Forman Justus Miles

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
STE. MARIE HEARS OF A MYSTERY AND MEETS A DARK LADY

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

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

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

"*Hè! veux, tu, cochon!*"

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

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

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

Ste. Marie waved a despondent glove.

"I 'ave," said he, "w'at you call ze blue. *Papillons noirs*– clouds in my soul." It was a species of jest with Ste. Marie – and he seemed never to tire of it – to pretend that he spoke English very brokenly. As a matter of fact he spoke it quite as well as any Englishman and without the slightest trace of accent. He had discovered a long time before this – it may have been while the two were at Eton together – that it annoyed Hartley very much, particularly when it was done in company and before strangers. In consequence he became at such occasions a sort of comic-paper caricature of his race, and by dint of much practice, added to a naturally alert mind, he became astonishingly

ingenious in the torture of that honest but unimaginative gentleman whom he considered his best friend. He achieved the most surprising expressions by the mere literal translation of French idiom, and he could at any time bring Hartley to a crimson agony by calling him "my dear" before other men, whereas at the equivalent "*mon cher*" the Englishman would doubtless never, as the phrase goes, have batted an eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The great bronze lamps were alight, and they cast reflections upon the still damp pavement about them. To either side the trees of the Tuileries gardens and of the Cours la Reine and the Champs Elysées lay in a solid black mass. In the middle the obelisk rose slender and straight, its pointed

top black against the sky, and beneath the water of the Nereid fountains splashed and gurgled. Far beyond, the gay lights of the Rue Royale shone in a yellow cluster and, beyond these still, the tall columns of the Madeleine ended the long vista. Pedestrians and cabs crept across that vast space, and seemed curiously little, like black insects, and round about it all the eight cities of France sat atop their stone pedestals and looked on. Ste. Marie gave a little sigh of pleasure, and the two moved forward, bearing to the left, towards the Champs Elysées.

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

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

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

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

And after another little pause he asked —

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

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

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

The other man walked a little way in silence.

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

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

Hartley laughed.

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

"Rich?" inquired the other quickly.

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

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

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

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

Ste. Marie turned an amused face from this voluble being to the other occupants of the patently hired car, who stood apart adding very little to the discussion. He saw a tall and bony man with very bright blue eyes and what is sometimes called a guardsman's moustache – the drooping walruslike ornament which dates back a good many years now. Beyond this gentleman he saw a young woman in a long grey silk coat and a motoring veil. He was aware that the tall man was staring at him rather fixedly and with a half-puzzled frown, as though he thought that they had met before and was trying to remember when, but Ste. Marie gave the man but a swift glance. His eyes were upon the dark face of the young woman beyond, and it seemed to him that she called aloud to him in an actual voice that rang in his ears. The young woman's very obvious beauty he thought had nothing to do with the matter. It seemed to him that her eyes called him. Just that. Something strange and very potent seemed to take sudden and almost tangible hold upon him – a charm, a spell, a magic – something unprecedented, new to his experience. He could not take his eyes from hers and he stood staring.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What did you say?" he asked idly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II
THE LADDER TO THE STARS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Baron de Vries nodded his head strongly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What thing then?"

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

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

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

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

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

"You are to cherish me," Ste. Marie said. "Orders from headquarters. How does one cherish people?" The corner of his very expressive mouth twitched and he grinned at her. Miss Benham did not approve of young men who began an acquaintance in this very familiar manner. She thought that

there was a certain preliminary and more formal stage which ought to be got through with first, but Ste. Marie's grin was irresistible. In spite of herself she found that she was laughing.

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

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

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

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

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

"I shall tell him nothing whatever," she said. "He's quite too dreadful really. People shouldn't be exposed to that sort of thing. It's not only the noises. Plenty of very charming and estimable Germans, for example, make strange noises at table. But he behaves like a famished dog over a bone. I refuse to have anything to do with him. You must make up the loss to me, M. Ste. Marie. You must be as amusing as two people." She smiled across at him in her gravely questioning fashion.

