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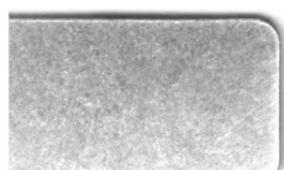




The red emerald

John Reed Scott

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THE RED EMERALD

**JOHN REED SCOTT'S
Previous Fiction Successes**

**The Unforgiving Offender
The First Hurdle and Others
The Last Try
In Her Own Right
The Impostor
The Woman in Question
The Princess Dehra
Beatrix of Clare
The Colonel of the Red Huzzars**



NATALIE SMILED AT THE MARQUIS, AND FLUNG HIM A KISS FROM HER FINGER TIPS

Page 246

THE RED EMERALD

BY
JOHN REED SCOTT

AUTHOR OF "THE COLONEL OF THE RED HUZZARS," "BEATRIX OF CLARE," "THE PRINCESS DEHRA," "THE WOMAN IN QUESTION," "THE LAST TRY," "THE UNFORGIVING OFFENDER," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR
BY EDMUND FREDERICK



PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON
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**TO THE ONE WHO TOLD ME
THE SCOTSWOMAN'S TALE.**

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THE RED EMERALD

I

HIS EXCELLENCY

“How does the old town seem, Orme,” said Silverthorne; “not slipping back any, is it?”

“If it’s slipped at all, it’s been downward, not backward!” smiled Vendome.

“And going like a toboggan,” concurred Plimpton; “all but the prices; they’re soaring heavenward or higher.”

“One would think you were the father of a numerous and extravagant family of daughters!” Fitzgerald scoffed.

“Absolutely unattached, and blessedly glad of it, thank you!” Plimpton retorted.

“What’s the matter, old man,” Vendome inquired; “has another fair maid conferred on you the Order of the Mitt?”

“Macajah isn’t dealing in mittens nor maids at present!” Silverthorne laughed. “He has experienced a change of heart and is saving his surplus cash. He has even taken to rolling his own cigarettes because it’s cheaper, and he isn’t expected to offer them around; though no one would take them

if he did—his tobacco is vile. You noticed it, didn't you?"

"It was the only recourse left to me, Orme," Plimpton confided to Vendome. "This rotten lot of grafters never thought of buying a cigarette so long as they could barnacle me."

"I dare say you are right," Vendome responded. "I knew their ways ten years ago."

"Can it be possible it is ten years since you went into the Diplomatic Corps?" Silverthorne exclaimed.

Vendome nodded. "Ten years this month—and five years since I've had a leave. The State Department seems to be positively unhappy if it lets me stay at one post long enough even to get acquainted with the personnel of the staff."

"Is that an evidence of your competency or incompetency?" Plimpton inquired.

"I have never been able to ascertain!" Vendome laughed.

"Now you can see what a mean-dispositioned freak Macajah has become recently," said Fitzgerald. "All the result of disappointed love, execrable tobacco, and kindred ailments."

"It's a crying pity to see a good fellow go so far wrong," Silverthorne sympathized. "I trust you'll bear with him."

"Do you know the cause of this kind feeling for

me?" Plimpton asked. "I cleaned them out at auction last night. They are poor losers, Vendome; I advise you not to play with them. I won eleven straight rubbers—and they're sore. Everyone's attitude is susceptible of explanation, you know."

"Why, you unmitigated liar!" said Fitzgerald. "I was at the Carstarphens' last night."

"And I wasn't in Washington," said Silverthorne.

Plimpton shrugged the denial indifferently aside.

"Tell us where all you've been stationed during the last five years," said he to Vendome. "Have you been at Vienna? That is the place I should like; there's a glamour about the Emperor and the Archdukes and Archduchesses—tinselly enough, I reckon, when one gets close, but mighty attractive from a distance."

"I've never been stationed in Vienna," Vendome said. "It is about the only capital in Europe that has escaped. I was Third Secretary at Constantinople and Berlin; Second at Madrid and Brussels; First at Rome and Paris; Chargé d'Affaires for months at the latter; Minister to the Netherlands; and now I'm home on vacation, and to receive instructions preparatory to taking up my new post as our first Ambassador to Spain."

"You've lasted much longer than the majority of our diplomats," said Fitzgerald.

"There hasn't been a change of party administration—and we youngsters, who have independent means, who like the job, and who manage to hold it down half decently, haven't been disturbed. In Root and Knox we have been blessed with chiefs who have the right idea as to good of the service and the stability of the Corps. It's only the big places that nowadays go to pay political debts."

"How long will you last on that basis?" asked Plimpton. "You're an Ambassador *now*—or is the President squaring an obligation with the Castles in Spain?"

"Ordinary promotion due to having made good," Vendome explained, laughing.

"Ordinary promotion preparatory to throwing you down and out," Plimpton remarked.

"You're a consoling person!" said Silverthorne.

"Anyone who enters our Diplomatic Corps hasn't the least ground to expect consolation," Plimpton retorted. "He knows the rotten game before he goes into it. Some years ago we sent a rich brewer, from Milwaukee or St. Louis, to represent us at the Austrian Court. Think of it! At the most aristocratic Court in the world! That is just one instance of it."

"Why did Austria accept him?" said Fitzgerald.

"Because the American diplomats are a joke—

and Austria thought she'd drawn the prize, I fancy."

" You don't seem to think much of Vendome's profession?" Silverthorne remarked.

" On the contrary, it is the cream of them all—when practised under a sensible government. It has been some better under Root and Knox, but they are not able to change the customs of a century, walled in by prejudice and national conceit. It's the Corps of Bunglers, not the Corps Diplomatic, that we belong to."

" Do you class Vendome with the Corps of Bunglers?" Fitzgerald asked.

" He's among them—I trust he is not of them," Plimpton replied. " Are you, Vendome?"

" Modesty forbids reply!" laughed Orme.

" Hum!" Plimpton grunted. " That sounds sensible—and they seem to have let you rise for ten years. You may survive until the next election; then some blatant brewer, or steel-maker, will want your job, and you will get the—recall."

" Every Ambassador and Minister resigns when a new Executive takes office," Vendome reminded.

" That's the rotten American system! That's why we pay political debts with them instead of making a permanent service of it, with traditions to uphold. No foreign country takes our diplomats seriously—and blessed few Americans."

"Can't you do something for Macajah?" said Silverthorne. "His point of view appears blunted."

"I might take him back with me, and let him observe an Ambassador in action and at close range," Vendome suggested.

"I'll go!" said Plimpton. "When do you sail?"

"Stung!" cried Silverthorne and Fitzgerald in the same breath.

"Won't you come, too?" Vendome invited.

"Not with Macajah!" said both.

"Your simultaneous unanimity is most remarkable, as well as gratifying," Plimpton observed indifferently. "When did you say we would sail, Orme?"

"I didn't say!" Vendome smiled. "I've indefinite leave—I may be ordered off to-morrow, and I may be here for some months."

"And you may lose your job before you depart," returned Plimpton. "There is nothing sure about the Bunglers' Corps, except the bounce—you'll get it, all right."

"If I don't bounce myself first," amended Vendome. "However, I'm not anticipating; it's very pleasant—while it lasts—and I enjoy it."

"Well, I'll look the duties over," Plimpton observed, "and if I like them, I may go in for a Diplomatic job, just for the experience."

"You!" cried Silverthorne and Fitzgerald.

"Are you two rehearsing a chorus," Plimpton asked, "or are you marionettes?"

"The Bungler Corps and the Diplomatic joke would have one shining example if ever you landed an appointment!" laughed Silverthorne.

"Don't I know it?" Plimpton agreed. "That is my particular qualification for the job—that's why I should make a brilliant success."

"Then it's the thing for you to do!" urged Fitzgerald, mockingly. "Better late than never in discovering your proper calling."

Plimpton smiled amiably—and arose.

"I wish you would advise me just as soon as you know when you're sailing," he said to Vendome, and sauntered from the room.

"Do you think he means it?" Vendome asked.

"Sure he does—for the moment!" Fitzgerald smiled. "He will probably forget all about it in ten minutes, particularly if Mrs. Tremaine should come within his view."

"Who is Mrs. Tremaine?" Vendome asked.

"Who is Mrs. Tremaine!" Silverthorne repeated incredulously. "Do you mean that you don't know?"

Vendome nodded. "I've been away for five years, and there wasn't a Mrs. Tremaine when I was here last, nor was there a Tremaine in society."

“ Of course! The Tremaines are new people—I mean new to us, not new in society. She was a Jumonville, of New Orleans. Tremaine is from California originally, I think—and from nowhere in particular. He has plenty of money—made it in Mexican mines and Texas oil, I’m told—and married into the Jumonvilles for good measure. The Jumonvilles haven’t much cash, but they more than made up the deficiency by blood and breeding. Four years or so ago they came here and set up an establishment and made a sensation—Mrs. Tremaine would be a sensation anywhere. In looks she has them all beaten to a frazzle. She is simply in a class by herself; and she is as unaffected and unspoiled as she is beautiful. She’s a bit difficult now—cold and reserved, that is—and you can’t blame her. You see, Tremaine got into the ‘ White Light’ and went the pace, it seems—quietly and discreetly. She learned of it, however; and after a scene, it is said, she gave him another chance. He was good about six months; then he broke over—and she divorced him.”

“ Are there children? ” Vendome asked.

“ None,” said Silverthorne; “ which made it easy, and no one suffered. They actually seem good friends—Tremaine and she—and sometimes meet at the same table. No one has ventured to put

them together—and I don't fancy they will. He is a very decent sort. She—well, she is the salt of the earth. Some people are inclined to think that they will make it up."

"How old is Mrs. Tremaine?" Vendome asked.

"About twenty-five—not more."

"And hasn't she any admirers—except yourself and Plimpton?"

"I wish I could say so!" Silverthorne laughed. "Admirers! She has them by the score. She has only to look at a man and he is done for."

"Hum!" said Vendome. "She must be popular among the ladies—eligible and ineligible."

"No woman is popular with another woman," said Silverthorne sententiously. "Among themselves women are the most jealous things imaginable."

"Right oh!" chimed in Fitzgerald. "And a trifle vindictive as well—upon occasion."

"Which occasion," Silverthorne added, "is generally forthcoming."

"Being unanimous on that subject, and there being no women present to move a reconsideration and to raise trouble," remarked Vendome, "let us proceed with the previous question: Mrs. Tremaine. I am to believe that she is beautiful, unaffected, unspoiled, difficult—whatever that may mean—cold, reserved, a divorcée—for no fault of hers, how-

ever—forbearing, also non-bearing, and in age twenty-five or thereabout. Am I right?"

"Good Lord! did I say all that?" Silverthorne exclaimed.

"I think I didn't omit anything!" Vendome said.

"Well, I'll stand for it—every word of it. I put it mild. She is all that and much more. Wait until you meet her—you may have seen the beauties of the Courts to which you've been accredited, but you've *not* seen Natalie Tremaine."

"I trust that I shall see her—and soon," said Vendome. "I never miss a pretty woman, I assure you!"

"You never used to miss them," Fitzgerald remarked; "and, I reckon, you haven't changed—though you haven't succeeded in landing one for Mrs. Vendome."

"Just so! I've found quite a number who were admirably fitted to fill the rôle, but *I* didn't seem to appeal to them as a husband."

"Possibly an Ambassador will be more attractive," Silverthorne suggested.

"We shall see. It's my last chance, I fear."

"Did you jingle your coin for them?" asked Fitzgerald. "They surely wouldn't have resisted the click of gold."

"My friend, I fear that you haven't a very high idea of the feminine——" Silverthorne began.

"Piffle!" said Fitzgerald.

"You're approaching Plimpton's class."

"Splash!" said Fitzgerald. "Never mind me—when are you going to present the Ambassador to the Queen?"

"Bully!—that is the idea exactly: the Ambassador to the Queen is good. That is just what she is—a Queen."

Vendome looked at Fitzgerald inquiringly.

"He's not responsible!" Fitzgerald confided. "On the subject of Mrs. Tremaine he is clean locoed. She is *very* good looking, and all that, but Silverthorne has her on a pedestal so high that none can see her but himself."

"Splash, yourself!" exclaimed Silverthorne. "You would be only too ready to see her, if she would drop her eyes to you. You've tried hard and often enough, the Lord knows!"

"There's a pleasant chap for you, Vendome!" Fitzgerald shrugged. "Always reminding you of something you can't do and he can. It makes for good feeling and comradeship."

"It mortifies the other fellow's spirit and tickles your own," Silverthorne explained. "But you're a good chap, Fitzgerald, I love you like a brother."

"Like a sister, you mean," the other retorted.

"Oh, very well! Like a sister, since you prefer

it," Silverthorne answered amiably, as he arose. " You'll excuse my hurrying off, Chambers, I have an appointment at five."

" With the Queen? " Vendome asked.

" More likely it's with a shop girl or a manicurist," said Fitzgerald.

" It's an awful thing, Vendome, to have a peevish disposition," said Silverthorne. " But you mustn't mind him—you'll get used to it in a little while."

" You haven't answered my question, Gordon," reminded Vendome.

" He is muddying the water," Fitzgerald interjected. " It's a favorite stunt with him. Vendome asked you, Silverthorne, if your appointment at five was with Mrs. Tremaine? "

" And I'll tell his Excellency with pleasure, but I'll not gratify your curiosity, my friend." He bent down. " It is not," he said, in Vendome's ear—and, with an amused nod to his host, he went out.

" He, at least, hasn't changed! " Vendome laughed. " The same admirer of the beautiful in women he always was." He threw his cigar into the grate and drew out another, shaking his head in negation as Fitzgerald pushed a box across. " How about this Mrs. Tremaine—is she really a beauty, or is our friend simply enthused for the time? "

" She really is a beauty," Fitzgerald replied.

“ Silverthorne is a bit too glowing, though I question if such an all-round handsome woman has been seen in society for—well, not in our generation, at least.”

“ How long ago was the divorce? ”

“ Something over two years.”

“ And she has remained here, instead of returning to New Orleans? ”

“ She is very popular—and no one blamed her in the slightest. Moreover, her parents are dead—were dead before she married Tremaine—so there was nothing to take her back to her old home.”

“ And Tremaine? ”

“ He’s here as much as anywhere. There doesn’t appear to be the least feeling in the matter. They speak pleasantly when they meet; and no one would ever imagine from their actions that they are a divorced couple. You will take them for casual acquaintances until you’re put wise.”

“ It’s rather unusual for the woman to be so liberal-minded. I can’t recall another case.”

“ Nor I,” said Fitzgerald. “ Mrs. Tremaine is an unusual woman—a very unusual woman.”

“ Has there been any suspicion of—indiscretion?”

“ Absolutely none. She is above suspicion. Even her worst enemy wouldn’t venture to suggest it.”

“ She has a *worst enemy*, then? ”

“ I was speaking abstractly. There are a few

who yap at her, as they yap at everyone who is popular and doesn't regard their opinions nor censure; they would yap at the Christ, to-day, if he were here. Mrs. Carstarphen and her cronies are the particular yappers. You recollect the dame, of course."

"Certainly—she ran foul of me in the Chadwick affair, you may remember. I haven't yet recovered my good standing in her opinion. Is she as handsome an old bird as she used to be?"

"Just the same for looks and maliciousness. She is still a marvel in both; and as skilled as ever in hood-winking the general public into taking her at her own valuation."

"I'm rather anxious to meet her again," Vendome remarked.

"I haven't the least doubt that she is just as anxious to renew the old acquaintance!" laughed Fitzgerald. "It won't take much to set her going again on you—she has had a good rest."

"A good rest from me, you mean?"

"I didn't mean from those of us who are handy."

For awhile the two men smoked in silence; then Fitzgerald spoke again.

"I should like you to meet Mrs. Tremaine—you used to have a way about you that was pleasing to the women. I dare say it has not decreased while you've been of the 'Bunglers' Corps,' as Plimpton styles it."

"I haven't any more to show for it, at all events!" Vendome answered.

"That probably wasn't your fault—you looked them over carefully, and went your way."

"I looked them over carefully—very carefully, indeed—and went my way, but it wasn't always voluntary. Sometimes it was the woman's will that I should go."

"No!" said Fitzgerald tersely. "No, I'll not believe it. You didn't wish it so, I think."

Vendome raised his eyebrows, with an amused smile of deprecation, and made no reply.

"I wish you would look Mrs. Tremaine over," Fitzgerald pursued seriously.

"I probably shall," Vendome answered.

"She will more than repay a look."

"I haven't a doubt of it. From what I've heard of the lady, this afternoon, I'm ready to believe that she will repay all the looks I can give her—and then some. I confess, my curiosity has been quickened as to this vision of loveliness, and everything that's fetching. Tell me, is she tall or medium—fair or dark or between? Slender, she has to be, to be in keeping with the picture. Describe her, won't you?"

"Not I!" Fitzgerald laughed. "To attempt a description is but to caricature her glorious beauty. Wait until you see her, Vendome. It

can't be long, certainly. The Ambassador must present his credentials promptly to the Queen."

"I take notice that Silverthorne didn't offer to make the presentation!" Vendome smiled. "Does he want to be her only subject?"

"He would like to be, I don't doubt; and there are a bunch of others with the same mind."

"Then one more would not matter."

"How does he know that you won't be *the one?*"

"Is he actually serious?"

"If he isn't, he's wasting a lot of valuable time, and burning up a mess of energy—not to mention good American dollars."

"Isn't that characteristic of Silverthorne—his time and energy and his dollars are his own!" Vendome returned. "Moreover, he furnishes amusement to the chaps who are simply onlookers."

"Oh, we're grateful for the amusement. I'm not so sure, however, of the Queen being grateful for his attentions."

"How does she seem to take them?"

"Like a thoroughbred. She makes no distinctions among those she likes—she is the same unapproachable approachableness to every one."

"A bit vague!" Vendome smiled.

"I think you know what I mean—courteously intimate, yet far away as the stars, in fact. You

think that you know her well—until you sit down and analyze it; then you realize that you know her very slightly. She inspires confidences, but gives none; and you don't perceive that fact until you consider the matter dispassionately and critically."

"And few, I suppose, get *far enough* from the sphere of the attractions to enable them to judge her dispassionately and critically. And would the judgment be in the least adverse if they did?"

"I fancy not," Fitzgerald admitted.

"She must have a remarkable personality," Vendome remarked.

"She has the most remarkably fascinating personality that I have ever encountered. Oh, I'm not a victim, in that sense—I'm one of her stanch subjects and admirers, but I'm not in the Silverthorne class. I am fully aware of my limitations. I don't appeal to her in that way. No one does, it seems—and I'm quite content to be just a friend. Now *you* may appeal to her—I'm perfectly sure that she will appeal to you; and I'm ready to be your sponsor at any time. What have you on for the next day or two?"

"Nothing in particular. I dine with the Whiplingtons to-night—a small party, I think. Are you included?"

"I'm dining with the Westlakes at the Rata-plan."

“Where does Mrs. Tremaine reside?”

“At the Collingwood.”

“The Collingwood apartments?”

Fitzgerald nodded. “There are bachelor quarters to be had there, also!” he smiled.

“I know,” said Vendome.—“I have sublet one for a short term.”

“The devil! Have I been carrying coals to New Castle?”

“No, I haven’t seen Mrs. Tremaine—to my knowledge.”

“You’ll know when you see her. She is not one that you are likely to overlook.—Stay, why shouldn’t I present you by telephone?”

“There is no why, so far as I am concerned!”
Vendome laughed.

Fitzgerald took up the instrument.

“But the lady may not fancy it,” Orme added.

“She is neither touchy nor absurd,” said Fitzgerald. He unhooked the receiver, “Give me Park 3848.”

“You know the number, I see!” remarked Vendome.

“Shut up!” said Fitzgerald.—“Is that the Collingwood? . . . Let me have Mrs. Tremaine’s apartment, please . . . Is Mrs. Tremaine in? . . . Mr. Fitzgerald would like to speak to her a moment.”

—He put his hand over the transmitter and motioned Vendome to come close. “I’ll hold the receiver so you can hear what she says.”

“How do you do, Mr. Fitzgerald,” came a low voice—with the peculiarly soft intonation of the far South.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Tremaine,” said Fitzgerald. “I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“You’re very humble, sir—you must want something.”

“I’m always humble with you.”

“Does that imply that you *always* want something?”

“Precisely.”

“Then why don’t you ask for it?”

“Because it’s unattainable—for me, I fear.”

She laughed deliciously. “You fear, Mr. Fitzgerald! I thought you feared neither God, man nor devil.”

“I may not,” he returned—“and yet I may fear a goddess.”

“What is it you want?” she said, smothered mirth in her tones.

“Just at present, I want to present a friend.”

“Is the friend there?”

“Right here—so don’t say what you think.”

“I’ll not. I’ll reserve it until I have you alone—

and then it will depend on a number of things what I shall say to you."

"If he's a good fellow?"

"It will be in your favor."

"You see, he is crazy to meet you, and he hasn't given me any rest until I offered to present him over the telephone."

"Only part of which is true!" Vendome cut in.

"What did you say?" Mrs. Tremaine asked.

"My friend says, it is all true," Fitzgerald answered. "You're not supposed to have heard him, Mrs. Tremaine."

"Oh, was that your friend's voice? Then present him, and let him do his own talking."

"I'll do it.—Mrs. Tremaine, let me present Mr. Vendome, our new Ambassador to Spain," and he passed the receiver to Orme.

"Are you there, Mr. Vendome?" she inquired.

"Yes, Mrs. Tremaine—and I want to tell you at once that I did *not ask* Mr. Fitzgerald to present me in this very unconventional way. Naturally, I am exceedingly anxious to meet you, but——"

"There is no need to protest, Mr. Vendome; you are acquitted. I understand Mr. Fitzgerald's little pleasantries."

"You're very good!" Vendome answered. "May I do myself the pleasure of calling, sometime soon?"

“ You will be expected to call, Mr. Vendome. To-morrow is my day at home. If you come at six, the others will be gone, and we shall have a quiet little chat.”

“ I shall be there on the second.”

“ Don’t be too sure!” she laughed. “ Street cars are uncertain, and motor cars have punctures at inconvenient places and inopportune times.”

“ I’m not dependent upon street cars nor motors.”

“ You prefer horses?”

“ No—I am quartered in the Collingwood.”

“ Delightful! We can, if we like each other, become very neighborly.”

“ It rests with you, Mrs. Tremaine,” Vendome replied. “ I’m more than ready——”

“ You’re taking me on faith, sir.”

“ I’m taking you on what my friend here, and another, have said—they are artists in words, Mrs. Tremaine.”

“ I’m afraid of artists in words!” she laughed. “ They are often daubers in words—smearers, if you please.”

“ I’ll risk it!” Vendome laughed back. “ I’ll risk it on their picture—and your voice. The voice is guarantee sufficient.”

“ *Merci*, your Excellency! It is easy to see that

you are a diplomat. To-morrow, then—at six, shall we say?"

"If we can't make it sooner," Vendome replied.

"Going some!" Fitzgerald observed.

"What was Mr. Fitzgerald's remark?" she asked.

"Oh, some impertinence," Vendome responded.

"Of course, but just what?"

"I said you are going some!" Fitzgerald called.

"It is permitted to Ambassadors to go some, Mr. Fitzgerald. Moreover, I can't see that you are called upon to comment."

"I'm not—it was just voluntary. You would better beware of this man Vendome."

"That is voluntary too, I suppose," Mrs. Tremaine replied.

"Entirely voluntary."

"Go away now, Chambers, and let me finish with Mr. Vendome," she said.

"You *have* finished him—completely!" laughed Fitzgerald, surrendering the instrument.

"I'm back, Mrs. Tremaine," said Vendome. "I didn't quite catch whether you fixed an earlier time than to-morrow at six."

"To-morrow at six is *very* prompt, Mr. Vendome," she admonished.

"But I'm a neighbor, you know."

"I really haven't a moment to spare—even for a neighbor and an Ambassador!" she laughed.

"I'm very sorry," Vendome answered. "I suppose I shall *have to* wait until to-morrow at six."

"Unless," she continued,—"unless you should happen to be at the Whippletons' this evening. I'm dining there, and we *might* manage it—if you care to try."

"I'm dining there also!" Vendome exclaimed.

"Take care, your Excellency—this isn't a diplomatic occasion, where deception——"

"I'm in earnest!" Vendome protested. "I'm dining with the Whippletons, at eight o'clock."

"Then we shall see each other sometime during the evening. Good-by, your Excellency!" And she clicked up the receiver.

Vendome slowly pushed the instrument aside and resumed his cigar.

"Well?" asked Fitzgerald. "What did you make out?"

"Mrs. Tremaine is dining at the Whippletons' this evening."

"Going some!" Fitzgerald laughed.

"You must go some—if you are to keep up with a Queen," Vendome replied.

II

MRS. TREMAINE

VENDOME, mildly interested in the coming meeting, went on to the Collingwood.

He had seen enough of women and their ways, in his forty odd years of bachelorhood, to take them all with an amused indifference—and a profound consideration. He had met so many wonderful visions of loveliness and perfection—only to find them stuffed with sawdust, some of them with not even that. In every capital where he had been stationed, in New York and Washington and Boston and Baltimore and Philadelphia, it was always the same—always a woman who was the sensation, the toast of the day, the sought-after of the moment. Mrs. Tremaine would be only another of the same sort. Not that he did not enjoy them for the time—he was a man, a rather good-looking man, with a man's instincts and frailties, but with the habit of his years of looking behind the screen of feminine charms and powder. His friends called him cynical and indifferent—the women thought him both of these, and therefore particularly amiable and fascinating. And Vendome knew that they thought him so, and was not spoiled by it—more than any level-

headed chap of his characteristics would be. And the spoiling having started so many years ago, he had finally become inured, and had accepted it with a good-natured unconcern that made him all the more fascinating. In other words, he had come through the spoiling without being spoiled—but with the experience. Which is more than most men could have done—even after reaching middle life.

It was five minutes of eight, when Vendome's taxi drew up at the Whippingtons'. A limousine was immediately before the entrance, and as he alighted the glint of a woman's gown shone in the lighted doorway.

"The Queen—or another!" he smiled.

A man-servant relieved him of his hat and coat, and another bowed him into the drawing-room, where Edith Whippington met him with a glad cry.

"I haven't seen you for five years!" she exclaimed.

"It seems much longer since I saw you," he answered.

"I am strictly truthful, Orme!" she laughed.

"Now," he amended, with the intimacy of boyhood friendship, "I'm delighted at the improvement, Edith."

"As impertinent as ever—and a Diplomat."

"No—only natural—and not a Diplomat, *here*."

“ Anywhere? ” she inquired.

“ Between ourselves, I’m in doubt,” he confided.

“ I’m not.”

“ Which gets it—I am or I amn’t? ”

“ You’re an Ambassador,” she replied.

“ Which answers the question about as much as if you were to say I’m a butcher or a haberdasher.”

“ That would have answered it.”

“ That would have answered it, if I were an Englishman, or a Frenchman—or any other Continental. The difficulty is that I’m an American; and it depends entirely upon what you mean by ‘ Ambassador,’ whether I am or I am not.”

“ You’re an am! ” Mrs. Whippington smiled.

“ Your friends think so, and you back their think by doing and promotion. You’ve made good, Orme, and we’re all proud of you. I wish you were taking me in, but we’ve the Russian Ambassador with us this evening—here he is now. You have a perfectly good companion, however, and you are on my left,” and she turned to greet the newcomer.

Vendome was holding his envelope in his hand—now he took out the card. As he turned to survey the room, he encountered his host.

“ Hello, Orme! ” said Whippington. “ Whom, by Edith’s grace, have you drawn? ”

“ I’ve drawn Mrs. Tremaine.”

"You're in luck—you know her, of course?"

"I've met her."

"She's in the red drawing-room—and looking very fit, even for her. There are compensations *at times* for being a bachelor."

"The particular compensation in question being, I suppose, the opportunity to try not to be."

"Or to be—whichever you may wish," Whippleton added.

"Or to try to be and not to be," Vendome supplemented.

"Which brings us back to the melancholy Dane!" the other laughed. "Now run along and get your friend. We're going in, in a moment."

The party was reasonably small, and Vendome, with a bow or a nod to those he knew, passed on to the red drawing-room. There was but one woman it—it—a dame of uncertain age and very certain *avoir du poise*. He had no recollection of ever having seen her.

"How do you do, Mr. Vendome," she said. "I met you at the Brierleys', years ago. You don't remember me, but I never forget a face—especially when I've seen it in the weekly journals frequently in the interval."

She gave Vendome a beautifully shaped hand, and smiled good-naturedly as he assured her that he remembered her perfectly.

"Don't protest!" she remarked. "I bear about as much resemblance to the Alicia Carroll, of five years ago, as—you do. She was sylph-like. I'm fat."

"Not fat, Miss Carroll—merely delicately plump," Vendome answered.

"Delicately plump is delightful!" she laughed. "I thank you most gratefully—it is a compliment quite worthy of an Ambassador. Believe me, I shall never forget it. Why didn't you say something even half so satisfying, Mr. Merryweather?" she demanded of her companion. Then, without giving him time to reply: "You're looking for someone, Mr. Vendome. How do I know it? By the card in your fingers. You will find Mrs. Tremaine on the piazza."

"Marvellous woman!" exclaimed Vendome.

"Nonsense!" she returned. "It doesn't require even ordinary intelligence, not to mention intuition, to know that every man is in search of Natalie Tremaine—or wants to be. I've got Mr. Merryweather now, which is the only reason he isn't on the piazza."

"And what has Mrs. Tremaine got?"

"Only one man, at present; you'll make two."

"I shall make one disappear!" he laughed—and turned, just as Natalie Tremaine appeared in the doorway.

Vendome caught his breath in sheer amazement!

Her hair was burnished copper; her face was flawless—the flawlessness of the alert and alive, not of the beautiful doll; her shoulders were superb in their uncovered loveliness; her figure was slender as a girl's, yet with the soft fullness of a woman's; she was gowned in lustreless black, against which the dead white of her skin shone like a cameo.

Suddenly a faint, hazy impression that he had seen her somewhere, years before—when she was only a beauty in embryo—came to him; but it was so faint and so hazy it lived only an instant, and died when, with an adorable smile, she came toward him.

"You have come for me, Mr. Vendome?" she said. "Do you know Mr. Wellington?"

Vendome did not know Mr. Wellington, and, after a perfunctorily polite greeting, the latter passed on.

"How did you recognize me?" he asked.

"How could I help recognizing you!" she smiled. "You forget that you are something of a celebrity—the newspapers have pictured you."

"Their pictures of me wouldn't help you," he replied.

"Not much!" she admitted. "However, I recognized you. Isn't that enough?"

"And I knew you, without the pictures!" he said.

"Because Alicia Carroll told you."

"Miss Carroll didn't tell me. It wasn't necessary—after Fitzgerald's description, I should have known you anywhere."

"Mr. Fitzgerald must be a wonderful word painter," she remarked.

"He is—and yet he did not do justice to his subject."

She gave him an amused glance.

"I am glad you think so," she returned. "A woman wants more than even-handed justice."

"She usually gets it, if it is deserved," he replied.

She answered him with a suggestion of a shrug.

A servant approached with the cocktails. Vendome handed one to her.

"To Fitzgerald's picture!" he said, raising his glass.

"And may she always have a Fitzgerald to paint her portrait," she added.

Their glasses touched, and they drank the toast. Then dinner was announced, and they went in.

"I am most grateful to Mrs. Whippleton," he said, as he placed her.

"It may be a bit early to give thanks," she warned. "Not every peach is sweet, you know."

"Very true!" he replied. "And some peaches are much more than sweet."

"Which can be verified only by the tasting."

"Maybe—but I'll risk the blush," he said.

"How long have we known each other?" she asked.

"Centuries!" he answered. "Five thousand years ago we two ruled in Egypt."

"And are in the British Museum now!" she smiled.

"What of it, since we ruled?—Three thousand years ago, Hero, I swam the Hellespont for you."

"And were drowned," she added.

"What of it, since I spent the—an hour with you each night."

"When did we next revivify, O Leander?" she laughed.

"I refuse to continue. The sentiment is gone—and there were such fine possibilities!"

"Never mind," she said soothingly; "since we have known each other for ages, we can dispense with sentiment, if we have any."

"Can a woman ever dispense with sentiment?" he reflected.

"The same woman and the same man—after six thousand years together, off and on! It doesn't require six thousand seconds sometimes."

"I quite believe you," he assented, wondering vaguely if she spoke from her own experience.

She had finished her grape-fruit, and, now, held the spoon balanced over it thoughtfully.

"Who is the man at the other end of the table—on Miss Carroll's right?" Vendome inquired.

She shot him a sharp look of question.

"That is Mr. Tremaine," she said.—"Oh, I am not sensitive. If I were, do you fancy both of us would be here? We're divorced; everyone knows it; so why should we ignore each other because of that fact? You may think my views peculiar, and possibly they are; but they work out for the general good, and no one has any ground to cavil."

"None at all," said Vendome; "though, I dare say, some of the dowagers don't approve."

"I don't mind the dowagers, in the least!"

"Which naturally doesn't render them any the less vehement in disapproval."

"At first, it didn't—now, I think, they have given over the attempt to regulate me. It hasn't had any effect. As I look at it, the affair solely concerns Mr. Tremaine and myself. For any one else to assume to meddle, even in the slightest, is exceedingly impertinent." Then she laughed. "Possibly you will wonder at my saying these things to one whom I have just met, but, you know, in ages past we sat together on Egypt's throne, and you swam the Hellespont to join me."

"Just so!" he answered. "If you had not confided in me, I should think it most negligent and unusual. As it is, we understand each other."

"We ought to—we have been at it for centuries; though time is no criterion, it seems."

He turned and regarded her critically. She met his look with amused eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I was wondering," he replied, "whether you were more beautiful when you were the Queen of Pharaoh, or when you were the Grecian priestess."

"That is rather beside the way," she replied. "The point is, whether Natalie Tremaine is as beautiful now, as she was in the days that are gone."

"Am I permitted to answer?" he asked.

"I don't see how any one else can answer—you alone knew me in the dim and misty past."

"I can tell you better somewhere else. *Here* I might become too enthusiastic."

She laughed softly. "Then *here* is the proper place for the telling. I am a trifle afraid of your enthusiasm under certain conditions, Mr. Vendome."

"I only can tell you here," he said, "that the Egyptian Queen was the loveliest of her race, the Grecian priestess the most ravishing of Venus's daughters, but—Natalie Tremaine is——"

She put her fingers to her ears. "No more, Mr.

Vendome, no more, I pray you! Have some regard for my blushes and—the truth.”

“ You see!” he exclaimed. “ Even my mildest is too enthusiastic for the place.”

“ It is, indeed,” she agreed. “ We would better forget our previous existence, and come down to the mundane Natalie Tremaine and his Excellency the American Ambassador to the Court of His most Catholic and Apostolic Majesty, Alphonso the Thirteenth.”

“ Do you consider the latter savors of the earth earthy?” Vendome smiled.

“ Possibly not,” she admitted; “ but I don’t see how it can be made any less formidable. You are all that, aren’t you?”

“ Only upon official occasions. To-night I’m simply Orme Vendome, a very mundane man, indeed.”

“ I fear you are too humble!” she smiled.

“ It is perfectly safe to be humble.”

“ Or to pretend to be,” she added.

“ A humble and a contrite heart, you know!”

“ Is the proper attitude for a sinner,” she appended.

The longer he talked with her, the firmer grew the impression that he had seen her, somewhere, years before—but when it was, or where, he could not fix. There was a little toss of her head that was most

reminiscent. She had given it several times this evening—and now it came again.

"Tell me," he said, "where have I seen you before?"

"In Egypt and Greece!" she laughed.

"I mean, in the present existence."

"How should I know, Mr. Vendome—when you've forgotten?"

"Yes, I'll admit it is very uncomplimentary; and my excuse must be that you have grown from girlhood to womanhood, in the meanwhile. It must be seven, perhaps eight, or even nine years ago."

"I am twenty-six now. You can calculate whether I was *so much* a girl!" she smiled.

"You have no recollection of meeting me?"

"Not the slightest."

"There!" he exclaimed. "You did it again—that peculiar toss of the head."

"A toss of the head is scarcely individual. I know several women with the same trick."

"No, not the same. Every toss is a different toss—as the personality of her who makes it is different."

"And you think that you can recognize the personality?"

"Scarcely!" he smiled. "I don't know that I recognize even the individual."

"Where do you think you saw me?" she asked.

"I have not the least idea."

"Was it in this country or in Europe?"

"I don't know—it seems to me it was in Europe."

"And you are sure that it was from seven to nine years ago?"

"I'm sure of nothing, Mrs. Tremaine."

"Not even that you saw me?"

"I am confident that I saw some one whom you suggest."

"Did you meet her, or was it only a chance encounter?"

"I recollect only the face faintly, and the little flirt of the head distinctly."

"Did you meet her?" she repeated.

"I don't know, certainly—I think that I did."

"Evidently I—assuming that it was I—didn't make much of an impression."

"You—assuming it was you—made sufficient impression to be remembered all these years."

"The vaguest of vague remembers!" she said.

"Is better than a forget," he added.

"Not much," she returned. "I would just about as soon be forgotten."

"I am sure it was you," he reflected. "Sometime I shall recollect the place and the circumstances."

"I trust that I shall be taken into your confidence—when you do recollect."

"Not until then?" he asked.

"The sometime must be very doubtful," she parried.

"I would not have your confidence depend upon my recollection."

"It doesn't—it depends upon yourself."

"Have I made a good start?"

"You've made a flying start, Mr. Vendome!" she laughed.

"Which way—toward confidence or toward distrust?"

"I shouldn't say that it was toward distrust."

Mrs. Whippington's voice cut short his reply.

"You have monopolized Mrs. Tremaine long enough, Orme; Mr. Kingsbury has been waiting his opportunity for an unseemly time. Devote yourself to me a brief space. I want to ask about your promotion."

"Don't!" he said. "Anything but that!"

"Very well—if you don't want me to, I won't." She lowered her voice confidentially. "Isn't Natalie Tremaine perfectly lovely?" she whispered.

"She is," he answered. "She's more than lovely; she is—what shall I say?"

"Leave it to the imagination—that is better than words."

"Even the imagination is weak sometimes."

"I shall tell her that you said so."

"You shall tell her nothing of the sort, Edith!"

"Didn't you mean it?"

"Certainly, I meant it—but she would not believe it."

"You great foolish! A woman always believes a compliment about herself, *when another woman* tells her—particularly, if a man has said it."

"It's rare that she tells, I suppose?" Vendome commented.

"As rare as—disinterested friendship."

"H-u-m! pretty scarce!"

"May I tell her?" Mrs. Whippington persisted.

Vendome shook his head. "I'll tell her myself some day, if I want her told."

His hostess looked at him quizzically a moment before replying.

"So soon, Orme?" she asked.

"Precisely what I don't know."

"And are you going to find out?"

"Possibly.—It depends on Mrs. Tremaine—whether she gives me the chance to find out. Also, whether the State Department doesn't order me away before that chance comes."

III

A MATTER OF INFERENCE

THEY played auction on the wide piazza after dinner. Mrs. Tremaine and Vendome were not at the same table—and he regretted it.

“Why didn’t you put us together, Edith?” he said to his hostess, when they both were dummies, and he had sauntered into the front drawing-room especially to ask her.

“Whom do you mean by ‘us’?” she smiled.

“By us I mean Mrs. Tremaine. She is easily the most interesting woman here, saving your sweet self, my dear cousin—twenty-seven-times—removed.”

“My dear Orme, you had Mrs. Tremaine at dinner. Give some one else a chance.”

“Not willingly!”

“You mustn’t expect to monopolize her the first time you meet.”

“I don’t see anything out there who is worth her time,” said Vendome.

“Of course, you don’t—but maybe she does.”

“Nonsense! Mrs. Tremaine has uncommonly good judgment and——”

“Would naturally prefer you,” Mrs. Whippington interjected.

“——and would naturally prefer a good table

to a three-fourths good one. Mackintosh is a rotten auctioneer. I saw him play at the Club this afternoon; I cut into his table—and him."

"How do you know that they all are not rotten auctioneers, and that that is my reason for putting them together?"

"Mrs. Tremaine couldn't be a poor player at anything," he declared.

"She won at dinner with you, that is certain enough!" Mrs. Whippleton laughed. "However, I'll confide to you that both Dorothy Westcourt and Parker Jennings play exceedingly satisfactory games. I didn't know about Mr. Mackintosh; I assumed that he could play because he plays at his Clubs."

"He pays, you mean. His partners will tell you that he thinks he plays, but he doesn't."

"It's too bad!" she said.

"Precisely my opinion—to waste Mrs. Tremaine on him, when I'm handy and willing!"

She laid her fan lightly on his arm.

"Believe me, it shall not happen again," she whispered.

"Hurrah for the again!" he smiled.

As he went back to his table, he caught Mrs. Tremaine's eye. She tossed him a friendly smile. He smiled back, only more friendly, and the game went on.

Alicia Carroll, who was his right-hand opponent, observed the play, and, leaning toward him, said very quietly:

“ You seem to have made astonishing progress.”

“ Yes ! ” he inflected.

“ I’m told you met her only this afternoon.”

“ Who told you ? ”

“ Never mind ! ”

“ I don’t mind, in the least,” he replied.

“ Ordinarily it would require at least six months to bring such a smile to the marble face of the fair Natalie.—Behold!—*you* accomplished it in less than a day.”

“ I’m the original miracle worker ! ” he acknowledged.

“ Be careful, sir ! Other eyes than mine saw that smile—as well as your devotion at dinner.”

“ Shall I send for my guards to escort me home with flambeaux and drawn swords ? ”

“ If I may advise, you will guard yourself, not with the flambeaux but from the lady’s *beaux yeux*.”

“ Perish the thought—it would not be gallant.”

“ Not gallant, but expedient. I bid two royal.”

“ Double ! ” said Vendome.

When they cut again, he was facing Mrs. Tremaine’s table. Her profile was toward him, and he watched her casually but intently during the

rubber. Presently she turned her head and looked directly at him, smiled as though in answer to his message, and went on with her game.

