

Anstey F.

The Brass Bottle



F. Anstey

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CHAPTER I

HORACE VENTIMORE RECEIVES A COMMISSION

"This day six weeks – just six weeks ago!" Horace Ventimore said, half aloud, to himself, and pulled out his watch. "Half-past twelve – what was I doing at half-past twelve?"

As he sat at the window of his office in Great Cloister Street, Westminster, he made his thoughts travel back to a certain glorious morning in August which now seemed so remote and irrecoverable. At this precise time he was waiting on the balcony of the Hôtel de la Plage – the sole hostelry of St. Luc-en-Port, the tiny Normandy watering-place upon which, by some happy inspiration, he had lighted during a solitary cycling tour – waiting until She should appear.

He could see the whole scene: the tiny cove, with the violet shadow of the cliff sleeping on the green water; the swell of the waves lazily lapping against the diving-board from which he had plunged half an hour before; he remembered the long swim out to the buoy; the exhilarated anticipation with which he had dressed and climbed the steep path to the hotel terrace.

For was he not to pass the whole remainder of that blissful day in Sylvia Futvoye's society? Were they not to cycle together (there were, of course, others of the party – but they did not count), to cycle over to Veulettes, to picnic there under the cliff, and ride back – always together – in the sweet-scented dusk, over the slopes, between the poplars or the cornfields glowing golden against a sky of warm purple?

Now he saw himself going round to the gravelled courtyard in front of the hotel with a sudden dread of missing her. There was nothing there but the little low cart, with its canvas tilt which was to convey Professor Futvoye and his wife to the place of *rendezvous*.

There was Sylvia at last, distractingly fair and fresh in her cool pink blouse and cream-coloured skirt; how gracious and friendly and generally delightful she had been throughout that unforgettable day, which was supreme amongst others only a little less perfect, and all now fled for ever!

They had had drawbacks, it was true. Old Futvoye was perhaps the least bit of a bore at times, with his interminable disquisitions on Egyptian art and ancient Oriental character-writing, in which he seemed convinced that Horace must feel a fervid interest, as, indeed, he thought it politic to affect. The Professor was a most learned archæologist, and positively bulged with information on his favourite subjects; but it is just possible that Horace might have been less curious concerning the distinction between Cuneiform and Aramæan or Kufic and Arabic inscriptions if his informant had happened to be the father of anybody else. However, such insincerities as these are but so many evidences of sincerity.

So with self-tormenting ingenuity Horace conjured up various pictures from that Norman holiday of his: the little half-timbered cottages with their faded blue shutters and the rushes growing out of their thatch roofs; the spires of village churches gleaming above the bronze-green beeches; the bold headlands, their ochre and yellow cliffs contrasting grimly with the soft ridges of the turf above them; the tethered black-and-white cattle grazing peacefully against a background of lapis lazuli and malachite sea, and in every scene the sensation of Sylvia's near presence, the sound of her voice in his ears. And now?.. He looked up from the papers and tracing-cloth on his desk, and round the small panelled room which served him as an office, at the framed plans and photographs, the set squares and T squares on the walls, and felt a dull resentment against his surroundings. From his

window he commanded a cheerful view of a tall, mouldering wall, once part of the Abbey boundaries, surmounted by *chevaux-de-frise*, above whose rust-attenuated spikes some plane trees stretched their yellowing branches.

"She would have come to care for me," Horace's thoughts ran on, disjointedly. "I could have sworn that that last day of all – and her people didn't seem to object to me. Her mother asked me cordially enough to call on them when they were back in town. When I did – "

When he had called, there had been a difference – not an unusual sequel to an acquaintanceship begun in a Continental watering-place. It was difficult to define, but unmistakable – a certain formality and constraint on Mrs. Futvoye's part, and even on Sylvia's, which seemed intended to warn him that it is not every friendship that survives the Channel passage. So he had gone away sore at heart, but fully recognising that any advances in future must come from their side. They might ask him to dinner, or at least to call again; but more than a month had passed, and they had made no sign. No, it was all over; he must consider himself dropped.

"After all," he told himself, with a short and anything but mirthful laugh, "it's natural enough. Mrs. Futvoye has probably been making inquiries about my professional prospects. It's better as it is. What earthly chance have I got of marrying unless I can get work of my own? It's all I can do to keep myself decently. I've no right to dream of asking any one – to say nothing of Sylvia – to marry me. I should only be rushing into temptation if I saw any more of her. She's not for a poor beggar like me, who was born unlucky. Well, whining won't do any good – let's have a look at Beevor's latest performance."

He spread out a large coloured plan, in a corner of which appeared the name of "William Beevor, Architect," and began to study it in a spirit of anything but appreciation.

"Beevor gets on," he said to himself. "Heaven knows that I don't grudge him his success. He's a good fellow – though he *does* build architectural atrocities, and seem to like 'em. Who am I to give myself airs? He's successful – I'm not. Yet if I only had his opportunities, what wouldn't I make of them!"

Let it be said here that this was not the ordinary self-delusion of an incompetent. Ventimore really had talent above the average, with ideals and ambitions which might under better conditions have attained recognition and fulfilment before this.

But he was not quite energetic enough, besides being too proud, to push himself into notice, and hitherto he had met with persistent ill-luck.

So Horace had no other occupation now but to give Beevor, whose offices and clerk he shared, such slight assistance as he might require, and it was by no means cheering to feel that every year of this enforced semi-idleness left him further handicapped in the race for wealth and fame, for he had already passed his twenty-eighth birthday.

If Miss Sylvia Futvoye had indeed felt attracted towards him at one time it was not altogether incomprehensible. Horace Ventimore was not a model of manly beauty – models of manly beauty are rare out of novels, and seldom interesting in them; but his clear-cut, clean-shaven face possessed a certain distinction, and if there were faint satirical lines about the mouth, they were redeemed by the expression of the grey-blue eyes, which were remarkably frank and pleasant. He was well made, and tall enough to escape all danger of being described as short; fair-haired and pale, without being unhealthily pallid, in complexion, and he gave the impression of being a man who took life as it came, and whose sense of humour would serve as a lining for most clouds that might darken his horizon.

There was a rap at the door which communicated with Beevor's office, and Beevor himself, a florid, thick-set man, with small side-whiskers, burst in.

"I say, Ventimore, you didn't run off with the plans for that house I'm building at Larchmere, did you? Because – ah, I see you're looking over them. Sorry to deprive you, but – "

"Thanks, old fellow, take them, by all means. I've seen all I wanted to see."

"Well, I'm just off to Larchmere now. Want to be there to check the quantities, and there's my other house at Fittlesdon. I must go on afterwards and set it out, so I shall probably be away some days. I'm taking Harrison down, too. You won't be wanting him, eh?"

Ventimore laughed. "I can manage to do nothing without a clerk to help me. Your necessity is greater than mine. Here are the plans."

"I'm rather pleased with 'em myself, you know," said Beevor; "that roof ought to look well, eh? Good idea of mine lightening the slate with that ornamental tile-work along the top. You saw I put in one of your windows with just a trifling addition. I was almost inclined to keep both gables alike, as you suggested, but it struck me a little variety – one red brick and the other 'parged' – would be more out-of-the-way."

"Oh, much," agreed Ventimore, knowing that to disagree was useless.

"Not, mind you," continued Beevor, "that I believe in going in for too much originality in domestic architecture. The average client no more wants an original house than he wants an original hat; he wants something he won't feel a fool in. I've often thought, old man, that perhaps the reason why you haven't got on – you don't mind my speaking candidly, do you?"

"Not a bit," said Ventimore, cheerfully. "Candour's the cement of friendship. Dab it on."

"Well, I was only going to say that you do yourself no good by all those confoundedly unconventional ideas of yours. If you had your chance to-morrow, it's my belief you'd throw it away by insisting on some fantastic fad or other."

"These speculations are a trifle premature, considering that there doesn't seem the remotest prospect of my ever getting a chance at all."

"I got mine before I'd set up six months," said Beevor. "The great thing, however," he went on, with a flavour of personal application, "is to know how to use it when it *does* come. Well, I must be off if I mean to catch that one o'clock from Waterloo. You'll see to anything that may come in for me while I'm away, won't you, and let me know? Oh, by the way, the quantity surveyor has just sent in the quantities for that schoolroom at Woodford – do you mind running through them and seeing they're right? And there's the specification for the new wing at Tusculum Lodge – you might draft that some time when you've nothing else to do. You'll find all the papers on my desk. Thanks awfully, old chap."

And Beevor hurried back to his own room, where for the next few minutes he could be heard bustling Harrison, the clerk, to make haste; then a hansom was whistled for, there were footsteps down the old stairs, the sounds of a departing vehicle on the uneven stones, and after that silence and solitude.

It was not in Nature to avoid feeling a little envious. Beevor had work to do in the world: even if it chiefly consisted in profaning sylvan retreats by smug or pretentious villas, it was still work which entitled him to consideration and respect in the eyes of all right-minded persons.

And nobody believed in Horace; as yet he had never known the satisfaction of seeing the work of his brain realised in stone and brick and mortar; no building stood anywhere to bear testimony to his existence and capability long after he himself should have passed away.

It was not a profitable train of thought, and, to escape from it, he went into Beevor's room and fetched the documents he had mentioned – at least they would keep him occupied until it was time to go to his club and lunch. He had no sooner settled down to his calculations, however, when he heard a shuffling step on the landing, followed by a knock at Beevor's office-door. "More work for Beevor," he thought; "what luck the fellow has! I'd better go in and explain that he's just left town on business."

But on entering the adjoining room he heard the knocking repeated – this time at his own door; and hastening back to put an end to this somewhat undignified form of hide-and-seek, he discovered that this visitor at least was legitimately his, and was, in fact, no other than Professor Anthony Futvoye himself.

