

Boothby Guy

# The Red Rat's Daughter



Guy Boothby  
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### CHAPTER I

If John Grantham Browne had a fault – which, mind you, I am not prepared to admit – it lay in the fact that he was the possessor of a cynical wit which he was apt at times to use upon his friends with somewhat peculiar effect. Circumstances alter cases, and many people would have argued that he was perfectly entitled to say what he pleased. When a man is worth a hundred and twenty thousand pounds a year – which, worked out, means ten thousand pounds a month, three hundred and twenty-eight pounds, fifteen shillings and fourpence a day, and four-and-sixpence three-farthings, and a fraction over, per minute – he may surely be excused if he becomes a little sceptical as to other people's motives, and is apt to be distrustful of the world in general. Old Brown, his father, without the "e," as you have doubtless observed, started life as a bare-legged street arab in one of the big manufacturing centres – Manchester or Birmingham, I am not quite certain which. His head, however, must have been screwed on the right way, for he made few mistakes, and everything he touched turned to gold. At thirty his bank balance stood at fifteen thousand pounds; at forty it had turned the corner of a hundred thousand; and when he departed this transitory life, a young man in everything but years, he left his widow, young John's mother – his second wife, I may remark in passing, and the third daughter of the late Lord Rushbrooke – upwards of three and a half million pounds sterling in trust for the boy.

As somebody wittily remarked at the time, young John, at his father's death and during his minority, was a monetary Mohammed – he hovered between two worlds: the Rushbrookes, on one side, who had not two sixpences to rub against each other, and the Brownes, on the other, who reckoned their wealth in millions and talked of thousands as we humbler mortals do of half-crowns. Taken altogether, however, old Brown was not a bad sort of fellow. Unlike so many parvenus, he had the good sense, the "e" always excepted, not to set himself up to be what he certainly was not. He was a working-man, he would tell you with a twinkle in his eye, and he had made his own way in the world. He had never in his life owed a halfpenny, nor, to the best of his knowledge, had he ever defrauded anybody; and, if he *had* made his fortune out of soap, well – and here his eyes would glisten – soap was at least a useful article, and would wash his millions cleaner than a good many other commodities he might mention. In his tastes and habits he was simplicity itself. Indeed, it was no unusual sight to see the old fellow, preparatory to setting off for the City, coming down the steps of his magnificent town house, dressed in a suit of rough tweed, with the famous bird's-eye neck-cloth loosely twisted round his throat, and the soft felt hat upon his head – two articles of attire which no remonstrance on the part of his wife and no amount of ridicule from the comic journals could ever induce him to discard. His stables were full of carriages, and there was a cab-rank within a hundred yards of his front door, yet no one had ever seen him set foot in either. The soles of his boots were thick, and he had been accustomed to walk all his life, he would say, and he had no intention of being carried till he was past caring what became of him. With regard to his son, the apple of his eye, and the pride of his old age, his views were entirely different. Nothing was good enough for the boy. From the moment he opened his eyes upon the light, all the luxuries and advantages wealth could give were showered upon him. Before he was short-coated, upwards of a million had been placed to his credit at the bank, not to be touched until he came of age. After he had passed from a dame's school to Eton, he returned after every holiday with sufficient money loose in his pocket to have treated the whole school. When, in the proper order of things, he went on to Christ Church, his rooms were the envy and the admiration of the university. As a matter of fact, he never knew what it was to have to

deny himself anything; and it says something for the lad's nature, and the father's too, I think, that he should have come out of it the honest, simple Englishman he was. Then old John died; his wife followed suit six months later; and on his twenty-fifth birthday the young man found himself standing alone in the world with his millions ready to his hand either to make or mar him. Little though he thought it at the time, there was a sufficiency of trouble in store for him.

He had town houses, country seats, moors and salmon-fishings, yachts (steam and sailing), racehorses, hunters, coach-horses, polo-ponies, and an army of servants that a man might very well shudder even to think of. But he lacked one thing; he had no wife. Society, however, was prepared to remedy this defect. Indeed, it soon showed that it was abnormally anxious to do so. Before he was twenty-two it had been rumoured that he had become engaged to something like a score of girls, each one lovelier, sweeter, and boasting blood that was bluer than the last. A wiser and an older head might well have been forgiven had it succumbed to the attacks made upon it; but in his veins, mingled with the aristocratic Rushbrooke blood, young John had an equal portion of that of the old soap-boiler; and where the one led him to accept invitations to country houses at Christmas, or to be persuaded into driving his fair friends, by moonlight, to supper at the Star and Garter, the other enabled him to take very good care of himself while he ran such dangerous risks. In consequence he had attained the advanced age of twenty-eight when this story opens, a bachelor, and with every prospect of remaining so. But the Blind Bow-Boy, as every one is aware, discharges his bolts from the most unexpected quarters; and for this reason you are apt to find yourself mortally wounded in the very place, of all others, where you have hitherto deemed yourself most invulnerable.

It was the end of the second week in August; Parliament was up; and Browne's steam-yacht, the *Lotus Blossom*, twelve hundred tons, lay in the harbour of Merok, on the Gieranger Fjord, perhaps the most beautiful on the Norwegian coast. The guests on board had been admirably chosen, an art which in most instances is not cultivated as carefully as it might be. An ill-assorted house party is bad enough; to bring the wrong men together on the moors is sufficient to spoil an otherwise enjoyable holiday; but to ask Jones (who doesn't smoke, who is wrapped up in politics, reads his leader in the *Standard* every morning, and who has played whist every afternoon with the same men at his club for the last ten years) and De Vere Robinson (who never reads anything save the *Referee* and the *Sportsman*, who detests whist, and who smokes the strongest Trichinopolis day and night) to spend three weeks cooped up on a yacht would be like putting a kitten and a cat-killing fox-terrier into a corn-bin and expecting them to have a happy time together. Browne, however, knew his business, and his party, in this particular instance, consisted of the Duchess of Matlock, wife of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and her two pretty daughters, the Ladies Iseult and Imogen; Miss Verney, the beauty of the season; the Honourable Silas Dobson, the American Ambassador; his wife and daughter; George Barrington-Marsh, of the 1st Life; and little Jimmy Foote, a man of no permanent address, but of more than usual shrewdness, who managed to make a good income out of his friends by the exercise of that peculiar talent for pleasing which rendered him indispensable whenever and wherever his fellow-creatures were gathered together. In addition to those I have mentioned there was a man whose interest in this story is so great that it is necessary he should be described at somewhat greater length.

Should you deem it worth your while to make inquiries at any of the Chancelleries in order to ascertain whether they happen to be acquainted with a certain Monsieur Felix Maas, you would probably be surprised to learn that he is as well known to them as – well – shall we say the Sultan of Turkey himself? though it would be difficult to mention in exactly what capacity. One thing is quite certain; it would be no easy task to find a man possessed of such peculiar characteristics as this retiring individual. At first glance his name would appear to settle his nationality once and for all. He would tell you, however, that he has no right to be considered a Dutchman. At the same time he would probably omit to tell you to which kingdom or empire he ascribes the honour of his birth. If you travelled with him you would discover that he speaks the language of every country west of the

Ural Mountains with equal fluency; and though he would appear to be the possessor of considerable wealth, he never makes the least parade of it. In fact, his one and only idea in life would seem to be always irreproachably dressed and groomed, never to speak unless spoken to, and at all times to act as if he took no sort of interest whatever in any person or thing save that upon which he happened to be engaged at the moment. When necessity demands it he can be exceedingly amusing; he never allows himself to be seen with a man or woman who would be likely to cause him the least loss of prestige; he gives charming little dinners *à la fourchette* at his rooms in town twice or thrice during the season, and is rumoured to be the author, under a *nom de plume*, of one of the best works on Continental politics that has seen the light since Talleyrand's day. So much for Felix Maas.

At one time or another there have been a number of exquisite yachts built to satisfy the extravagances of millionaires, but never one so perfect in every detail, and so replete with every luxury, as Browne's *Lotus Blossom*. The state-rooms were large and airy; beds occupied the places of the usual uncomfortable bunks; the dining-saloon was situated amidships, where the vibration of the screw was least felt; the drawing-room was arranged aft; and a dainty boudoir for the ladies extended across the whole width of the counter. The smoking-room was in a convenient position under the bridge, and the bathrooms, four in number, were luxury and completeness itself. Add to the other advantages the presence of Felicien, that prince of *chefs*, and little Georges, once so intimately connected with the English Embassy in Paris, and it is unnecessary to say more.

Browne himself was an excellent host; and by the time the Norwegian coast had been sighted the party had settled down comfortably on board. They visited Christiania, the Bukn, Hardanger, and Sogne, and eventually found themselves at anchor in the harbour of Merok, on the Gieranger Fjord. It is in this lovely bay, overshadowed by its precipitous mountains, that my story may be properly said to commence.

It is sometimes asserted by a class of people who talk of the Eiffel Tower as if it were a bit of natural scenery, and of the Matterhorn as though it were placed in its present position simply for the entertainment of Cook's tourists, that when you have seen one Norwegian fjord you have seen them all. But this statement is, as are the majority of such assertions, open to contradiction. The Ryfylke bears no sort of resemblance, save that they are both incomparably grand, to the Hardanger, or the Fjaerlands to the Gieranger. There is, of course, the same solemnity and the same overwhelming sense of man's insignificance about them all. But in every other essential they differ as completely as Windermere does from the Bitter Lakes of Suez – shall we say? – or the Marble Arch from the Bridge of Sighs.

"Knowing what we know, and seeing what we see," Maas remarked confidentially to the Duchess of Matlock as they sat in their chairs on deck, gazing up at the snow-capped mountains at the head of the fjord, "one is tempted to believe that Providence, in designing Europe, laid it out with the express intention of pleasing the British tourist."

"I detest tourists," replied her Grace, as she disentangled the straps of her field-glasses. "They cheapen everything, and think nothing of discussing their hotel bills in the Temple of the Sphinx, or of comparing and grumbling at their *dhobie's* accounts under the façade of the Taj Mahal."

"The inevitable result of a hothouse education, my dear Duchess," said Jimmy Foote, who was leaning against the bulwarks. "Believe a poor man who knows, it is just those three annas overcharge in a *dhobie's* bill that spoil the grandeur of the Sphinx and cast a blight over the Great Pyramid; as far as I am personally concerned, such an imposition would spoil even the Moti Masjid itself."

"People who quarrel over a few annas have no right to travel," remarked Mrs. Dobson, with the authority of a woman who rejoices in the possession of a large income.

