

Martyn Wyndham, Megrue Roi Cooper

Under Cover



Wyndham Martyn
Under Cover

«Public Domain»

Martyn W.

Under Cover / W. Martyn — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	5
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	19
CHAPTER FOUR	23
CHAPTER FIVE	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Martyn Wyndham , Megrue Roi Cooper

Under Cover

CHAPTER ONE

PARIS wears her greenest livery and puts on her most gracious airs in early summer. When the National Fete commemorative of the Bastille's fall has gone, there are few Parisians of wealth or leisure who remain in their city. Trouville, Deauville, Etretat and other pleasure cities claim them and even the bourgeoisie hie them to their summer villas.

The city is given up to those tourists from America and England whom Paris still persists in calling *Les Cooks* in memory of that enterprising blazer of cheap trails for the masses. Your true Parisian and the stranger who has stayed within the city's gates to know her well, find themselves wholly out of sympathy with the eager crowds who follow beaten tracks and absorb topographical knowledge from guide-books.

Monty Vaughan was an American who knew his Paris in all months but those two which are sacred to foreign travelers, and it irritated him one blazing afternoon in late July to be persistently mistaken for a tourist and offered silly useless toys and plans of the Louvre. The *camelots*, those shrewd itinerant merchants of the Boulevards, pestered him continually. These excellent judges of human nature saw in him one who lacked the necessary harshness to drive them away and made capital of his good nature.

He was a slim, pleasant-looking man of five and twenty, to whom the good things of this world had been vouchsafed, with no effort on his part to obtain them; and in spite of this he preserved a certain frank and boyish charm which had made him popular all his life.

Presently on his somewhat aimless wanderings he came down the Avenue de l'Opéra and took a seat under the awning and ordered an innocuous drink. He was in a city where he had innumerable friends, but they had all left for the seashore and this loneliness was unpleasant to his friendly spirit. But even in the Café de Paris he was not to be left alone and he was regarded as fair game by alert hawkers. One would steal up to his table and deposit a little measure of olives and plead for two sous in exchange. Another would place some nuts by his side and demand a like amount. And when they had been driven forth and he had lighted a cigarette, he observed watching him with professional eagerness a *ramasseur de megot*, one of those men who make a livelihood of picking up the butts of cigars and cigarettes and selling them.

When Monty flung down the half-smoked cigarette in hope that the man would go away he was annoyed to find that the fellow was congratulating himself that here was a tourist worth following, who smoked not the wispy attenuated cigarettes of the native but one worth harvesting. He probed for it with his long stick under the table and stood waiting for another.

The heat, the absence of his friends and the knowledge that he must presently dine alone had brought the usually placid Monty into a wholly foreign frame of mind and he rose abruptly and stalked down the Avenue.

A depressed-looking sandwich-man, bearing a device which read, "One can laugh uproariously at the Champs Elysées every night during the summer months," blocked his way, and permitted a woman selling fans of the kind known to the *camelots* as *les petits vents du nord* to thrust one upon him. "Monsieur does not comprehend our heat in Paris," she said. "Buy a little north wind. Two sous for a little north wind."

Monty thrust a franc in her hand and turned quickly from her to carom against a tall well-dressed man who was passing. As Monty began to utter his apology the look of gloom dropped from his face and he seized the stranger's hand and shook it heartily.

“Steve, old man!” he cried, “what luck to find you amid this mob! I’ve been feeling like a poor shipwrecked orphan, and here you come to my rescue again.”

The man he addressed as Steve seemed just as pleased to behold Monty Vaughan. The two were old comrades from the days at their preparatory school and had met little during the past five years. Monty’s ecstatic welcome was a pleasant reminder of happy days that were gone.

“I might ask what you are doing here,” Steven Denby returned. “I imagined you to be sunning yourself in Newport or Bar Harbor, not doing Paris in July.”

“I’ve been living here for two years,” Monty explained, when they were sheltered from interruption at the café Monty had just left.

“Doing what?”

Monty looked at him with a diffident smile. “I suppose you’ll grin just like everybody else. I’m here to learn foreign banking systems. My father says it will do me good.”

Denby laughed. “I’ll bet you know less about it than I do.” The idea of Monty Vaughan, heir to the Vaughan millions, working like a clerk in the Crédit Lyonnais was amusing.

“Does your father make you work all summer?” he demanded.

“I’m not working now,” Monty explained. “I never do unless I feel like it. I’m waiting for a friend who is sailing with me on the Mauretania next week and I’ve just had a wire to say she’ll be here to-morrow.”

“She!” echoed Denby. “Have you married without my knowledge or consent? Or is this a honeymoon trip you are taking?”

A look of sadness came into the younger man’s face.

“I shall never marry,” he returned.

But Steven Denby knew him too well to take such expressions of gloom as final. “Nonsense,” he cried. “You are just the sort they like. You’re inclined to believe in people too much if you like them, and a husband who believes in his wife as you will in yours is a treasure. They’ll fight for you, Monty, when you get home again. For all you know the trap is already baited.”

“Trap!” Monty cried reproachfully. “I’ve been trying to make a girl catch me for three years now and she won’t.”

“Do you mean you’ve been finally turned down?” Steven Denby asked curiously. It was difficult to suppose that a man of his friend’s wealth and standing would experience much trouble in offering heart and fortune.

“I haven’t asked yet,” Monty admitted. “I’ve been on the verge of it hundreds of times, but she always laughs as I’m coming around to it, and someone comes in or something happens and I’ve never done it.” He sighed with the deprecating manner of the devout lover. “If you’d only seen her, Steve, you’d see what mighty little chance I stood. I feel it’s a bit of impertinence to ask a girl like that to marry me.”

Steven patted him on the arm. “You’re just the same,” he said, “exactly the silly old Monty I used to know. Next time you see your charmer, risk being impertinent and ask her to marry you. Women hate modesty nowadays. It’s just a confession of failure and we’re all hitched up to success. I don’t know the girl you are speaking of but when you get home again instead of declaring your great unworthiness, tell her you’ve left Paris and its pleasures simply to marry her. Say that the Bourse begged you to remain and guide the nation through a financial panic, but you left them weeping and flew back on a fast Cunarder.”

“I believe you are right,” Monty said. “I’ll do it. I ought to have done it years ago. Alice is frightfully disappointed with me.”

“Who is Alice?” the other demanded. “The lady you’re crossing with on the Mauretania?”

“Yes,” said Monty. “A good pal of mine; one of those up-to-date women of the world who know what to do and say at the right moment. She’s a sort of elder sister to me. You’ll like her, Steve.”

Denby doubted it but pursued the subject no further. He conceived Alice to be one of those capable managing women who do so much good in the world and give so little pleasure.

“What are you doing in Paris now?” Monty presently demanded. It occurred to him that it was odd that Denby, too, should be in the city now.

“Writing a book on the Race Courses of the World,” he said, smiling. “I am now in the midst of Longchamps.”

Monty looked at him doubtfully. He had never known that his friend had any literary aspirations, but he did remember him as one who, if he did not choose to tell, would invent airy fairy fancies to deceive.

“I don’t believe it,” he said.

“You are quite right,” Denby admitted. “You’ve got the key to the mystery. I’ll confess that I have been engaged to guard Mona Lisa. Suspicious looking tourists such as you engage my special attention. Don’t get offended, Monty,” he added, “I’m just wandering through the city on my way to England and that’s the truth, simple as it may seem. I was desolate and your pleasing countenance as you bought a franc’s worth of north wind was good to see. I wondered if you’d remember me.”

“Remember you!” Monty snorted. “Am I the kind to forget a man who saved my life?”

“Who did that?” Denby inquired.

“Why, you did,” he returned, “You pulled me out of the Nashua river at school!”

The other man laughed. “Why, it wasn’t five feet deep there.”

“I can drown anywhere,” Monty returned firmly. “You saved my life and I’ve never had the opportunity to do anything in return.”

“The time will come,” Denby said lightly. “You’ll get a mysterious message sometime and it will be up to you to rescue me from dreadful danger.”

“I’d like to,” the other retorted, “but I’m not sure I’m cut out for that rescue business.”

“Have you ever been – ” Denby hesitated. “Have you ever been in any sort of danger?”

“Yes,” Monty replied promptly, “but you pulled me out.”

“Please don’t go about repeating it,” Denby entreated, “I have enemies enough without being blamed for pulling you out of the Nashua river.”

