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The Bird of Paradise

by

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CHAPTER I.

Hamer Wildburn sat suddenly up in his wide and luxurious cabin bed, with the start of the sound sleeper unexpectedly awakened. His hands clasped his pyjama clad knees. He listened intently. Through the wide open porthole opposite came the thirty seconds flash from Antibes lighthouse. From the shore road, which skirted the bay, there was the faint hoot of a belated motor car. Closer at hand the lazy murmur of the sea against the sides of his anchored yacht. Then more distinctly, he heard again the sound which had at first awakened him. This time there was no doubt about it. A human voice from the open space. A woman's cry of appeal. The soft but purposeful splashing of a swimmer keeping herself afloat...The young man hastened out of bed, ran up the companionway, and leaned over the side. What he saw almost immediately below was enough to startle anyone. A woman was floating upon her back, a woman, not in the day-by-day scanty but sufficient bathing dress of the moment, but a woman in evening dress, with the glint even of Jewels around her neck.

"What on earth's the matter?" he called out "Have you fallen in from anywhere?"

"Please do not ask foolish questions," was the composed reply. "Let down your steps. I have upset my canoe, and I must come on board for a moment."

Wildburn's hesitation was only momentary. He unscrewed the hooks, lowered the chain, and let down the steps into the sea. The woman, with a few tired strokes, swam towards him. She showed no particular signs of weakness or panic, but she clutched almost feverishly at his hand, and the moment she reached the deck she calmly but completely collapsed. With a thrill of horror, Wildburn realised that a portion of her black chiffon gown which clung so tightly to her body bore traces of a darker stain than the discolouration of the sea. His natural stream of questions died away upon his lips, as she became a dead weight upon his arm.

There was a quivering narrow shaft of light piercing the skies eastwards when the woman opened her eyes. Wildburn gave a sigh of relief. He held a glass of brandy once more to her lips. Her fingers guided it and she sipped some feebly.

"I will give you some coffee presently," he promised. "By an unfortunate chance, I am alone on the boat. I gave my *matelot* and his boy the night off."

She fingered the blanket by which she was covered. A look of mild horror shone out of her eyes. Hanging from the ropes which supported the forward awning was a black shapeless object.

"My gown!" she gasped.

"I had to take it off," he explained coolly. "I was not sure whether you were seriously hurt. I am glad to find that you are not. I have bound up your shoulder. You may find it stiff and a little painful at first, from the salt water, but it is not serious."

She lay quite still. Her hands were underneath the rug. From a very damp satin bag she produced a handkerchief, and wiped her forehead.

"I suppose it was necessary for you to play lady's maid?" she asked weakly.

"Absolutely," he assured her. "You were still bleeding, and I could not tell how serious your wound might be I—er—exercised every precaution."

She looked up at him earnestly. Apparently her scrutiny of his features satisfied her. Wildburn was not good looking in the ordinary sense of the word, but he had pleasant features, a freckled, sunburnt complexion, and the humourous gleam of understanding in his eyes.

"I am sure you did what you thought was best," she said. "I ran my canoe into one of those stationary fishing boats."

If it occurred to him to make any comment upon her journeying amongst them at an early hour in the morning, alone and in evening dress, he refrained.

"I always said that they ought to show a light," he remarked. "I have seen your canoe. It is drifting in shorewards."

"Give me some more brandy," she begged. "I wish to speak to you before we are disturbed."

"I can hear the kettle boiling now," he told her. "Wouldn't you like coffee?"

"Coffee would be better," she admitted. "You are being very kind to me. I thank you."

Still somewhat dazed, Wildburn descended the steps, made the coffee, and remounted.

"I'm sorry," he apologised, "that there will be no milk. They bring it to me from the shore at seven o'clock."

"It smells too delicious as it is," she declared.

"If you will swing a little round," he advised her, "with another cushion or two behind your back you will be more comfortable. You can sit up now and, you see, I will put this rug round your knees. Directly you have had your coffee you had better go down to my cabin and take off the remainder of your wet things."

"You have perhaps a stock of ladies clothing on board?" she asked curiously.

"If I had known of your projected visit," he replied, "I should have provided some. As it is you will have to content yourself with a set or my pyjamas. You will find them in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe by the side of the bed."

She looked at him meditatively. Wildburn was a trifle over six feet, and she herself, slim and elegant as she seemed, could scarcely have been more than five feet five. Furthermore, Wildburn was broad shouldered with a man's full chest. She sighed.

"I am going to look ridiculous," she complained.

"I should forget that for the moment," he ventured, as he set down her empty coffee cup. "You seem to be quite warm. I wonder whether you are feeling strong enough to satisfy my curiosity before you go down below."

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

He looked around the harbour. There were no unusual lights, no indications of any other yacht having come in during the night.

"Well, where you come from first of all. Then why you choose to paddle about the bay in the small hours of the morning in your ordinary evening clothes, and lastly, why you should choose my boat for your objective."

She was watching that broadening shaft of light uneasily.

"What is the time?" she inquired.

"Five o'clock," he told her. "Do you mind if I smoke a cigarette whilst you explain your adventure?"

"I will smoke one too." she said, holding out her hand. "As to explaining my adventure, I find it difficult. You smoke good tobacco, I am glad to see. Thank you," she added as she leaned towards his *briquet*.

There was a silence. As yet there were no signs of life either on the small *plage* or anywhere upon the sea. They were surrounded by the brooding background of the woods which fringed the inlet. The lights in the few villas had long been extinguished. The tops of a row of tall cypresses stood out like dark smudges against the coming dawn.

"Well?" he asked after a brief pause.

"After all, I find it difficult," she admitted. "Where I came from it does not matter. I started, as you perceive, in a hurry, I am rather impulsive. There was something which had to be done."

"Something which had to be done between three and four o'clock in the morning by a young lady still wearing valuable jewellery and dressed for the evening sounds," he pointed out, "mysterious."

"Life," she told him evasively, "is mysterious."

"You will have to be a little more definite," he insisted, with some impatience. "I have done my best to help you under these singular circumstances, but I want to know where you came from and what you want."

"Indeed," she murmured, drawing the blanket more securely around her.

"Think it over for a few minutes," he proposed. "Go down below—the hatch is open—five steps, first door to the right, and you will come to a very untidy cabin. There are plenty of clean towels on the settee. I have rubbed you as best I could. You had better try and get yourself quite dry. Put on some pyjamas and my dressing gown—which you will find there—then come up and explain yourself."

"You will trust me in your cabin then," she observed, struggling to her feet.

"Why shouldn't I? You do not appear to be in distressed circumstances and I have nothing in the world worth stealing."

She looked at him for a moment with an expression which baffled him.

"Are you as honest as you seem?" she asked abruptly.

"I think so," he answered, mystified.

Without further comment she rose to her feet and, holding the blanket about her as though it were an ermine cape, disappeared down the stairs. Wildburn waited for what seemed to him to be an unconscionable time, then he poured out another cup of coffee, lit a fresh cigarette, and strolled round the deck. Once more in the misty twilight of dawn he satisfied himself that no strange craft had entered the bay during the night. The tiny restaurant on the *plage* was still closed. The beautiful *château* which, with its thickly growing woods, occupied the whole of the western side of the bay offered no signs of life. The windows of the few villas on the other side were still lifeless blanks...He paused before the sodden black frock flapping in the faint breeze, took it down and shook it. A fragment of the sash disclosed within the name of a world famous dressmaker. Then he turned round to find his unaccountable visitor standing by the side of him.

"Of course I know that I look ridiculous," she admitted querulously. "I hope that your manners will stand the strain and that you will not laugh at me."

The tell-tale lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth deepened, but if he felt any inclination towards mirth he restrained it.

"I never realised that I had such good taste in night apparel," he assured her. "The prospect of your immediate future however, causes me—I must confess—some disquietude. Perhaps you are staying near here—at some place where I can send for clothes?"

"We will see about that presently," she replied. "It is a matter of no great importance."

She seemed to find the twinkle in his eyes, as he stole another look at her, unduly irritating.

"These things are all trifles," she declared with a frown. "Where I live or who I am does not matter. What do you want to know about me?"

"Let's get to something definite," he begged. "What were you doing swimming round my boat at three o'clock in the morning in an evening frock from the Rue de la Paix?"

She sighed.

"So you realised that?"

"No more evasions, please," he insisted sternly. "Facts."

"I came," she confided, "to pay you a visit."

"Very kind of you," he acknowledged. "You have robbed me of two or three hours' sleep, you have given me a great deal of anxiety, and even now I have not the faintest idea as to who you are or what you could want from me. Please be more explicit."

"You can give me another cigarette first," she demanded.

He handed her his case and *briquet*. "And now?"

"First of all, let me be sure that I am not making a mistake," she continued. "Your name is Hamer Wildburn? This is the yacht *Bird of Paradise*?"

"Correct."

"A very delightful boat."

"You flatter me. And then?"

"Is it for sale?"

"Certainly not." She sighed.

"That makes it more difficult. Will you sell it?"

He considered the matter for a moment.

"Why should I? It exactly suits me, and I am not in urgent need of money. I should only have to go and buy another one. No, I will not sell it."

For the second or third time she looked anxiously out seawards. She was watching the point around which incoming vessels must enter the bay.

"Will you charter it?" she persisted. "For a month if you like, even for a shorter time?"

"I shouldn't dream of such a thing," he assured her. "I have owned half a dozen small boats in my lifetime. I have never chartered one of them. I have just filled up with stores, and all my belongings are on board. I have settled down until the late autumn. There was never anyone less anxious to part with one of his possessions than I am to part with this little boat."

She rose to her feet with a staccato cry which thrilled him. Above the low land on the other side of the point a thin wireless mast was suddenly visible. The powerful engines of a large motor yacht broke the stillness. The woman's expression became haggard. That far-off monotonous sound was like the tocsin of fate.

"Hamer Wildburn," she said, "I have risked my life in this enterprise, which I suppose you look upon only as an act of folly."

"I simply do not understand it," he protested.

"I was at my villa in Mougins last night. I received a telephone message—something very important. Directly I received it I drove myself down here. My car is still there under the trees. There was no one to bring me to your boat—the little restaurant was locked up. There was not a soul on the beach, nothing but a darkness which seemed impenetrable. I took a canoe—you know what happened to me. I ran into one of those fishing boats and swam the rest of the way. Do you think it was a trifle which made me so desperate?"

"Perhaps not," he admitted, thoroughly dazed. "But what is it all about? What do you want my boat in particular for? There are hundreds just like it."

"I cannot tell you why I want it," she declared hopelessly. "That is the hateful part of the whole business. It is a matter of dire secrecy. But I will tell you this—before many days are past you will sell or part with it to someone. It may be taken from you by force. If you are obstinate it may cost you your life. Why not deal with me? I am the first to come to you. I am told that you bought it in Marseilles harbour for something under two thousand pounds. Let me put some men on board and take it away this morning and I will give you a cheque for four thousand pounds on the Credit Lyonnais. You will see my name then and you will know that it will be met. Make up your mind please, quickly. Listen! What is it that approaches?"

He answered without turning round. His eyes were fixed upon the paler beam from the lighthouse. The twilight of dawn had settled upon the grey sea.

"That is only a fishing boat going out," he said, listening for a moment to the soft swish of the oars. "There is a mist falling. Come below into the cabin and we will discuss this matter."

Auguste, *matelot* and assistant navigator of the *Bird of Paradise*, brought the dinghy round to the side of the yacht. He looked with surprise at the steps.

"Monsieur has perhaps taken an early swim," Jean, his subordinate suggested.

Auguste was a man of apprehensions. He glanced around and the longer he looked the less he liked the appearance of things.

"Monsieur would not use the steps," he pointed out. "Besides, he is nowhere in sight. There is one of the canoes from the beach, too, floating there which has been capsized."

With a few swift strokes he reached the steps, backed water deftly and swung round. He pulled himself on to the deck and left Jean to attach the boat. There were signs of disturbance everywhere—rugs thrown about the place where someone had sat in damp clothes, empty glasses, empty coffee cups. Auguste scratched his head in perplexity. The situation might have seemed obvious enough but Monsieur Wildburn was not like that. He descended the companionway with hasty footsteps. There was silence below but the door of the little salon was closed. He opened it and peered inside. There were evidences of recent occupation there—wine glasses and a bottle of brandy—but no sign of any human being. He knocked at the door of the cabin opposite. There was no reply. He turned the handle and looked cautiously in. At the first glance he scented tragedy. His feet seemed frozen to the mat. He tried to call out, and he was noted amongst the seamen of the port as being a lusty shouter, but this time his effort was in vain. The cabin itself was in the wildest disorder and doubled up across its floor, his arms outstretched, faint groans dribbling from his lips, the owner of the *Bird of Paradise* was facing the last act in the drama of that strange morning.

An hour later, settled on deck in a *chaise longue* piled up with cushions, with his face turned windwards and a cup of tea by his side, Hamer Wildburn felt life once more stirring in his pulses. The colour was

slowly returning to his healthy sunburnt face. His breathing was more natural. Auguste watched him with satisfaction.

"Monsieur is better?" he demanded interrogatively.

"Nothing left but a thumping headache and that passes," the young man acknowledged. "Why is Jean bringing the dinghy round?"

"One goes to acquaint the *gendarmerie*, Monsieur," Auguste replied.

"One does nothing of the sort," was the sharp rejoinder.

Auguste's eyes grew round with surprise.

"But Monsieur has been drugged!" he exclaimed. "That Monsieur himself admitted. He has also been robbed without a doubt. Every drawer in the cabin is open. The one with the false front has been smashed. Thieves have been at work here without a doubt."

"I do not believe that I have been robbed Auguste," his master replied. "There is nothing worth stealing upon the boat. In any case I do not want any gendarme or the Commissaire of Police or anyone of that sort down here. I forbid either you or Jean to say a word about this happening."

Auguste was disappointed. He had seen himself the hero of a small sensation.

"It must be as Monsieur wishes, of course," he grumbled.

"It must if you want to keep your posts, you two," the young man told them. "Now, listen to me. Did you seen an overturned canoe when you came in?"

"But certainly," Auguste replied. "It was one of those left for hire at the *plage*. Jean took it back some time ago."

"Where is the small dinghy?"

"Jean found it upon the *plage* and brought it back, Monsieur," Auguste explained. "It would seem that the thief of last night first of all took the canoe from the *plage*, ran into something, for the bows are badly damaged, perhaps swim to the boat and took the small dinghy for the return journey."

"Excellent Auguste," his master said approvingly. "You are probably right. Now go to the shore and have a look at the end of the road under the trees Tell me if there are any fresh signs of a motor car having stood there during the night. Let me know at once if you discover anything."

"And Monsieur does not wish me to approach the gendarmes?" the man asked as he turned away.

"I forbid it," was the firm injunction. "You will go straight to the spot I have told you of and return here."

Auguste executed his commission and returned within a quarter of an hour.

"A heavy car has been standing there recently, Monsieur," he reported. "Louget—he is one of the boatmen down at the *plage*—told me that he had seen a coupe turn out of the road just as he arrived about an hour ago."

"Did he notice the occupant?"

"But that he was too slim and small," Auguste recounted, "Louget would have believed him to have been Monsieur."

"Why?" Wildburn asked. "No one would call me either slim or small."

"It was because of the clothes, Monsieur," Auguste explained. "The driver was apparently wearing a fawn-coloured pullover such as Monsieur sometimes has on, and a yachting *casquette*."

"Go and see if anything is missing from my cabin," Wildburn directed. "Don't stop to clear up. I shall probably do that myself later on."

This time Auguste's absence was a brief one.

"The pullover such as Louget described is missing," he announced. "Also the *casquette*."

The young man sighed.

"We progress, Auguste," he said, finishing his tea and sitting up in his chair. "Without the help of the police we have discovered in what garb the thief made his escape and the manner of his doing so. I am also minus a lamb's-wool pullover, to which I was greatly attached."

Auguste had apparently lost interest in the affair. He tied up the dinghy and looked over his shoulder.

"Has Monsieur any commands for the morning?"

"None at present."

"Monsieur does not wish for the services of a doctor?"

"Don't be a fool," Wildburn replied irritably. "There's nothing whatever the matter with me. I may have had one drink too many."

"It is always possible," Auguste admitted. "In the meantime, what does Monsieur propose to do with this?"

He produced from under his coat and shook out that very exquisite but fantastic fragment of lace and crepe georgette from which Wildburn had torn off one sleeve In the small hours of the morning. He hold it out fluttering in the morning breeze. Wildburn studied it meditatively.

"It resembles a lady's gown, Auguste," he observed.

Auguste was not discussing the matter. As a matter of fact, he was a disappointed man. He was no lover of women himself, and he fancied that in his master he had met with a kindred spirit.

"Put it downstairs in the salon, Auguste. Another piece of evidence we have collected, you see. Very soon we shall probably be able to lay our hands upon the culprit without calling in the police at all."

"Monsieur's cabin is in a state of great disorder," Auguste reported. "It would be as well to go through his effects and see if anything has been stolen. The box which Monsieur calls his *caisse noire* does not appear to be in its place."

Wildburn rose to his feet and made his way below. He looked around his cabin critically. Nearly every drawer had been pulled out, and in some cases the contents had been emptied onto the floor. Every possible hiding-place seemed to have been ransacked, and a collection of letters, ties, shirts, and wearing apparel of every sort littered up the place. Two panels had been smashed with some heavy instrument. The cabin, in fact, bore every trace of a feverish search. Wildburn sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. He was a harmless young man of twenty-six, who had graduated from Harvard some four years ago, and he was picking up a little experience in journalism on the staff of one of his father's papers. There were no complications in his life. He had never sought adventure in its more romantic forms, nor had adventure sought him. There was certainly nothing amongst his possessions worthy of the attention of so elegant a woman as his visitor of a few hours before, a woman, too, who was prepared to write a cheque for four thousand pounds. And yet, however long he considered the matter, certain facts remained indisputable. A woman who was a perfect stranger to him had boarded his ship alone at 3 o'clock in the morning, had ransacked his belongings, and, in order to do so undisturbed, had resorted to the old-fashioned method of doctoring his coffee! Once again he asked himself the question—what was there amongst his very ordinary possessions which should plunge him, without any warning, into the middle of so curious an adventure?

CHAPTER II

The flash from the Antibes lighthouse, which had been growing paler and paler in the opalescent light, suddenly ceased. There was a faint pink colouring now in the clouds eastward. A sort of hush seemed to have fallen upon the sea. Morning had arrived. Upon the deck of the shapely yet—with its black hull—somewhat sinister-looking yacht, which had crept slowly into the bay during the hours of velvety twilight, a man in silk pyjamas and dressing gown was strolling slowly up and down. The captain, who had been superintending the final lowering of the anchors, approached and saluted him respectfully.

"This, Monsieur le Baron," he announced, "is the Bay of Caroupe."

The man in the pyjamas nodded. He was somewhat thickly built and inclined towards corpulence, but he carried himself with confidence and a certain distinction. He spoke French, too, but with scarcely a Parisian accent.

"The place has a pleasant aspect," he remarked. "One wonders to find it so deserted. An American boat, I see," he went on, pointing to the *Bird of Paradise*.

The captain was full of information—crisp and eloquent.

"The *Bird of Paradise*, Monsieur le Baron. A schooner yacht built in Marseilles by English men—thirty tons or so. The property of Mr. Hamer Wildburn—an American. He is apparently on board at the present moment."

"And how did you gather all this information?" the other inquired.

"I looked him up in the 'Yacht Chronicle,' Monsieur," the captain confided. "In a small harbour such as this I like to know who my neighbours are."

"How do you know that the owner is on board himself?"

"They hoisted the house burgee at sunrise with the Stars and Stripes."

The man in pyjamas threw away the stump of his cigarette and lit another thoughtfully.

"Her lines seem to me to be good," he remarked. "She has no appearance to you, Captain, of having been built for any specific purpose?"

"None that I can discover, Monsieur," was the somewhat puzzled reply. "She has all the ordinary points of a schooner yacht of her tonnage and description."

The Baron stared across at the small vessel riding so peacefully at anchor, and if his close survey did not indicate any intimate nautical knowledge it nevertheless betrayed intense interest.

"Does Monsieur Mermillon know that we have arrived?" he inquired.

"He was called as we entered the bay," the captain replied. "Those were his orders. Behold, Monsieur arrives."

A slim man of early middle-age, tall, and of distinguished appearance, with a broad forehead and masses of iron-grey hair, emerged from the companionway. The Baron, whom he greeted with a courteous nod and a wave of the hand, advanced to meet him.

"Our information, it appears, was correct so far, Edouard," he confided. "That small boat there is the *Bird of Paradise*. It gives one rather a thrill to look at her, eh, and to realise that there may be truth in Badoit's statement?"

Monsieur Edouard Mermillon, at that moment perhaps the most talked-about man in Europe, strolled with his friend towards the rail and gazed thoughtfully across the hundred yards or so which separated them from the *Bird of Paradise*.

"Dying men are supposed to have a penchant for speaking the truth," he observed. "I myself believe in his story. It is perhaps unfortunate under the circumstances that the boat should be owned by an American."

The Baron, whose full name was the Baron Albert de Brett, shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it matter?" he remarked. "The Americans have their fancy for a bargain like the men of every other race. I was wondering when you proposed to visit him."

"I see no great cause for haste," Mermillon replied. "It is obvious that the owner of the boat has no idea of the truth or he would not be lying here without any pretence at concealment."

His friend evidently held different views. He shook his head disapprovingly.

"In my opinion," he declared, "not a minute should be wasted. Imagine if there should be a leak in our information—if others should suspect."

"Seven o'clock in the morning is an early calling hour," Mermillon observed.

"On an occasion like this," was the swift retort, "one does not stand upon ceremony."

"The *petit déjeuner*," Mermillon suggested.

"After that I consent."

The Baron ceded the point.

"We will proceed to that as soon as possible then," he said. "I shall not have an easy moment until we are in touch with this American."

Over coffee and rolls, which were served on deck, the Baron became meditative. He seemed scarcely able to remove his eyes from the *Bird of Paradise*.

"In my opinion," he declared finally, crumbling a roll between his fingers, "our plans as they stand at present are indifferently made. They involve possible delay, and delay might well mean unutterable catastrophe. I am inclined to think that Chicotin's method would be the best solution."

His host regarded him tolerantly.

"Chicotin should be our last resource, my dear Albert," he insisted. "Such methods carry no certainty, no conviction. They involve also risk."

"The risk I cannot appreciate," de Brett argued. "On the contrary, I look upon destruction—absolute annihilation—as the safest, the only logical course open to us."

The steel grey eyes of his companion flashed for a moment with eager longing. His indifference was momentarily abandoned. There was an underlying note of passion in his tone.

"Annihilation, my dear Baron," he murmured. "Who but a child would not realise what that would mean to us? Surely there were never six men in this universe who suffered so much for one mistake. We suffer—we shall go on suffering until the end. But your method of annihilation is crude. How can we be sure that we are arriving at it? We are working upon presumption. We believe, but we need certainty. Every inch of that lazy-looking craft might drift to the skies in ashes or to the bottom of the sea in melting metal. We could see the place where she is riding so gracefully an empty blank, but yet we should never know. There would be always moments when the nightmare would return and fear would visit us in the night."

The Baron wiped his closely cropped brown moustache with his napkin. He considered the problem, and sighed. Something in his companion's voice had been convincing.

"I agree," he sighed. "A moment's doubt would plunge the souls of all of us into agony. We will approach this young American. We are fortunate that it is not too late."

There came the sound of a gentle ticking, a purring in the air, and then again a ticking. The Baron started.

"Your private wireless, Edouard. I thought you were closed off."

"I am in touch with only two men in the world," Mermillon replied. "Gabriel, the editor of the 'Grand Journal,' and Paul himself."

"Paul would never permit himself to speak on any wireless," de Brett declared anxiously.

"The very fact that he is risking it," Mermillon observed, with a slight shrug of the shoulders, "convinces one that the matter is urgent. We shall know in a minute at any rate."

The Baron lit a cigarette. He had fat pudgy hands, on one of the fingers of which he wore a massive signet ring. They trembled so that even his slight task was difficult. His host of the expressionless face watched him. A smile of contempt would have made him seem more human.

"Your man Jules can decode?" de Brett asked.

"He is capable of that," was the quiet reply. "Our code has been committed to memory by seven people. He is one. It has never been set down in print or ink. It has no existence save in the brains of the two men who compiled it and the five who understand it. Yes, my dear friend," Mermillon added, lifting his head and listening to the approaching footsteps, "Jules can decode, and in a moment we shall know whether our friend is simply telling us news of the weather in Paris or whether the wild beasts are loose."

A neatly dressed young man, wearing blue serge trousers, a blue shirt, and yachting cap, presented himself and bowed to Mermillon.

"A brief message and very easily decoded, Monsieur," he announced. "It is from your private bureau. Monsieur Paul desires to inform you that General Perissol has ordered out his most powerful 'plane and is leaving his private flying ground this morning."

"His destination?"

"That will be wirelessly to us as soon as he starts. At any rate, he is coming south."

The Baron's eyes were almost like beads as he gazed out at the *Bird of Paradise* rolling slightly in the swell. Even his imperturbable companion had glanced immediately in the same direction.

"Where was the General when the message was sent?" the latter inquired.

"With the Chief of the Police at his private house in the Bois de Boulogne."

De Brett moistened his dry lips.

"An early call that," he muttered. "It is now a quarter to eight. There are signs of life upon the boat yonder."

Mermillon rose to his feet and gave a brief order to one of the sailors. In a few moments there was the sound of quick explosions from a small motor dinghy which had shot round to the lowered gangway. The two men embarked and crossed the little sheet of shimmering water which separated them from the *Bird of Paradise*.

"Abandon for my special pleasure, Albert," his companion begged, "that appearance of a man who mounts the guillotine. We are going to pay a friendly call upon an unknown American and make him a business proposition which cannot fail to be of interest. The matter is simplicity itself. We loitered before in a room where the very whispers spelt death, but I never noticed on that occasion that your complexion assumed such an unbecoming hue. Remember, dear Baron," his friend concluded, "that fear is the twin sister of danger. The greatest agony can be ended by death, and one can only die once."

The Baron's rotund body ceased to shake. His features stiffened. His companion had succeeded in what had obviously been his desire—he had made a man of him.

"Why these sickening platitudes?" he exclaimed. "We must all have our fits of nerves—except you, perhaps. Permit me mine. They will pass when the danger comes. You others have less to fear than I. It is not one knife that will be at my throat if the fates desert me. It will be a thousand—a hundred thousand!"

"All the more reason for courage and self-restraint," was the smoothly spoken reply. "I say no more. Remember that we are arrived. Our host is already in sight. He seems prepared to receive us. Jean," he added, turning to the mechanic, "Monsieur seems to indicate that the gangway is down on the other side. With this swell it would naturally be so. We wish to go on board. We are paying a visit to Monsieur."

Everything was made quite easy for the two callers. The rope from the dinghy was caught by a waiting seaman, and Hamer Wildburn, leaning down himself, extended a steadying hand. Minister of State Edouard Mermillon stepped lightly on to the deck. His companion followed him. The *Bird of Paradise*, for the second time within a few hours, was to receive visitors of distinction.

"Say, you two are early birds," Hamer Wildburn observed with a welcoming smile. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"First of all pardon us for the informality of this call," Mermillon begged. "We should have waited until later in the day, but the matter is pressing."

"That's all right," the other answered. "I watched you come in an hour or so ago. A fine boat, that of yours. A fast one, too, I should think."

"Our engines are exceedingly powerful," Mermillon admitted. "To tell you the truth, however, for the moment I am more interested in your boat than in my own. You call her, I think, the *Bird of Paradise*?"

"That's right."

"And she was built at Marseilles?"

"Designed by an Englishman. She was built by the firm of Partrout. They are French, of course, but as a matter of fact every man employed upon her was, I believe, English."

"My name," the newcomer announced, "is Mermillon."

"Not Monsieur Edouard Mermillon, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs?" Wildburn exclaimed.

"That is so," Mermillon acknowledged. "My companion here is Baron Albeit de Brett."

"Proud to know you both," was the courteous but somewhat mystified, rejoinder. "My name is Wildburn—Hamer Wildburn—and I come from New York."

De Brett looked at the young American curiously.

"That is odd," he observed. "I cannot remember meeting you before, Mr Wildburn, but your name sounds familiar."

The young man offered his cigarette case.

"I write occasionally for one of the American newspapers, which is published in Paris," he confided, "and I sometimes sign my name."

"The reason for this visit," Mermillon intervened, "is easily disclosed. I have a nephew who comes of age within a few weeks, and whose great passion is for the sea. I should like to buy exactly this type of craft as a present for him. If by any remote chance, Monsieur Wildburn, this boat itself is for sale it would give me the utmost pleasure to pay you what you consider her value."

"You want to buy my boat?" Wildburn exclaimed incredulously.

"That was rather the idea," Mermillon admitted. "Why does that fact afford you so much surprise?"

"Because only a few hours ago," the young man told him, "someone else paid me a visit with the same object."

"You did not sell her?" the Baron interrupted anxiously.

"Nothing doing," Wildburn assured them "Nothing doing with the first would-be purchaser and nothing doing with you gentlemen. I am delighted to see you both, but I am sorry you have had the trouble of coming. My boat is not for sale."

"There is one question I would like to ask," the Baron ventured eagerly. "Who has been here before us wanting to buy the boat?"

"My dear Albert!" Mermillon remonstrated, "We must not be too inquisitive. I know my friend's idea of course," he continued, turning back to Wildburn. "He is wondering whether some other member of my family has had the same idea or perhaps even Claude, my nephew, himself. This," he added, turning round, "is so exactly what the lad has always wanted."

"The offer came from—no matter where," Wildburn said. "I have no reason to believe, however, that it came from anyone of your own people. In any case it makes no difference. The boat is not for sale."

Mermillon had the air of one suffering from a mild but not insupportable disappointment.

"You would not object, Monsieur Wildburn, I hope," he asked, "if I ordered from the builders the exact duplicate of this admirable craft?"

"I should not have the faintest objection in the world," Wildburn assured him, "but it would take them at least ten months to build a boat of this description."

Mermillon threw up his hands.

"Ten months—but it is unbelievable!" he exclaimed. "The young are not used to such delays. To wait for ten months would be impossible. Under those regrettable circumstances Monsieur Wildburn," he went on after a momentary pause, "you will not be offended if I ask whether this decision of yours not to sell your boat is absolutely final. I am only a French politician, not a world-famed banker like my friend here, and, as you know, French politicians are not amongst the wealthy ones of the world. Still, in the present instance, I might almost say that money is no object."

Wildburn appeared a little distressed. His visitor's tone and manner were alike charming.

"I have been one of your sincere admirers, Monsieur Mermillon," he said, "and I should hate to seem in any way discourteous to a person of such distinction, but the fact of it is that just now I am not in need of money, and the boat suits me exactly. Instead of finishing my vacation, as I had planned, cruising around in these seas, I should have all the trouble of dealing with specifications and superintending the rebuilding of another boat. Allow me to offer you chairs. Auguste!" he called out "Deck chairs here for these gentlemen."

The two visitors were soon comfortably ensconced. Their host produced cigarettes and cigars. Mermillon resumed the conversation.

"It is obvious," he remarked "that the matter would present inconveniences to you. That I should take into account."

"It would be a beastly nuisance," Hamer Wildburn assented. "That is why I am afraid I must remain obstinate. I love France, but I hate Marseilles. I have no wish to return there. What I want to do is to spend the rest of the summer idling about here."

"I do not blame you," Mermillon declared. "I find it very natural. The situation is delightful, and you have, doubtless, many friends. Still, there is this to be considered—I do not weary you by my persistence, I trust."

"Not in the least," Wildburn assured him, "but I am afraid you will find me very ungracious. Believe me, I honestly do not wish to sell the boat. It would interest me a great deal more to congratulate you upon some of your marvellous successes in the world of international politics."

Mermillon bowed.

"You flatter me," he acknowledged, smiling. "I must explain this, however before I—throw up the sponge. Is not that how you call it? Apart from my official position I possess, as you may have heard, a considerable fortune. I have such simple tastes in life that money with me has lost its significance. You will excuse the vulgarity of this statement. It comes into our discussion."

"No vulgarity at all," Wildburn assured his visitor "You should hear some of our westerners at home talk about their dollars. I am frankly delighted to meet a man over on this side who admits that he has any money left. It seems to be the fashion everywhere to plead poverty. I am rather tired of meeting poor men. This means, I suppose," he added, "that I can write my own cheque if I consider giving up the boat?"

Mermillon smiled.

"Not quite," he said "It might come very nearly to that if you are the man of common sense I think you are."

"May I make a suggestion?" de Brett intervened. "My friend Mermillon here has shown me a side of his character which I must confess that I never knew before. He is as impetuous as a boy about this present he wishes to make his nephew. I am afraid I am of a more cautious temperament. May I suggest that before discussing the matter further we just take a look below and a glance at the engines? For what else am I here?"

"With the greatest pleasure," Wildburn replied, rising promptly to his feet. "Follow me, gentlemen. After your yacht, Monsieur Mermillon, you will find it a little cramped, but there is plenty of room for one person—or even two."

The three men descended the companionway. They inspected the owner's cabin, which certainly had its charm. They glanced at the galley, and appreciated the power and condition of the Diesel engines. They ended in the salon, which was as handsome as a liberal expenditure and good taste could make it.

"I came prepared to criticise," de Brett confessed. "I am lost in admiration."

Mermillon seemed for the moment to have lost interest in the details which he had been admiring so generously. He was gazing at a particular spot on the carpet of the small salon. Wildburn perceived his diverted attention and frowned.

"My *matelot* had a day off yesterday," he explained. "I am afraid that you find the place a little untidy."

"It is scarcely that, Monsieur Wildburn," the visitor replied courteously. "There is some derangement of the apartment, it is true, but it was something else which attracted me. You are alone here, I think you said?"

"I certainly am."

Mermillon stooped lightly down and picked up from the carpet the object which had attracted his attention. He held it out to Wildburn. It was a very beautiful emerald of large size and finely cut!

"No wonder there are others besides myself," he remarked, "who would be willing to pay you a large price for your yacht if there is much jewellery of this description to be picked up."

The young American's face was suddenly dark. His voice lost its smoothness. His attempted indifference was badly assumed.

"I have visitors occasionally," he admitted. "Thank you for the emerald. I have no doubt that my latest visitor will be here to claim it very soon."

"She should not be blamed," Mermillon murmured. "I am a judge of gems, and I must confess that I envy her the possession of that one. However, we did not come here to discuss precious stones. I am satisfied with all that you have shown me, Monsieur Wildburn. I want your boat. My cheque book is at your disposal."

"I don't want to seem obstinate," Hamer Wildburn said smiling. "I will sell her to you on one condition."

"Well?"

"That I deliver her in two months' time after I have finished my cruise."

The eyebrows of Edouard Mermillon were slightly upraised, and the Baron frankly scowled. It was obvious that both men were disappointed.

"In two months' time," the former pointed out, "my nephew's birthday will be forgotten. The cruising season will be over. My gift would have no significance. If you are willing to sell at all I should prefer to pay for immediate delivery. Let us bring this matter to a point. I will offer you five thousand pounds cash for her as she stands or," he added with a smile, "I will make it twenty five thousand if the emerald is included!"

Wildburn shook his head.

"The emerald, although I cannot believe it is worth that much," he said "is not mine to dispose of. It will be returned to its owner as soon as I can assure myself of her identity and her whereabouts. As regards your offer am I permitted to ask you a question, Monsieur Mermillon? Even rich men do not throw money away heedlessly. Why do you offer me so much more than my boat is worth?"

"Why indeed," the Baron echoed with a little gesture of disapproval. "I think that my friend has lost his senses."

"In buying and selling," Mermillon said suavely, "one does not disclose even to one's friends one's reasons for wishing to operate. I want this boat very badly my dear new friend."

The American shrugged his shoulders. For some reason or other his attitude had become a shade less courteous towards his distinguished visitors.

"Then let me say at once Monsieur Mermillon, that no cheque which you could write would buy my boat." he announced. "I deeply appreciate the honour of your visit and I should have been proud and happy if I had been able to serve you. In this matter I cannot. After that I think you will agree with me that further conversation would be waste of time."

There was a brief silence. Mermillon appeared to be deep in reflection. In the end he rose to his feet.

"If you should change your mind within the next few days, Monsieur Wildburn," he said disconsolately, "I should be glad to hear from you. Since you have refused my offer of five thousand pounds, however, I am quite content to believe that you do not wish to sell the boat at all. For the present, therefore, we will consider the matter closed."

The Baron also rose to his feet with apparent alacrity.

"I congratulate you, my friend, Edouard," he exclaimed, patting his shoulder. "That was a foolish offer which you made. Monsieur Wildburn sets, I think, too high a value upon his possession."

The two men made their way to the gangway, the American strolling behind. The affair of embarkation was only a matter of seconds.

"I trust," Mermillon said courteously, as he took the wheel of the motor boat, "that you will pay us a visit on the *Aigle Noir* before you leave the harbour. We are generally at home at the time of the aperitif."

"I shall be delighted," the young man promised, as he waved his hand in farewell.

The motor boat shot away, made a circle, and headed for the *Aigle Noir*. Both men remained speechless until they were half way across. Then the Baron spoke. His voice was thick and dubious.

"I do not understand," he muttered.

"What is it that you do not understand, my friend?" Mermillon asked him.

"I do not understand that young man refusing an offer of five thousand pounds for a boat which is obviously worth less than two."

"Then you show less than your usual astuteness," was the caustic reply. "Although it seemed to me to be bad policy to allude to the fact, he told us himself that he had received another offer for the boat. The emerald which I picked up in his little salon is the property of Louise de Fantany."

The Baron's face showed signs of fear. His complexion was a most unwholesome colour. He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Louise de Fantany," he repeated. "And barely an hour ago we heard that Perissol had ordered a 'plane for the south!"

Mermillon brought the boat with skilful precision to the gangway steps of the yacht. He sprang lightly to the deck, and led the way to their favourite corner.

"Deeply as I regret such methods in these civilised days," he sighed, "I fear that there is now no alternative. Chicotin must take a hand."

CHAPTER III

Lucienne de Montelimar, a dazzlingly attractive young woman, with her yellow-gold hair, her deep brown eyes, and her perfect complexion, only beautified by its coat of sunburn, sat upon the topmost of the steps leading from the *château* grounds to the private dock and gazed thoughtfully across the bay to where, at about a hundred yards' distance, the *Bird of Paradise* lay at anchor. In something like thirty seconds after her arrival Hamer Wildburn had dived from his boat with a terrific splash and was swimming powerfully towards her. She welcomed him with the smile which had already turned the heads of half the young men in Paris.

"You are swimming well this morning," she approved. "I am afraid that if we race you will beat me. Nevertheless, we shall try presently."

"You have some time to spare to-day?" he asked eagerly.

"An incredible amount," she assured him. "My father started early this morning to motor over to some forest lands where he hopes later to find pheasants. Mother has gone to Cannes, and when she starts doing a tour of the dressmakers' shops there is no telling what will become of her. Anyway, I know if she is lunching at all that she is lunching with my aunt at La Napoule. I am neglected. In a day or two the house will be full. At present there is no one of account."

"If the honest endeavours of one worthy young man can save your feeling the chill of loneliness," he promised her, "I am at your disposition."

She looked at him speculatively.

"I am not sure," she said. "There are some quite agreeable English people who proposed themselves for a bathing party, and there is dancing at the villa of the people on the hill. Besides, I have so much time on my hands that you will probably get tired of me. *Enfin*, if I let you stay with me all the day you will use up that wonderful vocabulary of French!"

"Try me," he begged. "I read and live and think nothing but French now. I am almost prepared to be naturalised Furthermore, if you trust yourself to me I will tell you breathless stories—wildly exciting ones—of things which have happened to me here within a kilometre of your *château*. Monte Cristo isn't in it."

She sighed, although the twinkle in her eyes was scarcely one of melancholy.

"More women are conquered by curiosity than anything else in the world," she declared. "Very well, I agree. I am dying to swim, even before I listen to your adventures."

She dived from the stone quay. He followed her, and they went off together. They hurried towards the open sea, the faint tang of an easterly breeze in their faces, the sunshine glorious in her hair and deepening the tan upon his naked back, the love of living and of each other in their hearts. There was nothing in their conversation, however, to indicate their beatific condition. Perhaps at that time they scarcely realised it themselves.

"Look out for the wash from that speed-boat," he advised. "I am coming the other side of you."

"Look down, Hamer," she cried once. "There is a green carpet of leaves at the bottom of the sea twenty feet down. Just the colour of my bathing suit, too. I should love to go and walk about there."

"I will buy you a diver's outfit," he promised.

"It must be a green one," she insisted. "To-morrow you must teach me that crawl. I don't do it properly."

He lay on his back and lazed for a moment. "Lucienne," he asked, "you are sure you are real? You have not just stolen up out of those forests underneath?"

"I am so real that I am hungry," she declared. "I suggest that we turn. Tell me, whose is the yacht that came in this morning?"

"It belongs to a very distinguished person—one of your greatest statesmen—Mermillon."

She looked across at the boat with interest. "Father knows him quite well," she said. "I hope he will come to the *château*."

"I see in the French paper this morning," Hamer remarked, "that he is cruising in search of a complete rest. Throw your body out straighter, Lucienne. That's marvellous."

"Let us go a little nearer to the *Aigle Noir*," she proposed. "I should like to see Monsieur Mermillon. They say that he and the President between them have saved France during the last crisis."

"French politics get me all confused," he confessed. "Don't talk too much, Lucienne. There is a stiffish current now for a few minutes."

She made a grimace but she obeyed. Soon they were swimming with their faces to the *plage*, with the dark line of trees and the hidden Esterels before them.

"I think this is the most beautiful spot on the coast," he said enthusiastically.

"So do I," she agreed. "What have you for lunch?"

He reflected for a moment.

"Plenty of fish, anyway," he confided. "We had a good haul this morning. Then, there is a cold chicken I didn't touch yesterday, and heaps of fruit and vegetables."

"Delicious," she murmured, turning on her back for a moment. "Anyway, I shan't be able to wait till luncheon time. I'm too hungry. I shall have one of your breakfast rolls, if you have not eaten them all, and an early cocktail."

"You are the sort of girl," he declared, "a fellow ought to marry."

"Why don't you, then?" she asked. "You have all day to try and make me fall in love with you."

"That sounds a trifle old-fashioned but very exciting," he gasped. "Now, if you look up, you can see Mermillon, He is very elegant in what looks like white linen, but I think it is white tussore or something of that sort. The shorter, thick-set man sitting with him is the Baron de Brett."

"What—the banker?" she exclaimed.

"Banker, speculator, millionaire, and secret hoarder of gold—all these things and a little more."

She looked at the two men curiously. De Brett had already called his host's attention to the pair and was staring at the girl with unashamed admiration. Mermillon, who was reading from a pile of papers, his secretary standing by his side, only glanced at them for a few seconds.

"Baron de Brett used to be a friend of mother's," the girl confided. "I do not think I like him very much. All the same, I am afraid I am going to be faithless to you, Hamer. I adored the way Mermillon looked as though I were a performing sea lioness and then went on with his work. He has never looked up since, either..."

Wildburn, who had been swimming under water for a few seconds, came up and recovered his breath.

"I was thinking of drowning myself," he told her, "but I have changed my mind. I remembered a passage in a modern novel I was reading last night, at least, I don't remember the passage, but I remember the sense of it. One chap knows all about women and he is giving a younger chap a lesson. 'Indifference as a weapon to excite interest in the opposite sex no longer leads to success,' he said. 'The latest fashion is all the old stuff over again. Shyness, sentiment, moonlight walks, simple nervous love making.'"

"Commencing with holding hands under the table, I suppose," she mocked.

"Anyway," he concluded, "the fashion at the moment, is the young for the young. Girls have left off falling in love with hoary-headed sinners. They are not looking any longer for a man with experience. The fashionable passion of the moment is for innocence."

"You must lend me that book," Lucienne gasped, as she clutched at the chains of the "*Bird of Paradise*."

"It ought to have quite a vogue down in this part of the world."

They stood together upon the deck for a moment—a splendid sight in their bathing-suits, upon which and their limbs the seashine was still glistening.

"What you need," he observed thoughtfully, "Is a peignoir."

"Nice thoughtful boy," she assented. "Do you see a rather attractive-looking young woman in black seated on those steps, with a huge bathing-bag, gazing anxiously in our direction?"

"I do," he admitted.

"Well, that is Annette, my faithful maid, who is there according to orders. If you will kindly send your dinghy across for her. I will borrow your cabin and change."

He gave a brief order, and the dinghy shot out.

"There are two of my breakfast rolls left for you," he told her. "I am now going to make the cocktails."

"Well," she said, smiling, "whether you make love to me the new way or the old way, I think we are going to have a very happy time."

They were young and already sufficiently in love to be content with that monosyllabic and purely personal exchange of remarks which goes to make the conversation of young people in their position. They chattered in the canoe which they took out after the early cocktail and rolls, made fun of one another's occasional mishaps with the paddles, attempted hair-raising feats of racing to the terror of competing craft, then each in turn tried paddling alone.

"Fine exercise," she told him encouragingly, as he struggled against the current.

"I would sooner do deep-breathing exercises on the boat," he groaned.

They showed one another strange evolutions and contortions on the deck. Each performed incredible feats. Each welcomed the call to luncheon when it came. It was not until they had finished and were seated in two *chaises longues* in the sunshine that they gave a serious thought to the world about them.

"Now tell me about these strange adventures of yours, Mr. Monte Cristo," she begged. "I am happy and lazy, and perhaps a little sleepy, otherwise I am all attention."

"You may be sleepy but I do not think you will go to sleep," he assured her. "How is this picture for a start? A very beautiful woman in full evening dress, wearing even her jewels, hanging on to my chains at 3 o'clock this morning, with a canoe turned upside down drifting behind her?"