"In that case, one trembles to think what would become of the greater portion of mankind," continued Miss Verney, who was drawing on her gloves preparatory to going ashore.

"If that were the law, I am afraid I should never get beyond the white walls of Old England," said Jimmy Foote, shaking his head; "it is only by keeping a sharp eye on the three annas of which we

have been speaking that I manage to exist at all. If I might make a suggestion to the powers that be, it would be to the effect that a university should be founded in some convenient centre – Vienna, for instance. It would be properly endowed, and students might be sent to it from all parts of the world. Competent professors would be engaged, who would teach the pupils how to comport themselves in railway trains and on board steamboats; who would tell them how to dress themselves to suit different countries, in order that they might not spoil choice bits of scenery by inartistic colouring. Above all, I would have them instructed in the proper manner of placing their boots outside their bedroom doors when they retire to rest in foreign hotels. I remember a ruffian in Paris some years ago (truth compels me to put it on record that he was a countryman of yours, Mr. Dobson) who for three weeks regularly disturbed my beauty sleep by throwing his boots outside his door in the fashion to which I am alluding. It's my belief he used to stand in the centre of his room and pitch them into the corridor, taking particular care that they should fall exactly above my head."

"It seems to me that I also have met that man," observed Maas quietly, lighting another cigarette as he spoke. "He travels a great deal."

"Surely it could not be the same man?" remarked Mrs. Dobson, with an incredulous air. "The coincidence would be too extraordinary." A smile went round the group; for an appreciation of humour was not the lady's strong point.

"To continue my proposal," said Foote, with quiet enjoyment. "In addition to imparting instruction on the subjects I have mentioned, I would have my pupils thoroughly grounded in the languages of the various countries they intend visiting, so that they should not inquire the French for Eau de Cologne, or ask what sort of vegetable *pâté de foie gras* is when they encountered it upon their menus. A proper appreciation of the beautiful in art might follow, in order to permit of their being able to distinguish between a Sandro Botticelli and a 'Seaport at Sunrise' by Claude Lorraine."

"A professor who could give instruction upon the intricacies of a Continental wine list might be added with advantage," put in Barrington-Marsh.

"And the inevitable result," said Browne, who had joined the party while Marsh was speaking, "would be that you might as well not travel at all. Build an enormous restaurant in London, and devote a portion of it to every country into which modern man takes himself. Hang the walls with tricky, theatrical canvases after the fashion of a cyclorama; dress your waiters in appropriate costumes, let them speak the language of the country in which you are supposed to be dining, let the tables be placed in the centre of the hall, have a band to discourse national airs, and you would be able to bore yourself to death in comfort, for the simple reason that every one would talk, eat, drink, and behave just as respectably as his neighbour. Half the fun of moving about the world, as I understand it, lies in the studies of character presented by one's fellow-creatures. But, see, the boat is alongside; let us go ashore while it is fine."

Beautiful as Merok undoubtedly is, it must be admitted that its amusements are, to say the least of it, limited. You can lunch at the hotel, explore the curious little octagonal church, and, if you are a walker, climb the road that crosses the mountains to Grotlid. The views, however, are sublime, for the mountains rise on every hand, giving the little bay the appearance of an amphitheatre.

"What programme have you mapped out for us?" inquired Miss Verney, who, as was known to her companions, preferred an easy-chair and a flirtation on the deck of the yacht to any sort of athletic exercise ashore.

Browne thereupon explained that the Duchess, who was dressed in appropriate walking costume, had arranged everything. They were to visit the church, do the regulation sights, and, finally, make their way up the hillside to the Storfos Waterfall, which is the principal, and almost the only, attraction the village has to offer. The usual order of march was observed. The Duchess and the Ambassador, being the seniors of the party, led the way; the lady's two daughters, escorted by Barrington-Marsh and Jimmy Foote – who was too obvious a detrimental to be worth guarding

against – came next; Maas, Mrs. and Miss Dobson followed close behind them; Miss Verney and Browne brought up the rear.

Everything went merrily as a marriage bell. After those who had brought their cameras had snap-shotted the church, and made the usual mistake with regard to the angles, the party climbed the hill in the direction of the waterfall. It was only when they reached it that those in front noticed that Miss Verney had joined the trio next before her, and that Browne had disappeared. He had gone back to the boat, the lady explained, in order to give some instructions that had been forgotten. From her silence, however, and from the expression of annoyance upon her beautiful lace, the others immediately jumped to the conclusion that something more serious must have happened than her words implied. In this case, however, popular opinion was altogether at fault. As a matter of fact, Browne's reason for leaving his guests to pursue their walk alone was an eminently simple one. He strolled down to the boat which had brought them ashore, and, having despatched it with a message to the yacht, resumed his walk, hoping to overtake his party before they reached the waterfall. Unfortunately, however, a thick mist was descending upon the mountain, shutting out the landscape as completely as if a curtain had been drawn before it. At first he was inclined to treat the matter as of small moment; and, leaving the road, he continued his walk in the belief that it would soon pass off. Stepping warily – for mountain paths in Norway are not to be treated with disrespect – he pushed on for upwards of a quarter of an hour, feeling sure he must be near his destination, and wondering why he did not hear the voices of his friends or the thunder of the fall. At last he stopped. The mist was thicker than ever, and a fine but penetrating rain was falling. Browne was still wondering what Miss Verney's feelings would be, supposing she were condemned to pass the night on the hillside, when he heard a little cry proceeding from a spot, as he supposed, a few yards ahead of him. The voice was a woman's, and the ejaculation was one of pain. Hearing it, Browne moved forward again in the hope of discovering whence it proceeded and what had occasioned it. Search how he would, however, he could see nothing of the person who had given utterance to it. At last, in despair, he stood still and called, and in reply a voice answered in English, "Help me; help me, please."

"Where are you?" Browne inquired in the same language; "and what is the matter?"

"I am down here," the voice replied; "and I am afraid I have sprained my ankle. I have fallen and cannot get up."

Browne has since confessed that it was the voice that did it. The accent, however, was scarcely that of an Englishwoman.

"Are you on a path or on the hillside?" he inquired, after he had vainly endeavoured to locate her position.

"I am on the hillside," she replied. "The fog was so thick that I could not see my way, and I slipped on the bank and rolled down, twisting my foot under me."

"Well, if you will try to guide me, I will do all in my power to help you," said Browne; and as he said it he moved carefully towards the spot whence he imagined the voice proceeded. From the feel of the ground under his feet he could tell that he had left the path and was descending the slope.

"Am I near you now?" he asked.

"I think you must be," was the reply. And then the voice added, with a little laugh, "How ridiculous it all is, and how sorry I am to trouble you!"

Had she known to what this extraordinary introduction was destined to lead, it is very doubtful whether she would have considered it so full either of humour or regret as her words implied.

Inch by inch Browne continued his advance, until he could just distinguish, seated on the ground below him, and clinging with both her arms to a stunted birch-tree, the figure of the girl for whom he was searching. At most she was not more than five feet from him. Then, with that suddenness which is the peculiar property of Norwegian mists, the vapour, which had up to that moment so thickly enveloped them, rolled away, and the whole landscape was revealed to their gaze. As he took in the position, Browne uttered a cry of horror. The girl had wandered off the path, slipped down the bank,

and was now clinging to a tree only a few feet removed from the brink of one of the most terrible precipices along the Norwegian coast.

So overwhelmed was he with horror that for a moment Browne found himself quite unable to say or do anything. Then, summoning to his assistance all the presence of mind of which he was master, he addressed the girl, who, seeing the danger to which she was exposed, was clinging tighter than ever to the tree, her face as white as the paper upon which I am now writing. For a moment the young man scarcely knew how to act for the best. To leave her while he went for assistance was out of the question; while it was very doubtful, active as he was, whether he would be able, unaided, to get her up in her injured condition to the path above. Ridiculous as the situation may have appeared in the fog, it had resolved itself into one of absolute danger now, and Browne felt the perspiration start out upon his forehead as he thought of what would have happened had she missed the tree and rolled a few feet farther. One thing was quite certain – something must be done; so, taking off his coat, he lowered it by the sleeve to her, inquiring at the same time whether she thought she could hold on to it while he pulled her up to the path above. She replied that she would endeavour to do so, and thereupon the struggle commenced. A struggle it certainly was, and an extremely painful one, for the girl was handicapped by her injured foot. What if her nerve should desert her and she should let go, or the sleeve of the coat should part company with the body? In either case there could be but one result – an instant and terrible death for her.

Taken altogether, it was an experience neither of them would ever be likely to forget. At last, inch by inch, foot by foot, he drew her up; and with every advance she made, the stones she dislodged went tinkling down the bank, and, rolling over the edge, disappeared into the abyss below. When at last she was sufficiently close to enable him to place his arm round her, and to lift her into safety beside himself, the reaction was almost more than either of them could bear. For some minutes the girl sat with her face buried in her hands, too much overcome with horror at the narrowness of her escape even to thank her preserver. When she *did* lift her face to him, Browne became aware for the first time of its attractiveness. Beautiful, as Miss Verney was beautiful, she certainly could not claim to be; there was, however, something about her face that was more pleasing than mere personal loveliness could possibly have been.

"How did you come to be up here alone?" he inquired, after she had tried to express her gratitude to him for the service he had rendered her.

"It was foolish, I admit," she answered. "I had been painting on the mountain, and was making my way back to the hotel when the fog caught me. Suddenly I felt myself falling. To save myself I clutched at that tree, and was still clinging to it when you called to me. Oh! how can I thank you? But for you I might now be –"

She paused, and Browne, to fill in the somewhat painful gap, hastened to say that he had no desire to be thanked at all. He insisted that he had only done what was fit and proper under the circumstances. It was plain, however, from the look of admiration he cast upon her, that he was very well satisfied with the part he had been permitted to play in the affair.

While, however, they were progressing thus favourably in one direction, it was evident that they were not yet at an end of their difficulties, for the young lady, pretend as she might to ignore the fact, was undoubtedly lame; under the circumstances for her to walk was out of the question, and Merok was fully a mile, and a very steep mile, distant from where they were now seated.

"How am I to get home?" the girl inquired. "I am afraid it will be impossible for me to walk so far, and no pony could come along this narrow path to fetch me."

Browne puckered his forehead with thought. A millionaire is apt to imagine that nothing in this world is impossible, provided he has his cheque-book in his pocket and a stylographic pen wherewith to write an order on his banker. In this case, however, he was compelled to confess himself beaten. There was one way out of it, of course, and both knew it. But the young man felt his face grow hot as the notion occurred to him.

