

Tracy Louis

Cynthia's Chauffeur



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CHAPTER I THE HIRED CAR

Derby Day fell that year on the first Wednesday in June. By a whim of the British climate, the weather was fine; in fact, no rain had fallen on southern England since the previous Sunday. Wise after the event, the newspapers published cheerful “forecasts,” and certain daring “experts” discussed the probabilities of a heat wave. So London, on that bright Wednesday morning, was agog with excitement over its annual holiday; and at such a time London is the gayest and liveliest city in the world.

And then, wholly independent of the weather, there was the Great Question.

From the hour when the first 'bus rumbled Citywards until some few seconds before three o'clock in the afternoon the mass of the people seemed to find delight in asking and answering it. The Question was ever the same; but the answer varied. In its way, the Question formed a tribute to the advance of democracy. It caused strangers to exchange opinions and pleasantries in crowded trains and omnibuses. It placed peers and commoners on an equality. During some part of the day it completely eclipsed all other topics of conversation.

Thus, young Lord Medenham made no pretense of shirking it while he stood on the steps of his father's mansion in Cavendish Square and watched his chauffeur stowing a luncheon basket beneath the front seat of the Mercury 38.

“You know a bit about racing, Tomkinson,” he said, smiling at the elderly butler who had brought the basket out of the house. “What's going to win?”

“The King's horse, my lord,” replied Tomkinson, with the unctuous conviction of a prelate laying down a dogma.

“Is it as sure as all that?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Well, I hope so. You are on a sovereign – By gad, you really are, you know.”

Tomkinson was far too keenly alive to the monetary side of the transaction to pay heed to the quip. His portly figure curved in a superb bow.

“Thank you, my lord,” said he.

“Remind me this evening if you are right. I shall not forget to damn you if you are wrong.”

Tomkinson ignored the chance of error and its consequences.

“Your lordship will be home for dinner?”

“Yes, I have no other engagement. All ready, Dale?” for the chauffeur was in his seat, and the engine was purring with the placid hum of a machine in perfect tune.

Tomkinson moved grandly down the steps, ushered Viscount Medenham into the car, and watched its graceful swoop into Holles Street.

“Times have changed,” said he to himself. “Twenty years ago, when I first came here, his lordship's father would have given *me* a tip, and he wouldn't have been coming home for dinner, neether.”

By that last fatal word Tomkinson betrayed the cloven hoof. At least, he was no prelate – and his assumption of the prophetic rôle would soon be put to the test. But he had answered the Great Question.

The Mercury crossed Oxford Street and insinuated itself into the aristocratic narrowness of Mayfair. It stopped in Curzon Street, opposite a house gay with flowers in window-boxes. The Viscount looked at his watch.

“How far to Epsom?” he asked over Dale’s shoulder.

“About sixteen miles by the direct road, my lord, but it will be best to go round by Kingston and avoid the worst of the traffic. We ought to allow an hour for the run.”

“An hour!”

“We are not in France now, my lord. The police here would have spasms if they saw the car extended.”

Lord Medenham sighed.

“We must reason with them,” he said. “But not to-day. Lady St. Maur declares she is nervous. Of course, she doesn’t know our Mercury. After to-day’s experience it will be quite another matter when I take her to Brighton for lunch on Sunday.”

Dale said nothing. He had met his employer at Marseilles in October, when Lord Medenham landed from Africa; during the preceding twelve months his license had been indorsed three times for exceeding the speed limit on the Brighton Road, and he had paid £40 in fines and costs to various petty sessional courts in Surrey and Sussex. Sunday, therefore, promised developments.

Medenham seemed to think that his aunt, Lady St. Maur, would be waiting for him on the doorstep. As no matronly figure materialized in that locality, he alighted, and obeyed a brass-lettered injunction to “knock and ring.” Then he disappeared inside the house, and remained there so long that Dale’s respect for the law began to weaken. The chauffeur had been given a racing certainty for the first race; the hour was nearing twelve, and every road leading to Epsom Downs would surely be congested.

His lordship came out, alone, and it was clear that the unexpected had happened.

“Nice thing!” he said, with the closest semblance to a growl that his good-natured drawl was capable of. “The whole show is busted, Dale. Her ladyship is in bed with her annual bilious attack – comes of eating forced strawberries, she says. And she adores strawberries. So do I. There’s pounds of ’em in that luncheon basket. Who’s going to eat ’em?”

Dale foresaw no difficulties in that respect, but he did realize at once that his master cared little about racing, and, so far as Epsom was concerned, would abandon the day’s excursion without a pang. He grew desperate. But, being something of a stoic, he kept his feelings in check, and played a card that could hardly fail.

“You will find plenty of youngsters on the hill who will be glad of them, my lord,” said he.

“You don’t tell me so! Kiddies at the Derby! Well, why not? It shows what a stranger I am in my own land that I should never have seen the blessed race. Right ahead then, Dale; we must back the King’s horse and arrange a school treat. But I’ll take the wheel. Can you tuck your legs over that basket? I’m not going to sit alone in the tonneau. And, who knows? – we may pick up someone on the road.”

Starting on the switch, the car sprang off towards Piccadilly. Dale sighed in his relief. With ordinary luck, they ought to reach Epsom before one o’clock, and racing did not begin till half an hour later. He left wholly out of reckoning the mysterious element in human affairs that allots adventures to the adventurous, though close association with Viscount Medenham during the past nine months ought to have taught him the wisdom of caution. Several chapters of a very interesting book might be supplied by his lordship’s motoring experiences on the Continent, and these would only supplement the still more checkered biography of one who, at the close of the Boer War, elected to shoot his way home through the Mid-African haunts of big game rather than return by orthodox troopship. On the face of things, it was absurd to imagine that a self-confessed wanderer should be permitted to see his first Derby in the sacrosanct company of a stout aunt and a well-filled luncheon basket. Even Medenham’s recording angel must have smiled at the conceit, though doubtless shaking a grave

head when the announcement of the Dowager's indisposition revealed the first twist from the path of good intent. As for Lady St. Maur, she declared long afterwards that the whole amazing entanglement could be traced distinctly to her fondness for the ducal fruit raised under glass. A cherry-stone lodged in the vermiform appendix of an emperor has more than once played strange pranks with the map of Europe, so it is not surprising that a strawberry, subtly bestowed in a place well adapted to the exercise of its fell skill, should be able to convulse a section of the British peerage.

Be that as it may, the hap that put Medenham in control of his Mercury unquestionably led to the next turn in events. A man driving a high-powered car watches the incidents of the road more closely than the same individual lounging at ease in the back seat. Hence, his lordship's attention was caught instantly by a touring car drawn up close to the curb in Down Street. That short thoroughfare forms, as it were, a backwash for the traffic of Piccadilly. At the moment it held no other vehicle than the two automobiles, and it required no second look at the face of the driver of the motionless car to discover that something was seriously amiss. Anger and despair struggled there for predominance. Richard the Third of England must have given just such a glance at his last horse foundered on Bosworth Field.

Medenham never passed another motorist in trouble without stopping.

"Anything the matter?" he asked, when the Mercury was halted with the ease of a trained athlete poised in suspended motion.

"Everything!"

The chauffeur snapped out the word without turning. He was a man devoid of faith, or hope, or charity.

"Can I help?"

"Can you h – l!" came the surly response.

Thereupon, many viscounts would have swept on into Piccadilly without further parley – not so Medenham. He scrutinized the soldierly figure, the half-averted face.

"You must be hard hit, Simmonds, before you would answer me in that fashion," said he quietly.

Simmonds positively jumped when he heard his name. He wheeled round, raised his cap, and broke into stuttering excuse.

"I beg your lordship's pardon – I hadn't the least notion – "

These two had not met since they discussed Boer trenches and British generals during a momentary halt on the Tugela slope of Spion Kop. Medenham remembered the fact, and forgave a good deal on account of it.

"I have seen you look far less worried under a plunging fire from a pom-pom," he said cheerily. "Now, what is it? Wires out of order?"

"No, my lord. That wouldn't bother me very long. It's a regular smash this time – transmission shaft snapped."

"Why?"

"I was run into by a railway van, and forced against a street refuge."

"Well, if it was not your fault – "

"Oh, I can claim damages right enough. I have plenty of witnesses. Even the driver of the van could only say that one of his horses slipped. It's the delay I'm jibbing at. I hate to disappoint my customers, and this accident may cost me three hundred pounds, and a business of my own into the bargain."

"By gad! That sounds rather stiff. What's the hurry?"

"This is my own car, my lord. Early in the spring I was lucky enough to fall in with a rich American. I was driving for a company then, but he offered me three hundred pounds, money down, for a three months' contract. Straightaway I bought this car for five hundred, and it is half paid for. Now the same gentleman writes from Paris that I am to take his daughter and another lady on a thousand miles' run for ten days, and he says he is prepared to hire me and the car for the balance of another period of three months on the same terms."

“But the ladies will be reasonable when you explain matters.”

“Ladies are never reasonable, my lord – especially young ones. I have met Miss Vanrenen only once, but she struck me as one who was very much accustomed to having her own way. And she has planned this tour to the last minute. Any other day I might have hired a car, and picked up my own somewhere on the road, but on Derby Day and in fine weather – ”

Simmonds spread wide his hands in sheer inability to find words that would express the hopelessness of retrieving his shattered fortunes. Dale was fidgeting, fingering taps and screws unnecessarily, but Medenham was pondering his former trooper's plight. He refused to admit that the position was quite so bad as it was painted.

“Oh, come now,” said he, “I'll give you a tow to the nearest repair shop, and a word from me will expedite the business. Meanwhile, you must jump into a hansom and appeal to the sympathies of Miss – Vanrenen, is it?”

“No use, my lord,” was the stubborn answer. “I am very much obliged to you, but I would not dream of detaining you.”

“Simmonds, you are positively cantankerous. I can spare the time.”

“The first race is at 1.30, my lord,” muttered Dale, greatly daring.

Medenham laughed.

“You, too?” he cried. “Someone has given you a tip, I suppose?”

Dale flushed under this direct analysis of his feelings. He grinned sheepishly.

“I am told that Eyot can't lose the first race, my lord,” he said.

“Ah! And how much do you mean to speculate?”

“A sovereign, my lord.”

“Hand it over. I will lay you starting price.”

Somewhat taken aback, though nothing said or done by Viscount Medenham could really surprise him, Dale's leather garments creaked and groaned while he produced the coin, which his master duly pocketed.

“Now, Simmonds,” went on the pleasant, lazy voice, “you see how I have comforted Dale by taking his money; won't you tell me what is the real obstacle that blocks the way? Are you afraid to face this imperious young lady?”

“No, my lord. No man can provide against an accident of this sort. But Miss Vanrenen will lose all confidence in me. The arrangement was that to-day's spin should be a short one – to Brighton. I was to take the ladies to Epsom in time for the Derby, and then we were to run quietly to the Metropole. Miss Vanrenen made such a point of seeing the race that she will be horribly disappointed. There is an American horse entered – ”

“By gad, another gambler!”

Simmonds laughed grimly.

“I don't think Miss Vanrenen knows much about racing, my lord, but the owner of Grimalkin is a friend of her father's, and he is confident about winning this year.”

“I am beginning to understand. You are in a fix of sorts, Simmonds.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And what is your plan? I suppose you have one.”

“I have sent for a boy messenger, my lord. When he arrives I shall write – Oh, here he is.”

Viscount Medenham descended leisurely and lit a cigarette. Dale, the stoic, folded his arms and looked fixedly at the press of vehicles passing the end of the street. Vivid memories of Lord Medenham's chivalrous courtesy – his lordship's dashed tomfoolery he called it – warned him that life was about to assume new interests.

The boy messenger, summoned telephonically by a sympathetic maid-servant in a neighboring house, guessed that the gentleman standing on the pavement owned the “motor-car” to which he had been directed. Here were two cars, but the boy did not hesitate. He saluted.

