

# THE QUEST

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Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

*"He fell on his knees at her feet" (Page [312](#)).*

# THE QUEST

# A Romance

By

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"He fell on his knees at her feet" . . . *Frontispiece* (Page 312)

"It seemed to him that her eyes called him."

"I fancy I know who the man was."

"You're twenty-two. Have you ever fallen in love?"

"He turned and went out of the room."

"Don't refuse a helping hand!" said Captain Stewart, looking up once more.

"Don't be overproud!"

"So for an hour or more he stood in the open window staring into the fragrant night."

"He saw Captain Stewart moving among them."

"Captain Stewart lay huddled and writhing upon the floor."

"There appeared two young people."

"Michel is busy," said Coira O'Hara, "so I have brought your coffee."

"Ste. Marie has disappeared? How very extraordinary!"

"What can we do, Richard? What can we do?"

"Tell me about him, this Ste. Marie! Do you know anything about him?"

"Mlle. Coira O'Hara sat alone upon the stone bench."

"His hand went swiftly to his coat pocket."  
 "She did not move when he came before her."  
 "The girl fumbled desperately with the clumsy key."  
 "Walking there in the tender moonlight."

## CHAPTER I

### STE. MARIE HEARS OF A MYSTERY AND MEETS A DARK LADY

From Ste. Marie's little flat which overlooked the gardens they drove down the quiet Rue du Luxembourg, and, at the Place St. Sulpice, turned to the left. They crossed the Place St. Germain des Prés, where lines of homebound working people stood waiting for places in the electric trams, and groups of students from the Beaux Arts or from Julien's sat under the awnings of the Deux Magots, and so, beyond that busy square, they came into the long and peaceful stretch of the Boulevard St. Germain. The warm sweet dusk gathered round them as they went, and the evening air was fresh and aromatic in their faces. There had been a little gentle shower in the late afternoon, and roadway and pavement were still damp with it. It had wet the new-grown leaves of the chestnuts and acacias that bordered the street. The scent of that living green blended with the scent of laid dust and the fragrance of the last late-clinging chestnut blossoms: it caught up a fuller richer burden from the overflowing front of a florist's shop: it stole from open windows a savoury whiff of cooking, a salt tang of wood smoke, and the soft little breeze—the breeze of coming summer—mixed all together and tossed them and bore them down the long quiet street; and it was the breath of Paris, and it shall be in your nostrils and mine, a keen agony of sweetness, so long as we may live and so wide as we may wander—because we have known it and loved it: and in the end we shall go back to breathe it when we die.

The strong white horse jogged evenly along over the wooden pavement, its head down, the little bell at its neck jingling pleasantly as it went. The cocher, a torpid purplish lump of gross flesh, pyramidal, pear-like, sat immobile in his place. The protuberant back gave him an extraordinary effect of being buttoned into his fawn-coloured coat wrong-side-before. At intervals he jerked the reins like a large strange toy and his strident voice said—

"*Hé!*" to the stout white horse, which paid no attention whatever. Once the beast stumbled and the pear-like lump of flesh insulted it, saying—

"*Hè! veux, tu, cochon!*"

Before the War Office a little black slip of a milliner's girl dodged under the horse's head, saving herself and the huge box slung to her arm by a miracle of agility, and the cocher called her the most frightful names, without turning his head, and in a perfunctory tone quite free from passion.

Young Hartley laughed and turned to look at his companion, but Ste. Marie sat still in his place, his hat pulled a little down over his brows, and his handsome chin buried in the folds of the white silk muffler with which, for some obscure reason, he had swathed his neck.

"This is the first time in many years," said the Englishman, "that I have known you to be silent for ten whole minutes. Are you ill or are you making up little epigrams to say at the dinner party?"

Ste. Marie waved a despondent glove.

"I 'ave," said he, "w'at you call *ze blue*. *Papillons noirs*—clouds in my soul." It was a species of jest with Ste. Marie—and he seemed never to tire of it—to pretend that he spoke English very brokenly. As a matter of fact he spoke it quite as well as any Englishman and without the slightest trace of accent. He had discovered a long time before this—it may have been while the two were at Eton together—that it annoyed Hartley very much, particularly when it was done in company and before strangers. In consequence he became at such occasions a sort of comic-paper caricature of his race, and by dint of much practice, added to a naturally alert mind, he became astonishingly ingenious in the torture of that honest but unimaginative gentleman whom he considered his best friend. He achieved the most surprising expressions by the mere literal translation of French idiom, and he could at any time bring Hartley to a crimson agony by calling him "my dear" before other men, whereas at the equivalent "*mon cher*" the Englishman would doubtless never, as the phrase goes, have batted an eye.

"Ye—es," he continued sadly, "I 'ave *ze blue*. I weep. Weez *ze tears full ze eyes*. Yes." He descended into English. "I think something's going to happen to me. There's calamity—or something—in the air. Perhaps I'm going to die."

"Oh, I know what you are going to do, right enough," said the other man, "you're going to meet the most beautiful woman—girl—in the world at dinner, and of course you are going to fall in love with her."

"Ah, the Miss Benham!" said Ste. Marie with a faint show of interest. "I remember now, you said that she was to be there. I had forgotten. Yes, I shall be glad to meet her. One hears so much. But why am I of course going to fall in love with her?"

"Well, in the first place," said Hartley, "you always fall in love with all pretty women as a matter of habit, and, in the second place, everybody—well, I suppose you—no one could help falling in love with her, I should think."

"That's high praise to come from you," said the other, and Hartley said with a short, not very mirthful laugh—

"Oh, I don't pretend to be immune. We all—everybody who knows her— You'll understand presently."

Ste. Marie turned his head a little and looked curiously at his friend, for he considered that he knew the not very expressive intonations of that young gentleman's voice rather well, and this was something unusual. He wondered what had been happening during his six months' absence from Paris.

"I dare say that's what I feel in the air, then," he said after a little pause. "It's not calamity. It's love.

"Or maybe," he said quaintly, "it's both. *L'un n'empêche pas l'autre.*" And he gave an odd little shiver, as if that something in the air had suddenly blown chill upon him.

They were passing the corner of the Chamber of Deputies which faces the Pont de la Concorde. Ste. Marie pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"Eight-fifteen," said he. "What time are we asked for? Eight-thirty? That means nine. It's an English house and nobody will be in time. It's out of fashion to be prompt nowadays."

"I should hardly call the Marquis de Saulnes English, you know!" objected Hartley.

"Well, his wife is," said the other, "and they're altogether English in manner. Dinner won't be before nine. Shall we get out and walk across the bridge and up the Champs Elysées? I should like to, I think. I like to walk at this time of the evening—between the daylight and the dark."

Hartley nodded a rather reluctant assent, and Ste. Marie prodded the pear-shaped cocher in the back with his stick. So they got down at the approach to the bridge. Ste. Marie gave the cocher a piece of two francs and they turned away on foot. The pear-shaped one looked at the coin in his fat hand as if it was something unclean and contemptible, something to be despised. He glanced at the dial of his taximeter, which had registered one franc twenty-five, and pulled the flag up. He spat gloomily out into the street and his purple lips moved in words. He seemed to say something like: "*Sale diable de métier!*" which, considering the fact that he had just been overpaid, appears unwarrantably pessimistic in tone. Thereafter he spat again, picked up his reins and jerked them, saying—

"Hè, Jean Baptiste! Uip, uip!" The unemotional white horse turned up the boulevard, trotting evenly at its steady pace, head down, the little bell at its neck jingling pleasantly as it went. It occurs to me that the white horse was probably unique. I doubt that there was another horse in Paris rejoicing in that extraordinary name.

But the two young men walked slowly on across the Pont de la Concorde.

They went in silence, for Hartley was thinking still of Miss Helen Benham and Ste. Marie was thinking of Heaven knows what. His gloom was unaccountable unless he had really meant what he said about feeling calamity in the air. It was very unlike him to have nothing to say. Midway of the bridge he stopped and turned to look out over the river, and the other man halted beside him. The dusk was thickening almost perceptibly, but it was yet far from dark. The swift river ran leaden beneath them, and the river boats, mouches and hirondelles, darted silently under the arches of the bridge, making their last trips for the day. Away to the west, where their faces were turned, the sky was still faintly washed with colour, lemon and dusky orange and pale thin green. A single long strip of cirrus cloud was touched with pink, a lifeless old rose, such as is popular among decorators for the silk hangings of a woman's boudoir. And black against this pallid wash of colours the *Tour Eiffel* stood high and slender and rather ghostly. By day it is an ugly thing, a preposterous iron finger upthrust by man's vanity against God's serene sky, but the haze of evening drapes it in a merciful semi-obscurity, and it is beautiful.

Ste. Marie leant upon the parapet of the bridge, arms folded before him and eyes afar. He began to sing, *à demi voix*, a little phrase out of *Louise*,—an invocation to Paris—and the Englishman stirred uneasily beside him. It seemed to Hartley that to stand on a bridge, in a top hat and evening clothes, and sing operatic airs while people passed back and forth behind you, was one of the things that are not done. He tried to imagine himself singing in the middle of Westminster Bridge at half-past eight of an evening, and he felt quite hot all over at the thought. It was not done at all he said to himself. He looked a little nervously at the people who were passing, and it seemed to him that they stared at him and at the unconscious Ste. Marie, though in truth they did nothing of the sort. He turned back and touched his friend on the arm, saying—

"I think we'd best be getting along, you know," but Ste. Marie was very far away and did not hear. So then he fell to watching the man's dark and handsome face, and to thinking how little the years at Eton and the year or two at Oxford had set any real stamp upon him. He would never be anything but Latin in spite of his Irish mother and his public school. Hartley thought what a pity that was. As Englishmen go he was not illiberal, but, no more than he could have altered the colour of his eyes, could he have believed that anything foreign would not be improved by becoming English. That was born in him, as it is born in most Englishmen, and it was a perfectly simple and honest belief. He felt a deeper affection for this handsome and volatile young man, whom all women loved and who bade fair to spend his life at their successive feet—for he certainly had never shown the slightest desire to take up any sterner employment—he felt a deeper affection for Ste. Marie than for any other man he knew, but he had always



wished that Ste. Marie were an Englishman, and he had always felt a slight sense of shame over his friend's un-English ways.

After a moment he touched him again on the arm, saying—

"Come along! We shall be late, you know. You can finish your little concert another time."

"Eh!" cried Ste. Marie. "*Quoi, donc?*" He turned with a start.

"Oh yes!" said he. "Yes, come along! I was mooning. *Allons! Allons*, my old!" He took Hartley's arm and began to shove him along at a rapid walk.

"I will moon no more," he said. "Instead, you shall tell me about the wonderful Miss Benham whom everybody is talking of. Isn't there something odd connected with the family? I vaguely recall something unusual, some mystery or misfortune or something.

"But first a moment! One small moment, my old. Regard me that!" They had come to the end of the bridge and the great Place de la Concorde lay before them.

"In all the world," said Ste. Marie—and he spoke the truth—"there is not another such square. Regard it, *mon brave!* Bow yourself before it! It is a miracle."

The great bronze lamps were alight, and they cast reflections upon the still damp pavement about them. To either side the trees of the Tuileries gardens and of the Cours la Reine and the Champs Elysées lay in a solid black mass. In the middle the obelisk rose slender and straight, its pointed top black against the sky, and beneath the water of the Nereid fountains splashed and gurgled. Far beyond, the gay lights of the Rue Royale shone in a yellow cluster and, beyond these still, the tall columns of the Madeleine ended the long vista. Pedestrians and cabs crept across that vast space, and seemed curiously little, like black insects, and round about it all the eight cities of France sat atop their stone pedestals and looked on. Ste. Marie gave a little sigh of pleasure, and the two moved forward, bearing to the left, towards the Champs Elysées.

"And now," said he, "about these Benhams. What is the thing I cannot quite recall? What has happened to them?"

"I suppose," said the other man, "you mean the disappearance of Miss Benham's young brother, a month ago, before you returned to Paris. Yes, that was certainly very odd. That is, it was either very odd or very commonplace. And in either case the family is terribly cut up about it. The boy's name was Arthur Benham, and he was rather a young fool but not downright vicious, I should think. I never knew him at all well, but I know he spent his time chiefly at the Café de Paris and at the Olympia and at Longchamps and at *Henry's Bar*. Well, he just disappeared, that is all. He dropped completely out of sight between two days, and though the family has had a small army of detectives on his trail, they've not discovered the smallest clue. It's deuced odd altogether. You might think it easy

to disappear like that but it's not."

"No—no," said Ste. Marie thoughtfully. "No, I should fancy not.

"This boy," he said after a pause, "I think I had seen him—had him pointed out to me—before I went away. I think it was at *Henry's Bar* where all the young Americans go to drink strange beverages. I am quite sure I remember his face. A weak face but not quite bad."

And after another little pause he asked—

"Was there any reason why he should have gone away? Any quarrel or that sort of thing?"

"Well," said the other man, "I rather think there was something of the sort. The boy's uncle—Captain Stewart, middle-aged, rather prim old party—you'll have met him, I dare say—he intimated to me one day, that there had been some trivial row. You see the lad isn't of age yet, though he is to be in a few months, and so he has had to live on an allowance doled out by his grandfather, who's the head of the house—the boy's father is dead. There's a quaint old beggar, if you like!—the grandfather. He was rather a swell in the diplomatic, in his day it seems—rather an important swell. Now he's bedridden. He sits all day in bed and plays cards with his granddaughter or with a very superior valet, and talks politics with the men who come to see him. Oh yes, he's a quaint old beggar. He has a great quantity of white hair and an enormous square white beard, and the fiercest eyes I ever saw, I should think. Everybody's frightened out of their wits of him. Well, he sits up there and rules his family in good old patriarchal style, and it seems he came down a bit hard on the poor boy one day over some folly or other, and there was a row and the boy went out of the house swearing he'd be even."

"Ah well, then," said Ste. Marie, "the matter seems simple enough. A foolish boy's foolish pique. He is staying in hiding somewhere to frighten his grandfather. When he thinks the time favourable he will come back and be wept over and forgiven."

The other man walked a little way in silence.

"Ye—es," he said at last. "Yes, possibly. Possibly you are right. That's what the grandfather thinks. It's the obvious solution. Unfortunately there is more or less against it. The boy went away with—so far as can be learned—almost no money, almost none at all. And he has already been gone a month. Miss Benham—his sister—is sure that something has happened to him, and I'm a bit inclined to think so too. It's all very odd. I should think he might have been kidnapped but that no demand has been made for money."

"He was not," suggested Ste. Marie—"not the sort of young man to do anything desperate—make away with himself?"

Hartley laughed.

"O Lord, no!" said he. "Not that sort of young man at all. He was a very normal type of rich and spoilt and somewhat foolish American boy."

"Rich?" inquired the other quickly.

"Oh yes! they're beastly rich. Young Arthur is to come into something very good at his majority, I believe, from his father's estate, and the old grandfather is said to be indecently rich—rolling in it! There's another reason why the young idiot wouldn't be likely to stop away of his own accord. He wouldn't risk anything like a serious break with the old gentleman. It would mean a loss of millions to him, I dare say; for the old beggar is quite capable of cutting him off, if he takes the notion. Oh, it's a bad business, all through." And after they had gone on a bit he said it again, shaking his head—

"It's a bad business! That poor girl you know—it's hard on her. She was fond of the young ass for some reason or other. She's very much broken up over it."

"Yes," said Ste. Marie, "it is hard for her—for all the family, of course. A bad business, as you say." He spoke absently, for he was looking ahead at something which seemed to be a motor accident. They had, by this time, got well up the Champs Elysées and were crossing the Rond Point. A motor-car was drawn up alongside the kerb just beyond, and a little knot of people stood about it and seemed to look at something on the ground.

"I think some one has been run down," said Ste. Marie. "Shall we have a look?" They quickened their pace and came to where the group of people stood in a circle looking upon the ground, and two gendarmes asked many questions and wrote voluminously in their little books. It appeared that a delivery boy mounted upon a tricycle cart had turned into the wrong side of the avenue, and had got himself run into and overturned by a motor-car going at a moderate rate of speed. For once the sentiment of those mysterious birds of prey which flock instantaneously from nowhere round an accident, was against the victim and in favour of the frightened and gesticulating chauffeur.

Ste. Marie turned an amused face from this voluble being to the other occupants of the patently hired car, who stood apart adding very little to the discussion. He saw a tall and bony man with very bright blue eyes and what is sometimes called a guardsman's moustache—the drooping walruslike ornament which dates back a good many years now. Beyond this gentleman he saw a young woman in a long grey silk coat and a motoring veil. He was aware that the tall man was staring at him rather fixedly and with a half-puzzled frown, as though he thought that they had met before and was trying to remember when, but Ste. Marie gave the man but a swift glance. His eyes were upon the dark face of the young woman beyond, and it seemed to him that she called aloud to him in an actual voice that rang in his ears. The young woman's very obvious beauty he

thought had nothing to do with the matter. It seemed to him that her eyes called him. Just that. Something strange and very potent seemed to take sudden and almost tangible hold upon him—a charm, a spell, a magic—something unprecedented, new to his experience. He could not take his eyes from hers and he stood staring.

[image]

*"It seemed to him that her eyes called him."*

As before, on the Pont de la Concorde, Hartley touched him on the arm, and abruptly the chains that had bound him were loosened.

"We must be going on, you know," the Englishman said, and Ste. Marie said rather hurriedly—

"Yes! yes, to be sure. Come along!" But at a little distance he turned once more to look back. The chauffeur had mounted to his place, the delivery boy was upon his feet again, little the worse for his tumble, and the knot of bystanders had begun to disperse, but it seemed to Ste. Marie that the young woman in the long silk coat stood quite still where she had been, and that her face was turned towards him watching.

"Did you notice that girl?" said Hartley as they walked on at a brisker pace. "Did you see her face? She was rather a tremendous beauty, you know, in her gipsyish fashion. Yes, by Jove, she was!"

"Did I see her?" repeated Ste. Marie. "Yes. Oh yes. She had very strange eyes. At least I think it was the eyes. I don't know. I've never seen any eyes quite like them. Very odd!"

He said something more in French which Hartley did not hear, and the Englishman saw that he was frowning.

"Oh well, I shouldn't have said there was anything strange about them," Hartley said, "but they certainly were beautiful. There's no denying that. The man with her looked rather Irish I thought."

They came to the Etoile and cut across it towards the Avenue Hoche. Ste. Marie glanced back once more, but the motor-car and the delivery boy and the gendarmes were gone.

"What did you say?" he asked idly.

"I said the man looked Irish," repeated his friend. All at once Ste. Marie gave a loud exclamation—

"Sacred thousand devils! Fool that I am! Dolt! Why didn't I think of it before?" Hartley stared at him and Ste. Marie stared down the Champs Elysées

like one in a trance.

"I say," said the Englishman, "we really must be getting on, you know, we're late." And as they went along down the Avenue Hoche, he demanded—

"Why are you a dolt and whatever else it was? What struck you so suddenly?"

"I remembered all at once," said Ste. Marie, "where I had seen that man before, and with whom I last saw him. I'll tell you about it later. Probably it's of no importance, though."

"You're talking rather like a mild lunatic," said the other. "Here we are at the house!"

## CHAPTER II

### THE LADDER TO THE STARS

Miss Benham was talking wearily to a strange fair youth with an impediment in his speech, and was wondering why the youth had been asked to this house, where in general one was sure of meeting only interesting people, when some one spoke her name, and she turned with a little sigh of relief. It was Baron de Vries, the Belgian First Secretary of Legation, an old friend of her grandfather's, a man made gentle and sweet by infinite sorrow. He bowed civilly to the fair youth and bent over the girl's hand.

"It is very good," he said, "to see you again in the world. We have need of you, *nous autres*. Madame your mother is well, I hope—and the bear?" He called old Mr. Stewart "the bear" in a sort of grave jest, and that fierce octogenarian rather liked it.

"Oh yes," the girl said, "we're all fairly well. My mother had one of her headaches to-night and so didn't come here, but she's as well as usual, and 'the bear'—yes, he's well enough physically, I should think, but he has not been quite the same since—during the past month. It has told upon him, you know. He grieves over it much more than he will admit."

"Yes," said Baron de Vries gravely. "Yes, I know." He turned about towards the fair young man, but that youth had drifted away and joined himself to another group. Miss Benham looked after him and gave a little exclamation of relief.

"That person was rather terrible," she said. "I can't think why he is here. Marian so seldom has dull people."

"I believe," said the Belgian, "that he is some connexion of de Saulnes'. That explains his presence." He lowered his voice.

"You have heard no—news? They have found no trace?"

"No," said she. "Nothing. Nothing at all. I'm rather in despair. It's all so hideously mysterious. I am sure, you know, that something has happened to him. It's—very very hard. Sometimes I think I can't bear it. But I go on. We all go on."

Baron de Vries nodded his head strongly.

"That, my dear child, is just what you must do," said he. "You must go on. That is what needs the real courage and you have courage. I am not afraid for you. And sooner or later you will hear of him—from him. It is impossible nowadays to disappear for very long. You will hear from him." He smiled at her, his slow grave smile that was not of mirth but of kindness and sympathy and cheer.

"And if I may say so," he said, "you are doing very wisely to come out once more among your friends. You can accomplish no good by brooding at home. It is better to live one's normal life—even when it is not easy to do it. I say so who know."

The girl touched Baron de Vries' arm for an instant with her hand—a little gesture that seemed to express thankfulness and trust and affection.

"If all my friends were like you!" she said to him. And after that she drew a quick breath as if to have done with these sad matters, and she turned her eyes once more towards the broad room where the other guests stood in little groups, all talking at once very rapidly and in loud voices.

"What extraordinarily cosmopolitan affairs these dinner parties in new Paris are!" she said. "They're like diplomatic parties, only we have a better time and the men don't wear their orders. How many nationalities should you say there are in this room now?"

"Without stopping to consider," said Baron de Vries, "I say ten." They counted, and out of fourteen people there were represented nine races.

"I don't see Richard Hartley," Miss Benham said. "I had an idea he was to be here. Ah!" she broke off, looking towards the doorway.

"Here he comes now!" she said. "He's rather late. Who is the Spanish-looking man with him, I wonder? He's rather handsome, isn't he?"

Baron de Vries moved a little forward to look, and exclaimed in his turn. He said—

"Ah, I did not know he was returned to Paris. That is Ste. Marie." Miss Benham's eyes followed the Spanish-looking young man as he made his way through the joyous greetings of friends towards his hostess.

"So that is Ste. Marie!" she said, still watching him. "The famous Ste. Marie!" She gave a little laugh.

"Well, I don't wonder at the reputation he bears for—gallantry and that sort of thing. He looks the part, doesn't he?"

"Ye—es," admitted her friend. "Yes, he is sufficiently *beau garçon*. But—yes, well, that is not all, by any means. You must not get the idea that Ste. Marie is nothing but a genial and romantic young squire-of-dames. He is much more than that. He has very fine qualities. To be sure he appears to possess no ambition in particular, but I should be glad if he were my son. He comes of a very old house, and there is no blot upon the history of that house—nothing but faithfulness and gallantry and honour. And there is, I think, no blot upon Ste. Marie himself. He is fine gold."

The girl turned and stared at Baron de Vries with some astonishment.

"You speak very strongly," said she. "I have never heard you speak so strongly of any one, I think."

The Belgian made a little deprecatory gesture with his two hands, and he laughed.

"Oh well, I like the boy. And I should hate to have you meet him for the first time under a misconception. Listen, my child! When a young man is loved equally by both men and women, by both old and young, that young man is worthy of friendship and trust. Everybody likes Ste. Marie. In a sense that is his misfortune. The way is made too easy for him. His friends stand so thick about him that they shut off his view of the heights. To waken ambition in his soul he has need of solitude or misfortune or grief.

"Or," said the elderly Belgian, laughing gently, "or perhaps the other thing might do it best—the more obvious thing?"

The girl's raised eyebrows questioned him and, when he did not answer, she said—

"What thing then?"

"Why, love," said Baron de Vries. "Love, to be sure. Love is said to work miracles, and I believe that to be a perfectly true saying. Ah! he is coming here."

The Marquise de Saulnes, who was a very pretty little Englishwoman with a deceptively doll-like look, approached, dragging Ste. Marie in her wake. She said—

"My dearest dear, I give you of my best. Thank me, and cherish him! I believe he is to lead you to the place where food is, isn't he?" She beamed over her shoulder, and departed, and Miss Benham found herself confronted by the Spanish-looking man.

Her first thought was that he was not as handsome as he had seemed at a distance but something much better. For a young man she thought his face was rather oddly weather-beaten, as if he might have been very much at sea, and it was too dark to be entirely pleasing. But she liked his eyes, which were not

brown or black, as she had expected, but a very unusual dark grey—a sort of slate colour.

And she liked his mouth too. It was her habit—and it is not an unreliable habit—to judge people by their eyes and mouth. Ste. Marie's mouth pleased her because the lips were neither thin nor thick, they were not drawn into an unpleasant line by unpleasant habits, they did not pout as so many Latin lips do, and they had at one corner a humorous expression which she found curiously agreeable.

"You are to cherish me," Ste. Marie said. "Orders from headquarters. How does one cherish people?" The corner of his very expressive mouth twitched and he grinned at her. Miss Benham did not approve of young men who began an acquaintance in this very familiar manner. She thought that there was a certain preliminary and more formal stage which ought to be got through with first, but Ste. Marie's grin was irresistible. In spite of herself she found that she was laughing.

"I don't quite know," she said. "It sounds rather appalling, doesn't it? Mar-ian has such an extraordinary fashion of hurling people at each other's heads. She takes my breath away at times."

"Ah well," said Ste. Marie, "perhaps we can settle upon something when I've led you to the place where food is. And, by the way, what are we waiting for? Are we not all here? There's an even number." He broke off with a sudden exclamation of pleasure, and, when Miss Benham turned to look, she found Baron de Vries, who had been talking to some friends, had once more come up to where she stood. She watched the greeting between the two men, and its quiet affection impressed her very much. She knew Baron de Vries well, and she knew that it was not his habit to show or to feel a strong liking for young and idle men. This young man must be very worth while to have won the regard of that wise old Belgian.

Just then Hartley, who had been barricaded behind a cordon of friends, came up to her in an abominable temper over his ill luck, and, a few moments later, the dinner procession was formed and they went in.

At table Miss Benham found herself between Ste. Marie and the same strange fair youth who had afflicted her in the drawing-room. She looked upon him now with a sort of dismayed terror, but it developed that there was nothing to fear from the fair youth. He had no attention to waste upon social amenities. He fell upon his food with a wolfish passion extraordinary to see and also, alas! to hear. Miss Benham turned from him to meet Ste. Marie's delighted eye.

"Tell him for me," begged that gentleman, "that soup should be seen—not heard." But Miss Benham gave a little shiver of disgust.

"I shall tell him nothing whatever," she said. "He's quite too dreadful really.



People shouldn't be exposed to that sort of thing. It's not only the noises. Plenty of very charming and estimable Germans, for example, make strange noises at table. But he behaves like a famished dog over a bone. I refuse to have anything to do with him. You must make up the loss to me, M. Ste. Marie. You must be as amusing as two people." She smiled across at him in her gravely questioning fashion.

"I'm wondering," she said, "if I dare ask you a very personal question. I hesitate because I don't like people who presume too much upon a short acquaintance—and our acquaintance has been very very short, hasn't it? even though we may have heard a great deal about each other beforehand. I wonder."

"Oh, I should ask it, if I were you!" said Ste. Marie at once. "I'm an extremely good-natured person. And besides I quite naturally feel flattered at your taking interest enough to ask anything about me."

"Well," said she, "it's this. Why does everybody call you just 'Ste. Marie'? Most people are spoken of as Monsieur this or that—if there isn't a more august title—but they all call you Ste. Marie without any Monsieur. It seems rather odd."

Ste. Marie looked puzzled.

"Why," he said, "I don't believe I know, just. I'd never thought of that. It's quite true, of course. They never do use a Monsieur or anything, do they? How cheeky of them! I wonder why it is. I'll ask Hartley."

He did ask Hartley later on and Hartley didn't know either. Miss Benham asked some other people, who were vague about it, and in the end she became convinced that it was an odd and quite inexplicable form of something like endearment. But nobody seemed to have formulated it to himself.

"The name is really 'de Ste. Marie,'" he went on, "and there's a title that I don't use, and a string of Christian names that one employs. My people were Bearnais, and there's a heap of ruins on top of a hill in the Pyrenees where they lived. It used to be Ste. Marie de Mont-les-Roses, but afterwards, after the Revolution, they called it Ste. Marie de Mont Perdu. My great-grandfather was killed there, but some old servants smuggled his little son away and saved him."

He seemed to Miss Benham to say that in exactly the right manner, not in the cheap and scoffing fashion which some young men affect in speaking of ancestral fortunes or misfortunes, nor with too much solemnity. And when she allowed a little silence to occur at the end he did not go on with his family history, but turned at once to another subject. It pleased her curiously.

The fair youth at her other side continued to crouch over his food, making fierce and animal-like noises. He never spoke or seemed to wish to be spoken to, and Miss Benham found it easy to ignore him altogether. It occurred to her once or twice that Ste. Marie's other neighbour might desire an occasional word from him, but after all, she said to herself, that was his affair and beyond her control.

So these two talked together through the entire dinner period, and the girl was aware that she was being much more deeply affected by the simple magnetic charm of a man than ever before in her life. It made her a little angry, because she was unfamiliar with this sort of thing and distrusted it. She was a rather perfect type of that phenomenon before which the British and Continental world stands in mingled delight and exasperation—the American unmarried young woman, the creature of extraordinary beauty and still more extraordinary poise, the virgin with the bearing and *savoir faire* of a woman of the world, the fresh-cheeked girl with the calm mind of a *savant* and the cool judgment, in regard to men and things, of an ambassador. The European world says she is cold, and that may be true; but it is well enough known that she can love very deeply. It says that, like most queens, and for precisely the same set of reasons, she later on makes a bad mother; but it is easy to point to queens who are the best of mothers. In short, she remains an enigma, and like all other enigmas forever fascinating.

Miss Benham reflected that she knew almost nothing about Ste. Marie, save for his reputation as a carpet knight, and Baron de Vries' good opinion, which could not be despised. And that made her the more displeased when she realised how promptly she was surrendering to his charm. In a moment of silence she gave a sudden little laugh which seemed to express a half-angry astonishment.

"What was that for?" Ste. Marie demanded. The girl looked at him for an instant and shook her head.

"I can't tell you," said she. "That's rude, isn't it, and I'm sorry. Perhaps I will tell you one day when we know each other better."

But inwardly she was saying: "Why, I suppose this is how they all begin: all these regiments of women who make fools of themselves about him! I suppose this is exactly what he does to them all!"

It made her angry and she tried quite unfairly to shift the anger, as it were, to Ste. Marie—to put him somehow in the wrong. But she was by nature very just and she could not quite do that, particularly as it was evident that the man was using no cheap tricks. He did not try to flirt with her and he did not attempt to pay her veiled compliments—though she was often aware that when her attention was diverted for a few moments his eyes were always upon her, and that is a compliment that few women can find it in their hearts to resent.

"You say," said Ste. Marie, "'when we know each other better.' May one twist that into a permission to come and see you—I mean, really see you, not just leave a card at your door to-morrow by way of observing the formalities?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh yes, one may twist it into something like that without straining it unduly, I think. My mother and I shall be very glad to see you. I'm sorry she is not here to-night to say it herself."

Then the hostess began to gather together her flock, and so the two had no

more speech. But when the women had gone and the men were left about the dismantled table, Hartley moved up beside Ste. Marie and shook a sad head at him. He said—

"You're a very lucky being. I was quietly hoping, on the way here, that I should be the fortunate man, but you always have all the luck. I hope you're decently grateful."

"*Mon vieux*," said Ste. Marie, "my feet are upon the stars."

"No!" He shook his head as if the figure displeased him. "No, my feet are upon the ladder to the stars. Grateful? What does a foolish word like grateful mean? Don't talk to me. You are not worthy to trample among my magnificent thoughts. I am a god upon Olympus."

"You said just now," objected the other man practically, "that your feet were on a ladder. There are no ladders from Olympus to the stars."

"Ho!" said Ste. Marie. "Ho! aren't there, though? There shall be ladders all over Olympus if I like. What do you know about gods and stars? I shall be a god climbing to the heavens, and I shall be an angel of light, and I shall be a miserable worm grovelling in the night here below, and I shall be a poet, and I shall be anything else I happen to think of, all of them at once, if I choose. And you, you shall be the tongue-tied son of perfidious Albion that you are, gaping at my splendours from a fog bank—a November fog bank in May. Who is the dessicated gentleman bearing down upon us?"

## CHAPTER III

### STE. MARIE MAKES A VOW, BUT A PAIR OF EYES HAUNT HIM

Hartley looked over his shoulder and gave a little exclamation of distaste.

"It's Captain Stewart, Miss Benham's uncle," he said, lowering his voice. "I'm off. I shall abandon you to him. He's a good old soul but he bores me." Hartley nodded to the man who was approaching, and then made his way to the end of the table where their host sat discussing Aero-Club matters with a group of the other men.

Captain Stewart dropped into the vacant chair, saying—

"May I recall myself to you, M. Ste. Marie? We met, I believe, once or twice, a couple of years ago. My name's Stewart."

Captain Stewart—the title was vaguely believed to have been won some

years before in the American service, but no one appeared to know much about it—was not an old man. He could not have been, at this time, much more than fifty, but English-speaking acquaintances often called him "old Stewart" and others "*ce vieux Stewart*." Indeed, at a first glance, he might have passed for anything up to sixty, for his face was a good deal more lined and wrinkled than it should have been at his age. Ste. Marie's adjective had been rather apt. The man had a dessicated appearance. Upon examination, however, one saw that the blood was still red in his cheeks and lips, and, although his neck was thin and withered like an old man's, his brown eyes still held their fire. The hair was almost gone from the top of his large round head, but it remained at the sides, stiff colourless hair with a hint of red in it. And there were red streaks in his grey moustache, which was trained outwards in two loose tufts like shaving brushes. The moustache and the shallow chin under it gave him an odd cat-like appearance. Hartley, who rather disliked the man, used to insist that he had heard him mew.

Ste. Marie said something politely non-committal, though he did not at all remember the alleged meeting two years before, and he looked at Captain Stewart with a real curiosity and interest, in his character as Miss Benham's uncle. He thought it very civil of the elder man to make these friendly advances when it was in no way incumbent upon him to do so.

"I noticed," said Captain Stewart, "that you were placed next my niece, Helen Benham, at dinner. This must be the first time you two have met, is it not? I remember speaking of you to her some months ago, and I am quite sure she said that she had not met you. Ah! yes, of course, you have been away from Paris a great deal since she and her mother—her mother is my sister, that is to say, my half-sister—have come here to live with my father." He gave a little gentle laugh.

"I take an elderly uncle's privilege," he said, "of being rather proud of Helen. She is called very pretty and she certainly has great poise."

Ste. Marie drew a quick breath and his eyes began to flash as they had done a few moments before when he told Hartley that his feet were upon the ladder to the stars.

"Miss Benham," he cried. "Miss Benham is—" He hung poised so for a moment, searching, as it were, for words of sufficient splendour, but in the end he shook his head, and the gleam faded from his eyes. He sank back in his chair sighing.

"Miss Benham," said he, "is extremely beautiful." And again her uncle emitted his little gentle laugh which may have deceived Hartley into believing that he had heard the man mew. The sound was as much like mewling as it was like anything else.

"I am very glad," Captain Stewart said, "to see her come out once more into the world. She needs distraction. We—you may possibly have heard that the

family is in great distress of mind over the disappearance of my young nephew. Helen has suffered particularly because she is convinced that the boy has met with foul play. I myself think it very unlikely, very unlikely indeed. The lack of motive, for one thing, and for another— Ah well, a score of reasons! But Helen refuses to be comforted. It seems to me much more like a boy's prank—his idea of revenge for what he considered unjust treatment at his grandfather's hands. He was always a headstrong youngster, and he has been a bit spoilt. Still, of course, the uncertainty is very trying for us all—very wearing."

"Of course," said Ste. Marie gravely. "It is most unfortunate. Ah, by the way!" He looked up with a sudden interest. "A rather odd thing happened," he said, "as Hartley and I were coming here this evening. We walked up the Champs Elysées from the Concorde, and on the way Hartley had been telling me of your nephew's disappearance. Near the Rond Point we came upon a motor-car which was drawn up at the side of the street—there had been an accident of no consequence, a boy tumbled over but not hurt. Well, one of the two occupants of the motor-car was a man whom I used to see about Maxim's and the Café de Paris and the Montmartre places too, some time ago—a rather shady character whose name I've forgotten. The odd part of it all was that at the last occasion or two on which I saw your nephew he was with this man. I think it was in *Henry's Bar*. Of course it means nothing at all. Your nephew doubtless knew scores of people, and this man is no more likely to have information about his present whereabouts than any of the others. Still, I should have liked to ask him. I didn't remember who he was till he had gone."

Captain Stewart shook his head sadly, frowning down upon the cigarette from which he had knocked the ash.

"I am afraid poor Arthur did not always choose his friends with the best of judgment," said he. "I am not squeamish, and I would not have boys kept in a glass case, but— Yes, I'm afraid Arthur was not always too careful." He replaced the cigarette neatly between his lips.

"This man now, this man whom you saw to-night, what sort of looking man will he have been?"

"Oh, a tall lean man," said Ste. Marie. "A tall man with blue eyes and a heavy old-fashioned moustache. I just can't remember the name."

The smoke stood still for an instant over Captain Stewart's cigarette, and it seemed to Ste. Marie that a little contortion of anger fled over the man's face and was gone again. He stirred slightly in his chair.

After a moment he said—

"I fancy—from your description I fancy I know who the man was. If it is the man I am thinking of, the name is—Powers. He is, as you have said, a rather shady character, and I more than once warned my nephew against him. Such

people are not good companions for a boy. Yes, I warned him.”

[image]

*”I fancy I know who the man was.”*

”Powers,” said Ste. Marie, ”doesn’t sound right to me, you know. I can’t say the fellow’s name myself, but I’m sure—that is, I think—it’s not Powers.”

”Oh yes,” said Captain Stewart with an elderly man’s half-querulous certainty. ”Yes, the name is Powers. I remember it well. And I remember— Yes, it was odd, was it not, your meeting him like that just as you were talking of Arthur. You—oh, you didn’t speak to him, you say? No! no, to be sure. You didn’t recognise him at once. Yes, it was odd. Of course, the man could have had nothing to do with poor Arthur’s disappearance. His only interest in the boy at any time would have been for what money Arthur might have, and he carried none, or almost none, away with him when he vanished. Eh, poor lad! Where can he be to-night, I wonder? It’s a sad business, M. Ste. Marie. A sad business.”

Captain Stewart fell into a sort of brooding silence, frowning down at the table before him and twisting with his thin fingers the little liqueur glass and the coffee cup which were there. Once or twice, Ste. Marie thought, the frown deepened and twisted into a sort of scowl, and the man’s fingers twitched on the cloth of the table, but when at last the group at the other end of the board rose and began to move towards the door, Captain Stewart rose also and followed them.

At the door he seemed to think of something, and touched Ste. Marie upon the arm.

”This, ah, Powers,” he said in a low tone, ”this man whom you saw to-night. You said he was one of two occupants of a motor-car. Yes? Did you by any chance recognise the other?”

”Oh, the other was a young woman,” said Ste. Marie. ”No, I never saw her before. She was very handsome.”

Captain Stewart said something under his breath and turned abruptly away. But an instant later he faced about once more, smiling. He said, in a man-of-the-world manner which sat rather oddly upon him—

”Ah well, we all have our little love affairs. I dare say this shady fellow has his.” And for some obscure reason Ste. Marie found the speech peculiarly offensive.

In the drawing-room he had opportunity for no more than a word with Miss Benham, for Hartley, enraged over his previous ill success, cut in ahead of him and manoeuvred that young lady into a corner, where he sat before her turning a

square and determined back to the world. Ste. Marie listlessly played bridge for a time, but his attention was not upon it, and he was glad when the others at the table settled their accounts and departed to look in at a dance somewhere. After that he talked for a little with Marian de Saulnes, whom he liked and who made no secret of adoring him. She complained loudly that he was in a vile temper, which was not true: he was only restless and distraught and wanted to be alone; and so, at last, he took his leave without waiting for Hartley.

Outside in the street he stood for a moment hesitating, and an expectant fiacre drew up before the house, the cocher raising an interrogative whip. In the end Ste. Marie shook his head and turned away on foot. It was a still sweet night of soft airs and a moonless starlit sky, and the man was very fond of walking in the dark. From the Etoile he walked down the Champs Elysées, but presently turned towards the river. His eyes were upon the mellow stars, his feet upon the ladder thereunto. He found himself crossing the Pont des Invalides, and halted midway to rest and look. He laid his arms upon the bridge's parapet and turned his face outwards. Against it bore a little gentle breeze that smelt of the purifying water below and of the night and of green things growing. Beneath him the river ran black as flowing ink, and across its troubled surface the coloured lights of the many bridges glittered very beautifully—swirling arabesques of gold and crimson. The noises of the city—beat of hoofs upon wooden pavements, horn of tram or motor-car, jingle of bell upon cab horse—came here faintly and as if from a great distance. Above the dark trees of the Cours la Reine the sky glowed softly golden, reflecting the million lights of Paris.

Ste. Marie closed his eyes and, against darkness, he saw the beautiful head of Helen Benham, the clear-cut exquisite modelling of feature and contour, the perfection of form and colour. Her eyes met his eyes, and they were very serene and calm and confident. She smiled at him, and the new contours into which her face fell with the smile were more perfect than before. He watched the turn of her head, and the grace of the movement was the uttermost effortless grace one dreams that a queen should have. The heart of Ste. Marie quickened in him and he would have gone down upon his knees.

He was well aware that with the coming of this girl something unprecedented, wholly new to his experience had befallen him—an awakening to a new life. He had been in love a very great many times. He was usually in love. And each time his heart had gone through the same sweet and bitter anguish, the same sleepless nights had come and gone upon him, the eternal and ever-new miracle had wakened spring in his soul, had passed its summer solstice, had faded through autumnal regrets to winter's death; but through it all something within him had waited asleep.

He found himself wondering dully what it was, wherein lay the great differ-

ence, and he could not answer the question he asked. He knew only that whereas before he had loved, he now went down upon prayerful knees to worship. In a sudden poignant thrill the knightly fervour of his forefathers came upon him, and he saw a sweet and golden lady set far above him upon a throne. Her clear eyes gazed afar, serene and untroubled. She sat wrapped in a sort of virginal austerity, unaware of the base passions of men. The other women whom Ste. Marie had, as he was pleased to term it, loved, had certainly come at least halfway to meet him, and some of them had come a good deal farther than that. He could not, by the wildest flight of imagination, conceive this girl doing anything of that sort. She was to be won by trial and high endeavour, by prayer and self-purification, not captured by a warm eye glance, a whispered word, a laughing kiss. In fancy he looked from the crowding cohorts of these others to that still sweet figure set on high, wrapt in virginal pride, calm in her serene perfection, and his soul abased itself before her. He knelt in an awed and worshipful adoration.

So, before quest or tournament or battle, must those elder Ste. Maries—Ste. Maries of Mont-les-Roses—have knelt, each knight at the feet of his lady, each knightly soul aglow with the chaste ardour of chivalry.

The man's hands tightened upon the parapet of the bridge, he lifted his face again to the shining stars whereamong, as his fancy had it, she sat enthroned. Exultingly he felt under his feet the rungs of the ladder, and in the darkness he swore a great oath to have done for ever with blindness and grovelling, to climb and climb, forever to climb, until at last he should stand where she was—cleansed and made worthy by long endeavour—at last meet her eyes and touch her hand.

It was a fine and chivalric frenzy, and Ste. Marie was passionately in earnest about it, but his guardian angel, indeed Fate herself, must have laughed a little in the dark, knowing what manner of man he was in less exalted hours.

It was an odd freak of memory that at last recalled him to earth. Every man knows that when a strong and, for the moment, unavailing effort has been made to recall something lost to mind, the memory, in some mysterious fashion, goes on working long after the attention has been elsewhere diverted, and sometimes hours afterwards, or even days, produces quite suddenly and inappropriately the lost article. Ste. Marie had turned with a little sigh to take up once more his walk across the Pont des Invalides, when seemingly from nowhere, and certainly by no conscious effort, a name flashed into his mind. He said it aloud—

"O'Hara! O'Hara. That tall thin chap's name was O'Hara, by Jove! It wasn't Powers at all." He laughed a little as he remembered how very positive Captain Stewart had been. And then he frowned, thinking that the mistake was an odd one since Stewart had evidently known a good deal about this adventurer. Captain Stewart though, Ste. Marie reflected, was exactly the sort to be very sure he was right about things. He had just the neat and precise and semi-scholarly per-



sonality of the man who always knows. So Ste. Marie dismissed the matter with another brief laugh, but a cognate matter was less easy to dismiss. The name brought with it a face, a dark and splendid face with tragic eyes that called. He walked a long way thinking about them, and wondering. The eyes haunted him. It will have been reasonably evident that Ste. Marie was a fanciful and imaginative soul. He needed but a chance word, the sight of a face in a crowd, the glance of an eye, to begin story building, and he would go on for hours about it and work himself up to quite a passion with his imaginings. He should have been a writer of fiction.

He began forthwith to construct romances about this lady of the motor-car. He wondered why she should have been with the shady Irishman—if Irishman he was—O'Hara, and with some anxiety he wondered what the two were to each other. Captain Stewart's little cynical jest came to his mind, and he was conscious of a sudden desire to kick Miss Benham's middle-aged uncle.

The eyes haunted him. What was it they suffered? Out of what misery did they call?—and for what? He walked all the long way home to his little flat overlooking the Luxembourg Gardens, haunted by those eyes. As he climbed his stair it suddenly occurred to him that they had quite driven out of his mind the image of his beautiful lady who sat amongst the stars, and the realisation came to him with a shock.

## CHAPTER IV

### OLD DAVID STEWART

It was Miss Benham's custom upon returning home at night from dinner parties or other entertainments to look in for a few minutes on her grandfather before going to bed. The old gentleman, like most elderly people, slept lightly, and often sat up in bed very late into the night reading or playing piquet with his valet. He suffered hideously at times from the malady which was killing him by degrees, but when he was free from pain the enormous recuperative power, which he had preserved to his eighty-six years, left him almost as vigorous and clear-minded as if he had never been ill at all. Hartley's description of him had not been altogether a bad one—"a quaint old beggar ... a great quantity of white hair and an enormous square white beard and the fiercest eyes I ever saw—" He was a rather "quaint old beggar" indeed! He had let his thick white hair grow

long, and it hung down over his brows in unparted locks as the ancient Greeks wore their hair. He had very shaggy eyebrows, and the deep-set eyes under them gleamed from the shadow with a fierceness which was rather deceptive but none the less intimidating. He had a great beak of a nose, but the mouth below could not be seen. It was hidden by the moustache and the enormous square beard. His face was colourless, almost as white as hair and beard: there seemed to be no shadow or tint anywhere except the cavernous recesses from which the man's eyes gleamed and sparkled. Altogether he was certainly "a quaint old beggar."

He had, during the day and evening, a good many visitors, for the old gentleman's mind was as alert as it ever had been, and important men thought him worth consulting. The names which the admirable valet, Peters, announced from time to time were names which meant a great deal in the official and diplomatic world of the day. But if old David felt flattered over the unusual fashion in which the great of the earth continued to come to him he never betrayed it. Indeed it is quite probable that this view of the situation never once occurred to him. He had been thrown with the great of the earth for more than half a century, and he had learnt to take it as a matter of course.

On her return from the Marquise de Saulnes' dinner party Miss Benham went at once to her grandfather's wing of the house, which had its own street entrance, and knocked lightly at his door. She asked the admirable Peters, who opened to her—

"Is he awake?" And being assured that he was, went into the vast chamber, dropping her cloak on a chair as she entered. David Stewart was sitting up in his monumental bed behind a sort of invalid's table which stretched across his knees without touching them. He wore over his night-clothes a Chinese Mandarin's jacket of old red satin, wadded with down, and very gorgeously embroidered with the cloud and bat designs and with large round panels of the Imperial five-clawed dragon in gold. He had a number of these jackets, they seemed to be his one vanity in things external, and they were so made that they could be slipped about him without disturbing him in his bed, since they hung down only to the waist or thereabouts. They kept the upper part of his body, which was not covered by the bedclothes, warm, and they certainly made him a very impressive figure.

He said—

"Ah, Helen! Come in! Come in! Sit down on the bed there and tell me what you have been doing!" He pushed aside the pack of cards which was spread out on the invalid's table before him, and with great care counted a sum of money in francs and half-francs and nickel twenty-five centime pieces.

"I've won seven francs fifty from Peters to-night," he said, chuckling gently. "That is a very good evening indeed. Very good. Where have you been, and who were there?"

"A dinner party at the de Saulnes'," said Miss Benham, making herself comfortable on the side of the great bed. "It's a very pleasant place. Marian is, of course, a dear, and they're quite English and unceremonious. You can talk to your neighbour at dinner instead of addressing the house from a platform, as it were. French dinner parties make me nervous."

Old David gave a little growling laugh.

"French dinner parties at least keep people up to the mark in the art of conversation," said he. "But that is a lost art anyhow, nowadays, so I suppose one might as well be quite informal and have done with it. Who were there?"

"Oh, well—" she considered, "no one, I should think, who would interest you. Rather an indifferent set. Pleasant people but not inspiring. The Marquis had some young relative or connexion who was quite odious and made the most surprising noises over his food. I met a new man whom I think I am going to like very much indeed. He wouldn't interest you because he doesn't mean anything in particular—and, of course, he oughtn't to interest me for the same reason. He's just an idle pleasant young man, but—he has great charm. Very great charm. His name is Ste. Marie. Baron de Vries seems very fond of him, which surprised me rather."

"Ste. Marie!" exclaimed the old gentleman in obvious astonishment. "Ste. Marie de Mont Perdu?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, that is the name, I believe. You know him then? I wonder he didn't mention it."

"I knew his father," said old David. "And his grandfather, for that matter. They're Gascon, I think, or Bearnais, but this boy's mother will have been Irish, unless his father married again."

"So you've been meeting a Ste. Marie, have you? And finding that he has great charm?" The old gentleman broke into one of his growling laughs, and reached for a long black cigar which he lighted, eyeing his granddaughter the while over the flaring match.

"Well," he said, when the cigar was drawing, "they all have had charm. I should think there has never been a Ste. Marie without it. They're a sort of embodiment of romance, that family. This boy's great-grandfather lost his life defending a castle against a horde of peasants in 1799. His grandfather was killed in the French campaign in Mexico in '39—at Vera Cruz, it was, I think; and his father died in a filibustering expedition ten years ago. I wonder what will become of the last Ste. Marie?" Old David's eyes suddenly sharpened.

"You're not going to fall in love with Ste. Marie and marry him, are you?" he demanded.

Miss Benham gave a little angry laugh, but her grandfather saw the colour rise in her cheeks for all that.

"Certainly not!" she said with great decision. "What an absurd idea! Because I meet a man at a dinner party and say I like him, must I marry him tomorrow? I meet a great many men at dinners and things, and a few of them I like. Heavens!"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," muttered old David into his huge beard.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Miss Benham politely. But he shook his head, still growling inarticulately, and began to draw enormous clouds of smoke from the long black cigar. After a time he took the cigar once more from his lips and looked thoughtfully at his granddaughter where she sat on the edge of the vast bed, upright and beautiful, perfect in the most meticulous detail. Most women when they return from a long evening out, look more or less the worse for it. Deadened eyes, pale cheeks, loosened coiffure tell their inevitable tale. Miss Benham looked as if she had just come from the hands of a very excellent maid. She looked as freshly *soignée* as she might have looked at eight that evening instead of at one. Not a wave of her perfectly undulated hair was loosened or displaced, not a fold of the lace at her breast had departed from its perfect arrangement.

"It is odd," said old David Stewart, "you taking a fancy to young Ste. Marie. Of course it's natural too in a way, because you are complete opposites, I should think—that is, if this lad is like the rest of his race. What I mean is, that merely attractive young men don't as a rule attract you."

"Well, no," she admitted, "they don't usually. Men with brains attract me most, I think—men who are making civilisation, men who are ruling the world or at least doing important things for it. That's your fault, you know. You taught me that."

The old gentleman laughed.

"Possibly," said he. "Possibly. Anyhow that is the sort of men you like and they like you. You're by no means a fool, Helen. In fact, you're a woman with brains. You could wield great influence married to the proper sort of man."

"But not to M. Ste. Marie," she suggested, smiling across at him.

"Well, no," he said. "No, not to Ste. Marie. It would be a mistake to marry Ste. Marie—if he is what the rest of his house have been. The Ste. Maries live a life compounded of romance and imagination and emotion. You're not emotional."

"No," said Miss Benham slowly and thoughtfully. It was as if the idea were new to her. "No, I'm not, I suppose. No. Certainly not."

"As a matter of fact," said old David, "you're by nature rather cold. I'm not sure it isn't a good thing. Emotional people, I observe, are usually in hot water of some sort. When you marry you're very likely to choose with a great deal of care and some wisdom. And you're also likely to have what is called a career. I repeat that you could wield great influence in the proper environment."

The girl frowned across at her grandfather reflectively.

"Do you mean by that," she asked after a little silence, "do you mean that you think I am likely to be moved by sheer ambition and nothing else in arranging my life? I've never thought of myself as a very ambitious person."

"Let us substitute for ambition, common sense," said old David. "I think you have a great deal of common sense for a woman—and so young a woman. How old are you, by the way? Twenty-two? Yes, to be sure. I think you have great common sense and appreciation of values. And I think you're singularly free of the emotionalism that so often plays hob with them all. People with common sense fall in love in the right places."

"I don't quite like the sound of it," said Miss Benham. "Perhaps I am rather ambitious—I don't know. Yes, perhaps. I should like to play some part in the world. I don't deny that. But—am I as cold as you say? I doubt it very much. I doubt that."

"You're twenty-two," said her grandfather. "And you have seen a good deal of society in several capitals. Have you ever fallen in love?"

[image]

*"You're twenty-two. Have you ever fallen in love?"*

Oddly, the face of Ste. Marie came before Miss Benham's eyes as if she had summoned it there. But she frowned a little and shook her head, saying—

"No, I can't say that I have. But that means nothing. There's plenty of time for that.

"And you know," she said after a pause, "you know I'm rather sure I could fall in love—pretty hard. I'm sure of that. Perhaps I have been waiting. Who knows?"

"Ay, who knows?" said David. He seemed all at once to lose interest in the subject, as old people often do without apparent reason, for he remained silent for a long time, puffing at the long black cigar or rolling it absently between his fingers. After awhile he laid it down in a metal dish which stood at his elbow and folded his lean hands before him over the invalid's table. He was still so long that at last his granddaughter thought he had fallen asleep, and she began to rise from her seat, taking care to make no noise, but at that the old man stirred, and put out his hand once more for the cigar.

"Was young Richard Hartley at your dinner party?" he asked. And she said—

"Yes. Oh, yes, he was there. He and M. Ste. Marie came together, I believe.

They are very close friends.”

”Another idler,” growled old David. ”The fellow’s a man of parts—and a man of family. What’s he idling about here for? Why isn’t he in Parliament where he belongs?”

”Well,” said the girl, ”I should think it is because he is too much a man of family—as you put it. You see, he’ll succeed his cousin, Lord Risdale, before very long, and then all his work would have been for nothing, because he’ll have to take his seat in the Lords. Lord Risdale is unmarried, you know, and a hopeless invalid. He may die any day. I think I sympathise with poor Mr. Hartley. It would be a pity to build up a career for one’s self in the lower House and then suddenly in the midst of it have to give it all up. The situation is rather paralysing to endeavour, isn’t it?”

”Yes, I dare say,” said old David absently. He looked up sharply. ”Young Hartley doesn’t come here as much as he used to do.”

”No,” said Miss Benham, ”he doesn’t.” She gave a little laugh.

”To avoid cross-examination,” she said, ”I may as well admit that he asked me to marry him and I had to refuse. I’m sorry, because I like him very much indeed.”

Old David made an inarticulate sound which may have been meant to express surprise—or almost anything else. He had not a great range of expression.

”I don’t want,” said he, ”to seem to have gone daft on the subject of marriage, and I see no reason why you should be in any haste about it—certainly, I should hate to lose you, my child, but—Hartley, as the next Lord Risdale, is undoubtedly a good match. And you say you like him.” The girl looked up with a sort of defiance, and her face was a little flushed.

