

A Fool and His Money

George Barr McCutcheon

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A FOOL AND HIS MONEY

BY

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

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In the aperture stood my amazing neighbour ... Frontispiece

I found myself staring as if stupefied at the white figure of a woman who stood in the topmost balcony.

I sat bolt upright and yelled: "Get out!"

We faced each other across the bowl of roses

Up to that moment I had wondered whether I could do it with my left hand

CHAPTER I

I MAKE NO EFFORT TO DEFEND MYSELF

I am quite sure it was my Uncle Rilas who said that I was a fool. If memory serves me well he relieved himself of that conviction in the presence of my mother--whose brother he was--at a time when I was least competent to acknowledge his wisdom and most arrogant in asserting my own. I was a freshman in college: a fact--or condition, perhaps,--which should serve as an excuse for both of us. I possessed another uncle, incidentally, and while I am now convinced that he must have felt as Uncle Rilas did about it, he was one of those who suffer in silence. The nearest he ever got to openly resenting me as a freshman was when he admitted, as if it were a crime, that he too had been in college and knew less when he came out than when he entered. Which was a mild way of putting it, I am sure, considering the fact that he remained there for twenty-three years as a distinguished member of the faculty.

I assume, therefore, that it was Uncle Rilas who orally convicted me, an assumption justified to some extent by putting two and two together after the poor old gentleman was laid away for his long sleep. He had been very emphatic in his belief that a fool and his money are soon parted. Up to the time of his death I had been in no way qualified to dispute this ancient theory. In theory, no doubt, I was the kind of fool he referred to, but in practice I was quite an untried novice. It is very hard for even a fool to part with something he hasn't got. True, I parted with the little I had at college with noteworthy promptness about the middle of each term, but that could hardly have been called a fair test for the adage. Not until Uncle Rilas died and left me all of his money was I able to demonstrate that only dead men and fools part with it. The distinction lies in the capacity for enjoyment while the sensation lasts. Dead men part with it because they have to, fools because they want to.

In any event, Uncle Rilas did not leave me his money until my freshman days were far behind me, wherein lies the solace that he may have outgrown an opinion while I was going through the same process. At twenty-three I confessed that all freshmen were insufferable, and immediately afterward took my degree and went out into the world to convince it that seniors are by no means adolescent. Having successfully passed the age of reason, I too felt myself admirably qualified to look with scorn upon all creatures employed in the business

of getting an education. There were times when I wondered how on earth I could have stooped so low as to be a freshman. I still have the disquieting fear that my uncle did not modify his opinion of me until I was thoroughly over being a senior. You will note that I do not say he changed his opinion. Modify is the word.

His original estimate of me, as a freshman, of course,--was uttered when I, at the age of eighteen, picked out my walk in life, so to speak. After considering everything, I decided to be a literary man. A novelist or a playwright, I hadn't much of a choice between the two, or perhaps a journalist. Being a journalist, of course, was preliminary; a sort of makeshift. At any rate, I was going to be a writer. My Uncle Rilas, a hard-headed customer who had read Scott as a boy and the Wall Street news as a man,--without being misled by either,--was scornful. He said that I would outgrow it, there was some consolation in that. He even admitted that when he was seventeen he wanted to be an actor. There you are, said he! I declared there was a great difference between being an actor and being a writer. Only handsome men can be actors, while I--well, by nature I was doomed to be nothing more engaging than a novelist, who doesn't have to spoil an illusion by showing himself in public.

Besides, I argued, novelists make a great deal of money, and playwrights too, for that matter. He said in reply that an ordinarily vigorous washerwoman could make more money than the average novelist, and she always had a stocking without a hole to keep it in, which was more to the point.

Now that I come to think of it, it was Uncle Rilas who oracularly prejudged me, and not Uncle John, who was by way of being a sort of literary chap himself and therefore lamentably unqualified to guide me in any course whatsoever, especially as he had all he could do to keep his own wolf at bay without encouraging mine, and who, besides teaching good English, loved it wisely and too well. I think Uncle Rilas would have held Uncle John up to me as an example,--a scarecrow, you might say,--if it hadn't been for the fact that he loved him in spite of his English. He must have loved me in spite of mine.

My mother felt in her heart that I ought to be a doctor or a preacher, but she wasn't mean: she was positive I could succeed as a writer if I set my mind to it. She was also sure that I could be President of the United States or perhaps even a Bishop. We were Episcopalian.

When I was twenty-seven my first short story appeared in a magazine of considerable weight, due to its advertising pages, but my Uncle Rilas didn't read it until I had convinced him that the honorarium amounted to three hundred dollars. Even then I was obliged to promise him a glimpse of the check when I got it. Somewhat belated, it came in the course of three or four months with a rather tart letter in which I was given to understand that it wasn't quite the thing to pester a great publishing house with queries of the kind I had been so persistent in propounding. But at last Uncle Rilas saw the check and was properly impressed. He took back what he said about the washerwoman, but gave me a little further advice concerning the stocking.

In course of time my first novel appeared. It was a love story. Uncle Rilas read the first five chapters and then skipped over to the last page. Then he began it all over again and sat up nearly all night to

finish it. The next day he called it "trash" but invited me to have luncheon with him at the Metropolitan Club, and rather noisily introduced me to a few old cronies of his, who were not sufficiently interested in me to enquire what my name was--a trifling detail he had overlooked in presenting me as his nephew--but who did ask me to have a drink.

A month later, he died. He left me a fortune, which was all the more staggering in view of the circumstance that had seen me named for my Uncle John and not for him.

It was not long afterward that I made a perfect fool of myself by falling in love. It turned out very badly. I can't imagine what got into me to want to commit bigamy after I had already proclaimed myself to be irrevocably wedded to my profession. Nevertheless, I deliberately coveted the experience, and would have attained to it no doubt had it not been for the young woman in the case. She would have none of me, but with considerable independence of spirit and, I must say, noteworthy acumen, elected to wed a splendid looking young fellow who clerked in a jeweller's shop in Fifth Avenue. They had been engaged for several years, it seems, and my swollen fortune failed to disturb her sense of fidelity. Perhaps you will be interested enough in a girl who could refuse to share a fortune of something like three hundred thousand dollars--(not counting me, of course)--to let me tell you briefly who and what she was. She was my typist. That is to say, she did piece-work for me as I happened to provide substance for her active fingers to work upon when she wasn't typing law briefs in the regular sort of grind. Not only was she an able typist, but she was an exceedingly wholesome, handsome and worthy young woman. I think I came to like her with genuine resolution when I discovered that she could spell correctly and had the additional knack of uniting my stray infinitives with stubborn purposefulness, as well as the ability to administer my grammar with tact and discretion.

Unfortunately she loved the jeweller's clerk. She tried to convince me, with a sweetness I shall never forget, that she was infinitely better suited to be a jeweller's wife than to be a weight upon the neck of a genius. Moreover, when I foolishly mentioned my snug fortune as an extra inducement, she put me smartly in my place by remarking that fortunes like wine are made in a day while really excellent jeweller's clerks are something like thirty years in the making. Which, I take it, was as much as to say that there is always room for improvement in a man. I confess I was somewhat disturbed by one of her gentlest remarks. She seemed to be repeating my Uncle Rilas, although I am quite sure she had never heard of him. She argued that the fortune might take wings and fly away, and then what would be to pay! Of course, it was perfectly clear to me, stupid as I must have been, that she preferred the jeweller's clerk to a fortune.

I was loth to lose her as a typist. The exact point where I appear to have made a fool of myself was when I first took it into my head that I could make something else of her. I not only lost a competent typist, but I lost a great deal of sleep, and had to go abroad for awhile, as men do when they find out unpleasant things about themselves in just that way.

I gave her as a wedding present a very costly and magnificent dining-room set, fondly hoping that the jeweller's clerk would experience a great deal of trouble in living up to it. At first I had

thought of a Marie Antoinette bedroom set, but gave it up when I contemplated the cost.

If you will pardon me, I shall not go any further into this lamentable love affair. I submit, in extenuation, that people do not care to be regaled with the heartaches of past affairs; they are only interested in those which appear to be in the process of active development or retrogression. Suffice to say, I was terribly cut up over the way my first serious affair of the heart turned out, and tried my best to hate myself for letting it worry me. Somehow I was able to attribute the fiasco to an inborn sense of shyness that has always made me faint-hearted, dilatory and unaggressive. No doubt if I had gone about it roughshod and fiery I could have played hob with the excellent jeweller's peace of mind, to say the least, but alas! I succeeded only in approaching at a time when there was nothing left for me to do but to start him off in life with a mild handicap in the shape of a dining-room set that would not go with anything else he had in the apartment.

Still, some men, no matter how shy and procrastinating they may be--or reluctant, for that matter--are doomed to have love affairs thrust upon them, as you will perceive if you follow the course of this narrative to the bitter end.

In order that you may know me when you see me struggling through these pages, as one might struggle through a morass on a dark night, I shall take the liberty of describing myself in the best light possible under the circumstances.

I am a tallish sort of person, moderately homely, and not quite thirty-five. I am strong but not athletic. Whatever physical development I possess was acquired through the ancient and honourable game of golf and in swimming. In both of these sports I am quite proficient. My nose is rather long and inquisitive, and my chin is considered to be singularly firm for one who has no ambition to become a hero. My thatch is abundant and quite black. I understand that my eyes are green when I affect a green tie, light blue when I put on one of that delicate hue, and curiously yellow when I wear brown about my neck. Not that I really need them, but I wear nose glasses when reading: to save my eyes, of course. I sometimes wear them in public, with a very fetching and imposing black band draping across my expanse of shirt front. I find this to be most effective when sitting in a box at the theatre. My tailor is a good one. I shave myself clean with an old-fashioned razor and find it to be quite safe and tractable. My habits are considered rather good, and I sang bass in the glee club. So there you are. Not quite what you would call a lady killer, or even a lady's man, I fancy you'll say.

You will be surprised to learn, however, that secretly I am of a rather romantic, imaginative turn of mind. Since earliest childhood I have consorted with princesses and ladies of high degree,--mentally, of course,--and my bosom companions have been knights of valour and longevity. Nothing could have suited me better than to have been born in a feudal castle a few centuries ago, from which I should have sallied forth in full armour on the slightest provocation and returned in glory when there was no one left in the neighbourhood to provoke me.

Even now, as I make this astounding statement, I can't help thinking of that confounded jeweller's clerk. At thirty-five I am still

unattached and, so far as I can tell, unloved. What more could a sensible, experienced bachelor expect than that? Unless, of course, he aspired to be a monk or a hermit, in which case he reasonably could be sure of himself if not of others.

Last winter in London my mother went to a good bit of trouble to set my cap for a lady who seemed in every way qualified to look after an only son as he should be looked after from a mother's point of view, and I declare to you I had a wretchedly close call of it. My poor mother, thinking it was quite settled, sailed for America, leaving me entirely unprotected, whereupon I succeeded in making my escape. Heaven knows I had no desperate longing to visit Palestine at that particular time, but I journeyed thither without a qualm of regret, and thereby avoided the surrender without love or honour.

For the past year I have done little or no work. My books are few and far between, so few in fact that more than once I have felt the sting of dilettantism inflicting my labours with more or less increasing sharpness. It is not for me to say that I despise a fortune, but I am constrained to remark that I believe poverty would have been a fairer friend to me. At any rate I now pamper myself to an unreasonable extent. For one thing, I feel that I cannot work,--much less think,--when opposed by distracting conditions such as women, tea, disputes over luggage, and things of that sort. They subdue all the romantic tendencies I am so parsimonious about wasting. My best work is done when the madding crowd is far from me. Hence I seek out remote, obscure places when I feel the plot boiling, and grind away for dear life with nothing to distract me save an unconquerable habit acquired very early in life which urges me to eat three meals a day and to sleep nine hours out of twenty-four.

A month ago, in Vienna, I felt the plot breaking out on me, very much as the measles do, at a most inopportune time for everybody concerned, and my secretary, more wide-awake than you'd imagine by looking at him, urged me to coddle the muse while she was willing and not to put her off till an evil day, as frequently I am in the habit of doing.

It was especially annoying, coming as it did, just as I was about to set off for a fortnight's motor-boat trip up the Danube with Elsie Hazzard and her stupid husband, the doctor. I compromised with myself by deciding to give them a week of my dreamy company, and then dash off to England where I could work off the story in a sequestered village I had had in mind for some time past.

The fourth day of our delectable excursion brought us to an ancient town whose name you would recall in an instant if I were fool enough to mention it, and where we were to put up for the night. On the crest of a stupendous crag overhanging the river, almost opposite the town, which isn't far from Krems, stood the venerable but unvenerated castle of that highhanded old robber baron, the first of the Rothhoefens. He has been in his sarcophagus these six centuries, I am advised, but you wouldn't think so to look at the stronghold. At a glance you can almost convince yourself that he is still there, with battle-axe and broad-sword, and an inflamed eye at every window in the grim facade.

We picked up a little of its history while in the town, and the next morning crossed over to visit the place. Its antiquity was considerably enhanced by the presence of a caretaker who would never see eighty again, and whose wife was even older. Their two sons lived with them

in the capacity of loafers and, as things go in these rapid times of ours, appeared to be even older and more sere than their parents.

It is a winding and tortuous road that leads up to the portals of this huge old pile, and I couldn't help thinking how stupid I have always been in execrating the spirit of progress that conceives the funicular and rack-and-pinion railroads which serve to commercialise grandeur instead of protecting it. Half way up the hill, we paused to rest, and I quite clearly remember growling that if the confounded thing belonged to me I'd build a funicular or install an elevator without delay. Poor Elsie was too fatigued to say what she ought to have said to me for suggesting and even insisting on the visit.

The next day, instead of continuing our delightful trip down the river, we three were scurrying to Saalsburg, urged by a sudden and stupendous whim on my part, and filled with a new interest in life.

I had made up my mind to buy the castle!

The Hazzards sat up with me nearly the whole of the night, trying to talk me out of the mad design, but all to no purpose. I was determined to be the sort of fool that Uncle Rilas referred to when he so frequently quoted the old adage. My only argument in reply to their entreaties was that I had to have a quiet, inspirational place in which to work and besides I was quite sure we could beat the impoverished owner down considerably in the price, whatever it might turn out to be. While the ancient caretaker admitted that it was for sale, he couldn't give me the faintest notion what it was expected to bring, except that it ought to bring more from an American than from any one else, and that he would be proud and happy to remain in my service, he and his wife and his prodigiously capable sons, either of whom if put to the test could break all the bones in a bullock without half trying. Moreover, for such strong men, they ate very little and seldom slept, they were so eager to slave in the interests of the master. We all agreed that they looked strong enough, but as they were sleeping with some intensity all the time we were there, and making dreadful noises in the courtyard, we could only infer that they were making up for at least a week of insomnia.

I had no difficulty whatever in striking a bargain with the abandoned wretch who owned the Schloss. He seemed very eager to submit to my demand that he knock off a thousand pounds sterling, and we hunted up a notary and all the other officials necessary to the transfer of property. At the end of three days, I was the sole owner and proprietor of a feudal stronghold on the Danube, and the joyous Austrian was a little farther on his way to the dogs, a journey he had been negotiating with great ardour ever since coming into possession of an estate once valued at several millions. I am quite sure I have never seen a spendthrift with more energy than this fellow seems to have displayed in going through with his patrimony. He was on his uppers, so to speak, when I came to his rescue, solely because he couldn't find a purchaser or a tenant for the castle, try as he would. Afterwards I heard that he had offered the place to a syndicate of Jews for one-third the price I paid, but luckily for me the Hebraic instinct was not so keen as mine. They let a very good bargain get away from them. I have not told my most intimate friends what I paid for the castle, but they are all generous enough to admit that I could afford it, no matter what it cost me. Their generosity stops there, however. I have never had so many unkind things said to me in all my life as have been said about

this purely personal matter.

Well, to make the story short, the Hazzards and I returned to Schloss Rothhoefen in some haste, primarily for the purpose of inspecting it from dungeon to battlement. I forgot to mention that, being very tired after the climb up the steep, we got no further on our first visit than the great baronial hall, the dining-room and certain other impressive apartments customarily kept open for the inspection of visitors. An interesting concession on the part of the late owner (the gentleman hurrying to catch up with the dogs that had got a bit of a start on him),--may here be mentioned. He included all of the contents of the castle for the price paid, and the deed, or whatever you call it, specifically set forth that I, John Bellamy Smart, was the sole and undisputed owner of everything the castle held. This made the bargain all the more desirable, for I have never seen a more beautiful assortment of antique furniture and tapestry in Fourth Avenue than was to be found in Schloss Rothhoefen.

Our second and more critical survey of the lower floors of the castle revealed rather urgent necessity for extensive repairs and refurbishing, but I was not dismayed. With a blithesome disregard for expenses, I despatched Rudolph, the elder of the two sons to Linz with instructions to procure artisans who could be depended upon to undo the ravages of time to a certain extent and who might even suggest a remedy for leaks.

My friends, abhorring rheumatism and like complaints, refused to sleep over night in the drafty, almost paneless structure. They came over to see me on the ensuing day and begged me to return to Vienna with them. But, full of the project in hand, I would not be moved. With the house full of carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, locksmiths, tinsmiths, plumbers, plasterers, glaziers, joiners, scrub-women and chimneysweeps, I felt that I couldn't go away and leave it without a controlling influence.

They promised to come and make me a nice short visit, however, after I'd got the castle primed up a bit: the mould off the walls of the bedrooms and the great fireplaces thoroughly cleared of obstructive swallows' nests, the beds aired and the larder stocked. Just as they were leaving, my secretary and my valet put in an appearance, having been summoned from Vienna the day before. I confess I was glad to see them. The thought of spending a second night in that limitless bed-chamber, with all manner of night-birds trying to get in at the windows, was rather disturbing, and I welcomed my retainers with open arms.

My first night had been spent in a huge old bed, carefully prepared for occupancy by Herr Schmick's frau; and the hours, which never were so dark, in trying to fathom the infinite space that reached above me to the vaulted ceiling. I knew there was a ceiling, for I had seen its beams during the daylight hours, but to save my soul I couldn't imagine anything so far away as it seemed to be after the candles had been taken away by the caretaker's wife, who had tucked me away in the bed with ample propriety and thoroughness combined.

Twice during that interminable night I thought I heard a baby crying. So it is not unreasonable to suppose that I was more than glad to see Poopendyke clambering up the path with his typewriter in one hand and his green baise bag in the other, followed close behind by Britton and the Gargantuan brothers bearing trunks, bags, boxes and

my golf clubs.

"Whew!" said Poopendyke, dropping wearily upon my doorstep--which, by the way, happens to be a rough hewn slab some ten feet square surmounted by a portcullis that has every intention of falling down unexpectedly one of these days and creating an earthquake. "Whew!" he repeated.

My secretary is a youngish man with thin, stooping shoulders and a habit of perpetually rubbing his knees together when he walks. I shudder to think of what would happen to them if he undertook to run. I could not resist a glance at them now.

"It is something of a climb, isn't it?" said I beamingly.

"In the name of heaven, Mr. Smart, what could have induced you to--" He got no farther than this, and to my certain knowledge this unfinished reproof was the nearest he ever came to openly convicting me of asininity.

"Make yourself at home, old fellow," said I in some haste. I felt sorry for him. "We are going to be very cosy here."

"Cosy?" murmured he, blinking as he looked up, not at me but at the frowning walls that seemed to penetrate the sky.

"I haven't explored those upper regions," I explained nervously, divining his thoughts. "We shall do it together, in a day or two."

"It looks as though it might fall down if we jostled it carelessly," he remarked, having recovered his breath.

"I am expecting masons at any minute," said I, contemplating the unstable stone crest of the northeast turret with some uneasiness. My face brightened suddenly. "That particular section of the castle is uninhabitable, I am told. It really doesn't matter if it collapses. Ah, Britton! Here you are, I see. Good morning."

Britton, a very exacting servant, looked me over critically.

"Your coat and trousers need pressing, sir," said he. "And where am I to get the hot water for shaving, sir?"

"Frau Schmick will supply anything you need, Britton," said I, happy on being able to give the information.

"It is not I as needs it, sir," said he, feeling of his smoothly shaven chin.

"Come in and have a look about the place," said I, with a magnificent sweep of my arm to counteract the feeling of utter insignificance I was experiencing at the moment. I could see that my faithful retinue held me in secret but polite disdain.

A day or two later the castle was swarming with workmen; the banging of hammers, the rasp of saws, the spattering of mortar, the crashing of stone and the fumes of charcoal crucibles extended to the remotest recesses; the tower of Babel was being reconstructed in the language of six or eight nations, and everybody was happy. I had no idea there were so many tinsmiths in the world. Every artisan in the town across

the river seems to have felt it his duty to come over and help the men from Linz in the enterprise. There were so many of them that they were constantly getting in each other's way and quarrelling over matters of jurisdiction with even more spirit than we might expect to encounter among the labour unions at home.

Poopendyke, in great distress of mind, notified me on the fourth day of rehabilitation that the cost of labour as well as living had gone up appreciably since our installation. In fact it had doubled. He paid all of my bills, so I suppose he knew what he was talking about.

"You will be surprised to know, Mr. Smart," he said, consulting his sheets, "that scrub-women are getting more here than they do in New York City, and I am convinced that there are more scrub-women. Today we had thirty new ones scrubbing the loggia on the gun-room floor, and they all seem to have apprentices working under them. The carpenters and plasterers were not so numerous to-day. I paid them off last night, you see. It may interest you to hear that their wages for three days amounted to nearly seven hundred dollars in our money, to say nothing of materials--and breakage."

"Breakage?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, sir, breakage. They break nearly as much as they mend. We'll--we'll go bankrupt, sir, if we're not careful."

I liked his pronoun. "Never mind," I said, "we'll soon be rid of them."

"They've got it in their heads, sir, that it will take at least a year to finish the--"

"You tell the foremen that if this job isn't finished to our satisfaction by the end of the month, I'll fire all of them," said I, wrathfully.

"That's less than three weeks off, Mr. Smart. They don't seem to be making much headway."

"Well, you _tell_ 'em, just the same." And that is how I dismissed it. "Tell 'em _we've_ got to go to work ourselves."

"By the way, old man Schmick and his family haven't been paid for nearly two years. They have put in a claim. The late owner assured them they'd get their money from the next--"

"Discharge them at once," said I.

"We can't get on without them," protested he. "They know the ropes, so to speak, and, what's more to the point, they know all the keys. Yesterday I was nearly two hours in getting to the kitchen for a conference with Mrs. Schmick about the market-men. In the first place, I couldn't find the way, and in the second place all the doors are locked."

"Please send Herr Schmick to me in the--in the--" I couldn't recall the name of the administration chamber at the head of the grand staircase, so I was compelled to say: "I'll see him here."

"If we lose them we also are lost," was his sententious declaration.

I believed him.

On the fifth day of our occupancy, Britton reported to me that he had devised a plan by which we could utilise the tremendous horse-power represented by the muscles of those lazy giants, Rudolph and Max. He suggested that we rig up a huge windlass at the top of the incline, with stout steel cables attached to a small car which could be hauled up the cliff by a hitherto wasted human energy, and as readily lowered. It sounded feasible and I instructed him to have the extraordinary railway built, but to be sure that the safety device clutches in the cog wheels were sound and trusty. It would prove to be an infinitely more graceful mode of ascending the peak than riding up on the donkeys I had been persuaded to buy, especially for Poopendyke and me, whose legs were so long that when we sat in the saddles our knees either touched our chins or were spread out so far that we resembled the Prussian coat-of-arms.

[Illustration: I found myself staring as if stupefied at the white figure of a woman who stood in the topmost balcony]

That evening, after the workmen had filed down the steep looking for all the world like an evacuating army, I sought a few moments of peace and quiet in the small balcony outside my bedroom windows. My room was in the western wing of the castle, facing the river. The eastern wing mounted even higher than the one in which we were living, and was topped by the loftiest watch tower of them all. We had not attempted to do any work over in that section as yet, for the simple reason that Herr Schmick couldn't find the keys to the doors.

The sun was disappearing beyond the highlands and a cool, soft breeze swept up through the valley. I leaned back in a comfortable chair that Britton had selected for me, and puffed at my pipe, not quite sure that my serenity was real or assumed. This was all costing me a pretty penny. Was I, after all, parting with my money in the way prescribed for fools? Was all this splendid antiquity worth the--

My reflections terminated sharply at that critical instant and I don't believe I ever felt called upon after that to complete the inquiry.

I found myself staring as if stupefied at the white figure of a woman who stood in the topmost balcony of the eastern wing, fully revealed by the last glow of the sun and apparently as deep in dreams as I had been the instant before.

CHAPTER II

I DEFEND MY PROPERTY

For ten minutes I stood there staring up at her, completely bewildered and not a little shaken. My first thought had been of ghosts, but it was almost instantly dispelled by a significant action on the part of the suspected wraith. She turned to whistle over her shoulder, and to snap her fingers peremptorily, and then she stooped and picked up a rather lusty chow dog which promptly barked at me across the intervening space, having discovered me almost at once although I was many rods away and quite snugly ensconced among the shadows. The lady in white muzzled him with her hand and I could almost imagine I heard her

reproving whispers. After a few minutes, she apparently forgot the dog and lifted her hand to adjust something in her hair. He again barked at me, quite ferociously for a chow. This time it was quite plain to her that he was not barking at the now shadowy moon. She peered over the stone balustrade and an instant later disappeared from view through the high, narrow window.

Vastly exercised, I set out in quest of Herr Schmick, martialing Poopendyke as I went along, realising that I would have to depend on his German, which was less halting than mine and therefore, more likely to dovetail with that of the Schmicks, neither of whom spoke German because they loved it but because they had to,--being Austrians. We found the four Schmicks in the vast kitchen, watching Britton while he pressed my trousers on an oak table so large that the castle must have been built around it.

Herr Schmick was weighted down with the keys of the castle, which never left his possession day or night.

"Herr Schmick," said I, "will you be so good as to inform me who the dickens that woman is over in the east wing of the castle?"

"Woman, mein herr?" He almost dropped his keys. His big sons said something to each other that I couldn't quite catch, but it sounded very much like "der duyvil."

"A woman in a white dress,--with a dog."

"A dog?" he cried. "But, mein herr, dogs are not permitted to be in the castle."

"Who is she? How did she get there?"

"Heaven defend us, sir! It must have been the ghost of--"

"Ghost, your granny!" I cried, relapsing into English. "Please don't beat about the bush, Mr. Schmick. She's over there in the unused wing, which I haven't been allowed to penetrate in spite of the fact that it belongs to me. You say you can't find the keys to that side of the castle. Will you explain how it is that it is open to strange women and--and dogs?"

"You must be mistaken, mein herr," he whined abjectly. "She cannot be there. She--Ah, I have it! It may have been my wife. Gretel! Have you been in the east--"

"Nonsense!" I cried sharply. "This won't do, Mr. Schmick. Give me that bunch of keys. We'll investigate. I can't have strange women gallivanting about the place as if they owned it. This is no trysting place for Juliets, Herr Schmick. We'll get to the bottom of this at once. Here, you Rudolph, fetch a couple of lanterns. Max, get a sledge or two from the forge. There is a forge. I saw it yesterday out there back of the stables. So don't try to tell me there isn't one. If we can't unlock the doors, we'll smash 'em in. They're mine, and I'll knock 'em to smithereens if I feel like it."

The four Schmicks wrung their hands and shook their heads and, then, repairing to the scullery, growled and grumbled for fully ten minutes before deciding to obey my commands. In the meantime, I related my

experience to Poopendyke and Britton.

"That reminds me, sir," said Britton, "that I found a rag-doll in the courtyard yesterday, on that side of the building, sir--I should say castle, sir."

"I am quite sure I heard a baby crying the second night we were here, Mr. Smart," said my secretary nervously.

"And there was smoke coming from one of the back chimney pots this morning," added Britton.

I was thoughtful for a moment. "What became of the rag-doll, Britton?" I enquired shrewdly.

"I turned it over to old Schmick, sir," said he. He grinned. "I thought as maybe it belonged to one of his boys."

On the aged caretaker's reappearance, I bluntly inquired what had become of the doll-baby. He was terribly confused.

"I know nothing, I know nothing," he mumbled, and I could see that he was miserably upset. His sons towered and glowered and his wife wrapped and unwrapped her hands in her apron, all the time supplicating heaven to be good to the true and the faithful.

From what I could gather, they all seemed to be more disturbed over the fact that my hallucination included a dog than by the claim that I had seen a woman.

"But, confound you, Schmick," I cried in some heat, "it barked at me."

"Gott in himmel!" they all cried, and, to my surprise, the old woman burst into tears.

"It is bad to dream of a dog," she wailed. "It means evil to all of us. Evil to--"

"Come!" said I, grabbing the keys from the old man's unresisting hand. "And, Schmick, if that dog bites me, I'll hold you personally responsible. Do you understand?"

Two abreast we filed through the long, vaulted halls, Rudolph carrying a gigantic lantern and Max a sledge. We traversed extensive corridors, mounted tortuous stairs and came at length to the sturdy oak door that separated the east wing from the west: a huge, formidable thing strengthened by many cross-pieces and studded with rusty bolt-heads. Padlocks as large as horse-shoes, corroded by rust and rendered absolutely impracticable by age, confronted us.

"I have not the keys," said old Conrad Schmick sourly. "This door has not been opened in my time. It is no use."

"It is no use," repeated his grizzly sons, leaning against the mouldy walls with weary tolerance.

"Then how did the woman and her dog get into that part of the castle?" I demanded. "Tell me that!"

They shook their heads, almost compassionately, as much as to say, "It is always best to humour a mad man."

"And the baby," added Poopendyke, turning up his coat collar to protect his thin neck from the draft that smote us from the halls.

"Smash those padlocks, Max," I commanded resolutely.

Max looked stupidly at his father and the old man looked at his wife, and then all four of them looked at me, almost imploringly.

"Why destroy a perfectly good padlock, mein herr?" began Max, twirling the sledge in his hand as if it were a bamboo cane.

"Hi! Look out there!" gasped Britton, in some alarm. "Don't let that thing slip!"

