THE DUKE DECIDES

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THE DUKE DECIDES
By HEADON HILL

Author of *By a Hair's-Breadth*, etc.

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Leonie Sherman

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CHAPTER I—*The Man with the Mandate*

At six o'clock on a May evening, at an uptown corner of Broadway, in New York City, the bowels of the earth opened and disgorged a crowd of weary-faced men and women who scattered in all directions. They were the employees of a huge "dry-goods store," leaving work for the day. It was a stringent rule of the firm that everyone drawing wages, from the smart managers of departments and well-dressed salesladies down to the counting-house drudges and check-boys, should descend into the basement, and there file past the timekeeper and a private detective before passing up a narrow staircase, and so out by a sort of stage-door into the side street.

The great plate-glass portals on the main thoroughfare were not for the working bees of this hive of industry—only for the gay butterflies of fashion by whom they lived.

The last to come out was a young man dressed in a threadbare suit of tweeds, that somehow hardly seemed American, either in cut or fabric. There might have been a far-away reminiscence of Perthshire moors clinging to them, or earlier memories of a famous creator in Bond Street; but suggestion of the reach-me-down shops from which New York clerks clothe themselves there was none. A flush of anger was fading on their owner's face as he came out into the sunlight, leaving a mild annoyance that presently gave place to a grin.

The firm's detective, rendered suspicious by a bulging pocket, had just searched him, and had failed to apologize on finding the protuberance to be nothing but a bundle of un-eatable sandwiches that were being taken home to confound the landlady of the young man's cheap boarding-house.

The indignity did not rankle long. It was only a detail in the topsy-turvydom that in one short year had changed a subaltern in a crack English cavalry regiment into an ill-paid drudge in a dry-goods store. Twelve months before Charles Hanbury had been playing polo and riding gymkhana races in Upper India, but extravagance beyond his means had brought swift ruin in its train. Tired of helping him out of scrapes, his connections had refused further assistance; and, leaving the Army, he had come out to "the States" with the idea of roughing it on the Western plains. Still misfortune had dogged his steps. A fall down a hatchway on the voyage out had hopelessly lamed him, and he had been compelled to ward off starvation by obtaining his present inglorious berth.

His work—adding up columns of figures entered from the sales-tickets—was quite irresponsible, and he was paid accordingly. He drew eight dollars a week, of which five went to his boarding-house keeper.

Limping up —— Street, he turned into the Bowery, intending to take his usual homeward route across the big bridge into Brooklyn. Unable to afford a street-car, he walked to and from the store daily, and it was one of his few amusements to study the cosmopolitan life of the teeming and sordid thorough-

fare through which his way led.

He was still chuckling over the discomfiture of the tame detective, when his eye was caught by a label in a cheap boot-store. "Three dollars the pair," ran the legend, which drew a rueful sigh from one who had paid—and alas! still owed—as many guineas for a pair of dancing-pumps.

"I don't suppose they'd sell me half a pair, for that's all it runs to," he muttered, turning regretfully away from the vamped-up frauds, and in so doing jerking the elbow of a passer-by. The victim of his sudden move—a stout, fair man in a light frock-coat and a Panama straw hat—stopped, and seemed inclined to resent the awkwardness.

"I really beg your pardon," the culprit said with easy politeness. "I was so absorbed in my reflections that I forgot for the moment that the Bowery requires cautious steering."

"You are an Englishman?" returned the other, with a milder countenance. "So am I. No need to apologize. As a fellow-countryman in foreign parts, permit me to offer you some liquid refreshment. In other words, come into that dive next door and have a drink."

With an imperceptible shrug, Mr. Hanbury allowed himself to be persuaded. He would lose his supper at his boarding-house by the irregularity, but dissipation seldom came his way nowadays, and the prospect of whisky at some one else's expense was tempting. Yes, he had fallen low enough for that! The stout Englishman somehow conveyed the impression that he would not expect to be treated in return by his new acquaintance, who was prepared to take advantage of his liberality. To do him justice, Hanbury's complacence was not entirely due to spirituous longings, but to a homesick instinct aroused by the Cockney accent of the vulgar stranger.

The garish underground saloon into which they descended was almost empty at that early hour of the evening. Drinks having been set before them at one of the circular tables, the host subjected his guest to a scrutiny so searching that its object broke into a laugh.

"You are sizing me up pretty closely," he remarked, with a touch of annoyance.

"Exactly; but not so as to give offence, I hope," was the reply. "I should like to know your name, if you have no objection."

"Hanbury—Charles Hanbury. Perhaps you will make the introduction mutual?" said the younger man, appeased by the other's conciliatory manner.

"Call me Jevons," the stout man answered. "Now look here, Mr. Hanbury; it's not my game to begin our acquaintance under false pretences. The fact is, I contrived that you should jostle me just now, and so give me a chance to speak. I spotted you as an Englishman and a gentleman a fortnight ago, and I've noticed

you pass along the Bowery every day since. I am in need of an Englishman, who is also a gentleman, to take on a job with a fortune—a moderate fortune—at the back of it."

"You can hardly have mistaken me for an investor," said Hanbury, with a quizzical glance at his threadbare seams and dilapidated boots. "Believe me, I am a very broken-down gentleman; but still, my gentility survives, I suppose, and I am willing to treat it as a commercial asset, if that is what you mean."

Mr. Jevons gulped down his liquor without comment and did not utter another word till the glasses had been replenished. Then, hitching his chair closer, he produced a pocket-book from which he extracted five one-hundred-dollar notes.

"Before we leave this place I shall hand these over to you for preliminary expenses—if we come to terms," he said, watching the effect of the display on his companion's face. Satisfied with the eager glance in the tired eyes, he proceeded more confidentially: "There is a risk to be run, but it doesn't amount to much; and if the scheme comes off it will set you on your legs again. Part of this money you will have to spend in a first-class passage to England by the next steamer, and there'll be plenty more for you on arrival."

"My dear friend, you seem to be a sort of Aladdin. If you only knew the existence I have been leading here, without the courage to terminate it, you would be assured of my answer," replied Hanbury, wondering but not caring much what was expected of him. To escape from his dry-goods drudgery and return to England with money in his pocket and the prospect of more—why, the ex-cavalry officer felt that he would loot the Crown Jewels for that! And he said so in so many words.

"Then you're the man for us," was the verdict of Mr. Jevons. "It's a bit on the cross—not burglary, but a little matter of planting some beautifully imitated paper. Is that too steep for you?"

Hanbury made a wry face, but answered without hesitation:

"Aiding a forgery isn't quite the road to fortune I should have chosen, but beggars—you know the maxim. Society hasn't been too kind to me, and I don't see why I should range myself on its side. Yes, I'll do it; and if I'm caught, stone-breaking at Portland won't be any worse than adding up figures in a subterranean counting-house. Let me have the particulars, Mr. Jevons, and I'll see it through to the best of an ability that hasn't much to recommend it."

"You shall have the particulars," said the other; then stopped, and laughed rather nervously. "You must understand that I am but a subordinate in this matter, and we have reached the only unpleasant part of my task," he went on. "It is not congenial to have to use a threat—even a confidential one; yet I am instructed to do so, before I enlighten you further."

The rascal's concern was unmistakably genuine; and Hanbury, with the good-humored tolerance of his class, hastened to reassure him.

"Go on; I can guess what you have to disclose—the pains and penalties for breach of faith, eh?"

Jevons nodded, and bent his shiny, perspiring face nearer. "It is a big thing, involving enormous outlay and the interests of an organization commanding great resources," he whispered. "Your life wouldn't be worth five minutes' purchase if you deserted us after you had been entrusted with the details. Now, will you have them on those conditions, or shall we say 'Good-night' to each other?"

Hanbury stretched out his hand impatiently for the notes. "Pray satisfy my curiosity, and let me have them on those conditions," he said. "My life is of no earthly value to me. Besides, with all my faults, I'm not one to turn back after putting my hand to the plough. If I do, by all means give me my quietus as mercifully as may be."

"Then here goes," whispered Jevons, mouth to ear. "The game is the planting of faked United States Treasury Bonds on the Bank of England to the tune of three million sterling—pounds, not dollars, you know. You will proceed to England by the *St. Paul*, sailing for Southampton the day after to-morrow, and on arrival in London you will at once call on Mr. Clinton Ziegler, at the Hotel Cecil. He is our chief, and will give you final instructions as to your part in the campaign. You'll find him a handsome paymaster."

"I look forward to making Mr. Ziegler's acquaintance with interest," replied Hanbury, pocketing the notes which the other passed to him. "Am I to have the pleasure of your company on the voyage?"

"I'm afraid not; my work is here," said Jevons. "And—well, it's not altogether healthy for me on the other side." The confession was accompanied by a wink which forcibly brought it home to the recruit that he had joined the criminal classes. His new friend—"pal," he supposed he ought to call him—evidently thought him worthy of personal confidence.

They had another drink together at the bar, and parted outside the saloon, Hanbury making his belated way towards Brooklyn. Once or twice he turned abruptly to see if he was being followed, but the aggressive white Panama hat was nowhere visible, the conclusion being obvious that the astute Mr. Jevons had ascertained his domicile, as well as his place of employment, before broaching his delicate business.

Tramping along the teeming Bowery and across the footway of the mighty bridge, the ex-hussar enjoyed to the full the exultation of feeling money in his pocket once more. It was not much, and it was as good as spent already in the cost of a passage and an outfit; but it was the earnest of more to come, and, above all, it franked the exile home to England. At the price of his honor, perhaps? Well,

yes; but what was honor to a dry-goods clerk at eight dollars a week? He might have taken a different view two years ago, when honor stood for something in his creed; but not now, with the world against him.

Entering the sordid boarding-house, he mounted to his top-floor bedroom, aware that he had forfeited his supper of beef-hash, and that it was too late to go to the dining-room in quest thereof. His eyrie under the roof, flanked on one side by the apartment of a German car-driver and on the other by that of an Irish porter, was furnished with little else than a bed and a toilet-table.

On the toilet-table lay a telegram addressed to him—the first he had received since he had been in America. The unwonted sight caused his hands to tremble a little as he tore it open, but they trembled a good deal more as he read the fateful words:

"*Your uncle and cousin have been killed in a railway accident. Come to England at once. Have cabled a thousand pounds to Morgan's to your credit.—Pattisons.*"

"Pattisons" were the family solicitors, and he who a moment before had called himself Charles Hanbury now knew that his true description would appear in the next issue of "Debrett" as "Charles Augustus Trevor Fitzroy Hanbury, seventh Duke of Beaumanoir," with a rent-roll of two hundred thousand a year.

And he stood committed, on pain of assassination, to aid and abet in the palming off of bogus bonds on the Bank of England!

CHAPTER II—*On Board the* St. Paul

The *St. Paul* sped eastwards across the summer sea, and surely of all the human hopes and fears carried by the great liner those locked in the breast of the new Duke were the most momentous. To gain a little breathing time, he had booked his passage as plain Charles Hanbury. In the brief interval before sailing he had seen no more of Jevons, but he guessed that that shrewd practitioner would have watched him, or had him watched, on board, even if there was not a spy upon him among his fellow-passengers; and he wished to let it be inferred that his voyage was undertaken solely in observance of the compact made in the Bowery dive.

For as yet he was by no means certain of his attitude towards that compact. It was true that the cast-off wastrel of two days ago was now one of the premier peers of England, hastening home to take possession of his fortune and estates. But where was the good of being a duke if you were to be a dead duke? he argued with a cynicism bred of his misfortunes rather than innate. There had been a genuine ring about the proposal of Jevons that left no doubt as to the reality of the menace held out; the man's reluctance in broaching the penalty of desertion carried conviction that it was no mere flower of speech.

On the whole, the Duke was inclined to call on the arch rogue at the Hotel Cecil before incurring a risk that might render his dukedom a transitory possession. Then, if the part he was expected to play proved to be within his powers and without much chance of detection, he might still elect to play it, and so enjoy in security his hereditary privileges.

It will be seen that the seventh Duke of Beaumanoir was not troubled with moral scruples, and that the principle of *noblesse oblige* had no place as yet in his somewhat seared philosophy. It was enough for the moment that he had gained something worth having and keeping, and he meant to have it and keep it by the most efficacious method. Whether that method would prove to be connivance in a gigantic crime or the denouncement of the latter to Scotland Yard could only be decided by a personal interview with the mysterious Ziegler. Yes, he would pay that visit to the Hotel Cecil, at any rate, and be guided by what passed there as to his future course of action.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Hanbury," said a gay voice at his elbow, as on the third day of the voyage he leaned over the rail of the promenade deck and ruminated on his dilemma. Wheeling round he looked down into the laughing eyes of a girl, a very dainty and charming girl, who sat next him at the saloon table. No formal introduction had taken place between them, for lack of mutual friends; but he had learned from the card designating her place at table that she was Miss Leonie Sherman, and it is to be presumed that she had gathered his name in the same way.

"I will earn that penny," he said with mock gravity. "I was debating how far one might legitimately carry the principle of doing evil that good might come."

It was a strange answer to make to a shipboard acquaintance of three days, and Miss Sherman regarded him with a newly awakened interest.

"It depends," she said, "whether the good is to accrue to yourself or to other people."

"Oh, to myself," he replied, smiling. "I am not a philanthropist—quite the other way about."

"Then, whatever it is, you oughtn't to do it," said the girl, decidedly. "It will be horrid of you to as much as contemplate anything of the kind. You had much

better do good lest evil befall; and the opportunity occurs right here, at this very moment."

"I shall be most happy—without prejudice to my intentions as to the reverse of the medal," said Beaumanoir, lightly.

"Then help me to avoid a lecture from my mother by taking me for a promenade," proceeded Leonie, indicating a portly lady who had ascended from the lower deck and was peering about in search. "She is the best and dearest of mothers, but she has set her heart on a vain thing, and it is becoming the least bit tiresome. I can see that she is going to din it into me again, if she catches me. Her idea is that the sole duty of an American girl going to England is to 'spread herself,' as they say out West, to marry an English duke."

His Grace of Beaumanoir listened with an unmoved countenance.

"Yes," he said, "to marry a duke might—probably would—be an unmitigated evil. I will help you to avoid it with pleasure. Let us walk by all means, Miss Sherman, if you don't mind my awkward limp."

So they joined the procession of promenaders, and there and then cemented a friendship which ripened quickly, as friendships between the opposite sexes do at sea. The haughty salesladies of the dry-goods store had not deigned to notice the counting-house drudge, and Leonie's piquant beauty made instant captive of one who had been deprived of the society of women for over a year. She had all the frank *camaraderie* of the well-bred American, and her eager anticipations of the good time she was to have in Europe were infectious. In her company Beaumanoir was able to forget the dark shadow hanging over him, and to give himself up to the enjoyment of the hour. He began by being deeply grateful to her for taking him out of himself; and gratitude to a charming girl with a ravishing figure and a complexion of tinted ivory is like to have its heels trod by a warmer sentiment.

Leonie, in her turn, was interested in the reserved young Englishman, who had so little to say about his doings in America, and less about his position and prospects in his native land. As he paced with his slight limp at her side or lounged with her at the rail, she tried to draw him out; but she could get nothing from him but that he had been in New York on business, and that business was taking him home. Yet, though reticent on his own affairs, he talked freely about all that concerned herself, and painted vivid word-pictures of the delights that awaited her in London.

The girl, having nothing to conceal, told him freely of herself and of her plans and projects. She and her mother were going to stay with English friends in London till the end of the season, when perhaps they would run over to Paris and Rome for a month before returning to America in the autumn. Her father, Senator Sherman, was to have accompanied them; but he had been detained by

public business at Washington, and was to join them a little later in London.

On the fifth day of the voyage, as the *St. Paul* was approaching the Irish coast, Leonie and Beaumanoir were sitting on deck after dinner, chatting in the twilight, when she suddenly laid her hand on his arm.

"I want you to notice that man who has just gone by—the one smoking the fag-end of a cigar in a holder," she whispered, with a gesture towards the stream of passengers passing and repassing between the rows of chairs.

Beaumanoir's gaze followed her indication to an insignificant little figure in a brown covert-coat and tweed cap.

"Yes. What of him?" he asked. He had not spoken to this passenger, but now that attention was called to him he had an idea that the fellow had loomed largely during the last few days.

"That man is watching you, Mr. Hanbury," replied Leonie with conviction. "I wonder you haven't observed it yourself. Whenever you are talking he hangs about trying to listen; when you are on deck he is on deck; if you go below, he goes below. If you were a fugitive from justice, and he a detective, he couldn't shadow you more closely."

The Duke winced inwardly.

"I am not a fugitive from justice," he said, with the mental addition of "yet." He could not tell this laughing maiden that the man was probably spying on him in the interest, not of justice, but of crime—to see that he was true to a pledge to place forged bonds; for now that he had been put on his guard he had no doubt that his pretty informant was right. The stranger occupied the cabin next to him, and was always hovering near him in the smoking-room, unobtrusively but persistently.

Thanking the girl for her warning in a careless tone that implied that he had no reason to be anxious, he changed the subject. But before he turned in that night he made it his business to ascertain from his bedroom steward the name of his next-door neighbor, which proved to be Marker.

"Probably Mr. Marker's functions are confined to espionage. If that is a sample of the sort of bravo to be employed should I kick over the traces, I haven't much to fear," he reflected, as he switched off the electric light and composed himself to dream of Leonie Sherman.

CHAPTER III—*A Task-master*

in Goggles

The next morning the *St. Paul* arrived at Southampton, but Beaumanoir contrived to secure a seat in the same compartment of the boat-train, and his parting with his new friends was therefore deferred till they reached Waterloo.

He was sorely tempted to enlist the elder lady's favor by making known his proper style and rank; though, to do her justice, Mrs. Sherman's fondness for the peerage was largely a humorous fiction on her daughter's part. The Senator's wife was really a simple-minded body, with an abiding admiration for the unattainable, and the British aristocracy was naturally included in that category.

But the sight of Mr. Marker's covert-coat hovering near them on the arrival platform checked the Duke's intention, which the next moment was rendered unnecessary by Mrs. Sherman herself.

"Come and see us, Mr. Hanbury," she said, extending the tips of her fingers in farewell. "We are to be the guests of some good friends of ours at 140 Grosvenor Gardens, and we know them well enough to make ourselves at home. The Senator will be over in a week or two, and he'll be glad to thank you for your politeness."

"I will pay my respects without fail," Beaumanoir responded; and a minute later, after a warmer pressure of Leonie's well-gloved hand, he stood watching their cab with its load of "saratogas" drive down the incline. By the void in his heart he knew that the girl in the coquettish toque, who had just repeated her mother's invitation with her eyes, was all the world to him.

He turned to look after his scanty baggage with a sigh. How different it would all have been if he had chosen some other route to his Brooklyn boarding-house on the eventful night when the plausible Jevons had waylaid him! All would have been plain sailing, and he could have asked Leonie with a clear conscience to share his new-found honors and wealth. As it was he stood committed to a felonious enterprise which would fill her with contempt and loathing did she know of it; though, if he abandoned it, instinct told him he was a doomed man.

The sight of the insignificant spy Marker lurking behind a pile of luggage reminded him that his peril might commence at any moment if he showed any sign of inconstancy to his pledge. Not that he anticipated trouble from the covert-coated whippersnapper himself; but the mere fact of it having been thought worth while to shadow him across the Atlantic spelled danger, and suggested an organization that would stop at nothing to safeguard itself.

However, he had made up his mind to call on the mysterious Ziegler, and by doing so at once he might prove his fidelity and secure a respite from this unpleasant espionage. Summoning a hansom, he bade the driver take him to the Hotel Cecil, and looking back he saw Marker following in another cab.

In the few minutes that elapsed before he was driven into the courtyard of the palatial hotel he settled a problem that had been vexing him not a little during the voyage. Should he introduce himself to Ziegler as the Duke of Beaumanoir or as plain Charles Hanbury, the name by which he had been "engaged"? If he was for a brief space to be the consort of professional thieves, he would prefer to lead a double life—to perform his misdeeds as a commoner, and to keep his dukedom spotless. So it was that he gave his name as Hanbury to the clerk in the bureau of the hotel.

While waiting the return of the bell-boy who was sent to announce his arrival, Beaumanoir looked about for Marker, but the spy was nowhere visible in or from the entrance-hall. Having shepherded him to the fold, it was evidently no part of his duty to obtrude himself till further orders.

A minute later the neophyte in crime was limping up the grand staircase in wake of the bell-boy, who conducted him to one of the best private suites on the first floor overlooking the Embankment. It was a moment charged with electricity as the Duke of Beaumanoir found himself face to face with the man who had hired him in his poverty, and now held him fetter-bound in his good fortune.

"Yet could this be he—this personification of aged helplessness lying among the cushions of an invalid chair, who, in a thin, piping treble, requested his visitor to come closer? Beaumanoir had pictured all sorts of ideals of the master in crime, but Mr. Clinton Ziegler in the flesh resembled none of them. A snowy beard covered the lower half of his face, drooping over his chest, but the puffy cheeks were visible, and their full purple hue betokened some cutaneous affection. The eyes were shaded by blue glasses.

"You are the person sent by Jevons from New York?" he began in his parrot-like tones. "Good! What is your name? For the moment I have forgotten it, and I cannot lay my hand on the cablegram relating to you."

Encouraged by the feeble senility of one whom he had expected to find a tower of strength—a grim, inscrutable being with an inscrutable manner—the Duke was confirmed in his intention to preserve the secret of his rank.

"My name is Charles Hanbury," he answered, boldly.

But an awakening, instant and complete, was in store for him. The words were hardly out of his mouth when Mr. Ziegler coughed a signal, and three masked men rushed upon him from the adjoining bedroom, pinioning his arms and stifling his sudden cry of alarm.

"What shall we do with him, sir?" asked one of the men.

"Chloroform him first; then you must dispose of him at leisure," came the monotonous piping treble from the invalid chair.

One of the assailants made immediate preparations for obeying the behest, but just as he was about to saturate a handkerchief Ziegler laughed shrilly:

"Let him alone, boys. He lied to me, and I wanted to give him a lesson—that's all."

The men, at a sign from their chief, retired into the bedroom.

"Now, perhaps you will recognize that I am not to be played with, *your Grace*," squeaked Mr. Ziegler. "Also that my ears are as long as my arms. I have known for some days that the gentleman whom my good friend Jevons was able to procure has had a sudden change in his fortunes, and I congratulate myself upon it. It doubles your value to us, all the more since your early call upon me after landing shows that you mean to abide by your bargain. But there must be no more petty reservations and concealments like that. If you try them on, rest assured that they will be detected and dealt with."

The Duke straightened his rumpled collar, and looked, as he felt, a beaten man. The mass of infirmity in the wheel-chair held, without doubt, a power with which he could not cope. On the face of it the notion that a man could be violently made away with in a crowded London hotel might seem melodramatic and improbable, but the experience of the last few minutes had shown him how readily it could be done by a chief as well served as Ziegler appeared to be. And if he was at the man's mercy in a crowded hostelry like the Cecil, where would he be safe? Yes, if he was to enjoy his dukedom, he would have to go through with his task.

"Well, give me my instructions. What am I to do?" he said, stiffly.

"You have made a very good beginning already," replied Ziegler, watching him narrowly through the tinted glasses. "A gentleman, acting on behalf of the United States Government, will shortly bring to this country the three million pounds' worth of Treasury bonds which we mean to have. It will be your task to relieve him of the paper, substituting bonds of our own make, which will be deposited at the Bank of England as security against a shipment of gold."

"I see," the Duke murmured, mechanically. "But," he added with more animation, "how have I made a beginning already?"

"By making yourself agreeable to Miss Leonie Sherman. It is her father, Senator Sherman, who is bringing the real bonds," was the answer, which struck a chill to the Duke's heart and kept him speechless with amazement. This old scoundrel seemed to know everything, to have arranged everything, irrespective of time and space.

"You ought to be grateful for my foresight in smoothing the way for you,"

Ziegler croaked, in evident enjoyment of his perplexity. "It was my agent who, by securing the good offices of a steward, had you placed next Miss Sherman at the saloon table on the *St. Paul*, with the result that he was able to report to me this morning from Southampton by telegraph that you had made use of your opportunity."

"I see," was all the Duke could feebly repeat.

"You have been invited to call on the Shermans in London? You know where they are staying, 140 Grosvenor Gardens?"

"Yes," said Beaumanoir.

"Good! Then your Grace will go on as you have begun. Gain the girl's confidence, and that of her mother—the latter will be easy under the auspices of your new dignity—and come here again at twelve o'clock on Saturday morning, three days hence. I may then have further instructions for you."

And Mr. Clinton Ziegler waved a white, well-formed hand in dismissal.

CHAPTER IV—*The Lady in the Landau*

Beaumanoir passed into the corridor with unsteady steps, dazed by the enormity of his entanglement. He had been caught so easily, yet he was held so firmly. His first impulse was to rush off to Scotland Yard, expose the white-bearded wire-puller in the invalid chair, and claim protection. But that course would entail confession of his engagement as a criminal instrument, to the everlasting disgrace of the great family of which he was now the head. The alternatives were foul treachery to the girl of his heart or almost certain death at the hands of Ziegler's disciplined ruffians.

He had reached the top of the broad staircase when a step, almost inaudible on the thick pile carpet, sounded behind him and a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Charley, old boy! Or is it 'your Grace' I should be calling you? What the dickens are you doing here?" said the young man who had overtaken him.

Beaumanoir's harassed brows cleared as he met Alec Forsyth's honest gaze and he felt the grip of his honest hand. Their ways had lain apart for the last few

years, but a very real friendship, begun in the Eton playing fields, had survived separation. Of all his acquaintances, Alec had been the only one to go down to Liverpool twelve months before to bid scapegrace Charles Hanbury farewell.

"I had a call to make, before going to Pattisons' in Lincoln's Inn," said the Duke. And then with quick apprehension he added, pointing to the door he had just left: "Have you come from there? Have you business with Ziegler too?"

"Ziegler? Who's Ziegler?" asked Forsyth, looking puzzled by his sudden confusion. "No, I haven't been to those rooms, but to the suite beyond. A duty call on a certain Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, but, thank goodness, she wasn't at home. Now about yourself, Charley. Fortune smiles again, eh?"

"It's only a sickly grin at present," Beaumanoir replied, dejectedly. "See here, Alec; I've got my bag on a cab outside. I landed at Southampton too early for lunch. Come and talk to me while I get a snack before going to the lawyers."

A few minutes later they were seated in a Strand restaurant, and the young Scotsman heard all about his friend's struggles with the demon of poverty in New York, but never a word of the trouble that was brooding. In his turn Forsyth was able to fill in the blanks of the family solicitor's cablegram, and enlightened Beaumanoir as to the manner of his succession to the title. The late Duke was traveling to Newmarket in a racing "special," accompanied by his nephew and heir, George Hanbury, when they had both met their deaths in a collision.

The double funeral had taken place at Prior's Tarrant, the ancestral seat of the Dukes of Beaumanoir in Hertfordshire, three days before, the arrangements having been made by the solicitors, in the absence of the next successor. The last Duke having been a childless widower, and both his brothers, the fathers respectively of George and Charles Hanbury, having predeceased him, there had been no near relatives to follow the late head of the house to his last resting-place.

"Let me see, my cousin George had a sister, Sybil, who used to live with my uncle," Beaumanoir mused aloud. "I wonder what has become of her."

"I believe that she is still at your town house in Piccadilly," replied Forsyth with a constraint which the other did not notice in his self-absorption. But the next moment it struck Beaumanoir as odd that the information should have been so readily forthcoming, for he had been unaware that his friend knew his relatives.

"You have made Sybil Hanbury's acquaintance, then?" he asked.

"Yes, since your departure for America," was the reply. "I had the pleasure of meeting her first at my uncle's in Grosvenor Gardens—General Sadgrove's, you know. I dare say you remember him?"

"Oh, yes; I remember the General well—a shrewd old party with eyes like gimlets," said Beaumanoir. "But what's this about Grosvenor Gardens?" he added quickly. "The Sadgroves used to live in Bruton Street."

"Quite so; but they moved to 140 Grosvenor Gardens, last Christmas."

"140!" exclaimed the Duke. "Why, that's where the Shermans are going to stay. Some friends of mine who—who came over in the same ship," he went on to explain rather lamely.

Forsyth shot an amused glance at his old crony. "Yes, I know that Uncle Jem was expecting some Americans to put up with him, and he has been raving about the charms of the young lady of the party for the last fortnight. You are excited, Charley. Your manner has struck me as strange since we met at the hotel. Is it permitted to inquire if my uncle is entertaining unawares—a future Duchess?"

To the young Scotsman's surprise, the Duke showed signs for a moment of taking the light-spoken banter amiss. Beaumanoir flushed, and muttered something inarticulate, but pulled himself together and diverted their talk into a fresh channel, clumsily enough.

"Don't gas about me, old chap," he said. "Tell me of yourself. Is the world using you better than formerly?"

"About the same," Forsyth replied with a shrug. "They gave me a twenty-pound rise last year, so my pay as a third-grade clerk in the Foreign Office is now the princely sum of £230 per annum. Not a brilliant prospect. When I'm a worn-out old buffer of sixty I shall be able to retire on a pension about equal to my present pay."

"Then look here, Alec; chuck the public service and come to me," said the Duke, eagerly. "I'll give you eight hundred a year to begin with, and rises up to two thousand; and you can have the dower-house at Prior's Tarrant to live in. Call yourself private secretary, bailiff, anything you please—only come. The fact is—well, I've been a bit shaken by—by what I've gone through. I want someone near me who's more than a mere hireling."

It was Forsyth's turn to flush now, but with pleasure at the offer made to him. He accepted it in a few simple words, and the Duke rose and paid his score.

"Come with me to Pattisons'," he said. "Then we'll go on to Piccadilly and take possession."

The business at the lawyers', which consisted of little more than arranging future meetings, was soon finished, and the Duke and his new secretary took a fresh cab to the West End. As they bowled along Beaumanoir inquired further about his cousin Sybil, whom, owing to his absence in India and more latterly to his estrangement from his relations, he had never met. Forsyth imparted the information that for the last six months, since she "came out," she had virtually ruled the late Duke's household.

"But she can be little more than a child," Beaumanoir protested. "Anyhow, I can't keep a cousin of eighteen on as *my* housekeeper without setting Mrs. Grundy's tongue wagging. The question arises what to do with her. Old Pattison

tells me she is well provided for, but I don't like telling her to clear out if it does not occur to her to go. What sort is she, Alec?"

"That's rather a stiff question to put to *me*," Forsyth replied, as though to himself. "I had better make my confession first as last," he went on hurriedly. "You are her nearest relative now, and the head of her family. Ever since I first saw Sybil Hanbury the dearest wish of my heart has been to make her my wife, but without prospects of any kind I couldn't very well ask her. There you have it, my noble patron, in a nutshell."

Beaumanoir patted his friend's knee affectionately.

"My dear fellow, go in and win, so far as I am concerned," he said. "While I am above ground your prospects need stand in your way no longer. But you haven't answered my question, which I'll put in another way. How is she likely to take my appearance on the scene?"

"I'm afraid she's rather prejudiced. Her brother George didn't love you much, you know, and she is greatly cut up by his loss," Forsyth replied, with the dogged manner of the honest man who has to say a disagreeable thing. "I don't think that you need be under any apprehension about her staying on at Beaumanoir House when you show up. To be candid, I saw her yesterday, and she said she should begin packing as soon as she was sure that you hadn't been drowned on the voyage home."

"Good girl!" ejaculated the Duke. "The unexpressed hope did her much honor, only it's a pity it didn't come off. Now, Alec, if you'll see her first—she needn't see me at all if she doesn't wish to—and tell her from me that she's not to hurry out of the house, because I'm going to oscillate between Prior's Tarrant and a hotel for the present, I shall be immensely obliged to you."

"But you said just now that you were going to take possession."

"I have changed my mind. There are reasons which I cannot explain to you why my immediate neighborhood is likely to be dangerous for the present. I should be sorry to subject my fair cousin to any unpleasantness. Though not a word of this to her or anyone else, please."

The cab was drawing up before the ducal mansion, and Forsyth forbore to put into words the astonishment which he looked. As the two men were about to ascend the steps to the entrance, a landau, which was being driven slowly by, drew to the curb, and a lady who, besides the servants, was the sole occupant, called out:

"Surely you're not going to cut me, Mr. Forsyth. Too proud to know poor little me, eh, now that you've taken to calling on dukes?"

A murmur of annoyance escaped Forsyth, but perforce he went to the carriage and shook the daintily gloved hand held out to him.

"How do you do, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton?" he said, adding the reproving

whisper, "That *is* the Duke."

The lady in the landau raised her lorgnettes and calmly surveyed the waiting nobleman.

"How very interesting!" she purred, adding aloud so that the subject of her request could not fail to hear, "Why don't you introduce him, instead of keeping him standing there? We Americans are death on dukes, you know."

At a gesture from Forsyth, who tried to convey his disgust by a look, Beaumanoir limped forward, smiling. His misfortunes had made him something of a democrat, and he had always been ready to see the comic side of things till tragedy that morning had claimed him for its own. In meeting the advances of the agent Jevons in the Bowery saloon he had been largely influenced by the humor of the situation—of the scion of a ducal house consenting to "get a bit" by passing forged bonds.

Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, a handsome blonde with an elegant figure and a childish voice, received the Duke with effusion.

"I stopped my carriage to ask Mr. Forsyth to tea on Saturday," she prattled. "I do hope your Grace will come too. I am staying at the Cecil, and shall be delighted to see you."

The unblushing effrontery of the invitation failed to strike Beaumanoir in his sudden horror at the associations called up by it. This frivolous butterfly of a woman occupied the next suite of rooms to those in which Ziegler was spinning his villainous web—in which that terrible old man had unfolded to him the details of his treacherous task. Strange, too, that he should be bidden to the mild dissipation of an afternoon tea-table in that hotel, of all others, on the very day when he was due to go there on business so different, for Saturday was the day appointed by Ziegler for his call for "further instructions."

Conscious that the mocking eyes of the lady in the landau were watching him with a curious inquiry, he mastered his emotion, and at the same time came to a decision on the vital issue before him. Probably he would have arrived at the same one without the incentive of avoiding an unpalatable engagement, but Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's invitation to tea was undoubtedly the final influence in setting him on the straight path.

"I am very sorry," he replied, and there was a new dignity in his tone, "but I must ask you to excuse me. I am going down to-morrow to Prior's Tarrant, my place in Hertfordshire, and I shall not be in town on Saturday."

For the fraction of a second the rebuffed hostess seemed taken aback by the refusal. She flushed slightly under her powder, and the taper fingers twitched on the handle of her sunshade. But without any appreciable pause she answered gaily:

"That's most unkind of you. Well, what must be must be. Good-bye, your

Grace. Good-bye, Mr. Forsyth; I shall expect you, anyhow. Drive on, Bennett."