The Professor was standing in the doorway peering short-sightedly through his convex glasses, his head protruded from his loosely-fitting great-coat with an irresistible suggestion of an inquiring

tortoise. To Horace his appearance was more welcome than that of the wealthiest client – for why should Sylvia's father take the trouble to pay him this visit unless he still wished to continue the acquaintanceship? It might even be that he was the bearer of some message or invitation.

So, although to an impartial eye the Professor might not seem the kind of elderly gentleman whose society would produce any wild degree of exhilaration, Horace was unfeignedly delighted to see him.

"Extremely kind of you to come and see me like this, sir," he said warmly, after establishing him in the solitary armchair reserved for hypothetical clients.

"Not at all. I'm afraid your visit to Cottessmore Gardens some time ago was somewhat of a disappointment."

"A disappointment?" echoed Horace, at a loss to know what was coming next.

"I refer to the fact – which possibly, however, escaped your notice" – explained the Professor, scratching his scanty patch of grizzled whisker with a touch of irascibility, "that I myself was not at home on that occasion."

"Indeed, I was greatly disappointed," said Horace, "though of course I know how much you are engaged. It's all the more good of you to spare time to drop in for a chat just now."

"I've not come to chat, Mr. Ventimore. I never chat. I wanted to see you about a matter which I thought you might be so obliging as to – But I observe you are busy – probably too busy to attend to such a small affair."

It was clear enough now; the Professor was going to build, and had decided – could it be at Sylvia's suggestion? – to entrust the work to him! But he contrived to subdue any self-betraying eagerness, and reply (as he could with perfect truth) that he had nothing on hand just then which he could not lay aside, and that if the Professor would let him know what he required, he would take it up at once.

"So much the better," said the Professor; "so much the better. Both my wife and daughter declared that it was making far too great a demand upon your good nature; but, as I told them, 'I am much mistaken,' I said, 'if Mr. Ventimore's practice is so extensive that he cannot leave it for one afternoon –'"

Evidently it was not a house. Could he be needed to escort them somewhere that afternoon? Even that was more than he had hoped for a few minutes since. He hastened to repeat that he was perfectly free that afternoon.

"In that case," said the Professor, beginning to fumble in all his pockets – was he searching for a note in Sylvia's handwriting? – "in that case, you will be conferring a real favour on me if you can make it convenient to attend a sale at Hammond's Auction Rooms in Covent Garden, and just bid for one or two articles on my behalf."

Whatever disappointment Ventimore felt, it may be said to his credit that he allowed no sign of it to appear. "Of course I'll go, with pleasure," he said, "if I can be of any use."

"I knew I shouldn't come to you in vain," said the Professor. "I remembered your wonderful good nature, sir, in accompanying my wife and daughter on all sorts of expeditions in the blazing hot weather we had at St. Luc – when you might have remained quietly at the hotel with me. Not that I should trouble you now, only I have to lunch at the Oriental Club, and I've an appointment afterwards to examine and report on a recently-discovered inscribed cylinder for the Museum, which will fully occupy the rest of the afternoon, so that it's physically impossible for me to go to Hammond's myself, and I strongly object to employing a broker when I can avoid it. Where did I put that catalogue?.. Ah, here it is. This was sent to me by the executors of my old friend, General Collingham, who died the other day. I met him at Nakada when I was out excavating some years ago. He was something of a collector in his way, though he knew very little about it, and, of course, was taken in right and left. Most of his things are downright rubbish, but there are just a few lots that are worth securing, at a reasonable figure, by some one who knew what he was about."

"But, my dear Professor," remonstrated Horace, not relishing this responsibility, "I'm afraid I'm as likely as not to pick up some of the rubbish. I've no special knowledge of Oriental curios."

"At St. Luc," said the Professor, "you impressed me as having, for an amateur, an exceptionally accurate and comprehensive acquaintance with Egyptian and Arabian art from the earliest period." (If this were so, Horace could only feel with shame what a fearful humbug he must have been.) "However, I've no wish to lay too heavy a burden on you, and, as you will see from this catalogue, I have ticked off the lots in which I am chiefly interested, and made a note of the limit to which I am prepared to bid, so you'll have no difficulty."

"Very well," said Horace; "I'll go straight to Covent Garden, and slip out and get some lunch later on."

"Well, perhaps, if you don't mind. The lots I have marked seem to come on at rather frequent intervals, but don't let that consideration deter you from getting your lunch, and if you *should* miss anything by not being on the spot, why, it's of no consequence, though I don't say it mightn't be a pity. In any case, you won't forget to mark what each lot fetches, and perhaps you wouldn't mind dropping me a line when you return the catalogue – or stay, could you look in some time after dinner this evening, and let me know how you got on? – that would be better."

Horace thought it would be decidedly better, and undertook to call and render an account of his stewardship that evening. There remained the question of a deposit, should one or more of the lots be knocked down to him; and, as he was obliged to own that he had not so much as ten pounds about him at that particular moment, the Professor extracted a note for that amount from his case, and handed it to him with the air of a benevolent person relieving a deserving object. "Don't exceed my limits," he said, "for I can't afford more just now; and mind you give Hammond your own name, not mine. If the dealers get to know I'm after the things, they'll run you up. And now, I don't think I need detain you any longer, especially as time is running on. I'm sure I can trust you to do the best you can for me. Till this evening, then."

A few minutes later Horace was driving up to Covent Garden behind the best-looking horse he could pick out.

The Professor might have required from him rather more than was strictly justified by their acquaintanceship, and taken his acquiescence too much as a matter of course – but what of that? After all, he was Sylvia's parent.

"Even with *my* luck," he was thinking, "I ought to succeed in getting at least one or two of the lots he's marked; and if I can only please him, something may come of it."

And in this sanguine mood Horace entered Messrs. Hammond's well-known auction rooms.

CHAPTER II

A CHEAP LOT

In spite of the fact that it was the luncheon hour when Ventimore reached Hammond's Auction Rooms, he found the big, skylighted gallery where the sale of the furniture and effects of the late General Collingham was proceeding crowded to a degree which showed that the deceased officer had some reputation as a *connoisseur*.

The narrow green baize tables below the auctioneer's rostrum were occupied by professional dealers, one or two of them women, who sat, paper and pencil in hand, with much the same air of apparent apathy and real vigilance that may be noticed in the Casino at Monte Carlo. Around them stood a decorous and businesslike crowd, mostly dealers, of various types. On a magisterial-looking bench sat the auctioneer, conducting the sale with a judicial impartiality and dignity which forbade him, even in his most laudatory comments, the faintest accent of enthusiasm.

The October sunshine, striking through the glazed roof, re-gilded the tarnished gas-stars, and suffused the dusty atmosphere with palest gold. But somehow the utter absence of excitement in the crowd, the calm, methodical tone of the auctioneer, and the occasional mournful cry of "Lot here, gentlemen!" from the porter when any article was too large to move, all served to depress Ventimore's usually mercurial spirits.

For all Horace knew, the collection as a whole might be of little value, but it very soon became clear that others besides Professor Futvoye had singled out such gems as there were, also that the Professor had considerably under-rated the prices they were likely to fetch.

Ventimore made his bids with all possible discretion, but time after time he found the competition for some perforated mosque lantern, engraved ewer, or ancient porcelain tile so great that his limit was soon reached, and his sole consolation was that the article eventually changed hands for sums which were very nearly double the Professor's estimate.

Several dealers and brokers, despairing of a bargain that day, left, murmuring profanities; most of those who remained ceased to take a serious interest in the proceedings, and consoled themselves with cheap witticisms at every favourable occasion.

The sale dragged slowly on, and, what with continual disappointment and want of food, Horace began to feel so weary that he was glad, as the crowd thinned, to get a seat at one of the green baize tables, by which time the skylights had already changed from livid grey to slate colour in the deepening dusk.

A couple of meek Burmese Buddhas had just been put up, and bore the indignity of being knocked down for nine-and-sixpence the pair with dreamy, inscrutable simpers; Horace only waited for the final lot marked by the Professor – an old Persian copper bowl, inlaid with silver and engraved round the rim with an inscription from Hafiz.

The limit to which he was authorised to go was two pounds ten; but, so desperately anxious was Ventimore not to return empty-handed, that he had made up his mind to bid an extra sovereign if necessary, and say nothing about it.

However, the bowl was put up, and the bidding soon rose to three pounds ten, four pounds, four pounds ten, five pounds, five guineas, for which last sum it was acquired by a bearded man on Horace's right, who immediately began to regard his purchase with a more indulgent eye.

Ventimore had done his best, and failed; there was no reason now why he should stay a moment longer – and yet he sat on, from sheer fatigue and disinclination to move.

"Now we come to Lot 254, gentlemen," he heard the auctioneer saying, mechanically; "a capital Egyptian mummy-case in fine con – No, I beg pardon, I'm wrong. This is an article which by some mistake has been omitted from the catalogue, though it ought to have been in it. Everything on sale to-day, gentlemen, belonged to the late General Collingham. We'll call this No. 253*a*. Antique brass bottle. Very curious."

One of the porters carried the bottle in between the tables, and set it down before the dealers at the farther end with a tired nonchalance.

It was an old, squat, pot-bellied vessel, about two feet high, with a long thick neck, the mouth of which was closed by a sort of metal stopper or cap; there was no visible decoration on its sides, which were rough and pitted by some incrustation that had formed on them, and been partially scraped off. As a piece of *bric-à-brac* it certainly possessed few attractions, and there was a marked tendency to "guy" it among the more frivolous brethren.

"What do you call this, sir?" inquired one of the auctioneer, with the manner of a cheeky boy trying to get a rise out of his form-master. "Is it as 'unique' as the others?"

"You're as well able to judge as I am," was the guarded reply. "Any one can see for himself it's not modern rubbish."

"Make a pretty little ornament for the mantelpiece!" remarked a wag.

"Is the top made to unscrew, or what, sir?" asked a third. "Seems fixed on pretty tight."

"I can't say. Probably it has not been removed for some time."

"It's a goodish weight," said the chief humorist, after handling it. "What's inside of it, sir – sardines?"