"If you would only let me carry you as far as the main road, I could easily find a conveyance to take you the rest of the distance," he faltered.

"Do you think you *could* carry me?" she answered, with a seriousness that was more than half assumed. "I am very heavy."

It might be mentioned here, and with advantage to the story, that in his unregenerate days Browne had won many weight-lifting competitions; his modesty, however, prevented his mentioning this fact to her.

"If you will trust me, I think I can manage it," he said; and then, without waiting for her to protest, he picked the girl up, and, holding her carefully in his arms, carried her along the path in the direction of the village. It was scarcely a time for conversation, so that the greater portion of the journey was conducted in silence. When at last they reached the mountain road – that wonderful road which is one of the glories of Merok – Browne placed the girl upon the bank, and, calling a boy whom he could see in the distance, despatched him to the hotel for assistance. The youth having disappeared, Browne turned to the girl again. The pain she had suffered during that short journey had driven the colour from her face, but she did her best to make light of it.

"I cannot thank you enough for all you have done for me," she said, and a little shudder swept over her as the remembrance of how near she had been to death returned to her.

"I am very thankful I happened to be there at the time," the other replied with corresponding seriousness. "If you will be warned by me, you will be careful for the future how you venture on the mountains without a guide at this time of the year. Fogs, such as we have had to-day, descend so quickly, and the paths are dangerous at the best of times."

"You may be sure I will be more careful," she replied humbly. "But do not let me keep you now; I have detained you too long already. I shall be quite safe here."

"You are not detaining me," he answered. "I have nothing to do. Besides, I could not think of leaving you until I have seen you safely on your way back to your hotel. Have you been in Merok very long?"

"Scarcely a week," the girl replied. "We came from Hellesylt."

Browne wondered of whom the *we* might consist. Was the girl married? He tried to discover whether or not she wore a wedding-ring, but her hand was hidden in the folds her dress.

Five minutes later a cabriole made its appearance, drawn by a shaggy pony and led by a villager. Behind it, and considerably out of breath, toiled a stout and elderly lady, who, as soon as she saw the girl seated on the bank by the roadside, burst into a torrent of speech.

"Russian," said Brown to himself; "her accent puzzled me, but now I understand."

Then turning to the young man, who was experiencing some slight embarrassment at being present at what his instinct told him was a wiggling, administered by a lady who was plainly a past mistress at the art, the girl said in English: —

"Permit me to introduce you to my guardian, Madame Bernstein."

The couple bowed ceremoniously to each other, and then Browne and the villager between them lifted the girl into the vehicle, the man took his place at the pony's head, and the strange cortège proceeded on its way down the hill towards the hotel. Once there, Browne prepared to take leave of them. He held out his hand to the girl, who took it.

"Good-bye," he said. "I hope it will not be long before you are able to get about once more."

"Good-bye," she answered; and then, with great seriousness, "Pray, believe that I shall always be grateful to you for the service you have rendered me this afternoon."

There was a little pause. Then, with a nervousness that was by no means usual to him, he added:

—

"I hope you will not think me rude, but perhaps you would not mind telling me whom I have had the pleasure of helping?"

"My name is Katherine Petrovitch," she answered, with a smile, and then as frankly returned his question. "And yours?"

"My name is Browne," he replied; and also smiling as he said it, he added: "I am Browne's Mimosa Soap, Fragrant and Antiseptic."

## CHAPTER II

When Browne reached the yacht, after bidding good-bye to the girl he had rescued, he found his friends much exercised in their minds concerning him. They had themselves been overtaken by the fog, and very naturally they had supposed that their host, seeing it coming on, had returned to the yacht without waiting for them. Their surprise, therefore, when they arrived on board and found him still missing was scarcely to be wondered at. In consequence, when he descended the companion ladder and entered the drawing-room, he had to undergo a cross-examination as to his movements. Strangely enough, this solicitude for his welfare was far from being pleasing to him. He had made up his mind to say nothing about the adventure of the afternoon, and yet, as he soon discovered, it was difficult to account for the time he had spent ashore if he kept silence on the subject. Accordingly he made the best excuse that occurred to him, and by disclosing a half-truth induced them to suppose that he had followed their party towards the waterfall, and had in consequence been lost in the fog.

"It was scarcely kind of you to cause us so much anxiety," said Miss Verney in a low voice as he approached the piano at which she was seated. "I assure you we have been most concerned about you; and, if you had not come on board very soon, Captain Marsh and Mr. Foote were going ashore again in search of you."

"That would have been very kind of them," said Browne, dropping into an easy-chair; "but there was not the least necessity for it. I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

"Nasty things mountains," said Jimmy Foote to the company at large. "I don't trust 'em myself. I remember once on the Rigi going out with old Simeon Baynes, the American millionaire fellow, you know, and his daughter, the girl who married that Italian count who fought Constantovitch and was afterwards killed in Abyssinia. At one place we very nearly went over the edge, every man-jack of us, and I vowed I'd never do such a thing again. Fancy the irony of the position! After having been poverty-stricken all one's life, to drop through the air thirteen hundred feet in the company of over a million dollars. I'm perfectly certain of one thing, however: if it hadn't been for the girl's presence of mind I should not have been here to-day. As it was, she saved my life, and, until she married, I never could be sufficiently grateful to her."

"Only until she married!" said Lady Imogen, looking up from the novel she was reading. "How was it your gratitude did not last longer than that?"

"Doesn't somebody say that gratitude is akin to love?" answered Foote, with a chuckle. "Of course I argued that, since she was foolish enough to show her bad taste by marrying somebody else, it would scarcely have become me to be grateful."

Browne glanced at Foote rather sharply. What did he mean by talking of life-saving on mountains, on this evening of all others? Had he heard anything? But Jimmy's face was all innocence.

At that moment the dressing gong sounded, and every one rose, preparatory to departing to their respective cabins.

"Where is Maas?" Browne inquired of Marsh, who was the last to leave.

"He is on deck, I think," replied the other; but as he spoke the individual in question made his appearance down the companion-ladder, carrying in his hand a pair of field-glasses.

For some reason or another, dinner that night was scarcely as successful as usual. The English mail had come in, and the Duchess had had a worrying letter from the Duke, who had been commanded to Osborne among the salt of the earth, when he wanted to be in the Highlands among the grouse; Miss Verney had not yet recovered from what she considered Browne's ill-treatment of herself that afternoon; while one of the many kind friends of the American Ambassador had forwarded him information concerning a debate in Congress, in order that he might see in what sort of estimation he was held by a certain portion of his fellow-countrymen. Never a very talkative man, Browne this evening was even more silent than usual. The recollection of a certain pale face and a pair of beautiful

eyes haunted him continually. Indeed, had it not been for Barrington-Marsh and Jimmy Foote, who did their duty manfully, the meal would have been a distinct failure as far as its general liveliness was concerned. As it was, no one was sorry when an adjournment was made for coffee to the deck above. Under the influence of this gentle stimulant, however, and the wonderful quiet of the fjord, things brightened somewhat. But the improvement was not maintained; the pauses gradually grew longer and more frequent, and soon after ten o'clock the ladies succumbed to the general inertness, and disappeared below.

According to custom, the majority of the men immediately adjourned to the smoking-room for cards. Browne, however, excused himself on the plea that he was tired and preferred the cool. Maas followed suit; and, when the others had taken themselves off, the pair stood leaning against the bulwarks, smoking and watching the lights of the village ashore.

"I wonder how you and I would have turned out," said Maas quietly, when they had been standing at the rails for some minutes, "if we had been born and bred in this little village, and had never seen any sort of life outside the Geiranger?"

"Without attempting to moralize, I don't doubt but that we should have been better in many ways," Browne replied. "I can assure you there are times when I get sick to death of the inane existence we lead."

"*Leben heisst träumen; weise sein heisst angenehm träumen,*" quoted Maas, half to himself and half to his cigar. "Schiller was not so very far out after all."

"Excellent as far as the sentiment is concerned," said Browne, as he flicked the ash off his cigar and watched it drop into the water alongside. "But, however desirous we may be of dreaming agreeably, our world will still take good care that we wake up just at the moment when we are most anxious to go on sleeping."

"In order that we may not be disillusioned, my friend," said Maas. "The starving man dreams of City banquets, and wakes to the unpleasant knowledge that it does not do to go to sleep on an empty stomach. The debtor imagines himself the possessor of millions, and wakes to find the man-in-possession seated by his bedside. But there is one cure; and you should adopt it, my dear Browne."

"What is that?"

"Marriage, my friend! Get yourself a wife and you will have no time to think of such things. Doesn't your Ben Jonson say that marriage is the best state for a man in general?"

"Marriage!" retorted Browne scornfully. "It always comes back to that. I tell you I have come to hate the very sound of the word. From the way people talk you might think marriage is the pivot on which our lives turn. They never seem to realise that it is the rock upon which we most of us go to pieces. What is a London season but a monstrous market, in which men and women are sold to the highest bidders, irrespective of inclination or regard? I tell you, Maas, the way these things are managed in what we call English society borders on the indecent. Lord A. is rich; consequently a hundred mothers offer him their daughters. He may be what he pleases – an honourable man, or the greatest blackguard at large upon the earth. In nine cases out of ten it makes little or no difference, provided, of course, he has a fine establishment and the settlements are satisfactory. At the commencement of the season the girls are brought up to London, to be tricked out, regardless of expense, by the fashionable dressmakers of the day. They are paraded here, there, and everywhere, like horses in a dealer's yard; are warned off the men who have no money, but who might very possibly make them happy; while they are ordered by the 'home authorities' to encourage those who have substantial bank balances and nothing else to recommend them. As the question of love makes no sort of difference, it receives no consideration. After their friends have sent them expensive presents, which in most cases they cannot afford to give, but do so in order that they may keep up appearances with their neighbours and tradesmen, the happy couple stand side by side before the altar at St. George's and take the most solemn oath of their lives; that done, they spend their honeymoon in Egypt, Switzerland, or the Riviera, where they are presented with ample opportunity of growing tired

of one another. Returning to town, the man usually goes back to his old life and the woman to hers. The result is a period of mutual distrust and deceit; an awakening follows, and later on we have the *cause célèbre*, and, holding up our hands in horror, say, 'Dear me, how very shocking!' In the face of all this, we have the audacity to curl our lips and to call the French system unnatural!"

