wished a hundred times a day to die and be out of his misery. Perhaps death has come to him. It might, and I not have known; for from out of the pit which has engulfed him, seldom an echo reaches the world above."

"Roger, you frighten me! What do you mean?" the girl exclaimed.

"Forgive me, child. I forgot for a moment, and was thinking aloud. I don't often forget you, do I? I said to-day that Max Dalahaide was dead in life. That is true. Family influence, the tremendous eloquence of a man engaged to plead his cause, the fact that Max insisted upon his innocence, while the evidence was entirely circumstantial, saved him from the guillotine, which I believe he would have preferred, in his desperation. He was sent to that Hades upon earth, New Caledonia, a prisoner for life."

"But—he was *English*!"

"No. His parents had been English, but he, having been born in France, was a French subject. He had even served his time in the army. Naturally he was amenable to French law; and he is buried alive in Noumea, the most terrible prison in the world."

"And he was innocent!"

Roger, who had been gazing out over the sea, turned a surprised look upon Virginia.

"No! He was not innocent," he said quickly. "Everything proved his guilt. It is impossible that he should have been innocent."

"His sister believed in him."

"Yes, his sister. What does that prove? The father thought him guilty, and killed himself. As for the mother—who knows? At all events, she died—broken-hearted. Every penny the family possessed, after their great losses, went for Maxime's defense; but, except that his life was saved, it was in vain."

"You knew him—he was your friend—yet you believed in his guilt?"

"I hardly knew him well enough to call myself a friend. I admired him, certainly Max Dalahaide was the handsomest, wittiest, most fascinating fellow I ever met.

Neither man nor woman could resist him, if he set out to conquer. Loria and he were like brothers; yet Loria thought with the rest of the world. He can't be blamed for disloyalty, either, for really there was nothing else to think, if one used one's reason."

"If he had been *my* friend, I would not have used my reason!" exclaimed Virginia. "What is the use of reason, when one has instinct?—and that is never wrong. But it is good of you to defend the Marchese, for I know you don't like him."

"Don't I?" echoed Roger. "If I don't, I'm afraid it is because you *do*. You won't have me, dear; you've told me that, and I don't mean to bother you again; but I'm weak enough to be jealous when I think there's danger of your saying 'Yes' to anybody else."

"I don't know that there is any such danger in this case," said Virginia. "But the Marchese is very handsome, and rather romantic, and he sings like an angel. Oh, yes, I am almost in love with him when he sings—or I was till yesterday. And how he dances! It's poetry. When I am waltzing with the Marchese Loria I invariably make up my mind that I will accept him next time he asks. Then, afterward, something holds me back. To-day, in that valley of shadows, he affected me quite differently. It was as if—as if the shadows had shut down between us. I saw him in the shadow, his features changed—repellent. As the French say, he 'made me horror.' Yet I didn't know why. Now I begin to understand. It was my precious instinct warning me, saying: 'This man is disloyal. Don't trust him.'"

"You are unjust," said Roger. "I should like to let you misjudge him, but I can't be a bounder, you know. He really behaved extremely well in the Dalahaide affair. The man couldn't believe, against a mountain of evidence; nevertheless, he did what he could for his friend, guilty as he thought him. All this happened four years ago, when you were a demure little schoolgirl—if you ever *could* have been demure!—in your own Virginia, not allowed even to hear of, much less read, the great newspaper scandals of the moment. I can't remember every detail of the affair, but it was said to be largely through Loria's efforts that Max was saved from capital punishment for his crime."

"You haven't told me yet what that crime was."

"Yes. I have said it was murder."

"Ah! but that is only a crude statement. I ask for the story."

"You won't have it from me, my child," answered Roger coolly. "I'm not a sensation-monger. It was a horrid affair, and one doesn't talk of such things to little girls. You know all from me that you will know. Buy your château, if you choose. You've money enough to squander on twenty such toys and not miss it. No doubt poor Madeleine Dalahaide will be benefited by the exchange—her castle for your money. Fortunate for her, perhaps, that she is the last of the French Dalahaides, and has the right to sell the château."

"You will tell me nothing more?"

"Nothing."

"Then I will tell *you* one thing. I believe that the man was innocent. I have seen his portrait. I have seen his sister. That is enough for me. But what you will not tell me I shall learn for myself, and then—and then—you shall see what you shall see."

Virginia slept restlessly that night. In her dreams she was always in the Valley of the Shadow, striving to find her way out into the sunlight; and sometimes the valley seemed but the entrance to that bottomless pit of shame where Maxime Dalahaide was entombed. She awoke from a dream forgotten, in a spasm of cold fear, before it was dawn, and switching on the electric light near the bed, she drew her watch from under the pillow. It was just six o'clock; and for a few moments Virginia lay still, thinking over the events of yesterday. After all, what did they mean for her? Nothing, said Reason; everything, said a Voice to which she could give no name.

Suddenly her heart began to beat quickly with the excitement of a strange thought that seemed to spring out of herself, and then turn to face her. It pushed the girl from her bed, and she rose, shivering; for even here at Cap Martin it was cold in the early morning before the vivid sun had warmed the air.

She was used to lying in bed until a fire of fragrant pine cones and olive wood crackled on the hearth, and her own maid had filled the bath in the bathroom adjoining. But now she bathed in the cold, dressing herself in her riding-habit, and even arranging her hair without help. By seven her toilet was made, and,

turning off the electric light, she found that the sky was pink and golden with the winter sunrise.

The girl rang for coffee, and ordered her horse to be ready. She and Kate Gardiner never met before ten o'clock, at earliest; thus three hours would pass before any one save her maid would begin to wonder where she was; and for the maid she would leave a line of explanation, mentioning that she had gone out on business, and that nothing was to be said unless Lady Gardiner inquired.

Virginia had a ride of nearly two hours before she could reach the destination she had planned; but neither the fresh air, the beauty of the scene, nor the exercise which she loved, could calm the fever in her blood. It was as if some power stronger than herself pushed her on; and though she had always been too healthy in mind and body to suffer from superstition, she now believed, half fearfully, that such an influence had possession of her.

"What is the matter with me?" she asked. "I am no longer myself. It is as if I were only an instrument in hands that use me as they will. Why do I go this morning to the Château de la Roche? I don't know. I don't know what I shall say to excuse myself when I am there. Yet, somehow, the words will come to me—I feel it."

For it was to the château above the Valley of the Shadow that she was going.

When she reached the gates, half-way up the slope of the wooded hill which the whole party had climbed together yesterday, suddenly the nervous exaltation that had carried her courageously so far, broke like a violin string too tightly drawn. She was horrified at her own boldness. She half turned back; then, setting her lips together, she slipped down from her saddle and opened the gate.

This morning no slim, black-clad figure moved among the wilderness of neglected flowers. Virginia tethered her mare, ascended the two or three stone steps, and struck the mailed glove of iron which formed the knocker on the oak of the door. Its echoes went reverberating through wide, empty spaces, and for some moments she stood trembling at her audacity. She said to herself that she could not knock again. If no one answered the last summons she would take it as a sign that she ought not to have come, and she would steal away. But just as the limit of time she mentally set had passed, and she was in the act of turning from the door, it opened.

The servant who had guided Virginia and her friends through the house the day

before appeared, his pale, dignified old face showing such evident signs of surprise that the American girl, who had never flinched before any one or anything, stammered and blushed as she asked for Mademoiselle Dalahaide.

The old man politely ushered her in, but he was unable to hide his embarrassment. Mademoiselle should be informed at once, if she were at home, but, in fact, it was possible—— He hesitated, and Virginia saw well that he prepared a way of escape for his young mistress in case she wished to avoid the unexpected caller.

"Pray tell mademoiselle that—that——" Virginia began. She had meant to finish by saying that her business was urgent. But—supposing when she found herself face to face with the girl in black, the fugitive desires which had dragged her here refused to be clothed in coherent words?

As the servant waited respectfully for the end of the message, a door which Virginia remembered as leading into the family chapel suddenly opened. Mademoiselle Dalahaide came slowly out, her head bent, her long black dress sweeping the stone floor of the hall in sombre folds. She did not see the stranger at first; but a faint ejaculation from the lips of the old Frenchman caused the dark head to be quickly raised.

The eyes of the two girls met. Mademoiselle Dalahaide drew back a little, her tragically arresting face unlighted by a smile. She looked the question that she did not speak; but she gave the American no greeting, and there was something of displeasure or distrust in her level, searching look.

The moment which Virginia had dreaded, yet sought for, had come. All self-consciousness left her. She went to meet the other in an eager, almost childlike way.

"Do forgive me," she said in English. "I had to come. I could not sleep last night. I got up before any one else was awake, because I—because I wanted so much to see you, that I couldn't wait: and I wanted to come to you alone."

Madeleine Dalahaide's faint frown relaxed. Virginia in that mood was irresistible, even to a woman. Still the girl in black did not smile. She had almost forgotten that it was necessary and polite to force a smile for strangers. She had been so much alone, she and sorrow had grown so intimate, that she had become almost primitively sincere. The ordinary, pleasant little hypocrisies of the society in which she had once lived during what now seemed another state of existence,

no longer existed for her.

Nevertheless, she was not discourteous. "You are kind to have taken this trouble," she said. "It is something about the château, no doubt—some questions which perhaps you forgot to ask yesterday?"

The old man, who understood not a word of English, had discreetly and noiselessly retired, now that fate had taken the management of the situation from his hands. The two girls were alone in the great hall, the chapel door still open behind Madeleine Dalahaide, giving her a background of red and purple light from a stained-glass window.

"No," Virginia answered. "If I said that business about the château brought me, it would be merely an excuse. It would make things easier for me in beginning, but —I wish to say to you only things that are really true. I came because—because I want to help you."

The white oval of the other's face was suddenly suffused with scarlet. The dark head was lifted on the slender throat.

"Thank you," she said coldly. "But I am not in need of help. If that is your reason for thinking of buying this house, I beg——"

"But it is not my reason. What can I say that you won't misunderstand? There is one whom you love. Just now you were praying for him in that chapel. I know it. You were praying to God to help him, weren't you? What if I should be an instrument sent you to be used for that purpose?"

The tragic eyes stared at the eager, beautiful face, dazed and astonished.

Virginia went on, not seeming to choose her words, but letting them flow as they would.

"I know how you have suffered. It is only a little while that I have known, but it seems long, very long. I have seen *his* portrait, and partly I came up to tell you this morning that I believe in his innocence; partly that, but most of all I came to say that he must be saved."

"Saved?" echoed Madeleine Dalahaide. "But that is not possible. Only death can save him now."

Neither had uttered a name; neither was aware that it had not been spoken by the

other. For Madeleine always, for Virginia in this hour, one name rang through the world. There was no need to give it form. And, strangely, Madeleine was no longer surprised at Virginia's mission. Perhaps, indeed, she believed her an incarnate answer to prayer; and in a moment all conventionalities had crumbled to pieces at their feet.

"Why do you say that?" cried the American girl. "Prisoners are released sometimes."

"Not life-prisoners at Noumea," replied the other; and the answer fell desolately on Virginia's ear. Yet the thought, lit into life by her own words, as a flame is lighted by striking a match, had given her courage which would not die.

"Then he will be the first," she said. "I have been thinking. Oh! it has all been very vague—a kind of dream. But now I see everything clearly. Time unravels mysteries not easily solved at first. His innocence must be proved. Powerful friends shall give all their thoughts, all their ingenuity——"

"We have no friends," Madeleine answered bitterly.

"You have one friend. You have me."

Then at last a sense of the strangeness of this scene rushed in a wave over the consciousness of the lonely dweller in the castle.

"I don't understand," she said slowly. "Yesterday we had never met. I only knew your name because you spoke of buying this poor, sad home of mine. I——"

"Neither do I understand," broke in Virginia. "But I have never understood myself. I only know that this seems to be the thing I was born for. And if I fail in what I want to do for you and yours, why, I shall have come into the world for nothing, that is all."

"But you are wonderful!" exclaimed Madeleine Dalahaide, realizing with sudden force the other's extreme beauty and strong magnetism. "Did you—is it possible that you ever knew my brother?"

"I never heard his name till yesterday. But I have seen you, I have seen this house, I have heard something of the story, and—I have seen his portrait. Nobody told me, of course, that it was his; nobody could. But I knew at once. And I wondered how any one who had ever known him could have believed that —that——"

"Don't be afraid to say it. Believed that he was a murderer. Oh, friends—*friends*! Friendship is a flower that withers with the first frost."

"You shan't have cause to think that of me—if you are going to take me for a friend."

"I shall thank heaven for you. Even if you can do nothing, to think that there is one human being in the world besides my poor aunt and me who believe in him, is like balm on an open wound. Come with me into the room where you saw the portrait. I painted it the year before—the end. I talk to it sometimes, and for a moment I almost forget the horrible truth—when the eyes smile back at me just as they used to do when we had some joke together."

"As they will again," finished Virginia.

They went into the room of the portrait and stood before it in silence. Each one felt that its look was for her.

"And yet," Madeleine said, as if answering a question, "there must be some one who thinks of us, and remembers us with kindness, giving *him* at least the benefit of a doubt; some one who talked to you of Max and told you the story of—of his so-called crime in such a way as not to fill your mind with horror."

"No one has told me the story yet," hesitated Virginia. "I have only heard hints. They said—the word—*murder*! But that is not the face of a murderer. How could any one believe it?"

"You don't know—the story?"

Virginia shook her head.

"When you know it, you will turn away from us, as every one else has."

"No—no! Be sure I will not."

"How can I be sure? Ah, almost all the solace of hope has gone now! You will hear the horrible details, and—that will be the end."

Virginia caught the slender, cold fingers that twisted together nervously. "Tell me yourself," she cried. "Tell me all—you, his sister. Then you will see how I shall bear it, and whether I shall fail you."

"I will!"

Madeleine Dalahaide's breath came unevenly. For a moment she could not speak. Then she began, her eyes not on Virginia, but on the portrait.

"There was a woman," she said in a low, choked voice. "She was an actress. Max was in love with her, or thought he was. She was handsome. I have seen her on the stage. Other men besides Max were mad about her. But she seemed to care for him. He wanted to marry her, and when father and mother didn't approve, he quarrelled with them, for the first time in his life. We had always been so happy before that—so united. Everything began to go wrong with my poor Max then. He played cards at his club, and lost a great deal of money. And as if that were not enough, father's losses came. He could do nothing for Max. Besides, the woman Max loved made him jealous. He suspected that she cared for somebody else. He told me that the last time I saw him before—the terrible thing happened. But he didn't tell the man's name. Perhaps he didn't know him. We had a long talk, for I had been his friend and confidante through all. I didn't want him to marry the woman; but even that would be better than to have him miserable, as he said he must be without her. And it was the next night that the murder was committed. But it was not known until the day after."

"Was it—the man of whom he was jealous who was murdered?"

"No, the woman, Liane Devereux. She had been shot—in the face. Oh, it was horrible! It is horrible now to talk to you of it. Her features were so destroyed that she could be recognized only by her hair, which was golden-red, and her figure—her beautiful figure which all the world admired so much. Even her hands—she must have held them up before her face, the poor creature, instinctively trying to save herself, to preserve her beauty, for they, too, were shattered. Her jewels were all gone, and she had had many jewels. Soon the police discovered that they had been pawned. And Max was accused of pawning them, to get money to pay gambling debts."

"How could they accuse him of that?"

"He really had pawned them, at her request. She wanted money, and would not listen to his objections to getting it in that way. He had pawned them on the day of the murder, and still had the tickets, which he had forgotten to enclose with the money for the jewels, when he sent it to Mademoiselle Devereux. She had asked him to pawn the things in his name, so that hers could be protected, and, of course, that went dreadfully against Max. He couldn't possibly prove, when the woman was dead, that he had pawned the jewels for her, because the money

he had raised had disappeared. He would have taken it to her himself, but on returning to his own flat from the pawnbroker's he received a strange letter saying that she hated him, and never wished to see him again. It was all quite sudden, and Max was angry. Still, he might have gone, insisting that she should tell him what she meant by such a letter, but he had arranged a hurried journey to England. They arrested him on the way. He was going there in the hope of borrowing some money from his godfather, a cousin of ours, who had told Max that if at any time he should be in difficulties he must apply to him. But what proof had Max of his own intentions? Every one thought that he was escaping to England to hide himself, after having committed a cowardly murder.

"There were other bits of evidence against him, too; for instance, the revolver with which the woman was shot was his, with a silver monogram on it. Everybody—even the best of his friends—believed him guilty. And father—poor father!—but I can't talk about that part. It is too cruel. Oh, you are pale, and changed! I knew it would be so. You are like the rest. But how could I expect anything else when you have heard such a story? Everything against him—nothing in his favour. Even Max himself was dazed. Over and over again he said that he had no explanation to give of the mystery."

"There is only one explanation, since he was innocent—and I'm as sure of that as before," said Virginia firmly. "It was a diabolically clever plot, planned with fiendish ingenuity, to ruin your brother—all your family, perhaps."

"Hundreds of times I have thought of that," sighed Madeleine Dalahaide. "Many, many times I spoke of it to the man who defended Max at his trial. But there was no one it would be reasonable to suspect. We had absolutely no enemy. Max had none. Everybody adored him—in his happy days."

"The man whom Liane Devereux loved better than your brother?"

"Ah, but you must see, as the advocate saw, that if she loved the other better he had no motive either to kill the woman or ruin Max. Where there had been no injury, there need be no revenge. And if Max knew who the man was he never told his name."

"There was nobody—*nobody* who had a right to think himself injured by your brother, even long before?"

"Not by my brother, so far as we could find out. The theory of a plot was advanced, of course, and—and I clung to it; but it fell to the ground. There

seemed nothing to support it."

"And yet, from the way you speak, I can't help thinking that you suspect some one."

"Oh, *I*! But I am only a woman. I was a very young girl then. Every one I spoke to—even Max—thought my idea a mad one, and said it would do our case far more harm than good to have it mentioned."

"Tell me, won't you, what it was?"

Madeleine hesitated. "I dare not," she answered. "My reason says that the thing is impossible. If I wrong the man, it would be shameful to create a prejudice in your mind against one, no doubt a stranger to you, but whom you might one day meet, and, meeting, remember my words. Besides, it can do no good to speak. It would be hopeless to prove anything against him, even if his hand had been in a plot."

"Yet you said that your brother had no enemy?"

"This man was *my* enemy. It had not always been so. Once we were friends. But—something happened, and afterward I think he hated me."

"Is it possible that you are speaking of the Marchese Loria?"

The question sprang from Virginia's lips before she had stopped to reflect whether it were wise to ask it, and she was terrified at the effect of her impulsive words.

Madeleine Dalahaide's pale, sad face became ashen, her great eyes dilated, and there was something of fear, perhaps even of distrust, in the look she turned upon Virginia.

"You know him?" she exclaimed, her voice suddenly sharp.

"Yes," admitted the American girl.

"Then I think that you and I cannot be friends."

"Not friends? But if I give up the Marchese Loria for you?"

"I do not ask or wish you to do that."

"If he is your enemy he shall not be my friend."

"I have not said he was my enemy."

"I have heard that he loved your brother dearly."

"Perhaps."

"And yesterday——"

"What of yesterday?"

"He was with us when we rode into the valley. He turned pale, and begged not to come, because the place, he said, was connected with a great sorrow in his life."

"He would not meet me face to face! Did *he* suggest that you should try to save my brother?"

"No, he did not speak his name before me. He does not know what is in my mind. No one knows yet but you. It was my cousin, Roger Broom, who met you long ago, and told me that the Marchese Loria had done much to save your brother's life."

"It may be that he did. I don't deny it. But if you are to be my friend I ask you this: say nothing of Maxime Dalahaide to Loria."

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERY AND A BARGAIN

Lady Gardiner stood at Virginia's door, remained for a moment undecided, then tapped gently. The girl's voice answered "Come in!" and Kate obeyed.

Virginia sat at a small writing-table in a window reading a book; but at sight of Lady Gardiner she snatched up a paper and hastily laid it over the volume. "Oh, I thought it was George," she exclaimed, blushing brilliantly. "He has asked me to take a walk."

"Now," thought Kate, "what has that book she's hiding from me to do with the mystery that's been going on for the past three days?" but aloud, she said, without appearing to notice the hurried movement or the tell-tale blush: "I came to ask if you would go down to town with me for a little shopping."

"I'm afraid I can't," Virginia answered. "You see—er—I promised George."

"Perhaps he wouldn't mind if we arranged for him to meet us in about an hour; and we might all three have tea together at Rumpelmayer's."

Virginia looked embarrassed, which was unusual for her. "We didn't think of going into Mentone," she said. "We shall just stroll about, for the fact is, we've business to talk over."

"You seem to have had a great deal of business to talk over these last few days, you and Mr. Trent and Sir Roger. Would it be indiscreet to ask, dear child, if there has been any hitch about the purchase of your new toy? Oh, don't look vexed—your château, then?"

"No, there's been no hitch. What made you think that?"

"Well, business talks are so new for you. A little while ago you fled from the first hint of business. But now—you are very much changed these last few days, since we went to the château, Virginia. I've been wanting to speak to you about it. However, you are going out to walk, and I must wait."

Virginia met her eyes firmly; yet the violet gaze was not quite as frankly open

and childlike as it used to be. "You needn't wait, if your shopping can," she said. "Do sit down. I dare say it may be twenty minutes before George comes for me. He's with Roger—somewhere."

"Yes, I saw them. Virginia, do you know, I've been rather unhappy for several days?"

"I didn't know. I'm very sorry. Is it anything I've done?"

"Yes and no." Kate did not sit down, but perched on the arm of a big cushioned chair between the writing-desk and the dressing-table. "You see, dear," she went on in her softest voice, to which she could give a pretty, tearful *tremolo* at will, "I'm in rather a peculiar position. You have been so sweet all this year and more that we've been together, that I suppose you've spoilt me. I've forgotten often that I'm only a paid chaperon, and have felt like a friend and confidante."

"Why, so you are," returned Virginia.

"Wait, dear; let me finish. I've told you my various troubles, and you've told me things, too. Now, suddenly, everything is changed. Why, you even sit in your bedroom, instead of in our sitting-room, or on the balcony with me, as you used. You don't seem to want my society; you make excuses if I suggest going anywhere. You and your brother and cousin are continually getting away by yourselves and talking in whispers. Oh, I'm not hurt. It isn't that. I'm not so thin-skinned and stupid. But I've been thinking that perhaps I'd offended you, or you were simply tired of me, and, being kind-hearted, didn't like to send me about my business. You know, dear, if you would rather have any one else——"

"Oh, Kate, you *are* stupid!" cried Virginia. "Of course I'm not tired of you. We really have had business—not about the château. I—didn't mean to tell you until things were more settled, but since you've been talking like this, I will. I've discovered lately that I'm tired of the Riviera, heavenly as it is here. We've been a month now——"

"I always told you that Monte Carlo was more amusing, while as for Cannes ——"

"But I've seen enough of the Riviera for a while."

"What about your château, then—your château in the olive woods that you so adore?"

"That won't be ready until next winter. There's lots to be done. And—I've set my heart on a yachting trip."

Kate Gardiner's face fell. She was a wretched sailor, and Virginia knew it. Even the crossing from Dover to Calais was torture to her on a calm day.

"A *long* yachting trip?" she asked, controlling her voice.

"I don't quite know yet. Some weeks, perhaps. The only difficulty is about you."

Kate did not answer for a moment. *Was* this an excuse to get rid of her, and if so, why? Could it be that Roger Broom had been warning Virginia that her half-brother was in danger of making a fool of himself about a woman many years his senior? A short time ago she might have believed that this was the explanation, for Roger Broom knew a good deal about Lady Gardiner. He was aware that her dead husband was but a city man, knighted when he was sheriff; that she had been governess to the gruff old widower's one daughter; that she had married him for his money, and spent it freely until what remained was lost in a great financial panic; that since then she had lived as she could, trading upon her own aristocratic connections to chaperon girls, chiefly Americans, who wished to see "English society from the inside." Roger knew her real age, or something near it; he knew that she had been in debt when she had got this chance with Virginia, to whom she had been recommended by an American duchess; and as there was nothing against her character, he had been too good-natured—as she would have expressed it—to "put a spoke in her wheel." However, if he suspected designs upon George, he might not have continued to be as discreet; but during these last three days of mysterious confabs, George Trent had appeared as much changed toward her as his half-sister had, so that Roger need have had no new fears for him. George had never ceased to be courteous, but there was a subtle difference in his manner, in his way of looking at her. He appeared preoccupied; he no longer sought her out. And this alteration had only come about since the day when they had visited the Château de la Roche.

Perhaps, then, it was George who was tired of her. He had never been the same since he had seen that girl in black, with the tragic eyes and the dead-white face, with no more life in it than a marble statue. Maybe he was planning to attach that girl to the party in some way, and would find the society of the woman with whom he had flirted a constraint.

At this thought Kate Gardiner felt her blood grow hot. It was unbearable that she should be sent out of George Trent's life to make room for a younger woman.

She would not have it—she would not! If it killed her to go on this hateful yachting trip she would go; she would not be whistled down the wind.

"Oh, if the difficulty is only about me," she said sweetly, "it needn't be a difficulty at all. I dare say I shall be ill for a few days, but it can't last forever. I shall simply stop in my stateroom until I am fit to lie in a deck-chair and be a more or less interesting invalid."

As she spoke she watched Virginia's face through half-lowered lashes, and was certain that it changed. There could no longer be any doubt on that subject. For some reason Virginia did not want her on the yacht.

"I should hate you to be a martyr," said the girl uncomfortably. "Roger and I have been thinking it over, and I was wondering, in case we went (nothing is actually decided yet), whether you would like to wait here. I would keep on your room and the sitting-room, and the victoria, and you should have my maid and your own horse. Your income would be the same as always, of course; and you have a lot of friends here, so you wouldn't be lonely."

"How sweet and thoughtful you are, dearest child!" exclaimed Kate gratefully; while within she was saying, "Oh, so this is the game, is it? Come now; at least you're showing your hand. Roger and you have been 'talking things over?' You seem to have thought out the details pretty well; and I'm to be bribed. But it won't work, my love, it won't work." She rose, and going to Virginia, took her hand, looking affectionately down at the beautiful face. "You are always ready to sacrifice yourself for me. But what would you do for a chaperon if I stopped behind?"

"Oh, you see, George and Roger and I would be all the party on board. Surely George is chaperon enough?"

"Poor Marchese!" murmured Kate. "I'm afraid he also is suffering from an eclipse."

"I don't know what you mean," said Virginia, her colour deepening. "Why should he expect an invitation to go with us?"

"Ah! why? Unless, indeed, he had hopes that he was soon to be given some rights over you. Only the other day I used to fancy that you and he were half engaged."

"We never were. I—I found him rather interesting. But I don't think I have

behaved very badly. I really meant—oh, I don't know *what* I meant then; but I know I don't mean it now. The Marchese Loria is the *last* person I should wish to have go on this yachting trip, and as it's only us three, we'll chaperon each other."

"Can it be that she means to marry Roger Broom after all?" Kate Gardiner asked herself. "To my certain knowledge, she's refused him. I heard him reminding her of it the other night. But one never knows how many times a girl may change her mind. The more I think of it the more determined I am to be of the party on that yacht."

"Unless I should be one too many, I'd really love to go," said she aloud. "I must get over my horror of the sea. Mayn't I be with you, dear, if you have really made up your mind? I've grown so fond of you. I should feel deserted here."

"Even for a few weeks?"

"Even for a few weeks. When you marry, or go home to the States, I must lose you, but do let me be with you as long as I can."

"You shall go if you really wish to so much," said Virginia, trying in vain not to appear constrained. "Only I warn you, you may find that you've made a mistake."

"Why, how seriously you speak. One would think you meditated a voyage to the North Pole. Probably, though, you'll simply linger about in the Mediterranean; go to Naples, Greece, perhaps, and Egypt?"

"Something of the sort, I suppose," Virginia answered, dropping her eyes and playing with the paper she had used to conceal her book. "It's rather vague at present. Roger and George are looking for a yacht. We'll talk of it again later. I only mentioned it now to show you that we've really had business. And by the way, Kate, I'd rather you didn't say anything about it yet to people outside. It seems like making it of so much importance and I'd hate being asked three times a day: 'Well, when do you start on that yachting trip?'"

"I shall be discreet, never fear," replied Kate, more sure than ever that some mystery which she could not fathom hid itself under this new plan of Virginia's. "And now for something else I wanted to ask you. Do, like a dear, good girl, lend me ten pounds. You know how stupidly hard up I always am. I'll pay it back in a few days."

Virginia was on her feet in an instant and at the dressing-table, rummaging among scented laces and pretty odds and ends for the gold-netted purse with "V. B." on it in brilliants. For a moment her back was turned, and during that moment Kate Gardiner, standing close to the desk which the girl had left noiselessly, raised a corner of the paper and peeped underneath. The book which Virginia had been reading lay open. It was French, and at the top of the page Kate saw the word "Noumea." She dared look no longer, but let the paper drop, and had wheeled round with her back to the desk just as Virginia found the purse.

"Thank you *so* much," purred Lady Gardiner, who knew from experience that Virginia would beg her not to give back the money, and that, with a grateful kiss, and perhaps a tear or two, she would allow herself to be persuaded.

At this instant there came a knock at the door leading into the sitting-room, which Kate had left half-open on entering, and George Trent appeared, looking excited and eager. His eyes fell upon Virginia, and he began to speak before he had seen Lady Gardiner, standing at a little distance and out of his view at the door.