"I don't represent it as having anything inside it," said the auctioneer. "If you want to know my opinion, I think there's money in it."

"Ow much?"

"Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen. When I say I consider there's money in it, I'm not alluding to its contents. I've no reason to believe that it contains anything. I'm merely suggesting the thing itself may be worth more than it looks."

"Ah, it might be *that* without 'urting itself!"

"Well, well, don't let us waste time. Look upon it as a pure speculation, and make me an offer for it, some of you. Come."

"Tuppence-'ap'ny!" cried the comic man, affecting to brace himself for a mighty effort.

"Pray be serious, gentlemen. We want to get on, you know. Anything to make a start. Five shillings? It's not the value of the metal, but I'll take the bid. Six. Look at it well. It's not an article you come across every day of your lives."

The bottle was still being passed round with disrespectful raps and slaps, and it had now come to Ventimore's right-hand neighbour, who scrutinised it carefully, but made no bid.

"That's all *right*, you know," he whispered in Horace's ear. "That's good stuff, that is. If I was you, I'd 'ave that."

"Seven shillings – eight – nine bid for it over there in the corner," said the auctioneer.

"If you think it's so good, why don't you have it yourself?" Horace asked his neighbour.

"Me? Oh, well, it ain't exactly in my line, and getting this last lot pretty near cleaned me out. I've done for to-day, I 'ave. All the same, it is a curiosity; dunno as I've seen a brass vawse just that shape before, and it's genuine old, though all these fellers are too ignorant to know the value of it. So I don't mind giving you the tip."

Horace rose, the better to examine the top. As far as he could make out in the flickering light of one of the gas-stars, which the auctioneer had just ordered to be lit, there were half-erased scratches and triangular marks on the cap that might possibly be an inscription. If so, might there not be the means here of regaining the Professor's favour, which he felt that, as it was, he should probably forfeit, justly or not, by his ill-success?

He could hardly spend the Professor's money on it, since it was not in the catalogue, and he had no authority to bid for it, but he had a few shillings of his own to spare. Why not bid for it on his own account as long as he could afford to do so? If he were outbid, as usual, it would not particularly matter.

"Thirteen shillings," the auctioneer was saying, in his dispassionate tones. Horace caught his eye, and slightly raised his catalogue, while another man nodded at the same time. "Fourteen in two places." Horace raised his catalogue again. "I won't go beyond fifteen," he thought.

"Fifteen. It's *against* you, sir. Any advance on fifteen? Sixteen – this very quaint old Oriental bottle going for only sixteen shillings.

"After all," thought Horace, "I don't mind anything under a pound for it." And he bid seventeen shillings. "Eighteen," cried his rival, a short, cheery, cherub-faced little dealer, whose neighbours adjured him to "sit quiet like a good little boy and not waste his pocket-money."

"Nineteen!" said Horace. "Pound!" answered the cherubic man.

"A pound only bid for this grand brass vessel," said the auctioneer, indifferently. "All done at a pound?"

Horace thought another shilling or two would not ruin him, and nodded.

"A guinea. For the last time. You'll *lose* it, sir," said the auctioneer to the little man.

"Go on, Tommy. Don't you be beat. Spring another bob on it, Tommy," his friends advised him ironically; but Tommy shook his head, with the air of a man who knows when to draw the line. "One guinea – and that's not half its value! Gentleman on my left," said the auctioneer, more in sorrow than in anger – and the brass bottle became Ventimore's property.

He paid for it, and, since he could hardly walk home nursing a large metal bottle without attracting an inconvenient amount of attention, directed that it should be sent to his lodgings at Vincent Square.

But when he was out in the fresh air, walking westward to his club, he found himself wondering more and more what could have possessed him to throw away a guinea – when he had few enough for legitimate expenses – on an article of such exceedingly problematical value.

CHAPTER III

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING

Ventimore made his way to Cottesmore Gardens that evening in a highly inconsistent, not to say chaotic, state of mind. The thought that he would presently see Sylvia again made his blood course quicker, while he was fully determined to say no more to her than civility demanded.

At one moment he was blessing Professor Futvoye for his happy thought in making use of him; at another he was bitterly recognising that it would have been better for his peace of mind if he had been left alone. Sylvia and her mother had no desire to see more of him; if they had, they would have asked him to come before this. No doubt they would tolerate him now for the Professor's sake; but who would not rather be ignored than tolerated?

The more often he saw Sylvia the more she would make his heart ache with vain longing – whereas he was getting almost reconciled to her indifference; he would very soon be cured if he didn't see her.

Why *should* he see her? He need not go in at all. He had merely to leave the catalogue with his compliments, and the Professor would learn all he wanted to know.

On second thoughts he must go in – if only to return the bank-note. But he would ask to see the Professor in private. Most probably he would not be invited to join his wife and daughter, but if he were, he could make some excuse. They might think it a little odd – a little discourteous, perhaps; but they would be too relieved to care much about that.

When he got to Cottesmore Gardens, and was actually at the door of the Futvoyes' house, one of the neatest and demurest in that retired and irreproachable quarter, he began to feel a craven hope that the Professor might be out, in which case he need only leave the catalogue and write a letter when he got home, reporting his non-success at the sale, and returning the note.

And, as it happened, the Professor *was* out, and Horace was not so glad as he thought he should be. The maid told him that the ladies were in the drawing-room, and seemed to take it for granted that he was coming in, so he had himself announced. He would not stay long – just long enough to explain his business there, and make it clear that he had no wish to force his acquaintance upon them. He found Mrs. Futvoye in the farther part of the pretty double drawing-room, writing letters, and Sylvia, more dazzlingly fair than ever in some sort of gauzy black frock with a heliotrope sash and a bunch of Parma violets on her breast, was comfortably established with a book in the front room, and seemed surprised, if not resentful, at having to disturb herself.

"I must apologise," he began, with an involuntary stiffness, "for calling at this very unceremonious time; but the fact is, the Professor –"

"I know all about it," interrupted Mrs. Futvoye, brusquely, while her shrewd, light-grey eyes took him in with a cool stare that was humorously observant without being aggressive. "We heard how shamefully my husband abused your good-nature. Really, it was too bad of him to ask a busy man like you to put aside his work and go and spend a whole day at that stupid auction!"

"Oh, I'd nothing particular to do. I can't call myself a busy man – unfortunately," said Horace, with that frankness which scorns to conceal what other people know perfectly well already.

"Ah, well, it's very nice of you to make light of it; but he ought not to have done it – after so short an acquaintance, too. And to make it worse, he has had to go out unexpectedly this evening, but he'll be back before very long if you don't mind waiting."

"There's really no need to wait," said Horace, "because this catalogue will tell him everything, and, as the particular things he wanted went for much more than he thought, I wasn't able to get any of them."

"I'm sure I'm very glad of it," said Mrs. Futvoye, "for his study is crammed with odds and ends as it is, and I don't want the whole house to look like a museum or an antiquity shop. I'd all the trouble in the world to persuade him that a great gaudy gilded mummy-case was not quite the thing for a drawing-room. But, please sit down, Mr. Ventimore."

"Thanks," stammered Horace, "but – but I mustn't stay. If you will tell the Professor how sorry I was to miss him, and – and give him back this note which he left with me to cover any deposit, I – I won't interrupt you any longer."

He was, as a rule, imperturbable in most social emergencies, but just now he was seized with a wild desire to escape, which, to his infinite mortification, made him behave like a shy schoolboy.

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Futvoye; "I am sure my husband would be most annoyed if we didn't keep you till he came."

"I really ought to go," he declared, wistfully enough.

"We mustn't tease Mr. Ventimore to stay, mother, when he so evidently wants to go," said Sylvia, cruelly.

"Well, I won't detain you – at least, not long. I wonder if you would mind posting a letter for me as you pass the pillar-box? I've almost finished it, and it ought to go to-night, and my maid Jessie has such a bad cold I really don't like sending her out with it."

It would have been impossible to refuse to stay after that – even if he had wished. It would only be for a few minutes. Sylvia might spare him that much of her time. He should not trouble her again. So Mrs. Futvoye went back to her bureau, and Sylvia and he were practically alone.

She had taken a seat not far from his, and made a few constrained remarks, obviously out of sheer civility. He returned mechanical replies, with a dreary wonder whether this could really be the girl who had talked to him with such charming friendliness and confidence only a few weeks ago in Normandy.

And the worst of it was, she was looking more bewitching than ever; her slim arms gleaming through the black lace of her sleeves, and the gold threads in her soft masses of chestnut hair sparkling in the light of the shaded lamp behind her. The slight contraction of her eyebrows and the mutinous downward curve of her mouth seemed expressive of boredom.

"What a dreadfully long time mamma is over that letter!" she said at last. "I think I'd better go and hurry her up."

"Please don't – unless you are particularly anxious to get rid of me."

"I thought you seemed particularly anxious to escape," she said coldly. "And, as a family, we have certainly taken up quite enough of your time for one day."

"That is not the way you used to talk at St. Luc!" he said.

"At St. Luc? Perhaps not. But in London everything is so different, you see."

"Very different."

"When one meets people abroad who – who seem at all inclined to be sociable," she continued, "one is so apt to think them pleasanter than they really are. Then one meets them again, and – and wonders what one ever saw to like in them. And it's no use pretending one feels the same, because they generally understand sooner or later. Don't you find that?"

"I do, indeed," he said, wincing, "though I don't know what I've done to deserve that you should tell me so!"

"Oh, I was not blaming you. You have been most angelic. I can't think how papa could have expected you to take all that trouble for him – still, you did, though you must have simply hated it."

"But, good heavens! don't you know I should be only too delighted to be of the least service to him – or to any of you?"

"You looked anything but delighted when you came in just now; you looked as if your one idea was to get it over as soon as you could. You know perfectly well you're longing now for mother to finish her letter and set you free. Do you really think I can't see that?"

"If all that is true, or partly true," said Horace, "can't you guess why?"

