

GRIFFITHS ARTHUR

THE
PASSENGER
FROM CALAIS

Arthur Griffiths

The Passenger from Calais

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FOREWORD

I desire to state that the initial fact upon which I have founded this story is within my own experience. I travelled from Calais to Basle by the Engadine Express in the latter end of July, 1902, when my wife and myself were the only passengers. The rest is pure fiction.

A.G.

CHAPTER I

[Colonel Annesley's Story]

The crossing from Dover to Calais had been rough; a drizzling rain fell all the time, and most of the passengers had remained below. Strange to say, they were few enough, as I saw on landing. It was a Sunday in late July, and there ought to have been a strong stream setting towards Central Europe. I hardly expected to find much room in the train; not that it mattered, for my place was booked through in the Lucerne sleeping-car of the Engadine express.

Room! When I reached the siding where this train de luxe was drawn up, I saw that I was not merely the first but the only passenger. Five sleeping-cars and a dining-car attached, with the full staff, attendants, chef, waiters—all lay there waiting for me, and me alone.

"Not very busy?" I said, with a laugh to the conductor.

"*Parbleu*," replied the man, polyglot and cosmopolitan, like most of his class, but a Frenchman, or, more likely from his accent, a Swiss. "I never saw the like before."

"I shall have a compartment to myself, then?"

"Monsieur may have the whole carriage if he wishes—the whole five carriages. It is but to arrange." His eyes glistened at the prospect of something special in this obvious scarcity of coming tips.

"The train will run, I hope? I am anxious to get on."

"But assuredly it will run. Even without monsieur it would run. The carriages are wanted at the other end for the return journey. Stay, what have we here?"

We stood talking together on the platform, and at some little distance from the railway station, the road to which was clear and open all the way, so that I could see a little party of four approaching us, and distinguish them. Two ladies, an official, probably one of the guards, and a porter laden with light luggage.

As they came up I discreetly withdrew to my own compartment, the window of which was open, so that I could hear and see all that passed.

"Can we have places for Lucerne?" It was asked in an eager, anxious, but very sweet voice, and in excellent French.

"Places?" echoed the conductor. "Madame can have fifty."

"What did I tell madame?" put in the official who had escorted her.

"I don't want fifty," she replied, pettishly, crossly, "only two. A separate compartment for myself and maid; the child can come in with us."

Now for the first time I noticed that the maid was carrying a bundle in her arms, the nature of which was unmistakable. The way in which she swung it to and fro rhythmically was that of a nurse and child.

"If madame prefers, the maid and infant can be accommodated apart," suggested the obliging conductor.

But this did not please her. "No, no, no," she answered with much asperity. "I wish them to be with me. I have told you so already; did you not hear?"

"*Parfaitement*, as madame pleases. Only, as the train is not full—very much the reverse indeed—only one other passenger, a gentleman—no more—"

The news affected her strangely, and in two very different ways. At first a look of satisfaction came into her face, but it was quickly succeeded by one of nervous apprehension, amounting to positive fear. She turned to talk to her maid in English, while the conductor busied himself in preparing the tickets.

"What are we to do, Philpotts?" This was said to the maid in English. "What if it should be—"

"Oh, no, never! We can't turn back. You must face it out now. There is nothing to be afraid of, not in that way. I saw him, the gentleman, as we came up. He's quite a gentleman, a good-looking military-looking man, not at all the other sort—you know the sort I mean."

Now while I accepted the compliment to myself, I was greatly mystified by the allusion to the "other sort of man."

"You think we can go on, that it's safe, even in this empty train? It would have been so different in a crowd. We should have passed unobserved among a lot of people."

"But then there would have been a lot of people to observe us; some one, perhaps, who knew you, some one who might send word."

"I wish I knew who this passenger is. It would make me much easier in my mind. It might be possible perhaps to get him on our side if he is to go with us, at least to get him to help to take care of our treasure until I can hand it over. What a burden it is! It's terribly on my mind. I wonder how I could have done it. The mere thought makes me shiver. To turn thief! Me, a common thief!"

"Stealing is common enough, and it don't matter greatly, so long as you're not found out. And you did it so cleverly too; with such a nerve. Not a soul could have equalled you at the business. You might have been at it all your life," said the maid, with affectionate familiarity, that of a humble performer paying tribute to a great artist in crime.

She was a decent, respectable-looking body too, this confederate whom I concluded was masquerading as maid. The very opposite of the younger woman (about her more directly), a neatly dressed unassuming person, short and squat in figure, with a broad, plain, and, to the casual observer, honest face, slow in movement and of no doubt sluggish temperament, not likely to be moved or distressed by conscience, neither at the doing or the memory of evil deeds.

Now the conductor came up and civilly bowed them towards their carriage, mine, which they entered at the other end as I left it making for the restaurant, not a little interested in what I had heard.

Who and what could these two people be with whom I was so strangely and unexpectedly thrown? The one was a lady, I could hardly be mistaken in that; it was proved in many ways, voice, air, aspect, all spoke of birth and breeding, however much she might have fallen away from or forfeited her high station.

She might have taken to devious practices, or been forced into them; whatever the cause of her present decadence she could not have been always the thief she now confessed herself. I had it from her own lips, she had acknowledged it with some show of remorse. There must surely have been some excuse for her, some overmastering temptation, some extreme pressure exercised irresistibly through her emotions, her affections, her fears.

What! this fair creature a thief? This beautiful woman, so richly endowed by nature, so outwardly worthy of admiration, a despicable degraded character within? It was hard to credit it. As I still hesitated, puzzled and bewildered, still anxious to give her the benefit of the doubt, she came to the door of the buffet where I was now seated at lunch, and allowed me to survey her more curiously and more at leisure.

"A daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair."

The height and slimness of her graceful figure enhanced by the tight-fitting tailor-made ulster that fell straight from collar to heel; her head well poised, a little thrown back with chin in the air, and a proud defiant look in her undeniably handsome face. Fine eyes of darkest blue, a well-chiseled nose with delicate, sensitive nostrils, a small mouth with firm closely compressed lips, a wealth of glossy chestnut hair, gathered into a knot under her tweed travelling cap.

As she faced me, looking straight at me, she conveyed the impression of a determined unyielding character, a woman who would do much, dare much, who would go her own road if so resolved, undismayed and undeterred by any difficulties that might beset her.

Then, to my surprise, although I might have expected it, she came and seated herself at a table close to my elbow. She had told her companion that she wanted to know more about me, that she

would like to enlist me in her service, questionable though it might be, and here she was evidently about to make the attempt. It was a little barefaced, but I admit that I was amused by it, and not at all unwilling to measure swords with her. She was presumably an adventuress, clever, designing, desirous of turning me round her finger, but she was also a pretty woman.

"I beg your pardon," she began almost at once in English, when the waiter had brought her a plate of soup, and she was toying with the first spoonful, speaking in a low constrained, almost sullen voice, as though it cost her much to break through the *convenances* in thus addressing a stranger.

"You will think it strange of me," she went on, "but I am rather awkwardly situated, in fact in a position of difficulty, even of danger, and I venture to appeal to you as a countryman, an English officer."

"How do you know that?" I asked, quickly concluding that my light baggage had been subjected to scrutiny, and wondering what subterfuge she would adopt to explain it.