"I say, Virgie," he exclaimed, "the most ripping piece of luck. We can get hold of a steam yacht with four cannon—toys, but fit for work—only you'll have to buy, not hire——"

He stopped short, a look passing between him and Virginia, quick as a flash of light, yet not too quick to be seen by Kate.

"Good!" said the girl. "Well, we'll talk about it as we walk. Kate's going shopping." Evidently she intended to change the subject, but Lady Gardiner was not ready for another.

"Mercy! Are you fitting out as pirates?" she demanded, laughing.

George Trent flushed with annoyance under her unsparing eyes, but he smiled carelessly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, you mean the cannon? They happen to be there. It wouldn't be worth while to have the yacht dismantled. I think myself they'd give distinction. It isn't everybody who goes yachting in such conditions."

"Indeed, no. I only wish we may have a chance to use them. Perhaps we may, if we can get far enough up the Nile. You see, Virginia has told me of the trip and

promised that I may go. I hope you don't mind."

Of course George said that it would be charming to have her on board, and he opened the sitting-room door when she went out, making the necessary agreeable remarks about her shopping expedition. But when the door had closed after Lady Gardiner, and Virginia had joined him in the sitting-room, he was no longer smiling.

"So we're to have another passenger, are we?" he said in a low voice.

"She *says* she wants to go, but she may change her mind. You know what a wretched sailor she is. Perhaps even after starting she'll think better of it and beg to be put off at the nearest port. I had to tell her about the yacht, for she was so inquisitive concerning the business that has occupied you and Roger and me for the past three days. But she has promised not to say anything outside till she has permission."

"How much does she know?"

"Nothing at all, except that I'm tired of the Riviera and want to go yachting somewhere—almost anywhere."

"Sure she doesn't suspect?"

"How could she?"

"Well, I suppose she couldn't. And as far as I'm concerned, I don't see why we shouldn't trust her as if she were one of ourselves; a nice, jolly little woman, with no harm in her. What motive could she possibly have for blocking our game?"

"What, indeed? But you know I said so to Roger, and he vowed he'd have nothing to do with it if any one knew except you and Madeleine Dalahaide and me. He wouldn't hear of poor Kate's being told, though I assured him one might trust her. It was all I could do to get him to promise us, anyway."

"How *did* you get him to, by the by? He poured whole cataracts of ice-water on the scheme at first."

"I—I—suppose I wheedled."

"Virgie! I'll bet you said you'd marry him if he'd go in with us!"

"I didn't—exactly say I *wouldn't*."

"Poor old Roger! Shall you be cad enough to chuck him afterward?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I shall be so grateful to him for this, that I shall feel no reward could be too great for him—that is, if we *succeed*. He is a dear, kind fellow, and I have often made him unhappy. I've always thought, somehow, that I should end by marrying him."

"Yet you've refused him three times."

"That was to put off the evil day."

"And you came jolly near accepting Loria."

"Did I really, do you think? It seems so long ago, I can hardly remember. Anyway, everything is different now."

"I'm with you there. By Jove, what a funny world it is! What will Roger say when he hears that Kate Gardiner is bent on going? If he consents to her being on board, I don't see why he should go on refusing to take Miss Dalahaide."

"That's not the same thing at all. One can never do things quite secretly. They always leak out. Already it has got into the papers somehow—I suppose through that stupid agent—that I have bought the Château de la Roche, and interest has been revived in the Dalahaide story. It's so unfortunate that people should begin to talk again just now! And then if, on top of all this, should come the news that we'd taken Madeleine Dalahaide off with us on a mysterious yachting expedition, what would be said? Roger is quite right."

"It seems cruel that she should be left out of it."

"It would be more cruel to have her in, and perhaps ruin everything. She feels that herself though, of course, it's hard. Still, think how awful for her if—we *failed*! But I will not think of that. There's no such word as fail!"

"According to Roger, there's no such word as success. He's absolutely hopeless, and is only going into the adventure to please you—to *win* you, perhaps. And, by Jove, it *will* be an adventure!"

"Tell me about the yacht you've heard of."

They went out together, walking among the pine trees surrounding the hotel; and meanwhile Kate Gardiner had driven into the bright little town of Mentone, with its background of mountains, its foreground of blue-green sea. In the

neighbourhood of the shops, she sent away her victoria, which was to pick her up at Rumpelmayer's at five o'clock. She was charmingly dressed, and had secured ten pounds with which to buy an exquisite antique Italian watch which had taken her fancy a day or two before; never had there been so little need to worry about the future from a pecuniary point of view; still, Kate was not happy. She had lost interest in the watch, lost interest in her shopping expedition altogether, and was lingering outside the jeweler's wondering whether she should spend the ten pounds as she had planned or not, when a man's voice at her shoulder made her turn. It was the Marchese Loria; and Lady Gardiner noticed, as the sun streamed full into his face when he took his off hat, that he looked sallow and haggard.

He was staying at the Cap Martin also, but they had not seen each other that day, and now it struck Kate that he was surprisingly changed since the afternoon when they had so gaily ridden off to find the Valley of the Shadow. She was certain that, for some reason which puzzled her sorely, Loria had completely lost his chance with Virginia, and because his interests no longer threatened her own, she felt more friendly toward him. They both seemed to be rather left out in the cold, and she found herself suddenly sympathizing with the Italian.

He was quick to note the unusual cordiality of her smile, and was curious as to its motive, for Loria knew that Lady Gardiner was one of the few women who never act without one; and he had been fully aware that she did not favour his cause with Virginia Beverly.

"Has something in this window caught your fancy?" he inquired, stopping and joining her.

Kate pointed to a serpent belt, crusted with diamond scales, emerald-eyed, and having its open mouth lined with rubies. "Isn't that lovely?" she asked. "An antique, of course; everything is in this window. I daren't look at it. It's far beyond my means."

"I'm thinking of buying it myself," said Loria calmly. "I mean to give it to a woman I know, as a little souvenir of my gratitude for very great kindness."

"Lucky woman!" exclaimed Kate enviously, for she really wanted the diamond snake. "She must have done you some tremendous favour to have earned that."

"She hasn't done anything yet. But I hope she will. I hope very much that she will tell me certain things I'm anxious to know, and afterward help me, if

necessary, to make use of the knowledge. I wonder if she will do it?"

There was now a meaning in his voice which could not be mistaken. Kate looked up quickly and met his eyes. For, a long instant they gazed at each other, then she said: "I think the woman would be foolish if she didn't."

"Will you come with me when I buy the thing?" asked Loria.

Kate smiled and flushed faintly through the white rose balm which gave an illusion of youth. They went in, and Loria asked to be shown the serpent belt from the window.

A very old man, an Italian, brought the glittering thing and laid it on a piece of black velvet, which he spread as a background on the counter.

"It is only two thousand francs," he announced, "and it has a history. Perhaps I am indiscreet to mention it, but it may add to the interest, and I see that the illustrious Signor is a countryman of my own. This jewel was an heirloom in a very ancient family; but great misfortunes overtook them some years ago. The heir was accused of crime, and banished for life to Noumea. They were forced to sell everything of value."

Loria was ghastly. With an instinctive gesture of horror, he pushed the velvet away, not touching the serpent and averting his eyes.

"Let us choose something else," he said hoarsely to Lady Gardiner. But she was merciless. He had as much as offered her the belt, and she would not give it up easily.

"There is nothing else half as pretty or quaint," she said. "I think this bit of history makes it all the more interesting."

Loria did not look again at the serpent glittering on its black velvet cushion, but, having hesitated for a barely perceptible space, he abruptly ordered the jeweler to send the belt to his hotel, where it would be paid for on delivery. Kate decided that, as she was in such a vein of luck, she would have the watch she fancied, and keep the Marchese while she made the purchase. Half maliciously she said to the shopkeeper: "I suppose this pretty thing has no such story as the other?"

"Rather strangely, madame has chosen another heirloom disposed of by the same family," returned the man, as he placed the old blue-enameled watch in a box filled with pink cotton. It seemed as if Fate persisted in linking them with these

Dalahaides!

Loria did not speak, but Kate's observant eyes saw that the gloved hand nearest her closed tightly on the stick it held. A moment later she had paid for her purchase, and they were out in the street again.

"You look very down," she remarked. "I believe you must have been losing a lot at Monte, and that a little sympathy and good advice would do you good. I meant to go to Rumpelmayer's presently, but suppose we go now and have tea together?"

Neither he nor she had said in so many words that there was to be a bargain between them; but Loria understood what the suggestion of a tête-à-tête at Rumpelmayer's meant, and augured well of Kate's genuine good-will, by her readiness to give the opportunity he wanted.

She was curious, he labouring under suppressed excitement, and they did not speak much as they walked. At the confectioner's Loria chose a table in a corner, far from the few early customers who had already arrived. It was not yet four o'clock, and the rooms would not begin to be crowded for half an hour. In that time much could be said, much, perhaps, planned for the future.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLOSED DOOR

The Marchese Loria ordered tea, and the two newly made allies pretended to have no important more business than eating and drinking. But certain that nobody was within hearing distance, Loria squandered little time in frivolities. At any moment some one they knew might come in and interrupt their talk.

"You said that I looked 'very down,'" he began abruptly. "That is cool English for broken-hearted, no doubt. I'm half mad, I think, Lady Gardiner. For four nights I haven't slept; for three days I've scarcely eaten. You know why; there's no use in wasting words on explanation."

"You love her so much?" exclaimed Kate.

"I love her so much. You believe me?"

"Yes; for you have the reputation of being a rich man, and it can't be all a bubble, or you wouldn't buy eighty-pound presents—for gratitude, and rather premature gratitude at that."

"Ah! the gift hasn't been made yet."

"I fancy it will be made. And the principle is the same. You can't be a fortune-hunter, like many agreeable, titled countrymen of yours whom I have met."

"If a man began by seeking out Miss Beverly as a fortune-hunter, he would end by being her lover. She is the most beautiful girl on earth, and—the most maddening. I think I shall go mad if I am to lose her."

"How you Italians can love—and hate!"

"Yes, we can hate also, it is true. There is no half-way with us. Lady Gardiner, I used to think that you disliked me; but to-day you are different. I was as desperately in need of help as a drowning man, and I caught at the new look of kindness in your eyes, as such a man catches at a floating spar."

"Perhaps it was the appeal in your eyes that called out the answer in mine," said

Kate, half believing that she told the truth; for there was a certain magnetic power in the man's passion, which was, at least, sincere. "What help can I give you?"

"First of all, you can answer a few questions. What have I done to change Miss Beverly so completely?"

"Frankly, I don't know. There's something odd going on—something which interests her so much that she can think of nothing else."

"The change began on the day of—our ride. Our last ride! The last of everything worth having, it has been for me. She was angry because I was unwilling to go into—that valley. But afterward, when she learned how intimately I had been associated with the people at the château there, how could she blame me? I suppose she *did* learn the story?"

"She learned something of it, I know, the night after we rode up the valley. You remember there was a dance? I had left my fan in our sitting-room, and ran up to find it. There was no light in the room, and Virginia and Sir Roger were on the balcony. Of course, I didn't mean to listen, but I couldn't find the fan at first, and I didn't like to startle them by suddenly switching on the light, so I—er—I overheard a little of the conversation. Sir Roger was telling her the story of that unfortunate Maxime Dalahaide—why, Marchese, how you must have loved him! The very mention of his name turns you pale."

"We were like brothers," said Loria in a low voice. "But go on. Did Sir Roger Broom mention me in connection with the story?"

"Yes."

"The scoundrel! That explains all, then. This is your honourable English gentleman, who traduces a man behind his back, to ruin him with the girl they both love!"

"You do Roger Broom injustice. He defended you. Virginia thought that your friendship was not worth much, since you believed Maxime Dalahaide guilty, but Sir Roger assured her you had behaved exceedingly well."

"H'm! One knows what faint praise can do. Did he give her all the details of that loathsome story?"

"No; he refused. I was rather sorry, as I was interested by that time. Besides, I

had wanted to know, and I couldn't think of any one it would be convenient to ask, except Sir Roger or you."

"I wish he had told her all! If he had, she would never have wished to hear of the Dalahaides again."

"You speak bitterly of your old friends."

"I? No, you misunderstand. I mean only that a girl—a stranger—would be horrified if she could know the full details. It was a ghastly affair. I loved Max, but there was no excuse for him—none. And it would be better for Miss Beverly to have nothing to do with that family. They bring unhappiness to all who come near them. It is as if they were under a curse, which every one connected with them must share. I can't bear to think that so black a shadow should darken *her* sunlight. Already, you see, she has changed. She goes once to the Château de la Roche, and the spell falls upon her."

"I'm not sure that she hasn't been more than once," said Lady Gardiner.

"Ah! that was one of the things I wished to ask. You think so?"

"I don't know. The morning after we all went there she disappeared for hours, and would say nothing except that she had slept badly, got up early, and gone off for a ride. Whether Mr. Trent was with her or not I can't tell but when I first saw her, after looking everywhere, they were together, so absorbed in what they were saying that I believe if a revolver had been fired within a dozen yards of them they would hardly have heard it. At luncheon that same day, Sir Roger was telling me how he had seen the agent, and found out about the château, as it appears she had asked him to do—she has but to ask and to have, with him, you must know!—and though she was pleased and interested to a certain extent, still, she seemed to be thinking of something else."

"That *something else*! If I could find out what that was, I might know who is taking her from me."

"I'm afraid it's not as simple an affair to unravel as that; for I can tell you one of the things, at least, which was apparently occupying her thoughts at the time, yet I can't quite see why or how it could have much to do with you. You remember, perhaps, that you came while we were at luncheon the day after our ride into the Valley of the Shadow, and proposed that we should all go to Monte Carlo on your motor-car, that we should spend the afternoon in the Casino, and dine with

you at the Hôtel de Paris? Virginia said that she had important letters to write, and couldn't go; and her manner was rather distant."

"It chilled my heart."

"Well, she asked Sir Roger and Mr. Trent to come up to her sitting-room after luncheon. Naturally, I was there too; I've been told to look upon the room as my own. She did not tell what she had been doing in the morning, but, wherever she had been, she had contrived to discover a good deal more about the Dalahaide story than Sir Roger had been willing to tell her the night before, and she announced boldly, that in spite of everything, she believed Maxime Dalahaide was innocent. She demanded of Roger—who has spent a good deal of time in France, you know, and is supposed to be well up in French law—whether it wouldn't be possible to have the case brought up again, with the best lawyers in the country, expense to be no object. When Roger had shown her that the thing couldn't be done, and there was no use discussing it, she wanted him to say that by setting some wonderful detectives on the trail of the real criminal the truth might be discovered, and the man unjustly accused brought home in triumph from Noumea by a penitent Government. Sir Roger assured her that was hopeless. That, in the first place, Maxime Dalahaide wasn't innocent, and that, in the second place, even if he were, his innocence would be still more impossible to prove after all these years than it would have been at the time of the trial."

"What did she reply to that?"

"Nothing. She was silent and seemed impressed. She became very thoughtful. Since then I have not heard her say one word of the Dalahaides, except incidentally about the château, which she actually means to buy, and have restored in time to come to it, if she likes, next year. Now, I don't see why her interest in the Dalahaides, if she continues to feel it, should interfere with her friendship for you."

Loria did not answer. He sat thinking intently, his dark eyes staring unseeingly out of the window. At last he spoke. "Why—*why* should she interest herself in this cold-blooded murderer, whose best friends turned from him in horror at his crime? Is it pure philanthropy? Has the sister implored Miss Beverly to throw her money into this bottomless gulf? What happened when you were at the château that day I never knew."

"We thought that the subject was disagreeable to you," said Kate. "We saw and spoke with Miss Dalahaide, a pale, cold girl, dressed in black, with a voice that

somehow sounded—*dead*. She did not mention her brother, and seemed so reserved that I should think it would be difficult to break the ice with her. Indeed, she appeared very annoyed at the necessity for showing us a little room with a life-size picture in it, which I fancied must be a portrait of the brother."

A curious shiver passed through Loria's body.

"Miss Beverly saw that portrait?" he asked in a low, strained voice.

"Yes, and I noticed that she kept glancing at it again and again while we stopped in the room. I suppose a morbid sort of curiosity regarding a murderer is natural, even in a young girl, provided his personality is interesting."

Once more Loria remained silent, his face set in hard lines.

"Such a man as Maxime Dalahaide must have been before his fall, would be a dangerous rival," Lady Gardiner went on, with a spice of malice. She was watching Loria as she spoke, and thrilled a little at the look in his eyes as he turned them upon her. "Oh, these Italians!" she thought. "They are so emotional that they frighten one. Their passions are like caged tigers, and you never quite know whether the cage door is safely locked."

"Maxime Dalahaide will never be dangerous to any man again on this earth—not even to himself, since the worst has happened to him that can happen," answered Loria.

"Strange if, although he is buried in a prison-land at the other end of the world, he might still, in a vague, dim way, be a rival to fear more than another," Kate reflected dreamily. Aloud she went on: "It seems ridiculous to say so, but I believe that Virginia is making a hero of him. She has never seen this man—she never can see him; yet his image—evolved from that portrait at the château which was his old home—may blur others nearer to her."

"Great heavens! You believe that?"

"I merely suggest it. The idea only occurred to me at this moment. But Virginia is certainly thinking of Maxime Dalahaide. To-day, she was reading a French book about Noumea. She hid it when I came into the room; but later I came across it by accident. Yes, she is thinking of him, but it is only a girl's foolish, romantic fancy, of course—a spoilt child, crying for the moon, because it's the one thing that no adoring person can get for her. I shouldn't worry about it much, if I were you. Indeed, perhaps she sees herself that she is not very wise, and

wants to forget. Now she has set her heart on a yachting trip; but you must not speak of it to her or the others, for she asked me not to tell."

"She gives me little enough chance to speak of anything. A short time ago she would not have cared for a yachting trip, unless I were to be of the party. Now, I suppose, her wish is to be rid of me."

"Her wish is also to be rid of me."

"You are not to go?"

"Not if Virginia can make a decent excuse to leave me behind."

"Who, then, goes with her?"

"Her half-brother, and Sir Roger Broom. She isn't even going to take a maid."

"Heavens! It is Sir Roger Broom, then, who will win her!"

"I don't know what to think. She has refused him; he is many years older than she, and she has known him since she was a child, for Sir Roger went often to America while her father—his cousin—was alive. Why should she suddenly make up her mind to marry him? He was her guardian during her minority, or what remained of it after her father's death; now she has had her one-and-twentieth birthday, and is her own mistress. I fancied that she intended to remain so for a time, unless she lost her head—or her heart—and Sir Roger, nice as he is, is scarcely the man to make a girl like Virginia Beverly do either. Still, I don't understand the yachting trip. It is in every way mysterious; and since you have asked my advice, it is this: find out where they are going, and appear there, as if by chance. By that time our spoiled beauty's mind may have changed."

"Won't you tell me where they are going?"

"I would if I could." This was true, since Kate was sure that, change as Virginia might, she would never return to her brief, ballroom fancy for the Italian. "I hinted at Naples, Greece, and Egypt, and Virginia answered that it would be 'something of the sort'—answered evasively, saying nothing was decided yet; and so the conversation would have ended if George Trent hadn't come bursting in, very excited, exclaiming before he saw me that he'd got hold of exactly the right steam yacht, with *four cannon*."

Loria started like a sensitive woman. "A yacht with four cannon! What can they

want with cannon?"

"I asked if they were fitting out for pirates, and Mr. Trent assured me that the cannon being on board was a mere accident; they would not have them removed, but they had no intention of making use of them. Still, there's no doubt that there's some mystery behind this yachting expedition. I can't make it out at all. Whether it is Mr. Trent's plan——"

"But he would not wish to go without you."

"A few days ago, perhaps not. But others besides Virginia have changed. That day when we rode up the Valley of the Shadow, as they call it, was destined to be an eventful day for us all."

"You mean——"

"I mean that George Trent is a different man since he went to the Château de la Roche."

A dark flush rose to Loria's forehead. "He met Madeleine Dalahaide?"

"One might think, from your expression and accent, that you were jealous."

"One would think wrongly then. A man can't be in love with two women at the same time."

"Can't he? I wasn't sure. Men are strange; perhaps there's something of the dog in the manger about them, at times. At all events, George Trent is much interested in the yachting trip, and he *doesn't* want me to go. Perhaps Miss Dalahaide is to be of the party; and in that case I should be the odd woman. Not that it matters to me. George was pleasant to flirt with but I should not marry again, unless I married money. Virginia's great fortune comes from her father, George's step-father, who was jealous of the mother's affection for the first husband's son, and disliked him. George will accept nothing from Virginia, and has only what his mother could leave him—a miserable five thousand dollars a year."

Loria scarcely listened. His level black brows were drawn together. "She was reading a book about Noumea," he said slowly. "What if—no, it is impossible—impossible!"

"What is impossible? If I am to help you, you must have no secrets from me."

"She could not hope, if she went there, to see him. Bah! The bare thought is monstrous."

"It is a little far-fetched," said Kate. "I should think the adventure they are undertaking will be no more startling than an attempt to reach the Second Cataract. The cannon *might* be needed there, you know."

"That is true. But, Lady Gardiner, you must find out where they are going, and let me know. A hundred diamond serpents would not be enough to testify my gratitude. You mean to go with them?"

"If they will take me."

"They must take you. They must! You are my only hope, the only link that will be left between me and Virginia Beverly. Listen! We are talking frankly to each other, you and I. We never thought to be such friends—but we are friends, and must trust each other to succeed. You often speak, half-jestingly, of being poor. I have money—I don't say enough; who has enough? But I am not a poor man. Watch Virginia for me; watch Sir Roger Broom. Let me know where this yacht is taking you, whom she carries, all that happens on board of her. Advise me, from what you see of passing events; and for all these services, worth an inestimable sum to me, I will give you what I can afford—say, a thousand pounds. You shall have half down the day you start, and the other half the day that you return."

"You are generous; and—I will be loyal," said Kate. "It will not be my fault, I promise you, if the yacht sails without me. Now I must go. We must have been talking here for more than an hour, for Virginia's carriage, which she lent me, has just driven up to the door. Whenever there is a new development of this mystery, which interests us both, you shall know it. I wish I could take you up to Cap Martin with me, if you are ready to go that way, but perhaps it would be wiser not—especially as the victoria isn't my own."

Kate Gardiner had not been in the hotel an hour when a box was brought to her door by the Marchese Loria's valet. Inside was the diamond serpent. She told herself that she had done a very good afternoon's work.

Soon every one knew that the American heiress and beauty, Miss Virginia Beverly, had bought, for twenty thousand pounds, the famous steam yacht which

the mad Spanish Prince d'Almidares had used as a despatch boat at the time of the American war with Spain. For some time it had been for sale, lying in harbour at Nice; but it had been too costly a toy; the cannon with which it was armed were worth only the price of old iron to most buyers of yachts. They were equally useless to Miss Beverly and her party, as she and George Trent and Roger Broom impressed upon all who asked questions; but, then, what was the use in wasting time enough to dismantle the yacht, as she was wanted immediately, and the cannon were too cleverly concealed to injure the smart appearance of the little craft?

It was given out that the *Bella Cuba* would touch at Greece, go on to Egypt, and perhaps visit Algiers and Lisbon, steaming at last up the Thames to Tilbury. Virginia Beverly ostentatiously bought thin summer clothing, saying that it would be summer weather on the sea before she bade good-bye to the water. Still, Virginia announced that she did not wish to be bound down to a definite programme, and Kate Gardiner had to be satisfied with a prospect of vagueness if she intended to be of the party.

Not for a single moment had she abandoned that intention. Even if she had not stood to earn a thousand pounds she would have moved heaven and earth to go, for more and more, as the days of preparation went on, her curiosity and excitement increased.

Roger Broom, it was clear, had been intensely annoyed when he was informed that Lady Gardiner had so far overcome her fear of the sea, as to wish to be a passenger on the *Bella Cuba*. He had said little, but his face was expressive, and Kate was of opinion that he would have said a great deal more, had not some strong motive restrained him. Perhaps, she thought, this motive was fear of rousing her suspicions if he too emphatically advocated her stopping behind. But —suspicions of *what*? That was the question she often asked herself, and could never answer.

She had asked it of Loria also, when they met—as secretly as if the bond between them had been a forbidden love. But if the truth about the yachting trip had been told, even he had no solution ready for the puzzle.

At last the yacht, which had been re-painted, was ready, the captain and crew of picked men, all Englishmen, were engaged, and the *Bella Cuba* steamed into the harbour at Mentone, exactly one month from the date (as Kate happened to remember) of the eventful ride into the Valley of the Shadow.

They were to start in two days, and Lady Gardiner's heart sank at the thought of all the physical suffering she was doomed to endure. Nevertheless, when Virginia hinted that, if she chose to think better of her decision, it was not yet too late, she courageously assured the girl that she was looking forward to the trip. She had always wanted to see Egypt!

The yacht was swift, and had proved herself seaworthy, but she was comparatively small, and when Kate went on board with Virginia to inspect the accommodation, she was surprised to be shown only five passenger cabins. Still, as she had been informed that there were to be but four in the party, she did not see why it would be impossible for Virginia's maid to go, and ventured to say as much.

"But we have decided to take a doctor," explained Virginia. "We shall be so long at sea that otherwise it really wouldn't be safe."

"For my part I'd much rather have a maid than a doctor," sighed Kate, to whom Virginia's Celestine had made herself agreeably useful. "We shall have nothing worse the matter with us than seasickness; and how *are* we to do our hair?"

Thus bemoaning her fate, she passed along the line of white and gold painted doors, and stopped suddenly at a sixth, the only one which was closed. Gently she tried the handle. It did not yield.

"One would think that this ought to be another cabin," she remarked sweetly; "else what becomes of the symmetry? Now, if only it *were* one, you might take Celestine. You'd be so *much* more comfortable."

"That cabin can't be used," Virginia said, her eyes very bright, her cheeks very red. "And if you want Celestine, Kate, you must stop on land."

Lady Gardiner at once protested that she was not thinking of *herself*; oh, indeed no! but merely of her *dear* girl, who was not used to being her own maid. She said no more of the locked door, but she could think of nothing else. Why could the cabin not be used, and why had Virginia suddenly grown cross at the bare suggestion that it should be? Was it possible that Madeleine Dalahaide was going after all, that her presence was to be kept secret from Kate until the last moment, and that she was to have this stateroom? Perhaps, Lady Gardiner's jealous suspicion whispered, she was already in the cabin, and had locked herself in, fearing just such an intrusion as the turned key had prevented.

That night she saw Loria, and told him precisely what had happened on board. "I shouldn't wonder," she said reflectively, "if the whole mystery of this trip were not on the other side of that closed door. Something tells me it is so."

"When do you start?" asked the Italian.

"To-morrow, at five in the afternoon."

"Could you make an excuse to go on board in the morning alone?"

"Yes. Celestine has taken most of our things on to-day, and put them away for us. We are not supposed to leave the hotel till three o'clock. But I could say I had lost something, and hoped that I'd left it on the *Bella Cuba*. Or perhaps I could slip on board without saying anything until afterward. But what good would it do me? The door isn't likely to be unlocked; and I can see nothing through the keyhole. I tried this afternoon."

"I will get you a key which, if there isn't one already on the inside, will open the door."

In the night Kate Gardiner had strange dreams of the locked cabin. Twenty times in her sleep she was on the point of finding out the secret, but always woke before she had made it her own. She was up early in the morning, and went out, saying, as if carelessly, to Celestine, that she must buy a few last things which she had forgotten. In the town she met Loria, as they had arranged over-night, and he put into her hand something in a sealed envelope.

"You are sure this will do it?" she asked.

"Sure," returned the Italian.

Then they parted; Kate took a small boat and was rowed out to the *Bella Cuba*, which lay anchored not far from shore.

"I have come on board to look for a diamond ring which I think I dropped in my cabin yesterday," she remarked to the captain.

He turned away, all unsuspicious and Kate hurried to the saloon off which the cabins opened. Already she had broken the seal on the envelope, and taken out a small, peculiarly shaped steel implement. With a quick glance over her shoulder and a loud beating of the heart, she thrust the master-key into the lock of the closed door.

CHAPTER V

THE LADY ON THE VERANDAH

No one was coming; Lady Gardiner dared to turn the key. The door opened, and she looked into the room beyond.

It was a cabin, of the same size as the others, and fitted up as a stateroom, but furnished and decorated differently. The five which Kate had been shown yesterday were comfortable, but not particularly luxurious, and she had wondered, since this was ostensibly a pleasure trip, that beauty-loving Virginia had not thought it worth while to have her own cabin, at least, made more dainty.

In the locked stateroom, whose secret Kate was violating, the berth was hung with old brocaded silk of blue and silver, the curtains edged with curious thick lace, yellowed by time. On the floor lay a beautiful tiger-skin, covering it from end to end. A large fitted travelling-bag stood open on a cushioned seat, showing silver-topped bottles; and the wall on one side of the cabin was almost hidden with photographs and sketches which had been tacked up, over a low book-shelf, filled with volumes in uniform binding of blue and gold. The photographs were of places as well as people, and Kate had just identified the Valley of the Shadow, dominated by the Château de la Roche, when a sudden sound sent her out of the cabin and into the saloon, with her heart pounding and her nerves throbbing, in shamed fear of discovery.