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

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

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

Ste. Marie looked puzzled.

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

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

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

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

The fair youth at her other side continued to crouch over his food, making fierce and animal-like noises. He never spoke or seemed to wish to be spoken to, and Miss Benham found it easy to ignore him altogether. It occurred to her once or twice that Ste. Marie's other neighbour might desire an occasional word from him, but after all, she said to herself, that was his affair and beyond her control. So these two talked together through the entire dinner period, and the girl was aware that she was being much more deeply affected by the simple magnetic charm of a man than ever before in her life. It made her a little angry, because she was unfamiliar with this sort of thing and distrusted it. She was a rather perfect type of that phenomenon before which the British and Continental world stands in mingled delight and exasperation – the American unmarried young woman, the creature of extraordinary beauty and still more extraordinary poise, the virgin with the bearing and *savoir faire*of a woman of the world, the fresh-cheeked girl with the calm mind of a *savant* and the cool judgment, in regard to men and things, of an ambassador. The European world says she is cold, and that may be true; but it is well enough known that she can love very deeply. It says that, like most queens, and for precisely the same set of reasons, she later on makes a bad mother; but it is easy to point to queens who are the best of mothers. In short, she remains an enigma, and like all other enigmas forever fascinating.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the hostess began to gather together her flock, and so the two had no more speech. But when the women had gone and the men were left about the dismantled table, Hartley moved up beside Ste. Marie and shook a sad head at him. He said —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Captain Stewart dropped into the vacant chair, saying —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am very glad," Captain Stewart said, "to see her come out once more into the world. She needs distraction. We – you may possibly have heard that the family is in great distress of mind over the disappearance of my young nephew. Helen has suffered particularly because she is convinced that the boy has met with foul play. I myself think it very unlikely, very unlikely indeed. The lack

of motive, for one thing, and for another – Ah well, a score of reasons! But Helen refuses to be comforted. It seems to me much more like a boy's prank – his idea of revenge for what he considered unjust treatment at his grandfather's hands. He was always a headstrong youngster, and he has been a bit spoilt. Still, of course, the uncertainty is very trying for us all – very wearing."

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a moment he said —

"I fancy – from your description I fancy I know who the man was. If it is the man I am thinking of, the name is – Powers. He is, as you have said, a rather shady character, and I more than once warned my nephew against him. Such people are not good companions for a boy. Yes, I warned him."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the drawing-room he had opportunity for no more than a word with Miss Benham, for Hartley, enraged over his previous ill success, cut in ahead of him and manoeuvred that young lady into a corner, where he sat before her turning a square and determined back to the world. Ste. Marie listlessly played bridge for a time, but his attention was not upon it, and he was glad when the others at the table settled their accounts and departed to look in at a dance somewhere. After that he talked for a little with Marian de Saulnes, whom he liked and who made no secret of adoring him. She complained loudly that he was in a vile temper, which was not true: he was only restless and distrait and wanted to be alone; and so, at last, he took his leave without waiting for Hartley.

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

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

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

He found himself wondering dully what it was, wherein lay the great difference, and he could not answer the question he asked. He knew only that whereas before he had loved, he now went down upon prayerful knees to worship. In a sudden poignant thrill the knightly fervour of his forefathers came upon him, and he saw a sweet and golden lady set far above him upon a throne. Her clear eyes gazed afar, serene and untroubled. She sat wrapped in a sort of virginal austerity, unaware of the base passions of men. The other women whom Ste. Marie had, as he was pleased to term it, loved, had certainly come at least halfway to meet him, and some of them had come a good deal farther than that. He could not, by the wildest flight of imagination, conceive this girl doing anything of that sort. She was to be won by trial and high endeavour, by prayer and self-purification, not captured by a

warm eye glance, a whispered word, a laughing kiss. In fancy he looked from the crowding cohorts of these others to that still sweet figure set on high, wrapt in virginal pride, calm in her serene perfection, and his soul abased itself before her. He knelt in an awed and worshipful adoration.