"It is easy to see that. Gentlemen of your cloth are as easily recognizable as if your names were printed on your back."

"And as they are generally upon our travelling belongings." I looked at her steadily with a light laugh, and a crimson flush came on her face. However hardened a character, she had preserved the faculty of blushing readily and deeply, the natural adjunct of a cream-like complexion.

"Let me introduce myself in full," I said, pitying her obvious confusion; and I handed her my card, which she took with a shamefaced air, rather foreign to her general demeanour.

"Lieut.-Colonel Basil Annesley, Mars and Neptune Club," she read aloud. "What was your regiment?"

"The Princess Ulrica Rifles, but I left it on promotion. I am unattached for the moment, and waiting for reëmployment."

"Your own master then?"

"Practically, until I am called upon to serve. I hope to get a staff appointment. Meanwhile I am loafing about Europe."

"Do you go beyond Lucerne?"

"Across the St. Gothard certainly, and as far as Como, perhaps beyond. And you? Am I right in supposing we are to be fellow travellers by the Engadine express?" I went on by way of saying something. "To Lucerne or further?"

CHAPTER II

"Probably." The answer was given with great hesitation. "If I go by this train at all, that is to say."

"Have you any doubts?"

"Why, yes. To tell you the truth, I dread the journey. I have been doing so ever since—since I felt it must be made. Now I find it ever so much worse than I expected."

"Why is that, if I may ask?"

"You see, I am travelling alone, practically alone that is to say, with only my maid."

"And your child," I added rather casually, with no second thought, and I was puzzled to understand why the chance phrase evoked another vivid blush.

"The child! Oh, yes, the child," and I was struck that she did not say "my" child, but laid rather a marked stress on the definite article.

"That of course increases your responsibility," I hazarded, and she seized the suggestion.

"Quite so. You see how I am placed. The idea of going all that way in an empty train quite terrifies me."

"I don't see why it should."

"But just think. There will be no one in it, no one but ourselves. We two lone women and you, single-handed. Suppose the five attendants and the others were to combine against us? They might rob and murder us."

"Oh, come, come. You must not let foolish fears get the better of your common sense. Why should they want to make us their victims? I believe they are decent, respectable men, the employees of a great company, carefully selected. At any rate, I am not worth robbing, are you? Have you any special reason for fearing thieves? Ladies are perhaps a little too reckless in carrying their valuables about with them. Your jewel-case may be exceptionally well lined."

"Oh, but it is not; quite the contrary," she cried with almost hysterical alacrity. "I have nothing to tempt them. And yet something dreadful might happen; I feel we are quite at their mercy."

"I don't. I tell you frankly that I think you are grossly exaggerating the situation. But if you feel like that, why not wait? Wait over for another train, I mean?"

I am free to confess that, although my curiosity had been aroused, I would much rather have washed my hands of her, and left her and her belongings, especially the more compromising part, the mysterious treasure, behind at Calais.

"Is there another train soon?" she inquired nervously.

"Assuredly—by Boulogne. It connects with the train from Victoria at 2.20 and the boat from Folkestone. You need only run as far as Boulogne with this Engadine train, and wait there till it starts. I think about 6 p.m."

"Will that not lose time?"

"Undoubtedly you will be two hours later at Basle, and you may lose the connection with Lucerne and the St. Gothard if you want to get on without delay. To Naples I think you said?"

"I did not say Naples. You said you were going to Naples," she replied stiffly. "I did not mention my ultimate destination."

"Perhaps not. I have dreamt it. But I do not presume to inquire where you are going, and I myself am certainly not bound for Naples. But if I can be of no further use to you I will make my bow. It is time for me to get back to the train, and for my part I don't in the least want to lose the Engadine express."

She got up too, and walked out of the buffet by my side.

"I shall go on, at any rate as far as Boulogne," she volunteered, without my asking the question; and we got into our car together, she entering her compartment and I mine. I heard her door bang, but I kept mine still open.

I smoked many cigarettes pondering over the curious episode and my new acquaintance. How was I to class her? A young man would have sworn she was perfectly straight, that there could be no guile in this sweet-faced, gentle, well-mannered woman; and I, with my greater experience of life and the sex, was much tempted to do the same. It was against the grain to condemn her as all bad, a depredator, a woman with perverted moral sense who broke the law and did evil things.

But what else could I conclude from the words I had heard drop from her own lips, strengthened and confirmed as they were by the incriminating language of her companion?

"Bother the woman and her dark blue eyes. I wish I'd never come across her. A fine thing, truly, to fall in love with a thief. I hope to heaven she will really leave the train at Boulogne; we ought to be getting near there by now."

I had travelled the road often enough to know it by heart, and I recognized our near approach only to realize that the train did not mean to stop. I turned over the leaves of Bradshaw and saw I had been mistaken; the train skirted Boulogne and never entered the station.

"Well, that settles it for the present, anyhow. If she still wants to leave the train she must wait now until Amiens. That ought to suit her just as well."

But it would not; at least, she lost no time in expressing her disappointment at not being able to alight at Boulogne.

We had hardly passed the place when her maid's (or companion's) square figure filled the open doorway of my compartment, and in her strong deep voice she addressed a brief summons to me brusquely and peremptorily:

"My lady wishes to speak to you."

"And pray what does 'my lady' want with me?" I replied carelessly, using the expression as a title of rank.

"She is not 'my lady,' but 'my' lady, my mistress, and simply Mrs. Blair." The correction and information were vouchsafed with cold self-possession. "Are you coming?"

"I don't really see why I should," I said, not too civilly. "Why should I be at her beck and call? If she had been in any trouble, any serious trouble, such as she anticipated when talking to me at the buffet, and a prey to imaginary alarms since become real, I should have been ready to serve her or any woman in distress, but nothing of this could have happened in the short hour's run so far."

"I thought you were a gentleman," was the scornful rejoinder. "A nice sort of gentleman, indeed, to sit there like a stock or a stone when a lady sends for you!"

"A lady!" There was enough sarcasm in my tone to bring a flush upon her impassive face, a fierce gleam of anger in her stolid eyes; and when I added, "A fine sort of lady!" I thought she would have struck me. But she did no more than hiss an insolent gibe.

"You call yourself an officer, a colonel? I call you a bounder, a common cad."

"Be off!" I was goaded into crying, angrily. "Get away with you; I want to have nothing more to say to you or your mistress. I know what you are and what you have been doing, and I prefer to wash my hands of you both. You're not the kind of people I like to deal with or wish to know."

She stared at me open-mouthed, her hands clenched, her eyes half out of her head. Her face had gone deadly white, and I thought she would have fallen there where she stood, a prey to impotent rage.

Now came a sudden change of scene. The lady, Mrs. Blair, as I had just heard her called, appeared behind, her taller figure towering above the maid's, her face in full view, vexed with varying acute emotions, rage, grief, and terror combined.

CHAPTER III

"What's all this?" she cried in great agitation. "Wait, do not speak, Philpotts, leave him to me.... Do you go back to our place this instant; we cannot be away together, you know that; *it* must not be left alone, one of us must be on guard over it. Hurry, hurry, I never feel that *it* is safe out of our sight.