"Doesn't this castle belong to me?" I demanded, considerably impressed by the ease with which he swung the sledge. A very dangerous person, I began to perceive.

"It does, mein herr," shouted all of them gladly, and touched their forelocks.

"Everything is yours," added old Conrad, with a comprehensive sweep of his hand that might have put the whole universe in my name.

"Smash that padlock, Max," I said after a second's hesitation.

"I'll bet he can't do it," said Britton, ingeniously.

Very reluctantly Max bared his great arms, spit upon his hands, and, with a pitiful look at his parents, prepared to deal the first blow upon the ancient padlock. The old couple turned their heads away, and put their fingers to their ears, cringing like things about to be whipped.

"Now, one--two--three!" cried I, affecting an enthusiasm I didn't feel.

The sledge fell upon the padlock and rebounded with almost equal force. The sound of the crash must have disturbed every bird and bat in the towers of the grim old pile. But the padlock merely shed a few scabs of rust and rattled back into its customary repose.

"See!" cried Max, triumphantly. "It cannot be broken." Rudolph, his broad face beaming, held the lantern close to the padlock and showed me that it hadn't been dented by the blow.

"It is a very fine lock," cried old Conrad, with a note of pride in his voice.

I began to feel some pride in the thing myself. "It is, indeed," I said. "Try once more, Max."

It seemed to me that he struck with a great deal more confidence than before, and again they all uttered ejaculations of pleasure. I caught Dame Schmick in the act of thanking God with her fingers.

"See here," I exclaimed, facing them angrily, "what does all this mean?"

You are deceiving me, all of you. Now, let's have the truth--every word of it--or out you go to-morrow, the whole lot of you. I insist on knowing who that woman is, why she is here in my hou--my castle, and--everything, do you understand?"

Apparently they didn't understand, for they looked at me with all the stupidity they could command.

"You try, Mr. Poopendyke," I said, giving it up in despair. He sought to improve on my German, but I think he made it worse. They positively refused to be intelligent.

"Give me the hammer," I said at last in desperation. Max surrendered the clumsy, old-fashioned instrument with a grin and I motioned for them all to stand back. Three successive blows with all the might I had in my body failed to shatter the lock, whereupon my choler rose to heights hitherto unknown, I being a very mild-mannered, placid person and averse to anything savouring of the tempestuous. I delivered a savage and resounding thwack upon the broad oak panel of the door, regardless of the destructiveness that might attend the effort. If any one had told me that I couldn't splinter an oak board with a sledge-hammer at a single blow I should have laughed in his face. But as it turned out in this case I not only failed to split the panel but broke off the sledge handle near the head, putting it wholly out of commission for the time being as well as stinging my hands so severely that I doubled up with pain and shouted words that Dame Schmick could not put into her prayers.

The Schmicks fairly glowed with joy! Afterwards Max informed me that the door was nearly six inches thick and often had withstood the assaults of huge battering rams, back in the dim past when occasion induced the primal baron to seek safety in the east wing, which, after all, appears to have been the real, simon pure fortress. The west wing was merely a setting for festal amenities and was by no means feudal in its aspect or appeal. Here, as I came to know, the old barons received their friends and feasted them and made merry with the flagon and the horn of plenty; here the humble tithe payer came to settle his dues with gold and silver instead of with blood; here the little barons and baronesses romped and rioted with childish glee; and here the barons grew fat and gross and soggy with laziness and prosperity, and here they died in stupid quiescence. On the other side of that grim, staunch old door they simply went to the other extreme in every particular. There they killed their captives, butchered their enemies, and sometimes died with the daggers of traitors in their shivering backs.

As we trudged back to the lower halls, defeated but none the less impressed by our failure to devastate our stronghold, I was struck by the awful barrenness of the surroundings. There suddenly came over me the shocking realisation: the "contents" of the castle, as set forth rather vaguely in the bill of sale, were not what I had been led to consider them. It had not occurred to me at the time of the transaction to insist upon an inventory, and I had been too busy since the beginning of my tenancy to take more than a passing account of my belongings. In excusing myself for this rather careless oversight, I can only say that during daylight hours the castle was so completely stuffed with workmen and their queer utensils that I couldn't do much in the way of elimination, and by night it was so horribly black and lonesome about the place and the halls were so littered with tools and mops and

timber that it was extremely hazardous to go prowling about, so I preferred to remain in my own quarters, which were quite comfortable and cosy in spite of the distance between points of convenience.

Still I was vaguely certain that many articles I had seen about the halls on my first and second visits were no longer in evidence. Two or three antique rugs, for instance, were missing from the main hall, and there was a lamentable suggestion of emptiness at the lower end where we had stacked a quantity of rare old furniture in order to make room for the workmen.

"Herr Schmick," said I, abruptly halting my party in the centre of the hall, "what has become of the rugs that were here last week, and where is that pile of furniture we had back yonder?"

Rudolph allowed the lantern to swing behind his huge legs, intentionally I believe, and I was compelled to relieve him of it in order that we might extract ourselves from his shadow. I have never seen such a colossal shadow as the one he cast.

Old Conrad was not slow in answering.

"The gentlemen called day before yesterday, mein herr, and took much away. They will return to-morrow for the remainder."

"Gentlemen?" I gasped. "Remainder?"

"The gentlemen to whom the Herr Count sold the rugs and chairs and chests and--"

"What!" I roared. Even Poopendyke jumped at this sudden exhibition of wrath. "Do you mean to tell me that these things have been sold and carried away without my knowledge or consent? I'll have the law--"

Herr Poopendyke intervened. "They had bills of sale and orders for removal of property dated several weeks prior to your purchase, Mr. Smart. We had to let the articles go. You surely remember my speaking to you about it."

"I don't remember anything," I snapped, which was the truth. "Why--why, I bought everything that the castle contained. This is robbery! What the dickens do you mean by--"

Old Conrad held up his hands as if expecting to pacify me. I sputtered out the rest of the sentence, which really amounted to nothing.

"The Count has been selling off the lovely old pieces for the past six months, sir. Ach, what a sin! They have come here day after day, these furniture buyers, to take away the most priceless of our treasures, to sell them to the poor rich at twenty prices. I could weep over the sacrifices. I have wept, haven't I, Gretel? Eh, Rudolph? Buckets of tears have I shed, mein herr. Oceans of them. Time after time have I implored him to deny these rascally curio hunters, these blood-sucking--"

"But listen to me," I broke in. "Do you mean to say that articles have been taken away from the castle since I came into possession?"

"Many of them, sir. Always with proper credentials, believe me. Ach,

what a spendthrift he is! And his poor wife! Ach, Gott, how she must suffer. Nearly all of the grand paintings, the tapestries that came from France and Italy hundreds of years ago, the wonderful old bedsteads and tables that were here when the castle was new--all gone! And for mere songs, mein herr,--the cheapest of songs! I--I--"

"Please don't weep now, Herr Schmick," I made haste to exclaim, seeing lachrymose symptoms in his blear old eyes. Then I became firm once more. This knavery must cease, or I'd know the reason why. "The next man who comes here to cart away so much as a single piece is to be kicked out. Do you understand? These things belong to me. Kick him into the river. Or, better still, notify me and I'll do it. Why, if this goes on we'll soon be deprived of anything to sit on or sleep in or eat from! Lock the doors, Conrad, and don't admit any one without first consulting me. By Jove, I'd like to wring that rascal's neck. A Count! Umph!"

"Ach, he is of the noblest family in all the land," sighed old Gretel. "His grandfather was a fine man." I contrived to subdue my rage and disappointment and somewhat loudly returned to the topic from which we were drifting.

"As for those beastly padlocks, I shall have them filed off to-morrow. I give you warning, Conrad, if the keys are not forthcoming before noon to-morrow, I'll file 'em off, so help me."

"They are yours to destroy, mein herr, God knows," said he dismally. "It is a pity to destroy fine old padlocks--"

"Well, you wait and see," said I, grimly.

His face beamed once more. "Ach, I forgot to say that there are padlocks on the other side of the door, just as on this side. It will be of no use to destroy these. The door still could not be forced. Mein Gott! How thankful I am to have remembered it in time."

"Confound you, Schmick, I believe you actually want to keep me out of that part of the castle," I exploded.

The four of them protested manfully, even Gretel.

"I have a plan, sir," said Britton. "Why not place a tall ladder in the courtyard and crawl in through one of the windows?"

"Splendid! That's what we'll do!" I cried enthusiastically. "And now let's go to bed! We will breakfast at eight, Mrs. Schmick. The early bird catches the worm, you know."

"Will you see the American ladies and gentlemen who are coming to-morrow to pick out the--"

"Yes, I'll see them," said I, compressing my lips. "Don't let me over-sleep, Britton."

"I shan't, sir," said he.

Sleep evaded me for hours. What with the possible proximity of an undesirable feminine neighbour, mysterious and elusive though she may prove to be, and the additional dread of dogs and babies, to say nothing

of the amazing delinquencies to be laid to the late owner of the place, and the prospect of a visit from coarse and unfeeling bargain-hunters on the morrow, it is really not surprising that I tossed about in my baronial bed, counting sheep backwards and forwards over hedges and fences until the vociferous cocks in the stable yard began to send up their clarion howdy-dos to the sun. Strangely enough, with the first peep of day through the decrepit window shutters I fell into a sound sleep. Britton got nothing but grunts from me until half-past nine. At that hour he came into my room and delivered news that aroused me more effectually than all the alarm clocks or alarm cocks in the world could have done.

"Get up, sir, if you please," he repeated the third time. "The party of Americans is below, sir, rummaging about the place. They have ordered the workmen to stop work, sir, complaining of the beastly noise they make, and the dust and all that, sir. They have already selected half a dozen pieces and they have brought enough porters and carriers over in the boats to take the stuff away in--"

"Where is Poopendyke?" I cried, leaping out of bed. "I don't want to be shaved, Britton, and don't bother about the tub." He had filled my twentieth century portable tub, recently acquired, and was nervously creating a lather in my shaving mug,

"You look very rough, sir."

"So much the better."

"Mr. Poopendyke is in despair, sir. He has tried to explain that nothing is for sale, but the gentlemen say they are onto his game. They go right on yanking things about and putting their own prices on them and reserving them. They are perfectly delighted, sir, to have found so many old things they really want for their new houses."

"I'll--I'll put a stop to all this," I grated, seeing red for an instant.

"And the ladies, sir! There are three of them, all from New York City, and they keep on saying they are completely ravished, sir,--with joy, I take it. Your great sideboard in the dining-room is to go to Mrs. Riley-Werkheimer, and the hall-seat that the first Baron used to throw his armour on when he came in from--"

"Great snakes!" I roared. "They haven't moved it, have they? It will fall to pieces!"

"No, sir. They are piling sconces and candelabra and andirons on it, regardless of what Mr. Poopendyke says. You'd better hurry, sir. Here is your collar and necktie--"

"I don't want 'em. Where the dickens are my trousers?"

His face fell. "Being pressed, sir, God forgive me!"

"Get out another pair, confound you, Britton. What are we coming to?"

He began rummaging in the huge clothespress, all the while regaling me with news from the regions below.

"Mr. Poopendyke has gone up to his room, sir, with his typewriter. The young lady insisted on having it. She squealed with joy at seeing an antique typewriter and he--he had to run away with it, 'pon my soul he did, sir."

I couldn't help laughing.

"And your golf clubs, Mr. Smart. The young gentleman of the party is perfectly carried away with them. He says they're the real thing, the genuine sixteenth century article. They are a bit rusted, you'll remember. I left him out in the courtyard trying your brassie and mid-iron, sir, endeavouring to loft potatoes over the south wall. I succeeded in hiding the balls, sir. Just as I started upstairs I heard one of the new window panes in the banquet hall smash, sir, so I take it he must have sliced his drive a bit."

"Who let these people in?" I demanded in smothered tones from the depths of a sweater I was getting into in order to gain time by omitting a collar.

"They came in with the plumbers, sir, at half-past eight. Old man Schmick tried to keep them out, but they said they didn't understand German and walked right by, leaving their donkeys in the roadway outside."

"Couldn't Rudolph and Max stop them?" I cried, as my head emerged.

"They were still in bed, sir. I think they're at breakfast now."

"Good lord!" I groaned, looking at my watch. "Nine-thirty! What sort of a rest cure am I conducting here?"

We hurried downstairs so fast that I lost one of my bedroom slippers. It went clattering on ahead of us, making a shameful racket on the bare stones, but Britton caught it up in time to save it from the clutches of the curio-vandals. My workmen were lolling about the place, smoking vile pipes and talking in guttural whispers. All operations appeared to have ceased in my establishment at the command of the far from idle rich. Two portly gentlemen in fedoras were standing in the middle of the great hall, discussing the merits of a dingy old spinet that had been carried out of the music room by two lusty porters from the hotel. From somewhere in the direction of the room where the porcelains and earthenware were stored came the shrill, excited voices of women. The aged Schmicks were sitting side by side on a window ledge, with the rigid reticence of wax figures.

As I came up, I heard one of the strangers say to the other:

"Well, if you don't want it, I'll take it. My wife says it can be made into a writing desk with a little--"

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said I confronting them. "Will you be good enough to explain this intrusion?"

They stared at me as if I were a servant asking for higher wages. The speaker, a fat man with a bristly moustache and a red necktie, drew himself up haughtily.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded, fixing me with a glare.

I knew at once that he was the kind of an American I have come to hate with a zest that knows no moderation; the kind that makes one ashamed of the national melting pot. I glared back at him.

"I happen to be the owner of this place, and you'll oblige me by clearing out."

"What's that? Here, here, none of that sort of talk, my friend. We're here to look over your stuff, and we mean business, but you won't get anywhere by talking like--"

"There is nothing for sale here," I said shortly. "And you've got a lot of nerve to come bolting into a private house--"

"Say," said the second man, advancing with a most insulting scowl, "we'll understand each other right off the reel, my friend. All you've got to do is to answer us when we ask for prices. Now, bear that in mind, and don't try any of your high-and-mighty tactics on us."

"Just remember that you're a junk-dealer and we'll get along splendidly," said the other, in a tone meant to crush me. "What do you ask for this thing?" tapping the dusty spinet with his walking-stick.

It suddenly occurred to me that the situation was humorous.

"You will have to produce your references, gentlemen, before I can discuss anything with you," I said, after swallowing very hard. (It must have been my pride.)

They stared. "Good Lord!" gasped the bristly one, blinking his eyes. "Don't you know who this gentleman is? You--you appear to be an American. You must know Mr. Riley-Werkheimer of New York."

"I regret to say that I have never heard of Mr. Riley-Werkheimer. I did not know that Mrs. Riley-Werkheimer's husband was living. And may I ask who you are?"

"Oh, I am also a nobody," said he, with a wink at his purple-jowled companion. "I am only poor old Rocksworth, the president of the--"

"Oh, don't say anything more, Mr. Rocksworth," I cried. "I have heard of you. This fine old spinet? Well, it has been reduced in price. Ten thousand dollars, Mr. Rocksworth."

"Ten thousand nothing! I'll take it at seventy-five dollars. And now let's talk about this here hall-seat. My wife thinks it's a fake. What is its history, and what sort of guarantee can you--"

"A fake!" I cried in dismay. "My dear Mr. Rocksworth, that is the very hall-seat that Pontius Pilate sat in when waiting for an audience with the first of the great Teutonic barons. The treaty between the Romans and the Teutons was signed on that table over there,--the one you have so judiciously selected, I perceive. Of course, you know that this was the Saxon seat of government. Charlemagne lived here with all his court."

They tried not to look impressed, but rather overdid it.

"That's the sort of a story you fellows always put up, you skinflints from Boston. I'll bet my head you are from Boston," said Mr. Rocksworth shrewdly.

"I couldn't afford to have you lose your head, Mr. Rocksworth, so I shan't take you on," said I merrily.

"Don't get fresh now," said he stiffly.

Mr. Riley-Werkheimer walked past me to take a closer look at the seat, almost treading on my toes rather than to give an inch to me.

"How can you prove that it's the genuine article?" he demanded curtly.

"You have my word for it, sir," I said quietly.

"Pish tush!" said he.

Mr. Rocksworth turned in the direction of the banquet hall.

"Carrie!" he shouted. "Come here a minute, will you?"

"Don't shout like that, Orson," came back from the porcelain closet. "You almost made me drop this thing."

"Well, drop it, and come on. This is important."

I wiped the moisture from my brow and respectfully put my clenched fists into my pockets.

A minute later, three females appeared on the scene, all of them dusting their hands and curling their noses in disgust.

"I never saw such a dirty place," said the foremost, a large lady who couldn't, by any circumstance of fate, have been anybody's wife but Rocksworth's. "It's filthy! What do you want?"

"I've bought this thing here for seventy-five. You said I couldn't get it for a nickle under a thousand. And say, this man tells me the hall seat here belonged to Pontius Pilate in--"

"Pardon me," I interrupted, "I merely said that he sat in it. I am not trying to deceive you, sir."

"And the treaty was signed on this table," said Mr. Riley-Werkheimer. He addressed himself to a plump young lady with a distorted bust and a twenty-two inch waist. "Maude, what do you know about the Roman-Teutonic treaty? We'll catch you now, my friend," he went on, turning to me. "My daughter is up in ancient history. She's an authority."

Miss Maude appeared to be racking her brain. I undertook to assist her.

"I mean the second treaty, after the fall of Nuremburg," I explained.

"Oh," she said, instantly relieved. "Was it really signed here, right here in this hall? Oh, Father! We must have that table."

"You are sure there was a treaty, Maude?" demanded her parent

accusingly.

"Certainly," she cried. "The Teutons ceded Alsace-Lorraine to--"

"Pardon me once more," I cried, and this time I plead guilty to a blush, "you are thinking of the other treaty--the one at Metz, Miss Riley-Werkheimer. This, as you will recall, ante-dates that one by--oh, several years."

"Thank you," she said, quite condescendingly. "I was confused for a moment. Of course, Father, I can't say that it was signed here or on this table as the young man says. I only know that there was a treaty. I do wish you'd come and see the fire-screen I've found--"

"Let's get this out of our system first," said her father. "If you can show me statistics and the proper proof that this is the genuine table, young man, I'll--"

"Pray rest easy, sir," I said. "We can take it up later on. The facts are--"

"And this Pontius Pilate seat," interrupted Rocksworth, biting off the end of a fresh cigar. "What about it? Got a match?"

"Get the gentleman a match, Britton," I said, thereby giving my valet an opportunity to do his exploding in the pantry. "I can only affirm, sir, that it is common history that Pontius Pilate spent a portion of his exile here in the sixth century. It is reasonable to assume that he sat in this seat, being an old man unused to difficult stairways. He--"

"Buy it, Orson," said his wife, with authority. "We'll take a chance on it. If it isn't the right thing, we can sell it to the second-hand dealers. What's the price?"

"A thousand dollars to you, madam," said I.

They were at once suspicious. While they were busily engaged in looking the seat over as the porters shifted it about at all angles, I stepped over and ordered my workmen to resume their operations. I was beginning to get sour and angry again, having missed my coffee. From the culinary regions there ascended a most horrific odour of fried onions. If there is one thing I really resent it is a fried onion. I do not know why I should have felt the way I did about it on this occasion, but I am mean enough now to confess that I hailed the triumphal entry of that pernicious odour with a meanness of spirit that leaves nothing to be explained.

"Good gracious!" gasped the aristocratic Mrs. Riley-Werkheimer, holding her nose. "Do you smell _that_?"

"Onions! My Gawd!" sniffed Maude. "How I hate 'em!"

Mr. Rocksworth forgot his dignity. "Hate 'em?" he cried, his eyes rolling. "I just love 'em!"

"Orson!" said his wife, transfixing him with a glare. "_What_ will people think of you?"

"I like 'em too," admitted Mr. Riley-Werkheimer, perceiving at once whom she meant by "people." He puffed out his chest.

At that instant the carpenters, plumbers and stone masons resumed their infernal racket, while scrubwomen, polishers and painters began to move intimately among us.

"Here!" roared Mr. Rocksworth. "Stop this beastly noise! What the deuce do you mean, sir, permitting these scoundrels to raise the dead like this? Confound 'em, I stopped them once. Here! You! Let up on that, will you?"

I moved forward apologetically. "I am afraid it is not onions you smell, ladies and gentlemen." I had taken my cue with surprising quickness. "They are raising the dead. The place is fairly alive with dead rats and--"

"Good Lord!" gasped Riley-Werkheimer. "We'll get the bubonic plague here."

"Oh, I know onions," said Rocksworth calmly. "Can't fool me on onions. They are onions, ain't they, Carrie?"

"They are!" said she. "What a pity to have this wonderful old castle actually devastated by workmen! It is an outrage--a crime. I should think the owner would turn over in his grave."

"Unhappily, I am the owner, madam," said I, slyly working my foot back into an elusive slipper.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said, eyeing me coldly with a hitherto unexposed lorgnon.

"I am," said I. "You quite took me by surprise. I should have made myself more presentable if I had known--"

"Well, let's move on upstairs," said Rocksworth. Addressing the porters he said: "You fellows get this lot of stuff together and I'll take an option on it. I'll be over to-morrow to close the deal, Mr.--Mr.--Now, where is the old Florentine mirror the Count was telling us about?"

"The Count?" said I, frowning.

"Yes, the real owner. You can't stuff me with your talk about being the proprietor here, my friend. You see, we happen to know the Count."

They all condescended to laugh at me. I don't know what I should have said or done if Britton had not returned with a box of matches at that instant--sulphur matches which added subtly to the growing illusion.

Almost simultaneously there appeared in the lower hall a lanky youth of eighteen. He was a loud-voiced, imperious sort of chap with at least three rolls to his trousers and a plum-coloured cap.

"Say, these clubs are the real stuff, all right, all right. They're as brittle as glass. See what I did to 'em. We can hae 'em spliced and rewound and I'll hang 'em on my wall. All I want is the heads anyhow."

He held up to view a headless mid-iron and brassie, and triumphantly

waved a splendid cleek. My favourite clubs! I could play better from a hanging lie with that beautiful brassie than with any club I ever owned and as for the iron, I was deadly with it.

He lit a cigarette and threw the match into a pile of shavings. Old Conrad returned to life at that instant and stamped out the incipient blaze.

"I shouldn't consider them very good clubs, Harold, if they break off like that," said his mother.

"What do you know about clubs?" he snapped, and I at once knew what class he was in at the preparatory school.

If I was ever like one of these, said I to myself, God rest the sage soul of my Uncle Rilas!

The situation was no longer humorous. I could put up with anything but the mishandling of my devoted golf clubs.

Striding up to him, I snatched the remnants from his hands.

"You infernal cub!" I roared. "Haven't you any more sense than to smash a golf club like that? For two cents I'd break this putter over your head."

"Father!" he yelled indignantly. "Who is this mucker?"

Mr. Rocksworth bounced toward me, his cane raised. I whirled upon him.

"How dare you!" he shouted. The ladies squealed.

If he expected me to cringe, he was mightily mistaken. My blood was up. I advanced.

"Paste him, Dad!" roared Harold.

But Mr. Rocksworth suddenly altered his course and put the historic treaty table between him and me. He didn't like the appearance of my rather brawny fist.

"You big stiff!" shouted Harold. Afterwards it occurred to me that this inelegant appellation may have been meant for his father, but at the time I took it to be aimed at me.

Before Harold quite knew what was happening to him, he was prancing down the long hall with my bony fingers grasping his collar. Coming to the door opening into the outer vestibule, I drew back my foot for a final aid to locomotion. Acutely recalling the fact that slippers are not designed for kicking purposes, I raised my foot, removed the slipper and laid it upon a taut section of his trousers with all of the melancholy force that I usually exert in slicing my drive off the tee. I shall never forget the exquisite spasm of pleasure his plaintive "Ouch!" gave me.

Then Harold passed swiftly out of my life.

Mr. Rocksworth, reinforced by four reluctant mercenaries in the shape of porters, was advancing upon me. Somehow I had a vague, but unerring

instinct that some one had fainted, but I didn't stop to inquire. Without much ado, I wrested the cane from him and sent it scuttling after Harold.

"Now, get out!" I roared.

"You shall pay for this!" he sputtered, quite black in the face. "Grab him, you infernal cowards!"

But the four porters slunk away, and Mr. Rocksworth faced me alone. Rudolph and Max, thoroughly fed and most prodigious, were bearing down upon us, accounting for the flight of the mercenaries.

"Get out!" I repeated. "I am the owner of this place, Mr. Rocksworth, and I am mad through and through. Skip!"

"I'll have the law--"

"Law be hanged!"

"If it costs me a million, I'll get--"

"It will cost you a million if you don't get!" I advised him, seeing that he paused for want of breath.

I left him standing there, but had the presence of mind to wave my huge henchmen away. Mr. Riley-Werkheimer approached, but very pacifically. He was paler than he will ever be again in his life, I fear.

"This is most distressing, most distressing, Mr.-- Mr.-- ahem! I've never been so outraged in my life. I--but, wait!" He had caught the snap in my atavistic eye. "I am not seeking trouble. We will go, sir. I--I--I think my wife has quite recovered. Are--are you all right, my dear?"

I stood aside and let them file past me. Mrs. Riley-Werkheimer moved very nimbly for one who had just been revived by smelling-salts. As her husband went by, he half halted in front of me. A curious glitter leaped into his fishy eyes.

"I'd give a thousand dollars to be free to do what you did to that insufferable puppy, Mr.--Mr.--ahem. A cool thousand, damn him!"

I had my coffee upstairs, far removed from the onions. A racking headache set in. Never again will I go without my coffee so long. It always gives me a headache.

CHAPTER III

I CONVERSE WITH A MYSTERY

Late in the afternoon, I opened my door, hoping that the banging of hammers and the buzz of industry would have ceased, but alas! the noise was even more deafening than before. I was still in a state of nerves over the events of the morning. There had been a most distressing lack of poise on my part, and I couldn't help feeling after it was all over

that my sense of humour had received a shock from which it was not likely to recover in a long time. There was but little consolation in the reflection that my irritating visitors deserved something in the shape of a rebuff; I could not separate myself from the conviction that my integrity as a gentleman had suffered in a mistaken conflict with humour. My headache, I think, was due in a large measure to the sickening fear that I had made a fool of myself, notwithstanding my efforts to make fools of them. My day was spoilt. My plans were upset and awry.

Espying Britton in the gloomy corridor, I shouted to him, and he came at once.

"Britton," said I, as he closed the door, "do you think they will carry out their threat to have the law on me? Mr. Rocksworth was very angry--and put out. He is a power, as you know."

"I think you are quite safe, sir," said he. "I've been waiting outside since two o'clock to tell you something, sir, but hated to disturb you. I--"

"Thank you, Britton, my head was aching dreadfully."

"Yes, sir. Quite so. Shortly before two, sir, one of the porters from the hotel came over to recover a gold purse Mrs. Riley-Werkheimer had dropped in the excitement, and he informed Mr. Poopendyke that the whole party was leaving at four for Dresden. I asked particular about the young man, sir, and he said they had the doctor in to treat his stomach, sir, immediately after they got back to the hotel."

"His stomach? But I distinctly struck him on the verso."

"I know, sir; but it seems that he swallowed his cigarette."

To my shame, I joined Britton in a roar of laughter. Afterwards I recalled, with something of a shock, that it was the first time I had ever heard my valet laugh aloud. He appeared to be in some distress over it himself, for he tried to turn it off into a violent fit of coughing. He is such a faithful, exemplary servant that I made haste to pound him on the back, fearing the worst. I could not get on at all without Britton. He promptly recovered.

"I beg pardon, sir," said he. "Will you have your shave and tub now, sir?"

Later on, somewhat refreshed and relieved, I made my way to the little balcony, first having issued numerous orders and directions to the still stupefied Schmicks, chief among which was an inflexible command to keep the gates locked against all comers. The sun was shining brightly over the western hills, and the sky was clear and blue. The hour was five I found on consulting my watch. Naturally my first impulse was to glance up at the still loftier balcony in the east wing. It was empty. There was nothing in the grim, formidable prospect to warrant the impression that any one dwelt behind those dismantled windows, and I experienced the vague feeling that perhaps it had been a dream after all.

Far below at the foot of the shaggy cliff ran the historic Donau, serene and muddy, all rhythmic testimonials to the contrary. With

something of a shudder I computed the distance from my eerie perch to the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. Five hundred feet, at least; an impregnable wall of nature surmounted by a now rank and obsolete obstruction built by the hand of man: a fortress that defied the legions of old but to-day would afford no more than brief and even desultory target practice for a smart battery. To scale the cliff, however, would be an impossibility for the most resourceful general in the world. All about me were turrets and minarets, defeated by the ancient and implacable foe--Time. Shattered crests of towers hung above me, grey and forbidding, yet without menace save in their senile prerogative to collapse without warning. Tiny windows marked the face of my still sturdy walls, like so many pits left by the pox, and from these in the good old feudal days a hundred marksmen had thrust their thunderous blunderbusses to clear the river of vain-glorious foes. From the scalloped bastions cross-bowmen of even darker ages had shot their random bolts; while in the niches of lower walls futile pikemen waited for the impossible to happen: the scaling of the cliff!

Friend and foe alike came to the back door of Schloss Rothhoefen, and there found welcome or stubborn obstacles that laughed at time and locksmiths: monstrous gates that still were strong enough to defy a mighty force. There was my great stone-paved courtyard, flanked on all sides by disintegrating buildings once occupied by serfs and fighting men; the stables in which chargers and beasts of burden had slept side by side until called by the night's work or the day's work, as war or peace prescribed, ranged close by the gates that opened upon the steep, winding roadway that now dismayed all modern steeds save the conquering ass. Here too were the remains of a once noble garden, and here were the granaries and the storehouses.

Far below me were the dungeons, with dead men's bones on their dripping floors; and somewhere in the heart of the peak were secret, unknown passages, long since closed by tumbling rocks and earth, as darkly mysterious as the streets in the buried cities of Egypt.

Across the river and below me stood the walled-in town that paid tribute to the good and bad Rothhoefens in those olden days: a red-tiled, gloomy city that stood as a monument to long-dead ambitions. A peaceful, quiet town that had survived its parlous centuries of lust and greed, and would go on living to the end of time.