"You are not in earnest?" the girl exclaimed.

"Absolutely."

"Did she come on board?"

"Of course she did. She came out to pay me a call."

Lucienne set up in her chair.

"Go on with that story, please!"

"She came with a request. I refused it. We drank some coffee together. Really I am rather ashamed to admit this, but I was not expecting anything of the sort—she positively and absolutely, in the most melodramatic fashion, drugged me! When I had slept it off in about an hour's time she had turned my whole cabin and saloon upside down and disappeared."

"Of course you dreamt all this," Lucienne declared incredulously.

"I dreamt nothing," he insisted. "Do you know who she was?"

"Not the slightest idea. She didn't leave a card."

"Are you going to do anything about it? You have sent for the gendarmes—yes?"

"Not likely! For one thing I don't suppose anyone would believe my story, and for another-what's the good? She didn't steal anything that I can see."

"What was the request she made that you refused?"

"She wanted to buy the boat."

Lucienne leaned over and took his wrist in her hand.

"Pulse quite normal," she observed. "There is no exaggeration in what you tell me? It is a true story?"

"Absolutely."

"To buy the boat," Lucienne repeated in amazement. "Why didn't she send an agent or come in the daytime?"

"I'm telling you all I know," he assured her. "I will pass on to the next adventure when we have finished with this one."

"What—two in one night?"

"Well, the second one took place this morning to be exact," he admitted. "You know the yacht that came in with Edouard Mermillon and the Baron de Brett on board? We saw them while we were swimming."

"Of course."

"Somewhere about half-past eight this morning," he continued, "Mermillon and the baron arrived here in a dinghy to pay me a call."

"But, my dear friend, what an honour!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, I suppose it was," he agreed. "I had not looked at it from that point of view."

"What did they want?" she asked. "To buy my boat."

Her brown eyes were suddenly larger than ever. Her eyebrows were raised, her forehead wrinkled. She was tantalizingly beautiful, and much too engrossed in Wildburn's story to notice that he was holding her hand.

"What on earth did they want your boat for?"

"Monsieur Mermillon wished to make a present of it to his nephew who comes of age next week. He offered me about three times what I gave for it."

"What did you say?"

"I refused. I do not want to sell it, anyway. I do not want to move a foot or a yard from this place. I dare say if the *château* had not been up there," he went on, looking through the trees, "and you had not been in the *château*, and we were not both fond of swimming—well, I might have looked at the matter differently. As it is, no one buys my boat. No one is going to send me away."

"That is a great compliment to me," she acknowledged. "It appears incredible. You throw away money, which they say is all that you Americans think of, just to play in the sunshine here with me."

"I happen to like being with with you, Lucienne," he pleaded. "I happen to like the days we spend together here better than anything in the world that money could buy."

"And they tell me," she sighed, "that American men do not know how to make love."

"Making love is not a matter of nationality," he assured her. "You just have to feel what you say. That's all."

I am beginning to be afraid, she whispered. In France we are not quite so direct as this."

"Our way is better," Wildburn declared confidently. "We wait until we are sure of ourselves and then we speak."

"Then as I am sure that I should like a cup more coffee and I see that there is some may I ask you for it?"

He prepared it carefully and handed it to her without a word. She took a cigarette from the opened box and lit it. When she broke the silence her speech was a little uncertain although her voice was soft. There was a note almost of pathos in her tone.

"I have not met many of your country people, Hamer," she said, "but I know there is much freedom between all you young people—men and girls. Is this the way you talk to your girl friends?"

"Not unless we happen to mean what we are saying," was his prompt assurance.

"Are you sure that you meant what you said to me?"

"Every bit of it and a great deal more."

She laid her hand once more upon his. "Keep the rest. Keep it back just a little time. We are so happy here."

"You will still come to swim and pass your time with me?" he begged.

"So long as I can," she promised. "In a few days time the *château* will be filled with guests. That is a different thing. Just now let us go on pretending that we are children and play together. Soon, very soon perhaps, if you still wish to, we will talk more seriously."

Her fingers were cold upon his firm hard flesh. Although he pretended not to notice he could see the rapid rising and falling of her small bosoms. Discretion or insight—some gift of the gods—guided him. He was content to wait. Furthermore he helped her out of the labyrinth of emotion into which they had wandered.

"Now will you tell me what you think of my twenty-four hours adventures?"

There was a very sweet light in her eyes and he was conscious of her gratitude. For several moments she was silent. Her face was hidden behind her beautifully shaped, enamelled vanity-case. He looked away towards the distant mountains of the Italian frontier and watched the efforts of a small sailing yacht to elude the mistral and enter the bay. Presently she closed the case with a snap.

"Tell me, Hamer," she asked, "Do you carry treasure on board?"

"Not in a general way," he assured her. "I have nothing but a man's ordinary jewellery, a few possibly rare books and my wearing apparel."

"Then what do these people want to buy your boat for?"

"Can't imagine. But for your visit I should have been thinking of nothing else. I tell you frankly, though, I have not the slightest idea. There is nothing that I can see about her in which she is different from any other boat of her class. She was built by Englishmen, which might make her a trifle more valuable, but that would scarcely account for this rush of would-be purchasers."

"To whom did she belong before you bought her?"

"A very pertinent question," he approved. "A Frenchman named Dupont. She was built for him specially, and he took the most meticulous interest in every one of the smallest details of her construction. He made one trip in her, professed himself satisfied, paid for her in cash, planned a cruise for the following week, left Marseilles, and disappeared."

"Disappeared?" she repeated. "Isn't that rather difficult?"

"He did it anyway. The boat builder discovered that his addresses were false, his name was false, and no one knew anything about him in the quarter where he was supposed to live. In due course, after the legal formalities had been attended to, she came on the market. That's how I bought her."

"There was a mystery about her from the first, then," Lucienne observed. "Did you buy her furniture and fittings and all that sort of thing?"

"Practically," he assured her. "Of course, I added a few oddments myself. I had her painted a different colour, and had the cupboards put in. She is an ordinary schooner yacht, just under thirty tons, soundly and strongly built, but not a loophole of mystery anywhere about her construction."

"And yet," Lucienne murmured, "you have had one wild woman attack you at three o'clock in the morning, France's premier statesman, and one of the world's greatest financiers—all offering you two to three times as much as she is worth. Hamer, if I were you I would sell her and get out of it."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he promised. "I will sell her to the first person who tells me the truth as to why they want to buy her,"

Lucienne rose to her feet.

"A wonderful idea," she approved. "Except, if I were you, I would not sell her to that little man in the dinghy below. He has been round twice while we have been talking, and I don't like the look of him."

Hamer Wildburn leaned over by her side. Below them a pale faced, dark eyed man with a mass of black hair unshaded from the sun, dressed in violently red trousers and blue shirt open at the neck came drifting by in a small row boat. He looked up at Wildburn and attempted some form of salute.

"A beautiful leetle boat," he called out. "I like to see over—yes?"

Wildburn shook his head.

"Sorry," he refused. "She is not on exhibition."

"Pardon, Monsieur," the man remarked, rowing, however, nearer to the steps as though he failed to understand.

Wildburn addressed him rapidly in French. "No one is allowed on board," he said, "so get away from there, please."

"Perhaps afterwards," the little man begged. "Monsieur will understand that I am interested in ships of this class. I know all about engines. I could perhaps suggest—"

"My boat pleases me as it is," Wildburn interrupted. "Let it be understood, my friend, that neither you nor any other casual visitors are going to set foot on board. Off you go."

The man made a sulky withdrawal. Wildburn and the girl exchanged glances.

"I think you were quite right," the latter approved. "I have never seen that man before, but he is detestable. If there was any thing evil to be done upon your boat he would be the man to do it."

"He won't have the chance." Wildburn assured her confidently.

A small boat from the *château* landing stage came alongside, and Lucienne's maid extended her hands regretfully.

"Mais Mademoiselle," she announced, "you are urgently needed at the *château*. Madame la Duchesse has telephoned from Cap d'Ail. The Comtesse de Lirigny has arrived with two friends, and they are walking in the grounds. Madame has telephoned to beg that you will entertain any visitors until she returns. There was the yacht of the Marquis de St. Pierre in the harbour, and someone landing as I left. I thought it best to warn Mademoiselle."

"Quite right, Annette," her young mistress agreed. "*Au revoir*, my dear host," she added, clasping her two hands for a moment over his. "If our evening swim does not arrive, still there is to-morrow. I think you have let loose within me a spirit of mischief amongst other things. I shall swim out before the telephone or callers have become a nuisance, and stay until I am fetched. That will please you—yes?"

"It will make me very happy," he assured her.

CHAPTER IV

Royalty was giving a dinner party at the rendezvous which on that superb night seemed to be the centre of the universe—the Summer Casino at Monte Carlo. Royalty was giving it because the invitation said so, but a humbler admirer of court life was providing the cheque. Curtsies had been duly made and introductions effected. His Majesty was talking to the reigning favourite amongst his lady friends. His Foreign Minister was engaged in earnest conversation with Monsieur Edouard Mermillon, the famous

French statesman The member of the suite who was acting as master of ceremonies, and was carrying about a list in his hand, made urgent approach.

"Monsieur Mermillon," he begged the lady whom you are to have the honour of conducting in to dinner is close by. You will permit me this opportunity of presenting you?

Mermillon, with a friendly little nod, ended his conversation and turned away. He was almost immediately face to face with a woman who, for looks, was certainly the star of the evening. She was standing momentarily alone, having detached herself from a little crowd of acquaintances as the master of ceremonies made his approach.

"Madame la Princesse," the latter said, "you permit me to present to you your neighbour at this evenings ceremony—Monsieur Mermillon—whom you tell me that you have never met but whom you know, of course, by reputation. Monsieur Edouard Mermillon—la Princesse de Fantany."

Mermillon bowed low over her fingers and raised them to his lips.

"Chance has hitherto been unkind to me," he said. "I am forced to live a somewhat enclosed life, but I know very well that there is no Parisian who would not esteem the honour I receive to-night."

The master of ceremonies faded away. The Princes murmured a polite acknowledgment of her companions words.

"It is a great pleasure, Princess," the latter continued, "to find you in these parts. It is a great pleasure, too, to think that I bring you good news."

"How is that possible, Monsieur?" she asked. "It sounds intriguing. Do explain."

"It was my great good fortune," he confided, "to discover in a remote corner of a small pleasure yacht, only a few hours ago, one of those jewels which Madame wears with such distinction."

She was silent for a moment. The eyes whose colour no one had been able to determine absolutely, which seemed sometimes the softest of grey, and sometimes the palest blue, for the moment lost their lustre. She looked at him stonily.

"Jewels of mine," she repeated, "in a small yacht here? Ah, Monsieur, you are mistaken—or have I perhaps a thieving maid?"

"I might believe myself mistaken," he answered, but for the fact that the jewels were purchased on your behalf, I was told, at Christie's one disappointing day, and I was one of those who were left behind in the bidding. It was the famous Marie Antoinette necklace composed of entirely flawless emeralds."

"It is true that I own that treasure," the Princess replied, "but you will observe that I am wearing it this evening."

He bowed. There was a faintly amusing smile upon his lips. Mermillon was far too clever a man to have been a mere Cabinet Minister.

"You are wearing it indeed, Princess," he assented. "But the pendant emerald—the joy of the whole collection—is missing."

"You are going to be like one of the magicians of old and produce it from your waistcoat pocket?" she asked.

"Alas, I cannot do that," he regretted. "I, with all my family, have been cursed with the inconvenient guilt of honesty. I restored it to the owner of the boat. Pardon me if I point out that my excited friend, the good administrator of the feast, has given the signal. It follows that we should join the procession."

The woman swept her gown into place and laid her fingers upon his arm. They passed through an admiring vortex of spectators to their chairs. They sat with the stars and the blue dome of the cloudless sky above them and the sea, motionless since the dying away of the evening breeze, stretching away before them. The tables were plenteously and elaborately decorated with the flowers of the day. From the moment of taking her place she seemed to have fully recovered her composure. She became once more the unafraid beauty whom all Parisians adored.

"To leave for a moment, Monsieur, the subject of my possible indiscretion, which I can assure you was nothing of the sort," she said, "I find it strange to meet you in this somewhat unfamiliar entourage. In Paris for the last twelve months, I have scarcely been to a reception for dinner where your name has not been the engrossing topic. Yet we have never met."

I make no pretence, Madame, of taking part in any form of social life while I am in harness."

"I can well understand that," she said sympathetically. "Men who take the burdens of a struggling country upon their shoulders can find little time for the distractions of Paris."

She was addressed by the neighbour on her left. For a few minutes she talked to him lightly of a recent meeting, a dinner party at the Armenonville. The exigencies of the situation having been complied with, she turned once more to Mermillon.

"You are passing your vacation in this neighbourhood?" she asked,

"So far as one can call it a vacation," he replied. "I am on my yacht in company with a great financier, who tries night and day to convert me to his own ideas as to the gold standard, and I receive portfolios from Paris twice a day. The true vacation which rested the minds and souls of men came to an end with the telegraph, telephone, and wireless. These are the tentacles thrown out to keep us slaves for ever."

"Science takes a hand, too, on the other side," she reminded him. "She can transport you now with incredible speed from the scene of your labours."

He shook his head gently.

"The scene of our labours is wherever we happen to be," he told her.

"I find that a little enigmatic," she complained.

"Who speaks in plain words nowadays?" he rejoined. "The age of being natural is past. We are all playing some game or other, and we must veil our words, conceal our thoughts."

"Surely, the great Monsieur Mermillon is not obliged to play a part," she laughed mockingly. "The emperors of the world are supposed, are they not, to be monuments of truth?"

"The only one whom I have met," he replied lightly, "was a shocking liar."

"The fault was probably not with him," she ventured. "It was in the soil of his country."

Mermillon glanced round the table. "By-the-bye," he remarked, "I am somewhat disappointed to-night."

"I am not flattered."

"Madame requires no reassurance from me in that respect," he smiled. "I was thinking of my old friend, General Perissol. I thought that he might have been here."

"You have given him too much work to do," she said.

"His activities are at least distributed," Mermillon reminded her. "He has a bureau in every great city of France."

"Is it necessary for him to visit them individually?" she asked. "It seems to me that one reads reports signed by him issued from Paris most days."

"I have heard," he confided, "that sometimes those reports are issued with the sole purpose of confusing the world as to his actual whereabouts. *Par exemple*, this morning there is issued a decree from him dated from Paris dealing with the activities of the Communists in Marseilles, yet Perissol is not in Paris. He is very much nearer to us than that."

"You speak," she observed, "as though the movements of General Perissol were my chief interest in life."

"Are they not?" he inquired, with purposeful daring.

She continued her dinner as though she had not heard his question. He took the opportunity to address a few remarks to his neighbour on the other side—a very distinguished personage who had been eagerly awaiting his attentions. At their close he was aware of a change in the Princess's attitude towards him. Her beautiful shoulder was turned an inch or two away. She was talking to a friend across the table. It was some time before she even gave him the opportunity of addressing her again. When he did so his tone was as courteous as ever, but she realised that his thrust had been an intentional one. There was a suggestion that the buttons had been removed from the foils.

"If my questions gave offence, Princess," he said, "I am sorry. As I dare say you know, I am responsible for the department which General Perissol administers so excellently, and it is permitted to me to have sometimes a slight curiosity as to his movements. I have, of course, the means for satisfying myself as to these matters, but I thought perhaps I might have learnt from you without effort whether our friend had arrived in these parts."

"*Cher Monsieur Mermillon*," she protested with a faint gesture of reproach, "you credit me with too intimate a knowledge of the General's movements. He is, without doubt, a friend of mine, but I have never even heard of him in these parts. Why should he come here?"

"Why, indeed?" Mermillon agreed sympathetically. "It is without doubt as you say—one has never heard of him here. Yet one has heard of a Monsieur Benoit who lives in great seclusion in a villa amongst the pines, on the lighthouse hill, at Garoupe."

She turned and looked at him. His face was inscrutable. He seemed to be studying the contents of his wineglass. When he returned her glance, he knew, however, that the risk he had taken had been worth while.

"Do you," she asked, "keep a private army of spies?"

"One must make oneself secure," he answered.

"You do not trust General Perissol—the greatest patriot France ever had?"

He considered his reply for a moment.

"I would trust to his patriotism," he conceded, "but the time might come when I found his judgment at fault. In my position, I cannot afford to be dependent on any one department of the administration or any one man. I have known men betray their country, not from any lack of patriotism, but from lack of judgment."

"I see," she murmured.

"Furthermore," he went on, "it is to be acknowledged that, at the present moment, our friend, notwithstanding his many brilliant gifts, is confronted with a nervous depression which many months of failure have induced."

"How do you know that he has failed?" she asked.

Louise de Fantany was haunted for months afterwards by that sudden swift turn of the head, the light momentarily flashing in the eyes of the man by her side. She felt suddenly helpless as though, indeed, he was seeing through all that was at the back of her mind.

"If he has not failed," Mermillon replied, "he has committed a graver fault still. He has neglected to confide the news of his success, partial or complete, to the administration from which he holds his post."

"He may have had his reasons for that," she ventured.

"Alas, none of them would hold water. Our friend is the servant of his state. A servant who withholds the confidence of his doings from his employers places himself in a somewhat dangerous position..."

Permission to dance had been given to the members of the party. The minister leaned towards his neighbour.

"There is perhaps one last word," he said, "which could be more safely spoken in the seclusion of a crowd. Will you honour me, Princess?"

She rose to her feet with a mechanical word of gracious assent. It was some few minutes after their leisurely progress had started that they found themselves at last amidst a crowd of completely unfamiliar people. The moment came, however.

"You do not suspect General Perissol of disloyalty?" she asked.

"Towards his country or towards his chief?"

"Towards either."

"It is my opinion," he said, "that the people who put him into office and who are responsible to France for their action are the only ones whom he should consider."

"I see," she murmured. "The plain truth is that you have mistrusted Perissol, you have had him spied upon and you have made this discovery. Well, I will tell you something even at the risk of my own reputation. His possession of a secret identity and his possession of the villa on the lighthouse hill have nothing to do with his work for France or with any form of political intrigue or enterprise."

"*Nid d'amour*?" he whispered. "Precisely."

"And you happen to know that?"

"I am the person concerned."

Mermillon sighed ruefully. There was no evidence that he found the news specially important, yet both were perhaps aware of a certain change in the atmosphere.

"The man who has had such happiness granted to him," Mermillon observed, "can scarcely be censured if he does not hesitate to accept it. At the same time Paris and Antibes are a long way apart."

"His coming here is not an everyday affair. Besides, there is Marseilles."

"Marseilles is an important centre," the minister admitted... "I wonder if by chance the General is anywhere in the neighbourhood now."

"I have told you a good deal," she said. "To disclose his movements would be an impossibility. You are in a position to ascertain them for yourself."

"A matter of time only," Mermillon confessed. "We had better, perhaps, with your permission, return, Princess. My dancing can scarcely compare with the efforts of some of these younger men."

"Which is to say," she laughed, "that having succeeded in wringing my secret from me you want to get away as quickly as possible."

"Not at all," he assured her. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to spend the rest of the evening *tête-à-tête*. There are still many things I should like to ask."

"There is one, Monsieur," she said, fingering for a moment the vacant place in her necklace, "which I hope as a man of honour and gallantry you will forget."

Mermillon was smiling to himself somewhat cryptically as he took leave of his companion, and, having made his excuses to his host, left a few minutes later. There was a murmur of interest amongst the other guests as he disappeared.

"The most brilliant politician France has had for years," a famous banker declared.

"Almost the only one who has come through all these terrible scandals scatheless," someone else remarked.

"Scatheless personally, but they may yet prove his ruin," a woman of great consequence observed. "There is calm just now, but the people of France will never forgive if they are kept in ignorance as to what has become of all those other missing millions. They will always have the idea that they have been swindled."

The signal to leave came at last, and a somewhat turgid babble of small talk came to an end. Everyone hoped that they would catch another glimpse of the great French statesman in the Sporting Club. Edouard Mermillon, however, was no gambler with *jetons*.

CHAPTER V

Rumours of an unlimited baccarat bank presided over by the fabulously wealthy Belgian banker, Baron de Brett, filled the Sporting Club that evening. With rolls of notes in front of him and stacks of the famous hundred thousand franc plaques, making the small space immediately around him at the end of the table look rather like a remote comer of Aladdin's cave, the Baron himself—bland unruffled, with a large cigar in his mouth and a gleam of pleasure in his eyes—won and lost millions on the turn of a card. There were many very distinguished people amongst the crowd, but the great French statesman, of whom everyone had hoped to catch a glimpse, and who had been a guest at the Royal dinner party, was absent, as was also another visitor to the rooms, who was always a great attraction, the Princess de Fantany.

"Most disappointing," an English Cabinet Minister complained to his host. "I don't care a fig about this spectacular gambling—it may be a put-up job for all anyone knows—but if there was one man in this world with whom I wished for five minutes' conversation before I leave for Italy to-morrow it was Edouard Mermillon."

His host for the evening—a well-known American resident of the place, who had long ago shaken himself free from the trammels of international finance and politics—expressed his polite regrets.

"Mermillon very seldom comes this way," he confided, "and when he does he is almost as difficult to get hold of as royalty itself. I know for certain that he left directly after dinner. His hat and coat are gone, and the concierge called his car."

The Englishman sighed.

"A private word with him might have been immensely useful," he grumbled. "You do not interest yourself in our troubles nowadays, Mason, but I can tell you that they are real enough."

"I have had plenty of worry in my time," the American replied. "My stuff now is invested where neither the mice nor the tigers can get at it, and I've quit worrying."

"It is not altogether a matter of finance," the Englishman remarked.

"I had a kind of idea," Mr. Seth Mason observed, rolling round his cigar between his fingers, "that affairs in France were looking pretty good these days. She is the quaintest country on the face of the map. She has done everything in the most illogical fashion, she ought to be in trouble in half a dozen different quarters, and she isn't. It has all panned out right for her, somehow. A good many people say that it is mostly due to this chap you wanted to get hold of—Mermillon."

"He is the man with the brains," the Englishman admitted. "In my opinion, if he had the chance, he could be a greater man and a greater figure in Europe than any of these opportunist dictators."

"The only question about him in my mind," the American put in, "is whether he is dead square."

"What makes you suspect him?" the other asked curiously.

"There is no doubt that he is the man who saved France from revolution after those governmental scandals. It was just dawning upon the people that the Tositi affair was nothing but a pimple on a huge body of corruption. They were just beginning to seethe with fury, to demand something more than these sham investigations, when Mermillon takes the matter into his hands. There is no doubt that with his eloquence and his cleverness he has calmed things down for the moment. The other fellows were all for putting taxes on to make up the deficiency. He took 'em off. If you want to put a Frenchman in a good humour you take off a tax in which he is interested. Some day or other, however, one or two pretty awkward questions will have to be answered, especially if an honest budget is presented. When that time comes Mermillon will have to declare himself."

The Englishman rose gloomily to his feet.

"I would be quite content to let the future look after itself if I could have had that five minutes' talk with Edouard Mermillon tonight," he declared. "See you later, Mason, I'm going to watch the baccarat and get a word with de Brett if I can. He is a great friend of Mermillon's and if he's coming back he would be sure to know."

The French Minister was not the only one who had hurried away from the Royal dinner party. Mermillon's car had scarcely reached Villefranche when the famous car of the Princess de Fantany flashed past him. It was not for nothing that she had earned her reputation as a lover of speed. She possessed the fastest motor boat upon the coast, and the car into which she stepped on leaving the Sporting Club climbed the lighthouse hill at Antibes in something like 40 minutes after her departure. The iron gate before which it paused was opened by one of its three guardians, who appeared from some mysterious obscurity, without question. The car climbed the steep unlit avenue and drew up in front of what seemed like a deserted villa. A single touch of the bell, however, and the door was thrown open. Lights flashed out in every direction, and several shadowy figures approached towards Louise from the background. A young man hurried out to meet her.

"Monsieur le General is on the terrace, Princess."

She passed across the hall and out through a side door, which the young man had opened for her, with the air of an *habitué*, and was received almost at once by another of the famous men of the day. He strode across the terrace to greet her from the small table at which he had been working with his secretary—a tall, brown-bearded man of powerful physique and quick, impulsive movements. He had the frame of a Hercules, and the iron jaw of a man of deeds, but his voice was unexpectedly gentle and restrained. The fixed eyeglass in his left eye somehow softened his expression.

"Louise, my dear friend," he exclaimed as he took her into his arms. "This is indeed a beautiful surprise. I had no idea you would have been able to get away from the party so early."

"There was nothing more I could do there," she confided, sinking into the chair to which he led her. "Besides, I have news for you."

He waved his secretary away. They were alone in the shadow of the pine trees.

"Something which happened at the dinner?" he inquired.

"Let me tell you," she begged. "I was placed next to Edouard Mermillon. Lily arranged that for me, it was quite easy. You were right, of course, in all your information. He and de Brett are both on board the '*Aigle Noir*.' But there is something else."

"Well?"

"Events are moving quickly. They have only just arrived, but he has already been on board the '*Bird of Paradise*.' He has tried to buy it—he offered even an absurd price. This young man, Hamer Wildburn, who owns the boat must know."

"Mon Dieu! But how did you arrive at this information?"

"From Lily Montelimar. She, too, was dining. Lucienne, her daughter, has made friends with Hamer Wildburn, the young man who owns the boat. She told her mother of my foolish little enterprise and of their visit. Fortunately the young man doesn't know me by sight."

"Wildburn's dossier is harmless enough," General Perissol reflected.

"There is more to tell you, Armand. I fear that it means complications. He knows of your presence here."

"Ah!"

"For your sake beloved," she went on, "I have sacrificed my reputation. He believes that you come here secretly to be near me—as indeed you did before this thing happened. It is so, is it not, Armand?"

"For no other reason," he assured her. "It seems to me then that no great harm is done."

She clung to his arm.

"Alas, there is worse to be told," she went on anxiously. "You must not be angry, my lover. It was all the result of that foolish hope of mine that I might be of use to you. He knows that I, too, have visited the '*Bird of Paradise*.'"

"That is without doubt awkward," he admitted.

"You remember the Marie Antoinette necklace that I bought in London?" she continued. "He also was at the sale. As a matter of fact he was bidding against me. I am wearing it—as you see. He recognised it and he saw that the pendant was missing. I dropped that pendant on the '*Bird of Paradise*.' He saw it there."

Perissol's expression was for a moment grim. He remained silent, however.

"My dear," she went on, clinging to his arm, "I was so ashamed of my ridiculous failure—the attempt, I think, came from reading these foolish English detective stories, in which the woman always seems to be able to do anything—that I never made any inquiries even about my emerald. I was willing to consider it lost, although it is invaluable, if the young man didn't find out to whom it belonged and return it. But there you are. He saw it, and he knows of my visit. You are not angry, Armand?"

"Not I," he answered fondly. "What you don't realise, my dear Louise, is this. You bring more valuable information than you have given away. Edouard Mermillon should never have let you know of his visit to that young man. It is the first mistake I have ever detected in him. You tell me that he has actually been on board the '*Bird of Paradise*'?"

"I know it for a fact," she replied. "Not only that, but I know that he tried to buy the boat. That, of course, he would not have told me, but he knows nothing about the girl and her friendship with the young man. Two boats in the same harbour—it was nothing that he should have paid a visit. It is just chance that I found out the real object of the visit."

"After all," he assured her with a smile, "you have been much cleverer than you had any idea of. Lily Montelimar is your cousin, isn't she? The young man is, of course, a friend of the family. Your visit to him might easily be explained. Louise, I thank you. With the whole of my staff, who can be trusted watching, you are the first one who has brought me anything definite."

She leaned a little forward, and she gave him what his eyes demanded. He held her tightly in his arms for several minutes, then he released her, sat back in his chair and tapped thoughtfully upon the table.

"The owner of the *Bird of Paradise*, this young man, Hamer Wildburn, refused to sell," he reflected. "What, then, will be Mermillon's next step? It must be something rapid beyond a doubt, something he must have already decided upon when he was so naive with you."

He looked away into the darkness for a few moments, then he rose suddenly to his feet. It was as though he had received some disturbing inspiration. He called for his secretary, who appeared almost at once.

"Raymond," he inquired, "can you tell me who is the Admiral in charge at Toulon?"

"*Bien sûr*, Monsieur. He is Admiral Montreux, and his flagship is the *Revanche*."

"The private line is in order?"

"Without a doubt, sir."

"An all night service, of course?"

"*Parfaitement*, mon General."

"Get through to the Admiral. An official message of importance. I will speak myself."

The young man faded away.

"You are in no hurry, Louise?" Perissol asked, resuming his seat.

"Am I ever in a hurry when I come to see you?" she protested, with a faint smile.

"You spoil me," he answered tenderly. "But then you know how much your presence soothes me, how I love having you here."

He touched a bell. A *maître d'hotel* appeared a moment or so later.

"Jean," his master announced, "I said no dinner, but I will eat something—cold things. Don't forget my favourite cheese, some fruit and wine—you know the champagne Madame la Princesse prefers. Serve out here on this table. In the meantime an aperitif. You serve for two, of course."

"But, mon ami," Louise laughed as the man hurried away, "you forget that I have been to a Royal dinner party."

"I know those feasts," he answered. "Besides, if you were talking to our friend, what time had you to eat. I myself should not have dined, which, after all, is a bad thing. Gastronomically speaking, your arrival is a miracle for me, and your news a tonic. We shall hear a champagne cork pop under these trees."

She looked around.

"You are well taken care of here?" she asked. "I have twenty night watchmen about the place and ten day ones," he assured her, "I know there are men who desire my life, and with very good reason. For my country's sake I do not take risks."

Aperitifs were served whilst a couple of servants were making rapid preparations at the table. Perissol moved his chair closer to his guest's and held her hand. They raised their glasses to one another.

"Great news," he repeated. "All may now go well. Mermillon would never have taken the risk of trying to buy the boat himself if he had not been completely confident. It was a mistake. When a man makes his first mistake it leads easily to others."

She raised her glass once more.

"I drink to the hope," she said, "that the day of her deliverance is approaching for our beloved France."

They set down their glasses empty. The first course of the supper which had been ordered appeared in an incredibly short space of time. As they took their seats the buzzer of the telephone which Raymond had placed upon the table was agitated. Perissol lifted up the receiver. The servant faded away.

"I speak with the battleship *Revanche*?" he asked. "The Admiral is on board?...Never mind if he is in bed or tired. This is a matter of public service. It is General Perissol speaking."

There was a pause. Perissol covered the transmitter with his hand and spoke to his guest.

"It is a happy augury," he declared. "The first step in our enterprise meets with success. Delay might have been fatal. The Admiral is on board."

He replaced the receiver once more to his ear.

"*Allo, allo!* It is Admiral Montreux with whom I speak?...Good. I am Perissol—General Perissol. Listen, my confrere, listen!...Yes, I know that it is extraordinary, but the times are extraordinary...I assure you that I am General Perissol, Chef de la Surete Nationale, exercising the privileges of my new post. I can give you, if you wish, the code number of the naval branch of the Intelligence Department. Ah, you recognise my voice now. That is good. Listen, Admiral! I am a suppliant. If you telephoned me in distress and asked me for the sake of La Patrie to send you ten thousand policemen it would be done. I ask you for the loan of any one of your smallest armed craft, one that draws no more than ten metres, if possible, and armed—as lightly as you will, but armed—and with searchlights fitted...Garoupe—yes. Garoupe Bay—*près d'Antibes*...A thousand thanks, Admiral. Good things may come to both of us out of this, harm can come to neither...Good. A motor boat will be waiting outside the bay, and again a thousand thanks, dear Admiral...*Termine*."

Perissol laid down the receiver, tapped on the table, and the servants reappeared. The service of the meal was soon in progress.

"Of course, I remain bewildered," Louise observed.

Her host pointed through a narrow opening in the pine woods from which it was possible to obtain a view of the bay.

"Mermillon is not a man to be baulked," he said. "For reasons we know of he wants that ship. For reasons which we do not know of, but which are almost as curious, the owner declines to sell it even at what must be an enormous profit. Common sense suggests the rest. You follow me?"

"My intelligence so far has been equal to the effort," Louise assured him.

"Mermillon is following the tactics of one of the world's conquerors. It was Caesar, I think, who said: 'What I cannot possess I destroy.' The *Bird of Paradise* is too interesting a yacht for us to stand by and see her destroyed, hence I seek protection for her."

"Why not seize her boldly in the name of the Government?" Louise suggested.

"Remember, as yet I know nothing," Perissol reminded her. "Edouard Mermillon is in far too strong a position for me to risk a stroke of that sort. At the present moment I suspect that he knows more than I do. Soon it may be the other way round, then I can assure you that I shall not hesitate."

Louise meditated for a moment.

"Will the lion," she asked, with a faint smile at the corners of her Ups, "take advice from the mouse?"

"Accepting your simile," he replied promptly, "try me."

"Mermillon knows that you are here. Why not make the first move yourself? After all, what is more natural than that you should pay a visit of ceremony or friendship, whichever you like to call it, upon a fellow Cabinet Minister?"

Perissol reflected for a moment, then he took her hand in his.

"The mouse has spoken," he said. "I will pay that visit to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER VI

Mermillon himself received his unexpected caller at the head of the gangway. He had just emerged from the sea and the sting of the salt water had brought a faint glow into the ivory pallor of his cheeks.

"An unexpected pleasure, this, General," he exclaimed, "until last night I had no idea that you were a visitor in these parts."

Perissol smiled, accepted a cigarette and a chair.

"You are just from the sea," he pointed out. "Please change your wet things. I shall remain here with great comfort."

"I shall enjoy better a cigarette and a cup of coffee if I remain as I am," Mermillon assured his visitor. "When the sun shines I have adopted the custom of using it instead of a towel. Besides, you are just from Paris, beyond a doubt. I am curious for your news."

"I have no news," the General confessed. "Events in Paris are calm, for a wonder. Both my chief subordinates are there. I ventured myself to take a few days."

Mermillon patted his companion on the shoulder.

"My dear friend," he declared, "no one deserves it more. No one is a better judge of when Paris may safely be left. Is it my fancy or did I not hear that you had a charming chalet in these parts?"

"It is an old villa, well enclosed, almost a hiding-place, up on the lighthouse hill," Perissol replied. "It suits me for my brief vacations. I require a measure of solitude. You and I have both very full official lives, if I may venture to compare my occupation to yours. Sometimes it is necessary to get away from the voices."

Mermillon sipped his coffee thoughtfully. He buttered himself a roll with great deliberation.

"I agree with you, my dear colleague," he assented. "Sometimes it happens, however, that one finds oneself, as they say in England—'combining business with pleasure.'"

Perissol moved no muscle of his face. There was a light of mild inquiry in his eyes.

"The boat yonder, for instance—" Perissol nodded indifferently.

"We did hear rumours that she had been in the hands of suspected people," he admitted. "Exaggerated rumours, I fancy."

"Ah, you have interested yourself in her, then?" Mermillon asked, smiling.

"To some small extent," Perissol admitted. "We had the opportunity of examining her as she lay in Toulon harbour. We made use of the Naval Secrets Bill and examined her all over. There was nothing. She was ownerless then, or her owner was away, I forget which, so we were able to go about our task without interruption. When I return to Paris I can, if it interests you, send you the papers."

The Cabinet Minister shook his head.

"I have enough business of my own to attend to," he observed a little ruefully, "without interfering in your department. She belongs to an Englishman now, they tell me."

"Englishman or American," Perissol replied, "I forget which."

"A very pig-headed fellow," Mermillon declared. "Apart from those faint rumours which your investigations seem to have squashed, I would have bought the boat for my lad. I offered the owner quite a decent price, but he would have nothing to say to me. The personal characteristics of these Anglo-Saxons are exactly on a par with their national tendencies. They have always made life very difficult for politicians who take a broader outlook."

"I feel that I can never be sufficiently thankful," Perissol reflected, "for the fact that I understand nothing about international politics. I think that if I were able to look out upon the world to-day with the inner knowledge that a trained politician, such as yourself, must have I should go crazy. It is certain that I should never be able to continue my work."

"I appreciate your point of view," Mermillon meditated, "but there must be times, General, when you are forced to come into touch, and very close touch, too, with internal politics."

Perissol shook his head. He had accepted a cigarette after his coffee, and was leaning back in his chair smoking with an air of calm enjoyment.

"It is my business," he said, "to keep down crime. That is sufficient."

"When I first entered the Chamber," Mermillon confided, "a young man, full of ambition, and with a very single purpose, I might have agreed with you. To-day-well, there is still the shadow of that ghastly case which no patriotic Frenchman mentions but which we all remember. That and the man's sudden death afterwards. There was crime there, and there has been an aftermath of crime; but, alas, we all know that there was also politics."

"That case was not typical," Perissol pointed out. "There has never been another like it. All France is hoping that there never will be again."

"And with good reason," Mermillon declared fervently.

"Believe me. General, you are well off to be at the head of a great service which is not directly concerned with politics. There are men whom we meet day by day in Paris, men who are loved and men who are hated, who, at the back of our minds, we know have to bear the burden of almost intolerable secrets. They have to bear that burden for the sake of La Patrie. Believe me, the embers of that flaming bonfire of filth are still alight."

"This sounds like drama," Perissol muttered, "out of place amongst such serenity as this—this strengthening sunshine and the whispering wind."

"It is drama." Mermillon insisted, "drama walking in a guise it has never assumed before, but very terrible drama. I think that there is no one else in the world to whom I would say this, Perissol, but even to-day a blunderer, by a single ill-advised action, if chance gave him the opportunity, might bring about the ruin of the country we both love so much."

"You go beyond me," Perissol confessed. "I will give you an analogy," Mermillon suggested, gazing across the bay and watching a figure upon the *Bird of Paradise*. "There are many explorers and philosophers who will tell you that the class of people who have done more harm in the world than any other have done it through being over zealous to do good. So, in the case to-day of our beloved Mother country, she is in danger only when people, whilst working with the honest belief that their end and aim is for her good, might bring about a great catastrophe. Such people are cursed with narrow vision."

"Except," General Perissol acknowledged, "that I believe I understand something of the dynamics of crime, a great deal concerning its distribution, and have theories of my own as to dealing with it. I am an ignorant man. When you talk about any catastrophe to be brought about by plotters which might threaten the security of France, you talk in a language which I do not understand. If you spoke of war I might follow you. I gather, however, that it is not war you mean."

"Cast your thoughts back to that forbidden period," Mermillon enjoined sadly. "Think of some of those whose names you have heard whispered in connection with it. It is the corruption of humanity, of educated humanity, the corruption which has found its way into the best and most secret places which I have in my mind. Compared with that the menace of Germany or any foreign power is nothing. The philandering of England, the commercial outcry against us from America, the perpetual waved sword of Italy will never harm us. If France perishes the deed is her own."

"But surely our present position—" Perissol began.

"Let us have done with the subject," Mermillon interrupted. "Discussive talk is useless and it will never come within your province, dear General, to strike either the blow that would free France or the blow that would cripple her for ever. You must not take me too seriously. You know the critics of my career do sometimes say this against me, that I have done good work, that I am a sound statesman, and that I have shown myself a real patriot, but that I am also something of a dreamer. Let us leave it at that. I may have that faculty of seeing too far across the horizon into a visionary kingdom. Sometimes too strong a vision bleeds horrible fancies...We are to have a strange neighbour, it seems."

He inclined his head seaward towards the opening of the bay. There was a line of dark smoke curling upward from a long grey vessel moving at a considerable speed. Mermillon examined it through his glasses in interested fashion.

"What on earth can this be?" he exclaimed.

"Probably an old-fashioned oil tanker on its way to Antibes harbour," Perissol observed, as he rose to his feet. "I see them sometimes from my windows."

Mermillon, his glasses still in his hand, moved to the side of the yacht.

"But this is unbelievable," he pointed out. "It is a small gunboat—one of our own, I imagine, to judge by the flag. What on earth can she be doing coming in here?"

She was travelling now at half-speed—a shallow grey warship of somewhat antiquated type, but still formidable with her sharp bow and the morning sun flashing upon her forward guns. Perissol looked at her steadily.

"I do not understand naval movements," he remarked, "but is it not strange that she should be travelling alone?"

"I should have thought so," Mermillon agreed, lowering his glasses. "Certainly she has no business in here."

The two men watched her with interest as she made slow progress towards them. An officer upon the bridge held a chart in one hand. Two marines were taking soundings. Her anchor went down finally in the middle of the bay about a hundred yards away from the *Bird of Paradise*.

"Incredible," Mermillon murmured.

"Incredible, but it has happened," Perissol observed. "After all, it is not the first time."

"It is one of those apparently simple affairs which intrigue one," the other reflected. "I shall forget for the moment that I am spending my brief vacation incognito. I shall send across a note to the commander and ask for an explanation of his visit."

"Why not wait and see if he has not brought some sort of a message for you?" Perissol suggested.

Mermillon shook his head.

"I am devoured by a curiosity which is worse than the curiosity of a woman," he confessed with an easy smile. "I must know, and know at once, what an unescorted French gunboat is doing in Garoupe Bay. You will excuse me while I write a note, General. Perhaps you would like the pinnace to take you ashore?"

"I think I should like to wait and hear the news," the latter said. "Ah," he added, with a change of tone. "My curiosity is already assuaged."

"What do you mean?" Mermillon demanded, pausing on his way below.

Perissol pointed to the landing stage belonging to the great *château* in the woods opposite.

"The Marquis de Montelimar who lives opposite," he confided, "has two sons in the navy. He has also one singularly attractive daughter. Look! I fancy that the mystery is solved."

A motor boat had shot out from the basin at the end of which was the landing stage. Her prow was in the air from the moment she started. Almost before Mermillon had time to reply she was half way to the gunboat.

"A possible solution, without a doubt," the latter admitted. "Nevertheless, I shall invite the commander to make me a call. Private excursions in gunboats of the French navy are not exactly orthodox. Every now and then," he concluded, with a shrug of the shoulders, "even a Cabinet Minister who has the reputation of being an economist has to assert himself."

General Perissol did what he seldom did—he hesitated. The situation presented its own special difficulties.

"In a way, my friend," he said, "I, too, am greatly intrigued by this arrival. I, too, when I reflect upon the matter, feel that it is within the province of my duty to pay a visit to the commander. Should you consider me in any way intrusive if I ventured to accompany you?"

Mermillon's smile was altogether disarming.

"My dear General," he said, "how could you imagine such a thing? Nothing would give me greater pleasure. I shall delay you only a matter of five or ten minutes whilst I clothe myself. The cutter will be ready. We will solve this mystery together. *A bientôt*."

The motor boat which had put off from the beach of the Marquis de Montelimar drew up with a great commotion on the far side of the gunboat. Rather reluctantly an *échelle* was let down. Louise, in beautifully cut blue flannel pyjamas and seaman's jersey, ran lightly up the steps. An officer stood at the top, who saluted, but the opening on to the deck was barred.

"You will pardon me, Madame," he announced, "but visitors are not allowed without due notice."

"I am sure your commander will have a word with me," Louise insisted. "The matter is urgent."

"Your name, Madame?" the officer enquired. "I am the Princess de Fantany, but my name does not matter. I have a private message from the person whom the commander has come to meet here, which must be delivered instantly."

The officer saluted and made a brief report to his commander. The latter made his appearance almost at once. His manner was not exactly hospitable.

"We know who you are, of course, Princess," he admitted, "but, as my lieutenant has told you, we are not prepared to receive visitors."

"Naturally," she replied, "but listen. You have come here with orders from your Admiral at Toulon, but at the instigation of the Chef de la Surete of France. I am in General Perissol's confidence, as he will tell you when you meet. There is also here in the bay another Cabinet Minister—the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. You have instructions, I believe, to reveal to no one except to General Perissol the reason for your coming."

"My mission entails a certain amount of secrecy," the commander acknowledged, a little bewildered. One thing, however, is certain—I am here to do the bidding of the Chef de la Surete Nationale."

"Then please accept these instructions, which will be confirmed personally by him in the course of the morning," she begged. "You are here to take soundings of the place and to present a report to the Admiralty. It is quite a usual thing, I believe, for ships of your class to pay visits of this description."

The pinnacle was lying by the side of the "*Aigle Noir*" and already Mermillon had appeared in the act of descending the gangway. Louise's expression and tone at once became vital.

"You will please understand that this is a serious matter," she continued. "I do not ask you to take my word. You admit that you are here to do the bidding of General Perissol—the most important man in France—and to keep silent as to your business from anyone else. I simply ask you to remember that. The General has special need of your services, but without secrecy they would be useless."

"Did the General send you here to me, Princess?" the commander inquired.

"He did not, because he has not had time," she answered. "The trouble is that you have arrived twenty-four hours before you were expected. I happen to know something of the position. I saw your arrival and I hastened here to remind you. You must answer questions and obey orders only from Monsieur le General and no one else must know that you are here at his bidding."

"This is entirely in accordance with my instructions, Princess," the commander acquiesced after a moment's reflection. "I will accept your hint. I will confer with no one else until I have spoken privately with the General. At the same time, most regretfully, I can only repeat that I must not allow you on board without permission from General Perissol."

She laughed at him lightly.

"I have not the least desire to come," she assured him. "I have accomplished all that I wish. Later on, however, you will probably receive a visit from my great friends here at the *château*. The Marquis de Montelimar has two sons in the navy."

"François is on one of our destroyers at Toulon," the commander remarked, unbending at last. "We shall hope to have the pleasure of entertaining you on board then, Princess."

The sound of the approaching launch terrified her. She ran down the steps back into the boat and shot away at a great speed. She pretended not to notice the arriving visitors. The commander remained in his place to receive his guests. It was the General who first mounted the steps. Mermillon was watching with a slight frown upon his face the retreating launch, headed now for the open sea with a long line of white foam behind it.

The commander leaned over the rail as the two men mounted.

