

The Powers and Maxine

Charles Norris Williamson

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The Powers and Maxine

By C.N. and A.M. Williamson

Author of

"The Princess Virginia," "My Friend the Chauffeur,"
"The Car of Destiny," "The Princess Passes,"
"Lady Betty Across the Water," Etc.

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With Illustrations
By FRANK T. MERRILL

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LISA DRUMMOND'S PART

The Powers and Maxine

CHAPTER I

LISA'S KNIGHT AND LISA'S SISTER

It had come at last, the moment I had been thinking about for days. I was going to have him all to myself, the only person in the world I ever loved.

He had asked me to sit out two dances, and that made me think he really must want to be with me, not just because I'm the "pretty girl's sister," but because I'm myself, Lisa Drummond.

Being what I am,--queer, and plain, I can't bear to think that men like girls for their beauty; yet I can't help liking men better if they are handsome.

I don't know if Ivor Dundas is the handsomest man I ever saw, but he seems so to me. I don't know if he is very good, or really very wonderful, although he's clever and ambitious enough; but he has a way that makes women fond of him; and men admire him, too. He looks straight into your eyes when he talks to you, as if he cared more for you than anyone else in the world: and if I were an artist, painting a picture of a dark young knight starting off for the crusades, I should ask Ivor Dundas to stand as my model.

Perhaps his expression wouldn't be exactly right for the pious young crusader, for it isn't at all saintly, really: still, I have seen just that rapt sort of look on his face. It was generally when he was talking to Di: but I wouldn't let myself believe that it meant anything in particular. He has the reputation of having made lots of women fall in love with him. This was one of the first things I heard when Di and I came over from America to visit Lord and Lady Mountstuart. And of course there was the story about him and Maxine de Renzie. Everyone was talking of it when we first arrived in London.

My heart beat very fast as I guided him into the room which Lady Mountstuart has given Di and me for our special den. It is separated by another larger room from the ballroom; but both doors were open and we could see people dancing.

I told him he might sit by me on the sofa under Di's book shelves, because we could talk better there. Usually, I don't like being in front of a mirror, because--well, because I'm only the "pretty girl's sister." But to-night I didn't mind. My cheeks were red, and my eyes bright. Sitting down, you might almost take me for a tall girl, and the way my gown was made didn't show that one shoulder is a little higher than the other. Di designed the dress.

I thought, if I wasn't pretty, I did look interesting, and original. I looked as if I could think of things; and as if I could feel.

And I was feeling. I was wondering why he had been so good to me lately, unless he cared. Of course it might be for Di's sake; but I am not so queer-looking that no man could ever be fascinated by me.

They say pity is akin to love. Perhaps he had begun by pitying me, because Di has everything and I nothing; and then, afterwards, he had found out that I was intelligent and sympathetic.

He sat by me and didn't speak at first. Just then Di passed the far-away, open door of the ballroom, dancing with Lord Robert West, the Duke of Glasgow's brother.

"Thank you so much for the book," I said.

(He had sent me a book that morning--one he'd heard me say I wanted.)

He didn't seem to hear, and then he turned suddenly, with one of his nice smiles. I always think he has the nicest smile in the world: and certainly he has the nicest voice. His eyes looked very kind, and a little sad. I willed him hard to love me.

"It made me happy to get it," I went on.

"It made me happy to send it," he said.

"Does it please you to do things for me?" I asked.

"Why, of course."

"You do like poor little me a tiny bit, then?" I couldn't help adding--"Even though I'm different from other girls?"

"Perhaps more for that reason," he said, with his voice as kind as his eyes.

"Oh, what shall I do if you go away!" I burst out, partly because I really meant it, and partly because I hoped it might lead him on to say what I wanted so much to hear. "Suppose you get that consulship at Algiers."

"I hope I may," he said quickly. "A consulship isn't a very great thing--but--it's a beginning. I want it badly."

"I wish I had some influence with the Foreign Secretary," said I, not telling him that the man actually dislikes me, and looks at me as if I were a toad. "Of course, he's Lord Mountstuart's cousin, and brother-in-law as well, and that makes him seem quite in the family, doesn't it? But it isn't as if I were really related to Lady Mountstuart. I was never sorry before that Di and I are only step-sisters--no, not a bit sorry, though her mother had all the money, and brought it to my poor father; but now I wish I were Lady Mountstuart's niece, and that I had some of the coaxing, 'girly' ways Di can put on when she wants to get something out of people. I'd make the Foreign Secretary give you exactly what you wanted, even if it took you far, far from me."

With that, he looked at me suddenly, and his face grew slowly red, under the brown.

"You are a very kind Imp," he said. "Imp" is the name he invented for me. I loved to hear him call me by it.

"Kind!" I echoed. "One isn't kind when one--likes--people."

I saw by his eyes, then, that he knew. But I didn't care. If only I could make him say the words I longed to hear--even because he pitied me, because he had found out how I loved him, and because he had really too much of the dark-young-Crusader-knight in him, to break my heart! I made up my mind that I would take him at his word, quickly, if he gave me the chance; and I would tell Di that he was dreadfully in love with me. That would make her writhe.

I kept my eyes on him, and I let them tell him everything. He saw; there was no doubt of that; but he did not say the words I hoped for. A moment or two he was silent; and then, gazing away towards the door of the ballroom, he spoke very gently, as if I had been a child--though I am older than Di by three or four years.

"Thank you, Imp, for letting me see that you are such a staunch little friend," said he. "Now that I know you really do take an interest in my affairs, I think I may tell you why I want so much to go to Algiers--though very likely you've guessed already--you are such an 'intuitive' girl. And besides, I haven't tried very hard to hide my feelings--not as hard as I ought, perhaps, when I realise how little I have to offer to your sister. Now you understand all, don't you--even if you didn't before? I love her, and if I go to Algiers--"

"Don't say any more," I managed to cut him short. "I can't bear--I mean, I understand. I--did guess before."

It was true. I had guessed, but I wouldn't let myself believe. I hoped against hope. He was so much kinder to me than any other man ever took the trouble to be, in all my wretched, embittered twenty-four years of life.

"Di might have told me," I went gasping on, rather than let there be a long silence between us just then. I had enough pride not to want him to see me cry--though, if it could have made any difference, I would have grovelled at his feet and wet them with my tears. "But she never does tell me anything about herself."

"She's so unselfish and so fond of you, that probably she likes better to talk about you instead," he defended her. And then I felt that I could hate him, as much as I've always hated Di, deep down in my heart. At that minute I should have liked to kill her, and watch his face when he found her lying dead--out of his reach for ever.

"Besides," he hurried on, "I've never asked her yet if she would marry me, because--my prospects weren't very brilliant. She knows of course that I love her--"

"And if you get the consulship, you'll put the important question?" I cut him short, trying to be flippant.

"Yes. But I told you tonight, because I--because you were so kind, I felt I should like to have you know."

Kind! Yes, I had been too kind. But if by putting out my foot I could have crushed every hope of his for the future--every hope, that is, in which my stepsister Diana Forrest had any part--I would have done it, just as I trample on ants in the country sometimes, for the pleasure of feeling that I--even I--have power of life and death.

I swallowed hard, to keep the sobs back. I'm never very strong or well, but now I felt broken, ready to die. I was glad when I heard the music stop in the ballroom.

"There!" I said. "The two dances you asked me to sit out with you are over. I'm sure you're engaged for the next."

"Yes, Imp, I am."

"To Di?"

"No, I have Number 13 with her."

"Thirteen! Unlucky number."

"Any number is lucky that gives me a chance with her. The next one, coming now, is with Mrs. George Allendale."

"Oh, yes, the actor manager's wife. She goes everywhere; and Lord Mountstuart likes theatrical celebrities. This house ought to be very serious and political, but we have every sort of creature--provided it's an amusing, or successful, or good-looking one. By the way, used Maxine de Renzie to come here, when she was acting in London at George Allendale's theatre? That was before Di and I arrived on the scene, you remember."

"I remember. Oh, yes, she came here. It was in this house I met her first, off the stage, I believe."

"What a sweet memory! Wasn't Mrs. George awfully jealous of her husband when he had such a fascinating beauty for his leading lady?"

"I never heard that she was."

"You needn't look cross with me. I'm not saying anything against your gorgeous Maxine."

"Of course not. Nobody could. But you mustn't call Miss de Renzie 'my Maxine,' please, Imp."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "You see, I've heard other people call her that--in joke. And you dedicated your book about Lhassa, that made you such a famous person, to her, didn't you?"

"No. What made you think that?" He was really annoyed now, and I was pleased--if anything could please me, in my despair.

"Why, everybody thinks it. It was dedicated to 'M.R.' as if the name were a secret, so--"

"'Everybody' is very stupid then. 'M.R.' is an old lady, my god-mother, who helped me with money for my expedition to Lhassa, otherwise I couldn't have gone. And she isn't of the kind that likes to see her name in print. Now, where shall I take you, Imp? Because I must go and look for Mrs. Allendale."

"I'll stay where I am, thank you," I said, "and watch you dance--from far off. That's my part in life, you know: watching other people dance from far off."

When he was gone, I leaned back among the cushions, and I wasn't sure that one of my heart attacks would not come on. I felt horribly alone, and deserted; and though I hate Di, and always have hated her, ever since the tiny child and her mother (a beautiful, rich, young Californian widow) came into my father's house in New York, she does know how to manage me better than anyone else, when I am in such moods.

I could have screamed for her, as I sat there helplessly looking through the open doors: and then, at last, I saw her, as if my wish had been a call which had reached her ears over the music in the ballroom.

She had stopped dancing, and with her partner (Lord Robert, again) entered the room which lay between our "den" and the ballroom, Probably they would have gone on to the conservatory, which can be reached in that way, but I cried her name as loudly as I could, and she heard. Only a moment she paused--long enough to send Lord Robert away--and then she came straight to me. He must have been furious: but I didn't care for that.

I had been wanting her badly, but when I saw her, so bright and beautiful, looking as if she were the joy of life made incarnate, I should have liked to strike her hard, first on one cheek and then the other, deepening the rose to crimson, and leaving an ugly red mark for each finger.

"Have you a headache, dear?" she asked, in that velvet voice she keeps for me--as if I were a thing only fit for pity and protection.

"It's my heart," said I. "It feels like a clock running down. Oh, I wish I could die, and end it all! What's the good of me--to myself or anyone?"

"Don't talk like that, my poor one," she said. "Shall I take you upstairs to your own room?"

"No, I think I should faint if I had to go upstairs," I answered. "Yet I can't stay here. What shall I do?"

"What about Uncle Eric's study?" Di asked. She always calls Lord Mountstuart 'Uncle Eric,' though he isn't her uncle. Her mother and his wife were sisters, that's all: and then there was the other sister who married the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs, a cousin of Lord Mountstuart's. That family seemed to have a craze for American girls; but Lord Mountstuart makes an exception of me. He's civil, of course, because he's an abject slave of Di's, and she refused to come and pay a visit in England without me: but I give him the shivers, I know very well: and I take an impish joy in making him jump.

"I'm sure he won't be there this evening," Di went on, when I hesitated. "He's playing bridge with a lot of dear old boys in the library, or was, half an hour ago. Come, let me help you there. It's only a step."

She put her pretty arm round my waist, and leaning on her I walked across the room, out into a corridor, through a tiny "bookroom" where odd volumes and old magazines are kept, into Lord Mountstuart's study.

It is a nice room, which he uses much as his wife uses her boudoir. The library next door is rather a show place, but the study has only Lord Mountstuart's favourite books in it. He writes there (he has written a novel or two, and thinks himself literary), and some pictures he has painted in different parts of the world hang on the walls: for he also fancies himself artistic.

In one corner is a particularly comfortable, cushiony lounge where, I suppose, the distinguished author lies and thinks out his subjects, or dreams them out. And it was to this that Di led me.

She settled me among some fat pillows of old purple and gold brocade, and asked if she should ring and get a little brandy.

"No," I said, "I shall feel better in a few minutes. It's so nice and cool here."

"You look better already!" exclaimed Di. "Soon, when you've lain and rested awhile, you'll be a different girl."

"Ah, how I wish I could be a different girl!" I sighed. "A strong, well girl, and tall and beautiful, and admired by everyone,--like you--or Maxine de Renzie."

"What makes you think of her?" asked Di, quickly.

"Ivor was just talking to me of her. You know he calls me his 'pal,' and tells me things he doesn't tell everybody. He thinks a great deal about Maxine, still."

"She'd be a difficult woman to forget, if she's as attractive off the stage as she is on."

"What a pity we didn't come in time to meet here when she was playing in London with George Allendale. Everybody used to invite her to their houses, it seems. Ivor was telling me that he first met her here, and that it's such a pleasant memory, whenever he comes to this house. I suppose that's one reason he likes to come so much."

"No doubt," said Di sharply.

"He got so fascinated talking of her," I went on. "He almost forgot that he had a dance with Mrs. Allendale. Of course Maxine had made a great hit, and all that; but she didn't stand quite as high as she does now, since she's become the fashion in Paris. Perhaps she had nothing except her salary, then, whereas she must have saved up a lot of money by this time. I have an idea that Ivor would have proposed to her when she was in London if he'd thought her success established."

"Nonsense!" Di broke out, her cheeks very pink. "As if Ivor were the kind of man to think of such a thing!"

"He isn't very rich, and he is very ambitious. It would be bad for him to marry a poor girl, or a girl who wasn't well connected socially. He has to think of such things."

I watched the effect of these words, with my eyes half shut; for of course Di has all her mother's money, two hundred thousand English pounds; and through the Mountstuards, and her aunt who is married to the Foreign Secretary, she has got to know all the best people in England. Besides, the King and Queen have been particularly nice to her since she was presented, so she has the run of their special set, as well as the political and artistic, and "old-fashioned exclusive" ones.

"Ivor Dundas is a law unto himself," she said, "and he has plenty of good connections of his own. He'll have a little money, too, some day, from an aunt or a god-mother, I believe. Anyway, he and Miss de Renzie had nothing more than a flirtation. Aunt Lilian told me so. She said Maxine was rather proud to have Ivor dangling about, because everyone

likes him, and because his travels and his book were being a lot talked about just then. Naturally, he admired her, because she's beautiful, and a very great actress--"

"Oh, your Aunt Lilian would make little of the affair," I laughed. "She flirts with him herself."

"Why, Lisa, Aunt Lilian's over forty, and he's twenty-nine!"

"Forty isn't the end of the world for a woman, nowadays. She's a beauty and a great lady. Ivor always wants the best of everything. She flirts with him, and he with her."

Di laughed too, but only to make it seem as if she didn't care. "You'd better not say such silly things to Uncle Eric," she said, staring at the pattern of the cornice. "Aren't those funny, gargoyle faces up there? I never noticed them before. But oh--about Mr. Dundas and Maxine de Renzie--I don't think, really, that he troubles himself much about her any more, for the other day I--I happened to ask what she was playing in Paris now, and he didn't know. He said he hadn't been over to see her act, as it was too far away, and he was afraid when he wasn't too busy, he was too lazy."

"He said so to you, of course. But when he spends Saturday to Monday at Folkestone with the godmother who's going to leave him her money, how easy to slip over the Channel to the fair Maxine, without anyone being the wiser."

"Why shouldn't he slip, or slide, or steam, or sail in a balloon, if he likes?" laughed Di, but not happily. "You're looking much better, Lisa. You've quite a colour now. Do you feel strong enough to go upstairs?"

"I would rather rest here for awhile, since you think Lord Mountstuart is sure not to come," said I. "These pillows are so comfortable. Then perhaps, by and by, I shall feel able to go back to the den, and watch the dancing. I should like to keep up, if I can, for I know I shan't sleep, and the night will seem so long."

"Very well," said Di, speaking kindly, though I knew she would have liked to shake me. "I'm afraid I shall have to run away now, for my partner will think me so rude. What about supper?"

"Oh, I don't want any. And I shall have gone upstairs before that," I interrupted. "Go now, I don't need you any more."

"Ring, and send for me if you feel badly again."

"Yes--yes."

By this time she was at the door, and there she turned with a remorseful look in her eyes, as if she had been unkind and was sorry. "Even if you don't send, I shall come back by and by, when I can, to see how you are," she said. Then she was gone, and I nestled deeper into the sofa cushions, with the feeling that my head was so heavy, it must weigh down the pillows like a stone.

"She was afraid of missing Number 13 with Ivor," I said to myself. "Well--she's welcome to it now. I don't think she'll enjoy it much--or let him. Oh, I hope they'll quarrel. I don't think I'd mind anything, if

only I was sure they'd never be nearer to each other. I wish Di would marry Lord Robert. Perhaps then Ivor would turn to me. Oh, my God, how I hate her--and all beautiful girls, who spoil the lives of women like me."

A shivering fit shook me from head to feet, as I guessed that the time must be coming for Number 13. They were together, perhaps. What if, in spite of all, Ivor should tell Di how he loved her, and they should be engaged? At that thought, I tried to bring on a heart attack, and die; for at least it would chill their happiness if, when Lady Mountstuart's ball was over, I should be found lying white and dead, like Elaine on her barge. I was holding my breath, with my hand pressed over my heart to feel how it was beating, when the door opened suddenly, and I heard a voice speaking.

CHAPTER II

LISA LISTENS

Someone turned up the light. "I'll leave you together," said Lord Mountstuart; and the door was closed.

"What could that mean?" I wondered. I had supposed the two men had come in alone, but there must have been a third person. Who could it be? Had Lord Mountstuart been arranging a tete-a-tete between Di and Ivor Dundas?

The thought was like a hand on my throat, choking my life out. I must hear what they had to say to each other.

Without stopping to think more, I rolled over and let myself sink down into the narrow space between the low couch and the wall, sharply pulling the clinging folds of my chiffon dress after me. Then I lay still, my blood pounding in my temples and ears, and in my nostrils a faint, musty smell from the Oriental stuff that covered the lounge.

I could see nothing from where I lay, except the side of the couch, the wall, and a bit of the ceiling with the gargoyle cornice which Di had mentioned when she wanted to seem indifferent to the subject of our conversation. But I was listening with all my might for what was to come.

"Better lock the door, if you please, Dundas," said a voice, which gave me a shock of surprise, though I knew it well.

Instead of Di, it was the Foreign Secretary who spoke.

"We won't run the risk of interruptions," he went on, with that slow, clear enunciation of his which most Oxford men have, and keep all their lives, especially men of the college that was his--Balliol. "I told Mountstuart that I wanted a private chat with you. Beyond that, he knows nothing, nor does anyone else except myself. You understand that this conversation of ours, whether anything comes of it or not, is entirely confidential. I have a proposal to make. You'll agree to it or not, as you choose. But if you don't agree, forget it, with everything I may

have said."

"My services and my memory are both at your disposal," answered Ivor, in such a gay, happy voice that something told me he had already talked with Diana--and that in spite of me she had not snubbed him. "I am honoured--I won't say flattered, for I'm too much in earnest--that you should place any confidence in me."

I lay there behind the lounge and sneered at this speech of his. Of course, I said to myself, he would be ready to do anything to please the Foreign Secretary, since all the big plums his ambition craved were in the gift of that man.

"Frankly, I'm in a difficulty, and it has occurred to me that you can help me out of it better than anyone else I know," said the smooth, trained voice. "It is a little diplomatic errand you will have to undertake for me tomorrow, if you want to do me a good turn."

"I will undertake it with great pleasure, and carry it through to the best of my ability," replied Ivor.

"I'm sure you can carry it through excellently," said the Foreign Secretary, still fencing. "It will be good practice, if you succeed, for--any future duties in the career which may be opening to you."

"He's bribing him with that consulship," I thought, beginning to be very curious indeed as to what I might be going to hear. My heart wasn't beating so thickly now. I could think almost calmly again.

"I thank you for your trust in me," said Ivor.

"A little diplomatic errand," repeated the Foreign Secretary. "In itself the thing is not much: that is, on the face of it. And yet, in its relation with other interests, it becomes a mission of vast importance, incalculable importance. When I have explained, you will see why I apply to you. Indeed, I came to my cousin Mountstuart's house expressly because I was told you would be at his wife's ball. My regret is, that the news which brought me in search of you didn't reach me earlier, for if it had I should have come with my wife, and have got at you in time to send you off--if you agreed to go--to-night. As it is, the matter will have to rest till to-morrow morning. It's too late for you to catch the midnight boat across the Channel."

"Across the Channel?" echoed Ivor. "You want me to go to France?"

"Yes."

"One could always get across somehow," said Ivor, thoughtfully, "if there were a great hurry."

"There is--the greatest. But in this case, the more haste, the less speed. That is, if you were to rush off, order a special train, and charter a tug or motor boat at Dover, as I suppose you mean, my object would probably be defeated. I came to you because those who are watching this business wouldn't be likely to guess I had given you a hand in it. All that you do, however, must be done quietly, with no fuss, no sign of anything unusual going on. It was natural I should come to a ball given by my wife's sister, whose husband is my cousin. No one knows of this interview of ours: I believe I may make my mind easy on that score, at

least. And it is equally natural that you should start on business or pleasure of your own, for Paris to-morrow morning; also that you should meet Mademoiselle de Renzie there."

"Mademoiselle de Renzie!" exclaimed Ivor, off his guard for an instant, and showing plainly that he was taken aback.

"Isn't she a friend of yours?" asked the Foreign Secretary rather sharply. Though I couldn't see him, I knew exactly how he would be looking at Ivor, his keen grey eyes narrowed, his clean-shaven lips drawn in, the long, well-shaped hand, of which he is said to be vain, toying with the pale Malmaison pink he always wears in his buttonhole.

"Yes, she is a friend of mine," Ivor answered. "But--"

"A 'but' already! Perhaps I'd better tell you that the mission has to do with Mademoiselle de Renzie, and, directly, with no one else. She has acted as my agent in Paris."

"Indeed! I didn't dream that she dabbled in politics."

"And you should not dream it from any word of mine, Mr. Dundas, if it weren't necessary to be entirely open with you, if you are to help me in this matter. But before we go any further, I must know whether Mademoiselle de Renzie's connection with this business will for any reason keep you out of it."

"Not if--you need my help," said Ivor, with an effort. "And I beg you won't suppose that my hesitation has anything to do with Miss de Renzie herself. I have for her the greatest respect and admiration."

"We all have," returned the Foreign Secretary, "especially those who know her best. Among her many virtues, she's one of the few women who can keep a secret--her own and others. She is a magnificent actress--on the stage and off. And now I have your promise to help me, I must tell you it's to help her as well: therefore I owe you the whole truth, or you will be handicapped. For several years Mademoiselle de Renzie has done good service--secret service, you must understand--for Great Britain."

"By Jove! Maxine a political spy!" Ivor broke out impulsively.

"That's rather a hard name, isn't it? There are better ones. And she's no traitor to her country, because, as you perhaps know, she's Polish by birth. I can assure you we've much for which to thank her cleverness and tact--and beauty. For our sakes I'm sorry that she's serving our interests professionally for the last time. For her own sake, I ought to rejoice, as she's engaged to be married. And if you can save her from coming to grief over this very ticklish business, she'll probably live happily ever after. Did you know of her engagement?"

"No," replied Ivor. "I saw Miss de Renzie often when she was acting in London a year ago; but after she went to Paris--of course, she's very busy and has crowds of friends; and I've only crossed once or twice since, on hurried visits; so we haven't met, or written to each other."

("Very good reason," I thought bitterly, behind my sofa. "You've been busy, too--falling in love with Diana Forrest.")

"It hasn't been announced yet, but I thought as an old friend you might have been told. I believe Mademoiselle wants to surprise everybody when the right time comes--if the poor girl isn't ruined irretrievably in this affair of ours."

"Is there really serious danger of that?" "The most serious. If you can't save her, not only will the Entente Cordiale be shaken to its foundations (and I say nothing of my own reputation, which is at stake), but her future happiness will be broken in the crash, and--she says--she will not live to suffer the agony of her loss. She will kill herself if disaster comes; and though suicide is usually the last resource of a coward, Mademoiselle de Renzie is no coward, and I'm inclined to think I should come to the same resolve in her place."

"Tell me what I am to do," said Ivor, evidently moved by the Foreign Secretary's strange words, and his intense earnestness.

"You will go to Paris by the first train to-morrow morning, without mentioning your intention to anyone; you will drive at once to some hotel where you have never stayed and are not known. I will find means of informing the lady what hotel you choose. You will there give a fictitious name (let us say, George Sandford) and you will take a suite, with a private sitting-room. That done, you will say that you are expecting a lady to call upon you, and will see no one else. You will wait till Mademoiselle de Renzie appears, which will certainly be as soon as she can possibly manage; and when you and she are alone together, sure that you're not being spied upon, you will put into her hands a small packet which I shall give you before we part to-night."

"It sounds simple enough," said Ivor, "if that's all."

"It is all. Yet it may be anything but simple."

"Would you prefer to have me call at her house, and save her coming to a hotel? I'd willingly do so if--"

"No. As I told you, should it be known that you and she meet, those who are watching her at present ought not to suspect the real motive of the meeting. So much the better for us: but we must think of her. After four o'clock every afternoon, the young Frenchman she's engaged to is in the habit of going to her house, and stopping until it's time for her to go to work. He dines with her, but doesn't drive with her to the theatre, as that would be rather too public for the present, until their engagement's announced. He adores her, but is inconveniently jealous, like most Latins. It's practically certain that he's heard your name mentioned in connection with hers, when she was in London, and as a Frenchman invariably fails to understand that a man can admire a beautiful woman without being in love with her, your call at her house might give Mademoiselle Maxine a mauvais quart d'heure."

"I see. But if she sends him away, and comes to my hotel--"

"She'll probably make some excuse about being obliged to go to the theatre early, and thus get rid of him. She's quite clever enough to manage that. Then, as your own name won't appear on any hotel list in the papers next day, the most jealous heart need have no cause for suspicion. At the same time, if certain persons whom Mademoiselle--and we, too--have to fear, do find out that she has visited Ivor Dundas, who has assumed a false name for the pleasure of a private interview with

her, interests of even deeper importance than the most desperate love affair may still, we'll hope, be guarded by the pretext of your old friendship. Now, you understand thoroughly?"

"I think so," replied Ivor, very grave and troubled, I knew by the change in his manner, out of which all the gaiety had been slowly drained. "I will do my very best."

"If you are sacrificing any important engagements of your own for the next two days, you won't suffer for it in the end," remarked the Foreign Secretary meaningly.

No doubt Ivor saw the consulship at Algiers dancing before his eyes, bound up with an engagement to Di, just as a slice of rich plum cake and white bride cake are tied together with bows of satin ribbons sometimes, in America. I didn't want him to have the consulship, because getting that would perhaps mean getting Di, too.

"Thank you," said Ivor.

"And what hotel shall you choose in Paris?" asked the Foreign Secretary. "It should be a good one, I don't need to remind you, where Mademoiselle de Renzie could go without danger of compromising herself, in case she should be recognised in spite of the veil she's pretty certain to wear. Yet it shouldn't be in too central a situation."

"Shall it be the Elysee Palace?" asked Ivor.

"That will do very well," replied the other, after reflecting for an instant. And I could have clapped my hands, in what Ivor would call my "impish joy," when it was settled; for the Elysee Palace is where Lord and Lady Mountstuart stop when they visit Paris, and they'd been talking of running over next day with Lord Robert West, to look at a wonderful new motor car for sale there--one that a Rajah had ordered to be made for him, but died before it was finished. Lady Mountstuart always has one new fad every six months at least, and her latest is to drive a motor car herself. Lord Robert is a great expert--can make a motor, I believe, or take it to pieces and put it together again; and he'd been insisting for days that she would be able to drive this Rajah car. She'd promised, that if not too tired she'd cross to Paris the day after the ball, taking the afternoon train, via Boulogne, as she wouldn't be equal to an early start. Now, I thought, how splendid it would be if she should see Maxine at the hotel with Ivor!

The Foreign Secretary was advising Ivor to wire the Elysee Palace for rooms without any delay, as there must be no hitch about his meeting Maxine, once it was arranged for her to go there. "Any misunderstanding would be fatal," he went on, as solemnly as if the safety of Maxine's head depended upon Ivor's trip. "I only wish I could have got you off to-night; and in that case you might have gone to her own house, early in the morning. She is in a frightful state of mind, poor girl. But it was only to-day that the contents of the packet reached me, and was shown to the Prime Minister. Then, it was just before I hurried round here to see you that I received a cypher telegram from her, warning me that Count Godensky--of whom you've probably heard--an attache of the Russian embassy in Paris, somehow has come to suspect a--er--a game in high politics which she and I have been playing; her last, according to present intentions, as I told you. I have an idea that this man, who's well known in Paris society, proposed to Mademoiselle de Renzie, refused

to take no for an answer, and bored her until she perhaps was goaded into giving him a severe snub. Godensky is a vain man, and wouldn't forgive a snub, especially if it had got talked about. He'd be a bad enemy: and Mademoiselle seems to think that he is a very bitter and determined enemy. Apparently she doesn't know how much he has found out, or whether he has actually found out anything at all, or merely guesses, and 'bluffs.' But one thing is unfortunately certain, I believe. Every boat and every train between London and Paris will be watched more closely than usual for the next day or two. Any known or suspected agent wouldn't get through unchallenged. But I can see no reason why you should not."

"Nor I," answered Ivor, laughing a little. "I think I could make some trouble for anyone who tried to stop me."

"Caution above all! Remember you're in training for a diplomatic career, what? If you should lose the packet I'm going to give you, I prophesy that in twenty-four hours the world would be empty of Maxine de Renzie: for the circumstances surrounding her in this transaction are peculiar, the most peculiar I've ever been entangled in, perhaps, in rather a varied experience; and they intimately concern her fiance, the Vicomte Raoul du Laurier--"

"Raoul du Laurier!" exclaimed Ivor. "So she's engaged to marry him!"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I have friends who do. He's in the French Foreign Office, though they say he's more at home in the hunting field, or writing plays--"

"Which don't get produced. Quite so. But they will get produced some day, for I believe he's an extremely clever fellow in his way--in everything except the diplomatic 'trade' which his father would have him take up, and got him into, through Heaven knows what influence. No; Du Laurier's no fool, and is said to be a fine sportsman, as well as almost absurdly good-looking. Mademoiselle Maxine has plenty of excuse for her infatuation--for I assure you it's nothing less. She'd jump into the fire for this young man, and grill with a Joan of Arc smile on her face."

This would have been pleasant hearing for Ivor, if he'd ever been really in love with Maxine; but I was obliged to admit to myself that he hadn't, for he didn't seem to care in the least. On the contrary, he grew a little more cheerful.

"I can see that du Laurier's being in the French Foreign Office might make it rather awkward for Miss de Renzie if she--if she's been rather too helpful to us," he said.

"Exactly. And thereby hangs a tale--a sensational and even romantic tale almost complicated enough for the plot of a novel. When you meet Mademoiselle to-morrow afternoon or evening, if she cares to take you into her confidence, in reward for your services, in regard to some private interests of her own which have got themselves wildly mixed up with the gravest political matters, she's at liberty to do so as far as I'm concerned, for you are to be trusted, and deserve to be trusted. You may say that to her from me, if the occasion arises. I hope with all my heart that everything may go smoothly. If not--the Entente Cordiale may burst like a bomb. I--who have made myself responsible in the

matter, with the clear understanding that England will deny me if the scheme's a failure--shall be shattered by a flying fragment. The favourite actress of Paris will be asphyxiated by the poisonous fumes; and you, though I hope no worse harm may come to you, will mourn for the misfortunes of others. Your responsibility will be such that it will be almost as if you carried the destructive bomb itself, until you get the packet into the hands of Maxine de Renzie." "Good heavens, I shall be glad when she has it!" said Ivor.

"You can't be gladder than she--or I. And here it is," replied the Foreign Secretary. "I consider it great luck to have found such a messenger, at a house I could enter without being suspected of any motive more subtle than a wish to eat a good supper, or to meet some of the prettiest women in London."

I would have given a great deal to see what he was giving Ivor to take to Maxine, and I was half tempted to lift myself up and peep at the two from behind the lounge, but I could tell from their voices that they were standing quite near, and it would have been too dangerous. The Foreign Secretary, who is rather a nervous man, and fastidious about a woman's looks, never could bear me: and I believe he would have thought it almost as justifiable as drowning an ugly kitten, to choke me if he knew I'd overheard his secrets.

However, Ivor's next words gave me some inkling of what I wished to know. "It's importance evidently doesn't consist in bulk," he said lightly. "I can easily carry the case in my breast pocket."

"Pray put it there at once, and guard it as you would guard the life and honour of a woman," said the Foreign Secretary solemnly. "Now, I, must go and look for my wife. It's better that you and I shouldn't be seen together. One never knows who may have got in among the guests at a crush like this. I will go out at one door, and when you've waited for a few minutes, you can go, by way of another."

A moment later there was silence in the room, and I knew that Ivor was alone. What if I spoke, and startled him? All that is impish in me longed to see how his face would look; but there was too much at stake. Not only would I hate to have him scorn me for an eavesdropper, but I had already built up a great plan for the use I could make of what I had overheard.

CHAPTER III

LISA MAKES MISCHIEF

When Ivor was safely out of the room, my first thought was to escape from behind the lounge, and get upstairs to my own quarters. But just as I had sat up, very cramped and wretched, with one foot and one arm asleep, Lord Mountstuart came in again, and down I had to duck.

He had brought a friend, who was as mad about old books and first editions, as he; a stuffy, elderly thing, who had never seen Lord Mountstuart's treasures before. As both were perfectly daft on the subject, they must have kept me lying there an hour, while they fussed

about from one glass-protected book-case to another, murmuring admiration of Caxtons, or discussing the value of a Mazarin Bible, with their noses in a lot of old volumes which ought to have been eaten up by moths long ago. As for me, I should have been delighted to set fire to the whole lot.

At last Lord Mountstuart (whom I've nicknamed "Stewey") remembered that there was a ball going on, and that he was the host. So he and the other duffer pottered away, leaving the coast clear and the door wide open. It was just my luck (which is always bad and always has been) that a pair of flirting idiots, for whom the conservatory, or our "den," or the stairs, wasn't secluded enough, must needs be prying about and spy that open door before I had conquered my cramps and got up from behind the sofa.

The dim light commended itself to their silliness, and after hesitating a minute, the girl--whoever she was--allowed herself to be drawn into a room where she had no business to be. Then, to make bad worse, they selected the lounge to sit upon, and I had to lie closely wedged against the wall, with "pins and needles" pricking all over my cramped body, while some man I didn't know proposed and was accepted by some girl I shall probably never see.

They continued to sit, making a tremendous fuss about each other, until voices were "heard off," as they say in the directions for theatricals, whereupon they sprang up and hurried out like "guilty things upon a fearful summons."

By that time I was more dead than alive, but I did manage to crawl out of my prison, and creep up to my room by a back stairway which the servants use. But it was very late now, and people were going, even the young ones who love dancing. As soon as I was able, I scuttled out of my ball dress and into a dressing gown. Also I undid my hair, which is my one beauty, and let it hang over my shoulders, streaming down in front on each side, so that nobody would know one shoulder is higher than the other. It wasn't that I was particularly anxious to appear well before Di (though I have enough vanity not to like the contrast between us to seem too great, even when she and I are alone), but because I wanted her to think, when she came to my room, that I'd been there a long time.

I was sure she would come and peep in at the door, to steal away if she found me asleep, or to enquire how I felt if I were awake.

By and by the handle of the door moved softly, just as I had expected, and seeing a light, Di came in. It was late, and she had danced all night, but instead of looking tired she was radiant. When she spoke, her voice was as gay and happy as Ivor's had been when he first came into Lord Mountstuart's study with the Foreign Secretary.

I said that I was much better, and had had a nice rest; that if I hadn't wanted to hear how everything had gone at the ball, I should have been in bed and asleep long ago.

"Everything went very well," said she. "I think it was a great success."

"Did you dance every dance?" I asked, working up slowly to what I meant to say.

"Except a few that I sat out."

"I can guess who sat them out with you," said I. "Ivor Dundas. And one was number thirteen, wasn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"He told me he was going to have thirteen with you. Oh, you needn't try to hide anything from me. He tells most things to his 'Imp.' Was he nice when he proposed?"

"He didn't propose."

"I'll give you the sapphire bracelet Lady Mountstuart gave me, if he didn't tell you he loved you, and ask if there'd be a chance for him in case he got Algiers."

"I wouldn't take your bracelet even if--if--. But you're a little witch, Lisa."

"Of course I am!" I exclaimed, smiling, though I had a sickening wrench of the heart. "And I suppose you forgot all his faults and failings, and said he could have you, Algiers or no Algiers."

"I don't believe he has all those faults and failings you were talking about this evening," said Di, with her cheeks very pink. "He may have flirted a little at one time. Women have spoiled him a lot. But--but he does love me, Lisa."

"And he did love Maxine!" I laughed.

"He didn't. He never loved her. I--you see, you put such horrid thoughts into my head that--that I just mentioned her name when he said to-night--oh, when he said the usual things, about never having cared seriously for anyone until he saw me. Only--it seems treacherous to call them 'usual' because--when you love a man you feel that the things he says can never have been said before, in the same way, by any other man to any other woman."

