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The Grassleyes Mystery

by

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CHAPTER I

Mr. Frank Woodley looked up from the ledger which he was studying, rose to his feet and approached the mahogany counter behind which he and his desk were entrenched. He was an elderly man with unkempt grey hair, a tired expression and various irregularities of toilet accounted for by the heat wave then prevailing from the Estérels to Monte Carlo. Business was uncertain at this time of the year with the firm of Spenser & Sykes, the well-known house-agents, and Mr. Woodley, the manager, scarcely expected a client of interest.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he enquired of the caller who had summoned him.

The latter leaned a little forward. His back was towards the door, through which the sunlight was streaming. He was a lean, broad-shouldered man of apparently between thirty and thirty-five years of age, with firm features, clear grey-blue eyes and resolute expression.

"I am looking for an apartment," he announced. "I do not wish to go to an hotel. I would not consider an ordinary boarding-house. But I should prefer some sort of service."

"In the town of Nice?" Mr. Woodley asked.

"Certainly not," was the concise reply. "I wish to be somewhere within a twenty-mile radius of either Nice or Cannes, but I also wish to be entirely in the country. I have a great deal of research work to do and it is my habit to seek as much seclusion as possible."

The manager scratched his chin thoughtfully. His visitor's calm, decisive manner of speech was in its way impressive, but his appearance, when closely studied, was a little puzzling. He was a youngish man and looked like a worker, Mr. Woodley decided. He certainly had not the air of a pleasure seeker or a loungeur through life.

"What name, sir?" he asked, drawing a printed form towards him.

The other hesitated.

"Is it necessary for me to give my name before you can tell me whether you have anything likely to suit me?"

"It is usual, sir."

"My name is Granet, then. David Granet."

"And your nationality?"

"British."

The manager returned to the desk at which he had been seated and turned over some leaves of the opened ledger.

"We have any number of apartments to offer," he confided, bringing over the volume and laying it on the counter. "Quite half of these are in the country or in the suburbs. Do you wish a farm or garden?"

"Nothing that requires outside service. I want quietude and reasonable proximity to the sea, if possible."

"Might I ask what price you are willing to pay?"

"If I can find what I am looking for price is not a matter of import. I do not want the trouble of housekeeping. I do not desire the company of my fellows. I wish, in short, to pursue my own life in my own fashion."

Mr. Woodley looked his possible client up and down. Again he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Of course I don't know, sir," he said, "but there are one or two farms up in the mountains where they let off part of their premises to boarders, but they none of them speak any English—"

"I can speak French," the other interrupted, "but, as I have already told you, I do not wish to be a boarder. I possess a small car so I have no objection to being some little distance away."

"There is the Manoir of Lady Grassleyes, of course," the manager reflected, taking off his pince-nez and wiping the lenses.

"Well what about it?"

"Lady Grassleyes is a widow whose husband was in the Indian Civil Service. She has a rather lonely but very beautiful estate about thirty kilometres away. It is entirely in the country and is at least twenty kilometres from the sea."

"If it is a guest house it would be no use to me."

"It is not a guest house in the ordinary sense of the word," the manager said. "Lady Grassleyes has built six bungalows in the woods around the Manoir. Each is provided with the ordinary accessories of life. You can either have your own servant or be looked after from the Manoir and have your meals sent down from there. There are no public rooms and the inhabitants of the bungalows are only expected to visit the Manoir on business or by special invitation."

"Are any of the bungalows let?"

"Most of them, I think, sir."

"What rent does Lady Grassleyes ask?"

"The rent of the one I am offering you, including use of furniture, crockery, plate and linen, is eight *mille* a month."

"That seems a good deal, but I should like a card of inspection," Granet decided.

"We have none, sir. If you thought seriously about the place you would have to apply at the Manoir. Lady Grassleyes does not care to let one of her bungalows until she has had a personal interview with the applicant."

David Granet scoffed audibly.

"What business is it of hers who I am so long as I pay my rent and keep to myself?" he demanded. "I can give you a banker's reference, of course."

"I am sorry, sir," the manager regretted. "Lady Grassleyes' instructions are definite. She will only let after a personal interview. The bungalows, you will understand, although they have been carefully built out of sight of the Manoir, are in the park. Madame offers privacy to her tenants. It is not unnatural that she should require to know something about them. If you would care for the address—"

"Hand it over."

"I have not only the address, sir," Woodley pointed out as he took a card from a drawer, "but you will find here a small plan which shows you the route to be followed. I hope that we shall hear from you again."

David Granet nodded.

"You certainly shall, one way or the other," he promised as he pocketed the card and turned away.

* * * * *

Outside, the Promenade des Anglais was thronged with the usual half-clad crowd of bathers and loungers in pyjamas, shorts and every variety of beach suit. The blazing sun flashed upon a million wavelets; heads bobbed here and there in the sea; speed-boats were darting about in every direction. David Granet paused for a moment, looking across the road at the gay scene. Then he walked a few paces and stepped into a formidable-looking roadster which was parked against the kerbstone. He glanced at the card which he had drawn from his pocket, handled his starting button and gears with the air of an expert and within half an hour was gliding up the very attractive private way which led to his destination. The Manoir itself was an exceedingly picturesque stone building of Provençal type, red-tiled, admirably restored and set in the midst of precipitous terraces of blossoming shrubs, climbing roses and dark cypresses. He could see no definite trace of the bungalows but the park was everywhere dotted with coppices and small woods which afforded excellent shelter for buildings of that kind. He drew up before the heavy front door of the Manoir with its wrought-iron clappings and huge-ringed handle, alighted from the car and rang the bell. For a moment or two nothing happened. He heard the deep, mellow echoes of his summons die away in the distance. Then he was suddenly aware of a curious sound—the sound of pattering footsteps upon a stone floor. They came nearer every second. David Granet, who was a man accustomed to unusual situations, felt a slight tension of his limbs. The patter of footsteps ceased, the door was smoothly opened. In place of the breathless servitor he had imagined, a carefully dressed butler, wearing a white-linen coat and black

trousers, with smooth-shaven, dusky complexion and the slightly oblique eyes of the Oriental, stood looking at him gravely.

"Is Lady Grassleyes at home?"

The man bowed. He held the door a little wider open.

"If monsieur will enter—" he invited. "The name, if you please?"

"Does it matter about my name?" Granet asked, stepping across the threshold. "I have called about one of the bungalows on the estate which I understand is to let."

The man smiled suavely.

"Milady will prefer to receive your card."

Granet drew a case from his pocket, took out a card and handed it to the man, who, without glancing at it, placed it carefully in the middle of a silver tray, ranged with several others upon a black-oak chest. He pointed to a straight-backed chair which stood against the wall.

"If gentleman will seat himself I will seek milady. Sometimes it is her pleasure to let a bungalow. Sometimes she finds them all full. If gentleman will please wait?"

Granet looked at him with searching eyes.

"You speak English very well."

"Either English or French, whichever monsieur desires," was the smooth reply. "If gentleman will be so kind as to sit down?"

Granet did as he was bidden. He watched the butler cross the spacious hall with its rough stone walls and disappear, walking now in slow and dignified fashion, down a long passage. There was no suggestion of haste about his movements. Granet looked after him with a puzzled frown upon his forehead. He recognized the type without difficulty. The man was without a doubt half Malayan, half Chinese from the northern provinces. But his neck was short, his body almost corpulent. He showed no signs of one likely to be fond of exercise yet those pattering footsteps had been the footsteps of a trained runner. Granet, on the whole a matter-of-fact person, shrugged his shoulders and left the puzzle to solve itself. Indeed, he had no alternative. The butler had returned and was bowing before him.

"Milady will see gentleman," he confided smiling. "Please to follow."

Granet rose to his feet and followed his squat but dignified guide across the stone hall, down the passage until they arrived at a black-oak door. The servant threw it open, standing on one side to allow Granet to pass.

"The gentleman to see bungalow, milady," he announced.

He disappeared, closing the door behind him. Granet made his way across the long room, austere and melancholy in its furnishings, but, as he could not fail to notice even in those few moments, filled with some very beautiful Provençal pieces. At a writing-table at the end of the room a woman was seated in a high-backed chair. She was wearing a black-silk dress buttoned up to her throat. Her hair was also black, streaked with grey; she was thin, almost angular; she wore steel-rimmed spectacles; her head had fallen a

little forward as though she were asleep. Granet halted a few feet from the desk and looked at her with growing curiosity.

"Lady Grassleyes," he said quietly, "my name is Granet. I have called to see you about one of your bungalows."

Even as he spoke, however, he knew that with whomever he might discuss the matter of this bungalow it was improbable that it would ever be with the woman at the writing-table. She had not looked up as he had spoken or offered him any sort of welcome. He was a man of swift perception and from the first he felt convinced that she was dead.

CHAPTER II

Doctors, gendarmes, the Sub-Commissioner of Police from Nice, the matron of a neighbouring hospital, nurses in the garb of Sisters of Mercy, the *Curé* from the church which stood in the grounds—all finished with at last. It seemed to David Granet that he had explained his visit to a dozen different people, but there were still statements to be made and questions to be answered. At last he managed to escape and make his way to the spot where he had left his car. He was about to press the self-starter when he heard the sudden fluttering of skirts. He turned unwillingly around. He was confronted by a young woman who had apparently issued hurriedly from the house. In her distracted state, with the horror still in her eyes, he scarcely realized for a moment that she had been one of the little gathering of people who had been questioned by the Sub-Commissioner. Then he remembered his first start when in answer to a question she had admitted that she was Lady Grassleyes' niece. She was a young woman of a very different type, and she was very beautiful.

"Mr. Granet, if you please," she begged, "do not go away for a moment. May I speak to you?"

"Certainly," he answered. "I was only hurrying off because I thought there was nothing left for me to do—"

"Is it true," she interrupted breathlessly, "that you came to see about taking one of the bungalows?"

"Well, it was rather my idea," he admitted. "I was going to look at one, at any rate."

The girl shivered.

"Please come back into the house for a moment or two."

"Certainly."

She led him back into the hall, down the long corridor and into a small apartment which seemed to be behind the room into which he had originally been shown, and from which it was separated by two steps and a closed door. It was evidently her own sanctum. The most modern thing he had seen in the place, a typewriter, stood on a prim little writing-table in the window recess, and opposite was a small-sized grand piano. There were flowers everywhere in abundance. She forgot to ask him to sit down. Immediately she had secured the door she began to talk to him. There was subdued excitement in her tone, speculation in her eyes.

"Mr. Granet," she asked, "what really made you come here to-day?"

"My dear young lady, I have told you already," he declared. "I have been wandering about France in my car and I thought I would find a very quiet spot in which to work for a time. I am one of those people, you see, who appreciate tranquillity."

The girl looked at him curiously. Their eyes met. She was still under the stress of emotion, her breasts rising and falling as though she had been hurrying. Her puzzled but tortured eyes seemed to be asking him a question.

"Tranquillity," she murmured. "It is a hard thing to find. I thought that I should find it here—and now—this."

"Your aunt's sudden death must have been a great shock to you, of course," he said sympathetically.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Anything like that is always terrible," he went on quietly. "I think I heard you tell the doctor that you had never known her ill."

"Never," she replied. "On the contrary she has had, for the last few years, wonderful health. She took great care of herself, lived according to a régime of her own, concocted her own medicines all from herbs of her own growing, and never saw a doctor."

"Is she the only relative you have out here?"

"The only one."

"Are any of the occupants of the bungalows your special friends?"

"I scarcely know their names. Lately there have been many changes and I have only been out here a little more than two years."

Granet looked at her gravely.

"It seems to me," he ventured, "—forgive me if I am impertinent—that you are rather young to be left alone after a shock like this."

She shook her head.

"I am not so young as I seem," she confided. "And it is not only the shock. I am afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Why I am telling you this I don't know," she said, restlessly rolling and unrolling her handkerchief. "But I am afraid."

He smiled reassuringly.

"You will get over that. I understand the feeling perfectly. Whatever any one may say, sudden death, when we come face to face with it, is terrible."

The girl's fingers were still tearing at her handkerchief. Granet leaned forward and took it from her. She allowed him to do so quite meekly.

"Can't you understand," she faltered, "she doesn't look in the least like a dead person to me? I have seen several and they were not—like that."

"But you must remember," he pointed out, "that she has been examined by two doctors. They both of them pronounced life extinct."

"I know," she confessed, "but I cannot help it. I know she had lost all her colour—I know that she did not seem to be breathing—and yet—I do not believe it."

