Last Train Out

by

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CHAPTER I

Mr. Paul Schlesser, number-one cashier to the banking firm of Leopold Benjamin & Co., Ludenstrasse, Vienna, broke off in his conversation with the distinguished-looking young Englishman who was leaning over his portion of the counter and, in an undertone, directed the latter's attention to the taller of the two men who were issuing from the private office the other side of the marble tiled floor.

"That," he announced with bated breath and a note of deep respect in his tone, "is the present head of our firm—Mr. Leopold Benjamin. He comes here very seldom nowadays. It is a great pleasure for us to welcome him."

Mr. Schlesser, who was an insignificant-looking person, seemed to expand and grow almost into dignity as he bowed low to the tall, thin man who was passing by. Mr. Leopold Benjamin did not in the least resemble his cashier. No one would have imagined them to belong to the same race, a race which in those days stood in hourly peril of its life. His smile was scarcely cheerful, but pleasant enough in its way as he half paused to return his employee's greeting. His eyes looked enquiringly at the stranger. The cashier slipped open the wire partition which separated him from the outside world.

"If you will pardon me, Mr. Benjamin," he said, "this gentleman, Mr. Charles Mildenhall, has a Letter of Credit here from Barclay's in London. This is the head of our firm, Mr. Mildenhall—Mr. Leopold Benjamin."

The banker let his fingers slip from his companion's shoulder. He held out his hand. His voice was pleasant, almost musical.

"You are perhaps related to my old friend—Sir Phillip Mildenhall?" he asked.

"Sir Philip is my uncle, sir," the young man replied. "He was First Secretary here in his younger days."

Mr. Benjamin nodded reminiscently.

"He was a delightful companion. He dined with me often. A connoisseur, too, of pictures—in fact, of all objects d'art, I missed him very much when he went to Bucharest."

"I think in a way he was sorry to go," Mildenhall remarked. "He had many friends here. Amongst them I have heard him speak of you, sir. I heard from him of your marvellous collection of Old Masters."

"You are in the Diplomatic Service yourself?" the banker asked.

"In a way I am," the young man answered. "Just now I am on long leave."

"Your uncle is well, I trust?"

"In excellent health, I thank you, sir. I shall tell him of our meeting."

"You must come and see me before you leave the city," the banker invited. "How long do you stay here?"

"Only a few days longer, I fear."

"Will you dine with me on Thursday night?" the other suggested. "I am compelled to choose an early date because my movements are a little uncertain."

"I will do so with pleasure," the young man assented. "It will interest my uncle very much to have news of you."

Mr. Benjamin shrugged his high, stooping shoulders. There was a momentary look of sadness in his sunken eyes.

"Not too good news, I am afraid," he said. "Our race becomes less and less popular in this country as the days go by. Things were different in your uncle's time. At present we find the future full of anxiety. One pleasure at least I shall make sure of," he concluded with a smile. "I shall have the pleasure of seeing you on Thursday at eight o'clock. I trust that you do not mind our early hours."

"Not in the least, sir."

"Our friend here at the desk," Leopold Benjamin said, with a benevolent smile

towards the cashier, "will write down my address for you. Auf Wiedersehen, Mr. Mildenhall."

He passed on, his companion—a short, thick-set man with a very intelligent face—by his side. The cashier looked at his client with increased respect.

"We regard it as a great honour," he confided as he counted out some notes, "to be received by Mr. Benjamin. He entertains very little now. Your money, sir—also your Letter of Credit," he went on, returning the latter to its parchment envelope. "It will always be a pleasure to serve you here when you are in need of more money or if there is any general information about the city we can give you. I am writing here the address of Mr. Benjamin: Palais Franz Josef. Any vehicle you engage would drive you there without hesitation."

The young man gathered up his belongings, nodded in friendly fashion and took his leave. On the broad steps of the very handsome bank building he hesitated for a few moments, then decided to walk for a while in the Ringstrasse. It was barely five o'clock and, notwithstanding that these were days of strain and anxiety, something of the spirit of levity was visible on the countenances of most of the passers-by. The day's work was over. The evening and night were at hand. The true Viennese is seldom sensitive to the call of domesticity. It is the music of the cafés, the light laughter of the women, the flavour of his apéritif which appeal to him with the coming of the twilight. Mildenhall yielded to the general spirit. After an hour's promenade he entered one of the most attractive of the famous cafés, purchased an evening paper and installed himself at a comfortable table. He ordered a drink and lit a cigarette. His Thursday evening rendezvous pleased him. It was a great thing to have met Leopold Benjamin so entirely by accident and to have received so interesting an invitation. The Viennese cafés are not made for isolation. Mildenhall was seated in the corner place of the long settee which stretched down one side of the room. The table in front of him was sufficiently large to accommodate several customers. There were two chairs unoccupied. Mildenhall shook out his newspaper and turned it so that he could read the leading article. His attention, however, was suddenly distracted.

"I do not disturb you, sir, if I take this chair?" a friendly voice asked in excellent English.

Mildenhall glanced up and recognized the man who had been Mr. Benjamin's companion in the bank a short time before.

"By no means," he answered courteously. "Why not the settee? It is more comfortable and, after all, I don't take up much room."

With a bow the newcomer seated himself, handed his coat and hat to a waiter and gave an order. He glanced at the paper in Mildenhall's hands.

"One wastes much time nowadays," he remarked, "with these fugitive

journals. It seems to me that much is written which is not worth the ink."

"I gather that you are not a journalist!"

"I am not," was the quiet reply. "Clever men, no doubt, but what they are responsible for! Half the wars in the world are caused by the Press. Every grievance of mankind is nurtured by their pens. News itself is good, but news is the last thing one finds—in the evening papers, at any rate. The one you have there is engaged in an unholy crusade. It is doing great harm in the city. It is stirring up bad feeling in this place of beautiful things and kindly people."

"Did I not see you an hour ago in Benjamin's bank?" Mildenhall asked.

"You did indeed, sir. Mr. Leopold Benjamin is one of the men I admire most in the world. He is a great philanthropist, a great artist, a lover of the human race, a good man. But life for him at the present moment is poisoned by the campaign in a certain section of the Press."

Mildenhall nodded sympathetically.

"This crusade against the Jews." he murmured.

"It is a wicked and outrageous crusade," his companion said almost under his breath and after a careful glance around. "I should not, perhaps, speak like this in a public place, but I know who you are. I heard your introduction to Leopold Benjamin. I know, too, that you are an Englishman, and the English have always been the protectors of any persecuted race."

"Isn't 'persecuted' rather a harsh term?" Mildenhall asked. "The Austrian is such a kindly person—at least, so I have fancied from the little I have seen of him."

"The Austrian by himself is well enough," the other acknowledged. "It is what there is behind him, driving him on, that is dangerous. You permit?"

He drew a small case from his pocket and handed a card to his companion.

"I myself am not a Jew," he went on, "although my name, which you see there, rather suggests it. I have a profession which keeps me wandering all over the world. There are few countries, well-populated countries, which I have not visited. The empty places do not interest me. I like work, and my work is amongst human beings. My name, as you see, is Marius Blute and I am a naturalized Finn."

"From your speech," Mildenhall remarked, "I should have taken you to be English. From your appearance I should have thought that you were perhaps a Scandinavian."

"I was really born," Blute confided, "in Finland. My mother was a Finn and my father, a Russian."

"And your profession?" Mildenhall asked pleasantly.

"Ah, perhaps you will guess that before long," the other replied. "I understand that we are to meet again at dinner on Thursday."

"Delighted to hear it," Mildenhall assured him. "Tell me, do you think our host will show us any of his treasures? I have always been told that I should find choicer pictures in his rooms than in any European gallery."

"That is easily the truth," Blute acquiesced. "As to whether he will open up the galleries for you, I have my doubts. These are dangerous times for a man who has such possessions."

"He has dangerous neighbours?"

"Of that we will not speak here. Vienna, alas, is greatly changed. We have a perfect affliction of the Gestapo here amongst us. The Viennese themselves, the townspeople, have lost the control of their city. It is sad but it is true. One by one the men who have made Vienna a great and joyous place have been obliged to leave it. Those who have added most to its riches and its beauty are the very ones who are now the most persecuted. What the world of tomorrow may be, one sometimes wonders! I could take you to the house of one great Austrian aristocrat at this moment, Mr. Mildenhall. It is not far from here. You would find him sitting in one small room. At the further end is a curtain and behind that curtain, which is, I might tell you, of priceless Chinese silk, there is a bed, and on that bed he sleeps. At the other end there is a table surrounded by screens the beauty of which no words could describe, and there he dines. There is a great window hung with curtains which once adorned a Doge's palace. When they are drawn aside he has one of the most beautiful views in Vienna. That room and its little antechamber, Mr. Mildenhall, he has not left for twenty years, and in that room he will die. But if one of the experts, from any part of the world, who belonged to Benjamin's race and had a sense of financial values as well as appreciation saw that room, he would tell you that millions of your English pounds would not buy the contents of that one chamber. There he sits. He is content so long as he is undisturbed. He gave his life to beauty and he fears to lose his treasures. He fears so much that he has concentrated them, weeded them out, kept everything that was a little more beautiful than anything else of its sort. 'It is too small a room,' he says sometimes, 'to rob.' But there is fear in his heart at the thought. Some day he will lose everything. I passed his house not three days ago. I saw one of those loathed spies watching it. They begin to know where to find what their masters are craving for—anything, anything they can turn into gold. One more was added to the list that afternoon."

Blute's story had been so simply told, was so obviously the result of the man's own observation, that his companion felt a sudden surge of interest in the princely hermit guarding his treasures.

"Can't you warn him?" he asked. "Can't he be told that they have marked him down?"

The other shook his head slowly.

"What would be the good? He is too old to escape, he is too old and tired to leave his treasures. He will sit there with them all around him until the day comes that the Gestapo cross his threshold and he hears their fateful summons. When that time comes it is my belief that he will kill himself."

Mildenhall sighed. The orchestra was playing gay music, the place was filled with chattering and laughing groups of people who had been able for an hour or two to put all cares behind them.

"What about our friend Benjamin?" he asked. "Is he in any danger, do you think?"

"Leopold Benjamin," Blute said solemnly, "has the spotlight of fate playing on him at the present moment. Sometimes I wonder that he has escaped so long. He is the most prominent Jew in the city, he has been fined huge sums, he gives large amounts to charity, the old aristocracy of the country who refuse to open their doors even to their highly-born neighbours have welcomed him into their midst. He holds a great place in the hearts of the people here but, to tell you the truth, he is the anxiety of my life. Even I dare not tell him that if he remains in the city he is doomed. He is too rich, too powerful to escape. He will be one of the first victims of the disaster which threatens Austria. I have been here for two years doing nothing else but looking after him. I shall do all I can, although it will very likely cost me my life. I shall give it without hesitation. Nevertheless, Leopold Benjamin is doomed. I sat with him in that beautiful office of his this afternoon. I showed him a way to escape. 'And my pictures?' he asked. 'My treasures?' 'We could smuggle some things away,' I told him. He shook his head. 'I am a greedy man,' he said. 'I can part with nothing.' What are you to do with anyone like that? I keep the way open, but I fear that he will be obstinate to the end."

Mildenhall glanced at his watch and rose to his feet.

"Perhaps I shall be able to tell you better in a few days," he said. "I dine there then and I hope to see a few of the Old Masters, anyhow."

Marius Blute sighed.

"A few days," he murmured. "Yes, I should think a few days is about the limit of time. You may still eat your dinner at the Palais Franz Josef, Mr. Mildenhall. You will drink the choicest wines in Austria and eat the food prepared by our one great chef, but it will be rather like the feast before the descent of the Philistines."

Charles Mildenhall, with a farewell nod, left the place with his companion's

words ringing in his ears, but more poignantly even than those words he remembered the shadow which seemed to be lurking in the sad eyes of the man with whom he had spoken only for a few minutes in the bank. Leopold Benjamin had indeed the air of a man on his way towards death.

CHAPTER II

Mildenhall entered the British Embassy with the air of an habitué. He had a few words with the Ambassador, Sir John Maxwell-Tremearne, whom he found distrait and worried, and went on to see Freddie Lascelles, First Secretary and a man of some importance in the social and sporting side of Viennese life. Lascelles, too, wore a somewhat worried look and after the first few words led his visitor into a private room.

"Always around like a stormy petrel when there's a bit of trouble going, aren't you, Charles?" he observed grimly. "What are you doing this way? And where did you come from?"

"Oh, just knocking about," Mildenhall replied, helping himself to one of his friend's cigarettes. "I was in Budapest last."

"Got the jitters over there, haven't they?"

"Jitters everywhere! Europe's like one of those unlit bonfires already smouldering underneath."

"Is it true that Poland is completely mobilized?" Lascelles asked.

His visitor's face was absolutely blank.

"Some report of that sort going round," he observed. "Look here, when is our next bag going?"

"To-night."

"Plane or rail?"

"Don't know," Lascelles replied, leaning back for a telephone. "Wait a minute, there's a good fellow."

He held a brief conversation in fluent German with some unseen person.

"Plane," he announced as he rang off.

"What time?"

"Latish. The Chief is dining at the Chancellery and he'll have a brief report to put in when he comes back. How much room do you want?"

"Only enough for my weekly chatter...I'll do it here, if you don't mind. Shall I be in the way for a couple of hours or so?"

"Lock you up here with pleasure. Do you want a code book?"

"I may as well have one. I ought not to need it, though."

There was a gleam of admiration in Lascelles' eyes as he made a few preparations for his friend's comfort.

"What wouldn't I give for a memory like yours!" he observed. "Ten or fifteen pages of foolscap, your last report, I remember, straight into code."

"Rather more this time, I'm afraid," Mildenhall sighed. "As to the memory—that's only a trick."

"Wish I had it! Do you mean to say you have no notes even?"

"Not one," Mildenhall replied.

"And when did you send your last report home?"

"Warsaw, last Thursday."

"And you are going to sit down now and turn into code, probably without a code book at all, a report of how many visits and conversations?"

Mildenhall smiled.

"You run off and play, my friend," he advised. "Plenty of sealing wax there?"

"A drawerful. Are you going to pay your respects to Her Ladyship this evening?"

"I'll see what the time is when I've finished."

"Two bells on your desk," Lascelles pointed out. "One for secretarial help, the other domestic. I'm living in just now. Telephone up to me and we'll have a cocktail if you've finished in time."

He disappeared with a farewell nod. An English servant appeared a few minutes later with a small despatch case and a sealed envelope. Mildenhall greeted him with a friendly word or two.

"Mr. Lascelles says, sir, don't forget to speak to him before you go. He's free for dinner if you would care to join him."

"I'll see what time I finish, Butler. Thank him very much all the same. Things pretty gay here still?"

The man shook his head sadly.

"Not the same, sir. Nothing's quite the same. The sparkle's gone out of the place, if you know what I mean, sir."

"People gone 'nervy,' eh?"

"They're afraid of what might be coming, sir. That's what's wrong with them. It's the gentleman on the other side that they're afraid of."

Mildenhall's expression was once again utterly blank. He nodded slightly and waved his hand towards the door.

"Tell Mr. Lascelles that I'll look him up as soon as I can," he enjoined.

The servant took his leave. For a few minutes Mildenhall sat like a man deep in thought. His eyes wandered round the room. Everything was quite familiar. For the last seven or eight years he had finished those secret European tours of his, which had brought him so much distinction at the Foreign Office, in Vienna and written home from this same room his final report. The apartment was unchanged, the two doors were closed, the curtains were drawn, his solitude was assured. He broke the seal of the envelope and withdrew a small key, its sole contents. With the key he unlocked the despatch box and withdrew the code book. He pushed the case away and propped up the code book in a conspicuous place just in front of him. Then he drew out from the rack a pile of the heavy embossed, blue foolscap paper, examined his fountain pen and started to write.

In two hours time his task was finished. The eight sheets of foolscap covered with clear, bold handwriting contained, in carefully chosen code, the result of one secret visit to Moscow and three briefer sojourns at Warsaw, Bucharest and Budapest. Mildenhall lit a cigarette and read through all that he had written. There was a faint flicker of self-satisfaction in his smile as he finished. He made no corrections, not a single alteration, but he added just two words in a code so utterly secret between himself and the person who would read his report that the code itself existed only in the memories of the two men. He folded up the eight sheets, found the proper linen envelope, used liberally the brown sealing wax and his own seal. Then he replaced the code book in the despatch box, locked it up and enclosed the key itself in another envelope, which he scaled and stamped. Finally he rang the bell. A young man wearing heavy glasses, pale and eminently secretarial, made his appearance. He greeted the solitary occupant of the room without a smile.

"Good evening, Mr. Mildenhall."

"Good evening, Paul. There you are."

He handed over the packet. The young man took it into his charge.

"I will place it in the safe deposit, sir, until we open it at midnight for the bag. His Excellency will have returned by then."

"Who takes the plane over to-night?" Mildenhall asked.

"Major Grimmet, sir."

"Nice safe fellow," Mildenhall approved. "I wouldn't mind a ride over with him myself."

"You're not leaving us just yet, sir?" the secretary asked.

"Not just yet," was the somewhat vague reply. "Do you know if Mr. Lascelles is still in his room?"

"He is there and hoping to see you."

"And Her Ladyship?"

"Her Ladyship is dining in. She told me that if you rang before nine o'clock you could go in and have a cocktail with her."

Mildenhall glanced at his watch.

"Just five minutes," he remarked. "A cocktail sounds extraordinarily good to me, Paul."

"You will find Her Ladyship in the small drawing-room. Mr. Lascelles said that he would probably join you there."

Lady Maxwell-Tremearne was the typical ambassador's wife. She was born in Washington of American parents, had met her future husband on a winter-sports visit to the Austrian Tyrol and was married to him within a month or so of his appointment as First Secretary to the British Embassy in Washington. She was still under forty and exceedingly popular in Viennese society. She welcomed Charles Mildenhall warmly when he was announced by the seneschal of the household. She was lying on a sofa drawn up before a log fire and was surrounded with newspapers.

"My dear Charles!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you."

He kissed her fingers and drew a chair to her side.

"I'm sorry to see you reading all these semi-official newspapers," he declared, after a few amenities had passed between them. "You'll get in such a state of hopeless confusion if you try to read them all. There's the official organ of the Heimwehr, the Nazi rag, the Government organ and the Schutzbund!"

"I know," she sighed. "It's terribly difficult. I used to think our American politics were involved enough, but it's much worse over here. Tell me what's going to happen, Charles."

He laughed—almost light-heartedly.

"My dear Sarah," he exclaimed, "why ask me? I thought you knew that politics weren't in my line. I've come over here to escape from them. I'm always nervous that some day or other my family will insist upon my going into Parliament."

"Politics in England are different," she declared a little pettishly. "They don't mean bloodshed as they do here. Do you know, there has been quite a lot of fighting in the streets and the way they are treating these poor Jews is something awful. You remember Otto von Lenberg?"

"Why, of course," he answered.

"The Von Lenbergs aren't really Jews at all," she told him, "but just because he defended the Herzfelds when their properties were confiscated he has been turned out of the Courts and fined millions. He is in prison at the present moment and Olga is nearly out of her mind. Heaps and heaps of our friends have been branded suspects. The Austrian Nazis are getting stronger here every day. It really is alarming, Charles. We are expecting the Germans to cross the frontier at any moment and I can't imagine what will happen then. I don't particularly care for Jews, Charles, but some of them are quite delightful people and they are being treated brutally."

"What does Sir John think about it?" Mildenhall asked.

"He doesn't think anything, of course," she answered. "He can't. He's the ambassador of a foreign country and he can't open his mouth. It's different with you. You've practically left the Service, John says. You must admit that this Jew baiting, for a civilized nation, is a filthy affair."

"I'm dining with a Jew on Thursday," Mildenhall remarked. "A Jew banker, too. I hope he's not going to get into trouble."

"Not one of the Rothschilds?"

He shook his head.

"No. Leopold Benjamin."

She looked at him with uplifted eyebrows and an almost-frightened light in her eyes.

"Why, he's just the one man I'm most alarmed about," she confided. "I think he's the most lovable creature, but they say he's already had to pay two enormous fines and I heard only the other night that he is a marked man. I've never heard you speak of him before, have I?"

"I never met him until this afternoon," Mildenhall replied. "I met him in his own bank and he asked me to dine. I want awfully to see his pictures."

"He has the most gorgeous collection of everything artistic that you can imagine," Lady Tremearne said impressively. "My dear, he has a Murillo I would give my soul for, and a Fra Filippo Lippi more beautiful than the one in the Pitti Palace. John says his collection must be worth many millions of dollars."

"Must cost him some sleepless nights just now, I should think."

"We're getting used to them here," she sighed. "There is fighting of a sort in the streets most nights. If you've come here for some fun, Charles, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. The café life still goes on, I believe, but there are no parties, not even amongst our own people. Everyone here seems to be

sitting with bated breath waiting for something or other. Fancy what I'm reduced to in the way of dissipation nowadays! The Archduchess Katherine—you remember, you met them in the Tyrol somewhere—the Princess Madziwill and Molly Morton—the wife of our Embassy Counsellor here—dine with me and play bridge twice a week! They're coming to-night. What do you think of that for gay Vienna?"

"Very pleasant, I should call it." he remarked. "I haven't played bridge for I don't know how long. Your one great party of the year is coming off, I hear, as usual."

"The Von Liebenstrahls? What courage! They're safely away in their Schloss, which they say is a complete fortress and as big as a small town, and they're opening up the Palace here in Vienna just for that one party. Every spring for years theirs has been the great social event of Vienna and the Field Marshal will insist upon having it as usual. There are a hundred servants down here making the Palace ready now."

"The true Viennese spirit," he approved. "They say Prince von Liebenstrahl is the bravest man in Austria and his wife is still the most beautiful woman. It's years since I saw them."

"Have you ever been to one of their balls?" she asked.

"Never."

"You'd better come with us. You'll still see the most beautiful women in Europe and the most marvellous collection of uniforms."

"Very kind of you," Mildenhall said a little dubiously.

"We have forty people dining, as it is," Lady Tremearne confided, "but we'll squeeze you in somewhere. The English and American Embassies have always given dinner parties. I believe the Countess Otobini, the wife of the Hungarian Minister, is having one this year."

"I'm afraid dinner is off for me," he regretted. "It's the night I am dining with Benjamin."

"Then I shan't say another word about my little feast," she laughed. "Mr. Benjamin himself eats scarcely anything, but he is a great epicure and he pays his chef an immense salary. Then his wines, too, are the most famous in Vienna. What you probably won't get, and although I know it's a brutal taste I still like them, is a cocktail. I told Mr. Benjamin so once myself and there was that pained look in his eyes as though someone had played a wrong note on a violin or dropped an 'h' in the middle of a beautiful speech. He never said a word but I could see him suffering."

"He's perfectly right, of course. Spirits are crude things, however cunningly they are mixed, compared to wines."

Lascelles made rather a hurried entrance and took Mildenhall by the arm.

"We must fly," he declared. "Your guests are coming up the grand staircase. Lady Tremearne. I shall take Mildenhall down the back way."

Lady Tremearne smiled.

"Tweeds are quite all right until ten o'clock in this country," she said, "and I'm sure he'd like to see the Archduchess again."

"Later on in the week, perhaps," Mildenhall said as he felt his friend's compelling touch. "You will excuse us, Lady Tremearne? I shall pay my formal call to-morrow."

She dismissed them with a little wave of the hand.

"Wish me luck," she called out. "Fifty cents a hundred and we play the forcing two!"

CHAPTER III

Victor's smooth face was wreathed in smiles as he led Lascelles and Mildenhall, his two distinguished guests, to their places an hour later in the most famous of Vienna's smaller restaurants. He was reputed to speak the language of every recognized nation in Europe and his English was smooth and faultless.

"It is a great pleasure for me," he said, "to welcome Mr. Mildenhall back to Vienna. Mr. Lascelles has always his table here, although he dines at his beautiful Embassy more often than I could wish. To-night many of my valued patrons are honouring me. Sometimes I see them—sometimes I do not. The Archduke to-night, par exemple, I do not see, but Mr. Mildenhall will agree with me, I am sure, that his companion is very, very beautiful."

He ushered the two men into their bôite. A bowl of dark red roses stood in the centre of the small round table prepared for two, and the array of glass would have looked equally at home in a museum. They took their places. Victor spread out his hands.

"For the guests whom I would like to honour," he confided, "I carry no menu. I think that I know well the tastes of Monsieur Lascelles, I believe that I can divine those of Monsieur Mildenhall. I shall not shock you if I offer you the new season's caviar with the ninety-year-old vodka, the first of the young salmon from our own noble river, a baby deer with some garnishings of young hog's flesh, a salad which I prepare here and a souffle incomparable, something invented only last week by the nephew of my chef, the Cordon Bleu Maurice, who serves his apprenticeship here. With the salmon a

Berncasteler Doktor of '84 will serve to help you forget the crudeness of the vodka. With the deer I would offer a Chateau Mouton-Rothschild of 1870. Of the brandy we speak later."

"Victor has ideas!" Mildenhall murmured.

"Such a meal should be set to poetry," Lascelles suggested.

"But for poetry or for music where else would you go?" Victor demanded. "They all tell me that my restaurant is the meeting-place of lovely women, and you are precisely the right distance away to appreciate the most wonderful music Strauss ever wrote, played by the maestro."

"We submit, Victor," Mildenhall remarked with a twinkle in his eyes. "You are the Emperor of Gastronomy!"

Victor bowed low and left them.

Mildenhall's whole attention during the next few minutes was concentrated, as far as discretion permitted, upon the table exactly opposite.

"I think," he pronounced, "the woman with Karl Sebastian is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen in my life."

Lascelles permitted himself a glance across the room.

"Most of Vienna thinks as you do, my friend," he admitted. "An introduction would be quite in order, but—not to-night."

"Tell me her name," Mildenhall asked. "I can't remember having seen her here before."

"The name by which she is generally known, and to which I believe she is absolutely entitled, is the Baroness von Ballinstrode. I have heard there was a previous marriage, to a man whose name I have forgotten, which was annulled, but I don't think the divorce was properly legalized. Very complicated, some of these religious quibbles."

"Overwhelmingly Teutonic," Mildenhall murmured, "but nevertheless exquisite. I have never seen such a complexion—bluer eyes—a more fascinating smile. She has almost too much animation for her type."

"If you stay long enough I must certainly see about that introduction," Lascelles observed. "The Archduke is here for the Von Liebenstrahls' dance on Thursday. A day or two afterwards he and the Archduchess will return to their castle in the mountains, unless he can get off on his own for a few weeks to Monte Carlo. A week is about as long as he dare spend in Vienna, nowadays. Lucky for him if another putsch doesn't come while he's in the city. He's not much of a politician but he's quite a figurehead."

"What about the Anschluss?"'

"No politics, there's a dear fellow," Lascelles begged. "I don't know where the Germans got the idea from," he added, looking round, "but they always think that Englishmen—especially if they are connected with diplomacy in any way—are nothing but 'gasbags/ This place is a favourite rendezvous of the Royalists—the few of them that are left. I should think we are certain to have a visit from the Gestapo, unless Victor succeeds in keeping them away. Wish I were going back with you, Charles. Central Europe is getting on my nerves."

The caviar arrived and with its many et ceteras absorbed the attention of the two men for a time.

"There is no vodka like this in the world," Lascelles remarked as he sipped it slowly. "Soft as velvet, isn't it?"

"It's marvellous," his friend agreed. "Perfect food, perfect wine and glorious women. Think what would happen to us if anything went wrong with Vienna!"

Lascelles' face seemed suddenly to have lost all expression. His fingers were toying with the flask of vodka.

"Gestapo!" he murmured under his breath. "The one thing I regret in Vienna just now is the passing of the polo. Since the Hungarian team broke up there hasn't been a decent game."

"It's the County cricket I miss through travelling so much," Mildenhall observed with equal seriousness. "I saw Yorkshire play twice last year but I missed the West Indian Test Match. Free hitting and lots of it—that's the type of cricket I like to see."

Four members of the Gestapo—brawny, muscular young men with evil faces—stood in the middle of the restaurant talking to a very solemn-faced Victor. One of them detached himself and strolled in leisurely fashion about the place gazing insolently at the diners. Before one of the least conspicuous tables, where a man was dining alone, he stopped. The man continued to eat, taking apparently no notice of what was going on around him. The intruder knocked on the table with his knuckles. The diner looked up and asked what seemed to be a simple question. The S.S. man shouted at him angrily. His voice was heard all over the room.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Behrling—Antoine Behrling," was the distinctly spoken reply.

"Your papers!"

The man looked up.

"It is not necessary for me to carry papers," he said. "I am Viennese."

"You are a Jew," the other declared angrily.

The diner shrugged his shoulders.

"I am nothing of the sort," he answered. "I am a Catholic."

"We'll see about that!"

Victor came hurrying across the room. It evidently cost him an effort to speak politely.

"This gentleman," he said, "is a well-known lawyer. His name is Behrling and he is not the kind of person you are looking for at all."

"How do you know?"

Victor turned away. The man looked after him scowling.

"If you're a lawyer, why didn't you say so?" he asked, turning back to the table.

"You did not ask me my profession."

"Do not leave your place until I give you permission!"

The Nazi swaggered across the room towards where his companions were standing. They had a final look round, discussed Behrling for a moment but the apparent leader of the little band shook his head.

"A lucky night for you, Victor," one of the younger men remarked.

"Not particularly," was the quiet reply. "It is not a matter of chance at all. I have no patrons who would be likely to interest you."

"No impudence!" the sergeant snapped, pointing to a table. "Send us four glasses of beer over there."

"I regret," Victor said, "that we do not serve beer in this restaurant."

"You'll serve what I order!" was the angry retort.

It was several moments before Victor spoke again. When he did so his voice seemed to have faded away. It was raised scarcely above a whisper. It was none the less impressive.

"We natives and citizens of Vienna," he said, "are well aware of the danger in which we stand. In a very short time you may be within your rights in forcing your way into a hundred-year-old restaurant and demanding that its rules shall be broken and that you shall occupy a table unbecomingly clothed. But tonight I am still master here. The Chief of the Police of the city has booked a table here to-night and is already due, so you will be able to state your grievances in a few minutes. Until that time comes you will kindly take your leave."

There was a moment's hesitation. The situation was beginning to present difficulties.

"What if we order champagne?" one of the men blustered.

"I should still refuse to serve you here as guests," Victor announced. "I should

also warn you that my champagne is very expensive."

Herr Antoine Behrling seemed to have been entirely forgotten. The four men swaggered out of the place. Victor watched them leave, waiting until he heard the door close behind them. Then he returned, making his way towards his office. Lascelles leaned forward towards him as he passed their bôite. The words of congratulation, however, died away upon his lips. He could see that the restaurateur was still shivering.

"Bravely done, Victor," he said pleasantly. "We shall enjoy all the more your most wonderful dinner."

"I have never tasted anything to compare with your young deer," Mildenhall declared. "As for your Chateau Mouton-Rothschild—it has a fault."

Nothing could have galvanized Victor more suddenly into his ordinary self.

"It was perhaps a little overwarm?" he suggested anxiously.

"Not in the least, my friend," his patron assured him. "But for wine drinkers —"

"Yes?"

"One bottle!"

A smile broke across Victor's lips. He was himself again. He drew a little silver thermometer from his pocket.

"Five minutes, gentlemen. It shall be no longer," he assured them. "I will guarantee you exactly the same temperature."

On their way out the Archduke summoned them. He shook hands with both.

"My friend Lascelles I often see," he remarked. "We play bridge sometimes at the club. You, Mr. Mildenhall, are more of a stranger. I believe, though, that we have met."

"I have had the honour of dining with you, sir, two years ago, after a shooting party near your Schloss>," Mildenhall reminded him.

"Of course I remember," the Archduke said graciously. "You were staying with the Von Liebenstrahls. I remember remarking how well you young Englishmen shot considering the different conditions over here...Baroness, you must permit me to present my two friends—Mr. Lascelles from the British Embassy and Mr. Mildenhall, whom I heard someone once call a 'diplomatic vagrant.'"

The Baroness held out her fingers to Lascelles and afterwards received Mildenhall's bow. Upon Lascelles she bestowed a smile of courtesy. She looked into Charles Mildenhall's eyes with a different expression. It seemed to him, and he was by no means conceited, that she withdrew her fingers almost

with reluctance.

"Mr. Mildenhall does not come often enough to Vienna," she remarked.

"To-night's experience tells me that you speak the truth, Baroness," he replied.

"What does His Highness mean when he calls you a 'diplomatic vagrant'?" she asked.

"I started life in the Diplomatic Service," he told her, "but for some years I have been only partially attached."

"You lack fidelity?"

"Scarcely that, Baroness. I happen to possess a gift which we English, I fear, acquire with too much difficulty. I have the knack of speaking most European languages. Therefore, if there is any small trouble in any one of these countries whose language seems to be brimming over with consonants, I act for our government as messenger boy or peacemaker. The occupation has its advantages, but I can conceive nothing more wonderful than being in my friend Lascelles' position."

"And why?" she asked softly.

He leaned a little farther across the table. Certainly hers were the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

"Because I find Vienna the centre of civilization," he told her. "It possesses the best food, the most wonderful wines and the most beautiful women in the world."

"And since when," she persisted, "have you arrived at that conclusion?"

He glanced at his platinum wrist watch.

"Two hours and five minutes ago, Baroness."

"You are evidently a gourmet," she smiled. "I noticed that you were taking great interest in those wonderful dishes which were being served at your table."

"A gesture, Baroness," he assured her. "When one is so utterly content with one's surroundings it is necessary, sometimes, to dissemble."

She leaned back in her place and laughed frankly.

"From now on," she declared, "I change my opinion of all Englishmen."

The Archduke grunted.

"Mr. Lascelles," he said, "you must remove your young friend. I am becoming jealous. Nevertheless, I hope that we shall all meet again before long."

He waved them graciously away.

"Your opinion is unchanged?" Lascelles asked as he took his friend's arm

outside.

"I still think," Mildenhall replied, "that she is the most perfectly beautiful creature I have ever seen."

CHAPTER IV

The mansion of Leopold Benjamin, more than once the habitation of royalty, was encircled by a railing of iron bars as thick as a man's wrist, with spiked tops, reaching at least eight feet high. The lodge keeper, who somewhat reluctantly had answered Charles Mildenhall's summons, took down his name in a book, after which he swung open the great gates and motioned him forward. As far as he could see, when at last he reached the imposing entrance, the whole house on the other side of the huge front door was in complete darkness. He raised the knocker—a massive, wrought-iron affair—after a few moments' hesitation, and although he could hear the bell, with which it seemed to be connected, ringing somewhere in the realms of darkness beyond, he felt almost inclined to beat a retreat. It was a night of terror in the city. In the far distance he could hear the rat-tat-tat of machine guns and overhead the droning of planes. The streets were rapidly becoming deserted. To present oneself for an informal dinner party when all Vienna was shaken with tremors of fear, seemed a little ridiculous. He was, as a matter of fact, on the point of turning away when he became aware of a sudden blaze of light shining through the windows on either side of him. There were footsteps from within. The door was suddenly opened. A bowing manservant welcomed him and closed the door immediately upon his entrance.

"Mr. Benjamin is, I think, expecting me for dinner," Mildenhall announced, "or perhaps—" he hesitated. "The city is in such a disturbed state—"

"Der gnãdiger Herr is expected," the man assured him, collecting his coat and hat with another low bow. "Be so good as to follow me."

Mildenhall looked around him in astonishment. The great hall, which was more like the nave of a cathedral, was beautifully but softly illuminated by hundreds of shaded lamps. There were pictures hanging everywhere—Old Masters, many of them. The world-famous portrait of Frederick the Great dominated the wall on his right. Back in the shadows was the no-less-famous marble statue of Shunach's Venus. There were treasures on either side of him on which he had no time to bestow more than a casual glance as he followed his guide into the great reception room.

"Herr Mildenhall," the man announced.

At first Mildenhall thought that the huge apartment was empty. Then a girl,

who had been curled up in an easy chair, threw down her book, shook out her skirts and rose to her feet. She came forward to meet him with a delightful smile of welcome.

"I'm so sorry that Mr. Benjamin is a few minutes late," she apologized as she held out her hand. "You will please excuse him, Mr. Mildenhall, and talk to me for a moment. My name is Patricia Grey. I am one of Mr. Benjamin's secretaries."

"I am delighted to meet you. Miss Grey," Mildenhall said. "To tell you the truth, after that bewildering walk from the front entrance it is rather a relief to find something of normal size."

She laughed gaily.

"Do you know," she told him, "half the people who come here as strangers and face the splendours of the hall for the first time arrive in this room in rather a dazed condition. It is more like a museum than a private house, I admit. Do sit down, please. There will be a cocktail directly. Tell me—is it quiet outside?"

"Not very," he admitted. "And by-the-by, half of Vienna believes that Mr. Benjamin left the city this morning. I'm afraid things don't look very good."

"I think they look horrible," she agreed. "You know, of course, from my accent that I am an American. We are used to noise in the streets in New York, but this is all different. It's terribly upsetting. We've been trying hard to get Mr. Benjamin to leave, but he's very obstinate sometimes. He always feels that he might be of help to some of his own people here."

"But what could he do?" Mildenhall asked. "The place seems to be in an uproar already. I really wondered whether I ought to come to-night. I would not have ventured but I went into the bank this afternoon and they told me there that Mr. Benjamin was not thinking of leaving."

"Mr. Benjamin," she said, "is a wonderful man. He was born in Vienna in this very house and time after time he has announced his intention of dying here. The fact that he is a Jew never disturbs him. He calls himself Viennese. I should think no one has a better right."

The door was opened. Marius Blute was announced. The girl welcomed him as an old friend. He shook hands with Mildenhall and drew up a chair.

"Things are a little quieter, I believe," the newcomer reported. "They talk about parleys and all that sort of thing. I don't believe in them. What has to come has to come. Much better to get it over."

"You don't mean that you want the Germans to take over Austria?" the girl asked.

"I do not mean it," he replied, "but however much we may dislike it, they are

going to do it. How is our beloved Chief?"

"Just escaped from my hands," she confided. "I let him off as easily as possible but there were hundreds of papers to be signed. He'll be down in a few minutes. I never know exactly how many people are dining but I am sure it's a small party to-night so I think that we might have cocktails served."

"A heavenly thought," Blute declared, springing to his feet. "You see," he added, turning to Mildenhall, "I know the ways of the house so I am allowed to ring the bell."

Dr. and Mrs. Schwarz, evidently habitués, were announced.

"Dr. Schwarz," Patricia Grey told Mildenhall, "is the President of the famous Benjamin Hospital. I'll show you a photograph of it," she added, rising to her feet. "Please come with me."

She led him to the farther end of the room and unfastened a portfolio.

"You needn't look at these," she said. "You may-take my word for it that it is the most up-to-date hospital in Vienna and the entire cost is borne by Mr. Benjamin."

"Your Chief is a Prince of Philanthropists," Mildenhall declared. "I agree with you, though, I don't want to see any photographs of hospitals. I want you to tell me about yourself."

"I'm really a bank secretary," she confided. "I happen to be pretty good at languages so they sent me over here to train the girls. Our banks are just a little more modern, you know, in New York. I worked at that for a year and then Mr. Benjamin made me his private secretary. I have a small suite of rooms in the house and when none of his married daughters or Mrs. Benjamin are here—he has crowds of relations, you know—I help him with his dinners. I wanted to say something to you, Mr. Mildenhall."

"There are a great many things I should like to say to you," the young man assured her.

She laughed up at him.

"That can come afterwards. Listen! Mr. Benjamin seems to have taken rather a fancy to you. He tells me that you travel all over Europe and that you know as much of what is going on as anyone. Tell me, do you think the Nazis who are coming into Vienna are going to be as wicked with the Jews as they were in Germany?"

Mildenhall looked at her thoughtfully. There was no doubt at all but that Patricia Grey was a very attractive young woman. She had a piquant face, soft grey-green eyes, red hair, a slender charming figure and a pleasant voice. Just now she was very serious.

"Shall I tell you just what I believe?" he asked.

"That's what I want you to do," she begged him earnestly.

"I think they're going to be very bad," he said. "No one knows how many millions the government of Germany has taken from the Jews. The Austrian Nazis have begun, as you know, to do the same thing here. When this country is taken into the Reich, as it certainly will be, I think that they will treat the Austrian Jews even worse than they have the German."

"Why should they?" she asked. "The Jews are good citizens."

"Yes, but the German Jews," he told her, "were the great industrialists of the country. They were behind half the great commercial institutions. They were leading lights in nearly all the professions. Here the same condition of things exists, of course, but the very richest Jews of all are aristocrats. There are many old families in Vienna who have intermarried with Jews, and the Germany of to-day—I mean the government—hates the aristocrats. If I were you. Miss Patricia Grey, I should do all that I could to get Mr. Benjamin out of the country before it is too late."

"And he loves his home here so much!" she lamented. "His pictures, his tapestry and his china—all those things are his happiness in life. He is one of the world's greatest collectors, you know."

"Everyone appreciates that," Mildenhall admitted. "Still, you've asked for my advice. Miss Grey, and you have it. Get Mr. Benjamin out of this country as quickly as you can."

"You'll tell him what you think, if he asks you, won't you?" she begged.

"It's a promise."

He glanced towards the door. Leopold Benjamin had made his appearance and there was a bustle of further new arrivals.

"You shall be rewarded," Patricia told him, "for granting my request. I will now introduce you to the woman all Vienna is talking about."

Mildenhall was standing quite still gazing towards the other end of the room.

"I think I know whom you mean."

"Already?" she laughed.