"Only perhaps by the same man to another woman," I mocked at her, trying to act as if I were teasing in fun.

"Lisa, you can be hateful sometimes!" she cried.

"It's only for your good, if I'm hateful now," I said. "I don't want to have you disappointed, when it's too late. I want you to keep your eyes open, and see exactly where you're going. It's the truest thing ever said that 'love is blind.' You can't deny that you're in love with Ivor Dundas."

"I don't deny it," she answered, with a proud air which would, I suppose, have made Ivor want to kiss her.

"And you didn't deny it to him?"

"No, I didn't. But thanks to you, I put him upon a kind of probation. I wish I hadn't, now. I wish I'd shown that I trusted him entirely. I know he deserves to be trusted; and to-morrow I shall tell him--"

"I don't think I should commit myself any further till day after

to-morrow," said I drily. "Indeed, you couldn't if you wanted to, unless you wrote or wired. You won't see him to-morrow."

"Yes, I shall," she contradicted me, opening those big hazel eyes of hers, that looked positively black with excitement. "He's going to the Duchess of Glasgow's bazaar, because I said I should most likely be there: and I will go--"

"But he won't."

"How can you know anything about it?"

"I do know, everything. And I'll tell you what I know, if you'll promise me two things."

"What things?"

"That you won't ask me how I found out, and that you'll swear never to give me away to anybody."

"Of course I wouldn't 'give you away,' as you call it. But--I'm not sure I want you to tell me. I have faith in Ivor. I'd rather not hear stories behind his back."

"Oh, very well, then, go to the Duchess's to-morrow," I snapped, "and wear your prettiest frock to please Ivor, when just about that time he'll be arriving in Paris to keep a very particular engagement with Maxine de Renzie."

Di grew suddenly pale, and her eyes looked violet instead of black. "I don't believe he's going to Paris!" she exclaimed.

"I know he's going. And I know he's going especially to see Maxine."

"It can't be. He told me to-night he wouldn't cross the street to see her. I--I made it a condition--that if he found he cared enough for her to want to see her again, he must go, of course: but he must give up all thought of me. If I'm to reign, I must reign alone."

"Well, then, on thinking it over, he probably did find that he wanted to see her."

"No. For he loved me just as much when we parted, only half an hour ago."

"Yet at least two hours ago he'd arranged a meeting with Maxine for to-morrow afternoon."

"You're dreaming."

"I was never wider awake: or if I'm dreaming, you can dream the same dream if you'll be at Victoria Station to-morrow, or rather this morning, when the boat train goes out at 10 o'clock."

"I will be there!" cried Di, changing from red to white. "And you shall be with me, to see that you're wrong. I know you will be wrong."

"That's an engagement," said I. "At 10 o'clock, Victoria Station, just you and I, and nobody else in the house the wiser. If I'm right, and

Ivor's there, shall you think it wise to give him up?"

"He might be obliged to go to Paris, suddenly, for some business reason, without meaning to call on Maxine de Renzie--in which case he'd probably write me. But--at the station, I shall ask him straight out--that is, if he's there, as I'm sure he won't be--whether he intends to see Mademoiselle de Renzie. If he says no, I'll believe him. If he says yes--"

"You'll tell him all is over between you?"

"He'd know that without my telling, after our talk last night."

"And whatever happens, you will say nothing about having heard Maxine's name from me?"

"Nothing," Di answered. And I knew she would keep her word.

IVOR DUNDAS' POINT OF VIEW

CHAPTER IV

IVOR TRAVELS TO PARIS

It is rather a startling sensation for a man to be caught suddenly by the nape of the neck, so to speak, and pitched out of heaven down to--the other place.

But that was what happened to me when I arrived at Victoria Station, on my way to Paris.

I had taken my ticket and hurried on to the platform without too much time to spare (I'd been warned not to risk observation by being too early) when I came face to face with the girl whom, at any other time, I should have liked best to meet: whom at that particular time I least wished to meet: Diana Forrest.

"The Imp"--Lisa Drummond--was with her: but I saw only Di at first--Di, looking a little pale and harassed, but beautiful as always. Only last night I had told her that Paris had no attractions for me. I had said that I didn't care to see Maxine de Renzie: yet here I was on the way to see her, and here was Di discovering me in the act of going to see, her.

Of course I could lie; and I suppose some men, even men of honour, would think it justifiable as well as wise to lie in such a case, when explanations were forbidden. But I couldn't lie to a girl I loved as I love Diana Forrest. It would have sickened me with life and with myself to do it: and it was with the knowledge in my mind that I could not and would not lie, that I had to greet her with a conventional "Good morning."

"Are you going out of town?" I asked, with my hat off for her and for

the Imp, whose strange little weazened face I now saw looking over my tall love's shoulders. It had never before struck me that the Imp was like a cat; but suddenly the resemblance struck me--something in the poor little creature's expression, it must have been, or in her greenish grey eyes which seemed at that moment to concentrate all the knowledge of old and evil things that has ever come into the world since the days of the early Egyptians--when a cat was worshipped.

"No, I'm not going out of town," Di answered. "I came here to meet you, in case you should be leaving by this train, and I brought Lisa with me."

"Who told you I was leaving?" I asked, hoping for a second or two that the Foreign Secretary had confided to her something of his secret--guessing ours, perhaps, and that my unexpected, inexplicable absence might injure me with her.

"I can't tell you," she answered. "I didn't believe you would go; even though I got your letter by the eight o'clock post this morning."

"I'm glad you got that," I said. "I posted it soon after I left you last night."

"Why didn't you tell me when we were bidding each other good-bye, that you wouldn't be able to see me this afternoon, instead of waiting to write?"

"Frankly and honestly," I said (for I had to say it), "just at the moment, and only for the moment, I forgot about the Duchess of Glasgow's bazaar. That was because, after I decided to drop in at the bazaar, something happened which made it impossible for me to go. In my letter I begged you to let me see you to-morrow instead; and now I beg it again. Do say 'yes.'"

"I'll say yes on one condition--and gladly," she replied, with an odd, pale little smile, "that you tell me where you're going this morning. I know it must seem horrid in me to ask, but--but--oh, Ivor, it isn't horrid, really. You wouldn't think it horrid if you could understand."

"I'm going to Paris," I answered, beginning to feel as if I had a cold potato where my heart ought to be. "I am obliged to go, on business."

"You didn't say anything about Paris in your letter this morning, when you told me you couldn't come to the Duchess's," said Di, looking like a beautiful, unhappy child, her eyes big and appealing, her mouth proud. "You only mentioned 'an urgent engagement which you'd forgotten.'"

"I thought that would be enough to explain, in a hurry," I told her, lamely.

"So it was--so it would have been," she faltered, "if it hadn't been for--what we said last night about--Paris. And then--I can't explain to you, Ivor, any more than it seems you can to me. But I did hear you meant to go there, and--after our talk, I couldn't believe it. I didn't come to the station to find you; I came because I was perfectly sure I wouldn't find you, and wanted to prove that I hadn't found you. Yet--you're here."

"And, though I am here, you will trust me just the same," I said, as

firmly as I could.

"Of course. I'll trust you, if--"

"If what?"

"If you'll tell me just one little, tiny thing: that you're not going to see Maxine de Renzie."

"I may see her," I admitted.

"But--but at least, you're not going on purpose?"

This drove me into a corner. Without being disloyal to the Foreign Secretary, I could not deny all personal desire to meet Maxine. Yet to what suspicion was I not laying myself open in confessing that I deliberately intended to see her, having sworn by all things a man does swear by when he wishes to please a girl, that I didn't wish to see Maxine, and would not see Maxine?

"You said you'd trust me, Di," I reminded her. "For Heaven's sake don't break that promise."

"But--if you're breaking a promise to me?"

"A promise?"

"Worse, then! Because I didn't ask you to promise. I had too much faith in you for that. I believed you when you said you didn't care for--anyone but me. I've told Lisa. It doesn't matter our speaking like this before her. I asked you to wait for my promise for a little while, until I could be quite sure you didn't think of Miss de Renzie as--some people fancied you did. If you wanted to see her, I said you must go, and you laughed at the idea. Yet the very next morning, by the first train, you start."

"Only because I am obliged to," I hazarded in spite of the Foreign Secretary and his precautions. But I was punished for my lack of them by making matters worse instead of better for myself.

"Obliged to!" she echoed. "Then there's something you must settle with her, before you can be--free."

The guard was shutting the carriage doors. In another minute I should lose the train. And I must not lose the train. For her future and mine, as well as Maxine's, I must not.

"Dearest," I said hurriedly, "I am free. There's no question of freedom. Yet I shall have to go. I hold you to your word. Trust me."

"Not if you go to her--this day of all days." The words were wrung from the poor child's lips, I could see, by sheer anguish, and it was like death to me that I should have to cause her this anguish, instead of soothing it.

"You shall. You must," I commanded, rather than implored. "Good-bye, darling--precious one. I shall think of you every instant, and I shall come back to you to-morrow."

"You needn't. You need never come to me again," she said, white lipped. And the guard whistled, waving his green flag.

"Don't dare to say such a cruel thing--a thing you don't mean!" I cried, catching at the closed door of a first-class compartment. As I did so, a little man inside jumped to the window and shouted, "Reserved! Don't you see it's reserved?" which explained the fact that the door seemed to be fastened.

I stepped back, my eyes falling on the label to which the man pointed, and would have tried the handle of the next carriage, had not two men rushed at the door as the train began to move, and dexterously opened it with a railway key. Their throwing themselves thus in my way would have lost me my last chance of catching the moving train, had I not dashed in after them. If I could choose, I would be the last man to obtrude myself where I was not wanted, but there was no time to choose; and I was thankful to get in anywhere, rather than break my word. Besides, my heart was too sore at leaving Diana as I had had to leave her, to care much for anything else. I had just sense enough to fight my way in, though the two men with the key (not the one who had occupied the compartment first), now yelled that it was reserved, and would have pushed me out if I hadn't been too strong for them. I had a dim impression that, instead of joining with the newcomers, the first man, who would have kept the place to himself before their entrance, seemed willing to aid me against the others. They being once foisted upon him, he appeared to wish for my presence too, or else he merely desired to prevent me from being dashed onto the platform and perhaps killed, for he thrust out a hand and tried to pull me in.

At the same time a guard came along, protesting against the unseemly struggle, and the carriage door was slammed shut upon us all four.

When I got my balance, and was able to look out, the train had gone so far that Diana and Lisa had been swept away from my sight. It was like a bad omen; and the fear was cold upon me that I had lost my love for ever.

At that moment I suffered so atrociously that if it had not been too late, I fear I should have sacrificed Maxine and the Foreign Secretary and even the Entente Cordiale (provided he had not been exaggerating) for Di's sake, and love's sake. But there was no going back now, even if I would. The train was already travelling almost at full speed, and there was nothing to do but resign myself to the inevitable, and hope for the best. Someone, it was clear, had tried to work mischief between Diana and me, and there were only too many chances that he had succeeded. Could it be Bob West, I asked myself, as I half-dazedly looked for a place to sit down among the litter of small luggage with which the first occupant of the carriage had strewn every seat. I knew that Bob was as much in love with Di as a man of his rather unintellectual, unimaginative type could be, and he hadn't shown himself as friendly lately to me as he once had: still, I didn't think he was the sort of fellow to trip up a rival in the race by a trick, even if he could possibly have found out that I was going to Paris this morning.

"Won't you sit here, sir?" a voice broke into my thoughts, and I saw that the little man had cleared a place for me next his own, which was in a corner facing the engine. Thanking him absent-mindedly, I sat down, and began to observe my travelling companions for the first time.

So far, their faces had been mere blurs for me: but now it struck me that all three were rather peculiar; that is, peculiar when seen in a first-class carriage.

The man who had reserved the compartment for himself, and who had removed a bundle of golf sticks from the seat to make room for me, did not look like a typical golfer, nor did he appear at all the sort of person who might be expected to reserve a whole compartment for himself. He was small and thin, and weedy, with little blinking, pink-rimmed eyes of the kind which ought to have had white lashes instead of the sparse, jet black ones that rimmed them. His forehead, though narrow, suggested shrewdness, as did the expression of those light coloured eyes of his, which were set close to the sharp, slightly up-turned nose. His hair was so black that it made his skin seem singularly pallid, though it was only sallow; and a mean, rabbit mouth worked nervously over two prominent teeth. Though his clothes were good, and new, they had the air of having been bought ready made; and in spite of his would-be "smart" get up, the man (who might have been anywhere between thirty and thirty-eight) looked somewhat like an ex-groom, or bookmaker, masquerading as a "swell."

The two intruders who had violated the sanctity of the reserved compartment by means of their railway key were both bigger and more manly than he who had a right to it. One was dark, and probably Jewish, with a heavy beard and moustache, in the midst of which his sensual and cruel mouth pouted disagreeably red. The other was puffy and flushed, with a brick-coloured complexion deeply pitted by smallpox. They also were flashily dressed with "horsey" neckties and conspicuous scarf-pins. As I glanced at the pair, they were talking together in a low voice, with an open newspaper held up between them; but the man who had helped me in against their will sat silent, staring out of the window and uneasily fingering his collar. Not one of the trio was, apparently, paying the slightest attention to me, now that I was seated; nevertheless I thought of the large, long letter-case which I carried in an inner breast pocket of my carefully buttoned coat. I would not attract attention to the contents of that pocket by touching it, to assure myself that it was safe, but I had done so just before meeting Di, and I felt certain that nothing could have happened to it since.

I folded my arms across my chest, glanced up to see where the cord of communication might be found in case of emergency; and then reflected that these men were not likely to be dangerous, since I had followed them into the compartment, not they me. This thought was reassuring, as they were three to one if they combined against me, and the train was, unfortunately, not entirely a corridor train. Therefore, having assured myself that I was not among spies bent on having my life or the secret I carried, I forgot about my fellow-travellers, and fell into gloomy speculations as to my chances with Diana. I had been loving her, thinking of little else but her and my hopes of her, for many months now; but never had I realised what a miserable, empty world it would be for me without Di for my own, as I did now, when I had perhaps lost her.

Not that I would allow myself to think that I could not get her back. I would not think it. I would force her to believe in me, to trust me, even to repent her suspicions, though appearances were all against me, and Heaven knew how much or when I might be permitted to explain. I would not be a man if I took her at her word, and let her slip from me, no matter how many times that word were repeated; so I told myself over and over. Yet a voice inside me seemed to say that nothing could be as

it had been; that I'd sacrificed my happiness to please a stranger, and to save a woman whom I had never really loved.

Di was so beautiful, so sweet, so used to being admired by men; there were so many who loved her, so many with a thousand times more to offer than I had or would ever have: how could I hope that she would go on caring for me, after what had happened to-day? I wondered. She hadn't said in actual words last night that she would marry me, whereas this morning she had almost said she never would. I should have nobody to blame but myself if I came back to London to-morrow to find her engaged to Lord Robert West--a man who, as his brother has no children, might some day make her a Duchess.

"Sorry to have seemed rude just now, sir," said one of the two railway-key men, suddenly reminding me of his unnecessary existence. "Hardly knew what I was about when I shoved you away from the door. Me and my friend was afraid of missing the train, so we pushed--instinct of self-preservation, I suppose," and he chuckled as if he had got off some witticism. "Anyhow, I apologise. Nothing intentional, 'pon my word."

"Thanks. No apology is necessary," I replied as indifferently as I felt.

"That's all right, then," finished the Jewish-faced man, who had spoken. He turned to his companion, and the two resumed their conversation behind the newspaper: but I now became conscious that they occasionally glanced over the top at their neighbour or at me, as if their whole attention were not taken up with the news of the day.

Any interest they might feel in me, provided it had nothing to do with a certain pocket, they were welcome to: but the little man was apparently not of the same mind concerning himself. His nervously twitching hand on the upholstered seat-arm which separated his place from mine attracted my attention, which was then drawn up to his face. He was so sickly pale, under a kind of yellowish glaze spread over his complexion, that I thought he must be ill, perhaps suffering from train sickness, in anxious anticipation of the horrors which might be in store for him on the boat. Presently he pulled out a red-bordered handkerchief, and unobtrusively wiped his forehead, under his checked travelling cap. When he had done this, I saw that his hair was left streaked with damp; and there was a faint, purplish stain on the handkerchief, observing which with evident dismay he stuffed the big square of coarse cambric hastily into his pocket.

"The little beast must dye his hair," I thought contemptuously. "Perhaps he's an albino, really. His eyes look like it."

With that, he threw a frightened glance at me, which caused me to turn away and spare him the humiliation of knowing that he was observed. But immediately after, he made an effort to pull himself together, picking up a book he had laid down to wipe his forehead and holding it so close to his nose that the printed page must have been a mere blur, unless he were very near-sighted. Thus he sat for some time; yet I felt that no look thrown by the other two was lost on him. He seemed to know each time one of them peered over the newspaper; and when at last the train slowed down by the Admiralty Pier all his nervousness returned. His small, thin hands, freckled on their backs, hovered over one piece of luggage after another, as if he could not decide how to pile the things together.

Naturally I had not brought my man with me on this errand, therefore I had let my suitcase go into the van, that I might have both hands free, and I had nothing to do when the train stopped but jump out and make for the boat. Nevertheless I lingered, folding up a newspaper, and tearing an article out of a magazine by way of excuse; for it was not my object to be caught in a crowd and hustled, perhaps, by some clever wretches who might be lying in wait for what I had in my pocket. It seemed impossible that anyone could have learned that I was playing messenger between the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Maxine de Renzie: still, the danger and difficulty of the apparently simple mission had been so strongly impressed on me that I did not intend to neglect any precaution.

I lingered therefore; and the Jewish-looking man with his heavy-faced friend lingered also, for some reason of their own. They had no luggage, except a small handbag each, but these they opened at the last minute to stuff in their newspapers, and apparently to review the other contents. Presently, when the first rush for the boat was over, and the porters who had come to the door of our compartment had gone away empty-handed, I would have got out, had I not caught an imploring glance from the little man who had reserved the carriage. Perhaps I imagined it, but his pink-rimmed eyes seemed to say, "For heaven's sake, don't leave me alone with these others."

"Would you be so very kind, sir," he said to me, "to beckon a porter, as you are near the door? I find after all that I shan't be able to carry everything myself."

I did as he asked; and there was so much confusion in the carriage when the porter came, that in self-defence the two friends got out with their bags. I also descended and would have followed in the wake of the crowd, if the little man had not called after me. He had lost his ticket, he said. Would I be so extremely obliging as to throw an eye about the platform to see if it had fallen there?

I did oblige him in this manner, without avail; but by this time he had found the missing treasure in the folds of his travelling rug; and scrambling out of the carriage, attended by the porter I had secured for him, he would have walked by my side towards the boat, had I not dropped behind a few steps, thinking--as always--of the contents of that inner breast pocket.

He and I were now at the tail-end of the procession hastening boatward, or almost at the tail, for there were but four or five other passengers--a family party with a fat nurse and crying baby--behind us. As I approached the gangway, I saw on deck my late travelling companions, the Jewish man and his friend, regarding us with interest. Then, just as I was about to step on board, almost on the little man's heels, there came a cry apparently from someone ahead: "Look out--gangway's falling!"

In an instant all was confusion. The fat nurse behind me screamed, as the nervous fellow in front leaped like a cat, intent on saving himself no matter what happened to anyone else, and flung me against the woman with the baby. Two or three excitable Frenchmen just ahead also attempted to turn, thus nearly throwing the little man onto his knees. The large bag which he carried hit me across the shins; in his terror he almost embraced me as he helped himself up: the nurse, as she stumbled, pitched forward onto my shoulder, and if I had not seized the howling

baby, it would certainly have fallen under our feet.

My bowler was knocked over my eyes, and though an officer of the boat cried the reassuring intelligence that it was a false alarm--that the gangway was "all right," and never had been anything but all right, I could not readjust my hat nor see what was going on until the fat nurse had obligingly retrieved her charge, without a word of thanks.

My first thought was for the letter-case in my pocket, for I had a horrible idea that the scare might have been got up for the express purpose of robbing me of it. But I could feel its outline as plainly as ever under my coat, and decided, thankfully, that after all the alarm had had nothing to do with me.

I had wired for a private cabin, thinking it would be well to be out of the way of my fellow-passengers during the crossing: but the weather had been rough for a day or two (it was not yet the middle of April) and everything was already engaged; therefore I walked the deck most of the time, always conscious of the unusual thickness of my breast pocket. The little man paced up and down, too, though his yellow face grew slowly green, and he would have been much better off below, lying on his back. As for the two others, they also remained on deck, talking together as they leaned against the rail; but though I passed them now and again, I noticed that the little man invariably avoided them by turning before he reached their "pitch."

At the Gare du Nord I regretted that I had not carried my own bag, because if I had it would have been examined on the boat, and all bother would have been over. But rather than run any risks in the crowd thronging the douane, I decided to let the suitcase look after itself, and send down for it with the key from the hotel later. Again the little man was close to my side as I went in search of a cab, for all his things had been gone through by the custom house officer in mid-channel, so that he too was free to depart without delay. He even seemed to cling to me, somewhat wistfully, and I half thought he meant to speak, but he did not, save for a "good evening, sir," as I separated myself from him at last. He had stuck rather too close, elbow to elbow; but I had no fear for the letter-case, as he was on the wrong side to play any conjurer's tricks with that. The last I saw of the fellow, he was walking toward a cab, and looking uneasily over his shoulder at his two late travelling companions, who were getting into another vehicle near by.

I went straight to the Elysee Palace Hotel, where I had never stopped before--a long drive from the Gare du Nord--and claimed the rooms for which "Mr. George Sandford" had wired from London. The suite engaged was a charming one, and the private salon almost worthy to receive the lovely lady I expected. Nor did she keep me waiting. I had had time only to give instructions about sending a man with a key to the station for my luggage, to say that a lady would call, to reach my rooms, and to draw the curtains over the windows, when a knock came at the salon door. I was in the act of turning on the electric light when this happened, but to my surprise the room remained in darkness--or rather, in a pink dusk lent by the colour of the curtains.

"The lady has arrived, Monsieur," announced the servant. "As Monsieur expected her, she has come up without waiting; but I regret that something has gone wrong with the electricity, all over the hotel. It was but just now discovered, at time for turning on the lights,

otherwise lamps and plenty of candles would have been provided, though no doubt the light will fonctionne properly in a few minutes. If Monsieur permits, I will instantly bring him a lamp."

"No, thank you," I said hurriedly, for I did not wish to be interrupted in the midst of my important interview with Maxine. "If the light comes on, it will be all right: if not, I will put back the curtains; and it is not yet quite dark. Show the lady in."

Into the pink twilight of the curtained room came Maxine de Renzie, whose tall and noble figure I recognised in its plain, close-fitting black dress, though her wide brimmed hat was draped with a thickly embroidered veil that completely hid her face, while long, graceful lace folds fell over and obscured the bright auburn of her hair.

"One moment," I said. "Let me push the curtains back. The electricity has failed."

"No, no," she answered. "Better leave them as they are. The lights may come on and we be seen from outside. Why,"--as she drew nearer to me, and the servant closed the door, "I thought I recognised that voice! It is Ivor Dundas."

"No other," said I. "Didn't the--weren't you warned who would be the man to come?"

"No," she replied. "Only the assumed name of the messenger and place of meeting were wired. It was safer so, even though the telegram was in a cypher which I trust nobody knows--except myself and one other. But I'm glad--glad it's you. It was clever of--him, to have sent you. No one would dream that--no one would think it strange if they knew--as I hope they won't--that you came to Paris to see me. Oh, the relief that you've got through safely! Nothing has happened? You have--the paper?"

"Nothing has happened, and I have the paper," I reassured her. "No adventures, to speak of, on the way, and no reason to think I've been spotted. Anyway, here I am; and here is something which will put an end to your anxiety." And I tapped the breast of my coat, meaningly.

"Thank God!" breathed Maxine, with a thrilling note in her voice which would have done her great credit on the stage, though I am sure she was never further in her life from the thought of acting. "After all I've suffered, it seems too good to be true. Give it to me, quick, Ivor, and let me go."

"I will," I said. "But you might seem to take just a little more interest in me, even if you don't really feel it, you know. You might just say, 'How have you been for the last twelve months?'"

"Oh, I do take an interest, and I'm grateful to you--I can't tell you how grateful. But I have no time to think either of you or myself now," she said, eagerly. "If you knew everything, you'd understand."

"I know practically nothing," I confessed; "still, I do understand. I was only teasing you. Forgive me. I oughtn't to have done it, even for a minute. Here is the letter-case which the Foreign--which was given to me to bring to you."

"Wait!" she exclaimed, still in the half whisper from which she had

never departed. "Wait! It will be better to lock the door." But even as she spoke, there came a knock, loud and insistent. With a spring, she flung herself on me, her hand fumbling for the pocket I had tapped suggestively a moment ago. I let her draw out the long case which I had been guarding--the case I had not once touched since leaving London, except to feel anxiously for its outline through my buttoned coat. At least, whatever might be about to happen, she had it in her own hands now.

Neither of us spoke nor made a sound during the instant that she clung to me, the faint, well-remembered perfume of her hair, her dress, in my nostrils. But as she started away, and I knew that she had the letter-case, the knock came again. Then, before I could be sure whether she wished for time to hide, or whether she would have me cry "come in," without seeming to hesitate, the door opened. For a second or two Maxine and I, and a group of figures at the door were mere shadows in the ever deepening pink dusk: but I could scarcely have counted ten before the long expected light sprang up. I had turned it on in more than one place: and a sudden, brilliant illumination showed me a tall Commissary of Police, with two little gendarmes looking over his shoulder.

I threw a glance at Maxine, who was still veiled, and was relieved to see that she had found some means of putting the letter-case out of sight. Having ascertained this, I sharply enquired in French what in the devil's name the Commissary of Police meant by walking into an Englishman's room without being invited; and not only that, but what under heaven he wanted anyway.

He was far more polite than I was.

"Ten thousand pardons, Monsieur," he apologised. "I knocked twice, but hearing no answer, entered, thinking that perhaps, after all, the salon was unoccupied. Important business must be my excuse. I have to request that Monsieur Dundas will first place in my hands the gift he has brought from London to Mademoiselle de Renzie."

"I have brought no gift for Mademoiselle de Renzie," I prevaricated boldly; but the man's knowledge of my name was ominous. If the Paris police had contrived to learn it already, as well as to find out that I was the bearer of something for Maxine, it looked as if they knew enough to play the game in their own way--whatever that might be.

"Perhaps I should say, the thing which Mademoiselle lent--to a friend in England, and Monsieur has now kindly returned," amended the Commissary of Police as politely, as patiently, as ever.

"Really, I don't know what you are talking about," I said, shrugging my shoulders and looking bewildered--or hoping that I looked bewildered. All the while I was wondering, desperately, if this meant ruin for Maxine, or if she would still find some way of saving herself. But all I could do for her at the moment was to keep calm, and tell as many lies as necessary. I hadn't been able to lie to Diana; but I had no compunctions about doing it now, if it were to help Maxine. The worst was, that I was far from sure it would help her.

"I trust, Monsieur, that you do not wish to prevent the French police from doing their duty," said the officer, his tone becoming peremptory for the first time. "Should you attempt it, I should unfortunately be compelled to order that Monsieur be searched."

"You seem to forget that you're dealing with a British subject," said I.

"Who is offending against the laws of a friendly country," he capped my words. "You can complain afterwards, Monsieur. But now--"

"Why don't you empty your pockets, Mr. Dundas," suggested Maxine, lightly, yet contemptuously, "and show them that you've nothing in which the police can have any interest? I suppose the next thing they propose, will be to search me."

"I deeply regret to say that will be the next thing, Mademoiselle, unless satisfaction is given to me," returned the Commissary of Police.

Maxine threw back her thick veil; and if this were the first time these men had ever seen the celebrated actress off the stage, it seemed to me that her beauty must almost have dazzled them, thus suddenly displayed. For Maxine is a gloriously handsome woman, and never had she been most striking, more wonderful, than at that moment, when her dark eyes laughed out of her white face, and her red lips smiled as if neither they, nor the great eyes, had any secret to hide.

"Look at me," she said, throwing back her arms in such a way as to bring forward her slender body, in the tight black sheath of the dress which was of the fashion which, I think, women call "Princess." It fitted her as smoothly as the gloves that covered her arms to the elbows.

"Do you think there is much chance for concealment in this dress?" she asked. "I haven't a pocket, you see. No self-respecting woman could have, in a gown like this. I don't know in the least what sort of 'gift' my old friend is supposed to have brought me. Is it large or small? I'll take off my gloves and let you see my rings, if you like, Monsieur le Commissaire, for I've been taught, as a servant of the public, to be civil to my fellow servants, even if they should be unreasonable. No? You don't want to see my rings? Let me oblige you by taking off my hat, then. I might have put the thing--whatever it is--in my hair."

As she spoke, she drew out her hatpins, still laughing in a half scornful, half good-natured way. She was bewitching as she stood smiling, with her black hat and veil in her hand, the ruffled waves of her dark red hair shadowing her forehead.

Meanwhile, fired by her example, I turned out the contents of my pockets: a letter or two; a flat gold cigarette case; a match box; my watch, and a handkerchief: also in an outer pocket of my coat, a small bit of crumpled paper of which I had no recollection: but as one of the gendarmes politely picked it up from the floor, where it had fallen, and handed it to me without examining it, mechanically I slipped it back into the pocket, and thought no more of it at the time. There were too many other things to think of, and I was wondering what on earth Maxine could have done with the letter-case. She had had no more than two seconds in which to dispose of it, hardly enough, it seemed to me, to pass it from one hand to another, yet apparently it was well hidden.

"Now, are you satisfied?" she asked, "Now that we have both shown you we have nothing to conceal; or would you like to take me to the police station, and have some dreadful female search me more thoroughly still? I'll go with you, if you wish. I won't even be indiscreet enough to ask questions, since you seem inclined to do what we've no need to do--keep

your own secrets. All I stipulate is, that if you care to take such measures you'll take them at once, for as you may possibly be aware, this is the first night of my new play, and I should be sorry to be late."

The Commissary of Police looked fixedly at Maxine for a moment, as if he would read her soul.

"No, Mademoiselle," he said, "I am convinced that neither you nor Monsieur are concealing anything about your persons. I will not trouble you further until we have searched the room."

Maxine could not blanch, for already she was as white as she will be when she lies in her coffin. But though her expression did not change, I saw that the pupils of her eyes dilated. Actress that she is, she could control her muscles; but she could not control the beating of the blood in her brain. I felt that she was conscious of this betrayal, under the gaze of the policeman, and she laughed to distract his attention. My heart ached for her. I thought of a meadow-lark manoeuvering to hide the place where her nest lies. Poor, beautiful Maxine! In spite of her pride, her high courage, the veneer of hardness which her experience of the world had given, she was infinitely pathetic in my eyes; and though I had never loved her, though I did love another woman, I would have given my life gladly at this minute if I could have saved her from the catastrophe she dreaded.

CHAPTER V

IVOR DOES WHAT HE CAN FOR MAXINE

"How long a time do you think I had been in this room, Monsieur," she asked, "before you--rather rudely, I must say--broke in upon my conversation with my friend?"

"You had been here exactly three minutes," replied the Commissary of Police.

"As much as that? I should have thought less. We had to greet each other, after having been parted for many months; and still, in the three minutes, you believe that we had time to concoct a plot of some sort, and to find some safe corner--all the while in semi-darkness--for the hiding of a thing important to the police--a bomb, perhaps? You must think us very clever."

"I know that you are very clever, Mademoiselle."

"Perhaps I ought to thank you for the compliment," she answered, allowing anger to warm her voice at last; "but this is almost beyond a joke. A woman comes to the rooms of a friend. Both of them are so placed that they prefer her call not to be talked about. For that reason, and for the woman's sake, the friend chooses to take a name that isn't his--as he has a right to do. Yet, just because that woman happens unfortunately to be well-known--her face and name being public property--she is followed, she is spied upon, humiliated, and all, no doubt, on account of some silly mistake, or malicious false information.

Ah, it is shameful, Monsieur! I wonder the police of Paris can stoop to such stupidity, such meanness."

"When we have found out that it is a mistake, the police of Paris will apologise to you, Mademoiselle, through me," said the Commissary; "until then, I regret if our duty makes us disagreeable to you." Then, turning to his two gendarmes, he directed them to search the room, beginning with all possible places in which a paper parcel or large envelope might be hidden, within ten metres of the spot where Mademoiselle and Monsieur had stood talking together when the police opened the door.

Maxine did not protest again. With her head up, and a look as if the three policemen were of no more importance to her than the furniture of the room, she walked to the mantelpiece and stood leaning her elbow upon it. Weariness, disgusted indifference, were in her attitude; but I guessed that she felt herself actually in need of the physical support.

The two gendarmes moved about in noiseless obedience, their faces expressionless as masks. They did not glance at Maxine, giving themselves entirely to the task at which they had been set. But their superior officer did not once take his eyes from the pure profile she turned scornfully towards him. I knew why he watched her thus, and thought of a foolish, child's game I used to play twenty years ago, at little-boy-and-girl parties: the game of "Hide-the-Handkerchief." While one searched for the treasure, those who knew where it was stood by, saying: "Now you are warm. Now you are hot--boiling hot. Now you are cool again. Now you are ice cold." It was as if we were five players at this game, and Maxine de Renzie's white, deathly smiling face was expected to proclaim against her will: "Now you are warm. Now you are hot. Now you are ice cold."

There was a table in the middle of the room, with one or two volumes of photographs and brightly-bound guide books of Paris upon it, as well as my hat and gloves which I had tossed down as I came in. The gendarmes picked up these things, examined them, laid them aside, peered under the table; peeped behind the silk cushions on the sofa, opened the doors and drawers of a bric-a-brac cabinet and a small writing desk, lifted the corners of the rugs on the bare, polished floor; and finally, bowing apologies to Maxine for disturbing her, took out the logs from the fireplace where the fire was ready for lighting, and pried into the vases on the mantel. Also they shook the silk and lace window curtains, and moved the pictures on the walls. When all this had been done in vain, the pair confessed with shrugs of the shoulders that they were at a loss.

During the search, which had been conducted in silence, I had a curious sensation, caused by my intense sympathy with Maxine's suffering. I felt as if my heart were the pendulum of a clock which had been jarred until it was uncertain whether to go on or stop. Once, when the gendarmes were peering under the sofa, or behind the sofa cushions, a grey shadow round Maxine's eyes made her beautiful face look like a death-mask in the white electric light, which did not fail now, or spare her any cruelty of revelation. She was smiling contemptuously still--always the same smile--but her forehead appeared to have been sprinkled with diamond dust.

I saw that dewy sparkle, and wondered, sickeningly, if the enemy saw it too. But I had not long to wait before being satisfied on this point. The keen-eyed Frenchman gave no further instructions to his baffled

subordinates, but crossing the room to the sofa stood staring at it fixedly. Then, grasping the back with his capable-looking hand, instead of beginning at once a quest which his gendarmes had abandoned, he searched the face of the tortured woman.

Unflinching in courage, she seemed not to see him. But it was as if she had suddenly ceased to breathe. Her bosom no longer rose and fell. The only movement was the visible knocking of her heart. I felt that, in another moment, if he found what she had hidden, her heart would knock no longer, and she would die. For a second I wildly counted the chances of overpowering all three men, stunning them into unconsciousness, and giving Maxine time to escape with the letter-case. But I knew the attempt would be useless. Even if I could succeed, the noise would arouse the hotel. People would come. Other policemen would rush in to the help of their comrades, and matters would be worse with us than before.

The Frenchman, having looked at Maxine, and seen that tell-tale beating of her bodice, deliberately laid the silk cushions on the floor. Then, pushing his hand down between the seat and the back of the sofa, he moved it along the crevice inch by inch.

I watched the hand, which looked cruel to me as that of an executioner. I think Maxine watched it, too. Suddenly it stopped. It had found something. The other hand sprang to its assistance. Both worked together, groping and prying for a few seconds: evidently the something hidden had been forced deeply and firmly down. Then, up it came--a dark red leather case, which was neither a letter-case nor a jewel-case, but might be used for either. My heart almost stopped beating in the intense relief I felt. For this was not the thing I had come from London to bring Maxine.

I could hardly keep back a cry of joy. But I did keep it back, for suspense and anxiety had left me a few grains of sense.

"Voila!" grunted the Commissary of Police. "I said that you were clever, Mademoiselle. But it would have been as well for all concerned if you had spared us this trouble."

"You alone are to blame for the trouble," answered Maxine. "I never saw that thing before in my life."

I was astonished that there was no ring of satisfaction in her voice. It sounded hard and defiant, but there was no triumph in it, no joy that, so far, she was saved--as if by a miracle. Rather was her tone that of a woman at bay, fighting to the last, but without hope. "Nor did I ever see it before." I echoed her words.

She glanced at me as if with gratitude. Yet there was no need for gratitude. I was not lying for her sake, but speaking the plain truth, as I thought that she must know.

For the first time the Commissary of Police condescended to laugh. "I suppose you want me to believe that the last occupant of this room tucked some valued possession down into a safe hiding place--and then forgot all about it. That is likely, is it not? You shall have the pleasure, Mademoiselle--and you, Monsieur--of seeing with me what that careless person left behind him."