Monty looked at him in astonishment. Here was the most popular boy in Groton School complaining of enemies. Monty felt a thrill that had something of enjoyment in it. His own upbringing had been so free from any danger and his parents had safeguarded him from so much trouble that he had found life insipid at times. Yet here was a man talking of enemies. It was fascinating.

“Do you mean it?” he demanded.

“Why not?” said Denby, rolling himself a cigarette.

“You hadn’t any at school,” Monty insisted.

“That was a dozen years ago nearly,” Denby insisted. “Since then – ” He paused. “My career wouldn’t interest you, my financial expert, but I am safe in saying I have accumulated a number of persons who do not wish me well.”

“You must certainly meet Alice,” Monty asserted. “She’s like you. She often says I’m the only really uninteresting person she’s fond of.”

Denby assured himself that Alice would not interest him in the slightest degree and made haste to change the subject, but Monty held on to his chosen course.

“We’ll all dine together to-morrow night,” he cried.

“I’m afraid I’m too busy.”

“Too busy to dine with Alice Harrington when you’ve the opportunity?” Monty exclaimed. “Are you a woman-hater?”

A more observant man might have noted the sudden change in expression that the name Harrington produced in Steven Denby. He had previously been bored at the idea of meeting a woman

who he concluded would be eager to impart her guide-book knowledge. Alice evidently had meant nothing to him, but Alice Harrington roused a sudden interest.

"Not by any chance Mrs. Michael Harrington?" he queried.

Monty nodded. "The same. She and Michael are two of the best friends I have. He's a great old sport and she's hurrying back because he has to stay on and can't get over this year." Monty flushed becomingly. "I'm going back with her because Nora is going to stay down in Long Island with them."

"Introduce me to Nora," Denby insisted. "She is a new motif in your jocund song. Who is Nora, what is she, that Monty doth commend her?"

"She's the girl," Monty explained. He sighed. "If you only knew how pretty she was, you wouldn't talk about a trap being baited. I don't think women are the good judges they pretend to be!"

"Why not?" Denby demanded.

"Because Alice says she'd accept me and I don't believe I stand a ghost of a chance."

"Women are the only judges," Denby assured him seriously. "If I were you I'd bank on your friend Alice every time."

"Then you'll dine with me to-morrow?" Monty asked.

"Of course. You don't suppose I am going to lose sight of you, do you?"

And Monty, grateful that this admired old school friend was so ready to join him, forgot the previous excuse about inability to spare the time.

"That's fine," he exclaimed. "But what are we going to do to-night?"

"You are going to dine with me," Denby told him. "I haven't seen you, let me see," he reflected, "I haven't seen you for about ten years and I want to talk over the old days. What do you say to trying some of Marguery's *sole à la Normandie*?"

During the course of the dinner Monty talked frankly and freely about his past, present and future. Denby learned that in view of the great wealth which would devolve upon him, his father had determined that he should become grounded in finance. When he had finished, he reflected that while he had opened his soul to his old friend, his old friend had offered no explanation of what in truth brought him to Europe, or why he had for almost a decade dropped out of his old set.

"But what have you been doing?" Monty gathered courage to ask. "I've told you all about me and mine, Steve."

"There isn't much to tell," Denby responded slowly. "I left Groton because my father died. I'm afraid he wasn't a shrewd man like your father, Monty. He was one of the last relics of New York's brown-stone age and he tried to keep the pace when the marble age came in. He couldn't do it."

"You were going into the diplomatic service," Monty reminded him. "You used to specialize in modern languages, I remember. I suppose you had to give that up."

"I had to try to earn my own living," Denby explained, "and diplomacy doesn't pay much at first even if you have the luck to get an appointment."

Monty looked at him shrewdly. He saw a tall, well set up man who had every appearance of affluence.

"You've done pretty well for yourself."

Denby smiled, "The age demands that a man put up a good appearance. A financier like you ought not to be deceived."

Monty leaned over the table. "Steve, old man," he said, a trifle nervously, "I don't want to butt in on your private affairs, but if you ever want any money you'll offend me if you don't let me know. I've too much and that's a fact. Except for putting a bit on Michael's horses when they run and a bit of a flutter occasionally at Monte Carlo I don't get rid of much of it. I've got heaps. Do you want any?"

"Monty," the other man said quietly, "you haven't altered. You are still the same generous boy I remember and it's good for a man like me to know that. I don't need any money, but if ever I do I'll come to you."

Monty sighed with relief. His old idol was not hard up and he had not been offended at the suggestion. It was a good world and he was happy.

"Steve," he asked presently, "what did you mean about having enemies and being in danger? That was a joke, wasn't it?"

"We most of us have enemies," Steven said lightly, "and we are all in danger. For all you know ptomaines are gathering their forces inside you even now."

"You didn't mean that," Monty said positively. "You were serious. What enemies?"

"Enemies I have made in the course of my work," the other returned.

"Well, what work is it?" Monty queried. It was odd, he thought, that Denby would not let him into so harmless a secret as the nature of his work. He felt an unusual spirit of persistence rising within him. "What work?" he repeated.

Denby shrugged his shoulders. "You might call it a little irregular," he said in a lowered voice. "You represent high finance. Your father is one of the big men in American affairs. You probably have his set views on things. I don't want to shock you, Monty."

"Shock be damned!" cried Monty in an aggrieved voice. "I'm tired of having to accommodate myself to other people's views."

Denby looked at him with mock wonder.

"Monty in revolt at the established order of things is a most remarkable phenomenon. Have you a pirate in your family tree that you sigh for sudden change and a life on the ocean wave?"

Monty laughed. "I don't want to do anything like that but I'm tired of a life that is always the same. You've enemies. I don't believe I've one. I'd like to have an enemy, Steve. I'd like to feel I was in danger; it would be a change after being wrapped in wool all my life. You've probably seen the world in a way I never shall. I've been on a personally conducted tour, which isn't the same thing."

"Not by a long shot," Steven Denby agreed. "But," he added, "why should you want to take the sort of risks that I have had to take, when there's no need? I have been in danger pretty often, Monty, and I shall again. Why? Because I have my living to make and that way suits me best. You notice I am sitting with my back to the wall so that none can come behind me. I do that because two revengeful gentlemen have sworn bloodthirsty oaths to relieve my soul of its body."

Monty tingled with a certain pleasurable apprehension which had never before visited him. He was experiencing in real life what had only revealed itself before in novels or on the stage.

"What are they like?" he demanded in a low voice, looking around.

"Disappointing, I'm afraid," Steven answered. "You are looking for a tall man with a livid scar running from temple to chin and a look before which even a waiter would blanch. Both my men have mild expressions and wouldn't attract a second glance, but they'll either get me or I'll get them."

"Steve!" Monty cried. "What did they do?"

Denby made a careless gesture. "It was over a money matter," he explained.

Monty thought for a moment in silence. Never had his conventional lot seemed less attractive to him. He approached the subject again as do timid men who fearfully hang on the outskirts of a street fight, unwilling to miss what they have not the heart to enjoy.

"I wish some excitement like that would come my way," he sighed.

"Excitement? Go to Monte and break the bank. Become the Jaggers of your country."

"There's no danger in that," Monty answered almost peevishly.

"Nor of it," laughed his friend.

"That's just the way it always is," Monty complained. "Other fellows have all the fun and I just hear about it."

Denby looked at him shrewdly and then leaned across the table.

"So you want some fun?" he queried.

"I do," the other said firmly.

"Do you think you've got the nerve?" Steven demanded.

Monty hesitated. "I don't want to be killed," he admitted. "What is it?"

"I didn't tell you how I made a living, but I hinted my ways were a bit irregular. What I have to propose is also a trifle out of the usual. The law and the equator are both imaginary lines, Monty, and I'm afraid my little expedition may get off the line. I suppose you don't want to hear any more, do you?"

Monty's eyes were shining with excitement. "I'm going to hear everything you've got to say," he asserted.

"It means I've got to put myself in your power in a way," Denby said hesitatingly, "but I'll take a chance because you're the kind of man who can keep things secret."

"I am," Monty said fervently. "Just you try me out, Steve!"

"It has to do with a string of pearls," Denby explained, "and I'm afraid I shall disappoint you when I tell you I'm proposing to pay for them just as any one else might do."

"Oh!" said Monty. "Is that all?"

"When I buy these pearls, as you will see me do, with Bank of France notes, they belong to me, don't they?"

"Sure they do," Monty exclaimed. "They are yours to do as you like with."

"That's exactly how I feel about it," Denby said. "It happens to be my particular wish to take those pearls back to my native land."

