

Boothby Guy

A Cabinet Secret



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INTRODUCTION

The Author deems it right to preface his work with the remark, that while the War between England and the South African Republics forms the basis of the story, the characters and incidents therein described are purely fictional, and have no sort of resemblance, either intended or implied, with living people. The Author's only desire is to show what, under certain, doubtless improbable, conditions, might very well have happened, had a secret power endeavoured to harass the Empire by taking advantage of her temporary difficulties.

A CABINET SECRET

INTRODUCTION

Night was falling, and Naples Harbour, always picturesque, appeared even more so than usual in the warm light of the departing day. The city itself, climbing up the hillside, almost from the water's edge, was coloured a pale pink by the sunset, and even old Vesuvius, from whose top a thin column of black smoke was issuing, seemed somewhat less sombre than usual. Out Ischiawards, the heavens were a mass of gold and crimson colouring, and this was reflected in the calm waters of the Bay, till the whole world was a veritable glow. Taken altogether, a more beautiful evening could scarcely have been desired. And yet it is not with the city, the mountain, or the sunset, that we have to do, but with the first movement of a conspiracy that was destined ultimately to shake one of the greatest Empires, the earth has ever seen, to the very foundations of its being.

Though the world was not aware of it, and would not, in all human probability, have concerned itself very much about it even if it had, the fact remains that for some hours past two men, from a house situated on one of the loftiest pinnacles of the city, had been concentrating their attention, by means of powerful glasses, upon the harbour, closely scrutinizing every vessel that entered and dropped her anchor inside the Mole.

"Can anything have happened that she does not come?" asked the taller of the pair, as he put down his glasses, and began to pace the room. "The cable said most distinctly that the steam yacht, *Princess Badroulbador* passed through the Straits of Messina yesterday at seven o'clock. Surely they should be here by this time?"

"One would have thought so," his companion replied. "It must be borne in mind, however, that the *Princess* is a private yacht, and it is more likely, as the wind is fair, that the owner is sailing in order to save his fuel."

"To the devil with him, then, for his English meanness," answered the other angrily. "He does not know how anxious we are to see her."

"And, everything taken into consideration, it is just as well for us and for the safety of his passengers that he does not," his friend retorted. "If he did, his first act after he dropped anchor would be to hand them over to the tender mercies of the Police. In that case we should be ruined for ever and a day. Perhaps that aspect of the affair has not struck you?"

"It is evident that you take me for a fool," the other answered angrily. "Of course, I know all that; but it does not make me any the less anxious to see them. Consider for a moment what we have at stake. Never before has there been such a chance of bringing to her knees one of the proudest nations of the earth. And to think that if that vessel does not put in an appearance within the next few hours, all our preparations may be in vain!"

"She will be here in good time, never fear," his companion replied soothingly. "She has never disappointed us yet."

"Not willingly, I will admit," the other returned; "but in this matter she may not be her own mistress. She is a beautiful woman, and for all we know to the contrary, this English *milord* may be prolonging the voyage in order to enjoy her society. Who knows but that he may carry her off altogether?"

"In that case his country should erect a memorial to him, similar to the Nelson Monument," said the smaller man. "For it is certain he will have rendered her as great a service as that empty-sleeved Hero ever did."

The other did not reply, but, after another impatient glance at the Harbour, once more began to pace the room. He was a tall, handsome fellow, little more than thirty years of age, and carried himself

with soldierly erectness. The most casual observer would have noticed that he was irreproachably dressed, and that his manners were those of one accustomed to good society. His companion, on the other hand, was short and stout, with a round bullet head, and closely cropped hair. He was also the possessor of a pair of small twinkling eyes, and a neck so thick, that one instinctively thought of apoplexy and sudden death in connection with its owner. The room they occupied was strangely at variance with the appearance of the younger and taller man. It was little more than a garret, very dirty, and furnished in the poorest fashion. But it had one advantage: it commanded a splendid view of Naples Harbour, and, after all, that was what its present occupants required. At last, the younger man, tired of his sentry-go up and down the room, threw himself into a chair and lit a cigarette. For some minutes not a word passed between them; all the time, however, the shorter man remained at the window, his glass turned seaward, watching for the smallest sign of the vessel they were so eagerly expecting. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation which caused the other to spring to his feet.

"What is it?" cried the latter; "what do you see?"

"I fancy she is coming up now," his friend replied. "If you run your glass along the sky-line, I fancy you will be able to detect a white speck, with a tiny column of smoke above it."

The other followed the directions given him, and, after a careful scrutiny, gave it as his opinion that what his companion had said was correct. Nearly an hour elapsed, however, before they could be quite certain upon the subject. At last the matter was settled beyond doubt, and when a magnificent white yacht rounded the Mole and came to its anchorage in the Mercantile Harbour, they prepared to make their way down to the water-side in order to board her. Before they started, however, the elder of the two men effected sundry changes in his attire.

"Forgive the mummery," he remarked, as he took a somewhat clerical hat and cloak from a peg, "but, as they say upon the stage, 'the unities must be observed.' If our beautiful Countess has played her cards carefully, Monseigneur should be of great benefit to us hereafter. It would be a thousand pities to scare him away at the beginning. For this reason it will be as well for you to remember that I am her Excellency's lawyer, who has hastened to Naples in order to confer with her on a matter of considerable importance, connected with her Styrian estates. No suspicion will then be excited."

By the time he had finished speaking he had donned the hat and cloak, and when he had given another expression to his face – for the man was a consummate actor – he was satisfied that he looked the part he was about to play. After that they descended the narrow, rickety stairs together, and passed out into the street. It was a warm afternoon, and in consequence Naples was in her most unsavoury humour. The two men, however, did not appear to trouble themselves very much about it. Side by side they made their way through the crowded streets, almost in silence. Each was thinking of the approaching interview, and of what was to result from it. Reaching the Harbour, they chartered a boat and bade the rower convey them to the white yacht which had just dropped her anchor. The man obeyed, and in less than five minutes they were lying alongside one of the most beautiful pleasure vessels that has ever upheld the shipbuilding honour of the Clyde. The Port formalities had already been complied with, and now the accommodation ladder was hanging at the side in readiness for visitors. When they drew up at its foot, the tall man, addressing the quartermaster on duty at the gangway, enquired whether Madame la Comtesse de Venetza were aboard, and, if so, whether she would permit visitors to pay their respects to her.

It was noticeable that he spoke excellent English, with scarcely a touch of foreign accent.

The man departed with the message, to presently return with the report that Madame would be pleased to see the gentleman if they would "come aboard." They accordingly climbed the ladder, and followed the quartermaster along the deck to a sumptuous saloon under the bridge. The owner of the beautiful craft was in the act of leaving the cabin as they approached it.

"Won't you come in?" he said, pausing to open the door for them. "The Countess will be very pleased to see you."

As he said this he glanced sharply at the two men, with an Englishman's innate distrust of foreigners. He saw little in them, however, to criticise, and nothing to dislike. They, on their side, found him a tall, stalwart Englishman of the typical standard – blue eyes, ruddy cheeks, close cropped hair, the latter a little inclined to be curly, well, but not over dressed, and carrying with him an air of latent strength that, in spite of his good-humoured expression, would have made most people chary of offending him. When the two men entered the cabin, he closed the door behind them and ran lightly up the ladder to the bridge.

After his departure there was a momentary, but somewhat embarrassing, silence. A long shaft of sunlight streamed in through one of the windows (for they resembled windows more than port-holes) and revealed the fact that the lady, who was reclining in a long easy-chair, was extremely beautiful. Despite the cordial message she had sent, her visitors could scarcely have been welcome, for she did not even take the trouble to rise to receive them, but allowed a tall grey-haired man, who might very well have passed for her father, to do the honours for her.

"My dear Luigi – my dear Conrad," he said, offering his right hand to the smaller of the two men and his left to the other. "It is indeed kind of you to be so quick to welcome us. The Countess is a little tired this afternoon, but she is none the less delighted to see you."

The scornful curl of the lady's lips not only belied this assertion, but indicated that *miladi* was in a by no means pleasant temper. The impatient movement of the little foot, peeping from beneath her dress, said as much, as plainly as any words could speak.