The carriage rolled away.

"I am glad you snubbed her," Forsyth exclaimed. "She has been made a good deal of in certain circles during the last month or two, and presumes a lot on the strength of it."

"Did I snub her?" said the Duke carelessly. "I am sure I didn't mean to, for she deserves better things of me. You'd hardly believe it, Alec, but that little episode has jerked me into deciding a crucial point—no less than whether to be a man or a cur. At the same time it has put me quite outside the pale as a resident under the same roof as my cousin. On second thoughts, I will not go in at all, but I shall be obliged if you will see her and convey the message I gave you—that Beaumanoir House is at her disposal till she can quite conveniently leave it."

"But what are you going to do yourself?" said Forsyth in sheer bewilderment.

"First I shall go to Bond Street, to gladden the hearts of some of my old creditors; then by an evening train to Prior's Tarrant," was the reply. "And, Alec," proceeded the Duke earnestly, "if you can get leave from the Foreign Office, pending retirement, and join me there as soon as possible, you will place me under a very deep obligation."

CHAPTER V—*Ziegler Begins to Move*

On the following Sunday morning the Duke of Beaumanoir stood at one of the windows of the long library at Prior's Tarrant, idly beating a tattoo on the glass. The June sunshine flooded the bosky leafage of the glorious expanse of park, and nearer still the parterres of the old Dutch garden were gay with summer bloom; but the beauties of the landscape were lost upon the watcher at the window.

Nearly four and twenty hours had elapsed since he had failed to keep his appointment with Mr. Ziegler, and he was wondering how and when that autocrat of high-grade crime would signalize his displeasure at the mutiny. That sooner or later an edict would issue against him from the invalid chair in the

first-floor suite he had not the slightest doubt. He knew that he had to deal with men playing a great game for a great stake in deadly earnest.

The Dukes of Beaumanoir had never been famous for their virtues, any more than they had been cowards, and it was rather a dawning sense of responsibility than fear, either for his reputation or his person, that filled him with apprehension. If "anything happened" to him, such a lot would happen to so many other people. For instance, it had only occurred to him since he came down to the country that if Ziegler killed him his death would mean ruin to Alec Forsyth, who had thrown up a sure position to serve him. The next heir was an elderly cousin with a large family to provide for, and he would certainly not retain Forsyth in his employment.

Then, again, Beaumanoir reflected with a sigh, his new and sweet friendship with Leonie Sherman—a friendship to which no blot on his escutcheon need now put limits—would be rudely snapped. The King of Terrors would take away what his saved honor had restored, and perhaps it was the bitterest drop in his cup to feel that he might be giving his life to lose what in another sense he would have given his life to win. To ask Leonie to link her fate to his, with that dark shadow hanging over him, was out of the question.

Once he had taken up his pen to denounce Ziegler to the police authorities anonymously, but he had despondingly laid it down again. That crafty practitioner had doubtless safeguarded himself against such an obvious course by being prepared with an unimpeachable record which it would be impossible to shake unless he came forward and avowed complicity. There, again, dishonor waited for him, and he had already made his choice that a short shrift was preferable to that.

The gloom of his mood was enhanced by his intense loneliness in the huge feudal monastery that now called him master, for Forsyth had been unable to join him, owing to difficulties in obtaining release from his present duties.

Beaumanoir took out and read for the fifth time a letter which had arrived that morning from his friend and secretary:

> "My dear Duke (I mustn't use the irreverent 'Charley' any more),—I am still having trouble with the F.O. people about my departure, but I think I may safely promise to get away to you on Tuesday. In fact, I shall make a point of doing so, even if I have to leave the public service in disgrace, for you must forgive my saying that I am rather uneasy about you. The other day you seemed like a man with a millstone round his neck, and I take it that one of the duties of a private secretary is to remove millstones from the person of his employer. I only wish you would confide fully in me, and command me in any

way—but that is, of course, your affair.

"I dined with my uncle, General Sadgrove, last night, and had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. and Miss Sherman there. The latter is indeed a charming girl. She was rather shy in talking about you, having heard from my uncle that the Mr. Hanbury she met on shipboard was probably the Duke of Beaumanoir on his way to enter into his kingdom. Mrs. Sherman waxed enthusiastic on your 'old-world courtesy' and the General, who chaffs the old lady, remarked that she had been equally laudatory before she discovered your rank.

"They were all very kind and congratulatory on my announcing my engagement to Sybil, which, as I wrote you yesterday, was ratified within ten minutes of your leaving me at the door of Beaumanoir House.

"You may be interested to hear that I did *not* go to tea with Mrs. Talmage Eglinton to-day.—Yours,

"Alec Forsyth."

The Duke crushed the letter back into his pocket, and came to a resolution.

"I'll run up to town to-morrow and call on the Shermans," he said to himself. "And now I'll do the proper thing, and go to church. I'm not going to crouch in corners because of that patriarchal old fiend at the Cecil."

The church at which generations of Hanburys had worshiped was in the center of Tarrant village, a mile from the lodge gates, but there was a short cut to it across the park. This was the route taken by the Duke, who first crossed the greensward and then passed out by a private wicket into the road after traversing the belt of copse that fringed the demesne. The villagers, who had waited for his coming, standing bare-headed in the churchyard, were a little disappointed that he had not driven up in full state. But the solitary gentleman limping up the path atoned for the lack of ceremony and won their hearts by his friendly smile; and a handshake to one or two of the older inhabitants, whom he remembered as a boy, clinched the matter. The verdict went round that the new Duke would "do."

The service that morning was, it is to be feared, more ducal than devotional. From the white-robed choir, ranged among the tombs of dead-and-gone Hanburys in the chancel, to the hard-breathing rustics on the back benches every eye was turned and steadily kept on the lonely figure in the family pew. While grateful for the homage paid him, the Duke was not sorry when the ordeal was over and he was free to make his way homeward.

But he was not to get off so easily. As he was about to let himself through the private gate into the park, intending to go back, as he had come, through the copse, footsteps sounded behind him, and Mr. Bristow, the vicar, overtook him.

They had already met on the previous day.

"Your Grace is alone still?" panted the clergyman. "Ah, I thought your secretary wouldn't find it so easy to cast his shackles. I am commissioned by Mrs. Bristow to say—I hope you won't think us presuming—that we shall be delighted if you will give us your company at our homely lunch."

A sudden impulse prompted Beaumanoir to accept the invitation. He had taken a liking for the hale, vigorous old vicar, who had the archives of his family by rote, and an hour or two in his society would take him out of himself. So he turned back and accompanied his host to the vicarage, where he made a good impression on Mrs. Bristow by his cordial praise of her training of the choir and by appreciation of her strawberries and cream.

It was past four when he returned to Prior's Tarrant, to be met in the entrance-hall by the butler with a face eloquent of "something wrong."

"What is it, Manson?" he asked. "Mr. Bristow sent a boy, did he not, to say that I was lunching at the vicarage?"

"Yes, your Grace. It isn't that," was the agitated reply. "I have to report an outrage that's been committed on one of the under-servants. Jennings, the third gardener, was coming back from church through the copse in the park, when he was lassoed, your Grace, same as they do buffalo, I've been told, in foreign parts. A rope shot out of the bushes over his shoulders, and then a man ran up as he was struggling on the ground; but let him go, saying it was a joke. Jennings hasn't got any enemies that he knows of, and it was a wicked thing to do, because he's a bit of a cripple and walks lame. It's shook him a good deal."

"I am not surprised at that," said the Duke. "Possibly it was only intended as a practical joke, but you had better inform the constable in the village, and instruct him to inquire into the matter."

The butler retired, and the Duke smiled grimly.

"Ziegler has begun to put in some of his fine work," he muttered. "The initial blunder of his agents in mistaking a servant's limp for mine won't stop him long. I shall begin to like the excitement soon, I expect."

But as the day wore to evening, and the evening to night, the sensation of being *hunted* vexed his nerves. He found himself prolonging his solitary dinner for the sake of the company of the butler and footman who waited upon him, and afterwards he abstained from the moonlit stroll on the terrace to which he felt tempted. It was not till the mansion had been barred and bolted for the night that he ceased to fumble frequently for the revolver which he had carried all day.

Before retiring he inquired of Manson if the constable had traced the maltreaters of Jennings, and he was not surprised to learn that there had been no discoveries. Mr. Clinton Ziegler was not the man to employ agents incapable of baffling a village policeman.

The room which Beaumanoir occupied was the great state bed-chamber that had been used by his predecessors from time immemorial—a gaunt apartment with a cavernous fireplace and heavily curtained mullioned windows. He did not like the room, but had consented to sleep there on seeing that the old retainers would be scandalized by his sleeping anywhere but in the "Duke's Room."

After locking the door and seeing to the window fastenings, he took the additional precaution of examining the chimney. Bending his head clear of the massive mantelpiece, he looked up and saw that at the end of the broad shaft quite a large circle of star-lit sky was visible, while a cold blast struck downwards of sufficient volume to purify the air of the room.

He lay awake for some time, but he must have been slumbering fitfully for over an hour when he felt himself gradually awakening—not from any sudden start, but from a growing sense of strange oppression in his lungs. As his senses returned the choking sensation increased, and finally he lay wide awake, wondering what was the matter. Every minute it became harder to breathe the stifling air, and at last he flung the bedclothes off in the hope of relief, and in doing so saw something so unaccountable that his reeling senses were stricken with amazement rather than fear.

There was a fire in the grate. Glowing steadily in the recess of the ancient fireplace a great red ball burned, without flicker and without flame, but lurid with the unwavering light that comes from fuel fused to intense heat.

Even without the terrible oppression at his chest there would have been a weird horror in this mysterious fire introduced into his room at dead of night—into a room with locked door and fastened windows. But what did this ghastly struggle for breath portend?

"Charcoal! Ziegler!" were the two words that buzzed in response through his fast-clouding brain.

CHAPTER VI—*The General is Curious*

On the following afternoon at tea-time four ladies were seated in the pleasant drawing-room of 140 Grosvenor Gardens, the residence of General Sadgrove, late

of the Indian Staff Corps. Mrs. Sadgrove, a fair, plump, elderly dame, needs no special description, and two of the other tea-drinkers—Mrs. Senator Sherman, as she preferred to be called, and her daughter Leonie—we have met before.

The fourth occupant of the room—a girl dressed in deep mourning—was Sybil Hanbury, who had come to discuss her engagement to Alec Forsyth with her motherly old friend, Alec's aunt by marriage, Mrs. Sadgrove. Owing to the recent deaths in her family the engagement was not to be publicly announced at present; but Sybil had no secrets from the Sadgroves, who had known her from a baby, long before she had been taken up, on the death of her parents, by her grandfather, the late Duke of Beaumanoir.

Miss Hanbury owed her attractiveness to her essentially English type, not of beauty—she would have disdained to lay claim to that—but of fresh, healthy coloring, a suspicion of tomboyishness, and a lithe, supple figure that stood her in good stead in the hunting and hockey fields. A trifle slangy on occasion, she was a good hater and a staunch friend, with a temper—as she had warned Alec already—that would need a lot of humoring if they were not to have "ructions."

"I've got the makings of a termagant, my dear boy, but it will be all right if you rule me with a velvet glove," she had remarked within five minutes of their first kiss.

In fact, Miss Sybil Hanbury was a bit of a hoyden; but a very capable little hoyden for all that, and absolutely fearless.

The two girls had naturally paired off together, and the subject of their talk was, equally naturally, the new Duke—Alec's friend, Sybil's cousin, and Leonie's chance acquaintance on the *St. Paul.*

[image]

"A countrywoman of yours. I wonder if you know her?"

Sybil, after listening to Leonie's rather halting description of the fellow passenger whom she had known as "Mr. Hanbury," owned frankly that she had never heard any good of her cousin, but she hastened to add:

"He's given my prejudice a nasty knock, though, in behaving so well to my young man. Gave him a billet as private sec. that enabled Alec to—you know. A man can't be much of a wrong 'un who'll stick to old pals when they have no claim on him."

Leonie tried not to show surprise at the vernacular.

"He seemed very kind and considerate. I don't think he can ever have done anything dishonorable," she replied.

"Nobody ever accused him of that," Sybil assented. "It was only that he was extravagant, and that my grandfather got tired of paying his debts. You see, he wasn't the next heir, and—well, perhaps they were a little hard on him. I'm quite prepared to like him now."

The conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a servant, who announced:

"Mrs. Talmage Eglinton."

"A fellow countrywoman of yours. I wonder if you know her?" Sybil whispered, as a radiant vision in pale pink under a large "picture" hat sailed in, and was greeted with somewhat frigid politeness by Mrs. Sadgrove.

"No; I am not acquainted with either the name or the lady," Leonie replied, struck with a strange antipathy to the bold eyes that seemed to be mastering every detail in the room, herself included. Indeed, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton stared so markedly both at Leonie and her mother that Mrs. Sadgrove thought they must have met, and promptly introduced them as American friends staying in the house. The introduction was not a success, for the Shermans knew everyone worth knowing in American society, and the fact that they had never so much as heard of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton argued her outside the pale.

The elegant vision received her snubbing with cool unconcern, and after a few generalities turned again to her hostess and engaged in the trifling chatter of a "duty" call, making one or two unsuccessful attempts to include Sybil, to whom she had not been introduced, in the conversation.

"That woman is a brute," Sybil said to Leonie under her breath. "I'll tell you about her when she's gone."

The door opened, and there entered an iron-gray man of sixty, whose coming might almost have been the cause of expediting the departure of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, so quickly did she rise and begin her good-byes.

"No, really I can't stay, dear Mrs. Sadgrove, even to have the pleasure of a chat with the General," she prattled. "I have half a dozen other calls to pay, and you have beguiled me into staying too long already. Good-bye. Good-bye, General. Pray don't trouble to come down." And with a half-impudent bow of exaggerated respect to the Shermans, she swept out, with the master of the house in attendance.

General Sadgrove returned at once to the drawing-room after escorting the visitor to her carriage. He was a man who bore his years easily; singularly slow and scant of speech, but alert of eye and almost jaunty in the erectness of his bearing. He had gained his C.B. for prominent services in the suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity, and his name is still held in wholesome dread by the criminals of India whose method is violence. It had once been said of him by a high official: "Jem Sadgrove doesn't have to worry about *finding* clues. He

makes them for himself, and they always yield a true scent. He's got the nose of a fox-terrier, and the patience and speed of a greyhound."

But that was long ago, and it might be supposed that in such pleasant duties of retirement as the ushering out of dainty visitors from his wife's tea-table his faculties had become blunted. Nor in the law-abiding precincts of Belgravia could there be scope for the old-time energy. Yet Mrs. Sadgrove, who knew the signs and portents of her husband's face, looked twice at him with just a shade of anxiety as she asked whether he would take some tea.

"Thanks," he said, and taking his cup he went and stood on the rug before the empty hearth. He stirred his tea slowly, with his eyes wandering from one to the other of the four women in the room.

"You good people seem singularly calm, considering that you must just have been listening to a very exciting story," he remarked.

"Indeed, no," replied Sybil, taking upon herself to answer. "The lady to whom you have just been doing the polite bored us intensely. Leonie says, for all the dash she's cutting in London, she's an *incognita* so far as America is concerned."

The General continued to stir his tea impassively.

"Did she not inform you in the course of her small talk," he inquired presently, "that on her way here her carriage had knocked a man down and gone near to killing him?"

The question evoked a chorus of interested negatives.

"Neither did she say anything to me about it," said the General gravely.

"Then how did you become aware of the accident?" Mrs. Sadgrove ventured to ask.

"Saw it," returned the General. "It happened in Buckingham Palace Road. I was passing at the time, on my way home from the club. Her coachman drove right over the fellow as he was crossing the roadway at the corner. He was knocked down, and it was the merest shave that he wasn't trampled by the horses and crushed by the wheels. As it was, he escaped with a bit of a shaking and a dusty coat. At any rate, he got up and walked into the nearest barber's—for a wash and brush-up, I suppose."

Further questioned, the General in his jerky way informed his fair audience that he was sure that it was Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's jobbed landau that had wrought the mischief, and that she herself was in it at the time. It was the same vehicle which he had found at his own door on reaching home ten minutes ago, and to which he had just conducted her.

"Funny that she should be so secretive about it," said Mrs. Sadgrove, reflectively. "It's the sort of thing that most women, coming fresh from the scene, would have been full of—especially as it must have been the coachman's fault,

and not her own."

"Exactly," was the General's curt comment.

"She's a—a *creature*," Sybil Hanbury exclaimed, viciously. "Thank goodness, I don't know her; but I've heard all about her from Alec. The poor boy can't abide her; she makes eyes at him so unblushingly."

"Then we can appreciate your sentiments about her," remarked the General with the flicker of a smile. "How did we come to know this lady?" he added to his wife.

Mrs. Sadgrove explained that she had been asked as a favor to call on Mrs. Talmage Eglinton by a mutual acquaintance, a certain Lady Roseville, but had regretted it ever since. Their intercourse had, however, been of the slightest, being confined to the interchange of a couple of formal visits, and to an invitation by Mrs. Sadgrove to a musical "at home," at which Mrs. Talmage Eglinton had endeavored to embark on a flirtation with Alec Forsyth.

"She's a rich widow, I believe; and I don't think she would ever have been heard of if the Rosevilles hadn't taken her up," Mrs. Sadgrove concluded.

The series of grunts with which the General received this information had hardly ceased when again the footman appeared in the doorway and announced, with all due importance:

"His Grace the Duke of Beaumanoir."

The occupants of the drawing-room were all accustomed to the "usages of polite society," either in Britannic or Transatlantic form; but it was impossible for them to repress a flutter of excitement as the visitor entered, his original "cavalry swing" marred but not wholly obliterated by his limp. Leonie tried hard not to blush, and failed. Mrs. Sherman interlaced her fingers nervously. Sybil Hanbury stared hard at the cousin whose stately town house she was occupying, and who had waved a magic wand over her lover's prospects. Mrs. Sadgrove was the graceful and interested hostess, and the General—well, the General was surprised for once into a start which was only invisible because nobody was looking at him.

Beaumanoir's manner was perfectly easy and self-possessed, but there was a harassed look in his eyes which did not entirely fade as he responded to his welcome. But it was not that which had caused the General to start.

The Duke was the man whom he had seen knocked down by Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's carriage, to the imminent peril of his life.

The "wash and brush-up" had been effectual as regards the ducal garments, but they could not hide the black silk sling in which he carried his left arm. It was General Sadgrove's way to allow events to shape themselves, and saying nothing of the scene he had witnessed as he welcomed the distinguished visitor, he waited for the Duke to refer to his mishap himself.

But no. The victim of the accident was apparently as much inclined to

reticence as had been the fair cause of it. It was Mrs. Sherman who unconsciously provoked the mendacious statement which stimulated the General's curiosity.

"I'm afraid that your Grace has hurt your hand," said the Senator's wife, pointing to a broad strip of diachylon plaster that ran from the Duke's wrist to the ball of his thumb.

"Yes, I—I grazed it rather badly against the wheel in getting out of a cab," Beaumanoir replied with a momentary loss of his self-possession. The discomposure passed at once, and only the observer on the hearth-rug noticed it. The same shrewd observer presently perceived that the visitor was definitely leading the conversation to the subject of the arrival in England of Senator Sherman; and, more than that, that he was waxing a shade more inquisitive than good-breeding allowed as to the nature of the senatorial journey.

"Ah! he's coming on political business, I think you told me?" the Duke remarked in a half-tone of interrogation on Leonie saying that her father, according to advices received that morning, was to sail in two days' time on the *Campania*, and would be due at Liverpool early in the following week.

"Well, it's political business in a way," Mrs. Sherman struck in. "My husband is coming over in charge of a large amount of Government securities, which are to be deposited at the Bank of England against a shipment of English gold to the United States."

"He's got the opening he wanted. Now, what on earth is he going to do with it?" said the General to himself as he watched keenly.

"Rather a dangerous mission, I should say," was the Duke's comment on the information imparted to him.

"Dangerous! How can that be?" Leonie exclaimed, wondering. "United States Treasury bonds are not explosive."

"No, but the world is full of sharps, Miss Sherman, and some of them might fancy having a shy for such a haul," said Beaumanoir with a trace more of earnestness than the occasion seemed to require. "If I had a relative starting on such an errand, I should be inclined to cable him to—ah—to look out for himself," he added in direct appeal to Mrs. Sherman.

But the good lady laughed the suggestion to scorn, alleging playfully that "it would be as much as her place was worth" to tackle the Senator that way. It would be a hint that he wasn't able to take care of himself or of his charge, and would be resented accordingly.

The Duke abandoned the subject, but the General noted the disappointment in the tired eyes.

"His Grace knows something. Let's see—he was on his beam-ends when he was unearthed in New York," the old hunter of Thugs and Dacoits muttered under his gray mustache.

Beaumanoir made no long stay after his ineffectual effort to sound a warning note. There had been no opportunity for individual talk; but in saying his adieus he had two words with Sybil, who had been observing her cousin quite as intently as, and a good deal more openly than, the General.

"I'm going to look Alec up now, at his diggings in John Street," he said. "Probably I shall ask him to put me up to-night."

"It's a shame that you should have to do so," Sybil blurted in her boyish fashion. "You've been awfully good to us. I ought to have cleared out of Beaumanoir House at once, and I'll 'git' as soon as ever I can make other arrangements."

"I beg you'll do nothing of the kind," Beaumanoir made genial answer. "Alec is about the only friend I have, and—and I need a friend, Cousin Sybil. It has been a pleasure to serve him and you—if it can be called serving you," he added with a thoughtful gravity that puzzled the girl.

She shook hands with a warmth that bespoke the death of old prejudices, and General Sadgrove, who had hardly exchanged two words with his visitor, accompanied him to the hall-door.

"Are you walking, Duke? Or shall I whistle a cab?" he asked.

Beaumanoir looked up the street and down the street, and gave a queer little shrug.

"It won't make any difference whether I walk or drive," he said. "Good-bye, General."

Having gazed the limping figure out of sight, the General went back into the house and made for his private den—a cozy apartment crammed with Eastern spoils. There he leisurely selected a cigar and seated himself in a big saddle-bag chair.

"There is something brewing," he growled gently. "I perceive a vibration in the moral atmosphere which quite recalls old days. I wonder what it means?"

CHAPTER VII—*The Men on the Stairs*

The rooms—two in number—occupied by Alec Forsyth in John Street, Adelphi, were in a house let off in bachelor chambers, with the exception of the ground

floor, which was used as an office by a firm of wholesale wine-merchants. The young Scotsman's limited income had precluded a more aristocratic locality; and, at any rate, John Street offered the advantage of being within a few minutes' walk of his daily work in Downing Street.

In the daytime, when the tenants were out at their various avocations, the upper part of the dingy old building was deserted, save by the housekeeper in the attics; while the counting-house abutting on the street was all life and bustle. At night the conditions were reversed, the wine-merchant's premises being locked up and silent, and the rooms above occupied.

On the evening of that Monday on which the Duke of Beaumanoir called on the Shermans at the residence of General Sadgrove, Alec was busy in his sitting-room, tearing up papers and preparing generally for his departure to Prior's Tarrant on the morrow. It was past eight, and he had just lit the gas, when the door suddenly opened and Beaumanoir came in.

"Why, Charley—hang it! Duke, I mean—I thought you were in the country!" Alec exclaimed, more astonished by his friend's actions than by his appearance there.

For, after slipping quietly in, Beaumanoir had turned sharp round and loosed the catch of the spring-lock. Not satisfied with that, he also shot home the two old-fashioned bolts with which the door was fitted, top and bottom, and then flung himself into an easy chair, mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

"I don't think I was spotted, but it's best to be on the safe side," he muttered. Then aloud: "I came to ask you to give me a shake-down to-night, old chap, on a sofa or anything; only I don't know if it's fair to you; my proximity carries a pretty considerable risk. But I've been—rather worried, and I seem to want company."

Forsyth rose, and laid an affectionate hand on the Duke's shoulder.

"Now, look here," he said, firmly. "I'm going to forget that you're my employer at a generous salary, and remember only that I'm your friend. What does all this mean? You've been hurt somehow, too. Just make a clean breast of it, and let's see what can be done."

Beaumanoir shook his head sadly.

"I can't make a clean breast of it," he began; then pulled up short and went on. "At least, I can't tell you causes, but I'll tell you effects. My life has been attempted twice certainly, possibly three times, since noon yesterday."

"How?" said Alec with Scotch brevity.

"A lame gardener was set upon at Prior's Tarrant, and released on his assailants finding that they had mistaken him for me. And at night they got on the roof and tried to suffocate me by letting a brazier of charcoal down into the grate and plugging the chimney. Luckily I awoke, and managed to crawl out of the

room in time."

"But surely you raised an alarm and caught the fellows? They couldn't get off the roof and escape so quickly as that," exclaimed Alec, half incredulous.

Again the Duke shook his head.

"I raised no alarm, and they did get away, after pulling up the brazier and leaving no trace," he replied. "There are reasons, Alec, why I could not have appeared against them had they been caught—the same reasons why I can't confide more fully in you."

"You must have done something very bad—murder at least," said Forsyth, gravely.

"On the contrary, I have done nothing at all," Beaumanoir retorted. "It is for not doing something that I am being persecuted."

"Well, what about the third attempt?"

"It happened this afternoon, as I was on my way to your uncle's. A carriage knocked me down and very nearly crumpled me. But that may have been an accident."

"Did you take stock of the driver and the people in the carriage?"

Beaumanoir was obliged to admit that he had not. In his disheveled state he had been only anxious to be cleaned down and have his wrist attended to, and it was not till after the carriage had driven rapidly away that he had connected the incident with the other attempts.

Forsyth said nothing for the moment, but fetched some cigarettes from the mantelpiece; and it was not until they had smoked in silence for awhile that he blurted out suddenly:

"This can't be allowed to go on. It makes everything impossible. Have you any reason to think that the people who are pursuing you will do so indefinitely—until they have settled you?"

Beaumanoir considered before replying, as though the point had not occurred to him before.

"No," he said, with a nervous laugh. "Things have crowded so in the last few hours that I haven't thought much about any sort of future. I cannot be sure, but I believe if I could pull through till the end of next week—say, for another fortnight—that the danger would pass."

Forsyth sat and ruminated, blowing blue smoke-rings; and then, after two or three minutes of silence, a faint noise sounded in the room. The Duke, whose nerves were tuned to concert pitch, heard it first, and turned a pair of wide-open eyes on the door. Forsyth's gaze followed, and they both saw the handle of the door move. The door itself, being locked and double bolted, of course refused to yield to the gentle pressure from without.

Forsyth laid his finger to his lips for silence, and motioned Beaumanoir to

retire into the bedroom, which communicated by means of folding doors with the sitting-room. When the Duke had noiselessly disappeared, Forsyth stole to the outer door, and having first quietly drawn the bolts he quickly unlocked it and flung it open, to be confronted by an under-sized little man, who shrank back from his threatening attitude.

"Who the deuce are you—and what do you want, disturbing me at this time of night?" Forsyth demanded fiercely.

"These are Mr. Crofton's chambers, ain't they, sir?" bleated the intruder.

"No; they are not. There's no one of that name in the house that I know of," replied Forsyth, partially mollified by his mild manner, and wholly so when the little man proceeded to apologize for his mistake, explaining that he was from a chemist's in the Strand with some medicine for the gentleman, but that he must have come to the wrong house.

Holding up a bottle as evidence of his *bona fides*, he retreated downstairs, excusing himself to the last; but before going he had managed to snatch a comprehensive glance round the room. Forsyth waited on the landing until his steps had died away, and then went back into his room, barring the door as before.

"It's all right," he said, going to the folding doors. "Only some chap who had mistaken the address."

"Not much mistake there," replied the Duke, outwardly calm, but gone very white. "I caught a peep of him. He's a johnny who shadowed me over from America, and never left me till just before I met you at the Cecil. He called himself Marker, and—and he's in this business, Alec."

"He didn't look very formidable. Why, you could lick the thread-paper little skimp with one hand," said Forsyth, beginning to wonder if his friend's mind were unhinged. It was not like the once gay hussar Charley Hanbury—intrepid horseman, champion boxer, and good all-round athlete—to funk a miserable wisp such as that!

"He is only the spy, I expect—sent to find out if I was here," replied Beaumanoir, passing a weary hand over his eyes.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Forsyth went into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him so as to be in the dark. The window commanded a view of the street, and the blind had not been drawn. Looking down, he saw a man sauntering on the opposite pavement, who presently coming under the rays of a street-lamp was revealed as Marker. Forsyth waited until the spy turned and slowly retraced his steps, and then went back into the sitting-room.

"You have convinced me that there is something in all this," he said. "That fellow is mouching about outside."

"I'll go. I can't subject you to this sort of thing," said Beaumanoir, reaching for the new hat which he had purchased after his "accident."

But Forsyth pushed him back into his chair.

"A duke isn't necessarily a fool," he said, roughly. "What you want most is a good sleep, and you shall have it—here in these rooms. Mr. Marker can't *know* that you are here, or he wouldn't have come to the door with that bogus yarn. Also, he is evidently not satisfied that you are *not* here, or he would have gone away. It remains to throw dust in his eyes and fool him a bit. Lord! how I wish my uncle, General Sadgrove, was with us!"

"He seemed to me a trifle dull," remarked the Duke, inconsequently.

Forsyth made allowances, and did not answer.

"See here," he said, after a minute's reflection. "This is the plan to throw the spy off the scent. It's nine o'clock—just the hour when it would be quite natural for a bachelor to go to his club. I will stroll round to Northumberland Avenue, and drop into the Constitutional for an hour. In the meanwhile, do you stay here and lie low behind locked doors, and with gas turned down. That rascal will almost certainly retire to his employers baffled, for he would not think that I should go out and leave you alone."

"That sounds promising," Beaumanoir assented. "But don't stay a moment longer than the hour, Alec. I don't think I could stand it."

Forsyth reassured him, and having slipped into evening clothes and donned a light overcoat, he issued his final instructions. It was beginning to be natural to him now to take the lead, after that glimpse of the lurking figure in the light of the street-lamp. Beaumanoir was to lock and bolt himself in, and only open on hearing the password "*Rat*."

These matters arranged, Forsyth departed, and, after waiting until he heard the bolts shot, went down into the street, where the spy was still in evidence, prowling on the other side. He made no attempt to follow Forsyth, who, affecting not to notice him, walked rapidly the short distance to his club. There he remained in the smoking-room with what patience he could muster for the full hour, determined not to return till time enough had elapsed for Marker to come to the desired conclusion and act upon it.

It was half-past ten when Forsyth set out to retrace his steps to John Street, and almost as soon as he entered that deserted thoroughfare he saw that the watcher was no longer at his post. Eager to relieve Beaumanoir from his solitary state of siege, he made all haste to the house, and was passing quickly through the entry when he heard footsteps on the landing above. A gas-jet was kept burning over the closed door of the wine-merchant's office, for the benefit of the resident tenants on the upper floors, so that he had a clear view of the straight stone stairs. Before he reached the latter two men came into view, hurriedly descending, and talking together in muffled undertones—one a gaunt, hungry-looking individual in the garb of a clergyman; the other, burly and bull-necked, dressed in shabby

tweeds and bowler hat.

Forsyth stood aside at the stair-foot for them to pass, and then, moved by the furtive glances they turned back at him, he ran upstairs two steps at a time. He knew all his fellow-lodgers by sight; but these men were strangers, and he did not like the looks of the curiously assorted pair. On coming to the door of his rooms, he rapped and spoke the agreed signal, but something prompted him not to wait, and simultaneously he turned the handle. The door swung open at once, without any unbarring from within.

"Where have you got to?" cried Forsyth, peering round the room, in which the gas burned low, just as he had left it.

There was no response; and with a sinking heart he turned on a full light and dashed into the bedroom, only to find that also vacant. The Duke of Beaumanoir had vanished from his refuge.

There was no doubt that he was in neither of the rooms. A hasty search put that beyond question. Instinctively Forsyth ran to the outer door and at once made the discovery—for which he was already prepared—that his chambers had been forcibly entered during his absence. The door had been wrenched open with a jemmy, and had simply been pulled to on the departure of the intruders. The shattered woodwork round the spring-lock told its own tale, though the mystery was increased by the fact that the old-fashioned bolts had been withdrawn.

But what of Beaumanoir?

CHAPTER VIII—*The Cut Panel*

In the famous white drawing-room at Beaumanoir House Sybil Hanbury was preparing to end a solitary evening by the simple process of going to bed. The butler, a martyr to punctilio, had insisted on lighting every jet in the chandeliers and in the sconces on the walls, with the result that the vast apartment scintillated like a ball-room, accentuating the loneliness of the black-clad little figure of its sole occupant.

Sybil laid aside her book, and surveyed the splendid emptiness of the room with a smile of amusement for her monopoly of so much gorgeously upholstered space. But as she realized that her monopoly of the white drawing-room was only a detail in the much larger incongruity of her monopoly of the Piccadilly

mansion, her face took a graver look.

"I trust that the Vincents will be ready to take me in next week," she mused with a touch of impatience. "The idea of a score of servants and an acre of ducal palace being run for a simple body like me is too ridiculous, especially with the rightful owner ready to take possession."

She had been both puzzled and attracted by her cousin at General Sadgrove's that afternoon. As a child she had heard so much contemptuous obloquy poured on the absent ne'er-do-well that, in spite of his generosity to Alec Forsyth and his consideration for herself, she had been prepared to cling to the old prejudice. It had, however, at once broken down under the pathetic plea for friendship which she had discerned in the Duke's troubled eyes, for her womanly insight told her that the new head of the family was under the influence of a mental strain almost amounting to physical distress.

"He looks like a man sitting on an infernal machine, listening to the tick-tack of the clock-work," she reflected. "Yet I don't think he's wicked, or the sort of person with a past likely to fly up and hit him in the face. I wish I knew what he is grizzling about, so that Alec and I could do him a good turn in exchange for his benevolence."

She had risen with the intention of retiring to her own room, when the butler entered hurriedly, and with traces of well-disciplined agitation on his episcopal countenance. Mr. Prince had grown gray in the ducal service; but, beyond a slight fatherliness of manner, he did not presume on the fact towards the orphan scion of the great house.

"I really don't know, Miss, if I ought to disturb you so late on such a matter," he said. "Two men have called to see his Grace, and, failing him, insisted on my ascertaining if you would receive them."

"I know nothing of the Duke's affairs, and I am just going up to bed," Sybil replied, wondering at the usually correct retainer's excitement. "Besides, Prince, 'insist' is rather a curious word to use here," she added with a trace of asperity.

"I should not have ventured to repeat such an objectionable phrase, Miss, if it had not been used with a sort of authority," the butler hastened to put himself right. "I ought to have mentioned that they are Scotland Yard detectives, which accounts for my being a bit flurried."