"Then for heaven's sake do it," Monty advised. "What's hindering you?"

"A number of officious prying hirelings called customs officials. They admit that the pearls aren't improved by the voyage, yet they want me to pay a duty of twenty per cent. if I take them home with me."

"So you're going to smuggle 'em," Monty cried. "That's a cinch!"

"Is it?" Denby returned slowly. "It might have been in the past, but things aren't what they were in the good old days. They're sending even society women to jail now as well as fining them. The whole service from being a joke has become efficient. I tell you there's risk in it, and believe me, Monty, I know."

"Where would I come in?" the other asked.

"You'd come in on the profits," Denby explained, "and you'd be a help as well."

"Profits?" Monty queried. "What profits?"

Denby laughed. "You simple child of finance, do you think I'm buying a million-franc necklace to wear about my own fair neck? I can sell it at a fifty thousand dollar profit in the easiest sort of way. There are avenues by which I can get in touch with the right sort of buyers without any risk. My only difficulty is getting the thing through the customs. It's up to you to get your little excitement if you're game."

Monty shut his eyes and felt as one does who is about to plunge for the first swim of the season into icy water. It was one thing to talk about danger in the abstract and another to have it suddenly offered him.

Steven had talked calmly about men who wanted to part his soul from his body as though such things were in no way out of the ordinary. Suppose these desperate beings assumed Montague Vaughan to be leagued with Steven Denby and as such worthy of summary execution! But he put aside these fears and turned to his old friend.

"I'm game," he said, "but I'm not in this for the profits." Now he was once committed to it, his spirits began to rise. "What about the danger?" he asked.

"There may be none at all," the other admitted. "If there is it may be slight. If by any chance it is known to certain crooks that I have it with me there may be an attempt to get it. Naturally they won't ask me pleasantly to hand it over, they'll take it by force. That's one danger. Then I may be trailed by the customs people, who could be warned through secret channels that I have it and am purposing to smuggle it in."

“But what can I do?” Monty asked. He was anxious to help but saw little opportunity.

“You can tell me if any people follow me persistently while we’re together in Paris or whether the same man happens to sit next to me at cafés or any shows we take in.” He paused a moment, “By Jove, Monty, this means I shall have to book a passage on the Mauretania!”

“That’s the best part of it,” Monty cried.

“But Mrs. Harrington,” Denby said. “She might not like it.”

“Alice can’t choose a passenger list,” Monty exclaimed; “and she’ll be glad to have any old friend of mine.”

“That’s a thing I want to warn you of,” the other man said. “I don’t want you to give away too many particulars about me. Don’t persist in that fable about my saving your life. Know me just enough to vouch to her that I’m house-broken but don’t get to the point where we have to discuss common friends. I have my reasons, Monty, which I’ll explain later on. I don’t court publicity this trip and I don’t want any reporter to jump aboard at Quarantine and get interested in me.”

“I see,” cried the sapient Monty and felt he was plunging at last into dark doings and mysterious depths. “But how am I to warn you if you’re followed? I shall be with you and we ought not to let on that we know.” He felt in that moment the hours he had spent with detective novels had been time well spent.

“We must devise something,” Denby agreed, “and something simple.” He meditated for a moment. “Here’s an idea. If you should think I’m being followed or you want me to understand that something unusual is up, just say without any excitement, ‘Will you have a cigarette, Dick?’”

“But why ‘Dick,’” Monty cried, “when you’re Steve!”

“For that very reason,” Denby explained. “If you said Steve merely I shouldn’t notice it, but if you say Dick I shall be on the *qui vive* at once.”

“Great idea!” cried his fellow conspirator enthusiastically. “When do you buy them?”

“I’ve an appointment at Cartier’s at eleven. Want to come?”

“You bet I do,” Monty asserted, “I’m going through with it from start to finish.”

He looked at his friend a little anxiously. “What is the worst sort of a finish we might expect if the luck ran against us?”

“As you won’t come in on the profits, you shan’t take any risks,” Denby said. “If you agree to help me as we suggested that’s all I require of you. In case I should not get by, you can explain me away as a passing acquaintance merely. Don’t kick against the umpire’s decision,” he commanded. “If they halved the sentence because two were in it I might claim your help all the way, but they’d probably double it for conspiracy, so you’d be a handicap. You’ll get a run for your money, Monty, all right.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Monty doubtfully.

Denby fell into the bantering style the other knew so well. “There’s one thing I’ll warn you about,” he said. “If a very beautiful young woman makes your acquaintance on board, by accident of course, don’t tell her what life seems to you as is your custom. She may be an agent of the Russian secret police with an assignment to take you to Siberia. She may force you to marry her at a pistol’s point and cost your worthy progenitor a million. Be careful, Monty. You’re in a wicked world and you’ve a sinful lot of money, and these big ships attract all that is brightest and best in the criminal’s Who’s Who.”

Monty shivered a bit. “I never thought of that,” he said innocently.

“Then you’d better begin now,” his mentor suggested, “and have for once a voyage where you won’t be bored.”

He glanced at the clock. “It’s later than I thought and I have to be up early. I’ll walk to your hotel.”

During the short walk Monty glanced apprehensively over his shoulder a score of times. Out of the shadows it seemed to him that mysterious men stared evilly and banded themselves together until

a procession followed the two Americans. But Denby paid no sort of attention to these problematic followers.

“Wait till I’ve got the pearls on me,” he whispered mischievously. “Then you’ll see some fun.”

CHAPTER TWO

ALTHOUGH the carriages and automobiles of the wealthy were no longer three deep in the Rue de la Paix, as they had been earlier in the season, this ravishing thoroughfare was crowded with foot-passengers as Monty and his friend made their way under the red and white awnings of the shops into Cartier's.

The transaction took very little time. The manager of the place seemed to be expecting his client, to whom he accorded the respect that even a Rue de la Paix jeweler may pay to a million-franc customer. Bank of France notes of high denominations were passed to him and Steven Denby received a small, flat package and walked out into the sunshine with it.

"Now," said the owner of the pearls, "guard me as you would your honor, Monty; the sport begins, and I am now probably pursued by a half dozen of the super-crooks of high class fiction."

"I wish you'd be serious," Monty said plaintively.

"I am," Denby assured him. "But I rely on your protection, so feel more light-hearted than I should otherwise."

"You are laughing at me," Monty protested.

"I want you to look a little less like a detected criminal," Denby returned.

"If I happened to be a detective after a criminal I should arrest you on sight. You keep looking furtively about as though you'd done murder and bloodhounds were on your track."

"Well, they are on our track," Monty said excitedly, and then whispered thrillingly: "Have a cigarette, Dick." There was trembling triumph in his voice. He felt he had justified himself in his friend's eyes.

"What is it?" Denby asked with no show of excitement.

"There was a man in Cartier's who watched us all the time," Monty confided. "He is on our trail now. We're being shadowed, Steve. It's all up!"

"Nonsense!" his companion cried. "There's nothing compromising in buying a pearl necklace. I didn't steal it."

Suddenly he turned around and looked at the man Monty indicated. His face cleared. "That's Harlow. He's one of Cartier's clerks, who looks after American women's wants. Don't worry about him."

By this time the two had come to the Tuileries, that paradise for the better class Parisian children. Denby pointed to a seat. "Sit down there," he commanded, "while I see what Harlow wants."

Obediently Monty took a seat and watched the man he had mistaken for a detective from the corner of his eye. Denby chatted confidentially with him for fully five minutes and then, it seemed to the watcher, passed a small packet into his hand. The man nodded a friendly adieu and walked rapidly out of sight. For a few seconds Denby stood watching and then rejoined his friend.

"Anything the matter?" the timorous one demanded eagerly.

"Why should there be?" Denby returned. "Don't worry, Monty, there's nothing to get nervous about yet."

Monty remembered the confidential conversation between the two.

"He seemed to have a lot to tell you," he insisted.

Denby smiled. "He did; but he came as a friend. Harlow wanted to warn me that while I was buying the necklace a stranger was mightily interested and asked Harlow what he knew about me."

"There you are," Monty gasped excitedly, "I told you it was all up. Did Harlow know who the man was?"

"He suspected him of being a customs spy. Our customs service takes the civilized world as its hunting ground and Paris is specially beloved of it."

“What are you going to do?” Monty asked when he had looked suspiciously at an amiable old priest who went ambling by. “They’ll get you.”

“They may,” Denby said, “but the interested gentleman at Cartier’s won’t.”

“But he knows all about you,” Monty persisted. “It will be dead easy.”