"We have been waiting for you all day," the younger man began. "There is news of the greatest importance to communicate. Every hour that passes is now so much time wasted."

Then, for the first time during the interview, the lady spoke.

"You infer that I might have been quicker?" she said, with a touch of scorn in her voice. "You evidently forget that, had it not been for this English *milord's* kindness, I should not be here even now."

It looked as if the younger man, while really uncomfortable, were trying to act as if he were not afraid of her.

"Is there not such a thing as the Oriental Express?" he asked. "Had you used that, we might have met at Turin, and have saved a great deal of trouble and valuable time."

The lady turned impatiently from him to his companion.

"What form does your news take?" she enquired. "Is it contained in a letter?"

"No, *Excellenza*, it was to be delivered by word of mouth," the other replied. "The Council, who were in Prague at the time, paid me the compliment of trusting to my discretion, and despatched me immediately to you. We heard that you were in Constantinople, and the Secretary undertook to have a message transmitted to you there. Our friend, Conrad here, is perhaps not aware that the Oriental Express is occasionally an impossible medium. But, while condoling with you on that score, I must congratulate your Excellency in having pressed the Duke of Rotherhithe into your service."

"Pray spare yourself the trouble," the lady replied. "I do not know that I am particularly fond of obtaining hospitality, such as his, under false pretences. It is sufficient for your purposes, is it not, that I am here, and ready to do the Council's bidding, whatever that may be. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what is expected of me?"

"Is it safe for me to tell you here?" Luigi enquired, and as he said it he looked anxiously about him, as if he feared the presence of eavesdroppers.

"As safe as it will be anywhere," the lady answered. "It is an Englishman's yacht, and, whatever we may say of them, they are not in the habit of listening at keyholes. Now what have you to tell me?"

The man hesitated once more before he replied. He was the chosen mouth-piece of one of the most powerful organisations in Europe, and ere now affairs involving death, and worse than death, had been entrusted to him, and he had brought them to a satisfactory issue. As a rule, and certainly when dealing with men, he did not know what fear was. In this lady's presence, however, he was strangely nervous.

"Come," she said, "you are a long time telling me. Is it so very difficult to explain? Or am I to anticipate a repetition of the Palermo Incident?"

Whatever the Palermo Incident may have been, it was certainly not a pleasant recollection to either of the men before her; the elder man became uncomfortable, while the younger moved uneasily in his seat.

"You hit hard, madam," the elder man returned; "but, thank goodness, I am not thin-skinned. That the Palermo affair was a mistake, I am quite prepared to admit; it is possible, however, the success which will doubtless attend this affair, will make ample amends for it."

"You have not told me what the affair is," the lady replied. "Unless you make haste, I fear I shall not be able to hear it to-night. It would be as well for you to remember that I am not my own mistress, and that, in return for his hospitality, my host has at least some claim upon my society."

"I will not detain you longer than is absolutely necessary," the other replied. "With your permission I will now explain my mission. Of course, your Excellency is aware that the British Empire is on the eve of a serious struggle with the two South African Republics. The Republics in question have been arming for several years, and there can be no sort of doubt that the war, which is now about to begin, will make the most enormous demands upon the resources and capabilities of even that great Empire. That the country, at least so far as its military organisation is concerned, is not properly prepared for such an encounter, admits of no doubt. Her armament is well known to be deficient, if not defective; she possesses but few Generals whose experience entitles them to the right of leading her troops as they should be led against a foe which will have in its ranks some of the best fighting men in the world; while the nature of the country in which she will have to fight, and the peculiar tactics of the enemy, are unfavourable to her in the highest degree. Apart from this, it has been her boast that she occupies an isolated position in Europe, if not in the world. France, Russia, Germany and Holland are avowedly unfavourable; Spain remembers Great Britain's sympathy with America in the Cuban affair; Portugal will wait to see what turn events take before she commits herself; while America will stand strictly neutral. We all remember that the larger Republic has beaten her before: it is possible that it may do so again. All these things having been taken into consideration, it must be quite clear to an observant mind that if England is ever to be humiliated, now is the time to do it. With this end in view, the Council was summoned hastily to meet in Prague. The result of their deliberations was the drawing up of a plan of action, and as soon as this had been agreed upon, I was ordered to place myself in communication with you. You were in Constantinople, and, as I have said, a message was immediately despatched by the Secretary to you."

"I received it, and am here. What am I to do?"

"I can tell you no more than that you are to make your way to England at once, *via* Rome and Paris. Von Rosendell is in Rome. He will meet you, and give you full particulars of the scheme which has been proposed."

"And when am I to leave Naples in order to meet him?"

"As soon as possible," the other replied; "there is no time to waste. I was to invite you to make your arrangements at once, and to telegraph the hour of your departure in the usual way."

"In that case I need not detain you any longer," she answered with chilling politeness. "Should it be necessary for me to communicate with you, I presume the usual address will find you?"

"But –"

"But what? Is there anything else I am to hear?"

"There is this – that I am to go with you," the younger man put in, almost apologetically. "I received my orders from the Council this morning. I hope you do not disapprove?"

He looked at her almost beseechingly; the expression upon her face, however, betrayed neither pleasure nor annoyance. Do what he would, he could not prevent a sigh from escaping him as he became aware of it. All day he had been hoping that she would be pleased when she heard that he was to co-operate with her; now, however, his heart sank like lead. It was just the sort of enterprise

he liked. It was daring, reckless to a degree; they would carry their lives in their hands, as they had so often done before; indeed, the mere fact that he was to share the dangers with her had been the greatest pleasure he had known for months past.

"If you are to accompany us," she said, scarcely looking at him, "you had better hold yourself in readiness. It will be safer if we travel apart during the time we are in Italy, and afterwards other arrangements can be made so that we –"

"We will leave you and return to the shore," interrupted the man called Luigi, who did not altogether approve the turn affairs were taking. "I have carried out my instructions, and so far as I am concerned, individually, the matter is at an end."

Five minutes later they had left the yacht, and the Countess de Venetza was apologizing to the Duke of Rotherhithe for the intrusion of her lawyer people on his yacht.

"It is really too hard," she said pathetically; "they give me no peace. When my husband died and I inherited his estates, he had no thought of the trouble and anxiety the management of them would cause me. My lawyers are perpetually grumbling because they cannot obtain interviews with me. I often think that they look upon me as a sort of Will-o'-the-Wisp, flickering about Europe, and impossible to catch. Why they could not have transacted the business with my father instead of bothering me with it, I cannot imagine. However, you will forgive me, will you not?"

The Duke, who by the way, was extremely susceptible, looked unutterable things. He had first met the Countess in Algiers a year before, and had fallen desperately in love with her before he had known her twenty-four hours. The mere fact that she did not encourage his attentions only served to attract him the more. They met at Cairo six months later – and now, when he discovered that it was in his power to do her a service by conveying her from Constantinople to Naples, he was only too glad to avail himself of the opportunity.

"It is a shame, indeed, that they should worry you so," he said sympathetically, looking as he spoke into his fair friend's eyes in a manner that would have carried consternation into the hearts of not a few mothers in England. "They worry me at home in much the same way. As I say to them, what's the use of employing lawyers and Estate Agents, and all those sort of people, if they cannot do their work without your assistance? You might just as well do it yourself in the first instance, and save their salaries. But then, you see, I am not so clever as you are, Countess, and that makes all the difference."

"What makes you think I am so clever, pray?" she enquired, looking up at him with innocent eyes.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied; "I've noticed it on lots of occasions. Do you remember the day that plausible Greek beggar worried us so in Constantinople, and you whispered something to him that sent him off about his business like a shot out of a gun. And in Algiers, when that Frenchman made himself so objectionable and you managed to send him to the right-about after a few moments' conversation. How you did it I never could understand, but it was jolly clever all the same."

The Countess regarded him attentively for a moment. Was he really as innocent as he made out to be, or had he noticed anything else? No; one moment's examination was sufficient to convince her that, so far as he was concerned, all was as it should be. Strolling to the port side of the bridge, she looked down at the boat-load of musicians who were strumming guitars, and bawling "*Finiculi Finicula*," with all the strength of their Southern lungs.