She had just time to lock the door and pass on to that of her own stateroom when Celestine appeared, carrying various small parcels. She had been sent to the yacht by her mistress to finish a few preparations for the voyage, and was surprised to see Lady Gardiner. Kate, however, was prepared with her story of the lost ring, which no doubt Celestine would repeat to Virginia, and produced the jewel, saying that fortunately she had found it on the floor of her cabin.

The maid had no suspicion, probably did not dream that the *Bella Cuba* had a secret to keep, and Lady Gardiner was rowed back to shore, confident that she had come safely out of the morning's adventure. The mystery, however, remained a mystery, except that Kate was certain now of one thing which she had only suspected. There was to be a passenger on board the *Bella Cuba*, whose

expected presence had carefully been concealed from her. For this passenger elaborate preparations had been made. Everything behind that locked door was beautiful, but nothing was new. In the fleeting glimpse Kate had obtained before the sound of Celestine's descending steps had sent her flying from her stolen inspection, she had been impressed with the feeling that the decorations of the stateroom had all been taken from some other room, with the view of surrounding its occupant with old associations.

Lady Gardiner hoped to see Loria before going back to the hotel, and an appointment had been made, to be kept as nearly to the time as possible; but he was not at Rumpelmayer's, the place of meeting, and, astonished at his defection, she was obliged to return to the Cap Martin without the expected talk. In her room she found a line from the Italian. Sir Roger Broom had seen him at Rumpelmayer's, he explained, and had joined him there. Fearing that Lady Gardiner might come in while they were together, he pleaded an engagement and went out, still accompanied by Broom. Now, Loria asked, was it possible that Miss Beverly's cousin suspected anything? Had Lady Gardiner been imprudent and dropped the slightest hint of their new allegiance?

Kate had begun a note in reply, when Virginia knocked at her door, inquiring whether she were ready for luncheon. "Wait for me just a moment in the sitting-room," said the elder woman, and, her ideas confused in the necessity for haste, she merely scrawled: "Don't think Sir Roger or any one suspects. Must have been an accident. Key worked well. I saw cabin. It is ready for a passenger. I would wager that that passenger is Madeleine Dalahaide. Probably we shall not have a word together in private now before we go, but will write you from every port, or wire if necessary and possible.—K. G."

This note she took down to the dining-room with her, and barely had a chance to press it into Loria's palm as he bade her, with the others, a rather formal farewell.

The Marchese was not one of those who went out to the yacht to see the last of the beautiful American girl and her party. Virginia had definitely refused him now, and the old, pleasant intimacy had been brought to a sudden end. Nevertheless, he sent her flowers—a great basket of roses big enough to fill up half of her stateroom on the *Bella Cuba*—which she promptly gave to Kate, with various other elaborate offerings, keeping for her own cabin only a small bunch of fragrant violets sent by some one whose name she seemed to guess, although there was no card.

So, at last, they were off; and no sad-faced girl in black had appeared. Besides the original party of four, there was only a little dark, keen-eyed English doctor, taken from his practice in Mentone. He looked like a man who would know how to keep a secret, and Kate wondered whether the mystery of the *Bella Cuba* were a mystery to Dr. Grayle.

"Miss Dalahaide will come on board at Naples," Kate said to herself when it became certain that they would stop there. "She is well known in Mentone, no doubt, and didn't wish it to leak out that she was going on this yachting trip."

But they arrived at Naples, sent off telegrams and letters, coaled, and left without taking on another passenger. Always it seemed to Kate that Virginia's manner showed suppressed nervous excitement. She was restless, capricious, took an interest in nothing for more than ten minutes together. She had never been to Naples before, yet she appeared to grudge the two or three hours they spent in driving about, and would not listen to Kate's suggestion that they should stop long enough for a visit to Pompeii.

"Next time," she said evasively. Altogether, she had not at all the air of a young woman yachting for pleasure, as of course she must be, since what other object could the trip have? "I am in a hurry to see Cairo," she replied, when Lady Gardiner inquired the reason of her impatience.

After all, they did not touch at Greece, but went straight on to Alexandria, the sea being so calmly unruffled that even Kate had no excuse for illness. She might have been very happy in these long, lazy, blue-and-gold days, if George Trent had been his old self. But the frost which had withered the flower of his fancy for her that day in the Valley of the Shadow, had never thawed. He read and smoked a great deal, leaving Roger Broom to amuse Virginia and Lady Gardiner.

Something went wrong with the engine the morning when they expected to reach Alexandria and Kate heard talk of a "heated bearing on the crankshaft," which might have to be taken off, thus delaying them a couple of days. "But a couple of days!" she exclaimed in surprise. "Surely you mean to stop longer than that!"

"We hadn't thought of it," answered Roger drily.

"Are you going up the Nile then?"

"No; the *Bella Cuba* is rather big, you know."

"Not so big as the excursion boats that go, is she?"

"Virginia doesn't care about it, anyhow; she loves the sea for its own sake, and hasn't come as much for sight-seeing as for a complete rest. While the repairs are being done we shall run up to Cairo by rail, stop a night at the Ghezireh Palace, and drive out for a look at the Sphinx and the Pyramids."

"You really are the most extraordinary people!" ejaculated Kate. "I don't know what to make of you."

Roger smiled, and was silent. He had the air of thinking it of small importance whether or not Lady Gardiner, who had insisted upon coming on this trip, knew what to make of her hosts and hostess. But, then, Sir Roger Broom had never more than tolerated this most charming of companions.

Kate had kept the master-key which Loria had given her, and had never ceased to hope for another chance to investigate the locked stateroom, which might, she told herself sometimes, have a hidden occupant. To be sure, so far as she knew, no other passengers had come on board at Naples; but, then, they had all been away from the yacht for several hours, and some one might have been smuggled into the cabin. With this fancy lurking in her mind, she would have given much for a second peep; but she had never found a moment when it seemed safe to run the risk.

She could imagine no reason, if Madeleine Dalahaide had come on board at Naples, beyond spying-distance of old acquaintances, why she should remain hidden in the stateroom, unless, indeed, there were some truth in Loria's suggestion that the yacht was bound for New Caledonia, to take the girl out to her convict brother. In that case, perhaps, it might conceivably be necessary to keep the captain and crew in ignorance of her presence, lest they should gossip in port. Still, Virginia's restlessness, her lack of interest in the beautiful places so easy to visit, her desire to remain on board when the *Bella Cuba* was in port, seemed to point to some peculiar motive under her indifference to all pleasures of the trip.

In Alexandria, the girl "did not see why they should pack up to stop a night in Cairo." What if the crankshaft could be repaired sooner than they supposed? Then they would be wasting time. But she was overruled, and just before sunset they drove up to one of the most beautiful hotels in the world.

The evening chill was beginning to fall, yet many people still lingered on the

huge terrace overlooking the Nile, where the "winging" sails of the little boats were pink and golden as mother-o'-pearl, reflecting the crimson glory of the sky. A woman sitting alone at a little table looked up as they passed, and with a slight start. Virginia half stopped, staring almost rudely at the face which was lifted for a moment. But it was only for a moment.

The woman, who was exceedingly handsome, of the most luscious Spanish type of beauty, flushed under the American girl's intent gaze, drew up a sable cape which had partly fallen from the shoulders of her white cloth dress, and turned a resentful back.

"What a handsome creature, but awfully made up!" whispered Kate, who had no mercy on her own sex.

Virginia did not answer. She walked on, looking as if she had awakened from a dream.

At dinner that night, next to the party from the yacht, was a small table laid for one. It was unoccupied until they had half finished dinner; then heads began suddenly to turn toward the door; people whispered, there was a perceptible, though scarcely definable thrill of interest, and a tall woman in sequined black tulle, glittering with diamonds, came slowly up the room. She must have known that all eyes were upon her, yet she appeared unconscious. Her lashes were cast down as she moved toward a chair held obsequiously ready by a waiter at the little empty table, and their dusky length was not second even to Virginia's. As the newcomer sat down, she faced Roger Broom.

"That woman's face looks somehow familiar to me," he said, "yet I can't think where, if ever, I have seen it. I suppose it can only be a chance resemblance to somebody or other."

Virginia opened her lips to speak, but closed them again hastily. Kate then threw a questioning glance her way, and saw that she had suddenly grown pale. "I wish you or George would find out who she is," the girl said presently. "She is one of the handsomest women I ever saw. If possible, I should like to know her."

"I can promise that you shall at least know her name," replied Roger, smiling. "It wouldn't be safe to say more." And, true to his word, an hour after dinner he came to the private drawing-room where Virginia and Lady Gardiner sat, with the required information.

"The strange beauty is a Portuguese countess," he announced. "Her name is De Mattos, and she is a widow, spending the winter here alone, except for her maid. She is much admired, especially by men, but apparently does not care to make acquaintances; otherwise, as she seems to be a person whose name the gossips respect, your wish might perhaps have been gratified."

"Have you remembered yet where you saw her before?"

"I've remembered where I saw some one like her. But it is not the same woman."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely. The other was a blonde with Titian hair. And she has been dead for years."

Virginia said no more, and appeared to forget the Portuguese countess. But when Lady Gardiner complained of being tired, and went off to bed, that she might be fresh for sight-seeing next morning, also to write a puzzled letter to the Marchese Loria, Virginia remained. George Trent had gone to a Cairene theatre, and she and Roger were alone together.

Scarcely had the door closed upon Kate Gardiner, when the girl sprang up from her chair, and before Roger knew what she meant to do, was sitting on a divan beside him, her hand on his sleeve.

"Roger," she exclaimed, "I thank you a thousand, thousand times for insisting that I should come here."

"You haven't seen anything yet," he returned. "Thank me after to-morrow."

"It's the most wonderful thing in the world that we should have come," she went on. "If we had employed the cleverest detectives in Paris and London they might never have discovered what chance, merest chance—if there is such a thing as chance—has put into our hands to-night."

"What are you talking about, dear child?" asked Roger.

"I'm talking about Liane Devereux, the actress that Maxime Dalahaide is supposed to have murdered. You've been very good, Roger. I've appreciated it, for you never believed in his innocence. Now you must believe, in spite of yourself, since she is here, calling herself the Countess de Mattos."

Roger stared at her in amazement. "But this is madness, dear," he said. "Liane

Devereux was murdered; whether Maxime Dalahaide or another was her murderer, there is no possible doubt that she is dead. You can't know the story as well as I thought you did, if you don't put that beyond questioning."

"I tell you, Liane Devereux is in this house, and Providence sent me here to see her. It's that which is beyond question."

"Did Madeleine Dalahaide show you the woman's picture?"

"Yes, two pictures; a photograph and an ivory miniature. She kept them because they were her brother's, just as she kept everything of his. I looked at them again and again, until I knew the features line by line. I can't be mistaken. This is the same woman. There was an even deeper mystery about that murder than Maxime Dalahaide's best friends guessed."

Roger Broom shrugged his shoulders with a despairing laugh. "For light-hearted trampling on established facts, give me an American girl!" he exclaimed. "A woman is murdered, her body found, identified, buried. Four or five years afterward another woman appears, a brunette, while Number One was blonde. Number One, a Frenchwoman, was murdered in Paris; Number Two, a Portuguese, is spending the winter in Cairo. There is absolutely nothing to link these women together except a resemblance of feature, which, though strong, is not convincing even to a man who saw Number One on the stage many times. Yet here comes a maiden from the States, who was in the schoolroom in her own country when Number One was murdered, and insists, because she has seen a portrait or two, that Liane Devereux, the dead actress, and the Countess de Mattos are one and the same."

"I know it sounds childish," admitted Virginia, with unwonted meekness; "nevertheless, I'm absolutely sure. I'd stake my life on it, if it were necessary."

"How do you proceed to explain the identification and burial of Liane Devereux's body if she is now alive in Cairo?"

"I don't pretend to explain—yet. There was a mistake—that's all I can say."

"Liane Devereux was too well known for that to be possible. Besides, if there had been such a mistake, another woman, murdered and buried in her place, must have been missing. As a matter of fact, no other woman was missing."

"You mean no other woman's disappearance was discovered."

"You're incorrigible! I know you're wrong; but, admitting for the sake of argument that you might be right, what use could you make of this marvellous private information, supplied to your brain only? If the Countess de Mattos is really Liane Devereux, come to life, one might be sure that a woman clever enough to plan from the beginning so astounding an affair would be too clever to leave any tracks behind her."

"Yes, that is one of the difficulties," said Virginia. "Only somehow we must get over it."

"I hope, my dear free-lance detective, that you aren't plotting to accuse the Countess to her face, and have a dramatic scene in the hall of the Ghezireh Palace?"

"I don't know yet what to do," the girl answered slowly. "But I don't want to leave Cairo until after we've done something."

"Believe me, there's nothing to do. We are on a wild-goose chase as it is; don't let's complicate things by a suit for slander just as it's begun. My advice is, dear, put this mad idea out of your head, and let's get on about our business as quickly as we can—as quickly as you yourself wanted to do a few hours ago."

"Then I'm sorry I can't take your advice," said Virginia. "I'm growing superstitious. I believe that I was brought here for a particular purpose, and I don't mean to go until, in some way, I've accomplished that purpose."

Roger sighed, and said no more. He had exhausted his stock of arguments; he knew Virginia almost as well as he loved her. He had promised coöperation; and though there had been no bargaining, she had voluntarily led him to hope for a reward which, to him, was beyond any other happiness the world might hold. Therefore he could do nothing but bow to the inevitable, and await developments, which meant, with a girl like Virginia Beverly, expecting the unexpected.

Suddenly in the night Virginia sat up in bed and exclaimed aloud: "Oh, if I could!" Kate Gardiner, in a room adjoining, heard her, and supposed that she was talking in her sleep. But the truth was that a plan had at that instant sprung fully armed from her brain, like Minerva from the head of Jove; a plan so daring that

the bare thought was an electric shock.

She could not sleep after its conception, but lay tossing and tingling until it was time to get up. Every moment would be long now until the machinery could be set in motion, and she bathed and dressed hastily, having long ago ceased actively to miss Celestine's lost ministrations.

There was no sound in the next room. Kate was not yet awake, evidently; and so, as she took quite two hours for dressing and beautifying, it would be foolish to wait for her. Virginia went downstairs, looking about in vain for Roger or George, and stepped out on to the wide verandah, for a look at the Nile by morning light. To her joy the beautiful Portuguese countess was there, breakfasting alone, with a yellow-covered French novel open on the little table before her. Virginia instantly decided that she would also breakfast on the verandah, and as near to the Countess as possible.

As the American girl's pale blue serge rustled its silk lining along the floor, the Portuguese woman raised her eyes from the novel she was reading as she sipped her coffee. The eyes had appeared almost black in the evening; now Virginia saw that they were a curious, greenish gray, and her heart gave a leap, for the eyes of Liane Devereux, in the painted ivory miniature, had been gray.

Now or never, Virginia said to herself, was the time to begin the campaign. She seized the tide of fortune at its flood, and spoke in English, making the most of the pretty, drawling Southern accent of the State after which she had been named, because American girls were privileged to be eccentric.

"Good morning," she said. "Oh, I do hope you understand my language, because I want to tell you something."

The green-gray eyes of the Countess shone keenly between their heavy black fringes during a silent moment of inspection, which must have shown her Virginia divinely young, and childishly innocent of guile. At the end of the moment she smiled.

"Yes, I understand English, and speak it a little," she responded, with a charming accent, and in a voice musical but unexpectedly deep. "You are American, is it not? What have you to tell me—that we have met before, somewhere?"

At this—or Virginia imagined it—there came again a steely flash from the black lashes. "Oh, no," said the girl hurriedly. "I never saw you until yesterday. What I want to tell you is, that I hope you will forgive me for staring at you as I did

then. I was afraid you'd think me rude. But I just couldn't help it, you are so beautiful. I adore beauty. You can be sure now I'm American, can't you? for nobody but an American girl would say such things to a perfect stranger. I'm glad I *am* American, for if I didn't speak I don't see exactly how I should get to know you. And I want to know you very much. I made my cousin, Sir Roger Broom—he's English, though I'm American—ask who you were, so I heard your name. Mine is Virginia Beverly. Now we're introduced, aren't we?"

The Countess laughed and looked pleased. "I have seen your name in the journals," she said—"the journals of society all over the world, that one reads in hotels when one has nothing better to do, is it not? They told the truth in one thing, for they said that you were *très belle*. And you have bought the yacht of a Spanish gentleman, whom I have known a little. Yes, I remember it was a Miss Virginia Beverly, for it is not a name to forget; and I love yachting."

By this time, Virginia had ordered her breakfast and received it, but she was far too excited to make more than a pretense at eating. It was almost as if the Countess de Mattos were playing into her hands. It seemed too good to be true. She was afraid that something would happen to ruin all; that she would lose her head, and by her precipitancy put the other on her guard; yet the opportunity was too admirable to be entirely neglected.

"If you like yachting, it would be nice if you could come and have a day's run with us," said the girl. "The *Bella Cuba* is at Alexandria, and we should all love taking you. My cousin and my half-brother, George Trent, couldn't talk of anything but you last night. Perhaps, later, we might arrange it, if the railway journey both ways wouldn't bore you."

"On the contrary, I should be charmed," replied the Countess. She flushed, and her eyes brightened. Virginia looked at her admiringly, yet sharply, and said to herself: "If that rich, dark complexion of yours is make-up—as it must be to prove my theory right—then it's the cleverest make-up that any woman ever had as a disguise."

At this moment Sir Roger Broom and George Trent came out on to the verandah together, both looking very much surprised to see Virginia in conversation with the Countess de Mattos.

"Can she have said anything?" Roger thought quickly. But the calm expression of the beautiful, dark face was in itself an answer to his silent question.

The two men strolled up to Virginia, who asked and received permission from the Countess to introduce her brother and cousin; and soon they were talking as if they had known each other for days instead of moments.

The Portuguese beauty was distinctly ingratiating in her manner to all three, so much so that Roger became thoughtful. He was more certain than ever, if that were possible, that this woman was not Liane Devereux, for the voice was many tones deeper, and the Countess spoke English with an accent that was not at all French.

It seemed to him that no woman could disguise herself so completely—face, voice, mannerisms, accent—no matter how clever she might be; besides, Virginia's idea was ridiculous. But he began to wonder whether the lovely Portuguese had a right to her title, or, if she had, whether it were as well gilded as her charming frocks and her residence at this expensive hotel would suggest at first sight.

It seemed to him that she caught too readily at new acquaintances for a rich and haughty daughter of Portuguese aristocracy, and though he believed that he understood, only too well, Virginia's motive for cultivating a friendship, he was inclined to fear that the girl might be victimized by an adventuress.

The Countess de Mattos was too handsome and too striking not to have been remarked in Cairo, no matter how quietly she might live at the Ghezireh Palace Hotel, and he determined to make inquiries of some officers whom he knew there.

At all events, plans for the present were changed. Instead of a day or two in Cairo they were to stay on indefinitely. George, as well as Roger, was taken into the secret, but Lady Gardiner was told only the fact. She was pleased at first, for she was fond of Cairo, and had never had a chance to stop there in luxury before. She did not, however, like the Countess de Mattos, who was much too handsome to be acceptable to her; and before the slower and more prudent Roger had learnt anything, she was primed with all the gossip of the hotel regarding the Portuguese beauty. There was a certain Mrs. Maitland-Fox at the Ghezireh Palace, whom Lady Gardiner had met before, and from her she gathered the crumbs of gossip with which she immediately afterward regaled Virginia.

"They" said that the Countess de Mattos, although she might really be a countess (and there were those who pretended to vouch for this), had scarcely a penny. She traded on her beauty and the lovely clothes with which some trusting

milliner must have supplied her, to pick up rich or influential friends, from whom she was certain to extort money in some way or another. And it was Mrs. Maitland-Fox's advice that Miss Beverly should be warned to beware of the beautiful lady.

Among his friends, Roger heard something of the same sort, and though he was bound to admit that it was all very vague, he begged Virginia to abandon a forlorn hope, and let the Portuguese woman alone.

"If she were really a Portuguese woman she might vanish from before my eyes, for all I should care," obstinately returned the girl. "But she is Liane Devereux, and if she breathed poison I wouldn't let her go till I had torn out her secret."

"How do you mean to set about doing that?" demanded Roger.

"That is *my* secret," said Virginia. "Only let me alone and don't thwart me, or you'll spoil everything."

Roger waited, expectant and apprehensive. He had not to wait long.

CHAPTER VI

THE END OF THE WORLD

They stayed a week in Cairo, and at the end of that time the Countess de Mattos had accepted an invitation to go yachting; not for a day, but for a vague period of "dawdling," as Virginia evasively expressed it. The beautiful Portuguese woman had hesitated at first, and confided to the American girl that, on account of the delay in receiving an expected sum of money, she did not quite see how she could get away in time. But Virginia had begged the Countess not to let such a small difficulty trouble her for a moment. She really must accept a loan to tide over the little annoyance; it would indeed be too hard to lose the pleasure of her companionship for the sake of a few paltry dollars, so that would be no favour at all, or rather, the favour would be the other way round.

The "few paltry dollars" necessary turned out to be three thousand; but if they had been three times three thousand Virginia would have lent them just as cheerfully without the prospect of, or even wish for, their return. With the money obtained from Virginia's practically unlimited letter of credit in her pocket, and a hint delicately expressed that more would be at her service whenever she wished, "as it was such a nuisance having to keep in touch with one's bankers and people like that on a long yachting trip when nothing was less settled than one's plans," the Countess thought herself very well off.

"Are you in a hurry to be anywhere in particular during the next few weeks?" asked the girl of her new friend. "No? How nice! Then let us throw all the responsibility of planning things upon the men. What fun never to know where we are going, but to be surprised always when we arrive anywhere."

And the Countess de Mattos agreed. She would have agreed with almost anything that Virginia said that day. If the American girl believed that Providence had directed her to cross the path of this beautiful woman, the beautiful woman was equally sure that the god of luck had put this infatuated young heiress in her way.

Roger would hardly have consented to the carrying out of Virginia's plan, which he called "kidnapping," had George Trent not joined his arguments to his sister's.

"It does seem a mad idea," he admitted, "but if the woman isn't Liane Devereux, no harm will be done, except that she'll be taken a longer journey than she expects. If she is—ah! I know what you think, old chap, without your lifting your eyebrows up to your hair; but, by Jove! Virgie's got an instinct that's like the needle of a compass. When she says 'north,' I'd bet my bottom dollar it *was* north, that's all. If I don't object to Virgie's associating with the Countess, you needn't—yet, anyhow. She isn't the kind of girl to be hurt by that sort of thing, and, besides, she'll have the dickens of a tantrum if we try to thwart her now she's set her heart on this trick. She'd be equal to slipping anchor with the Countess on board and leaving us in the lurch. Let's see the little girl through on her own lines, and if the snap doesn't come off, she can't blame *us*. Anyway, it's rougher on me than on you, for Virgie's put me up to do the agreeable to the Countess and keep her from getting restless before we attempt to spring our mine. A while ago I wouldn't have asked anything better than flirting all day with such a woman, who is as pretty and as fascinating as they're made, but I'm not in the mood for it now, somehow. Still, we're playing for big stakes—you for yours, Roger, I for mine."

This was the only reference he made to his interest in Madeleine Dalahaide; but Roger guessed what was in his mind.

Lady Gardiner floundered deeper than ever into the quicksands of mystery when she heard that the Countess de Mattos was to be one of the party for the rest of the voyage—wherever it was to take them. What could be Virginia's object in picking up this woman? Was it really true that she had taken the violent and sudden fancy to her that she feigned to feel, or did that pretense cloak a hidden motive? Kate had no clue, unless the fact that Virginia had asked her never to mention Madeleine Dalahaide or the Château de la Roche before the Countess could be called a motive. She would have disobeyed Virginia, by way of a curiosity-satisfying experiment, if she had not feared that the result might be disastrous and that she would be found out.

At least she would in a gentle, tactful way have suggested objections to the Countess de Mattos's presence on the yacht, had she not been certain that Virginia would have frankly advised her to stay behind if she did not like the arrangements for the rest of the trip. Much as she loved Cairo in the height of its gay season, much as she hated the sea at all seasons, nevertheless she was doggedly determined to see this adventure to the end (bitter though it might be), not only to earn her thousand pounds, but to know the secret which actually kept her waking and wondering at night.

It really was the strangest thing that Virginia should want this adventuress on the yacht, Kate indignantly remarked to Mrs. Maitland-Fox. The girl had refused to take a maid because there would not be room, yet now she dragged this creature on board to flirt with George Trent and perhaps inveigle him into a marriage under the impression that he was as rich as he was handsome.

But with Virginia herself, after the first few moments of surprise, Lady Gardiner had been circumspect. She had not even dared to ask the question burning on her lips—whether the Countess would have the locked stateroom, or what arrangement would be made for her accommodation? Obliged to wait for this information until the hour of going on board again, once the Countess de Mattos's presence was to be expected without hope of change, Kate began to be impatient to start.

The party, counting quiet, keen-eyed little Dr. Grayle, was now increased to six, an equal number of men and women, for the Countess had readily given up her maid. They all travelled to Alexandria together one morning, and, boarding the yacht, Kate eagerly watched for the new guest to be taken to her stateroom. Would the locked door be opened? No; Virginia led her past that mysterious, closed door, to the cabin formerly occupied by George Trent, and Kate saw that the young man's belongings, just brought back from Cairo, had been set down inside the stateroom once sacred to the doctor alone. In this there were two berths, and evidently George and the medical man would "chum" together for the rest of the voyage. The discovery did not add to Lady Gardiner's love for the Portuguese woman, for, half forgetting her uneasiness concerning Madeleine Dalahaide, she was now jealous of the new beauty, and it was gall and wormwood to Kate that George Trent, lost to her, should be making gallant sacrifices of his personal comfort for another woman.

She had written to the Marchese Loria on the first night of their arrival in Cairo, before the acquaintance with the Countess had begun, and, as she could learn nothing of the future programme for the voyage, it had not seemed worth while to write again. As for the invitation to the Portuguese woman, Kate did not see that it could be of personal interest to Loria, and she never wrote unless she had something to say which was of importance to him; therefore the Italian remained in ignorance that the Countess de Mattos was a member of the little party on the *Bella Cuba*.

So far as the trip had gone, there was nothing to excite his anxiety save that the girl he coveted for her beauty and her money was going farther and farther from

him. But one day a telegram came for him to the Cap Martin Hotel, where he still remained. It was dated from Port Said. "Bound for Australia," were the three words the message contained; and they were words of heavy import to Loria.

Australia! There was no reason why Virginia Beverly should not visit Australia. He had heard her say that she would not be satisfied until she had seen all the world. But if she had thought of going to Australia before she left Mentone, she had carefully refrained from saying so. It was more the fact that she had concealed such an intention than that she was now carrying it out, which seemed ominous to Loria. Sydney was the nearest place of departure for New Caledonia. In a Messageries mail boat it took ten days to reach Noumea from Sydney; it would perhaps take longer in a yacht like the *Bella Cuba*. And the sensible question to ask would be, Was it likely that a bright, erratic, butterfly being like beautiful Virginia Beverly would go so far simply for the pleasure of seeing the prison which contained a stranger, a convicted assassin for whom she had conceived a girlishly romantic interest?

It was not as if she could hope to meet and talk with Maxime Dalahaide himself, have the pleasure of carrying him messages from his sister, or perhaps even bring Madeleine to him (for the Château de la Roche was empty now, in the hands of workmen, and no one, not even Loria, had been able to learn where Mademoiselle Dalahaide and her aunt had gone). The Italian was not unlearned in such lore of the far-away French prison-land as could be obtained, and he had read that, though strangers were allowed to land at Noumea, and a few had been enabled through influence to penetrate inside the prison walls, all personal intercourse with the convicts was strictly interdicted. Since the one almost miraculous escape, over thirty years ago, of Henri Rochefort and Humbert, watch and ward had been more strictly kept than ever; besides, they had escaped from Ducos, on the Isle of Pines, which in those days had been sacred to political prisoners, and discipline there had been, even then, lax compared to that of the Ile Nou, the very heart of prison-land, where Maxime Dalahaide was dragging out the weary years of his lost life.

Yet what if Virginia should have formed the extraordinary resolve of going to Noumea? What was it to him—Loria—since she could accomplish nothing there? Suppose, even, that among other miserable convicts she saw Maxime—pallid, thin, sullen and hopeless, his good looks and his brilliant audacity crushed and gone—would not the romantic feeling she had conceived for him be instantly turned into horror and disgust? When such a chill had withered a girl's fancy for a man, there could be no future blossoming, and her heart might be

caught in the rebound. Once, Loria had thought that Virginia had been on the point of caring for him. Perhaps when they met she would turn to him again, remorseful for the pain she had caused, grateful for his unwavering loyalty; and, telling himself these things, he was almost persuaded that it would do him more good than harm if Virginia did go to Noumea. But he was never wholly persuaded. A strange fear knocked at his heart, a fear that had no name. He never quite saw its face. Like a haunting ghost, it was always behind him, and he could hear the swish of its garments, the stealthy sound of its footfalls; but when he turned upon it the thing was gone, leaving only the impression of a black shadow with a veiled face inexpressibly awful.

Loria could not sleep by night, and by day he was restless. He began to dread an illness, and was constantly troubled with headache, which gave him an excuse for believing that the vague, nervous apprehension he suffered was largely the result of physical causes.

What else, indeed, could it be? He had absolutely nothing to fear. Of this he was still continually reminding himself, when another telegram came from Lady Gardiner, dated Sydney. "Leaving here to-morrow," she said. "Destination unknown."