"I met her a few nights ago—that is, if you mean the Baroness von Ballinstrode."

"And you are a victim, I can see!"

"I met her at Victor's restaurant," he said a little evasively. "She was with the Archduke Karl Sebastian."

Patricia caught at his arm. They were walking slowly towards the others.

"Don't mention that to anyone," she whispered. "It would be rather a faux pas here. Mr. Benjamin is devoted to the Archduke and he is also fond of the Archduchess."

"I will remember," Mildenhall promised.

She flitted away to greet the new arrivals. Mildenhall remained a little in the background, dividing his attention between the woman he admired and his host. In his simply cut dinner clothes Leopold Benjamin would have been an arresting figure anywhere. He was tall—over six feet—and very thin, but his carriage made his height unnoticeable. His features were excellent and the deep lines in his face detracted nothing from his good looks. His forehead was high, his grey hair brushed simply back. His expression was very grave in repose and it was evidently a very serious matter which he was discussing with the Baroness. Her fingers were resting upon his arm, those beautiful blue eyes were upturned to his. It was obvious that she was making a request of some sort which he was not wholly disposed to grant. He suddenly caught sight of Charles Mildenhall in the background, and beckoned to him with the air of one who welcomes a diversion.

"We will speak of these serious matters later, Baroness," he said pleasantly. "I must introduce to you a young friend who is making a flying visit to Vienna. He belongs, I think, more to your world than do we of this sober household. Mr. Mildenhall," he added, "the Baroness von Ballinstrode permits me to present you. Everything you wish to know about the gaiety of this fascinating city she can reveal."

The Baroness was gracious but showed no signs of ever having heard of Mildenhall before. The latter, grateful for Patricia Grey's hint, murmured only the few formal words necessary. Leopold Benjamin turned away to speak to Mrs. Schwarz.

"Our host is in an obstinate humour this evening," the Baroness confided. "I have been watching you from a distance," he admitted. "If such a thing were possible, I should have divined that you were asking him a favour which he was not disposed to grant."

"You are evidently," she said, sinking into one of the beautiful Empire chairs and motioning him to draw one to her side, "a person of discernment, perhaps I should also add—tact."

"You flatter me," he murmured. "As a matter of fact, I generally lose my head when I have a really pleasant surprise."

She tapped his knuckles with her fan.

"But listen," she begged. "I was really giving Mr. Benjamin some wonderful advice, if he would listen to it. The situation to-night is worse but—you know a little of the Viennese temperament, I'm sure—nobody will believe it. They

are light-hearted; they hope always for the best. No one will believe what I know to be the truth. The Germans have two divisions of picked troops actually on the frontier. They will be in Austria before daylight tomorrow."
"As bad as that," he murmured.
"Worse," she answered, "a great deal worse for Leopold Benjamin. I need not tell you how the Jews have been treated in Germany. It is too awful a subject to discuss—especially in this house. But listen, my friend—I know these things because I have influential connections—in this country Leopold Benjamin stands upon a pinnacle. He is the Emperor of all the Jews. No one believes that harm could come to him. All the same, it will. I want him to leave at once. I want him to pack up all those treasures of his—millions and millions of your English pounds they are worth—and take them over the Swiss frontier. He would be safe there. Not only that—his treasures would be safe. He will not listen to me. He will not believe even the late news that I bring him. Look at him listening to the Princess Sophie's chatter! Don't you love that gracious stoop of the neck he has? Have you influence with him, Mr. Mildenhall?"
"Not a scrap," Mildenhall assured her. "He was a great friend of my uncle's, but I only met him a few days ago and he knows nothing about me except that I am distantly connected with the British Embassy here."
She looked up at him with a reawakened gleam of interest in her eyes.
"So that was why you were dining with Freddie Lascelles!"
"An old friend of mine," he assented. "We started our career together in Paris."
"Later on this evening you must tell me all about yourself," she said. "Just now I feel that I want to talk about nothing but Leopold Benjamin. Someone ought to make him see reason. He has bad advisers here."
"He looks far too intelligent to make mistakes of that sort," Mildenhall remarked.
"He is too kindly. He sees nothing but the best side of everybody. How he came to make this enormous fortune banking I cannot imagine, except that his father had paved the way for him. Tell me, do you know a queer little man—Marius Blute, I think his name is?"
"Yes, I know him. I met him the same day that I met Mr. Benjamin. He's dining here to-night."
"That man," she said seriously, "is one of Leopold Benjamin's most dangerous advisers."
"Really? Of course, I know nothing about him," Mildenhall continued, "but I should not have thought that he possessed sufficient significance to be an adviser to one of the most astute men in Austria."
Patricia Grey glided up to them. In her simple black frock, with her delightful figure and marvellous colouring, she presented an altogether charming appearance—a complete and intriguing foil to the Baroness.

"We are going in to dinner quite informally," Patricia announced. "We have not even table cards. Will you look after the Baroness, Mr. Mildenhall? I am told that I must be somewhere in the neighbourhood as Mr. Mildenhall is our only stranger tonight."
"Seems to me," he remarked with a smile as he offered his arm to the Baroness, "that the strangers get all the luck here."

CHAPTER V

"This," Patricia told Mildenhall as he took his place in the high-backed chair next to her at the dining table, "is what Mr. Benjamin's industrious librarian calls in his guide to the house 'the smaller banqueting hall.' The fact that there is room for eighty to sit at this table he carefully ignores. One of Mr. Benjamin's visiting friends called it 'The Room of Faded Splendours.'"

"He was probably not a person of observation," Mildenhall remarked. "A few hundreds of years only added subtlety to the colouring of Gobelin tapestries and the wonder of the world is still the freshness of these Renaissance paintings. I have never dined before facing a genuine Andrea del Sarto."

"And what do you think of your servitors?" she asked smiling.

He glanced round the table. Behind every chair, in plain but attractive costume, stood a Viennese parlourmaid. With the exception of Heinrich, the butler, there was only one manservant in the room—the wine seneschal—and he stood immovable behind his master's chair.

"To tell you the truth," Mildenhall confided, "it was the strangeness of the—er—domestic staff which I noticed even before I realized the wonder of the picture."

"The service is an old feature of the housekeeping here," Patricia said. "It was like this in Mr. Benjamin's father's time and his grandfather's."

"To me it always seems," the Baroness remarked from his other side, "that, notwithstanding all its treasures, the most wonderful thing in the house is its owner."

"This is only the second time I have seen him," Mildenhall observed, "but I should think you are probably right."

"If he were not a Jew," she went on, "if he had been able to give his whole attention to politics, he would without a doubt have led the country. I do not think that it would have been in its present unhappy state. I think it would still have been a monarchy with a court the most brilliant in Europe."

"It is an interesting speculation," Mildenhall admitted. "I doubt, though,

whether the bourgeoisie of any country would submit to a revival of monarchal rule in these days."

"England, my friend! England!"

"The only exception," he agreed, "and Cromwell wasn't much of a dictator, was he? England is a difficult problem for any historian. When I was at Oxford the professors told us that the Stuarts had murdered the bourgeoisie just as the Pitts crushed labour."

"The English tolerate Jews as we do, don't they?" Patricia asked.

"Rather," he answered. "I should imagine that it is to the Jews England owes her financial prosperity. Except for Disraeli they have never been a success in politics. They may even have made us a nation of shopkeepers, but they are the greatest and most vital force in the country now. It is in the professions, too, that they have triumphed so completely. If Leopold Benjamin had been an Englishman, he would have been Prime Minister, beyond a doubt."

"There is one thing I do not like about this evening," Dr. Schwarz remarked, leaning forward in his place. "It is the silence in the streets. When the Viennese is gay he sings; when he is sad he shuts himself up at home. To-night he does not make the promenade. Even the cafés are half empty."

"Does anyone know," the Princess Sophie, an ample lady who wore a single eyeglass and was scarcely ever a moment without a cigarette between her lips, asked, "whether the Von Liebenstrahl ball has been postponed?"

"I called at the Embassy on my way down," Charles Mildenhall confided, "and everyone was preparing. Lady Tremearne is giving a large dinner for it."

"You are going to the ball afterwards?" the Baroness asked eagerly.

"I believe so," he answered.

"Fortunate man!"

"It is doubtless quite a spectacle, but there are still far more wonderful things to be seen in this house."

"That depends, my friend," she said. "For a woman, a great feast of colour, the latest models of all the dressmakers in Europe, a wealth of jewellery that is only seen once a year, the handsomest of all our men who put on their uniforms and deck themselves out for this one occasion—oh, it is a great sight!"

"You may be disappointed this time," he remarked. "I came from Bucharest here. Two years ago special planes brought down the King and some of the Court. Nothing of that sort is happening now."

"The old Prince," she reflected, "is as stubborn as a mule. I think everyone hoped that it would be postponed. I do not like our lovely music here played to

the accompaniment of bombing planes. The joys of peace and the horrors of war and revolution should be kept, I think, a long way apart."

Mildenhall turned to the girl on his other side.

"They told me at the Embassy, Miss Grey, that the wonderful galleries here were closed for the present. Is that true?"

She looked at him a little doubtfully.

"I'm afraid so," she answered. "It nearly broke my Chief's heart, but they all thought that it was necessary."

Mr. Benjamin leaned across the table.

"Is it true that you wished to see my pictures?" he asked.

"Indeed it is, sir," Mildenhall acknowledged. "Believe me, though, I quite understand. You are the custodian of such beautiful things that for the sake of the next generation, as well as for the rest of ours, you must keep them without risk for saner times."

Mr. Benjamin shook his head sorrowfully.

"It is not the mad people who parade the streets whom I fear," he said. "Not even the worst of them would damage my home or do harm to my treasures. It is a colder, more calculating business altogether which places them in danger. I have been obliged to take steps—"

Patricia leaned across the table.

"Mr. Benjamin!" she begged.

He smiled at her gently.

"But, my dear," he remonstrated, "to-night we are just a party of friends—so few of us—not a single stranger."

"Mr. Benjamin!" she pleaded once more.

He glanced round the table.

"But, my dear Patricia," he repeated, "I admire your zeal and you know that I appreciate your care for everything that is so precious to me, but my little explanation of why I have to refuse so simple and gracious a request was necessary. Surely I may exonerate myself?"

"Mr. Benjamin," she said firmly, "the words you were about to utter should not be spoken. Everyone at this table is, of course, above suspicion. That does not matter. The words should not be spoken."

Mr. Benjamin remained for a moment in a state of distressful indecision. Mildenhall leaned across to him.

"My dear host," he begged, "I wish, if you please, to withdraw my thoughtless

request. I have read what a very great man who stayed with you for a month wrote of your pictures and statuary, and his book is one of the few classics of my life, but believe me I should be perfectly miserable if I induced you to change any decision you have come to about your treasures or to alter your arrangements in any way. I have been perfectly honest. If you offered me your keys and yourself as cicerone I should put on my hat and walk out of the house for fear you would imperil the safety of any one of your—"

Mildenhall broke off in his speech. Louder than ever before that night they could hear the booming of heavy guns. Nearer at hand the rifle fire had become more persistent. For a moment a blaze of light filled the room so that the delicately shaded lamps seemed to exist no longer, and everyone covered his eyes. There was the sound of an explosion. Then silence. Mr. Benjamin smiled and patted the Princess Sophie's hand.

"That mine," he told her, "was at least ten miles away. It is our own people who are making all the disturbance. If the Germans enter the city to-night, believe me, they will do so in orderly fashion. They will be disciplined troops and we shall have nothing to fear from them except what we feel inside—the humiliation, the sorrow," he concluded, with his hand over his heart, "which comes with the passing of a great nation. If all negotiations fail, if the Germans enter the city, we must face what lies before us, but for the moment, believe me, we are in no danger."

"All the same," Mrs. Schwarz said, wiping her eyes and rising to her feet, "I think we must go. The streets soon will not be safe."

The Baroness pushed aside her ice and lit a cigarette.

"My car is not yet here," she confided. "I agree with Mr. Benjamin. We are as safe here as anywhere. There will be no fighting in this quarter. If the Germans enter it will be as the result of negotiations."

"Negotiations or no negotiations," the Princess declared, "I should like my car, Leopold."

"And I," Mrs. Schwarz demanded.

The single manservant disappeared. The sound of the cars outside was heard almost at once. Coffee was served and, in the temporary absence of disturbing interruptions, everyone seemed to recover himself a little. Very few noticed the quiet entrance of Marius Blute through a door just behind the banker. He pushed a slip of paper into Mr. Benjamin's hand and was gone in a moment, slipping behind the screen and out through the door. Leopold Benjamin, with a word of excuse to Mrs. Schwarz, with whom he had been conversing, read the single line, half closed his eyes and then looked across to where Patricia was watching him. The slightest inclination of his head was sufficient. In a moment she was standing by his side. He handed her the slip of paper. She

read it and they passed out into the hall together.

Heinrich, the single manservant who had been visible during the service of dinner except for the seneschal and aide from the wine cellar, threw open the door.

"The automobiles await Her Highness the Princess von Dorlingen, the Baroness von Ballinstrode and Dr. and Mrs. Schwarz," he announced.

The Baroness glanced around the room.

"But our host?" she exclaimed. "I rather fancy that was an urgent message he received," Mildenhall confided. "I saw that funny little man Blute slip in from behind the screen with a note."

"We'd better wait for a short time, I suppose," she suggested. "I will show you the music room. It is very famous but there are no treasures there."

Outside in the great hall Heinrich was standing by the opened door and the cars were in line. There was no sign of Patricia.

"The little girl secretary seems to be a sort of hostess," Mildenhall reflected. "Perhaps we ought to see if she is about."

"I do not see any necessity," the Baroness declared, as one of the maids brought her cloak. "I think we go together—you and 1.1 drop you where you like. You change your clothes, perhaps, before you go to the ball?"

"I must," he assented. "For that I shall have to go to the Embassy."

"Would you like to drive with me, or would you rather walk?" she asked.

"I should not feel in the least happy," he assured her, "if I let you go alone. There are all sorts of wild people in the streets."

"Perhaps you had better take me to my apartment first, then," she proposed.

"It will give me great pleasure."

"Come then."

"Mr. Mildenhall!"

He turned around. Patricia was coming towards him across the hall.

"Could you please come with me for a moment or two? I have a message for you."

"Of course."

He glanced towards the Baroness with a gesture of helplessness. The latter looked across at Patricia.

"The little lady can give you her message quickly," she suggested. "I will wait."

Patricia turned to her courteously.

"I cannot ask you to share in the message," she explained, "because it is rather important and very private, but if Mr. Mildenhall is driving you home, would you mind waiting in the dining-room? Heinrich will look after you."

"Thank you," the Baroness said. "Heinrich can show me into the car. I shall sit there and await Herr Mildenhall. Do not keep him too long. He has to change into uniform and make himself very beautiful for the ball."

She wrapped herself a little more closely in her ermine cloak. In the soft gleam from the shaded electric light near which she stood her anxious expression of a few minutes ago seemed entirely to have passed. There was something Grecian about her beauty, her superbly graceful pose as she stood there smiling with her eyes fixed upon Mildenhall's.

"You will not be long?" she asked.

"A minute or two only," he promised.

CHAPTER VI

Patricia led her companion almost in silence across the hall into the library. Neither of them found speech an easy matter. Mildenhall, curiously enough, was a little ashamed at the tumult of sensations which had suddenly disturbed the even progress of his life. Patricia, because of this moment of deep anxiety for all that she held dear in life, felt an irritated sense of disquietude of which she also was ashamed. She turned on two of the lights in the library, motioned him to close the door and listened for a moment. There were footsteps in the street outside, but not the sort of footsteps for which she was listening—wild, undisciplined footsteps these, mostly, of men and women running, or the shuffling footsteps of the Viennese beggars seeking always for shelter. What she was dreading was the iron tramp of soldiers, the voice of discipline, the harsh, raucous commands from an officer of the invaders.

"I must not keep you long, Mr. Mildenhall," she said. "Please listen. Air. Benjamin is a strange man. He is the kindest and best person in the world, but he has queer ideas. He is mortified to-night because you asked to see his pictures and he could not show them to you."

"But that is ridiculous," Mildenhall told her. "I was sorry afterwards that I had asked. I do hope he realized that it wasn't idle curiosity."

"He never thought that," she assured him. "It is odd how understanding he is. He seemed to divine that you were a lover of beautiful things, that you shared his own taste to some extent."

"It is remarkable that he should have known that," the young man agreed, "but it is quite true. Most of my leisure time, when I am wandering about Europe on political affairs, is spent in the picture galleries. I am only an amateur, of course. My grandfather had a fine collection of Italian Masters."

"Mr. Benjamin was just saying that he had only been to three private collections in Europe and it was your uncle's—I think he said in Norfolk—which pleased him best."

"Why are you speaking in the past tense?" he asked her suddenly. "Mr. Benjamin hasn't gone away, has he?"

"Please don't ask me that," she begged.

"But surely they wouldn't have touched him?"

"What did they do to the Rothschilds?"

"The Rothschilds were more or less politicians," he reminded her. "Our own Ambassador here has told me that Mr. Benjamin has never taken any part in the life of the city except to interest himself in every work of philanthropy and charity of every sort."

"I'm afraid that doesn't seem to go for much with Germans. Anyhow, I will tell you what has happened. That message Mr. Blute brought to-night was peremptory."

"Who the mischief is Mr. Blute?" he asked.

"Another time," she answered restlessly. "The Baroness is waiting for you outside. I want to show you something. Come this way, please."

He followed her obediently. She led him into the farthest corner of the room and through a heavy door into a smaller apartment, also lined to the ceiling with books but with a desk in a corner and more signs of habitation. In a few seconds she paused.

"Would you please close your eyes tightly," she begged.

He obeyed at once, raising his hands and pressing them against his eyeballs. A moment later she passed him. He felt the swish of her gown and caught a whiff of the perfume of roses. Then she called to him from a few yards away. She was standing with the handle of a door between her fingers, a door which comprised a portion of the bookcases themselves. Beyond was what seemed to be a vast apartment as black as night.

"Come here quickly," she enjoined.

He hurried to her side. She leaned forward and touched an electric switch in the wall. A few lights shone out in the room, which must have been at least a hundred and fifty feet long. He stared into its shadows in amazement. Then the walls themselves disclosed their secret.

"This is the main picture gallery," she whispered. "You see?"

There were plenty of spaces on the walls where pictures had hung, but of pictures there was not a trace. She looked up into his face.

"You understand now?" she asked.

"I understand," he replied.

She led him back again into the smaller room and passed out of it into the main library. She was a little breathless and she listened intently before she spoke.

"Quite half of the most valuable pictures have gone," she said.

"Safely out of Austria?"

There was distress in her eyes as she answered him.

"Not yet. We have sworn that they shall be got out, or Mr. Benjamin would never have left. He ought to have gone weeks ago. His wife is in Paris. I can't tell you how wonderful Mr. Blute has been, and how clever, but nothing would make Mr. Benjamin leave this place until the very last moment. He knows now that his name is first on the list of the Jews who are to be thrown into prison. The Nazis may come to-night. Certainly they will be here tomorrow. All we have to pray for is that he will get away safely."

"Wonderful!" he murmured.

"Mr. Benjamin is a miracle man," Patricia went on. "You will think so if ever the truth comes out. His enemies will think so when they seize his bank and go through his books. Now, one thing more and you must go. He left you a present."

"A present?"

She unlocked a drawer, pushed back a sheet of tissue paper and showed him a flat volume with gilt edges exquisitely bound in white vellum.

"There were only six of these made," she confided. "It is the catalogue—the complete catalogue—of the pictures, the statuary and the tapestries. You will realize its importance later on. Mr. Benjamin himself said it would be one of the world's treasures. It is his recompense to you because he could not show you his pictures. Take great care of it, Mr. Mildenhall. It is the last one in this country. Here is a case for it."

She slipped it into a plain brown leather wrapper.

"Now you must go," she insisted. "I have been as quick as I could, but the Baroness must have been hating me for the last ten minutes!"

"But can't we—shan't we meet again?" he begged.

"I haven't time to think of anything of that sort just now."

She pushed him very gently towards the door.

"You must go," she went on. "We may meet again somewhere—sometime. Who knows—and does it matter?"

Suddenly he felt that it did matter. That delightful little tremulous mouth and the sad eyes which looked as though they were really made for laughter and happiness suddenly seemed to make a new appeal to him.

"Of course it matters," he declared. "To-morrow—next day—anywhere—at any place."

"I have work to do," she sighed. "It isn't ordinary work. It is sacred. Until it is finished I have no time for any other thought. Please go."

They had reached the hall. Heinrich came respectfully forward.

"The Baroness is getting very impatient, mein Herr." he said.

Charles Mildenhall held out his hand. Patricia's fingers were like ice.

"Take care of yourself during the next few days," she advised. "Even for foreigners Vienna will not be a happy place."

"You must tell me—" he began.

She had suddenly turned away. Her hand was almost snatched from his. He caught a glimpse of the gathering tears in her eyes. She flew up the great staircase, slim and wonderfully graceful in those rapid movements.

"You will pardon me, mein Herr," a voice sounded in his ears. "The Baroness is leaving."

Patricia had disappeared. Mildenhall followed Heinrich to the door.

"I am an angry woman," the Baroness declared, throwing him a portion of the rug which covered her knees but retiring a little farther into her corner.

"I beg you to excuse me," he said. "Really, the message was quite important."

"And you have a present," she observed.

"Yes."

"Really, of all the men I know you are the most ungallant," she pronounced. "You go away to flirt with that little girl and leave me here shivering. What am I to expect from you in the future if you treat me like this so early in our acquaintance?"

"It is a relief to me to know that there is to be a future," he replied.

"You do not deserve one—with me."

The rug slipped. He stooped to replace it. Somehow or other their hands came into collision. He retained his hold upon her fingers.

"How amiable I am!" she sighed. "Why should I allow you to hold my hand when you have been so rude to me?"

"The greatest privilege a woman possesses is the privilege of forgiving/' he reminded her.

"That was never written by a writer of romance," she told him. "Forgiveness should be earned."

"Teach me how to earn it, please."

She sighed again.

"Well," she said, "you must answer every question I ask you."

"I'll do my best."

"What are you doing in Vienna just now?"

"I am on my way back to England."

"Where did you come from?"

"Budapest."

"What did you do there?"

"Wrote and sketched."

"What did you write about?"

"The country."

"What did you sketch—fortifications?"

"Why fortifications?"

"You are interested in such things," she observed. "You were military attaché here once."

"Was I?" he answered. "That must have been the year I suffered from loss of memory."

"What is in that parcel you have under your arm? If you are going to be rude I shall not let you hold my hand."

"I like holding your hand and I am certainly not being rude," he told her. "As regards the parcel, however, it was a present from a lady and the only condition she made was that I should tell no one I possessed it."

"You will take me to the Von Liebenstrahl ball to-night?"

"But how is that possible?" he asked. "I have only an Embassy card."

"Are you ever going to say 'yes' to anything I ask you?" she demanded.

"Ask me the thing I should like you to and I shall not hesitate."

"You are too glib," she laughed. "You are like all the others. I am tired of you."

"Infidèle." he murmured reproachfully.

"But what a man! He charges me with faithlessness!"

"Supposing I ask you a few questions."

"I shall answer you—truthfully if it pleases me, untruthfully if it suits me better."

"We make no progress," he complained.

"Along which road do you desire to travel?" she asked.

"The nearest road which leads to your heart, Madame."

"I shall begin to feel aggrieved," she declared. "Your first glance at me was the sort of glance a woman loves to receive. There was a little admiration in those rather expressive eyes of yours, there was a little curiosity, there was a certain amount of—desire."

"Then they appear to have told you everything," he said, "which my lips are not yet brave enough to utter."

She moved her head slightly and looked at him.

"Your mouth looks brave enough," she meditated.

"A challenge?"

She shook her head.

"Not a challenge. An affair of lipstick."

"You have none on your eyes," he said, gazing at them intently.

"There is poison on my eyelashes," she warned him.

He drew a little nearer.

"You are well protected," he complained.

"Something must have told me," she sighed, "that I was going to be driven home alone by a young man whose tongue, at any rate, was intrepid."

"That certainly is a challenge," he replied, and held her for a moment in his arms.

"Be sweet to me now," she begged, as she delicately removed herself. "Tell me what is in that parcel."

"I will tell you what is in my heart. Baroness," he promised, "but I cannot reveal the contents of this parcel."

"To think," she murmured, "that your lips should dare to misbehave as they have done and then refuse my simple request! Besides, your offer means nothing. I know what is in your heart."

"That should be of some assistance to me," he declared hopefully.

"On the contrary, it is fast making of me an icicle. In your heart is the image of that little red-haired girl who called you away from me and who has given you a present."

He glanced out of the window and sighed.

"I seem to make but little progress," he grumbled. "Are you really not going to the Von Liebenstrahl ball?"

She shook her head.

"Alas," she sighed, "I am not invited. It is well known that I adore Karl, and the Princess, like your Lady Tremearne at the Embassy, loves the Archduchess."

He drew a deep sigh of content.

"I suspected it," he said, "but I was not sure. I am feeling happy."

"But why?"

"You adore Karl. My name is Charles."

"You are quite and entirely incorrigible!" she exclaimed. "How could you possibly imagine that you could take any place in my affections?"

"I am an incurable optimist," he told her. "I expect always to receive everything that I desire."

"But what vast, what egregious conceit! After going off with that red-headed girl, too!"

They turned in underneath the broad porte-cochère of Sacher's Hotel.

"But I told you that I must go to the Embassy first to change," he reminded her.

"Did you? I forgot. You have talked so much nonsense. I remember now, though, that you said you must call here for your card."

"Quite true," he agreed. "But there is no reason why I should keep you waiting while I get that—or, if you like, I can take a taxi to the Embassy."

"You might find it difficult to find one," she replied. "You have an apartment here?"

"A small one."

"I will come up and wait in your salon while you get the card," she proposed. "Ten minutes, Friedrich," she told the chauffeur, as the doorkeeper stood on one side and Charles handed her out of the limousine.

They found the lounge crowded with eager little groups of men and women. Everyone was talking excitedly and the air was full of rumours. They reached the lift with difficulty. Arrived on the fourth floor Charles Mildenhall led the

way to his apartment. The Baroness took possession of an easy chair drawn up towards the balcony. At her request he opened the high windows.

"You can leave me your present to look at," she proposed, stretching out her hand, "while you find your card."

"Alas," he told her, "it is impossible. My present is connected with a secret, and the secret is not mine."

She rose to her feet, flung off her cloak and stood facing him, her hands resting upon his shoulders.

"My friend," she began, and her eyes were liquid and very, very blue, "how are we to continue friends if you refuse everything I ask? Come, I will do away with all the secrecy of your present. I know what it is. That little red-haired minx with the serpent's eyes has given you the last catalogue that exists of old Benjamin's great collection. I want to see it. I prayed him for one months ago. He has never promised, but he very nearly promised. There is no harm in my looking one through. Remember, I am Beatrice whom for a few minutes you once admired. Beatrice will be kind to you if you do what she asks."

The beautiful arms hung an inch or two farther over his shoulders. They were very nearly around his neck. His fingers caressed her hair for a moment. Then he held her wrists, raised her fingers to his lips and stepped back.

"Yes," he said, "I know that my mysterious package contains only the catalogue of Mr. Benjamin's pictures, but for some reason I know nothing of I was asked for a promise, and I gave it. You would not have me commence our friendship by breaking a promise, even if it were to another woman."

There was a cloud over the Baroness' face. One might imagine that she could be very angry.

"She is not a woman, that secretary," she scoffed. "She is just a little chit, a working girl. She does not count."

He moved a little farther away. The parcel was under his arm.

"Please be kind," he begged. "I shall be back in five minutes. We might have, perhaps, some coffee before I go to change."

Her arms dropped to her sides. She stood there quite speechless. Her eyes followed him to the door. He looked back for a moment. She was still standing there, her eyes still seeking for his. She said nothing. He hurried into his room, found the card and locked his parcel securely away in the safe by his bedside. When he returned the Baroness had gone, the room was empty. The hall porter sought him out as he was calling for a carriage.

"Madame la Baronne has left, sir," he announced. "She begged me to tell you that she would send her car back in five minutes. It will be at your disposition

for an hour. Ah, he returns already," the man pointed out.

Charles Mildenhall waited for a moment and slipped a pourboire into the hand of the chauffeur as he brought the automobile under the porte-cochère.

"Tell your mistress that I send her my grateful thanks but I have no further use for the car."

CHAPTER VII

Charles Mildenhall was honoured that night by a long conversation with the Princess von Liebenstrahl. She stopped him when he would have passed on in the wake of the Embassy party and, taking advantage of a little lull in the stream of arriving guests, accepted a chair from him and some coffee from one of the small army of servants who had been brought down from the Schloss>.

"I remember you so well, Mr. Mildenhall," she said. "Ah, if only there were more with your uniform here to-night! If we had still the joy of feeling that England was our friend! Alas, there seems to be nothing but darkness wherever we look. My husband is angry with me because he says we betray our cause when we lose heart, but I feel that Austria is doomed."

"They are bad days indeed. Princess," Mildenhall admitted, "but Austria has confronted them before and emerged victorious."

"It is the strength of Germany which we fear," the Princess lamented. "It is coming. I feel it in the air. We shall become a vassal state to our omnipotent neighbour. It has not happened since the days of Napoleon that the eyes of all Europe are fixed upon one man."

"Madame," Charles said, "even in these sacred precincts one hesitates to talk openly. The Nazi spies are everywhere. For that reason we, who follow diplomacy as a profession, and you, who represent the great ones of your country have to speak with reserve. Still, I think there is some comfort to be drawn from the fact that England and France are arming rapidly. For neither of them could there be any other enemy except one...Monsieur le Prince is here, I see."

Mildenhall rose to his feet and stood respectfully at attention. The Prince, a tall, broad-shouldered man with fine features and presence, greeted him with a smile.

"Only once have we met, my young friend," he reminded Charles, "since you taught us that the drives in our woods were too few and that my pheasants must have room to rise before they are worthy of the sportsman's gun. What days those were!"

"I remember the village folk," the Princess remarked, "gathering on the hills and the boundaries of the wood to see the Englishmen shoot the pheasants from the skies."

"The thing which I remember with almost the greatest pleasure," Charles said, "was the luncheon served in the market-place of the old village. We were waited upon by the gamekeepers and their wives in that wonderful costume. The peasants danced for us. We drank wine from huge casks. And then the nights that followed—the dinner in your great hall, the dancing, that glorious mountain air!"

"We shall make ourselves sad if we remember too much," the Prince remarked. "My dear," he added, offering his arm to his wife, "Her Royal Highness arrives. We are keeping our young friend from the dance. Later on, Mr. Mildenhall, we will drink a cup of wine to happier days."

Charles passed on into the ballroom, sought out his party and danced for an hour or more. The Archduke Karl Sebastian, with whose daughter he had been dancing, led him to one side. The two stood before one of the great windows which looked over the city. There were one or two fires to be seen, but the sound of artillery had decreased.

"Is there any news to-night," the Archduke enquired.

"Nothing special," Mildenhall replied. "I am not formally attached to the Embassy now so I have not seen any of the code messages, but I believe most of the telegraph wires are cut between here and the northern frontier and there are rumours that the internal railways have been commandeered."

"Any news of my friend Benjamin? That is a person for whom I am most anxious."

Charles looked around cautiously. Notwithstanding the great crowd, their corner was almost empty.

"I dined with him at his wonderful house tonight," he confided. "It was not a party. I met him in his bank and he asked me to come several days ago. He looked well but I fancy he was continually receiving disturbing messages."

"The times have changed," the Archduke murmured. "In the old days, when there was an uprising like this amongst the nations, it was the aristocrats who went shivering for their lives. Now it is the Jews. A senseless, ignorant, cruel persecution, it seems to me. Leopold Benjamin is a great man and a great gentleman. He has done more for Vienna than any-other citizen, yet they tell me if the Nazis get hold of him it will probably mean assassination and the confiscation of all his treasures. My heart has been in my own country home, in my own mountains and forests since 1918, but Vienna still means much to me. I know that Benjamin has parted with more than a million pounds to

charities during the last twenty years. I would sit at his table with pleasure if he invited me."

"I am afraid it will be a long time before he entertains again in Vienna," Charles sighed. "It was almost a home party to-night and there wasn't anyone there who wasn't anxious to have him cross the frontier. Mr. Benjamin was called away towards the end of the meal. He did not reappear."

The Archduke nodded understandingly.

"My wife and I are leaving in a few days," he said. "We have relatives in Italy, but I ask myself how we should be received in France."

"France is always a gracious country," Charles reflected. "There is Egypt, too...Here is my friend Lascelles. He looks as though he might have news."

"A message from His Excellency," the latter announced as he joined them. "You excuse me, sir?" he added, turning to the Archduke.

"Certainly."

"It is no longer a secret," Lascelles continued. "The Germans have crossed the frontier and are marching upon Vienna. There is no resistance, but in face of the disturbed condition everywhere we are ordered to quit. We have a special train at eight o'clock this morning, Charles. His Excellency wants to know if you will join us. He thinks that there may be considerable delay if you stay on here."

"Join you? Why, rather!" Mildenhall agreed. "I'll get round to the hotel and pack."

"Eight o'clock at the Western Station."

For the first half hour after his arrival at the hotel Mildenhall set the valet to work packing and occupied himself in sorting and destroying the few papers he possessed of any importance. As soon as he had finished his task he rose and went to the safe which was set into the wall by the side of his bed. He unlocked it and swung back the door. For a moment or two he stood motionless. Then he called the valet.

"Fritz," he said, "there was a parcel in this safe when I left for the ball this evening."

"A parcel, sir?"

"A leather case. Inside there was a book."

The man shook his head.

"I've never seen such a thing, sir," he replied. "You probably remember, sir, that you gave me the evening off."

"Quite right. When you came back were there any signs of anyone having

been here?"

"None, sir."

Charles made no further remark. Fie took the packets of money which were the sole contents of the safe and relocked it.

"I'm going out for an hour, Fritz," he said. "Get on with the packing. Leave me out a lounge suit and an overcoat. You can send my uniform round to the Embassy later on. I shall be back in plenty of time to change."

"Very good, sir. I'm sorry about the parcel."

"My mistake, perhaps, Fritz. I'm not blaming you in any way."

On his way out he stopped at the bureau. The reception clerk hurried up to him.

"Tell me," Charles asked, "has anyone called to see me to-night whilst I was out?"

The man smiled. He leaned a little farther across the counter.

"Only the lady who was with you when you went upstairs this evening, sir," he confided. "She came back about an hour after you had left for the Embassy."

"She came back?" Charles repeated thoughtfully.

"She asked for the keys of your room, sir. I hope I was right in giving them to her?"

"Of course. Did she return them to you?"

"Yes, sir. She was only upstairs for about a quarter of an hour. She said she hoped to see you later."

Mildenhall nodded and turned away. He spent a few minutes in the telephone box, stepped outside, ordered a taxi and drove to a small block of apartment flats on the other side of the Ringstrasse. He leaned across the counter to the sleepy concierge.

"The Baroness von Ballinstrode," he whispered confidentially. "She is expecting me."

The man rubbed his eyes, gazed in awe at Mildenhall's uniform and handed him the keys. The yawning lift boy took him up to the third floor. He opened the door of the number on the keys softly and found himself in a small hall. He passed through another door and entered a delightful little sitting-room half filled with roses. The door of the bedroom leading from it was wide open. Before an elegantly shaped oval mirror the Baroness was seated in the most negligible of negliges. Her golden hair in a long stream hung over the back of her chair. A dark complexioned Viennese maid was brushing it with intense care. It was not until Mildenhall had advanced half-a-dozen paces that they

were aware of his presence. The maid screamed and dropped the brush. The Baroness sat for a moment as though turned to stone. Then she sprang to her feet, wrapped her diaphanous dressing-gown a little more closely around her and came forward with outstretched hands.

"But, my friend!" she cried. "This is marvellous!"

He stood motionless. She came fearlessly up to him. Her expression was a curious mixture of fear and joy. Her eyes questioned him feverishly.

"Where have you come from?" she demanded.

"From the ball."

She suddenly realized that he was unresponsive. The eyes that met hers were hard.

"You have come direct here?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "I called at the hotel."

She turned round and closed the door behind her.

Then she flung herself on to a small divan and lay back amongst the cushions, her fingers clasped behind her head.

"You are angry with me, Charles," she said.

"Yes," he replied. "I am angry with you. There is little time to spare. Give me that book."

"Why do you say there is little time to spare?" she demanded. "The morning is young. We have many hours. There is wine on the sideboard there. Give me some and serve yourself. We must not quarrel, Charles."

Her voice was a caress but its sweetness was wasted upon him.

"Baroness—" he began.

"Beatrice," she interrupted.

"Beatrice, then," he continued. "I want my book."

"Why do you think that I have your book?" she asked.

"Because they told me at the hotel that you had been there and asked for my keys, which they were foolish enough to give you. Afterwards you apparently helped yourself to the book which was in my safe and returned with it here. You have exactly five minutes to hand it over."

"Why only five minutes?" she asked. "You are very handsome in that uniform, Charles, but you are very stiff and unbending. Loosen that high collar and sit down by my side. I will explain to you—"

"I desire no explanation," he broke in. "I must have the book."

"You are very foolish, Charles," she whispered. "The book is beautiful—but so am I."

"You are far more beautiful than any book could be," he assented, "but nevertheless, the book is mine and I demand it. You have now a matter of three minutes left in which to restore it."

She laughed gaily. Then for a moment she was silent. Her eyes were fixed upon his. She held out her arms. Her voice was lower still.

"If I am more beautiful than the book," she murmured, "take me instead."

"Beatrice," he answered, "you are as beautiful as an angel and the book is a dull thing of parchment and vellum, but we are not engaged in a battle of flowery words just now. I am in deadly earnest. That book I demand and must have. You have two minutes left."

She raised herself a little upon the divan.

"Why do you harp so upon the time, darling? We have many hours together—if you will. I am alone. If your thoughts are with your namesake—"

"Baroness, my thoughts are upon myself and my own safety," he interrupted. "Is it still the custom in Vienna to fight duels in a lady's salon?"

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "Ah, I can guess! Stupid! Monsieur—you think of him. It is arranged so that he does not come. You heard me say it. The hours are free and your book—if you must have it—may come into your possession a little later on."

"You have exactly one minute left. Baroness," he told her. "As to the movements of my distinguished namesake, you are wrong. Events have changed all that. The Archduchess has received an invitation to leave on the special train with Lady Tremearne for London. Her husband remains here."

She was on her feet now.

"What you tell me is the truth?"

"On my honour it is the truth."

"Then you must fly," she cried. "Do not hesitate for a moment. Karl has a terrible temper. You have heard stories of what has already happened. Please—please—my friend, I implore you—go!" For the first time the glimmering of a smile parted his lips.

"No," he said, "I am in no hurry. If a duel must be fought, if there is to be a violent scene, I will take my share in it. You spoke of a glass of wine. It is an idea."

He took one step towards the sideboard.

"Don't touch anything!" she cried. "Wait!"

She disappeared—a flash of fluttering ribbons and whirling draperies—through the door of her bedchamber. In a few seconds she was back. The parcel was there. She thrust it into his hands.

"Charles," she begged, "forgive me. For your life—hurry! For your life and mine! He will kill us both."

Charles tucked the book securely under his arm. He kissed her fingers—suddenly cold—then he moved towards the door. From the threshold he looked back. She was standing there shivering, still beautiful, waving him passionately away.

"Calm yourself, dear Beatrice," he cried. "The Archduchess refused Her Ladyship's invitation. Take my advice—a glass of wine quickly to restore you. Au revoir!"

He closed the door. Down the stairs, it is true, he moved swiftly. He stepped into his taxi.

"The Sacher Hotel!" he ordered.

CHAPTER VIII

Seventeen months and twenty-four days later Charles Mildenhall, weary to death of trans-European railways, of shouting and gesticulating crowds, unwashed for two days, with parched throat and the smell of all evil things in his nostrils, sat upon the porter's luggage barrow in the great railway station of Vienna and succeeded in achieving a state of utter disgust and weariness of life. He had been four days on a twenty-four hour journey, leaving behind him a commandeered car. He had stood in queues—a thing he loathed—he had had to make fairy-tale explanations of his business and his passport to a dozen unsympathetic officials rather than tell them the truth. He had reached Vienna in the gloom of a stormy evening to find not a taxicab at the station, not a single bowing commissionaire from any of the hotels, not a friendly face or a smile to be seen amongst the great cosmopolitan crowd who were pushing, apparently aimlessly, in every direction. Then, just as he sat up in despair to look out once more up and down the broad empty thoroughfare leading from the station, he beheld a wonderful sight and heard a wonderful sound. He saw a rather antiquated but a solid and veritable taxicab drawing up a few yards from the kerb-stone of the pavement and he heard what was far more wonderful still—a familiar voice. With his hand holding his cap raised high above his head, his countenance wreathed in one huge grin of welcome, was his ex-valet from the Embassy!

"Fritz!" he gasped.

"Mein Herr!" the little man exclaimed, only to wander off a minute later into a stream of mispronounced English. "What a joy! I am very happy. It is Herr Mildenhall."

"The remains of him," Charles uttered mournfully, rising to his feet. "Fritz, the sight of you has saved my life. I am worn out. I am hungry. I am thirsty. I am penniless. Take my dressing case, take my small bag, help me into your heaven-directed vehicle."

Fritz leaped lightly off the box and did everything he was told.

"Ach, it is many, many months since I saw you last," he cried. "Vienna is a rubbish heap. We are all starving. Where does Monsieur wish to drive?"