"May I inquire as to the reason for your visit, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Certainly, Commander," Mermillon replied. "I will tell you our names which may do instead. Mine is Edouard Mermillon, and I have the honour to be, as you probably know, a minister in the French Cabinet. The gentleman behind me is, however, a really famous person. He is General Perissol, occupying the new post of Chef de la Surete of the whole of the French police. He has also a portfolio."

The commander stood on one side. The other officers saluted. The way was made clear.

"I am proud to receive you, gentlemen," the former said. "Please step on board. We have nothing very luxurious in the way of accommodation here," he added, as he ushered them down the deck. "Such as we have, however, is at your disposition. This is my cabin."

Cigarettes and cigars were produced. Mermillon courteously waved them on one side.

"At this hour of the morning we are full of apologies for our visit. I happened to be on the deck of my boat with General Perissol here, and saw you come in, commander. I must confess to having been greatly intrigued."

"In what manner, sir?"

"Why, I find it difficult to understand what affairs a naval unit could possibly have, unattached to any force, in a small bay like this."

There was a moment's silence. In Mermillon's lazy voice there had been no trace of anything beyond a mild curiosity. Perissol was standing—a little in the background—a grim and silent figure. It was an unfortunate position in which he had been placed. If things went ill, he was preparing himself. Nevertheless, the commander's reply was an immense relief to him.

"Well, sir," the latter confided, "our navy regulations book, as you know, forbids us to answer any question from strangers, but a Cabinet Minister has, of course, special rights. I have been sent here by the admiral at Toulon to take some soundings around the opening of this bay at various states of the tide."

"I must admit," Mermillon acknowledged frankly, "that I never dreamt of such a thing. I thought of every reason for your presence here, but that. By-the-by, you have been so courteous that I shall venture upon one more question—was it my fancy, or did you not receive a lady visitor a few minutes ago?"

"I did not receive her, sir," was the prompt denial. "It would have been utterly contrary to regulations."

"Did she go so far as to explain the reason of her coming?" Mermillon persisted gently.

"I gathered," the other explained, "that she was staying at the *château*, the owner of which—the Marquis de Montelimar—has two sons in the navy, both in our fleet. She wished to offer me the hospitality of her friends, but I had to tell her we could not accept until our work here was finished."

Mermillon rose to his feet.

"I am obliged to you, sir," he said, "for answering my question so frankly. Your boat, I see, is the *Fidélité*. And your name?"

"Commander Berard. At your service, Monsieur."

Mermillon extended his hand.

"We shall not detain you a moment longer. Is your business likely to take you long?"

"About a week, I should think. I shall telephone each day to the Admiral. He will tell me if the result of my work here is in any way interesting and if it is worth continuing."

"If you stay long enough and have an hour to spare at any time," Mermillon invited graciously, "the hospitality of my yacht is at your service. I should be delighted to see you for lunch or dinner any day if you will signal first to be sure that we are on board. We are lying across the bay there."

"I shall venture to pay my respects, sir," the commander assured his distinguished visitor.

Mermillon let his fingers dabble in the water on their swift homeward voyage. He seemed a little thoughtful.

"I am afraid," he reflected, "I must have seemed to be making rather a fool of myself to that young man."

Perissol, who still preserved his attitude of indifference, shook his head.

"Your questions were perfectly in order," he remarked. "The only point is—I don't know exactly what replies you expected to receive. Charting the coast waters is one of the duties of the navy."

CHAPTER VII

"Fresh as the foam, new bathed in Paphian wells," Hamer Wildburn quoted as, stooping down, he pulled Lucienne from the water, up the steps and on to his boat, the sea shine glittering upon her bathing suit. "Say, if you had not come this morning, I should have put on my shore clothes and presented myself at the *château*."

"A young man who can quote poetry lying on his stomach," she laughed "deserves a visit from Aphrodite herself. I am terribly sorry, Hamer my dear but we have a houseful, and you know what that means. Thank goodness we have our own bay the other side so I can escape sometimes. I must lie in the sun while I dry."

"Your peignoir is here," he pointed out. "I fetched it up directly I saw you on the quay."

"Plenty of cushions are all I want for the moment," she answered, "then a cigarette and perhaps another swim."

"And luncheon?" he asked eagerly.

"Not a chance," she sighed "We have a houseful of young people at the *château*. You can come up and join us if you like."

"Not to-day, I'm afraid," he regretted. "You forget that I am a struggling journalist. I have to get some of my stuff off to Paris this afternoon. It's good to see you, Lucienne."

"And it's such a relief to be here," she assured him. "You have made me feel very unsocial, my dear Hamer. I no longer like to sit in a chattering group and talk scandal and nonsense. I am becoming a serious person."

She took his hand and twined her fingers between his.

"I don't want you ever to change," he said. "I love your gaiety. I am sometimes rather a sober sort of chap myself. It does one good to hear your laughter and have to rack one's brains to keep pace with you."

"Dear Hamer," she murmured, "kiss me."

He obeyed, after a tentative glance around. She scoffed at him as she drew away.

"*Que tu es sot!*" she exclaimed. "Did you think I hadn't made sure that no one was looking? That was a psychological minute. It may not recur during the whole of my visit. There was not a soul on the quay, and we are just out of sight from the *plage*. However, you probably don't like kissing. It's a pity."

"Don't be an idiot or I shall take you below," he threatened. "Tell me something, will you, Lucienne?"

"I'll see. What is it?"

"For the last three or four days there has been a very powerful motor boat lying in your pool there, a white one with a rather large cabin aft, and I should think very powerful engines. She doesn't belong to you people, does she?"

"No, she belongs to Louise de Fantany. She is a great friend of the house, and we let her keep it there when she wants to. She has a lovely *château*, but it is up in the mountains."

"Louise de Fantany," he repeated. "Tell me about her."

"So soon?" Lucienne sighed.

"Nothing of that sort," he declared scornfully, "and no secrets from you, my sweetheart. She is the lady who swam aboard my yacht at 3 o'clock in the morning! You know—I've told you all about her visit."

Lucienne sat up with a gasp.

"The half-naked woman who tried to do that old-fashioned stunt—to drug you?"

"Don't make me blush," he begged. "She's the woman all right. I caught a glimpse of her this morning."

"What was she doing here?" Lucienne asked curiously. "She hasn't been to the *château*."

"She drove up in a fast car at about a hundred kilometres an hour," he replied, "came like a streak down to the motor boat, started up in 30 seconds, and shot over to the gunboat. She didn't go on board, but she talked to the commander for a few minutes and then went off seawards, going at a terrific pace."

"She's crazy," Lucienne declared.

"That's how I figure it out," he agreed. "Anyway, if she's a friend of yours, I thought you might return the emerald she dropped here that night."

Lucienne's eyes were wide open. She lifted herself once more from her recumbent position.

"Not one of her famous emeralds?"

"I don't know anything about famous jewels," the young man answered. "I only know that it's an emerald."

"And she hasn't been to claim it?"

"The first glimpse I have had of her since was this morning in the motor boat."

An expression of blank bewilderment was reflected in Lucienne's charming face.

"Ah! *par exemple!*" she murmured. "My dear, do you know what that necklace is worth?"

"No idea."

"She gave a hundred and eighty thousand pounds for it—pounds sterling, mind!"

"Then she was crazy," he declared, "to go in swimming with that much round her neck."

She turned over on her side to face her companion. Those soft brown eyes were filled with something more than curiosity.

"Hamer," she demanded, "why did she take risks like that? What is there on this harmless little boat to send people demented in that fashion? A French Cabinet Minister has arrived here to try and buy it, Louise de Fantany tried to do the same thing and when she found you didn't want to sell, she searched the place. What for? You are not anybody in disguise, are you Hamer? You are not a secret agent of one of the world's great politicians incognito with boxes full of treaties in your wardrobe?"

He shook his head.

"The whole thing has got me set," he confessed. "I'm just a journalist, I've told you that before."

"Journalists come across secrets sometimes," she reflected.

"The greatest secret of my life," he replied, "is that I adore you."

"I wish you didn't have to keep it a secret," she said naively. "The *château* is full of eligible young Frenchmen and my beloved mamma is beginning to get curious about you. Such clever people mothers, when they have ingenuous daughters like me to deal with. She knows that there is someone and she is beginning to realise that it's you."

"I'll speak to your father whenever you give me permission. I've told you that before," he reminded her.

"To-morrow then or the next day," she sighed. "I warn you that you may find him just a little difficult."

Hamer nodded.

"I can quite understand that," he admitted. "I must seem a pretty useless sort of person to him, living on a boat and writing articles for the Paris edition of an American newspaper. Got a Duke staying there, too, haven't you?"

"How did you know that?" she demanded.

"I see the French paper every morning. Gets the news quicker than any other. 'Amongst the guests staying at the *château* de la Garoupe...Duc de Montesset.'"

She made a little grimace.

"I suppose you think it odd, Hamer," she confided, "that in a republican country like this one thinks of titles any more. I don't think I do. The old world that one hears about has fallen away. Perhaps it is as well. We are all more genuine men and women nowadays, but if you have been born in it there is a sort of glamour that holds. Mother has nearly shaken herself free. Father—never."

"He would like to see you the Duchesse de Montesset?"

"Even if there were no *château*, no money, no estates, I believe that he would," she admitted. "I have tried my best to laugh him out of such ideas. We have no court to go to. It is not dignified to be always accepting our position only at the hands of foreigners. I am a Frenchwoman, and I tell father that the only thing I can do is to be a Frenchwoman like the others. Being a duchess would make me no different. There is no reality about it. Guy is not particularly intelligent, he is not madly good looking, his manners are no better than other young men's. The *château* is wonderful. There is already a scheme headed by the mayor of the nearest town to take it over—with some sort of a recompense, I suppose—and turn it into a museum. There is no dignity in the position of being a French aristocrat in a republican country."

He put his arm round her.

"You are going to be an American citizen," he told her, "and you shall live in any country of the world you choose."

"Well, that's something," she sighed. "You will give up America for me then?"

"Pay visits there now and then, of course. I think you would like New York."

"I feel to-day that I should love any place with you, Hamer," she whispered. "When the sun shines like this I feel that it must be France, but then I feel so affectionate, too, that it really doesn't matter. Give me one of your cigarettes, and the lightest cocktail you can make and I shall swim home, be punctual for lunch, and see what I can do with daddy. If I come and wave to you in the afternoon you are to come over in the dinghy."

"You are an adorable child," he said a little huskily, "and this time I don't care whether anyone is looking or not..Afterwards I'll fetch the emerald."

The cigarette was smoked, the cocktail duly approved. Then Hamer Wildburn produced a small wooden box, and in the centre of it the pendant emerald. She gave a little gasp.

"Hamer," she exclaimed, "it is the pendant. It is the best emerald of the whole necklace."

He nodded.

"So Monsieur Mermillon seemed to think when he pointed it out."

She looked at it for several moments intently.

"Why on earth doesn't Louise come and claim it?" she marvelled.

"I have asked myself that question more than once," Hamer Wildburn admitted gravely. "The only conclusion I can come to is that if she makes a fuss about, it she must disclose the fact of her visit here. She is in some sort of a plot and she wants to keep behind the curtain. Well, when you give her this back you can tell her that her secret doesn't exist, that I am no chatterbox. Unless it becomes necessary I shall never mention the fact of her visit here—especially if she is a friend of yours."

She handed the box back.

"You don't think that I am going to swim with this in my hand," she protested. "Keep it, Hamer, or send it up by your *matelot* some time. Louise lives at the *château* de Mougins, only about ten kilometres from here."

He thrust the box into the pocket of his trousers. "I'll tell you what I shall do while you are frivolling with this crowd," he said. "I'm going over the boat with the plan and a hammer to tap the panels. I'm going to turn the old lady inside out to see what I've got that brings Cabinet Ministers here to beg, and a Princess to commit a crime and leave behind a twenty thousand pound emerald. Think of me as spending the afternoon in a sort of Aladdin's cave, Lucienne."

"I don't think you have any treasure aboard at all," she told him, pausing for a minute on the last step. "I think you have another man—or perhaps a woman—in the Iron Mask whom you are keeping locked up in a small hole somewhere in the galley and whom you let out at nights. When I get back I shall consult the Almanac and see if any crowned head or dictator is missing. If you are playing gaoler to one of these, Hamer, you can begin to shiver in your shoes. Father and I between us will spot him."

With a little backward wave of the hand she dived gracefully into the sea. Almost immediately she turned over upon her back, and, facing the boat, threw him a kiss.

"*A demain, mon amour*," she called to him softly.

CHAPTER VIII.

A small but perfectly appointed seaplane circled gracefully round the Bay of Garoupe, and finally alighted within a yard or two of the *Aigle Noir*. A few moments later the Baron de Brett, looking very smart in his white flannels and rakish-looking panama, climbed the gangway of the boat and descended into the lounge. Mermillon, who had just finished working with a messenger from his bureau in Paris, sent the latter away. He swung round to greet his friend.

"Well, what luck?" he asked. "*Comme toujours, je gagne*," was the indifferent reply. "But enough of that. Explain to me quickly—what is the meaning of a gunboat in the bay?"

The French statesman shrugged his shoulders slightly. His manner was evidently intended to convey the impression that the matter was of no particular moment.

"I interviewed the commander a few minutes after his arrival," he confided. "He is here to take soundings. It is a part of the coast which the French Navy have never considered seriously, either for purposes of attack or defence, and he is here to draw up a report."

"But for us," the Baron exclaimed, "the affair is an impossibility! Can you not telephone to the admiral and request its withdrawal? You surely have enough influence for that—the noises disturb your repose—you are here on a much-needed vacation, and must have complete rest."

"I have considered the matter," Mermillon replied. "I tell you frankly I do not see what possible excuse I can invent. It is not seemly for a politician on vacation to interfere with the activities of either of the services. To what real nuisance can we claim that we are subjected on account of the presence of the gunboat? It might disturb our fishing. It might, in this small space, render the waters of the bay less attractive, but can a good Frenchman complain of such a thing?"

"A mild remonstrance," the Baron suggested.

Mermillon shook his head. "You are not a diplomat, my dear friend," he commented. "An angry one would be more disarming."

"Why the devil doesn't that pig-headed American go for a cruise?" the Baron demanded furiously. "We could deal with him on the open seas all right."

"We might be able to," Mermillon agreed, "but can you tell me how to get him on to the open seas? He is on terms of close friendship with the Montelimars, the people at the *château*. A very beautiful young lady from there visits him daily. They lunch together often upon the boat. If you were this pig-headed person you would be the first to find it difficult to move away under such conditions. That, I think, was at the back of his mind when he offered to sell the boat in two months' time. He has no intention of leaving his situation here until matters are arranged. Incidentally, the young lady will have a fortune of millions."

The Baron grunted.

"The Montelimars are wealthy enough," he admitted. "We once did some business together."

"If you have done business with him, my dear Baron," Mermillon remarked with a smile, "perhaps we had better keep away from the *château* altogether."

"Not at all," was the half indignant reply. "We have met only on questions of high finance and Montelimar, or rather the firm he was connected with, made money by our transaction."

Mermillon touched the bell by his side. "We will have a word with Chicotin," he decided.

There was no difficulty about that for the latter was, they were informed, waiting outside for an audience. Monsieur Chicotin, whose nationality was Russian, had survived an infamous past by reason of his skill in the manufacture of explosives. He was even now in possession of several diplomas from various nations and, in moments of expansion and in the right company, he was accustomed to boast that he had slain more men with his own fingers than any regiment of soldiers in the world. He was a smooth, dapper-looking person, with eyes set far too close together, in appearance a cross between a gigolo and an apache. Mermillon motioned him to a seat and waited until the door was closed. It transpired that Monsieur Chicotin was angry.

"I am here to demand," he began, "if all my work is to be for nothing. Why do you ask me to solve an interesting and important scientific problem and then allow it to be rendered useless?"

"You are apparently suffering from some hallucination," Mermillon observed gently. "I sent for you to ask how near you were to the completion of your task."

"One—two hours," was the eager reply. "I hesitate to put the finishing touches because they should only be there a brief period before use. I have done what you asked me for. I have produced an instrument, adjustable by clockwork, which would destroy the boat you pointed out to me—not to clumsy fragments, not like the affairs of my younger days which blew a man's head in one direction and his legs in the other, but left his body without demolition. I have achieved a wonderful task. My success is so great that I assure you gentlemen that placed on any part of the *Bird of Paradise* my engine would not blow her up in the old-fashioned parlance. It would disintegrate her. There would not be a recognisable molecule of timber or of metal or of any known material substance to be found afterwards. She and all that she is made of would disappear into air. The theoretical scientist would tell you that absolute destruction is impossible. As a matter of practice—no. Any class of man with any class of intelligence might search these seas, might employ divers underneath and searchers upon all the near land, and not one fragment or atom would they ever discover of the ship itself or any anyone who had been on her at the time of the explosion."

"Marvellous," Mermillon acknowledged with a congratulatory smile. "You have earned your money at any rate, Chicotin. It is for us to take advantage of your success."

"You will be almost as clever as I have been if you do," the Russian replied gloomily. "Shall I tell you what that gunboat is here for?"

"We understand," Mermillon confided, "that she is here to take soundings. She already has a boat at work."

"*Quelle blague!*" Chicotin exclaimed scornfully. "I am a man with curiosity and I make inquiries. I know that soundings in this bay are worth nothing to the French navy. I take a walk. I see and I observe. On one side of that boat there are guns-small guns, but loaded. On the other there is a range of powerful searchlights. They have a new double reflector on an apparatus ready to set to work at a moment's notice. How am I to cross the bay, get the two minutes which is all I need on board the *Bird of Paradise*, whilst by day there are four look-out men to observe me, and at night one of the most powerful searchlights in the world? Taking soundings, indeed! What folly! They have heard that Chicotin is at work. Believe me, those guns and those searchlights are there for that reason!"

"Getting you on board and away again must be our responsibility," Mermillon assured him. "You have completed your share of the bargain. We accept your word that the instrument is all that you say. The amount promised—fifty thousand francs—will creep into your banking account at the Credit Lyonnais in Marseilles in the same way as payments have been made before."

"*C'est quelque chose,*" Chicotin admitted.

"It is a great deal, my friend," Mermillon insisted. "It frees you from all anxiety. Not a single soul—neither the messenger nor the manager of the bank—knows how that money comes there. But it arrives. You will be in a position to begin spending it in four days' time. If, having finished your work, you feel the need of a little relaxation before then, here is something that may help."

He flicked a small packet of *mille* notes across the table. Chicotin snatched them up with talon-like fingers.

"It is a gracious gesture this which I accept," he declared.

"In the meantime," his employer continued, "I understand that you have left the absolute completion of your work of art until immediately before its use is required."

"You are perfectly correct," Chicotin assented. "There is no clumsiness in my work. The instrument as it is at present—it looks too beautiful for destruction—is perfectly harmless. You could smash it to pieces with a hammer and nothing would happen, but one hour's work, the contents of a small phial in a certain cell and you have the most complete weapon of destruction which the fingers of an artist have ever completed."

The little man was bursting with vanity. He wiped the perspiration from his damp, unwholesome forehead. Without asking permission, he rolled some shreds of villainous-looking tobacco into a soiled paper and commenced to smoke furiously.

"Very well, then," Mermillon decided. "Leave everything as it is, Chicotin. Remain patient while we consider what is to be done. Accept our congratulations, my brave man, upon an excellent piece of work."

Chicotin shook hands with his two patrons and swaggered out. Mermillon watched him until he disappeared with a gleam of amusement in his eyes. Then he turned to his companion.

"And now, my dear Baron," he suggested, "search in the recesses of that marvellous brain of yours. What can now be effected."

"I propose," the Baron said, "to pay a visit to my dear friend, the Marquise de Montelimar. What may come of it we will discuss later in the day."

"It is probably an inspired idea," Mermillon assented graciously. "If you do not return for lunch, my friend, I shall understand."

The Baron retired to his suite with the object of making some change in his toilet. An hour later his car turned into the spacious grounds of the *château* de la Garoupe.

CHAPTER IX

The Baron de Brett was ushered at once on to the fine broad terrace of the *château*, where he was received in friendly and flattering fashion. It seemed in every way to be a fortuitous visit. The Marquise was enchanted to meet again her old admirer, and the young people, who had just trooped in from bathing, were duly impressed by the presence in their midst of one of the prominent figures in world finance. The Marquis, a tall and dignified personage, who had at one time been a senator, greeted his visitor with especial cordiality.

"I could scarcely believe it when I heard that you were in these parts," he said. "If I had not known that you were in the company of a very distinguished man who prefers always to spend his vacation in solitude I should have ventured to pay my respects."

"You would have been very welcome," the Baron assured his friend. "Edouard Mermillon is, however, I must admit, a queer fellow. We have separate suites, of course, and I see very little of him. He is fonder of solitude than any man I ever knew."

"Not so his *camarade, mon ami*," the Marquise intervened. "I heard of your running an enormous bank at Monte Carlo last night surrounded by half the beautiful women in Europe."

"An exaggeration," the Baron declared. "Exaggeration, I can assure you. The eyes of all the ladies whom I chanced to notice were fixed upon the cards. They were searching for eights and nines rather than for compliments."

"Nevertheless," the Marquise sighed, "Monte Carlo must have been quite like the old days. I hear you had good fortune, too. How thrilling! Of course, they don't permit women to run a bank, and I should never have the courage anyway, but I think that it must be fascinating."

"I was a humble loiterer in the background," a young man of the party remarked. "I saw the Baron pay out on one hand nearly seven hundred thousand francs."

"Ah, well, baccarat and the sunshine don't go together," the Baron observed, accepting a cocktail and lighting a cigarette. "Pray do not imagine for one moment that I am imposing upon your hospitality by calling before luncheon. The fact is that I live almost at the end of the wire. I have just finished to-day's business, but I am never certain that I may not be called away. Edouard has one of his clerks in the bureau with him, and is busy with despatches. I thought it opportune to come and greet my friends."

"Your place is already laid," the Marquise pointed out, "At this time of the year we keep open house. We shall be broken-hearted if you fail us."

There was a little chorus of confirmation. Lucienne herself came over to his side and patted his hand.

"Baron," she begged, "do not disappoint us all. I have so many friends in Paris and Brussels whose news I desire."

The Baron beamed on everyone.

"Never was a more willing surrender," he declared. "It is a great joy to be amongst so many young people, all so thoroughly happy. Such a season for sport, too! Aquaplaning is, alas, an enterprise for the young, but the fast motor boat driving I enjoy, and I can still swim enough to find pleasure in it. By-the-by, what's the meaning of a gunboat in this peaceful district? It gives one quite a sinister feeling to see those unmasked guns."

"The presence of a gunboat is easily explained," the Marquis confided. "The *Fidélité* has been told off from Toulon to take soundings here, technical business, I suppose, but necessary. I called on the commander this morning—a pleasant fellow and a good officer, I should think. He lunches here to-morrow."

"Well, I'm glad that there's such a reasonable explanation for its presence," the Baron observed, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "Our friend Edouard is a trifle nervous these days, and I think he was inclined to wonder whether any hints had been received at headquarters as to the necessity for keeping him guarded."

"I should think that was highly improbable," the Marquis pronounced. "I am glad to notice signs of a wave of sanity both in the Press and in public speeches which have been made lately. Besides, how could Edouard Mermillon have excited ill-feeling amongst any class of people? He is one of the few men towards whom France looks for her salvation."

"I am entirely in accord with you," the Baron agreed. "I think the man who raised a hand against Mermillon would be torn to pieces if the mob could get at him. By the by, who is the young man who owns the very attractive small yacht lying nearest to you?"

"Better ask Lucienne," was her father's unenthusiastic reply. "She appears to know more about him than any of us."

"Absurd," the girl laughed, peering down through the trees to where the *Bird of Paradise* was lying in the distance. "His name is Hamer Wildburn, and he is a young American journalist, who is very agreeable, but a trifle cranky as most of his race are."

"He arrived during my absence in Paris," the Marquis observed, "and I have not yet had the opportunity of meeting him."

"He behaves well and carries himself as a man of breeding," the Marquise said indulgently. "I was pleased with his manners when he lunched here. He appears to prefer solitude on the boat, though, or to swim with Lucienne, to any attractions we can offer him."

"That sounds incomprehensible, indeed," the Baron declared.

"His boat is very attractive," Lucienne remarked, "and he came down here to study and lead a very simple life."

"The *Bird of Paradise* is a Jewel," de Brett agreed. "Edouard took a great fancy to it and tried to buy it from him. He offered him, I think, a great deal more than it was worth, but the young man refused to part before the end of the season. To a person of such consequence as Edouard Mermillon his refusal seemed just a trifle ungracious."

"I don't see why he should part with his boat to anyone if he wishes to keep her," Lucienne objected. "He is, I think, well off. He has settled down thoroughly to enjoy his summer after his own fashion. You millionaires," she concluded, patting the Baron once more on the hand, "must be taught that you can't buy everything in the world."

"Alas," de Brett sighed, "It is our hard fate to realise that every day. Money helps us nowhere nowadays. It is why I remain a bachelor."

There was an undercurrent of mirth. They most of them knew, none better than the Marquise, the stories of the Baron's various escapades. Lucienne indulged in a little grimace.

"I adore money," she confided. "You might not find me, for instance, so implacable as that young man."

"A peasant does not try to drag down a star," the Baron quoted. "The discouragement of failure has shattered my later days. I may even find myself in a monastery—"

"For heaven's sake let the Baron have anything he likes rather than drive him into a monastery!" the Marquis interrupted. "I have been through two financial crises. I should never have the courage to face a third."

Lunch was announced and they all trooped to the farther end of the terrace. De Brett, seated on the Marquise's right, talked amiably to his hostess of their mutual friends in Paris, the beauty of their present surroundings, and the charm of possessing a great estate literally by the side of the sea.

"Always," he remarked, "I admire, my dear friend, your husband's tenacity of purpose. He has had the courage to cut himself off from the stir of life. The world of politics and finance know him no more. In Paris he remains an outstanding figure in the social life of the old regime. Here he becomes the indolent sun worshipper drinking in renewed life every one of these wonderful days."

The Marquise shrugged her shoulders.

"Henri, for all his great gifts," she confided, "was always afflicted with a gift of indolence."

"He thrives upon it," her neighbour observed. "I, who seldom find myself with an hour that is not occupied, envy him."

"I do not think that you need," she replied, a little pettishly. "Men need something vital in their lives. Life without risk," she went on, lowering her voice, "would be a tasteless affair."

The Baron smiled cryptically. He, too, had memories."

"Again it is a matter of temperament," he said. "Temperament and the nature of the risk. The time has arrived in my life when the risks are all financial. There is a flavour of dead ashes in their stimulation."

She laughed softly, and patted the back of his hand.

"You say those sort of things hoping for contradiction," she challenged him. "I shall disappoint you. I shall not contradict, but I do not believe you. Where was she found at last, that wonderful Argentine dancer, who disappeared from the Ambassadeurs without giving notice to her director? Ah, well," she went on, "do not be alarmed. Fragments of that sort of gossip which come my way sometimes I keep to myself. At any rate your method of living must have its good points. With your pink and white complexion and ingenuous manner I should say that things just now were going well with you."

"One has fewer anxieties," he admitted.

"For the sake of the country I am glad to hear you say that. These terrible crises, then, have really passed? Since Henri adjoined politics we are so completely removed from the world that nowadays I hear nothing."

"Politics and finance are not so closely allied as they used to be," he explained. "Perhaps that is so much to the good. Still, with Edouard Mermillon remaining my greatest friend, of course I hear things. On the surface France is a saved country."

"Saved from what?" she asked curiously.

"Communism, anarchy, a cataclysmic upheaval worse than anything that ever happened in Russia," he told her. "Believe me, France was nearer to it than the looker-on would ever believe. One hopes now, though, that the storm has died away. So long as no other great scandal arrives I think that the spirit of the people will remain quiet."

Luncheon came to its appointed end. There was a general move into more comfortable chairs. The Baron found an empty one next to his hostess. They were a little removed from the others, and a sudden movement to watch a passing liner clearly visible at the end of the long avenue left them almost alone.

"Lily," he whispered, and it was strange how low his voice could become upon occasion, "I am a suppliant for your help."

"You intrigue me."

"Lucienne and that young American are great friends, are they not?"

The gesture of the Marquise was eloquent. "Young people take so much liberty nowadays," she complained, "one does not know how to control them. It is true what you say, however. Lucienne and the young man are on very friendly terms."

"I want his yacht."

"*Quelle idée!* For yourself?"

"No, for Edouard Mermillon. He wants it for a birthday present to his nephew."

She leaned even further back in her chair. She was looking over the tops of the pine trees at the sky.

"You must not count on me," she told him. "I have no more interests outside my daily life. Besides, I have very little influence over Lucienne, and I am inclined to like the young man."

"Then, you would be doing him the best turn in the world," de Brett assured her, "If you persuaded him that a wish of Edouard Mermillon's was better granted."

She shook her head.

"The young man is not the sort that is easily frightened," she said. "No arguments of that kind would have the slightest weight with him. You know the Anglo-Saxon temperament as well as I do. They are not to be reasoned with. He would simply become more obstinate."

"Consult with Lucienne," he begged. "She might be able to suggest something."

"Why should I?" she protested. "I have told you the truth. I have gratified all the taste I ever had for intrigue. I want to be left alone. Besides, you can't ask favours in that manner without any explanation. You should take me into your confidence. What possible reason can Edouard Mermillon have for wanting that boat and no other?"

De Brett watched his fellow guests strolling back to their places, and his tone became more urgent.

"The secret is too compromising a one to inflict upon you."

"Mysterious but unsatisfying. Frankly, Albert, I am not very much interested in your request, and as for Lucienne—to tell you the truth I believe there is only one thing she desires in life."

"What is that?" he demanded. "To marry Hamer Wildburn."

"I should think one of the most beautiful young women in France—her mother's daughter, too, for charm as well as looks," he added with a little bow, "should find that easy enough, provided her parents made no obstacle."

"Are you suggesting that we should do so?" she asked. "Threats, instead of promises now. My dear Albert, be sensible. We are old friends, it is true, and any ordinary favour I should probably grant you, but when you ask me to interfere with my daughter's happiness, to threaten to withhold our consent to her marriage with this young man if she does not humour you in this way—why, the thing becomes ridiculous. I certainly decline to interfere."

"Please don't take that attitude," he begged.

"It is for the good of himself and everyone else that that young man parts with his boat to Edouard Mermillon. He loses nothing. There are a dozen others like it, and with the money Mermillon offers him he could buy one double the size. If he refuses to sell, I will be quite frank with you, he will be threatened with a certain amount of risk—not from Mermillon himself, naturally, but from entirely outside agencies."

The Marquise was annoyed.

"It is a stupid business this," she declared angrily. "I myself have been on the boat. I have been in the cabin and the little saloon. I have even been in the galley. There is no one concealed there. There is no place for any form of concealment. Not all the innuendoes in the world could make a mystery ship of the *Bird of Paradise*. You would do much better to persuade Edouard Mermillon to abandon his whim. No more, if you please. The subject wearies me."

"You refuse me your help, then," he concluded sadly, as he rose to his feet.

"Oh, I will not say that altogether" she temporised, "but I have no inducements to offer, and I do not wish to hurt or offend this young American gentleman whom Lucienne esteems so highly. A word of mild advice I might give him if the subject arises naturally. That is all."

The Baron's valedictory smile and bow were pleasant, but she recognised a somewhat sinister air of disappointment lurking beneath. She watched his disappearing figure with a certain amount of uneasiness. Her husband approached and sank into the vacant chair by her side.

"Our friend did not pay us a long visit to-day," he observed.

"Albert has lost the art of being interesting," she said. "He is learning to be prolix. He dwells upon trifles."

"Nevertheless," he said, "I am sorry that he hurried. I wanted to ask him about this new colonial loan. Its success depends entirely upon whether Mermillon gives it his blessing."

"My dear Henri," she replied reproachfully, "I thought that you had altogether abandoned your interests in high finance."

The Marquis smiled cryptically.

"An occasional speculation is permitted," he remarked, "when one knows."

CHAPTER X

Lucienne scrambled up the steps of the *Bird of Paradise* and wrapped herself in the *peignoir* which its owner was holding out for her.

"I hope you keep my belongings safely locked up," she laughed. "If you have any more people searching the ship you will lose your reputation if it is discovered that you have my powder-box, my *peignoir*, and spare bathing suit on board."

"Your possessions have a cupboard to themselves," he assured her. "Sometimes at night when I am feeling very sentimental, I take them out and have a little conversation with them."

"Not the bathing suit, I hope?"

"The bathing suit more even than any."

"Most improper," she decided, "but rather charming of you."

"Why are you so late?" he asked.

She settled herself comfortably in the lounge chair he was holding.

"Some slight trouble with the elders of the family," she confided, holding out her hand for a cigarette, "backed up in this instance by the yellow-haired young Duke who I discovered yesterday bathes in a bracelet and an anklet! They all thought that I ought to have gone to our neighbour's swimming picnic party. I came to the conclusion it would bore me. The discussion, however, took up valuable time."

"Well, you are here at last," he remarked cheerfully, if a little tritely.

"You have enough luncheon for two?" she asked.

He reflected.

"Nothing good enough for you, but whatever I have is at your service. There's fruit—some peaches and nectarines. There is a small ham which could be released from its glass covering, and a brawn. Salad, of course, some of your favourite cheese, and a Vin Blanc de Bellet."

"It sounds like a feast for the gods," she declared. "May I stay and share it with you?"

"Of course you may," he assured her. "I should have had fish, too, but this wretched gunboat seems to have driven them all out of the bay. Anyway, I hauled up my baskets empty this morning. Auguste can cook some vegetables, though."

"When I left you the other day," she meditated, "there was a delicious smell of fried potatoes floating out of the galley porthole."

"There shall be fried potatoes," he promised her. She sighed contentedly.

"What a joy it is to be greedy," she murmured. "Until I face the family wrath I shall now be perfectly happy."

"Why don't you let me get this marriage affair fixed up, Lucienne?" he pleaded. "It wouldn't matter any more about the family, then."

She smoothed his hand gently.

"I don't want to run the slightest risk of spoiling this adorable summer."

"Might be the making of it."

"It could not be," she assured him. "For one thing, it would not be nearly so piquant if I were allowed to steal down here to spend an hour or two with you instead of doing it when I am supposed to be somewhere else. And then—I wish I could explain it to you, *mon cher*—marrying and getting married is

not so simple a thing in my country as in yours. My mother, I think, would have no objections. She has developed a somewhat belated penchant for mild flirtations, and she is always afraid that I might interfere. With my father it is another matter. He would be terribly formal. He would want to know such a great deal about you, and even I know so little."

Wildburn frowned slightly. His good humoured face took on a new expression.

"What sort of things?" he asked. "Money social stuff—my genealogical tree—that kind of rubbish?"

"That kind of rubbish is considered rather important," she answered, a trifle unsympathetically. "But, leaving that out for the moment, he would want to know what you were doing living down here by yourself on a mystery yacht which everyone wants to buy."

"Not everyone," he remonstrated. "There was the beautiful adventuress out of the story book who swam aboard and disappeared after leaving all the contents of my cupboard upon the bed and me very clumsily doped. Then your famous statesman, Mermillon, and his banker friend, de Brett. No one else that I know of."

"Behold another would-be purchaser!" she exclaimed. "I want to buy it, Hamer."

"Don't be absurd," he scoffed. "I saw your father's yacht, the *Hermione*, in Marseilles Harbour only a few weeks ago. It is 20 times the size of this—a perfect palace of luxury."

"I want something I can sail myself with a little help," she confided. "I want this yacht—this particular one."

He looked at her thoughtfully, lit a cigarette, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"You would resell it?" he asked.

"How clever you are!" she exclaimed. "I should hate to, but I might be tempted. But listen, Hamer—not before I had ransacked her from end to end, tapped every panel for secret hiding-places, felt in the boards for springs, gone over her with a shipbuilder, inch by inch. Then, when I had either possessed myself of her secret or discovered that she hadn't one, I might sell."

"But I have already searched everywhere," he reminded her. "And now, listen," he went on gravely. "There is something kind of mysterious to me in your having joined the little company of people who want this boat. You shall have her with pleasure, my dear Lucienne, as a wedding present. What about that?"

"It's an idea," she admitted. "I will give you time to think it over," he suggested, rising to his feet. "I know what that thirsty gleam in your eyes means."

"The perfect lover," she murmured.

"I will go through all the necessary business with your father whenever you tell me to," he continued. "There are some things about me he may not like, but I don't see that there is anything to which he could seriously object. No one is good enough for you, of course, my dear," he added, leaning over her chair.

"You really, think that?"

"Of course I do."

"Then kiss me, please."

He obeyed, with flattering alacrity. Her arms left his neck a moment or so later with reluctance.

"I never thought of myself as a marrying man," he confessed. "I had all sorts of ideas, but they didn't exactly shape themselves that way. I expect I shall get the hang of it all right, though."

"I am beginning to think that you will do for me very well," she assured him. "You notice things so beautifully. I like your having seen that thirsty gleam in my eyes."

"Two minutes—no longer," he promised.

In less than that time he reappeared from the companionway, and she was listening with lazy pleasure to the tinkling of ice in the silver shaker.

"Well, is it to be a bargain?"

"Supposing I am not allowed to marry you?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Then you can marry me all right if you want to. You won't starve. You may lose, perhaps, what you call your social position or a portion of it. You will probably like some of my friends and dislike the others cordially. You may hate my profession, still, if you care for me enough to marry me you will probably make allowances."

She held out her arms and drew his face downwards. This time there were people upon the *plage*, but there was a certain recklessness about her action.

"Of course," she murmured as their lips met, "if anyone has seen this you will have to marry me."

Their cocktails were served on deck in picnic fashion, and with a pleasant absence of formalities. Lucienne was more silent than usual. He, on the other hand, had abandoned for the moment his natural taciturnity. He pointed to one of the small cutters returning to the gunboat.

"This is really," he declared, "a bay of mysteries. Can you imagine why that old hulk is here?"

"I think so," she answered. "Father called on the commander yesterday, and he came to dinner. The Admiralty are issuing a new chart of the smaller Mediterranean bays, and they are here to take soundings."

"Seems queer to me," he observed. "I should not have said there were any soundings in this bay worth a snap of the fingers to the French or any other navy."

"Well, that's what the commander said," she told him. "He asked questions about you, too. You really are an American, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Half and half. My father was an American, my mother French. There was a great struggle about where I should be brought up. My father won. He was a pretty lenient sort of man, but there were some things he was firm about. I spent four years at Harvard, and I have been on the Continent most of the time since."

"You are becoming more interesting every moment," she declared.

"You had better hold on a bit," he warned her. "There's nothing very romantic about me. I am a journalist. I write regularly for the Paris edition of one of our home newspapers in which my father is interested."

"That's not so bad," she told him encouragingly. "I know several French journalists who come to my mother's receptions. Is your father very rich that he has an interest in a newspaper?"

"I should think he was fairly well off," Hamer acknowledged.

"That may help with dad," she reflected. "He pretends to think more of family than anything else, but he is really a terrible money grubber. I have a little money of my own, too, left me by an aunt. All that I shall want from you on our wedding day, if not before, is this boat."

"As a journalist," he confided, "nothing is more unsettling to my peace of mind than unsatisfied curiosity. Couldn't you tell me just what you've got on your mind, all of you people, about this '*Bird of Paradise*'?"

"I couldn't," she replied firmly, "for the simple reason that I haven't the faintest idea. You see, the whole point of the matter is this—the secret of the '*Bird of Paradise*' is the secret of other people."

"It is the first duty of a journalist," he observed, "to find out other people's secrets. I expect they would be awfully bucked at my New York office if I sent them a marvellous original story."

"Well, you may do that some day," she promised him. "The day after our wedding day, perhaps."

"What about making that to-morrow?" he suggested.

"Absurd! We are not living in Hollywood. We have to be married in a church and before the Mayor, and we have to have the consents of our parents, and there have to be some sort of legal papers—even when settlements are not necessary. I know all about it. My hand was once asked in marriage by one of my own country people. Then came that wretched little war in Morocco, and, alas! he disappeared."

"Sorry," the young man murmured.

"I cannot claim much sympathy," she replied. "I had only seen him twice, and then in a crowded salon. I am afraid that the chief feelings I had about him were of mild dislike. Still, I should have married him, I suppose, if he had come back from Africa."

Auguste announced luncheon, and they took their places at the improvised table, set out aft under the awning.

"Nothing makes me so domestic," she sighed, "as these little *a deux*. I think I shall make you a good wife, Hamer."

"You will make an adorable one."

"If I am as well fed as this, I shall at least be a good tempered one," she assured him, as she finished mixing the salad and served it.

"Hamer, there never was such a ham. Where ever do you get them?"

"Ship's stores," he told her. "We put them on at Gibraltar."

"And to think that all my wretched house guests," she reflected, "are squatting in uncomfortable positions on the sands or leaning against jagged rocks, and eating sandwiches from one hand and balancing a luke-warm drink in the other! I am afraid I shall be a better wife than a hostess, Hamer."

"Don't let's entertain at all then," he proposed. "Two is such a wonderful number."

"Hamer," she broke in, looking downwards, "who is that villainous looking foreign person in the small dinghy? He has been round the boat twice."

"No idea," was the somewhat indifferent reply.

"Remember," she warned him, "you must take the greatest care of your boat now that it has become a consideration of our marriage. It must be delivered to me in good condition the day afterwards."

"I hope my boat is not the only consideration?"

"It is not. I like you very much, Hamer, dear. I have never really quite understood what it means to love anybody, but I think that I love you. I am quite sure that I am going to very much. Nevertheless, I must have the boat."

"Before I part with her I shall give her a good overhauling myself," he announced. "The *Bird of Paradise* is a nice little craft, and I think I bought her cheap, but I really do not know what there is about her to send people crazy."

"You have had quite an interesting time, anyhow, since you tied up your corps mort here," she remarked.

"You bet, I have. The most interesting and the most wonderful time of my life."

There was a brief but happy pause. She leaned back and straightened her hair.

"We are going to have such fun up at the *château* this evening," she told him. "My revered father is sufficiently ruffled already because I backed out of going to the party, but when he knows how I have spent the day, and what the result of it all has been, there will be, as you say, don't you, fur flying?"

"He'll want to kick me out, you mean, when I pay my formal visit?" Hamer suggested.

"Father would never kick anybody. His manners are the most perfect thing about him. He may make difficulties, however."

"Shouldn't take a bit of notice of them," the young man advised her confidently. "I feel that I shall make a marvellously good husband."

"You fulfil the first qualification of a husband all right," she declared, laughing. "You are full of assurance and you amuse me tremendously. You know what Moliere said in one of his comedies—that the husband who keeps his wife amused never loses her?"

"Don't try me too high," he begged. "Remember, there is no international standard of humour, and I shan't want to part with you."

"I shall be a wife worth keeping," she promised him hopefully. "Not only am I, as you may have noticed, remarkably pretty, but I can be very affectionate."

"You are the prettiest girl I ever saw," he pronounced. "I always adored chestnut hair and brown eyes. Your mouth too—well, I could write a column, being a professional journalist, on your mouth alone."

She glanced in the mirror which she had withdrawn from her bag.

"Yes, I think you are right," she agreed. "It is a wonderful mouth—tender and yet provocative. I am not sure about my ears, though. You had better examine them."

"You will drive me crazy presently," he warned her.

"I'll yet you off my ears then for the time being. We will set Auguste's mind at rest and go and have our coffee. I see it at the other end of the deck."

They resumed their deck chairs, and she leaned back happily.

"Hamer, darling, I think it is wonderful to be engaged," she declared. "I always had a strange fancy for you, you know. The first time I ever saw you you were on deck wringing out your own bathing suit, and you seemed so capable...I wonder who that villainous-looking foreigner can be? He is still drifting about."

"And interested in the boat," Hamer remarked with a frown. "Never takes his eyes off it."

Chicotin, who was the solitary occupant of the dinghy, stared at them aggressively, as though he were aware of their criticism. Hamer rose to his feet and leaned over the side.

"What do you want round here?" he demanded. "Are you looking for anyone on board?"

Chicotin stared at him insolently.

"I make small promenade," he said. "I not hurt your boat."

"Where do you come from?"

"My business," was the prompt reply.

"He's a horrible fellow," Hamer observed, turning round to his companion. "I don't, quite see what we can do, though. The sea is free to him as well as to us."

She came to his side and took his arm, frowning slightly. The longer she looked at the intruder the deeper grew the disgust in her face. The man suddenly bent to his oars and moved off.

"Hamer," she confided, "the most unpleasant idea has come to me."

"What is it?"

"You have had three mysterious offers to buy the *Bird of Paradise*. You are unwilling to sell. If these people wish to give so much more money than the boat is worth it must be for one of two reasons."

"Go on, clever girl."

"It must be because there is something terribly valuable concealed on board—jewels or something of that sort. Or something terribly incriminating—stolen papers or bonds. If it was that, Hamer, and they couldn't get hold of the boat, they might try to destroy it!"

"What good would that do?" he demanded. "Stupid! They would get rid of something they were afraid of."

He smiled incredulously.

"Lucienne, my dear," he expostulated, "where on earth could anything be hidden upon the boat that I don't know about? I have no valuables or papers myself. My first visitor, too, pretty well ransacked the place. If there had been anything to be discovered I should think that the Princess would have had it."

Lucienne shook her head. Nothing that he had said seemed to reassure her.

"Do your two men sleep on board," she asked.

"Why, yes," he told her. "In the galley there. Why?"

"You don't keep a watch, I suppose?"

"Never thought of it," he admitted. "I never heard of a burglary at sea."

"Well, keep one to-night and the next few nights," she begged. "Just to please me."

"All right," he promised. "I believe the men sleep on deck, anyway, this hot weather."

"Have you a revolver?"

"Did you ever know an American without one? I will keep it loaded at my bedside if you say the word."

"Please do. And if there is any further attempt, or if any strangers visit you, will you promise to let me know?"

