

Wallace Edgar

The Secret House



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CHAPTER I

A man stood irresolutely before the imposing portals of Cainbury House, a large office building let out to numerous small tenants, and harbouring, as the indicator on the tiled wall of the vestibule testified, some thirty different professions. The man was evidently poor, for his clothes were shabby and his boots were down at heel. He was as evidently a foreigner. His clean-shaven eagle face was sallow, his eyes were dark, his eyebrows black and straight.

He passed up the few steps into the hall and stood thoughtfully before the indicator. Presently he found what he wanted. At the very top of the list and amongst the crowded denizens of the fifth floor was a slip inscribed:

"THE GOSSIP'S CORNER"

He took from his waistcoat pocket a newspaper cutting and compared the two then stepped briskly, almost jauntily, into the hall, as though all his doubts and uncertainties had vanished, and waited for the elevator. His coat was buttoned tightly, his collar was frayed, his shirt had seen the greater part of a week's service, the Derby hat on his head had undergone extensive renovations, and a close observer would have noticed that his gloves were odd ones.

He walked into the lift and said, "Fifth floor," with a slight foreign accent.

He was whirled up, the lift doors clanged open and the grimy finger of the elevator boy indicated the office. Again the man hesitated, examining the door carefully. The upper half was of toughened glass and bore the simple inscription:

"THE GOSSIP'S CORNER"

Obediently the stranger knocked and the door opened through an invisible agent, much to the man's surprise, though there was nothing more magical about the phenomenon than there is about any electrically controlled office door.

He found himself in a room sparsely furnished with a table, a chair and a few copies of papers. An old school map of England hung on one wall and a Landseer engraving on the other. At the farthest end of the room was another door, and to this he gravitated and again, after a moment's hesitation, he knocked.

"Come in," said a voice.

He entered cautiously.

The room was larger and was comfortably furnished. There were shaded electric lamps on either side of the big carved oak writing-table. One of the walls was covered with books, and the litter of proofs upon the table suggested that this was the sanctorum.

But the most remarkable feature of the room was the man who sat at the desk. He was a man solidly built and, by his voice, of middle age. His face the new-comer could not see and for excellent reason. It was hidden behind a veil of fine silk net which had been adjusted over the head like a loose bag and tightened under the chin.

The man at the table chuckled when he saw the other's surprise.

"Sit down," he said – he spoke in French – "and don't, I beg of you, be alarmed."

"Monsieur," said the new-comer easily, "be assured that I am not alarmed. In this world nothing has ever alarmed me except my own distressing poverty and the prospect of dying poor."

The veiled figure said nothing for a while.

"You have come in answer to my advertisement," he said after a long pause.

The other bowed.

"You require an assistant, Monsieur," said the new-comer, "discreet, with a knowledge of foreign languages and poor. I fulfill all those requirements," he went on calmly; "had you also added, of an adventurous disposition, with few if any scruples, it would have been equally descriptive."

The stranger felt that the man at the desk was looking at him, though he could not see his eyes. It must have been a long and careful scrutiny, for presently the advertiser said gruffly:

"I think you'll do."

"Exactly," said the new-comer with cool assurance; "and now it is for you, dear Monsieur, to satisfy me that you also will do. You will have observed that there are two parties to every bargain. First of all, my duties?"

The man in the chair leant back and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"I am the editor of a little paper which circulates exclusively amongst the servants of the upper classes," he said. "I receive from time to time interesting communications concerning the aristocracy and gentry of this country, written by hysterical French maids and revengeful Italian valets. I am not a good linguist, and I feel that there is much in these epistles which I miss and which I should not miss."

The new-comer nodded.

"I therefore want somebody of discretion who will deal with my foreign correspondence, make a fair copy in English and summarize the complaints which these good people make. You quite understand," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "that mankind is not perfect, less perfect is womankind, and least perfect is that section of mankind which employs servants. They usually have stories to tell not greatly to their masters' credit, not nice stories, you understand, my dear friend. By the way, what is your name?"

The stranger hesitated.

"Poltavo," he said after a pause.

"Italian or Pole?" asked the other.

"Pole," replied Poltavo readily.

"Well, as I was saying," the editor went on, "we on this paper are very anxious to secure news of society doings. If they are printable, we print them; if they are not printable" – he paused – "we do not print them. But," he raised a warning forefinger, "the fact that particulars of disgraceful happenings are not fit for publication must not induce you to cast such stories into the wastepaper basket. We keep a record of such matters for our own private amusement." He said this latter airily, but Poltavo was not deceived.

Again there was a long silence whilst the man at the table ruminated.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"On the fourth floor of a small house in Bloomsbury," replied Poltavo.

The veiled figure nodded.

"When did you come to this country?"

"Six months ago."

"Why?"

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"Why?" insisted the man at the table.

"A slight matter of disagreement between myself and the admirable chief of police of Sans Sebastian," he said as airily as the other.

Again the figure nodded.

"If you had told me anything else, I should not have engaged you," he said.

"Why?" asked Poltavo in surprise.

"Because you are speaking the truth," said the other coolly. "Your matter of disagreement with the police in Sans Sebastian was over the missing of some money in the hotel where you were staying. The room happened to be next to yours and communicating, if one had the ingenuity to pick the lock of the door. Also your inability to pay the hotel bill hastened your departure."

"What an editor!" said the other admiringly, but without showing any signs of perturbation or embarrassment.

"It is my business to know something about everybody," said the editor. "By the way, you may call me Mr. Brown, and if at times I may seem absent-minded when I am so addressed you must excuse me, because it is not my name. Yes, you are the kind of man I want."

"It is remarkable that you should have found me," said Poltavo. "The cutting" – he indicated the newspaper clip – "was sent to me by an unknown friend."

"I was the unknown friend," said "Mr. Brown"; "do you understand the position?"

Poltavo nodded.

"I understand everything," he said, "except the last and most important of all matters; namely, the question of my salary."

The man named a sum – a generous sum to Poltavo, and Mr. Brown, eyeing him keenly, was glad to note that his new assistant was neither surprised nor impressed.

"You will see very little of me at this office," the editor went on. "If you work well, and I can trust you, I will double the salary I am giving you; if you fail me, you will be sorry for yourself."

He rose.

"That finishes our interview. You will come here to-morrow morning and let yourself in. Here is the key of the door and a key to the safe in which I keep all correspondence. You will find much to incriminate society and precious little that will incriminate me. I expect you to devote the whole of your attention to this business," he said slowly and emphatically.

"You may be sure – " began Poltavo.

"Wait, I have not finished. By devoting the whole of your attention to the business, I mean I want you to have no spare time to conduct any investigations as to my identity. By a method which I will not trouble to explain to you I am able to leave this building without any person being aware of the fact that I am the editor of this interesting publication. When you have been through your letters I want you to translate those which contain the most important particulars and forward them by a messenger who will call every evening at five o'clock. Your salary will be paid regularly, and you will not be bothered with any editorial duties. And now, if you will please go into the outer room and wait a few moments, you may return in five minutes and begin on this accumulation of correspondence."

Poltavo, with a little bow, obeyed, and closed the door carefully behind him. He heard a click, and knew that the same electric control which had opened the outer door had now closed the inner. At the end of five minutes, as near as he could judge, he tried the door. It opened readily and he stepped into the inner office. The room was empty. There was a door leading out to the corridor, but something told the new assistant that this was not the manner of egress which his employer had adopted. He looked round carefully. There was no other door, but behind the chair where the veiled man had sat was a large cupboard. This he opened without, however, discovering any solution to the mystery of Mr. Brown's disappearance, for the cupboard was filled with books and stationery. He then began a systematic search of the apartment. He tried all the drawers of the desk and found they were open, whereupon his interest in their contents evaporated, since he knew a gentleman of Mr. Brown's wide experience was hardly likely to leave important particulars concerning himself in an unlocked desk. Poltavo shrugged his shoulders, deftly rolling a cigarette, which he lit, then pulling the chair up to the desk he began to attack the pile of letters which awaited his attention.

For six weeks Mr. Poltavo had worked with painstaking thoroughness in the new service. Every Friday morning he had found on his desk an envelope containing two bank notes neatly folded and

addressed to himself. Every evening at five o'clock a hard-faced messenger had called and received a bulky envelope containing Poltavo's translations.