”I don’t love him,” she said. ”I like him immensely but I don’t love him, and after all—well, you say I’m cold and I admit I’m more or less ambitious, but, after all—well, I just don’t quite love him. I want to love the man I marry.”

Old David Stewart held up his black cigar and gazed thoughtfully at the smoke which streamed thin and blue and veil-like from its lighted end.

”Love!” he said in a reflective tone. ”Love.” He repeated the word two or three times slowly, and he stirred a little in his bed.

”I have forgotten what it is,” said he. ”I expect I must be very old. I have forgotten what love—that sort of love—is like. It seems very far away to me and rather unimportant. But I remember that I thought it important enough once, a century or two ago. Do you know, it strikes me as rather odd that I have forgotten what love is like. It strikes me as rather pathetic.” He gave a sort of uncouth grimace and stuck the black cigar once more into his mouth.

”Egad!” said he, mumbling indistinctly over the cigar, ”how foolish love seems when you look back at it across fifty or sixty years!”

Miss Benham rose to her feet smiling, and she came and stood near where the old man lay propped up against his pillows. She touched his cheek with her cool hand, and old David put up one of his own hands and patted it.

"I'm going to bed now," said she. "I've sat here talking too long. You ought to be asleep and so ought I."

"Perhaps! Perhaps!" the old man said. "I don't feel sleepy, though. I dare say I shall read a little." He held her hand in his and looked up at her.

"I've been talking a great deal of nonsense about marriage," said he. "Put it out of your head! It's all nonsense. I don't want you to marry for a long time. I don't want to lose you." His face twisted a little quite suddenly.

"You're precious near all I have left, now," he said.

The girl did not answer at once, for it seemed to her that there was nothing to say. She knew that her grandfather was thinking of the lost boy, and she knew what a bitter blow the thing had been to him. She often thought that it would kill him before his old malady could run its course.

But after a moment she said very gently—

"We won't give up hope. We'll never give up hope. Think! he might come home to-morrow. Who knows?"

"If he has stayed away of his own accord," cried out old David Stewart in a loud voice, "I'll never forgive him—not if he comes to me to-morrow on his knees! Not even if he comes to me on his knees!"

The girl bent over her grandfather, saying: "Hush! hush! You mustn't excite yourself." But old David's grey face was working and his eyes gleamed from their cavernous shadows with a savage fire.

"If the boy is staying away out of spite," he repeated, "he need never come back to me. I won't forgive him." He beat his unemployed hand upon the table before him, and the things which lay there jumped and danced.

"And if he waits until I'm dead and then comes back," said he, "he'll find he has made a mistake—a great mistake. He'll find a surprise in store for him. I can tell you that. I won't tell you what I have done, but it will be a disagreeable surprise for Master Arthur. You may be sure."

The old gentleman fell to frowning and muttering in his choleric fashion, but the fierce glitter began to go out of his eyes, and his hands ceased to tremble and clutch at the things before him. The girl was silent because again there seemed to her to be nothing that she could say. She longed very much to plead her brother's cause, but she was sure that would only excite her grandfather, and he was growing quieter after his burst of anger. She bent down over him and kissed his cheek.

"Try to go to sleep!" she said. "And don't torture yourself with thinking about all this. I'm as sure that poor Arthur is not staying away out of spite as if

he were myself. He's foolish and headstrong, but he's not spiteful, dear. Try to believe that! And now I'm really going. Good-night!"

She kissed him again and slipped out of the room. And as she closed the door she heard her grandfather pull the bell-cord which hung beside him and summon the excellent Peters from the room beyond.

## CHAPTER V

### STE. MARIE SETS FORTH UPON THE GREAT ADVENTURE

Miss Benham stood at one of the long drawing-room windows of the house in the Rue de l'Université and looked out between the curtains upon the rather grimy little garden, where a few not very prosperous cypresses and chestnuts stood guard over the rows of lilac shrubs and the box-bordered flower-beds and the usual moss-stained fountain. She was thinking of the events of the past month, the month which had elapsed since the evening of the de Saulnes' dinner party. They were not at all startling events; in a practical sense there were no events at all, only a quiet sequence of affairs which was about as inevitable as the night upon the day—the day upon the night again. In a word this girl, who had considered herself very strong and very much the mistress of her feelings, found, for the first time in her life, that her strength was as nothing at all against the potent charm and magnetism of a man who had almost none of the qualities she chiefly admired in men. During the month's time she had passed from a phase of angry self-scorn through a period of bewilderment not unmixed with fear, and from that she had come into an unknown world, a land very strange to her, where old standards and judgments seemed to be valueless—a place seemingly ruled altogether by new emotions, sweet and thrilling or full of vague terrors as her mood veered here or there.

That sublimated form of guesswork which is called "woman's intuition" told her that Ste. Marie would come to her on this afternoon, and that something in the nature of a crisis would have to be faced. It can be proved even by poor masculine mathematics that guesswork, like other gambling ventures, is bound to succeed about half the time, and it succeeded on this occasion. Even as Miss Benham stood at the window looking out through the curtains Monsieur Ste. Marie was announced from the doorway.

She turned to meet him with a little frown of determination, for in his ab-



sence she was often very strong indeed, and sometimes she made up and rehearsed little speeches of great dignity and decision, in which she told him that he was attempting a quite hopeless thing, and, as a well-wishing friend, advised him to go away and attempt it no longer. But as Ste. Marie came quickly across the room towards her the little frown wavered and at last fled from her face, and another look came there. It was always so. The man's bodily presence exerted an absolute spell over her.

"I have been sitting with your grandfather for half an hour," Ste. Marie said, and she said—

"Oh, I'm glad! I'm very glad. You always cheer him up. He hasn't been too cheerful, or too well of late." She unnecessarily twisted a chair about and after a moment sat down in it. And she gave a little laugh.

"This friendship which has grown up between my grandfather and you," said she, "I don't understand it at all. Of course, he knew your father and all that, but you two seem such very different types, I shouldn't think you would amuse each other at all. There's Mr. Hartley, for example, I should expect my grandfather to like him very much better than you, but he doesn't—though I fancy he approves of him much more."

She laughed again, but a different laugh, and when he heard it Ste. Marie's eyes gleamed a little and his hands moved beside him.

"I expect," said she, "I expect, you know, that he just likes you, without stopping to think why—as everybody else does. I fancy it's just that. What do you think?"

"Oh, I?" said the man. "I—how should I know? I know it's a great privilege to be allowed to see him—such a man as that. And I know we get on wonderfully well. He doesn't condescend as most old men do who have led important lives. We just talk as two men in a club might talk. And I tell him stories and make him laugh. Oh yes, we get on wonderfully well."

"Oh!" said she. "I've often wondered what you talk about. What did you talk about to-day?"

Ste. Marie turned abruptly away from her and went across to one of the windows—the window where she had stood earlier looking out upon the dingy garden. She saw him stand there, with his back turned, the head a little bent, the hands twisting together behind him, and a sudden fit of nervous shivering wrung her. Every woman knows when a certain thing is going to be said to her, and usually she is prepared for it, though usually also she says she is not. Miss Benham knew what was coming now, and she was frightened—not of Ste. Marie, but of herself. It meant so very much to her, more than to most women at such a time. It meant, if she said yes to him, the surrender of almost all the things she had cared for and hoped for. It meant the giving up of that career which old

David Stewart had dwelt upon a month ago.

Ste. Marie turned back into the room. He came a little way towards where the girl sat and halted, and she could see that he was very pale. A sort of critical second self noticed that he was pale, and was surprised, because, although men's faces often turn red, they seldom turn noticeably pale except in very great nervous crises—or in works of fiction; while women on the contrary may turn red and white twenty times a day, and no harm done. He raised his hands a little way from his sides in the beginning of a gesture, but they dropped again as if there were no strength in them.

"I—told him," said Ste. Marie in a flat voice, "I told your grandfather that I—loved you more than anything in this world or in the next. I told him that my love for you had made another being of me—a new being. I told him that I wanted to come to you and to kneel at your feet and to ask you if you could give me just a little, little hope—something to live for—a light to climb towards. That is what we talked about, your grandfather and I."

"Ste. Marie! Ste. Marie!" said the girl in a half whisper.

"What did my grandfather say to you?" she asked after a silence.

Ste. Marie looked away.

"I cannot tell you," he said. "He—was not quite sympathetic."

The girl gave a little cry.

"Tell me what he said!" she demanded. "I must know what he said." The man's eyes pleaded with her, but she held him with her gaze and in the end he gave in.

"He said I was a damned fool," said Ste. Marie. And the girl, after an instant of staring, broke into a little fit of nervous overwrought laughter, and covered her face with her hands.

He threw himself upon his knees before her, and her laughter died away. An Englishman or an American cannot do that. Richard Hartley, for example, would have looked like an idiot upon his knees and he would have felt it. But it did not seem extravagant with Ste. Marie. It became him.

"Listen! listen!" he cried to her, but the girl checked him before he could go on. She dropped her hands from her face and she bent a little forward over the man as he knelt there. She put out her hands and took his head for a swift instant between them, looking down into his eyes. At the touch a sudden wave of tenderness swept her—almost an engulfing wave—almost it overwhelmed her and bore her away from the land she knew. And so when she spoke her voice was not quite steady. She said—

"Ah, dear Ste. Marie! I cannot pretend to be cold towards you. You have laid a spell upon me, Ste. Marie. You enchant us all somehow, don't you? I suppose I'm not as different from the others as I thought I was.

"And yet," she said, "he was right, you know. My grandfather was right. No, let me talk, now! I must talk for a little. I must try to tell you how it is with me—try somehow to find a way. He was right. He meant that you and I were utterly unsuited to each other, and so, in calm moments, I know we are. I know that well enough. When you're not with me I feel very sure about it. I think of a thousand excellent reasons why you and I ought to be no more to each other than friends. Do you know, I think my grandfather is a little uncanny. I think he has prophetic powers. They say very old people often have. He and I talked about you when I came home from that dinner party at the de Saulnes' a month ago—the dinner party where you and I first met. I told him that I had met a man whom I liked very much—a man with great charm—and, though I must have said the same sort of thing to him before about other men, he was quite oddly disturbed, and talked for a long time about it, about the sort of man I ought to marry and the sort I ought not to marry. It was unusual for him. He seldom says anything of that kind. Yes, he is right. You see, I'm ambitious in a particular way. If I marry at all I ought to marry a man who is working hard in politics or in something of that kind. I could help him. We could do a great deal together."

"I could go into politics!" cried Ste. Marie, but she shook her head, smiling down upon him.

"No, not you, my dear. Politics least of all. You could be a soldier, if you chose. You could fight as your father and your grandfather and the others of your house have done. You could lead a forlorn hope in the field. You could suffer and starve and go on fighting. You could die splendidly but—politics, no! That wants a tougher shell than you have.

"And a soldier's wife! Of what use to him is she?"

Ste. Marie's face was very grave. He looked up to her smiling.

"Do you set ambition before love, my queen?" he asked, and she did not answer him at once. She looked into his eyes, and she was as grave as he.

"Is love all?" she said at last. "Is love all? Ought one to think of nothing but love when one is settling one's life for ever?"

"I wonder?"

"I look about me, Ste. Marie," she said, "and in the lives of my friends—the people who seem to me to be most worth while—the people who are making the world's history for good or ill, and it seems to me that in their lives love has the second place—or the third. I wonder if one has the right to set it first.

"There is, of course," she said, "the merely domestic type of woman—the woman who has no thought and no interest beyond her home. I am not that type of woman. Perhaps I wish I were. Certainly they are the happiest. But I was brought up among—well, among important people—men of my grandfather's kind. All my training has been towards that life. Have I the right, I wonder, to

give it all up?"

The man stirred at her feet and she put out her hands to him quickly.

"Do I seem brutal?" she cried. "Oh, I don't want to be! Do I seem very ungenerous and wrapped up in my own side of the thing? I don't mean to be that but—I'm not sure. I expect it's that. I'm not sure, and I think I'm a little frightened." She gave him a brief anxious smile that was not without its tenderness.

"I'm so sure," she said, "when I'm away from you. But when you're here—oh, I forget all I've thought of.

"You lay your spell upon me."

Ste. Marie gave a little wordless cry of joy. He caught her two hands in his and held them against his lips. Again that great wave of tenderness swept her—almost engulfing. But when it had ebbed she sank back once more in her chair, and she withdrew her hands from his clasp.

"You make me forget too much," she said. "I think you make me forget everything that I ought to remember. Oh, Ste. Marie, have I any right to think of love and happiness while this terrible mystery is upon us? While we don't know whether poor Arthur is alive or dead? You've seen what it has brought my grandfather to. It is killing him. He has been much worse in the last fortnight. And my mother is hardly a ghost of herself in these days. Ah, it is brutal of me to think of my own affairs—to dream of happiness at such a time." She smiled across at him very sadly.

"You see what you have brought me to!" she said.

Ste. Marie rose to his feet. If Miss Benham, absorbed in that warfare which raged within her, had momentarily forgotten the cloud of sorrow under which her household lay, so much the more had he, to whom the sorrow was less intimate, forgotten it. But he was ever swift to sympathy, Ste. Marie, as quick as a woman and as tender. He could not thrust his love upon the girl at such a time as this. He turned a little away from her and so remained for a moment. When he faced about again the flush had gone from his cheeks and the fire from his eyes. Only tenderness was left there.

"There has been no news at all this week?" he asked, and the girl shook her head.

"None! None! Shall we ever have news of him, I wonder? Must we go on always and never know? It seems to me almost incredible that any one could disappear so completely. And yet, I dare say, many people have done it before and have been as carefully sought for. If only I could believe that he is alive! If only I could believe that!"

"I believe it," said Ste. Marie.

"Ah," she said, "you say that to cheer me. You have no reason to offer."

"Dead bodies very seldom disappear completely," said he. "If your brother

died anywhere there would be a record of the death. If he were accidentally killed there would be a record of that too, and, of course, you are having all such records constantly searched?"

"Oh yes," she said. "Yes, of course. At least, I suppose so. My uncle has been directing the search. Of course he would take an obvious precaution like that."

"Naturally," said Ste. Marie. "Your uncle, I should say, is an unusually careful man." He paused a moment to smile.

"He makes his little mistakes, though. I told you about that man O'Hara and about how sure Captain Stewart was that the name was Powers. Do you know—" Ste. Marie had been walking up and down the room, but he halted to face her.

"Do you know, I have a very strong feeling that if one could find this man O'Hara one would learn something about what became of your brother? I have no reason for thinking that, but I feel it."

"Oh," said the girl doubtfully, "I hardly think that could be so. What motive could the man have for harming my brother?"

"None," said Ste. Marie; "but he might have an excellent motive for hiding him away—kidnapping him. Is that the word? Yes, I know, you're going to say that no demand has been made for money, and that is where my argument—if I can call it an argument—is weak. But the fellow may be biding his time. Anyhow, I should like to have five minutes alone with him.

"I'll tell you another thing. It's a trifle and it may be of no consequence, but I add it to my vague and—if you like—foolish feeling and make something out of it. I happened some days ago to meet at the Café de Paris a man who, I knew, used to know this O'Hara. He was not, I think, a friend of his at all, but an acquaintance. I asked him what had become of O'Hara, saying that I hadn't seen him for some weeks. Well, this man said O'Hara had gone away somewhere a couple of months ago. He didn't seem at all surprised, for it appears the Irishman—if he is an Irishman—is decidedly a haphazard sort of person, here to-day, gone to-morrow. No, the man wasn't surprised, but he was rather angry, because he said O'Hara owed him some money. I said I thought he must be mistaken about the fellow's absence, because I'd seen him in the street within the month—on the evening of our dinner party you remember—but this man was very sure that I had made a mistake. He said that if O'Hara had been in town he was sure to have known it.

"Well, the point is here. Your brother disappears at a certain time. At the same time this Irish adventurer disappears too, *and* your brother was known to have frequented the Irishman's company. It may be only a coincidence, but I can't help feeling that there's something in it."

Miss Benham was sitting up straight in her chair with a little alert frown.

"Have you spoken of this to my uncle?" she demanded.

"Well—no," said Ste. Marie. "Not the latter part of it; that is, not my having heard of O'Hara's disappearance. In the first place, I learnt of that only three days ago and I have not seen Captain Stewart since—I rather expected to find him here to-day; and in the second place I was quite sure that he would only laugh. He has laughed at me two or three times for suggesting that this Irishman might know something. Captain Stewart is—not easy to convince, you know."

"I know," she said, looking away. "He's always very certain that he's right. Well, perhaps he is right. Who knows?"

She gave a little sob.

"Oh!" she cried, "shall we ever have my brother back? Shall we ever see him again? It is breaking my heart, Ste. Marie, and it is killing my grandfather and, I think, my mother too! Oh, can nothing be done!"

Ste. Marie was walking up and down the floor before her, his hands clasped behind his back. When she had finished speaking the girl saw him halt beside one of the windows, and, after a moment, she saw his head go up sharply and she heard him give a sudden cry. She thought he had seen something from the window which had wrung that exclamation from him, and she asked—

"What is it?" But abruptly the man turned back into the room and came across to where she sat. It seemed to her that his face had a new look, a very strange exaltation which she had never before seen there. He said—

"Listen! I do not know if anything can be done that has not been done already, but if there is anything I shall do it, you may be sure."

"You, Ste. Marie!" she cried in a sharp voice. "You?"

"And why not I?" he demanded.

"Oh, my friend," said she, "you could do nothing. You wouldn't know where to turn, how to set to work. Remember that a score of men who are skilled in this kind of thing have been searching for two months. What could you do that they haven't done?"

"I do not know, my queen," said Ste. Marie; "but I shall do what I can. Who knows? Sometimes the fool who rushes in where angels have feared to tread succeeds where they have failed.

"Oh, let me do this!" he cried out. "Let me do it, for both our sakes, for yours and for mine. It is for your sake most. I swear that! It is to set you at peace again, bring back the happiness you have lost. But it is for my sake too, a little. It will be a test of me, a trial. If I can succeed here where so many have failed, if I can bring back your brother to you—or at least, discover what has become of him—I shall be able to come to you with less shame for my—unworthiness."

He looked down upon her with eager burning eyes, and, after a little, the girl rose to face him. She was very white and she stared at him silently.

"When I came to you to-day," he went on, "I knew that I had nothing to offer you but my faithful love and my life, which has been a life without value. In exchange for that I asked too much. I knew it and you knew it too. I know well enough what sort of man you ought to marry, and what a brilliant career you could make for yourself in the proper place—what great influence you could wield. But I asked you to give that all up and I hadn't anything to offer in its place—nothing but love.

"My queen, give me a chance now to offer you more! If I can bring back your brother or news of him, I can come to you without shame and ask you to marry me, because if I can succeed in that you will know that I can succeed in other things. You will be able to trust me. You'll know that I can climb. It shall be a sort of symbol. Let me go!"

The girl broke into a sort of sobbing laughter.

"Oh, divine madman!" she cried. "Are you all mad, you Ste. Maries, that you must be forever leading forlorn hopes? Oh, how you are, after all, a Ste. Marie! Now at last I know why one cannot but love you. You're the knight of old. You're chivalry come down to us. You're a ghost out of the past when men rode in armour with pure hearts seeking the Great Adventure.

"Oh, my friend," she said, "be wise! Give this up in time. It is a beautiful thought and I love you for it, but it is madness—yes, yes, a sweet madness, but mad nevertheless! What possible chance would you have of success? And think! Think how failure would hurt you—and me! You must not do it, Ste. Marie."

"Failure will never hurt me, my queen," said he; "because there are no hurts in the grave, and I shall never give over searching until I succeed or until I am dead." His face was uplifted, and there was a sort of splendid fervour upon it. It was as if it shone. The girl stared at him dumbly. She began to realise that the knightly spirit of those gallant long-dead gentlemen was indeed descended upon the last of their house, that he burnt with the same pure fire which had long ago lighted them through quest and adventure, and she was a little afraid with an almost superstitious fear.

She put out her hands upon the man's shoulders and she moved a little closer to him, holding him.

"Oh, madness! madness!" she said, watching his face.

"Let me do it!" said Ste. Marie.

And after a silence that seemed to endure for a long time she sighed, shaking her head, and said she—

"Oh, my friend, there is no strength in me to stop you. I think we are both a little mad, and I know that you are very mad, but I cannot say no. You seem to have come out of another century to take up this quest. How can I prevent you? But listen to one thing. If I accept this sacrifice, if I let you give your time and

your strength to this almost hopeless attempt, it must be understood that it is to be within certain limits. I will not accept any indefinite thing. You may give your efforts to trying to find trace of my brother for a month if you like, or for three months or six, or even a year, but not for more than that. If he is not found in a year's time we shall know that—we shall know that he is dead, and that—further search is useless. I cannot say how I— Oh, Ste. Marie, Ste. Marie, this is a proof of you indeed! And I have called you idle! I have said hard things of you. It is very bitter to me to think that I have said those things."

"They were true, my queen," said he, smiling. "They were quite true. It is for me to prove now that they shall be true no longer." He took the girl's hand in his rather ceremoniously, and bent his head and kissed it. As he did so he was aware that she stirred, all at once, uneasily, and when he had raised his head he looked at her in question.

"I thought some one was coming into the room," she explained, looking beyond him. "I thought some one started to come in between the portières yonder. It must have been a servant."

"Then it is understood," said Ste. Marie. "To bring you back your happiness and to prove myself in some way worthy of your love, I am to devote myself with all my effort and all my strength to finding your brother or some trace of him, and until I succeed I will not see your face again, my queen."

"Oh, that!" she cried, "that too?"

"I will not see you," said he, "until I bring you news of him, or until my year is passed and I have failed utterly. I know what risk I run. If I fail, I lose you. That is understood too. But if I succeed—"

"Then?" she said, breathing quickly. "Then?"

"Then," said he, "I shall come to you and I shall feel no shame in asking you to marry me, because then you will know that there is in me some little worthiness, and that in our lives together you need not be buried in obscurity—lost to the world."

"I cannot find any words to say," said she. "I am feeling just now very humble and very ashamed. It seems that I haven't known you at all. Oh yes, I am ashamed." The girl's face, habitually so cool and composed, was flushed with a beautiful flush, and it had softened and it seemed to quiver between a smile and a tear. With a swift movement she leant close to him holding by his shoulder, and for an instant her cheek was against his. She whispered to him—

"Oh, find him quickly, my dear! Find him quickly, and come back to me!"

Ste. Marie began to tremble, and she stood away from him. Once he looked up, but the flush was gone from Miss Benham's cheeks, and she was pale again. She stood with her hands tight clasped over her breast.

So he bowed to her very low, and turned and went out of the room and out



of the house.

[image]

*"He turned and went out of the room."*

So quickly did he move at this last that a man who had been for some moments standing just outside the portières of the doorway had barely time to step aside into the shadows of the dim hall. As it was, Ste. Marie in a more normal moment must have seen that the man was there, but his eyes were blind and he saw nothing. He groped for his hat and stick as if the place were a place of gloom, and, because the footman who should have been at the door was in regions unknown, he let himself out and so went away.

Then the man who stood apart in the shadows crossed the hall to a small room which was furnished as a library but not often used. He closed the door behind him and went to one of the windows which gave upon the street. And he stood there for a long time drawing absurd invisible pictures upon the glass with one finger, and staring thoughtfully out into the late June afternoon.

## CHAPTER VI

### A BRAVE GENTLEMAN RECEIVES A HURT BUT VOLUNTEERS IN A GOOD CAUSE

When Ste. Marie had gone Miss Benham sat alone in the drawing-room for almost an hour. She had been stirred that afternoon more deeply than she thought she had ever been stirred before, and she needed time to regain that cool poise, that mental equilibrium which was normal to her and necessary for coherent thought.

She was still in a sort of fever of bewilderment and exaltation, still all aglow with the man's own high fervour; but the second self, which so often sat apart from her and looked on with critical mocking eyes, whispered that to-morrow, the fervour past, the fever cooled, she must see the thing in its truer light—a glorious lunacy born of a moment of enthusiasm. It was finely romantic of him, this mocking second self whispered to her: picturesque beyond criticism; but, setting aside the practical folly of it, could even the mood last?

The girl rose to her feet with an angry exclamation. She found herself intolerable at such times as this.

"If there's a heaven," she cried out, "and by chance I ever go there, I suppose I shall walk sneering through the streets, and saying to myself: 'Oh yes, it's pretty enough, but how absurd and unpractical!'"

She passed before one of the small narrow mirrors which were let into the walls of the room in gilt Louis Seize frames with candles beside them, and she turned and stared at her very beautiful reflection with a resentful wonder.

"Shall I always drag along so far behind him?" she said. "Shall I never rise to him, save in the moods of an hour?"

She began suddenly to realise what the man's going away meant—that she might not see him again for weeks, months, even a year. For was it at all likely that he could succeed in what he had undertaken?

"Why did I let him go?" she cried. "Oh, fool, fool, to let him go!" But even as she said it she knew that she could not have held him back.

She began to be afraid, not for him, but of herself. He had taught her what it might be to love. For the first time love's premonitory thrill—promise of unspeakable uncomprehended mysteries—had wrung her, and the echo of that thrill stirred in her yet; but what might not happen in his long absence? She was afraid of that critical and analysing power of mind which she had so long trained to attack all that came to her. What might it not work with the new thing that had come? To what pitiful shreds might it not be rent while he, who only could renew it, was away? She looked ahead at the weeks and months to come, and she was terribly afraid.

She went out of the room and up to her grandfather's chamber and knocked there. The admirable Peters who opened to her said that his master had not been very well and was just then asleep, but as they spoke together in low tones the old gentleman cried testily from within—

"Well? Well? Who's there? Who wants to see me? Who is it?"

Miss Benham went into the dim shaded room, and when old David saw who it was he sank back upon his pillows with a pacified growl. He certainly looked ill, and he had grown thinner and whiter within the past month, and the lines in his waxlike face seemed to be deeper scored.

The girl went up beside the bed and stood there a moment, after she had bent over and kissed her grandfather's cheek, stroking with her hand the absurdly gorgeous mandarin's jacket—an imperial yellow one this time.

"Isn't this new?" she asked. "I seem never to have seen this one before. It's quite wonderful."

The old gentleman looked down at it with the pride of a little girl over her first party frock. He came as near simpering as a fierce person of eighty-six, with

a square white beard, can come.

"Rather good, that! What?" said he. "Yes, it's new. De Vries sent it me. It is my best one. Imperial yellow. Did you notice the little *Show* medallions with the *swastika*? Young Ste. Marie was here this afternoon." He introduced the name with no pause or change of expression, as if Ste. Marie were a part of the decoration of the mandarin's jacket.

"I told him he was a damned fool."

"Yes," said Miss Benham, "I know. He said you did."

"I suppose," she said, "that in a sort of very informal fashion I am engaged to him. Well no, perhaps not quite that, but he seems to consider himself engaged to me, and when he has finished something very important that he has undertaken to do he is coming to ask me definitely to marry him. No, I suppose we aren't engaged yet: at least I'm not. But it's almost the same, because I suppose I shall accept him whether he fails or succeeds in what he is doing."

"If he fails in it, whatever it may be," said old David, "he won't give you a chance to accept him. He won't come back. I know him well enough for that. He's a romantic fool, but he's a thorough-going fool. He plays the game." The old man looked up to his granddaughter, scowling a little.

"You two are absurdly unsuited to each other," said he, "and I told Ste. Marie so. I suppose you think you're in love with him."

"Yes," said the girl, "I suppose I do."

"Idleness and all? You were rather severe on idleness at one time."

"He isn't idle any more," said she. "He has undertaken—of his own accord—to find Arthur. He has some theory about it. And he is not going to see me again until he has succeeded—or until a year is past. If he fails, I fancy he won't come back."

Old David gave a sudden hoarse exclamation, and his withered hands shook and stirred before him. Afterwards he fell to half-inarticulate muttering.

"The young romantic fool!—Don Quixote—like all the rest of them—those Ste. Maries. The fool and the angels. The angels and the fool." The girl distinguished words from time to time. For the most part he mumbled under his breath. But when he had been silent a long time he said suddenly—

"It would be ridiculously like him to succeed."

The girl gave a little sigh.

"I wish I dared hope for it," said she. "I wish I dared hope for it."

She had left a book that she wanted in the drawing-room, and when presently her grandfather fell asleep in his fitful manner, she went down after it. In crossing the hall she came upon Captain Stewart, who was dressed for the street and had his hat and stick in his hands. He did not live in his father's house, for he had a little flat in the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, but he was in and

out a good deal. He paused when he saw his niece and smiled upon her a benignant smile, which she rather disliked, because she disliked benignant people. The two really saw very little of each other, though Captain Stewart often sat for hours together with his sister up in a little boudoir which she had furnished in the execrable taste which to her meant comfort, while that timid and colourless lady embroidered strange tea-cloths with stranger flora, and prattled about the heathen, in whom she had an academic interest.

He said—

“Ah, my dear! It’s you?” Indisputably it was, and there seemed to be no use of denying it, so Miss Benham said nothing, but waited for the man to go on if he had more to say.

“I dropped in,” he continued, “to see my father, but they told me he was asleep and so I didn’t disturb him. I talked a little while with your mother instead.”

“I have just come from him,” said Miss Benham. “He dozed off again as I left. Still, if you had anything in particular to tell him, he’d be glad to be wakened, I fancy. There’s no news?”

“No,” said Captain Stewart sadly, “no, nothing. I do not give up hope, but I am, I confess, a little discouraged.”

“We are all that, I should think,” said Miss Benham briefly. She gave him a little nod, and turned away into the drawing-room. Her uncle’s peculiar dry manner irritated her at times beyond bearing, and she felt that this was one of the times. She had never had any reason for doubting that he was a good and kindly soul, but she disliked him because he bored her. Her mother bored her too—the poor woman bored everybody—but the sense of filial obligation was strong enough in the girl to prevent her from acknowledging this even to herself. In regard to her uncle she had no sense of obligation whatever, except to be as civil to him as possible, and so she kept out of his way.

She heard the heavy front door close and gave a little sigh of relief.

“If he had come in here and tried to talk to me,” she said, “I should have screamed.”

Meanwhile Ste. Marie, a man moving in a dream, uplifted, cloud-enwrapped, made his way homeward. He walked all the long distance—that is, looking backward upon it later he thought he must have walked, but the half-hour was a blank to him, an indeterminate, a chaotic whirl of things and emotions.

In the little flat in the Rue d’Assas he came upon Richard Hartley, who, having found the door unlocked and the master of the place absent, had sat comfortably down with a pipe and a stack of *Courriers Français* to wait. Ste. Marie burst into the doorway of the room where his friend sat at ease. Hat, gloves and

stick fell away from him in a sort of shower. He extended his arms high in air. His face was, as it were, luminous. The Englishman regarded him morosely. He said—

"You look as if somebody had died and left you money. What the devil are you looking like that for?"

"*Hè!*" cried Ste. Marie in a great voice. "*Hè*, the world is mine! Embrace me, my infant! Sacred name of a pig, why do you sit there? Embrace me!" He began to stride about the room, his head between his hands. Speech lofty and ridiculous burst from him in a sort of splutter of fireworks, but the Englishman sat still in his chair, and a grey bleak look came upon him, for he began to understand. He was more or less used to these outbursts, and he bore them as patiently as he could; but though seven times out of the ten they were no more than spasms of pure joy of living, and meant, "It's a fine spring day," or "I've just seen two beautiful princesses of milliners in the street," an inner voice told him that this time it meant another thing. Quite suddenly he realised that he had been waiting for this, bracing himself against its onslaught. He had not been altogether blind through the past month.

Ste. Marie seized him and dragged him from his chair.

"Dance, lump of flesh! dance, sacred English *rosbif* that you are! Sing, *gros polisson!* Sing!" Abruptly, as usual, the mania departed from him, but not the glory; his eyes shone bright and triumphant.

"Ah, my old," said he, "I am near the stars at last. My feet are on the top rungs of the ladder. Tell me that you are glad!" The Englishman drew a long breath.

"I take it," said he, "that means that you're—that she has accepted you, eh?" He held out his hand. He was a brave and honest man. Even in pain he was incapable of jealousy. He said—

"I ought to want to murder you, but I don't. I congratulate you. You're an undeserving beggar, but so were the rest of us. It was an open field, and you've won quite honestly. My best wishes!"

Then at last Ste. Marie understood, and in a flash the glory went out of his face. He cried—

"Ah, *mon cher ami!* Pig that I am to forget. Pig! pig! animal!" The other man saw that tears had sprung to his eyes, and was horribly embarrassed to the very bottom of his good British soul.

"Yes! yes!" he said gruffly. "Quite so, quite so! No consequence!" He dragged his hands away from Ste. Marie's grasp, stuck them in his pockets, and turned to the window beside which he had been sitting. It looked out over the sweet green peace of the Luxembourg Gardens with their winding paths and their clumps of trees and shrubbery, their flaming flower-beds, their groups of

weather-stained sculpture. A youth in labourer's corduroys and an unclean beret strolled along under the high palings, one arm was about the ample waist of a woman somewhat the youth's senior, but, as ever, love was blind. The youth carolled in a high, clear voice: "*Vous êtes si jolie*," a song of abundant sentiment, and the young woman put up one hand and patted his cheek. So they strolled on and turned up into the Rue Vavin.

Ste. Marie, across the room, looked at his friend's square back, and knew that in his silent way the man was suffering. A great sadness, the recoil from his trembling heights of bliss, came upon him and enveloped him. Was it true that one man's joy must inevitably be another's pain? He tried to imagine himself in Hartley's place, Hartley in his; and he gave a little shiver. He knew that if that *bouleversement* were actually to take place he would be as glad for his friend's sake as poor Hartley was now for his; but he knew also that the smile of congratulation would be a grimace of almost intolerable pain, and so he knew what Hartley's black hour must be like.

"You must forgive me," he said. "I had forgotten. I don't know why. Well, yes, happiness is a very selfish state of mind, I suppose. One thinks of nothing but one's self—and one other. I—during this past month I've been in the clouds. You must forgive me."

The Englishman turned back into the room. Ste. Marie saw that his face was as completely devoid of expression as it usually was, that his hands when he chose and lighted a cigarette were quite steady, and he marvelled. That would have been impossible for him under such circumstances.

"She has accepted you, I take it?" said Hartley again.

"Not quite that," said he. "Sit down and I'll tell you about it." So he told him about his hour with Miss Benham, and about what had been agreed upon between them, and about what he had undertaken to do.

"Apart from wishing to do everything in this world that I can do to make her happy," he said, "—and she will never be at peace again until she knows the truth about her brother—apart from that, I'm purely selfish in the thing. I've got to win her respect as well as—the rest. I want her to respect me, and she has never quite done that. I'm an idler. So are you, but you have a perfectly good excuse. I have not. I've been an idler because it suited me, because nothing turned up, and because I have enough to eat without working for my living. I know how she has felt about all that. Well, she shall feel it no longer."

"You're taking on a big order," said the other man.

"The bigger the better," said Ste. Marie. "And I shall succeed in it or never see her again. I've sworn that." The odd look of exaltation that Miss Benham had seen in his face, the look of knightly fervour, came there again, and Hartley saw it and knew that the man was stirred by no transient whim. Oddly enough he

thought, as had the girl earlier in the day, of those elder Ste. Maries who had taken sword and lance and gone out into a strange world, a place of unknown terrors, afire for the Great Adventure. And this was one of their blood.

"I'm afraid you don't realise," he went on, "the difficulties you've got to face. Better men than you have failed over this thing, you know."

"A worse might nevertheless succeed," said Ste. Marie, and the other said—

"Yes. Oh, yes. And there's always luck to be considered, of course. You might stumble on some trace." He threw away his cigarette and lighted another, and he smoked it down almost to the end before he spoke. At last he said—

"I want to tell you something. The reason why I want to tell it comes a little later. A few weeks before you returned to Paris I asked Miss Benham to marry me."

Ste. Marie looked up with a quick sympathy.

"Ah!" said he. "I have sometimes thought—wondered. I have wondered if it went as far as that. Of course I could see that you had known her well, though you seldom go there nowadays."

"Yes," said Hartley, "it went as far as that, but no farther. She—well, she didn't care for me—not in that way. So I stiffened my back and shut my mouth, and got used to the fact that what I'd hoped for was impossible.

"And now comes the reason for telling you what I've told. I want you to let me help you in what you're going to do—if you think you can, that is. Remember, I—cared for her too. I'd like to do something for her. It would never have occurred to me to do this until you thought of it, but I should like very much to lend a hand, do some of the work. D'you think you could let me in?"

Ste. Marie stared at him in open astonishment, and, for an instant, something like dismay.

"Yes, yes! I know what you're thinking," said the Englishman. "You'd hoped to do it all yourself. It's your game, I know. Well, it's your game even if you let me come in. I'm just a helper. Some one to run errands, some one perhaps to take counsel with now and then. Look at it on the practical side! Two heads are certainly better than one. Certainly I could be of use to you. And besides—well, I want to do something for her. I—cared too, you see. D'you think you could take me in?"

It was the man's love that made his appeal irresistible. No one could appeal to Ste. Marie on that score in vain. It was true that he had hoped to work alone, to win or lose alone, to stand, in this matter, quite on his own feet, but he could not deny the man who had loved her and lost her. Ste. Marie thrust out his hand.

"You love her too!" he said. "That is enough. We work together. I have a possibly foolish idea that if we can find a certain man we will learn something about Arthur Benham. I'll tell you about it."

But before he could begin the door-bell jangled.

## CHAPTER VII

### CAPTAIN STEWART MAKES A KINDLY OFFER

Ste. Marie scowled.

"A caller would come singularly malapropos, just now," said he. "I've half a mind not to go to the door. I want to talk this thing over with you."

"Whoever it is," objected Hartley, "has been told by the concierge that you're at home. It may not be a caller anyhow. It may be a parcel or something. You'd best go." So Ste. Marie went out into the little passage, blaspheming fluently the while.

The Englishman heard him open the outer door of the flat. He heard him exclaim in great surprise—

"Ah, Captain Stewart! A great pleasure. Come in! Come in!" And he permitted himself a little blaspheming on his own account, for the visitor, as Ste. Marie had said, came most malapropos, and besides he disliked Miss Benham's uncle.

He heard the American say—

"I have been hoping for some weeks to give myself the pleasure of calling here, and to-day such an excellent pretext presented itself that I came straight away."

Hartley heard him emit his mewling little laugh, and heard him say with the elephantine archness affected by certain dry and middle-aged gentlemen—

"I come with congratulations. My niece has told me all about it. Lucky young man! Ah!—" He reached the door of the inner room and saw Richard Hartley standing by the window, and he began to apologise profusely, saying that he had had no idea that Ste. Marie was not alone. But Ste. Marie said—

"It doesn't in the least matter. I have no secrets from Hartley. Indeed, I have just been talking with him about this very thing." But for all that he looked curiously at the elder man, and it struck him as very odd that Miss Benham should have gone straight to her uncle and told him all this. It did not seem in the least like her, especially as he knew the two were on no terms of intimacy. He decided that she must have gone up to her grandfather's room to discuss it with that old gentleman—a reasonable enough hypothesis—and that Captain Stewart must



have come in during the discussion. Quite evidently he had wasted no time in setting out upon his errand of congratulation.

"Then," said Captain Stewart, "if I am to be good-naturedly forgiven for my stupidity, let me go on and say, in my capacity as a member of the family, that the news pleased me very much. I was glad to hear it." He shook Ste. Marie's hand, looking very benignant indeed, and Ste. Marie was quite overcome with pleasure and gratitude: it seemed to him such a very kindly act in the elder man. He produced things to smoke and drink, and Captain Stewart accepted a cigarette and mixed himself a rather stiff glass of absinthe—it was between five and six o'clock.

"And now," said he, when he was at ease in the most comfortable of the low cane chairs, and the glass of opalescent liquor was properly curdled and set at hand, "now, having congratulated you and—ah, welcomed you, if I may put it so, as a probable future member of the family, I turn to the other feature of the affair." He had an odd trick of lowering his head and gazing benevolently upon an auditor as if over the top of spectacles. It was one of his elderly ways. He beamed now upon Ste. Marie in this manner, and, after a moment, turned and beamed upon Richard Hartley, who gazed stolidly back at him without expression.

"You have determined, I hear," said he, "to join us in our search for poor Arthur. Good! Good! I welcome you there, also."

Ste. Marie stirred uneasily in his chair.

"Well," said he, "in a sense, yes. That is, I've determined to devote myself to the search, and Hartley is good enough to offer to go in with me; but I think, if you don't mind— Of course, I know it's very presumptuous and doubtless idiotic of us—but, if you don't mind, I think we'll work independently. You see—well, I can't quite put it into words, but it's our idea to succeed or fail quite by our own efforts. I dare say we shall fail, but it won't be for lack of trying."

Captain Stewart looked disappointed.

"Oh, I think," said he. "Pardon me for saying it! but I think you're rather foolish to do that." He waved an apologetic hand. "Of course, I comprehend your excellent motive. Yes, as you say, you want to succeed quite on your own. But, look at the practical side! You'll have to go over all the weary weeks of useless labour we have gone over. We could save you that. We have examined and followed up and at last given over a hundred clues that on the surface looked quite possible of success. You'll be doing that all over again. In short, my dear friend, you will merely be following along a couple of months behind us. It seems to me a pity. I shan't like to see you wasting your time and efforts." He dropped his eyes to the glass of Pernod which stood beside him, and he took it in his hand and turned it slowly, and watched the light gleam in strange pearl colours upon it. He glanced up again with a little smile which the two younger men found

oddly pathetic.

"I should like to see you succeed," said Captain Stewart. "I like to see youth and courage and high hope succeed." He said—

"I am past the age of romance, though I am not so very old in years. Romance has passed me by, but—I love it still. It still stirs me surprisingly when I see it in other people—young people who are simple and earnest and who—and who are in love." He laughed gently, still turning the glass in his hands.

"I am afraid you will call me a sentimentalist," he said, "and an elderly sentimentalist is, as a rule, a ridiculous person. Ridiculous or not, though, I have rather set my heart on your success in this undertaking. Who knows? you may succeed where we others have failed. Youth has such a way of charging in and carrying all before it by assault: such a way of overleaping barriers that look unsurmountable to older eyes! Youth! Youth!

"Eh, my God!" said he, "to be young again just for a little while. To feel the blood beat strong and eager. Never to be tired. Eh, to be like one of you youngsters! You, Ste. Marie, or you, Hartley. There's so little left for people when youth is gone." He bent his head again, staring down upon the glass before him, and for a while there was a silence which neither of the younger men cared to break.

"Don't refuse a helping hand!" said Captain Stewart, looking up once more. "Don't be overproud! I may be able to set you upon the right path. Not that I have anything definite to work upon. I haven't, alas! But each day new clues turn up. One day we shall find the real one, and that may be one that I have turned over to you to follow out. One never knows."

[image]

*"Don't refuse a helping hand!" said Captain Stewart, looking up once more. 'Don't be overproud!'"*

Ste. Marie looked across at Richard Hartley, but that gentleman was blowing smoke rings and to all outward appearance giving them his entire attention. He looked back to Captain Stewart, and Stewart's eyes regarded him smiling a little wistfully, he thought.

Ste. Marie scowled out of the window at the trees of the Luxembourg Gardens.

"I hardly know," said he. "Of course I sound a braying ass in hesitating even a moment, but—in a way, you understand. I'm so anxious to do this or to fail in it quite on my own! You're—so tremendously kind about it that I don't know what

to say. I must seem very ungrateful, I know. But I'm not."

"No," said the elder man, "you don't seem ungrateful at all. I understand exactly how you feel about it, and I applaud your feeling—but not your judgment. I am afraid that for the sake of a sentiment you're taking unnecessary risks of failure."

For the first time Richard Hartley spoke.

"I've an idea, you know," said he, "that it's going to be a matter chiefly of luck. One day somebody will stumble on the right trail—and that might as well be Ste. Marie or I as your trained detectives. If you don't mind my saying so, sir—I don't want to seem rude—your trained detectives do not seem to accomplish much in two months, do they?"

Captain Stewart looked thoughtfully at the younger man.

"No," he said at last. "I am sorry to say they don't seem to have accomplished much—except to prove that there are a great many places poor Arthur has *not* been to, and a great many people who have *not* seen him. After all, that is something—the elimination of ground that need not be worked over again." He set down the glass from which he had been drinking.

"I cannot agree with your theory," he said. "I cannot agree that such work as this is best left to an accidental solution. Accidents are too rare. We have tried to go at it in as scientific a way as could be managed—by covering large areas of territory, by keeping the police everywhere on the alert, by watching the boy's old friends and searching his favourite haunts. Personally I am inclined to think that he managed to slip away to America very early in the course of events—before we began to search for him. And of course, I am having a careful watch kept there as well as here. But no trace has appeared as yet—nothing at all trustworthy. Meanwhile I continue to hope and to work, but I grow a little discouraged. In any case, though, we shall hear of him in three months more if he is alive."

"Why three months?" asked Ste. Marie. "What do you mean by that?"

"In three months," said Captain Stewart, "Arthur will be of age, and he can demand the money left him by his father. If he is alive he will turn up for that. I have thought, from the first, that he is merely hiding somewhere until this time should be past. He—you must know that he went away very angry, after a quarrel with his grandfather. My father is not a patient man. He may have been very harsh with the boy."

"Ah yes," said Hartley, "but no boy, however young or angry, would be foolish enough to risk an absolute break with the man who is going to leave him a large fortune. Young Benham must know that his grandfather would never forgive him for staying away all this time if he stayed away of his own accord. He must know that he'd be taking tremendous risks of being cut off altogether."

"And besides," added Ste. Marie, "it is quite possible that your father, sir, may die at any time—any hour. And he's very angry with his grandson. He may have cut him off already."

Captain Stewart's eyes sharpened suddenly, but he dropped them to the glass in his hand.

"Have you any reason for thinking that?" he asked.

"No," said Ste. Marie. "I beg your pardon. I shouldn't have said it. That is a matter which concerns your family alone. I forgot myself. The possibility occurred to me suddenly, for the first time." But the elder man looked up at him with a smile.

"Pray don't apologise!" said he. "Surely we three can speak frankly together. And frankly I know nothing of my father's will. But I don't think he would cut poor Arthur off, though he is, of course, very angry about the boy's leaving in the manner he did. No! I am sure he wouldn't cut him off. He was fond of the lad, very fond—as we all were."

Captain Stewart glanced at his watch and rose with a little sigh.

"I must be off," said he. "I have to dine out this evening, and I must get home to change. There is a cab-stand near you?" He looked out of the window. "Ah yes! Just at the corner of the Gardens." He turned about to Ste. Marie, and held out his hand with a smile. He said—

"You refuse to join forces with us then? Well, I'm sorry. But for all that, I wish you luck. Go your own way, and I hope you'll succeed. I honestly hope that, even though your success may show me up for an incompetent bungler." He gave a little kindly laugh and Ste. Marie tried to protest.

"Still," said the elder man, "don't throw me over altogether. If I can help you in any way, little or big, let me know. If I can give you any hints, any advice, anything at all, I want to do it. And if you happen upon what seems to be a promising clue, come and talk it over with me. Oh, don't be afraid! I'll leave it to you to work out. I shan't spoil your game."

"Ah, now that's very good of you," said Ste. Marie. "Only you make me seem more than ever an ungrateful fool. Thanks, I will come to you with my troubles if I may. I have a foolish idea that I want to follow out a little first, but doubtless I shall be running to you soon for information."

The elder man's eyes sharpened again with keen interest.

"An idea!" he said quickly. "You have an idea? What—may I ask what sort of an idea?"

"Oh it's nothing," declared Ste. Marie. "You have already laughed at it. I just want to find that man O'Hara, that's all. I've a feeling that I should learn something from him."

"Ah!" said Captain Stewart slowly. "Yes, the man O'Hara. There's nothing

in that, I'm afraid. I've made inquiries about O'Hara. It seems he left Paris six months ago, saying he was off for America. An old friend of his told me that. So you must have been mistaken when you thought you saw him in the Champs Elysées, and he couldn't very well have had anything to do with poor Arthur. I'm afraid that idea is hardly worth following up."

"Perhaps not," said Ste. Marie. "I seem to start badly, don't I? Ah well, I'll have to come to you all the sooner, then."

"You'll be welcome," promised Captain Stewart. "Good-bye to you! Good day, Hartley. Come and see me both of you. You know where I live."

He took his leave then, and Hartley, standing beside the window, watched him turn down the street, and at the corner get into one of the fiacres there and drive away.

Ste. Marie laughed aloud.

"There's the second time," said he, "that I've had him about O'Hara. If he is as careless as that about everything, I don't wonder he hasn't found Arthur Benham. O'Hara disappeared from Paris (publicly, that is) at about the time young Benham disappeared. As a matter of fact he remains, or at least for a time remained in the city without letting his friends know, because I made no mistake about seeing him in the Champs Elysées. All that looks to me suspicious enough to be worth investigation.

"Of course," he admitted doubtfully—"of course I'm no detective, but that's how it looks to me."

"I don't believe Stewart is any detective either," said Richard Hartley. "He's altogether too cock-sure. That sort of man would rather die than admit he is wrong about anything. He's a good old chap though, isn't he? I liked him to-day better than ever before. I thought he was rather pathetic when he went on about his age."

"He has a good heart," said Ste. Marie. "Very few men under the circumstances would come here and be as decent as he was. Most men would have thought I was a presumptuous ass and would have behaved accordingly."

Ste. Marie took a turn about the room and his face began to light up with its new excitement and exaltation.

"And to-morrow," he cried, "to-morrow we begin! To-morrow we set out into the world and the Adventure is on foot. God send it success!" He laughed across at the other man, but it was a laugh of eagerness not of mirth.

"I feel," said he, "like Jason. I feel as if we were to set sail to-morrow for Colchis and the Golden Fleece."

"Ye-es," said the other man a little drily. "Yes, perhaps. I don't want to seem critical, but isn't your figure somewhat ill chosen?"

"Ill chosen'?" cried Ste. Marie. "What d'you mean? Why ill chosen?"

"I was thinking of Medea," said Richard Hartley.

## CHAPTER VIII

### STE. MARIE MEETS WITH A MISADVENTURE AND DREAMS A DREAM

So on the next day these two rode forth upon their quest, and no quest was ever undertaken with a stouter courage or with a grimmer determination to succeed. To put it fancifully they burnt their tower behind them, for to one of them at least—to him who led—there was no going back.

But after all they set forth under a cloud, and Ste. Marie took a heavy heart with him. On the evening before an odd and painful incident had befallen, a singularly unfortunate incident.

It chanced that neither of the two men had a dinner engagement that evening, and so, after their old habit, they dined together. There was some wrangling over where they should go, Hartley insisting upon *Armenonville* or the *Madrid* in the Bois, Ste. Marie objecting that these would be full of tourists so late in June, and urging the claims of some quiet place in the Quarter, where they could talk instead of listening perforce to loud music. In the end, for no particular reason, they compromised on the little Spanish restaurant in the Rue Helder. They went there about eight o'clock, without dressing; for it is a very quiet place which the world does not visit, and they had a *sopa de yerbas*, and some *langostinos*, which are shrimps, and a heavenly *arroz* with fowl in it, and many tender succulent strips of red pepper. They had a salad made out of a little of everything that grows green, with the true Spanish oil, which has a tang and a bouquet unappreciated by the philistine; and then they had a strange pastry and some cheese and green almonds. And to make them glad they drank a bottle of old red Valdepeñas, and afterwards a glass each of a special Manzanilla, upon which the restaurant very justly prides itself. It was a simple dinner and a little stodgy for that time of the year, but the two men were hungry, and sat at table, almost alone in the upper room, for a long time, saying how good everything was, and from time to time despatching the saturnine waiter, a Madrilenos, for more peppers. When at last they came out into the narrow street and thence to the thronged Boulevard des Italiens, it was nearly eleven o'clock. They stood for a little time in the shelter of a kiosk, looking down the boulevard to where the Place de l'Opéra opened wide, and the lights of the Café de la Paix shone garish

in the night, and Ste. Marie said—

”There’s a street *fête* in Montmartre. We might drive home that way.”

”An excellent idea,” said the other man. ”The fact that Montmartre lies in an opposite direction from home makes the plan all the better. And after that we might drive home through the Bois. That’s much farther in the wrong direction. Lead on!”

So they sprang into a waiting fiacre, and were dragged up the steep stone-paved hill to the heights where *La Bohême* still reigns, though the glory of Moulin Rouge has departed, and the trail of tourist is over all. They found Montmartre very much *en fête*. In the Place Blanche were two of the enormous and brilliantly lighted merry-go-rounds which only Paris knows—one furnished with stolid cattle, theatrical-looking horses, and Russian sleighs, the other with the ever-popular galloping pigs. When these dreadful machines were in rotation mechanical organs concealed somewhere in their bowels emitted hideous brays and shrieks, which mingled with the shrieks of the ladies mounted upon the galloping pigs, and together insulted a peaceful sky.

The square was filled with that extremely heterogeneous throng which the Parisian street *fête* gathers together, but it was, for the most part, a well-dressed throng, largely recruited from the boulevards, and it was quite determined to have a very good time in the cheerful harmless Latin fashion. The two men got down from their fiacre and elbowed a way through the good-natured crowd to a place near the more popular of the merry-go-rounds. The machine was in rotation. Its garish lights shone and glittered, its hidden mechanical organ blared a German waltz tune, the huge pink-varnished pigs galloped gravely up and down as the platform upon which they were mounted whirled round and round. A little group of American trippers, sight-seeing, with a guide, stood near by, and one of the group, a pretty girl with red hair, demanded plaintively of the friend upon whose arm she hung: ”Do you think mamma would be shocked if we took a ride? Wouldn’t I love to!”

Hartley turned laughing from this distressed maiden to Ste. Marie. He was wondering with mild amusement why anybody should wish to do such a foolish thing, but Ste. Marie’s eyes were fixed upon the galloping pigs and the eyes shone with a wistful excitement. To tell the truth it was impossible for him to look on at any form of active amusement without thirsting to join it. A joyous and care-free lady in a blue hat, who was mounted astride upon one of the pigs, hurled a paper serpentine at him, and shrieked with delight when it knocked his hat off.

”That’s the second time she has hit me with one of those things,” he said, groping about his feet for the hat. ”Here, stop that boy with the basket!” A vendor of the little rolls of paper ribbon was shouting his wares through the crowd. Ste. Marie filled his pockets with the things, and when the lady with the blue hat came

round on the next turn, lassoed her neatly about the neck and held the end of the ribbon till it broke. Then he caught a fat gentleman, who was holding himself on by his steed's neck, in the ear, and the red-haired American girl laughed aloud.

"When the thing stops," said Ste. Marie, "I'm going to take a ride, just one ride. I haven't ridden a pig for many years." Hartley jeered at him, calling him an infant, but Ste. Marie bought more serpentines, and when the platform came to a stop clambered up to it, and mounted the only unoccupied pig he could find. His friend still scoffed at him and called him names, but Ste. Marie tucked his long legs round the pig's neck and smiled back, and presently the machine began again to revolve.

At the end of the first revolution Hartley gave a shout of delight, for he saw that the lady with the blue hat had left her mount and was making her way along the platform towards where Ste. Marie sat hurling serpentines in the face of the world. By the next time round she had come to where he was, mounted astride behind him, and was holding herself with one very shapely arm round his neck, while with the other she rifled his pockets for ammunition. Ste. Marie grinned, and the public, loud in its acclaims, began to pelt the two with serpentines until they were hung with many-coloured ribbons like a Christmas-tree. Even Richard Hartley was so far moved out of the self-consciousness with which his race is cursed as to buy a handful of the common missiles, and the lady in the blue hat returned his attention with skill and despatch.

But as the machine began to slacken its pace, and the hideous wail and blare of the concealed organ died mercifully down, Hartley saw that his friend's manner had all at once altered, that he sat leaning forward away from the enthusiastic lady with the blue hat, and that the paper serpentines had dropped from his hands. Hartley thought that the rapid motion must have made him a little giddy, but presently, before the merry-go-round had quite stopped, he saw the man leap down and hurry towards him through the crowd. Ste. Marie's face was grave and pale. He caught Hartley's arm in his hand and turned him round, crying in a low voice—

"Come out of this as quickly as you can! No, in the other direction. I want to get away at once."

"What's the matter?" Hartley demanded. "Lady in the blue hat too friendly? Well, if you're going to play this kind of game, you might as well play it."

"Helen Benham was down there in the crowd," said Ste. Marie. "On the opposite side from you. She was with a party of people who got out of two motor-cars, to look on. They were in evening things, so they had come from dinner somewhere, I suppose. She saw me."

