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Содержание

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I. – LORD STRANLEIGH ALL AT SEA

A few minutes before noon on a hot summer day, Edmund Trevelyan walked up the gang-plank of the steamship, at that moment the largest Atlantic liner afloat. Exactly at the stroke of twelve she would leave Southampton for Cherbourg, then proceed across to Queenstown, and finally would make a bee-line west for New York. Trevelyan was costumed in rough tweed of subdued hue, set off by a cut so well-fitting and distinguished that it seemed likely the young man would be looked upon by connoisseurs of tailoring as the best-dressed passenger aboard. He was followed by Ponderby, his valet, whose usually expressionless face bore a look of dissatisfaction with his lot, as though he had been accustomed to wait upon the nobility, and was now doomed to service with a mere commoner. His lack of content, however, was caused by a dislike to ocean travel in the first place, and his general disapproval of America in the second. A country where all men are free and equal possessed no charms for Ponderby, who knew he had no equal, and was not going to

demean himself by acknowledging the possibility of such.

Once on deck, his master turned to him and said —

"You will go, Ponderby, to my suite of rooms, and see that my luggage is placed where it should be, and also kindly satisfy yourself that none of it is missing."

Ponderby bowed in a dignified manner, and obeyed without a word, while Trevelyan mounted the grand staircase, moving with an easy nonchalance suited to a day so inordinately hot. The prospect of an ocean voyage in such weather was in itself refreshing, and so prone is mankind to live in the present, and take no thought of the morrow, that Trevelyan had quite forgotten the cablegrams he read in the papers on his way down from London, to the effect that New York was on the grill, its inhabitants sweltering – sleeping on the house-tops, in the parks, on the beach at Coney Island, or wherever a breath of air could be had. On the upper deck his slow steps were arrested by an exclamation —

"Isn't this Mr. Trevelyan?"

The man who made the enquiry wore the uniform of the ship's company.

"Ah, doctor, I was thinking of you at this moment. I read in the papers that you had been promoted, and I said to myself: 'After all, this is not an ungrateful world, when the most skilful and most popular medical officer on the Atlantic is thus appreciated.'"

"Ah, you put it delightfully, Trevelyan, but I confess I hesitated about adding, at my time of life, to the burden I carry."

"Your time of life, doctor! Why you always make me feel an old man by comparison with yourself; yet you'll find me skipping about the decks like a boy."

"If you'll take the right-hand seat at my table, I'll keep an eye on you, and prevent you from skipping overboard," laughed the doctor.

"Indeed, that was the boon I intended to crave."

"Then the seat is yours, Trevelyan. By the way, I read in the newspapers that Evelyn Trevelyan is none other than Lord Stranleigh; but then, of course, you can never believe what you see in the press, can you?"

"Personally, I make no effort to do so. I get my news of the day from Ponderby, who is an inveterate reader of the principal journals favoured by what he calls the 'upper classes.' But I assure you that Evelyn Trevelyan is a name that belongs to me, and I wear it occasionally like an old, comfortable-fitting coat."

"Ah, well, I'll not give you away. I'll see you at lunch between here and Cherbourg." And the doctor hurried away to his duties.

The young man continued his stroll, smiling as he remembered some of the doctor's excellent stories. He regarded his meeting with that friendly officer as a good omen, but hoped he would encounter no one else who knew him.

The next interruption of his walk proved to be not so pleasant. There came up the deck with nervous tread a shabbily-dressed man, who appeared from ten to fifteen years older than Stranleigh, although in reality there was no great disparity in

their ages. His face was haggard and lined with anxiety, and his eyes had that furtive, penetrating glance which distinguishes the inveterate gambler. Stranleigh watched his oncoming with amazement.

The Hon. John Hazel had been a member of some of the most exclusive clubs in London; but whether or not Nature had endowed him with a useful talent, he had become notorious as a reckless cardsharper, quite unscrupulous when it came to obtaining money. No one knew this better than Lord Stranleigh, who had been so often his victim, yet had regarded his losses lightly, and forgiven the Hon. John time and again. But recently this younger son of an ancient and honourable house had committed the unpardonable sin – he had been found out, and had been permitted to resign from all his clubs but one, and from which he was expelled by a committee not so lenient. After that he disappeared. He was done for, so far as England was concerned, and he knew it.

"John, is this possible?" cried Lord Stranleigh, as the other approached.

Hazel stopped, his eyes veiling over, as though he held a hand at poker that was unbeatable.

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing you, sir," he said haughtily.

"I'm glad of that, because I'm Edmund Trevelyan at the moment, and was just hoping I should meet no one on board who would recognise me."

"I don't know Edmund Trevelyan, and have no wish to make

his acquaintance," returned the other coldly.

"That's quite all right, and your wish does you credit. Trevelyan has no desire to force his friendship on any man. Nevertheless, Jack, time was when I helped you out of a hole, and, if occasion arose, I should be glad to do it again."

"You could have prevented my expulsion from the Camperdown Club, had you but cared to raise a finger," said the other hotly.

"Hazel, you are mistaken. I did all I could for you, as in other crises of the same nature. The committee proved to be adamant, and rather prided themselves on their independence, as if they were a group of blooming Radicals. The House of Lords isn't what it was, Jack, as, alas, you may learn, should you ever come into the title of your family, although many people stand between you and it at the present moment. Indeed, Jack, it has been on my conscience that my urgent advocacy prejudiced your case instead of helping it."

"Ah, well, that's all past; it doesn't matter now," said the other, with a sigh. "I have shaken the dust of England for ever from my feet."

"The mud, you mean."

"Oh, I admit I wallowed in the mud, but it was dust when I left London this morning. Ah, we're off! I must be going." And he moved away from the rail of the ship, where he had been gazing over the side.

"Going? Where?"

"Where I belong. I'm travelling third-class. The moment the steamer gets under way, I have no right on the cabin deck. Before she left, I took the liberty of a sightseer to wander over the steamship."

"My dear Jack," said his former friend, in a grave voice, "this will never do; you cannot cross the Atlantic in the steerage."

"I have visited my quarters, and find them very comfortable. I have been in much worse places recently. Steerage is like everything else maritime – like this bewilderingly immense steamer, for example – vastly improved since Robert Louis Stevenson took his trip third-class to New York."

"Well, it is a change for a luxury-loving person like my friend the Hon. John Hazel."

"It is very condescending of you to call me your friend. Nobody else would do it," replied the Hon. John bitterly.

"Condescension be hanged! I'm rather bewildered, that's all, and wish for further particulars. Are you turning over a new leaf, then?"

"A new leaf? A thousand of them! I have thrown away the old book, with its blotches and ink-stains. I'm starting a blank volume that I hope will bear inspection and not shock even the rectitude of the Camperdown Committee."

"What's the programme?"

"I don't quite know yet; it will depend on circumstances. I think it's the West for me – sort of back-to-the-land business. I yearn to become a kind of moral cowboy. It seems the only

thing I'm at all equipped for. I can ride well and shoot reasonably straight."

"I thought," said Stranleigh, "that phase of life had disappeared with Bret Harte. Is there any money in your inside pocket?"

"How could there be?"