"Now, sir," Mrs. Blair turned on me fiercely, "will you be so good as to explain how I find you quarrelling with my maid, permitting yourself to cast aspersions, to make imputations upon two unprotected women?"

"How much have you overheard?" I asked, feeling very small already. My self-reproach was aroused even before I quailed under the withering contempt of her tone.

"Enough to expect ample apology. How dare you, how dare you say such things? What you may imagine, what unworthy idea you may have formed, is beyond me to guess, but you can know nothing. You can have no real reason for condemning me."

"Let me admit that, and leave the matter there," I pleaded. I could not bring myself to tell her that she was self-condemned, that she was the principal witness against herself. It would have been too cruel, ungenerous, to take an unfair advantage. Why should I constitute myself her judge?

She looked at me very keenly, her eyes piercing me through and through. I felt that she was penetrating my inmost thoughts and turning me inside out.

"I will not leave it at that. I insist upon your speaking plainly. I must know what is in your mind."

"And if I refuse, distinctly, positively, categorically; if I deny your contention, and protest that I have nothing to tell you?"

"I shall not believe you. Come, please, let there be no more evasion. I must have it out. I shall stay here until you tell me what you think of me, and why."

She seated herself by my side in the narrow velvet seat of the small compartment, so close that the folds of her tweed skirt (she had removed her ulster) touched and rubbed against me. I was invaded by the sweet savour of her gracious presence (she used some delightful scent, *violette ideale*, I believe), by putting forth my hand a few inches I might have taken hers in mine. She fixed her eyes on me with an intent unvarying gaze that under other conditions would have been intoxicating, but was now no more than disquieting and embarrassing.

As I was still tongue-tied, she returned to her point with resolute insistence.

"Come, Colonel Annesley, how long is this to go on? I want and will have an explanation. Why have you formed such a bad opinion of me?"

"How do you know I have done so?" I tried to fence and fight with her, but in vain.

"I cannot be mistaken. I myself heard you tell my maid that you wished to have nothing to say to us, that we were not your sort. Well! why is that? How do I differ from the rest of—your world, let us call it?"

"You do not, as far as I can see. At least you ought to hold your own anywhere, in any society, the very best."

"And yet I'm not 'your sort.' Am I a humbug, an impostor, an adventuress, a puppet and play-actress? Or is it that I have forfeited my right, my rank of gentlewoman, my position in the world, your world?"

I was silent, moodily, obstinately silent. She had hit the blot, and could put but one interpretation upon it. I saw she guessed I knew something. Not how much, perhaps, but something to her discredit. She still was not satisfied; she would penetrate my reserve, overcome my reticence, have it out of me willy nilly, whether I would or no.

"You cannot surely refuse me? I have my reasons for desiring to know the very worst."

"Why drive me to that?" I schooled myself to seem hard and uncompromising. I felt I was weakening under the subtle charm of her presence, and the pretty pleading of her violet eyes; but I was still resolute not to give way.

"If you will only tell me why you think such evil I may be able to justify myself, or at least explain away appearances that are against me."

"You admit there are such appearances? Remember, I never said so."

"Then on what do you condemn me? You do condemn me, I am certain of it," she insisted, seeing my gesture of negation. "Are you treating me fairly, chivalrously, as a gentleman and a man of honour should? How can you reconcile it to your conscience?"

"Some people talk very lightly of conscience, or use it when it is an empty meaningless word," I said severely.

"You imply that I have no conscience, or that I should feel the qualms, the prickings of conscience?"

"After what you've done, yes," I blurted out.

"What have I done? What do you know of it, or what led me to do it? How dare you judge me without knowing the facts, without a shadow of proof?" She sprang to her feet and passed to the door, where she turned, as it were, at bay.

"I have the very best proof, from your own lips. I heard you and your maid talking together at Calais."

"A listener, Colonel Annesley? Faugh!"

"It was forced on me. You stood under my window there." I defended myself indignantly. "I wish to heaven I had never heard. I did not want to know; your secrets are your own affair."

"And my actions, I presume?" she put in with superb indifference.

"And their consequences, madam," but the shot failed rather of effect. She merely smiled and shook her head recklessly, contemptuously. Was she so old a hand, so hardened in crime, that the fears of detection, arrest, reprisals, the law and its penalties had no effect upon her? Undoubtedly at Calais she was afraid; some misgiving, some haunting terror possessed her. Now, when standing before me fully confessed for what she was, and practically at my mercy, she could laugh with cool and unabashed levity and make little of the whole affair.

If I had hoped that I had done with her now, when the murder was out, I was very much mistaken. She had some further designs on me, I was sure. She wanted to make use of me, how or in what way I could not imagine; but I soon perceived that she was anxious to be friends. The woman was in the ascendant, and, as I thought, the eternal feminine ever agog to attract and subjugate the male, she would conquer my admiration even if she could not secure my esteem.

Suddenly, and quite without my invitation or encouragement, she reseated herself by my side.

"See, Colonel Annesley, let us come to an understanding." She said it quite gaily and with no shadow of apprehension left in her, not a sign of shame or remorse in her voice. Her mood had entirely changed. She was *débonnaire*, frolicsome, overflowing with fun.

"What do you mean to do? Give me into custody? Call in the gendarmes at the next station? Have me taken red-handed with the—stolen property—the 'swag,' you know the word, perhaps, in my possession?"

"I am not a police officer; it's not my business," I answered gruffly. I thought this flippancy very much misplaced.

"Or you might telegraph back to England, to London, to Scotland Yard: 'The woman Blair in the Engadine express. Wire along the line to authorities, French and Swiss, to look out for her and arrest preparatory to extradition.'"

"I would much rather not continue this conversation, Mrs. Blair."

"I am not 'Mrs. Blair,'" she cried, laughing merrily as at a tremendous joke. "It is only one of my aliases. I am better known as Slippery Sue, and the Countess of Plantagenet, and the Sly American, and dashing Mrs. Mortimer, and—"

"Oh, please, please spare me. It does not matter, not a row of pins, what you are called. I would rather not have the whole list," I interrupted her, but could not check her restless tongue.

"You shall hear, you must know all about me and my famous exploits. I was the heroine of that robbery at Buckingham Palace. I was at the State Ball, and made a fine harvest of jewels. I have swept a dozen country-houses clean; I have picked pockets and lifted old lace from the shop counters, and embezzled and forged—"

"And turned pirate, and held up trains, and robbed the Bank of England," I added, falling into her humour and laughing as she rose to her full height; and again her mood changed, dominating me with imperious air, her voice icily cold in manner, grave and repellent.

"Why not? I am a thief; you believe me to be a common thief."

CHAPTER IV

I was too much taken aback to do better than stammer out helplessly, hopelessly, almost unintelligibly, a few words striving to remind her of her own admission. Nothing, indeed, could take the sting out of this, and yet it was all but impossible to accuse her, to blame her even for what she had done.

She read that in my eyes, in my abashed face, my hands held out deprecating her wrath, and her next words had a note of conciliation in them.

"There are degrees of wrong-doing, shades of guilt," she said. "Crimes, offences, misdeeds, call them as you please, are not absolutely unpardonable; in some respects they are excusable, if not justifiable. Do you believe that?"

"I should like to do so in your case," I replied gently. "You know I am still quite in the dark."

