Le Queux William

The Golden Face: A Great 'Crook' Romance

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CHAPTER I
PRIVATE AND PERSONAL

In order to ease my conscience and, further, to disclose certain facts which for the past year or two have, I know, greatly puzzled readers of our daily newspapers, I have decided to here reveal some very curious and, perhaps, sensational circumstances.

In fact, after much perplexity and long consideration, I have resolved, without seeking grace or favor, to make a clean breast of all that happened to me, and to leave the reader to judge of my actions, and either to condemn or to condone my offenses.

I will begin at the beginning.

It has been said that service in the Army has upset the average man's chances of prosperity in civil life. That, I regret, is quite true.

When I, George Hargreave, came out of the Army after the Armistice, I found myself, like many hundreds of other ex-officers, completely at a loose end, without a shilling in the world over and above the gratuity of between two and three hundred pounds to which my period of commissioned service entitled me.

Grown accustomed during the war, however, to fending for myself and overcoming difficulties and problems of one sort and another, I at once set to work to look about for any kind of employment for which I fancied I might be fitted. After answering many advertisements to no purpose, I one day happened upon one in *The Times* which rather stirred my curiosity.

It stated that a gentleman of good position, who had occasion to travel in many parts of the world, would like to hear from a young man with considerable experience in motor driving. The applicant should not be over thirty, and it was essential that he should be a gentleman and well educated, with a knowledge of foreign languages if possible; also that he should be thoroughly trustworthy and possessed of initiative. The salary would be a very liberal one.

Application was to be made by letter only to a certain box at the office of *The Times*.

I wrote at once, and received some days later a reply signed "*per pro* Rudolph Rayne," asking me to call to see the advertiser, who said he would be awaiting me at a certain small hôtel-de-luxe in the West End at three o'clock on the following afternoon.

I arrived at the highly aristocratic hotel at five minutes to three, and was conducted to a private sitting-room by a page who, on ushering me in, indicated a good-looking, middle-aged man seated near the window, reading a newspaper and smoking a cigar.

The gentleman looked up as I approached, then put down his paper, rose, and extended his hand.

"Mr. George Hargreave?" he inquired in a pleasant voice.

"Yes. Mr. Rudolph Rayne, I presume?"

He bowed, and pointed to a chair close to his own. Then he sat down again, and I followed his example.

"I have received hundreds of replies to my advertisement," was his first remark, "and the reason why your application is one of the few I have answered is that I liked the frank way in which you expressed yourself. Can you sing?"

"Sing?" I exclaimed, startled at the unexpected question.

"Sing," he repeated.

"Well, yes, I do sing occasionally," I said. "That is to say, I used to at the sing-songs in France at sergeants' messes, and so on. But perhaps you mightn't consider it singing if you heard me," I ended lightly.

"Very good, very good," he observed absent-mindedly. "And you can drive a Rolls?"

"I can drive a Rolls and several other cars as well," I answered. "I was a driver in the R. A. S. C. early in the war."

Suddenly he focused his gaze upon me, and his keen, penetrating gray eyes seemed to pierce into my soul and read my inmost thoughts. For perhaps half a minute he remained looking at me like that, then suddenly he said shortly:

"You are engaged, Mr. Hargreave. Your salary will be six hundred pounds a year, paid monthly in advance, in addition to your living and incidental expenses. I leave for Yorkshire by the midday train from King's Cross to-morrow, and you will come with me. Good afternoon, Mr. Hargreave. By the way, you might take this suit-case with you, and bring it to the station to-morrow," and he pointed to a small suit-case of brown leather on the floor beside his chair.

The whole interview had not lasted three minutes and I went away obsessed by a feeling of astonishment. Mr. Rayne had not cross-questioned me, as I naturally had expected him to do, nor had he asked for my credentials. In addition he had fixed my salary at six hundred pounds, without even inquiring what wages I wanted.

Obviously a character, an oddity, I said to myself as I passed out of the hotel.

Had I suspected then that Mr. Rudolph Rayne was the sort of "oddity" I later found him to be, I should have refused to accept the situation even had he offered me two thousand a year.

Though, during the interview, my attention had been more or less concentrated on Mr. Rayne, I had not been so deeply engrossed as to fail to notice an exceptionally beautiful, dark-eyed girl, who had entered while we had been speaking and who was seated on a settee a little way off. She, too, had stared very hard at me.

Mr. Rayne was accompanied on that journey to Yorkshire by the pretty dark-eyed girl who was his daughter Lola, and by his valet, a very silent, stiff-necked, morose individual, whose personality did not attract me. He seemed, however, to be an exceptionally efficient person, so far as his duties were concerned, and on our arrival at the little wayside station about twelve miles beyond Thirsk, where we had changed trains, he proceeded to take charge of the luggage, all but the suit-case which I still carried.

Outside the little station a magnificent Rolls limousine, colored a dull gray, awaited us, and when the luggage had all been put on it, Mr. Rayne surprised me by asking me to take the wheel then and there.

"My chauffeur left last week, but Paul will show you the road," he said, as the valet seated himself beside me. "Overstow is about ten miles off."

I don't know why it was, but that girl's dark eyes seemed to haunt me. She was just behind me with her father, and twice when I had occasion to look round to ask Mr. Rayne some question or other, I found her gaze fixed on mine, which, foolishly I will admit, disconcerted me.

Mr. Rayne himself addressed me only once of his own accord during the drive, and that was to ask me again if I sang.

"Why the dickens does he want to know if I sing?" was my mental comment when I had replied that I sang a little, without reminding him that he had put the same question to me on the previous day. For an instant the thought flashed across me that perhaps my new employer had some kink in his brain to do with singing; and yet, I reflected, that seemed hardly likely to be the case with a man who in all other respects appeared to be so exceptionally sane.

I was still cogitating this, when the car sped round a wide curve in the road and beyond big lodge gates a large imposing mansion of modern architecture came suddenly into view about half a mile away, partly concealed by beautiful woods sloping down to it from both sides of the valley.

Slackening speed as we came near the lodge, I was about to stop to let Paul alight to open the gates, beyond which stretched the long winding avenue of tall trees, when a man came running out of the lodge and made haste to throw the gates open.

My first surprise on our arrival at Overstow Hall – and I was to have many more surprises before I had been long in Mr. Rayne's service – was at finding that though my employer had quite a large staff of servants, there was not a woman amongst them! Several guests were staying in the house, including a middle-aged lady, called Madame, whose position I could not exactly place, though she appeared to be in charge of the establishment, in charge also of Lola.

Towards ten o'clock next morning the footman came to tell me that Mr. Rayne wanted to see me at once in the library.

"He's in one of his queer moods this morning," the young man said, "so you had better be careful. His letters have upset him, I think."

I thanked the lad for his hint, but on my way to the library, a room I had not yet been in, I missed my bearings, entered a room under the impression that it might be the library, and had hardly done so when the sound of men's voices in a room adjoining came to me – the door between the rooms stood partly open.

"Are you certain, Rudolph," one of the men was saying, "that this new chauffeur of yours is the man for the job?"

"Have I ever made a mistake in summing up a man?" I heard Rayne answer. "I always trust my judgment when choosing a new hand."

Where, before, had I heard the first speaker's voice? I knew that voice quite well, yet, try as I would, I could not for the life of me place it.

"Yes," the first speaker replied; "but, remember, in this case we are running an enormous risk. If the least hitch should occur – "

They lowered their voices until their talk became inaudible, and presently I heard one of them go out of the room. After waiting a minute longer I left the room and went along the short passage, which I now knew must lead to the room where I had heard them talking.

Rayne was alone, standing on the hearthrug with his back to the big, open firegrate.

"Did you send for me, sir?" I inquired.