"Then why not let me grub-stake you, which I believe is the correct Western term."

"As how, for instance?"

"I'll secure for you a comfortable cabin, and you will pay the damage when you strike oil out West, so, you see, there's no humiliating condescension about the offer."

"I'm sure there isn't, and it's very good of you, Stranleigh, but I can't dress the part."

"That's easily arranged. Ponderby always over-dresses me. His idea of this world is that there is London, and the rest of the planet is a wilderness. You could no more persuade him that a decent suit might be made in New York than that I am the worst-dressed man in London. You and I are about the same height and build. Ponderby will have in my mountainous luggage anywhere from twenty-five to forty suits never yet worn by me. I don't know on what principle he goes, but as the last time we went to America he took twenty-five new suits, and we crossed in a twenty-five thousand ton boat, he is likely to have at least forty-five suits for this forty-five thousand ton steamship, and he will feel as much pleasure in rigging you out as he took in the crowning of the new

King."

"Very good of you, Stranleigh, but I cannot accept."

"I am pleading for Ponderby's sake. Besides, there's one practical point you have overlooked. If you attempt to land from the steerage – travelling under an assumed name, I suppose – "

"Like yourself, Stranleigh."

"No, I own the name 'Trevelyan.' But, as I was saying, if you attempt to land rather shabbily dressed and almost penniless, you will find yourself turned back as an undesirable alien, whereas you can go ashore from the first cabin unquestioned, save for those amazing queries the U.S.A. Government puts to one, the answers to which Ponderby will be charmed to write out for you."

Hazel without reply walked back to the rail, leaned his arms on it, and fell into deep thought. Stranleigh followed him.

"Give me your ticket," he said.

Hazel took it from his pocket and handed it over.

"Have you any luggage?"

"Only a portmanteau, which I placed in my bunk. It contains a certain amount of necessary linen."

"Wait here until I find out what there is to be had in the first cabin."

Stranleigh went down to the purser, and that overworked official threw him a friendly glance, which nevertheless indicated that his time was valuable.

"My name is Trevelyan," said the young man.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Trevelyan. You have our premier suite. How do

you like your accommodation?"

"I haven't seen it yet. I have just discovered a friend, a rather eccentric man, who had made up his mind to cross the Atlantic in the steerage. One of those silly bets, you know, which silly young men make in our silly London clubs, and I have persuaded him out of it."

"Our steerage is supposed to be rather comfortable, Mr. Trevelyan."

"So he says, but I want his company on deck, and not on the steerage deck at that. Have you got anything vacant along my avenue?"

The purser consulted his written list.

"Nobody with him?"

"He's quite alone."

"All the larger cabins are taken, but I can give him No. 4390."

"I suppose, like your steerage, it is comfortable?" said Stranleigh, with a smile.

"It is, yet it's not a private hotel like your quarters."

"Oh, he'll not grumble. Will you send a steward to carry his portmanteau from the number indicated on this steerage ticket to his new room? Meanwhile, I'll have transferred to him his luggage that I brought from London."

The purser rapidly wrote out a new ticket, and took the difference in five-pound notes.

"Are you going to your quarters now?" the purser asked.

"Yes, I must give some instructions to my man."

"Then it will give me great pleasure to show you the way there," said the purser, rising and locking the door; and in spite of Stranleigh's protest against his taking the trouble, he led him to a series of rooms that would have satisfied a much more exacting person than his young lordship. When the purser had returned to his duties, Stranleigh said to Ponderby —

"The Hon. John Hazel is aboard, and his cabin is No. 4390. He had to leave London in a great hurry and without the necessary luggage."

Ponderby's eyes lit up with an expression which said – "I knew that would happen sooner or later." But he uttered no word, and cast down his eyes when he saw his master had noticed the glance. Stranleigh spoke coldly and clearly.

"How many new suits have you provided for me?"

"Thirty-seven, my lord."

"Very well. Clear out one or two boxes, and pack a dress-suit and two or three ordinary suits; in fact, costume the Hon. John Hazel just as you would costume me. Call a steward, and order the box to be taken to his room. Lay out for him an everyday garb, and get all this done as quickly as possible."

His lordship proceeded leisurely to the upper deck once more, and found Hazel just as he had left him, except that he was now gazing at the fleeting shore, green and village-studded, of the Isle of Wight.

"Here you are," said Stranleigh breezily, handing the Hon. John the cabin ticket.

There was a weak strain in Hazel's character, otherwise he would never had come to the position in which he found himself, and he now exhibited the stubbornness which has in it the infallible signs of giving way.

"I really cannot accept it," he said, his lower lip trembling perceptibly.

"Tut, tut! It's all settled and done with. Your room is No. 4390. You will find your bag there, and also a box from my habitation. Come along – I'll be your valet. Luncheon will be on shortly, and I want your company."

Stranleigh turned away, and Hazel followed him.

Cabin 4390 could not be compared with the luxurious suite that Stranleigh was to occupy, yet, despite the purser's hesitation to overpraise it, the cabin was of a size and promise of comfort that would have been found in few liners a decade ago. Ponderby was on hand, and saved his master the fag of valeting, and when finally the Hon. John emerged, he was quite his old jaunty self again – a well-dressed man who would not have done discredit even to the Camperdown Club.

"I have secured a place for you," said Stranleigh, "next to myself at the doctor's table. I flatter myself on having made this transfer with more tact than I usually display, for I am somewhat stupid in the main, trusting others to carry out my ideas rather than endeavouring to shine as a diplomatist myself. The purser – the only official aware of the change – thinks you made a bet to go over steerage, and will probably forget all about the matter.

The question is, under what name shall I introduce you to the doctor?"

"What would you advise?" asked Hazel. "The name on my steerage ticket is William Jones."

"Oh, that's no good as a *nom de guerre*– too palpably a name chosen by an unimaginative man. I should sail under your own colours if I were you."

"Good! Then John Hazel I am, and so will remain. As a guarantee of good faith, I promise you not to touch a card all the way across."

"A good resolution; see that you keep it." And thus they enjoyed an appetising lunch together, and were regaled with one of the doctor's best salads.

They got away from Cherbourg before the dinner hour, and after that meal Stranleigh and Hazel walked together on the main deck, until the latter, admitting he was rather fagged after the exciting events of the day, went off to his cabin, and Stranleigh was left alone to smoke a final cigar. He leaned on the rail and gazed meditatively at the smooth sea.

It was an ideal evening, and Stranleigh felt at peace with all the world. There exists a popular belief that the rich are overburdened with care. This may be true while they are in the money-making struggle, but it is not a usual fault when the cash is in the bank or safely invested. Stranleigh occasionally lost money, but an immense amount had been bequeathed him, and he made many millions more than he had parted with, although he claimed

this was merely because of a series of flukes, maintaining that, whenever he set to work that part of him known as his brains, he invariably came a cropper.

"You are Mr. Trevelyan, are you not?" said a very musical feminine voice at his elbow. Stranleigh turned in surprise, and seeing there a most charming young woman, he flung his partially consumed cigar into the sea.

"Yes," he replied, "my name is Trevelyan. How did you know?"