The Pole was a keen student of the little paper, which he bought every week, and he had noted that very little of the information he had gleaned appeared in print. Obviously then *Gossip's Corner* served Mr. Brown in some other way than as a vehicle for scandal, and the veil was partly lifted on this mysterious business on an afternoon when there had come a sharp tap at the outer door of the office. Poltavo pressed the button on the desk, which released the lock, and presently the tap was repeated on the inside door.

The door opened and a girl stood in the entrance hesitating.

"Won't you come in?" said Poltavo, rising.

"Are you the editor of this paper?" asked the girl, as she slowly closed the door behind her.

Poltavo bowed. He was always ready to accept whatever honour chance bestowed upon him. Had she asked him if he were Mr. Brown, he would also have bowed.

"I had a letter from you," said the girl, coming to the other side of the table and resting her hand on its edge and looking down at him a little scornfully, and a little fearfully, as Poltavo thought.

He bowed again. He had not written letters to anybody save to his employer, but his conscience was an elastic one.

"I write so many letters," he said airily, "that I really forget whether I have written to you or not. May I see the letter?"

She opened her bag, took out an envelope, removed the letter and passed it across to the interested young man. It was written on the note-heading of *Gossip's Corner*, but the address had been scratched out by a stroke of the pen. It ran:

"Dear Madam, —

"Certain very important information has come into my possession regarding the relationships between yourself and Captain Brackly. I feel sure you cannot know that your name is being associated with that officer. As the daughter and heiress of the late Sir George Billk, you may imagine that your wealth and position in society relieves you of criticism, but I can assure you that the stories which have been sent to me would, were they placed in the hands of your husband, lead to the most unhappy consequences.

"In order to prevent this matter going any further, and in order to silence the voices of your detractors, our special inquiry department is willing to undertake the suppression of these scandal-mongers. It will cost you £10,000, which should be paid to me in notes. If you agree, put an advertisement in the agony column of the *Morning Mist*, and I will arrange a meeting where the money can be paid over. On no account address me at my office or endeavour to interview me there.

"Yours very truly,

"J. Brown."

Poltavo read the letter and now the function of *Gossip's Corner* was very clear. He refolded the letter and handed it back to the girl.

"I may not be very clever," said the visitor, "but I think I can understand what blackmail is when I see it."

Poltavo was in a quandary, but only for a moment.

"I did not write that letter," he said suavely; "it was written without my knowledge. When I said that I was the editor of this paper, I meant, of course, that I was the acting editor. Mr. Brown conducts his business quite independently of myself. I know all the circumstances," he added hastily, since he was very anxious that the girl should not refuse him further information in the belief that he was an inconsiderable quantity, "and I sympathize with you most sincerely."

A little smile curled the lips of the visitor.

Poltavo was ever a judge of men and women, and he knew that this was no yielding, timid creature to be terrified by the fear of exposure.

"The matter can be left in the hands of Captain Brackly and my husband to settle," she said. "I am going to take the letter to my solicitors. I shall also show it to the two men most affected."

Now the letter had been written four days earlier, as Poltavo had seen, and he argued that if it had not been revealed to these "two men most affected" in the first heat of the lady's anger and indignation, it would never be shown at all.

"I think you are very wise," he said suavely. "After all, what is a little unpleasantness of that character? Who cares about the publication of a few letters?"

"Has he got letters?" asked the girl quickly, with a change of tone.

Poltavo bowed again.

"Will they be returned?" she asked.

Poltavo nodded, and the girl bit her lips thoughtfully.

"I see," she said.

She looked at the letter again and without another word went out.

Poltavo accompanied her to the outer door.

"It is the prettiest kind of blackmail," she said at parting, and she spoke without heat. "I have only now to consider which will pay me best."

The Pole closed the door behind her and walked back to his inner office, opened the door and stood aghast, for sitting in the chair which he had so recently vacated was the veiled man.

He was chuckling, partly at Poltavo's surprise, partly at some amusing thought.

"Well done, Poltavo," he said; "excellently fenced."

"Did you hear?" asked the Pole, surprised in spite of himself.

"Every word," said the other. "Well, what do you think of it?"

Poltavo pulled a chair from the wall and sat down facing his chief.

"I think it is very clever," he said admiringly, "but I also think I am not getting sufficient salary."

The veiled man nodded.

"I think you are right," he agreed, "and I will see that it is increased. What a fool the woman was to come here!"

"Either a fool or a bad actress," said Poltavo.

"What do you mean?" asked the other quickly.

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"To my mind," he said after a moment's thought, "there is no doubt that I have witnessed a very clever comedy. An effective one, I grant, because it has accomplished all that was intended."

"And what was intended?" asked Mr. Brown curiously.

"It was intended by you and carried out by you in order to convey to me the exact character of your business," said Poltavo. "I judged that fact from the following evidence." He ticked off the points one by one on his long white fingers. "The lady's name was, according to the envelope, let us say, Lady Cruxbury; but the lady's real name, according to some silver initials on her bag, began with 'G.' Those initials I also noted on the little handkerchief she took from her bag. Therefore she was not the person to whom the letter was addressed, or if she was, the letter was a blind. In such an important matter Lady Cruxbury would come herself. My own view is that there is no Lady Cruxbury, that the whole letter was concocted and was delivered to me whilst you were watching me from some hiding place in order to test my discretion, and, as I say, to make me wise in the ways of your admirable journal."

Mr. Brown laughed long and softly.

"You are a clever fellow, Poltavo," he said admiringly, "and you certainly deserve your rise of salary. Now I am going to be frank with you. I admit that the whole thing was a blind. You now know my business, and you now know my *raison d'être*, so to speak. Are you willing to continue?"

"At a price," said the other.

"Name it," said the veiled man quietly.

"I am a poor adventurer," began Poltavo; "my life – "

"Cut all that stuff out," said Mr. Brown roughly, "I am not going to give you a fortune. I am going to give you the necessities of life and a little comfort."

Poltavo walked to the window and thrusting his hands deep into his trouser pockets stared out. Presently he turned. "The necessities of life to me," he said, "are represented by a flat in St. James's Street, a car, a box at the Opera – "

"You will get none of these," interrupted Mr. Brown. "Be reasonable."

Poltavo smiled.

"I am worth a fortune to you," he said, "because I have imagination. Here, for example." He picked out a letter from a heap on the desk and opened it. The caligraphy was typically Latin and the handwriting was vile. "Here is a letter from an Italian," he said, "which to the gross mind may perhaps represent wearisome business details. To a mind of my calibre, it is clothed in rich possibilities." He leaned across the table; his eyes lighted up with enthusiasm. "There may be an enormous fortune in this," and he tapped the letter slowly. "Here is a man who desires the great English newspaper, of which he has heard (though Heaven only knows how he can have heard it), to discover the whereabouts and the identity of a certain M. Fallock."

The veiled man started.

"Fallock," he repeated.

Poltavo nodded.

"Our friend Fallock has built a house 'of great wonder,' to quote the letter of our correspondent. In this house are buried millions of lira – doesn't that fire your imagination, dear colleague?"

"Built a house, did he?" repeated the other.

"Our friends tell me," Poltavo went on, – "did I tell you it was written on behalf of two men? – that they have a clue and in fact that they know Mr. Fallock's address, and they are sure he is engaged in a nefarious business, but they require confirmation of their knowledge."

The man at the table was silent.

His fingers drummed nervously on the blotting pad and his head was sunk forward as a man weighing a difficult problem.

"All child's talk," he said roughly, "these buried treasures! – I have heard of them before. They are just two imaginative foreigners. I suppose they want you to advance their fare?"

"That is exactly what they do ask," said Poltavo.

The man at the desk laughed uneasily behind his veil and rose.

"It's the Spanish prison trick," he said; "surely you are not deceived by that sort of stuff?"

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"Speaking as one who has also languished in a Spanish prison," he smiled, "and who has also sent out invitations to the generous people of England to release him from his sad position – a release which could only be made by generous payments – I thoroughly understand the delicate workings of that particular fraud; but we robbers of Spain, dear colleague, do not write in our native language, we write in good, or bad, English. We write not in vilely spelt Italian because we know that the recipient of our letter will not take the trouble to get it translated. No, this is no Spanish prison trick. This is genuine."

"May I see the letter?"

Poltavo handed it across the table, and the man turning his back for a moment upon his assistant lifted his veil and read. He folded the letter and put it in his pocket.