"And you must remain so, for the present at any rate," she said firmly and sharply. "I can tell you nothing, I am not called upon to do it indeed. We are absolute strangers, I owe you no explanation, and I would give you none, even if you asked."

"I have not asked and shall not ask anything."

"Then you are willing to take it so, to put the best construction on what you have heard, to forget my words, to surrender your suspicions?"

"If you will tell me only this: that I may have confidence in you, that I may trust you, some day, to enlighten me and explain what seems so incomprehensible to-day."

"I am sorely tempted to do so now," she paused, lost for a time in deep and anxious thought; and then, after subjecting me to a long and intent scrutiny, she shook her head. "No, it cannot be, not yet. You must earn the right to my confidence, you must prove to me that you will not misuse it. There are others concerned; I am not speaking for myself alone. You must have faith in me, believe in me or let it be."

She had beaten me, conquered me. I was ready to be her slave with blind, unquestioning obedience.

"As you think best. I will abide by your decision. Tell me all or nothing. If the first I will help you, if the latter I will also help you as far as lies in my power."

"Without conditions?" And when I nodded assent such a smile lit up her face that more than repaid me, and stifled the doubts and qualms that still oppressed me. But, bewitched by the sorcery of her bright eyes, I said bravely:

"I accept service—I am yours to command. Do with me what you please."

"Will you give me your hand on it?" She held out hers, gloveless, white and warm, and it lay in mine just a second while I pressed it to my lips in token of fealty and submission.

"You shall be my knight and champion, and I say it seriously. I may call you to fight for me, at least to defend and protect me in my present undertaking. The way is by no means clear. I cannot foresee what may happen on this journey. There are risks, dangers before me. I may ask you to share them. Do you repent already?"

She had been watching me closely for any sign of wavering, but I showed none, whatever I might feel in my inmost heart.

"I shall not disappoint you," was what I said, and, in a firm assured voice, added, "You have resolved then to travel forward in this train?"

"I must, I have no choice. I dare not tarry by the way. But I no longer feel quite alone and unprotected. If trouble arises, I tell you candidly I shall try to throw it on you."

"From what quarter do you anticipate it?" I asked innocently enough. "You expect to be pursued, I presume?"

She held up a warning finger.

"That is not in the compact. You are not to be inquisitive. Ask me no questions, please, but wait on events. For the present you must be satisfied so, and there is nothing more to be said."

"I shall see you again, I trust," I pleaded, as she rose to leave me.

"If you wish, by all means. Why should we not dine together in the dining-car by and by?" she proposed with charming frankness, in the lighter mood that sat so well upon her. "The waiters will be there to play propriety, and no Mrs. Grundy within miles."

"Or your maid might be chaperon at an adjoining table."

"Philpotts? Impossible! She cannot leave—she must remain on duty; one of us must be in charge always. Who knows what might happen when our backs were turned? We might lose it—it might be abstracted. Horrible thought after all it has cost us."

"It has evidently an extraordinary value in your eyes. If only I might be allowed to—" know more, I would have said, but she chose to put other words into my mouth.

"To join us in the watching? Take your turn of 'sentry go'—isn't that your military term? Become one of us, belong to a gang of thieves, liable like the rest of us to the law? Ah, that would be trying you too far. I see your face fall."

"I am ready to do much to serve you. I would gladly help you, see you through any difficulty by the way, but I'm afraid I must draw the line at active partnership," I answered a little lamely under her mocking eyes. Once more, as suddenly as before, she veered round.

"There is a limit, then, to your devotion?" She was coldly sarcastic now, and I realized painfully that I had receded in her favour. "I must not expect unhesitating self-sacrifice? So be it; it is well to know how far I may go. I sincerely hope I may have no need of you at all. How thankful I am that I never let you into my secrets! Good afternoon," and with a contemptuous whisk of her skirts and a laugh, she was gone.

"I'll have nothing more to say to her," I cried in great heat, vexed and irritated beyond measure at her capricious temper. I should only be dragged into some pitfall, some snare, some dire unpleasantness. But what did I know of her real character? What of my first doubts and suspicions? She had by no means dispelled them. She had only bamboozled me by her insinuating ways, had drawn me on by her guileful cleverness to pity and promises to befriend her. I had accorded her an active sympathy which in my more sober moments I felt she did not, could not, deserve; if I were not careful she would yet involve me in some inextricable mess.

So for half an hour I abused her fiercely; I swore at myself hotly as an ass, a hopeless and unmitigated ass, ever ready to be betrayed and beguiled by woman's wiles, the too easy victim of the first pretty face I saw. The fit lasted for quite half an hour, and then came the reaction. I heard her rich deep voice singing in my ears, I felt the haunting glamour of her eyes, remembered her gracious presence, and my heart went out to her. I was so sorry for her: how could I cast her off? How could I withhold my countenance if she were in real distress? She was a woman—a weak, helpless woman; I could not desert and abandon her. However reprehensible her conduct might have been, she had a claim to my protection from ill-usage, and I knew in my heart that she might count upon a good deal more. I knew, of course, that I ought not to stand between her and the inevitable Nemesis that awaits upon misdeeds, but what if I helped her to avoid or escape it?

The opportunity was nearer at hand than I thought. My kindly intentions, bred of my latest sentiments towards Mrs. Blair, were soon to be put to the test.

CHAPTER V

The train reached Amiens punctually at 5 p.m., and a stoppage of five minutes was announced. I got out to stretch my legs on the platform. No one took much notice of us; it must have been known that the train was empty, for there were no waiters from the buffet with *café au lait* or fruit, or *brioches*—no porters about, or other officials.

I had not expected to see any passengers come on board the train, a through express, made up of sleeping-cars and a supplementary charge on the tickets. But on running into the station (ours was the first carriage) I had noticed a man standing with a valise in his hand, and I saw him following the train down the platform when we stopped. He addressed himself to a little group of conductors who had already alighted, and were gossiping idly among themselves, having nothing else to do. One of them indicated our particular attendant, to whom he spoke, and who brought him directly to our carriage.

Evidently the newcomer was bound for Lucerne *via* Basle. Here was one more occupant of our neglected train, another companion and fellow traveller in our nearly empty sleeping-car. Curiosity and something more led me to examine this man closely; it was a strange, undefined, inexplicable sense of foreboding, of fateful forecast, that he and I were destined to be thrown together unpleasantly, to be much mixed up with one another, and to the comfort and satisfaction of neither.

Who and what was he? His position in life, his business, trade or calling were not to be easily fixed; a commercial man, an agent or "traveller" on his own account, well-to-do and prosperous, was the notion borne out by his dress, his white waistcoat and coloured shirt of amazing pattern (a hint of his Italian origin), his rings and the showy diamond pin in his smart necktie.

I added to this, my first impression, by further observation, for which I soon had abundant opportunity. When the train moved on, he came and took his seat on the flap seat (or *strapontin*) just opposite my compartment. I could not tell why, until presently he made overtures of sociability and began a desultory talk across the corridor. My cabin or compartment, it will be remembered, was the last but one; the newcomer had been given the one behind mine, and here from his seat he commanded the whole length of the carriage forward, which included the compartment occupied by Mrs. Blair and her party.