So here I sat me down, almost at the top of my fancy, to wonder if it were not folly as well!

Above me soared huge white-bellied birds, cousins germain to my dreams, but alas! infinitely more sensible in that they roamed for a more sustaining nourishment than the so-called food for thought.

I looked backward to the tender years when my valiant young heart kept pace with a fertile brain in its swiftest flights, and pinched myself to make sure that this was not all imagination. Was I really living in a feudal castle with romance shadowing me at every step? Was this I, the dreamer of twenty years ago? Or was I the last of the Rothhoefens and not John Bellamy Smart, of Madison Avenue, New York?

The sun shone full upon me as I sat there in my little balcony, but I liked the dry, warm glare of it. To be perfectly frank, the castle was a bit damp. I had had a pain in the back of my neck for two whole days. The sooner I got at my novel and finished it up the better, I

reflected. Then I could go off to the baths somewhere. But would I ever settle down to work? Would the plumbers ever get off the place? (They were the ones I seemed to suspect the most.)

Suddenly, as I sat there ruminating, I became acutely aware of something white on the ledge of the topmost window in the eastern tower. Even as I fixed my gaze upon it, something else transpired. A cloud of soft, wavy, luxurious brown hair eclipsed the narrow white strip and hung with spreading splendour over the casement ledge, plainly, indubitably to dry in the sun!

My neighbour had washed her hair!

And it was really a most wonderful head of hair. I can't remember ever having seen anything like it, except in the advertisements.

For a long time I sat there trying to pierce the blackness of the room beyond the window with my straining eyes, deeply sensitive to a curiosity that had as its basic force the very natural anxiety to know what disposition she had made of the rest of her person in order to obtain this rather startling effect.

Of course, I concluded, she was lying on a couch of some description, with her head in the window. That was quite clear, even to a dreamer. And perhaps she was reading a novel while the sun shone. My fancy went to the remotest ends of probability: she might even be reading one of mine!

What a glorious, appealing, sensuous thing a crown of hair--but just then Mr. Poopendyke came to my window.

"May I interrupt you for a moment, Mr. Smart?" he inquired, as he squinted at me through his ugly bone-rimmed glasses.

"Come here, Poopendyke," I commanded in low, excited tones. He hesitated. "You won't fall off," I said sharply.

Although the window is at least nine feet high, Poopendyke stooped as he came through. He always does it, no matter how tall the door. It is a life-long habit with him. Have I mentioned that my worthy secretary is six feet four, and as thin as a reed? I remember speaking of his knees. He is also a bachelor.

"It is a dreadful distance down there," he murmured, flattening himself against the wall and closing his eyes.

A pair of slim white hands at that instant indolently readjusted the thick mass of hair and quite as casually disappeared. I failed to hear Mr. Poopendyke's remark.

"I think, sir," he proceeded, "it would be a very good idea to get some of our correspondence off our hands. A great deal of it has accumulated in the past few weeks. I wish to say that I am quite ready to attend to it whenever--"

"Time enough for letters," said I, still staring.

"We ought to clean them all up before we begin on the romance, sir. That's my suggestion. We shan't feel like stopping for a lot of silly

letters--By the way, sir, when do you expect to start on the romance?" He usually spoke of them as romances. They were not novels to Poopendyke.

I came to my feet, the light of adventure in my eye.

"This very instant, Poopendyke," I exclaimed.

His face brightened. He loves work.

"Splendid! I will have your writing tablets ready in--"

"First of all, we must have a ladder. Have you seen to that?"

"A ladder?" he faltered, putting one foot back through the window in a most suggestive way.

"Oh," said I, remembering, "I haven't told you, have I? Look! Up there in that window. Do you see that?"

"What is it, sir? A rug?"

"Rug! Great Scott, man, don't you know a woman's hair when you see it?"

"I've never--er--never seen it--you might say--just like that. Is it hair?"

"It is. You do see it, don't you?"

"How did it get there?"

"Good! Now I know I'm not dreaming. Come! There's no time to be lost. We may be able to get up there before she hears us!"

I was through the window and half way across the room before his well-meant protest checked me.

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Smart, don't be too hasty. We can't rush in upon a woman unexpectedly like this. Who knows? She may be entirely--" He caught himself up sharply, blinked, and then rounded out his sentence in safety with the word "deshabille."

I was not to be turned aside by drivel of that sort; so, with a scornful laugh, I hurried on and was soon in the courtyard, surrounded by at least a score of persons who madly inquired where the fire was, and wanted to help me to put it out. At last we managed to get them back at their work, and I instructed old Conrad to have the tallest ladder brought to me at once.

"There is no such thing about the castle," he announced blandly, puffing away at his enormous pipe. His wife shook her head in perfect serenity. Somewhat dashed, I looked about me in quest of proof that they were lying to me. There was no sign of anything that even resembled a ladder.

"Where are your sons?" I demanded.

The old couple held up their hands in great distress.

"Herr Britton has them working their souls out, turning a windlass

outside the gates--ach, that terrible invention of his!" groaned old Conrad. "My poor sons are faint with fatigue, mein herr. You should see them perspire,--and hear them pant for breath."

"It is like the blowing of the forge bellows," cried his wife. "My poor little boys!"

"Fetch them at once Conrad," said I, cudgelling my brain for a means to surmount a present difficulty, and but very slightly interested in Britton's noble contraption.

The brothers soon appeared and, as if to give the lie to their fond parents, puffed complacently at their pipes and yawned as if but recently aroused from a nap. Their sleeves were rolled up and I marvelled at the size of their arms.

"Is Britton dead?" I cried, suddenly cold with the fear that they had mutinied against this brusque English overlord.

They smiled. "He is waiting to be pulled up again, sir," said Max. "We left him at the bottom when you sent for us. It is for us to obey."

Of course, everything had to wait while my obedient vassals went forth and reeled the discomfited Britton to the top of the steep. He sputtered considerably until he saw me laughing at him. Instantly he was a valet once more, no longer a crabbed genius.

I had thought of a plan, only to discard it on measuring with my eye the distance from the ground to the lowest window in the east wing, second floor back. Even by standing on the shoulders of Rudolph, who was six feet five, I would still find myself at least ten feet short of the window ledge. Happily a new idea struck me almost at once.

In a jiffy, half a dozen carpenters were at work constructing a substantial ladder out of scantlings, while I stood over them in serene command of the situation.

The Schmicks segregated themselves and looked on, regarding the window with sly, furtive glances in which there was a distinct note of uneasiness.

At last the ladder was complete. Resolutely I mounted to the top and peered through the sashless window. It was quite black and repelling beyond. Instructing Britton and the two brothers to follow me in turn, I clambered over the wide stone sill and lowered myself gingerly to the floor.

I will not take up the time or the space to relate my experiences on this first fruitless visit to the east wing of my abiding place. Suffice to say, we got as far as the top of the stairs in the vast middle corridor after stumbling through a series of dim, damp rooms, and then found our way effectually blocked by a stout door which was not only locked and bolted, but bore a most startling admonition to would-be trespassers.

Pinned to one of the panels there was a dainty bit of white note-paper, with these satiric words written across its surface in a bold, feminine hand:

"_Please keep out. This is private property._"

Most property owners no doubt would have been incensed by this calm defiance on the part of a squatter, either male or female, but not I. The very impudence of the usurper appealed to me. What could be more delicious than her serene courage in dispossessing me, with the stroke of a pen, of at least two-thirds of my domicile, and what more exciting than the thought of waging war against her in the effort to regain possession of it? Really it was quite glorious! Here was a happy, enchanting bit of feudalism that stirred my romantic soul to its very depths. I was being defied by a woman--an amazon! Even my grasping imagination could not have asked for more substantial returns than this. To put her to rout! To storm the castle! To make her captive and chuck her into my dungeon! Splendid!

We returned to the courtyard and held a counsel of war. I put all of the Schmicks on the grill, but they stubbornly disclaimed all interest in or knowledge of the extraordinary occupant of the east wing.

"We can smoke her out, sir," said Britton.

I could scarcely believe my ears.

"Britton," said I severely, "you are a brute. I am surprised. You forget there is an innocent babe--maybe a collection of them--over there. And a dog. We shan't do anything heathenish, Britton. Please bear that in mind. There is but one way: we must storm the place. I will not be defied to my very nose."

I felt it to see if it was not a little out of joint. "It is a good nose."

"It is, sir," said Britton, and Poopendyke, in a perfect ecstasy of loyalty, shouted: "Long live your nose, sir!"

My German vassals waved their hats, perceiving that a demonstration was required without in the least knowing what it was about.

"To-night we'll plan our campaign," said I, and then returned in some haste to my balcony. The mists of the waning day were rising from the valley below. The smell of rain was in the air. I looked in vain for the lady's tresses. They were gone. The sun was also gone. His work for the day was done. I wondered whether she was putting up her hair with her own fair hands or was there a lady's maid in her menage.

Poopendyke and I dined in solemn grandeur in the great banquet hall, attended by the clumsy Max.

"Mr. Poopendyke," said I, after Max had passed me the fish for the second time on my right side--and both times across my shoulder,--"we must engage a butler and a footman to-morrow. Likewise a chef. This is too much."

"Might I suggest that we also engage a chambermaid? The beds are very poorly--"

I held up my hand, smiling confidently.

"We may capture a very competent chambermaid before the beds are made

up again," I said, with meaning.

"She doesn't write like a chambermaid," he reminded me. Whereupon we fell to studying the very aristocratic chirography employed by my neighbour in barring me from my own possessions.

After the very worst meal that Frau Schmick had ever cooked, and the last one that Max under any circumstance would be permitted to serve, I took myself off once more to the enchanted balcony. I was full of the fever of romance. A perfect avalanche of situations had been tumbling through my brain for hours, and, being a provident sort of chap in my own way, I decided to jot them down on a pad of paper before they quite escaped me or were submerged by others.

The night was very black and tragic, swift storm clouds having raced up to cover the moon and stars. With a radiant lanthorn in the window behind me, I sat down with my pad and my pipe and my pencil. The storm was not far away. I saw that it would soon be booming about my stronghold, and realised that my fancy would have to work faster than it had ever worked before if half that I had in mind was to be accomplished. Why I should have courted a broken evening on the exposed balcony, instead of beginning my labours in my study, remains an unrevealed mystery unless we charge it to the account of a much-abused eccentricity attributed to genius and which usually turns out to be arrant stupidity.

I have no patience with the so-called eccentricity of genius. It is merely an excuse for unkempt hair, dirty finger-nails, unpolished boots, open placquets, bad manners and a tendency to forget pecuniary obligations, to say nothing of such trifles as besottedness, vulgarity and the superior knack of knowing how to avoid making suitable provision for one's wife and children. All the shabby short-comings in the character of an author, artist or actor are blithely charged to genius, and we are content to let it go at that for fear that other people may think we don't know any better. As for myself, I may be foolish and inconsequential, but heaven will bear witness that I am not mean enough to call myself a genius.

So we will call it stupidity that put me where I might be rained upon at any moment, or permanently interrupted by a bolt of lightning. (There were low mutterings of thunder behind the hills, and faint flashes as if a monstrous giant had paused to light his pipe on the evil, wind-swept peaks of the Caucasus mountains.)

I was scribbling away in serene contempt for the physical world, when there came to my ears a sound that gave me a greater shock than any streak of lightning could have produced and yet left sufficient life in me to appreciate the sensation of being electrified.

A woman's voice, speaking to me out of the darkness and from some point quite near at hand! Indeed, I could have sworn it was almost at my elbow; she might have been peering over my shoulder to read my thoughts.

"I beg your pardon, but would you mind doing me a slight favour?"

Those were the words, uttered in a clear, sweet, perfectly confident voice, as of one who never asked for favours, but exacted them.

I looked about me, blinking, utterly bewildered. No one was to be seen.

She laughed. Without really meaning to do so, I also laughed,--nervously, of course.

"Can't you see me?" she asked. I looked intently at the spot from which the sound seemed to come: a perfectly solid stone block less than three feet from my right shoulder. It must have been very amusing. She laughed again. I flushed resentfully.

"Where are you?" I cried out rather tartly.

"I can see you quite plainly, and you are very ugly when you scowl, sir. Are you scowling at me?"

"I don't know," I replied truthfully, still searching for her. "Does it seem so to you?"

"Yes."

"Then I must be looking in the right direction," I cried impolitely. "You must be--Ah!"

My straining eyes had located a small, oblong blotch in the curve of the tower not more than twenty feet from where I stood, and on a direct line with my balcony. True, I could not at first see a face, but as my eyes grew a little more accustomed to the darkness, I fancied I could distinguish a shadow that might pass for one.

"I didn't know that little window was there," I cried, puzzled.

"It isn't," she said. "It is a secret loop-hole, and it isn't here except in times of great duress. See! I can close it." The oblong blotch abruptly disappeared, only to reappear an instant later. I was beginning to understand. Of course it was in the beleaguered east wing! "I hope I didn't startle you a moment ago."

I resolved to be very stiff and formal about it. "May I enquire, madam, what you are doing in my hou--my castle?"

"You may."

"Well," said I, seeing the point, "what are you doing here?"

"I am living here," she answered distinctly.

"So I perceive," said I, rather too distinctly.

"And I have come down to ask a simple, tiny little favour of you, Mr. Smart," she resumed.

"You know my name?" I cried, surprised.

"I am reading your last book--Are you going?"

"Just a moment, please," I called out, struck by a splendid idea. Reaching inside the window I grasped the lanthorn and brought its rays to bear upon the--perfectly blank wall! I stared open-mouthed and unbelieving. "Good heaven! Have I been dreaming all this?" I cried aloud.

My gaze fell upon two tiny holes in the wall, exposed to view by the bright light of my lamp. They appeared to be precisely in the centre of the spot so recently marked by the elusive oblong. Even as I stared at the holes, a slim object that I at once recognised as a finger protruded from one of them and wiggled at me in a merry but exceedingly irritating manner.

Sensibly I restored the lanthorn to its place inside the window and waited for the mysterious voice to resume.

"Are you so homely as all that?" I demanded when the shadowy face looked out once more. Very clever of me, I thought.

"I am considered rather good-looking," she replied, serenely. "Please don't do that again. It was very rude of you, Mr. Smart." "Oh, I've seen something of you before this," I said. "You have long, beautiful brown hair--and a dog."

She was silent.

"I am sure you will pardon me if I very politely ask who you are?" I went on.

"That question takes me back to the favour. Will you be so very, very kind as to cease bothering me, Mr. Smart? It is dreadfully upsetting, don't you feeling that at any moment you may rush in and--"

"I like that. In my own castle, too!"

"There is ample room for both of us," she said sharply. "I shan't be here for more than a month or six weeks, and I am sure we can get along very amiably under the same roof for that length of time if you'll only forget that I am here."

"I can't very well do that, madam. You see, we are making extensive repairs about the place and you are proving to be a serious obstacle. I cannot grant your request. It will grieve me enormously if I am compelled to smoke you out but I fear--"

"Smoke me out!"

"Perhaps with sulphur," I went on resolutely. "It is said to be very effective."

"Surely you will not do anything so horrid."

"Only as a last resort. First, we shall storm the east wing. Failing in that we shall rely on smoke. You will admit that you have no right to poach on my preserves."

"None whatever," she said, rather plaintively.

I can't remember having heard a sweeter voice than hers. Of course, by this time, I was thoroughly convinced that she was a lady,--a cultured, high-bred lady,--and an American. I was too densely enveloped by the fogginess of my own senses at this time, however, to take in this extraordinary feature of the case. Later on, in the seclusion of my study, the full force of it struck me and I marvelled.

That plaintive note in her voice served its purpose. My firmness seemed to dissolve, even as I sought to reinforce it by an injection of harshness into my own manner of speech.

"Then you should be willing to vacate my premises er--or--"here is where I began to show irresoluteness--"or explain yourself."

"Won't you be generous?"

I cleared my throat nervously. How well they know the cracks in a man's armour!

"I am willing to be--amenable to reason. That's all you ought to expect." A fresh idea took root. "Can't we effect a compromise? A truce, or something of the sort? All I ask is that you explain your presence here. I will promise to be as generous as possible under the circumstances."

"Will you give me three days in which to think it over?" she asked, after a long pause.

"No."

"Well, two days?"

"I'll give you until to-morrow afternoon at five, when I shall expect you to receive me in person."

"That is quite impossible."

"But I demand the right to go wherever I please in my own castle. You--"

"If you knew just how circumspect I am obliged to be at present you wouldn't impose such terms, Mr. Smart."

"Oho! Circumspect! That puts a new light on the case. What have you been up to, madam?" I spoke very severely.

She very properly ignored the banality. "If I should write you a nice, agreeable letter, explaining as much as I can, won't you be satisfied?"

"I prefer to have it by word of mouth."

She seemed to be considering. "I will come to this window to-morrow night at this time and--and let you know," she said reluctantly.

"Very well," said I. "We'll let it rest till then."

"And, by the way, I have something more to ask of you. Is it quite necessary to have all this pounding and hammering going on in the castle? The noise is dreadful. I don't ask it on my own account, but for the baby. You see, she's quite ill with a fever, Mr. Smart. Perhaps you've heard her crying."

"The baby?" I muttered.

"It is nothing serious, of course. The doctor was here to-day and he reassured me--"

"A--a doctor here to-day?" I gasped.

She laughed once more. Verily, it was a gentle, high-bred laugh.

"Will you please put a stop to the noise for a day or two?" she asked, very prettily.

"Certainly," said I too surprised to say anything else. "Is--is there anything else?"

"Nothing, thank you," she replied. Then: "Good night, Mr. Smart. You are very good."

"Don't forget to-morrow--"

But the oblong aperture disappeared with a sharp click, and I found myself staring at the blank, sphynx-like wall.

Taking up my pad, my pipe and my pencil, and leaving all of my cherished ideas out there in the cruel darkness, never to be recovered,--at least not in their original form,--I scrambled through the window, painfully scraping my knee in passing,--just in time to escape the deluge.

I am sure I should have enjoyed a terrific drenching if she had chosen to subject me to it.

CHAPTER IV

I BECOME AN ANCESTOR

True to the promise she had extracted from me, I laid off my workmen the next morning. They trooped in bright and early, considerably augmented by fresh recruits who came to share the benefits of my innocuous prodigality, and if I live to be a thousand I shall never again experience such a noisome half hour as the one I spent in listening to their indignant protests against my tyrannical oppression of the poor and needy. In the end, I agreed to pay them, one and all, for a full day's work, and they went away mollified, calling me a true gentleman to my face and heaven knows what to my back.

I spoke gently to them of the sick baby. With one voice they all shouted:

"But our babies are sick!"

One octogenarian--a carpenter's apprentice--heatedly informed me, through Schmick, that he had a child two weeks old that would die before morning if deprived of proper food and nourishment. Somewhat impressed by this pitiful lament, I enquired how his wife was getting along. The ancient, being in a placid state of senility, courteously thanked me for my interest, and answered that she had been dead for forty-nine years, come September. I overlooked the slight discrepancy.

During the remainder of the day, I insisted on the utmost quiet in our wing of the castle. Poopendyke was obliged to take his typewriter out to the stables, where I dictated scores of letters to him. I caught

Britton whistling in the kitchen about noon-time, and severely reprimanded him. We went quite to the extreme, however, when we tiptoed about our lofty halls. All of the afternoon we kept a sharp lookout for the doctor, but if he came we were none the wiser. Britton went into the town at three with the letters and a telegram to my friends in Vienna, imploring them to look up a corps of efficient servants for me and to send them on post-haste. I would have included a request for a competent nurse-maid if it hadn't been for a report from Poopendyke, who announced that he had caught a glimpse of a very nursy looking person at one of the upper windows earlier in the day.

I couldn't, however, for the life of me understand why my neighbour enjoined such rigid silence in our part of the castle and yet permitted that confounded dog of hers to yowl and bark all day. How was I to know that the beast had treed a lizard in the lower hall and couldn't dislodge it?

Britton returned with news. The ferrymen, with great joy in the telling, informed him that the season for tourists parties was just beginning and that we might expect, with them, to do a thriving and prosperous business during the next month or two. Indeed, word already had been received by the tourists company's agent in the town that a party of one hundred and sixty-nine would arrive the next day but one from Munchen, bent on visiting my ruin. In great trepidation, I had all of the gates and doors locked and reinforced by sundry beams and slabs, for I knew the overpowering nature of the collective tourist.

I may be pardoned if I digress at this time to state that the party of one hundred and sixty-nine, both stern and opposite, besieged my castle on the next day but one, with the punctuality of locusts, and despite all of my precautions, all of my devices, all of my objections, effected an entrance and over-ran the place like a swarm of ants. The feat that could not have been accomplished by an armed force was successfully managed by a group of pedagogues from Ohio, to whom "Keep off the Grass" and "No Trespass" are signs of utter impotence on the part of him who puts them up, and ever shall be, world without end. They came, they saw, they conquered, and they tried to buy picture postcards of me.

I mention this in passing, lest you should be disappointed. More anon.

Punctually at nine o'clock, I was in the balcony, thanking my lucky stars that it was a bright, moonlit night. There was every reason to rejoice in the prospect of seeing her face clearly when she appeared at her secret little window. Naturally, I am too much of a gentleman to have projected unfair means of illuminating her face, such as the use of a pocket electric lamp or anything of that sort. I am nothing if not gallant,--when it comes to a pinch. Besides, I was reasonably certain that she would wear a thick black veil. In this I was wrong. She wore a white, filmy one, but it served the purpose. I naturally concluded that she was homely.

"Good evening," she said, on opening the window.

"Good evening," said I, contriving to conceal my disappointment. "How is the baby?"

"Very much better, thank you. It was so good of you to stop the workmen."

[Illustration: I sat bolt upright and yelled; "Get out!"]

"Won't you take off your veil and stay awhile?" I asked, politely facetious. "It isn't quite fair to me, you know."

Her next remark brought a blush of confusion to my cheek. A silly notion had induced me to don my full evening regalia, spike-tail coat and all. Nothing could have been more ludicrously incongruous than my appearance, I am sure, and I never felt more uncomfortable in my life.

"How very nice you look in your new suit," she said, and I was aware of a muffled quality in her ordinarily clear, musical voice. She was laughing at me. "Are you giving a dinner party?"

"I usually dress for dinner," I lied with some haughtiness. "And so does Poopendyke," I added as an afterthought. My blush deepened as I recalled the attenuated blazer in which my secretary breakfasted, lunched and dined without discrimination.

"For Gretel's benefit, I presume."

"Aha! You do know Gretel, then?"

"Oh, I've known her for years. Isn't she a quaint old dear?"

"I shall discharge her in the morning," said I severely. "She is a liar and her husband is a poltroon. They positively deny your existence in any shape or form."

"They won't pay any attention to you," said she, with a laugh. "They are fixtures, quite as much so as the walls themselves. You'll not be able to discharge them. My grandfather tried it fifty years ago and failed. After that he made it a point to dismiss Conrad every day in the year and Gretel every other day. As well try to remove the mountain, Mr. Smart. They know you can't get on without them."

"I have discharged her as a cook," I said, triumphantly. "A new one will be here by the end of the week."

"Oh," she sighed plaintively, "how glad I am. She is an atrocious cook. I don't like to complain, Mr. Smart, but really it is getting so that I can't eat anything she sends up. It is jolly of you to get in a new one. Now we shall be very happy."

"By Jove!" said I, completely staggered by these revelations. Unable to find suitable words to express my sustained astonishment, I repeated: "By Jove!" but in a subdued tone.

"I have thought it over, Mr. Smart," she went on in a business-like manner, "and I believe we will get along much better together if we stay apart."

Ambiguous remarks ordinarily reach my intelligence, but I was so stunned by preceding admissions that I could only gasp:

"Do you mean to say you've been subsisting all this time on my food?"

"Oh, dear me, no! How can you think that of me? Gretel merely cooks

the food I buy. She keeps a distinct and separate account of everything, poor thing. I am sure you will not find anything wrong with your bills, Mr. Smart. But did you hear what I said a moment ago?"

"I'm not quite sure that I did."

"I prefer to let matters stand just as they are. Why should we discommode each other? We are perfectly satisfied as we--"

"I will not have my new cook giving notice, madam. You surely can't expect her--or him--to prepare meals for two separate--"

"I hadn't thought of that," she interrupted ruefully. "Perhaps if I were to pay her--or him--extra wages it would be all right," she added, quickly. "We do not require much, you know."

I laughed rather shortly,--meanly, I fear.

"This is most extraordinary, madam!"

"I--I quite agree with you. I'm awfully sorry it had to turn out as it has. Who would have dreamed of your buying the place and coming here to upset everything?"

I resolved to be firm with her. She seemed to be taking too much for granted. "Much as I regret it, madam, I am compelled to ask you to evacuate--to get out, in fact. This sort of thing can't go on."

She was silent for so long that I experienced a slow growth of compunction. Just as I was on the point of slightly receding from my position, she gave me another shock.

"Don't you think it would be awfully convenient if you had a telephone put in, Mr. Smart?" she said. "It is such a nuisance to send Max or Rudolph over to town every whip-stitch on errands when a telephone --in your name, of course--would be so much more satisfactory."

"A telephone!" I gasped.

"Circumstances make it quite unwise for me to have a telephone in my own name, but you could have one in yours without creating the least suspicion. You are--"

"Madam," I cried, and got no farther.

"--perfectly free to have a telephone if you want one," she continued. "The doctor came this evening and it really wasn't necessary. Don't you see you could have telephoned for me and saved him the trip?"

It was due to the most stupendous exertion of self-restraint on my part that I said: "Well, I'll be--jiggered," instead of something a little less unique. Her audacity staggered me. (I was not prepared at that time to speak of it as superciliousness.)

"Madam," I exploded, "will you be good enough to listen to me? I am not to be trifled with. To-morrow sometime I shall enter the east wing of this building if I have to knock down all the doors on the place. Do you understand, madam?"

"I do hope, Mr. Smart, you can arrange to break in about five o'clock. It will afford me a great deal of pleasure to give you some tea. May I expect you at five--or thereabouts?"

Her calmness exasperated me. I struck the stone balustrade an emphatic blow with my fist, sorely peeling the knuckles, and ground out:

"For two cents I'd do it to-night!"

"Oh, dear,--oh, dear!" she cried mockingly.

"You must be a dreadful woman," I cried out. "First, you make yourself at home in my house; then you succeed in stopping my workmen, steal my cook and men-servants, keep us all awake with a barking dog, defying me to my very face--"

"How awfully stern you are!"

"I don't believe a word you say about a sick baby,--or a doctor! It's all poppy-cock. To-morrow you will find yourself, bag and baggage, sitting at the bottom of this hill, waiting for--"

"Wait!" she cried. "Are you really, truly in earnest?"

"Most emphatically!"

"Then I--I shall surrender," she said, very slowly,--and seriously, I was glad to observe.

"That's more like it," I cried, enthusiastically.

"On one condition," she said. "You must agree in advance to let me stay on here for a month or two. It--it is most imperative, Mr. Smart."

"I shall be the sole judge of that, madam," I retorted, with some dignity. "By the way," I went on, knitting my brows, "how am I to get into your side of the castle? Schmick says he's lost the keys."

A good deal depended on her answer.

"They shall be delivered to you to-morrow morning, Mr. Smart," she said, soberly. "Good night."

The little window closed with a snap and I was left alone in the smiling moonlight. I was vastly excited, even thrilled by the prospect of a sleepless night. Something told me I wouldn't sleep a wink, and yet I, who bitterly resent having my sleep curtailed in the slightest degree, held no brief against circumstances. In fact, I rather revelled in the promise of nocturnal distraction. Fearing, however, that I might drop off to sleep at three or four o'clock and thereby run the risk of over sleeping, I dashed off to the head of the stairs and shouted for Britton.

"Britton," I said. "I want to be called at seven o'clock sharp in the morning." Noting his polite struggle to conceal his astonishment, I told him of my second encounter with the lady across the way.

"She won't be expecting you at seven, sir," he remarked. "And, as for that, she may be expecting to call on you, instead of the other way

round."

"Right!" said I, considerably dashed.

"Besides, sir, would it not be safer to wait till the tourist party has come and gone?"

"No tourists enter this place to-morrow or any other day," I declared, firmly.

"Well, I'd suggest waiting just the same, sir," said he, evidently inspired.

"Confound them," I growled, somehow absorbing his presentiment.

He hesitated for a moment near the door.

"Will you put in the telephone, sir?" he asked, respectfully.

Very curiously, I was thinking of it at that instant.

"It really wouldn't be a bad idea, Britton," I said, startled into committing myself. "Save us a great deal of legging it over town and all that sort of thing, eh?"

"Yes, sir. What I was about to suggest, sir, is that while we're about it we might as well have a system of electric bells put in. That is to say, sir, in both wings of the castle. Very convenient, sir, you see, for all parties concerned."

"I see," said I, impressed. And then repeated it, a little more impressed after reflection. "I see. You are a very resourceful fellow, Britton. I am inclined to bounce all of the Schmicks. They have known about this from the start and have lied like thieves. By Jove, she must have an extraordinary power over them,--or claim,--or something equally potent. Now I think of it, she mentioned a grandfather. That would go to prove she's related in some way to some one, wouldn't it?"

"I should consider it to be more than likely, sir," said Britton, with a perfectly straight face. He must have been sorely tried in the face of my inane maunderings. "Pardon me, sir, but wouldn't it be a tip-top idea to have it out with the Schmicks to-night? Being, sir, as you anticipate a rather wakeful night, I only make so bold as to suggest it in the hopes you may 'ave some light on the subject before you close your eyes. In other words, sir, so as you won't be altogether in the dark when morning comes. See wot I mean?"

"Excellent idea, Britton. We'll have them up in my study."

He went off to summon my double-faced servitors, while I wended my way to the study. There I found Mr. Poopendyke, sound asleep in a great arm-chair, both his mouth and his nose open and my first novel also open in his lap.

Conrad and Gretel appeared with Britton after an unconscionable lapse of time, partially dressed and grumbling.

"Where are your sons?" I demanded, at once suspicious.