"I am afraid, dear Browne, you are not quite yourself to-night," said Maas, with a gentle little laugh, at the end of the other's harangue. "The mistake of believing that a marriage, with money on the side of the man and beauty on that of the woman, must irretrievably result in misfortune is a very common one. For my part, I am singular enough to believe it may turn out as well if not better than any other."

"I wasn't aware that optimism was your strong point," retorted Browne. "For my part I feel, after the quiet of this fjord, as if I could turn my back on London and never go near it again."

He spoke with such earnestness that Maas, for once in his life, was almost astonished. He watched his companion as he lit another cigar.

"One thing is quite certain," he said at length, "your walk this afternoon did you more harm than good. The fog must have got into your blood. And yet, if you will not think me impertinent for saying so, Miss Verney gave you a welcome such as many men would go through fire and water to receive."

Browne grunted scornfully. He was not going to discuss Miss Verney's opinion of himself with his companion. Accordingly he changed the subject abruptly by inquiring whether Maas had made any plans for the ensuing winter.

"I am a methodical man," replied the latter, with a smile at his companion's naive handling of the situation, "and all my movements are arranged some months ahead. When this charming voyage is at an end, and I have thanked you for your delightful hospitality, I shall hope to spend a fortnight with our dear Duchess in the Midlands; after that I am due in Paris for a week or ten days; then, like the swallow, I fly south; shall dawdle along the Mediterranean for three or four months, probably cross to Cairo, and then work my way slowly back to England in time for the spring. What do you propose doing?"

"Goodness knows," Browne replied lugubriously. "At first I thought of Rajputana; but I seem to have done, and to be tired of doing, everything. They tell me tigers are scarce in India. This morning I felt almost inclined to take a run out to the Cape and have three months with the big game."

"You said as much in the smoking-room last night, I remember," Maas replied. "Pray, what has occurred since then to make you change your mind?"

"I do not know, myself," said Browne. "I feel restless and unsettled to-night, that is all. Do you think I should care for Russia?"

"For Russia?" cried his companion in complete surprise. "What on earth makes you think of Russia?"

Browne shook his head.

"It's a notion I have," he answered; though, for my own part, I am certain that, until that moment, he had never thought of it. "Do you remember Demetrovitch, that handsome fellow with the enormous moustache who stayed with me last year at Newmarket?"

"I remember him perfectly," Maas replied; and had Browne been watching his face, instead of looking at the little hotel ashore, he would in all probability have noticed that a peculiar smile played round the corners of his mouth as he said it. "But what has Demetrovitch to do with your proposed trip to Russia? I had an idea that he was ordered by the Czar to spend two years upon his estates."

"Exactly! so he was. That accounts for my notion. He has often asked me to pay him a visit. Besides, I have never seen Petersburg in the winter, and I'm told it's rather good fun."

"You will be bored to death," the other answered. "If you go, I'll give you a month in which to be back in England. Now I think, with your permission, I'll retire. It's after eleven, and there's something about these fjords that never fails to make me sleepy. Good-night, *mon cher ami*, and pleasant dreams to you."

Browne bade him good-night, and when the other disappeared into the companion, returned to his contemplation of the shore. The night was so still that the ripple of the wavelets on the beach, half a mile or so away, could be distinctly heard. The men had left the smoking-room; and save the solitary figure of the officer on the bridge, and a hand forward by the cable range, Browne had the deck to himself. And yet he was not altogether alone, for his memory was still haunted by the recollection of the same sweet face, with the dark, lustrous eyes, that had been with him all the evening. Do what he would, he could not endow the adventure of the afternoon with the common-place air he had tried to bestow upon it. Something told him that it was destined to play a more important part in his life's history than would at first glance appear to be the case. And yet he was far from being a susceptible young man. The training he had received would have been sufficient to prevent that. For upwards of an hour he remained where he was, thinking and thinking, and yet never coming any nearer a definite conclusion. Then, throwing away what remained of his cigar, he bestowed a final glance upon the shore, and went below to his cabin, to dream, over and over again, of the adventure that had befallen him that afternoon.

Whatever else may have been said of it, the weather next morning was certainly not propitious; the mountains surrounding the bay were hidden in thick mist, and rain was falling steadily. After breakfast the male portion of the party adjourned to the smoking-room, while the ladies engaged themselves writing letters or with their novels in the drawing-room below.

Browne alone seemed in good spirits. While the others were railing at the fog, and idly speculating as to whether it would clear, he seemed to derive a considerable amount of satisfaction from it. About ten o'clock he announced his intention of going ashore, in order, he said, that he might confer with a certain local authority regarding their proposed departure for the south next day. As a matter of politeness he inquired whether any of his guests would accompany him, and received an answer in the negative from all who happened to be in the smoking-room at the time. His valet accordingly brought him his mackintosh, and he had put it on and was moving towards the gangway when Maas made his appearance from the saloon companion.

"Is it possible you are going ashore?" he inquired in a tone of mild surprise. "If so, and you will have me, I will beg leave to accompany you. If I stay on board I shall go to sleep, and if I go to sleep I shall wake up in a bad temper; so that, if you would save your guests from that annoyance, I should advise you to take me with you."

Though Browne could very well have dispensed with his company, common politeness prevented him from saying so. Accordingly he expressed his pleasure at the arrangement, and when they had descended the gangway they took their places in the boat together. For the first time during the excursion, and also for the first time in the years they had known each other, Browne felt inclined to quarrel with Maas; and yet there was nothing in the other's behaviour towards him to which he could take exception.

Maas could see that Browne was not himself, and he accordingly set himself to remedy the trouble as far as lay in his power. So well did he succeed that by the time the boat reached the tiny landing-stage his host was almost himself again.

"Now you must do just as you please," said Maas when they had landed. "Do not consider me in the matter at all, I beg of you; I can amuse myself very well. Personally I feel inclined for a walk up the mountain road."

"Do so, then, by all means," said his host, who was by no means sorry to hear him arrive at this decision. "If I were you, however, I should stick to the road; these mists are not things to be taken lightly."

"I agree with you," said Maas. Then, bidding the other good-bye, he set off on his excursion.

Browne, who was conscientiousness itself, walked along the hillside to the residence of the functionary whom he had professedly come ashore to see, and when he had consulted him upon

the point at issue, made his way in the direction of the hotel. Accosting the manager in the hall, he inquired whether it would be possible to obtain an interview with Madame Bernstein.

"Most certainly, sir," the man replied. "If you will follow me I will conduct you to her."

So saying, he led the way down the long wooden passage towards a room at the further end. Into this Browne was ushered, while the man departed in search of the lady. What occasioned the delay it is impossible to say, but fully a quarter of an hour elapsed before madame made her appearance. She greeted him with a great appearance of cordiality. Taking his hands in hers, she held them while she thanked him, in fluent French, for what she called his bravery on the preceding afternoon.

"*Mon Dieu!*" said she. "What should I have done had you not been there to help her? Had she been killed I should never have known happiness again. It was such a risk to run. She is so reckless. She fills me with consternation whenever she goes out alone."

This was not at all what Browne had bargained for. However, under the circumstances, it would not only have been unwise, but practically impossible, for him to protest. You cannot save a young lady's life and expect to escape her relatives' thanks, however much you may desire to do so. After these had been offered to him, however, he managed to discover an opportunity of inquiring after her.

"The poor child is better this morning," Madame replied, solemnly wagging her head. "But, alas! it will be several days before she can hope to put her foot to the ground. She begged me, however, to thank you, monsieur, should you call, for your goodness to her."

Try as he would to conceal it, there could be no sort of doubt that Browne was pleased that she should have thought about him. He begged Madame Bernstein to inform her that he had called to inquire, and then bade her good-bye. He had hoped to have discovered something concerning the girl's history; but as it was plain to him that Madame was not one who would be easily induced to make disclosures, he abandoned the attempt.

He had passed down the passage, and was in the act of leaving the hotel, when a voice reached him from a room on the right which caused him no little surprise. At the same instant the door opened, and no less a person than Maas stood before him.

"Why, my dear Browne, really this is most charming," he cried, with a somewhat exaggerated enthusiasm. "I had not the very least idea of finding you here."

"Nor I of seeing you," Browne retorted. "I understood that you were going for a walk up the mountain."

"I did go," the other replied, "but the mist was so thick that I changed my mind and came in here for a glass of Vermouth prior to going on board. Believe me, there is nothing like Vermouth for counteracting the evil effects of fog. Will you let me persuade you to try a glass? What they have given me is excellent."

Browne thanked him, but declined. He did not like finding the man in the hotel; but as things were, he could not see that he had any right to complain. He only hoped that Maas knew nothing of his reason for being there. Conversant, however, as he was with his friend's peculiarities, he felt certain he would say nothing about it to any one, even supposing that he had discovered it.

Leaving the hotel together, they made their way down to the boat, and in something less than a quarter of an hour were on board the yacht once more. The fog still continued, nor did it lift for the remainder of the day.

On the following morning they had arranged to leave Merok for Aalsund, and thence to turn south on their homeward journey. Fortunately the weather had cleared sufficiently by the time day dawned to admit of their departure, and accordingly at the appointed hour, dipping her ensign to the village in token of farewell, the yacht swung round and headed for the pass under the Pulpit Rock. Browne was on the bridge at the time, and it was with a sensible feeling of regret that he bade farewell to the little village nestling at the foot of the snow-capped mountains. Never did he remember having experienced such regret in leaving a place before. Whether he and Katherine Petrovitch would ever meet again was more than he could tell; it seemed to him extremely unlikely, and yet – But at this

juncture he shook his head very wisely at the receding mountains, and told himself that that was a question which only Fate could decide.

## CHAPTER III

Six months had elapsed since the *Lotus Blossom* had steamed out of the Gieranger Fjord and its owner had taken his last look at the little village of Merok. During that interval Browne had endeavoured to amuse himself to the best of his ability. In spite of Maas's insinuation to the contrary, he had visited Russia; had shot bears in the company and on the estates of his friend Demetrovitch; had passed south to the Crimea, and thence, by way of Constantinople, to Cairo, where, chancing upon some friends who were wintering in the land of the Pharaohs, he had been persuaded into engaging a *dahabîyeh*, and had endured the tedious river journey to Luxor and back in the company of a charming French countess, an Austrian archduke, a German diplomatist, and an individual whose accomplishments were as notorious as his tastes were varied. A fortnight in Monte Carlo and a week in Paris had succeeded the Nile trip; and now the first week in March found him, free of engagements, ensconced in the luxurious smoking-room of the Monolith Club in Pall Mall, an enormous cigar between his teeth, and a feeling of regret in his heart that he had been persuaded to leave the warmth and sunshine of the favoured South for what he was now enduring. The morning had been fairly bright, but the afternoon was cold, foggy, and dreary in the extreme. Even the most weather-wise among the men standing at the windows, looking out upon the street, had to admit that they did not know what to make of it. It might only mean rain, they said; it might also mean snow. But that it was, and was going to be still more, unpleasant, nobody seemed for an instant to doubt. Browne stretched himself in his chair beside the fire, and watched the flames go roaring up the chimney, with an expression of weariness upon his usually cheerful countenance.