"Messenger, sir," he said.

"This way," intervened Simmonds curtly.

"No. I want you," said Medenham. "You know Sevastopolo's, the cigarette shop in Bond Street?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take this card there, and ask him to dispatch the order at once." Meanwhile he was writing: "Kindly send 1,000 Salonikas to 91 Cavendish Square."

Simmonds looked anxious. He was not a smooth-spoken fellow, but he did not wish to offend Lord Medenham.

"Would your lordship mind if I sent the boy to the Savoy Hotel first?" he asked nervously. "It is rather late, and Miss Vanrenen will be expecting me."

"What time are you due at the Savoy?"

"We were to start at twelve o'clock, but the ladies' luggage had to be strapped on, and –"

"Ah, the deuce! That sounds formidable."

"Of course they must stow everything into the canvas trunks I supplied, my lord."

Medenham stooped and examined the screws which fastened an iron grid at the back of the broken-down vehicle.

"Whip open the tool box, Dale, and transfer that arrangement to my car," he said briskly. "Make it fit somehow. I don't approve of damaged paintwork, nor of weight behind the driving-wheels for that matter, but time presses, and the ladies might shy at a request to repack their belongings into my kit-bags, even if I were carrying them. Now, Simmonds, give me the route, if you know it, and hand over your road maps. I mean to take your place until your car is put right. Wire me where to expect you. You ought to be ship-shape in three days, at the utmost."

"My lord –" began the overwhelmed Simmonds.

"I'll see you hanged as high as Haman before I hand over my Mercury to you, if that is what you are thinking of," said Medenham sharply. "Why, man, she is built like a watch. It would take you a month to understand her. Now, you boy, be off to Sevastopolo's. Where can I buy a chauffeur's kit, Simmonds?"

"Your lordship is really too kind. I couldn't think of permitting it," muttered Simmonds.

"What, then – do you refuse my assistance?"

"It isn't that, my lord. I am awfully grateful –"

"Are you afraid that I shall run off with Miss Vanrenen – hold her to ransom – send Black Hand letters to her father, and that sort of thing?"

"From what little I have seen of Miss Vanrenen she is much more likely to run off with you, my lord. But –"

"You're growing incoherent, Simmonds. For goodness' sake tell me where I am to go. You can safely leave all the rest to me, and we haven't a minute to lose if I am to secure any sort of a decent motoring kit before I turn up at the hotel. Pull yourself together, man. Action front and fire! Guns unlimbered and first range-finder dispatched in nineteen seconds – eh, what?"

Simmonds squared his shoulders. He had been a driver in the Royal Artillery before he joined Viscount Medenham's troop of Imperial Yeomanry. There was no further argument. Dale, Oriental in phlegm now that Eyot was safely backed, was already unscrewing the luggage carrier.

Half an hour later, the Mercury curled with sinuous grace out of the busy Strand into the courtyard of the Savoy Hotel. The inclosure snorted with motors, the air was *petrolisé*, all the world of the hotel was going, or had already gone, to Epsom.

One quick glance at the lines of traffic showed Medenham that the Swiss Rear-Admiral on duty would not allow him to remain an unnecessary instant in front of the actual doorway. He swung his car to the exit side, crept in behind a departing taxicab, and grabbed a hurrying boy in buttons.

"You listen to me, boy," he said.

The boy remarked that his hearing was perfect.

“Well, go to Miss Vanrenen and say that her motor is waiting. Seize a porter, and do not leave him until he has brought two canvas trunks from the lady’s rooms. Help him to strap them on the grid, and I’ll give each of you half-a-crown.”

The boy vanished. Never before had a chauffeur addressed him so convincingly.

Medenham, standing by the side of the car, was deep in the contours of a road map of Sussex when a sweet if somewhat petulant voice, apparently at his elbow, complained that its owner could not see Simmonds anywhere. He turned instantly. A slim, straight-figured girl, wearing a dust-cloak and motor veil, had come out from the Savoy Court doorway and was scrutinizing every automobile in sight. Near her was a short, stout woman whose personality seemed to be strangely familiar to Medenham. He never forgot anyone, and this lady was certainly not one of his acquaintances; nevertheless, her features, her robin-like strut, her very amplitude of girth and singular rotundity of form, came definitely within the net of his retentive memory.

To be sure, he gave her but brief survey, since her companion, in all likelihood Miss Vanrenen, might quite reasonably attract his attention. Indeed, she would find favor in the eyes of any young man, let alone one who had such cause as Viscount Medenham to be interested in her appearance. In her amazingly lovely face the haughty beauty of an aristocrat was softened by a touch of that piquant femininity which the well-bred American girl seems to bring from Paris with her clothes. A mass of dark brown hair framed a forehead, nose, and mouth of almost Grecian regularity, while her firmly modeled chin, slightly more pronounced in type, would hint at unusual strength of character were not the impression instantly dispelled by the changing lights in a pair of marvelously blue eyes. In the course of a single second Medenham found himself comparing them to blue diamonds, to the azure depths of a sunlit sea, to the exquisite tint of the myosotis. Then he swallowed his surprise, and lifted his cap.

“May I ask if you are Miss Vanrenen?” he said.

The blue eyes met his. For the first time in his life he was thrilled to the core by a woman’s glance.

“Yes.”

She answered with a smile, an approving smile, perhaps, for the viscount looked very smart in his tight-fitting uniform, but none the less wondering.

“Then I am here instead of Simmonds. His car was put out of commission an hour ago by a brutal railway van, and will not be ready for the road during the next day or two. May I offer my services in the meantime?”

The girl’s astonished gaze traveled from Medenham to the spick and span automobile. For the moment he had forgotten his rôle, and each word he uttered deepened her bewilderment, which grew stronger when she looked at the Mercury. The sleek coachwork and spotless leather upholstery, the shining brass fittings and glistening wings, every visible detail in fact, gave good promise of the excellence of the engine stowed away beneath the square bonnet. Evidently Miss Vanrenen had cultivated the habit of gathering information rapidly.

“*This* car?” she exclaimed, with a delightful lifting of arched eyebrows.

“Yes, you will not be disappointed in it, I assure you. I am doing Simmonds a friendly turn in taking his place, so I hope the slight accident will not make any difference to your plans.”

“But – why has not Simmonds himself come to explain matters?”

“He could not leave his car, which is in a side street off Piccadilly. He would have sent a note, but he remembered that you had never seen his handwriting, so, as a proof of my genuineness, he gave me your itinerary.”

Medenham produced a closely-written sheet of note-paper, which Miss Vanrenen presumably recognized. She turned to her stout companion, who had been summing up car and chauffeur with careful eyes since Medenham first spoke.

“What do *you* think, Mrs. Devar?” she said.

When he heard the name, Medenham was so amazed that the last vestige of chauffeurism vanished from his manner.

“You don’t mean to say you are Jimmy Devar’s mother?” he gasped.

Mrs. Devar positively jumped. If a look could have slain he would have fallen then and there. As it was, she tried to freeze him to death.

“Do I understand that you are speaking of Captain Devar, of Horton’s Horse?” she said, aloof as an iceberg.

“Yes,” said he coolly, though regretting the lapse. He had stupidly brought about an awkward incident, and must remember in future not to address either lady as an equal.

“I was not aware that my son was on familiar terms with the chauffeur fraternity.”

“Sorry, but the name slipped out unawares. Captain Devar is, or used to be, very easy-going in his ways, you know.”

“So it would seem.” She turned her back on him disdainfully. “In the circumstances, Cynthia,” she said, “I am inclined to believe that we ought to make further inquiries before we exchange cars, and drivers, in this fashion.”

“But what is to be done? All our arrangements are made – our rooms ordered – I have even sent father each day’s address. If we cancel everything by telegraph he will be alarmed.”

“Oh, I did not mean that,” protested the lady hurriedly. It was evident that she hardly knew what to say. Medenham’s wholly unexpected query had unnerved her.

“Is there any alternative?” demanded Cynthia ruefully, glancing from one to the other.

“It is rather late to hire another car to-day, I admit – ” began Mrs. Devar.

“It would be quite impossible, madam,” put in Medenham. “This is Derby Day, and there is not a motor to be obtained in London except a taxicab. It was sheer good luck for Simmonds that he was able to secure me as his deputy.”

He thanked his stars for that word “madam.” Certainly the mere sound of it seemed to soothe Mrs. Devar’s jarred nerves, and the appearance of the Mercury was even more reassuring.

“Ah, well,” she said, “we are not traveling into the wilds. If desirable, we can always return to town by train. By the way, chauffeur, what is your name?”

For an instant Medenham hesitated. Then he took the plunge, strong in the belief that a half-forgotten transaction between himself and “Jimmy” Devar would prevent that impecunious warrior from discussing him freely in the family circle.

“George Augustus Fitzroy,” he said.

Mrs. Devar’s brows knitted; she was regaining her self-possession, and a sarcastic smile now chased away a perplexing thought. She was about to say something when Cynthia Vanrenen broke in excitedly:

“I declare to goodness if the hotel people have not fastened on our boxes already. They seem to know our minds better than we do ourselves. And here is the man with the wraps... Please be careful with that camera... Yes, put it there, with the glasses. What are you doing, Fitzroy?” for Medenham was discharging his obligations to the boy in buttons and a porter.

“Paying my debts,” said he, smiling at her.

“Of course you realize that I pay all expenses?” she said, with just the requisite note of hauteur in her voice that the situation called for.

“This is entirely a personal matter, I assure you, Miss Vanrenen.”

Medenham could not help smiling; he stooped and felt a tire unnecessarily. Cynthia was puzzled. She wrote that evening to Irma Norris, her cousin in Philadelphia – “Fitzroy is a new line in chauffeurs.”

“By the way, where is your trunk?” she demanded suddenly.

"I came away unexpectedly, so I have arranged that it shall be sent to Brighton by rail," he explained.

Apparently, there was nothing more to be said. The two ladies seated themselves, and the car sped out into the Strand. They watched the driver's adroit yet scrupulously careful dealing with the traffic, and Cynthia, at least, quickly grasped the essential fact that the six cylinders worked with a silent power that held cheap every other vehicle passed or overtaken on the road.

"It is a lovely automobile," she murmured with a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Quite an up-to-date car, I fancy," agreed her friend.

"I don't understand how this man, Fitzroy, can afford to use it for hiring purposes. Yet, that is his affair – not mine. I rather like him. Don't you?"

"His manners are somewhat off-hand, but such persons are given to aping their superiors. George Augustus Fitzroy, too – it is ridiculous. Fitzroy is the family name of the Earls of Fairholme, and their eldest sons have been christened George Augustus ever since the beginning of the eighteenth century."

"The name seems to fit our chauffeur all right, and I guess he has as good a claim to it as any other man."

Cynthia was apt to flaunt the Stars and Stripes when Mrs. Devar aired her class conventions, and the older woman had the tact to agree with a careless nod. Nevertheless, had Cynthia Vanrenen known how strictly accurate was her comment she would have been the most astounded girl in London at that minute. The Viscountcy, of course, was nothing more than a courtesy title; in the cold eye of the law, Medenham's full legal name was that which Mrs. Devar deemed ridiculous. As events shaped themselves, it was of the utmost importance to Cynthia, and to Medenham, and to several other persons who had not yet risen above their common horizon, that Mrs. Devar's sneer should pass unchallenged. Though that lady herself was not fashioned of the softer human clay which expresses its strenuous emotions by fainting fits or hysteria, some such feminine expedient would certainly have prevented her from going another hundred yards along the south road had some wizard told her how nearly she had guessed the truth.