“He doesn’t,” the other returned. “Harlow took the liberty of transforming me into an Argentine ranch owner of unbounded wealth about to purchase a mansion in the Parc Monceau.”

“That was mighty good of him,” Monty cried in relief. “That fellow Harlow is certainly all right.”

Denby smiled a trifle oddly, Monty thought. “His kind ways have won him a thousand dollars,” he returned. “Did you see me pass him something?”

Monty nodded.

“Well, that was five thousand francs. I passed it to him, not in the least because I believe in the mythical stranger – ”

“What do you mean?” the amazed Monty exclaimed. It seemed to him he was getting lost in a world of whose existence he had been unaware.

“Simply this,” Denby told him, “that I disbelieve Harlow’s story and am not as easily impressed by kind faces as you are. I think Harlow’s inquisitive stranger was a fake.”

Monty looked at him with a superior air. “And you mean to say,” he said with the air of one who has studied financial systems, “that you handed over a thousand dollars without verifying it? I call that being easy.”

“It’s this way,” Denby explained patiently. “Harlow knows I have the necklace and he’s in a position to know on what boat I sail. If I had not remembered that I owed him five thousand francs just now he might have informed the customs that I had bought a million-franc necklace and I should have been marked down as one to whom a special search must be made if I didn’t declare it.”

“But if he’s a clerk in Cartier’s what has he to do with the customs?” Monty asked.

“Perhaps he is underpaid,” the other returned. “Perhaps he is extravagant – I’ve seen him at the races and noticed that he patronized the *pari mutuel*— perhaps he has a wife and twelve children. I’ll leave it to you to decide, but I dare not take a risk.”

Monty shivered. “It looks to me as if we were going to have a hell of a time.”

“A little excitement possibly,” Denby said airily, “but nothing to justify language like that, though. You ought to have been with me last year at Buenos Ayres, Monty, and I could have shown you some sport.”

“I don’t think I’m built for a life like that,” Monty admitted, and then reflected that this friend of his was an exceedingly mysterious being of whose adult life and adventures he knew nothing. For an uneasy moment he hoped his father would never discover this association, but there soon prevailed the old boyish spirit of hero-worship. Steven Denby might not conform to some people’s standards, but he felt certain he would do nothing criminal. One had to live, Monty reflected, and his father complained constantly of hard times.

“What sort of sport was it?” he hazarded.

“It had to do with the secret of a torpedo controlled by wireless,” Denby said. “A number of governments were after it and there collected in Buenos Ayres the choicest collection of high-grade adventurers that I have ever seen. Some day when I’m through with this pearl trouble I’ll tell you about it.”

But what Denby had carelessly termed “pearl trouble” was quite sufficient for the less experienced man. He had a vivid imagination, more vivid now than at any period of his career. Paris was full of Apaches, he knew, and not all spent their days lying in the sun outside the barriers. Supposing one sprang from behind a tree and fell upon Denby and seized the precious package whose outline was discernible through the breast pocket of his coat. Monty suddenly took upon himself the rôle of an adviser.

"It's no use taking unnecessary risks," he said. "I saw you put those pearls in your breast pocket, and there were at least six people who had the same opportunity as I. It's just putting temptation in the way of a thief."

"I welcome this outbreak of caution on your part," said Denby, laughing at his expression of anxiety, "but you'll need it on board ship most. The greatest danger is that a couple of crooks may rob me and then pitch me overboard. Monty, for the sake of our boyhood recollections, don't let them throw me overboard."

"Now you are laughing at me," Monty said a trifle sulkily.

"What do you want me to do?" Denby demanded.

"Put those pearls in some other place," he returned stubbornly.

Denby made a pass or two in the air as conjurers do when they perform their marvels.

"It's done," he cried. "From what part of my anatomy or yours shall I produce them?"

"There you go," Monty exclaimed helplessly, "you won't be serious. I'm getting all on the jump."

"A cigarette will soothe you," Denby told him, taking a flat leathern pouch from his pocket and offering it to the other.

"I can't roll 'em," Monty protested.

"Then a look at my tobacco has a soothing effect," the elder man insisted. "I grow it in my private vineyard in Ruritania."

Monty turned back the leather flap to look at his friend's private brand and saw nestling in a place where once tobacco might have reposed a necklace of pearls for which a million of francs had been paid.

"Good Lord!" Monty gasped. "How did you do it?"

"A correspondence school course in legerdemain," Steven explained. "It comes in handy at times."

"But I didn't see you do it and I was watching."

"An unconscious tribute to my art," Denby replied. "Monty, I thank you."

Monty grew less anxious. If Steven had all sorts of tricks up his sleeve there was no reason to suppose he must fail.

"I don't think you need my advice," he admitted. "It doesn't seem I can help you."

"You may be able to help a great deal," Denby said more seriously, "but I don't want you to act as if you were a criminal. Pass it off easily. Of course," – he hesitated, – "I've had more experience in this sort of thing than you, and am more used to being up against it, but it will never do if you look as anxiously at everybody on the Mauretania as you do at the passers-by here. You can help me particularly by observing if I am the subject of special scrutiny."

"That will be a cinch," Monty asserted.

"Then start right away," his mentor commanded. "We have been under observation for the last five minutes by someone I've never laid eyes on before."

"Good Lord!" Monty cried. "It was that old priest who stared at us. I knew he was a fake. That was a wig he had on!"

"Try again," Denby suggested. "It happens to be a woman and a very handsome one. As we went into Cartier's she passed in a taxi. I only thought then that she was a particularly charming American or English woman out on a shopping expedition. When we came out she was in one of those expensive *couturier's* opposite, standing at an upper window which commands a view of Cartier's door. They may have been coincidences, but at the present moment, although we are sauntering along the Champs Elysées, she is pursuing us in another taxi. She has passed us once. When she went by she told the chauffeur to turn, but he was going at such a pace that he couldn't pull up in time. He has just turned and is now bearing down on us. Take a look at the lady, Monty, so you will know her again."

A sense of dreadful responsibility settled on Montague Vaughan. He was now entering upon his rôle of Denby's aid and must in a few seconds be brought face to face with what was unquestionably

an adventuress of the highest class. He knew all about them from fiction. She would have the faintest foreign accent, be wholly charming and free from vulgarity, and yet like Keats' creation be a *belle dame sans merci*. But, he wondered uneasily, what would be his rôle if his friend fell victim to her charms?

He was startled out of his vain imaginings when Denby exclaimed: "By all that's wonderful, she seems to know one of us, and it's not I! You're the fortunate man, Monty."

A pretty woman with good features and laughing eyes was certainly looking out of a taxi and smiling right at him. And when he realized this, Monty's depression was lifted and he sprang forward to meet her. "It's Alice," he cried.

Denby, following more leisurely, was introduced to her.

"I came last night," she explained. "Michael's horse won and there was no more interest in Deauville or Trouville and as I must buy some things I came on here as soon as I could. I thought I saw you in Cartier's," she explained, "and tried to make you see me when you came out, but only Mr. Denby looked my way so I dared not make any signs of welcome."

She seemed exceedingly happy to be in Paris again, and Denby, looking at her with interest, knew he was in the company of one of the most notable and best liked of the smart hostesses among the sporting set on Long Island. The Harringtons were enormously rich and lived at a great estate near Westbury, not far from the Meadow Brook Club. The Directory of Directors showed the name of Michael Harrington in a number of influential companies, but of recent years his interest in business had slackened and he was more interested in the development of his estate and the training of his thoroughbreds than in Wall Street activities.

For her part she took him, although the name was totally unfamiliar, as a friend of Monty's, and was prepared to like him. Whereas an Englishwoman of her class might have been insistent to discover whether any of his immediate ancestors had been engaged in retail trade before she accepted him as an equal, Alice Harrington was willing to take people on their face value and retain them on their merits.

She saw a tall, well-bred man with strong features and that air of *savoir faire* which is not easy of assumption. She felt instantly that he was the sort of man Michael would like. He talked about racing as though he knew, and that alone would please her husband.

"I've spent so much money," she said presently, "that I shall dismiss this taxi-man and walk. One can walk in Paris with two men, whereas one may be a little pestered alone."

"Fine," Monty cried. "We'll go and lunch somewhere. What place strikes your fancy?"

"Alas," she said, "I'm booked already. I have an elderly relation in the Boulevard Haussmann who stays here all summer this year on account of alterations in the house which she superintends personally, and I've promised."