"I will think about it," he said gruffly.

"Another privilege I would crave from you in addition to the purely nominal privilege of receiving more salary," said Poltavo.

"What is it?"

The Pole spread out his hands in a gesture of self-depreciation.

"It is weak of me, I admit," he said, "but I am anxious – foolishly anxious – to return to the society of well-clothed men and pretty women. I pine for social life. It is a weakness of mine," he added apologetically. "I want to meet stockbrokers, financiers, politicians and other *chevaliers d'industrie* on equal terms, to wear the *grande habit*, to listen to soft music, to drink good wine."

"Well?" asked the other suspiciously. "What am I to do?"

"Introduce me to society," said Poltavo sweetly – "most particularly do I desire to meet that merchant prince of whose operations I read in the newspapers, Mr. how-do-you-call-him? – Farrington."

The veiled man sat in silence for a good minute, and then he rose, opened the cupboard and put in his hand. There was a click and the cupboard with its interior swung back, revealing another room which was in point of fact an adjoining suite of offices, also rented by Mr. Brown. He stood silently in the opening, his chin on his breast, his hands behind him, then:

"You are very clever, Poltavo," he said, and passed through and the cupboard swung back in its place.

CHAPTER II

"Assassin!"

This was the cry which rang out in the stillness of the night, and aroused the interest of one inhabitant of Brakely Square who was awake. Mr. Gregory Farrington, a victim of insomnia, heard the sound, and put down the book he was reading, with a frown. He rose from his easy chair, pulled his velvet dressing gown lightly round his rotund form and shuffled to the window. His blinds were lowered, but these were of the ordinary type, and he stuck two fingers between two of the laths.

There was a moist film on the window through which the street lamps showed blurred and indistinct, and he rubbed the pane clear with the tips of his fingers (he described every action to T. B. Smith afterwards).

Two men stood outside the house. They occupied the centre of the deserted pavement, and they were talking excitedly. Through the closed window Mr. Farrington could hear the staccato rattle of their voices, and by the gesticulations, familiar to one who had lived for many years in a Latin country, he gathered that they were of that breed.

He saw one raise his hand to strike the other and caught the flash of a pistol-barrel excitedly flourished.

"Humph!" said Mr. Farrington.

He was alone in his beautiful house in Brakely Square. His butler, the cook, and one sewing maid and the chauffeur were attending the servants' ball which the Manley-Potters were giving. Louder grew the voices on the pavement.

"Thief!" shrilled a voice in French, "Am I to be robbed of –" and the rest was indistinguishable.

There was a policeman on point duty at the other side of the square. Mr. Farrington's fingers rubbed the glass with greater energy, and his anxious eyes looked left and right for the custodian of the law.

He crept down the stairs, opened the metal flap of the letter-box and listened. It was not difficult to hear all they said, though they had dropped their voices, for they stood at the foot of the steps.

"What is the use?" said one in French. "There is a reward large enough for two – but for him – my faith! there is money to be made, sufficient for twenty. It is unfortunate that we should meet on similar errands, but I swear to you I did not desire to betray you –" The voice sank.

Mr. Farrington chewed the butt of his cigar in the darkness of the hall and pieced together the jigsaw puzzle of this disjointed conversation. These men must be associates of Montague – Montague Fallock, who else?

Montague Fallock, the blackmailer for whom the police of Europe were searching, and individually and separately they had arranged to blackmail him – or betray him.

The fact that T. B. Smith also had a house in Brakely Square, and that T. B. Smith was an Assistant Commissioner of the police, and most anxious to meet Montague Fallock in the flesh, might supply reason enough to the logical Mr. Farrington for this conversation outside his respectable door.

"Yes, I tell you," said the second man, angrily, "that I have arranged to see M'sieur – you must trust me –"

"We go together," said the other, definitely, "I trust no man, least of all a confounded Neapolitan –"

Constable Habit had not heard the sound of quarrelling voices, as far as could be gathered from subsequent inquiry. His statement, now in the possession of T. B. Smith, distinctly says, "I heard nothing unusual."

But suddenly two shots rang out.

"Clack – clack!" they went, the unmistakable sound of an automatic pistol or pistols, then a police whistle shrieked, and P. C. Habit broke into a run in the direction of the sound, blowing his own whistle as he ran.

He arrived to find three men, two undoubtedly dead on the ground, and the third, Mr. Farrington's unpicturesque figure, standing shivering in the doorway of his house, a police whistle at his lips, and his grey velvet dressing-gown flapping in a chill eastern wind.

Ten minutes later T. B. Smith arrived on the scene from his house, to find a crowd of respectable size, half the bedroom windows of Brakely Square occupied by the morbid and the curious, and the police ambulance already on the spot.

"Dead, sir," reported the constable.

T. B. looked at the men on the ground. They were obviously foreigners. One was well, almost richly dressed; the other wore the shabby evening dress of a waiter, under the long ulster which covered him from neck to foot.

The men lay almost head to head. One flat on his face (he had been in this position when the constable found him, and had been restored to that position when the methodical P. C. Habit found that he was beyond human assistance) and the other huddled on his side.

The police kept the crowd at a distance whilst the head of the secret police (T. B. Smith's special department merited that description) made a careful examination. He found a pistol on the ground, and another under the figure of the huddled man, then as the police ambulance was backed to the pavement, he interviewed the shivering Mr. Farrington.

"If you will come upstairs," said that chilled millionaire, "I will tell you all I know."

T. B. sniffed the hall as he entered, but said nothing. He had his olfactory sense developed to an abnormal degree, but he was a tactful and a silent man.

He knew Mr. Farrington – who did not? – both as a new neighbour and as the possessor of great wealth.

"Your daughter – " he began.

"My ward," corrected Mr. Farrington, as he switched on all the lights of his sitting-room, "she is out – in fact she is staying the night with my friend Lady Constance Dex – do you know her?"

T. B. nodded.

"I can only give you the most meagre information," said Mr. Farrington. He was white and shaky, a natural state for a law-abiding man who had witnessed wilful murder. "I heard voices and went down to the door, thinking I would find a policeman – then I heard two shots almost simultaneously, and opened the door and found the two men as they were found by the policeman."

"What were they talking about?"

Mr. Farrington hesitated.

"I hope I am not going to be dragged into this case as a witness?" he asked, rather than asserted, but received no encouragement in the spoken hope from T. B. Smith.

"They were discussing that notorious man, Montague Fallock," said the millionaire; "one was threatening to betray him to the police."

"Yes," said T. B. It was one of those "yesses" which signified understanding and conviction.

Then suddenly he asked:

"Who was the third man?"

Mr. Farrington's face went from white to red, and to white again.

"The third man?" he stammered.

"I mean the man who shot those two," said T. B., "because if there is one thing more obvious than another it is that they were both killed by a third person. You see," he went on, "though they had pistols neither had been discharged – that was evident, because on each the safety catch was raised. Also the lamp-post near which they stood was chipped by a bullet which neither could have

fired. I suggest, Mr. Farrington, that there was a third man present. Do you object to my searching your house?"

A little smile played across the face of the other.

"I haven't the slightest objection," he said. "Where will you start?"

"In the basement," said T. B.; "that is to say, in your kitchen."

The millionaire led the way down the stairs, and descended the back stairway which led to the domain of the absent cook. He turned on the electric light as they entered.

There was no sign of an intruder.

"That is the cellar door," indicated Mr. Farrington, "this the larder, and this leads to the area passage. It is locked."

T. B. tried the handle, and the door opened readily.

"This at any rate is open," he said, and entered the dark passageway.

"A mistake on the part of the butler," said the puzzled Mr. Farrington. "I have given the strictest orders that all these doors should be fastened. You will find the area door bolted and chained."

T. B. threw the rays of his electric torch over the door.

"It doesn't seem to be," he remarked; "in fact, the door is ajar."

Farrington gasped.

"Ajar?" he repeated. T. B. stepped out into the well of the tiny courtyard. It was approached from the street by a flight of stone stairs.

T. B. threw the circle of his lamp over the flagged yard. He saw something glittering and stooped to pick it up. The object was a tiny gold-capped bottle such as forms part of the paraphernalia in a woman's handbag.

He lifted it to his nose and sniffed it.

"That is it," he said.

"What?" asked Mr. Farrington, suspiciously.