But the luck of the born adventurer saved Medenham from premature exposure. "I dare all" was the motto of his house, and it was fated to be tested in full measure ere he saw London again. Of these considerations the purring Mercury neither knew nor cared. She sang the song of the free highway, and sped through the leafy lanes of Surrey with a fine disregard for Acts of Parliament and the "rules and regulations therein made and provided." Soon after one o'clock, however, she was compelled to climb the road to the downs in meek agreement with two lines of toiling chars-à-bancs and laboring motors. Just to show her mettle when the opportunity offered, she took the steep hill opposite the stands with a greyhound rush that vastly disconcerted a policeman who told Medenham to "hurry up out of the dip."

Then, having found a clear space, she dozed for a while, and Cynthia, like a true-born American, began the day's business by giving the answer before either of her companions even thought of putting the Great Question.

"Grimalkin will win!" she cried. "Mr. Deane told my father so. I want to play Grimalkin for ten dollars!"

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST DAY'S RUN

Though Medenham was no turf devotee, he formed distinctly unfavorable conclusions as to the financial stability of the bawling bookmakers near at hand.

"If you wish to do any betting, Miss Vanrenen," he said, "give me the money and I will invest it for you. There is no hurry. The Derby will not be run till three o'clock. We have an hour and a half in which to study form."

For the life of him he could not imitate the complete annihilation of self practiced by the well-bred English servant. The American girl missed the absence of this trait far less than the other woman, but, by this time, even Mrs. Devar began to accept Medenham's good-humored assumption of equality as part of the day's amusement.

Cynthia handed him a card. She had bought three while they were crawling up the hill behind a break-load of jeering Cockneys.

"What will win the first race?" she asked. "Father says you men often hear more than the owners about the real performances of horses."

Medenham tried to look knowing. He thanked his stars for Dale's information.

"I am told Eyot has a chance," he said.

"Well, put me a sovereign on Eyot, please. Are *you* playing the ponies, Mrs. Devar?"

That lady, being quick-witted, took care not to offend Cynthia by pretending not to understand, though it set Medenham's teeth on edge to hear a racehorse called a pony. She opened a gold purse and produced a coin.

"I don't mind risking a little," she tittered.

Medenham found, however, that she also had handed him a sovereign, and his conscience smote him, for he guessed already, with accuracy as it happened, that she was Miss Vanrenen's paid chaperon during the absence of the girl's father on the Continent.

"Personally, I am a duffer in matters connected with the turf," he explained. "A friend of mine – a chauffeur – mentioned Eyot –"

"Oh, that is all right," laughed Cynthia. "I like the color – Eau de Nil and white. Look! There he goes!"

She had good eyes, as well as pretty ones, else she could not have distinguished the silk jacket worn by the rider of a horse cantering at that moment along the cleared course. Crowded coaches, four rows deep, lined the rails near the judge's box, and the gay-hued parasols of their feminine occupants almost completely blocked the view, a distant one in any case, owing to the width of the intervening valley.

Medenham raised no further protest. He walked to a stand where a press of people betokened the presence of a popular layer of odds, found that Eyot's price was chalked up at five to one, and backed him for four pounds. He had to push and elbow his way through a struggling crowd; immediately after the bet was made, Eyot's quotation was reduced by two points in response to signals tick-tacked from the inclosures. This, of course, argued a decided following for Dale's selection, and these eleventh hour movements in the turf market are illuminative. Before he got back to the car there was a mighty shout of "They're off!" and he saw Cynthia Vanrenen stand on the seat to watch the race through her glasses.

Mrs. Devar stood up, too. Both women were so intent on the troop of horses now streaming over the crest of the six-furlong course that he was able to stare his fill without attracting their attention.

"I like Cynthia," he said to himself, "though I shall be in a deuce of a mess if I meet her anywhere after this piece of masquerading. Not much chance of that, I expect, seeing that Dad and I

go to Scotland early in July. But what a bore to tumble across Jimmy's mater! I hope it is not a case of 'like mother like son,' because Jimmy is the limit."

A strange roar, gathering force and volume each instant, rose from a hundred thousand throats. Soon the shout became insistent, and Cynthia Vanrenen yielded to its magnetism.

"Eyot wins!" she cried delightedly. "Yes, none of them can catch him now. Go on, jockey – don't look round! Oh, if I were your master I'd give you such a talking to. Ah-h-h! We've won, Mrs. Devar – we've won! Just think of it!"

"How much, I wonder?" Mrs. Devar, though excited, had the calculating habit.

"Five pounds each," said Medenham, who had approached unnoticed during the tumult.

Cynthia's eyes sparkled.

"Five pounds! Why, I heard some betting person over there offering only three to one."

It was a task beyond his powers to curb an unruly tongue in the presence of this emancipated schoolgirl. He met her ebullient mood halfway.

"I have evidently beaten the market – that is, if I get the money. Horrible thought! I may be welshed!"

He strode back rapidly to the bookmaker's stand.

"What do you think of our chauffeur now?" cried Cynthia radiantly, for the winning of those few sovereigns was a real joy to her, and the shadow of the welsher had no terrors, since she did not know what Medenham meant.

"He improves on acquaintance," admitted Mrs. Devar, thawing a little under the influence of a successful tip.

He soon returned, and handed them six sovereigns apiece.

"My man paid up like a Briton," he said cheerfully. "I have no reliable information as to the next race, so what do you ladies say if we lunch quietly before we attack the ring for the Derby?"

There was an awkward pause. The air of Epsom Downs is stimulating, especially after one has found the winner of the first race.

"We have not brought anything to eat," admitted Cynthia ruefully. "We ordered some sandwiches before leaving the hotel, and we mean to stop for tea at some old-world hotel in Reigate which Mrs. Devar recommends."

"Unfortunately I was not hungry at sandwich time," sighed Mrs. Devar.

"If it comes to that, neither was I, whereas I have a most unromantic appetite now. But what can do, as the Babus say in India. I am rather inclined to doubt the quality of anything we can buy here."

Medenham's face lit up.

"India!" he cried. "Have you been to India?"

"Yes, have you? My father and I passed last cold weather there."

Warned by a sudden expansion of Mrs. Devar's prominent eyes, he gave a quick turn to a dangerous topic, since it was in Calcutta that the gallant ex-captain of Horton's Horse had "borrowed" fifty pounds from him. Naturally, the lady omitted the telltale prefix to her son's rank, but it was unquestionably true that the British army had dispensed with his services.

"I was only thinking that acquaintance with the East, Miss Vanrenen, would prepare you for the mysterious workings of Kismet," said Medenham lightly. "When I came across Simmonds this morning I was bewailing the fact that my respected aunt had fallen ill and could not accompany me to-day. May I offer you the luncheon which I provided for her?"

He withdrew the wicker basket from its nook beneath the front seat; before his astonished guests could utter a protest, it was opened, and he was deftly unpacking the contents.

"But that is *your* luncheon," protested Cynthia, finding it incumbent on her to say something by way of polite refusal.

"And his aunt's, my dear."

In those few words Mrs. Devar conveyed skepticism as to the aunt and ready acceptance of the proffered fare; but Medenham paid no heed; he had discovered that the napkins, cutlery, even the plates, bore the family crest. The silver, too, was of a quality that could not fail to evoke comment.

"Well, here goes!" he growled under his breath. "If I come a purler it will not be for the first time where women are concerned."

He laughed as he produced some lobster in aspic and a chicken.

"It is jolly useful to have as a friend a butler in a big house," he said. "I didn't know what Tomkinson had given me, but these confections look all right."

Mrs. Devar's glance dwelt on the crest the instant she took a plate. She smiled in her superior way. While Medenham was wrestling with the cork of a bottle of claret she whispered:

"This is screamingly funny, Cynthia. I have solved the riddle at last. Our chauffeur is using his master's car and his master's eatables as well."

"Don't care a cent," said Cynthia, who found the lobster admirable.

"But if any inquiry is made and our names are mixed up in it, Mr. Vanrenen may be angry."

"Father would be tickled to death. I shall insist on paying for everything, of course, and my responsibility ends there. No, thank you –" this to Medenham who was offering her a glass of wine. "I drink water only. Have you any?"

Mrs. Devar took the wine, and Medenham fished in the basket for the St. Galmier, since Lady St. Maur cultivated gout with her biliousness.

"Dear me!" she murmured after a sip.

"What is it now?" asked Cynthia.

"Perfect, my dear. Such a bouquet! I wonder what house it came from," and she pondered the crest again, but in vain, for heraldry is an exact science, and the greater part of her education had been given by a hard world. She did not fail, therefore, to notice that three persons were catered for by the packer of the basket. An unknown upper housemaid was already suspect, and now she added mentally "some shop-girl friend." The climax was reached when Medenham staged the strawberries. Cynthia, to whom the good things of the table were commonplaces, ate them and was thankful, but Mrs. Devar made another note: "Ten shillings a basket, at the very least; and *three baskets!*"

A deep, booming yell from the mob proclaimed that the second race was in progress.

"I can't see a thing unless I am perched on the seat, and if I stand up I shall upset the crockery," announced Cynthia. "But I am not interested yet awhile. If Grimalkin wins I shall shout myself hoarse."

"He hasn't a ghost of a chance," said Medenham.

"Oh, but he has. Mr. Deane told my father –"

"But Tomkinson told me," he interrupted.

"Tomkinson. Is that your butler friend?"

"Yes. He says the King's horse will win."

"Surely the owner of Grimalkin must know more about the race than a butler?"

"You would not think so, Miss Vanrenen, if you knew Tomkinson."

"Where is he butler?" asked Mrs. Devar suavely.

"I forget for the moment, madam," replied Medenham with equal suavity.

The lady waived the retort. She was sure of her ground now.

"In any case, I imagine that both Mr. Deane and this Tomkinson may be mistaken. I am told that a horse trained locally has a splendid chance – let me see – yes, here it is: the Honorable Charles Fenton's Vendetta."

It was well that those bulging steel-gray eyes were bent over the card, or they could not have failed to catch the flicker of amazement that swept across Medenham's sun-browned face when he heard the name of his cousin. He had not been in England a full week as yet, and he happened not to have read a list of probable starters for the Derby. He had glanced at the programme during

breakfast that morning, but some remark made by the Earl caused him to lay down the newspaper, and, when next he picked it up, he became interested in an article on the Cape to Cairo railway, written by someone who had not the remotest notion of the difficulties to be surmounted before that very desirable line can be constructed.

Cynthia, however, was watching him, and she laughed gleefully.

"Ah, Fitzroy, you hadn't heard of Vendetta before," she cried. "Confess now – your faith in Tomkinson is shaken."

"Vendetta certainly does sound like war to the knife," said he.

"It is twenty to one," purred Mrs. Devar complacently. "I shall risk the five pounds I won on the first race, and it will be very nice if I receive a hundred."

"I stick to Old Glory," announced the valiant Cynthia.

"The King for me," declared Medenham, though he realized, without any knowledge of the merits of the horses engaged, that the Honorable Charles was not the sort of man to run a three-year-old in the Derby merely for the sake of seeing his racing colors flashing in the sun.

Mrs. Devar kept to her word, and handed over the five pounds. Cynthia staked seven, the five she had won and the ten dollars of her original intent: whereupon Medenham said that he must cross the course and make these bets in the ring – would the ladies raise any objection to his absence, as he could not return until after the race? No, they were quite content to remain in the car, so he repacked the luncheon basket and left them.

Vendetta won by three lengths.

Medenham had secured twenty-five to one, and the bookmaker who paid him added the genial advice: "Put that little lot where the flies can't get at it." The man could afford to be affable, seeing that the bet was the only one in his book against the horse's name. The King's horse and Grimalkin were the public favorites, but both were hopelessly shut in at Tattenham Corner, and neither showed in the front rank at any stage of a fast run race. When Medenham climbed the hill again, hot and uncomfortable in his leather clothing, Mrs. Devar actually welcomed him with an expansive smile.

"What odds did you get me?" she cried, as soon as he was within earshot.

"A hundred and twenty-five pounds to five, madam," he said.

"Oh, what luck! You must keep the odd five pounds, Fitzroy."