"What a joyous sound is your voice, Fritz!" Charles exclaimed. "Is there by any chance a hostelry open in this melancholy city?"

"The Sacher," Fritz replied. "One wing is closed, the rest remains."

"The Sacher!" Charles repeated as though in a dream of frenzied joy. "The Sacher by all means. But do not leave me when we get there, Fritz. I shall need you for a dozen things. I must have news of the place. I buy you—you and your vehicle—from this moment for the duration of my visit."

"Thank God for that, sir!" Fritz said gratefully. "It is to be hoped mein Herr has enough money for his fare. If not, it is equal to me but there will be a tax owing to the hall porter—"

"Have no fear," was the joyous interruption. "I'll arrange all that. Let's get along."

They drove off. Charles lolled back against the cushions with a little groan of content. For two nights his head had rested on a wooden pillow. With every turn of the wheels the little vehicle seemed to be passing into the richer quarters of the city. There were more lights already. The fronts of many of the shops were barricaded with sandbags but here and there an open one invited customers. The line of cafés commenced, the lights of the Ringstrasse glowed feebly in their magic circle. There were men and women in the streets, crawling about, it is true, but civilized people. Marvellous! They drove up to the hotel and a porter stepped out for the luggage. Charles stumbled from the cab.

"Draw up and wait a minute, Fritz," he ordered. "I will be with you directly."

He walked to the cashier's office. What joy! A familiar face was there, a familiar smile, the same deeply respectful bow.

"It is Herr Mildenhall!" the man exclaimed. "Welcome, mein Herr. We have money for you."

"Thank God!" was all that Charles could say at that moment.

"What will you have, mein Herr?" the cashier asked. "There is money from England, money from Budapest and money from the Société Générale."

"Give me some local money and fifty pounds in English notes."

The clerk leaned across the desk.

"I would beg you, sir, not to display this too freely," he said. "There is very little money in Vienna just now. Here is Mr. Herodin to ask what apartment he can give you."

"A suite on the first floor," Charles ordered, welcoming the manager with joy. "Mr. Herodin, I am glad to see you. I have not changed my linen or washed for days! I have not drunk a glass of wine or smoked a cigarette for a week! You have a trunk of mine here. Let it be unpacked—set a valet to work at once. Let a waiter provide a meal, a bottle of wine—in my sitting-room. Do not be alarmed if I bring my taxicab driver up with me. He was my valet when I was last here."

"Suite number seventeen, Herr Mildenhall. I will set the quickest servants we have to work," the manager promised. "Dinner will be served before you are out of your bath. We have rooms, we have food, we have wine. What we need are clients. The hotel is almost empty."

"In a few moments," Charles promised, "I will denude your larders and empty your cellars."

He returned to the entrance. He poured small change into Fritz's hand for the taxi drive. He tipped the hall porter. He tipped the porters who were guarding his luggage. He turned back to the stupefied Fritz, who was gazing at his handful of silver.

"There is enough there?" Charles asked him.

"Gnãdiger Herr," Fritz replied, "this money would buy the taxicab and me! I am not sure that it would not buy the hotel!"

"Listen," Charles went on. "Park the taxicab anywhere, go and sit down at a café—eat, drink moderately, but eat, man! You look half starved. Then come back here to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. Suite number seventeen. Come up to me—suite seventeen."

There was joy mingled with a pitiful anxiety upon the man's face.

"Herr Mildenhall," he stammered. "You remember Suzette, my wife? She is starving, too."

"Fetch her, you idiot!" Charles cried. "Drive away in your taxi and fetch her wherever she is. Take her to the café. Eat and drink—both of you. Here—take some more money."

Fritz stepped back and shook his head.

"Mein Herr," he confided, "I could buy the café we go to with this."

"Go to a better one, then."

"Oh, we shall eat, I promise you," the man declared with tears in his eyes. "We will eat and we will drink and I will be here at ten in the morning—do not fear. One has not prayed for deliverance all this time in vain," he added as he stumbled into his seat.

For a moment Charles forgot his own discomfort. He watched Fritz drive off.

"There are many like that?" he asked the hall porter.

"The city is full of them, sir," was the doleful reply. "It is hard enough for those who have kept their posts. Our wages are reduced, the price of food has gone up, there is no coal and little wood. Life is very difficult. Everything that we have the Germans take. I think that they wish to get rid of the Austrians and they have decided that the quickest way is to starve them. Now they tell me we are to go to war again."

Charles hurried away with a word of sympathy. He slipped into the lift, where a pert young Viennese lady with flashing eyes languished at him in vain. In a moment or two he was in number seventeen. He drew a long sigh of deep content at the comfort and luxury with which he was surrounded. One valet was waiting to strip off his clothes, another was testing the warmth of the bath. The trunk he had left there had been fetched up and opened. Fresh silk underwear and fresh linen were already laid out. He plunged into the bath with a groan of happiness. He sank in it up to his neck, stretched out his hands for the sponge and the soap. A sensation of amazing and voluptuous content crept over him. He closed his eyes...When he awoke only one of the valets was left.

"Have I been asleep?" he asked.

"Only for a few minutes, sir," the servant answered.

"Is Frederick still in the bar?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Telephone down for two dry Martinis. See that they are sent up in the shaker —absolutely cold and the proper glass."

"I'll telephone down, sir."

"A debauch of luxury," Charles murmured to himself a little later as he finished shaving and eyed his second cocktail greedily. "What has become of my dinner?"

"The waiter brought the first course up, sir, but we sent it back in case you slept longer. I stayed here to see that you did not slip down in the bath and Franz here is unpacking the trunk and your small things and preparing your evening clothes."

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, sir."

"I'll dine in the restaurant," Charles decided. "I can't go to sleep at the table, anyhow. I shall come straight to bed afterwards."

The man's face was a little grave as he bowed.

"What's the matter—the restaurant is open, I suppose?"

"Most certainly, sir. The restaurant is open. There is dancing—Mademoiselle Celeste from Sweden, she makes very beautiful gymnastic dance."

"Capital! Tell the head-waiter to keep me a corner table against the wall somewhere."

"Certainly, mein Herr."

Charles completed his toilet, sipped his cocktail and lit a cigarette. There was a knock at the door. Mr. Herodin entered. He smiled at the transformation.

"You are feeling a different man, Herr Mildenhall?" he enquired.

"And looking one, too, I hope!"

The manager waved the servants away.

"You are doing us the honour, I believe, of dining in the restaurant, sir?"

"I thought I would," Charles acquiesced. "It will be a treat to see some civilized people again."

"I fear, sir, that you will see very few of them," Herodin confided. "The fact of it is that our clients have momentarily deserted us."

Charles nodded and waited for more.

"The people who come here," the man went on, "are chiefly German Nazis. They are not very polite, they give a great deal of trouble and they are not so particular in their dress and uniform as the Viennese—added to which their behaviour is rude."

"I understand. Anyhow, I'm much too sleepy to talk to anyone, much less quarrel with them."

The manager sighed.

"It is sad," he said, "but one by one my regular clients have deserted me. The Archduke Karl Sebastian was often here; Count Pilduski with the Countess; Monsieur and Madame de Kruiten, and always some of the younger gentlemen from the Embassies when they were going. And now—no one. I thought it better just to give you a word of warning."

"Very kind of you," Charles acknowledged. "As a matter of curiosity I must have a look at them, though. Is anyone in possession of the British Embassy?"

"It seems to us, sir, to be in a state of chaos," Herodin answered. "Mr. Porter is there for urgent enquiries. He was Consul General, I think, before the Embassy began to break up. Did you bring any news, sir? Do you think that there will be war?"

"If there is it will be a very foolish war," Charles replied. "But no one can tell."

"You will find such English papers as we have received during the past week on your table in the restaurant, sir," the hôtelier announced. "There is no late news, but one understands that the German mobilization on Poland's frontier is a very grave affair."

Charles finished his cocktail and moved towards the door. He bade the manager good night at the lift.

"I go now to discover," he said, "whether your chef's Wiener Schnitzel is as wonderful as ever."

CHAPTER IX

Charles Mildenhall, having been as near starvation during the past four days as he was ever likely to be, found his dinner excellent, the wine, personally vouched for by Mr. Herodin, of the best year and in perfect condition. The manager's warning, however, concerning the company, was fully justified. There were one or two small groups of German officers who kept carefully to themselves and whose bearing was almost offensive. It was curious to notice how the few Austrians dining there, especially those with their womenkind, took care to remain on the other side of the room. One woman, who was dining alone, Charles recognized, and towards the end of dinner, at her request brought by a waiter, he went and sat with her for coffee. She dropped her heavy monocle at his approach and beamed up at him with a ready greeting.

"I was afraid that you might not recognize me, Mr. Mildenhall," she said. "We dined together, you know, at Mr. Leopold Benjamin's some time ago—on the night of his disappearance. I am the Princess Sophie von Dorlingen."

"I remember you perfectly. Princess," Charles assured her as he took the chair the waiter had drawn out for him. "I scarcely flattered myself that you would remember me, however. We were seated some distance apart at that memorable dinner and I had not the pleasure of much conversation with you."

She shook her head ponderously.

"It is so sad, this," she continued in her rather guttural voice. "So sad about Mr. Benjamin."

"Tell me," he begged. "I have been away for so long travelling that I really

seem to have had but little news. Nothing has happened to him, I hope?"

The Princess rolled her eyes.

"Rumours, my young friend," she sighed. "Rumours—many of them. All bad. Some of them we hope not true. But you can see for yourself his beautiful house, the bank—"

"I only arrived here a couple of hours ago," Charles confided. "I've had a roughish journey down from Poland. I drove straight to the hotel and I have spent most of my time since changing."

She raised her hands.

"The bank is closed," she told him. "There are boards across the windows. As for the house—it is a wreck."

"And the picture galleries—the museum?" he asked breathlessly.

"There are all manner of stories," she went on, "but one thing is certain. Within an hour of the German invasion of Vienna a picked band of Nazis went straight to the house. They demanded to be shown to the picture galleries. They were stripped! There was not a picture upon the walls. Everything was gone. The museum was empty. The Nazis were in such a fury that they wanted to burn the house down. Since then there have been no end of stories. This much is true, at any rate—Mr. Leopold Benjamin was a much cleverer man than people believed. The bank vaults were almost empty. What has become of his possessions no one knows. The Nazis declare, though, that the pictures and a great many of the curios are still in the city. There are people who believe that Mr. Benjamin himself is still in Vienna. You and I know that he was at his house just before Hitler's Nazis swept through the place."

"I sincerely trust that he got away," Charles said earnestly. "Surely we would have heard of it if anything had happened to him?"

"I don't know," she answered with doleful pessimism. "Terrible things have been done here, and from the moment they entered the city the Nazis took control of all the newspapers. Then there was that sweet young lady—Mr. Benjamin's secretary. They say she was marched off to prison."

"Princess!" he exclaimed in a tone of horror.

"It is true," she assured him. "I believe that the American Minister went to her rescue but that they were furious at having to let her go. I am not sure that they did not arrest her again later on. Let me see—she sat next to you at dinner."

"I sat between her and the Baroness von Ballinstrode. The Baroness was attractive, of course, in her way, but one meets that type in the civilized places all over Europe. Miss Grey had a queer Watteau-like grace of movement and figure, and a wonderful smile. I am not a very impressionable person,

Princess, but I don't mind confessing that I have thought of her more often and with more pleasure than any of these famous beauties."

"She was, indeed, very charming," the Princess agreed. "Beatrice von Ballinstrode, of course, I knew much better, but of the two I would much rather trust the little lady you were speaking of. They both seem to have disappeared now. Oh, it is a sad place, this Vienna, Mr. Mildenhall! My life—what has it become? I was born in a palace. I live now in four rooms with a maid, almost as old as myself, to look after me. She cannot cook. Three times a week I come here and I eat—sometimes amittagessen, sometimes a dinner. Seldom do I see any of my friends. To-night I have been lucky. I used to see you sometimes, Mr. Mildenhall, at the Embassy parties. You are like a shadow from the old times, anyway. It has done me good to talk to you. Now, outside, in a few moments you will see an old woman, fatter than I am, in a black dress, a white apron and a shawl around her head. That is my maid Madeline. We shall hobble home together."

"If I stay long enough," Charles proposed, "you must dine with me one night, Princess."

"You will not stay," she sighed. "There is war in the air, more terror that is coming. I can scent it, almost I can smell it. Austria is full of German troops. In a few nights you will hear the tramp of feet, the roaring of planes, the shrieking of locomotive whistles. They will be off then to the north. A million or two more lives, rivers of blood, all for the lustful joy of one man."

"The war may still not come," he reminded her.

"If you really think that, all I can say is that I see the future more clearly than you," she said.

"We should have hope, at any rate," he declared. "I do not often talk of my missions. Princess, but I will tell you this. I have talked with the fighting men of Poland within the last ten days. I was on a special and a secret mission. It is over now. There is no secret about it any longer. I went to tell them frankly that England and France both recognize their responsibility in their guarantees to her, but though the guarantees would hold, time would not stand still. My mission was to beg them to count up their resources, to ask them whether they could maintain the defence of their country long enough for us to reach her. They only laughed at me. They are full of confidence, but I feel they over-estimate the value of bravery against science. They laughed at the idea of Germany's facing a declaration of war from England and France!"

"So do I," the Princess agreed. "In my saner moments I, too, feel the same way."

"It is always," he ventured with a smile as he followed her example and rose to his feet, "the women who are the bravest."

He accompanied her to the door, handed her over to her strange escort, then he returned to his own table. He sipped his brandy thoughtfully. What he had half expected happened. One of the little group of German officers seated at a round table whose attention, for the past quarter-of-an-hour, seemed to have been focused upon him rose to his feet. He crossed the room and came to a standstill before Mildenhall's table. He was a young man with closely cropped hair and the pink and white complexion of a boy. He had an immovable eyeglass and his manner was not ingratiating.

"I have the honour to address Mr. Charles Mildenhall?" he enquired frigidly.

Charles eyed him with some surprise.

"You have the advantage of me, sir," he said.

"I am Lieutenant von Hessen of the Third Army Corps, now quartered in Vienna. The Commanding Officer of my regiment desires a few words with you."

"I am at his disposition," was the quiet reply.

The young officer hesitated.

"My C.O. then will await your coming," he said.

"Wait one moment," Charles begged. "I said that I was at the disposition of your C.O. here."

"Are you a British officer?" the lieutenant asked a little arrogantly.

"Certainly."

"It is a peculiar habit you English have," he complained. "On the eve of war you discard your uniforms. May I enquire your rank?"

Mildenhall produced his pocketbook, drew out a card and handed it to his questioner. The latter read it out thoughtfully:

"'Major the Hon. Charles d'Arcy Mildenhall. Dragoon Guards.'

"You will permit me?" the young man added with some reluctance. "I will present your card to Major von Metternich."

He recrossed the room and leaned down to speak to his senior officer. Charles measured with his eye the distance between the table at which he had been seated with the Princess and the one occupied by the officers. It was absolutely impossible that they should have been able to overhear a word of his conversation. He waited with equanimity for what might happen. Presently a tall, broad-shouldered man with the Swastika a prominent embellishment of his uniform came across the room and addressed him. His manner was stiff but agreeable.

"May I have a few minutes' conversation with you, Major Mildenhall? I am

Major von Metternich of the Third Army Corps."

"With pleasure," Charles replied. "Pray sit down."

The Major seated himself and toyed with his miniature moustache for a moment or two. He spoke excellent English but he did not seem altogether at his ease.

"The matter which I wish to discuss with you, Major, is not altogether a military one," he confessed. "It is in a sense passed on to us from our Intelligence Department. It concerns the disappearance of a well-known Jewish banker and financier from his house and bank here in Vienna."

"Mr. Leopold Benjamin?" Charles ventured.

"Precisely. It appears that just before our Führer decided to rescue these poor people and draw them into the Reich, Mr. Benjamin gave a small dinner party at his house. From that dinner party he disappeared."

Charles nodded thoughtfully. He said nothing.

"In the course of my investigations," the Major continued, "I received a list of the guests who were present. Your name was amongst them."

"That is quite probable," Charles assented. "I was present."

"I have had an opportunity," the Major went on, "of questioning most of the other guests—I or someone representing our Intelligence Corps. Not one of them was able to give me the slightest clue as to Mr. Benjamin's probable whereabouts."

"I am sorry to hear it," Charles replied. "I was going to call at the bank to-morrow morning."

"I am afraid," the other observed, "you would find that a waste of time. The bank has ceased to operate."

"Bad luck," Charles remarked carelessly. "My visit was of no importance, however. Just a slight matter of business."

"Mr. Benjamin is not, to our knowledge, engaged in any business in Vienna at the present moment," the Major said. "He is a member of a race which is entirely out of favour with our Führer. He is a Jew."

"I think everyone in Europe knows that," Charles smiled. "However, if he is no longer in business I must find the small amount of money I need somewhere else."

"That is an easy matter for you, no doubt, Major. With our Intelligence Department, which I represent, it is a different matter. Mr. Benjamin is heavily in our debt. It seems highly improbable that he has left the country and the department is determined to find him."

"That he should be heavily in debt to your country astonishes me," Charles observed.

"He owes," Major von Metternich confided, "a very large sum for unpaid taxes. The Treasury of the Reich has decided that if he should show any indisposition to pay, it would be necessary to seize his great collection of pictures and other objects d'art. They have been famous throughout Europe for many years."

"Quite true."

"You have seen them, without a doubt?"

"Never," Charles replied. "I was to have seen them, I believe, the night of the dinner party of which you speak and from which Mr. Benjamin was summoned away."

"Did you ask to see them on that occasion?"

Charles's eyebrows went slowly up.

"You must excuse me. Major von Metternich," he said, "but you seem to be cross-examining me on a purely private matter."

"This is a friendly conversation," was the irritated reply. "If you cannot regard it in that light it may be necessary for me to pass the affair on to another tribunal."

"Is that a threat?"

"You may accept it as such, if you like."

Charles considered the matter for a moment quietly.

"I will tell you all that I know about the Benjamin collection," he proposed.

"That is all I can expect, Major," was the somewhat mollified response.

"My request to see the pictures," Mildenhall told his companion, "was received as quite an ordinary one, but, to be frank with you, there was a sense of excitement and unrest at that dinner party which I suppose was due to the fact that Vienna was at any moment expecting the arrival of your invading army. Towards the end of dinner Mr. Benjamin received a message and left the room. A short time afterwards word came that he had been called away. I left at once. So did most of the other guests. As soon as it was daylight I continued my journey."

"To England?"

"To England. I had stayed over for the Princess von Liebenstrahl's ball that night."

"And you have not seen Mr. Benjamin since?"

"I have not seen him since."

"Nor any of his household or family?"

"Nor any of his household or family."

"In that case, Major, it does not seem that you are going to be very much use to us," the Nazi remarked.

"Not the slightest," Charles agreed.

"You stay long in Vienna?"

Charles smiled.

"I am rather feeling the instinct of the homing pigeon," he confided.

Major von Metternich smiled grimly, then he rose to his feet.

"You are without a home here for the moment," he observed.

"I was not officially connected with the Embassy on my last visit," Charles explained. "I am staying here in the hotel. This time also I am on my way back to England."

"It remains for me to wish you a pleasant journey," the Major said with a bow.

"I thank you," Charles answered with equal politeness.

CHAPTER X

Soon after ten o'clock that night Charles Mildenhall suddenly realized that he was half dead with sleepiness and fatigue. He mounted to his rooms, rang for the valet and in a quarter-of-an-hour was in bed. Twelve hours later he awoke to find Herodin, frock-coated, smiling, the perfect hôtelier, standing by his side. He bowed apologetically.

"Mr. Mildenhall," he said, "the floor waiter reported that you gave no orders for calling."

"Quite right," Charles replied, sitting up in bed. "I was dead tired. This morning I am rested. If you will be so good as to send the valet to turn on my bath, and the waiter?"

"With pleasure, Mr. Mildenhall. I ventured to come up myself this morning because I thought that you would like to know that the news looks slightly better. TheFührer has consented to receive an emissary from Poland. It will at least mean a few more days' delay."

"Excellent!" Charles exclaimed, rubbing his eyes.

"There is also," Herodin continued, "the very shabby taxicab in which you

arrived last night."

"The chauffeur is to wait," Charles replied. "It would be a kindness, Mr. Herodin, if you could send him round to the back and supply him with coffee and anything else he wants. He is an old friend, once valet at the Embassy. I picked him up at the station on my arrival and have engaged him for my few days here."

"It is a very gracious action," Herodin murmured.

Charles Mildenhall was of an age when nature speedily reasserts itself. He drank his coffee, then he sent down for Fritz, who presently arrived already a different person and dressed in an entirely new suit of clothes.

"Feeling better, Fritz?" his patron enquired.

The chauffeur grinned.

"And the wife, sir," he replied. "Food and wine, they do make a difference. We drank your health, sir—yes, I can promise you that—more than once, too."

"Now listen," Charles said, tapping a cigarette and lighting it. "I have two to three days to spare in this city and I am very anxious to discover the whereabouts of a young lady and a man called Blute who was an agent of Mr. Leopold Benjamin, the banker."

"Yes, sir."

"That is going to be our work," Charles went on, "for every minute of the time until I have to leave for England. I know they will be difficult to find, because they were in a way members of Mr. Benjamin's household and that has been broken up, but we must set our minds to it."

"We will find them, sir," Fritz declared confidently. "The young lady, now," he went on, "would she be a young lady with red hair?"

"Good God, how did you know that? Of course she has red hair—very beautiful and plenty of it."

Fritz smiled.

"Rather small in figure—very pleasant voice and a real smile?"

"What do you know about her?" Charles demanded eagerly. "Have you seen her lately?"

Fritz shook his head.

"Well over a year ago, sir," he admitted, "and it's a queer thing how I come to remember it, except that she was almost the first fare I had. The young lady you are looking for, she came out of the porter's lodge of the Palais Franz Josef where she had been talking to the woman there. Why, it could not have been more than a day or a couple of days after you left. I was to drive her to

the Benjamin Bank, but when we got within a street of it she stopped me. We could see that there were soldiers guarding the place. She jumped out, paid me and slipped away."

"Patricia Grey her name was."

"I never heard any name," Fritz admitted, "but that young lady came out of the lodge and I drove her to Benjamin's Bank or should have done, if the soldiers had not been there—and she had marvellous red hair. It's an easy guess, sir, that she was the young lady you are looking for."

"The man's name was Marius Blute."

"Never heard of him, sir. But the young lady, I should know her again if I ever saw her, and don't you forget, sir, she came out of the porter's lodge at the Benjamin palace. She would not have been there if she had not had something to do with the place. She asked to be driven to Benjamin's Bank. That is proof that she belonged to the staff, and there isn't another young woman in Vienna with hair like that—a sort of golden red it is, sir. Shines like—"

"That," Charles interrupted, "is the young lady I want to find."

"We'll do it, sir," Fritz assured his patron confidently. "Where shall we start?"

"We will go to the Benjamin Hospital. We may hear something about the whereabouts of Mr. Benjamin there and that will be a start."

"Very good, sir. Shall I bring the taxi round to the front?"

"In ten minutes."

At the Krankenhaus Benjamin, Charles received his first knock-down blow. He was received by a German doctor and surrounded on all sides by Nazi Germans. The doctor was brusque in manner and downright in speech.

"The Austrian, Schwarz," he announced, in reply to Charles's enquiry, "is in prison. His wife has been banished."

Charles was staggered.

"What have they done?" he asked. "What was the charge?"

"They are Jews," the doctor replied, "and they dared to have a notice that Jews and Jewesses could claim priority here for treatment."

"But the hospital," Charles reminded the speaker gently, "was built and endowed by a Jew."

"What does that matter?" the doctor retorted.

"It is Nazi Germany now which owns Austria. We have control of the hospital and we have not a Jewish patient left. That I can tell you. The beds are filled with Germans who suffered during the fighting outside the city. What do you want with Dr. Schwarz?"

"I wanted news of Mr. Leopold Benjamin, if there was any. If not, of his secretary. There was a man, too, named Marius Blute, who managed some of his affairs."

"You will get no news of any of those people here," he was told promptly. "The man Blute has been here and was sent away again pretty quickly. He had the impudence to ask for money. It is true this hospital is endowed with Jewish money, but the money would have been taken away from the Jew Benjamin if the authorities had been able to find him. This hospital and the endowment money and everything else belongs now to the German Government."

"Do you think I would be allowed to see Dr. Schwarz at the prison?" Charles asked.

"I should think they would be more likely to send you in to keep him company," was the insolent reply. "Go away, please. I have no more time to waste—especially on an Englishman."

Charles was thoughtful when he regained the street.

"Fritz," he confided, "things are looking bad here. This is no longer the Benjamin Hospital. The two people I am anxious to find out about have been here—at least, Blute has—and been turned away. The whole of the funds and the endowment have been taken over by the Germans."

"Swine!" Fritz murmured equably.

"Yes, but what about it? I have only a day or two here. I want to find Miss Grey or Blute—Miss Grey particularly—and I don't know where to look."

Fritz's queer, puckered-up little face was full of concern. He looked doubtfully at his patron.

"You will excuse me, sir?" he begged. "But were they living together, these two—any relation or anything of that sort?"

Charles brushed the idea away without hesitation.

"That was quite impossible," he answered. "Mr. Blute has brains, of course, and I should think he's a very decent fellow, but I am sure they weren't related and I don't think anything else would be possible. Mr. Benjamin thought highly of Miss Grey. She came to him from the New York branch of his bank and she soon became his personal secretary."

"I should suggest we drive up to the old porter's lodge, sir, and make enquiry there. We might even get into what remains of the house. If we can find out nothing there we shall have to try the restaurants. Everyone's obliged to eat, anyway, and there are more than ever that are doing it in restaurants."

"As you say, Fritz," Charles assented.

They drove immediately to the fine porter's lodge which guarded the approach

to the Benjamin mansion. The entrance gates they found were locked. Fritz descended and rang the bell. The door of the lodge was opened in due course by a weary-faced woman. Fritz talked to her for a few moments, after which he returned to his employer.

"Nothing to be learned, sir," he reported. "This woman is the widow of the old doorkeeper. He was killed in the fighting when the Nazis first marched in. She says the place was overrun afterwards for weeks, first by disciplined soldiers and searchers, and then by a rabble. No one can get into the house now. The doors are locked and the windows barred. Forty vanloads of furniture have been taken away."

"Did you ask her what was in the vans?" Charles asked.

"No, but I will."

Fritz called back the woman and Charles descended from the taxi. She answered his questions through the railings.

"The vans were mostly locked up, sir," she told him, "but one thing is very certain. The first Germans who came were very disappointed. There were many officers amongst them and one or two civilians. They walked up and down the quadrangle and argued. Sometimes they went back into the house as though for another search. Then a fresh lot came. It was always the same—they went away angry."

Charles searched his pocket and dropped a few reichsmarks into the woman's eagerly outstretched hand.

"I want you to try and remember something for me."

There were tears in her eyes. Her clenched fingers were gripping the silver coins. She was shaking from head to foot.

"Tell me what it is, mein gnädiger Herr," she half sobbed.

"There is one person whom you must remember coming here often—Miss Patricia Grey, Mr. Benjamin's secretary."

"The little one?" she asked. "Always with a smile—with the hair—ach, so lovely?"

"That is she," Charles acknowledged. "Tell me, have you seen anything of her lately? Can you tell me where to find her?"

The woman's face fell. She shook her head drearily.

"The last time I saw her, mein Herr," she confided, "she was between two great Nazi soldiers or policemen—I do not know which—who were bringing her away from the house. She had passed through the gates only an hour before, waved her hand and thrown me a kiss. She was always so gay. When she went out her face was white and set, her hair was disarranged, it looked as

though she had been struggling."

"What do you suppose they were doing with her?"

"They were taking her to prison, mein Herr. That I know."

"And you have never seen or heard of her since?"

"Not once."

"She was a very important person in the household," he persisted. "You have not heard anything from the other servants or seen anything in the papers about her?"

She shook her head.

"Mein Herr will understand," she recounted sorrowfully, "that I have lost my husband and two sons. My daughter has disappeared. There is no one left. The young lady, she passed out of my mind."

"I am afraid that is quite natural," he murmured sympathetically. "Well, the other person was a man—a rather thickset, short man. His name was Blute. He talked a great deal. He was very clever and he worked for Mr. Benjamin."

"Mein Herr, you have not the chance this morning," she said. "Two days after the Nazis' first visit here he was carried out on a stretcher. He had been in the house working in the library. The soldiers had been asking him many questions. There was a quarrel and a fight. They said that he was keeping something back and they took him away to be examined in the prison. Never once has he been back, neither have I heard of him. There were others who were servants of Mr. Benjamin and Dr. Schwarz, the President of his hospital. They have all disappeared."

Charles wrote down his name and his address at the hotel.

"If you hear anything," he begged, "will you let me know—especially about the Fräulein."

The woman nodded.

"I will let you know," she promised, "but all the people of that world have gone—gone—gone."

She waved her hands downwards in despair. Charles stepped back into the taxicab.

"Fritz," he said firmly, "I want to find that young lady."

"One young lady," Fritz sighed, "in all this city! It is so many months ago—"

"Look here," Charles interrupted, "you are a sensible person. I shall try the police only as a last resource because, to tell you the truth, I do not think the police would help me. But think now—in what quarter of the city would they seek to live when they were set free from prison, if ever they were taken there?

Remember, it must not be too far away. Herr Blute would stay in a hotel, I should think. The girl would try to find cheap lodgings. Drive me to the quarter where people in that condition of life would live. I will sit at the cafés, the cheap cafés. We will take it by turns, Fritz. You must eat six meals a day. We must go to all the restaurants. You must drink beer or coffee at all the cafés. A spirit of restlessness must drive you from place to place. We must find them, Fritz. Succeed, and I will take you to England into my own household, or, if you prefer it, I will establish you here."

Life flowed back into the man's veins. He had dined enormously the night before, he had drunk many beers, he had found a great patron. He was Viennese to the backbone. Joy took the place of sorrow. He threw his cap into the air and caught it.

"All day and all night I shall search!" he exclaimed. "They cannot escape me, those two!"

"Stop a moment," Charles said. "There must be some method about our search. I am going to take it for granted that they will follow the example of nearly everyone in a city. They will sleep in their lodging, wherever it may be, and eat at a restaurant. Very well. Put me down far away from the fashionable places, in the district where clerks and middle-class people might go for their mittagessen. I will have an apéritif at one place, I will eat at another, I will drink coffee at another. You must commence with the places for the poorer people. You must do the same thing. Every three hours you must report to me —that is to say, we meet at Sachet's Hotel at three o'clock, at six o'clock, at nine o'clock and at twelve. Is that understood?"

"Alas, mein Herr, it is by now midday," Fritz declared, pointing to a church clock.

"Drive me then," Charles ordered, "to the neighbourhood I spoke of and leave me. I will be back at Sacher's Hotel at three o'clock. It may be that I shall give myself a rest then from this seeming to eat and drink continually. I shall leave you to carry on until six. Afterwards we will comb the city. That is understood?"

"It is understood, mein Herr," Fritz agreed enthusiastically.

He mounted to the driver's seat.

"In a quarter-of-an-hour, mein Herr, you will have commenced your part of the search."

At ten minutes to nine that evening Charles, with a crick in his neck, the sense of a new sort of fatigue in his eyes, limped into the American Bar at Sacher's. A familiar figure was there talking eagerly to the barman. It was Fritz in his brand new suit and holding his chauffeur's cap in his hand. Charles strode up

to him.

"Well, Fritz?"

There was the light of triumph in Fritz's bright eyes as he turned round.

"Mein Herr" he confided proudly, "the search is over. I triumph! It is an affair of ten minutes before I bring you to them."

Charles swallowed a cocktail at a gulp. He had learnt during the afternoon and early evening every subterfuge possible of make-believe for getting rid of unwanted beverages. The cocktail tasted like nectar. He followed Fritz out of the place.

"Which of them is it?" he asked.

"Both," Fritz replied. "Without a doubt, I should say both. The young lady I could swear to. The man—he was as you described him. Listen, mein Herr. I did not know," he went on, tapping his forehead, "what was to be the end of this enterprise. I decided that I must have caution. I found, but I did not address them. I saw them take their places in an eating house. Oh, mein Herr, it is a poor place! I did not permit myself to be seen."

Charles frowned.

"They may escape."

"I have provided against that. There is a man at the door giving away copies of the menu. It is a very ordinary place, mein Herr. I pointed them out to him. I gave him a florin. He will give away no more menus. His eyes are fixed upon them. They will not leave the place."

Charles took his seat in the taxi. It was a time when speed counted for nothing. In six or seven minutes they had passed into the outlying regions of the city. They pulled up with a jerk in front of a restaurant whose good days, if it had ever had any, had long since passed. There were two plate-glass windows, of which one was cracked and the other contained the remains of letters advertising a certain brand of beer. Inside there was an incredibly large number of marble-topped tables crowded with men and women mostly of the working-class type. The upper end of the establishment, obscured by a cloud of cigar smoke, was occupied by larger tables covered with soiled, coloured tablecloths. These were set against a semi-circle of divan seats with one or two cane-backed chairs, mostly in need of repair, facing them. There was half worn out cocoanut matting on the floor and a number of spittoons. The waiters, for the most part, wore a mixed garb consisting chiefly of black jerseys and dark-coloured trousers and aprons. Halfway up, the room branched to the right, and from the unseen portion came the strains of a violin. It was here that Charles came to a sudden standstill. Walking slowly down the passageway between the tables came a man with his eyes partially closed,

playing, not altogether without skill, upon a wretched instrument, a version of the old Viennese waltz. He was a man of slightly below middle height who looked as though he had once been corpulent but had shrunken away through illness or starvation. He was dressed in a very shabby blue suit and there were deep lines in his face. It was only when he paused in front of a table, at which a girl was sitting alone clutching a saucer in her hand on which were a few copper coins, that Charles realized this was the end of his search. There was something unfamiliar in his throat. He was afraid to go on. A curious sense of shame almost kept him speechless. Then the music came to an end in the middle of a bar. Very slowly the musician's arms descended until they hung straight down, the instrument in one hand, the bow in the other. He stared at Charles—quite speechless. The girl looked up. Charles had a horrible feeling that she was shaking the saucer at him. Then their eyes met and she gave a little cry. Every time he thought of that awful moment later in life he was thankful that her first expression was one of wonderful joy and it was only afterwards that the realization of their plight swept over her. It was Charles himself who made a gallant effort. He choked back down his throat that passionate outburst of dismayed sympathy. He even kept it from his tone. It was a heaven-directed impulse.

"Well, all I can say is," he declared, taking both the girl's hands in his, "thank God I have found you! Put that damn' thing down and come and sit down here, Blute. Miss Grey—Patricia!"

She was sobbing quietly into her handkerchief. No one took any notice. They were accustomed to tears nowadays. Blute stumbled over the broken cane chair on the outside and sank on to the divan. Charles took them both by the arm and some kindly fate seemed to have sent a waiter within calling distance.

"Waiter," Charles ordered. "Listen! I shall give you for your service—listen!—the biggest trinkgeld you ever had in your life. I have money—see," he added, thrusting his hand into his pocket and bringing it out. "I want two bottles of the best wine you have in the place—Hungarian Carlowitz, if you have it. Something good, mind. Bring brandy, too—a bottle of brandy. Rolls and butter...Something to get us out of this place," he explained to the other two in English, "until I can take you somewhere where we can eat."

The waiter set down a tray he had been carrying and departed at a gentle run, pushing his way wherever he met with an obstacle, his senses dazed by the memory of that handful of money. Charles drew his protégés closer to him. Patricia had tried twice to speak but found it impossible.

"I know all about it without a word," Charles said firmly. "There are hundreds just in the same plight—can't get a schilling of cash in this damned country. I was very nearly in the same box myself. Luckily I have friends always in the hotels. I left some money with Herodin when I was here last and as I heard

someone say the other day," he went on, dropping his voice although indeed there was no one within hearing, "the Germans would elbow a Bishop on one side, but a famous hotel proprietor was always sacred."

"It's Mr. Charles!" Patricia gasped. "It's Charles Mildenhall!"

"I know," Blute said feebly. "I recognized him but I couldn't speak. Day by day for months I have walked these streets looking for a friendly face and been scowled at by strangers. I've hung about the banks, I've argued at the tourist places. Charles Mildenhall, are you not afraid we shall murder you where you sit for that pocketful of money?"

"Write me your I.O.U.'s, if you like," Charles invited, drawing out notes from his pocket. "Oh, we can do all that later on. Here's the wine. My God, that fellow's a hustler! Thank heaven this is Vienna and not an English city. It's good wine."

The waiter's hand was shaking so that he could scarcely draw the cork. Charles leaned over and took the bottle from him, reached to another table for a third glass and poured out three brimming tumblersful.

"The rolls," he said. "You're a bright fellow, I can see," he went on, as the man began to beam upon them. "Never mind about the butter. Rolls."

They came. Cheese came. Delicatessen followed. Butter that was eatable made its appearance. Neither of the two made the slightest hesitation about proving to their host the horrible truth—they were starving. He ate bread himself—coarse bread—and found it delicious. He had no need to be polite about the wine. It was good. Patricia set down her tumbler half empty. Already a little colour was flushing her cheeks.

"Go steady with the rolls," Charles advised them both. "I shall carry you away from this place for dinner."

"Dinner," the girl faltered. "Just say that over again, Mr. Mildenhall. Dinner—something that smells good, perhaps!"

"Schnitzel à la Viennoise" he said light-heartedly, "in my private sitting-room at Sacher's. How will that go with you, Blute?"

Blute had a roll in either hand. He put one down and took a long draught of wine. For the first time he spoke coherently. He jerked out the words. They spelled their own tragedy.

"I have been in prison for six months," he groaned. "Towards the end of it we ate the filth the warders refused."

Charles would have nothing to do with sympathy. He nodded as though Blute's was quite an ordinary confidence.

"Hard luck! I just escaped prison myself this time. The world's gone mad," he

added, patting Blute's back and taking a fervent grip of Patricia's hand. "Never mind. Thank heaven Fritz and I found the right place!"

"You were looking for us?" she asked eagerly.

"I should jolly well think I was," he answered. "You don't suppose I dropped in here to have a light meal, I hope? I knew things must have gone terribly for you when I discovered all about the currency restrictions, that Mr. Benjamin had completely disappeared and Dr. Schwarz was in prison. You see, I did my best to trace you. Don't bother to tell me all about it yet. We must start another chapter of living again. Just get the ugly things out of your minds. A cigarette each? There we are! Now I'm the only conversationalist. I'm running this show. I've a taxi-cab outside. I take you under my charge. I'm taking you to the back entrance of my hotel—the manager loves me so much that he would give it to me if I asked him! By a route which I know quite well you will come with me to my sitting-room. I guarantee that within a few minutes of arriving there we shall be safely enclosed from any intruder."

"There will be police—and soldiers—" Patricia faltered.

"Not within my four walls," he declared, and his voice was full of confidence. "Now then, waiter—supposing I settle with you. How much for the wine and rolls and all the rest of it?"

The man handed him a strip of paper. Charles put down the amount.

"And now tell me," he went on. "What is the largest tip you have ever received?"

"A piece of gold," the man faltered in a voice that was scarcely audible. "The patron who gave it to me was drunk."

"Well, I am sober," Charles told him, "and I am very happy. There is the equivalent of five pieces of gold. Keep some for your wife and children."

They left the man supporting himself against the marble-topped table and stammering out his thanks. Charles held Patricia and Blute firmly by the arm, led them out into the street and tucked them into the taxi. He gave Fritz his orders and in seven minutes they were in the back regions of the hotel. They entered by the staff door and mounted quickly to the first floor. One turn to the left along the corridor and they were in Suite Seventeen. Charles threw his hat into the air.

"Arrived!" he cried. "Joyfully and safely! Sit down. Wait for my orders. I am in command of this expedition."

His protégés were utterly numb. Speech would have meant a breakdown. Charles stood pressing the bell and beaming upon them. Servants came hurrying in. There was a valet, a waiter and a chambermaid. Never did Charles feel more thankful for his glib use of the Viennese patois.

"Greta," he directed, pointing to a door, "that is my bathroom. Take this young lady in there. My friends have been in distress like many others in this city. They have lost their baggage—everything. Prepare a bath for Fräulein, fetch anything she asks for and wrap her in a dressing-gown. Do not leave the suite until after you have seen her into her bath and then come to me for orders. Come here, Franz," he went on, turning to the valet. "Take this gentleman into my bedroom and turn on a bath for him. Take linen, underclothes and socks from my suitcase and put them out for him. See that he has everything he needs—you understand?"

"Perfectly," the valet replied. "If the gentleman will come this way."

Blute followed the man out with shaking footsteps. Charles drew a long breath and lit a cigarette.

"Kellner," he asked, turning to the waiter, "what is best for us to eat? My friends, you understand, have been starving."

The waiter smiled sympathetically. He had seen others on the verge of starvation during the last few months.

"Plain dishes, gnädiger Herr," he advised.

"Good," Charles agreed. "Bring them some hot consomme, perfectly plain grilled cutlets of lamb or veal—heaps of them—figure to yourself that there are six or twelve of us!—and serve plenty of vegetables. Afterwards fruit. Now for wine. There we must be careful. We have drunk—not much but a little—heavy red wine. There is no German red wine like Carlowitz but my friends have now revived a little. We will give them a good Moselle, a Piesporter or a Braunberger, and I think with the help of their baths and getting accustomed to their new surroundings we could venture on a cocktail each. Let this all be ready in half-an-hour."

"It shall be done, mein Herr."