He had laid the thing on the table, and now he tapped it, aggravatingly, with his hand. But the strain was over for me. I looked on with calmness, and was amazed when at last Maxine flew to him, no longer scornful, tragically indifferent in her manner, but imploring--a weak, agonized woman.

"For the love of God, spare me, Monsieur," she sobbed. "You don't understand. I confess that what you have there, is mine. I have held myself high, in my own eyes, and the eyes of the world, because I--an actress--never took a lover. But now I am like the others. This is my lover. There's the price I put on my love. Now, Monsieur, I ask you on my womanhood to hold what is in that leather case sacred."

I felt the blood rush to my face as if she had struck me across it with a whip. My first thought, to my shame, was a selfish one. What if this became known, this thing that she had said, and Diana should hear? Then indeed all hope for me with the girl I loved would be over. My second thought was for Maxine herself. But she had sealed my lips. Since she had chosen the way, I could only be silent.

"Mademoiselle, it is a grief to me that I must refuse such a prayer, from such a woman. But duty before chivalry. I must see the contents of that case," said the Commissary of Police.

She caught his hand and rained tears upon it. "No--no!" she implored. "If I were rich, I would offer you thousands to spare me. I've been extravagant--I haven't saved, but all I have in the world is yours if--."

"There can be no such 'if,' Mademoiselle," the man broke in. And wrenching his hand free, he opened the case before she could again prevent him.

Out fell a cascade of light, a diamond necklace. It flashed to the floor, where it lay on one of the sofa cushions, sending up a spray of rainbow colours.

"Sacre bleu!" muttered the Frenchman, under his breath, for whatever he had expected, he had not expected that. But Maxine spoke not a word. Shorn of hope, as, in spite of her prayers and tears, the leather case was torn open, she was shorn of strength as well; and the beautiful, tall figure crumpling like a flower broken on its stalk, she would have fallen if I had not caught her, holding her up against my shoulder. When the cataract of diamonds sprang out of the case, however, I felt her limp body straighten itself. I felt her pulses leap. I felt her begin to live. She had drunk a draught of hope and life, and, fortified by it, was gathering all her scattered forces together for a new fight, if fight she must again.

The Commissary of Police turned the leather case wrong side out. It was empty. There had been nothing inside but the necklace: not a card, not a scrap of paper.

"Where, then, is the document?" Crestfallen, he put the question half to himself, half to Maxine de Renzie.

"What document?" she asked, too wise to betray relief in voice or face. Hearing the heavy tone, seeing the shamed face, the hanging head that lay against my shoulder, who--knowing a little less than I did of the

truth--would have dreamed that in her soul she thanked God for a miracle? Even I would not have been sure, had I not felt the life stealing back into her half-dead body.

"The contents of the case are not what I came here to find," admitted the Enemy.

"I do not know what you came to find, but you have made me suffer horribly," said Maxine. "You have been very cruel to a woman who has done nothing to deserve such humiliation. All pleasure I might have taken in my diamonds is gone now. I shall never have a peaceful moment--never be able to wear them joyfully. I shall have the thought in my mind that people who look at me will be saying: 'Every woman has her price. There is the price of Maxine de Renzie.'"

"You need have no such thought, Mademoiselle," the man protested. "We shall never speak to anyone except those who will receive our report, of what we have heard and seen in this room."

"Won't you search further?" asked Maxine. "Since you seemed to expect something else--"

"You would not have had time to conceal more than one thing, Mademoiselle," said the policeman, with a smile that was faintly grim. "Besides, this case was what you did not wish us to find. You are a great actress, but you could not control the dew which sprang out on your forehead, or the beating of your heart when I touched the sofa, so I knew: I had been watching you for that. There has been an error, and I can only apologise."

"I don't blame you, but those who sent you," said Maxine, letting me lead her to a chair, into which she sank, limply. "I am thankful you do not tell me these diamonds are contraband in some way. I was not sure but it would end in that."

"Not at all, Mademoiselle. I wish you joy of them. It is you who will adorn the jewels, not they you. Again I apologise for myself and my companions. We have but done our duty."

"I have an enemy, who must have contrived this plot against me," exclaimed Maxine, as if on a sudden thought. "It is said that 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.' But what of a man who has been scorned--by a woman? He knew I wanted all my strength for to-night--the night of the new play--and he will be hoping that this has broken me. But I will not be broken. If you would atone, Messieurs, for your part in this scene, you will go to the theatre this evening and encourage me by your applause."

All three bowed. The Commissary of Police, lately so relentless, murmured compliments. It was all very French, and after what had passed, gave me the sensation that I was in a dream.

CHAPTER VI

IVOR HEARS THE STORY

They were gone. They had closed the door behind them. I looked at Maxine, but she did not speak. With her finger to her lips she got up, trembling still; and walking to the door, she opened it suddenly to look out. Nobody was there.

"They may have gone into your bedroom to listen at that door," she whispered.

I took the hint, and going quickly into the room adjoining, turned on the light. Emptiness there: but I left the door open, and the electricity switched on. They might change their minds, or be more subtle than they wished to seem.

Maxine threw herself on the sofa, gathering up the necklace from the cushion where it had fallen, and lifting it in both hands pressed the glittering mass against her lips and cheeks.

"Thank God, thank God--and thank you, Ivor, best of friends!" she said brokenly, in so low a voice that no ear could have caught her words, even if pressed against the keyhole. Then, letting the diamonds drop into her lap, she flung back her head and laughed and cried together.

"Oh, Ivor, Ivor!" she panted, between her sobs and hysterical gusts of laughter. "The agony of it--the agony--and the joy now! You're wonderful. Good, precious Ivor--dear friend--saint."

At this I laughed too, partly to calm her, and patted gently the hands with which she had nervously clutched my sleeve.

"Heaven knows I don't deserve one of those epithets," I said, "I'll just stick to friend."

"Not deserve them?" she repeated. "Not deserve them, when you've saved me--I don't yet understand how--from a horror worse than death--oh, but a thousand times worse, for I wanted to die. I meant to die. If they had found it, I shouldn't have lived to see to-morrow morning. Tell me--how did you work such a miracle? How did you get this necklace, that meant so much to me (and to one I love), and how did you hide the--other thing?"

"I don't know anything about this necklace," I answered, stupidly, "I didn't bring it."

"You--_didn't bring it_?"

"No. At least, that red leather thing isn't the case I carried. When the fellow pulled it out from the sofa, I saw it wasn't what I'd had, so I thanked our lucky stars, and would have tried to let you know that all hope wasn't over, if I'd dared to catch your eye or make a signal."

Maxine was suddenly calm. The tears had dried on her cheeks, and her eyes were fever-bright.

"Ivor, you can't know what you are talking about," she said, in a changed voice. "That red leather case is what you took out of your breast pocket and handed to me when I first came into the room. At the sound of the knock, I pushed it down as far as I could between the seat and back of the sofa, and then ran off to a distance before the door

opened. You did bring the necklace, knowingly or not; and as it was the cause of all my trouble in the beginning, I needn't tell you of the joy I had in seeing it, apart from the heavenly relief of being spared discovery of the thing I feared. Now, when you've given me the other packet, which you hid so marvellously, I can go away happy."

I stared at her, feeling more than ever like one in a dream.

"I gave you the only thing I brought," I said. "It was in my breast pocket, inside my coat. I took it out, and put it in your hands. There was no other thing. Look again in the sofa. It must be there still. This red case is something else--we can try to account for it later. It all came through the lights not working. If it hadn't been dusk you would have seen that I gave you a dark green leather letter-case--quite different from this, though of about the same length--rather less thick, and--"

Frantically she began ransacking the crevice between the seat and back of the sofa, but nothing was there. We might have known there could be nothing or the Commissary of Police would have been before us. With a cry she cut me short at last throwing up her hands in despair. She was deathly pale again, and all the light had gone out of her eyes leaving them dull as if she had been sick with some long illness.

"What will become of me?" she stammered. "The treaty lost! My God--what shall I do? Ivor, you are killing me. Do you know--you are killing me?"

The word "treaty" was new to me in this connection, for the Foreign Secretary had not thought it necessary that his messenger should be wholly in his secrets--and Maxine's. Yet hearing the word brought no great surprise. I knew that I had been cat's-paw in some game of high stakes. But it was of Maxine I thought now, and the importance of the loss to her, not the national disaster which it might well be also.

"Wait," I said, "don't despair yet. There's some mistake. Perhaps we shall be able to see light when we've thrashed this out and talked it over. I know I had a green letter-case. It never left my pocket. I thought of it and guarded it every moment. Could those diamonds have been inside it? Could the Foreign Secretary had given me the necklace, instead of what you expected?"

"No, no," she answered with desperate impatience. "He knew that the only thing which could save me was the document I'd sent him. I wired that I must have it back again immediately, for my own sake--for his--for the sake of England. Ivor! Think again. Do you want me to go mad?"

"I will think," I said, trying to speak reassuringly. "Give me a moment--a quiet moment--"

"A quiet moment," she repeated, bitterly, "when for me each second is an hour! It's late, and this is the night of my new play. Soon, I must be at the theatre, for the make-up and dressing of this part for the first act are a heavy business. I don't want all Paris to know that Maxine de Renzie has been ruined by her enemies. Let us keep the secret while we can, for others' sakes, and so gain time for our own, if all is not lost--if you believe still that there's any hope. Oh, save me, Ivor--somehow. My whole life is in this."

"Let your understudy take your part to-night, while we think, and work,"

I suggested. "You cannot go to the theatre in this state."

"For an actress there's no such word as 'cannot,'" she said bitterly. "I could play a part to the finish, and crawl off the stage to die the next instant; yet no one would have guessed that I was dying. I have no understudy. What use to have one? What audience would stop in the theatre after an announcement that their Maxine's understudy would take her place? Every man and woman would walk out and get his money back. No; for the sake of the man I love better than my life, or twenty lives--the man I've either saved or ruined--I'll play tonight, if I go mad or kill myself to-morrow. Don't 'think quietly,' Ivor. Think out aloud, and let me follow the workings of your mind. We may help each other, so. Let us go over together everything that happened to you from the minute you took the letter-case from the Foreign Secretary up to the minute I came into this room."

I obeyed, beginning at the very beginning and telling her all, except the part that had to do with Diana Forrest. She had no concern in that. I told her how I had slept with the green letter-case under my pillow, and had waked to feel and look for it once or twice an hour. How when morning came I had been late in getting to the train: how I had struggled with the two men who tried to keep me out of the reserved compartment into which they were intruding. How the man who had a right to it, after wishing to prevent my entering, helped me in the end, rather than be alone with the pair who had forced themselves upon him. How he had stumbled almost into my arms in a panic, during the confusion after the false alarm on the boat's gangway. How he had walked beside me and seemed on the point of speaking, later, in the Gare du Nord. How I had avoided and lost sight of him; but how I had many times covertly touched my pocket to be sure that, through all, the letter-case was still safe there.

Maxine grew calmer, though not, I think, more hopeful as I talked; and at last she folded up the diamonds neatly in the red case, which she gave to me. "Put that into the same pocket," she said, "and then pass your hand over your coat, as you did often before. Now, does it feel exactly as if it were the green letter-case with which you started out?"

"Yes, I think it does," I answered, doubtfully. "I'm afraid I shouldn't know the difference. This may be a little thicker than the other, but--I can't be sure. And, you see, I never once had a chance to unbutton my coat and look at the thing I had in this inner pocket. It would have attracted too much attention to risk that; and as a matter of fact, I was especially warned not to do it. I could trust only to the touch. But even granting that, by a skill almost clever enough for sleight of hand--a skill which only the smartest pickpocket in Europe could possess--why should a thief who had stolen my letter-case give me instead a string of diamonds worth many thousands of pounds? If he wanted to put something into my pocket of much the same size and shape as the thing he stole, so that I shouldn't suspect my loss, why didn't he slip in the red case empty, instead of containing the necklace?"

"This necklace, too, of all things in the world!" murmured Maxine, lost in the mystery. "It's like a dream. Yet here--by some miracle--it is, in our hands. And the treaty is gone."

"The treaty is gone," I repeated, miserably.

It was Maxine herself who had spoken the words which I merely echoed,

yet it almost killed her to hear them from me. No doubt it gave the dreadful fact a kind of inevitability. She flung herself down on the sofa with a groan, her face buried in her hands.

"My God, what a punishment!" she stammered. "I've ruined the man I risked everything to save. I will go to the theatre, and I will act to-night, my friend, but unless you can give me back what is lost, when to-morrow morning comes, I shall be out of the world."

"Don't say that," I implored, sick with pity for her and shame at my failure. "All hope isn't over yet; it can't be. I'll think this out.

There must be a solution. There must be a way of laying hold of what seems to be gone. If by giving my life I could get it, I assure you I wouldn't hesitate for an instant, now: so you see, there's nothing I won't do to help you. Only, I wish the path could be made a little plainer for me--unless for some reason it's necessary for you to keep me in the dark. The word 'treaty' I heard for the first time from you. I didn't know what I was bringing you, except that it was a document of international importance, and that you'd been helping the British Foreign Secretary--perhaps Great Britain as a Power--in some ticklish manoeuvre of high politics. He said that, so far as he was concerned, you might tell me more if you liked. He left it to you. That was his message."

"Then I will tell you more!" Maxine exclaimed. "It will be better to do so. I know that it will make it easier for you to help me. The document you were bringing me was a treaty--a quite new treaty between Japan, Russia and France: not a copy, but the original. England had been warned that there was a secret understanding between the three countries, unknown to her. There was no time to make a copy. And I stole the real treaty from Raoul du Laurier, to whom I am engaged--whom I adore, Ivor, as I didn't know it was in me to adore any man. You know his name, perhaps--that he's Under Secretary in the Foreign Office, here in Paris. Oh, I can read in your eyes what you're thinking of me, now. You can't think worse of me than I think of myself. Yet I did the thing for Raoul's sake. There's that in my defence--only that."

"I don't understand," I said, trying not to show the horror of Maxine's treachery to a man who loved and trusted her, which I could not help feeling.

"How could you?--except that I've betrayed him! But I'll tell you everything--I'll go back a long way. Then you'll pity me, even if you scorn me, too. You'll work for me--to save me, and him. For years I've helped the British Government. Oh, I won't spare myself. I've been a spy, sometimes against one Power, sometimes against another. When there was anything to do against Russia, I was always glad, because my dear father was a Pole, and you know how Poles feel towards Russia. Russia ruined his life, and stripped it of everything worth having, not only money, but--oh, well, that's not in this story of mine! I won't trouble you or waste time in the telling. Only, when I was a very young girl, I was already the enemy of all that's Russian, with a big debt of revenge to pay. And I've been paying it, slowly. Don't think that the money I've had for my work--hateful work often--has been used for myself. It's been for my father's country--poor, sad country--every shilling of English coin. As an actress I've supported myself, and, as an actress, it has been easier for me to do the other secret work than it would have been for a woman leading a more sheltered life, mingling less with distinguished persons of different countries, or unable to be eccentric

without causing scandal. As for France, she's the friend of Russia, and I haven't a drop of French blood in my veins, so, at least, I've never been treacherous to my own people. Oh, I have made some great coups in the last eight or nine years, Ivor!... for I began before I was sixteen, and now I'm twenty-six. Once or twice England has had to thank me for giving her news of the most vital importance. You're shocked to hear what my inner life has been?"

"If I were shocked, no doubt the feeling would be more than half conventional. One hardly knows how conventional one's opinions are until one stops to think," said I.

"Once, I gloried in the work," Maxine went on. "But that was before I fell in love. You and I have played a little at being in love, but that was to pass the time. Both of us were flirting. I'd never met Raoul then, and I've never really loved any man except him. It came at first sight, for me: and when he told me that he cared, he said it had begun when he first saw me on the stage; so you see it is as if we were meant for each other. From the moment I gave him my promise, I promised myself that the old work should be given up for ever: Raoul's fiancee, Raoul's wife, should not be the tool of diplomatists. Besides, as he's a Frenchman, his wife would owe loyalty to France, which Maxine de Renzie never owed. I wanted--oh, how much I wanted--to be only what Raoul believed me, just a simple, true-hearted woman, with nothing to hide. It made me sick to think that there was one thing I must always conceal from him, but I did the best I could. I vowed to myself that I'd break with the past, and I wrote a letter to the British Foreign Secretary, who has always been a good friend of mine. I said I was engaged, and hoped to begin my life all over again in a different way, though he might be sure that I'd know how to keep his secrets as well as my own. Oh, Ivor, to think that was hardly more than a week ago! I was happy then. I feel twenty years older now."

"A week ago. You've been engaged only a week?" I broke in.

"Not many days more. I guessed, I hoped, long ago that Raoul cared, but he wouldn't have told me, even the day he did tell, if he hadn't lost his head a little. He hadn't meant to speak, it seems, for he's poor, and he thought he had no right. But what's a man worth who doesn't lose his head when he loves a woman? I adored him for it. We decided not to let anyone know until a few weeks before we could marry, as I didn't care to have my engagement gossipped about, for months on end. There were reasons why--more than one: but the man of all others whom I didn't want to know the truth found out, or, rather, suspected what had happened, the very day when Raoul and I came to an understanding--Count Godensky of the Russian Embassy. He called, and was let in by mistake while Raoul was with me, and, just as he must have seen by our faces that there was something to suspect, so I saw by his that he did suspect. Oh, a hateful person! I've refused him three times. There are some men so vain that they can never believe a woman really means to say 'no' to them. Count Godensky is one of those, and he's dangerous, too. I'm afraid of him, since I've cared for Raoul, though I used to be afraid of no one, when I'd only myself to think of. Raoul was going away that very night. He had an errand to do for a woman who was a dear and intimate friend of his dead mother. You must know of the Duchesse de Montpellier? Well, it was for her: and Raoul is like her son. She has no children of her own."

"I don't know her," I said, "but I've seen her; a charming looking

woman, about forty-five, with a gloomy-faced husband--a fellow who might be rather a Tartar to live with. They were pointed out to me at Monte Carlo one year, in the Casino, where the Duchess seemed to be enjoying herself hugely, though the Duke had the air of being dragged in against his will."

"No doubt he had been--or else he was there to fetch her out. Poor dear, she's a dreadful gambler. It's in her blood! I She lost, I don't know how much, at Monte Carlo on an 'infallible system' she had. She's afraid of her husband, though she loves him immensely; and lately a craze she's had for Bridge has cost her so much that she daren't tell the Duke, who hates her gambling. She confessed to Raoul, and begged him to help her--not with money, for he has none, but by taking a famous and wonderful diamond necklace of hers to Amsterdam, selling the stones for her there, and having them replaced with paste. It was all to be done very secretly, of course, so that the Duke shouldn't know, and Raoul hated it, but he couldn't refuse. He had no idea of telling me this story, that day when he 'lost his head,' while we were bidding each other good-bye before his journey. He didn't mention the name of the Duchess, but said only that he had leave, and was going to Holland on business. But while he was away a dreadful thing happened--the most ghastly misfortune--and as we were engaged to be married, he felt obliged when he came back to let me know the worst."

"What was the dreadful thing that happened?" I asked, as she paused, pressing her hands against her temples.

"The necklace was stolen from Raoul by a thief, who must have been one of the most expert in the world. Can you imagine Raoul's feelings? He came to me in despair, asking my advice. What was he to do? He dared not appeal to the police, or the Duchess's secret would come out. And he couldn't bear to tell her of the loss, not only because it would be such a blow to her, as she was depending on the money from the sale of the jewels, but because she knew that he was in some difficulties, and might be tempted to believe that he'd only pretended the diamonds were stolen--while really he'd sold them for his own use."

"As she's fond of him, and trusts him, probably she would have thought no such thing," I tried to comfort Maxine. "But certainly, it was a rather bad fix."

"Rather bad fix! Oh, you laconic creatures, Englishmen. All you think of is to hide your feelings behind icy words. As for me--well, there was nothing I wouldn't have done to help him--nothing. My life would have been a small thing to give. I would have given my soul. And already a thought came flashing into my mind. I begged Raoul to wait, and say nothing to the Duchess, who didn't even know yet that he'd come back from Amsterdam. The thought in my mind was about the commission from your Secretary for Foreign Affairs. As I told you, I'd just sent him word in the usual cypher and through the usual channels, that I couldn't do what he wanted. He'd offered me eight thousand pounds to undertake the service, and four more if I succeeded. I believed I could succeed if I tried. And with the few thousands I'd saved up, and selling such jewels as I had, I could make up the sum Raoul had been told to ask for the necklace. Then he could give it to the Duchess, and she need never know that the diamonds had been stolen. All that night I lay awake thinking, thinking. Next day, at a time when I knew Raoul would be working in his office, I went to see him there, and cheered him up as well as I could. I told him that in a few days I hoped to have eighteen

or twenty thousand pounds in my hands--all for him. To let him have the money would make me happier than I'd ever been. At first he said he wouldn't take it from me--I knew he would say that! But, at last, after I'd cried and begged, and persuaded, he consented; only it was to be a loan, and some how, some time, he would pay me back. In that office there are several great safes; and when we had grown quite happy and gay together, I made Raoul tell me which was the most important of all--where the really sacred and valuable things were kept. He laughed and pointed out the most interesting one--the one, he said, which held all the deepest secrets of French foreign diplomacy. I was sure then that the thing I had to get for the British Foreign Secretary must be there, though it was such a new thing that it couldn't have been anywhere for long. 'There are three keys to that safe,' said Raoul. 'One is kept by the President; one is always with the Foreign Secretary; this is the third'; and he showed me a strange little key different to any I had seen before. 'Oh, do let me have a peep at these wonderful papers,' I pleaded with him. Before coming I had planned what to do. Round my throat I wore a string of imitation pearls, which I'd put on for a special purpose. But they were pretty, and so well made that only an expert would know they weren't real. Raoul isn't an expert; so at the moment he fitted the key into the lock of the safe to open the door, I gave a sly little pull, and broke the thread, making the pearls roll everywhere about the floor. He was quite distressed, forgot all about the key in the lock, and flew to pick up the pearls as if each one were worth at least a thousand francs.

"While he was busy finding the lost beads, I whipped out the key, took an impression of it on a piece of wax I had ready, concealed in my handkerchief, and slipped it back into the lock while he was still on his hands and knees on the floor. Then he opened the safe-door for a moment, just to give me the peep I had begged for, but not long enough for me to touch anything even if I'd dared to try with him standing there. Enough, though, to show me that the documents were neatly arranged in labelled pigeon-holes, and to see their general character, colour, and shape. That same day a key to fit the lock was being made; and when it was ready, I made an excuse to call again on Raoul at the office. Not that a very elaborate excuse was needed. The poor fellow, trusting me as he trusts himself, or more, was only too glad to have me come to him, even in that sacred place. Now, the thing was to get him away. But I'd made up my mind what to do. In another office, upstairs, was a friend of Raoul's--the one who introduced us to each other, and I'd made up a message for him, which I begged Raoul to take, and bring his friend to speak to me. He went, and I believed I might count on five minutes to myself. No more--but those five minutes would have to be enough for success or failure. The instant the door shut behind Raoul, I was at the safe. The key fitted. I snatched out a folded document, and opened it to make quite, quite certain it was the right one, for a mistake would be inexcusable and spoil everything. It was what I wanted--the treaty, newly made, between Japan, Russia and France--the treaty which your Foreign Secretary thought he had reason to believe was a secret one, arranged between the three countries without the knowledge of England and to the prejudice of her interests. The one glance I had gave me the impression that the document was nothing of the kind, but quite innocent, affecting trade only; yet that wasn't my business. I had to send it to the Foreign Secretary, who wanted to know its precise nature, and whether England was being deceived. In place of the treaty I slipped into its pigeon-hole a document I'd brought with me--just like the real thing. No one opening the safe on other business would suspect the change that had been made. My hope was to get the treaty back before

it should be missed. You see, I was betraying Raoul, to save him. Do you understand?"

"I understand. You must have persuaded yourself that you were justified. But, good Heavens, Maxine," I couldn't help breaking out, "it was an awful thing to do."

"I know--I know. But I had to have the money--for Raoul. And there was no other way to get it. You remember, I'd refused, till the diamonds were lost, and would have refused even if Raoul had nothing to do with the French Foreign Office. But let me go on telling you what happened. I had time enough. I had even a minute or two to spare. And fortunately for me, the man I'd sent Raoul to find was out. I looked at my watch, pretended to be surprised, and said I must go at once. I couldn't bear to waste a second in hurrying the treaty off, so that it might the more quickly be on its way back. I hadn't come to visit Raoul in my own carriage, but in a cab, which was waiting. As Raoul was taking me to it, Count Godensky got out of a motor-brougham, and saw me. If only it had been anywhere except in front of the Foreign Office! I told myself there was no reason why he should guess that anything was wrong, but I was in such a state of nerves that, as he raised his hat, and his eyebrows, I fancied that he imagined all sorts of things, and I felt myself grow red and pale. What a fool I was--and how weak! But I couldn't help it. I didn't wait to go home. I wrote a few lines in the cab, and sent off the packet, registered, in time I hoped, to catch the post--but after all, it didn't. Coming out from the post office, there was Godensky again, in his motor-brougham. That could have been no coincidence. A horrid certainty sprang to life in me that he'd followed my cab from the Foreign Office, to see where I would go. Why couldn't I have thought of that danger? I have always thought of things, and guarded against them; yet this time, this time of all others, I seemed fated."

"But if Godensky had known what you were doing, the game would have been up for you before this," I said.

"He didn't know, of course. Only--if he wants to be a woman's lover and she won't have him, he's her enemy and he's the enemy of the man who is her lover. He's too clever and too careful of his own interests to speak out prematurely anything he might vaguely suspect, for it would do him harm if he proved mistaken. He wouldn't yet, I think, even warn those whom it might concern, to search and see if anything in Raoul's charge were out of order or missing. But what he would do, what I think he has done, is this. Having some idea, as he may have, that my relations with certain important persons in England are rather friendly, and seeing me come from the Foreign Office to go almost straight to the post, it might have occurred to him to try and learn the name of my correspondent. He has influence--he could perhaps have found out: but if he did, it wouldn't have helped him much, for naturally, my dealings with the British Foreign Secretary are always well under cover--hence a delay sometimes in his receiving word from me. What I send can never go straight to him, as you may guess. Godensky would guess that, too: and he would have perhaps informed the police, very cautiously, very unofficially and confidentially, that he suspected Maxine de Renzie of being a political spy in the pay of England. He would have advised that my movements be watched for the next few days: that English agents of the French police be warned to watch also, on their side of the Channel. He would have argued to himself that if I'd sent any document away, with Raoul's connivance or without, I would be wanting it back as soon as possible; and he would have mentioned to the police that possibly a

messenger would bring me something--if my correspondence through the post was found to contain nothing compromising. Oh, there have been eyes on me, and on every movement of mine, I'm sure. See how efficient, though quiet, the methods have been where you're concerned. They--the police--knew the name of the man I was to meet here at this hotel; and if, as Godensky must have hoped, any document belonging to the French Government had been found on you or me, everything would have played into his hands. Raoul would have been ruined, his heart broken, and I--but there are no words to express what I would have suffered, what I may yet have to suffer. Godensky would be praised for his cleverness, as well as securing a satisfactory revenge on me for refusing him. The only thing which rejoices me now is the thought of his blank disappointment when he gets the news from the Commissary of Police."

"You don't believe then," I asked, "that Godensky has had any hand in the disappearance of the treaty?"

"I would believe it, if it weren't for the necklace being put in its place. Even if Count Godensky could have known of Raoul's mission with the diamonds, and got them into his own hands, he wouldn't have let them get out again with every chance of their going back to Raoul, and thus saving him from his trouble. He'd do nothing to help, but everything to hinder. There lies the mystery--in the return of the necklace instead of the treaty. You have no knowledge of it, you tell me; yet you come to me with it in your pocket--the necklace stolen from Raoul du Laurier, days ago, in Amsterdam or on the way there."

"You're certain it's the same?"

"Certain as that you are you, and I am I. And I'm not out of my mind yet--though I soon shall be, unless you somehow save me from this horror."

"I'm going to try," I said. "Don't give up hope. I wish, though, that you hadn't to act to-night."

"So do I. But there's no way out of it. And I must go now to the theatre, or I shall be late: my make-up's a heavy one, and takes a long time. I can't afford to have any talk about me and my affairs to-night, whatever comes afterwards. Raoul will be in a box, and at the end of the first act, he'll be at the door of my dressing-room. The agony of seeing him, of hearing him praise my acting, and saying dear, trusting, loving words that would make me almost too happy, if I hadn't betrayed him, ruined his career for ever!"

"Maybe not," I said. "And anyhow, there's the necklace. That's something."

"Yes, that's something."

"Will Godensky be in the audience, too?" I asked.

"I'm sure he will. He couldn't keep away. But he may be late. He won't come until he's had a long talk with the Commissary of Police, and tried to thrash matters out."

"If only your theory's right, then,--if he hasn't dared yet to throw suspicion on du Laurier, and if the loss of that letter-case with its contents is as much of a mystery to him as it is to us, we have a little

time before us still: we're comparatively safe for a few hours."

"We're as safe," answered Maxine, with a kind of desperate calmness, "as if we were in a house with gunpowder stored underneath, and a train laid to fire it. But"--she broke off bitterly, "why do I say 'we'? To you all this can be no more than a regret, a worry."

"You know that's not just!" I reproached her. "I'm in this with you now, heart and soul. I spoke no more than the truth when I said I'd give my life, if necessary, to redeem my failure. Already I've given something, but--"

"What have you given?" she caught me up quickly.

"My hope of happiness with a girl I love as you love du Laurier," I answered; then regretted my words and would have taken them back if I could, for she had a heavy enough burden to bear already, without helping me bear mine.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Don't think of it. You can do nothing; and I don't grudge the sacrifice--or anything," I hurried on.

"Yet I will think of it, if I ever have time to think of anything beyond this tangle. But now, it must be au revoir. Save me, save Raoul, if you can, Ivor. What you can do, I don't know. I'm groping in darkness. Yet you're my one hope. For pity's sake, come to my house when the play's over, to tell me what you've done, if you've been able to do anything. Be there at twelve."

"I promise."

"Thank you. I shall live for that moment. Now, give me the diamonds, and I'll go. I don't want you to be seen with me outside this room."

I gave her the necklace, and she was at the door before I could open it.

CHAPTER VII

IVOR IS LATE FOR AN APPOINTMENT

I was glad to be alone, for as I had said, I wanted to think quietly.

Maxine had taken the diamonds, but she had slipped the necklace into the bosom of her dress, pressing it down through the rather low-cut opening at the throat, and had therefore left the leather case. I picked the thing up from the table where she had thrown it, and examined it carefully for the first time.

It had not been originally intended as a jewel-case, that was clear; and as Maxine's voice had rung unmistakably true when she denied all previous knowledge of it to the police, I judged that the diamonds had not been in it when the Duchess entrusted them to du Laurier. He would almost certainly have described to Maxine the box or case which had been

stolen from him, and if the thing pulled out from the sofa-hiding-place had recalled his description, she must have betrayed some emotion under the keen eyes of the Commissary of Police.

The case which, it seemed, I had brought to Paris, looked as if it might have been made to hold a peculiar kind of cigar, much longer than the ordinary sort. Within, on either side, was a partition, and there was a silver clasp on which the hallmark was English.

"English silver!" I said to myself, thoughtfully. The three men who had travelled in the carriage with me from London to Dover were all English. Of the trio, only the nervous little fellow who had reserved the compartment for himself had found the smallest possible opportunity to steal the treaty from me, and exchange for it this red leather case containing a diamond necklace worth twenty thousand pounds. If he possessed the skill and quick deftness of a conjurer or a marvellously clever professional pickpocket, as well as the incentive of a paid spy, he might conceivably have done the trick at the moment of alarm on the boat's gangway, not afterwards; for when he had pressed near me in the Gare du Nord he had been on the wrong side. But for my life I could not guess the motive for such an exchange.

Supposing him a spy, employed to track and rob me of what I carried, why should he have made me a present of these rare and precious diamonds? Would the bribe for which he used his skill reach anything like the sum he could obtain by selling the stones? I was almost sure it would not; and therefore, having the diamonds, it would have been far more to his advantage to keep them than to stuff them into my pocket, simply to fill up the space where the case with the treaty had lain. There would not have been time yet for the real diamonds to have been copied in Amsterdam, therefore it would be useless to build up a theory that the stones given me might be false.

Besides, I reminded myself, if the man were a spy whose business was to watch and be near me, why hadn't he waited to see what I would do, where I would go, instead of taking a compartment, carefully reserving it, and trusting to such an unlikely chance as that I might force myself into it with him? Even if the three men had been in some obscure way playing into each others' hands, I could not see how their game had been arranged to catch me.

Maxine and I had talked for a long time, but not two hours had passed yet since I saw the last of the little rat of a man in the railway-station. Though I could not understand any reason for his tricking me, still I told myself that nobody else could have done it, and I decided to go back at once to the Gare du Nord. There I might still be able to find some trace of the little man and of my two other fellow-travellers. If through a porter or cabman I could learn where they had gone, I might have a chance even now of getting back the stolen treaty. I had brought with me from London a loaded revolver, warned by the Foreign Secretary that to do so would be a wise precaution; and I was ready to make use of it if necessary.

I was beginning to be very hungry, but that was a detail of no importance, for I had no time to waste in eating. I went to the railway-station and looked about until I found a porter whose face I had seen when I got out of the train. He had, in fact, appeared under the window of my compartment, offering himself as a luggage carrier and had been close behind me when my late travelling companion walked by my

side. Questioned, he appeared not to remember; but his wits being sharpened by the gift of a franc, he reflected and recalled not only my features but the features of the little man, whom he described with sufficient accuracy. What had become of le petit Monsieur he was not certain, but fancied he had eventually driven away in a cab accompanied by two other gentlemen. He recollected this circumstance, because the face of the cabman was one that he knew; and it was now again in the station, for the voiture had returned. Would he point out the cocher to me? He would, and did, receiving a second franc for his pains.

The cab driver proved to be a dull and surly fellow, like many another cocher of Paris, but the clink of silver and the sight of it mellowed him. I began by saying that I was in search of three friends of mine whom I was to have met when the boat train came in, but whom I had unfortunately missed. I asked him to describe the men he had driven away from the station at that time, and though he did it clumsily, betraying an irritating lack of observation when it came to details, still such information as I could draw from him sounded encouraging. He remembered perfectly well the place at which he had deposited his three passengers, and I decided to take the risk of following them.

When I say "risk," I mean the risk that the man I was starting to chase might turn out not to be the man I wished to follow. Besides, as they had been driven to Neuilly, the distance was so great that, if I went there in a cab, and found at last that I had made a mistake, I should have wasted a great deal of valuable time on the wrong tack. If the driver had remembered the name of the street, and the number of the house at which he had paused, I would have hired a motor and flashed out to the place in a few minutes; but, despite a suggested bribe, he could say no more than that, when he had come to a certain place, one of his passengers had called, "Turn down the next street, to the left." He had done so, and in front of a house, almost midway along that street, he had been bidden to stop. He had not bothered to look at the name of the street; but, though he was not very familiar with that neighbourhood, various landmarks would guide him to the right place, when he came to pass them again.

Having heard all he had to say, I reluctantly made up my mind that I could do no better than take the man as my conductor; and accordingly, with a horse already tired, I drove to Neuilly. There, the landmarks were not deceiving, as I was half afraid they would be; and in a quiet street of the suburb, we stopped at last before a fair-sized house with lights in many windows. Evidently it was a pension.

Of the man-servant who answered my ring, I enquired if three English gentlemen had lately arrived. He replied that they had, and were dining. Would Monsieur give himself the pain of waiting a few minutes, until dinner should be over?

My answer was to slip a five franc piece into the servant's hand, and suggest that I should be shown at once into the dining-room, without waiting.

My idea was to catch my birds while they fed, and take them by surprise, lest they fly away. If I pounced upon them in the midst of a meal, at least they could not escape before being recognised by me: and as to what should come after recognition, the moment of meeting must decide.

The five franc piece worked like a charm. I was promptly ushered into

the dining-room, and standing just inside the door, I swept the long table with a quick, eager glance. About eighteen or twenty people were dining, but, though several were unmistakably English, I saw no one who resembled my travelling companions.

Everyone turned and stared. There was no face of which I had not a good view. In a low voice I asked the servant which were the new arrivals of whom he had spoken. He pointed them out, and added that, though they had come only that day from England, they were old patrons, well known in the house.

As I lingered, deeply disappointed, the elderly proprietor of the pension, who superintended the comfort of his guests, trotted fussily up to enquire the stranger's business in his dining-room. I explained that I had hoped to find friends, and was so polite that I contrived to get permission for my cabman to have a peep through the crack of the door. When he had identified his three passengers, all hope was over. I had followed the wrong men.

There was nothing to do but go back to the Gare du Nord, and question more porters and cabmen. Nobody could give me any information worth having, it seemed; yet the little man must have left the station in a vehicle of some sort, as he had a great deal of small luggage. Since I could learn nothing of him or his movements, however, and dared not, because of Maxine and the British Foreign Secretary, apply to the police for help, I determined to lose no more time before consulting a private detective, a man whose actions I could control, and to whom I need tell only as much of the truth as I chose, without fear of having the rest dragged out of me.