"No, thank you. I hedged on Vendetta, so I am still winning."

"But really, I insist."

He handed her a bundle of notes.

"You will find a hundred and thirty pounds there," he said, and she understood that his refusal to accept her money was final. She was intensely surprised that he had given her so much more than she expected, and the first unworthy thought was succeeded by a second – how dared this impudent chauffeur decline her bounty?

Cynthia pouted at him.

"Your Tomkinson is a fraud," she said.

"Your Grimalkin was well named," said he.

"That remark is very cutting, I suppose, Fitzroy."

"Oh, no. I merely meant to convey that a cat is not a racehorse."

"Poor fellow," mused Cynthia, "he is vexed because he lost. I must make it up to him somehow, but he is such an extraordinary person, I hardly dare suggest such a thing."

She began to adjust her veil and dust coat.

"If you are ready, Mrs. Devar," she said, "I think we ought to hit the pike for Brighton."

Mrs. Devar laughed. Fitzroy evidently understood, as he had taken his seat and the engine was humming.

"Americanisms are most fascinating," she vowed. "I wish you would use more of them, Cynthia. I love them."

Cynthia was slightly ruffled, though if pressed for a reason she could hardly have given one.

"Slang is useful occasionally, but I am trying to cure myself of the habit," she said tartly.

"A picturesque phrase is always pardonable. Oh, is this quite safe? –"

The Mercury, finding an opening, had shot down the hill with a smooth celerity that alarmed the older woman. Cynthia leaned back composedly.

"Fitzroy means to reach the road before the police stop the traffic for the next race," she said. Then, after a pause, she added: "I wish we could keep this car for the rest of our tour, yet I suppose I ought not to interfere in the arrangement father made with Simmonds."

Mrs. Devar frowned. Her momentary tremor had fled, and she had every cause to regard with uneasiness the threatened substitution during the forthcoming ten days, of this quite impossible Fitzroy for that very chauffeur-like person, Simmonds. Her acquaintance with Peter Vanrenen and his daughter was sufficiently intimate to warn her that Cynthia's least desire was granted by her indulgent parent; in fact, Cynthia would have been hopelessly spoilt were it not for a combination of those happy chances which seem to conspire at times in the creation of the American girl at her best. She was devoted to her father, her nature was bright and cheerful, and she had a heart that bubbled over with kindness. Mrs. Devar chose the right line of attack. She resolved to appeal to the girl's sympathies.

"I am afraid it would be a rather cruel thing to deprive Simmonds of his engagement," she said softly. "He has bought a car, I understand, on the strength of the contract with Mr. Vanrenen –"

"That doesn't cut any ice – I mean there would be no ill effect for Simmonds," explained Cynthia hurriedly. "Father will meet us in London at the end of our run, and Simmonds could come to us then."

The steel-gray eyes narrowed. Their owner was compelled to decide quickly. As opposition was useless, she laughed, with the careless ease of one who was in no way concerned.

"Don't you think," she said, "that if your father sees this car Simmonds will be dispensed with somehow?"

Cynthia nodded. The argument was unanswerable.

They were crossing the course at a walking pace; at that point a sort of passage was kept clear by the police for the convenience of those occupants of the stands who wished to visit the paddock. The owner of Vendetta, having been congratulated by royalty, was taking some friends to admire the horse during the rubbing-down process, when his glance suddenly fell on Medenham. Though amazed, he was not rendered speechless.

"Well, I'm –" he began.

But the Mercury possessed a singularly loud and clear motor-horn, and the voice of the Honorable Charles was drowned. Still, his gestures were eloquent. Quite obviously, he was saying to a man whose arm he caught:

"Did you ever in your life see anybody more like George than that chauffeur? Why, damme, it is Medenham!"

So Mrs. Devar lost a golden opportunity. She knew Fenton by sight, and her shrewd wits must have set her on the right track had she witnessed his bewilderment. Being a pretentious person, however, and not able to afford the up-keep of a motor, she was enjoying the surprise of two well-dressed women who recognized her. Then the car leaped forward again, and she scored a dearly won triumph.

At this crisis Medenham's scrutiny of the road map provided by Simmonds for the tour was well repaid. He turned sharp to the right past the back of the stands, and was fortunate in finding enough clear road to render pursuit by his elderly cousin a vain thing, even if it were thought of. The Mercury had to cross the caravan zone carefully, but once Tattenham Corner was reached the way lay open to Reigate.

Through a land of gorse and heather they sped until they came to the famous hill. They ran down in a noiseless flight that caused Cynthia to experience the sensation of being borne on wings.

"I imagine that aeroplaning is something like this," she confided to her companion.

"If it is, it must be enjoyable. I don't suppose, at my time of life, I shall ever try to navigate the air in one of those frail contrivances pictured in the newspapers. But I was nearly tempted to go up in a balloon two years ago."

Cynthia stole a glance at Mrs. Devar's rotund figure, and laughed. She could not help it, though she flushed furiously at what she deemed an involuntary rudeness on her part.

"Oh, it sounds funny, I have no doubt," said the other, placidly good-tempered, "but I really meant it at the moment. You have met Count Edouard Marigny, I fancy?"

"Yes, in Paris last month. In fact –"

Cynthia hesitated. She had scarcely recovered from the excitement of the racing and was not choosing her words quite happily. Mrs. Devar, still sugary, ended the sentence.

"In fact, it was he who recommended me to Mr. Vanrenen as your chaperon. Yes, my dear, Monsieur Marigny and I are old friends. He and my son are inseparable when Captain Devar is in Paris. Well, as I was saying, the Count offered to take me up in his balloon, L'Etoile, and I was ready to go, but the weather became stormy and an ascent from the Velo was impossible, or highly dangerous, at any rate."

Mrs. Devar cultivated the high-pitched voice that she regarded as the hall-mark of good breeding, and, in that silent rush downhill, Medenham could not avoid hearing each syllable. It was eminently pleasing to listen to Cynthia's praise of his car, and he was wroth with the other woman for wrenching the girl's thoughts away so promptly from a topic dear to his heart. Therein he erred, for the gods were being kind to him. Little recking how valuable was the information he had just been given, he slackened speed somewhat, and leaned back in the seat.

"We are nearing Reigate now," he remarked with half-turned head. "The town begins on the other side of that tunnel. Which inn do you wish to stop at for tea?"

"It seems to me that I have barely ended lunch," said Cynthia. "Shall we cut out your old-world Reigate inn, Mrs. Devar, and take tea at Crawley or Handcross?"

"By all means. How well you know the names of the towns and villages. Yet you have never before visited this part of England."

"We Americans are nothing if not thorough," answered the girl. "I would not be happy if I failed to look up our route on the map. More than that, I note the name of each river we cross and try to identify every range of hills. You must test me and count my mistakes."

Mrs. Devar spread her hands in a gesture copied from her French acquaintances.

"My dear, I am the most ignorant person geographically. I remember how that delightful Count Edouard laughed when I asked him if the Loire joined the Seine above or below Paris. It seems that I was thinking of the Oise all the time. The Marchioness of Belfort told me of my error afterwards."

Cynthia laughed merrily, but made no reply.

Medenham bent over the levers and the car danced on through Reigate. Mrs. Devar impressed him as a despicable type of tuft-hunter. His acquaintance with the species was not extensive; he had read of elderly dowagers who eked out their slender means by introducing the daughters of rich Americans to English society, and the thing was not in itself wholly indefensible; but he felt sure that Cynthia Vanrenen needed no such social sponsor, while the mere bracketing of Count Edouard Marigny with "Jimmy" Devar caused him to regard this unknown Frenchman with a suspicion that was already active enough so far as Mrs. Devar was concerned. And the Marchioness of Belfort, too! A decrepit old cadger with an infallible system for roulette!

Perhaps his mood communicated itself to the accelerator. At any rate, the Mercury seemed to sympathize, and it was a lucky hazard that kept the glorious stretch of road between Reigate and Crawley free of police traps on that memorable Wednesday. The car simply leaped out of Surrey into Sussex, the undulating parklands on both sides of the smooth highway appearing to float past in stately procession, and there was a fine gleam in Cynthia's blue eyes when the first check to a splendid run came in the outskirts of Crawley.

She leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Tea here, please,” she said. Then she added, as if it were an afterthought: “If you promise to let her rip in that style after we reach the open country again I shall sit on the front seat.”

The words were almost whispered into his ear. Certainly they were not meant to enlighten Mrs. Devar, and Medenham, turning, found his face very near the girl’s.

“I’m bribed,” he answered, and not until both were settled back in their seats did they realize that either had said anything unusual.

Medenham, however, took his cup of tea *à la chauffeur*, helping himself to bread and butter from a plate deposited on the bonnet by a waiting-maid.

When the ladies reappeared from the interior of a roadside restaurant he was in his place, ready to start. He did not offer to put them in the car, adjust their wraps, and close the door. If Miss Vanrenen liked to keep her promise, that was her affair, but no action on his part would hint of prior knowledge that she intended to ride in front.

Nevertheless, he could not repress a smile when he heard Mrs. Devar’s distinctly chilly, “Oh, not at all!” in response to Cynthia’s polite apology for deserting her until they neared Brighton.

Somehow, the car underwent a subtle change when the girl took her seat by his side. From a machine quivering with life and power it became a triumphal chariot. By sheer perfection of mechanical energy it had bridged the gulf that lay between the millionaire’s daughter and the hired man, since there could be no question that Cynthia Vanrenen placed Viscount Medenham in no other category. Indeed, his occasional lapses from the demeanor of a lower social grade might well have earned him her marked disfavor, and, as there was no shred of personal vanity in his character, he gave all the credit to the sentient creature of steel and iron that was so ready to respond to his touch.

Swayed by an unconscious telepathy, the girl almost interpreted his unspoken thought. She watched his deft manipulation of levers and brakes, and fancied that his hands dwelt on the steering-wheel with a caress.

“You have a real lovely automobile, Fitzroy,” she said, “and I have a sort of notion that you are devoted to it. May I ask – is it your own car?”

“Yes. I bought it six months ago. I learnt to drive in France, and, as soon as I heard of the new American engine, I – er – couldn’t rest until I had tried it.”

He was on the point of saying something wholly different, but managed to twist the second half of the sentence in time. What would Miss Vanrenen have thought had he continued: “I sent my chauffeur to England, and, on receipt of his report, I had this car shipped within a week?”

There are problems too deep for speculation when a man is guiding a ton of palpitating metal along a hedge-lined road at forty miles an hour. This was one.

Cynthia, knowing nothing of any “new American engine,” would die rather than confess her ignorance. Moreover, she was pondering a problem of her own. If it was not his master’s car he might be open to a bargain.

“Simmonds is an old friend of yours, I suppose?” she said.

“Yes, I have known him some years. We were in South Africa together.”

“In the war, do you mean?”

“Yes.”

“How dreadful! Have you ever killed anybody?”

“Not with petrol, I am happy to state.”

There was an eloquent pause. Cynthia examined his reply, and discovered that it covered a good deal of ground. Perhaps, too, it conveyed the least little bit of a snub. Hence, her tone stiffened perceptibly.

“I mentioned Simmonds,” she explained, “because I think my father might arrange – to the satisfaction of all parties, of course – that you should carry through this present tour, while Simmonds would come into our service when we return to London.”

Medenham laughed. In its way, the compliment was graceful and well meant, but the utter absurdity of his position was now thrust upon him with overwhelming force.

"I am very much obliged to you, Miss Vanrenen," he said, venturing to look once more into those alluring eyes, so shy, so daring, so divinely wise and childishly candid. "If circumstances permitted, there is nothing I would like better than to take you through this Paradise of a June England; but it is quite impossible. Simmonds must bring his car to Bristol, as I positively cannot be absent from town longer than three days."

Cynthia did not pout. She nodded appreciation of the weighty if undescribed business that called Fitzroy and his Mercury back to London, but in her heart she mused on the strangeness of things, and wondered if this smiling land produced many chauffeurs who lauded it in such phrases.