Sybil promptly sat down again and bade Prince show the visitors in. She had no desire to pry into her cousin's business, nor did her reception of the police-officers imply any such intention. But at that moment her preconceived notion that the Duke was the center of a mystery took definite shape, and she was above all things loyal to the house. She decided that in her cousin's interest it would be wiser to see these men, and, if possible, fore-arm herself with a knowledge of their designs.

But when Prince returned it was to usher in not two men, but only one—a cadaverous, middle-aged person in the garb of a clergyman, who waited obsequiously near the door while his card was presented by the butler.

"I found when I got back into the hall that he'd sent the other man away, Miss—said there was no need for two of them to intrude upon you," explained Prince in an undertone.

Sybil nodded, but the furtive glances of the clerically dressed visitor caused her to call Prince back as he was retiring.

"I trust you didn't leave them alone in the hall?" she whispered.

"Oh, dear, no, Miss; William, the second footman, was on duty in the hall while I came to you," was the reply, uttered in a slightly injured tone.

Prince having taken a dignified departure, Sybil beckoned forward the individual whom his card proclaimed to be "Inspector Chantrey, Criminal Investigation Department." He advanced with a shambling walk and with deprecating gestures in keeping with his disguise; but Sybil formed the opinion that all his nervousness was not simulated. It struck her that he was listening intently as he threaded his way through the priceless Louis Seize garniture of the white drawing-room.

He stood before her at last, for all the world like a half-famished wolf in the presence of a very wide-awake and dainty lamb that had not the least intention of being devoured. He spoke hurriedly—almost perfunctorily, as though he set no great store by his questions or the answers to them; and all the time that listening attitude was noticeable.

"I called in the hope of finding his Grace at home," he began, with a half-note of interrogation.

"Well, the butler will have told you that he is not at home," said Sybil sharply.

"True; but servants are not always reliable, and I thought I had better see one of the family. Might I ask if the Duke is expected here to-night?"

"No, he isn't. What do you want him for?" snapped Sybil.

The *aplomb* of the question seemed to take the inquisitor back. He glanced curiously at the girl in the high-backed arm-chair, first scanning her tenacious little face, but quickly dropping his shifty eyes to the carelessly crossed shoes.

He began to "hem" and "ha."

"The fact of the matter is, we have had a communication from the county police at Prior's Tarrant, in respect of an assault on one of the servants in the park yesterday. The local people think the attack may have been intended for the Duke, and they have wired us to make inquiries."

The reason alleged for his visit sounded plausible, and in some degree might account for the hunted look she had surprised in the Duke's eyes. Yet she was not

altogether satisfied. It was conceivable that the police should want to question the Duke, but the excuse for intruding on her at such an hour hardly seemed adequate.

"I am still at a loss to see how I can be of service to you in a matter of which I know nothing," she said, not attempting to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

"I only desired to make sure, madam, that the Duke was not at home. Having obtained that assurance from the fountain-head, pray permit me to withdraw," was the nervously spoken reply, punctuated by an awkward bow and the commencement of a hurried retreat. But the visitor had only taken three steps down the long vista of the room when the door was flung open, and Prince announced, with the air of one who springs a surprise:

"His Grace the Duke!"

Beaumanoir was very pale, but he advanced without hesitation, meeting Sibyl's interrogator half-way up the room. Startled as she was by her cousin's unexpected appearance, the girl intuitively rose and went forward, vaguely conscious of a desire to hear if the man repeated the same tale.

"Well, sir?" said the Duke, curtly.

Sybil hardly knew whether or no she was relieved when, word for word, the man repeated the reason he had just given her for his call. Watching her cousin's face, she saw the pallor yield to a flush of evident annoyance.

"Oh, yes; something of the kind occurred in the park at Prior's Tarrant," he angrily replied. "But all this about the man being mistaken for me is officious nonsense—too trivial to warrant your pushing your way into this young lady's presence at eleven o'clock at night. I shall complain to your superiors of this most impertinent intrusion."

"What could it mean?" Sybil asked herself. The man's nervous air—his attitude of listening—had disappeared. His sly face grew sleekly impudent under Beaumanoir's rebuke and it was quite jauntily that he answered:

"Then I'll bid your Grace good-night. Very possibly you'll reconsider the advisability of raising the question at Scotland Yard."

The clerical coat-tails went flapping down the room, the Duke following them to the door, where he handed their owner over to Prince, who was hovering in the hall. Having given a sharp order to "show the gentleman out," Beaumanoir returned to Sybil, humbly apologetic, but with signs of haste in his manner.

"My dear cousin, I am more than annoyed at Prince's laxity in admitting that fellow," he said, taking her hand. "It is fortunate that I chanced to look in in the hope of finding you up, and so was able to rid you of him. I came to leave a message for Alec in case he calls presently."

"But Alec is the pink of propriety," exclaimed Sibyl, laughing in spite of herself. "He doesn't call on an unprotected damsel, even if he is engaged to her,

at eleven o'clock at night."

"Nevertheless, I believe that he will call here very shortly; and I should like him to be told that I am all right, and, in fact, that I am going out of town for a few days to the sea-side. I will communicate with him when I want him to enter on his secretarial duties. That is all, I think. I must really be off now."

But Sybil would not at once take his proffered hand. She remembered that he had mentioned that he was to spend the night at Alec's chambers, and this sudden derangement of plans, coupled with the lurking suggestion in his message, was, to say the least of it, mysterious. Looking into the tired eyes, she found again that expression of sleepless worry that had puzzled her. Why should it be necessary for this young man, newly come to great wealth and station, to notify his friend so feverishly that he was "all right," and in the same breath announce his retreat from London to some vague destination—not to his own country-seat?

"As you expect Alec here, wouldn't it be better to wait for him?" she urged; adding naïvely, "I could even offer you a bed, if you would condescend to make yourself at home in your own house."

But Beaumanoir was in no mood to perceive the humor of the situation. He was clearly fidgeting to be gone, and Sybil could only conclude that he wanted to be gone before Alec arrived. With a girl's faith in her lover's power to surmount most difficulties, she decided to try and detain her cousin as long as possible; but her diplomacy was not called into play. Prince, now wearing an air of mild protest at all these excursions and alarums, appeared in the doorway to announce:

"Mr. Forsyth."

Beaumanoir was evidently disconcerted at not having made his exit in time; and Sybil, recognizing that there was something between the two men not for her ears, tactfully withdrew to the other end of the room, after smiling a greeting to her lover. She thought none the worse of him because he was too preoccupied to return it. She was beginning to discern an undercurrent of serious import beneath the happenings of the past half-hour.

"What made you break cover, old chap? You've given me a pretty scare," said Forsyth to the Duke. "When I found you'd gone, I came on here on the off-chance."

"I didn't think it fair to subject you to the sort of night you might have had with me as an inmate, so I cleared out," Beaumanoir replied, wearily. "I guessed you'd inquire here, so I called in to leave word that I was all right—up to date."

"You were not molested before quitting my chambers?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because the place has been visited; it must have been after you left," said Forsyth, gravely. And he went on to relate how he had found the door broken open, and how he had met two suspicious-looking men on the stairs, one dressed

as a clergyman and the other in shabby tweeds.

"Dressed as a clergyman?" cried Beaumanoir, startled into forgetfulness of Sybil's presence in the room. "Then, Alec, I have stood face to face with death in this house not ten minutes ago. I found your sham parson here, professing to be an official detective; but I doubted him from the first."

His raised tones reached Sybil, who realized that the house of Beaumanoir was confronted by no ordinary emergency. What the peril could be that threatened her noble relative she had no means of knowing, or any wish to know; but the Duke's description of himself as standing "face to face with death" amid the seeming security of his own white drawing-room touched her with the icy hand of unknown dread, and, moreever, filled her with a sense of responsibility. The man who was not safe under the dazzling lights of that splendid apartment, with a host of servants within call, was going forth into all the insecurity of the London streets at midnight because, her instinct told her, he would not expose her to the same danger.

Her cousin's chivalry appealed not only to her loyalty to the house, but to that protective impulse which springs readily in every woman's heart.

"I couldn't help overhearing you," she said, coming forward. "I, too, doubted that man—very strongly. I am sure he meant no good. But what I want to say, Cousin Charles, is that you must remain here to-night. If you go out of the house, I shall go also."

Forsyth shot a grateful look at her.

"The best possible plan," he said, quickly. "Now, don't be obstinate, Duke. The man has left the premises, I presume? Good! That being so, we shall be a poor lot if we can't prevent his getting in again, which he is hardly likely to attempt. There is nothing to hinder you from spending a quiet night here, without the slightest risk of unpleasantness either to Sybil or to yourself, and in the morning you and I can talk over your future movements at leisure."

"And I quite meant what I said," Sybil added, firmly. "If you won't stay here, you will put me to the inconvenience of turning out and going to an hotel at twelve o'clock at night. I have no intention of being forced into the horrid feeling that I am keeping you from the shelter of your own roof."

Under the pleading of the two pairs of kindly eyes turned on him Beaumanoir wavered. The chance of sleep and rest was tempting. He stepped to the door, and found Prince in the great entrance-hall.

"That man who called himself a detective has gone?" he inquired. "You are sure there is no mistake about it? You showed him to the door yourself, and saw him out?"

"And secured the door immediately afterwards, your Grace. Mr. Forsyth will bear me out in that; I had to withdraw the bolts to admit him."

Beaumanoir returned to the drawing-room.

"You are both very good, and I will stay for to-night only," he assented. "I wish I could make the explanation I owe you, but—well, I am the victim of circumstances."

"The explanation will keep," said Forsyth, bluntly. "May I stay too?"

The permission was, of course, accorded, and Sybil bade them good-night and retired to her room, giving orders on the way for two adjoining bedrooms to be prepared for them. The two men went into the smoking-room for a whisky and cigarette while the rooms were being got ready; but each with tacit consent avoided the topic of the moment. The one idea in Alec's mind was to let Beaumanoir have a good sleep, and persuade him into a serious discussion in the morning.

They parted at the door of their bedrooms on the first floor, where the late Duke's valet, who was still in the house, had done everything possible to cope with the sudden emergency. Pajamas had been routed out, and toilet requisites provided. The windows of both rooms looked out over the ceaseless traffic of Piccadilly, so that no danger could be apprehended from that quarter; yet Forsyth sat for a long time before turning in to bed. In his ignorance of what was the source of the Duke's danger, he had been loath to excite remark among the servants by fussing about the proper locking up of the mansion; but the stately tread of Prince going his rounds reassured him on that point, and eventually he slept.

In the meanwhile, Sybil, in her room at the other end of the same corridor, was finding a still greater difficulty in composing herself to rest. The events of the evening, in such startling contrast with the normal calm of the dignified establishment that had been her home, had unsettled—not to say alarmed—her, and she felt no inclination to the lace-edged pillow that usually wooed her to willing slumbers. She was a sound, healthy girl, untroubled by nerves; but she felt a singular need for alertness, unreasonable perhaps, but imperative.

The Duke's anxiety to make sure that the clerically dressed individual had really left the house had impressed her; and now, too late for inquiry, she remembered that she had omitted to mention that *two* men had called, one of them not having been shown into her presence. The latter, Prince had said, had been dismissed by his colleague; but his departure had only been witnessed by William, the second footman—a dreamy servant at the best of times, and unreliable by reason of a hopeless attachment to the senior housemaid. The thought thrilled Sybil that the other man, having hoodwinked the footman, might still be in the house, concealed in one of the many unused rooms.

The idea of a lurking prowler, biding his time in the stillness of the sleeping household, kept her wakeful. Once or twice she looked out into the corridor; but the flicker of her candle only showed two rows of closed doors, without a sign

of life, and each time she went back and tried to fix her attention on a book. So the night dragged into the small hours; and about three o'clock, after a longer interval than before, she determined to take one more peep and then get into bed.

She had already grasped the door-handle, when she withdrew her hand as though it had been stung by an adder. A faint scrooping sound told her that someone was doing something in the corridor, and half a minute's strained listening told her that, whatever that something was, it was persistent and continuous. It went on and on, like the drone of a bee in a bottle.

Silently crossing the room, she turned down her gas to a pin-point and blew out the candle with which she had intended to investigate. Then she returned to the door, and, opening it noiselessly, tiptoed into the outer darkness. Here the sound, though still faint, was more distinctly audible, and she was able to locate it at the door of the room occupied by the Duke. The discovery left her no time for fear, or even for conjecture. There was only one thing to be done—to rouse Alec and the Duke, but without, till that supreme moment, alarming the unseen manipulator at her cousin's door. Thus would she narrow the time at the disposal of that mysterious person for revising his plans and effecting his escape.

The thick pile carpet made for silence, and she stole quietly along the broad passage, touching and counting the doors till she reached that of Forsyth's room—only a few feet from the gentle buz-buz that had attracted her attention, and only a few feet from someone stealthily at work in the dark. A steady snore from the interior of the Duke's chamber explained his complacence under that uncanny tampering with his approaches.

Again giving herself no time for fear, Sybil beat a rat-tat on Forsyth's door, calling him by name. The sound at the next door immediately ceased, an instant of intense silence following, and then almost simultaneously two things happened. An iron grip settled on the girl's wrist, just as Forsyth flung open the door of his room, in which he had wisely turned the gas full on as he leaped out of bed. The light streamed into the corridor and shone upon a man in shabby tweeds and bowler hat, who was holding Sybil, but not so hampered that he was prevented from drawing a revolver and aiming straight at Forsyth's head.

[image]

"The procession of three led by the stranger."

Whether he intended to fire or offer an ultimatum was not demonstrated, for before he could do either he was taken in the rear and found himself a target.

There stood the Duke in his pajamas, with a handy little Smith and Wesson not a foot from the intruder's temples, and with his left hand significantly extended.

"Give me that pistol," he said, sternly.

Beaumanoir was dealing with a tangible foe at last, and with a thrill of racial pride Sybil noted the light of battle in her relative's eye. It was, therefore, more than a shock to her when the Duke, having relieved the tweed-coated lurker of his weapon, calmly added:

"Now, sir, if you will be good enough to march in front of me down to the front door, I will let you out. You two," he continued, addressing Sybil and Forsyth in the same quiet tones, "will greatly oblige me by not raising any alarm or disturbing the servants while I am gone."

"I am coming downstairs with you," said Forsyth, drily.

When the procession of three, led by the stranger with a brace of pistols at his head, had filed off to the grand staircase, Sybil ran back to her room and fetched her candle. An inspection of the Duke's door showed that a panel had been partially cut out with a watch-spring saw, which was still sticking in the almost invisible fissure.

CHAPTER IX—*The Strategy of the General*

Some five hours later General Sadgrove, at his house in Grosvenor Gardens, was taking his morning tub, when a servant tapped at the door of the bathroom and informed him that Mr. Alec Forsyth wanted to see him very urgently. The General as speedily as possible donned his dressing-gown and descended to his sanctum. His keen eyes just glanced at the troubled face of the young man standing on the hearth-rug; then, in his laconic way, he asked:

"What's wrong, laddie? Your chum Beaumanoir been in the wars?"

Forsyth favored him with a startled stare, and then broke into an uneasy laugh.

"You seem to have been exercising your faculty of second-sight already, Uncle Jem," he said.

"The man was being *stalked*," said the General. "Has anyone caught him?"

"Very nearly," replied Forsyth; and he proceeded to narrate the events of the night, and also what Beaumanoir had told him of the previous attempts on his life. At mention of the Duke's absolute refusal to disclose the cause of the vendetta and to invoke the protection of the police, General Sadgrove drew a long breath. On hearing that he had in the small hours of that morning, thanks to the vigilance of Sybil Hanbury, held one of his would-be assassins at his mercy, but had quietly escorted him to the door and let him go, the whilom hunter of Dacoits uttered inarticulate grunts.

"And now, Uncle Jem, I have come to you for help," Forsyth proceeded earnestly. "I have persuaded the Duke to permit me to tell you in strictest confidence as much as he has told me, and I think if you can make any suggestions for baffling these unknown malefactors that he will adopt them—always provided your advice does not entail going to the police. He has given me his word of honor to remain at Beaumanoir House until I return; but the odds are they'll have another shy at him directly he pokes his nose outside."

The General had been absently toying with a tray of Indian curios, but he now looked sharply up at his nephew.

"You are not exactly blind, Alec, and can read between the lines," he said. "Reluctance on the part of a man threatened with murder to communicate with the authorities must mean that he has got an ugly sort of secret himself."

"You know his record, sir. Charles Hanbury was never anyone's enemy but his own, and I expect the Duke of Beaumanoir is much the same," replied Forsyth with a warmth which left the General quite unmoved. The old warrior reverted to his curios and spent a couple of minutes in balancing an Afghan dagger on his finger, till, apparently inspired by the performance, he laid the venomous blade aside.

"I agree with you in one aspect of the case," he said. "An insurance company, knowing what we know, would be ill-advised to take a risk on his Grace's life. The chances are in favor of his being a dead man within twenty-four hours of his quitting his present shelter. I presume that precautions have been taken against any more bogus detectives, or bogus anything else, gaining access to him during your absence?"

Forsyth replied that the Duke had promised to remain in his own room till he returned, and that the butler had been instructed to admit no one into the house on any pretence whatever. Moreover, he added, with a proud note in his voice, Sybil was co-operating, and was thoroughly alive to the emergency.

"Then," said the General, briskly, "I will finish dressing, and when we have had a mouthful of breakfast I will go back with you to Beaumanoir House. We must get your Duke into the interior of a safer zariba than a Piccadilly mansion before we can open parallel trenches against such a persistent enemy."

General Sadgrove and Alec breakfasted alone together, the former, indeed, hurrying the meal purposely so as to get away before the ladies appeared. He had seen enough the previous day, when the Duke was calling on the Shermans, to make him shy of explaining to his guests that he was bound for Beaumanoir House at nine o'clock in the morning, both Mrs. Sherman and Leonie being aware that his acquaintance with the Duke only dated from yesterday. He shrewdly suspected that the young people who had been fellow-passengers on the *St. Paul* took more than a platonic interest in each other, and he did not want to stimulate that interest into anxiety until he was better informed.

He pursued the subject apologetically as soon as he was in the cab with his nephew.

"Sorry I made you bolt your food," he said. "I hate lying to women if it can be avoided. The Shermans, who are staying with me, know Beaumanoir—traveled in the same ship with him. It would have excited remark to mention our destination."

Forsyth, who had experience of his uncle's methods, perceived that he was being pumped, and he had no objection. Having summoned this wily man-hunter to his assistance, he was not foolish enough to expect results without full disclosure.

"I understand your reluctance to disturb the Shermans," he replied. "Beaumanoir has spoken several times about them—in fact, he seemed rather unduly excited when he first heard from me that they were at your house. I have thought that he might be *épris* of Leonie, though, as I have not seen them together, I can form no opinion whether the attraction is mutual."

The General, having acquired his information, relapsed into silence, which was only broken by Forsyth as the cab turned into Piccadilly. The short drive was nearly over, but before the cab stopped he contrived to describe briefly his chance meeting with the Duke, on the day of the latter's arrival in England, at the Hotel Cecil, and with an effort of memory he recalled the name of the man—Clinton Ziegler—whom the Duke had been to see.

"I dare say it's not important, but it just occurred to me that I had better mention it while there was an opportunity," he concluded, stealing a sidelong glance at his uncle's face, which, as usual, was illegible. But a movement of the General's well-gloved right hand in the direction of his left shirt-cuff, coupled with the gleam of a gold pencil-case, suggested that the name of Mr. Clinton Ziegler had been deemed worthy of record.

They were admitted to the ducal residence by Prince, whose dignity barely enabled him to stifle the inward curiosity with which he was devoured. In common with the other servants, he had not been told of the midnight alarm, and his orders to put the house practically into a state of siege had naturally mystified

him. The damage to the bedroom door was not visible except under close examination, and Sybil having swept up the sawdust, none of the household had yet discovered it.

"No one has called, sir, except one or two of the usuals to the tradesmen's entrance, and they were kept outside," the butler remarked as he relieved the two gentlemen of their hats and canes.

At Forsyth's request they were shown into the smoking-room—a cozy den, with only one window overlooking Piccadilly, to which the General immediately walked. His gaze roved over the crowded thoroughfare, comprehending pedestrians and passing vehicles in one swift scrutiny, and, apparently satisfied, he turned away just as Sybil entered, looking as fresh and sprightly as though she had slept the clock round. The General greeted her in the curt manner he affected to all women impartially, but an extra pressure of her hand may have had reference to her vigilant gallantry.

"His Grace is sulking," she said, with a smile. "At least, he refuses to leave his room until he has seen you, General Sadgrove. I tapped at his door and told him you were here, but he said that if you want to see him you had better go upstairs. Very rude of him, isn't it?"

"Very sensible," replied the General. "I would prefer to see him alone, if you will be so good as to escort me, Miss Hanbury. Alec," he added, "while I am gone just sit on this ottoman behind the window-curtain and keep your eye on that apple-woman under the railings of the Green Park. When I come back, be prepared to tell me exactly what she has done and how many customers she has had."

Forsyth nodded, and the General went away with Sybil, who conducted him up the grand staircase and left him at the door of the Duke's room. It was characteristic of the man that, having heard all there was to hear of her proceedings from his nephew, he forbore to waste words on what had occurred, but dismissed her with an injunction.

"Now run away and help Alec, but don't let the apple-woman know that those sharp eyes are observing her," he said, unbending so far as to give her a playful push.

His knock and mention of his name was followed by the sound of footsteps as the occupant of the room remembered that he had turned the key and hastened to admit the visitor. Beaumanoir was fully dressed, and had just finished breakfast.

"Don't think me a coward for locking the door, General," he said, as he shook hands. "This is a pretty bad gang that I am dodging."

The General's comment was to turn and re-lock the door himself, after a critical glance at the sawn panel. "I have spent my life in breaking up bad gangs,"

he said, when he had taken the chair indicated. "I am a bit rusty with disuse, but I should very much like to try conclusions with this one. From what I hear, they must be worthy of anyone's steel."

Beaumanoir indulged in a careworn smile.

"Three attempts in forty-eight hours speaks to their zeal, at any rate," he replied. "But seriously, General, you start badly handicapped," he went on. "I don't even know that I want them broken up, as you call it, for there must be no publicity. I can give you no clues nor answer any questions. All I ask of your great experience is how to thwart a determined hankering after my poor life—a hankering which may possibly cease if I survive for another week."

"You positively decline to give me any assistance?"

"Positively; the honor of my house forbids it."

The General tried to look pensive—a difficult matter to a gentleman of iron visage and bushy eyebrows.

"I am not going to ask questions," he said almost plaintively, without mentioning that there were some he had no need to ask and others which he fully intended to answer himself. "I am here to give advice, and it is to get out of London into the open, so that your friends can look after you. Professors of crime find their art more difficult in the country, where every gossiping woman in the village street is a possible witness. I want your Grace to go down to Prior's Tarrant, and allow me the honor of accompanying you as a guest."

The suggestion was met by a blank negative, and caused the Duke to rise and pace the room in more agitation than he had yet shown.

"Why, the very place is hateful to me since last Sunday night," he exclaimed. "You would realize that yourself, General, if you had been introduced to those silent fumes stealing down the chimney. I was thinking of going to some hotel by the sea when Forsyth and Sibyl induced me to remain here for the night, with such lively consequences. Come with me as my guest anywhere else, but not to Prior's Tarrant."

"Nevertheless, I should feel surer of your safety there than anywhere, and I do not speak without reason," replied the General, with a metallic snap in his voice. "I should wish at least to be accorded the privilege of finishing my proposition."

Beaumanoir promptly apologized very gracefully for his discourteous interruption, excusing it on the score of the strain on his nerves. He would be delighted to listen to any proposals, but nothing would shake his determination not to go back to Prior's Tarrant.

"My dear sir, the tangled woodland of the park there is the ideal spot for a lurking assassin. Mediæval architecture provided the house with nooks and corners which it would tax even your foresight to patrol," he insisted.

"But," said the General, "there is safety in numbers; and I was going to propose—rather coolly, perhaps—that you should have a house-party there. If I might bring Mrs. Sadgrove, and Alec and Sybil Hanbury would also give us their company, it would lend color to my own presence. The last two-named, as you have occasion to know, form a valuable body-guard."

The Duke stared at his visitor with something like horrified amazement.

"You forget, General, in your kind eagerness to serve me, that you have guests staying in your own house whom you cannot desert," he said, wondering how even an old man with his years behind him could suffer such lapse of memory when Leonie Sherman was one of the guests. He was almost angry that his visitor, being thus reminded, did not instantly abase himself.

But instead of shame General Sadgrove had only justification to offer—not profuse, because that was not his way—but complete.

"I had not forgotten the Shermans," he replied, in a tone of oddly contrasted reproof and apology. "I had it in my mind that if you entertained my view you would stretch a point, and make matters easy for me by inviting my guests as well." And the shrewd old diplomatist succeeded in looking as though the barefaced bait he was dangling was a piece of effrontery he only dared moot under stress of the emergency.

Beaumanoir, flushing scarlet, stopped short in his restless pacing and swallowed the hook.

"I never thought of that," he said, looking down at the General with more interest than he had yet shown. "And," he added, with unaffected modesty, "I very much doubt if they would come."

This was virtual surrender, and the General had an easy task to brush away objections obviously raised in the hopes of their demolition. Short notice? Well, perhaps; but Americans were used to a less formal hospitality than ours, and would take it as a compliment. Brief shipboard acquaintance? Nonsense. Five days' association on a "liner" was equivalent to a friendship of years. The chance of the Shermans being involved in a tragedy in which they had no concern? The General pledged his word that, whatever happened at Prior's Tarrant, no harm should befall the Senator's wife and daughter or breath of scandal assail them.

Before he left the room the General had arranged to return later in the day, possibly bringing with him his Pathan servant, Azimoolah Khan, whose aid he meant to enlist in securing the Duke's safety at his country-seat. In the meanwhile, he would go home and prepare the ladies for joining the party on the morrow, Beaumanoir's formal invitations following by post.

On his way down the broad staircase General Sadgrove chuckled audibly to himself: "I thought the prospect of entertaining Leonie in his ancestral halls would fetch him. Mustn't have her falling in love with him, though, till he can

show a clean sheet." A little lower down he stopped and stared at a huge canvas of the third Duke, but without heeding the bewigged and lace-ruffled counterfeit of the Georgian courtier. "Concentration!" he muttered. "The first axiom in a crime-problem is to concentrate the items. I shall have two of 'em now, by George, right under the same blanket—and with luck I'll have three."

In the hall Prince was hovering fatuously, assisted by a brace of tall flunkeys who fell under the General's critical gaze. One of them was the absent-minded William, all unconscious that he had allowed "Inspector Chantrey's" understudy to slip upstairs the night before. Him Sadgrove severely rejected, selecting his colleague.

"There's an apple-woman under the rails opposite," he said, producing a sovereign. "Run across and offer this for her basket and its contents. If she refuses, the chances are that she will almost immediately move away. In that case, if you can follow her a little distance, without letting her observe you, bring me back word directly she stops and speaks to anyone."

The well-trained servant, with scarcely the blink of an eyelash for his extraordinary mission, started to fulfil it, and the General hastened on to the smoking-room, where Forsyth and Sybil were still on guard at the window.

"Has the woman been doing any business?" he asked as he entered.

"She has only had one customer, who got off a Hammersmith 'bus and walked on," replied Sybil, without removing her gaze. "And now—why, it's one of our liveries—Steptoe, the first footman, is going up to her. Oh, but this is interesting. He is offering her a coin, and she is shaking her head."

"Go on," said the General.

"Steptoe is recrossing the road towards the house without buying anything, and—yes, the woman has taken up her basket and is leaving her pitch, don't you call it? She too is crossing to this side of the road, but higher up. Steptoe has turned and is looking after her, and—now I can't see any more without putting my head out of window."

Sybil stopped, breathless; and, without comment on the episode she had just witnessed, the General informed her and Forsyth of the proposed move to Prior's Tarrant. As was to be expected, neither of the engaged couple had any objection to an arrangement which would bring them together under the same roof, Sybil remarking naïvely that it was one thing to be allowed solitary house-room as a poor relation, and quite another to stay with the Duke as a guest. She promised to hold herself in readiness to join Mrs. Sadgrove and the Shermans on the morrow and go down with them, while Forsyth was to wait for his orders until the General returned in the afternoon.

"We may have a ticklish job in getting our noble convoy from one laager to the other, and I shall want you as an aide-de-camp, Alec, as well as Azimoolah

Khan for the more serious work," the General explained.

"Azimoolah!" Forsyth exclaimed, remembering certain blood-curdling stories of his uncle's old orderly, who had exchanged the fierce joys of Thug-hunting for the milder enjoyment of valeting his beloved Sahib in Belgravia. "Surely his methods smack too much of the jungle and the nullah for this country."

"That's why I want to cart the whole bag of tricks into the jungle," said the General, grimly. "Well?" he added, as Steptoe entered and tendered the sovereign on a salver.

"The woman wouldn't take it, sir," was the reply. "She got up and went round the corner into Air Street, where she was met by the person who called here last night dressed as a clergyman, only he was dressed as a working-man to-day. They went away together in a four-wheeler."

"Thank you—that simplifies things considerably," said the General, and, announcing his intention of returning later, he bade the footman call a cab and followed him out of the room.

"I wonder what he has got up his sleeve," Forsyth mused aloud, as he and Sibyl watched the wiry figure into the cab. "The spirit of the chase has gripped him tight, and he's in full cry already."

CHAPTER X—*A Duty Call*

General Sadgrove was not the man to embark on an undertaking without clearing the ground of doubtful points, and he drove home by way of New Scotland Yard, where, firmly refusing his reasons for wanting to know, he extracted the information that there was no such officer as "Inspector Chantrey" on the police roster. On arrival at Grosvenor Gardens he first sought and obtained a private interview with his wife, and astonished her by imparting the projected visit to Prior's Tarrant.

"You are at the old work, Jem; I can see it in your eye," she said after one glance at her husband's stern, introspective face. "Is there danger?"

"To me possibly; to another certainly," the General responded. "In fact, Madge, it is touch and go whether I can save a man's life. I do not know yet if he is a good man, but his life is an important one."

"Then of course I will go with you," said Mrs. Sadgrove, guessing whose that life was from Alec Forsyth's early call. "The Shermans, dear people, will be delighted to stay in a duke's historic mansion, even if the invitation is a little irregular, for are they not Americans? I will go to the morning-room and break it to them."

"Without a hint of what is brewing, mind," said the General, and vanished into his own den. He sat for a while in thought, and presently rang the bell. It was answered by a tall Oriental in native costume and turban, who made low obeisance, but listlessly, as though bored to death. As he straightened himself, however, his coal-black eyes, raised deferentially to his master's, blazed into sudden fire.

"Allah be praised! The black tribe walks again!" he cried in his vernacular, reading the sign as easily as Mrs. Sadgrove had done.

"Yes, Azimoolah, the black tribe walks. We go to pit cunning against cunning and right against wrong, you and I, as in the days when we rode the jungle-paths under the Indian moon," the General replied in the same tongue. "Art glib of speech and handy with those iron arms of thine, as in the old times when we earned our pensions beyond the black water?"

"Try me, sahib—only try me," came the quick answer. "I have feared that I was growing fat and soft in this city of laziness, where the tame *polis* use not the ways known to you and me, O leader of midnight pursuits. But that look in your eye brings back the old heart-hunger. I want a quarry, sahib, fleet of foot and strong of arm and wily of tongue, to match with all those of thine and mine. Show me such an one, sahib."

"So will I, Azimoolah—not one, but twenty quarries, maybe, whom it will tax all our ancient skill to defeat," said the General, with a frosty smile for his follower's eagerness. "Take heed while I give orders."

The conclave that ensued lasted until luncheon, at which it was noticed, though not remarked upon, by Mrs. Sadgrove that Azimoolah Khan did not as usual station himself behind his master's chair. The General, too, made no reference to his retainer's absence, but plunged at once into a totally unfounded explanation of the wholesale invitation to Prior's Tarrant. The Duke of Beaumanoir, he averred, wished to be kind to his young kinswoman, Sybil Hanbury, by asking her down while Alec Forsyth was there, and as that was impossible without a chaperon, he, the General, had suggested a small house-party with Mrs. Sadgrove and Mrs. Sherman to play propriety.

Mrs. Sherman evinced unfeigned delight at the prospect, her only anxiety being as to the length of the visit. Her husband, the Senator, with his precious charge of Treasury Bonds, was due in a week, and she would wish to be in London to receive him on arrival. Leonie, too, who did not seem to share her mother's

enthusiasm for accepting the ducal hospitality, pressed the point with some pertinacity. The General, however, was equal to the occasion.

"No dates were mentioned," he said, looking his guests guilelessly in the face. "But as his Grace alluded to the pleasure with which he anticipated making the Senator's acquaintance, I presume he takes it for granted that your husband will go straight to Prior's Tarrant from Liverpool."

Mrs. Sherman and Leonie exchanged glances, as though to say that that settled the matter, as indeed, from their point of view, it did. Senator Leonidas Sherman was the kindest of husbands and the most indulgent of fathers; but if he had landed in England and found that he had been deprived of the chance of staying with a duke, he would have made things hum for all concerned.

"Beaumanoir, having lived in your country, has a warm corner in his heart for all Americans," said the General. "And talking of Americans, my dear," he proceeded, addressing his wife, "I shouldn't like to be uncivil to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton. As we are all going out of town, what do you say to returning her call this afternoon? If you are not otherwise engaged, I will order the carriage for four o'clock."

When the General—who never in his life had paid a duty call without grumbling—spoke like that Mrs. Sadgrove knew what was expected of her, and did it. She had not the faintest inkling of his reasons for sudden politeness to a pushing woman whom they all disliked. In the old days, when she had gone out into camp with her husband, and had sat silent in the tent amid the coming and going of troopers and mysterious spies, she had always divined when a great *coup*, resulting in the death or capture of some notorious malefactor, was vexing his brain. She had watched the spreading of the net without troubling him with questions about the meshes. So now, though inwardly disquieted by this recrudescence of the professional instinct, she abstained from worrying him, confident that the veteran would achieve his purpose as ruthlessly as the zealous young captain of thirty years ago.

Without demur the ordering of the carriage was agreed to, and when it came round at the appointed hour the Sadgroves were reinforced by Mrs. Sherman and Leonie, who, at a hint from the General, had been induced to accompany them. During the drive the General fidgeted a good deal about the pace at which his fine pair of bays was being driven, and once or twice checked the coachman; but his wife, who had learned to notice trifles, observed also that he frequently consulted his watch, and concluded that his anxiety was not entirely on the score of his cattle. Of this she was assured when, as the equipage turned into the courtyard of the hotel, he replaced his watch with a scarcely audible sigh of relief. What was it for which they were neither too late nor too early, she wondered.

At the bureau they were informed that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was at home, and the party, having been handed over to a bell-boy, passed on—with the exception of the General, who lagged behind for a moment.

