Rogues & Company

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BY

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CHAPTER I

IT was a very curious and decidedly uncomfortable feeling, and though he had a dim idea that he had felt it somewhere before, he could remember nothing more definite about it. As a matter of fact it was in itself nothing so very unusual most people experience the same sensations on waking up at dead of night in strange quarters. On such occasions the victim grows hot and feverish in the endeavour to locate the door and window; he cannot remember who he is, where he is or how he got there; he feels painfully lost and helpless. Then, gradually, his faculties rub their eyes and arrange themselves, and the fact that he is Jones, that he is spending the week-end with the Smiths, and that the uncanny apartment is nothing more terrible than their best spare bed-room, dawns on him with comforting completeness, and he turns over and resumes his interrupted slumbers.

But in this case the experience was less pleasant in its development and considerably more original. The more wide-awake he grew the less he knew about himself. The more he said to himself, “My dear fellow, pull yourself together it’s only a dream,” the more obvious did it become that he was sitting on the doorstep of an unknown house in an unknown street, with aching limbs and an aching head. Now such a combination of circumstances is not altogether unusual even in the best society, and he sat and patiently waited for an illuminating memory. But none came. If he had, as he at first supposed, supped not wisely but too well, where had he supped and with whom? There was no answer to this natural question. He shook himself.

“Oh, come now!” he said aloud. “Surely you know your own name?”

Again no answer. Evidently it had been a big business. When a man has to resort to his own visiting card to find out who he is one may be forgiven for supposing that this self-forgetfulness is something less than pure altruism. The man on the doorstep resigned himself to necessity and put his hand in his trouser pocket. Nothing. The other trouser pocket was also empty likewise the waistcoat pocket. This was disconcerting. What was still more disconcerting was the hole in the knee of his trousers as revealed by the light of a street-lamp, and he thereupon made the discovery that far from being in. evening-dress, as his condition suggested, he wore a check suit of vulgar type and ancient lineage, and that he was cuffless and collarless. All this was very surprising and painful. He

addressed himself with severity.

“Really, my dear fellow, this won’t do can’t sit out here all night, you know not done—”

At this juncture Constable X. of the D. Division loomed upon the horizon. Constable X. carried a lantern and was evidently on the lookout for burglars and other miscreants, for he did not notice the man on the doorstep until he had stumbled over his legs. What the Constable said is irrelevant. The man on the doorstep apologised profusely.

“I’m sure I’m extremely sorry,” he said. His own prompt politeness led him at once to the conclusion that his station’ in life must be something between a shop-walker and a gentleman, but this opinion was apparently not shared by his victim. Constable X. flashed his lantern onto the doorstep and gave vent to a snort of mingled triumph and indignation.

“At it again! Eh?” he said. “Got you this time, have I?”

“It looks like it,” his prisoner admitted. “Were you looking for me?”

“Now then, none of your tongue, young fellow! Wot d’yer mean?”

“I mean,” said the man on the doorstep courteously, “that it would be a great relief to me to know that someone was looking for me—even a policeman. The fact is, you know I’m lost.”

“Oh, so you’re lost, are you?” The Constable laughed with the rudeness which is born of a shattered trust in human nature. “Sort of lost dog, eh?”

“The designation will do until I find a better one,” returned the other, wearily. “But I doubt if even the Dog’s Home will take me in. What am I to do?”

“Move on!” said the Constable, from sheer force of habit.

“But I can’t keep on ‘moving on’ indefinitely.”

The Constable scratched his head.

“You’d better come along with me,” he said.

“Might I ask whither?”

“Lock-up,” was the laconic answer.

“But I haven’t done anything.”

“Can’t be so sure of that and anyhow, you’re sitting on someone else’s doorstep.”

“You don’t know that it is someone else’s doorstep. It might be mine.”

“It might but it don’t look like it.”

“You infer,” his captive suggested, “that I do not give you the impression of being a landed proprietor?”

“Can’t say as you do,” Constable X. admitted frankly. “You gives me the impression of being a very common sort of night-bird.”

The man on the doorstep shook his head.

“You judge too hastily,” he protested. “If I am, as you suggest, a night-bird, I have none the less the feeling that I may turn out to be one of nature’s gentlemen. Now, look here!” He rose stiffly and painfully and conducted the doubting Constable to the lamp. “What do you make of that!” he enquired triumphantly. He extended his two hands. Constable X. considered them with his head cocked astutely on one side.

“Cleanish,” he said. “Uncommon cleanish.”

“Sergeant, you are a man of perception. Now, glance over me. Do not let yourself be led astray by the vulgarity of my costume. Consider my face, my manner and my speech. What do you think of me?”

“Well, you might be a sort of gent,” Constable X. admitted.

“Inspector—” the young man began.

“Not yet, sir—” Constable X. protested with a touch of coyness.

“Never mind, you ought to be an inspector, even if you aren’t. I was judging you

as you judged me by deserts. I feel that I ought to be a gentleman, I'm sure you ought to be an inspector. But the trouble with me is that I don't know who or what I am."

"Drunk," suggested the inspector in embryo, consolingly.

"I may have been in the past but I am certainly sober now."

"Yes, you talks clear enough. Got a wishing card on you?"

"If I had, the matter would be simplified. My pockets are as empty as my head."

The Constable's smile was unflattering.

"Can't you remember anythink?" he appealed.

"Not a thing. I've been trying for the last half-hour. What's to be done? I can't stay on the streets all night and as far as I know I haven't any claim on any charitable institution."

Constable X. rubbed his chin.

"It's a case of lost memory," he announced solemnly. "I've 'eard of it before. I knew of an old lady who wandered over 'alf London before they found out that she was a duchess' It was a big thing for the man who found 'er."

"Nothing like so big as it would be for you if you found I was a duke," interposed the lost one generously. "If I am a duke solvent of course I shall raise you to a position of affluency. I swear it by my ancestors supposing I have any."

Constable X. touched his helmet.

"Thank you, sir," he said with considerably more respect. "It's a case for the doctors that's wot it is," he went on thoughtfully, "wot they calls a specialist. The duchess was queer in her upper storey—senile decay, as they called it."

"Good heavens, I'm not as old as that, am I?"

" 'Tain't always age that does it," Constable X. returned, with a grave and significant shake of the head. "There's decays and decays. You've got 'em young

that’s all.”

“Suppose we find the doctor?” suggested the young man hastily.

“You’re sitting on ‘is doorstep.”

The prospective patient examined the doorplate.

“Mr. Smedley,” he read aloud, “veterinary surgeon. Look here, Inspector, that won’t do. I’m not an animal.”

“You said you was a lost dog,” retorted the Constable, with grim delight in his own jest. “Well, anyhow, there’s a Doctor Thingummy round the corner. I calls ‘im Thingummy because ‘e ‘as a foreign name, and I don’t ‘old with foreign names. Not since that there war. I up’ olds the Law myself, but wot I says is, ‘When an Englishman sees a foreigner he ort ter bash ‘im in the eye,’ I don’t care who he is–”

“Well, perhaps Dr. Thingumity only sounds foreign,” the young man suggested. “Anyhow, we’ll give him a call. What time is it?”

“About midnight.”

“In that case,” the young man reflected, “I fancy that we shall be the bashed ones bashed and abashed, you know.” He chuckled encouragingly, but his companion remained unmoved. “However, anything is better than the lock-up and the cold stone of Mr. Smedley’s steps. Lead on, Macduff.”

“Look here, young feller, if you start calling names—”

“I’m not. I’m quoting. I can’t remember what from Bible probably. Anyhow, absolutely respectable. Wouldn’t insult you for the world. Why—” he exclaimed with a rush of pathos “you may be my only friend, Constable.”

“Well, mind out. It’s as likely as not you’re under arrest, in which case anything you say will be taken down against you.”

“But I’m not a criminal.”

“Can’t be sure. You couldn’t swear to it yourself.”

“Well, I don’t look like one at least I don’t feel like one.”

Constable X. shook his head gloomily.

“Can’t go by that. If you knew wot I knew about criminals, you’d be surprised. There was a feller a nice upstanding chap, as pleasant spoken as you please murdered his wife, he did. ‘Why, Constable,’ he said to me going up to the dock, ‘I wouldn’t ‘urt a kitten.’ And I believed ‘im. But ‘is wife she got on ‘is nerves she was always a hummin’ tunes to ‘erself, and the more he asked ‘er not the more she did it. And one day, right in the middle of ‘Annie Laurie,’ he ups and ‘its ‘er over the ‘ead with ‘is beer-mug. Must ‘ave caught ‘er on ‘er soft spot, for she never ‘ummed again. But ‘e swung for it, poor chap, though the jury did put in extenuating circumstances. No, sir, you believe me, you can’t be sure of anyone in this life—least of all yourself.”

The young man put his hand to his forehead.

“Constable, I’m a sick man. You don’t want me to faint, do you?”

“I’m only doing my dooty, sir. Bound to warn you—”

“I know you mean it kindly,” the young man admitted humbly. “But it’s all very uncomfortable.”

That much, at any rate, was becoming certain. For the first few minutes his position had struck him as entirely humorous. He had expected each minute to bring the desired flash of illumination, but his mind had remained blank, and the pain at the back of his head was becoming troublesomely insistent. Who and what was he? He decided that it was a great deal worse than being born again, because of the additional unpleasantness of knowing beforehand all the awful conditions into which one might be flung by a reckless and indiscriminating Fate. He might be a Duke he hoped he was but he felt his appearance was against him. He might be what his clothes suggested, which was intolerable. He might be married, and his wife might be At this point the possibilities nearly overcame him, and he was thankful for the tonic effect of the Constable’s grip upon his arm.

“Hear that, sir?”

“Sounds like someone running,” the derelict admitted. “Someone looking for

me, no doubt—”

The next instant an extraordinary apparition tore round the corner of the street and was received full in Constable X.‘s genially outstretched arms. The constable rose to the situation with the same sangfroid that he had displayed earlier in the evening.

“So there you are!” he said. “Got you, ‘avel?”

His capture showed no intelligent appreciation of the Constable’s smartness. He broke into an incoherent torrent of bad language and, disengaging himself with a dexterous twist, revealed himself as a little dark man, of marked Hebraic descent, in a dressing-gown, bed-room slippers and an ungovernable temper.

“You jackass never anywhere where you’re wanted deaf as a door-post didn’t you hear my whistle? What’s the good of whistling if you don’t listen? My house broken into all my silver gone and you stand there like a like a—” He ran his fingers through his long black hair till it stood straight on end, adding a comically devilish touch to his unusual appearance. “My God this country!” he exclaimed finally, as though overwhelmed by some culminating grievance. “My God!”

“Now don’t you go getting abusive,” the Constable warned him coldly. “If you’ve ‘ad burglars, we’ll see after ‘em all in good time.” Then with a wink at his first captive, he remarked in a stage whisper “That’s ‘im!”

This cryptic observation drew the newcomer’s attention to the presence of a third person. He swung round and stared at the young man with his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his dressing-gown.

“So you did catch him. Your prisoner, eh?”

Constable X. scratched his chin.

“‘E is and ‘e isn’t,” he explained. “‘E’s mad.”

The doctor’s manner changed instantly. He drew out a pair of tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles, adjusted them on the bridge of his thick nose and considered the young man with a dispassionate interest, which seemed as out of place as the purple dressing-gown.

“Mad?” he said. “Rubbish. What does an idiot like you know about madness? Don’t talk nonsense.”

“Thank you,” the young man interjected warmly. “I felt sure that our friend here had overstated my case. I’m not exactly mad at least, I hope not. But I don’t know who I am. In fact, I’ve lost my memory—”

“Rubbish! There isn’t such a thing. You can’t lose your memory. You can hide it, you can suppress it, you can put it away and turn a key on it, but you can’t lose it. If I told you what I knew about memory, I should be standing here till tomorrow morning and then you wouldn’t have understood half I said. But though you express yourself inaccurately, I recognise your condition. It is not uncommon, but, to a certain degree, it is interesting—”

“—and uncomfortable.”

“Possibly for you. That—” he wagged a long reproving finger in the young man’s face “that, sir, is where the scientific and the untrained mind differ. You are concerned with trivial personalities, I with large issues, with cause and effect and the relation of one phenomenon to another. You, frankly, consider your identity as the main consideration. To me it is not of the slightest importance. How long have you been in this state?”

“I don’t know. The Constable here found me on a doorstep about half an hour ago.”

“Very brilliant of him. And you have nothing on your person no obvious clue—”

“Nothing. I haven’t even a brass-farthing. That’s what’s worrying me chiefly. You see, doctor—”

“Frohlocken, psycho-analyst,” the doctor interrupted with a slight bow.

“Thank you. I’m sorry that for obvious reasons I cannot introduce myself. Well, doctor, I want your help, but as I’ve already mentioned I am penniless and for all I know I may remain so and I feel—”

“That,” said the doctor, “is a second illustration of my point. In the very midst of what no doubt to you seems a catastrophe, your mind turns to money. What in God’s name do you suppose I care about your money? You interest me.

Microbes interest me. Do you think I request a newly discovered germ to pay me consulting fees? Don’t be a fool.”

The young man smiled ruefully.

“Well, thank Heaven I’ve got a value even if I haven’t got an identity,” he said. “May I count then upon your assistance? Without it I’m afraid I shall have to accompany our friend here to the police-station. It’s the only invitation I’ve had so far—”

The doctor’s answer was to take the young man by the arm and lead him by long, unhurried strides down the street whence he had come. Burglars, policemen, and stolen silver alike seemed to have been swept from his memory. But Constable X., not to be forgotten, ponderously brought up the rear. Five houses down the trio came upon an open door, at the moment blocked by a small crowd of excited domestics, scantily attired and armed with pokers, who welcomed their appearance with a murmur of triumph. The young man held back.

“Obviously they take me for your burglar,” he said. “It would be perhaps better if you explained—”

“Rubbish,” said the doctor firmly. He bustled his patient up the steps, and a person whom the latter judged by his waistcoat to be a butler the rest of his costume was unrecognisable made a fierce clutch at the supposed captive. Dr. Frohlocken warded off the attack with a sweep of the arm.

“Don’t be a fool, James! You’ve done enough stupid things for one evening. Go to bed, the lot of you. This gentleman is my patient. Come in, sir, come in.”

“Look ‘ere,” said Constable X. from the doorstep.

Dr. Frohlocken looked.

“Well? What at?”

“Look ‘ere,” the Law repeated undeterred, “that’s my man, if you don’t mind, sir.”

“Your man? Is this a slave-country? What right have you to call him your man?”

A shadow of bitter disappointment stole over the Constable's round red face.

"I found 'im," he said.

"Suppose you did? What do you want to do with him? Take him to the Lost Property Office as though he were an umbrella? My God and you call this a civilised country? Go away with you—"

"Well, wot about them burglars and the silver wot they took?" Constable X. persisted doggedly.

The doctor pressed his finger to his nose.

"Damn your burglars and your silver too," he said. He slammed the door in the aggrieved face. "That," he said, "is the lowest example of the type of mind that governs this unfortunate country. Entirely concerned with obvious and insignificant trivialities. Utterly untrained. But for me he would actually have taken you to the police-station, God knows what damage they would have done between them. As it is, there is every reason to hope—"

"—that I shall remember, you mean?"

Dr. Frohlocken shrugged his sloping shoulders.

"My dear sir, you have not forgotten. For reasons of which we are at present ignorant you are hiding your identity in your subconscious mind. When we have discovered and removed the cause of your action you will, as you would inaccurately express it, recover your memory. That is the whole business in a nutshell. In the meantime you must sleep. You have had some mental shock. You are suffering from a severe nervous strain—"

"I feel," the young man interrupted, u as though someone had hit me over the head with a brick-bat—"

"An illusionary sensation, no doubt, an effort of the mind to give a misleading cause for your condition. I have several similar cases on my hands. Yours indeed is the seventh. You won't object to my calling you No. 7, I hope? It will simplify matters, and for the moment you will find it a relief yourself to be something definite."

“Thank you,” said the young man. “I feel that already. When I start worrying I shall say, ‘That’s all right. You’re Dr. Frohlocken’s No. 7.’ I daresay it’s quite as good as my own name.”

“Better, no doubt,” the doctor agreed.

He opened a side-door and led the way into a plainly yet comfortably furnished room. A sofa was drawn up invitingly to the still glowing fire.

The walls were lined with books and shelves on which reposed glass cases and jars full of a yellowish liquid in which floated repellant lumps of grey matter. Dr. Frohlocken indicated one of these in passing.

“My first patient. Sir Augustus Smythe. Suffered from delusions, poor fellow. Fancied that water was poison to him. The fossil who called himself the family doctor talked about tumours on the brain and hereditary dipsomania and God knows what rubbish. The poor fellow came to me in desperation. I was just getting at the real trouble a simple matter of a suppressed complex in connection with a stepmother whom he disliked in early youth when the poor fellow died. Yes, delirium tremens. Very disappointing case. The wife presented me with a portion of his bra-in as a sign of gratitude. No tumour, of course. Utter rubbish. You can see for yourself.”

“Thank you,” said No. 7. “Tomorrow perhaps—”

“Certainly. I am merely diverting your mind from your own troubles. Now if you will lie down I will cover you over with a rug and in five minutes you will be asleep.”

“I’m afraid not,” No. 7 objected. “I feel horribly awake and my head hurts.”

He stopped, aware that Dr. Frohlocken was not listening. It was further borne in upon him that as a personality he had no real existence in the latter’s eyes and that he was there simply as a disease which hadn’t the ghost of a chance of survival. Already he felt the hopelessness of resistance. He was to lie down and go to sleep. He lay down and he had a rather horrible suspicion that he was already sleepy. The firelight was growing dim. His bottled predecessors faded from their shelves. There seemed to be nothing definite but the dark, unsmiling face with the black eyes staring at him through enormous aureoles of tortoise-shell. They grew larger and larger. They seemed to be swallowing him up bit by

bit. And his head with its aches and anxieties was the first to go.

“I suppose even a microbe may be grateful—” No. 7 murmured.

“In five minutes—” Dr. Frohlocken said.

He laid his hand on No. 7 and pushed him gently into darkness.

*

THE wintry morning sunshine had already begun to show through the window when the butler tiptoed into the library. He carried a laden breakfast-tray which he placed quietly on the table beside the sofa and then stood gazing severely at the man who lay there asleep. Once or twice he shook his head with that expression of aloof disparagement peculiar to his class, then, warned by a faint flutter of the sleeper’s eyelids, he began a discreet but busy clatter with the tea-things.

The man on the sofa stretched himself and yawned.

“Morning!” he said sleepily.

The butler apparently did not hear the greeting and No. 7 opened his eyes wide. He looked about him and his expression of peaceful content gave place to one of disappointment. He rubbed his hand over his dark head and sighed.

“I’m just where I was before,” he said.

“Yes sir,” said the butler. The “sir” came with an effort, but it came. No. 7 drew himself up and received his cup with resignation.

“Well, I suppose it can’t be helped,” he said. “I really hoped I’d sleep it off though. By the way, you had rather a disturbed night yourself, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did you see your nocturnal visitor?” No. 7 enquired with gracious interest.

“I did, sir.”

There was something about the man’s manner which was distinctly

unsatisfactory. It implied unutterable things. In its self-contained way it was inimical. And No. 7, in his lonely friendless state could not bear it. Moreover he was under the necessity of proving to himself that he had handled butlers before. He held the man under a steady eye.

“If you saw him,” he said, “then I suppose you could easily identify him?” The butler handed the toast.

“I’m afraid not, sir. He wore a mask.”

“But you saw his dress and figure?”

“Yes, sir. He was about your size, sir, and his clothes were checked as far as I could see a sort of dirty brown colour.”

“Oh!” No. 7 drew his rug up to his chin. But he knew by the slant of the butler’s eye that he had seen and he suspected the description to have been a piece of pure malice. “Scarcely enough for purposes of identification,” he observed.

The butler passed the butter. His features were expressionless.

“No, sir, I suppose not.”

This was no better. No. 7 felt thwarted. He put his hand to his collar with a movement that seemed habitual. It was disconcerting to find that the collar was missing.

“Any clue been found?” he asked, to cover his confusion.

“No, sir but the silver.”

“Oh indeed?”

“Yes, sir down an area.”

“Very fortunate.”

“Yes, sir.”

By this time the butler had finished his arrangements and placed the morning-paper on the table.

“You’ll find an account of it all in there, sir,” he said.

“What already?”

“There was a journalist fellow here last night, sir. He seemed to know more about it all than anyone.” The butler’s face lit up with a flash of bitter humour which made him seem more human. No. 7 felt encouraged. Perhaps, after all, they might be friends. It was a case for a discreet mixture of tact and frankness.

“By the way, what’s your name?” he asked graciously as the butler reached the door.

“James, sir.”

“Well, James, I think it better to inform you my reason for being here. In this eh unusual state. I am Dr. Frohlocken’s patient nervous shock, you know, followed by complete loss of memory.”

“Very good, sir.”

The butler’s tone suggested a discreet acceptance of a more than doubtful explanation, and as the door closed No. 7 sank back among his cushions. He had excused himself. And there was a beastly French adage about people who excused themselves, even he could remember that. Besides, it was evident that in good society one does not explain things even the most extraordinary to the butler. His belief in himself began to fade.

More to change the unpleasant trend of his thoughts than out of real interest he took up the paper and opened it. Judging from the first sheet which was black with startling headings, Dr. Frohlocken liked his news served up in a wellspiced form. Sandwiched between a horrible murder and the latest society scandal, the patient discovered “a daring burglary heroic conduct of a butler” which he recognized at once as the one in which Dr. Frohlocken’s silver had been so closely concerned. The account ran as follows:

“Last night, at about twelve o’clock, the house of the well-known specialist, Dr. Frohlocken, was broken into and a considerable quantity of valuable silver stolen before one of the servants, roused by the suspicious noise, gave the alarm. Great courage and presence of mind was displayed by the butler who pluckily attacked the intruder. The latter however succeeded in making good his escape. At the

time of going to press no trace of him had been found. The police believe, judging from the manner in which the robbery was carried out, that the burglar and the notorious William Brown, alias Slippery Bill, are identical. It will be remembered that Brown has been connected with the most cunning and daring swindles and burglaries, but his capture has been made extremely difficult by the fact that only his most intimate accomplices know what he really looks like. His disguises are as many as they are complete. Thanks to a gentlemanly appearance and manner, he has imposed upon his victims as a millionaire, nobleman, clergyman, as well as other less distinguished persons, and many legends are told concerning his cunning. A former accomplice, who turned King's evidence in the last case, gave evidence that Brown always carried a small charm fastened to the inside of his coat which served both as a luck-bringer and a means of revealing himself to his accomplices. This charm, a small gold pig, popularly known as a lucky pig, should prove useful as a mark of identity when the time comes, but for the present the owner has disappeared with his usual completeness."

Here followed further details concerning "Slippery Bill's" career which were not sufficiently interesting to attract the reader's thoughts from himself. The mere word "identity" had awakened in him the recollection of his own unhappy state, and he fell back with a sigh of despair. This Smith, this rogue had an identity and he had none not even a bad one. To all intents and purposes he was nothing but a mere derelict on a wide, unknown sea, without flag, without helm, without anchor. It was very tragic, very pathetic, and his imagination, taking the bit between his teeth, carried him into scenes both probable and improbable. He imagined in turn an adoring mother, an adoring bride, an adoring wife, waiting in vain for the son or, respectively, the fiance or husband who never returned. He came to the conclusion that he must be an affectionate and tender-hearted man, for he felt profoundly moved at the thought of the possible pain he might be inflicting. He grew desperate. Was there no means of unravelling the mystery which surrounded his life, nothing about him which might awaken memory or give some clue as to his previous existence?

With a quick glance round the room, to make sure that James was not watching, he threw off the big rug and examined himself from head to foot. The result was not gratifying. His boots were shapeless and ill-fitting and the same could be said of his trousers, which, what with their pattern and the recent rent in the knee, were the last thing in disreputableness. Anxiously, he plunged his hands first into one pocket and then into another, but without any better result than on

the first occasion. They were perfectly empty. He patted the side-pocket, the waistcoat nothing. His hand glided over the breast and there stopped suddenly as though it had been seized by a vise. Half paralysed he withdrew his hand and looked at it. Then his jaw dropped. There, between finger and thumb, was a small golden object a ridiculous thing with a minute curlytail and impossible eyes and a slight but ghastly resemblance to a pig. No. 7 lurched to his feet. He staggered to the looking-glass. He saw there a pleasant and even good-looking young man with a short dark moustache and eyes which in a normal state must have been both humorous and frank. At that moment, however, they were wide open with an expression of almost delirious consternation. No. 7 raised a trembling hand to his moustache and tugged it vigorously. The result proved it genuine. He tweaked the dark, disordered hair no wig revealed itself. He groaned aloud. This then was William Brown this was the real man. He was neither a duke nor a millionaire nor even a respectable loafer but a notorious swindler, a thief, a rogue. He had stolen the silver of his own host, had preyed upon the weakness and credulity of his fellow-creatures. He was called “Slippery Bill.” The last horrible item weighed more upon him than all the others put together. If it had been “Roving Robert” or “Daring Dick,” he would have borne it better; but “Slippery Bill” lacked the commonest element of romance as completely as did William Brown. Both names were vulgar as vulgar as his clothes, and one, at least, sounded as disreputable as his past reputation. He looked at the terrible discovery lying in the palm of his hand. It seemed to him that the beady eyes twinkled and that there was something malicious and insulting in the twist of the curly tail. Visions of rejoicing mothers and brides and wives vanished. He saw himself in the dock sentenced for offences he couldn’t even remember; he saw himself “doing time”; he heard the tread of approaching footsteps the footsteps of an avenging Nemesis; he heard the door open. Involuntarily he turned, prepared to face the worst, the perspiration breaking out in great beads upon his forehead. But it was only Dr. Frohlocken who gazed at him with a grim displeasure.

“You’ve been thinking about yourself,” he said crossly. “I told you not to. But I was not in form. It shows how the most disciplined brain can become unbalanced. At any rate you slept well?”

“Excellently.”

“Did you dream?”

“Not a thing.”

“Rubbish. However, it’s no use expecting anything from a mind that has not learnt to contemplate itself dispassionately. Sit down.”

No. 7 sat down. He tried to do so with an air of independence, but his recently acquired knowledge had cowed him to such an extent that he would have stood on his head with equal docility. Dr. Frohlocken sat down opposite him. Except that the lurid dressing-gown had given place to an old-fashioned frockcoat, his appearance had not changed. His black hair still stood on end and, for some reason or other, he was still in a very bad temper. After a moment’s intense silence, during which he stared at his patient unblinkingly, he produced a newspaper which he spread out over his knees, keeping his long finger on a particular paragraph and referring to it constantly throughout the interview.

It was a situation calculated to try the strongest nerves. The self-discovered William Brown could only set his teeth and endeavour to bear himself to some extent as became a man of his reputation. Highwaymen, he remembered, went to the gallows with a jest. Slippery Bill should at least not cringe openly.

“I suppose you still want to know who you are?” Dr. Frohlocken began at length. “I presume, judging from my observation of ordinary mentality, that you would prefer to be recognised, externally, if I may so express myself. The desire to get to the top of a mountain without climbing it is one of the most discouraging symptoms of our times—”

“If you mean,” William Brown interrupted, “that I want you to find out who I am, really I can’t say that I do. You see, I’ve been thinking it over. After all, you know, it’s rather an interesting experiment this starting all over again. Who knows perhaps I shan’t like my old self at all.”