Up and down Handcross Hill they whirled, treating that respectable eminence as if it were a snow bump in the path of a flying toboggan. Medenham had roamed the South Downs as a boy, and he was able now to point out Chanctonbury Ring, the Devil's Dyke, Ditchling Beacon, and the rest of the round-shouldered giants that guard the Weald. In the mellow light of a superlatively fine afternoon the Downs wore their gayest raiment of blue and purple, red and green – decked, too, with ribands of white roads and ruffs of rose-laden hedges.

Cynthia forgot many times, and he hardly ever remembered, that he was a chauffeur, and the miles, too, were disregarded until the sea sparkled in their eyes as they emerged from the great gap which the Devil forebore to use when he planned to swamp a land of churches by cutting the famous dyke.

Then the girl awoke from a day-dream, and the car was stopped on the pretense that this marvelous landscape must be viewed in silence and at rest. She rejoined Mrs. Devar, and began instantly to expatiate on the beauties of Sussex, so Medenham ran slowly down the hill through Patcham and Preston into Brighton.

And there, sitting in the wide porch of the Hotel Metropole, was a slim, handsome Frenchman, who sprang up with all the vivacity of his race when the Mercury drew up at the foot of the steps, dusty after its long run, but circumspect as though it had just quitted the garage.

"Mrs. Devar, Miss Vanrenen! what a delightful surprise!" cried the stranger with an accompaniment of wide smiles and hat flourishing. "Who would have thought of meeting you here? *Voyez, donc*, I was moping in solitude when suddenly the sky opens and you appear."

"*Dea ex machinâ*, in fact, Monsieur Marigny," said Cynthia, shaking hands with this overjoyed gentleman.

Mrs. Devar, not understanding, cackled loudly.

"We've had a lovely run from town, Count Edouard," she gushed, "and it is just too awfully nice of you to be in Brighton. Now, *don't* say you have made all sorts of engagements for the evening."

"Such as they are they go by the board, dear lady," said the gallant Count, who had good teeth, and showed them in a succession of grins.

"Ten to-morrow morning, Fitzroy," said Cynthia, turning on the steps as she was about to enter the hotel. He lifted his cap.

"The car will be ready, Miss Vanrenen," said he.

He got down, and scowled, yes, actually scowled, at a porter who was hauling too strongly at the straps and buckles of the dust-covered trunks.

"Damage the car's paint and I'll raise bigger blisters on yours," was what he said to the man. But his thoughts were of Count Edouard Marigny, and, like the people's discussion of the Derby, they took the form of question and answer.

"When is a coincidence not a coincidence?" he asked himself.

"When it is prearranged," was the answer.

Then he drove round to the yard at the rear of the hotel, where Dale awaited him, for Medenham would intrust the cleaning of the car to no other hands.

“You’ve booked my room at the Grand Hotel and taken my bag there?” he inquired.

“Yes, my lord.”

“Make these people give you the key when the door is locked for the night, and bring the car to my hotel at nine o’clock.”

He hurried away, and Dale looked after him.

“Something must ha’ worried his lordship,” said the man. “First time I’ve ever seen him in a bad temper. An’ what about Eyot? Three to one the paper says. P’raps he’ll think of it in the morning.”

CHAPTER III

SOME EMOTIONS – WITHOUT A MORAL

Not until he was dressing, and the contents of his pockets were spread on a table, did Medenham remember Dale's commission. It was quite true, as he told Mrs. Devar, that he had backed Vendetta for a small stake on his own account. But that was an afterthought, and the bet was made with another bookmaker at reduced odds. Altogether, including the few sovereigns in his possession at the beginning of the day, he counted nearly fifty pounds in gold, an exceptionally large amount to be carried in England, where considerations of weight alone render banknotes preferable.

He slipped Dale's money into an envelope, and took thirty pounds to be exchanged for notes by the hotel's cashier. At the same time he wrote a telegram to his father, destroying two drafts before he evolved something that left his story untold while quieting any scruples as to lack of candor. It was not that the Earl would resent his unexpected disappearance after nearly four years' absence from home, because father and son had met in South Africa during the war, and were together in Cannes and Paris subsequently. His difficulty was to explain this freak journey satisfactorily. The Earl of Fairholme held feudal views anent the place occupied in the world by the British aristocracy. His own hot youth was crowded with episodes that Medenham might regard with disdain, yet he would be shocked out of his well-fed cynicism by the notion that his son was gallivanting round the country as the chauffeur of an unconventional American girl and a middle-aged harpy like Mrs. Devar.

So Medenham's message was non-committal.

Aunt Susan was unable to come Epsom to-day. Have taken car to Brighton, and Bournemouth. Home Saturday, perhaps earlier. George.

Of course, he meant to fill in details verbally. It was possible in conversation to impart a jesting turn to an adventure which would be unconvincing and ambiguous in the bald phrases of a telegram.

Then he dined, filled a cigarette case from the box of Salonikas which Tomkinson had not omitted to pack with his clothes, and strolled out, bare-headed, to enrich Dale. He could trust his man absolutely, and was quite sure that the Mercury would then be in the drying stage after a thorough cleaning. Thus far he was justified, but he had not counted on the pride of the born mechanic. Though the car was housed for the night, when he entered the garage the hood was off, and Dale was annoying two brothers of the craft by explaining the superiority of *his* engine to every other type of engine.

All three were bent over the cylinders, and Dale was saying:

"Just take a squint at them valves, will you? – ever seen anything like 'em before? Of course you haven't. Don't look like valves, eh? Can you break 'em, can you warp 'em, can you pit 'em? D'ye twig how the mixture reaches the cylinder? None of your shoulders or kinks to choke it up – is there? – and the same with the exhaust. Would you ever have a mushroom valve again after you've once cast your peepers over this arrangement? Now, if I took up areonotting – if *I* wanted to fly the Channel –"

He stopped abruptly, having seen his master standing in the open doorway.

"By gad, Dale," cried Medenham, "I have never heard your tongue wagging in that fashion before."

Dale was flustered.

"Beg pardon, my lord, but I was only –" he began.

"Only using the cut-out, I fancy. Come here, I want you a minute."

The other chauffeurs suddenly discovered that they had urgent business elsewhere. They vanished. Dale thought it necessary to explain.

"One of them chaps has a new French car, my lord, and he was blowing so loudly about it that I had to take him down a peg or two."

Medenham grew interested. Like every keen motorist, he could "talk shop" at all times.

“What sort of car?”

“A 59 Du Vallon, my lord. It is the first of its class in England, and I rather think his guv’nor is running it on show.”

“Indeed. Who is *he*?”

“A count Somebody-or-other, my lord. I did hear his name – ”

“Not Count Edouard Marigny?” said Medenham, with a sharp emphasis that startled Dale.

“That’s him, my lord. I hope I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Medenham, early in life, had formed the habit of not expressing his feelings when really vexed, and it stood him in good stead now. Dale’s blunder was almost irreparable, yet he could not find it in his heart to blame the man for being an enthusiast.

“You have put me in a deuce of a fix,” he said at last. “This Frenchman is acquainted with Miss Vanrenen. He knows she is here, and will probably see her off in the morning. If his chauffeur recognizes the car he will be sure to speak of it. That gives the whole show away.”

“I’m very sorry, my lord – ”

“Dash it all, there you go again. But it is largely my own fault. I ought to have warned you, though I little expected this sort of a mix-up. In future, Dale, while this trip lasts, you must forget my title. Look here, I have brought you your winnings over Eyot – can’t you rig up some sort of a yarn that I am a sporting friend of yours, and that you were just trying to be funny when you addressed me as ‘my lord’? If you have an opportunity, tell Count Marigny’s man that your job is taken temporarily by a driver named Fitzroy. By the way, is the chauffeur a Frenchman, too?”

“No, my l – .” Dale caught Medenham’s eye, a very cold eye at that instant. “No, sir. He’s just a fitter from the London agency.”

“Well, we must trust to luck. He may not remember me in my chauffeur’s kit, which is beastly uncomfortable, by the way. I must get you a summer rig. Here is your money – five to one I took. Don’t lose sight of those two fellows, and spend this half sovereign on them. If you can fill that chap with beer to-night he may have a head in the morning that will keep him in bed too late to cause any mischief. When we meet in Bournemouth and Bristol, say nothing to anybody about either the car or me.”

Dale was a model of sobriety, but the excitement of “fives” when he looked for “threes” was too much for him.

“I’ll tank him all right, my l – , I mean, sir,” he vowed cheerfully.

Medenham lit a new cigarette and strolled out of the yard.

From the corner of his eye he saw Marigny’s helper looking at him. Without undue exaggeration, he craned his neck, rounded his shoulders, and carried himself with the listless air of a Piccadilly idler. He reflected, too, that a bare-headed man in evening dress would not readily be identified with a leather-coated chauffeur, and Dale, he hoped, was sufficiently endowed with mother wit to frame a story plausible enough to account for his unforeseen appearance. On the whole, the position was not so bad as it seemed in that first moment when the owner of the 59 Du Vallon was revealed in the handsome Count. In any event, what did it matter if his harmless subterfuge were revealed? The girl would surely laugh, while Mrs. Devar would squirm. So now for a turn along the front, and then to bed.

It was a perfect June evening, the fitting sequel to a day of unbroken sunshine. A marvelous amber light hovered beyond the level line of the sea to the west; an exquisite blue suffused the horizon from south to east, deepening from sapphire to ultramarine as it blended with the soft shadows of a summer’s night. He found himself comparing the sky’s southeasterly tint with the azure depths of Cynthia Vanrenen’s eyes, but he shook off that fantasy quickly, crossed the roadway and promenade, and, propping himself against the railings, turned a resolute back on romance. He did not gain a great deal by this maneuver, since his next active thought was centered in a species of quest for the

particular window among all those storeyed rows through which Cynthia Vanrenen might even then be gazing at the shining ocean.

He looked at his watch. Half-past nine.

"I am behaving like a blithering idiot," he told himself. "Miss Vanrenen and her friends are either on the pier listening to the band, or sitting over their coffee in the glass cage behind there. I'll wire Simmonds in the morning to hurry up."

A man descended the steps of the hotel and walked straight across King's Road. A light gray overcoat, thrown wide on his shoulders, gave a lavish display of frilled shirt, and a gray Homburg hat was set rakishly on one side of his head. In the half light Medenham at once discerned the regular, waxen-skinned features of Count Marigny, and during the next few seconds it really seemed as if the Frenchman were making directly for him. But another man, short, rotund, very erect of figure, and strutting in gait, came from the interior of a "shelter" that stood a little to the right of Medenham's position on the rails.

"Hello, Marigny," said he jauntily.

The Count looked back towards the hotel. His tubby acquaintance chuckled. The effort squeezed an eyeglass out of his right eye.

"Aie pas peur, mon vieux!" cried he in very colloquial French. "My mother sent a note to say that the fair Cynthia has retired to her room to write letters. I have been waiting here ten minutes."

Now, it chanced that Medenham's widespread touring in France had rubbed up his knowledge of the language. It is ever the ear that needs training more than the tongue, and in all likelihood he would not have caught the exact meaning of the words were it not for the hap of recent familiarity with the accents of all sorts and conditions of French-speaking folk.

"Jimmy Devar!" he breathed, and his amazement lost him Marigny's muttered answer.

But he heard Devar's confident outburst as the two walked off together in the direction of the West Pier.

"You are growing positively nervous, my dear Edouard. And why? The affair arranges itself admirably. I shall be always on hand, ready to turn up exactly at the right moment. What the deuce, this is the luck of a lifetime..."

The squeaky, high-pitched voice – a masculine variant of Mrs. Devar's ultra-fashionable intonation – died away midst the chatter and laughter of other promenaders. Medenham's first impulse was to follow and listen, since Devar had yielded to the common delusion of imagining that none except his companion on the sea-front that night understood a foreign language. But he swept the notion aside ere it had well presented itself as a means of solving an astounding puzzle.