Assuredly he had never beheld a more beautiful woman! Then his glance sought Tremaine, at a distant table—and lingered, meditatively. What possessed the man to graze with the forbidden, when he had such a woman for his own?—Was it something in him—or in her—or in them both? Something which she recognized was deficient in herself—and that he was not wholly to blame? She was too tolerant for a woman entirely without fault—at least, Vendome had never before met one so catholic in her ideas. Of course, it might be due to indifference; but indifference, in the ordinary woman, is not manifested by continued friendship under such circumstances. All things considered, Mrs. Tremaine must be a very remarkable woman. He would see to it that he got to know her better—if she would permit the knowing. He fancied there was small possibility of it otherwise.

When the game broke up, Vendome strayed over to Mrs. Tremaine.

“Won’t you let me drop you on my way to the Club?” he asked.

“You’re kind,” she answered. “I’m going with the Garrisons; they pass the Collingwood, you know.”

“ I’m sorry,” he said simply.

She gave him a quick look through half-veiled lids.

“ Are you sure you are sorry?”

“ How shall I prove it?”

“ By not forgetting to-morrow at six.” She held out her hand: “ *Au revoir* till then.”

“ I shall not forget,” he answered—retaining the slim fingers an instant. “ To-morrow at six.”

As the servant helped him into his top-coat, Mackintosh came into the room.

“ Going down to the Club, Vendome?” he asked cheerily.

“ I reckon so,” Vendome answered.

“ Ride along with me, won’t you?”

“ I have a taxi ordered, thank you.”

“ Dismiss it—dismiss it!” Mackintosh said. “ Taxis are used only under compulsion. I’ll run you down—and it’s pleasanter with company. Hold on a minute and I’ll be with you.”

As they passed out, the Garrison car was just rolling away—Mrs. Tremaine calling a smiling farewell to Miss Carroll, whose electric was next in line.

“ There is a fine woman!” said Mackintosh.

“ I see several women,” Vendome replied.

“ I see only one when Mrs. Tremaine is around. She’s the lady I mean.”

Vendome was silent.

Mackintosh signalled to his driver, and stood aside for Vendome to get in.

"What is your opinion?" he went on, as he settled back in his seat.

"About what?" said Vendome.

Mackintosh stared at him. "About the binomial theorem?"

"I haven't any," Vendome replied.

"About Mrs. Tremaine, then?"

"Mrs. Tremaine is an unusually beautiful woman, and, so far as I can judge on a very limited acquaintance, exceedingly fascinating."

"Well, let me assure you that longer acquaintance won't lessen either her beauty or her fascination."

"I'm quite ready to believe it!" Vendome said.

"What I can't make out," the other went on, "is why she and Tremaine remain good friends—at least seemingly. He was at Whippingtons' tonight—with her permission, of course. No one would ask both to dinner without first consulting her."

"That is an entirely reasonable inference," Vendome agreed.

"And she treats him so damned pleasantly. You've heard what the divorce was granted for. I can't understand it."

"Why try to understand it?" said Vendome.
"It's her affair, not ours."

"Sure it's her affair—but it's so infernally peculiar one has a right to wonder. Everybody is wondering, in fact."

"Meanwhile Mrs. Tremaine goes serenely on her way, and doesn't explain to anyone?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm for Mrs. Tremaine. If there were more of the same mind, society would be a lot better off. There is nothing like bland indifference to scandal mongers and gossips—nothing personal, Mackintosh, I assure you; just a general proposition, which applies quite as well to myself as to you."

"To hell with the gossips and scandal mongers!" Mackintosh said. "Mrs. Tremaine is doing exactly right—that's why everyone approves, except Mrs. Carstarphen and her troop of holy ones; and she doesn't count any longer; her day for regulating us is past. We've got bravely over our fear of her frown and disfavor. We don't care a damn for either."

"So I learned recently," Vendome remarked. "You're getting on, it seems. Society, without Mrs. Carstarphen as its fountain head, is pretty hard to conceive by one who has been absent for years. However, the rule of the boss in politics is ending, so why not also the boss in society?"

"Yes, everyone is going to the devil according to his own sweet will, not according to some one's else."

"Some may go the quicker because of it," Vendome reflected.

"Small matter," Mackintosh replied; "we'll all get there soon enough—and remain a long while.—Did you notice anything unusual about Tremaine, this evening?"

"I never saw him before to-night," said Vendome.

"Oh, you haven't! Well, he was singularly quiet; hardly said a word at dinner—nor afterwards, as far as I could see."

"Perhaps he didn't feel talkative."

"There isn't any doubt of that!" Mackintosh smiled. "What I refer to is the unusualness of it; he's always in the conversation."

"Either in it or *of* it!" Vendome laughed.

"Something seemed to be worrying him," Mackintosh persisted.

"Stock markets," Vendome suggested.

"A petticoat more likely. It was petticoats that caused the divorce."

"Therefore why should he worry about them? The petticoats have done him all the damage they can do."

"My dear Vendome, the petticoats have never done all the damage of which they are capable."

"Has the serpent ever stung *you?*" Vendome inquired.

"Only sufficiently to show what she can do—to prove her intent and capacity. I don't imagine that you've escaped either; you're no St. Anthony, I take it—at least, you didn't use to be."

"I reckon we all have had our trials——"

"And have come through them with credit—or rather with only a modicum of discredit," Mackintosh interjected. "With Tremaine, however, it's a long way through—the fascination hasn't worn off."

"He is not open in it?" Vendome questioned.

"Oh, no, nothing to make himself a *persona non* with the women. In fact, I think it increases his attractiveness to them; he is so quietly bad, you know."

"There must be something mighty good in him to have been the husband of Mrs. Tremaine."

"There is more than good in him; he is one of the best all-around fellows you've ever met. Everyone will say so—which is some evidence, I take it."

They got out at the Club.

Silverthorne, Fitzgerald and Plimpton, seated at a table in one corner of the lounge, hailed them.

Mackintosh shook his head and went on to the writing-room. Vendome, after a word here and there, joined them.

"We were just discussing you!" said Plimpton.

"What have you agreed is my chief fault?" Vendome asked, drawing out a cigarette and carefully lighting it.

"We can't agree. You have so many that are chief, we haven't tried to pick the chieffest."

"Good!" said Vendome. "The next best thing to having no faults is to have so many that your friends can't discriminate."

"Immunity by reason of numbers is a novel idea," Plimpton remarked.

"Plimpton is a novel young man!" Fitzgerald smiled.

"The novelty, in this case, consists in having the correct view point," Plimpton drawled. "What will you have, Vendome?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Note that Plimpton doesn't insist," Silverthorne remarked. "Thrift in drinks, you see, as well as in cigarettes."

"The thrift is exercised only toward some people —you'll observe it did not apply to Mr. Vendome."

"Oh, no!" laughed Fitzgerald. "You are to go abroad with him. For Heaven's sake, Orme, see to it that Macajah resumes his former ways of liberal-handed generosity before he returns to us."

"It would be more to the point, if you resumed your usual good manners," Plimpton returned.

"Well countered!" said Silverthorne. "You owe me one also, but we'll forget it for the present, if you don't mind. Let us go upstairs, and have a rubber of auction."

"Not I," said Plimpton. "I'm for home and bed."

"Reformed in that respect also, you will observe, Vendome," Fitzgerald remarked.

"Yes, thank you!" Plimpton answered—and sauntered away.

"Vendome dined with the Whippingtons this evening," Fitzgerald observed to Silverthorne.

"Then he dined sumptuously," was the reply; "and with mighty good company too, I warrant. Whom did you take in, Orme?"

"I took in Mrs. Tremaine," said Vendome.

"The devil you did!" said Silverthorne. "Well, you can judge now whether I put it too strongly this afternoon?"

"I think you were entirely justified in all you said," Vendome replied.

"You're not overflowing with enthusiasm," Silverthorne returned.

"We just don't see it, Gordon," Fitzgerald explained. "The enthusiasm is there, but it's cleverly hidden. It wouldn't be good form, you know, for a diplomat to show his real feelings."

"Did you ever see her equal?" Silverthorne de-

manded. "Ever see her equal even among the beauties of the Courts?"

"I've never seen anyone more beautiful," said Vendome.

"To be sure, you haven't—nor, if you ever get to *know* her, one more fascinating in every way. She can have me any time."

"As well as a lot of others," Fitzgerald added. "You've plenty of company."

"Yes, plenty of company, and it's growing all the time. We may count you in, Vendome, I assume?"

"Why?" said Vendome.

"Why? Didn't you take her in to dinner—didn't you talk to her for an hour! Good Lord! man, what more is necessary?"

"Temperament!" smiled Vendome. "Temperament and disposition. I don't want to join your army, Gordon."

"It isn't a question of temperament nor of disposition—it's a question of opportunity. You've had yours—you'll join us, all right!"

"Has Fitzgerald joined you?"

"Fitzgerald! He is the howling dervish of the company. I tell you, we're all crazy about her."

"It seems, then, there's no other woman in town."

"Just about—she has everything her own way, and everyone she wants."

"As well as everyone she doesn't want," Fitzgerald remarked.

"Then why get me in the company?" Vendome asked. "You've numbers sufficient."

"Lord, man, I'm not urging you to join!" Silverthorne said. "You've joined already. I would be the entire company, if I had my way, just as Fitzgerald, and every other fellow, would be, if he could."

"But not being, Vendome," said Fitzgerald, "we invite you to come in, and take the Queen's shilling, and be one of us in misery."

"I'll think about it," said Vendome.

"You'll think about it!" mocked Silverthorne. "That is what we all do—think about it, and her, and the other fellows."

"You're wanted at the telephone, Mr. Silverthorne," a servant announced.

"You may not credit it," Fitzgerald observed, when Silverthorne had gone, "but Gordon actually is in love with Mrs. Tremaine—he has been in love with her, I think, ever since she came to town; since the divorce, he has made no secret of it. He hasn't any chance, unless his unfailing constancy wins out in the end."

Vendome leaned forward and carefully flicked, into the tray, the ashes from his cigarette.

"I don't understand Tremaine," he said. "I

don't understand any man, who has such a glorious woman for wife, grazing in forbidden pastures."

"It depends on the man—and the woman—and the women," Fitzgerald replied. "The temperament of the husband may not fit in with the temperament of the wife; there may be quarrels and bickerings—and then the White Light. And there may be the White Light without the quarrels and bickerings. I don't know which it was in this case—the White Light, however, is sure."

"Mackintosh says Tremaine is a bully fellow."

"None more popular in town," Fitzgerald agreed. "Moreover, he looks the thoroughbred; you'll think so too when you see him."

"I have seen him. He was at the Whippingtons' this evening."

"Well, it was as I've said—no embarrassment to either?" Fitzgerald asked.

"Absolutely none, so far as I could observe—though, as they were not thrown together, there wasn't any occasion for embarrassment."

"It wouldn't have made a bit of difference if they had been put beside each other at the table. They are a remarkable pair, Orme, a very remarkable pair."

"Tell me about him—I mean, what are his antecedents? He looks to be thirty-five or forty."

"I have told you all I know," said Fitzgerald.

“He comes from California, where every one either is new or dates back to New England.”

“Is he of the Boston Tremaines?” Vendome asked.

“I have never heard of him claiming kinship. He is a man who stands absolutely on his own bottom, asking no favors from any one—though he’s always ready enough to do favors.”

“Do you know anything of his Mexican life?”

“Nothing, beyond the fact that he made a pile of money there, and has succeeded in keeping it—which is something of an achievement, these days.”

“It seems to me,” said Vendome, “that his principal achievement was in marrying Mrs. Tremaine.”

“I reckon his money, plus his handsome face, were what won out for him there. It was, I understand, rather a whirlwind courtship—over in a month or so. She was an orphan, with everything but wealth; he was the liberal-handed Prince Charming, and he won her over all rivals—we may assume that there were plenty of rivals. They came here at once, after the wedding journey, where he settled down as a man of leisure. Of course, the Jumonvilles of New Orleans need no placing anywhere in the land, and they were welcomed in society. They entertained liberally and made good. All went well

for a year or so. Then there was trouble—the impression being that he was straying. They patched it up, and went on as before, for a little while; then he strayed again—this time there wasn't any doubt—and she promptly brought suit for divorce. He did the decent thing—made no contest. The case was heard in Chambers; the decree granted and the papers sealed. Meanwhile, he had taken apartments in the Buckingham. She kept the town house a year, then sold it and went to the Collingwood. And they have continued to be friends. It is the puzzle of the town."

"Has she sufficient to live on—the Jumonvilles were poor, you have said?"

"There again Tremaine did the decent thing; he made over to her half a million dollars—or so gossip has it, and I have no reason for doubting it."

"It is rather a remarkable situation," Vendome said; "one you won't encounter in a hundred years, where both parties are so remarkably liberal. And yet the woman is so strictly right in her position."

He did not disclose to his friend the incident at dinner, when he had inquired as to the man across the table, and she had relieved the situation by her placid reply and easy manner. Nor did he voice even a hint of his vague suspicion that Tremaine might not be the only one at fault, that Mrs. Tre-

maine might, in part, be also to blame—and that the amity apparently existing between them was an evidence of it. In other words, she might have tired of him as a husband, yet be very willing to keep him as a friend.

"Then the public does *not* know the grounds for the divorce—they merely suspect?" Vendome asked.

"Yes, they merely suspect, but it is a fairly reasonable suspicion, and it has never been denied."

"Is there anything to substantiate even that there was a *first* trouble—before the one which led to the divorce—and that it had to do with women?"

"Nothing. It's assumed from circumstances."

"Assumed as society assumes," Vendome remarked; "gossip, suspicion, but never a definite admission from either party."

Fitzgerald nodded.

"Then, so far as known, the whole matter simply is this: the Tremaines are divorced; and yet, they are, to all outward appearances, friends."

"That is the unvarnished fact," Fitzgerald admitted.

"Moreover, they both have remained in town, going to the same houses at the same time, meeting each other unembarrassed and unashamed."

"True—yet as against your idea is Tremaine's known fondness for the petticoats."

"Even before the divorce?"

"Yes—after a fashion."

"And Mrs. Tremaine knew of it?"

"It is presumed so," Fitzgerald smiled.

"That is just it," said Vendome: "it's all presumption and assumption—with every *known fact* pointing the other way. It is none of my affair, I know, but I will wager that the petticoats aren't the true reason for the divorce."

"Then why haven't the Tremaines said so?" Fitzgerald asked.

"Primarily, because it concerns no one but themselves—though they have shown it by their conduct, I take it. They haven't admitted the public into their confidence, further than their acts. If the public has erred in interpreting those acts, it is no fault of the Tremaines. Of course, I may be wrong, but it seems to me the reasonable way of looking at it."

Fitzgerald smoked a bit in silence.

"Perhaps, you are right," he said. "It really doesn't make any difference one way or the other. Society has accepted the matter; it hasn't penalized either of them. Only Mrs. Carstarphen and her following have been chilly to Tremaine, and sort of 'high church' with Natalie, but their course hasn't affected any one else.—There is Tremaine now. I'll call him over."

IV

A VISIT AND A RECOLLECTION

As the last visitor made her adieu, Mrs. Tremaine glanced at the small crystal clock peering out from amid the flowers on the mantel-piece. Its hand pointed to a minute of six.

"Perkins," she said, "when Mr. Vendome comes I will receive him in the library."

"Yes, madame!" bowed Perkins.

The clock began to chime the hour. At its last stroke, the bell rang—and Vendome was admitted.

Mrs. Tremaine was standing at the big table in the centre of the room when Vendome was announced.

"You're a second late!" she said, extending her hand, and letting him retain it a trifle longer than was quite usual.

"I am punished by the loss even of a second," he returned. "Pray, forgive me!"

He looked at her with frankly admiring eyes. She was dressed in pale blue, clinging, and made with the all apparent simplicity of the artistic modiste's art. Her ruddy hair was dressed low on her shapely head in a most fetching coiffure; she wore no jewels, other than a simple sapphire necklace, the blue of the stones matching the blue of her eyes.

"Sit there, where I can see your face," she said, sinking with languid gracefulness into a chair, standing a bit in the shadow.

"Why put me alone in the light?" he asked.

"Because all men need the light."

"To see by—not to be seen."

"That is susceptible of two meanings!" she laughed.

"Not as I intended it," he replied. "Moreover, you would look much better here."

"I prefer a subdued light."

"It is a mistaken preference."

She shrugged the compliment aside with a smile.

"Tell me," she said, "have you succeeded yet in placing me?"

"I would place you in the brightest sunlight."

"And ruin whatever complexion I happen to have, Mr. Vendome? However, I was referring to your idea that you had seen me somewhere, seven, or eight, or nine years ago."

He shook his head. "No, I have not. It will come to me some day. When it does, you shall know it, even if I have to write."

"Would writing be such a great hardship?"

"I would much rather be near enough to tell you."

"Remember quickly then—before you are ordered to Spain."

"Would you like to know?" he asked.

"Most assuredly—if it's not *too* embarrassing!"

"There it is again—that little toss of the head. It is individual to you, and as distinguishing as—a halo is to a saint."

"Saints haven't halos," she replied.

"They have, for the purpose of this comparison."

"Moreover, a halo doesn't fit me—it is much too large; it would slip over my head and choke me."

"I will chance it!"

"Possibly—but maybe I won't."

"It is *very* fetching!" he exclaimed.

"What is fetching—the halo?"

"No, the little toss—the charming little toss.

Why can't I place it?"

"I most assuredly wish you could place it!" she replied. "It seems to bother you a great deal."

"Bother implies annoyance; delight is nearer the fact. Can't you help me?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"Is it because you don't know, or because you don't care to?"

"It is because I don't know," she answered.

He made a gesture of resignation. "Some day I shall remember where I met you, and the facts of the meeting."

"Don't tell me unless it is a pleasant recollection."

"It will be a pleasant recollection," he said significantly.

"You would much better wait," she shrugged; "rash promises are apt to be embarrassing."

"This promise is not rash," he smiled.

She gave him a fleeting glance through drooped lids, smiled back at him—and changed the subject.

And he, watching the play of her features, the violet eyes, the Venus mouth, the lovely ensemble of the woman, he grew more puzzled at Tremaine's conduct—and more fascinated himself. There was a mystery here. A mystery that did not concern him, he knew, yet regarding which he had more than normal curiosity, because, he had to admit, there was about her something indefinably alluring, something far more than a lovely face and figure. Too many lovely faces and figures are to be had for the asking. Beautiful dolls are plentiful; but beautiful dolls with brains are scarce, indeed. And Mrs. Tremaine had beauty, tact, discretion, poise, resolution, and depth of character—or he was sadly deceived. He could understand now the attitude of Plimpton, and Silverthorne, and the rest. She was well worth their admiration. If he were to stay in America, he also would get in the running. The mystery of the divorce could bring no reflection on her in its solution. He would as soon believe his own sister at fault.

"When are you returning to Spain?" she asked presently.

"I don't know," he replied. "It depends on the Department—I've three months' leave, but I've never yet been permitted to enjoy a leave to the limit. Always there has arisen some reason for curtailing it, and ordering me back post-haste."

"If I recall your record, you've been ten years in the service, and won your promotion not by political pull but by merit."

"I've been ten years in the service," he replied.

"Well, it seems to me that a man who is able to make good in such a politically fetid atmosphere as the American Diplomatic Corps, should be able to make a splendid career for himself at home."

"It may be!" he smiled. "But, you see, I like the life—and I'm not exactly in need of money, nor crazy for a reputation. The uniforms and color, and all that sort of thing, rather appeal to me—to say nothing of the *entrée* it gives to Court."

"If you were in any service than the American, I could understand it," she said. "With other nations, the Diplomatic Corps is a profession to which only the best are eligible, and then they must make good to stay in. With us, however, it is a question not of fitness but of politics—payment of political debts rather than reward for duty well

performed. How much did you subscribe to the campaign fund of the party?—is the question that you, or your sponsor, must answer; never, How competent are you for the place and its many duties? I suppose I speak feelingly; I once had an experience with one of our Ambassadors—and it has left a bad taste in my mouth."

" You must have had to do with one of more than average incompetence!" Vendome smiled.

" I had to do with one whose proper place was in a corner saloon or in a gambling hell!" she replied. " Yet he was accredited to represent the United States at one of the most aristocratic Courts in Europe. We may not be an aristocratic people, as aristocrats go on the continent, but we are not natural born boors. Moreover, we have a right to expect more than average competence, not average incompetence, in our representatives abroad."

" I'm afraid you'll have to recast our form of government, and try——"

" Not at all!" she interjected. " Simply except the Diplomatic Corps from party spoil. Put it on a permanent basis. France doesn't change her Ambassadors every time she changes a President nor a Premier. Her Foreign Department represents the nation, not the particular party that happens temporarily to be in power. It executes the orders

of those in authority, without the least regard for aught but the national policy at that particular time. It's France always and ever; with us, it's the party first and America afterward."

"You're a little of a monarchist!" Vendome laughed.

"France isn't a monarchy," she replied.

"Its Foreign Department is inherited from a monarchy."

"Then I am a monarchist, in that," she declared; "and so are you, if you were permitted to voice your honest convictions. I beg your pardon, Mr. Vendome; I am forcing you to talk shop—and denouncing the shop as well."

"My dear lady," said he, "I am much interested; don't for a moment think that——"

"I'll not think anything you don't want me to think; and we'll not——"

"You promise that?" he interrupted.

"I promise what?"

"That you'll not think anything I don't want you to."

She looked at him a moment deliberatively, a smile lurking in her eyes and about the corners of her mouth.

"It will depend on what you want me to think," she said.

"I want you to think only what you would like to think."

"Rather generous and impersonal!"

"It gives you full leeway to follow your inclination."

"Either way?"

"Either way," he said slowly—"but preferably, oh, much preferably, the one way."

"I am willing to try that way," she smiled. "In our previous existence, there is nothing to warn me against you. I don't recall much as to the time I was your Queen in Egypt, but the Hero episode is quite vivid. You were a wonderful swimmer, Leander."

"And you were a ravishingly beautiful woman!" he replied.

"I can see you now, breasting the waves in the moonlight, while I waited—where did I wait?"

"On the tower—beckoning me with a torch; but what matters it *where* you waited, so long as you waited—for me?"

"And what matters it whether you swam, or rode, or came in an air-ship, so long as you came to me?" she answered.

"But one night I did not come—the Hellespont overwhelmed me, and I drowned!"

"And thereupon, I—what *did* I do, Leander? Surely I must have ended my existence also!"

"You did—you threw yourself from the tower and were dashed to death."

"Ah! I was sure of it. Was that the last time we were together—until now?" she laughed. "You refused to tell me yesterday, you may remember."

"It seems to me that we have been together always!" he replied.

"Heaven, how tired we must be of each other! Six thousand years of us two—and more to follow!"

"The more that are to follow the happier I shall be."

"Almost thou persuadest me—that you mean it!"

"Almost?" he questioned.

She nodded, ever so slightly.

"Then my business shall be to remove the almost.—I am very fortunate that there is only an almost to remove."

"And when you have removed the almost?"

"Then you will be persuaded."

"And when I am persuaded?"—the lids drooping again.

"I shall try to persuade you of something else."

"Why not remove the almost, and try to persuade me at the same time?" she asked.

"You would not let yourself be persuaded until the almost is removed—though it might come very quickly after."

"Have you any assurance as to that?"

"I am hopeful."

"How are you to know when the almost is removed?" she pursued, with a quizzical look.

"You alone will know it, in the first instance," he replied; "and I shall know, or not, as you may wish."

"You mean that I will tell you?"

"You will not tell me—verbally; none-the-less you *will* tell me, and I shall know."

She laughed softly, infectiously, a deliciously tantalizing laugh that made him want to hear it always.

"Aren't you becoming dreadfully involved?" she asked.

"I think I am!" he returned meaningfully.
"There isn't a possible doubt of it, indeed."

"Then don't you think you would better slow down?"

"Is that a command?"

"No, just a cautioning warning—sort of a torpedo on the track."

"So long as you don't 'put the red on me,' I am well content."

"Railroaders' language is pertinently expressive!" she laughed.

"Where did you learn it?" he asked.

"I never learned it—I just picked it up in my travels."

" You won't put the red on me until——" he began.

"——You deserve it, or I have some other good reason," she ended. " Just now, we are making excellent progress."

" Sort of a Hellespont progress," he suggested.

" I hope it will not end as calamitously."

" This time there is no Hellespont for me to swim."

" There may be other things to cross."

" For instance? "

" I cannot tell until they present themselves—can you? "

" Do you mean for you to cross—or for me? "

The lids drooped again, and she seemed to hesitate a moment before she answered—gayly:

" For both of us, perchance. We know each other very slightly."

" Slightly!" said he. " I've known you for ages."

" Not continuously. There have been breaks in the knowledge—intervals when we both have been dead to each other; the last one, you know, lasted about three thousand years. We must have been doing something in the meantime, and we'll have to catch up."

" Catch up—not *start fresh*," he replied.

" It will require some catching, Leander. You are thirty centuries behind."

"It will depend on how far you have gotten ahead," he said. "Maybe I can cover the thirty centuries in a—month, shall we say?"

"Don't you think that will be pretty fast going?"

"I thought I was being very prodigal of time."

"Well, you for it!" she laughed. "It is for you to catch up—I'm not concerned until you've come within hailing distance."

"And then?" he asked, leaning forward.

"*Then*—you may hail me—and maybe I'll answer, and maybe I'll not."

"Maybe you'll not?" he interrogated.

"I can't answer until you hail; and I won't know what to answer until then—if I know *then*."

"Then the only thing that's sure is the hail. Very good—you shall hear it before the month is out."

Again the lids drooped—invitingly, he thought.

"One cannot prevent being followed and being hailed!" she smiled.

"Shall you be at home to-morrow?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I am going to Virginia to-morrow."

"All through Virginia?" he asked.

"No, stupid!—to Tarrington."

"I know a lot of Tarrington people," he said.

“ Meaning that you probably know my friends! ”
she laughed.

“ You’re very clever! Try me! ”
“ You really want to know? ”
“ Try me! ” he repeated.
“ I’m going to Rosemont.”
“ To the Singletons! Betty Singleton is a dear girl.”

“ You’re from Virginia? ” she asked.
“ Not exactly. I’m from the South Carolina lowlands. It’s pretty much the same thing—we’re equally conceited, and intermarried.”

“ I understand! ” she laughed.
“ Would you object, if I happen to go to Tarrington while you are there? ”

“ Not in the least! ”
“ Thank you—and would you mind telling me how soon I would be permitted to come? ”

“ I’m going to Rosemont on Monday.”
“ And you will be there until Tuesday? ”
She nodded—lids drooping again.
“ Why don’t you ask how long I’m to stay? ”
she said.

“ It is not necessary. I shall be there when you depart—and maybe I shall go with you.”

“ Why don’t you go down with me? ” she invited.
“ May I? ”

"Surely! I shall be glad for company. It's stupid travelling alone, particularly on the Southern."

The butler entered. Mrs. Tremaine looked up inquiringly.

"Mrs. Whippleton is in the drawing-room!" the man announced.

"Show her here," said Mrs. Tremaine.

Vendome arose.

"I'll meet you at the station, at——" he paused.

"The three-fifty!" she filled in—and gave him her hand. "You'll not forget?"

He took the slender fingers, and, bending, kissed them.

"I shall not forget!" he answered.

As he released her hand, Mrs. Whippleton entered the library.

"Don't let me drive you away," she greeted, perching herself on the arm of the sofa, and stripping off her gloves. "You don't want him to go, do you Natalie?" and she smiled maliciously at Vendome.

"Certainly not," Mrs. Tremaine replied imperturbably. "If it were left to me, I should never want Mr. Vendome to go."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Mrs. Whippleton. "May I stay just a minute—till I smoke a cigarette? I'm famished."

She drew out a tiny gold case and proffered it to Mrs. Tremaine.

"Take one!" she invited with pretty peremptoriness. "Orme doesn't mind—he's used to it. At any rate, he won't mind if *you* smoke, Natalie."

Mrs. Tremaine turned her eyes to Vendome.

"Do you object?" she asked.

"Not in the least!" he said. "Edith has smoked since she was in short skirts—shorter even than *those*"—and he looked very deliberately at an exceedingly generous length of black silk hosiery, which Mrs. Whippington's position on the sofa arm was exposing far below her gown.

"Still sitting in the bald-headed row, are you, Orme!" Edith laughed, with a little kick at him. "I thought you had outgrown that failing long ago."

He shook his head.

"No," he said; "a particularly trim pair of ——" he waved his hand expressively—"still make me look and admire."

"I reckon it doesn't have to be a pair," Edith rejoined. "One used to be enough. Now, Natalie, you can see what sort of a man Mr. Vendome is. Take warning and never cross your knees when he's around; or, better still, sit on the floor with your feet under you and your skirts well down.—Have a cigarette, Orme, won't you?"

"I think I would better be going, Mrs. Tremaine," he replied. "Edith has evidently just been reading Faublas, or Casanova, or a more than usually wicked yellow-back in the original French. And, when that has happened, it's not well for her to be in a mixed society for a time.—Good-by!" smiling at Mrs. Tremaine. "Hail and good-by!"

"Come up to-morrow afternoon, Orme," Edith called.

"I can't, to-morrow," he answered; "but I'll let you know as soon as I can."

"Isn't Orme a dear!" Edith exclaimed. "We're cousins, you know—in the Southern way. Before the Revolution, one of his uncles married one of my aunts—or maybe it isn't even that close. Most all Virginians and South Carolinians—I mean the gentry—are related. The South Carolinians, however, carry it a bit too far—the women there are perpetually in black. Everyone who dies in the two states is a relative." She tossed her cigarette in the receiver and slowly lit another. "Do you know, Natalie, it seems to me that you and Orme would make a corking good pair."

"For what?" smiled Natalie. "Auction, tennis, golf, or dinner?"

"Incidentally, yes," said Edith, "and for a

wedding, in particular. Her Excellency the Ambassador, would be exceedingly becoming to you, my dear Natalie."

"Does Mr. Vendome know it?" Natalie smiled.

"Certainly he knows it. If he doesn't, he is a bit stupid—and I think he isn't a stupid at all. He hasn't consulted me in the matter.—Oh, no! It's too self evident to be missed. You were made for each other, dear—simply made for each other." She flicked her ashes deftly across the table into a brass bowl. "Better think it over—he has cards and spades on Silverthorne, Plimpton & Co."

"Sit on a chair, Edith, and talk sense," said Mrs. Tremaine. "I'm not the bald-headed row—you can't influence me by your display."

"As I recollect it, you can make some display yourself, Natalie dear!" laughed Edith, crossing to Vendome's vacant chair. "Did you have a good time last night?"

"Very!"

"Which was the better, the dinner or the auction?"

"Both were the better!"

"H-u-m! I thought that you preferred your dinner partner."

"I did! He is the most interesting man I have met in years."

"Bravo!" laughed Edith. "We *are* getting along.—How about his looks?"

"You are as able as I to judge his looks," said Natalie.

"I should not call him *especially* handsome," Edith remarked. "To me, he suggests poise and latent strength, rather than beauty—Mars rather than Apollo."

"I wonder if Mr. Vendome would fancy your comparison," Natalie reflected. "Mars typifies brute force."

"He found favor with the lady Venus."

"You're shocking, this afternoon!" Natalie exclaimed. "You surely *must* have been reading a French novel."

"That reminds me," said Edith, "who are Faublas and Casanova? I never heard of them."

"Neither did I. Memoirs, I imagine."

"I shall look them up without delay. If they are fit for a young widow to read, Natalie, I'll lend them to you."

"Thanks!" said Natalie. "Judging from Mr. Vendome's reference to them, I should infer that they are eminently not fit to read."

"I hope so! I want something real devilish."

"You amuse me, Edith. To hear you talk, one would fancy you to be the fastest thing in skirts—

whereas, in fact, you are a charmingly modest woman. If I were to offer you Faublas, I don't believe you would take it."

"Try me!" said Edith, blowing a cloud of smoke at the ceiling.

Mrs. Tremaine got up, crossed to a book-case, switched on the electric light, sought a moment, and returned.

"Here is Faublas, in the original," she said, laying it on the table. "It's nothing; Mr. Vendome thought he would shock us with the idea. Want it?"

Edith laughed.

"No," said she. "I've got a copy. It's perfectly innocent, as you say. I wanted to see whether you hadn't one, also. Now to resume: I want to tell you, Natalie, that you have made a remarkable impression on Cousin Orme. I've never known him to be so genuinely taken with a woman. So, if you are not disposed to be kind, don't play with him, I beg of you. I'm fond of Orme."

"Has Mr. Vendome been confiding in his Cousin Edith?" Natalie inquired.

"You know he hasn't!"

"Then you are judging only from appearances?"

"Certainly—aided by years of acquaintance with Orme."

" You asked him, however? "

Mrs. Whipplington raised her eyes languidly.

" I asked him, yes—after the dinner last evening. His answer was that he did not know."

Mrs. Tremaine's reply was the faintest shrug, and an amused lift of the eyebrows.

" You don't believe it?" Edith questioned.

" Certainly, I believe him. It is sufficiently flattering for him not to know. It shows that he has possibilities."

" Do be sensible, Natalie."

" The same to you, my dear girl!" laughed Natalie.

" Well, I've told you," said Edith. " It's up to you now—and to Orme."

" Have you also cautioned Mr. Vendome to beware of me? "

" Likely! It's not for you I fear—it's for him; that he won't resist you. All I ask is for you to warn him off promptly."

" My dear Mr. Vendome, I see that you are about to fall in love with me—I warn you not to let yourself fall—it is risky—you may be hurt!—Is that sufficient, Edith? "

" Have a cigarette? " Mrs. Whipplington asked.

" No, thank you—I've had enough for the present."

"And as I have had twice as many as you, I reckon you think that I've had twice enough! But seriously, Natalie: Orme *is* taken with you—how much taken, I don't know, of course. You've a reputation of being a—Diana. So, if there is no chance of you becoming interested, let him see it at once. He is too good a chap to be made miserable needlessly; and you've got over hunting scalps, I take it."

"You're mythologically inclined, this afternoon," was the laughing answer. "Mars—Apollo—Venus—Diana—any others coming?"

"No more, at present. And now, having done my duty to my family, even unto the seventh generation, let us gossip a bit. I must be going on, in a few minutes."

And the few minutes having passed only when the clock struck seven, she fled in haste to her car, and was whirled up the avenue.

Mrs. Tremaine, turning slowly toward her boudoir, stopped sharply.

"I remember now where I saw him," she exclaimed—and remained standing, her eyes narrowed in thought. . . . "I wonder! I wonder, if he will recollect—and whether I would better warn him off before there is any danger."

V

THE IMPERTINENCE OF MR. BLAKE

MRS. TREMAINE had not answered her question when, about noon of the following day, her 'phone rang and she recognized Vendome's voice on the line.

"Yes, thank you!" she replied. "I'm feeling unusually fit this morning. If you've any doubt of it, you might stop in a moment on your way downtown—wait, I've not finished. I say, if you have any doubt of it, you might stop in a moment on your way downtown, if I were going to be in; but as I'm just hurrying to my dressmaker's, I'll have to postpone the pleasure of seeing you until we meet at the station. Goodness, that's long!"

"Till we meet at the station?" he asked.

"No, stupid, the sentence!"

"Oh!" he laughed. "But you are nearer right than you meant it—I have just received an order, from the Secretary, to report at his office at two o'clock and accompany him to the White House. It means that I shall not be able to go down with you on the three-fifty—and possibly not to go at all. I may even be ordered to proceed immediately to Spain—though that would be the supreme disappointment, and isn't likely. I shall hope to get

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down to-morrow. It's hard luck, to have our little ride together spoiled simply by a President of the United States!"

"I don't know that it isn't as well," she replied.

"I don't understand," he said.

"I was thinking seriously of forbidding your going with me, or your coming to Tarrington while I am there."

"Wherefore, may I ask?"

"Because!" she laughed.

"You are only 'thinking' of doing it?"

"Yes—I've not decided."

"Then please don't decide. Continue in a state of uncertainty until you decide for me."

"Decide what for you, Mr. Vendome?"

"What you're debating—what you're undecided about."

"What is the use in debating, if I'm only to decide for you in the end?"

"Of no use whatever; except that it may make you all the more satisfied—in the end."

"Satisfied?—with what?"

"With yourself."

"I'm entirely satisfied with myself."

"You have every occasion to be," he replied.

"That wasn't half bad!" she laughed. "You said it quite as though you meant it."

"I did mean it."

"Better and better!" she cried.

"It is a lamentable pity that I'm not there to make it the best."

"You might make it the worst!" she warned.

"H-u-m!" said he. "Maybe I should be content with the better, at present."

"You will have to be—were you knocking on my door at this moment, I wouldn't receive you."

"I'm at the Club," he interposed.

"And I should be at my dressmaker's—Good-by, Mr. Vendome!"

"How am I to know about Tarrington?" he said quickly.

She did not answer at once.

"Are you there, Mrs. Tremaine?" he asked.

"I was considering," she replied. "Well, I'll not forbid your coming to Tarrington; any one has a perfect right to come—but the thereafter will depend."

"I'm not going to Tarrington, unless I may see you," he answered.

"Very well! If you don't care to take the chance of—"

"There is a chance?" he asked.

"There is always a chance."

"Good!" said he. "I will go."

"The chance is either way," she reminded.

"I will go to Tarrington and take the chance."

"Very well!—*tout à l'heure*, M. Vendome."

"Until to-morrow!"

"Maybe then I shall be glad to see you!" she laughed—and hung up the receiver.

"I reckon I should not have done it," she reflected. "But the man attracts me—he is so different from the others. He seems always to be slyly laughing at me—and expecting me to know it; to mean what he says, and yet not to mean it. He has poise and power; is somewhat selfish, yet very generous; dignified, yet very gracious; sure of himself, yet becomingly modest. On the whole, a most attractive and admirable man. I think that I shall like him well. He won't make serious love to me, like Plimpton and Silverthorne and the rest. But if he does—and does it in the way I think he can—it will be exceedingly diverting, possibly rather engaging. Altogether, we shall have a very enjoyable time until he goes back to Spain—and if, by any chance, he should try to persuade me to go with him——" she laughed softly, and shrugged her shapely shoulders. "We shall see!—we shall see!"

She kept her appointment with her dressmaker, was fitted and gave instructions; visited some of the shops, including her milliner's and the candy shop; came home for luncheon, at one-thirty; rested a bit

after; had her bath, dressed, and was at the station ten minutes before the train left.

There was no one in the chair-car that she knew. A number of horsey-looking women and men occupied one end; she was at the other; with a couple of ancients, female and male, distributed between. She occupied herself with her magazine; but the matter was not especially absorbing, and, from time to time, she could hear the crowd at the other end. Their talk was loud, also their laughter.

Presently one of the men passed on his way to the smoking compartment. She did not glance up, yet she knew that he had stared at her. In a moment, he came back slowly—and the stare was repeated most brazenly.

She had long since gotten used to being stared at in a gentlemanly way, and sometimes in a way not exactly gentlemanly,—it was the penalty of her beauty—but even she felt the leer in this man's stare; and she wished for Vendome, to resent it for her. That she should instantly think of Vendome, in this exigency, to the exclusion of all her other friends, was what surprised her.

Then from the rear of the car came a man's voice:

“ If you chaps want to see the prettiest thing in petticoats that you've ever clapped your binoculars

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on, just go forward to the smoking compartment, and, as you pass, look at the dream on the fourth chair. My word, she is some class!"

"You're an expert on chorus girls, Blake," replied another. "You ought to know, so here goes!"

"Come along, Hudson!"

In a moment the two went by—stayed a very short time forward—and returned. And each time Natalie felt herself looked over, much as if she were a horse—and far more impudently. Yet there was nothing to do but to seem unconscious of the affront, and to go on with her reading.

And again she wished for Vendome.

"You've a fine eye, all right, Blake!" she heard one of them say. "She is the classiest bit of skirts I've ever seen—excluding, of course, the peaches near by."

"Oh, we are not sensitive!" laughed one of the women. "Enjoy yourselves looking, you're not likely to enjoy anything else with the aforesaid damsel."

"I hope she gets off at Tarrington," another feminine voice remarked. "I should like to see so much loveliness."

"Her hair is like yours, Daph," said one of the men: "screamingly beautiful."

"I wonder where she got it," said another. "I thought, Daph, yours was an exclusive shade."

"Shut up!" said the first, "you're becoming personal. The next thing you will be asking the fair maid herself."

"Which fair maid: the one up front, or this one here?"

"An idea, Hudson! you might speak to her."

"Why don't *you* speak to her, Blake?—you're the original discoverer. Go and ask her to join us."

"I'm the original discoverer, but I'm not looking for a freeze!" he laughed. "I've a notion that the lady can be very chilly to an unknown acquaintance—in public."

"How do you know that she isn't the new occupant of Alimony Row?" one of the women asked.

"Then me for the Row!" said Blake heartily.

"You, and the rest of the men, also!" was flung back.

The train stopped, and a number of school-girls got aboard. Their chairs were just back of Natalie, and with their chatter she heard no more of the comments from the rear.

When Tarrington was reached, she was occupied with her magazine, and did not stir until Blake and his friends had gone down the aisle; the women glancing, with affected indifference, at her as they passed; the men deliberately turning and staring with brazen candor.

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When Natalie came out on the station platform, they were climbing into their carts, with, on the feminine part, a shocking display of hosiery and lace.

"Blake!" called one—"There's your peach!"

"I see her!" Blake answered, wrestling with a skittish hackney. "Any one to meet her?"

"Yes—young Mrs. Singleton."

"Hum!" grunted Blake, bringing the bay down with a twist. "She isn't for Alimony Row."

"That is a reasonably safe gamble!" laughed the woman beside him; and, with a wave of her hand to the rest, they were gone.

The others followed immediately, bowing rather effusively to Mrs. Singleton, as they whirled off.

Mrs. Singleton returned their salutations with a perfunctory nod.

"You know them?" Mrs. Tremaine asked.