The *Bella Cuba* was ten days out from Sydney Heads. Her passengers rose early, for in the morning it was good to be alive. Virginia, fresh from her cold, salt bath, came on deck, and saw the Countess de Mattos there, with George Trent. Far away lay a strip of land, turning slowly from violet to emerald as the yacht steamed nearer. Virginia saw it and flushed. She knew what it must be, and quickly she glanced at George, with an eager question in her eyes.

It was tacitly understood that the task of informing the Countess de Mattos what her destination was to be must be left to Virginia; she coveted it, while the two men did not. Still, the Portuguese might have guessed, on seeing that strip of violet; or George might inadvertently have given her a clue, and she would be on her guard.

But George's blue eyes met his sister's; and with the faintest shake of his head he contrived to convey to her the intelligence that the secret still remained a secret.

Virginia's heart was beating fast as she joined her brother and the Countess, and

her hand was not quite steady as she offered her field-glass to the beautiful Portuguese, who had long ago begged the two ladies on board to call her "Manuela."

"What a large island!" exclaimed the Countess. "And we seem to be making for it. What can it be? Mr. Trent says perhaps it is a mirage. But I think that is his joke. He likes teasing."

"I think," replied Virginia calmly, though her eyes were on the face of Manuela, "that we must be coming in sight of New Caledonia."

As she gave this answer, Roger Broom came up the companionway, and heard the last words, which rang out, distinctly. Instantly he knew that the moment for which Virginia had been waiting was at hand, and he, too, watched the Countess.

She had taken Virginia's field-glass, and was gazing through it at the far-off land which with each moment seemed to grow more distinct. Only the delicate, aquiline profile could be seen by the eager eyes that looked for a sign of weakness. She did not speak at first, but a visible shiver ran through her body. The field-glass came down rather suddenly, and her fingers gripped it tightly as they rested on the rail. But she did not turn her face, and continued gazing landward as at last she echoed the words, "New Caledonia!"

"Is not that a prison for the French *forçats*?" she slowly asked.

Tacitly, the two men left the answer to Virginia. "Yes," said the girl. "Noumea is a penal settlement. They say it is very interesting to see. We thought that we might stop for a day or two in the harbour there."

This time the Countess turned. "Oh, but that would be terrible!" she exclaimed. "We—they might rob and murder us, these convicts. You did not say that we were coming to Noumea."

"It was to be one of our surprises," replied Virginia. "I thought that you would like it."

"No, no!" ejaculated Manuela. "I do not like it at all. I have a horror of such places and such people. This is a pleasure trip, is it not? There is no pleasure in visiting a prison-land. Dear Virginia, dear Mr. Trent and Sir Roger, do let us turn our faces another way and go somewhere else."

Virginia had not lost a single changing shade of expression on the Countess de

Mattos's darkly beautiful face; but if she had been questioned, she would have had to confess that she was disappointed in the great effect toward which she had so long been working up. She had half expected to see this wicked woman who, in some deadly and mysterious way, had plotted to destroy Maxime Dalahaide, turn livid under the brown stain which she (Virginia) suspected, gasp, totter, and perhaps fall fainting when she heard those fatal names—"New Caledonia, Noumea." But Manuela gave none of these evidences of distress. If she paled, the dusky stain in whose existence Virginia so tenaciously believed hid the sign of her emotion. It allowed a deep flush to be seen; even Virginia could not deny that, but pallor was difficult to trace where complexion and even lips were tinted brown and red; and the slight quivering of the body, the dropping of the hand with the field-glass, were not so marked that they might not be due to an ordinary, disagreeable surprise.

"I'm sorry you feel so about the place," said Virginia. "That's the worst of planning surprises, isn't it? One can't always be sure of bringing off a success. Now, I'm afraid we must make the best of it, for as we arranged to come here, our stores won't last long enough to avoid New Caledonia and go farther. We must buy butter and milk and vegetables, and chickens and lots of things, to say nothing of coaling. But you needn't see anything of the prison and the prisoners unless you like. The harbour is said to be glorious, and you can stop on board and read novels, while the rest of us do our sight-seeing, which won't take us very long."

"Sight-seeing in a prison!" exclaimed the Countess. "You English and Americans are strange. We Latins, we never give ourselves pain that can be avoided. There is enough that is unpleasant in life without that. Ugh! I would rather do without butter and milk than buy it of convicts, who may poison us in sheer spite because we are more fortunate than they. Could we not turn round, and get back to Sydney without starving?"

"No, it couldn't be managed," said Virginia.

Manuela turned pleading eyes upon Roger and George. They were men; they knew more about such things than women; besides she could usually make men do what she wished. But for once she found creatures of the opposite sex who were not to be melted by her pleading. They agreed with Virginia that it was impossible now to avoid New Caledonia.

"And how long shall we stay?" plaintively inquired the Countess, when she had

been obliged to resign herself to the inevitable, which, to her credit, she did with a very pretty grace. "Shall we leave again to-night, with our poisoned food?"

"Wait till you have seen the rocks in the harbour," answered George. "If they're as bad as the book says, they must be something to see. Anyhow, it's only possible to get in or out between sunrise and sunset. I'm afraid, Countess, you'll have to put up with it till to-morrow."

"Oh!" Manuela sighed a long sigh. She asked no more questions, she made no more protests. She turned her back upon New Caledonia, and appeared to dismiss the land of lost souls from her mind.

"Well," said Roger, when he and Virginia had walked away, leaving the Countess and George Trent to the flirtation which was so embittering the daily life of Lady Gardiner. "Well, was I right or wrong about this woman?"

"Wrong," firmly answered Virginia.

"You say that still, after the way she took your *grand coup*? But this is only because you hate giving up, beaten."

"I'm not beaten yet," the girl returned doggedly. "I hoped for something different—yes, I admit that. But her game means as much to her as ours does to us. She's playing it for all it's worth. If she weren't such a wretch, I should have admired her pluck. How she held her ground! Taken by surprise as she was, almost her first thought was whether we had purposely caught her in this trap, or whether she had only an avenging fate to thank for such a terrible and startling coincidence. I saw that, at least, in her eyes and her face, Roger, though I didn't see all I had been looking for. Think what she must have been feeling! She helped to send an innocent man who had loved and trusted her into this exile, worse than death. She thought herself free from him forever, because he was at the other end of the world, dead-alive, in the grave where she buried him. Suddenly she finds herself looking at that grave, unable to escape. At any moment it may open, and the dead appear to accuse her. What a situation!"

"What an imagination!" exclaimed Roger. "Dear child, you have let it carry you away as far from the truth as you've carried this woman from her home—this woman whom you've so audaciously kidnapped."

"Wait," said Virginia, her voice trembling. "I haven't done with her. This is only the first turn of the thumbscrew. She doesn't dream yet of the ordeal she'll have

to go through."

"May have to go through," quietly amended Roger Broom.

"You mean—oh, Roger, don't you think we'll succeed in what we've come for so far, so very far?"

Virginia, with tears sparkling in uplifted eyes, was irresistible.

"I hope it, dear," the man who loved and wanted her said, gravely. "I never thought it, you know. But the way hasn't seemed far to me, because I have been with you and the time will not have been wasted for me if we fail, because it has kept me by your side. I shall think, 'I have done what I could, and it has pleased Virginia.'"

"It has made Virginia grateful for all her life long," said the girl softly, "and whatever happens she will never forget. You have done so much already! Disapproving my plan, still you loyally did all you could to forward it. You used your influence to get us the one chance here, without which we could hope to do nothing. You wrote to the French Ambassador in London, the English Ambassador in France, and finally, when our interests were so twisted up in masses of official red-tape that it seemed they could never get disentangled, you ran on to Paris yourself to call on the Minister of the Colonies. If it had not been for the permit you got from him, we might as well have given up coming here, for all the prison doors would have been shut to us. Now, through him, and through you, they will be open, and our first step is clear. All this made me feel hopeful, when we were far away; I felt sure that we should succeed. But now that we have come these thousands of miles in our poor little boat; now that we have arrived at the end of the world and our real work is still before us, my heart suddenly sinks down—down. I'm frightened—I'm almost ill: and your words and your face are so grave, Roger! Your very tenderness and kindness make it worse, for somehow, it's as if you thought there might be a good-bye. It makes me realize that, after all, the greatest danger is to be run by you and George. You have both come for my sake; and—you are going to risk your lives."

"Risk your lives!" repeated a voice; and turning quickly, Virginia and her cousin saw Lady Gardiner, who had lately developed a rather stealthy way of creeping noiselessly behind her friends.

Virginia's mood was not one to promote presence of mind. She was speechless; but Roger stepped in to the breach.

"We were talking of a swim that George and I propose to have in these pleasant waters," he remarked. "There are supposed to be a good many sharks about, and Virginia is advising prudence."

"Oh!" breathed Lady Gardiner. "She is quite right. We will all join our persuasions to hers. But the Countess tells me this island is actually New Caledonia, the French penal settlement. Isn't that where your friend Miss Dalahaide's brother is imprisoned?"

"I believe so," said Virginia.

"How exciting! And how well you've kept the secret of this expedition! Is there any chance of our coming across the interesting murderer?"

"Don't call him that!" Virginia cried hotly. "How do you suppose that it would be possible for us to come across him? Do tourists who go to Portland 'come across' prisoners who have been convicted of murder—whether innocent or not? Noumea isn't the only port we have visited. It is on our way. We shall stop a day or two, and then—we shall go on somewhere else."

"Quite so," drily returned Lady Gardiner.

It was noon when they slowly steamed into the beautiful harbour of Noumea, and before them lay the crime-cursed land, fair with the fatal fairness of deadly nightshade.

There, for nearly five years, Maxime Dalahaide had not lived, but existed. To give him back to life, she had come thousands of miles and spent more than twenty thousand pounds. What would they find that he had become, if those precious documents which Roger had obtained proved as potent as they hoped? Would his brain and heart have been strong enough to bear the hopeless agony, the shame, the hideous associations of those years which to him must have seemed a century of despair; or would he have fallen under the burden?

Virginia shivered as if with cold, as she fancied a hard, official voice announcing that Number So-and-So was dead.

CHAPTER VII

THE GATES OPEN

The Countess de Mattos had a headache which was so severe, she announced, that it would prevent her from landing; besides, she was not interested in convicts. Lady Gardiner, on the contrary, was greatly interested. Never had she been more alert; never had her black eyes been so keen. She wanted to go everywhere; she wanted to see everything. She thought Noumea a charming place; she had "really *no* sympathy for the prisoners." One might commit a crime solely for the pleasure of being sent here.

The party of five went ashore, and Kate's principal preoccupation seemed to be to keep as close to Virginia as possible. She had the air of expecting some choice excitement, which she might miss if the girl were lost sight of for a moment. But nothing in the manner of Virginia or her brother or cousin suggested that they had come to this strange spot "at the end of the world" with any object save that of amusement. They behaved just as they had behaved at Sydney, or any other port at which they had called. All five strolled up, under a blaze of tropical sunshine, to the Place des Cocotiers, and sitting on the shaded verandah of the Hôtel de France, sipped a cooling drink concocted of oranges, lemons and pineapple. Then they sauntered on again, much observed by a few weary-looking persons they met, through broad streets, with long, low, white houses.

Dr. Grayle kept beside Lady Gardiner now, and they walked in front, as the former was supposed to have studied the subject of the penal settlement so thoroughly as to be qualified for guide.

Kate glanced over her shoulder often; but Dr. Grayle succeeded in genuinely interesting her in a story of an atrocious criminal who had been expatriated to Noumea some years before. When she looked hurriedly back, ostensibly to ask Roger Broom if he had ever heard the spicy narrative, the three had disappeared.

Lady Gardiner flushed in anger with them for their duplicity, with herself for her carelessness in letting them slip away. "Dear me! what *has* become of the others?" she exclaimed. "We must turn back and find them."

Dr. Grayle took the defection calmly—so calmly that Kate leaped to the

conviction that he was in the plot against her. The others wanted to go somewhere or do something without her, and this little brown-faced, sharp-eyed man had been told off as a kind of decoy duck. But she would circumvent them yet. She *would* know what was going on.

"They have probably gone to buy some bit of carving or other souvenirs of convict make," said the doctor. "Certainly we'll turn back if you like."

They did turn back, and wandered about in all the (according to Dr. Grayle) most likely places to find the lost ones, but in vain. Kate could have burst into tears of rage. She was hot, tired, dusty, and—worst of all—thwarted. It was hateful to feel herself helpless in the plotters' hands, being made to dance when they pulled the strings, and to know that this "horrid little brown man" was secretly laughing at her behind his polite air of concern. Yet she *was* helpless, and had to acknowledge it. If she left the doctor and went off on an expedition of independent exploration she would not know which way to go, and might get into trouble. But at last she could no longer bear her wrongs in silence; and, after all, she had nothing to gain by being nice to Dr. Grayle.

"I suppose you think," she burst out angrily, "that you are making a fool of me, and that I don't know it. But I'm not as simple as you seem to believe. I'm perfectly well aware that there's a mystery going on, and that all these elaborate precautions are to keep me out of it."

Dr. Grayle raised his eyebrows. "Then you are much more enlightened than I am," he returned mildly. "I'm really quite at loss to know what you mean, Lady Gardiner."

"In plain words, I mean that you are walking me off my feet to cover the others' escape. You know perfectly well where they are, but they've ordered you to keep out of the way, and you are doing as you're told, like a nice, obedient little man. I never was so abominably treated in my life."

"I can't see, even if Miss Beverly and her two relations choose to go off for a little private sight-seeing on their own account, that either you or I have anything to complain of," said the doctor. "We are outsiders, and are both very well paid for our services. My opinion is that few persons in our position receive as much consideration from their employers as we do."

Kate was so furious at this snub (which found a vital spot) that she was literally speechless for a moment. She would have liked to strike the impertinent little

wretch who dared put her on a level with himself; but she could hardly do that, even in Noumea. When the wave of angry blood flowed back from her brain, and she recovered presence of mind, she turned abruptly and walked away from the doctor. But he was at her side again almost immediately, keeping up with her without any appearance of haste, though she quickened her pace in spite of fatigue, looking as cool, as serene, as if he had been taking an afternoon stroll in Bond Street. Evidently he had torn a leaf out of Roger Broom's book; and Kate recalled the forgotten fact that it was Roger who had recommended him to Virginia's notice.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but you are now going toward that part of the town which was burnt down at the time of the plague here, about three years ago. It is leading you rather out of the way of the hotel, where we were all to meet for luncheon; but perhaps you have a curiosity to see it? I have studied a map of the place, and if you like can point out——"

"I do not like!" Lady Gardiner cut in sharply. "I wish to send a cablegram."

"Unfortunately, that is impossible."

"*What!* One can't telegraph from this loathsome place?"

"I thought you were so charmed with it? One cannot telegraph to-day."

"Why not to-day? Is it a holiday for the operators?"

"So far as we are concerned."

"Ah! I see what you mean now. You intend to prevent my communicating with my friends! But this is too much. I will do so."

"I fancied you were attached to Miss Beverly."

"What has that to do with it?"

"A good deal. We are Miss Beverly's guests—or her servants, whichever you please. In either case, we surely owe her fealty. I have been informed that she does not wish to have any communication made with the outside world, from Noumea."

"*I* was not informed of this mandate."

"I dare say she thought that you would be guided by my counsel."

"Counsel! A strange word for your tyranny. At least, I suppose, there are no orders against returning to the hotel?"

"None. So long as we are discreet."

"And in what does your idea of discretion consist, pray?"

"Keeping ourselves to ourselves. They are rather suspicious folk in New Caledonia. Few tourists come this way. Probably we are the first people who have landed here not on business for many a long year."

"I am not at all sure that we haven't come on business—very particular business."

"I wouldn't make that remark before anybody else, if I were you. You might—get into trouble."

As Dr. Grayle said this he looked steadily at Lady Gardiner. Their eyes met, and so peculiarly cold and menacing was the expression of his that she felt unpleasantly chilled, and even subdued. Those steady eyes so underscored his words with sinister meaning, that Kate dared not ask whether the "trouble" to which he suggestively referred would come to her through him or the inhabitants of Noumea. She thought that he looked capable of reducing her to helplessness by violence, if she showed signs of resisting his will, and she relapsed into silence. But she had not given up the hope of cabling to Loria. She resolved to watch her chance.

They walked back to the Hôtel de France, but the others had not returned, though the time fixed was long past. Kate was so hungry and weary that again she could have wept, and was secretly glad when Dr. Grayle ordered luncheon for two, though the prospect of a meal *tête-à-tête* was not enjoyable. She complained, however, of being too warm and dusty to eat, unless she could refresh herself by splashing a little in cold water, and she had to look down to hide the light which flashed into her eyes when Grayle consented without protest to her taking a room, and re-making her toilet before lunch.

"Now I shall get off that cable," she said to herself. Hardly had she entered the bare, poorly furnished bedroom when she rang, and stood waiting eagerly for a servant to answer the summons. Presently came the expected knock. She flew to open the door, and—there stood the little doctor, behind him approaching a maid, probably an ex-convict.

"You rang, Lady Gardiner," said Dr. Grayle, "to ask for a telegraph form, just as you might in a civilized place, didn't you? But this isn't a civilized place, and the methods are not all civilized. Now, here is the servant you rang for. If you persist in carrying out your intention I shall lock you in this room, take the key, and tell the landlord that you are a harmless lunatic, under my medical supervision. I think I shall not in that case lack for assistance in keeping you within bounds."

Kate glared at him, panting, for a moment. Then, controlling her voice, she asked the servant in French for some hot water. Having done this, she slammed the door in the little man's face, which was the only satisfaction she got out of the incident. She was inclined to remain sulking in the bedroom, but though the spirit was willing the flesh was weak, and the pangs of hunger drove her forth. Dr. Grayle was awaiting her in the corridor, a watchdog, patient and placid.

The missing three did no more aimless sauntering after they had slipped round a corner and eluded Kate Gardiner's curious eyes. Had their business not been of life-and-death importance, they would have felt like children escaped from school; since the least imprudence might lose them the stake for which they played, and Kate's presence had been a check and cause of delay. Fortunately, it was not yet the hour of *déjeuner*, even in Noumea, and they made up for lost time by hastening to the Governor's offices, which were in a white-painted, two-story building of wood, with a verandah facing the almost deserted street.

It was Sir Roger Broom who had used his influence in obtaining a special letter from the Minister of Colonies to the Governor of New Caledonia, and he now sent it in with his card, and those of his friends, by a clerk. For a few moments they waited, soldiers in gay uniforms, gendarmes and convict messengers passing in and out on various errands, all gazing with surprised, if furtive, interest at the extraordinarily beautiful girl in white. Presently the Governor was ready to receive his guests, and his turn came to be astonished by Virginia. She was the first lady who had ever come to Noumea, he said, on a journey of pleasure. Ah, the American young ladies, they were wonderful, amazing! He asked a few questions about the yacht, the trip they had had, and his old friend the Minister of Colonies, then countersigned the credentials for the party, and dashed off a letter to the Director of the Penitentiary Administration.

It was upon the latter official that everything depended. So far all was

satisfactory; but if the Director (who was supreme in authority over the prison, not answerable even to the Governor) chose to be ungracious, they might go back whence they had come without even attempting that bold stroke in the hope of which they had paid this visit. They had dared, however, show no signs of their consuming anxiety. With smiling thanks they bade good-bye to the Governor and went on, in the fitful silence of suspense, to the Direction.

Again the letters and cards were borne away by a clerk. There was more waiting; and when they were ushered into a large, cool, dusky room, strangely still behind its heavy double doors, Virginia was glad of the gloom, lest her pallor should excite suspicion.

Afterward Roger and George said to each other that if it had not been for Virginia they believed the Director would have politely, but firmly, refused to grant the special privileges they craved. Others had received ordinary permits to "view" the penitentiary establishment, yet very few, indeed (save those who went because they must), had been suffered by the authorities to pass the prison gates. But what Frenchman could refuse any favour in his power to the all-conquering Virginia? The Director would have been well within his rights, and could not have been accused of discourtesy, if he had allowed a certain short, concise sentence at the left-hand corner of the official sheet of paper which he signed, to remain. But instead he scratched it out with two quick strokes of the pen; and the doors of the prison and its cells were practically thrown open.

He, too, asked questions, and seemed wistfully loth to part with these interesting visitors from a far-away world, whose echoes he seldom heard. He smiled indulgently when Virginia fluently told the story prepared beforehand: the book she and her brother had been commissioned to write by a prominent American publishing firm; how it was to be all about this yachting trip, with Noumea as the *pièce de resistance* of the story. They expected, George Trent chimed in by saying, to stop on board their yacht in the harbour for a day or two perhaps, but (and he made the most of his engaging Southern accent) what they particularly wanted was to "do" the Ile Nou, which all the books said was so "mighty" interesting.

The Director obligingly scrawled a letter to the Commandant of the prison in New Caledonia, explained to his guests what they must do, and cordially invited them to lunch with him. The thought of eating was repulsive to Virginia; but Roger telegraphed her a warning look, and she knew that she must accept. It would not be wise to let it be seen that they were in a hurry; they were eccentric

pleasure-seekers, sea-tourists; to be in haste was to throw aside disguise.

After *déjeuner*, which seemed interminable, they were allowed to depart. So to a group of white, gray-roofed buildings set in brilliant little squares of garden—the offices of the executive police. Passing on, they reached a small wooden quay, belonging to the penitential administration. Men in ugly gray clothing, their faces shaded with broad, ribbonless straw hats, were working at loading a boat with large boxes, which they carried to the quay from a truck on a miniature local railway line. These men were directed in their labour by other men in white; and Virginia shivered all over, for this was her first sight of the convicts. What if Maxime Dalahaide were among these forlorn wretches who toiled and sweated in the blazing sun, with no encouragement save the rough exhortations of the white-clad surveillants with revolvers on their hips? If he were here, did any voice whisper to him of hope?

The *canot* for the Ile Nou was to start almost immediately. The credentials of the party were examined at the *douanerie*, and they were permitted to go on board. Twelve convicts were the rowers. They sat under an awning which protected them as well as the passengers from the sun, but Virginia, glancing almost fearfully at their faces, saw that their skins were tanned to the colour of mahogany by exposure. Their features were, without one exception, marked with the indefinable yet not-to-be-mistaken stamp of criminality, and she breathed more freely when she had assured herself that the man they sought was not one of them.

All they had to go upon was the vague information derived from Madeleine Dalahaide, that her brother was supposed to be on the Ile Nou. The time had not come yet to ask the questions that burnt their tongues; but it was coming nearer now with each wide sweep of the convicts' oars.

The Director had been thoughtful enough to telegraph to the Ile Nou of the visitors' arrival, and as the *canot* approached the quay of the strange little settlement, an officer of the prison, who had the appearance of a superior warder, stepped forward, touching his white hat.

Virginia felt, with a thickly beating heart, that the long preface was finished, the first chapter of the book about to begin. She looked at this island of exile and punishment with an emotion that was not curiosity, but which could be classified by no other word. The Ile Nou was not to the eye the terrible place of which she had so often dreamt. There were more low, white houses, clustering cosily

together or separated by thick, dark trees, and there were shaded streets and more blazing *flamboyant* flowers making patches of red in the deep green. But beyond the town rose a hill, and there the great prison buildings stood out grimly against the cloudless blue of the tropical sky.

They landed. The warder begged them with French politeness to give themselves the trouble of accompanying him to the quarters of the Commandant, who expected their visit.

The programme of conspiracy was all planned; each one's part had been carefully mapped out, and a thousand times Virginia had gone through the ordeal of this day in her mind. Yet now the beating in her temples confused her thoughts. She was afraid that she should forget, that she should make some irretrievable blunder, and that everything would be ruined by her fault. But much might depend now upon a look or a gesture, and she held herself in a vice of self-control, fearing that her smile on greeting the courteous old Commandant was suspiciously forced, her voice unnatural, or the look in her eyes a betrayal of desperate anxiety.

But the gallant Frenchman saw only the most entrancing vision of a girl his eyes had ever looked upon. Within the bounds of reason—which meant in honour and within the regulations of the establishment—he would have done anything to win one of those distracting smiles which brought into play two little round dimples. He ordered his own carriage to take his guests to the grim hill behind the town; he sat by Virginia as they were driven up the white, winding road; and when at last the convict coachman drew up the horses at a great door of black iron in the blank side of a high white wall, it was he who helped her to alight.

"You will be the only lady, not the wife or daughter of an official of the place, who has ever entered at this gate, mademoiselle," he remarked as the key of the surveillant grated in the lock.

The door opened, and Virginia passed through, trembling, the Commandant at her side. They were in a long, oddly-shaped courtyard. "The place of execution," said her guide. "In the early morning, at sunrise, a condemned man is brought here to die by the guillotine. Through that door yonder he comes, the priest walking by his side. To-morrow there will be such an execution. But I suppose you would scarcely care to see that, mademoiselle?"

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Virginia, shuddering. "I would die myself, sooner. What has he done—this unfortunate one—that he must suffer death?"

"He attempted to escape——"

"What—you kill them for that, if—they are retaken?"

"No; but wait, mademoiselle. I will tell you the story. It may be of use as an anecdote for the book you will write. This man who is to die to-morrow morning, and who will not know that his time has come until the knock at the door of his cell when the hour strikes—this man and another, who were imprisoned at the Isle of Pines, stole a small open fishing-boat, and with the branch of a tree for a mast and a shirt for a sail, started out in the desperate hope of eventually reaching Australia. But the alarm was soon given, and they were pursued by such a *canot* as that in which you came here, mademoiselle, from Noumea. One of the fugitives was mad enough to jump from the boat, scarcely knowing what he did. In a moment he had ceased to live."

"He was shot?"

"Ah, no, mademoiselle. The waters here are literally alive with sharks. Bathing even near shore is dangerous. A little farther out—but I will say no more. You grow pale."

"That is nothing. And the other man—what of him?"

"He was captured; but he is a young, athletic fellow, and in his fury at being retaken he snatched a surveillant's revolver and shot him dead. He was tried, condemned to death, and to-morrow at sunrise, as I said, will expiate his crime and folly."

Virginia was very white now—almost as white as the frock which she had chosen from her prettiest for the subjugation of these men in authority.

"What is the man's name?" she ventured to ask, her voice sounding strange and metallic in her own ears, her lips dry.

CHAPTER VIII

NUMBER 1280

"The man is without a name," said the Commandant. "He is a number. But once he was known as Jean Fourneau."

Virginia breathed again. "And the one who was with him?"

"The man eaten by the sharks? He was called, in the world, Pierre Duval."

The girl could hardly restrain a murmur of the infinite relief she felt. But she dared show no emotion. "I suppose you have all sorts and conditions of men here?" she asked.

"From the highest to the lowest."

"Then there must be many interesting cases—quite romances. Do tell us something about a few of the best."

"That is difficult. There are many cases which might interest you; but they would shock you as well."

"I would trust you to choose. Have you any young men of good family who, perhaps, committed their crimes for love?"

The Commandant smiled. "We have many such. There is the man who is called the New Caledonian Dreyfus—Chatelain—who sold his country to please the woman he loved. He is at Ducos. But perhaps the most notable example of the type you desire is a young scion of French and English aristocracy whom we have here, on the Ile Nou. He is now known as Number 1280; but a few years ago he figured brilliantly in the great world as Maxime Dalahaide. You may have heard of him, mademoiselle."

The words rang strangely in the girl's ears. She "might have heard of him"! But her presence of mind had not left her, as a few moments ago she had feared it might, when it should be needed most.

She was simply carrying out her part of the programme, and she knew that

Roger and George were watching her from behind half-closed lids. If they could help her they would; but the time had not come for their help yet.

"I left America only a year ago," she answered, "and one forgets things of this sort when they happen very far away."

"Naturally. But it was an uncommon case. Maxime Dalahaide was condemned to death for murdering a beautiful young actress, with whom he was in love—jealousy alleged as the cause. However, powerful influence saved him from death and sent him to us. I do not know that he was properly thankful."

Virginia showed a little decorous interest, such as a stranger might legitimately take in the hero of such a tale. "This story ought to make a splendid anecdote for our book," she exclaimed. "Is the man handsome?"

"You might not think so if you saw him now. The costume of the *forçat* is not becoming. But he is still quite young, between twenty-eight and nine. You can see his portrait if you like, mademoiselle, at the Bureau of Anthropometry, where each convict's photograph is taken, with every possible view of his face, when he first becomes an inmate of the prison."

"I would rather see the man himself," answered Virginia. "If you would *only* let my brother and me have an interview with him; think how it would help our book! Ah, monsieur, that *would* be kind. I should never forget your goodness in giving me such a chance."

The gallant Commandant hesitated. But—the permit in the possession of these three favoured visitors was very explicit. They were to have privileges scarcely ever granted before, and he had therefore the best of excuses for obliging the beautiful American girl.

"Do say yes!" persuasively added Virginia.

"I really think I may conscientiously do so," replied the old Frenchman, delighted to please the most radiant being he had seen for many a long year. "Number 1280 has acted for some time as secretary in one of the bureaux; but another convict, displaced for Dalahaide because of carelessness and inaccuracy, was jealous of the favour shown the aristocrat (ah, I assure you they know all about each other's affairs and circumstances here!), contrived to make a rough knife out of a piece of flint, and stabbed his rival in the back, narrowly missing the lungs. As it was, the wound was a serious one, and Dalahaide is in the

hospital. The would-be murderer is now undergoing punishment in what we call the Black Cell."