"No, dash it all, I'm not a private detective," he muttered angrily. "Why should I interfere? Confound Simmonds, and d – n that railway van! I have a good mind to hand the car over to Dale in the morning and return to town by the first train."

If he really meant what he said he ought to have gone back to his hotel, played billiards for an hour, and sought his bedroom with an easy conscience. He was debating the point when the conceit intruded itself that Cynthia's pretty head was at that moment bent over a writing-table in a certain well-lighted corner apartment of the second floor, so he compromised with his half-formed intent, whisked round to face the sea again, and lighted another cigarette from the glowing end of its predecessor. Some part of his unaccountable irritation took wings with the cloud of smoke.

"Blessed if I can tell why I should worry," he communed. "Never saw the girl before to-day ... shall never see her again if I put Dale in charge ... Her father must be a special sort of fool, though, to trust her to the care of the Devar woman ... What was it that rotter said? – 'The affair arranges itself admirably.' And he would be 'always on hand.' What is arranging itself?.. And why should Jimmy Devar be ready, if need be, 'to turn up exactly at the right moment?' I suppose the answer to the first bit of the acrostic is simple enough. Cynthia Vanrenen is to become the Countess Marigny, and the Devar gang stands in on the cash proceeds. Oh, a nice scheme! This Frenchman is posted as to

the tour. By the most curious of coincidences he will reappear at Bournemouth, or Bristol, or in the Wye Valley. What more natural than a day's run in company?... Ah, I've got it! Jimmy is to come along when Marigny thinks that Cynthia will take a seat in the 59 Du Vallon for a change – just to try the new French car... By gad, I shall have a word to say there... Steady, now, George Augustus! Woa, my boy; keep a tight hand on the reins. Why in thunder should you concern yourself with the wretched business, anyhow?"

It was a marvelously still night. Beneath him, on an asphalted path nearly level with the stone-strewn beach, passed a young couple. The man's voice came up to him.

"Jones expects to be taken into partnership after this season, and I am pretty certain to be given the management of the woolen department. If that comes off, no more long hours in the shop for you, Lucy, but a nice little house up there on the hill, just as quick as we can find it."

"Oh, Charlie dear, I shall never be tired then..."

A black arm was suddenly silhouetted across the shoulders of a white blouse, whose wearer received a reassuring hug.

"Let's reckon up," said the owner of the arm – "July, August, September – three months, sweetheart..."

Medenham had never given a thought to marrying until his father hinted at the notion during dinner the previous evening, and he had laughed at it, being absolutely heart-whole. There was something irresistibly comical then about the Earl's bland theory that Fairholme House needed a sprightly viscountess, yet now, twenty-four hours later, he could extract no shred of humor from the idyl of a draper's assistant. It seemed to be a perfectly natural thing that these lovers should talk of mating. Of what else should they whisper on this midsummer's night, when the gloaming already bore the promise of dawn, and the glory of the sea and sky spread quiet harmonies through the silent air?

Perhaps he sighed as he turned away, but his own evidence on that point would be inconclusive, since the first object his wondering eyes dwelt on was the graceful figure of Cynthia Vanrenen. There was no possibility of error. An arc lamp blazed overhead, and, to make assurance doubly sure, his recognition of Cynthia was obviously duplicated by Cynthia's recognition of her deputy chauffeur.

In the girl's case some degree of surprise was justified. It is a truism of social life that far more distinctiveness is attached to the seemingly democratic severity of evening dress than to any other class of masculine garniture. Medenham now looked exactly what he was – a man born and bred in the purple. No one could possibly mistake this well-groomed soldier for Dale or Simmonds. His clever, resourceful face, his erect carriage, the very suggestion of mess uniform conveyed by his clothing, told of lineage and a career. He might, in sober earnest, have been compelled to earn a living by driving a motor-car, but no freak of fortune could rob him of his birthright as an aristocrat.

Of course, Cynthia was easily first in the effort to recover disturbed wits.

"Like myself, you have been tempted out by this beautiful night, Mr. Fitzroy," she said.

Then "Mr." was a concession to his attire; somehow she imagined it would savor of presumption if she addressed him as an inferior. She could not define her mental attitude in words, but her quick intelligence responded to its subtle influence as a mirrored lake records the passing of a breeze. Very dainty and self-possessed she looked as she stood there smiling at him. Her motor dust-coat was utilized as a wrap. Beneath it she wore a white muslin dress of a studied simplicity that, to another woman's assessing gaze, would reveal its expensiveness. She had tied a veil of delicate lace around her hair and under her chin, and Medenham noted, with a species of awe, that her eyes, so vividly blue in daylight, were now dark as the sky at night.

And he was strangely tongue-tied. He found nothing to say until after a pause that verged on awkwardness. Then he floundered badly.

"I am prepared to vouch for any explanation so long as it brings you here, Miss Vanrenen," he said.

Cynthia wanted to laugh. It was sufficiently ridiculous to be compelled, as it were, to treat a paid servant as an equal, but it savored of madness to find him verging on the perilous borderland of a flirtation.

“Do you wish, then, to consult me on any matter?” she asked, with American directness.

“I was standing here and thinking of you,” he said. “Perhaps that accounts for your appearance. Since you have visited India you may have heard that the higher Buddhists, when they are anxious that another person shall act according to their desire, remain motionless in front of that person’s residence and concentrate ardent thought on their fixed intent... Sitting in *dhurma* on a man, they call it. I suppose the same principle applies to a woman.”

“It follows that you are a higher Buddhist, and that you willed I should come out. Your theory of sitting on the door-mat, is it? wobbles a bit in practice, because I really ran downstairs to tell Mrs. Devar something I had forgotten previously. Not finding her, I decided on a stroll. Instead of crossing the road I walked up to the left a couple of blocks. Then I noticed the pier, and meant to have a look at it before returning to the hotel. Anyhow, you wanted me, Mr. Fitzroy, and here I am. What can I do for you?”

Her tone of light raillery, supplemented by that truly daring adaptation of the method of gaining a cause favored by the esoteric philosophy of the East, went far to restore Medenham’s wandering faculties.

“I wanted to ask you a few questions, Miss Vanrenen,” he explained.

“Pray do, as they say in Boston.”

But he was not quite himself yet. He noticed that the lights were extinguished in the corner of the second floor.

“Is that your room?” he asked, pointing to it.

“Yes.”

Her air of blank amazement supplied a further tonic.

“Queer thing!” he said. “I thought so. More of the occult, I suppose. But I really wished to speak to you about Mrs. Devar.”

Cynthia was obviously relieved.

“Dear me!” she cried. “You two have taken a violent dislike to each other. You see, Mr. Fitzroy, we Americans are rather pleased than otherwise if a man acts and speaks like a gentleman even though he has to earn a living by hustling an automobile, but your sure-enough British dames exact a kind of servility from a chauffeur that doesn’t seem to fit in with your make-up. Servility is a hard word, but it is the best I can throw on the screen at the moment, and I’m real sorry if I have hurt your feelings by using it.”

Medenham smiled. Each instant his calmer judgment showed more and more clearly that he could not offer any valid excuse for interference in the girl’s affairs. For all he knew to the contrary, she might be tremulous with delight at the prospect of becoming a French countess; if that were so, the fact that he disapproved of Mrs. Devar’s matchmaking tactics would be received very coldly. Cynthia’s natural interpretation of his allusion to her chaperon offered a means of escape from a difficult position.

“I am greatly obliged by your hint,” he said. “Not that my lack of good manners is of much account, seeing that I am only a stop gap for the courtly Simmonds, but I shall endeavor to profit by it in my next situation.”

“Now you are getting at me,” cried Cynthia, her eyes sparkling somewhat. “Do you know, Mr. Fitzroy, I am inclined to think you are not a chauffeur at all.”

“I assure you there is not a man living who understands my special type of car better,” he protested.

“That isn’t what I mean, so don’t wriggle. You met Simmonds when he was in trouble, and just offered to take his place for a day or so, thereby doing him a good turn – isn’t that the truth?”

“Yes.”

“And you are not in the automobile business?”

“I am, for the time being.”

“Well, I am glad to hear it. I was shy of telling you when we reached the hotel, but you understand, of course, that I pay your expenses during this trip. The arrangement with Simmonds was that my father ante’d for petrol and allowed twelve shillings a day for the chauffeur’s meals and lodgings. Is that satisfactory?”

“Quite satisfactory, Miss Vanrenen,” said Medenham, fully alive to the girl’s effective ruse for the re-establishment of matters on a proper footing.

“So you don’t need to worry about Mrs. Devar. In any event, since you refused my offer to hire you for the tour, you will not see a great deal of her,” she went on, a trifle hurriedly.

“There only remains one other point,” he said, trying to help her. “Would you mind giving me Mr. Vanrenen’s address in Paris?”

“He is staying at the Ritz – but why do you want to know that?” she demanded with a sudden lifting of eyebrows, for the hope was strong in her that he might be induced to change his plans so far as the next nine days were concerned.

“A man in my present position ought always to ascertain the whereabouts of millionaires interested in motoring,” he answered promptly. “And now, pardon me for advising you not to walk towards the pier alone.”

“Gracious me! Why not?”

“There is a certain class of boisterous holiday-maker who might annoy you – not by downright ill-behavior, but by exercising a crude humor which is deemed peculiarly suitable to the seaside, though it would be none the less distressing to you.”

“In the States that sort of man gets shot,” she said, and her cheeks glowed with a rush of color.

“Here, on the contrary, he often takes the young lady’s arm and walks off with her,” persisted Medenham.

“I’m going to that pier,” she announced. “Guess you’d better escort me, Mr. Fitzroy.”

“Fate closes every door in my face,” he said sadly. “I cannot go with you – in that direction.”

“Well, of all the odd people! – why not that way, if any other?”

“Because Count Edouard Marigny, the gentleman whose name I could not help overhearing to-day, has just gone there – with another man.”

“Have you a grudge against him, too?”

“I never set eyes on him before six o’clock this evening, but I imagine you would not care to have him see you walking with your chauffeur.”

Cynthia looked up and down the broad sea front, with its thousands of lamps and droves of promenaders.

“At last I am beginning to size up this dear little island,” she said. “I may go with you to a racetrack, I may sit by your side for days in an automobile, I may even eat your luncheon and drink your aunt’s St. Galmier, but I may not ask you to accompany me a hundred yards from my hotel to a pier. Very well, I’ll quit. But before I go, do tell me one thing. Did you really mean to bring your aunt to Epsom to-day?”

“Yes.”

“A mother’s sister sort of aunt – a nice old lady with white hair?”

“One would almost fancy you had met her, Miss Vanrenen.”

“Perhaps I may, some day. Father and I are going to Scotland for a month from the twelfth of August. After that we shall be in the Savoy Hotel about six weeks. Bring her to see me.”

Medenham almost jumped when he heard of the projected visit to the Highlands, but some demon of mischief urged him to say:

“Let’s reckon up. July, August, September – three months – ”

He stopped with a jerk. Cynthia, already aware of some vague power she possessed of stirring this man's emotions, did not fail to detect his air of restraint.

"It isn't a proposition that calls for such a lot of calculation," she said sharply. "Good-night, Mr. Fitzroy. I hope you are punctual morning-time. When there is a date to be kept, I'm a regular alarm clock, my father says."

She sped across the road, and into the hotel. Then Medenham noticed how dark it had become – reminded him of the tropics, he thought – and made for his own caravanseraï, while his brain was busy with a number of disturbing but nebulous problems that seemed to be pronounced in character yet singularly devoid of a beginning, a middle, or an end. Indeed, so puzzling and contradictory were they that he soon fell asleep. When he rose at seven o'clock next morning the said problems had vanished. They must have been part and parcel with the glamor of a June night, and a starlit sky, and the blue depths of the sea and of a girl's eyes, for the wizard sun had dispelled them long ere he awoke. But he did not telegraph to Simmonds.