"You have a gentleman staying in the hotel of the name of Ziegler, have you not—Clinton Ziegler?" he inquired of the clerk. "Ah, thank you—I was not mistaken then. Do you happen to know if he is in his rooms at present?"

The answer was that Mr. Ziegler was certain to be in, as he was an invalid and never went out. Oh yes; he saw people—a good many, but always in his own apartments, and he never frequented the public rooms. His suite was in the same corridor as that of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton—next to it, in fact. No; the gentleman and lady were not friends, or even acquainted, the clerk believed. At any rate, they had arrived at different times, and he had never heard of any connection between them.

Thanking his informant, the General hurried after the others and caught them up in time to be ushered with them into Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's luxurious reception-room. The handsome widow, beautifully gowned, and already apprised by speaking-tube that visitors were coming up, received them with effusion, and made no effort to conceal her surprise when the General appeared in the wake of the ladies. She rallied him on his new-found politeness, and openly avowed that he must have some secret object in seeking her good-will.

The General, disclaiming anything unusual in his conduct, bore the flow of badinage meekly, but under his gray mustache he muttered:

"Confound the woman! She is clever, or else Jem Sadgrove has blundered."

The conversation drifted into the usual channels of small talk, and by the time the General joined in he had assimilated one important fact in connection with his surroundings. The suite of apartments in which he was doing the penance of a duty call was a split suite. There was a door at the end of the room, across which a fairly heavy writing-table was placed, denoting that the door was not in use, as naturally it would have been if the room beyond had been one of those rented by Mrs. Talmage Eglinton. The discovery and his own deduction caused an odd little crease at the corner of the General's mouth, and he seized the earliest opportunity to put in his word.

"I've got some news for you, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton. You are about to be the recipient of a very high honor."

"Really! But this is extremely interesting," was the reply, accompanied by a flash of scrutiny, quickly changed to a charming smile. "Pray don't keep me in suspense, General. Am I to go for a cruise in the royal yacht, or dine with the Lord Mayor?"

"The Duke of Beaumanoir is going to ask you down to his country-place at Prior's Tarrant," said the General, imperturbably ignoring her persiflage. "I

was with him this morning, and I gathered that you'll have your invitation in the course of the day. We're all going down. The Duke is Alec's new boss, don't you know, and he has taken a liking to the lot of us."

He carefully avoided his wife's eyes and those of his guests as he burst this amazing bombshell, thereby depriving himself of the sight of a toss of Leonie's pretty head and of the raising of two pairs of elderly eyebrows. His hostess had his sole attention, and she repaid it fully. For the first time in his experience of her Mrs. Talmage Eglinton changed color and seemed at a loss for words. He helped her out, and himself too, with the same old lie, and his manner was perfect—just that of the simple old soldier:

"The Duke dotes on Americans, don't you know. Says he was introduced to you by my nephew outside Beaumanoir House the day he landed, and when it came out in conversation that we knew you, he insisted on your being asked. Thought it would please Alec, don't you know."

The last sentence was spoken carelessly, as though it was an afterthought, but it had an effect that all the skill at Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's disposal could not hide—an effect transient only, but so marked that the three other women in the room, coldly hostile as they were, did not fail to note it. The flush which had tinged her cheek on hearing of the invitation deepened, and a softer light gleamed for a moment in her fine eyes.

But whether the General's explanation was deemed adequate, or whether she intended to accept the invitation, there was no present means of knowing. For the sedate calm of the afternoon call was suddenly interrupted by a tremendous uproar beyond the closed door that was blocked by the writing-table—a babel of confused voices and the shuffling of feet. The ladies looked at one another in alarm, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton fully sharing the agitation of her visitors. Indeed, she rose and glided swiftly towards the closed door, and then, as though recollecting that it was not available, made for the principal entrance of her suite.

The General rose and followed her into the corridor, the commotion being so great as to excuse his doing so. In fact, the sounds from the next room were so appalling as to suggest that his protection might be necessary against some broken-out lunatic, and out in the corridor it was evident that some such idea prevailed among the hotel attendants. A cluster of them had already collected at the door of the adjoining apartments, and more were arriving.

"What is all this disturbance?" Mrs. Talmage Eglinton inquired of one of them, and the General, close behind, discerned a tremulous note in her indignation.

The man she accosted did not know, but another, who had been inside the suite, at that moment pushed his way out and overheard the question.

"It's nothing really serious, madam," he said. "An Indian Prince who had

applied for rooms was being shown round, when he took a fancy to enter that suite—occupied by Mr. Clinton Ziegler. The Prince is in there now, and nothing will induce him to leave peaceably, as he can't be made to understand that the rooms are engaged. He doesn't appear to know much English, but I am going for one of the curry cooks, who will doubtless be able to interpret for us."

"No need to waste time in fetching the cook," interposed the General. "I speak most of the Indian dialects, and I dare say I can get him to quit."

"You'd better be careful, then, sir," said the attendant. "He pretty nearly strangled Mr. Ziegler's secretary when he tried to put him out."

Disdaining the warning and accepting the implied permission, the General elbowed his way into the invaded territory, from which, after a couple of minutes, he emerged with a tall Asiatic who was wreathed in apologetic smiles, and talking volubly in an unknown tongue. The intruder was dressed in a gorgeously embroidered purple vestment, and in his snowy turban blazed a diamond the size of a pigeon's egg. From the doorway of the invaded suite a couple of pale, fierce faces glared for an instant, and then the door was shut.

"It's all right," the General announced to the assembled spectators, who by this time included Mrs. Sadgrove and the Shermans. "This is his Highness the Thakore of Bhurtnagur, and he didn't mean to be rude. Just a little misunderstanding of his legal rights outside his own jurisdiction. He says he'll look for rooms at some other hotel, as he can't have those he wants here."

A murmur of relief went up from the embarrassed attendants, who with great deference proceeded to escort the swarthy potentate to the carriage which it was understood was waiting for him. At the same time Mrs. Sadgrove held out her hand to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, and, declining that lady's not too pressing offer of tea, sailed away to the stair-head, accompanied by Leonie and her mother. The General was the last to make his adieus, and he made them, oddly enough, much more cordially than the women-folk.

"Pleasant thing, a short parting," he ejaculated, as he bent over the fair American's jeweled hand. "We shall meet in a day or two at Prior's Tarrant, eh?"

Mrs. Talmage Eglinton smiled sweetly up at the rugged face of the veteran man-hunter.

"Come, General, you can't expect me to give myself away like that," she said. "I shan't make up my mind until I get the invitation. You might be a bad, bold dissembler, you know, just taking a rise out of me; and then what a fool I should look if I had said that I was going to stay with the Duke."

"I might be a dissembler, but you couldn't look a fool—under any circumstances," replied the General gallantly, as he turned away.

Mrs. Talmage Eglinton stood watching the erect figure march down the corridor, and suddenly called after him:

"When does the Duke himself go into the country, General?"

The erect figure wheeled as on a pivot, and the answer came back without a second's pause.

"To-night, by the 8.45 from St. Pancras. Alec Forsyth goes down with him."

CHAPTER XI—*On the Terrace*

The home park at Prior's Tarrant lay bathed in the gentle glow of a waning moon, but the hoary façade of the mansion itself, and the terrace that skirted it, were in shadow. Up and down in front of the long row of windows a red spark passed and repassed with monotonous regularity—the light of General Sadgrove's cigar as he waited in growing impatience for the coming of the Duke.

After his social duties of the afternoon he had paid a hurried visit to Beaumanoir House to arrange for the Duke's departure in company with his new secretary, and then, armed with credentials from the Duke and heralded by a preparatory telegram, he had proceeded to the Hertfordshire seat by an earlier train. He had good reasons for traveling separately. And now the carriage which he had sent to the little wayside station of Tarrant Road two miles off was overdue, and the General was beginning to chafe.

"I hope I haven't been too cocksure," he muttered, under his close-trimmed gray mustache. "I pinned my faith to Alec's company securing the fellow's safety on the journey at least."

He took another turn, and then, striking a vesta, looked at his watch. It was twenty minutes to eleven, whereas if those he expected had caught the 8.45 from St. Pancras, the carriage should have been back half an hour ago. He had hardly finished this calculation when from behind a gigantic vase on the plinth of the steps leading to the lower level of the gardens there sounded the hiss of a cobra, thrice repeated.

"Azimoolah?" said the General, softly.

His faithful servitor glided forward, almost invisible in the shabby blue tunic which had replaced the spotless white garments of Grosvenor Gardens.

"A queer orderly-room, sahib, but not more so than some we wot of in the by-ways of the Deccan," he whispered, glancing up at the loom of the great

mansion. "Well, I have done thy bidding, and have secured a lodging in the village as a poor vendor of Oriental trifles. Furthermore, I have already done some good police work."

"You have discovered that there are strangers dwelling in the place?"

"Not so, sahib; but they have been *seen* in the village," was the reply. "The woman with whom I have hired shelter says that two men, professing to be painters, were in the park all day painting the trees and the deer, for which purpose they had obtained permission of the steward. Whence the men came the woman did not know, but they drove in in a dog-cart on the St. Albans road."

"Your informant could not tell you if the picture was finished—whether the men were coming again?" the General asked quickly.

It was too dark to see the Pathan's face, but a ring in his carefully managed undertone told of pride in the answer:

"*She* could not tell *me*, sahib, but *I* can tell *you*. The picture makes the trees look like cauliflowers and the deer like unto swine. Moreover, it is not finished, and the men are coming again—to-morrow, perchance."

General Sadgrove congratulated himself on his foresight. He would have preferred having Azimoolah in the house with him, but he had detached him from personal service, and had sent him down separately to pick up unconsidered trifles in the character of a traveling huckster. And the old sleuth-hound had done well, after only a couple of hours in the place, in bringing this news of painters who could not paint, yet were returning on the morrow. The General had such absolute trust in his henchman's methods that he did not trouble to inquire how the news had been acquired, thereby sparing Azimoolah the needless narrative of a deal with the landlady of the "Hanbury Arms," where the strangers had put up their cart and lunched.

"Very good, old jungle-wolf," was all the comment he vouchsafed, and, making a mental note to see that the park was barred in future to the limners of "deer like unto swine," he was passing on to further instructions when the sound of wheels was heard far away down the avenue, and a moment later carriage-lamps twinkled into view round a corner in the drive.

"Here they come," he said. "Better make yourself scarce now, but stay within call in case I want you."

Azimoolah vanished in the darkness, and the General strolled on to the end of the terrace, where the descent of a flight of steps brought him to the main entrance of the mansion. Stationing himself under the portico, he waited the arrival of the brougham, which presently swung to a standstill, while the big hall door was opened wide by ready hands, and shed a blaze of light on—an empty carriage.

"What's this mean, Perrett?" asked the General, outwardly calm for all the

big lump in his throat, and cool enough to remember the name of the gray-haired coachman, learned on his own drive from the station. "Has not his Grace arrived?"

"No, sir," replied the old servant, leaning from the box. "There has been an accident to the 8.45. No one hurt, sir. No need for alarm, for his Grace can't have been in the train."

"How do you get at that?" the General asked, doubtfully.

"The train was derailed between St. Albans and Harpenden, sir. Some of the passengers were shaken, but none badly injured; so the fast train that followed was run on to the up metals and brought them on, stopping at every station. But none got out at Tarrant Road. James here," indicating the footman, "ran along the train and looked into every carriage, but he could not see the Duke."

And Perrett won golden opinions from the General by adding that, not satisfied with that, he got the station-master to wire up the line to the point of the accident, and received in reply the positive assurance that no injured persons had been left behind. All had been forwarded to their destinations by the succeeding fast train, which had been made "slow" for the purpose.

The General had already mastered the time-table, and knew that only one more train from London would stop at Tarrant Road that night—the last, due at a quarter past midnight. The coachman therefore received, as he had expected, orders to return to the station in time to meet that train, and the General, lighting a fresh cigar, strolled back to the terrace, where, in response to his low whistle, Azimoolah glided to his side.

"There is work afoot," he said, briefly. "Canst, as of yore, do without sleep at a pinch?"

"Ay, and without food if it is so willed by Allah and the sahib."

Whereupon the General gave him the best directions he could to the scene of the railway accident fifteen miles away, and bade him hie thither with all speed and glean particulars on the spot, especially with regard to the life they were pledged to defend and the nature of the accident, which might be no accident at all, but a move of their mysterious antagonists. It needed but few words to make Azimoolah understand, and he was gone—even before his hand, raised in unconscious salute, had dropped to his side.

The General fell to pacing to and fro again, striving to penetrate the new situation that had arisen, and, as was his wont when matters went wrong, not sparing himself much scathing criticism. For what had seemed to him good reason, he had put all his eggs in one basket—"gone nap"—as he reflected, on the Duke and Forsyth catching the 8.45, and now disaster had overtaken that very train. If the village post-office had been open, he would have wired to know if

the Duke was still at Beaumanoir House, for everything hinged on whether he had started, and Sadgrove felt an ominous presentiment that he had. The people he was playing against were not the sort to wreck a train without prospect of adequate result.

Presently the twin lamps went twinkling down the avenue again, and the General tried to comfort himself with the hope that when they reappeared Beaumanoir would be in the carriage. After all, Alec Forsyth was with him. What had befallen the one should have befallen the other, and he had the greatest confidence in his nephew's readiness and resource. It might even be, the General told himself, that Alec had suspected foul play to the 8.45, and had purposely delayed departure—although, in conflict with this theory, arose the conjecture that in that case the railway people would have been warned, and there would have been no "accident" at all.

But what was the use of following threads which, in the absence of a substantial starting-point, led nowhere? The worried veteran gave up the futile task in favor of more practical work, and occupied himself in learning the route by which the miscreants who had tried to suffocate the Duke had reached the chimney-stack over his chamber. He found that a decayed buttress had given them access to the top of the ancient refectory, whence an easy climb along a slanting gutter-pipe formed a royal road to the roof of the main building.

The discovery, interesting in itself, was doubly so from the deduction to be made therefrom. The men who had climbed the roof would have been caught like rats in a trap if the Duke had raised the alarm, and they must either have had complete confidence in their ability to kill him by the charcoal fumes, or, in the event of a hitch, in the Duke's unwillingness to rouse the household.

"Egad! but they must have a nasty grip on him, to trust to his not squealing under such provocation," the General murmured, as the sound of wheels drew him at last from the age-worn buttress back to the portico. "If he's turned up all right I'll try and persuade him to confide the secret before we go to bed."

But when the brougham stopped, it disgorged no Duke, but only Alec Forsyth, pale of face, and for once in his life half afraid of meeting his uncle's expectant eye. But he kept his presence of mind sufficiently to control his voice as he informed the General—the information being really for the servants who had appeared at the hall door—that his Grace had not arrived. In silence the General led the way to the dining-room, and it was not until he had dismissed the butler with the assurance that they would need nothing more that night that he found speech in the curt monosyllable, "Well?"

For answer Alec handed him a telegraph form conveying the message:

"*To A. Forsyth, passenger by 8.45, St. Pancras terminus.*

> *"Come back at once, urgent. Am in great distress. Persons threatening Duke detained here. He will be quite safe if he goes on, though not if he returns with you—Sybil Hanbury, Beaumanoir House."*

The General glanced through it and gripped the position.

"Beaumanoir was in the 8.45?" he snapped. "That telegram is a forgery, and you show it to me to explain your separation from him?"

Forsyth bowed his head in grieved assent to both questions.

"I am, of course, to blame for trusting that infernal thing," he said. "But I had better put you in possession of the facts at once, for until I reached Tarrant Road station and learned of Beaumanoir's non-arrival from the coachman I had hoped that he had come through all right. I ascertained at Harpenden, where I first heard of the smash, that no one had suffered serious injury."

The facts as related by Forsyth were very simple in themselves, though greatly enhancing the perplexity of the Duke's disappearance. The two friends had left Beaumanoir House in a hansom, giving themselves, as had been arranged, barely time enough to catch the train at St. Pancras. They had already taken their seats in an empty compartment on which the guard had, at their request, placed an "engaged" label, when a telegraph-boy came along the line of carriages, inquiring for Forsyth by name. On reading the message he had acted on the impulse of the moment, and asking the Duke to excuse him on the score of urgent private business, had left the train and driven back to Beaumanoir House, to find the telegram repudiated by Sybil as not emanating from her and its contents quite unfounded.

"I expect she let you have it," the General remarked grimly.

"She was a little cross," admitted Forsyth, flushing at the reminiscence. "I do not see, though, that I could have ignored what purported to be an appeal for assistance from a woman in distress—leaving aside my personal relations with her."

"Don't kick, laddie. I'm to blame for leaving our precious vanishing nobleman in the hands of a man in love. What next?"

"I hurried back to St. Pancras, and, just missing the fast train which afterwards picked up the 8.45 passengers at the scene of the accident, had to kick my heels until the last train started. But it was no accident, Uncle Jem. A big baulk of timber had been placed across the rails, they told me at Harpenden."

The General knitted his brows and pondered the problem, presently suggesting tentatively that there was no proof that the Duke had after all gone in the 8.45. He might, on finding himself suddenly deprived of his companion, have got out before it started. But this theory was at once knocked on the head by Forsyth's assertion that the train had begun to move before he left the platform,

and that Beaumanoir, still seated in the "engaged" compartment, had waved him farewell. If the Duke had not got out at an intermediate station, he must have disappeared at the place of derailment, the latter contingency being the more probable. Also the most alarming, because the stranded passengers had had to wait for three-quarters of an hour at the side of the line in the dark, at a remote spot surrounded by woods.

"Humph! It looks very much as if they'd got him this time," was the General's final comment. And he straightway walked over to the sideboard and poured himself out a glass of wine, motioning his nephew to join him. The action was significant of conclusiveness, and seemed to say that, doom having overtaken the Duke, there was nothing more to be done. The old gentleman drank his wine slowly, then turned to Forsyth with the fierce exclamation:

"First time Jem Sadgrove was ever beaten by a woman. Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, or whatever she may choose to call herself, has scored a record."

"Mrs. Talmage Eglinton! What on earth has she got to do with it?" was Forsyth's astounded rejoinder.

A good deal, it appeared, according to the view which the General had contrived to piece together, and which, leaning against the sideboard, he proceeded to propound in spasmodic jerks. Beginning with a description of how he had witnessed Beaumanoir's narrow escape of being run down by Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's landau, he hinted at the dawn of suspicion in his own mind on finding her immediately afterwards calling at his house, yet strangely silent on having nearly killed a man in the streets. Then, when Forsyth had consulted him after the midnight episode at Beaumanoir House, and had told him of the Duke's visit on the day of his arrival from New York to someone occupying the next suite at the hotel to that of Mrs. Eglinton, he had been fairly certain of his clue. Having satisfied himself by personal observation that the ducal mansion in Piccadilly was closely watched, he had set himself the task of establishing a connection between the *soi-disant* widow and her neighbor at the hotel—a task which had been successful so far as convincing himself went.

Forsyth recognized that, for all the mischance of the evening, his uncle had put in some good detective work, and said so. "You must have been quick, too," he added. "Is it permitted to ask how you managed it?"

"It was very simple," the General replied, with a relish for the remembrance. "I carted all the women off to call on the lady, and while we were there Azimoolah, in the character of an Indian rajah, blundered into Mr. Clinton Ziegler's rooms, which I had in the meanwhile ascertained communicated with Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's. When the prearranged hubbub commenced she gave herself away by an unconscious movement to the communicating door, showing that she was in the habit of using it, unknown to the hotel people, who believe that they have di-

vided one big suite into two smaller ones let separately. She's clever, and pulled herself together at once, but I had got what I wanted—the fact that she was anxious about the rumpus my good old Khan, tricked out in a suit from Nathan's and a stage diamond, was raising next door."

"That seems convincing, certainly," said Forsyth.

"Azimoolah's experiences were even more so. Mr. Clinton Ziegler has some associates with a very pretty way with them when Asiatic princes stumble by chance into his rooms. Of course, it was Azimoolah's cue to be a bit boisterous and persistent, but they needn't have roused the tiger in him by giving him the congenial task of disarming them of two uncommonly murderous knives. Funny thing is, that when I went in as an interpreting peace-maker, I saw no sign of Ziegler, who, I gathered at the hotel bureau, is an invalid and never goes out. The two men in the room were able-bodied fellows, fashionably dressed, but with that in their faces which there is no mistaking. The 'crime-look' is an open sign to those who know."

The General paused and looked at his nephew curiously. "Then I made a false move," he went on—"a false move which may have wiped the seventh Duke of Beaumanoir out of the peerage. I told Mrs. Talmage Eglinton that the Duke was going down to Prior's Tarrant by the 8.45. Yes, you may well stare, but I had an object. I also told her that you were going down with him, believing that that would secure you both a peaceful journey; for, vulgarly speaking, the woman is glaringly sweet upon you, laddie. I ought to have given such a combination as she works with credit for the cunning which drew you from your post."

Forsyth flushed with annoyance. It was not pleasant to hear that his friend's life might have been sacrificed through his uncle's perception of a feminine weakness which had irked him throughout the London season—in fact, ever since Mrs. Talmage Eglinton had made her mysterious appearance on the fringe of society. The card, however, on which the General had staked and apparently lost had been distinctly "the game" if he, Forsyth, had only played up to it himself by sticking like wax to poor hunted Beaumanoir.

But *why* was Beaumanoir being hunted? That easy-mannered unfortunate, who had exchanged a life of reckless irresponsibility for sordid penury, and the latter for the headship of a historic house, had performed all these *demivoltes* without making a visible enemy save himself. Why should he have incurred a remorseless hatred which aimed at nothing less than his life?

"The Star-spangled Banner looms largely on the horizon of all this," the young man mused aloud. "Can you explain that phase of the mystery, Uncle Jem?"

"The hub of the wheel, I take it, is my old friend Leonidas Sherman, or, rather, the three millions sterling which he is on his way to this country with,"

said the General briskly. "Big American robbery, worked by a disciplined gang, and somehow your pal Beaumanoir is entangled. The day he was at our house he tried vaguely to warn Leonie. Hinted that Sherman should be warned to be careful."

Forsyth heard the amazing theory with an inward qualm lest his shrewd old relative should have hit on the solution of the puzzle, and it filled him with greater apprehension than even the physical peril of the Duke had instilled. "Entanglement" in Beaumanoir's case could only mean complicity, for if his knowledge of the scheme was not a guilty knowledge, if he had become possessed of the secret accidentally, why did he not invoke the aid of the police and expose the conspirators? Forsyth saw that the General read what was passing in his mind, and he clutched at the only visible straw in defence of his friend.

"If Beaumanoir was culpably implicated these scoundrels wouldn't want to kill him, any more than he would want to queer their game by having Senator Sherman warned," he said.

"There you put your finger on the *crux*," replied the General, who disliked the raising of questions which he could not answer.

"And," proceeded Forsyth, pursuing his slight advantage, "you would never have got Beaumanoir to assent to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton being asked here if he had known her to be a professional criminal. The 'honor of the house,' as he calls it, is undoubtedly the motive of his inexplicable silence. He would hardly compromise that august sentiment, for which he is apparently willing to die, by desecrating Prior's Tarrant with the presence of a woman likely to figure in the police-courts—a woman, too, who, if your theory is correct, has designs against the father of the girl for whom I veritably believe he has more than a passing regard."

The General, secretly in danger of losing his temper—a thing he never really did—concealed his emotion by affecting to ruminate. The thought of his invitation to the dashing American, afterwards carelessly endorsed by the Duke, restored his equanimity.

"That was a neat touch," he remarked meditatively as he selected a cigar from his case. "If his Grace is not cold meat, I'd give a good deal to be living under the same roof with him and Mrs. Talmage Eglinton for a few days, with the prospect of Senator Sherman's arrival at the end of them."

He held the cigar he had chosen poised between finger and thumb, and suddenly gazed round with a comical expression at the rich appurtenances of the majestic dining-room. The maze of this latter-day pursuit had led him into unfamiliar paths. His ancient triumphs had been won under the free sky, where he could unravel a knotty point with the aid of tobacco at will; but now he wanted to smoke, and was confronted by sternly repressive ducal splendor.

"Mustn't light up here, I suppose," he grunted. "Let's get into the open and have a whiff. Yes, I know it's two o'clock, but we can't go to bed."

He moved to one of the French windows, and, parting the heavy curtains, unfastened the bolts and stepped out on to the terrace where he had spent the earlier hours of the evening. Instantly both he and Forsyth, who followed close behind, became conscious of the sound of heavy breathing. As the shaft of light shot from the opened window they saw that at the apex of the shaft, half way to the balustrade of the terrace, two men were locked together on the ground in a ferocious struggle, while twenty paces off, in the shadow of the gray pile, the dim shapes of two other men paused irresolute, as if their advance had been checked by the sudden opening of the window.

For two seconds General Sadgrove's eyes blazed along the line of light; then with a spring that would have done credit to one of half his age, he hurled himself upon the combatants, and selecting the topmost for his onslaught, dragged him from the prone figure below.

"Get back to the window! Watch those other fellows!" he called to his nephew, who was hurrying to his assistance. And Forsyth did as he was bid, though he had hardly run back and put himself on guard when the two distant prowlers vanished into the deeper shadows of the refectory wall.

With no gentle hand the General hauled his struggling captive towards the window. Half Forsyth's attention was diverted to the other party to the fray, who was slowly rising from the ground, and the other half to the dark end of the terrace, where the remaining pair had disappeared; and it was therefore not until the General had arrived, hanging like a terrier to his prisoner, that the obedient sentinel had eyes for them. But at last he had to stand aside to allow the veteran firebrand to drag the fighting, kicking figure into the room, and then only did he notice details.

"You've got the wrong one!" he exclaimed. "Don't you see—that's your own man, Azimoolah?"

CHAPTER XII—*The Man Under the Seat*

When the Duke of Beaumanoir found himself alone in the railway carriage after Alec Forsyth's departure he sank back in his corner with a certain sense of relief. The events of the last twenty-four hours had filled him with a very sincere regard for his cousin Sybil, and he had not much faith in the assurance given him by General Sadgrove that his journey down to Prior's Tarrant would be free from danger. His past experiences led him to expect that the terrible Ziegler and his myrmidons would be more than a match for the shrewd but somewhat out-of-date Indian officer, and if there was to be an "episode" on the railway he would be glad to think that it could not now plunge his plucky young cousin into mourning for her lover.

"She is a girl in a thousand," he murmured, as he lit a cigarette; "I should never forgive myself if I were the means of making her a widow before she is a wife. If, as I half suspect, Alec's detachment was effected by a ruse on the part of the graybeard at the Cecil—well, I take off my hat to that gentleman for his consideration."

As the train gathered speed, rushing through the twinkling suburban lights, the Duke put his feet on the opposite cushions and reviewed the situation—calmly, but always with but slender faith in being able "to worry through" with his life. That had really become quite a secondary object with him, so far as his personal safety was concerned; yet his present attitude was to escape the attentions of Ziegler long enough to convey a warning to Senator Sherman of the plot against him. Whether his nerves would be proof against the strain till the Senator's arrival at Liverpool was a phase of the case which he did not care to contemplate too closely.

Ziegler, he felt sure, would have grasped the position to a nicety, and would use every device in his apparently limitless *repertoire* to give him his quietus before Leonie's father set foot on shore. It might well be that another attempt would be made on him before he reached the sheltering zone of Prior's Tarrant, wherein General Sadgrove had promised him safety.

His reflections were cut short by the slowing down of the train for the stoppage at Kentish Town, and the Duke's sensations at that moment hardly presaged a comfortable journey for him, brief though it would be. The compartment was labeled "reserved," it was true, and the guard had been tipped to see that the legend was respected, but that stood for little when people of the Ziegler type were on the move, and he looked forward with dread to the future stoppages if his heart was to thump like this.

Which is a study in the quality of *fear*, for Beaumanoir was of the kind that leads cavalry charges to visible and certain death with gay recklessness.

The present trouble passed, however, for the guard hovered round the carriage and gave no chance to invaders, who in any case would have had some

difficulty in effecting an entrance, as the door was locked. The train sped on again, out into the country now, through the balmy summer night, and Beaumanoir breathed more freely. One of the dreaded stoppages was notched off the list.

So, too, were Hendon and Mill Hill safely negotiated, and Beaumanoir was able to contemplate the slackened speed for Elstree with greater equanimity. As before, the guard's portly form loomed large outside the compartment the moment the train stopped, and so doubtless would have remained had not a loud, imperious voice on the platform summoned him to a divided duty.

"Here, guard! What are you about there? Hurry up now, and open this door!" came the choleric command.

With a deprecatory glance at the Duke's carriage the guard perforce hurried off, and Beaumanoir peered out of the window after him. The official had gone to the assistance of a tall, well-groomed gentleman, who, with an air of irritable importance, was fumbling with the door-handle of a first-class compartment some way along the train. The traveler was of the type that secures the immediate respect of railway servants—dressed in brand new creaseless clothes, every immaculate pocket of which suggested the jingle of half-sovereigns. A man carrying a yellow hatbox and a rug lurked deferentially behind the magnate and cast reproachful glances at the guard, who was now thoroughly alive to his opportunities and opened the door with a flourish. The tall man, whom Beaumanoir took for a brother duke, or at least a director of the line, stepped with dignity into the compartment; the menial handed in the hatbox and rugs, and sought a second-class carriage; the guard waved his lamp, and the train moved on.

Beaumanoir withdrew his head and sank back in his corner, catching just a glimpse of the guard preparing to spring into his van as it neared him. The station lights flashed past, and the long line of carriages swung into the outer darkness, the little diversion of the important passenger leaving Beaumanoir amused and comforted. To the man who had tramped his weary way along the Bowery to his five-dollar boarding-house within the month this exhibition of class privileges and distinctions was breezily refreshing, seeing that he was now in a position to claim them himself.

Immunity from danger through four suburban stations had brought a delicious sense of calm, and as he leaned back he thought how nice it would be to live the life of an English nobleman, free from all sordid cares and humiliations. And if he could wake up at the end of a week and find that his entanglement was all a nightmare, or, at any rate, that Ziegler's bark was worse than his bite, and that Senator Sherman had safely deposited the bonds at the Bank—well, in that improved state of things what was to prevent his asking Leonie to share his

new-found privileges?

Then, suddenly, the icy finger touched his heart again. As the blue wreaths of cigarette smoke in which he had conjured up this alluring vision rolled away he became conscious that his gaze, hitherto absorbed and preoccupied with day-dreams, was in reality riveted on a material object under the opposite seat. A very material object indeed—no less than the heel of a man's boot.

At sight of this disturbing element Beaumanoir's sensations were of a mixed order. First of all, he could see so little of the boot that he could not be sure that there was a man attached to it, though the presumption was in favor of that supposition, for he was quite certain that it had not been there long, or he would have noticed it before. He guessed, so alert had his mind become under stress of emergencies, that the wearer of the boot had got into the compartment on the off side while he himself had been looking out of the window in Elstree station.

But if so, and the man had invaded his privacy with sinister design, why should he have plunged at once into a position of utter impotence? No one flattened out under the low seat of a first-class railway carriage is capable of active violence without a preliminary struggle to free himself, during which he would be at the mercy of his intended victim. The only design that Beaumanoir could attribute to him was that he would presently wriggle to the front and use a pistol.

He sat and eyed the motionless boot, and then an impulse, swift and irresistible, seized him.

"Come out of that, you beggar!" he cried; and, stooping down, he gripped the boot, wondering whether he was to be rewarded with a haul or whether he would have to laugh at himself for grabbing someone's discarded footgear. But the first touch told him that here was no empty boot, and, his fingers closing on it like a vise, he put forth all his strength and dragged its wearer, snarling and spluttering, out on to the open floor. There was no sign of a pistol, but as a measure of precaution Beaumanoir pulled out his own Smith and Wesson.

"Get up and sit in that corner," he said sternly, eyeing the puny form of the invader with curiosity. Open violence at any rate was not to be apprehended from the stunted little figure of a man who coweringly obeyed his order.

But as his captive turned round and showed his sullen face the Duke knew that this was no mere impecunious vagabond, sneaking a cheap railway journey. His fellow passenger was part and parcel of the peril that menaced him—had, in fact, been a fellow-passenger of his before. For the wizened, mean-looking face was the face of the spy Marker, who had been pointed out to him by Leonie on board the *St. Paul*, and who had afterwards shadowed him to the Hotel Cecil on landing.

"So we meet again, Mr. Marker," said the Duke with pleasant irony. "I

should have thought that your friend Mr. Ziegler could have provided you with a railway fare rather than let you travel like a broken racing sharp—under the seat."

The fellow blinked his ferret eyes viciously, but began a futile attempt at prevarication. "My name, I guess, ain't Marker, and I never heard of anyone called Ziegler," he whined.

"Very possibly your name may not be Marker, though you booked under it on the *St. Paul*; but you are undoubtedly acquainted with the old rascal at the Cecil who calls himself Ziegler," Beaumanoir retorted.

"You seem to know a powerful sight more about me than I know myself," was the sullen reply.

Beaumanoir made a long scrutiny of the weak but cunning countenance of the spy, and he came to the conclusion that this was one of the underlings of the combination, to be trusted only with minor tasks in the great game. His presence there under the seat of the compartment was the more unaccountable, since he was not the sort of creature with either nerve or physique to murder anything stronger than a fly.

"Look here, my good chap," said Beaumanoir with tolerant contempt, after, as he thought, gauging Mr. Marker's caliber. "You've got a bit out of your depth with the people you're trying to swim with. Why not chuck Ziegler and Co. and come over to me? I'll make it worth your while."

But the only response was a dull shake of the insignificant head and the sulky rejoinder: "I don't know what you're getting at, Mister. I'll chuck anybody you like and come over to you with pleasure if you will stand the price of a ticket to St. Albans."

The persistent denial was as absurd as the suggested reason for his presence under the seat, and Beaumanoir began to lose patience. "I suppose," he said, "that you will maintain that you did not go to Mr. Forsyth's chambers in John Street last night under the pretence of being a chemist's messenger?"

"Never been in John Street in my life," came back the pat and obvious lie.

It seemed useless to argue further, and Beaumanoir preserved silence till the train ran into Radlett Station, when he put into practice the course he had decided upon. At least he would force the creature to disclosure and put him to some inconvenience, as it was possible that thereby he might disconcert his plans, whatever they might be. Lowering the window, he called to the guard, and informed the astonished official that he had found a man traveling under the seat without a ticket.

Then uprose the righteous wrath of the guard, who had Mr. Marker by the collar in a trice and twisted him out on to the platform with the sharp demand:

"Now, young man, your name and address, and quick about it."

"What for?" inquired Marker, openly insolent.

"Defrauding the Company by traveling without previously paying the fare, contrary to By-law 18."