Conrad shook his sparsely covered head and mumbled something about each being his brother's keeper, all of which was Greek to me until Britton explained that they were not to be found in their customary quarters,--that is to say, in bed. Of course it was quite clear to me that my excellent giants were off somewhere, serving the interests of the bothersome lady in the east wing.

"Conrad," said I, fixing the ancient with a stern, compelling gaze, "this has gone quite far enough."

"Yes, mein herr?"

"Do you serve me, or do you serve the lady in the east wing?"

"I do," said he, with a great deal more wit than I thought he possessed. For a moment I was speechless, but not for the reason you may suspect. I was trying to fix my question and his response quite clearly in my memory so that I might employ them later in the course of a conversation between characters in my forthcoming novel.

"I have been talking with the lady this evening," said I.

"Yes, mein herr; I know," said he.

"Oh, you do, eh? Well, will you be good enough to tell me what the devil is the meaning of all this two-faced, underhanded conduct on your part?"

He lowered his head, closed his thin lips and fumbled with the hem of his smock in a significantly sullen manner. It was evident that he meant to defy me. His sharp little eyes sent a warning look at Gretel, who instantly ceased her mutterings and gave over asking God to bear witness to something or other. She was always dragging in the Deity.

"Now, see here, Conrad, I want the truth from you. Who is this woman, and why are you so infernally set upon shielding her? What crime has she committed? Tell me at once, or, by the Lord Harry, out you go to-morrow,--all of you."

"I am a very old man," he whined, twisting his gnarled fingers, a suggestion of tears in his voice. "My wife is old, mein herr. You would not be cruel. We have been here for sixty years. The old baron--"

"Enough!" I cried resolutely. "Out with it, man. I mean all that I say."

He was still for a long time, looking first at the floor and then at me; furtive, appealing, uncertain little glances from which he hoped to derive comfort by catching me with a twinkle in my eye. I have a stupid, weak way of letting a twinkle appear there even when I am trying to be harsh and domineering. Britton has noticed it frequently, I am sure, and I think he rather depends upon it. But now I realised, if never before, that to betray the slightest sign of gentleness would be to forever forfeit my standing as master in my own house. Conrad saw no twinkle. He began to weaken.

"To-morrow, mein herr, to-morrow," he mumbled, in a final plea. I shook my head. "She will explain everything to-morrow," he went on eagerly. "I am sworn to reveal nothing, mein herr. My wife, too, and my sons."

We may not speak until she gives the word. Alas! we shall be turned out to die in our--"

"We have been faithful servants to the Rothhoefens for sixty years," sobbed his wife.

"And still are, I suspect," I cried angrily.

"Ach, mein herr, mein herr!" protested Conrad, greatly perturbed.

"Where are the keys, you old rascal?" I demanded so sternly that even Poopendyke was startled.

Conrad almost resorted to the expediency of grovelling. "Forgive! forgive!" he groaned. "I have done only what was best."

"Produce the keys, sir!"

"But not to-night, not to-night," he pleaded. "She will be very angry. She will not like it, mein herr. Ach, Gott! She will drive us out, she will shame us all! Ach, and she who is so gentle and so unhappy and so--so kind, to all of us! I--I cannot--I cannot! No!"

Mr. Poopendyke's common sense came in very handily at this critical juncture. He counselled me to let the matter rest until the next morning, when, it was reasonable to expect, the lady herself would explain everything. Further appeal to Schmick was like butting one's head against a stone wall, he said. Moreover, Conrad's loyalty to the lady was most commendable.

Conrad and Gretel beamed on Poopendyke. They thanked him so profoundly, that I couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for myself, a tyrant without a backbone.

"Jah, jah!" Conrad cried gladly. "To-morrow she will explain. Time enough, Herr Poopendyke. Time enough, eh?"

"Well," said I, somewhat feebly, "where do I come in?"

They caught the note of surrender in my voice and pounced upon their opportunity. Before they had finished with me, it was quite thoroughly established that I was not to come in at all until my neighbour was ready to admit me. They convinced me that I was a meek, futile suppliant and not the master of a feudal stronghold. Somehow I was made to feel that if I didn't behave myself I stood in considerable danger of being turned off the place. However, we forced something out of Schmick before his stalwart sons came tramping up the stairs to rescue him. The old man gave us a touch of inside history concerning Schloss Rothhoefen and its erstwhile powerful barons, not to minimise in the least sense the peculiar prowess of the present Amazon who held forth to-night in the east wing and who, I had some reason to suspect, was one of the family despite the unmistakable flavour of Fifth Avenue and Newport.

About the middle of the nineteenth century the last of the real barons,--the powerful, land-owning, despotic barons, I mean,--came to the end of his fourscore years and ten, and was laid away with great pomp and glee by the people of the town across the river. He was the last of the Rothhoefens, for he left no male heir. His two daughters

had married Austrian noblemen, and neither of them produced a male descendant. The estate, already in a state of financial as well as physical disintegration, fell into the hands of women, and went from bad to worse so rapidly that long before the last quarter of the century was fairly begun the castle and the reduced holdings slipped away from the Rothhoefens altogether and into the control of the father of the Count from whom I purchased the property. The Count's father, it appears, was a distiller of great wealth in his day, and a man of action. Unfortunately he died before he had the chance to carry out his projects in connection with the rehabilitation of Schloss Rothhoefen, even then a deserted, ramshackle resort for paying tourists and a Mecca for antique and picture dealers.

The new Count--my immediate predecessor--was not long in dissipating the great fortune left by his father, the worthy distiller. He had run through with the bulk of his patrimony by the time he was twenty-five and was pretty much run down at the heel when he married in the hope of recouping his lost fortune.

The Schmicks did not like him. They did not approve of him as lord and master, nor was it possible for them to resign themselves to the fate that had put this young scapegrace into the shoes, so to speak, of the grim old barons Rothhoefen, who whatever else they may have been in a high-handed sort of way were men to the core. This pretender, this creature without brains or blood, this sponging reprobate, was not to their liking, if I am to quote Conrad, who became quite forceful in his harangue against the recent order of things.

He, his wife and his sons, he assured me, were full of rejoicing when they learned that the castle had passed from Count Hohendahl's hands into mine. I, at least, would pay them their wages and I might, in a pinch, be depended upon to pension them when they got too old to be of any use about the castle.

At any rate, it seems, I was a distinct improvement over the Count, who had been their master for a dozen very lean and unprofitable years. Things might be expected to look up a bit, with me at the head of the house. Was it not possible for a new and mighty race to rise and take the place of the glorious Rothhoefens? A long line of Baron Schmarts? With me as the prospective root of a thriving family tree! At least, that is what Conrad said, and I may be pardoned for quoting him.

I am truly sorry the old rascal put it into my head.

But the gist of the whole matter was this: There are no more Rothhoefens, and soon, God willing, there would be no more Hohendahls. Long live the Schmarts! Conrad invariably pronounced my name with the extra consonants and an umlaut.

All attempts on my part to connect the lady in the east wing with the history of the extinct Rothhoefens were futile. He would not commit himself.

"Well," said I, yawning in helpless collusion with the sleepy Gretel, "we'll let it go over till morning. Call me at seven, Britton."

Conrad made haste to assure me that the lady would not receive me before eleven o'clock. He begged me to sleep till nine, and to have pleasant dreams.

I went to bed but not to sleep. It was very clear to me that my neighbour was a disturber in every sense of the word. She wouldn't let me sleep. For two hours I tried to get rid of her, but she filtered into my brain and prodded my thoughts into the most violent activity. She wouldn't stay put.

My principal thoughts had to do with her identity. Somehow I got it into my head that she was one of the female Rothhoefens, pitiable nonentities if Conrad's estimate is to be accepted. A descendant of one of those girl-bearing daughters of the last baron! It sounded very agreeable to my fancy's ear, and I cuddled the hope that my surmise was not altogether preposterous.

My original contention that she was a poor relation of old Schmick and somewhat dependent upon him for charity--to say the least--had been set aside for more reliable convictions. Instead of being dependent upon the Schmicks, she seemed to be in an exalted position that gave her a great deal more power over them than even I possessed: they served her, not me. From time to time there occurred to me the thought that my own position in the household was rather an ignoble one, and that I was a very weak and incompetent successor to baronial privileges, to say nothing of rights. A real baron would have had her out of there before you could mention half of Jack Robinson, and there wouldn't have been any sleep lost over distracting puzzles. I deplored my lack of bad manners.

It was quite reasonable to assume that she was young, but the odds were rather against her being beautiful. Pretty women usually adjure such precautions as veils. Still, this was speculation, and my reasoning is not always sound, for which I sometimes thank heaven. She had a baby. At least, I suppose it was hers. If not, whose? This set me off on a new and apparently endless round of speculation, obviously silly and sentimental.

Now I have humbly tried to like babies. My adolescent friends and acquaintances have done their best to educate me along this particular line, with the result that I suppose I despise more babies than any man in the world. My friends, it would appear, are invariably married to each other and they all have babies for me to go into false ecstasies over. No doubt babies are very nice when they don't squawk or pull your nose or jab you in the eye, but through some strange and prevailing misfortune I have never encountered one when it was asleep. If they are asleep, the parents compel me to walk on tip-toe and speak in whispers at long range; the instant they awake and begin to yawp, I am ushered into the presence, or vice versa, and the whole world grows very small and congested and is carried about in swaddling clothes.

There is but one way for a bachelor to overcome his horror of babies, and he shouldn't wait too long.

I went to sleep about four o'clock, still oppressed by the dread of meeting a new baby.

My contact with the one hundred and sixty-nine sight-seers was brief but exceedingly convincing. They invaded the castle before I was out of bed, having--as I afterwards heard--the breweries, an art gallery and the Zoological gardens to visit before noon and therefore were required to make an early start. The cathedral, which is always open

to visitors and never has any one sleeping in it, was reserved for the afternoon.

I was aroused from my belated sleep by the sound of mighty cataracts and the tread of countless elephants. Too late I realised that the tourists were upon me! Too late I remembered that the door to my room had been left unlocked! The hundred and sixty-nine were huddled outside my door, drinking in the monotonous drivel of the guide who had a shrill, penetrating voice and not the faintest notion of a conscience.

I listened in dismay for a moment, and then, actuated by something more than mere fury, leaped out of bed and prepared for a dash across the room to lock the door. On the third stride I whirled and made a flying leap into the bed, scuttling beneath the covers with the speed and accuracy of a crawfish. Just in time, too, for the heavy door swung slowly open a second later, and the shrill, explanatory voice was projected loudly into my lofty bed chamber.

"Come a little closer, please," said the morose man with the cap. "This room was occupied for centuries by the masters of Schloss Rothhoefen. It is a bed chamber. See the great baronial bed. It has not been slept in for more than two hundred years. The later barons refused to sleep in it because one of their ancestors had been assassinated between its sheets at the tender age of six. He was stabbed by a step-uncle who played him false. This room is haunted. Observe the curtains of the bed. They are of the rarest silk and have been there for three hundred years, coming from Damascus in the year 1695. Now we will pass on to the room occupied by all of the great baronesses up to the nineteenth--"

A resolute beholder spoke up: "Can't we step inside?"

"If you choose, madam. But we must waste no time."

"I do so want to see where the old barons slept."

"Please do not handle the bedspreads and curtains. They will fall to pieces--"

I heard no more, for the vanguard had pushed him aside and was swooping down upon me. A sharp-nosed lady led the way. She was within three feet of the bed and was stretching out her hand to touch the proscribed fabrics when I sat bolt upright and yelled:

"Get out!"

Afterwards I was told that the guide was the first to reach the bottom of the stairs and that he narrowly escaped death in the avalanche of horrified humanity that piled after him, pursued by the puissant ghost of a six-year-old ancestor.

CHAPTER V

I MEET THE FOE AND FALL

The post that morning, besides containing a telegram from Vienna apprising me of the immediate embarkation of four irreproachable angels in the guise of servants, brought a letter from my friends the Hazzards,

inquiring when my castle would be in shape to receive and discharge house parties without subjecting them to an intermediate season of peril from drafts, leaky roofs, damp sheets and vampires.

They implored me to snatch them and one or two friends from the unbearable heat of the city, if only for a few days, appending the sad information that they were swiftly being reduced to grease spots. Dear Elsie added a postscript of unusual briefness and clarity in which she spelt grease with an e instead of an a, but managed to consign me to purgatory if I permitted her to become a spot no larger than the inky blot she naively deposited beside her signature, for all the world like the seal on a death warrant.

I sat down and looked about me in gloomy despair. No words can describe the scene, unless we devote a whole page to repeating the word "dismal." Devastation always appears to be more complete of a morning I have observed in my years of experience. A plasterer's scaffolding that looks fairly nobby at sunset is a grim, unsightly skeleton at breakfast-time. A couple of joiners' horses, a matrix or two, a pile of shavings and some sawed-off blocks scattered over the floor produce a matutinal conception of chaos that hangs over one like a pall until his aesthetic sense is beaten into subjection by the hammers of a million demons in the guise of carpenters. Morning in the midst of repairs is an awful thing! I looked, despaired and then dictated a letter to the Hazzards, urging them to come at once with all their sweltering friends!

I needed some one to make me forget.

At eleven o'clock, Poopendyke brought me a note from the chatelaine of the east wing. It had been dropped into the courtyard from one of the upper windows. The reading of it transformed me into a stern, relentless demon. She very calmly announced that she had a headache and couldn't think of being disturbed that day and probably not the next.

My mind was made up in an instant. I would not be put off by a headache,--which was doubtless assumed for the occasion,--and I would be master of my castle or know the reason why, etc.

In the courtyard I found a score or more of idle artisans, banished by the on-sweeping tourists and completely forgotten by me in the excitement of the hour. Commanding them to fetch their files, saws, broad-axes and augurs, I led the way to the mighty doors that barred my entrance to the other side. Utterly ignoring the supplications of Conrad Schmick and the ominous frowns of his two sons, we set about filing off the padlocks, and chiselling through the wooden panels. I stood over my toiling minions and I venture to say that they never worked harder or faster in their lives. By twelve o'clock we had the great doors open and swept on to the next obstruction.

At two o'clock the last door in the east ante-chamber gave way before our resolute advance and I stood victorious and dusty in the little recess at the top of the last stairway. Beyond the twentieth century portieres of a thirteenth century doorway lay the goal we sought. I hesitated briefly before drawing them apart and taking the final plunge. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to feel ashamed of myself. Suppose that she really had a headache! What an uncouth, pusillanimous brute I--

Just then, even as my hand fell upon the curtains, they were snatched aside and I found myself staring into the vivid, uptilted face of the lady who had defied me and would continue to do so if my suddenly active perceptions counted for anything.

I saw nothing but the dark, indignant, imperious eyes. They fairly withered me.

In some haste, attended by the most disheartening nervousness, I tried to find my cap to remove it in the presence of royalty. Unfortunately I was obliged to release the somewhat cumbersome crowbar I had been carrying about with me, and it dropped with a sullen thwack upon my toes. In moments of gravity I am always doing something like that. The pain was terrific, but I clutched at the forlorn hope that she might at least smile over my agony.

"I beg your pardon," I began, and then discovered that I was not wearing a cap. It was most disconcerting.

"So you would come," she said, very coldly and very levelly. I have a distinct recollection of shrinking. If you have ever tried to stand flatly upon a foot whose toes are cramped by an excruciating pain you may understand something of the added discomfiture that afflicted me.

"It--it was necessary, madam," I replied as best I could. "You defied me. I think you should have appreciated my position--my motives--er--my--"

She silenced me--luckily, heaven knows--with a curt exclamation.

"Your position! It is intensely Napoleonic," said she with fine irony. Her gaze swept my horde of panting, wide-eyed house-breakers. "What a noble victory!"

It was quite time for me to assert myself. Bowing very stiffly, I remarked:

"I regret exceedingly to have been forced to devastate my own property in such a trifling enterprise, madam. The physical loss is apparent,--you can see that for yourself,--but of course you have no means of estimating the mental destruction that has been going on for days and days. You have been hacking away at my poor, distracted brain so persistently that it really had to give way. In a measure, this should account for my present lapse of sanity. Weak-mindedness is not a crime, but an affliction."

She did not smile.

"Well, now that you are here, Mr. Smart, may I be so bold as to inquire what you are going to do about it?"

I reflected. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll come in and sit down. That was a deuce of a rap I got across the toes. I am sure to be a great deal more lenient and agreeable if I'm asked to come in and see you. Incidentally, I thought I'd step up to inquire how your headache is getting on. Better, I hope?"

She turned her face away. I suspected a smile.

"If you choose to bang your old castle to pieces, in order to satisfy a masculine curiosity, Mr. Smart, I have nothing more to say," she said, facing me again--still ominously, to my despair. Confound it all, she was such a slim, helpless little thing--and all alone against a mob of burly ruffians! I could have kicked myself, but even that would have been an aimless enterprise in view of the fact that Poopendyke or any of the others could have done it more accurately than I and perhaps with greater respect. "Will you be good enough to send your--your army away, or do you prefer to have it on hand in case I should take it into my head to attack you?"

"Take 'em away, Mr. Poopendyke," I commanded hurriedly. I didn't mind Poopendyke hearing what she said, but it would be just like one of those beggars to understand English--and also to misunderstand it. "And take this beastly crowbar with you, too. It has served its purpose nobly."

Poopendyke looked his disappointment, and I was compelled to repeat the order. As they crowded down the short, narrow stairway, I remarked old Conrad and his two sons standing over against the wall, three very sinister figures. They remained motionless.

"I see, madam, that you do not dismiss your army," I said, blandly sarcastic.

"Oh, you dear old Conrad!" she cried, catching sight of the hitherto submerged Schmicks. The three of them bobbed and scraped and grinned from ear to ear. There could be no mistaking the intensity of their joy. "Don't look so sad, Conrad. I know you are blameless. You poor old dear!"

I have never seen any one who looked less sad than Conrad Schmick. Or could it be possible that he was crying instead of laughing? In either case I could not afford to have him doing it with such brazen discourtesy to me, so I rather peremptorily ordered him below.

"I will attend to you presently,--all of you," said I. They did not move. "Do you hear me?" I snapped angrily. They looked stolidly at the slim young lady.

She smiled, rather proudly, I thought. "You may go, Conrad. I shall not need you. Max, will you fetch up another scuttle of coal?"

They took their orders from her! It even seemed to me that Max moved swiftly, although it was doubtless a hallucination on my part, brought about by nervous excitement.

"By Jove!" I said, looking after my trusty men-servants as they descended. "I like this! Are they my servants or yours?"

"Oh, I suppose they are yours, Mr. Smart," she said carelessly. "Will you come in now, and make yourself quite at home?"

"Perhaps I'd better wait for a day or two," said I, wavering. "Your headache, you know. I can wait just as well as--"

"Oh, no. Since you've gone to all the trouble I suppose you ought to have something for your pains."

"Pains?" I murmured, and I declare to heaven I limped as I followed her through the door into a tiny hall.

"You are a most unreasonable man," she said, throwing open a small door at the end of the hall. "I am terribly disappointed in you. You looked to be so nice and sensible and amiable."

"Oh, I'm not such a nincompoop as you might suspect, madam," said I, testily, far from complimented. I dislike being called nice, and sometimes I think it a mistake to be sensible. A sensible person never gets anything out of life because he has to avoid so much of it.

"And now, Mr. Smart, will you be kind enough to explain this incomprehensible proceeding on your part?" she said, facing me sternly.

But I was dumb. I stood just inside the door of the most remarkable apartment it has ever been my good fortune to look upon. My senses reeled. Was I awake? Was this a part of the bleak, sinister, weather-racked castle in which I was striving so hard to find a comfortable corner?

"Well?" she demanded relentlessly.

"By the Lord Harry," I began, finding my tongue only to lose it again. My bewilderment increased, and for an excellent reason.

The room was completely furnished, bedecked and rendered habitable by an hundred and one articles that were mysteriously missing from my side of the castle. Rugs, tapestries, curtains of the rarest quality; chairs, couches, and cushions; tables, cabinets and chests that would have caused the eyes of the most conservative collector of antiques to bulge with--not wonder--but greed; stands, pedestals, brasses, bronzes, porcelains--but why enumerate? On the massive oaken centre table stood the priceless silver vase we had missed on the second day of our occupancy, and it was filled with fresh yellow roses. I sniffed. Their fragrance filled the room.

And so complete had been the rifling of my rooms by the devoted vandals in their efforts to make this lady cosy and comfortable that they did not overlook a silver-framed photograph of my dear mother! Her sweet face met my gaze as it swept the mantel-piece, beneath which a coal fire crackled merrily. I am not quite sure, but I think I repeated "by the Lord Harry" once if not twice before I caught myself up.

I tried to smile. "How--how cosy you are here," I said.

"You couldn't expect me to live in this awful place without some of the comforts and conveniences of life, Mr. Smart," she said defiantly.

"Certainly not," I said, promptly. "I am sure that you will excuse me, however, if I gloat. I was afraid we had lost all these things. You've no idea how relieved I am to find them all safe and sound in my--in their proper place. I was beginning to distrust the Schmicks. Now I am convinced of their integrity."

"I suppose you mean to be sarcastic."

"Sarcasm at any price, madam, would be worse than useless, I am sure."

Crossing to the fireplace, I selected a lump of coal from the scuttle and examined it with great care. She watched me curiously.

"Do you recognise it?" she asked.

"I do," said I, looking up. "It has been in our family for generations. My favourite chunk, believe me. Still, I part with it cheerfully." Thereupon I tossed it into the fire. "Don't be shocked! I shan't miss it. We have coals to burn, madam!"

She looked at me soberly for a moment. There was something hurt and wistful in her dark eyes.

"Of course, Mr. Smart, I shall pay you for everything--down to the smallest trifle--when the time comes for me to leave this place. I have kept strict account of--"

She turned away, with a beaten droop of the proud little head, and again I was shamed. Never have I felt so grotesquely out of proportion with myself as at that moment. My stature seemed to increase from an even six feet to something like twelve, and my bulk became elephantine. She was so slender, so lissom, so weak, and I so gargantuan, so gorilla-like, so heavy-handed! And I had come gaily up to crush her! What a fine figure of a man I was!

She did not complete the sentence, but walked slowly toward the window. I had a faint glimpse of a dainty lace handkerchief fiercely clutched in a little hand.

By nature I am chivalrous, even gallant. You may have reason to doubt it, but it is quite true. As I've never had a chance to be chivalrous except in my dreams or my imagination, I made haste to seize this opportunity before it was too late. "Madam," I said, with considerable feeling. "I have behaved like a downright rotter to-day. I do not know who you are, nor why you are here, but I assure you it is of no real consequence if you will but condescend to overlook my insufferable--"

She turned towards me. The wistful, appealing look still lingered in her eyes. The soft red nether lip seemed a bit tremulous.

"I am an intruder," she interrupted, smiling faintly. "You have every right to put me out of your--your home, Mr. Smart. I was a horrid pig to deprive you of all your nice comfortable chairs and--"

"I--I haven't missed them."

"Don't you ever sit down?"

"I will sit down if you'll let me," said I, feeling that I wouldn't appear quite so gigantic if I was sitting.

"Please do. The chairs all belong to you."

"I'm sorry you put it in that way. They are yours as long as you choose to--to occupy a furnished apartment here."

"I have been very selfish, and cattish, and inconsiderate, Mr. Smart. You see, I'm a spoilt child. I've always had my own way in everything.

You must look upon me as a very horrid, sneaking, conspiring person, and I--I really think you ought to turn me out."

She came a few steps nearer. Under the circumstances I could not sit down. So I stood towering above her, but somehow going through a process of physical and mental shrinkage the longer I remained confronting her.

Suddenly it was revealed to me that she was the loveliest woman I had ever seen in all my life! How could I have been so slow in grasping this great, bewildering truth? The prettiest woman I had ever looked upon! Of course I had known it from the first instant that I looked into her eyes, but I must have been existing in a state of stupefaction up to this illuminating moment.

I am afraid that I stared.

"Turn you out?" I cried. "Turn you out of this delightful room after you've had so much trouble getting it into shape? Never!"

"Oh, you don't know how I've imposed upon you!" she cried plaintively. "You don't know how I've robbed you, and bothered you--"

"Yes, I do," said I promptly. "I know all about it. You've been stealing my coals, my milk, my ice, my potatoes, my servants, my sleep and"--here I gave a comprehensive sweep of my hand--"everything in sight. And you've made us walk on tip-toe to keep from waking the baby, and--" I stopped suddenly. "By the way, whose baby is it? Not yours, I'm sure."

To my surprise her eyes filled with tears.

"Yes. She is my baby, Mr. Smart."

My face fell. "Oh!" said I, and got no further for a moment or two. "I--I--please don't tell me you are married!"

"What would you think of me if I were to tell you I'm not?" she cried indignantly.

"I beg your pardon," I stammered, blushing to the roots of my hair. "Stupid ass!" I muttered.

Crossing to the fireplace, she stood looking down into the coals for a long time, while I remained where I was, an awkward, gauche spectator, conscious of having put my clumsiest foot into my mouth every time I opened it and wondering whether I could now safely get it out again without further disaster.

Her back was toward me. She was dressed in a dainty, pinkish house gown--or maybe it was light blue. At any rate it was a very pretty gown and she was wonderfully graceful in it. Ordinarily in my fiction I am quite clever at describing gowns that do not exist; but when it comes to telling what a real woman is wearing, I am not only as vague as a savage, but painfully stupid about colors. Still, I think it was pink. I recall the way her soft brown hair grew above the slender neck, and the lovely white skin; the smooth, delicate contour of her half-averted cheek and the firm little chin with the trembling red lips above it; the shapely back and shoulders and the graceful curves of her hips, suggestive of a secret perfection. She was taller than

I had thought at first sight, or was it that I seemed to be getting smaller myself? A hasty bit of comparison placed her height at five feet six, using my own as something to go by. She couldn't have been a day over twenty-two. But she had a baby!

Facing me once more she said: "If you will sit down, Mr. Smart, and be patient and generous with me, I shall try to explain everything. You have a right to demand it of me, and I shall feel more comfortable after it is done."

I drew up a chair beside the table and sat down. She sank gracefully into another, facing me. A delicate frown appeared on her brow.

"Doubtless you are very much puzzled by my presence in this gloomy old castle. You have been asking yourself a thousand questions about me, and you have been shocked by my outrageous impositions upon your good nature. I confess I have been shockingly impudent and--"

"Pardon me; you are the only sauce I've had for an excessively bad bargain."

"Please do not interrupt me," she said coldly. "I am here, Mr. Smart, because it is the last place in the world where my husband would be likely to look for me."

"Your husband? Look for you?"

"Yes. I shall be quite frank with you. My husband and I have separated. A provisional divorce was granted, however, just seven months ago. The final decree cannot be issued for one year."

"But why should you hide from him?"

"The--the court gave him the custody of our child during the probationary year. I--I have run away with her. They are looking for me everywhere. That is why I came here. Do you understand?"

I was stunned. "Then, I take it, the court granted him the divorce and not you," I said, experiencing a sudden chill about the heart. "You were deprived of the child, I see. Dear me!"

"You are mistaken," she said, a flash in her eyes. "It was an Austrian court. The Count--my husband, I should say--is an Austrian subject. His interests must be protected." She said this with a sneer on her pretty lips. "You see, my father, knowing him now for what he really is, has refused to pay over to him something like a million dollars, still due for the marriage settlement. The Count contends that it is a just and legal debt and the court supports him to this extent: the child is to be his until the debt is cleared up, or something to that effect. I really don't understand the legal complications involved. Perhaps it were better if I did."

"I see," said I, scornful in spite of myself. "One of those happy international marriages where a bride is thrown in for good measure with a couple of millions. Won't we ever learn!"

"That's it precisely," she said, with the utmost calmness and candour. "American dollars and an American girl in exchange for a title, a lot of debts and a ruined life."

"And they always turn out just this way. What a lot of blithering fools we have in the land of the free and the home of the knave!"

"My father objected to the whole arrangement from the first, so you must not speak of him as a knave," she protested. "He doesn't like Counts and such things."

"I don't see that it helps matters. I can hardly substitute the word 'brave' for the one I used," said I, trying to conceal my disgust.

"Please don't misunderstand me, Mr. Smart," she said haughtily. "I am not asking for pity. I made my bed and I shall lie in it. The only thing I ask of you is--well, kindness."

She seemed to falter again, and once more I was at her feet, figuratively speaking.

"You are in distress, in dread of something, madam," I cried. "Consider me your friend."

She shook her head ruefully. "You poor man! You don't know what you are in for, I fear. Wait till I have told you everything. Three weeks ago, I laid myself liable to imprisonment and heaven knows what else by abducting my little girl. That is really what it comes to--abduction. The court has ordered my arrest, and all sorts of police persons are searching high and low for me. Now don't you see your peril? If they find me here, you will be in a dreadful predicament. You will be charged with criminal complicity, or whatever it is called, and--Oh, it will be frightfully unpleasant for you, Mr. Smart."

My expression must have convicted me. She couldn't help seeing the dismay in my face. So she went on, quite humbly.

"Of course you have but to act at once and all may be well for you. I--I will go if you--if you command me to--"

I struck my knee forcibly. "What do you take me for, madam? Hang the consequences! If you feel that you are safe here--that is, comparatively safe,--_stay!_"

"It will be terrible if you get into trouble with the law," she murmured in distress. "I--I really don't know what might happen to you." Still her eyes brightened. Like all the rest of her ilk, she was selfish.

I tried to laugh, but it was a dismal failure. After all, wasn't it likely to prove a most unpleasant matter? I felt the chill moisture breaking out on my forehead.

"Pray do not consider my position at all," I managed to say, with a resolute assumption of gallantry. "I--I shall be perfectly able to look out for myself,--that is, to explain everything if it should come to the worst." I could not help adding, however: "I certainly hope, however, that they don't get on to your trail and--" I stopped in confusion.

"And find me here?" she completed gloomily.

"And take the child away from you," I made haste to explain.

A fierce light flamed in her eyes. "I should--kill--some one before that could happen," she cried out, clenching her hands.