"I hope she hasn't sacrificed you at a dinner table, too," Denby said, "because if you are free to-night you'd confer a blessing on a fellow countryman if you'd come with Monty and me to the Ambassadeurs. Polin is funnier than ever."

"I'd love to," she cried. "You have probably delivered me from my aunt's dismal dinner. I hadn't an engagement but now I can swear to one truthfully. Men are usually so vain that if you say you're dreadfully sorry but you've another engagement they really believe it. The dear things think no other cause would make a woman refuse. But my aunt would interrogate me till I faltered and contradicted myself."

They left her later at one of those great mansions in the Boulevard Haussmann. The house was enlaced with scaffolding and workmen swarmed over its roof.

"It's old Miss Woodward's house," Monty explained. "She's worth millions and will probably leave it to Alice, who doesn't need any, because she's the only one of all her relatives who speaks the truth and doesn't fawn and flatter."

"It takes greater strength of mind than poor relations usually have, to tell rich relatives the truth," Steven reminded him.

Monty had evidently recovered his good spirits. "I knew you'd like her," he said later, "and I knew she'd take to you. We'll have a corking dinner and a jolly good time."

"There's one thing I want to ask of you," Denby said gravely. "Don't give any particulars about me. If she's the sort I think her she won't ask, but you've got a bad habit of wanting people to hear how I fished you out of the river. I want to slip into New York without any advertisement of the fact. I'm not the son of a plutocrat as you are. I'm the hard-up son of a man who was once rich but is now dead and forgotten."

"Do hard-up men hand a million francs across for a string of pearls to put in their tobacco-pouches?" Monty demanded shrewdly.

"You may regard that as an investment if you like," Denby answered. "It may be all my capital is tied up in it."

"You're gambling for a big stake then," Monty said seriously. "Is it worth it, old man?"

For a moment he had an idea of offering him a position in some of the great corporations in which his father was interested, but refrained. Steven Denby was not the kind of man to brook anything that smacked of patronage and he feared his offer might do that although otherwise meant.

"It means a whole lot more to me than you can think," Denby returned. "I have made up my mind to do it and I think I can get away with it in just the way I have mapped out." Then, with a smile: "Monty, I've a proper respect for your imaginative genius, but I'd bet you the necklace to the tobacco-pouch that you don't understand how much I want to get that string of pearls through the customs."

"The pouch is yours," Monty conceded generously. "How should I guess? How do I know who's a smuggler or who isn't? Alice says she always gets something through and for all I know may have a ruby taken from the eye of a Hindoo god in her back hair!"

He looked at his friend eagerly, a new thought striking him. He often surprised himself in romantic ideas, ideas for which Nora was responsible.

"Perhaps you are taking it for someone, someone you're fond of," he suggested.

"Why not?" Denby returned. "If I were really fond of any woman I'd risk more than that to please her."

Monty noticed that he banished the subject by speaking of Alice Harrington's *penchant* for smuggling.

"I hope Mrs. Harrington won't run any risks," he said. "In her case it is absolutely senseless and unnecessary."

"Oh, they'd never get after her," Monty declared. "She's too big. They get after the little fellows but they'd leave Mrs. Michael Harrington alone."

"Don't you believe it," his friend answered. "They're doing things differently now. They're getting a different class of men in the Collector's office."

"I suppose you'd like the old style better," Monty observed.

"Oh, I don't know," said the other. "It's more risky now and so one has to be cleverer. I've often heard it said the hounds have all the fun and the fox none."

"I'm not so sure of that, Monty; I think a fox that can fool thirty couple of hounds and get back to his earth ought to be a gladsome animal."

"I'll find out when we're in West Street, New York," Monty said grimly. "I'll take particular notice of how this fox acts and where the hounds are. If you harp on this any more I shall lose my appetite. What about Voisin's?"

"Eat lightly," Denby counseled him. "I'm going to treat you to a remarkable meal to-night; I know the chef at the Ambassadeurs, and the wine-steward feeds out of my hand."

"I don't see why you shouldn't buy necklaces like that if you have those Ambassadeurs waiters corralled. They soaked me six francs for a single peach once," Monty said reminiscently. But he wondered, all the same, how it was Steven should be able to fling money away as he chose.

His friend looked at him shrewdly. "You're thinking I ought to patronize the excellent Duval," he observed. "Well, sometimes I do. I think I've patronized most places in Paris once."

"Steve, you're a mystery," Monty asserted.

"I hope I am," said the other; "I make my living out of being just that."

They walked in silence to the Rue St. Honoré, Monty still a bit uneasy at being in a crowded place with a friend in whose pocket was a million francs' worth of precious stones. Once or twice as the pocket gaped open he caught a glimpse of the worn pigskin pouch. Steven was taking wholly unnecessary risks, he thought.

As they were leaving Voisin's together after their luncheon it happened that Monty walked behind his friend through the door. Deftly he inserted his hand into the gaping pocket and removed the pouch to his own. He chuckled to think of the object lesson he would presently dilate upon.

When they were near one of those convenient seats which Paris provides for her street-living populace Monty suggested a minute's rest.

With an elaborate gesture he took out the pouch and showed it to Denby.

"Did you ever see this before?" he demanded.

"I've got one just like it," his friend returned without undue interest. "Useful things, aren't they, and last so much longer than the rubber ones?"

"My pouch," said Monty, beginning to enjoy his own joke, "looks better inside than outside. I keep in it tobacco I grow in my private orchid house. Look!"

He pulled back the flap and held it out to Denby.

Denby gazed in it obediently with no change of countenance.

"You're not a heavy smoker, are you?" he returned.

Instantly Monty gazed into it. It was empty except for a shred of tobacco.

"Good God!" he cried. "They've been stolen from me and they put the pouch back!"

"What has?" the other exclaimed.

"The pearls," Monty groaned. "I took them for a joke, and now they're gone!"

He looked apprehensively at Steven, meditating meanwhile how quickly he could turn certain scrip he held into ready money.

Steven evinced no surprise. Instead he rose from his seat and placed a foot upon it as though engaged in tying a lace. But he pointed to the cuff on the bottom of the trouser leg that was on the seat by Monty's side. And Monty, gazing as he was bid, saw his friend's slender fingers pick therefrom a string of pearls.

"I know no safer place," Denby commented judicially. "Of course the customs fellows are on to it, but no pickpocket who ever lived can get anything away from you if you cache it there. On board ship I shall carry it in my pocket, but this is the best place in Paris when one is in strange company."

Monty said no word. His relief was too great and he felt weak and helpless.

"What's the matter?" Denby demanded.

"I want a drink," Monty returned, "but it isn't on you."

CHAPTER THREE

THERE are still restaurants in Paris where a well chosen dinner delights the chef who is called upon to cook it and the waiters who serve. And although it is true that most of the diners of to-day know little of that art which is now disappearing, it happened that Steven Denby was one who delighted the heart of the Ambassadeurs' chef.

Monty was a happy soul who had never been compelled to consult his pocketbook in a choice of restaurants, and Mrs. Michael Harrington was married to a gourmand who well distinguished the difference between that and the indefensible fault of gluttony. Thus both of Denby's guests were in a sense critical. They admitted that they had dined with one who agreed with Dumas' dictum that a dinner is a daily and capital action that can only worthily be accomplished by *gens d'esprit*.

There are few places in Paris where a dinner in summer can be more pleasantly eaten than the balcony at the Ambassadeurs, among slim pillars of palest green and banks of pink roses. In the distance – not too near to be disturbed by the performers unless they chose – the three Americans saw that idol of the place, the great Polin at his best. French waiters do not bring courses on quickly with the idea of using the table a second time during the dining-hour. The financial genius who calculates *l'addition* knows a trick worth two of that.

Still a little anxious that Denby might not be able to stand the expense, Monty fell to thinking of the charges that Parisian restaurateurs can make. "They soaked me six francs for a peach here once," he said for the second time that day.

"That's nothing to what Bignon used to charge," Alice Harrington returned. "Once when Michael's father was dining there he was charged fifteen francs. When he said they must be very scarce in Paris, Bignon said it wasn't the peaches that were scarce, it was the Harringtons."

"Good old Michael," said Monty, "I wish he were here. Why isn't he?"

"Something is being reorganized and the other people want his advice." She laughed. "I suppose he is really good at that sort of thing, but he gets so hopelessly muddled over small accounts that I can't believe it. He was fearfully sorry not to have seen his colt run at Deauville. I shall have to tell him all about it."