I cannot say that I liked his looks or was greatly attracted by him. He was not prepossessing. Fair, with a flaccid unwholesome complexion, foxy haired, his beard cut to a point, small moustaches curled upward showing thin pale lips, and giving his mouth a disagreeable curve also upwards, a sort of set smile that was really a sardonic sneer, conveying distrust and disbelief in all around. His eyes were so deep set as to be almost lost in their recesses behind his sandy eyelashes, and he kept them screwed up close, with the intent watchful gaze of an animal about to make a spring. His whole aspect, his shifty, restless manner, his furtive looks, all were antipathetic and to his great advantage. I did not take to him at all, and plainly showed him that I had no desire for his talk or his company.

It was not easy to shake him off, however. He would take no offence; I was cold to positive rudeness, I snubbed him unmercifully; I did not answer his remarks or his questions, which were incessant and shamelessly inquisitorial. Nothing disconcerted him. I had all but shut the door of my compartment in his face, but it suddenly occurred to me that he was capable of wandering on, and when he found the ladies inflicting his greasy attentions upon them.

I felt that I had better submit to his unpalatable society than let him bore Mrs. Blair with his colossal impudence.

How right I was in this became at once apparent. He had taken out a cigar-case and pressed one upon me with such pertinacious, offensive familiarity that I could see no way out of it than by saying peremptorily:

"You cannot smoke here. There are ladies in that compartment yonder."

"Ladies indeed! You surprise me," but I saw a look on his face that convinced me he perfectly well knew they were there. "Ladies, aha! How many, may I ask?"

"One at least, with her maid and a child," I replied gruffly.

"And a child," he repeated, as if by rote. "Does monsieur, tell me quickly, I—I—beg—know them! Can he describe them to me?"

"I shall tell you nothing about them. What the mischief do you mean by asking me questions? Find out what you want for yourself." I was hot and indignant with the brute.

"By George, you're right. I'll go and ask for leave to smoke. I shall find out then," and he jumped up, the spring seat closing with a bang from under him.

The noise concealed the sound of the electric bell which I had pressed to summon the attendant, as I rushed out and caught the other man by the arm.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," I cried with very vigorous emphasis, backed by all my strength. "I'll shake you to a jelly if you dare to move another inch."

"Here, I say, drop it. Who the deuce are you? None of your bally nonsense. Hands off, or I'll make you."

But he was too soft and flabby to avail much, and I dragged him back helplessly with tightened grip, only too delighted to try conclusions with him.

At this moment the conductor appeared upon the scene, and began to expostulate loudly.

"Here, I say, what's all this? It can't be allowed. No fighting and quarrelling are permitted."

"Well, then, people must behave themselves," I retorted. "Don't let this chap annoy your passengers."

"I have done nothing to annoy them," stammered the other. "You shall answer for this. I've done no harm."

"I'll see you don't. Get in there and stay there;" and with that I forced him, almost flung him, into his compartment, where he fell panting upon the velvet sofa.

"You'd better keep an eye on him," I said to the conductor, who was inclined to be disagreeable, and was barely pacified by a couple of five-franc pieces. "Fellows of this sort are apt to be a nuisance, and we must take care of the ladies."

As I said this I saw Mrs. Blair's face peering out beyond her door a little nervously, but she ventured to come right out and along the passage towards me.

"What has happened? I heard some noise, high words, a scuffle."

"Some ruffian who got in at Amiens, and who has had to be taught manners. I told him not to smoke here, and he wanted to intrude himself upon you, which I prevented, a little forcibly."

"Where is he? In here?" and she followed the indication of my thumb as I jerked it back, and looked over my shoulder into the compartment.

"Ah!" The ejaculation was involuntary, and one of acute painful surprise, the gesture that accompanied it spontaneous and full of terror.

"That man! that man!" she gasped. "He must not see me; let me go, let me go!"

But her strength failed her, and but for my supporting arm she would have fallen to the ground. Half-fainting, I led her back to her own compartment, where her maid received her tenderly and with comforting words. There was clearly a strong bond of affection between these two, possibly companions and confederates in wrong-doing; the delicate and refined woman, tormented by the inner qualms of outraged conscience, relied and leant upon the stronger and more resolute nature.

"What's come to you, ma'am? There, there, don't give way," said the maid, softly coaxing her and stroking her hands.

"Oh, Philpotts, fancy! He is there! Falfani, the—the—you know—"

Of course I saw it all now. Stupid ass! I might have guessed it all along. I had puzzled my brains vainly trying to place him, to fix his quality and condition in life, neglecting the one simple obvious solution to which so many plain indications pointed. The man, of course, was a detective, an officer

or private agent, and his dirty business—you see, I was already shaken in my honesty, and now with increasing demoralization under seductive influences I was already inclined to cross over to the other side of the frontier of crime—his dirty business was the persecution of my sweet friend.

"What are we to do now?" asked Mrs. Blair, her nervous trepidation increasing. "I begin to think we shall fail, we cannot carry it through, we shall lose our treasure. It will be taken from us."

"You cannot, you must not, shall not turn back now," said the maid with great determination. "We must devise something, some way, of outwitting this Falfani. We did it before, we must do it again. After all he has no power over us; we are in France and shall be in Switzerland by daylight."

"We ought to go on, you think? Wouldn't it be better to slip out of the train at the first station and run away?"

"He would do the same. He does not intend to let us out of his sight. And how much the better should we be? It would be far worse; we should be much more at his mercy if we left the train. The journey would still have to be made; we must get to the end, the very end, or we'd better not have started."

"He will know then, if he sticks to us. We cannot hide it from him, nor where we have taken it; we shall never be able to keep it, they will come and claim it and recover it;" and she cried hysterically: "I cannot see my way; it's all dark, black as night. I wish—I wish—"

"That you had never done it?" quickly asked the maid; and I noticed a slight sarcasm in her tone that was not without its effect in bracing up and strengthening her companion's shattered nerves.

"No, no, no; I do not regret it, and I never shall. I did it deliberately, counting the cost fully, and it shall be paid, however heavy it may be. It is not regret that tortures me, but the fear of failure when so near success."

"We will succeed yet. Do not be cast down, my sweet dear." The maid patted her on the cheek with great affection. "We shall find a way. This gentleman, the colonel here, will help us, perhaps."

"Will you?" Who could resist her pleading voice and shining eyes? If I had had any scruples left I would have thrown them to the winds.

"Whatever lies in my power to do shall be done without stint or hesitation," I said solemnly, careless of all consequences, content to hold her hand and earn her heartfelt thanks. What though I were pawning my honour?

CHAPTER VI

[The Statement of Domenico Falfani, confidential agent, made to his employers, Messrs. Becke and Co., of the Private Inquiry Offices, 279 St. Martin's Lane, W.C.]

I propose, gentlemen, to set down here at length the story of my mission, and the events which befell me from the time I first received my instructions. You desired me to pursue and call to strict account a certain lady of title, who had fallen away from her high estate and committed an act of rank felony. The circumstances which led up to her disappearance and the partners of her flight are already well known to you.

The only indication given me, as you are aware, was that I might take it for granted that she would go abroad and probably by the most direct route to the South, to Switzerland and across the Alps into Italy. My orders having only reached me in the early morning, the theft having presumably been committed during the night previous to Sunday, September 21, I was unable to ascertain through the tourist agencies whether any and what tickets had been booked in the directions indicated.