"I did, Hargreave," he replied in a friendly tone. "I sent for you because I want you to go to Paris to-night. You will take with you the suit-case you still have in your possession, and as you will go by a trading steamer from Newcastle, the voyage will take you some days. The suit-case contains valuable documents, so you must on no account let it out of your sight, even for a minute, from the time you leave here until you hand it over personally to the gentleman I am sending you to – Monsieur Duperré. He is staying at the Hôtel Ombrone, that very smart and exclusive place in the Rue de Rivoli. He will give you a receipt, which you will bring back to me here at once, coming then by the ordinary route. You won't go by train to-day to Newcastle; you will drive yourself there in the Fiat. Paul will go with you and drive the car back."

He went on to give me one or two minor instructions, and then ended: "That's all, Hargreave."

I was walking back along the passage when Rayne's pretty daughter Lola came out of the room I had first entered. She must have come out expressly to meet me, because when close to me she stopped abruptly, glanced to right and left, and then asked me quickly in an undertone:

"Is my father sending you on any journey, Mr. Hargreave?"

Again her wonderful dark eyes became fixed upon mine, as they had done on the previous day during the drive from the railway station.

"Don't try to deceive me," she said earnestly. "You will find it far better to confide in me."

The words so astonished me that for the moment I could not reply. Then, all at once, a strange feeling of curiosity came over me. Why all this secrecy about the suit-case? I mentally asked myself.

And what an odd idea to send me to Paris by that long roundabout sea route! What could be the reason?

"I am not deceiving you, Miss Rayne," I said.

She only smiled and turned abruptly away.

Then, for the first time, I found myself wondering what could be these precious documents Rayne had told me the suit-case contained? That the suit-case was locked, I knew! He had not unlocked it since he had placed it in my charge in London two days before.

My employer gave me some money, and I started two hours later in the Fiat. As I sped along the broad road from Thirsk south towards York, with Paul beside me silent as ever, I could not get thoughts of Lola out of my mind.

Once more I saw her gazing up at me with that peculiar, anxious expression I had noticed when we had met in the passage, and I regretted that I had not prolonged our conversation then, and tried to find out what distressed her.

Several times I spoke to Paul, but he answered only in monosyllables.

We reached Newcastle in plenty of time, for the boat was not due to sail before early next morning, and I felt relieved at being at last rid of my uncongenial companion.

I had an evening paper in my pocket, and, to while away the time, I lay in my narrow berth and began to read. Presently my glance rested upon a paragraph which stated that two days before a dressing-case belonging to Lady Norah Kendrew disappeared in the most extraordinary manner from the hotel in London where she was staying. Exactly what happened had been related to the enterprising reporter by Lady Norah herself.

"My dressing-case containing all my jewelry was locked and on a table near my bed," she said. "I went out of the room soon after half-past ten this morning, my maid, who has been with me eight years, remaining in the room adjoining to put some of my things away – the door between the rooms remained ajar, she says. Whether or not the jewel-case was still there when she herself went out to lunch at about one o'clock she cannot say, as she did not go into my bedroom again. She shut the door behind her when she went out of the sitting-room into the corridor, and locked it. I first missed the jewel-case when I returned to my room at about a quarter past three in the afternoon. The contents are worth twenty thousand pounds. It seems hardly possible that anybody could have entered the bedroom unheard while my maid was in the sitting-room with the door between the two rooms ajar, so my belief is that it must have been stolen between the time she went to lunch and the time I returned. I am offering a big reward for the return of the jewel-case with its contents intact."

The paragraph interested me because of the hotel where the robbery – if robbery it was – had taken place, and the fact that I had happened to be in that hotel on the very day of the robbery!

"Ah, well," I remember saying to myself, "if women will be so careless as to leave valuable property like that unguarded they must expect to take the consequences."

Then my thoughts wandered from the newspaper, and I found myself wondering what Lady Norah Kendrew might be like – if she were young or old, plain or pretty, married or unmarried. And I suppose naturally that train of thought brought Lola once more into my imagination. I had, remember, to all intents, hardly seen her, and she had spoken to me only twice. Yet her personality literally obsessed me. That I was foolish to let it I fully realized. But how many of us can completely master our moods, our impulses and our emotions on all occasions?

The weather at sea remained fine, yet I found that long, slow voyage most tedious. I had nothing to do but read, for I could not disregard Mr. Rayne's strict instructions that I must on no account let the suit-case out of my sight, and in consequence I could not leave my cabin.

I remember looking down at the suit-case protruding from under the berth and thinking it curious that documents should weigh so heavy. There must be a great many of them, I reflected, but even so…

I bent down and pulled the suit-case right out and lifted it.

Indeed it was heavy – very heavy!

Then I began to think of something else.

I had the cabin to myself, which was pleasant, and I spent most of the day stretched out in my bunk. Oh, how I longed every hour for the terribly boring voyage to come to an end!

It was a lovely morning when at last we steamed into the estuary of the Seine, and I shall never forget how beautiful the river and its banks looked as I peered out through my port-hole and we crept up towards Rouen. My meals had all been served in my cabin during the voyage, as I could not well have taken the suit-case with me into the saloon.

Now I felt like a prisoner about to be released.

Mr. Rayne had told me to stop at the post-office in Rouen on my way from the boat to Paris, as I might, he said, find a letter or a telegram awaiting me. I had managed to pass the suit-case through the Customs, and now my heart beat faster as a letter was handed to me, for I recognized Lola's handwriting; I had seen it only once before – that was on a letter she had asked me to post for her.

I hurriedly tore open the envelope, and this was what I read:

"Private. I have suspicion that the suit-case you have you should get rid of at once. Destroy this!"

Undated and unsigned, the letter bore no address. At once thoughts and conjectures of all sorts came crowding into my mind. Could it be that the suit-case contained stolen jewelry and not documents?

Instantly I guessed why Rayne had sent me to Paris with it by that roundabout route. He must either himself be the thief, I concluded, or an accomplice in the theft, and by placing the stolen property in my charge and smuggling it out of England by a circuitous route…

One reflection led quickly to another. Paul, the valet, no doubt knew about his master's private life – possibly was in his confidence. And if Rayne had committed the robbery he must be a professional crook. In which case, should the whereabouts of the stolen property be discovered, I should be arrested as an accessory to the crime! Clearly I had no time to lose if I wanted to safeguard myself. Even now the police, with their wonderful acumen, might be on my track!

I reached Paris at last, and as my taxi swung round from the Place Jeanne d'Arc into the Rue de Rivoli I began to feel extremely nervous.

In reply to my inquiry at the bureau of the smart Hôtel Ombrone I was told that I could be given a bed. Monsieur Duperré? Ah, monsieur had just gone out, but would be back soon, most likely.

I had been given the key of my room, and was about to enter the lift, when I noticed seated on a settee in the vestibule a well-dressed woman whose face seemed familiar. And then in a flash I recognized the lady who had been at Overstow Hall on the day I had arrived there!

She did not recognize me, or I concluded she did not, and naturally it was no business of mine to make any sign of recognition.

I had been in my room, I suppose, about two hours when the telephone bell rang.

"That Mr. Hargreave? The bureau speaking. Monsieur Duperré has come in and is coming up to you now."

A minute later somebody knocked, and I called "Come in!" Then, to my amazement, who should enter but my old company commander in France in the early days of the war – Captain Vincent Deinhard, who later in the war had been court-martialed for misappropriating canteen funds and been subsequently cashiered! Altogether his Army record had been an exceedingly bad one.

Instantly I remembered the voice. It was Deinhard I had heard in conversation with Rayne at Overstow Hall!

He stood stock-still, staring at me.

"Why, Hargreave!" he exclaimed at last. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I am Mr. Rayne's chauffeur and general servant now, captain," I replied. "Mr. Rayne told me to inquire on my arrival here for Monsieur Duperré and hand him that suit-case," and I pointed to it.

He glanced quickly at the door, to make sure that it was shut, then, looking at me oddly, he said in a low voice:

"I am Duperré, Hargreave. You must forget that my name was ever anything else – I got myself into trouble in the Army, you remember – and you must forget that too – and that we have ever met before. So you are his new chauffeur, eh?" he went on, now talking naturally. "It never occurred to me that 'Hargreave,' the new chauffeur, would turn out to be the Hargreave who served under me for two years!" and he laughed dryly.