"You must really try to fight those nerves," he insisted. "There are many means of testing whether a person is actually dead or not and your aunt's regular medical attendant is with her now. I wish you would take my advice and go and lie down quite quietly and put these last hours out of your mind. One of the Sisters of Mercy who helped to move your aunt looks a kind sort of person. Would you like her to come and talk to you?"

"I should hate it. If you really want to help me you can do it another way."

"Of course I want to help you," he assured her quite truthfully. "You have only to tell me how."

"You came to look at a bungalow," she said eagerly. "Let me show it to you. My aunt would have sent me with Pooralli to go over it with you. Please come and see it."

Granet smiled at her kindly.

"Of course I will do that. Whether the place is kept on or not there is not the slightest harm in my looking at the bungalow."

The girl drew a long breath of relief. She clutched him by the arm and led him out through the front door into the avenue. She pointed across the park.

"The one my aunt would have offered you is called 'The Lamps of Fire.' You will find there are always fire-flies there at night."

"Picturesque, at any rate," he remarked. "What about that butler fellow who let me in? He is standing over there looking as though he wanted to come with us."

She glanced across in the direction her companion had indicated but she only shook her head.

"It is not necessary for him to come," she declared. "I have all the keys. I can tell you the price my aunt would have asked and give you all the particulars."

Granet hesitated.

"Don't you think," he suggested, "that it would be better for me to come up sometime to-morrow? Your butler is looking a little disappointed."

She laid her fingers upon his arm.

"Pooralli does not understand," she confided. "Please do as I wish. It is only a few minutes' walk. It will take you no time at all. The bungalow is just behind the acacia trees ... it is a bachelor bungalow ... you are not married?"

"No, I am not married."

"How do you manage about your domestic arrangements?" she asked as they started off together.

"I permit myself generally," he admitted, "the luxury of a servant. Sometimes I have fits of economy and do everything for myself. Is this the place?"

"Yes, this is it," she replied. "It is almost my favourite amongst the bungalows."

They had turned the corner round a little coppice of closely growing acacia trees whose blossoms lay like snow upon the ground and whose sweetness filled the air. In front of them, surrounded by a rustic paling, was a low building fashioned of the stone of the neighbourhood, with ancient red tiles and windows opening outwards. A small garage stood by its side. There was no attempt at a formal garden but wild flowers grew almost to the front door.

"It is delightfully situated, at any rate," Granet remarked.

"I do hope you will like it," she murmured, unlocking the front door.

They passed through a small hall, a pleasant lounge-library and a dining-room with plain but massive furniture. Behind the one room there was a simply furnished bedroom; behind the other a kitchen leading to outhouses.

"There is a bathroom beyond the bedroom," the girl told him, "and there is a servant's bedroom in case it is required. There is a telephone with an extension to the Manoir and we have a good cook who supplies things if they are wanted. On the other hand," she went on anxiously, "if you are used to doing things for yourself there is every facility. The kitchen stove is small but modern. The price of the bungalow furnished is eight *mille* a month. Any service from the Manoir is, of course, extra."

"Isn't it rather a bother sending the food down here, for instance?"

"My aunt has always been very peculiar," she explained. "She never had the tenants near the house if she could help it and yet she insisted upon visiting every bungalow once a month and collecting the rent herself. Pooralli or his brother will serve your meals if you do not bring a servant of your own. They have a funny habit of running wherever they go and you will be surprised how quickly they get over the ground."

"Was Pooralli the butler who opened the door for me?"

"Yes. He is a strange little man but he is a wonderful servant and I believe quite honest. My aunt brought him from Burma, also his younger brother whom you have not seen."

"Supposing I take the bungalow for a month. I think I should like it here."

"I should be very glad if you did," the girl said earnestly. "I should like you to come very much."

Granet was a simple man in some ways and he asked her a blunt question.

"Why is it so important to you that I come here? The rent cannot make very much difference. I should think these bungalows, at the price you are asking, ought to let very easily."

"It is not the money," she assured him. "It is very difficult to tell you."

"Come along, why do you think you would like me for a tenant? I hate mysteries."

There was a sudden flash of that uneasy light in her eyes. It was a warm afternoon but he almost fancied she was shivering.

"If you hate mysteries you had better stay away," she told him with a little tremor in her tone. "You see, I want you to come here but I won't have you come under false pretences."

"Why should there be mysteries?" he asked patiently.

"My aunt's collapse is a mystery," she declared, a note of passion throbbing in her voice. "She was perfectly well a few hours ago. Her life has always been a mystery, though. Sometimes all these people who occupy the bungalows seem like living mysteries to me. I don't know what they came for, I don't know why they stay on. I don't know why my aunt drove round once a month in her old-fashioned carriage to collect the rents when she had an agent. And perhaps the greatest mystery of all is that I don't know whether they loved her or whether they hated her.... There, I have told you a great deal. Will you come or not? Please come!"

Granet drew a card from his pocket and scribbled on the back. He also counted out some *mille* notes.

"There is my name and a banker's reference," he said. "And eight *mille* for my first month."

"It is not necessary," she assured him with tears in her eyes.

"I prefer it so," he replied. "And listen, will you please pay a little attention to a word or two of advice from a stranger?"

"I will listen to it from you—yes—but you must not mind my saying this. I do not feel that you are the ordinary sort of stranger at all."

"I am very glad. You know, you are really just a little dazed, aren't you? It is a terrible thing to have happened—to lose any one like that so suddenly. You scarcely believe it yourself. Now, if I were you, when you get back to the Manoir I should go and talk to your aunt's own physician. He will probably explain things to you a little more clearly. Some of the strongest people in the world, you know, have their own special weakness which no one—not even themselves, sometimes—knows anything about. It is not the worst way of quitting this world, after all."

"My aunt's physician is not a very sympathetic person," she told him. "I wonder whether you know him—Dr. Bertoldi?"

Granet shook his head.

"I have never stayed long enough in these parts to need a doctor."

"Dr. Bertoldi and my aunt were never very good friends," she confided. "My aunt was very clever with herbs. She has, I believe, some wonderful things in her garden. She has cured quite a number of people of slight ailments. I don't think the doctor likes it."

"Rather dangerous things to meddle with—herbs," he observed.

"That is what Dr. Bertoldi used to say. He was very angry one day when my aunt told him that she could cure more headaches in an hour than he could in a lifetime!"

"A self-respecting practitioner would no doubt find that trying," Granet agreed.

"Well, I shall certainly do as you say. I shall go and talk to him immediately you have left. When are you coming in?"

"The day after to-morrow, if that suits you," he replied. "We all have to come to some sort of enquiry up at the Manoir to-morrow. Perhaps you would rather I put off moving in for a short time."

"If I had a preference at all," she confided, "I should like you to move in to-night."

He hesitated. There was something strangely appealing about that anxious light in her eyes.

"Well, there's really nothing against it so far as I am concerned," he decided. "The only thing is, I haven't made up my mind yet whether to bring a servant or not."

"Come to-night, please!" she cried eagerly. "Do not bother about a servant, but perhaps, just for to-night, you had better have your dinner before you come."

"No difficulty about that," he agreed. "Suit me better, in fact. It will take me some time to pack."

He looked at her curiously. Her whole attention seemed suddenly to have wandered. She had become more tense. She was standing quite still, her head turned away from him, bent as though listening. He, too, heard the same strange sound as he had heard when waiting outside the front door earlier in the afternoon. He glanced out of the window. A curious figure was approaching the bungalow in a curious manner. It was Pooralli, wearing his white coat, black trousers and small patent-leather shoes—Pooralli, running steadily but without any sign of effort.

"Heavens, does he always do this?" Granet exclaimed.

"Ever since I've known him," the girl answered. "I have never been East myself but my aunt always told me that he came from a tribe, half Chinese, half Malayan, called 'The Running Footmen.'"

Pooralli came to a standstill just outside. Granet, anticipating his companion's intention, pushed open the window for her.

"Pooralli," she announced, "this gentleman has taken the bungalow we are in."

The man bowed politely.

"Gentleman has made good choice," he said. "We shall do our best to make him comfortable."

"He will move in to-night," the girl went on.

"A wise thing is well done quickly," Pooralli murmured. "I will send down the necessary articles. Meanwhile, Miss Grassleyes, the doctor wishes to see you before he leaves. He ask many questions."

"I'll come at once."

Pooralli turned round after a little bow to Granet and at exactly the same pace commenced his run back to the Manoir. His short legs, with their peculiar action, covered the ground with amazing speed. Granet looked after him in wonder.

"You certainly possess the most original butler in the world, Miss Grassleyes," he declared.

She smiled. Pooralli had already disappeared, as they crossed the strip of park land and came in sight of the house.

"He is a very remarkable creature," she agreed. "My aunt was very fond of him."

They walked side by side to where Granet had left his car.

"How long has Pooralli been in Lady Grassleyes' employ?"

"Eighteen or twenty years."

"An old servant," Granet reflected. "He has probably lost a mistress with whom he has been since a boy, yet how callous he seems! Don't you think so, too?"

"He is more than callous," she said quietly. "I do not think he has ever felt anything in his life. Even my aunt used to say of him that he had no vices, no virtues, no love in his nature and no hate. There are very few left of his race. In Burma or Siam they command higher wages than a European can ask. They say that if you wish for a perfectly run household you must seek for one of 'The Running Footmen.'"

Granet installed himself in the driving seat of his car. His finger lingered for a moment on the self-starter. She leaned towards him. For the first time he realized how suddenly and completely a woman's expression can change. The strained look was gone; her lips had grown softer; her eyes had lost their fear.

"I have said so little," she whispered. "I can say no more. But will you remember, please, that I am grateful? You are the first person who has ever done just what I asked out of simple kindness. I shall never forget, and I shall tell you now—ask no questions, please, but perhaps you will understand a little later—there is something about the place—somebody—some people who terrify me. There is something going on behind my back which I do not understand. With you near I shall have no more fear."

She stepped back and for once in his life Granet was entirely wordless. She waved her hand, he touched his hat and drove off. As he turned into the main road from the avenue he slackened speed and looked back over his shoulder. She was still standing where he had left her—a slim, motionless figure watching his retreating car.

"It seems to me," he muttered as his foot sought the accelerator once more, "that I'm probably doing a damned silly thing and that I'm certainly a damned silly fool to feel so glad about it!"

CHAPTER III

David Granet, for the second time that day, pushed open the swing door of the premises occupied by Spenser & Sykes and made his way to Mr. Woodley's desk. The manager looked up from his books, recognized his caller and rose to his feet.

"Good evening, Mr. Granet," he said. "I'm afraid that I sent you out to Grassleyes on a fool's errand."

"Not at all," Granet answered. "I like the place. I came in to tell you that I have taken a bungalow there."

Woodley stared at him over the counter.

"Didn't you hear—" he began.

"The sad news about Lady Grassleyes? Yes, I was there apparently a few minutes after it happened."

"She was alive when you got there? Did you have any conversation with her?"

"None at all. I was received by the quaintest-looking butler I ever saw and when we got into her room she was sitting at her desk in a perfectly natural attitude—but so far as I could see stone dead."

"God bless my soul!" the manager exclaimed, mopping his forehead. "You will excuse me, Mr. Granet. This is rather a blow. We have just heard the news, of course, but to think that you should have seen her! An important client of ours—Lady Grassleyes. A great shock for Mr. Spenser."

"There has been the usual fuss over there, of course," Granet confided, "but so far as the people themselves are concerned they seem to be taking it very quietly. I had to stay and be asked a few questions, naturally, but I was just on the point of leaving when a young lady, Lady Grassleyes' niece, stopped me. She was very upset indeed but she insisted upon showing me one of the bungalows. She assured me that they would go on with the place. The bungalow was just what I wanted, so I took it. I promised, as a matter of fact, to move in to-night."

Woodley gazed once more at his vis-à-vis incredulously.

"You are not serious, Mr. Granet!"

"Why not? If the rest of the household can take it calmly, what is it to do with me? I never heard of Lady Grassleyes before in my life. The fact that she seems to have died suddenly doesn't make the bungalow less attractive to me. I am going to move in there to-night as soon as I have had dinner and packed my things."

"Don't do it, Mr. Granet! I beg your pardon, but I wouldn't really if I were you."

"But why not?"

The door leading into the private offices behind the manager's reserved space was suddenly opened. A tall, good-looking man, florid and inclined towards *embonpoint*, made his appearance. Woodley, with a muttered word of apology, hurried towards him.