At my own hotel I enquired of the manager where I could find a good private detective, got an address, and motored to it, the speed bracing my nerves. Fortunately, (as I thought then) Monsieur Anatole Girard was at home and able to receive me. I was shown into the plain but very neat little sitting-room of a flat on the fifth floor of a big new apartment house, and was impressed at first glance by the clever face of the dark, thin Frenchman who politely bade me welcome. It was cunning, as well as clever, no doubt: but then, I told myself, it was the business of a person in Monsieur Girard's profession to be cunning.

I introduced myself as Mr. Sanford, the name I had been told to give at the Elysee Palace Hotel. This seemed best, as it was in the hotel that I had been recommended to Monsieur Girard, and complications might arise if George Sandford suddenly turned into Ivor Dundas. Besides, as there were a good many things which I did not want brought to light, Sandford seemed the man to fit the situation. Later, he could easily disappear and leave no trace.

I said that I had been robbed of a thing which was of immense value to me, but as it was the gift of a lady whose name must not on any account appear in the case, I did not wish to consult the police. All I asked of Monsieur Girard's well-known ability was the discovery of the supposed thief, whom I thereupon described. I added the fact that we had travelled together, mentioned the incident at the gangway, and explained that I had not suspected my loss until I arrived at the Elysee Palace Hotel.

Girard listened quietly, evidently realising that I talked to him from behind a screen of reserve, yet not seeking to force me to put aside

that screen. He asked several intelligent questions, very much to the point, and I answered them--as seemed best. When he touched on points which I considered too delicate to be handled by a stranger, even a detective in my employ, I frankly replied that they had nothing to do with the case in hand. Shrugging his shoulders almost imperceptibly, yet expressively, he took my refusals without comment; and merely bowed when I said that, if the scoundrel could be unearthed within twenty-four hours, I would pay a hundred pounds: if within twelve, a hundred and fifty: if within six, two hundred. I added that there was not a second to waste, as the fellow might slip out of Paris at any minute; but whatever happened, Monsieur Girard was to keep the matter quiet.

The detective promised to do his best, (which was said to be very good), held out hopes of success, and assured me of his discretion. On the whole, I was pleased with him. He looked like a man who thoroughly knew his business; and had it not been for the solemn warning of the Foreign Secretary, and the risk for Maxine, I would gladly have put more efficient weapons in Girard's hands, by telling him everything.

By the time that the detective had been primed with such facts and details as I could give, it was past ten o'clock. I could see my way to do nothing more for the moment, and as I was half famished, I whizzed back in my hired automobile to the Elysee Palace Hotel. There I had food served in my own sitting-room, lest George Sandford should chance inconveniently upon some acquaintance of Ivor Dundas, in the restaurant. I did not hurry over the meal, for all I wanted now was to arrive at Maxine de Renzie's house at twelve o'clock, and tell her my news--or lack of news. She would be there waiting for me, I was sure, no matter how prompt I might be, for though in ordinary circumstances, after the first performance of a new play, either Maxine would have gone out to supper, or invited guests to sup with her, she would have accepted no invitation, given none, for to-night. She would hurry out of the theatre, probably without waiting to remove her stage make-up, and she would go home unaccompanied, except by her maid.

Maxine lives in a charming little old-fashioned house, set back in its own garden, a great "find" in a good quarter of Paris; and her house could be reached in ten minutes' drive from my hotel. I would not go as far as the gate, but would dismiss my cab at the corner of the quiet street, as it would not be wise to advertise the fact that Mademoiselle de Renzie was receiving a visit from a young man at midnight. Fifteen minutes would give me plenty of time for all this: therefore, at about a quarter to twelve I started to go downstairs, and in the entrance hall almost ran against the last person on earth I expected to see--Diana Forrest.

She was not alone, of course; but for a second or two I saw no one else. There was none other except her precious and beautiful face in the world; and for a wild instant I asked myself if she had come here to see me, to take back all her cruel words of misunderstanding, and to take me back also. But it was only for an instant--a very mad instant.

Then I realised that she couldn't have known I was to be at the Elysee Palace Hotel, and that even if she had, she would not have dreamed of coming to me. As common sense swept my brain clear, I saw near the precious and beautiful face other faces: Lady Mountstuart's, Lord Mountstuart's, Lisa Drummond's, and Bob West's.

They were all in evening dress, the ladies in charming wraps which

appeared to consist mostly of lace and chiffon, and evidently they had just come into the hotel from some place of amusement. The beautiful face, which had been pale, grew rosy at sight of me, though whether with amazement or anger, or both, I couldn't tell. Lisa smiled, looking more impish even than usual; but it was plain that the others, Lord Mountstuart among them, were surprised to see me here.

"Goodness, is it you or your ghost?" exclaimed Lady Mountstuart, in the soft accents of California, which have never changed in spite of the long years of her married life in England.

If it had been my ghost it would have vanished immediately, to save Di from embarrassment, and also to prevent any delay in getting to Maxine's. But, unfortunately, a flesh and blood young man must stop for conventional politeness before he can disappear, no matter what presses.

I said "How do you do?" to everyone, adding that I was as surprised to see them as they could be to see me. I even grinned civilly at Lord Robert West, though finding him here with Di, looking particularly pleased with himself, made me want to knock him down.

"Oh, it was a plan, as far as Mounty and Lord Robert and I are concerned," explained Lady Mountstuart. "Of course, Lord Robert ought to have been at the Duchess's bazaar this afternoon, but then he won't show up at such things, even to please his sister, and Di and Lisa were to have represented me there. To-day and to-morrow are the only days all three of us could possibly steal to get away and look at a most wonderful motor car; made for a Rajah who died before it was ready. Lord Robert certainly knows more about automobiles than any other human being does, and he thought this was just what I would want. Di had the most horrid headache this morning, poor child, and wasn't fit for the fatigue of a big crush, so, as she's a splendid sailor, I persuaded her to come with us--and Lisa, too, of course. We caught the afternoon train to Boulogne, and had such a glorious crossing that we actually all had the courage to dress and dine at Madrid--wasn't it plucky of us? But we're collapsing now, and have come back early, as we must inspect the car the first thing to-morrow morning and do a heap of shopping afterwards."

"If you're collapsing, I mustn't keep you standing here a moment," I said, anxious for more than one reason to get away. Di wasn't looking at me. Half turned from me, purposely I didn't doubt, she had begun a conversation with Bob West, who beamed with joy over her kindness to him and her apparent indifference to me.

"'Collapsing' is an exaggeration perhaps," laughed Lady Mountstuart. "But, instead of keeping us standing here, come up to our sitting-room and have a little talk--and whisky and soda."

"Yes, do come, Dundas," her husband added.

"Thank you both," I stammered, trying not to look embarrassed. "But--I know you're all tired, and--."

"And perhaps you have some nice engagement," piped Lisa.

"It's too late for respectable British young men to have engagements in naughty Paris," said Lady Mountstuart, laughing again (she looks very handsome when she laughs, and knows it). "Isn't that true, Mr. Dundas?"

"It depends upon the engagement," I managed to reply calmly. But then, as Di suddenly turned and looked straight at me with marked coldness, the blood sprang up to my face. I began to stammer again like a young ass of a schoolboy. "I'm afraid that I--er--the fact is, I am engaged. A matter of business. I wish I could get out of it, but I can't, and--er--I shall have to run off, or I will be late.

Good-bye,--good-bye." Then I mumbled something about hoping to see them again before they left Paris, and escaped, knowing that I had made a horrid mess of my excuses. Di was laughing at something West said, as I turned away, and though perhaps his remark and her laugh had nothing to do with me, my ears burned, and there was a cold lump of iron, or something that felt like it, where my heart ought to have been.

Now was Lord Robert's time to propose--now, when she believed me faithless and unworthy--if he but knew it. And I was afraid that he would know it.

I got out into the open air, feeling half-dazed as one of the under porters called me a cab. I gave the name of a street in the direction, but at some distance from Maxine's, lest ears should hear which ought not to hear: and it was only when we were well away from the hotel that I amended my first instructions. Even then, I mentioned the street leading into the one where I was due, not the street itself.

"Depechez vous " I added, for I had delayed eight or ten minutes longer than I ought, and this had upset the exactness of my calculations. The man obeyed; nevertheless, instead of reaching the top of Maxine's street at two or three minutes before twelve, as I had intended, it was nearly ten minutes past when I got out of my cab at the corner: and when I came to the gate of the house a clock somewhere was striking the quarter hour after midnight.

MAXINE DE RENZIE'S PART

CHAPTER VIII

MAXINE ACTS ON THE STAGE AND OFF

How I got through the play on that awful night, I don't know.

When I went onto the stage to take up my cue, soon after the beginning of the first act, my brain was a blank. I could not remember a single line that I had to say. I couldn't even see through the dazzling mist which floated before my eyes, to recognise Raoul in the box where I knew he would be sitting unless--something had happened. But presently I was conscious of one pair of hands clapping more than all the rest. Yes, Raoul was there. I felt his love reaching out to me and warming my chilled heart like a ray of sunshine that finds its way through shadows. I must not fail. For his sake, I must not fail. I never had failed, and I would not now--above all, not now.

It was the thought of Raoul that gave me back my courage; and though I couldn't have said one word of my part before I came on the stage to

answer that first cue, by the time the applause had died down enough to let me speak, each line seemed to spring into my mind as it was needed. Then I got out of myself and into the part, as I always do, but had feared not to do to-night. The audience was mine, to play with as I liked, to make laugh, to make cry, and clap its hands or shout "Brava-brava!"

Yet for once I feared it, feared that great crowd of people out there, as a lion tamer must at some time or other fear one of his lions. "What if they know all I've done?" The question flashed across my brain. "What if a voice in the auditorium should suddenly shout that Maxine de Renzie had betrayed France for money, English money?" How these hands which applauded would tingle to seize me by the throat and choke my life out.

Still, with these thoughts murmuring in my head like a kind of dreadful undertone, I went on. An actress can always go on--till she breaks. I think that she can't be bent, as other women can: and I envy the women who haven't had to learn the lesson of hardening themselves. It seems to me that they must suffer less.

At last came the end of the first act. But there were five curtain calls. Five times I had to go back and smile, and bow, and look delighted with the ovation I was having. Then, when the time came that I could escape, I met on the way to my dressing-room men carrying big harps and crowns, baskets and bunches of flowers which had been sent up to me on the stage. I pushed past, hardly glancing at them, for I knew that Raoul would be waiting.

There he was, radiant with his unselfish pride in me--my big, handsome lover, looking more like the Apollo Belvedere come alive and dressed in modern clothes than like an ordinary diplomatic young man from the Foreign Office. But then, of course, he is really quite out of place in diplomacy. Since he can't exist on a marble pedestal or some Old Master's canvas, he ought at least to be a poet or an artist--and so he is at heart; not one, but both; and a dreamer of beautiful dreams, as beautiful and noble as his own clear-cut face, which might be cold if it were not for the eyes, and lips.

There were people about, and we spoke like mere acquaintances until I'd led Raoul into the little boudoir which adjoins my dressing-room. Then--well, we spoke no longer like mere acquaintances. That is enough to say. And we had five minutes together, before I was obliged to send him away, and go to dress for the second act.

The touch of Raoul's hands, and those lips of his that are not cold, gave me strength to go through all that was yet to come. There's something almost magical in the touch--just a little, little touch--of the one we love best. For a moment we can forget everything else, even if it were death itself waiting just round the corner. I've flirted with more than one man, sometimes because I liked him and it amused me,--as with Ivor Dundas,--sometimes because I had to win him for politic reasons. But I never knew that blessed feeling until I met Raoul du Laurier. It was a heavenly rest now to lay my head for a minute on his shoulder, just shutting my eyes, without speaking a word.

I thought--for I was worn out, body and soul, with the strain of keeping up and hiding my secret--that when I was dead the best paradise would be to lean so on Raoul's shoulder, never moving, for the first two or three hundred years of eternity. But as the peaceful fancy cooled my brain,

back darted remembrance, like a poisonous snake. I reminded myself how little I deserved such a paradise, and how my lover's dear arms would put me away, in a kind of unbelieving horror, if he knew what I had done, and how I had betrayed his trust in me.

For ten years I'd been a political spy--yes. But I owed a grudge to Russia, which I'd promised my father to pay: and France is Russia's ally. Besides, it seems less vile to betray a country than to deceive a man you adore, who adores you in return. We women are true as truth itself to those we love. For them we would sacrifice the greatest cause. Always I had known this, and I had thought that I could prove myself truer than the truest, if I ever loved. Yet now I had betrayed my lover and sold his country; and, realising what I had done, as I hardly had realised it till this moment, I suffered torture in his arms.

Even if, by something like a miracle, we were saved from ruin, nothing on earth could wash the stain from my heart, which Raoul believed so good, so pure.

What can be more terrible for a woman than the secret knowledge that to hold a man's respect she must always keep one dark spot covered from his eyes? Such a woman needs no future punishment. She has all she deserves in this world. My punishment had begun, and it would always go on through my life with Raoul, I knew, even if no great disaster came. Into the heart of my happiness would come the thought of that hidden spot; how often, oh, how often, would I feel that thought stir like a black bat!

I could no longer rest with my eyes shut, at peace after the storm. I shuddered and sobbed, though my lids were dry, and Raoul tried to soothe me, thinking it was but my excitement in playing for the first time a heavy and exacting part. He little guessed how heavy and exacting it really was!

"Darling," he said, "you were wonderful. And how proud I was of you--how proud I am. I thought it would be impossible to worship you more than I did. But I love you a thousand times more than ever to-night."

It was true, I knew. I could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice. Since his dreadful misfortune in losing the diamonds, since I had comforted him for their loss, and insisted on giving him all I had to help him out of his trouble, he had seen in me the angel of his salvation. To-night his heart was almost breaking with love for me, who so ill deserved it. Now, I had news for him, which would make him long to shout for joy. If I chose, I could tell him that the jewels were safe. He would love me still more passionately in his happiness, which I had given, than in his grief; and I would take all his love as if it were my right, hiding the secret of my treachery as long as I could. But how long would that be? How could I be sure that the theft of the treaty had not already been discovered, and that the avalanche of ruin was not on its way to blot us for ever out of life and love?

The fear made me nestle nearer to him, and cling tightly, because I said to myself that perhaps I might never be in his arms again: that this might be the last time that his eyes--those eyes that are not cold--might look at me with love in them, as now.

"Suppose all these people out there had hated and hissed me, instead of applauding?" I asked. "Would you still be proud of me, still care for

me?"

"I'd love you better, if there could be a 'better,'" he answered, holding me very close.

"You know, dearest one, most beautiful one, that I'm a jealous brute. I can't bear you to belong to others--even to the public that appreciates you almost as much as you deserve to be appreciated. Of course I'm proud that they adore you, but I'd like to take you away from them and adore you all by myself. Why, if the whole world turned against you, there'd be a kind of joy in that for me. I'd be so glad of the chance to face it for you, to shield you from it always."

"Then, what is there would make you love me less?" I went on, dwelling on the subject with a dreadful fascination, as one looks over the brink of a precipice.

"Nothing on God's earth--while you kept true to me."

"And if I weren't true--if I deceived you?"

"Why, I'd kill you--and myself after. But it makes me see red--a blazing scarlet--even to think of such a thing. Why should you speak of it--when it's beyond possibility, thank Heaven! I know you love me, or you wouldn't make such noble sacrifices to save me from ruin."

I shivered: and I shall not be colder when they lay me in my coffin. I wished that I had not looked over that precipice, down into blackness. Why dwell on horrors, when I might have five minutes of happiness--perhaps the last I should ever know? I remembered the piece of good news I had for Raoul. I would have told him then, but he went on, saying to me so many things sweet and blessed to hear, that I could not bear to cut him short, lest never after this should he speak words of love to me. Then--long before it ought, so it seemed--the clock in my dressing-room struck, and I knew that I hadn't another instant to spare. On some first nights I might have been willing to risk keeping the curtain down (though I am rather conscientious in such ways), but to-night I wanted, more than anything else, to have the play over, and to get home by midnight or before, so that my suspense might be ended, and I might know the worst--or best.

"I must go. You must leave me, dear," I said. "But I've some good news for you when there's time to explain, and a great surprise. I can't give you a minute until the last, for you know I've almost to open the third and fourth acts. But when the curtain goes down on my death scene, come behind again. I shan't take any calls--after dying, it's too inartistic, isn't it? And I never do. I'll see you for just a few more minutes here, in this room, before I dress to go home."

"For a few minutes!" Raoul caught me up. "But afterwards? You promised me long ago that I should have supper with you at your house--just you and I alone together--on the first night of the new play."

My heart gave a jump as he reminded me of this promise. Never before had I forgotten an engagement with Raoul. But this time I had forgotten. There had been so many miserable things to think of, that they had crowded the one pleasant thing out of my tortured brain. I drew away from him involuntarily with a start of surprise.

"You'd forgotten!" exclaimed Raoul, disappointed and hurt.

"Only for the instant," I said, "because I'm hardly myself. I'm tired and excited, unstrung, as I always am on first nights. But--"

"Would you rather not be bothered with me?" he asked wistfully, as I paused to think what I should do.

His eyes looked as if the light had suddenly gone out of them, and I couldn't bear that. It might too soon be struck out for ever, and by me.

"Don't say 'bothered'!" I reproached him. "That's a cruel word. The question is--I'm worn out. I don't think I shall be able to eat supper. My maid will want to put me to bed, the minute I get home. Poor old Marianne! She's such a tyrant, when she fancies it's for my good. It, generally ends in my obeying her--seldom in her obeying me. But we'll see how I feel when the last act's over. We'll talk of it when you come here--after my death." I tried to laugh, as I made that wretched jest, but I was sorry when I made it, and my laugh didn't ring true. There was a shadow on Raoul's face--that dear, sensitive face of his which shows too much feeling for a man in this work-a-day, strenuous world--but I had little time to comfort him.

"It will be like coming to life again, to see you," I said. "And now, good-bye! no, not good-bye, but au revoir."

I sent him away, and flew into my dressing-room next door, where Marianne was growing very nervous, and aimlessly shifting my make-up things on the dressing table, or fussing with some part of my dress for the next act.

"There's a letter for you, Mademoiselle," said she. "The stage-door keeper just brought it round. But you haven't time to read it now."

A wave of faintness swept over me. Supposing Ivor had had bad news, and thought it best to warn me without delay?

"I must read the letter," I insisted. "Give it to me at once."

Occasionally Marianne (who has been with me for many years, and is old enough to be my mother) argues a matter on which we disagree: but something in my voice, I suppose, made her obey me with extraordinary promptness. Then came a shock--and not of relief. I recognised on the envelope the handwriting of Count Godensky.

I know that I am not a coward. Yet it was only by the strongest effort of will that I forced myself to open that letter. I was afraid--afraid of a hundred things. But most of all, I was afraid of learning that the treaty was in his hands. It would be like him to tell me he had it, and try to drive some dreadful bargain.

Nerving myself, as I suppose a condemned criminal must nerve himself to go to the guillotine or the gallows, I opened the letter. For as long as I might have counted "one, two," slowly, the paper looked black before my eyes, as if ink were spilt over it, blotting out the words: but the dark smudge cleared away, and showed me--nothing, except that, if Alexis Godensky held a trump card, I was not to have a sight of it until later, when he chose.

"MY DEAR MAXINE," [he began his letter, though he had never been given the right to call me Maxine, and never had dared so to call me before] "I must see you, and talk to you this evening, alone. This for your own sake and that of another, even more than mine, though you know very well what it is to me to be with you. Perhaps you may be able to guess that this is important. I am so sure that you will guess, and that you will not only be willing but anxious to see me to-night, if you never were before, that I shall venture to be waiting for you at the stage door when you come out.

"Yours, in whatever way you will,

"ALEXIS."

If anything could have given me pleasure at that moment, it would have been to tear the letter in little pieces, with the writer looking on. Then to throw those pieces in his hateful face, and say, "That's your answer."

But he was not looking on, and even if he had been I could not have done what I wished. He knew that I would have to consent to see him, that he need have no fear I would profit by my knowledge of his intentions, to order him sent away from the stage door. I would have to see him. But how could I manage it after refusing--as I must refuse--to let Raoul go home with me? Raoul was coming to me after my death scene on the stage. At the very least, he would expect to put me into my carriage when I left the theatre, even if he went no further. Yet there would be Godensky, waiting, and Raoul would see him. What could I do to escape from such an impasse?

CHAPTER IX

MAXINE GIVES BACK THE DIAMONDS

I tried to answer the question, to decide something; but my brain felt dead. "I can't think now. I must trust to luck--trust to luck," I said to myself, desperately, as Marianne dressed me. "By and by I'll think it all out."

But after that my part gave me no more time to think. I was not Maxine de Renzie, but Princess Helene of Hungaria, whose tragic fate was even more sure and swift than miserable Maxine's. When Princess Helene had died in her lover's arms, however (died as Maxine had not deserved to die), and I was able to pick up the tangled threads of my own life, where I'd laid them down, the questions were still crying out for answer, and must somehow be decided at once.

First, there was Raoul to be put off and got out of the way--Raoul, my best beloved, whose help and protection I needed so much, yet must forego, and hurt him instead.

The stage-door keeper had orders to let him "come behind," and so he was already waiting at the door of my little boudoir by the time Helene had died, the curtain had gone down, and Maxine de Renzie had been able to

leave the stage.

As we went together into the room, he caught both my hands, crushing them tightly in his, and kissing them over and over again. But his face was pale and sad, and a new fear sprang up in my heart, like a sudden live flame among red ashes.

"What is it, Raoul?--why do you look like that?" I asked; while inside my head another question sounded like a shriek. "What if some word had come to him in the theatre--about the treaty?"

Then I could have cried as a child cries, with the snapping of the tension, when he answered: "It was only that terrible last scene, darling. I've seen you die in other parts. But it never affected me like this. Perhaps it's because you didn't belong to me in those days. Or is it that you were more realistic in your acting to-night than ever before? Anyway, it was awful--so horribly real. It was all I could do to sit still and not jump out of the box to save you. Prince Cyril was a poor chap not to thwart the villain. I should have killed him in the third act, and then Helene might have been happily married, instead of dying."

"I believe you would have killed him," I said.

"I know I should. It's a mistake not to be jealous. I admit that I'm jealous. But such jealousy is a compliment to a woman, my dearest, not an insult."

"How you feel things!" I exclaimed. "Even a play on the stage--"

"If the woman I love is the heroine."

"Will you ever be blasé, like the rest of the men I know?" I laughed, though I could have sobbed.

"Never, I think. It isn't in me. Do you despise me for my enthusiasm?"

"I only love you the more," I said, wondering every instant, in a kind of horrid undertone, how I was to get him away.

"I admit I wasn't made for diplomacy," he went on. "I wish, I had money enough to get out of it and take you off the stage, away into some beautiful, peaceful world, where we need think of nothing but our love for each other, and the good we might do others because of our love, and to keep our world beautiful. Would you go with me?"

"Ah, if I could!" I sighed. "If I could go with you to-morrow, away into that beautiful, peaceful world. But who knows? Meanwhile--"

"Meanwhile, you don't mean to send me away from you?" he pleaded, in a coaxing way he has, which is part of his charm, and makes him seem like a boy. "You don't know what it is, after that scene of your death on the stage, where I couldn't get to you--where another man was your lover--to touch you again, alive and warm, your own adorable, vivid self. You will let me go home with you, in your carriage, anyhow as far as the house, and kiss you good-night there, even if you're so tired you must drive me out then?"

I would have given all my success of that night, and more, to say "yes."

But instead I had to stumble into excuses. I had to argue that we mustn't be seen leaving the theatre together--yet, until everyone knew that we were engaged. As for letting him come to me at home, if he dreamt how my head ached, he wouldn't ask it. I almost broke down as I said this; and poor Raoul was so sorry for me that he immediately offered to leave me at once.

"It's a great sacrifice, though, to give up what I've been looking forward to for days," he said, "and to let you go from me to-night of all nights."

"Why to-night of all nights?", I asked quickly, my coward conscience frightening me again.

"Only because I love you more than ever, and--it's a stupid feeling, of course, I suppose all the fault of that last scene in the play--yet I feel as if--But no, I don't want to say it."

"You must say it," I cried.

"Well, if only to hear you contradict me, then. I feel as if I were in danger of losing you. It's just a feeling--a weight on my heart. Nothing more. Rather womanish, isn't it?"

"Not womanish, but foolish," I said. "Shake off the feeling, as one wakes up from a nightmare. Think of to-morrow. Meeting then will be all the sweeter." As I spoke, it was as if a voice echoed mine, saying different words mockingly. "If there be any meeting--to-morrow, or ever."

I shut my ears to the voice, and went on quickly:

"Before we say good-bye, I've something to show you--something you'll like very much. Wait here till I get it from the next room."

Marianne was tidying my dressing-room for the night, bustling here and there, a dear old, comfortable, dependable thing. She was delighted with my success, which she knew all about, of course; but she was not in the least excited, because she had loyally expected me to succeed, and would have thought the sky must be about to fall if I had failed. She was as placid as she was on other, less important nights, far more placid than she would have been if she had known that she was guarding not only my jewellery, but a famous diamond necklace, worth at least five hundred thousand francs.

There it was, under the lowest tray of my jewel box. I had felt perfectly safe in leaving it there, for I knew that nothing on earth--short of a bomb explosion--could tempt the good creature out of my dressing-room in my absence, and that even if a bomb did explode, she would try to be blown up with my jewel box clutched in her hands.

Saying nothing to Marianne, who was brushing a little stage dust off my third act dress, with my back to her I took out tray after tray from the box (which always came with us to the theatre and went away again in my carriage) until the electric light over the dressing table set the diamonds on fire.

Really, I said to myself, they were wonderful stones. I had no idea how magnificent they were. Not that there were a great many of them. The

necklace was composed of a single row of diamonds, with six flat tassels depending from it. But the smallest stones at the back, where the clasp came, were as large as my little finger nail, and the largest were almost the size of a filbert. All were of perfect colour and fire, extraordinarily deep and faultlessly shaped, as well as flawless. Besides, the necklace had a history which would have made it interesting even if it hadn't been intrinsically of half its value.

With the first thrill of pleasure I had felt since I knew that the treaty had disappeared I lifted the beautiful diamonds from the box, and slipped them into a small embroidered bag of pink and silver brocade which lay on the table. It was a foolish but pretty little bag, which a friend had made and sent to me at the theatre a few nights ago, and was intended to carry a purse and handkerchief. But I had never used it yet. Now it seemed a convenient receptacle for the necklace, and I suddenly planned out my way of giving it to Raoul.

At first, earlier in the evening, I had meant to put the diamonds in his hands and say, "See what I have for you!" But now I had changed my mind, because he must be induced to go away as quickly as possible--quite, quite away from the theatre, so that there would be no danger of his seeing Count Godensky at the stage door. I was not sorry that Raoul was jealous, because, as he said, his jealousy was a compliment to me; and it is possible only for a cold man never to be jealous of a woman in my profession, who lives in the eyes of the world. But I did not want him to be jealous of the Russian; and he would be horribly jealous, if he thought that he had the least cause.

If I showed him the diamonds now, he would want to stop and talk. He would ask me questions which I would rather not answer until I'd seen Ivor Dundas again, and knew better what to say--whether truth or fiction. Still, I wished Raoul to have the necklace to-night, because it would mean all the difference to him between constant, gnawing anxiety, and the joy of deliverance. Let him have a happy night, even though I was sending him away, even though I did not know what to-morrow might bring, either for him or for me.

I tied the gold cords of the bag in two hard knots, and went out with it to Raoul in the next room.

"This holds something precious," I said, smiling at him, and making a mystery. "You'll value the something, I know--partly for itself, partly because I--because I've been at a lot of trouble to get it for you. When you see it, you'll be more resigned not to see me--just for tonight. But you're to write me a letter, please, and describe accurately every one of your sensations on opening the bag. Also, you may say in your letter a few kind things about me, if you like. And I want it to come to me when I first wake up to-morrow morning. So go now, dearest, and have the sensations, and write about them. I shall be thinking of you every minute, asleep or awake."

"Why mayn't I look now?" asked Raoul, taking the soft mass of pink and silver from me, in the nice, clumsy way a big man has of handling a woman's things.

"Because--just _because_. But perhaps you'll guess why, by and by," I said. Then I held up my face to be kissed, and he bundled the small bag away in an inside pocket of his coat, as carelessly as if it held nothing but a handkerchief and a pair of gloves.

"Be careful!" I couldn't help exclaiming. But I don't think he heard, for he had me in his arms and was kissing me as if he knew the fear in my heart--the fear that it might be for the last time.

CHAPTER X

MAXINE DRIVES WITH THE ENEMY

When Raoul was gone I made Marianne hurry me out of the cloth-of-gold and filmy tissue in which the unfortunate Princess Helene had died, and into the black gown in which the almost equally unfortunate Maxine had come to the theatre. I did not even stop to take off my make-up, for though the play was an unusually short one, and all the actors and actresses had followed my example of prompt readiness for all four acts, it lacked twenty minutes of twelve when I was dressed. I had to see Count Godensky, get rid of him somehow, and still be in time to keep my appointment with Ivor Dundas, for which I knew he would strain every nerve not to be late.

My electric carriage would be at the stage door, and my plan was to speak to Godensky, if he were waiting, if possible learn in a moment or two whether he had really found out the truth, and then act accordingly. But if I could avoid it, I meant, in any case, to put off a long conversation until later.

I had drawn my veil down before walking out of the theatre, yet Godensky knew me at once, and came forward. Evidently he had been watching the door.

"Good-evening," he said. "A hundred congratulations."

He put out his hand, and I had to give him mine, for my chauffeur and the stage-door keeper (to say nothing of Marianne, who followed me closely), and several stage-carpenters, with other employes of the theatre, were within seeing and hearing distance. I wanted no gossip, though that was exactly what might best please Count Godensky.

"I got your note," I answered, in Russian, though he had spoken in French. "What is it you want to see me about?"

"Something that can't be told in a moment," he said. "Something of great importance."

"I'm very tired," I sighed. "Can't it wait until to-morrow?"

I tried to "draw" him, and to a certain extent, I succeeded.

"You wouldn't ask that question, if you guessed what--I know," he replied.

Was it a bluff, or did he know--not merely suspect--something?

"I don't understand you," I said quietly, though my lips were dry.

"Shall I mention the word--_document?_" he hinted. "Really, I'm sure you won't regret it if you let me drive home with you, Mademoiselle."

"I can't do that," I answered. "And I can't take you into my carriage here. But I'll stop for you, and wait at the corner Rue Eugene Beauharnais. Then you can go with me until I think it best for you to get out."

"Very well," he agreed. "But send your maid home in a cab; I can not talk before her."

"Yes, you can. She knows no language except French--and a little English. She always drives home with me."

This was true. But if I had been talking to Raoul, I would perhaps have given the dear old woman her first experience of being sent off by herself. In that case, she would not have minded, for she likes Raoul, admires him as a "dream of a young man," and already suspected what I hadn't yet told her--that we were engaged. But with Count Godensky forced upon me as a companion, I would not for any consideration have parted with Marianne.

Three or four minutes after starting I was giving instructions to my chauffeur where to stop, and almost immediately afterwards Godensky appeared. He got in and took the place at my left, Marianne, silent, but doubtless astonished, facing us on the little front seat.

"Now," I exclaimed. "Please begin quickly."

"Don't force me to be too abrupt," he said. "I would spare you if I could. You speak as if you grudged me every moment with you. Yet I am here because I love you."

"Oh, please, Monsieur!" I broke in. "You know I've told you that is useless."

"But everything is changed since then. Perhaps now, even your mind will be changed. That happens with women sometimes. I want to warn you of a great danger that threatens you, Maxine. Perhaps, late as it is, I could save you from it if you'd let me."

"Save me from what?" I asked temporising. "You're very mysterious, Count Godensky. And I'm Mademoiselle de Renzie except to my very intimate friends."

"I am your friend, always. Maybe you will even permit me to speak of myself as your 'intimate friend' when I have done what I hope to do for you in--in the matter of a certain document which has disappeared."

I was quivering all over. But I had not lost hope yet; I think that some women, feeling as I did, would have fainted. But it would have been better for me to die and be out of my troubles for ever, than to let myself faint and show Godensky that he had struck home.

"Be quiet. Be cool. Be brave now, if never again," I said to myself. And my voice sounded perfectly natural as I exclaimed: "Oh, the 'document' again. The one you spoke about when we first met to-night. You rouse my curiosity. But I don't in the least know what you mean."

"The loss of it is known," he said.

"Ah, it's a lost document?"

"As you will be lost, Maxine, if you don't come to me for the help I'm only too glad to give--on conditions. Let me tell you what they are."

"Wouldn't it be more to the point if you told me what the document is, and how it concerns me?" I parried him, determined to bring him to bay.

"Aren't you evading the point far more than I? The document--which you and I can both see as plainly before our eyes at this instant as though it were in--let us say your hands, or--du Laurier's, if he were here--that document is far too important even to name within hearing of other ears."

"Marianne's? But I told you she can't understand a word of Russian."

"One can't be sure. We can never tell, in these days, who may not be--a spy."

There was a stab for me! But I would not give him the satisfaction of showing that it hurt. He wanted to confuse me, to put me off my guard; but he should not.

"They say one judges others by one's self," I laughed. "Count Godensky, if you throw out such lurid hints about my poor, fat Marianne, I shall begin to wonder if it's not you who are the spy!"

"Since you trust your woman so implicitly, then," he went on, "I'll tell you what you want to know. The document I speak of is the one you took out of the Foreign Office the other day, when you called on your--friend, Monsieur le Vicomte du Laurier."

"Dear me!" I exclaimed. "You say you want to be my friend, yet you seem to think I am a kleptomaniac. I can't imagine what I should want with any dry old document out of the Foreign Office, can you?"

"Yes, I can imagine," said Godensky drily.

"Pray tell me then. Also what document it was. For, joking apart, this is rather a serious accusation."

"If I make any accusation, it's less against you than du Laurier."

"Oh, you make an accusation against him. Why do you make it to me?"

"As a warning."

"Or because you don't dare make it to anyone else."

"Dare! I haven't accused him thus far, because to do so would brand your name with his."

"Ah!" I said. "You are very considerate."

"I don't pretend to be considerate--except of myself. I've waited, and held my hand until now, because I wanted to see you before doing a thing which would mean certain ruin for du Laurier. I love you as much as I

ever did; even more, because, in common with most men, I value what I find hard to get. To-night I ask you again to marry me. Give me a different answer from that you gave me before, and I'll be silent about what I know."

"What you know of the document you mentioned?" I asked, my heart drumming an echo of its beating in my ears.

"Yes."

"But--I thought you said that its loss was already discovered?" (Oh, I was keeping myself well under control, though a mistake now would surely cost me more than I dared count!)

For half a second he was taken aback, at a loss what answer to make. Half a second--no more; yet that hardly perceptible hesitation told me what I had been playing with him to find out.

"Discovered by me," he explained. "That is, by me and one person over whom I have such an influence that he will use his knowledge, or--forget it, according to my advice."

"There is no such person," I said to myself. But I didn't say it aloud. Quickly I named over in my mind such men in the French Foreign Office as were in a position to discover the disappearance of any document under Raoul du Laurier's charge. There were several who might have done so, some above Raoul in authority, some below; but I was certain that not one of them was an intimate friend of Count Godensky's. If he had suspected anything the day he met me coming out of the Foreign Office he might, of course, have hinted his suspicions to one of those men (though all along I'd believed him too shrewd to risk the consequences, the ridicule and humiliation of a mistake): but if he had spoken, it would be beyond his power to prevent matters from taking their own course, independent of my decisions and his actions.

I believed now that what I had hoped was true. He was "bluffing." He wanted me to flounder into some admission, and to make him a promise in order to save the man I loved. I was only a woman, he'd argued, no doubt--an emotional woman, already wrought up to a high pitch of nervous excitement. Perhaps he had expected to have easy work with me. And I don't think that my silence after his last words discouraged him. He imagined me writhing at the alternative of giving up Raoul or seeing him ruined, and he believed that he knew me well enough to be sure what I would do in the end.

"Well?" he said at last, quite gently.

My eyes had been bent on my lap, but I glanced suddenly up at him, and saw his face in the light of the street lamps as we passed. Count Godensky is not more Mephistophelian in type than any other dark, thin man with a hook nose, keen eyes, heavy browed; a prominent chin and a sharply waxed, military moustache trained to point upward slightly at the ends. But to my fancy he looked absolutely devilish at that moment. Still, I was less afraid of him than I had been since the day I stole the treaty.

"Well," I said slowly, "I think it's time that you left me now."

"That's your answer? You can't mean it."

"I do mean it, just as much as I meant to refuse you the three other times that you did me the same honour. You asked me to hear what you had to say to-night, and I have heard it; so there's no reason why I shouldn't press the electric bell for my chauffeur to stop, and--"

"Do you know that you're pronouncing du Laurier's doom, to say nothing of your own?"

"No. I don't know it."

"Then I haven't made myself clear enough."