Then, without a word, he went over to the suit-case and picked it up.

"Come along to my room," he said.

CHAPTER II
ROOM NUMBER 88

I accompanied him along the corridor to a private sitting-room at the end, numbered 88, and adjoining which was a bedroom. There he placed the suit-case upon the table, and taking a piece of paper scribbled a receipt.

"Better post that on to Rayne at once," he suggested. "My wife will be here in a moment. We'll have lunch later on."

All that had already happened had so astonished me that I was only slightly surprised at finding a few moments later that the lady I had seen at Overstow Hall, and again a couple of hours before in the vestibule of the hotel, was Duperré's wife. He must, I think, have told her that we had met before, for she seemed in no way astonished at Mr. Rayne's chauffeur being presented to her.

I found her a pleasant woman, well-read, well-educated and widely travelled. She was, too, an excellent conversationalist. And yet, all the time we were talking, I could not help thinking of Lola, and wondering why Duperré's wife should be in such evidence at Overstow Hall, indeed, apparently in authority there, also why Lola seemed to be so afraid of her.

Half an hour later I posted the receipt to Rayne, and later we all three lunched together in the restaurant. We took our coffee upstairs in the private room, when Duperré said, *à propos* of nothing, suddenly looking across at his wife:

"Hargreave may be of great use to us, Hylda." Then, addressing me again, he said, lowering his voice and glancing at the door:

"In becoming associated with 'The Golden Face,' Hargreave, you are more fortunate than you may think. He's a man who can, and who will, if he likes, help you enormously in all sorts of ways – you will find that you are more to him than a mere chauffeur. In fact, we can both help you, that is, if you fall in with our plans. Our only stipulation will be that you do what we tell you —*without asking any questions*. You understand – eh?"

"I suppose," I said, smiling, "that by 'The Golden Face' you mean Mr. Rayne?"

"Yes. He's called 'Golden Face' by his intimates. I forgot you didn't know. He got the nick-name through going to the Bal des Quatre Arts, here in Paris, wearing a half-mask made of beaten gold."

By that time I had become convinced that both Rayne and Duperré were men with whom I should have to deal with the utmost circumspection.

The only person I had met since I had engaged myself to Rayne in whom I could, I felt, place implicit confidence, was Lola.

When we had finished our coffee, Duperré excused himself, saying that he had some letters to write, and suggested that his wife should accompany me for a taxi drive in the Bois. This struck us both as a pleasant manner in which to spend the afternoon, therefore Madame retired to her room, reappearing a few moments later wearing a smart cloak and a wonderful black hat adorned with three large handsome feathers.

She proved herself a very amusing companion as we drove out to Armenonville, where we sat out upon the lawn, she sipping her *sirop* while I smoked a cigarette. She knew Paris well, it seemed, and was communicative over everything – except concerning Rudolph Rayne.

When I put some questions to her regarding my new employer, she simply replied:

"We never discuss him, Mr. Hargreave. It is one of his rules that those who are his friends, as we are, preserve the strictest silence. What we discover from time to time we keep entirely to ourselves, and we even go to the length of disclaiming acquaintanceship with him when it becomes necessary. So it is best not to be inquisitive. If he discovers that you have been making inquiries he will be greatly annoyed."

"I quite understand, Madame," I replied with a meaning smile. That she was closely connected with the deep-laid schemes of Rudolph Rayne was more than ever apparent. But why, I wondered, was Lola so palpably beneath her influence?

My companion was about thirty-eight, though she looked younger, with handsome, well-cut features, and possessing the *chic* of a woman who had traveled much and who knew how to wear her clothes. There was, however, nothing of the adventuress about her. On the contrary, she had the appearance of moving in a very select set. She was English without a doubt, but she spoke perfect French.

I mentioned Lola, but she said:

"Remember what I have just told you about undue inquisitiveness, Mr. Hargreave! You will find out all you want to know in due course. So possess yourself in patience and act always with foresight as well as with discretion."

I chanced to raise my eyes at that moment, when I noticed that a well-dressed, black-mustached Frenchman, who wore white spats, while passing along the terrace of the fine *al fresco* restaurant had halted a second to peer into Madame's face, no doubt struck by her handsome features. She noticed it also but turned her head, and spoke to me of something else. A woman knows instinctively when she is being admired.

The position in which I now found myself, employed by a man who was undoubtedly a crook of no mean order, caused me considerable trepidation. When I had assumed the responsibility of that innocent-looking suit-case I never dreamt that it contained Lady Norah Kendrew's stolen jewels, as it did, otherwise I would certainly never have attempted to pass it through the Customs at Rouen. But why and how, I wondered, had Lola's suspicions been aroused? Why had she warned me?

Rayne had probably sent messengers with stolen property to France by that route before, knowing that, contrary to the shrewd examination at Calais, the officers of certain trading ships and the *douaniers* were on friendly terms.

When again I raised my eyes furtively to the Frenchman in the white spats I was relieved to find that he had disappeared. My fears that he might be an agent of the Sûreté were groundless. The afternoon was delightful as we sat beneath the trees, but Madame suddenly recollected an engagement she had with her dressmaker at five o'clock, so we reëntered our taxi and drove back to the Porte Maillot and thence direct to the hotel.

We found the door of the sitting-room locked, but as Madame turned the handle Duperré's voice was heard inquiring who was there.

"Open the door, Vincent," urged his wife.

"All right! Wait a moment," was the reply.

We heard the quick rustling of paper, and after a lapse of perhaps a minute he unlocked the door for us to enter.

"Well? Had a nice time – eh?" he asked, turning to me as he reclosed the door and again locked it.

I replied in the affirmative, noticing that on the table was something covered with a newspaper.

"I've been busy," he said with a grin, and lifting the paper disclosed a quantity of bracelets, rings, pendants and other ornaments from which the gems had been removed. During our absence he had been occupied in removing the stolen jewels from their settings.

"Yes," I laughed. "You seem to have been very busy, Vincent!"

Beside the bent and broken articles of gold lay a little pile of glittering gems, none of them very large, but all of first quality.

"Lady Norah wouldn't like to see her treasures in such a condition, would she?" laughed Duperré. "We shall get rid of them to old Heydenryck, who is arriving presently."

"Who is he?"

"A Dutch dealer who lives here in Paris. He's always open to buy good stuff, but he won't look at any stones that are set. Rayne's idea was to sell them, just as they were, to a dealer named Steffensen, who buys stuff here and smuggles it over to New York and San Francisco, where it is not likely to be traced. But I find that Steffensen is away in America at the moment, so I've approached the Dutchman. Heydenryck is a sly old dog. Unlike Steffensen, he buys unset stones because they are difficult to identify."

I bent and examined the glittering little pile of diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires which had been stolen from the hotel in London.

"Look here, Hargreave," said Duperré. "I want you to help us to get rid of this," and he pointed to the broken jewelry.

"How?" I asked dismayed, for I confess that I feared the discovery. To be thus intimately associated with a band of expert crooks was a new experience.

"Quite easily," he replied. "I'll show you." Then turning to his wife, he said: "Just bring Lu Chang in, will you, Hylda?"

Madame passed into the next room and returned with a small Pekinese in her arms.

"Lu Chang is quite quiet and harmless," laughed Duperré as his wife handed the dog to me.

As my hands came in contact with the animal's fur I realized that it was dead – and stuffed!

Duperré laughed heartily as he watched my face. I confess that I was mystified.

He took the dog, which had probably been purchased from a naturalist only that day, and ripping open the pelt behind the forelegs he quickly drew out the stuffing. Then into the cavity he hurriedly thrust the broken rings and pendants.

I watched him with curiosity. It seemed such an unusual proceeding. But I recollected that I was dealing with strange associates – people whom I afterwards found to be perhaps the most ingenious crooks in Europe.