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

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

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

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

"O'Hara! O'Hara. That tall thin chap's name was O'Hara, by Jove! It wasn't Powers at all." He laughed a little as he remembered how very positive Captain Stewart had been. And then he frowned, thinking that the mistake was an odd one since Stewart had evidently known a good deal about this adventurer. Captain Stewart though, Ste. Marie reflected, was exactly the sort to be very sure he was right about things. He had just the neat and precise and semi-scholarly personality of the man who always knows. So Ste. Marie dismissed the matter with another brief laugh, but a cognate matter was less easy to dismiss. The name brought with it a face, a dark and splendid face with tragic eyes that called. He walked a long way thinking about them, and wondering. The eyes haunted him. It will have been reasonably evident that Ste. Marie was a fanciful and imaginative soul. He needed but a chance word, the sight of a face in a crowd, the glance of an eye, to begin story building, and he would go on for hours about it and work himself up to quite a passion with his imaginings. He should have been a writer of fiction.

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

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

CHAPTER IV
OLD DAVID STEWART

It was Miss Benham's custom upon returning home at night from dinner parties or other entertainments to look in for a few minutes on her grandfather before going to bed. The old gentleman, like most elderly people, slept lightly, and often sat up in bed very late into the night reading or playing piquet with his valet. He suffered hideously at times from the malady which was killing him by degrees, but when he was free from pain the enormous recuperative power, which he had preserved to his eighty-six years, left him almost as vigorous and clear-minded as if he had never been ill at all. Hartley's description of him had not been altogether a bad one – "a quaint old beggar … a great quantity of white hair and an enormous square white beard and the fiercest eyes I ever saw – " He was a rather "quaint old beggar" indeed! He had let his thick white hair grow long, and it hung down over his brows in unparted locks as the ancient Greeks wore their hair. He had very shaggy eyebrows, and the deep-set eyes under them gleamed from the shadow with a fierceness which was rather deceptive but none the less intimidating. He had a great beak of a nose, but the mouth below could not be seen. It was hidden by the moustache and the enormous square beard. His face was colourless, almost as white as hair and beard: there seemed to be no shadow or tint anywhere except the cavernous recesses from which the man's eyes gleamed and sparkled. Altogether he was certainly "a quaint old beggar."

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

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

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

He said —

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

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

"A dinner party at the de Saulnes'," said Miss Benham, making herself comfortable on the side of the great bed. "It's a very pleasant place. Marian is, of course, a dear, and they're quite English

and unceremonious. You can talk to your neighbour at dinner instead of addressing the house from a platform, as it were. French dinner parties make me nervous."

Old David gave a little growling laugh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The old gentleman laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

The girl frowned across at her grandfather reflectively.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Oh, yes, he was there. He and M. Ste. Marie came together, I believe. They are very close friends."

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

"Well," said the girl, "I should think it is because he is too much a man of family – as you put it. You see, he'll succeed his cousin, Lord Risdale, before very long, and then all his work would have

been for nothing, because he'll have to take his seat in the Lords. Lord Risdale is unmarried, you know, and a hopeless invalid. He may die any day. I think I sympathise with poor Mr. Hartley. It would be a pity to build up a career for one's self in the lower House and then suddenly in the midst of it have to give it all up. The situation is rather paralysing to endeavour, isn't it?"

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

"No," said Miss Benham, "he doesn't." She gave a little laugh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But after a moment she said very gently —

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Try to go to sleep!" she said. "And don't torture yourself with thinking about all this. I'm as sure that poor Arthur is not staying away out of spite as if he were myself. He's foolish and headstrong, but he's not spiteful, dear. Try to believe that! And now I'm really going. Good-night!"

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

CHAPTER V
STE. MARIE SETS FORTH UPON THE GREAT ADVENTURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ste. Marie looked away.

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

The girl gave a little cry.