"Some of the vulgar horsey crowd!" was the answer. "The horsey crowd are not half bad—but the vulgar horsey crowd are the limit. I'm not squeamish, but when it comes to not knowing one's own wife or one's own husband, I do draw the line. Mrs. Hudson drove off with Mr. Blake, Mr. Anstruther with Mrs. Blake, and Mrs. Anstruther with Mr. Hudson. They won't see their own again until to-morrow—if then."

"And yet they are received?" Natalie asked.

“ Every one is received in Tarrington ; some way—somewhere—somehow, they get it. They all ride ; they all belong to the Hunt Club, to the Country Club ; they have plenty of money, and are not afraid to spend it ; they are lively companions, entertaining and amusing ; they are travelled, polished, when they care to show it. They are birds of passage, here awhile, then gone. The men of the resident old families like them—particularly the women of them ; everything goes with them, they say. However, you know them ; you’re no stranger in Tarrington.”

“ No—but this collection is a new sort to me,” said Natalie. “ The men are the most deliberately impudent starers I ever have encountered.”

“ There may be an excuse for that, my dear ! ” Mrs. Singleton said. “ You’re very good to look at.”

“ And I don’t object to being looked at in a decent way,” Natalie replied. “ But when that man Blake and his companions looked me over, I felt as if I hadn’t on a stitch of clothes.”

“ I know exactly what you mean. I have had the same feeling, though it hadn’t occurred to me so picturesquely—possibly because I don’t make such a charming picture.”

“ I fancy, Betty, that there isn’t much to choose between us ! ” Natalie laughed. “ You’re looking very fit, too, I tell you.”

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"I am fit. This country air and life is rejuvenating me. I feel sixteen."

"You look it! You tempt me to live here."

"Why don't you?"

"Maybe I shall sometime."

"And until *sometime*, you know that you are something more than welcome at Rosemont."

"Yes, dear, I know," said Natalie.

"Anything particular doing in town?" Mrs. Singleton inquired presently, as they left Tarrington behind them and sped along the level limestone pike, running almost straight away to the distant Blue Ridge, that frowned twenty-five miles to westward.

"Nothing—the usual things at this season; a few dinners, and the Rataplan are the only amusements. It is pretty dead."

"I see by the 'Post' that my cousin, Orme Vendome, the new Ambassador to Spain, is in town. Did you happen to meet him?"

"I met him the other night at the Whippingtons'. He took me in to dinner."

"Didn't you like him?" said Betty.

"I did!"

"Orme is a dear!"

"Just what he said about you!"

"Then he told you I was his cousin?"

"Yes. He wasn't sure, he said, how far you had

to go back to get a common ancestor, but he thought it was about two hundred years."

"Did he say that?" Betty laughed.

"I should be willing to go back four hundred years, if necessary, to claim him," Natalie responded. "He is, I think, distinctly worth while."

"You think exactly right, dear. After Carter Singleton, he is the finest man living. I'll write at once and invite him down, you haven't any objection?"

"Not in the least!"

"He is such a comfortable chap, he doesn't make love to every pretty woman. In fact, he has never made love to any one—at least in this country."

"That is, so far as you know."

"Well, he is still unattached," said Betty. "Moreover, he has passed the dangerous age."

"Or is just entering it!" Natalie smiled.

"He may be—with you at hand!" Then she looked at her friend thoughtfully. "Why shouldn't you two make a match of it?" she asked.

"No reason whatever why we shouldn't—nor why we should!" Natalie laughed. "Don't turn your charming self into a match-maker—you know the match-maker's fate, my dear."

"Knowing also the parties in this case, I am willing to take the risk. Besides, I'm not exactly a match-maker. I simply give you and Orme the op-

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portunity to test out each other to your own satisfaction. If he offers, you can take him or leave him as you're minded. And he won't offer without some encouragement. So the matter will be up to you."

"Don't be absurd, Betty dear; I'm not thinking of marrying any one—and neither, I fancy, is Mr. Vendome. At least, he is not thinking, on two days' acquaintance, of marrying me."

"That is precisely why I want to ask him to Rosemont—to extend the acquaintance of two days into sufficient time for you to get to know each other. All that you two need is the opportunity."

"How long will be the 'sufficient time'?"

"A week will be ample."

"Pretty speedy," said Natalie.

"Not for some people. If you don't see each other in a week, you never will."

"Well, you for it; Mr. Vendome is *your* cousin. As for me, I'm immune."

"Maybe you are, maybe you're not. At all events, we'll test it. I'll send him a wire to come to-morrow."

"Will he come?" Natalie asked.

"He will come, if he is free to come," said Betty confidently. "He has never failed me."

"Then why are you aiming to marry him off?"

"Because I think it's time he is marrying; and you're especially fitted for each other—and I want

to give you the chance. As I said before, the matter will then be up to you two. You can get him, my dear, if you want him."

"What I don't want," said Natalie, "is for Mr. Vendome even to suspect that I was aware of your invitation to him."

"Why surely——" she paused. "Does Orme know that you are at Rosemont?"

"Yes. He asked if I would be in town next week. I said that I was going to Tarrington today. He spoke of you, and I mentioned that you were to be my hostess."

"I see!—Did he speak of coming down?"

Natalie nodded. "He intimated that he might be down, if the State Department didn't interfere."

"I think it will be hardly necessary for me to wire!" Betty laughed. "Do you?"

"He seemed very anxious to see Cousin Betty," Natalie parried.

"And Cousin Betty's guest, *n'est ce pas?*"

"Nonsense! He was very polite, that's all."

"Of course! He wouldn't be Orme Vendome, if he were not, nor will he come unless he wishes. No, I'll not wire; it will be unnecessary. Between us," as they swung through the gates into the avenue of oaks leading up to Rosemont, half a mile away, "we should prove an overwhelming attraction."

VI

ROSEMONT AND A SURPRISE

Rosemont had been in the Singleton family for more than two centuries. The first Singleton, in Virginia, had come in time to join in Claiborne's raid on Kent Island, and in the subsequent war with Maryland which that dispute engendered. In the turnings of fortune that had ensued, now this way, now that, he eventually had stood with the Royal Governor, Sir William Berkeley; and when the latter resigned his office and withdrew to his plantation of Green Spring, Singleton retired from the Council, and ended his days in no more turmoil than membership in the House of Burgesses occasioned.

His younger son had inherited, as his portion, some thousands of acres, between the Potomac and the Rappahannock, called Rosemont. It was his son who built the present house—of English brick, a wide hall through the centre and spacious rooms on either side. Wings, a little detached, flanked it—for the kitchen, stores and offices. It stood in a grove of enormous oaks, thinned now by age and storms, yet majestic still in their stately dignity and unchanging calm. A wide piazza with shapely pillars had been added by a later generation to re-

place the Georgian entrance, which, however much it might comport with the English climate, was scarcely adapted to the Old Dominion's. The change may have injured the house architecturally, but it improved enormously its comfort as a dwelling. In the interior, the walls were panelled, sides and ceiling, with cypress painted white; the doors, cornices and windows were of mahogany; the floors of hard-wood, waxed and polished, and dark with the use of years, variegated, however, here and there, by replacements—of wears or of the scars of wars. For Rosemont had stood in the path of both armies, in the Great Conflict, and had suffered much; though it was saved from the torch by Sheridan's personal order, as his acknowledgment of a courteous hospitality on the part of its then mistress—the young bride of Colonel Singleton, of the Confederate States Army, and the mother of Carter Singleton, who now ruled at Rosemont.

And he ruled very much as the Singletons, of generations gone, had ruled—with a generous hand and a just heart. The same negroes born there, died there; the fields, once green with tobacco, were now green with corn or grass—the plantation of the old days was transformed into the stock farm of the present. Blooded horses and cattle were the product, every pound of the crops was consumed on the place.

The house-servants were of ante-bellum days—in training, in quality, and in quantity. The cook, the butler, the maids, the body-servants, the boys, were such as Rosemont had ever known—there was not a strange face among them. And while they might not all stay on the old place, those who did *belonged* there, and such as went, went of their own free will. Therein was the sole difference from slavery days—they went only if they wished to go. The tiny white cabins stood just as they had always stood, in a pleasant grove under the hill, below the big house. The piccaninnies, the half-grown children, the banjo, the singing, the superstition, the light-hearted and care-free—all were there.

"It is a wonderful place, this Rosemont," said Natalie, as they sat on the broad piazza the following morning. "Every time I see it, I love it more. It must be as Mountjoy was; the Jumonvilles lost it with the war, and I never saw it. Some day, however, I shall buy it back, or what remains of it—only, it's never the same, after strangers have lived for half a century in one's family home. I don't know even if the house is standing."

"You're not thinking of living there?" Betty asked.

"Not for a great while!" the other smiled. "It may be a matter of sentiment to own it, but not

necessarily to live in it. My sentiment may be the better preserved, indeed, by not living in it. Now with Rosemont it is quite different. I can't imagine Carter Singleton living anywhere else."

"There isn't anywhere else for either of us," said Betty. "A month of New York and Washington twice a year, six weeks at 'The White' in mid-summer; then Rosemont the rest of the time, with an occasional trip abroad. It is sufficient for us—we are of the life here; we both were born to it, you know. I am from Tide-water—but it's all Virginia, just the same."

"What is the use of going abroad?" said Natalie. "You've almost enough of England at your very door. How large is the Colony?"

"Something less than a hundred, I reckon. They're not all of your friend Blake's kind. The majority are exceedingly nice people, who have come here because they are attracted by the life,—the horse life, I mean—and its ramifications. Necessarily they all are well-to-do—financially; and we can take them, or leave them, as we see fit. They are not especially clannish. They don't hesitate to show their attitude toward the undesirables."

"Blake and his companions appeared to me more than ordinarily undesirable," Natalie remarked.

"It depends somewhat on the point of view. It seems that Blake and Anstruther are better born—sort of the younger son class—and their doings are viewed by their compatriots with lenient eyes. Moreover, one can overlook in a foreigner what is unforgivable in an American—so long as it doesn't affect one's self. I don't care for them, as I've said, but the life here is free and easy, and the large majority of the residents remain conveniently blind to their doings."

"Aren't they married?" Natalie asked.

"As far as Tarrington knows, they are; and the community has refrained from going further into the question."

"This seems to be a community where every one attends strictly to his own affairs!"

"So long as one doesn't become positively blatant in the disregard of proprieties," said Betty, "it is positively the blindest community on earth. 'Don't-Care-Tarrington' is what the place has come to be called among the old residents. A different code of morals seems to obtain for the new-comers, and the code of Tarrington has loosened up in consequence—though it hasn't slipped so far as the laxity of the big town. I may be a bit obscure, but——"

"I understand you perfectly," said Natalie. "It is the natural result of the two radically different

elements that make up your population—and which intermix, so to speak, for various reasons; principally, because they have by cultivation or affection what you have naturally; the love of the horse and hounds, of sports, of outdoor life with its various attendant pleasures."

The telephone rang sharply; a moment later, a maid summoned Mrs. Singleton within. Presently Betty returned, an amused smile on her lips.

"That," she said, "was Orme Vendome. He wanted to know whether we have room for him at Rosemont."

She paused expectantly. Mrs. Tremaine waited in polite interest—though suppressing a smile.

"Don't you want to know what I told him, Natalie?" Betty demanded.

"Certainly!" said Natalie. "Don't I look as if I were crazy to know?"

"I wouldn't recognize it! However, I told him to come down, that we would be delighted to see him."

"Did he mention my name?" Natalie asked.

"Not until I mentioned it—then he inquired for you, and sent his regards, and said he would be glad to see you again."

"To which you replied?"

"That I knew you would be equally glad to see him."

"Am I expected to bear you out?" Natalie smiled.

"If you wish."

"And if I don't wish?"

"It can be charged up to the polite lie account."

"When is he coming?"

"This evening—he isn't losing any time, you see."

"You do amuse me, Betty. How long after he comes will he propose to me—the same evening?"

"It will depend on you. Look as charming to-night as you do now, and it is altogether probable."

"To-night would be forcing things just a little?" Natalie suggested.

"Of course, it would—but when a man is in the mood for something, anything is likely to happen."

"Even to a disagreement and a—scene."

"There will be neither a disagreement nor a scene; of that, I am sure," Betty answered. "Neither you nor Orme is given to scenes. You both will consider calmly and decide calmly, and take the decision, whatever it may be, calmly. That's why I am—in this case—a match-maker."

"But I tell you, Betty, that I am not marrying again!" Natalie exclaimed. "And it's perfectly ridiculous for you to fancy that Mr. Vendome has the faintest notion of trying to marry me!"

"My dear Natalie! I have ventured to suggest Orme Vendome, who is as my own brother, as a proper and possible husband for you, who are my best friend; and I have asked him to Rosemont, so as to afford you the opportunity to know each other better. In that far, I am a match-maker. The rest is for you two. Only, I shall be a most interested spectator—and my prayers shall be with you."

"Don't you think that you are likely, despite your prayers," said Natalie, "to effect just the opposite of what you are praying for?"

"With most people, yes; with you, no. You won't be swayed, one way or the other, by anything I've done or could do. You are not one to be stampeded, or even hurried."

"No," said Natalie thoughtfully, "I am not—any longer. At least, I think I am not. Yet you can't tell anything about it—a woman is the most unexpected creature on earth."

"Some women," Betty amended.

"All women!" Natalie insisted. "The only difference is that some are more unexpected than others. However, I've served a pretty fair apprenticeship, so I am hopeful of not being too sudden—yet some ancient gentleman has said, I believe, that pride goes before a tumble, or words to that effect."

"There won't be any tumble in your case," said Betty. "Or, if there is, it will be upward and on—eider-down."

"From which it might be inferred that Mr. Vendome belongs to the duck family! Well, I'm ready to believe it—he *is* exceedingly nice, Betty. Yet let me reiterate, I'm not marrying any one. I tell you I am immune—and I intend to stay immune."

"Of course, you are immune; we all are immune—until we are taken by the disease. However, I now wash my hands of you both. Henceforth you may go your own gait—and joy go with you."

"And the faster that gait the more joy goes with us, I reckon!" Natalie laughed. "Are you intending to tell Mr. Vendome that you have picked out a bride for him, and that I am the aforesaid bride?"

"Do you wish me to tell him?" Betty smiled.

"You may do exactly as you see fit. I'm not responsible for anything you may say or do."

"Very good! I'll think it over. Meanwhile, here is the carriage; we'll drive uptown, and then to the Club for a short while before luncheon. Incidentally we may hear some entertaining gossip."

At the Club, they found a number of the habitués, who knew Mrs. Tremaine and were unfeignedly glad to see her. They gathered around her on the piazza, and chaffed and jollied one another in the

regular style—principally about their horses or their golf.

Presently Blake appeared in the doorway, glanced casually at the group, saw Mrs. Tremaine—and sauntered over.

"Hello, Blake!" said Ryence de Renne. "How are your old hobby-horses, this morning?"

"Wooden, of course," said Blake easily.

"The first time I ever knew you to tell the truth!" De Renne commented.

"The first time I ever knew you to ask a sensible question!" Blake smiled. Then he looked at Mrs. Singleton. "Won't some one present me to Mrs. Tremaine?" he said.

Natalie acknowledged the introduction with the very slightest inclination of her head, and went on with her conversation. Blake, ignoring the evident chilliness, drew up a chair and prepared to join in. In a moment, his chance came.

"I think we came down on the same train yesterday, Mrs. Tremaine," he remarked.

"Yes?" she answered, politely indifferent.

"The three-forty," he went on; "your chair was in the front of the car. I noticed you when I went forward to the smoking compartment."

Natalie viewed him with languid eyes, and made no comment.

"You appeared to be absorbed in a magazine," he continued.

"No, the magazine wasn't particularly interesting," she replied.

"Well, you seemed to be reading!" he fenced.
"And I saw *you*, which is the important point."

Natalie did not reply.

"You were good to look at, Mrs. Tremaine."

"Your compliments, Mr. Blake, are marvelously adroit and charmingly veiled."

"Aren't they?" said Blake calmly. "I've been told so before—frequently told so, indeed. It's a happy faculty I have, it seems—a happy faculty."

"A happy faculty for what, Blake?" Peterson inquired loudly, so loudly that the chatter stopped and every one waited. "For making yourself disagreeable?"

"No—for always having my conversation interrupted by a simpleton who asks asinine questions," said Blake pleasantly.

"You must choose your audience with admirable reference to yourself!" Peterson laughed. "However, the drinks are on you, Blake. I'll take champagne, thank you—what will you all have?" with an inquiring wave around the circle.

"Take the orders, Robert," said Blake to the servant hovering near. "Later, Peterson, you and

I will fight over who shall have the pleasure of signing the check."

"Not at all!" said Peterson. "The pleasure is yours without the slightest opposition. I renounce in your favor, old man."

Natalie caught Mrs. Singleton's eye; and the latter arose.

"Don't go, Mrs. Singleton!" Blake exclaimed. "You'll ruin the party, if you take yourself and Mrs. Tremaine away."

"I beseech you to remain!" Peterson implored, dropping on his knees.

Betty shook her head, smilingly.

"I'm sorry, but we must be going on," she said. "You may drink our share, Mr. Peterson—that will, in a measure, compensate you for our absence. So long, everybody!"

"Permit me to see you to your carriage," said Blake.

"It isn't at all necessary, thank you, Mr. Blake," said Natalie indifferently.

"Not necessary, but a pleasure, my dear Mrs. Tremaine," keeping beside her. "You have been to Tarrington before?"

"Several times," she replied.

"Great place!" he exclaimed. "Great place, charming people—and fine sport."

She made no reply, and the next moment they were at the steps of the porte-cochère.

A man, in cords and tops, had just dismounted and was coming up the steps. He raised his hat to the party, with a smiling bow to Mrs. Singleton. Then he glanced casually at Mrs. Tremaine—and a surprised, somewhat puzzled, look crossed his face. He hesitated—and went on.

As for Natalie, she had chanced to see him first—in time to recover from the shock of amazed incredulity and dismay, and to look away before he saw her. But she was acutely conscious of him—and she also knew that Blake's eyes were upon her.

"A good-looking chap, don't you think, Mrs. Tremaine?" Blake remarked.

"Yes, unusually so," she replied tranquilly. "Who is he?"

It was not the sort of answer Blake had anticipated—and he smiled slightly. Here, plainly, was no novice. She played the game like an expert. Ordinarily there would have been a denial of having seen him. Not so, Mrs. Tremaine!

"It's Warren Alstair, the Beau Brummell of the Tarrington Hunt," he answered, his eyes hard upon her face.

She nodded in reply and stepped into the car-

riage. Mrs. Singleton followed and they drove off—with Peterson and Blake bowing farewell.

Mrs. Tremaine smiled pleasantly at the former—the latter she ignored. Mrs. Singleton watched her out of the corner of her eye.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't save you from Blake," she said. "However, he won't likely bother you again—you surely did freeze him."

"There isn't sufficient frigidity in the world even to chill him, let alone to freeze him," Natalie replied. "Nothing will freeze the fellow—he has the brass of twenty devils."

"What did he say?"

"It wasn't what he said, it's the way he said it—and looked it. He started with the episode of the chair-car; when I wouldn't remember having seen him, he said it didn't matter, he had seen *me*, which was the important point; and that I was exceedingly good to look at."

"Which was true enough, but not from *him!*" said Betty.

"Exactly! I could have endured the stare and the compliment from any one else. I positively suffered under it from him."

"We will save you future suffering, so far as Rosemont is concerned!" Betty smiled. "Though you will be exposed to Blake's stares and com-

pliments at the Club—unless you can snub him."

"I do not want to do that without some very evident cause," Natalie replied. "And he will be careful to give none, you may be sure."

"He is a pretty smooth article," Betty answered.

"He is, indeed! And as I'm only a guest here, while he is a resident, it is just as well for me to be unseeing and unresenting."

"Only to a certain extent," said Betty. "However, we shall hope for the best—and that he won't become insufferably obnoxious. If he does, we'll let Carter settle him."

"We'll do nothing of the sort, my dear! I'm not going to mix Carter Singleton in any nasty little squabble. I shall go home to-night, if you don't promise. He is much too busy to be bothered, and too considerate of his guests to tolerate even a fancied injury. There would be trouble, Betty, and quick trouble, too. No, you shall not mention *anything* to Carter—do you hear?"

"Very well!" Betty smiled. "We might, if you prefer, turn the matter over to Orme Vendome. He will settle Mr. Blake in a brace of minutes—and be exceedingly glad for the chance."

"I would much rather have you turn the matter over to him than annoy Carter with it," Natalie smiled back.

"Are you serious?" Betty asked.

"Certainly, I'm serious. Only, let me be the one to tell him. 'Oh, yes! oh, yes! Here is a female in distress!'—and see him take to his heels and vanish."

The clatter of hoofs sounded behind them; but many hoofs clattered in Tarrington, and their clattering occasioned no interest whatever to the occupants of the Rosemont carriage—until they suddenly drew down beside it, and a man's voice said:

"Mrs. Singleton! your handkerchief, I believe," and Alstair was smiling down at them.

"Oh, Mr. Alstair!" Betty cried. "You're very, very kind! . . . Let me present you to Mrs. Tremaine."

Alstair bowed to the saddle-bow.

Natalie held out her hand—he was on her side of the carriage.

"How do you do, Mr. Alstair," she said, with languid naturalness, looking him straight in the eyes.

He took her hand, and held it lightly an instant—and it never trembled.

"I shall do myself the honor of calling on your guest, Mrs. Singleton," he said, his eyes flitting from the one to the other.

"We shall be delighted to see you, I'm sure," Betty responded.



"HOW DO YOU DO, MR. ALSTAIR," SHE SAID, LOOKING HIM STRAIGHT IN THE EYES

Alstair backed his horse away, bowed again, the women smiled a farewell, and the carriage went on.

"That," said Betty, "is Warren Alstair—'Devil Alstair,' they call him. The hardest rider, the gamest sport, the cleverest card-player, the handsomest man, and the gentlest-mannered, that Tarrington has ever known. You will like him."

"You like him," said Natalie, "so I shall like him also. We usually like the same people. Alstair! —I've never heard it among Virginia names."

"He is an Englishman—an Americanized Englishman," Betty replied. "He came to this country a number of years ago, and ranched it out in Wyoming or somewhere. He made a lot of money in cattle or mines, I forget which—maybe in both—and drifted East. He stopped at Tarrington, to see Anstruther and several other acquaintances; liked the place, the people, the life, the climate—and is still here. To-day he is the M. F. H., and easily the most popular man in the Hunt. He spends his time being agreeable to every one, yet there isn't an atom of the Politic about him. He is an all-round good fellow."

"I assume that he is married?" said Natalie.

"It is the natural assumption—and it's wrong. Any quantity of girls here have been willing—even angled for him—but never a nibble."

"Why don't you suggest that I get into the running?" Natalie smiled. "You seem so anxious to marry me off."

"To Orme Vendome, yes—to Warren Alstair, no."

Natalie raised her eyebrows expressively.

"Wherein is the difference?" she asked.

"If you can't distinguish the difference, I shan't tell you," Betty responded.

"Recall what you said of Mr. Alstair: 'the hardest rider, the truest sport, the gamest card-player, the handsomest man, and the gentlest mannered, that Tarrington has ever known,' or words to that effect. Very fair recommendation, don't you think?"

"Yes, very fair recommendation—but not good enough for you. There are but two men who *are* good enough, Natalie: one is Carter Singleton, who is taken—the other is Orme Vendome, who is not. *C'est pourquoi!*"

"You're a dear, Betty," said Natalie. "I'm only too sorry that I can't fall in with your plans."

Mrs. Singleton shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"We'll let Orme have a say to that!" she answered, as the carriage drew up at Rosemont.

Natalie went slowly up the stairs to her room,

surrendered her hat and parasol to the colored maid—she had left her own maid in town—and dropped into a chair by the window.

Rosemont took its name from the wild roses that the first Singleton found growing in luxuriant profusion over the hill on which he built the first house. That house had given way, long ago, to the stately mansion of the present; and the wild roses had been absorbed in hedges of rose trees that now bordered the driveway and the walks, and extended in wide circles through the lawn. The air was heavy with the delicious perfume, the foreground brilliant with the iridescent blooms.

It was a sight and a fragrance that Natalie adored—yet now she felt none of it; the glory of the roses, their exquisite redolence, were utterly unheeded. She saw but one thing: the face of Warren Alstair—the handsome, smiling face that she had seen last in London—and now saw again in Tarrington. And he knew her, though eight years had passed, and from a girl of eighteen she had become a woman of twenty-six! . . . What was to be done?—Should she flee—or should she stay?

VII

THE MARQUIS

“ **WILL** you drive with me to the station to meet the five-thirty? ” asked Betty, as she and Natalie, in negligee, sat in her high-ceilinged bed-room, which was ample enough to serve also as boudoir.

“ Maybe I will, ” answered Natalie slowly—“ and take the five-thirty on to Charlottesville.”

Betty paused in her brushing of the chestnut hair—her own—and regarded her friend in some surprise, mingled with frank incredulity.

“ You are not serious? ” she said.

“ I haven’t quite made up my mind, ” Natalie replied.

“ Which way is it leaning? ”

“ It’s wabbling.”

“ Better not let it wabble too long—your time is growing short.”

“ I’m waiting until the clock begins to strike four, as it leans at that instant, so goes the decision.”

“ At the first stroke? ”

“ At the first stroke.”

Betty turned and glanced at the clock: it was five minutes of the hour.

“ Why are you wabbling? ” she asked.

"For various reasons."

"You told Orme that you were coming here?"

"Yes."

"And he told you that he would be down, unless something prevented."

"Yes."

"And you didn't forbid his coming?"

"Forbid? Certainly not. I have no right to forbid him coming here. My recourse is to leave."

"Why have you become uncertain since morning? You were perfectly willing then to remain if he came? And yesterday your only stipulation was that he should not be told that you knew of my intention to invite him down."

Natalie nodded slowly. "Yes—yes—but I've become doubtful since."

"Why are you doubtful, Natalie, dear? Has something arisen to-day?"

"I don't know—that is why I'm doubtful,"—and the clock began to strike the hour.

Betty leaned over and took the other's hand.

"Which gets it?" she asked.

"I'll stay," said Natalie; "at least, I'll stay until to-morrow. To-morrow is time enough.—*Mañana! Mañana! Mañana!* There must be some Spanish in me."

"You will go along to the station?" Betty

asked. "Carter comes on the same train, you know."

"No, I'll not go to the station. I am not at all wabbly as to that."

Betty met the five-thirty at six o'clock—which was very fair for the Southern.

She kissed her husband rapturously, a tall, slender, handsome man, considerably older than she, with all the quiet dignity of his class; and kissed Vendome also—in a cousinly way. She asked the former how everything was in New York, and told the latter how delighted she was to see him—all in the same breath. Then she continued to chatter in the most bewildering and bewitching fashion, while the two men answered, or not, as the opportunity came—usually it did not come; but that fact Betty seemed never to note.

"She is just the same dear girl, Carter!" Vendome laughed, when, for a moment, Betty paused to speak to some one in a passing station-wagon.

"Always the same!" said Singleton, with a perfectly charming smile at his wife. "I constantly wonder how she does it—she's a marvel to me, Vendome. I've yet to see her out of humor or dispirited. It *is* something, I tell you, to a fellow with my disposition."

"What did you say, dear?" she asked, as her attention came back to her own carriage.

"It doesn't matter," her husband answered, with another smile. "It is what *you* were saying that interests us—so say on, little woman."

She leaned forward and patted his arm affectionately.

"Always nice, aren't you, Carter?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not always nice," Singleton replied. "There is where Betty is another wonder, Vendome—no matter how disagreeable I am, or irritable, she never seems to notice it."

"You're lucky, my friend," said Vendome; "just how lucky, you'll have to lose her before you'll know."

"He is appreciating me quite enough!" smiled Betty. "At least, I don't care to be fully appreciated, if I must first be lost to him."

"Where, Carter, can I get another Betty for *my* wife—can you tell me?"

"There isn't any other!" Singleton smiled.

"Oh, yes there is," said Betty—"only she is far superior, in every way, to me."

"Produce her—I'll marry her on the instant!" Vendome declared.

"Isn't she to have any say in the matter?" Betty laughed.

"Simply, yes."

"Rather a peremptory start, don't you think?"

"I daren't let such an opportunity escape! The

end justifies the means ; that end attained, I'll become even as Carter is, an admirably trained husband."

"I don't want you to say that Carter's 'trained,'" flashed Betty.

"Isn't he?"

"No, he isn't—he doesn't need any training."

"*Pardon! madame, pardon!*" Vendome cried. "I'll admit everything you say, if you'll only reveal the name of this incroyable damsels. Who is she?"

"You wish to know solely from curiosity!" Betty shrugged.

"Curiosity and—intention," Orme answered.

"I don't trust the intention!"

"I am helpless to prove it, unless you disclose the fair one's name."

"You really want to know?"

"Of course I want to know."

She regarded him doubtfully.

"I will engage to do my part if she is as nice as you are, Betty," he averred.

"That is a bargain?" she asked.

"Sure, it is a bargain."

"Very good then. Her name is—I'll not tell Carter."

"Not *now!*" Vendome laughed. "Whisper it in my ear, Betty."

"May I?" smiling at her husband. And when

he smiled back and nodded, she leaned over close to Orme and whispered: "It is Natalie Tremaine."

"H-u-m!" said Vendome. "Externally, at least, the lady measures up to your standard. So far, she is everything a man could desire. A promising start, Betty—a very promising start!"

"Is half the race!" his hostess added. "And having made a start it is for you to see that someone else doesn't win out."

"If the inner qualities equal the outer," he appended.

"I have no fear on that score," she said.

"And if she will permit me to see them," he added.

"That will depend on yourself. Moreover, no woman is likely to hide her good qualities before a man—particularly when that man is Orme Vendome."

"I am puffing up with vanity!" he smiled. "Don't you see me?"

A runabout went by—Blake and Mrs. Anstruther in it. Both bowed—Blake effusively pleasant. The Singletons bowed back very formally. Vendome glanced up and straight into Blake's eyes. Recognition was instant and mutual.

"Who are they?" he asked casually.

"Mr. Blake and a Mrs. Anstruther," Singleton replied; "they are transients of the English Colony."

"Friends of yours?"

"Distinctly not; we know them and that's all."

"Pretty sporty!"

"Distinctly, yes."

"H-u-m," said Vendome. The next moment they were driving into the Rosemont avenue. "Just the same fine old place!" he exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Think what is waiting for you," Betty whispered.

"I wonder," he replied.

"I also wonder!" she smiled.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Singleton, from the front seat.

"Secrets!" said his wife.

"Which Betty will tell you presently," Vendome appended. "Just now, it might embarrass me."

When they drove up to the house, Mrs. Tremaine was not visible, and Singleton and Vendome went on to their rooms to clean up.

Three-quarters of an hour later, bathed, shaved, and dressed for dinner, Vendome came downstairs, glanced into the living-room, and, finding it deserted, passed on to the front piazza.

It also was deserted—but on the lawn, amid the rose-hedges, Mrs. Tremaine was idly sauntering. He paused in contemplation—the woman—the flowers—the prospect; though it was the woman that held his

eyes, and the rest were but the background to the picture. Her lovely profile was toward him, and the slanting sun-rays were flaming through the coppery hair. Her gown was white, and, as she moved, one hand held it from the grass. She wore no jewels nor ornaments, and her only note of color was a bunch of red roses glowing at her waist. . . . And as he watched her, she slowly turned and looked directly at him. Instantly she smiled, and waved her hand. He waved back, and sprang down the steps to meet her.

“The Secretary was very considerate!” she greeted—giving him the tips of her fingers.

“The Secretary was very kind—it makes me venture to hope that others, also, will be kind,” he replied—and released her fingers, lingeringly and as though reluctant.

“What others?” she asked.

“You, in particular,” he answered.

“Certainly, I shall be kind—so long as you deserve it.”

“And when I don’t—if I don’t?”

“It will depend on the when, and the how, and—other things. At present, I am assuming that there won’t be any how nor when.”

“Nor other things!” he smiled. “I promise—so long as you are kind.”

“We’re back where we started,” she remarked.

“ Not quite, you have promised to be kind—I have promised to deserve it.”

“ Not exactly—you have promised to deserve it, and, in consideration, I have promised to be kind.”

“ It amounts to the same thing.”

“ In effect, yes; but the order of *doing* is different.” She drew a half-blown bud from her corsage.

“ Do you wish it?” she asked.

“ If you think that I deserve it.”

She shot him a glance upward through her lashes.

“ What do you think, Leander!” she laughed.

“ That I’ve just breasted the Hellespont to reach you—and am entitled to my reward.”

“ You shall have it,” handing him the rose.

He took it and drew it through his lapel.

“ For a rose a kingdom once was lost,” he said.

“ And you, having no kingdom to lose, will forfeit what?”

“ I have already lost!” he answered.

“ Lost what, my lord?” she laughed.

“ It mixes not with levity, my lady. ‘Tis a serious business, truly, a most serious business.”

“ It is too warm for serious business, fair sir,” she answered, and curtsied low. “ Let us return to the house—methinks the hour for refreshment has arrived.”

He swept the grass with his imaginary plume,

and, bowing low, his hand upon his heart, offered his arm.

"Wilt do me the honor, fair Countess?" he asked.

"My lord is most gracious!" she replied, and resting her fingers lightly on his doublet sleeve, they proceeded in stately fashion across the lawn to the mansion.

There he faced about, took her fingers gently in his own, and, walking backward, led her up the steps to the piazza. She curtsied again; once more he swept the ground with his plume, and bowed low.

"What in Heaven's name is the matter with you two?" said Singleton. "You're bobbing around like marionettes.—Have you become imbeciles?"

"I think *I* have—trying to courtesy in these narrow skirts!" Natalie laughed.

"I noticed that you haven't lost your beautiful sylph-like figure!" Singleton remarked, as he shook hands.

"Which you should not have noticed!" Natalie replied.

"I couldn't well miss it, not being blind—and still less could Vendome, being even closer."

"Speak for yourself, old man," interposed Vendome.

"I did—for you also, being your host, and considerate."

"Suppose you stop *being* anything for the present," said Natalie.

"I'll do it!"

"You will do what, Carter?" Betty inquired, as she joined them.

"Stop making embarrassing remarks," Natalie exclaimed.

Betty turned to her husband inquiringly.

"I'll tell you about it later, in the privacy of our apartment," he confided to her. "It was shocking!"

Betty raised her hands in pretended horror.

"Let us go in to dinner and forget it," she said. "Come, Natalie, we will go together, the nasty men may follow."

"Isn't that a new picture, Betty, the portrait yonder?" Vendome asked presently, nodding toward the opposite wall, where a young officer, in Continental uniform, looked down from his tarnished gold frame.

"Yes," she said. "I must tell you about the Marquis. We found him, a short time ago, in the attic—packed away behind the accumulations of generations. Why he should ever have been put there, we can't imagine. Maybe it happened in war-time, before General Sheridan placed a guard about the house and gave Mrs. Singleton the written order requiring all Federal soldiers to spare the place. Some of the Yankees were pretty free with

their swords on our ancestors' portraits, you know. Well, one day last spring, during a general cleaning up of the attic, the picture was brought to light; dusty and tarnished by age. On the back, is this inscription:

“ ‘Portrait of Adrien, Marquis de Chavenis, Lieutenant Colonel of Engineers, Continental Army, attached to the staff of Major General the Marquis de Lafayette. Presented by him, August 14, 1784, as a parting gift and in token of his esteem and affection, to his comrade-in-arms, Colonel George Singleton, of the Virginia Line.’ ”

“ How very interesting! ” said Vendome. “ I suppose it is a Peale? ”

Betty nodded affirmatively.

“ What happened to the Marquis, when the French Revolution came along? Did he escape the guillotine of the Terror? ”

“ I’ve looked up the record,” said she. “ He did not escape. He was one of the last to be beheaded.”

“ Peace to his ashes! ” said Vendome, raising his glass to the portrait. “ We can well take it that he died as became a gentleman of France.—And that reminds me of a rather queer incident that happened the other night. It may interest you—shall I relate it? ”

“ You are ordered to relate it,” said Betty.

VIII

THE SCOTSWOMAN'S TALE

"WELL, once upon a time, that is to say, last week," Vendome began, "I dined with a friend, who is a paying-guest of a dear old lady. Several others were at the table—also paying-guests I presume; one, a Mrs. McIvor, was a tall, gray-haired woman of exceedingly striking appearance. She wore dark glasses, and, I learned afterward, was blind. As a matter of fact, she had no eye-balls. During the course of the meal, the conversation turned upon jewels, and presently some one referred to the recent sale, in Paris, of the Crown Jewels of France.

"'Not all the jewels were sold,' Mrs. McIvor remarked.

"'No,' said I. 'A large portion, I believe, disappeared during the French Revolution—stolen, or carried away by some loyal friend of the King—and have never been recovered.'

"Mrs. McIvor nodded.

"'And for them the French Government has searched for years, and is still searching,' she said; 'and, all the while, they lie concealed in this country.'

"'Where?' exclaimed the hostess.

"'Where they have been for more than a hundred years—in Virginia; hidden and lost. The

man who brought them to America, and concealed them against a time when a Bourbon would once again rule in France, died in their defense, and his secret died with him.'

"How did you learn it?" I asked.

"I dreamed it."

"You mean that you are a clairvoyant—have the power of clairvoyancy?" I corrected.

"I think so; at least, it has been tested scores of times, and the vision, if it is a vision, never yet lied."

"Does the vision always respond?" I asked.

"It does not. It is not a trance; the vision comes like a flash—even as it came to me here, while you were speaking. I have absolutely no control over it. I never see things, in answer to a request. It passes in an instant—but the impression remains with me for years. I cannot explain it—it just is. Possibly, the fact that I have been sightless from birth may have something to do with the power, and with the vividness of the vision." She turned to me. "You, sir, are a diplomat, and as such would be interested in returning the jewels to France—shall I tell you what I saw?"

"Pray do!" said I—and all the table listened.

"Mrs. McIvor paused a moment, and then began:

"I shall give you briefly the directions how to

find the jewels.—Somewhere in Virginia is a place called Land's End. It is uncultivated. Once it was owned by a Frenchman. The house is still standing, though fallen to decay. The hall runs directly through the house and opens, at the rear, upon a square porch. Around for a considerable distance is turf. Directly in line with the rear doorway, and ninety feet away, is a huge chestnut tree. One hundred and fifty-three feet north-west of this tree is a depression in the turf. In the centre of the depression, at the depth of six feet, is a large stone. It covers the entrance to a cave eight or ten feet deep. After forty feet, the cave sinks abruptly to a new level twelve feet lower. Beyond this point, seventy-five feet, is the end of the cave; and in a recess cut in the rock at the height of two feet, with the stones fitting accurately around it and over it, is a copper box containing the jewels. But you will have water to overcome. The lower level of the cave is now filled with a subterranean stream.'

"Do you know that Land's End is in Virginia?" I asked.

"The vision told me. When I saw the place, I knew it was Virginia. Do I make my meaning plain?"

"What part of Virginia?" I persisted.

"She shook her head. 'I do not know. Land's End would suggest the coast, yet I didn't see the ocean.' "

"That is peculiar!" Singleton broke in. "There is an old, abandoned place called Land's End—I think it's Land's End—over near the mountains. It adjoins a tract of mine, where I go every autumn to hunt. It is, as I remember, occupied by negro squatters. The house is almost tumbled down, and the land looks as though it had not been cultivated for a hundred years. Much of it, indeed, is in virgin timber. May it be your Land's End?" he smiled.

"Like enough!" replied Vendome. "It is just as tangible as any other place—and fits the story in two respects. Now find the depression in the ground, and the stone, and the subterranean stream—and then the rest will bear looking into."

"Don't you believe in visions?" asked Natalie.

"Not until they are proven to be true."

"Skeptic!" she laughed. "They aren't visions then, they're facts."

"I believe very much in some visions," he replied.

"Meaning Betty and me!" she mocked. "O wise young man! However, if you're unbelieving, why did you take the bother to relate it, or to remember the exact distances? 'Ninety feet from the house—one hundred and fifty-three feet northwest of the chestnut tree,' and so on."

"Merely, as I said at first, because it was a queer incident. Why do *you* remember the distances?"

"Because I believe," said she—"at least, to the extent of investigation."

"Bravo, Natalie!" Singleton exclaimed; "you have the courage of your notions. I'll look into this matter of Land's End—because *you* are interested. I have the old title deeds to the mountain property. I'll get them; they will give the adjoiners, and possibly the names of the tracts. If it is Land's End, we'll go up and take a look at it. Maybe you can show Mr. Vendome the depression, and the stone, and the cave, and the subterranean stream."

"You may be sure I'll look, and eagerly!" said Orme. "It's not want of eyesight, it's want of present faith. What I can't understand, Carter, is why a property, abandoned for generations, hasn't long since been sold by the county for arrears of taxes."

"Because you don't live in Virginia—it never sells anything for arrears of taxes. The supposition is that if the land isn't worth paying taxes on, it isn't worth buying. Excuse me, I will get the deeds."

Presently he returned—an open parchment in his hand, a queer look on his face.

"Here," said he, "is the Singleton patent, dated in 1783. It names Land's End as the adjoiner on the west, and the owner of Land's End as Adrien, Marquis de Chavenis, Lieutenant Colonel, Continental Army."

"The portrait!" exclaimed Betty.

Her husband nodded. "Did the Marquis de Chavenis have anything to do with the disappearance of the Crown Jewels of France? Is there a connection between the Jewels, the Marquis, and Land's End? What do you think of it, Orme?"

"That it will bear looking into," Vendome answered.

"The skeptic is converted!" Natalie laughed.

"Not converted—simply open to conviction, and ready to be convinced."

"Very well!" said Singleton. "We will go up to the place and investigate on—Thursday; I can't get away before then."

"By 'we' you mean all of us, of course?" said Betty.

"Certainly, my dear—if Orme doesn't object. It is really his party, you know."

"I don't object in the least," said Vendome—and smiled frankly at Mrs. Tremaine.

"It is very possible that I shall not be here to take part in your quest," Natalie remarked. "I may return to town on Thursday."