"What a way in which to spend one's life," said the Duke, as he joined her, and tossed some silver into the boat. "Fancy shouting that wretched thing, week after week, and year after year! Italy is a funny country – all bandits, soldiers, beggars and musicians. I suppose, if the truth were known, each of those men belongs to some secret society or another. Either the Cammoristi, or the Mafia, or some such organisation. How would you like to be a conspirator, Countess, and be always in terror of being caught?"

The Countess's hand clenched the bar before her, and, for a moment, her face turned deathly pale.

"What an extraordinary question to ask," she began, fighting hard for her self-possession. "Do you want to frighten me out of my wits? I am afraid I should make the poorest conspirator imaginable. I should be too deficient in courage."

"I am not inclined to believe that," said the Duke, reflectively. "I think you would have plenty of courage when it was required."

"I am afraid you must think me an altogether remarkable person," she returned. "If you go on in this way, I shall scarcely have presence of mind enough to remain in your company. Seriously, however, Duke, I don't know how to thank you for the services you have rendered my father and myself. But for your assistance we should not be in Naples now, in which case we should have been too late to have joined the party with whom I am proceeding to England."

"You are going to England then after all?" he cried in great astonishment and delight. "I thought you were only going as far as Rome?"

"That was our original intention," she replied. "However, some letters that we received to-night have altered our plans. But why do you look so astonished? Are we poor foreigners not to be allowed to enter your country?"

"It is not that," he said. "I was so pleased to hear that you intend honouring us with a visit. When do you think you will reach England, and where will you stay while you are there?"

She shook her head.

"Those are questions I cannot at present answer," she said. "It will depend upon circumstances. As our arrangements stand at present, I think it is extremely likely that we shall be in London in less than a week's time."

"And will there be any means of learning your whereabouts?" he asked. "You will surely not be cruel enough to visit England without permitting me to call upon you?"

"Call by all means," she answered. "At present, however, I cannot tell you what our address will be, for the reason that I do not know it myself."

"But perhaps when you are settled you will let me know. You know my house, I think?"

"I will do so with pleasure," she replied. "Then you will come and see me, and I shall be able to thank you again for the kindness you have shown my father and myself in our present trouble."

"It has been a very great pleasure to me," he said, "and I cannot thank you sufficiently for honouring my yacht as you have done."

At that moment the elder man, to whom she had referred as her father, made his appearance on the bridge and came towards them.

"My dear," he began, "has it not struck you that it is time for us to be thinking of bidding His Grace farewell? Remember we have to start for Rome by the early train to-morrow morning. It behoves us, therefore, to make our preparations as soon as possible."

The Duke, however, would not hear of their leaving the yacht before dinner, and in consequence it was quite dark when the Countess de Venetza and her father, or, to be more correct, her reputed father, were rowed ashore by four stalwart yachtsmen, steered by the Duke of Rotherhithe himself. He would have accompanied them to their hotel, but this the Countess would not permit.

"You have done too much for us already," she said; "we cannot let you do more. We will not say *adieu*, but *au revoir*, since, in all probability, it will not be long before we meet again."

"I hope, with all my heart, it may not be," he replied, and then the cab they had engaged rattled away over the stones and was soon lost to view.

The Countess's stay in Naples was a short one, for next morning she left by an early train for Rome. According to the plan he had prepared, His Grace of Rotherhithe, having made enquiries as to the trains leaving Naples for the capital, was present on the platform when the first took its departure. With an eagerness that could only be accounted for by his infatuation, he scanned the faces of the

passengers, but the lady for whom he had been so anxiously waiting was not among them. Greatly disappointed by his discovery, he went off in search of breakfast, only to return a quarter of an hour before the next train was due to leave. Unfortunately, on this occasion, he was no more successful than before. The train was well filled, but among the passengers there was not one who bore any sort of resemblance to the lady he was hoping to see. So anxious was he to make sure that he did not miss her, that, just before the train started, he came within an ace of being run into by an invalid chair, in which was seated a man closely muffled up with shawls. By the side of the chair walked a nurse in English hospital uniform, who wore large blue glasses, and carried more wraps and a couple of cushions upon her arm. Even had he been aware of their identity, the Duke would have found it difficult to recognise in the pair his guests of the previous day. It was not the first time in their careers that they had been compelled to adopt such disguises, and only that morning news had reached them to the effect that, if they desired to get safely out of Naples, disguises such as they had assumed would be imperative necessities. A carriage, it appeared, had been reserved for the invalid Englishman, and towards it they made their way. Having seated the old gentleman in one corner, the nurse took her seat opposite him, and busied herself preparing for the journey. It was not until Naples was far behind, however, that she removed her spectacles and the invalid discarded his wraps.

"That was as narrow an escape as we have ever had," said the former. "The Head of the Police was upon the platform, and I recognised two detectives in the crowd. However, all is well that ends well, and if Luigi's arrangements have been properly made, we should be in Paris before they know we have left Naples, and in London forty-eight hours afterwards."

"Then you still feel certain that they were aware of our presence in Naples?"

"Luigi's message said there was no doubt about it. Though he did not know it, they must have been watching him, and have followed him to the yacht. It was foolish of him to run such a risk. Let us hope, however, he will be able to get out of Naples without their laying hands upon him."

Shortly after one o'clock the train reached Rome and they alighted from it. Such travellers as had witnessed the arrival of the invalid at the Neapolitan railway station, would have observed now that he seemed greatly fatigued by the journey. He was even more muffled up than before, while the nurse was, if possible, more assiduous in her attentions than she had been at the southern station. It was noticeable also that she was a poor Italian scholar. Indeed, her pronunciation of such words as she *did* know was of the most erratic and elementary description.

* * * * *

Later in the day, just as dusk was falling, an artist's model, in the picturesque dress of the country, might have been observed making her way slowly down the Via Sistina in the direction of the Piazza S. Trinità de' Monti. She appeared to be familiar with the neighbourhood, though, on the other hand, no one seemed to have any acquaintance with her. She had reached the Casa Zuccheri, when she was stopped by a tall artistic-looking man, who walked with great uprightness, and carried a portfolio beneath his arm. For the benefit of the passers by, he enquired in broken Italian, whether the girl could inform him as to the locality of a certain artist's studio, whereupon she personally offered to conduct him to it. He thanked her courteously, and proceeded with her in the direction indicated. They had no sooner left the vicinity of the Via Sistina, however, than he turned to her and said, in the purest Italian: "I was afraid you were not coming. You are very late."

"I am aware of that," the girl replied. "I had a suspicion that I was being watched. Now, what have you to tell me?"

"You saw Luigi in Naples, I believe?"

"He met me there, with Conrad," the girl answered. "I could not help thinking that it was an imprudence on his part."

"Luigi is always imprudent; and yet I cannot help feeling that he is safer in his folly than we are in our care. He told you of the scheme the Council had originated?"

The girl nodded an assent.

"He gave me to understand, however, that you would furnish me with full particulars," she said.

"I am prepared to do so now," her companion replied.

As he said this, he led her from the main street into a dark alley, where, having convinced himself that they had not been followed, he set to work and told his tale. So anxious was he that there should be no mistake about the matter, that when he had finished it he began it again, only to repeat it a third time. The woman listened with rapt attention.

"In conclusion," said he, "I might add that the money will be paid to your credit at whatever London Bank you may select. One of the most handsome residences, replete with all the necessaries, has been taken for you in a fashionable quarter, and on your arrival in London you will be left to act as your knowledge of the situation and the dictates of the Council may determine. It is needless to caution you as to the risks you may be called upon to run. The Council has, moreover, authorised me to say that it places implicit trust in your discretion. Should you require further advice, it will be furnished you at once, with any help that may be considered needful."

"In the meantime, Paris is the first stage," the girl answered. "You are quite certain that this Englishman, Sir George Manderville, has not yet returned to England?"

"No, he is still there," her companion replied. "We have learnt, however, that he will cross the channel on Friday next."

"On Friday next?" she repeated. "In that case there is no time to lose. At first glance it would appear that he is the key to the situation."

"That is exactly the opinion of the Council," the man answered. "Now, farewell, and may good luck attend you!"