"I--I beg of you, madam, don't work yourself into a--a state," I implored, in considerable trepidation. "Nothing like that can happen, believe me. I--"

"Oh, what do you know about it?" she exclaimed, with most unnecessary vehemence, I thought. "He wants the child and--and--well, you can see why he wants her, can't you? He is making the most desperate efforts to recover her. Max says the newspapers are full of the--the scandal. They are depicting me as a brainless, law-defying American without sense of love, honour or respect. I don't mind that, however. It is to be expected. They all describe the Count as a long-suffering, honourable, dreadfully maltreated person, and are doing what they can to help him in the prosecution of the search. My mother, who is in Paris, is being shadowed; my two big brothers are being watched; my lawyers in Vienna are being trailed everywhere--oh, it is really a most dreadful thing. But--but I will not give her up! She is mine. He doesn't love her. He doesn't love me. He doesn't love anything in the world but himself and his cigarettes. I know, for I've paid for his cigarettes for nearly three years. He has actually ridiculed me in court circles, he has defamed me, snubbed me, humiliated me, cursed me. You cannot imagine what it has been like. Once he struck me in--"

"Struck you!" I cried.

"--in the presence of his sister and her husband. But I must not distress you with sordid details. Suffice it to say, I turned at last like the proverbial worm. I applied for a divorce ten months ago. It was granted, provisionally as I say. He is a degenerate. He was unfaithful to me in every sense of the word. But in spite of all that, the court in granting me the separation, took occasion to placate national honour by giving him the child during the year, pending the final disposition of the case. Of course, everything depends on father's attitude in respect to the money. You see what I mean? A month ago I heard from friends in Vienna that he was shamefully neglecting our--my baby, so I took this awful, this perfectly bizarre way of getting her out of his hands. Possession is nine points in the law, you see. I--'

"Alas!" interrupted I, shaking my head. "There is more than one way to look at the law. I'm afraid you have got yourself into a serious--er--pickle."

"I don't care," she said defiantly. "It is the law's fault for not prohibiting such marriages as ours. Oh, I know I must seem awfully foolish and idiotic to you, but--but it's too late now to back out, isn't it?"

I did not mean to say it, but I did--and I said it with some conviction: "It is! You must be protected."

"Thank you, thank you!" she cried, clasping and unclasping her little hands. I found myself wondering if the brute had dared to strike her on that soft, pink cheek!

Suddenly a horrible thought struck me with stunning force.

"Don't tell me that your--your husband is the man who owned this castle up to a week ago," I cried. "Count James Hohendahl?"

She shook her head. "No. He is not the man." Seeing that I waited for her to go on, she resumed: "I know Count James quite well, however. He is my husband's closest friend."

"Good heaven," said I, in quick alarm. "That complicates matters, doesn't it? He may come here at any time."

"It isn't likely, Mr. Smart. To be perfectly honest with you, I waited until I heard you had bought the castle before coming here myself. We were in hiding at the house of a friend in Linz up to a week ago. I did not think it right or fair to subject them to the notoriety or the peril that was sure to follow if the officers took it into their heads to look for me there. The day you bought the castle, I decided that it was the safest place for me to stay until the danger blows over, or until father can arrange to smuggle me out of this awful country. That very night we were brought here in a motor. Dear old Conrad and Mrs. Schmick took me in. They have been perfectly adorable, all of them."

"May I enquire, madam," said I stiffly, "how you came to select my abode as your hiding place?"

"Oh, I have forgotten to tell you that we lived here one whole summer just after we were married. Count Hohendahl let us have the castle for our--our honeymoon. He was here a great deal of the time. All sorts of horrid, nasty, snobbish people were here to help us enjoy our honeymoon. I shall never forget that dreadful summer. My only friends were the Schmicks. Every one else ignored and despised me, and they all borrowed, won or stole money from me. I was compelled to play bridge for atrociously high stakes without knowing one card from the other. But, as I say, the Schmicks loved me. You see they were in the family ages and ages before I was born."

"The family? What family?"

"The Rothhoefen family. Haven't they told you that my great-grandmother was a Rothhoefen? No? Well, she was. I belong to the third generation of American-born descendants. Doesn't it simplify matters, knowing this?"

"Immensely," said I, in something of a daze.

"And so I came here, Mr. Smart, where hundreds of my ancestors spent their honeymoons, most of them perhaps as unhappily as I, and where I knew a fellow-countryman was to live for awhile in order to get a plot for a new story. You see, I thought I might be a great help to you in the shape of suggestion."

She smiled very warmly, and I thought it was a very neat way of putting it. Naturally it would be quite impossible to put her out after hearing that she had already put herself out to some extent in order to assist me.

"I can supply the villain for your story if you need one, and I can give you oceans of ideas about noblemen. I am sorry that I can't give you a nice, sweet heroine. People hate heroines after they are married

and live unhappily. You--"

"The public taste is changing," I interrupted quickly. "Unhappy marriages are so common nowadays that the women who go into 'em are always heroines. People like to read about suffering and anguish among the rich, too. Besides, you are a Countess. That puts you near the first rank among heroines. Don't you think it would be proper at this point to tell me who you are?"

She regarded me steadfastly for a moment, and then shook her head.

"I'd rather not tell you my name, Mr. Smart. It really can't matter, you know. I've thought it all out very carefully, and I've decided that it is not best for you to know. You see if you don't know who it is you are sheltering, the courts can't hold you to account. You will be quite innocent of deliberately contriving to defeat the law. No, I shall not tell you my name, nor my husband's, nor my father's. If you'd like to know, however, I will tell you my baby's name. She's two years old and I think she'll like you to call her Rosemary."

By this time I was quite hypnotised by this charming, confident trespasser upon my physical--and I was about to say my moral estate. Never have I known a more complacent violater of all the proprieties of law and order as she appeared to be. She was a revelation; more than that, she was an inspiration. What a courageous, independent, fascinating little buccaneer she was! Her calm tone of assurance, her overwhelming confidence in herself, despite the occasional lapse into despair, staggered me. I couldn't help being impressed. If I had had any thought of ejecting her, bag and baggage, from my castle, it had been completely knocked out of my head and I was left, you might say, in a position which gave me no other alternative than to consider myself a humble instrument in the furthering of her ends, whether I would or no. It was most amazing. Superior to the feeling of scorn I naturally felt for her and her kind,--the fools who make international beds and find them filled with thorns,--there was the delicious sensation of being able to rise above my prejudices and become a willing conspirator against that despot, Common Sense.

She was very sure of herself, that was plain; and I am positive that she was equally sure of me. It isn't altogether flattering, either, to feel that a woman is so sure of you that there isn't any doubt concerning her estimate of your offensive strength. Somehow one feels an absence of physical attractiveness.

"Rosemary," I repeated. "And what am I to call you?"

"Even my enemies call me Countess," she said coldly.

"Oh," said I, more respectfully. "I see. When am I to have the pleasure of meeting the less particular Rosemary?"

"I didn't mean to be horrid," she said plaintively. "Please overlook it, Mr. Smart. If you are very, very quiet I think you may see her now. She is asleep."

"I may frighten her if she awakes," I said in haste, remembering my antipathy to babies.

Nevertheless I was led through a couple of bare, unfurnished rooms

into a sunny, perfectly adorable nursery. A nursemaid,--English, at a glance,--arose from her seat in the window and held a cautious finger to her lips. In the middle of a bed that would have accommodated an entire family, was the sleeping Rosemary--a tiny, rosy-cheeked, yellow haired atom bounded on four sides by yards of mattress.

I stood over her timorously and stared. The Countess put one knee upon the mattress and, leaning far over, kissed a little paw. I blinked, like a confounded booby.

Then we stole out of the room.

"Isn't she adorable?" asked the Countess when we were at a safe distance.

"They all are," I said grudgingly, "when they're asleep."

"You are horrid!"

"By the way," I said sternly, "how does that bedstead happen to be a yard or so lower than any other bed in this entire castle? All the rest of them are so high one has to get into them from a chair."

"Oh," she said complacently, "it was too high for Blake to manage conveniently, so I had Rudolph saw the legs off short."

One of my very finest antique bedsteads! But I didn't even groan.

"You will let me stay on, won't you, Mr. Smart?" she said, when we were at the fireplace again. "I am really so helpless, you know."

I offered her everything that the castle afforded in the way of loyalty and luxury.

"And we'll have a telephone in the main hall before the end of a week," I concluded beamingly.

Her face clouded. "Oh, I'd much rather have it in my hallway, if you don't mind. You see, I can't very well go downstairs every time I want to use the 'phone, and it will be a nuisance sending for me when I'm wanted."

This was rather high-handed, I thought.

"But if no one knows you're here, it seems to me you're not likely to be called."

"You never can tell," she said mysteriously.

I promised to put the instrument in her hall, and not to have an extension to my rooms for fear of creating suspicion. Also the electric bell system was to be put in just as she wanted it to be. And a lot of other things that do not seem to come to mind at this moment.

I left in a daze at half-past three, to send Britton up with all the late novels and magazines, and a big box of my special cigarettes.

CHAPTER VI

I DISCUSS MATRIMONY

Poopendyke and I tried to do a little work that evening, but neither of us seemed quite capable of concentration. We said "I beg pardon" to each other a dozen times or more, following mental lapses, and then gave it up. My ideas failed in consecutiveness, and when I did succeed in hitching two intelligent thoughts together he invariably destroyed the sequence by compelling me to repeat myself, with the result that I became irascible.

We had gone over the events of the day very thoroughly. If anything, he was more alarmed over our predicament than I. He seemed to sense the danger that attended my decision to shelter and protect this cool-headed, rather self-centred young woman at the top of my castle. To me, it was something of a lark; to him, a tragedy. He takes everything seriously, so much so in fact that he gets on my nerves. I wish he were not always looking at things through the little end of the telescope. I like a change, and it is a novelty to sometimes see things through the big end, especially peril.

"They will yank us all up for aiding and abetting," he proclaimed, trying to focus his eyes on the shorthand book he was fumbling.

"You wouldn't have me turn her over to the law, would you?" I demanded crossly. "Please don't forget that we are Americans."

"I don't," said he. "That's what worries me most of all."

"Well," said I loftily, "we'll see."

We were silent for a long time.

"It must be horribly lonely and spooky away up there where she is," I said at last, inadvertently betraying my thoughts. He sniffed.

"Have you a cold?" I demanded, glaring at him.

"No," he said gloomily; "a presentiment."

"Umph!"

Another period of silence. Then: "I wonder if Max--" I stopped short.

"Yes, sir," he said, with wonderful divination. "He did."

"Any message?"

"She sent down word that the new cook is a jewel, but I think she must have been jesting. I've never cared for a man cook myself. I don't like to appear hypercritical, but what did you think of the dinner tonight, sir?"

"I've never tasted better broiled ham in my life, Mr. Poopendyke."

"Ham! That's it, Mr. Smart. But what I'd like to know is this:" What became of the grouse you ordered for dinner, sir? I happen to know that it was put over the fire at seven--"

"I sent it up to the countess, with our compliments," said I, peevishly. I think that remark silenced him. At any rate, he got up and left the room.

I laid awake half the night morbidly berating the American father who is so afraid of his wife that he lets her bully him into sacrificing their joint flesh and blood upon the altar of social ambition. She had said that her father was opposed to the match from the beginning. Then why, in the name of heaven, wasn't he man enough to put a stop to it? Why--But what use is there in applying whys to a man who doesn't know what God meant when He fashioned two sexes? I put him down as neutral and tried my best to forget him.

But I couldn't forget the daughter of this browbeaten American father. There was something singularly familiar about her exquisite face, a conviction on my part that is easily accounted for. Her portrait, of course, had been published far and wide at the time of the wedding; she must have been pictured from every conceivable angle, with illimitable gowns, hats, veils and parasols, and I certainly could not have missed seeing her, even with half an eye. But for the life of me, I couldn't connect her with any of the much-talked-of international marriages that came to mind as I lay there going over the meagre assortment I was able to recall. I went to sleep wondering whether Poopendyke's memory was any better than mine. He is tremendously interested in the financial doings of our country, being the possessor of a flourishing savings' account, and as he also possesses a lively sense of the ridiculous, it was not unreasonable to suspect that he might remember all the details of this particular transaction in stocks and bonds.

The next morning I set my labourers to work putting guest-rooms into shape for the coming of the Hazzards and the four friends who were to be with them for the week as my guests. They were to arrive on the next day but one, which gave me ample time to consult a furniture dealer. I would have to buy at least six new beds and everything else with which to comfortably equip as many bed-chambers, it being a foregone conclusion that not even the husbands and wives would condescend to "double up" to oblige me. The expensiveness of this ill-timed visit had not occurred to me at the outset. Still there was some prospect of getting the wholesale price. On one point I was determined; the workmen should not be laid off for a single hour, not even if my guests went off in a huff.

At twelve I climbed the tortuous stairs leading to the Countess's apartments. She opened the door herself in response to my rapping.

"I neglected to mention yesterday that I am expecting a houseful of guests in a day or two," I said, after she had given me a very cordial greeting.

"Guests?" she cried in dismay. "Oh, dear! Can't you put them off?"

"I have hopes that they won't be able to stand the workmen banging around all day," I confessed, somewhat guiltily.

"Women in the party?"

"Two, I believe. Both married and qualified to express opinions."

"They will be sure to nose me out," she said ruefully. "Women are dreadful nosers."

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll get a lot of new padlocks for the doors downstairs and you'll be as safe as can be, if you'll only keep quiet."

"But I don't see why I should be made to mope here all day and all night like a sick cat, holding my hand over Rosemary's mouth when she wants to cry, and muzzling poor Jinko so that he--"

"My dear Countess," I interrupted sternly, "you should not forget that these other guests of mine are invited here."

"But I was here first," she argued. "It is most annoying."

"I believe you said yesterday that you are in the habit of having your own way." She nodded her head. "Well, I am afraid you'll have to come down from your high horse--at least temporarily."

"Oh, I see. You--you mean to be very firm and domineering with me."

"You must try to see things from my point of--"

"Please don't say that!" she flared. "I'm so tired of hearing those words. For the last three years I've been commanded to see things from some one else's point of view, and I'm sick of the expression."

"For heaven's sake, don't put me in the same boat with your husband!"

She regarded me somewhat frigidly for a moment longer, and then a slow, witching smile crept into her eyes.

"I sha'n't," she promised, and laughed outright.

"Do forgive me, Mr. Smart. I am such a piggy thing. I'll try to be nice and sensible, and I will be as still as a mouse all the time they're here. But you must promise to come up every day and give me the gossip. You can steal up, can't you? Surreptitiously?"

"Clandestinely," I said, gravely.

"I really ought to warn you once more about getting yourself involved," she said pointedly.

"Oh, I'm quite a safe old party," I assured her. "They couldn't make capital of me."

"The grouse was delicious," she said, deliberately changing the subject. Nice divorcees are always doing that.

We fell into a discussion of present and future needs; of ways and means for keeping my friends utterly in the dark concerning her presence in the abandoned east wing; and of what we were pleased to allude to as "separate maintenance," employing a phrase that might have been considered distasteful and even banal under ordinary conditions.

"I've been trying to recall all of the notable marriages we had in New York three years ago," said I, after she had most engagingly reduced

me to a state of subjection in the matter of three or four moot questions that came up for settlement. "You don't seem to fit in with any of the international affairs I can bring to mind."

"You promised you wouldn't bother about that, Mr. Smart," she said severely.

"Of course you were married in New York?"

"In a very nice church just off Fifth Avenue, if that will help you any," she said. "The usual crowd inside the church, and the usual mob outside, all fighting for a glimpse of me in my wedding shroud, and for a chance to see a real Hungarian nobleman. It really was a very magnificent wedding, Mr. Smart." She seemed to be unduly proud of the spectacular sacrifice.

A knitted brow revealed the obfuscated condition of my brain. I was thinking very intently, not to say remotely.

"The whole world talked about it," she went on dreamily. "We had a real prince for the best man, and two of the ushers couldn't speak a word of English. Don't you remember that the police closed the streets in the neighbourhood of the church and wouldn't let people spoil everything by going about their business as they were in the habit of doing? Some of the shops sold window space to sight-seers, just as they do at a coronation."

"I daresay all this should let in light, but it doesn't."

"Don't you read the newspapers?" she cried impatiently. She actually resented my ignorance.

"Religiously," I said, stung to revolt. "But I make it a point never to read the criminal news."

"Criminal news?" she gasped, a spot of red leaping to her cheek. "What do you mean?"

"It is merely my way of saying that I put marriages of that character in the category of crime."

"Oh!" she cried, staring at me with unbelieving eyes.

"Every time a sweet, lovely American girl is delivered into the hands of a foreign bounder who happens to possess a title that needs fixing, I call the transaction a crime that puts white slavery in a class with the most trifling misdemeanours. You did not love this pusillanimous Count, nor did he care a hang for you. You were too young in the ways of the world to have any feeling for him, and he was too old to have any for you. The whole hateful business therefore resolved itself into a case of give and take--and he took everything. He took you and your father's millions and now you are both back where you began. Some one deliberately committed a crime, and as it wasn't you or the Count, who levied his legitimate toll,--it must have been the person who planned the conspiracy. I take it, of course, that the whole affair was arranged behind your back, so to speak. To make it a perfectly fashionable and up-to-date delivery it would have been entirely out of place to consult the unsophisticated girl who was thrown in to make the title good. You were not sold to this bounder. It was the other

way round. By the gods, madam, he was actually paid to take you!"

Her face was quite pale. Her eyes did not leave mine during the long and crazy diatribe,--of which I was already beginning to feel heartily ashamed,--and there was a dark, ominous fire in them that should have warned me.

She arose from her chair. It seemed to me she was taller than before.

"If nothing else came to me out of this transaction," she said levelly, "at least a certain amount of dignity was acquired. Pray remember that I am no longer the unsophisticated girl you so graciously describe. I am a woman, Mr. Smart."

"True," said I, senselessly dogged; "a woman with the power to think for yourself. That is my point. If the same situation arose at your present age, I fancy you'd be able to select a husband without assistance, and I venture to say you wouldn't pick up the first dissolute nobleman that came your way. No, my dear countess, you were not to blame. You thought, as your parents did, that marriage with a count would make a real countess of you. What rot! You are a simple, lovable American girl and that's all there ever can be to it. To the end of your days you will be an American. It is not within the powers of a scape-grace count to put you or any other American girl on a plane with the women who are born countesses, or duchesses, or anything of the sort. I don't say that you suffer by comparison with these noble ladies. As a matter of fact you are surpassingly finer in every way than ninety-nine per cent. of them,--poor things! Marrying an English duke doesn't make a genuine duchess out of an American girl, not by a long shot. She merely becomes a figure of speech. Your own experience should tell you that. Well, it's the same with all of them. They acquire a title, but not the homage that should go with it."

We were both standing now. She was still measuring me with somewhat incredulous eyes, rather more tolerant than resentful.

"Do you expect me to agree with you, Mr. Smart?" she asked.

"I do," said I, promptly. "You, of all people, should be able to testify that my views are absolutely right."

"They are right," she said, simply. "Still you are pretty much of a brute to insult me with them."

"I most sincerely crave your pardon, if it isn't too late," I cried, abject once more. (I don't know what gets into me once in a while.)

"The safest way, I should say, is for neither of us to express an opinion so long as we are thrown into contact with each other. If you choose to tell the world what you think of me, all well and good. But please don't tell me."

"I can't convince the world what I think of you for the simple reason that I'd be speaking at random. I don't know who you are."

"Oh, you will know some day," she said, and her shoulders drooped a little.

"I've--I've done a most cowardly, despicable thing in hunting you--"

"Please! Please don't say anything more about it. I dare say you've done me a lot of good. Perhaps I shall see things a little more clearly. To be perfectly honest with you, I went into this marriage with my you his queen? You'll find it better than being a countess, believe me."

"I shall never marry, Mr. Smart," she said with decision. "Never, never again will I get into a mess that is so hard to get out of. I can say this to you because I've heard you are a bachelor. You can't take offence."

"I fondly hope to die a bachelor," said I with humility.

"God bless you!" she cried, bursting into a merry laugh, and I knew that a truce had been declared for the time being at least. "And now let us talk sense. Have you carefully considered the consequences if you are found out, Mr. Smart?"

"Found out?"

"If you are caught shielding a fugitive from justice. I couldn't go to sleep for hours last night thinking of what might happen to you if--"

"Nonsense!" I cried, but for the life of me I couldn't help feeling elated. She had a soul above self, after all!

"You see, I am a thief and a robber and a very terrible malefactor, according to the reports Max brings over from the city. The fight for poor little Rosemary is destined to fill columns and columns in the newspapers of the two continents for months to come. You, Mr. Smart, may find yourself in the thick of it. If I were in your place, I should keep out of it."

"While I am not overjoyed by the prospect of being dragged into it, Countess, I certainly refuse to back out at this stage of the game. Moreover, you may rest assured that I shall not turn you out."

"It occurred to me last night that the safest thing for you to do, Mr. Smart, is to--to get out yourself."

I stared. She went on hurriedly: "Can't you go away for a month's visit or--"

"Well, upon my soul!" I gasped. "Would you turn me out of my own house? This beats anything I've--"

"I was only thinking of your peace of mind and your--your safety," she cried unhappily. "Truly, truly I was."

"Well, I prefer to stay here and do what little I can to shield you and Rosemary," said I sullenly.

"I'll not say anything horrid again, Mr. Smart," she said quite meekly. (I take this occasion to repeat that I've never seen any one in all my life so pretty as she!) Her moist red lip trembled slightly, like a censured child's.

At that instant there came a rapping on the door. I started

apprehensively.

"It is only Max with the coal," she explained, with obvious relief. "We keep a fire going in the grate all day long. You've no idea how cold it is up here even on the hottest days. Come in!"

Max came near to dropping the scuttle when he saw me. He stood as one petrified.

"Don't mind Mr. Smart, Max," said she serenely. "He won't bite your head off."

The poor clumsy fellow spilled quantities of coal over the hearth when he attempted to replenish the fire at her command, and moved with greater celerity in making his escape from the room than I had ever known him to exercise before. Somehow I began to regain a lost feeling of confidence in myself. The confounded Schmicks, big and little, were afraid of me, after all.

"By the way," she said, after we had lighted our cigarettes, "I am nearly out of these." I liked the way she held the match for me, and then flicked it snappily into the centre of a pile of cushions six feet from the fireplace.

I made a mental note of the shortage and then admiringly said that I didn't see how any man, even a count could help adoring a woman who held a cigarette to her lips as she did.

"Oh," said she coolly, "his friends were willing worshippers, all of them. There wasn't a man among them who failed to make violent love to me, and with the Count's permission at that. You must not look so shocked. I managed to keep them at a safe distance. My unreasonable attitude toward them used to annoy my husband intensely."

"Good Lord!"

"Pooh! He didn't care what became of me. There was one particular man whom he favoured the most. A dreadful man! We quarrelled bitterly when I declared that either he or I would have to leave the house--forever. I don't mind confessing to you that the man I speak of is your friend, the gentle Count Hohendahl, some time ogre of this castle."

I shuddered. A feeling of utter loathing for all these unprincipled scoundrels came over me, and I mildly took the name of the Lord in vain.

With an abrupt change of manner, she arose from her chair and began to pace the floor, distractedly beating her clinched hands against her bosom. Twice I heard her murmur: "Oh, God!"

This startling exposition of feeling gave me a most uncanny shock. It came out of a clear sky, so to say, at a moment when I was beginning to regard her as cold-blooded, callous, and utterly without the emotions supposed to exist in the breast of every high-minded woman. And now I was witness to the pain she suffered, now I heard her cry out against the thing that had hurt her so pitilessly. I turned my head away, vastly moved. Presently she moved over to the window. A covert glance revealed her standing there, looking not down at the Danube that seemed so far away but up at the blue sky that seemed so near.

I sat very still and repressed, trying to remember the harsh, unkind things I had said to her, and berating myself fiercely for all of them. What a stupid, vainglorious ass I was, not to have divined something of the inward fight she was making to conquer the emotions that filled her heart unto the bursting point.

The sound of dry, suppressed sobs came to my ears. It was too much for me. I stealthily quit my position by the mantel-piece and tip-toed toward the door, bent on leaving her alone. Half-way there I hesitated, stopped and then deliberately returned to the fireplace, where I noisily shuffled a fresh supply of coals into the grate. It would be heartless, even unmannerly, to leave her without letting her know that I was heartily ashamed of myself and completely in sympathy with her. Wisely, however, I resolved to let her have her cry out. Some one a great deal more far-seeing than I let the world into a most important secret when he advised man to take that course when in doubt.

For a long while I waited for her to regain control of herself, rather dreading the apology she would feel called upon to make for her abrupt reversion to the first principles of her sex. The sobs ceased entirely. I experienced the sharp joy of relaxation. Her dainty lace handkerchief found employment. First she would dab it cautiously in one eye, then the other, after which she would scrutinise its crumpled surface with most extraordinary interest. At least a dozen times she repeated this puzzling operation. What in the world was she looking for? To this day, that strange, sly peeking on her part remains a mystery to me.

She turned swiftly upon me and beckoned with her little forefinger. Greatly concerned, I sprang toward her. Was she preparing to swoon? What in heaven's name was I to do if she took it into her pretty head to do such a thing as that? Involuntarily I shot a quick look at her blouse. To my horror it was buttoned down the back. It would be a bachelor's luck to--But she was smiling radiantly. Saved!

"Look!" she cried, pointing upward through the window. "Isn't she lovely?"

I stopped short in my tracks and stared at her in blank amazement. What a stupefying creature she was!

She beckoned again, impatiently. I obeyed with alacrity. Obtaining a rather clear view of her eyes, I was considerably surprised to find no trace of departed tears. Her cheek was as smooth and creamy white as it had been before the deluge. Her eyelids were dry and orderly and her nose had not been blown once to my recollection. Truly, it was a marvellous recovery. I still wonder.

The cause of her excitement was visible at a glance. A trim nurse-maid stood in the small gallery which circled the top of the turret, just above and to the right of us. She held in her arms the pink-hooded, pink-coated Rosemary, made snug against the chill winds of her lofty parade ground. Her yellow curls peeped out from beneath the lace of the hood, and her round little cheeks were the colour of the peach's bloom.

"Now, _isn't_ she lovely?" cried my eager companion.

"Even a crusty bachelor can see that she is adorable."

"I am not a crusty bachelor," I protested indignantly, "and what's more, I am positive I should like to kiss those red little cheeks, which is saying a great deal for me. I've never voluntarily kissed a baby in my life."

"I do not approve of the baby-kissing custom," she said severely. "It is extremely unhealthy and--middle-class. Still," seeing my expression change, "I sha'n't mind your kissing her once."

"Thanks," said I humbly.

It was plain to be seen that she did not intend to refer to the recent outburst. Superb exposition of tact!

Catching the nurse's eye, she signalled for her to bring the child down to us. Rosemary took to me at once. A most embarrassing thing happened. On seeing me she held out her chubby arms and shouted "da-da!" at the top of her infantile lungs. _That_ had never happened to me before.

I flushed and the Countess shrieked with laughter. It wouldn't have been so bad if the nurse had known her place. If there is one thing in this world that I hate with fervour, it is an ill-mannered, poorly-trained servant. A grinning nurse-maid is the worst of all. I may be super-sensitive and crotchety about such things, but I can see no excuse for keeping a servant--especially a nurse-maid--who laughs at everything that's said by her superiors, even though the quip may be no more side-splitting than a two syllabled "da-da."

"Ha, ha!" I laughed bravely. "She--she evidently thinks I look like the Count. He is very handsome, you say."

"Oh, that isn't it," cried the Countess, taking Rosemary in her arms and directing me to a spot on her rosy cheek. "Kiss right there, Mr. Smart. There! Wasn't it a nice kiss, honey-bunch? If you are a very, very nice little girl the kind gentleman will kiss you on the other cheek some day. She calls every man she meets da-da," explained the radiant young mother. "She's awfully European in her habits, you see. You need not feel flattered. She calls Conrad and Rudolph and Max da-da, and this morning in the back window she applied the same handsome compliment to your Mr. Poopendyke."

"Oh," said I, rather more crestfallen than relieved.

"Would you like to hold her, Mr. Smart? She's such a darling to hold."

"No--no, thank you," I cried, backing off.

"Oh, you will come to it, never fear," she said gaily, as she restored Rosemary to the nurse's arms. "Won't he, Blake?"

"He will, my lady," said Blake with conviction. I noticed this time that Blake's smile wasn't half bad.

At that instant Jinko, the chow, pushed the door open with his black nose and strolled imposingly into the room. He proceeded to treat me in the most cavalier fashion by bristling and growling.

The Countess opened her eyes very wide.

"Dear me," she sighed, "you must be very like the Count, after all. Jinko never growls at any one but him."

* * * * *

At dinner that evening I asked Poopendyke point blank if he could call to mind a marriage in New York society that might fit the principals in this puzzling case.

He hemmed and hawed and appeared to be greatly confused.

"Really, sir, I--I--really, I--"

"You make it a point to read all of the society news," I explained; "and you are a great hand for remembering names and faces. Think hard."

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Smart, I do remember this particular marriage very clearly," said he, looking down at his plate.

"You do?" I shouted eagerly. The new footman stared. "Splendid! Tell me, who is she--or was she?"

My secretary looked me steadily in the eye.

"I'm sorry, sir, but--but I can't do it. I promised her this morning I wouldn't let it be dragged out of me with red hot tongs."

CHAPTER VII

I RECEIVE VISITORS

She was indeed attended by faithful slaves.

* * * * *

The east wing of the castle was as still as a mouse on the day my house party arrived. Grim old doors took on new padlocks, keyholes were carefully stopped up; creaking floors were calked; windows were picketed by uncompromising articles of furniture deployed to keep my ruthless refugee from adventuring too close to the danger zone; and adamantine instructions were served out to all of my vassals. Everything appeared to be in tip-top shape for the experiment in stealth.

And yet I trembled. My secret seemed to be safely planted, but what would the harvest be? I knew I should watch those upper windows with hypnotic zeal, and listen with straining ears for the inevitable squall of a child or the bark of a dog. My brain ran riot with incipient subterfuges, excuses, apologies and lies with which my position was to be sustained.