Betty shot a quick look of inquiry at her friend.

"If by waiting is to chance a loss of Mrs. Tremaine, then we'll go to-morrow," said Singleton. "Business may wait instead."

IX

RECOGNIZED

THEY had their coffee on the piazza. The Singletons remained a while; then Carter went in to his accumulated mail; Betty followed him a little later.

"We seem to have been deserted!" Natalie smiled.

"It's particularly thoughtful of them," said Vendome.

"I had not meant it quite that way!" she flashed. "I should call it thoughtless of them."

"Thoughtless is better than unthoughtful."

"I'm not going into etymological niceties of language; you know precisely what I mean."

"You will leave it to me then?"

"To your ordinary common sense, yes."

"Very good, let us take it as you said; they were thoughtless. Why were they thoughtless?"

"Why is the moon round?" she laughed.

He drew out his cigarette case and passed it across.

"Nevertheless, it is very pleasant to be with you again," he said.

She leaned forward and took a cigarette, watching him, the while, with an amused smile.

" You are just like the rest," she reflected. " I did think that you were a bit different, but, alas! my doll is stuffed with saw-dust, after all."

" It's something to be your doll!" he said, with affected seriousness.

" Oh, you beautiful doll! You great big, beautiful doll!" she sang.

" Am I beautiful?" he asked.

" Beautiful as a dream! And *apropos* of dreams, what, seriously, do you think of Mrs. McIvor's vision?"

" It is singular, when taken with the Marquis, the portrait, Land's End, and all the other coincidences."

" If we should find the Jewels, you would restore them to the French Government?"

" Certainly, if they are the Crown Jewels of France."

" But if there is nothing in the box to identify them?"

" The Jewels themselves will be their own best identification—their cutting, setting, and so on."

" There is a record of them extant?"

" Yes!" he said. " In the first place, the famous jewels are perfectly well known to the experts in the trade. They would recognize them at a glance. But there is something even more definite. I spent an afternoon, in the Library of Congress, looking up

the matter. I found that the loss of a large portion of the Jewels is conceded. In 1791, by Act of the Assemblée Nationale, a list of all the Crown Jewels,—at that time kept in the Garde-Meuble—was made by M. Delattre, a Deputy from the Department of the Somme. This report and list, containing over three hundred pages, is in existence. One year later, the Garde-Meuble was looted in the night, and the major portion of the Jewels stolen, including the famous Regent diamond, and the equally famous Red Emerald, the signet of the Kings of France since Francis the First. Only two of the thieves were captured. To save their lives, they revealed where their share of the plunder was hidden. Some years later, an anonymous letter came to the authorities to the effect that if they would dig at the foot of a certain tree, in the Allée des Veuves in the Champs Elysées, they would find the Regent. They dug there, and they found it. The Red Emerald has never been found. So, you see, there is an absolutely accurate list and description by which every jewel can be identified when recovered. When identified, they are the property of France.”

“ Why is it called the ‘ Red Emerald ’? ” asked Natalie.

“ Because, when the light rays fall on it at a certain acute angle, its green is mottled with red.”

"It seems a shame to give it and the others back," Natalie said regretfully.

"*Noblesse oblige!*" he smiled. "However, in return you can count on a few Grand Crosses of the Legion, not to mention a lot of fulsome articles in the newspapers. I shall have to wait for my Cross until I am out of the service—or get a special Act passed."

"Why?" said Natalie.

"Because the Constitution doesn't allow an official of the Government to accept a foreign decoration, unless specially permitted by Congress."

"Ridiculous!" she exclaimed.

"Now, it is; but when the Constitution was adopted, in 1787, the nation was frightfully opposed to the frumpery and foolishness of Kings and Courts. However, we are anticipating just a trifle. We have to get the Jewels before we can get the decoration—and I don't, for one moment, entertain the notion that the expedition to Land's End will eventuate in anything but an exceedingly pleasant outing, in exceedingly delightful company. I shall have Mrs. McIvor to thank for a very charming time as the result of her vision."

"How do you account for the vision?" Natalie asked.

Vendome looked at her questioningly. Was it possible she was tempted to take it seriously?

"As the vaporings of an old lady—who, by long years of blindness, has flashes of—sight, let us say, which she has come to believe. It is an innocent faculty, which does no one harm and entertains. I don't pretend to explain the vision."

"She said, didn't she, that the vision never lied?"

"Yes, but how does she know—she is blind! Moreover, if all her visions are as beautifully indefinite as this one, how can she ever know whether they were true or false!—In the State of Virginia is a place called Land's End! That is the starting point. There may be dozens of Land's Ends in Virginia, either named so in the original patent, or named so since in their deeds, or called so by the owners without having been put into the deeds. She has always the loophole: 'You have not the right Land's End; when you do find it, you will find the Jewels—if you can come at them.' Do you realize that, the cave having been attained, you must divert the subterranean stream, or build a coffer-dam around the far wall, before you can get to the place where the Jewels are supposed to be hidden? That will require an expert engineer, workmen, and quite some time—and, after all is done, there may be no cavity in the rock, or the box may not be in it."

"Mature reflection is cooling the earlier impulse!" she commented. "You seemed ready

enough, after Carter had found his deed, to look into the matter—to be convinced."

"I am readier than ever, dear Mrs. Tremaine, since you are to be in the party. I tell you, frankly, I don't have the remotest notion of finding the cave."

"You dash my enthusiasm so early!" she complained. "It is such a beautiful vision to verify:—the Crown Jewels of France! It tops Deadman's Rock, Treasure Island, and all the other tales of buried jewels."

"And, like them, it also is a myth!" Vendome laughed. "I prefer a treasure that's alert—glorious femininity."

"Say that last word again!"

"Femininity!"

"Good! Now say—statistician."

"What *is* this?" he asked.

"Say it!"

"Statistician, and also truly rural. Any more catch words?" he laughed.

"No," said she, "your vocal organs are working perfectly; your enunciation is extremely good."

"I am delighted to hear you say so—sometime soon, I shall probably tell you something of exceeding importance, and it is good to know that it can't be misunderstood."

"Why not tell me now?" she asked.

“Because it would be a bit precipitate.”

“Surely, that will not hamper you, Mr. Vendome!—Moreover, after some thousands of years of acquaintance more or less intimate, I should not style anything you could do now ‘precipitate.’”

“I thought you forbade me to presume on the past?”

“To presume, yes—but presumption is very different from precipitateness.”

“It is to the same effect, with either, one is apt to come a nasty cropper. It depends entirely on the disposition of the other party at the particular time.”

“You don’t trust my disposition, Mr. Vendome?”

“Generally, yes—specifically, as to the present matter, I am fearful; so fearful, indeed, that I don’t dare risk it prematurely.”

“Faint heart, you know!” she smiled.

“It is not a question of heart, it is a question of expediency. Perhaps you will advise me in the premises?”

“Methinks, sir, you are not sure of yourself. I should advise you to inquire within, before inquiring without, and to take time before doing the latter.”

“A warning?” he asked.

“As you wish,” she replied.

“H-u-m! I wish it not, however——”

" You will make the best of it, *n'est ce pas, monsieur!* And possibly, by diplomatic methods, you may——"

" I shall be most diplomatic—provided always that I am able to withstand temptation."

" A diplomat should never be tempted to anything but the expedient course."

" Granted!" he assented. " Only, it is exceedingly difficult occasionally to determine just what is the expedient course. There *are* times when the short cut is best for all concerned."

" Well, you have had your warning," she admonished. " Now let us talk of something else."

" Oh, very well!" he smiled.—" Did you have a pleasant ride down yesterday?"

" No, I didn't."

" What was the matter—just late, or an accident?"

" Neither. I was alone."

" I am sorry that I wasn't along!"

" So am I," she replied.

" Really?"

" Yes, really. I confess I even wished for you."

" What was the matter?" said he seriously.

" There were some ill-bred men in the car."

" What did they do?"

" Stared, most impudently. A woman gets ac-

customed to a certain amount of staring by men, but this was too much."

"They didn't venture to speak to you?"

"No—probably because I didn't seem to notice them. I was reading; they were at one end of the chair-car, I was at the other, so they couldn't sit and stare; they had to walk by. Nevertheless, it was most irritating and annoying. They wouldn't have dared it, if you, or Chambers Fitzgerald, or any other of my friends, had been with me."

"Not likely!" he said quickly. "You didn't know any of them, I suppose?"

"I pointed them out to Betty—they got off at Tarrington. Their names are Hudson, Anstruther and Blake.—Blake was the most offensive."

"H-u-m!" said Vendome slowly.

"Do you wonder that I have taken a violent dislike to Mr. Blake?"

"Not in the least."

"Moreover, he asked to be presented this morning at the Club, and I had to endure him a few minutes. My *not* seeing him yesterday worked distinctly against me to-day. I couldn't help myself, except by signalling Betty to depart, which she did, and Blake had the cold nerve to attend us to our carriage."

"Of course! He saw his advantage and used it. A pretty woman is his god."

" You know him? " Natalie exclaimed.

" I knew him slightly several years ago—and know more *of* him. I think you'll not be troubled with him, so long as I am here."

" I'm glad! " she said, with relief. " I didn't want to risk embroiling Carter with him on my account; they are residents here, members of the Club and the Hunt. I was thinking of cutting my visit short."

" You will stay now? "

She nodded. " For a while, yes."

" What is Blake doing here? " he asked.

" He is of the English Colony, the *outré* lot; no questions asked concerning them, their wives, or their doings, so they don't become actually offensive."

" Hum! " drawled Vendome. " What does Mrs. Blake look like, I wonder."

" Blonde—or rather blondine; with a beautiful complexion of enamel and paint; also plenty of length—rangy, that is—and dash. Is she the one whom you know? " Natalie laughed.

" Not exactly. The Mrs. Blake—that-used-to-be was quite the opposite; small, finely formed, with raven tresses, and a peach-blow complexion, both of which seemed to be natural."

" How long ago was *she*? "

" It was—six years—or thereabout."

" Blake has been here, Betty says, three years."

"And I assume," Vendome smiled, "that the present Mrs. Blake came with him!"

"I am not able to say.—Betty!" as their hostess passed the doorway, "will you come here a moment? Mr. Vendome wants to know something of Mr. Blake; it seems that he knew him, or of him, in Europe."

"What did you know?" asked Betty.

"Very little—" Vendome began.

"That was good," his hostess threw in. "Ditto here. But then, as I don't care for him or his friends, I'm a prejudiced witness. He has been a resident of Tarrington for about three years. I believe that he knew some of the sporty set on the other side; and as he has, or spends as though he has, plenty of money, no questions are asked regarding the past. And as there are others in the same boat, he readily found congenial companions."

"Was this Mrs. Blake with him when he came to Tarrington?" Natalie asked.

"She was—stunning figure, enamel, paint, blondine, *et cetera*."

"And she used to be small, Mr. Vendome says; with raven hair and a peach-blown complexion that didn't come off," Natalie remarked.

"Quite likely. At present, it is Mrs. Anstruther; last year, it was Mrs. Hudson; I don't recall who it was the year before—his wife, maybe."

"The man is not actively offensive, I take it, just—undesirable?" said Vendome.

"Undesirable to some people—to others not. Among the men, he seems popular—he is a good man's man, they say. Moreover, had he known that Natalie was a friend of mine, I doubt very much if he would have been so free with his stares. Personally, I must admit, he has always been polite to me."

"Do you exchange visits with the Blakes?"

"We did when they first came—formally and once. Every one did. We have not continued it, however—deliberately discontinued it, as the Blakes had sense enough to perceive. Carter sees him at the Club, and in the hunting-field; and, I think, likes him; at least, he doesn't actively dislike him."

"I can't imagine Carter Singleton actively disliking any one!" Vendome smiled. "He is quite too calmly superior."

Betty smiled back, appreciatively.

"There are two sets here, you know; the old residents and the new people. We take up whom it pleases us to take up, the rest we know only in a casual way—the Blakes and their particular associates are in the latter class."

"If you people are talking secrets," said Singleton, from the doorway, "better cut it out—I'm coming to join you."

"We're not talking secrets," said Betty; "we are discussing the Blakes."

"Profitable employment for idle moments!"
Singleton smiled.

"Orme knew Blake in London, it seems—when Mrs. Blake was small and a brunette."

"Which only proves that he has acquired another Mrs. Blake since."

"It might prove anything," Betty remarked.
"Warren Alstair might supplement your story, Orme, if he would."

"Who is Warren Alstair?" Vendome asked.

"The M. F. H., and an Englishman—maybe you knew him, also, on the other side?"

Mrs. Tremaine watched Vendome, casually but intently. Would he remember?

"I knew a Warren Alstair, a Captain in the Fiftieth Hussars," he answered. "'Devil' Alstair, they called him. I heard, after I had been transferred to Berlin, that he had thrown up his commission and gone to the States. He can't be your M. F. H., however."

"He is likely the same," Singleton answered.
"'Devil' Alstair is the name that came here with him.—As fine a chap as ever lived."

Suddenly Vendome's glance shifted to Natalie.
And she knew that he had remembered.

X

ALONE AND TOGETHER

NATALIE so managed, however, that Vendome had no opportunity alone with her that evening. Since he recollects where and under what circumstances he had met her, she was prepared to face it out—only she wanted a little time to think. Not that thinking could do any good; but she wanted to think, nevertheless—and to postpone the matter, a bit longer.

There was nothing about which to be particularly concerned. The episode was over and done with years ago; and it would not be especially embarrassing, but for the unexpected reappearance, at this time, of Warren Alstair. And it might not be, even then. It would depend on his attitude, and hers, when they met; whether he had forgotten the past, or whether he thought that he still remembered it.

He was handsomer than ever, she admitted. He was still a bachelor. He appeared to be all that was popular, and—well, a woman ever has a soft place in her heart for the first man that loved her.

She lay awake a long while that night—and, when she did finally fall asleep, it was with no more definite notion than she had on the piazza. She

would let things drift—along the line of least resistance—and see what happened. There was the alternative of a hasty departure—to get away from Alstair; yet that did not appeal to her, especially as they were booked for Land's End in the morning.

And the morning dawned with leaden sky. It was raining heavily, and the clouds lowered with no promise of a break.

"No Land's End this morning, I'm afraid," said Singleton, as they went in to breakfast. "Can you wait, Natalie, until the weather clears?"

"It depends on how long that will be," said Natalie. "Judging from the steady down-pour, it is going to be indefinitely wet."

"It won't flood the cave away—if it's there!" Betty laughed.

"Therefore, we may postpone the expedition with impunity, if Mrs. Tremaine is willing to wait for better weather?" said Singleton, inquiringly. "If not, we will start in an hour."

"For Heaven's sake, dear, have some compassion!" Betty exclaimed. "We shall need a boat—and there isn't a boat in Tarrington."

"By all means wait!" Natalie smiled. "You can go to the mountains without me——"

"We don't want to go without you!" Vendome interposed.

"We want you to stay," added Betty.

"Well,—I'll stay a day or two, at any rate," Natalie agreed—"How long will it take at the cave?"

"To locate the cave? About twenty minutes, if Vendome's information is accurate," said Singleton.—"To come at the Jewels?—God knows, I don't! We shall have something of an engineering problem before us then."

"Why not let the Jewels rest?" said Vendome.
"Why go after them at all?"

"Orme!" Betty cried protestingly.

"Why not?" he repeated. "They were the property of the Capets; they have been buried there—assuming they are there—for over a hundred years; we will be bound in honor to restore them to the French Government, as the legal successor of the Capets.—So why disturb the Jewels? Why not cut the whole thing?"

"I am astonished at you!" said Betty.

Vendome waved his hand impersonally. "Carter doesn't want to take the time to go to Land's End; and Mrs. Tremaine wants to go to Washington, to her dentist, or her dressmaker, or some one equally important. The Jewels will keep."

"Undoubtedly they will keep," Singleton smiled; "but our curiosity, Orme,—not to mention Natalie's and Betty's—will not keep; it will drive

us to Land's End. So it shall be up to Natalie whether we wait, or whether we go at once."

"As a reward for admitting that you may have even a little curiosity, I'll wait!" Natalie laughed. "I should have waited anyway, but now——"

"You are willing to wait a month if necessary," Singleton interjected. "You see, what it does to humor a woman."

"In the non-essentials!" Vendome added. "If one were to humor her in the really essentials, what wouldn't she do for him."

"It must be a him, however," Betty observed.

"And he must do it rather more adroitly than Mr. Vendome's bald remark," Natalie retorted, with the little toss of her head—that she remembered having done only when she saw Orme's smile and nod.

"What does the nod signify?" Betty asked.

"It signifies recollection," Vendome replied.

"A pleasant recollection?"

"Yes," with a look at Natalie, "a very pleasant recollection."

"All of it?" Natalie inquired.

"Undoubtedly! The more so, as I look back—and then forward."

"Do you have an idea what he is talking about?" said Betty.

"Not in the least," replied Natalie.

"I was talking of the past, the present—and the future!" smiled Vendome.

"Do tell!" scoffed Betty.

"Shall I?" said he, looking at Natalie.

"By all means," she replied, "if you think you can finish before the rain stops."

"Are you a seer?" Betty asked.

"I'm serious at any rate," Vendome answered.

"Orme!" cried his hostess. "I'm ashamed of you."

"I'm rather ashamed of myself!" he laughed.
"I promise not to do it again."

Singleton pushed back his chair and got up.

"In which event, and if the ladies will excuse us," he said, "Orme and I will have a look at the horses."

"If it clears by luncheon, shall we start for the mountains?" Betty asked.

"It won't clear by luncheon, nor by night either," he answered. "However, wait until luncheon," and with a smile at his wife, he went out.—Vendome smiled at Natalie, and went with him.

Betty looked at her friend a trifle inquiringly, but said nothing.

Natalie slowly sipped her coffee, and said nothing.

Presently Betty spoke.

"We might have gone along to the stables," she said tentatively; "only, the stables are not a pleasant place on such a morning."

"They are so very smelly," Natalie agreed.
"Moreover, I didn't want to go."

"I thought as much!" remarked her hostess.

"I'm putting off something; procrastinating the inevitable," said Natalie, toying with her fork.

"Is it inevitable?" Betty inquired.

The other nodded. "Mr. Vendome has just recollected where and how he met me—years ago. I would much rather that he had not remembered."

"Then I'm sure that he won't remember, if you let him infer your wish in the matter."

"It is the fact that he knows, which is embarrassing—and he can't infer himself into ignorance; and I shall know that he knows."

"It need never be alluded to."

"I shall allude to it myself—when we are alone," Natalie replied. Then she paused, and Betty waited. . . . "You are wondering why it is embarrassing?" she said. "It is because the circumstances under which we met were not—normal; in fact, they were altogether abnormal." Again she paused—longer, this time. . . . "It was this way," she resumed presently. "You may remember that shortly after we left school—it was the following autumn—I went abroad with my aunt and uncle, the Follansbees. He had some mission for this government that took him to several of the capitals

of Europe. We remained a year or more—beginning with London and ending with London. Shortly after we went over, I met a man, who—well, I was young and foolish and impressionable, and I grew fond of him, or I thought I did, which was just the same thing then. My aunt imagined it was a passing affair, and paid little attention to it, beyond a word of caution. My uncle, being occupied with his business, did not notice it. Then we went to Paris—and presently my friend turned up there for a few days; his duties would not permit a longer absence. We went to Berlin, the same thing happened there—and at Brussels, likewise. We came back to London, and there my aunt grew alarmed—and cabled my father. Now father was possessed by an altogether unreasonable hatred of Englishmen—a relic of some youthful experience, I believe—and he took the next steamer across. On his arrival, he went straight to the American Embassy, and had it appeal to the War Office—the man, in question, was an officer in the army and amenable to orders. Moreover, on my part, it was only a passing fancy of youth, and already I was recovering from my infatuation and precipitateness. I was quite willing to be reasonable—though making a show of resistance for appearance's sake. I was frank with the man and told him exactly what were my feelings. I fancied that he,

too, was wearying of the affair, and was quite ready to be released. Mr. Vendome came into the matter as the representative of the Embassy."

"I can understand the embarrassment of his recollection," said Betty.

"That isn't the only embarrassment," Natalie added. "The man in the case was Warren Alstair."

"Great Heaven!" Betty gasped. "You can't mean it!—I asked him to call. Why didn't you stop me?"

"How could I? Besides, it won't make any difference—the episode ended years ago.—Only, it is a bit awkward that he and Mr. Vendome should happen to turn up again at the same time."

"Maybe Mr. Alstair didn't recognize you."

"Do you think it is likely?" Natalie smiled.

"No, it isn't," Betty admitted.

"He recognized me," said Natalie. "He thought he recognized me when he passed us at the Club—he came after us, with your handkerchief, to make sure."

"When you parted—was it as friends?"

"Yes—somewhat constrained, but friendly."

"Do you think that he really cared very much?"

"He seemed to care at the time. He cared enough to come to Paris and Berlin."

"May it not have been your money—as well as yourself—that attracted him?" Betty asked.

"Possibly—that was before the Jumonvilles lost everything."

"I'm not minimizing your beauty, but——"

"The chances are entirely natural!" Natalie admitted. "English officers, who are younger sons, are not unknown as fortune hunters."

"He has never married," Betty observed; "and he threw up his commission a number of years ago, and took to ranching in the States."

"I hadn't anything to do with it!" Natalie smiled. "It isn't on my account that he is a bachelor still. Nevertheless, I'm glad my first affair was with one who proves such a favorite and so popular. I feel, after a manner, justified.—Of course, Betty, there is much that I haven't told you—and shan't; just be assured that there wasn't anything very bad—and that I was very young."

"My dear, I understand," said Betty. "Shall I let Mr. Alstair come or shall I not?"

"Let him come—only, I hope that he will come when Mr. Vendome isn't here.—However——" she ended with a shrug.

Breakfast was finished now, and they went out on the piazza. The rain was falling with a gentle steadiness that gave small hope of clearing.

"It looks very unpromising," Natalie observed.

"I think that we are in for a 'settlement'

rain—as the negroes say,” Betty replied.

“I wonder if we shall find the cave?” said Natalie. “The thing has a queer fascination for me—to think that the lost Crown Jewels of France are hidden in Virginia. Can’t you imagine the Valois, and the Bourbons, and their mistresses—Francis the First and Henry the Second, Diana of Poitiers, Marie de Medicis, Henry of Navarre, Queen Margot, Gabrielle d’Etampes, and all the others, Louis the Fourteenth and de Montespan, Louis the Fifteenth and Du Barry! Can’t you picture them, all resplendent in their gorgeousness?”

“What would you do with them—the Jewels, I mean?” Betty asked.

The other laughed, “I don’t know, wear them, I suppose, like d’Etampes and the rest of the women.”

“Who would be the King?”

“The King!” said Natalie, gayly. “I haven’t determined—yet. Maybe there won’t be a King.”

“Then there can’t be any Crown Jewels.”

“True—I’ve spoiled the picture; you’ve set me right. I’ll give the King to you, Betty—Carter Singleton will make a charming *your Majesty*.”

“For me—yes, but where is *your King*? ”

“One King is enough. I decline to set up a rival.”

“How would Mr. Alstair do? ”

"I thought that you were a partisan of Mr. Vendome!" Natalie smiled.

"I am.—That is why I asked."

"Concerned?"

"A little. You never can tell what a woman will do when an old flame appears."

"No," Natalie reflected; "you never can tell—I wish you could." Then she laughed. "You great foolish! Of course you can tell what I shall do—nothing, with either of them; assuredly nothing with Mr. Alstair—nor with Mr. Vendome either."

"Natalie Tremaine, do you realize that you are twenty-six years old and——"

"Divorced?" Natalie added. "I do."

——and," continued Betty with a gesture of disaffirmance, "in the perfection of your beauty, a beauty that is nigh flawless——"

"My dear Betty!" Natalie cried. "Save my blushes—and be sensible."

"The blushes are very becoming, my dear," Betty answered imperturbably. "If you could see yourself at this moment, impersonally, you would be enthusiastically with me. Orme saw you, you may believe—he hadn't eyes for anything else; he even forgot his coffee. And when a man forgets his coffee *at breakfast*, and looks at the woman across the table, believe me, it means something."

"It usually means that he doesn't like the coffee!" Natalie laughed,—"or has indigestion."

"It didn't mean the usual, in this case."

"I trust not—both for your coffee, and for Mr. Vendome's digestion."

"The former is above criticism—thanks to Aunt 'Manda; the latter is perfect, according to Orme himself last night. Therefore——"

"Oh, very well! Have it as you wish, Betty dear. Did he look at me *very* lingeringly?"

"You know how he looked. I noticed you smiling at him several times. There isn't much that escapes those limpid eyes of yours."

"Limpid is quite a word!" laughed Natalie.

"Pellucid, then, if you like it better."

"No, that is rather straining for effect. Limpid is amply expressive."

"Don't turn them too limpidly upon the gentleman who approaches," Betty remarked—she was facing the front.

"Who is it?" said Natalie, her back to the drive.

"It looks like Warren Alstair!"

"Coming here!" Natalie said, swinging around.

"To see Carter, possibly," Betty suggested.
"We will send him on to the stables. You go in from the porch, then there won't be any excuse for him to linger."

"No," said Natalie slowly; "this is a good time for us to have it out—the men are away, I've got to meet him sometime, so let him come up."

"Do you want me to disappear before he comes?"

"If you don't mind, dear; I think it might be better, if I saw him alone—for a little while. You can know when to come by my changing chairs. So long as I'm *here*, stay away."

"I go," said Betty. "When you want me, I'll be on hand."

A negro boy ran out, and stood by the steps.

"Good morning, Bob," said Alstair, as he rode up. "Is your master here?"

Bob touched his cap, and laid his hand on the bridle.

"Mawnin' seh!" he said. "Marster Singleton, seh? I don't know, seh; I jes' cum back from town. I'll see ef——"

"Never mind!" said Alstair, and swinging down he sprang lightly up the stairs. He had seen Mrs. Tremaine on the piazza—and that she was alone.

Natalie, her face toward the house, did not seem to have noticed him—she was absorbed in a book, and did not look up until he addressed her.

"May I come over, Mrs. Tremaine?" he asked, walking slowly down the piazza.

"Oh!" she said, lowering her book. "Why, how do you do, Mr. Alstair. Certainly, come over." She held out her hand.

"It is scarcely the hour for a visit," he apologized, bowing over her fingers.

"Won't you sit down!"

"Indeed, I will," whirling a chair around—"for a few minutes, that is; I'm on the hunt of Mr. Singleton."

"I think he and Mr. Vendome went down to the stables," she replied—and watching him carefully, as she said it.

"Then I can stay longer!" he smiled, not appearing to notice the Vendome. "He is good for an hour at least, and I'm good until he returns, if you can endure me."

"Are you very hard to endure, Mr. Alstair?" she laughed.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Sometimes—and for some people—I fancy that I am."

"And for the most part, and for the most people, it is the reverse, you would think—being, of course, impartial?"

"I hope so!" he smiled.

"You are too humble—or is it assumed?"

"I'm growing humble with the years. Once was when I thought the earth moved for me."

"Was that so very long ago?"

"A matter of—eight years. Then I began to see my delusion, and it has been growing more evident ever since."

"You must have become abnormally sensible!" she smiled.

"Or insensible," he amended—"though, in this respect, there is small difference between them. To be sensible, means to be insensible."

"What a cynical view to have of life!" she exclaimed.

"It's not cynical, it's *life!* The trouble is that not every one realizes it. All, or most all, come to it in time—but not at the same time."

"Everybody is not the same age—nor with the same degree of experience," she remarked.

"Nor with the same degree of intellect—nor of sense," he agreed. "In other words, it depends on the individual."

"Which is a wise and most profound observation!" she laughed.

"It is early in the morning," he defended. "Don't be too critical." Then he looked at her reflectively. "You used to be——" He broke off significantly and very deliberately. "This is a fine place, Mrs. Tremaine," he said.

She understood. He wished to assure her that

he had recognized her—but he would not refer again to the past unless she deliberately opened the way. The next move was to be hers. She looked at him with frank appreciation. It was what she had hoped for—certainly, not what she had expected.

“It is, indeed,” she replied—“the finest place in Virginia, to my mind.”

“This is your first visit to Tarrington?” he asked.

“My first in three years,” she answered, knowing what was in his mind.

“That explains why we have not met *before*.” There was just a shade of stress on the last word. “I have been in Tarrington a bit less than three years. I stopped here, one day, to see a friend—and I’ve been here ever since. I’m English, as you doubtless have observed!” he smiled.

“One would never know it from your intonation,” she smiled back. “Your English is as pure as a native-born American’s, and the monocle is absent.”

“How are my clothes?” he asked.

“They are not in the least eccentric nor misfit.”

“Then nothing remains for me but to be naturalized.”

“Your fate might be far worse.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” he said; “very much agree with you, indeed. The six years I have

been in America have been pleasant years, after a fashion; though three of them were passed amid totally different surroundings from Tarrington."

"Yes?" she inflected.

"In the land of ranches and of mines—and of the sort of life they breed. It's a good sort, too—though a bit strenuous. Do you wonder that I gave up the monocle?" he laughed.

"Not in the least. In fact, you seem a very nice American."

"Almost thou persuadest me to become one of you."

"And have the call of home eternally ringing in your ears."

"Perhaps!" he reflected, his eyes resting on her face. "One never wants a thing quite so much as after he has lost it."

And Natalie could not determine whether there was some genuine feeling in the words, or whether it was only a pleasant sentiment, conveyed by indirection. She chose, however, to treat it simply as a truism without any personal application.

"Moralizing in axioms?" she smiled.

"Not moralizing; stating the plain fact, in words of one syllable."

"So I can understand it?"

"So you can understand it—if you will."

“Do I seem particularly stupid?”

“May I tell you what you seem?” he asked.

“Is it complimentary?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Then you may *not* tell me. I never permit compliments that I can avoid.”

“You’re a very unusual woman, Mrs. Tremaine.”

“You see—I could not avoid it!” she smiled.

“Was *that* a compliment?”

“I took it so—it wasn’t an un-compliment, was it?”

“I shall try to remember,” he said, “you are averse to compliments. What else is it well to avoid?”

“I think I can trust you for the rest,” she replied. She meant the past—and he understood.

“Does not the prophet or some wise one somewhere say: ‘Put not your trust in anyone,’ or words to that effect?” he asked.

“I believe so—but he spoke generally. There are exceptions even to Holy Writ.”

“You seem able to bestow compliments!” he laughed.

“On the discerning and discriminating!” she explained.

“The two d’s—otherwise the despondent and the damned.”

"We are all damned, or ought to be, according to the theologists—otherwise they would be out of business. As for the despondent, you don't in the least look it; but have it as you wish—so long as you believe me. And now that we understand each other, let us return to polite amenities and nothing."

And once again he understood; it was formal notice not to refer openly to the past; to let that episode be as if it had never happened.

"By all means nothing," he replied—and they talked of impersonal matters.

Presently, up the drive from the stables, came Orme Vendome. Alstair saw him and leaned forward sharply.

"Can it be possible?" he exclaimed.

"Can what be possible?" Mrs. Tremaine asked.

"That I see Orme Vendome, yonder?"

"It is quite likely," she answered placidly. "He is a guest at Rosemont. Do you happen to know him?"

He gave her an amused smile. "I knew him some years ago."

"Mr. Vendome!" she called. "Will you come here a moment?"

XI

THOROUGHBREDS

As Vendome approached, Alstair arose and went forward.

"Mr. Alstair thinks he knows you, Mr. Vendome," Natalie remarked.

"He does," said Vendome, as his eyes lit upon the other. "I'm glad to see you, Alstair—it has been a long while since we last met."

Then for an instant his glance flitted questioningly to Mrs. Tremaine. She was waiting for it, and flashed back a command to silence.

"I have been in America for the last six years," said Alstair.

"I envy you!" Vendome returned.

"We envy each other, then! I, too, should have preferred home."

"And with nothing to restrain us except our indisposition to break away from what happens, for the time, to occupy us. Human nature is a queer thing."

"It is," Alstair agreed. "Sometimes it is nearer inhuman than human. However, now that nothing holds me, I'm in no haste to go back—which also, I suppose, is human nature."

"Tarrington is a charming place, as you doubtless have found out," Vendome remarked. "I'm told it has about the best Pack in the United States, which ought to be something to an Englishman."

"Mr. Alstair is the M. F. H.!" Natalie smiled.

"That accounts for the Pack," Vendome replied.

"Not at all," said Alstair. "A Pack's quality depends first on those who follow it. If the Hunt is keen for the sport, the hounds will be keen also. The Hunt won't tolerate anything else."

"And as the Master is, so is the Hunt," said Vendome. "You see, it comes back to you."

"I will accept it for the Pack!" the other laughed. "They deserve it all—and you can't please a M. F. H. more than to praise his hounds. I hope we can give you a run with them, Vendome—we shall likely have the first meet of the season next week; a trifle early, perhaps, but then we have a reputation for being a bit rapid in Tarrington. I'll be glad to offer you a mount, only Singleton would think me exceedingly presumptuous. He has hunters to burn—and they are *hunters*, too."

"I shall be mighty glad to ride, if I'm here," Vendome replied.

"You will be here, Mrs. Tremaine?" Alstair asked.

"It is quite possible," said Natalie; "though

I fear that I'm not quite up to the Tarrington Hunt. I'm told that they ride like demons."

"Some of them do—to get away from their consciences, I suppose," Alstair remarked. "However, we're not all of that class, Mrs. Tremaine: We ride straight, I think, but we have a good time while doing it. You'll come, won't you? Mrs. Singleton never misses a run."

"I'll come," said Natalie; "at least I can look on, and follow by the road—in a cart."

"The cart would have to be converted into a carry-all, and the Hunt will be sadly depleted," Vendome remarked.

"Then out of regard for the Hunt, I shall *not* attend," Natalie decided—and changed her chair.

"If you're here, we shall have Mrs. Singleton bring you," Alstair declared. "Your hostess you may not refuse."

"What may Mrs. Tremaine not refuse, Mr. Alstair?" Betty asked, as she came out on the piazza.

"To accompany you to the Hunt, next week," said Alstair, as both men arose.

"Of course, she is," Betty responded, sitting on the arm of Natalie's chair. "Who dared to intimate that she was not?"

"Mr. Alstair coerced me into it—abetted by Mr. Vendome," Natalie explained.

"How could you!" Betty exclaimed, looking reproachfully at the two men—"and Mrs. Tremaine so young and guileless."

"Precisely!" Natalie appended. "It was cruel of you—believe me, it was cruel of you."

"Sit down, however," Betty remarked. "This time we shall forgive you—but be careful of the next time."

A carriage drove rapidly around from the rear, and Singleton's head appeared at the window.

"Come on, Mr. Ambassador!" he called. "Hello, Alstair!—want anything with me, or are you just killing time?"

"Come up, Carter," said his wife; "Mr. Alstair wants to see you."

"Never mind," said Alstair, "I'll go down there. We can talk it over on the way to town. I shall do myself the pleasure of calling soon again, if I hear Madame Singleton's invitation?"

"As soon and as often as you wish, Monsieur Alstair!" Betty laughed, and gave him her hand—which Alstair promptly kissed most deferentially.

Vendome turned to Mrs. Tremaine importunately.

"Am I to be neglected?" he asked.

"Never!" she replied, putting out her hand with a soft laugh and the little toss of the head.

He did not attempt to salute it—just held it an instant with a firm pressure, looking at her meaningly the while, then loosed it. And as he did so, he thought a faint pressure met his own.

“Quit your playing the Marquis, and cut the parades, will you?” Singleton called. “Postpone them for a space—the horses are getting very restless.”

“How did you manage it—and them?” Betty asked, when the men had gone.

“It managed itself,” said Natalie. “Mr. Alstair naturally waited for me to indicate what our attitude was to be toward each other. I indicated that it was to be without reference to the past—that he was to be simply as a new acquaintance. He understood instantly. Really, he did it amazingly well.”

“What did he do when he saw Orme—and what did Orme do?” Betty asked.

“As you could expect from two such thoroughbreds; greeted each other as old acquaintances do—and that was all. Mr. Vendome gave me a quick look of interrogation. I shook my head ever so faintly that *the* episode was not to be referred to—and that is the present situation. What comes next, I’m at a loss to know—except that I shall explain the matter to Mr. Vendome so that he may compe-

hend. . . . At first—yesterday, that is—when I recognized Warren Alstair and realized that I would have to meet him, I was tempted to flee; to get away and avoid the difficulty. Then I got over my panic—and saw the simple way out. It shows how rattled I must have been to have forgotten that, as a gentleman, he would wait for me to mark the course."

"Very interesting!" Betty smiled. "You are not thinking of running away now, I reckon."

"On the contrary, I'm thinking of staying. It promises to be *very* interesting, Betty, very interesting, indeed."

"For whom?"

"For Warren Alstair."

"And possibly for Mr. Vendome," Betty appended.

"It need not be—unless he makes it. I'm curious to see how Warren Alstair acts."

"Are you considering going over to the enemy?"

"Which is the enemy?" Natalie smiled.

"Mr. Alstair is *very* fascinating," Betty observed.

"So I thought—some years ago."

"And he has never married!"

"Wherein he is fortunate—I mean as a general proposition, Betty; you and Carter are an excep-

tion, of course. As for me—a singed moth fears the flame."

"Which is a saying that doesn't say. If you've observed a singed moth, you also must have observed that it straightway goes back to the flame until it is burnt to a crisp or is incapacitated."

"That may be the way of moths!" Natalie smiled—"it's not the way of mankind generally. I'm simply a general human."

"Of a very rare class," her hostess added. "It is perfectly ridiculous, my dear, for you to say that you're never going to marry again. You must lose that face and figure, not to mention your fascinating way of doing everything—men in particular—if you would make even a start at it. You are going to marry—and soon—or you will be arrested for blockading the highway with your suitors and provoking a riot."

"And if I choose from among my suitors, I occasion a war; so what will be the advantage? I would better go quietly to Europe, or into a convent—or do something to eliminate myself. I might try the invalid scheme; no man wants to marry a—sanitarium."

"Many men do—also nerves, niggers and hypochondriacs."

"Any personal application?" Natalie inquired.

"Maybe you're a nagger!" Betty laughed.

"Maybe I am. Only Mr. Tremaine can answer that question. Sometimes I have thought that I am a nagger by indifference. One can be a nagger by persistent silence, as well as by persistent pestering. When something does not please me, I'm usually quiet. It's not worth while making a fuss. When the annoyance becomes intolerable, I just pack up and leave the annoyance, or I make the annoyance pack up and leave me. I simply refuse to be harassed. Life is too short to be troubled by the unnecessary. One has to endure some things—and I try to endure them placidly, when they come. Placidity is a wonderful quality, Betty, a wonderful quality. I try for it all the time; I've got to try, too—I'm not by nature placid, I assume it."

"Then you have cultivated it to perfection," said Betty. "I should like to see the occasion that could disturb your poise."

"There are plenty of them—plenty of times I am raging inwardly, while struggling to be calm outwardly."

"One would never imagine it."

"You're a sad flatterer, Betty. I see plainly that I shall have to depart in sheer self-defense. My assumed placidity won't last a week, at the present rate of—spoliation."

" Spoliation is good—in view of the rest of the picture."

" What picture? " Natalie asked.

" *La Belle Natalie Sans Merci.*"

" Without mercy for whom—the men or myself? "

" Both—you are a beautiful placidity before whom men prostrate themselves in vain."

" And myself? "

" You're without mercy on yourself because you are voluntarily condemning yourself to be a graven image.—I don't think, for an instant, that you *are* a graven image. Oh, no! far from it. But you are worse than a—Bostonian in your assumed frappéness. I can almost fancy you sitting on Plymouth Rock, with a Bible in one hand and a sizzling witch in the other, muttering: 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you'!"

" I must be a pleasant companion! " Natalie laughed.

" Perfectly fascinating—that is the remarkable thing about it."

Suddenly, and without warning, the sun broke through the clouds.

" Good! " Natalie exclaimed. " We can go to Land's End to-morrow. I promise you, Betty, not to be a Puritan one little minute on that excursion."

" You'll let yourself go?—Be natural—absolutely natural; forget everything but the present?"

" I'll try to be—nice to Mr. Vendome, if that is what you mean. In fact, I *have* been nice to him, Betty,—very nice."

Together they crossed the piazza and entered the hall. The portrait of Adrien de Chavenis looked down on them from the dining-room wall.

" The Marquis is smiling in encouragement," said Natalie. " Don't you notice it?"

" I don't know whether it is in encouragement or in derision," Betty answered, as they paused in the doorway. " It seems to me there is a cynical expression around the eyes."

" It is the cynicism of prospective defeat. He knows that we are about to find the Jewels."

" It is a pity, if we do find them, that we will have to give them up," Betty reflected regretfully. " I suppose the ethics of it are correct, but it does seem to me it is straining the proposition a bit too far. Why should the French Government of to-day be entitled to the Jewels, because, at one time, they were the property of the Kings of France? The Republic got possession of them by confiscation—it took them by force from Louis the Sixteenth. A loyal subject, the Marquis de Chavenis or some other, recovered a portion of them for his king,

brought them to America, and hid them away on an estate the Marquis owned in Virginia—where they have remained hidden to this day. Now, if we recover them, I cannot see on what possible theory, of abstract justice even, we are in the least obligated to restore them to the French Government, which never legally owned them. On Orme's principle, it seems to me, they belong to the Duc d'Orleans, who is the *de jure* King of France, and consequently the heir of Louis the Sixteenth."

"Just so!" said Natalie. "And as there is a difference of opinion as to whom they ought to go, why shouldn't we settle it by keeping them ourselves. Follow Mr. Vendome's idea to its ultimate conclusion, and half of the famous jewels of the world are held illegally by their present owners. About every famous precious stone we have ever heard of belongs in some Hindu idol or to some Rajah. I venture to say, there isn't a single one of the Crown Jewels of France that, at some time, wasn't stolen from its rightful possessor. What we should do, is to retain them until they are claimed by the proper owner or his proper heir. Our title is perfectly good against any one but him."

"I reckon you're right!" Betty agreed. "At least, it sounds reasonable to me."