"What a fool you were, my lad, to come back to this sort of thing!" he said to himself. "You might have known the sort of welcome you would receive. In Cannes the sun has been shining on the Boulevard de la Croisette all day. Here it is all darkness and detestation. I've a good mind to be off again to-night; this sort of thing would give the happiest man the blues."

He was still pursuing this train of thought, when a hand was placed upon his shoulder, and, turning round, he discovered Jimmy Foote standing beside him.

"The very man I wanted to see," said Browne, springing to his feet and holding out his hand. "I give you my word, old fellow, you couldn't have come at a more opportune moment. I was in the act of setting off to find you."

"My dear old chap," replied his friend, "that is my *métier*: I always turn up at opportune moments, like the kind godmother in the fairy tale. What is it you want of me?"

"I want your company."

"There's nothing I'd give you more willingly," said Jimmy; "I'm tired of it myself. But seriously, what is the matter?"

"Look out of the window," Browne replied. "Do you see that fog?"

"I've not only seen it, I have swallowed several yards of it," Foote answered. "I've been to tea with the Verneys in Arlington Street, and I've fairly had to eat my way here. But why should the weather irritate you? If you're idiot enough to come back from Cairo to London in March, I don't see that you've any right to complain. I only wish Fate had blessed me with the same chance of getting away."

"If she had, where would you go and what would you do?"

"I'd go anywhere and do anything. You may take it from me that the Bard was not very far out when he said that if money goes before, all ways lie open."

"If that's all you want, we'll very soon send it before. Look here, Jimmy; you've nothing to do, and I've less. What do you say to going off somewhere? What's your fancy – Paris, south of France, Egypt, Algiers? One place is like another to me."

"I don't want anything better than Algiers," said Jimmy. "Provided we go by sea, I am your obedient and humble servant to command."

Then, waving his hand towards the gloom outside, he added: "Fog, Rain, Sleet, and Snow, my luck triumphs, and I defy ye!"

"That's settled, then," said Browne, rising and standing before the fire. "I'll wire to Mason to have the yacht ready at Plymouth to-morrow evening. I should advise you to bring something warm with you, for we are certain to find it cold going down Channel and crossing the Bay at this time of the year. In a week, however, we shall be enjoying warm weather once more. Now I must be getting along. You don't happen to be coming my way, I suppose?"

"My dear fellow," said Jimmy, buttoning up his coat and putting on his hat as he spoke, "my way is always your way. Are you going to walk or will you cab it?"

"Walk," Browne replied. "This is not the sort of weather to ride in hansoms. If you are ready, come along."

The two young men passed out of the club and along Pall Mall together. Turning up Waterloo Place, they proceeded in the direction of Piccadilly. The fog was thicker there than elsewhere, and every shop window was brilliantly illuminated in order to display the wares within.

"Oh, by the way, Browne, I've got something to show you," said Foote, as they passed over the crossing of Charles Street. "It may interest you."

"What is it?" asked Browne. "A new cigarette or something more atrocious than usual in the way of ties?"

"Better than that," returned his companion, and as he spoke he led his friend towards a picture-shop, in the window of which were displayed a number of works of art. Occupying a prominent position in the centre was a large water-colour, and as Browne glanced at it his heart gave a leap in his breast. It was a view of Merok taken from the spot where he had rescued Katherine Petrovitch from death upwards of seven months before. It was a clever bit of work, and treated in an entirely unconventional fashion.

"It's not by any means bad, is it?" said Foote, after Browne had been looking at it in silence for more than a minute. "If I had the money – But I say, old chap, what is the matter? You are as pale as if you had seen a ghost. Don't you feel well?"

"Perfectly well," his friend replied; "it's the fog."

He did not say that in the corner of the picture he had seen the artist's name, and that that name was the one he had cherished so fondly and for so long a time.

"Just excuse me for a moment, will you?" he said. "I should like to go into the shop and ask a question about that picture."

"All right," said Jimmy. "I'll wait here."

Browne accordingly disappeared inside, leaving Foote on the pavement. As it happened, it was a shop he often visited, and in consequence he was well known to the assistants. When he made his business known to them, the picture was withdrawn from the window and placed before him.

"An excellent bit of work, as you can see for yourself, sir," said the shopman, as he pulled down the electric light and turned it upon the picture. "The young lady who painted it is fast making a name for herself. So far this is the first bit of her work we have had in London; but the Continental dealers assure me they find a ready market for it."

"I can quite believe it," said Browne. "It is an exceedingly pretty sketch. You may send it round to me."

"Very good, sir; thank you. Perhaps you will allow me to show you one or two others while you are here? We have several new works since you paid us a visit last."

"No, thank you," Browne replied. "I only came in to find out whether you could tell me the address of the young lady who painted this. She and I met in Norway some months ago."

"Indeed, sir, I had no idea when I spoke, that you were acquainted. Perhaps you know that she is in London at the present moment. She honoured me by visiting my shop this morning."

"Indeed," said Browne. "In that case you might let me know where I can find her."

"I will do so at once," the man replied. "If you will excuse me for a moment I will have it written out for you."

He disappeared forthwith into an office at the end of the shop, leaving Browne staring at the picture as if he could not take his eyes off it. So engaged was he with the thoughts it conjured up that he quite forgot the fact that he was standing in a shop in London with hansoms and 'buses rolling by outside. In spirit he was on the steep side of a Norwegian mountain, surrounded by fog and rain, endeavouring to discover from what direction a certain cry for help proceeded. Then the fog rolled away, and, looking up at him, he saw what he now knew to be the sweetest and most womanly face upon which he had ever gazed. He was still wrapped in this day-dream when the shopman returned, and roused him by placing on the counter before him an envelope upon which was written: —

### **Miss KATHERINE PETROVITCH**

#### ***43, German Park Road, West***

"That is it, sir," said the man. "If it would be any convenience to you, sir, it will give me the greatest pleasure to write to the young lady, and to tell her that you have purchased her picture and would like her to call upon you."

"I must beg of you not to do anything of the kind," Browne replied, with the most impressive earnestness. "I must make it a condition of my purchase that you do not mention my name to her in any way."

The shopman looked a little crestfallen. "Very good, sir; since you do not wish it, of course I will be sure not to do so," he answered humbly. "I thought perhaps, having purchased an example of her work, and being such a well-known patron of art, you might be anxious to help the young lady."

"What do you mean by helping her?" inquired Browne. "Do you think she needs assistance?"

"Well, sir, between ourselves," returned the other, "I do not fancy she is very well off. She was in a great hurry, at any rate, to sell this picture."

Browne winced; it hurt him to think that the girl had perhaps been compelled to haggle with this man in order to obtain the mere necessaries of life. He, however, thanked the man for his courtesy, and bidding him send the picture to his residence as soon as possible, left the shop and joined Foote on the pavement outside.

"Well, I hope you have been long enough," remarked that gentleman in an injured tone, as they proceeded up the street together. "Have you purchased everything in the shop?"

"Don't be nasty, Jimmy," said Browne, with sudden joviality. "It doesn't suit you. You are the jolliest little fellow in the world when you are in a good temper; but when you are not – well, words fail me."

"Don't walk me off my legs, confound you!" said Jimmy snappishly. "The night is but young, and we're not performing pedestrians, whatever you may think."

Browne was not aware that he was walking faster than usual, but he slowed down on being remonstrated with. Then he commenced to whistle softly to himself.

"Now you are whistling," said Jimmy, "which is a thing, as you are well aware, that I detest in the street. What on earth is the matter with you to-night? Ten minutes ago you were as glum as they make 'em; nothing suited you. Then you went into that shop and bought that picture, and since you came out you seem bent on making a public exhibition of yourself."

"So I am," said Browne; and then, suddenly stopping in his walk, he rapped with the ferrule of his umbrella on the pavement. "I am going to give an exhibition, and a dashed good one, too. I'll take one of the galleries, and do it in a proper style. I'll have the critics there, and all the swells who buy; and if they don't do as I want, and declare it to be the very finest show of the year, I'll never buy one of their works again." Then, taking his friend's arm, he continued his walk, saying, "What you want, Jimmy, my boy, is a proper appreciation of art. There is nothing like it in the world, take my word for it. Nothing! Nothing at all!"

"You've said that before," retorted his friend, "and you said it with sufficient emphasis to amuse the whole street. If you're going to give me an exposition of art in Regent Street on a foggy afternoon in March, I tell you flatly I'm going home. I am not a millionaire, and my character won't stand the strain. What's the matter with you, Browne? You're as jolly as a sandboy now, and, for the life of me, I don't see how a chap can be happy in a fog like this and still retain his reason."

"Fog, my boy," continued Browne, still displaying the greatest good humour. "I give you my word, there's nothing like a fog in the world. I adore it! I revel in it! Talk about your south of France and sunshine – what is it to London and a fog? A fog did me a very good turn once, and now I'm hanged if another isn't going to do it again. You're a dear little chap, Jimmy, and I wouldn't wish for a better companion. But there's no use shutting your eyes to one fact, and that is you're not sympathetic. You want educating, and when I've a week or two to spare I'll do it. Now I'm going to leave you to think out what I've said. I've just remembered a most important engagement. Let me find a decent hansom and I'll be off."

"I thought you said just now this was not the weather for driving in hansoms? I thought you said you had nothing to do, and that you were going to employ yourself entertaining me? John Grantham Browne, I tell you what it is, you're going in that hansom to a lunatic asylum."

"Better than that, my boy," said Browne, with a laugh, as the cab drew up at the pavement and he sprang in. "Far better than that." Then, looking up through the trap in the roof at the driver, he added solemnly: "Cabby, drive me to 43, German Park Road, as fast as your horse can go."

"But, hold on," said Foote, holding up his umbrella to detain him. "Before you do go, what about to-morrow? What train shall we catch? And have you sent the wire to your skipper to have the yacht in readiness?"