"The devil!" said Hartley under his breath. Then he gave a shout of laughter, demanding—



"Well, what of it? You weren't committing any crime, were you? There's no harm in riding a silly pig in a silly merry-go-round. Everybody does it in these *fête* things." But even as he spoke he knew how extremely unfortunate the meeting was, and the laughter went out of his voice.

"I'm afraid," said Ste. Marie, "she won't see the humour of it. Good God, what a thing to happen! *You* know well enough what she'll think of me.

"At five o'clock this afternoon," he said bitterly, "I left her with a great many fine high-sounding words about the quest I was to give my days and nights to—for her sake. I went away from her like a—knight going into battle—consecrated. I tell you, there were tears in her eyes when I went. And now, now, at midnight, she sees me riding a galloping pig in a street *fête* with a girl from the boulevards sitting on the pig with me and holding me round the neck before a thousand people. What will she think of me? What but one thing can she possibly think? Oh, I know well enough! I saw her face before she turned away.

"And," he cried, "I can't even go to her and explain—if there's anything to explain, and I suppose there is not. I can't even go to her. I've sworn not to see her."

"Oh, I'll do that," said the other man. "I'll explain it to her, if any explanation's necessary. I think you'll find that she will laugh at it." But Ste. Marie shook his head.

"No, she won't," said he. And Hartley could say no more, for he knew Miss Benham, and he was very much afraid that she would not laugh.

They found a fiacre at the side of the square and drove home at once. They were almost entirely silent all the long way, for Ste. Marie was buried in gloom, and the Englishman, after trying once or twice to cheer him up, realised that he was best left to himself just then, and so held his tongue. But in the Rue d'Assas as Ste. Marie was getting down—Hartley kept the fiacre to go on to his rooms in the Avenue de l'Observatoire—he made a last attempt to lighten the man's depression. He said—

"Don't you be a silly ass about this! You're making much too much of it, you know. I'll go to her to-morrow or next day and explain, and she'll laugh—if she hasn't already done so.

"You know," he said, almost believing it himself, "you are paying her a dashed poor compliment in thinking she's so dull as to misunderstand a little thing of this kind. Yes, by Jove, you are!"

Ste. Marie looked up at him, and his face, in the light of the cab-lamp, showed a first faint gleam of hope.

"Do you think so?" he demanded. "Do you really think that? Maybe I am. But—O Lord, who would understand such an idiocy? Sacred imbecile that I am: why was I ever born? I ask you." He turned abruptly and began to ring at

the door, casting a brief "Good-night," over his shoulder. And, after a moment, Hartley gave it up and drove away.

Above, in the long shallow front room of his flat, with the three windows overlooking the Gardens, Ste. Marie made lights, and after much rummaging unearthed a box of cigarettes of a peculiarly delectable flavour, which had been sent him by a friend in the Khedivial household. He allowed himself one or two of them now and then, usually in sorrowful moments, as an especial treat. And this seemed to him to be the moment for smoking all there were left. Surely his need had never been greater. In England he had, of course learnt to smoke a pipe, but pipe smoking always remained with him a species of accomplishment; it never brought him the deep and ruminative peace with which it enfolds the Anglo-Saxon heart. The *vieux Jacob* of old-fashioned Parisian Bohemia inspired in him unconcealed horror, of cigars he was suspicious because, he said, most of the unpleasant people he knew smoked cigars: so he soothed his soul with cigarettes, and he was usually to be found with one between his fingers.

He lighted one of the precious Egyptians, and after a first ecstatic inhalation went across to one of the long windows, which was open, and stood there with his back to the room, his face to the peaceful fragrant night. A sudden recollection came to him of that other night a month before, when he had stood on the Pont des Invalides with his eyes upon the stars, his feet upon the ladder thereunto. His heart gave a sudden exultant leap within him when he thought how far and high he had climbed, but after the leap it shivered and stood still when this evening's misadventure came before him.

Would she ever understand? He had no fear that Hartley would not do his best with her. Hartley was as honest and as faithful as ever a friend was in this world. He would do his best. But even then— It was the girl's inflexible nature that made the matter so dangerous. He knew that she was inflexible, and he took a curious pride in it. He admired it. So must have been those calm-eyed ancient ladies for whom other Ste. Maries went out to do battle. It was wellnigh impossible to imagine them lowering their eyes to silly revelry. They could not stoop to such as that. It was beneath their high dignity. And it was beneath hers also. As for himself, he was a thing of patches. Here a patch of exalted chivalry—a noble patch—there a patch of bourgeois child-like love of fun; here a patch of melancholic asceticism, there one of something quite the reverse. A hopeless patchwork he was. Must she not shrink from him when she knew? He could not quite imagine her understanding the wholly trivial and meaningless impulse that had prompted him to ride a galloping pig and cast paper serpentes at the assembled world.

Apart from her view of the affair he felt no shame in it. The moment of childish gaiety had been but a passing mood. It had in no way slackened his

tense enthusiasm, dulled the keenness of his spirit, lowered his high flight. He knew that well enough. But he wondered if she would understand, and he could not believe it possible. The mood of exaltation in which they had parted that afternoon came to him, and then the sight of her shocked face as he had seen it in the laughing crowd in the Place Blanche.

"What must she think of me?" he cried aloud. "What must she think of me?"

So for an hour or more he stood in the open window staring into the fragrant night, or tramped up and down the long room, his hands behind his back, kicking out of his way the chairs and things which impeded him—torturing himself with fears and regrets and fancies, until at last in a calmer moment he realised that he was working himself up into an absurd state of nerves over something which was done and could not now be helped. The man had an odd streak of fatalism in his nature—that will have come of his southern blood—and it came to him now in his need. For the work upon which he was to enter with the morrow he had need of clear wits, not scattered ones; a calm judgment, not disordered nerves. So he took himself in hand, and it would have been amazing to any one unfamiliar with the abrupt changes of the Latin temperament, to see how suddenly Ste. Marie became quiet and cool and master of himself.

[image]

*"So for an hour or more he stood in the open window staring into the fragrant night."*

"It is done," he said with a little shrug, and if his face was for a moment bitter it quickly enough became impassive. "It is done, and it cannot be undone—unless Hartley can undo it. And now, *revenons à nos moutons!*

"Or at least," said he, looking at his watch—and it was between one and two—"at least to our beds!"

So he went to bed, and, so well had he recovered from his fit of excitement, he fell asleep almost at once. But, for all that, the jangled nerves had their revenge. He who commonly slept like the dead, without the slightest disturbance, dreamed a strange dream. It seemed to him that he stood spent and weary in a twilight place, a waste place at the foot of a high hill. At the top of the hill She sat upon a sort of throne, golden in a beam of light from heaven—serene, very beautiful, the end and crown of his weary labours. His feet were set to the ascent of the height whereon she waited, but he was withheld. From the shadows at the hill's foot a voice called to him in distress, anguish of spirit—a voice he knew, but

he could not say whose voice. It besought him out of utter need, and he could not turn away from it.

Then from those shadows eyes looked upon him, very great and dark eyes, and they besought him too; he did not know what they asked, but they called to him like the low voice, and he could not turn away.

He looked to the far height, and with all his power he strove to set his feet towards it—the goal of long labour and desire—but the eyes and the piteous voice held him motionless, for they needed him.

From this anguish he awoke trembling. And after a long time, when he was composed, he fell asleep once more, and once more he dreamed the dream.

So morning found him pallid and unrefreshed. But by daylight he knew whose eyes had besought him, and he wondered, and was a little afraid.

## CHAPTER IX

### STE. MARIE GOES UPON A JOURNEY AND RICHARD HARTLEY PLEADS FOR HIM

It may as well be admitted at the outset that neither Ste. Marie nor Richard Hartley proved themselves to be geniuses, hitherto undeveloped, in the detective science. They entered upon their self-appointed task with a fine fervour, but, as Miss Benham had suggested, with no other qualifications in particular. Ste. Marie had a theory that when engaged in work of this nature you went into questionable parts of the city, ate and drank cheek by jowl with questionable people; if possible got them drunk while you remained sober (difficult feat), and sooner or later they said things which put you on the right road to your goal, or else confessed to you that they themselves had committed the particular crime in which you were interested. He argued that this was the way it happened in books, and that surely people didn't write books about things of which they were ignorant.

Hartley, on the other hand, preferred the newer or scientific methods. You sat at home with a pipe and a whisky and water—if possible in a long dressing-gown with a cord round its middle. You reviewed all the known facts of the case, and you did mathematics about them with Xs and Ys and many other symbols, and in the end, by a system of elimination, you proved that a certain thing must infallibly be true. The chief difficulty for him in this was, he said, that he had been

at Oxford instead of at Cambridge, and so the mathematics was rather beyond him.

In practice, however, they combined the two methods, which was doubtless as well as if they hadn't, because for some time they accomplished nothing whatever, and so neither one was able to sneer at the other's stupidity.

This is not to say that they found nothing in the way of clues. They found an embarrassment of them, and for some days went about in a fever of excitement over these; but the fever cooled when clue after clue turned out to be misleading. Of course Ste. Marie's first efforts were directed towards tracing the movements of the Irishman, O'Hara, but the efforts were altogether unavailing. The man seemed to have disappeared as noiselessly and completely as had young Arthur Benham himself. He was unable even to settle with any definiteness the time of the man's departure from Paris. Some of O'Hara's old acquaintances maintained that they had seen the last of him two months before, but a shifty-eyed person in rather cheaply smart clothes came up to Ste. Marie one evening in Maxim's, and said he had heard that Ste. Marie was making inquiries about M. O'Hara. Ste. Marie said he was, and that it was an affair of money, whereupon the cheaply smart individual declared that M. O'Hara had left Paris six months before to go to the United States of America, and that he had had a picture postal card, some weeks since, from New York. The informant accepted an expensive cigar and a Dubonnet by way of reward, but presently departed into the night, and Ste. Marie was left in some discouragement, his theory badly damaged.

He spoke of this encounter to Richard Hartley, who came on later to join him, and Hartley, after an interval of silence and smoke, said—

"That was a lie. The man lied."

"Name of a dog, why?" demanded Ste. Marie, but the Englishman shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. "But I believe it was a lie. The man came to you, sought you out to tell his story, didn't he? And all the others have given a different date? Well, there you are! For some reason this man or some one behind him—O'Hara himself, probably—wants you to believe that O'Hara is in America. I dare say he's in Paris all the while."

"I hope you're right," said the other. "And I mean to make sure, too. It certainly was odd, this strange being hunting me out to tell me that. I wonder, by the way, how he knew I'd been making inquiries about O'Hara. I've questioned only two or three people, and then in the most casual way. Yes, it's odd."

It was about a week after this—a fruitless week, full of the alternate brightness of hope and the gloom of disappointment—that he met Captain Stewart, to whom he had been more than once on the point of appealing. He happened upon him quite by chance one morning in the Rue Royale. Captain Stewart was com-

ing out of a shop, a very smart-looking shop, devoted, as Ste. Marie, with some surprise and much amusement, observed, to ladies' hats, and the price of hats must have depressed him, for he looked in an ill humour and older and more yellow than usual. But his face altered suddenly when he saw the younger man, and he stopped, and shook Ste. Marie's hand with every evidence of pleasure.

"Well met! well met!" he exclaimed. "If you are not in a hurry, come and sit down somewhere and tell me about yourself."

They picked their way across the street to the terrace of the *Taverne Royale*, which was almost deserted at that hour, and sat down at one of the little tables well back from the pavement, in a corner.

"Is it fair?" queried Captain Stewart, "is it fair as a rival investigator to ask you what success you have had?" Ste. Marie laughed rather ruefully and confessed that he had as yet no success at all.

"I've just come," said he, "from pricking one bubble that promised well, and Hartley is up in Montmartre destroying another, I fancy. Oh well, we didn't expect it to be child's play."

Captain Stewart raised his little glass of dry vermouth in an old-fashioned salute, and drank from it.

"You," said he, "you were—ah, full of some idea of connecting this man, this Irishman, O'Hara, with poor Arthur's disappearance. You've found that not so promising, as you went on, I take it."

"Well, I've been unable to trace O'Hara," said Ste. Marie. "He seems to have disappeared as completely as your nephew. I suppose you have no clues to spare? I confess I'm out of them, at the moment."

"Oh, I have plenty," said the elder man. "A hundred. More than I can possibly look after." He gave a little chuckling laugh.

"I've been waiting for you to come to me," he said. "It was a little ungenerous perhaps, but we all love to say, 'I told you so.' Yes, I have a great quantity of clues, and, of course, they all seem to be of the greatest and most exciting importance. That's a way clues have." He took an envelope from an inner pocket of his coat, and sorted several folded papers which were in it.

"I have here," said he, "memoranda of two chances, shall I call them?—which seem to me very good, though, as I have already said, every clue seems good. That is the maddening, the heart-breaking part of such an investigation. I have made these brief notes from letters received, one yesterday, one the day before, from an agent of mine who has been searching the *bains de mer* of the north coast. This agent writes that some one very much resembling poor Arthur has been seen at Dinard and also at Deauville, and he urges me to come there, or to send a man there at once to look into the matter. You will ask, of course, why this agent himself does not pursue the clue he has found. Unfortunately he has been called

to London upon some pressing family matter of his own; he is an Englishman.”

”Why haven’t you gone yourself?” asked Ste. Marie. But the elder man shrugged his shoulders and smiled a tired deprecatory smile.

”Oh, my friend,” said he, ”if I should attempt personally to investigate one half of these things, I should be compelled to divide myself into twenty parts. No, I must stay here. There must be, alas! the spider at the centre of the web. I cannot go, but if you think it worth while I will gladly turn over the memoranda of these last clues to you. They may be the true clues, they may not. At any rate, some one must look into them. Why not you and your partner—or shall I say assistant?”

”Why, thank you!” cried Ste. Marie. ”A thousand thanks. Of course I shall be—we shall be glad to try this chance. On the face of it, it sounds very reasonable. Your nephew, from what I remember of him, is much more apt to be in some place that is amusing—some place of gaiety—than hiding away where it is merely dull, if he has his choice in the matter, that is—if he is free. And yet——” he turned and frowned thoughtfully at the elder man.

”What I want to know,” said he, ”is how the boy is supporting himself all this time. You say he had no money, or very little, when he went away. How is he managing to live, if your theory is correct—that he is staying away of his own accord? It costs a lot of money to live as he likes to live.”

Captain Stewart nodded.

”Oh, that,” said he, ”that is a question I have often proposed to myself. Frankly it’s beyond me. I can only surmise that poor Arthur, who had scattered a small fortune about in foolish loans, managed, before he actually disappeared (mind you, we didn’t begin to look for him until a week had gone by), managed to collect some of this money, and so went away with something in pocket. That, of course, is only a guess.”

”It is possible,” said Ste. Marie doubtfully, ”but—I don’t know. It is not very easy to raise money from the sort of people I imagine your nephew to have lent it to. They borrow but they don’t repay.”

He glanced up with a half-laughing half-defiant air.

”I can’t,” said he, ”rid myself of a belief that the boy is here in Paris and he is not free to come or go. It’s only a feeling, but it is very strong in me. Of course I shall follow out these clues you’ve been so kind as to give me. I shall go to Dinard and Deauville, and Hartley, I imagine, will go with me; but I haven’t great confidence in them.”

Captain Stewart regarded him reflectively for a time, and in the end he smiled.

”If you will pardon my saying it,” he said, ”your attitude is just a little womanlike. You put away reason for something vaguely intuitive. I always distrust

intuition myself." Ste. Marie frowned a little and looked uncomfortable. He did not relish being called womanlike—few men do—but he was bound to admit that the elder man's criticism was more or less just.

"Moreover," pursued Captain Stewart, "you altogether ignore the point of motive—as I may have suggested to you before. There could be no possible motive, so far as I am aware, for kidnapping or detaining or in any way harming my nephew except the desire for money; but, as you know, he had no large sum of money with him, and no demand has been made upon us since his disappearance. I'm afraid you can't get round that."

"No," said Ste. Marie, "I'm afraid I can't. Indeed, leaving that aside (and it can't be left aside), I still have almost nothing with which to prop up my theory. I told you it was only a feeling."

He took up the memoranda which Captain Stewart had laid upon the marble-topped table between them, and read the notes through.

"Please," said he, "don't think I am ungrateful for this chance. I am not. I shall do my best with it, and I hope it may turn out to be important." He gave a little wry smile.

"I have all sorts of reasons," he said, "for wishing to succeed as soon as possible. You may be sure that there won't be any delays on my part. And now I must be going on. I am to meet Hartley for lunch on the other side of the river, and, if we can manage it, I should like to start north this afternoon or evening.

"Good!" said Captain Stewart, smiling. "Good! that is what I call true promptness. You lose no time at all. Go to Dinard and Deauville, by all means, and look into this thing thoroughly. Don't be discouraged if you meet with ill success at first. Take Mr. Hartley with you and do your best." He paid for the two glasses of aperatif, and Ste. Marie could not help observing that he left on the table a very small tip. The waiter cursed him audibly as the two walked away.

"If you have returned by a week from to-morrow," he said, as they shook hands, "I should like to have you keep that evening—Thursday—for me. I am having a very informal little party in my rooms. There will be two or three of the opera people there, and they will sing for us, and the others will be amusing enough. All young. All young. I like young people about me." He gave his odd little mewing chuckle. "And the ladies must be beautiful as well as young. Come if you are here! I'll drop a line to Mr. Hartley also." He shook Ste. Marie's hand and went away down the street towards the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, where he lived.

Ste. Marie met Hartley as he expected to do, at lunch, and they talked over the possibilities of the Dinard and Deauville expedition. In the end they decided that Ste. Marie should go alone, but that he was to telegraph, later on, if the clue looked promising. Hartley had two or three investigations on foot in Paris, and



stayed on to complete these. Also he wished, as soon as possible, to see Helen Benham and explain Ste. Marie's ride on the galloping pigs. Ten days had elapsed since that evening, but Miss Benham had gone into the country the next day to make a visit at the de Saulnes' chateau on the Oise.

So Ste. Marie packed a portmanteau with clothes and things, and departed by a mid-afternoon train to Dinard, and, towards five, Richard Hartley walked down to the Rue de l'Université. He thought it just possible that Miss Benham might by now have returned to town, but if not he meant to have half an hour's chat with old David Stewart, whom he had not seen for some weeks.

At the door he learnt that Mademoiselle was that very day returned and was at home. So he went in to the drawing-room, reserving his visit to old David until later. He found the room divided into two camps. At one side Mrs. Benham conversed in melancholic monotones with two elderly French ladies, who were clad in depressing black of a dowdiness surpassed only in English provincial towns. It was as if the three mourned together over the remains of some dear one who lay dead amongst them. Hartley bowed low with an uncontrollable shiver, and turned to the tea-table, where Miss Benham sat in the seat of authority, flanked by a young American lady, whom he had met before, and by Baron de Vries, whom he had not seen since the evening of the de Saulnes' dinner party.

Miss Benham greeted him with evident pleasure, and to his great delight remembered just how he liked his tea—three pieces of sugar and no milk. It always flatters a man when his little tastes of this sort are remembered. The four fell at once into conversation together, and the young American lady asked Hartley why Ste. Marie was not with him.

"I thought you two always went about together," she said. "Were never seen apart and all that—a sort of modern Damon and Phidias." Hartley caught Baron de Vries' eye and looked away again hastily.

"My—ah, Phidias," said he, resisting an irritable desire to correct the lady, "got mislaid to-day. It shan't happen again, I promise you. He's a very busy person just now, though. He hasn't time for social dissipation. I'm the butterfly of the pair." The lady gave a sudden laugh.

"He was busy enough the last time I saw him," she said, crinkling her eyelids. She turned to Miss Benham.

"Do you remember that evening we were going home from the *Madrid*, and motored round by Montmartre to see the *fête*?"

"Yes," said Miss Benham, unsmiling, "I remember."

"Your friend, Ste. Marie," said the American lady to Hartley, "was distinctly the lion of the *fête*—at the moment we arrived, anyhow. He was riding a galloping pig and throwing those paper streamer things—what do you call them?—with

both hands, and a genial lady in a blue hat was riding the same pig and helping him out. It was just like the *Vie de Bohême* and the other books. I found it charming.”

Baron de Vries emitted an amused chuckle.

”That was very like Ste. Marie,” he said. ”Ste. Marie is a very exceptional young man. He can be an angel one moment, a child playing with toys the next, and—well, a rather commonplace social favourite the third. It all comes of being romantic—imaginative. Ste. Marie—I know nothing about this evening of which you speak—but Ste. Marie is quite capable of stopping on his way to a funeral to ride a galloping pig—or on his way to his own wedding.

”And the pleasant part of it is,” said Baron de Vries, ”that the lad would turn up at either of these two ceremonies not a bit the worse, outside or in, for his ride.”

”Ah, now that’s an oddly close shot,” said Hartley. He paused a moment, looking towards Miss Benham, and said—

”I beg pardon! Were you going to speak?”

”No,” said Miss Benham, moving the things about on the tea-table before her, and looking down at them. ”No, not at all!”

”You came oddly close to the truth,” the man went on, turning back to Baron de Vries. He was speaking for Helen Benham’s ears, and he knew she would understand that, but he did not wish to seem to be watching her.

”I was with Ste. Marie on that evening,” he said. ”No! I wasn’t riding a pig, but I was standing down in the crowd throwing serpentines at the people who were. And I happen to know that he—that Ste. Marie was on that day, that evening, more deeply concerned about something, more absolutely wrapped up in it, devoted to it, than I have ever known him to be about anything since I first knew him. The galloping pig was an incident that made, except for the moment, no impression whatever upon him.” Hartley nodded his head.

”Yes,” said he, ”Ste. Marie can be an angel one moment and a child playing with toys the next. When he sees toys he always plays with them, and he plays hard, but when he drops them they go completely out of his mind.”

The American lady laughed.

”Gracious me!” she cried. ”You two are emphatic enough about him, aren’t you?”

”We know him,” said Baron de Vries. Hartley rose to replace his empty cup on the tea-table. Miss Benham did not meet his eyes, and as he moved away again she spoke to her friend about something they were going to do on the next day, so Hartley went across to where Baron de Vries sat at a little distance, and took a place beside him on the chaise longue. The Belgian greeted him with raised eyebrows and the little half-sad half-humorous smile which was characteristic of

him in his gentler moments.

"You were defending our friend with a purpose," he said in a low voice. "Good! I am afraid he needs it—here." The younger man hesitated a moment. Then he said—

"I came on purpose to do that. Ste. Marie knows that she saw him on that confounded pig. He was half wild with distress over it because—well, the meeting was singularly unfortunate, just then. I can't explain—"

"You needn't explain," said the Belgian gravely. "I know. Helen told me some days since, though she did not mention this encounter. Yes, defend him with all your power, if you will. Stay after we others have gone and—have it out with her. The Phidias lady (I must remember that *mot*, by the way) is preparing to take her leave now, and I will follow her at once. She shall believe that I am enamoured—that I sigh for her.

"Eh!" said he, shaking his head. And the lines in the kindly old face seemed to deepen, but in a sort of grave tenderness. "Eh, so love has come to the dear lad at last! Ah! of course, the hundred other affairs! Yes, yes. But they were light. No seriousness in them. The ladies may have loved. He didn't very much. This time, I'm afraid—"

Baron de Vries paused as if he did not mean to finish his sentence, and Hartley said—

"You say 'afraid'! Why, afraid?"

The Belgian looked up at him reflectively.

"Did I say 'afraid'?" he asked. "Well—perhaps it was the word I wanted. I wonder if these two are fitted for each other. I am fond of them both. I think you know that, but—she's not very flexible, this child. And she hasn't much humour. I love her, but I know those things are true. I wonder if one ought to marry Ste. Marie without flexibility and without humour."

"If they love each other," said Richard Hartley, "I expect the other things don't count. Do they?"

Baron de Vries rose to his feet, for he saw that the Phidias lady was going.

"Perhaps not," said he; "I hope not. In any case, do your best for him with Helen. Make her comprehend if you can. I am afraid she is unhappy over the affair." He made his adieux and went away with the American lady, to that young person's obvious excitement. And after a moment the three ladies across the room departed also, Mrs. Benham explaining that she was taking her two friends up to her own sitting-room to show them something vaguely related to the heathen. So Hartley was left alone with Helen Benham.

It was not his way to beat about the bush, and he gave battle at once. He said, standing to say it more easily—

"You know why I came here to-day. It was the first chance I've had since

that—unfortunate evening. I came on Ste. Marie’s account.”

Miss Benham said a weak—

”Oh!” And because she was nervous and overwrought and because the thing meant so much to her, she said cheaply—

”He owes me no apologies. He has a perfect right to act as he pleases, you know.”

The Englishman frowned across at her.

”I didn’t come to make apologies,” said he. ”I came to explain. Well, I have explained—Baron de Vries and I together. That’s just how it happened, and that’s just how Ste. Marie takes things. The point is, that you’ve got to understand it. I’ve got to make you.”

The girl smiled up at him dolefully.

”You look,” she said, ”as if you were going to beat me if necessary. You look very warlike.”

”I feel warlike,” the man said, nodding. He said—

”I’m fighting for a friend to whom you are doing, in your mind, an injustice. I know him better than you do, and I tell you you’re doing him a grave injustice. You’re failing altogether to understand him.”

”I wonder,” the girl said, looking very thoughtfully down at the table before her.

”I know,” said he.

Quite suddenly she gave a little overwrought cry, and she put up her hands over her face.

”Oh, Richard!” she said, ”that day when he was here! He left me— Oh, I cannot tell you at what a height he left me! It was something new and beautiful. He swept me to the clouds with him. And I might—perhaps I might have lived on there. Who knows? But then that hideous evening! Ah, it was too sickening, the fall back to common earth again!”

”I know,” said the man gently, ”I know. And he knew, too. Directly he’d seen you he knew how you would feel about it. I’m not pretending that it was of no consequence. It was unfortunate, of course. But—the point is it did not mean in him any slackening, any stooping, any letting go. It was a moment’s incident. We went to the wretched place by accident after dinner. Ste. Marie saw those childish lunatics at play, and for about two minutes he played with them. The lady in the blue hat made it appear a little more extreme, and that’s all.”

Miss Benham rose to her feet and moved restlessly back and forth.

”Oh, Richard!” she said, ”the golden spell is broken—the enchantment he laid upon me that day. I’m not like him, you know. Oh, I wish I were! I wish I were! I can’t change from hour to hour. I can’t rise to the clouds again after my fall to earth. It has all—become something different.

"Don't misunderstand me," she cried; "I don't mean that I've ceased to care for him. No, far from that! But I was in such an exalted heaven, and now I'm not there any more. Perhaps he can lift me to it again. Oh yes, I'm sure he can when I see him once more; but I wanted to go on living there so happily while he was away! Do you understand at all?"

"I think I do," the man said, but he looked at her very curiously and a little sadly; for it was the first time he had ever seen her swept from her superb poise by any emotion, and he hardly recognised her. It was very bitter to him to realise that he could never have stirred her to this, never under any conceivable circumstances.

The girl came to him where he stood and touched his arm with her hand.

"He is waiting to hear how I feel about it all, isn't he?" she said. "He is waiting to know that I understand. Will you tell him a little lie for me, Richard? No! You needn't tell a lie; I will tell it. Tell him that I said I understood perfectly. Tell him that I was shocked for a moment, but that afterwards I understood and thought no more about it. Will you tell him I said that? It won't be a lie from you, because I did say it. Oh, I will not grieve him or hamper him now while he is working in my cause! I'll tell him a lie rather than have him grieve."

"Need it be a lie?" said Richard Hartley. "Can't you truly believe what you've said?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I'll try," said she, "but—my golden spell is broken, and I can't mend it alone. I'm sorry."

He turned with a little sigh to leave her, but Miss Benham followed him towards the door of the drawing-room.

"You're a good friend, Richard," she said, when she had come near. "You're a good friend to him."

"He deserves good friends," said the man stoutly. "And besides," said he, "we're brothers in arms nowadays. We've enlisted together to fight for the same cause."

The girl fell back with a little cry. "Do you mean," she said, after a moment, "do you mean that you are working with him—to find Arthur?"

Hartley nodded.

"But," said she stammering, "but, Richard—"

The man checked her. "Oh, I know what I'm doing," said he. "My eyes are open. I know that I'm not—well, in the running. I work for no reward except a desire to help you and Ste. Marie. That's all. It pleases me to be useful."

He went away with that, not waiting for an answer; and the girl stood

where he had left her, staring after him.

## CHAPTER X

### CAPTAIN STEWART ENTERTAINS

Ste. Marie returned, after three days, from Dinard in a depressed and somewhat puzzled frame of mind. He had found no trace whatever of Arthur Benham either at Dinard or at Deauville, and, what was more, he was unable to discover that any one even remotely resembling that youth had been seen at either place. The matter of identification, it seemed to him, should be a rather simple one. In the first place, the boy's appearance was not at all French, nor for that matter English: it was very American. Also he spoke French—so Ste. Marie had been told—very badly, having for the language that scornful contempt peculiar to Anglo-Saxons of a certain type. His speech, it seemed, was, like his appearance, ultra-American, full of strange idioms and oddly pronounced. In short, such a youth would be rather sure to be remembered by any hotel management and staff with which he might have come in contact.

At first Ste. Marie pursued his investigations quietly and, as it were, casually, but, after his initial failure, he went to the managements of the various hotels and lodging-houses and to the cafés and bathing establishments, and told them with all frankness a part of the truth—that he was searching for a young man whose disappearance had caused great distress to his family. He was not long in discovering that no such young man could have been either in Dinard or Deauville.

The thing which puzzled him was that, apart from finding no trace of the missing boy, he also found no trace of Captain Stewart's agent—the man who had been first on the ground. No one seemed able to recollect that such a person had been making inquiries, and Ste. Marie began to suspect that his friend was being imposed upon. He determined to warn Stewart that his agents were earning their fees too easily.

So he returned to Paris more than a little dejected and sore over this waste of time and effort. He arrived by a noon tram, and drove across the city in a fiacre to the Rue d'Assas. But as he was in the midst of unpacking his portmanteau, for he kept no servant (a woman came in once a day to "do" the rooms), the door-bell rang. It was Baron de Vries, and Ste. Marie admitted him with an exclamation of

surprise and pleasure.

"You passed me in the street just now," explained the Belgian, "and, as I was a few minutes early for a lunch engagement, I followed you up."

He pointed with his stick at the open bag.

"Ah, you have been on a journey! Detective work?"

Ste. Marie pushed his guest into a chair, gave him cigarettes, and told him about the fruitless expedition to Dinard. He spoke also of his belief that Captain Stewart's agent had never really found a clue at all, and at that Baron de Vries nodded his grey head and said, "Ah!" in a tone of some significance. Afterwards he smoked a little while in silence, but presently he said, as if with some hesitation—

"May I be permitted to offer a word of advice?"

"But surely!" cried Ste. Marie, kicking away the half-empty portmanteau. "Why not?"

"Do whatever you are going to do in this matter according to your own judgment," said the elder man. "Or according to Mr. Hartley's and your combined judgments. Make your investigations without reference to our friend Captain Stewart." He halted there as if that were all he had meant to say, but when he saw Ste. Marie's raised eyebrows, he frowned and went on slowly as if picking his words with some care.

"I should be sorry," he said, "to have Captain Stewart at the head of any investigation of this nature in which I was deeply interested—just now, at any rate. I am afraid—It is difficult to say. I do not wish to say too much—I am afraid he is not quite the man for the position."

Ste. Marie nodded his head with great emphasis.

"Ah!" he cried, "that's just what I have felt, you know, all along. And it's what Hartley felt too, I'm sure. No, Stewart is not the sort for a detective. He's too cock-sure. He won't admit that he might possibly be wrong now and then. He's too—"

"He is too much occupied with other matters," said Baron de Vries. Ste. Marie sat down on the edge of a chair.

"Other matters?" he demanded. "That sounds mysterious. What other matters?"

"Oh, there is nothing very mysterious about it," said the elder man. He frowned down at his cigarette and brushed some fallen ash neatly from his knees.

"Captain Stewart," said he, "is badly worried, and has been for the past year or so—badly worried over money matters and other things. He has lost enormous sums at play, as I happen to know; and he has lost still more enormous sums at Auteuil and at Longchamps. Also the ladies are not without their demands."

Ste. Marie gave a shout of laughter.

"*Comment donc!*" he cried. "*Ce vieillard?*"

"Ah well," deprecated the other man, "*Vieillard* is putting it rather high. He can't be more than fifty, I should think. To be sure he looks older, but then, in his day, he lived a great deal in a short time. Do you happen to remember Olga Nilssen?"

"I do," said Ste. Marie. "I remember her very well indeed; I was a sort of go-between in settling up that affair with Morrison. Morrison's people asked me to do what I could. Yes, I remember her well, and with some pleasure. I felt sorry for her, you know. People didn't quite know the truth of that affair. Morrison behaved very badly to her."

"Yes," said Baron de Vries, "and Captain Stewart has behaved very badly to her also. She is furious with rage or jealousy or both. She goes about, I am told, threatening to kill him, and it would be rather like her to do it one day. Well, I have dragged in all this scandal by way of showing you that Stewart has his hands full of his own affairs just now, and so cannot give the attention he ought to give to hunting out his nephew. As you suggest, his agents may be deceiving him. I don't know, I suppose they could do it easily enough. If I were you I would set to work quite independently of him."

"Yes," said Ste. Marie in an absent tone. "Oh yes, I shall do that, you may be sure." He gave a sudden smile.

"He's a queer type, this Captain Stewart," said Ste. Marie. "He begins to interest me very much. I had never suspected this side of him (though I remember now that I once saw him coming out of a milliner's shop). He looks rather an ascetic, rather donnish, don't you think? I remember that he talked to me one day quite pathetically about feeling his age and about liking young people round him. He's an odd character. Fancy him mixed up in an affair with Olga Nilssen! or, rather, fancy her involved in an affair with him! What can she have seen in him? She's not mercenary, you know. At least she used not to be."

"Ah! there," said Baron de Vries, "you enter upon a *terra incognita*. No one can say what a woman sees in this man or in that. It's beyond our ken." He rose to take his leave, and Ste. Marie went with him to the door.

"I've been asked to a sort of party at Stewart's rooms this week," Ste. Marie said. "I don't know whether I shall go or not. Probably not. I suppose I shouldn't find Olga Nilssen there?"

"Well, no," said the Belgian, laughing. "No, I hardly think so. Good-bye! Think over what I've told you. Good-bye!" He went away down the stair, and Ste. Marie returned to his unpacking.

Nothing more of consequence occurred in the next few days. Hartley had unearthed a somewhat shabby adventurer, who swore to having seen the Irishman, O'Hara, in Paris within a month, but it was by no means certain that this



being did not merely affirm what he believed to be desired of him, and in any case the information was of no especial value, since it was O'Hara's present whereabouts that was the point at issue. So it came to Thursday evening. Ste. Marie received a note from Captain Stewart during the day, reminding him that he was to come to the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré that evening, and asking him to come early, at ten or thereabouts, so that the two could have a comfortable chat before any one else turned up. Ste. Marie had about decided not to go at all, but the courtesy of this special invitation from Miss Benham's uncle made it rather impossible for him to stay away. He tried to persuade Hartley to follow him later on in the evening, but that gentleman flatly refused, and went away to dine with some English friends at Armenonville.

So Ste. Marie, in a vile temper, dined quite alone at Lavenue's, beside the Gare Montparnasse, and towards ten o'clock drove across the river to the Rue du Faubourg. Captain Stewart's flat was up five stories, at the top of the building in which it was located, and so well above the noises of the street. Ste. Marie went up in the automatic lift, and at the door above his host met him in person, saying that the one servant he kept was busy making preparations in the kitchen beyond. They entered a large room, long but comparatively shallow, in shape not unlike the sitting-room in the Rue d'Assas but very much bigger, and Ste. Marie uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure, for he had never before seen an interior anything like this. The room was decorated and furnished entirely in Chinese and Japanese articles of great age and remarkable beauty. Ste. Marie knew little of the hieratic art of these two countries, but he fancied that the place must be an endless delight to the expert.

The general tone of the room was gold, dulled and softened by great age until it had ceased to glitter, and relieved by the dusty Chinese blue, and by old red faded to rose, and by warm ivory tints. The great expanse of the walls was covered by a brownish-yellow cloth, coarse, like burlap, and against it round the room hung sixteen large panels representing the sixteen *Rakan*. They were early copies—fifteenth century, Captain Stewart said—of those famous originals by the Chinese *Sung* master Ririomin, which have been for six hundred years or more the treasures of Japan. They were mounted upon Japanese brocade of blue and dull gold, framed in keyaki wood, and, out of their brown time-stained shadows, the great *Rakan* scowled or grinned or placidly gazed, grotesquely graceful masterpieces of a perished art.

At the far end of the room, under a gilded canopy of intricate wood-carving, stood upon his pedestal of many-petalled lotus a great statue of Amida Buddha in the yogi attitude of contemplation, and at intervals against the other walls other smaller images stood or sat; Buddha in many incarnations; Kwannon, Goddess of Mercy; Jizo Bosatsu; Hotei, pot-bellied, God of Contentment; Jingo-Kano, God of

War. In the centre of the place was a Buddhist temple table; and priests' chairs, lacquered and inlaid, stood about the room. The floor was covered by Chinese rugs, dull yellow with blue flowers; and over a doorway which led into another room was fixed a huge rama of Chinese pierced carving, gilded, in which there were trees and rocks and little grouped figures of the hundred immortals.

It was indeed an extraordinary room. Ste. Marie looked about its mellow glow with a half-comprehending wonder, and he looked at the man beside him curiously, for here was another side to this many-sided character. Captain Stewart smiled.

"You like my museum?" he asked. "Few people care much for it except, of course, those who go in for the Oriental arts. Most of my friends think it bizarre—too grotesque and unusual. I have tried to satisfy them by including those comfortable low divan couches (they refuse altogether to sit in the priests' chairs), but still they are unhappy." He called his servant, who came to take Ste. Marie's hat and coat, and returned with smoking things.

"It seems entirely wonderful to me," said the younger man. "I'm not an expert at all—I don't know who the gentlemen in those sixteen panels are, for example; but it is very beautiful. I have never seen anything like it at all." He gave a little laugh.

"Will it sound very impertinent in me, I wonder, if I express surprise—not surprise at finding this magnificent room, but at discovering that this sort of thing is a taste and, very evidently, a serious study of yours? You—I remember your saying once with some feeling that it was youth and beauty and—well, freshness that you liked best to be surrounded by. This," said Ste. Marie, waving an inclusive hand, "was young so many centuries ago! It fairly breathes antiquity and death."

"Yes," said Captain Stewart thoughtfully. "Yes, that is quite true." The two had seated themselves upon one of the broad low benches which had been built into the place to satisfy the philistine.

"I find it hard to explain," he said, "because both things are passions of mine. Youth—I could not exist without it. Since I have it no longer in my own body, I wish to see it about me. It gives me life. It keeps my heart beating. I must have it near. And then this—antiquity and death, beautiful things made by hands dead centuries ago in an alien country! I love this too. I didn't speak too strongly, it is a sort of passion with me—something quite beyond the collector's mania, quite beyond that. Sometimes, do you know, I stay at home in the evening, and I sit here quite alone with the lights half on and, for hours together, I smoke and watch these things—the quiet, sure, patient smile of that Buddha for example. Think how long he has been smiling like that, and waiting! Waiting for what? There is something mysterious beyond all words in that smile of his, that fixed,

crudely carved wooden smile. No, I'll be hanged if it's crude! It is beyond our modern art. The dead men carved better than we do. We couldn't manage that with such simple means. We can only reproduce what is before us. We can't carve questions—mysteries—everlasting riddles."

Through the pale blue wreathing smoke of his cigarette Captain Stewart gazed down the room to where Eternal Buddha stood and smiled eternally. And from there the man's eyes moved with slow enjoyment along the opposite wall over those who sat or stood there, over the panels of the ancient Rakan, over carved lotus and gilt contorted dragon for ever in pursuit of the holy pearl. He drew a short breath which seemed to bespeak extreme contentment, the keenest height of pleasure, and he stirred a little where he sat and settled himself among the cushions. Ste. Marie watched him, and the expression of the man's face began to be oddly revolting. It was the face of a voluptuary in the presence of his desire. He was uncomfortable and wished to say something to break the silence, but, as often occurs at such a time, he could think of nothing to say. So there was a brief silence between them. But presently Captain Stewart roused himself with an obvious effort.

"Here! this won't do," said he, in a tone of whimsical apology. "This won't do, you know. I'm floating off on my hobby (and there's a mixed metaphor that would do credit to your own Milesian blood!) I'm boring you to extinction, and I don't want to do that, for I'm anxious that you should come here again—and often. I should like to have you form the habit.

"What was it I had in mind to ask you about? Ah yes! The journey to Dinard and Deauville. I am afraid it turned out to be fruitless or you would have let me know."

"Entirely fruitless," said Ste. Marie. He went on to tell the elder man of his investigation, and of his certainty that no one resembling Arthur Benham had been at either of the two places.

"It's no affair of mine, to be sure," he said; "but I rather suspect that your agent was deceiving you—pretending to have accomplished something by way of making you think he was busy." Ste. Marie was so sure the other would immediately disclaim this that he waited for the word, and gave a little smothered laugh when Captain Stewart said promptly—

"Oh no! No! That is impossible. I have every confidence in that man. He is one of my best. No, you are mistaken there. I am more disappointed than you could possibly be over the failure of your efforts, but I am quite sure my man thought he had something worth working upon.

"By the way, I have received another rather curious communication—from Ostend this time. I will show you the letter, and you may try your luck there if you would care to." He felt in his pockets and then rose. "I've left the thing in

another coat," said he; "if you will allow me, I'll fetch it." But before he had turned away the doorbell rang, and he paused.

"Ah well," he said, "another time. Here are some of my guests. They have come earlier than I had expected."

The new arrivals were three very perfectly dressed ladies, one of them an operatic light who chanced not to be singing that evening, and whom Ste. Marie had met before. The two others were rather difficult of classification, but probably, he thought, ornaments of that mysterious borderland between the two worlds which seems to give shelter to so many people against whose characters nothing definite is known, but whose antecedents and connexions are not made topics of conversation. The three ladies seemed to be on very friendly terms with Captain Stewart, and greeted him with much noisy delight. One of the unclassified two, when her host, with a glance towards Ste. Marie, addressed her formally, seemed inordinately amused, and laughed for a long time.

Within the next hour ten or a dozen other guests had arrived, and they all seemed to know each other very well, and proceeded to make themselves quite at home. Ste. Marie regarded them with a reflective and not over-enthusiastic eye, and he wondered a good deal why he had been asked here to meet them. He was as far from a prig or a snob as any man could very well be, and he often went to very Bohemian parties which were given by his painter or musician friends, but these people seemed to him quite different. The men, with the exception of two eminent opera singers, who quite obviously had been asked because of their voices, were the sort of men who abound at such places as Ostend and Monte Carlo, and Baden Baden in the race week. That is not to say that they were ordinary racing touts or the cheaper kind of adventurers: there was a count among them, and a marquis who had recently been divorced by his American wife; but adventurers of a sort they undoubtedly were. There was not one of them, so far as Ste. Marie was aware, who was received anywhere in good society, and he resented very much being compelled to meet them.

Naturally enough he felt much less concern on the score of the ladies. It is an undoubted and wellnigh universal truth that men who would refuse outright to meet certain classes of their own sex show no reluctance whatever over meeting the women of a corresponding circle—that is, if the women are attractive. It is a depressing fact, and inclines one to sighs and head-shakes and some moral indignation, until the reverse truth is brought to light: namely, that women have identically the same point of view; that while they cast looks of loathing and horror upon certain of their sisters, they will meet with pleasure any presentable man whatever his crimes or vices.

Ste. Marie was very much puzzled over all this. It seemed to him so unnecessary that a man who really had some footing in the newer society of Paris

should choose to surround himself with people of this type; but, as he looked on and wondered, he became aware of a curious and, in the light of a past conversation, significant fact. All of the people in the room were young, all of them in their varying fashions and degrees very attractive to look upon, all full to overflowing of life and spirits and the determination to have a good time. He saw Captain Stewart moving among them, playing very gracefully his role of host, and the man seemed to have dropped twenty years from his shoulders. A miracle of rejuvenation seemed to have come upon him; his eyes were bright and eager, the colour was high in his cheeks, and the dry pedantic tone had gone from his voice. Ste. Marie watched him, and at last he thought he understood. It was half revolting, half pathetic, he thought, but it certainly was interesting to see.

[image]

*"He saw Captain Stewart moving among them."*

Duval, the great basso of the Opéra, accompanied at the piano by one of the unclassified ladies, was just finishing *Mefistofele's* drinking song out of *Faust* when the door-bell rang.

## CHAPTER XI

### A GOLDEN LADY ENTERS: THE EYES AGAIN

The music of voice and piano was very loud just then, so that the little soft whirring sound of the electric bell reached only one or two pairs of ears in the big room. It did not reach the host certainly, and neither he nor most of the others observed the servant make his way among the groups of seated or standing people and go to the outer door, which opened upon a tiny hallway. The song came to an end, and everybody was cheering and applauding and crying *bravo* or *bis*, or one of the other things that people shout at such times, when, as if in unexpected answer to the outburst, a lady appeared between the yellow portières, and came forward a little way into the room. She was a tall lady of an extraordinary and immediately noticeable grace of movement, a lady with rather fair hair, but her eyebrows and lashes had been stained darker than it was their nature

to be. She had the classic Greek type of face—and figure too—all but the eyes, which were long and narrow, narrow perhaps from a habit of going half closed; and when they were a little more than half closed, they made a straight black line that turned up very slightly at the outer end with an Oriental effect, which went oddly in that classic face. There is a very popular piece of sculpture now in the Luxembourg Gallery for which this lady "sat" as model to a great artist. Sculptors from all over the world go there to dream over its perfect line and contour, and little schoolgirls pretend not to see it, and middle-aged maiden tourists with red *Baedeckers* in their hands regard it furtively, and pass on, and after awhile come back to look again.

The lady was dressed in some close clinging material, which was not cloth-of-gold but something very like it, only much duller—something which gleamed when she stirred but did not glitter; and over her splendid shoulders was hung an Oriental scarf heavily worked with metallic gold. She made an amazing and dramatic picture in that golden room. It was as if she had known just what her surroundings would be and had dressed expressly for them.

The applause ceased as suddenly as if it had been trained to break off at a signal, and the lady came forward a little way, smiling a quiet assured smile. At each step her knee threw out the golden stuff of her gown an inch or two, and it flashed suddenly a dull subdued flash in the overhead light, and died and flashed again. A few of the people in the room knew who the lady was, and they looked at one another with raised eyebrows and startled faces; but the others stared at her with an eager admiration, thinking that they had seldom seen anything so beautiful or so effective. Ste. Marie sat forward on the edge of his chair. His eyes sparkled, and he gave a little quick sigh of pleasurable excitement. This was drama and very good drama too, and he suspected that it might at any moment turn into a tragedy.

He saw Captain Stewart, who had been among a group of people halfway across the room, turn his head to look, when the cries and the applause ceased so suddenly, and he saw the man's face stiffen by swift degrees, all the joyous buoyant life gone out of it, until it was yellow and rigid like a dead man's face; and Ste. Marie, out of his knowledge of the relations between these two people, nodded, *en connaisseur*, for he knew that the man was very badly frightened.

So the host of the evening hung back staring for what must have seemed to him a long and terrible time, though in reality it was but an instant; then he came forward quickly to greet the newcomer; and if his face was still yellow-white, there was nothing in his manner but the courtesy habitual with him. He took the lady's hand and she smiled at him; but her eyes did not smile: they were hard. Ste. Marie, who was the nearest of the others, heard Captain Stewart say—  
 "This is an unexpected pleasure, my dearest Olga!" And to that the lady

replied more loudly—

"Yes, I returned to Paris only to-day. You didn't know, of course. I heard you were entertaining this evening and so I came, knowing that I should be welcome."

"Always!" said Captain Stewart. "Always more than welcome!" He nodded to one or two of the men who stood near, and, when they had approached, presented them. Ste. Marie observed that he used the lady's true name—she had, at times, found occasion to employ others—and that he politely called her "Madame Nilssen" instead of "Mademoiselle." But at that moment the lady caught sight of Ste. Marie, and, crying out his name in a tone of delighted astonishment, turned away from the other men, brushing past them as if they had been furniture, and advanced, holding out both her hands in greeting.

"Dear Ste. Marie!" she exclaimed. "Fancy finding you here! I'm so glad! Oh, I'm so very glad! Take me away from these people! Find a corner where we can talk. Ah! there is one with a big seat. *Allons-y!*" She addressed him for the most part in English, which she spoke perfectly—as perfectly as she spoke French and German and, presumably, her native tongue, which must have been Swedish.

They went to the broad low seat, a sort of hard-cushioned bench, which stood against one of the walls, and made themselves comfortable there by the only possible means, which, owing to the width of the thing, was to sit far back with their feet stuck straight out before them. Captain Stewart had followed them across the room, and showed a strong tendency to remain. Ste. Marie observed that his eyes were hard and bright and very alert, and that there were two bright spots of colour in his yellow cheeks. It occurred to Ste. Marie that the man was afraid to leave him alone with Olga Nilssen, and he smiled to himself, reflecting that the lady, even if indiscreetly inclined, could tell him nothing—save in details—that he did not already know.

But, after a few rather awkward moments, Mlle. Nilssen waved an irritated hand.

"Go away!" she said to her host. "Go away to your other guests! I want to talk to Ste. Marie. We have old times to talk over." And after hesitating awhile uneasily, Captain Stewart turned back into the room; but for some time thereafter Ste. Marie was aware that a vigilant eye was being kept upon them, and that their host was by no means at his ease.

When they were left alone together, the girl turned to him and patted his arm affectionately. She said—

"Ah, but it is very good to see you again, *mon cher ami!* It has been so long!" She gave an abrupt frown.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. And she said an unkind thing about her fellow-guests. She called them *canaille*. She said—

"Why are you wasting your time among these *canaille*? This is not a place for you. Why did you come?"

"I don't know," said Ste. Marie. He was still a little resentful and he said so. He said—

"I didn't know it was going to be like this. I came because Stewart went rather out of his way to ask me. I'd known him in a very different *milieu*."

"Ah yes!" she said reflectively. "Yes, he does go into the world also, doesn't he! But this is what he likes, you know." Her lips drew back for an instant and she said—

"He is a pig-dog."

Ste. Marie looked at her gravely. She had used that offensive name with a little too much fierceness. Her face had turned for an instant quite white, and her eyes had flashed out over the room a look that meant a great deal to any one who knew her as well as Ste. Marie did. He sat forward and lowered his voice. He said—

"Look here, Olga! I'm going to be very frank for a moment. May I?"

For just an instant the girl drew away from him with suspicion in her eyes, and something else, alertly defiant. Then she put out her hands to his arm.

"You may be what you like, dear Ste. Marie," she said. "And say what you like. I will take it all—and swallow it alive—good as gold. What are you going to do to me?"

"I've always been fair with you, haven't I?" he urged. "I've had disagreeable things to say or do but—you knew always that I liked you and—where my sympathies were."

"Always! Always, *mon cher*!" she cried. "I trusted you always in everything. And there is no one else I trust. No one! No one!"

"Ste. Marie!"

"What then?" he asked.

"Ste. Marie," she said, "why did you never fall in love with me, as the other men did?"

"I wonder," said he. "I don't know. Upon my word, I really don't know." He was so serious about it that the girl burst into a shriek of laughter. And in the end he laughed too.

"I expect it was because I liked you too well," he said at last. "But come! We're forgetting my lecture. Listen to your *grandpère* Ste. Marie! I have heard—certain things—rumours—what you will. Perhaps they are foolish lies, and I hope they are. But if not, if the fear I saw in Stewart's face when you came here to-night was—not without cause, let me beg you to have a care. You're much too savage, my dear child. Don't be so foolish as to—well, turn comedy into the other thing. In the first place it's not worth while, and in the second place it recoils,



always. Revenge may be sweet. I don't know. But nowadays, with police courts and all that, it entails much more subsequent annoyance that it is worth. Be wise, Olga!"

"Some things, Ste. Marie," said the golden lady, "are worth all the consequences that may follow them." She watched Captain Stewart across the room where he stood chatting with a little group of people, and her beautiful face was as hard as marble, and her eyes were as dark as a stormy night, and her mouth, for an instant, was almost like an animal's mouth, cruel and relentless.

Ste. Marie saw, and he began to be a bit alarmed in good earnest. In his warning he had spoken rather more seriously than he felt the occasion demanded, but he began at last to wonder if the occasion was not in reality very serious indeed. He was sure, of course, that Olga Nilssen had come here on this evening to annoy Captain Stewart in some fashion. As he put it to himself, she probably meant to "make a row," and he would not have been in the least surprised if she had made it in the beginning upon her very dramatic entrance. Nothing more calamitous than that had occurred to him. But when he saw the woman's face, turned a little away and gazing fixedly at Captain Stewart, he began to be aware that there was tragedy very near him, or all the makings of it.

Mlle. Nilssen turned back to him. Her face was still hard, and her eyes dark and narrowed, with their oddly Oriental look. She bent her shoulders together for an instant, and her hands moved slowly in her lap, stretching out before her, in a gesture very like a cat's when it awakens from sleep and yawns and extends its claws, as if to make sure that they are still there and ready for use.

"I feel a little like Samson to-night," she said. "I am tired of almost everything, and I should like very much to pull the world down on top of me and kill everybody in it—except you, Ste. Marie, dear! Except you!—and be crushed under the ruins."

"I think," said Ste. Marie practically—and the speech sounded rather like one of Hartley's speeches—"I think it was not quite the world that Samson pulled down, but a temple—or a palace—something of that kind."

"Well," said the golden lady, "this place is rather like a temple—a Chinese temple, with the pig-dog for high priest."

Ste. Marie frowned at her.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded sharply. "What did you come here to do? Mischief of some kind—*bien entendu*—but what?"

"Do?" she said, looking at him with her narrowed eyes. "I? Why, what should I do? Nothing, of course! I merely said I should like to pull the place down. Of course I couldn't do that quite literally, now, could I? No. It is merely a mood. I'm not going to do anything."

"You're not being honest with me," he said. And at that her expression

changed, and she patted his arm again with a gesture that seemed to beg forgiveness.

"Well then," she said, "if you must know, maybe I did come here for a purpose. I want to have it out with our friend Captain Stewart about something.

"And Ste. Marie, dear," she pleaded, "please, I think you'd better go home first. I don't care about these other animals, but I don't want you dragged into any row of any sort. Please, be a sweet Ste. Marie and go home. Yes?"

"Absolutely, no!" said Ste. Marie. "I shall stay, and I shall try my utmost to prevent you from doing anything foolish. Understand that! If you want to have rows with people, Olga, for Heaven's sake don't pick an occasion like this for the purpose. Have your rows in private!"

"I rather think I enjoy an audience," she said with a reflective air, and Ste. Marie laughed aloud because he knew that the naïve speech was so very true. This lady, with her many good qualities and her bad ones—not a few, alas!—had an undeniable passion for red fire that had amused him very much on more than one past occasion.

"Please, go home!" she said once more. But when the man only shook his head, she raised her hands a little way and dropped them again in her lap in an odd gesture, which seemed to say that she had done all she could do, and that if anything disagreeable should happen now, and he should be involved in it, it would be entirely his fault because she had warned him.

Then quite abruptly a mood of irresponsible gaiety seemed to come upon her. She refused to have anything more to do with serious topics, and when Ste Marie attempted to introduce them she laughed in his face. As she had said in the beginning she wished to do, she harked back to old days—the earlier stages of what might be termed the Morrison régime, and it seemed to afford her great delight to recall the happenings of that epoch. The conversation became a dialogue of reminiscence which would have been entirely unintelligible to a third person, and was indeed so to Captain Stewart, who once came across the room, made a feeble effort to attach himself, and presently wandered away again.

They unearthed from the past an exceedingly foolish song all about one "Little Willie" and a purple monkey climbing up a yellow stick. It was set to a well-known air from *Don Giovanni*, and when Duval, the basso heard them singing it, he came up and insisted upon knowing what it was about. He laughed immoderately over the English words when he was told what they meant, and made Ste. Marie write them down for him on two visiting cards. So they made a trio out of "Little Willie," the great Duval inventing a bass part quite marvellous in its ingenuity, and they were compelled to sing it over, and over again, until Ste. Marie's falsetto imitation of a tenor voice cracked and gave out altogether, since he was by nature baritone, if anything at all.