“That,” said Dr. Frohlocken, referring disconcertingly to the paragraph, “is extremely likely. However, the matter is not in our hands. I foresee that interfering busybodies will make a reasonable and logical process in this matter impossible. In other words, No. 7, I fear that you are already discovered.”

No. 7 felt for a pocket-handkerchief that was not there.

“It’s not cricket,” he said, with passion. “I don’t see why I should have a personality thrust upon me that I don’t recognise. I repudiate it. Why, I don’t

remember a thing the fellow did. I might disapprove horribly and yet *I* should be blamed. *I* should be held responsible—”

“Exactly.” For the first time Dr. Frohlocken looked at him with approval. “I see that you have some glimmerings of my own idea. It’s childish to start at the end. The only sensible method is for you to return to your normal consciousness by normal means. That was what I had intended. Unfortunately it is a delicate and lengthy process and the time at our disposal is very limited. The best that I can do for you is to set you on the road. Are you prepared to answer my questions fully and frankly?”

“But,” said William Brown bitterly, “I tell you I don’t remember it’s not fair.”

“One moment. You say that you do not remember. Yet if I asked you to tell me some of the dreams you have dreamed in your other life you will no doubt be able to furnish me with several examples. Come now!”

This seemed innocent enough. Dreams were idiotic things. No one could be held responsible for them. And it certainly was odd that he did remember …

“Well, of course I suppose I dreamed the usual stuff the kind of thing everybody dreams.”

“As, for instance—”

“Well, walking down Bond Street in one’s pyjamas—”

“As you say common quite common—”

“Falling over precipices chased by locomotives climbing spiral staircases—”

Dr. Frohlocken glanced up over his glasses.

“I might suggest,” he said, “that in these days it is not wise to relate one’s dreams in public. But that is quite by the way. Is there nothing significant or outstanding that you can remember?”

“Nothing,” said William Brown firmly.

“Then allow me to test your reactions.” He took a very modern watch from his

old-fashioned waistcoat pocket and set it on his knee. “I shall give you a string of words and I wish you to respond promptly with whatever they suggest to you. For example “Drink?”

“Whisky.”

“You see. You get the idea. Butter?”

“Margarine.”

“Meat?”

“Coupons.”

“Locks?”

William Brown faltered “Lock-up” and “prison” had suggested themselves instantly. He suppressed them. Dr. Frohlocken was obviously counting the seconds. He plunged …

“Safes.”

“Sea?”

“America.”

“Career?”

“Criminal—” This would not do at all. He felt he had been trapped led into a bog in which he was slithering hopelessly.

“Pig,” said Dr. Frohlocken unexpectedly.

Thereat William Brown’s mind simply refused to function. It stopped dead. He sat there with his mouth open, the perspiration gathering on his forehead, whilst Dr. Frohlocken counted the seconds. It was devilish. There were Heaven knew how many thousand words in the English language. Not one of them came to him. But before his glazing eyes a monstrous thing had begun to shape itself a golden horror with beady staring eyes and a grotesque tail …

“A distinct result,” Dr. Frohlocken was saying gleefully; “in the short space of

five minutes we have touched on two definite suppressions. I have not the slightest doubt No. 7—”

His voice faded. William Brown heard a telephone clanging in the distance. Ever afterwards he believed that he fainted, for he remembered nothing further until a hand was laid on his shoulder with a galvanising horrible familiarity.

“It’s as I feared,” Dr. Frohlocken said. “Thanks to that damn Constable, they’re on your track already. I’m sorry. I would like to have prepared you better. You will now have to endure the methods of ordinary unscientific investigation. The best I can do for you is to see that you meet this fellow in a more presentable condition. If you go into the next room, you will find a bath prepared and a change of clothes. No, they are not my clothes. They belonged to my last patient. Threw himself out of the window, poor fellow. In your terminology, he’d lost his memory for five years. Oh, yes, he was cured. Wonderful case. But when he recognised his family he killed himself. Very sad. However, I think they’ll fit you—”

No. 7 held his ground. He was aware of a horrible internal upheaval. Something enormous was happening to him. Out of the depths, as it were, Slippery showed himself for the first time. He leered. He whispered. He nudged.

“You’re caught, old bird. Of course he knows who you are. He’s sent for the police. Bash him over the head and make a bolt for it. It’s your only chance—”

“I can’t,” No. 7 argued desperately. “It isn’t fair. I’ve stolen his silver, I’ve abused his hospitality, but there is a limit—”

“Stow it, old bird. You’re a scoundrel and you know it. None of that pi’-stuff—”

Physically he swayed before the storm. Dr. Frohlocken took him kindly by the arm.

“When you are ready,” he said, “I shall have further news for you. Mind you, I disapprove entirely. I consider the whole business outrageous. I told them so. It’s that damn Constable. When a reward of 1000 is offered you can’t expect an intellect like that to worjt scientifically. In fact I doubt if that Constable has an intellect at all probably he is a mere instinct. Anyhow, there it is. I can only hope that their methods will not be too much of a shock to you.”

“That’s the sort of sense of fun he’s got,” Slippery Bill urged, insidiously. “Guying you, that’s what he is. Give him one on the bean.”

The advice was obviously sound. That No. 7 did not follow it, but slunk tamely into the bathroom, was due to the fact that he was hopelessly handicapped. He might be otherwise a scoundrel, but he had become a scoundrel with a conscience. It was an impossible situation. True, his better-half enjoyed the bath, but the realisation that he had the instincts and even the appearance of a gentleman Dr. Frohlocken’s late patient must have had an excellent taste in suiting, and the glass revealed an agreeable young man with that correct bearing which is erroneously supposed to go with a blameless life did not reassure him. Not for nothing had William Brown impersonated dukes and millionaires with impunity. And then there was the Lucky Pig. He held it in the palm of his hand and considered it reproachfully. Its expression of idiotic complacency irritated him. He could not help feeling that its influence was bad and that it had led him astray in his early youth when a mother’s care might have put him on the right path, which leads to public funerals and other rewards of virtue. He fully intended to hurl it through the window, but a second impulse, born of superstition, prevented him and, instead, he slipped the creature into his pocket. After all, if he really were William Brown, it was sheer folly to throw away something which had been instrumental in getting him out of tight places.

And this was a tight place. He wanted all the luck he could lay hands on.

No. 7 went back to Dr. Frohlocken’s library with the courage which accompanies a comparatively new suit of clothes. But on the threshold he faltered. Dr. Frohlocken was no longer alone. There was Constable X., helmet in hand, and looking as though he were in church, and a second individual, dressed like a Man-in-the-Street. He was perhaps a trifle too clean-shaven and his dress perhaps a trifle too unobtrusive. He looked to No. 7 horribly like a detective in disguise. Dr. Frohlocken indicated him with a rude forefinger—

“That,” he said, “is Inspector Smythe from Scotland Yard.”

Inspector Smythe jerked his head at Constable X.

“That him?”

“That’s ‘im, sir.”

“Inspector Smythe takes a great interest in you, No. 7,” Dr. Frohlocken added with the obvious desire to be insulting. “1,000 is a nice little sum, eh, Inspector?”

No. 7 sat down because he could not stand, and the two men stared at him, the Doctor with a gloomy sympathy, the Inspector with an almost hungry eagerness. Constable X. had ceased altogether to be human. No. 7 had hated Inspector Smythe on sight. Probably the dislike was inherited from his other self which at that moment predominated wholly. The desire to “do” his enemy at all costs had sent the last remnants of a conscience in full retreat. He set his teeth and waited.

Inspector Smythe got up. He inspected No. 7 from different angles. He had a little note to which he referred, making marks against various items, after the fashion of a man checking an inventory.

“So you’re the gentleman who’s lost his memory?” he remarked, finally. “Don’t know who you are, eh?”

No. 7 felt there was malice in the question the sort of playful facetiousness for which the police are noted. He bowed coldly. Inspector Smythe sniped him from another corner.

“Read the morning’s paper yet, sir?”

“I have.”

“Nothing in it to strike your memory, eh?”

No. 7 realised that the end was very near. Too late he saw how good Slippery Bill’s advice had been. The odds were now three to one supposing the Doctor came to the Inspector’s assistance, which, from his expression, was doubtful. Constable X. blocked the window effectively, and No. 7 had a shrewd if unreasoned suspicion that James was at the key-hole. He slipped his hand into his pocket and finding the Pig still there clung to it.

“Nothing.”

“Humph. Well, we’ll see what we can do, eh, Doctor?”

Dr. Frohlocken ran his hand through his black hair.

“Idiot!” he said distinctly.

The Inspector smiled. He fluttered an eyelid in No. 7’s direction. It was evident he expected the latter to appreciate the joke.

“Our friend here doesn’t think much of our methods but we police have our little successes too sometimes. I wouldn’t mind laying a bet with you, Doctor, that our friend here will soon be telling us all about himself. Now, sir, one moment.

When you found yourself on the doorstep, what was your first sensation?”

“Well, I wondered how the deuce I’d got there?”

“You were surprised?”

“Very.”

“Did anything else surprise you?”

“My clothes—”

“Unfamiliar, eh?”

“Distinctly.”

“Feel more natural now?”

“Better, at any rate.”

Inspector Smythe nodded with satisfaction. He came closer to his victim. His bright gimlet eyes were fixed apparently on No. y’s neck.

“Found nothing on your person to identify you, eh?”

No. 7 gulped.

“Nothing.”

Obviously he would be searched. And the first and only thing that they would find was Slippery Bill’s mascot. He considered hurriedly whether it would be better to stuff it down the back of his chair or to swallow it whole. The latter

method occurred to him in the form of a gloomy pun “swallowing a pig to save his bacon” but it brought him no comfort. For one thing he had to keep it to himself, for another it seemed to point to a hopeless depravity; and for another it was obviously impossible to swallow anything without detection.

In the midst of his terrible indecision the Inspector seized his head and pressed it with a vigour which wrung from him a groan, of protest.

“Hurts, eh?”

There was, it seemed, something incriminating about the head. No. 7 temporised.

“Well it certainly seems to—”

“No wonder. You’ve got a bump there as big as my fist.”

“A natural one?”

The Inspector grinned.

“If a man hits you on the back of the head and a bump follows, you’d call it natural, wouldn’t you?”

No. 7 supposed he would.

“Have I been hit on the back of the head?” he asked.

“You have had an accident.” The Inspector wagged his pencil at the Doctor. “How does that strike you, eh, sir?”

Dr. Frohlocken sneered.

“You are no doubt doing your best according to your lights. The probability that you are about to wreck my patient’s mental balance for ever is of course an insignificant detail. Pray go on.”

The Inspector accepted the invitation. He sat down again, to No. y’s infinite relief, and referred t?ack to his notebook.

“Now, sir,” he said. “I want you to follow me with the closest attention. You have lost your memory, but I am certain, in spite of our friend here, that by

suggesting certain episodes of your past life to you we shall effect an immediate cure. You get the idea, don't you?"

No. 7 assented. He wondered which episode from Slippery Bill's career the Inspector had selected and hoped vaguely that he had never murdered anyone. Inspector Smythe put his pencil thoughtfully to his nose.

"Imagine a big steamer," he began slowly. "A well-dressed young man is lounging on a deck chair. Possibly he has a French novel on his knee, and is smoking a cigarette. But his thoughts are elsewhere. He is thinking of someone whom he is going to meet a certain lady who is waiting for him in England. The prospect pleases him. He enquires of a passing officer what speed the ship is making. One moment, please. Has anything come back to you?"

Dr. Frohlocken gave vent to a laugh such as might come from a disgusted hyena. No. 7 wavered. As far as he knew there was nothing criminal in these recollections. But one never knew. It would have been easier if he had known what sort of man Slippery Bill really was.

"It seems a sort of glimmering—" he murmured.

"Humph. I thought so. Now listen. There is a storm. For three days the steamer is tossed about a hopeless derelict then stranded. Most of the crew and passengers are drowned others fatally injured in the vessel. The young man, of whom I have been speaking, is saved and taken to a hospital. From thence he manages to write to his friend that she should come to him. Ha how's that?"

"It certainly seems to be getting clearer," No. 7 agreed. If he had never been at sea before, he was there now. There was nothing for it but to continue with his half admissions.

The Inspector smiled pleasantly in the Doctor's direction.

"You see. The power of suggestion. Not so unscientific as you thought, eh, Doctor? Well, sometimes a little bit of horse sense goes a long way. Allow me now to give you the brief history of this young man." He turned back to his notebook and began to read in a loud monotone :

"Count Louis de Beaulieu, son of the late Francpis de Beaulieu, of no address, and of his wife, the late Countess de Beaulieu, nee, Lady Caroline Sudleigh of

Sudleigh Court. Born 1890. Is known to have been travelling round the world and to have embarked on the ‘Melita’ at Gibraltar in order to return to England where an estate had been left him by his maternal grandfather. ‘Melita’ wrecked off the English coast and all hands lost except Count Louis who was injured on the head by a floating spar and taken to the nearest hospital. Two days ago disappeared whilst nurses changed duty. Nurse testifies to his having written and received letters and to have talked in delirium of his fiancee. Can give no details, as was too busy at the time to pay much attention, but describes the patient as being dark and good-looking.”

The Inspector glanced reassuringly at No. 7, who blushed. The Doctor repeated his unpleasant laugh.

“That settles it, of course. My God this country!”

“One moment, please.” The Inspector snapped his notebook. “Do you speak French?” he asked, slowly.

There was no evading this. And he was in such deep water that another fathom or two scarcely mattered.

“I do, “he said firmly.

“Parlez-vous francais?” demanded the Inspector, with increased solemnity.

No. 7 smiled. Somewhere at the back of his mind he had discovered a rescuing fragment.

“Mais certainement,” he said.

“That, I think,” said the Inspector, “settles it. And it gives me the greatest satisfaction,” he added pointedly, “to have been the means of identifying you, Count.” He produced the title with the gesture of an actor who knows he has effected an artistic and striking curtain. No. 7 rose slowly to his feet. Whatever other social positions he had arrogated to himself in his murky past this one, at least, was being thrust upon him.

“Do you mean *I* am the Count?” he stammered.

The Inspector bowed.

“There is, in my mind, no doubt of it.”

“He’s going to faint!” Dr. Frohlocken burst out furiously. “And I don’t wonder. If he dies or goes mad I wash my hands of the whole business. I never heard of such methods such damned folly—”

No. 7 had, in fact, caught hold of the chair back for support. The shock had been too sudden. His outraged and absurd conscience, stung to a last desperate resistance, struggled against the lies and deceptions in which he was being involved. Beautiful women, rich young foreigners, steamers, wrecks and untold wealth broke over him in an avalanche. He tried to explain to deny to confess. He went so far as to put his hand to his pocket to produce the fatal and damning Pig then he caught sight of Constable X.‘s face and desisted. That officer’s expression of hungry desire to arrest someone chilled No. y’s nobler impulse. He gave his conscience the coup de grace and the Pig slid back into its hiding place.

“I accept the identification,” he said. “I may be out of practice but I shall endeavour to fill my position worthily.”

Dr. Frohlocken snorted with disgust, but Slippery Bill was heard to applaud warmly from the depths.

CHAPTER III

DURING the next forty-eight hours Monsieur de Beaulieu, of innumerable aliases, scarcely knew whom he disliked most of the three people amongst whom circumstances forced him to move and have his being. Had they regarded him as a fellow creature in distress he might have liked them well enough even James had his relenting moments, and the Inspector was of a refreshing hopefulness but to them he was not a human being at all, but an Object, to James an Object of suspicion, to the Doctor an Object of Scientific Interest and to the Inspector a matter of a thousand pounds hard cash. All three were out to prove something at his expense, James that he wasn't what he seemed, the Inspector that he was what he wanted him to be, and the Doctor that the Inspector was an outrageous ass. Of the three the Doctor was undoubtedly the most dangerous. The Inspector at least played a straightforward game and at the worst he could only produce evidence from the outside against which Monsieur de Beaulieu could defend himself with some possibility of success. But Dr. Frohlocken was out for King's evidence. And the victim was to give evidence against himself.

"It doesn't matter what you are," was one of the Doctor's most disturbing dicta, "it's what you think you are that matters."

And his methods savoured of a perpetual Third Degree. By this time his patient had obtained a general and very unfavourable conception of the Doctor's theories. Life wasn't the relatively simple business he had supposed. It was an appearance, a disguise cloaking unspeakable possibilities. Nothing you did was innocent or insignificant. Everything pointed to something. The way you sneezed, the way you cut your bread and butter, your likes and dislikes, your harmless little idiosyncrasies were all symptoms usually of something highly discreditable. As to dreams, Monsieur de Beaulieu learnt to lie about them after his second night. From thence on he invented them, but with very little success a charming idyllic scene in which angels and heavenly choirs played the chief part proving itself to have an entirely unsuspected significance.

Under these circumstances it was impossible to know when and how the lurking Slippery Bill might be coaxed out into the open.

On the other hand, Monsieur de Beaulieu was steadying to his part. He was getting back something of the nerve which must have carried him safely through

other forgotten adventures. By his fourth morning he had almost begun to enjoy himself. The mere fact that he had genuinely lost his memory did not trouble him at all. On the contrary, the inability to remember his past seemed to him a distinct professional advantage, conducing to a sincere innocency and ignorance of the world's ways, not to mention his own. In fact, but for the existence of the Pig he might honestly have believed himself a Count or anything else that the Inspector had chosen to suggest to him. As it was, he was able to approach his breakfast with zest. Even the unexpectedly early appearance of the Inspector himself did not prevent him removing the top of his second egg with a nice accuracy.

"I think," Inspector Smythe said, shaking hands firmly with the Doctor regardless of the latter's obvious unwillingness, "I think, gentlemen, that matters are coming to a head. Hence this visit. I have obtained what will prove to be conclusive evidence. Personally, I was satisfied at once, but of course we could not expect the late Lord Sudleigh's executors to look at it in that way. A few more formalities, however, my dear Count, and we shall be through."

Dr. Frohlocken smiled satirically, but the Inspector, who was considering Monsieur de Beaulieu with an almost tender solicitude, was unaware of the fact. Indeed the Count had an uncomfortable conviction that Slippery Bill himself could not have aroused a deeper feeling of pride and proprietorship in the breast of his captor. But he had no means of resisting this encroachment on his freedom. When a man wears another man's clothes and another man's name and is contemplating the use of another man's money, it is inappropriate to argue the Rights of Property, and Monsieur de Beaulieu resigned himself to his position and his breakfast.

"The reason I turned up so early," the Inspector explained, referring to his watch, "is that I'm expecting my evidence to turn up here. You'll excuse the liberty I'm sure, Doctor. From the point of view of your patient's health, you know—"

"Your consideration dumfounds me," Dr. Frohlocken interjected. "May I ask whom my unfortunate patient is to be confronted with this morning?"

"Well, in the first place there's Lord Sudleigh's lawyer—"

Monsieur de Beaulieu dropped his egg-spoon.

"In my present state of health, I consider that my feelings ought to be

considered," he said, plaintively. "And I don't like lawyers."

"Memory returning, eh what?" the Inspector suggested.

"I think it's instinct," the Count explained.

"Well, anyhow he had to come. That's him ringing now, I've no doubt. Or maybe it's your nurse—"

"My what?" The Count had now definitely finished with his breakfast. The Inspector smiled reassuringly upon him.

"Your nurse, Count. I sent for her so that she could meet you together with the lawyer fellow. Identification, you understand. Nurse bound to recognise you—"

"But look here—" the Count put his hand to his burning forehead. A lawyer was bad enough, but a nurse the loving guardian of somebody else's tender youth was too much. Discovery again loomed on the horizon, and he did not want to be discovered. Whether it belonged to him or not, the position of Count de Beaulieu suited him down to the ground, and he had not the slightest intention of surrendering it without a struggle. "Excuse me, Inspector," he said, "but if I have been travelling round the world for the last few years, how do you expect this eh person to recognise me?"

Inspector Smythe stopped half-way to the door.

"Recognise you why shouldn't she recognise you? Why, only a week ago she was nursing you!"

Monsieur de Beaulieu drew himself up to his full height.

"It is quite true that I have completely forgotten my past," he said with dignity, "but one thing I'll swear to I haven't had a nurse for the. last twenty years and anybody who says she—"

"My dear Count," interrupted the Inspector. "I don't mean that sort I mean a sick nurse, a hospital nurse. But of course you've forgotten the wreck, you know."

The Count put his hand to the back of his head which was still sensitive. A light had dawned, but it was scarcely a comforting one.

“So it’s her!” he exclaimed, with a regrettable lack of grammar. “Good God!”

“Just you wait,” said his protector, consolingly, “I’ll bring the whole lot in and then we’ll be through with it—”

“Look here!” the Count held out a detaining hand. “Supposing she says I’m not who you think I am—what’s going to happen? It’s not a hanging business, is it? I never thought of being a Count until you suggested it and I—”

“I take all responsibility,” said the Inspector firmly. “And if you are not you then we must find out who you are. You must be somebody.”

“I suppose so.” The Count tugged at his small moustache. “On the whole though —if you don’t mind and the worst comes to the worst—I think I won’t bother any more about it. It’s rather nerve-racking, you know this sort of quick-change business. If I’m not the Count de Beaulieu I’ll just start life again as—eh—anybody—Adol Tom Smith Brown—” He had suppressed the William with an effort which left him breathless and horror-stricken by the nearness of his escape. The Inspector wagged a playful finger.

“Now just you wait, Count,” he said soothingly. “All you’ve got to do is to wait and keep cool quite cool—”

He was out of the room before any further protest could be made, and the Count, having overcome the temptation to put an end to the situation by jumping through the window, prepared himself for the next dilemma, with a sangfroid which the events of the last few days had helped to develop in him. Nevertheless, as he heard returning footsteps, he had some difficulty in retaining his attitude of dignified and he hoped aristocratic composure by the fireside. He knew that his face was redder than is considered elegant in good society and his high collar his first purchase with the Count’s money had become uncomfortably tight and hot. Even his last resource, an eyeglass which he had accustomed himself to wearing in moments of extreme pressure, failed him by dropping as the door opened, with a nerve-jarring click against his waistcoat button.

The Inspector had left the room in a certain state of excitement. He returned with the pompous and funereal tread of a man conscious that the eyes of the world are upon you. Behind him loomed a Large Person in the garb of a hospital nurse and, behind her again, a ferret-like little man, in all the glory of the professional frockcoat, was endeavouring not very successfully to make himself visible.

There was a moment's potential silence. The Inspector made a solemn gesture of introduction.

"Permit me," he said. "Count Louis de Beaulieu Nurse Bunbury Mr. Simmons; Dr. Frohlocken Nurse Bunbury—"

The Doctor removed his spectacles, placed them in an inner pocket and buttoned up his coat with the air of a man who refuses to contemplate a disgraceful scene. Count Louis, raised by the dignity of his full title, endeavoured to pull himself together. The Large Person was staring at him with a blankness which boded nothing good and the lawyer had evidently already summed him up and, from the expression of the small eyes behind the pince-nez, none too favourably. Hitherto Monsieur de Beaulieu had felt himself surprisingly at home in his position. Under this combined attack he began to slide rapidly down the social scale. There was no doubt that the game was up. It only remained for him to carry the rest of his brief glory to a gallant end.

"I'm awfully grateful to you both for coming to my assistance like this," he said. "Please sit down."

His manner was gracious and gentlemanly. The Large Person alone persisted in her uncompromising stare. The lawyer obviously softened.

"Thank you—thank you—" he was heard to murmur. "Delighted to be of any assistance." After which admission he sat down and produced a number of sealed documents which he laid on the table with an air of grave mystery and polished his pince-nez with a corner of his handkerchief. "You say you are the Count Louis de Beaulieu?" he asked so suddenly and loudly that even the Large Person started.

The Count smiled and shook his head.

"I don't say so," he said. "I am told so."

"Ah, yes, of course. Loss of memory. Very awkward indeed."

"But very interesting," put in the Doctor satirically. Whereupon the Large Person testified her assent by a slow and twice repeated nod of the neatly bonneted head.

Mr. Simmons coughed.

“It is a case of identification by credible witnesses then,” he said. “To all intents and purposes, Count, we might as well look upon you as a corpse.”

“By all means,” the Count agreed. “Barring anatomical researches there is nothing I should like better. Pray proceed.”

“But it is not an easy case,” Mr. Simmons went on, with the air of reproving unwarrantable levity. “Your inability to testify on your own behalf, and the difficulty in procuring witnesses, make the matter exceptionally complicated. I may remind you that you have no relative living to identify you. Your uncle, my late client, Lord Sudleigh, who has left you the property in question, died two months ago. His direct heir has never seen you. Your past mode of life, which, if I may say so, appears to have been somewhat roving, makes it practically impossible to procure reliable witnesses. Those who knew you on board the ‘Melita’ are unfortunately deceased. It remains to be seen whether Nurse Bunbury, who attended Count de Beaulieu, recognises you as her patient.”

“Exactly!” said the Inspector.

The Count put his hand involuntarily to his collar. The great and critical moment had come. The only person who appeared indifferent to the fact was Nurse Bunbury herself. Her expression remained blank. “Come!” exclaimed the lawyer, sharply. “Is he or is he not the Count de Beaulieu?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Nonsense you must know. He was under your charge for two days.”

“I don’t know,” the Large Person repeated, stonily. “There doesn’t seem to be anything the matter with him.”

“Good heavens, woman!”

“Except a bit of fever perhaps,” she interposed with the air of modifying an important statement, “but then most of ‘em have that.”

Mr. Simmons interposed with an air of exemplary patience.

“But, my good person—” he began, “nobody wants to know if there is anything the matter with him. You have come here—”

“If there isn’t anything the matter with him,” Nurse Bunbury interrupted, “I can’t tell whether I know him or not. That’s all I can say, but I would like to add that my name is Bunbury Nurse Bunbury and that I am not a person. I am a lady.”

The Inspector looked at the lawyer and the lawyer stared at his documents. The Count replaced his eyeglass in a bright eye which was twinkling at that moment with completely recovered good-humour.

“You mean to say,” Mr. Simmons began again sternly, “that you only recognise your patients by their diseases?”

“Diseases and haccidents,” the Large Person assented. “I have ten of ‘em under me this very day. No. I, dislocated knee joint. No. 2, broken leg. No. 3, amputated big toe. No. 4—”

“Thank you—” began the Doctor hastily.

“And last week I was in the infection ward,” Nurse Bunbury continued undeterred. “Twelve of ‘em I had and every one of ‘em diphtherias. Only knew them by their temperatures. No. 6, he died yesterday—”

The lawyer shifted his chair nearer the open window.

“Very interesting, Nurse,” he said, “very interesting indeed, but scarcely to the point. Would you mind turning your attention to your late patient, Count Louis de Beaulieu? What was the matter with him, pray?”

“If you mean No. 7—” the Large Person began.

“I mean the patient who disappeared last Thursday week with somebody else’s clothes.”

“That’s No. 7,” she said at once. “Came in with a whole lot of ‘em half drowned, that’s what they were. Couldn’t tell tother from which. But 7, he was a scamp. He went off with No. 9’s trousers and waistcoats. No. 9 died next day, which was a mighty good thing considering his nasty temper. If he had known that his trousers—”

By this time Dr. Frohloeken had replaced his spectacles, through which he was gazing at the Large Person with interest and satisfaction.