There would not be a minute during the week to come when I would be perfectly free to call my soul my own, and as for nerves! well, with good luck they might endure the strain. Popping up in bed out of a

sound sleep at the slightest disturbance, with ears wide open and nerves tingling, was to be a nightly occupation at uncertain intervals; that was plain to be seen. All day long I would be shivering with anxiety and praying for night to come so that I might lie awake and pray for the sun to rise, and in this way pass the time as quickly as possible. There would be difficulty in getting my visitors to bed early, another thing to test my power at conniving. They were bridge players, of course, and as such would be up till all hours of the morning overdoing themselves in the effort to read each other's thoughts.

I thanked the Lord that my electric lighting system would not be installed until after they had departed. Ordinarily the Lord isn't thanked when an electric light company fails to perform its work on schedule time, but in this case delay was courted.

We were all somewhat surprised and not a little disorganised by the appearance of four unexpected servants in the train of my party. We hadn't counted on anything quite so elaborate. There were two lady's maids, not on friendly terms with each other; a French valet who had the air of one used to being served on a tray outside the servants' quarters; and a German attendant with hands constructed especially for the purpose of kneading and gouging the innermost muscles of his master, who it appears had to be kneaded and gouged three times a day by a masseur in order to stave off paralysis, locomotor ataxia or something equally unwelcome to a high liver.

We had ample room for all this physical increase, but no beds. I transferred the problem to Poopendyke. How he solved it I do not know, but from the woe-be-gone expression on his face the morning after the first night, and the fact that Britton was unnecessarily rough in shaving me, I gathered that the two of them had slept on a pile of rugs in the lower hall.

Elsie Hazzard presented me to her friends and, with lordly generosity, I presented the castle to them. Her husband, Dr. George, thanked me for saving all their lives and then, feeling a draft, turned up his coat collar and informed me that we'd all die if I didn't have the cracks stopped up. He seemed unnecessarily testy about it.

There was a Russian baron (the man who had to be kneaded) the last syllable of whose name was vitch, the first five evading me in a perpetual chase up and down the alphabet. For brevity's sake, I'll call him Umovitch. The French valet's master was a Viennese gentleman of twenty-six or eight (I heard), but who looked forty. I found myself wondering how dear, puritanic, little Elsie Hazzard could have fallen in with two such unamiable wrecks as these fellows appeared to be at first sight.

The Austrian's name was Pless. He was a plain mister. The more I saw of him the first afternoon the more I wondered at George Hazzard's carelessness. Then there were two very bright and charming Americans, the Billy Smiths. He was connected with the American Embassy at Vienna, and I liked him from the start. You could tell that he was the sort of a chap who is bound to get on in the world by simply looking at his wife. The man who could win the love and support of such an attractive creature must of necessity have qualifications to spare. She was very beautiful and very clever. Somehow the unforgettable resplendency of my erstwhile typist (who married the jeweller's clerk) faded into a

pale, ineffective drab when opposed to the charms of Mrs. Betty Billy Smith. (They all called her Betty Billy.)

After luncheon I got Elsie off in a corner and plied her with questions concerning her friends. The Billy Smiths were easily accounted for. They belonged to the most exclusive set in New York and Newport. He had an incomprehensible lot of money and a taste for the diplomatic service. Some day he would be an Ambassador. The Baron was in the Russian Embassy and was really a very nice boy.

"Boy?" I exclaimed.

"He is not more than thirty," said she. "You wouldn't call that old." There was nothing I could say to that and still be a perfect host. But to you I declare that he wasn't a day under fifty. How blind women can be! Or is silly the word?

From where we sat the figure of Mr. Pless was plainly visible in the loggia. He was alone, leaning against the low wall and looking down upon the river. He puffed idly at a cigarette. His coal black hair grew very sleek on his smallish head and his shoulders were rather high, as if pinched upward by a tendency to defy a weak spine.

"And this Mr. Pless, who is he?"

Elsie was looking at the rakish young man with a pitying expression in her tender blue eyes.

"Poor fellow," she sighed. "He is in great trouble, John. We hoped that if we got him off here where it is quiet he might be able to forget--Oh, but I am not supposed to tell you a word of the story! We are all sworn to secrecy. It was only on that condition that he consented to come with us."

"Indeed!"

She hesitated, uncomfortably placed between two duties. She owed one to him and one to me.

"It is only fair, John, that you should know that Pless is not his real name," she said, lowering her voice. "But, of course, we stand sponsor for him, so it is all right."

"Your word is sufficient, Elsie."

She seemed to be debating some inward question. The next I knew she moved a little closer to me.

"His life is a--a tragedy," she whispered. "His heart is broken, I firmly believe. Oh!"

The Billy Smiths came up. Elsie proceeded to withdraw into herself.

"We were speaking of Mr. Pless," said I. "He has a broken heart."

The newcomers looked hard at poor Elsie.

"Broken fiddle-sticks," said Billy Smith, nudging Elsie until she made room for him beside her on the long couch. I promptly made room for

Betty Billy.

"We ought to tell John just a little about him," said Elsie defensively. "It is due him, Billy."

"But don't tell him the fellow's heart is broken. That's rot."

"It isn't rot," said his wife. "Wouldn't your heart be broken?"

He crossed his legs comfortably.

"Wouldn't it?" repeated Betty Billy.

"Not if it were as porous as his. You can't break a sponge, my dear."

"What happened to it?" I inquired, mildly interested.

"Women," said Billy impressively.

"Then it's easily patched," said I. "Like cures like."

"You don't understand, John," said Elsie gravely. "He was married to a beautiful--"

"Now, Elsie, you're telling," cautioned Betty Billy.

"Well," said Elsie doggedly, "I'm determined to tell this much: his name isn't Pless, his wife got a divorce from him, and now she has taken their child and run off with it and they can't find--what's the matter?"

My eyes were almost popping from my head.

"Is--is he a count?" I cried, so loudly that they all said "sh!" and shot apprehensive glances toward the pseudo Mr. Pless.

"Goodness!" said Elsie in alarm. "Don't shout, John."

Billy Smith regarded me speculatively. "I dare say Mr. Smart has read all about the affair in the newspapers. They've had nothing else lately. I won't say he is a count, and I won't say he isn't. We're bound by a deep, dark, sinister oath, sealed with blood."

"I haven't seen anything about it in the papers," said I, trying to recover my self-possession which had sustained a most tremendous shock.

"Thank heaven!" cried Elsie devoutly.

"Do you mean to say you won't tell me his name?" I demanded.

Elsie eyed me suspiciously. "Why did you ask if he is a count?"

"I have a vague recollection of hearing some one speak of a count having trouble with his young American wife, divorce, or something of the sort. A very prominent New York girl, if I'm not mistaken. All very hazy, however. What is his name?"

"John," said Mrs. Hazzard firmly, "you must not ask us to tell you. Won't you please understand?"

"The poor fellow is almost distracted. Really, Mr. Smart, we planned this little visit here simply in order to--to take him out of himself for a while. It has been such a tragedy for him. He worshipped the child." It was Mrs. Billy who spoke.

"And the mother made way with him?" I queried, resorting to a suddenly acquired cunning.

"It is a girl," said Elsie in a loud whisper. "The loveliest girl. The mother appeared in Vienna about three weeks or a month ago and--whiff! Off goes the child. Abducted--kidnapped! And the court had granted him the custody of the child. That's what makes it so terrible. If she is caught anywhere in Europe--well, I don't know what may happen to her. It is just such silly acts as this that make American girls the laughing stocks of the whole world. I give you my word I am almost ashamed to have people point me out and say: 'There goes an American. Pooh!'"

By this time I had myself pretty well in hand.

"I daresay the mother loved the child, which ought to condone one among her multitude of sins. I take it, of course, that she was entirely to blame for everything that happened."

They at once proceeded to tear the poor little mother to shreds, delicately and with finesse, to be sure, but none the less completely. No doubt they meant to be charitable.

"This is what a silly American nobody gets for trying to be somebody over here just because her father has a trunkful of millions," said Elsie, concluding a rather peevish estimate of the conjugal effrontery laid at the door of Mr. Pless's late wife.

"Or just because one of these spendthrift foreigners has a title for sale," said Billy Smith sarcastically.

"He was deeply in love with her when they were married," said his wife. "I don't believe it was his fault that they didn't get along well together."

"The truth of the matter is," said Elsie with finality, "she couldn't live up to her estate. She was a drag, a stone about his neck. It was like putting one's waitress at the head of the table and expecting her to make good as a hostess."

"What was her social standing in New York?" I enquired.

"Oh, good enough," said Betty Billy. "She was in the smartest set, if that is a recommendation."

"Then you admit, both of you, that the best of our American girls fall short of being all that is required over here. In other words, they can't hold a candle to the Europeans."

"Not at all," they both said in a flash.

"That's the way it sounds to me."

Elsie seemed repentant. "I suppose we are a little hard on the poor

thing. She was very young, you see."

"What you mean to say, then, is that she wasn't good enough for Mr. Pless and his coterie."

"No, not just precisely that," admitted Betty Billy Smith. "She made a bid for him and got him, and my contention is that she should have lived up to the bargain."

"Wasn't he paid in full?" I asked, with a slight sneer.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't he get his money?"

"I am sure I don't see what money has to do with the case," said Elsie, with dignity. "Mr. Pless is a poor man I've heard. There could not have been very much of a marriage settlement."

"A mere million to start with," remarked Billy Smith ironically. "It's all gone, my dear Elsie, and I gather that father-in-law locked the trunk you speak of and hid the key. You don't know women as well as I do, Mr. Smart. Both of these charming ladies professed to adore Mr. Pless's wife up to the time the trial for divorce came up. Now they've got their hammers and hat-pins out for her and--"

"That isn't true, Billy Smith," cried Elsie in a fierce whisper. "We stood by her until she disobeyed the mandate--or whatever you call it--of the court. She did steal the child, and you can't deny it."

"Poor little kiddie," said he, and from his tone I gathered that all was not rosy in the life of the infant in this game of battledore and shuttlecock.

To my disgust, the three of them refused to enlighten me further as to the history, identity or character of either Mr. or Mrs. Pless, but of course I knew that I was entertaining under my roof, by the most extraordinary coincidence, the Count and Countess of Something-or-other, who were at war, and the child they were fighting for with motives of an entirely opposite nature.

Right or wrong, my sympathies were with the refugee in the lonely east wing. I was all the more determined now to shield her as far as it lay in my power to do so, and to defend her if the worst were to happen.

Mr. Pless tossed his cigarette over the railing and sauntered over to join us.

"I suppose you've been discussing the view," he said as he came up. There was a mean smile on his--yes, it was a rather handsome face--and the two ladies started guiltily. The attack on his part was particularly direct when one stops to consider that there wasn't any view to be had from where we were sitting, unless one could call a three-decked plasterer's scaffolding a view.

"We've been discussing the recent improvements about the castle, Mr. Pless," said I with so much directness that I felt Mrs. Billy Smith's arm stiffen and suspected a general tension of nerves from head to foot.

"You shouldn't spoil the place, Mr. Smart," said he, with a careless glance about him.

"Don't ruin the ruins," added Billy Smith, of the diplomatic corps.

"What time do we dine?" asked Mr. Pless, with a suppressed yawn.

"At eight," said Elsie promptly.

We were in the habit of dining at seven-thirty, but I was growing accustomed to the over-riding process, so allowed my dinner hour to be changed without a word.

"I think I'll take a nap," said he. With a languid smile and a little flaunt of his hand as if dismissing us, he moved languidly off, but stopped after a few steps to say to me: "We'll explore the castle to-morrow, Mr. Smart, if it's just the same to you." He spoke with a very slight accent and in a peculiarly attractive manner. There was charm to the man, I was bound to admit. "I know Schloss Rothhoefen very well. It is an old stamping ground of mine."

"Indeed," said I, affecting surprise.

"I spent a very joyous season here not so many years ago. Hohendahl is a bosom friend."

When he was quite out of hearing, Billy Smith leaned over and said to me: "He spent his honeymoon here, old man. It was the girls' idea to bring him here to assuage the present with memories of the past. Quite a pretty sentiment, eh?"

"It depends on how he spent it," I said significantly. Smith grinned approvingly. Being a diplomat he sensed my meaning at once.

"It was a lot of money," he said.

At dinner the Russian baron, who examined every particle of food he ate with great care and discrimination, evidently looking for poison, embarrassed me in the usual fashion by asking how I write my books, where I get my plots, and all the rest of the questions that have become so hatefully unanswerable, ending up by blandly enquiring _what_ I had written. This was made especially humiliating by the prefatory remark that he had lived in Washington for five years and had read everything that was worth reading.

If Elsie had been a man I should have kicked her for further confounding me by mentioning the titles of all my books and saying that he surely must have read them, as everybody did, thereby supplying him with the chance to triumphantly say that he'd be hanged if he'd ever heard of any one of them. I shall always console myself with the joyful thought that I couldn't remember his infernal name and would now make it a point never to do so.

Mr. Pless openly made love to Elsie and the Baron openly made love to Betty Billy. Being a sort of noncommittal bachelor, I ranged myself with the two abandoned husbands and we had quite a reckless time of it, talking with uninterrupted devilishness about the growth of American dentistry in European capitals, the way one has his nails manicured

in Germany, the upset price of hot-house strawberries, the relative merit of French and English bulls, the continued progress of the weather and sundry other topics of similar piquancy. Elsie invited all of us to a welsh rarebit party she was giving at eleven-thirty, and then they got to work at the bridge table, poor George Hazzard cutting in occasionally. This left Billy Smith and me free to make up a somewhat somnolent two-some.

I was eager to steal away to the east wing with the news, but how to dispose of Billy without appearing rude was more than I could work out. It was absolutely necessary for the Countess to know that her ex-husband was in the castle. I would have to manage in some way to see her before the evening was over. The least carelessness, the smallest slip might prove the undoing of both of us.

I wondered how she would take the dismal news. Would she become hysterical and go all to pieces? Would the prospect of a week of propinquity be too much for her, even though thick walls intervened to put them into separate worlds? Or, worst of all, would she reveal an uncomfortable spirit of bravado, rashly casting discretion to the winds in order to show him that she was not the timid, beaten coward he might suspect her of being? She had once said to me that she loathed a coward. I have always wondered how it felt to be in a "pretty kettle of fish," or a "pickle," or any of the synonymous predicaments. Now I knew. Nothing could have been more synchronous than the plural howdy-do that confronted me.

My nervousness must have been outrageously pronounced. Pacing the floor, looking at one's watch, sighing profoundly, putting one's hands in the pockets and taking them out again almost immediately, letting questions go by unanswered, and all such, are actions or conditions that usually produce the impression that one is nervous. A discerning observer seldom fails to note the symptoms.

Mr. Smith said to me at nine-sixteen (I know it was exactly nine-sixteen to the second) with polite conviction in his smile: "You seem to have something on your mind, old chap."

Now no one but a true diplomat recognises the psychological moment for calling an almost total stranger "old chap."

"I have, old fellow," said I, immensely relieved by his perspicuity. "I ought to get off five or six very important letters to--"

He interrupted me with a genial wave of his hand. "Run along and get 'em off," he said. "Don't mind me. I'll look over the magazines."

Ten minutes later I was sneaking up the interminable stairways in the sepulchral east wing, lighting and relighting a tallow candle with grim patience at every other landing and luridly berating the drafts that swept the passages. Mr. Poopendyke stood guard below at the padlocked doors, holding the keys. He was to await my signal to reopen them, but he was not to release me under any circumstance if snoopers were abroad.

My secretary was vastly disturbed by the news I imparted. He was so startled that he forgot to tell me that he wouldn't spend another night on a pile of rugs with Britton as a bed-fellow, an omission which gave Britton the opportunity to anticipate him by almost giving notice that

very night. (The upshot of it was the hasty acquisition of two brand new iron beds the next day, and the restoration of peace in my domestic realm.)

Somewhat timorously I knocked at the Countess's door. I realised that it was a most unseemly hour for calling on a young, beautiful and unprotected lady, but the exigencies of the moment lent moral support to my invasion.

After waiting five minutes and then knocking again so loudly that the sound reverberated through the empty halls with a sickening clatter, I heard some one fumbling with the bolts. The door opened an inch OF two.

The Countess's French maid peered out at me.

"Tell your mistress that I must see her at once."

"Madame is not at home, m'sieur," said the young woman.

"Not at home?" I gasped. "Where is she?"

"Madame has gone to bed."

"Oh," I said, blinking. "Then she is at home. Present my compliments and ask her to get up. Something very exasperating has hap--"

"Madame has request me to inform m'sieur that she knows the Count is here, and will you be so good as to call to-morrow morning."

"What! She knows he's here? Who brought the information?"

"The bountiful Max, m'sieur. He bring it with dejeuner, again with diner, and but now with the hot water, m'sieur."

"Oh, I see," said I profoundly. "In that case, I--I sha'n't disturb her. How--er--how did she take it?"

She gave me a severely reproachful look.

"She took it as usual, m'sieur. In that dreadful little tin tub old Conrad--"

"Good heavens, girl! I mean the news--the news about the Count."

"Mon dieu! I thought m'sieur refer to--But yes! She take it beautifully. I too mean the news. Madame is not afraid. Has she not the good, brave m'sieur to--what you call it--to shoulder all the worry, no? She is not alarm. She reads m'sieur's latest book in bed, smoke the cigarette, and she say what the devil do she care."

"What!"

"Non, non! I, Helene Marie Louise Antoinette, say it for Madame. Pardon! Pardon, m'sieur! It is I who am wicked."

Very stiffly and ceremoniously I advised caution for the next twelve hours, and saying good night to Helene Marie Louise Antoinette in an unintentionally complimentary whisper, took myself off down the stairs,

pursued by an equally subdued *_bon soir_* which made me feel like a soft-stepping Lothario.

Now it may occur to you that any self-respecting gentleman in possession of a castle and a grain of common sense would have set about to find out the true names of the guests beneath his roof. The task would have been a simple one, there is no doubt of that. A peremptory command with a rigid alternative would have brought out the truth in a jiffy.

But it so happens that I rather enjoyed the mystery. The situation was unique, the comedy most exhilarating. Of course, there was a tragic side to the whole matter, but now that I was in for it, why minimise the novelty by adopting arbitrary measures? Three minutes of stern conversation with Elsie Hazzard would enlighten me on all the essential points; perhaps half an hour would bring Poopendyke to terms; a half a day might be required in the brow-beating of the frail Countess. With the Schmicks, there was no hope. But why not allow myself the pleasure of enjoying the romantic feast that had been set before me by the gods of chance? Chance ordered the tangle; let chance unravel it. Somewhat gleefully I decided that it would be good fun to keep myself in the dark as long as possible!

"Mr. Poopendyke," said I, after that nervous factotum had let me into my side of the castle with gratifying stealthiness, "you will oblige me by not mentioning that fair lady's name in my presence."

"You did not stay very long, sir," said he in a sad whisper, and for the life of me I couldn't determine what construction to put upon the singularly unresponsive remark.

When I reached the room where my guests were assembled, I found Mr. Pless and the Baron Umovitch engaged in an acrimonious dispute over a question of bridge etiquette. The former had resented a sharp criticism coming from the latter, and they were waging a verbal battle in what I took to be five or six different tongues, none of which appeared to bear the slightest relationship to the English language. Suddenly Mr. Pless threw his cards down and left the table, without a word of apology to the two ladies, who looked more hurt than appalled.

He said he was going to bed, but I noticed that he took himself off in the direction of the moonlit loggia. We were still discussing his defection in subdued tones--with the exception of the irate baron--when he re-entered the room. The expression on his face was mocking, even accusing. Directing his words to me, he uttered a lazy indictment.

"Are there real spirits in your castle, Mr. Smart, or have you flesh and blood mediums here who roam about in white night dresses to study the moods of the moon from the dizziest ramparts?"

I started. What indiscretion had the Countess been up to?

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Pless," I said, with a politely blank stare.

Confound his insolence! He winked at me!

CHAPTER VIII

I RESORT TO DIPLOMACY

"My dear Countess," said I, the next morning, "while I am willing to admit that all you say is true, there still remains the unhappy fact that you were very near to upsetting everything last night. Mr. Pless saw you quite plainly. The moon was very full, you'll remember. Fortunately he was too far away from your window to recognise you. Think how easy it might--"

"But I've told you twice that I held my hand over Pinko's nose and he just couldn't bark, Mr. Smart. You are really most unreasonable about it. The dog had to have a breath of fresh air."

"Why not send him up to the top of the tower and let him run around on the--"

"Oh, there's no use talking about it any longer," she said wearily. "It is all over and no real harm was done. I am awfully sorry if they made it uncomfortable for you. It is just like him to suggest something--well, scandalous. And the rest of them are dreadful teases, especially Mrs. Smith. They love anything risqué. But you haven't told me what they said that kept you awake all night."

My dignity was worth beholding.

"It was not what they said to me, Countess, but what they left unsaid. I sha'n't tell you what they said."

"I think I can make a pretty good guess--"

"Well, you needn't!" I cried hastily, but too late. She would out with it.

"They accuse you of being a sad, sad dog, a foxy; bachelor, and a devil of a fellow. They all profess to be very much shocked, but they assure you that it's all right,--not to mind them. They didn't think you had it in you, and they're glad to see you behaving like a scamp. Oh, I know them!"

As a matter of fact, she was pretty near to being right. "All the more reason for you to be cautious and circumspect," said I boldly. "Pray think of my position, if not your own."

She gave me a queer little look and then smiled brightly. (She is lovely!)

"I'll promise to be good," she said.

"I only ask you to be careful," said I, blunderingly. She laughed aloud: her merriest, most distracting gurgle.

"And now will you be good enough to tell me who I am?" she asked, after a few minutes. "That is, who am I supposed to be?"

"Oh," said I uneasily, "you are really nobody. You are Britton's wife."

"What! Does Britton know it?"

"Yes," said I, with a wry smile. "He took a mean advantage of me in the presence of George Hazzard not an hour ago, and asked for a raise in wages on account of his wife's illness. It seems that you are an invalid."

"I hope he hasn't forgotten the baby in his calculations."

"He hasn't, you may be sure. He has named the baby after me."

"How original!"

"I thought it rather clever to change Rosemary's sex for a few days," said I. "Moreover, it will be necessary for Britton to take Max's place as your personal servant. He will fetch your meals and--"

"Oh, I can't agree to that, Mr. Smart," she cried with decision. "I must have Max. He is--"

"But Britton must have some sort of a pretext for--"

"Nonsense! No one cares about Britton and his sick wife. Let well enough alone."

"I--I'll think it over, Countess," said I weakly.

"And now tell me all about--Mr. Pless. How is he looking? Does he appear to be unhappy?" There was a curious note in her voice, as of anxiety or eagerness, it was hard to tell which. In any case, I found myself inwardly resenting her interest in the sneering Hungarian. (I had discovered that he was not an Austrian.) There was a queer sinking sensation in the region of my heart, and a slight chill. Could it be possible that she--But no! It was preposterous!

"He appears to be somewhat sentimental and preoccupied. He gazes at the moon and bites his nails."

"I--I wish I could have a peep at him some time without being--"

"For heaven's sake, don't even consider such a thing," I cried in alarm.

"Just a little peek, Mr. Smart," she pleaded.

"No!" said I firmly.

"Very well," she said resignedly, fixing me with hurt eyes. "I'm sorry to be such a bother to you."

"I believe you'll go back to him, after all," I said angrily. "Women are all alike. They--"

"Just because I want to see how unhappy he is, and enjoy myself a little, you say horrid things to me," she cried, almost pathetically. "You treat me very badly."

"There is a great deal at stake," said I. "The peril is--well, it's enormous. I am having the devil's own time heading off a scheme they've got for exploring the entire castle. Your hus--your ex-husband says he knows of a secret door opening into this part of the--"

She sprang to her feet with a sharp cry of alarm.

"Heavens! I--I forgot about _that!_ There is a secret panel and--heaven save us!--it opens directly into my bedroom!" Her eyes were very wide and full of consternation. She gripped my arm. "Come! Be quick! We must pile something heavy against it, or nail it up, or--do something."

She fairly dragged me out into the corridor, and then, picking up her dainty skirts, pattered down the rickety stairs at so swift a pace that I had some difficulty in keeping her pink figure in sight. Why is it that a woman can go downstairs so much faster than a man? I've never been able to explain it. She didn't stumble once, or miss a step, while I did all manner of clumsy things, and once came near to pitching headlong to the bottom. We went down and down and round and round so endlessly that I was not only gasping but reeling.

At last we came to the broad hall at the top of the main staircase. Almost directly in front of us loomed the great padlocked doors leading to the other wing. Passing them like the wind she led the way to the farthest end of the hall. Light from the big, paneless windows overlooking the river, came streaming into the vast corridor, and I could see doors ahead to the right and the left of us.

"Your bedroom?" I managed to gasp, uttering a belated question that should have been asked five or six flights higher up at a time when I was better qualified to voice it. "What the dickens is it doing down here?"

She did not reply, but, turning to the left, threw open a door and disappeared into the room beyond. I followed ruthlessly, but stopped just over the threshold to catch my breath in astonishment.

I was in "my lady's bed-chamber."

The immense Gothic bed stood on its dais, imposing in its isolation. Three or four very modern innovation trunks loomed like minarets against the opposite walls, half-open; one's imagination might have been excused if it conjured up sentries who stood ready to pop out of the trunks to scare one half to death. Some of my most precious rugs adorned the floor, but the windows were absolutely undraped. There were a few old chairs scattered about, but no other article of furniture except an improvised wash-stand, and a clumsy, portable tin bath-tub which leaned nonchalantly against the foot of the bed. There were great mirrors, in the wall at one end of the room, cracked and scaly it is true, but capable of reflecting one's presence.

"Don't stand there gaping," she cried in a shrill whisper, starting across the room only to turn aside with a sharp exclamation. "That stupid Helene!" she cried, flushing warmly. Catching up a heap of tumbled garments, mostly white, from a chair, she recklessly hurled them behind the bed. "This is the mirror--the middle one. It opens by means of a spring. There is a small hole in the wall behind it and then there is still another secret door beyond that, a thick iron one with the sixth Baron Rothhoefen's portrait on the outer side of it. The canvas swings open. We must--"

I was beginning to get my bearings.

"The sixth baron? Old Ludwig the Red?"

"The very one."

"Then, by Jove, he is in my study! You don't mean to say--"

"Please don't stop to talk," she cried impatiently, looking about in a distracted manner, "but for goodness sake get something to put against this mirror."

My mind worked rapidly. The only object in the room heavy enough to serve as a barricade was the bed, and it was too heavy for me to move, I feared. I suggested it, of course, involuntarily lowering my voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"Pull it over, quick!" she commanded promptly.

"Perhaps I'd better run out and get Max and Ru--"

"If my hus--if Mr. Pless should open that secret door from the other side, Mr. Smart, it will be very embarrassing for you and me, let--"

I put my shoulder to the huge creaky bed and shoved. There were no castors. It did not budge. The Countess assisted me by putting the tips of her small fingers against one end of it and pushing. It was not what one would call a frantic effort on her part, but it served to make me exert myself to the utmost. I, a big strong man, couldn't afford to have a slim countess pushing a bedstead about while I was there to do it for her.

"Don't do that," I protested. "I can manage it alone, thank you."

I secured a strong grip on the bottom of the thing and heaved manfully.

"You might let me help," she cried, firmly grasping a side piece with both hands.

The bed moved. The veins stood out on my neck and temples. My face must have been quite purple, and it is a hue that I detest. When I was a very small laddie my mother put me forward to be admired in purple velveteen. The horror of it still lingers.

By means of great straining I got the heavy bed over against the mirror, upsetting the tin bathtub with a crash that under ordinary circumstances would have made my heart stand still but now only tripled its pumping activities. One of the legs was hopelessly splintered in the drop from the raised platform.

"There," she said, standing off to survey our joint achievement, "we've stopped it up very nicely." She brushed the tips of her fingers daintily. "This afternoon you may fetch up a hammer and some nails and fasten the mirror permanently. Then you can move the bed back to its proper place. Goodness! What a narrow squeak!"

"Madam," said I, my hand on my heart but not through gallantry, "that bed stays where it is. Not all the king's horses nor all the king's men can put it back again."

"Was it so heavy, Mr. Smart?"

I swallowed very hard. A prophetic crick already had planted itself in my back. "Will you forgive me if I submit that you sleep quite a distance from home?" I remarked with justifiable irony. "Why the deuce don't you stay on the upper floors?"

"Because I am mortally afraid," she said, with a little shudder. "You've no idea how lonely, how spooky it is up there at the dead hour of night. I couldn't sleep. After the third night I had my things moved down here, where I could at least feel that there were strong men within--you might say arm's length of me. I'm--I'm shockingly timid."

She smiled; a wavering, pleading little smile that conquered.

"Of course, I don't mind, Countess," I hastened to say. "Only I thought it would be cosier up there with Rosemary and the two maids for company."

She leaned a little closer to me. "We all sleep down here," she said confidentially. "We bring Rosemary's little mattress down every night and put it in the bathtub. It is a very good fit and makes quite a nice cradle for her. Helene and Blake sleep just across the hall and we leave the doors wide open. So, you see, we're not one bit afraid."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and laughed.

"This is delicious," I cried, not without compunction for I was looking directly into her eager, wistful eyes. A shadow crossed them. "I beg your pardon. I--I can't help laughing."

"Pray do not stop laughing on my account," she said icily. "I am used to being laughed at since I left America. They laugh at all of us over here."

"I dare say they laugh at me, confound them," said I, lugubriously.

"They do," said she flatly. Before I could quite recover from this sentient dig, she was ordering me to put the bathtub where it belonged. This task completed, I looked up. She was standing near the head of the bed, with a revolver in her hand. I stared. "I keep it under my pillow, Mr. Smart," she said nervously. I said nothing, and she replaced it under the pillow, handling the deadly weapon as gingerly as if it were the frailest glass. "Of course I couldn't hit anything with it, and I know I should scream when it went off, but still--accidents will happen, you know."

"Urn!" said I, judicially. "And so my study is just beyond this mirror, eh? May I enquire how you happen to know that I have my study there?"