The other guests had crowded round to hear the extraordinary song, and when the song was at last finished several of them remained, so that Ste. Marie saw he was to be allowed an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with Olga Nilssen no longer. He therefore drifted away, after a few moments, and went with Duval and one of the other men across the room to look at some small jade objects—snuff-bottles, bracelets, buckles and the like—which were displayed in a cabinet cleverly reconstructed out of a Japanese shrine. It was perhaps ten minutes later when he looked round the place and discovered that neither Mlle. Nilssen nor Captain Stewart were to be seen.

His first thought was of relief, for he said to himself that the two had sensibly gone into one of the other rooms to "have it out" in peace and quiet. But following that came the recollection of the woman's face when she had watched her host across the room. Her words came back to him: "I feel a little like Samson to-night.... I should very much like to pull the world down on top of me and kill everybody in it." Ste. Marie thought of these things and he began to be uncomfortable. He found himself watching the yellow-hung doorway beyond, with its intricate Chinese carving of trees and rocks and little groups of immortals, and he found that unconsciously he was listening for something—he did not know what—above the chatter and laughter of the people in the room. He endured this for possibly five minutes, and all at once found that he could endure it no longer. He began to make his way quietly through the group of people towards the curtained doorway.

As he went one of the women near by complained in a loud tone that the servant had disappeared. She wanted, it seemed, a glass of water having already had many glasses of more interesting things. Ste. Marie said he would get it for her and went on his way. He had an excuse now.

He found himself in a square dimly lighted room, much smaller than the other. There was a round table in the centre so he thought it must be Stewart's dining-room. At the left a doorway opened into a place where there were lights, and at the other side was another door closed. From the room at the left there came a sound of voices, and though they were not loud, one of them, Mlle. Olga Nilssen's voice, was hard and angry and not altogether under control. The man would seem to have been attempting to pacify her, and he would seem not to have been very successful.

The first words that Ste. Marie was able to distinguish were from the woman. She said in a low fierce tone—

"That is a lie, my friend! That is a lie. I know all about the road to Clamart, so you needn't lie to me any longer. It's no good." She paused for just an instant there, and, in the pause, Ste. Marie heard Stewart give a sort of inarticulate exclamation. It seemed to express anger and it seemed also to express fear. But the

woman swept on and her voice began to be louder. She said—

”I’ve given you your chance. You didn’t deserve it, but I’ve given it you—and you’ve told me nothing but lies. Well, you’ll lie no more. This ends it.”

Upon that Ste. Marie heard a sudden stumbling shuffle of feet and a low hoarse cry of utter terror—a cry more animal-like than human. He heard the cry break off abruptly in something that was like a cough and a whine together, and he heard the sound of a heavy body falling with a loose rattle upon the floor.

With the sound of that falling body he had already reached the doorway and torn aside the heavy portière. It was a sleeping-room he looked into, a room of medium size, with two windows and an ornate bed of the Empire style set sidewise against the farther wall. There were electric lights upon imitation candles which were grouped in sconces against the walls and these were turned on so that the room was brightly illuminated. Midway between the door and the ornate Empire bed Captain Stewart lay huddled and writhing upon the floor, and Olga Nilssen stood upright beside him, gazing down upon him quite calmly. In her right hand, which hung at her side, she held a little flat black automatic pistol of the type known as Brownings, and they look toys but they are not.

[image]

*”Captain Stewart lay huddled and writhing upon the floor.”*

Ste. Marie sprang at her silently and caught her by the arm, twisting the automatic pistol from her grasp, and the woman made no effort whatever to resist him. She looked into his face quite frankly and unmoved, and she shook her head.

”I haven’t harmed him,” she said. ”I was going to, yes. And then myself, but he didn’t give me a chance. He fell down in a fit.” She nodded down towards the man, who lay writhing at their feet.

”I frightened him,” she said, ”and he fell in a fit. He’s an epileptic, you know. Didn’t you know that? Oh yes.”

Abruptly she turned away shivering, and put up her hands over her face. And she gave an exclamation of uncontrollable repulsion.

”Ugh!” she cried, ”it’s horrible. Horrible! I can’t bear to look. I saw him in a fit once before—long ago—and I couldn’t bear even to speak to him for a month. I thought he had been cured. He said— Ah, it’s horrible!”

Ste. Marie had dropped upon his knees beside the fallen man, and Mlle. Nilssen said over her shoulder—

”Hold his head up from the floor, if you can bear to. He might hurt it.” It was not an easy thing to do, for Ste. Marie had the natural sense of repulsion in such

matters that most people have, and this man's appearance, as Olga Nilssen had said, was horrible. The face was drawn hideously, and, in the strong clear light of the electrics, it was a deathly yellow. The eyes were half closed, and the eyeballs turned up so that only the whites of them showed between the lids. There was froth upon the distorted mouth, and it clung to the cat-like moustache and to the shallow sunken chin beneath. But Ste. Marie exerted all his will power, and took the jerking trembling head in his hands, holding it clear of the floor.

"You'd better call the servant," he said. "There may be something that can be done." But the woman answered, without looking—

"No, there's nothing that can be done, I believe, except to keep him from bruising himself. Stimulants—that sort of thing, do more harm than good. Could you get him on the bed here?"

"Together we might manage it," said Ste. Marie. "Come and help!"

"I can't!" she cried nervously. "I can't—touch him. Please, I can't do it."

"Come!" said the man in a sharp tone. "It's no time for nerves. I don't like it either, but it's got to be done." The woman began a half-hysterical sobbing, but after a moment she turned and came with slow feet to where Stewart lay.

Ste. Marie slipped his arms under the man's body and began to raise him from the floor.

"You needn't help after all," he said. "He's not heavy." And indeed, under his skilfully shaped and padded clothes, the man was a mere waif of a man—as unbelievably slight as if he were the victim of a wasting disease. Ste. Marie held the body in his arms as if it had been a child, and carried it across and laid it on the bed; but it was many months before he forgot the horror of that awful thing, shaking and twitching in his hold, the head thumping hideously upon his shoulder, the arms and legs beating against him. It was the most difficult task he had ever had to perform.

He laid Captain Stewart upon the bed and straightened the helpless limbs as best he could.

"I suppose," he said, rising again, "I suppose when the man comes out of this he'll be frightfully exhausted and drop off to sleep, won't he? We'll have to—" He halted abruptly there and, for a single swift instant, he felt the black and rushing sensation of one who is going to faint away. The wall behind the ornate Empire bed was covered with photographs, some in frames, others left as they had been received upon the large squares of weird cardboard which are termed "art mounts."

"Come here a moment, quickly!" said Ste. Marie in a sharp voice. Mlle. Nilssen's sobs had died down to a silent spasmodic catching of the breath, but she was still much unnerved, and she approached the bed with obvious unwillingness, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. Ste. Marie pointed to an unframed

photograph which was fastened to the wall by thumb tacks, and his outstretched hand shook as he pointed. Beneath them the other man still writhed and tumbled in his epileptic fit.

"Do you know who that woman is?" demanded Ste. Marie, and his tone was such that Olga Nilssen turned slowly and stared at him.

"That woman," said she, "is the reason why I wished to pull the world down upon Charlie Stewart and me to-night. That's who she is."

Ste. Marie gave a sort of cry.

"Who is she?" he insisted. "What is her name? I—have a particularly important reason for wanting to know. I've got to know." Mlle. Nilssen shook her head, still staring at him.

"I can't tell you that," said she. "I don't know the name. I only know that—when he met her, he—I don't know her name, but I know where she lives and where he goes every day to see her—a house with a big garden and walled park on the road to Clamart. It's on the edge of the wood, not far from Fort d'Issy. The Clamart-Vanves-Issy tram runs past the wall of one side of the park. That's all I know."

Ste. Marie clasped his head with his hands.

"So near to it!" he groaned, "and yet— Ah!" He bent forward suddenly over the bed and spelled out the name of the photographer, which was pencilled upon the brown cardboard mount.

"There's still a chance," he said. "There's still one chance." He became aware that the woman was watching him curiously, and nodded to her.

"It's something you don't know about," he explained. "I've got to find out who this—girl is. Perhaps the photographer can help me. I used to know him." All at once his eyes sharpened.

"Tell me the simple truth about something!" said he. "If ever we have been friends, if you owe me any good office, tell me this! Do you know anything about young Arthur Benham's disappearance two months ago, or about what has become of him?" Again the woman shook her head.

"No," said she. "Nothing at all. I haven't even heard of it. Young Arthur Benham! I've met him once or twice. I wonder—I wonder Stewart never spoke to me about his disappearance. That's very odd."

"Yes," said Ste. Marie absently, "it is." He gave a little sigh. "I wonder about a good many things," said he. He glanced down upon the bed before them, and Captain Stewart lay still, save for a slight twitching of the hands. Once he moved his head restlessly from side to side, and said something incoherent in a weak murmur.

"He's out of it," said Olga Nilssen. "He'll sleep now, I think. I suppose we must get rid of those people and then leave him to the care of his man. A doctor

couldn't do anything for him."

"Yes," said Ste. Marie, nodding. "I'll call the servant and tell the people that Stewart has been taken ill." He looked once more towards the photograph on the wall, and under his breath he said with an odd defiant fierceness—

"I won't believe it!" But he did not explain what he wouldn't believe. He started out of the room, but, halfway, halted and turned back. He looked Olga Nilssen full in the eyes, saying—

"It is safe to leave you here with him while I call the servant? There'll be no more—?" But the woman gave a low cry and a violent shiver with it.

"You need have no fear," she said. "I've no desire now to—harm him. The—reason is gone. This has cured me. I feel as if I could never bear to see him again. Oh, hurry! Please, hurry! I want to get away from here." Ste. Marie nodded and went out of the room.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE NAME OF THE LADY WITH THE EYES: EVIDENCE HEAPS UP SWIFTLY

Ste. Marie drove home to the Rue d'Assas with his head in a whirl and with a sense of great excitement beating somewhere within him, probably in the place where his heart ought to be. He had a curiously sure feeling that at last his feet were upon the right path. He could not have explained this to himself—indeed, there was nothing to explain, and if there had been, he was in far too great an inner turmoil to manage it. It was a mere feeling—the sort of thing which he had once tried to express to Captain Stewart, and had got laughed at for his pains.

There was, in sober fact, no reason whatever why Captain Stewart's possession of a photograph of the beautiful lady whom Ste. Marie had once seen in company with O'Hara should be taken as significant of anything except an appreciation of beauty on the part of Miss Benham's uncle—not even if, as Mlle. Nilssen believed, Captain Stewart was in love with the lady. But to Ste. Marie, in his whirl of reawakened excitement, the discovery loomed to the skies, and, in a series of ingenious but very vague leaps of the imagination, he saw himself, with the aid of this new evidence (which was no evidence at all, if he had been calm enough to realise it), victorious in his great quest, leading young Arthur Benham back to the arms of an ecstatic family, and kneeling at the feet of that

youth's sister to claim his reward. All of which seems a rather startling flight of the imagination to have had its beginning in the sight of one photograph of a young woman. But then Ste. Marie was imaginative if he was anything.

He fell to thinking of this girl whose eyes, after one sight of them, had so long haunted him. He thought of her between those two men, the hard-faced Irish adventurer and the other, Stewart, strange compound of intellectual and voluptuary, and his eyes flashed in the dark and he gripped his hands together upon his knees. He said again—

"I won't believe it! I won't believe it!" Believe what? one wonders.

He slept hardly at all, only, towards morning, falling into an uneasy doze. And in the doze he dreamed once more the dream of the dim waste place and the hill, and the eyes and voice that called him back—because they needed him.

As early as he dared, after his morning coffee, he took a fiacre and drove across the river to the Boulevard de la Madeleine, where he climbed a certain stair, at the foot of which were two glass cases containing photographs of, for the most part, well-known ladies of the Parisian stage. At the top of the stair he entered the reception-room of a young photographer, who is famous now the world over, but who at the beginning of his career, when he had nothing but talent and no acquaintance, owed certain of his most important commissions to M. Ste. Marie.

The man, whose name was Bernstein, came forward eagerly from the studio beyond to greet his visitor, and Ste. Marie complimented him chaffingly upon his very sleek and prosperous appearance, and upon the new decorations of the little salon, which were, in truth, excellently well judged. But after they had talked for a little while of such matters he said—

"I want to know if you keep specimen prints of all the photographs you have made within the last few months, and if so I should like to see them."

The young Jew went to a wooden portfolio holder which stood in a corner and dragged it out into the light.

"I have them all here," said he, "everything that I have made within the past ten or twelve months. If you will let me draw up a chair you can look them over comfortably." He glanced at his former patron with a little polite curiosity as Ste. Marie followed his suggestion, and began to turn over the big portfolio's contents, but he did not show any surprise nor ask questions. Indeed he guessed—to a certain extent—rather near the truth of the matter. It had happened before that young gentlemen, and old ones too, wanted to look over his prints without offering explanations, and they generally picked out all the photographs there were of some particular lady, and bought them if they could be bought.

So he was by no means astonished on this occasion, and he moved about the room putting things to rights, and even went for a few moments into the



studio beyond, until he was recalled by a sudden exclamation from his visitor, an exclamation which had a sound of mingled delight and excitement.

Ste. Marie held in his hands a large photograph, and he turned it towards the man who had made it.

"I am going to ask you some questions," said he, "that will sound rather indiscreet and irregular, but I beg you to answer them if you can, because the matter is of great importance to a number of people. Do you remember this lady?"

"Oh yes," said the Jew readily, "I remember her very well. I never forget people who are as beautiful as this lady was." His eyes gleamed with retrospective joy.

"She was splendid!" he declared, "sumptuous! No! I cannot describe her. I have not the words. And I could not photograph her with any justice either. She was all colour—brown skin with a dull red stain under the cheeks, and a great mass of hair that was not black but very nearly black—except in the sun, and then there were red lights in it. She was a goddess, that lady, a queen of goddesses: the young Juno before marriage, the—"

"Yes," interrupted Ste. Marie, "yes, I see. Yes, quite evidently she was beautiful, but what I wanted in particular to know was her name, if you feel that you have a right to give it to me (I remind you again that the matter is very important), and any circumstances that you can remember about her coming here; who came with her, for instance, and things of that sort."

The photographer looked a little disappointed at being cut off in the middle of his rhapsody, but he began turning over the leaves of an order-book which lay upon a table near by.

"Here is the entry!" he said after a few moments. "Yes, I thought so, the date was nearly three months ago—April 5. And the lady's name was Mlle. Coira O'Hara."

"What?" cried the other man sharply. "What did you say?"

"Mlle. Coira O'Hara was the name," repeated the photographer. "I remember the occasion perfectly. The lady came here with three gentlemen, one tall thin gentleman with an eyeglass, an Englishman, I think, though he spoke very excellent French when he spoke to me. Among themselves they spoke, I think, English, though I do not understand it except a few words such as 'ow moch?' and 'sank you' and 'rady pleas' now."

"Yes! Yes!" cried Ste. Marie impatiently. And the little Jew could see that he was labouring under some very strong excitement, and he wondered mildly about it, scenting a love affair.

"Then," he pursued, "there was a very young man in strange clothes, a tourist, I should think, like those Americans and English who come in the sum-

mer with little red books and sit on the terrace of the Café de la Paix." He heard his visitor draw a swift sharp breath at that, but he hurried on before he could be interrupted—

"This young man seemed to be unable to take his eyes from the lady, and small wonder! He was very much *épris*, very much *épris* indeed. Never have I seen a youth more so. Ah, it was something to see, that! A thing to touch the heart."

"What did the young man look like?" demanded Ste. Marie. The photographer described the youth as best he could from memory, and he saw his visitor nod once or twice, and at the end he said: "Yes, yes, I thought so. Thank you."

The Jew did not know what it was the other thought, but he went on—

"Ah, a thing to touch the heart! Such devotion as that! Alas that the lady should seem so cold to it! Still, a goddess! What would you? A queen among goddesses. One would not have them laugh and make little jokes—make eyes at lovesick boys. No indeed!" He shook his head rapidly and sighed.

Ste. Marie was silent for a little space, but at length he looked up as if he had just remembered something.

"And the third man?" he asked.

"Ah yes, the third gentleman," said Bernstein. "I had forgotten him. The third gentleman I knew well. He had often been here. It was he who brought these friends to me. He was M. le Capitaine Stewart. Everybody knows M. le Capitaine Stewart. Everybody in Paris."

Again he observed that his visitor drew a little swift sharp breath, and that he seemed to be labouring under some excitement.

However, Ste. Marie did not question him further, and so he went on to tell the little more he knew of the matter: how the four people had remained for an hour or more, trying many poses; how they had returned, all but the tall gentleman, three days later to see the proofs, and to order certain ones to be printed—the young man paying on the spot in advance—and how the finished prints had been sent to M. le Capitaine Stewart's address.

When he had finished his visitor sat for a long time silent, his head bent a little, frowning upon the floor and chafing his hands together over his knees. But at last he rose rather abruptly. He said—

"Thank you very much indeed. You have done me a great service. If ever I can repay it command me. Thank you!"

The Jew protested, smiling, that he was still too deeply in debt to M. Ste. Marie, and so, politely wrangling, they reached the door, and, with a last expression of gratitude, the visitor departed down the stair. A client came in just then for a sitting and so the little photographer did not have an opportunity to wonder over the rather odd affair as much as he might have done. Indeed, in the press of

work, it slipped from his mind altogether.

But down in the busy boulevard Ste. Marie stood hesitating on the curb. There were so many things to be done, in the light of these new developments, that he did not know what to do first.

"Mademoiselle Coira O'Hara!—*Mademoiselle!*" The thought gave him a sudden sting of inexplicable relief and pleasure. She would be O'Hara's daughter then. And the boy, Arthur Benham (there was no room for doubt in the photographer's description), had seemed to be badly in love with her. This was a new development indeed! It wanted thought, reflection, consultation with Richard Hartley. He signalled to a fiacre, and when it had drawn up before him, sprang into it, and gave Richard Hartley's address in the Avenue de l'Observatoire. But when they had gone a little way he changed his mind and gave another address, one in the Boulevard de la Tour Maubourg. It was where Mlle. Olga Nilssen lived. She had told him when he parted from her the evening before.

On the way he fell to thinking of what he had learnt from the little photographer Bernstein, to setting the facts, as well as he could, in order, endeavouring to make out just how much or how little they signified, by themselves or added to what he had known before. But he was in far too keen a state of excitement to review them at all calmly. As on the previous evening they seemed to him to loom to the skies, and again he saw himself successful in his quest—victorious, triumphant. That this leap to conclusions was but a little less absurd than the first did not occur to him. He was in a fine fever of enthusiasm, and such difficulties as his eye perceived lay in a sort of vague mist, to be dissipated later on, when he should sit quietly down with Hartley, and sift the wheat from the chaff, laying out a definite scheme of action.

It occurred to him that in his interview with the photographer he had forgotten one point, and he determined to go back, later on, and ask about it. He had forgotten to inquire as to Captain Stewart's attitude towards the beautiful lady. Young Arthur Benham's infatuation had filled his mind at the time, and had driven out of it what Olga Nilssen had told him about Stewart. He found himself wondering if this point might not be one of great importance—the rivalry of the two men for O'Hara's daughter. Assuredly that demanded thought and investigation.

He found the prettily furnished apartment in the Avenue de la Tour Maubourg a scene of great disorder, presided over by a maid, who seemed to be packing enormous quantities of garments into large trunks. The maid told him that her mistress, after a sleepless night, had departed from Paris by an early train, quite alone, leaving the servant to follow on when she had telegraphed or written an address. No, Mlle. Nilssen had left no address at all, not even for letters or telegrams. In short the entire proceeding was, so the exasperated woman

viewed it, everything that is imbecile.

Ste. Marie sat down on a hamper with his stick between his knees, and wrote a little note to be sent on when Mlle. Nilssen's whereabouts should be known. It was unfortunate, he reflected, that she should have fled away just now, but not of great importance to him, because he did not believe that he could learn very much more from her than he had learnt already. Moreover, he sympathised with her desire to get away from Paris—as far away as possible from the man whom she had seen in so horrible a state on the evening past.

He had kept the fiacre at the door, and he drove at once back to the Rue d'Assas. As he started to mount the stair the concierge came out of her loge to say that Mr. Hartley had called soon after monsieur had left the house that morning, had seemed very much disappointed on not finding monsieur, and before going away again had had himself let into monsieur's apartment with the key of the *femme de ménage*, and had written a note which monsieur would find, *là haut*.

Ste. Marie thanked the woman and went on up to his rooms, wondering why Hartley had bothered to leave a note instead of waiting or returning at lunch-time as he usually did. He found the communication on his table and read it at once. Hartley said—

"I have to go across the river to the *Bristol* to see some relatives who are turning up there to-day, and who will probably keep me until evening, and then I shall have to go back there to dine. So I'm leaving a word for you about some things I discovered last evening. I met Miss Benham at Armenonville, where I dined, and in a *tête-à-tête* conversation we had after dinner she let fall two facts which seem to me very important. They concern Captain S. In the first place, when he told us that day, some time ago, that he knew nothing about his father's will or any changes that might have been made in it, he lied. It seems that old David, shortly after the boy's disappearance, being very angry at what he considered, and still considers, a bit of spite on the boy's part, cut young Arthur Benham out of his will and transferred that share to *Captain S.* (Miss Benham learnt this from the old man only yesterday). Also it appears that he did this after talking the matter over with Captain S., who affected unwillingness. So, as the will reads now, Miss B. and Captain S. stand to share equally the bulk of the old man's money, which is several millions (in dols. of course); Miss B.'s mother is to have the interest of half of both shares as long as she lives. Now mark this! Prior to this new arrangement Captain S. was to receive only a small legacy, on the ground that he already had a respectable fortune left him by his mother, old David's first wife. (I've heard, by the way, that he has squandered a good share of what he had.)

"Miss B. is, of course, much cut up over this injustice to the boy, but she

can't protest too much as it only excites old David—she says the old man is much weaker.

"You see, of course, the significance of all this. If David Stewart dies, as he's likely to do, before young Arthur's return, Captain S. gets the money.

"The second fact I learnt was that Miss Benham did not tell her uncle about her semi-engagement to you or about your volunteering to search for the boy. She thinks her grandfather must have told him. I didn't say so to her, but that is hardly possible in view of the fact that Stewart came on here to your rooms very soon after you had reached them yourself.

"So that makes two lies for our gentle friend, and serious lies, both of them. To my mind they point unmistakably to a certain conclusion. *Captain S. has been responsible for putting his nephew out of the way.* He has either hidden him somewhere and is keeping him in confinement, or he has killed him.

"I wish we could talk it over to-day, but, as you see, I'm helpless. Remain in to-night, and I'll come as soon as I can get rid of these confounded people of mine.

"One word more! Be careful! Miss B. is, up to this point, merely puzzled over things. She doesn't suspect her uncle of any crookedness, I'm sure. So we shall have to tread softly where she is concerned.

"I shall see you to-night.—R.H."

Ste. Marie read the closely written pages through twice, and he thought how like his friend it was to take the time and trouble to put what he had learnt into this clear concise form. Another man would have scribbled: "Important facts—tell you all about it to-night," or something of that kind. Hartley must have spent a quarter of an hour over his writing.

Ste. Marie walked up and down the room, with all his strength forcing his brain to quiet reasonable action. Once he said aloud—

"Yes, you're right, of course. Stewart has been at the bottom of it all along." He realised that he had been for some days slowly arriving at that conclusion, and that, since the night before, he had been practically certain of it, though he had not yet found time to put his suspicions into logical order. Hartley's letter had driven the truth concretely home to him, but he would have reached the same truth without it—though that matter of the will was of the greatest importance. It gave him a strong weapon to strike with.

He halted before one of the front windows, and his eyes gazed unseeing across the street into the green shrubbery of the Luxembourg Gardens. The lace curtains had been left by the *femme de ménage* hanging straight down and not, as usual, looped back at either side, but he could see through them with perfect

ease although he could not be seen from outside.

He became aware that a man who was walking slowly up and down a path inside the high iron palings was in some way familiar to him, and his eyes sharpened. The man was very inconspicuously dressed, and looked like almost any other man whom one might pass in the street without taking any notice of him; but Ste. Marie knew that he had seen him often, and he wondered how and where. There was a row of lilac shrubs against the iron palings just inside, and between the palings and the path, but two of the shrubs were dead and leafless, and each time the man passed this spot he came into plain view; each time also he directed an oblique glance towards the house opposite. Presently he turned aside and sat down upon one of the public benches, where he was almost but not quite hidden by the intervening foliage.

Then at last Ste. Marie gave a sudden exclamation and smote his hands together.

"The fellow's a spy!" he cried aloud. "He's watching the house to see when I go out." He began to remember how he had seen the man in the street and in cafés and restaurants, and he remembered that he had once or twice thought it odd but without any second thought of suspicion. So the fellow had been set to spy upon him, watch his goings and comings and report them to—no need of asking to whom!

Ste. Marie stood behind his curtains and looked across into the pleasant expanse of shrubbery and greensward. He was wondering if it would be worth while to do anything. Men and women went up and down the path, hurrying or slowly, at ease with the world—labourers, students, *bonnes* with market baskets in their hands and long bread loaves under their arms, nursemaids herding small children, bigger children spinning diabolo spools as they walked. A man with a pointed black beard and a soft hat passed once, and returned to seat himself upon the public bench that Ste. Marie was watching. For some minutes he sat there idle, holding the soft felt hat upon his knees for coolness. Then he turned and looked at the other occupant of the bench, and Ste. Marie thought he saw the other man nod, though he could not be sure whether either one spoke or not. Presently the newcomer rose, put on the soft hat again and disappeared down the path, going towards the gate at the head of the Rue de Luxembourg.

Five minutes later the door-bell rang.

## CHAPTER XIII

## THE ROAD TO CLAMART

Ste. Marie turned away from the window and crossed to the door. The man with the pointed beard removed his soft hat, bowed very politely, and asked if he had the honour to address Monsieur Ste. Marie.

"That is my name," said Ste. Marie. "*Entrez, monsieur!*" He waved his visitor to a chair and stood waiting.

The man with the beard bowed once more. He said—

"I have not the great honour of monsieur's acquaintance, but circumstances, which I will explain later, have put it in my power—have made it a sacred duty, if I may be permitted to say the word—to place in monsieur's hands a piece of information."

Ste. Marie smiled slightly and sat down. He said—

"I listen with pleasure—and anticipation. Pray go on!"

"I have information," said the visitor, "of the whereabouts of M. Arthur Benham." Ste. Marie waved his hand.

"I feared as much," said he. "I mean to say, I hoped so. Proceed, monsieur!"

"And learning," continued, the other, "that M. Ste. Marie was conducting a search for that young gentleman, I hastened at once to place this information in his hands."

"At a price," suggested his host. "At a price, to be sure."

The man with the beard spread out his hands in a beautiful and eloquent gesture which well accompanied his Marseillais accent.

"Ah, as to that!" he protested. "My circumstances—I am poor, Monsieur. One must gain the livelihood. What would you? A trifle. The merest trifle."

"Where is Arthur Benham?" asked Ste. Marie.

"In Marseille, monsieur, I saw him a week ago—six days. And so far as I could learn he had no intention of leaving there immediately—though it is, to be sure, hot."

St. Marie laughed a laugh of genuine amusement, and the man with the pointed beard stared at him with some wonder. Ste. Marie rose and crossed the room to a writing-desk which stood against the opposite wall. He fumbled in a drawer of this, and returned holding in his hand a pink and blue note of the Banque de France. He said—

"Monsieur—Pardon! I have forgotten to ask the name. You have remarked quite truly that one must gain a livelihood. Therefore I do not presume to criticise the way in which you gain yours. Sometimes one cannot choose. However, I should like to make a little bargain with you, monsieur. I know, of course, being not altogether imbecile, who sent you here with this story and why you

were sent—why also your friend who sits upon the bench in the garden across the street follows me about and spies upon me. I know all this and I laugh at it a little. But, monsieur, to amuse myself further I have a desire to hear from your own lips the name of the gentleman who is your employer. Amusement is almost always expensive, and so I am prepared to pay for this. I have here a note of one hundred francs. It is yours in return for the name—the right name. Remember, I know it already.”

The man with the pointed beard sprang to his feet, quivering with righteous indignation. All southern Frenchmen like all other Latins, are magnificent actors. He shook one clenched hand in the air, his face was pale and his fine eyes glittered. Richard Hartley would have put himself promptly in an attitude of defence, but Ste. Marie nodded a smiling head in appreciation. He was half a southern Frenchman himself.

”Monsieur!” cried his visitor in a choked voice. ”Monsieur, have a care! You insult me. Have a care, monsieur! I am dangerous. My anger when roused is terrible!”

”I am cowed!” observed Ste. Marie, lighting a cigarette. ”I quail.”

”Never,” declaimed the gentleman from Marseille, ”have I received an insult without returning blow for blow. My blood boils.”

”The hundred francs, monsieur,” said Ste. Marie, ”will doubtless cool it. Besides, we stray from our sheep. Reflect, my friend! I have not insulted you. I have asked you a simple question. To be sure I have said that I knew your errand here was not—not altogether sincere; but I protest, monsieur, that no blame attaches to yourself. The blame is your employer’s. You have performed your mission with the greatest of honesty—the most delicate and faithful sense of honour. That is understood.”

The gentleman with the beard strode across to one of the windows and leant his head upon his hand. His shoulders still heaved with emotion, but he no longer trembled. The terrible crisis bade fair to pass. Then abruptly, in the frank and open Latin way, he burst into tears, and wept with copious profusion, while Ste. Marie smoked his cigarette and waited.

When at length the Marseillais turned back into the room he was calm once more, but there remained traces of storm and flood. He made a gesture of indescribable and pathetic resignation.

”Monsieur,” he exclaimed, ”you have a heart of gold. Of gold, monsieur! You understand. Behold us! two men of honour.

”Monsieur,” he said, ”I had no choice. I was poor. I saw myself face to face with the *misère*. What would you? I fell. We are all weak flesh. I accepted the commission of the pig who sent me here to you.”

Ste. Marie smoothed the pink and blue banknote in his hands, and the other



man's eye clung to it as though he were starving and the banknote food.

"The name?" prompted Ste. Marie.

The gentleman from Marseille tossed up his hands.

"Monsieur already knows it. Why should I hesitate? The name is Ducrot."

"What?" cried Ste. Marie sharply. "What is that? Ducrot?"

"But naturally!" said the other man with some wonder. "Monsieur said he knew. Certainly, Ducrot. A little withered man, bald on the top of the head, creases down the cheeks, a moustache like this,"—he made a descriptive gesture—"a little chin. A man like an elderly cat. M. Ducrot."

Ste. Marie gave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, yes," said he. "Ducrot is as good a name as another. The gentleman has more than one, it appears. Monsieur, the hundred-franc note is yours." The gentleman from Marseille took it with a slightly trembling hand, and began to bow himself towards the door, as if he feared that his host would experience a change of heart, but Ste. Marie checked him, saying—

"One moment.

"I was thinking," said he, "that you would perhaps not care to present yourself to your—employer, M. Ducrot, immediately: not for a few days, at least, in view of the fact that certain actions of mine will show him your mission has—well, miscarried. It would perhaps be well for you not to communicate with M. Ducrot. He might be displeased with you."

"Monsieur," said the gentleman with the beard, "you speak with acumen and wisdom. I shall neglect to report myself to M. Ducrot—who, I repeat, is a pig."

"And," pursued Ste. Marie, "the individual on the bench across the street?"

"It is not necessary that I meet that individual either!" said the Marseillais hastily. "Monsieur, I bid you adieu!" He bowed again, a profound, a scraping bow, and disappeared through the door.

Ste. Marie crossed to the window and looked down upon the pavement below. He saw his visitor emerge from the house and slip rapidly down the street towards the Rue Vavin. He glanced across into the Gardens, and the spy still sat there on his bench, but his head lay back and he slept—the sleep of the unjust. One imagined that he must be snoring, for an incredibly small urchin in a blue apron stood on the path before him, and watched with the open mouth of astonishment.

Ste. Marie turned back into the room and began to tramp up and down, as was his way in a perplexity or in any time of serious thought. He wished very much that Richard Hartley were there to consult with. He considered Hartley to have a judicial mind—a mind to establish, out of confusion, something like logical order, and he was very well aware that he himself had not that sort of mind at

all. In action he was sufficiently confident of himself, but to construct a course of action he was afraid, and he knew that a misstep now, at this critical point, might be fatal—turn success into disaster.

He fell to thinking of Captain Stewart (alias M. Ducrot), and he longed most passionately to leap into a fiacre at the corner below, to drive at a gallop across the city to the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, to fall upon that smiling hypocrite in his beautiful treasure-house, to seize him by the withered throat and say—

“Tell me what you have done with Arthur Benham before I tear your head from your miserable body!”

Indeed, he was far from sure that this was not what it would come to, in the end; for he reflected that he had not only a tremendous accumulation of evidence with which to face Captain Stewart, but also a very terrible weapon to hold over his head—the threat of exposure to the old man who lay slowly dying in the Rue de l’Université! A few words in old David’s ear, a few proofs of their truth, and the great fortune for which the son had sold his soul (if he had any left to sell) must pass for ever out of his reach, like gold seen in a dream.

This is what it might well come to, he said to himself. Indeed, it seemed to him at that moment far the most feasible plan, for to such accusations, such demands as that, Captain Stewart could offer no defence. To save himself from a more complete ruin he would have to give up the boy, or tell what he knew of him. But Ste. Marie was unwilling to risk everything on this throw without seeing Richard Hartley first, and Hartley was not to be had until evening.

He told himself that, after all, there was no immediate hurry, for he was quite sure the man would be compelled to keep to his bed for a day or two. He did not know much about epilepsy, but he knew that its paroxysms were followed by great exhaustion, and he felt sure that Stewart was far too weak in body to recuperate quickly from any severe call upon his strength. He remembered how light that burden had been in his arms the night before, and then an uncontrollable shiver of disgust went over him as he remembered the sight of the horribly twisted and contorted face, felt again the shaking thumping head as it beat against his shoulder. He wondered how much Stewart knew, how much he would be able to remember, of the events of the evening before, and he was at a loss there because of his unfamiliarity with epileptic seizures. Of one thing, however, he was almost certain, and that was that the man could scarcely have been conscious of who were beside him when the fit was over. If he had come at all to his proper senses, before the ensuing slumber of exhaustion, it must have been after Mlle. Nilssen and himself had gone away.

Upon that he fell to wondering about the spy and the gentleman from Marseille (he was a little sorry that Hartley could not have seen the gentleman from Marseille), but he reflected that the two were, without doubt, acting upon old

orders, and that the latter had probably been stalking him for some days before he found him at home.

He looked at his watch and it was half-past twelve. There was nothing to be done, he considered, but wait—get through the day somehow; and so, presently, he went out to lunch. He went up the Rue Vavin to the Boulevard Montparnasse, and down that broad thoroughfare to Lavenue's, on the busy Place de Rennes, where the cooking is the best in all this quarter, and can indeed hold up its head without shame in the face of those other more widely famous restaurants, across the river, frequented by the smart world and by the travelling gourmet.

He went through to the inner room, which is built like a raised loggia round two sides of a little garden, and which is always cool and fresh in summer. He ordered a rather elaborate lunch and thought that he sat a very long time at it, but when he looked again at his watch only an hour and a half had gone by. It was a quarter-past two. Ste. Marie was depressed. There remained almost all of the afternoon to be got through, and Heaven alone could say how much of the evening, before he could have his consultation with Richard Hartley. He tried to think of some way of passing the time, but although he was not usually at a loss, he found his mind empty of ideas. None of his common occupations recommended themselves to him. He knew that whatever he tried to do he would interrupt it with pulling out his watch every half-hour or so and cursing the time because it lagged so slowly. He went out to the *terrasse* for coffee, very low in his mind.

But half an hour later, as he sat behind his little marble-topped table, smoking and sipping a liqueur, his eyes fell upon something across the square which brought him to his feet with a sudden exclamation. One of the big electric trams that ply between the Place St. Germain-des-Prés and Clamart, by way of the Porte de Versailles and Vanves, was dragging its unwieldy bulk round the turn from the Rue de Rennes into the boulevard. He could see the sign-board along the *impériale*: "Clamart—St. Germain-des-Prés" with "Issy" and "Vanves" in brackets between.

Ste. Marie clinked a franc upon the table, and made off across the place at a run. Omnibuses from Batignolles and Menilmontant got in his way, fiacres tried to run him down, and a motor-car in a hurry pulled up just in time to save his life, but Ste. Marie ran on, and caught the tram before it had completed the negotiation of the long curve and gathered speed for its dash down the boulevard. He sprang upon the step, and the conductor reluctantly unfastened the chain to admit him. So he climbed up to the top and seated himself, panting. The dial high on the façade of the Gare Montparnasse said ten minutes to three.

He had no definite plan of action. He had started off in this headlong fashion upon the spur of a moment's impulse, and because he knew where the tram

was going. Now, embarked, he began to wonder if he was not a fool. He knew every foot of the way to Clamart, for it was a favourite half-day's excursion with him to ride there in this fashion, walk thence through the beautiful Meudon wood across to the river, and, from Bellevue or Bas-Meudon, take a Suresnes boat back into the city. He knew, or thought he knew, just where lay the house, surrounded by garden and half-wild park, of which Olga Nilssen had told him; he had often wondered whose it was as the tram rolled along the length of its high wall. But he knew also that he could do nothing there, single-handed and without excuse or preparation. He could not boldly ring the bell, demand speech with Mlle. Coira O'Hara, and ask her if she knew any thing of the whereabouts of young Arthur Benham, whom a photographer had suspected of being in love with her. He certainly could not do that. And there seemed to be nothing else that— Ste. Marie broke off this somewhat despondent course of reasoning with a sudden little voiceless cry. For the first time it occurred to him to connect the house on the Clamart road and Mlle. Coira O'Hara and young Arthur Benham.— It will be remembered that the man had not yet had time to arrange his suddenly acquired mass of evidence in logical order and to make deductions from it.—For the first time he began to put two and two together. Stewart had hidden away his nephew: this nephew was known to have been much enamoured of the girl Coira O'Hara: Coira O'Hara was said to be living (with her father? probably) in the house on the outskirts of Paris, where she was visited by Captain Stewart. Was not the inference plain enough—sufficiently reasonable? It left, without doubt, many puzzling things to be explained?—perhaps too many; but Ste. Marie sat forward in his seat, his eyes gleaming, his face tense with excitement.

Was young Arthur Benham in the house on the Clamart road?

He said the words almost aloud, and he became aware that the fat woman with a live fowl at her feet, and the butcher's boy on his other side, were looking at him curiously. He realised that he was behaving in an excited manner, and so sat back and lowered his eyes. But over and over within him the words said themselves, over and over, until they made a sort of mad foolish refrain—

"Is Arthur Benham in the house on the Clamart road? Is Arthur Benham in the house on the Clamart road?" He was afraid that he would say it aloud once more, and he tried to keep a firm hold upon himself.

The tram swung into the Rue de Sevres, and rolled smoothly out the long uninteresting stretch of the Rue Lecourbe, far out to where the houses became scattered, where mounds and pyramids of red tiles stood alongside the factory where they had been made, where an acre of little glass hemispheres in long straight rows winked and glistened in the afternoon sun—the forcing beds of some market gardener; out to the Porte de Versailles at the city wall, where a group of customs officers sprawled at ease before their little sentry-box, or loafed

over to inspect an incoming tram.

A bugle sounded and a drum beat from the great fosse under the wall, and a company of *piou-pious*, red capped, red trousered, shambled through their evolutions in a manner to break the heart of a British or a German drill-sergeant. Then out past level fields to little Vanves, with its steep streets and its old grey church, and past the splendid grounds of the Lycée beyond. The fat woman got down, her live fowl shrieking protest to the movement, and the butcher's boy got down too, so that Ste. Marie was left alone upon the *impériale* save for a snuffy old gentleman in a pot-hat, who sat in a corner buried behind the day's *Droits de l'Homme*.

Ste. Marie moved forward once more, and laid his arms upon the iron rail before him. They were coming near. They ran past plum and apple orchards, and past humble little detached villas, each with a bit of garden in front and an acacia or two at the gate posts. But presently, on the right, the way began to be bordered by a high stone wall, very long, behind which showed the trees of a park, and among them, far back from the wall, beyond a little rise of ground, the gables and chimneys of a house could be made out. The wall went on for perhaps a quarter of a mile in a straight sweep, but halfway the road swung apart from it to the left, dipped under a stone rail way bridge, and so presently ended at the village of Clamart.

As the tram approached the beginning of that long stone wall it began to slacken speed, and there was a grating noise from underneath, and presently it came to an abrupt halt. Ste. Marie looked over the guard-rail and saw that the driver had left his place and was kneeling in the dust beside the car, peering at its underworks. The conductor strolled round to him after a moment and stood indifferently by, remarking upon the strange vicissitudes to which electrical propulsion was subject. The driver, without looking up, called his colleague a number of the most surprising and, it is to be hoped, unwarranted names, and suddenly began to burrow under the tram, wriggling his way after the manner of the serpent, until nothing could be seen of him but two unrestful feet. His voice though muffled was still tolerably distinct. It cursed in an unceasing staccato, and with admirable ingenuity, the tram, the conductor, the sacred dog of an impediment which had got itself wedged into one of the trucks, and the world in general.

Ste. Marie, sitting aloft, laughed for a moment, and then turned his eager eyes upon what lay across the road. The halt had taken place almost exactly at the beginning of that long stretch of the park wall which ran beside the road and the tramway. From where he sat he could see the other wing, which led inward from the road at something like a right angle, but was presently lost to sight because of a sparse and unkempt patch of young trees and shrubs, well-

nigh choked with undergrowth, which extended for some distance from the park wall backward along the roadside towards Vanves. Whoever owned that stretch of land had seemingly not thought it worth while to cultivate it, or to build upon it, or even to clear it off.

Ste. Marie's first thought as his eye scanned the two long stretches of wall, and looked over their tops to the trees of the park and the far-off gables and chimneys of the house, was to wonder where the entrance to the place could be, and he decided that it must be on the side opposite to the Clamart tram-line. He did not know the smaller roads hereabouts, but he guessed that there must be one somewhere beyond, between the Route de Clamart and the Fort d'Issy; and he was right. There is a little road between the two: it sweeps round in a long curve, and ends near the tiny public garden in Issy, and it is called the rue Barbés.

His second thought was that this unkempt patch of trees and brush offered excellent cover for any one who might wish to pass an observant hour alongside that high stone wall—for any one who might desire to cast a glance over the lie of the land, to see at closer range that house of which so little could be seen from the Route de Clamart, to look over the wall's coping into park and garden.

The thought brought him to his feet with a leaping heart, and before he realised that he had moved he found himself in the road beside the halted tram. The conductor brushed past him, mounting to his place, and from the platform he beckoned, crying out—

*"En voiture, monsieur! En voiture!"* Again something within Ste. Marie that was not his conscious direction acted for him, and he shook his head. The conductor gave two little blasts upon his horn, the tram wheezed and moved forward. In a moment it was on its way, swinging along at full speed towards the curve in the line that bore to the left and dipped under the railway bridge. Ste. Marie stood in the middle of that empty road, staring after it until it had disappeared from view.

## CHAPTER XIV

### IN THE GARDEN

Ste. Marie had acted upon an impulse of which he was scarcely conscious at all, and when he found himself standing alone in the road and watching the Clamart tram disappear under the railway bridge, he called himself hard names and won-

dered what he was to do next. He looked before and behind him, and there was no living soul in sight. He bent his eyes again upon that unkempt patch of young trees and undergrowth, and once more the thought forced itself to his brain that it would make excellent cover for one who wished to observe a little—to reconnoitre.

He knew that it was the part of wisdom to turn his back upon this place, to walk on to Clamart or return to Vanves, and mount upon a homeward-bound tram. He knew that it was the part of folly, of madness even, to expose himself to possible discovery by some one within the walled enclosure. What though no one there were able to recognise him, still the sight of a man prowling about the walls, seeking to spy over them, might excite an alarm that would lead to all sorts of undesirable complications. Dimly Ste. Marie realised all this, and he tried to turn his back and walk away, but the patch of little trees and shrubbery drew him with an irresistible fascination. Just a little look along that unknown wall! he said to himself; just the briefest of all brief reconnaissances, the merest glance beyond the masking screen of wood growth, so that in case of sudden future need he might have the lie of the place clear in his mind; for without any sound reason for it he was somehow confident that this walled house and garden were to play an important part in the rescue of Arthur Benham. It was once more a matter of feeling. The rather woman-like intuition which had warned him that O'Hara was concerned in young Benham's disappearance, and that the two were not far from Paris, was again at work in him, and he trusted it as he had done before.

He gave a little nod of determination, as one who, for good or ill, casts a die, and he crossed the road. There was a deep ditch, and he had to climb down into it and up its farther side, for it was too broad to be jumped. So he came into the shelter of the young poplars and elms and oaks. The underbrush caught at his clothes, and the dead leaves of past seasons crackled underfoot, but after a little space he came to somewhat clearer ground, though the saplings still stood thick about him and hid him securely.

He made his way inward along the wall, keeping a short distance back from it, and he saw that after twenty or thirty yards it turned again at a very obtuse angle away from him, and once more ran on in a long straight line. Just beyond this angle he came upon a little wooden door thickly studded with nails. It was made to open inward, and on the outside there was no knob or handle of any kind, only a large keyhole of the simple old-fashioned sort. Slipping up near to look, Ste. Marie observed that the edges of the keyhole were rusty, but scratched a little through the rust with recent marks, so the door, it seemed, was sometimes used. He observed another thing. The ground near by was less encumbered with trees than at any other point, and the turf was depressed with many wheel marks—broad marks such as are made only by the wheels of a motor-car. He followed

these tracks for a little distance and they wound in and out among the trees and, beyond the thin fringe of wood, swept away in a curve towards Issy, doubtless to join the road which he had already imagined to lie somewhere beyond the enclosure.

Beyond the more open space about this little door the young trees stood thick together again, and Ste. Marie pressed cautiously on. He stopped now and then to listen, and once he thought that he heard from within the sound of a woman's laugh, but he could not be sure. The slight change of direction had confused him a little, and he was uncertain as to where the house lay. The wall was twelve or fifteen feet high, and from the level of the ground he could of course see nothing over it but tree-tops. He went on for what may have been a hundred yards, but it seemed to him very much more than that, and he came to a tall gnarled cedar-tree which stood almost against the high wall. It was half dead but its twisted limbs were thick and strong, and by force of the tree's cramped position they had grown in strange and grotesque forms. One of them stretched across the very top of the stone wall, and, with the wind's action, it had scraped away the coping of tiles and bottle-glass, and had made a little depression there to rest in.

Ste. Marie looked up along this natural ladder, and temptation smote him sorely. It was so easy and so safe! There was enough foliage left upon the half-dead tree to screen him well, but whether or no it is probable that he would have yielded to the proffered lure. There seems to have been more than chance in Ste. Marie's movements upon this day. There seems to have been something like the hand of Fate in them, as doubtless there is in most things, if one but knew.

He left his hat and stick behind him under a shrub, and he began to make his way up the half-bare branches of the gnarled cedar. They bore him well, without crack or rustle, and the way was very easy. No ladder made by man could have offered a much simpler ascent. So mounting slowly and with care, his head came level with the top of the wall. He climbed to the next branch, a foot higher, and rested there. The drooping foliage from the upper part of the cedar-tree, which was still alive, hung down over him and cloaked him from view, but through its aromatic screen he could see as freely as through the window curtain in the Rue d'Assas.

The house lay before him, a little to the left, and perhaps a hundred yards away. It was a disappointing house to find in that great enclosure, for though it was certainly neither small nor trivial, it was as certainly far from possessing anything like grandeur. It had been in its day a respectable unpretentious square structure of three stories, entirely without architectural beauty, but also entirely without the ornate hideousness of the modern villas along the Route de Clamart. Now, however, the stucco was gone in great patches from its stone walls, giving



them an unpleasantly diseased look, and long neglect of all decent care had lent the place the air almost of desertion. Anciently the grounds before the house had been laid out in the formal fashion, with a terrace and geometrical lawns, and a pool and a fountain, and a rather fine long vista between clipped larches; but the same neglect which had made shabby the stuccoed house had allowed grass and weeds to grow over the gravel paths, underbrush to spring up and to encroach upon the geometrical turf plots, the long double row of clipped larches to flourish at will or to die, or to fall prostrate and lie where they had fallen.

So all the broad enclosure was a scene of heedless neglect, a riot of unrestrained and wanton growth, where should have been decorous and orderly beauty. It was a sight to bring tears to a gardener's eyes, but it had a certain untamed charm of its own, for all that. The very riot of it, the wanton prodigality of untouched natural growth, produced an effect that was by no means all disagreeable.

An odd and whimsical thought came into Ste. Marie's mind, that thus must have looked the garden and park round the castle of the Sleeping Beauty when the Prince came to wake her.

But sleeping beauties and unkempt grounds went from him in a flash when he became aware of a sound which was like the sound of voices. Instinctively he drew farther back into the shelter of his aromatic screen. His eyes swept the space below him, from right to left, and could see no one. So he sat very still, save for the thunderous beat of a heart which seemed to him like drum beats when soldiers are marching, and he listened—"all ears" as the phrase goes.

The sound was in truth a sound of voices. He was presently assured of that, but for some time he could not make out from which direction it came. And so he was the more startled when quite suddenly there appeared from behind a row of tall shrubs two young people, moving slowly together up the untrimmed turf in the direction of the house.

[image]

*"There appeared two young people."*

The two young people were Mlle. Coira O'Hara and Arthur Benham, and upon the brow of this latter youth there was no sign of dungeon pallor, upon his free moving limbs no ball and chain. There was no apparent reason why he should not hasten back to the eager arms in the Rue de l'Université if he chose to—unless indeed his undissembling attitude towards Mlle. Coira O'Hara might serve as a reason. The young man followed at her heel with much the manner

and somewhat the appearance of a small dog, humbly conscious of unworthiness, but hopeful nevertheless of an occasional kind word or pat on the head.

The world wheeled multi-coloured and kaleidoscopic before Ste. Marie's eyes, and in his ears there was a rushing of great winds, but he set his teeth and clung with all the strength he had to the tree which sheltered him. His first feeling, after that initial giddiness, was anger, sheer anger, a bewildered and astonished fury. He had thought to find this poor youth in captivity, pining through prison bars for the home and the loved ones and the familiar life from which he had been ruthlessly torn. Yet here he was strolling in a suburban garden with a lady—free, free as air (or so he seemed). Ste. Marie thought of the grim and sorrowful old man in Paris who was sinking untimely into his grave because his grandson did not return to him: he thought of that timid soul—more shadow than woman—the boy's mother: he thought of Helen Benham's tragic eyes, and he could have beaten young Arthur half to death, in that moment, in the righteous rage that stormed within him.

But he turned his eyes from this wretched youth to the girl who walked beside, a little in advance, and the rage died in him swiftly.

After all was she not one to make any boy—or any man—forget duty, home, friends, everything!

Rather oddly his mind flashed back to the morning, and to the words of the little photographer, Bernstein. Perhaps the Jew had put it as well as any man man could—

"She was a goddess, that lady, a queen of goddesses ... the young Juno before marriage...."

Ste. Marie nodded his head. Yes, she was just that. The little Jew had spoken well. It could not be more fairly put, though without doubt it could have been expressed at much greater length and with a great deal more eloquence. The photographer's other words came also to his mind, the more detailed description; and again he nodded his head, for this too was true.

"She was all colour—brown skin with a dull red stain under the cheeks, and a great mass of hair that was not black but very nearly black—except in the sun, and then there were red lights in it."

It occurred to Ste. Marie, whimsically, that the two young people might have stepped out of the door of Bernstein's studio straight into this garden, judging from their bearing, each to the other.

"Ah, a thing to touch the heart! Such devotion as that! Alas, that the lady should seem so cold to it! ... Still, a goddess. What would you? A queen among goddesses.... One would not have them laugh and make little jokes.... Make eyes at love-sick boys. No indeed!"

Certainly Mlle. Coira O'Hara was not making eyes at the love-sick boy who

followed at her heels this afternoon. Perhaps it would be going too far to say that she was cold to him, but it was very plain to see that she was bored and weary, and that she wished she might be almost anywhere else than where she was. She turned her beautiful face a little towards the wall where Ste Marie lay perdu, and he could see that her eyes had the same dark fire, the same tragic look of appeal, that he had seen in them before—once in the Champs Elysées and again in his dreams.

Abruptly he became aware that while he gazed, like a man in a trance, the two young people walked on their way and were on the point of passing beyond reach of eye or ear. He made a sudden involuntary movement as if he would call them back, and, for the first time, his faithful hiding-place, strained beyond silent endurance, betrayed him with a loud rustle of shaken branches. Ste. Marie shrank back, his heart in his throat. It was too late to retreat now down the tree. The damage was already done. He saw the two young people halt and turn to look, and, after a moment, he saw the boy slowly come forward, staring. He heard him say—

“What’s up in that tree? There’s something in the tree.” And he heard the girl answer: “It’s only birds fighting. Don’t bother!” But young Arthur Benham came on, staring up curiously until he was almost under the high wall.

Then Ste. Marie’s strange madness, or the hand of Fate, or whatever power it was which governed him on that day, thrust him on to the ultimate pitch of recklessness. He bent forward from his insecure perch over the wall until his head and shoulders were in plain sight, and he called down to the lad below in a loud whisper—

“Benham! Benham!”

The boy gave a sharp cry of alarm and began to back away. And after a moment Ste. Marie heard the cry echoed from Coira O’Hara. He heard her say—

“Be careful! Be careful, Arthur! Come away. Oh, come away quickly!”

Ste. Marie raised his own voice to a sort of cry. He said—

“Wait! I tell you to wait, Benham! I must have a word with you. I come from your family—from Helen!” To his amazement the lad turned about and began to run towards where the girl stood waiting; and so, without a moment’s hesitation Ste. Marie threw himself across the top of the wall, hung for an instant by his hands, and dropped upon the soft turf. Scarcely waiting to recover his balance he stumbled forward, shouting—

“Wait! I tell you, wait! Are you mad? Wait, I say! Listen to me!”

Vaguely, in the midst of his great excitement, he had heard a whistle sound as he dropped inside the wall. He did not know then from whence the shrill call had come, but afterwards he knew that Coira had blown it. And now, as he ran forward towards the two who stood at a distance staring at him, he heard other

steps and he slackened his pace to look.

A man came running down amongst the black-boled trees, a strange, squat, gnome-like man, whose gait was as uncouth as his dwarfish figure. He held something in his two hands as he ran, and when he came near he threw this thing with a swift movement up before him, but he did not pause in his odd scrambling run.

Ste. Marie felt a violent blow upon his left leg between hip and knee. He thought that somebody had crept up behind him and struck him, but, as he whirled about, he saw that there was no one there, and then he heard a noise, and knew that the gnome-like running man had shot him. He faced about once more towards the two young people. He was very angry, and he wished to say so, and very much he wished to explain why he had trespassed there, and why they had no right to shoot him as if he were some wretched thief. But he found that in some quite absurd fashion he was as if fixed to the ground. It was as if he had suddenly become of the most ponderous and incredible weight like lead—or like that other metal, not gold, which is the heaviest of all. Only the metal, seemingly, was not only heavy but fiery hot, and his strength was incapable of holding it up any longer. His eyes fixed themselves in a bewildered stare upon the figure of Mlle. Coira O'Hara, he had time to observe that she had put up her two hands over her face, then he fell down forward, his head struck upon something very hard, and he knew no more.

## CHAPTER XV

### A CONVERSATION AT LA LIERRE

Captain Stewart walked nervously up and down the small inner drawing-room at La Lierre, his restless hands fumbling together behind him, and his eyes turning every half-minute with a sharp eagerness to the closed door. But at last, as if he were very tired, he threw himself down in a chair which stood near one of the windows, and all his tense body seemed to relax in utter exhaustion. It was not a very comfortable chair that he had sat down in, but there were no comfortable chairs in the room—nor for that matter in all the house. When he had taken the place—about two months before this time—he had taken it furnished, but that does not mean very much in France. No French country houses—or town houses either—are in the least comfortable, by Anglo-Saxon standards, and that is at

least one excellent reason why Frenchmen spend just as little time in them as they possibly can. Half the cafés in Paris would promptly put up their shutters if Parisian homes could all at once turn themselves into something like English or American ones. As for La Lierre it was even more dreary and bare and tomb-like than other country houses, because it was after all a sort of ruin, and had not been lived in for fifteen years, save by an ancient caretaker and his nearly as ancient wife. And that was perhaps why it could be taken, on a short lease, at a very low price.