“I congratulate you, Madam.” he said. “You appear to have the proper scientific point of view. You are not concerned with absurd personalities. It happens that I, too, regard him as No. 7. And No. 7 he remains until by reasonable methods—”

“I am asking you about your patient,” Mr. Simmons put in with determined patience. “What was the matter with him?”

“Concussion, sir, with fever and a temperature—”

“Stop!” The Inspector pointed an accusing finger at her. “Did you say concussion?”

“I did, sir.”

“From a blow?”

“On the back of the head. A nasty-looking thing—”

“Wait!” The Inspector crossed the room and taking the Count by the shoulders whirled him round and removed the bandage very much as a conjuror removes the cloth from the magic flowerpot from whence rabbits and other surprises are to make their appearance. “Look at that!” he commanded.

The Large Person looked. The lawyer looked. The Count blushed self-consciously.

“How about that?” the Inspector appealed.

“If it isn’t it,” the Large Person began solemnly, “then it’s as like it as if it was its twinbrother.”

The Count was permitted to turn round. He found the Inspector flushed with triumph, the lawyer dubious. Nurse Bunbury smiled upon him with delighted recognition.

“I knew it at once, No. 7,” she said. “Couldn’t have made a mistake about it. And now I believe I remember you, too. When I was bandaging your head I said

to myself, ‘If that young fellow has any sense left in him after that it’s a wonder!’ And how you talked! My gracious, you kept us all awake with ‘her.’ It was ‘Theodora this’ and ‘Theodora that’ till—”

The Count coughed. They were on thin ice again and though it was a satisfaction to know the lady’s name he felt that there was something indiscreet in his discussion of another man’s loveaffairs.

“I think,” he said with dignity, “that we can leave the lady out of the case.”

“I should hope so,” the Doctor muttered.

Mr. Simmons shook his head.

“It would be a great gain if we could find this ‘Theodora,’—” he observed. “I confess, Inspector, that though your theories are very ingenious I feel doubtful as to whether I should like to trust them to the extent of 10,000 a year and an estate in Norfolk. You will admit that the evidence is weak in the extreme—”

“Weak! What more do you want?”

“I want Theodora,” Mr. Simmons returned with a dryness of manner which nullified the suggestion of tenderness in his words.

The Inspector shook his head and turned his eyes to the ceiling as though hoping to find there a sympathetic witness to so much unreasonableness. But before he had sufficiently recovered himself to protest the door was opened and James stood solemnly on the threshold.

“If you please, sir, a lady to see you,” he announced.

The Doctor waved his hands distractedly.

“I do not want to see her. Can’t you see I have enough fools here already. Send her away.”

“If you please, sir, it is your consultation hour.”

“What do I care, idiot. Send her away, I tell you!”

“If you please, sir, she said it was very important.”

“What do you mean? Is she dying?”

“I don’t know, sir. One never can tell.”

“The healthiest-looking go first,” the Large Person observed unexpectedly.

Dr. Frohlocken hesitated a moment, obviously torn between impatience at the interruption and a sense of professional duty.

“If you would wait but a few minutes?” he suggested doubtfully.

Simmons bowed.

“By all means.”

“My time is yours, Doctor,” added Monsieur de Beaulieu graciously.

Thus encouraged, but with considerable ill-will, Dr. Frohlocken followed the stoical James in the direction of his consulting-room and, for a time, nothing was heard but the distant murmur of a woman’s voice, interrupted occasionally by the Doctor’s familiar grunts of disapproval.

The three listeners maintained a gloomy silence. The Large Person, having lost interest in her whilom patient, had collapsed into the most comfortable chair, and the lawyer was staring in front of him with an expression which forbade liberties. The Count felt he was suspected in that quarter and, warned by experience, refrained from touching on even such innocent topics as the weather. For the moment the danger of discovery was averted, but for how long? As long, probably, as the real Count chose to maintain his mysterious incognito. Or, perhaps the Count was dead. The gold pig lying at the bottom of his understudy’s waistcoat suggested the glorious possibility with unction, but the understudy himself discountenanced it. He felt that to hope such a thing was indecent almost criminal a feeling which he knew to be ridiculous, but which, with the best will in the world, he could not altogether suppress. Anyhow, he had no grudge to speak of against the genuine Count, and none at all against the lovely Theodora. For he had made up his mind that she was lovely. The name suggested it and the Count’s behaviour proved it. A man who can ramble on about a lady on the top of a shipwreck and concussion of the brain has usually

method in his madness. The bogus Count fancied her at that moment in tears, weighed down by grief at the mysterious loss of her lover, and his heart went out to her in pity and considerable remorse.

“Theodora!” he repeated to himself. “Confoundedly pretty name! Theodora what, I wonder? Smith, probably or perhaps Brown!” Whereupon he smiled ruefully.

It was at this moment that Dr. Frohlocken returned. It appeared at once that some of his scientific detachment had been lost in that brief interview. He was still angry, but also not a little moved by some gentler emotion. He regarded No. 7 for the first time as though he were something more than an interesting experiment.

“As my house has become a lunatic asylum,” he said, “it is not inappropriate that mad events should take place in it. I am glad to think that at any rate I have washed my hands of all consequences. No. 7, Mademoiselle Theodora de Melville awaits you in my consulting room.”

CHAPTER IV

COUNT Louis DE BEAULIEU stood with his shaking hand upon the door handle. The last few minutes lay behind him like hours of nightmare of which this was the culminating agony. His utter consternation, mistaken by the Doctor for the bewilderment of an overpowering joy, the gradually dawning realisation of his position in its new and hopeless complications, had followed fast upon each other, and yet it seemed to him an eternity since he had smiled upon the Large Person and the dour-faced lawyer with all the insouciance of the budding fatalist. Then the whole thing had appeared more or less farcical an incredible comedy in which his mental misfortune played the chief role. Then he had, in some measure, felt himself a person of distinction. Now he was nothing more than a common rogue about to face his judge. And his judge was a woman that was the worst of it an angry, unhappy, disappointed woman, and one thing was certain in his mind, namely, that in all his previous nefarious career he had never enjoyed “doing” a woman or taking the consequences. Moreover, his nerve was gone. It was in vain that he threw back his shoulders and tugged at his tie and told himself that whatever happened she couldn’t kill him. He trembled visibly, and when he at length pushed open the fatal door he did so with much the same despairing courage as that which drives the suicide over the precipice.

He saw her before she saw him. She was standing by the window, her hands clasped together in an attitude of suppressed agitation, and before she moved he gathered that she was small, graceful and elegantly, if quietly, dressed. When she at length turned he saw that she suited the name Theodora even better than his picture of her. He had no memories to go by, but he could not believe that he had ever seen anything more lovely than her face, or anything more charming than its bewildering contrasts. The delicate features and grey eyes had certainly been made for happiness and their expression of trouble was as piquant as it was pathetic. Evidently she had been crying, and yet behind the tears there were untold possibilities of mirth and malicious humour; her fine lips trembled he could so easily have imagined how they would twitch with suppressed laughter. She looked at him steadily and he braced his shoulders against the door and faced her with sullen defiance. But she neither screamed nor gave any sign of surprise. She came towards him, and his eyes dropped. His defiance was melting fast into a miserable regret.

“Please don’t say anything!” he burst out at last. “You can’t say more than I could say about myself. I’m an utter cad I suppose I was born one and I’ve played you all a mean trick. I know it and it’s not much excuse to say I didn’t mean it. It was that Inspector—”

“But you see I know already I read about it in the papers,” she interrupted gently. “You lost your memory.” The tone of her voice gave him courage. He looked up at her again.

“Absolutely, I can’t remember a thing. That’s how it all started. It’s my only excuse.” He hesitated. “I’m most awfully sorry to have hurt you,” he said huskily.

She smiled a little woe-begone smile that was not without bitterness.

“You couldn’t help it,” she said. “Besides it’s all over now.”

“Yes of course, it’s all over now especially as far as I am concerned.” He drew himself upright. “Anyhow—before you call the Inspector—”

“But I’m not going to call the Inspector. Why should I? not yet at least.”

He stared at her.

“You mean—good heavens, Mademoiselle you don’t mean that you are going to help me out of this mess?”

“For what else should I be here?” She came forward and laid a white hand on his arm. “Aren’t you a little glad to see me Louis?”

For a minute a haze floated before his eyes. When it cleared he saw a sweet face close to his own, a pair of lips which trembled and yet smiled at him. He pressed his hand to his head.

“Mademoiselle I beg your pardon I don’t understand—”

“I asked if you were not a little glad to see me. Is that so very strange or difficult?”

“But—” He did not finish his sentence. Like so many flashes of light, a dozen

half-formed possibilities passed before his mind. Was he in reality the Count? Did he, by some extraordinary coincidence, bear that nobleman such a strong resemblance that even his fiancee was deceived? Had the lucky pig miraculously changed him or blinded her? Each suggestion seemed equally unlikely and equally absurd. The one thing that was certain was Mademoiselle Theodora herself and the small white hand resting on his arm. The instinct of self-preservation, or possibly the latent spirit of Slippery Bill or possibly something altogether different urged him to take it and press it between both his own.

“Forgive me if I seem very stupid,” he said.

“Look upon me as a sort of invalid with whom one must have patience. You see, I can’t remember anything not a single detail.”

“Not even the woman you you—”

“—loved?” He shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid not. Though, if it had the chance, I know it would all come back.” As he looked down into her face he winced at the thought of what his real memories might consist. “It’s infernally hard,” he said with truth and considerable force.

“Yes,” she agreed, sighing, “very hard.” Her hand dropped from his arm, and she turned away from him. He felt that the tears were very near the surface. “It’s like beginning life all over again,” she went on, half to herself.

He nodded ruefully.

“For me, at least. To all intents and purposes I’m a new born babe. I don’t even know my own name.”

“Your name is Louis de Beaulieu.”

“So I am told, Mademoiselle,” but *I* don’t know.”

She looked at him keenly and since, for once in a way and quite against the principles of his criminal self, he was telling the truth, he bore her scrutiny without flinching.

“Then then I suppose I had better go,” she said unsteadily. “I would never have come if I had realised that—that of course you would have forgotten me too.”

She moved towards the door. He followed her. Prudence flew to the winds. She was flushed with humiliation, and he had humiliated her. Here was a charming and lovely woman who came to him with her love and confidence, and he rebuffed her, insulted her by telling her that he did not even remember her existence. That was too much. Hardened criminal though he might be, Slippery Bill was evidently chivalrous to the bone. He interposed himself firmly between the lady and the door.

“Don’t go!” he blurted out. “Please don’t go not like that at any rate. Sit down and tell me all about everything about yourself and myself. It’s a wretched business, but perhaps we can help each other. At least we ought to try. Please don’t punish me like this.”

“I don’t want to punish you,” she said gently. “It’s not your fault.”

“Well, sit down then there by the fire. Let me take off your furs for you so. Are you comfortable? Is it too warm for you?”

She smiled up into his eager face and the smile transfigured her. Monsieur de Beaulieu forgot to look away.

“At any rate you have remembered how to be nice,” she said. “Thank you I am very comfortable. Won’t you sit down over there?”

The gentle reminder recalled him to himself and he bowed stiffly.

“Thank you, Mademoiselle—”

“Don’t be offended.” There was now a suspicion of genuine laughter in her grey eyes. “You see, we are starting life all over again.”

“Of course,” he said decorously, from the other side of the fireplace. “All the same I should like to know something of my pre-existence, if I may so call it. Would you mind?”

She did not answer at once. She stared gravely into the fire and he felt with a sense of shame that the subject must necessarily be painful to her. He bent forward in an attitude of confidential friendliness.

“Let me help you,” he said. “I’ll begin by asking questions. Am I, for instance,

really the Count Louis de Beaulieu?”

She looked at him in quick surprise.

“Of course,” she said.

“And you are Mademoiselle Theodora de Melville?”

She nodded without speaking and he hesitated, knowing that he was near delicate ground, yet desperately anxious to know more.

“I know I sound like an inquisitor,” he went on humbly, “but you must have patience with me. You can treat me as a sort of harmless lunatic if you like, but remember that you are the only person who can help me. Won’t you tell me something more tell me, for instance, where you live?”

“I lived in France,” she said, with a faint emphasis on the past tense.

“Was it there that we—er—first met?”

“Yes,” she said, and blushed. The blush was distracting. De Beaulieu fingered his eyeglass nervously.

“Was that very long ago?”

“Five years.”

“And we saw each other very often, I suppose?”

“Oh, no.” She looked at him with puzzled brows. “We only knew each other for a week. It was a case of love at first sight. Then you went away to make your fortune.”

He nodded gravely. It occurred to him that here lay a possible clue to the mystery. A week is a short time to remember and five years a long time in which to forget. A faint resemblance might easily develop, backed by circumstance, into something more definite.

“I understood—er—that we were were are engaged?” he ventured cautiously.

Her eyes returned to the fire.

“But certainly.” For the first time he detected a foreign nuance in her speech and manner. “We were engaged but my father objected. He turned you out of our house.”

Monsieur de Beaulieu drew himself up. It annoyed him to find that he was still saddled with a doubtful character.

“Why? Did they object to me?”

“You had no money in those days,” she answered with a faint smile. “And they said that you were well, just a little wild.”

It was no use feeling aggrieved. A man with Slippery Bill’s record might be thankful to come off so lightly. “Apparently you overcame their prejudices, however?” he suggested.

She threw back her head with a fascinating movement of defiance.

“Indeed not!” she said.

“Then, Mademoiselle, I’m afraid I really don’t understand how you came here.”

“I ran away.”

“From your parents?”

“I was very unhappy,” she said, almost in a whisper.

“Yes but surely wasn’t it very unwise?”

Her lips twitched.

“You were in New York,” she said, “and you wrote to me.”

“Well?”

“Well then I ran away.”

He rose slowly from his chair, as though impelled by an irresistible force.

“You ran away where to?”

“To England.”

“What what for?”

Her eyes avoided his. Her blush deepened.

“I would rather not say.”

“I insist. I must know. Why did you come to England?”

She looked at him again this time with resolve and a faint flicker of laughter in her eyes.

“You insist?” she asked.

“I insist.”

“Well then I came to England to marry you.”

Monsieur de Beaulieu sat down again. The movement had been a compulsory one. His knees had given way under him.

“And and your parents?” he began feebly.

“By this time they have discarded me.”

“Good heavens!” he said under his breath.

“I didn’t mean to tell you,” she went on, “but you made me, and perhaps it is just as well that you should know the truth. Of course, now the circumstances have altered everything, and you are quite, quite free. Here are your letters.”

She opened a dainty reticule and produced a packet tied with blue ribbons which he accepted gingerly. He looked at the contents and his last hope faded. The writing was utterly unlike his own secret experiments in that direction. It was a very simple, clerk-like hand, easy to imitate, as his criminal self immediately noted, and though the Doctor, who had theories on the subject of mental troubles, would never have recognised the discrepancies as evidence, the Rogue himself felt that the testimony of the little gold pig in his waistcoat pocket had been amply confirmed. Had he not the right to ignore the pig and accept a

situation into which he had been pitchforked by circumstances and a handful of determined lunatics? He glanced across at his companion. Her head was bowed. He fancied that there were tears on her cheeks.

“May I read these?” he asked uncertainly.

“Why not since they are yours?”

He untied the bundle. Some of the letters were in French, some in an English freely besprinkled with Americanisms, all of them were tender. Monsieur de Beaulieu’s knowledge of French proved to be limited but he guessed successfully at “ma bien-aimee” ; “mon ange” ; “je t’ adore,” and the signature, “Louis de Beaulieu,” was unmistakable. He ground his teeth.

“What an utter scoundrel!” he said aloud.

Mademoiselle Theodora opened her eyes wide.

“Who?” she asked.

“The Count—I mean—of course I mean—what an utter scoundrel I should be if I were—no, that’s not what I meant either. In plain language—it was a scoundrelly thing to have written to you like that and then have left you—well, like this.”

“But you couldn’t help it,” she protested. “You lost your memory.”

“Exactly. But if I hadn’t lost my memory I should be a scoundrel, shouldn’t I?”

She nodded in puzzled assent.

“I should deserve anything—I should deserve to lose you and—er—anything else that happened to belong to me, shouldn’t I?”

“You would certainly lose me,” she said with conviction.

Monsieur de Beaulieu adjusted his eyeglass with the air of a man who sees his way clear.

“Then it seems to me that we can go ahead without compunction,” he remarked.

“Theodora—”

She rose.

“I have the honour to wish you good-morning, Count.”

“Where are you going?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“That, my friend, is no longer your affair.”

“Excuse me!” He rose and faced her. “I have been thinking it over,” he said slowly and distinctly. “It’s too long a business to start life all over again. If you have no objection we will begin where we left off, Theodora.”

She drew back. The colour faded from her cheeks.

“I am afraid I am rather stupid,” she said.

“I mean I may be forgetful but I am very impressionable.”

She smiled ironically.

“You are very chivalrous,” she retorted.

“Then you don’t believe in love at first sight after all?” he asked.

“I believe that you are trying to be generous, Good-morning, Count!”

She tried to pass him but he caught her hands and held them.

“You are not going till you have heard me out. You say I am the Count de Beaulieu. Well, I take your word for it. You say you are Mademoiselle de Melville, my fiancee. Well, I take your word for that too. So we’re quits. As you are engaged to me I presume you must love me. Will you marry me?”

“Marry you?” she echoed.

“This very day!” he said recklessly.

She turned her back to him as though to hide her face.

“I repeat you are generous, Count.”

“And I swear to you that I have never loved another woman at least if I have I can’t remember it and I promise you that I will never love another. I can’t say more.”

She frowned.

“You would have been wiser if you had said less, Count,” she said. “Shall I tell you the truth? You are impelled by two motives firstly by your sense of duty and secondly by your susceptibility to a pretty face. For the first I admire you, for the second I despise you, and for your offer I thank you. And so good morning.”

Monsieur de Beaulieu held his ground, though he flushed.

“We will leave love and duty out of the matter,” he said. “Let us call it a ‘mariage de convenance.’—”

She seemed to take no exception to his French. She stopped short and looked at him with a sudden attention.

“Explain!” she commanded.

“I mean just this if you won’t have me I doubt if anyone ever will. I don’t seem to have a friend or a relation in the world. From my point of view it would be a charitable act to marry me. As for you well, you admit yourself that he I we have put you into a decidedly awkward position.”

“Do you think I would marry you out of fear for myself?” she asked, white with anger.

“Surely my forgetfulness has not cost me all your affection?” he pleaded pathetically.

“We will leave affection out of the matter,” she mimicked.

“Very well as a matter of convenience then.”

She stood silent, evidently at war with conflicting emotions, and he waited patiently. He had surreptitiously taken the Lucky Pig from his pocket and was squeezing it with a new fervour of beHef in its miraculous powers. For once in a way his conscience was mute. If he was the Count than he was doing the right thing; and if he was, as he had every reason to suspect, no other than William Brown, commonly known as Slippery Bill, then he was acting like a rogue, which was all that could be expected of him. As for Theodora it was her fault if she could not tell her lover from his double, and anyhow, in his opinion, she had made a profitable exchange.

So he waited, and presently she looked at him with a softened rather tremulous smile.

“Perhaps, Count—” she began.

“My name is Louis,” he interrupted. “You told me so yourself.”

“Perhaps then, Louis—” She hesitated.

“You consent?” he asked.

“We are rather like two lost children,” she said sadly. “Perhaps, as you say, we had better join forces if it is possible.”

“Instinct tells me that there are such things as special licenses,” he answered joyfully.

“And you understand it is and remains a matter of convenience?”

“Until further orders, Theodora.”

She smiled faintly.

“My name, at least, seems to be becoming familiar to you,” she said.

“I think,” he returned, “that there are some things which will come back to me very quickly.”

“It’s a bargain then?”

“A solemn league and covenant.”

She gave him her hand. He kissed it and she drew back with a proud offended gesture.

“That is not necessary, Monsieur.”

“After all, you did love me,” he returned reproachfully. “You have not forgotten.”

“Such things must be mutual.”

“Tell me. Didn’t I fall in love with you the first hour I saw you?”

She flushed deeply.

“You said so. Pray let us rejoin your friends, Monsieur.”

He held open the door for her.

“It seems I have not changed at all,” he said.

CHAPTER V

NOT very far from an unfashionable part of London, commonly known as Whitechapel, there is a dirty little street which serves as a means of communication between two larger and more populous thoroughfares. In this region there are many dirty little streets, so that the description would be scarcely adequate were it not added that Herbert or ‘Urbert Street to use the local designation was by far and away the dirtiest, narrowest and most evil-smelling of them all. In the day time it gave the impression of being wholly deserted not so much as an urchin enlivened its unsavoury gutters but towards evening there was a change which altered the whole character of the place. Dark figures slunk out of unlighted doorways and little mysterious groups formed themselves well out of reach of the lamp light scattering precipitately in all directions as a couple of stalwart constables promenaded down the centre of the narrow roadway. In a word ‘Urbert Street had a reputation which put Seven Dials to shame, and successfully saved it from the tender administrations of amateur “slumbers” and “Lady Beneficents” who were rumoured to haunt the more respectable regions. Even the constables hunted in couples, a few unpleasant little incidents having proved that it was unhealthy even for six foot of Yorkshire manhood to appear unchaperoned, and “swells” were naturally unknown. Consequently, the appearance of a tall, well-dressed young man who drove up to the corner in a taxi, would have caused a sensation had the usual habitues been there to witness it. For reasons best known to themselves, however, the inhabitants shunned the light of day and the only living object was a curious looking individual who was leaning up against a lamppost, staring blankly a-t nothing in particular. The well-dressed young man paid his taximan who, having eyed him and the proffered pound note with equal suspicion, turned his vehicle and drove off with as much speed as was consistent with dignity. His recent “hire” waited a moment and, after referring to a newspaper cutting, made his way slowly down the left side of the street. Evidently he was looking for a number, but numbers had long ago been discarded in a region where the tenants changed their place of residence too often and too suddenly to make an address of any great value. A fruitless wandering brought the unusual visitor back to his starting point. The quaint figure in the check suit was still leaning in the same attitude against the lamppost and the young man of immaculate appearance, after a moment’s hesitation, went up to him and lifted his hat.

“Would you mind telling me which is No. 10?” he asked courteously.

The person thus addressed gave not the slightest sign of having heard. His gaze continued as blank and idiotic as before and the enquirer repeated his question in a louder and more determined key.

“Would you mind telling me which is No. 10?” he said, and supplemented the appeal with a light tap on the shoulder. The check-suited one thereupon slowly brought his eyes down to the level of the speaker’s face and as slowly uncrossed his legs and unfolded his arms.

“Now then, young spark!” he drawled, with an indescribable accent which savoured about equally of Whitechapel and New York. “You stop that or you’ll find yourself in Queer Street. Can’t you let a fellow sleep?”

The young man smiled. “I didn’t know you were asleep,” he said. “Your eyes were wide open.”

“The blighter who goes to sleep with his eyes shut in these parts deserves all that’s coming to him,” was the sententious answer. “The trick is to look as wide awake as an ol’ clothes man even if you’re as sleepy as a dormouse. What’s your wants, young man?”

The stranger referred to the newspaper cutting.

“I want No. 10,” he said; “but I can’t find any number of any sort. Would you perhaps inform me—”

“Now, don’t begin your little yarn all over again,” the little man in the check suit interrupted. “If you hadn’t landed on a soft hearted little bit of goods like me all that parlez-vouing would have cost you your hat. Say, ‘Where’s No. 10. or I’ll punch your head till your own loving mother won’t know you’ and we’ll get to business.”

The stranger laughed.

“When I’ve done punching your head you won’t know No. 10 from No. 1000,” he said genially, “so for both our sakes you’d better hurry up and tell me what I want before it’s too late.”

The man by the lamppost rubbed his hands, tilted his brimless hat to the back of his close cropped head and winked.

“That’s the spirit!” he said. “My, though! You are a sight!”

“I beg your pardon?” In accents of some offence.

“In polite language you’re a highly coloured one. No. 10 will fall flat when it sees you.” The little man produced a packet of doubtful looking cigars and, selecting one, bit off the end with precision. “I doubt if No. 10 has seen a clean collar this side of 1900,” he went on meditatively, “and for friendship’s sake I reckon I oughtn’t to expose it to the shock. Just put up your coat, will you, and give your hat a tilt and then we’ll get along.”

The young man obeyed, though somewhat reluctantly, and the results of his alterations appearing to give satisfaction, the curiously assorted pair started down the street in search of No. 10. The check-suited Cicerone sauntered on ahead, his hands in his pockets, the cigar sticking out of the corner of his mouth, his swagger suggesting that what didn’t belong to him in ‘Urbert Street didn’t count for much. The young man followed him with an amateur appearance of rakishness, which in his present company and surroundings was decidedly ineffectual. Half way down the street his new acquaintance glanced over his shoulder.

“What’s your game at No. 10?” he asked. “You haven’t mistaken it for the Ritz, have you? All the palatial apartments down this avenue have been taken by the nobility months ago.”

“I’m not looking for apartments,” the young man replied uneasily. “I’m looking for—er—a certain Mrs. Jubbers.”

“Wall, I guess you’re not the only one whose looking for her,” was the cryptic answer. “Old friend, eh?”

“Er I hope not I meant I don’t know not exactly. It’s a sort of—er—business affair—”

“Oh, that’s all right, Innocent. I don’t want to know your secrets. What’s your title anyhow? I know Mrs. Jubbers like I know my own mother, and I’d better introduce you as something or other.”

The visitor arranged his tie nervously.

“You can call me—er—Harris,” he said.

“Couldn’t you make it a lord?” his companion suggested. “Mrs. Jubbers is a trifle particular, as you might say.”

“I’m afraid I can’t oblige for the present I’m just plain Harris.”

“Oh come, it’s not as bad as that! Never mind, I’ll make you into a Book incog. She won’t believe me anyhow. My name’s Washington Jones, sometime American Citizen at present enjoying a rest cure. Kindly step this way, Your Grace.”

He pushed open the door of one of the dirtiest dwellings and led the way down a narrow passage with the air of being very much at home. The young man who called himself Harris followed meekly, and a moment later the pair were brought to a halt by a door which was locked on the inside. Washington Jones whistled twice and, after a short delay, the key was turned and the two visitors found themselves in a low-ceilinged room whose atmosphere was at that moment almost opaque with the fumes of bad tobacco.

“My dear Mrs. Jubbers,” Washington Jones said loudly and distinctly, “permit me to present an old friend of mine to you, The Dook of Harrisville just arrived from the Continong. My dear Dook, this is Mrs. Jubbers, whose acquaintance you are so anxious to make.”

The newly created “Dook” bowed to a stout slovenly dressed old woman who had loomed out of the clouds of smoke and now advanced upon him with a tottering step. She had only one eye the other, judging from appearances, had been lost in honourable warfare but the remaining orb was extraordinarily bright and none too friendly. It flashed over the “Dook’s” person with a rapidity that seemed to take in every detail from the pearl scarf-pin downwards.

“Very ‘appy to meet ‘is Grace,” she said with a suspicious leer. “Mr. Jones’ friends are always welcome. Take a seat, me lord.” She proffered a chair, of whose four legs only three could be safely counted on, and wiped the seat. “We’re ‘umble folk, your Grace,” she mumbled on, “but wery ‘onest and wot we ‘ave we gladly shares with others. Make yourself at ‘ome.” During this speech the bright eye had been shooting wireless telegrams at Washington Jones, who

winked significantly.

“His Grace has come on vury important business,” he said. “Shouldn’t be surprised if it was something in your line, Mrs. Jubbers.”