"Poor Lu Chang," exclaimed my old company commander with a laugh. "If you drown him he won't feel it!"

Duperré watched the expression of surprise upon my face as he packed the whole of the broken jewelry into the dog.

"Now what I want you to do, Hargreave," he said, "is to drown Lu Chang in the Seine. Lots of people in Paris, who are not lovers of dogs, are flinging them into the river because of the new excessive tax upon domestic pets. You will just toss Lu Chang over the Pont Neuf. The police can't interfere, even though they see you. You will only have put the dog out of the world rather than pay the double tax."

He watched my natural hesitation.

"Isn't he a little dear!" exclaimed Madame, stroking the dog's fur. "Poor Lu Chang! He won't float with the gold inside him!"

"No," laughed Duperré. "He'll go plumb to the bottom!"

It was on the tip of my tongue to excuse myself, but I remembered that I was in the service of Rudolph Rayne, the country squire of Overstow, and paid handsomely. And, after all, it was no great risk to fling the stuffed dog into the river.

I am a lover of dogs, and had the animal been alive nothing would have induced me to carry out his suggestion.

But as it had been dead long ago, for I saw some signs of moth in the fur, and as I was in Paris at the bidding of my employer, I consented, and carrying the little Peke beneath my arm I walked along the Quai du Louvre to the old bridge which, in two parts, spans the river. Just before I gained the Rue Dauphine, on the other side, I paused and looked down into the water. An agent of police was regulating the traffic on my left, and he being in controversy with the driver of a motor-lorry, I took my opportunity and dropped the dog with its secret into the water.

Two boys had watched me, so I waited a moment, then turning upon my heel, I retraced my steps back to the Hôtel Ombrone, having been absent about twenty minutes.

As I entered Room 88, three Frenchmen, who had ascended in the lift, followed me in.

Madame was writing a letter, while Duperré was in the act of lighting a cigarette. We started in surprise, for next instant we all three found ourselves under arrest; the well-dressed strangers being officers of the Sûreté. One of them was the man in the white spats who had been attracted by Madame in the Bois.

"Arrest!" gasped Duperré.

As he did so, an undersized, rather shabbily-dressed man of sixty or so put his head into the door inquisitively, and realizing that something unpleasant was occurring, quickly withdrew and disappeared. I saw that he exchanged with Duperré a glance of recognition combined with apprehension, and concluded that it was the man Heydenryck, the dealer in stolen gems.

Meanwhile the elder of the three detectives told us that they had reason to believe that jewelry stolen from a London hotel was in our possession, and that the place would be searched.

"Messieurs, you are quite at liberty to search," laughed Duperré, treating the affair as a joke. "Here are my keys!"

At once they began to rummage every hole and corner in the room as well as the luggage of both Duperré and his wife. The brown suit-case which was in the wardrobe in the bedroom attracted their attention, but when unlocked was found to contain only a few modern novels.

At this they drew back in chagrin and disappointment. I knew that the broken gold was safely at the bottom of the Seine, but where were the gems?

It was all very well for Duperré to bluff, but they would, I felt convinced, eventually be found. The police, not content with searching the personal belongings of my friend, took up the floor-boards, and even stripped some paper from the wall and carefully examined every article of furniture. Afterwards they went to my room at the end of the corridor and thoroughly searched it.

At last the inspector, still mystified, ordered two taxis to be called, as it was his intention to take us at once before the examining magistrate.

"Madame had better put on her hat at once," he added, bristling with authority.

Thus ordered, she reluctantly obeyed and put on her big feathered hat before the glass. Then a few moments later we were conducted downstairs and away to the Prefecture of Police.

After all being thoroughly searched, Madame being examined by a prison wardress, we were ushered into the dull official room of Monsieur Rodin, the well-known examining magistrate, who for a full hour plied us with questions. Duperré and his wife preserved an outward dignity that amazed me. They complained bitterly of being accused without foundation, while on my part I answered the police official that I had quite accidentally come across my old superior officer.

Time after time Monsieur Rodin referred to the papers before him, evidently much puzzled. It seemed that Madame had been recognized in the Bois by the impressionable Frenchman who I had believed, had been attracted by her handsome face.

That information had been sent by Scotland Yard to Paris regarding the stolen jewels was apparent. Yet the fact that the locked suit-case only contained books and that nothing had been found in our possession – thanks to the forethought of Duperré – the police now found themselves in a quandary. The man in the white spats whom we had seen in the Bois identified Madame as Marie Richaud, a Frenchwoman who had lived in Philadelphia for several years, and who had been implicated two years before in the great frauds on the Bordeaux branch of the Société Générale.

Madame airily denied any knowledge of it. She had only arrived in Paris with her husband from Rome a few days before, she declared. And surely enough the visas upon their passports showed that was so, even though I had seen her at Overstow!

How I withstood that hour I know not. In the end, however, Monsieur Rodin ceased his questions and we were put into the cells till the next morning.

Imagine the sleepless night I spent! I hated myself for falling into the trap which Rayne, the crafty organizer of the gang, had so cleverly laid for me. Yet was I not in the hands of the police?

But the main question in my mind was the whereabouts of that little pile of gems.

Next day we were taken publicly before another magistrate and defended by a clever lawyer whom Duperré had engaged. It was found that not a tittle of evidence could be brought against us, and, even though the magistrate expressed his strong suspicions, we were at last released.

As we walked out into the sunlight of the boulevard, Duperré glanced at his watch, and exclaimed:

"I wonder if we shall be in time to catch the train? I must telephone to Heydenryck at once."

Five minutes later he was in a public telephone-box speaking to the receiver of stolen goods.

Then, without returning to the Hôtel Ombrone, we took a taxi direct to the Gare de Lyon.

As Duperré took three first-class tickets to Fontainebleau, the undersized, grave-faced old man whom I had seen at the moment of our arrest followed him, and also took a ticket to the same destination. We entered an empty compartment where, just before the train moved off, the old man joined us.

He posed as a perfect stranger, but as soon as the train had left the platform my companion introduced him to me.

"I called last night and saw what had happened. Surely you have all three had a narrow escape!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," said Duperré. "It was fortunate that Hylda recognized the *sous-inspecteur* Bossant in the Bois. She put me on my guard. I knew we should be arrested, so I took precautions to get rid of the gold and conceal the stones."

"But where are they?" I asked eagerly, as the train ran through the first station out of Paris. "They are still hidden in the hotel, I suppose. We've all been searched!"

Madame laughed merrily, and removing her hat, unceremoniously tore out the three great feathers, the large quills of which she held up to the light before my eyes.

I then saw to my amazement that, though hardly distinguishable, all three of the hollow quills were filled with gems, the smaller being put in first.

At the detective's own suggestion she had put on her hat when arrested, and she had worn it during the time she had been searched, during the examination by the magistrate, and during her trial!

Duperré was certainly nothing if not ingenious and his *sang-froid* had saved us all from terms of imprisonment.

Madame replaced the valuable feathers in her hat, and when we arrived at Fontainebleau we drove at once to the Hôtel de France, opposite the palace, where we took an excellent *déjeuner* in a private room.

And before we left, Duperré had disposed of Lady Norah's jewels at a very respectable figure, which the sly old receiver paid over in thousand-franc notes.

I marveled at my companion's ingenuity, whereupon he laughed airily, replying:

"When 'The Golden Face' arranges a *coup* it never fails to come off – I assure you. The police have to be up very early to get the better of him. His one injunction to all of us is that we shall be ready at all times to show clean hands – as we have to-day! But let's get away, Hargreave – back to London, I think, don't you?"

The whole adventure mystified and bewildered me. It was a mystery which, however, before long, was to be increased a hundredfold. Alas! that I should sit here and put down my guilt upon paper!

CHAPTER III
THE MAN WITH THE HUMP

One morning I called at Rayne's luxurious chambers in Half Moon Street, when he expressed himself most delighted at the result of our visit to Paris.