The room in which Captain Stewart sat was behind the large drawing-room, which was always kept closed now, and it looked out by one window to the west, and by two windows to the north, over a corner of the kitchen-garden, and a vista of trees beyond. It was a high-ceiled room with walls bare, except for two large mirrors in the Empire fashion, which stared at each other across the way with dull and flaking eyes. Under each of these stood a heavy gilt and ebony console with a top of chocolate-coloured marble, and in the centre of the room there was a table of a like fashion to the consoles. Further than this there was nothing save three chairs, upon one of which lay Captain Stewart's dust-coat and motoring cap and goggles.

A shaft of golden light from the low sun slanted into the place through the western window, from which the Venetians had been pulled back, and fell across the face of the man, who lay still and lax in his chair, eyes closed and chin dropped a little so that his mouth hung weakly open. He looked very ill, as indeed any one might look after such an attack as he had suffered on the night previous. That one long moment of deathly fear before he had fallen down in a fit had nearly killed him. All through this following day it had continued to recur until he thought he should go mad. And there was worse still. How much did Olga Nilssen know? And how much had she told? She had astonished and frightened him when she had said that she knew about the house on the road to Clamart, for he thought he had hidden his visits to La Lierre well. He wondered rather drearily how she had discovered them, and he wondered how much she knew more than she had admitted. He had a half-suspicion of something like the truth, that Mlle. Nilssen knew only of Coira O'Hara's presence here, and drew a rather natural inference. If that was all, there was no danger from her—no more, that is, than had already borne its fruit; for Stewart knew well enough that Ste. Marie must have learned of the place from her. In any case Olga Nilssen had left Paris—he had discovered that fact during the day—and so for the present she might be eliminated as a source of peril.

The man in the chair gave a little groan, and rolled his head wearily to and fro against the uncomfortable chair-back; for now he came to the real and immediate danger, and he was so very tired and ill, and his head ached so sickeningly,

that it was almost beyond him to bring himself face to face with it.

There was the man who lay helpless upon a bed upstairs! And there were the man's friends, who were not at all helpless or bedridden or in captivity!

A wave of almost intolerable pain swept through Stewart's aching head, and he gave another groan which was almost like a child's sob. But at just that moment the door which led into the central hall opened, and the Irishman O'Hara came into the room. Captain Stewart sprang to his feet to meet him, and he caught the other man by the arm in his eagerness.

"How is he?" he cried out. "How is he? How badly was he hurt?"

"The patient?" said O'Hara.—"Let go my arm! Hang it, man, you're pinching me!—Oh, he'll do well enough. He'll be fit to hobble about in a week or ten days. The bullet went clean through his leg and out again without cutting an artery. It was a sort of miracle. And a damned lucky miracle for all hands, too! If we'd had a splintered bone or a severed artery to deal with I should have had to call in a doctor. Then the fellow would have talked, and there'd have been the devil to pay. As it is I shall be able to manage well enough with my own small skill. I've dressed worse wounds than that in my time. By Jove, it was a miracle though!" A sudden little gust of rage swept him. He cried out:

"That confounded fool of a gardener, that one-eyed Michel, ought to be beaten to death. Why couldn't he have slipped up behind this fellow and knocked him on the head, instead of shooting him from ten paces away? The benighted idiot! He came near upsetting the whole boat!"

"Yes," said Captain Stewart with a sharp hard breath, "he should have shot straighter or not at all."

The Irishman stared at him with his bright blue eyes, and after a moment he gave a short laugh.

"Jove, you're a bloodthirsty beggar, Stewart!" said he. "That would have been a rum go, if you like! Killing the fellow! All his friends down on us like hawks, and the police and all that! You can't go about killing people in the outskirts of Paris, you know—at least not people with friends. And this chap looks like a gentleman, more or less, so I take it he has friends. As a matter of fact his face is rather familiar. I think I've seen him before somewhere. You looked at him just now through the crack of the door; do you know who he is? Coira tells me he called out to Arthur by name, but Arthur says he never saw him before, and doesn't know him at all."

Captain Stewart shivered. It had not been a pleasant moment for him, that moment when he had looked through the crack of the door and recognised Ste. Marie.

"Yes," he said half under his breath. "Yes, I know who he is. A friend of the family." The Irishman's lips puckered to a low whistle. He said—

"Spying then, as I thought. He has run us to earth." And the other nodded. O'Hara took a turn across the room and back.

"In that case," he said presently, "in that case then we must keep him prisoner here so long as we remain. That's certain." He spun round sharply, with an exclamation.

"Look here!" he cried in a lower tone, "how about this fellow's friends? It isn't likely he's doing his dirty work alone. How about his friends when he doesn't turn up to-night? If they know he was coming here to spy on us, if they know where the place is, if they know—in short, what he seems to have known, we're done for. We'll have to run, get out, disappear. Hang it, man, d'you understand? We're not safe here for an hour."

Captain Stewart's hands shook a little as he gripped them together behind him, and a dew of perspiration stood out suddenly upon his forehead and cheek bones, but his voice when he spoke was well under control.

"It's an odd thing," said he, "another miracle, if you like; but I believe we are safe—reasonably safe. I—have reason to think that this fellow learnt about La Lierre only last evening, from some one who left Paris to-day to be gone a long time. And I also have reason to believe that the fellow has not seen the one friend who is in his confidence since he obtained his information. By chance I met the friend, the other man, in the street this afternoon. I asked after this fellow whom we have here, and the friend said he hadn't seen him for twenty-four hours, was going to see him to-night."

"By the Lord!" cried the Irishman with a great laugh of relief. "What luck! What monumental luck! If all that's true, we're safe. Why, man, we're as safe as a fox in his hole. The lad's friends won't have the ghost of an idea of where he's gone to...."

"Wait though! Stop a bit! He won't have left written word behind him, eh? He won't have done that—for safety?"

"I think not," said Captain Stewart; but he breathed hard, for he knew well enough that there lay the gravest danger.

"I think not," he said again. He made a rather surprisingly accurate guess at the truth—that Ste. Marie had started out upon impulse, without intending more than a general reconnaissance, and therefore without leaving any word behind him. Still, the shadow of danger uplifted itself before the man and he was afraid. A sudden gust of weak anger shook him like a wind.

"In Heaven's name," he cried shrilly, "why didn't that one-eyed fool kill the fellow while he was about it? There's danger for us every moment while he is alive here. Why didn't that shambling idiot kill him?" Captain Stewart's outflung hand jumped and trembled, and his face was twisted into a sort of grinning snarl. He looked like an angry and wicked cat, the other man thought.

"If I weren't an over-civilised fool," he said viciously, "I'd go upstairs and kill him now with my hands—while he can't help himself. We're all too scrupulous by half."

The Irishman stared at him and presently broke into amazed laughter.

"Scrupulous!" said he. "Well, yes, I'm too scrupulous to murder a man in his bed, if you like. I'm not squeamish, but—Good Lord!"

"Do you realise," demanded Captain Stewart, "what risks we run while that fellow is alive—knowing what he knows?"

"Oh yes, I realise that," said O'Hara. "But I don't see why *you* should have heart failure over it."

Captain Stewart's pale lips drew back again in their cat-like fashion.

"Never mind about me," he said. "But I can't help thinking you're peculiarly indifferent in the face of danger."

"No, I'm not!" said the Irishman quickly. "No, I'm not. Don't you run away with that idea!" For the first time his hard face began to show feeling. He turned away with a quick nervous movement, and stood staring out of the window into the late sunlight.

"I merely said," he went on, "I merely said that I'd stop short of murder. I don't set any foolish value on life—my own or any other. I've had to take life more than once, but it was in fair fight or in self-defence, and I don't regret it. It was your cold-blooded joke about going upstairs and killing this chap in his bed that put me on edge. Naturally, I know you didn't mean it." He swung back towards the other man.

"So don't you worry about me!" said he after a little pause. "Don't you go thinking that I'm lukewarm or that I'm indifferent to danger. I know there's danger from this lad upstairs, and I mean to be on guard against it. He stays here under strict guard until—what we're after is accomplished—until young Arthur comes of age.

"If there's danger," said he, "why we know where it lies and we can guard against it. That kind of danger is not very formidable. The dangerous dangers are the ones that you don't know about—the hidden ones." He came forward a little, and his lean face was as hard and as impassive as ever, and the bright blue eyes shone from it steady and unwinking. Stewart looked up to him with a sort of peevish resentment at the man's confidence and cool poise. It was an odd reversal of their ordinary relations. For the hour the duller villain, the man who was wont to take orders and to refrain from overmuch thought or question, seemed to have become master. Sheer physical exhaustion and the constant maddening pain had had their will of Captain Stewart.

A sudden shiver wrung him so that his dry fingers rattled against the wood of the chair arms.



"All the same," he cried, "I'm afraid. I've been confident enough until now. Now I'm afraid. I wish the fellow had been killed."

"Kill him then!" laughed the Irishman. "I won't give you up to the police." He crossed the room to the door, but halted short of it and turned about again, and he looked back very curiously at the man who sat crouched in his chair by the window. It had occurred to him several times that Stewart was very unlike himself. The man was quite evidently tired and ill, and that might account for some of the nervousness; but this fierce malignity was something a little beyond O'Hara's comprehension. It seemed to him that the elder man had the air of one frightened beyond the point the circumstances warranted.

"Are you going back to town?" he asked, "or do you mean to stay the night?"

"I shall stay the night," Stewart said. "I'm too tired to bear the ride." He glanced up and caught the other's eyes fixed upon him.

"Well," he cried angrily. "What is it? What are you looking at me like that for? What do you want?"

"I want nothing," said the Irishman a little sharply. "And I wasn't aware that I'd been looking at you in any unusual way. You're precious jumpy, to-day, if you want to know... Look here!" He came back a step, frowning.

"Look here," he repeated. "I don't quite make you out. Are you keeping back anything? Because if you are for Heaven's sake have it out here and now! We're all in this game together, and we can't afford to be anything but frank with each other. We can't afford to make reservations. It's altogether too dangerous for everybody. You're too much frightened. There's no apparent reason for being so frightened as that."

Captain Stewart drew a long breath between closed teeth, and afterwards he looked up at the younger man coldly.

"We need not discuss my personal feelings, I think," said he. "They have no—no bearing on the point at issue. As you say, we are all in this thing together and you need not fear that I shall fail to do my part, as I have done it in the past... That's all, I believe."

"Oh, as you like! As you like!" said the Irishman in the tone of one rebuffed. He turned again and left the room, closing the door behind him. Outside on the stairs it occurred to him that he had forgotten to ask the other man what this fellow's name was—the fellow who lay wounded upstairs. No, he had asked once, but, in the interest of the conversation, the question had been lost. He determined to inquire again that evening at dinner.

But Captain Stewart, left thus alone, sank deeper in the uncomfortable chair, and his head once more stirred and sought vainly for ease against the chair's high back. The pain swept him in regular throbbing waves that were like the waves of the sea—waves which surge and crash and tear upon a beach.

But between the throbs of physical pain there was something else that was always present while the waves came and went. Pain and exhaustion, if they are sufficiently extreme, can well nigh paralyse mind as well as body, and for some time Captain Stewart wondered what this thing might be which lurked at the bottom of him, still under the surges of agony. Then at last he had the strength to look at it, and it was fear, cold and still and silent. He was afraid to the very depths of his soul.

True, as O'Hara had said, there did not seem to be any very desperate peril to face; but Stewart was afraid with the gambler's unreasoning, half-superstitious fear, and that is the worst fear of all. He realised that he had been afraid of Ste. Marie from the beginning, and that, of course, was why he had tried to draw him into partnership with himself in his own official and wholly mythical search for Arthur Benham. He could have had the other man under his eye then. He could have kept him busy for months running down false scents. As it was, Ste. Marie's uncanny instinct about the Irishman O'Hara had led him true—that and what he doubtless learned from Olga Nilssen.

If Stewart had been in a condition and mood to philosophise, he would doubtless have reflected that seven-tenths of the desperate causes, both good and bad, which fail in this world, fail because they are wrecked by some woman's love or jealousy (or both). But it is unlikely that he was able just at this time to make such a reflection, though certainly he wondered how much Olga Nilssen had known, and how much Ste. Marie had had to put together out of her knowledge and any previous suspicions which he may have had.

The man would have been amazed if he could have known what a mountain of information and evidence had piled itself up over his head all in twelve hours. He would have been amazed and, if possible, even more frightened than he was; but he was without question sufficiently frightened, for here was Ste. Marie in the very house, he had seen Arthur Benham, and quite obviously he knew all there was to know, or at least enough to ruin Arthur Benham's uncle beyond all recovery or hope of recovery—irretrievably.

Captain Stewart tried to think what it would mean to him—failure in this desperate scheme, but he had not the strength or the courage. He shrank from the picture as one shrinks from something horrible in a bad dream. There could be no question of failure. He had to succeed at any cost, however desperate or fantastic. Once more the spasm of childish futile rage swept over him and shook him like a wind.

"Why couldn't the fellow have been killed by that one-eyed fool!" he cried, sobbing. "Why couldn't he have been killed? He's the only one who knows—the only thing in the way. Why couldn't he have been killed?"

Quite suddenly Captain Stewart ceased to sob and shiver, and sat still in his

chair, gripping the arms with white and tense fingers. His eyes began to widen and they became fixed in a long strange stare. He drew a deep breath.

"I wonder!" he said aloud. "I wonder, now."

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BLACK CAT

That providential stone or tree-root, or whatever it may have been, proved a genuine blessing in disguise to Ste. Marie. It gave him a splitting headache for a few hours, but it saved him a good deal of discomfort the while his bullet wound was being more or less probed, and very skilfully cleansed and dressed by O'Hara. For he did not regain consciousness until this surgical work was almost at its end, and then he wanted to fight the Irishman for tying the bandages too tight.

But when O'Hara had gone away and left him alone he lay still—or as still as the smarting burning pain in his leg and the ache in his head would let him—and stared at the wall beyond his bed, and, bit by bit, the events of the past hour came back to him and he knew where he was. He cursed himself very bitterly, as he well might do, for a bungling idiot. The whole thing had been in his hands, he said with perfect truth—Arthur Benham's whereabouts proved, Stewart's responsibility, or at the very least complicity, and the sordid motive therefor. Remained, had Ste. Marie been a sane being instead of an impulsive fool, remained but to face Stewart down in the presence of witnesses, threaten him with exposure, and so, with perfect ease, bring back the lost boy in triumph to his family.

It should all have been so simple, so easy, so effortless! Yet now it was ruined by a moment's rash folly, and Heaven alone knew what would come of it. He remembered that he had left behind him no indication whatever of where he meant to spend the afternoon. Hartley would come hurrying across town that evening to the Rue d'Assas and would find no one there to receive him. He would wait and wait and at last go home. He would come again on the next morning, and then he would begin to be alarmed and would start a second search—but with what to reckon by? Nobody knew about the house on the road to Clamart but Mlle. Olga Nilssen, and she was far away.

He thought of Captain Stewart, and he wondered if that gentleman was by any chance here in the house, or if he was still in bed in the Rue du Faubourg St.

Honoré, recovering from his epileptic fit.

After that he fell once more to cursing himself and his incredible stupidity, and he could have wept for sheer bitterness of chagrin.

He was still engaged in this unpleasant occupation when the door of the room opened and the Irishman O'Hara entered, having finished his interview with Captain Stewart below. He came up beside the bed and looked down not unkindly upon the man who lay there, but Ste. Marie scowled back at him, for he was in a good deal of pain and a vile humour.

"How's the leg—and the head?" asked the amateur surgeon—to do him justice he was very skilful indeed through much experience.

"They hurt," said Ste. Marie shortly. "My head aches like the devil, and my leg burns."

O'Hara made a sound which was rather like a gruff laugh, and nodded.

"Yes, and they'll go on doing it too," said he. "At least the leg will. Your head will be all right again in a day or so. Do you want anything to eat? It's near dinner-time. I suppose we can't let you starve—though you deserve it."

"Thanks, I want nothing!" said Ste. Marie. "Pray don't trouble about me!" The other man nodded again indifferently, and turned to go out of the room, but in the doorway he halted and looked back.

"As we're to have the pleasure of your company for some time to come," said he, "you might suggest a name to call you by. Of course I don't expect you to tell your own name, though I can learn that easily enough."

"Easily enough, to be sure," said the man on the bed. "Ask Stewart. He knows only too well."

The Irishman scowled. And after a moment he said—

"I don't know any Stewart." But at that Ste. Marie gave a laugh, and a tinge of red came over the Irishman's cheeks.

"And so to save Captain Stewart the trouble," continued the wounded man, "I'll tell you my name with pleasure. I don't know why I shouldn't. It's Ste. Marie."

"What?" cried O'Hara hoarsely. "What? Say that again!" He came forward a swift step or two into the room, and he stared at the man on the bed as if he were staring at a ghost.

"Ste. Marie?" he cried in a whisper. "It's impossible!"

"What are you," he demanded, "to Gilles, Comte de Ste. Marie de Mont-Perdu? What are you to him?"

"He was my father," said the younger man, "but he is dead. He has been dead for ten years." He turned his head with a little grimace of pain to look curiously after the Irishman, who had all at once turned away across the room, and stood still beside a window, with bent head.

"Why?" he questioned. "What about my father? Why did you ask that?"

O'Hara did not answer at once, and he did not stir from his place by the window, but after awhile he said—

"I knew him ... That's all." And after another space he came back beside the bed, and once more looked down upon the young man who lay there. His face was veiled, inscrutable. It betrayed nothing.

"You have a look of your father," said he. "That was what puzzled me a little. I was just saying to—I was just thinking that there was something familiar about you.... Ah well! we've all come down in the world since then. The Ste. Marie blood though! Who'd have thought it!" The man shook his head a little sorrowfully, but Ste. Marie stared up at him in frowning incomprehension. The pain had dulled him somewhat.

And presently O'Hara again moved towards the door. On the way he said—

"I'll bring or send you something to eat—not too much. And later on I'll give you a sleeping powder. With that head of yours you may have trouble in getting to sleep. Understand, I'm doing this for your father's son, and not because you've any right yourself to consideration."

Ste. Marie raised himself with difficulty, on one elbow.

"Wait!" said he. "Wait a moment!" and the other halted just inside the door.

"You seem to have known my father," said Ste. Marie, "and to have respected him. For my father's sake will you listen to me for five minutes?"

"No, I won't!" said the Irishman sharply, "so you may as well hold your tongue. Nothing you can say to me or to any one in this house will have the slightest effect. We know what you came spying here for. We know all about it."

"Yes," said Ste. Marie with a little sigh, and he fell back upon the pillows. "Yes, I suppose you do. I was rather a fool to speak. You wouldn't all be doing what you're doing if words could affect you. I was a fool to speak." The Irishman stared at him for another moment and went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

So he was left once more alone to his pain and his bitter self-reproaches, and his wild and futile plans for escape. But O'Hara returned in an hour or thereabouts with food for him—a cup of broth and a slice of bread; and when Ste. Marie had eaten these, the Irishman looked once more to his wounded leg, and gave him a sleeping powder dissolved in water.

He lay restless and wide-eyed for an hour, and then drifted away through intermediate mists into a sleep full of horrible dreams, but it was at least relief from bodily suffering; and when he awoke in the morning his headache was almost gone.

He awoke to sunshine and fresh sweet odours, and the twittering of birds. By good chance O'Hara had been the last to enter the room on the evening before,

and so no one had come to close the shutters or draw the blinds. The windows were open wide, and the morning breeze, very soft and aromatic, blew in and out and filled the place with sweetness. The room was a corner room with windows that looked south and east, and the early sun slanted in and lay in golden squares across the floor.

Ste. Marie opened his eyes with none of the dazed bewilderment that he might have expected. The events of the preceding day came back to him instantly and without shock. He put up an experimental hand and found that his head was still very sore where he had struck it in falling, but the ache was almost gone. He tried to stir his leg, and a protesting pain shot through it. It burned dully even when it was quiet, but the pain was not at all severe. He realised that he was to get off rather well, considering what might have happened, and he was so grateful for this that he almost forgot to be angry with himself over his monumental folly.

A small bird chased by another wheeled in through the southern window and back again into free air. Finally the two settled down upon the parapet of the little shallow balcony, which was there, to have their disagreement out, and they talked it over with a great deal of noise and many threatening gestures and a complete loss of temper on both sides. Ste. Marie, from his bed, cheered them on, but there came a commotion in the ivy which draped the wall below, and the two birds fled in ignominious haste, and just in the nick of time, for when the cause of the commotion shot into view, it was a large black cat of great bodily activity and an ardent single-heartedness of aim.

The black cat gazed for a moment resentfully after its vanished prey, and then composed its sleek body upon the iron rail, tail and paws tucked neatly under. Ste. Marie chirruped, and the cat turned yellow eyes upon him in mild astonishment as one who should say—

"Who the deuce are you, and what the deuce are you doing here?" He chirruped again, and the cat, after an ostentatious yawn and stretch, came to him—beating up to windward, as it were, and making the bed in three tacks. When O'Hara entered the room some time later he found his patient in a very cheerful frame of mind, and the black cat sitting on his chest, purring like a dynamo and kneading like an industrious baker.

"Ho!" said the Irishman, "you seem to have found a friend."

"Well, I need one friend here," argued Ste. Marie. "I'm in the enemy's stronghold. You needn't be alarmed: the cat can't tell me anything, and it can't help me to escape. It can only sit on me and purr. That's harmless enough."

O'Hara began one of his gruff laughs, but he seemed to remember himself in the middle of it, and assumed an intimidating scowl instead.

"How's the leg?" he demanded shortly. "Let me see it!" He took off the bandages and cleansed and sprayed the wound with some antiseptic liquid that

he had brought in a bottle.

"There's a little fever," said he, "but that can't be avoided. You're going on very well—a good deal better than you'd any right to expect." He had to inflict not a little pain in his examination and redressing of the wound. He knew that, and once or twice he glanced up at Ste. Marie's face with a sort of reluctant admiration for the man who could bear so much without any sign whatever. In the end he put together his things and nodded with professional satisfaction.

"You'll do well enough now for the rest of the day," he said. "I'll send up old Michel to valet you. He's the gardener who shot you yesterday, and he may take it into his head to finish the job this morning. If he does I shan't try to stop him."

"Nor I," said Ste. Marie. "Thanks very much for your trouble. An excellent surgeon was lost in you."

O'Hara left the room, and presently the old caretaker, one-eyed, gnome-like, shambling like a bear, sidled into the room and proceeded to set things to rights. He looked, Ste. Marie said to himself, like something in an old German drawing, or in those imitations of old drawings that one sometimes sees nowadays in *Fliegende Blätter*. He tried to make the strange creature talk, but Michel went about his task with an air half frightened, half stolid, and refused to speak more than an occasional "oui" or a "*bien, monsieur*," in answer to orders. Ste. Marie asked if he might have some coffee and bread, and the old Michel nodded and slipped from the room as silently as he had entered it.

Thereafter Ste. Marie trifled with the cat and got one hand well scratched for his trouble, but in five minutes there came a knocking at the door. He laughed a little. "Michel grows ceremonious when it's a question of food," he said. "*Entrez, mon vieux!*" The door opened, and Ste. Marie caught his breath.

"Michel is busy," said Coira O'Hara, "so I have brought your coffee."

[image]

*"Michel is busy," said Coira O'Hara, 'so I have brought your coffee.'"*

She came into the sunlit room, holding the steaming bowl of *café au lait* before her in her two hands. Over it her eyes went out to the man who lay in his bed, a long and steady and very grave look. "A goddess that lady, a queen among goddesses,"—thus the little Jew of the Boulevard de la Madeleine. Ste. Marie gazed back at her, and his heart was sick within him to think of the contemptible role Fate had laid upon this girl to play: the candle to the moth, the bait to the

eager unskilled fish, the lure to charm a foolish boy.

The girl's splendid beauty seemed to fill all that bright room with, as it were, a richer subtler light. There could be no doubt of her potency. Older and wiser heads than young Arthur Benham's might well forget the world for her. Ste. Marie watched, and the heartsickness within him was like a physical pain keen and bitter. He thought of that first and only previous meeting—the single minute in the Champs Elysées when her eyes had held him, had seemed to beseech him out of some deep agony. He thought of how they had haunted him afterwards both by day and by night—calling eyes—and he gave a little groan of sheer bitterness, for he realised that all this while she was laying her snares about the feet of an inexperienced boy, decoying him to his ruin. There was a name for such women, an ugly name. They were called adventuresses.

The girl set the bowl which she carried down upon a table not far from the bed.

"You will need a tray or something," said she. "I suppose you can sit up against your pillows? I'll bring a tray, and you can hold it on your knees and eat from it." She spoke in a tone of very deliberate indifference and detachment. There seemed even to be an edge of scorn in it, but nothing could make that deep and golden voice harsh or unlovely. As the girl's extraordinary beauty had filled all the room with its light, so the sound of her voice seemed to fill it with a sumptuous and hushed resonance like a temple bell muffled in velvet.

"I must bring something to eat too," she said. "Would you prefer *croissants* or *brioches* or plain bread and butter? You might as well have what you like."

"Thank you!" said Ste. Marie. "It doesn't matter. Anything. You are most kind. You are Hebe, mademoiselle, server of feasts." The girl turned her head for a moment, and looked at him with some surprise.

"If I am not mistaken," she said, "Hebe served to gods." Then she went out of the room, and Ste. Marie broke into a sudden delighted laugh behind her. She would seem to be a young woman with a tongue in her head. She had seized the rash opening without an instant's hesitation.

The black cat, which had been cruising, after the inquisitive fashion of its kind, in far corners of the room, strolled back and looked up to the table where the bowl of coffee steamed and waited.

"Get out!" cried Ste. Marie. "*Va t'en, sale petit animal!* Go and eat birds! that's my coffee. *Va! Sauve toi! Hè voleur que tu es!*" He sought for something by way of missile, but there was nothing within reach. The black cat turned its calm and yellow eyes towards him, looked back to the aromatic feast, and leapt expertly to the top of the table. Ste. Marie shouted and made horrible threats. He waved an impotent pillow, not daring to hurl it for fear of smashing the table's entire contents, but the black cat did not even glance towards him. It



smelt the coffee, sneezed over it because it was hot, and finally proceeded to lap very daintily, pausing often to take breath or to shake its head, for cats disapprove of hot dishes, though they will partake of them at a pinch.

There came a step outside the door, and the thief leapt down with some haste, yet not quite in time to escape observation. Mlle. O'Hara came in breathing terrible threats.

"Has that wretched animal touched your coffee?" she cried. "I hope not." But Ste Marie laughed weakly from his bed, and the guilty beast stood in mid-floor, brown drops beading its black chin and hanging upon its whiskers.

"I did what I could, mademoiselle," said Ste. Marie; "but there was nothing to throw. I am sorry to be the cause of so much trouble."

"It is nothing," said she. "I will bring some more coffee, only it will take ten minutes, because I shall have to make some fresh." She made as if she would smile a little in answer to him, but her face turned grave once more, and she went out of the room with averted eyes.

Thereafter Ste. Marie occupied himself with watching idly the movements of the black cat, and as he watched something icy cold began to grow within him, a sensation more terrible than he had ever known before. He found himself shivering as if that summer day had all at once turned to January, and he found that his face was wet with a chill perspiration.

When the girl at length returned she found him lying still, his face to the wall. The black cat was in her path as she crossed the room, so that she had to thrust it out of the way with her foot, and she called it names for moving with such lethargy.

"Here is the coffee at last," she said. "I made it fresh. And I have brought some *brioche*s. Will you sit up and have the tray on your knees?"

"Thank you!" said Ste. Marie. "I do not wish anything."

"You do not—" she repeated after him. "But I have made the coffee especially for you!" she protested. "I thought you wanted it. I don't understand."

With a sudden movement the man turned towards her a white and drawn face.

"Mademoiselle!" he cried, "it would have been more merciful to let your gardener shoot again yesterday. Much more merciful, mademoiselle." She stared at him under her straight black brows.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "More merciful? What do you mean by that?" Ste. Marie stretched out a pointing finger and the girl followed it. She gave, after a tense instant, a single sharp scream. And upon that—

"No! no! It's not true. It's not possible." Moving stiffly she set down the bowl she carried, and the hot liquid splashed up round her wrists. For a moment she hung there, drooping, holding herself up by the strength of her hands upon

the table. It was as if she had been seized with faintness. Then she sprang to where the cat crouched beside a chair. She dropped upon her knees and tried to raise it in her arms, but the beast bit and scratched at her feebly, and crept away to a little distance, where it lay struggling and very unpleasant to see.

"Poison!" she said in a choked gasping whisper. "Poison!" She looked once towards the man upon the bed, and she was white and shivering.

"It's not true!" she cried again. "I—won't believe it. It's because the cat—was not used to coffee. Because it was hot. I won't believe it. I won't believe it." She began to sob, holding her hands over her white face.

Ste. Marie watched her with puzzled eyes. If this was acting, it was very very good acting. A little glimmer of hope began to burn in him—hope that in this last shameful thing, at least, the girl had had no part.

"It's impossible!" she insisted piteously. "I tell you it's impossible. I brought the coffee myself from the kitchen. I took it from the pot there—the same pot we had all had ours from. It was never out of my sight—or, that is—I mean——"

She halted there and Ste. Marie saw her eyes turn slowly towards the door, and he saw a crimson flush come up over her cheeks and die away, leaving her white again. He drew a little breath of relief and gladness, for he was sure of her now. She had had no part in it.

"It is nothing, mademoiselle," said he cheerfully. "Think no more of it. It is nothing."

"Nothing?" she cried in a loud voice. "Do you call poison nothing?" She began to shiver again very violently.

"You would have drunk it!" she said, staring at him in a white agony. "But for a miracle you would have drunk it—and died!" Abruptly she came beside the bed and threw herself upon her knees there. In her excitement and horror she seemed to have forgotten what they two were to each other. She caught him by the shoulders with her two hands and the girl's violent trembling shook them both.

"Will you believe," she cried, "that I had nothing to do with this? Will you believe me? You must believe me!"

There was no acting in that moment. She was wrung with a frank anguish and utter horror, and between her words there were hard and terrible sobs.

"I believe you, mademoiselle," said the man gently. "I believe you. Pray think no more about it!" He smiled up into the girl's beautiful face, though within him he was still cold and ashiver, as even the bravest men might well be at such an escape, and after a moment she turned away again. With unsteady hands she put the new-made bowl of coffee and the *brioche*s and other things together upon the tray, and started to carry it across the room to the bed, but halfway she turned back again and set the tray down. She looked about and found an empty glass,

and she poured a little of the coffee into it. Ste. Marie, who was watching her, gave a sudden cry—

"No! no! mademoiselle, I beg you. You must not!" But the girl shook her head at him gravely over the glass.

"There is no danger," she said, "but I must be sure." She drank what was in the glass, and afterwards went across to one of the windows and stood there with her back to the room for a little time.

In the end she returned and once more brought the breakfast tray to the bed. Ste. Marie raised himself to a sitting posture, and took the thing upon his knees, but his hands were shaking.

"If I were not as helpless as a dead man, mademoiselle," said he, "you should not have done that. If I could have stopped you, you should not have done it, mademoiselle." A wave of colour spread up under the brown skin of the girl's face, but she did not speak. She stood by for a moment to see if he was supplied with everything he needed, and when Ste. Marie expressed his gratitude for her pains she only bowed her head. Then presently she turned away and left the room.

Outside the door she met some one who was approaching. Ste. Marie heard her break into rapid and excited speech, and he heard O'Hara's voice in answer. The voice expressed astonishment and indignation and a sort of gruff horror, but the man who listened could hear only the tones not the words that were spoken.

The Irishman came quickly into the room. He glanced once towards the bed where Ste. Marie sat eating his breakfast with apparent unconcern (there may have been a little bravado in this), and then bent over the thing which lay moving feebly beside a chair. When he rose again his face was hard and tense, and his blue eyes glittered in a fashion that boded trouble for somebody.

"This looks very bad for us," he said gruffly. "I should—I should like to have you believe that neither my daughter nor I had any part in it. When I fight I fight openly, I don't use poison. Not even with spies."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Ste. Marie, taking an ostentatious sip of coffee. "That's understood. I know well enough who tried to poison me. If you'll just keep your friend Stewart out of the kitchen, I shan't worry about my food."

The Irishman's cheeks reddened with a quick flush, and he dropped his eyes. But in an instant he raised them again, and looked full into the eyes of the man who sat in bed.

"You seem," said he, "to be labouring under a curious misapprehension. There is no Stewart here, and I don't know any man of that name."

Ste. Marie laughed.

"Oh, don't you?" he said. "That's my mistake then. Well, if you don't know him, you ought to. You have interests in common."

O'Hara favoured his patient with a long and frowning stare. But at the end he turned without a word and went out of the room.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THOSE WHO WERE LEFT BEHIND

That meeting with Richard Hartley of which Captain Stewart, in the small drawing-room at La Lierre, spoke to the Irishman O'Hara, took place at Stewart's own door in the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, and it must have been at just about the time when Ste. Marie, concealed among the branches of his cedar, looked over the wall and saw Arthur Benham walking with Mlle. Coira O'Hara. Hartley had lunched at Durand's with his friends, whose name—though it does not at all matter here—was Reeves-Davis, and after lunch the four of them, Major and Lady Reeves-Davis, Reeves-Davis' sister Mrs. Carsten, and Hartley, spent an hour at a certain picture dealer's near the Madeleine. After that Lady Reeves-Davis wanted to go in search of an antiquary's shop which was somewhere in the Rue du Faubourg, and she did not know just where. They went in from the Rue Royale, and amused themselves by looking at the attractive windows on the way.

During one of their frequent halts, while the two ladies were passionately absorbed in a display of hats and Reeves-Davis was making derisive comments from the rear, Hartley, who was too much bored to pay attention, saw a figure which seemed to him familiar emerge from an adjacent doorway, and start to cross the pavement to a large touring car with the top up, which stood at the kerb. The man wore a dust-coat and a cap, and he moved as if he were in a hurry, but as he went he cast a quick look about him, and his eye fell upon Richard Hartley. Hartley nodded, and he thought the elder man gave a violent start—but then he looked very white and ill and might have started at anything. For an instant Captain Stewart made as if he would go on his way without taking notice, but he seemed to change his mind and turned back. He held out his hand with a rather wan and nervous smile, saying—

"Ah, Hartley! It is you, then. I wasn't sure." He glanced over the other's shoulder, and said—

"Is that our friend Ste. Marie with you?"

"No," said Richard Hartley, "some English friends of mine. I haven't seen

Ste. Marie to-day. I'm to meet him this evening. You've seen him since I have, as a matter of fact. He came to your party last night, didn't he? Sorry I couldn't come. They must have tired you out, I should think. You look ill."

"Yes," said the other man absently. "Yes. I had an attack of—an old malady, last night. I am rather stale to-day. You say you haven't seen Ste. Marie? No, to be sure. If you see him later on you might say that I mean to drop in on him to-morrow to make my apologies. He'll understand. Good day!" So he turned away to the motor, which was waiting for him, and Hartley went back to his friends, wondering a little what it was that Stewart had to apologise for.

As for Captain Stewart he must have gone at once out to La Lierre. What he found there has already been set forth.

It was about ten that evening when Hartley, who had left his people, after dinner was over, at the *Marigny*, reached the Rue d'Assas. The street door was already closed for the night, and so he had to ring for the *cordon*. When the door clicked open and he had closed it behind him, he called out his name before crossing the court to Ste. Marie's stair, but as he went on his way the voice of the concierge reached him from the little *loge*.

"*M. Ste. Marie n'est pas là.*"

Now the Parisian concierge, as every one knows who has lived under his iron sway, is a being set apart from the rest of mankind. He has, in general no human attributes, and certainly no human sympathy. His hand is against all the world and the hand of all the world is against him. Still, here and there amongst this peculiar race are to be found a very few beings who are of softer substance—men and women instead of spies and harpies. The concierge who had charge of the house wherein Ste. Marie dwelt was an old woman, undeniably severe upon occasion, but for the most part a kindly and even jovial soul. She must have become a concierge through some unfortunate mistake.

She snapped open her little square window, and stuck out into the moonlit court a dishevelled grey head.

"*Il n'est pas là,*" she said again, beaming upon Richard Hartley, whom she liked, and when he protested that he had a definite and important appointment with her lodger, went on to explain that Ste. Marie had gone out, doubtless to lunch, before one o'clock and had never returned.

"He may have left word for me upstairs," Hartley said. "I'll go up and wait, if I may." So the woman got him her extra key, and he went up, let himself into the flat and made lights there.

Naturally he found no word, but his own note of that morning lay spread out upon a table where Ste. Marie had left it, and so he knew that his friend was in possession of the two facts he had learnt about Stewart. He made himself comfortable with a book and some cigarettes, and settled down to wait. Ste.

Marie out at La Lierre, with a bullet hole in his leg, was deep in a drugged sleep just then, but Hartley waited for him, looking up now and then from his book with a scowl of impatience, until the little clock on the mantle said that it was one o'clock. Then he went home in a very bad temper, after writing another note, and leaving it on the table, to say that he would return early in the morning.

But in the morning he began to be alarmed. He questioned the concierge very closely as to Ste. Marie's movements on the day previous, but she could tell him little (save to mention the brief visit of a man with an accent of Toulouse or Marseille), and there seemed to be no one else to whom he could go. He spent the entire morning in the flat and returned there after a hasty lunch. But at mid-afternoon he took a fiacre at the corner of the Gardens and drove to the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré.

Captain Stewart was at home. He was in a dressing-gown and still looked fagged and unwell. He certainly betrayed some surprise at sight of his visitor, but he made Hartley welcome at once, and insisted upon having cigars and things to drink brought out for him. On the whole he presented an astonishingly normal exterior, for within him he must have been cold with fear, and in his ears a question must have rung and shouted and rung again unceasingly.—

"What does this fellow know? What does he know?"

Hartley's very presence there had a perilous look.

The younger man shook his head at the servant who asked him what he wished to drink.

"Thanks, you're very good," he said to Captain Stewart, and that gentleman eyed him silently. "I can't stay but a moment. I just dropped in to ask if you'd any idea what can have become of Ste. Marie."

"Ste. Marie?" said Captain Stewart. "What do you mean—'become of him'?" He moistened his lips to speak, but he said the words without a tremor.

"Well, what I meant, was," said Hartley, "that you'd seen him last. He was here Thursday evening. Did he say anything to you about going anywhere in particular the next day—yesterday? He left his rooms about noon and hasn't turned up since."

Captain Stewart drew a short breath and sat down abruptly in a near-by chair, for all at once his knees had begun to tremble under him. He was conscious of a great and blissful wave of relief and well-being, and he wanted to laugh. He wanted so much to laugh that it became a torture to keep his face in repose.

So Ste Marie had left no word behind him, and the danger was past!

With a great effort he looked up from where he sat to Richard Hartley, who stood anxious and frowning before him.

"Forgive me for sitting down!" he said, "and sit down yourself, I beg! I'm still very shaky from my attack of illness. Ste. Marie? Ste. Marie has disap-

peared? How very extraordinary! It's like poor Arthur. Still—a single day! He might be anywhere for a single day, might he not? For all that, though, it's very odd. Why no! No, I don't think he said anything about going away! At least I remember nothing about it." The relief and triumph within him burst out in a sudden little chuckle of malicious fun.

[image]

*"Ste. Marie has disappeared? How very extraordinary!"*

"I can think of only one thing," said he, "that might be of use to you. Ste. Marie seemed to take a very great fancy to one of the ladies here the other evening. And, I must confess, the lady seemed to return it. It had all the look of a desperate flirtation—a most desperate flirtation. They spent the evening in a corner together.

"You don't suppose," he said, still chuckling gently, "that Ste. Marie is taking a little holiday, do you? You don't suppose that lady could account for him?"

"No," said Richard Hartley, "I don't. And if you knew Ste. Marie a little better you wouldn't suppose it either." But after a pause he said—

"Could you give me the—lady's name, by any chance? Of course I don't want to leave any stone unturned." And once more the other man emitted his pleased little chuckle that was so like a cat's mew.

"I can give you her name," said he. "The name is Mademoiselle—Bertrand. Elise Bertrand. But I regret to say I haven't the address by me. She came with some friends. I will try to get it and send it you. Will that be all right?"

"Yes, thanks!" said Richard Hartley. "You're very good. And now I must be going on. I'm rather in a hurry."

Captain Stewart protested against this great haste, and pressed the younger man to sit down and tell him more about his friend's disappearance, but Hartley excused himself, repeating that he was in a great hurry, and went off.

When he had gone Captain Stewart lay back in his chair and laughed until he was weak and ached from it, the furious helpless laughter which comes after the sudden release from a terrible strain. He was not, as a rule, a demonstrative man, but he became aware that he would like to dance and sing, and probably he would have done both if it had not been for the servant in the next room.

So there was no danger to be feared, and his terrors of the night past—he shivered a little to think of them—had been after all useless terrors! As for the prisoner out at La Lierre nothing was to be feared from him so long as a careful watch was kept. Later on he might have to be disposed of, since both bullet and

poison had failed (he scowled over that, remembering a bad quarter of an hour with O'Hara early this morning), but that matter could wait. Some way would present itself. He thought of the wholly gratuitous lie he had told Hartley, a thing born of a moment's malice, and he laughed again. It struck him that it would be very humorous if Hartley should come to suspect his friend of turning aside from his great endeavours to enter upon an affair with a lady. He dimly remembered that Ste. Marie's name had, from time to time, been a good deal involved in romantic histories, and he said to himself that his lie had been very well chosen indeed, and might be expected to cause Richard Hartley much anguish of spirit.

After that he lighted a very large cigarette, half as big as a cigar, and he lay back in his low comfortable chair, and began to think of the outcome of all this plotting and planning. As is very apt to be the case when a great danger has been escaped, he was in a mood of extreme hopefulness and confidence. Vaguely he felt as if the recent happenings had set him ahead a pace towards his goal, though, of course, they had done nothing of the kind. The danger that would exist so long as Ste. Marie, who knew everything, was alive, seemed in some miraculous fashion to have dwindled to insignificance; in this rebound from fear and despair, difficulties were swept away and the path was clear. The man's mind leapt to his goal, and a little shiver of prospective joy ran over him. Once that goal gained he could defy the world. Let eyes look askance, let tongues wag, he would be safe then—safe for all the rest of his life, and rich, rich, rich!

For he was playing against a feeble old man's life. Day by day he watched the low flame sink lower, as the flame of an exhausted lamp sinks and flickers. It was slow, for the old man had still a little strength left, but the will to live—which was the oil in the lamp—was almost gone and the waiting could not be long now. One day, quite suddenly, the flame would sink down to almost nothing, as at last it does in the spent lamp. It would flicker up and down rapidly for a few moments, and all at once there would be no flame there. Old David would be dead, and a servant would be sent across the river in haste to the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. Stewart lay back in his chair and tried to imagine that it was true, that it had already happened, as happen it must before long, and once more the little shiver which was like a shiver of voluptuous delight ran up and down his limbs, and his breath began to come fast and hard.

But Richard Hartley drove at once back to the Rue d'Assas. He was not very much disappointed in having learnt nothing from Stewart, though he was thoroughly angry at that gentleman's hint about Ste. Marie and the unknown lady. He had gone to the Rue du Faubourg because, as he had said, he wished to leave no stone unturned, and, after all, he had thought it quite possible that Stewart could give him some information which would be of value. Hartley firmly believed the elder man to be a rascal, but, of course, he knew nothing definite save



the two facts which he had accidentally learnt from Helen Benham, and it had occurred to him that Captain Stewart might have sent Ste. Marie off upon another wild-goose chase such as the expedition to Dinard had been. He would have been sure that the elder man had had something to do with Ste. Marie's disappearance if the latter had not been seen since Stewart's party, but instead of that Ste. Marie had come home, slept, gone out the next morning, returned again, received a visitor, and gone out to lunch. It was all very puzzling and mysterious.

His mind went back to the brief interview with Stewart and dwelt upon it. Little things which had at the time made no impression upon him began to recur and to take on significance. He remembered the elder man's odd and strained manner at the beginning, his sudden and causeless change to ease and a something that was almost like a triumphant excitement, and then his absurd story about Ste. Marie's flirtation with a lady. Hartley thought of these things, he thought also of the fact that Ste. Marie had disappeared immediately after hearing grave accusations against Stewart. Could he have lost his head, rushed across the city at once to confront the middle-aged villain, and then—disappeared from human ken? It would have been very like him to do something rashly impulsive upon reading that note.

Hartley broke into a sudden laugh of sheer amusement when he realised to what a wild and improbable flight his fancy was soaring. He could not quite rid himself of a feeling that Stewart was, in some mysterious fashion, responsible for his friend's vanishing. But he was unlike Ste. Marie; he did not trust his feelings, either good or bad, unless they were backed by excellent evidence, and he had to admit that there was not a single scrap of evidence, in this instance, against Miss Benham's uncle.

The girl's name recalled him to another duty. He must tell her about Ste. Marie. He was by this time halfway up the Boulevard St. Germain, but he gave a new order and the fiacre turned back to the Rue de l'Université. The footman at the door said that mademoiselle was not in the drawing-room, as it was only four o'clock, but that he thought she was in the house. So Hartley sent up his name and went in to wait.

Miss Benham came down looking a little pale and anxious.

"I've been with grandfather," she explained. "He had some sort of sinking spell last night, and we were very much frightened. He's much better, but—well he couldn't have many such spells and live. I'm afraid he grows a good deal weaker, day by day, now. He sees hardly any one outside the family, except Baron de Vries." She sat down with a little sigh of fatigue and smiled up at her visitor.

"I'm glad you've come," said she. "You'll cheer me up and I rather need it. What are you looking so solemn about, though? You won't cheer me up if you

look like that.”

”Well, you see,” said Hartley, ”I came at this impossible hour to bring you some bad news. I’m sorry.

”Perhaps,” he conditioned, ”bad news is putting it with too much seriousness. Strange news is better. To be brief, Ste. Marie has disappeared—vanished into thin air. I thought you ought to know.”

”Ste. Marie!” cried the girl. ”How? What do you mean—vanished? When did he vanish?” She gave a sudden exclamation of relief.

”Oh, he has come upon some clue or other and has rushed off to follow it. That’s all—How dare you frighten me so?”

”He went without luggage,” said the man, shaking his head, ”and he left no word of any kind behind him. He went out to lunch yesterday about noon, and, as I said, simply vanished, leaving no trace whatever behind him. I’ve just been to see your uncle, thinking that he might know something, but he doesn’t.”

The girl looked up quickly.

”My uncle?” she said. ”Why my uncle?”

”Well,” said Hartley, ”you see Ste. Marie went to a little party at your uncle’s flat on the night before he disappeared, and I thought your uncle might have heard him say something that would throw light on his movements the next day.” Hartley remembered the unfortunate incident of the galloping pigs, and hurried on—

”He went to the party more for the purpose of having a talk with your uncle than for any other reason, I think. I was to have gone myself, but gave it up at the eleventh hour for the Cain’s dinner at Armenonville.

”Well, the next morning after Captain Stewart’s party he went out early. I called at his rooms to see him about something important that I thought he ought to know. I missed him, and so left a note for him, which he got on his return and read. I found it open on his table later on. At noon he went out again, and that’s all. Frankly, I’m worried about him.”

Miss Benham watched the man with thoughtful eyes and, when he had finished, she asked—

”Could you tell me what was in this note that you left for Ste. Marie?”

Hartley was by nature a very open and frank young man, and in consequence an unusually bad liar. He hesitated and looked away and he began to turn red.

”Well—no,” he said after a moment, ”no, I’m afraid I can’t. It was something you wouldn’t understand—wouldn’t know about.” And the girl said, ”Oh!” and remained for a little while silent.

But at the end she looked up and met his eyes, and the man saw that she was very grave. She said—

"Richard, there is something that you and I have been avoiding and pretending not to see. It has gone too far now, and we're got to face it with perfect frankness. I know what was in your note to Ste. Marie. It was what you found out the other evening about—my uncle, the matter of the will and the other matter. He knew about the will, but he told you and Ste. Marie that he didn't. He said to you also that I had told him about my engagement and Ste. Marie's determination to search for Arthur, and that was—a lie. I didn't tell him, and grandfather didn't tell him. He listened in the door yonder and heard it himself. I have a good reason for knowing that.

"And then," she said, "he tried very hard to persuade you and Ste. Marie to take up your search under his direction, and he partly succeeded. He sent Ste. Marie upon a foolish expedition to Dinard, and he gave him and gave you other clues just as foolish as that one.

"Richard, do you believe that my uncle has hidden poor Arthur away somewhere, or—worse than that? Do you? Tell me the truth!"

"There is not," said Hartley, "one particle of real evidence against him that I'm aware of. There's plenty of motive, if you like, but motive is not evidence."

"I asked you a question," the girl said. "Do you believe my uncle has been responsible for Arthur's disappearance?"

"Yes," said Richard Hartley, "I'm afraid I do."

"Then," she said, "he has been responsible for Ste. Marie's disappearance also. Ste. Marie became dangerous to him and so vanished. What can we do, Richard? What can we do?"

[image]

*"What can we do, Richard? What can we do?"*

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A CONVERSATION OVERHEARD

In the upper chamber at La Lierre the days dragged very slowly by, and the man who lay in bed there counted interminable hours, and prayed for the coming of night with its merciful oblivion of sleep. His inaction was made bitterer by the

fact that the days were days of green and gold, of breeze-stirred tree-tops without his windows, of vagrant sweet airs that stole in upon his solitude, bringing him all the warm fragrance of summer and of green things growing.

He suffered little pain. There was, for the first three or four days, a dull and feverish ache in his wounded leg, but presently even that passed and the leg hurt him only when he moved it. He thought sometimes that he would be grateful for a bit of physical anguish to make the hours pass more quickly.

The other inmates of the house held aloof from him. Once a day O'Hara came in to see to the wound, but he maintained a well-nigh complete silence over his work and answered questions only with a brief yes or no. Sometimes he did not answer them at all. The old Michel came twice daily, but this strange being had quite plainly been frightened into dumbness, and there was nothing to be got out of him. He shambled hastily about the place, his one scared eye upon the man in bed, and as soon as possible fled away, closing the door behind him. Sometimes Michel brought in the meals, sometimes his wife, a creature so like him that the two might well have passed for twin survivors of some unknown race; sometimes—thrice altogether in that first week—Coira O'Hara brought the tray, and she was as silent as the others.

So Ste. Marie was left alone to get through the interminable days as best he might, and ever afterwards the week remained in his memory as a sort of nightmare. Lying idle in his bed he evolved many surprising and fantastic schemes for escape—for getting word to the outside world of his presence here, and one by one he gave them up in disgust as their impossibility forced itself upon him. Plans and schemes were useless while he lay bed-ridden, unfamiliar even with the house wherein he dwelt, with the garden and park that surrounded it.

As for aid from any of the inmates of the place, that was to be laughed at. They were engaged together in a scheme so desperate that failure must mean utter ruin to them all. He sometimes wondered if the two servants could be bribed. Avarice unmistakable gleamed from their little glittering rat-like eyes, but he was sure that they would sell out for no small sum and, in so far as he could remember, there had been in his pockets when he came here not more than five or six louis. Doubtless the old Michel had managed to abstract those in his daily offices about the room, for Ste. Marie knew that the clothes hung in a closet across from his bed. He had seen them there once when the closet door was open.

Any help that might come to him must come from outside—and what help was to be expected there? Over and over again he reminded himself of how little Richard Hartley knew. He might suspect Stewart of complicity in this new disappearance, but how was he to find out anything definite? How was any one to do so?

It was at such times as this, when brain and nerves were strained and worn almost to breaking point that Ste. Marie had occasion to be grateful for the southern blood that was in him, the strong tinge of fatalism which is common alike to Latin and to Oriental. It rescued him more than once from something like nervous breakdown, calmed him suddenly, lifted his burdens from outwearied shoulders, and left him in peace to wait until some action should be possible. Then, in such hours, he would fall to thinking of the girl for whose sake, in whose cause, he lay bedridden, beset with dangers. As long before, she came to him in a sort of waking vision—a being but half earthly, enthroned high above him, calm-browed, very pure, with passionless eyes that gazed into far distance and were unaware of the base things below. What would she think of him, who had sworn to be true knight to her, if she could know how he had bungled and failed? He was glad that she did not know, that if he had blundered into peril the knowledge of it could not reach her to hurt her pride.

And sometimes also, with a great sadness and pity, he thought of poor Coira O'Hara and of the pathetic wreck her life had fallen into. The girl was so patently fit for better things! Her splendid beauty was not a cheap beauty. She was no coarse-blown gorgeous flower, imperfect at telltale points. It was good blood that had modelled her dark perfection, good blood that had shaped her long and slim and tapering hands.

"A queen among goddesses!" The words remained with him and he knew that they were true. She might have held up her head among the greatest, this adventurer's girl; but what chance had she had? What merest ghost of a chance?

He watched her on the rare occasions when she came into the room. He watched the poise of her head, her walk, the movements she made, and he said to himself that there was no woman of his acquaintance whose grace was more perfect—certainly none whose grace was so native.

Once he complained to her of the desperate idleness of his days and asked her to lend him a book of some kind, a review, even a daily newspaper, though it be a week old.

"I should read the very advertisements with joy," he said.

She went out of the room and returned presently with an armful of books, which she laid upon the bed without comment.

"In my prayers, mademoiselle," cried Ste. Marie, "you shall be foremost forever!" He glanced at the row of titles and looked up in sheer astonishment.

"May I ask whose books these are?" he said.

"They are mine," said the girl. "I caught up the ones that lay first at hand. If you don't care for any of them I will choose others." The books were: *Diana of the Crossways*, *Richard Feverel*, Henri Lavedan's *Le Duel*, Maeterlinck's *Pelleas et Melisande*, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, in Spanish, a volume of Virgil's *Eclagues*,

and the *Life of the Chevalier Bayard* by the "Loyal Servitor." Ste. Marie stared at her.

"Do you read Spanish?" he demanded, "and Latin, as well as French and English?"

"My mother was Spanish," said she. "And as for Latin, I began to read it with my father when I was a child. Shall I leave the books here?"

Ste. Marie took up the *Bayard* and held it between his hands.

"It is worn from much reading, mademoiselle," he said.

"It is the best of all," said she. "The very best of all. I didn't know I had brought you that." She made a step towards him as if she would take the book away, and over it the eyes of them met and were held. In that moment it may have come to them both who she was, who so loved the knight without fear and without reproach—the daughter of an Irish adventurer of ill repute; for their faces began suddenly to flush with red and after an instant the girl turned away.

"It is of no consequence," said she. "You may keep the book if you care to." And Ste. Marie said very gently—

"Thank you, mademoiselle! I will keep it for a little while." So she went out of the room and left him alone.

This was at noon on the sixth day, and after he had swallowed hastily the lunch which had been set before him Ste. Marie fell upon the books like a child upon a new box of sweets. Like the child again it was difficult for him to choose among them. He opened one and then another, gloating over them all, but in the end he chose the *Bayard* and for hours lost himself among the high deeds of the Preux Chevalier and his faithful friends (among whom, by the way, there was a Ste. Marie who died nobly for France). It was late afternoon when at last he laid the book down with a sigh and settled himself more comfortably among the pillows.

The sun was not in the room at that hour but, from where he lay, he could see it on the tree-tops, gold upon green. Outside his south window the leaves of a chestnut which stood there quivered and rustled gently under a soft breeze. Delectable odours floated in to Ste. Marie's nostrils, and he thought how very pleasant it would be if he were lying on the turf under the trees, instead of bed-ridden in this upper chamber, which he had come to hate with a bitter hatred.

He began to wonder if it would be possible to drag himself across the floor to that south window, and so to lie down for a while with his head in the tiny balcony beyond—his eyes turned to the blue sky. Astir with the new thought he sat up in bed and carefully swung his feet out till they hung to the floor. The wound in the left leg smarted and burnt, but not too severely, and with slow pains Ste. Marie stood up. He almost cried out when he discovered that it could be done quite easily. He essayed to walk and he was a little weak, but by no means

helpless. He found that it gave him pain to raise his left leg in the ordinary action of walking, or to bend that knee, but he could get about well enough by dragging the injured member beside him, for when it was straight it supported him without protest.

He took his pillows across to the window and disposed them there, for it was a French window opening to the floor, and the level of the little balcony outside was but a few inches above the level of the room. Then the desire seized him to make a tour of his prison walls. He went first to the closet where he had seen his clothes hanging, and they were still there. He felt in the pockets and withdrew his little English pig-skin sovereign purse. It had not been tampered with, and he gave an exclamation of relief over that, for he might later on have use for money. There were eight louis in it, each in its little separate compartment, and in another pocket he found a fifty-franc note and some silver. He went to the two east windows and looked out. The trees stood thick together on that side of the house, but between two of them he could see the park wall fifty yards away. He glanced down, and the side of the house was covered thick with the ivy which had given the place its name, but there was no water pipe near nor any other thing which seemed to offer foot or hand hold—unless perhaps the ivy might prove strong enough to bear a man's weight. Ste. Marie made a mental note to look into that when he was a little stronger, and turned back to the south window, where he had disposed his pillows.