So saying they retraced their steps to the main street. At the entrance to the alley they separated, the girl returning to the Via Sistina – the man going off in an opposite direction.

By the first train next morning the Countess de Venetza made an unostentatious departure from Rome, for Paris, accompanied by her father and her cousin, Conrad, Count Reiffenburg.

CHAPTER I

As a preface, I might explain that I have had the pleasure of knowing Paris and De Belleville for more than twenty years. Both are, therefore, old friends, the city and the man. The fact, however, remains, that De Belleville, though a most charming companion, has one fault. Few people would be prepared to admit it, but unfortunately, I am not only compelled to recognise it, but to proclaim it to the world. As a friend, he has not his equal – at least so far as I am concerned; he is certainly not punctual, however. It is of that I complain. I have remonstrated with him on the subject times out of number, but it makes no sort of difference. If one has an appointment with him, he is invariably late, but when he does put in an appearance, he will greet you with such charming assurance, that you feel angry with yourself for having been led into commenting upon the lapse of time.

On the particular afternoon which I am now about to describe to you, we had arranged to meet at my hotel and then to go on together to call upon the D'Etrebilles, who were just off to Cairo and the Upper Nile. He had promised to be with me at three o'clock, and, as usual, at twenty minutes past the hour he had not put in an appearance. Now, I flatter myself that I am a punctual man in every respect, and when one is ready to go out, a twenty minutes' wait is an annoyance calculated to test the serenest temper. In my case it was certainly so, and, as I sat in the picturesque courtyard of the hotel, you may be sure I called down the reverse of blessings upon De Belleville's handsome head. Carriage after carriage drove up, but not one of them contained my friend. I took a third cigarette from my case and lit it, and as I did so, lay back in my chair and amused myself watching my neighbours.

To my thinking, there are few places more interesting (that is, of course, provided one has a weakness for studying character) than a hotel courtyard. In sheer idleness I speculated as to the nationality and relationship of the various people about me. There were several probable Russians, one or two undoubted Germans, two whom I set down as Italians, one might have been a Greek, but the majority were undoubtedly English. And that reminds me that, as I waited, I was the witness of an amusing altercation between a cabman and an English lady of considerable importance and mature years. Both were playing at cross purpose, and it was not until the Hotel Commissionaire, the *deus ex machina*, so to speak, appeared upon the scene and interposed, that the matter at issue was satisfactorily adjusted.

"Your pardon, Madame," he said, bowing low, "but ze man meant no harm. It was his misfortune that he did not comprehend the words what Madame said to him."

For a person who prided himself upon his tact, the poor fellow could scarcely have said a more unfortunate thing. The matter of the overcharge, Madame could have understood and have forgiven, but to be informed in so many words that her knowledge of the French tongue was deficient, was an insult not only to her intelligence, and to her experience, but also to the money that had been spent upon her education. Casting a withering glance at the unhappy functionary, she departed into the hotel, every hair of her head bristling with indignation, while the Commissionaire, shrugging his shoulders, went forward to receive a tall, picturesque individual, who at that moment had driven up.

The new-comer interested me exceedingly. In my own mind I instantly set him down as a *dilettante* Englishman of good birth and education. He looked the sort of being who would spend the greater part of his time in foreign picture-galleries and cathedrals; who would carry his Ruskin continually in his pocket, and who would probably end by writing a volume of travels "*for private circulation only*." I should not have been surprised had I been told that he dabbled a little in water-colours, or to have heard that he regarded Ruskin as the greatest writer, and Turner as the greatest painter, of our era. One thing at least was self-evident, and that was the fact that he was a person of considerable importance at this particular hotel. The Commissionaire bowed before him as if he were a foreign potentate, while the *maître d'hôtel* received him with as much respect as if he had

been an American millionaire. When he in his turn disappeared into the building, I beckoned the Commissionaire to my side.

"Who is that gentleman that has just entered the hotel?" I enquired.

"Is it possible that Monsieur does not know him?" the man replied, with an expression of wonderment upon his face.

His answer more than ever convinced me that the other was a very great man, at least a German princeling, perhaps an Austrian archduke.

"No," I said, "I do not know him. As a matter of fact, I do not remember ever having seen him before. Who is he?"

"He is Monsieur Dickie Bucks," answered the Commissionaire, with as much respect as if he were talking of the Czar of all the Russias.

My illusion vanished in a trice. "Dickie Bucks, – Dickie Bucks," I repeated to myself. "Gracious heavens! what a name for such a man! And pray who is Mr Dickie Bucks, for I assure you his fame has not yet reached me?"

"Monsieur surely knows the great bookmaker," said the man, with an air of incredulity. "He is the great bookmaker, the very greatest, perhaps, in all England. Monsieur is not perhaps aware that there are races at Auteuil to-morrow."

And so my *dilettante* Englishman, my artist, my amateur author, was, after all, nothing more than a famous betting man, who, had I spoken to him of Ruskin, would probably have offered to lay me five to one against him for the Lincolnshire Handicap, and would have informed me that there was a general opinion in Sporting Circles that "Sesame and Lilies" was not the stayer she was popularly supposed to be. Well, well, it only proves how little our judgment is to be trusted, and how important it is that we should not pin our faith upon externals.

I was still moralising in this fashion when a smart equipage drove up to the steps, and the Commissionaire once more went forward to do his duty. In the carriage a lady and gentleman were seated, and it was evident, from the fact that a man, – who until that moment had been sitting near the hotel door – hastened forward to greet them, that their arrival had been expected by one person in the hotel at least. As the trio I am now about to describe to you are destined to play an extraordinary part in the story I have to tell, I may, perhaps, be excused if I bestow upon them a little more attention than I should otherwise feel justified in doing. Out of gallantry, if for no other reason, it is only proper that I should commence with the lady.

That she was not English was quite certain. It was difficult to say, however, to what European nation she belonged. Her face, from the moment I first saw it, interested me strangely. And yet, while it was beautiful, it was not that which altogether attracted me. I say *altogether*, for the reason that it owed more, perhaps, to its general expression than to the mere beauty of any individual feature. It was a countenance, however, that once seen would not be likely to be forgotten. The eyes were large and thoughtful, and of a darkness that suggested Southern birth. The mouth was small, but exquisitely moulded, the lips full, and the teeth, when they showed themselves, delightfully white and even. Her hair was black and, what is not commonly the case with hair of that colour, was soft and wavy. Though it would have been difficult to find fault with her attire, a fastidious critic might have observed that it was not of the very latest fashion. In London, it is possible it might have passed muster, but in Paris it was just one pin-prick behind the acme of the prevailing mode. As I looked at her I wondered who she might be. The eyes, at a hazard, might have been set down as Italian, the hair as Spanish, the nose had a suggestion of the Greek, while the sum total spoke for Southern France, or, at any rate a country bordering upon the Mediterranean.

As I have already said, her companions were two in number. The elder, who had driven up with the lady I have been endeavouring to describe, was a tall and handsome man of a little past middle age. He carried himself with considerable erectness, might very well have once been a soldier, and was possibly the lady's father. When he descended from the carriage, I noticed that he was a little

lame on his left leg, and that he walked with a stick. Like his companion he was the possessor of dark eyes, but with the difference that they looked out upon the world from beneath white bushy eyebrows, a fact which, combined with his fierce grey moustache, produced a most singular effect. He also was fashionably attired, that is to say, he wore the regulation frock coat and silk hat, but, as was the case with the lady, there was the suggestion of being just a trifle behind the times.

As much could not be said of the second man, the individual who had been seated near the door awaiting their coming. So far as outward appearances were concerned he was the pink of fashion, and not only of fashion, but of everything else. Tall, lithe, handsome, and irreproachably turned out, from the curl of his dainty moustache to his superbly shod feet, he appeared at first glance to be a typical *boulevardier*. Yet when one looked more closely at him, he did not strike one as being the sort of man who would idle his life away on the pavements or in the clubs. I could very well imagine his face looking out from beneath a helmet or *kepi*, under a *tarbush* with Arabi, or a *sombrero* with Balmaceda – anywhere, in point of fact, where there was vigorous life and action. He would certainly be a good shot, and, I reflected, not very particular what he shot at, that is to say, whether it was at man or beast, or both. For the moment, however, he was content to hand his fair friend from her carriage with the most fastidious politeness. They stood for a moment talking at the foot of the steps. Then they ascended, and, entering the hotel, were lost to my sight; whereupon I resettled myself in my chair with the reflection that they were the most interesting people I should be likely to see that afternoon, and then went on to wonder why De Belleville did not put in an appearance. Then another carriage drove up, and a moment later he stood before me.