"The scent I detected in your hall," replied T. B. "A peculiar scent, is it not?" He raised the bottle to his nose again. "Not your ward's by any chance?"

Farrington shook his head vigorously.

"Doris has never been in this area in her life," he said; "besides, she dislikes perfumes."

T. B. slipped the bottle in his pocket.

Further examination discovered no further clue as to the third person, and T. B. followed his host back to the study.

"What do you make of it?" asked Mr. Farrington.

T. B. did not answer immediately. He walked to the window and looked out. The little crowd which had been attracted by the shots and arrival of the police ambulance had melted away. The mist which had threatened all the evening had rolled into the square and the street lamps showed yellow through the dingy haze.

"I think," he said, "that I have at last got on the track of Montague Fallock."

Mr. Farrington looked at him with open mouth.

"You don't mean that?" he asked incredulously.

T. B. inclined his head.

"The open door below – the visitor?" jerked the stout man, "you don't think Montague Fallock was in the house to-night?"

T. B. nodded again, and there was a moment's silence.

"He has been blackmailing me," said Mr. Farrington, thoughtfully, "but I don't think –"

The detective turned up his coat collar preparatory to leaving.

"I have a rather unpleasant job," he said. "I shall have to search those unfortunate men."

Mr. Farrington shivered. "Beastly," he said, huskily.

T. B. glanced round the beautiful apartment with its silver fittings, its soft lights and costly panellings. A rich, warm fire burnt in an oxidized steel grate. The floor was a patchwork of Persian rugs, and a few pictures which adorned the walls must have been worth a fortune.

On the desk there was a big photograph in a plain silver frame – the photograph of a handsome woman in the prime of life.

"Pardon me," said T. B., and crossed to the picture, "this is – "

"Lady Constance Dex," said the other, shortly – "a great friend of mine and my ward's."

"Is she in town?"

Mr. Farrington shook his head.

"She is at Great Bradley," he said; "her brother is the rector there."

"Great Bradley?"

T. B.'s frown showed an effort to recollect something.

"Isn't that the locality which contains the Secret House?"

"I've heard something about the place," said Mr. Farrington with a little smile.

"C. D.," said the detective, making for the door.

"What?"

"Lady Constance Dex's initials, I mean," said T. B.

"Yes – why?"

"Those are the initials on the gold scent bottle, that is all," said the detective. "Good night."

He left Mr. Farrington biting his finger nails – a habit he fell into when he was seriously perturbed.

CHAPTER III

T. B. Smith sat alone in his office in Scotland Yard. Outside, the Embankment, the river, even the bulk of the Houses of Parliament were blotted out by the dense fog. For two days London had lain under the pall, and if the weather experts might be relied upon, yet another two days of fog was to be expected.

The cheery room, with its polished oak panelling and the chaste elegance of its electroliers, offered every inducement to a lover of comfort to linger. The fire glowed bright and red in the tiled fireplace, a silver clock on the mantelpiece ticked musically, and at his hand was a white-covered tray with a tiny silver teapot, and the paraphernalia necessary for preparing his meal – that strange tea-supper which was one of T. B. Smith's eccentricities.

He glanced at the clock; the hands pointed to twenty-five minutes past one.

He pressed a little button let into the side of the desk, and a few seconds later there was a gentle tap at the door, and a helmetless constable appeared.

"Go to the record room and get me" – he consulted a slip of paper on the desk – "Number G 7941."

The man withdrew noiselessly, and T. B. Smith poured out a cup of tea for himself.

There was a thoughtful line on his broad forehead, a look of unaccustomed worry on the handsome face, tanned with the suns of Southern France. He had come back from his holiday to a task which required the genius of a superman. He had to establish the identity of the greatest swindler of modern times, Montague Fallock. And now another reason existed for his search. To Montague Fallock, or his agent, must be ascribed the death of two men found in Brakely Square the night before.

No man had seen Montague; there was no photograph to assist the army of detectives who were seeking him. His agents had been arrested and interrogated, but they were but the agents of agents. The man himself was invisible. He stood behind a steel network of banks and lawyers and anonymities, unreachable.

The constable returned, bearing under his arm a little black leather envelope, and, depositing it on the desk of the Assistant Commissioner, withdrew.

T. B. opened the envelope and removed three neat packages tied with red tape. He unfastened one of these and laid three cards before him. They were three photographic enlargements of a finger print. It did not need the eye of an expert to see they were of the same finger, though it was obvious that they had been made under different circumstances.

T. B. compared them with a smaller photograph he had taken from his pocket. Yes, there was no doubt about it. The four pictures, secured by a delicate process from the almost invisible print on the latest letter of the blackmailer, proved beyond any doubt the identity of Lady Dex's correspondent.

He rang the bell again and the constable appeared in the doorway.

"Is Mr. Ela in his office?"

"Yes, sir. He's been taking information about that Dock case."

"Dock case? Oh yes, I remember; two men were caught rifling the Customs store; they shot a dock constable and got away."

"They both got away, sir," said the man, "but one was shot by the constable's mate; they found his blood on the pavement outside where their motor-car was waiting."

T. B. nodded.

"Ask Mr. Ela to come in when he is through," he said.

Mr. Ela was evidently "through," for almost immediately after the message had gone, the long, melancholy face of the superintendent appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, Ela," smiled T. B.; "tell me all your troubles."

"My main trouble," replied Ela, as he sank wearily into the padded chair, "is to induce eyewitnesses to agree as to details; there is absolutely no clue as to the identity of the robbers, and nearly murderers. The number of the car was a spurious one, and was not traced beyond Limehouse. I am up against a blank wall. The only fact I have to go upon is the very certain fact that one of the robbers was either wounded or killed and carried to the car by his friend, and that his body will have to turn up somewhere or other – then we may have something to go on."

"If it should prove to be that of my friend Montague Fallock," said T. B. humorously, "I shall be greatly relieved. What were your thieves after – bullion?"

"Hardly! No, they seem to be fairly prosaic pilferers. They engaged in going through a few trunks – part of the personal baggage of the *Mandavia* which arrived from Coast ports on the day previous. The baggage was just heavy truck; the sort of thing that a passenger leaves in the docks for a day or two till he has arranged for their carriage. The trunks disturbed, included one of the First Secretary to a High Commissioner in Congoland, a dress basket of a Mrs. Somebody-or-other whose name I forget – she is the wife of a Commissioner – and a small box belonging to Dr. Goldworthy, who has just come back from the Congo where he has been investigating sleeping sickness."

"Doesn't sound thrilling," said T. B. thoughtfully; "but why do swagger criminals come in their motor-cars with their pistols and masks – they were masked if I remember the printed account aright?" Ela nodded. "Why do they come on so prosaic an errand?"

"Tell me," said Ela, laconically, then, "What is your trouble?"

"Montague," said the other, with a grim smile, "Montague Fallock, Esquire. He has been demanding a modest ten thousand pounds from Lady Constance Dex – Lady Constance being a sister of the Hon. and Rev. Harry Dex, Vicar of Great Bradley. The usual threat – exposure of an old love affair.

"Dex is a large, bland aristocrat under the thumb of his sister; the lady, a masterful woman, still beautiful; the indiscretion partly atoned by the death of the man. He died in Africa. Those are the circumstances that count. The brother knows, but our friend Montague will have it that the world should know. He threatens to murder, if necessary, should she betray his demands to the police. This is not the first time he has uttered this threat. Farrington, the millionaire, was the last man, and curiously, a friend of Lady Dex."

"It's weird – the whole business," mused Ela. "The two men you found in the square didn't help you?"

T. B., pacing the apartment with his hand in his pocket, shook his head.

"Ferreira de Coasta was one, and Henri Sans the other. Both men undoubtedly in the employ of Montague, at some time or other. The former was a well-educated man, who may have acted as intermediary. He was an architect who recently got into trouble in Paris over money matters. Sans was a courier agent, a more or less trusted messenger. There was nothing on either body to lead me to Montague Fallock, save this."

He pulled open the drawer of his desk and produced a small silver locket. It was engraved in the ornate style of cheap jewellery and bore a half-obliterated monogram.

He pried open the leaf of the locket with his thumbnail. There was nothing in its interior save a small white disc.

"A little gummed label," explained T. B., "but the inscription is interesting."

Ela held the locket to the light, and read:

"Mor: Cot

God sav the Keng."