"That's true. You haven't made yourself clear enough."

"In what detail have I failed? Because--".

"In the detail of the document. I've told you I know nothing about it. You've told me you know everything. Yet--"

"So I do."

"Prove that by saying what it is--to satisfy my curiosity."

"I've explained why I can't do that--here."

"Then why should you stay here longer, since that is the point, to my mind. You understood before you came into my carriage that I had no intention of letting you go all the way home with me."

Count Godensky suddenly laughed. And the laugh frightened me--frightened me horribly, just as I had begun to have confidence in myself, and feel that I had got the best of the game.

CHAPTER XI

MAXINE OPENS THE GATE FOR A MAN

"You are afraid that du Laurier may find out," he said. "But he knows already."

"Knows what?"

"That I expected to have the privilege of going to your house with you."

All that I had gained seemed worthless. Those quiet, sneering words of his almost crushed me. On the load I had struggled to bear without falling they laid one feather too much.

My voice broke. "You--devil!" I cried at him. "You dared to tell Raoul that?"

Opposite, on her narrow little seat, Marianne stirred uneasily. Till now our tones had been quiet, and she could not understand one word we said. She is the soul of discretion and a triumph of good training in her walk

of life; but she loves me more than she loves any other creature on earth, and now she could see and hear that the man had driven me to the brink of hysterics. She would have liked to tear his face with her nails, or choke him, I think. If I had given her the word, I believe she would have tried with all her strength--which is not small--and a very good will, to kill him. I was dimly conscious of what her restlessness meant, and vaguely comforted too, by the thought of her supreme loyalty. But I forgot Marianne when Godensky answered my question.

"Yes, I told him. It was the truth. And I've always understood that you made a great point of never doing anything which you considered in the least risque. So why should I suppose you would rather du Laurier didn't know? You might already have mentioned it to him."

"He wouldn't believe you!" I exclaimed, desperately. And my only hope was that I might be right.

"As a matter of fact, he didn't seem to at first, so I at once understood that you hadn't spoken of our appointment. But it was too late to atone for my carelessness, and I did the next best thing: justified my veracity. I suggested that, if he didn't take my word for it, he might stand where he could see us speaking together at the stage door, and--"

"Ah, I am glad of that!" I cut in. "Then he saw that we didn't drive away together."

"You jump at conclusions, just like less clever women. I hardly thought you'd receive me into your carriage at the theatre, so I took the precaution of warning du Laurier that he needn't expect to see that. You would suggest a place for me to meet you, I said. When I knew it, I would inform him if he chose to wait about somewhere for a few minutes."

"Raoul du Laurier would scorn to spy upon me!" I broke out.

"How hard you are on spies. And how little knowledge of human nature you have, after all, if you don't understand that a man suddenly out of his head with jealousy will do things of which he'd be incapable when he was sane."

The argument silenced me. I knew--I had known for a long time--that jealousy could rouse a demon in Raoul. And only to-night he had reminded me that he was a "jealous brute." I remembered what answer he had made when I asked him what he would do if I deceived him. He said that he would kill me, and kill himself after. As he spoke, the blood had streamed up to his forehead, and streamed back again, leaving him pale. A flash like steel had shot out of his eyes--the dear eyes that are not cold. It was true, as this cruel wretch reminded me, Raoul would do things under the torture of jealousy that he would cut off his hand sooner than do when his own, sweet, poet-nature was in ascendancy.

"As a proof of what I say," Godensky went on, "du Laurier did wait, did hear from me the place where you were to stop and pick me up. And if it wouldn't be the worst of form to bet, I'd bet that he found some way of getting there in time to see that I had told the truth."

"You coward!" I stammered.

"On the contrary, a brave man. I've heard that du Laurier is a fine

shot, and that very few men in Paris can touch him with the foils. So you see--"

"You want to frighten me!" I exclaimed.

"You misjudge me in every way."

My only answer was to tell Marianne to press the button which gives the signal for my chauffeur to stop. Instantly the electric carriage slowed down, then came to a standstill. My man opened the door and Count Godensky submitted to my will. Nevertheless, he was far from being in a submissive mood, as I did not need to be reminded by the tone of his voice when he said "au revoir."

Nothing could have been more polite than the words or his way of speaking them, as he stood in the street with his hat in his hand. But to me they meant a threat, and as a threat they were intended.

My talk with Godensky at the stage door, my pause to pick him up, and my second pause to set him down, had all taken time, of which I had had little enough at the starting, if I were to meet Ivor Dundas when he arrived. It was two or three minutes after midnight, or so my watch said, when we drew up before the gate of my high-walled garden in the quiet Rue d'Hollande.

A little while ago I had been ready to seize upon almost any expedient for keeping Raoul away from my house to-night, but now, after what I had just heard from Godensky, I prayed to see him waiting for me.

Nobody (except Ivor, concerning whom I'd given orders) would be let in so late at night, during my absence, not even Raoul himself; so if he had come to reproach me, or break with me, he would have to stand outside the locked gate till I appeared. I looked for him longingly, but he was not there. There was, to be sure, a motor brougham in the street, for a wonder (usually the Rue d'Hollande is as empty as a desert, after eleven o'clock), but a girl's face peered out at me from the window--an impish, curiously abnormal little face it was--extinguishing the spark of hope that sprang to life as I caught sight of the carriage.

It was standing before the closed gate of a house almost opposite mine, and the girl seemed somewhat interested in me; but I was not at all interested in her, and I hate being stared at as if I were something in a museum.

The gate is always kept locked at night, when I'm at the theatre; but Marianne has the key, and we let ourselves in when we come, for only old Henri sits up, and he is growing a little deaf. A moment, and we were inside, the chauffeur spinning away to the garage.

Usually I am newly delighted every night with my quaint old house and its small, but pretty garden, to which it seems delightful to come home after hours of hard work at the theatre. But to-night, though a cheerful light shone out from between the drawn curtains of the salon, the place looked inexpressibly dreary, even forbidding, to me. I felt that I hated the house, though I had chosen it after a long search for peacefulness and privacy. How gloomy, how dead, was the street beyond the high wall, with all its windows closed like the eyes of corpses. There was a moist, depressing smell of earth after long-continued rains, in the garden. No wonder the place had been to let at a bargain, for a long term! There

had been a murder in it once, and it had stood empty for twelve or thirteen of the fifteen years since the almost forgotten tragedy. I had been the tenant for two years now--before I became a "star," with a theatre of my own in Paris. I had had no fear of the ghost said to haunt the house. Indeed, I remembered thinking, and saying, that the story only made the place more interesting. But now I said to myself that I wished I had never spoken so lightly. Perhaps the ghost had brought me bad luck. I felt as if the murder must have happened on just such a still, brooding, damp night as this. Maybe it was the anniversary, if I only knew.

I went indoors, Marianne following. Henri, very thin, very precise, withered like a winter apple, had fallen into a doze in the hall, where he had sat, hoping to hear the stopping of my carriage. He rose up, bowing and blinking, just as he had done often before, and would often again--if life were to go on for me in the old way. He regretted not having heard Mademoiselle. Would Mademoiselle take supper?

No, Mademoiselle would not take supper. She wanted nothing, and Henri might go to bed.

"I thank Mademoiselle. When I have closed the house."

"But I don't want the house closed," I said. "I shall sit up for awhile. It's hot--close and stuffy. I may like to have the windows open."

"The visitor Mademoiselle expected did not arrive. Perhaps--"

"If he comes, Marianne or I will let him in. But he may not come, now it is so late."

When Henri had gone, I told Marianne that she might go, too. I did not want her to wait. If the person I had expected should call, it was a very old friend; in fact, Mr. Ivor Dundas, whom Marianne must remember in London. He was to call--if he did call--only on a matter of business, which would take but a few minutes to get through, and possibly he would not even come into the house. If the gate-bell rang, I would answer it myself, and speak with Mr. Dundas, perhaps in the garden. Then I would let him out and come straight upstairs. Marianne might go to bed if she wished.

"I do not wish, unless Mademoiselle particularly desires me to do so," said she. "I do not rest well when I have not been allowed to undress Mademoiselle."

"Sit up, then, in your own room, and wait there for me till I ring for you," I replied. "I shan't be late, whether Mr. Dundas comes or doesn't come."

"Supposing the gate-bell should ring, and Mademoiselle should go, yet it should not be the Monsieur she expects, but another person whom she would not care to admit?"

I knew of what she was thinking, and of whom.

"There's no fear of that. No fear of any kind," I answered.

She took off my cloak, and went upstairs reluctantly, carrying my jewel box.

I walked into the drawing-room, which was lighted and looked very bright and charming, with its many flowers and framed photographs, and the delightful Louis Quinze furniture, which I had so enjoyed picking up here and there at antique shops or at private sales.

I flung myself on the sofa, but I could not rest. In a moment I was up again, moving about, looking at the clock, comparing it with my watch, wondering what could have happened to make Ivor fail in keeping his promise to be prompt on the hour of twelve.

Of course, a hundred harmless things might have kept him, but I thought only of the worst, and was working myself up to a frenzy when at last I heard the gate-bell. I had been in the house no more than twelve or fourteen minutes, but it seemed an hour, and I gave a sob of relief as I rushed out, down the garden path, to let my visitor in.

Fumbling a little at the lock, always a little difficult if one were in a hurry, I asked myself what if, as Marianne had suggested, it were not Ivor Dundas, but someone else--Raoul, perhaps--or the man who had been in her mind: Godensky.

But it was Ivor.

"What news?" I questioned him, my voice sounding queer and far away in my own ears.

"I don't know whether you'll call it news or not, though plenty of things have happened. I'm awfully sorry to be late--"

I wouldn't let him finish, standing there, but took him by the arm and drew him into the garden, pushing the gate shut behind him as I did so. Yet I forgot to lock it, and naturally it did not occur to Ivor that it ought to be fastened.

Once inside, in the garden, I was going to make him begin again, as I had told Marianne I would. But suddenly I bethought myself that he might have been followed; that there might be watchers behind that high wall, watchers who would try to be listeners too, and whose ears would be very different from old Henri's. "Come into the house," I said, in a low voice, "before you begin to tell anything." Then, when we were inside, I could not even wait for him to go on of his own accord and in his own way.

"The treaty?" I asked. "Have you got hold of it?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"But you've heard of it? Oh, say you've heard something!"

"If I haven't, it isn't because I've sat down and waited for news to come. I went back to the Gare du Nord after you left me, to try and get on the track of the men who travelled with me in the train to Dover. But I was sent off on the wrong scent, and wasted a lot of time, worse luck--I'll tell you about it later, if you care to hear details. Then, when that game was up, I did what I wish I'd done at first, found out and consulted a private detective, said to be one of the best in Paris--"

"You told your story--_my_ story--to a detective?" I gasped.

"No. Certainly not. I said I'd lost something of value, given me by a lady whose name I couldn't bring into the affair. I was George Sandford, too, not Mr. Dundas. I described my travelling companions, telling all that happened on the way, and offered big pay if he could find them quickly--especially the little fellow. He held out hopes of spotting them to-night, so don't be desperate, my poor girl. The detective chap seemed really to think he'd not have much difficulty in tracking down our man; and even if he's parted with the treaty, we can find out what he's done with it, no doubt. Girard says--"

"Girard!" I caught Ivor up. "Is your detective's name Anatole Girard, and does he live in Rue du Capucin Blanc?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"I know too much of him," I answered bitterly.

"Isn't he clever, after all?"

"Far too clever. I'd rather you had gone to any other detective in Paris--or to none."

"Why, what's wrong with him?" Ivor began to be distressed.

"Only that he's a personal friend of my worst enemy--the man I spoke of to you this evening--Count Godensky. I've heard so from Godensky himself, who mentioned the acquaintance once when Girard had just succeeded in a case everybody was talking about."

"By Jove, what a beastly coincidence!" exclaimed Ivor, horribly disappointed at having done exactly the wrong thing, when he had tried so hard to do the right one. "Yet how could I have dreamed of it?"

"You couldn't," I admitted, hopelessly. "Nothing is your fault. All that's happened would have happened just the same, no matter what messenger the Foreign Secretary had sent to me. It's fate. And it's my punishment."

"Still, even if Godensky and Girard are friends," Ivor tried to console me, "it isn't likely that the Count has talked to the detective about you and the affair of the treaty."

"He may have gone to him for help in finding out things he couldn't find out himself."

"Hardly, I should say, until there'd been time for him to fear failure. No, the chances are that Girard will have no inner knowledge of the matter I've put into his hands; and if he's a man of honour, he's bound to do the best he can for me, as his employer. Have you seen du Laurier?"

"Yes. At the theatre. Nothing bad had happened to him yet; but that brute Godensky has made dreadful mischief between us. If only I'd known that you would be so late, I might have explained everything to him."

"I'm very sorry," said Ivor, so humbly and so sadly that I pitied him (but not half as much as I pitied myself, even though I hadn't forgotten

that hint he had let drop about a great sacrifice--a girl he loved, whom he had thrown over, somehow, to come to me). "I made every effort to be in time. It seems a piece with the rest of my horrible luck to-day that I was prevented. I hope, at least, that du Laurier knows about the necklace?"

"He does, by this," I answered. "Yet I'm afraid he won't be in a mood to take much comfort from it--thanks to that wretch. You know Raoul hasn't a practical bone in his body. He will think I've deceived him, and nothing else will matter. I must--" But I broke off, and laid my hand on Ivor's arm. "What's that?" I whispered. "Did you hear anything then?"

Ivor shook his head. And we both listened.

"It's a step outside, on the gravel path," said I, my heart beginning to knock against my side. "I forgot to lock the gate. Somebody has come into the garden. What if it should be Raoul--what if he has seen our shadows on the curtain?"

Mechanically we moved apart, Ivor making a gesture to reassure me, on account of the position of the lights. He was right. Our shadows couldn't have fallen on the curtain.

As we stood listening, there came a knock at the front door. It was Raoul's knock. I was sure of that.

If only Ivor had arrived a quarter of an hour earlier, at the time appointed, I should have hurried him away before this, so that I might write to Raoul; but now I could not think what to do for the best--what to do, that things might not be made far worse instead of better between Raoul and me. I had suffered so much that my power of quick decision, on which I'd so often prided myself vaingloriously, seemed gone.

"It is Raoul," I said. "What shall I do?"

"Let him in, of course, and introduce me. Don't act as if you were afraid. Say that I came to see you on important business concerning a friend of yours in England, and had to call after the theatre because I'm leaving Paris by the first train in the morning."

"No use."

"Why not? When a man loves a woman, he trusts her."

"No man of Latin blood, I think. And Raoul's already angry. He has the right to be--or would have, if Godensky had been telling him the truth. And I refused to let him come here. I said I was going straight to bed, I was so tired. He's knocking again. Hide yourself, and I'll let him in. Oh, why do you stand there, looking at me like that? Go into that room," and I pointed, then pushed him towards the door. "You can get through the window and out of the garden--softly--while Raoul and I are talking."

"If you insist," said Ivor. "But you're wrong. The best thing--"

"Go--go, I tell you. Don't argue. I know best," I cut him short, in a sharp whisper, pushing him again.

This time he made no more objections, but went into the adjoining room,

my boudoir. The key was in the door; I turned it in the lock, snatched it out, and dropped it into a bowl of flowers on a table close by. That done, I flew out of the drawing-room into the little entrance hall, and opened the front door. There stood Raoul, his face dead white, and very stern in the light of the hall lamp. I had never seen him like that before.

"I know why you're here," I began quickly, before he could speak. "Count Godensky told me what he said to you. I--hoped you would come."

"Is this why you wished to know what I would do if you deceived me?" he asked, with the bitterest reproach in eyes and voice.

"No. For I hadn't deceived you," I answered. "I haven't deceived you now. If you loved me, you'd believe me, Raoul."

I put out my hand and took his. He gave mine no pressure, but he let me draw him into the house.

"For God's sake, give me back my faith in you, if you can," he said. "It's death to lose it. I came here wanting to die."

"After you'd killed me, as you said?"

"Perhaps. I couldn't keep away. I had to come. If you have any explanation, for the love of Heaven, tell me what it is."

"You know me, and you know Godensky--yet you need an explanation of anything evil said of me by him?" In this way I hoped to disarm Raoul; but he had been half-mad, I think, and was scarcely sane now, such a power had jealousy over his better self.

"Don't play with me!" he exclaimed. "I can't bear it. You sent me away. Yet you had an appointment with Godensky. You took him into your carriage; and now--"

"Marianne was in the carriage. If I could have had you with me, I should have packed her off by herself, alone, that I--might be alone with you. Oh, Raoul, it isn't possible you believe that I could lie to you for Godensky's sake--a man like that! If I'd cared for him, why shouldn't I have accepted him instead of you? Could I have changed so quickly, do you think?"

"I don't think; I'm not able to think. I can only feel," he answered.

"Then--feel sure that I love you--no man but you--now and always."

"Oh, Maxine!" he stammered. "Am I a fool, or wise, to let myself believe you?"

"You are wise," I answered, as firmly as if I deserved the full faith I was claiming from him as my right. "If you wouldn't believe, without my insisting, without my explaining and defending myself, I'd tell you nothing. But you do believe, just because you love me--I see it in your face, and thank God for it. So I'll tell you this. Count Godensky hates me, because I couldn't and wouldn't love him, and he hates you because he thinks I love you. He--" I paused for a second. A wild thought had flashed like the light of a beacon in my brain. If I could say something now which, when the blow fell--if it did fall--might come

back to Raoul's mind and convince him instantly that it was Godensky, not I, who had stolen the treaty and broken him! If I could make him believe the whole thing a monstrous plot of Godensky's to revenge himself on a woman who'd refused him, by cleverly implicating her in her lover's ruin, by throwing guilt upon her while she was, in reality, innocent! If I could suggest that to Raoul now, while his ears were open, I might hold his love against the world, no matter what happened afterward.

It was a mad idea and a wicked one, perhaps; but I was at my wits' end and desperate. Though not guilty of this one crime which I would shift upon his shoulders if I could, as a means of escaping from the trap he'd helped to set, Godensky was capable of it, and guilty of others, I was sure, which had never been brought home to him. I believed that he, too, was a spy, just as I was; and far worse, because if he were one he betrayed his own country, while I never had done that, never would.

All these thoughts rushed through my head in a second; and I think that Raoul could hardly have noticed the pause before I began to speak again.

"He--Godensky--would do anything to part you and me," I said. "There's no plot too sly and vile for him to conceive and carry out against me--and you. No lie too base for him to tell you--or others--about me. He sent me a letter at the theatre--soon after you'd left me the first time. In it, he said that I must give him a few minutes after the play, unless I wanted some dreadful harm to come to you--something concerning your career. That frightened me, though I might have guessed it was only a trick. Indeed, I did guess, but I couldn't be sure, so I saw him. I didn't want you to know--I tell you that frankly, Raoul. Because I'd told you not to come home with me, I hoped you wouldn't find out that I meant to let Count Godensky drive part of the way back with me and Marianne. I ran the risk, and--the very thing happened which I ought to have known would happen. As for what he had to tell me, it was nothing; only vague hints of trouble from which he, as one of an inner circle, might save you, if I--would be grateful enough."

"The scoundrel!" broke out Raoul, convinced now, his eyes blazing.
"I'll--"

He stopped suddenly. But I knew what had been on his lips to say. He meant to send a challenge to Count Godensky. I must prevent him from doing that.

"No, Raoul," I said, as if he had finished his sentence, "you musn't fight. For my sake, you mustn't. Don't you see, it's just what he'd like best? It would be a way of doing me the most dreadful injury. Think of the scandal. Oh, you will think of it, when you're cooler. For you, I would not fear much, for I know what a swordsman you are, and what a shot--far superior to Godensky, and with right on your side. But I would fear for myself. Promise you won't bring this trouble upon me."

"I promise," he answered. "Oh, my darling, what wouldn't I promise you, to atone for my brutal injustice to an angel? How thankful I am that I came to you to-night! I meant not to come. I was afraid of myself, and what I might do. But at last I couldn't hold out against the something that seemed forcing me here in spite of all resistance. Do you forgive me?"

"As a reward for your promise," I said, smiling at him through tears

that would come because I was worn out, and because I knew that it was I who needed his forgiveness, not he mine. "Now are you happy again?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm happy," he said. "Though on the way to this house I didn't dream that it would be possible for me to know happiness any more in this world. And even at your gate--" He stopped suddenly, and his face changed. I waited an instant, but seeing that he didn't mean to go on, I could not resist questioning him. I had to know what had happened at my gate.

"Even at the gate--what?" I asked.

"Nothing. I'm sorry I spoke. I want to show you how completely I trust you now, by not speaking of that."

But this reticence of his only made me more anxious to hear what he had been going to say. I was afraid that I could guess. But I must have it from his lips, and be able to explain away the mystery which, when it recurred to him in the future, might make him doubt me, even though in this moment of exaltation he did not doubt.

"Yes, speak of it," I said. "All the more because it is nothing. For it can be nothing."

"I want to punish myself for asking an explanation about Godensky, by not allowing you to explain this other thing," insisted poor, loyal, repentant Raoul. "Then--at the time--it made all the rest seem worse, a thousand times worse. But I saw through black spectacles. Now I see through rose-coloured ones."

"I'd rather you saw through your own dear eyes, without any spectacles. You must tell me what you're thinking of, dear. For my own sake, if not yours."

"Well--if you will know. But, remember, darling, I'm going to put it out of my mind. I'll ask you no questions, I'll only--tell you the thing itself. As I said, I didn't come here directly after seeing Godensky get into your carriage. I wandered about like a madman--and I thought of the Seine."

"Oh--you must indeed have been mad!"

"I was. But that something saved me--the something that drove me to find you. I walked here, by roundabout ways, but always coming nearer and nearer, as if being drawn into a whirlpool. At last, I was in this street, on the side opposite your house. I hadn't made up my mind yet, that I would try to see you. I didn't know what I would do. I stood still, and tried to think. It was very black, in the angle between two garden walls where the big plane tree sprouts up, you know. Nobody who didn't expect to find a man would have noticed me in the darkness. I hadn't been there for two minutes when a man turned the corner, walking very fast. As he passed the street lamp just before reaching the garden wall, I saw him plainly--not his face, but his figure, and he was young and well dressed, in travelling clothes. I thought he looked like an Englishman. He went straight to your gate and rang. A moment later someone, I couldn't see who, opened the gate and let him in. Involuntarily I took a step forward, with the idea of following--of pushing my way in to see who he was and who had opened the gate. But I

wasn't quite mad enough to act like a cad. The gate shut. Oh, Maxine, there were evil and cruel thoughts in my mind, I confess it to you--but how they made me suffer! I stood as if I were turned to stone, and I only wished that I might be, for a stone knows no pain. Just then a motor cab going slowly along the street stopped in front of your gate. There were two women in it. I could see them by the light of the street lamp, though not as plainly as I'd seen the man, and they appeared to be arguing very excitedly about something. Whatever it was, it must have been in some way concerned with you, or your affairs, because they were tremendously interested in the house. They both looked out, and one pointed several times. Even if I'd intended to go in, I wouldn't have gone while they were there. But the very fact that they were there roused me out of the kind of lethargy of misery I'd fallen into. I wondered who they were, and if they meant you harm or good. When they had driven away I made up my mind that I would see you if I could. I tried the gate, and found it unlocked. I walked in, and--there were lights in these windows. I knew you couldn't have gone to bed yet, though you'd said you were so tired. There was death in my heart then, for you and for me, Maxine, for--the gate hadn't opened again, and--"

"I know what you thought!" I broke in, my heart beating so now that my voice shook a little, though I struggled to seem calm. "You said to yourself, 'It was Maxine who let the man in. He is with her now. I shall find them together.'"

"Yes," Raoul admitted. "But I didn't try the handle of the door, as I had of the gate. I rang. I couldn't bring myself to take you unawares."

"Do you think still that I let a man in, and hid him when I heard you ring?" I asked. (For an instant I was inclined to tell the story Ivor had advised me to tell; but I saw how excited Raoul was; I saw how, in painting the picture for me, he lived through the scene again, and, in spite of himself, suffered almost as keenly as he had suffered in the experience. I saw how his suspicions of me came crawling into his heart, though he strove to lash them back. I dared not bring Ivor out from the other room, if he were still there. He was too handsome, too young, too attractive in every way. If Raoul had been jealous of Count Godensky, whom he knew I had refused, what would he feel towards Ivor Dundas, a stranger whose name I had never mentioned, though he was received at my house after midnight? I was thankful I hadn't taken Ivor's advice and introduced the two men at first, for in his then mood Raoul would have listened to no explanations. He and I would never have arrived at the understanding we had reached now. And not having been frank at first, I must be secret to the end.)

The very asking of such a bold question--"Do you think I let a man in, and hid him?" helped my cause with Raoul.

"No," he said, "I can't think it. I won't, and don't think it. And you need tell me nothing. I love you. And so help me God, I won't distrust you again!"

Just as it entered my mind to risk everything on the chance that Ivor had by this time found his way out, I heard, or fancied I heard, a faint sound in the next room. He was there still.

Instead of throwing open the door, as it had occurred to me to do, saying, "Let us look for the man, and make sure no one else let him in," I laughed out abruptly, as if on a sudden thought, but really to cover

the sound if it should come again.

"Oh, Raoul!" I exclaimed, in the midst of the laughter with which I surprised him. "You're taking this too seriously. A thousand times I thank you for trusting me in spite of appearances, but--after all, were they so much against me? You seem to think I am the only young woman in this house. Marianne, poor dear, is old enough, it's true. But I have a femme de chambre and a cuisiniere, both under twenty-five, both pretty, and both engaged to be married." (This was true. Ah, what a comfort to speak the truth to him!) "Doesn't it occur to you that, at this very moment, a couple of lovers may be sitting hand in hand on the seat under the old yew arbour? Can't you imagine how they started and tried to hold their breath lest you should hear, as you opened the gate and came up the path?"

"Forgive me!" murmured Raoul, in the depths of remorse again.

"Shall we go and look, or shall we leave them in peace?"

"Leave them in peace, by all means."

"The man will be slipping away soon, no doubt. Both Therese and Annette are good little girls."

"Don't let's bother about them. You will be sending me away soon, too, and I shall deserve it. Brute that I am. You were so tired, and I--"

"Oh, I'm better now," I said. "Of course I must send you away by and by, but not quite yet. First, I want to ask if you weren't glad when you saw the jewels?"

"Jewels?" echoed Raoul. "What jewels?"

"You don't mean to say you haven't yet opened the little bag I gave you at the theatre?" I exclaimed.

Raoul looked half ashamed. "Dearest, don't think me ungrateful," he said, "but before I had a chance to open it I met Godensky, and he told me--that lie. It lit a fire in my brain. I forgot all about the bag, and haven't thought of it again till this minute."

At last I laughed with sincerity. "Oh, Raoul, Raoul, you're not fit for this work-a-day world! Well, I'm glad, after all, that I shall be with you, when you see what that little insignificant bag which you've forgotten all this time has in it. Take it out of your pocket, and let's open it together."

For the moment I was almost happy; and that Raoul would be happy, I knew.

His hand went to the inner pocket of his coat, into which I had seen him put the brocade bag. But it did not come out again. It groped; and his face flushed. "Good heavens, Maxine," he said, "I hope you weren't in earnest when you told me that bag held something very valuable to us both, for I've lost it. You know, I've been almost mad. I had my handkerchief in that pocket. I must have pulled it out, and--"

My knees seemed to give way under me. I half fell onto a sofa.

"Raoul," I said, in a queer stifled voice, "the bag had in it the Duchess de Montpellier's diamonds."

IVOR DUNDAS' PART

CHAPTER XII

IVOR GOES INTO THE DARK

Never had I been caught in a situation which I liked less than finding myself, long after midnight, locked by Maxine de Renzie into her boudoir, while within hearing she did her best to convince her lover that no stranger had come on her account to the house.

I had never before visited her in Paris, though she had described her little place there to me when we knew each other in London; and in groping about trying to find another door or a window in the dark room, I ran constant risks of making my presence known by stumbling against the furniture or knocking down some ornament.

I dared not strike a match because of the sharp, rasping noise it would make, and I had to be as cautious as if I were treading with bare feet on glass, although I knew that Maxine was praying for me to be out of the house, and I was as far from wishing to linger as she was to have me stay. Only by a miracle did I save myself once or twice from upsetting a chair or a tall vase of flowers, on my way to a second door which was locked on the other side. At last, however, I discovered a window, and congratulated myself that my trouble and Maxine's danger was nearly over. The room being on the ground floor, though rather high above the level of the garden, I thought that I could easily let myself down. But when I had slipped behind the heavy curtains (they were drawn, and felt smooth, like satin) it was only to come upon a new difficulty.

The window, which opened in the middle like most French windows, was tightly closed, with the catch securely fastened; and as I began slowly and with infinite caution to turn the handle, I felt that the window was going to stick. Perhaps the wood had been freshly painted: perhaps it had swelled; in any case I knew that when the two sashes consented to part they would make a loud protest.

After the first warning squeak I stopped. In the next room Maxine raised her voice--to cover the sound, I was sure. Then it had been worse even than I fancied! I dared not begin again. I would grope about once more, and see if I could hit upon some other way out, which possibly I had missed.

No, there was nothing. No other window, except a small one which apparently communicated with a pantry, and even if that had not seemed too small for me to climb through, it was fastened on the pantry side.

What to do I did not know. It would be a calamity for Maxine if du

Laurier should hear a sound, and insist on having the door opened, after she had given him the impression (if she had not said it in so many words) that there was no stranger in the house.

Probably she hoped that by this time I was gone; but how could I go? I felt like a rat in a trap: and if I had been a nervous woman I should have imagined myself stifling in the small, hot room with its closed doors and windows. As it was, I was uncomfortable enough. My forehead grew damp, as in the first moments of a Turkish bath, and absent mindedly I felt in pocket after pocket for my handkerchief. It was not to be found. I must have lost it at the hotel, or the detective's, or in the automobile I had hired. In an outside pocket of my coat, however, I chanced upon something for the existence of which I couldn't account. It was a very small something: only a bit of paper, but a very neatly folded bit of paper, and I remembered how it had fallen from my pocket onto the floor, and a gendarme had picked it up.

At ordinary times I should most likely not have given it a second thought; but to-night nothing unexpected could be dismissed as insignificant until it had been thoroughly examined. I put the paper back, and as I did so I heard Maxine give an exclamation, apparently of distress. I could not distinguish all she said, but I thought that I caught the word "diamonds." For a moment or two she and du Laurier talked together so excitedly that I might have made another attack on the window without great risk; and I was meditating the attempt when suddenly the voices ceased. A door opened and shut. There was dead silence, except for a footfall overhead, which sounded heavier than Maxine's. Perhaps it was her maid's.

For a few seconds more I stood still, awaiting developments, but there was no sound in the next room, and I decided to take my chance before it should be too late.

I jerked at the window, which yielded with a loud squeak that would certainly have given away the secret of my presence if there had been ears to hear. But all was still in the drawing-room adjoining, and I dropped down on to a flower bed some few feet below. Then I skirted round to the front of the house, walking stealthily on the soft grass, and would have made a noiseless dash for the gate had I not seen a stream of light flowing out through the open front door across the lawn. I checked myself just in time to draw back without being seen by a woman and a tall man moving slowly down the path. They were Maxine and, no doubt, du Laurier. They spoke not a word, but walked with their heads bent, as if deeply absorbed in searching for something on the ground. Down to the gate they went, opened it and passed out, only half closing it behind them, so that I knew they meant presently to come back again.

I should have been thankful to escape, but the chance of meeting them was too imminent. Accordingly I waited, and it was well I did, for as they reappeared in three or four minutes they could not have gone far enough to be out of sight from the gate.

"There's witchcraft in it," Maxine said, as she and her lover passed within a few yards of me, where I hid behind a little arbour.

Du Laurier's answer was lost to me, but his voice sounded despondent. Evidently they had mislaid something of importance and had small hope of finding it again. I could not help being curious, as well as sorry for Maxine that a further misfortune should have befallen her at such a

time. But the one and only way in which I could help her at the moment was to get away as soon as possible.

They had left the gate unlocked, and I drew in a long breath of relief when I was on the other side. I hurried out of the street, lest du Laurier should, by any chance, follow on quickly: and my first thought was to go immediately back to my hotel, where Girard might by now have arrived with news. I was just ready to hail a cab crawling by at a distance, when I remembered the bit of paper I'd found and put back into my pocket. It occurred to me to have a look at it, by the light of a street lamp near by; and the instant I had straightened out the small, crumpled wad I guessed that here was a link in the mystery.

The paper was a leaf torn from a note-book and closely covered on both sides with small, uneven writing done with a sharp black pencil. The handwriting was that of an uneducated person, and was strange to me. I could not make out the words by the light of the tall lamp, so I lit a wax match from my match-box, and protecting the flame in the hollow of my hand, began studying the strange message.

The three first words sent my heart up with a bound. "On board the 'Queen.'" I had crossed the Channel in the "Queen," and this beginning alone was enough to make me hope that the bit of paper might do more than any detective to unravel the mystery.

"I'm taking big risks because I've got to," I read on. "It's my only chance. And if you find this, I bet I can trust you. You're a gentleman, and you saved my life and a lot more besides by getting into that railway-carriage when the other chaps did. The minute I seen them I thot I was done for, but you stopped there game. I'm a jewler's assistant, carrying property worth thousands, for my employers. From the first I knew 'twas bound to be a ticklish job. On this bote I'm safe, for the villion who would have murdered and robbed me in the train if it hadn't been for you being there, won't have a chance, but when I get to Paris it will be the worst, and no hope for the jewls, followed as I am, if I hadn't already thot of a plan to save them through you, an honest gentleman far above temptashun. I know who you are, for I've seen your photo in the papers. So, what I did was this: to try a ventriloquist trick which has often bin of use in my carere, just as folks were on the boat's gangway. Thro' making that disturbance, and a little skill I have got by doing amatoor conjuring to amuse my wife and famly, I was able to slip the case of my employer's jewls into your breast pocket without your knowing. And I had to take away what you had in, not that I wanted to rob one who had done good by me, but because if I'd left it the double thickness would have surprised you and you would probably have pulled out my case to see what it was. Then my fat would have bin in the fire, with certin persons looking on, and you in danger as well as me which wouldn't be fare. I've got your case in my pocket as I write, but I won't open it because it may have your sweetart's letters in. You can get your property again by bringing me my master's, which is fare exchange. I can't call on you, for I don't know where your going and daren't hang round to see on account of the danger I run, and needing to meet a pal of mine who will help me. I must get to him at once, if I am spared to do so, for which reason I wrote out this explanashun. The best I can do is to slip it in your pocket which I shall try when in the railway stashun at

Paris. You see how I trust you as a gentleman to bring me the jewls. Come as soon as you can, and get your own case instead, calling at 218 Rue Fille Sauvage, Avenue Morot, back room, top floor, left of passage. Expressing my gratitood in advance,

"I am,

"Yours trustfully,

"J.M. Jeweler's Messenger.

"P.S.--For heaven's sake don't fale, and ask the concierge for name of Gestre."

If it had not been for my rage at not having read this illuminating little document earlier, I should have felt like shouting with joy. As it was, my delight was tempered with enough of regret to make it easier to restrain myself.

But for the fear that du Laurier might be still with Maxine, I should have rushed back to her house for a moment, just long enough to give her the good news. But in the circumstances I dared not do it, lest she should curse instead of bless me: and besides, as there was still a chance of disappointment, it might be better in any case not to raise her hopes until there was no danger of dashing them again. The best thing was to get the treaty back, without a second of delay. As for the detective, who was perhaps waiting for me at the hotel, he would have to wait longer, or even go away disgusted--nothing made much difference now. Maybe, when once I had the treaty in my hands, I might send a messenger with a few cautious words to Maxine. No matter how late the hour, she was certain not to be asleep.

The cab I had seen crawling through the street had disappeared long ago, and no other was in sight, so I walked quickly on, hoping to find one presently. It was now so late, however, that in this quiet part of Paris no carriages of any sort were plying for hire. Finally I made up my mind that I should have to go all the way on foot; but I knew the direction of the Avenue Morot, though I'd never heard of Rue de la Fille Sauvage, and as it was not more than two miles to walk, I could reach the house I wanted to find in half an hour.

A few minutes more or less ought not to matter much, since "J. M." was sure to be awaiting me with impatience; therefore the thing which bothered me most was the effect likely to be produced on the man when I could not hand him over the diamonds in exchange for the treaty.

Of course I didn't believe that "J.M." was a jeweller's messenger, though possibly I might have been less incredulous if Maxine had not told me the true history of the diamonds, and what had happened in Holland. As it was, I had very little doubt that the rat of a man I had chanced to protect in the railway carriage was no other than the extraordinarily expert thief who had relieved du Laurier of the Duchess's necklace.

Following out a theory which I worked up as I walked, I thought it probable that the fellow had been helped by confederates whom he had contrived to dodge, evading them and sneaking off to London in the hope of cheating them out of their share of the spoil. Followed by them, dreading their vengeance, I fancied him flitting from one hiding-place

to another, not daring to separate himself from the jewels; at last determining to escape, disguised, from England, where the scent had become too hot; reserving a first-class carriage in the train to Dover, and travelling with a golfer's kit; struck with panic at the last moment on seeing the very men he fled to avoid, close on his heels, and opening the door of his reserved carriage with a railway key.