The unaccustomed activity was making his wound smart and prickle, and he lay down at once, with head and shoulders in the open air; and, out of the warm and golden sunshine and the emerald shade, the breath of summer came to him and wrapped him round with sweetness and pillowed him upon its fragrant breast.

He became aware, after a long time, of voices below, and turned upon his elbows to look. The ivy had clambered upon and partly covered the iron grille of the little balcony and he could observe without being seen. Young Arthur Benham and Coira O'Hara had come out of the door of the house, and they stood upon the raised and paved terrace which ran the width of the façade, and seemed to hesitate as to the direction they should take. Ste. Marie heard the girl say—

"It's cooler here in the shade of the house," and, after a moment, the two came along the shady terrace, whose outer margin was set at intervals with stained and discoloured marble nymphs upon pedestals, and, between the nymphs, with moss-grown stone benches. They halted before a bench upon which, earlier in the day, a rug had been spread out to dry in the sun and had been forgotten, and, after a moment's further hesitation, they sat down upon it. Their faces were turned towards the house and every word that they spoke mounted in that still air clear and distinct to the ears of the man above.

Ste. Marie wriggled back into the room and sat up to consider. The thought of deliberately listening to a conversation not meant for him sent a hot flush to his cheeks. He told himself that it could not be done, and that there was an end to the matter. Whatever might hang upon it it could not be asked of him that he should stoop to dishonour. But at that the heavy and grave responsibility which really did hang upon him and upon his actions came before his mind's eyes and loomed there mountainous. The fate of this foolish boy, who was set round with thieves and adventurers—even though his eyes were open and he knew where he stood—that came to Ste. Marie and confronted him: and the picture of a bitter old man who was dying of grief came to him: and a mother's face: and *hers*. There could be no dishonour in the face of all this, only a duty very clear and plain. He crept back to his place, his arms folded beneath him as he lay, his eyes at the thin screen of ivy which cloaked the balcony grille.

Young Arthur Benham appeared to be giving tongue to a rather sharp attack of homesickness. It may be that long confinement within the walls of La Lierre was beginning to try him somewhat.

"Mind you," he declared, as Ste. Marie's ears came once more within range, "mind you, I'm not saying that Paris hasn't got its points. It has. Oh yes! And so has London, and so has Ostend, and so has Monte Carlo—Verree much so!—I like Paris. I like the theatres and the vaudeville shows in the Champs Elysées, and I like Longchamps. I like the boys who hang around Henry's bar. They're good sports, all right, all right! But, by Golly, I want to go home! Put me off at the corner of Forty-second Street and Broadway and I'll ask no more. Set me down at seven p.m. right there on the corner outside the *Knickerbocker*, for that's where I would live and die." There came into the lad's somewhat strident voice a softness that was almost pathetic.

"You don't know Broadway, Coira, do you? Nix! of course not. Little girl, it's the one, one street of all this large world. It's the equator that runs north and south instead of east and west. It's a long bright gay live wire, that's what Broadway is. And I give you my word of honour like a little man that it—is—not—slow. No indeed! When I was there last it was being called the *Gay White Way*. It is not called the *Gay White Way* now. It has had forty other new good names since then, and I don't know what they are, but I do know that it is forever gay, and that the electric signs are still blazing all along the street, and the street cars are still killing people in the good old fashion, and the newsboys are still dodging under the automobiles to sell you a *Woild* or a *Choinal* or, if it's after twelve at night, a *Morning Telegraph*. Coira, my girl, standing on that corner after dark you can see the electric signs of fifteen theatres, no one of them more than five minutes' walk away, and just round the corner there are more.

"I want to go home! I want to take one large unparalleled leap from here



and come down at the corner I told you about. D'you know what I'd do? We'll say it's seven p.m. and beginning to get dark. I'd dive into the *Knickerbocker* (that's the hotel that the bright and happy people go to for dinner or supper), and I'd engage a table up on the terrace. Then I'd telephone to a little friend of mine, whose name is Doe—John Doe—and in about ten minutes he'd have left the crowd he was standing in line with and he'd come galloping up that glad to see me you'd cry to watch him. We'd go up on the terrace, where the potted palms grow, for our dinner, and the tables all around us would be full of people that would know Johnnie Doe and me, and they'd all make us drink drinks and tell us how glad they were to see us aboard again.

"And after dinner," said young Arthur Benham, with wide and smiling eyes, "after dinner we'd go to see one of the Roof Garden shows. Let me tell you they've got the *Marigny*, or the *Ambassadeurs*, or the *Jardin de Paris* beaten to a pulp—to—a—pulp! And after the show we'd slip round to the stage door—you bet we would!—and capture the two most beautiful ladies in the world and take 'em off to supper." He wrinkled his young brow in great perplexity.

"Now I wonder," said he anxiously. "I wonder where we'd go for supper.

"You see," he apologised, "it's two years since I left the Real Street, and Gee, what a lot can happen on Broadway in two years! There's probably half a dozen new supper places that I don't know anything about, and one of them's the place where the crowd goes. Well, anyhow, we'd go to that place, and there'd be a band playing, and the electric fans would go round, and round, and Johnnie Doe and I and the two most beautiful ladies would put it all over the other pikers there."

Young Benham gave a little sigh of pleasure and excitement.

"That's what I'd like to do to-night," said he, "and that's what I'll do, you can bet your sh—boots, when all this silly mess is over and I'm a free man. I'll hike back to good old Broadway, and if ever you see any one trying to pry me loose from it again, you can laugh yourself to death, because he'll never, never succeed.

"Nine more weeks shut in here by stonewalls!" said the boy, staring about him with a sort of bitterness. "Nine weeks more!"

"Is it so hard as that?" asked the girl. There was no foolish coquetry in her tone. She spoke as if the words involved no personal question at all, but there was a little smile at her lips, and Arthur Benham turned towards her quickly and caught at her hands.

"No, no!" he cried. "I didn't mean that. You know I didn't mean that. You're worth nine years' waiting. You're the best, d'you hear? the best there is. There's nobody anywhere that can touch you. Only—well, this place is getting on my nerves. It's got me worn to a frazzle. I feel like a criminal doing time."

"You came very near having to do time somewhere else," said the girl. "If

this M. Ste. Marie hadn't blundered we should have had them all round our ears, and you'd have had to run for it."

"Yes," the boy said, nodding gravely. "Yes, that was great luck." He raised his head and looked up along the windows above him.

"Which is his room?" he asked, and Mlle. O'Hara said—

"The one just overhead, but he's in bed far back from the window. He couldn't possibly hear us talking." She paused for a moment in frowning hesitation, and, in the end, said—

"Tell me about him, this Ste. Marie! Do you know anything about him?"

[image]

*"Tell me about him, this Ste. Marie! Do you know anything about him?"*

"No," said Arthur Benham, "I don't—not personally, that is. Of course I've heard of him. Lots of people have spoken of him to me. And the odd part of it is that they all had a good word to say. Everybody seemed to like him. I got the idea that he was the best ever. I wanted to know him. I never thought he'd take on a piece of dirty work like this."

"Nor I!" said the girl, in a low voice. "Nor I!" The boy looked up.

"Oh, you've heard of him too, then?" said he. And she said, still in her low voice—

"I—saw him once."

"Well," declared young Benham, "it's beyond me. I give it up. You never can tell about people, can you? I guess they'll all go wrong when there's enough in it to make it worth while. That's what old Charlie always says. He says most people are straight enough when there's nothing in it, but make the pot big enough and they'll all go crooked." The young man's face turned suddenly hard and old and bitter.

"Gee! I ought to know that well enough, oughtn't I?" he said. "I guess nobody knows that better than I do after what happened to me... Come along and take a walk in the garden, Maud! I'm sick of sitting still."

Mlle. Coira O'Hara looked up with a start, as if she had not been listening, but she rose, when the boy held out his hand to her, and the two went down from the terrace and moved off towards the west.

Ste. Marie watched them until they had disappeared among the trees, and then turned on his back, staring up into the softly stirring canopy of green above him, and the little rifts of bright blue sky. He did not understand at all. Something

mysterious had crept in where all had seemed so plain to the eye. Certain words that young Arthur Benham had spoken repeated themselves in his mind and he could not at once make them out. Assuredly there was something mysterious here.

In the first place what did the boy mean by "dirty work"? To be sure spying in its usual sense is not held to be one of the noblest of occupations, but—in such a cause as this! It was absurd, ridiculous, to call it "dirty work." And what did he mean by the words which he had used afterwards? Ste. Marie did not quite follow the idiom about the "big enough pot," but he assumed that it referred to money. Did the young fool think he was being paid for his efforts? That was ridiculous too.

The boy's face came before him as it had looked with that sudden hard and bitter expression. What did he mean by saying that no one knew the crookedness of humanity under money temptation better than he knew it after something that had happened to him? In a sense his words were doubtless very true. Captain Stewart (and he must have been "old Charlie"—Ste. Marie remembered that the name was Charles), O'Hara and O'Hara's daughter stood excellent samples of that bit of cynicism, but obviously the boy had not spoken in that sense—certainly not before Mlle. O'Hara! He meant something else, then. But what? What?

Ste. Marie rose with some difficulty to his feet, and carried the pillows back to the bed whence he had taken them. He sat down upon the edge of the bed, staring in great perplexity across the room at the open window, but all at once he uttered an exclamation, and he smote his hands together.

"That boy doesn't know!" he cried. "They're tricking him, these others!"

The lad's face came once more before him, and it was a foolish and stubborn face perhaps, but it was neither vicious nor mean. It was the face of an honest headstrong boy, who would be incapable of the cold cruelty to which all circumstances seemed to point.

"They're tricking him somehow!" cried Ste. Marie again. "They're lying to him and making him think——"

What was it they were making him think, these three conspirators? What possible thing could they make him think other than the plain truth? Ste. Marie shook a weary head and lay down among his pillows. He wished that he had "old Charlie" in a corner of that room with his fingers round "old Charlie's" wicked throat. He would soon get at the truth then: or O'Hara either, that grim and saturnine *chevalier d'industrie*, though O'Hara would be a bad handful to manage: or—Ste. Marie's head dropped back with a little groan when the face of young Arthur's enchantress came between him and the opposite wall of the room, and her great and tragic eyes looked into his.

It seemed incredible that that queen among goddesses should be what she

was!

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE INVALID TAKES THE AIR

When O'Hara, the next morning, went through the formality of looking in upon his patient, and after a taciturn nod was about to go away again, Ste. Marie called him back. He said—

"Would you mind waiting a moment?" and the Irishman halted inside the door.

"I made an experiment yesterday," said Ste. Marie, "and I find that, after a poor fashion, I can walk—that is to say, I can drag myself about a little, without any great pain, if I don't bend the left leg."

O'Hara returned to the bed and made a silent examination of the bullet wound which, it was plain to see, was doing very well indeed.

"You'll be all right in a few days," said he, "but you'll be lame for a week yet—maybe two. As a matter of fact, I've known men to march half a day with a hole in the leg worse than yours, though it probably was not quite pleasant."

"I'm afraid I couldn't march very far," said Ste. Marie, "but I can hobble a bit. The point is, I'm going mad from confinement in this room. Do you think I might be allowed to stagger about the garden for an hour, or sit there under one of the trees? I don't like to ask favours, but—so far as I can see it could do no harm. I couldn't possibly escape, you see. I couldn't climb a fifteen foot wall even if I had two good legs: as it is, with a leg and a half, I couldn't climb anything."

The Irishman looked at him sharply, and was silent for a time as if considering. But at last he said—

"Of course there is no reason whatever for granting you any favours here. You're on the footing of a spy—a captured spy, and you're very lucky not to have got what you deserved instead of a trumpery flesh wound." The man's face twisted into a heavy scowl.

"Unfortunately," said he, "an—accident has put me—put us in as unpleasant a position towards you as you had put yourself towards us. We seem to stand in the position of having tried to poison you, and—well, we owe you something for that. Still, I'd meant to keep you locked up in this room so long as it was necessary to have you at La Lierre." He scowled once more in an intimidating

fashion at Ste. Marie, and it was evident that he found himself embarrassed.

"And," he said awkwardly, "I suppose I owe something to your father's son.... Look here! if you're to be allowed in the garden you must understand that it's at fixed hours and not alone. Somebody will always be with you, and old Michel will be on hand to shoot you down if you try to run for it, or if you try to communicate with Arthur Benham. Is that understood?"

"Quite!" said Ste. Marie gaily.

"Quite understood and agreed to. And many thanks for your courtesy. I shan't forget it. We differ rather widely on some rather important subjects, you and I, but I must confess that you're very generous, and I thank you. The old Michel has my full permission to shoot at me if he sees me trying to fly over a fifteen foot wall."

"He'll shoot without asking your permission," said the Irishman grimly, "if you try that on, but I don't think you'll be apt to try it for the present—not with a crippled leg." He pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"Nine o'clock," said he. "If you care to begin to-day you can go out at eleven for an hour. I'll see that old Michel is ready at that time."

"Eleven will suit me perfectly," said Ste. Marie. "You're very good. Thanks once more!" The Irishman did not seem to hear. He replaced the watch in his pocket and turned away in silence. But before he left the room he stood a moment beside one of the windows, staring out into the morning sunshine, and the other man could see that his face had once more settled into the still and melancholic gloom which was characteristic of it. Ste. Marie watched and, for the first time, the man began to interest him as a human being. He had thought of O'Hara before merely as a rather shady adventurer of a not very rare type, but he looked at the adventurer's face now, and he saw that it was the face of a man of unspeakable sorrows. When O'Hara looked at one, one saw only a pair of singularly keen and hard blue eyes set under a bony brow. When those eyes were turned away, the man's attention relaxed, the face became a battleground furrowed and scarred with wrecked pride and with bitterness and with shame and with agony. Most soldiers of fortune have faces like that, for the world has used them very ill, and they have lost one precious thing after another until all are gone; and they have tasted everything that there is in life, and the flavour which remains is a very bitter flavour—dry like ashes.

It came to Ste. Marie, as he lay watching this man, that the story of the man's life, if he could be made to tell it would doubtless be one of the most interesting stories in the world, as must be the tale of the adventurous career of any one who has slipped down the ladder of respectability rung by rung into that shadowy no-man's-land, where the furtive birds of prey foregather and hatch their plots. It was plain enough that O'Hara had, as the phrase goes, seen bet-

ter days. Without question he was a villain, but after all a generous villain. He had been very decent about making amends for that poisoning affair. A cheaper rascal would have behaved otherwise. Ste. Marie suddenly remembered what a friend of his had once said of this mysterious Irishman. The two had been sitting on the terrace of a café, and, as O'Hara passed by, Ste. Marie's friend pointed after him and said: "There goes some of the best blood that ever came out of Ireland. See what it has fallen to!"

Seemingly it had fallen pretty low. He would have liked very much to know about the downward stages, but he knew that he would never hear anything of them from the man himself, for O'Hara was clad, as it were, in an armour of taciturnity. He was incredibly silent. He wore mail that nothing could pierce.

The Irishman turned abruptly away and left the room, and Ste. Marie, with all the gay excitement of a little girl preparing for her first nursery party, began to get himself ready to go out. The old Michel had already been there to help him bathe and shave, so that he had only to dress himself and attend to his one conspicuous vanity—the painstaking arrangement of his hair, which he wore, according to the fashion of the day, parted a little at one side and brushed almost straight back, so that it looked rather like a close-fitting and incredibly glossy skull-cap. Richard Hartley, who was inclined to joke at his friend's grave interest in the matter, said that it reminded him of patent leather.

When he was dressed—and he found that putting on his left boot was no mean feat—Ste. Marie sat down in a chair by the window and lighted a cigarette. He had half an hour to wait, and so he picked up the volume of Bayard, which Coira O'Hara had not yet taken away from him, and began to read in it at random. He became so absorbed that the old Michel, come to summon him, took him by surprise. But it was a pleasant surprise and very welcome. He followed the old man out of the room with a heart that beat fast with eagerness.

The descent of the stairs offered difficulties, for the wounded leg protested sharply against being bent more than a very little at the knee. But, by aid of Michel's shoulder, he made the passage in safety, and so came to the lower story. At the foot of the stairs some one opened a door almost in their faces, but closed it again with great haste, and Ste. Marie gave a chuckle of laughter, for, though it was almost dark there, he thought he had recognised Captain Stewart.

"So old Charlie's with us to-day, is he?" he said aloud, and Michel queried: "*Comment, monsieur?*" because Ste. Marie had spoken in English.

They came out upon the terrace before the house, and the fresh sweet air bore against their faces, and little flecks of live gold danced and shivered about their feet upon the moss-stained tiles. The gardener stepped back for an instant into the doorway and reappeared, bearing across his arms the short carbine with which Ste. Marie had already made acquaintance. The victim looked at this

weapon with a laugh, and the old Michel's gnome-like countenance distorted itself suddenly and a weird cackle came from it.

"It is my old friend?" demanded Ste. Marie, and the gardener cackled once more, stroking the barrel of the weapon as if it were a faithful dog.

"The same, monsieur," said he. "But she apologises for not doing better."

"Beg her for me," said the young man, "to cheer up. She may get another chance." Old Michel's face froze into an expression of anxious and rather frightened solicitude, but he waved his arm for the prisoner to precede him, and Ste. Marie began to limp down across the littered and unkempt sweep of turf. Behind him at the distance of a dozen paces he heard the shambling footfalls of his guard, but he had expected that, and it could not rob him of his swelling and exultant joy at treading once more upon green grass and looking up into blue sky. He was like a man newly released from a dungeon, rather than from a sunny and by no means uncomfortable upper chamber. He would have liked to dance and sing, to run at full speed like a child until he was breathless and red in the face. Instead of that he had to drag himself with slow pains and some discomfort, but his spirit ran ahead, dancing and singing, and he thought that it even halted now and then to roll on the grass.

As he had observed, a week before from the top of his wall, a double row of larches led straight down away from the front of the house, making a wide and long vista interrupted, halfway to its end, by a *rond point*, in the centre of which was a pool and a fountain. The double row of trees was sadly broken now, and the trees were untrimmed and uncared for. One of them had fallen, probably in a wind storm, and lay dead across the way. Ste. Marie turned aside towards the west and found himself presently among chestnuts, planted in close rows, whose tops grew in so thick a canopy above that but little sunshine came through, and there was no turf under foot, only black earth hard trodden, mossy here and there.

From beyond, in the direction he had chanced to take and a little towards the west, a soft morning breeze bore to him the scent of roses, so constant and so sweet despite its delicacy that to breathe it was like an intoxication. He felt it begin to take hold upon and to sway his senses like an exquisite, an insidious wine.

"The flower gardens, Michel?" he asked over his shoulder. "They are before us?"

"Ahead and to the left, monsieur," said the old man, and he took up once more his slow and difficult progress. But again, before he had gone many steps, he was halted. There began to reach his ears a rich but slender strain of sound, a golden thread of melody. At first he thought that it was a cello or the lower notes of a violin, but presently he became aware that it was a woman singing in

a half-voice without thought of what she sang—as women croon to a child, or over their work, or when they are idle and their thoughts are far wandering.

The mistake was not as absurd as it may seem, for it is a fact that the voice which is called a contralto, if it is a good and clear and fairly resonant voice, sounds at a distance very much indeed like a cello or the lower register of a violin. And that is especially true when the voice is hushed to a half-articulate murmur. Indeed, this is but one of the many strange peculiarities of that most beautiful of all human organs. The contralto can rarely express the lighter things, and it is quite impossible for it to express merriment or gaiety, but it can thrill the heart as can no other sound emitted by a human throat, and it can shake the soul to its very innermost hidden deeps. It is the soft yellow gold of singing—the wine of sound: it is mystery: it is shadowy unknown beautiful places: it is enchantment.

Ste. Marie stood still and listened. The sound of low singing came from the right. Without realising that he had moved he began to make his way in that direction, and the old Michel, carbine upon arm, followed behind him. He had no doubt of the singer. He knew well who it was, for the girl's speaking voice had thrilled him long before this. He came to the eastern margin of the grove of chestnuts, and found that he was beside the open *rond point* where the pool lay within its stone circumference, unclean and choked with lily pads, and the fountain, a naked lady holding aloft a shell, stood above. The *rond point* was not in reality round, it was an oval with its greater axis at right angles to the long straight avenue of larches. At the two ends of the oval there were stone benches with backs, and behind these tall shrubs grew close and overhung so that even at noonday the spots were shaded.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE STONE BENCH AT THE ROND POINT

Mlle. Coira O'Hara sat alone upon the stone bench at the hither end of the *rond point*. With a leisurely hand she put fine stitches into a mysterious garment of white, with lace on it, and, over her not too arduous toil, she sang *à demi voix*, a little German song all about the tender passions.

Ste. Marie halted his dragging steps a little way off, but the girl heard him and turned to look. After that she rose hurriedly and stood as if poised for flight, but Ste. Marie took his hat in his hands and came forward.



[image]

*"Mlle. Coira O'Hara sat alone upon the stone bench."*

"If you go away, mademoiselle," said he; "if you let me drive you from your place, I shall limp across to that pool and fall in and drown myself, or I shall try to climb the wall yonder and Michel will have to shoot me." He came forward another step.

"If it is impossible," he said, "that you and I should stay here together for a few little moments, and talk about what a beautiful day it is—if that is impossible, why then I must apologise for intruding upon you and go on my way, inexorably pursued by the would-be murderer who now stands six paces to the rear.

"Is it impossible, mademoiselle?" said Ste. Marie.

The girl's face was flushed with that deep and splendid understain. She looked down upon the white garment in her hand and away across the broad *rond point*, and, in the end, she looked up very gravely into the face of the man who stood leaning upon his stick before her.

"I don't know," she said in her deep voice, "what my father would wish. I did not know that you were coming into the garden this morning or——"

"Or else," said Ste. Marie with a little touch of bitterness in his tone, "or else you would not have been here. You would have remained in the house."

He made a bow.

"To-morrow, mademoiselle," said he, "and for the remainder of the days that I may be at La Lierre, I shall stay in my room. You need have no fear of me." All the man's life he had been spoilt. The girl's bearing hurt him absurdly, and a little of the hurt may have betrayed itself in his face as he turned away, for she came towards him with a swift movement, saying—

"No! no! Wait!

"I have hurt you," she said with a sort of wondering distress. "You have let me hurt you.... And yet surely you must see ... you must realise on what terms ... Do you forget that you are not among your friends ... outside? ... This is so very different!"

"I had forgotten," said he. "Incredible as it sounds, I had for a moment forgotten. Will you grant me your pardon for that?"

"And yet," he persisted after a moment's pause, "yet, mademoiselle, consider a little! It is likely that—circumstances have so fallen that it seems I shall be here within your walls for a time, perhaps a long time. I am able to walk a little now. Day by day I shall be stronger, better able to get about. Is there

not some way—are there not some terms under which we could meet without embarrassment? Must we for ever glare at each other and pass by warily, just because we—well, hold different views about—something?” It was not a premeditated speech at all. It had never until this moment occurred to him to suggest any such arrangement with any member of the household at La Lierre. At another time he would doubtless have considered it undignified if not downright unwise to hold intercourse of any friendly sort with this band of contemptible adventurers. The sudden impulse may have been born of his long week of almost intolerable loneliness, or it may have come of the warm exhilaration of this first breath of sweet outdoor air, or perhaps it needed neither of these things, for the girl was very beautiful—enchantment breathed from her, and though he knew what she was, in what despicable plot she was engaged, he was too much Ste. Marie to be quite indifferent to her. Though he looked upon her sorrowfully and with pain and vicarious shame, he could not have denied the spell she wielded. After all he was Ste. Marie.

Once more the girl looked up very gravely under her brows and her eyes met the man’s eyes.

”I don’t know,” she said. ”Truly I don’t know. I think I should have to ask my father about it.

”I wish,” she said, ”that we might do that. I should like it. I should like to be able to talk to some one—about the things I like—and care for. I used to talk with my father about things. But not lately. There is no one now.” Her eyes searched him.

”Would it be possible, I wonder,” said she. ”Could we two put everything else aside—forget altogether who we are and why we are here. Is that possible?”

”We could only try, mademoiselle,” said Ste. Marie. ”If we found it a failure we could give it up.” He broke into a little laugh.

”And besides,” he said, ”I can’t help thinking that two people ought to be with me all the time I am in the garden here—for safety’s sake. I might catch the old Michel napping one day, you know, throttle him, take his rifle away and escape. If there were two I couldn’t do that.”

For an instant she met his laugh with an answering smile, and the smile came upon her sombre beauty like a moment of golden light upon darkness. But afterwards she was grave again and thoughtful.

”Is it not rather foolish,” she asked, ”to warn us—to warn me of possibilities like that? You might quite easily do what you have said. You are putting us on our guard against you.”

”I meant to, mademoiselle,” said Ste. Marie. ”I meant to. Consider my reasons. Consider what I was pleading for!” And he gave a little laugh when the colour began again to rise in the girl’s cheeks.

She turned away from him, shaking her head, and he thought that he had said too much and that she was offended, but after a moment the girl looked up and, when she met his eyes, she laughed outright.

"I cannot for ever be scowling and snarling at you," said she. "It is quite too absurd. Will you sit down for a little while? I don't know whether or not my father would approve, but we have met here by accident, and there can be no harm surely in our exchanging a few civil words. If you try to bring up forbidden topics I can simply go away—and besides Michel stands ready to murder you if it should become necessary. I think his failure of a week ago is very heavy on his conscience."

Ste. Marie sat down in one corner of the long stone bench, and he was very glad to do it, for his leg was beginning to cause him some discomfort. It felt hot, and as if there were a very tight band round it above the knee. The relief must have been apparent in his face, for Mlle. O'Hara looked at him in silence for a moment, and she gave a little troubled anxious frown. Men can be quite indifferent to suffering in each other if the suffering is not extreme, and women can be too; but men are quite miserable in the presence of a woman who is in pain, and women, before a suffering man, while they are not miserable are always full of a desire to do something that will help. And that might be a small additional proof (if any more proof were necessary) that they are much the more practical of the two sexes.

The girl's sharp glance seemed to assure her that Ste. Marie was comfortable, now that he was sitting down, for the frown went from her brows, and she began to arrange the mysterious white garment in her lap in preparation to go on with her work.

Ste. Marie watched her for awhile in a contented silence. The leaves overhead stirred under a puff of air, and a single yellow beam of sunlight came down and shivered upon the girl's dark head and played about the bundle of white over which her hands were busy. She moved aside to avoid it, but it followed her, and when she moved back it followed again and danced in her lap, as if it were a live thing with a malicious sense of humour. It might have been Tinker Bell out of *Peter Pan*, only it did not jingle. Mlle. O'Hara uttered an exclamation of annoyance, and Ste. Marie laughed at her, but in a moment the leaves overhead were still again, and the sunbeam with a sense of humour was gone to torment some one else.

Still, neither of the two spoke, and Ste. Marie continued to watch the girl bent above her sewing. He was thinking of what she had said to him when he asked her if she read Spanish—that her mother had been Spanish. That would account then for her dark eyes. It would account for the darkness of her skin too, but not for its extraordinary clearness and delicacy, for Spanish women are apt

to have dull skins of an opaque texture. This was, he said to himself, an Irish skin with a darker stain, and he was quite sure that he had never before seen anything at all like it.

Apart from colouring she was all Irish, of the type which has become famous the world over, and which in the opinion of men who have seen women in all countries, and have studied them, is the most beautiful type that exists in our time.

Ste. Marie was dark himself and, in the ordinary nature of things, he should have preferred a fair type in women. In theory, for that matter, he did prefer it; but it was impossible for him to sit near Coira O'Hara, and watch her bent head and busy hovering hands and remain unstirred by her splendid beauty. He found himself wondering why one kind of loveliness more than another should exert a potent and mysterious spell by virtue of mere proximity, and when the woman who bore it was entirely passive. If this girl had been looking at him the matter would have been easy to understand, for an eye-glance is often downright hypnotic, but she was looking at the work in her hands and, so far as could be judged, she had altogether forgotten his presence; yet the mysterious spell, the potent enchantment, breathed from her like a vapour, and he could not be insensible to it. It was like sorcery.

The girl looked up so suddenly that Ste. Marie jumped. She said—

"You are not a very talkative person. Are you always as silent as this?"

"No," said he, "I am not. I offer my humblest apologies. It seems as if I were not being properly grateful for being allowed to sit here with you, but to tell the truth I was buried in thought." They had begun to talk in French, but, midway of Ste. Marie's speech, the girl glanced towards the old Michel, who stood a short distance away, and so he changed to English.

"In that case," she said, regarding her work with her head on one side like a bird—"in that case you might at least tell me what your thoughts were. They might be interesting." Ste. Marie gave a little embarrassed laugh.

"I'm sorry," said he, "but I'm afraid they were too personal. I'm afraid if I told you, you'd get up and go away, and be frigidly polite to me when next we passed each other in the garden here.

"But there's no harm," he said, "in telling you one thing that occurred to me. It occurred to me that, as far as a young girl can be said to resemble an elderly woman, you bear a most remarkable resemblance to a very dear old friend of mine who lives near Dublin—Lady Margaret Craith. She's a widow and almost all of her family are dead, I believe (I didn't know any of them), and she lives there in a huge old house with a park, quite alone, with her army of servants. I go to see her whenever I'm in Ireland, because she is one of the sweetest souls I have ever known."

He became aware suddenly that Mlle. O'Hara's head was bent very low over her sewing, and that her face, or as much of it as he could see, was crimson.

"Oh I—I beg your pardon!" cried Ste. Marie. "I've done something dreadful. I don't know what it is, but I'm very, very sorry. Please forgive me if you can!"

"It is nothing," she said in a low voice, and after a moment she looked up for the swiftest possible glance and down again.

"That is my—aunt," she said. "Only—please, let us talk about something else! Of course you couldn't possibly have known."

"No," said Ste. Marie gravely. "No, of course. You are very good to forgive me." He was silent a little while, for what the girl had told him surprised him very much indeed, and touched him too. He remembered again the remark of his friend when O'Hara had passed them on the boulevard—

"There goes some of the best blood that ever came out of Ireland. See what it has fallen to!"

"It is a curious fact," said he, "that you and I are very close compatriots in the matter of blood—if 'compatriots' is the word. You are Irish and Spanish. My mother was Irish and my people were Bearnais, which is about as much Spanish as French—and indeed there was a great deal of blood from across the mountains in them, for they often married Spanish wives." He pulled the Bayard out of his pocket.

"The Ste. Marie in here married a Spanish lady, didn't he?"

The girl looked up to him once more.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I remember. He was a brave man, monsieur. He had a great soul. And he died nobly."

"Well, as for that," he said, flushing a little, "the Ste. Maries have all died rather well." He gave a short laugh.

"Though I must admit," said he, "that the last of them came precious near falling below the family standard a week ago. I should think that probably none of my respected forefathers was killed in climbing over a garden wall. *Autres temps autres moeurs.*"

He burst out laughing again at what seemed to him rather comic, but Mlle. O'Hara did not smile. She looked very gravely into his eyes and there seemed to be something like sorrow in her look. Ste. Marie wondered at it, but after a moment it occurred to him that he was very near forbidden ground, and that doubtless the girl was trying to give him a silent warning of it. He began to turn over the leaves of the book in his hand.

"You have marked a great many pages here," said he, and she said—

"It is my best of all books. I read in it very often. I am so thankful for it that there are no words to say how thankful I am—how glad I am that I have such a world as that to—take refuge in sometimes when this world is a little too

unbearable. It does for me now what the fairy stories did when I was little. And to think that it's true, true! To think that once there truly were men like that—*sans peur et sans reproche!* It makes life worth while to think that those men lived even if it was long ago."

Ste. Marie bent his head over the little book, for he could not look at Mlle. O'Hara just then. It seemed to him wellnigh the most pathetic speech that he had ever heard. His heart bled for her. Out of what mean shadows had the girl to turn her weary eyes upward to this sunlight of ancient heroism!

"And yet, mademoiselle," said he gently, "I think there are such men alive to-day if only one will look for them. Remember! they were not common even in Bayard's time. Oh yes, I think there are *preux chevaliers* nowadays—only perhaps they don't go about things in quite the same fashion.

"Other times, other manners!" he said again.

"Do you know any such men?" she demanded, facing him with shadowy eyes. And he said—

"Yes. I know men who are in all ways as honourable and as high-hearted as Bayard was. In his place they would have acted as he did, but nowadays one has to practise heroism much less conspicuously—in the little things that few people see and that no one applauds or writes books about. It is much harder to do brave little acts than brave big ones."

"Yes," she agreed slowly. "Oh yes, of course." But there was no spirit in her tone, rather a sort of apathy. Once more the leaves overhead swayed in the breeze, opened a tiny rift, and the little trembling rays of sunshine shot down to her where she sat. She stretched out one hand cupwise, and the sunbeam, after a circling gyration, darted into it and lay there like a small golden bird panting, as it were, from flight.

"If I were a painter," said Ste. Marie, "I should be in torture and anguish of soul until I had painted you sitting there on a stone bench and holding a sunbeam in your hand. I don't know what I should call the picture, but I think it would be something figurative—symbolic. Can you think of a name?"

Coira O'Hara looked up at him with a slight smile, but her eyes were gloomy and full of dark shadows.

"It might be called any one of a great number of things, I should think," said she. "Happiness—belief—illusion.

”See! The sunbeam is gone.”

## CHAPTER XXI

### A MIST DIMS THE SHINING STAR

Ste. Marie remained in his room all the rest of that day, and he did not see Mlle. O’Hara again, for Michel brought him his lunch and the old Justine his dinner. For the greater part of the time he sat in bed reading, but rose now and then and moved about the room. His wound seemed to have suffered no great inconvenience from the morning’s outing. If he stood or walked too long it burned somewhat, and he had the sensation of a tight band round the leg, but this passed after he had lain down for a little while, or even sat in a chair with the leg straight out before him, so he knew that he was not to be crippled very much longer, and his thoughts began to turn more and more keenly upon the matter of escape.

He realised of course that now, since he was once more able to walk, he would be guarded with unremitting care every moment of the day, and quite possibly every moment of the night as well, though the simple bolting of his door on the outside would seem to answer the purpose save when he was out of doors. Once he went to the two east windows and hung out of them testing, as well as he could with his hands, the strength and tenacity of the ivy which covered that side of the house. He thought it seemed strong enough to give hand and foothold without being torn loose, but he was afraid it would make an atrocious amount of noise if he should try to climb down it, and besides he would need two very active legs for that.

At another time a fresh idea struck him, and he put it at once into action. There might be just a chance, when out one day with Michel, of getting near enough to the wall which ran along the Clamart road to throw something over it when the old man was not looking. In one of his pockets he had a cardcase with a little pencil fitted into a loop at one edge, and, in the case, it was his custom to carry postage stamps. He investigated, found pencil and stamps. Of course he had nothing but cards to write upon, and they were useless. He looked about the room and went through an empty chest of drawers in vain, but at last, on some shelves in the closet where his clothes had hung, he found several large sheets of coarse white paper: the shelves were covered with it loosely for the sake of cleanliness. He abstracted one of these sheets and cut it into squares of

the ordinary note paper size, and he sat down and wrote a brief letter to Richard Hartley, stating where he was, that Arthur Benham was there, the O'Haras and, he thought, Captain Stewart. He did not write the names out, but put instead the initial letters of each name, knowing that Hartley would understand. He gave careful directions as to how the place was to be reached, and he asked Hartley to come as soon as possible by night to that wall where he himself had made his entrance, to climb up by the cedar-tree, and to drop his answer into the thick leaves of the lilac bushes immediately beneath—an answer naming a day and hour, preferably by night, when he could return with three or four to help him, surprise the household at La Lierre, and carry off young Benham.

Ste. Marie wrote this letter four times, and each of the four copies he enclosed in an awkwardly fashioned envelope, made with infinite pains so that its flaps folded in together, for he had no gum. He addressed and stamped the four envelopes, and put them all in his pocket to await the first opportunity.

Afterwards he lay down for awhile and, as, one after another, the books he had in the room failed to interest him, his thoughts began to turn back to Mlle. Coira O'Hara and his hour with her upon the old stone bench in the garden. He realized all at once that he had been putting off this reflection as one puts off a reckoning that one a little dreads to face, and rather vaguely he realised why.

The spell that the girl wielded—quite without being conscious of it: he granted her that grace—was too potent. It was dangerous, and he knew it. Even imaginative and very unpractical people can be in some things surprisingly matter-of-fact, and Ste. Marie was matter-of-fact about this. The girl had made a mysterious and unprecedented appeal to him at his very first sight of her, long before, and ever since that time she had continued, intermittently at least, to haunt his dreams. Now he was in the very house with her. It was quite possible that he might see her and speak with her every day, and he knew there was peril in that.

He closed his eyes and she came to him, dark and beautiful, magnetically vital, spreading enchantment about her like a fragrance. She sat beside him on the moss-stained bench in the garden, holding out her hand cupwise, and a sun-beam lay in the hand like a little golden fluttering bird. His thoughts ran back to that first morning when he had narrowly escaped death by poison. He remembered the girl's agony of fear and horror. He felt her hands once more upon his shoulders, and he was aware that his breath was coming faster and that his heart beat quickly. He got to his feet and went across to one of the windows, and he stood there for a long time frowning out into the summer day. If ever in his life, he said to himself with some deliberation, he was to need a cool and clear head, faculties unclouded and unimpaired by emotion, it was now in these next few days. Much more than his own well-being depended upon him now. The fates



of a whole family and quite possibly the lives of some of them were in his hands. He must not fail and he must not, in any least way, falter.

For enemies he had a band of desperate adventurers, and the very boy himself, the centre and reason for the whole plot, had been, in some incomprehensible way, so played upon that he too was against him.

The man standing by the window forced himself quite deliberately to look the plain facts in the face. He compelled himself to envisage this beautiful girl with her tragic eyes for just what his reason knew her to be—an adventuress, a decoy, a lure to a callow impressionable foolish lad, the tool of that arch-villain Stewart and of the lesser villain her father. It was like standing by and watching something lovely and pitiful vilely befouled. It turned his heart sick within him, but he held himself to the task. He brought to aid him the vision of his lady in whose cause he was pursuing this adventure. For strength and determination he reached eye and hand to her where she sat enthroned, calm-browed, serene.

For the first time since the beginning of all things his lady failed him, and Ste. Marie turned cold with fear.

Where was that splendid frenzy that had been wont to sweep him all in an instant into upper air—set his feet upon the stars? Where was it? The man gave a sudden voiceless cry of horror. The wings that had such countless times upborne him fluttered weakly near the earth and could not mount. His lady was there: through infinite space he was aware of her, but she was cold and aloof and her eyes gazed very serenely beyond, at something he could not see.

He knew well enough that the fault lay somewhere within himself. She was as she had ever been, but he lacked the strength to rise to her. Why? Why? He searched himself with a desperate earnestness, but he could find no answer to his questioning. In himself, as in her, there had come no change. She was still to him all that she ever had been—the star of his destiny, the pillar of fire by night, of cloud by day, to guide him on his path. Where then the fine pure fervour that should, at thought of her, whirl him on high and make a god of him?

He stood wrapped in bewilderment and despair, for he could find no answer.

In plain words, in commonplace black and white, the man's anguish has an over-fanciful, a wellnigh absurd look, but to Ste. Marie the thing was very real and terrible: as real and as terrible as, to a half-starved monk in his lonely cell, the sudden failure of the customary exaltation of spirit after a night's long prayer.

He went after a time back to the bed and lay down there, with one upflung arm across his eyes to shut out the light. He was filled with a profound dejection and a sense of hopelessness. Through all the long week of his imprisonment he had been cheerful, at times even gay. However evil his case might have looked,

his elastic spirits had mounted above all difficulties and cares, confident in the face of apparent defeat. Now at last he lay still, bruised, as it were, and battered and weary. The flame of courage burnt very low in him. From sheer exhaustion he fell after a time into a troubled sleep, but even there the enemy followed him and would not let him rest. He seemed to himself to be in a place of shadows and fear. He strained his eyes to make out above him the bright clear star of guidance, for so long as that shone he was safe, but something had come between—cloud or mist—and his star shone dimly in fitful glimpses.

On the next morning he went out once more, with old Michel, into the garden. He went with a stronger heart, for the morning had renewed his courage, as bright fresh mornings do. From the anguish of the day before he held himself carefully aloof. He kept his mind away from all thought of it, and gave his attention to the things about him. It would return doubtless in the slow idle hours; he would have to face it again, and yet again; he would have to contend with it: but for the present he put it out of his thoughts, for there were things to do.

It was no more than human of him—and certainly it was very characteristic of Ste. Marie—that he should be half glad and half disappointed at not finding Coira O’Hara in her place at the *rond point*. It left him free to do what he wished to do—make a careful reconnaissance of the whole garden enclosure—but it left him empty of something he had, without conscious thought, looked forward to.

His wounded leg was stronger and more flexible than on the day before: it burnt and prickled less, and could be bent a little at the knee with small distress, so he led the old Michel at a good pace down the length of the enclosure, past the rose gardens—a tangle of unkempt sweetness—and so to the opposite wall. He found the gates there, very formidable-looking, made of vertical iron bars connected by cross pieces and an ornamental scroll. They were fastened together by a heavy chain and a padlock. The lock was covered with rust, as were the gates themselves, and Ste. Marie observed that the lane outside upon which they gave was overgrown with turf and moss and even with seedling shrubs, so he felt sure that this entrance was never used. The lane, he noted, swept away to the right, towards Fort d’Issy and not towards the Clamart road. He heard, as he stood there, the whirr of a tram from far away at the left—a tram bound to or from Clamart—and the sound brought to his mind what he wished to do. He turned about and began to make his way round the rose gardens, which were partly enclosed by a low brick wall some two or three feet high. Beyond them the trees and shrubbery were not set out in orderly rows as they were near the house, but grew at will without hindrance or care. It was like a bit of the Meudon wood.

He found the going more difficult here for his bad leg, but he pressed on and in a little while saw before him that wall which skirted the Clamart road. He felt in his pocket for the four sealed and stamped letters, but just then the old

Michel spoke behind him.

"*Pardon, monsieur! Il n'est pas permis.*"

"What is not permitted?" demanded Ste. Marie, wheeling about.

"To approach that wall, monsieur," said the old man with an incredibly gnome-like and apologetic grin.

Ste. Marie gave an exclamation of disgust.

"Is it believed that I could leap over it?" he asked. "A matter of five metres? *Merci non!* I am not so agile. You flatter me."

The old Michel spread out his two gnarled hands.

"*Pas de ma faute.* I have orders, monsieur. It will be my painful duty to shoot if monsieur approaches that wall." He turned his strange head on one side and regarded Ste. Marie with his sharp and bead-like eye. The smile of apology still distorted his face, and he looked exactly like the Punchinello in a street show.

Ste. Marie slowly withdrew from his pocket two louis d'or, and held them before him in the palm of his hand. He looked down upon them and Michel looked too, with a gaze so intense that his solitary eye seemed to project a very little from his withered face. He was like a hypnotised old bird.

"*Mon vieux,*" said Ste. Marie. "I am a man of honour."

"*Sûrement! Sûrement,* monsieur!" said the old Michel politely, but his hypnotised gaze did not stir so much as a hair's-breadth.

"*Ça va sans le dire.*"

"A man of honour," repeated Ste. Marie. "When I give my word I keep it. *Voilà!* I keep it."

"And," said he, "I have here forty francs. Two louis. A large sum. It is yours, my brave Michel, for the mere trouble of turning your back just thirty seconds."

"Monsieur," whispered the old man, "it is impossible. He would kill me—by torture."

"He will never know," said Ste. Marie, "for I do not mean to try to escape. I give you my word of honour that I shall not try to escape. Besides, I could not climb over that wall, as you see.

"Two louis, Michel! Forty francs!"

The old man's hands twisted and trembled round the barrel of the carbine, and he swallowed once with some difficulty. He seemed to hesitate but in the end he shook his head. It was as if he shook it in grief over the grave of his firstborn.

"It is impossible," he said again. "Impossible." He tore the bead-like eye away from those two beautiful glowing golden things, and Ste. Marie saw that there was nothing to be done with him just now. He slipped the money back into his pocket with a little sigh, and turned away towards the rose gardens.

"Ah well," said he. "Another time perhaps. Another time. And there are more louis still, *mon vieux.* Perhaps three or four. Who knows?" Michel emitted

a groan of extreme anguish, and they moved on.

But a few moments later Ste. Marie gave a sudden low exclamation and then a soundless laugh, for he caught sight of a very familiar figure seated in apparent dejection upon a fallen tree trunk and staring across the tangled splendour of the roses.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A SETTLEMENT REFUSED

Captain Stewart had good reason to look depressed on that fresh and beautiful morning when Ste. Marie happened upon him beside the rose gardens. Matters had not gone well with him of late. He was ill and he was frightened, and he was much nearer than is agreeable to a complete nervous breakdown.

It seemed to him that perils beset him upon every side: perils both seen and unseen. He felt like a man who is hunted in the dark, hard pressed until his strength is gone and he can go no farther. He imagined himself to be that man shivering in the gloom in a strange place, hiding eyes and ears lest he see or hear something from which he cannot escape. He imagined the morning light to come very slow and cold and grey, and in it he saw round about him a silent ring of enemies, the men who had pursued him and run him down. He saw them standing there in the pale dawn, motionless, waiting for the day, and he knew that at last the chase was over and he was done for.

Crouching alone in the garden with the scent of roses in his nostrils, he wondered with a great and bitter amazement at that madman—himself of only a few months ago—who had sat down deliberately, in his proper senses, to play at cards with Fate, the great winner of all games. He wondered if, after all, he had been in his proper senses, for the deed now loomed before him gigantic and hideous in its criminal folly. His mind went drearily back to the beginning of it all, to the tremendous debts which had hounded him day and night; to his fear to speak of them with his father, who had never had the least mercy upon gamblers. He remembered, as if it were yesterday, the afternoon upon which he learnt of young Arthur's quarrel with his grandfather, old David's senile anger, and the boy's tempestuous exit from the house, vowing never to return. He remembered his talk with old David later on about the will, in which he learnt that he was now to have Arthur's share under certain conditions. He remembered how that

very evening, three days after his disappearance, the lad had come secretly to the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, begging his uncle to take him in for a few days, and how, in a single instant that was like a lightning flash, the Great Idea had come to him.

What gigantic and appalling madness it had all been! And yet, for a time, how easy of execution. For a time. Now ... He gave another quick shiver, for his mind came back to what beset him and compassed him round about. Perils seen and hidden.

The peril seen was ever before his eyes. Against the light of day it loomed a gigantic and portentous shadow, and it threatened him—the figure of Ste. Marie *who knew*. His reason told him that, if due care were used, this danger need not be too formidable, and indeed in his heart he rather despised Ste. Marie as an individual; but the man's nerve was broken and, in these days, fear swept wave-like over reason and had its way with him. Fear looked up to this looming portentous shadow, and saw there youth and health and strength, courage and hopefulness, and (best of all armours) a righteous cause. How was an ill and tired and wicked old man to fight against these? It became an obsession, the figure of this youth: it darkened the sun at noonday, and at night it stood beside Captain Stewart's bed in the darkness and watched him and waited, and the very air he breathed came chill and dark from its silent presence there.

But there were perils unseen as well as seen. He felt invisible threads drawing round him, weaving closer and closer, and he dared not even try how strong they were lest they prove to be cables of steel. He was almost certain that his niece knew something or at the least suspected. As has already been pointed out, the two saw very little of each other, but on the occasions of their last few meetings it had seemed to him that the girl watched him with a strange stare, and tried always to be in her grandfather's chamber when he called to make his inquiries. Once, stirred by a moment's bravado, he asked her if M. Ste. Marie had returned from his mysterious absence, and the girl said—

"No. He has not come back yet, but I expect him soon now—with news of Arthur. We shall all be very glad to see him, grandfather and Richard Hartley and I."

It was not a very consequential speech, and to tell the truth it was what, in the girl's own country, would be termed pure "bluff," but to Captain Stewart it rang harsh and loud with evil significance, and he went out of that room cold at heart. What plans were they perfecting among them? What invisible nets for his feet?

And there was another thing still. Within the past two or three days he had become convinced that his movements were being watched. (And that would be Richard Hartley at work, he said to himself.) Faces vaguely familiar began to

confront him in the street, in restaurants and cafés. Once he thought his rooms had been ransacked during his absence at La Lierre, though his servant stoutly maintained that they had never been left unoccupied save for a half-hour's marketing. Finally, on the day before this morning by the rose gardens, he was sure that as he came out from the city in his car he was followed at a long distance by another motor. He saw it behind him after he had left the city gate, the Porte de Versailles, and he saw it again after he had left the main route at Issy, and entered the little Rue Barbes which led to La Lierre. Of course he promptly did the only possible thing under the circumstances. He dashed on past the long stretch of wall, swung into the main avenue beyond and continued, through Clamart, to the Meudon wood, as if he were going to St. Cloud. In the labyrinth of roads and lanes there he came to a halt, and after a half-hour's wait ran slowly back to La Lierre.

There was no further sign of the other car, the pursuer, if so it had been; but he passed two or three men on bicycles and others walking, and what one of these might not be a spy paid to track him down?

It had frightened him badly, that hour of suspense and flight, and he determined to remain at La Lierre for at least a few days, and wrote to his servant in the Rue du Faubourg to forward his letters there under the false name by which he had hired the place.

He was thinking very wearily of all these things as he sat on the fallen tree trunk in the garden and stared unseeing across tangled ranks of roses. And after awhile his thoughts, as they were wont to do, returned to Ste. Marie—that looming shadow which darkened the sunlight, that incubus of fear which clung to him night and day. He was so absorbed that he did not hear sounds which might otherwise have roused him. He heard nothing, saw nothing, save that which his fevered mind projected, until a voice spoke his name.

He looked over his shoulder thinking that O'Hara had sought him out. He turned a little on the tree trunk to see more easily, and the image of his dread stood there a living and very literal shadow against the daylight.

Captain Stewart's overstrained nerves were in no state to bear a sudden shock. He gave a voiceless, whispering cry, and he began to tremble very violently so that his teeth chattered. All at once he got to his feet and began to stumble away backwards, but a projecting limb of the fallen tree caught him and held him fast. It must be that the man was in a sort of frenzy. He must have seen through a red mist just then, for when he found that he could not escape his hand went swiftly to his coat pocket, and in his white and contorted face there was murder, plain and unmistakable.

Ste. Marie was too lame to spring aside or to dash upon the man across intervening obstacles and defend himself. He stood still in his place and waited.

[image]

*"His hand went swiftly to his coat pocket."*

And it was characteristic of him that at that moment he felt no fear, only a fine sense of exhilaration. Open danger had no terrors for him. It was secret peril that unnerved him, as in the matter of the poison a week before.

Captain Stewart's hand fell away empty and Ste. Marie laughed.

"Left it at the house?" said he. "You seem to have no luck, Stewart. First the cat drinks the poison and then you leave your pistol at home. Dear! dear! I'm afraid you're careless."

Captain Stewart stared at the younger man under his brows. His face was grey and he was still shivering, but the sudden agony of fear, which had been after all only a jangle of nerves, was gone away. He looked upon Ste. Marie's gay and untroubled face with a dull wonder, and he began to feel a grudging admiration for the man who could face death without even turning pale. He pulled out his watch and looked at it.

"I did not know," he said, "that this was your hour out of doors." As a matter of fact he had quite forgotten that the arrangement existed. When he had first heard of it he had protested vigorously, but had been overborne by O'Hara with the plea that they owed their prisoner something for having come near to poisoning him, and Stewart did not care to have any further attention called to that matter: it had already put a severe strain upon the relations at La Lierre.

"Well," observed Ste. Marie, "I told you you were careless. That proves it. Come! Can't we sit down for a little chat? I haven't seen you since I was your guest at the other address—the town address. It seems to have become a habit of mine, doesn't it? being your guest." He laughed cheerfully, but Captain Stewart continued to regard him without smiling.

"If you imagine," said the elder man, "that this place belongs to me you are mistaken. I came here to-day to make a visit." But Ste. Marie sat down at one end of the tree trunk and shook his head.

"Oh, come, come!" said he. "Why keep up the pretence? You must know that I know all about the whole affair. Why, bless you, I know it all—even to the provisions of the will. Did you think I stumbled in here by accident? Well, I didn't, though I don't mind admitting to you that I remained by accident." He glanced over his shoulder towards the one-eyed Michel, who stood near by regarding the two with some alarm.

Captain Stewart looked up sharply at the mention of the will, and he wetted

his dry lips with his tongue. But after a moment's hesitation he sat down upon the tree trunk, and he seemed to shrink a little together, when his limbs and shoulders had relaxed, so that he looked small and feeble, like a very tired old man. He remained silent for a few moments, but at last he spoke without raising his eyes. He said—

"And now that you—imagine yourself to know so very much, what do you expect to do about it?" Ste. Marie laughed again.

"Ah, that would be telling!" he cried. "You see, in one way I have the advantage (though outwardly all the advantage seems to be with your side): I know all about your game. I may call it a game? Yes? But you don't know mine. You don't know what I—what we may do at any moment. That's where we have the better of you."

"It would seem to me," said Captain Stewart wearily, "that since you are a prisoner here and very unlikely to escape, we know with great accuracy what you will do—and what you will not."

"Yes," admitted Ste. Marie. "It would seem so. It certainly would seem so. But you never can tell, can you?" And at that the elder man frowned and looked away. Thereafter another brief silence fell between the two, but at its end Ste. Marie spoke in a new tone, a very serious tone. He said—

"Stewart, listen a moment!" and the other turned a sharp gaze upon him.

"You mustn't forget," said Ste. Marie, speaking slowly as if to choose his words with care—"you mustn't forget that I am not alone in this matter. You mustn't forget that there's Richard Hartley—and that there are others too. I'm a prisoner, yes, I'm helpless here for the present—perhaps—perhaps, but they are not, *and they know, Stewart. They know.*"

Captain Stewart's face remained grey and still, but his hands twisted and shook upon his knees until he hid them.

"I know well enough what you're waiting for," continued Ste. Marie. "You're waiting—you've got to wait, for Arthur Benham to come of age, or, better yet, for your father to die." He paused and shook his head.

"It's no good. You can't hold out as long as that—not by half. We shall have won the game long before. Listen to me! Do you know what would occur if your father should take a serious turn for the worse to-night—or at any time? Do you? Well, I'll tell you. A piece of information would be given him that would make another change in that will just as quickly as a pen could write the words. That's what would happen."

"That is a lie!" said Captain Stewart in a dry whisper. "A lie." And Ste. Marie contented himself with a slight smile by way of answer. He was by no means sure that what he said was true, but he argued that since Hartley suspected or, perhaps by this time, knew so much, he would certainly not allow old David to



die without doing what he could do in an effort to save young Arthur's fortune from a rascal. In any event, true or false, the words had had the desired effect. Captain Stewart was plainly frightened by them.

"May I make a suggestion?" asked the younger man. The other did not answer him and he made it.

"Give it up!" said he. "You're riding for a tremendous fall, you know. We shall smash you completely in the end. It'll mean worse than ruin—much worse. Give it up, now, before you're too late. Help me to send for Hartley, and we'll take the boy back to his home. Some story can be managed that will leave you out of the thing altogether, and those who know will hold their tongues. It's your last chance, Stewart. I advise you to take it."

Captain Stewart turned his grey face slowly and looked at the other man with a sort of dull and apathetic wonder.

"Are you mad?" he asked in a voice which was altogether without feeling of any kind. "Are you quite mad?"

"On the contrary," said Ste. Marie, "I am quite sane, and I'm offering you a chance to save yourself before it's too late.

"Don't misunderstand me!" he said. "I am not urging this out of any sympathy for you. I urge it because it will bring about what I wish a little more quickly, also because it will save your family from the disgrace of your smash-up. That's why I'm making my suggestion."

Captain Stewart was silent for a little while, but after that he got heavily to his feet.

"I think you must be quite mad," said he, as before, in a voice altogether devoid of expression. "I cannot talk with madmen." He beckoned to the old Michel, who stood near-by leaning upon his carbine, and when the gardener had approached, he said—

"Take this—prisoner back to his room!"

Ste. Marie rose with a little sigh. He said—

"I'm sorry, but you'll admit I have done my best for you. I've warned you. I shan't do it again. We shall smash you now, without mercy."