"Moreover," Natalie went on, "for us to give

them up to the French Government would be an insult to the memory of the Marquis. I can almost fancy him rising from his grave to protest."

"Protest is putting it quite mildly. I can see him raging in their defense, his sword a wave of light before him."

"Then he must make a fine picture, judging from the portrait!" Natalie smiled. "You have a splendid imagination, dear."

"A splendid imagination is a valuable asset to possess, also, a most entertaining quality," Betty said.

"When it is not exercised in morbidity," the other amended.—"No personal application, I assure you. Has your imagination told you everything as to the actual finding of the Jewels?"

"I have not called upon it yet. Moreover, as we are going to Land's End and find the Jewels, why imagine? Let the facts prove themselves."

"Facts do generally prove themselves," Natalie remarked—"though imagination may result in facts, if you are a clever imaginer."

"Then I shall imagine you and Orme are to be married," Betty replied.

"There must be some basis in fact!" Natalie laughed.

"I have plenty of basis in fact."

"For instance?"

"No, no, my dear! You know the instances far better than I."

"I should like to have your idea of them; it might help me to—decide."

"Which way?"

"Either way, as the circumstances tend, and my inclination runs."

"Which means nothing whatever," Betty remarked.

"Because, as I've told you scores of times, there is nothing now to mean—so let us get back to the Jewels. Why should we not collectively express to Mr. Vendome our views concerning them?"

"No reason in the world, my dear. He may not be convinced, however, that our views are better than his; and as he supplied the information, I reckon it will be for him to say what shall be done with the Jewels—when we get them; until we do get them, it is rather unnecessary to decide anything."

"Do you hear, Marquis?" said Natalie, addressing the portrait. "I'm the only one who is your friend; all the rest are for your enemies."

"Don't you believe it, Adrien!" Betty protested. "I'm for you, too. Mr. Vendome is the one you must smile on. Try it at luncheon, and again at dinner—and ask Natalie to help you. Her smile should aid very much."

XII

THE LADY OR THE TITLE

“If you are going down to the Club, Singleton, we can postpone the business until then,” said Alstair, his hand on the bridle to mount. “It will keep. I wanted to talk over the Hunt Ball with you, and incidentally the Arthurson matter, which comes up to-night, you know.”

“Very good!” said Singleton. “I’ll meet you there in half an hour.” He and Vendome drove off.

Alstair, swinging up, rode slowly—and thoughtfully—down the avenue.

He had considered very seriously, before going to Rosemont, what he should do if he met Natalie Jumonville—she would always be Natalie Jumonville to him. He conceived that there would be something of embarrassment for both of them in that meeting—even though years had passed. They had parted as friends; and he was quite ready to resume the friendship, if she wished it. She should indicate. Beyond letting her see that he had recognized her—though that was doubtless altogether superfluous—he would do nothing. If she willed it, they would begin afresh, and never have known each other before now.

And now, that she had indicated most plainly

what she desired, he was quite content to act upon it, conceding the propriety of her decision. Under the circumstances, it was the wisest course—as well as the easiest way out of the tangle. Vendome's presence was something of a surprise; and he admitted to a mild curiosity as to what significance, if any, was to be attached to it. It did not concern him greatly; in fact, it was none of his business—but, being human, he wondered none the less.

At the Club-house he turned his horse over to a groom and went on to the grill. It was deserted save for Blake, who sat in a far corner with a bottle of Scotch, a syphon, and a tall glass at his hand.

"Come and join me!" he hailed. "I want to talk with you. Bickers, take Mr. Alstair's order."

"A glass of ice water, if you please, Bickers," said Alstair. "What is it, Blake?"

The latter took a gulp of his liquor before replying.

"Do you know who is up at Rosemont?" he asked.

"Do you mean of the guests?" said Alstair.

Blake nodded. "I don't mean the fair divorcee, Mrs. Tremaine—though she's a hell of a fine looker. I mean the Vendome chap."

"He is a hell of a fine looker, also," Alstair replied.

Blake frowned sourly. "I hadn't noticed it; but if you say so, I'll not dispute it. It's not his looks but his disposition for gossip that's concerning me. He knows of the Manning affair; and if he is disposed to babble, he can make it damned unpleasant for Mrs. Blake and me. What do you think about it?"

"Whether he will or he won't?" Alstair asked.

The other nodded.

"What do you think he will do?"

"Talk—that's the normal course."

"Of the average man, yes," Alstair remarked. "Vendome isn't an average man, however; he is a particularly high-class gentleman, who will remember nothing—unless circumstances oblige it."

"What do you mean by circumstances?"

"Nothing whatever. You can judge, quite as well as I, what will force him to remember."

"You imply that it won't be wise for me to look at Mrs. Tremaine?"

"My dear fellow, I imply nothing specific. All I say is that to my mind he won't remember the Manning affair so long as you don't force him to remember. How you may force him, you must be judge."

"She certainly is a screamer for looks, Alstair!" Blake exclaimed.

Alstair was silent.

"She is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen—and that's going some!" Blake went on. "She's got a foot and ankle that would set you wild; and as for her figure!—well—ask Anstruther or Hudson. They will tell you."

"Blake," said Alstair, sharply, pushing back his glass and getting up, "go home and take a bath, and try to cleanse your mind of your thoughts; at present, they are offensive to mankind."

"Ho! Ho!" Blake exclaimed. "Sets the wind in that quarter? Pardon, Sir Galahad; I knew not that you were even so much as acquainted with the lady."

Alstair stopped and swung around.

"And now, since you do know it," he said very quietly, "see that you put a curb on your foul tongue."

"Well, I'll be damned!" chuckled Blake, as Alstair disappeared. "Who would ever have thought it!"

He poured another measure of liquor, shot in the carbonated water, and settled back to his drink—his fourth in succession; the ultimate number would depend on whether he went home for luncheon or stayed at the Club.

Alstair passed on to the piazza; a moment later Vendome drove up.

"Singleton won't be able to come for some little

time; his business is detaining him longer than he anticipated," said Vendome. "So, if you've anything else on, don't wait for him, he says."

"I've nothing else on before luncheon," Alstair replied. "Won't you sit down, Vendome?"

For a little time they chatted on various matters, while, in the mind of each, one thought constantly obtruded. Finally, Alstair stopped abruptly, in the midst of a remark.

"Of what are you thinking, Mr. Vendome?" he asked.

"Of what you are thinking, I suppose!" Vendome smiled.

"That episode of eight years ago in London? It is a curious thing to have brought up again in Virginia, all unexpectedly, and with three of the principal actors. I have never mentioned the matter from that day to this; but I have often thought that, to you, I must have cut a rather sorry figure to have given up so easily."

"On the contrary, Alstair, you did, to my way of thinking, the only thing possible for a gentleman. Miss Jumonville was very young; she was not sure of her own mind, at the critical moment—and you released her."

"And Miss Jumonville was wonderfully beautiful, and marvellously attractive—which must be my

excuse," said Alstair. "I admit I should not have done it; but—well, I got right in the end. And the promise of her youth has been more than realized, Vendome. She is to-day the——" a gesture ended the sentence.

"She is," Vendome replied. "I don't remember her very distinctly at that time. In fact, I think I saw her but once, and then only for a moment. Indeed, when I met her again recently, I had just a hazy suggestion of having seen her somewhere. It was not until your name was mentioned, last evening, that I recollect ed."

"Do you mind telling me who mentioned my name and where?"

"It was at Rosemont—Singleton happened, in the course of the conversation, to mention Warren Alstair, the M. F. H."

"I see!" said Alstair.

What he sought to know was whether Natalie had been the one to bring up his name—and Vendome had understood.

"How hard was he hit?" Vendome thought.

"Why is Vendome hanging around her?" Alstair thought. . . . "I hear she has divorced Tremaine?" he remarked, after a pause.

Vendome nodded. "Several years ago, I believe.—They are good friends still, I'm told."

"She seems to have a knack of keeping even an ex-husband as a friend!" Alstair smiled. "You saw how willing I was to be received."

"It is a rare power! To lose—and yet to keep. It is marvellous how she does it."

"It is!" said Alstair thoughtfully. "Marvellous in its simplicity."

They smoked in silence—which Vendome broke.

"Have you been back to England since you threw up your commission in the Hussars?" he asked.

"This is the closest to England that I have been since I left it," was the answer. "You are not stationed there now, I believe?"

"Madrid."

"I fancy I shall have to go back some day soon. The wild-dogs are calling for home—they have been calling loudly of late. Of course, I hear from there at intervals, and so kept up on the major matters of deaths, marriages, and society's doings in general; but it is long range, and one wants something closer. I've about come to the closer, Vendome."

Vendome nodded understandingly. Alstair and he had become rather intimate after the Jumonville episode—they happened to know each other slightly at the time, and thereafter the acquaintance grew warmer. Then Vendome was transferred to Berlin. Shortly after, Alstair threw up his commission and

disappeared into the West. The real reason for which was that he had lost about all his money in the crazy rubber stock bubble, coupled with disgust for everything and everybody. He had prospered in his new venture—had struck it rich, in fact; and the fortune that had disappeared in rubber was more than replenished by the silver mine that had fairly dropped into his lap. And as the need for work diminished, the call of ease and the old life came back with ever increasing force. At last he had turned eastward, pausing at Tarrington because he did not wish to be hurried, and because it had congenial society, and pleasant people of a sort that were to be found at home.

He had been genuinely in love with Natalie Jumonville—and he had taken his congé with a smiling face and never a recrimination. If she did not want him, that was an end to the matter, and he might as well be cheerful about it. He would get over it in time. And he did get over it—though he had not seen any other woman who attracted him sufficiently to induce the plunge a second time. Always he had compared them with Natalie Jumonville, and always there had been something wanting; until, from an object of devotion, she had become a standard of merit—idealized, of course, and therefore the harder to satisfy.

He had never seen her again—from the day he had bade her farewell in London, until the unexpected encounter at the Club. He had ridden swiftly after for another look, to make sure that it was really she—more beautiful now than even the idealized woman of his dreams. . . . And she was free! . . . If he remained in Tarrington, he might have a problem before him. . . . And if he went back to England, he might have another problem before him. . . . And he was at a loss to know which problem would be the easier solved, and solved the better for both concerned. Of course, there might not be a problem if he went; certainly there would *not* be a solution. If he remained?—there was probability of the problem; and, if so, some sort of a solution was bound to follow. . . . If—only—if only—she had not come!

As for Vendome, he too had his problem; and it was beginning to concern him not a little, whether he should not hasten away—to Spain, if need be—and leave temptation and the temptress to Silverthorne, Plimpton, and the rest. She was occupying quite a bit more of his thoughts than he was wont to give to a woman, no matter how attractive and alluring. . . . However, there is always time to veer off, if one is not too precipitate; and he was not given to precipitateness—and no more, he

fancied, was Mrs. Tremaine. Moreover, he was quite old enough to take matters leisurely, and not to be stampeded. At any rate he thought he was. Also, he thought that he could read something of Alstair's mind; and he regarded him with the sympathetic toleration one has for those who have already come under the spell of the Woman.

"I notice in the *Times* recently," said he, "that your cousin had died; doesn't that make you the next in line for the title?"

"Yes, I'll come into it some day—if I live long enough, and his mightiness, Earl William, doesn't have male issue; which is somewhat doubtful, being of an age something over seventy. There were six cousins ahead of me, when I left England; they have been going overboard at the rate of one a year; now it is up to me either to go next, or to shift it lightly over to the Earl."

"I should by all means shift it over to the Earl!" Vendome smiled.

"I shall do my best to pass him the honor," said Alstair. "That is another reason for my returning."

"And another reason for your *remaining* has just come to Rosemont," Vendome reflected—though he did not voice it. "We will see which will win, the lady or the title."

XIII

LAND'S END

THE clear off, after several attempts, decided in the afternoon to become a fact, and the sun went down behind the mountains in a blaze of glorious color, that lingered in the crimson twilight as though reluctant to fade into the grey of night.

"Is it an eight o'clock start in the morning?" Singleton asked, at dinner. "It will be a fine, clear day—a red sunset never fails."

"Eight o'clock may be a trifle early for Natalie," Betty suggested.

"On the contrary, I'm ready to start at seven if you and Mr. Vendome are willing," Natalie answered, looking at her host.

"Seven o'clock be it!" Singleton replied.
"Hey, Orme?"

"Make it six-thirty sharp," Vendome replied.
"I hate to miss the sunrise."

"Oh, very well!" said Natalie. "Six-thirty it is. Far be it from me to discourage Mr. Vendome's love for the blush of the morning."

"Which blush he can admire quite as well from the piazza of Rosemont, if he really wished to admire it," Betty remarked. "I will rescue you,

Natalie—also myself. We shall start at eight, as Carter suggested."

"The hostess has spoken!" Vendome replied.

"Much to your satisfaction, I have no doubt!" Betty laughed. "Also to Mrs. Tremaine's.—Don't shrug your shoulders, Orme, or I will call your bluff yet."

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" Vendome exclaimed. "In which Mrs. Tremaine also joins with great enthusiasm."

"Speak for yourself, sir!" Natalie retorted.

"I am speaking for myself—solely——"

"Indeed!"

"—because I am not permitted to speak for you also—just yet."

"The sentence is exactly two words too long," she rejoined.

"Which two?"

"I will leave it to your intelligence—or want of it."

"I'll help you out, Orme," Singleton interjected.
"She means the 'because' and 'also.'"

"Beware of false interpretations, Mr. Vendome," Natalie warned.

"Also the dog!" Singleton laughed.

"What shall we take along?" asked Betty.

"To eat or to wear?"

"Both."

"It will depend on how long we stay—and that will depend on the accuracy of Vendome's tale——"

"And that will depend on a million other matters," Betty interjected. "We are not doing the endless chain at present, Carter Singleton; we are engaged in a Council of War for the recovery of the Crown Jewels of France."

"Gee! Doesn't it sound great!" said Singleton. "'For the recovery of the Crown Jewels of France!' Hear it, Marquis?—By Jove! he smiled. Did you notice, Vendome?"

"More than that," said Vendome; "he kissed his hand to the ladies."

"Charming taste," approved Singleton.

"Do be sensible, Carter," Betty exclaimed. "I want to know how we are to go, and what we are to take along."

"Yourselves, my dear, your charming selves—the rest is mere detail and surplusage!"

Betty turned to Natalie.

"Did you ever see two such idiots?" she said.

"Never!" said Natalie.

"I fear our efforts are not properly appreciated, Orme," observed Singleton.

"Better cut out sentiment and get down to cold facts," Vendome advised. "What to wear,

and what to eat, will interest the ladies more than compliments—at the present moment. Later, it may be otherwise."

"We will intimate when it is otherwise," said Betty.

Singleton threw up his hands resignedly.

"We will go just as you wish. We appoint you two Generals-in-Chief and obey orders."

"Until it please you to disobey," Betty retorted. "However, we are obliged for the concession; we shall exert our authority—while it lasts. We'll start at eight. We can't go in the car, because we haven't one—owing to the local dislike for them, and Carter's dislike in particular. Hence we shall drive, with Mr. Singleton as the driver, the coachman being undesirable in the present instance; and we shall be prepared to stay the night, if necessary."

"Aye, aye, madam!" said Singleton, with a formal salute. "You hear the orders, Vendome?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Vendome echoed.

"There is almost too much submission," Betty reflected. "I mistrust your good intent.—However——"

At eight o'clock next morning, with a clear sky and the air snappingly fresh, they started.

The first twenty miles was over a limestone

pike, and they made it easily in two hours. They then turned into a side-road, and the going became positively bad; where it was not washed by the recent rains, it was a mass of deep mud, due to the bone-headed supervisors, whose idea of road making was to dig out the ditches and throw the dirt into the track; and always to wait until well into autumn before doing it.

"Why don't they indict such rotten supervisors?" Vendome exclaimed, as they toiled through a sea of soft mud.

"Because the Commonwealth's Attorney wants their votes when he runs for office again," Singleton explained.

"Hasn't he a duty in the matter?" Natalie inquired.

"Sure! But what has an obligation of office to do with it when votes are concerned."

"Can't the Court notice it?" she insisted.

"Certainly—but if the Judge were in this carriage, at this very moment, he would clean forget about the road before he got back to town. He wants to be elected for another term; or, if he doesn't, he is going back into active practice and wants to be popular. It is always the way. I'm not referring to any particular case—it's a general truth touching all the country districts. Every

one has a vote, and those who are influential in their neighborhoods must not be offended, when offense can be avoided by being temporarily blind. When circumstances won't longer admit of blindness, then prosecute as mildly as possible. If the jury happen to convict, the Judge reads the prisoner a fine moral lecture, and either suspends sentence or lets him off with the lightest punishment permitted under the law. I'm not referring to grave infractions of the law, mind you, nor to habitual nor depraved criminals; they will be prosecuted and sentenced as the law contemplates. If either the Court or the Commonwealth's Attorney would let it be understood that inefficient supervisors, and others of their class, would be promptly hauled before the Bar and punished when they didn't do their duty—as to the roads or otherwise as the case may be, and which they know before they are elected is their duty—there would be very few offenders of this type. Once in a long while, you get a Commonwealth's Attorney who has the backbone and the independence to forget politics and to observe his oath—then the roads are fixed, as well as other obligations regarded that ordinarily are ignored. Isn't it so, Vendome? "

"Certainly, it's so," Vendome answered.
"Politics is at the base of it; votes—votes—votes!"

Take the Judge and the Commonwealth's Attorney out of the direct power of the voter,—I mean, make their offices appointive, as in England—and you will have the laws enforced without fear, for they have no favor to curry with the mob."

"Hear! Hear!" said Betty. "I reckon, Orme, you're not in favor of the recall of Judges and——"

"Quit it!" cried Singleton. "This is a pleasure jaunt and politics are distinctly barred, particularly Progressive platforms, not to mention hot air discussion of elementary principles."

"*Si, señor!*" Betty laughed. "We will back to the road—how is it now?"

"Washed out instead of in!" said Singleton. "However, we'll get there in time. Did you smile at the Marquis this morning, Natalie?"

"Several times."

"And he remained in his frame?"

"He remained in his frame."

"Try Vendome—he won't remain even in his—I beg your pardon! I mean he won't hesitate a moment—he's got plenty of nerve."

"Nerve?" said Natalie. "Does it need nerve, when I smile at him?"

"How about it, Vendome?" Singleton asked.

"I haven't been tried," Vendome answered.

"Try him right now, Natalie," said Singleton.

"There is no frame at hand," Natalie replied.

"Bother the frame! Orme will waive the frame and everything else for——"

The rest was cut short by a nasty breaker, over which the horses went at a spanking trot.

"Good Lord, Carter!" gasped Betty, when she and Natalie had disentangled themselves. "Pay attention to the road, or let me drive; I've lost every hairpin——"

"As well as your back hair!" Singleton laughed. "Don't look, Vendome—they will never forgive you, if you do. Eyes front, old man!"

"What is the matter with you this morning?" Betty demanded. "You're not ordinarily so silly."

"This is not an ordinary occasion. We are on the trail of the Crown Jewels of France."

"And you men are acting as though we were on the trail of a lunatic asylum."

"I am not so sure that our quest doesn't prove us fit candidates for one," Vendome observed.

"Still a skeptic?" said Natalie.

"Still from Missouri."

"We shall show him, Natalie," Betty remarked; "we shall show him."

"How much farther is it?" Natalie asked

"Just over the hill is Springberry, the Singleton place," said their host. "Land's End is be-

yond—nearer the river.—*That* is how it gets its name!" he exclaimed. "I was stupid not to think of it before; the river there makes a big reverse bend of more than two hundred and fifty degrees, I should say, and then straightens out again for its dash through the mountain. Land's End lies in this bend."

"Sort of a peninsula," said Natalie.

"Exactly. The house, as I remember, is about two hundred yards from the river bank, which there is high, almost a bluff, indeed."

They crested the hill, and Springberry lay beyond: a substantial dwelling built of solid timber, in the style of a century ago; comfortable and plain.

"The Singletons used it for a summer home many years ago—before 'The White' came into fashion. Then it was turned over to the farmer, except two rooms downstairs, which are always held ready for the master or his guests. I usually occupy them several times during the gunning and fishing season."

The road led by the house and on through the farm to Land's End. Williams, the farmer, happened to see them coming, and, recognizing the horses, hurried forward to meet them.

"How do you do, Mr. Singleton!" he said, with the respectful manner of one who knows his

place and does not try to presume; a manner still common enough in the South; though it has long since disappeared in the North, where everybody is on a par with everybody else—or tries to persuade himself that he is.

"We shall not stop now, Williams," Singleton answered, as the man went to the horses' heads. "It may be we shall be back presently however. We are going to Land's End. No one living in the house, is there?"

"Not in the house, sir," Williams replied. "There are a couple of nigger families squatting in cabins nearby. I've sort of appointed myself care-taker for the house, and have notified them not to attempt to live in it. It's gone pretty well to ruin, sir, but as long as I'm here, it shan't suffer that indignity."

Singleton nodded in approval.

"Good!" he commended. "You did right."

"Thank you, sir," said Williams.

"I wish you would fetch a pick, a snovel, and a crow-bar, and come along with us to Land's End," said Singleton. "We'll drive on slowly."

"Very well, sir."

"How is the road—poor?"

"Not through your place, it isn't; but when it comes to Land's End, there isn't any road to

speak of—you can get along through the timber, however. I'll overtake you in a moment, sir."

"Williams is perfectly safe," Singleton explained—as though in answer to Vendome's thoughts—when they had driven on. "The family has been in the Singleton employ for generations—his father, and his grandfather, farmed Springberry before him."

"We must risk something," Vendome replied; "we can't pull off the job alone."

"Is it a burglarization?" Natalie laughed.

"Something of the sort."

"You forget the Marquis smiled twice at me!"

"Not in the least; but I remember also that he is dead—and I forgive him."

"Lucky man!" she laughed.

"Because I forgive him, or because he is dead?"

"Neither—guess again."

"De Chavenis' smile could be variously interpreted," Singleton interjected. "It might be an encouragement to jewel hunting, and then again it might be an encouragement to another sort of hunting."

"Man-hunting, I suppose you mean!" said Natalie pleasantly. "Why don't you be specific, my dear Carter?"

"What need, since you can infer so cleverly

exactly what is intended? It is always pleasanter to convey by inference—it saves the baldness of speech."

"And sometimes, among men, it saves one from a beating," she added.

"Which also carries an inference!" Singleton smiled.

"It is very pleasant to converse with one who always infers so accurately," she retorted.

"Come again! Singleton, come again!" Vendome laughed.

"Not at present, thank you. Here is the end of Springberry. The horses will require all my attention for the rest of the way."

The road terminated abruptly, and a faint track continued through the timber—made by the passage, at rare intervals, of a vehicle of some sort. Even this was indistinct at places. Huge trees were on every side—of a size that proved their age; some were so old they were dying from decay; others had died, and lay rotting in their beds of mould and mushrooms.

For almost a mile the track wound in and out through the forest; then the timber suddenly thinned, and they saw the house directly ahead, with a few great oaks about it.

"Land's End!" said Singleton.

"Picturesque and solitary!" Natalie reflected.

"The niggers must be on the side toward the river," he remarked. "Yonder is the clearing where their corn is grown."

Just then Williams overtook them.

"Their cabins are on the far side of the house, sir, just within the heavy timber," he explained. "They are the laziest lot that ever were born. A little corn and some bacon—the rest of the time is spent in sleep. I reckon, they are all asleep now, except the piccaninnies."

A little darkey appeared around the house, saw the carriage, and quickly bolted out of sight.

"Our approach is heralded!" Singleton laughed—and as they drew up before the house, a troop of children came running to meet them, while their elders gathered at the edge of the woods and stared.

Houses, like dogs, are of various sorts—and one of the sorts is just plain house. Land's End had been just plain house—and so much of it as was left was just plain ruin. It never had been much to boast of, even when new; certainly, it was far more picturesque in its present condition. It was built of stone, taken probably from the river bank; the wood work was cypress, the windows were paneless—some sashless—and the doors were fallen from their hinges, save only at the front and rear. There

they were in place, as though to wave back the intruder who would presume to enter.

"The roof seems solid!" Vendome marvelled.

"Cypress withstands the elements almost better than iron," Singleton explained. "Did you re-hang the outer doors, Williams?"

"I did, sir."

"I'm glad of it."

"Who built this house—the Marquis?" Vendome asked.

"I have not the remotest idea; it has been here as long as I can remember. Thirty years ago, it was quite as dilapidated as it is to-day. The character of the construction shows that it must have been built early in the last century, if not before. What do you think about it, Williams?"

"My father told me, and he had it from his father, I think—leastwise it is a legend in the family, sir—that the house was built by a Frenchman, shortly after the Revolutionary War. I have still in my possession a gold piece, a *louis d'or*, I think you call it, which is said to have come from him."

"It couldn't have been the Marquis," Betty exclaimed.

"I never heard of a Marquis," said Williams.

"The Marquis de Chavenis was the original patentee," Singleton explained. "He died in Paris

—was guillotined during the French Revolution.
It was not he who built the house.”

“It must have been some one whom he sent,” said Natalie.

“Likely. Go on with your legend, Williams—we are much interested.”

“The story runs, sir,” the man resumed, “that the Frenchman, with his servant, who was also French, having built this house, lived here practically alone for some years. He rather shunned companionship, and the location of the farm didn’t make for neighbors, unless one sought them. Then one day there came another, also an aristocrat, inquiring for the first Frenchman. The tale has it that he sought him at Springberry, and was directed to Land’s End. He rode away toward the river—and neither he, nor the original settler, nor his servant, was ever seen again. And when at length their absence was noted in the neighborhood—which wasn’t for a long time, considering the location and the period—the house was deserted, and not a trace of them could be found. That is the legend, as we have it in the family, sir. I give it to you just as I got it, and for what it is worth. The only proof I have, if proof it be, is the gold piece; and maybe it didn’t come from the Frenchman, after all, sir.—One moment, Mr.

Singleton, I'll see how the house is, if you want to look it over."

"What do you think of the legend?" said Singleton, facing around.

"It corresponds beautifully with Orme's tale!" exclaimed Betty. "I can see the Jewels going back with us to Rosemont this evening."

"Somewhat optimistic!" her husband smiled.

"It *is* queer how the legend fits in with the Scotswoman's story," Vendome remarked.

"The quickest way to ascertain if it does fit is to test it," said Natalie. "Let us go and look for the chestnut tree, and the depression. You men are *so* deliberate."

"Yes," said Betty, "they are."

"We will do it, my dears!" laughed Singleton, and drove slowly around to the rear of the house.

"There is your chestnut tree!" cried he, pointing with his whip to a giant, whose towering height and great, spreading arms evidenced its age. "How far due north of the hall door is it?"

"Ninety feet!" said Natalie.

"Some one else is recollecting with astonishing accuracy," Vendome remarked.

"Certainly!" springing out. "I'm a believer and interested; where is the tape-line, Carter?—Thank you," as Singleton brought it from his

pocket. "Mr. Vendome, will you help me measure the distance from the house to the tree?"

"I'll help you to do anything you wish—now or hereafter," Vendome replied.

"Now will be quite sufficient for the matter in hand, thank you—we won't borrow trouble from the future. Here, sir!" as she extended the tape.

"It won't be borrowing. I'll meet all the bills instantly and gladly," he took the line, "if you will only let me——"

"I'll let you go to the house with one end of the tape," she interrupted. "Be off, with you!"

"Smile!" he demanded.

"Silly!" said she—and smiled bewitchingly.

"Now, I'll go!" said he; and dragging the tape behind him, she retaining the spool, he mounted the steps to the doorway.

She stretched the fifty-foot length on the ground, marked the place with a stone, and hastened to the chestnut. When Vendome stopped at the mark, she clapped her hands enthusiastically.

"Ninety feet exactly!" she cried. "Which way is north, Carter?"

"Thunder! I forgot a compass," Singleton exclaimed. "Did you think to get one, Vendome?"

"I did not," Vendome answered. "I'm not sufficiently experienced in the jewel hunting business."

" You're a fine pair!" said Natalie.

" Hold on!" said Singleton. " I want credit for remembering to bring the tape."

" And give me credit for remembering to bring myself!" Vendome laughed. " However, I should say from the sun—I'm a mariner, you know—that the house faces about due south; so if you put the helm over forty-five degrees, and hold a straight course for one hundred and fifty-three feet, you will come to port, that is, to the depression."

" Hearken to Captain Vendome!" Betty cried.

" Hearken as much as you please, but don't sail with him for pilot—at least, in the present quest," Singleton cautioned.—" Here is one, however, who can box the compass for us. Williams, which is north, please?"

" Yonder, sir," said Williams, indicating.
" The house faces due south."

" Ha! Ha!" Vendome chuckled. " Might I be permitted modestly to say, I told you so?"

" No!" retorted Natalie; " you are only permitted to proceed with the measurement. Put your helm over forty-five degrees, and be off with you once more."

" Won't you two come aboard?" Vendome asked the Singletons. " The gangway is about to be drawn in."

"We will take the next boat, thank you!"
Betty laughed.

"Oh, very well: That is northwest, Williams?"

"Yes, Mr. Vendome."

"Ready, Mrs. Tremaine?"

"Ready, Mr. Vendome."

"Full speed ahead, then."

They measured fifty feet, and another fifty.

"You're inclining to port, Mr. Vendome,"
Natalie cautioned. "Keep a straight course—that
is better."

The third fifty feet was marked off, leaving
three feet remaining.

"Any depression?" Natalie asked.

"Only to our hopes," Vendome replied. "It's
perfectly level for another fifty feet every way."

"Oh, it can't be!" exclaimed Natalie, coming
forward. "Let me measure the remaining three
feet."

"It is measured!" said Vendome, as he drove
his stick into the turf. "You see—level as a table."

"Mightn't you have made a mistake?" Betty
suggested.

"Mrs. Tremaine and I never make mistakes,"
Vendome answered.

"Speak for yourself, sir," said Natalie. "I'm
an aggregation of mistakes."

"Then me for the mistakes!" Vendome smiled.

"*Merci, monsieur!*" she curtsied mockingly.

"What are we to do now?" said Betty.

"Are you sure of your directions and distances, Vendome?" Singleton asked.

"Perfectly—they were not complicated. Moreover, I noted them on my cuff at the time, and later made a memorandum. It was such a remarkable story that I wanted to keep its details. I've got it here now." He searched a moment in his pocket-book, and produced a slip of paper. "Yes, we are right," he said. "Ninety feet from the rear door to the chestnut, and one hundred and fifty-three feet northwest to a depression in the turf——"

"The turf is here, all right," Singleton remarked; "but turf is fairly plentiful through Virginia."

"As well as elsewhere throughout the world," Vendome added.

"You're a pair of miserable skeptics!" said Natalie.

"As you've remarked before!" Singleton laughed.

"It's becoming a self-evident fact!" she retorted. "Let *us* find the depression, Betty."

"Why trouble to find it?" asked Betty.

"Are you a skeptic, also?" Natalie demanded.

"Not at all; I'm with you, my dear. I mean, why not accept your measurements as correct, and try for the stone that covers the entrance to the cave."

"Dig?" said Natalie.

"Certainly, dig."

"Here is where you come into it, Williams," Singleton remarked. "How far down is the stone, Vendome?"

"Six feet."

Singleton turned to his farmer, who was standing a little apart.

"Williams," said he, "we are on the hunt of something—which something may be here, and may be thousands of miles away. Your legend, together with certain other facts, lead to the inference that it is hereabouts. We have chosen you to aid us, because I know you to be entirely trustworthy. Are you willing?"

"I am more than willing, Mr. Singleton, and I thank you for your confidence," Williams replied. "What's to do, sir?"

"See if there is a stone, six feet under the surface, that covers the entrance to a cave."

"Straight down from the stick, sir?"

Singleton nodded. "You dig and I'll shovel."

"One moment, sir, till I drive away this rabble.—Here, you niggers!" he called to them, children

and adults, who were a short distance off, watching the proceedings. "Get back to your cabins and stay there. There is nothing here for you to see."

And they went—knowing Williams; but, being negroes, they spied upon the white people from behind the house and through the undergrowth.

"Take off your coat," said Singleton, as Williams fell to work.

"Will the ladies permit?" Williams asked.

"Most assuredly!" said both.

"Thank you!" said Williams.

"It digs very easily, sir," Williams observed presently, when the hole was about two feet deep; "no stones to speak of, you observe."

Singleton paused, his arms on the shovel.

"So I notice," he returned.

"Give me the shovel, now," said Vendome. "I want to do my share of the work."

"With the greatest pleasure!" Singleton laughed.

Two feet more of earth came out.

"Still remarkably easy digging, sir," Williams remarked, between pick-falls.

"How's the shovelling, Vendome?" Singleton inquired.

"The shovelling is bully," Vendome answered.

"Want to try it?"

“Hands getting blistered?”

“You’ve guessed it.”

“Leave off, Mr. Vendome,” said Williams. “I’ll throw out the rest of the dirt.”

“You poor kid-glover!” Singleton sympathized.
“Let a man handle it.”

“With the greatest of pleasure,” Vendome repeated.

Just then Williams’ pick rang against a stone, with the dull sound that indicated it was of considerable size.

“Try it again,” said Singleton; “a little farther away.”

The same sound came back.

“Once more!” cried Betty eagerly.

Once more the same sound followed.

A few vigorous strokes, and Williams dropped the pick.

“Give me the shovel, sir,” said he.

A moment’s quick work—and a large flat slab of granite lay uncovered.

Singleton and Vendome sprang down beside Williams.

“All together!” said Singleton as they grasped the edges. . . . “Now, with the bar. . . . Now!”

The stone was flung aside.—Under it was a hole—and blackness.

XIV

THE PROBLEM

“THE cave!” cried Betty. “Natalie, you may remind Orme that you told him so.”

“I told you so, Mr. Vendome!” smiled Natalie.

“The credit is yours!” Vendome replied—and dropping on one knee, he peered into the hole.

“It’s dark!” he remarked.

“Sure. It’s dark,” said Singleton. “Did you expect it to be lit up with electric lights?”

Vendome shrugged an answer, and struck a match. It was instantly extinguished. He tried several more without avail.

“It’s no use,” he said, “there is too much draught.” He took a stone and dropped it into the opening. “It’s not deep—eight or ten feet, maybe.”

“Another thing we forgot,” Singleton remarked: “a lantern. For bone-headedness, Vendome, you and I are in the expert class.”

“Isn’t it true!” said Vendome, climbing out. “Did you ever know such drivelling incompetents!”

“I reckon, Williams, you will have to go back to Springberry for a lantern,” said Singleton.

“Certainly, sir—if I can’t get one at the cabins,” Williams replied, and hastened across.

"It seems that the old Scotswoman's tale is being verified!" Vendome reflected.

"The passing of a skeptic!" Natalie laughed.

"And the justification of faith," he bowed.

"Cut the religion!" Singleton said. "It has no place in a jewel hunt. Jewels are the devil's lure."

"And we are at the pit's mouth," Betty remarked. "Who will venture to descend and scrape acquaintance with his Majesty?"

"We all will go," Natalie declared; "no favoritism shall be shown."

"Toward his Majesty, or toward ourselves?" Vendome inquired.

"Whichever you wish—I am concerned only for the Marquis."

"By all means, the Marquis!" Vendome said.

"Are you women actually thinking of going down into the cave?" Singleton asked.

"Most assuredly!" said Betty.

"Then we had better widen the opening or——"

"Narrow us," Natalie interjected. "Never mind, Carter; it won't be necessary; our hips are sufficiently small, and our skirts skimp enough to let us through easily, if you men don't stand and look."

"What has the looking got to do with the smallness of hips or skimpness of skirts?—and how dare you suggest that we would look?"

"I didn't suggest—I indicated."

"It is up to you to plead, Vendome," said Singleton.

"I plead guilty, for you—not guilty, for myself," Vendome replied.

"Thank you, kindly; I can plead for myself."

"Being a man makes your plea, in this case, altogether supererogatory," Natalie remarked.

"Doesn't she use big words!" Singleton exclaimed. "Say it again, Natalie."

"Another time, Carter; there's something else to be done now. Here comes Williams with the lantern."

Singleton took the light and lowered it into the opening.

"All right!" he said, after a hasty inspection. "I'm going down—the bottom is only about eight feet away. Hand me the lantern when I call."

"Let me go!" said both Vendome and Williams together—the latter adding, "You don't know about the air, sir."

"It's not foul—the light burned brightly here, give me a hand!"

He slid into the blackness, hung an instant from the edge, then disappeared.

"Down!" he called. "Now pass me the light." Williams swung in the lantern. "I've got it—wait till I look around. . . . Very good; come along!"

"You first, Betty," said Natalie.

Without the usual feminine demur and insistence that the other should precede, Betty gathered her skirts tightly around her and went forward. Vendome and Williams gave her a hand and she sprang down beside them.

"Now," said Vendome, "if you will permit each of us to slip a hand under your arm, we can lower you into the cave without the least difficulty."

"That is much better than falling in!" laughed Betty, and holding her arms tight to her body, she was lifted out over the hole and let down lightly through it to within a short distance of the floor, where Singleton steadied her for the slight drop.

"Now Mrs. Tremaine!" said Vendome.

She shot him a look and a dazzling smile—and gave her other hand to Williams. Then she stepped to the opening, lifted her arms for them to get a firm hold, smiled again, almost daringly, into Vendome's eyes, pressed his hand with her arm altogether more than was necessary—and found Betty below. Vendome followed instantly.

"Where is Williams?" Singleton asked, when the farmer did not join them.

"I left him up there," replied Vendome. "I supposed he was coming."

"Where are you, Williams?" Singleton called.

"I'll wait here, sir," said Williams.

"You'll do nothing of the sort—come on!"

"Very well, sir; as you wish," obeying without further objection. It was sufficient that Singleton wanted him.

"What is the size of your cave, Vendome?" said Singleton, holding the lantern high.

"I don't know the width; but it is forty feet to the lower level—seventy-five feet of water beyond."

"There is water, all right!" Singleton exclaimed, as the light glinted faintly in reflection.

"And about forty feet away!" Vendome added.
"It does look as if Mrs. McIvor's vision was true."

"What's that yonder?" Natalie whispered. The unusualness of the experience, and the blackness of the cave, had awed Betty and her to silence.

"Where?" said Betty nervously.

"There, by the wall!—don't you see it?—it looks like a skeleton."

"It is a skeleton—two of them," said Vendome.

"And side by side," Singleton added.

They went over to them—the women hanging back, yet afraid to be left even a few feet behind. The bones and buttons were all that remained of the bodies and clothes.

"This tells a tale!" said Vendome, pointing to a small hole in front of one skull.

He picked it up gently—a bullet fell out.

“Killed!” said Singleton.

Stooping, he turned over the other skull. A hole had been drilled in it from the rear—the bullet rattled as it rolled around.

“Murdered!” said Vendome.

Singleton nodded. “And the murderer carried the bodies here and then departed, replacing the stone after him.”

“And we have the Frenchman, his servant and the other Frenchman. We may choose between them, as to which got away and replaced the stone. The replacing of the stone is very indicative. Whether he took the Crown Jewels, we may, or we may not, find out. It looks exceedingly dubious.”

“The Scotswoman said that the Jewels are still here!” Natalie exclaimed.

“She didn’t see the skeletons,” said Vendome; “at least, she didn’t mention them.”

“Which means that the skeletons haven’t anything to do with the Jewels,” Natalie argued; “they have not been disturbed. For all we know, the skeletons may be the result of violence. The Frenchman may have died in their defense.”

“How about the one who got away, the survivor who replaced the stone after the others were dead?”

“I don’t know!” said Natalie. “All I know

is that I believe the Scotswoman; she said the Jewels were in the wall beyond the water. They may be difficult to get at, but they are there."

"For dogged faith, commend me to a trusting woman," said Singleton.

"As well as for intuition," Vendome added—with a glance at Natalie. "And however these gentlemen here may have died—whether it was in defense or otherwise—let us assume Mrs. Tremaine's belief that the Jewels are hidden in the wall beyond the water. How are we to reach them?"

"Let us take a look at the water," Singleton suggested. . . . "How far did your Scotswoman say it was to the opposite wall?"

"Seventy-five feet."

"It looks nearer fifty; however, across water none but a mariner can estimate distance."

"Is the water deep?" Betty inquired.

"Twelve feet," Vendome answered.

Singleton held the light aloft. The roof, walls, and floor were of limestone, eroded until the subterranean stream had worn its way through the softest part of the rock and disappeared in its lower channel, leaving the upper portion of the cave firm and dry.

"What puzzles me," said Betty, "is how the Frenchman could dig a hole in the solid rock ten feet under the surface of the water."

" You forget that the water was probably not twelve feet deep a hundred and twenty-five years ago," Vendome observed.

" How do you account for the higher level of the cave? Wasn't it made sometime by this stream? "

" I don't know."

" And if the stream was at a higher level, how could it avoid filling the lower level at the same time? "

" I don't know," Vendome replied.

" And how could the Jewels—you'll admit that this portion was dry when the killing occurred? "

" Undoubtedly! "

" And the stream was there? "

" I don't know."

" What do you know? " Singleton smiled.

" Nothing, my friend—except that it is quite possible the stream wasn't there when the men died."

" Well, it's small use to speculate over what was—we've got a sufficiently hard problem confronting us now. How are we to get at the infernal Jewels? "

" All I know," regretted Natalie, " is that we won't get at them to-day! "

" Nor in many days," said Singleton.

" I think we had better let them rest," Vendome advised. " Why should we trouble ourselves further? We can notify the French Government of what we have learned, and of what we have found in

corroboration; then it can proceed as it sees fit."

"You know you are not in earnest!" Natalie laughed.

"What is the good of it?" Vendome pursued.
"As I look at the matter, we will be obliged to restore the Jewels."

"Think of the glory of the finding!" Betty said.

"And think of the credit you will receive, not to speak of the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor," Natalie added.

"And think of the labor entailed, even if we succeed," Vendome replied.

"Not to mention, if we don't succeed; as well as the time spent under ground," Singleton remarked.
"It makes me chilly to contemplate it. I'm voting with Vendome. Let the French rescue their own Jewels. There is no assurance the Grand Cross will be forthcoming. It's purely speculative."