"No one but Fritz, my chauffeur, is to come near this room except by my orders. Now please send me the housekeeper."

The man hurried off. Charles threw open a window and looked out upon the well-lit but still somewhat turbulent city. He drew a long breath. He was alone. He was free to relax. His heart was beating like a boy's. There were tears in his eyes which he forced back with difficulty. Two starved human beings! What was there about that suddenly to change the world around him, to excite him more than any success he had ever had? He sat down. He was growing calmer every moment. He lit a cigarette. His brain was functioning now more normally. He knew what had happened to him. He saw her first startled look, he watched the joy which transformed her pinched, weary expression. He remembered her slow coming to life, the light that flowed from her eyes as she

had turned round from the bathroom door before disappearing, the faint little wave of her thin fingers. He knew quite well what had happened. He crossed the room and rang the bell. He returned to the window. Every second the thing was becoming clearer. He remembered how often she had occupied his thoughts. This wave of tenderness was amazing. All the same, he knew that never again in his lifetime would he feel the same thrill of exquisite joy which had come to him when he had turned the corner of that shabby restaurant, recognized Blute, seen Patricia lift her head, watched that dazed look in her hollow eyes suddenly disappear, watched the transformation which that flood of light brought into them...

There was a knock at the door. A stately, elderly woman dressed in black silk was ushered in by the waiter.

"I was told, sir, that you wished to speak to the housekeeper," she announced.

Charles was himself again. He motioned the lady to a chair.

"Waiter," he said, "I will have my cocktail at once. Let it be one of Frederick's special White Ladies."

CHAPTER XI

The dinner commenced almost normally except for the slight badinage occasioned by Blute's appearance in trousers turned up four times.

"I had no idea that I was such a fine fellow," Charles remarked as he took his place.

"I remember thinking the first time we met," Patricia confessed demurely, "that you had rather nice legs."

Charles looked at her with a smile. Already the joys of anticipation were making a lover of him. The deathly pallor had gone from her face, although her eyes were still sunken. She had entered from the bathroom with a faint glow upon her cheeks and a silk dressing-gown of Charles's effectively shortened with the aid of safety pins, displaying something of her beautifully silk-stockinged legs. She glanced at her host a little suspiciously.

"Do you travel round the world," she asked, "with a choice selection of lady's underwear of all sizes as part of your wardrobe, and do you really use for yourself all those powders and delicate perfumes the maid was trying to press upon me?"

"Not guilty," he assured her. "I travel always alone, as my own servant would tell you if he were here. Fortunately, though, I choose the right hotel. All these lighter feminine belongings came from the ladies' hairdressing department,

which that delightful old housekeeper opened up for the occasion."

"And the—other things I am wearing?" she asked with a touch of her old self in her mischievous glance.

"If you came here in the daytime," he pointed out, "you would notice that there are several establishments from Paris and two from Vienna itself which have showcases in the hall. The housekeeper procured the keys. We looted them."

"You have very good taste," she told him.

"I am glad they please you," he answered. "I am afraid I can't claim all the credit. There were two showcases—I took one and the housekeeper the other. I simply helped myself to an armful—everything that was displayed. The housekeeper was more selective. She explained that everything was likely to fit you because in showcases they always display the articles of women's attire in the smaller sizes because they look more attractive."

"You pick up things very quickly," she smiled, taking a long delicious sip of her cocktail. "Oh, what happiness!" she went on, with her eyes still half closed. "The feeling, the caress of this silk, the perfume of violets, the taste of a real cocktail, the smell of these cutlets! Mr. Mildenhall, you are a god and this is a personally conducted tour into Paradise!"

"Entirely my sentiments," Blute murmured, gripping at his trousers.

"To be light-hearted again even for a moment—it is wonderful!" Patricia declared, patting her host's hand.

"Another part of my anatomy is aiming at other things," Blute grunted. "I used to think I would be a happy man to lose four inches around the waist. They have gone, but the road to happiness—"

"Not a word!" Patricia insisted. "Until dinner is over the past is dead. I am in Paradise and my guide is serving my food."

"Lamb cutlets with Sauce Béarnaise," Blute murmured. "What a novelty but what a heavenly sauce!"

The soft delicate wines were drunk almost with reverence. The cutlets disappeared in almost miraculous fashion. Patricia looked up guiltily as she finished her second and found the waiter by her side. He had entered into the spirit of the feast, however, and he gave her no time to hesitate. He served her and passed on.

"It is my third cutlet," she confessed. "They are so large, too, but oh, how delicious!"

"The Viennese is the only school of cookery," Charles pronounced, "which condescends to acknowledge the grill. The French will have none of it."

"As a hungry—let me throw away affectation and say a starving girl," Patricia

declared, "I am glad that we are in Vienna."

Not a single serious word was spoken during that meal from beginning to end. Towards its conclusion there was a knock at the door and the housekeeper reappeared. She was followed by two girls carrying frocks and coats upon each arm. She smiled graciously upon the diners.

"I am too soon, I know," she said. "I shall take my young ladies into the bedroom and await your convenience. I was fortunate enough to find my sister and my two nieces in our establishment. They were only too anxious to help."

Charles rose to his feet and directed them to his bedroom.

"We will send you the young lady in a quarter-of-an-hour, Madame," he promised. "Will you take your assistants in there and ring for the chambermaid if there is anything you want?"

"Of course, this is a dream!" Patricia laughed a little jerkily. "Please, Mr. Mildenhall—"

"Charles," he interrupted.

"Charles, then," she went on. "This really isn't necessary. We can telephone to one of the big establishments for a gown and a hat and I can buy anything else I want to-morrow if you let me have a little money."

"Can't disappoint the dear old lady," he said. "She's knocked them all up and they're quite excited about it. Don't think those are all useless evening frocks. I particularly said a travelling gown, some tweeds and simple hats."

"You are an angel!" she told him. "All the same—"

"Well?"

"I am not going to say anything more. I am too happy to protest. I will talk reasonably about the clothes and everything soon—not now."

"I can quite see," he said, "why Mr. Leopold Benjamin chose you for his perfect secretary. You have the practical mind."

"Wait till I get it working," she warned him. "You must remember that even Mr. Benjamin's chosen secretary, in hell one moment and in heaven the next, is finding it a little difficult to keep her feet upon the ground. But please let me warn you of this. You may be King Cophetua himself, but I am only going to have from that woman one travelling gown and perhaps one other, two hats, and someone will have to get me a pair of shoes. I have crossed the Atlantic with less than that. The oddments—if you are going to let me have a little money—I know where to get myself."

"We'll deal with this soufflé," he suggested, "and come to terms later on and then I'll show you whether I can be practical, too."

He crossed the room and lifted the telephone receiver.

"Is Mr. Herodin in his room?" he asked.

"And speaking."

"I need your help, Herodin," Charles said. "Mildenhall speaking."

"I will step up to your room at once, sir."

"Even when we have finished dinner," Charles remarked as he resumed his seat, "you two will be too exhausted to discuss plans seriously. I must tell you, however, that there is a serious situation to be faced. The news to-day seems to be better but I'm afraid it's rather a mistake to build upon it. The Germans here all think that because the Führer has consented to receive a Polish envoy there will be no war. I think the people are wrong. That is all I want to say for the moment, but we have to bear it in mind. It may alter our plans."

There was a knock at the door and Mr. Herodin entered.

"Herodin," Charles said, "I will not introduce you to my two guests. It will leave you freer to answer any questions you may be asked. I want you to arrange, however, rooms in a strictly private part of your hotel for the young lady and a room also for the gentleman."

Blute held up his hand.

"Forgive me, Mr. Mildenhall," he begged. "Through all my misadventures, except for the time I was temporarily cut off from the world, otherwise in prison, I have spent my nights always in one place. I cannot break that rule. I have a very grave responsibility upon my shoulders. Your offer is one of kindness and I will admit that I am not fit to be seen upon the streets, but I am going to make a few little changes in my attire and I can easily reach the place where it is my duty to sleep."

"That's quite all right," Charles agreed. "We'll fix you up in the style of the perfect Viennese dandy to-morrow morning."

"You are very kind," Blute acknowledged, "but I still must leave and enter by the back door."

"That," Mr. Herodin observed with a smile, "can be arranged."

"The young lady," Charles said, "will be ready for her room in an hour's time. Will you kindly arrange to have a maid here then to show her where it is and look after her?"

The hôtelier bowed.

"I quite understand, Mr. Mildenhall. I will send a trusted chambermaid here at the time you say and I will have a room in the quietest part of the hotel prepared. I shall be honoured to do anything I can for your guests."

Charles nodded his acknowledgements. The manager bowed once more and left them.

"Of course, I hope you don't think I am butting in too much," Charles observed. "I cannot help treating you two like Babes in the Wood to-night! We will all be more normal to-morrow morning, perhaps."

"You are being kindness itself," Patricia declared. "Dear host," she went on, taking his hand and holding it tightly, "if there is one thing that sometimes makes me shiver with joy, it is the continual reflection that I have not to return to the lodging house where I have spent the last two months. It costs—very little—but it is horrible. I am not used to fear, but I was afraid there."

"Thank God you'll never see the beastly place again, then!" Charles exclaimed.

In due course Charles escorted Patricia to the room where the housekeeper and her nieces were waiting. He returned to find Blute with a blissful expression on his face smoking a large cigar.

"The waiter insisted," he apologized. "This is the first time I have smoked a cigar for five months. I cannot tell you the happiness."

"Capital! How are you feeling now, Mr. Blute?"

"I am a man again," the other declared. "What I ache for still is one thing and one thing only—a few serious words with you."

"I was hoping you might," was the quiet reply. "I will tell you why, or rather you have it in what I told you a few minutes ago. This country is on the threshold of war. I can tell you pretty well to an hour when that will come."

"I feared it," Blute said gloomily. "Here the people are taking it lightly. They are too obsessed all over Austria with this stupefying chaos of German propaganda. They believe that England will threaten and barter and argue, but they do not believe that she will fight."

"They are wrong. In this room I can talk to you in a way I should not have ventured to a week ago. I have been on a special mission to Poland. On the one hand I have had to convince their leaders of a fact which they were only too ready to accept—that England would keep strictly to her obligations, that France would do the same and that the day Poland was invaded both countries would declare war against Germany. Well, as I said, they were only too eager to believe that. On the other hand, it was my duty to point out to them that no practical aid could be looked for from England or even from France for many months—neither by air, nor by land, nor by sea could we reach her with any fighting forces. She must bear that in mind every time she remembered the pact. Our help would come, our word would be kept but if she went to war at the present moment she must make up her mind that she would have to look

after herself for at least six months."

"What was the reply to that?" Blute asked.

"Well, they listened to me but all the time they shrugged their shoulders, they babbled about the British Fleet, the French Army, our united air strength. The practical side of the matter is that I have been over to drill into them hard facts which they seem determined to ignore. I left them with the plainest statement of the situation, exactly as it exists; and I insisted upon it that not only the politicians but also the Air Field-Marshal, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the man who is responsible for their Navy be given the opportunity of listening to me. I battered it into their understandings that they would probably have five to six months' fighting without a soul to help them except by indirect pressure. It made no difference, I fear. I know for a fact that the plenipotentiary Hitler insists upon having will not be sent; I also know that if he does not arrive Hitler will move across the frontier immediately, and England and France will be at war with Germany twenty-four hours later."

"It is bad news. It affects, of course, what I have to say to you. It affects the position in which Miss Grey is placed. It affects my position...I fancy I hear her returning."

"I shall ring, then, for the coffee," Charles announced, rising to his feet. "As soon as Miss Grey comes I can hear your story and we will consider what help I can give you."

CHAPTER XII

Patricia came quietly back, helped herself to coffee, lit a cigarette and slipped into a corner of the couch. The housekeeper explained the situation to Charles, who went in search of her.

"The very gracious young lady," she said, "has made our task a pleasant one. She has moved us to admiration, but she is very firm. She has chosen two frocks of the least expensive stock, a travelling coat and two simple hats. She would look at nothing else. She has asked us to procure a pair of shoes and a pair of slippers, for which we have taken her measurements, and—the gnädiger Herr will pardon me—of the underclothes she has asked for two more sets to be supplied to-morrow morning with the other things. I have calculated out the amounts. I do not think that Herr Mildenhall will find the cost excessive. The Fräulein was very obstinate. The total amount of the indebtedness I have reckoned out at the figure shown here. The gnãdiger Herr may be grateful from his point of view that Fräulein is not like most of the young ladies we have to deal with."

Charles glanced at the bill.

"But it is ridiculous!" he exclaimed.

The housekeeper shook her head sadly.

"Perhaps," she remarked, smiling as the idea occurred to her, "Herr Mildenhall and the young lady will be in Vienna later on. They will bear in mind the fact that it is my sister who has been of assistance."

"That is indeed exceedingly likely," Charles agreed, "and with your permission I shall add this note for distribution between yourself and the young ladies, to compensate you for your—er—unusual services."

The housekeeper dropped one of the curtsies of her youth.

"The gift of mein Herr is joyously accepted," she said. "The two young ladies will join me in my thanks."

Charles hurried back into the salon. He took a place by Patricia's side upon the divan. Marius Blute disposed of himself in an easy chair opposite. Charles held up his hand.

"One moment," he begged.

He pressed the bell for the waiter.

"There are omissions here," he said, pointing to the table. "We must rectify them."

From the waiter he ordered French brandy, an orange and lemon squash for Patricia, with a small Grand Marnier to drink with her coffee. The cigars were brought back again. The conversation began.

"My one object," Blute said, lighting a fresh cigar, "is to save words. I want to put my situation and the situation of Miss Grey before you, sir, in as short a time as possible."

"Excellent," Charles murmured.

"For ten years," Blute continued, "I have been a sort of private confidential agent to Mr. Leopold Benjamin. His need of me was based upon this idea. He was the most far-seeing man I have ever come across. He foresaw twelve years ago a state of affairs very like the present one. He employed me for one purpose and one purpose only. It was my business to travel to the cities of Europe which contained sound banking institutions, to open up a correspondence with them on his behalf so that he could deposit money there at a reasonable rate of interest and assume possession of it when the necessity arrived. I shall speak only in sterling so that you, Mr. Mildenhall, who are perhaps not a great financier, will understand in a moment. I have invested nine millions sterling for Mr. Benjamin in this fashion. It has increased in value so that it is now ten millions. Besides this he had about three millions in

Vienna. Two million the Nazis stripped him of the day they sacked his bank; one million he took away with him in cash and short-dated bills. Twenty thousand pounds are somewhere waiting for Miss Grey and fifty thousand for me—but we have not the faintest idea where."

"Let me get my breath," Charles begged. "Did you draw no salary, Blute?"

"A splendid one," the latter acknowledged. "I spent more than half of it in expenses, the rest I left in Benjamin's Bank. It was taken over by the government."

"That explains your situation," Charles admitted. "Now, what about Miss Grey?"

"My salary," she confided, "was six hundred pounds a year. It was lodged to an account in my name. I drew the money exactly as I required it. Two years ago I thought I should like a small car. I bought it with Mr. Benjamin's approval. He paid for my lessons in driving and that Christmas Mrs. Benjamin gave me a brooch which must have been worth two or three hundred pounds. When the assets of the bank were devoured by the raids following the Anschluss, they helped themselves to the deposits and mine went with the rest."

"This is all very clear," Charles said, "but what I do not understand is this. Mr. Benjamin struck me as being a very delightful, a generous and a sympathetic person. I cannot conceive his suddenly flying out of the country and leaving you two—Miss Grey still in charge of his affairs and his secretary, and you, Blute, as his agent—without any form of farewell or without any certainty that your balances in the bank would not be touched. He must have known that if this happened you were penniless."

"Understand at once," Blute begged, "that neither Miss Grey nor I have a word of complaint against Leopold Benjamin. He would be incapable of any act of unkindness or inhumanity. On the night he received that terrible message and decided to leave the country he sent for us both. You will remember the occasion, Mr. Mildenhall. You yourself were dining in the house. His aeroplane was only a mile away. He told us his decision. We agreed that it was for the best. He laid upon us both a special task. He knew quite well that it would cost a great deal of money. We have both been working upon it for the last two years. He handed over to us, before he departed, ten thousand pounds in Bank of England notes. We were to deduct our own expenses or balances at the bank from this and the rest was to go towards the responsibility he laid upon us. Mr. Benjamin was princely in his departure from us as he had been through his life. He is not to be blamed in the least for our misfortunes or that we have come very near starvation."

"I'm glad to hear it," Charles declared. "I hate to be disappointed in people. I

believed in Mr. Benjamin. Now then, we come to the pith of the story. What happened to all the money?"

"The simplest, most foolish thing that could possibly happen," Blute groaned. "To carry an amount like that about with me was an utter impossibility. Miss Grey felt just the same about it. What we had to do for Mr. Benjamin was a costly affair. I spent a thousand pounds of it the first day, a second thousand the next day. By that time the trouble was getting worse here. Miss Grey, at my suggestion, decided to send a thousand pounds back to America. We arranged that. I sent my wife back home with another two thousand. We pooled the rest and I let Miss Grey have such money as she wanted as occasion arose. She was still living in the house. I was living not a quarter of a mile away—soon I shall have occasion to tell you where. The night that the house was raided by the Nazis all Vienna went mad. The Nazis were bitterly disappointed. They searched every person in the house. They took Miss Grey's money and they simply treated it as a terrific joke when she assured them that it was part of her salary and without it she was penniless. They found me in the library where I worked most evenings and they found also my money which I kept in a safe behind the desk. I fought for it but I hadn't a chance. I was carried away on a stretcher and was found by Miss Grey a week afterwards in a hospital. Not a penny of my money was left. Miss Grey went to the bank. It was already too late. The assets had been seized, a seal put upon the safes and not a schilling was parted with to any of the depositors. She and I were left very nearly destitute. I lodged a complaint in the Courts. I was perhaps foolish but it seemed to me there was nothing else to be done. As a result we were thrown into prison. When I was freed I found Miss Grey with difficulty. I tried to get a job at a tourist agency. Meanwhile I wrote home to my wife for money. Miss Grey wrote to America. We both of us wrote to Mr. Benjamin at every address we could think of. No answer came to either of us from anywhere. Soon we saw official notices in all the Austrian and German papers. What they called 'a moratorium' existed."

"I read of that," Charles murmured.

"No money from abroad could be claimed by individuals until the exchanges had been adjusted. If money was sent it was confiscated by the State and any letters accompanying it were destroyed by the censor. It was sheer robbery. Meanwhile our employment came to an end. We met day by day. It was impossible for me to leave Vienna because of the money I had already spent on Mr. Benjamin's account. Between us we could not raise enough for Miss Grey's passage to England, much less back to America."

"Why didn't you go on writing to Mr. Benjamin?" Charles asked.

"Because we neither of us had the slightest idea where he actually was," Patricia pointed out eagerly. "It was absolutely necessary, until he could reach

a place of safety, that no one should know his whereabouts. As soon as that time arrived he promised to write to us. We have had not a line, but as every letter that arrived here was censored, it seemed a hopeless task to get in touch with anyone."

"When disaster first came," Blute went on, "we had three hopes. One was that we should hear from Mr. Benjamin, that he would get a letter through to us somehow or other notwithstanding the censorship; the second was that the Benjamin Hospital, with a foundation from him which brought them in the equivalent of a quarter of a million dollars a year, would let us have the sum we needed to complete our obligations to Mr. Benjamin, and the third hope—it was the slimmest of all—was that we might some day or other come across a friend passing through Vienna."

"Nothing so wonderful as this, though, ever entered into our dreams," Patricia murmured.

"Well, that's a very clear explanation of everything that has happened," Charles pronounced. "It has been a horrible time for both of you. Now tell me this—I have made a wild guess. Am I right? The work you undertook for your Chief—had it anything to do with getting all his pictures and wonderful possessions out of Vienna?"

They were both silent.

"That was just what it was," Blute said hoarsely after a moment's pause. "We came so near success—"

"You didn't succeed, then?"

There was a long and melancholy silence. Blute was shaking his head sadly. Patricia sat with her hands folded in front of her and it seemed to Charles that she was going through some sort of inward struggle. When at last she spoke it was as though the three words she uttered were tearing at her very heartstrings.

"No," she confessed. "We failed."

There was a knock at the door of the salon. The waiter entered. He indicated a chambermaid who was waiting outside.

"The young woman has come," he announced, "to fetch the Fräulein who was dining here and who has a room on the other side of the hotel. It is a little difficult to find without help."

Patricia rose to her feet. She held out her hands to her host.

"Mr. Mildenhall," she said, "Charles, if you wish it—there are no words I can use to thank you. I go to bed without fear, almost happy for the first time for months. It is all your doing."

"'Almost' happy?" he repeated.

She nodded.

"If you knew the difference between now and last night," she said smiling, "you would not worry about the 'almost.'"

"When can we meet to-morrow?"

"I do not know," she answered thoughtfully. "I must see Mr. Blute, but I am too weary to talk any more to-night."

"Come and have your coffee and rolls with me here in the morning," he begged. "The chambermaid who looks after you will bring you along. I will be ready at nine o'clock."

"You wish it?"

"I do seriously," he insisted.

He led her towards the door.

"I wish it," he repeated, "and I am determined also to know the meaning of that 'almost.'"

The light faded from her face. She shook her head.

"That," she said, "I shall not tell you just yet. It is not for you to know. Be satisfied with thinking what you have done for us, the misery from which you have snatched poor Mr. Blute and me. Apart from all of which," she added, "I shall tell you this—"

She grasped his hand tightly. Suddenly she raised his fingers to her lips and kissed them.

"You are the sweetest Good Samaritan," she cried, "the most wonderful and most tactful who ever brought a poor girl back into life!"

Her feet seemed to have recovered some of their old grace and lightness. She was across the room in a moment. She waved her hand and disappeared with the chambermaid.

CHAPTER XIII

Marius Blute had risen to his feet when Charles returned to his easy chair. The latter waved him back again.

"Sit down and finish your cigar," he invited. "That is, unless you are tired."

"I am no longer tired," Blute said. 'T am a strong man, really. No man could have gone through what I went through in prison unless he had a sound constitution. Wine and good food were what I needed. I am myself again. But I must not keep you up."

"My dear fellow," Charles protested, "does anyone ever go to bed in Vienna before midnight? If you were not here I should only go out to a café. Remember, I have only heard just a sketch of your adventures."

"It is difficult," Blute reflected, "to explain everything."

"Could you tell me this?" Charles asked. "What was the meaning of that 'almost' in Miss Grey's farewell speech? She had been looking so radiantly happy all the evening. Now just a little of the cloud seems to have come back."

"If I were to tell you what I think," Blute said thoughtfully, "I believe that she would be very angry with me."

"There is something that still troubles her, then?"

"There is something."

"Is there anything more I could do?" Charles asked bluntly.

"Nothing that I could ask you," Blute replied, "nothing that either of us has the faintest right to ask you to do."

"Look here, Blute," Charles confided, "I'll let you into a secret. I am very fond of Miss Grey."

"That is no secret," was the other's quiet comment.

"I dare say not," Charles observed smiling. "To tell you the truth," he went on, "I really didn't know it myself. I thought Miss Grey was very charming and all that, but it wasn't until I saw her to-night in that horrible place and saw how ill and miserable she looked, and realized how she must have suffered—well, it wasn't until then, anyhow, that I suddenly discovered I was very, very fond of her. I believe that if she realized how fond, she'd have explained that 'almost.'"

"I think I know what Miss Grey meant. Our re-establishment, which has come about entirely due to your kindness, has reminded us that our task is not complete."

"Well," Charles pointed out, "I am still here, still at your service. How can I help you further?"

"It is not fair," Blute said, moving uneasily in his place, "to invite you into an adventure in which you have everything to lose and nothing to gain. More especially Miss Grey will feel this because you have just about saved our lives in so charming a manner."

"Absurd!" Charles declared lightly. "All that I have done has been a pleasure to me. Don't think that I have finished with you, my friend Blute. There is the question of funds to settle. I can help you there—you and Miss Grey. It is impossible for you to get at your money—I mean your own money apart from what you have been robbed of. I can get at all I want without difficulty. Tell me frankly, beyond getting you out of the country what do you need money

for? Is it possible that you still have a hope of saving any of Mr. Benjamin's glorious collection?"

Blute was on his feet. Excitement gleamed in his eyes. He whirled his arms.

"Listen, my friend!" he cried. 'It comes! I can keep silent no longer! It will be impossible for me to keep my mouth closed. Miss Grey will be angry. It cannot be helped. Be prepared to be astonished, my friend. Save for the last struggle, that marvellous young woman and I have succeeded in achieving the impossible. All those glorious paintings—the two Andrea del Sartos, the Fra Filippo Lippis, the Murillo, the Titian, the two Spanish pictures, the Cellini handwork—oh! the great list of immortal things, the fit possessions of a god—we have saved them! Not yet have they been touched by one of Hitler's emissaries, not once have the greedy eyes of his henchmen revelled in their beauties. There were days when we worked from sunrise till night, and if we ate it was without knowing it, and if we drank it was still bending over our tasks. That girl, with the heart of a lioness and the frame of a child, worked with me with the strength of a dozen men. We succeeded. The collection is in our keeping. Never has there been so much fury spent upon any Nazi failure as there has been spent over this one. Everyone wondered at the final rush of that big band of the Gestapo into Vienna. It was to make sure of their loot. It was to make sure of their millions. They came—and what did they find? Half a mile of empty walls."

"Do you mean to say that you actually got the whole collection away?" Charles demanded incredulously. 'T know that a great many of the pictures had gone from the first gallery the night of the scare, but in less than a week the whole house was being ransacked by the Nazis."

"The whole collection is still under our control," Blute declared. "We had even reached the final steps in its disposal. Then our luck failed. Perhaps we were a little careless one day. So many things seemed to have happened between that we began to hope we had been forgotten. Perhaps we were wrong. At any rate, our days of tribulation arrived. We were stripped of every pfennig we possessed, we were questioned and bullied to death. For months I lay in one prison and Patricia Grey in another. We were tortured—but never mind—we have finished with the horrors. Just as summarily as we were imprisoned we were thrown out onto the streets two months ago—penniless. For a time we were followed everywhere we went, then I think they gave us up. They saw me in the clothes of a beggar of the street, they saw me eating crusts at the back doors of the restaurants which in the old days I had patronized. They saw her in the same plight. Then little paragraphs began to appear in the papers that some of the pictures had been seen in Paris and some in London. They cooled off, they left us alone except now and then to mock at us as we passed. There we were starving in the streets, and treasures worth millions still safe

here, still waiting only for us to take the final step. And we were without apfennig towards a meal, without the money now for a letter or a telegram, without any means of opening up communication outside the ring of the city. Have you ever considered, Mr. Charles Mildenhall, the psychological, the actual mental condition of the really penniless man or woman?"

"No, and I don't want to just now," Charles declared. "Let's get on with this. I gather that by some extraordinary means the pictures remain hidden, that you still have access to them and with money you could carry out your plans to restore them to Leopold Benjamin."

"With money and help—yes. But listen, Mr. Mildenhall. The last steps will be the most dangerous. You are still a young man and you have all that you need in life. Why should you risk everything in an enterprise of this sort?"

Charles smiled deliberately. It was not a humorous effort. It just meant the slow relaxation of his features from his strained period of listening.

"For the same reason, I suppose," he replied, "that half the men in the world have, some time or another, made fools of themselves. I don't admit that I am going to make a fool of myself, but I am going to help you and Patricia to finish your adventure whatever we may have to go through."

Blute spent several moments of indecision, his eyes fixed intently upon the speaker.

"If you were an ordinary young man," he began, "I should warn you once more. As it is, I shall not do so. I believe that you have made up your mind. Very well, I proceed—"

"Let me tell you this one thing about myself which may set your mind a little more at ease," Charles insisted, finishing his brandy and lighting a cigarette. "I started in the diplomatic world with every mortal advantage. Things were made far too easy for me. I abandoned the straightforward course towards the final goal of an ambassadorship solely because the preliminaries were too circumscribed. I felt a craving for adventure. My year as military attache did not help me in the least. I happened to be on friendly terms with our Foreign Secretary. I have one great gift—the gift of languages—so I put it up to him that I could be of more use to the country as a free lance, wandering from one seat of disturbance to another, undertaking special missions, bringing back from remote places at times very valuable information. He agreed and off I went. I shall never earn any great distinctions, I shall never have my chest covered with medals and orders. People will repeat my name and wonder in years to come what I have done to be still hanging about the Foreign Office. I don't mind. I shall have lived the life I wanted to live."

Blute finished his brandy and rose to his feet. With a grin across the table at Charles he put several of the cigars in his pocket.

"Put on your hat and coat," he enjoined, "and come with me."

CHAPTER XIV

Charles piloted his companion by the intricate route leading through the back quarters of the hotel to the lift and into the courtyard. Fritz was sitting on the box seat of his taxicab smoking a cigarette and reading the evening paper. Blute seized Charles's arm.

"This chauffeur!" he exclaimed. "Remember, the fate of our whole enterprise will depend upon his discretion."

"I pledge my word upon it," was the confident reply. "I have known him for years. He is absolutely trustworthy. He is my man body and soul. Apart from that, he has somewhat the spirit of an adventurer and he is an out-and-out Viennese, loathing the Germans."

"Satisfied," Blute said tersely. "I will direct him myself."

Fritz, with smiling face, held open the door. Charles entered the vehicle. Blute remained talking with Fritz for almost five minutes. Afterwards he took his place inside. Fritz closed the door and they drove off.

"I am satisfied with your chauffeur," Blute declared. "He is intelligent, he worships you, he has quick wit, he is likely to be useful to us."

"Is it permitted to ask where we are going?" Charles enquired.

"We are going by a roundabout course," Blute confided, "to a compound attached to the garage of Mr. Leopold Benjamin's palace. It abuts upon a lane where there are no other buildings and it is nearly a quarter of a mile from the house. Listen while I explain something. Do not let your spirits fall when I speak of a secret passage because, although I know these places have no novelty as hiding resorts and would be most unlikely to escape the notice of a trained S.S. man, you will have to take my word for it that this is one of the most wonderful secret passages in Europe. The palace in which Mr. Benjamin lived was built, as you know, by the Hapsburgs, and it has always remained a Royal Domain until it was purchased by Mr. Benjamin's grandfather from the Archduke Ferdinand. The Archduke had a mistress to whom he was devoted, but he had also a jealous wife and family. He discovered the existence of this passage for himself, spent millions upon its development and built the compound as a villa, where the lady was installed. None of this appears in any published guide-book and most people seem to have forgotten the story. The passage is a quarter of a mile long and it commences fifty feet from the end of the picture gallery. It terminates in the room in which I have slept every night I

have been free, before and after I was in prison. The only person to whom Mr. Benjamin ever revealed its intricacies was myself. I can safely say that no one else breathing has ever passed from one end of it to the other, or been shown the exit. No one whom I have ever come across in the city or amongst the hundreds of guests who have visited Mr. Benjamin have ever known that there was such a place. The police have no information concerning it, the twelve specialists whom Mr. Benjamin brought from America to install ventilation at various points and to connect it up electrically returned to the States when their job was over—well paid, I can promise you, but under a covenant never again to set foot in Europe. There are twenty-four doors between the palace and the villa. Every one opens in a different manner, and there is a secret connected with the key of every one of them. Patricia Grey and I have committed the plan to memory and destroyed it. Without our aid it would be a definite impossibility for anyone to traverse it."

"I'll take your word for it," Charles declared.

"The impossibility of trusting a single person of our acquaintance with a secret of such vast importance," Blute went on, "made it necessary for both Miss Grey and myself to go through an amount of physical labour which I could not describe to you. We have removed every canvas from three hundred frames and those we have transported into their present hiding place, which is within a few yards of where I have slept for many months. The canvases alone represent a value of some thirty million dollars and are the most valuable collection of Old Masters in any private ownership in the world."

"Amazing!" Charles murmured. "I can't grapple with it all yet. Tell me, though," he added, looking out of the window and conscious of a sudden obscurity, "why has Fritz turned off his lights?"

"We are in what used to be a private road," Blute confided, "leading to the compound. Now that the Benjamin house is unoccupied and partly in ruins the compound—part of which had been used as a garage—was also naturally left deserted. When I first started upon my scheme for concealing the pictures I had a camp bed and a few necessaries moved into it and that has been my home. We are fast approaching it."

They turned in between two pillars, gigantic obelisks they appeared in the semi-darkness. They were in what had once been a courtyard but which was now overgrown with weeds. Blute pointed to a distant corner.

"Under the wall there," he told Fritz, "with your lights turned off, you will be completely out of sight. There is no thoroughfare here and I may tell you that I have never known anyone to pass down this road. If by any hundred-to-one chance anyone should ask you what you are doing there, invent any story you like, but be sure not to say you brought a fare here."

"It is well understood, mein Herr," Fritz declared. "I shall say that I brought my young lady, that she ran away promising to return at once and has given me the hoop-la!"

"We shall make good use of that fellow, I'm sure," Blute remarked. "Follow me very carefully, Mr. Mildenhall," he said, pointing to a high hedge of laurels. "These bushes are a good screen but they have grown."

He paused at last before a long low building. He counted the bricks from a certain spot, removed one when he had arrived at the fourteenth by simply pressing a piece of the mortar, thrust his hand into the cavity, turned a handle and swung open a door. He replaced the brick, stepped into a dark apartment and beckoned to Charles to follow him.

"Now don't be alarmed that I use this torch," Blute warned his companion. "The wires have been cut and we daren't show much light, anyway."

He flashed the torch around. It was a dreary-looking place and the walls showed signs of damp and decay. In a distant corner was a plain iron bedstead, a rather dejected-looking screen, two chairs, an oil stove and a cupboard.

"My surroundings, as you see, are not luxurious," Blute pointed out. "Nevertheless, as I told you, the only nights I have not slept here since Mr. Benjamin left were the nights I spent in prison."

"And you have never been disturbed?" Charles asked.

"Not only have I never been disturbed but I am convinced that no one has ever visited this place either in the daytime or at night. Why should they? It is just a stone barn with no obvious means of entry. Look into my cupboard!"

Charles glanced over his companion's shoulder. There was coffee equipment but no signs of any coffee. There was a very small piece of black bread on a plate and not another thing.

"I slept here last night," Blute confided. "I munched at that piece of bread when I got up and there it remains. I washed my face and hands in the basin opposite and I walked all the way up into the city. I served coffee during the rush hour at a café en route and there I got a mugful for myself and a roll in payment for half-an-hour's work. It was my breakfast. My mittagessen did not exist. My dinner I will not speak about! I am fortunately a man—as you would be, I think, Mr. Mildenhall—who finds humour in violent contrasts."

He closed up the cupboard.

"Now for some more magic!"

He moved across to the middle of the floor and stooped down, pressed a certain spot in the corner of a square slab of ancient paving-stone, and a trap-door fell slowly back. Charles followed his guide down a ladder with iron

rungs into another large but perfectly dry apartment. Blute held up his torch.

"Take a pull on yourself here," he advised. "For the first moment you may not like it."

Charles followed him confidently. Blute raised his arm and the light from his torch partially illuminated the place. Against the wall, side by side, were four deep coffins. The black cloths which had covered them were neatly piled by their sides. Charles stared at them wonderingly.

"Defunct Gestapos?" he enquired. "Or have we here other enemies? Are these the results of a battle in the Catacombs?"

Blute smiled.

"You are a bad guesser, Mr. Mildenhall," he said. "Within these coffins are some of the Old Masters which were the joy of Mr. Benjamin's life."

"Awaiting exportation," Charles murmured.

"Precisely."

"Won't that be just a little difficult?"

"Not if our plans work smoothly. Consider what might happen. A shocking skiing or automobile disaster—a car rushing down, say, to catch the last train to the frontier. Four over a precipice. Fine description written the same afternoon in a well-known Viennese sporting paper. At the end of the column there is a notice that the bodies of the four victims are being conveyed to France for burial."

"I am confused," Charles admitted.

"It's clear enough," Blute pointed out patiently. "These are supposed to contain the bodies of the four young men. We have the tickets for the transport of the coffins. Remember that no notice has yet appeared in the papers concerning the accident. The day before we are ready to ship the coffins the account of the supposed accident will be published in the Viennese paper. As I said before, the accident never did happen and will be contradicted a week later. A stiff sum that little fairy story will cost but it will be worth it."

"Are those part of the game?" Charles asked, pointing to three large cases. "They seem to have the Customs chalk mark on them already."

"Another little idea," Blute explained. "Those cases contain tapestry and some of the small objets d'art, including some miniatures that Mr. Benjamin is very anxious to have. I will tell you how they happen to be in their present condition. The Austrian Railway has a terribly bad name for the low wages it pays to its employees. At the Swiss frontier there are two Customs officials whose addresses I carry with me and whom I have only to advise of my coming. I have to arrange to travel by a train on which the Chef de Bagages is

a certain Jean Pfeiffer, with whom I am acquainted. It was he who put me up to this in the first place. When we arrive at the frontier he will put these out of the train as usual but they will not be carried to the Customs shed where the luggage is opened. They will be glanced at and when no official is in sight they will be put back again upon the train in their old place—the first packages passed by the Customs."

"Ingenious." Charles observed.

"You see, the point is," Blute went on, "Mr. Benjamin wants the contents of those cases. If by any chance the fraud were detected, they would be at the frontier, it would be the Swiss side which would take care of them and the consignee would be able to get possession of them by paying a heavy fine. If they remained in Austria the Nazis would confiscate them and Mr. Benjamin would never see them again."

"It all seems to me like a very cleverly thought-out scheme," Charles admitted. "The only thing is—why have you left it so long? If there is a declaration of war within the next few days—and there will be—there will be a tremendous rush of people across the frontier and you will find it difficult to get away."

Blute, for once in his life, spoke as a man might speak who was accustomed to lose control of his temper. He even raised his voice. His soft, low intonation was gone. He almost shouted.

"Jesus Christ!" he cried. "Can't you realize, sir, can't you realize, Mr. Mildenhall, the agony through which that little girl and I have awakened in the morning and crawled to meet one another? No news—no fresh face—nothing at the post—nothing at the Censor's office—and every day that passed brought us nearer disaster. We have everything planned and, simple though it may now seem, it has taken some planning and some scheming. And then we come face to face with this horrible position. For the final expenses we have not one penny between us! We have no money with which to bribe the undertaker and his men who are to take the coffins to the station, we have no money for our own tickets, we still have the guard and the Customs men to arrange with. We are helpless!"

"You were helpless," Charles said, patting him on the shoulder. "Why, it must have been maddening, Blute. Thank heavens I came along."

Blute sat down on one of the cases. For the first time he seemed in some small degree to lose control of himself. His face twitched. Charles looked away quickly but he could almost have sworn that there were tears in the man's eyes.

"Maddening it has been these last few weeks," he went on. "Listen, Mr. Mildenhall, I must tell you that it was I who transferred Leopold Benjamin's whole fortune from Germany and Austria to America and London. It was I who thought out the schemes for transference, who guarded against the

currency troubles, who completed the whole business. I can assure you it was child's play compared to these schemes which Miss Grey and I between us have perfected to bring Mr. Benjamin back his treasures. We are on the point of success. Everything is arranged and the money does not come. We have been robbed of what we had and now all the banks have closed their doors firmly against anyone who needs money in this country. I am not a beggar, Mr. Mildenhall, no more is that child a beggar, but last night I was playing a tin-pot little violin in a lowdown café to earn a wretched dinner which I shared with the child; and as for finishing our work here—it is ruined, all brought to nothing for the need of a few thousand pounds."

"Steady on," Charles begged. "My dear fellow," he went on kindly, "wipe your face—do. I know it sounds terrible, but listen—that all belongs to the past. I'm coming in with you. I'll risk all the money I can raise for you and I'm perfectly certain that even now I can get all you want. I'll travel with you. I'll take the whole adventure on. You and I and Patricia—we'll fool these fellows, we'll cheat the Customs and we'll make that old man happy."

"You mean that, Mr. Mildenhall?" Blute asked hoarsely. "For God's sake don't fool about with me."

"I do mean it," Charles assured him. "I can be useful to you in many ways. I have a pull with the railway and the Customs. I have a diplomatic passport as well as my own. We will devote to-morrow—or rather to-day—to deciding the train we travel on. You can get the story of the terrible accident into the paper at once. Here—wipe your face—there's a good fellow. I have never known you to raise your voice before. Use my handkerchief. I have a spare one. You will need all your nerve for the next few days."

The smile came back to Blute's lips. He led the way up the ladder to the main room, bent down, closed the trap-door and standing up again moved slowly towards the exit.

"My friend, I am ashamed," he said humbly. "For the moment I forgot. Do you really mean it? You will come to our aid, you will be once more our deliverer?"

"Of course I mean it. I've promised. To-morrow morning you must come straight to my room at Sacher's. We will work out just how much money we shall need. We shall have the help of the hotel in getting the places on the train. Everything will be easy...Now what's the matter?"

The smile had already disappeared from Blute's lips. There was fear on his face, horror in his eyes. The door was slowly being pushed open. Fritz crept onto the threshold and was standing there, his face as white as a ghost's.

"Mein Herr," he cried softly. "A man has been down the lane. He came quietly but he carried a torch. I had no time to get to you or to get away before he saw

the taxicab. I hid behind it. He called out. I did not answer. I heard him mumbling to himself. He stepped out into the lane again and I heard him calling. He is coming down—they are coming here—two of them. They are S.S. men! Ach, mein Herr!"

The gift of swift thought had helped Charles Mildenhall through more than one crisis of his life.

"Come inside and get behind the door, Fritz," he ordered. "Don't close it. Leave it open. We'll deal with these men."