"Bother to-morrow," answered Browne. "There is no to-morrow, there are no trains, there is no skipper, and most certainly there is no yacht. I've forgotten them and everything else. Drive on, cabby. Bye-bye, Jimmy."

The cab disappeared in the fog, leaving Mr. Foote standing before the portico of the Criterion looking after it.

"My friend Browne is either mad or in love," said that astonished individual as the vehicle disappeared in the traffic. "I don't know which to think. He's quite unnerved me. I think I'll go in here and try a glass of dry sherry just to pull myself together. What an idiot I was not to find out who painted that picture! But that's just like me; I never think of things until too late."

When he had finished his sherry he lit a cigarette, and presently found himself making his way towards his rooms in Jermyn Street. As he walked he shook his head solemnly. "I don't like the look of things at all," he said. "I said a lunatic asylum just now; I should have mentioned a worse place – 'St. George's, Hanover Square.' One thing, however, is quite certain. If I know anything of signs, Algiers will not have the pleasure of entertaining me."

## CHAPTER IV

While Foote was cogitating in this way, Browne's cab was rolling along westward. He passed Apsley House and the Park, and dodged his way in and out of the traffic through Kensington Gore and the High Street. By the time they reached the turning into the Melbury Road he was in the highest state of good humour, not only with himself but the world in general.

When, however, they had passed the cab-stand, and had turned into the narrow street which was his destination, all his confidence vanished, and he became as nervous as a weak-minded school-girl. At last the cabman stopped and addressed his fare.

"The fog's so precious thick hereabouts, sir," he said, "that I'm blest if I can see the houses, much less the numbers. Forty-three may be here, or it may be down at the other end. If you like I'll get down and look."

"You needn't do that," said Browne. "I'll find it for myself."

It may have been his nervousness that induced him to do such a thing – on that point I cannot speak with authority – but it is quite certain that when he did get down he handed the driver half-a-sovereign. With the characteristic honesty of the London cabman, the man informed him of the fact, at the same time remarking that he could not give him change.

"Never mind the change," said Browne; adding, with fine cynicism, "Put it into the first charity-box you come across."

The man laughed, and with a hearty "Thank ye, sir; good-night," turned his horse and disappeared.

"Now for No. 43," said Browne.

But though he appeared to be so confident of finding it, it soon transpired that the house was more difficult to discover than he imagined. He wandered up one pavement and down the other in search of it. When he did come across it, it proved to be a picturesque little building standing back from the street, and boasted a small garden in front. The door was placed at the side. He approached it and rang the bell. A moment later he found himself standing face to face with the girl he had rescued on the Gieranger Fjord seven months before. It may possibly have been due to the fact that when she had last seen him he had been dressed after the fashion of the average well-to-do tourist, and that now he wore a top-hat and a great coat; it is quite certain, however, that for the moment she did not recognise him.

"I am afraid you do not know me," said Browne, with a humility that was by no means usual with him. But before he had finished speaking she had uttered a little exclamation of astonishment, and, as the young man afterwards flattered himself, of pleasure.

"Mr. Browne!" she cried. "I beg your pardon, indeed, for not recognising you. You must think me very rude; but I had no idea of seeing you here."

"I only learnt your address an hour ago," the young man replied. "I could not resist the opportunity of calling on you."

"But I am so unknown in London," she answered. "How could you possibly have heard of me! I thought myself so insignificant that my presence in this great city would not be known to any one."

"You are too modest," said Browne, with a solemnity that would not have discredited a State secret. Then he made haste to add, "I cannot tell you how often I have thought of that terrible afternoon."

"As you may suppose, I have never forgotten it," she answered. "It is scarcely likely I should."

There was a little pause; then she added, "But I don't know why I should keep you standing out here like this. Will you not come in?"

Browne was only too glad to do so. He accordingly followed her into the large and luxuriously furnished studio.

"Won't you sit down?" she said, pointing to a chair by the fire. "It is so cold and foggy outside that perhaps you would like a cup of tea."

Tea was a beverage in which Browne never indulged, and yet, on this occasion, so little was he responsible for his actions that he acquiesced without a second thought.

"How do you prefer it?" she asked. "Will you have it made in the English or the Russian way? Here is a teapot, and here a samovar; here is milk, and here a slice of lemon. Which do you prefer?"

Scarcely knowing which he chose, Browne answered that he would take it *à la Russe*. She thereupon set to work, and the young man, as he watched her bending over the table, thought he had never in his life before seen so beautiful and so desirable a woman. And yet, had a female critic been present, it is quite possible – nay, it is almost probable that more than one hole might have been picked in her appearance. Her skirt – in order to show my knowledge of the technicalities of woman's attire – was of plain merino, and she also wore a painting blouse that, like Joseph's coat, was of many colours. To go further, a detractor would probably have observed that her hair might have been better arranged. Browne, however, thought her perfection in every respect, and drank his tea in a whirl of enchantment. He found an inexplicable fascination in the mere swish of her skirts as she moved about the room, and a pleasure that he had never known before in the movement of her slender hands above the tray. And when, their tea finished, she brought him a case of cigarettes, and bade him smoke if he cared to, it might very well have been said that that studio contained the happiest man in England. Outside, they could hear the steady patter of the rain, and the rattle of traffic reached them from the High Street; but inside there was a silence of a Norwegian fjord, and the memory of one hour that never could be effaced from their recollections as long as they both should live. Under the influence of the tea, and with the assistance of the cigarette, which she insisted he should smoke, Browne gradually recovered his presence of mind. One thing, however, puzzled him. He remembered what the shopman had told him, and for this reason he could not understand how she came to be the possessor of so comfortable a studio. This, however, was soon explained. The girl informed him that after his departure from Merok (though I feel sure she was not aware that he was the owner of the magnificent vessel she had seen in the harbour) she had been unable to move for upwards of a week. After that she and her companion, Madame Bernstein, had left for Christiania, travelling thence to Copenhagen, and afterwards to Berlin. In the latter city she had met an English woman, also an artist. They had struck up a friendship, with the result that the lady in question, having made up her mind to winter in Venice, had offered her the free use of her London studio for that time, if she cared to cross the Channel and take possession of it.

"Accordingly, in the daytime, I paint here," said the girl; "but Madame Bernstein and I have our lodgings in the Warwick Road. I hope you did not think this was my studio; I should not like to sail under false colours."

Browne felt that he would have liked to give her the finest studio that ever artist had used a brush and pencil in. He was wise enough, however, not to say so. He changed the conversation, therefore, by informing her that he had wintered in Petersburg, remarking at the same time that he had hoped to have had the pleasure of meeting her there.

"You will never meet me in Petersburg," she answered, her face changing colour as she spoke. "You do not know, perhaps, why I say this. But I assure you, you will never meet me or mine within the Czar's dominions."

Browne would have given all he possessed in the world not to have given utterance to that foolish speech. He apologised immediately, and with a sincerity that made her at once take pity on him.

"Please do not feel so sorry for what you said," she replied. "It was impossible for you to know that you had transgressed. The truth is, my family are supposed to be very dangerous persons. I do not think, with one exception, we are more so than our neighbours; but, as the law now stands, we are prohibited. Whether it will ever be different I cannot say. That is enough, however, about myself. Let us talk of something else."

She had seated herself in a low chair opposite him, with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her hand. Browne glanced at her, and remembered that he had once carried her in his arms for upwards of a mile. At this thought such a thrill went through him that his teacup, which he had placed on a table beside him, trembled in its saucer. Unable to trust himself any further in that direction, he talked of London, of the weather, of anything that occurred to him; curiously enough, however, he did not mention his proposed departure for the Mediterranean on the morrow. In his heart he had an uneasy feeling that he had no right to be where he was. But when he thought of the foggy street outside, and realised how comfortable this room was, with its easy chairs, its polished floor, on which the firelight danced and played, to say nothing of the girl seated opposite him, he could not summon up sufficient courage to say good-bye.

"How strange it seems," she said at last – "does it not? – that you and I should be sitting here like this! I had no idea, when we bade each other good-bye in Norway, that we should ever meet again."

"I felt certain of it," Browne replied, but he failed to add why he was so sure. "Is it settled how long you remain in England?"

"I do not think so," she answered. "We may be here some weeks; we may be only a few days. It all depends upon Madame Bernstein."

"Upon Madame Bernstein?" he said, with some surprise.

"Yes," she answered; "she makes our arrangements. You have no idea how busy she is."

Browne certainly had no idea upon that point, and up to that moment he was not sure that he was at all interested; now, however, since it appeared that madame controlled the girl's movements, she became a matter of overwhelming importance to him.

For more than an hour they continued to chat; then Browne rose to bid her good-bye.

"Would you think me intrusive if I were to call upon you again?" he asked as he took her hand.

"Do so by all means, if you like," she answered, with charming frankness. "I shall be very glad to see you."

Then an idea occurred to him – an idea so magnificent, so delightful, that it almost took his breath away.

"Would you think me impertinent if I inquired how you and Madame Bernstein amuse yourselves in the evenings? Have you been to any theatres or to the opera?"

The girl shook her head. "I have never been inside a theatre in London," she replied.

"Then perhaps I might be able to persuade you to let me take you to one," he answered. "I might write to Madame Bernstein and arrange an evening. Would she care about it, do you think?"

"I am sure she would," she answered. "And I know that I should enjoy it immensely. It is very kind of you to ask us."

"It is very kind of you to promise to come," he said gratefully. "Then I will arrange it for tomorrow night if possible. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered, and held out her little hand to him for the second time.

When the front door had closed behind him and he was fairly out in the foggy street once more, Browne set off along the pavement on his return journey, swinging his umbrella and whistling like a schoolboy. To a crusty old bachelor his state of mind would have appeared inexplicable. There was no sort of doubt about it, however, that he was happy; he walked as if he were treading on air. It was a good suggestion, that one about the theatre, he said to himself, and he would take care that they enjoyed themselves. He would endeavour to obtain the best box at the opera; they were playing *Lohengrin* at the time, he remembered. He would send one of his own carriages to meet them, and it should take them home again. Then a still more brilliant idea occurred to him. Why should he not arrange a nice little dinner at some restaurant first? Not one of your flash dining-places but a quiet, comfortable little place – Lallemand's, for instance, where the cooking is irreproachable, the wine and waiting faultless, and the company who frequent it beyond suspicion. And yet another notion, and as it occurred to him he laughed aloud in the public street.