"I must offer you ten thousand pardons, *cher ami*," said he, as we shook hands. "I fear I have kept you waiting an unpardonable time. Forgive me, I implore you; I am prostrated with sorrow."

The words were apologetic enough, but the face belied the assertion. A more cheerful countenance could scarcely have been discovered in all Paris. I had promised myself that I would give him a good rating for his unpunctuality, but, as usual, I found that when he *did arrive* it was impossible for me to be angry with him. De Belleville, as I have already remarked, boasts the most ingratiating manners I know; is an ideal companion, for the reason that he is never put out or, apart from his unpunctuality, puts others out. He is one of the best hosts in Europe, and regards life as life regards him, that is to say, with invariable cheerfulness and goodfellowship.

Having taken our places in the carriage, we set off for the D'Etrebilles' residence in the Faubourg St Germain. Throughout the drive my companion rattled on continually. He was well up, none better, in the gossip of the day, and could use his knowledge to the wittiest effect. Fortunately, the D'Etrebilles were at home, and appeared delighted to see us. They were, moreover, kind enough to congratulate me upon my acceptance of my new position in the English Cabinet.

"As you are strong, be merciful," said D'Etrebille, with a smile. "Remember, the peace of Europe is in your hands, and at the end of your term of office we shall require it of you again intact."

"A life-long study of European politics," said De Belleville, "has convinced me that the peace of Europe is never so much assured as when the various nations are struggling to be at each other's throats. This is a point of which so many people, renowned for their political perspicuity, seem to lose sight. Our very good friend and visitor, the Czar, would have us disarm and turn our swords into ploughshares. By this time, however, he must agree that, if only from a humanitarian point of view, he has made a mistake. It may appear paradoxical, but there is certainly nothing that promotes peace so much as war. I never feel sure in my own mind that the next year will be a quiet one until I am told that the military bloodhounds are about to be unchained. By the way, what do you think of your country's prospects of war in South Africa?"

"If I am to judge the situation by your own theory, I should say that the possibilities are remote," I replied. "From my own stand-point, however, I am by no means so optimistic. The look-out is undoubtedly a grave one, and, while I have the greatest faith in our strength to assert our

own supremacy, I cannot help thinking that matters may in the end prove somewhat different to our expectations."

Without wishing to pose as a prophet after the event, on looking back on all that has happened, I cannot help being struck by the aptness of my prophecy. This, however, is no place for such reflections. What I have to do is to tell my story as quickly and concisely as possible, and, above all, to avoid undue digressions.

Strange indeed is the way in which a face or a voice once seen or heard, if only for a moment, has the power of seizing and taking possession of the memory, when there is little or no reason that it should not be forgotten. It was certainly so in my case on this particular afternoon, for, during the time I was with the D'Etrebilles, during our drive in the Bois afterwards, and in fact for the remainder of the evening, the face of the woman I had seen entering my hotel a few hours before, haunted me continually.

It went to the Opera with me, accompanied me to a supper at the Amphitryon Club afterwards, and returned with me again to my hotel. The memory of a pair of beautiful eyes, such as hers undoubtedly were, might appear to many men a light burden to have placed upon them. By some strange irony of Fate, however, it was otherwise with me. Instead of being charmed by them, I dreaded them with a fear that was as inexplicable as it was unpleasant. I laughed at myself for my folly, ascribed my absurd condition to indigestion, and endeavoured by every means in my power to drive the matter from my mind. I went to bed and tried to sleep. I was not successful, however. When I closed my eyes, the eyes of the woman were still there, gazing at me with a steadfastness that produced a sensation almost describable as hypnotic. I tried to picture other scenes, recalled the events of the day – De Belleville's prophecies for the future – his witty remarks on Paris topics – but without success. At last, unable to bear it any longer, I rose from my bed, turned on the electric light, and, having donned a dressing-gown, began to pace the room. I had drunk scarcely any wine that evening, so that my condition could not be ascribed to that source. Nevertheless, an ill defined, yet none the less real, fear was steadily taking possession of me. I could not remember ever having been affected in this way before. Could it be that I had not the same power over my intellect as of yore? In other words, was this the beginning of some brain trouble that would eventually land me in a lunatic asylum? I knew in my inmost heart that such was not the case. Yet how to account for the eyes that haunted me so peculiarly, I could not say. Until I had seen the woman's face that afternoon, I had been as rational and evenly balanced a man as could have been discovered in the French capital. No! it was all nonsense! My internal economy was a little out of gear, my nerves and brain were indirectly affected, and this illusion was the result. In that case the eyes, haunting as they were, would disappear before the magic wand of Calomel.

Being too wide awake to return to bed, I seated myself in a chair and took up a book on the Eastern Question which I had been reading during the day, and in which I was greatly interested. The fact that I did not entertain the same views with regard to the Russo-Chinese-Japanese *entente* as the author only added to my enjoyment of the work. I remembered that when I had taken it up in the morning I had found it difficult to lay it aside again; now, however, though I glued my eyes to the pages by sheer will pressure, I was scarcely conscious of the printed words before me. As I read, or rather tried to read, it appeared to me that somebody was standing in the room, a few paces from my chair, intently regarding me. More than once I involuntarily looked up, only to find, as it is needless to state, that there was no one there. At last I put down the book in despair, went to the window and, leaning my arms upon the sill, looked out. Sleeping Paris lay before and around me, scarcely a sound was to be heard; once the roll of distant carriage-wheels, from the Rue de Rivoli, came up to me, then the irregular striking of the clocks in the neighbourhood announcing the hour of three.

As I stood at the window, I thought of the crisis which England was approaching. Many years had elapsed since she had been involved in a great war. In these days epoch succeeds epoch with incredible rapidity, and public opinion has the knack of changing with each one. The stolidity, the

self-reserve, the faculty of being able to take the hard knocks and yet continue the fight, that had characterised us at the time of Waterloo and the Crimea, did that still exist? Then again, were we as fully prepared as we might be? Were our Generals as competent as of yore, or had the long spell of peace wrought a change in them also? They were weighty questions, and a man might very well have been pardoned had he asked them of himself with an anxious heart. Our "splendid isolation" had been the jeer and taunt of the world. Would that very isolation prove our downfall, if by any evil chance matters took a wrong turn with us? For a moment I could see England as she would be were her armies to be defeated in the present struggle. The croaking prophecies of her enemies would have proved too true, and she would be at the mercy of the yelping mob that had once only dared to bark and snap at her from a distance. "O God! grant that such a thing may never come to pass," I muttered, and, as the prayer escaped my lips, there shaped themselves in the darkness in front of me, the eyes that had haunted me all the afternoon and evening. As I gazed into their soulless depths, a sensation of icy coldness passed over me.

"This will never do," I said to myself. "If I go on like this I shall have to see a doctor; and yet how ridiculous it is. Why that woman's eyes should haunt me so I cannot understand. In all probability I shall never see her again, and if I do, it will only be to discover that she is very beautiful, but in no respect different to other people."

But while I endeavoured to convince myself that it was all so absurd, I had the best of reasons for knowing that it was not so silly as I was anxious to suppose. At any rate, I did not go to bed again, and when, some hours later, my servant came to call me, he found me seated at my table, busily engaged writing letters. Years seemed to have elapsed since I had bade him good-night.

The last day of my stay in Paris had dawned, and, after my experience of the night, I began to think that I was not altogether sorry for it. A cold tub, however, somewhat revived me, and when I left my room I was, to all intents and purposes, myself once more.