"Take him away!" cried Captain Stewart in a sudden loud voice, and the old Michel touched his charge upon the shoulder. So Ste. Marie went without further words. From a little distance he looked back, and the other man still stood by the fallen tree trunk, bent a little, his arms hanging lax beside him, and his

face, Ste. Marie thought fancifully, was like the face of a man damned.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE LAST ARROW—AND A PROMISE

The one bird-like eye of the old Michel regarded Ste. Marie with a glance of mingled cunning and humour. It might have been said to twinkle.

"To the east, monsieur?" inquired the old Michel.

"Precisely!" said Ste. Marie. "To the east, *mon vieux*." It was the morning of the fourth day after that talk with Captain Stewart beside the rose gardens.

The two bore to the eastward, down among the trees, and presently came to the spot where a certain trespasser had once leapt down from the top of the high wall and had been shot for his pains. The old Michel halted and leant upon the barrel of his carbine. With an air of complete detachment, an air vague and aloof as of one in a reverie, he gazed away over the tree-tops of the ragged park; but Ste. Marie went in under the row of lilac shrubs which stood close against the wall, and a passer-by might have thought the man looking for figs on thistles—for lilacs in late July. He had gone there with eagerness, with flushed cheeks and bright eyes; he emerged, after some moments, moving slowly, with downcast head.

"There are no lilac blooms now, monsieur," observed the old Michel, and his prisoner said in a low voice—

"No, *mon vieux*. No. There are none." He sighed and drew a long breath. So the two stood for some time silent, Ste. Marie a little pale, his eyes fixed upon the ground, his hands chafing together behind him: the gardener with his one bright eye upon his charge. But in the end Ste. Marie sighed again and began to move away, followed by the gardener. They went across the broad park, past the double row of larches, through that space where the chestnut trees stood in straight close rows, and so came to the west wall which skirted the road to Clamart. Ste. Marie felt in his pocket and withdrew the last of the four letters—the last there could be, for he had no more stamps. The others he had thrown over the wall, one each morning, beginning with the day after he had made the first attempt to bribe old Michel. As he had expected, twenty-four hours of avaricious reflection had proved too much for that gnome-like being.

One each day he had thrown over the wall, weighted with a pebble tucked

loosely under the flap of the improvised envelope in such a manner that it would drop out when the letter struck the ground beyond. And each following day he had gone with high hopes to the appointed place under the cedar-tree to pick figs of thistles, lilac blooms in late July. But there had been nothing there.

"Turn your back, Michel!" said Ste. Marie. And the old man said from a little distance—

"It is turned, monsieur. I see nothing. Monsieur throws little stones at the birds to amuse himself. It does not concern me."

Ste. Marie slipped a pebble under the flap of the envelope and threw his letter over the wall. It went like a soaring bird, whirling horizontally, and it must have fallen far out in the middle of the road near the tramway. For the third time that morning the prisoner drew a sigh. He said—

"You may turn round now, my friend," and the old Michel faced him.

"We have shot our last arrow," said he. "If this also fails, I think—well, I think the *bon Dieu* will have to help us then.

"Michel," he inquired, "do you know how to pray?"

"Sacred thousand swine, no!" cried the ancient gnome in something between astonishment and horror. "No, monsieur. *Pas mon metier, ça!*" He shook his head rapidly from side to side like one of those toys in a shop window whose heads oscillate upon a pivot. But all at once a gleam of inspiration sparkled in his lone eye.

"There is the old Justine!" he suggested. "*Toujours sur les genoux, cette im-bécile la.*"

"In that case," said Ste. Marie, "you might ask the lady to say one little extra prayer for—the pebble I threw at the birds just now. *Hein?*" He withdrew from his pocket the last two louis d'or, and Michel took them in a trembling hand. There remained but the note of fifty francs and some silver.

"The prayer shall be said, monsieur," declared the gardener. "It shall be said. She shall pray all night or I will kill her."

"Thank you!" said Ste. Marie. "You are kindness itself. A gentle soul."

They turned away to retrace their steps, and Michel rubbed the side of his head with a reflective air.

"The old one is a madman," said he. The "old one" meant Captain Stewart. "A madman. Each day he is madder, and this morning he struck me—here on the head, because I was too slow. Eh! a little more of that, and—who knows? Just a little more, a small little! Am I a dog, to be beaten? *Hein? Je ne le crois pas. Hè!*" He called Captain Stewart two unprintable names, and, after a moment's thought, he called him an animal, which is not so much of an anti-climax as it may seem, because to call anybody an animal in French is a serious matter.

The gardener was working himself up into something of a quiet passion,

and Ste. Marie said—

”Softly, my friend! Softly!” It occurred to him that the man’s resentment might be of use, later on, and he said—

”You speak the truth. The old one is an animal, and he is also a great rascal.” But Michel betrayed the makings of a philosopher. He said with profound conviction—

”Monsieur, all men are great rascals. It is I who say it.” And at that Ste. Marie had to laugh.

He had not consciously directed his feet, but without direction they led him round the corner of the rose gardens and towards the *rond point*. He knew well whom he would find there. She had not failed him during the past three days. Each morning he had found her in her place, and, for his allotted hour—which more than once stretched itself out to nearly two hours, if he had but known—they had sat together on the stone bench or, tiring of that, had walked under the trees beyond.

Long afterwards Ste. Marie looked back upon these hours with, among other emotions, a great wonder, at himself and at her. It seemed to him then one of the strangest relationships—intimacies, for it might well be so called—that ever existed between a man and a woman, and he was amazed at the ease, the unconsciousness with which it had come about.

But during this time he did not allow himself to wonder or to examine—scarcely even to think. The hours were golden hours, unrelated, he told himself, to anything else in his life or in his interest. They were like pleasant dreams, very sweet while they endured, but to be put away and forgotten upon the waking. Only, in that long afterwards, he knew that they had not been put away, that they had been with him always, that the morning hour had remained in his thoughts all the rest of the long day, and that he had waked upon the morrow with a keen and exquisite sense of something sweet to come.

It was a strange fool’s paradise that the man dwelt in, and in some small vague measure he must, even at the time, have known it, for it is certain that he deliberately held himself away from thought—realisation; that he deliberately shut his eyes, held his ears, lest he should hear or see.

That he was not faithless to his duty has been shown. He did his utmost there, but he was for the time helpless save for efforts to communicate with Richard Hartley, and those efforts could consume no more than ten minutes out of the weary day.

So he drifted, wilfully blind to bearings, wilfully deaf to sound of warning or peril, and he found a companionship sweeter and fuller and more perfect than he

had ever before known in all his life, though that is not to say very much, because sympathetic companionships between men and women are very rare indeed, and Ste. Marie had never experienced anything which could fairly be called by that name. He had had, as has been related, many flirtations and not a few so-called love affairs; but neither of these two sorts of intimacies are of necessity true intimacies at all: men often feel varying degrees of love for women without the least true understanding or sympathy or real companionship.

He was wondering as he bore round the corner of the rose gardens, on this day, in just what mood he would find her. It seemed to him that in their brief acquaintance he had seen her in almost all the moods there are, from bitter gloom to the irrepressible gaiety of a little child. He had told her once that she was like an organ, and she had laughed at him for being pretentious and high-flown, though she could upon occasion be quite high-flown enough herself for all ordinary purposes.

He reached the cleared margin of the *rond point*, and a little cold fear stirred in him when he did not hear her singing under her breath, as she was wont to do when alone, but he went forward, and she was there in her place upon the stone bench. She had been reading, but the book lay forgotten beside her and she sat idle, her head laid back against the thick stems of shrubbery which grew behind, her hands in her lap. It was a warm still morning with the promise of a hot afternoon, and the girl was dressed in something very thin and transparent and cool-looking, open in a little square at the throat and with sleeves which came only to her elbows. The material was pale and dull yellow with very vaguely defined green leaves in it, and against it the girl's dark and clear skin glowed rich and warm and living, as pearls glow and seem to throb against the dead tints of the fabric upon which they are laid.

She did not move when he came before her, but looked up to him gravely without stirring her head.

[image]

*"She did not move when he came before her."*

"I didn't hear you come," said she. "You don't drag your left leg any more. You walk almost as well as if you had never been wounded."

"I'm almost all right again," he answered. "I suppose I couldn't run or jump, but I certainly can walk very much like a human being. May I sit down?"

Mlle. O'Hara put out one hand and drew the book closer to make a place for him on the stone bench, and he settled himself comfortably there, turned a

little so that he was facing towards her.

It was indicative of the state of intimacy into which the two had grown that they did not make polite conversation with each other, but indeed were silent for some little time after Ste. Marie had seated himself. It was he who spoke first. He said—

"You look vaguely classical to-day. I have been trying to guess why and I cannot. Perhaps it's because your—what does one say: frock, dress, gown? because it is cut out square at the throat."

"If you mean by classical, Greek," said she, "it wouldn't be square at the neck at all. It would be pointed—V-shaped. And it would be very different in other ways too. You are not an observing person after all."

"For all that," insisted Ste. Marie, "you look classical. You look like some lady one reads about in Greek poems—Helen or Iphigenia or Medea or somebody."

"Helen had yellow hair, hadn't she?" objected Mlle. O'Hara. "I should think I probably look more like Medea: Medea in Colchis before Jason—" She seemed suddenly to realise that she had hit upon an unfortunate example, for she stopped short in the middle of her sentence, and a wave of colour swept up over her throat and face. For a moment Ste. Marie did not understand, then he gave a low exclamation, for Medea certainly had been an unhappy name. He remembered something that Richard Hartley had said about that lady a long time before.

He made another mistake, for to lessen the moment's embarrassment he gave speech to the first thought which entered his mind. He said—

"Some one once remarked that you looked like the young Juno—before marriage. I expect it's true too."

She turned upon him swiftly.

"Who said that?" she demanded. "Who has ever talked to you about me?"

"I beg your pardon!" he said. "I seem to be singularly stupid this morning. A mild lunacy. You must forgive me, if you can. To tell you what you ask would be to enter upon forbidden ground, and I mustn't do that."

"Still, I should like to know," said the girl watching him with sombre eyes.

"Well then," said he, "it was a little Jewish photographer in the Boulevard de la Madeleine." And she said—

"Oh!" in a rather disappointed tone and looked away.

"We seem to be making conversation chiefly about my personal appearance," she said presently. "There must be other topics, if one should try hard to find them. Tell me stories! You told me stories yesterday; tell me more! You seem to be in a classical mood. You shall be Odysseus, and I will be Nausicaa, the interesting laundress. Tell me about wanderings and things! Have you any more islands for me?"

"Yes!" said Ste. Marie, nodding at her slowly. "Yes, Nausicaa, I have more

islands for you. The seas are full of islands. What kind do you want?"

"A warm one," said the girl. "Even on a hot day like this I choose a warm one, because I hate the cold." She settled herself more comfortably, with a little sigh of content that was exactly like a child's happy sigh when stories are going to be told before the fire.

"I know an island," said Ste. Marie, "that I think you would like because it is warm and beautiful and very far away from troubles of all kinds. As well as I could make out when I went there nobody on the island had ever even heard of trouble. Oh yes, you'd like it. The people there are brown, and they're as beautiful as their own island. They wear hibiscus flowers stuck in their hair and they very seldom do any work."

"I want to go there!" cried Mlle. Coira O'Hara. "I want to go there now, this afternoon, at once! Where is it?"

"It's in the South Pacific," said he, "not so very far from Samoa and Fiji and other groups that you will have heard about, and its name is Vavau. It's one of the Tongans. It's a high, volcanic island, not a flat, coral one like the southern Tongans. I came to it one evening, sailing north from Nukualofa and Haapai, and it looked to me like a single big mountain jutting up out of the sea, black-green against the sunset. It was very impressive. But it isn't a single mountain, it's a lot of high broken hills covered with a tangle of vegetation and set round a narrow bay, a sort of fjord, three or four miles long, and at the inner end of this are the village and the stores of the few white traders.

"I'm afraid," said Ste. Marie, shaking his head—"I'm afraid I can't tell you about it, after all. I can't seem to find the words. You can't put into language—at least I can't—those slow hot island days that are never too hot because the trades blow fresh and strong, or the island nights that are more like black velvet with pearls sewed on it than anything else. You can't describe the smell of orange-groves and the look of palm-trees against the sky. You can't tell about the sweet simple natural hospitality of the natives. They're like little unsuspecting children.

"In short," said he, "I shall have to give it up, after all, just because it's too big for me. I can only say that it's beautiful and unspeakably remote from the world, and that I think I should like to go back to Vavau and stay a long time, and let the rest of the world go hang."

Mlle. O'Hara stared across the park of La Lierre with wide and shadowy eyes, and her lips trembled a little.

"Oh, I want to go there!" she cried again. "I want to go there—and rest—and forget everything!"

She turned upon him with a sudden bitter resentment.

"Why do you tell me things like that?" she cried. "Oh yes, I know. I asked you, but— Can't you see?"

"To hide oneself away in a place like that!" she said. "To let the sun warm you and the trade winds blow away—all that had ever tortured you! Just to rest and be at peace!"

She turned her eyes to him once more.

"You needn't be afraid that you have failed to make me see your island! I see it. I feel it. It doesn't need many words. I can shut my eyes, and I am there. But it was a little cruel. Oh, I know, I asked for it.

"It's like the garden of the Hesperides, isn't it?"

"Very like it," said Ste. Marie, "because there are oranges—groves of them. (And they were the golden apples, I take it.) Also it is very far away from the world, and the people live in complete and careless ignorance of how the world goes on. Emperors and kings die, wars come and go; but they hear only a little faint echo of it all, long afterwards, and even that doesn't interest them."

"I know," she said. "I understand. Didn't you know I'd understand?"

"Yes," said he, nodding. "I suppose I did. We—feel things rather alike, I suppose. We don't have to say them all out."

"I wonder," she said in a low voice, "if I'm glad or sorry." She stared under her brows at the man beside her.

"For it is very probable that when we have left La Lierre you and I shall never meet again. I wonder if I'm—" For some obscure reason she broke off there and turned her eyes away, and she remained without speaking for a long time. Her mind, as she sat there, seemed to go back to that southern island and to its peace and loveliness, for Ste. Marie, who watched her, saw a little smile come to her lips, and he saw her eyes half close and grow soft and tender, as if what they saw were very sweet to her. He watched many different expressions come upon the girl's face and go again, but at last he seemed to see the old bitterness return there and struggle with something wistful and eager.

"I envy you your wide wanderings," she said presently. "Oh, I envy you more than I can find any words for. Your will is the wind's will. You go where your fancy leads you, and you're free—free.

"We have wandered, you know," said she, "my father and I. I can't remember when we ever had a home to live in. But that is—that is different—a different kind of wandering."

"Yes," said Ste. Marie. "Yes, perhaps." And within himself he said, with sorrow and pity: "Different indeed!"

As if at some sudden thought the girl looked up at him quickly.

"Did that sound regretful?" she asked. "Did what I say sound—disloyal to my father? I didn't mean it to. I don't want you to think that I regret it. I don't. It has meant being with my father. Wherever he has gone I have gone with him, and if anything ever has been—unpleasant, I was willing, oh, I was glad, glad to



put up with it for his sake and because I could be with him. If I have made his life a little happier by sharing it, I am glad of everything. I don't regret."

"And yet," said Ste. Marie gently, "it must have been hard sometimes." He pictured to himself that roving existence lived among such people as O'Hara must have known, and it sent a hot wave of anger and distress over him from head to foot. But the girl said—

"I had my father. The rest of it didn't matter in the face of that."

After a little silence she said—

"M. Ste. Marie!" And the man said—

"What is it, mademoiselle?"

"You spoke the other day," she said, hesitating over her words, "about my aunt, Lady Margaret Craith. I suppose I ought not to ask you more about her, for my father quarrelled with his people very long ago, and he broke with them altogether. But—surely it can do no harm—just for a moment—just a very little! Could you tell me a little about her, M. Ste. Marie? What she is like and—and how she lives—and things like that?"

So Ste. Marie told her all that he could of the old Irishwoman who lived alone in her great house and ruled with a slack Irish hand, a sweet Irish heart, over tenants and dependants. And when he had come to an end the girl drew a little sigh and said—

"Thank you! I am so glad to hear of her. I—wish everything were different, so that—I—think I should love her very much if I might."

"Mademoiselle," said Ste. Marie, "will you promise me something?"

She looked at him with her sombre eyes, and after a little she said—

"I am afraid you must tell me first what it is. I cannot promise blindly." He said—

"I want you to promise me that if anything ever should happen—any difficulty, trouble—anything to put you in the position of needing care or help or sympathy—"

But she broke in upon him with a swift alarm, crying—

"What do you mean? You're trying to hint at something that I don't know. What difficulty or trouble could happen to me? Please tell me just what you mean."

"I'm not hinting at any mystery," said Ste. Marie. "I don't know of anything that is going to happen to you, but—will you forgive me for saying it?—your father is, I take it, often exposed to danger of various sorts. I'm afraid I can't quite express myself, only, if any trouble should come to you, mademoiselle, will you promise me to go to Lady Margaret, your aunt, and tell her who you are, and let her care for you?"

"There was an absolute break," she said. "Complete." But the man shook

his head, saying—

"Lady Margaret won't think of that. She'll think only of you—that she can mother you, perhaps save you grief—and of herself, that in her old age she has a daughter. It would make a lonely old woman very happy, mademoiselle."

The girl bent her head away from him, and Ste. Marie saw, for the first time since he had known her, tears in her eyes. After a long time she said—

"I promise then.

"But," she said, "it is very unlikely that it should ever come about—for more than one reason. Very unlikely."

"Still, mademoiselle," said he, "I am glad you have promised. This is an uncertain world. One never can tell what will come with the to-morrows."

"I can," the girl said with a little tired smile that Ste. Marie did not understand. "I can tell. I can see all the to-morrows—a long, long row of them. I know just what they're going to be like—to the very end."

But the man rose to his feet and looked down upon her as she sat before him. And he shook his head.

"You are mistaken," he said. "Pardon me, but you are mistaken. No one can see to-morrow—or the end of anything. The end may surprise you very much."

"I wish it would!" cried Mlle. O'Hara. "Oh, I wish it would!"

## CHAPTER XXIV THE JOINT IN THE ARMOUR

Ste. Marie put down a book as O'Hara came into the room and rose to meet his visitor.

"I'm compelled," said the Irishman, "to put you on your honour to-day if you are to go out as usual. Michel has been sent on an errand, and I am busy with letters. I shall have to put you on your honour not to make any effort to escape. Is that agreed to? I shall trust you altogether. You could manage to scramble over the wall somehow, I suppose, and get clean away; but I think you won't try it if you give your word."

"I give my word gladly," said Ste. Marie. "And thanks very much. You've been uncommonly kind to me here. I—regret more than I can say that we—that we find ourselves on opposite sides, as it were. I wish we were fighting for the same cause."

The Irishman looked at the younger man sharply for an instant, and he made as if he would speak, but seemed to think better of it. In the end he said—

"Yes, quite so! Quite so! Of course you understand that any consideration I have used towards you has been by way of making amends for—for an unfortunate occurrence."

Ste. Marie laughed.

"The poison!" said he. "Yes, I know. And, of course, I know who was at the bottom of that. By the way, I met Stewart in the garden the other day. Did he tell you? He was rather nervous and tried to shoot me, but he had left his revolver at the house—at least, it wasn't in his pocket when he reached for it."

O'Hara's hard face twitched suddenly, as if in anger, and he gave an exclamation under his breath, so the younger man inferred that "old Charlie" had not spoken of their encounter. And after that the Irishman once more turned a sharp, frowning glance upon his prisoner as if he were puzzled about something. But, as before, he stopped short of speech and at last turned away.

"Just a moment!" said the younger man. He asked—

"Is it fair to inquire how long I may expect to be confined here? I don't want to presume upon your good nature too far, but if you could tell me I should be glad to know."

The Irishman hesitated a moment, and then said—

"I don't know why I shouldn't answer that. It can't help you, so far as I can see, to do anything which would hinder us. You'll stay until Arthur Benham comes of age, which will be in about two months from now."

"Yes," said the other. "Thanks! I thought so. Until young Arthur comes of age and receives his patrimony, or until old David Stewart dies. Of course, that might happen at any hour."

The Irishman said—

"I don't quite see what—Ah, yes, to be sure! Yes, I see. Well, I should count upon eight weeks, if I were you. In eight weeks the boy will be independent of them all, and we shall go to England for the wedding."

"The wedding?" cried Ste. Marie. "What wedding?—Ah!"

"Arthur Benham and my daughter are to be married," said O'Hara, "so soon as he reaches his majority. I thought you knew that."

In a very vague fashion he realised that he had expected it. And still the definite words came to him with a shock which was like a physical blow, and he turned his back with a man's natural instinct to hide his feeling. Certainly that was the logical conclusion to be drawn from known premises. That was to be the O'Haras' reward for their labour. To Stewart the great fortune, to the O'Haras a good marriage for the girl and an assured future. That was reward enough surely for a few weeks of angling and decoying and luring and lying. That was what she

had meant, on the day before, by saying that she could see all the to-morrows. He realised that he must have been expecting something like this, but the thought turned him sick nevertheless. He could not forget the girl as he had come to know her during the past week. He could not face with any calmness the thought of her as the adventuress who had lured poor Arthur Benham on to destruction. It was an impossible thought. He could have laughed at it in scornful anger, and yet—What else was she?

He began to realise that his action in turning his back upon the other man in the middle of a conversation must look very odd, and he faced round again trying to drive from his expression the pain and distress which he knew must be there plain to see. But he need not have troubled himself, for the other man was standing before the sext window and looking out into the morning sunlight, and his hard bony face had so altered that Ste. Marie stared at him with open amazement. He thought O'Hara must be ill.

"I want to see her married!" cried the Irishman suddenly. And it was a new voice, a voice Ste. Marie did not know. It shook a little with an emotion that sat uncouthly upon this grim stern man.

"I want to see her married and safe!" he said. "I want her to be rid of this damnable, roving, cheap existence. I want her to be rid of me and my rotten friends and my rotten life." He chafed his hands together before him, and his tired eyes fixed themselves upon something that he seemed to see out of the window, and glared at it fiercely.

"I should like," said he, "to die on the day after her wedding, and so be out of her way for ever. I don't want her to have any shadows cast over her from the past. I don't want her to open closet doors and find skeletons there. I want her to be free—free to live the sort of life she was born to and has a right to."

He turned sharply upon the younger man.

"You've seen her!" he cried. "You've talked to her, you know her! Think of that girl dragged about Europe with me ever since she was a little child! Think of the people she's had to know, the things she's had to see! Do you wonder that I want to have her free of it all, married and safe and comfortable and in peace? Do you? I tell you it has driven me as nearly mad as a man can be. But I couldn't go mad because I had to take care of her. I couldn't even die because she'd have been left alone, without any one to look out for her.

"She wouldn't leave me! I could have settled her somewhere in some quiet place where she'd have been quit at least of shady rotten people, but she wouldn't have it. She's stuck to me always through good times and bad. She's kept my heart up when I'd have been ready to cut my throat if I'd been alone. She's been the—bravest and faithfulest—Well I—And look at her! Look at her now! Think of what she's had to see and know—the people she's had to live with—and look

at her! Has any of it stuck to her? Has it cheapened her in any littlest way? No, by God! She has come through it all like a—like a Sister of Charity through a city slum—like an angel through the dark!”

The Irishman broke off speaking, for his voice was beyond control, but after a moment he went on again more calmly—

”This boy, this young Benham, is a fool, but he’s not a mean fool. She’ll make a man of him. And, married to him, she’ll have the comforts that she ought to have and the care and—freedom. She’ll have a chance to live the life that she had a right to, among the sort of people she has a right to know. I’m not afraid for her. She’ll do her part and more. She’ll hold up her head among duchesses, that girl. I’m not afraid for her.”

He said this last sentence over several times, standing before the window and staring out at the sun upon the treetops. ”I’m not afraid for her.... I’m not afraid for her.” He seemed to have forgotten that the younger man was in the room, for he did not look towards him again or pay him any attention for a long while. He only gazed out of the window into the fresh morning sunlight, and his face worked and quivered and his lean hands chafed restlessly together before him.

But at last he seemed to realise where he was, for he turned with a sudden start, and he stared at Ste. Marie frowning as if the younger man were some one he had never seen before. He said—

”Ah, yes, yes! You were wanting to go out into the garden. Yes, quite so! I—I was thinking of something else. I seem to be absent-minded of late. Don’t let me keep you here!” He seemed a little embarrassed and ill at ease, and Ste. Marie said—

”Oh, thanks! There’s no hurry. However, I’ll go, I think. It’s after eleven. I understand that I’m on my honour not to climb over the wall or burrow under it or batter it down. That’s understood. I—”

He felt that he ought to say something in acknowledgment of O’Hara’s long speech about his daughter; but he could think of nothing to say, and besides, the Irishman seemed not to expect any comment upon his strange outburst. So, in the end, Ste. Marie nodded and went out of the room without further ceremony.

He had been astonished almost beyond words at that sudden and unlooked-for breakdown of the other man’s impregnable reserve, and dimly he realised that it must have come out of some very extraordinary nervous strain; but he himself had been in no state to give the Irishman’s words the attention and thought that he would have given them at another time. His mind, his whole field of mental vision had been full of one great fact—*the girl was to be married to young Arthur Benham*. The thing loomed gigantic before him, and, in some strange way, terrifying. He could neither see nor think beyond it. O’Hara’s burst of confidence

had reached his ears very faintly, as if from a great distance—poignant but only half comprehended words, to be reflected upon later in their own time.

He stumbled down the ill-lighted stair with fixed, wide, unseeing eyes, and he said one sentence over and over aloud—as the Irishman standing beside the window had said another.

”She is going to be married! She is going to be married!”

It would seem that he must have forgotten his previous half knowledge of the fact. It would seem to have remained, as at the first hearing, a great and appalling shock—thunderous out of a blue sky.

Below in the open his feet led him mechanically straight down under the trees, through the tangle of shrubbery beyond, and so to the wall under the cedar. Arrived there he awoke all at once to his task, and with a sort of frowning anger shook off the dream which enveloped him. His eyes sharpened and grew keen and eager. He said—

”The last arrow! God send it reached home!” And so went in under the lilac shrubs.

He was there longer than usual: unhampered now he may have made a larger search, but when at last he emerged Ste. Marie’s hands were over his face, and his feet dragged slowly like an old man’s feet.

Without knowing that he had stirred he found himself some distance away, standing still beside a chestnut tree. A great wave of depression and fear and hopelessness swept him, and he shivered under it. He had an instant’s wild panic, and mad, desperate thoughts surged upon him. He saw utter failure confronting him. He saw himself as helpless as a little child, his feeble efforts already spent for naught, and, like a little child, he was afraid. He would have rushed at that grim encircling wall and fought his way up and over it, but even as the impulse raced to his feet the momentary madness left him and he turned away. He could not do a dishonourable thing even for all he held dearest.

He walked on in the direction which lay before him, but he took no heed of where he went; and Mlle. Coira O’Hara spoke to him twice before he heard or saw her.

## CHAPTER XXV

### COIRA GOES OVER TO THE ENEMY

They were near the east end of the *rond point*, in a space where fir trees stood and the ground underfoot was covered with dry needles.

"I was just on my way to—our bench beyond the fountain," said she, and Ste. Marie nodded, looking upon her sombrely. It seemed to him that he looked with new eyes, and after a little time when he did not speak but only gazed in that strange manner the girl said—

"What is it? Something has happened. Please tell me what it is!" Something like the pale foreshadow of fear came over her beautiful face, and shrouded her golden voice as if it had been a veil.

"Your father," said Ste. Marie heavily, "has just been telling me—that you are to marry young Arthur Benham. He has been telling me."

She drew a quick breath, looking at him, but, after a moment, she said—

"Yes, it is true. You knew it before, though. Didn't you? Do you mean that you didn't know it before? I don't quite understand. You must have known that.

"What in Heaven's name *did* you think?" she cried, as if with a sort of anger at his dulness.

The man rubbed one hand wearily across his eyes.

"I—don't quite know," said he. "Yes, I suppose I had thought of it. I don't know. It came to me with such a—shock! Yes. Oh, I don't know. I expect I didn't think at all. I—just didn't think." Abruptly his eyes sharpened upon her and he moved a step forward.

"Tell me the truth!" he said. "Do you love this boy?"

The girl's cheeks burned with a swift crimson and she set her lips together. She was on the verge of extreme anger just then, but after a little the flush died down again and the dark fire went out of her eyes. She made an odd little gesture with her two hands. It seemed to express fatigue as much as anything—a great weariness.

"I like him," she said. "I like him—enough, I suppose. He is good—and kind—and gentle. He will be good to me. And I shall try very, very hard to make him happy." Quite suddenly and without warning the fire of her anger burnt up again. She flamed defiance in the man's face.

"How dare you question me?" she cried. "What right have you to ask me questions about such a thing? You, what you are!"

Ste. Marie bent his head.

"No right, mademoiselle," said he in a low voice. "I have no right to ask you anything—not even forgiveness. I think I am a little mad to-day. It—this news came to me suddenly. Yes, I think I am a little mad." The girl stared at him and he looked back with sombre eyes. Once more he was stabbed with intolerable pain to think what she was. Yet in an inexplicable fashion it pleased him that she should carry out her trickery to the end with a high head. It was a little less base

done proudly. He could not have borne it otherwise.

"Who are you," the girl cried in a bitter resentment, "that you should understand? What do you know of the sort of life I have led—we have led together, my father and I?—Oh, I don't mean that I'm ashamed of it! We have nothing to feel shame for, but you simply do not know what such a life is."

Though he writhed with pain, the man nodded over her. He was so glad that she could carry it through proudly, with a high hand, an erect head.

She spread out her arms before him, a splendid and tragic figure.

"What chance have I ever had?" she demanded. "No, I am not blaming him. I am not blaming my father! I chose to follow him. I chose it! But what chance have I had? Think of the people I have lived among! Would you have me marry one of them—one of those men? I'd rather die! And yet I cannot go on—forever. I am twenty now. What if my father—You yourself said yesterday—Oh, I am afraid! I tell you I have lain awake at night a hundred times and shivered with cold, terrible fear of what would become of me if—if anything should happen—to my father.

"And so," she said, "when I met Arthur Benham last winter and he—began to—he said—when he begged me to marry him.... Ah, can't you see? It meant safety—safety—safety! And I liked him. I like him now—very, very much. He is a sweet boy. I—shall be happy with him—in a peaceful fashion. And my father—"

"Oh, I'll be honest with you," said she. "It was my father who decided me. He was—he is—so pathetically pleased with it! He so wants me to be safe! It's all he lives for now. I—couldn't fight against them both. Arthur and my father.

"So I gave in. And then when Arthur had to be hidden we came here with him—to wait."

She became aware that the man was staring at her with something strange and terrible in his gaze, and she broke off in wonder. The air of that warm summer morning turned all at once keen and sharp about them—charged with moment.

"Mademoiselle!" cried Ste. Marie. "Mademoiselle, are you telling me the truth?"

For some obscure reason she was not angry. Again she spread out her hands in that gesture of weariness. She said—

"Oh, why should I lie to you?" And the man began to tremble exceedingly. He stretched out an unsteady hand.

"You—knew Arthur Benham last winter?" he said. "Long before his—before he left his home? Before that?"

"He asked me to marry him last winter," said the girl. "For a long, long time I—wouldn't.... But he never let me alone. He followed me everywhere. And my father—"

Ste. Marie clapped his two hands over his face, and a groan came to her



through the straining fingers. He cried in an agony—

”Mademoiselle! mademoiselle!”

He fell upon his knees at her feet, his head bent in what seemed to be an intolerable anguish, his hands over his hidden face. The girl heard hard-wrung, stumbling, incoherent words, wrenched each with an effort out of extreme pain.

”Fool! Fool!” the man cried, groaning. ”Oh, fool that I have been! worm, animal! Oh, fool not to see—not to know! Madman; imbecile; thing without a name!”

She stood white-faced, smitten with great fear over this abasement. Not the least and faintest glimmer reached her of what it meant. She stretched down a hand of protest and it touched the man’s head. As if the touch were a stroke of magic he sprang upright before her.

”Now at last, mademoiselle,” said he, ”we two must speak plainly together. Now at last I think I see clear, but I must know beyond doubt or question. Oh, mademoiselle, now I think I know you for what you are, and it seems to me that nothing in this world is of consequence beside that. I have been blind, blind, blind! ... Tell me one thing! Why did Arthur Benham leave his home two months ago?”

”He had to leave it!” she said, wondering. She did not understand yet, but she was aware that her heart was beating in loud and fast throbs, and she knew that some great mystery was to be made plain before her. Her face was very white.

”He had to leave it!” she said again. ”You know as well as I. Why do you ask me that? He quarrelled with his grandfather. They had often quarrelled before—over money—always over money! His grandfather is a miser, almost a madman. He tried to make Arthur sign a paper releasing his inheritance—the fortune he is to inherit from his father—and when Arthur wouldn’t he drove him away. Arthur went to his uncle—Captain Stewart—and Captain Stewart helped him to hide. He didn’t dare go back because they’re all against him, all his family. They’d make him give in.”

Ste. Marie gave a loud exclamation of amazement. The thing was incredible—childish! It was beyond the maddest possibilities. But even as he said the words to himself a face came before him—Captain Stewart’s smiling and benignant face—and he understood everything. As clearly as if he had been present he saw the angry bewildered boy, fresh from David Stewart’s berating, mystified over some commonplace legal matter requiring a signature. He saw him appeal for sympathy and counsel to ”old Charlie,” and he heard ”old Charlie’s” reply. It was easy enough to understand now. It must have been easy enough to bring about. What absurdities could not such a man as Captain Stewart instil into the already prejudiced mind of that foolish lad?

His thoughts turned from Arthur Benham to the girl before him, and that part of the mystery was clear also. She would believe whatever she was told in the absence of any reason to doubt. What did she know of old David Stewart or of the Benham family? It seemed to Ste. Marie all at once incredible that he could ever have believed ill of her—ever have doubted her honesty. It seemed to him so incredible that he could have laughed aloud in bitterness and self-disdain. But as he looked at the girl's white face and her shadowy, wondering eyes all laughter, all bitterness, all cruel misunderstandings were swallowed up in the golden light of his joy at knowing her, in the end, for what she was.

"Coira! Coira!" he cried, and neither of the two knew that he called her for the first time by her name. "Oh, child," said he, "how they have lied to you and tricked you! I might have known, I might have seen it, but I was a blind fool. I thought—intolerable things. I might have known! They have lied to you most damnably, Coira."

She stared at him in a breathless silence without movement of any sort. Only her face seemed to have turned a little whiter, and her great eyes darker so that they looked almost black, and enormous in that still face.

He told her, briefly, the truth, how young Arthur had had frequent quarrels with his grandfather over his waste of money, how after one of them, not at all unlike the others, he had disappeared, and how Captain Stewart, in desperate need, had set afoot his plot to get the lad's greater inheritance for himself. He described for her old David Stewart and the man's bitter grief, and he told her about the will, about how he had begun to suspect Captain Stewart and of how he had traced the lost boy to La Lierre. He told her all that he knew of the whole matter and he knew almost all there was to know, and he did not spare himself even his misconception of the part she had played, though he softened that as best he could.

Midway of his story Mlle. O'Hara bent her head and covered her face with her hands. She did not cry out or protest or speak at all. She made no more than that one movement, and after it she stood quite still, but the sight of her, bowed and shamed, stripped of pride, as it had been of garments, was more than the man could bear. He cried her name—

"Coira!" And when she did not look up, he called once more upon her. He said—

"Coira, I cannot bear to see you stand so! Look at me! Ah, child, look at me!

"Can you realise," he cried, "can you even begin to think what a great joy it is to me to know at last that you have had no part in all this? Can't you see what it means to me? I can think of nothing else. Coira, look up!"

She raised her white face and there were no tears upon it, but a still anguish

too great to be told. It would seem never to have occurred to her to doubt the truth of his words. She said—

"It is I who might have known. Knowing what you have told me now it seems impossible that I could have believed.—And Captain Stewart—I always hated him—loathed him—distrusted him.

"And yet," she cried, wringing her hands, "how could I know? How could I know?"

The girl's face writhed suddenly with her grief and she stared up at Ste. Marie with terror in her eyes. She whispered—

"My father! Oh, Ste. Marie, my father! It is not possible. I will not believe—He cannot have done this, knowing. My father, Ste. Marie!"

The man turned his eyes away, and she gave a sobbing cry.

"Has he," she said slowly, "done even this for me? Has he given—his honour also—when everything else was—gone? Has he given me his honour too?"

"Oh!" she said, "why could I not have died when I was a little child? Why could I not have done that? To think that I should have lived to—bring my father to this! I wish I had died.

"Ste. Marie!" she said, pleading with him. "Ste. Marie, do you think—my father—knew?"

"Let me think!" said he. "Let me think! Is it possible that Stewart has lied to you all—to one as to another? Let me think!" His mind ran back over the matter and he began to remember instances which had seemed to him odd but to which he had attached no importance. He remembered O'Hara's puzzled and uncomprehending face when he, Ste. Marie, had spoken of Stewart's villainy. He remembered the man's indignation over the affair of the poison, and his fairness in trying to make amends. He remembered other things, and his face grew lighter and he drew a great breath of relief. He said—

"Coira, I do not believe he knew. Stewart has lied equally to you all—tricked each one of you!" And at that the girl gave a cry of gladness, and began to weep.

As long as men and women continue to stand upon opposite sides of a great gulf—and that will be as long as they exist together in this world—just so long will men continue to be unhappy and ill at ease in the face of women's tears, even though they know vaguely that tears may mean just anything at all, and by no means always grief.

Ste. Marie stood first upon one foot and then upon the other. He looked anxiously about him for succour. He said: "There! there!" or words to that effect, and once he touched the shoulder of the girl who stood weeping before him, and he was very miserable indeed.

But quite suddenly, in the midst of his discomfort, she looked up to him, and she was smiling and flushed, so that Ste. Marie stared at her in utter amazement.

"So now at last," said she, "I have back my Bayard. And I think the rest—doesn't matter very much."

"Bayard?" said he, wondering. "I don't understand," he said.

"Then," said she, "you must just go without understanding. For I shall never, never explain."

The bright flush went from her face and she turned grave once more.

"What is to be done?" she asked. "What must we do now, Ste. Marie?—I mean about Arthur Benham. I suppose he must be told."

"Either he must be told," said the man, "or he must be taken back to his home by force." He told her about the four letters which in four days he had thrown over the wall into the Clamart road.

"It was on the chance," he said, "that some one would pick one of them up and post it, thinking it had been dropped there by accident. What has become of them I don't know. I know only that they never reached Hartley."

The girl nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes," said she, "that was the best thing you could have done. It ought to have succeeded. Of course——" She paused a moment and then nodded again. "Of course," said she, "I can manage to get a letter in the post now. We'll send it to-day if you like. But I was wondering—Would it be better or not to tell Arthur the truth? It all depends upon how he may take it—whether or not he will believe you. He's very stubborn, and he's frightened about this break with his family, and he is quite sure that he has been badly treated. Will he believe you? Of course if he does believe he could escape from here quite easily at any time and there'd be no necessity for a rescue. What do you think?"

"I think he ought to be told," said Ste. Marie. "If we try to carry him away by force there'll be a fight, of course, and—who knows what might happen? That we must leave for a last resort—a last desperate resort. First we must tell the boy."

Abruptly he gave a cry of dismay, and the girl looked up to him, staring.

"But—but *you*, Coira!" said he, stammering. "But *you*! I hadn't realised—I hadn't thought—it never occurred to me what this means to you." The full enormity of the thing came upon him slowly. He was asking this girl to help him in robbing her of her lover.

She shook her head with a little wry smile.

"Do you think," said she, "that knowing what I know now I would go on with that until after he has made his peace with his family? Before, it was different. I thought him alone and ill-treated and hunted down. I could help him then, comfort him. Now I should be—all you ever thought me, if I did not send him to his grandfather." She smiled again, a little mirthlessly.

"If his love for me is worth anything," she said, "he will come back—but openly, this time, not in hiding. Then I shall know that he is—what I would have

him be. Otherwise—”

Ste. Marie looked away.

”But you must remember, Coira,” said he, ”that the lad is very young, and that his family—They may try—It may be hard for him. They may say that he is too young to know—Ah, child, I should have thought of this!”

”Ste. Marie!” said the girl, and after a moment he turned to face her.

”What will you say to Arthur’s family, Ste. Marie,” she demanded very soberly, ”when they ask you if I—if Arthur should be allowed to—come back to me?”

A wave of colour flooded the man’s face and his eyes shone. He cried—

”I shall tell them, Coira, that if that wretched half-baked lad should search this wide world round, from Paris on to Paris again, and if he should spend a lifetime searching, he would never find the beauty and the sweetness and the tenderness and the true faith that he left behind at La Lierre—nor the hundredth part of them. I should say that you are so much above him that he ought to creep to you on his knees from the Rue de l’Université to this garden, thanking God that you were here at the journey’s end, and kissing the ground that he dragged himself over for sheer joy and gratitude. I should tell them—Oh, I have no words! I could tell them so pitifully little of you! I think I should only say: ’Go to her and see!’ I think I should just say that.”

The girl turned her head away with a little sob, but afterwards she faced him once more, and she looked up to him with sweet, half-shut eyes for a long time. At last she said—

”For love of whom, Ste. Marie, did you undertake this quest—this search for Arthur Benham? It was not in idleness or by way of a whim. It was for love. For love of whom?”

For some strange and inexplicable reason the words struck him like a blow, and he stared whitely.

”I came,” he said at last, and his voice was oddly flat, ”for his sister’s sake. For love of her.” Coira O’Hara dropped her eyes. But presently she looked up again with a smile. She said—

”God make you happy, my friend!” And she turned and moved away from him up among the trees. At a little distance she turned, saying—

”Wait where you are! I will fetch Arthur or send him to you. He must be told at once.” Then she went on and was lost to sight.

Ste. Marie followed a few steps after her and halted. His face was turned, by chance, towards the east wall, and suddenly he gave a great cry and smothered it with his hands over his mouth. His knees bent under him and he was weak and trembling. Then he began to run. He ran with awkward steps for his leg was not yet entirely recovered, but he ran fast, and his heart beat within him until he

thought it must burst.

He was making for that spot which was overhung by the half dead cedar tree.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### "I WON'T GO!"

Ste. Marie came under the wall breathless and shaking. What he had seen there from a distance was no longer visible, but he pressed in close among the lilac shrubs and called out in an unsteady voice. He said—

"Who is there? Who is it?" And after a moment he called again.

A hand appeared at the top of the high wall. The drooping screen of foliage was thrust aside, and he saw Richard Hartley's face looking down. Ste. Marie held himself by the strong stems of the lilacs, for once more his knees had weakened under him.

"There's no one in sight," Hartley said. "I can see for a long way. No one can see us or hear us." And he said: "I got your letter this morning—an hour ago. When shall we come to get you out—you and the boy? To-night?"

"To-night at two!" said Ste. Marie. He spoke in a loud whisper. "I'm to talk with Arthur here in a few minutes. We must be quick. He may come at any time. I shall try to persuade him to go home willingly, but if he refuses we must take him by force. Bring a couple of good men with you to-night and see that they're armed. Come in a motor and leave it just outside the wall by that small door that you passed. Have you any money in your pockets? I may want to bribe the gardener."

Hartley searched in his pockets, and while he did so the man beneath asked—

"Is old David Stewart alive?"

"Just about!" Hartley said. "He's very low and he suffers a great deal, but he's quite conscious all the time. If we can fetch the boy to him it may give him a turn for the better. Where is Captain Stewart? I had spies on his trail for some time but he has disappeared within the past three or four days. Once I followed him in his motor out past here, but I lost him beyond Clamart."

"He's here, I think," said Ste. Marie. "I saw him a few days ago."

The man on the wall had found two notes of a hundred francs each, and

he dropped them down to Ste. Marie's hands. Also he gave him a small revolver which he had in his pocket, one of the little automatic weapons such as Olga Nilssen had brought to the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. Afterwards he glanced up and said—

"Two people are coming out of the house, I shall have to go. At two to-night, then!—and at this spot. We shall be in time." He drew back out of sight, and the other man heard the cedar-tree shake slightly as he went down to the ground. Then Ste. Marie turned and walked quickly back to the place where Mlle. O'Hara had left him. His heart was leaping with joy and exultation, for now at last he thought that the end was in sight—the end he had so long laboured and hoped for. He knew that his face must be flushed and his eyes bright, and he made a strong effort to crush down these tokens of his triumph—to make his bearing seem natural and easy. He might have spared himself the pains.

Young Arthur Benham and Coira O'Hara came together down under the trees from the house. They walked swiftly, and the boy was a step in advance, his face white with excitement and anger. He began to speak while he was still some distance away. He cried out in his strident young voice—

"What the devil is all this silly nonsense about old Charlie and lies and misunderstandings and—and all that guff?" he demanded. "What the devil is it? D'you think I'm a fool? D'you think I'm a kid? Well, I'm not!" He came close to Ste. Marie, staring at him with an angry scowl, but the scowl twitched and wavered, and his hands shook a little beside him, and his breath came irregularly. He was frightened.

"There is no nonsense," said Ste. Marie. "There is no nonsense in all this whole sorry business. But there has been a great deal of misunderstanding and a great many lies and not a little cruelty. It's time you knew the truth at last." He turned his eyes to where Coira O'Hara stood near-by.

"How much have you told him?" he asked. And the girl said—

"I told him everything, or almost. But I had to say it very quickly and—he wouldn't believe me. I think you'd best tell him again."

The boy gave a short contemptuous laugh.

"Well, I don't want to hear it," said he. He was looking towards the girl. He said—

"This fellow may be able to hypnotize you, all right, but not Willie. Little Willie's wise to guys like him." And swinging about to Ste. Marie, he cried—

"Forget it! Forget it! I don't want to listen to your little song to-day. Ah, you make me sick! You'd try to make me turn on old Charlie, would you? Why, old Charlie's the only real friend I've got in the world. Old Charlie has always stood up for me against the whole bunch of them. Forget it, George! I'm wise to your graft."

Ste. Marie frowned, for his temper was never of the most patient, and the youth's sneering tone annoyed him. Truth to tell the tone was about all he understood, for the strange words were incomprehensible.

"Look here, Benham!" he said sharply. "You and I have never met, I believe, but we have a good many friends in common, and I think we know something about each other. Have you ever heard anything about me which would give you the right to suspect me of any dishonesty of any sort? Have you?"

"Oh, slush!" said the boy. "Anybody 'll be dishonest if it's worth his while."

"That happens to be untrue," Ste. Marie remarked, "and as you grow older you will know it. Leaving my honesty out of the question if you like, I have the honour to tell you that I am, perhaps not quite formally, engaged to your sister, and it is on her account, for her sake, that I am here. You will hardly presume, I take it, to question your sister's motive in wanting you to return home? Incidentally your grandfather is so overcome by grief over your absence that he is expected to die at any time.

"Come!" said he, "I have said enough to convince you that you must listen to me. Believe what you please, but listen to me for five minutes! After that I have small doubt of what you will do."

The boy looked nervously from Ste. Marie to Mlle. O'Hara, and back again. He thrust his unsteady hands into his pockets, but withdrew them after a moment and clasped them together behind him.

"I tell you!" he burst out at last—"I tell you it's no good, your trying to knock old Charlie to me. I won't stand for it. Old Charlie's my best friend, and I'd believe him before I'd believe anybody in the world. You've got a knife out for old Charlie, that's what's the matter with you."

"And your sister?" suggested Ste. Marie. "Your mother? You'd hardly know your mother if you could see her to-day. It has pretty nearly killed her."

"Ah, they're all—they're all against me!" the lad cried. "They've always stood together against me. Helen too!"

"You wouldn't think they were against you if you could just see them once, now," said Ste. Marie. And Arthur Benham gave a sort of shamefaced sob, saying—

"Ah, cut it out! Cut it out!"

"Go on then and talk, if you want to," he said. "I don't care. I don't have to listen. Talk, if you're pining for it." And Ste. Marie, as briefly as he could, told him the truth of the whole affair from the beginning, as he had told it to Coira O'Hara. Only, he laid special stress upon Charles Stewart's present expectations from the new will; and he assured the boy that no document his grandfather might have asked him to sign could have given away his rights in his father's fortune since he was a minor, and had no legal right to sign away anything at all even if he



wished to.

"If you will look back as calmly and carefully as you can," he said, "you will find that you didn't begin to suspect your grandfather of anything wrong until you had talked with Captain Stewart. It was your uncle's explanation of the thing that made you do that. Well, remember what he had at stake—I suppose it is a matter of several millions of francs. And he needs them. His affairs are in a bad way."

He told also about the pretended search which Captain Stewart had so long maintained, and of how he had tried to mislead the other searchers whose motives were honest.

"It has been a gigantic gamble, my friend," he said at the last. "A gigantic and desperate gamble to get the money that should be yours. You can end it by the mere trouble of climbing over that wall yonder, and taking the Clamart tram back to Paris. As easily as that you can end it—and, if I am not mistaken, you can at the same time save an old man's life—prolong it at the very least." He took a step forwards.

"I beg you to go!" he said very earnestly. "You know the whole truth now. You must see what danger you have been and are in. You must know that I am telling you the truth. I beg you to go back to Paris."

And from where she stood, a little aside, Coira O'Hara said—

"I beg you too, Arthur. Go back to them!"

The boy dropped down upon a tree stump which was near, and covered his face with his hands. The two who watched him could see that he was trembling violently. Over him their eyes met and they questioned each other with a mute and anxious gravity—

"What will he do?" For everything was in Arthur Benham's weak hands now.

For a little time, which seemed hours to all who were there, the lad sat still hiding his face, but suddenly he sprang to his feet and once more stood staring into Ste. Marie's quiet eyes.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" he cried, and his voice ran up high and shrill, and wavered and broke. "How do I know that? You'd tell just as smooth a story if—if you were lying—if you'd been sent here to get me back to—to what old Charlie said they wanted me for."

"You have only to go back to them and make sure," said Ste. Marie. "They can't harm you or take anything from you. If they persuaded you to sign anything—which they will not do—it would be valueless to them because you're a minor. You know that as well as I do. Go and make sure!"

"Or wait! wait!" He gave a little sharp laugh of excitement.

"Is Captain Stewart in the house?" he demanded. "Call him out here! That's

better still! Bring your uncle here to face me without telling him what it's for, without giving him time to make up a story! Then we shall see. Send for him!"

"He's not here," said the boy. "He went away an hour ago. I don't know whether he'll be back to-night or not." Young Arthur stared at the elder man, breathing hard.

"Good God!" he said in a whisper, "if—old Charlie is rotten, who in this world isn't? I—don't know what to believe." Abruptly he turned with a sort of snarl upon Coira O'Hara.

"Have you been in this game too?" he cried out. "I suppose you and your precious father and old Charlie cooked it up together! What? You've been having a fine low-comedy time laughing yourselves to death at me, haven't you! O Lord, what a gang!"

Ste. Marie caught the boy by the shoulder and spun him round.

"That will do!" he said sternly. "You have been a fool; don't make it worse by being a coward and a cad. Mlle. O'Hara knew no more of the truth than you knew. Your uncle lied to you all." But the girl came and touched his arm. She said—

"Don't be hard with him! He is bewildered and nervous, and he doesn't know what he is saying. Think how sudden it has been for him. Don't be hard with him, M. Ste. Marie."

Ste. Marie dropped his hand, and the lad backed a few steps away. His face was crimson. After a moment he said—

"I'm sorry, Coira. I didn't mean that. I didn't mean it. I beg your pardon. I'm about half dippy, I guess. I—don't know what to believe or what to think or what to do." He remained staring at her a little while in silence, and presently his eyes sharpened. He cried out—

"If I should go back there (mind you, I say, 'if!') d'you know what they'd do? Well, I'll tell you. They'd begin to talk at me one at a time. They'd get me in a corner and cry over me and say I was young and didn't know my mind, and that I owed them something for all that's happened, and not to bring their grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. And the long and short of it would be that they'd make me give you up." He wheeled upon Ste. Marie.

"That's what they'd do!" he said, and his voice began to rise again shrilly. "They're three to one, and they know they can talk me into anything. *You* know it too." He shook his head.

"I won't go back!" he cried wildly. "That's what will happen if I do. I don't want granddad's money. He can give it to old Charlie or to a gendarme if he wants to. I'm going to have enough of my own. I won't go back, and that's all there is of it. You may be telling the truth or you may not, but I won't go."

Ste. Marie started to speak, but the girl checked him. She moved closer to

where Arthur Benham stood, and she said—

"If your love for me, Arthur, is worth having, it is worth fighting for. If it is so weak that your family can persuade you out of it, then—I don't want it at all, for it would never last. Arthur, you must go back to them. I want you to go."

"I won't!" the boy cried. "I won't go. I tell you they could talk me out of anything. You don't know 'em. I do. I can't stand against them. I won't go, and that settles it. Besides, I'm not so sure that this fellow's telling the truth. I've known old Charlie a lot longer than I have him."

Coira O'Hara turned a despairing face over her shoulder towards Ste. Marie.

"Leave me alone with him!" she begged. "Perhaps I can win him over. Leave us alone for a little while!" Ste. Marie hesitated, and in the end went away and left the two together. He went farther down the park to the *rond point* and crossed it to the familiar stone bench at the west side. He sat down there to wait. He was anxious and alarmed over this new obstacle, for he had the wit to see that it was a very important one. It was quite conceivable that the boy, but half convinced, half yielding before, would balk altogether when he realised, as evidently he did realise, what returning home might mean to him—the loss of the girl he hoped to marry.

Ste. Marie was sufficiently wise in worldly matters to know that the boy's fear was not unfounded. He could imagine the family in the Rue de l'Université taking exactly the view young Arthur said they would take towards an alliance with the daughter of a notorious Irish adventurer. Ste. Marie's cheeks burned hotly with anger when the words said themselves in his brain, but he knew that there could be no doubt of the Benhams' and even of old David Stewart's view of the affair. They would oppose the marriage with all their strength.

He tried to imagine what weight such considerations would have with him if it were he who was to marry Coira O'Hara, and he laughed aloud with scorn of them and with great pride in her. But the lad yonder was very young (too young: his family would be right to that extent). Would he be able to stand against them?

Ste. Marie shook his head with a sigh and gave over unprofitable wonderings, for he was still within the walls of La Lierre, and so was Arthur Benham. And the walls were high and strong. He fell to thinking of the attempt at rescue which was to be made that night, and he began to form plans and think of necessary preparations. To be sure Coira might persuade the boy to escape during the day, and then the night attack would be unnecessary; but in case of her failure it must be prepared for. He rose to his feet and began to walk back and forth under the rows of chestnut trees, where the earth was firm and black and mossy and there was no growth of shrubbery. He thought of that hasty interview with Richard Hartley and he laughed a little. It had been rather like an exchange of

telegrams—reduced to the bare bones of necessary question and answer. There had been no time for conversation.

His eyes caught a far-off glimpse of woman's garments, and he saw that Coira O'Hara and Arthur Benham were walking towards the house. So he went a little way after them and waited at a point where he could see any one returning. He had not long to wait, for it seemed that the girl went only as far as the door with her fiancé and then turned back.

Ste. Marie met her with raised eyebrows, and she shook her head.

"I don't know," said she. "He is very stubborn. He is frightened and bewildered. As he said, a while ago, he doesn't know what to think or what to believe. You mustn't blame him. Remember how he trusted his uncle! He's going to think it over, and I shall see him again this afternoon. Perhaps when he has had time to reflect—I don't know. I truly don't know."

"He won't go to your father and make a scene?" said Ste. Marie, and the girl shook her head.

"I made him promise not to."

"Oh, Bayard," she cried—and in his abstraction he did not notice the name she gave him—"I am afraid, myself! I am horribly afraid about my father."

"I am sure he did not know," said the man. "Stewart lied to him." But Coira O'Hara shook her head, saying—

"I didn't mean that. I'm afraid of what will happen when he finds out how he has been—how we have been played upon, tricked, deceived—what a light we have been placed in. You don't know, you can't even imagine, how he has set his heart on—what he wished to occur. I am afraid he will do something terrible when he knows. I am afraid he will kill Captain Stewart."

"Which," observed Ste. Marie, "would be an excellent solution of the problem. But, of course, we mustn't let it happen. What can be done?"

"We mustn't let him know the truth," said the girl, "until Arthur is gone, and until Captain Stewart is gone too. He is terrible when he's angry. We must keep the truth from him until he can do no harm. It will be bad enough even then, for I think it will break his heart."