"I guessed how it was when you called here first that afternoon. Mamma had asked you to, and you thought you might as well be civil; perhaps you really did think it would be pleasant to see us again – but it wasn't the same thing. Oh, I saw it in your face directly – you became conventional and distant and horrid, and it made me horrid too; and you went away determined that you wouldn't see any more of us than you could help. That's why I was so furious when I heard that papa had been to see you, and with such an object."

All this was so near the truth, and yet missed it with such perverse ingenuity, that Horace felt bound to put himself right.

"Perhaps I ought to leave things as they are," he said, "but I can't. It's no earthly use, I know; but may I tell you why it really was painful to me to meet you again? I thought *you* were changed, that you wished to forget, and wished me to forget – only I can't – that we had been friends for a short time. And though I never blamed you – it was natural enough – it hit me pretty hard – so hard that I didn't feel anxious to repeat the experience."

"Did it hit you hard?" said Sylvia, softly. "Perhaps I minded too, just a very little. However," she added, with a sudden smile, that made two enchanting dimples in her cheeks, "it only shows how much more sensible it is to have things out. *Now* perhaps you won't persist in keeping away from us?"

"I believe," said Horace, gloomily, still determined not to let any direct avowal pass his lips, "it would be best that I *should* keep away."

Her half-closed eyes shone through their long lashes; the violets on her breast rose and fell. "I don't think I understand," she said, in a tone that was both hurt and offended.

There is a pleasure in yielding to some temptations that more than compensates for the pain of any previous resistance. Come what might, he was not going to be misunderstood any longer.

"If I must tell you," he said, "I've fallen desperately, hopelessly, in love with you. Now you know the reason."

"It doesn't seem a very good reason for wanting to go away and never see me again. *Does* it?"

"Not when I've no right to speak to you of love?"

"But you've done that!"

"I know," he said penitently; "I couldn't help it. But I never meant to. It slipped out. I quite understand how hopeless it is."

"Of course, if you are so sure as all that, you are quite right not to try."

"Sylvia! You can't mean that – that you do care, after all?"

"Didn't you really see?" she said, with a low, happy laugh. "How stupid of you! And how dear!"

He caught her hand, which she allowed to rest contentedly in his. "Oh, Sylvia! Then you do – you do! But, my God, what a selfish brute I am! For we can't marry. It may be years before I can ask you to come to me. You father and mother wouldn't hear of your being engaged to me."

"*Need* they hear of it just yet, Horace?"

"Yes, they must. I should feel a cur if I didn't tell your mother, at all events."

"Then you shan't feel a cur, for we'll go and tell her together." And Sylvia rose and went into the farther room, and put her arms round her mother's neck. "Mother darling," she said, in a half whisper, "it's really all your fault for writing such very long letters, but – but – we don't exactly know how we came to do it – but Horace and I have got engaged somehow. You aren't *very* angry, are you?"

"I think you're both extremely foolish," said Mrs. Futvoye, as she extricated herself from Sylvia's arms and turned to face Horace. "From all I hear, Mr. Ventimore, you're not in a position to marry at present."

"Unfortunately, no" said Horace; "I'm making nothing as yet. But my chance must come some day. I don't ask you to give me Sylvia till then."

"And you know you like Horace, mother!" pleaded Sylvia. "And I'm ready to wait for him, any time. Nothing will induce me to give him up, and I shall never, never care for anybody else. So you see you may just as well give us your consent!"

"I'm afraid I've been to blame," said Mrs. Futvoye. "I ought to have foreseen this at St. Luc. Sylvia is our only child, Mr. Ventimore, and I would far rather see her happily married than making what is called a 'grand match.' Still, this really does seem *rather* hopeless. I am quite sure her father would never approve of it. Indeed, it must not be mentioned to him – he would only be irritated."

"So long as you are not against us," said Horace, "you won't forbid me to see her?"

"I believe I ought to," said Mrs. Futvoye; "but I don't object to your coming here occasionally, as an ordinary visitor. Only understand this – until you can prove to my husband's satisfaction that you are able to support Sylvia in the manner she has been accustomed to, there must be no formal engagement. I think I am entitled to ask *that* of you."

She was so clearly within her rights, and so much more indulgent than Horace had expected – for he had always considered her an unsentimental and rather worldly woman – that he accepted her conditions almost gratefully. After all, it was enough for him that Sylvia returned his love, and that he should be allowed to see her from time to time.

"It's rather a pity," said Sylvia, meditatively, a little later, when her mother had gone back to her letter-writing, and she and Horace were discussing the future; "it's rather a pity that you didn't manage to get *something* at that sale. It might have helped you with papa."

"Well, I did get something on my own account," he said, "though I don't know whether it is likely to do me any good with your father." And he told her how he had come to acquire the brass bottle.

"And you actually gave a guinea for it?" said Sylvia, "when you could probably get exactly the same thing, only better, at Liberty's for about seven-and-sixpence! Nothing of that sort has any charms for papa, unless it's dirty and dingy and centuries old."

"This looks all that. I only bought it because, though it wasn't down on the catalogue, I had a fancy that it might interest the Professor."

"Oh!" cried Sylvia, clasping her pretty hands, "if only it does, Horace! If it turns out to be tremendously rare and valuable! I do believe dad would be so delighted that he'd consent to anything. Ah, that's his step outside ... he's letting himself in. Now mind you don't forget to tell him about that bottle."

The Professor did not seem in the sweetest of humours as he entered the drawing-room. "Sorry I was obliged to be from home, and there was nobody but my wife and daughter here to entertain you. But I am glad you stayed – yes, I'm rather glad you stayed."

"So am I, sir," said Horace, and proceeded to give his account of the sale, which did not serve to improve the Professor's temper. He thrust out his under lip at certain items in the catalogue. "I wish I'd gone myself," he said; "that bowl, a really fine example of sixteenth-century Persian work, going for only five guineas! I'd willingly have given ten for it. There, there, I thought I could have depended on you to use your judgment better than that!"

"If you remember, sir, you strictly limited me to the sums you marked."

"Nothing of the sort," said the Professor, testily; "my marginal notes were merely intended as indications, no more. You might have known that if you had secured one of the things at any price I should have approved."

Horace had no grounds for knowing anything of the kind, and much reason for believing the contrary, but he saw no use in arguing the matter further, and merely said he was sorry to have misunderstood.

"No doubt the fault was mine," said the Professor, in a tone that implied the opposite. "Still, making every allowance for inexperience in these matters, I should have thought it impossible for any one to spend a whole day bidding at a place like Hammond's without even securing a single article."

"But, dad," put in Sylvia, "Mr. Ventimore did get *one* thing – on his own account. It's a brass bottle, not down in the catalogue, but he thinks it may be worth something perhaps. And he'd very much like to have your opinion."

"Tchah!" said the Professor. "Some modern bazaar work, most probably. He'd better have kept his money. What was this bottle of yours like, now, eh?"

Horace described it.

"H'm. Seems to be what the Arabs call a 'kum-kum,' probably used as a sprinkler, or to hold rose-water. Hundreds of 'em about," commented the Professor, crustily.

"It had a lid, riveted or soldered on," said Horace; "the general shape was something like this ... " And he made a rapid sketch from memory, which the Professor took reluctantly, and then adjusted his glasses with some increase of interest.

"Ha – the form is antique, certainly. And the top hermetically fastened, eh? That looks as if it might contain something."

"You don't think it has a genie inside, like the sealed jar the fisherman found in the 'Arabian Nights'?" cried Sylvia. "What fun if it had!"

"By genie, I presume you mean a *Jinn*, which is the more correct and scholarly term," said the Professor. "Female, *Jinneeyeh*, and plural *Jinn*. No, I do *not* contemplate that as a probable contingency. But it is not quite impossible that a vessel closed as Mr. Ventimore describes may have been designed as a receptacle for papyri or other records of archæological interest, which may be still in preservation. I should recommend you, sir, to use the greatest precaution in removing the lid – don't expose the documents, if any, too suddenly to the outer air, and it would be better if you did not handle them yourself. I shall be rather curious to hear whether it really does contain anything, and if so, what."

"I will open it as carefully as possible," said Horace, "and whatever it may contain, you may rely upon my letting you know at once."

He left shortly afterwards, encouraged by the radiant trust in Sylvia's eyes, and thrilled by the secret pressure of her hand at parting.

He had been amply repaid for all the hours he had spent in the close sale-room. His luck had turned at last: he was going to succeed; he felt it in the air, as if he were already fanned by Fortune's pinions.

Still thinking of Sylvia, he let himself into the semi-detached, old-fashioned house on the north side of Vincent Square, where he had lodged for some years. It was nearly twelve o'clock, and his landlady, Mrs. Rapkin, and her husband had already gone to bed.

Ventimore went up to his sitting-room, a comfortable apartment with two long windows opening on to a trellised verandah and balcony – a room which, as he had furnished and decorated it himself to suit his own tastes, had none of the depressing ugliness of typical lodgings.

It was quite dark, for the season was too mild for a fire, and he had to grope for the matches before he could light his lamp. After he had done so and turned up the wicks, the first object he saw was the bulbous, long-necked jar which he had bought that afternoon, and which now stood on the stained boards near the mantelpiece. It had been delivered with unusual promptitude!

Somehow he felt a sort of repulsion at the sight of it. "It's a beastlier-looking object than I thought," he said to himself disgustedly. "A chimney-pot would be about as decorative and appropriate in my room. What a thundering ass I was to waste a guinea on it! I wonder if there really is anything inside it. It is so infernally ugly that it *ought* to be useful. The Professor seemed to fancy it might hold documents, and he ought to know. Anyway, I'll find out before I turn in."

He grasped it by its long, thick neck, and tried to twist the cap off; but it remained firm, which was not surprising, seeing that it was thickly coated with a lava-like crust.