"Immensely patriotic, but unintelligible and illiterate," said T. B., slipping the medallion into his pocket, and locking away the dossier in one of the drawers of his desk.

Ela yawned.

"I'm sorry – I'm rather sleepy. By the way, isn't Great Bradley, about which you were speaking, the home of a romance?"

T. B. nodded with a twinkle in his eye.

"It is the town which shelters the Secret House," he said, as he rose, "but the eccentricities of lovesick Americans, who build houses equally eccentric, are not matters for police investigation. You can share my car on a fog-breaking expedition as far as Chelsea," he added, as he slipped into his overcoat and pulled on his gloves; "we may have the luck to run over Montague."

"You are in the mood for miracles," said Ela, as they were descending the stairs.

"I am in the mood for bed," replied T. B. truthfully. Outside the fog was so thick that the two men hesitated. T. B.'s chauffeur was a wise and patient constable, but felt in his wisdom that patience would be wasted on an attempt to reach Chelsea.

"It's thick all along the road, sir," he said. "I've just 'phoned through to Westminster Police Station, and they say it is madness to attempt to take a car through the fog."

T. B. nodded.

"I'll sleep here," he said. "You'd better bed down somewhere, David, and you, Ela?"

"I'll take a little walk in the park," said the sarcastic Mr. Ela.

T. B. went back to his room, Ela following.

He switched on the light, but stood still in the doorway. In the ten minutes' absence some one had been there. Two drawers of the desk had been forced; the floor was littered with papers flung there hurriedly by the searcher.

T. B. stepped swiftly to the desk – the envelope had gone.

A window was open and the fog was swirling into the room.

"There's blood here," said Mr. Ela. He pointed to the dappled blotting pad.

"Cut his hand on the glass," said T. B. and jerked his head to the broken pane in the window. He peered out through the open casement. A hook ladder, such as American firemen use, was hanging to the parapet. So thick was the fog that it was impossible to see how long the ladder was, but the two men pulled it up with scarcely an effort. It was made of a stout light wood, with short steel brackets affixed at intervals.

"Blood on this too," said Ela, then, to the constable who had come to his ring, he jerked his orders rapidly: "Inspector on duty to surround the office with all the reserve – 'phone Cannon Row all men available to circle Scotland Yard, and to take into custody a man with a cut hand – 'phone all stations to that effect."

"There's little chance of getting our friend," said T. B. He took up a magnifying glass and examined the stains on the pad.

"Who was he?" asked Ela.

T. B. pointed to the stain.

"Montague," he said, briefly, "and he now knows the very thing I did not wish him to know."

"And that is?"

T. B. did not speak for a moment. He stood looking down at the evidence which the intruder had left behind.

"He knows how much I know," he said, grimly, "but he may also imagine I know more – there are going to be developments."

CHAPTER IV

It was a bad night in London, not wild or turbulent, but swathed to the eyes like an Eastern woman in a soft grey garment of fog. It engulfed the walled canyons of the city, through which the traffic had roared all day, plugged up the maze of dark side-streets, and blotted out the open squares. Close to the ground it was thick, viscous, impenetrable, so that one could not see a yard ahead, and walked ghostlike, adventuring into a strange world.

Occasionally it dispersed. In front of the Jollity Theatre numbers of arc-lights wrought a wavering mist-hung yellow space, into which a constant line of vehicles, like monstrous shiny beetles, emerged from the outer nowhere, disgorged their contents, and were eclipsed again. And pedestrians in gay processional streamed across the rudy glistening patch like figures on a slide.

Conspicuous in the shifting throng was a sharp-faced boy, ostensibly selling newspapers, but with a keen eye upon the arriving vehicles. Suddenly he darted to the curb, where an electric coupe had just drawn up. A man alighted heavily, and turned to assist a young woman.

For an instant the lad's attention was deflected by the radiant vision. The girl, wrapped in a voluminous cloak of ivory colour, was tall and slim, with soft white throat and graceful neck; her eyes under shadowy lashes were a little narrow, but blue as autumn mist, and sparkling now with amusement.

"Watch your steps, auntie," she warned laughingly, as a plump, elderly, little lady stepped stiffly from the coupe. "These London fogs are dangerous."

The boy stood staring at her, his feet as helpless as if they had taken root to the ground. Suddenly he remembered his mission. His native impudence reasserted itself, and he started forward.

"Paper, sir?"

He addressed the man. For a moment it seemed as though he were to be rebuffed, then something in the boy's attitude changed his mind.

As the man fumbled in an inner pocket for change, the lad took a swift inventory. The face beneath the tall hat was a powerful oval, paste-coloured, with thin lips, and heavy lines from nostril to jaw. The eyes were close set and of a turbid grey.

"It's him," the boy assured himself, and opened his mouth to speak.

The girl laughed amusedly at the spectacle of her companion's passion for news in this grimy atmosphere, and turned to the young man in evening dress who had just dismissed his taxi and joined the group.

It was the diversion the boy had prayed for. He took a quick step toward the older man.

"T. B. S.," he said, in a soft but distinct undertone.

The man's face blanched suddenly, and a coin which he held in his large, white-gloved palm slipped jingling to the pavement.

The young messenger stooped and caught it dexterously.

"T. B. S.," he whispered again, insistently.

"Here?" the answer came hoarsely. The man's lips trembled.

"Watchin' this theatre – splits¹ by the million," finished the boy promptly, and with satisfaction. Under cover of returning the coin, he thrust a slip of white paper into the other's hand.

Then he wheeled, ducked to the girl with a gay little swagger of impudence, threw a lightning glance of scrutiny at her young escort, and turning, was lost in the throng.

The whole incident occupied less than a minute, and presently the four were seated in their box, and the gay strains from the overture of *The Strand Girl* came floating up to them.

¹ Splits: detectives.

"I wish I were a little street gamin in London," said the girl pensively, fingering the violets at her corsage. "Think of the adventures! Don't you, Frank?"

Frank Doughton looked across at her with smiling significant eyes, which brought a flush to her cheeks.

"No," he said softly, "I do not!"

The girl laughed at him and shrugged her round white shoulders.

"For a young journalist, Frank, you are too obvious – too delightfully verdant. You should study indirection, subtlety, finesse – study our mutual friend Count Poltavo!"

She meant it mischievously, and produced the effect she desired.

At the name the young man's brow darkened.

"He isn't coming here to-night?" Doughton asked, in aggrieved tones.

The girl nodded, her eyes dancing with laughter.

"What can you see in that man, Doris?" he protested. "I'll bet you anything you like that the fellow's a rogue! A smooth, soft-smiling rascal! Lady Dinsmore," he appealed to the elder woman, "do you like him?"

"Oh, don't ask Aunt Patricia!" cried the girl. "She thinks him quite the most fascinating man in London. Don't deny it, auntie!"

"I shan't," said the lady, calmly, "for it's true! Count Poltavo" – she paused, to inspect through her lorgnette some new-comers in the opposite box, where she got just a glimpse of a grey dress in the misty depths of the box, the whiteness of a gloved hand lying upon the box's edge – "Count Poltavo is the only interesting man in London. He is a genius." She shut her lorgnette with a snap. "It delights me to talk with him. He smiles and murmurs gay witticisms and quotes Talleyrand and Lucullus, and all the while, in the back of his head, quite out of reach, his real opinions of you are being tabulated and ranged neatly in a row like bottles on a shelf."

Doris nodded thoughtfully.

"I'd like to take down some of those bottles," she said. "Some day perhaps I shall."

"They're probably labelled poison," remarked Frank viciously. He looked at the girl with a growing sense of injury. Of late she had seemed absolutely changed towards him; and from being his good friend, with established intimacies, she had turned before his very eyes into an alien, almost an enemy, more beautiful than ever, to be true, but perverse, mocking, impish. She flouted him for his youth, his bluntness, his guileless transparency. But hardest of all to bear was the delicate derision with which she treated his awkward attempts to express his passion for her, to speak of the fever which had taken possession of him, almost against his will. And now, he reflected bitterly, with this velvet fop of a count looming up as a possible rival, with his *savoir faire*, and his absurd penchant for literature and art, what chance had he, a plain Briton, against such odds? – unless, as he profoundly believed, the chap was a crook. He determined to sound her guardian.

"Mr. Farrington," he asked aloud, "what do *you* think – hallo!" He sprang up suddenly and thrust out a supporting arm.