"There will be three of us," he said, "and the chaperon will need an escort. By Jove! Jimmy called me mad, did he? Well, I'll be revenged on him. *He shall sit beside Madame Bernstein.*"

## CHAPTER V

If Browne had ever looked forward to anything in his life, he did to the dinner-party he had arranged for the evening following his visit to the studio in the German Park Road. On more than one occasion he had entertained royalty at his house in Park Lane, and at various times he had invited London society to functions which, for magnificence and completeness, had scarcely ever been equalled and never excelled. Upon none of these affairs, however, had he bestowed half so much care and attention as he did upon the dinner which it is now my duty to describe. Having written the formal invitation, he posted it himself; after which he drove to the restaurant which was to be honoured with Katherine Petrovitch's presence, and interviewed the proprietor in his own sanctum.

"Remember, Alphonse," he said to that delightful little man, "good as the others have been, this must be the very best dinner you have ever arranged for me. It must not be long, nor must it be in the least degree heavy. You know my taste in wine, and I give you *carte blanche* to ransack London for what you consider necessary in the way of rarities. Reserve 'No. 6' for me, if it is not already engaged; and make it look as nice as you possibly can. I will send the flowers from my house, and my own man shall arrange them."

Alphonse chuckled and rubbed his hands. This was just the sort of order he delighted to receive.

"Ver' good; it shall be done, M'sieu Browne," he said, bowing and spreading his hands apart in his customary fashion when pleased. "I have made you many, many dinners before, but I give you the word of Alphonse that this shall be the best of all. *Ma foi!* but I will give you a dinner zat for its betterment you cannot get in England. Ze cost I will –"

"Never mind the cost," answered the reckless young man; "remember, it must be the best in every way. Nothing short of that will do."

"I will satisfy you, m'sieu; never fear that. It is my honour. Perhaps it is royalty zat you have to come to my house?"

"It is nothing of the sort," Browne replied scornfully. "I am asking two ladies and one gentleman."

Alphonse's face expressed his surprise. It looked as if his beautiful dinner was likely to be wasted.

Having arranged the hour and certain other minor details, Browne returned to his cab once more, and drove off in search of Jimmy Foote. It was some time before he found him, and, when he did, a considerable period elapsed before he could obtain speech with him. Jimmy was at the Welter Club, playing black pool with two or three youths of his own type. From the manner in which their silver was changing hands, it certainly looked as if that accomplished young gentleman was finding his time very fully taken up, picking half-crowns off the rim of the table, placing them in his pocket, and paying them out again.

"Hullo, Browne!" said Bellingham of the Blues, after the black ball had disappeared into the top pocket and while the marker was spotting it again. "Are you coming in?"

"Not if I know it," said Browne, shaking his head. "Judging from the anxious expression upon Jimmy's face, things are getting a little too hot with you all."

At the end of the next round, the latter retired from the game, and, putting his arm through that of his friend, led him to the smoking-room on the other side of the hall.

"I hope you have calmed down, old fellow," said Jimmy as they seated themselves near the fire. "To what do I owe the honour of seeing you here to-night?"

"I want you to do me a favour," Browne returned, a little nervously, for he was afraid of what Jimmy would say when he knew everything.

"Anything you like in the world, old man," said the latter. "You have only to ask. There is nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing at all," replied Browne. "Rather the other way round, I fancy. The fact of the matter is, I have asked two ladies to dine with me to-morrow evening at Lallemand's, and to go to the Opera afterwards. I want you to make one of the party."

"The young lady is the painter of that charming Norwegian picture," said Jimmy, with imperturbable gravity, "and the other is her chaperon."

"How on earth did you know it?" asked Browne, blushing like a schoolboy, for the simple reason that he thought his secret was discovered.

"It's very plain that you never knew I was a wizard," returned his companion, with a laugh. "You old duffer; put two and two together for yourself – that is to say, if you have any brains left to do it with. In the first place, did you not yesterday afternoon invite me to accompany you on a delightful yachting trip to the Mediterranean? You were tired of England, you said, and I gathered from your remarks that you were counting the hours until you could say 'good-bye' to her. We went for a walk, and as we passed up Waterloo Place I happened to show you a picture. You turned as white as a sheet at once, and immediately dived into the shop, bidding me wait outside. When you reappeared you acted the part of an amiable lunatic; talked a lot of bosh about preferring fogs to sunshine; and when I informed you that you were on the high-road to an asylum, said it was better than that – you were going to the German Park Road. Our yachting cruise has been thrown to the winds; and now, to make up for it, you have the impudence to ask me to play gooseberry for you, and try to propitiate me with one of Lallemand's dinners, which invariably upset me for a week, and a dose of Wagner which will drive me crazy for a month."

"How do you know I want you to play gooseberry?" asked Browne savagely. "It's like your impudence to say such a thing."

"How do I know anything?" said Jimmy, with delightful calmness. "Why, by the exercise of my own common-sense, of course – a commodity you will never possess if you go on like this. You are spoons on this girl, I suppose, and since there's another coming with her, it's pretty plain to me somebody must be there to keep that other out of the way."

"You grow very coarse," retorted Browne, now thoroughly on his dignity.

"It's a coarse age, they say," Foote replied. "Don't I know by experience exactly what that second party will be like!"

"If you do you are very clever," said Browne.

"One has to be clever to keep pace with the times," Jimmy replied. "But, seriously, old man, if you want me, I shall be only too glad to come to your dinner; but, mind, I take no responsibility for what happens. I am not going to be called to account by every London mother who possesses a marriageable daughter."

"You needn't be afraid," said Browne. "I will absolve you from all responsibility. At any rate you assure me that I can depend upon you?"

"Of course you can, and anything else you like besides," Foote replied. Then, laying his hand upon Browne's shoulder, he added: "My dear old Jack, in spite of our long acquaintance, I don't think you quite know me yet. I talk a lot of nonsense, I'm afraid; but as far as you are concerned you may depend the heart's in the right place. Now I come to think of it, I am not quite certain it would not be better for you to be decently married and out of harm's way. Of course, one doesn't like to see one's pals hurried off like that; but in your case it's different."

"My dear fellow," said Browne, "as you said just now, you certainly do talk a lot of nonsense. Whoever said anything about marriage? Of course I'm not going to be married. I have never contemplated such a thing. It's always the way; directly a man shows a little extra courtesy to a woman, talks to her five minutes longer than he is accustomed to do, perhaps, or dances with her twice running, you immediately get the idea that everything is settled between them, and that all you have to do is to wonder what sort of wedding present you ought to give them."

"When a man gives himself away as completely as you have done in this particular instance, it is not to be wondered that his friends think there is something in the air," said Jimmy. "However, you know your own business best. What time is the dinner?"

"Seven o'clock sharp," said Browne. "You had better meet me there a few minutes before. Don't forget we go to the Opera afterwards."

"I am not likely to forget it," said Jimmy, with a doleful face.

"Very well, good-bye until to-morrow evening."

There was a little pause, and then Browne held out his hand.

"Thank you, Jimmy," he said with a sincerity that was quite inconsistent with the apparent importance of the subject. "I felt sure I could rely upon you."

"Rely upon me always," Jimmy replied. "I don't think you'll find me wanting."

With that Browne bade him good-bye, and went out into the street. He hailed a cab, and bade the man drive him to Park Lane.

Once it had started, he laid himself back on the cushions and gave free rein to his thoughts. Though he had to all intents and purposes denied it a few minutes before, there could be no doubt that he was in love – head over ears in love. He had had many passing fancies before, it is true, but never had he experienced such a strong attack of the fever as at present. As the cab passed along the crowded street he seemed to see that sweet face, with its dark eyes and hair; that slender figure, and those beautiful white hands, with their long tapering fingers; and to hear again the soft tones of Katherine's voice as she had spoken to him in the studio that afternoon. She was a queen among women, he told himself, and was worthy to be loved as such. But if she were so beautiful and so desirable, could she be induced to have anything to do with himself? Could she ever be brought to love him? It was consistent with the man's character to be so humble, and yet it was strange that he should have been so. Ever since he had been eligible for matrimony he had been the especial prey of mothers with marriageable daughters. They had fawned upon him, had petted him, and in every way had endeavoured to effect his capture. Whether or not Katherine Petrovitch knew of his wealth it was impossible for him to say. He hoped she did not. It was his ambition in life to be loved, and be loved for himself alone. If she would trust him, he would devote his whole life to making her happy, and to proving how well founded was the faith she had reposed in him. Vitaly important as the question was, I believe he had never for one moment doubted her. His nature was too open for that, while she herself, like Caesar's wife, was of course above suspicion. The fact that she had confessed to him that her family was prohibited in Russia only served to intensify his admiration for her truthful qualities. Though he knew nothing of her history or antecedents, it never for one moment caused him any uneasiness. He loved her for herself, not for her family. When he went to bed that night he dreamt of her, and when he rose in the morning he was, if possible, more in love than before. Fully occupied as his day usually was, on this occasion he found it more than difficult to pass the time. He counted the hours – nay, almost the minutes – until it should be possible for him to set off to the restaurant. By the midday post a charming little note arrived, signed Katherine Petrovitch. Browne was in his study when it was brought to him, and it was with the greatest difficulty he could contain his impatience until the butler had left the room. The instant he had done so, however, he tore open the envelope and drew out the contents. The writing was quaint and quite un-English, but its peculiarities only served to make it the more charming. It would give Madame Bernstein and the writer, it said, much pleasure to dine with him that evening. He read and re-read it, finding a fresh pleasure in it on each occasion. It carried with it a faint scent which was as intoxicating as the perfume of the Lotus Blossom.

Had the beautiful Miss Verney, who, it must be confessed, had more than once written him letters of the most confidential description, guessed for a single moment that he preferred the tiny sheet he carried in his coat-pocket to her own epistles, it is certain her feelings would have been painful in the extreme. The fact remains, however, that Browne preserved the letter, and, if I know anything of human nature, he has it still.

## CHAPTER VI

The dinner that evening must be counted a distinct success. Browne was the first to arrive at the rendezvous, and it was not wonderful that he should have been, considering that he had spent the whole of his day waiting for that moment. The owner of the restaurant received him personally.

"Well, Lallemand," said Browne, with an anxiety that was almost ludicrous, "how are your preparations? Is everything ready?"

"Certainly, monsieur," Lallemand replied, spreading his hands apart. "Everything is ready; Felix himself has done ze cooking, I have chosen ze wine, and your own gardener has arranged ze flowers. You have ze best men-servants in London to wait upon you. I have procured you four kinds of fruit that has only a few times been seen in England before; and now I give you ze word of Lallemand zat you will have ze most perfect little dinner in ze city of London."