"I must get some of that off first, and then try again," he decided; and after foraging downstairs, he returned with a hammer and chisel, with which he chipped away the crust till the line of the cap was revealed, and an uncouth metal knob that seemed to be a catch.

This he tapped sharply for some time, and again attempted to wrench off the lid. Then he gripped the vessel between his knees and put forth all his strength, while the bottle seemed to rock and heave under him in sympathy. The cap was beginning to give way, very slightly; one last wrench – and it came off in his hand with such suddenness that he was flung violently backwards, and hit the back of his head smartly against an angle of the wainscot.

He had a vague impression of the bottle lying on its side, with dense volumes of hissing, black smoke pouring out of its mouth and towering up in a gigantic column to the ceiling; he was conscious, too, of a pungent and peculiarly overpowering perfume. "I've got hold of some sort of infernal machine," he thought, "and I shall be all over the square in less than a second!" And, just as he arrived at this cheerful conclusion, he lost consciousness altogether.

He could not have been unconscious for more than a few seconds, for when he opened his eyes the room was still thick with smoke, through which he dimly discerned the figure of a stranger, who seemed of abnormal and almost colossal height. But this must have been an optical illusion caused by the magnifying effects of the smoke; for, as it cleared, his visitor proved to be of no more than ordinary stature. He was elderly, and, indeed, venerable of appearance, and wore an Eastern robe and head-dress of a dark-green hue. He stood there with uplifted hands, uttering something in a loud tone and a language unknown to Horace.

Ventimore, being still somewhat dazed, felt no surprise at seeing him. Mrs. Rapkin must have let her second floor at last – to some Oriental. He would have preferred an Englishman as a fellow-lodger, but this foreigner must have noticed the smoke and rushed in to offer assistance, which was both neighbourly and plucky of him.

"Awfully good of you to come in, sir," he said, as he scrambled to his feet. "I don't know what's happened exactly, but there's no harm done. I'm only a trifle shaken, that's all. By the way, I suppose you can speak English?"

"Assuredly I can speak so as to be understood by all whom I address," answered the stranger.

"Dost thou not understand my speech?"

"Perfectly, now," said Horace. "But you made a remark just now which I didn't follow – would you mind repeating it?"

"I said: 'Repentance, O Prophet of God! I will not return to the like conduct ever.'"

"Ah," said Horace. "I dare say you *were* rather startled. So was I when I opened that bottle."

"Tell me – was it indeed thy hand that removed the seal, O young man of kindness and good works?"

"I certainly did open it," said Ventimore, "though I don't know where the kindness comes in – for I've no notion what was inside the thing."

"I was inside it," said the stranger, calmly.

CHAPTER IV

AT LARGE

"So *you* were inside that bottle, were you?" said Horace, blandly. "How singular!" He began to realise that he had to deal with an Oriental lunatic, and must humour him to some extent. Fortunately he did not seem at all dangerous, though undeniably eccentric-looking. His hair fell in disorderly profusion from under his high turban about his cheeks, which were of a uniform pale rhubarb tint; his grey beard streamed out in three thin strands, and his long, narrow eyes, opal in hue, and set rather wide apart and at a slight angle, had a curious expression, part slyness and part childlike simplicity.

"Dost thou doubt that I speak truth? I tell thee that I have been confined in that accursed vessel for countless centuries – how long, I know not, for it is beyond calculation."

"I should hardly have thought from your appearance, sir, that you had been so many years in bottle as all that," said Horace, politely, "but it's certainly time you had a change. May I, if it isn't indiscreet, ask how you came into such a very uncomfortable position? But probably you have forgotten by this time."

"Forgotten!" said the other, with a sombre red glow in his opal eyes. "Wisely was it written: 'Let him that desireth oblivion confer benefits – but the memory of an injury endureth for ever.' *I* forget neither benefits nor injuries."

"An old gentleman with a grievance," thought Ventimore. "And mad into the bargain. Nice person to have staying in the same house with one!"

"Know, O best of mankind," continued the stranger, "that he who now addresses thee is Fakrash-el-Aamash, one of the Green Jinn. And I dwelt in the Palace of the Mountain of the Clouds above the City of Babel in the Garden of Irem, which thou doubtless knowest by repute?"

"I fancy I *have* heard of it," said Horace, as if it were an address in the Court Directory. "Delightful neighbourhood."

"I had a kinswoman, Bedeea-el-Jemal, who possessed incomparable beauty and manifold accomplishments. And seeing that, though a Jinneeyeh, she was of the believing Jinn, I despatched messengers to Suleyman the Great, the son of Daood, offering him her hand in marriage. But a certain Jarjarees, the son of Rejmoos, the son of Iblees – may he be for ever accursed! – looked with favour upon the maiden, and, going secretly unto Suleyman, persuaded him that I was preparing a crafty snare for the King's undoing."

"And, of course, *you* never thought of such a thing?" said Ventimore.

"By a venomous tongue the fairest motives may be rendered foul," was the somewhat evasive reply. "Thus it came to pass that Suleyman – on whom be peace! – listened unto the voice of Jarjarees and refused to receive the maiden. Moreover, he commanded that I should be seized and imprisoned in a bottle of brass and cast into the Sea of El-Karkar, there to abide the Day of Doom."

"Too bad – really too bad!" murmured Horace, in a tone that he could only hope was sufficiently sympathetic.

"But now, by thy means, O thou of noble ancestors and gentle disposition, my deliverance hath been accomplished; and if I were to serve thee for a thousand years, regarding nothing else, even thus could I not requite thee, and my so doing would be a small thing according to thy desserts!"

"Pray don't mention it," said Horace; "only too pleased if I've been of any use to you."

"In the sky it is written upon the pages of the air: 'He who doth kind actions shall experience the like.' Am I not an Efreet of the Jinn? Demand, therefore, and thou shalt receive."

"Poor old chap!" thought Horace, "he's very cracked indeed. He'll be wanting to give me a present of some sort soon – and of course I can't have that... My dear Mr. Fakrash," he said aloud, "I've done nothing – nothing at all – and if I had, I couldn't possibly accept any reward for it."

"What are thy names, and what calling dost thou follow?"

"I ought to have introduced myself before – let me give you my card;" and Ventimore gave him one, which the other took and placed in his girdle. "That's my business address. I'm an architect, if you know what that is – a man who builds houses and churches – mosques, you know – in fact, anything, when he can get it to build."

"A useful calling indeed – and one to be rewarded with fine gold."

"In my case," Horace confessed, "the reward has been too fine to be perceived. In other words, I've never *been* rewarded, because I've never yet had the luck to get a client."

"And what is this client of whom thou speakest?"

"Oh, well, some well-to-do merchant who wants a house built for him and doesn't care how much he spends on it. There must be lots of them about – but they never seem to come in *my* direction."

"Grant me a period of delay, and, if it be possible, I will procure thee such a client."

Horace could not help thinking that any recommendation from such a quarter would hardly carry much weight; but, as the poor old man evidently imagined himself under an obligation, which he was anxious to discharge, it would have been unkind to throw cold water on his good intentions.

"My dear sir," he said lightly, "if you *should* come across that particular type of client, and can contrive to impress him with the belief that I'm just the architect he's looking out for – which, between ourselves, I am, though nobody's discovered it yet – if you can get him to come to me, you will do me the very greatest service I could ever hope for. But don't give yourself any trouble over it."

"It will be one of the easiest things that can be," said his visitor, "that is" (and here a shade of rather pathetic doubt crossed his face) "provided that anything of my former power yet remains unto me."

"Well, never mind, sir," said Horace; "if you can't, I shall take the will for the deed."

"First of all, it will be prudent to learn where Suleyman is, that I may humble myself before him and make my peace."

"Yes," said Horace, gently, "I would. I should make a point of that, sir. Not *now*, you know. He might be in bed. To-morrow morning."

"This is a strange place that I am in, and I know not yet in what direction I should seek him. But till I have found him, and justified myself in his sight, and had my revenge upon Jarjarees, mine enemy, I shall know no rest."

"Well, but go to bed now, like a sensible old chap," said Horace, soothingly, anxious to prevent this poor demented Asiatic from falling into the hands of the police. "Plenty of time to go and call on Suleyman to-morrow."

"I will search for him, even unto the uttermost ends of the earth!"

"That's right – you're sure to find him in one of them. Only, don't you see, it's no use starting to-night – the last trains have gone long ago." As he spoke, the night wind bore across the square the sound of Big Ben striking the quarters in Westminster Clock Tower, and then, after a pause, the solemn boom that announced the first of the small hours. "To-morrow," thought Ventimore, "I'll speak to Mrs. Rapkin, and get her to send for a doctor and have him put under proper care – the poor old boy really isn't fit to go about alone!"

"I will start now – at once," insisted the stranger "for there is no time to be lost."

"Oh, come!" said Horace, "after so many thousand years, a few hours more or less won't make any serious difference. And you *can't* go out now – they've shut up the house. Do let me take you upstairs to your room, sir."

"Not so, for I must leave thee for a season, O young man of kind conduct. But may thy days be fortunate, and the gate never cease to be repaired, and the nose of him that envieth thee be rubbed in the dust, for love for thee hath entered into my heart, and if it be permitted unto me, I will cover thee with the veils of my protection!"

As he finished this harangue the speaker seemed, to Ventimore's speechless amazement, to slip through the wall behind him. At all events, he had left the room somehow – and Horace found himself alone.

He rubbed the back of his head, which began to be painful. "He can't really have vanished through the wall," he said to himself. "That's too absurd. The fact is, I'm over-excited this evening – and no wonder, after all that's happened. The best thing I can do is to go to bed at once."

Which he accordingly proceeded to do.

CHAPTER V

CARTE BLANCHE

When Ventimore woke next morning his headache had gone, and with it the recollection of everything but the wondrous and delightful fact that Sylvia loved him and had promised to be his some day. Her mother, too, was on his side; why should he despair of anything after that? There was the Professor, to be sure – but even he might be brought to consent to an engagement, especially if it turned out that the brass bottle ... and here Horace began to recall an extraordinary dream in connection with that extremely speculative purchase of his. He had dreamed that he had forced the bottle open, and that it proved to contain, not manuscripts, but an elderly Jinnee who alleged that he had been imprisoned there by the order of King Solomon!