"Mr. Spenser," he said, "this is Mr. Granet. I sent him out to look at one of Lady Grassleyes' bungalows this afternoon."

"Poor dear lady," Mr. Spenser observed with a sympathetic note in his voice which was not altogether convincing. "He had to come back again, of course?"

"Not at all," the manager replied. "He has just come to tell me that he was shown into Lady Grassleyes' apartment, found her apparently dead in her chair and that afterwards the niece came just as he was leaving and took him to look at a bungalow and said they were going to carry on as usual. And he has taken it."

Mr. Spenser's expletive was both startled and forceful.

"He'll have to give it up. He must be told so at once."

"Perhaps you would like to speak to him yourself, sir. He seems the sort of person who knows his own mind."

Spenser walked to the counter, introduced himself and lifted the flap.

"Mr. Granet I understand your name is. Do you mind coming into my office for just a moment?"

Granet acquiesced, following the head of the firm into a luxuriously furnished room, the walls of which were covered with photographs of most of the desirable estates on the Riviera. He accepted the chair which Spenser offered him by the side of the desk.

"This is a most tragic story, Mr. Granet," Spenser began. "I have been away all day beyond Mentone visiting a property, and have only just heard about it. Do you mind telling me exactly what happened?"

"So far as I was concerned—nothing. I was taken by a queer Oriental butler with an absurd name to Lady Grassleyes' room. He announced me. I said how do you do. She didn't reply and when I looked at her I saw at once that there was something seriously wrong. I rang the bell. Back came the butler. He took one look at her and never hesitated. A queer little fellow—you have seen him, perhaps. He turned to me with his eyes blinking: 'Milady taken bad medicine,' he announced. 'Gone dead.' After that there was the usual sort of fuss. I had to stay and answer questions. I was just leaving when a young lady who said she was Lady Grassleyes' niece stopped me and insisted upon showing me the bungalow. She explained that the place would be kept on, that the letting of the bungalows was in her hands and, to cut a long story short, I took one of them called 'The Lamps of Fire,' paid a month in advance and came away having promised to move in to-night."

"To do what?"

"To move in to-night," Granet repeated coolly. "Now one comes to think of it it is rather a queer thing that the young lady was so insistent. She seemed frightened and nervous, of course, but the bungalows are some distance from the house and she must have people of her own there. Anyway, she made such a point of it that I consented."

The house-agent abandoned his position of nonchalant ease. He rose to his feet and with his hands behind his back walked the length of the spacious apartment and back again.

"Did the young lady give you any special reason why she wished you to move in so quickly?" he asked, pausing in front of Granet.

"Nothing definite. She did rather give me the impression that something had been going on in the Manoir which she had found disturbing and that she felt herself in a way in need of protection. I was inclined to think, at the time—I still think so really—that it was an outburst of nerves."

Spenser was tugging hard at his moustache. He, too, seemed to be struggling with a nervous attack of a sort.

"Didn't it seem queer to you, with all this trouble going on, that she should want to bring a stranger into it?" he demanded with a distinct note of truculence in his tone.

"It does now that I think it over," Granet admitted frankly. "It didn't seem so at the time."

Spenser resumed his seat at the table.

"If you'll allow me to give you a word of advice, Mr. Granet, I should suggest you break your promise to the young lady."

Granet looked at him steadily.

"I am not in the habit of breaking my word, Mr. Spenser," he said.

The house-agent seemed uneasy. His fingers were playing once more with his closely clipped moustache. It appeared to his companion, who was a keen observer of trifles, that he was finding it difficult to retain his composure.

"I should break it on this occasion," Spenser advised, "because it is such an utterly impossible thing to ask you to do. The place must be all upside down. A newcomer just arriving would create a most embarrassing situation."

"That's all very well," Granet pointed out, "but it's their look-out, not mine. I paid the girl a month's rent in advance and if she particularly wants me to do something a little unusual why shouldn't I?"

"You can't," the other insisted abruptly. "It is quite out of the question. It isn't even a certainty that the place will be kept on for a week. There's an offer pending which, in the present circumstances, will probably be accepted at once."

"Have you any authority for saying that?"

"None whatever. I perhaps should not have mentioned it. Still, you must agree with me that yours is an impossible proposition."

"The trouble is that I have given my word to be there sometime to-night," Granet pointed out, "and it is rather a peculiar prejudice of mine that when I have once given my word I keep it. I dare say I shall find the place in confusion, as you suggest. If so, and the young lady has changed her mind or is willing to excuse me, I shall come away."

A message was brought to Spenser on an oblong slip of paper. He glanced at it with a frown, rose to his feet and with a muttered word of apology to his visitor left the room. It was quite ten minutes before he returned.

"Very sorry to keep you, Mr. Granet," he explained, "but the fact of it is, this message is from Lady Grassleyes' local solicitors. They tell me that the police have been asking some ridiculous questions and there will probably have to be an inquest, which in this country is rather a serious thing."

"What have the doctors to say?"

"Well, it is through the local doctor that the trouble has arisen. He declares that there is not the slightest sign of any disease of any sort, that Lady Grassleyes' heart, for instance, is perfectly sound, and that he is not disposed to sign any sort of certificate."

Granet considered for a moment.

"There is no suggestion, I suppose, of anything in the shape of foul play?" he ventured.

Spenser leaned forward in his chair. He passed his hand through his already untidy hair.

"If the doctors cannot find a weak spot or any trace of disease in the body of an elderly woman who has never been known to have an illness in her life—why, one might suspect anything."

"Poison or a deed of violence," Granet pointed out, "would just as necessarily leave a trace as disease."

"We are getting out of our depth," the other declared with an irritable gesture. "These matters are for the specialists, whether they be doctors or police. If I have my way I shall close the estate and the bungalows pending further investigation. I do not understand," he added, glaring across at Granet, "any one wishing to take up residence there in the present circumstances."

"Neither do I altogether understand," Granet rejoined coolly, "what business it is of the house-agent to interfere with his client's actions to such an extent."

Spenser rose to his feet.

"I shall communicate my views, at any rate, to Miss Grassleyes. In view of your attitude, Mr. Granet, however," he continued, drawing a card from his waistcoat pocket and scrutinizing it thoughtfully, "I shall feel it my duty to make the most careful enquiries into your references."

"Well?"

"They seem to be all right but in my opinion they need verifying."

"Why not verify them?" Granet suggested. "There's a *Who's Who* behind you on the shelf. Mind if I smoke a cigarette?"

Spenser took no notice. Granet calmly produced his case, drew out a cigarette and lit it. He continued to smoke whilst his companion turned over the pages of the bulky *Who's Who*. He closed the volume at last. There was a very different note in his voice when he spoke, but he was a tenacious man and he held to his last shred of argument.

"How do I know that you are the person described here?"

Granet looked out into the street and pointed through the window.

"Why not try the British Consul? Take you a matter of a few minutes and save you from making a fool of yourself."

"What—Colonel Dryden?"

"Certainly. The office may be closed now but you can get him at his private house—the 'Villa Colombe,' I think it is."

Spenser played his last card.

"If you are a friend of the British Consul, why did you not say so when you gave a reference?"

Granet rose to his feet. His manner was still superficially amiable but he had the air of one who has had enough of the conversation.

"That is my business, not yours, sir," he said calmly. "I wish you good evening."

He turned towards the door. Spenser leaned forward in his place, the palms of his hands stretched out upon the table, his mouth open for speech. He was apparently dumbfounded, for he said nothing. He watched the door open and close but it was not until he was perfectly certain that his visitor had no intention of returning that he staggered rather than rose to his feet, snatched down his grey Homburg hat from the peg in the small ante-room and made his way into the street by the back entrance.

CHAPTER IV

David Granet, who had no superstitions and who would have laughed at the mere idea of having been at any time afflicted by nerves, was nevertheless conscious of a queer disturbance in his mind as, having rounded the last curve of the hilly approach to the domain later on that evening, he entered the gate and drove slowly along the main avenue to the Manoir. He decided, however, at the last moment to proceed direct to his bungalow and turning down between the two white stones which marked the way he drove along the newly made road to where the dim outline of "The Lamps of Fire" presented itself. The door of the garage had been left open and he drove straight in. He had no sooner turned off his engine and stepped out of the car than he was aware of a queer, shrill voice behind him. A miniature duplicate of Pooralli was advancing through the dim light. He seemed to be the image of the other, except for his smaller stomach and thin frame.

"I am Postralli," he announced gravely. "The brother of Pooralli who you saw this afternoon. I come to tell you that the door of your bungalow is open. I give you the key and carry your things inside."

"That is very thoughtful of some one," Granet said, after a moment's amazed contemplation of the youth. "Perhaps you can help me with these cases."

"It is the young mistress who sent me," Postralli explained. "She told me expect you to-night. I can carry cases by myself. I am small but I am strong. Gentleman can go inside. I will bring all that is in car."

Granet took his suit case, a proceeding which was viewed with disapproval by his new attendant, entered the bungalow and looked about him. The lounge into which he stepped seemed very empty and silent but it was a different place when he had touched the electric switch and the light had flooded the room. He saw then that there were flowers in many vases, the furniture had been rearranged and portières were carefully drawn over the three doors. He made his way into the bedroom, from which came the strong odour of pine and lavender, and looked with satisfaction at the silk coverlet on the bed and the softly shaded reading lamp. He had scarcely succeeded in his task of unlocking his case and throwing out some pyjamas before he heard Postralli's footsteps in the lounge. He returned there to find his case of whisky, a crate of Perrier Water, two tins of biscuits and some other oddments already placed upon the hearthrug.

"Gentleman like whisky in sideboard," Postralli decided. "Only six bottles. Not worth opening cellar. Good cellar other side of kitchen. Master would like bottle whisky opened?"

Granet threw himself into an easy chair with a smile.

"Get along with it, young fellow," he enjoined. "Make me comfortable."

"All gentlemen are comfortable here," Postralli declared gravely. "Gentleman sit still and watch. I show him."

In five minutes there was an opened bottle of whisky on the table, a glass by its side, a bottle of Perrier on a tray and oblong pieces of ice fresh from the refrigerator in a small dish. There were also a box of matches and an ash tray. The remainder of the whisky was neatly arranged in the sideboard. There were packets of tea, coffee, sugar and a bottle of milk upon another and smaller table. Postralli was busy with a duster wiping some china from the sideboard.

"Gentleman could have tea or coffee from the house, or he can make himself here or I make."

"How is your mistress?" Granet asked.

"Very sad," the youth replied. "Aunt went dead very suddenly. Very sad indeed. Plenty policemen and doctors about place all evening. Two policemen up at house now."

He stood up and surveyed the result of his labours. Finally he disappeared, carrying off the empty boxes and the brown paper. He came back with a broom, swept up a few pieces of packing from the otherwise spotless carpet and nodded approval.

"More things to-morrow?"

"Yes, there will be a few things to-morrow," Granet assented.

"You telephone to house and ask and I come and help. Master got servant?"

"Not yet."

"I do everything until servant comes," Postralli promised cheerfully. "I have pass-key all doors," he added proudly. "I come in master's room, take his shoes and clean them early in morning."

"Don't you do anything of the sort, young fellow," Granet replied. "I shall bolt my door. You can come down at eight o'clock, if you like."

"I make the tea at eight o'clock for master. I clean the shoes and I take the glass if he has had drink."

"How many bungalows do you look after?"

"Only this one. The rest of the bungalows each have servant. My brother, he butler in house."

"Where did you learn to speak English?"

The boy waved his hand vaguely. It was almost as though he were acquainted with some place which he believed nobody else could see.

"Home," he confided, "and on ship and here. Very easy."

"And where is home?"

He shook his head.

"You not understand. Fine country but no money."

"Well be off with you now, then," Granet enjoined. "Come and look after my tea in the morning."

He drew a coin from his pocket. Postralli shook his head once more.

"Not now, please, gentleman," he begged. "My brother very greedy man. When I go in he ask me what you give. I tell him. He take it away. Gentleman give it me some other time. Good night, gentleman."

The boy took his leave, closing the door gently behind him. Granet looked out of the window. Postralli had no sooner stepped on to the little paved way outside than he had commenced that queer, slouching run. He seemed to make no effort, but in a few moments he was out of sight. Granet laughed quietly to himself as he filled his pipe and mixed himself a drink. He pulled his chair up to the low window and looked out across the rock-strewn space of open country to where, some distance beyond the Manoir, the pine-woods opened up again towards the mountains. He turned to the right and caught the gleam of the stream between the gently fluttering leaves of the olive and acacia trees.