The spy broke into a jeering cackle. "You've only got *his* word for it that I haven't got a ticket," he replied. "I nipped under the seat because I thought he was a lunatic, and a gent can travel that way, I reckon, if he's paid his shot. Here's the ticket, Mister. I'll make tracks to another carriage."

With which he produced a first-class ticket all in order and walked off along the platform, leaving the Duke and the guard looking after him, the former with a curious smile, the latter with dismayed perplexity.

"Well, of all the funny games!" exclaimed the official. "He must have got in at Elstree while I was attending to that there toff, and blessed if he ain't scooting into the same compartment with him now. Your Grace will understand that I couldn't interfere with him, seeing that he had a ticket and you didn't prefer no charge?"

"All right, guard," replied Beaumanoir, with his weary smile. "It really doesn't matter. He seems to have taken me for a madman, while I took him for a dead-head, that's all. These little misunderstandings will arise, you know. We're behind time, eh?"

Taking the hint, the guard retired and started the train, Beaumanoir resuming his seat in a frame of mind only to be described as mixed. He stared out into the gloom of night, wondering what was to come next. His little stratagem had succeeded, in so far as it had revealed Marker as the possessor of a ticket, and therefore as presumably charged with some design against himself, though it had shed no light on the nature of that design. But the adroitness with which the wretched spy had extricated himself made him gnash his teeth because of the impudent reliance on his inability to assign a reason to the guard for fearing an intruder. That in itself was clear evidence that Mr. Marker was under the seat with a very real purpose.

Had that purpose been entirely thwarted by his discovery? was the question which buzzed through the Duke's brain to the tune of the rolling wheels. There had been an air of insolent confidence in the fellow as he showed his ticket and walked away which hardly tallied with total discomfiture. And then, mused Beaumanoir, was there not ground for further apprehension in his selection of a fresh compartment and a fresh traveling companion? Could it be that "the toff" who had entered the train at Elstree was an accomplice, and that Mr. Marker had gone to report to him and concert new measures? It might well be so, for, whether wittingly or no, the swaggering passenger had certainly caused the diversion which had enabled Marker to open the door on the off side and creep under the seat.

The reflection that the spy might have confederates on the train did not add to Beaumanoir's equanimity, and at the next stop he let down the window again and peered along the line of carriages. Sure enough, he caught a glimpse of a head protruding from the compartment into which Marker had disappeared—not the head of Marker himself, but of the imperious person who had played the magnate and distracted the guard. The head was instantly withdrawn, but it had done a useful work in convincing Beaumanoir that he was really an object of interest in that quarter, and not to Marker alone.

"I wish they would *do* something and end this beastly suspense," the hunted man muttered to himself as the train moved on once more; "though, for the matter of that, they can't do anything till I get out at Tarrant Road—unless they openly come to the door and shoot me at one of the few remaining stoppages."

But he was soon to learn that stations were not to be the only stopping-places for the 8.45 that night. It had come to a steep gradient, up which it was plodding laboriously, when suddenly there was a bumping thud that hurled Beaumanoir on to the opposite seat; the wheels screeched on the metals as if in agony; a tremor as of impending dissolution quivered through the framework of the carriage, and the train jerked to a standstill.

Beaumanoir had the door open instantly with his own private key, and clambering down on to the side of the line nearly fell into the arms of the guard, hurrying from the rear van towards the engine.

"Run into an obstruction, I expect, your Grace—nothing very serious, I hope," panted the guard as he went scrunching over the ballast to the center of disaster.

People were swarming out of the carriages, all of them evidently more frightened than hurt, and Beaumanoir strained his eyes through the leaping, scuffling figures to the compartment occupied by his enemies. Yes, there they were, and apparently the thing was to be done in character to the last. The tall, well-dressed man opened the door, called "Guard!" in the same old tone of importance, and, getting no response, began to leisurely descend on to the permanent way, followed by Marker, who feigned to hold no converse with him. At the same time there hastened up the man who had handed in the hatbox and rug, and then the three were swallowed up in the shadows beyond the radius of light from the carriage windows.

For the night had fallen inky dark, and outside that narrow band of artificial light all was as black as the nether pit. Shrieking women and agitated men appeared for a moment on the footboards and disappeared, directly they had traversed the short zone of light, into the outer gloom of the waste ground at the side of the railway.

Casting a comprehensive glance at his surroundings, the Duke saw that the

accident had occurred at a lonely spot where the line was hemmed in on either hand by dense woods running right up to the rail-fence that bounded the track. Instinct prompted him to quit the dangerous proximity of his own compartment, and at the same time he desired to ascertain how long the delay was likely to last. This he could only do by proceeding to the front of the train, but to reach the engine would entail passing the place where the mysterious three lurked in the shadows. In order to avoid them, therefore, he darted across the zone of light, hoping to escape observation, dived under the train, and made his way forward on the other side of the line, shielded from his foes by the carriages.

One glance at the derailed engine sufficed to show him the nature of the accident, and to inform him of the reason for it. A barrier composed of baulks of timber, supplemented by heaped-up ballast, had been built across the six-foot way, and from the excited remarks of driver, stoker, and guard Beaumanoir gathered that the locomotive was so damaged that even when the obstruction was removed it would be unable to proceed under its own steam. The passengers would have to wait till a relief train came along, unless they elected to trudge three miles to the next or the last station.

It was all too plain to Beaumanoir that here was no accident at all, but an outrage designed to strand him in that lonely place, where amid the darkness and the confusion murder would come easy. The choice of the locality, half-way up a steep gradient where the speed would be reduced to a minimum, pointed to no desire to injure the passengers generally; indeed, there would have been an obvious intention to avoid a really perilous collision, seeing that some of the conspirators were on board. He could pretty accurately gauge Marker's functions now. The spy was to have kept close to him after the "accident," so as to signal his whereabouts in the darkness to the more active members of the gang.

The emissaries of Ziegler would have to dispense with that aid now, but still Beaumanoir could not shut his eyes to his imminent peril. The three who had traveled in the train were on the other side of the line, but the contingent—there would be at least two of them—who had wrecked the engine were probably lurking somewhere near. He could have no assurance that they were not at his very elbow, stealing on him through the dense undergrowth that fringed the fence.

A shout from the guard to the passengers congregated behind the train told him that at least half an hour must elapse before they could be picked up and carried on, and he at once decided that to stay at the spot would be intolerable. He should go mad if he remained at the mercy of invisible adversaries whom he could not *hit back*. If they would only come out into the open, in a body if they liked, so that he could empty the six chambers of his revolver into them before he went down, he would take his risks gladly; but to stand still in the dark, not

knowing how soon a stab in the back would be his fate, was the thing too much. There and then he ended the situation by climbing the fence and plunging into the wood.

He had not taken six steps through the brambles when from the pitch darkness ahead a low, flute-like whistle sounded, to be instantly answered by the cracking of a twig a little to the right of him. His present intention to quit the scene and make his way to Prior's Tarrant on foot across country had evidently been foreseen and provided for. Those bushes were *occupied*, and his retreat at that point was cut off. He clambered back on to the railway, and, running as hard as his lameness would allow, close to the fence, he again essayed the wood two hundred yards ahead of the engine. This time he won free into the tangle of the copse without any sign of pursuit, and presently came to an open "ride" where progress was easier.

CHAPTER XIII—*At the Keeper's Cottage*

The Duke followed the ride for some distance, the clamor of voices around the wrecked train growing every moment less distinct till they died away altogether, and he guessed that he was in the heart of the wood, half a mile from the scene of the disaster. Whether or no he was pursued he had no means of knowing, with such diabolical cunning pitted against him; but, at any rate, no sound of pursuit reached his straining ears, and he began to hope that his break-away had been undetected.

Suddenly the ride turned abruptly to the right, and at the end of a glade, some hundred yards further on, he saw the lights of a dwelling. Across the intervening years came a flash of remembrance. These must be the celebrated coverts of his neighbor, Sir Claude Asprey, and the house ahead must be the keeper's cottage where, when an Eton boy spending the holidays with his uncle at Prior's Tarrant, he had lunched as a member of Sir Claude's shooting-party ten years ago. The place was graven on his memory, because the day was a red-letter one by reason of his having shot his first pheasant thereon.

Without any definite plan in his head, but actuated by a longing for human companionship, however brief, he went up to the door of the cottage and knocked, his arrival being also heralded by the barking of dogs at the side of the house. The door was almost immediately thrown open by a stalwart, ruddy-faced man of sixty, who carried a candle and stared in open-mouthed wonder at a well-dressed visitor at such an hour and place. Beaumanoir looked at him closely, and smiled his first smile of pleasure since Forsyth's hand had gripped his on the day he landed.

"I can see you've forgotten me, Mayne," he said, "though I should have known you anywhere—time has touched you so slightly. Don't you recollect young Charley Hanbury, who came over with the Duke of Beaumanoir to a big shoot with Sir Claude in '91?"

A gleam shone in the honest keeper's keen eyes. "Of course I remember, sir," he replied, adding quickly: "Begging your Grace's pardon, for you'll be the Duke yourself now?'

"Yes, I am the Duke, Mayne, and a very unfortunate one," Beaumanoir laughed. "There has been a mild sort of smash-up on the railway yonder, and I started to walk to Prior's Tarrant rather than hang about for a relief train. I was a bit hazy about my direction, so I thought I'd inquire, and at the same time reassure you that it wasn't a poacher who was abroad in the woods. May I come in while you give me my bearings?"

"Come in, your Grace, and welcome; but it isn't in my house that I shall direct you. It's not likely that I'm going to let you wander about my woods on a dark night when I can guide you out of them myself and think it an honor," was the keeper's cordially respectful reply.

Beaumanoir was conscious that standing in a lighted doorway was hardly the place for him just then, and he followed into a roomy kitchen, professionally eloquent with its array of guns and sporting prints. Mayne explained that his wife had just gone up to bed, and that all the youngsters, whom perhaps it might please his Grace to remember, were out in the world.

Beaumanoir dropped into a chair, and to gratify his kindly host accepted a horn tankard of home-brewed ale, which he sipped while he satisfied Mayne's curiosity about the "accident." He would have given much to take the keeper into his confidence about the personal element in the outrage, but that luxury could not be indulged in without impossible disclosures. Considering that he had eliminated the most pertinent part of his narrative, he was unable to account for the growing gravity with which it was received till Mayne disburdened himself.

"I wonder your Grace can take your narrow escape so lightly," said the keeper. "Providence must have been in two minds about you to-night."

"How so?" asked the Duke, starting. Surely General Sadgrove had not been

spreading indiscreet reports in the county already. There had not been time.

"It isn't a fortnight since his Grace your uncle and your cousin were killed on the railway," replied the keeper.

The coincidence had not occurred to Beaumanoir, nor if it had would it have troubled him; but he was relieved to find that Mayne's solemnity was due to the traditional superstition of a gamekeeper. To have his terrible secret, or so much as a hint of it, suspected by this cheery old associate of the happiest day of his boyhood would have been a blow indeed.

"Yes," he admitted, though in a different sense; "I have certainly had a narrow escape, and it has shaken me a little, Mayne. On second thoughts, if you would let me lie down for a few hours on that very comfortable settle, I would defer my departure for Prior's Tarrant till the morning. I really don't feel quite equal to trudging so far to-night."

This was true enough, for though he was physically fit he dreaded leaving this haven of rest and apparent security for the darkling wood, in which his remorseless foes were probably searching for him. The promised escort of the unsuspecting keeper would be of little value, for, unwarned of any peril, the man would be simply an encumbrance, equally liable with himself to swift death at any moment at the hands of the enormous odds against them. Apart from other considerations, he could not subject the good fellow to such a risk, though he would have preferred, had it been possible to proceed alone, to have got to Prior's Tarrant that night and so have ended the suspense under which Forsyth and the General must be laboring.

Of course the proposal was hailed with delight, Mayne only insisting that he should wake his wife and get her to prepare the spare bedroom. Of this, however, Beaumanoir would not hear, and he was trying to persuade his host to retire for the night when a dog barked furiously at the back of the house.

"That's old Tear'em; there'll be someone moving," said Mayne, going out into the passage and listening intently.

Beaumanoir remained in the kitchen, but for all that it was he, with his highly strung nerves, who was the first to catch the sound of a footstep without—a stealthy footstep, not approaching the cottage door boldly, but creeping close to the window. The next instant, however, before he could communicate with Mayne, another and a brisker step, without any attempt at secrecy, crunched on the pebble path, and there came a tap at the cottage door. Mayne immediately opened it.

"Sorry to disturb you, but there has been a railway accident," a man said in tones that struck Beaumanoir as vaguely familiar. "I'm tired of waiting about at the side of the line. Can you give me shelter for the night?"

"If you'll please to walk in, sir, I'll see what can be done," came the reply of

the hospitable keeper. "I've got one of the passengers in here already."

The next moment there appeared in the doorway of the kitchen the tall man who had hectored the guard at Elstree station and who had afterwards been joined by the spy, Marker, at Radlett. Whatever his purpose, he was plainly not disposed to lay aside his air of self-importance as yet. He glanced superciliously at Beaumanoir, and promptly appropriated the chair which the latter had risen from at the first alarm. Loyal to his own county, this was more than Mayne could stand; he hastened to effect a one-sided introduction.

"Beg pardon, sir, but you've taken the Duke's chair," he said. "This gentleman is his Grace the Duke of Beaumanoir."

The newcomer rose with alacrity. "Sorry, I'm sure," he said, taking another seat. "We are companions in misfortune, Duke, if, as I understand, you were traveling in that wretched 8.45 from St. Pancras."

Beaumanoir's sense of humor, ever present, but of late repressed by stress of circumstances, broke out at the efforts of this man, who spoke with a pronounced American accent, and who, he was persuaded, was there with murderous intent, to sustain the *rôle* of an English gentleman. He had not forgotten that other and more furtive footstep under the window, but he could not resist the sport of leading this rascal on. The mood had seized him to avoid being killed if he could; but, if that were not possible, to extract all available fun out of the process. And it might serve either of these contingencies to lead his adversary into the belief that he was not being imposed on by all this specious posing.

"Yes, I was in the 8.45," he replied, looking the other squarely in the face. "You joined it at Elstree, I think. I noticed you because a man who was found under the seat of my compartment got into yours at Radlett, and I saw you leaving the train with him after the accident."

For the fraction of a second the man failed to control the answering defiance of his eyes, but he got a grip of himself soon enough to prevent a premature explosion. "Really?" he said, with affected carelessness. "He was under the seat, eh? Funny sort of person to be traveling first-class; but, of course, you will understand that I am not acquainted with him."

Beaumanoir made no comment. He had got what he wanted. That sudden tell-tale gleam of menace had discounted the subsequent disclaimer, and he knew that this man had been no chance fellow-passenger with Marker, the spy. What was more, the man knew that he knew it, and Beaumanoir shrewdly guessed that the effort of control was intended to deceive not him but the keeper. The rascal was biding his time till he had learned what dispositions were to be made for the night, when doubtless he would shape his actions accordingly; and, in the meanwhile, it was necessary to his purpose that Sir Claude Asprey's honest old retainer should regard him as an innocent guest.

Again that persistent reliance on the Duke's impotence to speak up and boldly claim protection. All through the hot pursuit that leaguered him so closely this was the bitterest drop in Beaumanoir's cup, for it was he himself who had placed the gag in his own mouth, he himself who had forged the fetters that kept him from running to Scotland Yard with an exposure of the whole conspiracy. And it is galling to be hampered by a past lapse from virtue when you have abandoned evil courses and are like to lose your life for doing so.

"Now that this gentleman has come in your Grace will *have* to have the spare bedroom," said Mayne triumphantly, moving towards the door. "The wife will have it ready for you in a brace of shakes."

Beaumanoir detained him with a hasty gesture. "One minute," he said, "I'm not at all sure that I care about having the bedroom. I had arranged to sleep downstairs on the settle, you know. Why shouldn't we adhere to that plan, and let this gentleman have the room?"

He was moved to discover which of the two sleeping-places his enemies would prefer him to occupy, and also by the imperative need of gaining time to gauge the altered circumstances. Moreover, if Mayne went upstairs to consult his wife he would be left alone with this great strapping potential assassin, who as like as not would promptly admit half a dozen other assassins from outside. Strangely enough, it was the potential assassin himself who solved his dilemma—by tossing a visiting-card on to the table.

"I shouldn't dream of sleeping in the bedroom while you are roughing it down here, your Grace," he said. "I shall certainly insist on occupying the settle."

Beaumanoir picked up the card and read:

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Colonel Anstruther Walcot,
  14th Dragoon Guards.
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The sight of that card, for all his imminent danger, cheered him, as showing that his opponents were not infallible. Not only had they made the initial blunder of furnishing this obvious Yankee with the outward semblance and name of an English officer commanding a distinguished regiment, relying on the fact that the real owner of the name was in India, but they had chanced to select the name of the colonel of Beaumanoir's old regiment.

The impostor's card inspired him with an idea. He would accept him at his own valuation.

"Very well," he said, rising from his chair. "As I am the first comer, perhaps it is right that I should be first served. I'll take the bedroom, Mayne; but there's

no need to disturb your wife. If you'll show me up we'll soon put the room to rights. Good-night, sir, and thank you for your courtesy."

With which he signed to the keeper to lead the way and followed him out, casting a glance at the American to see how he took the arrangement. Diagnosis of the man's face was, however, impossible, for he had already turned to the window and was drawing aside the curtain—to signal to his fellows, Beaumanoir had no doubt.

Mayne mounted the steep cottage staircase, Beaumanoir limping awkwardly in his wake into one of two rooms on the tiny landing. The moment they had crossed the threshold he perceived that the chamber was little better than a trap. The man downstairs would simply have him at his mercy, after admitting his companions and probably screwing up the door of the keeper's sleeping apartment. Locks and bolts to the primitive doors there were none. He recognized all too late that it would have been better to have insisted on the Yankee occupying this room and on remaining downstairs himself, when he would at least have formed a wedge between the traitor in the camp and his colleagues outside.

To stay the night in the room was out of the question, and he determined to put in practice the inspiration derived from "Colonel Walcot's" card.

"Mayne," he said, laying his hand on the astonished keeper's shoulder, "I must get out of this at once, without the gentleman below being aware of it, and you must help me."

"But, your Grace——" began Mayne.

"Don't withstand me," Beaumanoir cut short the protest. "I cannot go into a long explanation, but it's like this. That man is the colonel of my former regiment—an old brother officer, you understand. My name was Hanbury then, and he either does not, or pretends not to, recognize me. It is not a nice thing to have to confess, but I borrowed money in those days from Colonel Walcot, which never till now have I had it in my power to repay. It would distress me greatly to have that money mentioned before I have repaid it, as I shall do to-morrow, so if you can contrive to let me out without his knowledge I'll make for Prior's Tarrant and never forget your assistance."

Mayne scratched his grizzled head in pained perplexity. To his slow brain the incident of a wealthy nobleman fleeing in the dead of night from a creditor presented a startling incongruity, but gradually it recurred to him that he had heard that the new Duke had been "a bit wild" when in the army; and, after all, his reluctance to be recognized by the Colonel till he had had time to liquidate the debt seemed but natural.

"Yes, it can be done, your Grace," replied the keeper, softly opening the lattice casement. "The lean-to roof of the woodshed reaches right up here, and

there's a pile of faggots against the shed. You can get down easy enough, and as it's the back of the house, if you are careful, he won't know anything about it. But I'll come, too, and show your Grace the way out of the wood."

"On no account, Mayne," said Beaumanoir quickly. "You'll be much more useful here. I'll find my way out of the wood all right, but you must go back to the kitchen and tell Colonel Walcot that I am going to bed. It's only a white lie, and here's a five-pound note on account of it. Stay with him as long as you can—half an hour at least—and then go to bed yourself."

"Very well, your Grace; I don't like it, but I'll do it."

"And see here, Mayne: there's one thing more. In the morning, or whenever Colonel Walcot discovers that I have gone away, tell him from me why I went, and that I intend to repay him all I owe him. *All I owe him*, don't forget that."

Directly he was alone Beaumanoir left himself no time for weighing the chances, but took the risk. Squeezing through the window, he climbed down the sloping roof of the woodshed and thence by way of the faggot-pile to the ground. He was well aware that every step, as he groped his way across the clearing into the thicket, might be his last, for doubtless he had been traced to the cottage and the whole pack were somewhere about. His only hope lay in the probability that they were in front of the house, where they could hold themselves ready to obey signals from the kitchen window or a summons from the door.

It might have been that this was the case, for Beaumanoir reached the trees without interference, and at once shaped a course for the edge of the wood. His progress was difficult by reason of the darkness and the density of the undergrowth, but fortune favored him in so far that he presently hit upon a public foot-path, and so came eventually to a stile giving on a high road. At the next cross-ways was a sign-post, which he read by the light of a wax match, and thence onward limped steadily forward for Prior's Tarrant, with growing confidence that he had eluded pursuit.

Great, then, was his dismay when, on turning into his own park, he became conscious that he was being shadowed by someone whose stealthy pid-pad sounded resolutely behind him. As he mounted the terrace steps it grew louder; the man who was following him was close behind and gaining quickly. Something in the Duke's tired brain seemed to snap, and with just a glance at the lighted window of the dining-room where General Sadgrove was in the act of drawing up the blind, he turned at the top of the steps and flung himself, half mad with rage and terror, on the faithful Azimoolah, who had picked him up near the sign-post and shepherded him safely for the rest of the journey.

CHAPTER XIV—*Too Many Women*

General Sadgrove relaxed his grip on Azimoolah's lean neck, not as a consequence of Alec Forsyth's exclamation, but because he and his captive had crossed the threshold of the French window—gone "off," in fact, from the stage on which he had been playing a little comedy for the benefit of an invisible audience. Forsyth guessed at once that the pulley-hauley business on the terrace had only been a sham, from the half-playful push with which his uncle released the now passive Indian, and also from the more than half-contemptuous glance flung at himself.

The next moment the other party to the tussle on the terrace elucidated the matter by walking up to the window instead of running away. It was the Duke himself, outwardly calm, but somewhat disheveled by the fray, and looking very sleepy. Entering the room he gave Forsyth's hand an affectionate squeeze, and turned to secure the window.

"It's all right," he said, in the listless tone that he always used nowadays. "When the train got stuck up I smelt rats, and cleared out from the locality—thought it better to cut across country on foot than to stay about a spot where I was probably being looked for. But this beggar," pointing to Azimoolah, standing at "attention," proudly erect, "must have shadowed me, and caught me up just as I was coming to tap at the window. You will confer a great favor on me by letting him go."

This dogged determination to take no prisoners strengthened the General's suspicions of his host, and there was a harsh ring in the laugh with which he explained that Azimoolah was his own emissary, who, on returning from the scene of the accident, had mistaken the Duke for one of their unknown adversaries. He did not mention that there were two genuine prowlers outside who, but for Azimoolah's intervention, would have fallen on their prey, and who were probably intensely puzzled by finding someone else playing the same game as themselves.

"And now, if your Grace will go to bed, I will guarantee you a good night's

rest," added the General. "You must not forget that you will have ladies to entertain to-morrow."

Beaumanoir gave a tired shrug.

"Even without that inducement I'd take your prescription, General," he replied. "This hide-and-seek is rather wearing; but if you two good fellows can keep me in the land of the living for the next few days, I shan't worry you further."

He left the room, dragging his lame foot painfully, and the General, stricken with a sudden sympathy, whispered Forsyth to accompany him.

"The poor beggar is troubled," he said. "Sleep on the sofa in his room, and don't be afraid to close your eyes—as soon as *he* is asleep. Azimoolah and I will see there's no bother. But your friend mustn't be left alone. Danger from his own pistol—see?"

Forsyth nodded with grieved comprehension, and followed the Duke. On his departure the General turned to Azimoolah, who had stood like a statue since his release, and the twain exchanged a twinkle of mutual congratulation.

"We managed that quite in the old style, O taker of many thieves," said the General in Hindustani. "'Twas well that you heard and quickly obeyed my whisper to offer resistance, for so we have deceived the malefactors who beheld us into the belief that you also are an enemy of the house."

"The sahib's praise is sweet as the honey of Kashmir," responded Azimoolah, gravely. "Is it the Heaven-born's will that I should go out and slay these dealers in iniquity?"

The commission entrusted to him, however, held promise of no such luxury. On the contrary, Azimoolah received strict injunction to avoid violence except in the last extremity—in self-defence or to prevent entry into the house. The duty laid down for him was to patrol the grounds, and instantly apprise the General of any action on the part of the two trespassers that pointed to a renewal of aggressiveness that night.

"I shall remain in this room till daybreak; if anything occurs, make the signal outside," were the General's final instructions as he loosed his human watchdog on to the terrace, after putting out the lights to conceal the opening of the window. Then, having carefully closed it, he sat himself down in the dark, and presently slumbered, secure in the knowledge that none could approach the mansion while Azimoolah was on guard. Also, he was pretty sure that the siege would not be raised till the two prowlers should have reported to their superiors the doings and, as they would believe, the capture of the strange rival who had forestalled them.

The General's confidence was justified, for the night passed without further alarms, and the three gentlemen met at the breakfast-table under ordinary country-house conditions. The servants being in the room, no reference was

made to the abnormal circumstances that had brought them together, though Beaumanoir, in the course of reading letters that had come by post, held up a gorgeously monogrammed note, and remarked that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton had accepted his invitation and would be with them on the morrow.

"She writes rather flippantly for a stranger," he added, eyeing the scented missive doubtfully, but not offering to show it. "I hope it's all right for her to meet my cousin Sybil, and—er—the other ladies. She's coming on your recommendation, you know, General, so you must vouch for her good behavior."

Sadgrove growled unintelligibly, and was at pains to conceal a sudden upheaval of his facial muscles. For the Duke's reference to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton in her relations to the other guests had all at once opened up to his mind a contingency which he had overlooked—a terrible contingency, which demanded instant consideration before the American widow was admitted to the house. He made an early excuse for quitting the table, and, exacting a promise that Beaumanoir and Forsyth would for the present remain indoors, he went out into the park to face the position alone, and thresh it out to a conclusion.

Walking under the trees in the historic elm avenue, it was not till he had smoked a whole cigar and lit another that he was able to approach the problem with anything like calmness. For he was suffering from the humiliation of having to admit that he had committed the grievous error of imperiling the life of a woman—one, too, whom he held in affectionate regard only second to his wife. If his suspicion of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was as well founded as instinct told him, she ought never to have been asked to stay under the same roof as Sybil Hanbury, her victorious rival in the affections of a man who had repulsed her advances by stolidly ignoring them.

"Gad! but I'd cut my hand off rather than harm should come to that girl, let alone never being able to look Alec in the face again," he muttered, as he gnawed his white mustache in perplexity.

The situation was indeed serious from the point of view that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was head of a gang of international criminals, and that she was, moreover, as he put it in his simple soldier phrase, "sweet upon" his nephew Alec. If, for her as yet unexplained ends, she would not stick at assassinating the Duke of Beaumanoir, she would be capable of wreaking a deadly vengeance on the girl who had won the heart she hungered for. Once installed as a guest in the mansion, she would have plenty of facilities of which she might make venomous use. The General had engineered her invitation with the laudable purpose of keeping her under constant observation and of making communication with her confederates difficult; but in his zeal for check-mating her predatory designs he had forgotten her amatory ones.

It was true that Sybil's engagement had not yet been published to the world,

but the Shermans, who were also to be the Duke's guests, knew of it, and to enter into explanations with Mrs. Sherman, the voluble and unsophisticated, would be going far towards defeating his cherished hope of protecting that lady's husband from the gang without implicating the Duke. As it was, the invitation of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, of which he was suspected of being the cause, had excited more than curiosity among his American visitors, who had nearly upset his arrangements by canceling their own visit on learning that their mysterious fellow countrywoman was to be of the party. One crumb of comfort he derived from the fact that in all things he could rely on his wife's discretion. Though they had exchanged no word on the subject, he knew that, without penetrating or wishing to penetrate his motive in trafficking with Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, his wife guessed that he had one; he knew that he could depend upon her unquestioning aid if he asked for it.

"I guess I've bitten off more than I can chew, as Sherman himself would put it," he mused, with a sigh for the old days of jingling bridle-chains and night rides, when he had merrily run down his Thugs and Dacoits without female influence upsetting his calculations. The female influence had been there, doubtless, with all its jealousies and consequent treacheries; but all that had been Azimoolah's department. It had fallen to the silent-footed, black-bearded Pathan to explore the under-currents of social life in the native villages, and he had not worried his chief with details till the patient sapping of traitorous brains was done, and all that remained was to sally forth and hunt the faithless lover or erring husband who was also a breaker of laws. Azimoolah's knowledge in India of the eternal feminine had been extensive and peculiar; but the General felt that he could not with propriety set him poking into love affairs which included Sybil Hanbury in its scope.

Another point which harassed the General's soul was the new light shed on the Duke's attitude towards Mrs. Talmage Eglinton by his mild displeasure at the style of her note. The General was assured that the remark at the breakfast-table had been the genuine expression of an honest doubt as to the fitness of the sparkling widow to mix with gentle-women; whereas the Duke could have had no doubt whatever if he had had relations with the gang of whom he, the General, believed this woman to be the moving spirit. It certainly seemed that the Duke was ignorant that she was a dangerous adventuress, for, though he might have suspected her of designs against himself and yet have consented to her presence at Prior's Tarrant, he would never have subjected Sybil to the peril of daily intercourse with a potential murderess. All along Beaumanoir had shown a chivalrous disposition to protect his cousin from even minor annoyances.

"Perhaps there are two distinct crowds after Sherman's gold bonds, and Beaumanoir is in with the Ziegler lot, and Mrs. Talmage Eglinton is playing

against them," the General mused as he turned his steps back to the house. "To think that the fellow holds the key of it all, and won't speak, is what riles me."

The immediate dilemma confronted him whether or no to impart to his nephew the cause for alarm that had arisen about Sybil. He had been surprised at first that a man of Alec Forsyth's shrewdness had not seen for himself a danger threatening the girl he loved; but closer examination disclosed a reason. Forsyth was too modest, too little of a coxcomb, for it to occur to him that violence could result from a misplaced passion for himself. On the whole, the General decided that, as Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was not due till the next day, he would say nothing to Alec at present.

"If I can make Beaumanoir disgorge his secret, the trouble may not arise," he comforted himself. Though the veteran's faith in himself was shaken, and he wished he had resisted the temptation to meddle with crime outside his old Eastern sphere, he was not the man to take his hand from the plough. He would devote all his diplomacy to penetrating the cause of the Duke's obstinate silence.

As he had anticipated, there was a lull that day in the activity of the enemy—at any rate of overt attempts. No communication reached him from Azimoolah, who would certainly have been heard from if suspicious characters had been on the move in the neighborhood of the mansion; for, though unseen, that tireless tracker might be trusted to be at his post, which was anywhere and everywhere within the radius of a mile. The denser thickets of the park possibly concealed him, or it might be that he hovered in the nearer precincts of the gardens, unseen but ready. His presence relieved the General from disturbing the routine of the household by special instructions to the servants, who were still fluttered by the lassooing of the lame gardener on the previous Sunday. So far, all the precaution that the General had delegated to others than himself and Forsyth was to give the bailiff a quiet hint, as a message from the Duke, not to admit the "artists" to the park, should they present themselves again. But up to the hour of luncheon the painters of "deer like unto swine" had not renewed their application or put in an appearance.

In the afternoon Beaumanoir, shaking off some of his weary apathy, went down to the portico with his male guests to receive the four ladies, who arrived in time for tea, which, with the General's acquiescence, was to be taken on the terrace. No sooner were the first greetings over than Mrs. Sadgrove caught her husband's eye and telegraphed the information that she had something for his private ear at the earliest opportunity. He therefore contrived to lag behind with her while Beaumanoir did the honors to Leonie and her mother, and Forsyth paired off with Sybil, as the party mounted the marble steps to the terrace.

"Jem," said Mrs. Sadgrove, scanning the rugged face of her spouse with a sidelong scrutiny, "I received an anonymous letter this morning. Let them get

ahead a bit, and I'll show it to you."

The screed which she put into his hand contained but five words:

"*There is danger from Ziegler.*"

General Sadgrove's Eastern experiences had not educated him into an expert in calligraphy, but it needed no particular insight to perceive that this was a lady's handwriting, clumsily disguised. He transferred his attention to the paper, half a sheet of "note"; and here he was rewarded with a startling discovery. He had noticed that the letter of acceptance from Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, which the Duke had received at breakfast, had been heavily charged with a peculiar perfume, and this unsigned missive was simply reeking of the same pungent fragrance. He had sat next the Duke, and knew that there was no mistake.

"You have no idea who sent this?" he asked.

"I seem to recognize the scent as having come to me before in notes—proper, signed notes," Mrs. Sadgrove replied, evasively. And then she added, with gentle significance, not from curiosity, but from a desire to help him in case he did not know: "I heard the name of Ziegler when we were calling at the Cecil yesterday. It was mentioned, I think, by one of the attendants as that of the gentleman occupying the rooms where the disturbance was."

The General looked hard at her, and saw that his little drama had not deceived the companion of his Indian days.

"Yes," he said, shortly. "Do not trouble about this, Madge. It's all in the day's work."

But he himself was greatly troubled, inasmuch as if that anonymous warning came from Mrs. Talmage Eglinton all his "case" was demolished, and a perfect maze of new problems was presented. A warning from her would be presumptive evidence that she was an ally, and—sad blow to his *amour propre*—would stultify all the theories he had based on what he had fondly hoped was an unerring intuition. He would have to begin all over again, solacing himself—and it was no small solace—with the reflection that he had raised an unnecessary bogey in anticipating danger to Sybil Hanbury from Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's visit.

Yet by the time he reached the top of the terrace steps reaction had set in, and he began to think that his brain could not have lost all its cunning. For, unless in the very improbable event of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton having found out something about the mysterious Ziegler through occupying the next suite to him since yesterday, she must still be the heart and core of the evil influence he had to combat. Without knowledge she would not have been in a position to warn; and, like the Duke, how could she have obtained knowledge without complicity? Why, too, should she also be unwilling to use her knowledge openly? No, he came back to the opinion that there must originally have been one gigantic plot against Senator Sherman's precious charge, and that there must have been a split

in the camp; but from which section, or whether by both sections, the Duke was threatened was an irritating conundrum. Anyhow, Sybil Hanbury's peril assumed ugly shape again in the General's mind.

"The woman must have sent it to mislead—to throw dust in my eyes," he murmured, not knowing that he spoke aloud. And following up that train of reasoning he found it grow into conviction. The letter was not really anonymous. That is to say, the writer had been at particular pains to disclose her identity by means of the scent if General Sadgrove deemed the communication sent to his wife of sufficient importance to investigate. The letter had been despatched, he now felt assured, with the express purpose of whitewashing the sender in the event of any further "accident" happening to the Duke. In short, he was of opinion that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton had suspected his manoeuvre at the hotel, and had devised this method of hoodwinking him, and of diverting his vigilance from herself during her forthcoming visit if her suspicions were correct. The craftiness of the idea was obvious, and the General was beginning to be delighted with his perspicacity when, lo and behold, the whole fabric crumbled again, from a flaw at the very base of the structure. It was inconceivable that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, if she was guilty of criminal intent, should have directed his thoughts to Ziegler, who, if not a confederate, was certainly part and parcel of the mystery.