"I read the account," said Denby. "St. Mervyn was the name, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "He won by a short head. Michael always likes to beat French horses. I'm afraid he isn't as fond of the country as I am. The only thing he really likes here is the *heure de l'aperitif*. He declares it lasts from four-thirty till seven." She laughed. "He has carried the habit home with him."

"Did you win anything?" Denby asked.

"Enough to buy some presents at Cartier's," she returned. "I've bought something very sweet for Nora Rutledge," she said, turning to Monty. "Aren't you curious to know what? It's a pearl la vallièrè."

"Then for Heaven's sake, declare it!" Monty cried.

"Oh, no," she said, "I'll pay if it's found, but it's a sporting risk to take and you can't make me believe smuggling's wrong. Michael says it's a Democratic device to rob Republican women."

"Ask Mr. Denby," Monty retorted. "He knows."

"And what do you know, Mr. Denby?" she demanded.

"That the customs people and the state department see no humor in that sort of a joke any longer. You read surely that society women even have been imprisoned for taking sporting risks?"

"Milliners who make a practice of getting things through on their annual trip," she said lightly. "Of course one wouldn't make a business of it, but I've always smuggled little things through and I always shall."

"Well, I wouldn't if I were you," said Monty. "Mr. Denby has frightened me."

Alice Harrington looked at him curiously.

"Have you been caught?" she asked with a smile.

"I've seen others caught," he returned, "and if any sister of mine had to suffer as they did by the publicity and the investigation the customs people are empowered and required to make, I should feel rather uncomfortable."

"What a depressing person you are," she laughed. "I had already decided where to hide the things. I think I shall do it after all. It's been all right before, so why not now?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It may be the new brooms are sweeping clean or it may be the state department has said smuggling shall no longer be condoned. I only know that things are done very differently now."

Monty looked at him in amazement. His expression plainly meant that he considered his friend the proprietor of an unusually large supply of sheer gall.

"I heard about that," she said, "but one can't believe it. There's a mythical being known only by his initials who is investigating for the state department. Even Michael warned me, so he may have some inside tip. Have you heard of him, Mr. Denby?"

"I was thinking of him," he answered. "I think they call him R. B. or R. D. or some non-committal thing like that."

"And you believe in him?" she asked sceptically.

"I'm afraid I do," he returned.

"The deuce you do!" Monty cried, aggrieved. He had been happy for the last few hours in the belief that his friend was too well armed to get detected, and here he was admitting, in a manner that plainly showed apprehension, that this initialed power might be even on his track.

"You never smuggle," Alice Harrington said, smiling. "You haven't the nerve, Monty, so you need not take it to heart."

"But I do nevertheless," he retorted.

"Monty," she cried, "I believe you're planning to smuggle something yourself! We'll conspire together and defeat that abominable law."

"If you must," Denby said, still gravely, "don't advertise the fact. Paris has many spies who reap the reward of overhearing just such confidences."

"Spies!" She laughed. "How melodramatic, Mr. Denby."

"But I mean it," he insisted. "Not highly paid government agents, but perhaps such people as chambermaids in your hotel, or servants to whom you pay no attention whatsoever. How do you and I know for example that Monty isn't high up in the secret service?"

"Me?" cried Monty. "Well, I certainly admire your brand of nerve, Steve!"

"That's no answer," his friend returned. "You say you have been two years here studying Continental banking systems. I'll bet you didn't even know that the Banque de France issued a ten thousand franc note!"

"Of course I did," Monty cried, a little nettled.

Denby turned to Mrs. Harrington with an air of triumph.

"That settles it, Monty is a spy."

"I don't see how that proves it," she answered.

"The Banque de France has no ten thousand franc note," he returned; "its highest value is five thousand francs. In two years Montague Vaughan has not found that out. The ordinary tourist who passes a week here and spends nothing to speak of might be excused, but not a serious student like Monty."

"I will vouch for him," Mrs. Harrington said. "I've known him for years and I don't think it's a life suited to him at all, is it, Monty?"

"Oh, I don't know," said he airily. "I may be leading a double life." He looked at her not without an expression of triumph. Little did she know in what a conspiracy he was already enlisted. After an excellent repast and a judicious indulgence in some rare wine Monty felt he was extraordinarily well

fitted for delicate intrigue, preferably of an international character. He stroked his budding moustache with the air of a gentleman adventurer.

Alice Harrington smiled. She was a good judge of character and Monty was too well known to her to lend color to any such notion.

"It won't do," she averred, "but Mr. Denby has every earmark of it. There's that piercing look of his and the obsequious way waiters attend on him."

Monty laughed heartily. He was in possession of a secret that made such an idea wholly preposterous. Here was a man with a million-franc pearl necklace in his pocket, a treasure he calmly proposed to smuggle in against the laws of his country, being taken for a spy.

"Alice," he said still laughing, "I'll go bail on Steve for any amount you care to name. I am also willing to back him against all comers for brazen nerve and sheer gall."

Denby interrupted him a little hastily.

"As we two men are free from suspicion, only Mrs. Harrington remains uncleared."

"This is all crazy talk," Monty asserted.

"I know one woman, well known in New York, who goes over each year and more than once has made her expenses by tipping off the authorities to things other women were trying to get through without declaration."

"You speak with feeling," Mrs. Harrington said, and wondered if this friend of Monty's had not been betrayed by some such confidence.

"Are you going to take warning?" Denby asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. You've been reading the American papers and are deceived by the annual warnings to intending European tourists. I'm a hardened and successful criminal." She leaned forward to look at a dancer on the stage below them and Denby knew that his monitions had left her unmoved.

"When were you last at home?" she demanded presently of Denby.

"About six months ago," he answered. "I shall be there a week from to-morrow if I live."

The last three words vaguely disturbed Monty. Why, he wondered crossly, was Denby always reminding him of danger? There was no doubt that what his friend really should have said was: "If I am not murdered by criminals for the two hundred thousand dollars' worth of valuables they probably know I carry with me."

"Have you booked your passage yet?" she asked.

It occurred to her that it would be pleasant to have a second man on the voyage. Like all women of her world, she was used to the attentions of men and found life deplorably dull without them, although she was not a flirt and was still in love with her husband.

"Not yet," he answered, "but La Provence goes from Havre to-morrow."

"Come with us," she insisted. "The Mauretania sails a couple of days later but gets you in on the same morning as the other." She turned to Monty. "Isn't that a brilliant idea?"

"It's so brilliant I'm blinded by it," he retorted, gazing at his friend with a look of respect. Not many hours ago Steven had asserted that he and Monty must sail together on the fastest of ships, and now he had apparently decided to forsake the Compagnie Transatlantique only on account of Alice Harrington's invitation.

"I shall be charmed," was all he had said.

Monty felt that he was a co-conspirator of one who was not likely to be upset by trifles. He sighed. A day or so ago he had imagined himself ill-used by Fate because no unusual excitement had come his way, and now his prayers had been answered too abundantly. The phrase "If I live" remained in his memory with unpleasant insistency.

"We ought to cross the Channel by the afternoon boat to-morrow," Alice said. "There are one or two things I want to get for Michael in London."

"It will be a much nicer voyage for me than if I had gone alone on La Provence," Denby said gratefully, while Monty continued to meditate on the duplicity of his sex.

When they had taken Mrs. Harrington to her hotel Monty burst out with what he had been compelled to keep secret all the evening.

"What in thunder makes you so careful about people smuggling?" he demanded.

"About other people smuggling, you mean," Denby corrected.

"It's the same thing," Monty asserted.

"Far from it," his friend made answer. "If Mrs. Harrington is suspected and undeclared stuff found on her, you and I as her companions will be more or less under suspicion too. It is not unusual for women to ask their men friends to put some little package in their pockets till the customs have been passed. The inspectors may have an idea that she has done this with us. Personally I don't relish a very exhaustive search."

"You bet you don't," his friend returned. "I shall probably be the only honest man aboard."

"Mrs. Harrington may ask you to hold some small parcel till she's been through the ordeal," Denby reminded him. "If she does, Monty, you'll be caught for a certainty."

"Damn it all!" Monty cried petulantly, "why can't you people do the right thing and declare what you bring in, just as I do?"

"What is your income?" Denby inquired. "Your father was always liberal with you."

"You mean I have no temptation?" Monty answered. "I forgot that part of it. I don't know what I'd do if there wasn't always a convenient paying teller who passed me out all the currency I wanted."

He looked at his friend curiously, wondering just what this act of smuggling meant to him. Perhaps Denby sensed this.