"I am glad to hear it," said Browne. "I am exceedingly obliged to you for the trouble you have taken in the matter."

"I beg you will not mention ze trouble, monsieur," replied Lallemand politely. "It is ze pleasure of my life to serve you."

He had scarcely spoken before a cab drew up before the door, and Jimmy Foote made his appearance, clad in immaculate evening-dress. He greeted Browne with a somewhat sheepish air, as if he were ashamed of himself for something, and did not quite know what that something was.

"Well, old man," he said. "Here I am, you see; up to time, I hope. How d'ye do, Lallemand?"

"I hope you are most well, Monsieur Foote," replied Lallemand, with one of his inimitable bows.

"I am better than I shall be after your dinner," Foote replied, with a smile. "Human nature is weak. I am tempted, and I know that I shall fall."

Browne all this time was showing signs of impatience. He glanced repeatedly at his watch, and as seven o'clock drew near he imagined that every vehicle pulling up outside must contain the two ladies for whom he was waiting so eagerly. When at last they did arrive he hastened to the door to greet them. Madame Bernstein was the first to alight, and Katherine Petrovitch followed her a moment later. She gave her hand to Browne, and as he took it such a thrill went through him that it was wonderful the young man did not collapse upon the pavement.

Having conducted them to the room in which they were to take off their wraps, Browne went in search of Foote, whom he found in the dining-room.

"Pull yourself together, old chap," said Jimmy as he glanced at him; "you are all on the jump. What on earth is the matter with you? Take my advice and try a pick-me-up."

"I wouldn't touch a drop for worlds," said Browne, with righteous indignation. "I wonder you can suggest such a thing."

Instead, he went to the table and moved a flower-vase which was an eighth of an inch from the centrepiece farther than its companion on the other side.

"This is as bad a case as I ever remember," said Foote to himself; and at the same moment Katherine Petrovitch and Madame Bernstein entered the room. A somewhat painful surprise was in store for Browne. There could be no doubt about one thing: Madame Bernstein had dressed herself with due regard to the importance of the occasion. Her gown was of bright ruby velvet; her arms were entirely bare; and while her bodice was supported by the most slender of shoulder-straps, it was cut considerably lower than most people would have considered compatible with either her age or her somewhat portly appearance. Round her neck and studded in her hair were many diamonds, all so palpably false as to create no suspicion of the means by which she had obtained them. Her companion's costume, on the other hand, was simplicity itself. She was attired in black, unrelieved by any touch of colour; a plain band of velvet encircled her throat, and Browne confessed to himself

afterwards that he had never in his life seen anything more becoming. He presented Foote to the ladies with due ceremony; and when their places had been allotted them they sat down to dinner, madame on Browne's right, Katherine on his left.

Despite the knowledge that the dinner had been prepared by one of the most admirable *chefs* in the world, and the fact that Lallemand himself had given his assurance that everything was satisfactory, Browne was nevertheless exercised in his mind lest anything should go wrong. He might have spared himself the anxiety, however, for the dinner was perfection itself. One other thing troubled him, and that was that the person he was most anxious to please scarcely touched anything. But if she did not, Madame Bernstein made ample amends for her. She allowed no dish to pass her untasted; the connoisseur was apparent in her appreciation of the wines, while her praise of the cooking was volubility itself. From what he had seen of her, Browne had been prepared to dislike her intensely; to his surprise, however, he discovered that she improved on acquaintance. Seemingly, she had been everywhere and had seen everything; in her youth she had known Garibaldi personally, had met Kossuth, and been brought into contact with many other European liberators. For this reason alone her conversation could scarcely have failed to prove interesting. Katherine, on the other hand, was strangely quiet.

The dinner at an end, the ladies withdrew to put on their cloaks; and while they were absent Browne ascertained that his carriage was at the door. In it they drove to Covent Garden. The box was on the prompt side of the house, and was the best that influence and money could secure. Madame Bernstein and Katherine Petrovitch took their places in the front, while Browne managed to manoeuvre his chair into such a position that he could speak to Katherine without the others overhearing what he said.

"You are fond of music, are you not?" he inquired as the orchestra took their places. He felt as he said it that he need not have asked; with such a face she could scarcely fail to be.

"I am more than fond of it," she answered, playing with the handle of her fan. "Music and painting are my two greatest pleasures."

She uttered a little sigh, which seemed to suggest to Browne that she had not very much pleasure in her life. At least, that was the way in which he interpreted it.

Then the curtain went up, and Browne was forced to be silent. I think, if you were to ask him now which was the happiest evening of his life, he would answer, "That on which I saw Lohengrin with Katherine Petrovitch." If the way in which the time slipped by could be taken as any criterion, it must certainly have been so, for the evening seemed scarcely to have begun ere it was over and the National Anthem was being played. When the curtain descended the two young men escorted the ladies to the entrance hall, where they waited while the carriage was being called. It was at this juncture that Jimmy proved of use. Feeling certain Browne would be anxious to have a few minutes alone with Katherine, he managed, with great diplomacy, to draw Madame Bernstein on one side, on the pretence of telling her an amusing story concerning a certain Continental military attaché with whom they were both acquainted.

"How long do you think it will be before I may venture to see you again?" Browne asked the girl when they were alone together.

"I cannot say," she replied, with an attempt at a smile. "I do not know what Madame Bernstein's arrangements are."

"But surely Madame Bernstein does not control all your actions?" he asked, I fear a little angrily; for he did not like to think she was so dependent on the elder woman.

"No, she does not altogether control them, of course," Katherine replied; "but I always have so much to do for her that I do not feel justified in making any arrangements without first consulting her."

"But you must surely have some leisure," he continued. "Perhaps you shop in the High Street, or walk in the Park or Kensington Gardens on fine mornings. Might I not chance to find you in one of those places?"

"I fear not," she answered, shaking her head. "If it is fine I have my work to do."

"And if it should be wet?" asked Browne, feeling his heart sink within him as he realised that she was purposely placing obstacles in the way of their meeting. "Surely you cannot paint when the days are as gloomy as they have been lately."

"No," she answered; "that is impossible. But it gives me no more leisure than before; for in that case I have letters to write for Madame Bernstein, and she has an enormous amount of correspondence."

Though Browne wondered what that correspondence could be, he said nothing to her on the subject, nor had he any desire to thrust his presence upon the girl when he saw she was not anxious for it. It was plain to him that there was something behind it all – some reason to account for her pallor and her quietness that evening. What that reason was, however, he could not for the life of him understand.

They had arrived at this point when the carriage reached the door. Madame Bernstein and Foote accordingly approached them, and the quartette walked together towards the entrance.

"I thank you many times for your kindness to-night," said Katherine, looking shyly up at Browne.

"Please, don't thank me," he replied. "It is I who should thank you. I hope you have enjoyed yourself."

"Very much indeed," she answered. "I could see *Lohengrin* a hundred times without growing in the least tired of it."

As she said this they reached the carriage. Browne placed the ladies in it, and shook hands with them as he bade them good-night. He gave the footman his instructions, and presently the carriage rolled away, leaving the two young men standing on the pavement, looking after it. It was a beautiful starlight night, with a touch of frost in the air.

"Are we going to take a cab, or shall we walk?" said Foote.

"Let us walk, that is if you don't mind," Browne replied. "I feel as if I could enjoy a ten-mile tramp to-night after the heat of that theatre."

"I'm afraid I do not," Foote replied. "My idea is the 'Périgord' for a little supper, and then to bed. Browne, old man, I have been through a good deal for you to-night. I like the young lady very much, but Madame Bernstein is – well, she is Madame Bernstein. I can say no more."

"Never mind, old chap," said Browne, patting his companion on the shoulder. "You have the satisfaction of knowing that your martyrdom is appreciated; the time may come when you will want me to do the same thing for you. One good turn deserves another, you know."

"When I want a turn of that description done for me, I will be sure to let you know," Foote continued; "but if I have any sort of luck, it will be many years before I come to you with such a request. When I remember that, but for my folly in showing you that picture in Waterloo Place, we should by this time be on the other side of the Eddystone, *en route* for the Mediterranean and sunshine, I feel as if I could sit down and weep. However, it is *kismet*, I suppose?"

Browne offered no reply.

"Are you coming in?" said Foote as they reached the doorstep of the Périgord Club.

"No, thank you, old man," said Browne. "I think, if you will excuse me, I will get home."

"Good-night, then," said Foote; "I shall probably see you in the morning."

Having bidden him good-night, Browne proceeded on his way.

Next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, he betook himself to Kensington Gardens, where he wandered about for upwards of an hour, but saw no sign of the girl he hoped to meet. Leaving the Gardens, he made his way to the High Street, with an equally futile result. Regardless of the

time he was wasting, and of everything else, he passed on in the direction of Addison Road. As disappointment still pursued him, he made up his mind to attempt a forlorn hope. Turning into the Melbury Road, he made for German Park Road, and reaching the studio, rang the bell. When the door was opened he found himself confronted with an elderly person, wearing a sack for an apron, and holding a bar of yellow soap in her hand.

"I have called to see Miss Petrovitch," he said.

"She is not at home, sir," the woman replied. "She has not been here this morning. Can I give her any message?"

"I am afraid not," Browne replied. "I wanted to see her personally; but you might tell her that Mr. Browne called."

"Mr. Browne," she repeated. "Very good, sir. You may be sure I will tell her."

Browne thanked her, and, to make assurance doubly sure, slipped five shillings into her hand. Then, passing out of the garden, he made his way back to the High Street. He had not proceeded more than a hundred yards down that interesting thoroughfare, however, before he saw no less a person than Katherine herself approaching him.

They were scarcely a dozen paces apart when she recognised him.

"Good-morning, Miss Petrovitch," he said, raising his hat and speaking a little nervously. "I have just called at your studio in the hope that I might see you. The woman told me that she did not know when you would return. I thought I might possibly meet you here."

It was a poor enough excuse, but the only one he could think of at the moment.

"You wanted to see me?" she said in a tone of surprise.

"Are you angry with me for that?" he asked. "I did not think you would be; but if you are I will go away again. By this time you should know that I have no desire save to make you happy."

This was the first time he had spoken so plainly. Her face paled a little.

"I did not know that you were so anxious to see me," she said, "or I would have made a point of being at home."

All this time they had been standing on the spot where they had first met.

"Perhaps you will permit me to walk a little way with you?" said Browne, half afraid that she would refuse.

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