Farrington had risen, and stood swaying slightly upon his feet. He was frightfully pale, and his countenance was contracted as if in pain. He lifted a wavering hand to his head.

With a supreme effort he steadied himself.

"Doris," he asked quickly, "I meant to ask you – where did you leave Lady Constance?"

The girl looked up in surprise.

"I haven't seen her to-day – she went down to Great Bradley last night – didn't she, auntie?"

The elder woman nodded.

"Mannish, and not a little discourteous *I* think," she said, "leaving her guests and motoring through the fog to the country. I sometimes think Constance Dex is a trifle mad."

"I wish I could share your views," said Farrington, grimly.

He turned abruptly to Doughton.

"Look after Doris," he said. "I have remembered – an engagement."

He beckoned Frank, with a scarcely perceptible gesture, and the two men passed out of the box.

"Have you discovered anything?" he asked, when they were outside.

"About what?" asked Frank, innocently.

A grim smile broke the tense lines of Mr. Farrington's face.

"Really!" he said, drily, "for a young man engaged in most important investigations you are casual."

"Oh! – the Tollington business," said the other. "No, Mr. Farrington, I have found nothing. I don't think it is my game really – investigating and discovering people. I'm a pretty good short story writer but a pretty rotten detective. Of course, it is awfully kind of you to have given me the job – "

"Don't talk nonsense," snapped the older man. "It isn't kindness – it's self-interest. Somewhere in this country is the heir to the Tollington millions. I am one of the trustees to that estate and I am naturally keen on discovering the man who will relieve me of my responsibility. There is a hundred pounds awaiting the individual who unearths this heir."

He glanced at his watch.

"There is one other thing I want to speak to you about – and that is Doris."

They stood in the little corridor which ran at the back of the boxes, and Frank wondered why he had chosen this moment to discuss such urgent and intimate matters. He was grateful enough to the millionaire for the commission he had given him – though with the information to go upon, looking for the missing Tollington heir was analogous to seeking the proverbial needle – but grateful for the opportunity which even this association gave him for meeting Doris Gray, he was quite content to continue the search indefinitely.

"You know my views," the other went on – he glanced at his watch again. "I want Doris to marry you. She is a dear girl, the only human being in the world for whom I have any affection." His voice trembled, and none could doubt his sincerity. "Somehow I am getting nervous about things – that shooting which I witnessed the other night has made me jumpy – go in and win."

He offered a cold hand to the other, and Frank took it, then, with a little jerk of his head, and a muttered "shan't be gone long," he passed into the vestibule, and out into the foggy street. A shrill whistle brought a taxi from the gloom.

"The Savoy," said Farrington. He sprang in, and the cab started with a jerk.

A minute later he thrust his head from the window.

"You may drop me here," he called. He descended and paid his fare. "I'll walk the rest of the way," he remarked casually.

"Bit thickish on foot to-night, sir," offered the driver respectfully. "Better let me set you down at the hotel." But his fare was already lost in the enveloping mist.

Farrington wrapped his muffler closely about his chin, pulled down his hat to shadow his eyes, and hurried along like a man with a set destination.

Presently he halted and signalled to another cab, crawling along close to the curb.

CHAPTER V

The fog was still heavy, and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the yellow mist, when the little newsboy messenger, the first half of his mission performed, struck briskly riverward to complete his business. He disposed of his papers by the simple expedient of throwing them into a street refuse-bin. He jumped on a passing 'bus, and after half an hour's cautious drive reached Southwark. He entered one of the narrow streets leading from the Borough. Here the gas lamps were fewer, and the intersecting streets more narrow and gloomy.

He plunged down a dark and crabbed way, glancing warily behind him now and then to see if he was being followed.

Here, between invisible walls, the fog hung thick and warm and sticky, crowding up close, with a kind of blowsy intimacy that whispered the atmosphere of the place. Occasionally, close to his ear, snatches of loose song burst out, or a coarse face loomed head-high through the reek.

But the boy was upon his native heath and scuttled along, whistling softly between closed teeth, as, with a dexterity born of long practice, he skirted slush and garbage sinks, slipped around the blacker gulfs that denoted unguarded basement holes, and eluded the hideous shadows that lurched by in the gloom.

Hugging the wall, he presently became aware of footsteps behind him. He rounded a corner, and, turning swiftly, collided with something which grabbed him with great hands. Without hesitation, the lad leaned down and set his teeth deep into the hairy arm.

The man let go with a hoarse bellow of rage and the boy, darting across the alley, could hear him stumbling after him in blind search of the narrow way.

As he sped along a door suddenly opened in the blank wall beside him, and a stream of ruddy light gushed out, catching him square within its radiance, mud-spattered, starry-eyed, vivid.

A man stood framed in the doorway.

"Come in," he commanded, briefly.

The boy obeyed. Surreptitiously he wiped the wet and mud from his face and tried to reduce his wild breathing.

The room which he entered was meagre and stale-smelling, with bare floor and stained and sagging wall-paper; unfurnished save for a battered deal table and some chairs.

He sank into one of them and stared with frank curiosity past his employer, who had often entrusted him with messages requiring secrecy, past his employer's companion, to the third figure in the room – a prostrate figure which lay quite still under the heavy folds of a long dark ulster with its face turned to the wall.

"Well?" It was a singularly agreeable voice which aroused him, soft and well-bred, but with a faint foreign accent. The speaker was his employer, a slender dark man, with a finely carved face, immobile as the Sphinx. He had laid aside his Inverness and top hat, and showed himself in evening dress with a large – perhaps a thought too large – buttonhole of Parma violets, which sent forth a faint fragrance.

Of the personality of the man the messenger knew nothing more than that he was foreign, eccentric in a quiet way, lived in a grand house near Portland Place, and rewarded him handsomely for his occasional services. That the grand house was an hotel at which Poltavo had run up an uncomfortable bill he could not know.

The boy related his adventures of the evening, not omitting to mention his late pursuer.

The man listened quietly, brooding, his elbows upon the table, his inscrutable face propped in the crotch of his hand. A ruby, set quaintly in a cobra's head, gleamed from a ring upon his little finger. Presently he roused.

"That's all to-night, my boy," he said, gravely.

He drew out his purse, extracted a sovereign, and laid it in the messenger's hand.

"And this," he said, softly, holding up a second gold piece, "is for – discretion! You comprehend?"

The boy shot a swift glance, not unmixed with terror, at the still, recumbent figure in the corner, mumbled an assent and withdrew. Out in the dampness of the fog, he took a long, deep breath.

As the door closed behind him, the door of an inner room opened and Farrington came out. He had preceded the messenger by five minutes. The young exquisite leaned back in his chair, and smiled into the sombre eyes of his companion.

"At last!" he breathed, softly. "The thing moves. The wheels are beginning to revolve!"

The other nodded gloomily, his glance straying off toward the corner of the room.

"They've got to revolve a mighty lot more before the night's done!" he replied, with heavy significance.

"I needn't tell you," he continued, "that we must move in this venture with extreme caution. A single misstep at the outset, the slightest breath of suspicion, and pff! the entire superstructure falls to the ground."

"That is doubtless true, Mr. Farrington," murmured his companion, pleasantly. He leaned down to inhale the fragrant scent of the violets. "But you forget one little thing. This grand superstructure you speak of – so mysteriously" – he hid a slight smile – "I don't know it – all. You have seen fit, in your extreme caution, to withhold complete information from me."

He paused, and regarded his companion with a level, steady gaze. A faint, ironical smile played about the corners of his mouth; he spoke with a slightly foreign accent, which was at once pleasant and piquant.

"Is it not so, my friend?" he asked, softly. "I am – how you say – left out in the cold – I do not even know your immediate plans."

His countenance was serene and unruffled, and it was only by his slightly quickened breathing that the conversation held any unusual significance.

The other stirred uneasily in his chair.

"There are certain financial matters," he said, with a light air.

"There are others immediately pressing," interrupted his companion. "I observe, for example, that your right hand is covered by a glove which is much larger than that on your left. I imagine that beneath the white kid there is a thin silk bandage. Really, for a millionaire, Mr. Farrington, you are singularly – shall I say – 'furtive'?"

"Hush!" whispered Farrington, hoarsely. He glanced about half-fearfully.

The younger man ignored the outburst. He laid a persuasive hand upon his companion's arm.