"You probably wondered why I wrung that invitation out of Mrs. Harrington instead of being honest and saying I, too, was going by the Cunard line. I can't tell you now, Monty, old man, but I hope some day if I'm successful that I can. I tell you this much, though, that it seems so much to me that no little conventionalities are going to stand in my way."

Monty, pondering on this later when he was in his hotel room, called to mind the rumor he had heard years ago that Steven's father had died deeply in debt. It was for this reason that the boy was suddenly withdrawn from Groton. It might be that his struggles to make a living had driven him into regarding the laws against smuggling as arbitrary and inequitable just as Alice Harrington and dozens of other people he knew did. Denby, he argued, had paid good money for the pearls and they belonged to him absolutely; and if by his skill he could evade the payment of duty upon them and sell them at a profit, why shouldn't he? Before slumber sealed his eyes, Montague Vaughan had decided that smuggling was as legitimate a sport as fly-fishing. That these views would shock his father he knew. But his father always prided himself upon a traditional conservatism.

CHAPTER FOUR

LESS than an hour before the Mauretania reached Quarantine, James Duncan, whose rank was that of Customs Inspector and present assignment the more important one of assistant to Daniel Taylor, a Deputy-Surveyor, threw away the stub of cigar and reached for the telephone.

When central had given him his number he called out: "Is that you, Ford?" Apparently the central had not erred and his face took on a look of intentness as he gave the man at the other end of the line his instructions. "Say, Ford," he called, "I've got something mighty important for you. Directly the Mauretania gets into Quarantine, go through the declarations and 'phone me right away whether a man named Steven Denby declares a pearl necklace valued at two hundred thousand dollars. No. No, not that name, Denby, D-E-N-B-Y. Steven Denby. That's right. A big case you say? I should bet it is a big case. Never you mind who's handling it, Ford. It may be R. J., or it may not. Don't you worry about a little thing like that. It's your job to 'phone me as soon as you get a peek at those declarations. Let Hammett work with you. Bye-bye."

He hung up the receiver and leaned back in his chair, well satisfied with himself. He was a spare, hatchet-faced man, who held down his present position because he was used to those storm warnings he could see on his chief's face and knew enough to work in the dark and never ask for explanations.

He did not, for instance, lean back in his chair and smoke cigars with a lordly air when Deputy-Surveyor Daniel Taylor was sitting in his big desk in the window opposite. At such times Duncan worked with silent fury and felt he had evened up matters when he found a Customs Inspector whom he could impress with his own superiority.

When a step in the outside passage warned him that his chief might possibly be coming in, he settled down in an attitude of work. But there entered only Harry Gibbs, dressed in the uniform of a Customs Inspector. Gibbs was a fat, easy man, whose existence was all the more pleasant because of his eager interest in gossip. None knew so well as Gibbs the undercurrent of speculation which the lesser lights of the Customs term office politics. If the Collector frowned, Gibbs instantly dismissed the men upon whom his displeasure had fallen and conjured up erroneous reasons concerning high official wrath. Since Duncan was near to a man in power, Gibbs welcomed any opportunity to converse with him. He seldom came away from such an interview empty-handed. He was a pleasant enough creature and filled with mild wonder at the vagaries of Providence.

Just now he seemed hot but that was not unusual, for he was rarely comfortable during the summer months as he complained frequently. He seemed worried, Duncan thought.

"Hello, Jim," he said when he entered.

Duncan assumed the inquisitorial air his chief had in a marked degree.

"Thought you were searching tourists on the Olympic this afternoon," he replied.

Gibbs mopped his perspiring head, "I was," he answered. "I had two thousand crazy women, all of 'em swearing they hadn't brought in a thing. Gosh! Women is liars."

"What are you doing over here?" Duncan asked.

"I brought along a dame they want your boss Taylor to look over. It needs a smart guy like him to land her. Where is he?"

"Down with Malone now; he'll be back soon."

Gibbs sank into a chair with a sigh of relief. "He don't have to hurry on my account. I'll be tickled to stay here all day. I'm sick of searching trunks that's got nothing in 'em but clothes. It ain't like the good old days, Jim. In them times if you treated a tourist right he'd hand you his business card, and when you showed up in his office next day, he'd come across without a squeal. I used to know the down-town business section pretty well in them days."

“So did I. Why, when I was inspector, if you had any luck picking out your passenger you’d find twenty dollars lying right on the top tray of the first trunk he opened up for you.”

Gibbs sighed again. It seemed the golden age was passing.

“And believe me,” he said, “when that happened to me I never opened any more of his trunks, I just labeled the whole bunch. But now – why, since this new administration got in I’m so honest it’s pitiful.”

Duncan nodded acquiescence.

“It’s a hell of a thing when a government official has to live on his salary,” he said regretfully. “They didn’t ought to expect it of us.”

“What do they care?” Gibbs asserted bitterly, and then added with that inquiring air which had frequently been mistaken for intelligence: “Ain’t it funny that it’s always women who smuggle? They’ll look you right in the eye and lie like the very devil, and if you do land ’em they ain’t ashamed, only sore!”

Duncan assumed his most superior air.

“I guess men are honester than women, Jim, and that’s the whole secret.”

“They certainly are about smuggling,” the other returned. “Why, we grabbed one of these here rich society women this morning and pulled out about forty yards of old lace – and say, where do you think she had it stowed?”

“Sewed it round her petticoat,” Duncan said with a grin. He had had experience.

Gibbs shook his head, “No. It was in a hot-water bottle. That was a new one on me. Well, when we pinched her she just turned on me as cool as you please: ‘You’ve got me now, but damn you, I’ve fooled you lots of times before!’”

Gibbs leaned back in enjoyment of his own imitation of the society lady’s voice and watched Duncan looking over some declaration papers. Duncan looked up with a smile. “Say, here’s another new one. Declaration from a college professor who paid duty on spending seventy-five francs to have his shoes half-soled in Paris.”

But Gibbs was not to be outdone.

“That’s nothing,” said he, “a gink this morning declared a gold tooth. I didn’t know how to classify it so I just told him nobody’d know if he’d keep his mouth shut. It was a back tooth. He did slip me a cigar, but women who are smugglin’ seem to think it ain’t honest to give an inspector any kind of tip.” Gibbs dived into an inner pocket and brought out a bunch of aigrettes. “The most I can do now is these aigrettes. I nipped ’em off of a lady coming down the gangplank of the Olympic. They ain’t bad, Jim.”

Duncan rose from his chair and came over to Gibbs’ side and took the plume from his hand.

“Can’t you guys ever get out of the habit of grafting?” he demanded. “Queer,” he continued, looking at the delicate feathers closely, “how some soft, timid little bit of a woman is willing to wear things like that. Do you know where they come from?”

“From some factory, I s’pose,” Gibbs answered with an air of candor.

“No they don’t,” Duncan told him. “They take ’em from the mother bird just when she’s had her young ones; they leave her half dead with the little ones starving. Pretty tough, I call it, on dumb animals,” he concluded, with so sentimental a tone as to leave poor Gibbs amazed. He was still more amazed when his fellow inspector put them in his own pocket and went back to his desk.

“Say, Jim,” Gibbs expostulated, “what are you doing with them?”

“Why, my wife was asking this morning if I couldn’t get her a bunch. These’ll come in just right.”

“You’re a funny guy to talk about grafting,” Gibbs grumbled, “I ain’t showing you nothin’ more.”

“Never you mind me,” Duncan commanded. “You keep your own eyes peeled. Old man Taylor’s been raising the deuce around here about reports that some of you fellows still take tips.”

Gibbs had heard such rumors too often for them to affect him now. "Oh, it's just the usual August holler," he declared.

Duncan contradicted him, "No, it isn't," he observed. "It's because the Collector and the Secretary of the Treasury have started an investigation about who's getting the rake-off for allowing stuff to slip through. I heard the Secretary was coming over here to-day. You keep your eyes peeled, Harry."

"If times don't change," Gibbs said with an air of gloom, "I'm going into the police department."

He turned about to see if the steps he heard at the door were those of the man he had come to see. He breathed relief when he saw it was only Peter, the doorkeeper.

"Mr. Duncan," said the man, "Miss Ethel Cartwright has just 'phoned that she's on her way and would be here in fifteen minutes."

Gibbs looked from one to the other with his accustomed mild interest. He could see that the news of which he could make little had excited Duncan. It was evidently something important. Directly the doorkeeper had gone Duncan called his chief on the telephone and Gibbs sauntered nearer the 'phone. To hear both sides of the conversation would make it much easier.