My most urgent duty then was to watch the outgoing Continental trains, the first of which left Charing Cross for Dover and Calais at 9 a.m. I closely watched it therefore, and its passengers, and travelled with it to Cannon Street, where I continued my search, but without result. I was greatly helped in my quest by the not unusual fact noticeable on Sundays, that travellers abroad are few in number.

I had no difficulty in satisfying myself that the lady and her party were not in this train, and I returned at once to Charing Cross in time for the second Continental train, the 10 a.m.

I had resolved to book myself by that as far as Amiens, for I knew that, once there, I should have reached a central point or junction, a sort of throat through which every train moving southward to Paris or Switzerland must pass.

There remained, of course, the route via Dover by Ostend and through Brussels; but I had been informed by you that Ludovic Tiler, my colleague and coworker, was to undertake the inquiry on that line.

It is part of my business to be thoroughly familiar with the Continental Bradshaw, and I soon ticked off the different trains that interested me.

There was first the 11 a.m. from Victoria by Dover and Calais, where it connected with the Paris express and the sleeping-car Engadine express, both of which run through Amiens, where, however, the latter branches off to Basle and beyond, with special cars for Lucerne, Zurich and Coire.

Then came the 2.20 p.m. from Charing Cross to Folkestone, and so to Boulogne, Amiens and the rest, travelling the same road as the Engadine express. This was the last of the day service, as it gave most time, allowing people to start at the very latest moment, and I felt it quite probable that my lady would prefer to take it.

I reached Amiens a little before 5 p.m., and I had a wait of half an hour for the first express from Calais. I was greatly disappointed when at last it appeared issuing from the tunnel, and passed me where I stood at the commencement of the platform, taking stock of each carriage as it passed. The train seemed to be quite empty; there were no passengers, so the officials, the conductors, informed me when I talked to them, sad and unhappy at the certain loss of tips. Only one of them had any luck, Jules l'Echelle, of the Lucerne sleeping-car, who had one or two people on board.

I questioned him not very hopefully, but was agreeably surprised when he told me that his clients consisted of two ladies with a child, and one gentleman. English? Yes, all English. The lady, quite a lady, a *grande dame belle personne*, tall, fine figure, well dressed; her companion no doubt her servant; the child, well, an ordinary child, an infant in arms. What would you?

I had them, I felt sure. There could be no mistaking this description. I held them in the hollow of my hand. Here they were in this car, and it would be all my own fault if they escaped me. It would be necessary only to verify my conclusions, to identify the lady according to the description and photograph given me. For the rest I knew what to do.

But now a quite unexpected difficulty turned up.

As I have said, there was one other passenger, a gentleman, in the car, and I felt it would be prudent to make his acquaintance. No doubt I could tell at the first glance whether or not he was an ordinary traveller, or whether he was a friend and accomplice of the lady under observation.

I regret to say that he met me in a very hostile spirit. I was at great pains to be affable, to treat him with all the courtly consideration I have at command, and I flatter myself that in the matter of tact and good-breeding I do not yield to princes of the blood royal. But my civility was quite thrown away. The man was an absolute brute, abrupt, overbearing, rude. Nothing would conciliate him. I offered him a cigar (a Borneo of the best brand, at 10s. the hundred), and he not only refused it, but positively forbade me to smoke. There were ladies in the carriage, he said (this was the first reference made to them), and, when declining to be ordered about, I proposed to refer the question to themselves, he threw himself violently upon me and assaulted me brutally.

Fortunately the attendant came to my rescue or I should have been seriously injured. He lifted me into my compartment very kindly, and acted like an old friend, as indeed he was, for I remembered him as the Jules l'Echelle with whom I served some time back as an assistant at the Baths of Bormio.

It was, of course, clear to my mind that my assailant was associated in some way with the lady, and probably a confederate. I saw that I must know more about him, with the least possible delay, and as soon as Jules had left me, promising to return later and talk of old times, and the changes that had come over us since then, I ventured to look out and get a glimpse of the other man, I will not call him gentleman after his conduct.

He was nowhere in sight, but I could hear his voice, several voices, talking together at the far end. No doubt he had joined his friends in their compartment, and the moment seemed opportune to visit his. It was next to mine, and the door stood invitingly open. A few minutes, seconds even, would be enough to tell me something of his identity, perhaps all I wanted to.

At least he made no pretence at mystery; his light baggage lay about, a dressing bag, a roll of rugs, a couple of sticks and an umbrella strapped together, all very neat and precise and respectable, and all alike furnished with a parchment tag or label bearing in plain language all that I wanted to know.

His name was printed "Lieut.-Col. Basil Annesley," and his club, the Mars and Neptune, that famous military house in Piccadilly. Underneath, on all, his destination was written, "Hotel Bellevue, Bellagio, Como." There could never be the least difficulty in finding this person if I wanted him, as I thought likely. He was a blustering, swashbuckling army officer, who could always be brought to account if he misconducted himself, or mixed himself up in shady transactions.

In my great contentment at the discovery I had been wanting in caution, and I lingered too long on forbidden ground.

"You infernal scoundrel," cried some one from the door, and once more I felt an angry hand on my shoulder. "How come you here? Explain yourself."

"It's all a mistake," I began, trying to make the best of it, struggling to get free. But he still held me in a grip of iron, and it was not until my friend Jules appeared that I got out of the enemy's clutches.

"Here, I say!" shouted Jules vaguely. "This won't do, you know. I shall have to lodge a complaint against you for brawling."

"Complaint, by George!" he replied, shaking his fist at me. "The boot is on the other leg, I take it. How is it that I find this chap in my compartment? Foraging about, I believe."

"Indeed no, Colonel Annesley," I protested, forgetting myself; and he caught at it directly.

"Oho, so you know my name! That proves what I say. You've been messing about and overhauling my things. I won't stand it. The man's a thief. He will have to be locked up."

"I'm not the only thief in the car, then," I cried, for I was now mad with him and his threats.

"I don't know what you're driving at, or whom you think to accuse; but I tell you this, my friend, that I shall call in the police at the next station and hand you over."

I looked at the conductor Jules, appealing for protection. I saw at once that it would be terrible for me to have any trouble with the police. They could do me no harm, but I might be delayed, obliged to leave the train, and I should lose sight of the lady, possibly fail altogether.

Jules responded at once. "Come, come," he said. "You're talking big. You might own the whole train. Who might you be?"

"None of your confounded impudence," shouted the Colonel, as he pointed to one of the luggage labels. "That's who I am. It's good enough to get you discharged before you're a much older man. And now I call upon you to do your duty. I have caught this man under suspicious circumstances in the very act of rifling my effects. I insist upon his being taken into custody."

"There isn't enough for that," Jules answered, still my friend, but weakening a little before this masterly army officer, and I felt that I must speak for myself.

"And if you stop me I will have the law of you for false imprisonment, and bring heavy damages. You will be doing me a great injury in my business."

"Precisely what I should like to do, my fine fellow. I can guess what your business is. Nothing reputable, I feel sure."