The “Dook” coughed again either out of nervousness or because the atmosphere was getting too much for him.

“Er yes I have come on business,” he admitted. “In fact, it is such important business that I’m afraid I must ask for a private interview. I’m sure Mr. Jones will understand when I say that the happiness of more than one person hangs in the balance.”

The American Citizen raised an eyebrow and waved his hand, expressing thereby both interest and comprehension for the delicacy of the situation.

“Why, sure,” he agreed. “Say the word, sir, and yours truly will be gone in the twinkle of an eye.”

“Mr. Jones is an old friend,” Mrs. Jubbers interposed sharply. “There ain’t nothing wot consens me wot ‘e cawn’t ‘ear. Just you sit tight, Mr. Jones.”

Mr. Jones obediently “sat tight,” though evidently undesirous of seeming to intrude, and the “Dook” fidgeted uneasily.

“Can I rely—er—upon your entire discretion?” he asked at last.

“I am sometimes an American Citizen and always a man of honour,” returned Washington Jones. “You can trust me like yourself, sir.”

The “Dook’s” smile was a trifle rueful.

“As a matter of a fact I came here after having come across this newspaper cutting,” he began at last. “If you wouldn’t mind glancing over it you will see how I came to know your name.”

“You can read out wot it says,” Mrs. Jubbers retorted gloomily. “I ain’t got no time for making out that sort o’ rubbish.”

“It’s an—er—police-court report,” the “Dook” explained with increasing

nervousness. “I will quote—er—strictly. ‘Henrietta Jubbers, said to be of No. 10, Herbert Street, E. C. and already familiar to the public in connection with the notorious swindler William Brown, was charged yesterday before Mr. James Hawley with drunkenness and disorder—”

“Look ‘ere, young man,” Mrs. Jubbers interrupted, her clenched first within an inch of her visitor’s nose, “if you’re one o’ them tee-totlars or Prisoner’s Friends you can take yourself off—”

“But I’m not,” the “Dook” protested vigorously.

“Well, wot’s it got to do with you if I gets ‘awled up before the beak? Ain’t it enough to ‘ave one’s fizzical weaknesses mistook by a bloomin’ cop wot doesn’t know when a lidy ‘as a fainting fit, without a lot of busybodies acomin’ in afterwards with their notebooks and noospapers? You clear out you!”

“But I don’t care a brass farthing for all that!” the “Dook” insisted. “It isn’t you I have come about. It’s the other part of the business. It says here that you are connected with William Brown, and that’s why I want to meet you, Mrs. Jubbers.”

There was a moment’s silence. Mrs. Jubbers was studying her visitor with all the intensity of her one bright eye, and her toothless mouth was pursed up into a very dubious expression.

“Look ‘ere, Mr. Book,” she said slowly. “I don’t much care for the looks of you and that’s the truth. Fine gents of your sort don’t come our way, and when they do we scents mischief. If you’re a bloomin’ tec you’d better clear out ‘fore I calls me friends in the next room—”

“I’m not what you call a ‘tec,’—” the “Dook” interrupted with despairing firmness. “I’m in a tight and uncomfortable hole and want to get out of it if I can. I’ll make this much clear right away I haven’t anything to do with the police and I don’t want to have. They’re the last people I want to meet at the present moment.”

His earnestness, combined with an expression of genuine distress, carried partial conviction. Mr. Washington Jones twisted his features into a non-committal grimace.

“If you take my advice you’ll talk out straight, sir,” he said. “If you want a house broke or a friend doped you can say so and we shan’t be shocked, we’ve sympathy for those little human weaknesses, haven’t we, Mrs. Jubbers?”

Mrs. Jubbers assented with a nod of her untidy head, but the “Dook’s” distress appeared to increase.

“I don’t want anything of that sort,” he said. “I simply want to find out if you know William Brown who I believe goes under the alias of Slippery Bill. I assure you the matter is of the utmost importance to me.”

Mrs. Jubbers considered. She was evidently considering very earnestly indeed, for her eye had become positively piercing.

“I don’t know wot you mean by ‘aliasses’,” she said at last, “but I know of a fellow called Slippery Bill. I don’t know ‘im” she added hastily, “there aren’t many who do and I don’t know where ‘e is either.”

“But you said when you gave evidence that he carried a talisman with him by which he could be identified.”

Mrs. Jubbers glanced uneasily about the room.

” ‘E ‘ad something of that sort,” she admitted, “a kind of charm ‘is Lucky Pig ‘e called it. ‘E always ‘ad it with ‘im, so they say. ‘E said it kept the cops off.”

The “Dook” put his hand in his pocket and drew out a minute object between his finger and thumb.

“Is that it?” he said faintly.

Mrs. Jubbers drew nearer. It was a small gold pig such as ladies have been known to wear on their bracelets, with a curly tail and peculiarly staring eyes to all appearances a harmless enough ornament. But it caused Mrs. Jubbers to utter a croaking exclamation and the “Dook” was. actually trembling.

“That’s it,” Mrs. Jubbers said emphatically. “I couldn’t mistake it. I sawed it once never you mind where and I’d know it among a hundred of ‘em. I don’t believe there’s another pig with a look like that in all London.”

“Then it’s true!” said the “Dook” under his breath.

Mrs. Jubbers and Mr. Washington Jones stared at him. The perspiration had broken out on his forehead and his pleasant face was perfectly colourless.

“Look here,” said Mr. Jones, “you’d better make a clean breast of it. What’s the matter with you?”

The “Dook” passed his handkerchief over his face.

“That’s the matter with me,” he said, pointing a trembling finger at the pig which was now lying on the table. “That pig is mine.”

“Lor’!” from Mrs. Jubbers.

“Holy Jimjams!” from Mr. Washington Jones.

“Looks nasty for someone,” Mrs. Jubbers reflected. Her siriisterly alert eye expressed close mental concentration. “Seems to me,” she went on, “if that there pig belongs to you—”

“I don’t know that it does—” the “Dook” interposed hastily. “I only found it I mean it was in my pocket—” he floundered. He was aware that his audience had exchanged a significant glance, and that he had already hopelessly compromised himself. “You see, the terrible position I’m in,” he said.

“‘Orrible,” said Mrs. Jubbers.

“You—” said Washington Jones pointing his finger, “are the French Count who was found on a doctor’s doorstep. I know all about you, sir. A case of loss of memory, eh what!”

The “Dook” nodded, conscious that the less he said the better.

“No clue, eh?”

“Except the pig, it seems,” Mrs. Jubbers remarked.

She stood with her arms akimbo. Her eyelid had dropped a little over her eye giving her an expression of extraordinary cunning.

“I tell you wot it is,” she said. “There’s only one man ‘oos bound to know what you are or what you aren’t and that’s Slippery Bill’s own brother, Garge. ‘E’s in the ‘ouse at this very moment. I’ll go an’ ask ‘im to come and ‘ave a look at you.”

“Please don’t bother him!” the young man begged, evidently grown anxious to postpone the decisive moment, but Mrs. Jubbers was obdurate.

” ‘E’ll be mighty glad,” she said. “‘E’s been worritting about Bill till I thought ‘e’d go off his nut; powerful fond of Bill, is Garge. Now just you wait quietly there whilst I bring ‘im along.”

The “Dook” waited. There was indeed nothing else for him to do as Mr. Washington Jones was leaning against the door which led out on to the passage and showed not the slightest intention of moving. There was an awkward pause. The visitor began to pace restlessly about the room and the American Citizen watched him through the thickening clouds of tobacco.

“Queer thing that I should have spotted you as a ‘Dook’,” he said presently. “Of course I notched you a point too high but I’ve a first rate nose for blue blood. What’s your name, Count?”

“Beaulieu,” the unhappy nobleman answered, “but don’t talk about it. It haunts me.”

Mr. Washington Jones gave vent to a sound which might have passed for a laugh.

“Wall, I guess you might be haunted by worse, dear boy,” he said. “What price ‘Slippery Bill’…”

The young man made a gesture of despair but he had no opportunity to give further expression to his feelings for at that moment the door opened. Mrs. Jubbers entered followed by a tall flashily dressed individual whose face, as soon as he perceived the visitor, lit up with a bewilderment and ecstasy which should have been highly flattering but, instead, appeared to cause the supposed Count de Beaulieu considerable alarm. He retreated precipitately before the newcomer’s eager advance.

“My dear brother!” the latter said, husky with emotion. “My dear, dear brother!”

It was a touching scene. The Count sank feebly on the unsteady chair whilst his new-found relation bent over him and clasped his hand with emotional fervour.

“And to think that I’d given you up for lawst,” Slippery Bill’s brother went on brokenly. “To think all the time I was ‘alf mad with grief you was lahdy-dahding it as a bloomin’ Count! Ain’t that enough to wring tears out of a beak? Ain’t that tragic?”

“Yes,” the prodigal one admitted faintly.

“And you don’t seem a bit pleased!” George observed with a gentle note of reproach. “Aren’t you glad to see your brother again, Bill?”

The Count looked up.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he said. “I thought Mrs. Jubbers had told you I’ve lost my memory. I can’t remember anybody not even myself. It was a blow on the head that did it.”

“One of those nasty cops,” George remarked sympathetically. “And when you came round you found you was a Count. Now ain’t that luck.”

“Luck!” said Mrs. Jubbers solemnly. “It’s genius!”

George nodded.

“You always did land on your feet, Bill,” he said. “Fancy you regular toff with ‘caps of dibs. I ‘ope you ‘ave ‘caps of dibs, brother?”

“The Count de Beaulieu has,” the prodigal answered heavily. “I haven’t.” He picked up the Lucky Pig and put it back in his pocket. “Well, there’s nothing for it but to go back and own up,” he said with a cheerless little laugh.

“Wot?” The exclamation came in the same breath from George and Mrs. Jubbers. Mr. Washington Jones looked mildly amused. Mrs. Jubbers threw up her hands.

“You don’t mean to say you are goin’ to make a fool of yourself like that!” she said.

“Fool of myself? Why, I can’t let things go on as they are. It wouldn’t be honest.”

The word caused a shout of rude laughter.

George lent over the table in an attitude which suggested acute physical suffering.

‘“Onest!” he groaned. “Why, Bill, you’ve never been such an ‘orrid thing in your life! Ever since you was a little five year old nipper and pinched those apples off Mother Grumbage you’ve been up to something or other. Old bird, you don’t say that blow ‘as spilt you for the profession?”

“It seems so,” the Count admitted ruefully. “At any rate I can’t go on with this business.”

“Gammon and spinach! You sit tight, brother! If you’re copped you might as well be copped for being a Count as for that last little affair of yours at Dr. wot-‘is name Frohlocken—”

The Count fairly writhed.

“That’s the man who has befriended me,” he said. “It’s too awful.”

“Don’t take on!” George pleaded. “The old josser got ‘is silver back. I read about it in the pipers. You must ‘ave been in a ‘urry or lawst your nerve or something, for you chucked it down one of the areas. Besides, why shouldn’t you be a Count, bless your ‘eart? Don’t you remember the time you was the Prince Donowaski and pinched the Duchess’ diamonds?”

“No I can’t say I do. But I suppose all that explains why the thing comes so easily to me.”

George brought his hand down with a heavy slap on the drooping shoulders.

“Of course it does, you old blighter!” he said. “Why, you’ve got the manners and the haccent of the ‘ighest in the land. Just you stick to it that’s wot I say!”

“I can’t!” the Count answered hoarsely. “Even if I wanted to I can’t. There’s the girl.”

“The girl! Oh, my, is there a girl in it too?”

“The Mademoiselle de Melville my—our—the Count de Beaulieu’s fiancee.”

George whistled. Mr. Washington Jones screwed up one eye.

“Say, that’s a knock-out,” he admitted. “I suppose she’ll blow on you—she’s bound to.”

“No, she won’t—at least she hasn’t.”

“Hasn’t? Speak plain, will you?”

“I mean—” the Count appeared to have some difficulty in controlling his voice. “I mean that she has seen me and and—well, she thinks I am the Count!”

The three stared at him and then at each other.

“Wall, I reckon I’m done,” said Washington Jones.

“‘As she ‘ad a blow on the ‘ead too?” Mrs. Jubbers suggested.

“I can’t explain it,” the Count said hopelessly. “I can only think that there is some resemblance between the Count and myself and that long absence has weakened her memory. At any rate there she is and, unless I tell the truth, we shall be married this afternoon by special license.”

“Wot about the relations?” Mrs. Jubbers enquired.

“There aren’t any. Mine—the Count’s—are dead and hers—well, to tell the truth she’s run away from her people in France in order to marry me—the Count, I mean. That’s what’s so confoundedly awkward. For the present Dr. Frohlocken has taken her into his protection, but that can’t go on.”

George shook his head.

“That’s luck and genius,” he said admiringly. “You go ahead, old bird. You stick to it. It’s the best thing you’ve been in for years.”

“But Mademoiselle de Melville—”

“If she’s satisfied, wot’s the odds? Maybe the real Count is dead and buried and you’re quite a nice-looking fellow. Wot’s she like?”

For the first time the Count’s face lit up with genuine satisfaction.

“She’s splendid!” he said simply, but emphatically.

“Well then sit tight!”

“I can’t!”

“If you don’t—” said George with his red face very close to his brother’s “if you don’t I shall whistle up the cops for you. I won’t ‘ave a piface for a relation. It’s a disgraice I’d never live it down and I won’t try.”

Monsieur de Beaulieu looked about him. He was not a weak young man, either physically or mentally the cut of his jaw and the build of his shoulders testified to considerable strength both of body and mind but he evidently recognised the hopelessness of his situation. He wavered. George grinned.

“After all, a fellow with your reputation don’t need to be so mealy,” he said.

The Count picked up his hat.

“No, I suppose not,” he said in a completely changed tone. “I quite see that under the circumstances my idea of turning over a new leaf, as it were, was absurd. Paradoxically, there’s only one way out of this business and that is to stick to it. Anyhow I know now for certain who I am and that’s something to be grateful for. I’m much obliged, Mrs. Jubbers. Good-morn—”

He went straight to the door and the American Citizen, after a moment’s hesitation, shifted. Both men followed the visitor into the street and there was a moment’s awkward silence. The Count looked at his brother with a kind of ironical regret on his handsome face.

“I’m awfully sorry to appear so indifferent,” he said, “but you understand how it is. Upon my word, I was really beginning to believe in myself in which case things would have been very different and in fact it’s been rather a shock all round.”

George waved his hand.

“Don’t you worry, my bantam,” he said. “I’m not hurt. Just lend me a quid and all shall be forgotten. Thank you, brother! You are a born nobleman. I shan’t lose you again in a hurry!” He laughed uproariously at his own significant joke and the Count hurried down the street as though to escape the sound. At the turning he was overtaken by Mr. Washington Jones. The expression on that gentleman’s clean-shaven wizened little face had become startlingly and almost uncannily astute. He pinched the Count’s arm and his wink was the last thing in significance.

“Young man,” he said, “you’re in for a big business and I have my holy doubts as to whether you’ll be able to pull it off. If things get too sultry just you drop a line to Washington Jones, U. S. A., at present of No. 10 Herbert Street, and don’t you get the jumps if you see me flitting round occasionally. You can take it from me—” and he put his finger solemnly to his nose, “things aren’t always what they seem.”

And with that he swaggered off in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER VI

MADEMOISELLE THEODORA DE MELVILLE sat in the sitting-room which Dr. Frohlocken had vacated for her on her arrival on the previous day. The room had once been his “Museum” and in spite of pathetic attempts with flowers, gim-crack vases and other supposed feminine trifles it still bore the impress of its origin. A forgotten skull grinned mirthlessly over the doorway and something in a bottle what it was the new inhabitant had not cared to enquire adorned the chimneypiece. Yet to all appearances Mademoiselle Theodora felt herself at home, even if she was not particularly happy. She was arrayed in a dark blue tailor-made costume which showed up her graceful figure to perfection and the gloomy room and heavy depressing furniture formed an admirable background for her fair, somewhat fragile beauty. She had taken her place before the fire and her attitude was sufficiently haughty and selfpossessed to make the young man opposite her feel less at his ease than he liked. To cover his discomfort he removed his lavender-coloured gloves and smoothed them out carefully on his knee.

“It was deuced nice of you to send me that card, Theo,” he drawled. “I was getting a bit nervous about you I promise you I was.”

“I have no doubt,” she said coldly and ironically.

“You don’t need to be nasty. My alarm was genuine—”

“—and financial,” she suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I certainly don’t pretend that finance played no role in my anxiety,” he admitted. “My duns are pressing me worse and worse every day, and if relief doesn’t come from somewhere the crash will and well, I’ve explained the sequel to you before.”

“Very often and at some length.” Her face was impassive and only a slight tension about the mouth betrayed that her teeth were hard set. “I don’t think we need discuss the matter any further,” she went on slowly. “It only makes me angry and it does no good to either of us.”

“Oh come!” he said, stroking his little fair moustache, “you’ve pulled it off splendidly so far, Theo—”

“I’ve pulled off nothing so far,” she interrupted passionately, “and what is more I am not going to. That is what I wanted to tell you and why I sent for you. Now you know. I meant to help you I started out with the full intention of carrying the wretched business through but but now I can’t.”

“Why not?” he asked. His small vacant-looking face had flushed with consternation, but his mouth was vicious and a little threatening. She looked at him steadily, her white slender fingers interlocked.

“Because I don’t quite see after all why I should marry a man I don’t care for,” she said.

“Oh, I see. You might have thought of that before. My dear Theo it’s too pretty an excuse. I simply don’t believe it. You’re afraid.”

“That is not true!”

Her companion smiled satirically.

“Are you quite, quite sure? Is there not at the bottom of that scrupulous heart a little fear of breaking the eleventh commandment l Thou shalt not be found out’?”

“None,” she answered firmly. “I had already counted the cost and you ought to know that I am not a coward. From that point of view the situation is unchanged. There remains the Count de Beaulieu.”

“Certainly.”

She got up and stood very erect. Her mouth trembled at the corners, but she spoke without faltering.

“I don’t like him,” she said, “and I simply do not choose to cheat him.”

“My dear Theo, if you will excuse my saying so, those two statements are somewhat inconsistent. Or do you only cheat the people you are fond of? In any case, who is proposing to cheat him? He is engaged to marry Mademoiselle

Theodora de Melville and Mademoiselle Theodora, fully authorized so to speak, presents herself to be married. What more do you want?”

“It’s unfair to him,” she persisted. “I don’t like him, but it is taking a cruel advantage of his misfortune. He doesn’t know me he has forgotten everyone. If he marries me it is out of chivalry out of nobility—”

“—for which characteristics he has incurred your displeasure.” he put in with a sneer.

“I detest you!” she said deliberately.

“I know that, dear Theo. But frankly, all you have said is beside the point. We counted on his chivalry and nobility and all the rest of it, and now you discover that these virtues are a stumbling block. Women are never satisfied.”

“I, at least, am satisfied to go no further,” she retorted.

Her companion was silent for a moment. He was evidently at a loss for an answer and the entrance of the butler with a letter tray caused him to give a smothered sigh of relief.

“The Doctor has told me to give you this telegram, madam,” the man said. “It has just come for him and he would be glad to see madam your ladyship as soon as possible.”

“Very well.”

She took up the opened telegram and, when the butler had left the room, unfolded it. She glanced over the contents and then let the flimsy paper flutter to the ground and laughed. The laugh was a somewhat cheerless one, and her companion bent down and picked up the apparent cause with delicate fingers.

“I can’t read French,” he said. “What’s it all about?”

“It is from the Count de Melville,” she said in a voice sharp with bitterness. “He begs to inform Dr. Frohlocken that he has every reason to suppose from the description that the person whom Dr. Frohlocken has protected is his renegade daughter. Under the circumstances, however, he forbids any further communication on the subject. In other words the Countess Theodora is

disowned."

The young man with the lavender gloves smiled.

"Most satisfactory," he said.

She turned on him furiously.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. The Count is nailed. His chivalry and nobility won't allow him to desert a lonely maiden who has been flung off by her family for his sake. I see myself at St. Mary's this afternoon after all."

She looked at him. A vivid flush had mounted her cheeks and her grey eyes had grown hard and bright.

"You miscalculate," she said. "You underestimate me."

"Does that mean you are going to back out?"

"Yes."

Her companion put his hand in his pocket and drew out a couple of letters which he handed to her.

"I don't make any appeal for myself," he said in a businesslike tone. "I know well enough that if the ocean swallowed me up tomorrow you would only be too glad. But the letters will plead for themselves. Pray read them then you can decide."

She took the letters from his hand reluctantly, with her eyes on his face as though she suspected some trick, and carried them to the window. Ten minutes passed during which the young man stared absently and apparently indifferently into the fire. Then Mademoiselle Theodora came back and faced him. She was very pale now and the black eyelashes were wet with recent tears.

"You are very clever," she said with a little broken laugh. "I congratulate you. Had your talent been directed in another channel—"

He waved his hand.

“Don’t preach, Theo. I’ve heard all that before. What are you going to do about it?”

For a minute she said nothing, battling for her voice. Then she broke down. Her sobs were inaudible but their violence shook her slender frame from head to foot and she leant against the mantelpiece with her face buried in her arms. Her companion rose to his feet. His expression was coolly triumphant.

“Well?” he said.

“For their sake I shall go through with it,” she said unsteadily.

“Thank you.” He took up his hat. “I shall hope to hear from you in the next few days as soon as possible in fact and afterwards you can arrange to introduce me as your old friend, Mr. Cecil Saunders.” He laughed lightly. “Well, good-bye, Theo. Good luck and all happiness!”

She made no answer and he lounged out of the room and down stairs. In the hall he passed Dr. Frohlocken who stared at him suspiciously, but Mr. Cecil Saunders was evidently not a man to be easily upset, and he continued on his way undisturbed.

Dr. Frohlocken waited until the hall door had banged on the unknown guest and then hurried upstairs and softly opened the door of his old “Museum.” He peered in. Mademoiselle Theodora was still by the mantelpiece and the sound of her uneven breathing told him even more than her attitude of complete abandonment. The torn telegram lay at her feet and the Doctor nodded and scowled in mingled sympathy and annoyance. “Damned idiot!” he muttered and, closing the door, crept away as softly as he had come.

CHAPTER VII

HE was a rogue and he consorted with rogues. At the tender age of five he had “pinched” apples from some harmless body rejoicing in the name of Mother Grumbage. He had posed as a prince and decamped with the diamonds of a duchess. He had stolen inadvertently it is true the silver of a man destined to befriend him in the hour of need and now, so it appeared, he had bribed Luck herself into becoming an active partner in his nefarious business. At any rate the fickle lady had thrust him into his present position without the slightest assistance from himself. In one evening he, Slippery Bill, had become Count de Beaulieu, a young and wealthy nobleman, engaged to be married to a charming lady of equally exalted station, and nobody had so far disputed his position, not even the person most entitled to do so. The whole thing was miraculous and scarcely credible more than that it was altogether splendid. As he stood hesitating on Dr. Froh locken’s doorstep he looked back on the last few days as on a mad if not unpleasant dream. He realised that for a man in his position he had done extremely well by himself that he had, in fact, surpassed all previous records in high-class swindling. Apple-pinching, fraudulent impersonations and unwarranted removals of other people’s property were nothing compared to his present undertaking always supposing that he had the nerve to carry it through. But of that he was now almost certain. His previous career warranted it, and as the door opened and he passed the now obsequious James he felt his self-confidence rise. The man who can bear the scrutiny of a butler can brazen out anything. Nor did the sudden appearance of Dr. Frohlocken, more than ever wildhaired and bad-tempered, cause him more than a slight start of natural apprehension. He saw that something unusual had happened, but unusual things were becoming paradoxically commonplace and he was prepared for everything.

“What is the latest news?” he asked a trifle wearily, for even surprises can become tedious. “Who has turned up now?”

“For Heaven’s sake go to her at once,” Dr. Frohlocken pleaded violently. “I’ve done it I’ve put my foot in it when it comes to women a woman like that I lose my head. Thank God you are marrying her! It was a telegram from her parents and I sent it up without warning absolutely idiotic and she’s crying fainting I don’t know what—”

De Beaulieu controlled the desire to finish the flight of stairs in a couple of

strides. Haste is plebeian and, besides, there was no real need for haste. If his heart thumped against his ribs it was no doubt at the thought of the endless possibilities which the telegram might contain and he entered Mademoiselle de Melville's sitting-room with as much nonchalance as he could muster. He found her seated by the table, but as she heard the door close she sprang up and faced him with flushed and tear-stained cheeks which put all his artificial sangfroid to flight. He came impulsively to her side.

"The Doctor told me that you had had bad news," he said. "Is it anything very serious? I am so awfully sorry."

"Bad news?" she sobbed and stared at him blankly. "Who told you? How do you know?"

"The doctor told me that you had received a telegram from your people," he explained somewhat taken aback.

"Of course." She passed her handkerchief nervously over her burning cheeks. "I had forgotten, yes, of course, he it is. I suppose you ought to see it." She picked up the crumpled bit of pink paper and handed it to him. "There you can read it for yourself."

But that was just what he could not do. The pithy French phrases were Hebrew to him and he stared at them with a mounting panic. Undoubtedly the moment had come to prove himself worthy of his reputation, and yet he felt his courage oozing slowly but perceptibly out of his finger tips.

"I'm afraid I do not quite understand," he hedged at last, feeling that, as the Count de Beaulieu, he could neither ask to have the telegram translated nor continue to stare at it indefinitely. "Your parents—er—"

"—have done just what I expected them to do," she finished mercifully. "They have disowned me."

"Good heavens!" His exclamation was not quite sincere. He took up the telegram and stared at it again as though he could not believe his eyes and, as he did so, he was overtaken by an impulse which, in him, was altogether insane. "Theo—" he began recklessly. "Theo—supposing you went back to them without me —supposing you felt that it was after all your duty to obey them—would they take you back?"

“No,” she said bitterly, “they would not. You ought to know them better.”

He felt that he certainly ought. He felt also that the treacherous demon, honesty, had nearly led him into committing an irremediable blunder and that he was in danger of blundering even more effectually. Mademoiselle Theodora looked at him and he flinched.

“Perhaps you mean that you have come to the conclusion that our marriage is a mistake?” she suggested slowly and sarcastically.

“Of course not!” he protested. “What an idea! My dear girl—”

“It is not at all necessary to call me ‘your dear girl’ in private,” she interrupted, with angry eyes.

“Not necessary perhaps, but pleasant.” He felt that he was getting impertinent — he was certainly angry. She had flicked him on the raw though he could not have explained how, and he had some difficulty in hiding the fact.

“I merely meant to observe that it would grieve me to come between you and those to whom you belong,” he said.

“I belong to no one,” she retorted. “I have no one in the world except—”

“Me?” he suggested with miraculously recovered cheerfulness.

“Certainly not. Did I say so?”

“You did not say so, but circumstances—”

“You are both stupid and ungenerous!” she blazed. “You are constantly referring to my helpless position and—”

“Oh, I know I’m an utter scoundrel!” he interrupted in a tone of profound injury which, on closer inspection, might have seemed somewhat unjustifiable, “but, after all, as we are to be married this afternoon I think you might at least pretend to have some feeling in the matter.”

She looked at him with scornful, unhappy eyes.

“You do not expect me to love a man who has completely forgotten my existence and who is only marrying me out of a sense of duty, and whom I am only marrying because I have to—”

“Now you are getting nasty again!” he protested.