"Queer place," he muttered to himself. "Queer people. Don't know what I am doing here anyway."

He smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two, then he dragged his chair outside and sat in the balmy stillness, breathing in that wonderful air which seemed fragrant with the scent of honey-suckle and wild roses, clusters of which were climbing up the pillars and over the front of the bungalow. Granet was not given to self-analysis, yet in those moments he was conscious of a curious conflict of emotions. He was content—drowsy, almost, with content. At the same time he was expectant. The domain which had become his home, so peaceful and in a way so beautiful, seemed to lie dreaming in an almost ghostly tranquillity. Something, he felt, must happen soon. He scarcely knew what it might be but something must happen. The stillness was like the unnatural quiet before a storm ...

The end of the almost drugged silence brought with it a queer note of unreality. From the darkest corner of the strip of pine-wood in front of him he heard the crackling of dry twigs, saw the long branches of the trees being drawn slowly back. Through the little space something moved—a human being—some one who, save for the face, an oval of white, seemed as black as the trees themselves. He leaned forward curiously. There was nothing much to be startled at, after all—a girl in dead-black clothes standing there with the branches still in her hands looking across at him from some fifty feet away. But from the first he realized the momentary unearthliness of her. She glided rather than moved up to the green border of turf which separated them. When he spoke his words sounded to him, in that tense moment, the most banal he had ever heard.

"Hello! What do you want?"

She came towards him. He scarcely knew whether the strangeness of her was a relief or otherwise. It was some one, most certainly, whom he had never before seen in his life—a girl who might have been beautiful save that some emotion seemed to have drawn all expression from her pallid face. Only in her eyes lay the light of distress. Then she spoke, and all those first unearthly impressions of her passed away. Granet felt as though the land of dreams had vanished. He was back again, spending his first evening in a bungalow belonging to the Grassleyes Manoir, and this was apparently a neighbour in distress.

"Who are you?" she asked.

He rose to his feet and approached the little paling. She was standing now with white ringless hands resting upon the top of it. Every moment seemed to reveal her as being some one more definitely human.

"I thought that this place was empty," she continued. "It startled me to see you here. Please tell me who you are."

"A very insignificant person," he replied. "My name is David Granet. I am an Englishman. I have just taken this bungalow. Do you, too, live in this strange encirclement of lunatics?"

They were side by side now and they were near enough to one another for him to mark the rapid rise and fall of her breasts under the black taffeta of her dress; near enough to perceive the slimness of her body, notwithstanding the faintly voluptuous curve of the hips; near enough to discover that everything about her was not entirely black and white, for her eyes were grey-blue and her lips were red.

"I am Carlotta di Mendoza. You have heard of me—no? My sister is a singer."

He hesitated.

"I am not sure," he admitted truthfully.

"Ah, well, it is not I who am famous. Perhaps I never shall be. When I listen to the nightingales in this wood I am sure I shall not, because human beings were not made to sing."

"Will you come in?" he invited. "Are you looking for anybody? Are you in any sort of distress?"

"I am frightened," she told him, and with the re-establishment of her composure her delicately pencilled eyebrows were lifted in an almost humorous fashion. "I cannot tell you exactly why, but I am frightened. I came here to share a bungalow with my sister who is singing at the Méditerranée. I did not know how strange her habits had become. She is in bed all day. She leaves here at seven in the evening and returns at four in the morning—sometimes later. I heard her come home to-day. Some one brought her in a car and drove away. I have tried her door three times. She is locked inside. She has not appeared. The little man who runs has been down to bring me the news. He tells me that something terrible has happened at the Manoir."

"Come and sit down for a moment," Granet suggested. "I will tell you all about it."

"You are alone?"

"Absolutely. Take my chair and I will fetch another."

He opened the small gate and the girl passed through after a moment's hesitation. She sank willingly into his chair. He fetched out another and also a box of cigarettes. She pounced gratefully upon the latter but he noticed when he held out the match towards her that the cigarette was shaking between her lips.

"Thank you," she said. "To smoke would be good for me. You have just come here?"

"An hour ago," he replied.

"I love quiet," she confessed. "I came for quiet. But the deathly stillness of this place frightens me."

Granet looked at her curiously. He was rather a good judge of his fellow human beings. He had once, indeed, written a book about them. But this girl puzzled him.

"You are not English?"

"No. I hope some day to sing in English, in German and in French, but my mother was an Italian and my father a Spaniard."

"You have been there—in Spain?"

"Not since I was a child. You are trying to account for the fact that I am frightened. You need not, Mr.—what did you say—Granet. I will tell you presently why I am frightened. It is something that has happened this very day. It is because of the woman who lies up at the Manoir. She looked so strong and well. It frightens me when people like that die."

He leaned towards her. She felt her wrists suddenly gripped in his light but firm fingers. There was a warning flash in his grey eyes. She opened her lips to speak and closed them again. She glanced instead over her shoulder. Only a few yards away from them a man was leaning over the paling, a man with a squat, ungainly figure and creased tweed clothes, a Homburg hat slightly on the back of his head, and—although he had arrived in silence and done nothing to break it—a man of menacing appearance. Granet rose slowly to his feet. The girl clung to his arm.

CHAPTER V

"Not disturbing you, I hope?" the newcomer asked in a surly tone as he pushed open the wooden gate.

Granet made no reply. He had drawn himself up. There was a frown upon his face and his eyes were fixed steadfastly upon the head-gear of the man who was lounging towards them. The latter paused a few paces away. Granet's eyes remained fixed on his hat. With an awkward little laugh the man dragged it from his head.

"No harm in coming to call upon a neighbour is there?" he asked.

"It depends upon the manner of arrival," was the dry comment. "I do not as yet know that you are a neighbour. And, to let you in to one of my idiosyncrasies, I am never favourably disposed towards a stranger who seems lacking in manners."

"High and mighty, aren't you," the other sneered. "I live in the next bungalow but one on this estate. There are queer things going on up at the Manoir. I thought it was time we tenants got together and discussed it."

"Thank you," Granet said. "I have only just arrived myself, I have not had time to get used to the place and I have nothing to discuss with anybody."

"My name," the intruder confided, "is Herbert Johnson. Good old British name, that. I have been here a month and I was just settling down nicely. Now I am told we may have to turn out at any moment because the old lady has popped off. What might your name be, sir?"

"My name is Granet," was the calm reply, "but I really don't see that it is any business of yours. I came here for quiet because I understood that I had no near neighbours. Might I suggest that you close the gate as you go out?"

The man stood motionless for some moments. He was looking at Granet curiously and without any sign of anger or annoyance.

"So you are one of that sort, are you?" he remarked. "Well, perhaps the lady is a little more amiable. I called to propose, madam," he went on, turning to the girl, "that we go up to the Manoir and ask if the agent is there. I should like a little information as to what is happening to the tenants. Are we supposed to leave at once, for instance?"

She laid her hand upon Granet's arm.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "one ought to do that. What do you think, Mr. Granet? To me it seems rather soon to go and trouble Miss Grassleyes with questions about ourselves, though."

"Well, for my part," Granet decided, "I shall wait until things have quietened down a little. The doctors have had their turn. One understands that the police are there now."

"The police?" Mr. Johnson exclaimed. "What the hell business is it of theirs?"

"Well, sir," Granet confided, "even if you are a neighbour I do not like you. I do not like the way you kept your hat on in a lady's presence. Nor do I like your language. Might I suggest that you go on to the Manoir and ask what questions you like and leave us alone?"

"Oh, shut up!" Mr. Johnson protested, producing a large handkerchief and dabbing his forehead. "I'll go up there fast enough and I'm not asking for your company. What about the police, though? What have they got to do with it? Nothing wrong with the place, is there?"

"Go away and find out!"

"Look here—"

"On second thoughts," Granet interrupted, "that might be an unkind suggestion. Perhaps you are the man for whom they are searching."

Johnson resumed his head-gear. Curiously enough, in a matter of a few seconds it had slipped back to its original, somewhat unbecoming angle.

"If there's any search for me," he declared belligerently, "any search for Herbert Johnson, I'm here. They can ask me any questions they want to. I never saw the woman but three times in my life. She sent that fat-bellied man down with the key to show me the bungalow, and I took it. The next time was a few days afterwards when I called upon her and made a perfectly sound business proposition. She laughed me out of the place. She was pretty well as rude to me as you have been, and that's saying something. The third time was when she drove round in her tumbled-down carriage to collect the rent. So now what?"

Granet waved his hand towards the house.

"That," he said slowly. "Go away. We are tired of you. Go and find out everything you want to know for yourself."

"Well, all I can say," Johnson remarked in the nature of a concluding speech, "is that if they make a success of this bungalow idea it won't be because of the sociability of the occupants. You get me, Mr. Granet?"

Complete silence. Granet had drawn his chair a little back and was once more seated by the girl's side. They were at that particular moment absorbed in the contemplation of the fire-flies....

Johnson, on his way to the gate, turned round once more. He jerked his head towards the Manoir.

"Do you know whose car that is?" he asked, pointing to a car with exceedingly powerful head-lights which was standing in the drive.

Granet leaned forward and shook his head.

"Considering I only arrived this evening," he said, "I am not likely to recognize it. Perhaps it belongs to the doctor."

"It has nothing to do with the doctor. That is Spenser's Lancia."

"Spenser, the house-agent?"

"That's the chap."

Carlotta leaned over and touched Granet's arm.

"The rude man is quite right," she said. "Mr. Spenser drove my sister down to the opera one night and I am sure that is his car."

"There ain't no doubt about that," Mr. Johnson declared. "They have been trying to get hold of him all day to tell him about the old lady. Mr. Granet—why don't you come off your high horse and stroll up with me? We will get to know how the land lies, anyhow. Spenser's a pal of mine and he will tackle the young woman if necessary."

"You are more interested than I am," Granet said curtly. "You had better hurry up and catch him before he leaves."

Johnson relieved his feelings with a grunt of disgust, slammed the little gate behind him and made his way up towards the Manoir.

CHAPTER VI

Very reluctantly Jane Grassleyes obeyed Pooralli's eager request and followed him into the reception room. Spenser was standing alone amongst the shadows at the far end of the apartment. He was contemplating with an air of intense absorption the safe which was let into the wall exactly opposite to him. He neither heard Pooralli's entrance nor Jane's footsteps nor her cold greeting.

"Mr. Spenser," she said, addressing him for the second time.

He started and swung round towards her.

"Isn't this rather a late visit?" she asked. "Pooralli said you wished to see me particularly. Surely tomorrow would have done."

He laughed uneasily.

"Perhaps it would," he admitted. "I thought you might feel pretty lonely up here by yourself. Glorious night for a ride, too, if you cared to get away for an hour. What about a run down to Nice? I'll bring you back again."

"It is very kind of you," Jane replied. "I am feeling sad, of course, but I am certainly not lonely, and I should not think of a joy ride to Nice or anywhere else."

"You must miss the poor old lady, though."

"I have scarcely had time to miss her yet," was the icy rejoinder, "and to tell you the truth, Mr. Spenser, I don't feel in the least like conversation. What is this urgent matter?"

"Well, it is business connected with the estate. Can't you sit down and talk for a few minutes, please?"

"Certainly not."

"Ten minutes only," he begged. "And do you mind if I ring for a whisky-and-soda? This has been rather a trying day, you know."

"I am afraid," she told him, "that the servants are all in bed."

"Pooralli never sleeps."

Pooralli was already there. Spenser looked at him in surprise.

"Jove, that was quick work! I never heard you open the door."

"Handle noiseless—Pooralli's footsteps noiseless," the man explained. "Gentleman want drink?"

"A whisky-and-soda as quickly as possible," Spenser ordered.

Pooralli took his leave. Jane, with a sigh of resignation, seated herself in a high-backed chair.

"Tell me at once, please, Mr. Spenser, what it is you wish?" she begged.

"Dash it all, Miss Grassleyes," he protested, "there's not any need, is there, to be so grim with me? You and I ought to be great friends."

"I don't see why."

"You must know," he continued, drawing a chair close to where she was seated, "that I have a great admiration for you."

"I would rather not know it, especially at this particular moment," she answered indignantly. "My aunt thought that you were a very clever business man and perhaps she was right. Beyond that I certainly have no interest in you or your doings."

He looked at her keenly. He was not a bad-looking man, even at the end of a trying day during which he had made no change in his toilet. As though conscious of her disparaging glance, he straightened his tie and studied his hands. Jane rose to her feet.