It is one of those little idiosyncrasies in my character which afford my friends such an excellent opportunity for making jokes at my expense, that when I go to Rome, Paris, Berlin, St Petersburg, or any other city I may be in the habit of visiting, that I invariably stay at the same hotel and insist on being given the same bedroom I have occupied on previous occasions. For some reason a strange room is most obnoxious to me. In Paris, worthy Monsieur Frezmony is good enough to let me have a suite of apartments at the end of a long corridor on the first floor. They boast an excellent view from the windows, of the gardens of the Tuileries, and the whole suite is, above all, easy of access at any hour of the day or night. On this particular occasion, having dressed, I left my room and passed along the corridor in order to descend to the hall below. I was only a few paces from the head of the stairs when a door directly opposite opened, and a lady emerged and descended the stairs in front of me. She was dressed for going out, but, for the reason that my letters had just been handed to me and I was idly glancing at the envelopes, beyond noticing this fact, I bestowed but little more attention on her. She had reached the first landing, and I was some few steps behind her, when the chink of something falling caught my ears. Surely enough when I, in my turn, reached the landing I discovered a small bracelet lying upon the carpet. I immediately picked it up with the intention of returning it. But the lady was too quick for me and had reached the courtyard before I could set foot in the hall. A carriage was awaiting her coming at the foot of the steps, and she had already taken her place in it when I approached her. For the reason that she was putting up her parasol, it was impossible for me to see her face, but when she lifted it on hearing my voice, I discovered, to my amazement, that she was none other than the lady whose arrival I had witnessed on the previous afternoon, and whose eyes had had such a strange effect upon me ever since.

"Permit me to ask if this is your property, madam?" I began, holding out the bracelet as I spoke. "I had the good fortune to discover it on the stairs just after you passed."

"Ah, yes, it is mine," she answered in excellent French, and in a voice that was low and musical. "I would not have lost it for anything. It was careless of me to have dropped it. I thank you most heartily."

She bowed, and at a signal from the Commissionaire, the coachman started his horses, and a moment later the carriage had left the courtyard.

For some moments after it had passed out of sight I stood looking in the direction it had taken. Then turning to the Commissionaire who stood before me, I enquired if it were in his power to tell me the name of the lady to whom I had rendered so small a service.

"She is Madame la Comtesse de Venetza," the man replied.

"The Countess de Venetza?" said I to myself, "that tells me nothing. It sounds Italian. At the same time it might be almost anything else."

Circumstances forbade me that I should question the man further, though the temptation was sufficiently great. Nothing remained, therefore, but to withdraw and to derive what consolation I could from the fact that I had spoken to her and knew her name.

"The Countess de Venetza," I repeated, as I made my way up the steps once more. The name had suddenly come to have a strange fascination for me. I found myself repeating it again and again, each time deriving a new sensation from it.

Having procured a morning paper, I returned to the verandah, seated myself in the place I had occupied on the previous afternoon, when I had first seen the Countess, and turned my attention to the English news. If the information set forth there were to be believed, there could be no sort of doubt that we were distinctly nearer the trouble which had been brewing for so long. The wildest rumours were afloat, and the versions printed in the Parisian papers were not of a nature calculated to allay my fears. If what they said were correct there could be no doubt that England was standing face to face with one of the greatest dangers that had threatened her in her life as a nation. And yet it was impossible to believe that the Might, Majesty, Dominion, and power of Great Britain could be successfully defied by a rabble horde such as we knew the Boers to be. But had we not the remembrance of '81 continually with us to remind us that on another lamentable occasion we had been too sanguine? This time, I told myself, it was vitally necessary that it should be all going forward and no drawing back. If we set our hands to the plough, it must be with a rigorous determination not to remove them until the task we had set ourselves should be accomplished.

At last I threw down my paper in disgust. An overwhelming desire to thrash every journalistic cur who yelped at the heels of the British Lion was fast taking possession of me. For the first time since I had known her, Paris was positively distasteful to me.

"Perhaps monsieur will pardon me if I ask permission to glance at the paper he has just thrown down," said a polite voice at my elbow. "I have tried to obtain one at the hotel, but without success."

Turning, I saw beside me the taller of the two men I had seen with the Countess de Venetza on the preceding afternoon – the man with the bushy eyebrows who had driven up with her in the carriage, and who was lame.

"Take it by all means," I replied, handing it to him as I spoke. "I doubt, however, if you will find anything in it but a series of insults to England and her soldiers. That seems to be the *metier* of the Parisian Press just now."

"It is a thousand pities," the stranger replied, slowly and solemnly; "and the more to be regretted for the reason that it does not voice the public sentiment."

I had no desire to be drawn into a political controversy with a man who, for all I knew to the contrary, might be an anarchist, a police spy, or an equally undesirable acquaintance. I accordingly allowed him to seat himself at some little distance from me and to peruse his paper in peace. He was still reading it when a carriage drove up, bringing the Countess de Venetza back to the hotel. Seeing her friend she approached him, whereupon he rose to greet her, still retaining the newspaper in his hand.

A few moments later another carriage drove up, and, when it came to a standstill, the well-dressed individual who had waited in the verandah on the previous afternoon, alighted. That he was much agitated could be seen at first glance. I noticed also that he was doing his best to conceal the fact. As he approached his friends, he raised his hat with ceremonious politeness. Then he said something in an undertone which would have been inaudible more than a few paces away. The effect upon his comrades was electrical. The man gave a start of astonishment and horror, while the woman turned deathly pale, and for a moment looked as if she were about to faint. With an effort, however, she recovered her self-possession, and as she did so I noticed out of the corner of my eye (for the life of me I could not help watching them), that the man who had brought this disconcerting intelligence turned quickly round as if to satisfy himself that her agitation had not been noticed by any one near at hand. Next moment they were walking slowly towards the main entrance, the woman's hands clenching and unclenching at every step. It was no business of mine, of course, but I felt as certain that the drama I had seen acted in front of me was of vital importance to the trio, but more especially so far as the woman was concerned. Had I known what the communication was, it is just possible I might have been able to avert what promised to be a great National calamity, and one which even now I can scarcely contemplate without a shudder.

How I came to know these things and how innocently I walked into the trap that had been so artfully laid for me, you shall hear. Believe me, if I say, without conceit, that the story is an exceedingly interesting one.

CHAPTER II

My arrangements were completed, and in spite of De Belleville's entreaty that I should remain for at least another day, I was adamant in my determination to leave Paris for England that night. In view of the existing state of affairs there, it would be a truism to say that there was much to be done before the assembling of Parliament; it behoved us all, we knew, to put our shoulders to the wheel and to do our utmost to help our country in her hour of need. Accordingly, the appointed moment found me at the railway station, whither my servant had preceded me. Williams is the best courier as well as the best servant in existence, and when I reached the platform it was to find my compartment reserved for me, my books and papers spread out to my hand, my cap and travelling rug in readiness, and the faithful man himself on guard at the door. It only wanted three minutes to starting time, and already the various functionaries were busying themselves with intending passengers.

"It looks as if we shall have a full train, Williams," I said, as I stood at the door gazing down the platform. "Let us hope we shall have a good crossing!"

"The weather report is favourable, sir," he replied.

I returned to the other end of the carriage to look for my cigar-case and was in the act of cutting a weed when I heard Williams' voice raised as if in expostulation.

"I must beg your pardon, sir," he was saying in his curious French, that no experience ever makes any better or any worse, "but this is a reserved compartment."

"But, my good fellow, there is no more room in the train," said a voice I instantly recognised. "Pray speak to your master and I am sure he will not deny our request."

I walked to the door where this conversation was being carried on, to discover the lady and the two men who have already figured so prominently in my narrative, standing upon the platform.

"I am afraid we are taking an unwarrantable liberty in asking such a favour from you," the elder man began, "but by our carelessness we are placed in a dilemma. We omitted to secure a compartment, and now the train is so full that we cannot procure seats. It is most necessary for us to cross to London to-night, and unless you will go so far out of your way as to permit us to share your carriage with you, I fear we must remain behind. The train is about to start even now."

Though I had no desire for their company, courtesy forbade that I should insist upon my rights. Nothing remained for it, therefore, but for me to submit with as much graciousness as I could assume.

"Pray step in," I said. "It is the fault of the Railway Authorities who should provide sufficient accommodation for travellers. May I ask which seat you prefer, madame?"