"Faithfully."

She drew a sigh of relief.

"Now I must really depart," she announced, with a glance at her wrist watch. "It has been a lovely morning, Hamer. Thank you so much."

"Swimming back, or shall I take you in the dinghy?"

She handed him her watch and adjusted her cap.

"I'll swim," she decided. "If I want you to come to-night and send a note will it be all right?"

"I'll come over in less than no time," he promised her.

They crossed the deck. She drew off her peignoir and stood poised for a moment at the top of the steps—a slim, fairy-like figure, seductively feminine, notwithstanding the almost boyishly straight line.

"Wait for my message," she called to him, as she turned round and trod water after her almost perfect dive.

He waved his hand and stood watching her until she landed.

CHAPTER XI

The girl slipped during the last few steps of her furious dance in the roughly built *café chantant* at Garoupe, and would have fallen from the slightly raised platform into the scanty row of chairs below, but for the promptness of a man seated there alone, who rose swiftly to his feet and caught her in his arms. She lay there for a moment or two, panting, an epitome of abandon in her tumbled skirts, her mass of disarranged black hair, and the trembling of her passion-riven body. The man gazed down at her in amazement.

"It is without a doubt the little Tanya!" he exclaimed.

She raised her head, which had rested upon his shoulder, stared at him a moment, then sank into the cane chair by his side.

"Paul Chicotin!" she cried. "It is thou, Paul, my little one."

"Large enough to have saved you from a bad fall," he reminded her. "And you, what are you doing here, dancing like a crazy thing in a village barn?"

"Oh, la la," she scoffed. "You will find fault with my performance next. I dance here because I choose. Remain where you are, little one. More must come of this."

She stood up and bowed to the small audience, who were still applauding. Another performer—a man—came forward to do his gymnastic turn. She caught Chicotin by the arm.

"This is a meeting," she exclaimed. "It means much to me. I need not perform unless I choose. We are going to drink a glass of wine together—yes?"

They left the scantily filled barn, crossed the road, and entered a *café*, rather a famous *café* in its way, with its table set against the stone wall, a precipice a few feet away. There was a screen of plane trees around the place. The lighting was almost negligible. She led the way to a table in the corner. He summoned a waiter from out of the shadows and ordered a bottle of champagne. She looked at him curiously from those marvellous black eyes of hers, which seemed to be flecked with gold.

"Things march well with thee, then," she observed.

"With those who know where to look for it, there is always money," he replied, boastfully.

"You are still a worker for The Cause," she asked, dropping her voice.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"No."

Her face was almost ugly as she leaned towards him.

"You are a renegade," she demanded.

"Bah, such folly!" he answered. "Years ago I was a nihilist. I was also an anarchist. Later I joined the Communist party. Now I belong to no party. I am an egoist. I work for myself, and myself only. My genius is for those who choose to pay for it."

"Ah!"

There was a world of meaning in the long drawn-out interjection. He rolled a cigarette and lit it. She watched his fingers and hands as though fascinated.

"In one thing I am unchanged," he declared. "I hate the people who possess wealth while I have nothing, but it is not for vague causes or for the community or any society that I labour now. It is for Paul Chicotin."

"Is it not that you serve the world best when you labour for the oppressed masses," she demanded, "when you work to destroy the capitalist and the aristocrat?"

"Perhaps so," he answered indifferently, "Only I do not care any longer for the masses. I work only for Paul Chicotin."

She bit her upper lip thoughtfully. It was not until the wine was served that she relaxed.

"To the sacred cause of the people," she said, raising her glass.

"To Paul Chicotin and Tanya," he countered. "In the world I have lost touch with, little one, I have not lost my fondness for thee. There is a lover—yes?"

"Plenty," she assured him. "I give myself where the cause demands it. I am not like you. I have no self outside it."

"If you give yourself to me," he suggested cunningly, "you might rekindle my enthusiasm."

"I wonder," she answered.

He held her hand. They kissed in the darkness, yet she was guarded even in her love making.

"What do you do here, Paul?" she asked.

"I have completed a marvellous piece of work within the last few days," he confided, "work no other person in the world could have ventured upon. For it I have already received fifty thousand francs. In a day or two I am to receive a further hundred thousand."

There was a covetous gleam in her eyes.

"Who is it that has such sums of money to spend and what is this work?" she demanded with apparent carelessness. "I remember you only as an indolent student who tampered with fine machinery and made clocks."

"This," he admitted, "is a clock. It is a clock *de luxe*. It is a clock such as never before has been fashioned. It is the most amazing piece of machinery in the world."

"Tell me some more," she begged.

"There is no more to tell," he rejoined. "It is not as it was in the old days when we worked in a band. I work now for a single employer and I have no place in his counsels."

"You have become a tool once more," she scoffed.

"I have earned money," he replied, "but I have earned money for Paul Chicotin. I have a bank balance such as a man might be proud of. Before this week is over I shall add to it one hundred thousand francs. Think of that, Tanya! Only a man of genius could succeed in such a fashion."

"I know more of the men of genius," she sighed, "who fail. Perhaps they fail because their aims are lofty, because they work only for those who suffer."

"I am one of those who suffer and have suffered," he answered doggedly. "Now I work for myself...Tell me what you are doing here?"

She leaned across the table, a familiar attitude, her elbows firmly planted, her oval face between her long, tapering fingers. She was sallow in complexion and her make-up was negligible. Her eyes, however, were brilliant and her full lips invitingly red. She was without doubt a Jewess.

"Tell me first," she insisted, "for whom you perform these works. Who has bought that cunning brain of yours, Paul, and those marvellous fingers? In whose cause do you labour?"

"The cause of Paul Chicotin," he repeated.

"And who reaps the benefit of your brain?"

"Paul Chicotin."

"It is all you are disposed to tell me?"

"It is as much as is good for you to know." She brooded over his response, smoking his cigarettes with fierce little gulps, drinking the wine greedily.

"Often they have asked for you in The Circle, Paul," she confided.

"The Circle for me does not exist any longer," he declared. "I am no longer a philanthropist. I shall soon be old. Life is only a matter of a few short years and then—gone—gone," he added with a snap of the fingers. "The ash heap gets us in the end. I wheeze no more of suffering humanity. It is folly that the strong should work for the weak, the clever man for the fool. I work for Paul Chicotin. Mine is the one unassailable philosophy of the world. I rely on no one. I depend on no one. I use my genius for myself."

She looked at him searchingly. She had the air of one seeking to penetrate into the man's mind, to learn what was there beneath the mere words. The fragmentary moonlight seemed to have changed her whole expression. She was no longer the Paris *gamine* dancing before a crude audience for unworthy applause. The hidden enthusiasm of a woman with a purpose in life had almost spiritualised her. She neglected her champagne. In that moment he was dimly aware of, although he viciously resented, the change in their relations.

"So your genius now," she murmured, "goes not for The Cause, but to make life soft for Paul Chicotin."

"It is ill put," he grunted, "but the meaning is the same."

"I liked it better," she told him, "when, without a scruple you blew off the heads and legs of innocent people to reach the one guilty one."

"And spent my days hungry, my nights in squalor, and every second in fear."

"And now," she continued, "you work for a master. What is the task, Paul, mon petit? You work on a machine perhaps to drive a hundred toilers on to the streets because it will do their work, or are you the paid servant of an assassin?"

"I work for Paul Chicotin," he repeated, doggedly. "That is why I can offer you champagne, a little flat at Juan or Nice, if you care to stay in these parts, and man, hours of the day and night in my company."

She sighed.

"I was starving when I wandered over here from Marseilles," she confided. "In a sense you are right, I suppose. The Circle is in trouble. We have good leaders, but they have no power. All our efforts fade away in speeches forgotten as soon as they are made, for our audiences seem to have melted away. Never has there been such an opportunity as we possess at present, and we cannot use it. If we had the money now that we had in the old times, the money to bribe, to buy the secrets of our enemies, we would brush away this fog which hangs over our beloved country. We would set the guillotine flashing once more in the Place de la Republique. We would see the heads tumble of the men who are sucking; her life blood away."

He looked uneasily around.

"That sort of talk," he warned her, "would get you into trouble nowadays."

"The leaves of the plane trees would need to betray us then, dear Paul," she pointed, out, "for there is no one else here, no one to listen to a poor little dancing girl whose heart aches for the suffering millions. We know who those men are who have betrayed her but they are far above our reach. We need a few men of courage like Paul Chicotin used to be."

He caressed her fingers and she permitted his touch passively.

"Paul Chicotin, the Killer for The Cause," he whispered, "is dead, but Paul Chicotin, the lover of Tanya, remains."

"Passion is dead in my heart," she sighed. "The man who wakes it must be one of us. Tell me then, my friend, since you think so dearly of me—for whom is it that you work?"

He shook his head.

"I answer all your questions, Tanya," he complained. "I tell you everything. To me you are dumb. Why are you singing for sous when your place is at the *Folies Bergères*? Are you down here for The Circle?"

"The Circle has been driven out of Paris," she confided. "It is re-established secretly, oh, and with so much caution, in Marseilles. I have a mission here, but it is so hard to make progress—penniless and without friends."

He drew from his pocket a *porte-monnaie* stuffed with notes and threw it on the table before her.

"Never again call yourself penniless," he chided. "Chicotin is at least faithful to his loves. You have been my *bonne amie*, Tanya. You need money? It is yours."

"I will take money," she told him, "only from my lover."

"Can I not be he once more?" Chicotin pleaded.

She shook her head sadly, although there was promise in her eyes.

"You have been, dear Paul," she admitted, "and a wonderful lover, too. You might be again, but you would have to remember that the price of my love would be—not your *mille* notes, but your help."

"But how can I help?" he demanded. "I have told you that Paul the Killer is dead. I work only for myself. I have no heart for any Cause. France, Italy, Russia—they are all one to me. Patriotism was once a religion in my heart. I have outlived that. I am Chicotin the individual. I love life, I love wine, I love comfort, and I love luxury, and—I love you."

"Prove it," she begged, clutching at his hand. "I am not asking you to become again The Killer, the scourge upon the earth, as the bourgeois Press once called you. Help me with a word or two of information."

"Well?"

She rose casually enough to her feet and looked searchingly around the place. Satisfied as to their complete detachment she resumed her chair, folded her arms and leaned across the table towards him.

"It has long been known, Paul," she said, "that France has been the carcase upon which a number of her so-called statesmen have fastened themselves—pilfering money, stealing it in huge sums, sucking her dry with the help of such poor dupes as the man whom they shot at Geneva for fear he should breathe a word as to his accomplices. Those men are still alive. For all we know they are still engaged in the greatest orgy of robbery that the world has ever known. The aristocrats, whose heads filled the baskets at the time of the revolution, and whose blood ran down the gutters, were innocent babes compared to these men. They believed that they had the right to oppress the poor. They were blatant in their lives as they were in their deaths. These men whom we Communists hate so now call themselves of the people. They profess to rule France for the people. They call themselves honest citizens of the Republic. They sit in the high places. Their mistresses hung with Jewels roll in their Limousines and befoul the very atmosphere of our adored Paris. Listen Paul," she went on, clutching him fiercely by the shoulder. "If we were in a position to publish the truth all France would be on our side, revolution would sweep over the country like a devouring wind. There would come the Soviet of France, starting upon the heights, not having to tear its way upwards with bleeding fingers. France, the real France, would rule the world. Bear with me, Paul, a minute, I implore you."

She drank wine, holding the glass to her lips with trembling fingers.

"Calm yourself, my little Tanya," her companion begged. "This is good for the meetings. It is good when you are in company with the others, but remember—we seem to be alone, but one never knows. Calm yourself, my child. I am here waiting to listen."

"Well, listen, then," she went on a moment or so later. "I was with Berthold a few minutes before he died on the scaffold. There was a company of gendarmes there and a *commissaire* of police. They believed me to be his sister. Berthold's last speech was overheard by all these people—also the priest—but he was clever. He knew what I was there for, and he knew that a direct word from him to me, and a bullet from the revolver the chief of the gendarmes was holding would silence him before he could finish his sentence. He told me of a little money in his lodgings. 'Leave Paris alone,' he advised me. 'Get out of Marseilles. There is no future for you there. Find work at one of those pleasant places on the coast—Cannes, Juan, Nice. In the pleasure haunts of the world they will let you alone and you may forget.' Then the signal was given. Berthold's cigarette was placed between his lips, He passed through the door."

"Well?" Chicotin asked a little breathlessly.

"Berthold told me with those dying words that the truth was to be found in these parts," she pointed out. "That is why I am here. Can you help me, my lover that used to be, my lover who might still hold me in his arms?"

Paul Chicotin shivered although the night was warm, and the perfume of the flowering shrubs that, hung over the terrace was heavy and soothing.

"Was the money in his room?" he asked.

"The money was there—a few hundred francs, barely more. There had been a letter. It was gone. The place was swept bare. The police had seen to that. They knew very well what he was striving to tell me. They stood around in the room of execution to see that he carried the secret of what he had learnt with, him to the grave."

Chicotin lit a fresh cigarette with shaking yellow-stained fingers. Already the stumps of a dozen were on the table.

"The thing is probably a myth," he declared. "There is nothing to grasp—no starting point. What good can you do groping about this coast looking—for what? You don't know. Berthold should have had the courage to shout one name, one hint. The bullet would have been a pleasanter death."

"Berthold was wiser than you," she told him scornfully. "He knew that if he had spoken that definite word, if he had given me any hint which it was possible to follow, I should never have seen the sunlight again."

Chicotin shivered once more. He was sure of himself but he was at heart a sentimentalist.

"Is there anything to keep you here?" he asked.

"Nothing," she assured him. "I come to all these places on the chance. There are ten francs owing to me for the song and dance to-night. My room I pay for by the day. My clothes are only fit to be destroyed."

They rose and he took her arm.

"I have a small car," he said. "Shall it be Nice or Juan?"

They passed out of the garden café into the shadow-hung street. She clung to his arm.

"Where you wish—where you wish," she breathed so softly that the words almost died away before they reached his ears. She clung to his arm, however. She followed his guidance.

CHAPTER XII

Louise, arm in arm with Perissol, walked in the pine-hung gardens of the villa, on the lighthouse hill, and breathed in happiness with the sunlight and the fragrant breeze.

"My dear beloved," she murmured, as they paused for a moment to look down upon the bay, "if only this dark cloud could pass away. If only we could be happy here together, and feel that France was herself again."

His stern face relaxed slightly for the moment, as he pressed her arm.

"It is the uncertainty of it all that is so nerve racking," he declared. "Action I never fear. It may be ugly, it may be dangerous, but it is movement. Here we live in a state of suspended animation. I used to say that I feared nothing in life. To-day I am afraid of making a mistake. I might find myself at any moment in such a position that, if I were to do the right and honourable thing, men might point to me in days to come as having been the man who was responsible for the ruin of his country."

"Some day or other," she told him, "you will have to come to a woman for advice."

"I know very well what yours would be," he admitted, "but then, probably, even you do not grasp all the side issues."

"As, for instance?"

"If I were to make the discovery which I am dimly beginning to apprehend, do you realise to whom I should have to make my report?"

She shook her head.

"I imagine to the Chamber of Deputies."

"Not at all. I should have to make my report to the person who is responsible for my appointment, the man who, in the absence of the Premier, is the leader of the House Edouard Mermillon."

"That gives you ideas?" He smiled bitterly.

"It gives me ideas as to why I received the unique appointment I hold."

"Figure me now, beloved, as a living note of interrogation."

He looked around. They were in the loneliest part of the grounds. Their solitude was absolute.

"Edouard Mermillon is probably at the present moment the most brilliant politician France has possessed for years. I do not think that there is his equal for astuteness in Europe. He has confided to me his ideas as

to what the foreign policy of France should be. To my mind they were inspired. If he is able to carry them out France will never have anything more to fear from Germany or any other foreign nation."

"Marvellous," she whispered.

"He knows very well that I did not seek office," Perissol continued. "He knows very well that I do not care for personal advancement or honours I seek only to serve my country with all my heart and soul. He throws down the gage to me and he smiles. If by any chance what one is driven dimly to suspect turned out to be true and he was found to be implicated in these recent horrible events, should I be the man, he asks himself, to expose him? He knows very well that I would rather shield him, because no one else in the world could carry out his marvellous policy and because without him France would at once drift into the hands of the Communists."

Louise was more than a little startled. She betrayed it, perhaps, in her manner.

"You see a long way," she ventured.

"Further than my critics will allow," he said smiling. "But you, dear, I want you to understand the peculiar nature of the problem all this presents, even though fate should place in my hands the knowledge of the truth. How am I to use that knowledge? Picture me rising in the Chamber and denouncing the one man upon whom the safety of the country depends. Picture me alternately going to him privately and saying, 'Send in your portfolio and disappear or I disclose the truth.' In either case the wound to France would be mortal."

"Then if you were a perfectly logical being," she decided, "you would join the malefactors."

"I suppose I should," he admitted. "The only thing is that this is an illogical world and an illogical position. I must carve my own way out. The trouble is that the light comes slowly. See what would happen, Louise, if I did what I more than once felt inclined to do. I would not mind," he added, with a grim smile, "making a serious wager with you that if I were to go down to the '*Aigle Noir*' to-day and close myself in with Edouard Mermillon and the Baron de Brett and tell them all I know, tell them what I suspect but cannot prove, the Baron would light a cigar, Edouard Mermillon one of his precious cigarettes, and he would ask me with that wonderful smile of his and that gentle voice, 'What are you going to do about it, General?' I could not answer him."

"I can understand what you say about Mermillon," she said, thoughtfully. "He has already created an entirely different atmosphere in two of the countries where we were becoming highly unpopular. He has just that mesmeric gift that the English Jew of the last century, Disraeli, is reputed to have had. But de Brett—I cannot follow you there."

"De Brett, of course, personally counts for nothing," Perissol admitted, "but anything serious that happened to him would disorganise the whole banking world of Europe. Finance plays far too important a role in sound government nowadays. De Brett has been a good friend to France and we should be face to face with a terrible financial crisis if we impeached him and if he retaliated."

"I am glad I am not a man," Louise exclaimed. "The study of all these possibilities is almost maddening."

"I share your thankfulness, dearest," he assured her tenderly. "If I hadn't a companion with a plastic mind like yours to come to these days life would be utterly unendurable. I seem to have turned into a sort of super-detective since I took up my new office. I see before me the promised land of accomplishment but my heart and judgment fail me."

Perissol and his companion continued their walk through the woods. In sheltered places the perfume of the pines, sweet and aromatic, was almost overpowering. There were barer spots, however, where the east wind, warmed by the tropical sun, was like a breath of Paradise. She clung to his arm passionately.

"If this were my last word to you I would say it," she declared. "At all costs preserve your confidence in yourself. Others have said it—not I alone—that the time must come when one man will save France. You will be that man. You have the will, you have the power, you have just that touch of genius which is necessary. Other countries have yielded to the inspiration of one-man government. France has nothing to lose by following suit."

"I lack one quality," he told her a little sadly, "amongst many others, of course. I fear that I lack ambition."

"But think of the wonder of it," she urged. "If one could revive France and live. Our country is too beautiful to be brought to the threshold of ruin by all these plots and counter plots."

"The plots and counter plots," he reminded her, "are all the result of the evil underneath. It is this eager desire to enjoy, this foolish passion for luxury, which has created the fantastic hankering after wealth even in the minds of some of our finest citizens. That honest bourgeois class that Balzac taught us to appreciate, who were content with a simple house and a simple life, seems to have passed out of existence."

"I am afraid," Louise sighed, "my sex is largely to blame. It is the women who goad men on, always wanting more and more money nowadays."

"French women were always extravagant," he agreed, "but in my younger days their menkind were strong enough to keep them within bounds. To-day the world is suffering—Paris goes on spending. Neither the conscience nor the will of man is strong enough to bear the strain. Communism," he wound up, "is an infernal creed, but if ever the time existed or could exist which might seem to justify some of its principles it is to-day."

"Communism! Horrible!" she shivered.

"There is something good in every creed if it be honest," he declared. "All the same, the triumph of Communism in France to-day would mean her ruin. Listen—"

There were footsteps to be heard through the undergrowth. Raymond appeared suddenly before them. He had descended the slope by one of the narrow paths which intersected the broader avenues, and he was a little breathless.

"Mon General," he announced. "The Chef de la Surete of Marseilles is anxious to speak to you."

"On the telephone?"

"No, monsieur. He came to Cannes by 'plane, and has motored over here. He would like to return in half an hour, if possible."

"I will mount to the house at once. You will excuse?" he added, turning to Louise. "Come yourself, I beg of you, by the easier way. I am interested to hear what Monsieur Boyer has to say."

He waved his hand in farewell and climbed the steep hillside with giant strides, leaving his secretary breathless far in the rear. In less than ten minutes he was on the terrace where a stiff-looking little man with military bearing, black moustache and imperial, in strictly conventional clothes, was awaiting him.

"Mon General," he said, saluting. Perissol took him by the arm.

"Come into my study," he invited. "We shall be quite alone. You can disclose your news there."

Boyer was a man renowned, in the circles amongst which he moved, for his precise manner of dress, of speech, and of deportment. On this occasion, however, it was easy to see that he was suffering from some sort of shock. He found it difficult to remain seated quietly in the chair which his host had designated.

"My chief," he began, "you will understand that I am in a state of some disturbance. Early this morning I found occasion to dismiss from the service of the country two members of the detective staff of my bureau, two men who have held for many years important positions connected with the Port of Marseilles."

General Perissol stiffened into sudden attention. He glanced towards the door to be sure that it was closed and out on to the terrace, which was entirely deserted.

"You have further news concerning the *Bird of Paradise*?" he asked, as he stepped back again.

"News which should have been yours twenty-four hours after the first inquiry you put in, General," was the regretful reply. "Amongst my faults the worst, perhaps, is that I am too much inclined to trust my subordinates. Figure to yourself, General, for twenty years these two men have served me and served the State. They have been heavily bribed—even now I am not sure by whom—but that may transpire. For the moment they remain in the cells. The *Bird of Paradise* was built to the order and instructions of a man who gave the name of Dupont. It was in his possession for one month, and, from the information I possess, I have no doubt whatever that the man Dupont was no other than the man whose name is forbidden in France—the man who was shot at Geneva."

"He sailed the boat?" the General demanded.

"For one month. He cruised about Toulon, Bandol, and as far as Sainte Maxime. Either his wife or some other woman was on board with him."

"You have the plans of the boat?"

"General, the story of my humiliation continues. The plans have been stolen—when or how no one in the bureau has the slightest idea. These two miscreants who lie in the cells are of course responsible."

"The ship's builders?"

"Partrout et Fils—a well-known firm—but every single man employed was an Englishman. They seem to have come over for the sole purpose of building the *Bird of Paradise*. Afterwards they returned home again and it is curious that in no single case have I been able to discover one who left an address. My subordinate has already telephoned to London. We shall, of course, in time, trace down one or two of them."

"Was the present purchase of the boat a genuine one?" the General asked.

"Of that, I think, there seems to be no reasonable doubt," was the eager reply. "The young man's name as on the charter has been confirmed. It is, as he had announced, Hamer Wildburn. He is an American and a contributor to the Paris edition of an American newspaper. His record is perfectly clean and the purchase seems to have been an ordinary legitimate one. It took place through an agent, who has since given up business, and it appears that the price paid was in the neighbourhood of sixteen hundred pounds."

"This is all the information you have been able to collect?"

"For the moment, General, I regret that it is all."

Perissol paced the room thoughtfully for a moment.

"Monsieur Boyer," he said. "We are always, to a certain extent, at the mercy of our subordinates, and fifteen to twenty years is a long period of service. When, however, false reports are accompanied by the theft of the plans of a suspected boat the matter presents itself in a serious light."

"Mon General," Boyer pleaded. "I offer no excuse. I have a wife and family. I have been in the service for forty years. Some of the most dangerous of the felons that haunted Marseilles have been brought to the scaffold in my time. It was I, with a revolver in my hand, who took Berthold."

"That is all to the good," the General admitted. "The arrest of Berthold and his execution was good work. It is not my custom to act harshly. It would influence my opinion very much if during the next week the plans of the *Bird of Paradise* were discovered."

"Everything that is humanly possible shall be done," Boyer promised. "There is another matter, General, concerning which I should like to speak. It is not directly connected with the affair of the *Bird of Paradise*, but it might turn out to be of some consequence."

"Proceed," his chief invited.

"The little friend and mistress of Berthold, the anarchist, who passed as his sister, and who was with him during his last few minutes, bears the name of Tanya Vizille. His last words bequeathed to her some money in his rooms, and recommended her to come to these parts. The recommendation may have had no significance, but one wonders. The money was less than three hundred francs, but the girl is living in a luxurious flat at Juan, dancing at nights and spending money freely. She has been the companion of Communists and anarchists all her days, and is herself suspected of being a member of what they call The Circle. She is associated at the present moment with a man named Chicotin, a Russian, who is now employed by Edouard Mermillon, the Cabinet Minister, on his yacht. He is supposed to be a sort of super-engineer, but he is under strong suspicion of having been at various times in his career a manufacturer of—bombs."

"I should continue to have the young woman watched," the General advised. "At present, I can connect her in no way with our immediate anxieties, but one cannot tell. Now permit me to offer you some refreshment, Monsieur Boyer."

"A glass of wine in haste, with pleasure," the other accepted. "My great anxiety now is to return. I am expecting a report on the matter of the missing plans of the *Bird of Paradise* this evening."

"Compose yourself, my dear Boyer," his chief begged, after the wine had been served. "The more I think of this affair the less I am inclined to blame you. You may be sure that it would not be a light thing that would cause me to exercise extreme measures in the case of such an official as you, with such a period of long service behind him."

"Your words inspire me with the deepest gratitude, my General," the other said fervently.

"Tell me now," Perissol went on. "I shall not detain you, I understand your haste. But in a few words—how do you find things in Marseilles? We have our own great and special anxieties in Paris just now, I can assure you, but Marseilles is often in our thoughts."

"Marseilles, until the coming of the millennium or the day of doom," Boyer declared, "will be one of the hotbeds of crime in France. There is one thing to be borne in mind, however. Political crime does not flourish to the same extent as personal vice and lawlessness. We have to deal chiefly with subtle and daring acts of robbery and violence by bands of criminals associated only for the purpose of gain. There are many places in France to-day of little note where Communism and even anarchy flourish more than with us. Berthold was an exception. His fate has terrified many."

Boyer rose to his feet and the General saw him to his car.

"I wish you a successful flight home, and have no anxieties," were the latter's last words. "Solve the mystery of the *Bird of Paradise* for me and there shall be something for your buttonhole."

CHAPTER XIII

Chicotin, a little sulky, obeyed his employer's unexpected summons a few mornings later, and presented himself in the latter's suite just before noon. He was wearing a mauve silk shirt, which came from a Paris *chemisier*, blue trousers from St. Tropez, and blue espadrilles, with a red handkerchief knotted around his neck. The whole effect was exceedingly chic according to the summer fashions of the moment. His master looked at him from head to foot with a faint smile of amusement upon his lips.

"Very nice, indeed, Chicotin," he observed. "The costume of Juan-les-Pins, without a doubt."

"Monsieur did not send for me to discuss my clothes, I presume," the man rejoined sullenly.

"Certainly not. They happen to amuse me, that's all. I sent for you, Chicotin, to inquire as to why you are neglecting your duties."

"Duties? My task is finished."

"The first part of it only."

Chicotin pointed through the portholes.

"Monsieur would not desire that I committed suicide by venturing on board the *Bird of Paradise* with those searchlights playing? It would end the whole affair."

"You await, then, the withdrawal of the gunboat?"

"But naturally. The withdrawal of the gunboat or the cessation of the searchlights."

"And in the meantime you inhabit a flat in Juan-les-Pins with your mistress, regardless of the fact that you have been allotted quarters on board here and that you are being paid a handsome salary for acting as my consulting engineer."

"The title is a sinecure," Chicotin pointed out. "There is nothing to be done to engines that are stationary."

"You are mistaken," Mermillon replied. "I require you to remain on duty. What else do I pay you for?"

"I am not an eight-hour mechanic or a slave," Chicotin protested. "I am willing to carry out my contract when there is anything to be done. When there is not why should I stay and gaze at dumb machinery in an atmosphere entirely disagreeable to me? You have divined rightly. My mistress is at Juan-les-Pins. I prefer to be there with her."

"That is very interesting," Mermillon observed tonelessly, "but I have sent for you to say that in future you will report each morning for orders and again at 6 o'clock in the evening."

Chicotin's face darkened.

"There can be no orders to give under the present conditions," he grumbled. "If Monsieur wishes to hasten the finish of this business he would have that gunboat removed."

"No one but a fool like you could have made such a suggestion," was the caustic reply. "One lives nowadays in a glasshouse of publicity. If the gunboat were sent away at my request, and things were to happen on board the *Bird of Paradise* directly afterwards, the situation, so far as I was concerned, might easily become embarrassing."

Chicotin's face was dark with anger.

"It is not fair that my efforts should be hampered in such a fashion," he insisted. "I have carried out my contract. I have produced an even more wonderful machine than I promised. It is no fault of mine that conditions prevent its being used. Unless you can smooth the way to bring this business to an end, I think that you should make me a further advance on account of the hundred thousand."

"There will be no more money until the affair is concluded," Mermillon warned him. "That event would find me without a doubt in a generous frame of mind. What have you done with the fifty thousand francs?"

"I had debts," the man admitted. "Then—since you seem to know it—it is nothing to be ashamed of—I have a little friend in Juan who sends the *mille* notes spinning. It is not given to all men to live like hermits."

"Your manner of life does not interest me," Mermillon assured him. "There will be no more money until the deed is accomplished, and until then you will report at 10 o'clock every morning and 6 every evening. On the other hand, on the day when your coup is successfully dealt your extra bonus will be raised to a hundred and fifty thousand francs."

Chicotin's eyes shone with desire. One hundred and fifty thousand francs! What could not be done with such a sum? Tanya could have the bracelet she coveted, and a few thousand francs for The Cause, if it made her happy. He himself could play roulette like a prince. What he would win! He moistened his dry lips.

"I could, perhaps, arrange so that the attachments on board were unnecessary," he muttered. "It could be done with a few hours' work. All that I would have to do in that case would be to accelerate the time fuse and leave the despatch box into which I have fitted it on board. Getting away would still be a risk."

"One hundred and fifty thousand francs is worth a risk," his employer told him coolly.

"I shall need to visit the chemist's," Chicotin announced. "I must go there at once. At six o'clock I will return. I shall work all night. During the early morning I may devise a scheme for getting on board."

"Very good," Mermillon agreed.

Chicotin drew a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote a name and address. He passed it to his employer.

"If I succeed for you, but disappear myself into atoms, which is clearly possible, I desire that you will pay the money to my friend."

"It is a reasonable request."

"I have Monsieur's permission to depart then?"

"Under the present circumstances the sooner the better."

From their chairs under the awning, which covered most of the deck of the *Aigle Noir*, de Brett and his host watched Chicotin step into the little dinghy and push off towards the shore.

"Our friend inspires me with a theme for a brief essay," Mermillon remarked. "It is a strange thing how many famous criminals have delighted in exotic and luxurious attire. These American gangsters, for instance, the list of their wardrobes, silk shirts, and silk underclothes, filled whole columns of the newspapers a year or so ago. One very notorious bootlegger gunman is said to have found his way into what is known as New York society, and to have become a recognised arbiter in the knowledge of clothes and of luxury appurtenances. Our Chicotin has gone out to-day to conquer like a tropical bird of brilliant plumage. To-night he will work for hours in a suit of overalls, with death waiting for him round the corner if he makes a single mistake."

"Very likely for us, too," de Brett grumbled. "Lily has invited me to dinner. The Marquis has been called suddenly to Paris. I think I shall accept her invitation."

"Do, my dear fellow, by all means," Mermillon agreed. "I am afraid I have been rather a dull host," he apologised, "although there have been many matters of business which we have profitably discussed."

"We could have discussed them equally well in Paris or Brussels," the Baron pointed out, "and I confess that I am tired of the quiet life. Your society, my dear Edouard, is always wonderful, and I must admit that the sight of that infernal little schooner yacht fascinates me. Still, I shall tear myself away before long."

"You will go to Paris?"

De Brett shook his head thoughtfully.

"To Brussels, I fancy, until this matter is finally settled. I shall be at the end of the telephone there. I shall hear quickly of your success or of disaster."

There was a subtle significance in the faint twitching of Mermillon's lips, which scarcely amounted to a smile.

"You are fortunate, my dear Albert," he said, "to be a citizen of two countries, and a native of only one. Brussels will always provide an asylum for you."

The Baron permitted himself a little gesture of contempt.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "For men like you and me no asylum will ever be necessary."

"If the world knows what is good for it, you are right, my friend," his companion assented. "But sometimes men—even nations—achieve insanity...Ah, now approaches one of the enjoyable moments of the day. Here is something worth talking about. I have finished with my despatches. One of them, by-the-by, to our friend over in London, is I think a masterpiece. I have worked Chicotin into a reasonable frame of mind. In half an hour's time there will be luncheon and at this moment cocktails are arriving."

"And so," de Brett remarked, looking over across the narrow strip of sea between the *Aigle Noir* and the gunboat, "is a visitor."

"Our friend, the commander, paying his return visit," Mermillon observed. "I begged him to come in the morning, to be sure of finding us at home. *Matelot, l'échelle!*"

The two men strolled over to the rail to greet their guest. The latter saluted them respectfully. These were very great men whom he had the honour of visiting.

"Delighted to see you, Commander," Mermillon said, as they shook hands. "You are in time to join us in our pre-luncheon cocktail. Perhaps you will give us the pleasure of your company at *déjeuner?*"

"Sorry," the visitor regretted, "My first officer is away for the day. An aperitif I will accept with pleasure."

The three men sat down, and, after a few minutes' general conversation, Mermillon made tactful reference to the work upon which the gunboat was supposed to be engaged.

"I am not a naval man, Commander, I must admit," he said, "but the nature of your operations here has been somewhat of a surprise to me."

"If one may go so far as to admit the fact," the officer replied, "they have been equally a surprise to me. We continue the work according to instructions. I took the precaution of having them confirmed from Toulon."

"Your men appear to me," the Baron observed, "remarkably well disciplined. They make little disturbance. The presence of a ship of war, however, in a tiny pleasure bay like this is naturally a trifle disconcerting. My distinguished friend here, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, has been engaged for some time upon a scheme to be submitted to the Counsel of Europe, the object of which is to secure peace for the world. Those rakish-looking guns of yours only a few hundred yards away must, I fancy, be disconcerting."

The commander smiled broadly.

"You will understand," he said, "that I cannot discuss my mission here in a general way, but there is no harm in confiding to you my personal impression. I cannot help believing that I was simply sent here because of the presence of a French Minister of great distinction and a banker of international fame."

"Someone in that case would seem to have been a trifle officious," Mermillon reflected.

"If I may continue to speak entirely personally," the commander went on, "I am not at all sure that my presence here, from the point of view I have just suggested, is not a wise dispensation. Marseilles and Toulon are both dangerous centres of Communism in these days. Le Prefet of Toulon, who visited the Admiral not long ago, has many anxieties. Deeds of violence in the city occur with lamentable frequency, and I fear that the next 10 years will witness many of them. In a beautiful holiday centre such as this it would be ruinous and most distressing to the inhabitants to have tragedy, as it were, thrust down their throats. A few extra precautions are worth taking. At the same time, Monsieur le Ministre," the officer

added, rising to his feet and turning respectfully to his distinguished host, "if there is anything in the conduct of our operations which can be altered to suit your convenience, I should only be too glad to consent to it, so long as it does not clash with my instructions."

"You are very kind, sir," the latter acknowledged. "Your name, I think you said, was Berard?"

The young man bowed. Mermillon rose to his feet and laid his hand upon his shoulder as they walked together towards the gangway.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "if you could arrange to discontinue those searchlights, say after 3 o'clock, it would be a blessing. I am here for a vacation, it is true, but I have messengers from Paris every day and sometimes I am working with them until long after midnight. My best hours for sleep are from 3 o'clock until eight."

The commander saluted.

"I will give orders for the searchlights to cease an hour earlier, that is at 3 o'clock," he promised. "If at any future time I can be of service, Monsieur, I am at your disposition."

"I shall not forget your courtesy, sir," Mermillon assured him.

The Baron was helping himself to another cocktail when his host resumed his seat.

"You see, I have solved Chicotin's difficulty," the latter remarked. "It was an idea, I think."

The Baron lit a cigar and smoked thoughtfully for several moments.

"An idea, beyond a doubt," he admitted. "Yet one has to consider this. If anything curious were to happen between the hours of 3 and 4 o'clock and our young friend was court-martialled he would naturally disclose the fact that it was at our request that he discontinued those searchlights."

Mermillon smiled.

"Ah, my dear Albert," he said. "I think that fortune is with us because the small things march our way. I happen to know through your friend, the Marquise, that the young American, Hamer Wildburn, was the first to protest against the searchlights. I have exchanged courtesies with the young man. It would be natural for me to use my influence to help him in the matter. You will excuse me, Baron? I go to have a word with Chicotin. He will be a happy man. He is now a step nearer the fortune at which he aims."

Chicotin and Tanya dined late that evening in the garden of the Provençal Hotel. They had chosen one of the small tables, half hidden amongst the trees. Chicotin was an ardent lover, and he liked the surreptitious caresses impossible in a crowded room. It was 11 o'clock when they sat down for dinner, but what an evening it had been! They had gambled a little at the Casino and won. They had drunk cocktails there, crossed the road, and danced at Maxim's. Cocktails there, and so on to the Provençal Bar, where they spent a pleasant hour. Then back to Tanya's room, where two new frocks from Cannes had just arrived, and must be tried on with the aid of Chicotin, who always declared that if he had not been a miraculous machinist he would have been a ladies' dressmaker. He dared even to put the finishing touches and criticise the creations of one of the most famous dressmakers in the world. Each gown awoke in him fresh transports. Tanya at last escaped.

"You are terrible to-night, my dear Paul," she cried. "Remember that the night is young."

His expression suddenly changed.

"Yes, the night is young," he agreed. "At 3 o'clock—"

She stood rigidly in front of her mirror.

"Yes?" she Queried

"At 3 o'clock I shall be gay still, but not with you, dear one."

She half turned her head.

"With another woman, perhaps?"

"With no other woman."

"I should think not, indeed," she murmured, coming across the room towards him, her arms outstretched, that terribly seductive look in her eyes. "At 3 o'clock, what?" she went on, her right arm around his neck, the fingers of her left hand caressing his cheek. "Tell me, my lover, what is it that you do at 3 o'clock?"

"A trifling commission," he confided. "Something to be done by Paul Chicotin that he may pay for more frocks for Tanya, more of the *jetons* one flings upon the board, more of the glorious sunshine of life."

"Three o'clock," she repeated wonderingly.

"Ah, well, forget that," he enjoined, "or if you will speak of it again remember this it is an affair of two hundred thousand francs."

"Paul!" she remonstrated, patting his cheek once more. "There is no man in the world clever enough to earn two hundred thousand francs at 3 o'clock in the morning."

He suddenly realised the hour, the number of cocktails he had drunk, his companion with her blind enthusiasms.

"I talk no more," he insisted. "I am fatigued with hunger. I have spoken for our little table under the trees at the Provençal. You will wear the robe cerise. I will arrange that scarf. Then at half-past two, I leave you for an hour, and at half-past three, when Juan sleeps, will be our next hour of love."

She pinched his cheeks.

"I am your slave, little one," she submitted. "Come and choose what remains of my toilette."

So that was how they came to dine under the trees at the Provençal and Tanya was seductive and amorous in turn, as he liked her best. When the lights went out and the waiters began to linger around impatiently they crossed the way to Maxim's, where they danced under the trees and found a seat once more in the background. Chicotin glanced at his watch.

"It is *triste* here this evening," he declared. "We are the only two who seem to have gaiety in our hearts and the flavour of living upon our lips. There is an hour before I start."

She sprang to her feet.

"We go home then—yes?" she invited. "You may rest there if you will. The car is outside my door. You can start from there."

They walked through the maze of pavement cafes with their dance gardens and small restaurants. His fingers trembled as they turned the key of Tanya's door. They mounted to the first floor. With a little laugh she threw herself upon the couch.

"Give me a drink, dear lover," she cried. "There is everything there on the side—champagne even. Open a bottle and have a drink to your enterprise. Sit here. I will spare you just that much room," she went on, making a little circle in the air. "We will talk together and I will pronounce a benediction upon your enterprise. You are going to rob someone, perhaps? A brave deed. It is for you people with brains to take their possessions away from the plutocrats. I love a daring thief. Paul. I love you."

The fingers which tore away the wires of the champagne bottle trembled. Paul Chicotin was treading on air. Even to himself he was great. A man with a brave enterprise before him—an enterprise which was to save or destroy a country. He poured out the wine, drained a glassful, and took another over to her. Passion flamed in his eyes.

"Drink," he begged. "Drink quickly."

She drew him down on to the side of the couch.

"Paul," she whispered, "I shall remain here counting the seconds while you are away. I pray for you. Tell me what it is that you do. What is it that you carry about in that despatch box which you look at so anxiously?"

She drank half the contents of the glass, then she placed it to his lips. He drained the remainder greedily.

"I do what it is not within the power of any other man in the world to accomplish," he confided. "I save France from revolution, I spread to the winds of heaven written words which might have brought her to the threshold of ruin. Two hundred thousand francs is little enough to pay. It is my brain which has done this. It is your lips and your arms which will reward."

He drew her to him and she easily yielded to his embrace—one arm around his neck, the other, however, still free.

"Paul," she murmured, "what is it then you do?"

"The last record," he cried. "At three o'clock it will be back amongst the atoms of the universe—gone for all time, Tanya!"

There was a sudden pain in his back. The eyes that a moment before had seemed luminous with love were glaring at him. He was drunk! He was sure he must be drunk. But the pain. His head was swimming. He fell back. Tanya slipped from his arms. He lay on the floor and he felt the slow ebbing away of life.

CHAPTER XIV

At the sound of the stroke of the hour of three, a metallic yet somehow significant chime, from the chapel hidden in the lighthouse woods. Mermillon rose slowly to his feet and leaned over the side of the boat. The Baron, in his pyjamas and dressing-gown, had already taken his place there. The seconds passed without a word between the two men. The commander of the French gunboat was evidently qualifying for promotion. The play of the searchlights had ceased some five minutes before. Black darkness enveloped the small bay. The long slanting beam from the Antibes lighthouse passed over the top of the woods, searched the far seas, but it did nothing to illumine the sombre obscurity below. Mermillon drew a little nearer to his companion. A very rare emotion trembled in his voice.

"If Chicotin succeeds," he said, "It will be within the next five minutes."

"A long time to wait," the Baron growled. Mermillon leaned speechless over the side. His face had lost its calm satirical expression, and he was like a man stretched upon the rack. He stood slightly turned away so that not even his companion could see the agony through which he was passing. Neither of the two men seemed to be able to preserve the sense of time, but when the quarter chimed from the chapel in the woods, though even the seconds had seemed intolerably long, Mermillon gave vent to a groan of surprise.

"Chicotin has failed," he muttered.

"Name of heaven, what was that?" the Baron exclaimed with a start.

Whatever the sound denoted, it came, alas, from the far distance. A low rumbling first, as though of thunder, then a crash, an opening of the black skies over westward as though to let out a flood of summer lightning. Then silence—darkness and silence more profound than ever.

The commander of the gunboat heard it, sprang from his bunk, and hurried up on deck also to gaze around at nothing. Perissol heard it and leaned over from his balcony, straining his eyes and striving to penetrate the darkness of the near horizon. Tanya, who had been dealing a hand in Juan Casino, heard it a great deal more distinctly, and almost dropped the cards from her bejewelled fingers. The little company of eight seated at the table stared at one another without any inclination to move. Tanya, whose bank now amounted to a good many *mille*, and who had just had *banco* called against her, was the first to recover herself. Perhaps because she understood. She showed no sign of the relief which had set her wicked little heart dancing with joy.

"Whatever has happened," she exclaimed, "it is not for our harm. Let us finish the hand."

She gave the card which had been demanded—ten—and triumphantly, with her amazing finger nails, pointed to the six which she had already shown upon the table. The man who had gone *banco*, with a shrug of the shoulders, opened his pocket book and counted out the money. Tanya leaned back in her chair humming a little tune. Poor Chicotin! His boasts, then, had not been idle ones.

"*Un banco de quatorze mille*," the *croupier* announced.

This time no one paid any attention. The little company had recovered from then stupor and everyone except Tanya had rushed to the doors.

"*La main passe*," Tanya declared, stretching out her hand and clutching her winnings. Everything had happened according to plan.

The Baron was a few minutes late in the morning for his *petit déjeuner*, which he made a rule of sharing with his host in a pleasant corner of the deck. He found Mermillon with the *Eclaireur* gripped in his hand. He had evidently just finished reading something of interest.

"*Eh bien, mon ami?*" de Brett exclaimed inquiringly.

Mermillon laid down his paper.

"It is the old story," he confided. "God and men make plans and women destroy them. I knew that vain little fool of a Chicotin was playing the Don Juan. I ought to have confined him to the ship until his work was done."

"What then has happened?" the Baron demanded.

"One has to guess. We, I think, can gill in the blanks better than anyone. A block of flats newly built in Juan-les-Pins, only one of which was occupied, has been blown to pieces—wrecked completely and absolutely soon after 3 o'clock this morning. The owner of the flat was playing *chemin-de-fer* at the Casino. All that this journal professes to know about her is that she came from Marseilles and that she had a lover—apparently wealthy—who was with her earlier in the evening. According to this paper the two dined at the Provençal Hotel and were seen soon after midnight to enter the flat—the man carrying a small despatch case. The girl, however, took her accustomed place at her favourite *chemin-de-fer* table at the Casino shortly after 2. At a quarter-past 3 came the explosion."