"I thought you two were good sports!" mocked Natalie.

"It isn't a sporting proposition, my dear girl. We lose anyway we look at it. The Legion won't do me any good."

"How about you, Mr. Vendome?" inquired Natalie. "The Grand Cross may be of much use to a diplomat. It carries more with it, I fancy, than ordinary mortals wist."

"You forget one has to cease being a diplomat to get it—unless he receives the permission of Congress to accept it," Vendome replied.

"Which is usually granted, isn't it?"

"I think so—General Porter was decorated by France with the Grand Cross—but some friend has to engineer it through Congress, and that is unpleasant."

"I should think, if France indicated its desire to confer the Order, it would be most discourteous in Congress not to grant the permission. A mere suggestion, by the State Department, of a friendly government's desire should be quite sufficient."

"True enough!" Vendome smiled. "But Congress is rather boorish at times—and you never can tell when one of the times is going to drop around."

"I'm rather ashamed of the gentlemen!" Natalie remarked, turning to Betty.

"I'm rather ashamed of them myself," said Betty. "I thought with you that they were good sports. We can't do anything alone."

"No—that is the pity of it! The Jewels are yonder, across the water, and the men lie down on the job. They are too apathetic to take a chance. They are quitters."

"Now you know what's the matter with you,

Vendome!" Singleton laughed. "You're too apathetic to take a chance—you're a quitter."

"Ditto, yourself!" Vendome replied.

"My dear young women!" Singleton began, "you don't appreciate the difficulties of the situation. You are in a cave——"

"How did you ever find it out?" said Natalie.

"——confronted by the problem," Singleton went on, "of a subterranean stream, twelve feet deep and over seventy-five feet wide. It can't be dammed, so it must be diverted, or coffer-dammed, before we can come at the place where we think the Jewels are concealed. That means a serious problem in engineering, and in time, and plenty of assistance—including an engineer. It's quite too much of a puzzle for me. Do you want to tackle it, Vendome?"

"None of it for me, my friend!" said Vendome.

"Can't we get a professional diver to go down and try to locate the hiding place?" Betty asked.

"We can—we can do anything in reason," Vendome replied, "but as I have said before, is it worth while?"

"That is for you and Carter to decide," said Natalie. "Betty and I are only a negligible quantity in this affair."

"I distinctly deny that either of you could ever be negligible," Vendome declared.

"A pleasant protest gracefully expressed—otherwise mere words!" she laughed.

"You see, Singleton, how they distort my meaning."

"Well, however that may be," said Betty, "I will admit you have done all that is possible to-day; therefore, my lords, I suggest that we withdraw into the light of the sun, also into a better atmosphere."

"One moment!" returned Singleton. "We have not verified the depth of the stream. Maybe it isn't twelve feet—maybe it's very shallow."

"It's twelve feet!" said Natalie confidently. "The Scotswoman will be sustained in every detail."

Williams stepped forward and sounded the stream with his shovel. He failed to touch bottom, though he got down on his knees and added the length of his arm.

"It looks that way," Singleton admitted. "Anything more to be done here at this time?"

"Nothing," said Betty—"except to hope for the Jewels over the water."

"With about as much prospect of success as the 'King over the water,'" Singleton returned.

Suddenly Williams put down the lantern and darted toward the entrance. At the same instant, a man dropped through the hole into the cave.

XV

THE RED EMERALD

BLAKE was in the habit, at certain times, of going for long rides alone; sometimes not returning until late in the night, or even not until the following day. He sought solitude, and so these excursions were mainly toward the mountains, where the roads were rarely used, and the encounters seldom. He knew the Land's End peninsula well, and the bridle-path leading along the river bluff was mainly of his horse's making.

That morning, as he came slowly down the track through the timber, he noticed the negroes watching something beyond the house—in a manner indicating intense curiosity, held in leash by fear. Not until he was close upon them did they see him.

"What are you looking at, boys?" he inquired.

"Warn' lookin' at nothin', seh," one of them answered—having often seen him ride by their cabins, they had come to know him. "Jest some'n over yonder aroun' de house."

"Is it interesting?" Blake smiled.

"Yass, seh! Hit was Marster Williams an' some nudder gentlemans and two ladies. Dey dug

a hole and wen' down in hit, and you kain't see dem no mo', seh."

"What?" said Blake. "They dug a hole?"

"Yas, seh, Marster Williams he dun druv us 'way, seh; an' den dey dug a hole, seh—yo kin see hit, if yo cum heah, seh."

Blake went.

"Dyar, seh!—Does yo see hit, now?"

Blake nodded. He also saw the horses and the carriage, and he recognized them as Singleton's.

"Do you know what they dug for?" he asked.

"No, seh—that's whar we wuz tryin' to see, seh. We didn't spect dyar waz anyt'ing dyar to dig fur, seh."

"I suppose not!" Blake smiled; "you would have dug it up yourself, if you had."

"Yass, seh! We sho would, seh."

"How long has Mr. Williams and the others been there?"

"'Bout an hour, seh, I reckon."

"Hum!—Thank you, Ben."

Tossing the negro a quarter, Blake rode on to the house, hitched his horse, and walked across to the opening. Here was his opportunity!

The party, of course, was the Singletons, Mrs. Tremaine and Vendome. They had come to this remote and secluded place for a specific purpose—

they had driven off the negroes, dug a large hole, uncovered an entrance to some sort of a cave, and entered it. It was fair to presume that they did not want the owner of the land, whoever he was, to be informed of their doings. Here was his chance to trade his knowledge for Vendome's silence. The hole was in the open, with nothing to distinguish the spot, so they had found it by measurement. And the measurements were exactly correct, they had dug only at the one point; the turf was unscarred elsewhere. He would not be a welcome visitor, but that was a small matter—it would not be his first experience at not being welcome.

He could detect the murmur of voices, and, dropping lightly into the excavation, he bent over the opening—just in time to hear Singleton say:—"the Jewels are concealed. That means a serious problem in engineering. . . ."

He listened carefully for something more definite; but beyond Mrs. Singleton's questions as to the diver and the water, there was nothing—though it was enough to tell him that they sought jewels, and that the jewels were under water. The only question was whether he should confront them in the cave, or when they came out—and the question was answered for him by a clod of dirt he inadvertently dislodged with his hand.

He heard some one running in the cave; and as it was easier to go down than up, he went down—landing almost on top of Williams.

“A trifle sudden!” said he, recovering his balance by putting a hand on Williams’ shoulder. “I beg your pardon, Mrs. Singleton and Mrs. Tremaine!” with a bow. “I jumped down in the excavation, and the ground was soft and slid me into the cave. What have you run to earth, Singleton?”

“You are the latest,” Singleton answered.

“You didn’t need to excavate to find me!” Blake laughed.

“Unfortunately, no!” Singleton smiled coldly.

It did not affect Blake in the least.

“I’m not spying on you,” he protested; “though I’ll admit you are justified in thinking that I am. You see, I’ve been riding along this river loop for months; it’s wild and unfrequented. This morning I was coming back through the timber, when I noticed a mound of fresh earth south of the house; a pardonable curiosity led me to investigate—and I am here.”

“We are just leaving,” said Singleton.

“Then I am leaving, also,” Blake responded.
“After you, Alphonse!”

“On the contrary, after you. In this instance, the ladies go last.”

"Isn't this Mr. Vendome?" Blake asked—seeming, for the first time, to see Orme.

"I didn't know if you would recognize me," Vendome returned, as he took Blake's outstretched hand.

"I never forgot a face," Blake replied. "I think I passed you the other evening."

"Williams, you first," said Singleton. . . . "Now, Blake, see if you can go up as successfully as you came down."

"I hope I can," Blake replied meaningly.

And he did—aided by Singleton's and Vendome's strength, which they supplied none too gently.

"Did he hear anything?" Vendome asked—as the Englishman was recovering himself from the strenuous boost.

"I'm afraid he did," Singleton answered, very low. "Now you go up, and you and Williams help the women. I'll remain here, so they can use me for a platform, unless *you* would prefer Vendome," he added, looking at Natalie with a quizzical smile.

"We prefer Mr. Vendome *above*—as he prefers to be," Natalie remarked.

"You don't know Vendome!" Singleton laughed. "However, we married men must be imposed upon at times. Vendome, are you ready?"

And Vendome was quickly up.

"Now, my dears, I'll shut my eyes and help

you. One at a time, please—my knee is too small for all your dainty feet together."

"You go first, Natalie—he won't dare look, if I am watching him!" Betty smiled.

"Then *watch* him," Natalie enjoined—and stepping on Singleton's knee her hands were caught by Vendome and Williams, and she was quickly drawn from the cave.

"Thank you!" said she to Williams; and, "thank you!" she smiled to Vendome—only the latter was a very different sort of "thank you" from the former.

The next moment Betty stood beside her—and Singleton followed.

"Shall I replace the stone, sir?" said Williams.

"It isn't necessary," Singleton replied, knowing that Blake's sharp eyes were on him. "Any-one is welcome to what he finds."

"That being the case," said Blake, "may I ask what you expected to find?"

"Nothing—absolutely nothing," Singleton answered, with a bland smile.

"Of course," said Blake, "you just happened to bring along the pick, and shovel, and crowbar, also Williams. It is very queer how fortuitous a combination of circumstances may happen at times."

"It is indeed!" Singleton remarked. "Witness the fortuitous combination of circumstances that attended your slide into the cave—just as we left."

"It was truly remarkable!" Blake agreed easily. "I wonder if, by any chance, I might have slipped on a diamond."

"Quite likely," Singleton replied. "Diamonds were scattered through the cave as thickly as dollars in a bank. Maybe some did get away while we were not looking."

"I might come back to-morrow and look," Blake replied.

"Why wait until to-morrow—why not do the looking to-day?"

Blake raised his hands protestingly.

"My dear Singleton!" he said, "I never pry into other people's affairs—and if I do slip into them, by inadvertence, I never babble." He caught Vendome's eye—and went on. "I believe in attending strictly to my own business, and letting others attend to theirs—so long as they let me alone. Don't you approve, Mr. Vendome?"

It was an offer to exchange his silence as to the cave, for Vendome's silence as to his past life. And Vendome understood the offer, and met it with an amused smile.

"Certainly, Mr. Blake; it is a most excellent

habit, provided one doesn't violate the compact in other ways."

And Blake, on his part, understood that the exchange was accepted, on condition that he keep away from Mrs. Tremaine.

"Oh, surely!" he said; "that is comprehended."

And even as he said it, he shot a covert glance at Mrs. Tremaine. Such contracts were always made to be broken, if the lady happened to be willing.

The women walked together, the three men followed, Williams brought up the rear. When they reached the carriage, Blake went on to his horse; Vendome helped Betty and Natalie to their places.

"Are you going home?" Blake asked, reining around and waiting.

"No," said Singleton, gathering up the lines; "we shall make a day of it along the river and at Springberry Farm. Good-bye!"

"That will cool his curiosity as to the cave until to-morrow!" Vendome laughed.

"I wonder just what he thinks?" said Natalie.

"It depends on how much he heard," Vendome replied.

"And there is no means of knowing that?" Betty remarked.

"We can make a reasonable guess," said Singleton. He raised his whip and beckoned to

one of the negro men. . . . "How long before we all came from the cave did Mr. Blake arrive?" he asked.

"Jest a little while, seh; 'bout ten minutes, I reckon, seh. 'Twarn no time at all, seh."

Singleton nodded. "We will leave the cave in your particular charge," he said. "See that no one molests it,"—and flinging him a coin he drove off.

"Yass, seh! yass, seh! We'll tek good kear of hit, seh; yass, seh!" came floating after.

"Now if any one can tell what a nigger thinks is ten minutes," Singleton remarked, "he will please enlighten us. I'll confess that I'm in the dark. However, I reckon we may assume that Blake didn't hear more than half our talk. If he heard all of it, I don't know that he would be much better off; we can't come at the Jewels, and no more can he."

"To-morrow he will return and investigate," Betty observed. "He will find the skeletons, and——"

"He saw them to-day—and said nothing," Vendome remarked. "He fancies he is very crafty."

"He does!" said Betty. "He thinks he is so deep no one can see through him. At the Club, he is called 'The Ostrich.' It's a base libel on the bird."

"As you may have observed, Mr. Blake is not popular with the Mistress of Rosemont!" Singleton laughed.

"About the only good thing in him that I have observed," Betty retorted, "is that he rides straight and hard—and, I am informed, is an amiable card player and a good loser; also he essays the great American game."

"Traits which are far from bad!" Vendome smiled.

"They don't make up with women for an impertinent look, or a suggestive leer," Betty added.

"Get back to business, my dear," said Singleton. "What shall we do—go home?"

"What else is there to do?" Betty asked.

"We might return to the cave and bury the skeletons," Natalie suggested.

"The skeletons are best buried where they are—or in the subterranean stream," Vendome remarked.

"The appropriate place!" Natalie exclaimed. "Let us go back and bury them beside the Jewels."

"Yes," added Betty; "let us do it for—sentiment."

"Not for sentiment but because you two wish it, it shall be done. Hey, Vendome?" said Singleton.

"Certainly!" Vendome responded. "Need you ask?"

Singleton swung the horses around, and they

trotted over to the entrance to the cave. Williams, who was standing before the house, followed in response to a signal—he had not yet returned the lantern.

“ Natalie and I will not go down,” said Betty.

“ The interment is because you two wish it; we will not be deserted at the end. Hey, Singleton?” said Vendome.

“ Certainly. Need you ask?” Singleton echoed. “ Williams will stay with the horses.”

The four again descended into the cave. By the lantern’s smoky light, the two men gathered up the bones, and cast them far out into the stream.

“ Till the Resurrection morn!” intoned Singleton solemnly, as the dark waters closed over them.

“ Amen!” Natalie whispered.

As Vendome turned away, the glint of something in the dust where the bones had lain caught his eye.

“ What’s this?” he said—and he picked it up, and held it to the light.

It was a man’s ring, set with a superb emerald, in which were exquisitely cut three *fleur-de-lys*.

“ Look!” said he. “ The King’s own signet—the Royal Arms of France!—It’s the Red Emerald!! See!” as the light fell on it at the proper angle. “ Now it’s mottled red and green, now green again.”



"LOOK! IT'S THE RED EMERALD! SEE!"

"One of these—skeletons was the King!" Natalie exclaimed.

Vendome shook his head.

"Not the King," said he. "Louis died on the guillotine; of that there is no possibility of doubt. One of these men, however, was his accredited deputy—the ring proves it. I am persuaded now that the old Scotswoman's tale is true."

"Betty and I have been persuaded all along."

"The eyes of faith can behold much!" Vendome smiled. "They might help look if any other jewels are scattered over the floor."

But none were to be found.

"What will you do with the emerald ring, Orme?" Betty inquired slyly, as they drove away; "return it to France—or keep it?"

"I won't keep it," he replied; "but," and he looked at Mrs. Tremaine, "it will depend on circumstances—whether it goes back to France."

"What circumstances, Mr. Vendome?" said Natalie, blandly—and Betty laughed.

"Whether *you* will accept it."

"You intend to offer it to *me*?"

"If you will permit me to offer it."

"It rests with me?"

"Absolutely."

"Is there a time limit?"

"A reasonable time."

"Reasonable is relative!"

"A reasonable time, *under the circumstances*, should not exceed three months."

"You surely are not pressing for a decision?" she mocked.

"Merely forbearance—and to let you decide calmly. Did it rest with me, I could decide at once."

"The volatile nature of woman has to be considered, *n'est ce pas?*"

"Come down to earth!" exclaimed Singleton. "Such ethereal twaddle is floating the carriage. Why don't you talk sense?"

"Sense, also, is relative," Natalie said sweetly.

"Sure it is!" said Singleton heartily. "You both would get along better, if you talked plain facts. Vendome is giving you three months' limit, Natalie, to make up your mind whether or not you will accept the ring, and him with it—but he'll be mighty glad to have you make it three days, or less. Isn't that so, Vendome?"

"Most assuredly, it is so!"

"Mr. Vendome is too well-bred to differ with his host," said Natalie imperturbably.

"Mr. Vendome is too thoroughly enamored of Mrs. Tremaine—and her manifold fascinations—to

want to differ with his host!" Singleton laughed.—"Plunge in, Orme; I have adroitly finessed a beautiful opening for you, and no one else is aware of it. Show your nerve, old man, show your nerve!"

"Carter, you embarrass Natalie," Betty said.

"Not in the least, my dear," said Natalie. "I know your loving husband of old. It is Mr. Vendome who may be surprised at his impertinence. However, he is not always so rude," turning to Vendome. "He is usually a very decent sort; at heart is a fine fellow.—I hope, sir, that you will pardon him—"

"Thanks for the excellent words!" Singleton interrupted. "And Vendome, if the lady won't accept the King's emerald *now*, put it away for the nonce, and offer it to her again in a day or so—when she's more amenable to your good points, and not so hampered with solicitous friends.—You want him to offer it again, Natalie?—Yes; of course, I know you do. In the meantime, and first, we will go home; discussing on the way what we shall do with the Jewels we haven't got—and with Mr. Blake. Williams, you had better replace the stone, and caution the niggers to see that no one disturbs it. They may not obey the injunction, but at least it will impress them with the gravity of their disobedience."

XVI

MOTHS

"**W**HY didn't you take the emerald ring?" Betty asked, coming into Natalie's room just before dinner that evening.

"For two reasons, my dear," Natalie answered, dabbing a finishing touch of powder on her nose, then carefully dusting it off. "The first reason is, I didn't want it *now*—and the second reason is, I am perfectly sure it will be offered to me again."

"And what shall you do then?"

"I've not decided—'sufficient unto the day,' and so forth."

"It is a gorgeous emerald!" Betty reflected.

"Gorgeous!" Natalie echoed. "I think I have never seen such a depth of color in a stone." She held up her slender left hand. "It would look very well on my finger—very well, indeed."

"And Orme would look very well as your husband."

"Without a doubt, Betty dear—but would I look well as his wife?"

"Is that all that deters you?"

"No, not all——"

"Does Warren Alstair deter you?"

"I don't know!"

"You realize what 'don't know' indicates?"

"If I knew what it indicates, my don't know would be a know."

"And are you going to mark time until you do know?"

"I am not accepting any emerald, at any rate!" Natalie smiled. "Moreover, Mr. Vendome wasn't serious in the offer—any more than I was serious in what I said."

"Fudge!" said Betty.

"What am I to infer from 'fudge'?"

"You're not stupid."

"Well, if I promise to consider the ring—only consider, mind you—will you be good?"

"If it is the best you can do, I shall have to be content—for the time."

"It's a truce for the rest of my visit?"

Betty nodded.

"Then read these," said Natalie, taking three telegrams from her dressing-table and passing them across. "They were here when we returned from Land's End."

Betty opened the first—it was from Plimpton:

"Will be down this evening. Call you from the Club when I arrive."

The second was from Silverthorne:

“Down this evening. Trust to see you. Regards to Mrs. Singleton.”

The third was from Fitzgerald:

“Am hoping it will be convenient for you and Mrs. Singleton to have me call this evening. Down on the five-thirty.”

“They seem to be coming!” Betty laughed. “Is it a movement in force to rout Orme, or is it simply the Moths to the Flame?”

“It’s the Moths to the Flame, I reckon!” Natalie laughed back. “At least it isn’t because of Mr. Vendome—he told no one but the State Department where he was going.”

“Which doesn’t prove that it hasn’t been found out since. Washington is not far from Tarrington, and an Ambassador isn’t an ordinary person to newspaper correspondents.”

“Then, in this triple instance, you are willing to acquit me somewhat of being simply a Flame.”

“By no means! You’re a Flame for four instead of three—with the three realizing that the size of the fourth may extinguish the Flame for them. I suppose they wired because they couldn’t get you on the telephone. I should like to have seen them, when they all met on the train!”

“They are friends!” Natalie observed.

“Not now!” Betty laughed. “You will have

a perfectly lovely (!) time this evening—entertaining them."

"I wonder just what they did think when they all got off at Tarrington," Natalie reflected.

"Maybe they all didn't come through—maybe they caught the up-train back to Washington."

"Not they!" said Natalie. "Every one of them will come, just to annoy the others."

"Very human!" said Betty.

"And what's more, they will hide their chagrin, and get all the fun possible out of the situation. Do you know them?"

"I know Fitzgerald fairly well—Silverthorne barely—Plimpton, not at all. Fitzgerald is charming."

"He is," said Natalie. "And Silverthorne and Plimpton are fine fellows also. I think, however, I like Fitzgerald best. He is different, a trifle blasé, the blaséness of experience; with a calmly determined way about him, neither ruthless nor irritating—and very pleasing and dependable."

"How is Silverthorne?" Betty asked.

"A trifle spoiled and a bit opinionated—but very much a man, nevertheless, and a bully chap."

"And Plimpton?"

"Of a different sort: plenty of money—of the never-done-anything class—looks and acts the

natural-born gentleman—a club-man of leisure with everything that means—yet unspoiled and not unduly impressed with his own importance. A thoroughly likable chap.”

“ Altogether, three fine strings to have to one’s bow,” Betty remarked.

“ Why do you persist in trying to marry me off? ” Natalie exclaimed.

“ Because it is a woman’s business in life to get married ; and because, until you’re married, no other girl will have a chance at the men whom you dangle.”

“ You are for the general good! ” Natalie laughed. “ Why not have me put on the block, and offered to the highest bidder? If I’m as attractive as you would have me believe, I should bring an enormous price.”

“ Because some fellow with a bottomless pocket-book might outbid Orme Vendome. I’m for Orme first—the general good afterward. However, I shall trust to him, and the King’s emerald—but particularly to him.”

“ You will have me married despite myself, and before he asks me,” said Natalie.

“ Not at all! I’m just getting you in a proper frame of mind to accept him when he offers.”

Natalie smiled good-naturedly and arose.

“ Let us go down and take a critical look at

Mr. Vendome," said she. "The wonderful Mr. Vendome!—my fate and my fatality."

Singleton and Vendome were in the library; the former sitting at his desk; the latter standing before the fireplace, as a man does without regard to season, heat, or the absence of heat.

"There is no earthly use in our trying," Vendome was saying as they entered.

"In trying for what, if we may ask?" said Betty.

"In trying to lay hands on the Jewels.—Oh! I know,"—as he placed a chair for her, while Natalie seated herself on a corner of Singleton's desk, and slowly swung a trim foot and ankle—"we're quitters, no sports, and an awful poor lot, and anything else you may choose to call us; but such is the decision of the male portion of the Court, taken after due and profound consideration of the subject."

"Please say that again!" Natalie exclaimed.
"It sounds so well and weighty."

"Your turn, Singleton," Vendome remarked;
"once is enough for me."

"Once is sufficient," said Singleton. "Moreover, I can't improve on either the diction or the substance. If you wish it in words of one syllable, however—we've flew'd the job, *alias* the Jewels; if France wants to get her old plunder let her tackle

the problem herself. None of it for yours truly."

"And that is the determination of you both after due consideration?" Betty asked.

"*Sí, señora!*"

"Well—you two for it! It's your secret, not Natalie's nor mine. It seems too rare a chance to let slip, Natalie and I wouldn't let it slip, but—" she shrugged expressively. "You don't care for Blake, I assume?"

"Not a particle! He is welcome to anything he can discover, even if he overheard everything we said. If it's too big a job for us to handle, it's quite safe from him. Am I right, Vendome?"

"Absolutely."

"Might I ask, Orme," said Betty, "what you intend to do with the emerald ring; present it to the French Government; return it to its skeleton, at the bottom of the underground stream; or hold it for the three months, pending Natalie's decision as to whether she will accept it?"

"Don't let the last embarrass you, Mr. Vendome!" Natalie laughed.

"I'm not embarrassed," Vendome assured her; "though Mrs. Singleton ought to be—and isn't."

They went in to dinner. Natalie smiled at the Marquis, and flung him a kiss from her finger tips; Betty waved her hand to him.

"We have done our best for you, Colonel de Chavenis," Natalie confided, "but, alas! our men are too matter-of-fact, too coldly calculating. They have basely deserted to the enemy; they are about to surrender your secret to the French Republic."

"It is enough to bring you down from your frame in righteous wrath," Betty added. "Betrayed in the house of your friends!"

"I reckon we shall have to return the noble Marquis to his former lodging-place in the attic," said Singleton. "He is receiving quite too much attention from the ladies."

"They are jealous of you, Marquis!"

"Who wouldn't be? He is handsome; and the Continental uniform is strikingly becoming. With his powdered hair and fine features he is a winner.—No, you for the garret, Marquis, you for the garret! I can understand now why you were promptly promoted to the top of the house; all the women of the place were in love with you. You are a gay macaroni, Monsieur de Chavenis."

"This is surely your silly day, Carter!" his wife remarked. "Where is the natural dignity of Head of the Singletons?"

"That's right, my dear! Muddy the water—divert attention from yourself by accusing the other fellow. We know the trick, Vendome——"

" You bet you do!" Betty retorted. " You have practised it enough to know it. It's a trick of which you men have a monopoly."

" Which being the case, and definitely settled by the fair Judge, what do you say to going to the Club after dinner, and tying up to some gossip?"

" And incidentally to a few wagers on the horses, and also a few drinks!" Betty added.

" What's wrong about that?" said Singleton.

" Nothing. I wanted you to include all the inducements, out of respect for truth and for the Club. But, we can't go, at least, Natalie and I can't."

" Wherefore?" with raised brows.

She glanced at Natalie, and got a nod of permission.

" We are to have visitors, this evening, from out of town."

" May we venture to inquire as to the names of the aforesaid visitors?"

" You may inquire—and Natalie may answer, if she is so minded."

" Marquis, will you please ask the lady," said Singleton, bowing to the portrait.

" I'll tell *you* anything, dear Marquis," said Natalie, " though I fear that you are not acquainted with the gentlemen. They are Mr. Fitzgerald, Mr. Silverthorne and Mr. Plimpton."

“Coming here?” Vendome exclaimed.
“I am so advised,” Natalie answered.
“Together?”
“I am not able to say.”
“What brings them?”
“The train, I presume.”
“Thanks! I should have said, what made you manage it so ill?”

“I didn’t manage; I wasn’t consulted. They wired, singly, that they would be down this evening; I presume they’re not starting *en masse*, however they may arrive in Tarrington, and later at Rosemont.”

“*De trop?*” queried Singleton.
“Who?” said Vendome.
“Everybody.”

“Not at all—there is safety in numbers.” Then he chuckled. “I should like to have heard the pleasantries exchanged by them when they met on the train, and realized they all were bound for Tarrington. Some one came in for a jolly good roast—and I’ll wager, it wasn’t Fitzgerald.”

“Maybe the pleasantry is directed at you,” Betty suggested.

“It is quite possible—quite probable, indeed.”
“They don’t intend that you shall have it all your own way with Natalie.”

“Small likelihood of that,” he replied.

"They fear it, nevertheless," she persisted.

"Then they don't know Mrs. Tremaine. If it were the Marquis they feared, their fear might be well grounded. Even I knuckle to him—ere he goes back to the attic."

"It looks to me, as though Carter and Mr. Vendome were very silly this evening," Natalie said.

"Three sane ones are coming," Betty replied.

"None of the three has a mammoth emerald to bestow," Singleton reminded. "The emerald is the thing, Vendome; dangle it constantly before Mrs. Tremaine's eyes; it will land her in the end."

"You are perfectly outrageous, Carter!" Natalie laughed. "Am I so mercenary as that?"

"No more jewelinary than the rest, my dear. I never knew one of the sex who wouldn't do anything for a sparkler of an adequate size—depending on the high contracting parties. We are dropping into diplomatic terms now, you will note. Sometimes a larger sparkler is required than at others; but if you make the carats plentiful, you land the damsel every time. Isn't it true, Marquis?"

"The Marquis will never endorse such sentiments," Natalie replied. "He is an honest man."

"Bully for him!" Singleton exclaimed. "Socrates searched a few centuries too soon. You're a wonder, Marquis, a perfect wonder! I'm not sur-

prised that you came to an untimely death.—Have a cigarette, Mrs. Tremaine?" as they arose.

"Yes, thank you! Did you expect me to refuse?"

"Not at all. I never expect a woman to refuse anything she cares for—when offered courteously."

As they came out on the piazza, a carriage was drawing up before the house.

"Here they are!" said Betty—"And together, as I live!" as three men alighted.

"Ah, Mrs. Singleton!" said Fitzgerald. "I bespeak your kind favor for my companions, Mr. Silverthorne and Mr. Plimpton; they are far from home and grieving sorely."

"How good of you to look after their distress, and pilot them to Rosemont!" smiled Betty.

"He is looking after our distress, all right, Mrs. Singleton—and adding to it all he can," said Silverthorne.

"By bringing you *here*?" Mrs. Tremaine asked.

"By bringing himself here. We didn't want him—did we, Plimpton?"

"I didn't want either of you," Plimpton answered. "My only distress is that you and Fitzgerald are along. I wish you both were in Washington, or Kalamazoo or——"

"Hel-goland!" Fitzgerald interjected.

"Ditto, here!" Silverthorne remarked.

" You see how it is, Mrs. Singleton," Plimpton confided. " I make arrangements to run down here for a cozy little evening with you and Mrs. Tremaine—only to find, when I get to the station, that Silverthorne and Fitzgerald have somehow learned of my intention and are coming along. *That is how they got here.*"

" Plimpton hasn't any monopoly on the unexpected, self-invited guests," Silverthorne observed. " Truth is, we're all unexpected to each other."

" Exactly!" said Fitzgerald. " Each one thought to spend a delightful evening at Rosemont; and we shall—all together.—Good Lord! You too, Vendome!"

" I'm delighted to see you all!" laughed Vendome. " When are you returning to Washington?"

" None of your business!" Fitzgerald answered.

" Oh, very well; let me present those who don't know him to Mr. Singleton," Vendome continued.

" How delightful you three should drop in so happily," Betty said, as they went down the piazza.

" Oh, yes; very delightful, indeed!" said Plimpton. " When did you come down, Vendome?"

" A day or two ago."

" I heard you had been called to New York."

" What did you hear, Silverthorne?" Vendome asked.

"Nothing at all!" Silverthorne replied.

"There is a straightforward answer! No one will ever get puffed up with pride, when Silverthorne's handy to tell him the unvarnished truth."

"It's good sometimes to hear the truth!" Plimpton reflected.

"About the other fellow—or about yourself?" Natalie asked.

"Plimpton's angelic disposition makes it easy to tell him the truth about himself," Fitzgerald said.

"That is about all I ever hear from you and Silverthorne, so you are a very competent witness."

"I think, Mr. Plimpton, you are especially amiable and long suffering," said Betty.

"Thank you, Mrs. Singleton! I am glad, indeed, some one appreciates me."

"That is his main object in life," Silverthorne observed. "To be appreciated has become a disease with him. He is here now, Mrs. Tremaine, because you are the only one who fully understands him."

"You see what a wonderfully thoughtful friend Silverthorne is," Plimpton retorted. "He even repeats for me, what I never said."

"You chaps must have had a pleasant ride down!" Vendome smiled.

"We did," said Fitzgerald. "The interchange of compliments and wit was positively dazzling."

"Yours wasn't," said Plimpton instantly.

"Good!" cried Vendome. "Score one for Plimpton."

"He is always scoring on either Fitzgerald or me," Silverthorne remarked.

"It makes no impression," Plimpton retorted; "you're solid brass, both of you!"

"Score another!" said Natalie.

"We had better call it Plimpton's game for the time, and resume it on the journey back in the morning," Silverthorne suggested. "We are going back then—are we not?"

"Don't let us talk of departure until we are gone!" Plimpton exclaimed.

"And when are you going?" said Fitzgerald.

"On the next train after you and Silverthorne."

"I thought as much!—Silverthorne, I shall have to leave it to you to watch him; I am a working man, you know."

"And why must you watch Mr. Plimpton?" Natalie asked.

"To see that he doesn't do what he shouldn't."

"You mean, he needs a guardian?"

"Something of the kind."

"And you trust Mr. Silverthorne?"

"Yes, Plimpton, in turn, will watch him; we are always watching one another. It is a great game!"

“For what?” said Betty mischievously.
“For making the other fellow miserable.”
“And the other fellow makes you miserable?”
“Unfortunately, yes!”
“Who is winning here?”
“I don’t know.”
“Who appears to be winning?”
“No one.”
“Do you enjoy the game?”
“At times—and at times no, distinctly no.”
Natalie, who had turned to address a word to Plimpton, caught Betty’s last question.
“What game, Mr. Fitzgerald?” she inquired.
“Hearts. Ever play it, Mrs. Tremaine?”
“With cards or with people?” she smiled.
“With people!”
“No, I’ve never played it—but I’ve watched others play, and it does not appeal to me.”
“Why?”
“No matter how skilful we are, we usually lose.”
“Some one must win!”
“Rarely—generally every one loses.”
It was said with a smile—almost a tantalizing smile—certainly a dazzling smile—yet, for a moment, there was silence. She was a divorcee, and a divorcee who had been the libellant; the inference was evident, or seemed evident.

"I have no reference to Mr. Tremaine nor to myself," she said. And the others fairly gasped, and a little stir went around the circle. "I am speaking from observation, not from experience; the personal equation does not enter in, I assure you. For my part, I am quite ready to marry again—if the proper man happens along and asks me."

"There is your chance, gentlemen!" Singleton exclaimed. "Who is the first one out—come singly, not in a bunch."

"Present company is excepted, Mr. Singleton," said Natalie. "I am not inviting a husband."

"I'm sorry for you all," Singleton sympathized. "I've done what I could for you, however, so you mustn't blame me. Come in and have a drink, won't you?—It may help you to forget."

• • • • •
"What in the world," said Betty, coming into Natalie's room that night, "did you mean by deliberately warning off all the men!"

"I meant what I said. It was a splendid opportunity—and I took it."

"But you included Orme!"

"Did I?" said Natalie, drawing a braid of the coppery hair slowly through her fingers.—"Well, if Mr. Vendome is serious, he won't let that speech deter him—nor will I, if I want him."

XVII

ON THE TARRINGTON PIKE

“SINGLETON,” said Vendome, the following morning, as they were making the rounds of the stables, and had paused to watch a negro groom rub down a spanking three year old, “I’m not quite satisfied with our decision concerning the Jewels.”

“Then guess again,” Singleton replied. “Your decision is what decides, you know.”

“What do you think in the matter?”

“About searching further?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not quite satisfied either,” Singleton admitted. “Seems to me it would be better to consult an engineer. If the Jewels are there, it is a crying shame not to recover them. The old Scotswoman’s story has been borne out so well thus far, that it’s safe to assume it will be borne out to the end.”

“And yet,” said Vendome, “an engineer can do nothing without workingmen—and a number of them; and that means notoriety; and with notoriety will come the question of title to Land’s End.—And where is that now—in the State of Virginia, or in the Marquis’ heirs?”

“In the Marquis’ heirs presumably,” said Singleton.

“And who are they?”

“Thunder! how should I know?”

“I fancy, we had better first consult a lawyer, on a hypothetical case. I’m not familiar with Virginia law; it may be that the title now is in the State for want of naturalized owners—or for non-payment of taxes—or for a dozen other causes. However, it will do no harm for me to run up to Washington and interview an engineer; possibly he may be able to tell us how to proceed with the aid of only Williams and a few of the blacks.”

“I think it just the right thing to do,” Singleton agreed. “Meantime, Blake may do the hunting.”

“I’ll go up to-morrow morning, and come back in the evening. Possibly I’ll bring the engineer and let him have a look at the ground; he can estimate the labor and time necessary—and whether the thing is feasible within reasonable limits.”

“The idea has occurred to me,” added Singleton, “that it might be a good notion—if it is decided not to attempt the job ourselves—to disclose the matter to the Secretary of State, and let the Government tackle the matter. It could turn it over to the War Department for investigation. On the whole, I’m not so sure it would not be the better course anyway. We have verified the tale, so far as to afford every assurance of its truth, so you

would be entirely justified in recommending its further investigation."

"I would do it," said Vendome, "if it were not for Betty and Mrs. Tremaine. They are much more interested than we—and when the Army Engineers enter, they must exit. I should like to find the Jewels just because of *them*—precious stones have a wonderful fascination for women."

"Yes," Singleton agreed: "women are creatures of fancy, more or less children still."

"And that," said Vendome, "is why we are fascinated by them; we never know what they will do next. They are always a surprise to us."

"Occasionally it isn't a pleasant surprise," Singleton added.

"I fancy, we men haven't much on them, when it comes to a matter of surprise. However, what makes life interesting is the uncertainty of it; it's uncertainty that lures us on to the Jewels.—A blind Scotswoman's tale at a Washington dinner-table, my coming to Rosemont, the Marquis de Chavenis' portrait, and Land's End, sets us on trail of the Crown Jewels of France, lost for over a century."

"And if you hadn't met Mrs. Tremaine in Washington, you would not have come to Rosemont—the Scotswoman's tale would have been forgotten—and so on," said Singleton. "You see,

it all comes back to a woman; she is the moving cause and consideration for everything in life really worth while—and much that isn't."—He tossed away his cigar and faced Vendome. "What in the devil did Natalie mean last night by giving you all notice not to apply for the position of husband?"

"Search me!" Vendome laughed.

"It was notice, wasn't it?"

"I took it so."

"And I took it also that she meant it."

"I think she did mean it—for some of us."

"Whom?" Singleton asked.

"That is just what I don't know; we shall have to wait and see, or inquire, if we won't wait."

"I reckon every one thinks that she intended it for the other fellows."

"Exactly—but with a lingering fear that she *may* have meant it for him."

"No one but a widow would have had the nerve to make such a statement—and a marvellously beautiful and fascinating widow, at that."

"Mrs. Tremaine is that—and then some," Vendome remarked.

"Tremaine was a glorious fool!" Singleton declared. "He didn't know when he had the real thing. Though there is something queer about that divorce, I have always thought. If granted for

that cause, why are they still friends—or, at least, friendly? I've seen them chatting, as unconcerned as if there never had been anything between them."

"And therefore," said Vendome, "is it not reasonable to suppose that the divorce was obtained for some other cause?"

"H-u-m!" said Singleton. "I had never thought of that. The papers in the case were sealed, I believe, but it was common talk at the time that it was for infidelity. Furthermore, it was not denied by Tremaine."

"Perhaps he didn't want to deny it; perhaps it fitted into their plan that he should not deny it; should, in fact, create and foster the notion. Society is always ready to presume, and forgive the man."

"For what purpose would he foster it?"

Vendome shrugged. "You can guess as well as I—or better, knowing the parties intimately."

"It may have been because of dishonesty in money matters; but the answer to that is: he gave her half a million outright, *after* the divorce was granted.—And it couldn't be to shield *her*; she's not that sort, I'll bank on it."

"So will I!" said Vendome.

"I'm quite sure, Natalie never mentioned the matter to Betty—and they are pretty close, you know."

“ Which further sustains the supposition.”

“ Have you ever seen Tremaine? ”

Vendome nodded.

“ Ever see a better-looking chap? ”

“ Never.”

“ Such a man *might* stray among the tempestuous petticoats, but I can’t imagine him doing anything worse.”

“ It’s a queer proposition,” Vendome reflected. “ We acquit her at once; we acquit him of everything but another woman; and she, by her actions, acquits him of that—so, where are we? ”

“ Stumped! ” Singleton said.

“ Moreover, it’s none of our business anyway,” Vendome added. “ I shouldn’t have started the subject—it was damn rotten in me.”

“ Tut! tut! ” said Singleton. “ A divorce is a public record; and we were trying to explain it for our own satisfaction, not scandalizing.”

“ Very true! but you were discussing the matter, because I started it, and because you’re a very courteous host; which, however, in no way excuses me. I repeat, it was damn rotten in me! I beg Mrs. Tremaine’s pardon.”

“ In person, or in spirit? ” Singleton smiled. “ I sort of fancy the former would make a poor hit with Natalie.”

"Wouldn't it?" Vendome laughed. "I can see myself squelched by a look—and a charmingly smiling look at that; but even a blind man would comprehend it."

"Natalie is a wonder! She has beauty—disposition—poise—unaffectedness—and a quiet dignity that never obtrudes but is always there. She is a veritable *grande dame*, Orme—and yet an American woman clean through."

"As a large number of gentlemen seem to have discerned."

"Regiments of them, Vendome, regiments of them! You can fairly hear their drums beating the charge. Your friends of last evening are but three of the army."

"If she serves the rest as she served them, I can see their finish—maybe."

"Just so! Uncertainty again, whether it is you or the other fellows, lures us on—and holds us dangling.—Bless me, if here don't come the women. Betty is forever wandering around among the horses. She's a true Virginia girl and all-around good sport. I wonder how I was lucky enough to get her?"

"I suppose that is what every man wonders, whose wife is the right sort," Vendome remarked.

"And if she isn't the right sort, he wonders also—with another sort of wonder," Singleton

added. " You have yet to do either—so beware, and be prepared."

" No danger!" Vendome smiled. " I'll choose Betty's kind."

" We all think we are choosing the Betty kind, when we're choosing, we know what we've chosen, after we've chosen, and the only way out is via the divorce court or the undertaker. However, Orme, you appear to be a chap of good discrimination, so you will likely pick with discretion and particular care; you've taken your time about it, Lord knows!"

" The fellow that runs has another chance!" Vendome smiled.

" But after a certain time—and age—the chance of choosing wrong is woefully increased. There is no fool like an old fool, my boy."

" You can't raise any dispute with me on that point."

" *Verbum sap!*" said Singleton.

" Dreadfully weighty conversation that calls for Latin proverbs!" Natalie laughed. " We would better not interrupt them, Betty."

" Nonsense!" Betty exclaimed. " It is likely a poker term, some horse lingo, or a new sort of mixed drink—which is it, Orme?"

" None," said Vendome—" it's slang for the Crown Jewels of France!"

"You've abandoned the Jewels, so please don't mention them to us *any more*," Betty retorted. "Instead of discussing what you've surrendered, go riding with Natalie."