With an expression of her thanks she chose the corner at the further end of the compartment, and opposite the corner Williams had prepared for me. Her companions followed her, and a moment later the train moved slowly out of the station and our journey had commenced. That journey will be remembered by two of our number, at least, so long as they can recollect anything. I am not going to pretend that I felt at my ease for the first part of it. Far from it. I fancy the Countess must have noticed this, for she did not address me for some time, vouchsafing me an opportunity of becoming accustomed to the novelty of the situation. Then, feeling that it was incumbent on me to do the honours of the compartment, I offered her her choice of papers. She chose one, and, when she had opened it, assured me that I was at liberty to smoke, should I care to do so. Her companions had also made themselves at home, so that by the time our train ran through Ailly-sur-Noye we might have been said to have been on comparatively intimate terms with each other.

"I have an idea that my father and I have had the pleasure of meeting an old friend of yours lately," said the Countess, when the station to which I have just referred was a thing of the past and we were speeding on towards the sea.

"Really!" I replied, with some little astonishment. "Pray, who might that friend be?"

"The Duke of Rotherhithe," she returned, and, as she said it, she neatly folded the paper she had been reading and laid it on the seat beside her.

"A friend of mine, indeed," I answered. "I fancied, however, that he was yachting in the Mediterranean?"

"Exactly! He was! We met him quite by chance in Constantinople, and, finding that we were anxious to reach Naples as quickly as possible, he offered to convey us thither in his yacht. I remember that he spoke most kindly of you."

"The dear fellow!" I replied. "We were at school together and afterwards at the 'Varsity."

So easily impressed is the human mind by former associations, that the mere fact that the Countess de Venetza and her father had lately been the guests of my old friend, Rotherhithe, was sufficient to make me treat them in an entirely different fashion to what I had hitherto done. Until that time I had rather prided myself upon being a somewhat sceptical man of the world, but, now I was giving splendid proofs of my peculiar susceptibility. There was, however, a grain of suspicion still lingering about me. I accordingly proceeded to indirectly question her concerning my friend, and, as I noticed that she answered without hesitation or any attempt at concealment, my doubts faded away until they vanished altogether. We talked of the *Princess Balroubadour* with the familiarity of old friends; Rotherhithe's antipathy to those whom he described as "foreigners" afforded us conversation for another five minutes; while the Malapropisms, if I may coin a word, of his head steward, were sufficient to carry us through two more stations without a single break in the conversation. We discussed the various Ports of the Mediterranean, ran up to Assuan in a *dahabiyeh*, and afterwards made a pilgrimage to Sinai together. The Countess was a witty conversationalist and, as I discovered, a close observer of all that went on around her. Her father and cousin, beyond putting in a word now and again, scarcely spoke, but seemed absorbed in their books and papers.

At last we reached Calais, and it became necessary for us to leave the train. It was a beautiful evening; the sea was as smooth as glass, while there was not enough wind to stir the pennant on the steamer's masthead.

"I am sure we cannot thank you enough for permitting us to share your carriage," said the Countess as we left the train and prepared to go on board the steamer. "Had it not been for your kindness, I fear we should still be in Paris, instead of being well on our way to England."

I returned something appropriate to this remark, then, side by side, we boarded the steamer.

"Since you have been yachting with the Duke of Rotherhithe," I said, when we had gained the deck, "it is only fair to suppose that you are a good sailor, Countess?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered, with a little laugh; "I am an excellent sailor. But – forgive my asking the question – how did you become aware of my identity?"

"I happened to hear your name at the hotel this morning," I replied. "It was told me after I had restored the bangle you so nearly lost."

At this moment her father put in an appearance and caused a diversion by enquiring after the safety of her jewel-case, which, it appeared, stood in continual danger of being lost. A few seconds later the boat was under weigh and we had said good-bye to French soil. As we left the place of embarkation it seemed to me that my companion gave a little sigh, and noticing that it was followed by a slight shiver, I enquired whether she felt cold. She replied in the negative, though at the same time she drew her furs a little closer round her.

"I wonder whether certain places affect you as they do me," she said, when the French port lay well astern and we were heading for the white cliffs of England. "It is strange that I never leave Calais without undergoing a decided feeling of depression. I don't know why it should be so; it is a fact, nevertheless."

"I hope it is not the thought of visiting England that causes it?" I replied with an attempt at jocularly. "You have visited our country before, of course?"

"Very often," she answered; "we have many friends in England."

"In the list of whom I hope you will permit me some day to number myself?" I continued with an eagerness that was not at all usual with me.

"I shall be very pleased," she returned quietly, and then looked away across the still water to where a French pilot cutter lay becalmed half a mile or so away.

An hour later we reached Dover.

Just as we were entering the harbour, the Countess's father approached me and thanked me effusively for my kindness in permitting them to share my carriage from Paris.

"But you must not let my generosity, such as it is, cease there!" I replied. "I hope you will also share my carriage to London, that is to say if the Countess is not already too tired of my society."

"It would be ungenerous to say so if I were," she answered with a smile. "But if you, on your side, do not feel that we have trespassed too far already, I am sure we shall be only too glad to accept your kind offer."

The Custom authorities having been satisfied as to the innocence of our baggage, we took our seats in the carriage which had been reserved for me. My indispensable Williams made his appearance with an armful of papers, and then we started upon the last stage of our journey. When I had handed the Countess a copy of the *Globe*, I selected a *Pall Mall* for myself, and turned to the page containing the latest war news. From what I found there, there could be no doubt that the situation was hourly increasing in danger. There were complications on every side, and the position was not rendered easier by the fact that a certain number of prominent politicians were endeavouring to make capital out of the difficulties of the Government.

"I suppose there can now be no doubt as to the probability of war?" said Count Reiffenburg, looking up from his paper as he spoke.

"None whatever, I should say," I answered. "If the papers are to be believed the clouds are blacker and heavier than they have yet been. I fear the storm must burst ere long."

The Countess did not take any part in our conversation, but I fancied that she was listening. Not feeling any desire to continue the discussion with the younger man, I returned to my paper, leaving him to follow my example. A few minutes later the Countess put down her *Globe*, and sat looking out upon the country through which we were passing.

"I see they have captured another notorious anarchist in Naples," I said, after we had been sitting in silence for some minutes. "So far as can be gathered from the report given here, the arrest is likely to prove important in more respects than one."

"Indeed," said the Countess, looking steadily at me as she spoke. "The police are certainly becoming more expeditious in the matter of arrests. The only difficulty they experience is the finding of any substantial crime against their victims when they have brought about their capture. Pray, who is this particular man?"

"An individual rejoicing in the romantic name of Luigi Ferreira," I answered. "It appears that they have been endeavouring to lay their hands upon him for some time past. Until now, however, he has managed to slip through their fingers."

"Poor fellow!" said the Countess, still in the same even voice. "I hope it will not prejudice you against me, but I cannot help feeling a little sympathy for people – however misguided they may be – who imperil their own safety for the sake of bringing about what they consider the ultimate happiness of others."

Then, as though the matter no longer interested her, she returned to the perusal of her paper. Her cousin had all this time been drumming with his fingers in an impatient manner, so I thought, upon the glass of the window beside which he sat. For my own part, I scarcely knew what to make of this young man. Though he did not show it openly, I could not help thinking that he was jealous of the attention I was paying his fair cousin. As the idea crossed my mind I remembered the previous afternoon, when I had sat in the portico of the hotel, speculating as to the nationality and lives of the people about me. How little I had thought then that twenty-four hours later would find me seated

with them in an English railway carriage, discussing the fortune of another man with whom neither I, nor they, for the matter of that – at least, so I then supposed – had even the remotest connection.

It was not until we were approaching the end of our journey that I spoke to my *vis-à-vis* concerning her stay in London.

"We shall in all probability remain in London for some three or four months," she said. "I hope, if you can spare the time, that you will call upon me. I have taken Wiltshire House, by the way, and shall be most pleased to see you."