That rare smile came to his lips – a smile, people said, which made you feel instinctively you could trust him; and many ladies who were quite willing to bestow their trust, called it fascinating.

"I am afraid," said the girl, whose beautiful face was very serious, and whose large dark eyes seemed troubled – "I am afraid that I enacted the part of unintentional eavesdropper. I had some business with the purser – business that I rather shrank from executing. You came to his window just before I did, for I was hesitating."

"I am sorry," said Stranleigh, "if I obtruded myself between you and that official. Being rather limited in intelligence, my mind can attend to only one thing at a time, and I must confess I did not see you."

"I know you did not," retorted the girl. "There was no obtrusion. You were first comer, and therefore should have been first served, as was the case."

"I would willingly have given up my place and whatever rights

I possessed in the matter, had I known a lady was waiting."

"I am sure of it. However, your conversation with the purser gave me a welcome respite, and, thinking over the crisis, I determined to consult you before I spoke to him; thus I have taken the unusual step of bringing myself to your notice."

"In what way can I assist you, madam?" asked Stranleigh, a return of his usual caution showing itself in the instant stiffening of manner and coldness of words.

"I learned you were exchanging, on behalf of a friend, a third-class ticket for a place in the cabin. I judged from this that you are a good-hearted man, and my attention was attracted when you introduced yourself to the purser as Trevelyan, because Trevelyan is my own name."

"Really?" ejaculated his lordship. "Have you relatives near Wychwood? You are English, are you not?"

"I am English, and a distant connection with the family of Trevelyan, near Wychwood, none of whom, however, I have yet met, unless you happen to belong to that branch."

"I do," said Stranleigh. "And now tell me, if you please, what is your difficulty?"

"I wish to ask you if the steerage ticket you gave the purser was taken in part payment for the cabin ticket, or did you forfeit it altogether?"

"That I can't tell you," said Stranleigh, with a laugh. "I am not accustomed to the transaction of business, and this little arrangement had to be made quickly."

Although his lordship spoke lightly and pleasantly the girl appeared to have some difficulty in proceeding with her story. The large eyes were quite evidently filling with tears, and of all things in the world Stranleigh loathed an emotional scene. The girl was obviously deeply depressed, whatever the cause.

"Well," he said jauntily and indeed encouragingly, "we were talking of first and third-class tickets. What have you to say about them?"

"I speak of the steerage ticket only. If you haven't forfeited it, you have the right to demand its return."

"I suppose so. Still, it is of no particular use to me."

"No, but it would be vital to me. Coming down in the train from London, my purse was stolen, or perhaps I lost it when giving up my railway ticket. So I am now without either money or transportation voucher."

"Was it for cabin passage?"

"Yes."

"In that case you will have no difficulty; your name will be on the purser's list. Do you know the number of your state-room?"

"No, I do not, and, so far as my name goes, I can expect no help from that quarter, because the name I travel under is not Miss Trevelyan."

"Good gracious," cried Stranleigh, "there are three of us! This ship should be called *Incognita*. Was your money also in that purse?"

"Yes, all my gold and bank-notes, and I am left with merely

some silver and coppers."

"Then the third-class ticket would not be of the slightest use to you. As I had to point out to another person on a similar occasion, you would not be allowed to land, so we will let that third-class ticket drop into oblivion. If you are even distantly related to the Trevelyan family, I could not think of allowing you to travel steerage. Are you alone?"

"Yes," she murmured almost inaudibly.

"Well, then, it is better that you should make all arrangements with the purser yourself. As I told you, I am not particularly good at business affairs. You give to him the name under which you purchased your ticket. You bought it in London, I suppose?"

"Yes," she murmured again.

"Mention to him the name you used then. He will look up his list, and allot you the state-room you paid for. It is probable he may have the power to do this without exacting any excess fare; but if such is not the case, settle with him for your passage, and take his receipt. The money will doubtless be refunded at New York. Here is a fifty-pound note, and you can carry out the transaction much better than I. But stop a moment. Do you remember how much you paid for the room?"

"Twenty-five pounds."

"That will leave you only the remaining twenty-five for New York, which is an expensive place, so we must make the loan a hundred pounds. Leave me your address, and if you do not hear from your people before that loan is expended, you may have

whatever more you need. You will, of course, repay me at your convenience. I will give you the name of my New York agents."

The eyes had by this time brimmed over, and the girl could not speak. Stranleigh took from his pocket-book several Bank of England notes. Selecting two for fifty pounds each, he handed them to her.

"Good-night!" he said hurriedly.

"Good-night!" she whispered.

After dinner on the day the liner left Queenstown, Lord Stranleigh sat in a comfortable chair in the daintily furnished drawing-room of his suite. A shaded electric light stood on the table at his elbow, and he was absorbed in a book he had bought before leaving London. Stranleigh was at peace with all the world, and his reading soothed a mind which he never allowed to become perturbed if he could help it. He now thanked his stars that he was sure of a week undisturbed by callers and free from written requests. Just at this moment he was amazed to see the door open, and a man enter without knock or other announcement. His first thought was to wonder what had become of Ponderby – how had the stranger eluded him? It was a ruddy-faced, burly individual who came in, and, as he turned round to shut the door softly, Stranleigh saw that his thick neck showed rolls of flesh beneath the hair. His lordship placed the open book face downwards on the table, but otherwise made no motion.

"Lord Stranleigh, I presume?" said the stranger.

Stranleigh made no reply, but continued gazing at the intruder.

"I wish to have a few words with you, and considered it better to come to your rooms than to accost you on deck. What I have to say is serious, and outside we might have got into an altercation, which you would regret."

"You need have no fear of any altercation with me," said Stranleigh.

"Well, at least you desire to avoid publicity, otherwise you would not be travelling under an assumed name."

"I am not travelling under an assumed name."

The stout man waved his hand in deprecation of unnecessary talk.

"I will come to the point at once," he said, seating himself without any invitation.

"I shall be obliged if you do so."

The new-comer's eyes narrowed, and a threatening expression overspread his rather vicious face.

"I want to know, Lord Stranleigh, and I have a right to ask, why you gave a hundred pounds to my wife."

"To your wife?" echoed Stranleigh in amazement.

"Yes. I have made a memorandum of the numbers, and here they are – two fifty-pound notes. Bank of England. Do you deny having given them to her?"

"I gave two fifty-pound notes to a young lady, whose name, I understood, was Trevelyan – a name which I also bear. She informed me, and somehow I believed her, that her purse containing steamship ticket and money, had been lost or stolen."

A wry smile twisted the lips of the alleged husband.

"Oh, that's the story is it? Would you be surprised if the young lady in question denied that *in toto*?"

"I should not be astonished at anything," replied his lordship, "if you are in possession of the actual bank-notes I gave to her."

"She describes your having taken these flimsies from a number of others you carry in your pocket. Would you mind reading me the number of others you carry in your pocket. Would you mind reading me the number of the next note in your collection?"

"Would you mind reading me the numbers on the notes you hold?" asked Stranleigh, in cool, even tones, making no sign of producing his own assets.