Dale brought the car to the Grand Hotel in good time, and Medenham ran it some distance along the front before drawing up at the Metropole. By that means he dissipated any undue curiosity that might be experienced by some lounge on the pavement who happened to notice the change of chauffeurs, while he avoided a prolonged scrutiny by the visitors already packed in chairs on both sides of the porch. He kept his face hidden during the luggage strapping process, and professed not to be aware of Cynthia's presence until she bade him a cheery "Good-morning."

Of course, Marigny was there, and Mrs. Devar gushed loudly for the benefit of the other people while settling herself comfortably in the tonneau.

"It was awfully devey of you, Count Edouard, to enliven our first evening away from town. No such good fortune awaits us in Bournemouth, I am afraid."

"If I am to accept that charming reference as applying to myself, I can only say that *my* good fortune has exhausted itself already, madame," said the Frenchman. "When do you return to London?"

"About the end of next week," put in Cynthia.

"And your father – that delightful Monsieur Vanrenen," said the Count, breaking into French, "he will join you there?"

"Oh, yes. My father and I are seldom separated a whole fortnight."

"Then I shall have the pleasure of seeing you there. I go to-day to Salisbury – after that, to Hereford and Liverpool."

"Why, we shall be in Hereford one day soon. What fun if we met again!"

Marigny looked to heaven, or as far in the direction popularly assigned to heaven as the porch of the Metropole would permit. He was framing a suitable speech, but the Mercury shot out into the open road with a noiseless celerity that disconcerted him.

Medenham at once slackened speed and leaned back.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I clean forgot to ask if you were quite ready to start."

Cynthia laughed.

"Go right ahead, Fitzroy," she cried. "Guess the Count is pretty mad, anyhow. He was telling us last night that his Du Vallon is the only car that can hit up twenty at the first buzz."

"Unpardonable rudeness," murmured Mrs. Devar.

"On the Count's part?" asked the girl demurely.

"No, of course not – on the part of this chauffeur person."

"Oh, I like him," was the candid answer. "He is a chauffeur of moods, but he can make this car hum. He and I had quite a long chat last night after dinner."

Mrs. Devar sat up quickly.

"After dinner – last night!" she gasped.

"Yes – I ran into him outside the hotel."

“At what time?”

“About ten o’clock. I came to the lounge, but you had vanished, and the wonderful light on the sea drew me out of doors.”

“My dear Cynthia!”

“Well, go on; that sounds like the beginning of a letter.”

Mrs. Devar suddenly determined not to feel scandalized.

“Ah, well!” she sighed, “one must relax a little when touring, but you Americans have such free and easy manners that we staid Britons are apt to lose our breath occasionally when we hear of something out of the common.”

“From what Fitzroy said when I told him I was going as far as the pier unaccompanied it seems to me that you staid Britons can be freer if not easier,” retorted Miss Vanrenen.

Her friend smiled sourly.

“If he disapproved he was right, I admit,” she purred.

Cynthia withheld any further confidences.

“What a splendid morning!” she said. “England is marvelously attractive on a day like this. And now, where is the map? I didn’t look up our route yesterday evening. But Fitzroy has it. We lunch at Winchester, I know, and there I see my first English Cathedral. Father advised me to leave St. Paul’s until I visit it with him. He says it is the most perfect building in the world architecturally, but that no one would realize it unless the facts were pointed out. When we were in Rome he said that St. Peter’s, grand as it is, is all wrong in construction. The thrust downwards from the dome is false, it seems.”

“Really,” said Mrs. Devar, who had just caught sight of Lady Somebody-or-other at the window of a house in Hove, and hoped that her ladyship’s eyes were sufficiently good to distinguish at least one occupant of the car.

“Yes; and Sir Christopher Wren mixed beams of oak with the stonework of his pillars, too. It gave them strength, he believed, though Michael Angelo had probably never heard of such a thing.”

“You don’t say so.”

The other woman had traveled far on similar conversational counters. They would have failed with Cynthia, but the girl had opened the map, and talk lagged for the moment.

Leaving the coast at Shoreham, Medenham turned the car northward at Bramber, with its stone-roofed cottages gilded with lichen, its tiny gardens gay with flowers, and the ruins of its twelfth-century castle frowning from the crest of an elm-clothed hill. Two miles to the northwest they came upon ancient Steyning, now a sleepy country town, but of greater importance than Bath or Birmingham or Southampton in the days of the Confessor, and redolent of the past by reason of its church, with an early Norman chancel, its houses bearing stone moldings and window mullions of the Elizabethan period, and its quaint street names, such as Dog Lane, Sheep-pen Street, and Chantry Green, where two martyrs were burnt.

Thence the way lay through the leafy wonderland of West Sussex, when the Mercury crept softly through Midhurst and Petersfield into Hampshire, and so to Winchester, where Cynthia, enraptured with the cathedral, used up a whole reel of films, and bought some curios carved out of oak imbedded in the walls when the Conqueror held England in his firm grip.

They lunched at a genuine old coaching-house in the main street, and Medenham persuaded the girl to turn aside from Salisbury in order to pass through the heart of the New Forest. She sat with him in front then, and their talk dealt more with the magnificent scenery than with personal matters until they reached Ringwood, where they halted for tea.

Before alighting at the inn there she asked him where he meant to stay in Bournemouth. He answered the one question by another.

“You put up at the Bath Hotel, I think?” he said.

“Yes. Someone told me it was more like a Florentine picture gallery than a hotel. Is that true?”

“I have not been to Florence, but the picture gallery notion is all right. When I was a youngster I came here often, and my – my people always – well, you see – ”

He nibbled his mustache in dismay, for it was hard to keep up a pretense when Cynthia was so near. She ended the sentence for him.

“You came to the Bath Hotel. Why not stay there to-night?”

“I would like it very much, if you have no objection.”

“Just the opposite. But – please forgive me for touching on money matters – the charges may be rather dear. Won’t you let me tell the head waiter to – to include your bill with ours?”

“On the strict condition that you deduct twelve shillings from my account,” he said, stealing a glance at her.

“I shall be quite business-like, I promise.”

She was smiling at the landscape, or at some fancy that took her, perhaps. But it followed that a messenger was sent for Dale to the hostelry where he had booked a room for his master, and that Mrs. Devar, after one stony and indignant glare, whispered to Cynthia in the dining-room:

“Can that man in evening dress, sitting alone near the window, by any possibility be our chauffeur?”

“Yes,” laughed the girl. “That is Fitzroy. Say, doesn’t he look fine and dandy? Don’t you wish he was with us – to order the wine? And, by the way, is there a pier at Bournemouth?”

CHAPTER IV

SHADOWS – WITH OCCASIONAL GLEAMS

Mrs. Devar ate her soup in petrified silence. Among the diners were at least two peers and a countess, all of whom she knew slightly; at no other time during the last twenty years would she have missed such an opportunity of impressing the company in general and her companion in particular by waddling from table to table and greeting these acquaintances with shrill volubility.

But to-night she was beginning to be alarmed. Her youthful protégée was carrying democratic training too far; it was quite possible that a request to modify an unconventional freedom of manner where Fitzroy was concerned would meet with a blank refusal. That threatened a real difficulty in the near future, and she was much perturbed by being called on to decide instantly on a definite course of action. Too strong a line might have worse consequences than a *laissez faire* attitude. As matters stood, the girl was eminently plastic, her naturally gentle disposition inducing respect for the opinions and wishes of an older and more experienced woman, yet there was a fearlessness, a frank candor of thought, in Cynthia's character that awed and perplexed Mrs. Devar, in whom the unending struggle to keep afloat in the swift and relentless torrent of social existence had atrophied every sense save that of self-preservation. An open rupture, such as she feared might take place if she asserted her shadowy authority, was not to be dreamed of. What was to be done? Small wonder, then, that she should tackle her fish vindictively.

"Are you angry because Fitzroy is occupying the same hotel as ourselves?" asked Cynthia at last.

The girl had amused herself by watching the small coteries of stiff and starched Britons scattered throughout the room; she was endeavoring to classify the traveled and the untraveled by varying degrees of frigidity. As it happened, she was wholly wrong in her rough analysis. The Englishman who has wandered over the map is, if anything, more self-contained than his stay-at-home brother. He is often a stranger in his own land, and the dozen most reserved men present that evening were probably known by name and deed throughout the widest bounds of the empire.

But, though eyes and brain were busy, she could not help noticing Mrs. Devar's taciturn mood. That a born gossip, a retailer of personal reminiscences confined exclusively to "the best people," should eat stolidly for five consecutive minutes, seemed somewhat of a miracle, and Cynthia, as was her habit, came straight to the point.

Mrs. Devar managed to smile, pouting her lips in wry mockery of the suggestion that a chauffeur's affairs should cause her any uneasiness whatsoever.

"I was really thinking of our tour," she lied glibly. "I am so sorry you missed seeing Salisbury Cathedral. Why was the route altered?"

"Because Fitzroy remarked that the cathedral would always remain at Salisbury, whereas a perfect June day in the New Forest does not come once in a blue moon when one really wants it."

"For a person of his class he appears to say that sort of thing rather well."

Cynthia's arched eyebrows were raised a little.

"Why do you invariably insist on the class distinction?" she cried. "I have always been taught that in England the barrier of rank is being broken down more and more every day. Your society is the easiest in the world to enter. You tolerate people in the highest circles who would certainly suffer from cold feet if they showed up too prominently in New York or Philadelphia; isn't it rather out of fashion to be so exclusive?"

"Our aristocracy has such an assured position that it can afford to unbend," quoted the other.

"Oh, is that it? I heard my father say the other day that it has often made him tired to see the way in which some of your titled nonentities grovel before a Lithuanian Jew who is a power on the Rand. But unbending is a different thing to groveling, perhaps?"

Mrs. Devar sighed, yet she gave a moment's scrutiny to a wine-list brought by the head waiter. "A small bottle of 61, please," she said in an undertone.

Then she sighed again, deprecating the Vanrenen directness.

"Unfortunately, my dear, few of our set can avoid altogether the worship of the golden calf."

Cynthia thrust an obstinate chin into the argument.

"People will do things for bread and butter that they would shy at if independent," she said.

"I can understand the calf proposition much more easily than the snobbishness that would forbid a gentleman like Fitzroy from eating a meal in the same apartment as his employers, simply because he earns money by driving an automobile."

In her earnestness, Cynthia had gone just a little beyond the bounds of fair comment, and Mrs. Devar was quick to seize the advantage thus offered.

"From some points of view, Fitzroy and I are in the same boat," she said quietly. "Still, I cannot agree that it is snobbish to regard a groom or a coachman as a social inferior. I have been told that there are several broken-down gentlemen driving omnibuses in London, but that is no reason why one should ask one of them to dinner, even though his taste in wine might be beyond dispute."

Cynthia had already regretted her impulsive outburst. Her vein of romance was imbedded in a rock of good sense, and she took the implied reproof penitently.

"I am afraid my sympathies rather ran away with my manners," she said. "Please forgive me. I really didn't mean to charge you with being a snob. The absurdity of the statement carries its own refutation. I spoke in general terms, and I am willing to admit that I was wrong in asking the man to come here to-night. But the incident happened quite naturally. He mentioned the fact that he often stayed in the hotel as a boy –"

"Very probably," agreed Mrs. Devar cheerfully. "We are all subject to ups and downs. For my part, I was speaking *à la* chaperon, my sole thought being to safeguard you from the disagreeable busy-bodies who misconstrue one's motives. And now, let us talk of something more amusing. You see that woman in old rose brocade – she is sitting with a bald-headed man at the third table on your left. Well, that is the Countess of Porthcawl, and the man with her is Roger Ducrot, the banker. Porthcawl is a most complaisant husband. He never comes within a thousand miles of Millicent. She is awfully nice; clever, and witty, and the rest of it – quite a man's woman. We are sure to meet her in the lounge after dinner and I will introduce you."