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

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

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

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

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

"And yet," she said, "he was right, you know. My grandfather was right. No, let me talk, now! I must talk for a little. I must try to tell you how it is with me – try somehow to find a way. He was right. He meant that you and I were utterly unsuited to each other, and so, in calm moments, I know we are. I know that well enough. When you're not with me I feel very sure about it. I think of a thousand excellent reasons why you and I ought to be no more to each other than friends. Do you know, I think my grandfather is a little uncanny. I think he has prophetic powers. They say very old people often have. He and I talked about you when I came home from that dinner party at the de Saulnes' a month ago – the dinner party where you and I first met. I told him that I had met a man

whom I liked very much – a man with great charm – and, though I must have said the same sort of thing to him before about other men, he was quite oddly disturbed, and talked for a long time about it, about the sort of man I ought to marry and the sort I ought not to marry. It was unusual for him. He seldom says anything of that kind. Yes, he is right. You see, I'm ambitious in a particular way. If I marry at all I ought to marry a man who is working hard in politics or in something of that kind. I could help him. We could do a great deal together."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I wonder?

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

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

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

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

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

"You lay your spell upon me."

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

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

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

Ste. Marie rose to his feet. If Miss Benham, absorbed in that warfare which raged within her, had momentarily forgotten the cloud of sorrow under which her household lay, so much the more had he, to whom the sorrow was less intimate, forgotten it. But he was ever swift to sympathy, Ste. Marie, as quick as a woman and as tender. He could not thrust his love upon the girl at such a time

as this. He turned a little away from her and so remained for a moment. When he faced about again the flush had gone from his cheeks and the fire from his eyes. Only tenderness was left there.

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

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

"I believe it," said Ste. Marie.

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

"Dead bodies very seldom disappear completely," said he. "If your brother died anywhere there would be a record of the death. If he were accidentally killed there would be a record of that too, and, of course, you are having all such records constantly searched?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She gave a little sob.

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

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

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

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

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

"And why not I?" he demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The girl broke into a sort of sobbing laughter.

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

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

"Failure will never hurt me, my queen," said he; "because there are no hurts in the grave, and I shall never give over searching until I succeed or until I am dead." His face was uplifted, and there

was a sort of splendid fervour upon it. It was as if it shone. The girl stared at him dumbly. She began to realise that the knightly spirit of those gallant long-dead gentlemen was indeed descended upon the last of their house, that he burnt with the same pure fire which had long ago lighted them through quest and adventure, and she was a little afraid with an almost superstitious fear.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, my friend, there is no strength in me to stop you. I think we are both a little mad, and I know that you are very mad, but I cannot say no. You seem to have come out of another century to take up this quest. How can I prevent you? But listen to one thing. If I accept this sacrifice, if I let you give your time and your strength to this almost hopeless attempt, it must be understood that it is to be within certain limits. I will not accept any indefinite thing. You may give your efforts to trying to find trace of my brother for a month if you like, or for three months or six, or even a year, but not for more than that. If he is not found in a year's time we shall know that – we shall know that he is dead, and that – further search is useless. I cannot say how I – Oh, Ste. Marie, Ste. Marie, this is a proof of you indeed! And I have called you idle! I have said hard things of you. It is very bitter to me to think that I have said those things."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So quickly did he move at this last that a man who had been for some moments standing just outside the portières of the doorway had barely time to step aside into the shadows of the dim hall.

As it was, Ste. Marie in a more normal moment must have seen that the man was there, but his eyes were blind and he saw nothing. He groped for his hat and stick as if the place were a place of gloom, and, because the footman who should have been at the door was in regions unknown, he let himself out and so went away.

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

CHAPTER VI
A BRAVE GENTLEMAN RECEIVES A HURT BUTVOLUNTEERS IN A GOOD CAUSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I told him he was a damned fool."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It would be ridiculously like him to succeed."

The girl gave a little sigh.