I must confess that her announcement caused me a considerable amount of surprise. All things considered, it was rather a strange coincidence, for, only that morning, I had received a letter from my sister Ethelwyn, who, as you are doubtless aware, is the Countess of Brewarden, in which occurred the following significant passage (Ethelwyn, I might here remark, is somewhat given to the florid style): —

"Existence is now altogether a blank! the dream of my life – Wiltshire House – has vanished. Some rich foreigner has taken it, and in consequence George (my brother-in-law) and I have quarrelled desperately. He declares it is a good thing it is let, as he couldn't think of it. He moreover avers that it would cost a king's ransom to keep up. Nevertheless, I shall detest the foreigner whoever she or he may be."

I can scarcely say how I derived the impression, but, until that moment, I had not supposed my fair friend to be the possessor of any great wealth. It was the more surprising, therefore, to hear that she was not only a rich woman, but also that she was to be the temporary mistress of one of the most beautiful and expensive dwellings in the Metropolis. Needless to say, I did not let her become aware of the surprise she had given me, but contented myself with thanking her and expressing the hope that shortly I should be able to do myself the honour of calling upon her.

"You won't allow your public duties to make you forget your promise to come and see me, I hope," said the Countess, as we shook hands.

"You may be quite sure that I shall not," I replied.

"Then, *au revoir*, and many thanks for the kindness you have shown us."

"It has given me the greatest possible pleasure," I answered, and, as I said it, I had a guilty remembrance of my uncharitable feelings that morning, when I had discovered that my privacy was destined to be disturbed. Yet so pleasantly had the time passed, that I felt as if I had known the Countess for years instead of hours.

When I reached my house it was to find everything just as I had left it. A cheerful fire blazed in my study, the latest evening papers lay, cut and folded, upon a table beside my favourite chair; a subdued light shone above the table in the dining-room adjoining, and everything denoted the care and comfort which a master possessing good servants has a right to expect. Having removed the stains of travel, and changed my attire, I sat down to dinner, afterwards spent an hour skimming my correspondence, then, to fill up the time, I ordered a cab and drove to my favourite Club.

Though I had only been absent from England a short time, and had not been further than Paris, I discovered that I had a vast amount of news to hear. Men imparted their information to me as if I had that day returned from Central Africa or the Australian Bush. Young Paunceford, the member for Banford, for which place his father had sat before him, was good enough to give me his views on the Crisis. His complaint was that no one would listen to him, and, in consequence, he was only too glad to find some one who required bringing up to date. That I happened to be a Cabinet Minister as well as an old friend made no sort of difference.

"By Jove, I envy you," he said, as he lit a fresh cigar. "I can tell you, if you play your cards carefully, you'll be no end of a swell over this business. Why on earth couldn't I have had such an opportunity?"

"For the simple reason that you know too much, my boy," said a man in the Guards, who happened to be sitting near. "Haven't you heard that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing? They know Manderville's safe on a secret, so they gave him the job. What's the use of a secret unless there's some mystery about it. By the way, talking of mysteries, what's this about Wiltshire House? Somebody tells me that it has been let to the prettiest woman in Europe. Do any of you know anything about her?"

Paunceford was as well informed upon this as upon all other subjects.

"Of course," he replied; "the news is as old as the hills. I heard it from Bill Kingsbury, who was in the agent's shop, or office – whatever they call it – when the business was being arranged. But it's all nonsense about her being the prettiest woman in Europe. Hailed from Jamaica, I believe; has to own to curly hair and to just one touch of the tar-brush."

"Paunceford seems to know all about her," said another man. "He always is well informed, however, upon any matter, whatever it may be. If there's going to be a war the House ought to vote a sum sufficient to send him out, in order that he may keep the Authorities posted on the progress of affairs. You've missed your vocation, Paunceford; you'd make an ideal War Correspondent."

"Too much imagination," said the man in the Guards; "military matters must be taken seriously. But nobody has answered my question yet. Who is this lady who has taken Wiltshire House?"

"I have already told you," said Paunceford sulkily. "I never came across such a set of unbelievers."

"Elderly, coloured, and of West Indian origin?" said the Guardsman. "It doesn't sound well."

I could stand it no longer.

"For goodness sake," I put in, "don't go about the town spreading that report. I assure you Paunceford is, as usual, altogether out of it."

"How do you know that?" asked Paunceford suspiciously.

"Because I happen to have had the good-fortune to travel with the lady from Paris to-day," I replied, with just that little touch of satisfaction the position warranted.

"And yet you kept quiet about it," said another man. "Well, you are a reticent beggar, I must say. Don't you know this has been one of the mysteries of the town. My goodness, man, you shan't escape from this room until you have told us all about her! Who is she? What is she? What is her name? How much money has she? Above all, is she pretty?"

"She is the Countess de Venetza," I replied. "Italian, I should say; rich – since she has taken Wiltshire House; and as for her personal appearance – well, when you see her, you will be able to judge of that for yourselves."

"Excellent!" said the Guardsman. "I prefer Manderville's report to yours, Paunceford. Is she married?"

"A widow, I fancy," I replied.

"Still better! If she is kind to me I will make her reputation, and Wiltshire House shall be the smartest caravansérai in London. Not shooting in your wood, Manderville, I hope?"

"I wish to goodness you men wouldn't spend your time so much in inventing new slang," I answered. "But some of you seem to have nothing else to do. Now that I have satisfied your curiosity, I shall go home to bed. The early bird catches the early news. In these days one lives for the morning papers."

Paunceford saw another opportunity.

"Talking of morning papers – " he began, but before he had finished the sentence I had left the room.

Being tired when I reached home I went straight to bed. Remembering my experience of the previous night, I was determined that this one should make up for it. To my disappointment, however, I discovered that, tired though I was, sleep would not visit my eyelids. I was as wide awake when I had been two hours in bed as I was when I entered my room. Once more, as on the previous night, I

was haunted with the remembrance of the Countess's eyes; do what I would, I could not get them out of my mind. Tired at last of tumbling and tossing, and thoroughly angry with myself, and the world in general, I rose, donned a dressing-gown, and went into the small study that adjoins my bedroom. The fire was not quite extinguished, and with some little coaxing I was able to induce it to burn again. Taking a book I drew up my chair, seated myself in it, and tried to read. I must have done so to some purpose, for after a time I fell asleep. Possibly it may have been due to the fact that I had had no rest on the previous night, and that my mind was naturally much occupied with the gravity of England's situation, and the part I had to play in the coming strife; at any rate, my dreams were not only vivid but decidedly alarming. I dreamt that I was in a transport *en route* to the Cape, and that the vessel struck a rock, and sank with all the troops on board. There was no time to get out the boats, and, in company with some hundreds of others, I was precipitated into the water. While we were still struggling with the waves, a life-boat made her appearance, and, to my intense astonishment, standing in the bows was no less a person than the Countess De Venetza. What was stranger still, she carried in her hand a heavy spear, or harpoon, with which, whenever a drowning man approached the boat, she stabbed him in the back, laughing as she did so. Then, by means of that wonderful mechanical ingenuity with which the theatres of the land of dreams are furnished, the scene changed to a lonely plain at the foot of a rugged mountain-range. A battle had been fought upon it, and the dead and wounded still lay where they had fallen. So real did it appear to me, that when I recognised here and there the faces of friends, I found myself wondering what I should say to their loved ones when I returned to England. Suddenly, in the weird light, for the moon was shining above the mountain-peaks, there appeared from among the rocks on the further side of the plain a woman, whose face I instantly recognised. With stealthy steps she left her hiding-place and descended to where the wounded lay thickest. In her hand she carried the same spear that I remembered in my previous dream, and with it she stabbed every man who remained alive. So terrible was the expression upon her face as she did so, that I turned away from her in loathing and disgust. When I looked again she was bending over the body of a man who still lived, but who was bleeding from a deep wound in his side. Picture my consternation when I discovered that he was none other than the Guardsman who had been so persistent in his inquiries that night concerning her. As I watched, for I was unable to move hand or foot to save him, a low moan escaped his lips, followed by an appeal for water. With the same expression of fiendish rage upon her face that I had noticed before, she raised the spear, and was about to plunge it into his breast, when with a cry I awoke, to find the sun streaming into the room, and my respectable Williams standing before me.

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