"As soon as you have finished your whisky-and-soda I should be glad if you would leave."

Spenser's expression hardened almost into a scowl. The sound of the fizzing sodawater, however, restored his complacency. He accepted the glass from Pooralli.

"Leave the whisky and the sodawater," he ordered. "Don't come back until I ring."

"If you will excuse my saying so," Jane told him severely, "I strongly object to your giving orders to my aunt's servants in that fashion. You are her man of business, it is true, but that does not entitle you to behave as though you lived on the premises, does it?"

"So it's like that, is it?" he said quietly.

"That is just how I feel about your presence here, Mr. Spenser."

"Perhaps, if you should find that you and I are co-executors in the handling of this property," he remarked, "you might change your mind a little."

"I hope that we are not," she declared fervently.

"Want it all for yourself, eh?"

"Not at all. I shall welcome help but I hope it will be from Mr. Clunderson."

He took a long drink and set down his glass.

"What, that dry-as-dust old lawyer?"

Jane made no comment but glanced patiently at the clock.

"Dash it all!" Spenser exclaimed. "You make it very difficult. I came all the way out here to-night first because I was wondering about you, second because a very important matter of business has turned up in connection with the property—business which requires immediate attention."

"Really? You can set your mind quite at ease about me. I do not ask for your interest and I do not require it. Furthermore, there could be no question of business that we could discuss at this hour of the night."

"That shows that you know nothing whatever about it," he snapped. "If we were on the terms I should like to be, Miss Jane, I would talk to you differently. Perhaps what has happened to your aunt has disturbed you to-night, but you will have to pull yourself together to-morrow. You may wake up to find yourself a rich woman."

"I am not in the least interested," she said. "I do not wish you to call me Miss Jane or anything but Miss Grassleyes, either. And please leave my hand alone," she added, snatching it away from his tentative grasp.

Once more his face hardened and such good looks as he possessed became negligible.

"Well, I suppose I must approach this subject differently," he decided. "Do you see that safe, Miss Grassleyes?"

"I do," she answered. "I noticed that you were looking at it very fixedly when I came in."

"Have you the key to it?"

"Whether I have or not makes little difference," she replied. "I would not give it to you."

"Why not?"

"You have no established position in any of my aunt's affairs except the letting of the bungalows."

"That shows how ignorant you are," he scoffed. "It is I who am responsible for this wonderful offer."

"From whom?"

"From a syndicate. A very important syndicate of French and English business men."

"An offer to purchase the Manoir?"

"Yes."

"I am not interested," she assured him. "If I have any voice in the future disposition of the property in any way I shall be dead against selling it."

"You have not heard the offer or what it is for," he reminded her.

"I am not interested. I am going to ring for Pooralli to show you out."

"I am not ready to leave yet. Wait," he added, holding out his hand as she turned towards the door. "I will show you how much your aunt trusted me. I will show you the sort of position I am likely to hold in this household."

He rose to his feet and swaggered over towards the safe. From his pocket he drew out a long, slim key. He played for a little time with the combination, then swung the heavy door open.

"Perhaps that will help you to realize that I am something more than your aunt's estate agent," he said scornfully.

Jane crossed the room swiftly.

"Where did you get that key from?" she demanded.

"Never mind. I just wanted to show you that I am not dependent upon your help."

"I insist upon your telling me how that key came into your possession."

"Simplest way possible," he said. "Your aunt gave it to me."

"I am perfectly certain that that is a falsehood, but since you have it why not see what you can find?" she suggested. "Go on, I am not interfering with you."

He thrust his arm into the hollow space and brought out a pile of engrossed documents.

"Leases of the bungalows," he announced.

"Mind you put them back neatly when you have done with them."

Spenser scowled at her for a moment, thrust his arm in again and brought out a pile of miscellaneous papers—fire-insurance policies and correspondence of various sorts. Jane watched him equably.

"Am I right," she asked, "or were you not searching for something else? Just what is it that you are looking for, Mr. Spenser?"

"It would save the estate a tremendous lot of money if I could find Lady Grassleyes' will," he confided.

"Why don't you find it, then?" she asked, with an irony in her tone which was entirely lost upon him.

He turned back to the safe, searched again, stood away from it and tried the handle of the corresponding section.

"Have you the combination for this side?" he enquired.

"There is none. It is a very clever safe but that is a dummy handle. The whole of the thing is supposed to be a dummy except the portion you have opened. I think, Mr. Spenser," she concluded, "that if my aunt had really meant you to be one of her executors she would have told you all about her bogus safe and where to find her will."

"Do you know where to find it?" he asked bluntly.

"The will is not your business or mine."

"Whose is it, then?"

"Mr. Clunderson's."

"Clunderson again!" he muttered. "It will take us months to get a move on if your aunt has been stupid enough to leave him in authority."

"I do not agree with you, Mr. Spenser," she said. "I should be very pleased indeed to hear that Mr. Clunderson was one of the executors."

"That is because you don't understand," he explained impatiently.

"Was my aunt a very rich woman that you are making such a fuss about her will?"

"She owned very valuable properties."

"Well, it is not our business yet," she said calmly, "and it is scarcely decent of you to come here worrying about such matters before my aunt is even buried. Don't you think you had better put back those leases?"

He flung them into the safe, closed the door and turned towards her.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I want your aunt's will! I know your name is mentioned in it. I know mine is. I want to read it. It's important."

"You will read it when it is common property and not before," she answered.

"You know very well that there is more in the safe than these few rubbishy leases and other oddments," he declared fiercely. "Look at the size of it! How do we get at the other part?"

He moved a little nearer to her. It seemed incredible but for a moment Jane thought he was really about to seize her by the throat.

"I have had more than enough of you for to-night, Mr. Spenser," she told him. "I refuse to answer any more questions. I am going to my room and please do not disturb me again."

"You are going to stay here with me," he insisted. "Blast that fellow!"

Pooralli was standing just across the threshold. He bowed to Jane.

"A gentleman," he announced. "He saw the lights of Mr. Spenser's car and if he is not disturbing you he would like to speak to Mr. Spenser."

Jane took the opportunity of slipping quietly away. With her fingers upon the handle of the door she looked back.

"I think you are going to have quite a busy night, Mr. Spenser," she said. "All the same, I do not think you will find that will."

* * * * *

Johnson came lumbering into the room and threw himself into an easy chair. He was a fleshy man, he had walked quickly and he was out of breath.

"What the mischief do you want?" Spenser demanded.

"I want to know why you didn't come down to my bungalow," Johnson replied. "You know which it is; you knew that I should be anxious. Out with it! What's going to happen now?"

"How the devil should I know?" Spenser protested. "They have moved the old lady. One of the doctors refused to give a certificate and the body is down in a Nice hospital. I called there on my way up and talked to the matron, who is an old friend of mine. They had no report to make. I telephoned the doctor—I know him quite well—but he had very little to say. He simply declared that life seemed to him to be extinct but on the other hand there was no certain proof of death. So there we are."

"She's out of the place, anyway," Johnson pointed out. "There's no one here to stop you going on with this job. If the truth gets about we shall have a crowd here."

"I can't do a damn' thing till I get hold of the will," Spenser replied fiercely.

"Why not? You told me that you and that slip of a girl were the two executors. Why can't you get her to sign a sanction for us to get on with the proceedings and let me get back to Marseille?"

"She's as pigheaded as she can be," Spenser confided. "I am certain she and I are the two executors but she won't take anything for granted, won't give me the slightest clue as to where the will is, won't even discuss a sale. She was here a few minutes ago and if you had not come in—well, I'm not sure that I shouldn't have shaken the life out of her. Just a schoolgirl hussy a bit above herself—that's what she is."

Johnson poured himself out some whisky and added a splash of sodawater with a grunt.

"You are a clumsy fellow, Fred," he said. "You are always bragging of what you can do with the girls but when the time comes you are nothing but a nitwit."

"Try her yourself, then," the other sneered. "I don't fancy you'll get very far."

"It isn't my line of business," Johnson declared. "I could do the rough stuff all right but this isn't the place for that. What about the safe?"

"Go and look at it, if you want to," Spenser suggested. "Seems to me it must be one of those double ones. The right-hand side opens with an ordinary key and a combination. The left-hand side—well, that's where all the things must be that we want to get at, and the Lord only knows how it opens. The girl tried to make me believe it was a dummy."

Johnson dragged out a case and with some difficulty lit a most unpleasant-looking cigar. His companion waved the smoke away in disgust.

"I wish you would throw that beastly thing out of the window," he said pettishly. "There are heaps of cigarettes on the table there."

"No use to me," was the sullen reply. "Look here, Fred, what are you going to do? We're onto a big thing and it's no good sitting here and letting it slip out of our hands. There's the safe. That would tell us a good deal of what we want to know. And there's the girl in this very house who could also tell us a good deal. It's not in my line of country but if you can't make her talk I shall have to try."

"You're talking now like a damn' fool," Spenser said. "If you try any rough stuff you will find those little foreigners will cut your throat for two pins. Besides, you wouldn't get any forrader. As soon as the formal certificate of death has been signed the lawyer will be here and the will will be read. It's damned annoying to have to wait but it's better than qualifying for the criminal pen."

Johnson smoked stolidly for a moment or two. He looked with gloom at his companion.

"When I think of all the women you have done just as you liked with, you lousy Lothario," he scoffed, "it makes me want to get up and knock your head off to think you can't have your way with a chit of a girl like this. She can't be more than twenty-five."

"It's not a matter of age," Spenser protested irritably. "The girl's got ideas of her own. Of course, if I had known she was going to turn out like this I would have started making the running long ago. I'll tell you a chap I don't like, Johnson—he's a professor, too, just home from India, and he might be a pretty dangerous chap here—Granet. I tried to stop him coming but he wouldn't listen."

"I don't like him myself," Johnson agreed. "He's sitting in front of his bungalow at the present moment talking pretty with little Carlotta di Mendoza."

Spenser frowned angrily.

"Butting in with her, too, is he? Curse the fellow!"

"Look here," Johnson said. "It doesn't matter how many kids he plays with so long as he doesn't get in our way. Do you believe that this girl, Jane Grassleyes, has the key to the other side of the safe?"

"I don't even know that there is a key," Spenser replied. "If there is she's got it. She has plenty of brains and the first thing she would go for would be the old lady's keys. The one that opens the harmless part of the affair came off a little bunch of her own. I noticed that when she opened it—borrowed it more than a month ago and had another made. The other side of the safe has me beaten but there must be an entrance to it somewhere."

"Why don't we go after the girl, then?" Johnson suggested. "You know which her bedroom is. You seem to have had hard words with her this evening. Why not try the sentimentalist? She can't keep it up for ever, you know. She must be kind of broken down after a day like she's had."

"I'll think it over," Spenser promised.

"Supposing," Johnson speculated, "the old lady gets over it?"

"That's just why I don't want you to try any of these games," Spenser pointed out. "The trouble of it is the girl and I never hit it off. I used to make fun of the old lady sometimes, thinking it would amuse her, but she never liked it. I tried a bit of the usual stuff on her the only night I ever took her out to dinner and it didn't go. I can tell you that, Johnson. She wouldn't have come out at all if her aunt hadn't insisted. Lady Grassleyes looked pretty queer at me the next morning and she never suggested my taking her out again."

"Do you think she knows anything?"

"I'm not at all sure. I'm not even sure that the old lady knew as much as she ought to have known. If she did she was one of the best bluffers I've ever come across."

Johnson threw away his cigar.

"To-morrow," he said, "I'll draw up a little plan of action. You're sure there's no one else on the lay, Fred?"

"Certain!"

"We'd best let it run, then," Johnson declared as he made his way across the room.

Spenser waited until he heard the front door close, then he went back to the safe, unlocked it once more and commenced a more comprehensive search of the loose papers underneath the leases.

* * * * *

He had almost completed his search when he stopped short, gave a little exclamation, lifted up a pile of heavily mounted photographs and drew from underneath a calf-bound volume. He stared at it joyfully. Embossed upon it in gilt letters he read: Private Ledger, Grassleyes Estate.

"God Almighty!" he muttered. "That's a lucky find!"

He listened for a moment, looking over his shoulder. There was no one about. He moved quickly to the desk, carrying the ledger with him, unlocked it with a key which was attached to a ring in its back by a fine steel chain and turned to the index.