"The wound was not actually dangerous?" Roger hastened to inquire, seeing that Virginia's lips were white.

"He ought not to be dangerously ill," said the Commandant. "He is young, and quite one of our athletes—or was. The life he had led here, though not what he would choose, has not been unhealthful. But the doctor, with whom I have discussed his case, says that the wish to recover is lacking. The man is hopeless. He would rather die than live; and his physician thinks it exceedingly likely that he will do so."

"That is sad," said Sir Roger, his eyes still on Virginia.

The Commandant shrugged his shoulders. "We are accustomed to sadness here," he replied. "But the exile and degradation of Noumea are no doubt harder of endurance to a man like Dalahaide—proud, sensitive, refined, intellectual, accustomed to every luxury. He was like a madman when he first came, four or five years ago. Several times he attempted escape and suicide. Then he became sullenly despairing; but I began to take an interest in him, believing that he was not at bottom such a desperate character as the surveillants had grown to consider him. I did what I could to soften his lot, having him introduced to more congenial work in the bureau; but this was not until he had known three months in the Black Cell. Some men lose their minds in the *Cachot Noir*, though its horrors have been mitigated of late years. But Dalahaide's brain did not fail; and he has proved a valuable man at secretarial work. Also during the plague, three years ago, he volunteered as a nurse, and was admirable. You shall see him in hospital, since you wish it, and even talk with him; but you must not leave New Caledonia with the impression that all convicts are like this man. Now we will finish the inspection of the prison here, and then my carriage shall drive us to the hospital, which is at a little distance."

How Virginia got through the next half-hour she did not know. If she had dared, she would have begged to go on at once to the hospital; but she did not dare. It was necessary to submit to the delay of being guided through the prison, to be shown the galleries and the cells, the Prétoire, and to hear patiently the explanation of the Bertillon system. At last, however, they were once more in the carriage which had been kept waiting for them; but even then they must still exercise patience, for a Disciplinary Camp was on the road along which they

must pass, and to betray too much eagerness to reach their journey's end (when avowedly they had come to New Caledonia for information) would have been dangerous. At the camp they must perforce squander twenty or thirty minutes, Virginia and George pretending to take notes of what they saw and heard; and then they turned westward. Before them stretched a long avenue of strangely bent and sloping palms. It was the avenue of the hospital.

They drove down it to a stone archway, glittering white in the sun, and saw beyond a green and shaded garden, jewelled with gorgeous flowers, and heavy with richly mingling scents.

"If Dalahaide is no worse to-day, we shall probably find him in the garden here," said the Commandant. "He must have read at least half a dozen times an old copy of Dante which I lent him; the books in the prison library are not much to his taste."

No one answered, not even Roger. In fact, at the moment Roger was more anxious, perhaps, than any other member of the party, for he realized the existence of a certain danger which Virginia and her brother had apparently lost sight of, although long ago it had been discussed by them all. It had also been provided against; but the suggestion that Maxime Dalahaide might be met here in the garden, the thought that at any moment they might come upon him suddenly and unexpectedly, upset these prudent calculations.

As Maxime and Roger had known each other five years ago, it had been decided that a meeting must be avoided at first, lest in his surprise at seeing a familiar face—like a ghost from another world—the prisoner should cry out, and involuntarily put those who watched upon their guard. The three had planned among themselves, when this day was still in the future, that if they should succeed in their first step, and gain access to Maxime Dalahaide, Roger must keep in the background until his mind had been prepared by Virginia and George Trent for what was to come. The other two, as strangers to him, could approach the prisoner without risk. But they had expected to see him, if at all, in some room or cell, to which certain members of the party might be conducted by request; while here, in this vast garden, with its ambushes of trees and shrubs, any one of the half-hidden gray figures which they could distinguish in the green shadows might prove to be Dalahaide.

Roger did not know what to do. He might offer to stop behind and wait in the carriage outside the garden gates. But if he did this it would seem strange and

even ungracious to the Commandant, who was taking so much trouble to entertain them, and to "seem strange" was alone enough to constitute danger. He compromised, keeping behind with George, while Virginia walked ahead with the old Frenchman.

In the midst of the garden stood the quadrangular building of the hospital, the steep roof forming broad verandahs. There were gray figures sitting or lounging there also, but the Commandant said that Number 1280 would not be found among these, for he fled as much as might be from the society of his fellow-convicts.

They turned the corner of a shaded path and came out under a green canopy made by four large palms. A man lay underneath, his head pillowed on his arm, his face upturned—a man in the sordid prison gray. Virginia Beverly grew giddy, and, brave as she had been so far, for an instant she feared that she was going to faint like an ordinary, stay-at-home girl. She started, and caught at the arm of the Commandant, who turned to her in concerned surprise.

"One would think you had guessed that this was our man," he said in a low voice, for the convict, whose face was ghastly pale in the green dusk, seemed to sleep.

"I beg your pardon," whispered Virginia. "I stepped on a stone and twisted my foot. Is this, then, the man we have come to find?"

How well she knew that it was he! How well she knew, though the terrible years had changed the brave young face in the portrait almost beyond the recognition of a stranger. All the gay audacity was gone, therefore much of the individuality which had distinguished it for Virginia. The strong, clear features of the man looked, as he lay there asleep, as if they had been carved from old ivory; the lines were sharpened, there were hollows in the cheeks and under the black lines of the lashes. Even in sleep the dark brows were drawn together in a slight frown, and the clean-cut lips drooped in unutterable melancholy. The figure, lying on its back and extended along the grass, appeared very tall, and lay so still that it might have been the form of a dead man.

Roger, without seeing the sleeping face, guessed by the abrupt stop and the low-spoken words of the two in front that Maxime Dalahaide was found. He drew back slightly, with a meaning glance at George, who stepped forward to join the others.

Suddenly the black line of lashes trembled; a pair of dark, tragic eyes, more like those of Madeleine Dalahaide than the laughing ones of the portrait, opened and looked straight into Virginia's. For a few seconds their gaze remained fixed, as if the white vision had been a broken dream; then a deep flush spread over the thin face of the young man, and he rose to his feet.

"This lady and her brother have come a long way to see New Caledonia," said the Commandant kindly. "They wish to talk to you."

Maxime Dalahaide bowed. Virginia saw that he pressed his lips together, and that the muscles of his face quivered. She guessed how he must suffer at having to gratify—as he supposed—the morbid curiosity of a girl, and it hurt her to think that she must be the one to give him this added pain.

She turned to the Commandant, and, with a voice not quite steady, asked if she and her brother might speak to the man alone. She felt that she should be less embarrassed in her questions, she said, if no one listened. With a smile the old Frenchman consented, bowing like a courtier, and joined Roger Broom, who stood at a little distance out of sight of the convict.

"I thought there was no use embarrassing the poor fellow with any more strangers," Roger explained to the Commandant, as they moved further away down the path by which they had come. "After all, my place in this expedition is only to take a few photographs, wherever they are permitted"; and he touched the camera, slung over his shoulder, of which he had already made ostentatious use on several occasions. "May I have a snapshot of the hospital, with all those chaps on the verandahs? Thanks; we must go a little to the right, then. By Jove! what a lot of gray figures there are about. How do you make sure they can't escape, if they choose, out here where they don't seem to be guarded?"

"It is only 'seem,'" retorted the Commandant, laughing. "All these men are invalids; we make short work of malingerers. Very few could run a dozen yards without falling down, and most of them are well contented as they are. But, if any one should be mad enough to attempt a dash for freedom, four or five surveillants would be on him before he could count twenty. They do not make themselves conspicuous here, that is all."

Sir Roger Broom looked across the eastern wall of the hospital garden, over the green expanse of the great lagoon, and thought much; but he said nothing. Quietly he prepared to take the suggested photograph, and the hand that held the camera did not shake, though he could guess of what, by this time, George Trent

and Virginia were talking with the convict under the palms.

When the Commandant had left them alone with him, Maxime Dalahaide remained silent, Virginia's beauty filled him—not with happy worship of its perfection, but rather with an overwhelming bitterness. He was a Thing, of whom this exquisite, fresh young girl wished to ask a few questions, so that she might go back to her world, thousands of miles away, and say, "Only fancy, I talked to one of the convicts—an awful creature. He had murdered a woman, but he was quite quiet, and, as my brother was close beside me, I was not one bit afraid."

Just because he was a Thing, with no right to pride and self-respect, she could ask what she pleased, and he would answer her; but she must begin, not he.

She did begin, yet so differently from the cut-and-dried beginning which he had scornfully expected, that a flash of vivid amazement swept the hardness from the exile's face.

"Be very careful," she said rapidly in English. "Don't speak, don't show anything you may feel. Perhaps we are watched. You are Maxime Dalahaide. We haven't come here for curiosity, as you think, but to save you. We have come thousands of miles for that."

"Why?" It was as if the question fell from his lips without volition. The man did not believe his own ears. He thought that he must have been seized with delirium.

"Because we believe in you and because we are friends of your sister's," Virginia answered. "A man you once knew is with us—Roger Broom. Do you remember?"

"Roger Broom!" Maxime repeated dazedly. "It is like an echo from the past. Yes—yes, I remember."

"It is through him that we have been able to reach you. He is close by, but dared not let you see him, until you had been warned. Now, we must arrange everything in a few minutes for your escape; the Commandant has been kind, but he may not give us long together."

"I think I must be dreaming," stammered Maxime, all his bitterness forgotten. "I've been ill. I don't understand things as quickly as I used. Escape! You have come here to—help me to escape. Yes, it is certainly a dream. I shall wake up by and by!"

"You will wake up free," said Virginia not daring to raise her voice above a low monotone. "Free, on our yacht, that has brought us from France to take you home."

Suddenly a glaze of tears overspread Maxime Dalahaide's dark eyes. "Home?" he echoed wistfully. "Home! Ah, if it might be!"

"It shall be," returned Virginia. "George, tell him our plan. You can do it better than I."

"The thing is to get you on board the yacht," said Trent. "After that, you're all

right. We can show our heels to pretty well anything in these parts."

Dalahaide shook his head. "There are no words to thank you for what you have done, and would do for me," he answered. "But it is impossible. Once I thought of escape. I tried and failed, as others have tried and failed. After the second time, they put me in the Black Cell, and I saved myself from madness by calling to memory all of Shakespeare that I had ever learned. I don't say 'impossible' because I am afraid of that again. I have passed beyond fear of anything. What have I left to dread? I know the worst; I have lived through the worst that can befall a man. But in that dreadful blackness, where my very soul seemed to dissolve in night, I realized that, even if I could escape, how useless freedom would be if my innocence were not proved. I could not go to France or England. I should live a hunted life. As well be an exile here as nearer home—better, perhaps, now that the first bitterness has passed."

"You think this because you've been ill, and your blood runs slow," said George Trent. "All you need is to be strong again, and——"

"Strong again!" echoed Maxime, with sorrowful contempt. "I've been thanking heaven that I hadn't strength enough left to care for anything. It's true, as you say; the oil in my lamp of life burns low, and so much the better for me. What I want now is to get it all over as soon as may be. You are kind—you are so good to me that I am lost in wonder; yet even you cannot give me a freedom worth having. Take back my love to my sister, but tell her—tell her that I am content to stay as I am."

"Content to die, you mean!" cried Virginia.

"Oh, you are ill indeed to feel like this. How can you bear to stay here, when you have a chance to be a free man—even if not a happy man—to stay here, and let your enemy, who sent you to this place, laugh and think how his plot against you has succeeded?"

The dreamy look of weary resignation on Maxime Dalahaide's face changed to alertness. "Why do you speak of an enemy, and a plot against me?" he asked. "That poor girl was murdered; but I have never thought that she was killed because her murderer wished to involve me. That part was an accident. Liane Devereux——"

"Is not dead," broke in Virginia. "She is on our yacht now, in the harbour of Noumea. When you come, and she sees you, she will confess the whole plot."

"But I saw her lying dead—a thousand times that sight has been before my eyes."

"It was not she. If you want to know all, to fathom the whole mystery, and learn how to prove your own innocence, you will not refuse to do what we ask."

Maxime's thin face no longer looked like a carving in old ivory. The statue had come to life. The spring of hope had begun to stir in his veins. "If it were possible to prove it—at this late day!" he exclaimed. "But even if it were—you forget the tremendous difficulties in the way of escape. How could I reach your yacht? It could not come near enough to shore here to pick me up; even a small boat would be seen——"

"Not at night," said Virginia.

"Remember, it is moonlight. The night will be like day. Long before a small boat could reach the yacht from the beach she would be followed, overtaken, and not only should I be brought back, but I should have the misery of knowing that I had been the cause of bringing my brave friends into trouble. They would fire upon us. If I were killed it would matter little enough; but if you were to be shot ——" He spoke to George Trent, but his eyes moved quickly to Virginia's face.

"My sister would be waiting for us on board the *Bella Cuba*," said Trent. "Roger Broom and I will take jolly good care of ourselves—and of you, too, if you'll only give us a chance."

"If you'd come here a month ago," sighed the prisoner, "before I got this wound in my back! Now I'm afraid it's too late. I've let myself go. I thought I saw the one door of escape for me opening—death; and instead of turning my back I walked toward it. I've let my strength down. I haven't eaten or slept much, and I began to have a pleasant feeling of slipping easily out with the tide. Now there's an incentive to stop, the tide's too strong and I'm too weak. I can't count on myself."

"Count on us," said George. "We'll see you through, you bet. And think of your sister. We promised we'd take you back with us. We can't go to her without you, after raising her hopes. It would kill her." Trent glanced at Virginia, as if expecting her to add encouraging arguments to his; but she was silent, her eyes alone appealing to Dalahaide. George Trent was her half-brother, and had known her all her life, but he felt the thrill of that look in the girl's beautiful eyes. How much more, then, must Maxime Dalahaide have felt it, he said to himself.

"It is the risk for you I think of—if I fail," the prisoner exclaimed. "If I had only myself to consider I should hesitate no longer."

"We have come a long, long way to you," Virginia's eyes said; and her lips would have added something had not George's hand fallen suddenly in warning on her shoulder. "Somebody is coming," he whispered. "For all our sakes, don't fail us, Dalahaide. We shall look for you to-night—there," and he nodded toward the water. "Make your way to the beach and hide among the rocks till you see our little boat. Don't take to the water—remember the sharks. If you're not there to-night, we'll hang about till the next."

"We'll wait till you come, if we wait a year," said Virginia.

There was time for no more. The Commandant, with Roger Broom by his side, appeared round the corner of the winding path near by.

"Well, mademoiselle, have we given you time to finish your interview, and has it been satisfactory?" asked the old Frenchman good-naturedly.

"You have given us just enough time, and it has been most satisfactory, thank you," the girl answered. "I hope," she added, "to make the very best use of it later." And again her eyes met those of the statue that she had waked to life.

CHAPTER IX

A CRY ACROSS THE WATER

It was night in the harbour of Noumea; a night of pitiless, white, revealing moonlight which sharpened the black outline of every shadow, and made the whitewashed wall of each low house gleam like mother-o'-pearl. Had there been no secret business on foot, Virginia Beverly's beauty-loving soul would have been on its knees in worship of the scene as she sat on the deck of the yacht, which seemed not to float in water, but to hang suspended in the transparent, mingling azure of sea and sky. To her the moon was an enemy, cruel and terrible. She would have given her right hand for a dark curtain cloud to be drawn across that blazing lamp and the scintillating stars reflected in the water like sequins shining through blue gauze.

Midnight was near, and the yellow lights of the town were fewer than they had been. The quay was quiet and deserted, and the Ile Nou was a black shape in the translucent glitter of the water. On the *Bella Cuba* all was very still, and each whisper of the little waves that lapped against the side of the yacht came distinctly to Virginia's ears.

The Countess de Mattos had not appeared at dinner, but had sent excuses, her head being much worse. But it was Virginia's opinion that, once out of sight of Noumea, the lady intended to be convalescent. Kate Gardiner also was in retirement, and had for once shown temper even to Virginia; but Dr. Grayle's report of the day was reassuring, and as Kate had had no opportunity of doing harm, even if she had wished it, she and her grievances were dismissed from Virginia's mind in these supreme moments.

Her eyes were straining after a small electric launch, which was already distant. Virginia could not look away, and still she tried to persuade herself that she could not see the little black gliding thing distinctly, because, if it was plainly visible to her, it must be so to other eyes also—if eyes on shore were waking and watching now.

Suddenly the boat disappeared behind a buttress of rock silhouetted on the silver track of the moon, and at the same instant the yacht's anchor began slowly to be

hauled up.

Virginia knew what that meant. To-night's work was for Roger and George, not for her; but she had each detail of the programme at her fingers' ends—indeed, had helped to arrange it. When the launch had gone a certain distance from the *Bella Cuba*, on its stealthy way toward the Ile Nou, the yacht's captain—an Englishman, discreet and expert—had orders to follow slowly. The start had not been made earlier, because it was desirable that town and prison should be asleep, and the danger of discovery minimized. If the yacht were seen moving in the night suspicion would be aroused, for leaving the harbour of Noumea is a perilous undertaking except between sunrise and sunset; yet she must move, and follow the boat like one of the great black sharks swimming with grim expectancy behind her, lest the little bark should be overtaken in case of alarm and pursuit.

No explanation had been given to Captain Gorst, who neither needed nor desired any. His orders were to follow the boat, and stand in as near the Ile Nou as possible without arousing attention on shore; there to wait until the launch returned, or to approach still closer to the island, if pursuit rendered it advisable. These orders Virginia knew he would obey to the letter; and she knew also, though no word had been spoken to her on the subject, that the little cannon, which had been silent since the *Bella Cuba* had been a lightly armoured despatch-boat in the American-Spanish War, were ready to speak to-night, if worst came to worst.

It was that vague "worst" that troubled Virginia's soul as, almost soundlessly, the heart of the *Bella Cuba* began to beat, and she glided through the glimmering water. If only one could know exactly where and how to expect the blow, the thought that it might fall would be more bearable, the girl felt. But one of many things might happen to wreck their hopes; and failure now probably meant failure forever.

Maxime Dalahaide might be too ill to make the attempt to-night, or he might be watched in the act of making it. The men in the launch might miss seeing him, even if he had contrived to escape from the hospital and gain the beach. Or his flight might be discovered, and the launch only arrive near the shore in time for its occupants to see him dragged back to the old life, with all its past horrors, and many new ones added by way of punishment. Possibly the coral reefs and jagged rocks might prevent the launch getting close to shore, and Maxime would have to swim out to it. Then, there were the sharks. Virginia had already seen two or

three to-day—hideous, black shapes swimming far down below the surface of the clear water—and she shuddered as she remembered the great snouts and cold, evil eyes of the man-eaters. What was that the Commandant had said in the afternoon? "The sharks are the best guardians the Ile Nou can have." Were those horrible watch-dogs of the sea on the lookout now?

At the same moment, the same thought was in the minds of Roger Broom and George Trent, as the little electric launch rounded the point of rock and lost sight of the *Bella Cuba*. The water, as they looked toward the Ile Nou, which must be their destination, was a flood of molten silver poured from the white-hot furnace of the full moon. They knew how black the launch must be on this sheet of radiance, how conspicuous an object to watchful eyes on shore; and though the glittering sheen destroyed the transparent effects of the water here, they guessed what gliding shapes were surely upon their track, coldly awaiting disaster.

Sitting in the boat they could not see the hospital; not a light was visible in any prison building; and they had the feeling that in any one of a dozen great masses of shadow armed surveillants might be hiding, to spring out upon Maxime Dalahaide as he crept toward his friends and far-off safety. There was no sound except the crisp rustle of the water as the launch cut through it; but as they entered the lagoon, where among tall reeds the image of the moon lay unbroken like a fallen silver cup, a whispering ran through the rushes, as if to pass the news of their approach from ear to ear.

Suddenly a tall figure rose up on a slight eminence and waved its arms, then disappeared again so quickly that it might almost have been a fantastic shadow; but quickly as it had come and gone, Roger and George knew that their hope had not been in vain. Convict 1280 had completed the first stage of his journey. He had seen them coming to the rescue, and he had given them the secret of his hiding-place.

The two men were alone in the launch. Now, without a word, Roger Broom headed it for the point where the figure had appeared. There was a strange confusion of emotions in his brain, which still left it clear to act. Under his habitual air of lazy indifference he hid strong feelings, and at this moment they worked within him like fermenting wine. In this adventure he was playing for great stakes. Twice in the last year had Virginia refused him; her love and her beautiful self were all that Roger craved for in the world, but he had meant never to ask for them again, when this mad scheme of rescue had been conceived. He had opposed it as foolish and impossible; then Virginia had hinted that, if he

would join her in it, giving help and advice, she would refuse him nothing. After that day he had thrown himself into the adventure heart and soul, saying little, but doing all that man could do. Though his few words had sometimes discouraged Virginia's ardent hopes, he had doggedly meant to succeed if he had to die in the supreme effort. He had put his whole soul into the work, with no other thought until to-day. Then—he had seen what George Trent had seen; a certain look in Virginia's eyes as they pleaded with Maxime Dalahaide to free himself. Her lips had said: "Do this for your sister's sake." But her eyes had said: "Do it for mine." Never had such a light shone in those beautiful eyes for Roger; never would it so shine for him; and he knew it well, with a dull, miserable sickening of the heart, which was like a pinch from the hand of Death.

In a moment the whole face of the world had changed for him. He was a man of honour, and he would go on along the path which he had traced out for himself; but the wish to succeed in his task for the sake of success was murdered by that sweet light in a girl's eyes. Something coldly calculating said to Roger Broom that it would be a good thing for him if Maxime failed to come to the rendezvous, on that night or any other night; or, if, in case he came, he should be retaken. Should this happen, Virginia's implied promise need not hold good, but Roger thought he knew her generous heart well enough to be certain that she would in the end reward him for what he had tried to do, even though—not through his fault—the fight had been in vain. On the other hand, if he and George succeeded in saving Dalahaide, in bringing Dalahaide to Virginia—but Roger would not quite finish that thought in his mind. Resolutely he turned his back upon it, yet it grinned an evil, skeleton grin over his shoulder, and he could not make his ears deaf to the whisper that though he could and would hold Virginia to the keeping of her bargain, her heart would always have a holy of holies shut away from him.

Roger hated the cold Voice that explained his heart to his head, and he did his best not to listen. But all he could compass was not to let himself be guided by its promptings. If he had desired Dalahaide's escape as whole-heartedly as before, he could have worked for it no harder than he did; still, he experienced no warmth of gladness at sight of the dark figure silhouetted for an instant against a moonlit haze. Trent was not close to him in the launch, and yet somehow he felt the thrill of joyous relief which shot through the younger man's body at the signal, and envied it. But all was different with George; he could afford to be single-minded. Roger knew very well that George was in love with Madeleine Dalahaide, and that there was nothing he would not sacrifice for the

happiness of giving her back her brother.

As Roger Broom wrestled with his own black thoughts, the launch, which had hitherto slipped swiftly toward its goal, dividing the rushes and reeds of the lagoon, refused to move on. The lush, green barricade was too thick to be cut through by its clean bow and the force of its powerful little electric motor.

"It's no good," whispered George. "We can't get on any farther. This is what I was afraid of. He'll have to come out to us. Thank goodness, if we can't get through, neither can the sharks."

"Where is he? Can you see him?" Roger asked. And the Voice was loud in his ears again.

"No, I wish I could. I don't like to sing out. This luck of ours so far is too good to last."

"Stand up and wave your hand. Perhaps he'll see and reply," said Roger.

Somehow he wanted George to take the initiative now. He was afraid of being unconsciously guided by the Voice.

George stood up and waved a handkerchief. No figure rose in response, but as if in answer, they heard a distant splashing in the water, and then, following so quickly that it blurred the impression of the first stealthy sound, came the sharp explosion of a shot. Instantly the slumberous silence of the tropical night was shattered by a savage confusion of noises. Other shots were fired, a great bell began to clang, another boomed a sullen echo, and from far away spoke the deep, angry voice of a cannon.

"Good heavens! that's the cannon on board that beastly steam tub of theirs!" cried George. "Luckily for us it's a makeshift concern and no gunboat; but it can catch us on our way back to the yacht, and if it does, all's up."

Roger did not answer. His ears were strained for the splashing in the water, if still it might be heard as an undertone beneath the distant din of the alarm. The launch could not advance a foot farther, if it were to save all three lives; and it would take some time at best for Dalahaide to wade, and swim, and fight his way to them, among the tangling reeds. The escaping prisoner was weak still from his recent wound; no matter how high his courage might be now, it could not in a moment repair the physical waste which he had voluntarily allowed to go on, courting the sole release he had then foreseen.

The one chance left, now the alarm was given, lay in the hope that, though Dalahaide's flight from the prison hospital had been discovered, the direction he had chosen was not yet known. But the lagoon was at least as likely a place for the search to begin as any other; and then the launch might have been seen moving across the bright streak of the moon's track before it could reach the shelter of the rocks on its way to the lagoon. A few minutes at most, and the hounds would be on the right scent.

These things Roger told himself, but he had not sat still to listen. After the first second of straining attention, he sprang up, threw off his coat and waistcoat, and kicked off his shoes.

"I'm going to help him if I can," he said. "His strength may fail, or some stray shark may be a little cleverer than its fellows and find its way through the rushes. Anyhow, here goes; and if Dalahaide gets to you before me, don't wait. Push out the best you can, and I'll catch you up, swimming."

There was no time for arguing or objecting, even if it had been in Trent's mind to do either. Since it was right for one to go, and Roger chose to be that one, he must stay; but, even for Maxime's sake, and for Madeleine's, he could not, he decided, leave Roger Broom to follow—for there were the sharks. No, they three must stand or fall together, whatever happened now.

The lagoon, in the spot where Roger left the launch, was too deep for wading, nor could he swim there. Somehow—he scarcely knew how—he seemed to tread water, his feet slipping among the slimy tangled stems that were like a network under the surface, a brackish taste in his mouth, the rank, salt smell of seaweeds in his nostrils, and his ears a soft, sly rustling which might mean the disturbed protest of a thousand little subterranean existences, or—the pursuit of an enemy more deadly than any on land.

It was a harder task than he had thought; still he persevered. "Dalahaide, where are you?" he called.

"Here!" came the answer, only a few yards away. "I'm caught in something, and up to my knees in mud. I think my wound's broken out again. For heaven's sake, go back and let them take me. After all, what does it matter for me? I'm done. A thousand times better die than get you all into trouble."

"You *all*!" Even in that moment Roger said to himself that "all" meant Virginia. Dalahaide was thinking of her. He would rather die than she should be punished

for this bold attempt to break the law. But aloud Roger cried out that he would go back with Maxime or he would not go back at all, and cheering the other, with death in his own heart, he struggled along, half swimming, half wading, but always moving on, how he hardly knew. Then at last he saw a dark head, and a face, white in the moonlight, floating seemingly on the reedy surface of the lagoon, like a water lotus on its stem.

Roger grasped a handful of slippery stems and held out a strong left hand to the wounded man.

"Take hold, and I'll pull you out," he said.

The two hands met, one thin and white with a prison pallor, the other brown and muscular and dependable. They joined, and Roger held on to the bunch of slippery stems so hard that they cut into his fingers. Once he thought they were yielding, but at that instant Dalahaide was lifted out of the mud in which he had sunk. Roger caught him under the arm and held him up. Scrambling, rustling, pushing, sinking, rising, spitting out salt, brackish water, they struggled back toward the launch.

There it was, waiting, Trent crouching down, scarcely breathing in his agony of impatience. They saw him, and at the same time their heads came into sight for him, among the tall, dark spears of the rushes. In another moment George in the launch and Roger in the water were pulling and pushing Maxime, half fainting now, up over the side of the swaying boat.

As he tumbled in, limply, Roger saw a dark stain on the wet, gray convict jacket. It was black in the moonlight, but Roger knew it would be red by day. The wound in his back had broken out again, as he had thought; even if they saved him now, it might only be to die. It was the cold Voice that said this; and Roger shuddered, yet half his nature welcomed the suggestion. "I've done what I could, let him die," was the answer that came. Quickly the little launch began to back out from the entanglement of the rushes, and as soon as there was room George turned her and sent her out like an arrow from the lagoon to deeper, clearer water. Beyond a certain point of rock the *Bella Cuba* should lie by this time, and once on board her all might yet be well, for she could easily show her heels to anything that walked the sea in these waters.

They headed straight for the place where they hoped to find the yacht waiting, and with an exclamation Trent pointed to the sky, across which floated a black, gauzy scarf of smoke.

"Ripping old chap, Captain Gorst," chuckled George. "That's his signal. Trust him to be where he's wanted on time and a bit before."

But Roger was silent. There was a thought in his mind with which he could not darken George's mood by speaking out. Sufficient for the moment was the evil thereof.

They were close to the jutting rock now, and it seemed within ten minutes of safety. But something shot into sight round the point, something big, and black, and swift, with a gleam of fiery eyes and a belching stream of smoke streaked with fire.

"By thunder!" stammered George. "It's not the *Cuba*. It's the Government boat, coming down on us. We're trapped, sure as fate."

The words rang in Maxime Dalahaide's ears and reached his dimmed consciousness. The danger was not for him alone, but for the others who were risking everything to save him. It was this thought which seemed to grip him, and shake him into sudden animation. He sat up, resting on one elbow, not even wincing at the grinding pain that gnawed within the lips of his re-opened wound.

"Not trapped yet," he said. "Keep to the right; to the right—not too far out. She daren't come where we are, for she'd be ripped to pieces on the reef, and she knows that."