"My friend," he said gravely, "let me give you a bit of good advice. Believe me, I speak disinterestedly. Take me into your counsel. I think you need assistance – and I have already given you a taste of my quality in that respect. This afternoon when I called upon you in your home in Brakely Square, suggesting that a man of my standing might be of immense value to you, you were at first innocently dull, then suspicious. After I told you of my adventures in the office of a certain Society journal you were angry. Frankly," the young man shrugged his shoulders, "I am a penniless adventurer – can I be more frank than that? I call myself Count Poltavo – yet the good God knows that my family can give no greater justification to the claim of nobility than the indiscretions of lovely Lydia Poltavo, my grandmother, can offer. For the matter of that I might as well be prince on the balance of probability. I am living by my wits: I have cheated at cards, I have hardly stopped short of murder – I need the patronage of a strong wealthy man, and you fulfill all my requirements."

He bowed slightly to the other, and went on:

"You challenged me to prove my worth – I accepted that challenge. To-night, as you entered the theatre, you were told by a messenger that T. B. Smith – a most admirable man – was watching you – that he had practically surrounded the Jollity with detectives, and, moreover, I chose as my

messenger a small youth who has served you more than once. Thus at one stroke I proved that not only did I know what steps authority was taking to your undoing, but also that I had surprised this splendid rendezvous – and your secret."

He waived his hand around the sordid room, and his eyes rested awhile upon the silent, ulster-covered figure on the bed; his action was not without intent.

"You are an interesting man," said Farrington, gruffly. He looked at his watch. "Join my party at the Jollity," he said; "we can talk matters over. Incidentally, we may challenge Mr. Smith." He smiled, but grew grave again. "I have lost a good friend there" – he looked at the form on the bed; "there is no reason why you should not take his place. Is it true – what you said to-day – that you know something of applied mechanics?"

"I have a diploma issued by the College of Padua," said the other promptly.

CHAPTER VI

At precisely ten o'clock, as the curtain came reefing slowly down upon the first act of *The Strand Girl*, Lady Dinsmore turned with outstretched hand to greet the first of the two men who had just entered the box.

"My dear Count," she exclaimed, "I am disappointed in you! Here I have been paying you really quite tremendous compliments to these young people. I presume you are on Gregory's 'business'?"

"I am desolated!"

Count Poltavo had a way of looking at one gravely, with an air of concentrated attention, as if he were seeing through the words, into the very soul of the speaker. He was, indeed, a wonderful listener, and this quality, added to a certain buoyancy of temperament, accounted perhaps for his popularity in such society as he had been able to penetrate.

"Before I ask you to name the crime, Lady Dinsmore," he said, "permit me to offer my humblest apologies for my lateness."

Lady Dinsmore shook her head at him and glanced at Farrington, but that dour man had drawn a chair to the edge of the box, and was staring moodily down into the great auditorium.

"You are an incorrigible!" she declared, "but sit down and make your excuses at your leisure. You know my niece, and I think you have met Mr. Doughton. He is one of our future leaders of thought!"

The Count bowed, and sank into a chair beside his hostess.

Frank, after a frigidly polite acknowledgement, resumed his conversation with Doris, and Lady Dinsmore turned to her companion.

"Now for the explanation," she exclaimed, briskly. "I shall not let you off! Unpunctuality *is* a crime, and your punishment shall be to confess its cause."

Count Poltavo bent toward her with bright, smiling eyes.

"A very stupid and foolish business engagement," he replied, "which required my personal attendance, and unfortunately that of Mr. Farrington."

Lady Dinsmore threw up a protesting hand.

"Business has no charms to soothe my savage breast! Mr. Farrington," she lowered her voice confidentially, "can talk of nothing else. When he was staying with us he was for ever telegraphing, cabling to America, or decoding messages. There was no peace in the house, by day or by night. Finally I made a stand. 'Gregory,' I said, 'you shall not pervert my servants with your odious tips, and turn my home into a public stock-exchange. Take your bulls and bears over to the Savoy and play with them there, and leave Doris to me.' And he did!" she concluded triumphantly.

Count Poltavo looked about, as if noting for the first time Farrington's preoccupation. "Is he quite well?" he inquired, in an undertone.

Lady Dinsmore shrugged her shoulders.

"Frankly, I think he had a slight indisposition, and magnified it in order to escape small talk. He hates music. Doris has been quite distraught ever since. The child adores her uncle – you know, of course, that she is his niece – the daughter of my sister. Gregory was her father's brother – we are almost related."

Her companion glanced across to the subject of their remarks. The girl sat in the front of the box, slim and elegant, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She was watching the brilliant scene with a certain air of detachment, as if thinking of other things. Her usual lightness and gay banter seemed for the moment to have deserted her, leaving a soft brooding wistfulness that was strangely appealing.

The Count looked at her.

"She is very beautiful," he murmured under his breath.

Something in his voice caught Lady Dinsmore's attention. She eyed him keenly.

The Count met her look frankly.

"Is – is she engaged to her young friend?" he asked quietly. "Believe me, it is not vulgar curiosity which prompts the question. I – I am – interested." His voice was as composed as ever.

Lady Dinsmore averted her gaze hurriedly and thought with lightning rapidity.

"I have not her confidence," she replied at length, in a low tone; "she is a wise young woman and keeps her own counsel." She appeared to hesitate. "She dislikes you," she said. "I am sorry to wound you, but it is no secret."

Count Poltavo nodded. "I know," he said, simply. "Will you be my good friend and tell me why?"

Lady Dinsmore smiled. "I will do better than that," she said kindly. "I will be your very good friend and give you a chance to ask her why. Frank," – she bent forward and tapped the young man upon the shoulder with her fan, – "will you come over here and tell me what your editor means?"

The Count resigned his seat courteously, and took the vacant place beside the girl. A silence fell between them, which presently the man broke.

"Miss Gray," he began, seriously, "your aunt kindly gave me this opportunity to ask you a question. Have I your permission also?"

The girl arched her eyebrows. Her lip curled ever so slightly.

"A question to which you and my Aunt Patricia could find no answer between you! It must be subtle indeed! How can I hope to succeed?"

He ignored her sarcasm. "Because it concerns yourself."

"Ah!" She drew herself up and regarded him with sparkling eyes. One small foot began to tap the floor ominously. Then she broke into a vexed little laugh.

"I am no match for you with the foils, Count. I admit it freely. I should have learned by this time that you never say what you mean, or mean what you say."

"Forgive me, Miss Gray, if I say that you mistake me utterly. I mean always what I say – most of all to you. But to say all that I mean – to put into speech all that one hopes or dreams – or dares," – his voice dropped to a whisper – "to turn oneself inside out like an empty pocket to the gaze of the multitude – that is – imbecile." He threw out his hands with an expressive gesture.

"But to speak concretely – I have unhappily offended you, Miss Gray. Something I have done, or left undone – or my unfortunate personality does not engage your interest. Is it not true?"

There was no mistaking his sincerity now.

But the girl still held aloof, her blue eyes cool and watchful. For the moment, her face, in its young hardness, bore a curious resemblance to her uncle's.

"Is that your question?" she demanded.

The Count bowed silently.

"Then I will tell you!" She spoke in a low voice surcharged with emotion. "I will give you candour for candour, and make an end of all this make-believe."

"That," he murmured, "is what I most desire."

Doris continued, heedless of the interruption. "It is true that I dislike you. I am glad to be able to tell you as much openly. And yet, perhaps, I should use another word. I dislike your secrecy – something dark and hidden within you – and I fear your influence over my uncle. You have known me less than a fortnight – Mr. Farrington, less than a week – yet you have made what I can only conceive to be impertinent proposals of marriage to me. To-day you were for three hours with my uncle. I can only guess what your business has been."

"You would probably guess wrong," he said coolly.

Farrington, at the other end of the box, shot a swift, suspicious glance across. Poltavo turned to the girl again.

"I want only to be a friend of yours in the day of your need," he said, in a low voice; "believe me, that day is not far distant."

"That is true?" She leaned toward him, a little troubled.

He bowed his head in assent.

"If I could believe you," she faltered. "I need a friend! Oh, if you could know how I have been torn by doubts – beset by fears – oppressions." Her voice quivered. "There is something wrong somewhere – I can't tell you everything – if you would help me – wait. May I test you with a question?"

"A thousand if you like."

"And you will answer – truthfully?" In her eagerness she was like a child.