“I can’t help it. I am nasty by nature. Besides you insist on looking at things from the wrong point of view. We arranged from the beginning that it was to be a matter of convenience—”

“—until further notice,” he interposed.

“No notice has been given or shall be given.” Her face grew hard and determined but there was a strange, intent look in her eyes which would have startled him had he seen it. “If you would rather get out of your bargain there is still time,” she added slowly.

“Theodora!” He was now thoroughly aroused. Her indifference piqued him. He had completely forgotten that he was not the Count de Beaulieu and had therefore no claim on her affection. He had also completely forgotten that Mademoiselle de Melville was a mere pawn in his vile conspiracy. He felt increasingly injured and illused. “I shall marry you if I have to hang for it!” he said between his teeth.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“In that case there is nothing more to be said.”

There was a moment’s angry silence. Then, suddenly, he realised how pale and miserable she looked in spite of her assumption of indifference and his heart steeped though it doubtless was in untold and untellable crimes softened unexpectedly. He came to her side and took her hand in his.

“I’ve been a brute,” he said. “I know there’s not the least reason why you should care for me I’m not worth it. If the truth were told—” he choked and went on hurriedly “I don’t ask for much, Theo only if you could possibly trust me—”

“I do trust you!” she broke in passionately. “I trust you so much that I am sorry for you. You don’t know what sort of a person you are marrying.”

“Nor do you,” he said with truth and bitterness.

“But I trust you all the same. Besides, of course I know.”

“Yes of course,” he agreed hastily. “I meant would you trust me anyhow—whatever I did, whatever I had done?”

“Yes,” she said. She held out her hand. The Rogue hesitated. He was threatened by another attack from his pet demon and he set his teeth hard to hold back a headlong confession. None of his previous villainies equalled this one—of that he was sure—and yet she looked so helpless, so lonely, so bewilderingly attractive in her frank surrender. Besides, he was a rogue, and why in the name of all the saints in the criminal calendar should he not act as one? He took the outstretched hand and kissed it. But in the end the Demon got the better of him.

“Heaven make me more worthy of you!” he said solemnly.

And if it was the first prayer that he had ever uttered it had, at least, the advantage of being sincere.

That afternoon a quiet ceremony was performed in an unfashionable church in the West of London. The bride, as the ladies’ papers would have said had they had the chance, looked charming in a blue cloth costume, and was given away by Dr. Frohlocken, the well-known scientist. What the bridegroom did or looked like is unimportant. There was only one uninvited guest at the ceremony a person who sat at the end of the church and played with his lavender-kid gloves and the witnesses consisted of the charwoman and her husband.

Thus, “no just cause or impediment” intervening, William Brown, alias Slippery Bill, became not only a bogus Count but a most fraudulently married man.

CHAPTER VIII

“STAND back there! Stand back!”

The guard waved his flag, a shrill whistle rose above the general hubbub, doors were banged, a wildhaired gentleman of obviously Semitic descent, who had been exchanging voluble farewells with a first-class passenger, was hustled on one side and the Northern Express glided triumphantly out of the station.

The first-class passenger sank back into his seat with a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad that’s over!” he said.

His companion removed her hat, smoothed her fair hair and settled herself comfortably among her rugs.

“Are you?” she then enquired with polite interest.

“Getting married is such a business,” he explained.

“It seems so. But this is my first experience.”

Her tone was not encouraging. Moreover she was staring out of the window, and it is notoriously difficult to talk to a person who refuses to look at you. The Count Louis de Beaulieu coughed to cover his embarrassment.

“Quite comfortable?” he asked, after a moment, with a cheerful brevity which was intended to impress both her and himself with his complete mastery of the situation.

“Quite comfortable, thank you.”

She glanced round at him this time, frigidly polite, and it was his turn to take refuge in the outlook. The outlook at that moment was even less exhilarating. The lights of dirty tenements and an occasional suburban station flashed past, and for all he could see they were being whirled through a monotonous darkness a fact which made his appearance of absorbed interest somewhat farcical. He sighed ostentatiously, but as no notice was taken of this distress signal he ventured to glance cautiously at his vis-i-vis. She had taken a magazine out of

her hand-bag and was reading, for all the world as though the business of getting married was of daily occurrence. She was also looking very pretty. The two circumstances, taken together, were intensely aggravating. Monsieur de Beaulieu sighed again.

“I wish I had bought myself an evening paper!” he burst out, with the abruptness of a longsuppressed grievance.

“Why didn’t you?” she enquired tranquilly.

” ‘Pon my word I thought it would seem well callous on one’s wedding day.”

The shot was excellent, but the target merely smiled and turned over another page of the magazine.

“In an ordinary way your delicacy would be justified,” she said. “As it happens, however, our marriage is exceptional.”

“Indeed?”

“The circumstances attending it are exceptional, you will admit?”

“What circumstances?” he asked obstinately.

“Mon pauvre ami you know them as well as I do.”

Count Louis flinched. The slightest inclination on her part to burst into French terrified him. Moreover her answer was conclusive and did not admit of contradiction, and he was surprised at his own dogged determination not to drop the subject.

“It certainly is an extraordinary business,” he admitted meditatively as though continuing an amicable discussion ; “I should never have dreamed that night when I woke up on the doorstep with a broken head and no idea what had happened to me or who I was, that a fortnight later I should be a Count and a married man.”

“I suppose not,” she agreed coldly. Nevertheless she looked up from her book with a faint interest, and presently she added evidently much against her own will: “It must be uncomfortable to wake up and find that one has lost one’s

memory.”

“I should think so! If it hadn’t been for our friend, Dr. Frohlocken, I have not the slightest doubt that Constable X. would have bundled me off to a pauper lunatic asylum. As it was—”

“—you found you were a missing French nobleman, heir to English estates and engaged to be married to a runaway French girl whom you couldn’t even remember!”

He nodded not quite so much at his ease.

“I couldn’t remember anything,” he apologised, “—not even myself. For all I knew I might have been well anybody, you know.”

The Countess Theodora smiled.

“The marriage part of the affair must have been a shock,” she said thoughtfully.

“Not when I saw you.”

“I did not ask for compliments.”

“I’m not trying to pay any.”

Her smile became mocking.

“At any rate you behaved like a knight sans peur et sans reproche. You married the runaway. It was noble of you.”

The Count blushed.

“Theodora—” he began impulsively.

She withdrew her hand not unkindly but with decision.

“All that is in defiance of our compact,” she reminded him.

“Confound the compact!”

“No don’t confound it it would be a pity. It is an excellent compact so

businesslike and simple. In marrying you, I settled the doubtful matter of your identity; in marrying me well, as a disowned runaway my advantage was obvious. But sentimentalities on either side are quite unnecessary."

"Then your girlhood's affection for me is dead?" he enquired with profound gloom.

"Quite."

"Do you think there is any likelihood of a resurrection?"

"None."

"Don't you think it's rather bad luck?"

"For whom?"

"For me, of course."

She gave a gay little laugh.

"Considering that you cannot even remember me, the loss of my girlhood's affection cannot be unbearable."

The Count said something under his breath and turned his attention back to the window. The Countess went on reading and a long silence intervened. The Count was in a state usually described by the patient as "hurt" and by other people as "sulky"; the Countess appeared blissfully indifferent. And thus half an hour passed. Then the dining-car attendant made his appearance. He made his appearance discreetly, after a due rattling of the door handle, and his face, when he saw fit to reveal it, was radiant with knowing sympathy.

"Shall I reserve places for you, my lord?" he asked. "Dinner in twenty minutes."

The Count glanced across at the Countess.

"I do not want any dinner," she said, "but go yourself by all means. You are sure to be hun—"

"I am not at all hungry," with much stiffness.

“No places needed then, my lord?”

“No, thank you.”

The attendant looked from one to the other with an air of exasperating understanding, mumbled a discreet “good-night” and retired. The Countess watched his departure with a faint uneasiness. M

Why did he look at us like that?” she asked. “Does he think we are suspicious characters?”

“Suspicious characters? Good heavens—” The Count started, but recovered himself with great presence of mind. “Probably he thinks we have had a lovers’ quarrel,” he added bitterly.

“That is one thing we shall never be able to have,” she retorted.

“Thank Goodness!” said the Count with the hypocritical gratitude of frenzy. Whereupon the Countess Theodora smiled, and her smile was the last thing in sweetness.

“I knew you were really glad,” she commented. “I am delighted you too feel like that. It makes things so much nicer. I am sure we shall be excellent friendsi in time.” She looked at him expectantly as though awaiting a further attack, but the Count covered his face with his hand, apparently overcome by a sudden weariness. “I think I shall try to go to sleep too,” she went on with unalloyed affability. “Bon Soir, Louis.”

“Bong Soir,” in a gloomy growl.

She piled up her rugs to a comfortable pillow and closed her eyes or appeared to close them. As a matter of fact her long dark lashes concealed a narrow aperture through which she studied her vis-a-vis with malicious curiosity. Was he looking at her between his fingers or was he not? Either way he annoyed her, and her annoyance was increased by her inability to come to a decision. The Count remained motionless; his breathing was peaceful and regular, and his fingers were suspicious. Once she fancied she caught the gleam of his eyes, but a sudden opening of hers produced not so much as a movement, and a few minutes later the Countess Theodora dropped into a heavy sleep.

The Count noted the fact, and he also noticed that she had inadvertently commandeered his rug and that the window was open. He bore the consequent rapid descent of his own temperature patiently, fearful of disturbing her, and, lulled by the rumble and roar of the train, he relapsed into a half-frozen state of torpor. His mind continued to work, however, against his will, and in a very jerky and disconnected fashion. Jumbled and distorted visions of the past few weeks rolled themselves out before his mental eye like a mad cinematograph film. Policemen, bogus counts, runaway, enraged French parents, distraught doctors, a whole galaxy of victims whom he had basely deceived danced for a moment into the limelight and disappeared. Last of all one face appeared and remained a red, grinning face, horribly familiar. The Count shook himself, he rubbed his eyes. He told himself that he was dreaming and that he would wake up in a moment but the face remained. Its expression became increasingly, disgustingly friendly. And then a hand added itself to the nightmare and cautiously, steadily, the big window of the railway carriage was pushed farther down. Under happier circumstances, the Count would have pulled the alarm cord or at least taken some steps to draw attention to his visitor. As it was he sat paralysed and tongue-tied and it was left to the apparition to break the ice.

"'Ullo, Bill!" it whispered.

The Count tried to respond, but could only give an imploring terror-stricken glance at his wife. With a sigh of relief he saw that she was still sleeping peacefully.

"'Ullo!" the owner of the red face repeated. "Ye don't seemed so pleased to see your brother Garge as you ought, old bird. Give us a 'and!"

"For pity's sake!" the "old bird" managed to gasp in a tragic undertone. "What on earth are you doing out there? You'll be killed!"

"Not I, anxious one. I'll be through in a jiffy."

"In? You can't come in here!"

"Oh, yes, I can! Just you open your little peeps and watch me!"

One foot and then a leg were introduced through the open window. The Count made a frantic gesture of protest. But it was too late. The nightmare had become an insurmountable reality.

“Look here you can’t you’ll ruin me. If you’re found in here, it’s all over with me—”

“Sonny, trust your loving brother. Anyhow I’ve got to come in. I’ve reckoned on you. This bloomin’ old bone-rattler’s goin’ a good sixty and I can’t hold on much longer. Now then softly’ s the word and mind your toes!”

He was through. So cautious and light had been his movements that such noise as he had made had lost itself in the steady rumble of the express. Monsieur de Beaulieu rose involuntarily to his feet. George smiled cheerfully upon him.

“You don’t need to look so blue, old bird,” he whispered. “Ain’t it nat’ral and right that a man should see ‘is brother on the most solemn day of ‘is life? Look ‘ere ‘ere’s a wedding present for you!” He slipped a small jewel case out of his pocket, selected something from the contents and pressed it into the Count’s nerveless hand. “You give that to your lady with brother George’s best love!” he said. “They’re real they are. I’ve got ‘em from an old friend of mine Mrs. Pagot-Chump ‘oo is at the very moment lying in a lovely swoon not two carriages off.”

The Count examined the string of pearls in blank consternation.

“Stolen!” he groaned.

“Now, Bill, don’t you go using nasty expressions or my feelings’ll be ‘urt. I’m ‘elping to nationalise property that’s all.”

“The train will be searched—”

“Not a bit of it. I left the carriage door open. They’ll be looking for me poor corpse along the line. Bright of me, wasn’t it? Ain’t I worthy of you, Bill, dear?”

“Don’t for mercy’s sake don’t! And look here take these things back I can’t—I won’t have them—”

“Why not, old bird?”

“I tell you I can’t. It’s impossible to explain but I’m trying to lead an honest life and—”

“Wot you, you old ‘umbug you—”

“Hush!”

The train had suddenly begun to slacken speed and, apparently roused by the change of motion, the Countess Theodora opened her eyes. In questioning amazement she looked from her husband to his companion and back again.

“Louis!” she exclaimed. “Qui est ce monsieur?”

It was the first time she had addressed him directly in the language which should have been his own and the shock gave the Count back something of his presence of mind.

“Ce monsieur—” he began, and then tottered back into his own tongue, “Theodora this gentleman—I should say this man—this—eh—person is of course my valet—”

It had come as an inspiration. He clutched at it as a drowning man clutches at a straw and shut his eyes. Nothing happened. When he opened them again George was standing stiffly respectful, his wife was looking at him in mild wonder.

“I didn’t know you had a valet,” she said.

“Nor did I—I mean I hadn’t, but the faithful fellow would follow me—”

“It’s like this, your ladyship,” George put in humbly but with gentle firmness. “His lordship left me behind to look after something he had ordered for your ladyship and which wasn’t quite ready, but it arrived in time for me to catch the train and I thought it better to bring the parcel straight to his lordship.”

The Count stared open-mouthed. The aspirates were in their place. The ruffianly George had become miraculously and instantaneously an edition de luxe of the proverbial “gentleman’s gentleman.”

“Yes—er—that was how it was,” the Count assented hastily, in response to an admonitory wink from George’s off-side eye. “It was to have been a little surprise for you, Theo in fact—” He broke off ; where the surprise was coming from he had no idea. He felt that he was up to his neck in a horrid quagmire of deceit from which there was no escape. It was Theodora herself who came to the rescue.

“Oh, Louis, how beautiful!” she said softly.

He followed the direction of her eyes. They rested on his hand with an expression of incredulous delight, and he remembered. The pearls! A storm of protest rushed to his lips, but stopped there, checked by the utter futility of endeavouring to explain a so hopelessly inexplicable situation. Paralysed with dismay, he watched her as she held the string of perfectly matched pearls to the light, a flush of genuine pleasure spreading over her fair cheeks.

“Oh, Louis!” she said scarcely above a whisper. “Did you really mean them for me are they really mine to do just what I like with?”

The Count hesitated, gasping on the edge of the precipice. A gentle but expressive pressure from George’s boot on his foot sent him headlong into the depths.

“Of course, Theo,” he said. “Of course.”

The deed was done. By his own action he had set the seal on his criminal career. He was once more the Rogue, that much sought-after individual who rejoiced in the vulgar pseudonym of “Slippery Bill,” and all the make-believe glories of his present position and dropped from him like a borrowed mantle. And at that precise moment, as though to complete his misery, the brakes gripped and with an unpleasant jar the express came to a standstill. Loud voices sounded from the neighbouring carriages an excited guard hurried down the corridor, gesticulating wildly, and a no less excited female, armed with smelling salts, followed in the rear.

But of all these matters the Countess Theodore appeared blissfully unconscious. She looked up shyly from her belated wedding gift, a faint smile dawning in her eyes and about the corners of her mouth.

“Thank you!” she said.

And for the first time since their marriage, George having tactfully withdrawn, she kissed him lightly on either cheek.

CHAPTER IX

“FANCY there having been a robbery on our train!” said the Countess Theodora looking up from “The Bunmouth Daily Chronicle.” “How strange! Didn’t you know anything about it, Louis?”

“Nothing at all,” said the Count de Beaulieu intent on his breakfast and very red in the face. George, resplendent in a cast-off suit, was temporarily taking the place of the hotel-waiter whom he had ignominously ejected from the Count’s suite, and his manner of serving the ham and eggs was stoically selfpossessed and correct. The Count glared at him out of the corners of his eye, mutely admiring. Certainly the talent for impersonating superior people ran in the family.

“Really, there appears to have been quite a commotion,” the Countess Theodora went on. “Just listen ‘Mrs. Pagot-Chump, the well-known American millionairess who is at present honouring Bunmouth with a long visit—”

“What!”

The Countess Theodora looked across the table in grave surprise. The exclamation had come like a pistol-shot. Her husband’s face was colourless and his eyeglass had dropped with a click into his plate.

“Is there anything the matter, Louis?” she asked. “Aren’t you feeling well?”

“Well?” He caught George’s eye and recovered himself, though not very effectually. “Of course perfectly well. I was only shocked surprised, I should say, that a person like Mrs. Pagot-Chump should come to well to a place like this you know—”

“Do you you know her then?”

“Certainly not—that is to say—I have heard of her.”

“You seem to be very well acquainted with her tastes.”

“My dear Theo,” in tones of mild superiority, “American millionairesses are the

same all the world over."

"Do you generally shout like that when you hear one mentioned?"

"I do not," with increasing asperity. "If a man takes a mouthful of hot coffee—"

"You are drinking tea, are you not?"

"The point is immaterial."

"Oh!"

The Countess Theodora returned to "The Bunmouth Daily Chronicle," but she did not proffer any more extracts from its contents and the subsequent silence was glacial. Count Louis de Beaulieu took a third helping of ham and eggs out of pure panic and the entry of the waiter with that morning's post completed his confusion. The waiter was Bunmouth's pet prodigy and the Count's nightmare. Rumour or local pride had it that he could speak every known tongue, and he certainly flavoured his conversation with a sufficiently large quantity of foreign exclamations more or less profane to justify the assertion. The Count was a legitimate prey.

"Deux lettres pour Monsieur le Comte."

"Merci bieng."

"Et une pour Madame la Comtesse."

Madame la Comtesse said nothing at all, but snatched her letter from the tray and Monsieur le Comte realised with a sinking heart that his manners were not as Continental as they should have been. Evidently in France one does not say "merci bien," one merely snatches. Chastened and uneasy, he opened the long, legal looking envelope and hurried over the contents. At the end he draw a quick sigh of relief. Messrs. Billington & Boles begged to inform him that the matter of his inheritance was now satisfactorily settled. The executors had expressed themselves convinced by the proofs of his identity, and the sum of 40,000 had been duly paid into the Bank of England to his credit. Messrs. Billington & Boles added that they hoped to have the honour of attending to the Count de Beaulieu's affairs in the future.

“40,000!” said the Count under his breath. He glanced involuntarily across the table. For one very beautiful and illusionary moment the true state of affairs was forgotten. He was the Count de Beaulieu with 40,000 in cash, an estate in Norfolk and a lovely wife. Fortune smiled upon him, and he too smiled, indifferent to the extreme dubiousness of his claim to these various possessions.

As though aware that he was looking at her, the Countess lifted her eyes. Her face was flushed, and all the laughter and mockery had disappeared. It seemed to him indeed that the tears were very near the surface, and suddenly he remembered that she too had received a letter. From whom? From her parents? A reconciliation, perhaps? In that case his part was played out. Chivalry would no longer require him to offer his protection he would be perfectly free to bolt with the 40,000 and anything else pertaining to the missing Count that he could lay hands on. Nothing could be more propitious. He was nothing to her and she was nothing to him. It was curious that the fact left him unenthusiastic. On the contrary, he felt dully miserable.

“From France?” he enquired at last with assumed indifference.

“No.”

“Oh?” He wished she was not so curt. After all, he had a right to know. He was her husband in spite of everything. He intended to assert his authority. “Might I enquire from whom your letter is then?” he said.

“You may.”

“Theodora I expect an answer.”

“Do you?” In spite of her obvious trouble she smiled, baffling, and truculent. “Well, as it happens I have no objection to answering. This letter is from a friend a Mr. Cecil Saunders.”

“Indeed?”

“And he is coming down to see me.”

“Oh does it not occur to you that I might object?”

“No, it does not. The idea, under the circumstances would be highly ridiculous.”

“Indeed?”

She got up, still smiling, though now with a touch of exasperation.

“Your repartee is a trifle monotonous, Louis,” she said. “You should endeavour to cultivate a greater variety and a little less pomposity. And now for the present au revoir. I am going out in the grounds for some fresh air.”

Louis stifled a third “indeed?” and was left staring angrily at his third and untouched helping of ham and eggs. He wondered whether all French women were so provoking in which case he thanked Heaven that he was a true-born Englishman even though a bad one. And yet and yet! He rose and pushed his chair viciously under the table. One thing was clear in his mind he was not going to beat a retreat before this Mr. Cecil Saunders. He could stick to his guns and his wife even though all Scotland Yard were after him. After all there was no proof as yet. And then he caught sight of George and the whole precariousness of his situation revealed itself in that grinning, unalterably amicable countenance.

“George!” he said curtly.

George put down his tray and with it his respectful bearing and a good percentage of aspirants.

“Well, Bill, dear!” he returned cheerfully. “Wot’s your call, old blighter?”

“Come here and for pity’s sake don’t shout like that. Look here things can’t go on like this.”

George agreed with a jerk of the bullet head.

“Now you’re a-talkin’ sense, my cough-drop,” he said. “Wot concerns yours truly the joke’s gettin’ too stale. Carryin’ round plates and brushin’ me own brother’s togs is a very pleasant sort of rest cure but a bit wearin’. If there was any ‘opes of makin’ a good ‘awl I wouldn’t mind hobligin’ you a bit longer, but outside my dear old friend Mrs. Pagot-Chump there ain’t a soul in the blessed place wot’s got so much as a genuine twinkler and I’m a ‘ard workin’ man, I am —”

“Well, then, George, I’ve got a job for you.”

“Lawks, you don’t say?”

“It’s true. I want you to steal that—that infernal necklace.”

“Wot me wedding-gift from ‘er ‘Ighness, me own sister-in-law? You don’t mean it, Bill?”

“I do—I’m in deadly earnest.”

“Bill, me feelin’s are that ‘urt—”

“I can’t help it you must get those pearls back.” The Count began to pace restlessly about the room whilst George watched him in grieving sympathy. “You must get them back,” the Count went on. “I’m willing to make any sacrifice and run any risk, but those pearls must be given back to their rightful owner.”

“Bill, you’ve lost a slate—”

“Yes, yes, I know. Something’s wrong with me. I’m not the man I was. That blow on the head seems to have spoilt everything. But there the fact is I can’t go on nationalising property, as you gracefully express it. I’m using another man’s money and and deceiving a trusting woman. That’s bad enough for me I’m not going any further. The real Count may be dead and in that case I shall endeavour I feel it my duty to endeavour to lead an honest life. And you’ve got to help me, George.”

George drew himself up to his full height.

” ‘Ave I sunk this low?” he appealed pathetically.

“Don’t trifle I’ve said that I am in deadly earnest. Get me those pearls and I’ll give them back to their owner. I don’t know what I shall say to her any lie will do, and she’ll be glad enough to swallow anything. After that I’m going to keep straight.”

“Yes, that’s all very fine, but wot abaut yours truly?”

“You?” The Count de Beaulieu stopped his restless wandering and confronted his relative with a grave but softened countenance. “Get me that necklace and

I’ll square you with 500,” he said. “Afterwards well, you’re my brother and I’ll start you in anything you like. I’ll buy you a business and I’ll keep you on your legs so long as you keep straight.” His voice rang with a new enthusiasm. He saw before him the vista of a new life full of a noble generosity, and honest atonement for the murky past. But George drew out a handkerchief of doubtful antecedents and mopped his eyes.

“You’re beautiful, Bill,” he said in accents of stifled emotion, “—too beautiful, we’ve never ‘ad anythink so beautiful in the family before. You’ll die young I knows you will, my poor misguided brother.”

“Don’t jeer I’m not mad I’m in deadly earnest.”

George looked up and put his finger vulgarly to his nose.

“You ain’t mad,” he said, “and you ain’t in deadly earnest. It’s worse than all that. When a man with your talents starts bein’ honest I knows wot’s wrong with ‘im ‘e’s in love, that’s wot ‘e is and that’s wot you are, me amatoor skypilot!”

The Count’s eyeglass and his jaw dropped simultaneously, but no answer occurred to him, and by the time he had begun to digest the full purport of the accusation the accuser had crept with professional stealth into the Countess’ bed-room.

CHAPTER X

MRS. PAGOT-CHUMP, American millionairess, sunned herself on the covered verandah of Bunmouth Spa Hotel. Not since the day when Mr. Pagot-Chump had made his record corner in wheat had she felt the same glow of worldly success. It was not a great success no members of the aristocracy were gathered round her but it was at least complete. On either hand the Spa's celebrities, male and female, sipped their tea and listened to her with the respect for millions which is the only form of veneration known to the twentieth century. Mrs. Pagot-Chump, elated and affable, and charming, had just completed her fourth description of the previous night's adventure.

"It isn't the value of the pearls I mind," she concluded pathetically. "James could get me a finer set any day, but it's the associations, and I guess associations can't be bought."

"Indeed not," said her neighbour, a young curate, whose expression eloquently added "How modest of you to say so."

"The pearls were given me on my wedding-day," Mrs. Pagot-Chump went on. "A friend gave them to me a very old and dear friend and I'd give the world to have them back." She smiled archly, and her guests, who acted as a sort of Greek Chorus, simpered after her.

"Pearls stand for tears," said an elderly spinster, with a coy and significant glance.

"Somebody's gain is somebody's loss," added the curate gallantly sententious.

"Which reminds me of a sad case of a dear friend of mine," continued Mrs. Pagot-Chump, who had been carefully leading up to this point. "I take it you have all read in the noospapers about the poor young French nobleman who lost his memory under most distressing circumstances?"

"Of course. 'He was found unconscious on a doorstep, wasn't he?" put in the spinster, determined on proving her up-to-dateness.

"That's the man. Such a romantic affair! He couldn't remember anybody not

even the young lady who had run away from home to marry him. I was mighty upset when I heard about it. We were great friends out in the States a nice, cute young fellow and of the very best French family, you know."

By this time the tea-party, as was expected of them, had put two and two together, with the result that the rejected suitor whose significant present of a pearl necklace had been stolen, was raised promptly into the ranks of the French peerage.

"Why let me think!" exclaimed the curate eagerly. "Aren't you talking of the Count de Beaulieu?"

"Sure I am," said Mrs. Pagot-Chump, well content that the title should be out at last.

"Well, then he's staying in this very hotel. I saw him arrive last night!"

Mrs. Pagot-Chump flushed with genuine delight. This opportunity of proving her connection with "the best French families" was worth more than any pearls to her, and the fact that the connection in question had been bought by a large monetary loan out of James Pagot-Chump's pocket did not in the least detract from its value.

"You don't say!" she exclaimed. "Well, now, if that isn't real quaint! And to think I didn't know! The world's only a pocket handkerchief after all! I wonder what brought him here?"

"If I'm not much mistaken, the Count de Beaulieu is coming towards us this very minute," said the curate.