"Hark! They've spotted us. She's hailing!" cried Roger Broom.

"*Halte! halte!*" came harshly across the moonlit space of water, as, obedient to Dalahaide's quick hint, the course of the launch was changed.

The three fugitives were mute, and again a raucous cry broke the silence of the sea.

"Halt, or we fire!"

"They've two cannon," said Maxime. "I was mad to bring this on you, my friends. If they fire——"

"Let them fire, and be hanged to them!" grumbled George Trent. "Two can play at that game. In heaven's name, where's the yacht? Ah—you *would*, would you!"

This in answer to a shot that, with a red blaze and a loud report, came dancing across the water, churning up spray and missing the launch by a man's length.

"Keep her going, George," said Roger as quietly as was his wont. "Our hope's in speed now, and dodging, till the *Bella Cuba* takes a part in this game."

As if the calling on her name had conjured her like a spirit from the "vasty deep," the graceful form of the yacht came into sight. George, tingling with the joyous lust of the battle, could not resist a hurrah; but his shout was deadened by the din of another shot, and then an answering roar from the *Bella Cuba*. One of those cannon of hers had "paid for its keep" at last. Now the yacht, and every one on board her—to say nothing of the three who wished to be on board—were in for a penny, in for a pound.

The act just committed was an offense against law and justice (not always the same) and joined hands with piracy. To be caught meant punishment the most severe for all, possibly even international complications. If the French prison-boat sunk the yacht and the launch, and drowned every soul concerned in this mad adventure, she would be within her rights, and the fugitives knew it well. The *Bella Cuba* had flung the red rag into the face of the bull, and Roger Broom and George Trent thought they saw Virginia's hand in the unhesitating challenge. Captain Gorst might have thought twice before assuring himself that the time had come to obey orders given in case of dire necessity; but once would be enough for Virginia.

"She's given herself away!" laughed George, keeping the launch between the lagoon and an irregular line of dark horns which, rising just above the shining surface of the water, marked a group of coral reefs. "There won't be much doubt in Johnny Crapaud's mind now as to what part that tidy little craft's cast to play in this show, eh? Hello-o!"

Another blaze and a following roar drew the exclamation; but before George had had time to draw breath after it, he and Roger and Maxime were all three in the water. The ball from the little cannon of the prison-boat had done its work better this time, striking the electric launch on her nose and shattering her to pieces.

George Trent was a brave man, but his first thought was "Sharks!" and the horror of it caught his throat with a sensation of nausea. The instinct of self-preservation is strong in all healthy men, and, though an instant later he was ashamed on realizing it, the fear that thrilled him was for himself. He expected, as his momentarily scattered senses told him what had happened and where he was, to feel huge teeth, sharp as scythes, meet round his thigh and cut off a leg as cleanly as a surgeon's knife.

While he still quivered with this living horror, he remembered that the danger was Roger's and Maxime's as well as his, and manhood and unselfishness came back. He forgot himself in his fear for them, more especially for Maxime—poor Maxime, who had suffered so much that it would be hard indeed if he were to meet a ghastly death in the very act of achieving safety and freedom. Madeleine's beautiful, tragic face rose, clear as a star, before his eyes, and he knew that it would be reward enough for him if he could give his life for the brother she loved so well. If she should say afterward, "Poor fellow, he died that you might live, Maxime," he felt that the words and the gratitude in the girl's heart would warm him even, if his grave were to be under these dark waters at the other end of the world.

He had gone down at first, and a hundred thoughts seemed to have spun themselves in his head by the time he rose to the surface. Shaking the water out of his eyes, he looked anxiously round for Roger and Maxime. They were nowhere to be seen, and a pang shot through George Trent's breast like a dagger of ice. What if one or both of them had already met the terrible fate which he had pictured for himself?

His whole soul was so concentrated upon this fear that for a few seconds he was deaf and blind to everything outside; but suddenly he realized that the firing between the yacht and the Government boat was still going on, a further cannonade which woke strange echoes over the water.

"Roger—Dalahaide!" he called. No answer came, but, as his eyes strained through the haze of moonlight, a dark dot appeared on the bright mirror of the sea, moving fast, and a cry was raised which, though not loud, carried clearly, and seemed to George Trent the most terrible he had ever heard:

"A shark—a shark!"

CHAPTER X

"ONCE ON BOARD THE LUGGER"

It was Roger Broom's voice which sent across the water that ominous shout so appalling to Trent's ears. Mechanically George swam toward the place where the dark head had risen, but as he took his first stroke a second head appeared beside the other, then both went down together.

That moment concentrated more of anguish for George Trent than all the years of his past life had held. He believed that both Roger and Maxime had almost before his eyes suffered the most hideous death possible to imagine, and he knew that at any instant he might share their fate. But that thought no longer shook him as before. Since the others had died so horribly it would be well that he should die too. A moment of sharp agony, and all would be over. Better so, since he could not go back to Virginia or to Madeleine Dalahaide alone.

His eyes strained despairingly over the cruel glitter of the rippling sea, with a cold, vague feeling that he had reached the edge of the world, and was looking over into the dim mystery of the next. He was young and vigorous, and had loved life for its own sake; but, with Roger and Dalahaide both dead, there was no longer a full-blooded craving for help to save himself in his mind as he gazed toward the yacht and the French boat. Instead he wondered with a sickly curiosity how long it would be before the filthy brutes, which had put an end to his companions, would make a meal of him, and whether it would hurt much, or if unconsciousness would come soon. Mechanically he swam on, more or less in the direction of the *Bella Cuba* and the French boat, which were at close quarters now; and perhaps there was a scarcely defined hope in his heart that a stray shot might finish him before the hideous "guardians of the Ile Nou" found their chance.

The state of his own brain and nerves became a matter of cold surprise to him; the suspense without fear, though tingling with physical dread, and the capacity for separation of emotions. He found himself thinking of Virginia, and pitying her. This would break her heart, he told himself. She would have a morbid feeling that she was to blame for the disaster; that she had caused the death of her brother and cousin, and the other man so strangely important in her life of

late. He wished that he might talk to her, and tell her not to mind, because it was not in the least her fault, and she had done nothing but good.

Then he began to wonder why the yacht and the French boat had ceased firing. The latter had only two guns, while the *Bella Cuba* had four, and, as he had said to Roger a few minutes (or was it years?) ago, she was but a poor "makeshift," rigged up more as a kind of "scarecrow" for *forçats* meditating escape than for actual service. Still, she must carry at least ten or twelve rounds of ammunition. Could it be that the little *Bella Cuba* had contrived to knock a hole in her hull, and that her men must choose between beaching her immediately or having her sink? It looked as if this explanation might be the right one, for she was certainly retiring, and that with haste. To beach she must go round the point whence she had come in, approaching the lagoon, and this she was doing, the yacht having no more to say to her.

"The Frenchies know what their sea-wolves have done," George thought grimly, "and so they can afford to let things slide and save themselves. No good sending out a boat and trying to pick up their man under the nose of the enemy, for the poor fellow's gone where neither friends nor foes can get him. The episode is closed. And all the *Bella Cuba* wanted was to put the prison boat out of the running. There's no good being vindictive. I could get to her now, if I liked—provided those brutes would let me. But it's impossible—I won't think of it. Afterward I should loathe myself for being a coward and going back to life without the others. I couldn't have helped them—but it would seem as if I might have, and didn't. Heavens! When is this going to end? I can't bear it long. The best thing I could do would be to drown myself like a man, and get it over before the worst can happen."

He flung up his arms, meaning to sink, and wondering whether it would be really possible for a strong swimmer deliberately to drown himself, or whether instinct would keep on countermanding the brain's orders, until exhaustion did its work. One last look at the world he gave before the plunge, and that look showed him a thing which he could not believe. Between him and the black horns of the outer reef he saw once more two dark heads close together.

"It can't be!" Trent said to himself; nevertheless, instead of flinging away life, with all his strength he struck out lustily toward those floating dots in the water. Then, suddenly, something cold and solid rubbed against his leg. How the knowledge of what it was and what to do came to him so quickly, and how he acted upon that knowledge swiftly almost as light moves, he could not have told;

but he knew that a shark was after him; he knew that it must turn over on its back in the water before the cavernous, fang-set jaws could crunch his bone and flesh, and like a flash he dived. Queerly, as he shot down through the water, he thought again of something outside the desperate need of self-preservation. "This is what happened when I saw their heads go down before and supposed it was all up with them both!" he said to himself. "That's what they are supposing about me now, if they're looking my way. Well, we shall see. It's going to be a race between this infernal brute and me. I'd bet on him—but the dark horse sometimes gets in."

After that he had no more consecutive thoughts. Primitive instinct guided him, and hope was the light which marked the goal. The others were not dead yet, so he had a right to his life, if he could keep it; and toward that end he strained, swimming as he had never swum before, diving, darting this way and that, feeling rather than seeing which spot to avoid, which to strive for. At last his foot touched rock. He had reached that part of the jagged coral-reef which rose out of the sea. He ceased to swim, and found that slipping, sliding, stumbling on a surface, which felt to clinging hands and feet as if coated with ice, and smeared with soap, he could scramble up to a point above water. He got to his knees, then to his feet, and as he stood up, dripping and dizzy, a shout came to him. Roger's voice again!—but no longer sharp with horror and loathing. There he stood on another low peak of the reef, and Dalahaide was beside him, slimmer, taller, and straighter than he, as the two figures were darkly outlined against the light.

They were safe, at least from the sharks; and from the *Bella Cuba* a boat with four rowers was swiftly approaching. The reaction of joy after the resignation of despair was almost too great. George Trent's throat contracted with a sob, and there was a stinging of his eyelids which was not caused by the salt of the sea.

"Hurrah!" he cried out, waving his hand to the two men on the reef, and to the rowers in the boat. While his shout still rang in the air a *canot*, such as that in which they had crossed from Noumea to the Ile Nou, manned by twelve rowers, leaped round the point of rock behind which the French boat had disappeared, and came straight as an arrow for the reef on which the three men stood.

Now it was a race once more for life and death. The yacht's boat had the start, but those twenty-four oars carried the *canot*, heavy as it was, far faster through the water. The *Bella Cuba* could not use her cannon lest she should destroy her own friends, so nearly did the two boats cross each other as both from, different directions, sped toward the same goal.

The yachtsmen's blood was up, and they worked like heroes, but they were four to twelve. The *canot* shot ahead and got the inside track. The race, as a race, could now have but one end. The *canot* was bound to be first at the spot where the runaway *forçat* and one of his English friends stood side by side out of reach of the hungry sharks, but not beyond the grasp of justice. The fugitives, who had fought so long with the sea, were unarmed, while the four surveillants in the *canot* had revolvers, and would either recapture or kill.

But Maxime Dalahaide spoke a word to his companion; and, as if the triumph of the *canot* over the yacht's boat had been a signal, the two sprang from the shelf of the reef into the sea. George Trent knew well what was in their minds; they preferred to risk being food for sharks to certain capture; and without hesitating for an instant, George followed their example. If they could swim under water to the yacht's boat before the sharks took up the prison cause, all was not yet lost, for the boat would do its best to dodge the *canot* while the *Bella Cuba's* cannon seized their chance to work once more.

George kept under water as long as he could, then came up to breathe and venture a glance round. Crack! went a pistol-shot close to his head, and he dived again; but not before he had seen the yacht's boat not thirty yards off. How near the *canot* lay he had not been able to inform himself, but the narrow shave he had just had gave him a hint that it could not be far distant. He aimed for the boat as well as he could judge, felt an ominous, cold touch, dived deeper for a shark, forged ahead again, trying to forget the double danger, came up to breathe because he must, and could have yelled for joy, if he had had breath enough in his lungs, to see that either Roger or Maxime was being pulled into the yacht's boat, while a second head bobbed on the water a couple of yards away. The air cracked with revolver-shots, but George was not the target now: the eyes of the surveillants were for the fugitives nearest safety. Whether Roger or Dalahaide were hit, George could not tell, but he kept his head above water in sheer self-forgetfulness until both had been hauled on board. Then he dived again, and when he rose to the surface he was close to the boat. It was his turn to be helped over the side and to become a target. Something whizzed past his ear, leaving it hot and wet, and he had a sudden burning pain in his left arm; but nothing mattered, for there were Roger and Maxime, and he was beside them. The rowers had set to their work with a will once more, not to reach the *Bella Cuba* with the best speed, but to dodge from between her guns and the *canot*. Once she could let her cannon speak, the *canot* was no longer to be feared. Brave as the Frenchmen were, clearly as they had right on their side, from their point of view,

they would have to recognize that they were helpless, that the rest of the battle was to the strong.

A moment more, and one of the little cannon roared a warning. She did not try to hit the *canot*; the message she sent was but to say, "Hands off, or take the consequences." And the men of the *canot* understood. Not only did they cease firing, but began to retire with leisurely dignity toward the point which hid the disabled prison boat.

Now, suddenly, when all such peril was over, the thought of that slimy, cold touch on his flesh, and what it had meant, turned George Trent sick. He did not see how he or his friends had escaped the horror. If it were to come again he was sure that escape would be impossible; and somehow he knew, as if by prevision, that there would be nights so long as he lived when he would dream of that touch in the water, and wrench himself awake, with sweat on his forehead and his hands damp.

"Roger, are you all right, and Dalahaide, too?" he asked, wondering at the weight he felt on his chest and the effort it was to speak.

"Thanks to Dalahaide, I am all right," Roger answered. "If it hadn't been for his quickness and presence of mind, twice I should have been nabbed by a shark. Weak as he was, he pulled me down for a dive that I should have been too dazed to think of without him."

"I have cause enough to know something of these waters and their danger," Maxime said slowly, as if he too found it an effort to speak. "I was weak, yes, but strength comes of great need, I suppose; and already I owed you so much. I had to think and act quickly; besides, it was for myself too."

"Thank heaven it's all over," exclaimed Roger, with a great sigh. "We've a good doctor on board. He'll know how to make you fit once we have you there. And that will be shortly now. See, here's the yacht! In ten minutes you'll be in the stateroom that has been ready for you ever since we left Mentone a few hundred years ago, bound for New Caledonia."

"Yes, your passage was engaged from the first," chuckled George, with an odd little catch in his voice that would have been hysterical if he had been a woman. "And I'll bet something you'll like your quarters. Two lovely ladies took a lot of trouble with them—your sister and mine."

"I don't know what to say, or how to thank you," stammered Maxime. "It goes so far beyond words."

"Just try to *live* your thanks, if you think they're worth while. I reckon that's what our two sisters would say on the subject. Don't let there be any more talk about dying like there was to-day, that's all, you know. And oh, by Jove! doesn't it feel queer to be gabbling this way, when you remember what we've just come out of —those grinning brutes down there, with their red mouths in their white shirt fronts, so to speak. Ugh! I don't want to think of it, but I'm hanged if I can help it. I say, did those Johnnies' revolvers do any damage here?"

"Dalahaide got a bullet in his shoulder, as if the wound in his back wasn't enough to remember the place by," said Roger. "He says it's nothing, and I hope that's the truth" (he actually did hope it now, at least for the moment); "as for me, I believe they've saved the yacht's barber a little trouble in cutting my hair on the left side, that's all; luckily no harm done to any of our men."

All these scraps of conversation had been flung backward and forward inside five minutes. Then they were at the yacht's side. Maxime, forced to yield to his own weakness in the reaction now, was being helped on board, the others following.

A slim, white figure, ethereal and spirit-like in the sheen of the moon, was waiting to give them welcome. Virginia stood on deck, weeping and laughing, Dr. Grayle by her side.

"Thank heaven! Thank heaven!" she sobbed at sight of Maxime. The cry was for him, the look, the tears, the clasped hands, all for him. Roger and George came together for her in a second thought, and Roger knew; though he was not surprised, because he had guessed her secret, such joy of success as even he, being a man, had felt, was blotted out for him.

Down below, locked into their staterooms, Lady Gardiner and the Countess de Mattos had passed a strange and terrible hour, each in a different way.

To Kate there was little mystery, though much fear. She had sulkily shut herself up, and, not dreaming what was appointed for the night, had finally dropped asleep, while meditating reprisals for the bad treatment she had received that

day. But though her suspicions had not gone as far as an actual rescue in dramatic fashion, with the first shot from the prison boat which woke her from a sound sleep, she divined what was happening. Bounding from her berth, while hardly yet awake, she darted to her porthole, which was wide open. It faced the wrong way to afford her a glimpse of what was going on, but she could hear more firing at a distance, doubtless at the prison on the Ile Nou, the ringing of bells, and much tramping overhead on the deck of the yacht. She felt the throb of the engine too, and though the *Bella Cuba* had been lying quietly at anchor in the harbour when Kate had fallen asleep, now she was moving at a rapid rate through the water, which gurgled past her sides.

Kate had known, of course, that they had not come thousands of miles for nothing, and the moment she was certain that New Caledonia was to be the *Bella Cuba's* destination she realized that an attempt would be made to save Maxime Dalahaide. She had been anxious to earn the other half of the Marchese Loria's money, and at the same time to pay Virginia and George Trent for their secretiveness, by letting Loria hear of their arrival, at least, even if she could tell him no more. That desire had been thwarted by Dr. Grayle, but Kate considered the act merely postponed. Next time they coaled—since they must coal somewhere before long—she would certainly find a way of wiring to Loria, and probably she would have something much more definite to tell him, that was all. Exactly what that "something" might be, had been rather vague in her mind; but she had thought that Virginia, George, and Roger would most likely have found means to communicate with Dalahaide and give him hope for the future; perhaps they might even try to put in his hands some means of escape, after which the *Bella Cuba* would linger about in these waters, out of sight of New Caledonia, until he either succeeded in getting away or failed signally to do so. This plan Kate had considered not beyond the bounds of possibility; or (she had told herself) Virginia, who was so enormously, absurdly rich, might be counting upon bribing some lesser prison authority to help the convict to escape. So daring a girl, sure of the power of beauty and wealth, and with millions of pounds to play with, might have conceived such a scheme and have the boldness to carry it out. She could offer any bribe she liked, and—every man was said to have his price. It was conceivable now to Kate that Virginia and Madeleine Dalahaide had had confidences together, and that the mysterious locked stateroom had been specially fitted up for the benefit of the prodigal. It would be like Virginia to have made such a wild plan, and to persuade Roger Broom and George Trent to aid her in carrying it out; yet Kate had not guessed to what desperate lengths they would be ready to go. She had forgotten about the yacht's cannon; but when

she heard the shot from the French boat she suddenly remembered them, and wondered, in great terror, whether they would be put to use. She realized that the trio meant to stop at nothing to gain their end and that this end was to have Maxime Dalahaide out of prison at any cost to themselves and others.

Into the midst of her confused deductions broke the yell of a shot from one of the yacht's guns. It was as if the *Bella Cuba* were alive and had given a tiger-spring out of the water. Kate shrieked with fear, and staggered away from the porthole. Her first thought was to run out of the stateroom and seek refuge somewhere—anywhere. But, with her hand on the bolt with which she had fastened the door, she realized that she was as safe where she was as she could be elsewhere, in the dreadful circumstances—perhaps safer. But she was in deadly terror. As a roar from the French boat was answered by another roar from the yacht, which again shivered and leaped like a wounded thing, her knees gave way under her, and she half fell, half crouched on the floor of the stateroom, shuddering and moaning. The danger seemed as appalling, as hopeless to escape from, as an earthquake which, go where you would, might tear asunder the ground under your feet and bury you alive.

It was clear that the *Bella Cuba* and the strange, ugly-looking steamboat she had seen in the harbour, with its two unmasked cannon, were waging fierce war upon one another. For all that Lady Gardiner knew, Dalahaide was already on board, and the prison boat was giving chase; yet that could not be true, surely, for suddenly the yacht's engines ceased to move; it was as if her heart had stopped beating. Had the *Bella Cuba* been struck? Was she sinking? Even if not, one of those horrible cannon-balls might come crashing into the yacht's side at any moment, and every one on board might be instantly killed.

Kate knew not what to do; whether to remain where she was, or to crawl out into the cabin and try to find some one—even the hateful doctor—who would tell her how great the danger was, and what one must do to be saved from it. She forgot all about Loria, and Dalahaide, and her many grievances, and only knew that she wished to be spared from death, no matter whose schemes failed or succeeded, or who else lived or died.

The Countess de Mattos had not been asleep. Her headache, perhaps, had kept her nerves at high tension, and made rest impossible. As she had confessed to Virginia early that morning, on discovering the name of the next landing-place, she did not like New Caledonia. The thought of the place, and the secrets it must hold, oppressed her. She wondered, with a kind of disagreeable fascination

which invariably forced her weary mind back to the same subject, whether the convicts' life was very terrible; whether they lived long in this land of exile, or whether they were notoriously short-lived. The climate must be trying, and then there were countless hardships to endure—hardships which must be less bearable to those who had known luxury and refinements. She did not like to dwell upon anything that was painful or even sordid; and when memory persisted in dragging before her reluctant eyes the dead body of any particularly hateful scene in her past, as a cat will sometimes obstinately lay before its master a rat it has mangled, she was in the habit of dulling her sensibility by drinking a little absinthe in which some chlorodyne had been dropped.

When she travelled, she always carried two or three bottles of the liquor with her, wrapped in laces and cambric, in her luggage, for she had grown used to it, and could hardly support life without its soothing influence now. She was careful not to take too much, however, for she worshipped her own beauty; and absinthe was an enemy to a woman's complexion.

She felt to-night, lying in the harbour of Noumea, as she had felt sometimes during a furious *sirocco* in Sicily—restless, unnerved, fearful of some vague evil, though common sense assured her that nothing of the kind she dimly pictured could possibly happen. She remembered uncomfortable things more vividly and painfully than usual, too; and, at last, she could deny herself the wished-for solace no longer. She rose from her berth, trailing exquisite silk and lace (for the woman must always frame her beauty worthily, even for her own eyes alone), poured out half a glass of absinthe, dropped in her allowance of the drug, added water, till the mixture looked like liquid opal, and sipped the beverage with a kind of dainty greed.

In a few minutes she had ceased to care whether the *Bella Cuba* lay in the harbour of Noumea or off Sydney Heads. What did it matter? What harm could come?

Presently, lying in her berth, dreamily staring out at the moonlight through the open porthole, her lovely arms pillowing her head, the Countess became aware that the yacht was moving. So they were getting out to sea again, she told herself. A little while ago she would have been delighted, as if at an escape, because, as she had said, Noumea was hateful, and no place for pleasure-seekers. But now that the absinthe and chlorodyne soothed her nerves she was comparatively indifferent whether they stopped or steamed away. Nothing unpleasant had happened. Of course not; why should it? She had racked her

nerves, and given herself a headache all in vain. Still, it was good to know that she would see no more of that terrible land of beauty and despair.

She shut her eyes comfortably, and was on the way to the more welcome land of sleep when the boom of the gun, which had wakened Lady Gardiner, roused her from her lotus mood of soft forgetfulness—the greatest joy which she could ever know.

Her brain was dazed with the liquor and the drug she had taken, and she was utterly unable to comprehend the tumult and confusion which followed.

Kate Gardiner had a clue to the mystery which the Countess de Mattos did not possess. The Portuguese beauty had no means of guessing what had brought the *Bella Cuba* to Noumea. She had never heard any one on board speak the name of Dalahaide, or that of any convict imprisoned at New Caledonia, and the firing between the yacht and the French boat suggested nothing to her but horror.

She, too, was afraid, half-stunned with fear, and she was angry with herself now for having taken the absinthe and chlorodyne, because they prevented her from thinking clearly—the very thing which, a short time ago, she had wished not to do. At first she lay still, burying her head in the pillows; then she murmured prayers to more than one saint, for she was an ardent Catholic; and at last, unable to bear the suspense and isolation any longer, she threw open the stateroom door and ran out into the cabin.

No one was there; but above the sound of trampling overhead she thought she could distinguish voices, and Virginia Beverly's was among them. If Virginia were on deck, the Countess said in her mind, it would be well for her to be there too.

CHAPTER XI

VIRGINIA'S GREAT MOMENT

She went up on deck, moving dazedly, with a strange sense of unreality upon her, as if she had somehow wandered into a cold, dim world of dreams.

The firing had ceased, and the yacht was no longer in motion. The confused whirlwind of brain-shaking events which revolved in her memory might now have been a part of the dream in which she was still entangled. The Countess de Mattos's beautiful eyes swept the moon-drenched scene for enlightenment, but none came.

They were not now in the harbour, that alone was clear; but land was close, and black horns of rock stood up out of the shining water as if they had broken through a great sheet of looking-glass. Across this bright, mirror-like surface a small boat was being quickly rowed toward the yacht. It was very near now, and several dark figures could be distinguished in it besides those of the four rowers. Another boat, much larger, with more than twice the number of oars, swiftly rising and falling, was hurrying away in the direction of a high, rocky point on the island itself.

A chill premonition of evil fell upon the woman's soul. It was like a heavy nightmare weight that might only be felt, not seen, and could not be shaken off. But the Countess de Mattos had experienced this undefinable misery before, when the reaction came after taking too large a dose of chlorodyne with her "solace." She hoped that it was merely this now—that it was no real warning of trouble or threatening danger.

Virginia stood talking to Dr. Grayle and gazing eagerly toward the advancing boat. The Countess de Mattos glanced at the two wistfully, longing to go to them and ask questions. Yet something seemed to hold her back. It was as if a whisper in her ear advised that there were things it was better not to know. This was ridiculous, of course. It was always more prudent to know about disagreeable things before they could happen, and then sometimes they could be prevented, or at least staved off till one was more prepared to grapple with them. But all the beautiful woman's prudence was in abeyance to-night. The quality had not been

born in her, but acquired; which can never be the same.

She felt weak and unnerved, with a great longing to cling to some one stronger and wiser than herself. But there was no such person at hand for her. These others had their own interests. If they really cared for her at all it was because she was ornamental, a thing of beauty which it is pleasant to have within sight; and usually it was very convenient to the Countess de Mattos to be considered thus. Indeed, most of the luxuries which she loved so much more dearly than the necessities of life came through her distinct value as an ornament. But now what was ordinarily enough for her failed to satisfy. She felt horribly alone in the world, as if she had slipped upon some terrible ledge of rock overhanging a sheer precipice, and there was no one—no one on earth to help her back to safety. Tears of self-pity rose hot in her eyes as she stood, not far from Virginia and the doctor, hesitating what to do.

They were so absorbed in watching the approach of the boat that they were unconscious of her presence, and suddenly it began to fascinate the Countess de Mattos also, as if it were one of the discs which hypnotists give to their patients. She, too, bent over the rail and gazed at the boat as the rowers brought it nearer and nearer, but she could not see the faces of its occupants. For three or four minutes she stood thus, and then the boat was under the yacht's side and the men were coming up the ladder.

The Countess moved nearer to Virginia and Dr. Grayle. She no longer intended —for the moment at least—to catechize them, but it occurred to her that, by merely standing within earshot while the others exchanged questions and answers, the mystery of this night's alarming work would be explained to her. Without being seen by her hostess or the little doctor, she was so close now that the trailing silk and lace of her *robe de chambre* was blown by the light breeze against Virginia's white dress.

"Thank heaven—thank heaven!" she heard the girl exclaim as some one came on board. The pair in front of her crowded so closely toward this person that she could not see who it was, and could only suppose that it must be Sir Roger Broom or George Trent returning from some strange adventure. Then, suddenly, she saw the newcomer's face, with the moon shining full upon it, chiselling it into the perfection of a marble masterpiece of old, thrown up by the sea from some long engulfed palace.

She stared, incredulous, her breath in abeyance, her heart stopped like a jarred

clock. Then, over Virginia's shoulder, a pair of dark eyes found hers—eyes darkened with tragedy while youth and joy should still have shone in their untroubled depths.

Ah, the awfulness of that instant, the ghastly horror of it! Something in the woman's brain seemed to snap, and, with a loud shriek that cut the new-fallen silence as a jagged knife-blade of lightning cuts the sky, she threw out her hands to shut away the sight and fell backward, fainting. Virginia turned, and knew that her great moment had come.

When the Countess de Mattos came to herself she awoke gazing straight upward at the stars, which danced a strange, whirling measure as the horizon rose and dipped with the swift forging of the yacht. She was lying on the deck, her head supported on something low and soft, and Dr. Grayle bent over her, kneeling on one knee.

"All right again?" he inquired cheerfully, in his blunt way.

She did not answer, for with desperate haste she was collecting her thoughts, linking together broken impressions. An awful thing had happened. What? she asked herself. Then suddenly the vision flashed back to her, and she shuddered. Lowering her lids, so that the thick, black fringe of lashes veiled her eyes, she glanced anxiously about. Had it been a vision and no more, or was it real, and should she have to meet those accusing eyes again? As she debated thus Virginia stepped forward.

"I think, Countess, that you will do now," said Dr. Grayle. "There is a wounded man below who needs my services, but refused them until you should have recovered."

"Oh, go—go!" murmured his patient in irritable weakness.

The little doctor got up, and as he walked quickly away Virginia took his place.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked.

The Countess shook her head. Her face looked lined and haggard, despite its beauty, in the bleaching light of the moon, and Virginia was almost sorry for her. She could afford to pity the woman now, she thought, for she had triumphed. Her

case was proved beyond all doubt, and even Roger, who had heard the scream of recognition and witnessed the fainting fit, could no longer deny that the Countess de Mattos and Liane Devereux were one. Virginia would not strike a blow at a fallen enemy, and, holding this woman in the hollow of her hand, as she believed she did, she was ready to give such help as could be given without injuring the cause she served.