"I want you to-morrow morning to drive Lola and Madame up to Overstow," he said. "Better start early. Call for them at the hotel at nine o'clock. The roads are good, so you'll have a pleasant journey. I'll get home by train at the end of the week."

At this I was very pleased, for Lola with her great dark eyes always sat beside me. She could drive quite well, and was full of good humor and a charming little gossip. Hence I looked forward to a very pleasant run. The more I saw of the master-crook's daughter the more attracted I became by her. Indeed, though she seemed to regard me with some suspicion – why, I don't know – we had already become excellent friends.

The month of September passed.

We had all spent a delightful time at Overstow. Rayne had given two big shoots at which several well-known Yorkshire landowners had been present, while I had taken a gun, and Lola, Madame and several other ladies had walked with us. Lola and I were frequently together, and I often accompanied her on long walks through the autumn-tinted woods.

Madame's husband had only spent a week with us, for he had, I understood, been called to Switzerland on "business" – the nature of which I could easily guess.

At the end of the month we were back in London again.

One evening I had dined at the Carlton with Lola, her father and Madame, and the two ladies having gone off to the theater, he took me round to the set of luxurious chambers he occupied in Half Moon Street.

When we were alone together with our cigars, he suddenly said:

"I want you to go out for a run to-night – to Bristol."

"To Bristol! To-night?" I echoed.

"Yes. I want you to take the new 'A. C.' and get to the Clifton Suspension Bridge by two o'clock to-morrow morning. There, in the center of the bridge, you will await a stranger – an elderly hunchback whose name is Morley Tarrant. He'll give you, as *bonâ fides*, the word 'Mask.' When you meet him act upon his instructions. He is to be trusted."

The tryst seemed full of suspicion, and I certainly did not like it. The evening was bright and clear, and the run in the fast two-seater would be enjoyable. But to meet a man who would give a password savored too much of crookdom.

He quickly saw my hesitation, and added:

"Now, Hargreave, I ought not to conceal from you the fact that there may be a trap. If so, you must evade it and escape at all costs. I have enemies, you know – pretty fierce ones."

Again, for the hundredth time, I debated within myself whether I dare cast myself adrift from the round-faced, prosperous-looking cosmopolitan who sat before me so full of good humor and so fearless.

I had been cleverly inveigled into accepting the situation he had offered me, but I had never dreamed that by accepting, I was throwing in my lot with the most marvelously organized gang of evil-doers that that world had ever known.

Other similar gangs blundered at one time or another and left loopholes through which the police were able to attack them and break them up. But Rudolph Rayne had flung his octopus-like tentacles so far afield that he had actually attached to him – by fear of blackmail – an eminent Counsel who appeared for the defense of any member of the circle who happened to make a slip. That well-

known member of the Bar I will call Mr. Henry Moyser, a lawyer whose fame was of world-wide repute, and who was employed for the defense in most of the really great criminal trials.

I sat astounded when, by a side-wind, I was told that Mr. Moyser would defend me if I were unlucky enough to be arrested. Certainly his very name was sufficient to secure an acquittal.

The journey from Pall Mall to Clifton had been a long and rather tiring one, and as I sat in the swift two-seater half-way across the high suspension bridge, I smoked reflectively as I gazed away along the river where deep below shone a few twinkling lights. Across at Clifton I could see the row of street lamps, while above the stars were shining in the sharp frosty air, and in the distance I could hear the roar of an express train.

The bell of Clifton parish church struck the half-hour, but nobody was in sight, and there were no sounds of footsteps in the frosty air. Though so near the busy city of Bristol, yet high up on that long bridge, that triumph of engineering of our yesterday, all was quiet with scarce a sound save the shrill cry of a night-bird.

If it were not that I loved Lola I would gladly have resigned the position which had already become hateful to me. Somehow I felt vaguely that perhaps I might one day render her a service. I might even extricate her from the dangerous circumstances in which she was living in all innocence of the actual conspiracies in which her father was engaged. Who could know?

As far as I could gather, Lola was much puzzled at certain secret meetings held at Overstow. Her father's friends of both sexes were shrouded in mystery, and she was, I knew, seeking to penetrate it and learn the truth.

I had already satisfied myself that the gang was a most dangerous and unscrupulous one, and that Rayne and his friends would hesitate at nothing so long as they carried out the plans which they laid with such innate cunning in order to effect great and astounding *coups*– the clever thefts and swindles that from time to time had held the world aghast.

I suppose I must have waited nearly half an hour when suddenly there fell upon my ear uneven footsteps hurrying along towards the car, and in the light of the street lamp I distinguished, hurrying towards me, a short, elderly man, somewhat deformed, with a distinct hump on his back.

"You're Mr. Hargreave, aren't you?" he inquired breathlessly, with a distinct Scottish accent. "I'm Tarrant! I'm so sorry I'm late, but Rudolph will understand. I'll explain it to him."

And he was about to mount into the seat beside me.

I put out my arm, and peering into the man's face, asked:

"Is there nothing else, eh?"

"Nothing," he replied. "Why? You are here to meet me. Rudolph sent you down from London."

I was awaiting the prearranged word that would show the hunchback's *bonâ fides*.

I gave him another opportunity of giving the password, but he seemed ignorant of it.

Next second, my suspicions being aroused, I sprang down, and crying:

"Look here, old fellow! I fancy you've made a mistake!" I struck him familiarly upon the back.

His hump was *soft*! In that instant I detected him as an impostor – a Scotland Yard detective – without a doubt!

Fortunately for me my brain acts quickly. But it was not so quick as his. He gave a shrill whistle, and in a flash from nowhere three of his colleagues appeared. They ran around the car to hold it up.

For a few seconds I found myself in serious jeopardy.

I sprang into the driver's seat, switched on the self-starter, and just as one of the detectives tried to mount beside me, I threw down among my assailants a little dark brown bomb the shape of an egg, with which Rayne had provided me in case of emergency.

It exploded with a low fizz and its fumes took them aback, allowing me to shoot away over the bridge and down into Bristol, much wiser than when I had arrived.

The arrangement of that password in itself showed how cleverly Rudolph Rayne was foresighted in all his plans. He always left a loophole for escape. Surely he was a past-master in the art of criminality, for his fertile brain evolved schemes and exit channels which nobody ever dreamed of.

The squire of Overstow, who was regarded by the wealthy county people of Yorkshire as perfectly honest in all his dealings, and unduly rich withal, attracted to his table some of the most exclusive hunting set, people with titles, as well as the *parvenus* "impossibles" who had bought huge places with the money made out of the war. The "County" never dreamed of the mysterious source of Rudolph Rayne's unlimited income.

After traveling through a number of deserted streets in Bristol, I at last found myself upon a high road with a signpost which told me that I was on my way to Wells, that picturesque little city at the foot of the Mendip Hills. So, fearing lest I might be followed, I went "all out" through Axbridge and Cheddar, until at last I came to the fine old cathedral at Wells, which I knew quite familiarly. Near it was the Swan Hotel, at which, after some difficulty, I aroused the "boots," secured a room, and placed the car in the garage.

It was then nearly half-past three in the morning, and my only object in taking a room was to inform Rayne by telephone of my narrow escape. Rayne was remaining the night at Half Moon Street, while Lola and Madame Duperré were at the Carlton. We had all come up from Overstow a couple of days before, and two secret meetings had been held at Half Moon Street.

Of the nature of the plot in progress I was in entire ignorance. They never let me completely into their plans; indeed, I only knew their true import when they were actually accomplished.

The half-awake "boots" at the Swan indicated the telephone, and a quarter of an hour later I was speaking to Rayne in his bedroom in London. Very guardedly I explained how nearly I had been trapped, whereupon I heard him chuckle.

"A very good lesson for you, Hargreave!" he replied. "Our friends are apparently on the watch, so get back to London as soon as you can. You'll be here at breakfast-time. Leave the car at Lloyd's and come along to me. Good luck to you!" he added, and then switched off.