"I have a revolver—in the car," Fritz stammered.

"Leave it there," Charles answered. "I have one in my pocket!"

CHAPTER XV

The intruders displayed none of Fritz's hesitation. They pushed the door noisily open and stood staring about them. They were both hefty fellows, one in a well-worn German S.S. uniform, the other in a newer outfit of the same type with the Swastika prominently displayed. They had only one rather poor torch between them carried by the Austrian.

"What are you men doing in this place?" the latter asked suspiciously.

Charles was on the point of answering him when Blute gripped his arm.

"Let me deal with this," he begged, speaking in English. "I know how to handle these fellows better than you would. Besides, I want you to keep out of it as much as you can."

"It's too late to think of that," Charles replied. "Still, go ahead, my friend. If you have an idea how to deal with this situation you're welcome. Anything short of murder—don't forget that."

"Turn on the lights!" the bigger man shouted. "I want to see what sort of place we're in."

"There are no lights, Herr Gestapo," Blute answered. "You'll have to do as well as you can with your torch. What do you want here, anyway? This is private property."

The German took the torch away from his companion and inspected the place as far as he could. His language became blasphemous.

"What in hell is a place like this for—stone walls—stone roof—stone floor and not a light?"

"It's a prison/' Blute explained.

"A prison for whom?" the Austrian asked contemptuously.

"You, if you don't behave yourself," was the quick response. "Now, put your hands up—both of you—quick!"

Blute drew a clumsy, old-fashioned revolver from his pocket and held it out. The weapon which Charles had been hiding behind his back also appeared. It was a highly modern, beautifully polished affair.

"Put your revolver away," Blute told him. "I could hit their eyeballs if I wanted to from here. They aren't armed, you see. They've got nothing but those steel whips with knobs at the end—wicked weapons but no good except at close quarters."

"Do you know we are Gestapo?" the German shouted. "You'll go to prison for this!"

"And you'll go to hell, if you don't keep your mouth shut," Blute retorted. "Want some plain talk or a bullet, you two?"

"Proceed with the plain talk," the Austrian demanded. "Put your revolver down. We are not armed."

"So I see, but I will keep my revolver in my hand. I earned my living once as a trick shot on the stage. I could put a bullet in either of you any place I chose within a couple of millimetres. And, while I'm about it, get this into your brains if you've got any—we've been working here for some time and we're not going to be disturbed. There are two things you can do. You'd better stand still and listen to them. If you make the slightest attempt to escape you are dead men and I can promise we can hide your bodies in this building in such a way that they will never be found until the rats have eaten the flesh off your bones."

"They'll be taking a dislike to you presently," Charles muttered sotto voce.

"You leave me alone," Blute whispered. "I know the breed. Now then, you fellows," he went on, "you may put your hands down. I'm not afraid of your rushing in. You want to know what we are. We're thieves. This place has been empty for years, there isn't a soul living anywhere near and we've used it for a hiding place. We've still got some loot here to carry away. It will take us two or three days. Until we've taken it right away you'll stay where you are.

"What, in this place?" the German called out.

"In this place," Blute repeated. "And you can be thankful you're not down in one of the cellars with a bullet through your forehead."

The Austrian coughed. His small eyes were glazed with fear.

"I think we'd better come to an arrangement," he suggested. "I'm an S.S. man all right—so is my friend—but we all have to live. If we were free we would

arrest you. As we are not, we will not be so silly as to try. Make it worth our while and we'll clear out."

"There's another Austrian alive," Blute observed with a grin, "whose word I wouldn't trust for five minutes. I fancy you two are about the same kidney. There may be something coming to you afterwards if you behave yourselves, but I wouldn't trust either of you further than I could see you. Come on—I'm not much of a talker—no more is my friend. We like things to happen. Take your choice. Are you going to obey us or are you going to share the contents of this revolver of mine?"

"You've got us," the German said sulkily. "We'll do as you say, provided there's no killing."

"There'll be no killing unless you ask for it. You came here of your own choice—you'll leave when we choose."

"When will that be?" the Austrian asked uneasily.

"Possibly in either four or five days."

The stream of blasphemy from the German left him for a moment incapable of coherent speech. The Austrian kept his head and temper.

"What do we live on for those four days?" he demanded.

"Sausages, beef, rolls, butter, coffee, beer and brandy," was the prompt response.

"Where do they come from?" the German growled.

"You will be provided with food—just as much as you can eat," Blute promised, "and drink—just as much as you can put away—provided you make no attempt to communicate with anyone outside."

There was a cunning gleam in the big man's eye. It was easy to guess at the thought behind it. Blute flashed his torch upon him.

"By whatever means these things are brought to you," he said, "it will be in such a fashion that you will be dead in ten seconds if you try any tricks."

The German scowled. This wizard of a man seemed to have read his thoughts. His companion raised his voice in excitement.

"Mein Herr," he promised, "I will look after Adolf here. I am not going to have my life risked by his folly. I don't care if you are a thief, I don't care how much you get away with, I don't mind anything as long as we aren't hurt and we get our liberty in four or five days and something in our pockets for keeping quiet."

"Same here," the German echoed gruffly, but without quite as much sincerity ringing in his voice.

"Now, tell me this," Blute asked, turning slightly towards Charles but keeping a stern watch upon the two intruders. "You said that Fritz is to be trusted. Do you mean that absolutely and entirely?"

"I mean that I trust him as completely," Charles replied, "as I should you yourself or Miss Grey."

"The matter, then, is easy," Blute decided. "Fritz," he went on, "your master wants to speak to you."

The two men in uniform started. Fritz appeared from the shadows. There was a somewhat self-conscious smile upon his face. He pointed to the Austrian Nazi as he approached.

"My cousin," he announced, "Johann Lehrer. He was not so bad until he joined the Gestapo."

"Fritz!" the other exclaimed.

"Relations, eh?" Blute queried.

"I speak the truth," Fritz said. "He is the son of my mother's sister."

"Family ties, eh?" Blute observed. "Well, that may help. Now listen. Fritz, I take it," he added, turning to Charles, "is entirely at our disposal for the next four or five days, if necessary?"

"He will do whatever we tell him," Charles answered. "His trustworthiness is guaranteed."

"This, then, is what will happen," Blute announced. "In the first place Fritz will drive us back to the hotel. We shall leave you there," he went on, touching Mildenhall on the arm. "I hope you will have the night's sleep you deserve. Fritz and I will drive on to the all-night market. Listen," he continued, beckoning to the two others, "you can come a little nearer. First, perhaps, it would be better if you took your belts off and got rid of those ugly-looking weapons."

The two Nazis did as they were bidden. They had lost all fear now and it was obvious that they were intrigued.

"In the all-night market," Blute went on, "Fritz will purchase for you all the provisions I have mentioned or anything else you prefer. He will then drive back to this place, he will open the door with his revolver in one hand and pass over the provisions to you. He will then lock you up again. He can provide you with journals which he will buy on the way down. Let this be clearly understood. You have your provisions and your drinks and you will be locked up here alone."

"With the provisions and drinks?" the German repeated in a stentorian voice.

"Precisely."

"And tobacco?"

"And tobacco," Blute assented. "Later in the day Fritz will return. This time he may bring you wine and perhaps a can of hot meat. You will be well fed in any case. That is understood. He may be accompanied by men who will do some removal work. That is not for you to notice. Whatever they may appear to be, these men are on our side, and if you appeal to them in any way the chapter will be closed. You will go out of the world probably with a bullet in your body and you will have thrown your lives away to no purpose."

"We shall not do that," the German declared. "I am not in love with my job. We will follow the directions. We are listening."

"For two or three days you may see either this gentleman who is with me or myself at any time. Then the moment will come when we shall leave the city. Fritz here will remain. There will be twenty-four hours' interval after we have left, during which you will have your usual supply of food and papers, drink and tobacco. At the end of that time Fritz will place in your hands a certain sum of money each."

"What will that sum be?" the German asked, his blue eyes greedily eager.

"One thousand reichsmarks each."

The two men were speechless. The Austrian was the first to find words.

"How do we know that we will get it?" he demanded.

"You can surely trust your relative," Blute replied. "We are giving him his own present separately and we will hand him one thousand reichsmarks for each of you two. You hear that, Fritz?"

"Certainly, sir," the chauffeur answered. "I can tell you both," he went on. "One of you I don't know but the other is my cousin and he knows very well that I have been an honest man all my life and always kept my word. These gentlemen will keep theirs. I know that much about them. They will give me the thousand reichsmarks for each of you and I will hand it over to you. You are very lucky fellows!"

"There is one thing left," Blute reflected. "In this you will have to concern yourselves a little. How will you account for your absence to your principals?"

Johann, the Austrian, simply grinned.

"With me that is easy," he confided. "I shall offer a princely gift to my sergeant. I shall offer him five reichsmarks. He will enter me in his book as on duty. My comrade here is in my charge. For another five he will enter him also as having been in my company."

"You have no wives or anything of that sort?" Blute asked.

An ecstatic smile broke over the German's face. The Austrian's grin was

seraphic.

"The little Lizette," he muttered to himself. "I have dreamed of this! No, mein Herr," he went on, turning to Blute, "we have no wives and we sleep in the barracks, but I think I can promise you that we shall have a wife each in five days' time."

"I have no wife or sweetheart in Germany," the other said, "and these Austrian women—they are lovely."

"Well," Charles said, after a momentary pause, "that all seems to be happily arranged. You'd better change your plans now, Blute, and come back with me."

"I think you're right," Blute agreed, "although they'd get the shock of their lives if they set out to rob me! A staff room in the back quarters of the hotel will seem like a palace after this place."

Charles emptied his cigarette case between the two prisoners. Blute pointed out his water tap and the bed.

"In an hour," he promised them, "Fritz will be back with the food. The one thing you must not do, either of you, is to try and leave this place."

They helped themselves greedily to the cigarettes.

"We will sit and wait," the German promised. "And let it not be too long—I am hungry."

"For me," Johann confided, "I shall dream of Lizette. I shall smoke many cigarettes which will give me a glorious thirst. When the beer comes—ach!"

Blute drew a deep sigh of relief as he locked the outer door and bared his head to the gently falling rain.

"Now at last," he murmured beatifically, "I begin to allow myself hope."

CHAPTER XVI

Charles Mildenhall's very pleasant salon, soon after nine o'clock on the following morning, resembled something between a tourists' bureau and the enquiry office of a great newspaper. In a remote corner sat Blute with a map spread out before him, a directory and a heap of notepaper by his side. Down below in the square bells were ringing, military bands playing and large detachments of German troops who had taken part in the formal entry into Vienna marched through the streets for re-embarkation to Poland. The crowds were on the whole apathetic, but the German side of the Gestapo were doing their best to whip them into some sort of enthusiasm. Charles had established several contacts with his friends in London and elsewhere, and telegrams in

various foreign languages were streaming in. Amongst others was a rather curt intimation from the Foreign Office in London that his return to that capital was greatly desired. Patricia, who was in her element amidst the stream of communications, handed him the British telegram, which was not in code, a little anxiously.

"I expected that," he remarked, "but it can't be helped. I've never taken a liberty with the authorities in my life and in this case it's only a matter of days. Lascelles is really my senior and I have loaded him up with every scrap of information I had."

"I do hope you won't get into trouble," she sighed. "It's marvellous what you are doing for us."

"My dear," he assured her, "I'm enjoying it. When I think of last night I realize how empty life has seemed without an adventure of this sort...Come in, Mr. Herodin," he called out as the manager appeared on the threshold. "Sorry to insist upon seeing you but it was necessary. Blute, you had better come and join in this consultation."

Blute rose at once and seated himself at the round table. He exchanged greetings with the manager.

"Pretty busy, I expect," Blute remarked.

"I am glad to get out of my office for a moment or two," Herodin confessed.

He sank into the chair which Charles pointed out.

"In the first place," the latter began, "as I gave you warning, I am going to drain you dry of every penny you can spare in German, English and American currencies."

"I quite understand that, sir, and I have brought you something to be going on with," Herodin declared. "In reichsmarks I can do you pretty well. Then I have some sterling and a certain amount of dollar currency."

He drew some wads of notes from his pocket which he passed on to Patricia.

"I'll just check the amounts," she said. "Then I expect Mr. Mildenhall will have to give you a draft on account. No one can tell exactly what the exchange is likely to be—especially with war almost a certainty."

"You think war is a certainty, Mr. Mildenhall?" Herodin asked anxiously.

"I am afraid so. In fact I know it. At the rate they're going now Hitler's troops will cross the frontier to-morrow. The Poles will appeal to England and France; England will declare war first and France will follow suit. Now, Mr. Herodin, you may wonder what I want all this money for. Well, I am not going to tell you!"

"I am not curious, sir," Herodin assured his patron. "I told you that you should

have all I could spare and, of course, I had about five hundred pounds' balance on the amount you always leave with me. I think the young lady will find that I can spare altogether somewhere about three thousand pounds."

"Marvellous!" Charles exclaimed. "What do you say, Blute?"

"We couldn't possibly need more than that," the latter declared. "We have some heavy expenses to face, but we shall get the whole of the money back again."

"Well, Miss Grey will give you a receipt for this, Herodin," Charles said. "I will also leave a cheque with you for about the amount in case anything happens to us. So far as you are concerned I don't want you to think any more about this money. You might get into trouble with the Nazis if they knew that you were mixed up in my affairs. All that you know is that I wanted to get away from here in a hurry, I had a great many friends who were in the same predicament, I had a credit with you and you gave me what I asked for. The money is the great thing, of course, but there's something else. I want every scrap of influence I can get with the railway here and some of this money that I am taking away from you is going to be used for what we call in the Secret Service: 'quiet money.' My friend Mr. Blute here knows a great deal about this. You've always done everything I wanted, of course, but I don't wish to involve you in this matter. What about Joseph?"

"I really believe, sir," the manager said impressively, "that Joseph could do even more than I could with the railway people. He knows exactly who is approachable and who is not. You want to get to the frontier, I suppose?"

"With a great deal of luggage," Charles told him, "and, at the very latest, the day after to-morrow."

Herodin looked grave.

"You must go before war is declared."

"That is absolutely and entirely necessary," Charles agreed. "As a matter of fact I expect we shall be in the train when war is declared, but we must be en route. Now, if I were you, Mr. Herodin, I would not have anything more to do with us. Send Joseph up. Drag him out of his office if you must, but I must have him here within ten minutes."

"The people are standing ten or a dozen deep round his bureau," the manager confided. "I'll have to get him out at the back through my office."

"You must do it, Herodin," Charles insisted cheerfully. "Drag him out by those nice fat little ears of his, if you have to. I shall be down below very soon and I will bring in your cheque."

"Very good, sir. By the by," Herodin added, rising to his feet, "I forgot to mention it in all this excitement but there has been a terrible motor accident in

the north. Four or five young people—all Americans, I believe—have lost their lives."

Charles and Blute exchanged significant glances.

"Dear me, I'm very sorry to hear that," the former remarked. "Racing down here to get out of Austria, I suppose."

"Some of the roads coming south," Herodin observed, "are in a very poor state just now and very dangerous...I'll send Joseph right away, Mr. Mildenhall."

"And could you send us up a paper with an account of the accident?" Blute asked eagerly. "I have some friends up north."

"They're selling the papers in the streets now, sir," the manager declared. "I'll get one and send it up at once."

He departed, closing the door quietly behind him. Charles grinned as he took a cigarette from the box on the table and lit it.

"That's quick work!" he exclaimed. "How did you manage it?"

"I've had the particulars of the accident written out for several months," Blute confided. "When you went into the cable office on your way up here I slipped into the newspaper bureau and caught my friend just going in. I'm sorry to seem a little precipitate, Mr. Mildenhall," he went on, "but to tell you the truth, my friend, the journalist, is sitting downstairs waiting. He's afraid he may get the sack if the truth leaks out."

"So he wants the money quick," Charles observed.

"Wise fellow. How much for half a column of lurid tragedy?"

"Well, I told him it would be worth five hundred reichsmarks to him."

"If you please, young lady," Charles said, holding out his hand.

Patricia counted out the notes and gave them to him. Charles passed them on to Blute, who stuffed them into his pocket.

"If you will excuse me," he begged, "I'll just finish with that young man. I must get a few copies of the paper, too," he added, hurrying off.

Charles and his companion were suddenly amazingly aware of each other's presence. Patricia rose to her feet. Never in the world had she found speech so difficult. Forever afterwards, mingled with her gratitude and her genuine affection for him, she was conscious of those few moments of deep and sincere admiration for his supreme tact.

"Any time that fat old lady in the silk dress and the starched manners wants a testimonial," Charles declared, "she can have it from me. Do you know, Patricia," he said, leaning back in his chair and regarding her critically, "notwithstanding the fact that you possess charm of a very peculiar and

distinctive order, a fact I have no doubt men have been telling you of ever since you crawled out of your cradle, I never saw you look so well as you do at the present moment. That black and white checked gown you are wearing fits marvellously and the little bit of lace at your throat is an inspiration. How on earth did you get your hair to look like that? All its fire back in a moment —and really a little colour in your cheeks."

"Extravagance with your money, I'm afraid," she laughed. "Do you know that in the small hours of the morning I looked at myself in the looking-glass and ten minutes after the maid came to wake me I had a coiffeur in the room—at your expense!"

"Starvation," he observed, "agrees with you."

"Thank you," she answered. "I don't want to try it again."

"I'll see that you don't!"

It was too much. The tears were in her eyes.

"I shall have several small attacks like this," she warned him with a little choke. "Don't take any notice of them, please."

"I was just thinking," he remarked, "that I should like to kiss that one away."

"You can do just as you like," she said, moving her handkerchief from her eyes and looking at him.

There was no doubt whatever about his inclinations or the exquisite touch of her arms around his neck. There was no doubt at all, either, about the sincerity of his imprecation at the sound of that stiff official knocking at the door. He drew quickly away.

"Come in!"

Joseph, the world-famed concierge of one of the most famous hotels in Europe, entered the room cap in hand. He was a large, rotund person whose spreading stomach was scarcely noticeable, owing to his upright carriage and agile movements. He had the face of a Napoleon and the smile of a Cheeryble brother. The supreme unconsciousness of his manner was in itself proof positive of his diplomatic gifts.

"Mr. Mildenhall, sir," he said, "I am told that you have urgent need of me."

"I have indeed, Joseph," Charles replied. "I do not suppose that anyone in this world has ever been in such need of you."

"Anything that I can do for you, sir, has always been a great pleasure," the man assured him.

"It isn't deeds I require, it's miracles."

"I am at your service, sir."

"Very well. I want a special luggage van attached to the earliest possible train to Innsbruck and Switzerland and I also want three first-class tickets on the same train."

The smile slowly faded from Joseph's lips.

"Mr. Mildenhall!" he exclaimed. "May I ask you one question?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you realize that if things proceed as now seems inevitable, the morning train to-morrow will be the last train to leave Austrian territory before the declaration of war?"

"Better than you do, Joseph, because I know for a fact what you only surmise. You are quite right. That is the last train which will leave Austro-German territory before the declaration of war and that is why it is absolutely imperative that I and my friends travel by it together with the special luggage truck."

"You wouldn't care to risk your plane, I suppose, Mr. Mildenhall?" Joseph suggested.

"My plane is at the present moment on its way over from England," Charles replied. "It is bound for Switzerland and it wouldn't carry a tenth part of the luggage."

"I have at the present moment," Joseph confided, "nearly a hundred people around my desk demanding accommodations by that train. Of telephone calls I take no account. There are about the same number."

"Seems to be quite a rush of people wanting to get away," Charles observed.

"For many of them," the concierge replied, "it is a question of getting away or being interned."

"You wouldn't like that to happen to me, Joseph, I'm sure?

"I should not, sir," was the devout answer, "but I do not think it is possible, because you are a diplomatic gentleman."

"No use nowadays. Our Embassy here is broken up. Then there are my friends and the luggage."

"Would the luggage be very heavy, sir?"

"Let me see—the weight of four people might be—what do you think, Blute?"

"I do not think," Blute, who had just re-entered the room, replied, "that you need reckon it that way. Together with the weight of the guard of four men I can assure our friend here that the weight would be less than half what any ordinary luggage truck is supposed to carry."

"What does the gentleman mean by a guard, sir?" Joseph asked anxiously.

"I rather forgot that, I'm afraid," Charles confessed. "Can't carry everything in your mind, though, these unusual times. Would you work for us, Joseph, with more confidence if I let you into a secret as regards the proposed contents of that truck?"

"It certainly would be helpful, sir."

"Very well. Do you happen to have read the special edition of the paper?" he asked, taking one from the roll upon the table which Blute had brought up and holding it out. "There has been a terrible accident to some motorists driving here from Moravia. They were apparently in as great a hurry as we are to get out of the country. The chief contents of this luggage van will be four large coffins."

Joseph's equanimity was for once troubled. He gazed incredulously at the speaker.

"Coffins?" he repeated.

"Caskets which contain the remains of these four unfortunate people," Charles said gravely. "Quick work, isn't it? I can explain that, though. This accident happened several days ago, but the Press have only just got hold of it. The four guards who will travel with the coffins are the representatives of the undertakers. We shall want tickets for them, of course."

Joseph coughed and looked up towards the ceiling. When he spoke again there was a faint change in his manner.

"As I presume you know, sir," he remarked, "the linings of the coffins would be of lead, to conform with the regulations. This would add considerably to the weight. Then there are the four guards. Nearly all the undertakers' assistants whom I have ever come across," he went on thoughtfully, "have been small, straggly types of men—"

"I hope these won't be anything of the sort," Charles interrupted, "but anyhow, I think that my friend Mr. Blute over here is right when he says that the weight will not be a difficulty. The tickets for the four guards I shall require as a matter of course. Even though they must travel in the luggage truck I have no desire to smuggle them out of the country. This is a perfectly straightforward transaction, you understand, Joseph, carried out at the desire of the—er—relations."

Joseph's eyes once more sought the ceiling. They lingered there for a moment. When they came down his gaze was perfectly respectful, his tone gently enquiring.

"I am well aware of the regulation rates for merchandise, Mr. Mildenhall," he said, "but I think if by any miraculous means I was able to put this affair through for you the charges would be something in excess of the ordinary."

Charles smiled—a very understanding gesture.

"I think that you are probably right, Joseph," he acknowledged. "Now, if you should be successful in carrying this little affair through and procuring for me a compartment in the train, or, at any rate, three first-class seats, I would show my appreciation of the fact that the charges of a miracle-monger must necessarily be high. I should hand over to you, Joseph, a sum which would roughly represent a thousand pounds in English money. I should look upon it as being necessary to dispense a considerable portion of this amongst the officials of the railway company—what proportion I should have to leave to your judgment. The balance of the thousand pounds would belong to you. Miss Grey," he added, turning round, "the equivalent of one thousand pounds sterling in reichsmarks, if you please. Now, Joseph," he concluded, "I would suggest that before your luncheon hour you take a little carriage down to the railway station, fill your pockets with cigars and interview your friends."

"The guard of the train," Joseph reflected, "will be at his house for his day off before the journey. He is a very good friend of mine. Something, of course, might be arranged, but the station authorities will also require a little special information. The length of the train is probably already prodigious. I think your idea is a good one, Mr. Mildenhall. I will see what I can do personally. In any case sir," he wound up, picking up his cap from the chair, "if I fail I shall have to introduce a new word into my vocabulary. I shall report as soon as possible. Fräulein, Herr Mildenhall, Herr Blute, I wish you good morning."

"One of nature's dictators," was Charles's only remark after the door was closed.

CHAPTER XVII

The church clock on the other side of the square struck eleven as Joseph left the salon. Charles glanced at his watch with a slight frown.

"At what time was Fritz to report to us this morning?" he asked.

There was the same faint trace of uneasiness in Blute's expression as he answered.

"Half-past ten he was to have been here. If that clock is right it is eleven o'clock."

The frown upon Charles's forehead deepened.

"It isn't like Fritz to be even five minutes late," he remarked. "You took him to the night market after you left me, I suppose?"

Blute smiled at the recollection.

"I not only did that but I took him round to the stalls. First of all we bought the largest basket you could imagine and then Fritz, who knew what he was about, I must say, filled it. I won't disturb your early morning appetites with all the details, but there was sausage, there was ham, there was pâté, there was jam, there were rolls, butter, wine, beer—everything you can think of. Then I bought a little cheap crockery and packed him back in the taxi. He had made up his mind to stop and share the feast, I think, but anyway he promised to visit them early this morning with coffee and rolls and be here punctually."

"At what time was he to have been here?" Charles asked again.

"At half-past ten. Still, the streets are very-crowded and he might easily be held up."

"Will my adorable secretary telephone down and ask if the taxicab for Mr. Mildenhall has arrived?" Charles suggested.

Patricia obeyed with a slight grimace. She set down the receiver a moment later.

"Your man has just arrived," she announced. "He is on his way up."

They were all a trifle uneasy and there was a prompt response to the expected knock at the door. A glance at Fritz as he entered the room was sufficient to show them that something had happened. He was walking with a decided limp. He closed the door behind him carefully and advanced to the centre of the room.

"What's gone wrong?" Charles asked anxiously.

"Ach, mein Herr," Fritz faltered, "I do not think that it was my fault. Wait, and I shall tell my story. The service steps are steep and I did not take the lift. I didn't want to attract any attention."

"What is the trouble?" Blute demanded.

"I will tell my story," Fritz repeated.

Charles made a sign towards the door. Blute hurried over and locked it. Fritz pointed to him.

"Together," he began, "we bought much that was good last night to eat and to drink. The Herr Blute left me and I drove back to where the two Gestapo were waiting for me. All seemed well. I opened the door quietly. The two were playing cards by the light of the torch. When they saw the basket they howled with joy. The German was like a wild animal. My cousin—he is thin to look at but he eats as no other I have ever seen. I opened the wine, put out the crockery the Herr here had bought and I took leave of them. My cousin, he wished me good night without looking up from his plate; the German, his mouth was too full to speak. They never even looked out as I passed through

the door. They were safe. I locked them in."

Fritz paused for breath. His voice was becoming steadier. He leaned forward.

"This morning at nine o'clock I left my car in that corner where it is out of sight, I crossed the yard, I listened for a moment. It seemed to me then that everything was very quiet. I opened the door very carefully, as Mr. Blute had shown me. The moment it was a few inches open, out came a great hand and seized me by the collar. I was dragged in. It was the German! He was grinning like a fat, fair devil. In his left hand he held the revolver my cousin had prayed me to leave with him. There were no signs of Johann about the place, but the remains of their supper were all there. There were broken plates, glasses, a stain where wine had been spilt and food lying about. The German plumped me up against the wall.

"'Now then,' he shouted, 'there is some secret about this place. There's money here or stolen goods. What is it? Where is it? No good your twitching about like that. You'll tell the truth or you'll go where your cousin has gone.'

"'Have you killed him?' I asked.

"He grinned at me. When I think of that grin I can forgive myself for everything!

"'You can look for him when I've done with you, if you can crawl so far,' he sneered. 'You didn't think when you left him your revolver that I might take a fancy to it, eh?'

"It was then, at that moment, Herr Mildenhall—Herr Blute," Fritz continued, "that my brain began to work a little. The German's eyes were red, his face was all patchy. The bottle of wine we had brought, the beer bottles and the brandy bottle were all lying on the floor empty—except for the brandy. There was just that much left of the brandy," Fritz went on, holding up three fingers. "The German was still half drunk but he was terribly determined. I was sure that he had murdered Johann. There was bloodshed in his eyes when he looked at me. I think he was aching to swing that revolver up into line and shoot me. He began to shuffle a little nearer.

"'I know nothing about this place,' I told him. 'I brought the gentleman who sent you your supper up here. He's been living in this room.'

"The German jeered at me.

"'Him live here? What for? To guard something. If he lived here in a hole like this, there's treasure about. I'll—'

"He hiccuped. He made noise enough doing it to awaken the dead," Fritz went on, his face whiter than ever, his eyes glaring. "Then he retched and vomited right across the room. The effort made him stagger. He dropped the revolver."

They were all three very quiet indeed. Their eyes were fixed upon the chauffeur.

"It was a clumsy thing," he said. "It rolled over on the floor. I am good on my feet. I jumped. Oh, it was a long jump! I hit my leg against something as I landed. I fell on the revolver—it was in my hand—he was slipping about looking like a great angry devil. There were two chambers gone—four left. I emptied all four into him. The first one only grazed him but the second, third and fourth all went into his chest. He hiccuped once more—and that was the end of him."

There was silence in the room. Patricia was deathly pale. Blute was wiping the sweat from his forehead. Charles threw open the window.

"Well done, Fritz!" he said calmly. "You were a fool to leave the revolver with your cousin. The rest of your story is good. Now, what about Johann?"

"When I saw that the German was dead," Fritz went on, "I hurried over to the screen. Johann was lying across the bed. I think they must have been playing cards in that spot for half the pack was scattered about the floor. He had a bad wound on the head and a bullet wound through his shoulder, but he was still breathing. I got him to swallow a little brandy. Then he opened his eyes. I bathed his head and gave him some of the hot coffee. He sat up. Then he told me that the German had stolen up behind him and hit him a blow with a bottle whilst he was sorting his cards. He had taken the revolver, all his money and refused to believe that Johann did not know what treasure was hidden in the place. Johann knew no more than the German did, so in the end, in a sort of half-drunken fury, he shot him."

"What became of the body?" Charles asked quietly.

"Johann is still alive," Fritz concluded. "I dragged him out, put him into my cab and drove him to one of the hospitals. I said that I had picked him up on the doorstep of a gay house early this morning. I gave a false name and address, and they took him in."

"How badly are you hurt, I wonder?"

"I am not hurt much," Fritz replied. "A bruised leg that will make me limp for a few days—that is all."

"You have given us matter for thought," Charles declared, after a brief silence. "Go and sit in your taxicab and read the news, but be sure to keep your car out of sight."

Fritz took his usual respectful leave.

"Good thing this didn't happen before," Charles observed, as soon as the door was closed. "Now tell me, Blute, are there any houses about on the other side of the lane?"

"There couldn't be a lonelier spot than the district around that extraordinary building," Blute confided. "Mr. Benjamin refused to sell a yard of the land anywhere near the palace, fortunately."

Charles drew a sigh of relief.

"Then for a short time," he proposed, "let us leave the disposal of the dead Gestapo for further consideration. We ought to go right on with the general scheme."

Patricia looked up from her desk.

"I quite agree," she said. "I think the next thing we ought to consider is making arrangements for the guards who are travelling with the caskets."

"Even before that," Blute suggested, "we must make sure first of securing the van."

"Where will you make for first when you have crossed the frontier?" asked Charles, studying the map.

"Once in Switzerland," Blute answered, "I think we might pause and try to find out Mr. Benjamin's whereabouts. By then I imagine we shall be getting to the end of these heaven-sent resources of yours, Mr. Mildenhall."

Charles acquiesced.

"It seems a queer thing to me," he reflected, "that Mr. Benjamin should have succeeded in disappearing so completely."

"He has disappeared because he is the wisest and most sagacious man I ever met," Marius Blute said emphatically. "No possible inducement ever succeeded in leading him to commit himself politically in any way. His whole life was an enigma to the Nazis. All that they knew was that long before they were sure of getting hold of Austria he was working like an alchemist getting rid of his fortune and his investments and distributing them all over the world. I know because it was I who was doing it for him, and their agents were on my track every day."

Charles sauntered to the window and looked across once more at the church clock.

"I suppose you'd think I was mad, Blute, if I suggested that Miss Grey and I take a little stroll," he remarked.

Blute's expression for a moment was almost savage. He was, without a doubt, angry.

"In forty-eight hours," he said, speaking very slowly and very distinctly, "we may be absolutely free to do exactly what we like, we may be in a fortress, we may be dead or we may have brought off one of the most amazing coups the secret service of the lay world has ever known. The greatest danger we have to

face is association of the one with the other. How you, Mr. Charles Mildenhall, whom I should call the directing brains of the enterprise, can suggest that in this spot, which is the very centre of Nazi espionage, you and Miss Grey—who is well known as having been the private secretary of Mr. Benjamin—should be seen together in friendly conversation, defeats me."

"I sit in sackcloth and ashes," Charles repented. "Blute, I'm afraid you are right."

"In your salon here," Blute continued, "with access to the back service stairs, we have a sanctuary. I have a room leading out to the fire escape which I shall use instead of the stairs or lift if I think it advisable. Miss Grey here mingles with the servants and the hired help of the establishment. You, Mr. Mildenhall, make no attempt at concealment. You are the wealthy and distinguished patron of the hotel. If we should by any evil chance come face to face at any time there must not be the slightest suggestion of recognition."

"I absolutely agree with Mr. Blute," Patricia said earnestly. "You are running great and unnecessary risks for our sakes, Charles. I would never forgive myself if anything happened in these last few hours, nor, I am sure, would Mr. Blute."

"If I might make a suggestion," Blute said, "I think that a stroll across the square and a half-hour on view alone, Mr. Mildenhall, would be an excellent idea. I hope, too, that you will show yourself in the bar and restaurant here as usual on every opportunity. You are a well-known figure in Vienna when you pass through and people might very well wonder where you had spent your time here if you are not visible at any of the show places."

"I am crushed," Charles acknowledged. "I will swagger about the place presently and leave you two to go your own way for a time. If you want me, telephone to Herodin. I'll leave word where I am. Don't stint the 'quiet money,' Blute. Remember that an odd fifty pounds here and there may make all the difference."

"You've been setting us a pretty good example of spending money," Patricia observed, leaning forward to sniff at the bowl of roses upon the table.

"Roses in Vienna are like cabbages in White-chapel," he answered. "You find them wherever you go."

Once more a knock at the door. Joseph made his reappearance, calm but triumphant.

"Mein Herr," he said, addressing Charles, "I have succeeded, but I have bought the railway! At least, so it seems to me—a poor man. I have arranged for the van, I have arranged that it shall be attached to the eight o'clock train to-morrow morning on one condition—that whatever you are sending in it

shall be in the yard before midnight. It is yard number seven, to be reached from the Weltenstrasse."

Patricia leaned back and clapped her hands.

"That is precisely what we were hoping for!" she exclaimed. "Not ten minutes ago. Monsieur Joseph, we were saying that it would be a great deal off our minds if we could get the van linked up tonight."

"It is arranged," Joseph announced. "To tell you the truth, Fräulein, the guard is waiting outside. With him, too, the preliminaries have been broached. He has consented to help in your scheme. I must warn you, Herr Mildenhall, that you will now have to face a shock."

He handed over a slip of paper.

"For that I have bought the railway," he murmured.

Charles glanced at the amount and smiled.

"It is an amazing feat, Joseph," he declared. "On the other hand it is an absurdity. You have bought the railway, perhaps, for our interests, but for yourself, your wife, your children, your son's wife—what remains? Nothing. Patricia, you must see to this. Joseph is robbing himself. You will provide him at once with another thousand reichsmarks."

Joseph's bow was equal to the bow of any courtier who had ever entered the royal palace.

"Monsieur is a Prince!"

"Bring in your guard," Charles begged. "I am being dismissed from this assembly, Joseph, just when I am getting a little fun out of it. Bring in your guard that I may deal with him. And wait," he went on, laying his hand upon the man's shoulder, "when you come to fetch him away see that you are accompanied by Frederick, the second barman in the American Bar. See that he brings with him four carefully mixed dry Martinis still in the shaker with the ice just dropped in, also four glasses. And Joseph, see that the glasses are not too small. Frederick himself calls them doubles, I believe."

"Der gnãdiger Herr shall be obeyed," Joseph murmured. "I fetch now the guard. Afterwards I shall send word to Frederick."

He disappeared for a moment and returned ushering in a stalwart-looking elderly official in the uniform of the Austrian Railway Company. The newcomer carried himself in soldierly fashion. His grey hair was neatly parted, he wore a closely clipped grey beard and he had more the appearance of a gentleman farmer than a railway official. He carried his cap in his hand. He bowed to Patricia, he smiled in more familiar fashion to Mr. Blute and he bowed respectfully to Charles. He nodded a temporary farewell to Joseph,

who disappeared.

"I understand, Mr. Guard, that you are willing to help my two friends and myself in a rather sad little enterprise to which we are committed," Charles began.

"It will give me much satisfaction to be of service," the official replied. "Often it has been my pleasure, Herr Mildenhall, to number you amongst my patrons, more especially when I conducted the Orient Express. You had diplomatic privileges and to serve you was an honour. The present occasion, I gather, is purely a private one."

"Entirely so," Charles admitted. "I am here to do all that I can to help my friend Mr. Marius Blute, who is a connection of the four young people who met with their deaths in a motor accident three or four days ago."

"A sad affair," the man sighed.

"Mr. Blute has brought their bodies down here and the relatives are almost passionately anxious that they should be taken to Switzerland. As you perhaps realize, Europe to-morrow will probably again be in a state of war. We ourselves, therefore, must pass into a neutral country."

"The situation presents many complications," the guard remarked dubiously.

"Not so many as you would think," Charles insisted. "I am sure you will agree with me presently that they are all capable of solution. The eight o'clock train, which you will take charge of from here to Innsbruck and afterwards into Switzerland, is the last train to run before the closing of the frontiers. We have bespoken through Joseph a van for the four coffins, accommodations for the four guards who will travel with them and a place for three plain cases which contain the effects of the victims. These will not require to pass through the Customs in the usual way. Nothing, therefore, need be disturbed in the van at the frontier."

"If you entrust me with the carrying out of this programme," the official promised, "you may consider the matter arranged. The only condition is that the coffins and boxes are brought to where the van will be waiting for them on siding number seven Weltenstrasse this evening between ten and twelve o'clock. I have postponed a dinner of celebration which some friends were giving me to be there in person."

"This gentleman here, Mr. Blute, will look after everything," Charles said. "He will come down with the caskets himself. He will be at the place you say at the time you name. The station van, as you know, is already arranged for."

"I have been warned of that by the authorities, sir," the man replied. "They have admitted that the circumstance is entirely unusual, but it is undertaken at the desire of a very distinguished Englishman to whom they wish to render

service."

The official bowed to Charles. Charles returned the courtesy.

"That's all clear, then," the latter said. "Now comes this important question, my friend. We are causing you grave discomfort. We are inviting your leniency with regard to several restrictions, as a rule imposed by your company. We are, in short, asking you to do us a great favour. I am to ask you, on behalf of the relatives of these unfortunate people, whether you would consider the sum of two thousand reichsmarks adequate return for your personal consideration, all other expenses having been arranged with the company."

The official once more bowed low. He also extended his hand.

"Herr Mildenhall," he promised, "the commission which you have placed in my keeping shall be truly and faithfully carried out."

"Capital," Charles declared. "And here, in what we call in English the nick of time, comes our friend Frederick with the slight apéritif which we English and Americans usually permit ourselves at this hour of the day. I hope that you will join us."

Frederick poured out the cocktails.

"A toast," Charles proposed, bowing towards Patricia and Blute. "To our safe journey in the last train!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Charles, in accordance with the very sage advice of Marius Blute and his temporary lady secretary, Patricia Grey, descended a short time later by the crowded lift to take luncheon in the restaurant of the great, luxurious hotel. He stopped short, however, on the threshold of the American Bar. If the presence of the lady who was its sole occupant had anything to do with his hesitation, he was too late. Already the Baroness was waving her hand. He continued his progress into the room and raised her fingers to his lips.

"A divine chance!" he murmured.

"And you," she exclaimed, and those beautiful eyes were full of reproach, "you are here in Vienna and we meet by accident!"

His moment of irresolution passed. There was not the slightest suggestion of self-consciousness about her manner. It was plain that the result of their little duel had ceased to rankle.

"Baroness," he replied, "an accident indeed, but I am running for my life.

Something tells me that it would not be healthy for an Englishman to be found in Vienna to-morrow night."

"But you were here the night before last," she complained. "You took your coffee with the Princess Sophie."

"It is true," he acknowledged. "She was gracious enough to send over a message asking me to join her for a few minutes."

"So you remember the last time you met her?"

"I shall never forget it. You sat on my right hand. The Princess Sophie was opposite. We were the guests of that delightful man—Leopold Benjamin. You drove me home and, alas, you developed a very unfortunate curiosity about that catalogue I was carrying away."

"You were very obstinate and very unkind," she said. "No wonder I had completely forgotten you."

"We are quits, then," he remarked, "because that would have been an act of even greater unkindness."

"There is no doubt whatever," she acknowledged, "that for an Englishman you have a very glib tongue."

"I have also a very susceptible heart."

"Call it fancy."

"Fancy is a delightful word," he reflected, "and perhaps we do overtax that other organ a little. Am I permitted to offer you a cocktail?"

"Why not?"

Charles shivered as she selected a cherry brandy. He himself asked for a small Martini.

"You do not approve of my taste in apéritifs?" she queried.

"Nor in my sex," he replied. "That is to say if your luncheon companion is to be the gentleman who looked in here and disappeared a moment ago."

"You mean Lieutenant von Hessen? He may not be a very agreeable person but he is interesting."

"Really?"

"I mean it," she continued. "You probably do not know that he is in the German Intelligence Department."

"I should never have believed that he was qualified for the post if you had not told me so."

"Stupid!" she answered, smiling. "He only asked to be presented to me because he had heard that I was an acquaintance of Leopold Benjamin's."

"Why on earth is everyone so interested in poor Benjamin?"

The Baroness yawned.

"Why do we talk of these foolish things after our long separation?" she murmured.

"I am not so sure that they are foolish. My time in Vienna is short. I arrived here late at night. In the morning the impulses of my civilized life assailed me. I remembered that dinner and I started out to leave my card of ceremony at the Palais Franz Josef."