He smiled. "If I answer at all, be sure it will be truthful."

"Tell me then, is Dr. Fall your friend?"

"He is my dearest enemy," he returned, promptly.

He had only the dimmest notion as to the identity of Dr. Fall, but it seemed that a lie was demanded – Poltavo could lie very easily.

"Or Mr. Gorth?" she asked, and he shook his head.

She drew a deep breath of relief. "And my uncle?" The question was a whisper. She appeared to hang upon his reply.

The Count hesitated. "I do not know," he admitted finally. "If he were not influenced by Dr. Fall, I believe he would be my friend." It was a bow at a venture. He was following the bent of her inclination.

For the first time that evening Doris looked at him with interest.

"May I ask how your uncle came to know Gorth?"

He asked the question with the assurance of one who knew all that was to be known save on this point.

She hesitated awhile.

"I don't quite know. The doctor we have always known. He lives in the country, and we only see him occasionally. He is –" She hesitated and then went on rapidly: "I think he has rather dreadful work. He is in charge of a lunatic."

Poltavo was interested.

"Please go on," he said.

The girl smiled. "I am afraid you are an awful gossip," she rallied, but became more serious. "I don't like him very much, but uncle says that is my prejudice. He is one of those quiet, sure men who say very little and make one feel rather foolish. Don't you know that feeling? It is as though one were dancing the tango in front of the Sphinx."

Poltavo showed his white teeth in a smile.

"I have yet to have that experience," he said.

She nodded.

"One of these days you will meet Dr. Fall and you will know how helpless one can feel in his presence."

A remarkable prophecy which was recalled by Poltavo at a moment when he was powerless to profit by the warning.

"Mr. Gorth?"

Again she hesitated and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said frankly, "he is just a common man. He looks almost like a criminal to my mind. But apparently he has been a loyal servant to uncle for many years."

"Tell me," asked Poltavo, "on what terms is Dr. Fall with your uncle? On terms of equality?"

She nodded.

"Naturally," she said with a look of surprise, "he is a gentleman, and is, I believe, fairly well off."

"And Gorth?" asked Poltavo.

He was interested for many reasons as one who had to take the place of that silent figure which lay in the fog-shrouded house.

"I hardly know how to describe uncle's relations with Gorth," she answered, a little puzzled. "There was a time when they were on terms of perfect equality, but sometimes uncle would be very angry with him indeed. He was rather a horrid man really. Do you know a paper called *Gossip's Corner*?" she asked suddenly.

Poltavo had heard of the journal and had found a certain malicious joy in reading its scandalous paragraphs.

"Well," she said in answer to his nod, "that was Mr. Gorth's idea of literature. Uncle would never have the paper in his house, but whenever you saw Mr. Gorth – he invariably waited for uncle in the kitchen – you would be sure to find him chuckling over some of the horrid things which that paper published. Uncle used to get more angry about this than anything else, Mr. Gorth took a delight in all the unpleasant things which this wretched little paper printed. I have heard it said that he had something to do with its publication; but when I spoke to uncle about it, he was rather cross with me for thinking such a thing."

Poltavo was conscious that the eyes of Farrington were searching his face narrowly, and out of the corner of his eye he noted the obvious disapproval. He turned round carelessly.

"An admirable sight – a London theatre crowd."

"Very," said the millionaire, drily.

"Celebrities on every hand – Montague Fallock, for instance, is here."

Farrington nodded.

"And that wise-looking young man in the very end seat of the fourth row – he is in the shadow, but you may see him."

"T. B. Smith," said Farrington, shortly. "I have seen him – I have seen everybody but – "

"But – ?"

"The occupant of the royal box. She keeps in the shadow all the time. She is not a detective, too, I suppose?" he asked, sarcastically. He looked round. Frank Doughton, his niece and Lady Dinsmore were engrossed in conversation.

"Poltavo," he said, dropping his voice, "I want to know who that woman is in the opposite box – I have a reason."

The orchestra was playing a soft intermezzo, and of a sudden the lights went down in the house, hushed to silence as the curtain went slowly up upon the second act.

There was a shifting of chairs to distribute the view, a tense moment of silence as the chorus came down a rocky defile and then – a white pencil of flame shot out from the royal box and a sharp crash of a pistol report.

"My God!" gasped Mr. Farrington, and staggered back.

There was a loud babble of voices, a stentorian voice from the back of the stalls shouted, "House lights – quick!" The curtain fell as the house was bathed in the sudden glare of lights.

T. B. saw the flash and leapt for the side aisle: two steps and he was at the door which led to the royal box. It was empty. He passed quickly through the retiring room – empty also, but the private entrance giving on to the street was open and the fog was drifting through in great wreaths.

He stepped out into the street and blew a shrill whistle. Instantly from the gloom came a plain clothes policeman – No, he had seen nobody pass. T. B. went back to the theatre, raced round to the box opposite and found it in confusion.

"Where is Mr. Farrington?" he asked, quickly.

He addressed his remark to Poltavo.

"He is gone," said the other, with a shrug.

"He was here when the pistol was fired – at this box, my friend, as the bullet will testify." He pointed to the mark on the enamelled panel behind. "When the lights came he had gone – that is all."

"He can't have gone," said T. B. shortly. "The theatre is surrounded. I have a warrant for his arrest."

A cry from the girl stopped him. She was white and shaking.

"Arrest!" she gasped, "on what charge?"

"On a charge of being concerned with one Gorth in burglary at the Docks – and with an attempted murder."

"Gorth!" cried the girl, vehemently. "If any man is guilty, it is Gorth – that evil man – "

"Speak softly of the dead," said T. B. gently. "Mr. Gorth, as I have every reason to believe, received wounds from which he died. Perhaps you can enlighten me, Poltavo?"

But the Count could only spread deprecating hands.

T. B. went out into the corridor. There was an emergency exit to the street, but the door was closed. On the floor he found a glove, on the door itself the print of a bloody hand.

But there was no sign of Farrington.

CHAPTER VII

Two days later, at the stroke of ten, Frank Doughton sprang from his taxi in front of the office of the *Evening Times*.

He stood for a moment, drawing in the fresh March air, sweet with the breath of approaching spring. The fog of last night had vanished, leaving no trace. He caught the scent of Southern lilacs from an adjoining florist shop.

He took the stairs three at a time.

"Chief in yet?" he inquired of Jamieson, the news editor, who looked up in astonishment at his entrance, and then at the clock.

"No, he's not down yet. You've broken your record."

Frank nodded.

"I've got to get away early."

Tossing his hat upon his desk, he sat down and went methodically through his papers. He unfolded his *Times*, his mind intent upon the problem of the missing millionaire. He had not seen Doris since that night in the box. The first paper under his hand was an early edition of a rival evening journal.

He glanced down at the headlines on the front page, then with a horrified cry he sprang to his feet. He was pale, and the hand which gripped the paper shook.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

Jamieson swung round in his swivel chair.

"What's up?" he inquired.

"Farrington!" said Frank, huskily. "Farrington has committed suicide!"

"Yes, we've a column about it," remarked Jamieson, complacently. "A pretty good story." Then suddenly: "You knew him?" he asked.

Frank Doughton lifted a face from which every vestige of colour had been drained. "I – I was with him at the theatre on the night he disappeared," he said.

Jamieson whistled softly.

Doughton rose hurriedly and reached for his hat.

"I must go to them. Perhaps something can be done. Doris – " he broke off, unable to continue, and turned away sharply.

Jamieson looked at him sympathetically.

"Why don't you go round to Brakely Square?" he suggested. "There may be new developments – possibly a mistake. You note that the body has not been discovered."

Out upon the pavement, Frank caught a passing taxi.

He drove first to the city offices which were Farrington's headquarters. A short talk with the chief clerk was more than enlightening. A brief note in the handwriting of the millionaire announced his intention, "tired of the world," to depart therefrom.

"But why?" asked the young man, in bewilderment.

"Mr. Doughton, you don't seem to quite realize the importance of this tragedy," said the chief clerk, quietly. "Mr. Farrington was a financial king – a multi-millionaire. Or at least, he was so considered up till this morning. We have examined his private books, and it now appears that he had speculated heavily during the last few weeks – he has lost everything, every penny of his own and his ward's fortune. Last night, in a fit of despair, he ended his life. Even his chief clerk had no knowledge of his transactions."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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