The Lloyd's garage he mentioned was in Bloomsbury, a place kept for the accommodation of motor-thieves. Many a car which disappeared quickly found its way there, and in a few hours the engine numbers were removed and fresh ones substituted, while the bodies were repainted and false number-plates attached.

As I put down the telephone receiver, it suddenly occurred to me that already the Bristol police might have telephoned a description of the car along the various roads leading out of the city. Therefore it would be too risky to remain there. Hence, as though in sudden decision, I paid the "boots" for my bed, and five minutes later was again on the road speeding towards London.

I chose the road to Salisbury, and after "blinding" for half an hour, I stopped and put on the false number-plates and license with which Rayne always provided me.

It was as well that I did so, for in the gray morning as I went through Salisbury a police-sergeant and a constable hailed me just as I turned into St. John Street, near the White Hart, calling upon me to stop. I could see by their attitude that they were awaiting me, therefore pretending not to hear I quickened my pace and, knowing the road, soon left the place behind me.

Again, in a village some ten miles farther on, a constable shouted to me as I continued my wild flight, hence it seemed apparent that a cordon had been formed around me, and I now feared that to enter Winchester would be to run right into the arms of the police.

The only way to save myself was to abandon the car and get back to London by rail. As I contemplated this I was already passing beside the high embankment of the South Western Railway, where half a mile farther on I found a little wayside station. Therefore I turned the car into a small wood, and destroying my genuine license and hiding the genuine number-plate, I took the next train to Winchester, and thence by express to Waterloo after a very wild and adventurous night. That I had been within an ace of capture was palpable. But why?

I was in the service of the man who controlled that vast criminal organization which the police of Europe were ever trying to break up. But why should I be sent to meet the mysterious hunchback Tarrant on Clifton Bridge?

"There seemed to have been a little flaw in our plans, Hargreave," said the alert, good-looking man as I sat with him in his cosy chambers in Half Moon Street that morning. "The police evidently got wind of the fact that old Morley was meeting you, and Benton tried to impersonate him. I know Benton. He's always up against me. He might have succeeded had he made the hump on his back a hard one, eh?" he laughed, as though rather amused than otherwise.

"But he didn't know the password," I remarked in triumph.

"No! It was fortunate for you that I had arranged it with old Morley," said the man with the master-mind. "One must be ever wary when one treads crooked paths, you know. The slightest slip – and the end comes! But, at any rate, last night's adventure has sharpened your wits."

"And it has cost us the 'A. C.'!" I remarked.

"Bah! What's a motor-car more or less when one is working a big thing!" he exclaimed. "Never let ideas of economy stand in your way, or you'll never make a fortune. In order to make money you must always spend money."

I often recollected that adage of his in later days, when the pace grew even hotter.

Rayne paused for a few minutes. Then he said:

"I've already heard from old Morley on the telephone half an hour ago. He was on the bridge and watched the fun. Then he discreetly withdrew and went back to his hotel in Clifton. He declares that you acted splendidly."

"I'm much gratified by his testimonial," I said.

"I've arranged that he shall meet you to-night here in London – outside the Three Nuns Hotel at Aldgate. Go to Lloyd's and get a car. At half-past seven it will be dark. Drive up, go into the bar and have a drink. You'll find him there and recognize him by his deformity. Outside he will mention the password and you will drive him where he directs. That's all!"

And the man who had, on engaging me, so particularly wanted to know if I could sing, and had never asked me to do so, dismissed me quite abruptly, as was his habit. His quick alertness, keen shrewdness and sharp suspicion caused him to speak abruptly – almost churlishly – to those about him. I, however, now understood him. Yet I wondered what evil work was in progress.

He had often pitted his wits against the most famous detective inspector, the great Benton, who had achieved so much notoriety in the Enfield poisoning case, the Sunbury mystery in which the body of a young girl shop-assistant had been found headless in the Thames, the great Maresfield drug drama of Limehouse and Mayfair, and the disappearance of the Honorable Edna Newcomen from her mother's house in Grosvenor Gardens. Superintendent Arthur Benton was perhaps the most wideawake hunter of criminals in the United Kingdom. As chief of his own particular branch at Scotland Yard he performed wonderful services, and his record was unique. Yet, hampered as he was by official red-tape and those regulations which prevented his men from taking a third-class railway ticket when following a thief, unless they waited for weeks for the return of the expenditure from official sources, he was no match for the squire of Overstow, who had a big bank balance, who moved in society, official, political and otherwise, and who actually entertained certain high officials at his table.

From a man in the Department of the Public Prosecutor at Whitehall, Rayne often learnt much of the inner workings of Scotland Yard and of secret inquiries, for a civil servant at a well-laid sumptuous table is frequently prone to indiscretion.

Arthur Benton was a well-meaning and very straight-dealing public servant with a splendid record as a detector of crime, but against money and such influence he could not cope. Indeed, more than once Rayne declared to me that he intended evil against Benton.

"Yet I rather like him," he had said when we were discussing him one day. "After all, he's a real good sportsman!"

So according to Rayne's orders I met the hunchback Tarrant at the Three Nuns Hotel at Aldgate. I had taken another car from Lloyd's garage – a Fiat landaulette, stolen, no doubt – and in it, at the old man's directions, I drove out to Maldon, in Essex, where at a small house outside the town I found, to my surprise, Rayne already awaiting us.

What, I wondered, was in progress?

CHAPTER IV
THE FOUR FALSE FINGERS

The house outside Maldon proved to be a newly built, detached, eight-roomed villa in a lonely spot on the high road to Witham. As I idled about it, I smelt a curious odor of melting rubber. Apparently the place had been taken furnished, but with what object I could not guess. Tarrant was a queer, rather insignificant-looking old fellow with a shock of white hair and a scraggy white beard.

Both he and Rayne were closeted together in the little dining-room for nearly two hours, while I sat in the adjoining room. I could hear them conversing in low tones, and the smell of rubber warmed by heat became more pungent. What game was being carried on? Something very secret without a doubt. I thought I heard the sound of a third man's voice. Indeed, there might be a third person present, for I had not been admitted to the room.

At last, leaving Rayne there, I drove the old man on to Witham, where I left him at his own request at a point near the wireless telegraph station, and turning, went back to the thieves' garage and there left the car.

I did not see Rudolph Rayne again for several days, but according to instructions I received from Madame Duperré, I went by train up to Yorkshire and awaited their arrival.

From Duperré, who arrived three days after I had got to Overstow, I gathered that Rayne had suddenly been called away to the Continent on one of his swift visits, "on a little matter of business," added Vincent with a meaning grin.

We were smoking together in the great old library, when I told him of my narrow escape on Clifton Bridge.

"Yes," he said. "Benton is always trying to get at us. It was sly of him to impersonate old Morley. I wonder how he got to know that you were meeting him? Someone must have betrayed Rayne. I have a suspicion who it may be. If he has, then woe betide him! Rudolph never forgives an enemy or a blunderer."

I tried to get from Duperré the reason why the hunchback had met Rayne in such secrecy, but he would divulge nothing.

Next day his wife and Lola returned, and that same evening as I sat with the latter in the chintz-covered drawing-room – for though I had been engaged as chauffeur I was now treated as one of the family – I had a delightful chat with her.

That she was sorely puzzled at her father's rapid journeys to and fro across Europe without any apparent reason, of the strange assortment of his friends and the secrecy in which he so often met them, I had long ago observed.

The truth was that I had fallen deeply in love with the sweet dainty girl whose father was the most audacious and cunning crook the modern world had produced. I believed, on account of the small confidence we had exchanged, that Lola, on her part, did not regard me with actual disfavor.

"When will your father be back, do you think?" I asked her as she lounged upon a settee with a big orange silk cushion behind her. She looked very sweet. She wore a pretty but very simple dance-frock of flame-colored ninon, in which I had seen her at the Carlton on the night when I set out to meet the man Tarrant and was so nearly caught.