All this was merely deduction, for so far as I had seen, "J.M.'s" travelling companions hadn't even accosted him. Still, the theory accounted for much that had been puzzling, and made it plausible that a man should be desperate enough to trust his treasure to a stranger (known only through "photos in the newspapers") rather than risk losing it to those he had betrayed.

I resolved to use all my powers of diplomacy to extract from "J.M." the case containing the treaty before he learned that he was not to receive the diamonds in its place; and I had no more than vaguely mapped out a plan of proceeding before I arrived in the Avenue Morot. Thence I soon found my way into the Rue de la Fille Sauvage, a mean street, to which the queer name seemed not inappropriate. The house I had to visit was an ugly big box of a building, with rooms advertised to let, as I could see by the light of a street lamp across the way, which gleamed bleakly on the lines of shut windows behind narrow iron balconies.

The large double doors, from which the paint had peeled in patches, were closed, but I rang the bell for the concierge; and after a delay of several minutes I heard a slight click which meant that the doors had opened for me. I passed into a dim lobby, to be challenged by a sleepy voice behind a half open window. The owner of the voice kept himself invisible and was no doubt in the bunk which he called his bed. Only a stern sense of duty as concierge woke him up enough to demand, mechanically, who it was that the strange monsieur desired to visit at this late hour?

I replied according to instructions. I wished to see Monsieur Gestre.

"Monsieur Gestre is away," murmured the voice behind the little window.

I thought quickly. Gestre was probably the "pal" whom "J.M." had been in such a hurry to find. "Very well," said I, "I'll see his friend, the Englishman who arrived this evening. I have an appointment with him."

"Ah, I understand. I remember. Is it not that Monsieur has been here already? He now returns, as he mentioned that he might do?"

Again my thoughts made haste to arrange themselves. The "monsieur" who had called had probably also arrived late, after the concierge had gone to bed in his dim box, and become too drowsy to notice such details as the difference between voices, especially if they were those of foreigners. Perhaps if I explained that I was not the person who had said he would come again, but another, the man behind the window would consider me a complication, and refuse to let me pass at such an hour without a fuss. And of all things, a fuss was what I least wanted--for Maxine's sake, and because of the treaty. I decided to seize upon the advantage that was offered me.

"Quite right," I said shortly. "I know the way." And so began to mount the stairs. Flight after flight I went up, meeting no one; and on the fifth floor I found that I had reached the top of the house. There were

no more stairs to go up.

On each of the floors below there had been a dim light--a jet of gas turned low. But the fifth floor was in darkness. Someone had put out the light, either in carelessness or for some special reason.

There were several doors on each side of the passage, but I could not be sure that I had reached the right one until I'd lighted a match. When I was sure, I knocked, but no answer came.

"He can't be out," I said to myself, cheerfully. "He's got tired of waiting and dropped asleep, that's all."

I knocked again. Silence. And then for a third time, loudly, keeping on until I was sure that, if there were anyone in the room, no matter how sound asleep, I must have waked him.

After all, he had gone out, but perhaps only for a short time. Surely, he would soon come back, lest he should miss the keeper of the diamonds.

I had very little hope that, even on the chance of my arriving while he was away, he would have left the door open. Nevertheless I tried the handle, and to my surprise it yielded.

"That must be because the lock's broken and only a bolt remains," I thought. "So he had to take the risk. All the better. This looks as if he'd be back any minute. He wouldn't like giving the enemy a chance to find his lair and step into it before him." It was dark in the room, and I struck another wax match just inside the threshold. But I had hardly time to get an impression of bareness and meanness of furnishing before a draught of air from an open window blew out the struggling flame and at the same instant banged the door shut behind me.

CHAPTER XIII

IVOR FINDS SOMETHING IN THE DARK

There was a strong smell of paraffin oil in the room; and from somewhere at the far end came a faint tap, tapping sound, which might be the light knocking of a window-blind or the rap of a signalling finger.

If I could steer my way to the window and pull back the drawn curtains I might be able to let in light enough to find matches on mantelpiece or table. Then, what good luck if I should discover the case containing the treaty and go off with it before "J.M." came back! It was not his, and he was a thief: therefore, I should be doing him no wrong and Maxine de Renzie much good by taking it, if he had left it behind, not too well hidden when he went out.

Guided in the darkness by a slight breeze which still came through the window, though the door was now shut, I shuffled across the uncarpeted floor, groping with hands held out before me as I moved.

In a moment I brushed against a table, then struck my shin on something which proved to be the leg of a chair lying over-turned on the floor. I

pushed it out of the way, but had gone on no more than three or four steps when I caught my foot in a rug which had got twisted in a heap round the fallen chair. I disentangled myself from its coils, only to slip and almost lose my balance by stepping into some spilled liquid which lay thick and greasy on the bare boards.

The warm hopefulness which I had brought into this dark, silent room was chilled and dying now.

"I'm afraid there's been a struggle here," I thought. And if there had been a struggle--what of the treaty?

There seemed to be a good deal of the spilled liquid, for as I felt my way along, more anxious than ever for light, the floor was still wet and slippery; and then, in the midst of the puddle, I stumbled over a thing that was heavy and soft to the touch of my foot.

A queer tingling, like the sting of a thousand tiny electric needles pricked through my veins, for even before I stooped and laid my hand on that barrier which was so heavy and yet so soft as it stopped my path, I knew what it would prove to be.

It was as if I could see through the dark, to what it hid. But though there was no surprise left, there was a shock of horror as my fingers touched an arm, a throat, an upturned face. And my fingers were wet, as I knew my boots must be. And I knew, too, with what they were wet.

I'm ashamed to say that, after the first shock of the discovery, my impulse was to get away, and out of the whole business, in which, for reasons which concerned others even more than myself, it would be unpleasant to be involved, just at this time especially. I could go downstairs now, past the sleeping concierge, and with luck no one need ever know that I had been in this dark room of death.

But as quickly as the impulse came, it went. I must stop here and search for the treaty, no matter what happened, until I had found it or made sure it was not to be found; I must not think of escape. If there were matches in the room, well and good; if not, I must go elsewhere for them, and come back. It was a grim task, but it had to be done.

Somehow, I got to the mantelpiece; and there luckily, among a litter of pipes and bottles and miscellaneous rubbish, I did lay my hand on a broken cup containing a few matches. I struck one, which showed me on the mantel an end of a candle standing up in a bed of its own grease. I lighted it, and not until the flame was burning brightly did I look round.

There was but a faint illumination, yet it was enough to give me the secret of the room. I might have seen all at a glance as I came in, before the light of my last match was blown out by the wind, had not the door as I opened it formed a screen between me and the dead man on the floor.

He lay in the midst of the wildest confusion. In falling, he had dragged with him the cover of a table, and a glass lamp which was smashed in pieces, the spilled oil mingling with the stream of his blood. A chair had been overturned, and a broken plate and tumbler with the tray that had held them were half hidden in the folds of a disordered rug.

But this was not all. The struggle for life did not account for the condition of other parts of the room. Papers were scattered over the floor: the drawers of an old escritoire had been jerked out of place and their contents strewn far and near. The doors of a wardrobe were open, and a few shabby coats and pairs of trousers thrown about, with the pockets wrong side out or torn in rags. A chest of drawers had been ransacked, and a narrow, hospital bed stripped of sheets and blankets, the stuffing of the mattress pulled into small pieces. The room looked as if a whirlwind had swept through it, and as I forced myself to go near the body I saw that it had not been left in peace by the murderer. The blood-stained coat was open, the pockets of the garments turned out, like those in the wardrobe, and all the clothing disarranged, evidently by hands which searched for something with frenzied haste and merciless determination.

The cunning forethought of the wretched man had availed him nothing. I could imagine how joyously he had arrived at this house, believing that he had outwitted the enemy. I pictured his disappointment on not finding the friend who could have helped and supported him. I saw how he had planned to defend himself in case of siege, by locking and bolting the door (both lock and bolt were broken); I fancied him driven by hunger to search his friend's quarters for food, and fearfully beginning a supper in the midst of which he had probably been interrupted. Almost, I could feel the horror with which he must have trembled when steps came along the corridor, when the door was tried and finally broken in by force without any cry of his being heard. I guessed how he had rushed to the window, opened it, only to stare down at the depths below and return desperately, to stand at bay; to protest to the avengers that he had not the jewels; that he had been deceived; that he was innocent of any intention to defraud them; that he would explain all, make anything right if only they would give him time.

But they had not given him time. They had punished him for robbing them of the diamonds by robbing him of his life. They had made him pay with the extreme penalty for his treachery; and yet in the flickering candle-light the stricken face, blood-spattered though it was, seemed to leer slyly, as if in the knowledge that they had been cheated in the end.

The confusion of the room promised badly for my hopes, nevertheless there was a chance that the murderers, intent only on finding the diamonds or some letters relating to their disposal, might, if they found the treaty, have hastily flung it aside, as a thing of no value.

Though the corridors of the house were lit by gas, this room had none, and the lamp being broken, I had to depend upon the bit of candle which might fail while I still had need of it. I separated it carefully from its bed of grease on the mantel, and as I did so the wavering light touched my hand and shirt cuff. Both were stained red, and I turned slightly sick at the sight. There was blood on my brown boots, too, and the grey tweed clothes which I had not had time to change since arriving in Paris.

I told myself that I must do my best to wash away these tell-tale stains before leaving the room; but first I would look for the treaty.

I began my search by stirring up the mass of scattered papers on the floor, and in spite of the horror which gripped me by the throat, I cried "hurrah!" when, half hidden by the twisted rug, I saw the missing

letter-case. It was lying spread open, back uppermost, and there came an instant of despair when I pounced on it only to find it empty. But there was the treaty on the floor underneath; and lucky it was that the searchers had thrown it out, for there were gouts of blood on the letter-case, while the treaty was clean and unspotted.

With a sense of unutterable relief which almost made up for everything endured and still to be endured, I slipped the document back into the pocket from which it had been stolen.

At that moment a board creaked in the corridor, and then came a step outside the door.

My blood rushed up to my head. But it was not of myself I thought; it was of the treaty. If I were to be caught here, alone with the dead man, my hands and clothing stained with his blood, I should be arrested. The treaty must not be found on me. Yet I must hide it, save it. I made a dash for the window, and once outside, standing on the narrow balcony, I threw the candle-end into the room, aiming for the fire-place. Faint starlight, sifting through heavy clouds, showed me a row of small flower-pots standing in a wooden box. Hastily I wrapped the treaty in a towel which hung over the iron railing, lifted out two of the flower-pots (in which the plants were dead and dry), laid the flat parcel I had made in the bottom of the box, and replaced the pots to cover and conceal it. Then I walked back into the room again. A hand, fumbling at the handle of the door, pushed it open with a faint creaking of the hinges. Then the light of a dark lantern flashed.

DIANA FORREST'S PART

CHAPTER XIV

DIANA TAKES A MIDNIGHT DRIVE

Some people apparently understand how to be unhappy gracefully, as if it were a kind of fine art. I don't. It seems too bad to be true that I should be unhappy, and as if I must wake up to find that it was only a bad dream.

I suppose I've been spoiled a good deal all my life. Everybody has been kind to me, and tried to do things for my pleasure, just as I have for them; and I have taken things for granted--except, of course, with Lisa. But Lisa is different--different from everyone else in the world. I have never expected anything from her, as I have from others. All I've wanted was to make her as happy as such a poor, little, piteous creature could be, and to teach myself never to mind anything that she might say or do.

But Ivor--to be disappointed in him, to be made miserable by him! I didn't know it was possible to suffer as I suffered that day he went off and left me standing in the railway-station. I didn't dream then of going to Paris. If anybody had told me I would go, I should have said, "No, no, I will not." And yet I did. I allowed myself to be persuaded. I

tried to make myself think that it was to please Aunt Lilian; but down underneath I knew all the time it wasn't that, really. It was because I couldn't bear to do the things I'm accustomed to doing every day. I felt as if I should cry, or scream, or do something ridiculous and awful unless there were a change of some sort--any change, but if possible some novelty and excitement, with people talking to me every minute.

Perhaps, too, there was an attraction for me in the thought that I would be in Paris while Ivor was there. I kept reminding myself on the boat and the train that nothing good could happen; that Ivor and I could never be as we had been before; that it was all over between us for ever and ever, and through his fault. But, there at the bottom was the thought that I might have done him an injustice, because he had begged me to trust him, and I wouldn't. Just suppose--something in myself kept on saying--that we should by mere chance meet in Paris, and he should be able to prove that he hadn't come for Maxine de Renzie's sake! It would be too glorious. I should begin to live again--for already I'd found out that life without loving and trusting Ivor wasn't life at all.

He couldn't think I had followed him, even if he did see me in Paris, because I would be with my Aunt and Uncle, and Lord Robert West; and I made up my mind to be very nice to Lord Bob, much nicer than I ever had been, if Ivor happened to run across us anywhere.

Then that very thing did happen, in the strangest and most unexpected way, but instead of being happier for seeing him, I was ten times more unhappy than before--for now the misery had no gleam of hope shining through its blackness.

That was what I told myself at first. But after we had met in the hall of the hotel, and Ivor had seemed confused, and wouldn't give up his mysterious engagement, or say what it was, though Lisa chaffed him and he must have known what I thought, I suddenly forgot the slight he had put upon me. Instead of being angry with him, I was afraid for him, I couldn't have explained why, unless it was the look on his face when he turned away from me.

No man would look like that who was going of his own free will to a woman with whom he was in love, that same queer something whispered in my ear. Instead of feeling sick and sorry for myself and desperately angry with him, it was Ivor I felt sorry for.

I pretended not to care whether he stayed or went, and talked to Lord Robert West as if I'd forgotten that there was such a person as Ivor Dundas. I even turned my back on him before he was gone. Still I seemed to see the tragic look in his eyes, and the dogged set of his jaw. It was just as if he were going away from me to his death; and his face was like that of the man in Millais' picture of the Huguenot Lovers. I wondered if that girl had been broken-hearted because he wouldn't let her tie round his arm the white scarf that might have saved him.

It is strange how one's mood can change in a moment--but perhaps it is like that only with women. A minute before I'd been trying to despise Ivor, and to argue, just as if I'd been a match-making mamma, to myself that it would be a very good thing if I could make up my mind to marry Lord Bob; that it would be rather nice being a Duchess some day; and that besides, perhaps Ivor would be sorry when he heard that I was engaged to somebody else.

But then, as I said, quite suddenly it was as if a sharp knife had been stuck into my heart and turned round and round. I would have given anything to run after Ivor to tell him that I loved him dreadfully and would trust him in spite of all.

"You look as pale as if you were going to faint," said Lisa, in her little high-keyed voice, which, though she doesn't speak loudly, always reaches to the farthest corners of the biggest rooms.

I did think it was unkind of her to call everyone's attention to me just then, for even strangers heard, and turned to throw a glance at me as they passed.

"It must be the light," I said, "for I don't feel in the least faint." That was a fib, because when you are as miserable as I was at that minute your heart feels cold and heavy, as though it could hardly go on beating. But I felt that if ever a fib were excusable, that one was. "I'm a little tired, though," I went on. "None of us got to bed till after three last night; and this day, though very nice of course, has been rather long. I think, if you don't mind, Aunt Lil, I'll go straight to my room when we get upstairs."

We all went up together in the lift, but I said good-night to the others at the door of the pretty drawing-room at the end of Uncle Eric's suite.

"Shan't I come with you?" asked Lisa, but I said "no." It was something new for her to offer to help me, for she isn't very strong, and has always been the one to be petted and watched over by me, though she's a few years older than I am.

Aunt Lilian had brought her maid, without whom she can't get on even for a single night, but Lisa and I had left ours at home, and Aunt Lil had offered to let Morton help us as much as we liked. I hadn't been shut up in my room for two minutes, therefore, when Morton knocked to ask if she could do anything. But I thanked her, and sent her away.

I had not yet begun to undress, but was standing in the window, looking along the Champs Elysees, brilliant still with electric lights, and full of carriages and motor-cars bringing people home from theatres and dinner-parties, or taking them to restaurants for supper.

Down there somewhere was Ivor, going farther away from me every moment, though last night at about this time he had been telling me how he loved me, how I was the One Girl in the world for him, and always, always would be. Here was I, remembering in spite of myself every word he had said, hearing again the sound of his voice and seeing the look in his eyes as he said it. There was he, going to the woman for whose sake he had been willing to break with me.

But was he going to her? I asked myself. If not, when they had chaffed him he might easily have mentioned what his engagement really was, knowing, as he must have known, exactly how he made me suffer.

Still--why had he looked so miserable, if he didn't care what I thought, and was really ready to throw me over at a call from her? The whole thing began to appear more complicated, more mysterious than I had felt it to be at first, when I was smarting with my disappointment in Ivor, and tingling all over with the humiliation he seemed to have put upon me.

"Oh, to know, to know, what he's doing at this minute!" I whispered, half aloud, because it was comforting in my loneliness to hear the sound of my own voice. "To know whether I'm doing him the most awful injustice--or not!"

Just then, at the door between my room and Lisa's, next to mine, came a tapping, and instantly after the handle was tried. But I had turned the key, thinking that perhaps this very thing might happen--that Lisa might wish to come, and not wait till I'd given her permission. She does that sort of thing sometimes, for she is rather curious and impish (Ivor calls her "Imp"), and if she thinks people don't want her that is the very time when she most wants them.

"Oh, Di, do let me in!" she exclaimed.

For a second or two I didn't answer. Never in my life had I liked poor Lisa less than I'd liked her for the last four and twenty hours, though I'd told myself over and over again that she meant well, that she was acting for my good, and that some day I would be grateful instead of longing to slap her, as I couldn't help doing now. But always before, when she has irritated me until I've nearly forgotten my promise to her father (my step-father) always to be gentle with her in thought and deed, I have felt such pangs of remorse that I've tried to atone, even when there wasn't really anything to atone for, except in my mind. I was afraid that, if I refused to let her come in, she would go to bed angry with me. And when Lisa is angry she generally has a heart attack and is ill next day. "Di, are you there?" she called again.

Without answering, I went to the door and unlocked it. She came in with a rush. "I feel perfectly wild, as if I must do something desperate," she said.

So did I, but I didn't mean to let her know that.

"I'm going out," she went on. "If I don't, I shall have a fit."

"Out!" I repeated. "You can't. It's midnight."

"Can't? There's no such word for me as 'can't,' when I want to do anything, and you ought to know that," said she. "It's only being ill that ever stops me, and I'm not ill to-night. I feel as if electricity were flowing all through me, making my nerves jump, and I believe you feel exactly the same way. Your eyes are as big as half-crowns, and as black as ink."

"I am a little nervous," I confessed. And I couldn't help thinking it odd that Lisa and I should both be feeling that electrical sensation at the same time. "Perhaps it's in the air. Maybe there's going to be a thunder-storm. There are clouds over the stars, and a wind coming up."

"Maybe it's partly that, maybe not," said she. "But there's one thing I'm sure of. Something's going to happen."

"Do you feel that, too?" I broke out before I'd stopped to think. Then I wished I hadn't. But it was too late to wish. Lisa caught me up quickly.

"Ah, I knew you did!" she cried, looking as eerie and almost as haggard as a witch. "Something is going to happen. Come. Go with me

and be in it, whatever it is."

"No," I said. "And you mustn't go either." But she was weird. She seemed to lure me, like a strange little siren, with all a siren's witchery, though without her beauty. My voice sounded undecided, and I knew it.

"Of course I'm not asking you to wander with me in the night, hand in hand through the streets of Paris, like the Two Orphans," said Lisa. "I'm going to have a closed carriage--a motor-brougham, one belonging to the hotel, so it's quite safe. It's ordered already, and I shall first drive and drive until my nerves stop jerking and my head throbbing. If you won't drive with me I shall drive alone. But there'll be no harm in it, either way. I didn't know you were so conventional as to think there could be. Where's your brave, independent American spirit?"

"I'm not conventional," I said.

"Yes, you are. Living in England has spoiled you. You're afraid of things you never used to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid of things, and I'm not a bit changed," I said. "You only want to 'dare' me."

"I want you to go with me. It would be so much nicer than going alone," she begged. "Supposing I got ill in a hired cab? I might, you know; but I can't stay indoors, whatever happens. If we were together it would be an adventure worth remembering."

"Very well," I said, "I'll go with you, not for the adventure, but rather than have you make a fuss because I try to keep you in, and rather than you should go alone."

"Good girl!" exclaimed Lisa, quite pleasant and purring, now that she had got her way; though if I'd refused she would probably have cried. She is terrifying when she cries. Great, deep sobs seem almost to tear her frail little body to pieces. She goes deadly white, and sometimes ends up by a fit of trembling as if she were in an ague.

"Have you really ordered a motor cab?" I asked.

"Yes," said she. "I rang for a waiter, and sent him down to tell the big porter at the front door to get me one. Then I gave him five francs, and said I did not want anybody to know, because I must visit a poor, sick friend who had written to say she was in great trouble, but wished to tell no one except me that she'd come to Paris."

"I shouldn't have thought such an elaborate story necessary to a waiter," I remarked, tossing up my chin a little, for I don't like Lisa's subterranean ways. But this time she didn't even try to defend herself.

"Let's get ready at once," she said. "I'm going to put on my long travelling cloak, to cover up this dress, and wear my black toque, with a veil. I suppose you'll do the same? Then we can slip out, and down the 'service' stairs. The carriage is to wait for us at the side entrance."

I looked at her, trying to read her secretive little face. "Lisa, are you planning to go somewhere in particular, do something you want to 'spring' on me when it's too late for me to get out of it?"

"How horrid of you to be so suspicious of me! You do hurt my feelings! I haven't had an inspiration yet, so I can't make a plan. But it will come; I know it will. I shall feel where we ought to go, to be in the midst of an adventure--oh, without being mixed up in it, so don't look horrified! I told you that something was going to happen, and that I wanted to be in it. Well, I mean to be, when the inspiration comes."

We put on our dark hats and long travelling cloaks. I pinned on Lisa's veil, and my own. Then she peeped to see if anyone were about; but there was nobody in the corridor. We hurried out, and as Lisa already knew where to find the 'service' stairs, we were soon on the way down. At the side entrance of the hotel the motor-cab was waiting, and when we were both seated inside, Lisa spoke in French to the driver, who waited for orders.

"I think you might take us to the Rue d'Hollande. Drive fast, please. After that, I'll tell you where to go next."

"Is this your 'inspiration'?" I asked.

"I'm not sure yet. Why?" and her voice was rather sharp.

"For no particular reason. I'm a little curious, that's all."

We drove on for some minutes in silence. I was sure now that Lisa had been playing with me, that all along she had had some special destination in her mind, and that she had her own reasons for wanting to bring me to it. But what use to ask more questions? She did not mean me to find out until she was ready for me to know.

She had told the man to go quickly, and he obeyed. He rushed us round corners and through street after street which I had never seen before--quiet streets, where there were no cabs, and no gay people coming home from theatres and dinners. At last we turned into a particularly dull little street, and stopped.

"Is this the Rue d'Hollande?" Lisa enquired of the driver, jumping quickly up and putting her head out of the window.

"Mais oui, Mademoiselle," I heard the man answer.

"Then stop where you are, please, until I give you new orders."

"I should have thought this was the sort of street where nothing could possibly happen," said I.

"Wait a little, and maybe you'll find out you're mistaken. If nothing does, and we aren't amused, we can go on somewhere else."

She had not finished speaking when a handsome electric carriage spun almost noiselessly round the corner. It slowed down before a gate set in a high wall, almost covered with creepers, and though the street was dimly lighted and we had stopped at a little distance, I could see that the house behind the wall, though not large, was very quaint and pretty, an unusual sort of house for Paris, it seemed to me.

Scarcely had the electric carriage come to a halt when the chauffeur, in neat, dark livery, jumped down to open the door; and quickly a tall,

slim woman sprang out, followed by another, elderly and stout, who looked like a lady's maid.

I could not see the face of either, but the light of the lamp on our side of the way shone on the hair of the slim young woman in black, who got down first. It was gorgeous hair, the colour of burnished copper. I had heard a man say once that only two women in the world had hair of that exact shade: Jane Hading and Maxine de Renzie.

My heart gave a great bound, and I guessed in an instant why Lisa had brought me here, though how she could have learned where to find the house, I didn't know.

"Oh, Lisa!" I reproached her. "How could you?"

"It really was an inspiration. I'm sure of that now," she said quietly, though I could tell by her tone that she was trying to hide excitement. "You never saw that woman before, except once on the stage, yet you know who she is. You jumped as if she had fired a shot at you."

"I know by the hair," I answered. "I might have foreseen this would be the kind of thing you would think of--it's like you."

"You ought to be grateful to me for thinking of it," said Lisa. "It's entirely for your sake; and it's quite true, it was an inspiration to come here. This afternoon in the train I read an interview in 'Femina' with Maxine de Renzie, about the new play she's produced to-night. There was a picture of her, and a description of her house in the Rue d'Hollande."

"Now you have satisfied your curiosity. You've seen her back, and her maid's back, and the garden wall," I said, more sharply than I often speak to Lisa. "I shall tell the driver to take us to the hotel at once. I know why you want to wait here, but you shan't--I won't. I'm going away as quickly as I can."

She caught my dress as I would have leaned out to speak to the driver. Her manner had suddenly changed, and she was all softness and sweetness, and persuasiveness.

"Di, dearest girl, don't be cross with me; please don't misunderstand," she implored. "I love you, you know, even if you sometimes think I don't; I want you to be happy--oh, wait a moment, and listen. I've been so miserable all day, knowing you were miserable; and I've felt horribly guilty for fear, after all, I'd said too much. Of course if you'd guessed where I meant to come, you wouldn't have stirred out of the hotel, and it was better for you to see for yourself. Unless Ivor Dundas came here with a motor-cab, as we did, he could hardly have arrived yet, so if he does come, we shall know. If he doesn't come, we shall know, too. Think how happy you'll feel if he doesn't! I'll apologise to you then, frankly and freely; and I suppose you would not mind apologising to him, if necessary?"

"He may be in the house now," I said, more to myself than to Lisa.

"If he is, he'll come out and meet her when he hears the gate open. There, it's open now. The maid's unlocked it. No, there's nobody in the garden."

"I can't stop here and watch for him, like a spy," I said.

"Not like a spy, but like a girl who thinks she may have done a man an injustice. It's for his sake I ask you to stay. And if you won't, I must stay alone. If you insist on going away, I'll get out and stand in the street, either until Ivor Dundas has come, or until I'm sure he isn't coming. But how much better to wait and see for yourself."

"You know I can't go off and leave you standing here," I answered. "And I can't leave you sitting in the carriage, and walk through the streets alone. I might meet--" I would not finish my sentence, but Lisa must have guessed the name on my lips.

"The only thing to do, then, is for us to stop where we are, together," said Lisa, "for stop I must and shall, in justice to myself, to Ivor Dundas and to you. You couldn't force me away, even if you wanted to use force."

"Which you know is out of the question," I said, desperately. "But why has your conscience begun to reproach you for trying to put me against Ivor? You seemed to have no scruples whatever, last night and this morning."

"I've been thinking hard since then. I want my warning to you either to be justified, or else I want to apologise humbly. For if Ivor doesn't come to this house to-night, in spite of his embarrassment when he spoke about an engagement, I shall believe that he doesn't care a rap about Maxine de Renzie."

I said no more, but leaned back against the cushions, my heart beating as if it were in my throat, and my brain throbbing in time with it. I could not think, or argue with myself what was really right and wise to do. I could only give myself up, and drift with circumstances.

"A man has just come round the far corner," whispered Lisa. "Is it Ivor? I can't make out. He doesn't look our way."

"Thank Heaven we're too far off for him to see our faces! I would rather die than have Ivor know we're here," I broke out.

"I don't think it is Ivor," Lisa went on. "He's hidden himself in the shadow, as if he were watching. It's that house he's interested in. Who can he be, if not Ivor? A detective, perhaps."

"Why should a detective watch Mademoiselle de Renzie's house?" I asked, in spite of myself.

Lisa seemed a little confused, as if she had said something she regretted.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she answered hastily. "Why, indeed? It was just a thought. The man seems so anxious not to be seen. Oh--keep back, Di, don't look out for an instant, till he's passed. Ivor is coming now. He's walking in a great hurry. There! he can't see you. He's far enough away for you to peep, and see for yourself. He's at Maxine de Renzie's gate."

It was all over, then, and no more hope. His eyes when they gave me that tragic look had lied, even as his lips had lied last night, when he told

me there was no other woman in his world but me.

"I won't look," I stammered, almost choking.

"Someone, I can't see who, is letting him in. The gate's shut behind him."

"Let us go now," I begged.

"No, no, not yet!" cried Lisa. "I must know what happens next. We are in the midst of it, indeed."

I hardly cared what she did, now. Ivor had come to see Maxine de Renzie, and nothing else mattered very much. I had no strength to insist that we should go.

"I wonder what the man in the shadow would do if he saw us?" Lisa said. Then she leaned out, on the side away from the hiding man, and softly told our chauffeur to go very slowly along the street. This he did, but the man did not move.

"Stop before that house behind the wall with the creepers," directed Lisa, but I would not allow that.

"No, he shall not stop there!" I exclaimed. "Lisa, I forbid it. You've had your way in everything so far. I won't let you have it in this."

"Very well, we'll turn the corner into the next street, to please you," said Lisa; and she gave orders to the chauffeur again. "Now stop," she cried, when we had gone half way down the street, out of sight and hearing of anyone in the Rue d'Hollande. Then, in another instant, before I had any idea what she meant to do, she was out of the cab, running like a child in the direction whence we had come. I looked after her, hesitating whether or not to follow (for I could not bear to risk meeting Ivor), and saw that she paused at the corner. She was peeping into the Rue d'Hollande, to find out what was happening there.

"She will come back in a moment or two," I said to myself wearily, and sat waiting. For a little while she stood with her long dress gathered up under her cloak: then she darted round the corner and vanished. If she had not appeared again almost at once, I should have had to tell the driver to follow, though I hated the thought of going again into the street where Maxine de Renzie lived. But she did come, and in her hand was a pretty little brocade bag embroidered with gold or silver that sparkled even in the faint light.

"I saw this lying in the street, and ran to pick it up," she exclaimed.

"You might better have left it," I said stiffly. "Perhaps Mademoiselle de Renzie dropped it."

"No, I don't think so. It wasn't in front of her house."

"It may belong to that man who was watching, then."

"It doesn't look much like a thing that a man would carry about with him, does it?"

"No," I admitted, indifferently. "Now we will go home."

"Don't you want to wait and see how long Ivor Dundas stops?"

"Indeed I don't!" I cried. "I don't want to know any more about him." And for the moment I almost believed that what I said was true.

"Very well," said Lisa, "perhaps we do know enough to prove to us both that I haven't anything to reproach myself with. And the less you think about him after this, the better."

"I shan't think about him at all," I said. But I knew that was a boast I should never be able to keep, try as I might. I felt now that I could understand how people must feel when they are very old and weary of life. I don't believe that I shall feel older and more tired if I live to be eighty than I felt then. It was a slight comfort to know that we were on our way back to the hotel, and that soon I should be in my room alone, with the door shut and locked between Lisa and me; but it was only very slight. I couldn't imagine ever being really pleased about anything again.

"You will marry Lord Robert now, I suppose," chirped Lisa, "and show Ivor Dundas that he hasn't spoiled your life."

As she asked this question she was tugging away at a knot in the ribbons that tied the bag she had found.

"Perhaps I shall," I answered. "I might do worse."

"I should think you might!" exclaimed Lisa. "Oh, do accept him soon. I don't want Ivor Dundas to say to himself that you're broken-hearted for him. Lord Bob is sure to propose to you to-morrow--even if he hasn't already: and if he has, he'll do it again. I saw it in his eye all to-day. He was dying to speak at any minute, if only he'd got a chance with you alone. You will say 'yes' when he does, won't you, and have the engagement announced at once?"

"I'll see how I feel at the time, if it comes," I answered, trying to speak gaily, but making a failure of it.

At last Lisa had got the brocade bag open, and was looking in. She seemed surprised by what she saw, and very much interested. She put in her hand, and touched the thing, whatever it was; but she did not tell me what was there. Probably she wanted to excite my curiosity, and make me ask. But I didn't care enough to humour her. If the bag had been stuffed full of the most gorgeous jewels in the world, at that moment I shouldn't have been interested in the least. I saw Lisa give a little sidelong peep up at me, to see if I were watching; but when she found me looking entirely indifferent, she tied up the bag again and stowed it away in one of the deep pockets of her travelling cloak.

I was afraid that, when we'd arrived at the hotel and gone up to our rooms Lisa might want to stop with me, and be vexed when I turned her out, as I felt I must do. But she seemed to have lost interest in me and my affairs, now that all doubt was settled. She didn't even wish to talk over what had happened; but when I bade her good-night, simply said, "good-night" in return, and let me shut the door between the rooms.

"I suppose," I thought, "that the best thing I shall have to hope for after this, until I grow quite old, is to sleep, and be happy in my

dreams." But though I tried hard to put away thoughts of all kinds, and fall asleep, I couldn't. My eyes would not stay closed for more than a minute at a time; and always I found myself staring at the window, hour after hour, hoping for the light.

CHAPTER XV

DIANA HEARS NEWS

It seemed as if the night would never end. If I had been vain, and deserved to be punished for my vanity, then I was well punished now; I felt so ashamed and humiliated.

It must have been long after one when I went to bed, yet I was thankful when dawn came, and gave me an excuse to get up. After I had had a cold bath, however, I felt better, and a cup of steaming hot coffee afterwards did me good. I was all dressed when Morton, Aunt Lilian's maid, knocked at my door to ask if I were up, and if she could help me do my hair. "Her Ladyship" sent me her love, and hoped I had rested nicely. She would be pleased to hear that I was looking well.

Looking well! I was glad to know that, though it surprised me. I stared at myself in the glass, and wondered that so many hours of misery had made so little impression on my face. I was rather paler than usual, perhaps, but my cheeks were faintly pink, and my lips red. I suppose while one is young one can suffer a good deal and one's face tell no secret.

We were to make a very early start to examine the wonderful motor-car which Lord Robert West had advised Aunt Lil to buy. Afterwards she and Lisa and I had planned to do a little shopping, because it would seem a waste of time to be in Paris and bring nothing away from the shops. But when I tapped at Lisa's door (dreading, yet wishing, to have our first greeting over), it appeared that she had a bad headache and did not want to go with us to see the Rajah's automobile. While I was with her Aunt Lil came in, looking very bright and handsome.

She was "so sorry" for Lisa, and not at all sorry for me (how little she guessed!); and before taking me away with her, promised to come back after it was settled about the car, to see whether Lisa were well enough by that time for the shopping expedition.

The automobile really was a "magnificent animal," as Aunt Lil said, and it took her just two minutes, after examining it from bonnet to tool-boxes, to make up her mind that she could not be happy without it. It was sixty horsepower, and of a world-renowned make; but that was a detail. Any car could be powerful and well made; every car should be, or you would not pay for it; but she had never seen one before with such heavenly little arrangements for luggage and lunch; while as for the gold toilet things, in a pale grey suede case, they were beyond words, and she must have them--the motor also, of course, since it went with them.

So that was decided; and she and I drove back to the hotel, while the two men went to the Automobile Club, of which Lord Bob was an honorary

member.

If possible, all formalities were to be got through with the Rajah's agent and the car paid for. At two o'clock, when we were to meet the men at the Ritz for luncheon, they were to let us know whether everything had been successfully arranged: and, if so, Aunt Lil wanted the party to motor to Calais in her new automobile, instead of going by train. Lord Bob would drive, but he meant to hire a chauffeur recommended by the Club, so that he would not have to stop behind and see to getting the car across the Channel in a cargo boat.

Aunt Lil was very much excited over this idea, as she always is over anything new, and if I was rather quiet and uninterested, she was too much occupied to notice.

Lisa was looking worse when we went back to her at the hotel, but Aunt Lil didn't notice that either. She is always nice to Lisa, but she doesn't like her, and it is only when you really care for people that you observe changes in them when you are busy thinking of your own affairs.

I advised Lisa to rest in her own room, instead of shopping, as she would have the long motor run later in the day, and a night journey; but she was dressed and seemed to want to go out. She had things to do, she said, and though she didn't buy anything when she was with us, while we were at a milliner's in the Rue de la Paix choosing hats for Aunt Lil, she disappeared on some errand of her own, and only came back just as we were ready to leave the shop. Whatever it was that she had been doing, it had interested her and waked her out of herself, for her eyes looked brighter and she had spots of colour on her cheeks.

Aunt Lil found so much to do, and was sure we could easily carry so many things in the motor-car, that it was a rush to meet Uncle Eric and Lord Bob at the Ritz, by two o'clock. But we did manage it, or nearly. We were not more than ten minutes late, which was wonderful for Aunt Lil: and the short time that we'd kept them waiting wasn't enough to account for the solemnity of the two men's faces as they came forward to meet us.

"Something's gone wrong about the car!" exclaimed Aunt Lil.