Cynthia said she would be delighted. Reading between the lines of Mrs. Devar's description, it was not easy to comprehend the distinction that forbade friendship with Fitzroy while offering it with Millicent, Countess of Porthcawl. But the girl was resolved not to open a new rift. In her heart she longed for the day that would reunite her to her father; meanwhile, Mrs. Devar must be dealt with gently.

Despite its tame ending, this unctuous discussion on social ethics led to wholly unforeseen results.

The allusion to a possible pier at Bournemouth meant more than Mrs. Devar imagined, but Cynthia resisted the allurements of another entrancing evening, went early to her room, and wrote duty letters for a couple of hours. The excuse served to cut short her share of the Countess's brilliant conversation, though Mr. Ducrot tried to make himself very agreeable when he heard the name of Vanrenen.

Medenham, standing in the hall, suddenly came face to face with Lady Porthcawl, who was endowed with an unerring eye for minute shades of distinction in the evening dress garments of the opposite sex. Her correspondence consisted largely of picture postcards, and she had just purchased some stamps from the hall porter when she saw Medenham take a telegram from the rack where it had been reposing since the afternoon. It was, she knew, addressed to "Viscount Medenham." That, and her recollection of his father, banished doubt.

“George!” she cried, with a charming air of having found the one man whom she was longing to meet, “don’t say I’ve grown so old that you have forgotten me!”

He started, rather more violently than might be looked for in a shikari whose nerves had been tested in many a ticklish encounter with other members of the cat tribe. In fact, he had just been disturbed by coming across the unexpected telegram, wherein Simmonds assured his lordship that the rejuvenated car would arrive at the College Green Hotel, Bristol, on Friday evening. At the very moment that he realized the imminence of Cynthia’s disappearance into the void it was doubly disconcerting to be hailed by a woman who knew his world so intimately that it would be folly to smile vacantly at her presumed mistake.

Some glint of annoyance must have leaped to his eyes, for the lively countess glanced around with a mimic fright that testified to her skill as an actress.

“Good gracious!” she whispered, “have I given you away? I couldn’t guess you were here under a *nom de voyage*— now, could I? — when that telegram has been staring at everybody for hours.”

“You have misinterpreted my amazement, Lady Porthcawl,” he said, spurred into self-possession by the hint at an intrigue. “I could not believe that time would turn back even for a pretty woman. You look younger than ever, though I have not seen you for — ”

“Oh, hush!” she cried. “Don’t spoil your nice speech by counting years. When did you arrive in England? Are you alone — really? You’ve grown quite a man in your jungles. Will you come to the lounge? I want ever so much to have a long talk with you. Mr. Ducrot is there — the financier, you know — but I have left him safely anchored alongside Maud Devar — a soft-furred old pussie who is clawing me now behind my back, I am sure. Have you ever met her? Wiggy Devar she was christened in Monte, because an excited German leaned over her at the tables one night and things happened to her coiffure. And to show you how broad-minded I am, I’ll get her to bring downstairs the sweetest and daintiest American ingénue you’d find between here and Chicago, even if you went by way of Paris. Cynthia Vanrenen is her name, daughter of *the* Vanrenen. He made, not a pile, but a pyramid, out of Milwaukeees. She is *it*— a pukka Gibson girl, quite ducky, with the dearest bit of an accent, and Mamma Devar is gadding around with her in a mo-car. Do come!”

Medenham was able to pick and choose where he listed in answering this hail of words.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he said, “but the telegram I have just received affects all my plans. I must hurry away this instant. When will you be in town? Then I shall call, praying meanwhile that there may be no Ducrots or Devars there to blight a glorious gossip. If you bring me up to date as to affairs in Park Lane I’ll reciprocate about the giddy equator. How — or perhaps I ought to say where — is Porthcawl?”

“In China,” snapped her ladyship, fully alive to Medenham’s polite evasion of her blandishments.

“By gad,” he laughed, “that is a long way from Bournemouth. Well, good-bye. Keep me a date in Clarges Street.”

“Clarges Street is off the map,” she said coldly. “It’s South Belgravia, verging on Pimlico, nowadays. That is why Porthcawl is in China ... and it explains Ducrot, too.”

An unconscious bitterness crept into the smooth voice; Medenham, who hated confidences from the butterfly type of woman, nevertheless pitied her.

“Tell me where you live and I’ll come round and hear all about it,” he said sympathetically.

She gave him an address, and suddenly smiled on him with a yearning tenderness. She watched his tall figure as he strode down the hill towards the town to keep an imaginary appointment.

“He used to be a nice boy,” she sighed, “and now he is a man... Heigh-ho, you’re a back number, Millie, dear!”

But she was her own bright self when she returned to the bald-headed Ducrot and the bewigged Mrs. Devar.

“What a small world it is!” she vowed. “I ran across Medenham in the hall.”

The banker's shining forehead wrinkled in a reflective frown.

"Medenham?" he said.

"Fairholme's eldest son."

Mrs. Devar chortled.

"Such fun!" she said. "Our chauffeur calls himself George Augustus Fitzroy."

"How odd!" agreed Countess Millicent.

"You people speak in riddles. Who or what is odd?" asked Ducrot.

"Oh, don't worry, but listen to that adorable waltz." Ducrot's polished dome compared badly with the bronzed skin of the nice boy who had grown to be a man, so her ladyship's rebellious tongue sought safety in silence, since she could not afford to quarrel with him.

It is certainly true that the gods make mad those whom they mean to destroy. Never was woman nearer to a momentous discovery than Mrs. Devar at that instant, but her active brain was plotting how best to develop a desirable acquaintance in Roger Ducrot, financier, and she missed utterly the astounding possibility that Viscount Medenham and George Augustus Fitzroy might be one and the same person.

In any other conditions Millicent Porthcawl's sharp wits could scarcely have failed to ferret out the truth. Even if Cynthia were present it was almost a foregone conclusion that the girl would have told how Fitzroy joined her. The luncheon provided for a missing aunt, the crest on the silver and linen, the style of the Mercury, a chance allusion to this somewhat remarkable chauffeur's knowledge of the South Downs and of Bournemouth, would surely have put her ladyship on the right track. From sheer enjoyment of an absurd situation she would have caused Fitzroy to be summoned then and there, if only to see Wiggy Devar's crestfallen face on learning that she had entertained a viscount unawares.

But the violins were singing the Valse Bleu, and Cynthia was upstairs, longing for an excuse to venture forth into the night, and three people, at least, in the crowded lounge were thinking of anything but the amazing oddity that had puzzled Ducrot, who did not con his Burke.

Medenham, of course, realized that he had been vouchsafed another narrow escape. What the morrow might bring forth he neither knew nor cared. The one disconcerting fact that already shaped itself in the mists of the coming day was Simmonds tearing breathlessly along the Bath Road during the all too brief hours between morn and evening.

It is not to be wondered at if he read Cynthia's thoughts. There is a language without code or symbol known to all young men and maidens – a language that pierces stout walls and leaps wide valleys – and that unlettered tongue whispered the hope that the girl might saunter towards the pier. He turned forthwith into the public gardens, and quickened his pace. Arrived at the pier, he glanced up at the hotel. Of girls there were many on cliff and roadway, girls summer-like in attire, girls slender of waist and airy of tread, but no Cynthia. He went on the pier, and met more than one pair of bright eyes, but not Cynthia's.

Then he made off in a fume to Dale's lodging, secured a linen dust-coat which the man happened to have with him, returned to the hotel, and hurried unseen to his room, an easy matter in the Royal Bath, where many staircases twine deviously to the upper floors, and brilliantly decorated walls dazzle the stranger.

He counted on the exigencies of Lady Porthcawl's toilette stopping a too early appearance in the morning, and he was right.

At ten o'clock, when Cynthia and Mrs. Devar came out, the men lounging near the porch were too interested in the girl and the car to bestow a glance on the chauffeur. Ducrot was there, bland and massive in a golf suit. He pestered Cynthia with inquiries as to the exact dates when her father would be in London, and Medenham did not hesitate to cut short the banker's awkward gallantries by throwing the Mercury into her stride with a whirl.

"By Jove, Ducrot," said someone, "your pretty friend's car jumped off like a gee-gee under the starting gate."

"If that chauffeur of hers was mine, I'd boot him," was the wrathful reply.

"Why? What's he done?"

"He strikes me as an impudent puppy."

"Anyhow, he can swing a motor. See that!" for the Mercury had executed a corkscrew movement between several vehicles with the sinuous grace of a greyhound.

Now it was Mrs. Devar, and not Cynthia, who leaned forward and said pleasantly:

"You seem to be in a hurry to leave Bournemouth, Fitzroy."

"I am not enamored of bricks and mortar on a fine morning," he answered.

"Well, I have full confidence in you, but don't embroil us with the police. We have a good deal to see to-day, I understand."

Then he heard the strenuous voice addressing Cynthia.

"Millicent Porthcawl says that Glastonbury is heavenly, and Wells a peaceful dream. I visited Cheddar once, some years ago, but it rained, and I felt like a watery cheese."

Lady Porthcawl's commendation ought to have sanctified Glastonbury and Wells – Mrs. Devar's blue-moldy joke might even have won a smile – but Cynthia was preoccupied; strange that she, too, should be musing of Simmonds and a hurrying car, for Medenham had told her that the transfer would take place at Bristol.

She was only twenty-two, and her very extensive knowledge of the world had been obtained by three years of travel and constant association with her father. But her lines had always been cast in pleasant places. She had no need to deny herself any of the delights that life has to offer to youth and good health and unlimited means. The discovery that friendship called for discretion came now almost as a shock. It seemed to be a stupid social law that barred the way when she wished to enjoy the company of a well-favored man whom fate had placed at her disposal for three whole days. Herself a blue-blooded American, descendant of old Dutch and New England families, she was quite able to discriminate between reality and sham. Mrs. Devar, she was sure, was a pinchbeck aristocrat; Count Edouard Marigny might have sprung from many generations of French gentlemen, but her paid chauffeur was his superior in every respect save one – since, to all appearance, Marigny was rich and Fitzroy was poor.

Curiously enough, the man whose alert shoulders and well-poised head were ever in view as the car hummed joyously through the pine woods had taken on something of the mere mechanic in aspect since donning that serviceable linen coat. The garment was weather-stained. It bore records of over-lubrication, of struggles with stiff outer covers, of rain and mud – that bird-lime type of mud peculiar to French military roads in the Alpes Maritimes – while a zealous detective might have found traces of the black and greasy deposit that collects on the door handles and side rails of P. L. M. railway carriages. Medenham borrowed it because of the intolerable heat of the leather jacket. Its distinctive character became visible when he viewed it in the June sunshine, and he wore it as a substitute for sackcloth, since he, no less than Cynthia, recognized that a dangerous acquaintance was drawing to an end. So Dale's coat imposed a shield, as it were, between the two, but the man drove with little heed to the witching scenery that Dorset unfolded at each turn of the road, and the woman sat distraught, almost downcast.

Mrs. Devar was smugly complacent. Difficulties that loomed large overnight were now vague shadows. When the Mercury stopped in front of a comfortable inn at Yeovil it was she, and not Cynthia, who suggested a social departure.

"This seems to be the only place in the town where luncheon is provided. You had better leave the car in charge of a stableman, and join us, Fitzroy," she said graciously.

"Thank you, madam," said Medenham, rousing himself from a reverie, "I prefer to remain here. The hotel people will look after my slight wants, as I dislike the notion of anyone tampering with the engine while I am absent."

“Is it so delicate, then?” asked Cynthia, with a smile that he hardly understood, since he could not know how thoroughly he had routed Mrs. Devar’s theories of the previous night.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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