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

She had left a book that she wanted in the drawing-room, and when presently her grandfather fell asleep in his fitful manner, she went down after it. In crossing the hall she came upon Captain Stewart, who was dressed for the street and had his hat and stick in his hands. He did not live in his father's house, for he had a little flat in the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, but he was in and out a good deal. He paused when he saw his niece and smiled upon her a benignant smile, which she rather disliked, because she disliked benignant people. The two really saw very little of each other, though Captain Stewart often sat for hours together with his sister up in a little boudoir which she had furnished in the execrable taste which to her meant comfort, while that timid and colourless lady embroidered strange tea-cloths with stranger flora, and prattled about the heathen, in whom she had an academic interest.

He said —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the little flat in the Rue d'Assas he came upon Richard Hartley, who, having found the door unlocked and the master of the place absent, had sat comfortably down with a pipe and a stack of *Courriers Français* to wait. Ste. Marie burst into the doorway of the room where his friend sat at ease. Hat, gloves and stick fell away from him in a sort of shower. He extended his arms high in air. His face was, as it were, luminous. The Englishman regarded him morosely. He said —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The bigger the better," said Ste. Marie. "And I shall succeed in it or never see her again. I've sworn that." The odd look of exaltation that Miss Benham had seen in his face, the look of knightly fervour, came there again, and Hartley saw it and knew that the man was stirred by no transient whim. Oddly enough he thought, as had the girl earlier in the day, of those elder Ste. Maries who had taken sword and lance and gone out into a strange world, a place of unknown terrors, afire for the Great Adventure. And this was one of their blood.

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

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

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

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

Ste. Marie looked up with a quick sympathy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But before he could begin the door-bell jangled.

CHAPTER VII
CAPTAIN STEWART MAKES A KINDLY OFFER

Ste. Marie scowled.

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

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

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

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

He heard the American say —

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ste. Marie stirred uneasily in his chair.

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

Captain Stewart looked disappointed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the first time Richard Hartley spoke.

"I've an idea, you know," said he, "that it's going to be a matter chiefly of luck. One day somebody will stumble on the right trail – and that might as well be Ste. Marie or I as your trained

detectives. If you don't mind my saying so, sir – I don't want to seem rude – your trained detectives do not seem to accomplish much in two months, do they?"

Captain Stewart looked thoughtfully at the younger man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah!" said Captain Stewart slowly. "Yes, the man O'Hara. There's nothing in that, I'm afraid. I've made inquiries about O'Hara. It seems he left Paris six months ago, saying he was off for America. An old friend of his told me that. So you must have been mistaken when you thought you saw him in the Champs Elysées, and he couldn't very well have had anything to do with poor Arthur. I'm afraid that idea is hardly worth following up."

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

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

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

Ste. Marie laughed aloud.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VIII
STE. MARIE MEETS WITH A MISADVENTURE AND DREAMS A DREAM

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

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

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

"There's a street *fête* in Montmartre. We might drive home that way."

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

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

The square was filled with that extremely heterogeneous throng which the Parisian street *fête*gathers together, but it was, for the most part, a well-dressed throng, largely recruited from the boulevards, and it was quite determined to have a very good time in the cheerful harmless Latin fashion. The two men got down from their fiacre and elbowed a way through the good-natured crowd to a place near the more popular of the merry-go-rounds. The machine was in rotation. Its garish lights shone and glittered, its hidden mechanical organ blared a German waltz tune, the huge pink-varnished pigs galloped gravely up and down as the platform upon which they were mounted whirled

round and round. A little group of American trippers, sight-seeing, with a guide, stood near by, and one of the group, a pretty girl with red hair, demanded plaintively of the friend upon whose arm she hung: "Do you think mamma would be shocked if we took a ride? Wouldn't I love to!"

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

"That's the second time she has hit me with one of those things," he said, groping about his feet for the hat. "Here, stop that boy with the basket!" A vendor of the little rolls of paper ribbon was shouting his wares through the crowd. Ste. Marie filled his pockets with the things, and when the lady with the blue hat came round on the next turn, lassoed her neatly about the neck and held the end of the ribbon till it broke. Then he caught a fat gentleman, who was holding himself on by his steed's neck, in the ear, and the red-haired American girl laughed aloud.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.