"No, the car's all right," said Lord Bob. "I've got you a chauffeur too, and--"

"Then what has happened? You both look like thunder-clouds, or wet blankets, or something disagreeable. It surely can't be because you're hungry that you're cross about a few minutes."

"Have you seen a newspaper to-day?" asked Uncle Eric.

"A newspaper? I should think not, indeed; we've had too many important things to do to waste time on trifles. Why, has the Government gone out?"

"Ivor Dundas has got into a mess here," Uncle Eric answered, looking very much worried--so much worried that I thought he must care even more about Ivor than I had fancied.

"Of course it's the most awful rot," said Lord Bob, "but he's accused of

murder."

"It's in the evening papers: not a word had got into the morning ones," Uncle Eric went on. "We've only just seen the news since we came here to wait for you; otherwise I should have tried to do something for him. As it is, of course I must, as a friend of his, stop in Paris and do what I can to help him through. But that needn't keep the rest of you from going on to-day as you planned."

"What an awful thing!" exclaimed Aunt Lil. "I will stay too, if the girls don't mind. Poor fellow! It may be some comfort to him to feel that he has friends on the spot, standing by him. I've got thousands of engagements--we all have--but I shall telegraph to everybody. What about you, Lord Bob?"

"I'll stand by, with you, Lady Mountstuart," said he, his nice though not very clever face more anxious-looking than I had ever seen it, his blue, wide-apart eyes watching me rather wistfully. "Dundas and I have never been intimate, but he's a fine chap, and I've always admired him. He's sure to come out of this all right."

Poor Lord Robert! I hadn't much thought to give him then; but dimly I felt that his anxiety was concerned with me even more than with Ivor, of whom he spoke so kindly, though he had often shown signs of jealousy in past days.

I felt stunned, and almost dazed. If anyone had spoken to me, I think I should have been dumb, unable to answer; but nobody did speak, or seem to think it strange that I had nothing to say.

"I suppose you won't try to do anything until after lunch, will you, Mountstuart?" Lord Robert went on to ask.

"No, we must eat, and talk things over," said Uncle Eric.

We went into the restaurant, I moving as if I were in a dream. Ivor accused of murder! What had he done? What could have happened?

But I was soon to know. As soon as we were seated at a table, where the lovely, fresh flowers seemed a mockery, Aunt Lil began asking questions.

For some reason, Uncle Eric apparently did not like answering. It was almost as if he had had some kind of previous knowledge of the affair, of which he didn't wish to speak. But, I suppose, it could not have been that.

It was Lord Robert who told us nearly everything; and always I was conscious that he was watching me, wondering if this were a cruel blow for me, asking himself if he were speaking in a tactful way of one who had been his rival.

"There was that engagement of Dundas' last night, which he was just going to keep when we saw him," said Lord Bob, carefully, but clumsily. "I'm afraid there must have been something fishy about that--I mean, some trap must have been laid to catch him. And, it seems, he wasn't supposed to be in Paris--though I don't see what that can have to do with the plot, if there is one. He was stopping in the hotel under another name. No doubt he had some good reason, though. There's nothing sly about Dundas. If ever there was a plucky chap, he's one. Anyhow,

apparently, he wanted to get hold of a man in Paris he couldn't find, for he called last evening on a detective named Girard, a rather well-known fellow in his line, I believe. It almost looks as if Dundas had made an enemy of him, for he's been giving evidence pretty freely to the police--lost no time about it, anyhow. Girard says he was following up the scent, tracking down the person he'd been hired by Dundas to hunt for, and had at last come to the house where he was lodging, when there he found Dundas himself, ransacking the room, covered with blood, and the chap who was wanted, lying dead on the floor, his body hardly cold."

"What time was all that?" enquired Lisa sharply. It was the first question she had asked.

"Between midnight and one o'clock, I think the papers said," answered Lord Bob.

"Well, of course it's all nonsense," exclaimed Aunt Lil impatiently. "French people are so sensational, and they jump at conclusions so. The idea of their daring to accuse a man like Ivor Dundas of murder! They ought to know better. They'll soon be eating humble-pie, and begging England's pardon for wrongful treatment of a British subject, won't they, Eric?"

"I'm afraid there's no question of jumping at conclusions on the part of the authorities, or of eating humble-pie," Uncle Eric said. "The evidence--entirely circumstantial so far, luckily--is dead against Ivor. And as for his being a British subject, there's nothing in that. If an Englishman chooses to commit a murder in France, he's left to the French law to deal with, as if he were a Frenchman."

"But Ivor hasn't committed murder!" cried Aunt Lilian, horrified.

"Of course not. But he's got to prove that he hasn't. And in that he's worse off than if this thing happened in England. English law supposes a man innocent until he's been proved guilty. French law, on the contrary, presumes that he's guilty until he's proved innocent. In face of the evidence against Ivor, the authorities couldn't have done otherwise than they have done."

For the first time in my life I felt angry with Aunt Lilian's husband. I do hate that cold, stern "sense of justice" on which men pride themselves so much, whether it's an affair of a friend or an enemy!

"Surely Mr. Dundas must have been able to prove an--an--don't you call it an alibi?" asked Lisa.

"He didn't try to," replied Lord Bob. "He's simply refused, up to the present, to tell what he was doing between twelve o'clock and the time he was found, except to say that he walked for a good while before going to the house where Girard afterwards found him. Of course he denies killing the man: says the fellow had stolen something from him, on the boat crossing from Dover to Calais yesterday, and that after applying to the detective, he got a note from the thief, offering to give the thing back if he would call and name a reward. Says he found the room already ransacked and the fellow dead, when he arrived at the address given him; that he was searching for his property when Girard appeared on the scene."

"Couldn't he have shown the note sent by the thief?" asked Aunt Lil.

"He did show a note. But it does him more harm than good. And he wouldn't tell what the thing was the thief had taken from him, except that it was valuable. It does look as if he were determined to make the case as black as possible against himself; but then, as I said before, no doubt he has good reasons."

"He has no good luck, anyhow!" sighed Aunt Lil, who always liked Ivor.

"Rather not--so far. Why, one of the worst bits of evidence against him is that the concierge of this house in the Rue de la Fille Sauvage swears that though Dundas hadn't been in the place much above half an hour when the detective arrived, he was there then for the second time, that he admitted it when he came. The first visit he made, according to the concierge, was about an hour before the second: the concierge was already in bed in his little box, but not asleep, when a man rang and an English-sounding voice asked for Monsieur Gestre. On hearing that Gestre was away, the visitor said he would see the gentleman who was stopping in Gestre's room. By and by the Englishman went out, and on being challenged, said he might come back again later. After a while the concierge was waked up once more by a caller for Gestre, who announced that he'd been before; and now he vows that it was the same man both times, though Dundas denies having called twice. If he could prove that he'd been in the house no more than half an hour, it might be all right, for two doctors agree that the murdered man had been dead more than an hour when they were called in. But he can't or won't prove it--that's his luck again!--and nobody can be found who saw him in any of the streets through which he mentions passing. The last moment that he can be accounted for is when a cabman, who'd taken him up at the hotel just after he left us, set him down in the Rue de Courbvoie, not so very far from the Elysee Palace. Then it was only between five and ten minutes past twelve, so he could easily have gone on to the Rue de la Fille Sauvage afterwards and killed his man at the time when the doctors say the fellow must have died. It's a bad scrape. But of course Dundas will get out of it somehow or other, in the end."

"Do you think he will, Eric?" asked Aunt Lil.

"I hope so with all my heart," he answered. But his face showed that he was deeply troubled, and my heart sank down--down.

As I realised more and more the danger in which Ivor stood, my resentment against him began to seem curiously trivial. Nothing had happened to make me feel that I had done him an injustice in thinking he cared more for Maxine de Renzie than for me--indeed, on the contrary, everything went to prove his supreme loyalty to her whose name he had refused to speak, even for the sake of clearing himself. Still, now that the world was against him, my soul rushed to stand by his side, to defend him, to give him love and trust in spite of all.

Down deep in my heart I forgave him, even though he had been cruel, and I yearned over him with an exceeding tenderness. More than anything on earth, I wanted to help him; and I meant to try. Indeed, as the talk went on while that terrible meal progressed, I thought I saw a way to do it, if Lisa and I should act together.

I was so anxious to have a talk with her that I could hardly wait to get back to our own hotel, from the Ritz. Fortunately, nobody wanted to sit long at lunch, so it wasn't yet three when I called her into my room.

The men had gone to make different arrangements about starting, for we were not to leave Paris until they had had time to do something for Ivor. Uncle Eric went to see the British Ambassador, and Aunt Lilian had said that she would be busy for at least an hour, writing letters and telegrams to cancel engagements we had had in London. For awhile Lisa and I were almost sure not to be interrupted; but I spoke out abruptly what was in my mind, not wishing to lose a minute.

"I think the only thing for us to do," I said, "is to tell what we know, and save Ivor in spite of himself."

"How can anything you know save him?" she asked, with a queer, faint emphasis which I didn't understand.

"Don't you see," I cried, "that if we come forward and say we saw him in the Rue d'Hollande at a quarter past twelve--going into a house there--he couldn't have murdered the man in that other house, far away. It all hangs on the time."

"But you didn't see him go in," Lisa contradicted me.

I stared at her. "You did. Isn't it the same thing?"

"No, not unless I choose to say so."

"And--but you will choose. You want to save him, of course."

"Why?"

"Because he's innocent. Because he's your friend."

"No man is the friend of any woman, if he's in love with another."

"Oh, Lisa, does sophistry of that sort matter? Does anything matter except saving him?"

"I don't consider," she said, in a slow, aggravating way, "that Ivor Dundas has behaved very well to--to our family. But I want you to understand this, Di. If he is to be got out of this danger--no doubt it's real danger--in any such way as you propose, it's for me to do it, not you. He'll have to owe his gratitude to me. And there's something else I can do for him, perhaps--I, and only I. A thing of value was stolen from him, it seems, a thing he was anxious to get back at any price--even the price of looking for it on a dead man's body. Well, I think I know what that thing was--I think I have it."

"What do you mean?" I asked, astonished at her and at her manner--and her words.

"I'm not going to tell you what I mean. Only I'm sure of what I'm saying--at least, that the thing is valuable, worth risking a great deal for. I learned that from experts this morning, while you and your aunt were thinking about hats."

For an instant I was completely bewildered. Then, suddenly, a strange idea sprang into my mind:

"That brocade bag you picked up in the Rue d'Hollande last night!"

It was the first time I had thought of it from that moment to this--there had been so many other things which seemed more important.

Lisa looked annoyed. I think she had counted on my not remembering, or not connecting her hints with the thing she had found in the street, and that she had wanted to tantalise me.

"I won't say whether I mean the brocade bag or not, and whether, if I do, that I believe Ivor dropped it, or whether there was another man mixed up in the case--perhaps the real murderer. If I do decide to tell what I know and what I suspect, it won't be to you--unless for a very particular reason--and it won't be yet awhile."

I'm afraid that I almost hated her for a moment, she seemed so cold, so calculating and sly. I couldn't bear to think that she was my step-sister, and I was glad that, at least, not a drop of the same blood ran in our veins.

"If you choose to keep silent for some purpose of your own," I broke out, "you can't prevent me from telling the whole story, as I know it--how I went out with you, and all that."

"I can't prevent you from doing it, but I can advise you not to--for Ivor's sake," she answered.

"For his sake?"

"Yes, and for your own, too, if you care for his opinion of you at all. For his sake, because neither of us knows when he came out of Maxine de Renzie's house. You would go away, though I wanted to stay and watch. He may not have been there more than five minutes for all we can tell to the contrary, in which case he would still have had time to go straight off to the Rue de la Fille Sauvage and kill that man, in accordance with the doctors' statements about the death. For your sake, because if he knows that you tracked him to Maxine de Renzie's house, he won't respect you very much; and because he would probably be furious with you, unable to forgive you as long as he lived, for injuring the reputation of the woman he's risked so much to save. He'd believe you did it out of spiteful jealousy against her."

I grew cold all over, and trembled so that I could hardly speak.

"Ivor would know that I'm incapable of such baseness."

"I'm not sure he'd hold you above it. 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'--and he has scorned you--for an actress."

It was as if she had struck me in the face: and I could feel the blood rush up to my cheeks. They burned so hotly that the tears were forced to my eyes.

"You see I'm right, don't you?" Lisa asked.

"You may be right in thinking I could do him no good in that way--and that he wouldn't wish it, even if I could. But not about the rest," I said. "We won't talk of it any more. I can't stand it. Please go back to your room now, Lisa, I want to be alone."

"Very well," she snapped, "you called me in. I didn't ask to come."

Then she went out, with not another word or look, and slammed the door. I could imagine myself compelling her to give up the brocade bag, or offering her some great bribe of money, thousands of pounds, if necessary. Lisa is a strange little creature. She will do a good deal for money.

CHAPTER XVI

DIANA UNDERTAKES A STRANGE ERRAND

If I had not been tingling with anger against Lisa, who had seemed to enjoy saying needlessly cruel things to me, perhaps I would have been utterly discouraged when she pricked the bubble of my hope. She had made me realise that the plan I had was useless, perhaps worse than useless; but in my desperate mood I caught at another. I would try to see Ivor, and find out some other way of helping him. At all events he should know that I was for him, not against him, in this time of trouble.

Perhaps this new idea was a mad one, I told myself. Perhaps I should not be allowed to see him, even in the presence of others. But while there was a "perhaps" I wouldn't give up. Without waiting for a cooler or more cowardly mood to set in, I almost ran out of my room, and downstairs, for I hadn't taken off my hat and coat since coming in.

I had no knowledge of French law, or police etiquette, or anything of that sort. But I knew the French as a gallant nation; and I thought that if a girl should go to the right place begging for a short conversation with an accused man, as his friend, an interview--probably with a witness--might possibly be granted. The authorities might think that we were engaged, for all I cared. I did not care about anything now, except seeing Ivor, and helping him if I could.

I hardly knew what I meant to do at the beginning, by way of getting the chance I wanted, until I had asked to have a motor-cab called for me. Then, I suddenly thought of the British Ambassador, a great friend of Uncle Eric's and Aunt Lilian's. Uncle Eric had already been to him, but I fancied not with a view of trying to see Ivor. That idea had apparently not been in his mind at all. Anyway, the Ambassador would already understand that the family took a deep interest in the fate of Ivor Dundas, and would not be wholly astonished at receiving a call from me. Besides, hearing of some rather venturesome escapades of mine when I first arrived in London, he had once, while visiting Uncle Eric, laughed a good deal and said that in future he would be "surprised at nothing an American girl might do."

I told the driver to go to the British Embassy as fast as he could. There, I sent in my name, and the Ambassador received me at once. I didn't explain much, but came to the point immediately, and said that I wanted--oh, but wanted and needed very much indeed--to see Ivor Dundas. Could he, would he help me to do that?

"Ought I to help you?" he asked. "Would Mountstuart and Lady Mountstuart approve?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "They would approve. You see, it is necessary."

"Then, if it's necessary--and I believe you when you say that it is," he answered, "I'll do what I can."

What he could do and did do, was to write a personal letter to the Chief of Police in Paris, asking as a favour that his friend, Miss Forrest, a young lady related through marriage to the British Foreign Secretary, should be allowed five minutes' conversation with the Englishman accused of murder, Mr. Ivor Dundas.

I took the letter to the Chief of Police myself, to save time, and because I was so restless and excited that I must be doing something every instant--something which I felt might bring me nearer to Ivor.

From the Chief of Police, who proved to be a most courteous person, I received an order to give to the governor of the gaol or prison where they had put Ivor. This, he explained, would procure me the interview I wanted, but unfortunately, I must not hope to see my friend alone. A warder who understood English would have to be present.

So far I had gone into the wild venture without once thinking what it would be to find myself suddenly face to face with Ivor in such terrible circumstances, or what he would think of me for coming in such a way now that we were no longer anything to each other--not even friends. But a kind of ague-terror crept over me while I sat waiting in an ugly little bare, stuffy reception room. My head was going round and round, my heart was pounding so that I could not make up my mind what to say to Ivor when he came.

Then, suddenly, I heard the sound of footsteps outside the door; and when it opened, there stood Ivor, between two Frenchmen in blue uniforms. One of them walked into the room with him--I suppose he must have been a warder--but he stopped near the door, and in a second I had forgotten all about him. He simply ceased to exist for me, when my eyes and Ivor's had met.

I sprang up from my chair and began to talk as quickly as I could, stammering and confused, hardly knowing what I said, but anxious to make him understand in the beginning that I had not come to take back my words of yesterday.

"We're all so dreadfully sorry, Mr. Dundas," I said. "I don't know if Uncle Eric has been here yet--but he is doing all he can, and Aunt Lilian is dreadfully upset. We're staying on in Paris on account of--on account of this. So you see you've got friends near you. And I--we're such old friends, I couldn't help trying as hard as I could for a sight of you to--to cheer you up, and--and to help you, if that's possible."

I spoke very fast, not daring to look at him after the first, but pretending to smooth out some wrinkles in one of my long gloves. My eyes were full of tears, and I was afraid they'd go splashing down my cheeks, if I even winked my lashes. I loved him more than ever now, and felt capable of forgiving him anything, if only I had the chance to forgive, and if only, only he really loved me and not that other.

"Thank you, a hundred times--more than I can express," he said, with a faint quiver in his voice--his beautiful voice, which was the first thing that charmed me after knowing him. "It does cheer me to see you.

It gives me strength and courage. You wouldn't have come if you didn't--trust me, and believe me innocent."

"Why, of course, I--we--believe you innocent of any crime," I faltered.

"And of any lack of faith?"

"Oh, as for that, how can--but don't let's speak of that. What can it matter now?"

"It matters more than anything else in the world. If only you could say that you will have faith!"

"I'll try to say it then, if it can give you any comfort."

"Not unless you mean it."

"Then--I'll try to mean it. Will that satisfy you?"

"It's better than nothing. And I thank you again. As for the rest, you're not to be anxious. Everything will come right for me sooner or later, though I may have to suffer some annoyances first."

"Annoyances?" I echoed. "If there were nothing worse!"

"There won't be. I shall be well defended. It will all be shown up as a huge mistake--another warning against trusting to circumstantial evidence."

"Is there nothing we can do then? Or--that we would urge others to do?" I asked, hoping he would understand that I meant one other--Maxine de Renzie.

I guessed by his look that he did understand. It was a look of gloom; but suddenly a light flashed in his eyes.

"There is one thing you could do for me--you and no one else," he said. "But I have no right to ask it."

"Tell me what it is," I implored.

"I would not, if it didn't mean more than my life to me." He hesitated, and then, while I wondered what was to come, he bent forward and spoke a few hurried words in Spanish. He knew that to me Spanish was almost as familiar as English. He had heard me talk of the Spanish customs still existing in the part of California where I was born. He had heard me sing Spanish songs. We had sung them together--one or two I had taught him. But I had not taught him the language. He learned that, and three or four others at least, as a boy, when first he thought of taking up a diplomatic career.

They were so few words, and so quickly spoken, that I--remembering the warder--almost hoped they might pass unnoticed. But the man in uniform came nearer to us at once, looking angry and suspicious.

"That is forbidden," he said to Ivor. Then, turning sharply to me. "What language was that?"

"Spanish," I answered. "He only bade me good-bye. We have been--very

dear friends, and there was a misunderstanding, but--it's over now. It was natural he shouldn't want you to hear his last words to me."

"Nevertheless, it is forbidden," repeated the warder obstinately, "and though the five minutes you were granted together are not over yet, the prisoner must go with me now. He has forfeited the rest of his time, and must be reported."

With this, he ordered Ivor to leave the room, in a tone which sounded to me so brutal that I should have liked him to be shot, and the whole French police force exterminated. To hear a little underbred policeman dare to speak like that to my big, brave, handsome Englishman, and to know that it would be childish and undignified of Ivor to resist--oh, I could have killed the creature with my own hands--I think!

As for Ivor, he said not another word, except "good-bye," smiling half sadly, half with a twinkle of grim humour. Then he went out, with his head high: and just at the door he threw me back one look. It said as plainly as if he had spoken: "Remember, I know you won't fail me."

I did indeed remember, and I prayed that I should have pluck and courage not to fail. But it was a very hard thing that he had asked me to do, and he had said well in saying that he would not ask it of me if it did not mean more than his life.

The words he had whispered so hastily and unexpectedly in Spanish, were these: "Go to the room of the murder alone, and on the window balcony find in a box under flower-pots a folded document. Take this to Maxine. Every moment counts."

So it seemed that it was always of her he thought--of Maxine de Renzie! And I, of all people in the world, was to help him, with her.

As I thought of this task he'd set me, and of all it meant, it appeared more and more incredible that he should have had the heart to ask such a thing of me. But--it "meant more than his life." And I would do the thing, if it could be done, because of my pride.

As I drove away from the prison a kind of fury grew in me and possessed me. I felt as if I had fire instead of blood in my veins. If I had known that death, or worse than death, waited for me in the ghastly house to which Ivor had sent me, I would still have gone there.

My first thought was to go instantly, and get it over--with success or failure. But calmer thoughts prevailed.

I hadn't looked at the papers yet. My only knowledge of last night's dreadful happenings had come from Uncle Eric and Lord Robert West. I had said to myself that I didn't wish to read the newspaper accounts of the murder, and of Ivor's supposed part in it. I remembered now, however, that I did not even know in what part of Paris the house of the murder was. I recalled only the name of the street, because it was a curiously grim one--like the tragedy that had been acted in it.

I couldn't tell the chauffeur to drive me to the street and house. That would be a stupid thing to do. I must search the papers, and find out from them something about the neighbourhood, for there would surely be plenty of details of that sort. And I must do this without first going back to the hotel, as it might be very difficult to get away again, once

I was there. Now, nobody knew where I was, and I was free to do as I pleased, no matter what the consequences might be afterwards.

Passing a Duval restaurant, I suddenly ordered my motor-cab to stop. Having paid, and sent it away, I went upstairs and asked for a cup of chocolate at one of the little, deadly respectable-looking marble tables. Also I asked to see an evening paper.

It was a shock to find Ivor's photograph, horribly reproduced, gazing at me from the front page. The photograph was an old one, which had been a good deal shown in shop windows, much to Ivor's disgust, at about the time when he returned from his great expedition and published his really wonderful book. I had seen it before I met him, and as it must have been on sale in Paris as well as London, it had been easy enough for the newspaper people to get it. Then there came the story of the murder, built up dramatically. Hating it, sickened by it, I yet read it all. I knew where to go to find the house, and I knew that the murder had been committed in a back room on the top floor. Also I saw the picture of the window with the balcony. Ivor was supposed--according to Girard, the detective--to have tried in vain to escape by way of this high balcony, on hearing sounds outside the door while busy in searching the dead man's room. Girard said that he had seen him first, by the light of a bull's-eye lantern, which he--Girard--carried, standing at bay in the open window. There was a photograph of this window, taken from outside. There was the balcony: and there was the balcony of another window with another balcony just like it, on the adjoining house. I looked at the picture, and judged that there would not be more than two feet of distance between the railings of those two balconies.

"That would be my way to get there--if I can get there at all," I said to myself. But there was hardly any "if" left in my mind now. I meant to get there.

By this time it was after five o'clock. I left the Duval restaurant, and again took a cab. The first thing I did was to send a petit bleu to Aunt Lilian, saying that she wasn't to worry about me. I'd been hipped and nervous, and had gone out to see a friend who was--I'd just found out--staying in Paris. Perhaps I should stop with the friend to dinner; but at latest I should be back by nine or ten o'clock. That would save a bother at the hotel (for Aunt Lilian knew I had heaps of American friends who came every year to Paris), yet no one would know where to search for me, even if they were inclined.

Next, I drove to a street near the Rue de la Fille Sauvage, and dismissed my cab. I asked for no directions, but after one or two mistakes, found the street I wanted. Instead of going to the house of the murder, I passed on to the next house on the left--the house of the balcony almost adjoining the dead man's.

I rang the bell for the concierge, and asked him if there were any rooms to let in the house. I knew already that there were, for I could see the advertisement of "Chambres a louer" staring me in the face: but I spoke French as badly as I could, making three mistakes to every sentence, and begged the man to talk slowly in answering me.

There were several rooms to be had, it appeared, but it would have been too good to be true that the one I wanted should be empty. After we had jabbered awhile, I made the concierge understand that I was a young American journalist, employed by a New York paper. I wanted to "write

up" the murder of last night, according to my own ideas, and as of course the police wouldn't let me go into the room where it happened, the next best thing would be to take the room close to it, in the house adjoining. I wanted to be there only long enough to "get the emotion, the sensation," I explained, so as to make my article really dramatic. Would the people who occupied that room let it to me for a few hours? Long before bedtime they could have it back again, if I got on well with my writing.

The concierge, to whom I gave ten francs as a kind of retaining fee, was almost sure the occupants of the room (an old man and his wife) would willingly agree to such a proposal, if I paid them well enough for their trouble in turning out.

Would three louis be enough? I asked. The concierge--whose eyes brightened--thought that it would. I knew by his look that he would take a large commission for managing the affair, as he quickly offered to do; but that didn't matter to me.

He confirmed my idea that it would have been hopeless to try and get into the room of the murder itself, even if I could have borne it, saying that the door, and window too, had been sealed by the police, who were also guarding the house from curiosity seekers; but he added that I could see the shut window from the balcony of the room I was going to hire.

I waited for him, and played with his very unattractive baby while he went upstairs to make enquiries. He was gone for some time, explaining to the people; but at last, when my patience was almost too far strained, he came back to say that Monsieur and Madame Nissot had consented to go out of their room for the evening. They were dining at the moment, however, and Mademoiselle must be pleased to wait a few moments until they finished the meal and gathered up a few things which they could carry to a neighbour's: books, and work for their hours of absence, the concierge politely suggested. But that was to save my feelings, no doubt, for I was sure the husband and wife meant to make a parcel of any valuables which could possibly be carried off by an unscrupulous American journalist. Also, they stipulated that payment must be made in advance. To this I agreed willingly. And then--I waited, waited. It was tedious, but after all, the tediousness didn't matter much when I came to think of it. It would be impossible to do the thing I had made up my mind to do, till after dark.

MAXINE DE RENZIE'S PART

CHAPTER XVII

MAXINE MAKES A BARGAIN

We looked everywhere, in all possible places, for the diamond necklace, Raoul and I; and to him, poor fellow, its second loss seemed overwhelming. He did not see in glaring scarlet letters always before

his eyes these two words: "The treaty," as I did--for my punishment. He was in happy ignorance still of that other loss which I--I, to whom his honour should have been sacred--had inflicted upon him. He was satisfied with my story; that through a person employed by me--a person whose name could not yet be mentioned, even to him--the necklace had been snatched from the thief who had stolen it. He blamed himself mercilessly for thinking so little of the brocade bag which I had given him at parting, for letting all remembrance of my words concerning it be put out of his mind by his "wicked jealousy," as he repentantly called it. For me, he had nothing but praise and gratitude for what I had done for him. He begged me to forgive him, and his remorse for such a small thing, comparatively--wrung my heart.

We searched the garden and the whole street, then came back to search the little drawing-room for the second time, in vain. It did seem that there was witchcraft in it, as I said to Raoul; but at last I persuaded him to go away, and follow his own track wherever he had been since I gave him the bag with the diamonds. It was just possible, as it was so late, and his way had led him through quiet streets, that even after all this time the little brocade bag might be lying where he had left it--or that some honest policeman on his beat might have picked it up. Besides, there was the cab in which he had come part of the distance to my house. The bag might have fallen on the floor while he drove: and there were many honest cabmen in Paris, I reminded him, trying to be as cheerful as I could.

So he left me. And I was deadly tired; but I had no thought of sleep--no wish for it. When I had unlocked the door of my boudoir and found Ivor Dundas gone, as I had hoped he would be, the next hope born in my heart was that he might by and by come back, or send--with news. Hour after hour of deadly suspense passed on, and he did not come or make any sign. At five o'clock Marianne, who had flitted about all night like a restless ghost, made me drink a cup of hot chocolate, and actually put me to bed. My last words to her were: "What is the use? I can't sleep. It will be worse to lie and toss in a fever, than sit up."

Yet I did sleep, and heavily. She will always deny it, I know, but I'm sure she must have slyly slipped a sleeping-powder into the chocolate. I was far too much occupied with my own thoughts, as I drank to please her, to think whether or no there was anything at all peculiar in the taste.

Be that as it may, I slept; and when I waked suddenly, starting out of a hateful dream (yet scarcely worse than realities), to my horror it was nearly noon.

I was wild with fear lest the servants, in their stupid but well-meant wish not to disturb me, might have sent important visitors away. However, when Marianne came flying in, in answer to my long peal of the electric bell, she said that no one had been. There were letters and one telegram, and all the morning papers, as usual after the first night of a new play.

My heart gave a spring at the news that there was a telegram, for I thought it might be from Ivor, saying he was on the track of the treaty, even if he hadn't yet got hold of it. But the message was from Raoul; and he had not found the brocade bag. He did not put this in so many words, but said, "I have not found what was lost, or learned anything of it."

From Ivor there was not a line, and I thought this cruel. He might have wired, or written me a note, even if there were nothing definite to say. He might, unless--something had happened to him. There was that to think of; and I did think of it, with dread, and a growing presentiment that I had not suffered yet all I was to suffer. I determined to send a servant to the Elysee Palace Hotel to enquire for him, and despatched Henri immediately. Meanwhile, as there was nothing to do, after pretending to eat breakfast under the watchful eyes of Marianne, I pretended also to read the newspaper notices of the play. But each sentence went out of my head before I had begun the next. I knew in the end only that, according to all the critics, Maxine de Renzie had "surpassed herself," had been "astonishingly great," had done "what no woman could do unless she threw her whole soul into her part." How little they knew where Maxine de Renzie's soul had been last night! And--only God knew where it might be this night. Out of her body, perhaps--the one way of escape from Raoul's hatred, if he had come to know the truth.

Of course the enquiry at the hotel was not for Ivor Dundas, but for the name he had adopted there; yet when my servant came back to me he had nothing to tell which was consoling--rather the other way. The gentleman had gone out about midnight (I knew that already), and hadn't returned since. Henri had been to the Bureau to ask, and it had struck him, he admitted to me on being catechised, that his questions had been answered with a certain reserve, as if more were known of the absent gentleman's movements than it was considered wise to tell.

My servant had not been long away, though it seemed long to me, and he had delayed only to buy all the evening papers, which he "thought that Mademoiselle would like to see, as they were sure to be filled with praise of her great acting." It was on my tongue to scold him for stopping even one moment, when he had been told to hurry, but he looked so pleased at his own cleverness that I hadn't the heart to dash his happiness. I would, however, have pushed the papers aside without so much as glancing at them, if it hadn't suddenly occurred to me that, if any accident had befallen Ivor, news of it might possibly have got into print by this time.

When I read what had happened--how he was accused of murder, and while declaring his innocence had been silent as to all those events which might have proved it, my heart went out to him in a wave of gratitude. Here was a man! A man loyal and brave and chivalrous as all men ought to be, but few are! He had sacrificed himself to the death, no doubt, to keep my name out of the mud into which my business had thrown him, and to save me from appearing in Raoul's eyes the liar that I was. Had Ivor told that he was with me, after I had prevaricated (if I had not actually lied) to Raoul about the midnight visitor to my house, what would Raoul think of me?

Ivor was trying to save me, if he could; and he had been trying to save me when he went to the room of that dead man, though how and when he had decided to go I knew not. If it were not for me, he would be free and happy to-day.

My conscience cried out that the one thing to do was to go at once to the Chief of Police and say: "Monsieur, this English gentleman they have arrested cannot have committed a murder in the Rue de la Fille Sauvage, between twelve and one last night, for he came to my house, far away in the Rue d'Hollande, at a quarter past twelve, and didn't leave it till

after one o'clock."

I even sprang up from my chair in the very room where I had hidden Ivor, to ring for Marianne and tell her to bring me a hat and coat, to bid her order my electric brougham immediately. But--I sat down again, sick and despairing, deliberately crushing the generous impulse. I couldn't obey it. I dared not. By and by, perhaps. If Ivor should be in real pressing danger, then certainly. But not now.

At four o'clock Raoul came, and was with me for an hour. Each of us tried to cheer the other. I did all I could to make him hope that even yet he would have news of the brocade bag and its contents. He, thinking me ill and tired out, did all he could to persuade me that he was not miserable with anxiety. At least, he was no longer jealous of Godensky or of any man, and was humbly repentant for his suspicions of me the night before. When Raoul is repentant, and wishes to atone for something that he has done, he is enchanting. There was never a man like him.

At five I sent him away, with the excuse that I must rest, as I hadn't slept much the night before; but really it was because I feared lest I should disgrace myself before him by breaking down, and giving him a fright--or perhaps even by being mad enough to confess the thing I had done. I felt that I was no longer mistress of myself--that I might be capable of any folly.

I could not eat, but I drank a little beef-tea before starting for the theatre, where I went earlier than usual. It would be something to be busy; and in my part I might even forget for a moment, now and then.

Marianne and I were in my dressing-room before seven. I insisted on dressing at once, and took as long as I could in the process of making up; still, when I was ready there was more than half an hour to spare before the first act. There were letters for me--the kind that always come to the theatre--but I couldn't read them, after I had occupied myself with tearing open the envelopes. I knew what they would be: vows of adoration from strangers; poems by budding poets; petitions for advice from girls and young men who wanted to go on the stage; requests from artists who wanted to paint my picture. There were always such things every night, especially after the opening of a new play.

I was still aimlessly breaking fantastic seals, and staring unseeingly at crests and coronets, when there came a knock at the door. Marianne opened it, to speak for a moment with the stage door keeper.

"Mademoiselle," she whispered, coming to me, "Monsieur le Comte Godensky wishes to see you. Shall I say you are not receiving?"

I thought for a moment. Better see him, perhaps. I might learn something. If not--if he had only come to torture me uselessly to please himself, I would soon find out, and could send him away.

I went into my little reception-room adjoining, and received him there. He advanced, smiling, as one advances to a friend of whose welcome one is sure.

"Well?" I asked, abruptly, when the door was shut and we were alone. He held out his hand, but I put mine behind me, and drew back a step when he had come too close.

"Well--I have news for you, that no one else could bring, so I thought you would be glad to see--even me," he answered, smiling still.

"What news? But bad, of course--or you wouldn't bring it."

"You are very cruel. Of course, you've seen the evening papers? You know that your English friend is in prison?"

"The same English friend whom you would have liked to see arrested early last evening on a ridiculous, baseless charge," I flung at him.

"You look surprised. But you are not surprised, Count Godensky--except, perhaps, that I should guess who had me spied upon at the Elysee Palace Hotel. A disappointment, that affair, wasn't it? But you haven't told me your news."

"It is this: That Mr. Ivor Dundas, of England, has been on the rack to-day."

"What do you mean?"

"He has been in the hands of the Juge d'Instruction. It is much the same, isn't it, if one has secrets to keep? Would you like to know, if some magical bird could tell you, what questions were put to Mr. Dundas, and what answers he made?"

Strange, that this very thought had been torturing me before Godensky came! I had been thinking of the Juge d'Instruction, and his terrible cross-examination which only a man of steel or iron can answer without trembling. I had thought that questions had been asked and answers given which might mean everything to me, if I could only have heard them. Could it be that I was to hear, now? But I reminded myself that this was impossible. No one could know except the Juge d'Instruction and Ivor Dundas himself. "Only two men were present at that scene, and they will never tell what went on," I said aloud.

"Three men were present," Godensky answered. "Besides the two of whom you think, there was another: a lawyer who speaks English. It is permitted nowadays that a foreigner, if he demands it, can be accompanied by his legal adviser when he goes before the Juge d'Instruction. Otherwise, his lack of knowledge of the language might handicap him, and cause misunderstandings which would prejudice his case."

He paused a moment, but I did not reply. I knew that Ivor Dundas spoke French as well as I; but I was not going to tell this Russian that fact.

"The adviser your friend has chosen," Godensky went on, "happens to be a protege of mine. I made him--gave him his first case, his first success; and have employed him more than once since. Odd, what a penchant Mr. Dundas seems to have for men in whom I, too, have confidence! Last night, it was Girard. To-day, it is Lenormand."

This was a blow, and a heavy one; but I wouldn't let Godensky see that I winced under it.

"You keep yourself singularly well-informed of the movements of your various proteges," I said--"as well as those of your enemies. But if the information in the one case is no more trustworthy than in the other--why, you're not faithfully served. I've good reason to know that

you've made several mistakes lately, and you're likely to make more."

"Thanks for the warning. But I hope you don't call yourself my 'enemy'?"

"I don't know of a more appropriate name--after the baseness that you haven't even tried to hide, in your dealings with me."

"I thought all was fair in love and war."

"Do you make war on women?"

"No--I make love to them."

"To many, I dare say. But here is one who won't listen."

"At least you will listen while I go on with the news I came to tell?"

"Oh, yes, I confess to being curious. No doubt what you say will be interesting--even if not accurate."