I had given her a cigarette, and we were smoking together cosily – Duperré and his wife being somewhere in the great old house. I think Duperré was, after all, a sportsman, even though he was a practiced crook, for on that night he and his wife allowed me to be alone with Lola.

"Do you know a friend of your father, an old man named Tarrant?" I asked her suddenly.

"Tarrant – Morley Tarrant?" she asked. "Oh! yes. He's such a funny old fellow. Three years ago he often used to visit us when we lived in Biarritz, but I haven't seen him since."

"Who is he?"

"He was the manager of the branch of the Crédit Foncier. He is French, though he bears an English name."

"French! But he speaks English!" I remarked.

"Of course. His mother was English. He was once employed by Morgan's in Paris, I believe, but I haven't seen him lately. Father said one day at table that the old fellow had overstepped the mark and owing to some defalcations had gone to prison. I was sorry. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing," I replied. "I've heard of him."

She looked me very straight in the face from beneath her long dark lashes.

"Ah! you won't tell me what you know," she said mysteriously.

"Neither will you, Lola!" Then, after a pause, I added: "I want to know whether he is your father's friend – or his enemy."

"His friend, no doubt."

"Why should your father have as friend a man who robs a bank, eh?" I asked very earnestly.

"Ah! That I don't know!" replied the girl as she bent towards me earnestly. "I – I'm always so puzzled. Ever since my dear mother died, just after I came back from Roedene, I have wondered – and always wondered. I can discover nothing – absolutely nothing! Father is so secret, and neither Madame nor he will tell me anything. They only say that their business is no affair of mine. My father has business, no doubt, Mr. Hargreave. From his business he derives his income. But I cannot see why he should so constantly meet men and women in all sorts of social positions and give them orders, as it were. I am not blind, neither am I deaf."

"You have listened in secret, eh?" I asked.

"I confess that I have." Then, after a slight pause, she went on: "And I have overheard some very strange conversations. My father seems to direct the good fortunes of certain of his friends, while at the same time he plots against his enemies. But I suppose, after all, it is business."

Business! Little did the girl dream of the real occupation of her unscrupulous father, or the desperate characters of his friends, both male and female.

Truly, she was very sweet and charming, and I hated to think that in her innocence she existed in that fevered world of plotting and desperate crime.

We walked along the broad terrace in the twilight. Beyond spread the wide park to a dark belt of trees, Sherman's Copse, it was called, a delightfully shady place in summer where we had often strolled together.

As we chatted, I reflected. So old Morley Tarrant was a gaol-bird! Hence it was but natural that Rudolph Rayne, who preserved such a high degree of respectability, would hesitate to meet him providing he knew that the police were watching. He certainly knew that, hence the secrecy of their appointment.

As we walked Madame suddenly emerged from the French windows of the drawing-room and joined us.

"I've just had a wire from Rudolph," she said. "He's leaving Copenhagen to-night and will be back to-morrow night. I'd no idea that he had been over in Denmark. But there! he is such a bird of passage that one never knows where he may be to-morrow." And she laughed.

Later we all four sat down to dinner, a decorous meal, well-cooked and well-served. But the character of the household was shown by the fact that none of the servants – discreetly chosen, of course, and in themselves members of the criminal organization – betrayed the least surprise that I, who acted as chauffeur, should be admitted to that curious family circle.

Rayne returned next night, tired and travel-worn, and I met him at Thirsk station.

"We go up to Edinburgh to-morrow. I shall want you to drive me," he said as he sat at my side in the Rolls. "Lola will go also."

His last words delighted me, and next day at noon we all three set forth on our journey north. It rained all day and the run was the reverse of pleasant, nevertheless, we arrived at the Caledonian Hotel quite safely, and were soon installed in one of the cosy private suites.

Father and daughter breakfasted in their sitting-room, while I had my meal alone in the coffee-room.

When later I went up for orders Rayne dismissed me abruptly, saying that he would not require me till after lunch.

Half an hour afterwards, while idling along Princes Street, I came across Lola, who was looking in one of the shop windows.

"Father has sent me out as he wants to talk business with Mr. Hugh Martyn, a rich American we met at the Grand, in Rome, last year. Father has come up here specially to meet him."

What fresh crooked business could there be in progress? That Rayne had paid flying visits to Copenhagen and Edinburgh in such a short space of time was in itself highly suspicious.

After luncheon, on entering Rayne's sitting-room, I found him busily fashioning from a sheet of thin cardboard a small square box which he was fitting over a large glass paper-weight, a cube about four inches square which was wrapped in tissue-paper, the corner of which happened to be torn and so revealed the glass.

"I'm sending this away as a present," he explained. "I bought it over in Princes Street this morning." And he continued with his scissors to make the box to fit it. "I shall not want you any more to-day Hargreave," he went on. "We'll get back home to-morrow, starting at ten."

And, as was his habit, he dismissed me abruptly.

Four days later I was summoned to the library, where in breeches and gaiters he was standing astride upon the hearthrug.

"Look here, Hargreave," he said, "I want you to take the next train up to London and carry that little leather bag with you," and he indicated a small bag standing upon the writing-table. "On arrival go at once down to Maldon and call at half-past nine o'clock to-morrow night at that house to which you took old Mr. Tarrant. You recollect it – The Limes, on the Witham road. Morley will be expecting you."

"Very well," I replied. "Is there any message?"

"None. Just deliver it to him. But to nobody else, remember," he ordered.

So according to his instructions I duly arrived at the remote house at the hour arranged, and delivered the bag to the old man, who welcomed me and gave me a whisky-and-soda, which I found very acceptable after my long tramp from Maldon station. Tarrant was not alone, for I distinctly heard a man's voice calling him just before he opened the door to me.

Recollecting that the old fellow had been in gaol, I was full of curiosity as to what was intended. I certainly never believed it to be so highly ingenious and dastardly as it eventually proved to be.

About a month passed uneventfully, save that I spent many delightful hours in Lola's company. Her father had purchased another two-seater car – a "sports model" Vauxhall – and on several occasions I took him for runs in it about Yorkshire. Naturally he knew little about cars himself, but relied upon my knowledge and judgment. In addition to the Rolls and the Vauxhall I also had an "Indian" motor-cycle for my own personal use, and found it very useful in going on certain rapid missions to York and elsewhere. But the abandonment of the "A.C." – which had, by the way, been regarded as a mystery by the Press – hurt me considerably.

Duperré had been absent from Overstow ever since the day we had left for Edinburgh, but as the bright autumn days passed I found myself more and more in love with the dainty girl whose father was a master-criminal.

Nevertheless, I felt that Duperré's wife kept eager watch upon both of us. Perhaps she feared that I might tell Lola some of my adventures. As for Rayne, he was often out shooting over neighboring

estates, for he was a good shot and highly popular in the neighborhood, while at Overstow itself there was some excellent sport to which now and then he would invite his local friends.

Rayne possessed a marvelous personality. When at home he was the typical country gentleman, a good judge of a horse and in his "pink" a straight rider to hounds. None who met him would have ever dreamed that he was the shrewd, crafty cosmopolitan whose evil machinations and devilish ingenuity made themselves felt in all the capitals of Europe, and whose word was law to certain dangerous characters who would not hesitate to take human life if it were really necessary to evade arrest.

His outstanding cleverness, however, was that he never revealed his own identity to those who actually carried out his devilish schemes. The circle of cosmopolitan malefactors who were his cat's-paws only knew Monsieur and Madame Duperré – under other names – but of Rudolph Rayne's very existence they were nearly all ignorant. Money was, I learnt, freely paid for various "jobs" by agents engaged by the man I had once known as Captain Deinhard, or else by certain receivers of stolen goods in London and on the Continent, who were forewarned that jewels, bonds or stolen bank-notes would reach them in secret, and that payment must be made and no questions asked.