"Not at all," replied the other; whereupon he read them. The notes were evidently two of a series, and the numbers differed only by a single unit. Stranleigh nonchalantly took out his pocket-book, and the intruder's eyes glistened as he observed its bulk. Stranleigh glanced at the number on the top bank-note, and replaced his pocket-book, leaning back in his easy chair.

"You are quite right," he said. "Those are the notes I gave to Miss Trevelyan."

"I asked why."

"I told you why."

"That cock-and-bull story won't go down," said the other. "Even the richest men do not fling money about in such reckless fashion. They do it only for a favour given or a favour expected."

"I dare say you are right. But come to the point, as you said you would."

"Is that necessary?"

"I don't know that it is. You want money – as large an amount as can be squeezed from a man supposedly wealthy. You use your good-looking wife as a decoy – "

"You are casting aspersion on a lady quite unknown to you!" cried his visitor, with well-assumed indignation.

"Pardon me, you seem to be casting aspersion on her whom you say is your wife. I don't know how these notes got into your hands, but I'd be willing to stake double the amount that the lady is quite innocent in the matter. She certainly is so far as I am concerned. If the lady is your wife, what is her name? She told me she was travelling under a different title from that written on the lost ticket."

"I am not ashamed of my name, if you are of yours. My name is Branksome Poole."

"Ah, then she is Mrs. Branksome Poole?"

"Naturally."

Stranleigh reached out and drew towards him a passenger list. Running his eye down the column of cabin passengers, he saw there the names: "Mr. and Mrs. Branksome Poole."

"Well, Mr. Poole, we come to what is the final question – how much?"

"If you give me the roll of Bank of England notes which you exhibited a moment ago, I shall say nothing further about

the matter, and, understand me, there is no coercion about my request. You may accept or decline, just as you like. I admit that my wife and I do not get along well together, and although I consider I have a grievance against you, I am not assuming the injured husband *rôle* at all. If you decline, I shall make no scandal aboard ship, but will wait and take action against you the moment we arrive in New York."

"Very considerate of you, Mr. Poole. I understand that in New York the fountains of justice are perfectly pure, and that the wronged are absolutely certain of obtaining redress. I congratulate you on your choice of a battle-ground. Of course, you haven't the slightest thought of levying blackmail, but I prefer to spend my money on the best legal talent in America rather than trust any of it to you. It's a mere case of obstinacy on my part. And now, if you will kindly take your departure, I will get on with my book; I am at a most interesting point."

"I shall not take my departure," said Poole doggedly, "until we have settled this matter."

"The matter is settled." Stranleigh touched an electric button. An inside door opened, and Ponderby entered, looking in amazement at his master's visitor.

"Ponderby," said Lord Stranleigh, "in future I desire you to keep this outer door locked, so that whoever wishes to see me may come through your room. Take a good look at this gentleman, and remember he is not to be allowed within my suite again on any pretext. Meanwhile, show him into the corridor.

Take him through your room, and afterwards return and lock this other door."

Then occurred an extraordinary thing. Ponderby, for the first time in his life, disobeyed his master's instructions. Approaching the seated Poole, he said —

"Will you go quietly?"

"I'll not go, quietly or otherwise," answered the man stubbornly.

Ponderby opened the door by which Poole had entered, then, seizing him by the collar, lifted him, led him to the door, and pitched him out of the room across the corridor. Returning, he closed, locked, and bolted the door.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," said the panting Ponderby to his amazed master, "but I dare not take him through my room. His wife is there. She appears to have followed him. Anyhow, she recognised his voice, and told me hurriedly why she came. I locked the door to the passage, for, as I heard her story, I felt it might be serious, and at least you ought to hear what she has to say before you acted. I hope you will excuse the liberty I have taken, my lord."

"Ponderby, as I have often told you, you are a gem! I will go into your room, but you must remain there while I talk to this lady. No more *tête-à-tête* conversations with the unprotected for me."

"I think she is honest, my lord, but in deep trouble."

"I am glad to have my opinion corroborated by so good a judge

of character as yourself, Ponderby."

They went together to the valet's sitting-room, and there sat the woman, with her dark head bowed upon arms outstretched along the table, her shoulders shaking. She was plainly on the verge of hysterics, if, indeed, she had not already crossed the boundary line.

"Here is Mr. Trevelyan, madam," said Ponderby. "You wanted to speak with him."

She raised her head, dabbed her wet eyes nervously with her handkerchief, and made an effort to pull herself together. When she spoke, it was with rapid utterance, reeling off what she had to say as if it were a task learned by rote.

"I have at last come to the end of my tether, and to-night, if there is no prospect of freedom, I shall destroy myself. Before this I have often thought of suicide, but I am a cowardly person, and cling to life. Five years ago my father went out to America bent on a motor tour; he took me with him. Among other servants he engaged Charles Branksome, who had proved himself an expert chauffeur. He was English, and came to us well recommended. He intimated that he was of good family, but had his living to earn. He was handsome then, and had a most ingratiating manner. The person who called on you to-night bears little resemblance to the Branksome of five years ago. I had often gone motoring with him while in America, and I was young, and rather flighty: a foolish person altogether. Perhaps you read about it in the papers. I cannot dwell on the appalling mistake I made.

"We became very well acquainted, and at last he professed to have fallen in love with me, and I believed him. We were secretly married before a justice of the peace in America, and I was not long left in doubt as to the disaster that had befallen me. His sole desire was money. My father being wealthy, he hoped to get all he cared to demand. My father, however, is a very stubborn man, and, after his first shock on finding the episode made much of by the American papers, he refused to pay Branksome a penny, and returned forthwith to England. I never saw him again, nor could I get into communication with him. Two years after my mad act he died, and never even mentioned me in his will.

"My husband is a liar, a thief, a forger, a gambler, and a brute. He has maltreated me so that I have been left once or twice for dead, but finally he broke me to his will. He is known as a cheat in every gambling resort in Europe, and on the Atlantic liners. Lately I have been used as a decoy in the way of which you have had experience. Somehow he learned – indeed, that is his business – who were the rich travellers on this boat. He thought, as this was the newest and largest steamship on the ocean, its staff would not at first be thoroughly organised, and that he might escape detection. He pointed you out to me as you came on board, and said you were Lord Stranleigh, travelling as Mr. Trevelyan. The rest you know. He forced me to hand to him the money you had given, and told me it might be necessary for me to go on the witness-stand when we reached New York, but, as you were very wealthy, it is not likely you would allow it to go

so far as that. His plan was to demand a very moderate sum at first, which was to be a mere beginning, and each exaction would be but a prelude for the next. He is old at the game, and is wanted now by the authorities in New York for blackmailing a very well-known millionaire."

"Do you know the name of the millionaire?"

She gave him the information.

"Very well, madam. In the first place, you must do nothing reckless or foolish. I shall see that this man is detained at New York on some pretext or other – in fact, I shall arrange for this by wireless. You should journey to one of the states where divorces are easily obtained. If you will permit me, I shall be your banker. Even if Branksome got free in New York, it will cost him dear, and his supplies are precarious. You should experience no difficulty in evading him with money in your possession. Do you agree?"

"Oh, yes!"

"That's settled, then. Ponderby, look into the corridor, and see that the way of escape is clear."

"I am sorry, my lord," she said, rising, "to cause you such trouble and inconvenience."