"I can promise that it shall be both. I called on Lenormand as soon as I learned what had happened--that he'd been mixed up in this case--and expressed myself as extremely concerned for the fate of his client, friends of whom were intimate friends of mine. So you see, there was no question of treachery on Lenormand's part. He trusts me--as you do not. Indeed, I even offered my help for Dundas, if I could give it consistently with my position. Naturally, he told me nothing which could be used against Dundas, so far as he knew, even if I wished to go against him--which my coming here ought to prove to you that I do not."

"I read the proof rather differently," I said. "But go on. I'm sure you are anxious to tell me certain things. Please come to the point."

"In a few words, then, the point is this: One of the most important questions put by the Juge d'Instruction, after hearing from Mr. Dundas the explanation of a document found on him by the police--ah, that wakes you up, Mademoiselle! You are surprised that a document was found on the prisoner?"

I was half fainting with fear lest Ivor had regained the treaty, only to lose it again in this dreadful way; but I controlled myself.

"I rather hope it was not a letter from me," I said. "You know so much, that you probably know I admitted to the police at the Elysee Palace a strong friendship for Mr. Dundas. We knew each other well in London. But London ways are different from the ways of Paris. It isn't agreeable to be gossipped about, however unjustly, even if one is--only an actress."

"You turn things cleverly, as always. Yes, you are afraid there might have been--a letter. Yet the public adores you. It would pardon you any indiscretion, especially a romantic one--any indiscretion except treachery_. There might, however, be a few persons less indulgent. Du Laurier, for instance."

I shivered. "We were speaking of the scene with the Juge d'Instruction," I reminded him. "You have wandered from the point again."

"There are so many points--all sharp as swords for those they may pierce. Well, the important question was in relation to a letter--yes.

But the letter was not from you, Mademoiselle. It was written in English, and it made an appointment at the very address where the crime was committed. It was, as nearly as I could make out, a request from a person calling himself a jeweller's assistant, for the receiver of the letter to call and return a case containing jewels. This case had been committed to Mr. Dundas' care, it appeared, while travelling from London to Paris, and without his knowledge, another packet being taken away to make room for this. Mr. Dundas replied to the Juge d'Instruction that his own packet, stolen from him on the journey, contained nothing but papers entirely personal, concerning himself alone.

"What was in the case which the man afterwards murdered slipped into your pocket?" asked the Juge d'Instruction--Lenormand tells me.

"A necklace," answered Mr. Dundas.

"A necklace of diamonds?"

"Possibly diamonds, possibly paste, I wasn't much interested in it."

"Ah, was this not the necklace which you--staying at the Elysee Palace under another name--gave to Mademoiselle Maxine de Renzie last evening?" was the next question thrown suddenly at Mr. Dundas' head. Now, you see, Mademoiselle, that my story is not dull."

"Am I to hear the rest--according to your protege?" I asked, twisting my handkerchief, as I should have liked to twist Godensky's neck, till he had no more breath or wickedness left in him.

"Mr. Dundas tried his best to convince the Juge d'Instruction, a most clever and experienced man, that if he had, as an old friend, brought you a present of diamonds, it was something entirely different, and therefore far removed from this case.

"Are you not Mademoiselle de Renzie's lover?" was the next enquiry. 'I admire her, as do thousands of others, who also respect her as I do,' your friend returned very prettily. At last, dearest lady, you begin to see what there is in this string of questions and answers to bring me straight to you?"

"No, Count Godensky, I do not," I answered steadily. But a sudden illuminating ray did show me, even as I spoke, what might be in his scheming mind.

"Then I must be clear, and, above all, frank. Du Laurier loves you. You love him. You mean, I think, to marry him. But deeply in love as he is, he is a very proud fellow. He will have all or nothing, if I judge him well; and he would not take for his wife a woman who accepts diamonds from another man, saying as she takes them that he is her lover."

"He wouldn't believe it of me!" I cried.

"There is a way of convincing him. Oh, I shall not tell him! But he shall see in writing all that passed between the Juge d'Instruction and Mr. Dundas, unless--"

"Unless?--but I know what you mean to threaten. You repeat yourself."

"Not quite, for I have new arguments, and stronger ones. I want you,

Maxine. I mean to have you--or I will crush you, and now you know I can. Choose."

I sprang up, and looked at him. Perhaps there was murder in my eyes, as for a moment there was in my heart, for he exclaimed:

"Tigeress! You would kill me if you could. But that doesn't make me love you less. Would du Laurier have you if he knew what you are--as he will know soon unless you let me save you? Yet I--I would love you if you were a murderer as well as a--spy."

"It is you who are a spy!" I faltered, now all but broken.

"If I am, I haven't spied in vain. Not only can I ruin you with du Laurier, and before the world, but I can ruin him utterly and in all ways."

"No--no," I gasped. "You cannot. You're boasting. You can do nothing."

"Nothing to-night, perhaps. I'm not speaking of to-night. I am giving you time. But to-morrow--or the day after. It's much the same to me. At first, when I began to suspect that something had been taken from its place, I had no proof. I had to get that, and I did get it--nearly all I wanted. This affair of Dundas might have been planned for my advantage. It is perfect. All its complications are just so many links in a chain for me. Girard--the man Dundas chose to employ--was the very man I'd sent to England; on what errand, do you think? To watch your friend the British Foreign Secretary. He followed Dundas to Paris on the bare suspicion that there'd been, communication between the two, and he was preparing a report for me when--Dundas called on him."

"What connection can Ivor Dundas' coming to Paris have with Raoul du Laurier?" I dared to ask.

"You know best as to that."

"They have never met. Both are men of honour, and--"

"Men of honour are tricked by women sometimes, and then they have to suffer for being fools, as if they had been villains. Think what such a man--a man of honour, as you say--would feel when he found out the woman!"

"A woman can be calumniated as well as a man," I said. "You are so unscrupulous you would stoop to anything, I know that. Raoul du Laurier has done nothing; I--I have done nothing of which to be ashamed. Yet you can lie about us, ruin him perhaps by a plot, as if he were guilty, and--and do terrible harm to me."

"I can--without the trouble of lying. And I will, unless you'll give up du Laurier and make up your mind to marry me. I always meant to have you. You are the one woman worthy of me."

"You are the man most unworthy of any woman. But, give me till to-morrow evening--at this time--to decide. Will you promise me that?"

"No, I know what you would do. You would kill yourself. It is what is in your mind now. I won't risk losing you. I have waited long enough already. Give me a ring of yours, and a written word from you to du

Laurier, saying that you find you have made a mistake; and not only will I do nothing to injure him, but will guard against the discovery of--you know what. Besides, as a matter of course, I'll bring all my influence to bear in keeping your name out of this or any other scandal. I can do much, everything indeed, for I admit that it was through me the Commissary of Police trapped you with Dundas. I will say that I blundered. I know what to do to save you, and I will do it--for my future wife."

"No power on earth could induce me to break with Raoul du Laurier in the way you wish," I said. "If--if I am to give him up, I must tell him with my own lips, and bid him good-bye. I will do this to-morrow, if you will hold your hand until then."

We looked at each other for a long moment in silence. Godensky was trying to read my mind, and to make up his accordingly.

"You swear by everything you hold sacred to break with him to-morrow?"

"By the memory of my father and mother, martyred by bureaucrats like you, I pledge my word that--that--if I can't break with Raoul, to let you know the first thing in the morning, and dare you to do--what you will."

"You will not 'dare' me, I think. And because I think so, I will wait--a little longer."

"Until this time to-morrow?"

"No. For if you cheated me, it would be too late to act for another twelve hours. But I will give you till to-morrow noon. You agree to that?"

"I agree." My lips formed the words. I hardly spoke them; but he understood, and with a flash in his eyes took a step towards me as if to snatch my hand. I drew away. He followed, but at this instant Marianne appeared at the door.

"There is a young lady to see Mademoiselle," she announced, her good-natured, open face showing all her dislike of Count Godensky. "A young lady who sends this note, begging that Mademoiselle will read it at once, and consent to see her."

Thankful that the tete-a-tete had been interrupted, I held out my hand for the letter. Marianne gave it to me. I glanced at the name written below the lines which only half filled the first page of theatre paper, and found it strange to me. But, even if I had not been ready to snatch at the chance of ridding myself immediately of Godensky, the few words above the unfamiliar name would have made me say as I did say, "Bring the young lady in at once."

"I come to you from Mr. Dundas, on business which he told me was of the greatest and most pressing importance.

"DIANA FORREST."

That was the whole contents of the note; but a dozen sheets closely filled with arguments could not have moved me more.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAXINE MEETS DIANA

Godensky was obliged to take his leave, which he did abruptly, but to all appearance with a good grace; and when he was gone Marianne ushered in a girl--a tall, beautiful girl in a grey tailor dress built by an artist.

For such time as it might have taken us to count twelve, we looked at each other; and as we looked, a little clock on the mantel softly chimed the quarter hour. In fifteen minutes I should be due upon the stage.

The girl was very lovely. Yes, lovely was the right word for her--lovely and lovable. She was like a fresh rose, with the morning dew of youth on its petals--a rose that had budded and was beginning to bloom in a fair garden, far out of reach of ugly weeds. I envied her, for I felt how different her sweet, girl's life had been from my stormy if sometimes brilliant career.

"Mr. Dundas sent you to me?" I asked. "When did you see him? Surely not--since--"

"This afternoon," she answered quietly, in a pretty, un-English sounding voice, with a soft little drawl of the South in it. "I went to see him. They gave us five minutes. A warder was there; but speaking quickly in Spanish, just a few words, he--Mr. Dundas--managed to tell me a thing he wished me to do. He said it meant more than his life, so I did it; for we have been friends, and just now he's helpless. The warder was angry, and stopped our conversation at once, though the five minutes weren't ended. But I understood. Mr. Dundas said there wasn't a moment to lose."

"Yet that was in the afternoon, and you only come to me at this hour!" I exclaimed.

"I had something else to do first," she said, in the same quiet voice. She was looking down now, not at me, and her eyelashes were so long that they made a shadow on her cheeks. But the blood streamed over her face.

"Even before I saw--Mr. Dundas," she went on, "I had the idea of calling on you--about a different matter. I think it would be more honest of me, if before I go on I tell you that--quite by accident, so far as I was concerned--I was with someone who saw Mr. Dundas go to your house last night, a little after twelve. I didn't dream of spying on--either of you. It just happened, it wouldn't interest you to know how. Yet--I beg of you to tell me one thing. Was he with you for long--so long that he couldn't have got to the other place in time to commit the murder?"

"He was in my house until after one," I said boldly. "But you, if you are his friend, ought to know him well enough to be certain without such an assurance from me, that he is no murderer."

"Oh, I am certain," she protested. "I asked the question, not for that reason, but to know if you could really prove his innocence, if you choose. Now, I find you can. When I read the papers this afternoon, at

first I wanted to rush off to the police and tell them where he had been while the murder was being committed. But I didn't know how long he had stopped in your house, and, besides--"

"You would have dared to do that!" I broke in, the blood, angry blood, stinging my cheeks more hotly than it stung hers.

"It wasn't a question of daring," she answered. "I thought of him more than of you; but I thought of you, too. I knew that if I were in your place, no matter how much harm I might do to myself, I would confess that he had been in my house."

"There are reasons why I can't tell that he was there," I said, trying to awe her by speaking coldly and proudly. "His visit was entirely on business. But Mr. Dundas understands why I must keep silence, and he approves. You know he has remained silent himself."

"For your sake, because he is a gentleman--brave and chivalrous. Would you take advantage of that?"

"You take advantage of me," I flung back at the girl, looking her up and down. "You pretend that you came from Mr. Dundas with a pressing message for me. Do you want me to believe this his message? I think too well of him."

"I don't want you to believe that," she answered. "I haven't come to the message yet. I have earned a right to speak to you first, on my own account."

"In twelve minutes I must be on the stage," I said.

"The stage!" she echoed. "You can go on acting just the same, though he is in prison--for you!"

"I must go on acting. If I didn't, I should do him more harm than good."

"I won't keep you beyond your time. But I beg that you will do him good. If you care for him at all, you must want to save him."

"If I care for him?" I repeated, in surprise. "You think--oh, but I understand now. You are the girl he spoke of."

She blushed deeply, and then grew pale.

"I did not think he would speak of me," she said. "I wish he hadn't. But, if you know everything, the little there is to know, you must see that you have nothing to fear from any rivalry of mine, Mademoiselle de Renzie."

"Why," I exclaimed, "you speak as if you thought Ivor Dundas my lover."

"I don't know what you are to each other," she faltered, all her coolness deserting her. "That isn't my affair--"

"But I say it is. You shall not make such a mistake. Mr. Dundas cares nothing for me, except as a friend. He never did, though we flirted a little a year ago, to amuse ourselves. Now, I am engaged to marry a man whom I worship. I would gladly die for him. Ivor Dundas knows that, and is glad. But the other man is jealous. He wouldn't understand--he would

want to kill me and himself and Ivor Dundas, if he knew that Ivor was in my house last night. He was there too, and I lied to him about Ivor. How could I expect him to believe the real truth now? He is a man. But you will believe, because you are a woman, like myself, and I think the woman Ivor Dundas loves."

Her beautiful eyes brightened. "He told you--that?"

"He told me he loved a girl, and was afraid that he would lose her because of the business which brought him to me. You seem to have been as unreasonable with him, as Ra--as the man I love could be with me. Poor Ivor! Last night was not the first time that he sacrificed himself for chivalry and honour. Yet you blame me! Look to yourself, Miss Forrest."

"I--I don't blame you," she stammered, a sob in her voice. "Only I beg you to save him, from gratitude, if not from love."

"It's true I owe him a debt of gratitude, deeper than you know," I answered. "He is worth trusting--worth saving, at the expense of almost any sacrifice. But I can't sacrifice the man I love for him."

She looked thoughtful. "You say the man you were engaged to was at your house while Ivor was there?"

"Yes. He came then. I hid Ivor, and I lied."

"He suspected that someone was with you? He stood watching, outside your gate?"

"He confessed that, when I'd made him repent his jealousy. Why do you ask? You saw him?"

"I think so. Tell me, Mademoiselle de Renzie, did he lose anything of value near your house?"

"Great heavens, yes!" I cried. "What do you know of that?"

"I know--something. Enough, maybe, to help you to find the thing for him--if you will promise to help Ivor."

"Oh, shame," I cried violently, sick of bargains and promises. "You are trying to bribe me!"

"Yes, but I am not ashamed," the girl answered, holding her head high. "I have not the thing which was lost; but I can get it for you--this very night or to-morrow morning, if you will do what I ask."

"I tell you I cannot," I said. "Not even to get back that thing whose loss was the beginning of all my misery. Ivor would not wish me to ruin myself and--another. Mr. Dundas must be saved without me. Please go. If we talked of this together all night, it could make no difference. And I'm in great trouble, great trouble of my own."

"Has your trouble anything to do with a document?" Miss Forrest slowly asked.

I started, and stared at her, breathless.

"It has!" she answered for me. "Your face tells me so."

"Has Ivor's message--to do with that?" I almost gasped.

"Perhaps. But he had no good news of it to give you. If you want news--if you want the document, it must be through me."

"Anything, anything on earth you like to ask for the document, if you can get it for me, I will do," I pleaded, all my pride and anger gone.

"I ask you to tell the police that Ivor Dundas was in your house from a little after midnight until after one. Will you do that?"

"I must," I said, "if you have the document to sell, and are determined to sell it at no other price. But if I do what you ask, it will spoil my life, for it will kill my lover's love, when he knows I have lied to him. Still, it will save him from--" I stopped, and bit my lip. "Will you give me the diamonds, too?" I asked, humbly enough now.

"The diamonds?" She looked bewildered.

"The diamonds in the brocade bag. Oh, surely they are still in the bag?"

"Yes, they are--they will be in the bag," the girl answered, her charming mouth suddenly resolute, though her eyes were troubled. "You shall have the diamonds, and the document, too, for that one promise."

"How is it possible that you can give me the document?" I asked, half suspicious, for that it should come to me after all I had endured because of it seemed too good to be true; that it should come through this girl seemed incredible.

"Ivor sent me to find it, and I found it," she said simply. "That was why I couldn't come to you before. I had to get the document. I didn't quite know how I was to do it at first, because I had no one to help or advise me; and Ivor said it was under some flower-pots in a box on the balcony of the room where the man was murdered. I was sure I wouldn't be allowed to get into the room itself, so it seemed difficult. But I thought it all out, and hired a room for the evening in a house next door, pretending I was a New York journalist. I had to wait until after dark, and then I climbed across from one balcony to the other. It wasn't as easy to do as it looked from the photograph I saw, because it was so high up, and the balconies were quite far apart, after all. But I couldn't fail Ivor; and I got across. The rest was nothing--except the climbing back. I don't know how the document came in the box, though I suppose Ivor put it there to hide it from the police. It was wrapped up in a towel; and it's quite clean."

"I think," I said slowly, when she had finished her story, "that you have a right to set a high price on that document. You are a brave girl."

"It's not much to be brave for a man you love, is it? And now I'm going to give the thing to you, because I trust you, Mademoiselle de Renzie. I know you'll pay. And I hope, oh, I feel, it won't hurt you as you think it will."

Then, as if it had been some ordinary paper, she whipped from a long

pocket of a coat she wore, the treaty. She put it into my hand. I felt it, I clasped it. I could have kissed it. The very touch of it made me tremble.

"Do you know what this is, Miss Forrest?" I asked.

"No," she said. "It was yours, or Ivor's. Of course I didn't look."

And then there came the rap, rap, of the call-boy at the door. The fifteen minutes were over. But I had the treaty. And I had to pay its price.

CHAPTER XIX

MAXINE PLAYS THE LAST HAND OF THE GAME

When the play was over, I let Raoul drive home with me to supper. If Godensky knew, as he may have known--since he seemed to know all my movements--perhaps he thought that I was seeing Raoul for the last time, and sending him away from me for ever. But, though the game was not in my hands yet, the treaty was; and I had made up my mind to defy Godensky.

I had almost promised that, if he held his hand, I would give Raoul up; and never have I broken my word. But if I wrote a letter to Godensky in the morning, saying I had changed my mind, that he could do his worst against Raoul du Laurier and against me, for nothing should part us two except death? Then he would have fair warning that I did not intend to do the thing to which he had nearly forced me; and I would fight him, when he tried to take revenge. But meanwhile, before he got that letter, I would--I must--find some way of putting the treaty back in its place at the Foreign Office.

It was too soon to dare to be happy, yet; for it was on the cards that, even when I had saved Raoul from the consequences of my political treachery, Godensky might still be able to ruin me with him. Yet, the relief I felt after the all but hopeless anguish in which I had been drowning for the last few days gave to my spirit a wild exhilaration that night. I encouraged Raoul with hints that I had news of the necklace, and said that, if he would let me come to him in his office as soon as it was open in the morning, I might be able to surprise him pleasantly. Of course, he answered that it would give him the greatest joy to see me there, or anywhere; and we parted with an appointment for nine o'clock next day.

When he had gone, I wrote a note--a very short note--to Count Godensky. I wanted to have it ready; but I did not mean to send it till the treaty was in the safe whence I had taken it. Then, the letter should go at once, by messenger; and it would still be very early in the day, I hoped.

Usually, I have my cup of chocolate in bed at nine; but on the morning which followed I was dressed and ready to go out at half past eight. I think that I had not slept at all, but that didn't matter. I felt strong and fresh, and my heart was full of courage. I was leaving nothing to

chance. I had a plan, and knew how I meant to play the last hand in the game. It might go against me. But I held a high trump. Again, as before, Raoul received me alone.

"Dearest," he exclaimed, "I know your news must be good, for you look so bright and beautiful. Tell me--tell me!"

I laughed, teasingly, though Heaven knew I was in no mood for teasing.

"You're too impatient," I said. "To punish you for asking about the wretched diamonds before you enquired how I slept, and whether I dreamed of you, I shall make you pay a penalty."

"Any penalty you will," he answered, laughing too, and entering into the joke--for he was happy and hopeful now, seeing that I could joke.

"Let me sit down and write at your desk, on a bit of your paper," I said.

He gave me pen and ink. I scribbled off a few words, and folded the note into an envelope.

"Now, this is very precious," I went on. "It tells you all you want to know. But--I'm going to post it."

"No, no!" he protested. "I can't wait for the post."

"Oh, I wouldn't trust my treasure to the post office, not even if it were insured. Open that wonderful safe you gave me a peep into the other day, and I'll put this valuable document in among the others, not more valuable to the country than this ought to be to you. I'll hide it there, and you must shut up the safe without looking for it, till I've gone. Then, you must count ten, and after that--you may search. Remember, you said you'd submit to any penalty, so no excuses, no complaints."

Raoul laughed. "You shall have your way, fantastic though it be, for you are a sorceress, and have bewitched me."

He unlocked the door of the safe and stood waiting for me to gratify my whim. But I gaily motioned him behind me. "If you stand there you can see where I put it, and that won't! be fair play. Turn your back."

He obeyed. "You see how I trust you!" he said. "There lie my country's secrets."

"They're safe from me," I said pertly. (And so indeed they were--now.) "They're too uninteresting to amuse me in the least."

As I spoke I found and abstracted the dummy treaty and slipped the real one into its place. Then I laid the envelope with the note I had written where he could not help finding it at first or second glance.

"Now you can close the safe," I said.

He shut the door, and I almost breathed aloud the words that burst from my heart, "Thank Heaven!"

"I must leave you," I told him. And I was kind for a moment, capricious

no longer, because, though the treaty had been restored, I was going to open the cage of Godensky's vengeance, and--I was afraid of him.

"I may come to you as soon as I'm free?" Raoul asked.

"Yes. Come and tell me what you think of the news, and--what you think of me," I said. And while I spoke, smiling, I prayed within that he might continue to think of me all things good--far better than I deserved, yet not better than I would try to deserve in the future, if I were permitted to spend that future with him.

The next thing I did was to send my letter to Count Godensky. This was a flinging down of the glove, and I knew it well. But I was ready to fight now.

Then, I had to keep my promise to Miss Forrest. But I had thought of a way in which, I hoped, that promise--fulfilled as I meant to fulfil it--might help rather than injure me. I had not lain awake all night for nothing.

I went to the office of the Chief of Police, who is a gentleman and a patron of the theatre--when he can spare time from his work. I had met him, and had reason to know that he admired my acting.

His first words were of congratulation upon my success in the new play; and he was as cordial, as complimentary, as if he had never heard of that scene at the Elysee Palace Hotel, about which of course he knew everything--so far as his subordinate could report.

"Are you surprised to see me, Monsieur?" I asked.

"A great delight is always more or less of a surprise in this work-a-day world," he gallantly replied.

"But you can guess what has brought me?"

"Would that I could think it was only to give me a box at the theatre this evening."

"It is partly that," I laughed. "Partly for the pleasure of seeing you, of course. And partly--you know already, since you know everything, that I am a friend of Mr. Dundas, the young Englishman accused of a murder which he could not possibly have committed."

"Could not possibly have committed? Is that merely your opinion as a loyal friend, or have you come to make a communication to me?"

"For that--and to offer you the stage-box for to-night."

"A thousand thanks for the box. As for the communication--"

"It's this. Mr. Dundas was in my house at the time when, according to the doctors' statements, the murder must have been committed. Oh, it's a hard thing for me to come and tell you this!" I went on hastily. "Not that I'm ashamed to have received a call from him at that hour, as it was necessary to see him then, or not at all. He meant to leave Paris early in the morning. But--because I'm engaged to be married to--perhaps you know that, though, among other things?"

"I've heard--a rumour. I didn't know that it amounted to an engagement. Monsieur du Laurier is to be a thousand times congratulated."

"I love him dearly," I said simply. And, not because I am an actress, but because I am a woman and had suffered all that I could bear, tears rose to my eyes. "I am true to him, and always have been. But--he is horribly jealous. I can't explain Mr. Dundas' night visit in a way to satisfy him. If Raoul finds out that an Englishman--well-known, but of whom I never spoke--was at my house after midnight, he will believe I have deceived him. Oh, Monsieur, if you would help me to keep this secret I am telling you so frankly!"

"Keep the secret, yet use it to free the Englishman?" asked the Chief of Police gravely.

"Yes, I ask no less of you; I beg, I implore you. It would kill me to break with Raoul du Laurier."

"Dear Mademoiselle," said the good and gallant man, "trust me to do the best I can for you." (I could see that my tears had moved him.) "A grief to you would be a blow to Paris. Yet--well, as you have been frank, I owe it to you to be equally so on my side. I should before this have sent--quite privately and in a friendly way, to question you about this Mr. Dundas, who passed under another name at the hotel where you called upon him; but I received a request from a very high quarter to wait before communicating with you. Now, as you have come to me, I suppose I may speak."

"Ask me any questions you choose," I said, "and I'll answer them."

"Then, to begin with, since you are engaged to Monsieur du Laurier, how do you explain the statement you made at the hotel, concerning Mr. Dundas?"

"That is one of the many things I have come here on purpose to tell you," I answered him; "for I am going to give you my whole confidence. I throw myself upon your mercy."

"You do me a great honour. Will you speak without my prompting?"

"Yes. I would prefer it. In England, a year ago, I had a little flirtation with Mr. Dundas--no more, though we liked and admired each other. We exchanged a few silly letters, and I forgot all about them until I fell in love with Raoul and promised to marry him--only a short time ago. Then I couldn't bear to think that I had written these foolish letters, and that, perhaps, Mr. Dundas might have kept them. I wrote and asked if he had. He answered that he had every one, and valued them immensely, but if I wished, he would either burn all, or bring them to me, whichever I chose. I chose to have him bring them, and I told him that I'd meet him at the Elysee Palace Hotel on a certain evening, to receive the letters from him."

"He came, as I said, under another name. Why was that, Mademoiselle, since there was nothing for him to be ashamed of?"

"He also is in love, and just engaged to be married to an American girl who lives with relations in London, in a very high position. He didn't want the girl to know he was coming to Paris, because, it seems, there had been a little talk about him and me, which she had heard. And she

didn't like it."

"I see. This gentleman started for Paris, I have learned, the first thing in the morning, the day after a ball at a house where he met the British Secretary for Foreign Affairs."

"Perhaps. For I have enquired and found out that the girl--a Miss Forrest, is distantly connected with the British Foreign Secretary. She lives with her aunt, Lady Mountstuart, whose sister is married to that gentleman. And the Foreign Secretary is a cousin of Lord Mountstuart."

"Ah, Miss Forrest!"

"You know of her already?"

"I have heard her name."

(I guessed how: for she could not have seen Ivor Dundas in prison except through the Chief of Police; but I said nothing of that.)

"You say you know how we met at the hotel, Mr. Dundas and I," I went on. "But I'll explain to you now the inner meaning of it all, which even you can't have found out. Mr. Dundas was to have brought me my letters--half a dozen. He gave me a leather case, which he took from an inner breast pocket, saying the letters were in it. But the room was dark. Something had gone wrong with the electricity, and I hadn't let him push back the curtains, for fear I might be seen from outside, if the lights should suddenly come on. He didn't see the case, as he handed it to me, nor could I. Just at that instant there was a knock at the door; and quick as thought I pushed the leather case down between the seat and back of the sofa."

"But what reason had you to suppose that any danger of discovery threatened you because of a knock at the door?"

"I'll tell you. There is a man--I won't mention his name, but you know it very well, and maybe it is in your mind now--who wants me to marry him. He has wanted it for some time--I think because he admires women who are before the public and applauded by the world; also, perhaps, because I have refused him, and he is one who wants most what he finds hardest to get. He is not a scrupulous person, but he has some power and a good deal of influence, because he is very highly connected, and when people have 'axes to grind' he helps to grind them. He has suspected for some time that I cared for M. du Laurier, and for that he has hated Raoul. I have fancied--that he hired detectives to spy upon me; and my instinct as well as common sense told me that he would let no chance slip to separate me from the man I love. He would work mischief between us--or he would try to ruin Raoul, or crush me--anything to keep us apart. When I saw the Commissary of Police I was hardly surprised, and though I didn't know what pretext had brought him, I said to myself 'That is the work of--'"

"Perhaps better not mention the name, Mademoiselle."

"I didn't mean to. I leave that to your--imagination. 'This is the work of the man whose love is more cruel than hate,' I thought. While I wondered what possible use the police could make of my letters, I was shaking with terror lest they should come upon them and they should somehow fall into--a certain man's hands. Then, at last, they did find

the case, just as I'd begun to hope it was safe. I begged the Commissary of Police not to open it. In vain. When he did, what was my relief to see the diamond necklace you must have heard of!--my relief and my surprise. And now I'm going to confide in you the secret of another, speaking to you as my friend, and a man of honour.

"Those jewels had been stolen only a few days ago from Monsieur du Laurier, and he was in despair at their loss, for they belonged to a dear friend of his--an inveterate gambler, but an adorable woman. She dared not tell her husband of money that she'd lost, but begged Raoul to sell the diamonds for her in Amsterdam and have them replaced by paste. On his way there the necklace was stolen by an expert thief, who must somehow have learned what was going on through the pawnbroker with whom the jewels had been in pledge--for a few thousand francs only. You can imagine my astonishment at seeing the necklace returned in such a miraculous way. I thought that Ivor Dundas must have got it back, meaning to give it to me as a surprise--and the letters afterwards. And it was only to keep the letters out of the affair altogether at any price--evidences in black and white of my silly flirtation--and also to avoid any association of Raoul's name with the necklace, that I told the Commissary of Police the leather case had in it a present from my lover. I spoke impulsively, in sheer desperation; and the instant the words were out I would have cut off my hand to take back the stupid falsehood. But what good to deny what I had just said? The men wouldn't have believed me.

"When the police had gone, I asked Mr. Dundas for my letters. But he thought he had given them to me--and he knew no more of the diamonds in their red case than I did--far less, indeed.

"I was distracted to find that my letters had disappeared, though I was thankful for Raoul's sake, to have the necklace. Mr. Dundas believed that his own leather case with the letters must have been stolen from his pocket in the train, though he couldn't imagine why the diamonds had been given to him instead. But he suspected a travelling companion of his, who had acted queerly; and he determined to try and find the man. He was to bring me news after the theatre at my house, about midnight.

"He came fifteen minutes later, having been detained at his hotel. Friends of his had unexpectedly arrived. He had just time to tell me this, and that after going out on a false scent he had employed a detective named Girard, when Monsieur du Laurier arrived unexpectedly. It seems, he'd been made frantically jealous by some misrepresentations of--the man whose name we haven't mentioned. I begged Mr. Dundas to hide in my boudoir, which he disliked doing, but finally did, to please me. I hoped that he would escape by the window, but it stuck, and to my horror I heard him there, in the dark, moving about. I covered the sounds as well as I could, and pacified Raoul, who thought he had seen someone come in. I hinted that it must have been the fiance of a pretty housemaid I have. It was not till after one that Ivor Dundas finally got away; this I swear to you. What happened to him after leaving my house you know better than I do, for I haven't seen him since, as you are well aware."

"He says he found a letter from the thief in his pocket, and went to the address named; that he couldn't get a cab and walked. But you have read the papers."

"Yes, and I know how loyal he has been to me. Why, he wouldn't even tell

about the diamonds, much less my letters!"

"As for these letters, you are still anxious about them, Mademoiselle?"

"My hope is that Mr. Dundas found and had time to destroy them, rather than risk further delay."

"You would like to know their fate?"

"I would indeed."

"Well, I applaud the Englishman's chivalry. Vive l'Entente Cordiale!"

"You are a man to understand such chivalry, Monsieur. Now that I've humbled myself, can't you give me hope that he'll soon be released, and yet that--that I shan't be made to suffer for my confession to you? It's clear to you, isn't it, that the murder must have been done long before he could have reached the house in the Rue de la Fille Sauvage from the Rue d'Hollande?"

"Yes, that is clear. And needless to say, I believe your statement, Mademoiselle. You are brave and good to have come forward as you have, without being called upon. There are still some formalities to be gone through before Mr. Dundas can be released; but English influence is at work in high quarters, and after what you have told me, I think he will not much longer be under restraint. Besides, I may as well inform you, dear lady, that not ten minutes before you arrived this morning I received satisfactory news of the arrest of two Englishmen at Frankfort, who seem to have been concerned in this business in the Rue de la Fille Sauvage. They certainly travelled with the murdered man; and a friend of his called Gestre, just back from Marseilles, has sworn that these persons were formerly partners of Janson, the deceased. If Janson stole the necklace from Monsieur du Laurier, with this pair as accomplices, and then tried to cheat them, a motive for the crime is evident. And we are getting at Janson's record, which seems to be a bad one--a notorious one throughout Europe, if he proves to be the man we think. I hope, really, that in a very few days Mr. Dundas may be able to thank you in person for what you've done for him, and--to tell you what has become of those letters."

"What good will their destruction do me, though, if you are not merciful?"

"I intend to be, for I can combine mercy with justice. Dear Mademoiselle, Monsieur du Laurier need never know the circumstances you have told to me, or that the Englishman's alibi has been proved by you. The arrest of these two men in Frankfort will, I feel sure, help the police to keep your secret as you would keep it yourself. Now, will that assurance make it easier for you to put your whole soul into your part to-night?"

"If you will accept that box," I said, letting him kiss my hand, and feeling inclined to kiss his.

Then I drove home, with my heart singing, for I felt almost sure that I had trumped Godensky's last trick now.

When I reached home Miss Forrest was there. She had brought the diamonds in the brocade bag. Oddly enough, the ribbons which fastened it were

torn out, as if there had been a struggle for the possession of the bag. But Miss Forrest did not explain this, or even allude to it at all.

I thanked her for coming and for bringing the jewels. "I have kept my promise," I said. "The man you love will be free in a few days. Will you let me say that I think you are a very noble pair, and I hope you will be happy together."

"I shall try to make up to him for--my hateful suspicions and--everything," she said, like a repentant child. "I love him so much!"

"And he you. You almost broke his heart by throwing him over; I saw that. But how gloriously you will mend it again!"

"Oh, I hope so!" she cried. "And you--have I really spoiled your life by forcing you to make that promise? I pray that I haven't."

"I thought you had, but I was mistaken," I answered. "The thing you have made me do has proved a blessing. I may have--altered some of the facts a little, but none of those that concern Mr. Dundas. And a woman has to use such weapons as she has, against cruel enemies."

"I hope you'll defeat yours," said Miss Forrest.

"I begin to believe I shall," said I. And we shook hands. She is the only girl I ever saw who seemed to me worthy of Ivor Dundas.

Early in the afternoon Raoul came, and the first thing I did was to give him the diamonds.

"You are my good angel!" he exclaimed. "Thank Heaven, I won't have to take your money now."

"All that's mine is yours," I said.

"It is you I want for mine," he answered. "When am I to have you? Don't keep me waiting long, my darling. I'm nothing without you."

"I don't want to keep you waiting," I told him. And indeed I longed to be his wife--his, in spite of Godensky; his, till death us should part.

He took me in his arms, and then, when I had promised to marry him as soon as a marriage could be arranged, our talk drifted back to the morning, and the note I had written, telling him that a pretty American girl had found the diamonds.

"She's engaged to marry Ivor Dundas, an old friend of mine--the poor fellow so stupidly accused of murder," I explained. "But of course he is innocent. Of course he'll be discharged without a blot upon his name. They're tremendously in love with each other, almost as much as you and I!"

"You didn't tell me about the love affair in your note," said Raoul. "You spoke only of the girl, and the coincidence of her driving past your house, after I went in."

"There wasn't time for more in that famous communication!" I laughed.

Raoul echoed me. "It came rather too near being famous, by the way," he said. "Just after I had found it in the safe--where you would put it, you witch!--a man came in with an order from the President to copy a clause in a new treaty which is kept there."

"What treaty?" I asked, with a leap of the heart.

"Oh, one between France, Japan and Russia. But that isn't the point." (Ah, was it not, if he had known?) The thing is, it would have been rather awkward, wouldn't it? if I hadn't got your note out of the safe before the man came in, as he never took his eyes off me, or out of the open safe, for a second."

"Thank God I wasn't too late!" I stammered, before I could keep back the rushing words. "You mean, thank God he wasn't sooner, don't you, darling?" amended Raoul.

"Yes, of course. How stupid I am!" I murmured.

All along, then, Godensky had meant to get my promise and deceive me, for I had not even sent my note of defiance when this trick was played. Had the treaty been missing, and Raoul disgraced, Godensky would no doubt have vowed to me--if I'd lived to hear his vows--that he had had no hand in the discovery. Fear of the terrible man who had so nearly beaten me in the game made me quiver even now. "You see," I went on, "I can think of nothing but you, and my love for you. You'll never be jealous and make me miserable again, will you, no matter what Count Godensky or any other wretched creature may say of me to you?"

"I've listened to Godensky for the last time," said Raoul. "The dog! He shall never come near me again."

"I hardly think he will try," I said. "I'm glad we're going to be married soon. Do you know, I'm half inclined to do as you've asked me sometimes, and promised you wouldn't ask again--leave the stage. I want to rest, and just be happy, like other women. I want love--and peace--and you."

"You shall have all, and for always," answered Raoul. "If only I deserved you!"

"If only I deserved you!" I echoed.

Raoul would not let me say that. But he did not know. And I trust that he never may; or not until a time, if such a time could come, that he would forgive me all things, because we are one in a perfect love.

THE END

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