"Spenser & Sykes," he murmured in the same hoarse undertone. "Folio ninety-two. Here we are. Oh, my God! She hasn't half stuck me for it!"

He doubled the ledger back, listened again, then walked with swift footsteps to the door and quietly locked it. For a heavy man he had suddenly become very light on his feet. He dragged out the photographs from the safe, took the thickest of all of them and slipped it underneath page ninety-two. Then he drew out a penknife from his pocket.

"Here goes and chance it! One—two—three—four—five—six—seven."

He counted the pages. They were all there. There were some figures in coloured crayon on the next page but nothing else, no other record of that ghastly total. He trimmed the cut edges a little, closed the ledger, doubled up the sheets and stuffed them into his trousers' pocket. Then he returned to the safe, thrust back the ledger as near as possible in the place where he had found it, stuffed in the photographs, closed and locked the door of the safe, reset the combination, regained his seat and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"My God, if I can only get away with this!" he groaned.

He bit his nails for a moment or two, thought heavily—thought till his face seemed to get smaller—poured out some whisky, forgot the sodawater and drank.

"It's all right," he told himself. "I'm in luck."

He listened intently and went on.

"The whole place is as silent as a mausoleum. There's not a soul about. I'll have one go for the will."

He pulled out the middle drawer of the desk and commenced his search. He was a curious man by disposition and there were many things that interested him in the papers he found. Some he put on one side to examine more thoroughly.

"The will," he kept reminding himself, "the will."

CHAPTER VII

Carlotta waited until it was quite obvious that Johnson was on his way up to the Manoir and well out of hearing before she laid her hand once more on her companion's arm.

"Mr. Granet," she confided, "I was frightened before I came. I am more frightened than ever now. What is the mystery up at the Manoir? What are the police doing there and why did the doctor refuse to sign the certificate?"

"My dear young lady," Granet assured her, "I cannot tell you. It really isn't any business of ours, is it?"

"I think that it is our business," Carlotta persisted. "You are such a clever man! You could find out, if you wished. She was such a dear old lady and there is something so mysterious about it all."

"You flatter me," he smiled. "I think that the doctor who refused to sign the certificate was a little meticulous. His refusal was probably because he could not nominate the actual cause of death. I suppose I was one of the first to see her afterwards. To me she seemed quite peaceful and as though she had passed away without any struggle at all. There was probably some cardiac trouble that no one, not even herself, knew of."

Carlotta sighed, and her large, appealing eyes sought for his sympathy. Granet, however, was not a man with an overwhelming amount of that quality.

"Look here," he proposed. "I personally don't see what we can do to-night or what any one can do to us, but if you like I will ring up the Manoir and see if the agent is really there. If he is not, then I think the best thing you can do is to go to bed and forget this affair until to-morrow."

"But I cannot sleep," the girl protested, clasping her fingers together. "I am sure you would find Mr. Spenser at the Manoir. That is his car over there."

"I have an idea," Granet said, "that Mr. Spenser would like to get rid of us all for some reason or other. Are you willing to go if they want us to?"

"I am not sure," was the aimless reply. "I do not think so."

"Will your sister want to go?"

"I am sure that she will not. She had a peculiar sort of affection for Lady Grassleyes and she will be terribly upset."

"Do you mean she has not heard yet?"

Carlotta shook her head.

"She knows nothing of what has happened here. I dare not wake her. She has been in her room all day and although I have knocked on her door I knew it was useless. She has taken a strong sleeping draught."

"Well, that fellow Johnson is not likely to come back here again so would you like me to go up to the Manoir and find out if there is any news?" he proposed.

Her beseeching look brought a smile to his lips. She clutched at his hand and gripped it tightly.

"Please do not send me away."

"You can stay here, if you like, until I come back."

"I should like to do that," she assented. "But do not be very long."

He rose to his feet.

"If you will excuse me, then. Sorry I have nothing suitable to offer you in the way of refreshment. I only moved in this evening, you know, and I have nothing but whisky."

"I should like some whisky."

He fetched a glass, the bottle of whisky and some Perrier. She watched him pour out a small quantity of the former into the tumbler, for which she held out her hand.

"But you must not drink it neat!" he warned her.

"How does one drink it, then?"

"Why, with sodawater or this Perrier."

"Then give me some of the Perrier, please. This is the first time I have ever tasted whisky. I hope that it will warm me."

"If you had drunk it as it was," he told her, "it would have warmed you all right."

He filled the tumbler with Perrier Water and placed it in her hand. She looked at it doubtfully.

"You can go now," she said. "Hurry back."

Granet made his way through the gate and began his short walk across the park to the Manoir. He glanced back once. Carlotta was still sitting there motionless. She was holding the tumbler awkwardly in her hand as though she scarcely knew what to do with it. He turned away impatiently.

"The girl is like the rest of them—crazy," he muttered. "I wish I'd never seen the damned place!"

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There was nothing inhospitable about the appearance of the Manoir although it was now getting late. One side of the very attractive front door was open, giving a little vista of the cool stone hall. Granet entered and looked round him. There were several heavily shaded lights but no visible person, no sound about the place. He hesitated for some time, then he made his way down the corridor towards the room where Lady Grassleyes had been seated on the occasion of his first visit. He tried the handle of the door and found, not altogether to his surprise, that it was locked. He stooped down to peer through the large keyhole but saw nothing. The key was in the other side. The door had obviously been locked by some one now in the room. Granet stood upright again. Well under control though his nerves were, he almost shouted out, for without the slightest warning a voice whispered literally in his ear. He swung round. Pooralli was standing there, pasty-faced, black-eyed, self-contained. He held up his finger and beckoned. Granet advanced a few yards towards him.

"Where the devil did you come from?" he demanded.

"The passage," was the quietly spoken answer, accompanied with a little wave of the hand. "I hear well. I heard that there was some one in the hall and my feet are quiet feet. What does the gentleman need?"

"First of all," Granet said, unconsciously dropping his voice to attune with the man's stealthy tone, "I was wondering who was in that room with the door locked."

"A gentleman from Nice," Pooralli whispered.

"Why is he locked in?"

Pooralli raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

"He told nothing. He has been here for more than an hour. He has talked with the doctor; he has talked with Mr. Reynard, the local lawyer; he has talked with the police; he has talked with Miss Grassleyes, he has talked with the tenant of 'The Olive Tree' bungalow. All gone away now. Only him left."

"Who is 'him'?"

"The agent for the whole estate," Pooralli explained with a wave of the hand. "Mr. Spenser."

"I should like to speak to him."

Pooralli received the suggestion unfavourably.

"Him very busy man," he said. "He have much private business."

"I only want to ask him an ordinary question," Granet persisted. "Knock at the door and say that I have come. Tell him that I am the tenant who moved in this evening—or—stop! What about the young lady?"

"Miss Grassleyes not anywhere. Hiding."

"Why?"

The butler shook his head.

"She is afraid of Mr. Spenser," he confided. "She watched his car mounting the hill, round and round and round. Then she ran away. Mr. Spenser he ask for her and it took me a long while to find her. Then they talked in large room—locked now—where ladyship used to sit. Miss Grassleyes gone now."

"It seems to me," Granet observed a little irritably, "that every one spends their time avoiding some one else up here. Anyhow, just knock at the door and tell the agent that the new tenant wants to speak to him."

Pooralli made no further protest. He knocked at the door. For a moment there was silence. He knocked again. They heard the turning of the key and the door was flung open.

"What do you want?" Spenser demanded.

The butler pointed to Granet.

"Gentleman wished to see agent," he explained. "Tenant 'The Lamps of Fire.' Young lady let it this afternoon."

Spenser waved Pooralli away, motioned Granet into the room and closed the door. Granet, in one swift glance round, obtained a vision of open cupboards and drawers, a table strewn with papers. He saw also a very disturbed and angry man.

CHAPTER VIII

"What is it that you wish to see me about, Mr. Granet?" Spenser asked.

"Nothing out of the way, I hope. A few of us just want to know what Miss Grassleyes' plans are with regard to the bungalows."

"Look here," Spenser replied in a tone of exasperation, "you may be all that your references pronounce you, but will you tell me why, when I advised you not to take a bungalow here and you insisted upon doing so—why, now that the lady who owned the property is no longer here—you make yourself the spokesman of all the tenants and come and bother me as to whether you are going to be turned out of your bungalows? Personally, I hope you are. If I am, as I believe, one of the executors of Lady Grassleyes' will, I shall see that you are."

Granet, taken aback by the manner of his reception, was silent for a few moments.

"Well, that's straight talk at any rate," he admitted. "All the same, if you don't mind my saying so, there does seem something a little mysterious about the whole affair. Why are you so anxious to get rid of us? What harm can we do by staying on for a few more days, especially the older residents who have got used to the place?"

Spenser turned the key of the door and beckoned him to a chair in the neighbourhood of the desk. He turned up the table lamp, switched off the other lights in the room and sat down himself. In the comparative gloom by the threshold his appearance had seemed to Granet fairly normal. But now, with this fierce glare thrown upon him, he had the air of a man in torture.

"You can tell your co-tenants this, Mr. Granet," he said, "and accept the same message yourself. I speak to you as a possible executor of Lady Grassleyes' will. In the interests of the estate every one of the tenants will receive a week's notice and any one who chooses to leave before that time is welcome to do so."

Granet reflected for a moment.

"I can understand that you might find the running of the estate in its present form a little unsound from a financial point of view," he admitted, "but how do you know that Miss Grassleyes, for instance, shares your views? She probably will have something to say about it. You are not likely to be the only executor."

"You can adopt that view, if you choose, Mr. Granet," was the irritable reply, "but considering you cannot have been here for more than a few hours and that your baggage can hardly have arrived, I cannot see what inconvenience you are put to in being asked to leave at once."

Granet relapsed into a further brief silence. He was still hesitating when he happened to glance up. Spenser was leaning across the table, his protuberant eyes widely open, his lips a little parted, a fierce expression of anxiety on his face. Granet was bewildered. He promptly changed his mind.

"If Miss Grassleyes," he said, "will confirm your request; if she, too, asks me to leave, I will go at once."

Spenser's expression remained almost ferocious.

"Why insist upon Miss Grassleyes' coming into the matter?" he demanded. "I am acting in her interests. She knows nothing about business. Set these others an example, Mr. Granet, in kindness. Accept my word for it that your departure is for the good of everybody. If you do not go it may be a matter of great regret to you later on."

"That sounds almost like a threat," Granet observed.

"I have not threatened you. I have treated you courteously. I have not made the mistake of losing my temper as I did in my office this afternoon. The matter is one of great moment to those who have to carry on after Lady Grassleyes. I repeat my request. Please go yourself and so much the better if you can induce the others to follow your example."

"You have not advanced a single sane reason why I should do so," Granet pointed out.

The house-agent was silent.

"No," he admitted, "I have not. Furthermore," he added after another pause, "I shall not. I take it that you refuse?"

"Unless Miss Grassleyes adds her persuasion to yours. A single word from her will be sufficient."

"Very well, we will leave it like that. At present you must excuse me."

He rose to his feet. Granet, who had followed his example, found himself studying with as much alarm as a brave man can feel the change in his vis-à-vis's expression. Mr. Spenser was no longer the suave man of affairs temporarily disconcerted by the loss in somewhat dramatic circumstances of a valued client and friend. There was something in his eyes, something in the twitch of his lips, which was almost akin to lunacy. It was the expression of a man desperate with fear yet determined. His hand had strayed for a moment into the top drawer of the desk at which he had been seated. Granet leaned forward curiously, but the next second Spenser's left hand shot out towards the table lamp and they were plunged into darkness. The room was large, the windows small and closely curtained and the darkness seemed to possess a strangely enveloping quality. Even the somewhat bulky form of the house-agent seemed to have faded into complete obscurity. Then Granet heard his voice. He must have stolen away from his place at the desk. The voice came from somewhere near the middle of the apartment. The tone of it was apologetic and almost gentle.

"Sorry, I forgot you don't know your way about this room as I do. Will you turn on the light yourself or can you find your way to the door? I'm going to let you out."

Granet opened his lips to reply and suddenly closed them again. Every now and then in life he had trodden on the mantle of adventure. He remembered a room suddenly dark in a far-away shanty amongst the hills of Yukon, a voice ringing out through the darkness, a reply, and a rain of bullets from the spot whence the reply had come.... He closed his lips and on tiptoe stole away from the desk. He made not the slightest sound. Every instinct he possessed was directed towards self-preservation from a probable madman.