"Got a cigar, Jim?" he inquired casually of the other, who was holding the wire.

"Yes," said Duncan, taking one from his pocket.

Gibbs reached a fat hand over for it, "Thanks," he returned simply.

Duncan bit the end off and put it in his own mouth. "And I'm going to smoke it myself," he observed.

Gibbs shook his head reprovingly at this want of generosity and took a cigar from his own pocket. "All right then; I'll have to smoke one of my own."

Just then Duncan began to speak over the wire. "Hello. Hello, Chief. Miss Ethel Cartwright just 'phoned she'd be here in fifteen minutes... Yes, sir... I'll have her wait."

When he had rung off, Gibbs could see his interest was increasing. "What do you think of her falling for a bum stall like that?"

"Who?" Gibbs demanded. "Which? What stall?"

"Why, Miss Cartwright!" said Duncan. "Ain't I talking about her?"

"Well, who is she?" the aggrieved Gibbs cried. "Is she a smuggler?"

"No. She's a swell society girl," said Duncan in a superior manner.

"If she ain't a smuggler, what's she here for then?" Gibbs had a gentle pertinacity in sticking to his point.

"The Chief wants to use her in the Denby case, so he had me write her a letter saying we'd received a package from Paris containing dutiable goods, a diamond ring, and would she kindly call this afternoon and straighten out the matter." Duncan now assumed an air of triumph. "And she fell for a fake like that!"

"I get you," said Gibbs. "But what does he want her for?"

"I told you, the Denby case."

"What's that?" Gibbs entreated.

Duncan lowered his voice. "The biggest smuggling job Taylor ever handled."

"You don't say so," Gibbs returned, duly impressed. "Why, nobody's told me anything about it."

"Can you keep your mouth shut?" Duncan inquired mysteriously.

"Sure," Gibbs declared. "I ain't married."

"Then just take a peek out of the door, will you?" Duncan directed.

The other did as he was bid. "It's all right," he declared, finding the corridor empty.

"I never know when he may stop out there and listen to what I'm saying. You can hear pretty plain."

"He is the original pussy-foot, ain't he," Gibbs returned. He had known of Taylor's reputation for finding out what was going on in his office by any method. "Now, what's it all about?"

Duncan grew very confidential.

"Last week the Chief got a cable from Harlow, a salesman in Cartier's."

"What's Cartier's?" Gibbs inquired.

"The biggest jewelry shop in Paris. Harlow's our secret agent there. His cable said that an American named Steven Denby had bought a pearl necklace there for a million francs. That's two hundred thousand dollars."

"Gee!" Gibbs cried, duly impressed by such a sum, "But who's Steven Denby? Some new millionaire? I never heard of him."

"Neither did I," Duncan told him; "and we can't find out anything about him and that's what makes us so suspicious. You ought to be able to get some dope on a man who can fling two hundred thousand dollars away on a string of pearls."

Gibbs' professional interest was aroused. "Did he slip it by the Customs, then?"

"He hasn't landed yet," Duncan answered. "He's on the Mauretania."

"Why, she's about due," Gibbs cried.

"I know," Duncan retorted, "I've just had Ford on the 'phone about it. This fellow Denby is traveling with Montague Vaughan – son of the big banker – and Mrs. Michael Harrington."

"You mean *the* Mrs. Michael Harrington?" Gibbs demanded eagerly.

"Sure," Duncan exclaimed, "there's only one."

Gibbs was plainly disappointed at this ending to the story.

"If he's a friend of Mrs. Harrington and young Vaughan, he ain't no smuggler. He'll declare the necklace."

"The Chief has a hunch he won't," Duncan said. "He thinks this Denby is some slick confidence guy who has wormed his way into the Harringtons' confidence so he won't be suspected."

Gibbs considered the situation for a moment.

"Maybe he ain't traveling with the party at all but just picked 'em up on the boat."

Duncan shook his head. "No, he's a friend all right. She's taking him down to the Harrington place at Westbury direct from the dock. One of the stewards on the Mauretania is our agent and he sent us a copy of her wireless to old man Harrington."

"He sounds to me like a sort of smart-set Raffles," Gibbs asserted.

"You've got it right," Duncan said approvingly.

"What's Taylor going to do?" Gibbs asked next.

"He's kind of up against it," Duncan returned. "I don't know what he'll do yet. If Denby's on the level and we pinch him and search him and don't find anything, think of the roar that Michael Harrington – and he's worth about ninety billion – will put up at Washington because we frisked one of his pals. Why, he'd go down there and kick to his swell friends and we'd all be fired."

"I ain't in on it," Gibbs said firmly; "they've no cause to fire me. But how does this Miss Cartwright come in on the job?"

"I don't know except that she is going down to the Harringtons' this afternoon and Taylor's got some scheme on hand. I tell you he's a pretty smart boy."

"You bet he is," Gibbs returned promptly, "and may be he's smarter than you know. Ever hear of R. J.?"

"R. J.?" Duncan repeated. "You mean that secret service agent?"

"Yes," Gibbs told him with an air of one knowing secret things. "They say he's a pal of the President's."

"Well, what's that to do with this?" Duncan wanted to know.

"Don't you know who he is?"

"No," Duncan retorted, "and neither does anyone else. Nobody but the President and the Secretary of the Treasury knows who he really is."

Gibbs rose from his chair and patted his chest proudly. "Well, I know, too," he declared.

Duncan laughed contemptuously. "Yes, you do, just the same as I do – that he's the biggest man in the secret service, and that's all you know."

Gibbs smiled complacently. "Ain't it funny," he observed, "that you right here in the office don't know?"

"Don't know what?" Duncan retorted sharply; he disliked Gibbs in a patronizing rôle.

"That your boss Taylor is R. J."

"Taylor!" Duncan cried. "You're crazy! The heat's got you, Harry."

"Oh, indeed!" Gibbs said sarcastically. "Do you remember the Stuyvesant case?"

Duncan nodded.

"And do you remember that when Taylor took his vacation last year R. J. did some great work in the Crosby case? Put two and two together, Jim, and may be you'll see daylight."

"By George!" Duncan exclaimed, now impressed by Gibbs' news. "I believe you're right. Taylor never will speak about this R. J., now I come to think of it." He raised his head as the sound of voices was heard in the passage.

"There he is," Duncan whispered busying himself with a sheaf of declarations.

Gibbs looked toward the opening door nervously. It was one thing to criticize the deputy-surveyor in his absence and another to meet his look and endure his satire. His collar seemed suddenly too small, and he chewed his cigar violently.

CHAPTER FIVE

DANIEL TAYLOR entered quickly without acknowledging the presence of his inferiors and crossed to his desk by the window. He was a man above medium height, broad of shoulder, thick through the chest and giving the idea of one who was alert and aggressive mentally and physically. Those in the service who had set themselves against him had been broken. His path had been strewn with other men's regrets; but Taylor climbed steadily, never caring for what was below, but grasping eagerly for power.

Naturally a man of his type must have had other qualities than mere aggressiveness to aid him in such vigorous competition. He had commended himself to the powers above him for snap judgment and quick action. And although men of his temperament must inevitably make mistakes, it was notorious that Taylor made fewer than his rivals.

Toward men like Duncan and Gibbs who were not destined to rise, men who could be replaced without trouble, Taylor paid small heed. They did what he told them and if they failed he never forgot. It was to the men above him that Taylor showed what small social gifts nature had given him. He had sworn to rise in the service and he cultivated only those who might aid him.

After glancing over the papers arranged on his desk he called to Duncan: "Has Miss Cartwright been here yet?"

"No, sir," Duncan responded promptly.

His superior pushed the buzzer on his desk and then looked across at the uncomfortable Gibbs. "Want to see me?" he snapped.

"Yes, sir," Gibbs made answer as Peter the doorkeeper entered in answer to Taylor's summons.

"Then wait outside," Taylor said, "I'll see you in five minutes."

"Yes, sir," Gibbs said obediently and made his exit.

The deputy-surveyor turned toward the attendant. "Peter, let me know the instant Miss Cartwright arrives. Don't forget; it's important. That's all."

He dismissed Peter with a nod and then called to Duncan.

"Did Bronson of the New York Burglar Insurance Company send over some papers to me relating to the theft of Miss Cartwright's jewels?"

Duncan took a long envelope and laid it on his chief's desk. "Here they are, sir."

Taylor looked at the documents eagerly. "By George!" he cried, when he had looked into them, "I knew I was right. I knew there was something queer about the way her diamonds were stolen."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.