Late one evening Duperré returned unexpectedly in a hired car from Thirsk. We had finished dinner, and I chanced to be with Rayne in the library, yet longing to get to the old-fashioned drawing-room with its sweet odor of potpourri, where Lola was, I knew, sitting immersed in the latest novel.

"Hallo, Vincent! Why, I thought you were still in Aix-les-Bains!" cried Rayne, much surprised, and yet a trifle excited, which was quite unusual for him.

"There's a nasty little hitch!" replied the other, still in his heavy traveling coat. Then, turning to me, he said: "Hargreave, old chap, will you leave for a moment or two? I want to speak to Rudolph."

"Of course," I said. I was by that time used to those confidential conversations, and I walked along the corridor and joined Lola.

"I'm very troubled, Mr. Hargreave," the girl suddenly exclaimed in a low, timid voice after we had been chatting a short time. "I overheard father whispering something to Madame Duperré to-day."

"Whispering something!" I echoed. "What was that?"

"Something about Mr. Martyn, that American gentleman he met in Edinburgh," she replied. "Father was chuckling to himself, saying that he had taken good precautions to prevent him proving an alibi. Father seemed filled with the fiercest anger against him. I'm sure he's an awfully nice man, though we hardly know him. What can it mean?"

An alibi? I reflected. I replied that it was as mysterious to me as to her. Like herself I lived in a clouded atmosphere of rapidly changing circumstances, mysterious plots and unknown evil deeds – truly a world of fear and bewilderment.

Some days later I had driven up to London in the Rolls with Duperré, leaving Rayne and Lola at home, Duperré's wife being away somewhere on a visit. We took up our quarters at Rayne's chambers, and next day idled about London together. Just before we went out to dinner Martyn called, and after taking a drink Duperré went out with him, remarking to me that he would be in soon after eleven. Hence I went to the theater, and on returning at midnight awaited him.

I sat reading by the fire and dozed till just past two o'clock, when he returned dressed in unfamiliar clothes: a rough suit of tweeds in which he presented the appearance of a respectable artisan. His left hand was bound roughly with a colored handkerchief, and he appeared very exhausted. Before speaking he poured himself out a liqueur glass of neat brandy which he swallowed at a single gulp.

"I've had a rather nasty accident, George," he said. "I've cut my hand pretty badly. Only not a soul must know about it – you understand?"

I nodded, and then at his request I assisted him to wash the wound and rebandage it.

"What's been the matter?" I asked with curiosity.

"Nothing very much," was his hard reply. "You'll probably know all about it to-morrow. The papers will be full of it. But mind and keep your mouth shut very tightly."

And with that he drew from his pockets a pair of thin surgical rubber gloves, both of which were blood-stained, and hurriedly threw them into the fire.

On the following evening about six o'clock I was alone in Rayne's chambers when the evening newspaper was, as usual, pushed through the letter-box. I rose, and taking it up glanced casually at the front page, when I was confronted by a startling report.

It appeared that just after midnight on the previous night the watchman on duty at the Chartered Bank of Liberia, in Lombard Street, had been murderously attacked by some unknown person who apparently battered his head with an iron bar, and left him unconscious and so seriously injured that he was now in Guy's Hospital without hope of recovery. The bank robbers had apparently used a most up-to-date oxyacetylene plant for cutting steel, and from the strong-room in the basement – believed to be impregnable and which could only be opened by a time-clock, and, moreover, could be flooded at will – they had cut out the door as butter could be cut with a hot knife. From the safe they had abstracted negotiable bonds with English, French and Italian notes to the value of over eighty thousand pounds, with which the thieves had got clear away.

The bank robbery was the greatest sensation of the moment. The thieves had cleverly effected an entrance by one of them having secreted himself in a safe in the bank when it had closed. In the morning at nine o'clock when the first clerk, a lady accountant, had arrived, she could get no entrance, so she waited till one of her male colleagues arrived. Then they called a constable, and after half an hour the sensational fact of the unconscious watchman and the rifled strong-room became revealed.

The newspaper report concluded with the following sentences:

"It is evident that one of the thieves cut his hand badly, for we understand that the detectives of the City police have found blood-stained finger-prints of four distinct fingers upon the door and in other parts of the strong-room. These, of course, have already been photographed, and in due course will be investigated by that department of Scotland Yard which deals with the finger-prints of known criminals."

With the knowledge of the injury to Duperré's hand I felt confident that the great *coup* was due to him. And I was not mistaken.

The bank thieves had got clear away, it was true, but they had left those tell-tale finger-prints behind! As everyone knows, the ridges and whorls upon the hands of no two men are alike, therefore it seemed clear that Scotland Yard, now aroused, would very quickly – owing to its marvelous classification of the finger-prints of every criminal who has passed through the hands of the police during the past quarter of a century – fix upon the person who had laid his hands upon the steel safe door.

An hour after I had read the report in the paper, Duperré rang me up.

"I'm going to Overstow by the nine-thirty from King's Cross to-night," he said. "If you can join me, do. The air is better in Yorkshire than in London, don't you think so, old chap?"

"Right-oh!" I replied. "I'll travel up with you."

We met, and early next morning we were back at Overstow. Yet I managed to suppress any untoward curiosity.

It was only when about a week later I read in the paper of the result of the discovery of Scotland Yard finger-print department and of a consequent arrest that I sat aghast.

A notorious jewel-thief named Hersleton, alias Hugh Martyn, an American, had been arrested at a hotel at Brighton, and had been charged at Bow Street with the murderous attack upon the night watchman at the Chartered Bank of Liberia, his finger-prints, taken some years before, coinciding exactly with those left at the bank. He had violently protested his innocence, but had been committed for trial.

At the Old Bailey six weeks later, the night watchman having fortunately recovered from his injuries, Hugh Martyn was brought before Mr. Justice Harland, and though very ably defended by his counsel, he was quite unable to account for his movements on the night in question.

"I was never there!" the prisoner shrieked across the court to the judge as I sat in the public gallery watching the scene. "I know nothing of the affair – nothing whatever. I am innocent."

"It is undeniable that the prisoner's finger-prints were left there," remarked the eminent counsel for the Treasury, rising very calmly. "We have them here before us – enlarged photographs which the jury have just seen. Gentlemen of the jury, I put it to you that the prisoner is the man who assisted in this dastardly crime!"

The jury, after a short retirement, found Hugh Martyn guilty, and the judge, after hearing his previous convictions, sentenced him to fifteen years' penal servitude.

But Mr. Justice Harland has never known, until perhaps he may read these lines, that by the ingenious machinations of the super-criminal Rudolph Rayne, Hugh Martyn, who was one of his associates who had quarrelled with him over his share of a bank robbery in Madrid, and had tried to betray me to Benton on Clifton Bridge, had been the victim of a most dastardly treachery, though he was quite unaware of it and believed Rayne to be his friend.

Only many months later I learned, by piecing together certain facts, that old Morley Tarrant was an expert photographer and maker of printer's "blocks." Slowly it became plain that Rayne, having been betrayed by the astute American crook, had met him in Edinburgh and with devilish malice aforethought, had contrived to get him to handle the glass cube which served as a paper-weight, and which I had quite innocently conveyed to the old hunchback, who had succeeded in taking the finger-prints and by photography transferring them upon the surgical rubber glove, thin as paper – really a false skin – which Duperré had worn over his hands when he and his associates made an attack upon the bank.

By that means Martyn's finger-prints were left upon the safe door.

Duperré had previously taken out Martyn, whom one of his friends, a woman, had drugged, so that he lay in that furnished house near Maldon for two days unconscious. Hence he was unable to give any accurate account of his movements on the night in question, or prove an alibi, and was, in consequence, convicted.

Rayne, the man with the abnormal criminal brain, had, by that ingenious *coup*, not only contrived to spirit away to the Continent a sum of eighty thousand pounds in negotiable securities, but had also sent to a long term of penal servitude the man who had attempted to betray him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.