Mrs. Pagot-Chump looked up, very elate and a little nervous. She was shrewd enough to know that there is a class of aristocrat whose degree of friendship for his democratic friends varies with the fluctuation of his own particular money-market and at the time of their acquaintance the Count had been very "low" indeed. In spite of her preparedness, however, she was only just able to suppress a gasp, for the young man who was coming towards her was not the Count de Beaulieu as she had known him. Her mind, once having grasped that fact, worked with amazing rapidity. Somebody "had been done in the eye" as James would have expressed it in his Anglo-American phraseology. If this was the Count de Beaulieu, then the person who had paid her such marked attention and

had borrowed from her husband with such inimitable grace was nothing better than a mountebank and a fraud. In which case she would become a laughing-stock, she would be disgraced and her social prestige held up to ridicule. The possibility was too awful the risk too serious. She rose briskly and murmuring "Excoose me, won't you? Old friend, you know," she tripped to meet the mysterious stranger. Like a good general she had decided quickly and her plan of action once made she meant to stick to it. By hook or by crook she was going to talk to that young man, she was going to hold him in an amicable conversation, she was going to win him over to an appearance of intimacy. It was a big undertaking, but with the eyes of Bunmouth Spa on her, defeat was unbearable and unthinkable. Trusting to her national fluency and considerable personal charms, she advanced to do battle, and to her amazement infinitely to her relief the young man lifted his hat.

"Mrs. Pagot-Chump, I believe?" he ventured. He was evidently nervous very much more nervous than Mrs. Pagot-Chump was and that fact gave her back her wavering self-confidence.

"My dear Count!" she exclaimed. "So delighted to meet you again!"

It was a bold stroke, but, as is the way with bold strokes, it succeeded. The Count took the outstretched hand, blushed and stammered.

"I didn't know that I—I had the honour," he said when he had regained a certain degree of coherency. "Indeed I didn't know that I knew anybody here."

"Don't you really remember?" she asked softly and with a touch of smiling reproach.

The Count righted himself mentally speaking and smiled back.

"'Pon my word, I don't!" he admitted, "but then perhaps you have heard I've lost my memory through an accident, you know. You might forgive me on that score."

"Of course I will—right away. My name is Pagot-Chump—Mary Pagot-Chump. We met in Noo York. And I'm glad as can be that we've met again. James and I have never forgotten you at any rate."

"It's very nice of you to say so," murmured the Count. He hesitated, digging in

the gravel with the point of his stick. “I can’t tell you how pleased and relieved I am,” he went on jerkily. “It makes it easier for me. I wanted to speak to you in fact—” he stopped again. “In fact I have a favour to ask,” he blurted out.

“Well, suppose you give me your arm,” she suggested shrewdly. “When we get away from these good folk you can tell me about it.”

He obeyed and she felt that he was trembling. She wondered if this “Count” was also in a “temporary financial embarrassment” and how much his friendship was likely to cost the long-suffering James. Under the circumstances she felt it would be cheap at any price and, conscious of eager, watching eyes, her manner grew increasingly gracious.

“Just you tell me what I can do for you, Count,” she encouraged. “Anything is a pleasure when it’s for an old friend.”

“You are most kind,” the Count murmured again. “To tell you the truth all I ask of you is to—er—accept something of—er—value without explanations in fact without asking questions.”

They had reached a solitary by-path in the hotel grounds, and Mrs. Pagot-Chump stopped short.

“Do you realise that it’s a woman you’re talking to, Count?” she asked.

“Certainly, Mrs. Pagot-Chump.”

“Well, then, doesn’t it strike you as a rather tall order?”

“I know—I know!” He looked at her with miserable appeal. “I know, but I can’t help myself. I must just fling myself blindly on your mercy. There—there are your pearls!”

He fairly thrust them on her and when they were safely in her hands he heaved a sigh of relief. “There there I’ve done it,” he said. “You can think what you like. I can’t tell you how I came by them—I can’t and I shan’t. You can send for the police if you like—you have every right to do so—but at any rate I’ve given them back. Anyhow, sooner or later—” He stopped again, his lips firmly compressed, and Mrs. Pagot-Chump looked at him with an expression of amused interest on her charming face. The recovery of her jewels did not please her half

so much as this good-looking and most unusual young man.

“I guess you look honest enough, Count,” she observed critically.

“I feel honest,” he admitted, though in the tone of one confronted with an enigma.

“And suppose I strangle my femininity, don’t ask questions and tell your somnolent police that I’ve made almost as big a fool of myself as they have?”

“—then count on me as your devoted servant for life!”

Mrs. Pagot-Chump smiled. Not in vain was she the wife of a “Wheat King.”

“I guess it’s a bargain, Count,” she said.

“I guess you’re an angel,” said the Count with gallant enthusiasm, and kissed the small extended hand.

And it was at that precise and critical moment that the Countess Theodora turned the corner of the shrubbery.

The three members of the trio saw each other simultaneously and there was a short electric silence. The Count dropped the small hand as though he had been struck with paralysis, and Mrs. Pagot-Chump looked from one blank face to the other with a puzzled good-nature.

“If this is the Countess, I guess you might introduce us to one another, Count,” she said.

The Count made an effort.

“Theo this is Mrs. Pagot-Chump,” he jerked out, “an old friend—”

“I am delighted.” She came slowly forward, her small graceful head held very high, her face pale but composed. “It seems your memory must be returning,” she went on. “This morning you told me—”

“Mrs. Pagot-Chump reminded me of our old acquaintanceship,” he interrupted despairingly.

“The Count and I were great friends out in the States,” Mrs. Pagot-Chump explained still buoyant and conciliatory. “It’s a real treat to have met you, Countess, and if you two would do me the honour to have lunch with me I’d be more than delighted—”

“I thank you you are most kind. Unfortunately I must ask my husband to accompany me at once. I have just discovered that my boxes have been broken into and—” She stopped short. The Count closed his eyes in the instinctive endeavour to shut out the coming catastrophe. She had seen the jewel case in Mrs. Pagot-Chump’s hand. Nothing could save him now. And yet for the second time in his short disturbed honeymoon the catastrophe hung fire. From afar off as it seemed to him Mrs. Pagot-Chump’s high-pitched voice was enquiring with natural excitement as to the loss and he heard his wife’s cold level answer—”

“No, nothing of the least value was taken, thank you. Still, the matter should be investigated. Louis, if you could spare me a few minutes?”

He opened his eyes and met her steady gaze with a speechless gratitude. She had deliberately saved him that was the one thing which stood out clearly in the chaos of his emotions.

“I will come with you at once,” he said quickly. “I am sure, under the circumstances, you will excuse us, Mrs. Pagot-Chump.”

Mrs. Pagot-Chump bowed her head graciously. She scented mischief and there was already a gleam of understanding in her keen eyes.

“Meet you both again, Count,” she said. “And don’t forget our bargain!”

In painful silence the Count accompanied his wife down the path which led back to the hotel. The moment Mrs. Pagot-Chump had dropped out of sight the Count stopped short. His face was flushed but resolute.

“Theodora,” he said, “you were splendid I can’t thank you enough—”

“I do not want you to thank me at all,” she interrupted, “I did it for my own sake. I did not want to admit that—that I was married to a—a—”

“—a what?” he demanded.

“I don’t know what to call you.”

“—a scoundrel?” he suggested bitterly.

“If you like to dub yourself yes.”

“All the same I owe you an explanation,” he persisted with the determination of despair. “It’s extremely hard—”

“So I should imagine.” Her lips curled contemptuously. “How long have you known that—that woman?”

“Theodora I don’t know her—”

“You said she was an old acquaintance.”

“She said so I didn’t.”

She stopped short and looked at him with haughty severity.

“Did you intend those pearls for me or did you not?”

He tried to lie, but his imagination failed him.

“No I did not!”

“Did you take those pearls from my box to give to her?”

“George took them for me—”

“So? You have encouraged an honest man on the road to dishonesty? Really, I am filled with admiration!”

“Theodora—”

She waved his extended hand aside.

“Thank you you have explained enough. I have quite understood. Your valet made an unfortunate mistake in supposing that so valuable a gift would have been intended for your wife, and I made the worse mistake of believing him. I apologise for the inconvenience I have caused you. At the same time”—and at

this point her voice shook—“it would have been kinder if you had told me the truth instead of acting as as you have done.”

“Theo won’t you listen to me?”

“No. If I cared for you, it would be different. As it is, an explanation is unnecessary and stupid.”

She walked on, and he followed in seething silence. Her last remark rankled goaded him to a wild, ridiculous attack.

“If you don’t care, I wonder why you are crying?” he asked, with a thin covering of mild curiosity. “Are you perhaps jealous?”

She turned round on him, crimson with anger, the tears flashing like diamonds in her bright eyes.

“I am not crying and if I was it would be because because I hate and loathe you!”

“Oh!” said the Count. He stood and stared after her until the slight, erect figure had disappeared in the porch of the hotel.

CHAPTER XI

SUSAN, scullerymaid-in-chief to the Bunmouth Spa Hotel, stood by the scullery window and peeled multitudinous potatoes. At intervals a white-capped head appeared round the door and a masculine voice, softened by the dulcet influence of the French language, enquired patiently if Mademoiselle Suzanne was not yet finished with “ces maudites pommes de terre.” Twice Mademoiselle Suzanne, with her eye on the window which looked out on to the stable-yard, replied by a sniff, the third time she waxed indignant.

“If you mean the taters, why don’t you call them by their proper name?” she demanded. “Taters is taters, and they won’t be done for another half hour. So now you know!”

Thereupon she began to sing in the peculiarly high-pitched tuneless way for which scullerymaids are noted, and Monsieur Bonnet shook his head ruefully.

“Thou art not gentille, Mademoiselle Suzanne,” he said. “Thou ‘ast not been gentille for many days past.”

“What’s ‘gentille’?” she enquired freezingly. “And why will you say ‘thee’? ‘Tain’t English?”

Monsieur waved his arms with a movement of despair.

“English is a language without tenderness,” he began. “I try to soften her I try to fill her with ze tendresse of ze French but it avails me not. She remains ze language of ze barbares—”

“Barbers, indeed!” Susan interrupted with energy. “I don’t see wot you need to be so haughty about. You’re only a cook yourself.”

“Helas, Suzanne, you ‘ave not understood—”

“Go along with you!” Susan retorted crisply.

Monsieur Bonnet found no answer to this. He stood with folded arms and knitted brows and eyed her with the gloomy despair of a defeated Napoleon. No one, not

even the hotel manager, dared to speak to him, Monsieur Bonnet, world-famous gastronomer, as did this little fair-haired, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked bundle of impertinence. Why did he bear it? Why did he not send her to the right-about as he had done dozens of other clumsy but willing spirits? Monsieur Bonnet shook his head over himself. Therein lay the curse of the artistic temperament; against tears and entreaties he had a heart of adamant, but fair hair, rosy cheeks and blue eyes could blind him to anything and everything and melt him to a softness unequalled by his own butter. So he sighed and scratched his little black Imperial and sighed again.

“Ever since that fellow ‘as been ‘ere thou art not more the same to me,” he said pathetically. “It is ‘Monsieur Bonnet this’ and ‘Monsieur Bonnet that’ and not once ‘ast thou called me ‘Fran�ois’ as in the old days. Suzanne—”

“My name’s ‘Susan’,” interrupted his tormentor with energy. “I’m English, I am, and I don’t hold with these nasty foreign words.”

“Ah!” Monsieur Bonnet brought his clenched fist down on the table with a gust of violence which sent a couple of potatoes rolling under the sink. “Ah, I ‘ave understood! It is zat Georges, zat sneak, zat poltroon, zat rogue of a gentleman’s gentleman! Shall I tell him I believe not in ze Count de Beaulieu. ‘E call ‘imself a Frenchman and when Jean speak to ‘im ‘e answer as no Frenchman ever speaked. And this George, this calf who makes ‘is eyes at thee—”

“Please remember that you are speaking of a friend of mine,” Susan broke in with dignity.

“Friend! I say ‘e is a rogue a—”

“Now then, who’s calling me names?” came through the window. Both combatants started Monsieur Bonnet with fury, Susan with a slightly exaggerated delight. George, very spruce, with oiled hair and neatly waxed moustache, was leaning against the window-sill, an expression of patronising benevolence on his smooth face.

“You get along, Cooky,” he added with a wave of the hand. “Your omelettes are burning. I can smell ‘em from here.”

“Bah!” said Monsieur Bonnet scornfully. Nevertheless the professional instinct was roused. He sniffed the air suspiciously, he hesitated, glaring furiously from

Susan to the newcomer and then, with a snort of fury, stamped back into the kitchen. Susan's silver giggle pursued him with malicious triumph and George joined in, in a peculiar noiseless way which Susan felt was highly superior.

"You're a nice one!" she gurgled with mock reproof. "That will make him wild for a week."

"Serves him right!" George asserted. "Hasn't got the manners of a cheesemonger. 'Pon my word, I can't think how you can stand him, Susan."

"Oh, I've known worse," said Susan with a half regretful glance at the kitchen.

"I mean," insinuated George, "you're a long way too good for this sort of job. From the first moment I saw you I felt you was different from the rest. There was something about you that told me that you was meant for a higher destiny."

"Now you're talking," said Susan. "You're only a sort of waiter yourself. Monsieur Bonnet is just as good as your boss any day."

"If you mean the Count de Beaulieu, you're off the track," George observed mysteriously. "To the world we may seem as master and man but trust me, there is more between us than meets the eye."

"I saw you brushing his trousers," retorted Susan doubtfully.

"Circumstances, my dear, circumstances over which the strongest have no control."

Susan sniffed.

"Monsieur Bonnet doesn't believe he is a Count," she said. "He says he can't even speak French."

George lifted a supercilious eyebrow.

"You don't really suppose the Count de Beaulieu talks the same French as a common cook, do you?" he asked.

Susan ruminated.

“I s’pose not,” she admitted doubtfully.

“Of course not. Monsieur Bonnet doesn’t know anything about Counts.”

“What do you know about ‘em anyhow?” in a rather ruffled tone. “You aren’t such a toff yourself and Monsieur Bonnet doesn’t believe you’re even honest.”

“Me honest? I should think—” George stopped short, coughed, and waved a scented handkerchief as though to purify a tainted atmosphere. Then a slow smile such as heralds the birth of a great idea dawned over his face. “Susan, can you keep a secret?”

“You try!” she encouraged non-committally.

“Look here, if you found a man sitting on a doorstep in a dirty old suit and not so much as a pocket handkerchief to call his own, wouldn’t you be surprised if you heard he was a Count?”

“Oh, only a little!” with sarcasm and an impatient jab at a harmless potato.

“Well, that shows what you know about Counts! That’s what happened to my friend de Beaulieu. He didn’t know who he was himself until his girl who had run away to marry him claimed him. Seems a queer story, doesn’t it?”

At this the luckless potato received such a mutilating slash that Susan thought it better to let it roll discreetly after its companions under the sink. Her whole face shaped itself into an “Oh” of awed interest.

“I calls it romantic,” she declared solemnly.

“Well, I know queerer things than that,” George asserted.

From that moment five brown-coated potatoes lay sorrowful and neglected at the bottom of the pan whilst Susan soared through realms where dukes and lords, not to mention counts, are supposed to flourish in delightful superabundance.

She planted her elbows on the window-sill and gazed up into her companion’s face.

“You go on!” she pleaded. “I won’t tell!”

Thereupon George folded his arms, and his expression grew sombrely mysterious.

“Aristocrats have to play strange parts in the world’s history,” he began. “There was once a young man Count de Beautemps he was called who had to take the position of a servant. He was of the noblest French blood and yet he had to brush his master’s trousers just as you have seen me do.”

“Why?” queried Susan, not unnaturally.

“Political reasons,” was the dark answer. “In France they cut off heads like you peel a potato.”

“Wot happened to ‘im?” Susan persisted.

“He fell in love,” said George solemnly.

Susan indicated by a jerk of the head that she had guessed that much.

“Who with?” she demanded.

“Ah, that’s where the romance comes in, as you might say.” George’s voice deepened. His eyes filled with a tender significance. “She was beneath him, Susan, but she had a heart of gold. She knew him for what he was when the whole world despised him. She helped him against his enemies and he loved her for it, Susan. As Shakespeare says, ‘What is a coronet to a noble heart’?” His hand glided towards hers and held it in a tender pressure. “Susan, can’t you guess?”

“Lawks ‘tain’t true—”

“I swear it by my honour as a gentleman. Take this as a proof of my devotion! One day I will reclaim it and you.”

Susan gazed open-mouthed at the crested signet ring which he had thrust into her hand. More than the gift his change of manner from the airy ease of the cockney valet to the grandiloquent gesture of romance filled her with a delicious confidence. George passed his hand over his eyes. “The last of a once princely fortune,” he murmured with emotion.

“Oh, sir!” Susan gasped.

“I am not ‘sir’ to you!” he interrupted softly.

At that moment Monsieur Bonnet, having readjusted the matter of the omelettes and having violently scolded his subordinates, made his appearance to discover why the potatoes had not made theirs. Susan’s attitude with her head against George’s shoulder offered sufficient explanation. Monsieur Bonnet shot forward ejaculating “ha” in a crescendo of fury, and thrust the chief offender from his perch on the window-sill.

“Thus my potatoes are they treated!” he shrieked. “Thus are the precious hours wasted! Away with you—you—you—” He found no English epithet to fit the situation, and George gathered himself up slowly from the cobbles.

“You do not know to whom you speak,” he said with dignity.

“Scelerat-rogue—vagabond!” Monsieur Bonnet retorted.

“You shall apologise for this,” George prophesied, dusting the knees of his trousers.

“Bah!”

“I say you shall apologise,” George persisted, and then with a solemn gesture directed at Susan “Remember!”

Susan kissed her hand by way of response, and the next minute the contents of the potato tub swept down upon the intruder. Susan screamed, then as George, shaking himself free of the deluge, retired out of range, burst into a stream of tears.

“You don’t know what you’ve done!” she sobbed. “He’s a gentleman—a real count in disguise.”

“Bah!” Monsieur Bonnet snapped his fingers after the retreating George. “‘E is a liar in no disguise at all. Foolish misguided woman!”

“I’m not!” protested Susan, goaded to self-defence.

Monsieur Bonnet, still hot with victory, gazed upon her with righteous indignation. But then the blue eyes, tear-filled, came into play, and the usual melting process in Monsieur Bonnet's heart began.

"Suzanne!" His voice grew soft and persuasive, "Suzanne weep not. I am a much tried man—if I am a little angry who shall wonder? Voyons, for the hundredth time let there be peace between us—wilt thou marry me, ma petite?"

But Susan, still on aristocratic heights, merely emitted a sniff of inexpressible hauteur.

"Do you think," she said eyeing him from head to foot, "do you really think I'd marry a cook!"

And with this Parthian shot she flounced out into the kitchen.

CHAPTER XII

As George, heated and indignant, made his way up the front steps of the Bunmouth Spa Hotel, a young man with a fair moustache and a general appearance of extreme boredom came down. As a result of George's indignation and the stranger's indifference to all things earthly they collided.

"Can't you see where you're going?" George enquired with polite concern.

The stranger brushed off imaginary results of the encounter.

"My good fellow, I imagine it is your business to get out of my way," he observed.

"Oh, do you? And who do you think I am?"

"You have been pointed out to me as the Count de Beaulieu's valet."

"Oh, indeed. Well, perhaps you aren't quite as bright as you think you are." George made an attempt to pass, but the stranger stretched out two detaining fingers.

"Do you want to earn half a crown?" he asked.

George shuddered.

"Wot a nasty idea!" he said. "I'll think about it."

"Because if you do, take this letter and give it to the Countess of Beaulieu. Say that I'll wait for her in the garden."

"Aren't you afraid she'll die of joy?"

"You are an extremely impertinent fellow. I understand that the Count is giving a reception. Kindly deliver this letter at once."

"Permit me to lick your boots for you," George implored with mock humility. But the stranger had apparently no use for this offer and, after a moment's consideration, George pocketed the half-crown and the letter, and having

performed a deep bow proceeded upstairs.

He found the Count de Beaulieu's suite evidently prepared to receive guests, but the Count and Countess themselves, who stood at either end of the room, watched the waiter's proceedings as though a funeral ceremony was in progress. Since the episode of the pearl-necklace a kind of armed neutrality had been established between them, but the compact, such as it was, was at the moment of George's entry undergoing a serious rupture. The skirmish had been opened by the Count, who had innocently remarked that Dr. Frohlocken's train must be overdue.

"I cannot think why you have invited him at all," the Countess had retorted.

"We owe Dr. Frohlocken a great deal."

"Do we?" with bitter significance.

"I do, at least."

"I suppose that is why you have invited this this person this Mrs. Bugot-Chump —"

"Pagot-Chump, Theodora."

"Her name is nothing to me. I consider it an an insult to have asked her." Tears had been very manifest, and the Count had made a valiant attempt to avert the threatening storm.

"My dear Theo, I can't help myself. It seems I am under some obligation to her. My loss of memory does not do away with the fact that I have a past—"

"So it seems!"

"And I expect you to treat my friends as your friends," the Count had finished, goaded by the sneer.

"If—if I were in the least inclined to be interested I should suspect that there was more between you than you care to confess—"

"My dear girl—" But the unconscious truth of the suggestion cut short the

Count's flood of eloquent protest and only George's entry prevented the victor from following up the pursuit.

"If you please," said George, still flushed with indignation, "there's a gentleman in the garden waiting to see your Ladyship, and he sent this letter." George's manner lacked its usual polish, but neither Theodora nor Louis were in a mood to notice the fact. Theodora had grown pale, and she tore open the envelope with trembling fingers.

"It's from Cecil Saunders," she said at last, meeting her husband's eye with defiance. "He's in Bunmouth."

"Indeed. And pray what does he want?"

"He wants to see me."

"Well, I object. We are waiting to receive our friends—"

"I shall bring him here, then."

Quite suddenly the Count lost his temper.

"I forbid you, Theodora."

"I expect you to treat my friends as yours," quoted the Countess mockingly.

"Theodora if I were inclined to be jealous—"

"Do try to be more original!" said the Countess with annoyance.

The Count hesitated. Then his tone softened.

"Please Theodora—consider my feelings. It's absurd to talk of jealousy, I know, but still—you are my wife and and I don't know this Saunders—in fact none of our party know him. It will spoil everything. I don't want to seem unreasonable, but I have a feeling that I shall dislike the fellow—"

"Well, I dislike this Mrs. Bagot-Chump—"

"Theo, I have explained the circumstances almost as often as I have told you the unfortunate lady's name. I am under obligations to her—"

“And I am under obligations to my my friend.”

“That is another thing altogether.”

“Anyhow I shall bring him up here.”

“If you do—”

The end of the threat if there was an end was lost. The Countess swept out of the room amidst a frou-frou of silk and chiffon, and the Count, with a gesture of resignation, turned to find George seated in the armchair by the fireplace with his feet upon the fender.

“What on earth are you doing?” the Count demanded.

“Accustoming myself to my noo situation,” George explained pleasantly.

“Get up at once. Supposing someone came in and found you—”

“—that’s what they’re going to do, dear bird. Now, don’t you get rorty there ain’t nothing to excite yourself about.”

“For pity’s sake explain.”

George waved his hand towards the door.

“That’s my last job,” he said cryptically.

“I don’t see—”

“In plain English, brother, I’ve guv notice. I’m fed up, I am. I ‘ave borne with a lot to please you and come up to my fraternal duties, but when it comes to a bloomin’ French cook pourin’ potato-skins over me well, I strike, and I’ve struck. You’ll ‘ave to look for a new valet, dear one.”

“Thank Heaven,” said the Count fervently. “You’d better be off at once, hadn’t you?” he suggested.

“Me off? Oh, I ain’t in no ‘urry. I enjoys a little ‘family party’ like this.”

“Look here, though, you must clear out before people come.”

“Me? Not a bit of it. You introduce me as your cousin, Count de Bontemps, who’s been disguised as your valet for grave political reasons. They’ll swallow me like butter.”

“You!” The unhappy young man folded his arms in an attitude of utter exasperation. “You a Count!!”

George leered.

“I’m just as good a count as you are any day,” he observed. ” ‘Ave you forgotten the tender bond of brotherhood?”

“Why, you can’t even behave like a gentleman,” burst in the Count, in a falsetto of indignation.

George got up; pulled down his waistcoat. It was as though a magician had waved a wand over him.

“My dear Beaulieu,” he said, “in the matter of manners I believe I have nothing to learn from a person who screams like a madman and appears to forget that by the unwritten laws of hospitality—”

“For mercy’s sake don’t jump about from your vulgar cockney to that high-flown stuff,” his brother pleaded. “It makes my head whirl.”

“It’s all part of the trade,” George explained airily. “I can be anything at any minute. Mrs. Jubbers is like that too. You should see her as the Duchess of Kolderado—”

“I don’t want to see Mrs. Jubbers as anything.”

“That’s a pity. I thought of trotting her down as a mutual aunt. Well, never mind, I daresay one new-found Count is enough for an afternoon. As I was saying, I am a man of many parts. In private life or during compulsory rest-cures I drop ‘hs.’ At other times I can talk any lingo you like. Would you like a sample of French?”

“Good Heavens no!”

Voices sounded outside. Monsieur de Beaulieu heard his wife’s laugh a little

uneasy, he thought and then a detestable masculine bass. George leant forward, his face had become diabolically threatening.

“If you don’t give me out as your cousin, I’ll give you away,” he said in a sepulchral whisper. “I’ll show you up I’ll tell ‘em all you’re a ‘umbug, a common cheat wot’s gone and swindled a poor trusting girl into a marriage under false pretences—”

“For Heaven’s sake—”

“—I’ll tell ‘em that you’ve cheated your benefactor that you stole his plate the very night he befriended you—”

“George hold your tongue—”

George leered hideously.

“And I’ll talk French to you!” he said, as a culminating blow.

The door opened. The Countess Theodora led the way, followed by Mrs. Pagot-Chump whose gorgeous afternoon “creation” in mauve crepe de chine was finished off by the fatal pearl necklace. Behind appeared the gloomy face ot Dr. Frohlocken and a tall fair-haired young man whom Monsieur de Beaulieu hated at sight.

“You see we’ve all come together,” said the Countess Theodora cheerfully.

“So delightful!” murmured Mrs. Pagot-Chump, and pressed her host’s hand with an arch smile. “I guess we don’t need any introdoocing, do we Count?”

Dr. Frohlocken greeted his recent patient with a depressed friendliness.

“Didn’t want to come,” he declared, with scientific honesty. “Hate hotel life. But I felt responsible. One never knows how a case like yours may turn out, especially when treated in that criminal fashion. However, glad to see you happy, at any rate.”

The Count was relieved to hear that he looked happy. He felt he must be making progress in the art of deception and wondered if Theodora shared his talent or whether her smile was genuine. It was certainly defiant, and her bright eyes and

flaming cheeks seemed to challenge him to do his worst.

“Louis, this is my old friend, Mr. Saunders,” she said. “Mr. Saunders this is my husband.” The two men bowed, and the Rogue successfully performed the feat of grinding his teeth and smiling at the same time. His hatred for this languid individual was increased by the growing conviction that he played a sinister part in his wife’s life. What that part was he had no time to consider and his seething indignation was suddenly, brutally cooled.

“George please order tea to be sent up—” the Countess Theodora was saying.

Involuntarily the husband clutched at the Lucky Pig concealed in his waistcoat pocket. Then he turned. George, modestly awaiting attention, stood on the hearthrug and smiled the kindly exasperating smile of the superior being.

“I think, my dear de Beaulieu,” he said with a slight drawl, “I think it is time you offered the Countess an explanation for our little masquerade.”