"Did we not hear it?" the Baron muttered. "The adjectives used by these French journalists in trying to describe its effect," Mermillon continued, stirring his coffee, "suggest that Chicotin told us the truth. The flat and its contents have gone up into thin air. There is not even an indication as to whether any human being was in the building. Not an article of furniture or clothing of any description remains. It stood, fortunately, upon an empty space, but every window in the neighbourhood was shattered and several small buildings forty yards away were wrecked. A small saloon car standing at the entrance was scattered in morsels of metal and upholstery right across the road. *Enfin, mon cher Baron*, we have lost our dear Chicotin."

The Baron plucked up his spirits.

"Under the circumstances, I think," he remarked cheerfully, as he buttered himself a piece of toast, "it is perhaps the best thing that could have happened. Alive, whether successful or unsuccessful, he would have been a terrible nuisance."

Mermillon sighed as he glanced to where the *Bird of Paradise* was swaying gracefully at her moorings.

"It is now my turn," de Brett went on, "to disclose some news. In a few weeks' time the *Bird of Paradise* will have changed hands."

Mermillon's eyebrows were faintly uplifted. His guest continued.

"There has been, as you may be aware, something in the nature of a flirtation between Hamer Wildburn, the owner of the *Bird of Paradise*, and Mademoiselle Lucienne de Montelimar I dined last night, as you know, at the *château*. Madame took me into her confidence. A marriage, it seems, is on the *tapis* between the two young people."

"This sounds interesting," Mermillon observed.

"It becomes more and more so," de Brett proceeded "As I have already told you, I have intimated to the Marquise our desire to acquire the boat. She has used all her influence with her daughter and the young man has promised Lucienne that she shall have it for a wedding gift."

Mermillon leaned back from the table and lit a cigarette.

"How does that strike you, Baron?" he asked. "The *Bird of Paradise* in the hands of the girl, eh? It doesn't strike me that our position will be greatly improved. He will probably make it a condition that she does not dispose of it."

De Brett smiled, and his smile had none of the attractive qualities that his companion's possessed. His lips were pudgy and his eyes beadlike.

"The mother and I are old friends," he confided. "We have talked of this matter seriously, and I believe that we shall at any rate have facilities—through a third person if necessary—to gain at least temporary possession of the boat. The affairs of one's youth sometimes turn out to one's advantage in later years." he added with a little chuckle. "The Marquise at one time did me the honour to accept me as her cavalier. She has every reason to afford me now what assistance is in her power."

Mermillon turned away from his companion as though to study once more the outline the "*Bird of Paradise*." His real intention was to mask the slight expression of disgust which came so often into his face during his conversations with his guest.

"You are an amazing man, Albert," he murmured. "You have influence everywhere."

De Brett chuckled once more.

"I say only this of myself," he declared.

"Other men submit to having their schemes wrecked and their future ruined for the sake of a woman. I, too, love women, but I make them serve my purpose."

Mermillon rose as though to stretch himself and walked to the rail of the yacht. For a moment or two he remained standing upright gazing steadily seawards. There were those amongst his contemporaries who criticised him sometimes as a dreamer. This might have been one of those moments which justified such an idea, for the thoughts of Edouard Mermillon, premier Minister of France, were far away in an island in the Pacific, where the sole intrigues were amongst the natives in their bargaining for fish or coral or wives, where wealth was useless, and ambition ineffective. The island belonged to him—his by right of purchase and charter. He looked across the sea with gleaming eyes and it was not for any human being to know the longing in his heart. He heard his guest's slippered feet approach. The light went out from his face. A stony calm took its place.

"In the meantime," the Baron observed, rubbing his hands, "I am a man of action. I commence the affair. I have despatched a messenger already to Mademoiselle Lucienne, begging her to bring the young man over here this afternoon, and take tea or an aperitif with us. I have done well—yes?"

"Prompt action is certainly your forte, my friend," Mermillon conceded.

CHAPTER XV.

Commander Berard, who had been invited by signal to join the small afternoon party on board the *Aigle Noir*, arrived half an hour later than expected towing behind his launch a small dinghy.

"Brought you back some ship's property, I think, sir," he observed, as he shook hands with Mermillon.

The latter strolled to the side of the yacht with his visitor, who pointed downwards. Mermillon signalled for the captain, who promptly joined them.

"That's our dinghy, sir, all right," was the unhesitating decision. "It was reported missing to me when I made my morning rounds. Might one ask, sir, where you picked it up?"

"We didn't pick it up exactly," the commander explained. "One of my men on leave was taking a promenade and found it underneath those overhanging bushes."

"How do you account for that, Captain?" Mermillon asked.

The former shook his head.

"How can one account for an incident so extraordinary?" he replied. "No one is allowed to take out a boat or even one of the smaller dinghies without express permission. Monsieur Chicotin is the only one who has occasionally taken a liberty."

"It appears to me," the commander volunteered, "as though one of your crew had helped himself to a little extra leave during the night time and had hidden that boat with the idea of getting back at any hour in the morning."

"A very plausible suggestion," Mermillon decided. "After all, this is a pleasure yacht and a too rigid discipline is scarcely called for. From the decks here my men can often hear the music being played at Juan-les-Pins. I expect now and then some of the gay minded ones find it too much for them. The matter is not of any particular importance."

"I thought at first it might have been someone intending to pay you a visit," the commander remarked to Wildburn. "It was nearer your boat than anyone's."

"Sorry to have missed a visitor," the latter observed. "It might have been another bidder for the boat."

"The boat," Lucienne reminded him sternly, "is not for sale. It is pledged to me. You have perhaps heard," she went on, smiling at Mermillon, "the *Bird of Paradise* is to be my wedding present from Hamer."

"I am out of luck," Mermillon complained ruefully. "I tried so hard to buy that small yacht, but Mr, Wildburn was adamant."

"I don't think he liked parting with her even to me," Lucienne confided. "He was very sweet about it, though."

Her host dismissed the subject with a little wave of the hand.

"My nephew, at any rate, is not hard to please," he said. "So long as it is a boat and has sails and something in the way of a engine she is his natural home. I never asked de Brett what he discovered about your engines, by-the-by. Mr. Wildburn."

"Twin Diesel," the Baron reported. "Quite enough for her size. I never believe in overpowering a boat."

They went back to their interrupted tea, which was served in the most approved English fashion. Afterwards they were shown over the yacht, and Lucienne, especially, was loud in her praises.

"When the *Bird of Paradise* belongs to me Monsieur Mermillon," she said, "I shall perhaps make you a generous offer. Hamer permits I shall propose that we exchange boats!"

"I expect you will find me perfectly willing," he replied. "My nephew would find a ship of this size entirely a white elephant. It costs more than I can afford to keep it in condition. To tell you the truth, one reason why I asked the Baron to cruise with me as my guest was the hope that some evening after we had discussed a bottle of his favourite wine together I might sell it to him!"

"Dismiss the idea, my friend," de Brett advised. "In Brussels we are all as poor as church rats. Besides which, we are not yachtsmen. We spend our money on horses and racing cars."

"Has anyone," Berard asked, "been in to Juan to see the scene of the explosion?"

"I have," Hamer Wildburn replied.

"And I," the Baron echoed. "I have never seen a thing so extraordinary."

"The police and the firemen together are, I am informed, confounded," Mermillon declared. "They have wired to Paris for two scientists to come down from a Government laboratory. It seems that some new explosive of terrific power must have been used, for there are literally no remains, A house and furniture, and possibly human beings, have never been known to disappear in such a fashion before. Nothing remains but dust and ashes."

"Of course, the usual stories are going about," the Baron observed. "I lunched at the Provençal, and they are full of it. Two or three people declare that they positively saw an aeroplane of German make pass over last night a few minutes before the explosion. They think that it was just an experiment, and that they had observers in the vicinity."

"The most arrant sensationalism, I should imagine," Mermillon pronounced. "I hear that there were no lives lost at all. A wild looking young Jewish danseuse, Mademoiselle Tanya, who was the only known tenant, is reported as having been seen about during the evening with a man, but she declares that they parted long before she entered the Casino, and that he did not even enter her apartment. She herself was safely seated at the *chemin-de-fer* table an hour before the explosion."

"Is it the same Mademoiselle Tanya, I wonder," Lucienne asked, "who was dancing at a café up in one of those hill villages a week or two ago? We were getting up a party to go and see her, but we were told that she had left."

"I should doubt it very much," the Baron replied. "The performances you are speaking of were of a much more artistic nature. I have seen Tanya in the Casino at Juan. She has a somewhat wild appearance, but she is beautifully dressed, and she has jewellery. One is told that she has received large salaries in Paris in well-known places of amusement. The *Folies Bergère*, even, was mentioned."

Wildburn leaned forward in his place.

"Nevertheless, I believe her to be the same," he declared. "I saw her dance at a very ordinary café indeed just at the back of Garoupe. She was shabbily dressed and, so far as I could see, she wore no jewellery. That may have been done to keep up the part of the female apache which she was representing. I have seen her since at the Casino at Juan, and, as the Baron told us, she made a very different appearance."

"This is distressing news," Lucienne observed, "I pictured you, my dear Hamer, spending your nights writing that book or your articles for the paper. When have you found time to disport yourself at Juan?"

"I have been in too great a state of mental disturbance during the last few weeks," the young man confessed with a grin, "to settle down to any serious work. If you care to see the young woman I will take you to Juan, any night you like. Unless she is scared back to Paris by having had her flat blown up we are certain to find her playing *chemin*."

"I will dine with you this evening at the Casino," Lucienne suggested. "Mother is going over to Monte Carlo. See what you have let yourself in for!"

"A very pleasant evening, it seems to me," the young man exclaimed, with a proper amount of enthusiasm. "I will call for you at about nine o'clock. They dine pretty late there, I believe. I suppose, Monsieur Mermillon," he went on, turning a little diffidently towards his distinguished host, "it would not be possible for you to discover anything about the person who helped himself to your dinghy last night? I have noticed a very suspicious-looking fellow hanging around in a small boat for several evenings lately."

"Well, I was rather leaving that to my captain," Mermillon replied courteously. "Matters of discipline amongst the crew scarcely enter into my activities. You are interested?"

"Only because the dinghy was hidden some forty or fifty yards from my own boat," Wildburn pointed out. "It might almost seem, as the commander indicated, that someone had intended to pay me a nocturnal visit."

"Mademoiselle Tanya, perhaps!" Lucienne suggested. "I scarcely expected to be honoured so far as that," he replied. "Still, between ourselves," he added, looking round, "there has been a certain mysterious interest in my little craft, and I have already received at least one unwelcome visitor. I have not a thing on board worth stealing, but apparently there are people about who think that I have. I should really like to know who hid the dinghy under those bushes and for what purpose."

"I will speak to the captain myself," Mermillon promised graciously. "Every effort shall be made to clear the matter up. I am inclined to suspect my wireless operator. He is rather a gay young Lothario and a wizard with those small boats. He can paddle without making a sound. He is off duty just now, I am afraid, but later on I will have a word or two with him myself."

"Of course, it might have been he," Wildburn agreed, "but on the other hand it doesn't explain his hiding the boat in those bushes."

The Baron looked up with a twinkle in his eye.

"Our neighbour is becoming nervous," he said "Now is your time, Edouard, to bid him a trifle less than that ridiculous five thousand. I think Mr. Wildburn might possibly be induced to break his contract with Mademoiselle and get rid of his supposed treasure boat for—shall we say?—four thousand!"

"And I thought that you were my friend, Baron!" Lucienne exclaimed reproachfully.

"You needn't worry, my dear," Wildburn put in. "I shall sell my craft to no one at any price. It's yours the day we are married. That's my bribe to get you to hurry events up!"

She hung on to his arm.

"Quite unnecessary," she whispered. "To-morrow would suit me admirably!"

"Hello! More visitors," the Baron pointed out "We are popular to-day, Edouard."

Mermillon turned his head lazily. The others were already looking down the deck with obvious curiosity. General Perissol, a fine figure of a man even in his loosely fitting flannels, was approaching, escorted by the first officer.

"It is my friend, our famous neighbour from the lighthouse hill," Mermillon announced. "I can guess what has brought him here."

He rose to his feet and held out his hands. The General clasped them and greeted the others to whom he was presented with a comprehensive bow.

"You have come, my dear General, without doubt, to solve for us the mystery of that amazing explosion this morning," Mermillon hazarded.

"Not entirely for that purpose."

"You are very welcome in any case," his host assured him. "That chair is comfortable? Good. Shall we have some fresh tea made or will you join us in our first cocktail?"

"Thank you, I will take the cocktail. Will you, however, present me first to the young lady? I have an idea that she is the daughter of my old friend, the Marquis de Montelimar."

"A thousand apologies," Mermillon said. "In the little fraternity of the bay it never occurred to me that you would not have met. Permit me, Mademoiselle—General Perissol—one of the most dangerous and important men in this troubled country of ours—Mademoiselle de Montelimar."

"Your father is an old friend of mine, Mademoiselle," the General remarked as he shook hands. "It is owing to your frequent absences abroad, I imagine, that we never met."

"I am glad that I have been fortunate at last." Lucienne answered. "I'm afraid that the greater part of my last two years has been spent in England and Italy. Let me present a young man in whom I have some slight interest—Mr Hamer Wildburn."

"A great pleasure," the General said, shaking hands.

"Now for the news, sir," Mermillon insisted. "You have the air of one bearing tidings."

"I have none," Perissol confessed calmly. "I am a policeman, and the police always keep what news they have to themselves. I am here in search of clues to this latest crime myself if anyone has any help to offer."

"We are all quite ready to assist the law," Mermillon assured him. "But what is the crime?"

"Sabotage," the General replied. "The blowing up of a new block of flats with an absolutely novel explosive."

"But this is a purely local affair," General Mermillon protested "You surely do not occupy yourself with such trifles."

"I do not," Perissol admitted, "except where they touch the fringe of larger interests. The Chef de la Surete of the neighbourhood has been to see me. He is a nervous man, and he feared to approach you personally. I undertook to lessen his responsibilities in the matter. He is anxious to know whether you have had in your employ an engineer by the name of Chicotin?"

"Paul Chicotin?" Mermillon repeated. "Why, certainly, Paul Chicotin has been my consulting engineer for some short time. He left me yesterday."

"May I presume to ask a further question?"

"By all means, *cher General*."

"You perhaps dismissed him?"

"Not at all. I ought to have done, because there was not enough work for him, but he himself was the first to realise this. He left entirely of his own accord. In fact, he has been so useful that I promised to take him back if he did not succeed in finding agreeable occupation."

"You know of his past?"

"Ah, there I am at a loss," Mermillon acknowledged. "Very little, I'm afraid. I knew that he was a Russian by birth, and amazingly skilful in dealing with machinery. He has increased the speed of my engines, for instance, without expense to me or change of fuel, by at least three knots."

"I can assure you," the General announced, with a certain dry inflection in his tone, "that he did not start life as a marine engineer, nor is that his special forte. However, I agree that we need not concern ourselves with his misdeeds of a generation ago. The point is that he is suspected of being concerned in the affair of the explosion at Juan-les-Pins last night."

"*Incroyable!*" the Baron exclaimed. "A young dandy like Chicotin to mix himself up with an affair like that!"

"It is possible, my confrere," the General continued, taking no notice of the interruption "that with many more important matters upon your mind you have neglected to notice the man Chicotin, or to concern yourself in his doings. He is the reputed lover of Mademoiselle Tanya, the dancer, and is said to have spent upon her a considerable amount of money. It is certain that in his younger days he was a skilled manufacturer of bombs."

"Bombs!" Lucienne cried. "What horrible things you make us listen to, General."

"What could a marine engineer know about bombs?" Hamer Wildburn protested.

"The bomb which destroyed the block of flats in Juan-les-Pins could have been made by no amateur," the General went on, ignoring the young man's query. "A more wholesale piece of destruction I have never seen."

Mermillon sat up in his chair. It was obvious that he was disturbed.

"My dear General," he protested. "You do indeed bring a note of tragedy into our little haven of rest. I should be deeply grieved if what you suggest turned out to be the truth."

"I fear that there is very little doubt about it," the General pronounced gravely. "Quite unwittingly on the part of its officers or Monsieur Mermillon, of course, I am afraid that the *Aigle Noir* has been harbouring a very dangerous criminal."

"This is most unpleasant information," Mermillon acknowledged. "At the same time, if it is true the police are to be congratulated upon having got so far in their investigations."

"As I explained," the General continued "Monsieur Sarciron himself, the local Chef de la Surete, would have paid you this visit, but he hesitated to do so, knowing that you were here seeking a period of complete tranquility. He asked me to come unofficially and make these few inquiries. You will not, I imagine, object to a visit from the gendarmes to search Monsieur Chicotin's belongings and to ask your captain a few questions."

"Not in the least," was the emphatic response. "In the meantime I myself am immensely curious to know what has become of that strange little man, and why, if he was bent on crime, he concerned himself with an empty flat."

"The mystery will probably unfold itself in time," Perissol surmised. "Our friend Sarciron has already a theory. If it is correct you will never, I am afraid, see your engineer again."

"And the theory?" de Brett asked

"He believes that Chicotin was in the flat when the explosion took place."

"If it was he who made the bomb," Hamer Wildburn remarked, "that was the best place for him."

"Sarciron believes also," the General proceeded, "that Chicotin was deeply enamoured of this Mademoiselle Tanya, who is a dangerous character, and a woman of many lovers. He believes that Chicotin quarrelled with her that night, and that she left him and went to the Casino. Chicotin remained behind, and in some way or other managed to work out his scheme of destruction, involving himself in it."

They had all been seated in a circle listening, and, as neither the General nor Mermillon himself had made any effort to keep the conversation secret, their interest had been growing all the time. Hamer Wildburn leaned forward in his place.

"Perhaps I ought not to say so," he ventured, "but I do not believe in the theory of your local Chef de la Surete."

The General looked at him tolerantly. "And why not?" he asked.

"If Chicotin had wanted vengeance upon the girl," Hamer pointed out, "he would have waited until she was in the flat, and then exploded the bomb. For a man of that type it was a senseless thing to do—to commit suicide and blow up her flat whilst Mademoiselle Tanya was seated happily in the Casino."

"Reasonable," the General admitted. "You have an alternative theory of your own, perhaps?"

"I have," Hamer assented, "but you would probably laugh at it."

"Let us hear it, at any rate," Perissol begged.

"I believe that the bomb was intended for me, or rather for my boat."

"Hamer!" Lucienne cried.

"You are surely not serious," the General demanded.

"Well, I rather think I am," the young man persisted. "Certain things that have happened lately have put me on my guard, and for two nights I have taken to keeping a sort of watch myself, and both nights, between the searchlight flashes, I have seen a small boat of some sort between me and the shadow of the

trees. Each time there was the same slim man in the boat, wearing a beret and a pullover, and each time he had a parcel between his feet—a parcel, or it might have been a leather case. Last night I was particularly on the look-out for him, because for some reason or other the searchlights left off earlier than usual. He didn't appear, but there was the dinghy under the trees."

There was a puzzled silence, broken at last by the commander.

"The searchlights left off earlier last night or rather this morning," he explained, "at Monsieur Mermillon's request. I can quite understand that they must have been a nuisance to everyone."

"I owe you at least four hours' sleep for your forbearance," Mermillon observed graciously. "Before you left this afternoon I intended to express my gratitude."

"Have you any personal knowledge of this man Chicotin?" the General inquired, turning to Wildburn.

"I have never spoken to him in my life except to ask him what he meant by hanging around my boat about a week ago," was the terse reply. "I began to think that I must have a false keel filled with precious stones or half a ton of cocaine!"

Mermillon smiled.

"I am afraid that little romance, Mr. Wildburn, is rather discounted by the fact that to blow up your ship would destroy any secret treasure that might be stored upon her or any value that she might have. However, the General will probably mention your theory to his friend, Monsieur Sarciron. He will naturally find it a little difficult to account for the bomb being in Juan-les-Pins while your boat is here, however."

"He might have been waiting for the searchlights to stop," the young man suggested thoughtfully. "Curiously enough, the explosion took place within about ten minutes of the time that they left off."

Lucienne turned towards the commander with an idea of her own.

"Did you tell anyone that you were going to stop the searchlights earlier last night?" she asked, curiously.

"Never mentioned it to a soul," he assured her. "As a matter of fact, I only gave the order a few minutes beforehand."

The clock from the chapel in the woods struck the hour. The commander rose hastily to his feet.

"You will excuse me," he begged. "I am keeping an evening watch. I shall give you a respite again, Monsieur Mermillon, after three o'clock. I wish everybody good evening."

The commander hurried off and Hamer Wildburn and his companion followed suit a short time later. Only Perissol lingered. The frown upon his forehead had become more pronounced.

"The situation," he remarked dolefully, "is becoming a trifle more complicated."

Mermillon was inclined to be curt. He rose to his feet and sauntered along towards the gangway. It was almost an invitation to his guest to take his departure.

"I must confess," he admitted "that I am a little bored with my recreant marine engineer and this ingenuous young American with his mysterious boat. I have not yet finished my day's despatches which it occurs to me, are of more vital importance."

Perissol promptly took the hint.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," he acknowledged, "for the time you have given me. The solution of this matter will without a doubt present itself."

"I cannot see that the affair is of more than local importance," was the terse reply.

CHAPTER XVI

The dinner party *a deux* at Juan-les-Pins had been very happily accomplished. The rising of the moon found Hamer Wildburn and Lucienne a little weary, but exceedingly content, still seated at their table on the terrace of the Casino. The place was thinning out, for the gambling was in full swing, but the divine stillness of the night, the queer attraction of the hanging lights, the softly played music, had tempted many to linger.

"When," the young man asked, not for the first time, "is that father of yours really coming back from Paris?"

"I wish I knew," she answered. "I want my boat."

"And I want you," he sighed.

"Would it be very unmaidenly of me," she whispered, "If I told you that you would find me quite ready?"

"Of course, you are driving me crazy," he complained. "I wonder if you have any idea how beautiful you look to-night in that white frock and just the pearls?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea," she told him. "Tell me, please."

"Well, you look just the most exquisite thing on earth," he assured her. "I swear that your eyes have grown larger during the last few days and as for those eye-lashes of yours—why, no one could describe them. Shall I say a few words about your hair?"

"What lovely nonsense," she interrupted. "But I love to hear it. I love being here with you, too, especially to-night, Hamer. Shall I tell you something strange?"

"Do," he begged.

"For the first time in my life I think I know what fear is."

"Fear?" he repeated incredulously. "Being afraid, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"But what are you afraid of?"

"I can't tell you. Life. It is not so much a personal fear. I seem to feel somehow that things are happening. The sort of feeling one might have if one were very religious and were told in a vision that the world were coming to an end. That is how I feel about life just now."

"For a sane and healthy young woman," he declared, "I don't think I ever heard anything so absurd. Try another glass of champagne, dear, quickly,"

She obeyed him, but the look of trouble remained in her eyes.

"Of course, I know that I'm silly," she acknowledged "There's only one thing in life I take seriously except you, and that's France."

He nodded sympathetically,

"A grand country," he agreed, "but what's wrong with it? I thought that since Edouard Mermillon and Chauvanne accepted portfolios in the Cabinet, and they created that wonderful new post for Perissol—a fine fellow, that—everything was so much better and sounder."

"On the surface," she answered. "Perissol is splendid, of course, but I can't help wishing that he were back in Paris."

"Even a superman must have a holiday sometimes," Hamer protested. "I saw in one of the papers that he had not been away from the bureau since the day he accepted his office, five months ago."

"Of course, I have a thoroughly stupid idea," she confessed, "but there it is. I believe he is down here watching Mermillon."

Hamer Wildburn stared across at her without comprehension.

"But listen, sweetheart," he said. "I read the French papers a good deal. It's my job rather not to come a bloomer over any of these things. It was Mermillon's brilliant speech in the Chamber which united the votes of all parties except the extremists and gave Perissol his post. Why, look at them this afternoon, how friendly they were."

"I know," she assented without enthusiasm "I dare say I'm crazy, Hamer, but even the *Temps* predicted once that if anything happened in the way of a rising in France, if someone fanned up the embers of all those terrible scandals of a year ago into flames again, it would happen during this period of long vacation with everyone away. Think of it now. The President is in his country house somewhere in the Pyrenees, where he boasts that he hasn't a telephone and a motor car can only reach him with difficulty. As for Monsieur Chauvanne, no one knows where he is. He left Cherbourg in his own yacht, which is quite large enough to sail round the world, and a little paragraph in one of the papers this morning pointed out that his boat has not been reported since she left France. I wish I knew the General well enough. I would tell him that I think he ought to be back in Paris."

"If there had been anything going on there," Hamer pointed out, "I should have heard of it through my paper. Even the Communists must rest some time, you know. Put all these things out of your mind. I never did thoroughly understand French politics," he went on. "I spent a year in Paris trying to study them, and in the end I think I understood a little less than when I began. All I know is that the present Cabinet is considered the strongest which France has had for a long time."

"I expect it is all right," she declared more cheerfully. "I suppose I am too happy in myself. That is what has made me feel nervous lately. Home influences, too, I suppose."

"Your father is not in politics, is he?"

Hamer asked.

She shook her head.

"He is interested, of course, but outside it all. That is where I think France is wrong. The old aristocracy are looked upon coldly whenever they make any attempt to serve their country, yet no one cares for France more than we do, Hamer!"

"Dearest."

"Will you say yes if I ask you a favour?"

"I should think it highly probable, if it's anything about this dance I'm all for it."

They gilded off together—a kind of slow blues—the movements of which were so smooth that they formed no hindrances to conversation.

"This is my favour," she said. "Of course, I have been all over her once, but I want to thoroughly explore the *Bird of Paradise*."

"Why, you're welcome to do that whenever you choose," he assented promptly. "Any day you like. I don't mind confessing that after certain events and certain inexplicable happenings lately I have been going round myself with a hammer and divining rod—speaking metaphorically."

"Did you discover anything?"

"Not a thing. I have done my best, but I can't see anything about her which makes her worth even a penny more than the eighteen hundred pounds I gave for her. There is no space for hidden treasure of any very large amount, and the people who are chiefly interested in her don't seem like people who are hungry for money. There's a woman there," he added, moving his head slightly in the direction of a couple a little ahead of them, "who could probably give us an idea what to look for."

"The Princess!" the girl exclaimed. "I don't think that she knows anything."

"Why did she turn my cabin inside out, then?" Hamer demanded. "Why did she put stuff in my coffee? What did she come to the boat at all for?"

"She is an impulsive creature," Lucienne declared. "I never mentioned the drug, of course, but I did ask her why she turned all your things inside out after you had been so kind and pulled her out of the water. She insisted upon it that all she wanted was a scarf! Her neck was cold, and she wanted to hide the jewellery she was wearing! Be careful, Hamer. She is coming to speak to us. That is the Marquis de St. Pierre she is with."

Louise and her escort came up to the table at which the others had just reseated themselves. Hamer Wildburn was introduced. There was a little family conversation, then Louise turned smilingly to the young American.

"And my beautiful boat," she asked, "where you made me so comfortable when I was stupid and overturned my canoe? You are taking care of it?"

"I am doing my best," he assured her. "I never dreamed that I was acquiring so popular a possession when I bought her."

"She is coming into the family very soon," Lucienne confided. "I am going to marry Mr. Wildburn, although my people don't know it yet, and he has promised me the '*Bird of Paradise*' for a wedding present."

Louise was a little startled.

"I congratulate Mr. Wildburn heartily," she said, "and of course, my dear Lucienne, you know that I wish you every happiness. I regret, though, that he has promised you the '*Bird of Paradise*.' I want to buy it. I told him so that night. You wouldn't rather have a pearl necklace, would you, dear? We might make an exchange."

"You don't suppose that one could barter the wedding present of a bridegroom to his bride?" Lucienne protested. "When it becomes mine it is mine for ever. I am not sure that I shall keep her where she is. You are all so jealous. I think I shall take her round into our private harbour on the other side..."

"Tell me about dear Armand," Louise begged. "I haven't seen him for a whole day. I don't think he looks in the least rested."

"We met him on the *Aigle Noir* this afternoon," Wildburn remarked. "He seemed all right. Lonely life for him up there, I should think. No distraction and nothing but messengers going backwards and forwards all the time."

"That's the worst of French politics, especially if a man is in the Cabinet," Louise sighed. "A Minister is never left alone even on his vacation. Busy little secretaries with their portfolios follow him about wherever he is. That's why so many of them go into hiding. Armand, too, is so conscientious. That reminds me—I have invited myself to lunch there to-morrow. I shall try and make him take me out somewhere...Is this a joke of yours, Lucienne, or are you and Mr. Wildburn really engaged?"

"We are waiting for the family sanction," the girl replied. "I telephone father every day and warn him that terrible things are going on here, but it doesn't seem to hurry him up. Since he developed this intense interest in politics and finance Paris seems to draw him like a magnet."

"You will permit me," the Marquis intervened, "to offer you my heartfelt wishes for your happiness, Lucienne, and to congratulate you, sir," he added, turning to Wildburn. "If the hour of the night permitted I would suggest that we drink your health, As it is," glancing towards Louise, "I am afraid that we must be leaving."

"I am at your disposition, St. Pierre," she told him.

"Your mention of your father reminds me that I saw him in Paris three days ago," the Marquis remarked as he shook hands with Lucienne."

"Enjoying himself?" she asked.

"Very much the reverse, I should say," the Marquis replied.

"He was with two very well known men lunching at Henry's and discussing some apparently weighty matter with great vigour."

"I thought you never left your property here now, Marquis," Lucienne observed, shaking her finger at him.

"I leave very seldom," he admitted. "On this occasion I found Paris unbelievably *triste*. Everyone seems to be moving about as though they were bowed down with woe and expecting a thunderstorm at any moment. Of gaiety there is very little. My heart was light for the first time when I returned to my *château* here."

"What is it all about, anyway?" Wildburn asked. "I have an office in Paris and I hear very much the same reports, but no one seems to know why. France has at least succeeded in getting together a strong and reputable Cabinet. She is the only nation which seems to understand finance—bleeding us poor foreigners to death, as a matter of fact. I should think that everyone ought to be walking on tiptoe."

"How can one tell where one gets these feelings from?" the Marquis sighed, "So far as I am concerned, it is perhaps because I am growing old. The wines which I used to find so wonderful in my favourite restaurants seem to have lost their flavour. The girls dance with heavy feet. Their eyes call no longer. The little chansons which once amused us so are toneless. Perhaps it is Paris that is growing old."

"Au revoir," Louise exclaimed. "I must take my old friend away or I shall have the migraine."

"A nice cheerful old bird, that," Hamer Wildburn observed dolefully, a moment or two later.

"The trouble with St. Pierre," Lucienne murmured, as she rose to her feet, "is that he has too much courage to admit defeat. He is really seventy-five years old and he thinks that he is sixty-five. He has an income of perhaps a million francs, and he believes that it is three—which I believe it was not long ago. He was too devoted to his wife to ever marry again, and he has too good taste to care about a housekeeper."

"Pretty good summing up for an ingenue," Hamer Wildburn acknowledged, as he paid the bill.

CHAPTER XVII

Soon after midnight Perissol, sitting in his shirt sleeves before his desk, was disturbed by the entrance of Raymond, the chief of his secretaries. The young man was looking grave.

"Mon General," he announced. "I regret to say that our private wire to Paris has probably been tampered with. I can get no connection."

"Ring up on the other exchange," Perissol ordered. "Speak to the night chef. Tell him to report the breakdown to Monsieur Laporte, and if the line is not in order by nine o'clock to-morrow morning Laporte himself is suspended. You understand that?"

"*Parfaitement, monsieur*. An important message has just come through very much delayed on the ordinary line."

"Well?"

"Monsieur Lavandou has just passed through Avignon on his way southward."

"Coming to see me?"

"That was the message. Monsieur Lavandou is travelling by automobile, and paused only for a moment, leaving the message to be transmitted by the telephone bureau."

"Lavandou on his way here!" the General repeated. "What does that mean? There is no news of Chauvanne or we should have had it upon the wireless."

"None whatever. Two or three of the Paris evening papers have commented upon the fact. They have communicated with Lloyd's in London. The yacht Monsieur Chauvanne is on has not been reported since she left Cherbourg."

"And Lavandou on his way here," Perissol meditated. "Pass word down to the lodge, Raymond, that Monsieur Lavandou's car is to be sent through without delay."

"That is already done, General," the secretary replied. "May I suggest, in view of what must be an important interview, that you have an hour's sleep? Lavandou's car can scarcely get here before four o'clock."

The General leaned back in his chair, a little wearily. He dropped his eyeglass and smoothed his eyes.

"On the contrary, Raymond," he said, "I think I will get into the pool for a quarter of an hour. I certainly could not sleep until I know Lavandou's mission. What time are you off duty?"

"Another five hours, General. I only came on at eleven o'clock. Andre will relieve me then. He knows already about the telephone."

"The message to the commandant at Antibes went through on the local line, I suppose?" Perissol inquired.

"Quite early this evening, General. The commandant's reply was that everything was prepared."

Perissol dismissed the young man with a nod. Afterwards he passed through the French windows, descended the terrace, and, reaching the swimming pool, slipped off his clothes and plunged in. For a quarter of an hour he swam peacefully. Then, with a sigh of contentment, he dried himself with towels from a hidden grotto, and resumed his clothes. He lit a cigar and paced the terrace which surrounded the villa, his brow furrowed with thought, a new anxiety added to the cares of the moment...Chauvanne was without a doubt the one vulnerable spot in the Cabinet, Lavandou, his understudy, was to be trusted, but here was Lavandou, after only a month of office, on his way down rushing southwards obviously with tidings of great import...Perissol took little notice of the falling moon, which had been flooding the whole bay and the surrounding country with beauty. He watched only the distant road with its many twists and turns, which led from Cannes. It was fruitless watching for the end brought pain rather than relief. A furiously-driven car came tearing up the last few corkscrew bends, lights flashing and horn blowing. A few minutes later a middle-aged man, his possibly official clothes covered by a motoring duster, his hair and face powdered with dust, stumbled out through the hastily-opened door on to the terrace.

"My dear Lavandou," the General exclaimed, "you are worn out. Don't tell me that you have come from Paris in the day?"

"I left at six o'clock this morning," the man replied, sinking on to one of the garden seats. "Of course, I meant to fly, but the aviation ground was watched. The authorities advised me by telephone that no plane

was available for me. I suppose if I had ventured there it would have been the end. They say that there are assassins at every corner in Paris."

"But what is it then that has arrived?" Perissol demanded anxiously. "The last time we met you were exuberant with joy over your new appointment. What is this catastrophe that has brought you here in such a state? For heaven's sake, explain."

"I have made a horrible discovery," the newcomer groaned, throwing his hat away from him and passing his hands through his dust-sprinkled hair.

"Surely it can't be so horrible as all that," Perissol remonstrated. "You want food and drink, I can see. Afterwards, perhaps affairs will shape differently."

"Wine, perhaps," the other assented. "Food afterwards. Mon General, I think the world is coming to an end!"

"Well, that has to happen some time," was the philosophical response.

"Then it had better happen now," Lavandou declared.

A servant brought out wine. The tired man drank feverishly.

"The chauffeur," he begged. "Please see to his wants. He has driven like one inspired."

"His wants will be attended to," his host assured him. "Now, Lavandou," he added, as soon as the door was closed. "No more of this suspense. Let me have your news if you have any."

"France lately," Lavandou faltered, "has lost by death or disgrace some of her finest sons, yet the debacle has not yet begun. One begins to fear for others—others more trusted—more beloved."

The General looked around. He drew his friend through the French windows into the study and closed the door.

"Spies even here?" Lavandou asked bitterly. "One never knows," was the even rejoinder. "I have learnt caution in my later days. It appears to me that you are going to speak of serious things."

"You shall judge. You will remember that my appointment was made only a short time before Chauvanne was to leave for his long delayed vacation, I had several interviews with him and learnt the outline of my work. At the final one he seemed to me a little mysterious.

"If you come to anything, Lavandou," he instructed, 'that you do not understand place it on one side until my return. Do not seek the advice of anyone else. You and I and our staff are to run this bureau. You understand?"

"Of course, I assured him that I understood perfectly. I have dealt with big figures all my life, as you know, General, and I had no fears. Nevertheless, I determined to leave nothing to chance. I asked him to give me his destination secretly in case anything of great importance should happen. He shook his head. There was that queer look about his eyes that I had noticed during the last six or seven months.

"I am not going to give you the chance of communicating with me, Lavandou," he replied. 'My doctor tells me that unless I get a complete rest I shall become a wreck for life. I am leaving on a yacht in three days' time, and I am sailing westwards. I shall touch no port until I am obliged to and I have given orders to

have the wireless disconnected. Voila. Continue with the routine work and leave anything you don't understand for my return.' That was his farewell."

"It seems reasonable enough." Perissol commented.

"Wait! The first task which fell to my lot was to tabulate; and master the details of the recently subscribed 5 per cent. National Loan. The papers have announced the subscription of nine hundred millions. The actual amount received was thirteen hundred millions."

The General smiled.

"My dear Lavandou," he expostulated. "A mistake of four hundred millions is incredible."

"That is the curse of it!" Lavandou cried. "There could not be a mistake. There is not a mistake. Do you not understand what I am telling you? Four hundred millions of francs have disappeared from the Treasury books! They have gone into space—into air—whatever you like. But we are not talking now of possible mistakes. They have gone where many another hundred million has gone during the last 12 months."

Perissol was serious enough now.

"There is no possibility of any blunder, my friend?" he asked hoarsely.

"None whatever, my General," was the agonised reply. "Four hundred million francs have disappeared and two men, beside myself and Chauvanne, must be aware of this."

"Who are they?"

"Edouard Mermillon and the Baron de Brett."

"Mermillon!"

There was a brief silence. Perissol was standing with folded arms looking into space. In the fading light he seemed to have grown in stature. He was like some emblematical figure of past ages standing up to greet the morning.

"The one man who might have saved the country," he murmured. "The one man concerning whom no word of scandal has ever been spoken."

"De Brett was without a doubt at the back of it," Lavandou groaned. "That is easily proved. It is the whole of the subscriptions from Belgium which are unaccounted for."

"Do they know at the bureau what you have discovered?" Perissol asked.

"They might surmise," Lavandou acknowledged. "I discovered days ago that I am surrounded by spies. I am convinced that a record has been kept of how many hours I have been at the bureau, where I have lunched and dined and with whom I have conversed. Early this morning I rang up an aerodrome. Within a few minutes afterwards I had word from a friend that I had better not ask for a 'plane.'"

"And you?"

"Of course I asked for one. It was official business and I had a perfect right to. The reply came almost at once. There was no private plane available for at least 48 hours."

"And Chauvanne is still away on that infernal yachting cruise?"

"Bound for an unknown port without wireless. That is what they believe at the Bureau, at any rate, and what he told me. It was because I could not communicate with him that I tried to solve what seemed to be quite a trifling matter myself. In the course of my attempts I stumbled upon the truth. I take no credit for this thing, General, but I assure you that a super-accountant with the most astute financial brain in Europe might go over these accounts day after day without making the discovery that I did. It was entirely due to my not being able to ask the chief a single question and having to invent a checking system of my own."

The General buried his face for a moment in his hands.

"Where is this thing going to end?" he groaned.

"In the ruin of France," Lavandou replied solemnly. "You and I will survive, if we survive at all, to see her in the hands of the Communists. We shall see her a country without soul or living purpose drifting to her ruin."

Perissol seemed to gain strength from the other's weakness. He lit a cigarette and looked with calm contempt at the broken down man upon the bench.

"You are overtired, my friend," he said. "Your effort has been too much. Eat and drink and then smoke. You will then see things in a less gloomy light."

The two men talked until the moon paled in the sky and a cool breeze stole from eastwards with the incoming tide. Curiously enough, for the first part of the time, they spoke very little of the grim tragedy by which they were confronted. Something even stronger than themselves seemed to drive them into a strangely inspired dissertation on life and death. Afterwards, however, for hours on end they faced the truth with grim directness. The sun had already risen when Lavandou held out his hands.

"My friend," he said, "my friend of twenty years, you have at all times supported me. You will not misjudge me. You will understand if the world reviles that I take the only course a man can take. If I disclose my discoveries to the Press or outside the bureau it will be a nail in the coffin of France. I cannot report to my chief, and I have a terrible feeling in my heart that we shall never see him again. If discovery comes I shall know what to do, I am fortunately a man without family, or I might hesitate. France demands her sacrifice, and she shall have it."

The General wrung his friend's hand. The automobile was waiting and he had no words.

"Under certain circumstances you have found the only solution," he reflected sadly. "But courage, mon ami. Chauvanne may return. There is something in the breath of this air that gives me hope. A morning even as beautiful may dawn for France."

CHAPTER XVIII

Two of the greatest men in France opened their morning papers three days later at the same moment. Edouard Mermillon, in a sheltered corner of the *Aigle Noir* sat before his *petit déjeuner* of fragrant coffee, fresh rolls with Normandy butter, and wonderful peaches—General Perissol, seated in a corner of his terrace before a far more Spartan meal. Mermillon read one column, swung round in his place, and sent for his secretary. Afterwards he poured out his coffee and prepared a peach in leisurely fashion.

"Jules," he directed, "telephone at once to the air depot at Cannes. Ask at what time the morning 'plane for Paris goes, and whether it is necessary to stop at Lyons. If so, demand further if a private 'plane can be commandeered for Government service.. One moment, Baron," he cried to his friend, who, in bathing attire, had just stepped up the gangway.

The latter wrapped himself in the dressing gown which his valet was holding out for him.

"I drip," he cried, "and the water was cold. Is it news of importance?"

"It might almost be called that," Mermillon assured him.

The Baron came unwillingly to the table and clutched the paper which his host extended to him. The healthy glow of a few seconds ago passed from his features. The flesh seemed to sag in his cheeks. His eyes, normal enough in a general sort of way, seemed to become like beads.

"Gaston Lavandou Suicide:

"Le Sous-Secrétaire du Bureau de Finance est trouvé mort dans l'appartement de Madame Jacqueline, l'actrice bien connue de la Comédie Française."

"Ciel!" de Brett exclaimed. "What does this mean?"

Mermillon shrugged his shoulders.

"It appears quite clear," he said, "that there exists, or rather did exist until early this morning, one more prodigious fool in the world. If you read further you will see that Gaston Lavandou called earlier in the evening upon his mistress and found her and his rival. She appears to have been a little brutal to Lavandou and to have left for the theatre with this man who is at present unknown. Lavandou, instead of behaving like a man of fashion and a philosopher, blows out his brains in her apartment and leaves behind a letter which reads like the sentimental caterwauling of a disappointed tom-cat!"

"*Qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire?*" the Baron exclaimed, his voice hoarse with fear. "Another man will have to be appointed and Chauvanne is away. Who will be able to fix the limit to his possible investigations?"

"What must be done is clear," Mermillon declared. "I must get to Paris in time to appoint a successor to Lavandou who is one of our own party and a man we can trust. I have sufficient authority for that. They say that Chauvanne has no wireless on his yacht. I begin to ask myself, perhaps, whether his destination was not Brazil. Anyway someone in authority must be at the Bureau of Finance within a few hours. Drink some coffee. You are shivering."

"I should spit it out," the Baron answered. He glanced at the headlines, read the paragraph again, then he laid the paper upon the table.

"Only one thing can happen," he groaned. "If Chauvanne does not return the President will order an outside investigation at the bureau."

"Nothing of that sort is likely to happen," Mermillon said calmly. "I shall reach Paris in time to appoint a successor and when you read the paper carefully you will see that this fellow Lavandou has made it as clear as day that his suicide had nothing whatever to do with finance."

"I don't think," the Boron said, with chattering teeth, "that I shall go to Paris."

"In any case you had better go and change," Mermillon advised him, with a slight but distinct note of scorn in his tone. "You could scarcely go to Brussels like that."

General Perissol was perhaps calmer, but when he laid down the newspaper there were tears in his eyes. He was still seated in his place gazing out seawards when Louise, who had hurried past the servant who would have announced her, swept through the French windows and with extended arms came breathlessly towards him.

"My dear friend," she cried. "My poor dear Armand! I heard the news an hour ago. I rushed here."

He held her hands for a moment in silence. Then he fetched a garden chair and placed it by his side.

"But Lavandou of all men!" she exclaimed. "One saw nothing of him in society. Once you gave a reception and I talked to him for a few minutes. I thought him a shy man. He was difficult to talk to, and seemed only anxious to get away. He is the last person in the world I should have suspected of an intrigue like that. Lavandou, a lover of women, to that extent! It seems incredible."

"He was no lover of women," the General answered sadly.

"Then what was he?" she demanded. "A hero," was the brief response.

Louise held her forehead for a minute.

"I am bewildered," she confessed. "Give me some of your coffee if you have any left."

A butler, who had been hovering in the background, brought a fresh supply. Louise sipped a little and leaned back in her chair.

"You suspected this?" she asked.

"I feared it," Perissol admitted. "Lavandou was here three days ago."

"But you take it so calmly," she exclaimed. "You show no anger. Surely this thing which he has done—for a deputy, for a man on his way to high office—is ignominious. It is dastardly. His letter is the letter of a mad but peevish schoolboy. He seems to wish the world to know that he has abandoned his career and killed himself because a woman has been faithless to him. He seems to glory in his disgrace."

"You do not understand yet," Perissol said gravely.

She looked back at the paragraph.

"But what more is there to understand?" she demanded. "I have never known you before to be mistaken in a man. You must have understood his disposition."

"I knew it better than any other man," Perissol told her. "I knew his habits well. I know that women for him were only a slight but pleasant pastime. What he loved more than anything else in the world was France. He died for France. He gave more than his life for France; he gave his honour."

"You are trying to bewilder me," she complained.

"You and I will share this secret," he said, "or the secret of what I believe."

She smiled.

"Have I ever broken faith with you, Armand?"