Ste. Marie remembered that there was something she did not know, and he told her about his interview with Richard Hartley, and about their arrangement for the rescue—if it should be necessary—on that very night.

She nodded her head over it, but for a long time after he had finished she did not speak. Then she said—

"I am glad, I suppose. Yes, since it has to be done I suppose I am glad that it is to come at once." She looked up at Ste. Marie with shadowy inscrutable eyes.

"And so, monsieur," said she, "it is at an end—all this." She made a little gesture which seemed to sweep the park and gardens.

"So we go out of each other's lives as abruptly as we entered them. Well—" She had continued to look at him, but she saw the man's face turn white, and she saw something come into his eyes which was like intolerable pain. Then she looked away.

Ste. Marie said her name twice, under his breath, in a sort of soundless cry, but he said no more, and after a moment she went on—

"Even so, I am glad that at last we know each other—for what we are.... I should have been sorry to go on thinking you ... what I thought before.... And I could not have borne it, I'm afraid, to have you think ... what you thought of me ... when I came to know.... I'm glad we understand at last."

Ste. Marie tried to speak, but no words would come to him. He was like a man defeated and crushed, not one on the highroad to victory. But it may have been that the look of him was more eloquent than anything he could have said. And it may have been that the girl saw and understood.

So the two remained there for a little while longer in silence, but at last Coira O'Hara said—

"I must go back to the house now. There is nothing more to be done, I suppose—nothing left now but to wait for night to come. I shall see Arthur this afternoon and make one last appeal to him. If that fails you must carry him off. Do you know where he sleeps? It is the room corresponding to yours on the other side of the house—just across that wide landing at the top of the stairs. I will manage that the front door below shall be left unlocked. The rest you and your friends must do. If I can make any impression upon Arthur, I'll slip a note under your door this afternoon or this evening. Perhaps even if he decides to go it would be best for him to wait until night and go with the rest of you. In any case I'll let you know."

She spoke rapidly, as if she were in great haste to be gone, and with averted eyes. And at the end she turned away without any word of farewell, but Ste. Marie started after her. He cried—

"Coira! Coira!" And, when she stopped, he said—

"Coira, I can't let you go like this! Are we to—simply to go our different ways, like this, as if we'd never met at all?"

"What else?" said the girl. And there was no answer to that. Their separate ways were determined for them—marked plain to see.

"But afterwards!" he cried. "Afterwards—after we have got the boy back to his home! What then?"

"Perhaps," she said, "he will return to me." She spoke without any show of feeling. "Perhaps he will return. If not—well, I don't know. I expect my father and I will just go on as we've always gone. We're used to it, you know."

After that she nodded to him and once more turned away. Her face may

have been a very little pale, but, as before, it betrayed no feeling of any sort. So she went up under the trees to the house, and Ste. Marie watched her with strained and burning eyes.

When, half an hour later, he followed, he came unexpectedly upon the old Michel, who had entered the park through the little wooden door in the wall, and was on his way round to the kitchen with sundry parcels of supplies. He spoke a civil "*bon jour, monsieur*," and Ste. Marie stopped him. They were out of sight from the windows. Ste. Marie withdrew from his pocket one of the hundred-franc notes, and the single bead-like eye of the ancient gnome fixed upon it and seemed to shiver with a fascinated delight.

"A hundred francs!" said Ste. Marie unnecessarily, and the old man licked his withered lips. The tempter said—

"My good Michel, would you care to receive this trifling sum? a hundred francs?"

The gnome made a choked croaking sound in his throat. "It is yours," said Ste. Marie, "for a small service—for doing nothing at all." The bead-like eye rose to his and sharpened intelligently.

"I desire only," said he, "that you should sleep well to-night, very well—without waking."

"Monsieur," said the old man, "I do not sleep at all. I watch. I watch monsieur's windows. Monsieur O'ara watches until midnight, and I watch from then until day."

"Oh, I know that," said the other. "I've seen you more than once in the moonlight, but to-night, *mon vieux*, slumber will overcome you. Exhaustion will have its way and you will sleep. You will sleep like the dead."

"I dare not!" cried the gardener. "Monsieur, I dare not! The old one would kill me. You do not know him. He would cut me into pieces and burn the pieces. Monsieur, it is impossible."

Ste. Marie withdrew the other hundred franc note and held the two together in his hand. Once more the gnome made his strange croaking sound, and the withered face twisted with anguish.

"Monsieur! monsieur!" he groaned.

"I have an idea," said the tempter. "A little earth rubbed upon one side of the head—perhaps a trifling scratch to show a few drops of blood. You have been assaulted, beaten down despite a heroic resistance and left for dead. An hour afterwards you stagger into the house a frightful object. *Hein?*"

The withered face of the old man expanded slowly into a senile grin.

"Monsieur," said he with admiration in his tone, "it is magnificent. It shall be done. I sleep like the good dead—under the trees, not too near the lilacs, eh? *Bien, monsieur, it is done!*" Into his trembling claw he took the notes, he made an

odd bow, and shambled away about his business. Ste. Marie laughed and went on into the house.

He counted and there were fourteen hours to wait. Fourteen hours, and at the end of them—what? His blood began to warm to the night's work.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE NIGHT'S WORK

The fourteen long hours dragged themselves by. They seemed interminable, but somehow they passed and the appointed time drew near. Ste. Marie spent the greater part of the afternoon reading, but twice he lay down upon the bed and tried to sleep, and once he actually dozed off for a brief space. The old Michel brought his meals. He had thought it possible that Coira might manage to bring the dinner-tray, as she had already done on several occasions, and so make an opportunity for informing him as to young Arthur's state of mind. But she did not come and no word came from her. So evening drew on and the dusk gathered and deepened into darkness.

Ste. Marie walked his floor and prayed for the hours to pass. He had candles and matches, and there was even a lamp in the room so that he could have read if he chose, but he knew that the words would have been meaningless to him, that he was incapable of abstracting his thought from the night's stern work. He began to be anxious over not having heard from Mlle. O'Hara. She had said that she would talk with Arthur Benham during the afternoon, and then slip a note under Ste. Marie's door. Yet no word had come from her, and, to the man pacing his floor in the darkness, the fact took on proportions tremendous and fantastic. Something had happened. The boy had broken his promise, burst out upon O'Hara, or more probably upon his uncle, and the house was by the ears. Coira was watched—even locked in her room. Stewart had fled! A score of such terrible possibilities rushed through Ste. Marie's brain and tortured him. He was in a state of nervous tension that was almost unendurable, and the little noises of the night outside, a wind-stirred rustle of leaves, a bird's flutter among the branches, the sound of a cracking twig, made him start violently and catch his breath.

Then at his utmost need came reassurance and something like ease of mind. He heard a sound of voices at the front of the house, and sprang to his balconied

window to listen. Captain Stewart and O'Hara were walking upon the brick-paved terrace and chatting calmly over their cigars. The man above, prone upon the floor, his head pressed against the ivy-masked grille of the balcony, listened, and though he could hear their words only at intervals when they passed beneath him, he knew that they spoke of trivial matters in voices free of strain or concern.

He drew back with a breath of relief, and at that moment a sound across the room arrested him: a soft scraping sound such as a mouse might make. He went where it was, and a little square of paper gleamed white through the darkness just within the door. Ste. Marie caught it up and took it to the far side of the room away from the window. He struck a match, opened the folded paper, and a single line of writing was there—

"He will go with you. Wait by the door in the wall."

The man nearly cried out with joy.

He struck another match and looked at his watch. It was a quarter to ten. Four hours left out of the fourteen.

Once more he lay down upon the bed and closed his eyes. He knew that he could not sleep, but he was tired from long tramping up and down the room and from the strain of over-tried nerves. From hour to hour he looked at his watch by match-light, but he did not leave the bed until half-past one. Then he rose and took a long breath, and the time was at hand.

He stood a little while gazing out into the night. An old moon was high overhead in a cloudless sky, and that would make the night's work both easier and more difficult, but, on the whole, he was glad of it. He looked to the east towards that wall where was the little wooden door, and the way was under cover of trees and shrubbery for the whole distance save a little space beside the house. He listened and the night was very still—no sound from the house below him—no sound anywhere save the barking of a dog from far away, and, after an instant, the whistle of a distant train.

Ste. Marie turned back into the room and pulled the sheets from his bed. He rolled them, corner-wise, into a sort of rope and knotted them together securely. Then he went to one of the east windows. There was no balcony there, but, as in all French upper windows, a wood and iron bar fixed into the stone casing at both ends, with a little grille below it. It crossed the window-space a third of the distance from bottom to top. He bent one end of the improvised rope to this, made it fast, and let the other end hang out. The east side of the house was in shadow, and the rolled sheet, a vague white line, disappeared into the darkness below, but Ste. Marie knew that it must reach nearly to the ground. He had made use of it because he was afraid there would be too much noise if he tried to



climb down the ivy. The room directly underneath was the drawing-room, and he knew that it was closed and shuttered and unoccupied both by day and by night. The only danger, he decided, was from the sleeping-room behind his own, with its windows opening close by; but though he did not know it he was safe there also, for the room was Coira O'Hara's.

He felt in his pocket for the pistol and it was ready to hand. Then he buttoned his coat round him and swung himself out of the window. He held his body away from the wall with one knee, and went down, hand under hand. It was so quietly done that it did not even rouse the birds in the near-by trees. Before he realised that he had come to the lower windows his feet touched the earth and he was free.

He stood for a moment where he was, and then slipped rapidly across the open moonlit space into the inky gloom of the trees. He made a half-circle round before the house and looked up at it. It lay grey and black and still in the night. Where the moonlight was upon it it was grey, where there was shadow black as black velvet, and the windows were like open dead eyes. He looked towards Arthur Benham's room, and there was no light, but he knew that the boy was awake and waiting there, shivering probably in the dark. He wondered where Coira O'Hara was, and he pictured her lying in her bed fronting the gloom with sleepless open eyes looking into those to-morrows which she had said she saw so well. He wondered bitterly what the to-morrows were to bring her, but he caught himself up with a stern determination and put her out of his mind. He did not dare think of her in that hour.

He turned and began to make his way silently under the trees towards the appointed meeting place. Once he thought of the old Michel, and wondered where that gnarled and withered watch-dog had betaken himself. Somewhere, within or without the house, he was asleep, or pretended to sleep, and Ste. Marie knew that he could be trusted. The man's cupidity and his hatred of Captain Stewart together would make him faithful—or faithless, as one chose to look upon it.

He came to that place where a row of lilac shrubs stood against the wall and a half-dead cedar stretched gnarled branches above. He was a little before his time, and he settled himself to listen and wait, his sharp ears keenly on the alert, his eyes turned towards the dark and quiet house.

The little noises of the night broke upon him with exaggerated clamour. A crackling twig was a thunderous crash, a bird's sleepy stir was the sound of pursuit and disaster. A hundred times he heard the cautious approach of Richard Hartley's motor-car without the wall, and he fell into a panic of fear lest that machine prove unruly, break down, puncture a tyre, or burst into a series of ear-splitting explosions. But at last—it seemed to him that he had waited untold

hours and that the dawn must be nigh—there came an unmistakable rustling from overhead and the sound of hard-drawn breath. The top of the wall, just at that point, was in moonlight, and a man's head appeared over it, then an arm and then a leg. Hartley called down to him in a whisper, and Ste. Marie, from the gloom beneath, whispered a reply. He said—

"The boy has promised to come with us. We shan't have to fight for it." Richard Hartley said—

"Thank God!" He spoke to some one outside and then, turning about, let himself down to arm's length and dropped to the ground.

"Thank God!" he said again. "The two men who were to have come with me didn't show up. I waited as long as I dared, and then came on with only the chauffeur. He's waiting outside by the car ready to crank up when I give the word. The car's just a few yards away headed out for the road. How are we to get back over the wall?"

Ste. Marie explained that Arthur Benham was to come out to join them at the wooden door, and doubtless would bring a key. If not, the three of them could scale fifteen feet easily enough in the way soldiers and firemen are trained to do it. He told his friend all that was necessary for the time, and they went together along the wall to the more open space beside the little door.

They waited there in silence for five minutes, and once Hartley, with his back towards the house, struck a match under his sheltering coat, looked to see what time it was, and it was three minutes past two.

"He ought to be here!" the man growled. "I don't like waiting. Good Lord, you don't think he's funk'd it, do you? Eh?" Ste. Marie did not answer, but he was breathing very fast and he could not keep his hands still.

The dog which he had heard from his window began barking again very far away in the night, and kept it up incessantly. Perhaps he was barking at the moon.

"I'm going a little way towards the house," said Ste. Marie at last. "We can't see the terrace from here." But before he had started they heard the sound of hurrying feet, and Richard Hartley began to curse under his breath. He said—

"Does the young idiot want to rouse the whole place? Why can't he come quietly?"

Ste. Marie began to run forward, slipping the pistol out of his pocket and holding it ready in his hand, for his quick ears told him that there was more than one pair of feet coming through the night. He went to where he could command the approach from the house and halted there, but all at once he gave a low cry and started forward again, for he saw that Arthur Benham and Coira O'Hara were running together, and that they were in desperate haste. He called out to them and the girl cried—

"Go to the door in the wall! The door in the wall! Oh, be quick!" He fell into step beside her, and, as they ran, he said—

"You're going with him? You're coming with us?" The girl answered him—

"No! no!" and she sprang to the little low door and began to fit the iron key into the lock. The three men stood about her, and young Arthur Benham drew his breath in great shivering gasps that were like sobs.

"They heard us!" he cried in a whisper. "They're after us. They heard us on the stairs. I—stumbled and fell. For God's sake, Coira, be quick!"

The girl fumbled desperately with the clumsy key, and dropped upon her knees to see the better. Once she said in a whisper: "I can't turn it. It won't turn," and at that Richard Hartley pushed her out of the way and lent his greater strength to the task.

[image]

*"The girl fumbled desperately with the clumsy key."*

A sudden loud cry came from the house, a hoarse screeching cry in a voice which might have been either man's or woman's, but was as mad and as desperate and as horrible in that still night as the screech of a tortured animal—or of a maniac. It came again and again and it was nearer.

"Oh, hurry! hurry!" said the girl. "Can't you be quick? They're coming." And, as she spoke, the little group about the wall heard the engine of the motor-car outside start up with a staccato roar, and knew that the faithful chauffeur was ready for them.

"I'm getting it, I think!" said Richard Hartley between his teeth. "I'm getting it. Turn, you beast! Turn!"

There was a sound of hurrying feet, and Ste. Marie spun about. He cried—

"Don't wait for me! Jump into the car and go! Don't wait anywhere. Come back after you've left Benham at home!" He began to run forward toward those running feet, and he did not know that the girl followed after him. A short distance away there was a little open space of moonlight, and in its midst, at full career, he met the Irishman O'Hara, a gaunt and grotesque figure in his sleeping suit, barefooted, with empty hands. Beyond him still, some one else ran stumbling, and sobbed and uttered mad cries.

Ste. Marie dropped his pistol to the ground and sprang upon the Irishman. He caught him about the body and arms, and the two swayed and staggered under the tremendous impact. At just that moment, from behind, came the crash of the opened door and triumphant shouts. Ste. Marie gave a little gasp of triumph

too, and clung the harder to the man with whom he fought. He drove his head into the Irishman's shoulder, and set his muscles with a grip which was like iron. He knew that it could not endure long, for the Irishman was stronger than he; but the grip of a nervous man who is keyed up to a high tension is incredibly powerful for a little while. Trained strength is nothing beside it.

It seemed to Ste. Marie in this desperate moment—it cannot have been more than a minute or two at the most—that a strange and uncanny miracle befel him. It was as if he became two. Soul and body, spirit and straining flesh, seemed to him to separate, to stand apart each from the other. There was a thing of iron flesh and thews which had locked itself about an enemy, and clung there madly with but one purpose, one single thought—to grip and grip and never loosen until flesh should be torn from bones. But apart, the spirit looked on with a complete detachment. It looked beyond—he must have raised his head to glance over O'Hara's shoulder—saw a mad figure staggering forward in the moonlight, and knew the figure for Captain Stewart. It saw an upraised arm and was not afraid, for the work was almost done now. It listened and was glad, hearing the motor-car without the walls leap forward into the night, and its puffing grow fainter and fainter with distance. It knew that the thing of strained sinews received a crashing blow upon back-flung head, and that the iron muscles were slipping away from their grip, but it was still glad, for the work was done.

Only at the last, before red and whirling lights had obscured the view, before consciousness was dissolved in unconsciousness, came horror and agony, for the eyes saw Captain Stewart back away and raise the thing he had struck with, a large revolver, saw Coira O'Hara, a swift and flashing figure in the moonlight, throw herself upon him, before he could fire, heard together a woman's scream and the roar of the pistol's explosion, and so knew no more.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### COIRA'S LITTLE HOUR

When Coira O'Hara came to herself from the moment's swoon into which she had fallen she rose to her knees and stared wildly about her. She seemed to be alone in the place, and her first thought was to wonder how long she had lain there. Captain Stewart had disappeared. She remembered her struggle with him to prevent him from firing at Ste. Marie, and she remembered her desperate

agony when she realised that she could not hold him much longer. She remembered the accidental discharge of the revolver into the air, she remembered being thrown violently to the ground—and that was all.

Where was her father and where was Ste. Marie? The first question answered itself, for, as she turned her eyes towards the west, she saw O'Hara's tall ungainly figure disappearing in the direction of the house. She called his name twice, but it may be that the man did not hear for he went on without pausing and was lost to sight.

The girl became aware of something which lay on the ground near her, half in and half out of the patch of silver moonlight. For some moments she stared at it uncomprehending. Then she gave a sharp scream and struggled to her feet. She ran to the thing which lay there motionless and fell upon her knees beside it. It was Ste. Marie, his face upturned to the sky, one side of his head black and damp. Stewart had not shot him, but that crashing blow with the clubbed revolver had struck him full and fair and he was very still.

For an instant the girl's strength went out of her and she dropped lax across the body, her face upon Ste. Marie's breast. But after that she tore open coat and waistcoat and felt for a heartbeat. It seemed to her that she found life, and she began to believe that the man had only been stunned.

Once more she rose to her feet and looked about her. There was no one to lend her aid. She bent over the unconscious man and slipped her arms about him. Though Ste. Marie was tall he was slightly built, by no means heavy, and the girl was very strong. She found that she could carry him a little way, dragging his feet after her. When she could go no farther she laid him down, and crouched over him, waiting until her strength should return. And this she did for a score of times; but each time the distance she went was shorter, and her breathing came with deeper gasps, and the trembling in her limbs grew more terrible. At the last she moved in a sort of fever, an evil dream of tortured body and reeling brain. But she had got Ste. Marie up through the park to the terrace and into the house, and, with a last desperate effort, she had laid him upon a couch in a certain little room which opened from the lower hall. Then she fell down before him and lay still for a long time.

When she came to herself again the man was stirring feebly and muttering to himself under his breath. With slow and painful steps she got across the room, and pulled the bell cord. She remained there ringing until the old Justine, blinking and half dressed, appeared with a candle in the doorway. Coira told the woman to make lights and then to bring water and a certain little bottle of aromatic salts which was in her room upstairs. The old Justine exclaimed and cried out, but the girl flew at her in a white fury, and she tottered away as fast as old legs could move, once she had set alight the row of candles on the mantel shelf. Then Coira

O'Hara went back to the man who lay outstretched on the low couch, and knelt beside him looking into his face. The man stirred and moved his head slowly. Half articulate words came from his lips and she made out that he was saying her name in a dull monotone—only her name, over and over again. She gave a little cry of grief and gladness, and hid her face against him as she had done once before, out in the night.

The old woman returned with a jug of water, towels and the bottle of aromatic salts. The two of them washed that red stain from Ste. Marie's head and found that he had received a severe bruise, and that the flesh had been cut before and above the ear.

"Thank God!" the girl said, "it is only a flesh wound. If it were a fracture he would be breathing in that horrible loud way they always do. He's breathing naturally. He has only been stunned.

"You may go now!" she said. "Only, bring a glass and some drinking water—cold."

So the old woman went away to do her errand, returned and went away again, and the two were left together. Coira held the salts bottle to Ste. Marie's nostrils, and he gasped and sneezed and tried to turn his head away from it, but it brought him to his senses—and doubtless to a good deal of pain. Once when he could not escape the thing he broke into a fit of weak cursing, and the girl laughed over him tenderly and let him be.

Very slowly Ste. Marie opened his eyes and, in the soft half light, the girl's face was bent above him, dark and sweet and beautiful—near, so near that her breath was warm upon his lips. He said her name again in an incredulous whisper—

"Coira! Coira!" And she said—

"I am here." But the man was in a strange borderland of half consciousness, and his ears were deaf.

He said, gazing up at her—

"Is it—another dream?" And he tried to raise one hand from where it lay beside him, but the hand wavered and fell aslant across his body. It had not the strength yet to obey him.

He said, still in his weak whisper—

"Oh, beautiful—and sweet—and true!"

The girl gave a little sob and hid her face.

"A goddess!" he whispered. "'A queen among goddesses!' That's—what the little Jew said. 'A queen among goddesses.—The young Juno, before—'" He stirred restlessly where he lay, and he complained—

"My head hurts! What's the matter with my head? It hurts."

She dipped one of the towels in the basin of cold water and held it to the

man's brow. The chill of it must have been grateful for his eyes closed and he breathed a little satisfied. "Ah!

"It mustn't hurt to-night," said he. "To-night at two—by the little door in the garden wall. And he's coming with us. The young fool is coming with us.... So she and I go out of each other's lives....

"Coira!" he cried with a sudden sharpness. "Coira, I won't have it! Am I going to lose you ... like this? Am I going to lose you after all ... now that we know?" He put up his hand once more—a weak and uncertain hand. It touched the girl's warm cheek and a sudden violent shiver wrung the man on the couch. His eyes sharpened and stared with something like fear.

"*Real!*" he cried, whispering. "Real? ... Not a dream?"

"Oh, very real, my Bayard!" said she. A thought came to her and she drew away from the couch, and sat back upon her heels, looking at the man with grave and sombre eyes. In that moment she fought within herself a battle of right and wrong.

"He doesn't remember," she said. "He doesn't know. He is like a little child. He knows nothing but that we two—are here together. Nothing else. Nothing!"

His state was plain to see. He dwelt still in that vague borderland between worlds. He had brought with him no memories, and no memories followed him save those her face had wakened. Within the girl a great and tender passion of love fought for possession of this little hour.

"It will be all I shall ever have!" she cried piteously. "And it cannot harm him. He won't remember it when he comes to his senses. He'll sleep again and—forget. He'll go back to her and never know. And I shall never even see him again. Why can't I have my little sweet hour?"

Once more the man cried her name, and she knelt forward and bent above him.

"Oh, at last, Coira!" said he. "After so long! ... And I thought it was another dream."

"Do you dream of me, Bayard?" she asked. And he said—

"From the very first. From that evening in the Champs Elysées. Your eyes, they've haunted me from the very first.

"There was a dream of you," he said, "that I had so often—but I cannot quite remember because my head hurts. What is the matter with my head? I was—going somewhere. It was so very important that I should go, but I have forgotten where it was and why I had to go there. I remember only that you called to me—called me back—and I saw your eyes—and I couldn't go. You needed me."

"Ah, sorely, Bayard! Sorely!" cried the girl above him.

"And now," said he, whispering.

"Now?" she said.

"Coira, I love you," said the man on the couch. And Coira O'Hara gave a single dry sob. She said—

"Oh, my dear love! now I wish that I might die after hearing you say that. My life, Bayard, is full now. It's full of joy and gratefulness and everything that is sweet. I wish I might die before other things come to spoil it."

Ste. Marie—or that part of him which lay at La Lierre, laughed with a fine scorn, albeit very weakly.

"Why not live instead?" said he. "And what can come to spoil our life for us?"

"*Our life!*" he said again in a whisper. A flash of remembrance seemed to come to him for he smiled, and said—

"Coira, we'll go to Vavau."

"Anywhere!" said she. "Anywhere!"

"So that we go together."

"Yes," she said gently, "so that we two go together." She tried with a desperate fierceness to make herself like the man before her, to put away, by sheer power of will, all memory, the knowledge of everything save what was in this little room, but it was the vainest of all vain efforts. She saw herself for a thief and a cheat—stealing, for love's sake, the mere body of the man she loved while mind and soul were absent. In her agony she almost cried out aloud as the words said themselves within her. And she denied them. She said—

"His mind may be absent but his soul is here. He loves me. It is I, not that other. Can I not have my poor little hour of pretence? A little hour out of all a lifetime! Shall I have nothing at all?"

But the voice which had accused her said—

"If he knew, would he say he loves you?" And she hid her face, for she knew that he would not—even if it were true.

"Coira!" whispered the man on the couch, and she raised her head. In the half darkness he could not have seen how she was suffering. Her face was only a warm blur to him, vague and sweet and beautiful, with tender eyes. He said—

"I think—I'm falling asleep. My head is so very, very queer! What is the matter with my head? Coira, do you think I might be kissed before I go to sleep?"

She gave a little cry of intolerable anguish. It seemed to her that she was being tortured beyond all reason or endurance. She felt suddenly very weak and she was afraid that she was going to faint away. She laid her face down upon the couch where Ste. Marie's head lay. Her cheek was against his and her hair across his eyes.

The man gave a little contented sigh and fell asleep.

Later, she rose stiffly and wearily to her feet. She stood for a little while looking down upon him. It was as if she looked upon the dead body of a lover.



She seemed to say a still and white and tearless farewell to him. Her little hour was done, and it had been, instead of joy, bitterness unspeakable: ashes in the mouth. Then she went out of the room and closed the door.

In the hall outside she stood a moment considering, and finally mounted the stairs and went to her father's door. She knocked and thought she heard a slight stirring inside, but there was no answer. She knocked twice again and called out her father's name, saying that she wished to speak to him, but still he made no reply, and, after waiting a little longer, she turned away. She went downstairs again and out upon the terrace. The terrace and the lawn before it were still chequered with silver and deep black, but the moon was an hour lower in the west. A little cool breeze had sprung up and it was sweet and grateful to her. She sat down upon one of the stone benches and leant her head back against the trunk of a tree which stood beside, and she remained there for a long time, still and relaxed in a sort of bodily and mental languor—an exhaustion of flesh and spirit.

There came shambling footsteps upon the turf and the old Michel advanced into the moonlight from the gloom of the trees, emitting mechanical and not very realistic groans. He had been hard put to it to find any one before whom he could pour out his tale of heroism and suffering. Coira O'Hara looked upon him coldly, and the gnome groaned with renewed and somewhat frightened energy.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked. "Why are you about at this hour?" The old Michel told his piteous tale with tears and passion, protesting that he had succumbed only before the combined attack of twenty armed men, and exhibiting his wounds. But the girl gave a brief and mirthless laugh.

"You were bribed to tell that, I suppose," said she. "By M. Ste. Marie? Yes, probably. Well, tell it to my father to-morrow! You'd better go to bed now." The old man stared at her with open mouth for a breathless moment, and then shambled hastily away, looking over his shoulder, at intervals, until he was out of sight.

But after that the girl still remained in her place from sheer weariness and lack of impulse to move. She fell to wondering about Captain Stewart and what had become of him, but she did not greatly care. She had a feeling that her world had come to its end, and she was quite indifferent about those who still peopled its ashes—or about all of them save her father.

She heard the distant sound of a motor-car, and at that sat up quickly, for it might be Ste. Marie's friend Mr. Hartley returning from Paris. The sound came nearer and ceased, but she waited for ten minutes before rapid steps approached from the east wall and Hartley was before her.

He cried at once—

"Where's Ste. Marie? Where is he? He hasn't tried to walk into the city?"

"He is asleep in the house," said the girl. "He was struck on the head and stunned. I got him into the house and he is asleep now.

"Of course," she said, "we could wake him, but it would probably be better to let him sleep as long as he will if it is possible. It will save him a great deal of pain I think. He'll have a frightful headache if he's wakened now. Could you come for him or send for him to-morrow—towards noon?"

"Why—yes, I suppose so," said Richard Hartley. "Yes, of course, if you think that's better. Could I just see him for a moment?" He stared at the girl a bit suspiciously and Coira looked back at him with a little tired smile, for she read his thought.

"You want to make sure," said she. "Of course! Yes, come in. He's sleeping very soundly." She led the man into that dim room where Ste. Marie lay, and Hartley's quick eye noted the basin of water and the stained towels and the little bottle of aromatic salts. He bent over his friend to see the bruise at the side of the head, and listened to the sleeper's breathing. Then the two went out again to the moonlit terrace.

"You must forgive me," said he when they had come there. "You must forgive me for seeming suspicious, but—all this wretched business—and he is my closest friend.—I've come to suspect everybody. I was unjust, for you helped us to get away. I beg your pardon!"

The girl smiled at him again, her little white tired smile, and she said—

"There is nothing I would not do to make amends—now that I know—the truth."

"Yes," said Hartley. "I understand. Arthur Benham told me how Stewart lied to you all. Was it he who struck Ste. Marie?" She nodded.

"And then tried to shoot him—but he didn't succeed in that. I wonder where he is—Captain Stewart?"

"I have him out in the car," Hartley said. "Oh, he shall pay, you may be sure! If he doesn't die and cheat us, that is. I nearly ran the car over him a few minutes ago. If it hadn't been for the moonlight I would have done for him. He was lying on his face in that lane that leads to the Issy road. I don't know what is the matter with him. He's only half conscious and he's quite helpless. He looks as if he'd had a stroke of apoplexy or something. I must hurry him back to Paris, I suppose, and get him under a doctor's care. I wonder what's wrong with him?" The girl shook her head, for she did not know of Stewart's epileptic seizures. She thought it quite possible that he had suffered a stroke of apoplexy as Hartley suggested, for she remembered the half-mad state he had been in.

Richard Hartley stood for a time in thought.

"I must get Stewart back to Paris at once," he said finally. "I must get him under care, and in a safe place from which he can't escape. It will want some

managing. If I can get away, I'll come out here again in the morning; but if not, I'll send the car out with orders to wait here until Ste. Marie is ready to return to the city. Are you sure he's all right—that he isn't badly hurt?"

"I think he will be all right," she said, "save for the pain. He was only stunned." And Hartley nodded.

"He seems to be breathing quite naturally," said he. "That's arranged then. The car will be here in waiting, and I shall come with it if I can. Tell him when he wakes." He put out his hand to her, and the girl gave him hers very listlessly but smiling. She wished he would go, and leave her alone.

Then in a moment more he did go, and she heard his quick steps down through the trees, and heard, a little later, the engine of the motor car start up with a sudden loud volley of explosions. And so she was left to her solitary watch. She noticed as she turned to go indoors that the blackness of the night was just beginning to grey towards dawn.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE SCALES OF INJUSTICE

Ste. Marie slept soundly until mid-morning—that is to say, about ten o'clock—and then awoke with a dull pain in his head and a sensation of extreme giddiness, which became something like vertigo when he attempted to rise. However, with the aid of the old Michel he got somehow upstairs to his room, and made a rather sketchy toilet.

Coira came to him there and, while he lay still across the bed, told him about the happenings of the night after he had received his injury. She told him also that the motor was waiting for him, outside the wall, and that Richard Hartley had sent a message by the chauffeur, to say that he was very busy in Paris making arrangements about Stewart, who had come out of his strange state of half insensibility only to rave in a delirium.

"So," she said, "you can go now whenever you are ready. Arthur is with his family, Captain Stewart is under guard, and your work is done. You ought to be glad—even though you are suffering pain."

Ste. Marie looked up at her.

"Do I seem glad, Coira?" said he. And she said—

"You will be glad to-morrow—and always, I hope and pray. Always, al-

ways!"

The man held one hand over his aching eyes.

"I have," he said, "queer half-memories. I wish I could remember distinctly."

He looked up at her again.

"I dropped down by the gate in the wall. When I awoke I was in a room in the house. How did that happen?"

"Oh," she said, turning her face away, "we got you up to the house almost at once." But Ste. Marie frowned thoughtfully.

"'We'? Who do you mean by 'we'?"

"Well then, I," the girl said. "It was not difficult."

"Coira!" cried the man, "do you mean that you carried me bodily all that long distance? You?"

"Carried or dragged," she said. "As much one as the other. It was not very difficult. I'm strong, for a woman."

"Oh, child, child!" he cried. And he said—

"I remember more. It was you who held Stewart, and kept him from shooting me. I heard the shot and I heard you scream. The last thought I had was that you had been killed in saving me. That's what I went out into the blank, thinking."

He covered his eyes again as if the memory were intolerable. But after a while he said—

"You saved my life, you know." And the girl answered him—

"I had nearly taken it once before. It was I who called Michel that day you came over the wall, the day you were shot. I nearly murdered you once. I owed you something. Perhaps we're even now." She saw that he did not at all remember that hour in the little room—her hour of bitterness, and she was glad. She had felt sure that it would be so. For the present she did not greatly suffer; she had come to a state beyond active suffering—a chill state of dulled sensibilities.

The old Justine knocked at the door to ask if monsieur was going into the city soon, or if she should give the chauffeur his *déjeuner* and tell him to wait.

"Are you fit to go?" Coira asked. And he said—

"I suppose as fit as I shall be." He got to his feet, and the things about him swam dangerously, but he could walk by using great care. The girl stood white and still, and she avoided his eyes.

"It is not good-bye," said he. "I shall see you soon again—and I hope, often—often, Coira." The words had a flat and foolish sound, but he could find no others. It was not easy to speak.

"I suppose I must not ask to see your father?" said he, and she told him that her father had locked himself in his own room and would see no one, would not even open his door to take in food.

Ste. Marie went to the stairs, leaning upon the shoulder of the stout old Justine, but, before he had gone, Coira checked him for an instant. She said—

"Tell Arthur, if he speaks to you about me, that what I said in the note I gave him last night, I meant quite seriously. I gave him a note to read after he reached home. Tell him for me that it was final. Will you do that?"

"Yes, of course," said Ste. Marie. He looked at her with some wonder because her words had been very emphatic.

"Yes," he said, "I will tell him. Is that all?"

"All but good-bye," said she. "Good-bye, Bayard!"

She stood at the head of the stairs while he went down them. And she came after him to the landing halfway where the stairs turned in the opposite direction for their lower flight. When he went out of the front door he looked back, and she was standing there above him—a straight, still figure, dark against the light of the windows behind her.

He went straight to the Rue d'Assas. He found that while he sat still in the comfortable tonneau of the motor his head was fairly normal, and the world did not swing and whirl about in that sickening fashion. But when the car lurched or bumped over an obstruction it made him giddy, and he would have fallen had he been standing.

The familiar streets of the Montparnasse and Luxembourg quarters had for his eyes all the charm and delight of home things to the returned traveller. He felt as if he had been away for months, and he caught himself looking for changes, and it made him laugh. He was much relieved when he found that his concierge was not on watch, and that he could slip unobserved up the stairs and into his rooms. The rooms were fresh and clean, for they had been aired and tended daily.

Arrived there he wrote a little note to a friend of his who was a doctor and lived in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs, asking this man to call as soon as it might be convenient. He sent the note by the chauffeur, and then lay down, dressed as he was, to wait, for he could not stand or move about without a painful dizziness. The doctor came within a half-hour, examined Ste. Marie's bruised head and bound it up. He gave him a dose of something with a vile taste, which he said would take away the worst of the pain in a few hours, and he also gave him a sleeping potion, and made him go to bed.

"You'll be fairly fit by evening," he said. "But don't stir until then. I'll leave word below that you're not to be disturbed."

So it happened that when Richard Hartley came dashing up an hour or two later he was not allowed to see his friend, and Ste. Marie slept a dreamless sleep until dark.

He awoke then, refreshed but ravenous with hunger, and found that there was only a dull ache in his battered head. The dizziness and the vertigo were

almost completely gone. He made lights and dressed with care. He felt like a little girl making ready for a party; it was so long—or seemed so long—since he had put on evening clothes. Then he went out, leaving at the loge of the concierge a note for Hartley to say where he might be found. He went to Lavenue's and dined in solitary pomp, for it was after nine o'clock. Again it seemed to him that it was months since he had done the like—sat down to a real table for a real dinner. At ten he got into a fiacre and drove to the Rue de l'Université.

The man who admitted him said that mademoiselle was alone in the drawing-room, and he went there at once. He was dully conscious that something was very wrong, but he had suffered too much within the past few hours to be analytical, and he did not know what it was that was wrong. He should have entered that room with a swift and eager step, with shining eyes, with a high-beating heart. He went into it slowly, wrapped in a mantle of strange apathy.

Helen Benham came forward to meet him and took both his hands in hers. Ste. Marie was amazed to see that she seemed not to have altered at all—in spite of this enormous lapse of time, in spite of all that had happened in it. And yet, unaltered, she seemed to him a stranger, a charming and gracious stranger with an icily beautiful face. He wondered at her and at himself, and he was a little alarmed, because he thought that he must be ill. That blow upon the head must, after all, have done something terrible to him.

"Ah, Ste. Marie!" she said in her well-remembered voice—and again he wondered that the voice should be so high-pitched, and so without colour or feeling. "How glad I am," she said, "that you are safely out of it all! How you have suffered for us, Ste. Marie! You look white and ill. Sit down, please! Don't stand!" She drew him to a comfortable chair, and he sat down in it obediently. He could not think of anything to say, though he was not, as a rule, tongue-tied, but the girl did not seem to expect any answer, for she went on at once with a rather odd air of haste—

"Arthur is here with us, safe and sound. Richard Hartley brought him back from that dreadful place, and he has talked everything over with my grandfather, and it's all right. They both understand now, and there'll be no more trouble. We have had to be careful, very careful, and we have had to—well, to rearrange the facts a little so as to leave—my uncle—to leave Captain Stewart's name out of it. It would not do to shock my grandfather by telling him the truth. Perhaps, later; I don't know. That will have to be thought of. For the present we have left my uncle out of it—and put the blame entirely upon this other man. I forget his name."

"The blame cannot rest there," said Ste. Marie sharply. "It is not deserved, and I shall not allow it to be left so. Captain Stewart lied to O'Hara throughout.

You cannot leave the blame with an innocent man."

"Still—" she said, "such a man!"

Ste. Marie looked at her, frowning, and the girl turned her eyes away. She may have had the grace to be a little ashamed.

"Think of the difficulty we were in!" she urged. "Captain Stewart is my grandfather's own son. We cannot tell him now, in his weak state, that his own son is—what he is."

There was reason if not justice in that, and Ste. Marie was forced to admit it. He said—

"Ah well! for the present, then. That can be arranged later. The main point is that I've found your brother for you. I've brought him back."

Miss Benham looked up at him and away again, and she drew a quick breath. He saw her hands move restlessly in her lap, and he was aware that for some odd reason she was very ill at ease. At last she said—

"Ah, but—but have you, dear Ste. Marie? Have you?"

After a brief silence she stole another swift glance at the man, and he was staring in open and frank bewilderment. She rushed into rapid speech.

"Ah," she cried, "don't misunderstand me! Don't think that I'm brutal or ungrateful for all you've—you've suffered in trying to help us. Don't think that! I can—we can never be grateful enough, never! But stop and think! Yes, I know this all sounds hideous, but it's so terribly important. I shouldn't dream of saying a word of it if it weren't so important, if so much didn't depend upon it. But stop and think! Was it, dear Ste. Marie, was it, after all, you? Was it you who brought Arthur to us?"

The man fairly blinked at her, owl-like. He was beyond speech.

"Wasn't it Richard?" she hurried on. "Wasn't it Richard Hartley? Ah, if I could only say it without seeming so contemptibly heartless! If only I needn't say it at all! But it must be said because of what depends upon it.

"Think! Go back to the beginning! Wasn't it Richard who first began to suspect my uncle? Didn't he tell you or write to you what he had discovered, and so set you upon the right track? And after you had—well, just fallen into their hands, with no hope of ever escaping, yourself—to say nothing of bringing Arthur back—wasn't it Richard who came to your rescue and brought it all to victory? Oh, Ste. Marie, I must be just to him as well as to you! Don't you see that? However grateful I may be to you for what you have done—suffered—I cannot, in justice, give you what I was to have given you, since it is, after all, Richard who has saved my brother. I cannot, can I? Surely you must see it. And you must see how it hurts me to have to say it. I had hoped that—you would understand—without my speaking."

Still the man sat in his trance of astonishment, speechless. For the first time

in his life he was brought face to face with the amazing, the appalling injustice of which a woman is capable when her heart is concerned. This girl wished to believe that to Richard Hartley belonged the credit for rescuing her brother, and, lo! she believed it. A score of juries might have decided against her, a hundred proofs controverted her decision, but she would have been deaf and blind. It is only women who accomplish miracles of reasoning like that.

Ste. Marie took a long breath and he started to speak, but in the end shook his head and remained silent. Through the whirl and din of falling skies he was yet able to see the utter futility of words. He could have adduced a hundred arguments to prove her absurdity. He could have shown her that before he ever read Hartley's note he had decided upon Stewart's guilt—and for much better reasons than Hartley had. He could have pointed out to her that it was he, not Hartley, who discovered young Benham's whereabouts; that it was he who summoned Hartley there; and that, as a matter of fact, Hartley need not have come at all, since the boy had been persuaded to go home in any case.

He thought of all these things and more, and, in a moment of sheer anger at her injustice, he was on the point of stating them, but he shook his head and remained silent. After all, of what use was speech? He knew that it could make no impression upon her, and he knew why. For some reason, in some way, she had turned, during his absence, to Richard Hartley, and there was nothing more to be said. There was no treachery on Hartley's part. He knew that, and it never even occurred to him to blame his friend. Hartley was as faithful as any one who ever lived. It seemed to be nobody's fault. It had just happened.

He looked at the girl before him with a new expression, an expression of sheer curiosity. It seemed to him wellnigh incredible that any human being could be so unjust and so blind. Yet he knew her to be, in other matters, one of the fairest of all women, just and tender and thoughtful and true. He knew that she prided herself upon her cool impartiality of judgment. He shook his head with a little sigh, and ceased to wonder any more. It was beyond him.

He became aware that he ought to say something, and he said—

"Yes. Yes, I—see. I see what you mean. Yes, Hartley did all you say. I hadn't meant to rob Hartley of the credit he deserves. I suppose you're right." He was possessed of a sudden longing to get away out of that room, and he rose to his feet.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I think I'd better go. This is—well, it's a bit of a facer, you see. I want to think it over. Perhaps to-morrow—you don't mind?" He saw a swift relief flash into Miss Benham's eyes, but she murmured a few words of protest that had a rather perfunctory sound. Ste. Marie shook his head.

"Thanks! I won't stay," said he. "Not just now. I—think I'd better go." He had a confused realisation of platitudinous adieux, of a silly formality of speech,



and he found himself in the hall. Once he glanced back, and Miss Benham was standing where he had left her, looking after him with a calm and unimpassioned face. He thought that she looked rather like a very beautiful statue.

The butler came to him to say that Mr. Stewart would be glad if he would look in before leaving the house, and so he went upstairs and knocked at old David's door. He moved like a man in a dream, and the things about him seemed to be curiously unreal and rather far away, as they seem sometimes in a fever.

He was admitted at once, and he found the old man sitting up in bed, clad in one of his incredibly gorgeous mandarin's jackets—plum-coloured satin, this time, with peonies—overflowing with spirits and good-humour. His grandson sat in a chair near at hand. The old man gave a shout of welcome—

"Ah, here's Jason, at last, back from Colchis. Welcome home to—whatever the name of the place was. Welcome home!" He shook Ste. Marie's hand with hospitable violence, and Ste. Marie was astonished to see upon what a new lease of life and strength the old man seemed to have entered. There was no ingratitude or misconception here, certainly. Old David quite overwhelmed his visitor with thanks and with expressions of affection.

"You've saved my life among other things!" he said in his gruff roar. "I was ready to go, but, by the Lord, I'm going to stay a while longer now! This world's a better place than I thought—a much better place." He shook a heavily-waggish head.

"If I didn't know," said he, "what your reward is to be for what you've done, I should be in despair over it all, because there is nothing else in the world that would be anything like adequate. You've been making sure of the reward downstairs, I dare say? Eh, what? Yes?"

"You mean—?" asked the younger man.

And old David said—

"I mean Helen, of course. What else?"

Ste. Marie was not quite himself. At another time he might have got out of the room with an evasive answer, but he spoke without thinking. He said—

"Oh—yes! I suppose—I suppose I ought to tell you that Miss Benham—well, she has changed her mind. That is to say—"

"What!" shouted old David Stewart, in his great voice. "What is that?"

"Why, it seems," said Ste. Marie, "it seems that I only blundered. It seems that Hartley rescued your grandson, not I. And I suppose he did, you know. When you come to think of it, I suppose he did."

David Stewart's great white beard seemed to bristle like the ruff of an angry dog, and his eyes flashed fiercely under their shaggy brows.

"Do you mean to tell me that after all you've done and—and gone through, Helen has thrown you over? Do you mean to tell me that?"

"Well," argued Ste. Marie uncomfortably, "well, you see, she seems to be right. I did bungle it, didn't I? It was Hartley who came and pulled us out of the hole."

"Hartley be damned!" cried the old man in a towering rage. And he began to pour out the most extraordinary flood of furious invective upon his granddaughter and upon Richard Hartley, whom he quite unjustly termed a snake-in-the-grass, and finally upon all women, past, contemporary or still to be born.

Ste. Marie, in fear of old David's health, tried to calm him, and the faithful valet came running from the room beyond with prayers and protestations, but nothing would check that astonishing flow of fury until it had run its full course. Then the man fell back upon his pillows, crimson, panting and exhausted; but the fierce eyes glittered still, and they boded no good for Miss Helen Benham.

"You're well rid of her!" said the old gentleman, when at last he was once more able to speak. "You're well rid of her. I congratulate you! I am ashamed and humiliated, and a great burden of obligation is shifted to me—though I assume it with pleasure—but I congratulate you. You might have found out too late what sort of a woman she is."

Ste. Marie began to protest and to explain, and say that Miss Benham had been quite right in what she said, but the old gentleman only waved an impatient arm to him; and presently, when he saw the valet making signs across the bed, and saw that his host was really in a state of complete exhaustion after the outburst, he made his adieux and got away.

Young Arthur Benham, who had been sitting almost silent during the interview, followed him out of the room, and closed the door behind them. For the first time Ste. Marie noted that the boy's face was white and strained. Young Arthur pulled a crumpled square of folded paper from his pocket and shook it at the other man.

"Do you know what this is?" he cried. "Do you know what's in this?" Ste. Marie shook his head, but a sudden recollection came to him.

"Ah!" said he, "that must be the note Mlle. O'Hara spoke of. She asked me to tell you that she meant it—whatever it may be—quite seriously; that it was final. She didn't explain. She just said that; that you were to take it as final."

The lad gave a sudden, very bitter sob.

"She has thrown me over!" he said. "She says I'm not to come back to her." Ste. Marie gave a wordless cry, and he began to tremble.

"You can read it if you want to," the boy said. "Perhaps you can explain it. I can't. Do you want to read it?" The elder man stood staring at him whitely, and the boy repeated his words. He said—

"You can read it if you want to," and at last Ste. Marie took the paper between stiff hands and held it to the light. Coira O'Hara said briefly that too much

was against their marriage. She mentioned his age, the certain hostility of his family, their different tastes, a number of other things. But in the end she said she had begun to realise that she did not love him as she ought to do if they were to marry. And so, the note said finally, she gave him up to his family, she released him altogether, and she begged him not to come back to her or to urge her to change her mind. Also she made the trite but very sensible observation that he would be glad of his freedom before the year was out.

Ste. Marie's unsteady fingers opened, and the crumpled paper slipped through them to the floor. Over it the man and the boy looked at each other in silence. Young Arthur Benham's face was white, and it was strained and contorted with its first grief. But first griefs do not last very long. Coira O'Hara had told the truth; before the year was out the lad would be glad of his freedom. But the man's face was white also, white and still, and his eyes held a strange expression which the boy could not understand, and at which he wondered. The man was trembling a little from head to foot. The boy wondered about that too, but abruptly he cried out—

"What's up? Where are you going?" for Ste. Marie had turned all at once and was running down the stairs as fast as he could run.

## CHAPTER XXX

### JOURNEY'S END

In the hall below Ste. Marie came violently into contact with and nearly overturned Richard Hartley, who was just giving his hat and stick to the man who had admitted him. Hartley seized upon him with an exclamation of pleasure, and wheeled him round to face the light. He said—

"I've been pursuing you all day. You're almost as difficult of access here in Paris as you were at La Lierre. How's the head?"

Ste. Marie put up an experimental hand. He had forgotten his injury.

"Oh, that's all right," said he. "At least I think so. Anderson fixed me up this afternoon. But I haven't time to talk to you. I'm in a hurry. To-morrow we'll have a long chin. Oh, how about Stewart?" He lowered his voice, and Hartley answered him in the same tone.

"The man is in a delirium. Heaven knows how it'll end. He may die, and he may pull through. I hope he pulls through—except for the sake of the family—

because then we can make him pay for what he's done. I don't want him to go scot free by dying."

"Nor I!" said Ste. Marie fiercely. "Nor I! I want him to pay too—long and slowly and hard, and, if he lives, I shall see that he does it, family or no family. Now I must be off." Ste. Marie's face was shining and uplifted. The other man looked at it with a little envious sigh.

"I see everything is all right," said he. "And I congratulate you. You deserve it if ever any one did."

Ste. Marie stared for an instant uncomprehending. Then he saw.

"Yes," he said gently. "Everything is all right." It was plain that the Englishman did not know of Miss Benham's decision. He was incapable of deceit. Ste. Marie threw an arm over his friend's shoulder, and went with him a little way towards the drawing-room.

"Go in there," he said. "You'll find some one glad to see you, I think. And remember that I said everything is all right." He came back after he had turned away, and met Hartley's puzzled frown with a smile.

"If you've that motor here, may I use it?" he asked. "I want to go somewhere in a hurry."

"Of course!" the other man said. "Of course! I'll go home in a cab."

So they parted, and Ste. Marie went out to the waiting car.

On the left bank the streets are nearly empty of traffic at night, and one can make excellent time over them. Ste. Marie reached the Porte de Versailles, at the city's limits, in twenty minutes, and dashed through Issy five minutes later. In less than half an hour from the time he had left the Rue de l'Université he was under the walls of La Lierre. He looked at his watch, and it was not quite half-past eleven.

He tried the little door in the wall, and it was unlocked, so he passed in and closed the door behind him. Inside he found that he was running, and he gave a little laugh, but of eagerness and excitement, not of mirth. There were dim lights in one or two of the upper windows, but none below, and there was no one about. He pulled at the door bell, and, after a few impatient moments, pulled again and still again. Then he noticed that the heavy door was ajar, and since no one answered his ringing he pushed the door open and went in.

The lower hall was quite dark, but a very faint light came down from above through the well of the staircase. He heard dragging feet in the upper hall and then upon one of the upper flights, for the stairs, broad below, divided at a half way landing and continued upward, in an opposite direction, in two narrower flights. A voice, very faint and weary, called—

"Who is there? Who is ringing, please?" And Coira O'Hara, holding a candle in her hand, came upon the stair landing, and stood gazing down into the

darkness. She wore a sort of dressing gown, a heavy white garment which hung in straight long folds to her feet, and fell away from the arm that held the candle on high. The yellow beams of light struck down across her head and face, and, even at the distance, the man could see how white she was, and hollow-eyed and worn—a pale wraith of the splendid beauty that had walked in the garden at La Lierre.

"Who is there, please?" she asked again. "I can't see. What is it?"

"It is I, Coira!" said Ste. Marie, and she gave a sharp cry. The arm which was holding the candle overhead shook and fell beside her, as if the strength had gone out of it. The candle dropped to the floor, spluttered there for an instant, and went out, but there was still a little light from the hall above.

Ste. Marie sprang up the stairs to where the girl stood, and caught her in his arms, for she was on the verge of faintness. Her head fell back away from him, and he saw her eyes through half-closed lids, her white teeth through parted lips. She was trembling, but, for that matter, so was he, at the touch of her, the heavy and sweet burden in his arms. She tried to speak, and he heard a whisper—

"Why? Why? Why?"

"Because it is my place, Coira!" said he. "Because I cannot live away from you. Because we belong together."

The girl struggled weakly and pushed against him. Once more he heard whispering words, and made out that she tried to say—

"Go back to her! Go back to her! You belong there." But at that he laughed aloud.

"I thought so too," said he. "But she thinks otherwise. She'll have none of me, Coira. It's Richard Hartley now. Coira, can you love a jilted man? I've been jilted—thrown over—dismissed."

Her head came up in a flash, and she stared at him, suddenly rigid and tense in his arms.

"Is that true?" she demanded.

"Yes, my love!" said he, and she began to weep, with long, comfortable sobs, her face hidden in the hollow of his shoulder. On one other occasion she had wept before him, and he had been horribly embarrassed, but he bore this present tempest without, as it were, winking. He gloried in it. He tried to say so. He tried to whisper to her, his lips pressed close to the ear that was nearest them, but he found that he had no speech. Words would not come to his tongue; it trembled and faltered, and was still for sheer inadequacy.

Rather oddly, in that his thoughts were chaos, swallowed up in the surge of feeling, a memory struck through to him of that other exaltation which had swept him to the stars. He looked upon it and was amazed because now he saw it, in clear light, for the thing it had been. He saw it for a fantasy, a self-evoked

wraith of the imagination, a dizzy flight of the spirit through spirit space. He saw that it had not been love at all, and he realised how little a part Helen Benham had ever really played in it. A cold and still-eyed figure for him to wrap the veil of his imagination round, that was what she had been. There were times when the sweep of his upward flight had stirred her a little, wakened in her some vague response, but for the most part she had stood aside and looked on, wondering.

The mist was rent away from that rainbow-painted cobweb, and at last the man saw and understood. He gave an exclamation of wonder, and the girl who loved him raised her head once more, and the two looked each into the other's eyes for a long time. They fell into hushed and broken speech.

"I have loved you so long, so long!" she said, "and so hopelessly. I never thought—I never believed.—To think that in the end you have come to me! I cannot believe it!"

"Wait and see!" cried the man. "Wait and see!" She shivered a little.

"If it is not true I should like to die before I find out. I should like to die now, Bayard, with your arms holding me up, and your eyes close, close."

Ste. Marie's arms tightened round her with a sudden fierceness. He hurt her, and she smiled up at him. Their two hearts beat one against the other, and they beat very fast.

"Don't you understand," he cried, "that life's only just beginning—day's just dawning, Coira? We've been lost in the dark. Day's coming now. This is only the sunrise."

"I can believe it at last," she said, "because you hold me close, and you hurt me a little, and I'm glad to be hurt. And I can feel your heart beating. Ah, never let me go, Bayard! I should be lost in the dark again, if you let me go." A sudden thought came to her, and she bent back her head to see the better.

"Did you speak with Arthur?" And he said—

"Yes. He asked me to read your note, so I read it. That poor lad! I came straight to you then. Straight and fast!"

"You knew why I did it?" she said, and Ste. Marie said—

"Now I know."

"I could not have married him," said she. "I could not. I never thought I should see you again, but I loved you and I could not have married him.—Ah, impossible! And he'll be glad, later on. You know that. It will save him any more trouble with his family, and besides—he's so very young! Already, I think, he was beginning to chafe a little. I thought so more than once.

"Oh, I'm trying to justify myself!" she cried. "I'm trying to find reasons, but you know the true reason. You know it."

"I thank God for it!" he said.

So they stood clinging together in that dim place, and broken whispering

speech passed between them or long silences when speech was done. But at last they went down the stairs and out upon the open terrace where the moonlight lay.

"It was in the open sweet air," the girl said, "that we came to know each other. Let us walk in it now. The house smothers me." She looked up when they had passed the west corner of the façade, and drew a little sigh.

"I am worried about my father," said she. "He will not answer me when I call to him, and he has eaten nothing all day long. Bayard, I think his heart is broken. Ah! but to-morrow we shall mend it again. In the morning I shall make him let me in, and I shall tell him—what I have to tell."

They turned down under the trees, where the moonlight made silver splashes about their feet, and the sweet night air bore soft against their faces. Coira went a half step in advance, her head laid back upon the shoulder of the man she loved, and his arm held her up from falling.

So at last we leave them, walking there in the tender moonlight, with the breath of roses about them, and their eyes turned to the coming day. It is still night, and there is yet one cloud of sorrow to shadow them somewhat, for upstairs in his locked room a man lies dead across the floor with an empty pistol beside him—heart-broken, as the girl had feared. But where a great love is shadows cannot last very long, not even such shadows as this. The morning must dawn—and joy cometh of a morning.

[image]

*"Walking there in the tender moonlight."*

So we leave them walking together in the moonlight, their faces turned towards the coming day.

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