There was a blank silence. Monsieur de Beaulieu felt that the room had become full of eyes and that they were all staring at him. Either his neck had swollen or his collar had shrunk, causing him an unpleasant sensation, of suffocation, and his voice, when it was at last induced to produce itself, sounded high and unnatural.

“My dear Theo—” he jerked out, “I have a little explanation to make in fact a little surprise. This—er—this gentleman whom you have been accustomed to know so well, frankly as George is in reality—”

“—Still your humble servant, de Bontemps, and otherwise Georges,” put in George with a gay smile and a general bow which however seemed peculiarly addressed to Mrs. Pagot-Chump.

“Why, that’s the fellow I tipped half-an-hour ago!” Mr. Cecil Saunders exclaimed, examining him intently.

“It is not the first time that a French nobleman has been grateful for a borrowed half-crown,” retorted the newly created Count de Bontemps, with a whimsical and continental movement of the shoulders. “All the same I confess to being a base deceiver,” he went on lightly. “My dear Countess, against whom I have chiefly sinned, accept my apologies and explanations. Political troubles forced

me to fly my own country and disguise myself under the name by which you have hitherto known me. My dear cousin, your husband, offered me the protection of which I stood in need, and now that the clouds are passed and I may once more assume my rightful position, I hope that we may both receive absolution."

Monsieur de Beaulieu suppressed a gasp. It was relatively plausible and beautifully expressed. The vulgar denizen of No. 10, 'Urbert Street had disappeared behind an impenetrable coating of polish and refinement. Nevertheless, his wife's face expressed frozen incredulity, and it was Mrs. Pagot-Chump who took the lead.

"Well, if this isn't like a scene in the French Revolution," she said cheerily. "I guess I'll turn out a Countess myself if you give me time. But I'm real glad to make your acquaintance, Monsieur de Bonton, and if you're in need of another situation just you come along to James Pagot-Chump, U. S. A., and we'll see you get more than half-a-crown."

"Vive l'Amerique," said George and kissed the cordially outstretched hand with the gallantry of a 17th century courtier.

"And now come along and give me a cup of tea and the whole romance," went on Mrs. Pagot-Chump pleasantly elated. "I'm thirsting for both."

Before the eyes of his horrified relative, George, late of No. 10 'Urbert Street, offered his arm and the two led the way into the adjoining room. Mr. Saunders with Dr. Frohlocken, both obeying an imperative gesture from their hostess, brought up the rear, and for a moment husband and wife were left alone.

"You have indeed astonishing friends," the Countess Theodora observed sarcastically.

"I thought—" began her husband with desperate selfpossession.

"I know just what you are going to say: 'Live and let live.' But you will admit that I have stranger things to accept from you than you from me."

"Theo, you said once you would trust me."

Her eyes softened a little and he saw a new expression creep into her face part

timid, part appealing and part defiant.

“Louis how can I trust you after all that has happened?”

Instinctively he felt that she was offering him a loophole of escape, and he seized it eagerly.

“I’d do anything—” he began. “Anything, Theodora.”

“Will you give me 300?”

He looked at her in amazement. It was crude brutal, almost vulgar.

“Why, only the other day it was fifty—”

“I know, I know.” She held out her hands pleadingly. “Surely it is a little thing to ask, and I want it so badly.”

“You want it?” She saw the surprise flash up and every trace of colour faded from her cheeks “or or is it for him?” he asked hoarsely.

Her eyes met his without flinching.

“It is for him.”

“Is that the nature of your obligation?”

“Partly.”

He began to pace about the room in a fever of unrest.

“Theodora won’t you trust me? If this man is using any undue influence over you—”

“Oh, no, it isn’t that my obligation is one of feeling.”

“You mean you care for him?”

She bowed her head. He drew himself up with a hard effort. In the next room he heard George relating his recent adventure with the Bunmouth Hotel’s chef and Mrs. Pagot-Chump’s high-pitched laughter. But for the first time he did not care.

Everything had become indifferent worthless to him.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “It would have been better if you had told me before. As it is you shall have the money.”

“Louis—” He heard the sob in her voice, but he did not see her face. He turned away with compressed lips, and before she could speak again a waiter entered with the letter tray.

“A telegram for you, your Lordship.”

Monsieur de Beaulieu took the envelope and tore it open. There was a moment’s silence. Then he laughed a curious mirthless little laugh.

“Louis what is it have you bad news?”

“Nothing unexpected.” He passed his hand over his forehead. “Theo please ask George I mean Bontemps to speak to me.”

“Yes, Louis,” she said with a new meekness.

He heard the laughing voices in the next room drop to an abrupt silence and the next minute George, flushed and elated, stood in the doorway.

“Wot’s the matter?” he asked boisterously and with painful relapse into his native dialect. “Why don’t you come along in, you weeping willow, you? I’ve just been telling Mrs. Chump about Monsieur Bonnet and we’ve sent for ‘im just for the fun of seein’ ‘is face when ‘e finds who ‘e threw his potato at. Why, Bill —”

“Read that!” said the. Rogue.

George, Count de Bontemps, took the crumpled piece of pink paper and spreading it out read aloud:

“Count de Beaulieu and wife travelling to Bunmouth by the afternoon express. Arrive 5:30. Look out. “Washington Jones.”

Instinctively both men glanced at the clock. The hands marked 5:45. The Count de Bontemps whistled softly.

“There’s a Count too many in this game and that’s me,” he said. “I’m off, brother, dear, and if you take my advice—” Then suddenly he smiled a beautiful smile worthy of a better cause. “No, Bill no, we’ll face it out we’ll face it out, old bird.”

And, slipping his arm through that of his fellow-conspirator, he dragged him, feebly resisting, into the next room.

CHAPTER XIII

MONSIEUR FRANCOIS BONNET divested himself of his apron and flung his white cap down on the table, like a knight weary of his armour.

“I go,” he said solemnly. “I go it is my duty, and a Frenchman never yet refused to perform his duty. Ze manager ‘as said to me, ‘Francois Bonnet apologise! You ‘ave thrown potato-skins at a guest, and for ze honour of ze hotel you must apologise like a gentleman.’ Eh bien, I go. I will make my amends to this scelerat, but I will not forget. Ah, no, I’ll not forget!”

Susan tossed her head.

“If you had listened to me, it would never have happened,” she said condescendingly. “I knew at once he was a gentleman. But perhaps you don’t know the sort. You will look silly.”

Monsieur turned a melancholy brown eye upon her.

“Disloyal one!” he said bitterly. “What is it to thee what I look? Through thy faithlessness am I ‘umbled in ze dust. Is that not enough?”

“Oh, go along!” said Susan cheerfully.

Monsieur Bonnet drew out an embroidered handkerchief and laid it ceremoniously on the table.

“Little did I think when thou gavest me this first gift that I should return it to thee thus,” he said. “But indeed all is over. Go then to thy Count and forget one who loved thee wiz an ‘onourable ‘eart. Farewell.”

“See you later!” said Susan with the haughty aloofness of a Countess in embryo.

As Monsieur Bonnet, heavy of step and heavier of heart, reached the ground floor he became aware of voices, raised in hot altercation, which came from the entrance hall. Monsieur Bonnet, who had been making for the back staircase, changed his course, and made for the front ones instead. Which proves that Monsieur Bonnet was not wholly free from the weakness of curiosity. Two new

arrivals, barricaded in the midst of an astonishing quantity of foreign looking luggage, were engaged in a loud discussion with the perplexed and heated hotel manager. Monsieur perceived that the lady and gentleman were both young and of the type that is briefly classified as “newly married.” Both were below the medium height; the gentleman was dark and excitable, with a fiercely waxed little moustache, the lady was fair and fluffy and placid, with a tendency to plumpness. Monsieur Bonnet had noticed these peculiarities and was on the point of resuming his penitential pilgrimage when the manager, perceiving him, signalled to him like a ship in distress.

“Monsieur Bonnet,” he said in an excited undertone, “you are a man of tact, and perhaps you can manage your own countrymen better than I can. Go and ask the Count de Beaulieu if he would ‘be so kind as to spare me a few minutes. It is a matter of importance.

“The Count is with guests,” said Monsieur Bonnet, his eye on the strange couple, who had relapsed into a heated silence. “Can I not offer him some reason?”

“Say that well, you’d better tell him the truth. Say that a gentleman is here who says he is the Count de Beaulieu—”

“And that he is a fraud, a humbug,” put in the new arrival fiercely, and with a wild and threatening wave of the arms.

Monsieur Bonnet drew a deep sigh of infinite satisfaction.

“I go,” he said. “I go quicker than ze lightening and wiz ze greatest joy.”

Thus it was that when Monsieur Bonnet was ushered into the presence of his enemy he came with the air of a conqueror. George, who was seated by the tea-table next to Mrs. Pagot-Chump, received him with a gracious and graceful movement of the hand.

“Ah, vous voila, Monsieur le Chevalier de la Pomme de Terre,” he said gaily.

Monsieur Bonnet returned the recognition with a stare and a chilly bow.

“I ‘ave come to make the expression of my regrets,” he said stiffly in English.

“Pray consider the matter forgotten,” George assured him. “Your dinners should

soften the heart of your deadliest enemy."

"—and I 'ave come also on ze part of ze Count de Beaulieu." Monsieur Bonnet persisted with dangerous calm. "Ze Count and Countess 'ave just arrived and 'e begs to inform Monsieur de Beaulieu that 'e is a fraud and a 'umbug and zat 'e would be glad of a moment's speak wiz 'im."

The Count rose slowly to his feet, impelled by George's determined eye.

"Absurd!" he heard himself say from a long way off.

"Impertinence!" said George, passing Mrs. Pagot-Chump the sugar. "Must be a fraud. Go and see that he is turned out, Louis. Did you ever hear of such a thing, Mrs. Pagot-Chump?"

Mrs. Pagot-Chump, with recollections of New York, showed a face of blank indignation.

"Never!" she said.

Louis meanwhile looked round the room like a man who is taking a last farewell of his surroundings. He encountered his wife's wondering gaze and Saunders' supercilious stare. The one filled him with a biting remorse for the wrong he had done, the other with an obstinate desire to go on doing it. He had cheated her but, scoundrel though he was, he felt that he was nothing like as big a scoundrel as this pale-eyed wastling. It was his duty to protect his wife against herself. He squared his shoulders.

"If Mrs. Pagot-Chump would excuse me for a moment—" he began.

Mrs. Pagot-Chump bowed.

"And Mrs. Pagot-Chump will come down and legitimise you," said George jocosely, but with significance.

Mrs. Pagot-Chump smiled a smile that was not altogether happy. The possibility that this new arrival was the ingratiating foreigner who had beguiled many an unreturned dollar out of James Pagot-Chump's pocket had already presented itself to her astute mind. But she was a woman of courage.

“Of course,” she said. “I guess I’ll go bail for you, Count.”

With this assurance the Rogue followed Monsieur Bonnet into the manager’s private room. As William Brown, at any rate, he was beginning to believe in himself. The sword of Damocles was about to fall and he felt astonishingly selfpossessed, not to say brazen-faced. Nevertheless, the first encounter with the man he was impersonating caused him a shock. He had expected to meet his double instead he found himself confronted by a small, alert and very angry personage who bore him no resemblance whatever. Theodora’s conduct, not to mention Mrs. Pagot-Chump’s, was growing more and more inexplicable.

There was a moment’s sultry silence. The manager stood midway between them, rubbing his hands and endeavouring to pacify the infuriated little man in the heavy travelling coat who, at the Count’s entrance, made what in police terms is called an “ugly rush.”

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!” The manager pleaded soothingly.

Monsieur de Beaulieu smiled.

“I believe you wished to speak to me,” he said. “Who is this person?”

The manager had no opportunity to explain. The “person” turned from red to purple and uttered a sound that was like a throttled scream.

“I demand that the police be sent for,” he stuttered. “I demand that this man be arrested. He is a fraud, a humbug. There is but one Count de Beaulieu and I am he. This here is the Countess de Beaulieu—” He broke off, choking with temper, and the late William Brown glanced involuntarily in the direction indicated. For the first time he became aware that a lady was seated by the fireside. She looked up and smiled placidly. The Rogue clenched his fists. This then was the woman for whom Theodora had been so basely deserted. The last spark of remorse died out.

“You say you are Count de Beaulieu,” he said with the severity of innocence. “Have you any proof to offer?”

“Proof? Proof? I have papers hundreds of papers—” the infuriated Frenchman dragged out his pocket, but his impersonator waved the offer on one side.

“Papers can be forged,” he said. “You are aware, perhaps that the Count de Beaulieu inherits a considerable fortune from his English Grandfather?”

“Aware? Of course I am aware. It is for that—that I have come to this wretched country.”

“Then no doubt your bankers and the executors will legitimise you?”

The Frenchman snorted.

“I have arrived yesterday from America,” he retorted. “I have had no time—”

William Brown smiled affably.

“That is a pity,” he commented, “because the executors of the late Lord Sudleigh have acknowledged me.”

“Comment!!”

The manager smiled with a dawning relief. After all, the first week’s bill had been paid, and people who pay their bills inspire confidence.

“I might perhaps telephone to your bankers, Monsieur le Comte?” he suggested apologetically.

“By all means,” William Brown asserted. “I —”

At this the Frenchman, who had been reeling round the room in a transport of impotent fury, came to a standstill. By a supreme effort he attained that state which in French passes for calm.

“Wait!” he said. “I have thought. There is a friend of mine here a Madame Pagot-Chump. It is for her I have come. I knew her in New York. She will recognise me. Send for her.”

“Mrs. Pagot-Chump’s evidence will no doubt be helpful,” remarked the manager tentatively.

“By all means,” Brown agreed.

The manager made for the door.

“With your permission, gentlemen, I will go myself and explain to Mrs. Pagot-Chump and ask her to spare us a few moments.”

“You will find her in my wife’s apartments,” Brown added.

The Count started and William Brown smiled. He had taken out his Lucky Pig and was surreptitiously caressing it with his forefinger. The good luck which had made Theodora and Mrs. Pagot-Chump mistake him for this man was utterly incomprehensible, but he had begun to believe in it. Meanwhile the manager had closed the door softly behind him and the Frenchman advanced threateningly.

“You are a swindler, sir, and you know it,” he said.

William Brown confronted him. At that moment the thought of Theodora and her betrayal at the hands of this man made him dangerous.

“I dare say I do,” he said slowly and distinctly “but I’d rather be a swindler than a scoundrel.”

“Sir you insinuate?”

“I insinuate nothing. I affirm. Do you deny that you wrote to the Countess Theodora de Melville asking her to come to England to marry you in defiance of her parents wishes?”

“I do not deny it.”

“And you married this lady?”

“Of course—”

“Then I say you are a scoundrel and I regret nothing that I have done.”

The Frenchman recoiled. His expression changed from rage to alarm.

“C’est un fou!” he murmured distractedly. “Un fou!”

But at that moment the door opened and, catching sight of Mrs. Pagot-Chump’s gaily adorned person, he advanced with outstretched hands. “Ah, Madame, you are come like an angel to deliver me and my poor wife from a most absurd

position—”

Mrs. Pagot-Chump waved him severely on one side.

“I do not know this person,” she said.

“Ah!” said the manager from the rear. William Brown pressed his Lucky Pig in silent gratitude.

“You do not know me!” gasped the Frenchman. “Why in New York—”

“I remember that in New York a person this person presented himself to Mr. Pagot-Chump and myself as the Count de Beaulieu,” Mrs. Pagot-Chump went on with freezing deliberation. “I remember that he borrowed $1,000 from my husband, but I do not remember that he ever paid them back. We discovered afterwards that he was a common swindler.” She inspected the feebly gesticulating Frenchman through her lorgnettes. “Under the circumstances I guess our acquaintance is at an end,” she added.

“Naturally,” murmured the manager. “I am deeply grateful -to you, Madam, for clearing up this difficulty.” He rang the bell. “John, see that this this gentleman’s boxes are put back and bring the omnibus round to the door—”

“I protest I remonstrate I shall send for the police—”

“You can be thankful that I have not sent for the police,” the manager retorted sharply. “I suppose, Monsieur le Comte, you do not wish to prosecute?”

“Oh, dear no,” Wiliam Brown assured him. “It really isn’t worth while.” He offered Mrs. Pagot-Chump his arm. “I think after this little intermezzo we can rejoin our friends,” he said gaily.

Ten minutes later the Hotel omnibus containing the still furiously tirading Frenchman and a French lady who had by this time relapsed into a placid shower of tears, rolled out of the Hotel grounds. From the scullery window Susan watched the departure in triumph.

“You see I told you so!” she said to Monsieur Bonnet who scowled in the background.

“The end is not yet,” returned Monsieur Bonnet, gloomily prophetic. “Misguided woman!”

And upstairs Monsieur de Beaulieu listened to the dying rumble of the wheels with the relief of a man who has successfully dodged the sword of Damocles for the fourth time.

CHAPTER XIV

DR. FROHLOCKEN sat at breakfast and discoursed on the subject of crimes. It was a subject which invariably put him in a good temper, and the close, slightly strained attention of his audience encouraged him to explain his theories at some length.

“There are no such people as criminals,” he declared, adding paradoxically, “and none of us can claim to be anything better. A so-called criminal is merely a person whose buried instincts have got out of control. We are all potential murderers and thieves; even you, my dear lady, may at heart be something very different to what you seem, and as to you, No. 7, who knows what that memory of yours is hiding so carefully.”

He chuckled with unusual levity and went on quite unaware of the chill silence which had welcomed his mild pleasantry.

“Hence so-called crimes enter into my domain; criminals, as you call them, interest me. I collect them. I confess that I have sympathy with them, which does not, however, prevent my recognising the necessity for limiting their activities. There was one fellow in particular whom I genuinely admire a notorious person who has made our idiotic police appear more idiotic than usual William Brown he was christened, but he had several aliases Slippery Pill, I think, among others —”

“Slippery Bill,” Monsieur de Beaulieu corrected hastily.

Dr. Frohlocken appeared delighted.

“Ah, then you remember him?”

“Remember? Certainly not. I mean , I’ve heard through the papers of course—”

“Well, he’s worth remembering,” the Doctor resumed appreciatively. “A wonderful impersonator. Dukes, clergymen, detectives, it was all the same to him apparently. And the police have never so much as laid hands on him. However, what can you expect? A man of genius like that pitted against our friend Inspector Smythe? The conclusion is inevitable. At the same time I think I

may say I fear that the object of my admiration has met his match. I have a suspicion that his career is drawing to a close."

Monsieur de Beaulieu leant forward.

"Do you?" he said scarcely above a whisper.

Dr. Frohlocken nodded gravely.

"Sooner or later they all make the same mistake. They play the same part too often. You remember the gentleman who had a fatal boating accident with three heavily insured wives in succession? Now that was overdoing a good idea. Two might have passed, but three was unreasonable unlikely. You see, they get intoxicated with success. They feel their luck can't fail and so they blunder as I fancy Mr. William Brown has done—"

He glanced round, flattered by the intense interest which he had evidently aroused. Monsieur de Beaulieu seemed even unnecessarily moved. His cousin's attitude, though attentive, was more impersonal.

"You surprise me, Doctor," he remarked rather coldly. "I have not heard of any arrest—"

"Not yet, sir. Nevertheless you will do so. Now, I have never seen the man, but I have no doubt that I shall be the means of cutting short a very interesting career —"

Monsieur de Beaulieu, taken unawares, gripped the edge of the table.

"You!" he breathed.

"I think so. It was the similarity of the various cases that struck me. You see, I have been collecting them and their method has always been identical, the impersonation of someone who is well out of the way or whom nobody is likely to know. The moment the pair were driving out of the grounds the suspicion flashed across my mind. Of course I could not be certain, nevertheless I wired the police in London, who will undoubtedly take steps—"

"You mean the Count the so-called Count has been arrested?"

Dr. Frohlocken assented.

“I am expecting news any moment—” he said in a tone of mild satisfaction. “The scientific mind, my dear No. 7, works slow, but it works exceeding sure.”

The Count de Beaulieu glanced sideways at his companion in nobility and received a gentle pressure on the foot by way of response. No further conversation on the subject was possible, however, for at that moment the bilingual waiter, Jean, made his appearance with the morning’s post.

“Une lettre pour Monsieur le Comte une letter pour Madame la Comtesse.”

Jean’s French invariably caused the Count a twinge of alarm. This morning it reduced him to a state bordering on panic and the letter, when he saw the envelope, completed the devastation of his nervous system. It bore the printed address of his bankers. He opened it and the first lines told him that the blow had fallen. In polite, but no longer cordial terms, Messrs. Thomas and Blithe begged to inform the Count de Beaulieu that they had received a letter purporting to come from the genuine bearer of the title who was returning from America. Pending enquiries, Messrs. Thomas and Blithe felt it necessary to close the Count de Beaulieu’s account. They expressed regrets, but their instructions from the executors of the late Lord Sudleigh’s will left them no alternative. The recipient of this intelligence felt the blood slowly recede from his face. He looked up, fearing that the change might have been noticed, and saw that his wife was white to the lips.

“Are you about to faint, both of you?” Dr. Frohlocken enquired with cold professional interest.

The Count, once again admonished under the table, recovered himself. In an instant he had reached his wife’s side and had placed his arm protectingly about her.

“Theodora—” he said, “what is the matter? Have you had bad news?”

For a full minute she did not answer. Her fair head rested against his arm and, to his amazement, he felt that she was clinging to him like a frightened child.

“Theodora!” he coaxed, with a long suppressed tenderness.

Her eyes opened and she looked up at him. A wave of wondering surprise seemed to swamp for a moment the underlying fear.

“It’s from my my father,” she stammered. “He has forgiven us he is coming over tomorrow.” But she did not offer him the letter nor did he ask to see it. Knowing that it was written in the French language he had not the slightest desire to reveal his astonishing ignorance of what was supposed to be his own tongue, and he contented himself with a non-committal cough. Dr. Frohlocken gazed from one to the other with alert attention.

“Your reaction to good news, my dear lady,” he remarked, “is quite unusual and most interesting. One might almost suppose, judging superficially—”

The Countess rose unsteadily to her feet. She still held her letter tight clenched in her hand, and her eyes sought her husband’s with the same look of mute appeal.

“I think I shall rest a little in the next room,” she said faintly. “The shock you know. Dr. Frohlocken your arm!”

That gentleman responded with clumsy alacrity, and a moment later the Count and George were alone. The Count continued to stare at the door through which his wife had passed, as though he had seen a vision, and George, who was eminently practical, coughed.

“Wot’s up?” he enquired briefly, and with a distressing return to his native intonation.

“Everything’s up U.P.,” the Count answered with a short unhappy sight. “Read that!”

He pushed the bankers’ letter across the table and George, having glanced over it, nodded.

“Once the real josser had turned up you couldn’t expect things to go on as they are,” he said. “It’s a case of the night express and a visit to the Continong, eh, old bird?”

The “old bird” glanced despairingly about the room.

“Yes, I suppose so. It’s all over this time and it can’t be helped.”

“Wot about your missus? Going to take ‘er with you?”

“No.” The Count made a movement of despairing resignation. “I shall write to her. I shall tell her the whole truth. Her people will look after her now and and I dare say the law will set her free. I’m sure I hope so.”

“Wot about this friend of ‘ers this ‘ere Saunders?” George enquired darkly.

His brother squared his shoulders like a man preparing to meet the attack of a whole army.

“I suppose she’ll marry him in the end,” he jerked out. “I’d like to kill him first though.”

“Why don’t you, old bird?”

“Me? Good heavens, do you take me for a murderer?”

George gave an unpleasant chuckle.

“Well, I don’t know. You downed that fellow round by Blake’s pretty neatly. I don’t know whether ‘e recovered but—”

“George, for pity’s sake don’t talk about things of that sort! You know I can’t remember them and they are simply unbearable. Anyhow, this is different. I can’t harm a man she’s fond of even though I think he’s a scoundrel.”

George shook his head.

“You’re off colour, Bill dear,” he lamented. “You wouldn’t ‘ave turned a hair over a little job like that a year ago. However, it’s love’s young dream that’s upset you, I suppose. But look ‘ere, to get back to business how much filthy lucre ‘ave you got for our little trip?”

The Count started, overwhelmed by this new idea.

“Money? Why, I don’t believe I’ve got 20 in the world. I gave my wife 300 last night.”

“Wives is expensive luxuries,” George commented gloomily. “Don’t you saddle yourself with another, Bill dear.”

“I never shall,” Monsieur de Beaulieu returned with a tragic glance at the closed door, “even if I had the chance,” he added, as a melancholy after-thought.

“And you won’t have much chance unless we can raise the wind some’ow,” George observed. He was silent a moment, contemplating his brother with a half-amused cunning. Then he slapped his knee. “It’s a lifer if you get caught, Bill,” he said. “You don’t know wot a little lot the beaks ‘ave got against you thirty burglaries, fourteen fraudulent impersonations, twenty forgeries, three cases of manslaughter, not to mention bigamy. Why, an ordinary ‘uman life won’t be ‘alf long enough! You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“I’m sure I shan’t care much,” was the bitter answer.

“Well, wot about the poor Countess wot you’ve deluded so? D’yer think it’ll be a nice thing for ‘er wot’s come of a noble French family to see ‘er ‘usband in the dock, eh?”

George was sinking deeper and deeper in the sloughs of cockneyism, and the unhappy Count winced.

“No, no, I must spare her that,” he agreed hoarsely. “Besides I couldn’t face her. She trusted me, you know, and upon my word I’d have made her happier than either that blackguard Count or that Saunders fellow could have done. But the luck’s been against me and I must let her go. It would be horrible to see her when she hears that I’m only a common rogue.”

” ‘Old on there! Don’t you go calling names. Hours is a honourable profession if you looks on it in the right light. Besides, you’re getting washy, brother, and you can keep all that for the beak when you pleads ‘extenuating circumstances’. Look ‘ere, I’ve got an idea, old bird.” He picked up a copy of the “Bunmouth Daily Chronicle” and pointed out the social paragraph entitled “Latest Arrivals.” “See that?”

“See what?”

“If you can’t read at your time of life you ought to be ashamed. Listen to this? Mr. John Lancaster, the well-known Australian financier who is travelling over

Europe in connection with his recent mysterious loss, has arrived for a few days' rest in Bunmouth! Now, how does that strike you, brother?"

The Count put his hand involuntarily to the back of his head as though perplexed by some vague memory.

"The name sounds familiar," he said hesitatingly. "I seem to have heard it somewhere."

"Of course you have, you Chatham & Dover express, you. Why he's known everywhere and fairly oozes with chink. And I tell you wot, sweet innocent, we leave by the night train and Mr. John Lancaster's cash goes with us."

The Count recoiled.

"You can't you won't do it!" he stammered.

"Can't I? I've got a little friend below stairs who'll make it as easy as going to sleep. Just you keep an eye on yours truly and I'll show you the neatest bit of safe-breaking you've ever seen."

The Count drew himself up to his full height.

"George," he said sternly, "you are my brother and I should hate to have to do it, but if you persist in this nefarious plan I shall feel it my duty to warn the manager."

"You!" George gave vent to a snort of contempt. "Why, you 'ave done that sort of thing dozens of times yourself, you old white-washed sepulchre! And if you makes a fuss and tries to queer my crib—" he drew nearer and his voice sank to a snarl "I'll send for the manager myself and then we'll see who looks funny."

The Count sank down annihilated into the nearest chair.

"I apologise," he murmured. "'Pon my word, it seems I must have had another attack of honesty."

"It'll be over in a minute," George reassured him. "Try a drop of brandy, dear boy."