What, he wondered, could have put so grotesque a fancy into his head? and then he smiled as he traced it to Sylvia's playful suggestion that the bottle might contain a "genie," as did the famous jar in the "Arabian Nights," and to her father's pedantic correction of the word to "Jinnee." Upon that slight foundation his sleeping brain had built up all that elaborate fabric – a scene so vivid and a story so circumstantial and plausible that, in spite of its extravagance, he could hardly even now persuade himself that it was entirely imaginary. The psychology of dreams is a subject which has a fascinating mystery, even for the least serious student.

As he entered the sitting-room, where his breakfast awaited him, he looked round, half expecting to find the bottle lying with its lid off in the corner, as he had last seen it in his dream.

Of course, it was not there, and he felt an odd relief. The auction-room people had not delivered it yet, and so much the better, for he had still to ascertain if it had anything inside it; and who knew that it might not contain something more to his advantage than a maundering old Jinnee with a grievance several thousands of years old?

Breakfast over, he rang for his landlady, who presently appeared. Mrs. Rapkin was a superior type of her much-abused class. She was scrupulously clean and neat in her person; her sandy hair was so smooth and tightly knotted that it gave her head the colour and shape of a Barcelona nut; she had sharp, beady eyes, nostrils that seemed to smell battle afar off, a wide, thin mouth that apparently closed with a snap, and a dry, whity-brown complexion suggestive of bran.

But if somewhat grim of aspect, she was a good soul and devoted to Horace, in whom she took almost a maternal interest, while regretting that he was not what she called "serious-minded enough" to get on in the world. Rapkin had wooed and married her when they were both in service, and he still took occasional jobs as an outdoor butler, though Horace suspected that his more staple form of industry was the consumption of gin-and-water and remarkably full-flavoured cigars in the basement parlour.

"Shall you be dining in this evening, sir?" inquired Mrs. Rapkin.

"I don't know. Don't get anything in for me; I shall most probably dine at the club," said Horace; and Mrs. Rapkin, who had a confirmed belief that all clubs were hotbeds of vice and extravagance, sniffed disapproval. "By the way," he added, "if a kind of brass pot is sent here, it's all right. I bought it at a sale yesterday. Be careful how you handle it – it's rather old."

"There *was* a vawse come late last night, sir; I don't know if it's that, it's old-fashioned enough."

"Then will you bring it up at once, please? I want to see it."

Mrs. Rapkin retired, to reappear presently with the brass bottle. "I thought you'd have noticed it when you come in last night, sir," she explained, "for I stood it in the corner, and when I see it this

morning it was layin' o' one side and looking that dirty and disrespectful I took it down to give it a good clean, which it wanted it."

It certainly looked rather the better for it, and the marks or scratches on the cap were more distinguishable, but Horace was somewhat disconcerted to find that part of his dream was true – the bottle had been there.

"I hope I've done nothing wrong," said Mrs. Rapkin, observing his expression; "I only used a little warm ale to it, which is a capital thing for brass-work, and gave it a scrub with 'Vitrolia' soap – but it would take more than that to get all the muck off of it."

"It is all right, so long as you didn't try to get the top off," said Horace.

"Why, the top *was* off it, sir. I thought you'd done it with the 'ammer and chisel when you got 'ome," said his landlady, staring. "I found them 'ere on the carpet."

Horace started. Then *that* part was true, too! "Oh, ah," he said, "I believe I did. I'd forgotten. That reminds me. Haven't you let the room above to – to an Oriental gentleman – a native, you know – wears a green turban?"

"That I most certainly 'ave *not*, Mr. Ventimore," said Mrs. Rapkin, with emphasis, "nor wouldn't. Not if his turbin was all the colours of the rainbow – for I don't 'old with such. Why, there was Rapkin's own sister-in-law let her parlour floor to a Horiental – a Parsee *he* was, or *one* o' them Hafrican tribes – and reason she 'ad to repent of it, for all his gold spectacles! Whatever made you fancy I should let to a blackamoor?"

"Oh, I thought I saw somebody about – er – answering that description, and I wondered if – "

"Never in *this* 'ouse, sir. Mrs. Steggars, next door but one, might let to such, for all I can say to the contrary, not being what you might call particular, and her rooms more suitable to savage notions – but I've enough on *my* hands, Mr. Ventimore, attending to you – not keeping a girl to do the waiting, as why should I while I'm well able to do it better myself?"

As soon as she relieved him of her presence, he examined the bottle: there was nothing whatever inside it, which disposed of all the hopes he had entertained from that quarter.

It was not difficult to account for the visionary Oriental as an hallucination probably inspired by the heavy fumes (for he now believed in the fumes) which had doubtless resulted from the rapid decomposition of some long-buried spices or similar substances suddenly exposed to the air.

If any further explanation were needed, the accidental blow to the back of his head, together with the latent suggestion from the "Arabian Nights," would amply provide it.

So, having settled these points to his entire satisfaction, he went to his office in Great Cloister Street, which he now had entirely to himself, and was soon engaged in drafting the specification for Beevor on which he had been working when so fortunately interrupted the day before by the Professor.

The work was more or less mechanical, and could bring him no credit and little thanks, but Horace had the happy faculty of doing thoroughly whatever he undertook, and as he sat there by his wide-open window he soon became entirely oblivious of all but the task before him.

So much so that, even when the light became obscured for a moment, as if by some large and opaque body in passing, he did not look up immediately, and, when he did, was surprised to find the only armchair occupied by a portly person, who seemed to be trying to recover his breath.

"I beg your pardon," said Ventimore; "I never heard you come in."

His visitor could only wave his head in courteous deprecation, under which there seemed a suspicion of bewildered embarrassment. He was a rosy-gilled, spotlessly clean, elderly gentleman, with white whiskers; his eyes, just then slightly protuberant, were shrewd, but genial; he had a wide, jolly mouth and a double chin. He was dressed like a man who is above disguising his prosperity; he wore a large, pear-shaped pearl in his crimson scarf, and had probably only lately discarded his summer white hat and white waistcoat.

"My dear sir," he began, in a rich, throaty voice, as soon as he could speak; "my dear sir, you must think this is a most unceremonious way of – ah! – dropping in on you – of invading your privacy."

"Not at all," said Horace, wondering whether he could possibly intend him to understand that he had come in by the window. "I'm afraid there was no one to show you in – my clerk is away just now."

"No matter, sir, no matter. I found my way up, as you perceive. The important, I may say the essential, fact is that I *am* here."

"Quite so," said Horace, "and may I ask what brought you?"

"What brought – " The stranger's eyes grew fish-like for the moment. "Allow me, I – I shall come to that – in good time. I am still a little – as you can see." He glanced round the room. "You are, I think, an architect, Mr. ah – Mr. um – ?"

"Ventimore is my name," said Horace, "and I *am* an architect."

"Ventimore, to be sure!" he put his hand in his pocket and produced a card: "Yes, it's all quite correct: I see I have the name here. And an architect, Mr. Ventimore, so I – I am given to understand, of immense ability."

"I'm afraid I can't claim to be that," said Horace, "but I may call myself fairly competent."

"Competent? Why, of *course* you're competent. Do you suppose, sir, that I, a practical business man, should come to any one who was *not* competent?" he said, with exactly the air of a man trying to convince himself – against his own judgment – that he was acting with the utmost prudence.

"Am I to understand that some one has been good enough to recommend me to you?" inquired Horace.

"Certainly not, sir, certainly not. *I* need no recommendation but my own judgment. I – ah – have a tolerable acquaintance with all that is going on in the art world, and I have come to the conclusion, Mr. – eh – ah – Ventimore, I repeat, the deliberate and unassisted conclusion, that you are the one man living who can do what I want."

"Delighted to hear it," said Horace, genuinely gratified. "When did you see any of my designs?"

"Never mind, sir. I don't decide without very good grounds. It doesn't take me long to make up my mind, and when my mind is made up, I act, sir, I act. And, to come to the point, I have a small commission – unworthy, I am quite aware, of your – ah – distinguished talent – which I should like to put in your hands."

"Is *he* going to ask me to attend a sale for him?" thought Horace. "I'm hanged if I do."

"I'm rather busy at present," he said dubiously, "as you may see. I'm not sure whether – "

"I'll put the matter in a nutshell, sir – in a nutshell. My name is Wackerbath, Samuel Wackerbath – tolerably well known, if I may say so, in City circles." Horace, of course, concealed the fact that his visitor's name and fame were unfamiliar to him. "I've lately bought a few acres on the Hampshire border, near the house I'm living in just now; and I've been thinking – as I was saying to a friend only just now, as we were crossing Westminster Bridge – I've been thinking of building myself a little place there, just a humble, unpretentious home, where I could run down for the weekend and entertain a friend or two in a quiet way, and perhaps live some part of the year. Hitherto I've rented places as I wanted 'em – old family seats and ancestral mansions and so forth: very nice in their way, but I want to feel under a roof of my own. I want to surround myself with the simple comforts, the – ah – unassuming elegance of an English country home. And you're the man – I feel more convinced of it with every word you say – you're the man to do the job in style – ah – to execute the work as it should be done."

Here was the long-wished-for client at last! And it was satisfactory to feel that he had arrived in the most ordinary and commonplace course, for no one could look at Mr. Samuel Wackerbath and believe for a moment that he was capable of floating through an upper window; he was not in the least that kind of person.

"I shall be happy to do my best," said Horace, with a calmness that surprised himself. "Could you give me some idea of the amount you are prepared to spend?"

"Well, I'm no Cræsus – though I won't say I'm a pauper precisely – and, as I remarked before, I prefer comfort to splendour. I don't think I should be justified in going beyond – well, say sixty thousand."