"No inconvenience at all," said Stranleigh, with his usual nonchalance, "and I never allow myself to be troubled."

Ponderby reported the way open, and the lady disappeared silently along the passage. Stranleigh betook himself to Room 4390, and had a long talk with the Hon. John Hazel, who, for the

first time during the voyage, seemed to be enjoying himself.

Next morning the Hon. John paced up and down one deck after another, as if in search of someone. On an almost deserted lower deck he met the person whom he sought.

"I beg your pardon," said Hazel in his suavest manner, "but I am trying to find three men as tired of this journey as I am. I have never been on a voyage before, and I confess I miss London and the convenience of its clubs. A quiet little game of poker in the smoking-room might help to while away the time."

The keen eyes of Mr. Branksome Poole narrowed, as was a custom of theirs, and he took in the points of the man who addressed him.

"I am not much of a hand at poker," he said hesitatingly and untruthfully.

The Hon. John laughed.

"Don't mind that in the least," he said. "The requirement for this game is cash. I have approached several men, and they object to playing for money; but I confess I don't give a rap for sitting at a card-table unless there's something substantial on."

"I'm with you there," agreed the stout man, his eyes glistening at the thought of handling a pack of cards once more. His momentary hesitation had been because he feared someone might recognise him, for he felt himself quite able to cope with anyone when it came to the shuffle and the deal. They were a strangely contrasted pair as they stood there, the pleb and the patrician – the pleb grim and serious, the patrician carrying off

the situation with a light laugh – yet it was hard to say which was the more expert scoundrel when it came to cards.

A little later four men sat down to a table. Hazel ordered a new pack of cards from the smoke-room steward, broke the seal, and pulled off the wrapper.

It is not worth while to describe the series of games: only the one matters. At first Poole played very cautiously, watching out of the tail of his eye for any officer who might spot him as one who had been ordered off the green, and so expose him for what he was. The consequence of this divided attention was soon apparent. He lost heavily, and finally he drew a couple of fifty-pound notes from his pocket-book. He fingered them for a moment as if loath to part with paper so valuable.

"Where's that steward?" he asked.

"What do you want?" demanded Hazel, as though impatient for the game to go on.

"Change for a fifty."

"I'll change it for you." And the Hon. John drew from his pocket a handful of gold and five-pound bank-notes, counted out fifty pounds, and shoved them across the table to Poole, who, still hesitating, was forced reluctantly to give up the big bank-note. Now Poole began to play in earnest, but still luck was against him, and soon the second fifty-pound note was changed, for they were playing reasonably high. Hazel, after glancing at the number on the note, thrust it carelessly into his waistcoat pocket alongside its brother, as if it were of no more account than a cigarette paper.

Little did the pleb dream that he was up against a man of brains. Hazel now possessed the two bank-notes that could have been used in evidence against Lord Stranleigh, and he drew a sigh of satisfaction. Poole only saw that here was a man, evidently careless of money, possessing plenty of it, and extremely good-natured. He had already recognised him as an aristocrat, and expected that, whatever happened, he would treat it with a laugh, and perhaps leave the table, so the pleb now began some fine work. Two games were played in silence, and in the third it was the deal of Branksome Poole. Hazel watched him like a beast of prey, conscious of every crooked move, yet he did not seem in the least to be looking. He gazed at the cards dealt him, rose to his feet, and spread the hand face upward on the table.

"Sir, you are cheating," he said crisply.

"You lie!" roared Branksome Poole, turning, nevertheless, a greenish yellow, and moistening his parched lips. At the sound of the loud voice, a steward came hurrying in.

"Show your hand, if you dare!" challenged Hazel. "You have dealt yourself – " And here he named the concealed cards one after another. Poole made an effort to fling his hand into the rest of the pack, but Hazel stopped him.

"Show your hand! Show your hand!" he demanded. "These two gentlemen will witness whether I have named the cards correctly or not. Steward, ask the chief officer to come here, or, if he is not on duty, speak to the captain."

The steward disappeared, and shortly returned with the chief

officer, to whom Hazel briefly and graphically related what had happened.

"Will you come with me to the captain's room?" requested the chief officer.

Branksome Poole had been through the mill before, and he offered no resistance.

When the wireless came in touch with the American shore, a dispatch reached police headquarters in New York, informing them that Charles Branksome, wanted for blackmailing Erasmus Blank, the millionaire, was detained by the ship's authority for cheating at cards.

When the great vessel arrived at her berth, Mrs. Branksome Poole was quite unmolested as she took her ticket for the West. She was amply supplied with money, and among her newly-acquired funds were two fifty-pound notes which had been previously in her possession.

II. – AN AUTOMOBILE RIDE

When Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood came to New York under his family name of Trevelyan, he had intended to spend several weeks in that interesting metropolis, but newspaper men speedily scattered his incognito to the winds, and, what with interviewers, photographers, funny paragraphists and the like, the young lord's life was made a burden to him. Despite his innate desire to be polite to everyone, he soon found it impossible to receive even a tenth part of those who desired speech with him. This caused no diminution of interviews or special articles regarding his plans, and his object in revisiting America. The sensational papers alleged that he had untold millions to invest; that he had placed cash on all the available projects in Europe, and now proposed to exploit the United States in his insatiable desire to accumulate more wealth.

Stranleigh changed his quarters three times, and with each move adopted a new name. He endured it all with imperturbable good-nature, despite the intense heat, but Ponderby was disgusted with the state of affairs, and wished himself and his master back once more in that quiet village known as London.

"By Jove! Ponderby," said Stranleigh, "they say three moves are as bad as a fire, and the temperature to-day seems to corroborate this, for we are making our third move. Have you anything to suggest?"

"I should suggest, my lord," said Ponderby, with as much dignity as the sweltering day would allow, "that we return to London."

"A brilliant and original idea, Ponderby. Many thanks. Go down at once to the steamship office, and book the best accommodation you can get on the first big liner leaving New York."

Ponderby departed instantly, with a deep sigh of relief.

Stranleigh's life had been made more of a burden to him than was necessary through the indefatigable exertions of a fellow countryman, whose name was Wentworth Parkes. This individual brought with him a letter of introduction from the Duke of Rattleborough. Rattleborough was an acquaintance, but not a particular friend of Stranleigh's; nevertheless, a Duke overtops a mere Earl in social eminence, much as the Singer building overtops the structure next to it.

Wentworth Parkes told Stranleigh he had been in America for something more than a year. He had been very successful, making plenty of money, but expending it with equal celerity. Now he determined to get hold of something that contained princely possibilities for the future. This he had secured by means of an option on the Sterling Motor Company at Detroit, and the plant alone, he alleged, was worth more than the capital needed to bring the factory up to its full output. J. E. Sterling, he went on to explain, knew more about automobile designing than anyone else in the world, notwithstanding the fact that he

was still a young man. He would undoubtedly prove to be the true successor of Edison, and everyone knew what fortunes had come to those who interested themselves in the products of the great Thomas Alva, who up to date had proved to be the most successful money-making inventor the world had ever seen, to which Lord Stranleigh calmly agreed. Well, J. E. Sterling was just such another, and all a man required to enter the combination, was the small sum of one hundred thousand dollars. This would purchase a share in the business which might be sold within a year or two for millions. Detroit was the centre of automobile manufacturing in America; a delightful city to live in; the finest river in the world running past its doors, with a greater tonnage of shipping than passed through the Suez Canal.