"Never, dearest. I trust you now, although this matter goes beyond the life or death of one man."

"You terrify me."

"Lavandou came to me a man distraught, as you know. He was a skilful mathematician as well as a great financier. He understood the art of juggling with figures possibly better than any man in France. He was set an important task—to tabulate the amounts received from different departments of France and neighbouring countries to this last great national loan launched by Chauvanne. In the course of his work he came to a cul de sac. If Chauvanne had been in the country he would have asked one simple question, easily answered, and all would have been well. Chauvanne being away, he applied a method of his own to test certain results. The outcome was alarming. He discovered, beyond a doubt, that some four hundred millions of the loan had never been tabulated at all."

"Then what had become of them?" she asked breathlessly.

He shook his head.

"We must pause there," he told her.

"But it is impossible," she protested. "You have begun: you must finish. Armand—what does this mean?"

He reflected for some moments, then he continued.

"You know what I have long suspected," he said. "You know that while I rest here, apparently taking my usual vacation in the usual fashion, such brains as I have are at work in Paris, in Brussels, in Lyons, in London, in other centres. I may find myself before long in the same terrible position as Lavandou. He knew very well this smouldering feeling of discontent all through France, this horrible, only half-stifled suspicion that the Tositi investigation has failed, that the discoveries which have been made are only external discolorations of a foul disease. Lavandou knew very well that the publication of this discovery—another four millions gone into the pockets of robbers of the State—would have been as good as a battle cry to the Communists, the anarchists, and the riff-raff who would wreck France. Nevertheless, their outcry would have raised a fire of passionate discontent. The President would have had to call the Chamber together and without a doubt the Government would have fallen. Who is left to take our place? Not one single soul. With no Government what would happen to France?"

"Is there no honest political party, then," she cried, "no one who can be trusted?"

"The men are there," he answered. "Plenty of them. But they have never been brought together. They are kept apart by trifles—personal predilections, prejudices—all things not worth a moment's consideration. They want the right leader, the strong ringing voice telling the truth, and France could once more have the

most powerful and patriotic Government in the world. But the electioneering has been all wrong. The people have been deceived. She will right herself, but Lavandou saw the truth. She must right herself slowly without any of these violent discoveries or shocks. She must right herself at a time when the men who can deal with a crisis are at hand and ready to act."

"Give up your police work, Armand," she begged him. "The stamping out of crime is a slight thing compared to the future of France. Take a bold plunge."

He drew her even closer to him. His strong features were moved with agitation.

"Don't you see, Louise, the people whom I most mistrust have shown their genius by placing me in the Cabinet? You forgot that I am no longer Chef de la Surete of Paris. I have powers over the whole of France. I am a Minister, too, with a portfolio. If I have to change my portfolio I shall do it, but the last year in my present position has enabled me to find out more about the Communists and the secret plotters against the Government than I could have found out in any other way. I have no ambitions, dearest, for myself, but I have a desire which is a real passion to see France again in safe waters."

Her arm stole round his neck. They were completely alone. She stroked his face gently. Her fingers seemed to travel down those lines which had grown deeper during the last few minutes.

"Meanwhile," she whispered, "you starve yourself. You work night and day, your thoughts concentrated upon others. You give your life, your passion, your heart to one task. Great though it may be, Armand, it is also selfish. You keep others who love you suffering."

His eyes softened. He held her hands and drew her from her chair to the place on the bench by his side. Her head fell on his shoulder. She raised her lips.

"For the rest, sweetheart," he said, "help me if you will. Go on helping me. If I have seemed distant at times, it is because I fear to draw anyone so famous and beautiful as you, one whom I love so well, into the whirlpool. This morning I am either weaker or stronger—Heaven knows which—but remember this, those who fight in this secret battle, which at any moment may blaze up into furious pandemonium, live under a death sentence. Realise that, Louise, and choose."

Her lips, on fire with passion, met his once more.

"You know how I shall choose," she sobbed. "I, too, want to serve—not, alas, for the sake of France only, but because I love you."

There were sounds within the house. She resumed her seat with gay, stealthy movements. Her face had become like the face of a young girl. She leaned towards him with shining eyes.

"My trunks are already at the station," she whispered. "We dine here—yes?"

"At your own hour," he said. "Bring your own maid. It was a foolish thought of mine to go to Paris. I have others who can serve me there. I shall do better to stay away until the moment of crisis."

"If only we can have even twenty-four hours," she prayed.

"Lavandou has given us that—and longer," he assured her. "You had better bring your maid. Remember that my household here is rough enough. You will have to reconstruct it. You must make me live once more like a civilised man. Perhaps I shall be able to cope better with these elegants of the coast—Edouard

Mermillon, de Brett, the Marquis de Montelimar, and St. Pierre, who called the other day and looked with horror at my shabby grey trousers!"

"We will live for one another and France," she declared fervently, "and, if necessary, I will do the cocking."

CHAPTER XIX.

The walls of the Casino at Juan-les-Pins were plastered with announcements of a great attraction.

"TANYA VIZILLE des Folies Bergeres de Paris, Trois representations seulement: Toutes les nuits sont des nuits de gala. Prix du diner frs. 100. Il est prudent de retenir ses places."

An hour before the second night of her appearance, Mademoiselle Tanya sat in the retiring room allotted to her in the Casino suffering the ministrations of her coiffeur and manicurist. There was a pile of evening papers by her side to which she was also giving some attention.

"Mademoiselle's triumph last night was unparalleled," the coiffeur confided in almost an awed tone. "Seldom have we seen such a fury amongst an audience. To-night there is not a table to be had."

"Zut," Tanya scoffed. "They are easy to please—this little world. In Paris it is the same. It is here I live. The great critics come to my room."

"So one has heard, Mademoiselle," the coiffeur ventured. "And in the midst of her triumph Mademoiselle disappeared. One heard she was dancing up at a small café in this neighbourhood. It was perhaps a *canard, cela*."

"I do as I please," Tanya said curtly. "Sometimes I am bored with life, then I look for a quiet spot and to amuse myself I dance for a few francs. I send the people crazy just the same. They ask me: 'Why am I not in Paris? Do I wish for introductions?'—and I laugh. That pleases me and I go back again. But there are other things I care about as much as the stage."

"As *par exemple*?"

"You are my coiffeur," Tanya reminded him curtly. "Arrange my hair and ask no more questions."

The man was coldly angry, for he saw the smile on the lips of the manicurist. He obeyed, however.

"There is a young man who has a boat near here—an American, I believe. They tell me that he seldom comes to the Casino. A Mr. Hamer Wildburn," Tanya said. "He is a client of yours perhaps? You may answer when I speak to you," she added a little sharply, as the man hesitated.

"I do not know the gentleman, Mademoiselle," he regretted.

"Nor, it seems, does anyone else," she complained. "He keeps his yacht in Garoupe Bay. It is called the *Bird of Paradise*. Does that assist?"

"I do not know him," the coiffeur repeated. The manicurist paused for a moment at her task.

"Mademoiselle," she confided eagerly, "I do not know the gentleman of whom you speak, but I have seen him several times with a very good client of mine, Mademoiselle de Montelimar, the daughter of the Marquise de Montelimar. One has heard a rumour that they are fiancées."

"What sort of a young man is he?" The manicurist shook her head.

"He is of fine appearance—tall and strong," she said. "He speaks with an American accent. He appears *gentil*. Mademoiselle kept him waiting once for a quarter of an hour, and he was not like these short tempered English. He only laughed."

"You have not seen him to-day?"

"Not to-day, Mademoiselle."

"*Ecoute, ma chère*," Tanya said, leaning towards the girl, "If you see him while you are here—wherever I am—come and tell me. It shall mean a *cadeau* for you. You understand?"

"*Mais parfaitement, Mademoiselle*," the girl assented. "If one might choose one's *cadeau* I would value a signed photograph—just Tanya—more than anything else in the world."

"Even that shall be arranged," the danseuse promised graciously. "I am only here for a day or two. I stay at the Provençal, as my flat was blown up with all my clothes. It was very inconvenient."

There was a tap at the door. A *chasseur* entered. He was wearing a sky blue uniform and a peaked cap, and he evidently meant to make the best of this visit. He approached Tanya's chair before he made the announcement, and he regarded her with veneration.

"It is a gentleman who has called to see Mademoiselle."

"He gave you his name?" the *danseuse* asked eagerly.

"He said that his name was Suess, and that he had just arrived from Paris. He wears the ribbon of the Legion d'Honneur."

The enthusiasm died out of Tanya's voice.

"*C'est bien*," she said. "It is a gentleman whom I desire to see. He can be shown in."

The boy made a lingering retreat. This visit into Mademoiselle's room, with its perfumes and suggestions of the stage, to say nothing of Tanya's own daring *deshabille*, was a moving event. He left reluctantly, but with the door once closed, he hurried to the man who was waiting in the hall—a pale-faced man, with a full, round stomach, short, but with a very upright carriage. The man wore spectacles, although the eyes behind them seemed bright enough.

"If you will follow me, Sir," the boy invited.

Monsieur Suess did as he was bidden. He was wearing a dinner coat and white waistcoat, and he carried in his hand a paper bag of flowers. He was clean shaven, and his age was not easily guessed. The boy knocked once more at the door of the dressing-room and announced the visitor with an air.

"Gentleman to see Mademoiselle Tanya. Monsieur Suess."

Tanya turned her head and nodded.

"Find yourself a place somewhere, Adolf," she begged. "My hair is almost finished—also my nails. You understand that I dance to-night?"

"All Juan-les-Pins has been telling me so from the walls and from the lips of an excited people," Monsieur Suess replied, with a bow. "I will not congratulate you upon your success, my dear Tanya. It is inevitable. Still, it will be very pleasant to see you once more making wild men of us."

"I do not think that I should have much luck at that with you, my friend," she observed, leaning forward to look at her hair. "It is not good, but it will do," she added, turning to the coiffeur. "Monsieur le Directeur will pay you at the caisse, and you, too," she added to the manicurist. "I have no costume which would admit of a pocket."

The two took their leave. Suess, who was not far from the door, shook the handle gently after they had left. He took off his gloves and looked round the room with keen piercing glances. Tanya threw herself upon a couch. Her *deshabille* would have shocked a man with a different outlook upon life. Monsieur Suess was not shocked.

"We are all right here," she said shortly. "Before we begin let me tell you this. If another gentleman is announced—a Mr. Hamer Wildburn—leave me at once. It is important that I should see him."

"*L'amour ou les affaires?*" Monsieur Suess enquired, with a complete absence of jealousy in his tone."

"Don't be a fool," she answered. "A book of love would be less interesting to me than a page of affaires. You should know that."

"Yes, Tanya," he admitted. "You are without a doubt devoted."

"Tell me how this affair of Lavandou has been received in Paris?" she asked.

"A disappointment," he announced. "The train was all laid. The blaze should have reached the skies. Then came the publication of the letter, the interviews with Madame Jacqueline. The thing fizzled out in sneers and laughter."

She moved in her place impatiently.

"That, although it was known that Lavandou was in the Bureau of Finance, that he was practically taking Chauvanne's place during his absence!"

"There has been no hint at defalcations," he said regretfully. "It does not appear that there have been any. We have no Press to compete with theirs. We did what we could. No one listened to us."

"Nevertheless, you have something else on your mind, comrade," Tanya said, "or you would not have come all this way."

"I have something else in my mind," he confessed. "It is a serious affair. All the same, I wish you would not lie three quarters naked before me. You know the sort of man I am."

She shook with barely suppressed laughter. Her face was impish.

"Oh, yes, I know, Adolf," she admitted. "Do I not know? But those things are for afterwards. You men think too much of women."

"And you women," he growled, with a gleam in his eyes. "It is not for your own pleasure that you writhe in those shreds of clothing, that you have always the air of longing to kick them off! A man works better who is not starved."

She caught up a beautifully embroidered opera cloak, wrapped it around her tightly and clutched it with one hand.

"Now, a truce to your complaints, Adolf," she enjoined. "You had more than this to tell me or you would not have come. The other things are for afterwards—if at all. I do not know. It depends upon my mood."

"You wrote to us of the man Chicotin." Her face darkened.

"Another fool who had great things within his grasp and lost his head about me!" she scoffed. "Well?"

"You know what Berthold was in Marseilles for?"

"He said he came to see me," she said. "There was other business, I suppose?"

"Berthold was not like me," Suess confided. "He loved you well enough but he never wholly trusted you."

"The man is a fool," she answered carelessly, "who ever trusts wholly any woman."

"I sometimes ask myself whether you are a woman," he snarled. "I think you are a wild animal—a tigress. I think blood is more to you than love. You have no sentiment—no softness. Bah, I could spit!"

She laughed.

"But, you won't, dear Adolf," she mocked him. "You know very well that it is I who fire your blood—who make you feel like great deeds."

"Well, let us speak now seriously," Suess continued sullenly. "There is something else to be done. Berthold believed that Tositi left a written confession somewhere in Marseilles. Not only a confession for himself but the confession of his confederates."

"It has had something to do with a ship, then," Tanya declared. "He was always down around the docks."

"You are quite right," Suess admitted. "It had something to do with a ship. Berthold got as far as that when, as you know, the police made a swoop upon him. I will not say that Berthold had not earned the scaffold, but they gave him no chance. They executed him within a few hours for a crime that was never proved against him. They wanted him out of the world just as they wanted Tositi out of the world and just as they will want you or me out of the world if we discover the truth."

"They won't get rid of me like that," Tanya scoffed. "I have escaped from prison three times always the same way. There are no doors will remain closed on me if men are the gaolers."

Suess shivered. In his heart he believed that Tanya was telling the truth.

"Listen," he went on. "Berthold discovered the name of the boat on which is hidden this secret. It is the *Bird of Paradise*. Tositi had it built, for himself and some woman."

"Everything is clear to me now," Tanya announced, sitting up. "You are not all fools at headquarters, Adolf. You have discovered something. If the confession of Tositi and his friends, or any part of the story of their doings, really exists, it is on a yacht not half a dozen kilometres from this spot!"

"Who owns it?" Suess demanded.

"A young American—Hamer Wildburn," she declared. "He looks too honest to be anything but stupid, but I have written to him. I have asked him to come and see me, either before the show or after. I think it will be after the show. He will come to that, and he will not keep away."

"You are certainly as seductive as ever, you little beast," Suess admitted. "You are also more conceited. As for me, I only find you fairly well."

"Oh, la, la," she laughed. "A few moments ago you were shivering. If I had not put this coat on—"

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing. Only I know the signs when a man is nearly losing his head."

"You have an idea to work upon?" he asked.

"If the young man comes to me, the confession will be mine," she said. "If he does not come, I shall visit the boat in the night. If he will not give me the papers—whatever they are—I shall stab him, like I did Chicotin, by-the-by, and help myself. I am very clever at that."

"And if you are arrested?" he asked.

"I shall say that it was in self-defence," she said coolly. "I shall be tried by jury. I shall probably dine at night, when it is all over, with the Judge, and I shall have enough flowers for a palace. I have always rather fancied myself as the heroine of a *cause célèbre*."

"And if you succeed?"

"You will find me either here, at the Provençal, or in the little dancing place next door," she replied.

"There will be serious business afoot then. Are you ready for it, Adolf Suess? That is what I ask myself. There will be far more danger in success than failure."

"If you can implicate Chauvanne or any one of the Ministers—Edouard Mermillon would be the best of all—the train is still ready. The fires could be lit in a matter of seconds," he answered.

"But money—how about money?" she asked. "It would require a woman to ask a question so foolish," he scoffed. "There will be a mob of a hundred thousand loose in Paris and there will be ten thousand sane men to look after them. We know where to put our hands upon all the money we shall need, my little one. We must use the mob. It will be the same in every city in France. But we have brains as well, remember. We can put into the Chamber at least three Governments who would rule this country on the finest Soviet principles. It is not going to be a muddled affair. I can assure you of that. We have men ready for every post. The mob shall have their way up to a certain point, but the mob do not know where to look for the real loot. The banks will be our affair."

"I wonder who will look after me?" Tanya speculated.

"The wisest man," Suess said, rising to his feet, "will be the man who leaves you alone."

She laughed and threw her slipper after his disappearing figure. Bare legged and with the opera cloak slipping from her shoulders, she chased him out of the room, throwing his hat after him. Then she flung herself into a chair and rang a handbell vigorously.

"My bath," she called to the woman who made an unexpectedly swift appearance. "My half bottle of champagne, my dry biscuits, my cigarettes. In an hour I must dance. Wait on me quickly, Aimee. To-night I must be beautiful."

"More diamonds to-night," the old woman cried with a satyr-like grin.

"Serious business to-night, my old pet," Tanya declared, springing to her feet. "In a week's time the diamonds may be for you, and for me—this—"

She stretched up her hands suddenly, arched her feet, and she danced. She danced softly at first and quietly. She crept like a cat, she sprang like a tigress. Then she seemed to be standing quite still. It was only her body that moved. Her eyes seemed to be piercing the ceiling. Then she became rigid. She was absolutely motionless. Her hands dropped to her sides. Her eyes became glazed. The fingers of one hand sought her throat. It was death that visited her...She drew a little breath.

"You don't understand that, Grannie."

The woman mumbled something. Tanya moved to the table, picked up a biscuit, and bit into it with her strong white teeth.

"Open the wine, Grannie," she directed.

CHAPTER XX.

That night, once more Tanya danced to the enthusiastic plaudits of a huge audience. It was said, with absolute truth, that on that particular night she created a perfect furore. There were men, and women, too, wedged in amongst the crowds standing up in the background, who forgot themselves and their manners, in a wild struggle to force themselves into some place where they could catch a glimpse of that struggling phantasy of a black gown, the white limbs, scarlet lips, and blazing, eyes—calling, and calling, and calling. An elderly *boulevardier* of the last decade made his escape mopping his forehead.

"My Heaven!" he exclaimed. "It is like when Cleo danced for those three weeks of her madness. Men fought their way on to the stage. They had to have a guard for her. That woman is a she devil, I tell you! There was, never a lady of the pavement who pleaded so eloquently as she."

But there were others, colder critics, who fancied that they detected that night an uneasiness in Tanya's movements. Her eyes searched everywhere for something they failed to find. In her dressing-room afterwards, both bolts of the door firmly fastened, she flung her frock away and cursed like a mad person. Adolf Suess, smoking a cigar, her sole companion, watched her in amusement.

"*Pas de chance, petite*," he murmured looking at her with twinkling eyes as he lit a cigarette. "*Et le souper, hein?*"

She flashed round upon him.

"You are a black-hearted pig," she shouted. "You think more of your stomach than your *patrie*!"

"And you, little one, think more of your hurt vanity than your failure here."

"And you call yourself a deputy," she cried. "You are supposed to represent forty thousand eager Communists. You represent nothing except your appetite."

Suess was shivering a little, but he laughed at her. "I am the gentleman who prefers the blonde," he said. "I know your tricks too well, little Tanya. You would never tear the soul out of my body, and this man you want—he will not come near you."

"A great compliment, my dear. He is afraid."

"Go and ring the bell three times," she told him. "I need Aimee."

"Shall I help?" he asked, with an unpleasant grin.

She stood facing him, her arms akimbo, but defiance in every feature.

"If you came near me, if you put your filthy hands within reach," she cried, "I would forget La Patrie for the first time in my life. Except that I fear you might be some small loss to her, I would stick a knife in your back! Remember that, and do what I tell you. Ring for Aimee."

He moistened his dry lips and obeyed. Presently there was a sound of voices outside the door, Aimee's grumbling and protesting. She knocked—three times quickly and then twice. Satisfied, Tanya unfastened the door and peered out. Aimee slipped in. Tanya was on the point of closing the door when she recognised a face in the background.

"Tanya, don't be so cruel," a young man with pallid features and straw-coloured hair drawled. "There's Francois St. Pierre here and two other of my fellow-guests from the *château*. The little restaurant at Garoupe keeps open for you. Supper is all ordered. If you disappoint us we will come and howl the show down to-morrow night."

She laughed mockingly.

"Poor little boys," she jeered. "What could you do against the crowd of those who love my art? You would be thrown out. Nevertheless, the thought of supper is good. You are sure we can have it at Garoupe?"

"One hour," the young man with straw-coloured hair, the Duc de Montesset declared with emphasis, "it took us to persuade Monsieur and Madame Crestner to keep their place open. There is a bouillabaisse there cooked, by the chef from Marseilles, and there's a pate that came from Montpellier."

"Shall I make myself beautiful or shall I come to you like a guttersnipe?" she asked. "I can do either. The guttersnipe will be quicker."

"Let it be so," the Duc replied. "Come as yourself."

"You pay for that later on, Monsieur le Duc, when that nice looking friend of yours sits on the other side!" she threatened.

"Be off with you to the bar in the baccarat room. I will be there in twenty minutes."

She slammed the door and bolted it.

"Wash the stuff off me, Aimee," she ordered. "Make me, if you can, like the girl going to her first communion! Perhaps to-night I get a little revenge. Who can tell?"

Aimee took possession. Tanya opened her eyes a few seconds later to find Suess still there.

"Get out!" she ordered. "Haven't you heard? My plans for the evening are made. Why do you sit there staring at me? Go and play with some of the little *poules* in the bar."

"So there is to be no supper?" he asked sullenly.

"Not with you, *mon vieux*," she assured him.

"How will these others help you?" he grumbled. "I thought to-night all was to be for La Patrie."

"You fool!" she answered. "You think of nothing but yourself. What do I care for those boys? The man with whom I am going to supper, the Due de Montesset, he is the unfortunate suitor of Mademoiselle de Montelimar, and it is Monsieur Hamer Wildburn who is his rival. Monsieur Hamer Wildburn will not come to me. Perhaps something may be done through one who hates him."

"This business may be all a legend," Suess declared, rising unwillingly to his feet.

"Zut, you have the brains of a rabbit!" she cried. "I go—I ask no questions. I just see and I know. Fifty yards away from the *Bird of Paradise* is a Government gunboat with naked guns and a searchlight. In a villa on the hill opposite is the great General, the one strong man of France—would to Heaven he belonged to us!—watching, and between him and the gunboat Edouard Mermillon in his yacht—watching. No one dare move by force. No one knows exactly how to move, but I am going to find out, Adolf Suess, and it will not be by force."

"And later?"

"There will be no later," she answered fiercely. "Go and wait till the morning. If there is anything to be told—you are my official chief—you will know it. After that—Marseilles and Paris and Lyons must be told simultaneously. If I succeed the end begins. You have the article written attacking the authenticity of Lavandou's dying letter? You have the statement from Madame Jacqueline?"

"I know my business," the man growled. "If you succeed—I laugh when I think of your success—two of the papers which have the largest circulation in France will publish both. The revolution will commence to-morrow."

She rose to her feet—unrecognisable, pale, with dark spiritual eyes, the exquisite shape of her body nowhere concealed by the simple black robe which was all she wore.

"To think," she meditated, "that one man's obstinacy stands between us and triumph. I will give," she went on, and for a moment she seemed almost like a religious devotee before the altar, although the pagan words were trembling upon her lips. "I will give more than I have ever given any man or any human being

before in my life. I will kill myself in his arms afterwards if he wishes it, or live for him for ever, or just as gladly, if I can get what I want that way. I will murder him without blenching. Farewell, Adolf. If you still worship the black gods of Madagascar get down on your knees and pray."

It was a wild supper party in strange surroundings. The restaurant was little more than a shed built to offer luncheon and dinner to the bourgeoisie of Nice, situated upon the *plage* itself, and in the very shadow of the *château*. The tables were merely wooden planks upon trestles, the chairs hard, except that Tanya sat upon a great pile of cushions enthroned like a queen. Tablecloths and napkins were of course linen, but all was scrupulously clean. The cutlery was crude. Everywhere was the impression of an almost barbaric simplicity. Nevertheless, Monsieur le Patron's chickens were famous and his *langouste à l'Américaine* and *bouillabaisse* unsurpassed. At this hour in the morning there was only one waiter, beside Monsieur and Madame, to wait upon their guests, but never was a supper party received with so much acclamation. Never did gaiety soar to such heights. The champagne—very good champagne, too—flowed like water. Tanya, in turn voluptuous and spiritual, was an inspiration. There were seven in the party and five were already demented with drink and enthusiasm. Only Montesset sat by her side coldly sober, his strangely coloured eyes flaming all the time with an icy passion. She judged the time ripe and she leaned over and whispered in his ear.

"Where is the American to-night—the fiance they say of Mademoiselle de Montelimar?"

"Heavens knows. On his boat, I suppose."

"And Mademoiselle?"

"She and the Marquise are at Monte Carlo. They are passing the night there. We invited the young man to come with us to your show, but he refused."

"Pig," she answered. "Listen, Guy. It pleases you, this party—yes?"

"There are too many of us," he said. "It pleases me because I am next to you, and soon they will go away."

"I, too," she whispered. "I wait for that. I want to ruffle that wonderful hair of yours, and I want—well, for that I can wait no longer."

She leaned over and kissed him upon the lips. His arms would have closed wildly around her, but she sat up with a laugh just in time.

"I have an idea," she cried. "Let us go out and wake this sleeping hermit who will not come to see me dance."

There was a burst of applause from everyone except Montesset. A spot of colour was burning in his cheeks. His hands, which had been perfectly steady a moment before, shook as he raised his glass to his lips.

"I think the party has lasted long enough," he pronounced. "You fellows are all at home. The *château* is only two hundred yards up the drive. I shall take Mademoiselle back to Juan."

"Not yet," they shouted almost in unison. "We can't part with Mademoiselle. Tanya!"

They all stood up and drank to her. They threw the empty glasses with a crash upon the floor and called for fresh ones. The patron made a note of the number broken, and promptly supplied them.

"Listen," Tanya said. "I agree with you others. Guy shall drive me home presently, but not yet. Guy is my love. Let us take boats and board this fierce American and make him join us. If he refuses we will make him swim."

The roar of applause might almost have awakened Hamer in his bunk.

"Has he plenty to drink," one man demanded, "or shall we take champagne on board?"

"Take champagne." Tanya advised. "We will be on the safe side."

They trooped down to the edge of the *plage*. The moon was a little misty, but there was still light. They packed bottles of champagne in the bows of a heavy cutter, and bestowed themselves upon the seats. The patron, a little doubtfully, started them off. Montesset and Tanya sat in the aft seat together.

"You are not happy?" Tanya whispered, squeezing his arm.

"I am impatient," he answered. "I am not sure that this is not a foolish business, although we are all drunk, so it doesn't matter. The American has not our temperament, however. He may be disagreeable."

She laughed gaily.

"He will forget all that," she declared, "when he sees the present which we have brought him."

CHAPTER XXI.

Hamer sat suddenly up in his bed. He slept always with his door open, and he was conscious of a dark figure blotting out the moonlight. His visitor tapped at the door, and a familiar voice hailed him.

"There's a boatload of young people from the *château* here, sir," his *matelot* announced.

"From the *château*," Hamer repeated incredulously. "Why, it's 3 o'clock. What on earth do they want, Auguste?"

"If you ask me, sir, I think they want a drink. There's the young Duke there amongst them, and two or three of the other gentlemen who have been on board with Mademoiselle. There's a pinnace from the *Fidélité* here, too. They seem to keep an eye on us all the night. I told the bo'sun to lie to until you came up on deck."

Hamer Wildburn wrapped himself in his dressing gown and ran lightly up the steps. The two boats—the boat from the *Fidélité* a little in the background—were both on the starboard side. Hamer was greeted at once with cheers as he made his appearance.

"What do you want, you fellows?" he demanded.

"Sorry if we're a nuisance," Montesset drawled. "The fact is we've been having supper on the *plage* there, and we thought we'd come out and see you. Do you feel inclined to offer us a drink? If not, we'll offer you one. We've got some champagne here."

"Very nice of you," Wildburn observed, with a marked absence of enthusiasm, "but isn't it a bit late for this sort of thing?"

"Oh, we're making a night of it." Montesset replied "There's no one at home at the *château*, as I dare say you know. We have been having supper down on the *plage*. Can we come up?"

"Of course you may," Hamer invited. "Let down the gangway, Auguste, and go back to sleep. Tell the men from the *Fidélité* that it's all right. These are friends from the *château*."

They came clambering up the steps. Hamer started when he saw the slight figure in black emerge from the obscurity and spring on deck.

"This," the Duke announced, "is the most marvellous artiste upon the French stage—Mademoiselle Tanya Vizille. She has been dancing to-night at Juan and driving the people crazy. Since then she has had supper with us down here."

She held out her hand.

"I wished Monsieur to come and see me dance," she said reproachfully, "but I looked for him and he was not there. Is it not your English saying that if Mahomet will not come to the mountain the mountain must go to Mahomet? You see—I am here."

"But understand, Hamer, my friend," Montesset declared, lurching forward, "My mountain. You are my mountain, aren't you, Tanya?"

"Ah, I am the mountain of whom I love for the moment," she confided. "Sometimes I change my mind. Sometimes there come feelings which carry one away and the world changes, and if the world changes the woman in it must change too."

"Well, this all sounds very nice," Hamer remarked as good-humouredly as he knew how. "What do you want to drink?" Where will you sit? Out on deck or down in the saloon? I think perhaps we had better go below. We have a gunboat within hearing of us and a famous French statesman who is here for a rest."

"I should like to go below," Tanya said softly. "I should like to see more of your boat, Mr. Wildburn."

"You needn't worry about the famous French statesman," Montesset observed. "He flew to Paris this morning. The suicide of Chauvanne's understudy, I expect. However, Mademoiselle wishes to go below. Come along."

Wildburn led the way. They seated themselves, with some difficulty, round his small table in the salon. He waved their contributions on one side, produced champagne and opened it. They drank to his health. One of the crowd sang a song.

"You must please sit down," Tanya whispered to her host. "Near me, please."

Hamer produced a stool and seated himself upon it. Tanya's hand slipped into his. He lifted it on to the table and left his own upon it. Montesset watched with a scowl.

"Your champagne is wonderful, Monsieur Hamer," Tanya said, smiling at him. "I drink to your health and to your boat—the *Bird of Paradise* you call it—yes?"

Hamer drank with her. Montesset left his glass untouched.

"I was disappointed," the girl continued, "that Monsieur did not come and see me me dance."

"I have heard all about it," Hamer said courteously. "I am told that well-brought-up and respectable young men go perfectly insane when they watch you. From all I have heard I think that perhaps I was wise not to go."

"Why were you wise?"

"Because I had the marvellous good fortune to become engaged only a day or so ago," he told her.

"That is very pleasant," she admitted. "All young men must become engaged. All young men must marry and found families, but there is no reason why the moments of insanity should not continue sometimes. Every passion that makes the heart beat faster is good for men—and women too. Besides, they say that you Americans keep women too far away from your hearts even when you bring them into your homes. I am a great artist at playing upon the heart-strings, Monsieur Hamer."

"If you are going to talk this sort of rubbish I'm off on deck," Montesset said, a little roughly. "It's too hot down here anyway."

"Do." Tanya begged. "All of you go. Mr. Wildburn and I will follow directly. I have something to say to him."

"So this is why you brought us here!"

Montesset exclaimed, a furious light in his eyes.

She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Guy," she said, and there was a note of warning in her tone, "you risk everything when you talk to me like that. I am in earnest when I tell you that I have something I wish to say to Mr. Wildburn. If you think that I am going to ask him to make love to me you are wrong. What I have to say to him deals with other matters. Now will you go?"

"Come on Guy," a young cousin of Montelimar's who was by far the soberest of the party, enjoined. "Wildburn's all right. He's not like us poor simple-hearted Frenchmen who go crazy for the sake of a great artist in love, like Tanya. Besides, he's engaged to Lucienne all right. I am to be one of the witnesses."

Still grumbling, Guy led the way on to the deck. Hamer Wildburn looked curiously at his companion.

"You wrote me to come to the show, to come to your room or to the Provençal," he reminded her abruptly. "I am very much flattered, Miss Tanya, because I know that you are a great artist. But what do you want with me?"

"It is very difficult," she complained, "and I have so little time."

"You are quite right about that," he agreed. "You will have Montesset down here in a minute. He doesn't like your leaving him. Please tell me quickly what it is."

"Monsieur Wildburn" she said, and probably not one single soul amongst her thousands of admirers would have recognised her voice or herself as she spoke. "I have a religion. That religion is worship of my country, because I believe that she is being led to ruin. I am a Communist. I believe that only the Communists can save France."

"What!" Hamer Wildburn exclaimed. What on earth—"

"You must take me seriously," she begged. "Communism may mean many things. You don't understand what it does mean. It means the giving of real liberty to people who are being deceived and robbed every day of their lives. It means giving the people liberty to breathe upon their own soil the air of the country they love—free men and free women with the right to live and the right to the means of living."

"That is very sensibly said," he acknowledged. "But my dear Mademoiselle Tanya, at this time of the night with a lover aching for you on board, why start a discussion of this sort with me?"

"Because," she explained, "by some diabolical chance you can render the Communists of France the greatest service in the world."

"I?" Wildburn cried.

"You. Not because you are yourself but because you are the owner of the *Bird of Paradise*."

Hamer Wildburn for a moment was devoid of words. He struck the table with his hands so that the glasses rattled.

"What!" he exclaimed "The boat again."

"Yes," she admitted. "It is the boat again. I do not suppose that I am the first person in the world to ask what I am going to ask you. You want it out short. I will try. Berthold, my comrade, who was executed in Marseilles, he gave me the hint. Something—signed papers, cheques—something in writing, exists upon this boat which would break the bourgeois Government of France, which would set France on fire from one end to the other, which would deliver her into our hands—into the hands of the Communists. We have a Government ready to step in. We have every means at hand and [are] prepared to stop the worst developments of revolution. We want what you have here on the *Bird of Paradise* to start it."

"But, my dear young lady," Hamer Wildburn protested, "I have heard something of this before but not so eloquently put. I have been all over the ship myself. I have searched in every possible place. I can assure you that there is nothing the *Bird of Paradise* can reveal which would help you in the least."

"You think not," she smiled incredulously.

"Listen I know more than you do. I cannot go direct to the spot, but I have a hint, an idea. Give me three hours alone here, whenever you like. Oh, if you were one of that crowd upstairs, if you were a man like all these others, I would ask you what reward you needed. If you wanted me I would be your slave for the rest of my days. If you wanted money you should have it year by year from the new Government. Your name should be enshrined as one of the benefactors of France. There is nothing that you could ask for that should not come to you in the future There is nothing from me that you could not have in the present. But give me those three hours!"

"I'm sorry Mademoiselle Tanya," Hamer said firmly. "But in the terse language of my country—there's nothing doing. I hate the principles of Communism, although I admit I never heard them put so sweetly as you have done, but I should not run any risks. If I thought there was anything hidden on my boat which would cause such an upheaval in the country as you suggest, I should find it myself and I should consider in whose hands to place it."

There was a disturbance of voices on deck. Montesset came down the companionway dangerously quiet.

"You are wanted on deck, Hamer Wildburn," he announced. "Tanya, you come with me. This thing has gone far enough."

She pointed to her companion, who had risen to his feet.

"If he asks me to stay," she said, "I would never leave him for the rest of my life. He will not give me what I want, but he is at least a man."

They mounted on deck. Hamer was conscious from the first moment that he was moving in an atmosphere of animosity. They were all Montesset's friends and they all seemed to resent Tanya's attitude. Montesset stepped forward and held Tanya for the moment by the wrist.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded. "You are my guest. It is I who brought you here. You are coming with me."

"Take your hand away," she ordered. "I shall only go because I must. If Monsieur Wildburn there invites me to stay I remain."

"Upon this boat."

"Upon this boat?"

"With him—alone?"

"With him alone," she repeated. "For to-night and as long as he chooses to keep me."

"Look here," Hamer intervened. "Don't let there be any misunderstanding about this. Mademoiselle Tanya does not care about me, nor I about her. She has an idea that I will permit her to stay and search my boat for heaven knows what if she offers me, what I understand," he added, with perhaps a faint show of sarcasm, "belongs, Montesset, to you. Take her away, all of you. She and I have nothing to do with one another. Mademoiselle is a very charming and talented young lady, with great gifts, but nothing which she could say would induce me to keep her on this boat for ten minutes longer than is necessary. Is that plain enough?"

There was a new fire now in Tanya's eyes; a very wicked fire it was. Trouble—there must be trouble at any cost.

"I hear," she said sadly. "It is not quite what he said downstairs, but if he insists that I must go, I must go. Another time may do very well for him. It suits me not at all."

"So you mean to come back another time?" the Duke demanded.

She looked timidly up at Hamer.

"Whenever he wants me," she assented. "Whenever he will send for me. Whenever he will let me come."

Montesset turned round to his friends.

"Have we not rather forgotten how we proposed to wind up the evening?" he reminded them. "We thought of inviting Mr. Wildburn to take a swim with us?"

There was a little murmur.

"Why not?"

"It will teach him to keep his hands off other people's property," someone else muttered.

"You must not hurt him." Tanya insisted.

Hamer Wildburn took off his dressing gown. "I am not inclined to swim with you," he said. "You came on my boat uninvited guests and I beg you to leave it—all of you—and take Mademoiselle with you."

Monteset moved forward.

"We wish you to go with us," he confided. "There is a little lesson you should learn."

"Look here, Monteset," Hamer rejoined angrily, "you are all drunk. Get away and take the girl with you. I hate hitting a smaller man than myself, but you are for it if this goes on any longer."

Monteset sprang towards him. Two of the others came on either side. The other two struggled to find a place. Monteset went down like a log with a straight left-hander which caught him on the point of the jaw, and the right was ready for his successor as he came along. The cousin of the Montelimars made a lunging blow at Hamer, a signet ring on his finger, and cut into his cheek. In another moment he was over the side. The two who were left on their feet paused. Wildburn had had enough hesitation. He closed with both of them. One, a heavy fellow, the most drunken of the lot, he knocked down without the slightest difficulty. The other one, too small to hit, who was already fading away, he caught up round the middle and threw over the side.

"Now, out you go," he ordered Monteset, who was sitting up, and his friend who was trying to struggle to his feet. "Quick! Both of you."

Monteset swayed for a moment, and then rushed in.

"This is your trouble—not mine," Hamer declared, easily, evading his wild blows. "You are drunk—all of you. You can't fight. You can have all of this medicine you like."

After those first few moments there was only a blundering resistance. Wildburn had seen them all swim, and he was reckless. One by one he pushed or threw them overboard, and drew up the steps to which Monteset was already hanging.

"Get into your boat and clear out," he shouted, as he shook him loose. "If any one of you wants a hiding in the morning you can have it. You are too drunk now."

Monteset, a ludicrous-looking object, his hair plastered down over his face, his clothes clinging to him, stood up and shook his fist. He shouted, but he seemed to have lost control over his voice. What he said was incomprehensible. One by one he pulled the others into the cutter.

"Be off with you," Wildburn called out. "What are you doing hanging around here?"

They rowed a few strokes and still waited, then very slowly they dipped their oars again and went off shorewards. His last glimpse of them, all shouting and talking amongst themselves, puzzled Hamer for the moment. He had a vague feeling that he had forgotten something. Suddenly he felt something clinging

softly to his arm, a little body pressed against his, an inch or two of fine muslin with one of the world's newest perfumes pressed against his cheek.

"You are a brave man, Monsieur Wildburn," Tanya murmured. "If you will come downstairs I will bathe your cheek. He was *méchant*, that man with the ring. He struck you when you were not looking. Soon I will bind it up for you very nicely."

He stared down at her in amazement. He realised suddenly what it was he had forgotten. He had forgotten Tanya.

CHAPTER XXII.

A very soft voice sounded in his ear as he remained for the moment thunderstruck.

"And so I remain, Monsieur Hamer."

He opened his lips and, if he had spoken at the moment of his intention, the words would have been very decisive and more than a little harsh, but looking downwards it seemed to him that he was discovering a new Tanya. Out of her pale, beautifully shaped face her eyes were shining pleadingly, sweetly up into his. The *diablerie* had gone from her. Something had taken its place—something which mocked his intelligence to give it a name.

"Monsieur Hamer," she pleaded, "you permit me to stay a little time? I talk with you out here on the deck. First I go down below. I fetch a towel. I bathe your cheek because the blood runs on to your neck. I do that well, for I am a good nurse. Then we talk for a few moments, please. You will hear a Tanya speak to you whom the world has never heard before."

A few seconds ago Hamer had fancied himself proof against all the pleading and all the lure in the world, yet at her words he seemed nerveless. He felt like a man who holds in his hands a butterfly and fears to crush it.

"All right," he agreed. "My cheek does smart a bit."

She walked quickly towards the companionway and disappeared. His eyes followed her critically—dubiously. There were no tricks with her skirt, no backward turn of the head, none of that quaint swaying of the body which seemed a heritage of her dancing. She walked swiftly and with a sylphlike grace, but she walked as any other woman of her charm would have done. Hamer sat down upon a bench and looked out across the expanse of darkened sea.

"Well," he exclaimed to himself. "This girl is a witch."

She was some little time before she reappeared. When she did so she had a damp towel hanging over her shoulder, a sponge between her fingers, and a glass with something that fizzed in her hand.

"You drank nothing," she said, as she came to him. "I watched you. You drink now half a glass of wine."

"And you?" he asked. She shook her head.

"I am like you," she said. "I drink because it serves my purpose. If I lived the life of an ordinary human being—oh, how wonderful it would be—I should be like others. My single aperitif, my glass of white wine, my glass of champagne, perhaps, for dinner. But fate has me tied. I live as I must...Your head on one side, please. So."

With gentle fingers she bathed his wound, looked at it critically, placed upon it a square compress and two pieces of sticking plaster.

"I think that is best," she decided. "The disinfectant may hurt for a minute. It will soon be well. You drink your wine—yes? And now, Mr. Hamer Wildburn, because I feel at any moment you may want to send me from your boat, I talk to you as one human being to another—yes"

"Why not?" he answered

"Forget all that you have thought of me," she continued. "Forget that I tried to win you over to do my will in the way that other women try. I am not good—I do not pretend that—but I do not wish to do evil. The sacrifices I make I make because I have big things in my heart."

"You are a very extraordinary person," he acknowledged, "but if you want to be turned loose on this boat as you told me—"

"Hush." she interrupted. "Let me finish. I was not born like that, but I have become heart and soul a slave to one burning desire—to work in the cause of freedom for the people in this world who have never known freedom, but chiefly for the people in the next world who are to come, who might breathe a different air and might climb instead of stumbling all the way through the foul places. There is no name for the need of us who are in earnest. Communism will do as well as any other. But what we want, those of us who are so much in earnest and the thousand who are not for more selfish reasons, perhaps, is to chase away from control this bourgeois money-grabbing Government, and put in a Government of men who are willing to work, not to enrich themselves, but to build the foundations of the future race in different fashion."

He looked at her curiously.

"Your name is Russian," he said.

"And I am a Russian," she answered. "Perhaps some day I will tell you my real name. I am Russian. I have lived in Russia since the Soviet. I have watched the crude beginnings of what will come in fifty years' time—a glorious climax. I have watched the mistakes we have all deplored. I have watched the miserable futility, the cruelty, the wickedness, the bloodthirstiness of the birth of a new faith, and I am going to say of a new religion. Because I criticised I had to flee for my life. I joined some people, but they had as little as I had. I drifted into becoming a member of what they call The Circle here—the Communists. Russia was badly treated in the old days, Mr. Wildburn. It had a cruel and ignorant aristocracy, who became the ruin of the country, but who are responsible for the coming of the Soviet. France has a greedy and ignorant bourgeoisie who will be responsible for the coming of the French Soviet."

"Are you trying to convert me to a new faith?" he asked, in a very different tone to any he had ever used to her before.

"No," she said. "I could not do that. You are an Anglo-Saxon. You are too fixed, you are too honest to make believe, you have that terrible facility for taking things as they are. I could do nothing with you, Hamer Wildburn. You are too strong for me. All that I could hope for would be that you should realise

that I am in earnest. I will tell you what I want from you in plainer words than you have ever been told by anyone else, and then you will reflect—you will think perhaps that you would do not much harm if you helped me."

He moved uneasily in his place.

"I am beginning to believe, my dear young lady," he observed, "that I and the whole world may be mistaken about you. If that is so it is your own fault. On the other hand, so far as regards the concrete thing which you ask of me—the possession of this boat—that is an impossibility."

She waved his words away.

"This boat was built by Tositi," she confided. "He, with all his faults, was a man of imagination. He loved the sea and he loved the woman for whom he built it. She cared little for him, perhaps, but she saw through him the means to an end."

All the time the sea lapped gently against the sides of the yacht. The long straight beam from the Antibes lighthouse flashed across its sullen surface and across the sleeping hills. Of found there was none. The world slept.

"Go on, please," he begged.

"Tositi, it is true," she admitted, "was the tool of many men in greater positions than he, but he was their willing tool. He was their deliberate accomplice. All his life his great ambition had been to move in the greater places of the world. He had no ideals. He was nothing of a dreamer. He was a clod of a man, but he had the greedy ambitions of the egotist. He wanted the applause of the multitude without being capable of doing or producing anything to deserve it."

"That is a poor epitaph for a man," he murmured.

"It was given to me to see the truth about him," she answered. "With it all he had the gifts which belong to that order of human being. He was cunning. He helped the greater men than he to rob, and he saw them go off with the greater share of the spoils. He knew perfectly well, although he bore it uncomplainingly, that in two cases out of three the result, if things should ever be discovered, was fastened upon his shoulder. But Tositi never slept. In every one of the great frauds wherein he was at the same time the tool and the instigator, he preserved some little fragment of proof that he was not the only one concerned, that greater than he had planned what he only carried out. He kept these proofs care fully and added to them week by week, month by month. He picked the millions out of the fire for the great men who called themselves his friends but kept him a long way in the background, but he had them all the time safe in his net. He knew it and, when they failed to save him, when one of the schemes went awry and Tositi was to be the sacrifice, he sent them a warning word of what might happen. What did happen was the contents of a dozen revolvers were emptied into his body within twelve hours. That was the end of Tositi. Unfortunately he did not live long enough to protect himself. It was only after his death that they learnt through another man of his cunning The truth is coming to them piece by piece. They know that Tositi's damning records are concealed somewhere upon this boat where you and I are sitting. They know that if he had had time to get to them he would have been allowed to walk out of the country with millions in his pockets. That, however, never happened. Tositi is dead but the records remain. Two people know where. The man who designed the boat and the builder."