"Sixty thousand!" exclaimed Horace, who had expected about a tenth of that sum. "Oh, not *more* than sixty thousand? I see."

"I mean, on the house itself," explained Mr. Wackerbath; "there will be outbuildings, lodges, cottages, and so forth, and then some of the rooms I should want specially decorated. Altogether, before we are finished, it may work out at about a hundred thousand. I take it that, with such a margin, you could – ah – run me up something that in a modest way would take the shine out of – I mean to say eclipse – anything in the adjoining counties?"

"I certainly think," said Horace, "that for such a sum as that I can undertake that you shall have a home which will satisfy you." And he proceeded to put the usual questions as to site, soil, available building materials, the accommodation that would be required, and so on.

"You're young, sir," said Mr. Wackerbath, at the end of the interview, "but I perceive you are up to all the tricks of the – I *should* say, versed in the *minutiæ* of your profession. You would like to run down and look at the ground, eh? Well, that's only reasonable; and my wife and daughters will want to have *their* say in the matter – no getting on without pleasing the ladies, hey? Now, let me see. To-morrow's Sunday. Why not come down by the 8.45 a.m. to Lipsfield? I'll have a trap, or a brougham and pair, or something, waiting for you – take you over the ground myself, bring you back to lunch with us at Oriel Court, and talk the whole thing thoroughly over. Then we'll send you up to town in the evening, and you can start work the first thing on Monday. That suit you? Very well, then. We'll expect you to-morrow."

With this Mr. Wackerbath departed, leaving Horace, as may be imagined, absolutely overwhelmed by the suddenness and completeness of his good fortune. He was no longer one of the unemployed: he had work to do, and, better still, work that would interest him, give him all the scope and opportunity he could wish for. With a client who seemed tractable, and to whom money was clearly no object, he might carry out some of his most ambitious ideas.

Moreover, he would now be in a position to speak to Sylvia's father without fear of a repulse. His commission on £60,000 would be £3,000, and that on the decorations and other work at least as much again – probably more. In a year he could marry without imprudence; in two or three years he might be making a handsome income, for he felt confident that, with such a start, he would soon have as much work as he could undertake.

He was ashamed of himself for ever having lost heart. What were the last few years of weary waiting but probation and preparation for this splendid chance, which had come just when he really needed it, and in the most simple and natural manner?

He loyally completed the work he had promised to do for Beevor, who would have to dispense with his assistance in future, and then he felt too excited and restless to stay in the office, and, after lunching at his club as usual, he promised himself the pleasure of going to Cottesmore Gardens and telling Sylvia his good news.

It was still early, and he walked the whole way, as some vent for his high spirits, enjoying everything with a new zest – the dappled grey and salmon sky before him, the amber, russet, and yellow of the scanty foliage in Kensington Gardens, the pungent scent of fallen chestnuts and acorns and burning leaves, the blue-grey mist stealing between the distant tree-trunks, and then the cheery bustle and brilliancy of the High Street. Finally came the joy of finding Sylvia all alone, and witnessing her frank delight at what he had come to tell her, of feeling her hands on his shoulders, and holding her in his arms, as their lips met for the first time. If on that Saturday afternoon there was a happier man than Horace Ventimore, he would have done well to dissemble his felicity, for fear of incurring the jealousy of the high gods.

When Mrs. Futvoye returned, as she did only too soon, to find her daughter and Horace seated on the same sofa, she did not pretend to be gratified. "This is taking a most unfair advantage of what I was weak enough to say last night, Mr. Ventimore," she began. "I thought I could have trusted you!"

"I shouldn't have come so soon," he said, "if my position were what it was only yesterday. But it's changed since then, and I venture to hope that even the Professor won't object now to our being regularly engaged." And he told her of the sudden alteration in his prospects.

"Well," said Mrs. Futvoye, "you had better speak to my husband about it."

The Professor came in shortly afterwards, and Horace immediately requested a few minutes' conversation with him in the study, which was readily granted.

The study to which the Professor led the way was built out at the back of the house, and crowded with Oriental curios of every age and kind; the furniture had been made by Cairene cabinet-makers, and along the cornices of the book-cases were texts from the Koran, while every chair bore the Arabic for "Welcome" in a gilded firework on its leather back; the lamp was a perforated mosque lantern with long pendent glass tubes like hyacinth glasses; a mummy-case smiled from a corner with laboured *bonhomie*.

"Well," began the Professor, as soon as they were seated, "so I was not mistaken – there was something in the brass bottle after all, then? Let's have a look at it, whatever it is."

For the moment Horace had almost forgotten the bottle. "Oh!" he said, "I – I got it open; but there was nothing in it."

"Just as I anticipated, sir," said the Professor. "I told you there couldn't be anything in a bottle of that description; it was simply throwing money away to buy it."

"I dare say it was, but I wished to speak to you on a much more important matter;" and Horace briefly explained his object.

"Dear me," said the Professor, rubbing up his hair irritably, "dear me! I'd no idea of this – no idea at all. I was under the impression that you volunteered to act as escort to my wife and daughter at St. Luc purely out of good nature to relieve me from what – to a man of my habits in that extreme heat – would have been an arduous and distasteful duty."

"I was not wholly unselfish, I admit," said Horace. "I fell in love with your daughter, sir, the first day I met her – only I felt I had no right, as a poor man with no prospects, to speak to her or you at that time."

"A very creditable feeling – but I've yet to learn why you should have overcome it."

So, for the third time, Ventimore told the story of the sudden turn in his fortunes.

"I know this Mr. Samuel Wackerbath by name," said the Professor; "one of the chief partners in the firm of Akers and Coverdale, the great estate agents – a most influential man, if you can only succeed in satisfying him."

"Oh, I don't feel any misgivings about that, sir," said Horace. "I mean to build him a house that will be beyond his wildest expectations, and you see that in a year I shall have earned several thousands, and I need not say that I will make any settlement you think proper when I marry –"

"When you are in possession of those thousands," remarked the Professor, dryly, "it will be time enough to talk of marrying and making settlements. Meanwhile, if you and Sylvia choose to consider yourselves engaged, I won't object – only I must insist on having your promise that you won't persuade her to marry you without her mother's and my consent."

Ventimore gave this undertaking willingly enough, and they returned to the drawing-room. Mrs. Futvoye could hardly avoid asking Horace, in his new character of *fiancé*, to stay and dine, which it need not be said he was only too delighted to do.

"There is one thing, my dear – er – Horace," said the Professor, solemnly, after dinner, when the neat parlourmaid had left them at dessert, "one thing on which I think it my duty to caution you. If you are to justify the confidence we have shown in sanctioning your engagement to Sylvia, you must curb this propensity of yours to needless extravagance."

"Papa!" cried Sylvia. "What *could* have made you think Horace extravagant?"

"Really," said Horace, "I shouldn't have called myself particularly so."

"Nobody ever *does* call himself particularly extravagant," retorted the Professor; "but I observed at St. Luc that you habitually gave fifty centimes as a *pourboire* when twopence, or even a penny, would have been handsome. And no one with any regard for the value of money would have given a guinea for a worthless brass vessel on the bare chance that it might contain manuscripts, which (as any one could have foreseen) it did not."

"But it's not a bad sort of bottle, sir," pleaded Horace. "If you remember, you said yourself the shape was unusual. Why shouldn't it be worth all the money, and more?"

"To a collector, perhaps," said the Professor, with his wonted amiability, "which you are not. No, I can only call it a senseless and reprehensible waste of money."

"Well, the truth is," said Horace, "I bought it with some idea that it might interest *you*."

"Then you were mistaken, sir. It does *not* interest me. Why should I be interested in a metal jar which, for anything that appears to the contrary, may have been cast the other day at Birmingham?"

"But there *is* something," said Horace; "a seal or inscription of some sort engraved on the cap. Didn't I mention it?"

"You said nothing about an inscription before," replied the Professor, with rather more interest. "What is the character – Arabic? Persian? Kufic?"

"I really couldn't say – it's almost rubbed out – queer little triangular marks, something like birds' footprints."

"That sounds like Cuneiform," said the Professor, "which would seem to point to a Phœnician origin. And, as I am acquainted with no Oriental brass earlier than the ninth century of our era, I should regard your description as, *à priori*, distinctly unlikely. However, I should certainly like to have an opportunity of examining the bottle for myself some day."

"Whenever you please, Professor. When can you come?"

"Why, I'm so much occupied all day that I can't say for certain when I can get up to your office again."

"My own days will be fairly full now," said Horace; "and the thing's not at the office, but in my rooms at Vincent Square. Why shouldn't you all come and dine quietly there some evening next week, and then you could examine the inscription comfortably afterwards, you know, Professor, and find out what it really is? Do say you will." He was eager to have the privilege of entertaining Sylvia in his own rooms for the first time.

"No, no," said the Professor; "I see no reason why you should be troubled with the entire family. I may drop in alone some evening and take the luck of the pot, sir."

"Thank you, papa," put in Sylvia; "but *I* should like to come too, please, and hear what you think of Horace's bottle. And I'm dying to see his rooms. I believe they're fearfully luxurious."

"I trust," observed her father, "that they are far indeed from answering that description. If they did, I should consider it a most unsatisfactory indication of Horace's character."

"There's nothing magnificent about them, I assure you," said Horace. "Though it's true I've had them done up, and all that sort of thing, at my own expense – but quite simply. I couldn't afford to spend much on them. But do come and see them. I must have a little dinner, to celebrate my good fortune – it will be so jolly if you'll all three come."

"If we do come," stipulated the Professor, "it must be on the distinct understanding that you don't provide an elaborate banquet. Plain, simple, wholesome food, well cooked, such as we have had this evening, is all that is necessary. More would be ostentatious."

"My *dear* dad!" protested Sylvia, in distress at this somewhat dictatorial speech. "Surely you can leave all that to Horace!"