"Wouldn't you like to go back to your stateroom?" she went on. "You have had a great shock, and——"

The Countess sat up quickly, pushing her disordered hair away from her eyes. "I don't know what you mean by a shock," she said, "unless you refer to the terrible cannonading. That was enough, I should think, to frighten the bravest. No wonder I fainted. And then, seeing that ghastly man, dressed like a *forçat*, all dripping wet, and stained red with blood, was the last drop in the cup of fear. I cannot think what horrors have been happening to-night."

All Virginia's pity was swept away. Her heart hardened toward this tiger-woman.

"Cannot you think?" she echoed bitterly. "Then I will tell you. We have been rescuing an innocent man, who for years has suffered untold miseries for a crime never committed. Thank heaven that his sufferings are ended at last, for we have him on board this yacht, which is carrying him away from New Caledonia at about twenty knots an hour, and we have the proof with us which will establish his innocence before many days have passed."

"It is a crime for a *forçat* to evade his prison—a crime to aid him," cried the Countess.

"We are not afraid of the punishment," said Virginia, hot, indignant blood springing to her cheeks. "*We* are ready to face the consequences of our own actions."

The emphasis was an accusation, but the Countess de Mattos did not wince under the lash. Even a coward may be brave in a hand-to-hand fight for life; and it was only physically that she was a coward.

"You are courageous," she said, almost wholly mistress of herself now, "and, of course, you know your own affairs best, dear girl. But I am not so brave. This awful night has tried me severely, and has come near to spoiling our so pleasant trip. It has sickened me of the sea and of yachting. I shall beg to be landed as

soon as convenient to you."

"It will be convenient to us when you have confessed everything in writing," Virginia flung at her, stung into mercilessness by the woman's brazen defiance. "Then, and not before, you may leave this yacht."

The Countess de Mattos arose from her lowly place as gracefully and with as much dignity as such an act could be performed. While she sat on the floor and Virginia towered over her, the enemy had too much advantage of position. The two were of one height, and, standing, they faced each other like contending goddesses.

"You speak in riddles," said the elder woman.

"Riddles to which you have the key."

"I do not know what you mean, except that it seems to me it is your intention to be insolent."

"In your code, perhaps, honesty is insolence. But I do not wish to forget that, in a way, you are my guest. I asked you to come for a purpose, I admit; yet——"

"Ah! you admit that. Possibly you will condescend to inform me what your purpose was?"

"My purpose was to make assurance doubly sure. To-night I have done this."

"Evidently you do not wish me to understand you."

"Say, rather, you do not wish to understand me. I think you must do so, in spite of yourself; but lest you should not, I will tell you. I suspected that you were the woman whom Maxime Dalahaide was accused of murdering. Now I *know* that you are not the Countess de Mattos, but Liane Devereux!"

The woman's green-gray eyes were like steel in the moonlight. "Maxime Dalahaide; Liane Devereux," she slowly repeated. "I never heard these names."

Virginia was struck dumb by the other's effrontery, almost frightened by it. If this terrible creature withdrew into a brazen fortress of lies, who could tell how long a siege she might be able to withstand? The girl had been astonished and dismayed in the morning, when the first sally of the attack had failed; but then her strongest forces, her most deadly weapons, had been still in reserve. Now they had been brought against the enemy's defenses and—the walls had not

fallen; there was no sign of capitulation. A cold misgiving began to stir in Virginia's mind. Would it mean failure if the Countess de Mattos obstinately refused to tell the truth?

After all, she was only a girl, opposed to a woman whose varied experience of thirty years or more had endowed her with infinite resource. Virginia's stricken silence gave the other a new advantage.

"As you have said yourself," icily began the Countess once more, "you are my hostess. You flattered me; you made me think that you were my friend; you asked me on board your yacht, and I came, trustingly, ignorant that, under some wild mistake which even now I do not comprehend, you plotted my betrayal. Why, it was a Judas act!"

"If I did evil, I did it that good might come," said poor Virginia. "And it *shall* come. You are Liane Devereux. *You* were guilty of the 'Judas act.' Maxime Dalahaide loved you; and with what motive I don't yet know, but mean to know, you betrayed him to a fate worse than death. For that you deserve anything. Yes, I kidnapped you. That's what Roger called it, and I don't repent now. You are here on this yacht with Maxime Dalahaide, and we are on the open sea. Unless you jump overboard, you cannot get away from your atonement. Atonement—that is the word. Oh, woman, woman—if you *are* a woman and not a stone, think what atonement would mean for you! You must have had terrible moments, living with remembrances like yours—a man who loved you sent to a living grave. Now it is in your power to make up to him—ever so little, perhaps, but a thousand times better than nothing—for the wrong you did. Do this—do it, and be thankful all the rest of your life for the blessed chance which heaven has sent you."

The Countess laughed. "You change your tone suddenly—from threats to an appeal. You would make quite a good preacher, but your eloquence can have no effect on my conscience, as I have not the remotest idea what you are talking about. I had let myself grow fond of you, and I was grateful for all these lazy, pleasant weeks, and for the money you lent me; but now that I know what was underneath your seeming kindness I am no more grateful, and I shall do my best to punish you for the wicked trick you have played upon me. As for attempting to prove that I am—what name did you give the woman?—well, anybody except myself, you will find it impossible. I have powerful friends who would travel far to save me from any trouble. You cannot keep me a prisoner on board this yacht. You must touch again at land before long, and then I shall go away and tell every one what has happened on your *Bella Cuba*."

"We shall see," said Virginia.

"We *shall* see," echoed the Countess. "And now I am going to my stateroom. Perhaps I may hope to be free from persecution there."

She swept away, looking gorgeously beautiful, and as proud as a queen bent on

holding her crown against the people's will.

Virginia stood still, watching her; and when the tall, stately figure had disappeared, a crushing sense of defeat fell upon the girl.

Only a few moments ago, as time counted, she had felt that, with Maxime Dalahaide's rescue, she had every wish of her heart fulfilled. But now she saw the position of affairs with changed eyes. It was as different as a flower-decked ballroom seen by the light of a thousand glittering candles, and again by sunrise when the candles had burnt down and the flowers faded.

Maxime was out of prison; there was that, at all events, to be thankful for, and there was nothing at New Caledonia which could even attempt to give chase to the wicked little *Bella Cuba*. Nevertheless, the French Government had a long arm, and would not quietly let a convict sentenced for life be snatched away without making a grab to get him back again. Virginia had known this from the first, but when Roger had pointed the fact out to her as one of the difficulties to be encountered, she had said in the beginning: "If we have the luck to rescue him we shall have the luck to hide him," and afterward, when she had seen the Countess de Mattos at Cairo, she had amended the prophecy by saying: "If they catch us we shall be able to prove his innocence."

It had all seemed very simple, and she had been impatient with Roger for bringing up so many discouraging objections to her impulsively formed plans. He had gone in with them at last, without, however, pretending to be convinced, and she had bribed him with a virtual promise of marriage. He had done all that she had asked of him, and more; and she would have to keep her promise, but—had she accomplished enough that was good for Maxime, to pay for the sacrifice? It would be a sacrifice—a greater one than she had known at first, greater than, somehow, she had realized until to-day. She must pay the price; and Maxime—what of him?

If his innocence could not be proved, through the dead woman miraculously come alive, he could never, at best, go back to France; and as the crime of which he was accused came under the extradition treaty, he would be safe nowhere. He must—as he himself had said—lead "a hunted life," wherever he might be. Neither money, nor influence, nor yearning sister-love, nor—the love of friends who would give their heart's blood to save him, could shield Maxime Dalahaide from the sword of Damocles, ever suspended, ever ready to fall.

When the Marchese Loria received Lady Gardiner's telegram from Sydney, he was stunned. "Leaving here to-morrow," the message ran; "destination unknown."

Unknown to her the destination might be, but it was not unknown to him. He was almost as sure that the *Bella Cuba* was bound for New Caledonia, as if Dr. Grayle had allowed Kate Gardiner to send her desired word from prison-land; and although he had constantly assured himself that if Virginia did go there it could do no harm, now that he was morally certain she would go, he quivered with vague apprehension.

At first, he could not force his mind to concentrate itself upon the intricacies of the situation. He walked up and down his room, like a caged animal, trying to think how, if it were by moving heaven and earth, he could prevent Virginia Beverly and the convict Max Dalahaide from coming together. Then, with the thought that they might meet seething in his head, he would stop abruptly and say to himself, as he had said so often before: "Nonsense; you are a fool. They cannot come together. There is everything against it." Still, the root of fear was there, and grew again as soon as burned away.

If he chose, he might send a warning to the prison authorities at New Caledonia. He could say that the *Bella Cuba* was a suspicious craft, and ought not to be allowed in the harbour for a single hour. But to do this, he would be obliged either to proceed to Paris and give satisfactory reasons why such proceedings should be taken, or wire the warning message himself, signing his own name. No other method would be of any avail, as the governor of the prison would pay no attention to an anonymous telegram, and there was now no time to write a letter. He would be obliged also to assert positively that he knew the *Bella Cuba's* errand to be treacherous; and, whether he went to Paris, or telegraphed, through Sydney, to New Caledonia, in either case Virginia was certain to find out, later, what he had done. Such secrets could not be successfully hidden, and she would hate him for his interference. If there was little hope for him now, there would be none then.

When his wits began to work he regarded the situation from all points of view. He admitted the remote—extremely remote—possibility that the party on the *Bella Cuba* might actually contemplate a rescue. He would almost have been ready to stake his life that, if such an attempt were made, it would fail

ignominiously, with disaster to all concerned—perhaps death to more than one. But—it *might* succeed. If it did, what would happen?

They would not dare to put back to Sydney Heads. The yacht must be coaled and provisioned somewhere. He consulted maps, and saw that the most likely place for the *Bella Cuba* to proceed on leaving New Caledonia was Samoa. It seemed to him that she must go there, in any case.

Loria did not wish to appear as an active enemy of Maxime Dalahaide's. It was largely owing to his efforts on the prisoner's behalf that Max had been saved from the guillotine, and all the Dalahaides must have known that. Virginia, no doubt, knew it too. But what was to be done, if he were not to fling aside the cloak of his reputation as a friend of that unfortunate family? The spirit of high romance ran in Virginia Beverly's blood. She was capable of marrying an escaped prisoner, and sharing his miserable, hunted existence. Such a thing must not be. Loria felt that it would be less bearable to lose her through Max Dalahaide than through any other man. He would rather see her Roger Broom's wife than Maxime's, but he had not yet given up all hope of having her for his own.

He would have just time to go to Samoa and meet the *Bella Cuba* there, if he started at once. The yacht would not leave Sydney Heads till next day, according to the news in the telegram. Then it would take her ten days more to reach New Caledonia. There she was sure to remain for some hours, at the very least. If he, Loria, caught a certain "greyhound of the sea" which was sailing from Cherbourg for New York the following morning, took a fast express from New York for San Francisco, and then sailed immediately for Samoa, he could not fail to be in time for the *Bella Cuba*. But the important thing was to find an excuse to account for his being there when the *Bella Cuba* arrived.

He was not, luckily for his present plan, supposed to know for what parts the yacht had been bound; therefore, if he went to Samoa to visit his friend the French Consul, who had once really invited him to do so, even Virginia need not suspect his motive. His opportune appearance might pass merely as a rather odd coincidence.

If the *Bella Cuba* took away a fugitive on board, the authorities at New Caledonia would not remain idle. They would at once wire to Sydney of a convict's escape, and the telegram would be sent on to Samoa from there. A description of the yacht would be given, and inquiries would be made. But those

inquiries! It was because of them that Loria was ready to make so strong an effort to be there in time. Without him, the fugitive from justice might be allowed to escape, despite the extradition treaty. With him, Loria thought that he saw a way to make the detention of the prisoner sure, and that without showing the hand he played.

He had not lost many hours in indecision. As soon as he had made up his mind what to do, he wired to find out if there were still a berth to be had on board the New York bound ship sailing from Cherbourg next day. Even if he had been forced to travel in the steerage he would have gone, though he keenly disliked physical hardships; but he was fortunate, and obtained a good cabin for himself. As soon as this matter was arranged he left for Cherbourg; and next day, on board his ship, gazing across the tumbled gray expanse of sea, he thought of Virginia on her little yacht, and smiled. About this time, perhaps, the *Bella Cuba* was steaming boldly from Sydney Heads, bound for New Caledonia—on what strange, desperate errand, who could tell? The girl's heart was beating high with hope, no doubt. How little she guessed that, half across the world, a man was setting forth to defeat her plans, even if they attained success!

CHAPTER XII

STAND AND DELIVER!

The Marchese Loria had always been lucky in games of chance. In this biggest game of all Fortune still stood behind him and, with a guiding finger, pointed out the cards to play.

There were no delays in his programme. His ship arrived in port precisely at the appointed hour. He was able to go on immediately to San Francisco. There he was just in time to catch a boat for Samoa. He wired to his friend, Monsieur de Letz, the French Consul, that he was coming, and received an enthusiastic welcome. The Consul was a bachelor, approaching middle age, was intensely bored with the monotony of life on an island of the Pacific, and was ravished with the chance of entertaining a personage so brilliant in the great far-away world as the Marchese Loria. He had a charming house, and a good cook; some wine also, and cigars of the best. Loria arrived at dinner-time, and afterward, smoking and talking in the moonlight on a broad verandah, the guest led up to the question he was half dying to ask.

"Have you heard any exciting news lately?" he airily inquired, in a tone that hovered between pleasantry and mystery.

"Does one ever hear exciting news in this place?" groaned the French Consul. "Nothing has happened for years. Nothing is ever likely to happen again now that we have become so dull and peaceful here."

"No news of another visitor?"

"Another visitor?"

"A gentleman from New Caledonia."

"*Mon Dieu!* How did you know that?"

"Is it then so difficult to know, *mon ami*?"

"One hopes so. It is not good that these things should leak out and reach the public ear. The information is very private. The authorities at home and abroad

do all they can to keep it dark, and yet it seems——"

"My ear isn't exactly the 'public ear,' as I'll presently explain. But it is a fact, then, that a convict has escaped from the Ile Nou, and you have got word that he is likely to turn up here on board a steam yacht?"

"It is a fact. I see you have the whole story. But how did you get it?"

"I'll tell you that later. First, just a question or two, if you don't mind, for I happen to be interested in the affair. How long ago did the fellow get away—or rather, when may the yacht, the *Bella Cuba*, be expected here, if at all?"

"She might come in to-morrow."

Loria gave a long sigh. He was lying back in a big easy-chair and sending out ring after ring of blue smoke, which he watched, as they disappeared, with half-shut eyes. One would have fancied him the embodiment of happy laziness, unless one had chanced to notice the tension of the fingers which grasped an arm of the chair.

"What will happen when she does come in?"

"Oh, trouble for me, and nothing to show for it."

"What do you mean?"—with a sudden change of tone.

"All I could do, I have done; which is to inform the Government authorities here that on board the expected yacht is a runaway *forçat* belonging to France, and ask that he be arrested on the yacht's arrival."

"And then?"

"Then a boat will go out to meet this *Bella Cuba* as she comes into the harbour, and she will be requested to give up the man. Her people will say that there's no such person there, and refuse to let any one on board."

"But surely you could detain the yacht and search? The *Bella Cuba* comes from Sydney and New Caledonia. If you had reason to believe that there was a case of plague on board, for instance, the yacht would be quarantined."

"Yes; but if she were detained, and the convict found on board, he couldn't be identified by any one here. There has been no time for a photograph to arrive from New Caledonia. He won't be dressed like a convict; his hair will have

grown. I have only the description telegraphed. His friends will take care he doesn't answer to that. Even if the Government fellows here had any pluck and wanted to attempt an arrest they wouldn't dare, with no one to identify the *forçat*. You see, the yacht will be flying the English or American flag, and so——"

"I can identify him."

"You? There is a mystery then. I scented it at your first words."

"Scarcely a mystery. You have been very good to answer my questions. Answer one more now, and I'll explain everything. Suppose I can put you in the way of identifying this man, without chance of error; suppose I can put you up to a trick for detaining the yacht, is there any hope, if I proved to you it would be for your own advantage, as well as of everybody else concerned, that you could have the man arrested, and sent back where he deserves to be?"

The Frenchman hesitated. Then he said slowly, and more gravely than he had yet spoken: "Yes, I think I could."

"That is well, for he is a fiend in human shape, not fit to be at large. Worse than all, if he escapes, he is almost certain to ruin the life of the woman I love, and end my hopes of winning her."

"*Mon Dieu!* We must send him back to New Caledonia, to spend the rest of his life in the Black Cell!" enthusiastically exclaimed De Letz. "But my curiosity is on the stretch. A moment more unsatisfied, and it snaps."

"It shall be satisfied on the instant. I'll tell you the story in as few words as may be. You remember the crime committed by this fellow—for of course you know that, before he was Convict 1280, he was Maxime Dalahaide?"

"I know that. I know he is a murderer. But it is eight years, you must recollect, since I was in France, long before the thing happened. I took no particular interest in the crime, as I had never met the Dalahaides. He killed a woman: so much I recall. You were acquainted with him, I suppose?"

"To my sorrow. I thought he was my friend. He was a traitor. I cared for his sister. She loved and would have married me; but because I knew too much about him and his evil ways, he did not want me in the family. He told the girl and her parents lies. They believed them and sent me away. He borrowed huge sums of money of me, and never paid—never meant to pay. Always he was my secret enemy, yet when the world knew he was a murderer I strained every nerve

to save his life, for his sister's sake. I did save it. But for every one concerned it was better that he should be removed where he could no longer strike at society, and I could scarcely regret his fate. Four years passed; I loved again, this time a beautiful American girl, the most perfect creature I have ever seen, and a great heiress. Madeleine Dalahaide had learned to detest me. She prejudiced this girl against me, and, not satisfied with that, excited her romantic nature to sympathy for the murderer, as a victim of injustice. The *Bella Cuba* is this girl's yacht—Miss Beverly's. She bought it in the hope of rescuing Maxime Dalahaide, and if he can escape, there is little doubt that she will put her hand in his, red though it is with a detestable crime. She must be saved from so ghastly a fate. But if she learns that she owes the failure of her plans to me, she will hate me to the death, and I shall lose all hope of her; whereas, if my agency in this affair could be hidden from her knowledge, the chances are that, if I could keep my head, I might win back her heart, after it is healed from its first disappointment. Help me to accomplish this, De Letz, for the sake of old times, and there's nothing you can ask of me that I will not do. Italian though I am, you know that my French cousins have powerful political influence. They shall use it to the utmost for you, and get you what post you please. I promise it—and I never break a promise to a friend."

"You fire me with your own enthusiasm!" cried De Letz. "We shall work the thing between us. But if you, and you alone, can identify this man, how will your part in the business be kept dark?"

"I will tell you how. I have brought several photographs of him, which I have always kept within reach. These I will give to you, and you can use them. If possible, I should, however, like to appear, not in the character of an enemy, but that of a friend. You may think this a low way of playing the game; but, you know, 'all is fair in love and war.' I want Miss Beverly to think I am here at this time by chance; that I have tried to soften your heart toward Dalahaide, and that I come with you, not as your ally against her, but to offer her and her cause what help I can. Of course, I shall fail in that effort, and you will win; but the little comedy will have brought me the girl's gratitude, which is worth all the world at this ticklish stage of the game. Will you aid me to play the part on these lines?"

De Letz laughed. "So, I am to be the villain of the piece? Well, I do not mind. We will stage the play realistically, and I——"

"And you will never regret your rôle in it," returned Loria.

Before the *Bella Cuba* left Mentone all probable contingencies of the mission had been foreseen, and as far as possible provided for, by Roger Broom, George Trent, and Virginia Beverly, in council. They had talked over what must be done in case of failure or success, and the only event which Virginia had not felt able to discuss had been the death of one or more of the three men concerned in the rescue. They knew that, if the *Bella Cuba* should be lucky enough to get away from New Caledonia with Max Dalahaide on board, the news of the convict's escape would certainly reach the next port at which they must touch, before they could arrive there. Virginia's hope had been, after meeting the Countess de Mattos, that the woman's confession would exculpate Maxime, and that the peace of his future would be secured by the great *coup* of "kidnapping" her. But now this glimpse of brightness seemed likely to prove a mirage. Virginia was as sure as ever that Manuela de Mattos was Liane Devereux; even Roger Broom's contrary opinion had been somewhat shaken by the woman's horrified shriek at sight of Max Dalahaide's white face and tragic eyes in the moonlight. But the Countess had hardened once more into marble self-control, and Maxime, after an hour or two on board the yacht, had fallen into a state of fever and delirium. For the time being he could do nothing to assist in proving her identity; indeed, even if he had kept his senses, he might not have been able to swear that she was Liane Devereux, so many were the differences of personality. Months might have to pass before the truth of the strange conjecture could be proved—if it could ever be proved—while the Countess de Mattos remained entrenched in her strong position as a much injured and innocent lady.

They could not count upon her, and were forced to rely wholly upon the plan formed before the beautiful Manuela had entered into their calculations. On reaching Samoa it was to be, as George Trent expressed it, a "game of bluff." One hope of saving Max lay in the fact that no photograph of him could have arrived from New Caledonia; there were a hundred chances to one that there would be no one at Samoa who had ever seen him; he could not, therefore, be positively identified, and as the *Bella Cuba*, owned by an American girl, flew the stars and stripes, it was not likely that the authorities would care to invite trouble by attempting to detain a yacht sailing under American colours. It was well known to the initiated also, that successful "evasions" from the French penal settlements were hushed up with nervous caution whenever possible and that the news of even an attempted escape was seldom printed in French papers. This was another advantage for the guilty *Bella Cuba*. It might be considered better to

let one convict go free, than precipitate an international complication, a world-wide sensation, especially as there was no one with a personal interest to serve in recovering this particular prisoner.

They steamed boldly on toward Samoa. The morning that the island was sighted, Dr. Grayle had pronounced Max Dalahaide better. The delirium had passed. He was quiet, though still very weak.

"I suppose he wouldn't be able to confront that wicked woman and accuse her to her face?" asked Virginia of the little brown man.

Dr. Grayle shook his head. "Not yet," he said. "Our motto must be forward, but not too fast. He isn't fit yet for any strong excitement, since we don't want to risk a relapse now that he's getting on so well. I was rather afraid the sight of all those souvenirs of the past in his cabin would upset him when he should be in a state of mind to recognize them, but the effect has apparently been precisely opposite. At first, before he entirely realized things, and remembered where he was and how he had got there, he seemed to think that he was at home, and was continually talking to his mother or sister, or calling for his father, sometimes in English, sometimes in French. Now he knows all, and when he heard how it was your thought and his sister's to have so many familiar objects surrounding him, to give an atmosphere of home to the cabin prepared in case of a rescue, the tears came to his eyes, and he turned away his head on the pillow to hide them from me. He believes that, even in his unconsciousness, these things must have made an impression upon his mind, and by their soothing influence drawn his thought toward home, otherwise he must have raved about the prison in his delirium, instead of returning to old, happy days. So you see, Miss Beverly, he has one more reason to thank you, this poor fellow who has suffered so much, and kept so brave and strong through all."

Virginia had been pale of late, but she flushed at these words. "You believe him innocent, Dr. Grayle!" she exclaimed. "You wouldn't speak of him like that unless it were so."

"No one could have been with him as I have these past few days, and not believe him innocent," said the little doctor in his quiet voice. "Sir Roger thinks as I do, too, now. You will be glad to hear that."

"I am glad," Virginia answered. But Roger was not glad. Above all things he was just—sometimes in spite of himself. He had helped to nurse Max Dalahaide; he had changed his opinion of him, and felt bound to say so; yet he was not glad to

change. He would have preferred to go on believing Dalahaide a guilty man.

Virginia had not the key to Roger's heart, however, and she did not know that he had the key to hers—to one hidden place there into which she had hardly dared to look. She would have kept it always locked, even from herself, if she could; but because she knew that there was something there to hide, she invited Roger to go with her when Max sent word through Dr. Grayle, begging to see his hostess. She did not want Roger to be present when she talked with Maxime Dalahaide for the first time since his escape. She would have liked to be alone with him, if that had been possible; but for the very reason that the wish was so strong in her heart, she denied it. Her cousin Roger had risked his life to please her, and she had a promise to keep. She meant to keep it; and he had a right to be by her side when she went to the man whom he had so nobly helped to save.

But Roger refused. "No, dear," he said. "Soon we shall be in the harbour at Samoa. There is plenty to do. I want to be on hand with George to do it. Let Dr. Grayle take you to Maxime. He will know how long and how much it is best for him to talk."

"We will be in harbour so soon?" exclaimed Virginia. "The Countess! She will try to get away, you know."

"She'll try in vain," responded Roger. "We won't give her a boat."

"But there'll be ships and boats in the harbour. She may call for help, and make us trouble."

"I'll see to her," said Roger. "I don't think we shall get much good out of detaining her; but we've gone so far now, we may as well go a little further."

They were talking in the saloon, out of which the cabins opened, but they had spoken in low voices, guarding against being overheard. Nor could they have been overheard, unless by some one making a special effort to listen. Such an effort the Countess de Mattos was making. She had kept to her cabin since the eventful night of the escape from New Caledonia, and had demanded her meals and other attentions with the air of an insulted queen claiming her just rights. She always bent herself eagerly to listen when she heard the murmur of voices in the saloon, especially if they seemed to be suppressed. She did not now catch every word, but she heard "the harbour of Samoa"; "soon in"; "the Countess—try to get away"; "call for help—make us trouble"; "I'll see to her"; and she pressed her lips together in fierce anger, her delicate nostrils quivering.

From her porthole she had not seen the land in sight, and had had no means of knowing that the time for her to act was so near at hand. Since the night of her terrible shock, she had revolved many plans in her mind, but the only one upon which she had definitely decided was to leave the *Bella Cuba* at all costs, and as soon as possible. Her nerves were not in a state to stand an indefinite strain, and she realized that she could not bear much more. Even with the chlorodyne and absinthe she hardly slept now, and she scarcely cared to project her thoughts beyond the time of escape from the hateful yacht.

Now, she had one thing for which to thank Virginia Beverly; the suggestion that she should call for help when the *Bella Cuba* had steamed into the harbour of Samoa. At once her excitable brain seized the picturesqueness of a dramatic situation. She saw herself, effectively dressed, rushing to the rail and hailing any passing ship which might be nearest. Sir Roger Broom, or her late friend George Trent, might try to stop her, but their violence would be seen from some other ship, and her cause against them would be strengthened.

Surely her appeals would not be ignored; men, of whatever class or country, were never blind to the distress of a woman as beautiful as she. Yes, she would be rescued. The story that she would tell must rouse indignation against Virginia Beverly and her companions. She herself had nothing to fear—nothing. And the man on whose advice she had spent years of exile would admire her more than ever, when he knew what she had endured, without breaking down. The end of her probation had come. The reason for delay had disappeared now, after all these years. They would marry, he and she, and he would help her to forget the past.

Manuela's reflections did not cause her to waste time. They were a mere accompaniment to her rapid action. Virginia had said they would soon be in the harbour. She must prepare herself to leave the yacht, and get ready to carry with her such things as were indispensable. Hurriedly she threw off the *robe de chambre* of silk and lace which she had been wearing, and put on a charming dress, suitable for travelling. The long outstanding account for this *confection* had been paid with Virginia Beverly's money; but that was a detail.

When she was ready to go up on deck—which she would do as soon as the yacht dropped anchor—she took her jewels from the large leather box where they were kept, and wrapping everything in a soft silk scarf, she stuffed the thick parcel into a handbag, which already held several mysterious-looking bottles with the labels carefully taken off. This bag was always locked, except when the

Countess was at her toilet; then, for a brief time, the bottles came out, and a few tiny boxes and brushes; but she never forgot to put them back into the bag again, turn the key, and slip the latter on to the gold key-ring which she wore on her chatelaine.

The bag packed with jewels, as well as its legitimate contents, Manuela turned her attention to the larger luggage. This she could not carry away with her, if she were gallantly rescued from her sea-prison by a *coup d'état*; but it would be as well to have the things which she most valued ready to go later. She had filled her cabin-box, and was in the act of locking it, when the yacht's screw ceased to throb. The *Bella Cuba* had stopped. Orders were being shouted up above; and then came a grinding sound as the anchor was slowly dropped. The Countess de Mattos knew that they must be in the harbour of Samoa. She flung open the door of her cabin and stepped out into the saloon. There sat George Trent, who, as she appeared, looked up from a book which he was reading, or seemed to read.

"Good morning, Countess," he said coolly, rising and flinging away his book. "I'm glad you're better, but I don't think, now I see you in the light, that you look well enough to be out."

"I was never ill," she answered haughtily—for Virginia Beverly's brother could only be an enemy.

"It's mighty brave of you to try and keep up like this," said George, "but that was a bad attack of yours the other night. I can see you're not fit yet. You'd better go back and lie down while we coal. The blacks will be flying around, you know, and you'll get them in your lungs."

"Let me pass," exclaimed the Countess, making a rush to push by him and reach the companionway.

"I'd do a good deal for you, Countess, but I can't do that," retorted George. "It's against the doctor's orders."

"How dare you!" she panted. "Oh, you shall suffer for this!"