"Too many women in it," he growled, testily, unaware, in the brown study into which he had fallen, that he had seated himself in one of the cane chairs round about the tea-table at which Sybil Hanbury was already presiding. He was also unconscious that he had expressed himself audibly—at least, so far as concerned Sybil, who at that moment happened to be handing him his cup. Indeed, he repeated the phrase, the sentiment of it growing in vigor from the sight of Leonie Sherman listening to Beaumanoir's description of his ancestral home, and of Mrs. Sherman and Mrs. Sadgrove talking to Alec Forsyth.

Sybil gave the old man a queer look, more affectionate than reproachful; and when she had finished pouring out tea came and took a vacant seat beside him. For a while she drank her tea in silence, stealing a half-amused glance now and then at the puckered face of the checked hunter of men. The General was gazing moodily across the green expanse of park, wishing with all his heart that Azimoolah, on guard out there in the leafy solitudes, was a fitting oracle to consult in a matter touching the private feelings of *memsahibs*.

"No," he growled regretfully, and again aloud; "this must be a white man's war."

Sybil leaned over and tapped his knee with her gold tea-spoon. The General started, smiled fatuously at the celebrated Beaumanoir heirloom, as though he were expected to admire it, and then suddenly came down from the clouds, realizing that the young woman with the bright eyes searching his face was some-

thing more than a source of anxiety to him. She was a factor to be reckoned with, and if he was a judge of the human countenance she was about to enforce that view.

"A white man's war with too many women in it, General?" she asked, archly. "Isn't that rather an anomaly?"

"It's gospel truth," the General replied, with sturdy insistence. "Sign of senile decay, though, thinking aloud."

"*You* are not decayed. You might as well accuse *me* of being in my first childhood, and I have really passed that," Sybil smiled back at him. "But," she added, "I am childish enough to be a little hurt that you don't appear to think so."

"My dear girl, what have I done? 'Pon honor, I don't know that I have done anything," the General protested piteously.

"That's just it. It's because you have done nothing, or next to nothing, that your contemptuous reference to 'too many women' seems to me a trifle unkind," replied Sybil, pretending to misunderstand him. "What would have happened to my cousin, when the panel was cut the other night at Beaumanoir House, if it hadn't been for a woman?"

The General accepted the reproof in thoughtful silence, forced to admit to himself that it was not uncalled for. If it had not been for Sybil Hanbury's nerve and courage on the occasion when the bogus detective officer had secreted himself in the Duke's town house, the answer to her question might have had to be written in blood. Her quick apprehension of subtle danger, her determination to sit up and watch, and her cool presence of mind in face of the emergency when it arose, had saved the situation and stamped her as of sterling metal.

"I apologize," he jerked out presently. "I still think there are too many women in the business, but you ain't one of 'em."

"Thank you," Sybil returned, drily. "And, that being so, wouldn't it be a good plan to ask a woman to help you, on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief, you know?"

The General shot a rather shamefaced glance at the firm mouth and steadfast eyes of this plucky young enthusiast, and thereupon he decided to enlist her as an adviser in the more intricate questions that vexed him. There was the chance that woman's wit would fathom woman's guile, and tell him why Mrs. Talmage Eglinton should want to point the index of suspicion at Ziegler, who was probably her *confrère* in crime. Woman's wit might even tell him why his Grace the Duke of Beaumanoir, engaged in such a simple ducal pastime as making sheep's-eyes at a pretty American girl, should yet recoil abashed whenever Leonie turned her frankly responsive but puzzled gaze on him. Above all, the course proposed would enable this brave English girl to do what he was beginning to fear he could not do for her—to take care of herself.

"Yes," he said, putting down his cup with a grim smile, "I'll take you on, soon as you've finished your tea. And," he added, fumbling for his cigar-case, "I'll try and not frighten you."

Sybil rose at once, and together they strolled along the terrace to a distance from the chatter round the tea-table, which had drowned their incipient confidences. When they were quite out of earshot Sybil turned and confronted the General, and the lighter tone with which she had "played" him was lacking now.

"Tell me," she said gravely, "why Mrs. Talmage Eglinton is so anxious to kill my poor cousin and spoil that charming idyll."

"Mrs. Talmage Eglinton!" stammered the General. "How on earth did you know that?"

"How did I know!" his new coadjutor repeated with scorn. "In the same way that she must know herself that *you* know, you dear silly old man. Because of the absolutely absurd invitation to her to come and stay here at Prior's Tarrant without rhyme or reason."

And then, when General Sadgrove had recovered from the shock of finding that he was not quite inscrutable, they talked, very seriously, for upwards of half an hour.

CHAPTER XV—*A New Cure for Headache*

"I wonder if General Sadgrove and Mr. Forsyth are lunatics?" Sybil Hanbury purred softly, after joining in the chorus of thanks which greeted a superb rendering of Strelezki's "Arlequin" on the long disused grand piano in the tapestry-room. This apartment was more cozy and homelike than the vast white drawing-room at Beaumanoir House, but it was quite large enough for isolated conversations.

The uncomplimentary confidence was made into the shell-like ear of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, who, faultlessly gowned by Worth, was sitting apart with her nominal hostess in the embrasure of an oriel window. The Duke was hovering near the piano, and Forsyth was talking to Mrs. Sadgrove and Mrs. Sherman. The General was not present, having excused himself from coming straight from

the dining-room on the plea of having a letter to write.

Sybil's disjointed remark—for it followed a discussion on French cookery—caused a sudden twist of the ivory shoulders towards her, the swift eagerness of the movement being discounted by the languorous stare of slowly interested surprise. There was a hint of resentment, perhaps also a trace of alarm, in the wheeling of the décolletée shoulders; in the stare these emotions were corrected into a mild desire to hear more of such a sweeping surmise.

"Lunatics—those two!" Mrs. Talmage Eglinton exclaimed, in well-modulated astonishment. "That's what you English call rather a large order, isn't it? What makes you say so?"

"Hush! My cousin is trying to persuade Miss Sherman to sing," replied Sybil. "Wait till she has begun, and I'll tell you. It's too funny to keep to one's self."

For two days now the house-party at Prior's Tarrant had been increased by the elegant addition of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, and on the surface matters were pursuing their normal course. The Duke had received his latest guest with a democratic courtesy none the less cordial because of her floridly expressed note, which in the stress of other preoccupations he had forgotten altogether. He had a vague idea that the General had wished the vivacious American to be included because she was a fellow countrywoman of the Shermans, and that was quite enough to ensure his good-will towards her.

This view was so far from being the right one that Mrs. Sherman and Leonie had only succeeded in being coldly polite to the latest arrival. Mrs. Sadgrove, with an inkling that the beautifully dressed but too effusive American was an important factor in her husband's schemes, was more outwardly complacent, but it was reserved for Sybil to shower upon Mrs. Talmage Eglinton special civilities which had ended, after two days only, in their becoming constant companions, if not bosom friends. If the handsome visitor wanted to walk in the park or to be shown some object of interest in the gardens, Sybil was always at hand to accompany her; and if it rained, as it had done all this day, she spent hours in entertaining her in her own rooms.

As for Forsyth, Sybil deserted him entirely; and as the other ladies abstained from discussing personal topics before the unpopular guest, there had been no making known beyond the small circle who knew it already of the new secretary's engagement to his employer's cousin. Singularly enough, this was one of the very few subjects which the girl did not touch upon in her confidences to her new friend.

Presently the importunities of the Duke, backed by a general murmur of request, prevailed, and Leonie began a quaint old melody in a clear contralto that at any other time would have held Sybil an enthralled listener. As it was, she took

instant advantage of the rippling flood of sound that filled the room to resume her talk, though for the moment the continuity was not apparent.

"Beaumanoir House was burgled the other night, and we caught a man trying to get into my cousin's bedroom," she whispered.

"No. Really? I—I saw nothing in the papers," replied Mrs. Talmage Eglinton in even tones, but with another turn of the white shoulders and a sudden shading of her eyes the better to watch the fair narrator's face.

"That was because the Duke let the man go—didn't want any fuss just after coming into the title; and quite reasonable, I call it," Sybil proceeded. "And that's where the fun comes in. Mr. Forsyth insists that my cousin is the proposed victim of some diabolical plot, anarchist or otherwise, and he took General Sadgrove into his confidence. The old gentleman, as you may not be aware, was a sort of policeman in India, and is cracked on finding out things. Naturally, to one of that temperament, the mystery Mr. Forsyth chose to make out of a vulgar attempt at robbery was like a spark on tinder, and the General caught on at once. They're both fairly on the job—as amateur detectives, you know—and they think they've got a clue."

"How truly interesting! And the clue?"

"Of the most remote kind—not even arrived at, *à la* Sherlock Holmes, by inspecting cigarette ashes. It seems that Mr. Forsyth—who, by the way, had been to leave a card on you—met the Duke at the Cecil, coming away from the suite of a Mr. Ziegler. He chose to think that my cousin was looking agitated, whereas he was only tired after his voyage. Mr. Ziegler, therefore, if you please, has fallen under the ban of suspicion from these wiseacres, and is supposed to be murderously inclined towards the poor Duke. Even the mischief of some wretched boy in playing tricks with the train he traveled by the other night is attributed to this probably harmless Mr. Ziegler."

"And his Grace—does he also attribute these things to the same quarter?" asked Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, scarcely with the breathless interest due to such tremendous doings. She had a way of opening her eyes wide when putting a question—a mannerism which had the effect of creating doubt whether she was intensely eager or only bored.

"He thinks it all nonsense—same as I do," Sybil made answer. "He has told these over-clever gentlemen to leave the thing alone, and I expect if he finds out what the General is up to that he'll turn them both out of the house and give Mr. Forsyth his dismissal. Of course, you won't say anything—will you?—because I'm only a poor relation, and I can't afford to offend people."

"I am discretion itself. What is General Sadgrove up to, dear?" was the reply.

Sybil's pretty mouth bent close to confide the startling fact that the General

was going to London in the morning with the intention of bearding Mr. Ziegler in his den—otherwise, in his rooms at the Cecil. If he should be refused permission to see Ziegler, or, seeing him, should be unable to satisfy himself of his respectability, he was going straight on to Scotland Yard to impart his suspicions to the authorities. Sybil sketched the carrying out of this amazing programme and its probable consequences with much animation and ridicule, but her hearer's interest tailed off into undisguised indifference, ending in a deliberate yawn.

"What a very stupid affair!" Mrs. Talmage Eglinton murmured. "Do you know, it has made me quite sleepy, and—and I think I'll go to bed. I have started a real, clawing, hammering headache. Shouldn't wonder if I am not laid up to-morrow."

Nodding a good-night to the others, she rose and swept from the room, followed by Sybil, who, profusely sympathetic, insisted on accompanying her to her own apartments. At the door of the latter a dark-eyed, slender woman, in a black dress with broad white collar and cuffs, was standing. This was Rosa, the French maid, on whose services Mrs. Talmage Eglinton professed herself entirely dependent.

"One of my headaches, Rosa. The pink draught—quickly!" cried the incipient invalid, and pausing on the threshold she bade an affectionate good-night to her girlish admirer. "I am not really ill—only a little run down," she assured her. "I do *hope* I shan't have to keep my room to-morrow."

The brilliant vision of Parisian elegance having vanished into the room, Sybil made her way downstairs, and in the hall encountered General Sadgrove, who wore a light overcoat over his evening things and a gray felt hat. He was engaged in wiping the wet from his patent-leather shoes with his handkerchief, but looked up on Sybil's approach, and, removing his hat, went on with his occupation.

"Still raining?" said Sybil, carelessly.

"Like the very—I mean, like it used to in the monsoon," the General checked himself.

No more passed, except a slight raising of the old soldier's eyebrows and a corresponding droop of one of the lady's eyelids. The General having restored the gloss to his footgear and doffed his overcoat, they went on with linked arms to the tapestry-room, where, however, the party shortly broke up, the ladies to retire for the night, and the men to go to the smoking-room. The Duke remained but a short time, leaving the General and Forsyth with the playful remark that he was growing quite bold after two days' immunity, and hoped they would not sit up all night—which was exactly what one or other of them had been doing ever since they came to Prior's Tarrant, and, moreover, what they intended to do for the present.

"Sybil has done her part," said the General, as soon as he was alone with his nephew. "And I have prepared Azimoolah to be on the lookout for results. He tells me that the men in the dog-cart were outside the park wall again last night, and that there was the same exhibition of a red lamp in that infernal French maid's window."

"An abortive attempt at communication?" asked Forsyth.

"That or something worse," replied the General. "It may only be that the woman inside wants to confer with her confederates without; or it may be that the red lamp is a signal to them not to approach any nearer or try to get into the house. I incline to the latter being the explanation, as on each occasion the men in the cart have driven off immediately on seeing the red lamp, and there has been no attempt at short or long flashes, or any sort of code talk, Azimoolah tells me. In either case, it points to those beauties upstairs being aware that you and I are on guard, and that any attempt on their part to give admission to outsiders would be frustrated."

"But if she knows that a watch is being kept, surely madam will not dare to leave the house?" suggested Forsyth, in the tentative tone that was necessary to preserve his uncle's good humor.

"If she does, it will show that she's cornered, and that Sybil's guess has hit the bull's eye," said the General, adding, with a significant grimace, "a preparatory headache has been started already. You had better go to bed and leave me to see to the commencement of the cure."

Two hours later Azimoolah Khan, lying flattened out like a huge lizard on the parapet of the terrace, and thanking Allah that the rain had ceased, suddenly pricked up his ears and thanked Allah again that the time for relieving his cramped limbs had come. At first his ears were the only part of his body affected by the slight sound he had heard, but some thirty seconds later, keeping the rest of him motionless, he goggled his eyes round to one of the ground-floor windows and saw—seeing in the dark was one of his accomplishments—a female figure turn from it and flit along the terrace towards the steps leading down to the park. Waiting till the figure had gained the lower level, he slid from the parapet and gave noiseless chase.

The woman in front spared no precaution to guard against pursuit. She stopped many times and listened; she doubled on her tracks; and as soon as she reached the woodland belt she proved to be an expert in the art of taking cover. But she had to do with probably the most wily exponent of woodcraft at that moment in England, and her pursuer was never at fault. Dark as the night was, Azimoolah never lost her for an instant. With sinuous movements that never caused a twig to crack, the lithe Pathan was always creeping, gliding, dodging close behind, till he stopped within ten paces of the park wall, and from the

shelter of an oak trunk watched his quarry nimbly climb the obstacle. No sooner had she disappeared than he swung himself to the top of the wall, and peered over just as a horse broke into a trot on the other side.

Piercing the gloom, his keen sight distinguished the shape of a fast-receding rubber-tired dog-cart, in which three figures were seated; and, having fulfilled his mission, he dropped back to the ground. In a few minutes he was on the terrace again, hissing like a cobra outside the smoking-room. General Sadgrove opened the French casement.

"The daughter of Sheitan came from the fifth window, and has gone away, even as the sahib predicted, in the cart with two men," Azimoolah reported.

"Which road did they take?"

"To the left—the Senalban road, sahib."

"St. Albans, eh? Then she's going to catch the 3.15 up night mail," muttered the General. "Well, good-night, old *jungle-wallah*. You've got your orders," he added, closing and bolting the window.

The next morning there were two absentees from the breakfast-table—General Sadgrove, who by overnight arrangement had breakfasted by himself, so as to be driven to Tarrant Road in time for the nine o'clock train to town, and Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, who was confined to her bed by a bad headache. The news of the indisposition was imparted to Sybil by the maid Rosa at her mistress's door, and was accompanied by a regretful but firm refusal of admission to the patient.

"Madame is so *désolée* not to receive you, ma'amselle, but she 'ave ze malady too strr-rong for speak even with her dearest friend," was the ultimatum which sent Miss Hanbury from the door with a doleful face, which somehow took quite a different expression when she had turned the corner.

For some mysterious reason her aloofness from her lover vanished that morning, and she and Forsyth were on the best of terms. They spent two hours together wandering in the park, where in one of the more remote glades Azimoolah flitted up to them from the bushes, and, regarding Sybil with awe-struck veneration, made a deep salaam and was gone. The Duke, who had given his word of honor to the General not to go beyond the park gates, passed the time partly with his bailiff and partly strolling with Leonie in the gardens and glass-houses. The friendship between Beaumanoir and his beautiful guest, so promisingly begun on board the *St. Paul*, seemed to have lost ground. Though he was much in her society, he avoided intimate topics, and often puzzled her with a hastily averted look of wistful tenderness in strange contrast to his assiduous but commonplace hospitality.

Half an hour before luncheon General Sadgrove, returning on foot from the station and looking five years older for his run up to London, met the two

young couples, who had now joined forces, as they were entering the mansion. Forsyth gave his uncle an anxious glance of inquiry, but the old man passed him by unheeding, and addressed the Duke in a tone of icy formality.

"I shall be obliged if your Grace will give me five minutes in the library on a very urgent matter," he said, adding, with significant emphasis, "*I have been with Mr. Ziegler this morning.*"

Beaumanoir, gone all pale and tremulous, made a palpable effort at self-control as he replied:

"Come into the library by all means, General. But I am afraid you will find me quite as reticent as I am sure Ziegler was."

The interview lasted till long after the luncheon gong had sounded, and when at length the Duke and the General entered the dining-room two pairs of watchful eyes observed that their relative attitudes had been reversed. The General's usually impassive face was working so painfully that Mrs. Sadgrove half rose from her chair at sight of her husband, checking herself with difficulty; while the Duke bore himself almost jauntily, and began chaffing Sybil about her devotion to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, who was still, by latest bulletin from Rosa, "suffering ze grand torments" and unable to leave her room.

The afternoon passed without external signs that the house-party was living on the verge of an active volcano. But as it was growing dusk Forsyth, at the risk of being late for dinner, took a solitary walk in the direction of a certain stile, by which the Prior's Tarrant pastures were approached by a short cut across fields from Tarrant Road railway station. He arrived at the stile in the nick of time to give a helping hand to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, who had just reached the spot from the opposite direction. The hour was the one when the guests at the house might be expected to be dressing for dinner, and it also tallied with the arrival of a London train at the station; but neither alluded to these incidentals of such an obviously chance meeting.

"I trust that your headache is better," said Forsyth, politely.

But the headache, he was assured, was rather worse than better. The sufferer averred that she had slipped out an hour before, to go for a quiet walk in the meadows in the hope of obtaining relief; but the remedy had been of no avail, and all that remained was to go back to bed.

"Won't you walk back with me?" Mrs. Talmage Eglinton added, devouring the young Scotsman's healthy, good-looking face with eyes of invitation. "I don't seem ever to get you alone nowadays."

"I am very sorry, but I have to go a little further," replied Forsyth, and, raising his hat, he passed on. But it was a very little way further that he had to go, for at the end of the first meadow he turned and followed in the lady's wake back to the mansion, catching, as he did so, a glimpse of Azimoolah moving

stealthily in the bushes at the side of the path.

That night the post-bag which one of the Prior's Tarrant grooms conveyed to the office in the village contained a letter addressed to "Clinton Ziegler, Esqre.," at the Hotel Cecil, couched thus:

> *"The gentleman interviewed in the Bowery, New York, by Mr. Jevons on your behalf has reconsidered the matter, and is now prepared to carry out his commitment. He is so shaken by recent occurrences that he does not feel up to coming himself till he has received assurances, but his secretary will call at the hotel on Monday for instructions, which please hand to the secretary in writing and carefully sealed."*

CHAPTER XVI—*A Delicate Mission*

It was on Sunday evening that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, after a pious pilgrimage to the village church in company with her assiduous friend Sybil Hanbury, sought the Duke and asked if she might have a carriage to take her to the station for the up-train on the following morning. She would return in the evening, she said, but imperative business with her milliner and tailor demanded her presence in London for a few hours.

Beaumanoir, in courteously promising that her request should be attended to, regarded her with a wan smile. "You will have a companion—that is, if you do not mind Mr. Forsyth sharing the station brougham with you," he added. "Alec has to go to London to-morrow on my business—leases at the solicitors', isn't it?"

He turned for confirmation to Forsyth, who, with General Sadgrove, had been strolling with him on the terrace.

"Yes, leases at the solicitors'," replied the private secretary, flushing slightly. The General looked indifferent.

"Really?" said the lady. "There must be a lot of that sort of thing to see to just now, I suppose. Of course, I shall be delighted to have Mr. Forsyth's escort, provided he drops me at Bond Street. I cannot have a critical male person

following me across my tailor's sacred threshold."

She shook a gay finger at the party and disappeared into one of the French windows—a vision of dainty *chiffons* and rustling silks.

"She's gone to put her prayer-book away," laughed Forsyth, in the nervous manner of one wishing to cover an awkward situation.

"She needs one," muttered the General under his mustache, shooting a furtive glance at his nephew.

Beaumanoir said nothing, and the three paced on, hardly speaking, till it was time to dress for dinner. Since the General's return from town on the day of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's headache, not exactly a coolness, but a constraint, had sprung up between them. A suspicion of cross-purposes was in the air, which kept them silent when all together, but communicative enough when any two of them were alone in solitary places.

It was so now, for the General waited till the Duke had left them to go up to his dressing-room before he remarked in a tone of grim humor:

"I told you that you would have her for a traveling companion."

"I don't anticipate much pleasure from the journey," Forsyth replied, gloomily, and reddening under the searching gaze with which his uncle raked him.

But with the exception of the short drive to the station, during which Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was unusually preoccupied, he was spared the uncongenial *tête-à-tête* he had expected. When the train came in the fair American said chaffingly that she knew he was dying to smoke—that, anyhow, she was in a mood for meditation herself, and intended to indulge it in the seclusion of a "ladies' compartment." Forsyth responded with the barest protest demanded by courtesy, and went away to a smoking-carriage, much relieved.

He saw her again at St. Pancras; indeed, he contrived to be near enough to overhear the direction to an address in Bond Street which she gave to her cabman, but he noticed the not unexpected fact that here in London she had no desire for his society. She had hurried into the vehicle without looking round for him, and was driven away at a pace that betokened special instructions to the driver.

Forsyth took another cab and bade his man keep the first cab in sight. Before long he perceived that the lady was in truth going to Bond Street, and presently he had the satisfaction of seeing her discharge her cab and skip lightly into the shop of a fashionable *modiste* in that thoroughfare. His complacence was a little marred by uncertainty whether she had observed him or not, but from the quick turn of her head as she crossed the pavement he was rather inclined to think that she had.

"It doesn't matter, really," he reflected. "She knows that we suspect her complicity, or she wouldn't have tried to blind her trail to the hotel by driving

here first. Strange, though, that, suspecting that, she should have taken so much trouble."

He ordered his driver to take him to the Hotel Cecil, and at the same time to keep a lookout to see whether they in turn were being followed by the lady whom they had just run to ground. But when he was set down at the main entrance of the great twelve-storied palace he received the assurance that nothing of the sort had occurred.

"Not so keen after you, sir, as you was after her," ejaculated the smart cabman as he whipped up and wheeled round, dissatisfied, after the manner of his kind, with the extra half-crown he had received for his "shadowing job."

Forsyth shuddered. "*Keen*, by George!" he murmured ruefully. "If only my devotion to poor old Charley could have led me into paths untrodden by Mrs. Talmage Eglinton my task would have been a lighter one."

He went into the bureau and inquired if Mr. Clinton Ziegler was in, receiving the stereotyped reply that Mr. Ziegler was *always* in, being an invalid. Whereupon he sent up his card, first penciling thereon the words, "Private Secretary to the Duke of Beaumanoir."

The bell-boy who took up the card reappeared almost immediately, flying down the grand staircase three steps at a time.

"Please to come up at *once*, sir, the gentleman said," was the boy's urgent appeal.

Forsyth, with a feeling of having "burned his ships," obeyed with equal alacrity, and was shown into the suite made memorable by the raid of his Highness the Thakore of Bhurtnagur, otherwise General Sadgrove's faithful orderly, Azimoolah Khan. He noticed in passing in that the door of the next suite—that of Mrs. Talmage Eglinton—was slightly ajar, but his attention was immediately claimed by the welcome he received in Mr. Ziegler's apartments. Just inside the door he was met by a tall, bold-eyed man whom, from Beaumanoir's description, he had no difficulty in recognizing as the sham "Colonel Anstruther Walcot," but who introduced himself as Leopold Benzon, Mr. Ziegler's private secretary.

The idea of a professional criminal being served with such specious pomp tickled Forsyth's sense of humor; but, restraining an impulse to laugh in the fellow's face, he responded gravely to the salutation and stated his business. He had come, he said, after mentioning his name, on behalf of the Duke of Beaumanoir, to see Mr. Ziegler by appointment on a matter of private business.

"Mr. Ziegler is expecting you," Benzon replied, scrutinizing the visitor's face narrowly. "Unfortunately he is not so well as usual this morning, and is not yet dressed. I must ask you to wait a little till he is ready to receive you."

Forsyth bowed and took the chair offered him, not without an inward chuckle at the discrepancy between the haste of the bell-boy's summons to the

suite and the delay in receiving him. To his mind the position was clear. Mrs. Talmage Eglinton desired to keep up the polite fiction of her innocence to the end, yet Ziegler was apparently not prepared to go forward with the business without an opportunity of consulting her. She had come up to town for the express purpose of advising, perhaps supervising, her colleagues at an important crisis, and was doubtless on her way to the hotel after the diversion he had created, so that it was necessary to get him out of the entrance-hall before she passed up to her suite.

"I shouldn't wonder if she isn't the boss of the show, with Ziegler, who is probably her husband, as figure-head," Forsyth told himself.

Benzon, with a polite excuse, had retired into an inner room; but his place had immediately been taken by a well-dressed but cadaverous individual whom Forsyth recognized as the man in clerical attire whom he had seen descending the stairs in John Street after the forcible entry into his chambers, the miscreant who later on the same eventful night had called at Beaumanoir House in the character of a disguised police-officer.

There was evidently no disposition to leave him alone in the ante-room, and so give him a chance to open the outer door and witness Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's arrival in the next suite. So twenty minutes passed, and Forsyth was speculating as to how communication would be carried on with the female partner during the forthcoming interview, when Benzon returned and announced that Mr. Ziegler was awaiting him. He could not help observing how much better suited was this bowing and smirking American swindler to the *rôle* of a superior flunkey than to that of a British cavalry officer.

The next moment he found himself in the principal reception-room of the suite, face to face with a frail old man of unpleasant appearance, who, Forsyth noticed with quick intuition, was reclining on a couch that had been drawn across a closed door. There was another—open—door leading into the bedroom, but the closed one must be the same which from the other side of it had confirmed the General's suspicions of the occupant of the adjoining suite. Forsyth could picture to himself Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's shell-like ear glued to that door, its fair owner prepared to tap gentle signals by the Morse code on the panels if things did not go to her liking in the audience-chamber.

His conjectures were brought down to the bed-rock of fact by the croaking voice of the invalid on the couch. Mr. Ziegler's repulsive aspect, his purple cheeks, and green-shaded eyes suggested some horrible cutaneous affection, though Forsyth was not so ingenuous as to accept the disfigurements as genuine.

"I am sorry to have detained you, sir," Ziegler began, and then paused abruptly. Forsyth wondered if he had been brought up with a round turn by a tap on the door close to his ear. There seemed something tentative, as though

the speaker were trying his ground, in that first disjointed utterance.

"It does not matter," Forsyth replied, and then in his turn came to a sudden stop. His diplomatic training at the Foreign Office had taught him the advantage of allowing the other side to open the proceedings. He who has the first word is seldom the one to have the last.

But it appeared that Mr. Ziegler was also alive to the value of reserving his fire. "I presume that the Duke of Beaumanoir instructed you on the nature of the business you were to transact with me?" he said, and there was a firmer ring in the curious metallic voice than when he made his first brief apology.

"On the contrary, he left me quite in the dark about it," Forsyth made answer. "All I understood was that I was to fetch something which you would hand me in person."

Ziegler took a leisurely survey of the young Scotsman through his green glasses. "Then you did not come here expecting to have to use your own discretion in any way—to traffic with me, in fact?" he presently asked.

"Certainly not," Forsyth replied. "I gathered that the part I was to play was solely that of a trusted messenger who could be relied on to say nothing about his errand afterwards."

"Not even to General Sadgrove?" flashed back the answering question so swiftly that for an instant Forsyth was taken aback.

"I am not one to betray my employer's secrets—even to my uncle, General Sadgrove," he said, recovering himself quickly.

"Very good!" was the croaking comment. "I deemed it necessary to sound you because we are aware of the foolish meddling—I might also say muddling—of that mischievous old man. We know also that you have aided and abetted him in an attempt to swim against a tide that is far too strong for both of you."

"I quite admit that," responded Forsyth, boldly. "My uncle has been doing his best to protect the Duke's life, and as in duty bound I have used my efforts to assist him—up to a certain point."

"What do you mean—up to a certain point?"

"I mean that as the Duke seems now to have taken matters actively into his own hands by opening up communication with you, I am naturally rather at the disposition of my employer than of anyone else."

"Truly a faithful servant," said Ziegler, with a strong suspicion of a sneer. "And now, Mr. Forsyth, I have a question to ask which you are at liberty to answer or not as you please, but on which the future security of his Grace will probably depend. I shall draw my own deductions from a refusal to answer, and take it as an affirmative. Has the Duke disclosed to either you or General Sadgrove, or, as far as you are aware, to anyone else, the reason of his recent differences with us?"

Forsyth rejoiced that he was able to reply in the negative. "No," he said promptly and with evident truth; "he has always steadily refused to enlighten my uncle and myself as to the cause of his being so persecuted. We have been kept absolutely in the dark."

He did not feel called upon to add, as he might have done, that a good deal of that darkness had been penetrated by General Sadgrove's acumen, and that the design on Senator Sherman's gold bonds was an open book to them.

Ziegler, however, was satisfied with the reply. Signing to the pretentious Benzon, who throughout the interview had hovered close to his master's couch, he conferred with him in a whisper, and then addressed Forsyth again with a request that he would wait for a few minutes in the ante-room, when a letter for the Duke would be handed to him and he would be free to depart.

"Good-day to you, sir," added the arch-plotter. "I regret that my infirmities preclude me from offering you hospitality. These little encounters become, I find, more fatiguing with advancing years."

Bidding him a curt good-morning, Forsyth returned to the ante-room, accompanied by the cadaverous individual, who had also been present at the interview. Benzon remained behind, softly shutting the door on them, and there was a distinct click of the key being turned in the lock. His companion making no overture for conversation, Forsyth sat down and affected to read a newspaper, though he was really straining his ears to catch what passed in the inner room. Already perplexed by having seen no signs of communication between Ziegler and the next suite, he was trying to ascertain if a conference was now proceeding with the fair tenant next door. No sound reached him, however, till after the lapse of some twenty minutes Benzon came swiftly out of the inner room with a heavily sealed letter in his hand.

"This," said Ziegler's aide-de-camp, "is the packet which my chief wishes you to deliver to the Duke of Beaumanoir. You are alive to the importance of seeing that it reaches its destination without being lost or tampered with?"

"My dear sir, I should not, I imagine, have been entrusted with this very uncongenial errand unless I had been thought capable of carrying it out," replied Forsyth, in a tone of annoyance.

"Take it, then," Benzon proceeded. "And you are, please, to inform his Grace that Mr. Ziegler, though he would have preferred to see him in person, is satisfied with the discretion of his emissary."

"Thanks, but I don't think I need a testimonial from Mr. Ziegler to recommend me to the Duke," replied Forsyth, coolly, as he buttoned the letter into the breast-pocket of his frock coat and with a bow took his departure.

Out in the corridor he breathed more freely. "I don't think that I overdid my exhibition of temper," he told himself. "A little touchiness was to be expected

under the circumstances."

He had begun to descend the stairs into the entrance-hall, when he saw—with something of a shock—coming up, and therefore about to meet him, the lady whom he believed to be in the next suite to Ziegler's, advising her partners through the communicating door. He had got it firmly into his head that during the twenty minutes he had been kept waiting that door had been opened, and the terms of the letter settled between the two principals; and here was Mrs. Talmage Eglinton not in her rooms at all, but apparently only just arrived.

"Ah, Mr. Forsyth!" she cried, coquettishly. "You have been up to my suite to look for me, with a view to standing me a luncheon somewhere. Now don't deny that you were disappointed when you found that I had not reached the hotel and that the suite was locked up."

Could he have been mistaken? Forsyth asked himself. If so, the mistake was not really his, but General Sadgrove's, and the entire bottom was knocked out of the veteran's theory as to this woman's complicity.

"But I have not been up to your rooms," was all he could reply on the spur of the moment. "I had business with the gentleman who occupies the adjoining suite."

If it was not genuine, the look of disappointment that stole into her face was a consummate piece of acting. "Oh, was that all," she said, with a queer little laugh. "Well, that doesn't absolve you from asking me to lunch now that you have the chance."

"I shall be delighted," was the only answer he could make without showing open hostility.

"Wait in the hall, then," said Mrs. Talmage Eglinton. "I am only going up to see if some jewelry I left locked up when I went down to Prior's Tarrant is safe."

She hurried up the remaining stairs, and Forsyth continued his way down to the hall, a prey to conflicting emotions. Disgust at having to lunch with a woman he abhorred was the least of them. What worried him most at that moment was the doubt, restored by this meeting, whether Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was not, after all, the victim of a chain of coincidences.

And then, suddenly, a flicker of light broke on the situation through—of all places in the world—a tiny flaw in the lady's defensive armor. She had spoken of her suite as locked up, but he remembered now that the outer door of it had been slightly ajar when he went in to his interview with Ziegler. He went up to the big uniformed porter on duty at the swing doors, and asked him if he knew Mrs. Talmage Eglinton by sight.

"Oh yes, sir," the man replied. "You'll catch her if you run up to her rooms sharp. She's just going out."

"Going out?" exclaimed Forsyth, with well simulated surprise. "I thought I

caught a glimpse of her going upstairs a moment ago. She seemed to have only just arrived."

"Oh no, sir; she came in an hour ago, and was on her way out just now when she found she'd forgotten something."

Forsyth left the proximity of the porter quickly, and went and waited at the foot of the staircase. The horizon had cleared again, and he smiled at the very thin trick which had so nearly deceived him—would have deceived him, in fact, if one of the gang, eagerly expecting her, had not chanced to be at her door when he went up. After concluding her business with her accomplices she had contrived the meeting on the stairs to throw dust in his eyes, going, in her desire for realism, to the length of explaining to the hall-porter why she had gone upstairs again after coming down into the hall. Well, he would hold her to the lunch invitation; let her think that she had hoodwinked him; and endeavor to ascertain whether she was courting his society as a mere bluff to lend color to her deception, or with some other object as yet undefined.