"I'm not ashamed of it, and I have powerful friends behind me. I am acting for—"

"Yes?" he asked me mockingly, for I had checked my tongue, fearing to say too much.

"It is my affair. Enough that you will feel the weight of their hands if you interfere with me in carrying out their instructions."

"Well, anyhow, tell me who you are. I've a right to know that in exchange. You chose to help yourself to my name; now I insist upon knowing yours."

I told him, not very readily, as may be supposed.

"Domenico Falfani? Is that your own or a 'purser's' name? Come, you know what I mean. It's part of your stock in trade to understand all languages, including slang. Is that the name he has given you?"—this to the conductor. "Show me your way-bill, your *feuille de route*."

Jules at a nod from me produced it, and no doubt understood my reason when in my turn I claimed to see it.

"I have a clear right," I insisted, overruling all objections raised by the Colonel; and taking it into my hands I read the names aloud, "Colonel Annesley, Mrs. Blair, maid and child." I pronounced the name with great contempt.

"You talk of purser's names," I said sneeringly. "What do you think of this? Blair, indeed! No more the woman's name than Smith or Jones, or what you please."

"Speak more respectfully of a lady," cried the Colonel, catching me tightly by the arm.

"Lady? Oho! Don't, Colonel, drop it. At any rate, she is not Mrs. Blair; you may take that from me," I said as impressively as a judge on the bench. "And what's more, Colonel, I wouldn't press charges you can't substantiate against me, or I may hit back with another not so easy to meet. Try to stop me at the next station, and I'll stop your pal—ah, don't"—he had a cruelly strong hand—"your Mrs. Blair, and she'll find herself in a particularly tight place."

"We'll see about that," said the Colonel, who kept a stiff face, but was, I think, rather crestfallen. "I shall act as I think best. Anyhow, get out of this, both of you. This is my private berth, and you are trespassing."

CHAPTER VII

Whatever may have been the Colonel's intentions when he caught me in his compartment, something, and I think my last words, led him to modify them. He felt, probably, that if he attacked me I might retaliate unpleasantly. I ought to be able to hold my own with him, although in truth I was not over happy at the course events had taken, and I could not compliment myself on my good management.

I had not been overprudent; I had pressed my attentions on him rather abruptly, although I had the excuse that I usually found them well received, thanks to my affable address; again I had behaved most incautiously in penetrating his identity.

And, worse than all, I had still no certainty. I could only surmise that the lady was the one I was in search of, for I had not as yet clapt eyes on her, and I had been to some extent driven to show my hand before I had made my ground good. So the first thing I did on regaining my own compartment was to ring for Jules, the conductor, and put before him the photograph with which I was provided, and ask him if he recognized it.

"But perfectly. It is the lady yonder," he said promptly. "Is it your own, or did you find it or annex it from next door? Ah, your own; and what have you to do with her?"

"I may tell you some day, Jules. For the present you must know that I am after her; I have to watch her, stick to her like her shadow until it is time to act."

"An adventuress, eh?"

"She is in possession of what does not belong to her; something she abstracted from—from—Never mind where, and it must be recovered from her here, or after she leaves the car."

"Afterwards, please. We can't have any scandal on board here."

"Five hundred francs wouldn't tempt you to let me have a free hand for just half an hour? I could do it, say somewhere short of Basle, and on reaching there make off. No one should be any the wiser, and they, the women, wouldn't dare to make a fuss."

"It's I who do not dare—not for twice five hundred francs. My place is worth more than that; and if it is a dog's life, it is better than lying on the straw. Besides, there's her friend the Colonel, he'll be on the alert, you may depend."

"So must I be, and I must find some way to circumvent him. I'll be even with him. He sha'n't beat me, the overbearing, hectoring brute. It's between him and me, and I think I'm a match for him."

I spoke this confidently to my friend, who engaged for his part to do all in his power to assist, or at least to do nothing against me, and I was content to bide my time. Pride goes before a fall. I was not as clever as I thought, and shall have to tell you how seriously I had underrated his worth in the coming trial of strength.

As the train sped on and the night began to close in on us, I remained quietly in my berth, pondering over my position, and in considering the course I should adopt under various contingencies. The first and most serious danger was that the lady should succeed in leaving the train at any of the intermediate stations at Basle, and so give me the slip. There were Laon, Rheims, Chaumont, and the rest.

It must be my business to keep close watch against any evasion of this kind, and Jules had promised to help. I did not look for any such attempt until far into the night, when the stations were empty and half-dark, and I agreed with Jules to divide the hours till daylight, he taking the first, I the last. We were due at Basle at 5 a.m., and I expected to join forces then with Tiler, my colleague, coming from the side of Ostend, via Brussels and Strasburg.

Meanwhile I kept quiet and made no sign beyond showing that I was there and on the spot ready to act if it should be necessary. Thus, when the train slackened speed on approaching a station, I was always on the move and the first to descend and patrol the platform. The Colonel always got out too,

but he never accosted me; indeed, he seemed disposed to despise me, to ignore my existence, or dare me to the worst I could do.

I suppose the lady must have been of the same mind, for when dinner-time arrived, she came boldly out of her compartment, and I met her face to face for the first time, on her way to the restaurant. I was standing at the door of my compartment.

"Dinner is ready," the Colonel said to me significantly, but I did not choose to understand, and shook my head, holding my ground.

"You are coming to dinner, I think," he repeated in a sharp commanding way, as if he were talking to his soldiers.

"I shall please myself about that," I replied gruffly.

"Not a bit of it. One moment," he whispered to the lady, who walked on, and turned again to me: "Now see here, my friend, I do not mean to leave you behind. You will come to the dining-car with us, and no two ways about it, even if I have to carry you."

"I won't dine with you," I cried.

"I never asked you to dine with me, but you shall dine when I do. I will pay for your dinner, but I wouldn't sit at table with you for worlds," he shouted with scornful laughter. "You're going to dine under my eye, that's all, even though the sight of you is enough to make one sick. So come along, sharp's the word, see? Walk first; let him pass you, Mrs. Blair."

I felt I had no choice. He was capable of again assaulting me. There was something in his manner that cowed me, and I was obliged in spite of myself to give way.

There were only three of us in the dining-car, and we were not a very merry company. Our tables were laid almost adjoining, and there was no conversation between us, except when the Colonel asked me with contemptuous civility what wine I preferred. He did not talk to the lady, or the merest commonplaces, for I was within earshot. But I made an excellent dinner, I must confess. I had eaten nothing since Amiens. Then I got back to my berth, where the bed was made. I threw myself on to it, rejoiced at the prospect of getting a few hours' sleep while Jules remained on the watch.

He was to call me a little before reaching Basle, and, like an ass that I was, I fully relied on his doing so, believing him to be my friend. Such friendship as his did not bear any great strain, as I learnt presently to my great chagrin.

I slept heavily, but in fitful snatches, as a man does when constantly disturbed by the whirr and whizzing of the train, the rattle and jangle of wheels passing over ill-jointed points. After one of the longest periods of unconsciousness I awoke, aroused by the complete absence of noise. The train was at a standstill in some station and making a very protracted halt.