"Can't you answer me?" Spenser demanded, this time with a different ring in his voice. "Turn on the lamp, man, if you can't see the way."

Again silence. Granet was almost holding his breath. He could tell by the uneasy creaking of Spenser's shoes that he was nearer than he had been. He could tell, too, by that next staccato sentence, that his unseen enemy was losing his nerve, for there was a distinct tremble in his voice.

"Look here, no more of this! What are you hiding for? Are you going to turn up that lamp?"

Still silence, complete and utter darkness. If Spenser could have seen anything he would have very much disliked the smile on Granet's lips.

"Very well," he snapped out tremulously. "I am going to open the door and lock you in from the other side while I telephone to the police. You don't believe me? Well, listen."

Once more there was the uneasy squeaking of his shoes. Apparently he was keeping his word this time. A moment later Granet heard the withdrawal of the key. He listened intently. There had been no sound of unlocking.

"Come on!" cried Spenser, his voice now shaking with anxiety. "We have had enough of this farce. We don't want any more scandal about the place. I was going to throw you out, but instead we will leave together. I have wasted enough of my time up here."

Granet's unbroken silence continued. He had something else to think about now. From underneath the door of the adjoining apartment, only a few feet behind the chair where Spenser had been seated and which Lady Grassleyes had occupied earlier in the day, there was a sudden thin line of light. Some one had entered the room which Miss Grassleyes had told him was her sanctuary. Granet, whose silence had been so marvellously preserved, retained it during the next few moments with a gigantic effort.

"Very well, then, very well! In three seconds I shall put you out of the way!" cried Spenser, his voice vibrating through the silence.

Granet stooped a little and moved noiselessly a foot or two to the right. Nevertheless, the sound which he expected did not come. Soft footsteps he heard instead—footsteps drawing nearer every moment. He glanced over his shoulder at the faint line of light under the door of the adjoining room. Instinctively he knew that whoever was in that room was listening. Inch by inch the line of light grew wider.

"Be careful what you're doing, you fool!" he shouted at Spenser. "There's some one coming out of the next room."

He leaned forward, snatched a heavy paperweight from the table and slung it into the darkness. There was an angry shout from out of the invisible chaos ahead. The door behind him was suddenly flung wide open and a flood of light streamed in. Almost simultaneously a revolver bullet whistled past his head, followed by a feminine scream. Granet sprang like a cat to the door of the adjoining room at which Jane Grassleyes was standing. He thrust her backwards and slammed it to behind them.

"It's that fellow Spenser!" he gasped. "Gone mad—got hold of a revolver."

"If he's been in that room all this time," she cried, "he may have found the key. Let me pass!"

"Not I. I tell you he's mad."

The girl made a rush at the door and flung it open. The light streamed into the larger apartment, revealing a crashed vase of flowers in the middle of the carpet, the door at the end of the room standing open. They heard the slamming of the front door. Jane Grassleyes slipped suddenly from Granet's grasp and dashed across the room. The next moment they heard the honking of a horn and saw the flashing of lights of a disappearing car.

CHAPTER IX

Granet, who had moved swiftly across the room and pulled back the curtains from the windows on the north side, watched the head-lights of the car disappear round the last bend of the mountain road.

"If I were you, Miss Grassleyes," he said, turning towards her, "I think I should change my house-agent."

Jane looked up from the place she had taken in front of the desk. Her arms were spread over the drawer which she had pulled open and in which she was still searching. She seemed to have forgotten his presence in the room.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Why, Mr. Spenser of Spenser & Sykes—the gentleman who had been fiddling about at that drawer when I came in and who later seemed to have evil designs upon my person. Nasty trick of his to turn the lights out, and I don't think house-agents ought to be allowed to carry firearms, even if they are bad shots. Great friend of your aunt's, wasn't he?"

She closed the drawer. Granet watched her for a moment without further remark.

"Not quite the sort of person I should have chosen to be my executor if ever I were making a will," he concluded.

"How do you know he is my aunt's executor?" she demanded.

"Well, he seemed pretty sure about it. Was it true do you think?"

"It may be."

"Was it by any chance your aunt's will that you were looking for in that drawer?"

"It was not."

"Because if it was," he went on, "I might suggest to you that the drawer has already been searched by several people—the police, for instance, as well as our fugitive friend. A document so important as a will would not have been allowed to remain there."

"Naturally it would not," she assented.

Granet looked at her thoughtfully. There was something utterly unnatural in the impassivity of her features. He drew his cigarette case from his pocket.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"No. Give me one," she begged.

He handed her the case, struck a match and lit a cigarette for her. Then he watched her for a few moments in silence. He himself smoked with the calm enjoyment of a man who accepts a cigarette as a relief after a brief crisis. He inhaled slowly, watched the smoke curl up towards the ceiling, knocked off his ash with a perfectly easy and natural gesture and all the time studied the girl. She was smoking in an entirely different fashion. She did not for some time even remove the cigarette from her mouth. She puffed rapidly, inhaling and exhaling almost fiercely. The blue vapour hung about her like a film. She smoked, Granet decided, like a person never likely to feel a cigarette between her lips again—as one might smoke on the way from the condemned cell to the place of execution.

"I wonder whether you know, Miss Grassleyes," he continued presently, "that there is a great deal of curiosity amongst your tenants as to what is going to happen to them. I have had two visitors this evening from amongst their number who—"

"Who were they?" she interrupted with evidences of a fierce anxiety in her voice.

"The young sister of the singer Madame di Mendoza, and a Mr. Johnson."

"No one else?"

"No one else up to the present," he assured her.

Jane relaxed into her former manner. Apparently she was not greatly interested in either of the two persons he had mentioned.

"It appears," Granet went on, "if you will permit what may seem to be an impertinent suggestion, that there is a good deal of mystery concerning these bungalows."

"Curiosity, rather," she remarked.

He shook his head.

"More than that. I am including myself in the list."

"You disappoint me," she sighed.

"Why not drop this fencing and tell me the truth?" he asked bluntly. "Remember, I was in at the beginning. I have really been at one or two little scenes you missed. I have been insulted and, as you saw for yourself, even had my life threatened by that enterprising young man who they say if he set his mind to it could sell a hovel to a duke and a palace to a beggar. Mr. Spenser was very anxious indeed that I should not become one of your tenants."

"And I," she reminded him, "was just as anxious that you should."

"Therein," he expounded gently, "part of the mystery."

She had finished smoking. She refused another cigarette with a little gesture of disgust.

"I will be an honest woman for two minutes," she decided at last, wearily. "I would give everything I had in the world to offer you my whole confidence and ask you to be my friend. I can't do it."

"To shield some one else?"

"Certainly not. I think of no one but myself."

"Then if I were you I should look at that clock," he advised her, "lock up the place and go straight to bed. On a night like this it would be worse than indiscreet for you to be found in here at midnight holding a consultation with a comparative stranger in an apartment impregnated with the distinct odour of gunpowder."

"I don't fear that in the least," she told him.

"Neither do I. I am rather enjoying it, in fact. I have a taste for mysteries and I was hoping to get a little information from you or make you commit yourself in some way."

"Do you think you are so much cleverer than I?"

"I should say that I am a person of more experience."

"You would find it a case in which experience would not help you."

"How do you know? Supposing I were a detective, for instance. Would not my previous experience in questioning and cross-questioning possible criminals be of some service to me?"

There was the faintest glimmer of a smile upon her lips.

"Then you admit that I might be a possible criminal," she said.

"I can't imagine you a criminal at all. That is why I should like to have your confidence and help you to get out of this mess."

"How do you know that I am in a mess?"

"It is perfectly obvious that you are," he declared. "You are a part sharer at any rate in your own secret, whatever that may be. You know all about the mystery of Spenser's wild behaviour, you are more than anxious that I should not fall into a panic and leave you here."

"What makes you jump to that conclusion?" she demanded.

"I mean that without trusting me you realize very well that I am a man to be trusted, and if anything is to happen you feel that you will be safer if I am somewhere within call."

"I consider you," she said deliberately, "to be a perfectly blended mixture of self-confidence and conceit. I give you up. I will have no more to do with you. If you don't say good night and leave the room I shall ring the bell and Pooralli will come to my rescue."

Granet lit another cigarette.

"Now that we have finished playing with words and posing as being quite impossible people," he remarked calmly, "why can't we be honest with one another?"

"Because I don't know what you want," she told him, with something of the former weariness in her tone. "I really don't."

"I should like to be your friend," he confided. "If you don't find one presently that madman Spenser will land you into some sort of trouble."

"I accept your friendship," she said, her voice softening. "Now tell me how to escape the wiles of Mr. Spenser. I will admit this much to you if it helps. He has a real and vital reason for wanting to get control over the whole of this property."

"I should begin by refusing to believe a single thing he says."

"The man in whom my aunt had implicit confidence?" she expostulated.

"Look here," he said. "If you would like me to pack up and go you have only to say the word, but I warn you that I'm not going to stay here and be treated like a fool. This man in whom your aunt had 'implicit confidence' has behaved like a lunatic during the last hour. For some reason or other he doesn't want to have me as a tenant on the estate and now that I am here he wants to turn me out. Because I hesitated he lost his temper with me down at his office; I found him up here to-night and he behaved like a madman, turned out the lights and, because I discovered him rummaging in that desk and he probably guessed by the line of light under the door of your bureau that you were likely to enter the room at any moment, he deliberately took a chance shot at me with his revolver. I suppose if anything had happened he would have declared that he thought I was a burglar, and probably got away with it. It won't do, Miss Grassleyes. You are either going to tell me a little more about this madman or, however much I regret leaving a lady in the lurch, I shall pack up and go."

Almost as the words left his lips he regretted them. In silence he watched her rise to her feet, climb the two steps into her own little room and close the door behind her. Even then, however, he would have called after her but for the click of the lock in the door. He walked irresolutely the whole length of the room. Then the matter was decided for him. Pooralli entered.

"What do you want?" Granet asked.

"Miss Grassleyes she telephone from her office to show gentleman out," he announced. "This way, gentleman."

"Isn't she coming back again?"

"She say no. I am to tell gentleman to leave. Please."

Granet shrugged his shoulders, followed the man down the hall and passed out into the quiet night. Almost with his first gulp of the fresh air—very fragrant it seemed after the atmosphere he was leaving—the door was closed behind him. He saw the hall light go out. With his hands in his pockets he made his way gloomily back to "The Lamps of Fire." Here again he met with a shock. All the lights inside appeared to have been extinguished. Nowhere was there any sign of life. He pressed down the latch of the door and pushed. To his surprise it did not yield. He shook the latch itself without any result. The door was locked. He could see distinctly by that flat shining slab of metal that his own door was barred against him. He shook it again violently, but in vain. There was no light or sound in the house.

* * * * *

For an angry man Granet certainly behaved quite reasonably. He threw himself into the larger of the two chairs outside, mixed himself a drink from the bottles which had mercifully been left there, lit a fresh cigarette and tried to piece together the puzzle of the night. An impossible task, he decided. There was a mad house-agent who had tried to provoke a quarrel and then fired a shot at him. All this simply because he wouldn't promise to leave the place. There was a woman who had apparently met with her end in some utterly mysterious fashion. There was her very attractive niece who had received him so charmingly but who had now relapsed into a state of mortal fear and withdrawn her confidence from him. There were two servants who seemed as though they had tumbled out of a Chinese theatre. There were the other occupants of the bungalows: Mr. Herbert Johnson, rude, ill-bred, persistent; Carlotta di Mendoza, a frightened, exquisitely beautiful child with that queer air of belonging to the world of mystery, seeking to give him some message out of her wonderful, appealing eyes. And finally there was the fact that some one had slammed the door of his bungalow with the idea of locking him out for the night. There was something so absurd about this last that he was goaded to action. He rose to his feet, looked once more at the narrow strip of metal which stood between him and his bed and made his way round to the back of the bungalow. Nothing was easier than the remainder of his task. The small blade of his penknife was sufficient to lever

the catch of the kitchen window. He hoisted himself without effort to the sill and dropped lightly on to the other side. He walked through to the lounge. It appeared undisturbed, his key ostentatiously displayed upon the table. He moved on to the bedroom and here received perhaps the greatest shock of the evening. Lying stretched upon his bed, her head thrown back amongst the pillows, with a delicacy of outline in her posture which had been lacking outside in the wicker chair, an attraction in her quiet, profound sleep which had not been present in her waking moments, was Carlotta di Mendoza. There was a smile upon her lips which was almost beatific. Granet realized then that she had come to him in a state of terror which in repose she had entirely lost. He realized also that she was occupying the only bed in the place and had every appearance of having settled down for the night. Added to which it was past one o'clock in the morning. He was suddenly indignant. He leaned forward.