"You found no one upon whom to leave it!"

"Neither man nor house," he replied. "I cannot say that I was surprised. If the Germans really expected that Mr. Benjamin would sit there and wait to be arrested they were very foolish. He must have known what would have been in store for him. He probably had plenty of cars and planes and he took his leave. Why are your German friends angry at that? Probably, if I were caught wandering about the streets here in a couple of days, I should be placed in a concentration camp. I should very much dislike to be placed in a concentration camp. That's why I am hurrying home. Worse things, far worse things, might have happened to Mr. Benjamin. He might have been dropped into a fortress and it is just possible that he might never have been seen again. No, I don't think Mr. Benjamin ought to be blamed for having hurried away."

She leaned nearer towards him, although the room was still empty except for the barman.

"I think," she confided, "that it was not his flight so much that they disapproved of. They rather expected that. It was what he took with him."

"Of course, I have heard no particulars about his leaving," Charles said slowly. "It still seems to me a little crude to destroy a magnificent specimen of historical architecture like the Palais Franz Josef. They would have done better to confiscate it."

"I should think that they did it," she continued, still in the same undertone, "in case by any chance there had been some secret spot in the mansion where some of his treasures might have been hidden."

Charles did not attempt to conceal his expression of incredulity.

"Secret hiding-places of that sort do not exist nowadays," he said. "Benjamin's house had been completely modernized and all traces of the old portion had vanished. In their place it possessed shower baths, racket courts, music rooms and all manner of luxuries. Baroness, alas, I fear I must take my leave. For the second time your prospective host has looked in here. A Nazi lieutenant in the German Army, even if he should only be in the Intelligence Department, must not be kept waiting by a British civilian."

The Baroness played a false card.

"But you are not a British civilian," she rejoined. "You are a major in the Dragoon Guards—one of the British crack regiments."

"And how did you know that?" he asked swiftly.

She looked up at him with a little pout. Underneath the caress of her eyes he knew very well that she was annoyed with herself.

"I heard it somewhere. It must have been at the old Embassy. Perhaps you are right about the Lieutenant, though. I have kept him waiting already a quarter-of-an-hour. Shall I see you again?"

He shook his head dolefully.

"Alas, Baroness," he said as he held her fingers for a moment to his lips, "I am compelled to say—I hope not. I am moving heaven and earth to get away by the eight o'clock train to-morrow. If not I shall be in trouble."

"I will hide you," she whispered.

"You have heard before now what happens to the men of my country in the world," he said sorrowfully, "when they hide under the skirts of the ladies of their hearts after their country has declared war. But Baroness," he added, after he had risen to his feet, "before we part there is one question I would like to ask."

"I have no secrets from you."

"Why were you so anxious to secure possession of my present from Mr. Benjamin, so anxious that you came back to my hotel and stole it?"

"I was piqued. Mr. Benjamin had promised me a copy of his marvellous catalogue. He had one copy left and he chose to present it to a stranger. It was not like Mr. Benjamin. It was an ungallant action."

He seemed dissatisfied.

"It seems an insufficient reason," he persisted. "What is the use of the catalogue without the pictures?"

"The catalogue in itself is a work of art," she explained.

He remained apparently puzzled.

"To a person who was intending to dispose of the pictures," he reflected, "I can quite understand that the catalogue might have been a priceless possession, otherwise—"

She rose to her feet.

"I am spoiling you," she interrupted. "I stay here answering your questions and my host again seeks me. I will confess, if it makes you happier, that mine was

a freakish and ill-conceived enterprise. I regret it. Banish your evil thoughts of me, Charles. I must fly."

Charles crossed the hall, seated himself at a retired corner table in the restaurant, ordered a bottle of Gumpoldskirchner and sent for the waiter. With the help of a fragment of his roll he essayed and approved of the wine.

"Ober Kellner," he said to the man who came hurrying up, anxious to serve personally a client who he knew held such a high place in the esteem of the management, "it is necessary that I eat something."

"At this hour of the day, mein Herr," the man replied, "it is a habit with many people to do so."

"You see this simple wine which I have chosen and which I like—what shall I eat with it? I am reversing the usual custom of letting the wine blend with the food. I am seeking for food which will bring out the flavour of this unusual and very pleasant beverage."

The ober Kellner smiled. For a Britisher he found Charles talkative.

"It should be something quite plain and of the English type, sir," he suggested. "A grilled entrecôte with my own sauce, potatoes soufflé and beans of the country."

"It will be a hearty meal," Charles said a little doubtfully.

"It is as well sometimes to prepare for the day when meals will be less easy to obtain," the maître d'hôtel pointed out. "To-morrow, for instance, both restaurant cars have been removed from the Vienna-Innsbruck Express. The train, already, one hears, is above the regulation length and there are still hundreds of people clamouring for tickets."

"With the possibility of a day's starvation in front of me," Charles remarked with a twinkle in his eyes, "I will accept the luncheon you have offered. Afterwards I shall take a little mountain cheese and some fresh fruit."

The ober Kellner disappeared with his order. Charles looked round without seeing a single familiar face except that of the Princess Sophie, who sat at her accustomed table. She caught his eye and beckoned him. He rose at once and paid his devoirs.

"It will be also farewell, Princess. I leave tomorrow."

"You are one of those fortunate people who have obtained a seat on the last train?"

"I believe so."

"You travel alone?"

"As there are over a thousand disappointed passengers I can scarcely hope for

that good fortune."

"I do not mean the companions of necessity," the Princess said. "I saw you just now in the small cocktail bar with the Baroness von Ballinstrode. I have not seen her since our dinner party at Leopold Benjamin's."

"She said nothing of leaving Vienna in her conversation with me this morning."

The Princess looked thoughtful.

"It is not my affair," she continued, "but the Baroness was joined a few moments after you left by one of those German Nazi officers who have been thrust upon our city. Beatrice is always indiscreet. I have often reproved her for it."

"She is a friend of yours, the Baroness?"

"My dear young man, she was a Von Bless, so how in Austria could one help it? Her father was a friend of mine, her grandfather was a great gentleman and our families have been connected for generations. Of Beatrice, who made an indiscreet marriage from which I am told she has never wholly escaped, I am bound to say that I have not a high opinion. I would not advise any young man for whom I had any regard to accept her close friendship."

Charles was thoughtful for a moment.

"Tell me, Princess, why do you warn me about her?"

"Because, from a word she let fall as she passed me in the hall," she confided, "I thought it possible that she might be on your train, and although it is pure assumption on my part she left me with the idea that she had been discussing your probable presence upon it with her companion."

He looked round the room.

"They don't seem to be lunching here," he observed.

"She and her friend, I am told, are more often to be met with at Driegel's, which is a more intimate place than this. However, do not take what I have told you too seriously," she added. "It was perhaps scarcely worth mentioning. It did occur to me, though, that if you knew Beatrice as the daughter of a distinguished family here, which she undoubtedly is, you might be inclined to place more trust in her than she deserves. One might tolerate—in fact many of us do—her great friendship with one of our own people, but I am afraid that she has been indiscreet in other directions. I am a garrulous old lady, am I not, Mr. Charles Mildenhall? Forget all that I have said. Remember only the warning that lies underneath."

She gave him a little nod which he accepted as one of dismissal and returned to his place. His light-heartedness of the morning had to some extent

disappeared. The more serious side of the adventure to which he was committed was assuming a more definite place in his thoughts. He had just finished his luncheon and ordered his coffee when a familiar figure entered the room, looked round for a moment or two and then made his way to Charles's table. He was a middle-aged man, grey-bearded and bespectacled, carefully dressed and of not unpleasing presence. Charles had met him several times before, but their acquaintance was only a slight one.

"Mr. Porter, isn't it?" Charles asked as they shook hands. "Sit down for a moment. Perhaps you will join me in some coffee?"

The visitor handed his hat and cane to the page who had followed him in but retained the despatch case which he was carrying.

"You are very kind. I will take some coffee certainly. Very trying times, these, Mr. Mildenhall."

"They are indeed," Charles agreed, summoning his waiter. "What about a cigar?"

"If I could have one of the light ones, native growth," he begged. "To tell you the truth I haven't smoked for two days. His Excellency gave me so many small things to finish up for him at the Embassy—semi-personal, of course, some of them—that with those to look after and our own curious position to consider I've been a trifle overtaxed lately."

"You still have a staff of some sort, I suppose?"

"Yes, but half of them are Austrians," Mr. Porter explained, "and a great many of them have been called up. However, I don't want to bother you with outside affairs too much. I've just had a long despatch from Lascelles, brought by plane from Munich. I have found all the papers he refers to and I have brought them for your attention. I suggest that you read the note from Mr. Lascelles, then you can give me a receipt for the papers and I can get back to work. If it's true, as they tell me, that you are leaving to-morrow for Switzerland, you will have all you can do to get through them."

The Consul leaned back in the chair, lit his cigar and sipped his coffee and the glass of light but very pleasant liqueur brandy which Charles had ordered. Every now and then he looked out into the street. He was a native of Hull, the son of a well-to-do merchant captain, he had served in Rotterdam, Marseilles and Vienna and he had made up his mind as he sat there that he had had enough of it. Consular life in these days had become too strenuous. His pension was due in a few months. A farmhouse in Northumberland, two hundred acres of shooting and a seat on the Parish Council, perhaps, would be like a dream of Paradise after this restless continental existence. He watched Charles Mildenhall, a young man for whom he had a great respect, decode and read his letter at the same time, with a pencil in his hand. Here was a young

man who was supposed to have a brilliant diplomatic future before him. Let him have it, Mr. Porter decided. Not in his line at all...Charles paused to light another cigarette and pushed the coffee towards his guest. Then he read through once more the brief note from Lascelles.

My dear Charles,

I was on the way back to confer with you in Vienna and hand you some further instructions to take up to Warsaw after you had visited our friend. They cabled the news to me and ordered me home. There is not the slightest doubt that we are in for it and the whole affair at first will be a horrible muddle, for there Is nothing on God's earth we can do for the wretched Poles, and if our friend's troops are anything Uke what I've seen entraining to-day for the Polish frontier they will walk through any half-armed rabble, however brave they may be.

I expect poor old P. will be in an awful fuss. Don't let him worry you but the contents of 17 A, B and C black despatch boxes in the main safe must be gone through and destroyed. Please see to this yourself. Then, if you take my advice, you will leg it for home as quickly as you can.

F. L.

P.S. If you have time, and for the love of her sweet little figure find time, Charles, drop in at the hair-dressing rooms at the Bristol Hotel. Give Mademoiselle Rosette a kiss and a thousand schilling note from me.

"Well, I'm damned!" Charles exclaimed with a sudden twinkle in his eyes.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It was the postscript to my friend Lascelles' note. I suppose one must expect one's friends to take a little advantage these times."

"We must certainly make allowances," the Consul admitted. "I always found Mr. Lascelles exceedingly considerate the few times I came across him."

"I'm not complaining," Charles murmured.

"I am instructed," Mr. Porter said, finishing his coffee, "to hand you over the keys of the black boxes. Here they are, Mr. Mildenhall. You will see the numbers upon the labels."

"And the boxes?"

"They are in the charge of the great Joseph here," Mr. Porter declared. "With your permission I will now take my departure."

Charles walked with his visitor out into the hall. Joseph came from his bureau to meet them.

"If you are going up to your room, Mr. Mildenhall," he said, "I will send up those three cases which the gentleman has left for you."

"Send them up as quickly as you can," Charles replied. "I am in the humour for a little frivolous work. Don't send any strangers up, though. If the spies of Vienna—they tell me that every other man is a spy here, Joseph—knew what was in those black tin boxes they would blow me sky high."

Mr. Porter, for the first time for many days, smiled slightly as he held out his hand to Charles.

"Our young friend," he remarked to the concierge, "if I may venture to call you so, Mr. Mildenhall, treats our sacred profession a little lightly."

"Before I leave this city," Charles promised, "I will tell you what I think of our profession!"

He bade his visitor farewell and walked with Joseph to the lift.

"You will find them very anxious to see you upstairs, sir," Joseph told him. "We have had to make a few changes in the arrangements. All is well, though. Everything has been carried out according to Mr. Blute's latest instructions. The despatch cases are coming up in the lift with you, sir. I have kept them within sight ever since they were handed over into my keeping."

Charles watched the cases placed inside, then he Spoke through the grille of the lift gate to the concierge.

"Joseph, at what time will the manicure department for gentlemen close at the Bristol Hotel this evening?"

"At about eight o'clock, sir," was the prompt reply.

"Telephone across, if you please, and speak to Mademoiselle Rosette. Tell her not to leave the premises until an ambassador from Mr. Lascelles has visited her this evening."

The man bowed without even the flicker of a smile.

"Your message will be delivered, sir," he promised.

CHAPTER XIX

Charles Mildenhall's elegantly furnished salon had lost its character. It had become a bureau of industry. Blute, in his shirt sleeves, was seated at a writing-table with piles of accounts on one side and time-tables and maps on the other. He was a very different person from the Marius Blute who had been dragging wheezy music from a broken-down violin in the café des Voyageurs not many hours ago. He helped Charles arrange the black tin boxes by the side of the other writing-table and tipped the porter who brought them up. He could scarcely restrain himself until he had bundled the fellow out of the room. His

manner still retained something of its phlegmatic calm but his speech was cut and dried and unhesitating.

"Mr. Mildenhall," he announced, "we have been obliged to change some of our plans. We have been very successful in everything so far but we must bend a little where it is necessary."

"Proceed," Charles enjoined, throwing himself into an easy chair and casting a discontented glance around the apartment. "First of all, though, where is Miss Grey?"

"She has gone out to do a little shopping," Blute replied. "I showed her the way out at the back and she will only be a few minutes. I don't want to leave the place myself until I go down for the caskets. Miss Grey as Mr. Benjamin's secretary and I as his agent might easily be recognized in the principal streets, and I am just as anxious to avoid that as I am to avoid your being seen with us."

"I expect you're right," Charles agreed. "Get along with it and make your report now."

"This is what has happened," Blute continued. "The railway company, through sheer necessity, have had to alter their plans. The last train for the frontier leaves to-morrow morning and must run in two portions."

"The mischief!" Charles exclaimed. "That's rather a nuisance for us, isn't it?"

"On the contrary," Blute assured him, "it is a great advantage. If the three of us were to be seen on the platform, even if we were not absolutely together, it might set people thinking."

"All right. You're in charge of the expedition, Blute."

"Thank you, Mr. Mildenhall. The first train, or portion of the train, will leave here at six o'clock in the morning, the second part at eight. I want to persuade you, Mr. Mildenhall, to travel on the first portion."

"Six o'clock!" Charles groaned.

"It cannot be helped. The special van must be on the second portion, therefore Miss Grey and myself, the coffins, the four men from the undertaker's, who will sit with the coffins, and the three cases must leave at eight o'clock."

"I can't see why we all can't go by the second portion if we occupy different compartments," Charles suggested.

His companion hesitated.

"Mr. Mildenhall," he pointed out at last, "even if we are in separate compartments, the fact that we arc travelling in the same train might easily be noticed by anyone who was on the lookout. You must remember that I am not altogether a stranger in this city. You only know me as Mr. Benjamin's agent,

but I have worked for others besides him in Vienna. If any man could be called a professional spy I think I could fairly lay claim to that title."

"What company I am keeping!" Charles sighed.

"You needn't worry," Blute assured him. "My operations have been confined to finance, politics have never interested me particularly. I have agents in every capital of Europe worth mentioning. It was with their help that I was able to arrange Mr. Benjamin's affairs so successfully and it is through them also that I have been able to make all the preliminary arrangements for to-morrow's expedition."

"Useful chap to know in a crisis, aren't you?" Charles observed. "All the same, I was able to help you a little through Joseph."

"I most gratefully acknowledge it," Blute declared. "What I was anxious to point out, however, was this. I have talked with every one of our expeditionary force this afternoon and I have noticed the same thing with all of them. They are looking forward to to-morrow's journey with a certain degree of apprehension."

"What have they to worry about? We practically own the train until we get to the frontier and as soon as we are over that we've nothing to fear from anybody."

"I admire your confidence, and honestly I am inclined to share it, but that feeling I have spoken of does exist amongst the others, although I cannot understand why. Our friend, the guard, this morning I think looked upon this as a gay adventure. This afternoon he is just as keen, just as confident of carrying it through, even with these altered arrangements, but he is more serious. Then those four men that I have engaged from the undertaker, who were quite content with their little Viennese weapon, something like your English jemmy, to start with, now each one of them decide that in case anything goes wrong they would like to have a gun."

"I don't blame them for that," Charles declared. "A jemmy is not much use except in a scrap and it's astonishing what a feeling of confidence a loaded Colt gives you."

"I notice you don't carry a Colt yourself."

Charles shook his head.

"I like something smaller," he confided. "Revolver shooting is one of my few accomplishments in life. If you know where to put the bullet, it doesn't need to be very large. By the by, how is my chauffeur, Fritz? Feeling a little better, I hope, than this morning. Were you able to make use of him?"

"Yes," Blute replied. "I took him round to the scene of last night's debauch to clear things up. I can tell you it wasn't a pleasant sight, Mr. Mildenhall. We

dropped in at a café on our way back and had a double brandy quick. Fritz had pretty well plastered his German friend."

"What did you do with his remains?"

"Don't ask me! It is not necessary, anyway, for you to know anything about that. I can tell you this, though—unless something exceptional happens it will be a good many years before anyone comes across them."

"How is the fellow at the hospital?"

"Safe to keep his Ups closed for a few days, I think," Blute said dryly. "The only thing Fritz seems to be afraid of is that there might be a death-bed confession. I looked at his chart, though, and I don't think he's as bad as that. Faithful dog, that fellow Fritz. He can't think of anyone but his master. He is terrified lest the Gestapo get on your track. Of course, I'm a little anxious about that, too, but they've nothing really against you."

"Of course they haven't," Charles said impatiently. "Fritz is like a lot of these Viennese. He is as impressionable and sensitive as he can be. I expect I shall end by having to take him to England."

Patricia glided into the room. She sat on the arm of Charles's chair.

"Everything all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Of course," he smiled. "What is there to go wrong? Nothing—absolutely nothing."

"Everything is O.K., so far," Blute reported a little less enthusiastically.

"You've lost your colour," Charles told Patricia. "You're worrying, young woman."

"I'm not."

"You've had no lunch, then."

"I have. I've had an omelette and a glass of red wine."

"Not enough."

"I'm afraid that Miss Grey is taking this affair a little too seriously," Blute said, crossing the room towards them. "Just look at the matter for a moment as I look at it, Mr. Mildenhall. If we go crash on this enterprise what's the odds to those four men when they know that they're secure for life if they bring it off, and probably only in for a short imprisonment if they fail? The guard of the train—pretty well the same thing with him. Joseph—"

"Joseph is impregnable, I admit," Charles declared. "If anyone laid a finger upon Joseph I think there would be a minor revolution here. He'll be mayor of the city before he's finished. He has more friends than any man I ever knew."

"I quite agree," Blute assented. "I haven't a shadow of anxiety myself about

Joseph, Then there's myself. I stand to make a million if we succeed. It's the end of work for me—the beginning of a life of leisure. If I fail—well, Mr. Mildenhall, I'll only say this. I have had a nasty shock these last few months—I will admit that—but it will never happen again. Everything was against Miss Grey and myself in this wretched city. It could never happen to us again to be censored out of existence."

"From what I've seen of you, Blute, I think you'd get out of anything in time," Charles declared, "but there's Miss Grey here."

"She isn't really in it," Blute pointed out. "She and I were both employees of Leopold Benjamin, but she has only the slightest association with the job I am trying to work."

"Well, then we've no one to worry about."

"We have," the girl cried eagerly.

"Indeed we have," Blute agreed. "There is you, sir."

"Bosh!"

"What I'm afraid of," Blute explained, "is this. With the war coming on, if there are any of these Gestapo about they'll try to drag you into it. Please listen to me, Mr. Mildenhall," he went on as Charles showed signs of escaping. "We should never have had a chance but for you. You found us the whole of the money, we are going about now—at least I am—with our pockets bursting. Think where you found us! We were down and out completely. I don't say it would have lasted but when help came it would very likely have been too late. You've helped with the plans here, you've been wonderful, sir. If I let you get into trouble I don't think Mr. Benjamin, or this young lady here, for that matter, would ever forgive me. I've been working to keep you out of it this morning and you must please do all that I ask of you."

"You shall have your own way as long as it's reasonable," Charles assured him. "I don't like that six o'clock train, though. I've heaps of things I want to say to Miss Grey and I can't bear the thought of that long journey alone."

"Never mind, sir," Blute insisted. "Remember this. There will be as many spies about the Westbahnhof to-morrow as there will be passengers. As I have arranged it everyone in the city will know that you left in a Diplomatic coupé locked up by yourself two hours before the—what shall I call it?—the conspiracy. Not one of us, not Miss Grey, not the caskets, not the guard, not the railway agent, not I—will be on your train. If you travel with us or even with Miss Grey you're in it up to the neck. Not one of us counts. They tell me you've a great future before you, you're the nephew of a peer of England and you belong to a great family who would be disgraced if you were mixed up with this."

"That's all very well," Charles said discontentedly. "I have been working at this thing with you practically the whole of the last two days. You're turning me out of bed at five o'clock to-morrow morning, and then if any adventure should come of it when we reach the frontier or thereabouts I'm to miss all the fun."

Blute shook his head.

"It won't be fun, Mr. Mildenhall," he said. "I can assure you of that. I don't believe for a single moment that anything can go wrong with our plans but if it does," he added gravely, "it will be anything you like to call it, but it won't be amusing!"

"All the more reason why I should be on the spot," Charles persisted stubbornly.

Blute's tone and manner were alike changed. He spoke coldly but vigorously. His frown was forbidding.

"Mr. Mildenhall," he said, "Miss Grey and I have talked this over and it's come to this. We will let chance take care of what happens afterwards, but unless you consent to go by the first train and go by yourself I shall give you a cheque payable in London for the whole of the money you have advanced and we shall ask you to retire."

Charles smoked nearly the whole of a cigarette and held Patricia's hand firmly in his before he answered. Then he rose to his feet with a sigh, moved to the other writing-table, lifted one of the tin boxes to his side and unlocked it.

"All right," he decided, "have it your own way. All the same, I hate travelling at six o'clock in the morning."

CHAPTER XX

"Never, young lady," Charles said an hour or so later, leaning back in his chair and closing the lid of the last of the three boxes, "will you be able to say in the days of our more-matured acquaintance that you have never seen your husband do any real work."

Her eyes were flashing all sorts of things at him. She left her place, came over and dragged a stool to his side.

"Do you want to be my husband?" she asked.

"Frantically."

"Why?"

"Well, I suppose I must be fond of you. Isn't that a good reason?"

"Yes, but you can't be fond of me," she remonstrated. "You know nothing about me. That first dinner—"

"Well, there's a proof," he interrupted. "At that one dinner, the first time I had ever met you, do you remember what happened?"

The colour slowly crept into her cheeks. Very velvety and soft they looked in the shaded lamplight by which she had been working.

"I can see you do," he went on. "I very nearly kissed you. Now I ask you—isn't that a proof? Could any man want to kiss a girl whom he was meeting for the first time in his life unless he had fallen head over ears in love with her?"

"Well, I don't know," she said doubtfully. "They might in Vienna. I never met with anything of the sort in New York. We mustn't talk nonsense, though. Is there any more typing for me?"

"Not a thing," he answered. "You see," he continued, looking round at the piles of torn paper by which he was surrounded, "I have a frantic sort of weakness for destroying and tearing up papers. I never see an important document lying about that I don't want to destroy it."

"A very inconvenient habit, I should think," Patricia laughed.

"It's a great strain. It means that if you don't have to learn them off by heart you master their contents, at any rate."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have mastered the contents of all these papers that you have destroyed?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course not. Only those that were worth while. You'll see a certain number of documents still in sound condition. They are over on the right there. You will see a smaller number on your left—also spared. Some of those will be destroyed but both lots are to be glanced through again."

"What are they all about?"

"Well, the last one I destroyed," he told her, "was a bill for Her Ladyship's lingerie from Madame Sturt. I destroyed the bill but I kept the receipt."

"How much did the lingerie cost?"

He tweaked her ear—a soft pink and white shell-like little affair which he abandoned with reluctance.

"Do you realize that I was once a member of that household? You must not expect me to reveal the secrets of Her Ladyship's toilet. Most unbecoming."

"What are those serious-looking documents that you've kept?"

"Look here," he demanded, "are you a spy?"

"Why no," she assured him. "I should think it must be rather fun, though. If by any chance you didn't change your mind and I did marry you, do you think

you could find me a little espionage work?"

"Nothing in it nowadays," he told her gloomily. "Typewriters and wireless have done away with all that. Diplomacy as a fine art is finished."

"Then why are you taking all that trouble with those papers?"

"So that Her Ladyship shouldn't pay her lingerie bills twice."

"And to save her that," she said, "you can sit there for nearly three hours with the fever of war in the air, troops marching by all the time and a long perilous journey before us within a few hours?"

"It does seem a little off the map, doesn't it? But listen, I know what we might do."

"What?"

"Slip down to the Herrenhof and have a cocktail. It's half-past seven."

"And supposing Mr. Blute comes back while we're there? You know perfectly well that you have promised not to be seen anywhere on the other side of that door with me."

"Quite right," he agreed. "Same thing. We'll have it up here. Telephone down, there's a dear—ask especially for Frederick. Say we want White Lady cocktails in a shaker—four of them."

She telephoned down the order, then she came back to his side.

"My temporary work is spoiling me for real work," she sighed. "I've been with Mr. Benjamin for two years and he has never offered me a cocktail."

"Quite right. You couldn't have been out of your teens two years ago and cocktail drinking is not a child's habit."

"My teens, as you call them," she confided, "were finished long before I went to Mr. Benjamin's bank. It is time you began to treat me with a little more respect."

"We don't have time to play games," he told her. "Every time I've met you we've been facing a crisis."

"It is quite true," she admitted. "I wish we could get you to take this one a little more seriously."

"It is difficult to take anything seriously in Vienna," he said. "To tell you the truth, the ways of even our diplomats here are strange. In this medley which I have been requested to clean up and leave nothing behind me are some quite important notes concerning a conversation between two important people. The same rubber band enclosed the account for Her Ladyship's lingerie."

"Very slack," she criticized.

"Don't be too severe," he begged. "These are just the scraps left over from about a ton of rubbish which bothered our very respectable Consul, Mr. Porter. Kindly collect for me, dear secretary-in-chief and wife-that-is-to-be, every wastepaper basket you can find in the apartment. I can count three from here."

"Aren't you rather harping on that matrimonial business?" she asked as she started on her tour round the room.

"It drives everything else out of my mind," he confided. "Especially when you look as sweet as you do this evening."

She paused in the centre of the apartment with a basket in either hand.

"Come and kiss me," he insisted.

She moved slowly towards him without any marked reluctance.

"Tell me," she enquired, "have you ever had a secretary before?"

"Heaps of them."

"Did you expect them to come and kiss you whenever you felt amorous?"

"I never felt that way."

"Why not?"

"They were all men."

"Do you mean that you never had a girl secretary?"

"Never in my life," he assured her. "When I've been staying down at home I've sometimes dictated a few letters to my mother's amanuensis but as she is well over fifty, wears most unbecoming glasses and has taken a degree at Oxford I refrained from taking liberties."

She brought the baskets and succeeded in slipping from his knee just as the waiter arrived with the cocktails.

"Never," Patricia confessed, opening her vanity-bag, "have I been driven to my mirror so often as I have been during the last few hours."

"Well, there's a slight difference between the atmosphere of New York and Vienna, isn't there?" he remarked. "Waiter," he added, "you can leave the shaker and come back again in half-an-hour."

Two more wastepaper baskets were discovered and filled. Charles leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"Is it my fancy," he asked, "or has my charming helper and bride-to-be been afflicted with a sudden seriousness?"

"I have been wondering," she confided, "where we shall find Mr. Benjamin."

"I can't think how you ever completely lost him," Charles reflected. "I should have thought Blute would have had a special emergency address which would

have reached him."

"He had several—and pseudonyms, too. He had tried them all before we got into the state in which you found us. The censorship here is simply devastating. Practically everything in any sort of code was destroyed."

"It's a mistake," he told her, "to attempt to get a code letter through a censor anywhere. But let's abandon this discussion now and talk about something really interesting."

"Suggest something, then."

"Getting married."

"Lovely! Go on, please."

"You see, I'm slightly interested in what happens the other side of that frontier, but when we find ourselves in the bracing climate of Switzerland I can't carry a private chaplain in my waistcoat pocket and I believe it's a terribly complicated thing, anyway, to get married in Switzerland."

"Let's talk about it," she insisted. "It's a heavenly thing to talk about, anyway."

The floor valet knocked at the door and interposed.

"Shall you be changing to-night, sir?" he enquired.

Charles hesitated.

"Remember," she told him, "Mr. Blute was terribly anxious that you should do everything according to your usual custom. He can't somehow get it out of his head that we're being watched."

"Dear old boy, he's probably right," Charles acknowledged. "All right, Franz, I'll be round in two minutes. Will you order your dinner yourself, child?" he asked. "The waiter will be here directly."

She shook her head firmly.

"For me to dine up here is forbidden, too. Mr. Blute has been very firm about it. I suppose it is quite easy if anyone is watching these apartments for them to find out whether any extra meals are served up here."

"What about my ordering dinner for one, but plenty of it? We can eat off the same plate and fool them that way."

"You're ridiculous," she laughed. "Mr. Blute showed me a very clean little restaurant out at the back part of the hotel where some of the courriers and hotel clerks go sometimes. I can use the service stairs to it and I'll hurry back for coffee."

Charles took her into his arms for a moment before she slipped off. Then he held her about a yard away and looked into her face.

"It's the deep setting of your eyes, child, which has so completely disturbed my affections. Rather theatric, you know, but it's frightfully attractive."

"Don't dare to look into any others," she enjoined, releasing herself reluctantly. "Especially beware of the beautiful Baroness!"

CHAPTER XXI

The Baroness was there all right. She was seated on a divan in Frederick's small private bar and by her side was the young German officer. She waved her hand to Charles and patted the place by her side.

"Come, Mr. Mildenhall," she invited. "This is somewhat piquant. Come and amuse a tired woman. Come and have a glass of wine with us. To-morrow it will not be possible."

Charles bowed to both of them and accepted the invitation.

"To-morrow," she went on, "if that brave little island of yours makes up its mind to stand up and fight the mighty German Empire, if you two should meet one of you will be interned. Is that not so, Count?"

"I have no idea," the young man replied formally, "as to what Herr Mildenhall's exact diplomatic position is. If he claims no privileges he will certainly have to be dealt with as an enemy."

"I have at present no diplomatic position," Charles admitted, "which is the reason why I am running away. I am taking the last train to the frontier. If you will excuse me," he added, waving on one side the bottle of champagne, "I will ask Frederick to mix me one of his White Lady cocktails."

"You will not, I fear," the young officer observed, "have a comfortable journey."

"I am a seasoned traveller," was the careless reply. "I am used to hardships."

The Baroness shivered.

"Hardships," she echoed. "I hate even the sound of the word. I like comfort."

There was a single moment in their lives when Lieutenant Count von Hessen and Charles Mildenhall were en rapport. They both glanced involuntarily at the Baroness, who gave one the impression of a gorgeous butterfly stretched out on the divan in the gentle and voluptuous abandon of her soulless, insect life. The beauty of her limbs if anything was a little too much displayed under the light chiffon of her gown. Her neck and shoulders were exquisite. As a matter of fact she was looking her best that night. There was a twin gleam of humour in the eyes of the two men as they met for a moment.

"The Baroness glorifies that simple word," Charles murmured.

"My friend speaks truthfully," the German assented.

"A girl friend of mine once declared," the Baroness said with a faintly humorous smile upon her lips, "that I was not nearly so beautiful as I believed but that I had the gift, when I desired to use it, of appearing beautiful. It has not brought me much reward in this world. If it gives anyone pleasure to look at me I am glad. But how do I benefit by it? Not at all. I am an unhappy woman."

"Unhappiness could never remain in so lovely a setting," the Count pronounced with stilted emphasis.

"Nevertheless, it is true," she assured them. "I am unhappily married. My husband does not come near me. I have a dear friend who is always in political troubles and who flies from country to country. I have a few acquaintances who please me—like you two. But you amuse yourselves and you hurry away. That, Mr. Mildenhall—and you. Count, is not the way to treat a woman whom you profess to find attractive."

"I am the slave of duty," the Count volunteered.

"I am a wanderer who has lingered too long in Paradise," Charles sighed. "Now I have to fly or the stern hand of the law will set me down in a draughty tent somewhere behind barbed wire!"

"I am obviously unlucky in my admirers!" she lamented.

Charles sipped his cocktail. Somehow it seemed to lack the flavour of its predecessor.

"I have not received even an invitation to dine," the Baroness went on.

The Lieutenant Count von Hessen rose smartly to his feet. He stood to attention.

"Baroness," he said, "you are aware of the necessity of my presence at the Barracks at half-past nine to-night. If you will share a humble meal with me now it will give me great pleasure and will render less sad my departure."

The Baroness showed signs of being disposed to linger.

"Will you order the dinner, dear friend?" she suggested, smiling up at him. "When it is ready I will come. There is wine to finish and the days of economy must begin once more."

"The dinner is already ordered," he said firmly. "I ventured to anticipate a favourable reply to my invitation. It is the duty of a soldier always to be economical. Frederick, will you send the bottle of wine to my table?"

"Certainly, Herr Lieutenant," the man replied. "It shall be done."

The Baroness, a little wearily, held out her hand to Charles, who had also risen, and rose gracefully but languidly to her feet.

"It is to be farewell, then, Mr. Charles Mildenhall?"

"Baroness," he said as he bent over her fingers, "after all, there is a chance the war may not come. In that case we shall meet before long in one of the three capital cities of pleasure."

"And they are?"

"Vienna, Paris or London—perhaps even in New York."

The Count and Charles exchanged formal bows. The Baroness threw Charles a kiss from the tips of her fingers. She was a woman who knew how to express a great deal in a pout. She exercised her art as she left the room with that frankly voluptuous swing of the hips which had cost many a man his night of dreamless repose.

The very luxurious little saloon which the gilded youth of Vienna were accustomed to frequent for the purpose of having their nails manicured was almost empty when Charles presented himself. A lady in a gorgeous coiffure, who was seated at a table near the entrance, flashed a dazzling smile at him and indicated the line of shrouded chairs beyond. A young woman, becomingly attired in a black silk frock of Viennese design, motioned him into a small apartment which she had just left. She spoke in French.

"You are a little late. Monsieur Mildenhall."

"It is unfortunately true," he apologized. "Everyone, I think, is half-an-hour late in Vienna to-day. They are all getting ready to leave to-morrow. Nevertheless, I apologize."

"I have waited for you," she said simply. "You are a friend of Monsieur Lascelles?"

"Quite true. I have to bring you two farewell offerings. This one," he added, handing her the thousand schilling note in an envelope, "and this," raising her fingers to his lips.

"Monsieur Lascelles was more generous with his money than with his little caress," she remarked.

"It is the only fault the genuine Englishman possesses," he assured her. "We are a jealous race. My friend, I can tell you, left the city with much reluctance."

"They told me before I came that everyone was always happy in Vienna," she sighed. "I did not find it so in London, nor even in Paris. Here I do not think it will remain so. One feels the change coming."

"Mademoiselle," he agreed, "you are entirely right. If I were you I would at

once return to Paris. The joys of Vienna are passing. Soon they will become history."

She looked at him disconsolately.

"But you are depressing! Monsieur Lascelles, he told me that however seriously you really felt you had the gift of appearing light-hearted, that you made the world always seem a carefree place. He said that part of your success in your profession was that you seemed always to be a trifler, even when you were dealing with serious things."

"Well, do you disapprove?" he asked. "One should not ask the world to share one's sorrows."

She glanced through the curtains to where her employer had been seated. Her chair was vacant. The lights of the place were burning dimly. She drew back the curtain and returned to the side of the client's chair where Charles was seated. She slipped a little bowl of hot water into the ring for its reception.

"You are already tired, Mademoiselle," he remarked.

"I am not proposing," she said, "to attend to your nails. This is what they call in English a bluff. It is in case a chance client should present himself, although it is after hours. Did you know, Mr. Mildenhall, that your friend left a message with me for you?

"Not an idea," he answered. "He said nothing about it."

"That is rather like him. You were not formally attached to the Embassy, were you?"

"Not now," he told her. "I am a free lance. I call in there whenever I am in Austria for old association's sake."

"Just so. Monsieur Lascelles had a fixed post there, had he not?"

"Certainly. He was First Secretary. Do you know, Mademoiselle," Charles went on, "I dare say Monsieur Lascelles told you that I had queer habits and ideas. One of my ideas is that I do not like very much to talk about politics or what goes on at the Embassy, even though I have now no responsibilities."

"I expected that speech," she said smiling. "I am very much to be trusted, though, Monsieur Mildenhall. I might tell you something which would surprise you quite a great deal, but it is not necessary. You received from your friend. Monsieur Lascelles, to-day three black boxes with a request that you go through them and destroy everything that was worthless and preserve for your own transportation to London what you thought should be kept."

Mildenhall's stern grey eyes were fixed upon the girl. The smile had gone from his lips. She felt the difference at once. It was like a little draught of icy wind passing through the overperfumed atmosphere. He made no answer to

her statement nor did he comment upon it. He simply waited.

"I tell myself," she went on softly, "that tomorrow morning Monsieur Mildenhall will be leaving Vienna. It must be that he will come and see me to-night. I get your message. I wait."

There was another pause. Charles knocked the ash from the cigarette that he had been smoking. It was his only movement. His face remained expressionless.

"In one of the three boxes," she continued, "you found a sealed letter which you have without doubt preserved. The letter was contained in a long brown envelope sealed with green wax and addressed to Monsieur Lascelles at the Embassy."

She paused.

"You will forgive me if I light another cigarette," Charles observed. "The atmosphere of this place is a little overpowering."

She accepted one from his case, struck a match and offered it to him.

"Well," he said, "Mademoiselle Rosette, your little story about the three boxes is absolutely correct. Now what about this message?"

"The envelope addressed to Monsieur Lascelles," she demanded breathlessly, "the brown envelope with the green seals—you have preserved that?"

There was again that uncompromising and brutal silence. She failed to penetrate it by gesture, the eloquence of her pleading eyes, the touch of her fingers. He remained stony and immutable.

"The message is simply this," she went on. "I was to say that he had changed his mind with regard to the contents of that letter and that you were to hand it over to me just as it was. Monsieur Lascelles told me to say that the proof of my good faith would be the fact that I knew of its existence."

For several moments Charles seemed absorbed in thought. Nevertheless, the girl, who was watching him closely, was conscious of a change. The quality of his silence was altered. Her fear of him was slowly passing. After all, he was human. He leaned over and felt her hand. She returned the pressure of his fingers eagerly. He felt her cheek. She crept nearer to him.

"Your fingers are icy cold!" he exclaimed. "So is your cheek! Yet the temperature of this place is almost overpowering. Mademoiselle Rosette, you are not well, I fear."

"I am perfectly well," she assured him. "For a moment or two you frightened me. Indeed—indeed, Mr. Mildenhall, it was that which did upset me very much. I had the idea that I was talking to a lay figure, to someone who listened only with his ears but not with his brain."

"Very clever," he smiled. "Well, I don't seem to remember coming across a brown envelope with green seals. I must go through the boxes again."

"But you have been through them once and you cannot have missed a letter like that!"

He shook his head.

"You have no idea how careless I am," he confided. "Lascelles did not seem to attribute very much importance to the affair. I think I shall go through them after dinner."

She gazed at him as though doubting the sound of his words.

"But you have been through the boxes!" she gasped.

"How do you know that?" he asked quickly.

She was breathing fast now. All her fears seemed to be returning. That delicately shaped bosom was rising and falling quickly. She pressed closer to him. He held out his hand.

"I shall go through them more carefully after dinner," he told her, patting her gently but at the same time rising to his feet.

"Ah, but you must not go away like this," she begged. "Let me go with you to your room. If I feel cold, if I seem ill, it is because I am hungry. I am worried, too. I do not understand—"

"What is it that you do not understand?" he asked calmly.

"You are strange with me, you act as though you did not believe."

He was infinitely remote again. He had picked up his hat. He was leaving—leaving her in this terrible state of uncertainty. She clung to his arm as he moved towards the door.

"Mademoiselle Rosette," he said, smiling down at her, "you are certainly very attractive. Let me give you a word of advice. One profession should be enough for you. Stick to the manicuring."

Charles, still dinnerless, returned nevertheless to his rooms. He found the valet in his bedchamber talking eagerly to Patricia. The latter welcomed him with immense relief.

"Charles," she cried, "Franz has just been across to fetch me. He declares that someone has been in your room."

"How do you know that, Franz?" Charles asked.

"These three tin boxes, sir," the man replied, pointing to them. "I brought them out, as you instructed me, empty from the salon. I put them together in that corner of the room. I came in here after you had descended and I found that the boxes had been moved."

"They were empty," Charles pointed out.

"Empty or not," the valet continued, still shaking, "someone has been in the room with a master key. A bureau drawer was open."

"Well, well," Charles said smiling, "it might have been worse. There is not a thing of value or importance in this room. Calm yourself, my dear fellow. If you will feel easier for knowing it there was a letter once in number two of these tin boxes. The letter itself is in ashes, its contents are here," he concluded, tapping his forehead.

The valet breathed a sigh of relief. Charles and Patricia walked arm in arm through into the salon.