Something moved me to lift the blind and look out, and I saw, not without uneasiness, that we were at Basle. I thought I recognized the station, but I soon made out for certain the name "Basilea" (Basle), and saw the clock with the fingers at five-thirty. People were already on the move, work-people, the thrifty, industrious Swiss, forestalling time, travellers in twos and threes arriving and departing by the early train through this great junction on the frontier of Switzerland.

Stay! What? Who are those crossing the platform hurriedly. Great powers! Right under my eyes, a little party of four, two females, two men accompanying them, escorting them, carrying rugs and parcels. There could not be a shadow of doubt.

It was the lady, the so-called Mrs. Blair, in full flight, with all her belongings, and under the care and guidance not only of the Colonel, that of course, but also of the perfidious Jules l'Echelle. He had sold me! All doubt of his treachery disappeared when on rushing to the door I found I had been locked into my compartment.

I rang the electric bell frantically, again and again. I got no answer; I threw up the window and thrust my head out, shouting for help, but got none, only one or two sluggish porters came up and asked what was amiss, answering stolidly, when they heard, that it was none of their business. "They had no key, it must be a mistake. The conductor would explain, I must wait till he came."

Presently Jules arrived, walking very leisurely from the direction of the restaurant, and he stood right under my window with a grin on his face and mockery in his voice.

"What's wrong? Locked in? Can't be possible? Who could have done it? I will inquire," he said slowly and imperturbably.

"No, no; let me out first. You can do it if you choose. I believe it was your trickery from the first. I must get out, I tell you, or they will escape me," I cried.

"Not unlikely. I may say it is pretty certain they will. That was the Colonel's idea; you'd better talk to him about it next time you see him."

"And that will be never, I expect. He's not going to show up here again."

"There you're wrong; he will be back before the train starts, you may rely on that, and you'll be able to talk to him. We'll let you out then," he was laughing at me, traitor that he was. "Here he comes. We're just going on."

Now I saw my last chance of successfully performing my mission disappearing beyond recall. I renewed my shouts and protests, but was only laughed at for my pains. The railway officials at Basle might have interfered, but Jules answered for me, declaring with a significant gesture that I was in drink and that he would see to me.

I quite despaired. Already the train was moving out of the station, when, to my intense joy, I caught sight of Ludovic Tiler, who came down the platform running alongside us, and crying, "Falfani, Falfani," as he recognized me.

"Don't mind me," I shouted to him. "I must go on, I can't help myself. It's for you to take it up now. She's in the restaurant. You'll easily know her, in a long ulster, with her maid and the child. You can't miss her. By the Lord, she is standing at the door! Get away with you, don't let her see you talking with me. She must not know we are acting in common, and I do hope she hasn't noticed. Be off, I tell you, only let me hear of you; wire to Lucerne what you're doing. Address telegraph-office. Send me a second message at Goeschenen. I shall get one or both. Say where I may answer and where I can join you."

CHAPTER VIII

The timely appearance of my colleague, Ludovic Tiler, consoled me a little for the loss of the lady and her lot. I had failed, myself, but I hoped that with my lead he would get on to the scent and keep to it. Ere long, on the first intimation from him I might come into the game again. I should be guided by his wire if I got it.

For the moment I was most concerned to find out whether Tiler's intervention and my short talk with him had been noticed by the other side. If the Colonel knew that another man was on his friend's track, he would surely have left the train at once so as to go to her assistance. But he was still in the train, I could hear him plainly, speaking to Jules in the next compartment. Again, as we sped on, I reasoned favourably from their leaving me as I was, still under lock and key. No one came near me until after we had passed Olten station, the first stopping-place after Basle, where I could alight and retrace my steps. By holding on to me I guessed that I was still thought to be the chief danger, and that they had no suspicion of Tiler's existence.

I laughed in my sleeve, but not the less did I rage and storm when Jules l'Echelle came with the Colonel to release me.

"You shall pay for this," I cried hotly.

"As for you, l'Echelle, it shall cost you your place, and I'll take the law of you, Colonel Annesley; I'll get damages and you shall answer for your illegal action."

"Pfui!" retorted the Colonel. "The mischief you can do is nothing to what you might have done. We can stand the racket. I've bested you for the present—that's the chief thing, anyway. You can't persecute the poor lady any more."

"Poor lady! Do you know who she is or was, anyway?"

"Of course I do," he answered bold as brass.

"Did she let on? Told you, herself? My word! She's got a nerve. I wonder she'd own to it after all she's done."

"Silence!" he shouted, in a great taking. "If you dare to utter a single word against that lady, I'll break every bone in your body."

"I'm saying nothing—it's not me, it's all the world. It was in the papers, you must have read them, the most awful story, such—such depravity there never was—such treachery, such gross misconduct."

He caught me by the arm so violently and looked so fierce that for a moment I was quite alarmed.

"Drop it, I tell you. Leave the lady alone, both by word and deed. You'll never find her again, I've seen to that. She has escaped you."

"Aha! You think so? Don't be too cocksure. We understand our business better than that, we don't go into it single-handed. You've collared me for a bit, but I'm not the only one in the show."

"The only one that counts," he said sneering.

"Am I?" I answered in the same tone. "What if I had a pal waiting for me at Basle, who received my instructions there—just when you thought you had me safe—and has now taken up the running?"

He was perfectly staggered at this, I could see plainly. I thought at first he would have struck me, he was so much upset.

"You infernal villain," he shouted, "I believe the whole thing is a confounded lie! Explain."

"I owe you no explanations," I replied stiffly, "my duty is to my employers. I only account to them for my conduct. I am a confidential agent."

He seemed impressed by this, for when he spoke again it was more quietly. But he looked me very straight in the eyes. I felt that he was still likely to give trouble.

"Well, I suppose I cannot expect you to tell me things. You must go your own way and I shall go mine."

"I should advise you to leave it, Colonel," I said, civilly enough. "I'm always anxious to conciliate and avoid unpleasantness. Give up the whole business; you will only burn your fingers."

"Ah! How so?"

"The law is altogether against you. It is a nasty job; better not be mixed up in it. Have you any idea what that woman—that lady," I corrected myself, for his eyes flashed, "has done?"

"Nothing really wrong," he was warming up into a new burst of passion.

"Tell that to the Courts and to the Judge when you are prosecuted for contempt and charged as an accessory after the fact. How will you like that? It will take the starch out of you."

"Rot! The law can't do us much harm. The only person who might make it disagreeable is Lord Blackadder, and I snap my fingers at him."

"The Earl of Blackadder? Are you mad? He is a great personage, a rich and powerful nobleman. You cannot afford to fight him; he will be too strong for you. He has been made the victim of an abominable outrage, and will spare no effort, no means, no money to recover his own."

"Lord Blackadder is a cad—a cruel, cowardly ruffian. I know all about him and what has happened. It would give me the greatest pleasure to kick him down the street. Failing that, I shall do my best to upset and spoil his schemes, and so you know."

I smiled contemptuously. "A mere Colonel against an Earl! What sort of a chance have you? It's too absurd."

"We shall see. Those laugh longest who laugh last."

By this time our talk was done, for we were approaching Lucerne, and I began to think over my next plans. All must depend on what I heard there—upon what news, if any, came from Ludovic Tiler.

So on my arrival I made my way straight to the telegraph-office in the corner of the great station, and on showing my card an envelope was handed to me. It was from Tiler at Basle, and ran as follows:

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