"Oh, I peeked in the other day," she said, serene once more.

"The deuce you did!"

"I was quite sure that you were out," she explained. "I opened Ludwig the Red an inch or two, that's all. You are quite cosy in there, aren't you? I envy you the grand old _chaise longue_."

I wavered, but succeeded in subduing the impulse. "It is the only

comfortable piece of furniture I have left in my apartments," said I, with convincing candour.

"You poor man," she said, with her rarest smile. "How fortunate you are that I did not remember the chaise longue. You would have been deprived of it, I am quite sure. Of course I couldn't think of robbing you of it now."

"As a matter of fact, I never lie in it," I said, submitting to a once conquered impulse. "If you'd really like to have it, I'll see that it is taken up to your rooms at once."

"Thank you," she said, shaking her head. "It's kind of you, but I am not so selfish as all that, believe me."

"It is--quite in the way, Countess."

"Some one would be sure to miss it if you sent it up now," she said reflectively.

"We'll wait till they're all gone," said I.

She smiled and the bargain was settled without a word from her. You've heard of men being wrapped about little fingers, haven't you? Well, there you are. We returned to the corridor. She closed the door softly, a mockery in view of the clatter I had made in shifting the bed and its impediments.

"We can't be too careful," she said in a whisper. She might have spoken through a megaphone and still been quite safe. We were tramping up the stairs. "Don't you think your guests will consider you rather inhospitable if you stay away from them all morning?"

I stopped short. "By Jove, now that you remind me of it, I promised to take them all out for a spin in the motor boat before luncheon. Hazzard has had his boat sent down,"

She looked positively unhappy. "Oh, how I should love to get out for a spin on the river! I wonder if I'll ever be free to enjoy the things I like most of--"

"Listen!" I whispered suddenly, grasping her arm. "Did you hear footsteps in the--Sh!"

Some one was walking over the stone floor in the lower hall, brisk strides that rang out quite clearly as they drew nearer.

"It is--it is Mr. Pless," she whispered in a panic. "I recognise his tread. As if I could ever forget it! Oh, how I hate him! He--"

"Don't stop here to tell me about it," I cut in sharply. "Make haste! Get up to your rooms and lock yourself in. I'll--I'll stop him. How the deuce did he get into this side of the--"

"Through the dungeons. There is a passage," she, whispered, and then she was gone, flying noiselessly up the narrow stairway.

Assuming a nonchalance I certainly did not feel, I descended the stairs. We met in the broad hallway below. Mr. Pless approached slowly,

evidently having checked his speed on hearing my footsteps on the stairs.

"Hello," I said agreeably. "How did you get in?"

He surveyed me coolly. "I know the castle from top to bottom, Mr. Smart. To be perfectly frank with you, I tried the secret panel in your study but found the opposite door blocked. You have no objection, I trust, to my looking over the castle? It is like home to me."

My plan was to detain him in conversation until she had time to secrete herself on the upper floor. Somehow I anticipated the banging of a door, and it came a moment later--not loud but very convicting, just the same. He glanced at me curiously.

"Then how did you get in?" I repeated, cringing perceptibly in response to the slam of the distant door.

"By the same means, I daresay, that you employ," said he.

For a moment I was confounded. Then my wits came to the rescue.

"I see. Through the dungeon. You do know the castle well, Mr. Pless."

"It is a cobwebby, unlovely passage," said he, brushing the dirt and cobwebs from his trousers. My own appearance was conspicuously immaculate, but I brushed in unison, just the same.

"Grewsome," said I.

He was regarding me with a curious smile in his eyes, a pleasantly bantering smile that had but one meaning. Casting an eye upwards, he allowed his smile to spread.

"Perhaps you'd rather I didn't disturb Mrs.-- Mrs.--"

"Britton," said I. "My valet's wife. I don't believe you will disturb her. She's on the top floor, I think."

He still smiled. "A little remote from Britton, isn't she?"

I think I glared. What right had he to meddle in Britton's affairs?

"I am afraid your fancy draws a rather long bow, Mr. Pless," said I, coldly.

He was at once apologetic. "If I offend, Mr. Smart, pray forgive me. You are quite justified in rebuking me. Shall we return to our own ladies?"

Nothing could have been more adroit than the way he accused me in that concluding sentence. It was the quintessence of irony.

"I'd like to have your opinion as to the best way of restoring or repairing those mural paintings in the dome of the east hall," I said, detaining him. It was necessary for me to have a good excuse for rummaging about in the unused part of the castle. "It seems too bad to let those wonderful paintings go to ruin. They are hanging down in some places, and are badly cracked in others. I've been worrying about

them ever since I came into possession. For instance, that Murillo in the centre. It must be preserved."

He gave me another queer look, and I congratulated myself on the success of my strategy.

He took it all in. The mocking light died out in his eyes, and he at once became intensely interested in my heaven-sent project. For fifteen or twenty minutes we discussed the dilapidated frescoes and he gave me the soundest sort of advice, based on a knowledge and experience that surprised me more than a little. He was thoroughly up in matters of art. His own chateau near Buda Pesth, he informed me, had only recently undergone complete restoration in every particular. A great deal of money had been required, but the expenditures had been justified by the results.

Paintings like these had been restored to their original glory, and so on and so forth. He offered to give me the address of the men in Munich who had performed such wonders for him, and suggested rather timidly that he might be of considerable assistance to me in outlining a system of improvements. I could not help being impressed. His manner was most agreeable. When he smiled without malice, his dark eyes were very boyish. One could then forget the hard lines of dissipation in his face, and the domineering, discontented expression which gave to him the aspect of a far greater age than he had yet attained. A note of eager enthusiasm in his voice proved beyond cavil that if this sprig of nobility had had half a chance in the beginning he might have been nobler than he was to-day. But underneath the fascinating charm of manner, back of the old world courtliness, there lurked the ever dominant signs of intolerance, selfishness and--even cruelty. He was mean to the core. He had never heard of the milk of human kindness, much less tasted of it.

There was no getting away from the fact that he despised me for no other reason than that I was an American. I could not help feeling the derision in which he held not only me but the Hazzards and the Smiths as well. He looked upon all of us as coming from an inferior race, to be tolerated only as passers-by and by no means worthy of his august consideration. We were not of his world and never could be.

Ignoble to him, indeed, must have been the wife who came with the vulgar though welcome dollars and an ambition to be his equal and the sharer of his heaven-born glory! He could not even pity her!

While he was discoursing so amiably upon the subjects he knew so well by means of an inherited intelligence that came down through generations, I allowed my thoughts to drift upstairs to that frightened, hunted little fellow-countrywoman of mine, as intolerant, as vain perhaps as he after a fashion, and cursed the infernal custom that lays our pride so low. Infinitely nobler than he and yet an object of scorn to him and all his people, great and small; a discredited interloper who could not deceive the lowliest menial in her own household into regarding her as anything but an imitation. Her loveliness counted for naught. Her wit, her charm, her purity of heart counted for even less than that. She was a thing that had been bartered for and could be cast aside without loss--a pawn. And she had committed the inconceivable sin of rebelling against the laws of commerce: she had defaulted! They would not forgive her for that.

My heart warmed toward her. She had been afraid of the dark! I can forgive a great deal in a person who is afraid of the dark.

I looked at my watch. Assuming a careless manner, I remarked:

"I am afraid we shall be late for the start. Are you going out with us in the boat or would you prefer to browse about a little longer? Will you excuse me? I must be off."

His cynical smile returned. "I shall forego the pleasure of browsing in another man's pasture, if you don't mind."

It was almost a direct accusation. He did not believe a word of the Britton story. I suddenly found myself wondering if he suspected the truth. Had he, by any chance, traced the fugitive countess to my doors? Were his spies hot upon the trail? Or had she betrayed herself by indiscreet acts during the past twenty-four hours? The latter was not unlikely; I knew her whims and her faults by this time. In either case, I had come to feel decidedly uncomfortable, so much so, in fact, that I was content to let the innuendo pass without a retort. It behooved me to keep my temper as well as my wits.

"Come along," said I, starting off in the direction of the lower regions. He followed. I manoeuvred with such success that ultimately he took the lead. I hadn't the remotest idea how to get to the confounded dungeons!

It never rains but it pours. Just as we were descending the last flight of stairs before coming to the winding stone steps that led far down into the earth, who but Britton should come blithely up from the posterior regions devoted to servants and their ilk. He was carrying a long pasteboard box. I said something impressive under my breath. Britton, on seeing us, stopped short in his tracks. He put the box behind his back and gazed at me forlornly.

"Ah, Britton," said I, recovering myself most creditably; "going up to see little John Bellamy, I suppose."

I managed to shoot a covert look at Mr. Pless. He was gazing at the half-hidden box with a perfectly impassive face, and yet I knew that there was a smile about him somewhere.

The miserable box contained roses, I knew, because I had ordered them for Rosemary.

"Yes, sir," said my valet, quite rigid with uncertainty, "in a way, sir." A bright look flashed into his face. "I'm taking up the wash, Mr. Smart. From the laundry over in the town, sir. It is somethink dreadful the way they mangle things, sir. Especially lady's garments. Thank you, sir."

He stood aside to let us pass, the box pinned between him and the wall. Never in my life have I known roses with a more pungent and penetrating odour! Britton seemed to fairly reek with it.

"I like the perfumes the women are using nowadays," said Mr. Pless affably, as we felt our way down the steps.

"Attar of roses," said I, sniffing.

"Umph!" said he.

It was quite dark and very damp in the underground passages. I had the curious sensation of lizards wriggling all about me in the sinister shadows. Then and there I resolved that the doors of this pestilential prison should be locked and double locked and never opened again, while I was master of the place.

Moreover, old man Schmick was down for a bad half-hour with me. How came these doors to be unlocked when the whole place was supposed to be as tight as a drum? If nothing else sufficed, the two prodigious Schmicks would be required to stand guard, day and night, with bludgeons if needs be. I intended to keep snooping busybodies out of that side of the castle if I had to nail up every door in the place, even at the risk of starving those whom I would defend.

Especially was I firm in my resolve to keep the meddling ex-husband in his proper place. Granted that he suspected me of a secret amour, what right had he to concern himself about it? None whatever. I was not the first baron to hold a fair prisoner within these powerful walls, and I meant to stand upon my dignity and my rights, as every man should who--But, great heaven, what an imbecile view to take of the matter! Truly my brain was playing silly tricks for me as I stumbled through the murky corridors. I had my imagination in a pretty fair state of subjection by the time we emerged from the dungeons and started up the steps. Facts were facts, and I would have to stick to them. That is why I bethought myself to utter this sage observation:

"Britton is a faithful, obliging fellow, Mr. Pless. It isn't every Englishman who will gracefully submit to being chucked out of comfortable quarters to make room for others. We're a bit crowded, you know. He gave up his room like a gentleman and moved over temporarily into the other wing. He was afraid, don't you see, that the baby might disturb my guests. A very thoughtful, dependable fellow."

"Yes," said he, "a very dependable fellow, Mr. Smart. My own man is much the same sort of a chap. He also is married." Did I imagine that he chuckled?

Half an hour later when I rejoined my guests after a session with Conrad Schmick, I was somewhat annoyed by the dig George Hazzard planted in my devoted ribs, and the furtive wink he gave me. The two ladies were regarding me with expressions that seemed pretty well divided between disapproval and mirth. The baron, whose amicable relations with Mr. Pless evidently had been restored, was grinning broadly at me.

And the Countess imperiously had directed me to supply her with all the scandal of the hour!

CHAPTER IX

I AM INVITED OUT TO DINNER

I sometimes wonder what would happen if I really had a mind of my own. Would I be content to exercise it capably? Would I cease to be putty in the hands of other people? I doubt it. Even a strong, obdurate mind

is liable to connect with conditions that render it weak and pliable for the simple reason that it is sometimes easier to put up with a thing than to try to put it down. An exacting, arbitrary mind perhaps might evolve a set of resolutions that even the most intolerant would hesitate to violate, but for an easygoing, trouble-dodging brain like my own there is no such thing as tenacity of purpose, unless it be in the direction of an obfuscated tendency to maintain its own pitiful equilibrium. I try to keep an even ballast in my dome of thought and to steer straight through the sea of circumstance, a very difficult undertaking and sometimes hazardous.

A man with a firm, resolute grip on himself would have checked Mr. Pless and Baron Umovitch at the outset of their campaign to acquire undisputed possession of all the comforts and conveniences that the castle afforded.

He would have said no to their demands that all work about the place should be regulated according to their own life-long habits, which, among other things, included lying in bed till noon, going back to bed at three for a quiet nap, and staying up all night so that they might be adequately worn out by the time they went to bed in the first place.

I mention this as a single instance of their power to over-ride me. It got to be so that when a carpenter wanted to drive a nail he had to substitute a screw and use a screw-driver, a noiseless process but an insufferable waste of time and money. Lathers worked four days on a job that should have been accomplished in as many hours. Can you imagine these expert, able-bodied men putting laths on a wall with screw-drivers?

When Elsie Hazzard, painfully aware of my annoyance, asked the two noblemen why on earth they couldn't get up for breakfast, they coldly informed her that they were civilised human beings and not larks.

They used my study for purposes of their own, and glared at me when I presumed to intrude upon their privacy. Mr. Pless took possession of this room, and here received all sorts of secret operatives engaged in the task of unearthing the former Mrs. Pless. Here he had as many as fifteen reports a day by messenger from all parts of the land and here he discussed every new feature of the chase as it presented itself, coolly barring me out of my sanctum sanctorum with the impassive command to knock before attempting to enter.

In spite of their acrimonious tilts over the card table, he and the baron were as thick as could be when it came to the question of the derelict countess. They maintained the strictest privacy and resented even the polite interest of their four American friends.

Finding Mr. Poopendyke at work over some typing one day, Mr. Pless peremptorily ordered him out of the study and subsequently complained to me about the infernal racket the fellow made with his typewriter. Just as I was on the point of telling him to go to the devil, he smilingly called my attention to a complete plan for the restoration of the two great halls as he had worked it out on paper. He had also written a personal letter, commanding the Munich firm to send their most competent expert to Schloss Rothhoefen without delay, to go over the plans with him. As I recall it, he merely referred to me as a rich American who needed advice.

They cursed my servants, drank my wines, complained of the food, and had everybody about the place doing errands for them. My butler and footman threatened to leave if they were compelled to continue to serve drinks until four in the morning; but were somewhat appeased when I raised their wages. Britton surreptitiously thrashed the French valet, and then had to serve Mr. Pless (to my despair) for two days while Francois took his time recovering.

The motor boat was operated as a ferry after the third day, hustling detectives, lawyers, messengers and newspaper correspondents back and forth across the much be-sung Danube. Time and again I shivered in my boots when these sly-faced detectives appeared and made their reports behind closed doors. When would they strike the trail?

To my surprise the Hazzards and the Smiths were as much in the dark as I concerning development in the great kidnapping case. The wily Mr. Pless suddenly ceased delivering his confidences to outsiders. Evidently he had been cautioned by those in charge of his affairs. He became as uncommunicative as the Sphinx.

I had the somewhat valueless satisfaction of knowing a blessed sight more about the matter than he and all of his bloodhounds put together. I could well afford to laugh, but under the extremely harassing conditions it was far from possible for me to get fat. As a matter of fact, it seemed to me that I was growing thinner. Mrs. Betty Billy Smith, toward the end of her visit, dolefully--almost tearfully--remarked upon my haggard appearance. She was very nice about it, too. I liked her immensely.

It did not require half an eye to see that she was thoroughly sick of the baron and Mr. Pless. She was really quite uncivil to them toward the end.

At last there came a day of deliverance. The guests were departing and I can truthfully say that I was speeding them.

Elsie Hazzard took me off to a remote corner, where a little later on Betty Billy and the two husbands found us.

"John, will you ever forgive me?" she said very soberly. "I swear to you I hadn't the faintest idea what it--"

"Please, please, Elsie," I broke in warmly; "don't abuse yourself in my presence. I fully understand everything. At least, nearly everything. What I can't understand, for the life of me, is this: how did you happen to pick up two such consummate bounders as these fellows are?"

"Alas, John," said she, shaking her head, "a woman never knows much about a man until she has lived a week in the same house with him. Now you are a perfect angel."

"You've always said that," said I. "You did not have to live in the same house with me to find it out, did you?"

She ignored the question. "I shall never, never forgive myself for this awful week, John. We've talked it all over among ourselves. We are ashamed--oh, so terribly ashamed. If you can ever like us again after--"

"Like you!" I cried, taking her by the shoulders. "Why, Elsie Hazzard, I have never liked you and George half so much as I like you now. You two and the Smiths stand out like Gibraitars in my esteem. I adore all of you. I sha'n't be happy again until I know that you four--and no more--are coming back to Schloss Rothhoefen for an indefinite stay. Good Lord, how happy we shall be!"

I said it with a great deal of feeling. The tears rushed into her eyes.

"You _are_ a dear, John," she sighed.

"You'll come?"

"In a minute," said she with vehemence, a genuine American girl once more.

"Just as soon as these pesky workmen are out of the place, I'll drop you a line," said I, immeasurably exalted. "But I draw the line at noblemen."

"Don't worry," she said, setting her nice little white teeth. "I draw it too. Never again! _Never_!"

It occurred to me that here was an excellent opening for a bit of missionary work. Very pointedly I said to her: "I fancy you are willing to admit now that she wasn't such a simpleton for leaving him."

She went so far as to shudder, all the time regarding me with dilated eyes. "I can't imagine anything more dreadful than being that man's wife, John."

"Then why won't you admit that you are sorry for her? Why won't you be a little just to her?"

She looked at me sharply. "Do you know her?"

"Not by a long shot," I replied hastily, and with considerable truthfulness.

"Why are you so keen to have me take sides with her?"

"Because I did, the instant I saw that infernal cad."

She pursed her lips. It was hard for her to surrender.

"Out with it, Elsie," I commanded. "You know you've been wrong about that poor little girl. I can tell by the look in your eyes that you have switched over completely in the last four days, and so has Betty Billy."

"I can't forgive her for marrying him in the first place," she said stubbornly. "But I think she was justified in leaving him. As I know him now, I don't see how she endured it as long as she did. Yes, I am sorry for her. She is a dear girl and she has had a--a--"

"I'll say it, my dear: a hell of a time."

"Thank you." "And I daresay you now think she did right in taking the

child, too," I persisted.

"I--I hope she gets safely away with little Rosemary, back to God's country as we are prone to call it. Oh, by the way, John, I don't see why I should feel bound to keep that wretch's secret any longer. He has treated us like dogs. He doesn't deserve--"

"Hold on! You're not thinking of telling me his name, are you?"

"Don't you want to know it? Don't you care to hear that you've been entertaining the most talked of, the most interesting--"

"No, I don't!"

"Don't you care to hear who it was that he married and how many millions he got from--"

"No, I don't."

"And why not?"

"Well," said I, judicially, "in the first place I like the mystery of it all. In the second place, I don't want to know anything more about this fellow than I already know. He is enough of a horror to me, as it is, God knows, without giving a name to him. I prefer to think of him as Mr. Pless. If you don't mind, Elsie, I'll try to eradicate him thoroughly from my system as Pless before I take him on in any other form of evil. No, I don't want to know his name at present, nor do I care a hang who it was he married. Silly notion, I suppose, but I mean what I say."

She looked at me in wonder for a moment and then shook her head as if considering me quite hopeless. "You are an odd thing, John. God left something out when He fashioned you. I'm just dying to tell you all about them, and you won't let me."

"Is she pretty?" I asked, yielding a little.

"She is lovely. We've been really quite hateful about her, Betty and I. Down in our hearts we like her. She was a spoiled child, of course, and all that sort of thing, but heaven knows she's been pretty thoroughly made over in a new crucible. We used to feel terribly sorry for her, even while we were deriding her for the fool she had made of herself in marrying him. I've seen her hundreds of times driving about alone in Vienna, where they spent two winters, a really pathetic figure, scorned not only by her husband but by every one else. He never was to be seen in public with her. He made it clear to his world that she was not to be inflicted upon it by any unnecessary act of his. She came to see Betty and me occasionally; always bright and proud and full of spirit, but we could see the wounds in her poor little heart no matter how hard she tried to hide them. I tell you, John, they like us as women but they despise us as wives. It will always be the same with them. They won't let us into their charmed circle. Thank God, I am married to an American. He must respect me whether he wants to or not."

"Poor little beggar," said I, without thinking of how it would sound to her; "she has had her fling, and she has paid well for it."

"If her stingy old father, who permitted her to get into the scrape, would come up like a man and pay what he ought to pay, there would be no more pother about this business. He hasn't lived up to his bargain. The--Mr. Pless has squandered the first million and now he wants the balance due him. A trade's a trade, John. The old man ought to pay up. He went into it with his eyes open, and I haven't an atom of sympathy for him. You have read that book of Mrs. O'Burnett's, haven't you?--'The Shuttle'? Well, there you are. This is but another example of what fools American parents can be when they get bees in their bonnets."

She seemed to be accusing me!

"I hope she gets away safely with the kiddie," said I, non-committally.

"Heaven knows where she is. Maybe she's as safe as a bug in a rug."

"I shouldn't be surprised," said I.

The Billy Smiths and George Hazzard came up at this juncture. Elsie at once proceeded to go into a long series of conjectures as to the probable whereabouts of Mr. Pless's former wife and their child. I was immensely gratified to find that they were now undivided in their estimate of Mr. Pless and firmly allied on the side of the missing countess.

I gathered from their remarks that the young woman's mother and brothers were still in Paris, where their every movement was being watched by secret agents. They were awaiting the arrival from New York of the father of the countess, after which they were to come to Vienna for the purpose of making a determined fight for the daughter's absolute freedom and the custody of the child.

Somehow this news gave me a strange feeling of apprehension, a sensation that later on was to be amply justified.

I daresay an historian less punctilious about the truth than I propose to be, would, at this stage of the narrative, insert a whopping lie for the sake of effect, or "action," or "heart interest," as such things are called in the present world of letters. He would enliven his tale by making Mr. Pless do something sensational while he was about it, such as yanking his erstwhile companion out of her place of hiding by the hair of her head, or kicking down all the barricades about the place, or fighting a duel with me, or--well, there is no end of things he might do for the sake of a "situation." But I am a person of veracity and the truth is in me. Mr. Pless did none of these interesting things, so why should I say that he did?

He went away with the others at half-past eleven, and that was the end of his first visit to my domain. For fear that you, kind reader, may be disappointed, I make haste to assure you that he was to come again.

Of course there was more or less turmoil and--I might say disaffection--attending his departure. He raised Cain with my servants because they did this and that when they shouldn't have done either; he (and the amiable baron) took me to task for having neglected to book compartments for them in the Orient Express; he insisted upon having a luncheon put up in a tea basket and taken to the railway station by Britton, and he saw to it personally that three or four bottles of my best wine were neatly packed in with the rest. He

said three or four, but Britton is firm in his belief that there was nearer a dozen, judging by the weight.

He also contrived to have Mr. Poopendyke purchase first-class railway tickets for him and the baron, and then forgot to settle for them. It amounted to something like four hundred and fifty kronen, if I remember correctly. He took away eleven hundred and sixty-five dollars of my money, besides, genially acquired at roulette, and I dread to think of what he and the baron took out of my four friends at auction bridge.

I will say this for him: he was the smartest aristocrat I've ever known.

Need I add that the Hazzards and the Smiths travelled second-class?

"Well, thank the Lord!" said I, as the ferry put off with the party, leaving me alone on the little landing. The rotten timbers seemed to echo the sentiment. At the top of the steep all the Schmicks were saying it, too; in the butler's pantry it was also being said; a score of workmen were grunting it; and the windlass that drew me up the hill was screaming it in wild, discordant glee. I repeated it once more when Britton returned from town and assured me that they had not missed the train.

"That's what I'd like to say, sir," said he.

"Well, say it," said I. And he said it so vociferously that I know it must have been heard in the remotest corners of heaven.

The merry song of the hammer and the sweet rasp of the saw greeted my delighted ear as I entered the castle. Men were singing and whistling for all they were worth; the air was full of music. It was not unlike the grand transformation scene in the pantomime when all that has been gloom and despondency gives way in the flash of an eye to elysian splendour and dazzling gaiety. 'Pon my soul, I never felt so exuberant in all my life. The once nerve-racking clangour was like the soothing strains of an invisible orchestra to my delighted senses. Ha! Ha! What a merry old world it is, after all!

Nearing my study, I heard an almost forgotten noise: the blithe, incessant crackle of a typewriting machine. Never have I heard one rattle so rapidly or with such utter garrulousness.

I looked in at the door. Over in his corner by the window Poopendyke was at work, his lanky figure hunched over the key-board, his head enveloped in clouds from a busy pipe, for all the world like a tugboat smothering in its own low-lying smoke. Sheets of paper were strewn about the floor. Even as I stood there hesitating, he came to the end of a sheet and jerked it out of the machine with such a resounding snap that the noise startled me. He was having the time of his life!

I stole away, unwilling to break in upon this joyful orgy.

Conrad, grinning from ear to ear, was waiting for me outside my bedroom door late in the day. He saluted me with unusual cordiality.

"A note, mein herr," said he, and handed me a dainty little pearl-grey envelope. He waited while I read the missive.

"I sha'n't be home for dinner, Conrad," said I, my eyes aglow. "Tell Hawkes, will you?"

He bowed and scraped himself away; somehow he seemed to have grown younger by decades. It was in the air to be young and care-free. I read the note again and felt almost boyish. Then I went up to my room, got out my gayest raiment without shame or compunction, dressed with especial regard for lively effects, and hied me forth to carry sunshine into the uttermost recesses of my castle.

The Countess welcomed me with a radiant smile. We shook hands.

"Well, he has gone," said I, drawing a deep breath.

"Thank the Lord," said she, and then I knew that the symphony was complete. We all had sung it.

It must not be supposed for an instant that I had been guilty of neglecting my lovely charge during that season of travail and despair. No, indeed! I had visited her every day as a matter of precaution. She required a certain amount of watching.

I do not hesitate to say at this time that she seemed to be growing lovelier every day. In a hundred little ways she was changing, not only in appearance but in manner.

Now, to be perfectly frank about it, I can't explain just what these little changes were--that is, not in so many words--but they were quite as pronounced as they were subtle. I may risk mentioning an improvement in her method of handling me. She was not taking quite so much for granted as she did at first. She was much more humble and considerate, I remarked; instead of bullying me into things she now cajoled me; instead of making demands upon my patience and generosity, she rather hesitated about putting me to the least trouble. She wasn't so arrogant, nor so hard to manage. In a nutshell, I may say with some satisfaction, she was beginning to show a surprising amount of respect for me and my opinions. Where once she had done as she pleased, she now did so only after asking my advice and permission, both of which I gave freely as a gentleman should. Fundamentally she was all right. It was only in a superficial sort of way that she fell short of being ideal. She really possessed a very sweet, lovely nature. I thought I could see the making of a very fine woman in her.

I do not say that she was perfect or ever could be, but she might come very close to it if she went on improving as she did every day. As a matter of fact, I found an immense amount of analytical pleasure in studying the changes that attended the metamorphosis. It seemed to my eager imagination that she was being translated before my eyes; developing into a serious, sensible, unselfish person with a soul preparing to mount higher than self. Her voice seemed to be softer, sweeter; the satirical note had disappeared almost entirely, and with it went the forced raillery that had been so pronounced at the beginning of our acquaintance.

Her devotion to Rosemary was wonderful to see. By the way, while I think of it, the child was quite adorable. She was learning to pronounce my name, and getting nearer and nearer to it every day. At the time of which I now write she was calling me (with great enthusiasm), by the name of "Go-go," which, reduced to aboriginal American, means

"Man-with-the-Strong-Arm-Who-Carries-Baby."

"It is very nice of you to ask me up to dine with you," said I.

"Isn't it about time I was doing something for you in return for all that you have done for me?" she inquired gaily. "We are having a particularly nice dinner this evening, and I thought you'd enjoy a change."

"A change?" said I, with a laugh. "As if we haven't been eating out of the same kettle for days!"

"I was not referring to the food," she said, and I was very properly squelched.

"Nevertheless, speaking of food," said I, "it may interest you to know that I expected to have rather a sumptuous repast of my own to celebrate the deliverance. A fine plump pheasant, prepared a la Oscar, corn fritters like mother used to make, potatoes picard,--"

"And a wonderful alligator pear salad," she interrupted, her eyes dancing.

I stared. "How in the world did you guess?"

She laughed in pure delight, and I began to understand. By the Lord Harry, the amazing creature was inviting me to eat my own dinner in her _salle manger!_ "Well, may I be hanged! You do beat the Dutch!"

She was wearing a wonderful dinner gown of Irish lace, and she fairly sparkled with diamonds. There was no ornament in her brown hair, however, nor were her little pink ears made hideous by ear-rings. Her face was a jewel sufficient unto itself. I had never seen her in an evening gown before. The effect was really quite ravishing. As I looked at her standing there by the big oak table, I couldn't help thinking that the Count was not only a scoundrel but all kinds of a fool.

"It was necessary for me to bribe all of your servants, Mr. Smart," she said.

"You did not offer the rascals money, I hope," I said in a horrified tone.

"No, indeed!" She did not explain any farther than that, but somehow I knew that money isn't everything to a servant after all. "I hope you don't mind my borrowing your butler and footman for the evening," she went on. "Not that we really need two to serve two, but it seems so much more like a function, as the newspapers would call it."

It was my turn to say "No, indeed."

"And now you must come in and kiss Rosemary good night," she said, glancing at my great Amsterdam clock in the corner.

We went into the nursery. It was past Rosemary's bedtime by nearly an hour and the youngster was having great difficulty in keeping awake. She managed to put her arms around my neck when I took her up from the bed, all tucked away in her warm little nightie, and sleepily presented her own little throat for me to kiss, that particular spot being where

the honey came from in her dispensation of sweets.