"There is just one point about this," Charles observed. "I have now more confidence than ever in Mr. Blute. This affair is not of vast importance but it supplies a test. Blute is quite right. We have spies all round us. Run along and finish your dinner. I shall be up in half-an-hour, unless someone drops some strychnine into my coffee."

"Don't run the risk," she begged. "I'll make the coffee myself up here—and tell the waiter—coffee for one but bring enough for two."

"It's an idea," he assented.

CHAPTER XXII

"Baroness!" Charles exclaimed, waking apparently from a profound slumber, sleepily stifling a yawn, sitting up in his corner seat and staring in well-simulated amazement at his neighbour. "What the mischief are you doing in this train and how on earth did you find your way into my coupé?"

The Baroness' exclamation was without a doubt sincere. A few seconds before, Charles had appeared to be in the deepest of slumbers. She withdrew her eyes from the tin despatch box in the rack opposite and stared at him.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked.

"That is no answer to my question," he reminded her. "What are you doing in this train and how does it happen that we have become neighbours?"

"You are not pleased to find me here?"

His eyes still seemed full of sleep. He yawned once more. He tapped the label gummed on the window of the compartment.

"How did you find your way in here. Baroness?"

"Baroness!" she complained. "I like better Beatrice."

"I wish that you would answer my question."

"My dear, what would you have?" she protested. "Last night I got into serious trouble. It was because my thoughts were with you. I could not help it. He wearied me—that young German Nazi. He wanted me to stay with him until the hour of his departure. I refused. He left me white with fury."

"It sounds as though you had been very unkind to the young man, but I scarcely see how that explains your presence here," he said patiently.

"Am I doing any harm?" she asked. "The Herr Lieutenant lodged a complaint about me with the police. The under-chief of the police is a friend of mine. He sent me a word of warning. He advised me to get away from Vienna without delay. I pack a few things and I come. I arrive at the station. It is a seething mass of human beings. The station master, the officials, they were all in despair—but what could they do? 'Only let me get on the train,' I begged. That is what happened. They put me in the corridor and they lifted my dressing-case and bag after me. I sit on my bag very unhappy. Then I walk a little way and what do I see? It is the one man of whom I have been thinking, the one man for whose sake I am in trouble. I was brave. An inspector passed. I pointed to the empty seats in your coupé. I said, 'Monsieur has locked the door by accident. I wish to enter.' He read the label and hesitated. I empty my purse into his hand and he opens the door. That is how I come here."

"Do not think," Charles begged, sitting still a little more upright, "that I complain of my good fortune, but you will admit that when I woke up it was a shock to see you there."

"I have explained," she pointed out. "You have a good word for it in English. It is a coincidence. Believe me, I did not intrude upon you willingly. I do not look my best at this hour of the morning. I need a great deal of sleep always and I have had very little."

"But where are you going to?" he asked.

"I have yet to make my plans. Paris, I think. Believe me, though, I shall be no encumbrance to you. I have money, I have a passport, I have a ticket as far as Zürich. I think I shall go to Paris. Why do you ask? You are not really interested."

"I can assure you that I am."

"It is not interest of the sort I desire. It is curiosity. It is perhaps suspicion. Why should you feel like that towards me, Charles?"

"There was that little affair of Mr. Benjamin's catalogue, you know," he reflected. "Then the number and variety of your admirers keeps me disquieted. By the by, where is His Highness?"

"Your namesake?"

"Yes."

"From Zürich I telephone," she confided. "It is possible that he is at Monte Carlo. Monte Carlo would suit me very well for a short time unless something more amusing suggested itself. What are your plans, Charles?"

"Already," he told her severely, "you have begun to interfere with them. That box is full of papers, most of which need destroying. I ought to begin work on them at once."

Her eyes, he decided, were beautiful even at this time in the morning, although they rather resembled a cat's. They were watching him sleepily yet intently.

"I do not wish to interfere with your work," she said. "I will help you."

"I am not yet sufficiently awake," he confessed. "Perhaps I will doze a little longer."

"But you are ungallant," she complained. "I know what I will do. I have a thermos full of coffee here. I will give you a cup. Then you will wake up. You will be your old self. How is that? What do you say?"

She drew her dressing-case a little closer to her and unlocked it. She brought out a very beautiful thermos and two collapsible cups. She filled them with coffee and held one out towards him. He shook his head.

"You will excuse me," he begged, glancing at his watch. "I had coffee at the hotel. Before long I shall shock you by bringing out a little apparatus of my own which makes something more palatable."

"You will not take a half a cup?" she pleaded. "It is of my own making."

He shook his head again.

"Don't let me stop you, though."

She poured the contents of the cups carefully back into the thermos.

"I will wait," she murmured.

"If you wait for me to drink that coffee," he said gently, "you will wait a long time."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I do not drink coffee in the middle of the morning," he replied. "Do not let us bandy words any longer, Baroness—or Beatrice—which you like. I must think and I must think very hard."

"What about?"

"I must try to solve the question which is at present puzzling me. I must try to find out why you have chosen to board this train and why I opened my eyes to find you staring at that tin box."

"All these things you could find out quickly," she assured him, "if you would give me your own confidence."

"And in return?"

"What do you want?" she asked. "Not me, I am afraid. Never have I gone so near offering myself to anyone as I have to you. All the time you keep me at a distance. At night I begin to look for the crow's-feet round my eyes. I look at my body before the glass. I ask myself what you can find fault with. Sometimes I fancy that your voice grows a little kinder. The moment passes and the suspicions are all back again, the cold light is fixed in your eyes. And I could do so much for you!"

He threw down the window and looked out. They were passing across a great stretch of upland country and a fresh tingling wind from the distant mountains was blowing in their faces. He moved to the other side of the carriage and glanced down the corridor. The train seemed packed with a monumental burden of human beings, men and women from every walk of life, from a little herd of terrified Jews to the scattered members of a British touring company. The heat was overpowering. People were wedged together in the corridors until there was scarcely room for them to breathe. The air which swept through the window brought fresh life with it. The smell of the fields and woods seemed to chase away the heavy odours of the overcrowded train. Charles turned and dabbled his fingers in the tiny toilet basin and passed them over his eyes. He took Eau de Cologne from his dressing-case and offered it to his companion. She moistened her hands and lips.

"My bath this morning was a farce," he remarked. "It was five o'clock and the water was unheated. A swim in some southern sea, and a sun bath afterwards, I think that is what we need."

"We could have it," she murmured.

"Ah, my dear, but there is work to be done," he reminded her. "There is work before me now."

"Where do you sleep to-night?"

"How can I tell." he answered. "Somewhere in Switzerland, I hope."

"There is always a doubt," she said, "whether we shall cross the frontier to-night. There is another huge train behind ours. I cannot really see how everyone can expect to get through the Customs. Is this all your luggage?" she concluded, looking round the coupé,

"I have clothes in Switzerland."

"Clothes and what?"

"It is the curse of my life," he sighed, "that I can never answer a beautiful

woman in the way she sometimes deserves. I ought to tell you firmly and unmistakably not to seek to penetrate into my secrets and instead of that I find myself telling you very gently that much though I appreciate your interest in my affairs I should prefer your abandoning this habit of perpetually teasing me with questions."

"You are a tantalizing person, Charles."

"You will like me better presently when I tell you something."

She moved a little closer to him.

"What is it, please?"

"I possess a luncheon basket."

Disappointment gleamed for a moment in her eyes.

"You are so very British," she said. "I, too, love to eat and I shall certainly be hungry by and by but there are other things I like better."

"Yes?"

"I love kindness and kind words. I am a soft woman. I love affection. I love love. I really do not think you understand what Austrian women are like, Charles."

He was silent for several moments. When he spoke again she might well have believed that she had made progress.

"It is a pity," he complained, "that women, so lovable in themselves, should devote their lives as they so often do to unworthy purposes. I can imagine you, Beatrice, as a wonderful wife, a delightful companion, an excellent mother. The trouble seems to be that nowadays a woman does not find these things sufficient. She peers into the men's world of strife and struggle and she fosters unsuitable ambitions. The Viennese world, the little I have seen of it, is inclined to be artificial, Beatrice. The realities arc not sufficient. From the manicurist to the Princess, all women seem to be searching for something in life which they will never find."

"What we do, we do for men's sake," she said bitterly. "It is to help or to bring us nearer to some man whom we love or think that we love."

He rose to his feet.

"This," he declared, "is an absurd conversation. If I can find my way so far I am going to make a little promenade."

"And leave me alone with all your property?" she asked, pointing with a sudden smile to the tin box.

"I shall leave you alone even with that. Baroness. Perhaps the very fact that I do so will dispel some of those suspicions you have of me. If I should happen

to come across the crushed and suffocated remains of our conductor amongst this phalanx of people, is there any information you would like to have?"

"I should like to know at what hour we arrive at this little town near Feldkirch where we are to wait for the other train to join us, and whether we are supposed to leave the train for the night or remain in it."

"I'll do my best to find out," he promised, "but it's a thin chance, from what I can see."

He paused to light a cigarette and stepped out into the corridor. It took him more than a quarter-of-an-hour to reach the conductor, who was obstinately protecting his stool in the far corner of the voiture. The corridor was jammed. Not a single window was open. One other coupé, the same size as his own, was occupied by at least a dozen English and American tourists. In every other compartment the people seemed to have wedged their way in indiscriminately. Some were sitting upon the floor outside in the corridor itself. It was necessary at times to step over crowds of prostrate men and women, some of them still asleep. Charles reached the conductor at last. The man rose and saluted him as he approached but he kept his foot upon the stool.

"I have here," he announced, "a note for the gnãdiger Herr. If I had tried to deliver it before I should never have been able to return."

He felt in his satchel and produced the note. It was written in Blute's clear handwriting and addressed to him by name.

Your train will remain outside the station of Feldkirch at a small country village until ours arrives. A room is engaged for you at the only hotel—the Schweizerhof. Be sure to claim it directly you arrive. The journey will be continued at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. All well.

M. B.

Charles handed the eagerly anticipated trinkgeld to the man who took off his cap and broke into a smile which sat strangely upon his wrinkled and perspiring countenance.

"We shall arrive at about what time?" Charles enquired.

The man's gestures were indicative of a profound ignorance.

"To-night—to-morrow night. Who can tell? We are taking the place of the great express which touches in these parts a hundred kilometres an hour. We proceed at less than thirty. Nevertheless, we make no stops. That much is to the good. I would offer my services to the gnãdiger Herr but I am helpless. There is nothing I can do. If by chance the guard should bring the train to a standstill I will offer myself to seek anything the gnãdiger Herr might wish for."

"I have some food with me," Charles told him. "If you have any drinkable water you can bring it along. There is nothing else I want seriously."

Charles started on his return journey and decided that he had no curiosity left in his fellow passengers. He tore the note which he had received into small pieces and let them slip through his fingers as he passed the only opened window. The Baroness looked up expectantly as he entered the coupé. He went straight to his dressing-case, drew out a cocktail shaker wrapped in a towel, shook it violently, handed a glass to his companion, brought one out for himself, filled the two and replaced the shaker. He swallowed half his cocktail at a gulp.

"The place," he declared, "is a madhouse. Men and women of every race, squawking babies; the women—half of them asleep—are lying about anywhere, the men angry and sullen. I don't think I like these wild rushes."

He lit a cigarette which she had placed between her lips, lit another for himself, refilled their glasses and put away the shaker.

"Did you collect any information?" she asked.

"Not a scrap. Apparently no one knows where we are going or when we shall get there."

She came a little nearer to him.

"Just now I don't much care."

He ignored the pressure of her fingers upon his arm. His eyes were fixed upon the tin box.

"I don't believe you've touched it," he observed.

"It's locked," she sighed.

CHAPTER XXIII

Charles closed the atlas, which he had been studying, with a snap between quarter- and half-past six that evening. The great train was slowly slackening speed. He pointed out to his companion a tiny village composed of a few white-washed villas with overhanging roofs and fantastic decorations dimly seen through the trees.

"We are about to stop," he announced. "I'm afraid there is nothing more that I can do for you, Baroness. I have not asked you what your plans are and I do not know my own. I shall fight my way into the inn if I can. Perhaps the station master here will be able to tell us when we move on again."

She seemed suddenly very strange. If such a thing had been possible he would

have thought her nervous. She looked out of the window. They were almost at a standstill.

"I know where we are," she said. "I have friends living not far away. I must find them."

"I am sorry to be so ungallant," he regretted. "This is a moment when I can offer you no further assistance."

"I have wasted all this time," she sighed. "We have sat looking at each other, my heart has been full, there have been words trembling on my lips. Now we shall part and they are unspoken. I shall regret it, I know, all my life."

There was a series of violent jolts. Then they came to a standstill. People were tumbling out of the carriages in a mad procession. A brawny man in the uniform of a hotel porter came striding up the platform pushing everyone on one side. He threw open the door of the coupé.

"Herr Mildenhall!" he called out. "This way."

He picked up the despatch box, the suitcase and dressing-case. Charles looked over his shoulder as he turned to follow the porter.

"I am being taken care of, you see, Baroness," he said. "Farewell. We shall meet, I hope, in happier days."

She still presented the distracted appearance of a woman torn many ways by opposing impulses. Charles stepped lightly out onto the platform.

"You are from the Schweizerhof ?" he asked.

"Ja wohl, mein Herr," the man replied. "You follow—yes?"

He strode along the platform, led the way through the little station hall and out into the street.

"No passport, no tickets?" Charles asked in surprise.

The man grinned.

"Here there is only one station master and one porter," he explained. "The officials could not deal with a thousand people. That will arrive when the gnãdiger Herrcrosses the frontier. Oh, they will take care to be there then, without a fear."

Charles followed him across the road to where a straggling and somewhat shabby edifice described itself on a sprawling placard as "Der Schweizerhof."

People were already trying to storm the place but the hotel porter lowered his head and charged straight forward like a bull. Charles followed him perforce. There was no manager or clerk to be seen. The porter mounted the stairs and Charles pressed on behind. On the first landing his guide pushed open a door. Charles found himself in a large bedroom, reasonably clean, plainly but

adequately furnished. The porter stacked the tin box, the dressing-case and suitcase upon a luggage rack. Then he held out his hand with a grin.

"Too many people," he grumbled. "Such a crowd have I never seen. This room is for Herr Mildenhall. Here is the key, sir."

Charles handed him over a fantastic gratuity which the man stared at for a moment without speech. Then he removed his cap and bowed.

"Danke schon, gnãdiger Herr" he said. "Guten Abend."

"When will the other portion of the train be in?" Charles asked.

The man shook his head.

"No one knows," he declared. "The station master says that it left Vienna two hours after yours but that it will have travelled faster."

"One moment, before you go," Charles persisted. "Do you think it would be possible for me to have a word with the manager?"

The porter looked doubtful. He watched Charles's hand straying once more towards his pocket.

"The manager's name is Hauser," he confided. "He is afraid of all this crowd. He saw them jumping out of the train and running across the street as soon as it stopped. He has shut himself up in his own room/'

"I just want to ask him a friendly question," Charles explained.

His hand was removed from his pocket. The porter watched the note which he had withdrawn. He retraced his steps and lowered his voice.

"The gnãdiger Herr will follow me down the stairs," he said. "I shall turn to the left instead of to the right at the bottom, then I walk along a passage. The last door on the left along that passage will be locked, but if the gentleman knocks quickly three times it will be opened."

The matter of the note was arranged. Taking the man's advice, Charles locked up his room and descended the stairs, which were already crowded with people sitting and lying about. He followed his guide to the bottom of the stairs, turned to the left and down the passage. The man pointed to a door and promptly disappeared himself. Charles obeyed his instructions. He knocked sharply three times, heard a key turn and the latch slowly drawn back. He pushed his way through. A small man with a sandy moustache recovered his balance and looked up at him angrily. Charles bowed in his politest fashion to the lady who was seated at the dining table, smiled on the children and relocked the door.

"You are Herr Hauser, I am sure," he said pleasantly. "I apologize a thousand times for my intrusion. I am the occupant of number seven, so you see I am not like all these other people wanting a room."

The frown left the face of the little man.

"You are the English gentleman," he said, "for whom the great Mr. Blute engaged an apartment?"

"I am he."

"Mr. Blute can command my services at any time," the manager declared. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I want to know whether Mr. Blute has engaged rooms for himself and a friend here."

"He asked for nothing else but a room for Mr. Mildenhall."

"What time do you expect the second portion of the train to arrive for the frontier?"

"In about one hour's time, sir."

Charles bowed to the lady who, unlike her husband, was very dark indeed and very fat. He smiled at the manager and turned towards the door.

"I will detain you no longer, Mr. Hauser," he said. "I thank you for the room."

"The gentleman is welcome," the manager declared, softly unlocking the door. "The porter will warn you, sir, when the train is starting for the frontier in the morning."

Charles made his way through the thronged passages, across the crowded lounge and out into the street. He turned towards the open country. The road, as straight as a line, disappeared in the heart of a pine wood. He followed it, walking slowly, pausing every now and then to draw in a deep gulp of the fragrant air. After his long day of confinement in the ill-ventilated, unwholesome atmosphere of the railway carriage he felt stimulated, felt somehow a lessening of the strain of the last few days. The end of this curious adventure was close at hand. He realized that in twenty-four hours he might be riding the clouds again. If his half-formed plans came to anything Patricia might be seated by his side, her sweet, eager little face all alight with the novelty of the flight and the joy of a difficult task accomplished. The depression from which he had been suffering was falling from his shoulders. Then he was confronted with a sudden relapse. A limousine car, rapidly driven, emerged from the tree-bordered road ahead and came towards him. The road was narrow and he stepped on to the grass border to avoid the dust. As the car passed him he recognized its solitary passenger. It was the Baroness, unusually pale, her large eyes set and fixed, her whole appearance that of a woman who has received a shock. He stood quite still, startled by her sudden appearance. He heard her cry of recognition, her sharply spoken order to the chauffeur, the grinding of the brakes. He turned round to find the car already at a standstill. He crossed the road and approached her. She had the

look of a woman who had either just passed through a crisis or was preparing to face one.

"Has anything happened?" he asked her.

"Yes," she told him without hesitation. "I am in great distress." I am sorry.

"I do not know why I stopped you," she continued. "I suppose it was the sudden excitement of seeing you so unexpectedly. You cannot help me—or anyone else...I can give you some news, perhaps."

"Yes?"

"England is on the point of declaring war against Germany."

"England alone?"

"France will declare soon afterwards."

"All this was a certainty," he said simply. "Tell me why it has so greatly affected you."

She made no reply. Somehow or other she seemed very pathetic leaning out of the car, speaking as though every word were a tragedy. Then she asked him a question.

"Did you read the letter your friend Lascelles sent to you, the letter in the tin despatch box?"

"I did."

"You know my history, then?"

"A good deal of it."

"Yet you were pleasant to me to-day."

"I hope so."

"You do not all the time despise me?"

"No. I am sorry about it all."

"Do you know where I was going when I met you?"

He shook his head.

"You were not very confidential about your movements," he reminded her. "You spoke of Monte Carlo or Paris."

"I was coming to see if I could find you," she told him. "No," she went on, "you need not frown. It was only for one reason. I wanted to beg you, to implore you, to give up your present enterprise. You see, I have guessed what it is."

He looked at her in astonishment. Slowly his expression began to harden. She knew the symptoms. She laid her fingers upon his hand.

"Do not be angry with me," she begged. "I am not the woman I was twenty-four hours ago. I want you to abandon this foolish enterprise. It is beneath your dignity. You will not succeed. It will probably cost you your life."

"Yes? Is that all you have to say?"

"I am telling you the truth."

"How did you hear about my enterprise, as you call it?"

"As I have heard of others," she answered wearily. "I expect you have heard me called a spy, a dangerous woman, but what you did not know until you read that letter, and I do not suppose you appreciate the truth of it even now, is that although I have a legal right to the name I bear I am also the wife of one of the world's greatest criminals. I obtained my divorce before I was married to the Baron but the divorce is worthless. I was married in a Roman Catholic cathedral. That is enough of the past. Did Mr. Lascelles tell you my real husband's name?"

"Yes."

"Charles, won't you take a great weight off my mind?" she pleaded, and in the softly gathering twilight she was beautiful once more. "Pass on your way to England, forget the purpose for which you started out, let them carry it on without you. Will you do this?"

"I cannot."

"It is because you love this girl?"

"Partly."

"No words that I could say will change you?"

"Nothing that you or anyone else could say." She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it. "Good-bye, Charles."

He heard her give an order to the chauffeur and before he realized it she was gone. He watched the car disappear in a cloud of dust, then he scrambled down the bank into the meadow and walked back to the village by the side of a dashing little stream which had tumbled down from the mountains. Three-quarters of the way there he heard the roar of a locomotive. He looked across the road. With its huge engine belching out black smoke the second part of the last train crawled past him into the station.

CHAPTER XXIV

The grim hand of tragedy was suddenly lifted. Charles's depression disappeared. He was unexpectedly aware of a glow of happiness. It certainly

was not the appearance of the trim, broad-shouldered Mr. Blute who had wrought the change. It was the sight of the girl by his side in the neat travelling coat, smart little hat and graceful carriage, whose unrestrained cry of joy and upraised arms had brought the thrill into his pulses and lifted the weight from his heart. Charles was not in the least a demonstrative person but it seemed the most natural thing in the world to stoop down and kiss the eagerly lifted lips, to smile into those beautiful dancing eyes and draw her hand underneath his arm.

"It's awfully nice to see you people again!" he exclaimed. "How goes it, Blute?" he added, dropping his voice.

"So far according to plan," was the impassive reply.

Charles's relief shone out of his face.

"Excellent," he chuckled.

"It seems ages since yesterday," Patricia sighed. "But oh, how wonderful all this is!"

They were crossing the road slowly towards the Schweizerhof, unnoticed units of the crowd. She was laughing now at the discomforts of the journey.

"Nine people in the compartment," she confided. "No water to wash in, wine and biscuits for lunch. Everyone eating horrible messes, windows that opened with difficulty—English, French, a few Austrians and dozens of Americans all jumbled up together. Everyone talking at the same time. But Mr. Blute as silent as the Sphinx. Charles, will there be any danger?"

"Not a hope, I should think," was the cheerful reply.

"Who cares?" she laughed. "We shall be in Switzerland to-morrow—the land of plenty. Charles, do you love Switzerland?"

"To look at—not to live in. I shall probably love it passionately to-morrow for a short time."

"Mr. Benjamin used to say that he got nearly the best food in the world at Geneva. What do you think, Mr. Blute?"

Blute was watching the crowd amongst whom they were slowly making progress. His eyes seemed to be studying every person there. He walked like a man self-absorbed yet always watching.

"Switzerland is a great country," he conceded, "but a little difficult to get into, except during the tourist season. There are times when it is equally difficult to get out of."

They reached the hotel. The same state of confusion prevailed. An angry crowd was besieging the telephone booth—journalists, a French professor who was frankly pushing people out of his way in his anxiety to reach the closed

door, a screaming woman and two students with knapsacks on their backs who were loudly lamenting their interrupted holiday. Blute turned away in disgust.

"I shall try the manager's room," he whispered to Charles. "Come this way for a moment."

He led them down the passage. A perspiring little waiter greeted Blute with a grin. The latter caught him by the arm and made a few rapid enquiries. He turned to Charles.

"This fellow says there is not the slightest chance of any dinner. The manager himself is dining off the last tureen of soup in his room here. There is plenty to drink, though. I have ordered you two a vermouth and cassis. Will you both pass out through the door in front into the garden? The waiter will find you there."

Blute, who appeared to be perfectly at home in the place, knocked at the manager's door and disappeared. Charles and his companion passed on into the grounds, which were rather reminiscent of a tea garden in a London suburb on a Bank Holiday. People were lying about on the lawn and every seat and bench was occupied. One man with a map in his hand was already lecturing about the war; another, an exiled Pole, was making a furious attack upon England and France who, he said, had guaranteed his country and then were going to declare war a fortnight too late to save her. Charles and Patricia found a grassy bank at the far end of the lawn where they seated themselves and looked tolerantly out upon the scene. The French professor, finally ejected from the room which contained the telephone box, was striding up and down in silent fury. The waiter who had recognized Blute came running across the devastated stretch of turf. He had a bottle in each of his coat pockets and he carried three glasses.

"Vermouth and cassis," he announced to the two as he paused breathless. "Herr Blute—he ordered."

Charles took the bottles from him.

"Vermouth and cassis," he remarked. "It's a good enough drink, Patricia. How much for the three, waiter?"

"Five francs, Monsieur L'Anglais."

"How much for the two bottles?"

"Twenty francs."

Charles handed out the money, added five francs and motioned him away. The waiter departed, his face wreathed in smiles.

"Delicious!" Patricia exclaimed, sipping hers.

They drank a glassful each. Charles also nodded his approval.

"The civilized person," he observed, "becomes awfully narrow about his drinks. If I lived to be a hundred I should never have ordered a vermouth and cassis. Here comes Mr. Blute. We'll mix his."

Blute approached them, walking a shade more quickly than usual, but otherwise preserving his attitude of stony abstraction. He accepted his drink, however, and sipped it appreciatively.

"I regret to say," he announced, "that there is not a room to be had in the hotel. For forty people the lounge is reserved. The dining hall being empty—there is no food here to be served—it is also turned into a dormitory. Two American tourists, students from Grenoble, a man and a girl on their honeymoon, have commandeered the billiard table. There seems really to be not an inch of space vacant. I did not book rooms in advance because having done so for Mr. Mildenhall I did not wish it to appear that we were travelling in his company."

Charles laughed gaily.

"You're over-scrupulous, my friend," he declared. "I still hope to be in London only a day after I was expected, and when I am on the sort of mission I have been engaged on during the last two months I make my own plans and choose my own company."

"They would not have been able to keep the rooms, in any case," Blute remarked. "The people on the first train forced their way in."

"And things otherwise are going all right?" Charles asked, a lingering note of anxiety still in his tone.

"Everything goes like clockwork. The guards have permission to sleep in the van. That I arranged in Vienna. They brought their food with them. I paid them a farewell visit just before we reached this place and found them at their posts perfectly satisfied and ready for anything. The guard of the train has already taken possession of the cases which are supposed to contain the effects of the victims and he assures me that there is not the faintest chance of trouble with the Customs. I shall not worry any longer about these by-way telephones. We shall go through to Zürich and from there I know I can ascertain Mr. Benjamin's whereabouts."

"In the meantime I have an idea," Charles said. "We mount from here to my bedroom. There we can talk undisturbed. Afterwards, naturally. Miss Grey will occupy it. You and I, Blute, can easily sleep out of doors if necessary."

"I could sleep very well where we are," Blute assented, "but your room will be an excellent refuge for a short time. I don't fancy this mixed crowd of people all around us."

They rose to their feet and made their way through the uneasy mob into the hotel and up the stairs. Charles unlocked his door and threw open the

windows.

"Not so bad," he declared cheerfully. "There is soap, water and one clean towel for Miss Grey if she should care to use them. The air which comes in through the windows is not at all bad and furthermore—"

"Something left from your luncheon?" Patricia exclaimed, jumping up with a whirl of her skirts and seizing the basket which he had been holding out.

He drew back the fastenings and lifted the cover, raised a serviette and smiled.

"Behold! The offering of the best hotel manager in Europe left neglected at the time it was meant to be eaten but welcome as never was food welcomed before by us three hungry mortals."

"And I never knew I was really greedy," Patricia murmured as she lifted the second serviette. "A whole chicken, a delicious cheese, rolls, butter, fruit! Charles, I must be greedy! I am going to cry."

"A sure sign," he observed, undoing the inside straps, producing a dish and beginning to carve the chicken. "Well turn my suitcase off the luggage. Stand and use that for a table. We must sit on the bed. But wait a moment—you carve the chicken, Blute."

He rummaged in his dressing-case and produced the cocktail shaker.

"I have no words of gratitude and thanks left," Patricia sighed. "My greed has conquered my emotions. You men had better divide the cocktail. I can have more vermouth and cassis. Besides, there's a delicious bottle of white wine here."

"The wine I drank for my dinner last night—Gumpoldskirchner," he remarked, drawing it from the basket. "A terrific name but an excellent flavour."

"The best Austrian wine that's grown," Blute declared. "You two can play about with the apéritif—I'll wait for the wine."

They finished their meal in supreme content. Patricia insisted upon rolling up her sleeves and washing the plates. Afterwards, they sat by the open window and over the station roof watched the outline of the mountains in the distance. Darkness had come and Charles broke up a somewhat spasmodic conversation.

"I think we'd better leave you, Patricia," he suggested. "We're all tired and we shall have to be up early in the morning."

"Nothing of the sort," Patricia protested. "I am not going to take your room, Charles. I shouldn't think of it. You were up long before we were this morning."

"The matter," Charles declared, "is not worth an argument. I am no Sir Philip Sidney but I should hate to go through life remembering that a few nights

before our wedding I let my wife sleep with all the rest of this picnicking Bank Holiday crowd whilst I revelled in the luxury of this—er—truckle bedstead!"

"Please, Charles!" she begged with something suspiciously like a blush on her cheeks. "I'm much more used to roughing it than you are."

Charles abandoned the discussion. He took a couple of bottles from his dressing-case and a clean handkerchief and joined Blute at the door.

"Sleep well, my dear Patricia," he enjoined. "Brace yourself up for those few minutes of agony tomorrow. I have a feeling somehow or other that no one will do more than glance at our passports, that the Customs men will be so busy that they will just wave our baggage on one side and that we shall be making our brief farewells within half-an-hour of crossing the frontier. What do you say, Blute?"

"When I am engaged upon a serious enterprise," the latter replied, "I concentrate the whole of the time upon its successful accomplishment. I think of nothing else. The details are always before me. This time I feel that nothing has been forgotten, there is nothing that can intervene. We shall miss you, Mr. Mildenhall, and I know that Mr. Benjamin will not rest until he has thanked you personally for all your assistance."

"What shall you do with all your treasures if you find that Mr. Benjamin is in London, say?"

"I shall deposit everything in the safety vaults of a Zürich bank," Blute confided. "Switzerland is the most secure country in Europe for anything of that sort. I shall then buy half-a-dozen maps, read all the newspapers which I have neglected for the last fortnight and absorb myself in a study of the war. I take a great interest in wars. I regret to say that so far I have come to the conclusion that there would be no wars but for the professional politicians and the newspapers."

"What about the little trouble over at Carthage?" Charles asked.

"The world of to-day lacks primitive passion," Blute declared. "It no longer exists as a motive."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Charles meditated. "They say that even the great man of Germany is crazy about a dancing girl. Personally, I can see myself purchasing a second-hand suit of armour and a two-edged sword to rescue my princess from an invader."

"But as your princess," Patricia reminded him, "happens to be a little red-haired typist with green eyes and not in the least like any princess that was ever dreamed of, and as she has a father, by the by, who is a college professor and doesn't approve of fighting, what are you going to do about it?"

"I should win her with song and written words," he replied. "The troubadour

might triumph where the warrior had failed! Come along, Blute. We will leave this young lady to her dreams."

"I'm terribly ashamed," she confessed with a glance at the bed. "Still—good night, both of you. Please kiss me, Charles. Mr. Blute isn't looking."

"Mr. Blute," that gentleman remarked, "is a person of discretion."

The two men wandered out into the garden and found a retired, unoccupied seat. There were still muffled scraps of conversation from all around but very little gaiety. One of a small party of students struck up a few notes on a ukulele but was driven into retreat by a shower of miscellaneous missiles. The night itself was curiously still and there was a sense of thunder in the air. Blute began to talk. His voice had no expression—it was changeless in its tone. He began to talk of wars, of chance words spoken in secret places by irresponsible people, of the crackle of inflammable materials as gossiping tongues trifled with serious subjects and lit the bonfires which were to scorch the world.

"All wars," he said, addressing himself to no one in particular, "would die out and the spirit of warfare would perish if it were not for the gross things of life. There are no more Wars of the Roses, no more passionate journeys across the desert on the part of holy men, although they wore armour and carried swords by their sides. No more struggles to free the world from tyranny and barbarism, to set free the nations that have fallen by the wayside. Nowadays, the armament makers light the flame and the newspaper millionaires fan it. It has become a sickly and a horrible thing—but so long as the world exists war will continue because evil will dominate. There are more evil qualities in the world than good ones and behind it all, deep enough underneath, there is the fascination of the struggle to the man who has brain but no emotion. That is the man who enjoys warfare."

Charles, who had been half dozing, sat up.

"I have never heard you talk so much in my life, Blute!"

"I never have a chance to talk. I am always afraid of speech. I am a man of action, of secret underground action. I like to work where no other men can intrude. I am a rich man but I am not a money grabber. I am a man who loves gratitude but I am not a philanthropist. Within a few hours I shall bring, I hope, to a successful end one of the greatest enterprises of my life. You are a newcomer, Mr. Mildenhall, to the world I have made my own. I saw what was coming to the Jews years before they dreamed of it themselves. As far as I ever feel friendship for anyone I felt friendship and reverence for Leopold Benjamin. I set myself to work on his affairs. Millions upon millions that his father and grandfather had made I removed quietly, inconspicuously from the dangerous places. I made that the business of my life. I encouraged him in those great sums he used to pay for objets d'art. A work of genius is always a

marketable thing. Sometimes he was puzzled. It seemed to him that he must be growing poorer. The millions that used to be in Hamburg, the huge iron works that were run entirely with his capital, the ships that took the seas, the streets of palaces in Berlin and Frankfurt—all the money which had brought these things into being and which supported them slipped quietly away. There was always more money to take its place from a hundred different sources. Leopold was sometimes frightened. 'Blute,' he used to say to me, 'you are making a poor man of me.' And I smiled. It will be a moment of triumph for me when we meet. Not only shall I restore to him the pictures he loves, the treasures of his life, but I shall tell him, and it is a wonderful thing to tell any man, aye, not only tell him but prove to him with the figures which weary him so much, that he is the richest man in the world."

"Are we still talking fairy stories?" Charles asked.

"I talk because I feel like it," Blute said calmly. "I very seldom feel like it. You must be a good listener, Mr. Mildenhall. You have an inborn gift for it. Now I am going to sleep."

He closed his eyes. All around them the murmur of voices was growing fainter and fainter.

Charles was awakened by someone pulling his arm. He heard a scared foreign voice in his ear.

"Wake up, sir, please wake up!"

He opened his eyes and sat up quickly. It was the sandy-haired little manager still in his soiled grey-linen suit.

"It is the young lady who travels with Mr. Blute," he declared. "She rang the bell. She declares that two men have been in her room. She declares that they were tampering with your luggage, sir."

Charles, followed by Blute, crossed the lawn swiftly and mounted the now deserted stairs. The door of number seven stood ajar. Patricia was standing upon the threshold clad in a dark green dressing-gown, with slippers upon her bare feet. She was breathing rapidly and there was fear in her eyes.

"I awoke suddenly," she called out to Charles. "I felt there was someone in the room. There were two men. They were trying to open your tin case."

"What's become of them?" Charles asked quickly.

"I turned on the light and screamed," Patricia told him. "I rang the bell and screamed—"

The little proprietor nodded.

"Mademoiselle did indeed make herself heard," he chimed in. "I am sitting up all night myself to collect money from these people before they leave. I ran

upstairs. I passed one man on the landing. He was running with his head down."

Charles handled the despatch box.

"Well," he remarked, "he was a very poor sort of burglar."

"Nothing has been stolen?" Patricia gasped.

"Not a thing," Charles assured her. "A key to the door I dare say the man might find easily, but the key to open this despatch box is a different matter."

"No papers gone—nothing?" Herr Hauser asked.

"Nothing."

The proprietor expressed his satisfaction.

"It is useless to give an alarm," he said. "The police are all called up."

"How did the fellow open the door?" Blute asked.

"Alas," the manager confessed, "the keys are all the same. Still, nothing has been stolen," he continued, looking round. "That is good. I am sorry that Mademoisellewas frightened. It is a difficult time."

Patricia sat down. She was still trembling.

"You can have your room, please, Mr. Mildenhall," she said. "The keys are useless. How could I sleep dreading every minute that that man would come back again? Perhaps both of them."

The manager expressed his sympathy once more.

"The gentlemen have only a seat in the garden," he told her. "If Mademoiselle does not object, they should lie down here. There is the couch for one gentleman, a rug and a cushion for the other. Remember, gentlemen, if you please, that this is only one night in a lifetime. I do my best, Herr Blute."

"Quite right, Hauser," Blute agreed. "If you do not object, Miss Grey," he added, "we will be your protectors."

She smiled on them both.

"I think it is a very good arrangement. Now I shall sleep in peace. As the manager has just told us, it is but one night in a lifetime."

Charles threw himself down on the hearth-rug with a pillow under his head. Blute leaned a little anxiously over him and whispered in his ear.

"Sure they didn't get at your papers?"

"There are no papers," Charles whispered back. "The box is full of my soiled linen!"

Blute retired to his couch smiling. This was his own way of doing things.

Charles was more than ever a young man after his own heart.

CHAPTER XXV

For some reason or other there was an air of greater calm about the place the next morning when Charles, after his morning coffee with Patricia in the garden, strolled down the road in front of the hotel smoking a cigarette. Some people were already taking their places in the train which, however, was not to start for another half-hour. Blute was engaged in conversation with the four guardians of his treasure who, having had their morning coffee and rolls brought to them, were sitting about on the steps of the van smoking. Herr Hauser, who seemed for some reason or other, Charles thought, to be avoiding him, was back in his place in his bureau collecting money from every one of the hotel visitors of the night before. Blute stepped over the paling which led on to the railway line and joined Charles.

"Get any sleep?" he asked.

"Not much," Charles answered truthfully. "Cut myself shaving, too. I love cold water for everything in the world except to shave with."

"You should have waited till we arrived in Zürich," Blute told him. "All the luxuries in the world there, including a wonderful hairdressing establishment."

Charles glanced around and dropped his voice a little.

"I have decided not to go on to Zürich," he confided. "Once across the Swiss frontier you won't need me any more. I have a small chateau, as you know, that I've used for a sort of headquarters when I've been doing my tramps round Europe. It's a little place called Felsen, not many kilometres across the frontier. I have telephoned this morning for my plane to be put in order and got ready for me and I shall fly direct to England. That way I shall avoid all risk of getting into trouble."

"What does Miss Grey say to that?"

"I haven't told her yet. I think she'll be glad. I shall ask her to come with me but I think she'll decide that she must stay with you."

"Well, that's her affair," Blute observed. "I can't trust these country telephones. I shan't attempt to speak to Paris until we get to Zürich, then I know I can find out Mr. Benjamin's whereabouts. There is to be a passport examination here in the train before we start. They've just stuck up a notice."

"What's the idea?"

"A very good one, I should think. It will save at least an hour to an hour-and-a-

half at the frontier town and here nobody's doing anything until the line is clear for us to go on. The two passport men have just arrived in a car. I've taken a place for you in the dining saloon. There's no service there, of course, but you won't want that and I'd rather we both kept away from you as much as possible. Once across the frontier we can all join up. Miss Grey is still very nervous that if ever this expedition of ours is talked about you will get into trouble. I think I'll go into the hotel and tell her to come and take her place. I'll send your bags here, if you like."

"Send out that lusty porter. I owe him a pourboire."

The two passport men came and took their seats at the farther end of the dining car just as Charles settled down in his corner. The superior of the two recognized him and bowed. He came over and shook hands.

"Saving you a little trouble, Herr Mildenhall," he said.

"A very good idea," Charles replied. "You may as well start with me. How are your wife and family?"

"Excellently, I thank you, mein Herr."

He took Charles's passport to the desk, wrote the usual inscription, stamped and returned it with a little bow. He had always a great respect for diplomatic passports. Charles thrust it in his pocket and established himself comfortably with his luggage in the rack above him. He was just settling down when he noticed a car approaching at great speed along the level stretch of road by the side of the railway. He recognized it at once. Beatrice, who was alone, descended and disappeared in the station. A moment or two later she entered the dining car from the other end and presented herself to the passport examiners. She talked with them for some few minutes and it was obvious from her expression that there was some trouble. She looked around and recognized Charles. With a word to the passport chef she left his extempore desk and came to Charles's corner.

"Mr. Mildenhall," she said, "I think you must be more tired of seeing me than any woman on earth. I need your help. Again I am a suppliant."

"What is there that I can do for you?" he asked a little dubiously.

"My passport," she told him, "has been stolen."

He raised his eyebrows slowly.

"That is rather a serious matter, isn't it?"

She leaned towards him. He was looking at her curiously. The early morning sunlight treated her kindly but it was the face of a very serious woman which was inclined towards his. Her eyes, which had danced so often with joy, were full of trouble. She seemed somehow or other to belong to a different world.

"I slept last night," she went on, "at the chateau of some friends—indeed, I might say a relative. Early this morning I was awakened by someone in my room. I gave the alarm. A man was seen to disappear down the drive on a motor bicycle. I searched my belongings. Only one thing was stolen—my passport."

The chef at the other end of the dining car left his seat and came towards them.

"With every desire to help Madame," he said, bowing to Charles, "it is, of course, impossible for us to issue a passport here on the train."

"But listen," she persisted, drawing a leather-bound object from her bag. "I have an old passport here. It is out of date but it could be extended."

"There are difficulties about that," the man objected.

She turned to Charles.

"Mr. Mildenhall," she begged, "send him away for one moment."

"The lady has something to confide to me," Charles told the official.

The latter smiled and drew back. The Baroness looked into her companion's eyes.

"Charles," she said, "I am not a bad woman. I have never deceived anyone whom I have loved. I pray you—it is for your sake as well as mine—get me that passport."

"For my sake?"