Mr. Parkes was a glib and efficient talker, who might have convinced anyone with money to spare, but he felt vaguely that his fluency was not producing the intended effect on Lord Stranleigh. His difficulty heretofore had been to obtain access to men of means, and now that he had got alongside the most important of them all, he was nonplussed to notice that his eloquence somehow missed its mark. Stranleigh remained scrupulously courteous, but was quite evidently not in the least interested. So shrewd a man as Parkes might have known that it is not easy to arouse enthusiasm in a London clubman under the most favourable auspices, and this difficulty is enormously increased when the person attacked is already so rich that any further access of wealth offers no temptation to him.

Parkes had come to believe that the accumulation of gold was the only thing the average man really cared about, so he failed, by moving against the dead wall of Stranleigh's indifference towards money, whereas he might have succeeded had he approached the sentimental side of the young man. Indeed, Mr. Wentworth Parkes seemed to catch a glimmering of this idea as his fairy visions of the future fell flat, so he reversed his automobile talk, and backed slowly out.

Conversation lagging, his lordship asked a few casual questions about the Duke of Rattleborough and other persons he knew in London, but if any of these queries were intended to embarrass his visitor, Stranleigh's failure was equal to that of Parkes himself. The latter answered all enquiries so promptly and correctly that Stranleigh inwardly chided himself for his latent distrust of the man who now, quick to see how the land lay, got his motor car in position once more, but took another direction. He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, and drew a slight sigh.

"You see," he said, in a discouraged tone, "a person brought up as I have been, to do nothing in particular that is of any use to the world, finds himself at a great disadvantage in a hustling land like the United States, where the fellows are all so clever, and have been trained from their very boyhood to be alert business men. I have a good thing in this option, and if once I got upon my feet, I could soon build up a great and profitable business. My chief trouble is to convince any capitalist of this, and if he

asks me whether or not the scheme will produce a fortune within six months or a year, I am forced to admit there is little chance of it. An American wishes to turn over his money quickly; a long look into futurity is not for him. He wishes to buy one railway on Monday, another on Tuesday, amalgamate them on Wednesday, and sell out the stock to the public at several millions profit on Thursday, then rake in the boodle on Friday, which proves an unlucky day for the investors. When I truthfully confess it will be a year before I get fairly under way, I am immediately at a discount. Capitalists won't listen any further."

Parkes saw that for the first time during the interview Lord Stranleigh began to show interest, reserved though it was.

"Do you know anything about cars?" asked his lordship.

"I can take apart any motor in the market, and put it together again, always leaving it a little better than when I found it."

"And this machine – invented by the Detroit man – does it fill the bill?"

"It's the best motor in the world to-day," asserted Parkes, with a return of his old confidence.

Stranleigh smiled slightly.

"I think," he said, "you have been very successful in catching the enthusiasm of America. You deal glibly with superlatives. Mr. Sterling is the most remarkable man on earth, Detroit the most beautiful city on the globe, and your motor-car beats the universe."

"Well, my lord, I don't disclaim the superlatives, but I insist on

their truth. As I said, I deal in truth, and have suffered somewhat in pocket by doing so."

A slight shade of perplexity came into the young earl's face. There was something deferential in the tone used by Parkes when he enunciated the phrase "my lord," which Stranleigh did not like. Neither phrase nor tone would have been used by any person in his own circle of acquaintance addressing another in the same set. His former distrust was again aroused. As he remained silent, Parkes went on —

"You need not take my word for the automobile, which after all is the crux of the situation. I have one of them here in New York. I tested it very fully on the way from Detroit to this city, travelling in it the whole distance. Let me take you for a drive. You doubtless know all about a motor-car, for I was told in London that you owned at least a dozen of them."

"I daresay it's true. I'm not sure. Nevertheless, I am so unfortunate as to have only a slight knowledge of their mechanics. I have driven a good deal, but not being so energetic as Prince Henry of Prussia, I leave details to my chauffeurs."

"Very good. You are doubtless well acquainted with the merits of a car from the owner's point of view. Come out with me in this Detroit motor, and I will be your chauffeur, or you may drive the machine yourself, if you remember that in this country you keep to the right side of the road."

Thus the appointment was made, and was kept by Lord Stranleigh. At the end of his run, he said to Parkes —

"The car seems to be a satisfactory piece of construction, but I own two or three American cars in London, any one of which, I think, is equally good; in fact, as Mark Twain said about his Jumping Frog – 'I see no points about this frog different from any other frog.' However, I will consider your proposal, and will let you know the result. Meanwhile, many thanks for a most interesting ride."

Stranleigh sauntered down town, and entered a cable office.

"Can I send a message to London, and leave a deposit here for the reply, that it may not cost my London friend anything?"

"Certainly, sir."

Stranleigh wrote —

> "Duke of Rattleborough, Camperdown Club, London.
>
> "A man calling himself Wentworth Parkes presented a letter of introduction from you to me. Please cable whether or not he is reliable."

Two days later, Stranleigh received a reply —

> "Letter a forgery. Parkes was my valet for three years, then bolted, leaving a lot of little things behind him, but not if they were portable and valuable. Believe he is now abroad, though the London police are yearning for him.
>
> *Rattleborough."*

Now began the persistent pursuit of Stranleigh, which culminated in his sending Ponderby down to the steamship office to buy tickets for England. The young man said nothing to anyone of the cablegram he had received, nor did he inform

the police of London the whereabouts of their quarry. He rather pitied the poor wretch, as he called him, but he had no use for a thief and a liar, so he refused to hold further communication with him, or to make any explanation. Parkes, finding he could not gain admission to Stranleigh, took to sending letters by special messenger, first adopting an aggrieved tone, a reproachful suggestion of injured innocence running through his correspondence like a minor note in a piece of music; then he became the victim of an unscrupulous millionaire, asserting that Stranleigh had promised to finance the proposed company, and breathing threats of legal proceedings. Indeed, as the recipient read these later communications, he realised they were evidently written with a view to publicity in law courts, for there emanated from them sentiments of great patriotism. The United States, Stranleigh learned, would not put up with his villainy, as would have been the case with legal proceedings in decadent England, where judges were under the thumb of a debased aristocracy.

Stranleigh had no ambition to appear in the courts of either country, so he removed from one hotel to another, but apparently he was watched, for Parkes ran him down wherever he betook himself. Thus we come to the moment when the sedate but overjoyed Ponderby returned with the steamship tickets, which Stranleigh thrust into his pocket.

"Shall I pack up now, my lord?"

"I wish you would. The valet of the hotel will assist you. Prepare three boxes; one for yourself and two for me, filling mine

with such clothing as I should take were I going to visit a friend in the country for a week or two. Place the other luggage in charge of the manager of the hotel, and say I will telegraph when I make up my mind where it is to be sent."

And then, to Ponderby's amazement, the young man left for Boston, and took passage in the steamer for St. John, New Brunswick.