"I'll be delighted!" Vendome exclaimed.

"Of course you will—and delighted also that neither Carter nor I am going with you. The duties of the house and plantation prevent."

"Will you go, Mrs. Tremaine?"

"If you will take me, Mr. Vendome," she answered, with a demure smile.

"Saddle Lancelot and Chartreuse," Singleton directed, turning to a stable-boy; and the boy touched his cap and sprang away. "I'll give you two the pick of the bunch—the bay for you, Natalie; the chestnut for Vendome. They are safe, bridle-wise, and fool-proof."

"Sounds as if they were an automobile!" Natalie laughed.

"I only wish they were!" said Vendome.

"Heresy, sir, rank heresy!" Singleton answered. "It's the horse in Tarrington, sir, not the motor-car. Now toddle along and change your clothes, and the horses will be at the block when you come down."

When Vendome appeared in cords and puttees, Natalie was already on the piazza.

"A trifle slow, sir, a trifle slow!" Singleton remarked.

"Say, rather, Mrs. Tremaine is very swift," Vendome answered.

"No, no! I would not presume.—Possibly, you—"

"Some people can take a wrong meaning out of anything," Vendome remarked. "You understand me, I hope, Mrs. Tremaine."

"Perfectly!" she replied. "You mustn't mind Carter; he always tries to fuss everybody."—She smiled at Singleton over her shoulder, as she went down the steps. "Don't you want to put me up?" she called back.

"Not at all!" said he. "I'll renounce in favor of the 'gent' at your elbow."

"The 'gent' is very ready to accept the privilege anyway it comes. I'm not at all proud."

"There is a meek and lowly spirit!" laughed Singleton. "Brace up, Vendome; you mustn't be so humble with Natalie—she will put it all over you, if you are."

"I'm more charitable than you," Vendome returned. "Besides, it's the way it's put over one that makes the difference."

She gathered the reins. He dropped his hand.—There was a swish of a skirt; the glint of a patent-

leather boot resting an instant on his palm—and she was up and in saddle, without an ounce of lift.

"Very pretty indeed!" said he, as he arranged her skirt.

"The skirt?" she asked.

"No—your mount. I've never before felt one half so light. I scarcely knew you were there."

"Splash!" she smiled. "I thought you were more original—you look it."

"Disillusion number one," said he—swinging up on Chartreuse.

"Number *one?*" she inflected.

"Good Lord! what number is it?" he inquired.

"I have ceased counting."

"So soon!"

"The last number I had was fifteen."

"And yet you are willing to ride with me?"

"Fifteen isn't many—and yours is the lowest number to date!"

"*Fifteen!*" he repeated.

She nodded. "You see, I haven't known you very long."

"I'm afraid to contemplate the number when you have."

"Then don't contemplate it."

"Unless it should happen," he said, "that numbers are to one's advantage."

"How can a disillusion be to one's advantage?"

"It would depend on whether the first impression was favorable or unfavorable."

"You can't escape that way!" she smiled.

"Yours was distinctly favorable—at first."

"*At first!*" he repeated. "Alas! that I should have fallen."

"Don't be discouraged; you have plenty of company," she comforted.

"Company won't compensate," he replied—"unless *you* are the company."

She laughed gaily, as she swung her horse through the gates.

"It is too far to Land's End, I suppose," she remarked.

"Do you wish to ride there?"

"Not until we go to get the Jewels."

"You condition it on almost an impossibility."

She shrugged, and raised her eye-brows expressively.

"Another disillusion?" he inquired sadly.

"Several of them."

"And can nothing set me right?"

"Find the Jewels!"

"You drive a hard bargain."

"Find the Jewels!" she repeated.

"And if I am unable to find them?"

"An honest effort will serve."

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll tell you a secret—Carter and I are to make the effort. I go to Washington to-morrow to refer the matter to the Government."

"There won't be much effort in that," she shrugged.

"Not individually, possibly—but entirely in accord with what we deem it proper for us to do. You don't for a moment think that we could, in honor, retain the Jewels, if we were to find them?"

"It's a pity," she said regretfully.

"I quite agree with you!" he smiled.

"What will the Government do?" she asked.

"Refer it to the French Embassy, I imagine."

"And they, in turn, will refer it to their Government for orders?"

"That would be the regular way."

"And suppose the French Government should not consider the Scotswoman's tale, and our partial verification, worthy of further investigation—what then?"

"Then I should say that I, a Diplomat in active service, would be relieved of any further obligation, even in ethics, and would be at liberty to retain the Jewels. In other words, by declining

to proceed, the French Government would renounce whatever rights it had in the premises."

"I think it would!" she laughed. "Especially, as it never had any right in the premises. If the Jewels belong to any one, they belong to the *de jure* King of France. The fact that the new Government stole them, doesn't give it any title. It took them by force from the rightful owner, it retains them by superior power. Some of them were recovered for the King; at least, they disappeared—with that disappearance, even the title that it had was extinguished. As between the French Government and the rest of the world, they are anybody's. They belong to him who finds them."

"Pretty fair argument!" he smiled. "And you may be right in theory; but I am duty bound to our Government to disclose this matter to it—then my responsibility ends."

"And if neither Government acts, you will nevertheless have disclosed all the facts, and some one in the service will profit by them."

"No—I shall not disclose the locality of the cave, the name of the place, nor the Marquis, until the French Government is ready to proceed. Moreover, it will be a confidential diplomatic communication. There will not be any leaks."

"Maybe there won't!" she scoffed. "How-

ever, it is really none of my affair. I should not be more than mildly interested—but I am. Not for the value of the Jewels, Mr. Vendome,”—and Vendome smiled—“but because they are *jewels*, and jewels with histories—and you know what a fascination and a lure jewels, particularly such jewels, are to a woman. She can’t explain it; she simply adores to have them about her—to feel them—to toy with them—to kiss them—to revel in their color, their lights and shadows. They are worse than drug or drink. When under their influence, a woman will commit any crime to obtain them, or to retain them. Beware, Mr. Vendome, I may even now be plotting your undoing.”

“I am already undone,” said he instantly.—“Won’t you take the King’s emerald, Hero?”

“I can’t plead that it is too soon, when you hearken back to that name!” she laughed, bending over and patting Lancelot’s glistening neck; “so I shall have to plead: it is too sudden—three months I was to have, before you swam the Hellespont for my decision—unless *I* signalled earlier.”

“Methought you signalled,” he replied.

“Methinks you ‘methought’ wrong.”

“Desire then must have quickened my sight.”

“Better curb your desire, or else wear dark glasses so that the prospect won’t be so—fair.”

"No bit is strong enough to curb—no glasses black enough to darken the delightful prospect."

"I believe you could write poetry!" she laughed.

"Do I look like a poet?"

"No, but you talk like one."

"It is a very charming day," he remarked.

"Perfectly adorable!" she returned.

"I hope you like *that* better."

"Very much, thank you—but I also like the other. You are equally good at both, Mr. Vendome—discussing the weather, or discussing nonsense."

"Was that nonsense?" he asked.

"Wasn't it?"

"Not unless you make it so."

"We are not on a man-of-war, sir!" she laughed. "It is eight bells, sir,' says the quartermaster to the Captain. 'Make it so,' says the Captain—and the hour is struck."

"This isn't the silly season," he observed.

"Isn't it?" smiling into Lancelot's mane—and giving Vendome a fleeting glance from under her veiled lids. "I thought perhaps it was."

"Won't you take the King's emerald?" he asked.

"No," she answered tantalizingly.

"Will you sometime?"

"You must swim the Hellespont to get your answer—and, at present, the strait is impassable."

"Again let me remark, this is a very charming day," he observed.

"Again let me add, it is perfectly adorable. It is like an Egyptian day—when we two ruled together on the Double Throne, O Son of Ra!"

"And later stood at Armageddon and battled for the Right!" he laughed.

"That smacks of sacrilege and of treason!" she warned. "You are not properly submissive to the infallibility of the Great Noise, and to the doctrine of the 'transubstantiation of righteousness.'"

"What do you mean by the 'transubstantiation of righteousness'?" he asked.

"I haven't an idea!" she laughed. "It sounds big, and so is in keeping with the Great Noise."

"Will you take the emerald ring?" he asked suddenly.

"Not at present, thank you!" she smiled. "You're too abrupt in changing topics, Mr. Vendome. Lead up to a subject gradually—very gradually, indeed—to some subjects."

"I have much faith in persistence of purpose," he explained.

"Persistence may accomplish defeat as well as success," she warned.

"I am thinking only of success."

" You want to think also of the possibility of failure."

He shook his head. " It is time enough to think of failure, when I have failed. I try never to anticipate the unpleasant."

" What a cheerful disposition!" she mocked.

" I'm the little sunbeam in our house!" he replied. " I always get up in good humor, never lose my temper, never swear, never find fault, never complain, never, do anything that isn't just sweet."

" I see," she said; " purely negative, or a *saintly* man. Preserve me from either! Neither has any reason for lingering here—he should be translated. He is too good, or too useless, to live in this busy, give-and-take world. I like a man with red blood—but fleshed in courtesy and gentleness."

" Hum—hum!" he said, sitting very erect and throwing out his chest. " How do I size up to the description, Mrs. Tremaine?"

She flung him an alluring smile and pointed ahead with her crop.

" *Tout à l'heure!*" she called, and raced away.

A dirt road bordered the pike, at this point, for nearly a mile, and they sped along it at a run; she in the lead, gained by her flying start, he trailing by as much, and unable to overtake her. . . . Presently, he ceased to try—and waited for

her to pull up. She and the chestnut were as one. She rode with the easy grace of one accustomed to the saddle from earliest childhood—with never a thought of how she sat, nor where her hands, nor what the pace, nor any other of the dozen things that only long practice makes instinctive. If there was a prettier sight anywhere in the world than the glorious woman before him, he, at least, had never seen it—and he had seen much and many in his forty odd years.

And he was so intent with the looking that, when she drew rein suddenly, he would have ridden her down had not Lancelot, attending strictly to business, swerved slightly and avoided the collision.

“ Singleton was right ! ” he laughed, as his boot brushed hers. “ The bay is fool-proof.”

“ What did you do ? ” she asked.

“ I almost rode you down.”

“ Where were your eyes, sir ? ”

“ Ahead of me, about fifty feet. Oh, I’m guilty of negligence, but you’re *particeps criminis*. ”

“ What is that ? ” she smiled.

He refused to be diverted.

“ If you will be so alluringly lovely, you must accept your share of the guilt.”

“ ‘ Alluringly lovely ! ’ ” she repeated. “ Surely you have the poetic fancy.”

"I'm not hankering for the poetic fancy—I would much rather have 'red blood in my veins, fleshed with courtesy and gentleness.' However, that hasn't anything to do with the subject under discussion—which is yourself. I wish you could have seen the picture you made—racing ahead with the sun glinting through your ruddy tresses and——"

"No more!" she cried. "I pray you no more! 'The sun glinting through your ruddy tresses'! *Pardieu! Corpo di Baccho! Ventre Saint Gris! Saint Denis!* Saint George! *Pasque Dieu!*—what a superb poet was wasted, when you entered the Diplomatic Corps."

"You like it so much? Well if you'll ride ahead again, I'll tune my muse another time. I never know, however, what I may do on second trial. But seriously," he said, "the dark green habit, the coppery hair, the sinuous figure, were a——"

"Symphony on horse-back!" she laughed.

"Isn't there something sweeter than a symphony?" he asked.

"Yes, a nocturne possibly; but it is neither so finished nor so complete as a symphony."

"Then it is a symphony and a nocturne combined—several of them, indeed."

"Why not throw in an étude, a Chopin waltz,

an impromptu, and any other musical term that happens along."

"Fine!" said he. "It can't be too strong for the man-on-horse-back."

"Are you the man-on-horse-back?" she exclaimed.

"For the moment, yes."

She looked him over with a critical glance.

"You appear well!" she decided.

"Thank you!" he said condescendingly.

"You have the requisite amount of imperiousness."

"Thank you!"

"Dare-devilism."

"Thank you!"

"Arrogance!"

"Thank you!"

"Impertinence!"

"Thank you!"

"And a fine disregard for the rights of others."

"Thank you!"

"Have I omitted anything?" she smiled.

"My criminal record," he suggested.

"I'm not conversant with it;—moreover, I think we have sufficient for this time."

"We are getting on famously!" he declared.
"We are becoming very frank with each other."

"Why shouldn't we get on? We have known each other for something like six thousand years."

"I thought that I alone remembered the past—that to you the knowing dated only from the other day."

She drew in her horse and faced him—she would have it out and over with.

"I met you," she said gravely, "in London eight years ago. I may as well admit it now; you recognized me—and said nothing. . . . And you recognized Warren Alstair—and still you said nothing. Why his path and mine should cross again is a mystery of fate. The first time, I was young, headstrong, and inexperienced—and he was very courteous and very fascinating. I was much to blame at the end—and it is something that I don't care to recall. Had I it to do over again, with the light of the present, I would do differently."

"You would have married Alstair?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I only know that I would have done differently."

He looked at her—and she guessed his thoughts.

"What is it?" she smiled.

"Nothing," he said.

"You are wondering whether I would marry Mr. Alstair now?"

"Yes," said he, "that is what I am wondering."

"Shall I answer?"

"As you wish."

"Frankly—I do not know."

"I had hoped," said he slowly, "that Alstair was eliminated."

"Speaking of angels," said she, and pointed to a horseman rounding the bend, a little way ahead.

Alstair drew down, and they halted.

"Better turn and ride with us," Natalie invited.

"I can't, thank you," said Alstair. "I've got to get back and gather up the stray ends for the Hunt Ball to-morrow evening. You will be here for it, I hope, Vendome?"

"I shall be here," Vendome answered.

"Why don't you hope for me also, Mr. Alstair?" Natalie asked.

"My dear Mrs. Tremaine, I *know* that you will be here. I made sure by asking your hostess—and I have promised myself the pleasure of a dance. May I?"

"You may!" she smiled—thinking of the many dances she had with him eight years ago.

He raised his cap in farewell—and rode away.

"You will be here for the ball—if the Secretary doesn't hold you, Mr. Vendome, or if you don't get lost among the Jewels or elsewhere," she remarked.

"On the contrary," Vendome replied, "instead of getting lost, I am promising myself the pleasure of dancing with you twice as frequently as—any one else."

"Why stop at only twice—why not make it five times as often!" she mocked.

"I'm modest. I will grow bolder in time—a very little time, Mrs. Tremaine."

"I am very ready to believe it!" she laughed, "very ready, indeed."

"Won't you change your mind about the emerald ring?" he asked.

"How many times this morning have you offered it?"

"Three—or was it four?"

"How many times do you expect to offer it?"

"Until you accept it!"

"And what goes with it?"

"Such was the idea!" he smiled.

"Then don't offer it again to-day," she said.

"To-morrow?"

"I don't know about to-morrow until to-morrow comes. I'm specifying only for to-day."

"And you are sure for to-day?"

"Perfectly!"

"Very well!" he acquiesced. "Until to-morrow, then—though I shan't see you until even-

ing, and am not likely to have an opportunity before the Ball."

"It is dreadfully long!" she sympathized. "However, Mr. Silverthorne or Mr. Plimpton will help me put in the dreary day—and possibly Mr. Alstair might be requisitioned, if time hangs *too* heavily on my hands."

"I think," said he, "that France may wait for the Jewels until the emerald has been accepted."

"The contingency is rather uncertain," she warned.

"It would be more uncertain, if I left the field to my rivals."

"Do you think so?"

"It is more to the point what *you* think—possibly either way it won't advantage me. Are you playing on my susceptibilities, Hero?"

"When you call me by that name, I am helpless in the fetters of recollection."

"Charming!" he cried. "Wear the fetters until to-morrow, won't you, Hero?"

"You will swim the Hellespont to me?"

"I will!"

"It's a bargain," she decided. "And now, having frivoled and nonsensed quite too long, let's come back to this world and the Tarrington pike, and be as we are: two sensible people of discreet years."

XVIII

BY AGREEMENT

VENDOME met the Secretary, by appointment at eleven o'clock the following morning, and told him the whole story.

The Chief listened with great interest—but without comment. At the end, he said:

“I quite agree with you that this is a matter to be taken up with the French Embassy. It so happens that the Ambassador is to be here in five minutes. You may remain and tell him so much of the story as you see fit. Until his Government authorizes him to proceed, I do not think it necessary to disclose the locality of the Jewels. In other words, relate sufficient for him to report to Paris that there seems to be an excellent chance to recover their missing Crown Jewels.” He touched a button. “Announce the French Ambassador the moment he arrives!” he directed.

“He is waiting, sir,” said the man—and bowed the nervous little Frenchman into the room.

“Your Excellency,” said the Secretary, when the greetings were over, “Mr. Vendome has just made a verbal report on a matter that will, I feel

sure, interest you exceedingly. I have asked him to remain, so that he may repeat it to you."

"I shall be most glad, indeed, to hear it," the Ambassador answered, turning to Vendome.

"Some little time ago," said Vendome, "I heard a tale purporting to give the locality where the Crown Jewels of France—stolen, I believe, during the Revolution"—and the Ambassador nodded and sat forward on his chair—"are hidden. I thought nothing of it then—more than that it was an entertaining tale. It was to the effect that, during the French Revolution, a Frenchman came to America and settled here. The name of the place and the State were given—they are, I beg your Excellency's pardon, not material at present. On this place, the tale went, the Jewels were buried in a cave. Specific directions were given how to find the cave: ninety feet from the rear of the house was a large tree; one hundred and fifty-three feet northwest of the tree was a depression in the turf; in the centre of the depression, at the depth of six feet, was a large stone, concealing the entrance to the cave; after forty feet, the cave sank abruptly to a new level, seventy-five feet across and twelve feet deep; this new level was entirely filled by a subterranean stream; the Jewels were hidden in a rocky recess in the farther bank, about

ten feet under water. Such were the main features of the story.

“Now for the facts in confirmation. Some days later at a friend’s house, I chanced to retail the story, and gave the name of the place. My host knew of such a place, abandoned for generations, with a stone house upon it. It was in a remote section. The next day we went there without an idea, however, that anything but a pleasant ride would come of it. We found the place. Ninety feet from the rear of the house we found the giant tree—one hundred and fifty-three feet northwest there was no depression in the turf, but we dug and found the stone. Under it was the cave—and the subterranean stream—and on the floor, midway between the entrance and the stream, were two skeletons—each with a bullet hole in the skull—and the bullet inside. These bones we committed to the stream; but in the dust beside them we found this!”—and he drew out the ring, and handed it to the Ambassador.

The Frenchman fairly jumped at it.

“The Red Emerald!” he cried.

He examined it closely—and handed it back.

“It is marvellous! simply marvellous!” he exclaimed—they were speaking in French.—“Here, in America, are found the lost Crown Jewels!”

"They are not found yet," Vendome remarked.

"Not yet—but they are as good as found.—You went no farther, I presume—the stream blocked you?"

"It did—we went no farther."

"Who else knows of this matter, may I ask?"

"Four others were with us. They may be relied on absolutely."

"Of course, sir," said the Ambassador. "It is marvellous, truly marvellous! I thank you, on behalf of my Government, for your great courtesy in disclosing the matter to me—until France can honor you more fittingly. I assume, sir, that the locality will be disclosed when I receive the formal authority to proceed?"

"Exactly. I have already disclosed it to the Secretary of State—as it is not my secret alone, I do not feel at liberty to do more, until your Government, as a government, is prepared to push the investigation to a finish. If it so happen that it does not wish to do so, then I, as a private individual, freed of any obligation by reason of being connected with the Diplomatic service, am at liberty to act on only my own responsibility."

"Undoubtedly, sir!" the Ambassador exclaimed. "And your friends, also, are most gracious in permitting France an opportunity to profit by

your discovery. It is a rare act of high-mindedness, as well as of good will, sir." He turned to the Secretary of State. "Is it not, your Excellency?"

"It is what could be expected from Mr. Vendome and his friends," the Secretary replied.

"Do you wish me to put the matter in writing?" Vendome asked.

"It will not be necessary—moreover, I can see no need to complicate the affair by written communications until such time as it is finally settled."

And again he turned, in polite inquiry, to the Secretary—and again that personage concurred; this time, by a bow.

"I presume the investigation will be attended by considerable work?" the Frenchman went on.

"So it seems to me," said Vendome. "To divert the subterranean stream, which is of considerable width and much more than ordinary volume, promises to be something of a task."

"Might the Jewels be come at by means of an excavation from the outside—beyond the far side of the stream?"

"Possibly—though it doesn't impress me as feasible," Vendome replied. "However, as I am not an engineer, I am not qualified to give an opinion."

The Ambassador nodded gravely.

"I will cable fully the facts to Paris this afternoon, and will apprise you of the reply, as soon as it is received."

Vendome arose—shook hands with both the Secretary and Ambassador, and went up to the Club for luncheon.

As he checked his hat, with a courteous word to the attendant in acknowledgment, and turned toward the lounge, for a companion and a drink, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder from behind, and a hearty voice exclaimed:

"Vendome, by the Houris of Mahomet!"

Vendome swung around in surprise.

"Montgomery!" said he. "I thought you were hunting rubies in Burma, or pearls in Ceylon, or yaks in Tibet, or something of the sort. When did you get home?"

"Oh, a trifle more than two years ago—you keep a very accurate line on your old friends, Mr. Ambassador!"

"That is one of the pleasures of diplomats."

"To forget them?"

"To be obliged to forget them—and to be overjoyed when a rare wind blows one across your path. Come over in a quiet corner, old man; I'll buy you a drink, and look at you, and hear you. You used to know everything about everybody."

"Sort of a walking bureau of information, both pleasant and scandalous?" laughed Montgomery, as they found a table where they could see everyone that entered the house. "I'll take a Bronx, thank you." And to the boy: "Tell the man to put in plenty of orange juice and only a dash of gin. Which, of course, he won't do; either because the boy doesn't tell him, or because he thinks that I don't know what I want. These damn bartenders are the limit—ever notice it?"

"I never noticed anything else," said Vendome. "Sometimes I'm tempted to drink only from original bottles—though I fancy they tamper with them, just the same."

"*Of course!*" said Montgomery, when his cocktail was put before him: "Plenty of gin and only a dash of orange! Here, boy! take this back, and tell the man to make it as I told him—plenty of orange juice and only a dash of gin, or I will report him for wilful disobedience of orders."

"Which won't accomplish a thing—except to get you more gin!" Vendome laughed.

"Did you tell him?" Montgomery asked, when the servant returned.

"I did, sir."

Montgomery nodded in dismissal—and tasted the cocktail.

"It's no use!" he shrugged.—"You're right, Vendome: more gin. I shall have to make good my threat and report him."

"And get all gin, hereafter—or worse. However, I fancy you're in for it now."

"My mistake was in threatening," Montgomery remarked. "It would have been much wiser to drink—and then be properly sarcastic to you over the rotten inefficiency of the House Committee, and of the Club servants in general—with special reference, at this time, to the bartenders.—But to resume—Congratulations on your promotion, Orme! How long do you expect to be here?"

"Three months—subject, of course, to orders," Vendome replied. He raised his hand to a servant: "The luncheon card, please."

When it came, he wrote the order and sent it up to the dining-room; Montgomery, looking idly over the lounge, the while, from behind the smoke of his cigarette.

"Do you know that chap standing in the doorway?" the latter asked.

"Slightly; his name is Tremaine."

"Oh, I know him well—I've known him for fifteen years," said Montgomery. "Have you met his wife, or rather his late wife—the fascinating beauty, ycleped *La Belle Dame Sans Mercie?*"

Vendome nodded. "I took her in to dinner the other night."

"You did! Well, I suppose she got you, too?"

"Meaning?"

"She has got about everyone."

"She is a wonderfully attractive woman," Vendome admitted.

"Sure! she is. The title is wholly undeserved—given her by Mrs. Carstarphen, I understand. You were told of the divorce, of course?"

"Before I even met her," said Vendome.

"Have you ever seen them together—Tremaine and her?"

"He was at the dinner, also."

Montgomery blew a smoke ring at the electric cluster above him, and followed it by another, and yet another.

"Struck you as—sort of queer, didn't it?" he asked.

"It seemed rather unusual," Vendome answered.

"It has seemed more than unusual to every one; though after two years it's ceased to be a wonder. You should have heard the buzz when, a month after the divorce was granted, they came face to face at a large evening affair at the Wallastons'—and she smiled and greeted him most cordially, and they stood talking for five minutes in the most

prominent place in the house; at least, it was the most prominent place while they were occupying it. You would have thought there was a riot in the room—everybody tried to get in it at once. It never fazed either of them. She seemed to be entirely unconscious of doing anything out of the ordinary—her poise was superb; and *he* carried it off just about as cleverly. I tell you, society didn't catch its breath for days—it was a paralyzer. Mrs. Carstarphen's enmity dated from that time; and I have always thought it was because she had not been advised in advance—and never received any confidence from either of them afterward."

"I had not heard of the Wallaston affair," Vendome replied; "but I can imagine Mrs. Carstarphen's remarks and resentment—having myself at one time, as you may recall, experienced both."

"She's an old fool," said Montgomery,—"but she gives handsome entertainments and gorgeous cotillon favors, aims to maintain a *salon*, and seeks to be the social dictator. So I'm not telling it to the multitude."

"Not if you would retain favor, and avoid the fearful penalty of outer darkness."

"Oh, I'm in favor all right! I always make my duty visits promptly; and the contrast is so marked from the rest of the bunch, that if I were

to tell her, to her face, she is a pestiferous old wasp, she wouldn't believe her own ears. She thinks that I'm the impeccable young man! However, Mrs. Carstarphen isn't interesting to *us*, except as an example of arrogant assumption; but I'll tell you something about the Tremaines that will interest you." He blew a smoke ring and watched it circle upward. "I've tried for the lady, I will admit—and she would have none of me. It took me six months to get over it, and back to normal vision. We all serve our time. She is the most alluringly beautiful woman in the world, Vendome—and the coldest. It's a queer combination, but it is true. She doesn't freeze you—unless you deserve to be frozen; but strive as you may, you can never get beyond a certain friendliness. Her poise is perfect, as I think I said before,—her bewitching loveliness absolutely fascinating."

"And yet," said Vendome, "Tremaine strayed."

Montgomery leaned forward and carefully flicked the ashes from his cigarette into the receiver on the table beside them.

"Yes," said he slowly, "Tremaine strayed—by agreement."

XIX

THE REASON

VENDOME nodded deliberately, as one does who is not surprised.

"I don't mean to *protect her*," Montgomery said hastily—he had noticed the nod and its character.

"Oh, of course not!" said Vendome. "I have surmised something of the sort, since the first evening I saw them together—either that the ground for the divorce was other than report has it, or that the straying was prearranged, as the quickest way and the surest."

"The latter is the fact," said Montgomery.

"The fact?" Vendome inflected. "You know?"

"I know.—Tremaine himself told me, a year or so ago. It was not in confidence, yet I have never before mentioned it. I'll tell it to you if you care to hear it, since it doesn't reflect the slightest on either of them, and because I know it won't go any farther."

"You had better not repeat it even to me."

"Just this once—in memory of old times, Vendome!" Montgomery laughed. "Then I'll forget it utterly."

"Very well!" Orme responded. "We will both forget it the instant it is told."

"It was this way!" Montgomery began, lighting a fresh cigarette, and pausing as though considering just where to begin the narrative. . . . "You see, Tremaine spent the ten years before he met Natalie Jumonville in Mexico—and made a fortune in mines. If he hadn't been a mighty fine chap, with plenty of bottom, the life there would have spoiled him for polite society. He would have progressed backward. You have to be familiar with the mining business in Mexico to understand—have to stay there yourself, and develop your own mines, to appreciate just what Tremaine went through. I've been in it, just a little—dropped a considerable bunch of money—and escaped with my life and some of my coin—thanks to Tremaine's advice. I didn't sample the *actual* life, but I coasted about on the edge a bit—and none of it in mine, Vendome, none of it in mine! It's hell! That's what it is; just plain, unvarnished hell. Talk about your bad men of the West, when the gold fever was on, and Leadville, and all the rest of its class, were in their prime! They were a Woman's Christian Temperance Union compared to Chihuahua and Durango in Greaserland. I'll not go into particulars—they are not pleasant, I assure you. The only relaxation, or rather diversion, is the—señorita. You maintain as many households as

you wish, and have the coin to support—and keep off prowlers with a gun, your own, or one you pay for, or both. This sort of thing isn't looked upon there as we look at it. Mexico is as barbaric as—Java; and it's going backward, not forward. Every one is a brigand, with a brigand's sentiments and feelings. Zapata and his ilk are typical of the Nation—only they come out in the open, while the rest lurk in the bush and watch for an opportunity. They have no respect nor regard for law, except the law of numbers or of brute force. Give them the power, and they are ruthless, cruel, savage, with the instincts and desires of the tiger. If they haven't the power, they are skulking cowards, ready to knife you or to fawn upon you, as the expediency of the moment dictates. Ough! it pollutes the atmosphere even to speak of them!"

"Aren't you a bit hard on them?" Vendome smiled.

"Hard on them!" Montgomery exclaimed. "Ask any one who knows them as they are; not the veneered ones you meet on parade in the Diplomatic Corps, but the Mexican *at home*. There is where you see them in their true light. I would shoot them with as little compunction as I would a lot of venomous snakes—they are in the same class, only lower. However, this is pertinent to

the subject in hand only that you may understand the sort of people Tremaine had for companions during his years in Mexico. That he came out of it with his life, and reasonably clean, speaks volumes for his shooting, as well as for his strength of will and his morals in general. When he finally emerged from the wilderness, prepared to spend the rest of his days in respectable leisure, his first stopping place was among his business friends in New Orleans. There he met Natalie Jumonville—in three months, she was Mrs. Tremaine.

“Now it happened, that though he had never maintained any household in Mexico, yet there were several señoritas in whom he had shown something more than a passing interest. He was most generous with them on leaving; and they, understanding the customs of the country, saw him go, possibly with regret but without making a scene. One, however, was inconsolable; and after a time she ventured to follow him—and found him, six months after his marriage. And the marriage seemed to infuriate her. She knew she couldn’t have him, but she didn’t want any one else to have him, she alternately reproached Tremaine bitterly, and cried passionately. When he declined very gently to have anything more to do with her, and urged her to return to Chihuahua, she went straight

to his wife and told her that Tremaine and she had lived together—that they were recognized in Mexico as married—that having made his fortune he had deserted her—and a lot of other lies. At the end, Mrs. Tremaine herself showed her the door and bowed her out. When Tremaine came, his wife asked for his side of the story—and she got it, unglossed by a single word. She believed him, and the Mexican was persuaded to return beyond the Rio Grande—for a consideration, though of that Mrs. Tremaine was not informed, escorted by a plain-clothes man. But the *status quo* had been disturbed, so to speak; and it never returned to the old conditions—why, Tremaine did not disclose; I have always declined even to surmise. They remained friendly; there never were bickerings, nor recriminations, nor anything to mar their good fellowship—yet they steadily drifted apart.

“One day they sat down and calmly considered the matter—held a council of peace with each other—and reached a decision. Whatever love had been between them was dead, throttled by inactivity. Such affection as remained, was of the quieter kind that breeds respect and friendship. So, why keep up the farce? Why not make an end—and remain good friends? Neither was to blame; they were simply mismatched; not team-mates; not gaited to

travel in double-harness. Thousands of others, Vendome, in similar case, have not the courage to face the matter—they temporize, and temporize, and do nothing but make life unbearable for both. With the Tremaines a cause for divorce was wanting—and he supplied the cause. That is the story. You can understand now their seemingly peculiar conduct—their being friends, instead of never seeing each other when they meet."

"Yes, I can understand!" said Vendome. "It is a very sensible solution—but not many solve it in the Tremaine way. Now—I have forgotten that you ever told me."

"And I've forgotten that I ever knew," Montgomery replied.

Then a servant came and announced their luncheon.

"Where is Mrs. Tremaine now?" Montgomery asked presently.

"How should I know?" said Vendome.

"Come! come! Orme; no bluffing—where is she?"

"She has, I believe, apartments in the Collingwood," Vendome remarked.

"Indeed! Well, I don't mind telling you, I've inquired there and all I could get from the maid on the line was that 'Mrs. Tremaine is out of town.'

The moment I saw you, I knew that you could tell me."

"Even though you didn't know that I knew her?"

"You be in town for forty-eight hours and not know Natalie Tremaine! Oh, no! Eye-for-a-hand-some-woman! Oh, no!"

"Why do you wish to know?" Vendome smiled.

"Interest in her!" Montgomery smiled back.

"My last information is that she is visiting the Singletons of Tarrington."

"When did you hear?"

"This morning."

"Might I be permitted to ask from whom you heard it?"

"Certainly," said Vendome, with an amused twinkle. "I saw Mrs. Tremaine at Rosemont this morning."

"So!" exclaimed Montgomery. "Going some! old chap, going some! Look that you're not riding for a fall. 'Ware wire! sir; 'ware wire!"

"Is Mrs. Tremaine, then, so deadly?" Vendome asked.

"There isn't a man of us but has come a nasty cropper—some of us several croppers. What's more, we are likely to keep on coming croppers until she is run to earth."

"I wonder how Mrs. Tremaine would fancy your metaphor?"

"I'm not saying it to her; though I fancy she wouldn't mind—she likes picturesque expressions. Run her to earth, Vendome, run her to earth!"

"With your best wishes?"

"No, you haven't my best wishes, but you have my hope for your success; it will save a lot of chaps from making consummate asses of themselves —myself among the number."

"You and they seem to be enjoying the occupation," Vendome observed.

"Sure! The moths always seek the flame."

"What a strikingly original thought!"

"It wasn't aimed at originality—there isn't anything original about the subject under discussion. I only wish there were. It's plain, unvarnished fact—very plain and very unvarnished: The way of a woman with a man that doesn't appeal to her, and whom she doesn't want."

"How do you know that I'll not be just another moth?" Vendome questioned.

"I don't! but you're another man with a chance, a very fair chance, I should say, and you may escape the flame and win the brush—that's a bit mixed, but it expresses the idea exactly."

"You should have been a General—you would

have such fine disregard for the lives of those under you."

"For the general good—no joke intended!" Montgomery explained.

"You have a rare care for others," Vendome remarked.

"As well as for myself," Montgomery added.

"In that event, better not throw up the sponge."

"I haven't, she threw it up for me—and it never has come down."

"Get another sponge!"

Montgomery shrugged the suggestion aside.

"Go along down to Tarrington," Vendome urged. "The Hunt Ball is to-night."

"No, thank you!"

"Silverthorne and Plimpton are there!"

"The more fools they. Even I had a better chance than those plugs."

"They haven't run out of sponges, anyway."

"They haven't sense enough to know when they are out of sponges."

"The persistency of endeavor!" said Vendome.

"The persistency of jackass stupidity!" Montgomery retorted.

"Then I can't prevail on you to go back with me to Tarrington?"

" You can't. I know when I've been dropped with a thud—pardon the bromidianism."

" I fear your temper has become a trifle soured," said Vendome.

" I'm so sad that I'll be delighted to be your best man at the wedding, if you ask me."

" My friend," said Vendome seriously, " you will be married, and the happy father of twins, long before I'm even in the notion."

" Of being the father of twins? I haven't the least doubt of it!" Montgomery laughed.

" I'll give you a wager," continued Vendome:—" A dinner for twenty—that you are married before me."

" You're on! In addition, a thousand dollar present to the bride, against a thousand dollars in cash to charity."

" Done! Who's the bride, and who's charity?"

" You're the bride, and I'm charity," said Montgomery.

XX

THE PINCH OF THE MATTER

THE engine on Vendome's train blew out a cylinder-head an hour out of Washington; as a consequence it was nearly two hours late in arriving at Tarrington. Blake also was in the car; and, during the wait this mishap entailed, he took advantage of an adjoining chair being temporarily unoccupied to saunter forward and take possession.

"Going back to Rosemont?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Vendome, glancing up from his magazine.

"Devilish stupid, this accident!" Blake continued—"especially on the evening of the Hunt Ball. No telling when we shall get away."

Vendome nodded.

"You chaps of the Diplomatic service deal in delays," Blake went on. "I fancy, you won't mind it if you don't get to Tarrington until to-morrow."

"Not a bit!" said Vendome. "Next week would be quite the same to me. It's all a matter of patience and placidity."

"Coupled with training, and the customs of the service," the other added. "Sometimes I wish I had gone in for diplomacy."

Vendome said nothing.

"Patience and placidity are admirable qualities," Blake reflected—"also the ability to keep your own counsel, and to attend strictly to your own business. I particularly compliment you, Mr. Vendome, on the possession of the latter quality."

"Thank you!" said Vendome, politely.

"You have done me a special favor by not mentioning a certain matter," Blake remarked.

"There hasn't been any occasion to mention it, Mr. Blake."

"No, of course not. I understand.—And you understand, also, that I shouldn't care to have the matter known here; it would be—embarrassing."

"Naturally," said Vendome dryly.

Blake looked at the other shrewdly a moment.

"Queer thing about the hidden cave on the deserted farm, and the—jewels," he remarked.

"Not at all," Vendome replied. "Everything is regular and in order."

"Even the water?" the other smiled.

Vendome raised his eyebrows. "Even the water."

"You found the jewels, then?"

"We did not wish to find them."

"You did not wish to find them?" Blake mocked.
Vendome did not reply.

"Then why, may I ask, did you go to that remote and deserted place, seek out the cave, and enter?"

"To verify a story," Vendome responded. He was aiming to find out just what and how much Blake knew.

"And it was verified?"

"In part."

"Not entirely?"

"No."

"You intend to proceed with the verification?"

"Perhaps."

"'Perhaps'!" Blake repeated. "They must be a valuable lot of jewels!"

Vendome smiled inwardly—at least, Blake was not aware of the character of the gems.

"You wouldn't like to take me aboard—let me in on your find?" Blake asked.

"It isn't my find, nor my secret," Vendome said. "We are only agents for another in the investigation."

It was now Blake's turn to smile.

"I should try not to be objectionable," he said. "Moreover, it's no longer a secret from me, you know—and one more will not be too many."

"I haven't the least discretion in the matter, Mr. Blake," returned Vendome pleasantly. "We

cannot take you in. However, that does not hinder you from adventuring on your own account."

"Of course not! Only, I thought, you might prefer the matter should not be generally known."

"Not at all!" Vendome replied. "If you think you have a line on anything of value, you are welcome to take the whole town in with you, and to divert the river itself, if you wish."

"You think that I do not know where the jewels are concealed?" Blake sneered.

"I am not thinking one way or the other, if you will excuse me," Vendome replied, taking up his magazine to indicate that the talk was ended.

"I think I shall give you a toss for it."

"That is your privilege," Vendome shrugged.

"You haven't any title to the property—the title is lost—at least, there isn't a record of any one owning it. Consequently the jewels belong to him who finds them. We shall see who finds them, Mr. Vendome."

"It will be very interesting!" Vendome laughed, and resumed his reading.

Blake glared at him a moment; then got up and sauntered away.

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Dinner was almost over, when Vendome got to Rosemont.

"Come right in, Orme!" Mrs. Singleton called, as he crossed the hall. "Don't stop to change. Carter rang up the station, but they didn't know anything, of course."

"Which isn't strange," said Singleton. "They never know anything, when there has been any sort of an accident."

"What did you do, Orme—*what did you do?*" Betty demanded.

"Let the man get something to eat!" laughed her husband.

"He can tell us while he's being served.—You want to know, too, don't you, Natalie?"

"It's not in the least difficult to tell," said Vendome, carefully flourishing the salt spoon over his soup. "I did as your husband suggested, Betty: turned the matter over to the French Ambassador—the Secretary of State concurring."

"I suppose the French Ambassador was grateful and inordinately pleased," Natalie remarked.

"He kissed me on both cheeks," said Vendome.

"Ough!" exclaimed Singleton. "How did you like it?"

"Not much!"

"Now you may have some idea how distasteful it is to a woman to be kissed by a man," Natalie volunteered.

"*What!*" cried Singleton.

"By some men, she means!" Betty explained.

"Is the present company excepted?" he asked.

"The present company is always excepted."

"Good!" said Singleton.

"Speak for yourself, Betty, dear!" Natalie smiled.

"To end our embarrassment, Orme, you had better resume your story," Singleton suggested.

"Yes, let us have the story," said Natalie. "It is more to the point—and interesting. What is the Ambassador to do, Mr. Vendome?"

"Report the Scotswoman's tale, with the facts as verified, to his Government, and await instructions."

"And meanwhile?"

"We will wait."

"For how long?"

"A reasonable time."

"Which may mean anything—a week—a month—a year."

"The Ambassador will cable at once, and advise me of the answer instantly."

"And what will Mr. Blake do—consult us before acting?" she laughed.

"It won't make much difference what Blake does," said Singleton. "He doesn't know any-

thing, and, even if he does, he can't get the Jewels."

"As you have said before—but if you give Blake time enough, he will dig up the whole country; or set it by the ears, which is worse. May I ask, Mr. Vendome, if you told the Ambassador of Blake?"

"I did not."

"Didn't he ask who were in the secret?"

"Yes—and I told him the number but not the names. Blake isn't in the secret."

"Maybe, he isn't!" said Natalie.

"He was in the train coming down this afternoon. We had a talk; he wanted in the hunt, and I took the opportunity to ascertain casually what he knew. He doesn't know anything."

"Except the cave, and that there are jewels hidden there. Moreover, it may seem very peculiar to the Ambassador to find some one has preceded him, and *that* some one not of your party."

"If you don't mind," said Singleton, "tell us just what your conversation was with Blake. . . . So!" when Vendome had finished. "I think we're in for trouble with Mr. Blake—I mean, that is, that he will try for the Jewels, and make it as embarrassing as he can for you. You see, he struck the crux of the matter when he mentioned the title to Land's End. He *has* as much right there as we have, and he knows it. Evidently he consulted

counsel. I had my attorney look up the title, and so far as the records show it is still in the Marquis. There appears never to have been a tax sale, nor any adverse proceedings affecting it. The question is, who are the right heirs of De Chavenis! If they can't be found after due advertisement and various cumbersome proceedings, which the lawyers may understand but no one else of mortals, the Courts will escheat—notice my very technical language, please—it to the State——”

“I fail to see how that would improve matters,” observed Vendome.