"Horace, my dear, understands that, in speaking as I did, I was simply treating him as a potential member of my family." Here Sylvia made a private little grimace. "No young man who contemplates

marrying should allow himself to launch into extravagance on the strength of prospects which, for all he can tell," said the Professor, genially, "may prove fallacious. On the contrary, if his affection is sincere, he will incur as little expense as possible, put by every penny he can save, rather than subject the girl he professes to love to the ordeal of a long engagement. In other words, the truest lover is the best economist."

"I quite understand, sir," said Horace, good-temperedly; "it would be foolish of me to attempt any ambitious form of entertainment – especially as my landlady, though an excellent plain cook, is not exactly a *cordon bleu*. So you can come to my modest board without misgivings."

Before he left, a provisional date for the dinner was fixed for an evening towards the end of the next week, and Horace walked home, treading on air rather than hard paving-stones, and "striking the stars with his uplifted head."

The next day he went down to Lipsfield and made the acquaintance of the whole Wackerbath family, who were all enthusiastic about the proposed country house. The site was everything that the most exacting architect could desire, and he came back to town the same evening, having spent a pleasant day and learnt enough of his client's requirements, and – what was even more important – those of his client's wife and daughters, to enable him to begin work upon the sketch-plans the next morning.

He had not been long in his rooms at Vincent Square, and was still agreeably engaged in recalling the docility and ready appreciation with which the Wackerbaths had received his suggestions and rough sketches, their compliments and absolute confidence in his skill, when he had a shock which was as disagreeable as it was certainly unexpected.

For the wall before him parted like a film, and through it stepped, smiling benignantly, the green-robed figure of Fakrash-el-Aamash, the Jinnee.

CHAPTER VI

EMBARRAS DE RICHESSES

Ventimore had so thoroughly convinced himself that the released Jinnee was purely a creature of his own imagination, that he rubbed his eyes with a start, hoping that they had deceived him.

"Stroke thy head, O merciful and meritorious one," said his visitor, "and recover thy faculties to receive good tidings. For it is indeed I – Fakrash-el-Aamash – whom thou beholdest."

"I – I'm delighted to see you," said Horace, as cordially as he could. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nay, for hast thou not done me the greatest of all services by setting me free? To escape out of a bottle is pleasant. And to thee I owe my deliverance."

It was all true, then: he had really let an imprisoned Genius or Jinnee, or whatever it was, out of that bottle! He knew he could not be dreaming now – he only wished he were. However, since it was done, his best course seemed to be to put a good face on it, and persuade this uncanny being somehow to go away and leave him in peace for the future.

"Oh, that's all right, my dear sir," he said, "don't think any more about it. I – I rather understood you to say that you were starting on a journey in search of Solomon?"

"I have been, and returned. For I visited sundry cities in his dominions, hoping that by chance I might hear news of him, but I refrained from asking directly lest thereby I should engender suspicion, and so Suleyman should learn of my escape before I could obtain an audience of him and implore justice."

"Oh, I shouldn't think that was likely," said Horace. "If I were you, I should go straight back and go on travelling till I *did* find Suleyman."

"Well was it said: 'Pass not any door without knocking, lest haply that which thou seekest should be behind it.'"

"Exactly," said Horace. "Do each city thoroughly, house by house, and don't neglect the smallest clue. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try, again!' as one of our own poets teaches."

"Try, try, try again," echoed the Jinnee, with an admiration that was almost fatuous. "Divinely gifted truly was he who composed such a verse!"

"He has a great reputation as a sage," said Horace, "and the maxim is considered one of his happiest efforts. Don't you think that, as the East is rather thickly populated, the less time you lose in following the poet's recommendation the better?"

"It may be as thou sayest. But know this, O my son, that wheresoever I may wander, I shall never cease to study how I may most fitly reward thee for thy kindness towards me. For nobly it was said: 'If I be possessed of wealth and be not liberal, may my head never be extended!'"

"My good sir," said Horace, "do please understand that if you were to offer me any reward for – for a very ordinary act of courtesy, I should be obliged to decline it."

"But didst thou not say that thou wast sorely in need of a client?"

"That was so at the time," said Horace; "but since I last had the pleasure of seeing you, I have met with one who is all I could possibly wish for."

"I am indeed rejoiced to hear it," returned the Jinnee, "for thou showest me that I have succeeded in performing the first service which thou hast demanded of me."

Horace staggered under this severe blow to his pride; for the moment he could only gasp: "You — *you* sent him to me?"

"I, and no other," said the Jinnee, beaming with satisfaction; "for while, unseen of men, I was circling in air, resolved to attend to thy affair before beginning my search for Suleyman (on whom be peace!), it chanced that I overheard a human being of prosperous appearance say aloud upon a bridge that he desired to erect for himself a palace if he could but find an architect. So, perceiving thee afar off seated at an open casement, I immediately transported him to the place and delivered him into thy hands."

"But he knew my name – he had my card in his pocket," said Horace.

"I furnished him with the paper containing thy names and abode, lest he should be ignorant of them."

"Well, look here, Mr. Fakrash," said the unfortunate Horace, "I know you meant well – but *never* do a thing like that again! If my brother-architects came to know of it I should be accused of most unprofessional behaviour. I'd no idea you would take that way of introducing a client to me, or I should have stopped it at once!"

"It was an error," said Fakrash. "No matter. I will undo this affair, and devise some other and better means of serving thee."

"No, no," he said, "for Heaven's sake, leave things alone – you'll only make them worse. Forgive me, my dear Mr. Fakrash, I'm afraid I must seem most ungrateful; but – but I was so taken by surprise. And really, I am extremely obliged to you. For, though the means you took were – were a little irregular, you have done me a very great service."

"It is naught," said the Jinnee, "compared to those I hope to render so great a benefactor."

"But, indeed, you mustn't think of trying to do any more for me," urged Horace, who felt the absolute necessity of expelling any scheme of further benevolence from the Jinnee's head once and for all. "You have done enough. Why, thanks to you, I am engaged to build a palace that will keep me hard at work and happy for ever so long."

"Are human beings, then, so enamoured of hard labour?" asked Fakrash, in wonder. "It is not thus with the Jinn."

"I love my work for its own sake," said Horace, "and then, when I have finished it, I shall have earned a very fair amount of money – which is particularly important to me just now."

"And why, my son, art thou so desirous of obtaining riches?"

"Because," said Horace, "unless a man is tolerably well off in these days he cannot hope to marry."

Fakrash smiled with indulgent compassion. "How excellent is the saying of one of old: 'He that adventureth upon matrimony is like unto one who thrusteth his hand into a sack containing many thousands of serpents and one eel. Yet, if Fate so decree, he *may* draw forth the eel.' And thou art comely, and of an age when it is natural to desire the love of a maiden. Therefore be of good heart and a cheerful eye, and it may be that, when I am more at leisure, I shall find thee a helpmate who shall rejoice thy soul."

"Please don't trouble to find me anything of the sort!" said Horace, hastily, with a mental vision of some helpless and scandalised stranger being shot into his dwelling like coals. "I assure you I would much rather win a wife for myself in the ordinary way – as, thanks to your kindness, I have every hope of doing before long."

"Is there already some damsel for whom thy heart pineth? If so, fear not to tell me her names and dwelling place, and I will assuredly obtain her for thee."

But Ventimore had seen enough of the Jinnee's Oriental methods to doubt his tact and discretion where Sylvia was concerned. "No, no; of course not. I spoke generally," he said. "It's exceedingly kind of you – but I *do* wish I could make you understand that I am overpaid as it is. You have put me in the way to make a name and fortune for myself. If I fail, it will be my own fault. And, at all events, I want nothing more from you. If you mean to find Suleyman (on whom be peace!) you must go and live in the East altogether – for he certainly isn't over here; you must give up your whole time to it,

keep as quiet as possible, and don't be discouraged by any reports you may hear. Above all, never trouble your head about me or my affairs again!"

"O thou of wisdom and eloquence," said Fakrash, "this is most excellent advice. I will go, then; but may I drink the cup of perdition if I become unmindful of thy benevolence!"

And, raising his joined hands above his head as he spoke, he sank, feet foremost, through the carpet and was gone.

"Thank Heaven," thought Ventimore, "he's taken the hint at last. I don't think I'm likely to see any more of him. I feel an ungrateful brute for saying so, but I can't help it. I can *not* stand being under any obligation to a Jinnee who's been shut up in a beastly brass bottle ever since the days of Solomon, who probably had very good reasons for putting him there."

Horace next asked himself whether he was bound in honour to disclose the facts to Mr. Wackerbath, and give him the opportunity of withdrawing from the agreement if he thought fit.

On the whole, he saw no necessity for telling him anything; the only possible result would be to make his client suspect his sanity; and who would care to employ an insane architect? Then, if he retired from the undertaking without any explanations, what could he say to Sylvia? What would Sylvia's father say to *him*? There would certainly be an end to his engagement.

After all, he had not been to blame; the Wackerbaths were quite satisfied. He felt perfectly sure that he could justify their selection of him; he would wrong nobody by accepting the commission, while he would only offend them, injure himself irretrievably, and lose all hope of gaining Sylvia if he made any attempt to undeceive them.

And Fakrash was gone, never to return. So, on all these considerations, Horace decided that silence was his only possible policy, and, though some moralists may condemn his conduct as disingenuous and wanting in true moral courage, I venture to doubt whether any reader, however independent, straightforward, and indifferent to notoriety and ridicule, would have behaved otherwise in Ventimore's extremely delicate and difficult position.

Some days passed, every working hour of which was spent by Horace in the rapture of creation. To every man with the soul of an artist in him there comes at times – only too seldom in most cases – a revelation of latent power that he had not dared to hope for. And now with Ventimore years of study and theorising which he had often been tempted to think wasted began to bear golden fruit. He designed and drew with a rapidity and originality, a sense of perfect mastery of the various problems to be dealt with, and a delight in the working out of mass and detail, so intoxicating that he almost dreaded lest he should be the victim of some self-delusion.

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