"You see, Ponderby," said his lordship, when they got out into the ocean, "the estimable Parkes, if he is watching us, is already aware that you have booked for Southampton. He may possibly set the law in motion, and appear with some emissaries thereof aboard the liner before she sails, so we might be compelled to remain in this country which he so ardently loves."

"But the steamship tickets, my lord? They cost a lot of money."

"Quite so, my economical Ponderby, but remember for your consolation that when you step ashore from this boat, you will be under the British flag. You may telegraph to the company and tell them to sell the tickets, meanwhile sending them by post to New York. Here they are. Whatever money the company returns, is to be retained by you further to mitigate your disappointment. I have no doubt that in thus bolting for Canada you feel like a culprit escaping from justice, but we are only escaping from Parkes. Having pestered me as much about Detroit as he has done, that city will be the last place in which he is likely to look for me. We are making for Detroit, Ponderby, by the most

roundabout route I could choose, seeing that the Panama Canal is not yet open, and thus I am unable to reach the autometropolis by way of San Francisco."

After passing through Canada, Lord Stranleigh settled himself very comfortably in a luxurious suite of rooms situated near the top storey of a luxurious hotel in the city of the Straits, under the assumed commonplace name of Henry Johnson. The windows of his apartment afforded wide and interesting views of skyscrapers and noble public edifices, with a wilderness of roofs extending towards the misty horizon to the west, north, and east, while to the south flowed the majestic river, its blue surface enlivened by stately steamers and picturesque sailing craft.

The gloomy valet did not share his master's admiration of the scene. Ponderby was heart and soul a Londoner, and although forced to admit that the Thames was grey and muddy, and its shipping for the most part sombre and uncouth, that tidal water remained for him the model of all other streams. He was only partially consoled by the fact that five cents brought him across to the Canadian shore, where he might inhale deep breaths of air that fluttered the Union Jack.

Stranleigh, confident that he had shaken off pursuit, enjoyed himself in a thoroughly democratic manner, sailing up stream and down, on one of the pearl white passenger boats, that carried bands which played the immortal airs of Sousa.

He began his second week in Detroit by engaging a motor to make a tour of the motor manufacturing district. He was amazed

at the size and extent of the buildings, and recognised, among the names painted thereon, the designation of cars that were familiar to him. He had come to believe Parkes such an untruthful person, that he had taken a big discount from everything he said, and so was unprepared to find the reality far in advance of the description. However, he saw no sign bearing the name of the Sterling Motor Company, so asked his chauffeur to convey him thither. The chauffeur, pondering a moment, was forced to admit that he had never heard of the firm.

"Then be so good," requested Stranleigh, "as to drop into one of these offices and enquire. It is likely that someone will know the names of all other companies in the same line of manufacture."

"I don't doubt," said the chauffeur, "that they know all about it, but it wouldn't be business to direct a possible customer to a rival firm."

Stranleigh smiled.

"I have not been in this country so long as you have," he said, "but I think you will find an American business man ignores rivalry when he has an opportunity of doing an act of courtesy."

The chauffeur drew up at a huge factory and went inside. Returning very promptly, he informed his fare that they knew of no Sterling Motor Company, but there was in Woodbridge Street a young engineer named J. E. Sterling, who, they believed, made motor-cars.

"J. E. Sterling! That's the man I want. Where is Woodbridge

Street?"

"Right away down town; next door, as you might say, to the river front."

"Very good; we'll go there. Just drive past Mr. Sterling's place, for if I do not like the look of it I shall not go in."

By and by they turned into Woodward Avenue, and raced down town at a speed which Stranleigh thought must surely exceed the legal limit, if there was one. Woodbridge Street proved to be crowded with great lumbering trucks, loaded with vegetables for the most part, and among these vehicles the chauffeur threaded his way cautiously. They passed a small, rather insignificant shop, above whose window was painted —

"J. E. Sterling. Motor Engineer. Repairs promptly executed. Satisfaction guaranteed."

When the chauffeur came to a halt a little further on, Stranleigh said —

"The place doesn't look very inviting, but as Mr. Sterling guarantees satisfaction, I think it but right to call upon him. I sha'n't need you any more to-day."

The door being open, Stranleigh walked in unannounced. A two-seated runabout, evidently brand new, stood by the window, where it could be viewed by passers-by. Further down the room rested a chassis, over which two men, one middle-aged and the other probably twenty-five, were bending, with tools in their

hands. They were dressed in grease-stained blue overalls, and they looked up as Stranleigh entered.

"I wish to see Mr. J. E. Sterling," he said.

"My name is Sterling," replied the younger man, putting down his tools, and coming forward.

"I understood," went on Stranleigh, "that there was a Sterling Motor Car Company."

"There will be," answered the young man confidently, "but that's in the sweet by and by. It hasn't materialised so far. What can I do for you?"

"Well, you can give me some information regarding J. E. Sterling. I want to learn if it tallies with what I have heard."

The young man laughed.

"It depends on who has been talking about me. I daresay you have been told things that might require explanation."

"I heard nothing but praise," his lordship assured him. "It was said you were the true successor of Thomas Alva Edison."

Sterling laughed even more heartily than before.

"I'm afraid they were getting at you. A man may be a creditable inventor, and a good, all-round engineer without being able to hold a candle to Edison. Are you looking for an automobile?"

"No; as I told you at first, I am looking for J. E. Sterling."

"I was going to say that I am not yet prepared to supply cars. I do repairing and that sort of thing, merely to keep the wolf from the door, and leave me a little surplus to expend in my business.

My real work, however, is experimenting, and when I am able to turn out a machine that satisfies me, my next business will be to form a company, for one can't do anything in this trade without capital."

"The competition must be intense."

"It is, but there's always room for a first-rate article, and the production of a first-rate article is my ambition."

"Is that your work in the window?"

"Yes."

"Does it come up to your expectations?"

The young man's face grew serious; his brow wrinkled almost into a frown, and he remained silent for a few moments.

"Well, I can't exactly say that it does," he answered at last, "still, I think the faults I have found can be remedied with a little patience. On the other hand, I fear the improvement I have put in this car may not be as great as I thought when I was working at it."

Lord Stranleigh looked at the young man with evident approval; his frankness and honesty commended themselves to him.

"Do you mind showing me your improvement and explaining its function?"

"Not at all. You will remember, however, that this exhibition is confidential, for I have not yet patented the mechanism."

"I shall not mention to anyone what you show me. You asked me a moment ago if I wished to buy an automobile, and I said

I did not. I have made a little money in my time, but mostly, it seems to me, by flukes. I do not pretend to be a business man, yet such is the conceit of humanity that I wish to invest some of my money to back my own judgment. If I lose the cash, it won't cripple me to any appreciable extent. On the other hand, should the investment prove satisfactory, I shall have more faith in my judgment than has hitherto been the case. In any event, I promise to assist you in the formation of your company."

"That's all right!" cried the young engineer, with enthusiasm. "My own judgment of men is frequently at fault, but somehow I'd stake my bottom dollar on you. Come over to the window, and I'll show you how the wheels go round."