"All I'm worried about now is that *you* don't suffer. You really mustn't excite yourself. It's not good, you know. It's as much as my place is worth to let you upstairs. I expect it would be the best thing for your health to go and lie down, but if you won't do that, why, I'll try and entertain you here as well as I can."

The beautiful woman looked the tall young man full in the eyes, hers dilated and

burning with the impotent fury in her soul. She was wise enough to see that he was not to be beguiled. If he, like other men, had his price, nothing that she could offer would pay it. He did not mean to let her go up on deck, and it would be as useless as undignified to attempt carrying out her will with a high hand. If there were any hope, it was in stratagem. Without breaking another lance against the impenetrable armour of his obstinacy, she turned her back upon him, swept into her cabin, and shut the door. Having done so—her little bag still grasped in her hand—she flew to the porthole and peered out. If a boat had been passing, or a ship at anchor visible near by, she would have screamed for help; but nothing promising was to be seen for the moment.

Meanwhile, Virginia had spent the most heavenly half-hour of her life. She had been so divinely happy that she had forgotten the danger ahead. To sit beside Max Dalahaide, to meet his eyes, tragic no longer, but bright with passionate gratitude; to know that he was out of danger, that he would live, and owe his life to her and hers; to hear the thanks, spoken stammeringly, but straight from his heart, filled her with an ecstasy such as she had never known. It was akin to pain, and yet it was worth dying for, just to have felt it once.

She was with him still when the yacht dropped anchor.

"This is Samoa?" he said, half rising on his elbow, and a quick flush springing to his thin cheeks.

"Yes," Virginia answered. "But there is no danger. My cousin says they will dare nothing. We shall have coaled in a couple of hours, and then——"

At this moment a sound of voices came through the open porthole, which was on the side of the yacht opposite to Manuela's.

Some one in a boat was calling to some one on the deck of the *Bella Cuba*; and evidently the boat was near.

Virginia's sentence broke off. She forgot what she had been saying, and sprang to her feet, her heart in her throat. It was the Marchese Loria's voice that she had heard.

What could his presence here signify? Did it mean unexpected disaster? Involuntarily her frightened glance went to Maxime's face. Their eyes met. She saw in his that he, too, had recognized those once familiar tones.

"I will go on deck," she said brokenly, trying to control her voice. "I—when I

can I will come back again. And—of course, Dr. Grayle, you will stay here."

"You may trust me," said the little brown man, with meaning in his words.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GAME OF BLUFF

Roger Broom had seen the boat coming from afar. Already the lighters were alongside, and the process of coaling was about to begin. This would be got through as soon as possible, and necessary provisions bought from the boats plying from the town with fresh milk, butter, eggs, meat, fowls, and green vegetables. But Roger knew well that, expedite their business as they might, the *Bella Cuba* would not steam out of the harbour without a challenge from the law. The only shock of surprise he experienced at sight of the official-looking little craft, making straight for the yacht, was in recognizing the Marchese Loria, the last man he had expected to see.

As he stood on deck beside the quartermaster near the rail, Loria hailed him by name, while the boat came alongside, and the four rowers shipped their dripping oars.

"Ah, Sir Roger, you are surprised to see me!" the Marchese cried. "But, by our old friendship, I hope you will let me come on board. These gentlemen in the boat with me are the United States Consul, Mr. Chandler; the French Consul, Monsieur de Letz; and Herr Dr. Sauber, the medical officer for the health of the port."

"Speaking for Miss Beverly as well as myself, we shall be very pleased to see you," said Roger. "Herr Dr. Sauber's business with us it is easy to guess, and he is prompt in carrying it out. Mr. Chandler and Monsieur de Letz are, no doubt, your friends, Marchese, who have come with you to pay us a friendly visit. We shall be delighted to entertain them on board as well as we can during the dreary process of coaling."

"I can't let you receive us on false pretenses, sir," replied the United States Consul. "My business and that of Monsieur de Letz is not wholly friendly, unfortunately, although we are both particularly anxious it should be carried out in a friendly spirit. It is in this hope that certain formalities have been waived. It is, as you know, your duty to receive Dr. Sauber on board, and as you fly the American colours it is your duty to receive me as the representative of the

authority of the United States."

"Charmed, I'm sure, to see you in any capacity," said Roger, his tone unchanged. "Though what the authority of the United States should have to do in procuring us the pleasure, I——"

"The authority of the United States supports France, as it is bound to do, in accordance with the extradition treaty, in demanding that you give up the fugitive convict, 1280, who came on board your yacht at New Caledonia."

"We have no convict with us," retorted Roger.

"In that case you cannot object to search being made," said Monsieur de Letz.

"We do most certainly object to being insulted," Roger replied. "Mr. Chandler, the owner of this yacht is an American lady, Miss Beverly. I call upon you as her Consul to protect her interests, not to sacrifice them."

"Sir Roger," Loria broke in, before Chandler could answer, "I beg once more that you will let me come on board with the doctor as a friend. I will explain why, when we can talk together. Though I am with these gentlemen, their errand is not mine."

"The doctor I feel bound to receive," said Roger. "But Miss Beverly, it seems to me, has as much right to choose who her guests shall be on board her own yacht as in her own house. If she were here to speak for herself——"

"She is here to speak for herself," said Virginia, at his shoulder. "Marchese Loria, I invite you to come on board. I invite also the United States Consul, whose protection I claim. But I do not choose to have other guests."

"The health officer has a right to board us, you know, Virginia," said Roger in a loud tone; then close to her ear: "Hang it all! we are more or less at their mercy. We can't get away without coaling, and they know it. Our poor little cannon are of no use to us here. We can't afford to defy any of the powers interested; they've got too many gunboats in the harbour. Bluff is our game, and we've got to play it for all it's worth. But you're perfectly right about the Consul. Only, if you don't want Loria, you needn't——"

"I do want him," Virginia hastily whispered—"for a special reason. And I want to talk to him alone. But for heaven's sake keep the Frenchman off! Who knows what *coup* he may be planning?"

As if in answer, though he could not possibly have heard, De Letz announced from the boat that he did not wish to insist upon boarding the yacht. He would trust his business in Mr. Chandler's hands, since the lady preferred it. This easy-going courtesy alarmed Virginia. She felt instinctively that the enemy had a strong trump with which to confound her unexpectedly. Still, if she did not quite see the enemy's game, at least they could not see hers.

The gangway was let down. Loria, Chandler, and the medical officer of the port came on board. Then the gangway was drawn up, though the French Consul and the four oarsmen sat placidly in the boat.

The purser, who was busy receiving stores, was sent for, to be interviewed by the doctor. Roger, standing by, gave half his attention to the conversation between these two, and half to the United States Consul, who plunged at once into the subject of the escaped convict.

Monsieur de Letz had informed him, he announced, that if the fugitive were not given up to justice by the American yacht, it would be regarded by France as a direct and deliberate affront. Meanwhile, the medical officer bombarded the unfortunate purser with questions. What ports had been visited? Where had the passengers been taken on? None since Alexandria? Humph! Alexandria was considered an infected port at present. Any one ill on board? No? Where, then, were the remaining members of the party? In their cabins? The doctor must ask, as a mere matter of form, to see them.

Roger Broom's lips were suddenly compressed. So this was the game. He saw it all now. The doctor was in the plot. He meant to detain the yacht in quarantine. If he succeeded in doing this, Maxime Dalahaide was lost. Everything else they had thought of, but not this.

"May I speak with you alone, Miss Beverly?" Loria had begun to plead, the instant he had set foot on deck. "Believe me, it is partly for your own sake, partly for the sake of others whose welfare is dear to you, that I ask it."

It was the thing for which Virginia had been wishing. "Come down with me into the saloon," she said.

"Could we not speak here, at a little distance from the others?" urged Loria, who knew that the doctor intended to visit the cabins.

"It is better below," the girl answered. She was determined to be already in the

saloon before the others came down. "Come quickly, and we can talk without being disturbed."

There was nothing for Loria to do but to obey.

They went down the companionway; and George Trent, on guard with his book near the Countess de Mattos's cabin door, jumped up at sight of Loria.

"What, you here, Marchese?" he began. But Virginia cut him short with a look and gesture both imploring and imperative.

"Leave us, George, I beg," she said. "Later, there will be time for explanations."

Without a word, the young man bowed and walked away. But he did not go farther than his cabin. He wished to be at hand if he were needed, as he might be, by and by.

On the other side of the stateroom door stood the Countess, half crouching, like a splendid tigress ready to spring.

"Marchese," George Trent had said. Who was this Marchese? Could it be possible that it was the one man of all others for whom her heart had cried out? Had his soul, in some mysterious, supernatural way, heard her soul calling to him across the world? Had he heard, and come to her here, to save her from her enemies? In another moment she must hear the voice of the newcomer whom George had addressed as "Marchese," and then she would know.

Even as she told herself this, schooling her impatience, the voice spoke. "Miss Beverly—Virginia," it said brokenly, imploringly, "for the love of heaven don't misjudge me. I came with those men to-day, not to help them, but to help you—if I can. You must know I would give my life to serve you. My life, do I say? I would give my soul. It was in ignorance of what would happen that I visited Samoa. The French Consul is an old school friend. He told me everything—I mean, the news from New Caledonia. He has photographs of Maxime. I tried to get them away, without his knowledge, but I didn't succeed. You must not be embroiled further in this terrible affair. The best thing is for you to give the poor fellow up, and I swear to you that, for your sake, and for his—even though I believe him guilty—I will find some means of saving him. The doctor has been promised all sorts of favours if he will state that there is a suspicious case of illness on board; a stateroom door locked against him will be enough to raise suspicions that you are hiding a case of plague. You can do nothing. Unless you

give Maxime up, and it is seen that you have a clean bill of health, you will be detained indefinitely in quarantine. Further advices will arrive from New Caledonia, representations will be made to the authorities here, it will become an international question, and you will be forced to surrender the escaped prisoner. Maxime will then be lost, for I should be unable to help him, if things had gone so far—the hue and cry would be too furious. De Letz is determined to thwart you, but he doesn't know that I am a secret ally of your plans. Trust to me. Give Maxime up while there is time, and you will never repent it."

"You make brave promises, Marchese," returned Virginia. "But you do not name your price. I suppose, like other men, you have a price for what you say you can do?"

"I make no conditions," answered Loria. "It hurts me that you could think of it. All I want is a little gratitude from you—ah, no, I cannot say that is all I *want*. Only, it is all I ask. What I want more than anything on earth, more than anything which even Heaven could give, is the treasure of your love. For that, I could fight my way, and Maxime Dalahaide's way, through the place of lost spirits, and laugh at the tortures of Hades. I dare not ask for that treasure now. Give me what you can, that is all, and my life's blood is yours, for I worship you, Virginia. I dream of you night and day. If I cannot have you for my wife, I shall go to my grave unmarried, and the sooner the better. There's nothing but you in the world; no other woman but you; there never has been for me, and never will be."

"It's false!" cried the voice of a woman, husky with passion; and throwing open the door of her cabin, the Countess de Mattos stood on the threshold, not six feet distant from the two in the saloon.

Carried away on the tide of his very real love for Virginia Beverly, whose pale, spiritualized beauty had gone to his head like wine, the hot-blooded Italian was at a disadvantage. Strength had gone out of him in his appeal. Physically and mentally he was spent.

The passionate voice, the flaming eyes of the woman suddenly seen in the doorway, struck him like a double blow aimed at a drowning man. "Liane!" he cried, before he could regain the self-mastery which meant all the difference between life and death.

"Yes," she flung at him in French, "I *am* Liane—Liane Devereux. Come, every one, and hear what I have to say. This man is a traitor—traitorous friend and

treacherous lover!" She stopped for an instant, and threw a glance round the saloon. Loria and Virginia Beverly were no longer alone there. George Trent, Sir Roger Broom, Kate Gardiner, and two men who were strangers had suddenly appeared as if by a conjuring trick. The woman stood with her head held high, like some magnificent wild creature of the forest at bay, fearing nothing save loss of vengeance. She was glad that all these people had come. The more there were to hear the tale she meant to tell, the more sure the stroke of her revenge. Yes, she was glad, glad! And though she died for it, under the knife of the guillotine, she would ruin the man who had deceived her.

"He pretended to love me," she went on. "But now I know that he never did, for when he vowed love and devotion his voice did not once sound as I have heard it now, speaking to that white-faced girl when he did not dream I was near.

"I am Liane Devereux, not a Portuguese woman, not the Countess de Mattos, therefore Maxime Dalahaide is not a murderer, since I live. It was the Marchese Loria who arranged everything—even my name, and credentials, and proofs of my identity as Manuela de Mattos, in case they were ever needed. Oh, there was nothing neglected. But now I know that it was not for my sake, as I thought, but to serve his own ends, and I am willing to die to hold him back from success.

"I will tell you the whole story from the beginning. Five years ago I was an actress in Paris. I made two or three failures. A powerful dramatic critic had vowed to drive me off the stage. He had begun his work; and at this perilous time in my career, just as I had quarrelled with my manager, Maxime Dalahaide fell in love with me. I thought he was rich. It occurred to me that if I became his wife I could leave the stage in a blaze of glory. Besides, he was brilliant and handsome. I was flattered by his admiration, and felt that it would be easy to love him. I did all I could to win an offer of marriage from him. When it came I accepted. But soon after our engagement his father lost a great deal of money. I realized that Maxime would not be as good a match as I had counted upon making. Still, I did not throw him over; for by that time I cared for his handsome face, and I was of far too jealous a nature to risk throwing him into the arms of another woman. If we parted, I thought I knew to what woman he would turn. There was an English girl singing at the Opera Comique, whose name at one time had been coupled with Maxime Dalahaide's. She had a good voice and a pretty enough face, but she would not have succeeded in Paris, people whispered, if Maxime had not helped her. I had spoken to him of this girl, and he had denied caring for her. She was a very ordinary, uninteresting creature, apart from her beauty, he said; but she had been friendless and in hard luck, and as he

was half English himself, he had done what he could to aid a lonely and deserving young countrywoman, that was all. Still, I was never sure that he was not deceiving me. Altogether, in those days, I was unhappy. The Marchese Loria, Maxime's best friend—as I thought—was very sympathetic. He came often to see me, both with Maxime and alone. One day they quarrelled in my house. It was Loria who began it. He accused Maxime of prejudicing his sister Madeleine against him, and Maxime admitted that, though he loved Loria, he did not think he would made a good husband, and did not wish him to marry Madeleine. With a look of jealous hatred in his eyes, which I have never forgotten, Loria cried out that Maxime had always taken away from him everything he wanted most—love of friends and women, popularity, all that a man values in life. Then, almost before Maxime could answer to vow that never, consciously, had he been Loria's rival or injured him in any way, Loria begged forgiveness, said he had spoken in anger—that in his heart he did not mean a word. So the quarrel—if quarrel you could call it—was made up. But I guessed then that Loria had never really loved Maxime.

"It was only a few days after this that I found myself in great trouble with my creditors. Maxime had had too many losses to help me much, though he lent me two or three thousand francs. I asked him to pawn my jewels, which were worth a good deal, and to do it in his own name. It was Loria who put this idea into my head. He said that by this means I should prevent the pawn-tickets from being seized by other creditors. Late that very afternoon, when, against his will, Maxime had taken my jewels, the English girl, Olive Sinclair, came to my flat, saying that she must talk to me of an affair of great importance to us both. I was curious, and my jealousy was up in arms. She was admitted by my maid, who was just going out for the whole evening, by my permission.

"Olive Sinclair came in. We were alone together in the flat. She began by saying that she was going to England by the late boat that night, and that Maxime Dalahaide was going with her. As soon as possible, the girl went on, they would be married at a registrar's office, and the marriage kept secret from his family until she came of age the next year, when she would inherit a fortune, which she should be only too glad to share with her beloved Maxime. She had heard, she said, that I went about boasting everywhere of my engagement to Maxime Dalahaide, and that she could bear it no longer, so she had come to tell me the real truth, and humble my pride. Perhaps I would not have believed her if I had not known that Maxime *did* intend to go to England that night. He had told me that he wanted to see an uncle there on business. At once his story seemed

improbable. I believed that the girl was telling me the truth. I have always had a hot temper, which often escapes beyond control. A wave of rage rushed up to my head, and made a red flame leap before my eyes. As the girl talked on, smiling insolently, I struck her in my passion. She staggered, and fell on the floor, her head pressed up against the fender in a curious way. Dear heaven, I can see her now, lying there, her eyes staring wide open, seeming to look at me, her lips apart! She did not cry out or move; and as I stood watching her, frightened at what I had done, a few drops of blood began to ooze from her mouth.

"I went down on my knees, and shook her by the shoulder, calling her name; but her head fell on one side, as if she had been a horrid dummy made of rags; and still her eyes were staring and her blood-stained lips smiling that foolish, awful smile. It was at this moment that I heard a knocking at the door.

"At first I kept quite still, dazed, not knowing what I should do. But then I thought it might be Maxime, who had changed his mind about selling the jewels, and come back soon to tell me. I was in the mood to see him at whatever cost. I called through the door to know who was there. Loria's voice answered. I let him in, explained confusedly what had happened, and begged him to bring the girl back to consciousness. Five minutes later he told me that she was dead. In falling, and striking against the fender, she had broken her neck.

"'What is to become of me?' I asked. 'I did not mean to kill her, and yet—I am a murderess. Will they send me to the guillotine for this?'

"'No, because I will save you,' Loria answered. Then, quickly, he made me understand the scheme that had come into his mind. So cunning, so wonderfully thought out it was, that I asked myself if he had somehow planned all that had happened; if he had sent the girl to me, and told her to say what she had said, counting on my hot blood for some such sequel as really followed. But I could not see any motive for such plotting, and in a moment I forgot my strange suspicions, in gratitude for his offer to save me. Sometimes I had fancied that, in spite of his wish to marry Madeleine Dalahaide, he loved me; now he swore to me the truth of this, and I was scarcely surprised. He would give everything he had in the world to save me, he said. What a fool I was to believe him! All I had to do in return was to promise that I would obey implicitly. Gladly I promised, and I did not falter even when the full horror of his plan was revealed. It was that or a disgraceful, terrible death for me. Oh, I would have done anything then to escape the guillotine!

"First of all he made me write a letter to Maxime, telling him that I hated him and never wished to see him again; that I loved another man better. I did this gladly. That was nothing. And Loria let me go out and send the letter, while he began the awful work which had to come next. I thanked him for that. I had not nerve enough left to help much after what I had gone through.

"When I came back to the flat after sending off the letter, Loria unlocked the door for me. Already the worst was over.

"His idea was for me to escape and let it seem that *I* had been murdered. This could be done, because Olive Sinclair would not be missed. She had given up her rooms to leave for England that night. In a bag hanging from her belt were her tickets for train and boat. We were of much the same figure. Loria, in speaking to me of her before, had mentioned this slight resemblance. Her hair was brown, while mine was red-gold. Hers would have to be bleached, now that she lay dead. But there was no great difficulty in that, for I had the stuff in the house, as I used it in very small quantities to give extra brightness to mine.

"While I had been gone Loria had fired shot after shot into the poor dead face, from a revolver, which he did not show me. Afterward, when I was far away, I heard that the weapon was Maxime's; but, honestly, I did not think at the time that Maxime would be implicated in this affair. I was half mad. I thought only of myself, and of Loria's self-sacrifice. Already I could have worshipped him for what he was doing to save me.

"He shot the hands, too, that they might be shattered, for Olive Sinclair's hands were not like mine; but before he did that, he had slipped two or three of my rings, which he had found on my dressing-table, upon the dead fingers.

"All this was finished when I dragged myself home. But together we bleached the dark hair till it was the colour of mine, and together we dressed the body in my clothes, Loria having removed the gown before he used the revolver. Oh, the horror of that scene! It is part of my punishment that I live it over often at night. At last we arranged the shattered hands to look as if the girl had flung them up to protect her face from the murderer.

"I put on her travelling dress, and her hat, with a thick veil of my own. Meanwhile, a knock had come at the door. I feared that the shots had been heard, and that we would be arrested. But Loria quieted me. He said the revolver was small, and had made scarcely any sound; that, as no one lived in the flat above or just underneath, it was quite safe. We did not answer the knock, though it came

again and again. But afterward, in the letter-box on the door, there was a packet containing the money which Maxime had got from the pawnbroker for my jewels. That I took with me, and Loria gave me more. Whether Maxime himself brought the money, or sent it by messenger, I did not know; but, afterward, the *concierge* bore witness that he had passed into the house before the murder must have taken place, and gone out long afterward. And dimly I remembered, in thinking of Loria as he had looked in that dreadful hour, that he had worn a coat and hat like Maxime's. How can I tell what were the details of his scheme? But when Maxime was accused of the murder, and Loria made no effort to exonerate him, it took all my faith in the Marchese as a lover to believe that he was sacrificing his friend wholly for my sake. As for me—why should I give myself up to the guillotine for a man who would have betrayed me for an Olive Sinclair—especially when he was not condemned to death, but only to imprisonment?

"I went to England in Olive Sinclair's place. Fortunately for me, she had no relatives. No one asked questions, no one cared what had become of her. She was not a celebrity, in spite of the way in which Maxime Dalahaide had worked to help her. After a while I left England for Portugal. Meanwhile I had dyed my hair, and stained my complexion with a wonderful clear olive stain which does not hurt the skin, and shows the colour through. Here are the things I use, in this bag. I keep it always locked and ready to my hand.

"Loria bought me a little land and an old ruined house near Lisbon, belonging to an ancient family, of whom the last member had died. The title went with the land. It was supposed that I was a distant cousin, with money, and a sentiment of love for the old place. But really I hated it. It was dull—deadly dull. I travelled as much as possible, and Loria had promised that at the end of the five years he would marry me, saying always that he loved me well; that if he had sinned it was for love of me, and to save me. When the world had forgotten the affair of Maxime Dalahaide we would be married, and live in countries where no one had heard the story, and nothing would remind us of the past. I forced myself to believe him, for he was my all—all that was left to me in exile. But now I know him for what he is. I would swear that he planned everything from the beginning to ruin Maxime Dalahaide. He here to help his old enemy! No, it is he who must have set the bloodhounds on his track. I fight under Loria's banner no longer. He loves Virginia Beverly. Now that she knows him as he is, and what he has done for hatred, let her put her hand in his if she will."

The woman's voice fell from a shrill height into silence. Her olive-stained face was ash-gray with exhaustion. No one had interrupted, or tried to check the

fierce flood of the confession, not even Loria. All had stood listening, breathless; and Virginia had known that, behind the door of his locked cabin, Maxime Dalahaide must hear every clear-cadenced word of fine, Parisian French.

Loria had stood listening with the rest, a sneer on his lips, though his eyes burned with a deep fire. If he had taken a step, hands would have been thrust out to stop him. But he did not move except, in the midst of Liane Devereux's story, to play nervously with an old-fashioned ring of twisted, jewel-headed serpents on the third finger of his left hand.

Suddenly, as the woman finished, he raised the hand to his lips and seemed to bite the finger with the ring. Then he dropped his hand and looked at his accomplice with a strained smile. But the smile froze; the lips quivered into a slight grimace. His eyes, glittering with agony, turned to Virginia.

"I loved you," he said, and fell forward on his face.

"He has taken poison!" exclaimed Chandler, the United States Consul. "It must have been in that queer ring."

He and Roger Broom and George Trent and the German doctor pressed round the prostrate figure, but the woman who had denounced him was before them all. With a cry she rushed to the fallen man, and, flinging herself down, caught up the hand with the ring. They saw what she meant to do, and would have snatched her away, but already her lips had touched the spot where his had been, and found the same death.

The whole situation was changed by the unexpected developments on board the *Bella Cuba*. Dr. Sauber had relinquished, indeed, almost forgotten, the clever plan by which the yacht was to be detained. The French Consul, Loria's host, was hurriedly brought on board, to be dumbfounded by a recital of what had happened. With Loria dead, and guilty, the fugitive concealed on the *Bella Cuba* innocent, De Letz's personal motive for detaining the prisoner disappeared. His chivalry was fired by Virginia's beauty and the brave part she had played. In the end, instead of making difficulties for the party, he consented to take charge of his friend's body and that of Liane Devereux, which latter duty was his by right, as consul to the country from which she came. The dead man and dead woman would be carried ashore in the boat which had brought the four men out to the

yacht; and De Letz would, acting on the statement of those who had heard the confession, make such representations to France as would eventually obtain for Maxime Dalahaide a free pardon with permission to return to his own land. Meanwhile he (De Letz) reiterated that it was as much his duty as before to bring about the arrest of the escaped convict, who had no more right to break his prison bonds if innocent than if he were guilty. To bring it about if possible! But —*was* it possible? And the Frenchman shrugged his shoulders, half smiling at Virginia. Mr. Chandler advised him that, in the present circumstances, it would be unwise to make the attempt. De Letz was inclined to agree, and, as Dr. Sauber had apparently found a clean bill of health, the *Bella Cuba* must take her own sweet way, rebel though she was.

So when the yacht had finished coaling she steamed out of the harbour of Samoa with Convict 1280 still on board.

Virginia's desire was to make for America, and to send for Madeleine, who had been living all this time with her aunt in an old Surrey manor-house belonging to Roger Broom. The brother and sister should stay at her house in Virginia until Maxime was free to return to France, and he would grow strong and well, and everybody concerned would be happy. It would be madness, she urged, for Maxime to put himself in the power of French law until such time as his innocence was officially acknowledged.

But Maxime thought otherwise. His innocence had been declared, and would sooner or later be acknowledged. The manly and honourable thing to do was to trust to the generosity of his adopted land. To France he would go, and boldly throw himself upon her mercy.

"He is right, Virginia," said Roger, fearing the while that secret jealousy influenced his decision.

"He is right," echoed George Trent, with no hidden thoughts at all.

Virginia held her peace, though her heart was full; and the ultimate destination of the *Bella Cuba* was France.

France did not disappoint Maxime's trust, but months passed before he was a free man. Meantime hope had given him new life. His sister was near him.

Virginia Beverly was in Paris with an elderly relative of Roger Broom's as her chaperon-companion, instead of Kate Gardiner. Though he was virtually a prisoner, since the eye of the law was upon him, and the voice of the law pronounced that he should go so far and no farther, still he was happy, so happy that he often awoke from prison dreams, not daring to believe the present reality.

Then at last the day came when he was free. Madeleine was staying with Virginia. He would see them together. There was heaven in the thought. George Trent was there, but not Roger Broom. Roger had been called to England on business, but he was returning that evening.

Never had there been such a dinner as that which celebrated Maxime's release from the old bonds. Virginia had taken a beautiful house which had been to let furnished, near the Bois de Boulogne.

After the dinner the two girls with their brothers went out into the garden, the old aunt, exhausted with over-much joy, remaining indoors.

Virginia knew what would come next, and drew Madeleine away from the two young men that George might have the chance of asking Maxime for his sister. Five minutes later Maxime was squeezing Madeleine's hand, and telling her that no news could have made him so happy. Then, somehow, the lovers disappeared, and Virginia Beverly and Maxime Dalahaide were alone together.

"Everything good comes to us from you," he said, his voice unsteady. "What can I do to show you how I—how we worship you for all you have done, all you have been?"

"There is one thing you can do," Virginia answered softly. "A favour to me. There is a little gift I want to make to you, on this day of all others. I have been planning it, thinking of it for a long time. Here is this paper. Take it and read. You will see then what I mean, and why I want it so much."

It was a long, folded document of legal aspect which she thrust into his hand, and in the blue evening light he opened it. At sight of the first words the blood leaped to his dark face, marble no longer, but a man's face, young, handsome, and virile. He looked from the paper to Virginia.

"Why, it is a deed of gift!" he exclaimed. "The château—no, Miss Beverly, you are more than generous, but this cannot be. The château is yours—I would rather it belonged to you than to any one on earth, even myself—and yours it must

remain."

"I bought it for you. It will break my heart if you refuse," said Virginia, with tears in her voice.

The sound of her pain smote him with anguish. He lost his head and forgot the barrier between them—that he was poor, with a dark past and an uncertain future, that she was a great heiress.

"Break your heart!" he repeated. "My darling, my angel, I would give all the blood in mine for one smile from you. I never meant to say this. I oughtn't to say it now, but—it said itself. You must have known before. You are the very soul of me, though I'm not worthy to touch your dear hand. I couldn't take the old home from you—don't you understand? I couldn't live there again with this love of you in my heart, for it would make it so much the harder. I can't forget you; I would rather die than forget you. This love is too sweet to live without, but I know very well that we can never be anything to each other, and my plans are all made. As soon as Madeleine is married I shall go out to Africa and try for luck as other men have tried—and found it. It is better for me to be far away from you——"

"No, no, I love you!" cried Virginia. Then putting him from her with a quick gesture: "But it will be I who go far away from you. I have no right to care. My cousin, Roger Broom, will take me to England—anywhere—it doesn't matter. I promised long ago to marry him. In the winter perhaps——"

"In the winter you and Max here will be spending your honeymoon at the Château de la Roche," said Roger's voice, with a hard cheerfulness. "That old promise—why, I never meant to hold you to it, dear. I don't take bribes, and—I saw this coming long ago. I'm quite content it should be so. You'll forgive me for overhearing, won't you, girlie? I didn't mean to give you such a surprise, but I'm not sorry now. Give me your hand, Max, old man, and you, Virginia. There! I'm glad it should be the old cousin-guardian who joins them together."

"You mean it, Roger?" panted Virginia.

"Of course I mean it."

The two hands joined under his. And the man and the girl were too happy to read anything save kindness in its nervous pressure.

THE END

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