But at that moment Dr. Frohlocken’s dark head appeared between the curtains of the door.

“The Countess is feeling better now,” he said mildly. “She would be glad to see you, Count.”

CHAPTER XV

MONSIEUR BONNET sat by the kitchen table with his head between his hands and stared gloomily at a rough copy of the dinner menu. To welcome the new and celebrated arrival he had been told to put his best foot forward, which command Monsieur Bonnet had construed into a prodigious culinary effort. On another occasion the effort would have given him pleasure, but to-day his heart was heavy and he had every reason to fear that his hand would be heavier still. The reason was not far to seek. Susan was faithless. From where he sat he could hear her crooning to herself over the afternoon's washing up and since he had told her that his heart was broken her singing was nothing short of callous. He knew what it all meant. With visions of becoming the Countess de Bontemps Susan's previous ambition of one day assuming the name of Bonnet and the sway over a nice little hotel had dropped out of sight. As a direct consequence Monsieur Bonnet found himself unable to concentrate even on his favourite subject of entrees and when the singing suddenly ceased he rose up, smote himself on the breast, and determined on a last attack.

"The Old Guard dies but never surrenders!" he declared defiantly and quite indifferent to the fact that there was no one to appreciate this stalwart sentiment, unless the blinking of the pots and pans could be accepted as signs of intelligent understanding. As Monsieur Bonnet approached the scullery door he fancied he heard the sound of voices and, aroused by a sudden, hideous suspicion, he stopped short. Through the chink of the door he perceived that his worst fears were justified. Susan was perched on the inside window ledge, George, Count de Bontemps on the outside, and the proximity of their heads brought a torrent of remarkably expressive French epithets to Monsieur Bonnet's lips. Fortunately they were smothered. Paralysed with indignation, Monsieur Bonnet heard a rapid exchange of whispers of which George had the lion's share.

"You don't mean it?" Susan was exclaiming softly. "You're having me, aren't you?"

"Having you? Ah, Susan, to have you, to call you mine that alone is indeed my ambition." George's voice, though subdued, rang with the tenderest enthusiasm. "Now that my position is acknowledged here you trust me, do you not, my sweet English rosebud?"

“Oh, I trust you all right,” said Susan complacently. “I only wants to know wot you’re after.”

George passed his hand caressingly over her fair hair, whereupon the concealed Monsieur Bonnet made a gesture suggesting homicidal tendencies.

“I want you to marry me, Susan,” George said. “Is that not clear to you, my fair English lily? But before I marry you I must have finally overcome the machinations of my enemies.”

“Wot’s machinations?” inquired Susan intelligently. “Anything to do with aeroplanes?”

“Nothing, bien aimee. I merely meant that my enemies who have stolen my rightful heritage must be routed finally before I dare ask you to share my life with me.”

“Who’s your enemies?”

George’s voice dropped. Although Monsieur Bonnet glued his ear to the draughty aperture the rest of the conversation only came to him in maddeningly disconnected scraps.

“—you don’t say—”

“—millionaire stolen papers my father’s heritage—”

“I don’t see—”

“You must help me to-night—the key—”

“Ain’t it wrong?”

“Wrong to help right the wrong Susan, my English flower—”

The rest was smothered in a tender embrace. But Monsieur Bonnet had heard enough. He withdrew on tiptoe, removed his cap and apron, took his best coat out of the cupboard and proceeded upstairs with the air of sinister purpose worthy of a Machiavelli. Monsieur Bonnet was in point of fact a cook only by accident. Had the times or his country demanded it of him he would have made

an equally famous diplomatist or general. And it was in these capacities that he waylaid the unsuspecting Dr. Frohlocken on the hotel terrace.

“Monsieur, a word wiz you!”

Dr. Frohlocken, immersed in a new theory of the subconscious, stopped resentfully.

“What is it? Who are you? What did you say you wanted?”

Monsieur Bonnet glanced cautiously round. No one was in sight except a small, eccentric looking visitor who sat in the shade, apparently lost in the contemplation of the heavens. Monsieur Bonnet laid a mysterious finger to his lips.

“I would ask you a question. You are a doctor a famous doctor?”

“I believe so,” returned Dr. Frohlocken more pleasantly.

“You are a man of honour?”

“As far as I know—”

“Then are you not aware zat you protect a scoundrel a robber un scelerat?”

Dr. Frohlocken contemplated his unknown companion in blank, rather offended surprise.

“I certainly am not aware of any such thing,” he declared energetically. “I have had charge of certain so-called lunatics and some of them may have appeared to be, and were undoubtedly scoundrels, but—”

“Wait!” Monsieur Bonnet held up a commanding hand. “You are a man of honour I appeal to you. Ze ‘appiness of one dear to me depends on you. Answer me, Monsieur. Who is this Count de Bontemps?”

Dr. Frohlocken, from being offended, became vaguely uneasy.

“The Count de Bontemps the Count de Bontemps is a friend a cousin of of the Count de Beaulieu.”

“And ‘ow do you know zat?”

“Good heavens, man—” the doctor made a gesture of increasing irritability “he the Count de Beaulieu said so.”

“And who is this Count de Beaulieu?”

Dr. Frohlocken shrugged his shoulders. “As far as I am concerned he is No. 7 ; speaking with exactitude that is all I know of him. You might as well ask me who I am.”

“I ask you ‘ow you know?”

“How I know who I am?”

“I ask you ‘ow you know ‘e is ‘e?”

Both parties were growing more heated. Dr. Frohlocken endeavoured with very little success to counterfeit an expression of judicial calm.

“Before I answer your questions I would be glad to know who you are,” he said, “and why you ask them.”

“I ask them because not five minutes ago I did ‘ear ze so called Comte de Bontemps make ze plans wiz my scullerymaid to rob Monsieur Lancaster who arrive only this day. My scullerymaid—elle ne salt rien—she is innocent—she is deceived—‘ypnotised by ze scoundrel, this rogue—”

Dr. Frohlocken waved his arms as though he were trying to swim through the torrent of words.

“It’s intolerable—idiotic. Why don’t they teach people to say what they mean? I don’t understand a thing you’re talking about. It’s this damned unscientific thinking—”

“Excoose me, gentlemen!” Both combatants were arrested by the drawling accents. Unknown to them the stranger on the terrace had ceased contemplating the heavens and now stood negligently leaning against the balcony, a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, a peculiar smile on his wizened little face. “‘Scoose me,” he repeated. “Overhearing other people’s talk is all part of my business, and

I overheard yours. My name's Washington Jones. Here's my card. If you don't believe it ask Mr. Lancaster. I'm his charge d'affaires, as you might say."

"I really don't see—" Dr. Frohlocken began…

"—what business I've got in this galere?" Mr. Washington Jones interrupted. "It's just this I know what you're talking about and you don't. Monsieur Bonnet —this gentlemen here—has got his nose somewhere near the scent, but you've made altogether an astonishing fool of yourself, Dr. Frohlocken."

Dr. Frohlocken drew himself up with dignity.

"I expect proof of that statement, sir."

"Waal, I guess that's what I'm going to give you. You think this young man of yours is the Count de Beaulieu, don't you?"

"I do not. I never said so. I always protested—"

"Well, he isn't!"

"Bah!" said Monsieur Bonnet, and snapped his fingers triumphantly. Dr. Frohlocken ran his fingers wildly through his hair.

"Is this man mad?" he demanded.

"Read that!" said Mr. Washington Jones placidly.

With impatient fingers the Doctor took the offered newspaper cutting and hurried over the first few lines. And very slowly a light of triumph spread over his sallow countenance.

"You mean that's him?" he said.

"That's him," said Mr. Washington Jones, with a corresponding lack of grammar.

"Bah!" said Monsieur Bonnet to no one in particular, but with the satisfaction of victory.

CHAPTER XVI

NINE o’clock struck. The Count and Countess sat on either side of the fireplace and simultaneously both glanced at the clock and then at each other; simultaneously their eyes returned to their books. After that ten minutes passed before either moved. Their respective novels must have provided ponderous reading, for the pages were left unturned, and when the Count ventured to look up again he found his wife was watching him surreptitiously from under cover of her eyeslashes.

“You are looking tired,” she observed hastily, as though offering an explanation. “You are pale.”

“I have a headache,” he admitted. “It’s the weather. You don’t look very well either. Hadn’t you better go to bed?”

“Oh no, thank you. But don’t wait up for me.”

Further silence. At intervals stolen glances at the clock. At last the Countess Theodora rose. Her face indeed justified her husband’s statement that she was not looking well. It was deadly white and the hands that played nervously with the long gold chain were obviously trembling.

“I think—” she began with a little gulp “I think I shall go to bed, Louis, I am feeling upset. It is the heat or the cold or something. Good night.”

He rose and approached her anxiously.

“Theodora can I get you anything shall I send for the doctor?”

“Oh, no, no.” She held out her hands as though to ward him off and, instead, yielded them with a sudden impetuousness into his clasp. “I have been very horrid to you and you are very, very kind to me, Louis. But you must not bother about me never, never!”

“Never?” he said with a whimsical sadness.

“No, never.” She hesitated, toying with a kind of desperate playfulness with the

buttons on his coat. “Really, I’m not worth bothering about, Louis.”

“Isn’t that for me to decide?”

“No, no, I know better than you. If if I had known you were so—so good and chivalrous and generous I wouldn’t have done it—I mean I wouldn’t have consented to marrying you. It was wrong—”

“I’d do it all over again,” he broke in impetuously.

“Would you?”

He flushed.

“No, I wouldn’t—”

“Ah, you see!”

His lips parted with his one and only reason then closed again. She laughed brokenly.

“Do not try to soften it. I have understood. How could it be otherwise. You have done what you felt was your duty and I have made you suffer.” She drew back her head and for a moment looked him full and straight in the eyes. “I am sorry for everything I have done to hurt you,” she said solemnly. “I want you to believe that—that I couldn’t help myself. Had things been different—”

“Ah, had things been different!” he interrupted sighing.

“Who knows then?” She shrugged her shoulders recklessly. “Why do we stand here talking of the might-have-beens? It is so foolish so useless and it is late. Bon soir, Monsieur, mon mari!”

“Theodora!”

She looked back at him from between the parted curtains.

“Bon soir, Monsieur, mon mari!” she repeated softly as though the phrase pleased her and the next minute she was gone.

The Count made a movement to follow her, then stood irresolutely staring at the

spot where she had vanished until with alarming abruptness the clock struck the half hour. Then he started like a man awakening from a dream and, crossing to his writing desk, took pen and paper and began to write.

“My wife,” he wrote clearly, “though my knowledge of the French language is limited I believe you have just called me husband for the first time as though you meant it. I call you ‘wife’ for the last time, though I think you will remain that to me always in spite of everything. Still it is a title from which you have every right to free yourself. I am not the Count de Beaulieu and I do not know how you ever came to suppose I was. From my point of view I don’t know who I am but the person whom I was forced to introduce to you as the Count de Bontemps declares that I am his brother. As he is a scoundrel, I presume I am a scoundrel also I have certainly acted as one. A Lucky Pig, which is the one thing I brought with me out of my mysterious and unknown past, points to my being the notorious William Brown, alias Slippery Bill. George confirms this so now you know what manner of man you have married. Have I any excuse to offer? Well, I think I can plead that I was driven into this false position. When I recovered consciousness after that accident or whatever it was I couldn’t remember anything about myself. Inspector Smythe put two and two together, however, and apparently made five, but that wasn’t altogether my fault, was it? I did not remember any of my past crimes, and for all I knew he was right indeed if he had said I was the Emperor of China I should have believed him. Afterwards, of course thanks to that unlucky Pig I found out who I really was, but then it was too late. And now the game is up. The real Count and he was a worse scoundrel than I was for deserting you for that fair-haired doll has turned up, and it’s only a question of hours before he proves his identity. In any case I should have to own up to you. I couldn’t stand it any longer. Of course it was natural that you shouldn’t care for me and I don’t blame you. I deceived you and your feminine intuition found me out. You grew to care for someone else and I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t bear to see you unhappy or to see you caring for another man. This brings me up to the last point in my confession. I love you. That’s why I’m off why I am going to commit a last crime in order to make good my escape and why afterwards I shall try to live an honest life. It’s the one atonement I can offer.

“Your devoted and unhappy husband,

“The Rogue.”

“Are you ready, old bird?”

William Brown, as he was to be from henceforth, started to his feet, and then, as he saw the grinning face in the doorway, nodded a curt assent.

“Yes.”

“Coast clear?”

“Yes wait a moment though till I have addressed this envelope.”

“Parting love-letter, eh?”

“Hold your tongue!”

George grimaced rudely. William Brown finished his task in stern silence. Then, as he threw the pen down with a sigh of bitter satisfaction, he caught sight of a second envelope addressed to him, propped up against a vase, with the injunction “not to be opened till tomorrow morning.” This letter he thrust into his pocket.

“Are you coming or are you waiting for your escort to take you to Buckingham Palace?”

“I’m coming I’m coming!”

A moment later both men stood together in the quiet passage. Downstairs they heard the subdued strains of music and the hum of voices. George put his finger to his nose.

“Grand doings,” he said briefly. “The road is as clear as it could be. Try and look innocent, dear boy, and come along. My little friend Susan has given me the key to No. 36 it will be as easy as flying—”

“—and about as safe,” commented the Rogue gloomily.

George chuckled but made no answer, and in silence they proceeded down the corridor. Their progress was open and even ostentatious. The chamber-maid who bade them good-night did not even trouble to look after them and yawned her way back to her own quarters.

“Now!” said George quietly.

They had reached room No. 36. George stopped, took a key from his pocket and fitted it into the lock.

“Susan is to meet me outside the gates,” he observed casually. “I hope the dear little thing won’t catch cold.”

But on this cynical hope his wretched partner made no comment. The key turned easily, and with a gracefully inviting gesture George motioned William Brown into the dark and silent room. Both darkness and silence oppressed the latter with an eerie prescience of danger, but he said nothing and clenched his chattering teeth, desperately intent on seeing the business through.

“The safe’s over by the window,” his companion whispered. “Take this electric torch and turn it on when I tell you. We mustn’t be wasteful with the gas.”

On tip-toe both men crossed the room to the spot which George had indicated. A small travelling safe of determined appearance had been set against the wall and, obeying a curt command, the Rogue switched on the torch. Its straight stream of light fell on the lock and there was a soft clink of steel instruments as George set to work. The business filled William Brown with indescribable and unnatural horror. It was insult added to injury that he couldn’t even be dishonest with a good conscience. Whatever he had been in the past he was now a hopeless failure. “I’ll have to go straight,” he thought. “I can’t stand this sort of thing any more I simply can’t.” He was, in fact, suffering acutely. Every hoarse rasp of the file seemed to vibrate down his backbone and George’s breathing magnified itself in his ears to the stentorian snorting of a bull. He looked nervously about him. A shadow moved. He attributed it at first to the light then suddenly a fearful suspicion grew to a blood-curdling certainty.

“George!” he whispered. “There’s somebody in the room there—behind the wardrobe—”

The next instant the torch was dashed from his hand. He felt himself half dragged, half carried to the open window and before he had time to utter more than a gasp of protest he was flying through a horrible space which ended suddenly and uncomfortably in the mouldy moistness of a flower-bed. Choking, his mouth and eye? and nose full of the damp earth, the Rogue scrambled to his feet. The room which he had left thus unceremoniously was now brightly lit and

excited shadows ran backwards and forwards against the yellow background. But he had no time to consider the situation. A figure rose up from the flower bed beside him and gripped him by the arm.

“We’re mugged!” George spluttered. “That vixen—that blue-eyed cat has done me. Never trust a woman—never. There’s nothing for it but to show a clean pair of heels. The gate’s no good. Make for the wall. After that try for the station in time for the express. I’ll keep to the woods. Off with you!”

His confederate waited for no more. The instinct of self-preservation lent him a speed and agility with which he would never have accredited himself. The five-foot wall might have been two feet the two miles to the station thirty yards. No one intervened to check his wild progress though he swerved at every shadow, and at last the light of Bunmouth Station hove in sight. Breathless, gasping and hatless, he drew up at the booking-office. The instinct of self-preservation had forgotten to lend him a measure of commonsense, for his state would have aroused the suspicions of an angel. He realised this fact as he passed the barrier and faced the familiar stationmaster. Instinctively he pulled himself up to meet the worst. To his utter amazement the gentleman in dark blue merely touched his cap.

“Close shave, your lordship,” he said pleasantly. “You seem to have had a run for it.”

“I have,” William Brown admitted truthfully.

“Another minute and you’d have missed,” the stationmaster went on. “I’ve reserved a compartment higher up.”

William Brown shook his head feebly as though protesting against the crazy vagaries of fortune, but followed unresisting. The express was already moving as the guard unlocked the door of a first-class compartment.

“There you are!” he said. “Just in time, sir!”

The door was slammed to and the fugitive heard no more. He broke down helplessly in a corner seat and did not move until the lights of the station had disappeared round a curve. Then for the first time he realised that he was not alone. He looked up and encountered the horrified, bewildered gaze of the Countess Theodora.

CHAPTER XVII

THEY stared at each other for a full minute in frankly aghast silence. The Countess's face was whiter than marble; the perspiration stood out in beads on the Count's forehead. Thrice he essayed to speak and twice failed. The third time he managed to bring out her name.

"Theodora!"

"Louis!"

"What in the world are you doing here?"

She drew herself up defiantly.

"I'm running away."

"From me? Ah, I understand!" He put his shaking hand to his collar. "You have read my letter you know everything?"

"Your letter? I have it here. I found it on your table but I have not read it."

"Not read it? Then why are you here? Why are you running away? Ah—it is that Saunders—that scoundrel—"

"Louis don't you understand? What are you talking about? Haven't you got my note?"

"Your note?"

His jaw dropped. Mechanically he took the crumpled envelope from his pocket and considered it as though it might have been a bomb.

"I hadn't time," he stammered. "I don't understand anything at all."

"Then why are you here? Why have you come after me? How did you know I was in this train?"

"Know?" William Brown clasped his hands in mute appeal to the unseen

powers. “I didn’t know. Otherwise I’d rather have been hanged, drawn and quartered than have got into this carriage.”

“Then—” She endeavoured to steady the trembling of her lips. “I really think it would be simpler if we both read our letters,” she said desperately.

“It seems like it,” Brown admitted.

In silence they tore open their respective envelopes. For a minute the Rogue’s dazed consciousness that she was reading the confession of his villainy blinded him then he forced himself to read the hastily scrawled lines.

“My husband, I am leaving you because I am unworthy of you. I am a wicked woman. I have deceived you. I have misused your chivalry and goodness. I have taken advantage of your misfortune, I am not Theodora de Melville I never was. My name my maiden name was Theodora Saunders. My people are poor, but, incredible as it may seem, honourable. Two years ago, to help them, I became the Countess de Melville’s companion and afterwards her intimate friend. With her I learnt to speak French sufficiently well to deceive you thanks to our arrangement to speak English in England my knowledge was never put severely to the test and it was I who fled with her when she came to England to marry you. We waited for you at the appointed meeting place but you never came. We knew nothing of the shipwreck and the Countess believed that she had been betrayed. She dared not return to her people and decided to take refuge with a rich aunt in America. Before she left she gave me all your letters and presents and bade me find you out and give them back to you. I did so as soon as I heard where you were. Naturally I heard also that you had lost your memory. About that time my family was in desperate straits. My brother, Cecil, whom you met, had made debts of honour which he could not meet and dared not confess to his father. It was he who suggested to me that I should play the part of the Countess Theodora. Our Christian names were the same and I had your letters to help me. Louis all the same I did not mean to go through with it but the trick was so horribly, painfully successful. I was driven on and on. Cecil pointed out to me that even if I was found out it wouldn’t be so bad. I could have concealed my own identity and my father and mother would have been spared the disgrace of a dishonoured son. You see it was a choice between the son and the daughter and it is always better for the daughter to go under, isn’t it? Of course my people knew nothing they believe I am still earning my bread honourably. Cecil helped me to deceive them, but now that he is on his way to South Africa there is no reason

why I should go on with the cruel farce. Further deceit is useless and discovery imminent. In any case I could not have borne it any longer. I have acted wickedly, shamelessly, criminally, but I have suffered! Oh, I have suffered terribly. When I think of that dreadful woman that Mrs. Pagot-Chump! Of course you had no reason to care for me I had deceived you and your instinct knew it but it hurt all the same. And now comes the worst part of my punishment: I must leave you and you must know who I really am. I can hardly bear it. Oh, Louis, Fate has played me such a cruel trick! She has made me care for the man I have treated so badly she has made me love him. Oh, Louis, if you only knew how miserable I have been you would forgive as I hope you will forget

“Your loving and unhappy

“Theodora.”

William Brown looked up. His wife looked up at the same moment. Simultaneously they broke out into an hysterical peal of laughter.

“Louis you humbug!”

“Theodora my darling adventuress!”

“Then you’re not the Count?”

“No—you’re sure you’re not the Countess?”

“Positive!”

“Thank Heaven!”

He caught her in a wild joyful embrace and for a full two minutes detectives, pursuing policemen and deeply injured French noblemen were forgotten in a tumult of happiness. Then William Brown gently released himself.

“You don’t know what I’ve done, Theodora,” he said. “I’ve robbed and forged perhaps murdered. It’s a lifer at least if I get caught.”

“I don’t care—I’ll wait for you—I’ll hang with you—I’ll stand by you whatever happens—whatever you’ve done!”

“Theodora—angel!”

“My dear, dear Rogue!”

It was at that precise and beautiful moment that the Express went off the rails. The accident has always been one of the mysteries of that particular line for the train was not travelling at a great speed. The shock was nevertheless sufficient to separate the newly united couple and send the Rogue flying across the compartment, where the back of his head encountered the door handle. He was briefly aware of a magnificent display of celestial fireworks and of somebody calling to him from a long way off then everything rolled away into velvety darkness and peaceful silence.

When the velvety darkness began to thin the Rogue made no attempt to hasten the process. He was feeling very comfortable, very happy, entirely disinclined to exert himself. He was vaguely aware that a change had come over him but what the change was he could not be bothered to think and, when he opened his eyes at last, the sight of his hotel bed-room and a white-haired man seated beside him caused him no particular surprise.

“Hullo, dad!” he said simply and cheerfully. The minute he had spoken however, he knew that something wonderful had happened that the vaguely felt change had become definite. He sat up with his hand to his bandaged head and stared about him. “Why, what’s happened?” he asked.

The old gentleman laid a soothing affectionate hand on his shoulder.

“My dear boy you’ve recovered your memory that’s all,” he said. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

“Of course—you’re my father.”

“And you know who you are?”

“Why Roger Lancaster of course!”

Dr. Frohlocken, who had been standing concealed behind the curtains of the window, appeared at this moment, like an unusual looking Deus ex machina.

“May this be a lesson to you all,” he said severely. “But more than anyone I

blame that idiot—that Inspector. Didn't I protest? Didn't I tell him? Circumstantial evidence! Nonsense! Rubbish! Utterly unscientific. And you yourself, No. 7 led astray by a ridiculous pig! However, let that pass. Do you remember how you came to London?"

"I came to study."

"Right! You observe Mr. Lancaster—you will note a complete recovery. You remember how you came to lose consciousness."

"I believe I was attacked by someone."

"Probably—and afterwards when you came round—do you remember that?"

The patient stared at his father in sudden white-faced consternation.

"Why yes, I do!" he gasped. "Good heavens—what an awful kettle of fish! What shall I do, sir? Get me out of England before that Count and Mrs. Pagot-Chump catch me, or there'll be murder."

Mr. Lancaster chuckled.

"Don't worry, my dear boy. Everything has been explained. Thanks to an—er—slight scientific miscalculation the Count de Beaulieu was arrested yesterday on a charge of fraudulent misrepresentation, but I got him out this morning and he has accepted apologies, explanations and compensations. The Countess is at the present moment in the next room, renewing her friendship and exchanging notes with your wife." He paused and watched his son narrowly. "It appears that the Count made his escape from the hospital in order to follow the Countess when he heard that she had gone to America. He overtook her in New York and after various explanations and reconciliations they were married out there. As to Mrs. Pagot-Chump well, she assures me that the pleasure of making your acquaintance atones for any unpleasantness. So you see, all's well that ends well."

Roger Lancaster shook his head.

"It's all a most glorious confusion," he said. "How did you find me out, sir?"

"When I missed you I travelled all over Europe after you," the elder man

answered. “Fortunately I obtained the services of this gentleman here.” He indicated the small neatly attired individual who was leaning negligently against the mantelpiece. “I think you have met before.”

“Washington Jones, Private Detective, at your service,” the little man said with an easy bow. “Pleased to welcome you back to your right mind, sir. Thought I knew you when we met in Herbert Street, but couldn’t be sure till I got your father on the spot. One of my best jobs, sir.”

“I’m sure we’re very grateful,” Roger answered. He glanced uneasily at the door. “I say though what about George and that—that Pig?”

Mr. Washington Jones’ face creased itself into innumerable folds of laughter, though he made no sound.

“George and the Lucky Pig have disappeared and I don’t suppose we shall see either of ‘em again,” he said. “This letter, addressed to the Count de Beaulieu’s locum tenens, arrived at the Bunmouth Hotel this morning. I ventured to open it and here it is. If you permit me to read it to you I guess you won’t need much more explaining.” He took out a dirty sheet of paper from his pocket and cleared his throat.

“Dear old bird,” he read out. “You are not Slippery Bill you’re merely a Silly Duffer. What else you are besides this I really don’t know except that you’re the fellow I dropped on that evening Dr. Frohlocken missed his silver. I changed clothes with you whilst you were dozing on the doorstep I fear I have rather a heavy hand and that is how you came to have my Lucky Pig, which animal, by the way, I ventured to nip off your watch-chain at parting. In exchange I intended to return the gold watch I accepted from you at our first meeting but really we were rather pressed for time, were we not, and I am sure you will not grudge me the little souvenir. Please give my respects to Dr. Frohlocken and tell him his silver was really very much over-estimated and quite beneath my notice. Also suggest to Monsieur Bonnet that he forgive Susan as soon as he recovers his temper. She is quite a nice little thing and should make an excellent cook, if her hands are anything like as light as her brains. And now, good-bye! You were not much good in my profession, but you made an excellent Count, and I have not the slightest doubt that you are really something highly respectable. In any case I shall always bear you in affectionate remembrance as a well intentioned understudy and partner.

“Yours faithfully,

“William Brown, alias Slippery Bill.”

“P. S. Give my love to the police and tell them that No. 10, Herbert Street is to let unfurnished.”

“Well, upon my word, I hope they don’t catch him!” the late William Brown declared delightedly.

“And you can stake your bottom dollar that they won’t,” said Mr. Washington Jones, “unless he lands in the States, of course, in which case—”

But the younger Lancaster was not listening. At that moment the door had opened and he held out his hands in glad recognition.

“Theodora!” he said.

She came towards him bravely and a little defiantly.

“I don’t know, now that you have recovered your memory, if you want to see me again,” she said.

“I want to see and keep you always.”

“You are sure? Remember who I am and what I have done!”

“A man who has rejoiced in the name of Slippery Bill and tried to rob his own father is scarcely in the position to throw stones,” observed the elder Lancaster grimly.

“In fact, since we’re rather shady characters,” his son suggested, “we have just got to join forces, my wife!”

“Rogues & Company!” suggested Dr. Frohlocken pleasantly. But as the two chief members of his audience were far too absorbed in each other to notice him this last stroke of genius passed without recognition.

THE END