The two men approached the car in the window, and as they did so a third person on the pavement outside stopped suddenly, and regarded them with evident astonishment. Neither of those inside saw him, but if one or the other had looked through the glass, he would have recognised the sinister face of Wentworth Parkes who, having satisfied himself as to the visitor's identity, turned away and retraced his steps.

Sterling lifted up a leather curtain which hung down in front from the passenger's seat and disclosed a line of three upright pegs, rising two or three inches from the floor of the car. They were concealed when the curtain was lowered.

"If you give the matter any thought," said Sterling, "you will discover that the passenger in an automobile is in rather a helpless position. His chauffeur may faint, or even die at his wheel from

heart failure, as has been the case in several instances I know of, or he may be drunk, and therefore unreasonable or obstinate, driving the car with danger to all concerned, yet if his master attempt to displace him while the car is going at high speed, disaster is certain. Now, the centre peg here will stop the engine and put on the brakes. A pressure by the foot on the right-hand peg turns the car to the right; and on the left-hand to the left. In the ordinary car the passenger can do nothing to save himself, but here he may stop the car dead, or, if he prefers it, may disconnect the steering wheel, and guide the car at his will."

"Why, I think that's an excellent device!" cried Stranleigh.

"I thought so, too, but there are disadvantages. The crises in which it could be brought to play are rare. As a general rule, a chauffeur is much more to be trusted than the owner, and if the owner happens to be a nervous man, he might interfere, with deplorable results."

"Yes," said Stranleigh, "it's like the pistol in Texas. You may not need it, but when you do you want it very badly. Has anyone else seen this contrivance?"

"No one except my assistant."

"Could you lend me this car to-morrow?"

"Certainly."

"Then place the car in charge of a competent chauffeur, who knows nothing of your safety device, and send it up to my hotel at eleven o'clock. Tell him to ask for Henry Johnson. I'll take a little trip into the country, where I can test the car on some

unfrequented road."

"Better cross the river to Canada," said Sterling, with a smile. "Things are quiet over there."

"Very well," agreed Stranleigh. "You are a busy man, and I have taken up a considerable amount of your time. You must allow me to pay you for it."

The young man's face grew red underneath its spots of grease, and he drew back a step.

"You have spent your own time to an equal amount, so we'll allow one expenditure to balance the other."

"My time is of no account. I'm a loafer."

"I could not accept any money, sir."

The two looked at one another for a moment, and gentlemen understand each other even though one wears the greasy clothes of a mechanic.

"I beg your pardon," said Stranleigh, softly. "Now, let me ask you one question. Have you given an option on this business to anyone?"

Sterling glanced up in surprise.

"Why, yes, I did give an option to an Englishman. By the way, you're English, are you not?"

"I was born over there."

"This Englishman wasn't your sort. He was a most plausible talker, and as I told you, my judgment of men is sometimes at fault. I gave him an option for two months, but I think all he wanted was to get an automobile for nothing. He said he

represented a syndicate of English capitalists, some of whom were in New York, and he borrowed the only car I had completed at that time. That was four months ago. Like the preacher after the futile collection, I wanted to get back my hat at least, but although I wrote letter after letter, I never received any answer. It wasn't worth my while to set the police on his track, so I tried to forget him, and succeeded until you spoke of an option just now."

"That agreement lapsed two months ago?"

"Yes."

"Then write out an option for me, good for a week. I'll pay you five hundred dollars down, to be forfeited if I fail to do what I promise."

"I'll give you the document with pleasure, but it is unnecessary to make a deposit."

"This is business, you know, Mr. Sterling. You are pretending you are as bad a business man as I am. I don't know much about the law of America, but I think you will find that unless a deposit is made, your instrument would be invalid in a court of law. There must be value received, I believe, when a bargain is made."

"All right," said Sterling, "but I'll give you back your money if you regret the deal."

He went to a desk in the corner, and wrote out the agreement, in which he acknowledged the receipt of five hundred dollars. Stranleigh selected from his wallet five bills for a hundred dollars each, and handed them over, then bidding farewell to the engineer, walked to his hotel, followed at a discreet distance by

Mr. Wentworth Parkes.

Having located his quarry, Parkes retraced his steps to Woodbridge Street, deep in thought. His first resolution was to try bluster, but he abandoned that idea for two reasons, each conclusive in its way. His slight acquaintance with the engineer had convinced him that while much could be done with Sterling by persuasion, he would not yield to force, and secondly, the motor builder had no money. Whatever gold he was to acquire in his deal must come from Lord Stranleigh. It was, therefore, a mild and innocent lamb of a man who entered the machine shop of Woodbridge Street.

"Hello!" cried Sterling, who seemed taken aback by the encounter. "What have you done with my automobile, and why did you not answer my letters?"

"Your automobile is here in Detroit; a little the worse for wear, perhaps, but there is nothing wrong with it that you cannot put right in short order. As for letters, I never received any. I thought I had notified you of my changed address."

"As a matter of fact, you didn't."

"In that case, I apologise most humbly. The truth is, Mr. Sterling, I have been working practically night and day, often under very discouraging circumstances. Until quite recently there was nothing hopeful to tell, and the moment I struck a bit of good luck, I came on here in the car to let you know. You see, it was very difficult to interest capital in a proposition that apparently has no substantiality behind it. If you had possessed

a big factory in going order, that I could have shown a man over, the company would have been formed long ago. It therefore surprised me exceedingly, when I passed your shop less than a hour ago, to see standing in this window, while you were explaining the car to him, the man on whom I chiefly depended. You must put it down to my credit that instead of coming in as I had intended, thus embarrassing him, and perhaps spoiling a deal by my interference, I passed on, waited until he came out, and followed him to his hotel."

Sterling was plainly nonplussed.

"I wish you had come in an hour earlier," he said. "You couldn't have interfered with a deal, because your option ran out two months ago."

"I know that," said Parkes regretfully, "but I thought the good work on my part would have made up for a legal lapse. Indeed, Mr. Sterling, if you will allow me to say so, I had such supreme faith in your own honesty, that I believed you would not hesitate to renew our arrangement."

"That's just the point," said Sterling. "Had you come in an hour sooner, you would have been in time. As it is, I have granted a new option to the man you saw here with me."

"What name did he give you? Trevelyan?"

"No; the name he mentioned was Henry Johnson."

Parkes laughed a little, then checked himself.

"He went under the name of Trevelyan in New York, but I know neither that nor Johnson is his true title. Well, is he going

in with you, then?"

"He has asked for a week to decide."

Now Parkes laughed more heartily.

"I took him out in your motor in New York, and there also he asked for a week in which to decide. He seems to have taken the opportunity to come West, and try to forestall me."

"Oh, I don't believe he's that sort of man," cried Sterling, impatiently.

"Perhaps I do him an injustice. I sincerely hope so. Of course you're not compelled to show your hand, but I think, in the circumstances, you might let me know just how far you've got."

"Yes, I think you are entitled to that. I remember I was rather astonished when I learned he knew I had given a former option, but I shall be very much disappointed if he doesn't run straight. Still, I have been mistaken in men before. He took an option for a week, and paid me five hundred dollars down in cash, to be forfeited if he does not exercise it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.