He had not long to wait for her. Tripping lightly down the stairs, she joined him with a charming assumption that he would be interested to hear that her jewels were "quite safe," and she supplemented the information with the request that they should not lunch in the hotel.

"I am known here, and people stare so," she said. "Take me somewhere where we can be quiet. I have got something to say."

"Very well," he replied. "Come over to Kettner's. There won't be much of a crowd there at this time of day." And he strove hard to be polite as he steered her across the Strand, though he could have wished himself back at the Foreign Office, with no prospects and no Duke to serve, if Sybil's brave young face had not been in his mind's eye.

At the restaurant Mrs. Talmage Eglinton chose a table in a remote corner of the dining-room and devoted herself to a careful study of the *menu*. It was not till she had selected her dishes and quizzed the appearance of the other customers that she developed her plan of attack.

"You don't seem at all interested in the fact that I have something to say to you," she began, leaning back and scanning him critically. Her voluptuous style of beauty had never had any attraction for him; to-day it positively repelled.

"My worst enemies have never accused me of being curious," he answered lightly. "Nay, I am not discourteous," he protested, seeing the angry gleam in the fine eyes. "I only mean that I cannot work myself into a fever about a communication the subject of which I am ignorant of."

"Tell me," she said abruptly, "what reason you had for following me from St. Pancras to Bond Street this morning?"

Whatever her motive she was pushing him hard, and Forsyth's presence of

mind failed him. He flushed and began to stammer.

[image]

"I am very far from being indifferent to Mrs. Talmage Eglinton."

"It is useless to deny it," she cut him short. "I saw you in the cab quite plainly as I entered the shop, and my cabby had previously told me that I was being shadowed. Now, Mr. Forsyth, when a gentleman follows a lady about the streets he either does it because he means her some harm, or because—well, because he is not quite indifferent to her. Which was it in your case?"

This was a poser, and it had to be faced with instant decision. Rapidly reflecting that unless he was then and there prepared to accuse his fair *vis-à-vis* with complicity with Ziegler there was only one course open to him, he took it promptly. He little thought that within the next forty-eight hours his fate—to live or to die—would depend on the demeanor he then adopted.

"I certainly did not follow you with a bad motive, and—there, a straight question deserves a straight answer—I am very far from being indifferent to you, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton," he said.

After that the amenities flowed in the most friendly channel, though Forsyth suffered agonies, and it required all his skill as an amateur actor of repute to sustain the part of a diffident lover hovering on the brink of a declaration.

In the afternoon they returned to Prior's Tarrant together, outwardly on the best of terms; but, needless to say, Forsyth was still "hovering."

CHAPTER XVII—*Where is the Duke?*

The next day was that set for the arrival of Senator Sherman, though it would be quite late in the afternoon before he could reach Prior's Tarrant from Liverpool. Mrs. Sherman had addressed a letter to him on board the *Campania*, explaining matters and passing on a cordial invitation from Beaumanoir that he would join

the party on landing.

Latterly there had been an entire absence of the excursions and alarums which had marked the earlier days of the house-party. General Sadgrove and Alec Forsyth had relaxed none of their vigilance, and Azimoolah still ranged the glades of the park, but no more unauthorized artists had put in an appearance, nor had any member of the party suffered from headache, entailing the strange cure of a midnight journey.

On this eventful morning it so happened that the ladies were all assembled in the breakfast-room before any of the gentlemen were down. Sybil, presiding at the tea and coffee equipage, was evincing deep interest in Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's narrative of her purchases in London the day before; Mrs. Sherman was wondering to Mrs. Sadgrove whether "Leonidas" would come straight to Prior's Tarrant, or insist on depositing the bonds in the Bank of England first; and Leonie was looking dreamily through the open windows across the park—she was often dreaming nowadays; so was the Duke.

Presently General Sadgrove strode in and took his seat, making no apology, because breakfast was a come-as-you-please meal, and no one was expected to be punctual. But when he had said good-morning all round he glanced uneasily at the vacant places of Beaumanoir and Forsyth. The two young men were usually up and about before anyone.

Mrs. Talmage Eglinton had broken off in the middle of describing a new and ravishing hat to Sybil in order to smile a welcome to the grim old warrior. She was now following the direction of his glance, and commented on it in sprightly fashion.

"The naughty Duke and the naughty Mr. Forsyth!" she purred. "I believe you men keep most frightfully late hours in this house, General. What is it that you do—play cards or gamble with dominoes?"

"No, it's chess," jerked out the General, regarding her impassively. "Mate to the King and the Black Queen to move. All that sort of thing, don't you know."

The American widow trilled out a silvery laugh, and the veteran attacked his breakfast. But, looking singularly old this morning, he seemed to have but little appetite, and ate slowly, frowning at the two empty places; and when Alec Forsyth came in alone, and white as a sheet, he was on his legs in a moment.

"Where is the Duke?" the General flung at his nephew.

"I don't know; he's not in his room, and I can't find him anywhere in the nearer gardens," was the reply. "I should like to speak to you for a moment," Forsyth added, with a significant glance at the ladies, who had so far failed to grasp that there was anything serious in a Duke being late for breakfast in his own house.

It needed no second request to bring the General out into the hall. "Now

tell me shortly," said the old man as soon as they were alone together.

What Forsyth had to tell did not amount to much. As was his custom, he had gone to Beaumanoir's room as soon as he was dressed, and had found it vacant. As, however, the bed had been slept in, he apprehended nothing wrong, thinking merely that the Duke was smoking an early cigarette on the terrace. Seeing no sign of him there, he extended his search in the grounds, but again with no result. The next step was to question the servants, none of whom had seen their master since the previous day.

The General stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I don't believe that woman knows anything," he said at length. "I was watching her when you came in. She seemed to be surprised, and even disconcerted, by your news."

"Perhaps one of her colleagues has acted independently, or there may be divided counsels in the camp," Forsyth suggested. "In that case——"

"In *any* case, what we have to do is to find Beaumanoir, dead or alive," the General interrupted. "See here, Alec, you must get a grip on yourself and go in and eat your breakfast calmly—just to prevent a premature panic among the women. I'll go and hunt up Azimoolah. If there has been any stir during the night he is sure to know of it."

But as the General descended the terrace steps he was smitten with inward misgivings on that point. Had his faithful henchman detected anything unusual during the hours of darkness he would, long ere this, have been up to the house to report; besides which, if he had come across any lurking miscreants he would have seen to it that no harm befell the Duke. And here was the Duke missing. The hypothesis was that Azimoolah had either been eluded or had himself fallen a victim to foul play.

Influenced by this fear, the General quickened his pace, and as soon as he reached the wooded portion of the park uttered at frequent intervals his signal for the Pathan to appear. But glade after glade he traversed, scaring the rabbits with his cobra-like hiss, yet the lithe form of Azimoolah nowhere broke through the bushes. The General did not desist till he had thoroughly drawn the coverts, abandoning after a while his strange noises for a systematic scrutiny of the ground. He knew that had Azimoolah been in the park as a live man he would have answered the well-known call by now; whereas if he was lying cold and stark somewhere in the thicket, by patient search alone could he be found.

At the end of a fruitless hour the General went back to the house, realizing that not only the Duke, but the Duke's most capable protector, was missing. The blow was a severe one, for, apart from the ominous mystery of this dual disappearance, a certain scheme that had come to very near maturity was rendered null and void—a scheme that before another day dawned was to have cut the claws of Ziegler and Co. for ever.

There was the bare chance that Beaumanoir might have turned up during his absence, and General Sadgrove covered the ground at his best pace; but he was destined to find no such pleasant surprise in store for him. Forsyth met him, as he mounted the terrace steps, with the significant inquiry whether he had discovered anything.

"Nothing, and Azimoolah has gone too," was the reply. "Where are the women?"

"In the morning-room; they are not alarmed as yet, only a little uneasy—especially Leonie."

"She would be, but we needn't mind her," the General rejoined, brusquely. "What do you make of Ziegler's understudy?"

"I cannot make much of her," replied Forsyth. "I am inclined to agree with you that she is as much in a fog as the rest of us."

The General grunted, and proposed that they should at once go up and rummage Beaumanoir's room for clues, a course which they instantly adopted. Since the charcoal episode their host had resolutely refused to occupy "the Duke's room," preferring to that grim state apartment a smaller chamber in the corridor where most of the guests were accommodated. Access was gained to it by two different doors, one leading to it through a dressing-room, the other directly opening into it. They chose the latter as being the nearest, and as they entered distinctly heard the swish of a silk skirt in the dressing-room, followed by the soft closing of the dressing-room door.

Alert and bristling like an angry terrier, the General stepped quickly back into the corridor—just in time to see another door gently shut a little farther on.

"You were right, laddie," he said, rejoining Forsyth. "She has been here before us on the same errand. Mrs. Talmage Eglinton is as much bewildered as we are by the turn of events, and she has been trying to arrive at conclusions from an inspection of the Duke's room."

They began their "rummage," which was made easier for them by the fact that the housemaids had not yet paid their morning visit to the room. The bed had certainly been slept in, and there were also indications that the occupant had made a perfunctory sort of toilet afterwards. There was fresh lather on a shaving-paper, and soapy water in the wash-basin, to show that Beaumanoir had been able to attend to his person.

"Whatever has happened to him didn't happen here," said the General with decision. "He left this room a free agent, at all events. The question then arises, When and why did he leave it, and has he left the confines of the park?"

"He must have made a cold toilet," said Forsyth. "See, here is the hot water which was brought up for him at eight o'clock this morning, and also the water for his tub."

He stepped outside into the corridor and pointed to a small and a large can that had been placed close outside the door of the dressing-room. By the General's advice the Duke had been in the habit of keeping both doors locked at night, and the cans were never brought in by the servant who called him. A valet had not yet been engaged.

"And there by the wash-stand is the empty can he used overnight," said the General. "Yes, there is the dirty water, in which he washed his hands before going to bed, in the waste-pail. We fix him, then, to having slept for some hours, and to having got up early and left the house in the small hours before anyone was about."

"It looks as if he were playing a lone hand at some game of his own," said Forsyth, doubtfully.

But the General would have no vague conjectures. Having settled within approximate limits the time when Beaumanoir quitted his room, he desired to learn how he had left the house. He himself had been sitting up from two, at which hour he relieved Forsyth, till five o'clock, and he would stake his reputation that no one had been moving during the period of his vigilance. The Duke must have left the house between five and six, at which latter hour the servants began to be moving.

This view was strengthened by inquiry from the butler, who reported that on going his rounds to open up the house he had discovered one of the windows of the smoking-room unbolted, though he had himself seen to the fastenings the night before. He had not thought anything of it, supposing that one of the gentlemen had gone out for an early stroll.

The General led Forsyth aside. "Whatever has happened to Beaumanoir, he has courted his own fate by going outside unattended," he said. "It almost looks as if he had been lured out by some trick of his enemies, in which case Azimoolah has probably been done to death while endeavoring to protect him. Come and help me search the park once more, and then if we find nothing we must call in the police."

Making a detour by the stable-yard, so as to avoid meeting and being questioned by the ladies, they struck out for the leafy recesses of the broad belt of woodland that fringed the park. Allotting one section to Forsyth and taking the other himself, the General repeated the process of the morning, peering into the bushes, turning over heaps of leaves and probing the bracken with his stick, but all to no purpose. No gruesome corpse, either of English nobleman or of dark-skinned Asiatic, met their straining eyes.

"We must give it up," said the General at last. "Now that we are down here we had better go out through the wicket-gate into the village and tell the constable to send for his superiors. We have reached the limit, and poor Beaumanoir's

secrets can belong to him no longer, I fear."

Forsyth assented that it would be no longer advisable, even if it were possible, to keep the Duke's affairs out of the hands of the police, and the two made their way toward the private gate in the park wall through which Beaumanoir had gone to church on his first memorable Sunday at Prior's Tarrant. They were approaching the gate, not by the path, but skirting the wall through the undergrowth, when a lissome body appeared suddenly at the top of the wall, poised there for a moment, and then dropped almost at their feet. It was Azimoolah Khan, dusty and out of breath, but very far from being a dead man.

"How is this, thou son of Sheitan?" exclaimed the General, affecting sternness to hide his pleasure. "It was not your wont in the jungle days to desert your post in times of danger. In your absence some evil thing has befallen him whom we are pledged to guard."

"Nay, Sahib, but hear me. It is not thy servant who has deserted his post, but his post which has deserted him," protested the Pathan, with dignified reproof. "The great Lord Duke ran away—oh so far and so fast—and thy servant ran after in his tracks to see that no harm befell him."

"Well, where is the Duke now, man?" the General blurted out in great excitement. "Surely you haven't come back to tell me that you have lost him?"

"The Duke is in the fire-carriage, Sahib; and thy servant having no sufficient money or orders from the Sahib, was not able to follow further than the station," Azimoolah replied.

Pressed to be more explicit, this was the story he had to impart. He had been patrolling the park, ever with a watchful eye for the house, when between five and six he had seen the Duke come from one of the ground-floor windows and make at great speed for the coppices. Keeping himself concealed, Azimoolah had quickly perceived that it was the Duke's intention to leave the park by the wicket gate, and, considering it his duty not to lose sight of him, he had climbed the wall and followed. Avoiding the village street, Beaumanoir had struck into a series of lanes which presently brought him back into the main road beyond the farthest habitation. Thenceforward, with Azimoolah shadowing him, he had commenced a tramp which lasted between two and three hours, and finally ended at a railway station in a fair-sized country town.

"You ascertained the name of the town?" asked the General.

Yes, after the train had steamed away Azimoolah had not omitted to inquire the name of the town. It was Tring. He had also inquired at the booking-office where the Duke had taken a ticket for, but the clerk had refused the information with a rude remark about the color of his skin—a remark which, east of Suez, might have brought him a taste of cold steel.

"And then, Sahib," concluded the narrator, "without bite or sup I started

to run back again, being sore afraid lest thy heart should be troubled by these things."

The General patted his orderly's lean shoulder. "You have done right, old sheep-dog," he said. "And as the lamb has broken loose from the fold you can go and get food and take a few hours' rest. Come, Alec! Let us get back and see what Bradshaw has to tell us."

Azimoolah having vanished over the boundary wall for his lodging in the village, they returned to the house and repaired to the library. Forsyth found a Northwestern time-table and turned up Tring.

"Beaumanoir must have caught the 7.30 down," he said, running his finger down the page. "It's a slow train, stopping at every station, and doesn't go beyond Bletchley."

The General was growing querulous. "Bletchley!" he snorted. "What the deuce does he want at Bletchley? It's a little one-horse town in North Bucks, isn't it?"

"Hold on, it's more than that," said Forsyth, still with his finger on the column. "It's a junction where fast trains stop, and—yes!—he could change there into the North of England express, which calls there at 8.10."

The two men looked at each other in silence and with something of consternation.

"Liverpool is in the north of England," said the General after a pause, "and Sherman is due to arrive there to-day."

"I cannot and will not believe that Beaumanoir has gone wrong after all," Forsyth angrily replied to his uncle's significant remark. He spoke with such heat that neither of them noticed that the library door had been opened and that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton stood there, smiling at them.

"Who has gone wrong?" she purred sweetly. "For goodness' sake, don't tell me that the Duke has run away with a housemaid!"

She was looking at Forsyth with eyes that bored like gimlets, and he thought of the letter from Ziegler, addressed to the Duke, entrusted to him the day before. Was it something in that letter that made her stare so steadfastly and yet with something of mockery in her gaze? Having good reason to be aware of the contents of that letter, he thought it likely. Only in that case calculations had been all at sea, and Beaumanoir—alas, poor Beaumanoir!

It was the General who answered the lady's banter, and that without any visible discomfiture. "No, it isn't the Duke who has gone wrong," he said calmly. "We were talking of someone not nearly so exalted. Our host is all right—gone away for a few hours by an early train on business. We have found out all about his movements, and I shall be obliged, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, if you will kindly reassure the other ladies that Beaumanoir's absence is satisfactorily accounted

for."

"How delighted Miss Sherman will be. I will go and tell them all, at once," cried the American gaily. And she swept out of the room with an exuberant triumph not lost on those who remained behind.

"Wherever the Duke has gone, and with whatever motive, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton is pleased," the General mused aloud.

"She will find herself mistaken if she thinks he has gone to play her game," said Alec Forsyth, staunch as ever to his friend.

CHAPTER XVIII—*The Senator and the Securities*

On the hurricane-deck of the *Campania*, as the leviathan liner thrust her huge bulk towards the landing-stage through the lesser fry of the teeming Mersey traffic, a big man, wearing a light-gray frock-coat and a broad-brimmed soft white hat, stood talking to the purser. Senator Leonidas Sherman was accounted the handsomest man at Washington, and in his broad, well-chiseled, clean-shaven face was reflected that honesty and shrewd alertness which had caused his selection for his present trust.

"I don't want the box out before the last moment, Mr. Seaton, and if you can conveniently keep the bullion-room locked till you hand it over I should be obliged," the Senator was saying.

The brass-buttoned official gave a ready assent to the distinguished passenger's request.

"I'd rather you had your job than me, sir," he added, seriously. "The equivalent of three million sterling in a little leather thing like that, and to have to cart it up to London all by your lone self—why, it's enough to make one shudder."

"It doesn't me," the Senator replied simply, with an unconscious gesture to his hip-pocket. "I have a bit of a reputation to live up to, you know. If it's to be shooting, my early training has taught me to draw first; and if it's to be confidence-men—well, it's some years since I was born."

The purser nodded and went about his duties while Sherman leaned over the forward rail and watched the shore, looming larger now every moment. The

Senator was no back-woods "hayseed." A man of culture and much travel, he possessed far more than a guide-book knowledge of every European capital, and did not make the mistake of under-estimating London as a hatching-ground for crime. Till his precious charge was deposited in the Bank of England and he had fingered the receipt he was prepared for emergencies. The gold shipment which his Government had negotiated against the bonds he was bringing had been buzzed about in Wall Street for two months and more—ample time for the maturing of predatory schemes.

Aided by the company's tug, the great steamer sidled up to the landing-stage, and as soon as the gangways were opened the usual stream of passengers' friends began to push their way on board. The hurricane-deck towered high above the level of the quay, and Senator Sherman, not expecting anyone to meet him, retained his post of vantage at the rail, looking down with amused interest at the embracings and hand-shakings. He had no need to hurry, for it was too late to catch a train to London in time to reach the Bank before it closed for the day, and he preferred to let the ship clear before he claimed the box of bonds from the purser.

Suddenly he heard his name spoken inquiringly at his elbow, and wheeling smartly round he found himself looking into the harassed eyes of a well-dressed man whom he had seen, a few minutes before, pass on board from the landing-stage. He had specially noticed him from a limp which impeded his progress across the crowded gangway.

"Yes, my name is Sherman, but I haven't the pleasure of knowing yours," said the Senator shortly. There was a diffident air about this tired-looking individual—a something that might be shyness or might be guile—that put him on his guard. Could it be that one of the "confidence-men," about whom he had just spoken so lightly, was going to practise on him ere even the securities were out of the purser's custody? He wondered what tale would be unfolded for his entrapment.

"I am the Duke of Beaumanoir," the stranger replied, after a nervous glance round. "I don't suppose you ever heard of me. There wouldn't have been time for a letter from your people to reach you from this side before you sailed."

"You know my wife and daughter?" the Senator asked, sharply. The "tale" was developing on the grand scale, he told himself.

"I have the privilege of knowing Mrs. and Miss Sherman," replied the Duke, flushing under the keen scrutiny to which he was being subjected. "I have also the honor of being their host. They are staying, together with their friends the Sadgroves, at my place in Hertfordshire. I—I came down to meet you in the hope of inducing you to join them there."

"Very good of you. May I ask how you came to make their acquaintance?"

asked the Senator, in an arid tone.

"I traveled in the same ship with them from New York, and General Sadgrove, with whom they stayed on arrival, happened to be the uncle of my friend and secretary, Alec Forsyth," Beaumanoir made answer.

An amused twinkle flashed into the Senator's clear eyes. He was quite certain now that the man was an impostor with designs on the three millions. The only spice of truth in the fellow's story, he told himself, probably was that he had sailed in the *St. Paul*, which would have given him the opportunity of gathering from his wife or Leonie the particulars he was now working on. The Senator had no doubt that if he accompanied this rather poor specimen of a criminal decoy an attempt would be made to relieve him of the bonds—possibly to murder him. It was all a little too thin—especially the dangling of an exalted title as a bait to catch an American. This part of the scheme really annoyed him, as casting on a foible of his fellow-countrymen a reflection which he felt to be not wholly undeserved. The Senator became dangerous.

"Very well, your Grace; if my family is under your roof, it is the right place for me," he said more affably. "I accept your invitation in the spirit in which it is given. I have a matter of three million sterling in securities to get from the bullion-room, and then I'm your man. Kindly wait here."

A grim smile played round the Senator's firm lips when, after going through the needful formalities with the purser, he quitted the steamer's stronghold, carrying the leather despatch-box. He would lead the rascal on, making his mouth water, gently titillate his expectations, and then, having got him fairly on the hooks, hand him over to the police. Delighted with the prospect of thwarting a rogue, he sought his state-room to collect his personal baggage and have it conveyed ashore. The first thing that met his eye on entering the state-room was a letter in his wife's handwriting that had just been delivered.

It bore date of the previous day, and informed him that the writer and Leonie were staying as the guests of the Duke of Beaumanoir at his country seat, Prior's Tarrant. Mrs. Sherman went on to explain the circumstances, so far as she was aware of them, of the invitation, and she wound up with the hope that the Senator would join them immediately on landing. The Duke, who was the embodiment of affability, had cordially expressed that wish, she wrote; without, however, mentioning the Duke's intention of going to Liverpool to meet the *Campania*.

Senator Sherman read the letter twice, assured himself of the authenticity of the handwriting, examined the postmark, and—made a wry face. It looked as if he had been too hasty in jumping to a conclusion about the young man waiting for him on the hurricane-deck, and he began to regret the curt demeanor he had assumed. He was not quite convinced, however, owing to the absence of any

allusion to the Duke meeting him—in itself an extraordinary proceeding. Good republican as he was, the Senator fully appreciated the cleavage of English class distinctions, and he was aware that great nobles do not, as a rule, wait at seaport towns to welcome perfect strangers. It was possible that the depressed individual on deck might, after all, be a criminal who had discovered Mrs. Sherman's visit to the Duke of Beaumanoir and was turning his knowledge to evil account. Still, though caution was called for, his wife's letter invested the man's story with a credibility which it had wholly lacked, and when he rejoined him the Senator's manner was altered accordingly. The Duke having telegraphed for the carriage to meet them at Tarrant Road, they took a cab together to Lime Street station, and were fortunate enough to find a train on the point of starting. It was a corridor express, made up entirely of vestibule cars, and the fact caused the Duke an annoyance which partially revived the Senator's suspicions.

"I don't like this," Beaumanoir said, glancing with what looked very like dismay up and down the well-filled car as they took their seats. "I should have preferred an ordinary first-class compartment that we could have had reserved."

"Ah! I suppose a duke is bound to be a bit exclusive," said the Senator, guardedly.

Beaumanoir, who a month before had regarded a ride in a Bowery street-car as an unattainable luxury, was betrayed into disclaiming any such snobbery.

"It isn't that——" he was beginning hotly, when he pulled up short and feebly subsided, without explaining why he should have desired a *tête-à-tête* journey.

With the starting of the train a sustained and confidential conversation became impracticable, nor did either of the fellow travelers seem inclined for one; but as they sped southward the Senator found plenty of food for reflection in his companion's behavior. To the experienced American eye the outline of a pistol was plainly apparent in the breast-pocket of the Duke, whose fingers never strayed far from that receptacle—an attitude which was always more distinctly marked during the infrequent stoppages. Except when it was distracted into a swift and nervous glance round by a movement of one of the other passengers, the Duke's gaze was always focused on the precious box which the Senator carried on his lap.

"Either he means to rob me himself, or he is scared lest someone else will," was the Senator's conclusion.

But the journey came to an end without either of these consummations being arrived at or even attempted, and the sight of the coroneted carriage and the ducal liveries at Tarrant Road station removed the Senator's last lingering doubt as to the Duke's identity. And, twenty minutes later, when, still hugging his despatch-box, he found his wife and daughter waiting to welcome him under

the portico at Prior's Tarrant, he was ready to laugh at himself; and what the Senator was ready to do he usually did promptly—as now.

"Ah, Jem!" he cried, as General Sadgrove came forward to greet him. "You'll never believe what an ass I've been making of myself. Something in the British soil, I guess. It's only this minute that I've been able to clear my silly brain of a lurking suspicion that his Grace's kindness in coming to meet me covered a design on this little box. Took him for a sort of bunco-steerer."

The General passed over the remark as a careless jest without pursuing it, but shook hands with his old friend warmly. The veteran was looking careworn and aged, the Senator thought, and he wondered, too, at the queer searching glance which the General cast upon their mutual host as the latter limped from the brougham into the hall. The Duke was engaged in making light of the thanks and reproaches showered upon him for going to Liverpool, wherefrom the Senator guessed that that singular proceeding had been unknown beforehand to the house-party.

They all went into the tapestry-room, where Mrs. Talmage Eglinton, now happily recovered from her headache of three days ago, was chatting to Sybil Hanbury and Alec Forsyth. The necessary introductions were effected by Beaumanoir, whose spirits had wonderfully revived with his entry into the house—to such an extent, indeed, that Leonie put it down to a few hours in the company of her breezy father, little thinking that they had traveled two hundred miles together without exchanging half as many words. Yet if there was nothing forced about the Duke's sudden gaiety it certainly suggested unnatural excitement, and everyone present was impressed by his changed demeanor. Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was so affected by it that in narrowly observing her host she failed to notice that for some minutes after the introduction she herself was the object of observation, not to say a pretty sharp scrutiny, on the part of Senator Sherman.

"Say, your Grace," exclaimed the Senator, recovering from his abstraction and turning with some abruptness to the Duke, "I can't enjoy your hospitality with a whole heart till I've got this treasure under lock and key. Have you got any place where I can deposit the box with tolerable confidence of finding it when I want to take it to the Bank of England to-morrow? It's a just retribution, I guess, to have to make you its custodian after suspecting you of wanting to lift it."

Beaumanoir, it seemed, was quite equal to the occasion.

"I can guarantee the impregnability of the fire-proof safe in my muniment room," he replied with alacrity. "If you will come with me, we will lock it up at once."

Sturdily disregarding the badinage of his wife and Leonie for thinking robbery possible at Prior's Tarrant, the Senator followed the Duke, and was conducted by him along many corridors to a stone-floored chamber lined with

shelves full of dusty archives, and furnished only with a carved oak table and a few worm-eaten chairs. But, what was more to the purpose, a brand-new safe, resplendent in green and gold, the very latest patent of the most eminent manufacturers, occupied an imposing position at the far end. Producing a key, the Duke unlocked the safe, with no result till a touch on a hidden spring caused the heavy steel door to roll slowly outwards. The interior was nearly filled with parchment-bound volumes exactly like those on the shelves, but there was plenty of room for the box.

The Senator promptly placed his precious charge in the vacant space, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"It ought to be all right there," he said.

"It ought to be," Beaumanoir echoed, as he set the mechanism in motion. And when the heavy door had slid noiselessly back into position, he turned the key and pocketed it with an air of achievement. "Come, Mr. Sherman," he said lightly, "let us go and rejoin the ladies. Now that we have got that safely housed we shall both feel much—er—more comfortable, shan't we?"

CHAPTER XIX—*In the Crypt*

Late on the evening of Senator Sherman's arrival at Prior's Tarrant he was alone with General Sadgrove in the smoking-room, the Duke of Beaumanoir and Forsyth having avowedly gone up to bed. Under the influence of the genial American, and with the Duke himself in a more expansive mood, dinner and the subsequent reunion in the tapestry-room had been prolonged later than recently, and the chiming clock on the mantelpiece tinkled out the hour of midnight as the Senator put the question:

"Who the dickens is that Talmage Eglinton woman, Jem?"

The General started, but affected a carelessness which he was far from feeling in the trite reply that "Goodness only knew." He proceeded, however, to temper the crudity of the remark with the information that the lady in question was staying in London for the season, professed to hail from Chicago, and was reputed wealthy.

"She is hardly the type of American one expects to meet in such a house as

this—or wants to meet anywhere," said the Senator. "And," he added, poising the match with which he was about to light another of his own green Havanas, "she is the cause of prejudice in a usually unbiased mind. She has the misfortune to be fashioned in the likeness of one Cora Lestrade, a person of note in my country, whom I once saw in my capacity of Visiting Prison Commissioner. That was three years ago, but of course it can't be the same woman."

"It would be a curious coincidence," was all the General would admit. "She was taken up by Lord and Lady Roseville, impecunious folk who would take up anyone for value received. What was this Cora Lestrade's particular line of business?"

The Senator reflected for a moment.

"I don't think she specialized herself," he said. "Her forte was organization, and I heard that at the time she was taken she bossed a complete outfit, comprising forgers, confidence-men, train-robbers, and high-grade criminals of all sorts, who operated over the entire universe. They used to regard her as a queen. It was hinted at her trial that they were all fascinated by the spell of her charms, though she would never favor any of the crew in that way. Probably that was the secret of her power over them."

"You don't happen to know when her sentence expired?" the General asked, after a pause.

"It didn't expire; she broke jail—an easy matter for one as well served as she was by a clever crowd with unlimited financial resources."

The two old cronies relapsed into a thoughtful silence, neither of them showing a disposition to retire for the night, though the intense stillness prevailing in the great house implied that everyone else was asleep. Yet it was not so, for Alec Forsyth was at that moment uncommonly busy before the looking-glass in his bedroom. On the toilet-table there lay open a theatrical "make-up" box, from which he was putting the finishing touches to a very creditable transformation of himself into a semblance of the Duke. His deft usage of the various pigments revealed him as no tyro at the task, for which, indeed, his proficiency as an amateur actor had inspired the idea.

"That will do, I think," he said to himself after a final survey. "It is a good thing that the scene is to be played without limelight effects; but it is my voice that will give me away if anything does."

He rose and crossed the room once or twice, copying Beaumanoir's slight limp to the life. Then, having consulted his watch, he took from his pocket-book a letter, addressed to the man he was about to personate, and refreshed his memory.

"I congratulate you on this return to your senses," the writer began. "My agents inform me that the gentleman in whom we are interested is expected to

stay at Prior's Tarrant as your guest on arrival, being due on Tuesday. On Tuesday night you will leave unfastened the door leading into the crypt from the Dutch garden, so that I and my assistants may obtain access secretly. You will come down into the crypt an hour after midnight, when I will hand you the documents for substitution. Do not fail to make your arrangements so that the exchange may be effected without a hitch, and as rapidly as possible. As host you should have no difficulty in inspiring the necessary confidence to put the business through, and you will then be troubled no further by us.—C. Z."

"Poor old Beau! He's played up as well as if we had told him all about our plan," Forsyth muttered as he replaced the letter and took another look at himself in the glass. "I trust they won't call me 'your Grace,' and make me laugh."

But it was in no laughing mood that he switched off the electric light, listened at the door for fully a minute, and then softly opened it. His room, as it had been in the London house, was next to that of the Duke, and, satisfied that there was no one in the corridor, he slid out softly and shut the door behind him. A few natural steps having brought him opposite the Duke's room, he fell at once into Beaumanoir's limp, and so continued his way to the head of a secondary staircase that led down to the service rooms on the ground floor.

At the foot of the stairs, never forgetting his limp, he traversed several passages in which at long intervals only had a light been left burning, and at length he came to a massive oak door. Opening this, he found himself at the top of a flight of straight stone steps, running down into the blackness of the great subterranean chamber, which had been used as a crypt in the old monastic days. The shutting of the door cut off the last ray of light, and there being no rails to the steps he struck a wax match in order to make the descent in safety. But the feeble flame had hardly flickered out when it was rendered useless by a dazzling beam of white effulgence that suddenly sprang into being and shone upon him from below.

"Hang it all, I didn't allow for this!" he thought uneasily. "They have brought one of those wretched portable electric lamps, and I doubt if the disguise will stand. However, here goes."

Nerving himself for the ordeal, he went slowly down the steps, and so limped across the stone floor towards a spot in the very center of the crypt where five figures were grouped under the groined roof. He had only time to observe that one figure—that of an old man with snow-white beard and puffed, purple cheeks—stood slightly in advance of the rest, when on his near approach an order was given in a queer, parrot-like squeak to switch out the lamp. The crypt was windowless, but it was conceivable that a light in the interior might be seen from outside under the door leading into the gardens. Hence, doubtless, the precaution.

"You have made all preparations above, Duke?" was queried in the same piping voice.

"The bonds are in my own safe, and I obtained the key of the Senator's despatch-box by a trick—picked his pocket, in fact—after dinner," Forsyth replied, in a perfect imitation of Beaumanoir's tone. He was beginning to feel more confident in being able to sustain his part; he would not, he thought, have lived to reach this parley if his disguise had been penetrated.

"Then," the unseen spokesman proceeded, "all you have to do is to take this bundle of papers and place them in the box, extracting the originals, and returning here at once with them. It will then give me pleasure to absolve you from further service."

Forsyth felt a large packet pressed into his grasp, and he instantly turned with it to go towards the steps, expecting that the lamp would be switched on to guide him. This proved to be the case, and he was glad that those five scoundrels only had a back view of him as he limped across the floor and laboriously climbed the steps. Nor when he had passed through the door out of their sight was there any quickening of his halting gait to show that he was exulting in that he had so far successfully risked his life for his friend. And it was well that he kept up his part, for as he crossed under the well of the staircase to the servants' bedrooms he caught a glimpse of Rosa, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's French maid, watching him over the banisters.

Mounting to his own room he locked the bundle of papers he had received away in one of his trunks, from which he first took a packet of similar dimensions, formidably sealed. Without wasting a moment he placed this packet under his arm, and, falling once more into Beaumanoir's limp, retraced his steps to the crypt, where, as soon as he had passed through the door, a beam from the portable lamp shed a glare on his descent to the level of the floor. The five figures, with the white-bearded old man in advance, awaited him as before.

As Forsyth approached he hoped every moment to hear those parrot-like tones order the light to be cut off, but this time no such welcome sound fell upon his ears. He had to advance quite close with the full radiance of the lamp shining on him. The light, he soon perceived, had been retained for the purpose of examining the packet, which Ziegler snatched from him with impatient vehemence; and suddenly Forsyth was confronted with a situation not wholly unforeseen, but which he had hoped to avoid in the haste of the gang to make off with their plunder. Not content with a scrutiny of the carefully taped and sealed dummy package, Ziegler was about to undo the fastenings and look at the contents, which consisted of nothing more valuable than tissue paper.