“It wouldn't; it would complicate them. So with the State out of it, and De Chavenis' heirs unknown for a hundred years, possibly non-existent, Land's End belongs to no one; the Jewels are his who finds them. The French Government hasn't the least standing till the Jewels *are* found and identified.”

“How much standing has it then?” Natalie said.

“I don't know!” Singleton laughed. “No one knows, I fancy, until the Supreme Court of the United States has made the last guess—which, because it is the last guess, must needs be right.”

“Did you consult an engineer?” Natalie asked Vendome.

“I hadn't time—furthermore, I thought it unnecessary. There isn't any haste, as I look at it.

The French Government has the first chance—aside from our friend Blake, of course. If it decline, then *we* get our chance—which isn't a very glowing chance at present, I should say—France will certainly accept."

"And in the meantime," said Betty, "while France is making up her mind in the matter, would it be amiss to put a guard over the cave—so as to shoo off Blake, if he comes around?"

"I'm for letting Blake try his hand, if he desires," said Singleton. "Having no knowledge of the actual hiding place, what can he accomplish—except to make himself ridiculous?"

"You forget, Betty, that I told him he was welcome to adventure on his own account," Vendome remarked. "Let him—he won't find the Jewels. I'll wager a hundred to one on it."

"Hundred to one shots are proverbially dangerous," Betty shrugged. "However, you and Carter for it. Natalie and I have done our part.—We can do no more, dear Marquis. We are your friends, but we are only women and so helpless."

"Come down from your frame, De Chavenis, and let them try their wiles and eyes on you!" Vendome laughed. "They are helpless! Oh, so helpless, dear Marquis!"

"'Twas not a gallant speech, Mr. Vendome,"

Betty remarked—while Natalie shrugged her bare shoulders, and looked her disapproval.

“That settles it!” Singleton decided. “You go upstairs to-morrow, Marquis; you have made enough trouble for us. But for you, we should have never started this fool quest for the Crown Jewels of France.”

“Yes,” said Vendome, “the Marquis is responsible for it all. But for him I would never have thought of the Scotswoman’s tale—and then everything followed in consequence. To the garret with him! Singleton, to the garret with him!”

“Farewell, dear Marquis!” said Natalie, and flung him a kiss from her finger tips. “It is too bad you’re not here in the flesh to put these impudent fellows back into place.”

“The day of the courtier and good manners have departed,” Betty added sadly.

“In which event, it behooves me, by your leave, mesdames, to retire and change my apparel,” Vendome observed. “Shall I reappear in powdered hair, small clothes, and a sword, or how?”

“Reappear in no clothes—if you want to make a hit!” said Singleton.

“I see plainly this is no place for an unmarried man!” Vendome smiled. “Therefore, I go.”

“Don’t stay long!” laughed Natalie.

XXI

THE HUNT BALL

Mrs. TREMAINE was the sensation of the Hunt Ball. The men crowded around her, and fairly fought one another for a word with her or for a dance—and the dances were divided, and even subdivided, until she laughingly declined to go on the floor and be passed to a new partner at every round. So she talked to them instead, according to their order—though, now and then, flitting off with the last for a turn around the room before the music stopped.

The cotillon, after supper, she danced with Vendome.

“It’s mighty good to have you for a reasonable length of time!” he said, as he put his arm around her, and guided her out into the pink-coated throng.

“I’m afraid you’re not a progressive!” she remarked.

“In the sharing of you, I most certainly am not. This ball is absolutely communistic, as far as you are concerned. You are sirenish in your alluringness.”

“Now I’m a siren!” she smiled. “And you are Ulysses, I suppose—in our former existence.”

He shook his head. "No, I'm not, Ulysses.—Ulysses heard, and sailed on."

"The unappreciative wretch!" she commented.

"If he had seen you to-night, he would *not* have sailed on. He would have sailed in, and borne you away with him."

"And deserted me later, when he got home to Ithaca and Penelope?"

He shook his head again. "Not *you!* There would have been no Penelope for him with you beside him—if you looked then, as you look now."

"Do I look so different this evening?"

"You look as you always look—only more so," he replied—and gathered her closer.

"And you are as you always were: an arrant flirt—only more so!" she smiled.

"Won't you take the Red Emerald?" he whispered.

"Here?"

"Here, right here; in the centre of the floor!"

"Have you it with you?"

"Have I it with me! Am I ever without it?"

"I didn't notice you wearing it to-night," she replied.

"I never wear it—as you also may have noticed; but I've it with me, you may be sure. Will you take it, Mrs. Tremaine?"

She looked at him with a tantalizing smile.
“Not *here*, Mr. Vendome. It is quite too——”

What she would have said was lost in the blare of the M. F. H.’s bugle.

“What were you about to say when that infernal horn sounded?” he asked, as they crossed the floor for their favors. “‘Quite too what?’”

“The bugle blew it completely out of my head!” she laughed. “I haven’t time to recall it—now.”

“Are you looking for me, Natalie?” said Singleton, who had not been out. “Because, if you are, I’m here—but so very shy.”

“You poor thing!” said Natalie. “Get my toy, and come on.”

Vendome favored Betty, and they swung out into the crowd.

“Your black coat looks very distinctive among so much pink—also, the man in it,” she said.

“Splash!” he smiled. “We men aren’t interesting at a ball—it’s you women who are the wonders to behold. You’ve got a bully looking bunch here.”

“And Natalie is the bulliest of the bunch, you mean.”

“After yourself.”

“Splash, for yours! Reverse the order, however, and I’ll not dispute your taste. Isn’t she a vision?”

"She is!" said he.

"What other woman would dare, at such a time, to wear a black velvet, cut so low, and yet hiding so much! Did you ever see such a ravishingly slender figure, all curves and no angles—and it's not made, I can assure you; it's all there."

"I think the men have not been blind to her beauty," Vendome ventured.

Betty laughed a bit scornfully. "You think!—Why don't you go in and win?—Silverthorne and Plimpton are playing the game to the limit."

"They haven't won, I believe?"

"You can't tell when they *will* win!" she said.

"Nor when they will fail," he replied. "Moreover, they can't last much longer—they must win or lose very shortly; the pace is too fast; they have got to kill, or it's an escape. Pardon the metaphor—this is a Hunt Ball, you know."

"And you, I suppose, are following in a cart, or else are trailing far behind."

"Reserving my strength for the next run.—There won't be any kill, this time."

"Maybe!" said she.

"I'm chancing it!" he laughed. "They all are following your principle, and no one has captured the brush as yet. Sometimes it pays to lie back and wait."

"You're lying back, all right, but are you *waiting?*" she demanded.

"Haven't I offered her the King's ring before you all?"

"Huh, that doesn't mean anything. You didn't expect her to fall to your hand then, did you?"

"What if I tell you I have offered it repeatedly since then?"

"Do you tell me?"

"Yes."

"And you still have the ring?"

"I certainly have."

"Offer it to her again to-night."

"I offered it to her a moment ago—just before the bugle sounded."

"Persistence will win—keep on offering it."

"On the ground that she can't do any worse than refuse?"

"Yes!" she laughed. "But I forgot, Orme, I promised not to refer to this matter ever again. Pray, forgive me!"

"I think I rather like it," he confessed, looking after Mrs. Tremaine as she glided by—and receiving an intimate little smile from the violet eyes, as she met his glance.

Then the bugle blew again, and the dance abruptly ended.

"Vendome, you're in luck!" said Singleton, as they went to their seats. "Natalie is a perfect dream of a stepper—she and Betty are the best in the room."

"Don't I know it?" Vendome answered.

"Spare our modesty!" said Natalie. "Your compliments, Carter, are *so* delicately clever."

Alstair, who was leading alone, waved out the next couples and crossed to Mrs. Tremaine. She did not see him until he stood beside her.

"Will you lead this with me?" he said.

She smiled an acquiescence—what woman would refuse the honor, even though the cotillon leader were her blood-foe?—put her hand on his sleeve, and was caught away—but over his scarlet shoulder, she flashed another look to Vendome.

"Eight years is a long time, Natalie!" said Alstair, as naturally as though continuing a conversation interrupted but a moment before.

"It is," said she. "Long enough for us both to remember dispassionately—and to forgive."

"I have nothing to forgive," he answered.

"I'm glad," she said. "I thought perhaps you had. I fear, Warren, that I acted abominably in the—matter."

"You acted according to your father's wishes; a sufficient excuse—if any excuse were needed."

"Then you have not censured me?"

"Never for one moment."

"I'm glad!" she said again.

"And if I had censured you," he went on, "do you fancy I could censure you now, you wonderful woman?"

"You've not forgotten how to flatter!"

"Nor how to tell the simple truth," he added.

"Don't you find it difficult to tell the simple truth?" she parried.

"Not to you."

"Then tell me, do you think of remaining here?"

"A while."

"Aren't you next in line for the title?"

"Yes.—You have followed that—because of me?" he asked.

"I was interested because of you. One is always interested in an *old* friend—and you are one of my very oldest."

"It is good to know, Natalie, that you have thought of me sometimes," he answered.

"I have thought of you very often, Warren—and very affectionately. I learned that you had thrown up your commission and had gone in for a fortune in the States, or in Canada. I didn't hear which, and I was unable to find out by casual inquiry—and I thought of you only the more. And

when I saw the title was coming near, and that some day, probably, you would be the Earl of Darroque, I was delighted—I knew what it would mean to you, to go back home a Peer of England."

He looked down at her with grave eyes.

"Yes," he said, "it means something to me to rule where my ancestors have ruled for centuries; but have you also thought that, had you wished, you would be the next Countess of Darroque?"

"No!" she smiled. "It had not occurred to me."

"Will you consider it *now?*" he said suddenly—and she felt his arm tighten around her.

"Warren!" she exclaimed. "Don't make me answer!—and don't forget you are leading the cotillon—and that it is time to order a change."

"God!" said he. "You make me forget everything but you." He gave the signal, without releasing her. "Have I no chance?" he asked, continuing the dance.

"None!" she answered simply.

"I shouldn't have asked you—but—there has never been any one but you, Natalie. When I saw you the other day, I realized it.—And to-night, with my arm around you, your hair brushing my cheek, your hand on my shoulder—I could not resist."

The floor was full now.—Vendome went by, glancing at her inquiringly. She did not see him. Here was her chance—to atone for the past, if atonement were due from her—and yet—

“I understand, Warren,” she said very low.

“And we will be friends—as before?”

“As before,” she answered, pressing his hand.

“Thank you, Natalie,” he said simply. “Believe me, I shall not forget.”

Then he took her back to her place.

Vendome, returning to Natalie, regarded her with an amused, yet a questioning, smile.

“Well?” she said. “What is it you want to know?”

“Most?” he asked.

“I won’t take the ring——”

“Now,” he added.

“The now is apt to be a long now,” she retorted. “Moreover, I did you the honor to ask you a question.”

“I was a bit curious to know—and a bit impertinent, also, maybe—what you and the M. F. H. were discussing when I passed.”

“Only a *bit* impertinent!” she mocked. “You have a queer idea of degree, Mr. Vendome.”

“The degree is not material!” he smiled. “I will admit any degree you may name.”

"And is what we were discussing material—and for what, please?"

"Had it to do with the past?" he asked.

"It did!"

"And with the present?"

"It did."

"And with the—future?"

"Yes—with the future also."

Again the look of question came into his eyes.

"Do you wish to know what I answered?" she smiled.

"Need you ask?" he replied.

"I answered,"—she flashed him a look from under her long lashes—"I answered—what I answered, Mr. Vendome, you shall know—when I tell you—and that will be, maybe, in the cave at Land's End, when you have found the Jewels."

As she finished, Blake's voice obtruded.

"Mrs. Tremaine—may I have the pleasure?" he smiled, offering her his favor.

"Mrs. Tremaine has all her dances taken for the evening, Mr. Blake," Vendome calmly interposed—and handed her to Silverthorne, who happened to be at hand. Then he looked at Blake, and said meaningfully: "You understand, I hope."

"Hell!" sneered Blake—and with a shrug he turned away.

XXII

UNDER THE WALL

BLAKE poured himself a plain brandy and drank it off at a gulp—which is not the best way to drink brandy, as every one knows. Moreover, it was the fourth time he had emptied his glass, during the quarter of an hour he had been sitting alone in the grill.

The Hunt Ball was still in full going, but it did not interest him at present. He was too enraged to trust himself on the floor,—and yet he was helpless. Enraged at Vendome; helpless to square it with him. The whip hand was over him—and he knew it. It behooved him to efface himself—and yet he was loath to forego Mrs. Tremaine. It was not often that he was bowled over so completely—and her very dislike for him gave more zest to the game. He wanted to go on—yet there was Vendome, blocking him off by an unfortunate knowledge of the past.

“Damn him!” he muttered—and helped himself again to the brandy. “I’m going up to Land’s End, and try my hand at the jewel hunt. Maybe, with the sparklers dangling before her eyes, she

won't be so high and mighty—woman will do anything for the glittering glass.—Lord! what a figure she has!"

"What is that, Blake?" said Anstruther. "Who is she of the figure—a chorus girl or a manicurist?"

"Either would do for you!" Blake retorted.

"For me, yes—but not for your dilettante taste. *She* must be something."

"She is something."

"Said I not so!" Anstruther laughed.

"*She* is the *divorcee*."

Anstruther's eyebrows went up expressively.

"Mrs. Tremaine?" he questioned. "Better go slow, old chap—better go slow!"

"Wherefore the advice? Have you been getting fresh?"

"With her! I fancy not."

"Well, neither have I—but that doesn't hinder me from admiring her, does it?"

"Not in the least—provided you don't voice your admiration in indecent compliments."

"Thanks for the advice—though if I were to, who would resent it?"

"Almost any one who is handy; especially Alstair or Singleton, or more especially, Monsieur Vendome, who isn't French, even if he has the name."

“ Damn Vendome!” said Blake.

“ What has he done?” said Anstruther.

“ Nothing.”

“ Then why damn him?”

“ Just to keep my hand in—also my tongue!”

“ Superfluous, my friend, exceedingly superfluous! Your hand and your tongue are always in.”

“ Humph!” was Blake’s comment. “ Your supper doesn’t seem to have agreed with you.”

“ I didn’t eat any, old chap—I was like unto you: I drank it.”

“ Are you trying to quarrel?” Blake demanded.

“ Perish the suggestion; also the thought.”

“ Sometimes you act like a damn fool!”

“ When is sometimes—when I act natural, or when I don’t?”

Blake laughed in spite of himself.

“ Sit down, Anstruther, and I’ll tell you something interesting.”

“ Permit me to judge of the quality—at another time. I must be going higher.”

“ Get out!” said Blake—and poured another measure of brandy. . . . “ Very well!” he reflected. “ I was about to let him into the secret, but he wouldn’t have it. I’ll go it alone. No one owns the place; so it’s nobody’s, and therefore it’s everybody’s. I’ve as much title as Singleton; and

I'll take a look—several looks, if I want—several looks. . . . I don't know just where to begin in the cave—but I do know that jewels are concealed somewhere on the premises. I'd like to get them—if only to head off that damn meddler Vendome."

He took another drink of brandy—blinked a bit uncertainly at the bottle—and slowly sank into slumber.

He awoke, presently, with a snort and a start—frowned sourly—got rid of some of the bad-taste-in-his-mouth, muttering the while under his breath—glanced at his watch—frowned again—noticed the glass of water on the table; seized it eagerly, took a drink, then spat it angrily on the floor—got up and went upstairs.

The Ball was just ended. The women had gone to the dressing-rooms; the men were gathered about, waiting for them to come down. He passed Singleton, and turning around remarked pleasantly:

"See you at the cave to-morrow."

"Why not make it to-day?" Singleton asked.

"I have to-day taken, thank you."

"And we have to-morrow taken—sorry we don't find a mutually convenient time."

"Where's the cave, Blake?" Anstruther inquired.

"Too late!" Blake replied. "You had your chance, and you refused to listen."

"So you took Singleton aboard instead? He seems to be wonderfully impressed with your yarn!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Blake. "Watch me, if you think so."

"If that's the penalty for thinking, I'll not think!" Anstruther laughed.

Mrs. Anstruther was not at the dance, so Blake was staggering it. Now he went back to the grill for another drink, and in search of company. Mrs. Blake, he knew, would be taken home by Hudson, or somebody—trust to her for that.

At daybreak, he himself was taken home by one of the servants.—The Hunt Ball came but once a year; on that night the club-house was never closed.—About noon, he awoke fresh as a daisy; having made a leisurely toilet, he went down to Hudson's to try a couple of moderately green hunters, and to look over his string generally, with a view to trading or buying—and doing Hudson if he could. He knew perfectly well that Hudson would do him at every opportunity.

All of which is highly honorable among gentlemen, in the noble profession of horses.

The idea, however, of going to the cave on the morrow was still with him; and, in the evening, he

finally determined to go immediately after breakfast—and to go alone. He had considered again whether to invite Anstruther along, but after considerable debate he had given up the notion.

So, shortly after eight o'clock, he mounted a big bay hunter, and, a bit crafty, circling around so as to avoid passing Rosemont, he had regained the pike a few miles farther on. Some hours later, on nearing Springberry Farm, he made another detour, to avoid that place, and approached Land's End from the river.

"It doesn't make any particular difference about Williams," he reflected, "but it will be just as well not to have him spying around. He struck me as being entirely too officious. However, he might be persuaded for a sufficient consideration. He is Singleton's tenant; but tenants *have* been known to ease up on the master, under certain conditions. . . ." On the whole, if he were not successful, it might not be a bad idea to try to *interest* Williams. Williams was in the cave with the others; must have heard their talk; therefore, must know what he himself had missed—the precise location of the jewels. For some reason, they had not been taken from their hiding place before he had tumbled in so unexpectedly.—Yes, unquestionably Williams was the one to corrupt and consult.

As Blake came out from the timber into the open space before the house, Ben was sunning himself at his cabin door, swaying his body back and forth in unison with the chant of a negro folk-song—monotonous and minor, yet distinctly sweet.

His frequent rides by had made him a familiar figure to the black squatters, and Ben hastily scrambled up and pulled off his battered hat.

“Mornin’, Marster!” he greeted.

“Good morning,” said Blake; “how are you?”

“Only tol’able, seh, only tol’able!”

“What seems to be the matter?”

“Nothin’, seh, nothin’. I’m purty pert, yass, seh; thankee, seh!”

“Any one here since we left the other day?”

“I ain’ seed no one, seh.”

“The cave is still there, I suppose?”

“Yass, seh! yass, seh! even de stone’s nuvver bin tek’n away.”

“Sure you haven’t been investigating?”

Ben rolled his eyes protestingly. “No, seh! no, seh! I’se shu’ o’ hit, seh; shu’ o’ hit.”

“Well, come along over and help me with the stone,” said Blake, producing a half-dollar.

It was more money than the negro had seen in a year; his face brightened eagerly, and his hand went out greedily.

"Thankee, seh!—de Lawd bless yo, seh!"

Blake dismounted and was tying his horse when he suddenly remembered that by Singleton's express direction the stone had not been replaced on the entrance.

"Who put back the stone?" he inquired sharply.

"Yass, seh!" said Ben, "Yass, seh! Marster Singleton and de nudders cum back to de cave arfter you lef', an when dey cum out agin, dey put back de stone."

"Hell!" said Blake—then to the negro, "Oh, they returned to the cave, did they?"

"Yass, seh! yass, seh!—dey wuz in hit quite a spell befo' dey cum out."

"I'm a drivelling idiot!" Blake muttered. "I need a guardian, sure."

"Whar yo sez, seh, yass, seh!"

Blake did not hear him.

"Of course!" he reflected. "A four-year-old child would have known better! They came back and continued the search—and found the jewels. Lord! what a bone-head I am! . . . However, I'm here now, so I'll have a look around."

He helped the negro remove the stone—shot an electric torch into the cave—and climbed down.

"You stay where you are, Ben—and warn off any but *our* party!" he smiled.

"Yass, seh! yass, seh!" came Ben's voice.

First he would see if they had left any trace, and he turned the light slowly around the cave. . . . The skeletons were gone—but there was not anything under *them!* stirring the dust with his foot.—No—nothing! Yet why should they have disturbed a few bones? . . . Did they bury them in the stream, or did they take them away to prove something by them? . . . Well, he was hunting jewels, not bones, so it did not matter.

He went carefully over every inch of the floor, the sides, the roof; searching in vain for evidence that something had been removed. He came to the stream, and flashed the rays across it. In the intense blackness, the light, glittering on the water as in a mirror, was reflected to the opposite wall. Slowly he ran the torch up and down it—not knowing what he sought, yet seeking—and not knowing how he would reach the wall, even though he were to see the jewels lying there ready for his taking. . . . Then suddenly the light stopped—on a square of stone, possibly two or three feet in height, of a different color from the surrounding rock, and with its edges well defined by the contrast.

"Now what is that?" he muttered—and his

voice sounded hollow in the subterranean stillness.

It looked as if a hole had been cut in the rock, and filled in, or faced, with stones of another kind —or was it but the same kind showing at another angle. Queer!—queer!—He had no means to cross—and even if he had, he should hesitate with that current! Lord! how it whirled out of sight! A boat would be sucked under the rock like a match.

He ran his torch over the rest of the wall; found nothing, and came back to the queer square.

“If I had a rifle,” he reflected, “I would see what that thing is made of. I wonder if the nigger has—Ben!” he called.

“Yass, seh! yass, seh!” said Ben, sticking his head in the hole. “I’se heah, seh.”

“Have you got a rifle?” Blake asked.

“Lawd! no, seh!”

“Any of the cabins got one?”

“’Deed dey hasn’t, seh. Mebbe yo kin git one at Marster Williams’s, seh. He’s Marster Singleton’s man, an’ he libs on de next place, seh; yass, seh!”

“Never mind!” said Blake. “You may remove your head from the opening now, Benjamin, and return to earth.—That is better, thank you!”

He drew a large revolver from a shoulder-holster. It was too far, he imagined, but he would

try a few shots anyway. Maybe he could blunder into a hit.

He was an expert in his handling apparently, for he fired with his finger along the barrel, quick as a flash and seemingly without taking aim.

At the first shot, which crashed through the cave like thunder, and burst from the opening with frightful suddenness and force, the negro let out a yell, and fled in terror for the cover of the trees.

"Hell!" said Blake. "That *is* some noise!—We'll turn the balance loose quickly and get it over. It's good I'm using smokeless powder."

Crack!

"Missed it!"

Crack!

"Missed!"

Crack!

"Never touched it!—Now for the last."

Crack!

"Missed, by the——"

The sentence was never finished. Loosened by the concussions, a huge piece of rock slipped from its place directly over Blake's head, and striking him at an angle crushed his skull like paper and drove his body into the stream—which swept it swiftly under the wall and away.

XXIII

THE CROWN JEWELS OF FRANCE

THE morning after the Hunt Ball, breakfast at Rosemont was a movable feast. Singleton came down at eight as usual; he always went on schedule time when at home. Vendome sauntered along about nine-thirty; inquired for his host, and was told he had gone to town; had coffee, eggs, broiled chicken, roast ham, stewed kidney, three kinds of hot bread, and all the rest of a Virginia breakfast.

Whether one is a nervous dyspeptic or good feeder, it makes no difference to the turbaned cook of the old school; she puts it all before him, and lets him choose what it is wise for him to eat; which he *may* do, but usually does not. The Southern cook has much to pride herself on—also much to blame herself for—because of man's want of resistance to her culinary triumphs.

Vendome having eaten moderately a little fruit, a small piece of chicken, a bit of corn bread, and some coffee—the last hot, strong, and of a golden brown—went into the library and wrote letters until nearly noon. Then he wandered out into the garden, and to the stables, returning by way of the rose-hedge, where he plucked a belated Jacqueline and drew it through his button-hole. Neither

Betty nor Mrs. Tremaine seemed to be about, so he strolled down toward Tarrington, thinking to meet his host. But he did not meet him, and at the edge of the town he faced about and retraced his steps.

He got back to Rosemont just in time for luncheon, and to find that Singleton had returned another way.

"You're to call Long Distance at once, Orme," Betty greeted; "Washington has been after you for an hour."

"The Ambassador of France wishes to inform Mr. Vendome—and so on!" Natalie laughed.

"We shall see," said Vendome. "More than likely, it's orders to pack my kit for the *Château en Espagne*." He bent over Natalie and whispered, "If it is, won't you go with me?"

"Why should I?" said she.

"Lord knows, I don't!—but won't you?"

"No, I won't!" she answered—but she smiled, and the smile tempered the words.

"We will continue the subject later!" Vendome smiled back—and went to the telephone.

Presently he came into the dining-room and joined in the talk—with a sly wink at Singleton.

"Well!" said Betty, after a moment, and interrupting the conversation. "What was it—the Ambassador, or 'boots and saddles'?"

"Don't ask diplomatic secrets," said Singleton; "you will——"

"Will you be quiet, sir!" Betty retorted. "I am waiting for an answer, Mr. Vendome."

"And you?" Orme asked, looking at Natalie.

"I'm waiting also," she replied.

"Truth compels me to admit——"

"Good thing! Push it along!" Singleton said.

"Truth compels me to admit," Vendome repeated, "that it was the Ambassador. His Government has cabled its acceptance, and instructed him to do everything necessary for a thorough investigation of the truth of the story. I won't go into details; but an officer of the Engineer Corps of the Army will be down this evening; to-morrow he will look over the ground and determine what is to be done."

"Farewell! *dear Marquis*," said Natalie softly. "I'm sorry, indeed, for you."

"Hang the Marquis!" exclaimed Singleton. "We have——"

"He is hanging, my dear," Betty observed.

"Thanks!" smiled Singleton. "I hadn't noticed it. I was about to remark, however, that 'we have with us to-day 'a Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, *in prospectu*.' He raised his water-glass. "To the Grand Cross and Monsieur Vendome."

"Writ in water!" Vendome laughed, as they drank.

"You're nearer the fact than you thought," said Singleton. "If you find the Crown Jewels, it will be through water."

"Go on with the formula," said Betty:—"A copper-haired, beautiful woman, and a tall, distinguished-looking, dark-completed man—complete the prophecy, Natalie?"

"That's all!" said Natalie. "There is nothing else to add. The copper-haired, beautiful lady, and the tall, distinguished-looking, dark-haired man failed to coalesce."

"Good word!" cried Singleton. "I tell you, Natalie, you have all of them over the ropes in your vocabulary of striking vocables. You must sit up nights studying the 'Book of Correct English for All Occasions' I noticed on your desk."

"I may cull a few outside before I leave," Natalie retorted.

"Do you know, Orme, what officer is coming?" Betty asked, with a that-is-sufficient-from-you look at her husband.

"I do not. The Ambassador simply said that he had conferred with the Secretary of State, who volunteered, if it were agreeable to me, to ask the Secretary of War to detail an officer at once. So

the aforesaid officer will be along on the evening train, with orders to report to me on arrival."

"We will have him met and brought right to Rosemont," said Betty. "He shall stop here."

"That will be very kind," Vendome replied. "Maybe he is the tall, distinguished-looking, dark-haired man of the prophecy."

"Maybe he is," said Natalie. "You never can tell."

Vendome himself met the evening train—and the first man to swing down from the Pullman was an old friend, Major Dangerfield.

"I'm to report to you, sir," said the Major, with a formal salute.

"Bully!" said Vendome. "Come along—you're going out to Rosemont with me. The Singletons will be delighted it's you. Do you know what you're here for?"

"I haven't an idea!" said Dangerfield. "I got a telephone order, while at lunch at the Club, to take the next train for Tarrington and report to the Honorable Orme Vendome, Ambassador of the——"

"Cut it out!" Vendome laughed. "Well, it's a fairly interesting game you're about to sit in. It's neither war, weapons nor women, Dangerfield, but it's water—lots of it. However, everything in time. We have all evening for it—and a charming

company of three, exclusive of myself, with whom to go over the details.—Mrs. Dangerfield is well, I hope.”

“Very well, indeed.”

“Hum!—Give her my best compliments when you see her. A charming woman, Dangerfield, a charming woman! And you’re a fortunate chap, sir, a very fortunate chap.—You know the Singletons, of course.”

“Sure!” said Dangerfield.

“Mrs. Tremaine is the other one at Rosemont.”

“She that was Natalie Jumonville?”

Vendome nodded.

“I’ve known her a long while.” He glanced quickly at Vendome. “She’s some looker!” he remarked.

“She is,” said Vendome. “If you had seen the mob of men around her at the Hunt Ball last evening, you would have gotten the notion that there are a number of others with the same idea.”

“Yourself included!” the Major laughed.

“No one ever accused me of blindness. Moreover, I proved my good taste, also my good fortune, by dancing the cotillon with her.”

“Enough!” said Dangerfield, with a meaning smile—which Vendome noticed but did not remark upon.

The air was delightfully balmy—the moonlight playing through the gently moving trees and amid the rose hedges, the quiet hush of the country over all the landscape—when the Singletons and their guests came out on the piazza after dinner. Mrs. Singleton poured the coffee, the men lit their cigars and settled back to satisfied enjoyment. It had been a delicious dinner and delightful company; now was a good cigar—a comfortable chair—a charming prospect—and an entertaining yarn in which they all were interested.

“I am sure, Major Dangerfield,” said Betty, “that you must be anxious for Mr. Vendome’s story, and to know why you are ordered down here so suddenly.”

“Mr. Vendome told me it is neither war, weapons nor women, but water—and the rest he left hidden in fascinating mystery,” said the Major. “I shall be much more than glad to know the awful truth.”

“Shall I tell it?” Vendome inquired. . . . “Well, here goes, subject, fellow explorers, to your suggestions, amendments and corroborations. If I omit anything, pray don’t hesitate to interrupt.”

“They won’t,” said Singleton.

“Who are *they*?” Betty asked.

“I leave it to your imagination.—Vendome, as you love me, begin.”

Vendome recounted everything—beginning with the Scotswoman's tale at the Washington dinner-table, and ending with the Hunt Ball—not omitting the incident of Blake's unexpected slide in the cave, and his veiled and unveiled threats since. All of which took time—with Dangerfield's technical questions and asked-for explanations—and it was well into the night before the story was ended.

As Vendome bade Mrs. Tremaine good-night at the foot of the stairs, she paused, one hand holding up her gown, the other extended to him.

" Didn't you forget something, Mr. Vendome? " she smiled.

" No, I did not forget," he answered. " I am waiting for—to-morrow."

" To-morrow," she said, as she reached the landing, " is in the future."

" I'm trading in futures," he replied, as she disappeared around the turn.

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" This is such a beautiful day," said Singleton, at breakfast the next morning, " that if the ladies are not going to Land's End, we men might ride. It's fifty mi——"

" The ladies are going!" his wife remarked.

" Do you fancy us such poor sports, Carter, as to quit just at the interesting time? " said Natalie.

"The surrey is ordered for nine, my dears. I knew it would be quite impossible to lose you."

"Nevertheless, it was thoughtful of you to give us this opportunity to be lost," Betty remarked.

"The surrey will take us to where we leave the pike," Singleton continued; "from there we will ride. I have an intimate recollection of the miseries of driving that side-road—and Vendome's comments on it and the political activities of certain officials at the expense of their sworn duties and of the public in general."

"Where are we to get riding horses?" said Natalie.

"I sent them forward at day-break—they will be waiting our arrival."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Carter," his wife smiled. "Really you're not such a bad chap."

They covered the twenty miles of pike in spanking time. The saddle horses were waiting, and they were quickly up and away. Natalie attached Major Dangerfield, and kept him beside her—to the exclusion of Vendome: who, however, did not seem to notice it, and rode ahead with his hostess without the suspicion of a glance back, or a hearken either.

At Springberry Farm they halted a moment for Williams; then proceeded—slowly—through the forest, until the stone house came into view.

"There is Land's End!" said Natalie. "The cave is just back of it."

"What ails the niggers?" Singleton remarked to Williams, who was riding at his bridle. "They must be having a camp meeting. Did you ever see such gesticulating?"

"The whole colony is assembled, and wildly excited," said Williams. "I thought that bunch too worthless and tired to do a thing but sleep and eat."

They came out into the open, and the negroes saw them. Instantly one, whom they recognized as Ben, ran toward them, followed by all the rest.

"Marster Williams!" he cried, "Marster Williams! De good Lawd be praised you's heah. Some'n turable has happened to 'im. He wen' in de cave an' hasn' cum out—an' deah wuz a tremenjus 'splosion, an' he mus' be kilt dead."

"What are you talking about, nigger?" said Williams sharply. "Who's in the cave, and who's killed?"

"Marster Blake, seh; he cum a little while ago, an' wen' down in de hole."

"Blake!" Vendome laughed. "*We* will do the dropping in this time, I'm thinking.—Nevertheless, it's embarrassing—we don't want *him* around now."

"You speak of noise, Ben," said Singleton; "what sort of noise?"

"Mons'us big noise, seh—some'n like a cannon."

"The fool certainly wouldn't be blasting in a cave!" Vendome exclaimed.

"I'm not sure of Blake!" Singleton answered. He turned to the black. "Did you see him go into the cave?"

"Yass, seh; I help't him to move de stone off."

"He wasn't carrying a cannon, was he?"

"No, seh, he warn'; but he ax'd me ef I hed a rifle, or could git 'im one from de cabins, seh."

Singleton looked at Vendome with lifted brows.

"And did you get him one, Ben?"

"No, seh! I told him dat Marster Williams hed one, seh, but he didn't seem to warn' dat."

"Strange!" said Vendome—and all the men laughed.

"Where were you when these explosions went off?" Williams asked.

"When de first one wen' off, I wuz bendin' over de hole tryin' to see in, seh—de rest o' de time, I was runnin'."

"This *is* curious," said Vendome. "Blake wanted a rifle—why? It's not obtainable, then the explosions follow rapidly—and Blake hasn't come out, which looks promising. If he has got the Jewels, we are in time to *share* them with him. Let's investigate."

They went over to the entrance—followed by Ben and all the other negroes, at distances proportionate to the individual fear. In the cave was darkness and absolute quiet.

Williams bent over and put his head in the hole.

“Nothing!” said he, and swung himself down.

Vendome instantly flung him an electric torch—this time they had brought a plentiful supply—and followed. Dangerfield came next.

“Blake!” Vendome called, shooting the light around. “Blake!—He isn’t here—but don’t let the women enter, Singleton; a big section of the roof has fallen in. It’s dangerous—better not come.”

“Bosh!” said Singleton—and came.

The four torches made the cave as light as day. The fallen rock and débris littered the floor beside the stream—but never a trace of Blake was visible.

“Tons of it!” said Dangerfield, indicating the stone.

“Could that have been the explosions?” Williams asked.

“More than likely the fall of the roof was due to the explosions,” Dangerfield answered.—“Here’s something that may help us,” he said, as the light glinted on an object lying partially free from the fallen rock.—He stooped and pulled it loose.

“A military revolver, and”—breaking it—

"with every chamber freshly smutted.—There are your explosions! The fall of the roof was due to the concussion; which would be very considerable in such a confined space—especially if the shots were fired rapidly, as the negro says."

"Aren't you men going to help us down?" came Betty's voice.

"Lord, *no!*" exclaimed Singleton. "You mustn't venture in: the roof may fall any minute."

"How are we to see?" Natalie demanded.

"Get down on your knees and look in!" said Vendome.

"You're in, are you?" said Betty.

"And we're coming in," said Natalie. "Look the other way, please."

And she came—and Betty after her.

"Now, my dears, you go right up again," said Singleton, starting toward them. "Come on, Vendome—up they go."

"I will not go up until I'm ready," Betty said.

"Then get ready!" said her husband.

"Natalie first!" she smiled.

"Not now, thank you!" said Natalie. "Is that the roof?" pointing to the débris on the floor.

"It *was* the roof," replied Singleton. "If any more falls, you're liable to be buried under it."

"Come, Mrs. Tremaine, let us lift you out."

"Presently, Mr. Vendome. I'm having a delightful time; aren't you, Betty? It's so, riskily bizarre."

Singleton threw up his hands in defeat.

"All right!" he consented. "But keep under the opening! There isn't quite so much danger there."

"Certainly, dear!" assented Betty sweetly. "We will do anything to please you!"

"Of course you will!" mocked Singleton. "You're a marvel of obedience."

"How's Natalie?" she asked.

"Excuse me, I've enough on my hands. Vendome may answer, if he wish; if he is wise, he won't wish."

"I should like to know," Dangerfield was saying, "what was Blake's occasion for firing this revolver? I can't find a thing that even appears likely." Then he lowered his voice. "If the negro's tale is true, however, it is perfectly plain what happened. Blake was struck by these rocks and knocked into the stream.—No use in looking for him, Vendome. The blow certainly stunned him—it probably killed him instantly—and the current would whirl him away in a flash. Look at it—it runs like Niagara. His body is underground, and miles away by this time."

"Don't let the women know," said Singleton. "I hope the negro is mistaken, and that Blake came out of the cave."

Dangerfield shook his head. "There is a chance, of course, but it's infinitesimal.—However, I'm here for a definite purpose—and nothing can be done for Blake now. . . . This fallen roof complicates matters. The rest will have to be braced and protected before anything can be done. Limestone is particularly treacherous—it may stand for centuries, and it may break and crumble at any moment. The fact that one slip has just occurred, due to concussion, is exceedingly significant of weakness in the cleavage. If you will be advised, you will not linger. I am familiar with the story, and where the Jewels are cached, and I can make my investigations alone. In fact, every noise, even talking, increases the danger—if there is danger. I just want you to understand the situation. The women are practically safe—so long as they remain under the opening—and we may be also. I must take the risk, however, but you are under no ob——"

There was a sudden rending of the ground under them; and with a detonation like subdued thunder, the bottom dropped out of the entire upper half of the stream, leaving in its place a huge, cavernous hole, into which the water fell boominly.

The women cried out in sharp terror! For an instant, even the men were dismayed.

Then Dangerfield snapped out an order.

“Train your torches on the opposite wall and let the light travel together slowly along it, two feet above the bottom level. There’s little time to waste.”

Led by Dangerfield’s torch, the lights swung to the right, passed the cavernous hole, gained the bank of the former stream, passed slowly toward the end wall, and suddenly stopped, over an unfaced opening. In it lay what appeared to be a metal box.

“The Scotswoman seems to have told the truth,” said Dangerfield. “Now to get across.—Oh, for a rope!”

“I have one, sir,” said Williams, slipping off his coat, and disclosing a rope wound around his body. “I thought perhaps it would prove handy.”

“You’re a wonder, Williams!” exclaimed Singleton. “You have been wasted at Springberry—you’re going to Rosemont.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Williams simply.

A hand touched Vendome’s arm.

“You have found them?” whispered Natalie.

“We have found something——” he began.—“You go back to your place—there is great danger here.”

“You are in it,” she said—not thinking what it implied.

“As you love me, go back,” he implored, not

thinking what he said, so long as she heeded. Then he turned to Dangerfield. "I'm with you, Major. Singleton, you return to the women—two's enough, here; if it isn't, we'll call for help."

"Three will be ample, Mr. Singleton," said Williams—"pardon me, sir, Mrs. Singleton needs you."

"Bully for you!" said Dangerfield, as he ran a slip-knot in the rope and put it over his shoulder. "Come on, Vendome—and lower away."

Singleton started after—heard Betty's cry—hesitated—and turned back to her. The men would not require him—the women might.

Meanwhile, Dangerfield had been lowered by Vendome into the bed of the deserted stream.

"Wait!" he said, throwing off the rope. "Possibly I can handle the box alone and you won't be necessary—the less weight here the better. You may depend, if I need assistance I will call."

Vendome hesitated—but the point as to weight was controlling.

"He's right," said he to Williams. "We'll wait."

From the edge of the bank, they saw Dangerfield swiftly cross the rocky bottom and gain the opposite side—saw him grasp the box with both hands, and throw his weight upon it—saw it lifted free—saw him put his arms around it for a secure hold—and quickly retrace his steps. . . . He

fastened the rope to the box; they drew it up—and he followed.

Vendome grasped his hand as he landed, while Williams took up the box and bore it to the entrance.

"Let us get out of here at once," said Dangerfield. "There is no telling what such a mass of water will do."

They lifted the women out, the box was hoisted up, and the men followed.

"Do you mind telling us, Major," said Natalie, when they stood once more in the sunlight, "your thoughts while you were crossing over and back?"

"I took twenty-eight steps going over, and thirty-one coming back," Dangerfield laughed—"it seemed a powerful long time while I was taking them."

"I thought as much," she said, "but no one would have guessed it from your actions—you were provokingly deliberate, Major Dangerfield."

"Hear! hear!" laughed Dangerfield.

"And now for the box!" exclaimed Betty.

Williams waved the negroes further back—and stepped aside. Vendome, who was examining the box, looked up.

"It's copper," said he; "the water has injured it very little. It seems to be beautifully made; it locks not with a hasp but with a plate. Have you the key, Mrs. Singleton?"

“ Maybe it’s unlocked! ” said Natalie.

Vendome smiled, and tried to raise the lid—tried harder—it gave just a trifle.

“ I believe you’re right! ” said he. “ Singleton, get a hold——Now! ”

The lid creaked slowly back: the box was empty!

For a space they stared—no one spoke. Then Vendome burst into a laugh.

“ The Crown Jewels of France! ” he proclaimed.

—“ Behold! ”

Again there was silence.

“ Where *are* the Jewels? ” said Natalie. “ Certainly they once *were* there.”

“ Ask of the skeletons—or of him who rode away! ” Vendome replied.

“ Hurrah for the Marquis de Chavenis! ” cried Betty.

“ And exit the Grand Cross of the Legion,” observed Singleton.

“ Who cares for the Cross? ” said Vendome. “ I have the Red Emerald of his Majesty, the Signet of the King.—Natalie—will you accept it now? ”

Without hesitation, Natalie held out her hand; and Vendome slipped the ring on her finger.

“ It will have to be made smaller, dearest! ” she smiled.

FINIS

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