I was full of exuberance. An irresistible impulse to do a jig seized upon me. To my own intense amazement, and to Blake's horror, I began to dance about the room like a clumsy kangaroo. Rosemary shrieked delightedly into my ear and I danced the harder for that. The Countess, recovering from her surprise, cried out in laughter and began to clap time with her hands. Blake forgot herself and sat down rather heavily on the edge of the bed. I think the poor woman's knees gave way under her.

"Hurrah!" I shouted to Rosemary, but looking directly at the Countess. "We're celebrating!"

Whereupon the girl that was left in the Countess rose to the occasion and she pirouetted with graceful abandon before me, in amazing contrast to my jumping-jack efforts. Only Blake's reserved and somewhat dampening admonition brought me to my senses.

"Please don't drop the child, Mr. Smart," she said. I had the great satisfaction of hearing Rosemary cry when I delivered her up to Blake and started to slink out of the room in the wake of my warm-cheeked hostess. "You would be a wonderful father, sir," said Blake, relenting a little.

I had the grace to say, "Oh, pshaw!" and then got out while the illusion was still alive. (As I've said before, I do not like a crying baby.)

It was the most wonderful dinner in the world, notwithstanding it was served on a kitchen table moved into the living room for the occasion. Imposing candelabra adorned the four corners of the table and the very best plate in the castle was put to use. There were roses in the centre of the board, a huge bowl of short-stemmed Marechal Niel beauties. The Countess's chair was pulled out by my stately butler, Hawkes; mine by the almost equally imposing footman, and we faced each other across the bowl of roses and lifted an American cocktail to the health of those who were about to sit down to the feast. I think it was one of the best cocktails I've ever tasted. The Countess admitted having made it herself, but wasn't quite sure whether she used the right ingredients or the correct proportions. She asked me what I thought of it.

"It is the best Manhattan I've ever tasted," said I, warmly.

Her eyes wavered. Also, I think, her faith in me. "It was meant to be a Martini," she said sorrowfully.

Then we both sat down. Was it possible that the corners of Hawkes' mouth twitched? I don't suppose I shall ever know.

My sherry was much better than I thought, too. It was deliciously oily. The champagne? But that came later, so why anticipate a joy with realisation staring one in the face?

We began with a marvellous hors-d'oeuvres. Then a clear soup, a fish aspic, a--Why rhapsodise? Let it be sufficient if I say that in discussing the Aladdin-like feast I secretly and faithfully promised my chef a material increase in wages. I had never suspected him of being such a genius, nor myself of being such a Pantegruelian disciple.

I must mention the alligator pear salad. For three weeks I had been trying to buy alligator pears in the town hard by. These came from Paris. The chef had spoken to me about them that morning, asking me when I had ordered them. Inasmuch as I had not ordered them at all, I couldn't satisfy his curiosity. My first thought was that Elsie Hazzard, remembering my fondness for the vegetable--it is a vegetable, isn't it?--had sent off for them in order to surprise me. It seems, however, that Elsie had nothing whatever to do with it. The Countess had ordered them for me through her mother, who was in Paris at the time. Also she had ordered a quantity of Parisian strawberries of the hot-house, one-franc-apiece variety, and a basket of peaches. At the risk of being called penurious, I confess that I was immensely relieved when I learned that these precious jewels in the shape of fruit had been paid for in advance by the opulent mother of the Countess.

"Have I told you, Mr. Smart, that I am expecting my mother here to visit me week after next?"

She tactfully put the question to me at a time when I was so full of contentment that nothing could have depressed me. I must confess, however, that I was guilty of gulping my champagne a little noisily. The question came with the salad course.

"You don't say so!" I exclaimed, quite cheerfully.

"That is to say, she is coming if you think you can manage it quite safely."

"I manage it? My dear Countess, why speak of managing a thing that is so obviously to be desired?"

"You don't understand. Can you smuggle her into the castle without any one knowing a thing about it? You see, she is being watched every minute of the time by detectives, spies, secret agents, lawyers, and Heaven knows who else. The instant she leaves Paris, bang! It will be like the starter's shot in a race. They will be after her like a streak. And if you are not very, very clever they will play hob with everything."

"Then why run the risk?" I ventured.

"My two brothers are coming with her," she said reassuringly. "They are such big, strong fellows that--"

"My dear Countess, it isn't strength we'll need," I deplored.

"No, no, I quite understand. It is cunning, strategy, caution, and all that sort of thing. But I will let you know in ample time, so that you may be prepared."

"Do!" I said gallantly, trying to be enthusiastic.

"You are so wonderfully ingenious at working out plots and conspiracies in your books, Mr. Smart, that I am confident you can manage everything beautifully."

Blatchford was removing my salad plate. A spasm of alarm came over me. I had quite forgotten the two men. The look of warning I gave her brought forth a merry, amused smile.

"Don't hesitate to speak before Blatchford and Hawkes," she said, to my astonishment. "They are to be trusted implicitly. Isn't it true, Hawkes?"

"It is, Madam," said he.

"Do you mean to say, Countess, that--"

"It has all been quite satisfactorily attended to through Mr. Poopendyke," she said. "He consulted me before definitely engaging any one, Mr. Smart, and I referred him to my lawyers in Vienna. I do hope Hawkes and Blatchford and Henri, the chef, are quite satisfactory to you. They were recently employed by some one in the British embassy at--"

"Pray rest easy, Countess," I managed to say, interrupting out of consideration for Hawkes and Blatchford, who, I thought, might feel uncomfortable at hearing themselves discussed so impersonally. "Everything is most satisfactory. I did not realise that I had you to thank for my present mental and gastronomical comfort. You have surrounded me with diadems."

Hawkes and Blatchford very gravely and in unison said: "Thank you, sir."

"And now let us talk about something else," she said complacently, as if the project of getting the rest of her family into the castle were already off her mind. "I can't tell you how much I enjoyed your last book, Mr. Smart. It is so exciting. Why do you call it 'The Fairest of the Fair'?"

"Because my publisher insisted on substituting that title for the one I had chosen myself. I'll admit that it doesn't fit the story, my dear Countess, but what is an author to do when his publisher announces that he has a beautiful head of a girl he wants to put on the cover and that the title must fit the cover, so to speak?"

"But I don't consider it a beautiful head, Mr. Smart. A very flashy blonde with all the earmarks of having posed in the chorus between the days when she posed for your artist. And your heroine has very dark hair in the book. Why did they make her a blonde on the cover?"

"Because they didn't happen to have anything but blonde pictures in stock," said I, cheerfully. "A little thing like that doesn't matter, when it comes to literature, my dear Countess. It isn't the hair that counts. It's the hat."

"But I should think it would confuse the reader," she insisted. "The last picture in the book has her with inky black hair, while in all the others she is quite blonde."

"A really intelligent reader doesn't have to be told that the artist changed his model before he got to the last picture," said I, and I am quite confident she didn't hear me grate my teeth.

"But the critics must have noticed the error and commented upon it."

"My dear Countess, the critics never see the last picture in a book."

They are much too clever for that."

She pondered. "I suppose they must get horribly sick of all the books they have to read."

"And they never have a chance to experience the delicious period of convalescence that persons with less chronic afflictions have to look forward to," said I, very gently. "They go from one disease to another, poor chaps."

"I once knew an author at Newport who said he hated every critic on earth," she said.

"I should think he might," said I, without hesitation. It was not until the next afternoon that she got the full significance of the remark.

As I never encourage any one who seeks to discuss my stories with me, being a modest chap with a flaw in my vanity, she abandoned the subject after a few ineffectual attempts to find out how I get my plots, how I write my books, and how I keep from losing my mind.

"Would you be entertained by a real mystery?" she asked, leaning toward me with a gleam of excitement in her eyes. Very promptly I said I should be. We were having our coffee. Hawkes and Blatchford had left the room. "Well, tradition says that one of the old barons buried a vast treasure in the cellar of this--"

"Stop!" I commanded, shaking my head. "Haven't I just said that I don't want to talk about literature? Buried treasure is the very worst form of literature."

"Very well," she said indignantly. "You will be sorry when you hear I've dug it up and made off with it."

I pricked up my ears. This made a difference. "Are you going to hunt for it yourself?"

"I am," she said resolutely.

"In those dark, dank, grewsome cellars?"

"Certainly."

"Alone?"

"If necessary," she said, looking at me over the edge of the coffee cup.

"Tell me all about it," said I.

"Oh, we sha'n't find it, of course," said she calmly. I made note of the pronoun. "They've been searching for it for two centuries without success. My--that is, Mr. Pless has spent days down there. He is very hard-up, you know. It would come in very handy for him."

I glowered. "I'm glad he's gone. I don't like the idea of his looking for treasures in my castle."

She gave me a smile for that.

CHAPTER X

I AGEEEE TO MEET THE ENEMY

That night I dreamed of going down, down, down into the bowels of the earth after buried treasure, and finding at the end of my hours of travel the countess's mother sitting in bleak splendour on a chest of gold with her feet drawn up and surrounded by an audience of spiders.

For an hour or more after leaving the enchanted rooms near the roof, I lounged in my study, persistently attentive to the portrait of Ludwig the Red, with my ears straining for sounds from the other side of the secret panels. Alas! those panels were many cubits thick and as staunch as the sides of a battleship. But there was a vast satisfaction in knowing that she was there, asleep perhaps, with her brown head pillowed close to the wall but little more than an arm's length from the crimson waistcoat of Ludwig the Red,--for he sat rather low like a Chinese god and supported his waistcoat with his knees. A gross, forbidding chap was he! The story was told of him that he could quaff a flagon of ale at a single gulp. Looking at his portrait, one could not help thinking what a pitifully infinitesimal thing a flagon of ale is after all.

Morning came and with it a sullen determination to get down to work on my long neglected novel. I went down to breakfast. Everything about the place looked bleak and dreary and as grey as a granite tombstone. Hawkes, who but twelve hours before had seemed the embodiment of life in its most resilient form, now appeared as a drab nemesis with wooden legs and a frozen leer. My coffee was bitter, the peaches were like sponges, the bacon and rolls of uniform sogginess and the eggs of a strange liverish hue. I sat there alone, gloomy and depressed, contrasting the hateful sunshine with the soft, witching refulgence of twenty-four candles and the light that lies in a woman's eyes.

"A fine morning, sir," said Hawkes in a voice that seemed to come from the grave. It was the first time I had ever heard him speak so dolorously of the morning. Ordinarily he was a pleasant voiced fellow.

"Is it?" said I, and my voice sounded gloomier than his. I was not sure of it, but it seemed to me that he made a movement with his hand as if about to put it to his lips. Seeing that I was regarding him rather fixedly, he allowed it to remain suspended a little above his hip, quite on a line with the other one. His elbows were crooked at the proper angle I noticed, so I must have been doing him an injustice. He couldn't have had anything disrespectful in mind.

"Send Mr. Poopendyke to me, Hawkes, immediately after I've finished my breakfast."

"Very good, sir. Oh, I beg pardon, sir. I am forgetting, Mr. Poopendyke is out. He asked me to tell you he wouldn't return before eleven."

"Out? What business has he to be out?"

"Well, sir, I mean to say, he's not precisely out, and he isn't just what one would call in. He is up in the--ahem!--the east wing, sir, taking down some correspondence for the--for the lady, sir."

I arose to the occasion. "Quite so, quite so. I had forgotten the appointment."

"Yes, sir, I thought you had."

"Ahem! I daresay Britton will do quite as well. Tell him to--"

"Britton, sir, has gone over to the city for the newspapers. You forget that he goes every morning as soon as he has had his--"

"Yes, yes! Certainly," I said hastily. "The papers. Ha, ha! Quite right."

It was news to me, but it wouldn't do to let him know it. The countess read the papers, I did not. I steadfastly persisted in ignoring the Paris edition of the New York Herald for fear that the delightful mystery might disintegrate, so to speak, before my eyes, or become the commonplace scandal that all the world was enjoying. As it stood now, I had it all to myself--that is to say, the mystery. Mr. Poopendyke reads aloud the baseball scores to me, and nothing else.

It was nearly twelve when my secretary reported to me on this particular morning, and he seemed a trifle hazy as to the results of the games. After he had mumbled something about rain or wet grounds, I coldly enquired:

"Mr. Poopendyke, are you employed by me or by that woman upstairs?" I would never have spoken of her as "that woman," believe me, if I had not been in a state of irritation.

He looked positively stunned. "Sir?" he gasped.

I did not repeat the question, but managed to demand rather fiercely: "Are you?"

"The countess had got dreadfully behind with her work, sir, and I thought you wouldn't mind if I helped her out a bit," he explained nervously.

"Work? What work?"

"Her diary, sir. She is keeping a diary."

"Indeed!"

"It is very interesting, Mr. Smart. Rather beats any novel I've read lately. We--we've brought it. quite up to date. I wrote at least three pages about the dinner last night. If I am to believe what she puts into her diary, it must have been a delightful occasion, as the newspapers would say."

I was somewhat mollified. "What did she have to say about it, Fred?" I asked. It always pleased him to be called Fred.

"That would be betraying a confidence," said he. "I will say this much, however: I think I wrote your name fifty times or more in connection with it."

"Rubbish!" said I.

"Not at all!" said he, with agreeable spirit.

A sudden chill came over me. "She isn't figuring on having it published, is she?"

"I can't say as to that," was his disquieting reply. "It wasn't any of my business, so I didn't ask."

"Oh," said I, "I see."

"I think it is safe to assume, however, that it is not meant for publication," said he. "It strikes me as being a bit too personal. There are parts of it that I don't believe she'd dare to put into print, although she reeled them off to me without so much as a blush. 'Pon my soul, Mr. Smart, I never was so embarrassed in my life. She--"

"Never mind," I interrupted hastily. "Don't tell tales out of school."

He was silent for a moment, fingering his big eyeglasses nervously. "It may please you to know that she thinks you are an exceedingly nice man."

"No, it doesn't!" I roared irascibly. "I'm damned if I like being called an exceedingly nice man."

"They were my words, sir, not hers," he explained desperately. "I was merely putting two and two together--forming an opinion from her manner not from her words. She is very particular to mention everything you do for her, and thanks me if I call her attention to anything she may have forgotten. She certainly appreciates your kindness to the baby."

"That is extremely gratifying," said I acidly.

He hesitated once more. "Of course, you understand that the divorce itself is absolute. It's only the matter of the child that remains unsettled. The--"

I fairly barked at him. "What the devil do you mean by that, sir? What has the divorce got to do with it?"

"A great deal, I should say," said he, with the rare, almost superhuman patience that has made him so valuable to me.

"Upon my soul!" was all that I could say.

Hawkes rapped on the door luckily at that instant.

"The men from the telephone company are here, sir, and the electricians. Where are they to begin, sir?"

"Tell them to wait," said I. Then I hurried to the top of the east wing to ask if she had the least objection to an extension 'phone being placed in my study. She thought it would be very nice, so I returned with instructions for the men to put in three instruments: one in her room, one in mine, and one in the butler's pantry. It seemed a very jolly arrangement all 'round. As for the electric bell system, it would speak for itself.

Toward the middle of the afternoon when Mr. Poopendyke and I were hard at work on my synopsis we were startled by a dull, mysterious pounding on the wall hard by. We paused to listen. It was quite impossible to locate the sound, which ceased almost immediately. Our first thought was that the telephone men were drilling a hole through the wall into my study. Then came the sharp rat-a-ta-tat once more. Even as we looked about us in bewilderment, the portly facade of Ludwig the Red moved out of alignment with a heart-rending squeak and a long thin streak of black appeared at the inner edge of the frame, growing wider,-- and blacker if anything,--before our startled eyes.

"Are you at home?" inquired a voice that couldn't by any means have emanated from the chest of Ludwig, even in his mellowest hours.

I leaped to my feet and started across the room with great strides. My secretary's eyes were glued to the magic portrait. His fingers, looking like claws, hung suspended over the keyboard of the typewriter.

"By the Lord Harry!" I cried. "Yes!"

The secret door swung quietly open, laying Ludwig's face to the wall, and in the aperture stood my amazing neighbour, as lovely a portrait as you'd see in a year's trip through all the galleries in the world. She was smiling down upon us from the slightly elevated position, a charming figure in the very latest Parisian hat and gown. Something grey and black and exceedingly chic, I remember saying to Poopendyke afterwards in response to a question of his.

"I am out making afternoon calls," said she. Her face was flushed with excitement and self-consciousness. "Will you please put a chair here so that I may hop down?"

For answer, I reached up a pair of valiant arms. She laughed, leaned forward and placed her hands on my shoulders. My hands found her waist and I lifted her gently, gracefully to the floor.

"How strong you are!" she said admiringly. "How do you do, Mr. Poopendyke! Dear me! I am not a ghost, sir!"

His fingers dropped to the keyboard. "How do you do," he jerked out. Then he felt of his heart. "My God! I don't believe it's going."

Together we inspected the secret doors, going so far as to enter the room beyond, the Countess peering through after us from my study. To my amazement the room was absolutely bare. Bed, trunks, garments, chairs--everything in fact had vanished as if whisked away by an all-powerful genie.

"What does this mean?" I cried, turning to her.

"I don't mind sleeping upstairs, now that I have a telephone," she said serenely. "Max and Rudolph moved everything up this afternoon."

Poopendyke and I returned to the study. I, for one, was bitterly disappointed.

"I'm sorry that I had the 'phone put in," I said.

"Please don't call it a 'phone!" she objected. "I hate the word 'phone."

"So do I," said Poopendyke recklessly.

I glared at him. What right had he to criticise my manner of speech? He started to leave the room, after a perfunctory scramble to put his papers in order, but she broke off in the middle of a sentence to urge him to remain. She announced that she was calling on both of us.

"Please don't stop your work on my account," she said, and promptly sat down at his typewriter and began pecking at the keys. "You must teach me how to run a typewriter, Mr. Poopendyke. I shall be as poor as a church mouse before long, and I know father won't help me. I may have to become a stenographer."

He blushed abominably. I don't believe I've ever seen a more unattractive fellow than Poopendyke.

"Oh, every cloud has its silver lining," said he awkwardly.

"But I am used to gold," said she. The bell on the machine tinkled.

"What do I do now?" He made the shift and the space for her.

"Go right ahead," said he. She scrambled the whole alphabet across his neat sheet but he didn't seem to mind.

"Isn't it jolly, Mr. Smart? If Mr. Poopendyke should ever leave you, I may be able to take his place as your secretary."

I bowed very low. "You may be quite sure, Countess, that I shall dismiss Mr. Poopendyke the instant you apply for his job."

"And I shall most cheerfully abdicate," said he. Silly ass!

I couldn't help thinking how infinitely more attractive and perilous she would be as a typist than the excellent young woman who had married the jeweller's clerk, and what an improvement on Poopendyke!

"I came down to inquire when you would like to go exploring for buried treasure, Mr. Smart," she said, after the cylinder had slipped back with a bang that almost startled her out of her pretty boots and caused her to give up typewriting then and there, forevermore.

"Never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day," quoted I glibly.

She looked herself over. "If you knew how many times this gown had to be put off till to-morrow, you wouldn't ask me to ruin it the second time I've had it on my back."

"It is an uncommonly attractive gown," said I.

"Shall we set to-morrow for the treasure quest?"

"To-morrow is Sunday."

"Can you think of a better way to kill it?"

"Yes, you might have me down here for an old-fashioned midday dinner."

"Capital! Why not stay for supper, too?"

"It would be too much like spending a day with relatives," she said. "We'll go treasure hunting on Monday. I haven't the faintest notion where to look, but that shouldn't make any difference. No one else ever had. By the way, Mr. Smart, I have a bone to pick with you. Have you seen yesterday's papers? Well, in one of them, there is a long account of my--of Mr. Pless's visit to your castle, and a lengthy interview in which you are quoted as saying that he is one of your dearest friends and a much maligned man who deserves the sympathy of every law-abiding citizen in the land."

"An abominable lie!" I cried indignantly. "Confound the newspapers!"

"Another paper says that your fortune has been placed at his disposal in the fight he is making against the criminally rich Americans. In this particular article you are quoted as saying that I am a dreadful person and not fit to have the custody of a child."

"Good Lord!" I gasped helplessly.

"You also expect to do everything in your power to interest the administration at Washington in his behalf."

"Well, of all the--Oh, I say, Countess, you don't believe a word of all this, do you?"

She regarded me pensively. "You have said some very mean, uncivil things to me."

"If I thought you believed--" I began desperately, but her sudden smile relieved me of the necessity of jumping into the river. "By Jove, I shall write to these miserable sheets, denying every word they've printed. And what's more, I'll bring an action for damages against all of 'em. Why, it is positively atrocious! The whole world will think I despise you and--" I stopped very abruptly in great confusion.

"And--you don't?" she queried, with real seriousness in her voice. "You don't despise me?"

"Certainly _not!_" I cried vehemently. Turning to Poopendyke, I said: "Mr. Poopendyke, will you at once prepare a complete and emphatic denial of every da--of every word they have printed about me, and I'll send it to all the American correspondents in Europe. We'll cable it ourselves to the United States. I sha'n't rest until I am set straight in the eyes of my fellow-countrymen. The whole world shall know, Countess, that I am for you first, last and all the time. It shall know--"

"But you don't know who I am, Mr. Smart," she broke in, her cheeks very warm and rosy. "How can you publicly espouse the cause of one whose name you refuse to have mentioned in your presence?"

I dismissed her question with a wave of the hand: "Poopendyke can supply the name after I have signed the statement. I give him carte blanche. The name has nothing to do with the case, so far as I am concerned. Write it, Fred, and make it strong."

She came up to me and held out her hand. "I knew you would do it," she

said softly. "Thanks."

I bent low over the gloved little hand. "Don Quixote was a happy gentleman, Countess, with all his idiosyncrasies, and so am I."

She not only came for dinner with us on Sunday, but made the dressing for my alligator pear salad. We were besieged by the usual crowd of Sunday sight-seers, who came clamouring at our staunch, reinforced gates, and anathematised me soundly for refusing admission. One bourgeoisie party of fifteen refused to leave the plaza. until their return fares on the ferry barge were paid stoutly maintaining that they had come over in good faith and wouldn't leave until I had reimbursed them to the extent of fifty hellers apiece, ferry fare. I sent Britton out with the money. He returned with the rather disquieting news that he had recognised two of Mr. Pless's secret agents in the mob.

"I wonder if he suspects that I am here," said the Countess paling perceptibly when I mentioned the presence of the two men.

"It doesn't matter," said I. "He can't get into the castle while the gates are locked, and, by Jove, I intend to keep them locked."

"What a delightful ogre you are, Mr. Smart," said she.

Nevertheless, I did not sleep well that night. The presence of the two detectives outside my gates was not to be taken too lightly. Unquestionably they had got wind of something that aroused suspicion in their minds. I confidently expected them to reappear in the morning, perhaps disguised as workmen. Nor were my fears wholly unjustified.

Shortly after nine o'clock a sly-faced man in overalls accosted me in the hall.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Smart," he said in fairly good English, "may I have a word with you? I have a message from Mr. Pless." I don't believe he observed the look of concern that flitted across my face.

"From Mr. Pless?" I inquired, simulating surprise. Then I looked him over so curiously that he laughed in a quiet, simple way.

"I am an agent of the secret service," he explained coolly. "Yesterday I failed to gain admission as a visitor, to-day I come as a labourer. We work in a mysterious way, sir."

"Is it necessary for Mr. Pless to resort to a subterfuge of this character in order to get a message to me?" I demanded indignantly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It was not necessary yesterday, but it is to-day," said he. He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Our every movement is being watched by the Countess's detectives. We are obliged to resort to trickery to throw them off the scent. Mr. Pless has read what you had to say in the newspapers and he is too grateful, sir, to subject you to unnecessary annoyance at the hands of her agents. Your friendship is sacred to him. He realises that it means a great deal to have the support of one so powerful with the United States government. If we are to work together, Mr. Smart, in bringing this woman to justice,

it must be managed with extreme skill or her family may--"

"What is this you are saying?" I broke in, scarcely able to believe my ears.

"I speak English so badly," he apologised. "Perhaps I should do no more than to give you his message. He would have you to meet him secretly to-night at the Rempf Hotel across the river. It is most important that you should do so, and that you should exercise great caution. I am to take your reply back to him."

For an instant I was fairly stupefied. Then I experienced a feeling of relief so vast that he must have seen the gleam of triumph in my eyes. The trick was mine, after all.

"Come into my study," I said. He followed me upstairs and into the room. Poopendyke was there. "This is my secretary, you may speak freely before him." Turning to Poopendyke, I said: "You have not sent that statement to the newspapers, have you? Well, let it rest for a day or two. Mr. Pless has sent a representative to see me." I scowled at my secretary, and he had the sense to hide his astonishment.

The fellow repeated what he had said before, and added a few instructions which I was to follow with care if I would do Mr. Pless the honour to wait upon him that evening at the Rempf Hotel.

"You may tell Mr. Pless that I shall be there at nine," said I. The agent departed. When he was safely out of the room, I explained the situation to Poopendyke, and then made my way through the secret panels to the Countess's rooms.

She was ready for the subterranean journey in quest of treasure, attired in a neat walking skirt, with her bonny hair encased in a swimming cap as a guard against cobwebs.

"Then you don't intend to send out the statements?" she cried in disappointment. "You are going to let every one think you are his friend and not mine?"

I was greatly elated. Her very unreasonableness was a prize that I could not fail to cherish.

"Only for the time being," I said eagerly. "Don't you see the advantage we gain by fooling him? Why, it is splendid--positively splendid!"

She pouted. "I don't feel at all sure of you now, Mr. Smart," she said, sitting down rather dejectedly in a chair near the fireplace. "I believe you are ready to turn against me. You want to be rid of me. I am a nuisance, a source of trouble to you. You will tell him that I am here--"

I stood over her, trying my best to scowl. "You know better than that. You know I--I am as loyal as--as can be. Hang it all," I burst out impulsively, "do you suppose for a minute that I want to hand you over to that infernal rascal, now that I've come to--that is to say, now that we're such ripping good friends?"

She looked up at me very pathetically at first. Then her expression changed swiftly to one of wonder and the most penetrating inquiry.

Slowly a flush crept into her cheeks and her eyes wavered.

"I--I think I can trust you to--to do the right thing by me," she said, descending to a banality in her confusion.

I held out my hand. She laid hers in it rather timidly, almost as if she was afraid of me. "I shall not fail you," said I without the faintest intention to be heroic but immediately conscious of having used an expression so trite that my cheek flamed with humiliation.

For some unaccountable reason she arose hastily from the chair and walked to the window. A similar reason, no doubt, held me rooted rather safely to the spot on which I stood. I have a vague recollection of feeling dizzy and rather short of breath. My heart was acting queerly.

"Why do you suppose he wants to see you?" she asked, after a moment, turning toward me again. She was as calm as a summer breeze. All trace of nervousness had left her.

"I can't even supply a guess."

"You must be very, very tactful," she said uneasily. "I know him so well. He is very cunning."

"I am accustomed to dealing with villains," said I. "They always come to a bad end in my books, and virtue triumphs."

"But this isn't a book," she protested. "Besides virtue never triumphs in an international marriage. You must come--to see me to-night after you return from town. I won't sleep until I've heard everything."

"I may be very late," I said, contriving to hide my eagerness pretty well, I thought.

"I shall wait for you, Mr. Smart," she said, very distinctly. I took it as a command and bowed in submission. "There is no one here to gossip, so we may be as careless as we please about appearances. You will be hungry, too, when you come in. I shall have a nice supper ready for you." She frowned faintly. "You must not, under any circumstance, spoil everything by having supper with _him._"

"Again I repeat, you may trust me implicitly to do the right thing," said I beamingly. "And now, what do you say to our trip to the bottom of the castle?"

She shook her head. "Not with the house full of spies, my dear friend. We'll save that for another day. A rainy day perhaps. I feel like having all the sunshine I can get to-day. To-night I shall be gloomy and very lonely. I shall take Rosemary and Jinko out upon the top of the tower and play all day in the sun."

I had an idea. "I am sure I should enjoy a little sunshine myself. May I come too?"

She looked me straight in the eye. There was a touch of dignity in her voice when she spoke.

"Not to-day, Mr. Smart."

A most unfathomable person!

CHAPTER XI

I AM INVITED TO SPEND MONEY

Any one who has travelled in the Valley of the Donau knows the Rempf Hotel. It is an ancient hostelry, frequented quite as much in these days as it was in olden times by people who are by way of knowing the excellence of its cuisine and the character of its wines. Unless one possesses this intelligence, either through hearsay or experience, he will pass by the Rempf without so much as a glance at its rather forbidding exterior and make for the modern hotel on the platz, thereby missing one of the most interesting spots in this grim old town. Is it to the fashionable Bellevue that the nobility and the elect wend their way when they come to town? Not by any means. They affect the Rempf, and there you may see them in fat, inglorious plenty smugly execrating the plebeian rich of many lands who dismiss Rempf's with a sniff, and enjoying to their heart's content a privacy which the aforesaid rich would not consider at any price.

You may be quite sure that the rates are low at the historic Rempf, and that they would be much lower if the nobility had anything to say about it. One can get a very comfortable room, without bath, at the Rempf for a dollar a day, provided he gets in ahead of the native aristocracy. If he insists on having a room with bath he is guilty of _lese majeste_ and is sent on his way.

But, bath or no bath, the food is the best in the entire valley and the cellar without a rival.

I found Mr. Pless at the Rempf at nine o'clock. He was in his room when I entered the quaint old place and approached the rotund manager with considerable uncertainty in my manner. For whom was I to inquire? Would he be known there as Pless?

The manager gave me a broad (I was about to say serviceable) smile and put my mind at rest by blandly inquiring if I was the gentleman who wished to see Mr. Pless. He directed me to the top floor of the hotel and I mounted two flights of stairs at the heels of a porter who exercised native thrift by carrying up a large trunk, thus saving time and steps after a fashion, although it may be hard to see wherein he really benefited when I say that after escorting me to a room on the third floor and knocking at the door while balancing the trunk on his back, he descended to the second and delivered his burden in triumph to the lady who had been calling for it since six o'clock in the evening. But even at that he displayed considerable cunning in not forgetting what room the luggage belonged in, thereby saving himself a trip all the way down to the office and back with the trunk.

Mr. Pless welcomed me with a great deal of warmth. He called me "dear ol

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