It seemed an age while the lithe white fingers broke the seals and disarranged the tape, and Forsyth steadied himself for the inevitable discovery. He

was not prepared to lose his life at the hands of this murderous crew without a fight for it, five to one though they were; and it occurred to him that at the first sign of violence his best plan would be to smash the electric lamp with a well-directed kick, and then try and elude them in the dark. Ziegler's face was in shadow, the miscreant holding the lamp being behind him; but Forsyth saw at last, by the swift upward jerk of the arch-robber's head, that the worthlessness of the bundle was known to him. It was probable, too, from the prolonged silent stare with which he gazed and gazed at the Duke's counterfeit, that the latter's identity was no longer a secret.

With quite a natural movement Forsyth edged a little nearer to the man with the lamp, and the movement seemed to break the spell which held Ziegler speechless. The chief turned abruptly to his followers.

"I must have a word with this gentleman—with the Duke—alone," he squeaked. "Go out into the garden and await close outside—within call. Here, I will keep the lamp." Forsyth noticed that the well-shaped hand with which he grasped the contrivance was shaking violently—so violently, that the ray with which he guided his four subordinates through the groined arches to the door wavered like a will-o'-the-wisp. He waited till the last one had filed out before he turned again to the man who had baffled him.

"Well, Mr. Forsyth?" he piped, and the high-pitched note quivered and trembled as the lamp-ray had done.

"Well, sir?" Forsyth repeated, in blank amazement at the sparing of his life, for unless some hidden treachery beyond his fathoming was afoot, he could not doubt that it was spared. He was more than a physical match for the aged evil-doer in front of him, and before the others could be recalled he could make good his retreat into the house by the way he had come. The quiet acceptance of defeat by the bloodthirsty old schemer was a puzzle beyond solution, if it was not a veil for some further villainy.

"You have beaten me, Mr. Forsyth—you and General Sadgrove," Ziegler went on. "I don't suppose it's of any use my offering you a bribe to bring me back the package you have obtained so smartly? I would make it a very large one."

"Not the slightest use," Forsyth answered, almost laughing, yet more than ever puzzled by the *naïveté* of the question. "I have been at considerable pains to deprive you of your bogus bonds, and it is hardly likely, Mr. Ziegler, that I am going to restore your power over the Duke of Beaumanoir. He is a brave man, and doesn't fear death. You can't hurt him that way; but with these forgeries in your possession you might make some sort of a story good against him. Without them, anything you could say would be an idle tale."

"That is not the point, believe me, Mr. Forsyth," the shrill voice quavered

almost pleadingly. "The contents of that package took three of my most skilled colleagues months to prepare. They are proud of their work—love those forged bonds as if they were their children. To their pride in their work I should owe my life, if you would give them back to me."

Forsyth could hardly believe his ears. Could this tremulous dotard be the redoubtable master of crime whom he and his uncle had been fighting throughout the last crowded week? "I really don't see how your not particularly valuable life can depend on your possession of a lot of bogus bonds," he said, with genuine curiosity. The appeal to his pity filled him with vague uneasiness, the alleged reason for it being so utterly absurd. Yet Ziegler was ready with an explanation, more or less plausible.

"My associates will kill me for being duped out of their handiwork," he answered, glancing fearfully to the garden entrance. "They would perhaps pardon the miscarriage of the main scheme, but to have parted with material which might yet have been turned to account will seal my doom—that, and having allowed you to survive your triumph over us."

Forsyth saw now—or thought he saw—why the murderous crew had been ordered off in ignorance of the miscarriage. It was to enable Ziegler to make this desperate appeal for the restitution of the bogus bonds, so that he might "save his face" with his comrades. It would be ample excuse in their eyes—flatter their vanity, as their tottering chief had hinted—if he had himself been deceived by the fabricated securities. But they had seen him examine the parcel; they would know that he had made the discovery on the spot, and yet had not decreed instant death to their successful opponent. One flaw in this chain of reasoning Forsyth, himself no casuist, overlooked. It did not occur to him that the old practitioner with the white beard and the squeaky voice could have put himself right with his companions if he had hounded them on to him the moment he knew he was fingering tissue-paper and not United States Treasury bonds, good, bad, or indifferent.

"Well, Mr. Clinton Ziegler," said Forsyth, eager now to have done with the matter in the only possible way, "your appeal is dismissed with costs—on the higher scale. What does it matter to me what happens to you? If you had had your way you would have earned a legal hanging four times in the last week. If your friends save the common hangman the trouble, so much the better for all concerned, especially as they would thereby get themselves hanged also."

"Nothing will move you?"

"Absolutely nothing; and now I'll trouble you to clear off the premises if you and your gentlemen outside don't want to be treated as ordinary burglars."

"What if I call them back and have you strangled?"

With the way of escape open behind him Forsyth laughed at the futile

threat, and to the group outside in the Dutch garden it must have sounded like a friendly laugh of mutual satisfaction and farewell, for he gently pushed the old man before him to the garden door and shut it on him. Then, having carefully shot the heavy bolts, he groped his way back to the stone steps leading up into the house, triumphant, yet not wholly convinced. The ignominious collapse of Mr. Clinton Ziegler was almost too good to be true, and he was painfully conscious that such an astute antagonist was not likely to have thrown all his cards on to the table.

The fact, however, remained that the schemers had been deprived of their spurious bonds, without which their carefully planned design to obtain possession of the genuine ones fell to the ground.

"And their blood-feud against the poor chap will surely cease, now that there is no crime, past or contemplated, for which he can denounce them," Forsyth comforted himself as he stepped from the door at the head of the stone stairs and hastened along the dimly lit corridor, limping no longer. His destination was the smoking-room, where he guessed that the General would be eagerly awaiting news.

CHAPTER XX—*In the Muniment Room*

While Alec Forsyth was engaged in showing Ziegler out of the crypt, the Duke of Beaumanoir, in happy ignorance of the perilous effort his friend was making for him, sat in the dark muniment room, still as a cat, with his eyes on the door. He had drawn one of the oak chairs close to the safe in which Senator Sherman's genuine bonds reposed. He had established himself on guard, in case, trickery having failed, violent methods should be adopted at the last moment to obtain the huge plunder.

He thought it improbable that, with General Sadgrove in the house and Azimoolah somewhere loose around it, any of the gang would break in unseen, still less that they would reach the muniment room. He sincerely hoped that the vigilance of those trained watch-dogs would prevail, for, though he was prepared to atone for his folly by defending the safe at the cost of his life, if need be,

he did not see how that could be done without opening up the scandal he had gone through so much to avoid. He had bought the safe, had met the Senator at Liverpool, and now, unknown to anyone, was keeping his lonely vigil in the firm determination that, at all hazards, the bonds should reach the Bank of England in safety; but there was a dread in his heart lest the tell-tale emergency he was providing against should arise.

For here it becomes necessary to say that the letter sent to Ziegler in London five days before, and purporting to convey the Duke's submission and request for instructions, which were called for by Alec Forsyth, was not written by the Duke at all, or even with his cognizance. It had been the joint production of General Sadgrove and Forsyth, with an eye to immediate immunity for the Duke from further murderous attacks, and to the enactment of some such dangerous comedy as had just been played in the crypt. Though when that deceptive missive was penned, its authors expected, in varying degrees, as will presently be seen, tragedy rather than comedy. And he who by right of youth and friendship necessarily took the greater risk was the one who, not being fully informed by his uncle, had most cause for apprehension from the masquerade.

But Beaumanoir, sitting in the dark with his Smith and Wesson at full cock amid the archives of the house he was concerned to preserve stainless, was aware of none of these tortuous dealings. Had his zeal allowed him to indulge in the luxury of a light, he might have whiled away the time by perusing some of the musty chronicles around him, and have so drawn comfort from the knowledge that if his misdeed was published with the usual trimmings in every paper in the kingdom, he would still compare favorably with some of his race who had gone before. So far he had never stolen poor men's land under the protection of the Commons Enclosure Act, or appropriated tenants' improvements to his own enrichment.

True, it was a dirty trick he had put his hand to—a dirty trick in dirty company—and he hated himself for it to the full. But he had been a denizen of another world when Ziegler's emissary had annexed him, body and soul, as plain Charles Hanbury, in the Bowery saloon. He remembered that world now with a horror and a loathing greater, if possible, than when he had endured it—the sordid life in the five-dollar boarding-house, the lunch of tough sandwiches of Texas beef which had bulged his pockets on the way to his duties in the big dry goods store, the insolence of his Irish-American and German fellow-workers because of his English speech. And the haughty salesladies who had drawn their skirts from him as they squeezed past the tame detective at the time-keeper's box—sitting there in the dark muniment room, even his present trouble could not check a smile at thinking what those damsels would have done if told that he had been about to become a duke within the month.

Yes, it had been a dirty trick that he had undertaken to escape all this, but somehow the thing had not seemed so bad when he was unacquainted with the persons interested. Just as old-time smugglers persuaded themselves that there was no dishonesty in defrauding the state, so in the same light he had regarded the spoliation of a big corporation like the Bank of England or the United States Treasury, whichever would have been the ultimate loser when the lawyers had settled the matter. He would never have gone into the business, even in his despairing exile, if he had not looked upon it as a breach of honesty which no single individual would be an appreciable loser. He made no excuses for himself on this score, but merely analyzed his state of mind philosophically, by no means salving his conscience because he had dropped the affair the moment individualities had become involved, or laying claim to any merit for a repentance sustained at such imminent peril.

"Whatever is the upshot of it all I can never be too thankful that I came over in the same ship with the Shermans," he muttered, "and for being brought up with a round turn by the knowledge that the one to bear the brunt of my iniquity would have been Leonie's father. Why, the excellent Senator might have been suspected of having stolen the bonds himself. Funny that that view didn't occur to me till I knew the people."

The same gratitude had filled his simple soul twenty times during the last week, even when his enemies had pressed him most sorely; but it recurred with redoubled force now that he was within sight of the end. By noon on the morrow the Senator would have safely housed the securities at the Bank, and then his own responsibility would cease. Ziegler could kill him then, and welcome, if he still thought it worth while, though the chief of the organization was not, he imagined, the sort of person to waste time and energy on a purely sentimental revenge. If Ziegler carried on the feud after the bonds were safe from him it would be, as before, to secure silence about the attempt, and he could fling no stigma on the family name without divulging details that would incriminate his gang. And the family name was all that mattered.

Beaumanoir had just rounded off his forecast in this satisfactory manner when he was suddenly startled back into the present by a faint sound far down the corridor on which the muniment room abutted. He knew perfectly well what the sound was—the "scroop" of the spring-driven swivel-roller that automatically closed a baize door shutting off the servants' premises. He had half risen from his chair when another sound—the tinkle of a pebble cast against the window from outside—distracted his attention; but disregarding it in favor of the more pressing emergency, he made haste towards the door of the room.

The room was at the extreme end of the corridor, looking along it lengthwise, and it was not therefore necessary for the Duke to disclose himself at the

door, which he had purposely left partially open, in order to reconnoiter. Standing in the darkness a few feet from the door, he was able to see who was coming, and the sight sent a thrill of despair to his heart. All his pleasant anticipations of oblivion for his transgression were rudely shattered, for the old man who, white-bearded and with cat-like tread, came along the passage was Ziegler himself. Another figure was dimly discerned close behind, but of that the Duke took no heed. His eyes were riveted on the one in front—on the evil man who had the power to change his destiny. There was something curiously fantastic, something unreal, in the aged miscreant gliding towards him, framed in the gaping darkness of the doorway.

The opening into a branch passage, leading to another part of the mansion, lay between Ziegler and the muniment room, and there was a bare chance that he might turn in that direction. In reality he had to advance but a few steps before the point could be settled, but it seemed a whole æon to the Duke, and, to add to the tension of his nerves, another pebble struck the window. All hope of being able to preserve his secret had fled now, and Beaumanoir strove to concentrate his reeling brain on how best to summon assistance and ward off an attack on the safe. If only he knew who that was throwing up stones from outside—whether friend or foe—he could decide whether to run to the window and open it or leave it alone. He dared not act in ignorance, possibly to admit a third adversary. The window was ten feet from the ground, but the wall was covered with gnarled ivy stems up which an active man could readily climb.

While he was hesitating the matter was arranged for him. There was no time to reach the window, for Ziegler passed the branch corridor without as much as looking at it, and was coming straight on to the muniment room. Beaumanoir raised his revolver, but lowered it again, incapable of shooting a fellow-creature in cold blood, and also fascinated by a horrible curiosity to learn the intruder's intention. He could not as yet be absolutely certain that Ziegler knew that the bonds were in the safe. He would wait till it was attacked before he made a counter-move.

In this mind he slipped behind a huge oak press laden with expired leases, and had hardly ensconced himself when Ziegler entered the room, followed, to Beaumanoir's surprise, by a woman, whom he did not recognize, in the faint light diffused from the corridor, as Rosa, Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's French maid. The shadowy figures—that of the frail old man and of the trim soubrette—stood motionless and silent just within the doorway, evidently mastering the landmarks of the room. Then, at a whisper from Ziegler, the maid glided with a nod of comprehension to the nearest window, and was busy with the hasp when the rattle of still another pebble on the glass accelerated her movements. She swung the casement outwards, and in a muffled voice called down:

"'Tis ze right room. You are to come oop."

A rustling noise, as of foliage shaken, rising from below warned the Duke that if he waited longer he might be beset by a horde of assailants. It spurred him to instant action. Set in the wall close to his place of concealment was the switch of the electric light, and stretching out his left hand he turned it on, at the same time stepping forward and covering Ziegler with his pistol. The old man blinked at him in the sudden glow, and then, quietly turning, shut the door. His object must have been to prevent his voice penetrating into the house, for he croaked out to the Frenchwoman by the window the petulant order:

"Tell Benzon to hurry."

The maid, relaxing the venomous glare with which she was regarding Beaumanoir, put out her head and obeyed. A renewal of the rustling and the sound of heavy breathing told her that her request had been heard, and drew a harsh laugh from Ziegler. Fixing the Duke with a cruel gaze, he remarked calmly, in his thin falsetto:

"The champion safe-cracksman of America will be here in a moment. Your Grace will have the opportunity of seeing a very pretty piece of work if you care to remain till I have exchanged this package for the one inside. You are not going to be fool enough to use that pistol and give yourself away at this stage, and if you were, my friend Benzon would be equal to the occasion." And holding up the parcel of tissue paper which he had received from Forsyth in the crypt, he shook it mockingly at the Duke.

But in so doing he reckoned literally without his host. With a spring that wrenched his lame foot painfully Beaumanoir leaped upon him, and, crushing the white beard to a throat that somehow seemed less scraggy than might have been expected, dragged him to the door and contrived to get it open with his left hand. So struggling, the pair stumbled into the corridor, and Beaumanoir was about to shout lustily for help, when his voice dwindled into a panting:

"Thank God you've come! I've got this one, but there is a woman in there, and—and others are coming in through the window."

For in the corridor, hurrying towards him, were General Sadgrove, Senator Sherman, and Alec Forsyth, each with revolvers in their hands, while Sybil Hanbury brought up the rear, looking as if she resented that position. In the presence of this formidable phalanx Beaumanoir felt his captive wilt in his grasp, and indeed he himself was swept back by it, still holding on, into the muniment room, where the woman Rosa was in the act of retreating from the window. The General took command quite naturally, bidding Forsyth guard the door, while he himself advanced to the window, very stern and upright, and muttering as he went:

"What can Azimoolah have been about? He must be past his work."

But the words were hardly spoken when the subject of his censure leaped in through the window, drawing his breath quickly, but not otherwise inconvenienced by a limp bundle of humanity which he carried over his shoulder, and now proceeded to dump like a sack on the floor. After securing the window, the Pathan turned and gravely saluted the General.

"There were three others, sahib, but they are gone," he said simply. "At sight of thy servant fear seemed to fall upon them, so that they fled across the *maidan* like deer flushed by a cheetah. But this one was already climbed nigh to the window, so I followed, and choking him a little, brought him in." And with his foot he slightly spurned the motionless form of his prisoner, whom the Duke and Forsyth recognized as the hero of the watch-spring saw who had been surprised cutting out the panel at Beaumanoir House a week before.

"Choked him a little!" said the General with a grim chuckle. "You don't seem to have left much life in him, but it was no case for standing on ceremony. And now, madam," continued the veteran, facing round to where Beaumanoir stood with his grip on Ziegler's collar, "your disguise need hamper you no longer—that is, if you prefer to finish this business in your own person. Get the pull of your sex, you know."

"Yes, I guess that wig doesn't do justice to Cora Lestrade," interjected Senator Sherman, and with a dexterous twirl of his wrist he jerked off the elaborate head-gear which had effectually transformed the dashing lady known as Mrs. Talmage Eglinton into a repulsive old man. But it was only when feminine instinct had prompted her with a swift application of her handkerchief to remove the purple stain that had added the semblance of disease to old age that the Duke recognized his guest.

"I do not understand," he murmured, feebly.

And it seemed that Alec Forsyth, in spite of the part entrusted to him in the comedy of the crypt, had been ignorant of the identity of his antagonist, for a cry of astonishment escaped him. On the other hand, the demure smile that played round Sybil Hanbury's pretty mouth betokened a closer intimacy with the foregoings of this wonderful development. Forsyth's sharp exclamation had the effect of rousing Azimoolah's captive from his swoon. The man raised himself on his elbow, and, grasping the situation, remained quietly watchful.

"And now, your Grace, before another word is said, let me shake you by the hand right here, and thank you for all the patient courage you have shown and all the danger you have incurred to baffle as waspish a gang as ever hailed from my side of the ditch," said the Senator, suiting the action to the word, greatly to the embarrassment of the Duke, and provoking a scornful laugh from the fantastic figure in male attire.

"Why, he was one of us," she sneered. "It was only when he found he had

something to lose that he backed out."

The Senator looked her up and down with a fine contempt.

"So much for a great reputation," he said. "My good Lestrade, the warders who told me you were the cleverest woman in Sing-Sing must have made a grievous error, for a really clever criminal would never have been cornered by a brave man pretending to join the confederacy. The Duke has not tripped once all through the affair, except that he has been a little too reckless in exposing his valuable life to peril. The result of his heroic conduct is that you are outwitted all along the line, and that the three millions are secure in that safe."

This misdescription of the case, so adroitly near the mark and yet differing from the truth in the all-important word "*pretending*," made the Duke catch his breath. Somehow the matter which he had believed himself to be working single-handed seemed to have been taken out of his shaky grasp, and, shamed by the unmerited praise, he waited for the rejoinder of the adventuress. It came crisp and sharp.

"Then what you have to do is to call in the police and hand us over to justice," she said defiantly. "The authorities will be puzzled to find a reason for all you worthy amateurs bottling up your knowledge of a crime that would have shaken two continents. I think I shall be able to instruct my counsel so that by the time he has done with him his Grace won't be much of a hero."

The Senator smiled superior.

"Ah!" he retorted, pleasantly; "you might have tried that if you had had the chance. But then, you see, you won't have it. I'm only a visitor here—like yourself, his Grace's guest—but I believe the intention is that you and your friend, who really need not scowl so, are not to face a judge this time. General Sadgrove has charge of what we may call the liberation department, and he will enlighten you."

The man Benzon, lying propped on his elbow, with Azimoolah standing over him statuesquely menacing, shot a sly glance of triumph at his confederate, but it met with only a sickly smile for a response. Lestrade's eyes turned with shrinking expectancy to the General, her insolent demeanor having vanished, strangely enough, at the hint that she would not be detained.

"Yes, there will be no prosecution," the General said, sternly. "The Duke took the onus of defeating your aims upon him before he was called to his present high station, and his friends are unanimous that he ought not to pursue the matter now. You, Madame Lestrade, will be allowed to depart early to-morrow morning in the name you have chosen to assume; and you, sir, can go at once by the way you came—through the window."

The man Benzon rose to his feet with alacrity, trying vainly to catch the eye of his accomplice, and shooting furtive glances at the package which she still

carried. There was evidently something that he did not understand, and wanted to before he availed himself of the unexpected permission. There came a curious gleam into the General's eyes as he noticed this perplexity, and when he took up his parable again there was a ring in his voice that chained his hearers' attention. Sybil, too, leaned forward, watching the two bond-robbers alternately, as though expecting a surprise for them.

"Before you go I will explain what is puzzling you," the General went on, addressing himself to Benzon, and pointing to the dummy package in Cora Lestrade's hand. "You are under the impression that those are the bonds, and you are half inclined to think that we are letting you go in ignorance of what you believe to be the case—that the genuine bonds were handed to that lady in the crypt by the Duke. Know, then, that the Duke wasn't in the crypt at all, nor were any bonds handed over. His Grace's place was taken by Mr. Forsyth there, who succeeded in getting from her the spurious bonds and handed her in return a lot of blank paper. See—examine it for yourself."

And quickly possessing himself of the parcel, he held it for inspection. A spasm crossed Benzon's sinister face, and there escaped him the involuntary cry:

"But you looked at the things, Cora, and pronounced them correct. You said we were only coming here for the heirlooms in the safe; yet you must have known."

"Quite so," the General proceeded, disregarding a smothered remark from the female culprit. "She knew that she had been hoodwinked, because she recognized my nephew under his disguise, and so at once examined the parcel. Thereupon she deceived you and her other associates for a private reason that had nothing to do with the interests of your precious combination. Like to hear what that reason was?"

Benzon flung a reproachful, half-imploring look at his strangely garbed chief, as though seeking for a denial from her, but failing to catch her downcast eye, he gave a sullen assent to the question.

"Very well," the General went on, inexorably. "She withheld her confidence from her colleagues because she desired to save the life of Mr. Forsyth from the murderous vengeance of you gentlemen who are so handy with charcoal braziers and railway accidents. So she made a last desperate effort to obtain the bonds by persuading you to break into the safe under a false pretext—used you as tools, do you understand?—to repair her own breach of faith to you without having to confess it. Her idea was doomed to failure, anyway, for, apart from his Grace's vigilance, she was effectually watched by Miss Hanbury from the moment of her readmission into the house by that Frenchwoman. When 'Mrs. Talmage Eglinton'"—with a fine scorn on the name—"crept out dressed like that, we wanted to see whether she would go straight to her room when she came

back, don't you know."

He paused, but not with an air of finality. No one had ever suspected Jem Sadgrove in the old days of an eye for dramatic effect. He must have been coached by somebody into leading up to the question now to be put with fierce insistence by the saturnine Benzon, and, to judge by the eager interest in Sybil's dilated eyes, that young lady had been the coach.

"Why should Cora Lestrade want to spare Mr. Forsyth?" asked the man, taking a step forward, to be instantly reminded of his position by the lean brown hand of Azimoolah falling like a vise on his shoulder. The Pathan evidently cherished a lingering hope that there might yet arise a pretext for treating "the black tribe" in the old way.

"Because, sir, a woman can't help herself in matters of the heart, and even the worst of 'em is capable of an unselfish attachment," the General replied, with slow emphasis. But he hastened to add, as if eager to disavow responsibility for the introduction of sentiment: "At least, so I was advised. The little scheme for obtaining the sham securities was based on the supposition that this woman had a liking for Mr. Forsyth, and would do him no hurt if she recognized him. That forecast has turned out to be well founded."

"Uncle Jem!" Forsyth protested, flushing hotly.

"Yes, laddie, I know you would not have taken the job on if I had informed you who Ziegler was," said the General. "There would have been less to fear, but there would have been a dash of the underhand about it that wouldn't have suited you. But I should never have allowed you to walk into such a death-trap as that crypt would have been without the safeguard we—that is, I—trusted to. It wasn't a case for being too nice. There's no such thing as taking a mean advantage of people threatening life and property, they told me when I was taught my trade."

The man Benzon, who had kept his gaze fixed on the face of Cora Lestrade, removed it now, and, with a cool politeness that struck an unaccountable chill to most of his hearers, thanked the General for enlightening him on "a point of considerable importance," and begged permission to depart if he was really not to be detained. At a sign from his master Azimoolah stood aside, and the man swung himself out of the window, gained a foothold on the ivy stems, and was gone. When they had all turned away from the darkling face framed for a moment among the creepers, it was seen that she who had loomed so largely in their lives of late as "Mr. Clinton Ziegler" and "Mrs. Talmage Eglinton" was swaying and about to fall.

"Thank you," she said, recovering herself with a painful effort as Senator Sherman, who happened to be nearest, came to her assistance. "It was only a passing weakness, but I shall be glad if I may go to my room."

And with a flicker of the old impudence she mimicked General Sadgrove:

"Even the worst of 'em is capable of feeling shaken on hearing sentence of death pronounced," adding, with a swift change of manner, "and that is what I have heard in this room to-night."

But in the morning, when, with the Frenchwoman Rosa, she took her departure by a train leaving so early that none of the house-party were visible, it was observed by the servants that Mrs. Talmage Eglinton was in the highest spirits, and, if possible, more stylishly appareled than usual. And Mr. Manson, the butler, looking regretfully after the station brougham as it drove away, murmured benedictions, having palmed the largest tip that had come his way in a quarter of a century.

"A thorough lady," he sighed, as he closed the hall door and went in to preside at the breakfast sideboard. "Pity she was called away unexpected."

CHAPTER XXI—*The Honor of the House*

The Treasury bonds had reached their goal in the vaults of the Bank of England, and Senator Sherman, having duly discharged his duty to his Republic, was speeding back to his wife and daughter at Prior's Tarrant, with, as he quaintly phrased it, "a considerable load off his chest." In the reserved compartment with him were the Duke of Beaumanoir and General Sadgrove, who had insisted on forming an escort.

The Duke, who had been buoyed up with excitement till the bonds were safe in the bank, had fallen into dejection on the return journey. His two companions persisted in treating him as a hero, whereas he guessed that they were both aware of the true state of the case. He knew that one of them was, for he had himself, under threat of information being given to the police, confessed everything to the General after the latter's visit to the hotel on the day of "Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's" supposed confinement to her room; and, at any rate, the Senator must have heard something of the truth, or he would not have been prepared the night before to confound Cora Lestrade's correct accusation with a generous but entirely erroneous construction of his complicity.

All this made Beaumanoir miserable and ill at ease, the more so that he had three times attempted, without success, to terminate his false position. The two gentlemen had evidently entered into a friendly conspiracy to maintain their own reading of his conduct; and whenever he began to make penitential allusions to it, one or other of them would, so to speak, jump down his throat with an encomium on the motive they chose to attribute to him for originally allying himself to the Lestrade combination. Nor did it add to his comfort on the last of these occasions to catch the Senator deliberately winking at the General.

Now this was exasperating in the present and intolerable for the future, for Beaumanoir had set his heart on that to which, conscience told him, a clear understanding with Senator Sherman was essential. But at last he abandoned direct efforts and sank back in his corner, hoping to obtain an opening by more diplomatic methods presently.

In the meanwhile, the General was satisfying the curiosity of the Senator, and incidentally that of the Duke, as to the identification of the self-styled Mrs. Talmage Eglinton with the mysterious Clinton Ziegler. He described the tangle of doubt and surmise he had got into when he had convinced himself that the occupants of the neighboring suites at the hotel were both concerned in the plot against the bonds, without being able to carry the matter further. And especially did he lay stress on the deadlock that had been reached when "Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's" artfully concocted anonymous warning against "Ziegler" had caused him to waver in his suspicions of her guilt.

"It took a woman to nose that out," said the General, with a whimsical grimace. "Miss Sybil heard me grumbling—unfortunate habit, talking to one's self—and put me right in a brace of shakes. 'Why,' she snaps out, after she'd pumped me about my difficulty, 'they must be one and the same person. Mrs. Talmage Eglinton *is* Ziegler, and her intention is that after they've finished the business the Eglinton part of her will remain and the Ziegler part will vanish—with the odium of anything that may happen, don't you see. I didn't see it at once, but consented to lay a trap, and blessed if the girl wasn't right. Soon as the Eglinton was posted up by Sybil that I was going up next day to call on Ziegler at the hotel, and that I was going to raise Cain if I wasn't admitted, she shammed sick and sneaked out of the house, with old Azimoolah at her heels, to keep the appointment."

He went on to tell how his call on "Ziegler," followed by "Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's" clandestine return to the house as witnessed by Alec Forsyth, had brushed all doubts aside and cleared the way for the final *coup* in the crypt, again suggested by Sybil, for obtaining the bogus bonds and so drawing the sting of the enemy.

"The girl has got grit," was the Senator's admiring comment. "The right

sort of grit, because she trusted to her man having it too. And, thunder, but it was plucky of him to face that crew in ignorance of the saving clause in his favor."

"Yes, the boy behaved well," the General admitted. "But I think the Duke beat him for courage in going to meet you at Liverpool in ignorance that we had drawn off the cut-throats who he had reason to believe would dog him directly he left the house. Alec had to make up for a bad lapse. We never allowed laxity in our service, and Alec was lax, very lax, in giving them that chance on the railway."

Beaumanoir sat up at this, and, leaning forward, tapped the General on the knee.

"Oblige me by not drawing comparisons," he said—for him—quite fiercely. "If I have come out of the ordeal of the last few days unscathed, and with the honor of my house untarnished, it is in great part due to Alec's loyalty to a poor weak coward. Had I done my duty I should have gone to the police the moment Lestrade unfolded her plot, instead of embarking on a course of secrecy and moral cowardice which kept alive the danger to Senator Sherman and his charge. I did not see it at the time, but the gang would assuredly have matured some other plan for trying for the plunder, using some other wretched tool, perhaps, if they hadn't been gammoned into believing that I had caved in. It was gross moral cowardice of me to give them the chance."

The torrent of words flowed so quickly that neither of his hearers was able to check it, and it was so evidently the outcome of deep emotion that it was equally impossible to ignore it. The Senator, with a twinkle in his shrewd gray eyes, laid a warning hand on the General's shoulder and took it upon himself to answer—with a question which had the instant effect of soothing Beaumanoir, for it implied a concession of the position he desired to take up.

"What should you have done in the same circumstances, but with this difference—that you had landed in England a simple commoner instead of the representative of an ancient and noble family?" the Senator inquired.

"Informed the authorities, of course," the Duke replied without hesitation.

"Good! Then assuming for the sake of argument your charge against yourself to be correct, you incurred a mortal peril voluntarily, not from personal considerations affecting yourself, but for fear of involving other people—most of them dead, by the way—in disgrace. I don't see how you can make moral cowardice out of that."

"*I* do," said Beaumanoir, bluntly.

"But," proceeded the Senator, with bland insistence, "you might have avoided the peril to your own life and the besmirching of the family name by the simple expedient of carrying out the behests of Ziegler and Company. You had every facility for pulling the job off without a breath of suspicion ever touch-

ing you."

The diplomatic opening, the psychological moment, for which poor, blundering Beaumanoir had been hoping, had arrived. It would be uncharitable to suggest that it was proffered to him, as a card is "forced," by an American gentleman with a taste for strawberry leaves; but be it as it may, Beaumanoir was not too dull to seize his chance.

"I might have done that—I was tempted to," he blurted out. "In fact, I believe I should have done it if—if I hadn't come over in the same ship with your—with Mrs. and Miss Sherman."

The General, sitting up stiffly with his chin on the knob of his malacca cane, turned his head sharply to hear his old friend's judgment on this amazing confession. It was pronounced with Trans-Atlantic briskness.

"Then, sir, by token of that frankness, your Grace is a straight man," the Senator said, decidedly, and with an air that invested his words with greater weight than was perhaps due to their moral perspective. "And," he added in a lighter vein, "somehow, the honor of your house seems to have got inextricably mixed with that of mine."

"That's exactly the way I hoped you'd look at it," responded the Duke, earnestly. "I think you take my meaning. May I speak to Leonie?"

"It's what I should do in your place," was the Senator's reply—a reply which had the effect of relaxing General Sadgrove's ramrod-like attitude, and of causing that grim man-hunter to subside into his corner, with a not unkindly chuckle.

————

On a winter afternoon, six months afterwards, Alec Forsyth entered the firelit dining-room of the Prior's Tarrant dower-house, which, as agent of the ducal estates, he had occupied since his marriage in September. The Duke and Duchess were away in Egypt on their honeymoon, and Forsyth had been doing the honors of a big shoot in the home coverts to a party of neighboring country gentlemen. Sybil, who had been sitting in a low chair by the hearth, rose and drew him to the blaze, first relieving him of his gun.

"I won't light the lamp yet, dear," she said. "I am forced to refer to the forbidden subject, and you may want to blush."

"Forbidden subject?" said Forsyth, not for the moment comprehending.

"Well, of course you haven't taken to forbidding me anything yet; perhaps 'tacitly avoided' would be a better phrase," the young wife replied, perching herself on the arm of her husband's chair. "I refer to that poor creature whose one redeeming point was, as the dear General put it on that eventful night, an unselfish attachment to your noble self."

Forsyth had never been able to bring himself to talk of the reason of his uncle's confidence in his safety in the crypt that night, when he had lent himself to a ruse which he had believed meant death if he was recognized. He had loathed "Mrs. Talmage Eglinton's" obtrusive admiration long before he had entered the lists against her, and it was from a knowledge of his feelings that the General had abstained from informing him beforehand of the terrible Ziegler's identity, guessing that his natural delicacy would have prevented him from turning to account a sentimental weakness so necessary to a successful issue, yet so revolting to his modesty.

"Must you really refer to that wretched woman?" he asked, as soon as he saw Sybil's meaning.

"Only to tell you that she is dead," was the reply. "It is in the *Standard*, which came after you had left for the coverts. There, I must light the lamp, after all, so that you may read it yourself."

When the lamp shone out on the pleasant, homelike room, this was the paragraph which Forsyth read:

"On the arrival at Vienna of the through mail train from Budapest on Thursday night a fashionably dressed female was found alone in a first-class compartment, stabbed to the heart. The police inquiries have established her identity as Cora Lestrade, a notorious American ex-convict, who is believed to have practised on the credulity of highly placed personages in nearly every European capital. At the time of her death she was traveling as the Countess Poniatowski. A man who was in another compartment of the train, dressed as a Roman priest, but who is supposed to be one of the band of professional criminals ruled by this extraordinary woman, has been arrested in connection with the occurrence."

Forsyth laid the paper down—Sybil told him a month later that it was "with a sigh of relief"—and said:

"She seemed to expect something of the sort when she spoke about her death sentence and showed such fear of the man Benzon. But isn't Uncle Jem's intuition marvelous? He has always held that the confederacy would come to loggerheads and be no longer dangerous after our victorious tussle with them."

"Yes, dear," Sybil assented, dutifully. "Your uncle is a very remarkable man, with very remarkable gifts." But she did not add, as she might have added had she so chosen, that it had required a woman's knowledge of woman's heart to inspire in the General the insight which had steered the Duke's storm-tossed bark

to harbor.

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