"I will take that back, but you will do a great, a wonderful kindness to a woman who is suffering if you will get me that passport, and you will do no harm nor bring any harm upon any human being in the world."

She returned his steadfast gaze without flinching. Then he rose to his feet and drew the passport inspector outside the car.

"The lady is honest, I believe," he said. "And her need for the passport is very real. You may lose promotion by doing a generous action. Let this recompense you."

The notes passed into the man's hand. He thrust them into his pocket.

"Come with me to the table, sir," he said.

Charles obeyed. The man took up the old passport and placed a pen between Charles's fingers.

"Sign your name, please, as sponsor there," he begged, pointing to a certain place.

Charles did as he was told.

"Now write on this sheet of paper to me, sir:

"The Baroness von Ballinstrode has urgent need of a passport to replace the one stolen from her this morning. I guarantee her probity and that her name and the other particulars upon the passport which is out of date are true."

Charles did as he was asked. The man blotted the piece of paper, placed it inside the document and presented it to the Baroness with a bow.

"That, Madame," he said, "will pass you over the frontier to-day. I should advise you, though, as soon as you have an opportunity to take out a fresh passport."

Beatrice smiled her thanks. She held Charles's hand for a moment in hers. Then she swung around and without a backward glance stepped off the car. Charles returned to his place.

"God knows what old Blute would say to me," he muttered to himself.

Ten o'clock came at last. Punctually they jogged slowly out of the station. Charles tried to settle down to read. It was impossible. The dining car was now full of passengers, some having their passports examined, others engaging in eager conversation. The short journey to the frontier seemed to Charles absolutely intolerable. He smoked several cigarettes, finally gave it up, put away his book and sat with folded arms and eyes resolutely turned away from the windows. They gained a little speed, slackened again and then came to a sudden stop. They were under the roof of a station. The platforms were crowded with shouting porters and streams of people passed the windows on their way to the Customs shed. Charles yielded over his belongings to a couple of blue-smocked men and told them to follow him to the office. Here he enquired for one of the chefs by name, exhibited his passport and pointed to his bags. The man scrawled across them.

"Diplomatic," he grunted to the porters. "Passed."

The fortunate passenger made his way back to the train. With a great effort he obeyed Blute's request and made no attempt to discover either of his travelling companions. He entered the buffet, drank half a bottle of Swiss wine, paced up and down the platform for half-an-hour and then regained his seat. From a post of vantage he looked out on a very quaint spectacle. Two station officials were standing at the entrance to the private luggage van with their hats in their hands. Mr. Blute, one of the little group, was signing papers with a fountain pen. Charles heard some people on their way past the car speak of the terrible accident in the north and tell others that the bodies of the victims were on their way back to Grenoble for burial. Finally it was all over. Mr. Blute shook hands warmly with the officials and disappeared into the train. Very slowly it jolted out of the station.

In less than quarter-of-an-hour there was another halt. This time there was only a platform with no station, but the former was crowded with another

company of officials. The examination, however, was only of passports and railway tickets. The period of tension, brief though it was, seemed to pass very slowly. At last they were moving again. They slipped farther and farther away from the entanglement of sidings and signal boxes. They began to gather speed. They were in the open country. The door of the dining car was suddenly swung open. Marius Blute and Patricia made their appearance. The former was carrying a bottle of champagne under his arm, the strain had gone from his face, a thin but genuine smile was parting his lips.

"Our effort is accomplished," he announced. "We are safely in Switzerland. There is nothing more to be feared. I bought a bottle of Swiss champagne at the buffet. The attendant has given me three glasses. We will drink to our success, we will drink to one another, we will drink to this happy event which seems to be pending between you. Miss Grey, and Mr. Mildenhall!"

"Dear me," she laughed, "I'm getting so used to the idea of being married to you, Charles!"

"You will never get used to it," he declared as he drew the cork from the bottle and filled the glasses. "You will find being married to me fills life with continual novelty, you will find no time even to pity the many millions who cannot have that happiness."

"I shall devote the earlier part of our life together," she said severely, "towards filing down the sharp edges of your conceit."

"So easily done," he murmured. "The great success of my life—the winning of Patricia—has turned my head a little."

"You two seem booked for a happy time, if you go on like this," Blute declared. "Where's the wedding going to be?"

And then, before either of them could deal with this rapturous subject, there came a sudden shock. The handsome guard of the train who had had nothing but smiles for them since the commencement of the journey came hurrying to where they were seated. He had lost alike his dignity, his composure and his slight swagger. He looked over his shoulder. There was no one within hearing. He leaned towards Blute. His voice shook.

"Did you ever hear of the Three G's, sir?"

Blute started as though he had been struck.

"What—the Gervaise Gunther Gang?"

"They're here—in the train—spread about! I've counted ten. One of them has tried twice to get into the van."

"Is Gervaise himself here?" Blute groaned.

"I shouldn't think so, sir. I have not seen him. He never travels with the

others."

For the first time in her life Patricia saw Blute temporarily overcome. His hand trembled. He spilt some of the wine as he set down his glass.

"Who on earth is Gervaise Gunther?" Charles demanded. "Docs he bite?"

Neither of the two men answered him. Both seemed overpowered.

This was no moment for frivolity. Patricia looked at them and her own heart sank.

"Is this what you were afraid of?" she asked Blute.

He shook his head.

"No, I was afraid of a Nazi coup. I thought that they might have sent a special enquiry guard to the frontier. Gervaise—I never thought of him. I have had not a single word of warning from anyone. I thought he was in New York."

"The same fellow is on the train," the guard went on, his voice half-choked with fright, "as the last time I saw any of them. It was when they stopped and robbed the Orient Express and got away with a hundred-thousand pounds worth of jewels. I saw this man put on his mask three minutes before the hold-up. There he sits to-day, the same man. He knew that I recognized him and he just winked. They say that Gervaise himself was at a café in Budapest two days after the robbery with his mistress, who was wearing some of the jewellery! No one dared lay a finger upon him. It will be the same again."

Charles suddenly began to realize the situation.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Are these men after our stuff?"

"They are indeed," Blute groaned. "He is the only man in the underworld I have ever feared. When I first planned this coup, Mildenhall, long before I spoke to you about it, I sent wires to New York, Chicago, Paris, London, Marseilles and I had combed Vienna, as I thought, to the bone for news of this man. Not a single police headquarters, not a single private agent, no one in Vienna had heard of him for years. They all declared that he was not working. I dropped him out of my calculation. Are you sure that he's not on the train himself, guard?"

"I am sure," the latter replied. "I am the only man who could recognize him. Last time we met I passed him as a stranger. If I had given him away by so much as a blink I should not have lived another ten seconds."

"How did you find this out?" Blute asked.

"The little lieutenant, the man I told you I recognized from last time, called me in to him just now. He was rolling a thousand schilling note in his hand. He had the same thin, squeaky voice. It gave me a shiver all through my body when I recognized it. 'Guard,' he said, looking me straight in the face, 'I would

like you to stop this train for a few minutes at Alteren.' He opened his hand and I saw the note. I had to be careful. There was something else bulging in his pocket and his fingers were creeping around the bulge. I'm talking to you now at the risk of my life."

"Where is Alteren?" Charles asked.

"It is just a signal box. We should be there in half-an-hour's time. It's rather a lonely spot with trees on either side of the track."

"What did you say?"

"I promised I would speak to the engine driver."

"How many of these fellows do you think there are?" Blute demanded.

"I've recognized ten, sir. That's the number he generally works with."

"You don't think Gervaise himself is on the train, then?" Blute persisted.

"I am sure he is not. He has a swagger with him that no one can mistake. He has the voice and manner, too, of a well-bred man."

"The way he's worked it out," Blute speculated, "is probably like this. When we reach Alteren he will probably pick up the gang and the loot in a powerful motor lorry. If he sees it's all right when the train stops, he'll just slip into the affair as naturally as possible. If none of his men are in sight he'll know there's a hitch and he'll be off like a flash. He won't be seen again for a year or two. There's only one thing for us to do," he added grimly. "We must get into the van and shoot it out with them."

Charles's hesitation was only a matter of seconds.

"Look here," he proposed, "I have a better scheme."

"Out with it quick, then," Blute begged.

Charles dragged out his watch.

"The train is being stopped for me in less than ten minutes from now just opposite my little chateau at Felsen, where I was going to break away. There is a siding there. To start with we three must make our way into the van right away. Just before we get to Felsen, guard, you must loosen the couplings and detach them altogether with the brakes on. We'll be ready to jump out with the guards and all our luggage before anyone else realizes what we are doing. Meanwhile the train itself won't stop and it will be out of sight in no time. If this cheerful gang of desperadoes you are talking about tumble to what's happening and jump the train we shall fight it out with them, but at this speed I don't think they'll risk it."

"It's a good scheme," the guard cried feverishly.

"It's the best chance you've got, anyway, and I'm with you."

"Well, there you are," Charles concluded. "There will be six of us all armed and we shall have the stuff in the grounds before they can stop the train and get out in the regular way. If we can get as far as the chateau itself there are one or two servants of mine up there who are used to a rough-house."

They were all on their feet now. Blute laid his hand on Charles's shoulder.

"There's only one thing against this scheme, Mr. Mildenhall," he said gruffly. "You'll be let down completely. You'll be marked down as one of a gang of thieves, even if we are only trying to save a man's property from a greedy State."

"That be damned!" Charles scoffed. "I'll take my chance. Miss Grey, of course, must stay in the train."

"Miss Grey will do nothing of the sort," Patricia declared passionately. "I am coming down to the van with you now and if anything goes wrong and they try to rush us I shall fight it out with the rest of you. I'll take the first gun there is to spare from either side. I can shoot pretty straight, I promise you."

The guard looked out of the window and glanced at the watch he held in his shaking fingers.

"No time to argue, gentlemen," he insisted.

He snatched Charles's bags from the rack and led his three passengers along towards the end of the car. They hurried through the kitchen adjoining, through another door and out on to the iron platform.

"Into the van with you!" the guard insisted. "You three must hurry. I must stop to see about the couplings. I shall have to lie down on my stomach to do that job while she's going. I shall manage it, though. It will be a nasty jerk, mind, when she breaks away. Into the van, please! You will find it difficult to get across that last bit when she begins to sway."

He stood on one side and they hurried past him. There was an open space bridged over by only a narrow footway into the van. Blute shouted and one of the four guardians held out his hand and helped him across. One by one they safely negotiated the passage. Blute explained the situation in a few breathless words.

"If they try to follow us this way," he pointed out, "we'll kill the lot of them before they get across. A bullet a time and over they go. They won't get here in time, though. The guard will have disconnected us and we shall be half a mile away even if they get hold of the engine driver and make him stop the train."

"They won't do that, sir," the guard, holding on to an iron rod and looking up from his horizontal position, called out. "There's a locked door between them and the engine. I shall be telephoning to the driver directly to put on steam. I should not be surprised if you are not safely in the chateau before they can

leave the train...There goes the first of the couplings!"

They were beginning to wobble now. Charles half carried Patricia to the far end of the car and placed her by one of the cases.

"You crawl down behind that, young woman," he enjoined, "and don't go bobbing your head up to see who's hit. Listen to me—and you, too, Blute—because I know the country here. If the train gets half a mile away before the gang are on the track it's a cinch for us! We have a gate over the narrow road that runs level with the railway and an open entrance up the avenue to the chateau. Once inside there we're safe. Now then, what about the caskets?"

"We can each carry one or drag it," the chief of the guardians declared. "They're no great weight. We'll have to come back for the boxes."

"As long as we get them across the road we can send down for them," Charles said. "We must hide them inside the wood bordering the road."

He knelt down by Patricia's side. She came very close to him.

"There's plenty of cover, Blute," he called out. "Come farther back."

Blute concluded his rapid orders to the four men and changed his position slightly.

"Look out!" he warned them. "We shall all go head over heels when that last coupling is loosened and the brake's on."

There was a sudden hissing of steam, a shriek from the metals. They were on the siding, very nearly jumping it. The van rocked from side to side as the brakes began to bite, then they slackened down to a crawl and came to a standstill. They rushed for the door which Blute had opened and jumped safely on to the track. The disappearing train was already well away and the engine driver had done even better than his instructions. He had put on speed to such an extent that, although one or two of the doors had opened and the forms of several men were visible hanging out as though they meant to jump, not one of them tried it. The most daring of their enemies had apparently rushed through the dining car and the kitchen and, leaning over the platform at the end of the carriage, had fired one abortive shot. The train was gathering speed every moment.

CHAPTER XXVI

"That's trick number one for us," Blute declared, springing lightly down on to the permanent way. "Two of you fellows come down here and the others pass the caskets to us."

They promptly obeyed. Afterwards they found the gate leading from the railway line to the road opened with a latch and the gate up the avenue to the chateau was easily flung back. One by one they dragged the caskets and then the three cases across the rails, the bordering roadway and into a place of security behind some shrubs in the chateau park.

"It's trick number one for us, all right," Blute repeated, pausing to wipe his forehead, "but we're not quite out of the wood yet. How many men did you say you have up there, Mr. Mildenhall?"

"Well, I haven't been there for over twelve months," Charles reflected. "There was an old housekeeper who looked after things—I took her over from the last proprietor. Then there were two indoor menservants, a youth who looked after the electricity and telephone—we've always done a lot of long-distance telephoning from here—three men in the garden and a woodman."

"Any weapons?"

"Not much in that way, I'm afraid. There are two or three sporting guns. A number five shot from a highly charged cartridge out of a Purdy gun is not to be sneezed at! No rifles, I'm afraid, but I'm sure there are a couple of revolvers. The servants are mostly Swiss but a pretty decent lot as far as I can remember. Needham, the butler, is really in charge. I'm afraid they get very slack when I'm away for a time. I couldn't get hold of any of the servants whom I remembered when I rang up but the chauffeur's voice was familiar and he told me he knew all about the plane and would see that it was got ready. He promised, too, to have the cars looked over. I suggest that we three go straight on up to the chateau and leave the cases here for the present. We can send down some more men to help bring them up. I know we have one lorry at least and a large car which should carry the lot. You can start off when you like."

Blute hesitated for a moment.

"We must have transport," he reflected. "The only thing I'm bothered about is supposing the Three G's get the train stopped and hurry back here."

Charles pointed to the range of mountains ahead.

"They've got to get to the other side of those before they come to a town of any size," he confided. "Even if they got the train stopped, there would be nothing to bring them back. It's nothing but rough mountain country for fifty or sixty kilometres. There's one military post but that wouldn't do them any good."

"We'll do as you propose then," Blute agreed. "Wait just a moment while I have a few words with the men."

"It's a lovely old place," Patricia remarked as they drew nearer to the house on their upward climb. "I love the towers at the corner and the long sweep of the

front."

"It's more French than Swiss, I'm glad to say," Charles pointed out. "I don't altogether like the look of the place, though," he went on, glancing disparagingly around. "The grounds look very neglected and I can't see a single gardener about. I fancy I can hear someone in the flying field, though, and there's smoke enough from the chimneys. As soon as we've got our luggage up we must see what Madame can do for luncheon."

"Have you a very good cook?" Patricia asked wistfully.

"Pretty fair so far as they go," he answered. "I have never done a great deal of entertaining here. It was a very useful headquarters to write reports from and it is quite near several frontiers. Here we are!"

They crossed the paved courtyard; Charles pulled the huge iron bell chain, turned the great handle of the front door and pushed it open. There was a large but silent and gloomy hall. A man issued from the back regions and made his way towards them. He was dressed in dark livery but Charles looked at him puzzled.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The man stared at him for a moment, then he smiled a little superciliously.

"I was about to ask you the same question," he confided. "Whom do you want to see?"

"I want to see Needham, my butler," Charles replied. "My name is Mildenhall. The chateau belongs to me. I telephoned to say that I was coming."

The man looked at him for a moment in blank astonishment, then he moved across the hall and threw open the door of a large reception room.

"Some visitors for you, sir," he announced. "The younger gentleman says that his name is Mildenhall and that he owns the chateau."

The man who had been seated at the writing-table rose to his feet. He was dark, tall, his figure was slim, even elegant, he was well and carefully dressed although in markedly foreign fashion. His grey eyes had a peculiarly chilling effect. The smile upon his lips, however, was a perfectly genuine affair. He appeared to find the situation a little unexpected but amusing.

"Really?" he exclaimed. "Mr. Mildenhall! I was hoping to make your acquaintance but not quite in this fashion. I am afraid before I ask you to be seated—the young lady will excuse me?—I must ask you, both of you, please, without any hesitation—quickly in fact—to raise your arms towards the ceiling and keep them there."

Almost before he realized it Charles found himself looking into the barrel of a revolver held in the speaker's right hand and Blute felt himself covered by a

second weapon held in his left. It was certainly no time for argument. Charles's first impulsive move forward and the lowering of his right hand had sent his opponent's finger swiftly and without the slightest hesitation to the trigger of his weapon. Mildenhall raised his arms in approved fashion. Blute had already done the same.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Now, will you kindly explain this unexpected visit?"

"I don't see that any other explanation is necessary than to tell you that this is my chateau and I am asking you what the devil right you have here," Charles replied.

"The right of possession."

"And your name?"

"Ah, you are beginning to be inquisitive," the other observed. "I have special names for most of the countries I visit and they are many. In Switzerland I am known nowadays as Count Gervaise Gunther. That is when I am addressed formally, which rarely happens."

"Of the Three G's!" Blute groaned.

The Count smiled.

"You are a man of the world, I perceive, sir," he remarked, bowing slightly to the speaker. "You have heard of me."

This was, as he instantly realized, the bitterest moment of Charles Mildenhall's life. He was conscious of a sensation which produced in him a feeling of deadly sickness. In his own vanity, in his own self-confidence, he had brought the girl whom he loved and the man with whom he was working into this mortal danger. He had taken a risk, not only on his own account but for them also. It was a horrible thought. If ever he passed out of this ghastly room alive, a possibility which he was inclined to doubt, he would still never forget the agony of these moments.

"Yes," Blute admitted after a brief pause, "I have heard of you. I sometimes wondered if the time would ever come when we should meet face to face. I did not think that it would be here, though, or in this fashion."

"You have brought to a successful conclusion, Mr. Blute," the Count observed, reseating himself in his chair but keeping the little dark brown gun with its almost violet-coloured barrel in his right hand, "so many of your schemes in life that I imagine you have forgotten the possibility of failure. I have been one of your admirers, you know. I always felt that if I could have come across a man with a genius for finance, as brilliant in his way as I am in mine, we might have done great things in Europe. We might have become king-makers. We might even have occupied thrones of our own."

"You flatter me," Blute said bluntly.

"Not in the least. By the by, young lady, will you not honour this poor abode by taking a chair? It is really more your friend Mr. Mildenhall's than mine, you know, although I am doing the honours just now. Do sit down. The small orange-coloured couch behind you would go with your complexion and hair."

"Thank you. I'll try it," Patricia assented.

The Count smiled in approval.

"I was about to allude, Mr. Blute," he went on, "to the amazing coup you have brought off which has preserved for Mr. Leopold Benjamin his great fortune. In nearly every country you have not only preserved his wealth but you have added to it. You will be proud to know, I am sure, that even in my own country, Switzerland, your name is as famous even as my own."

"It is an honour," Blute murmured with gentle sarcasm.

"This present enterprise of yours, though, Mr. Blute, seems scarcely likely to redound so much to your credit," the Count continued. "I am inclined to fear that you have been a little indiscreet in your choice of an ally."

"That," was the calm reply, "seems to be my affair. If I may be pardoned for saying so, I am not a young man and I cannot support the weight of my two arms held in a vertical position very much longer."

"Reasonable," the other acknowledged. "Let me see—what can we do? Strauss, this way a moment."

The man who had admitted them came from the shadows of a further apartment. His master reflected.

"Let me see if this would work," he suggested. "Hold Mr. Blute's right wrist firmly in your fingers, Strauss, and place your hand upon the muzzle of his weapon. If he is willing to relinquish it bring it to me."

Blute was not the man to make an effort which was foredoomed to failure. He yielded the revolver.

"The same course of action with my younger friend, Mr. Mildenhall...Excellent. Both weapons I will keep on the table by my side, gentlemen, until we have arrived at an understanding. By the by, Mr. Mildenhall, we have turned your rackets court temporarily into an execution ground. We have found it very well adapted for the purpose."

"I shall be happy to sample it," Charles observed grimly.

"It seems to me highly probable," the Count continued, "that you will have an opportunity. I am not a jealous husband but I do not like young men whose flirtations with my wife become too obvious. There was that hideous-looking Hessian lieutenant, for instance, who has probably saved his skin by going off

to Poland. I had no fancy for that young man. Of course, when it comes to the great ones of the world—with the same Christian name as your own," he reflected with a smile, "a husband may regard the affair with greater leniency. A very charming man, the Archduke."

"Do you know, I don't want to be rude," Charles ventured, "but I'm getting very bored, and I am sure Mr. Blute is too, with your monologue. What the hell does all this talk about your wife mean?"

"My wife. I forgot you knew her by her later name, the Baroness von Ballinstrode. She was really a very pretty young woman years ago when she became the Countess Gunther."

There was a brief acute silence.

"Are you telling me," Charles demanded, "that Beatrice von Ballinstrode is your wife?"

The Count sighed.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have never heard of that dear lady's disreputable connection?"

"I will answer for it that he did not," Blute intervened. "Mr. Mildenhall knew only that the Baroness had made an unfortunate marriage with a man who ruined her life and from whom she was divorced."

"Ah, but that is where my wife was wrong," the Count protested calmly. "I never consented to the divorce. If my wife had been a little more reasonable she might have been very useful to me. At any rate, I never had any idea of letting her go. I have not been quite satisfied with her behaviour lately—in fact, my displeasure went so far as to relieve her of her passport—but..."

"Get on with the matter in hand," Blute insisted.

"I am talking to save time," the Count confided. "I am coming to the point now, though. In this bungled enterprise of yours, Mr. Blute, what have you done with the—er—loot?"

"It lies at the bottom of the avenue on the left-hand side coming up," Blute replied without hesitation.

"Right to my door!" Gunther exclaimed with a gesture of gratitude. "Well, you really are the most accommodating interlopers I ever knew. To realize that I might have gone to the trouble of bringing all these things down here from Vienna myself and then very likely made a mess of it—as you have done! I really am indebted to you both—and to the young lady, too," he added with a little bow.

"Nothing to thank me for," Patricia remarked with a slight yawn. "I have been rather in the way."

"Fancy, the bottom of the avenue here!" the Count repeated. "Really! We'll say nothing about the freight but I think that I ought to pay something towards the Customs. What do you think, Mr. Blute?"

"Go to hell!"

The Count looked at the speaker gravely.

"Mr. Blute," he remonstrated, "there is a young lady present. However, as it seems to irritate you I will make no more comments upon this dismal failure of yours. Under the circumstances perhaps it was to be expected. There is one question, however, I would like to ask. What has become of the guard you brought with you whose instructions were to remain with the caskets in the luggage van?"

"They are still guarding our property," Blute replied. "They will go on doing that, you know, for the present."

"I judged that they might be," the other observed. "To tell you the truth, when Mr. Mildenhall complained just now of what he called my monologue I was perfectly truthful in my reply. I was talking to save time. It occurred to me that if those four men of yours were to march up here I should have been obliged to get rid of you two in order to have made our numbers a little more even."

"How should you have got rid of us?" Patricia asked.

"I should have left you out of the affair entirely, young lady," he assured her. "I have a great fancy for red hair and those queer greenish eyes that go with it sometimes. I admire a slim figure, too. That is why I could not get on so well with my own wife lately. She is just a little too much inclined to put on flesh. Don't you think so, Mr. Mildenhall? Ah, I see you agree with me. You, young lady, as I was saying, I should reserve for a different fate, as they say in the pictures, but I should have been compelled to take Mr. Mildenhall and Mr. Blute up to the—er—rackets court. Sounds better than execution ground."

"I'd rather go with them than listen to you talk," she declared boldly. "I think that you are a most annoying person. Couldn't they have done something about it while you were young?"

"My mother and father," he assured her, "loved to listen to my childish prattle. However—finished. I've gained all the time I wanted. I am going to shoot you two—you, Blute, because you have already cut into one or two of my little affairs and I'm getting tired of it. If it hadn't been for a stroke of good luck you'd have spoilt this one for me—and that would have meant," he went on, leaning forward, "something like four million pounds. The Leopold Benjamin collection is worth quite that."

"I believe it is," Blute agreed.

"Well, you say you have four men guarding it down there. Now, I have eleven

men who will hurry back here when they find that I am not at the rendezvous because they will know that I have taken this little affair over and they will want to know where the treasure is. In a very few minutes they will no doubt be here. They will fight it out with your four brave warriors. What do you say, my divinity with the red hair? Will you come up with me to the tower and look out through my telescope and watch the Struggle or will you come and watch a little diversion on the rackets court first?"

"I would go anywhere for the pleasure of seeing you shot!" she retorted.

"Bad manners," he sighed.

"In any case, if ever you laid a finger on me," she assured him, "I would shoot you before you did so if I could, but I would shoot you afterwards if I had to wait a dozen years. That's my red hair, you see. Bad temper it means."

Her inquisitor smiled. It was one of the most unpleasant smiles that ever parted a man's lips.

"I foresee that there might be difficulties in my original scheme," he remarked. "Strauss, move those two revolvers I have left upon the table. We are excellently placed here. Unless I am very much mistaken the diversion down below is about to commence."

Charles suddenly caught up the chair by his side and held it over his head.

"I've had enough of this! Get out of the way, Patricia. Let the fellow shoot."

He smashed the window in front of them into a dozen pieces. He was poised for the spring through what was left of it when Patricia's shriek rang through the room.

"Stop, Charles!" she cried. "These aren't his men at all!"

A lorry had turned in at the bottom of the drive and was being driven furiously towards the chateau. It was packed with soldiers in an unfamiliar uniform. Behind was another and smaller car, and then a limousine. The Count stood like a man turned to stone. He watched the approaching cavalcade with blank amazement. His upraised hand which had been clutching the revolver fell to his side. Patricia made a lightning-like dash at the weapon and snatched it from his loosened fingers. She tossed it across to Charles.

"Catch!" she cried.

Charles caught it.

CHAPTER XXVII

The actual moments that passed before the door was flung open must have

been almost negligible, yet to Patricia they seemed interminable. To the man who stood now covered by his own revolver they might have been a lifetime. There was no doubt but that it was not so much cowardice as blank and complete astonishment which robbed him temporarily of the power of speech or movement. He only recovered himself when he heard the babel of voices in the hall and found the room invaded. An officer in field-grey uniform crossed the threshold. A sergeant and a dozen privates pressed after him. Then for the first time the Count found his voice.

"Who the mischief are you?" he demanded.

"Major Huber—Swiss Infantry," was the prompt reply. "Arrest that man, sergeant!"

The sergeant and two privates seized hold of the Count just a little too late. He was recovering himself. He sent the first private sprawling. His place was taken by another, however. All the time Charles's gun was perfectly steady.

"I can shoot him if you give the word," he declared.

"So could I," the officer, who had withdrawn his revolver from its holster, replied. "My job is to arrest him, though."

The Count was himself again but a few seconds too late. The first private was still on the floor, the sergeant, who had staggered back after a fierce blow on the cheek, had recovered himself and was holding his prisoner's arm. Two other privates obeyed the word of command. At least a half-dozen men had their grip upon him. He ceased to struggle.

"What is the charge. Major?" he asked.

The officer turned towards the entrance. He made a sign to the man who was standing on duty there. The door was flung open. Beatrice von Ballinstrode, with a soldier on either side, entered.

"Baroness," the Major said, "are you able to identify this man?"

She advanced into the full light of the room. Charles very nearly dropped his revolver. She was probably the calmest person there. She looked him in the face, then turned back to the Major.

"Certainly," she answered. "I was unfortunately married to him eighteen years ago under the name of Schrafft—Paul Schrafft."

"You are positively able to identify him, Baroness?"

"Absolutely," she said.

"The charge is, then," the Major said, "that you have been for fifteen years, Paul Schrafft, a deserter from the Swiss Army. Have you anything to say about that?"

"It is you who identify me?" he asked, looking across the room at Beatrice.

"It is I. Do you know why I do it? I see that you do. Major, I spent the night at a little village not far from here at the chateau of my cousins. This man here, still my husband, I suppose, sent one of his company of thieves all the way there to steal my passport. He was afraid that it was my intention to interfere in a little business he was engaged upon. He was quite right, but I arrived here all the same and, I should imagine," she continued, her eyes sweeping the room, "just in time."

The Major saluted.

"We are obliged. Baroness," he said.

"Is my presence required further?" she asked.

"Certainly not. Sergeant, you may remove the prisoner. Allow me to see you to your car. Baroness. Which of you gentlemen is Mr. Mildenhall?"

Charles stepped forward.

"I'm here."

The Major smiled.

"I shall be returning directly," he said, "for the favour of a few minutes' conversation with you."

There was a tramping of feet. In a moment or two the room was empty except for Patricia, Blute and Charles. Marius Blute was smoothing his hair before a mirror after a hurried glance down the avenue. Patricia had thrown herself into a chair. Her own hair was in wild disorder and she had torn her skirt in the convulsive leap forward when she had snatched the revolver from the arrested man. Charles was on his knees by her side. Nevertheless, although she was very pale, her eyes were open and she forced a smile as she felt the pressure of his fingers.

"If I could have some water," she murmured.

"Look round the room—there's a good fellow," Charles asked Blute.

The latter looked round the room in vain, then he stepped out into the hall. He returned, followed by a chauffeur and a plump lady dressed in black. Charles welcomed them gladly.

"That's you, is it. Holmes?" he exclaimed. "Thank heavens! And you, Madame Renouf!"

"We're here, sir," the chauffeur said, "but it's been a funny business!"

"It has indeed," Madame Renouf assented. "Allow me, sir."

She poured some water from the carafe which she was carrying into a tumbler.

"The poor young lady," she murmured sympathetically. "She's had a nasty shock and no mistake."

"I shall be all right in a minute," Patricia declared.

"Tim's gone, sir," the chauffeur announced gloomily. "He smelt a rat, Tim did, and he let on to the Count. The Count shot him down just as you or I would brush away a fly. Thank God he's off the premises, sir. He came here and said he'd leased the chateau from you for six months. If it hadn't been your own voice I heard on the phone last night, sir, I should have been off to-night. They made me answer the phone and wouldn't let me say a word on my own."

"Plane all right?" Charles asked.

"Going like a humming bird, sir."

"Johnson there? That's his name, isn't it? The pilot."

"He's around all right, sir, but again he isn't, so to speak. The Count told him he might want the plane this morning. Never said a word about your coming. Johnson's off in hiding, he is, but I can put my hand on him in a minute."

Patricia sat up.

"I'm absolutely all right," she announced. "Charles, do you realize what has happened?"

She threw her arms round his neck. The housekeeper glanced discreetly away.

"And me, I think," Mr. Blute suggested.

Patricia embraced him without hesitation.

"That," he remarked as he withdrew himself a little awkwardly, "is the first time I have kissed a lady for twelve years."

"It's been worth while waiting, hasn't it, dear?" she laughed.

"Don't you try your tricks on me!" he warned her. "Remember, you're as good as a married woman!"

"There is nothing that could go wrong, now, is there?" she asked, a great relief shining out of her eyes.

Blute escorted her to the window.

"Our four guards are there smoking cigarettes and guarding the treasure. The Count is seated in the middle of that lorry which has just passed out through the gate, two soldiers either side of him and two behind. I never thought I'd see the end of the Three G's crowd. Whichever way our plans lie now we are safe and when opportunity arises I shall most certainly drink the health of that brave lady who has got us out of this mess."

"We are returning to earth again," Charles said.

"It's a mercy, sir," the housekeeper declared, "because I'm hoping you'll fancy some luncheon, even if it is late."

There was a squeal from Patricia, various other sounds of approbation from Blute and Charles.

"The Count's been sort of funny all this morning," Madame Renouf remarked. "I could never get him to tell me how many to cook for but there's enough for ten or twelve anyhow and something over if you've men to feed."

"Who's looking after my cellar here?" Charles asked.

"Mr. Needham's been doing it until the last few days, sir," she declared. "He felt like I did about the Count and he refused to give up the keys. There was a sort of scramble and Needham didn't get the best of it. He'd have liked to have got away, but this place has been like one of them fortresses, sir. There have been men watching at every door. You weren't very fond of strangers in your day, Mr. Mildenhall, sir," she remarked, "but the Count, he was a lot worse."

"What I want to know now," Charles said patiently, "is—where are the cellar keys?"

"I have them here, sir," she announced, producing them. "I made that other man—the Count's valet, he was really—hand them over every night. I've a couple of maids in the kitchen. They weren't in with the rough lot at all—they're Swiss girls I found myself. They can be getting on with the luncheon and you'd better let me be seeing what there is I can bring you up from the cellar. I know where everything is. I'm thinking it's a cocktail that the young lady and you gentlemen will be wanting—and no wonder with the morning you've been through."

"I'd come with you, Madame Renouf," Charles declared, "but I want to speak to the Major before he slips away. Bring us up vermouth, gin, Cointreau, lemons, champagne and white wine—all you can carry."

"There's a cellar boy with a wine basket," she confided. "The Count was a terrible man but he knew the way the gentry did things. We're all very curious down below but I'll be asking questions a little later on."

"And ice, Madame Renouf," Charles called out.

The housekeeper looked round in mild reproof.

"As though I'd be forgetting such a thing!" she exclaimed reproachfully. "I'll go and see Mr. Need-ham at once. He'll perhaps be able to look after you now he knows the others have gone. In three-quarters of an hour's time, sir, I shall be able to serve lunch and if those are your men in the park, sir, with the luggage, they can come in and have a bite in the servants' hall when they've a mind for it."

"What a heavenly person!" Patricia breathed as Madame Renouf left the room.

"She's a character," Charles grinned. "She comes from Geneva and is really more French than Swiss. My head seems to be going round still," he went on after a moment's pause, "I'll never forget the shock when that fellow Strauss met us in the hall. I felt there was something wrong."

Blute lit a cigarette. Charles rose to his feet.

"Patricia," he said, "I think I ought to go and speak to the Baroness."

"I should think so," the girl declared. "Charles, she was absolutely splendid. She faced that man, who looked as though he was dying to kill her, like a lioness, and what pleased me most was that she never even attempted to make eyes at you!"

The Major made his appearance. Charles went forward to meet him.

"Major," he said, "I hope you're not in a hurry. You'll stay and have lunch with us?"

"That's very kind of you. Are you sure it won't be inconvenient?"

"Not in the least," Charles assured him. "This prize criminal you've laid by the heels seems to have kept most of my staff. My housekeeper tells me that luncheon for as many people as we like will be ready in three-quarters of an hour. That should give us almost time enough to drink as many cocktails as the occasion demands."

The Major smiled.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "that delightful American and English custom! The cocktails—yes. Delightful."

Needham and the chauffeur appeared with a tray and the cellar boy with the bottles. One of the maids brought glasses and the ice.

"I'll make the cocktails," Patricia decided, jumping down. "Forgive my skirt—I'll mend it afterwards."

"One moment," Charles said. "Major, I must present you to my fiancee—Mademoiselle Grey. If you were an Englishman and played cricket you would know what I mean when I say that she has just made the most wonderful throw-in I ever saw."

"You were pretty nippy with the catch," Blute observed.

"We were in a hole here," Charles admitted. "We walked in expecting nothing of this sort and I suppose we were a little foolish, but anyhow the Count got our revolvers. He brought us over to the window to see a massacre. He was holding his weapon all the time and I think he'd made up his mind to shoot me. He saw the lorry full of soldiers turning in at the gate and for a moment he

relaxed. Miss Grey gave one jump, snatched his revolver from his fingers while he was staring out of the window and threw it over to me. We haven't had time to say a word about it yet and however long we live I don't suppose we shall ever forget it. I've been in a few tight corners in my time but I shall never forget this one."

"If you are Major Mildenhall of the British Intelligence, sir," the Major declared, "you certainly have. We knew all about your having this chateau unofficially, but of course we couldn't approach you in any way."

"Yes, I'm Mildenhall, but I should have been a dead Mildenhall instead of a live one if it hadn't been for this girl," Charles confided as he escorted her to the table. "I'll hand you the bottles, Patricia, and you do the mixing. Heavens, what a gorgeous shaker! I don't think that belongs to the house."

These Three G's men understood the niceties of life, anyhow."

"What marvellous lemons!" Patricia exclaimed. "Charles, I think it will have to be White Ladies, the lemons look so good."

It was a very cheerful little cocktail party. Afterwards the Major drew Charles on one side.

"I know so little of what has occurred yet," he confessed, "that you must forgive me if I make a faux pas, but I speak for a moment, with your permission, of the Baroness von Balhnstrode, that poor woman who was deceived into marrying Paul Schrafft—"

"I was on my way out to talk to her when you entered," Charles interrupted, feeling a sudden qualm. "I feel rather ashamed that she would have left without a single word."

"My dear fellow," the Major said earnestly, "she wished it. She was perfectly honest but her one idea was to get away. She was in a highly emotional state, she had braced herself for a great effort. I thought she played her part magnificently. She wishes to drop right out of everything. I have given her a card to the Chef de la Gare at Zürich and also a note on the back of one of my cards to the passport authorities. She will be perfectly all right now. There was not a thing she wanted but to get away. She had everything necessary for the voyage, plenty of money, Letter of Credit, everything. She will probably catch the last train that runs into Monte Carlo and there she assures me that she will find one of her oldest friends. If I say one thing you will not think it an impertinence?"

"How could I?" Charles protested.

"She did not want to see you again. There, I do not mind telling you that. Major Mildenhall, because you know which way to take it. I felt a lump in my throat when she found the words to tell me not to let you come out. You see, I

am a man of sentiment. I understood."

He held out his hand. Mildenhall gripped it warmly. They all clamoured for another cocktail. The Major raised his glass.

"To a brave woman!" he said softly.

They drank the toast in rapt silence. They put down their glasses empty. The door was opened. They seemed suddenly transported into another country. Needham, the typical grey-haired English butler, stood upon the threshold.

"Luncheon is served, sir," he announced.

Charles put his arm round Patricia's waist and led her towards the dining-room.

"Had a pretty rough time, I'm afraid, Needham," he remarked, pausing for a moment to shake hands with his servant.

"An exceedingly uncomfortable period of great anxiety, sir," the man admitted. "Will you drink white wine or red, sir, with your luncheon?"

"The white wine to start with and then champagne."

"It is indeed a festival day," the Major, who loved champagne, declared as he unfolded his napkin.

Fortunately for the plans of the host the Major was obliged to be back in barracks at three o'clock. Immediately after his departure Blute drew his two young companions back into the reception room.

"My young friends," he said, "I have a proposition to make to you. Thanks to our host's marvellous telephone service I have already received the best of news. Mr. Benjamin is at Meurice's hotel in Paris. He is in the best of health, his wife is with him and also one daughter. I shall never forget his amazement at hearing my voice. The situation is exactly as I feared with regard to our correspondence. Not one line has he received from me. One hundred communications of various sorts has his secretary addressed to me. The main line is still open to Paris. I with my guards and baggage propose to leave at five o'clock. With regard to Miss Grey, Mr. Benjamin desired me to say that no one in the world would be more welcome if she chose to accompany me. He wished me to add that her post awaits her and that her salary has accumulated. I told him that I believed she had found a more suitable engagement."

"Excellent!" Charles declared. "There really is nothing more that either I or Miss Grey could do for you?"

"Not a thing," Blute assured them. "I have a message from Mr. Benjamin for you, Mr. Mildenhall, and also for you. Miss Grey. It is a message, he says, too precious to be sent over the telephone. War or no war he demands that with the utmost expedition possible you spend the last few days of your honeymoon

with him at Meurice's."

"Nothing would suit us better," Charles acquiesced. "Your plan is admirable, Blute. What I want to do, and I hope Patricia will agree, is to fly to England to-day."

"To England to-day?" she gasped.

He nodded.

"You only want your dressing-bag. I have loads of sisters and cousins who will cart you round to do trousseau-buying but I warn you, you won't have much time for that sort of thing. It's a special licence for us to-morrow. A week in England—half of it at the Foreign Office, I'm afraid—and all being well, Mr. Blute, you can tell Mr. Benjamin that we'll be at Meurice's in ten days. Then we shall have a week's more honeymoon and I must settle down into whatever war job they give me. Is that all right, Patricia?"

She clung to his arm.

"It sounds like heaven, dear. But there's just one thing—shall I have time to mend my frock or must I mend it in the plane?"

"I should like to start," he told her, "in half-an-hour."

"Then I'll mend my frock in the plane," she decided.

"And," he went on, "as I should like to take a tolerably clean girl into England may I remind you, young lady, that I carried your dressing-case all the way up the hill and Madame Renouf has put it in one of the rooms that hasn't been used. It has a bathroom and she will provide a maid to help you. You have exactly half-an-hour from now."

She was gone like a flash.

"Quickest thing on her feet I've ever seen," Blute remarked, as he watched her admiringly. "I'm not much for the other sex myself, Mr. Mildenhall, but I think you're to be envied."

The two men shook hands warmly.

"And so is she," Blute declared. "I can't say I've known many Englishmen, Mr. Mildenhall, but you're—well, you're all right. I shall be always glad I've known you."

"And I've just one thing to say to you in reply, Blute," Charles said with his hand on the other's shoulder. "You never said a word when I nearly let you down, you never even looked what you must have felt. That was the action and the reserve of a great gentleman."

"Ah, well," Blute said, "you knew." Half-an-hour later he watched their plane pass westwards—a glittering speck in the sky.

THE END