"And they—" he began.

"It is known that they went off together to America."

Silently Hamer rose to his feet, went below, busied himself in the galley for a few minutes, and came up carrying a packet of cigarettes.

They both spoke for a moment or two without speech.

"So that is the secret of the *Bird of Paradise*," he said at last.

"The secret but not the key," she reminded him.

"It can never happen," he went on "because I do not possess it, but supposing I handed you the key, supposing I turned you loose and you discovered these records?"

"I should proceed with discretion," she said, "but what would happen is this. The Government would fall and, as soon as they tried to create another, a little note to one of the proposed members, and that, too, would never come to being. Then the newspapers. We should set a match to the bonfires already built. After that the floodgates would be let loose. The men whom we have already decided upon would march to their places with the millions of people behind them. There would be excesses, of course. There would be bloodshed. Innocent people would suffer. Property would be destroyed. But, at one leap, France would spring into freedom. Those who are behind the scenes in this thing have learnt from the French republic. They have learnt from the Russian Soviet. They learnt what blunders to avoid. They have learnt to rebuild commencing where others have left off. Humanity would owe a great debt, a debt she could never pay, to the man who supplies the key."

"I, alas, can never be that man. Mademoiselle," Hamer announced. "I cannot help believing in you. You are, I think, the most wonderful person I ever met. When I think of what you have sacrificed from sheer devotion to a cause, from consecrated altruism, I respect and honour you. I can say no more except that I am ashamed when I tell you that I am pledged to keep my word to the girl I am going to marry. Frankly, I suspect her father is implicated in these records, but there it is. My word is given. I shall keep it."

"It is such a pity," she sighed "So small the cause; so mighty a result. You and I together could be responsible for the making of a great country. You must keep your word to this nicely brought up young lady who has a devotion to her family."

"It has to be like that," he confessed.

She looked at him steadily.

"Yes," she agreed, "if you say so. I do not fancy that anything I could say or do would change you. It is amazing that you should be the man that you are, the great stumbling block to the coming of the Millennium, but such as you are you must remain...May I be put ashore?"

Hamer produced his whistle.

"One word more," he said. "You have given me a great deal of your confidence. You knew without asking that you were safe. What are you going to do about this business?"

"I am going to take the *Bird of Paradise* from you if I can," she told him. "If they had dared, if they had felt convinced, as I could have convinced them, that the records they sought were here, it would have been destroyed by now a hundred times over. I am the only one who knows, and I must have your boat whole. You have chosen to shelter a group of wicked men, Monsieur Hamer Wildburn. It may cost you your life, though it shall not if I can help it."

"That's kind of you," he said, "but it must be war, then."

"I must have the boat," she insisted, "and I must see that it is not destroyed. It is not for myself. It is not for any glory that may come to me in the future. Probably no one will know. I shall never be a Joan of Arc to France, because I am not French. It is not for France I offer myself. It is for humanity. The day will come some time when nations will flow the one into the other like the seas. That will be the time of freedom."

Hamer blew his whistle, and Auguste appeared from the galley almost at once. Hamer's instructions were simple and decisive.

"You will take this young lady to the *plage*, Auguste," he said. "You will find my car in the first shed. Drive mademoiselle to the Provençal Hotel, or wherever else she directs. First, get me an overcoat from downstairs."

Auguste did as he was bidden. Hamer felt curiously moved as he took her hands at the top of the steps. She seemed very frail and tired in the gleaming light of the dawn, grey and ghastly before the coming of the sun. Yet, when she smiled it was another face.

"You have been gentle and kind with me, Mr. Wildburn," she confessed. "I have met with the great failure of my life just when success seemed so near, but I can feel no bitterness towards you. You see with the eyes given you. No one can change them."

He kissed her cold fingers, threw the coat over her shoulders, and stood on deck till the dinghy passed into the little wisp of mist which hung over the border of the *plage*.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Lucienne arrived on board the *Bird of Paradise* towards 5 o'clock on the following afternoon. She had abandoned the absolute negligee in which the Riviera was revelling at the moment, and wore a white beach frock, a panama hat, and carried a sunshade. She came round the point in one of the motor boats which were kept in the private bay of the *château*, and, though she smiled as she recognised Hamer waiting for her, there was a slight restraint about the wave of her hand.

"You look terribly formal," he told her.

"This is entirely a formal visit," she assured him, as he drew her chair back under the awning. "I imagine you must have been expecting me. I have come to break off our engagement."

"Not a chance," he answered. "If I was not so pleased to see you I should have sent you back again for that speech."

"Where is the scene of this bloody encounter?" she demanded.

He pointed to the deck. "Up and around there."

"And is it true that you threw my alternate suitor, second Duke of France, into the sea?"

"Absolutely. I should probably do it again unless he came to apologise."

"Apologise for what?"

He told her the story up to his having been left on board with Tanya. Every now and then her eyes lit up, and she had hard work to restrain a smile.

"Up to the present moment, dear Hamer, my sympathies are with you," she admitted. "A tiresome lot of young men we seem to have collected at the *château*, and I knew nothing of the supper party. So it was they who brought Mademoiselle Tanya on board?"

"It certainly was," he replied.

"But there is more to be told," she insisted. "According to your own story, the prize of the night seems to have been Mademoiselle Tanya."

"It might seem so," he admitted. "She remained on board, sitting just about where you are, and I by her side, for at least an hour and a half after they had left. Then I lent her an overcoat, Auguste rowed her to the *plage*, and drove her home to the Provençal. If the circumstance," he went on, "is of any import, I might add that she did not move from that chair from the time of the departure of her friends until I sent her away."

"I must be in an inquisitive frame of mind," Lucienne confessed, "because I find myself asking questions all the time. Why did she stay here with you an hour and a half after the others? To see the sun rise?"

"Well, we did see the sun rise for that matter," he acknowledged, "but she stayed to add herself to the number of those who have bewildered me with their offers for my boat, and she stayed a little longer to elucidate once and for all the mystery of the *Bird of Paradise*."

"Hamer! You are talking nonsense,"

Lucienne declared.

"If you say that again I shall kiss you," he threatened.

"Things are not so bad as I feared," she conceded, "but I should regard any attempt on your part towards familiarities of that sort as an impertinence which I should promptly resent."

He leaned over and kissed her. She made not the slightest resistance, and he had a very strong idea that she returned the caress.

"What happened was this," he said. "Tanya suddenly changed from a mad *gamine* to a young woman of sound common sense—a most inspired person. She told me some things which I would rather not pass on for the moment, but they were purely political. She told me others which I will confide to you. The reason, from different points of view, that different people want to acquire the *Bird of Paradise*, is because cunningly hidden in various parts of her are the detailed reports made by that fellow Tositi as to his dealings with some of your greatest politicians."

Lucienne had gone a little paler. She was leaning forward in her chair.

"Is Mademoiselle Tanya being bribed by one of these men?" she asked.

"By no means," he answered. "She is working for herself and for her party. She is a Communist, and she wants to start a new era in this country. It is true that she egged those half-drunken young men on to bring her on board. It is true, I believe, that in the first instance she encouraged a row so that if I got knocked out she would be free of the place, but she had only one motive for coming or for staying here. She wanted those records."

Lucienne removed her hat. She placed one of her small delicate hands on either side of Hamer's cheeks, drew his face down, and kissed him.

"Now I feel better," she declared. "She did try to vamp you, though."

"All in the way of business," he denied. "I told her that I was engaged, and that Americans did not understand the vamping dodge. It was then she became earnest and talked to me like a serious woman."

"You didn't let her have the records?"

"Not a chance," he answered. "Where they are I don't know myself. What to do with the boat I don't know. What I am sure of, though, is that, there is going to be some trouble here before very long."

"The boat is mine," she reminded him calmly.

"Then, for heaven's sake, come and marry me to-morrow at Nice, and take possession," he suggested. "I'm as ready for a fight as most men, but I honestly don't see any fun in being shot or murdered in my sleep just because I happen to own a boat which possesses secrets. It is not as though I cared a fig either way. I am neither a philanthropist nor a sentimentalist. Anyone can govern France for all I care. For a moment or two that young woman last night nearly converted me, then I thought of that gunboat and Perissol on the hill. They would never let her get away with anything. Why on earth, Lucienne, can't we go to General Perissol and tell him what we believe. He must have a suspicion of it already. He is the man to deal with the affair."

She shook her head sadly.

"Hamer, dearest," she said, "There is more to be considered. General Perissol is not France any more than Edouard Mermillon is France. Father is coming back from Paris next week. We must wait till then."

"And in the meantime," he observed, "what is to happen if my Joan of Arc, with a thousand Marseillais behind her, sweep through the gendarmes here, as they easily could, and seize the boat? What about that, Lucienne?"

"Did you part on friendly terms with your Joan of Arc, as you call her?"

"Yes. But make no mistake about this," he insisted. "She made me no promise. I don't amount in her eyes to a husk of chaff. She wants the secret of the boat in her hands, and then, according to her, the whole of the French Government is doomed."

Lucienne simply pointed backwards over her shoulder. He followed the direction of her gesture, and suddenly realised that the guns of the *Fidélité* were practically trained upon them.

"So that's what the gunboat's there for, is it?" he demanded, with indications of anger in his tone.

She laid her hand upon his.

"Hamer, dear," she said, "remember this. You are the unfortunate possessor of a bone of contention. The final issue does not concern you. The only insupportable catastrophe would be if your Joan of Arc, as you call her, were to succeed. Otherwise the whole thing would be, as I think you say in English, stalemate. It would be settled in the way my father wishes it settled."

Hamer gazed gloomily across the stretch of sea landwards. Since the first inkling of the fact that the *Bird of Paradise* carried treasure of some sort it seemed to him that the situation had never been so unsatisfactory. He fancied that he could almost hear Tanya's gentle beseeching voice, the music which her simple eloquence had sometimes imparted to it, the pleading which, regardless of all the small things of life come so convincingly from her heart. And for those few minutes, minutes which he was destined never to forget, the little guttersnipe, as he had heard her called, and as she had more than once seemed to him, had attained to something like a stainless spirituality. He recalled that exquisite simplicity of verbiage and motive which had so nearly undermined even his promise. Every other argument those people had brought to bear upon him seemed suddenly sordid. Even Lucienne was begging only for her father's material safety and well being. Beside all this Tanya's message seemed to come to him from a different and a cleaner world.

"You are not Hesitating, Hamer?" Lucienne asked him softly.

He made no effort to explain. There was no human being, he felt, who could have understood. For the moment, however, he was spared the necessity of a response. The small dinghy from the shore was rocking below. A boy, exhausted with his efforts, was resting upon his oars and in the band of his cap was an oblong strip of pale green.

"For me?" Hamer called out. The boy nodded.

"*Une depeche pour Monsieur. Urgent.*"

Auguste's hand steadied the boat. The boy passed him the message. Hamer, with an apologetic glance towards his companion, tore the perforated edges. He read, and read again. The message took his breath away. It was dated from Paris that morning.

"I wish to see you at the earliest possible moment on an urgent matter. Cancel every engagement and come to me at once. Ned will meet you at Le Bourget. Buy 'plane if necessary.—Luke."

Hamer's surprise choked him. He uttered no word or exclamation. He simply read the message over for the third time.

"No bad news, I hope?" Lucienne asked, gravely curious.

The young man came to himself. He passed the message to her, handed down ten francs to the boy and waved him away.

"Who is this from?" she inquired. "My father."

"I thought he never came to Europe nowadays."

"He has not been for two years. It must be ten since he was in France."

"His message sounds very urgent," she remarked.

"Something very extraordinary must have happened," he agreed. "I have heard my father say he never intended to visit France again and I have never known him to change his mind."

Lucienne sighed.

"Well, I am afraid there is no doubt about it," she said. "You will have to go."

"Come up to the Cap with me," he begged, "while I telephone. We can decide there whether I take a 'plane or the six o'clock Blue Train."

"The weather's bad for flying inland," she reminded him anxiously. "We had a message this morning. My cousin thought of flying; one of the young men you knocked to pieces. He heard that it was snowing at Grenoble."

"I hate flying anyway," he replied, "but if they guarantee me a reasonable passage I suppose I will have to go. What I am thinking about is, though—what about the boat?"

"I will take care of her for you," Lucienne promised.

"You will do nothing of the sort," he objected firmly. "It would not surprise me in the least to come back—when I do come back—and find her blown to smithereens, like that flat in Juan was the other night. I don't want you anywhere near her, my dear."

"If you want to keep things just as they are," she suggested, after a moment's pause, "why not have a word or two with Commander Berard?"

He nodded.

"It seems the most sensible thing," he decided.

"I will help Auguste pack your bag," she said, "while you take the dinghy across."

"What a luxury!" he smiled. "I never felt so nearly married in my life."

"Like the feeling?"

"It's swell," he assured her.

Commander Berard was reticent, but reasonable.

"You see, Commander," Hamer explained, "I know very well that you are supposed to be down here taking soundings, and the rest of it, and that you could not be expected to enter upon any activities outside, but there is the most important French Cabinet Minister within a few yards of you. There is the chief of all the police of France up on the hill, and you may possibly have gathered from them that my boat is an object of interest to certain undesirable people."

Berard's expression was unchanging. He said nothing. He merely listened.

"We will leave it at that," Hamer went on. "I am compelled to go to Paris to-day. It is my father who has sent for me. I shall leave Auguste in charge, of course, and he has Jean with him. I want to ask you

unofficially whether you could not—bearing all things in mind—place a small guard upon her until I get back? That and your guns ought to be enough."

"I think I should be justified in going as far as that, Mr. Wildburn," the commander admitted. "The only thing is that if my action is not approved of by General Perissol I shall have to withdraw my men."

"I'll take the risk," Hamer agreed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Hamer Wildburn alighted from the Paris Blue Train at the Gare de Lyons on the following morning, and held out his hand to the bespectacled young man who hurried up to him.

"Well, Ned, old fellow," he greeted him. "This is a nice surprise to spring upon one. What's all the fuss about?"

"Can't tell you a single thing, Hamer. We only heard that the old man was on his way over when he was half a day out of Cherbourg. I expect he had hard work dodging the newspaper men at the other end and those radio fellows. We had instructions to take the suite he used to have in the old days at the Meurice and to get you here at once. The suite was easy enough, but you took a bit of moving."

"I hate Paris anyway—especially at this time of the year," Hamer confessed, handing the ticket for his registered luggage to a porter. "I thought it would have done the old man good to have come down to my part of the world, and, anyway, I didn't waste any time in telephoning. There was a storm blowing south, around Uriage way, and there were no 'planes leaving of any sort."

"It blew hard here last night," the young man observed. "The chief heard from Le Bourget that no 'plane would be leaving Cannes so he didn't expect you before."

"What's, it all about?" Hamer inquired. "It isn't a thing we talk much about, but I know for a fact that he never meant to set foot in France again as long as he lived."

"We were just as much surprised as you were," Ned Foster answered, as they made their way towards the exit. "So far we have not heard a word of explanation."

"Something to do with the newspaper, perhaps?"

His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"Shouldn't be surprised. We have to run the paper as we are told, of course, but we run it at a good many millions of francs loss because of our politics. I am never quite sure when I get down in the mornings that I shan't find the office blown up."

They stepped into the waiting automobile, and drove off after a very brief delay. Hamer looked about him with distaste. It was a grey morning, but the air was heavy and oppressive.

"Well, I hope he won't keep me long," he remarked fervently. "I am really having the time of my life down there, Ned. I am doing my stunt of work for you fellows, and meeting some very interesting

people—French politicians most of them, by-the-bye. I have also just become engaged to the prettiest and sweetest girl you ever saw out of the States, or in them either, for that matter."

Ned Foster started.

"Does the chief know that?" he asked.

"It won't be popular news, I don't suppose, but he will know as soon as I see him," the other replied. "I have not had time to write yet. What sort of a humour is he in?"

"Dangerous, I should say. Dangerous, with a touch of the mysterious. He is too amiable to be natural. So far, although he came over on a fast boat, and insisted upon a special train from Cherbourg, he has done nothing but loll about in the sitting-room, smoking those terrible cigars. He has not been near the office, and he doesn't want to see Jimmy Pollen until to-morrow. I had hard work to keep Jimmy away. He's afraid the governor may have an idea of shutting up here."

"Is he out of bed yet—the governor, I mean?"

"Got up at six, and had his coffee and rolls. He went out last night in his ordinary clothes, after having dinner in his room, but he was back before midnight. I think he was only having a look round the place."

"Well, I wish he had chosen another time for this surprise visit," Hamer grumbled. "I'm a dutiful son when it comes to the point, and all that, but I was just planning a cruise to Bandol and Toulon when I got your despatch."

"Living on that little boat of yours?"

"I should say I am. Sleep on deck most nights. It's a good life."

"You can get the same sort or thing at Palm Beach or Newquay," his patriotic friend reminded him.

Hamer shook, his head.

"No, you can't," he denied. "Too many people. Too much to do. Too many late parties it's so artificial at those places. We lead the simple life down my way. Besides, you see—"

"I understand," the other interrupted. "The sweetest and prettiest girl in the world out side the States—or in them for that matter—lives there!"

"You can chaff, but you wait till you see her," Hamer laughed.

Luke Scott Wildburn, who was accounted one of the most successful men in the world, welcomed his son with a good natured smile and a hearty handshake. He was a tall, fine looking man with a good deal of his son's physique, but with the worn lines of coming age in his face, and a touch of langour in his manner which some people thought was affectation, but which he had possessed all his life. He was dressed, notwithstanding the heat, with great formality, and he had apparently been dictating letters to one of his typists, who left the room and hurried away at the entrance of the two visitors.

"Well, young fellow, you hated coming away, I suppose?" he remarked, pushing his chair further away from the table and crossing his legs.

"So would you, sir, if you had been in my place," his son replied. "It's no weather for Paris. I wonder you can stand that kit."

"I have an early appointment with the President," Scott Wildburn explained, "and you know we Americans have the reputation of overdoing the right thing for fear of doing the wrong. What do you say about it, Ned?"

"Before midday, sir, even in diplomatic circles, a certain negligence of costume is permitted in August."

"Hear him," his chief chuckled. "He's a walking encyclopaedia. He will suggest your first proper remarks when you are introduced to a fashionable cocotte, a princess, or a crowned head. I don't know what I should do without Ned."

"Thank you, sir," the young man replied. "I hope you will never have occasion to."

"Apt, you see, as usual...To return to the subject of my black coat, I think that I am one of those people who are proof against these changes of climate, perhaps because I am of a sedentary turn of life. You must have some coffee after your journey, Hamer. Order *petit déjeuner* in the smaller salon, Ned, for Hamer. I will ring up your room when I want anybody or anything. See that a car and servant are ready at half past eleven for my visit. After that time you and Hamer can fade away for lunch somewhere if you want to. I am invited by the President."

Father and son strolled into a smaller room, and Ned hastened away. Scott Wildburn threw himself into an easy chair, and lit an atrocious looking cigar. Hamer followed suit with a cigarette.

"So you are having a good time, are you, young fellow?"

"I like it," Hamer confessed. "It would not suit you, sir, but then I was never so fond of action as you are."

"I don't know that I am particularly fond of action," his father meditated. "On the other hand, I cannot see how anybody finds any time for dawdling with only thirty or forty years of actual life."

"I suppose one develops even when one dawdles," Hamer reflected. "I have not been utterly lazy either. I have written two articles a week for the paper, read a good bit, and I have the outline of a novel ready to start upon. I like working all right, but I like working in my own way and at my own time. I should hate an official post, for instance, with all its responsibilities and complications, and I should never be able to manage an immense organisation like yours, with all your staff to keep in their places. Incidentally, sir, I was going to write to you in a few days to tell you that I am engaged to be married."

His father raised his eyebrows.

"Better be careful," he advised. "This is France, not America. You are supposed to be in it for life when you start that sort of thing over here."

"I hope I shall be," Hamer declared. "When you have seen my young woman you will hope so, too, for my sake."

"Confident young feller, aren't you? How old are you, Hamer?"

"Twenty-six, sir."

"A year older than I thought. Well, I'm glad that you are not one of these crazy super-sportsmen, anyway. You look as though you took plenty of exercise."

"I swim three times a day," Hamer said, "play tennis most days, a little golf now and then, and enough canoeing to keep my muscles in order every evening."

"Well, well," his father said tolerantly. "It is not every man who is born ambitious. I am not really sure," he went on, "that to be ambitious—unless it is a very definite and worthy form of ambition—is not a sign of weakness. Tell me about the young lady. I am afraid that she must be French."

"She is, sir."

"Innkeeper's daughter or princess, eh?"

"Half-way between the two, I suppose. I believe her family is quite good. They own the *château* close to where my boat is moored. Her name is Montelimar—Lucienne de Montelimar."

"Very pretty," his father observed approvingly. "The name sounds familiar."

"Her father, the Marquis de Montelimar, has been French ambassador in several European capitals, I believe," Hamer confided. "I think you will like him. For a Frenchman he has quite a broad outlook."

"If it becomes necessary I shall, of course, be prepared to make the acquaintance of the family," Scott Wildburn said after a moment's hesitation. "You are aware, however, of course, of my prejudices. I have no great friendship for the French, as I think you know...Tell me about this boat of yours, Hamer."

"The *Bird of Paradise*," the young man replied in some surprise. "Oh, she isn't much, but then I never had any ambition to own a yacht. Nothing like your Valkyrie or even the Storm Cloud. She's just a thirty-ton schooner yacht, built by a Frenchman for his honeymoon, with one large cabin and a decent little saloon. Just big enough for me to get some fun out of sailing her and cruising around—although I haven't done much of that lately."

"Something in the nature of an engine, I suppose?"

"Diesels. Why don't you come down and see her? I think you told me that you've never been down to the Riviera in the summer."

"That may happen. You are fond of the boat, I suppose?"

"I am, rather," Hamer confessed.

"How much did you give for her?"

"Eighteen hundred pounds, sir. She was not particularly cheap, but I thought she was worth it, and she was so exactly what I wanted."

"Bought her at Marseilles, didn't you?"

"Why, how did you know that, sir?" Hamer asked, more surprised than ever. "I didn't know that I had ever written you about her."

"You haven't—and yet I know," his father observed, smiling. "Now, I am going to give you a chance of doing a little remunerative business. You say that you gave eighteen hundred pounds for her. I am going to buy her from you at five thousand."

To Hamer Wildburn his father's words wore perhaps the greatest shock of his life. He dropped his cigarette upon the carpet, and stared across the room open-mouthed. There was no doubt whatever but that Scott Wildburn was in earnest. He was smiling at his son's astonishment, but he had by no means the appearance of a man who had embarked upon a jest.

"Come, Hamer, don't look as though you had lost your senses," he admonished his son. "Sit up and take notice. I want to buy the *Bird of Paradise*. I am offering you five thousand pounds for her; cheque before you leave this room."

"What on earth," Hamer gasped, as a flood of memories came rushing into his brain, "do you want to buy the *Bird of Paradise* for?"

His father tapped the ash from his cigar into the plate by his side.

"Well, I may tell you that some day," he promised. "Just at present it doesn't matter, does it? I'll give you a cheque for the amount now, or if you see anything you fancy at a few thousands more that won't matter. I'll give you the Storm Cloud if you care to sail her across. That's the sort of enterprise that might appeal to you, I imagine. She would cross the Atlantic all right. She has done it twice already. What about it, Hamer? I have a crew ready. When can I put them on board?"

"You have rather taken my breath away," his son acknowledged. "Do you know, sir, that nearly everyone in the neighbourhood has been trying to buy that boat from me?"

Scott Wildburn stiffened visibly.

"What do you mean by 'everyone in the neighbourhood'?"

"Why, Monsieur Edouard Mermillon, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, General Perissol, the man who has the wonderful new post, in the Ministry, and controls the whole of the police of France. He has not made me any definite offer, but it is easy to see that he's interested. I have since discovered that a very beautiful woman who swam from the shore one night and turned my cabin inside out is his *chère amie*. Then there is a young woman, a danseuse, but you wouldn't know about her."

"Anyone else?"

"Well, no one has made a direct offer to me," Hamer confessed, "but Lucienne—that's Lucienne de Montelimar, you know, the girl I am engaged to marry—has made me promise to give it to her for a wedding present."

There was a brief silence. Scott Wildburn had drawn his chair further back and his face seemed to have relapsed into the shadows.

"Mermillon," he muttered. "Let me see—he is Minister for Foreign Affairs. General Perissol. H'm. I should have thought he would have adopted another line. Montelimar's daughter. A young danseuse: mixed up in some intrigue, I suppose. All this is very strange, Hamer."

"It is bewildering."

"From what I remember of your younger days," his father remarked, "it seems to me that you never had the bump of curiosity very strongly developed. I presume the same idiosyncrasy has survived your adolescence. But seriously, Hamer, haven't you ever wondered what they wanted your boat for?"

"I have racked my brains," the young man acknowledged. "Even Lucienne wouldn't tell me. I always imagined that she wanted it for sentimental reasons. You see, we really met on board. I pulled her in when she was exhausted swimming on a rough day and since then we have spent a good deal of time on board together. Mermillon wanted it for a present to his nephew. That seemed quite reasonable. Then, for the first time, within the last few days, the danseuse I have spoken of gave me an idea. I thought I saw a gleam of light. Now you come along and I am all in the dark again. You could not want the boat for the same reason that my little friend. Mademoiselle Tanya wanted it."

"You think not," his father observed.

"I don't think. I'm sure of it, Dad," Hamer declared. "Why not tell me what you do want her for? It would help me out of a dilemma, anyway."

"Serve you right if I did tell you," was the somewhat grim reply.

"Well, for heaven's sake, do. The story I have heard seems to me most terribly improbable, but I was never so curious about anything in my life."

"Bottle it up, my boy," his father advised him. "Believe me, you are a safer man, in France, at any rate, not to know...And now I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you, Hamer. I want that boat. I must have her—and at once."

Something in his father's tone startled him. He looked up in surprise.

"But, Dad," he expostulated, "I've told you I've promised it to Lucienne. It is the only thing she has ever asked me for."

"And that may be the only promise you have ever broken," was the quiet reply, "but you will have to break it."

There was a short but somewhat awkward silence.

Scott Wildburn had sunk back in his comfortable chair, and his eyes—cold and relentless—were fixed upon his son. The fingers of his right hand drummed restlessly upon the table by his side. Hamer was in the throes of a great bewilderment. His father's request, almost demand, had come like a thunderbolt. He temporised—weakly, as he realised afterwards.

"You won't mind my writing to Lucienne, sir?" he said at last. "I must give some explanation. You see," he went on, a little awkwardly, "she looks upon the boat as her own already."

"That is, of course, unfortunate," his father admitted calmly, "but it can't be helped. I want possession within the next few hours. I have brought a crew of my own over from New York to take her to Marseilles.

"From New York?" Hamer gasped.

"I can assure you that this is no sudden impulse. Nothing in the world but to acquire possession of the '*Bird of Paradise*' would have brought me back to France."

Hamer leaned forward with his hand behind his head.

"I'm sorry, dad," he reiterated. "I must speak to Lucienne first. I cannot break the first promise I ever made to her without some explanation."

Considering the number of years which had passed since anyone had even hesitated for a single moment to do the bidding of the great millionaire, his present attitude was exemplary. He showed no signs of losing his temper. He even smiled indulgently.

"Hamer," he said, "I do not propose to enter into lengthy explanations, but it has already, no doubt, dawned upon you that we are up against no ordinary situation. The fact that you risk your life every moment that you stay upon that boat means, I am sure, very little to you because you are courageous, almost rash, by disposition. But you must get this firmly into your head. I should not ask you to break your promise to the young woman whom you propose to marry if there were not vital and overwhelming reasons for doing so. You would not be able to comprehend if I were to tell you why I am making this demand upon you. You will have to accept the bald facts. I must have the boat and at once."

"I will get on the telephone to Lucienne," Hamer proposed.

"You must do nothing of the sort," his father enjoined firmly. "You must tell her nothing until the boat is safely in my possession."

Hamer was beginning slowly to recover his poise. He was perhaps more uncomfortable, though, than he had ever been in his life.

"Dad," he said, "I am not sure that I can do what you ask me until I have spoken to Lucienne."

Scott Wildburn looked thoughtfully across at his son. There, alas, was the same firm chin, the same steady eyes, the same note of determination in the voice. It was a duplication of himself and his own obstinacy with which he was confronted.

"This is going to be a very awkward affair, Hamer," he meditated.

"A very awkward affair for me, without doubt," his son replied. "I realise, of course, what it may mean to refuse what you ask me. I am afraid, however, that I cannot let that make any difference."

"Good lad," his father approved. "Quite the right attitude."

A waiter had entered the room during the last few minutes with the *petit déjeuner*, which he wheeled up on a small table to Hamer's side. Scott Wildburn rose to his feet.

"I shall leave you alone for a quarter of an hour," he said. "You can talk to Ned if you like. Sometimes that young man has gleams of positive inspiration. Between you, you may be able to work something out."

"I'm sorry to be such a nuisance, sir," Hamer regretted.

"Under the unfortunate circumstances," his father admitted. "I am not surprised that this trouble has arisen. However, we must try and get over it somehow...They have given you my special coffee, I hope? You will find it delicious. I shall be back within a quarter of an hour."

"Well?"

Scott Wildburn had returned. Hamer had dealt with his breakfast, and smoked two cigarettes without coming any nearer to a solution of the quandary in which his father's demands had placed him.

"Thinking doesn't seem to be of any use," he confessed ruefully. "I must ask Lucienne before I give away her property."

"Not her property until your wedding day, I understood," his father objected. "Still, I won't quibble. I will take you into my confidence instead. I will tell you why I must have the boat."

CHAPTER XXV.

Scott Wildburn settled himself in his chair and lit one of his amazing cigars.

"It is Ned's idea that I should extend this confidence to you," he began. "Quite a stroke of genius, I call it. He proposed that I should tell you the truth. You will be murdered, of course, if anyone finds out that you know, but then so should I. It will be simply one more taking a chance. Scared?"

"Not a bit."

"I didn't suppose you would be. Well, you don't read my newspapers, I suppose?"

"I certainly do," Hamer assented. "You read my editorials?"

"Every one of them,"

"Then you can judge where my sympathies have been as regards France during the last few years."

"The whole world knows that," Hamer agreed. "You have not given them a chance to forget it either. You have been, if not an enemy, a very stern critic of French policy practically the whole of the time since the war."

The newspaper millionaire nodded acquiescence.

"I mention this," he said, "because it will help you to understand why a certain adventure was offered to me. One day a Frenchman, who had been persistently demanding an interview for days, succeeded in finding his way into my private office in New York. He stated his case in very few words."

"I have read your newspapers," he confided, 'day by day. I married an American and I have lived over here. That is why I understand your point of view. You hate France—for personal as well as political reasons.'

"That was going pretty far, you know. I remember the time when I should have thrown any man out of the room who had dared to say that to me."

"I can quite understand."

"Well," Scott Wildburn went on, "my visitor's next sentence was something startling."

"I can put you,' he assured me, 'in a position to ruin France as a civilised country, at any rate, for several generations.'"

"Must have been a madman." Hamer declared.

"He was no madder than I am," Scott Wildburn rejoined "He went on to tell me his story. The proofs he had to offer were insignificant. The whole thing might very easily have been a faked up tale, but he left my office with a certified cheque for fifty thousand dollars in his pocket. He could have had more if he had asked for it. Even if it were not true, his story was almost worth the money."

Hamer, who was deeply interested, reverted unconsciously to the slang of his younger days.

"Gee," he muttered "I would like to have been there!"

"He would probably have convinced you as he did me," Scott Wildburn continued. "He reminded me of the Tositi frauds in which a number of public men were concerned, and the discovery of which has given the Communist cause in France a tremendous leg up on account of the number of men in politics and public life who are involved. He went on to assure me that the Tositi affair itself was only like one little twig on a great tree. He assured me of what I have sometimes suspected—that France is being bled through her public services by politicians to an incredible extent. According to him, there is scarcely a man in politics who is not deeply implicated in a gigantic scheme of national embezzlement. The six arch embezzlers formed a small circle, and, according to this visitor of mine, incredible as it seems, the amount of their defalcations would have pretty well paid France's debt to America."

"How could a country be bled to that extent?" Hamer demanded incredulously.

"The thing begins at the bottom," Scott Wildburn pointed out. "You should realise that in a budget of fifty milliards or thereabouts the officials, the pensioners, and those in receipt of government assistance of some kind or other call for at least twenty-five milliards, which must never appear either before the Chamber or in print. The French budget is a gigantic plum cake for those who are nearest to help themselves, and there are very few who do not get some of the plums. From that the whole scheme moves upwards...At the time of the Tositi affair the man who had been the tool of the circle warned them promptly that unless he was protected, certain proofs which he had collected of their wrongdoing would be placed in the hands of his counsel. Their answer was a dozen revolver bullets in Tositi's body. You may think it was a queer thing this, Hamer, my boy—I scarcely believed in it myself—but the French outlook and temperament are different to ours. Anyway, I bought the clue which would enable me to handle that list of six names, and the written evidence which Tositi had in his possession, for fifty thousand dollars and a further fifty thousand later on."

"Do you mean to say that you have this evidence?"

"No, but I know where the records are which would damn some of the greatest statesmen in France and plunge the whole country into confusion," Scott Wildburn answered. "They are on your boat, the *Bird of Paradise*."

Hamer was speechless. He could think of nothing but Tanya. He seemed to be back on the boat on that moonless night when she had sat by his side and calmly told him her wonderful story. He remembered her words—crisp, cool, exquisitely poignant. In all this labyrinth of lies and inventions here had been the truth.

"It isn't—it couldn't be possible," he faltered.

"It is very possible indeed," his father answered tritely. "It is not a certainty, of course, but I am not exactly a credulous person, and I have ventured a hundred thousand dollars on it. A great many secrets, Hamer, have gone down to the bottom of the sea this way. My visitor was the draftsman to the naval architect who designed the *Bird of Paradise*, and the paper he gave me was a plan showing exactly where the secret hiding places were made. The boat will have to be practically disembowelled. She will probably be useless afterwards, but that really doesn't matter much. Now, you see, my boy, why I must have your boat."

Hamer made no reply. His father watched him with searching eyes. Dimly he began to wonder whether it was possible that he had made a mistake in confiding the secret of the *Bird of Paradise* to his son. Hamer could never feel the same hatred as had scarred his own life. France had been a second home to him. He had probably grown to love the country. Even at his father's bidding he might hesitate to aid in striking her this mortal blow. Too late now. He had chosen his weapons and he must abide by them.

"What you have told me, Hamer," he continued, "concerning these other people who have been trying to buy the boat from you seems to me to be strong confirmation of the story as it was handed over to me. At any rate, as soon as the boat comes into my possession I shall pull her to pieces, and I shall know exactly where to find these records."

"And when you have found them?"

"It may depend to some extent upon the names of the men implicated," Scott Wildburn admitted. "At any rate, I promise you that I shall know how to use the document. I do not pretend that I shall not use it ruthlessly, because I shall. France will receive the greatest shock she has ever known in her life—worse than the Revolution itself."

There was a light in his father's eyes which Hamer had only seen there once before—something intensely and bitterly cruel. He felt a shiver of something like fear.

"Father," he said, "we shall never be so close together again as we are now. It is a time for naked words. Is this hatred of yours for France political only or is it inspired as well by the memory of a woman—my mother—who is dead?"

"I am glad you have asked that question," Scott Wildburn replied, "but although you are my son and hers, Hamer, I shall not answer it. You know for yourself that since the day she left me I have never set my foot on French soil and you know for yourself that I never forgive. Most men in their lives," he went on with marked deliberation, "have one great love or one great hate, men I mean who have walked in the lofty places of life. It may be so with me. I leave it to you to divine for yourself. I only ask you, for your own sake, to remember this. Remember that you are now a partner in the world's most dangerous secret. A word, the breath of a word, and there is a whole army of assassins ready for us, a crowd that would make the gangsters of Chicago seem like children playing on a nursery floor. How you lived on that boat, Hamer, and escaped being killed is more than I can imagine, especially after that little danseuse had visited you. You had the luck of innocence, I suppose."

"Is the Marquis de Montelimar one of the people implicated?" Hamer asked.

"How do I know?" his father answered. "I'll tell you when the records come into my hands. I imagine that the first name we draw will give the whole world a shock. Concerning the others I am not sure."

Hamer Wildburn was feeling dazed and utterly miserable, perhaps more miserable than he had ever been before in his life. The blackest terror of all was that overwhelming suspicion that Lucienne's father must somehow be concerned in the records.

"Why do you deal with this horrible business yourself, father?" he asked. "Of course, I know that newspapers nowadays practically govern the world. They make war or peace. They unearth horrible conspiracies. They deal in the honour of great men, they traffic with the national conscience of countries. But it is not their office. They were never meant to mete out justice. It is a foul way to balance the scales of justice. This thing, if it must be brought to light, dad, should never be done through the newspapers. There is at any rate one man in France who can be trusted—General Perissol. He has control over all the police and the internal secret service of France. Why not let him deal with this matter?"

"General Perissol is an honourable man so far as I know," Wildburn Scott admitted. "On the other hand, I am not sure that he would deal with this affair as I intend it to be dealt with."

"You are taking a great responsibility, sir," Hamer insisted.

"I don't think that anyone ever took a greater," his father agreed. "However, it has come, and I am ready for it...Shall I send for Ned? We had better have some sort of deed of sale. Ned can take it down to Antibes to-night. I have a 'plane waiting, and the crew are all ready to go on board. You can have your cheque now."

"I don't want the cheque, dad," Hamer said. "I'm not thinking about that. I'm thinking of the ruin which will surely come upon France if you publish those names."

Scott Wildburn made no reply. He stretched out his hand towards the bell. Hamer caught his wrist just in time.

"Don't bother, please," he begged. "I must think for a moment."

Scott Wildburn turned calmly around. "Think? What about?"

"About handing you over the boat," Hamer cried desperately "You know what it will mean. You know the difficulty there has been in getting a Government together whom the French people are willing to trust. Six months ago the country was in peril. If these records contain any of the great names of those who are in the present Government the Ministry will fall, there will be no one else whom the people will trust and the Communists will come into power. You could not avoid a revolution then and all that is left of France that is worth having would go into the melting-pot."

"Glad to see you have been studying these things," his father acquiesced. "Yes, that is probably what would happen. Leaving out the personal side, however, looking at the matter from the Frenchman's own point of view, could anything be worse than for the country to be governed by men who are sucking the blood out of her?"

"I do not know," Hamer groaned. "Tanya herself put ideas into my head, but I have not had time to think them out. The only thing I am sure of is that a newspaper exposure would mean utter and complete ruin. There must be safer, less ghastly, and more diplomatic ways of dealing with the situation. The men whose names appear in the records that you spoke of, they could be approached secretly and forced to resign. They must be punished, of course, but there is no need for them to drag down the country's honour with their own. They will lose their careers, they will be under a shadow for the rest of their lives, but you don't want to turn the whole country into a seething inferno."

Scott Wildburn had drawn himself up to his full height, and a very fine figure of a man he was except for the inhumanity of his features and poise.

"There may be some small measure of doubt in my mind as to minor details," he said, "but what I have decided to do is already settled, and—forgive me, my son—advice from you would seem a little out of place, would it not? I am going to send for Ned."

"I shouldn't." Hamer exclaimed with desperate courage.

His father, with his hand upon the bell, looked round at him.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean that I have made up my mind not to part with the boat." Hamer shouted. "I would sooner place a bomb in her and blow her to pieces!"

The atmosphere seemed to grow tenser every second because of the dead silence which followed Hamer's words. His father stood for a moment without moving, his hand poised over the bell. Then he resumed his place in his chair, and sat without gesture or speech, his eyes fixed steadily on his son. Hamer was desperately uncomfortable. He felt himself at a hopeless disadvantage beside that immense self-control.

"I'm sorry," he blundered out. "You see, I can't feel about France like you do. I love it. It is my home. And then there's Lucienne. That was a promise—the first promise I ever made her."

"I have always looked upon you, Hamer, as being a person of average intelligence," his father said quietly, without the slightest trace of anger in his tone. "With average intelligence you should duly appreciate the proportions of life. I am asking one of the smallest things in the world of you considering our relative positions, which happens, owing to circumstances, to be also one of the greatest. You talk to me of a girl to whom you have become engaged during these lazy summer months—of bathing and swimming together—and who suddenly seems to take the place to you of your duty to your father, your race, and your honour. I must ask you once more to be sure that there is no misunderstanding. Are you willing to place the *Bird of Paradise* immediately and without reservations in my hands?"

"I must see Lucienne first." Hamer answered doggedly. "I must find out whether her father is interested in these records before I tell her that I cannot keep my promise."

"And in doing that," his father reminded him, "you disclose the whole situation. The *Bird of Paradise* will depart at once from the face of the waters and the most disgraceful conspiracy the modern world has ever known will remain undetected, and its authors go unpunished. All this that you may keep your word to your sweetheart."

"You make it sound pretty rotten, dad," Hamer replied, "but I shall keep my word to Lucienne. I would waive all the other considerations even though I should feel that you were wrecking a great country to gratify your personal vengeance. I should think it a horrible thing to do, but I should not interfere. Your genius, the gargantuan success of your life has given you the power. If you wanted to ruin the careers of these men, one of whom at least I know to be a fine statesman, although I believe he would be involved, you must do it if you think fit. I would not interfere if you insisted, although I should loathe myself for giving way, and if you will forgive my saying so—I should lose some of my respect for you in the contemplation of such human sabotage. But I am going to keep my word to Lucienne."

"In that case," his father replied, glancing at his watch, "you will perhaps excuse me. Mine is only a flying visit to Paris—the first, as you know, for many years, and I have various things to attend to. I am sorry to have given you the trouble of this fruitless journey. You have only to ask for it and a draft for your expenses will be attached to your next quarter's allowance."

Something like tears stood in Hamer's eyes. "Look here, Dad," he remonstrated, "aren't you hitting rather below the belt?"

His father had touched the bell. He stood with his back to the room looking out of the window. Ned Foster, the young bespectacled secretary, made swift appearance.

"Ned," his chief directed, looking for a moment over his shoulder, "my son and I have failed to come to an understanding. Please take him from the suite and see that he catches the next train back to the South of France. I shall not be requiring to see him again."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Monsieur and Madame Crestner of the Plage Restaurant at Garoupe were excited, jubilant, but a trifle disturbed. Madame was genuinely uneasy. She drew her husband on one side away from the little babel before the bar.

"What is it then that arrives?" she demanded. "Mademoiselle Tanya, the great artiste from Juan-les-Pins, she visits us. She says that she has invited a great supper party here of friends. She bids me provide more tables, more food, more wine. The money drops from her fingers like water."

"All these things," Monsieur said, rubbing his hands gently together, "are excellent. Mademoiselle is drawing a large salary. She will not look at the bills."

"That is all very well," Madame declared, "but how can we feed a hundred people? Our regular clients we have had to send away. Our cooking ranges inside and out are heaped with food. We cook, and we cook, and we cook. But a hundred people, and, *ma foi*, such people!"

"It is not our concern who they are," her husband pointed out. "As for the wine, it is stored up behind the shed. We have enough, and more than enough, for a hundred people. The food—well, they must have consideration."

"But listen, Jean," she went on, clutching at his arm. "Who are these people? I ask you. Look around. I know where they come from. They come from Marseilles—nearly every one of them. Look at their faces. See how they talk together in corners. All the time I fancy that there is something on their minds. They look to me more like conspirators than men out for a night picnic with a great actress."

Monsieur shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not our affair," he decided.

"Of course, it is our affair," she insisted, drawing him a little further on one side. "They point, and they point, and they point—always at the *Bird of Paradise*. Monsieur Wildburn—*si gentil*—he is away in Paris. Do you note this? Auguste has not arrived for his aperitif nor for the ice to-night. Never does he miss. There is the dinghy and the small speedboat. Auguste has not left the *Bird of Paradise*."

"Is that of consequence?" Monsieur asked, after a brief visit to his kitchen.

"I am uneasy. That is all," she said. "Always we know there has been something; mysterious about Monsieur Wildburn's boat. So many people visit it. They talk and they go away, and now the gunboat lying there. It seems strange that Mademoiselle should have chosen to give her party the one night that Monsieur Wildburn is away."

Monsieur rolled and lit a cigarette.

"Disturb yourself no longer, little one," he begged. "I am a restaurant keeper and you are my wife. We have a great feast to prepare for one who is well able to pay and has given us two *mille* already to secure the tables. To-night we are going to make money. Others can do as they wish."

Another carload of guests was discharged—good-looking men in their way but hard men, saturnine in appearance, few of them with the *joie de vivre* of the French café lounge in his face. Men with a purpose they seemed, and there was something too which Monsieur observed but of which he said nothing to his wife. Here and there was a little bulge in those queer-shaped side pockets that were very much the fashion in Marseilles...

There was a murmur amongst the gathering crowd. Some with their aperitifs still in their hands strolled down to the edge of the water. A large speedboat had rounded the point and was making for the *plage*. A whisper went about.

"It is Tanya—Tanya warned us that she would come by sea."

Monsieur of the restaurant shaded his eyes with his hand and looked seawards.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "Mademoiselle was not wise."

A loiterer standing by him heard the words and noticed the little streak of white which capped the waves in the distance.

"Something which arrives, eh Monsieur?" he demanded.

"Nothing of any account," Monsieur replied.

The speedboat anchored about twenty yards from the landing-stage. The loiterers took little dinghies out, and the speedboat unloaded a couple. She was crowded herself with the remainder of the guests of the evening, and there was a shout of welcome when Mademoiselle stepped on shore. Tanya was her old self. Her eyes seemed on fire. She needed no rouge upon her cheeks. Her hair, already disarranged by the wind, blew wildly about her face. She was dressed in black, but she wore a red shawl draped loosely over her shoulders. As she stepped onto the *plage* there was a sudden forest of uplifted hands, the murmur of a song, and then the song itself—the Red March, rolling, thunderous music—a march prohibited in France and all over Europe where the forces of government were strong enough to insist without indiscretion. They came to the scattered group of tables under the shed, singing the words and swaying their bodies to the music, and presently they forgot to sing while they clapped.

"Monsieur Crestner," Tanya called out, shaking hands with his wife and himself, "our feast is prepared—yes?"

"Everything is prepared, Mademoiselle," Madame assured her. "This is a great honour that you have done us. If only we could have accommodated more. They keep ringing up for tables, but I say that it is impossible. I have six extra waiters. I hope that everything will be well served—that Mademoiselle will excuse."

"We will excuse everything," Tanya declared gaily. "Let there be plenty of food and wine and we will help ourselves. We are hungry, and, above all, we are thirsty."

The man by her side, a man of gigantic frame, but of savage, unpleasant expression, clapped his hands together.

"Mademoiselle Tanya speaks the truth," he said, "but there are other things, too, in our blood."

She pulled him by the sleeve.

"Sit down," she enjoined. "The time is not yet."

An officer from the *Fidélité* drove up in a taxicab and on his way to the landing stage stared around him in amazement. A sudden silence fell upon the crowd at the sight of his uniform. He had an uneasy feeling that he was the cynosure of a hundred hostile gazes. He paused, however, and addressed one of the waiters whom he knew.

"What on earth is this which goes on to-night?" he demanded.

"It is Mademoiselle Tanya, the great danseuse, who gives a party," the man explained.

The officer smiled. He knew nothing of Mademoiselle, save as a danseuse. He looked towards the table where she sat and saluted. She waved her hand.

"Queer looking lot to-night," he muttered to the boatman who was lounging at the end of the pier, looking earnestly out to sea.

"Shan't be sorry to see the back of 'em, sir," was the fervent reply.

A gendarme, who was on duty all day to regulate the traffic, crept round to the back of the shed and mounted his bicycle. An inspiration had arrived to him. He had overheard scraps of the conversation at the head table where Tanya was seated with a little crowd of men whose appearance was not altogether festive.

At their extemporised dining table on the fringe of the pine woods, which reached almost to the villa itself, General Perissol and Louise sat lingering over an unusually late dinner. From where they sat the bay was almost hidden although faint sounds of revelry below mounted at times to their hearing. Perissol, after many hours of hard and continuous fighting, was realising, perhaps for the first time, the glow of an undisturbed happiness. Louise, notwithstanding the new softness in her eyes and her general air of regained youth, showed some faint signs of anxiety as every now and then the strains of music and the faint echoes of laughter floated up from the *plage*. Coffee had been served and the servants had disappeared. She leaned forward and smoothed his hand.

"Tell me," she begged, "why you seem to worry no longer about the *Bird of Paradise*? Is there something which you have not confided to me?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing in the world, my dear Louise," he assured her. "I have simply tried to look at the matter philosophically. The situation, as it exists down in the bay there, is a kind of stalemate. The young American is obstinate, perhaps not over-intelligent, but he is honest. He will not part with the boat or anything in her to a soul. She is his destined wedding present to Lucienne de Montelimar. There remains

Edouard Mermillon, of course, and the Baron de Brett. I should find it hard to believe that Mermillon was personally concerned or incriminated in any records left by Tositi, but I can quite understand that for the sake of the stability of the Government he would loathe their appearance. On the other hand, what can he do about it? There lies the *Fidélité* with her guns trained upon the *Bird of Paradise*, and powerful enough to blow her out of the water at any moment, and searchlights to prevent her crawling out at any hour in the dark. What then can happen? You see the situation is still within my reach."

"Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"It should be within my province," he explained, "to land a mixed force of gendarmes and marines from the gunboat upon the *Bird of Paradise*, and with all proper diplomatic excuses to young Wildburn seize her in the name of the French Government."

"To tell you the truth," she said, "that is what I thought you would have done before now."

"Supposing I did so," he went on. "Supposing, in the course of a search by technical experts, I discovered these reports concealed in her by the cunning of Tositi. Supposing they incriminated Chauvanne, Despard, Montelimar indirectly perhaps, and more important than anyone, Mermillon, would I dare to pass that evidence on to the Commission? Would I dare to attack Mermillon in the Chamber, or even to hint a word concerning the honour of the President? To do so would be to let loose the dogs of war with a vengeance. From the Pyrenees to the Channel France would be in the throes of an earthquake, and what that earthquake might not spell for her heaven only knows."

The faint shadow of trouble in Louise's face deepened.

"You seem to have left out one possible contingency, Armand," she reminded him. "There are men amongst the Communist party who are alive to every move in the game. I have noticed strange-looking people on the *plage* the last few days, and there is this woman from Marseilles—Tanya—who they say is a very firebrand amongst them. Think what it would mean if these records, or whatever they are, fall into their hands. They would have no scruple in publishing them. To plunge France into a revolution is the only way they could ever come into power. Sometimes I think that that is the greatest danger we have to face. That man Clairemond, who writes for even some of the decent papers, is brilliantly clever, and when he commits himself to print he is almost convincing. They say his speeches are different, but amazingly eloquent."

"You give me something to reflect upon, Louise," he admitted thoughtfully. "You put your hand upon the weak point in the situation without a doubt. Somehow or other Communism has failed so utterly wherever it has been put to the trial—Italy and Germany are glaring examples—that one thinks of it all the time as discredited. After all, though, its fundamentals skilfully handled by a person of moderation might be dangerous enough just now. The patriotic Frenchman has had a great deal to forgive during the last twelve months. He will have a great deal more to forgive before we are in smooth waters again."

"Supposing the Communists get hold of these records?" she persisted bluntly.

"Under the guns of the *Fidélité*?" he asked incredulously.

"My dear Armand," she remonstrated, "there is one quality, at least, you must remember that the Communists possess. They possess a desperate fanatical courage. Listen!"

There floated up to them from the *plage* below the strains of harsh but vivid singing in unison.

"You hear that?" Louise exclaimed. "You know what it is. It is the marching song of the Communists—their battle song. Armand! Only half a mile away from them lies the *Bird of Paradise*. Supposing they know!"

He rose quickly to his feet. She held his wrist. They both listened. Coming up the winding avenue they could hear the engine throbs of a high-powered car, the scrunching of gravel thrown away at the curves, then they saw the flashing of lights through the shrubs.

"Wait, Armand," she begged. "Here comes news of some sort."

The two men who hurried out on to the terrace, ushered there by Raymond with an entire lack of ceremony, were easily recognisable. There was Monsieur Vigon, the Mayor of Antibes, and by his side, a step or two already in front of him—for Monsieur Vigon had eaten of many banquets and was inclined to be obese—came Sarciron, the local head of police.

"We have disturbing news, sir, from below," Raymond said quickly. "Monsieur Sarciron, please make your report."

Sarciron wasted no words.

"Mademoiselle Tanya, the danseuse," he announced, "who is perhaps the most dangerous figure amongst the Communists of the south here, is giving an extraordinary reception and dinner down on the *plage*. Fifty or sixty leaders of the party have come over from Marseilles in an autobus and all the leaders in this district from Cannes to Menton, and some few even from Lyons, have arrived. There are a hundred of them feasting there below and they seem to have some purpose. A report I have just received, General, declares that everyone of them is armed."

"A dinner, eh? A feast?" the General exclaimed. "They sing—dance? They seem jovial?"

"They do nothing but sing the Red March," Sarciron declared. "They mean mischief if ever a hundred men did mean mischief. They have left the scum behind. These are strong men we have to deal with."

"How many gendarmes can you send down to the *plage*?" the General asked quickly.

"Not more than a dozen, sir," Sarciron answered, "and two of them are under suspicion. They were discovered reading Communist literature."

"Writing materials, Raymond, quickly. No, write yourself. Bring me the paper to sign. Write to Colonel Dupresson, or the Commanding Officer in charge of the Chasseurs Alpains at Antibes. Ask him to despatch one hundred to two hundred fully armed men, properly detailed on motor bicycles or in cars, to the *plage* here without a moment's delay. Write a similar letter to General Fausson at Nice, but send the message to Antibes first."

Raymond shot away into the darkness. Perissol lifted the telephone which stood upon the table and spoke to the house. Presently a young man of disturbed appearance hurried out.

"I am very sorry to report, sir," he announced, "that the private telephone service which we had established between the *Fidélité* and this villa has been tampered with."

"Tampered with?" the General repeated.

"The wire is quite dead," the young man replied. "It has certainly been cut."

"Go to the nearest point of the *plage*," Perissol ordered. "Swim or row to the *Fidélité* and report. I shall send another messenger in case of accident. Ask them to fill their pinnace with as many fighting units as the ship can afford—fully armed. Tell the commander, with my compliments, that we are expecting an attack upon the *Bird of Paradise* by a gang of Communists. Order the car as you go out."

The General took brusque leave of everybody.

"Louise," he directed, "you remain here. Monsieur le Maire, if there is any sort of an armed force you can muster at Antibes send them along, otherwise there is nothing you can do. Sarciron, back like the wind and bring all the gendarmes you can. Have your people telephone the alarm to Juan. Let it be understood that this is no ordinary Communist after-dinner riot. It is a serious affair with a serious object, and every Frenchman who refuses to serve on behalf of the law is asking for trouble. Spread that everywhere. What the mischief's that?"

From down below in the bay came the dull booming of a gun. Almost immediately afterwards a strange sort of darkness seemed to hang over the bay. Louise ran lightly to the end of the terrace and jumped on to the parapet. She turned round—a shrouded, almost indistinguishable figure.

"The searchlights on the *Fidélité* have stopped!" she cried.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Hamer Wildburn, with the great headlights of his coupe flaming, swung round the last corner into the Garoupe lane which led to the *plage* and then jammed on his brakes furiously. Twenty or thirty yards in front of him someone was standing in the dusk swinging a lantern or torch. A shower of pebbles flew up. He skidded slightly but recovered. Finally he brought the car to a standstill within a few feet of the man in the road.

"What the devil—" he began.

Then he stopped. The man was well enough known, to him, one of the staff of the bathing beach who waited on him day by day. Something in his expression checked Hamer's outburst.

"What is it?" the latter demanded, leaning a little wearily over the wheel. "What's wrong. Pierre?"

The man put a foot upon the step and held on to the dashboard.

"It is impossible to say what is wrong, Monsieur," he said, "but you should keep away. If you must return to your boat to-night go to the *château* landing stage and borrow a dinghy from there."

"Why on earth should I put myself to all that trouble?" Hamer asked in astonishment.

The man tightened his grip upon the car.

"Monsieur," he confided, "there's bad business on at the *plage*, that is my belief, for all the gaiety and the popping of corks and the crowd of people. They have shoved me off, the Crestners have. They do not wish me around to-night. They will not have any of the regular staff. They have driven us out without dinner or excuse."

Hamer was as tired as any man might be who had driven 500 kilometres without stopping from a 'plane that lay smashed to pieces in a ditch, and a pilot on his way to hospital with a broken leg. He leaned forward to one of the pockets of the car, drew out a flask and took a drink of whisky.

"Try and explain, Pierre," he begged. "I shall be better able to ask you questions in a moment."

"It's that young dancing woman that's been creating such a furore at Juan-les-Pins," Pierre explained. "She's giving a huge party to-night. Crestners are not receiving any other guests and they've had to order 20 or 30 more tables. Nearly all the people have come from a distance and, Monsieur, they're a wicked crowd or I never saw one. Forty came from Marseilles in one autobus. They looked like cut-throats and the lot from Nice were not much better."

"Well, I don't suppose they'll stop me getting on my boat," Hamer observed.

"That I know they mean to do," was the emphatic warning. "There's four of them standing in that little opening and no four criminals who ever stood together looked worse than they do! They've just stopped one young fellow in the darkness. I heard them ask his name and where he was going. They thought it was you."

"So I am the unpopular person, am I?" Hamer exclaimed.

"I don't know what they want," Pierre answered; "but I do know the order is that if you come you are to be stopped. What's to happen to you I don't know, but you are not to be allowed on your boat."

"Have any of them gone on board?" Hamer asked.

"A boatload," the man replied; "and it seemed to me there was another boatload getting ready when I left. This is not like the other night, sir," he went on, "when you threw them young gents into the sea. That was more or less of a lark, I expect. There's no lark about this. You know what sort of people these are?"

"How the devil should I?" Hamer asked wearily.

"Well, I'll tell you. Communists—anarchists—the riff-raff of Marseilles and Nice. They have been singing the Red Victory March all through dinner-time. And that Mademoiselle Tanya, she's been making speeches to them till they nearly roared the awning off. They're like a lot of madmen. You turn round, sir, and get back to the hotel or somewhere safe. That boat of yours isn't worth what they say they're going to do to you if you interfere with them."

Hamer thought hard for several moments. Gradually the situation became clearer to him.

"The gunboat is still lying there?" he inquired.

"There's something wrong about her, too," Pierre declared. "I don't know anything about it, Monsieur Wildburn, and I don't want to say anything that leads to trouble, but her communications with the shore are broken and I could have sworn I heard firing on board a few minutes ago...Don't you try to get back by the *plage*, Monsieur Wildburn. There's at least a hundred and twenty men down there—picked men, I should say. They may have had a bottle or two of wine and a drink of brandy; but that's made them the more dangerous. They're not going to let you on board. You keep out of it. Your boat isn't worth it."

"Perhaps you're right, Pierre," Hamer admitted. "I'll keep out of it. What about you?"

"Oh, my room is just at the corner, sir. I'm like you—I'm going to keep out of it. I don't understand what it's all about, but what I do know is that if the marines from the gunboat interfere or the gendarmes come down there's going to be a bloody fight. It's not my affair. I'm off to the wife and children."

"You're a good fellow, Pierre. Were you up here looking for me?"

"I was, sir," the man acknowledged. "There's been a rumour going round that you were on your way here. Then there was another rumour that you had had a smash in an aeroplane. Then someone else thought that you had got a car at Lyons. There's just one thing, sir, I must mention. That wicked looking young woman who has got them all on fire, she gave her orders, and they were not half orders, either! You were to be stopped going on your boat, but if you came to any harm without her instructions she was going to shoot the man who did it."

Hamer smiled faintly.

"She's a great person in the wrong place, Pierre," he said, slowly commencing to back down the lane with Pierre standing on the step. "She's the disciple of a dangerous faith—sublime for some, hell for others who have no understanding."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't understand, monsieur," he confessed.

Hamer only shook his head. They had reached the corner of the road, and Pierre stepped off the car. Hamer turned round and threw in his clutch.

"You take my advice sir, and clear right away." Pierre begged. "If you show yourself on the *plage*—Mademoiselle Tanya or no Mademoiselle Tanya—they mean bloodshed."

"I'm making for shelter all right, Pierre," Hamer assured him, with a farewell wave of a hand.

Cautiously, with lights extinguished, Hamer drove through the *château* woods, past the *château* itself, and down the steep way that led to the private landing stage. Here he left the car in a sheltered spot, and from behind a clump of trees looked out upon the bay. In a sense it was an amazing sight. The restaurant seemed to be packed with dark figures. Some of the tables were dragged out on to the sands. One heard voices shouting for the waiters, demanding more wine. One man had fallen off his chair and lay on the sands, but on the whole there were few signs of drunkenness—more of ferocious waiting. Little companies of men were walking arm-in-arm along the edge of the water. Many were standing looking out seawards—arguing, talking with one another. Around the bar they were standing three or four deep. Madame's plump, comely form could be seen leaning over the counter where she was still opening wine, still filling the glasses. Out in the bay there seemed to be a good deal of movement upon the *Fidélité*, but very little illumination. The searchlights which had been in full swing, were inactive. It was all Hamer could do to make out the dim shape of the *Bird of Paradise*. There were lights in her galley but some attempt seemed to have been made to shade them. From the rigging there was a single lantern hanging on the starboard side...

Hamer often wondered afterwards at the deliberation which marked his actions for the next half-an-hour or so. There were several courses which occurred to him. One was to swim out to the *Fidélité* and consult Commander Berard as to how to deal with the situation, taking into account the possible invasion of his own boat. He discarded that because it was perfectly obvious that there was something wrong on the *Fidélité* herself. As to the *plage*—Pierre's warning had been quite justified.

Hamer seemed to be developing instincts altogether strange to him. He listened for several moments before he moved and he resisted with an effort an intense desire to light a cigarette. He covered over the engine of his car with a rug, looked round it to be sure that all was in order, although there was in his mind a grave doubt as to whether he should ever use it again, stripped himself of everything but his underclothes and shoes, and made his way carefully down the precipitous slope to the rocky edge of the bay. He kept inside the enclosed part of the wood until he was at the nearest point to the *Bird of Paradise*, then he scaled the wall, waded out over the happy hunting-grounds of the fishers for sea-urchins, kicked off his shoes and swam very softly and slowly towards the yacht. It seemed to him that the very fact of his lazy strokes, his disappearance every now and then under water altogether, incited an unnatural activity of his brain. He thought out the possibilities. Tanya would have selected, perhaps, half a dozen of the strongest and most dependable of her adherents to seize the boat. She had probably received from somewhere or other an idea as to where to search. The men were at work now, without a doubt, breaking open the secret parts of the boat very likely endangering her seaworthy qualities. Possibly they were working right down in the hull where sounds would only come to them in a muffled undernote. They would keep a look-out, though.

That must be reckoned with...

Slowly he came up to the surface. The easterly wind was sending in a good many white-flecked waves now and he hoped that his head would be quite invisible. There was a muffled glare of light in one place in the galley and a subdued light aft. He could just make out the dinghy rocking rather violently about ten yards from the stern. It was towards this he directed his very cautious movements. His sense of distance was accurate enough, for when again he came up he was within a few feet of the dinghy. He turned on his back, listened intently and watched. There was a man on deck seated by the companionway, obviously the man on guard. He seemed almost formless but he was smoking a cigarette, the thin end of which was a point in the gloom. Hamer swam on a few more strokes until he could clutch the bows of the dinghy. He rested there for a moment to take breath, then very slowly he hoisted himself into the boat. He had made no sound and the man on deck had apparently heard nothing. The point of light from his cigarette was still obliquely turned away. Hamer leaned forward and scrutinised the lights on the *plage*. They were all very vague and indistinct from this distance but there was a gramophone going and plenty of people moving about. Nothing was to be seen on the stretch of sea between him and the *plage*. There was no sound of cars which might have indicated approaching danger. Slowly he began to paddle with his hands, first with one, swinging the dinghy round to the reverse side on which the lookout man was seated and afterwards paddling very slowly, moving her only a foot or so at a time until she came in touch with the *Bird of Paradise* herself. He caught hold of the chains and pulled himself stealthily, along. As soon as he was exactly behind the man seated on the other side he pulled himself up by the chains and, with absolute noiselessness, reached the deck. Arrived there he crouched down for a moment behind the small water reservoir. The man on the other side continued to smoke. From down in the galley there came the sound of voices—eager, staccato voices which might well have belonged to men engaged upon a desperate search. He peeped in through one of the portholes. The door leading from the galley into the little salon was closed and the salon in darkness. That in itself was an immense relief. Once down the companionway he could enter his bedroom and barricade himself in. He felt around until he found what he sought—an iron spanner which was used to unscrew the orifices which permitted the entrance of fresh water. He balanced it in his hand—perhaps just heavy enough. He had instinctively a hatred of bloodshed but he was nerved at that moment for a great enterprise and nothing else intervened. He crawled a step backwards until he was exactly behind the dozing man. He raised himself on his knees. He crept inch by inch a little nearer, then with his left hand he gripped the boom. With his right he raised and brought down the spanner he was carrying with the whole of his strength on to the head of the dozing man.

For the first time Hamer abandoned then those stealthy movements which had been a continual strain upon him. His victim had slithered sideways and the cry which burst through his lips in momentary agony died away in a sort of gurgle, so that it was doubtful whether anyone below could hear him. Hamer sprang

down the companionway in one leap, slipped through the entrance into his own cabin, locked and bolted the door.

Even then he was not safe, for a revolver through any of the portholes would follow him wherever he went. He closed all these and screwed them up there was still no noticeable sound. He tore out a jersey and a pair of trousers, slipped one revolver into his hip pocket and rapidly loaded the heavier one of army type which he kept in a drawer below his wardrobe. Then he sat down on the edge of his bunk. It appeared to him that the time had arrived for a little further reflection. Scarcely half a dozen breathless seconds had passed, however, before he leaped to his feet with a cold shiver—not perhaps of fear but born of some sense of impending danger. Something on the bed had moved. On his first entrance he had seen a little mound of clothes and forgotten it. He caught hold of the counterpane with his left hand, holding his gun tightly in his right. Again, what he saw nearly forced an interjection from his lips. Auguste, bound hand and foot, with a gag in his mouth and a nasty cut under his right eye, was lying there breathing faintly—unshaven and dishevelled, a ghastly sight on the blood stained bedclothes. There was life enough in the man, however, for him to shake his head as though in warning.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Hamer always afterwards believed that his actions in that brief hour or two were governed by some automatic function as well as by the quick working of his brain. He had made no sound at Auguste's touch, he uttered no exclamation when he saw him. In half a dozen seconds his clasp knife was working at the leather thongs which secured the gags. In less than a minute Auguste was a free man. It was the latter then who broke the spell. With the urge for silence instinctively forced upon both of them, he permitted himself the slightest of groans as he tried to swing himself on to his feet.

"How did Monsieur arrive here?" he asked. "Swam from the *château* rocks," Hamer whispered. "I had to smash a fellow's head in who was on deck. He's lying still enough. How many of the others are there?"

"Seven." Auguste answered. "They came in Crestner's old longboat. Seven of them—bad men all. Knives as well as guns."

"What are they doing now?"

"Tinkering with the mast. They are looking for hidden records."

"Mademoiselle has not been round?" Hamer asked anxiously.

"Late this afternoon. She went away when she found you were not here."

"Where's Jean?"

"Went after the water two hours ago. I expect they knocked him on the head."

Hamer paused for a moment. There was a sound forward as though of sawing wood, a mumble of voices.

"Why aren't the searchlights playing from the *Fidélité*?" Hamer demanded. "What's happened to them all?"

"Mutiny," was the brief response. "There's been fighting on deck for an hour. Some of these men who are on board here brought pals from Toulon. They got amongst the sailors."

"Any fight left in you?"

"I'm still giddy, sir, but I'll do my best," Auguste promised, sitting up.

Hamer handed him the smaller gun.

"Don't use it unless we are hard pressed," he enjoined. "I don't understand why the Crestners haven't sent somebody out to see what's on."

Auguste snorted.

"The young woman who's giving the party there and brought all this gang down is her old friend," he said. "She knew all of these stage women."

"So it is Mademoiselle Tanya, then?"

"That's her name," Auguste assented. "She ordered supper for a hundred to-night and they're all here, too, and a few over. If we could have got word to the General on the hill," he concluded wistfully, "there is the man who would have swept this lot up."

Hamer suddenly stiffened.

"Be careful, Auguste," he warned him. "They've opened the galley door."

A babel of excited voices reached their ears. Hamer slipped back the bolt. His gun was still clutched firmly in his right hand, but he swung round towards Auguste.

"Look here Auguste," he said. "We can't fight in here; we should just be like rats in a trap. I'm going to open the door. If these fellows have found what they wanted perhaps they will go away quietly. If they haven't, we may as well have it out with them face to face."

There was no time for consultation. Hamer threw open the door. He stood in the small space with the open door of the salon in front of him, the steps on to the deck on his left, the small toilet room on his right. His right hand gripping his revolver was outstretched, but the barrel pointed downwards. He had a lightning-like impression of four men seated at the table, one on the threshold of the galley, another fidgeting about behind. One of the men at the table was busy with a corkscrew and a bottle of champagne.

"Help yourselves, gentlemen," Hamer invited. "Anything I have here on board is at your service, but if your hands go down to your pockets there's going to be trouble."

They all turned their faces towards him—an evil-looking crowd, most of them of the sleek desperado type. One, the furthest from him, wearing a pince-nez, might have been a clerk in some public office. The lapel of his coat was torn as though some button had been removed for the occasion. Still holding his hands above his head, he rose to his feet and addressed a few rapid words to his companions. The man in the galley, whose hand had been stealing downwards, paused. He kept his eyes on Hamer, though, and very wicked eyes they were.

"How did you get here?" he demanded.

"This is my own boat, anyway," was the swift reply. "What I should like to know is what you others are doing here."

The man with the pince-nez evidently had some authority. He swept aside a chorus of blasphemous rejoinders.

"If you are Wildburn," he said, "I will answer your question. We came here to find a message left for us upon this boat. We have the plan of the place. You may have bought the boat, but you never bought the message. We came to search for it, to take it—by force if necessary. The message is gone. The hiding-places are empty."

"Nothing to do with me," Hamer disclaimed. "I know nothing of any hiding places on this boat, nor anyone who has left messages for you or anyone else. I bought the yacht from an agent in Marseilles."

"Listen," the man of the pince-nez went on, "You can almost see from where you stand. Your foremast is in sections. There are seventeen of them altogether, in number one, three, seven, nine, fourteen, and two other numbers there were records concealed. In case of disaster to our comrade they were to be used on his behalf. Our comrade was murdered. We came to find those records and the places where they were are empty."

"Who are you?" Hamer asked.

"There is no necessity for me to answer your question," was the sneering retort. "We are here. We hold the bay as we hold your ship. Those papers have gone. It is you who must have removed them. You might have time to shoot a couple of us before we got to work, but there are five more left on board, and a hundred on the *plage*, besides a few comrades over there on the gunboat. You have not one chance in a thousand of getting out of this alive, unless you tell us where to find those records. Make up your mind quick."

"Yes, you are quite light to tell me to hurry," Wildburn scoffed. "You will see your hundred men on the *plage* legging it for their holes in a few minutes, and you will feel the handcuffs on your wrists in less if you don't clear out of this. There's a gentlemen on the hill there who knows something about you fellows. He will be here when he's ready."

Hamer's words carried conviction. Two of the men half-rose to their feet.

"Get at it, Laporte," one of them shouted. "Cut your words short. The records or a bullet."

"My comrades are impatient, you see," their spokesman went on, "have you those records?"

"I have not. I know nothing about them. I have never seen them."

"Who are your crew?"

"One named Jean went for water two or three hours ago. He is still on the *plage*."

"Right," the other replied. "He is locked up. Who else?"

"Auguste, my *matelot*, whom you seem to have disposed of pretty well."

"Is he the man who can neither read nor write?"

"You have been correctly informed," Wildburn answered. "He can neither read nor write. He would not know what your records were if he saw them, and he happens to be an honest fellow. If he found anything on this ship which had been secreted, he would bring it to me."

"Whom have you allowed to search this ship?"

"I have allowed no one," Wildburn declared. "It seems to me that you have been fooled. The agents must have known all about these hiding places. They probably took care to empty them before they sold the boat."

The man with the pince-nez bit his nails furiously. He looked over the tops of his fingers at Hamer, and all the malice in the world was in that look.

"We have reason to believe," he said, "that the records were here in their places not a week ago. If they had been disturbed, all France would have been disturbed. There are some secrets that could never be kept, and the finding of these records would have been one of them."

Two of the fiercest-looking of the men at the table rose and shouted one against the other.

"Thirty seconds," the one with the louder voice yelled. "Give him 30 seconds, Laporte. It is enough. We will tear the truth out of him. One of us may get a bullet. Who cares? We will have his tongue out of his head. There are seven of us and plenty more to come. It is for The Cause, you others! He is lying to us, this man. Thirty seconds! No more."

The man with the pince-nez looked deprecatingly across at Hamer. He appeared, as he was, the perfect hypocrite.

"I regret, monsieur," he said. "Mine would have been the gentler way but I am over-ruled. You may pay with your life if you cannot tell us anything more about those records. I shall begin to count. One—"

Hamer held out his hand.

"One second," he begged. "On my word of honour I will make no movement. I ask you—all of you or any one of you who likes. Get on your knees. Look through those portholes. When you have seen what I can see perhaps you may reflect. They would not think much of hanging seven men for one murder so long as those men came from Marseilles."

Somehow or other they believed him. The sight they saw was alarming enough. From the narrow point where the road curved to Antibes right past the rival restaurant along the road to Crestner's there seemed to be one tangle of flashing lights. Vehicles of some sort were streaming down from the hill. Their lights flared through the closely-grown pine woods. Everywhere was an orgy of illumination, and even while they looked there was a clear sonorous voice from immediately below.

"*Bird of Paradise* ahoy! Commander Berard from the *Fidélité*."

"Get any men?" Hamer shouted.

"Twenty—and thirty coming. We have had trouble but it is over. We are coming on board."

"Put out to sea," the most desperate of the men demanded, watching the others struggling into the galley. "Never mind whether you have time or not. Gino, start the engine!"

Hamer laughed at him.

"Look out of the porthole, you fool," he said. "Can't you feel the sea beneath your feet? If the anchors hold we are safe here, but it would take you half an hour to get them up. We are on a corps mort. There is no harbour on this coast you could get the *Bird of Paradise* into when you had them up."

There was the sound outside of the men jumping into the cutter in which they had arrived. Only the man of the pince-nez remained in his place. He sat at the table with folded arms.

"I am in charge of the political side of this visit," he declared. "I am not armed. I have nothing to do with those threats. We were here merely to recover our stolen property."

There was the sound of firing outside. Berard sprang over the side and came crashing down the stairs. There were a dozen marines behind him.

"Thank Heaven you're safe, Wildburn!" he exclaimed. "Who is this?"

"I have not been presented," Hamer replied. "I found him on board the ship. He was the leader of the boarding party who are just making for the *plage*."

Berard signed to two of the marines behind him.

"I am Deputy Laporte," the little man said with stuttering dignity. No true Frenchman will lay a hand upon me."

"We will see about that," the commander answered tersely. "There are several true Frenchmen of the type you talk about already in irons, and one or two of them shot."

The deputy shivered.

"I have not broken the law," he complained. "I am here to search for the property of a comrade."

The commander smiled, rather a ferocious looking effort at mirth.

"You are one of the men," he said sternly, "who was distributing those secret pamphlets, one of which I found on the *Fidélité*. It was you who brought a handful of them to the marines I had placed on guard here. You know the penalty for doing that, I suppose, to sailors or soldiers in uniform?"

The little man was ghastly white, but he bluffed once more.

"When the day comes," he threatened, "officers of the French army or navy with a black mark against their names will be the first to suffer. In a few minutes my bodyguard will be here. We have a hundred men in the *plage*."

"Take him on board and lock him up," Berard ordered, "then come back and fetch me. Have a look at your hundred men if your eyes are good enough," he advised Laporte. "There are four hundred soldiers from the barracks at Antibes on the *plage*, and more streaming in—and pretty well all the gendarmes in the neighbourhood. They will have to open the old military prison at Antibes to hold your lot to-night."

The little man shrunk back in his corner.

"You can't arrest me!" he expostulated. "I have already told you that I am a deputy—Deputy Laporte of the Rhone Department."

"Well, if you are, so much the worse for you," Berard replied. "Sergeant, my idea is changed," he went on, turning to his man. "Take him ashore. Hand him over to the officer in command of the *chasseurs*. Tell them who he is. I won't have him on my ship. He will be safer in Antibes prison. Tell them he was in command of the expedition here, and is taking the responsibility for it."

Laporte made a show of dignity.

"There will come a time," he prophesied, as he rose to his feet, "when you will listen to another sort of command."

Berard laughed scornfully.

"I doubt whether you will be there to hear it, my little friend," he said, waving the man away.

"Any casualties?" the commander asked, as he seated himself opposite to Hamer Wildburn, a bottle of Scotch whisky and a syphon between them.

"Only my *matelot* here a trifle knocked about," Hamer replied, pouring some whisky into a tumbler and passing it to him. "Then there's a man I hit on the head with a spanner lying on the deck. Auguste, just have a look round behind and report. I'm afraid they've made a mess of your galley."

"They have ruined the mizzen-mast," the man muttered. "Here's wishing you good health, sir," he added, helping himself very sparsely to the soda water. "I hope if ever I find myself again in a scrap like this that I shall be next a gentleman who holds his gun as steady as you, Monsieur Hamer. You had 'em scared for a minute or so, sir, the whole lot of them."

Berard also helped himself to a long drink, for now that the excitement was passed he was obviously depressed.

"It's the one thing, this, in the navy," he explained to Hamer, "that we dread. Everything in the shape of mutiny reflects back on the officers. I wouldn't have believed it with some of the men. There was one I shot with my own hand. He was only married last week and going on leave to-morrow. There's plenty of this sort of stuff at Toulon, of course, but I never dreamt there was any of it here or I would have curtailed leave."

"Don't you worry, old chap," Hamer said, patting him on the shoulder. "You don't suppose I shall forget that you turned up here in the nick of time. I think they meant business—that little deputy fellow especially. They wouldn't believe that we had not got the papers or whatever it was they were searching for."

"Well, I'm glad you made straight for the *Bird of Paradise*," Berard declared. "There was something suspicious about the way she was lying so quietly. They put my searchlights out of order, but I knew that was a strange boat alongside. What the devil were they after?"

Hamer Wildburn shook his head. "I think I know," he said.

They mounted the companionway at the sound of oars. A junior officer saluted and reported to Berard.

"The fighting is all over, sir. Ten of the *chasseurs* were killed and two gendarmes wounded, and one of our men got a bullet in his leg. Twenty of that Communist rag-tag and bobtail are stretched out there, half a dozen or so escaped, and the rest are for Antibes and Grasse prisons. It is all quiet now, and the place locked up."

"What about Mademoiselle Tanya," Wildburn asked.

"Madame Crestner drove her off directly the shooting began. They will arrest her when they want her."

"If there's nothing more I can do," Berard observed, holding out his hand to Hamer, "I had better be looking after my own little troubles. We have brought you back your second *matelot*—Jean. They simply locked him up and refused to let him come back. Shall I leave you an escort?"

"Not in the least necessary," Hamer declared. "I think they're all satisfied that what they want is not on the *Bird of Paradise*. Besides, they're pretty well cleaned up for the night."

He strolled on deck and waved his hand to Berard as he stepped into the pinnace. The sea had gone down, and the moon was beginning to shine dimly through the misty bank of clouds. There were several stationary vehicles still at La Garoupe, but the place itself was in darkness. Neither did the *château* show any sign of life. The lights along the coast road had been extinguished. Only the lighthouse still flung its long beam across the bay over the dark woods and out seawards. Hamer descended the companionway and entered the saloon. Auguste was standing there with a somewhat puzzled look upon his face.

"I ask myself, monsieur," he said, taking from under his arm a pair of disreputable and ragged blue trousers. "It could not have been by any chance this rubbish that all them people have been smelling around after?"

He lifted the trousers up by the legs and shook them. Odd rolls of paper, what seemed to be the stubs of many empty cheque books, a package of letters, and a larger packet of more formal-looking documents stamped with the seal of the French Republic, were shaken out on to the table. Then, last of all, with a black seal upon the envelope, was a letter addressed to three names:

"A Monsieur Edouard Mermillon, Monsieur le Baron Albert de Brett, ou Monsieur Eugene Chauvanne."

Hamer stared at them in amazement. He had remained cool throughout a somewhat disturbing night, but he suddenly felt the walls of the little saloon spinning round him. Auguste scratched his head.

"I emptied this rubbish out of those places in the mast months ago, and laid them away in this old pair of trousers," he explained. "Me not being able to read, they seemed just like rubbish."

"Just rubbish." Hamer repeated.

Like a man in a dream he rose to his feet. He held the bottom of one of the legs of the soiled, disreputable trousers in one hand and he passed the other to Auguste, then one by one he picked up the alarming-looking pile of documents and papers which lay upon the table, and dropped them down into their crude hiding-place. In addition to the papers which had first caught his eye, there were many others full of equally potent significance. There was a batch of perfumed and coroneted letters. There were at least a dozen independent cheque books—some not half-used. There was one loose cheque, the figures of which seemed to reach from one end of the blue oblong strip to the other. There were hastily scrawled letters. There was a parchment-bound cipher with a marvellous key. And there were deeds with great seals upon them—black and red and green. In they all went, and still scarcely realising what he was doing, Wildburn

rolled up the trousers and secured them with a soiled white canvas belt. He held the bundle under his arm and turned towards Auguste. His knees were none too steady. Auguste looked at him anxiously.

"I have done wrong, monsieur?" he asked, in a tone of deep concern.

Hamer shook his head, but found speech difficult.

"I do not know, Auguste," he answered truthfully enough.

As the dawn was breaking Auguste, with a cup of tea on a tray, made his way into his master's cabin. Still fully dressed, still with his hand upon the butt of his revolver, Hamer was lying in a semi-recumbent position upon the bed.

"Monsieur has not slept?" Auguste asked disconsolately.

Hamer waved the question away. It seemed unimportant.

"You have not spoke to Jean?" he asked. "Not I, monsieur," Auguste declared.

Hamer swung himself into a sitting position. He looked at Auguste as no other man had ever looked at him in his life.

"You have seen no one else this morning?"

"Not a soul, monsieur."

"Swear on the head of your mother and the souls of your children that you will open your lips to no one."

"I swear," Auguste, who was a religious man, said solemnly.

Hamer Wildburn drank his tea and went back to bed.

"Sit on the steps outside, Auguste," he directed. "Call me in an hour. If anyone approaches the boat wake me. You understand?"

"I understand, monsieur," Auguste promised.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Monsieur Leon Crotieres, member of the Académie Francais, and perhaps the most distinguished of modern European historians, paused in his labours and looked downwards from the grounds of his villa into the Bay of Garoupe. He pointed to a very graceful thirty-ton yacht below which was flying the flags of France and the United States.

"My task," he said to his wife, who was also his secretary, "would be an easier one if that boat, like the singing barge of Ulysses, could talk."

His wife laid down her pencil. The summer heat was making her indolent, and she, too, was glad to pause.

"Explain, *mon cher*," she begged. "What is there that boat could tell you that you do not know already?"

"Perhaps nothing," he admitted, "and perhaps a great deal. You knew that she once belonged to a famous, or rather an infamous, financier who was supposed to be responsible for that terrible period of speculation and corruption on a gigantic scale which very nearly brought France to her knees a year or so ago?"

"Yes I remember hearing that."

"There was a rumour that this financier had built on board a marvellous hiding place where he kept letters and bank books, and all sorts of evidence which would have destroyed the reputations of half the famous men in France if they had been found."

"I remember that, too," she acknowledged. "It made the drama of his murder so intensely interesting. The police broke in and shot him on the morning of the investigation."

Her husband nodded absently.

"Supposing they had not," he meditated. "Think how differently the history of France during those few years might have been written. If ever there was a case of evil having been done that good might come of it I should think that it was there."

"You have theories?" she asked. He smiled and lit a cigarette.

"I have theories," he admitted. "My dear, to be a true historian you must have imagination. You are permitted theories but you may not write about them. I figure to myself that that marvellous secret hiding place existed, inaccessible unless the *Bird of Paradise* had been almost disembowelled. I picture to myself that on the night of the Communist riot down below, the time when Tanya was singing and stirring the blood of all Frenchmen—her Communist songs in secret, her exquisite lyrics before the world—well, I picture to myself that at that time, when there is no doubt that the *Bird of Paradise* was seized by Communists and was almost broken to pieces there in the harbour, these secret documents really were discovered."

"Are you going to write this," his wife asked eagerly, "because it sounds as though it might become immensely interesting?"

He smiled again.

"My dear, I could not write it because it is only a theory, and if I knew it for a fact, still I should have to follow the path that those far greater men than I have trodden."

"You mean forget?"

"I mean destroy. Sometimes I see it almost in a mirage, and I have hard work to convince myself that it was not the truth."

"Tell me at least, Leon, what you mean."

"I believe honestly," he declared, "that either one of the Communists themselves, or someone amongst the defending party, who drove them away, really did discover those secret records."

"Then what has become of them now?"

"How can one tell? I can sometimes imagine myself going through that agony of thought and doubt—what to do with them?...There have been whispers about so many great men. Supposing they had all been implicated!"

"Supposing they had. Would it not have been well for the whole truth to come out?"

"I will tell you what would have happened. Tanya knew—she who had planned that Communist meeting here, planted Communists on the gunboat, gave that great party down on the beach—she knew well what would have happened. She knew well that there would not have been a man in France who could have taken up the government, or even have served in a Government. The people had suffered enough already. Their nerves were stretched to breaking-point. They would have been up in arms in every city in France. France would have gone Communist, and Communism, you know, my dear, which is all very well in theory when poets talk of it, and dreamers play the men of action, would really ruin body and soul of any country which was governed according to its axioms."

"But she recovered even after the Revolution," his wife reminded him.

"This would have been worse. To begin with, she would have been overrun at once by Germany. She would have become a vassal State. She would have become the scorn of the world. I picture to myself that some man was great enough to scatter that evidence to the four winds of heaven and place their fates—the fates of the guilty—back in their own hands with a pledge to work out their redemption."

Madame Crotieres moistened the tip of her pencil between her lips. She was an extraordinarily pretty woman, and in her eyes at that moment there was a light of longing.

"If only you could have written this," she murmured. "If only you could have been the discoverer."

He shook his head.

"By chance, my dear," he said, "I know who was on the yacht with that young American the day after the fighting, and he, I think, was the one man great enough to have been the saviour of France. You yourself, my dear, when our work is completed, should be able to divine the truth. You will never know it any other way...This morning, you see, the sun is hot and the wind is sweet, and one has fancies. Presently we must go back to our work and write of the day when General Perissol became President of France."

"Darling," Mrs. Hamer Wildburn pouted, "why were you in such a hurry to get away from the *château* this morning? I had heaps of things to do, and I am not at all sure that I have not forgotten half the lunch." Hamer looked up to the skies. One hand rested upon the wheel of the *Bird of Paradise*, and one arm was around his wife's waist as she sat in the pit by his side.

"My dear," he confided, "your father awoke this morning in a most determined frame of mind. All this summer he has been praying me to accept the *Hermoine*. This morning I fled to escape argument."

She nodded understandingly.

"It would give him so much pleasure, Hamer, if you would accept it. You know what he thinks of you. There is nothing in the whole world good enough."

He drew her a little closer. Auguste had just looked round. The anchor was up. Jean was busy with the sail. The wind was fair for their cruise. Watching the sails closely Hamer swung the *Bird of Paradise* a few points to leeward.

"Your father has already given me the most precious thing in the world, Lucienne," he declared. "I don't want anything else. We have quite as much money as is good for us, and since you won dad's heart so completely we have to face the certainty of becoming multimillionaires some day. I have heaps of work when I can find time for it, and we have that marvellous youngster for a plaything. How could I be happier with a two hundred ton yacht? If you want it—"

"I want the *Bird of Paradise* and you," she whispered with her lips perilously near to his ear. "I think I wanted them from the day I thought I was going to drown and you pulled me on board."

More dignified in presence than ever, as upright as a year or so before, the handsomest president Europe had ever known—Perissol—stood arm-in-arm with his wife in the gardens of his lighthouse hill villa. His face was more deeply lined because all the cares of a prosperous nation at times rested upon his shoulders, but his mouth had softened and the light in his eyes was the light of a lover's happiness.

"Louise," he exclaimed, "look!"

They saw the *Bird of Paradise* heeling over a little on her way out to sea. They saw Hamer Wildburn standing up at the wheel and Lucienne by his side.

"The first day of our holiday, my dear. Isn't that a wonderful sight Look at them. The happiest couple in the world, I should think, and perhaps I am the one man in the world who knows how he deserves it."

His face became more thoughtful. Louise's arm tightened upon his.

"What lie did that day—the decision he came to—has made not only France, but Europe, what it is," he said almost reverently. "His father would have given him twenty millions, the wealth of empires, for the contents of those old trousers. He could have become the most famous figure in history. He could have had the crazy populace of France at his feet, and all the time he could have satisfied what the Anglo-Saxons are too ready to call their sense of honour. My dear, it was a miracle. He saw the truth."

"Please go on, Armand," she begged. "It is almost the first time you have ever talked like this."

"I have felt too much," he admitted. "I have felt that what came of his action was too wonderful, that I might wake one morning and find it a house of cards and the earth quaking again beneath our feet. What he did will live as a great deed, as France will live. Look at everyone. There is Montelimar. Nothing would drag him on the Bourse. Nothing would tempt him back into politics. He remains, though, one of the greatest philanthropists in France, always ready to do his duty to his country—a true patriot. Look at Edouard Mermillon. He has brought France back again into the front rank of the nations. He has made us famous throughout Europe as a country whose policy is dignified and stable and whose honour is unsullied. There is not an enemy who does not recognise Mermillon as one of the greatest of modern statesmen, and he himself—you do not know it, but I do—he is a poor man. Every penny that ever came dragged up from that foul pit of corruption has gone back again—and more. He lives on the pension of a Civil Servant, Half his salary even goes towards the past. There is no yacht for Mermillon, none of the great luxuries of life, but if there could be a man whose thoughts, whose day by day life I might envy—which there could not be—it would be his. Chauvanne—well, he went where he was headed for...Lavandou. Ah, he was a hero, but nothing will bring him back again, and he was the first who made the sacrifice. Look at the men of whom France can boast to-day."

Her lips stole up to his.

"And their President," she murmured. "The real inspiration of all that happened. If only that beautiful head of his would come down a little oftener from the clouds."

He stooped and kissed her. The *Bird of Paradise* rounded the point, the west wind in her sails, the line of foam behind. The President and his wife continued their morning walk along the path thick with pine needles.

THE END

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