"Get up, please," he enjoined quietly but firmly. "You must get up at once."

The girl shivered for a moment, opened her eyes, looked up at him, deliberately turned her shoulder and seemed in the act of going off to sleep again.

"Look here," Granet protested, "you can't do this."

"What are you talking about?" she asked querulously. "Let me alone, please. I am a very tired girl. This is the first time I have slept for three nights."

"Well, you are not going to sleep here," he said. "Please get up. I have been to the Manoir at your request. I am back to make my report."

She turned over again, yawned and drew up the coverlet.

"You are a man who is very tiresome."

"You are a girl who is making free with a bed which does not belong to her," he retorted. "I, too, am tired. You have a bungalow of your own quite close. Please to get up and I will escort you there."

"Oh, I do not think so. I know I should go but Miriam is there and she will be angry if I disturb her. You can sleep here so long as you are very quiet and do not disturb me."

She moved a little away as though to make room for him by her side.

"I'm damned if I'll do anything of the sort!" he exclaimed. "I'm sorry," he apologized the next second, "but, young lady, you are half asleep and talking nonsense."

"You are very, very English. Do you think I am being improper? I am not. I have found a bed I like and I want to sleep if you will only let me, if you will leave off talking. Just tell me what you found out up at the Manoir and then we will go to sleep."

"I have found out nothing," he told her, "and if I had I should not tell you until you got up."

Her eyes were closing again. Granet took a step forward.

"I'm coming," he warned her.

"That is sensible."

She moved still farther away and lazily took the pillow which was lying over her knees and pushed it towards him.

"You can have that. You can put it between us if you like or you can use it for your head."

Granet looked down at her helplessly. Her dress was crumpled, she had taken off her brooch and stuck it in the pillow, one leg was daringly displayed. She pulled the coverlet up to her chin.

"I have been a refugee," she confided drowsily. "I have had to sleep in the same room as strangers before. You are very, very British. You think that to sleep in the same bed is wicked. It is not so. I will not disturb you, Mr.—Mr.—"

She was actually dropping off to sleep with the last "Mr." quivering on her lips. Granet looked down at the empty space she had left at her side and at the pillow she had held out to him and which had slipped from her fingers.

"Be a good man," she murmured, opening her eyes once more. "I go to sleep now. Stretch yourself out. You may hold my hand for a few moments."

He took her by the shoulders and gently, almost tenderly, shook her.

"My dear child," he reasoned, "except in uniform I have never been to sleep with my clothes on in my life."

"You can take off a few of them, surely? You are being unkind. Please, please take off your shoes quietly and let me go to sleep again. Morning will come and I shall still be tired. I will not disturb you in any way. But I do not wish to get up," she cried as she felt his fingers more firmly on her shoulders. "Please do not disturb me. I will be as quiet as you like. Cannot you be content to let me dream? Am I so repulsive to have near you? I will not fidget. I am not a thief. In the morning I shall have courage and will go away."

By this time Granet had drawn her to a sitting position. She looked at him like a hurt child.

"Carlotta," he pleaded, "I would leave you here with pleasure but you would only be found by one of those foreign servants when they came down in the morning."

She shivered.

"I do not mind."

"Do be reasonable, please. You can't stay here."

"But I want to."

"Well, you just can't. Now I am going to mix a drink and then will you sit outside with me and talk for a minute or two? Afterwards I will take you back to your bungalow. Thank goodness you have had the sense to keep your clothes on!"

"I can take them off, if you like," she proposed hopefully. "It would rest me more. But if I must get up, lift me, please."

He was so quick about it that she was in the easy chair by the side of the bed before she realized it. Granet drew a deep breath of relief. The faint odour of the perfume she used came from the crumpled sheets. He drew the coverlet over them and faced her firmly.

"Where are your shoes?"

"In the bottom of the bed."

He found them for her. She stretched out her stockinged legs.

"Put them on, please."

He obeyed a little clumsily.

"Now come outside," he insisted, holding out his hand.

She came with the air of a reluctant child. He established her in one of the wicker chairs, mixed himself a drink and sat by her side.

"You feel that little trickle of wind from the mountains? I think that must mean that when the dawn comes there will be a mistral."

"I feel it," she murmured. "It is beautiful. It is so cool. I thought the mistral was always a hot wind."

"Not always," he told her. "Not as bad as the sirocco, anyway."

"Give me some of your drink, please," she begged.

He poured half of his into another glass.

"I drank some of what you left," she told him. "But not much. Please get some other things here. I like wine, not spirits. Will you have some champagne to-morrow night?"

"You will not be here to-morrow night," he said severely.

She drew herself up in her chair.

"I have met several men before in my life," she confided, "although I always say no when strangers wish for an introduction, but I have never met a man so unkind, so disagreeable as you. What is there wrong with me, Mr. Granet? You do not find me attractive? You find in me nothing you like?"

"I know very little about you," he replied. "And considering we are complete strangers I think you are a trifle forward."

"No one," she declared, "has ever called me that before."

"Well, in any case," he said, "I must make my report. I must tell you that I found the Manoir a hot-bed of mystery. The house-agent, who behaved more like a burglar, was very rude, and Miss Grassleyes refused to discuss the situation with me. I shall pack up my things and leave in the morning. I should advise you and your sister to do the same."

"And not see one another again?" she asked with a little purr in her voice and the softness gathering again in her eyes.

"Look here, how old are you?" he demanded.

"I am seventeen. I know quite well everything you are trying to say to me but I do not wish to leave here. My sister will not go, either."

"Do you think your sister would approve of your being here alone with me at this hour of the night?"

"Perhaps not," she reflected, "but if she knew you as I do she would not mind. Anybody would trust you, would they not, Mr. Granet? You are almost too trustworthy."

He took the hand she held out, patted the long, soft fingers and returned it to its place.

"They might," he warned her, "have a bad shock. You had better report to your sister that a sane man who has done his best to solve the mystery of this place has come to the conclusion that we had all better clear out."

"She will not go," the girl declared hopefully. "I am glad that she will not. I like it here. I thought that in the morning perhaps you would take me in your automobile up into the mountains. We could have a picnic."

"Well, we can't. I have work to do."

"I will help you."

"You could not. Now, do you mind if we go?"

She rose reluctantly to her feet, passed through the gate and hung heavily on his arm.

"The path between our bungalows," she whispered, "was meant for lovers, I am sure. There are flowers on either side and it is necessary to walk very close together. You have not been along it yet?"

"Not yet. I have not been here many hours, you know."

"The roses are *sauvage*," she continued, "and they have a wonderful perfume through the day. You see the light still burns."

"Is your bungalow as near as that?"

"Just at the end of the walk. That is the room my sister is in," she pointed out. "Hers is all dark but there is a light in the lounge."

Granet could scarcely believe that he was within a few yards of safety. Carlotta seemed to have become suddenly quite resigned. They turned the slight bend in the walk and before him, in the midst of what seemed to be a cascade of drooping roses, was an open door.

"You left your door open!" he exclaimed.

"Of course," she answered. "What does it matter? There are no thieves in these parts. Good-bye, Mr. Granet, you sad, stern man. You see, I shall give you my fingers to kiss."

He lifted her hand high up to his lips—slim, exquisite fingers they were, ringless and soft. He brushed them with his lips and she smacked his cheek lightly.

"You are a bad man," she complained, "not to want to kiss me. Perhaps I should not like you to. Perhaps I should. But you should want to. Good night. Thank you very much for being kind. I loved your bed but I will not dream of you."

She threw him a little backward glance, floated through the door and closed it gently behind her. Granet made his way back along the grassy path to "The Lamps of Fire." He finished his drink, undressed like one in a dream, loaded a six-shooter which he dragged out from one of his bags, and crawled into that restless mass of tumbled bed-clothes. In five minutes he was pleasantly asleep.

CHAPTER X

Mr. Woodley's polite smile of welcome was a trifle strained as he leaned over his little strip of mahogany counter the following afternoon. He had taken a morbid dislike to the pale-faced gentleman of prosperous appearance who was standing there, and also to his female companion. Nevertheless, he asked the usual question with his usual smile.

"What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, sir?"

"We are looking for quiet rooms in a secluded neighbourhood," the man replied. "We wish to be outside the town but not too far away. My name," he concluded, producing a somewhat ornate card, "is Leonidas—Mr. Samuel Leonidas."

The manager glanced at the card and bowed.

"I have no doubt that we shall be able to suit you, sir," he said. "What is the nature of the accommodation you require?"

"My husband is in the film business," the lady explained, fanning herself in a somewhat affected manner. "Perhaps that is the reason why in private life we like a certain amount of retirement."

"That's right," Mr. Leonidas agreed. "I don't want to be at the end of the telephone every few minutes."

"People are always bothering my husband," Mrs. Leonidas confided, "either to buy a story which would make, of course, a wonderful film, or to give a talented son or daughter or perhaps themselves a chance in one of their own films. He finds it sometimes a little fatiguing."

"Quite so," Woodley assented vaguely, his knowledge of the ins and outs of the film business being slight. "I gather that you do not wish to be in Nice itself."

"That's the idea," Mr. Leonidas agreed, twirling his black moustache. "I'm not too fond of the sea, either. Bit of rheumatism, you know," he added, smacking his thigh. "About thirty kilometres or so would be a reasonable distance."

Woodley stroked his chin.

"Well, things are a little upset there just now," he remarked, "but Lady Grassleyes' bungalows are very popular when there is one to let."

Mrs. Leonidas nodded approval.

"I have heard of them, my dear," she told her husband. "Miriam di Mendoza is staying at one with her young sister. A very sad thing about Lady Grassleyes. Will they carry on the place, do you suppose?"

"I'll have a word with Mr. Spenser, if you will allow me, madam," Woodley suggested.

He slipped away through that inner door into his employer's room. Spenser, who had a slight scar on his cheek and was not looking particularly well that day, glanced up impatiently at his coming.

"More people for Grassleyes, Mr. Spenser."

"Tell them to go to hell," Spenser replied fiercely. "Don't you know better than to come and worry me about that blasted place, Woodley?"

The manager stood his ground.

"You will excuse me, sir," he ventured, "but you might find these people useful. They are not quite the ordinary sort of tenant."

"What sort are they then?"

"Films, money," Woodley told him impressively.

"Money," the house-agent repeated thoughtfully.

He rose to his feet and gazed in the looking-glass. He touched the place where the scar was somewhat obtrusive and dabbed a little powder upon it. He smoothed his face over with a silk handkerchief and straightened his hair.

"I will have a word with them, Woodley," he decided. "Don't forget, though, I don't want any ordinary tenants."

Woodley hesitated for a single moment.

"The gentleman," he remarked, "is, I should think, either Greek or Jewish. He looks as though he understood his way about."

"The film magnate generally does," his employer said dryly. "He generally gets there, too. Show them in."

The manager returned to the outer office. He raised the flap of the counter.

"Mr. Spenser, the head of the firm, would like to have a word with you, Mr. Leonidas, and you, too, madam," he announced.

He ushered them into the private office. Spenser rose to his feet, bowed amiably and pointed to chairs.

"Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas, I believe?" he said. "I fancy I have read about you in the film papers."

"That's very likely," Mr. Leonidas acknowledged. "I am on vacation, really, Mr. Spenser, but I have heard of this district in connection with our industry. They tell me there are several companies at work in this neighbourhood at the present moment."

"There are five or six French companies, three English, one German and two American, that I know of," Spenser declared. "They have nearly all invited me to go out and see their stuff but I am a busy man. I don't get much time for that sort of thing."

"English, I am glad to hear," Mr. Leonidas remarked.

"The oldest-established English agency but one on the Riviera."

"Your manager tell you what sort of thing we are looking for?"

"He did indeed," was the prompt assent. "If the Grassleyes bungalows are not too far out for you I should think they would be suitable. The proprietress, Lady Grassleyes, was taken suddenly ill yesterday and there is a slight uncertainty as to whether the bungalows will be carried on. But they are worth having a look at."

"Give us a card to view and we will go out right away," Mr. Leonidas suggested.

"Just like you, rushing at things," his wife put in. "How do we know a bungalow would be any use to us? What about servants, plate, linen and all that sort of thing, Mr. Spenser?"

"You can be supplied with everything, or bring everything you are likely to want yourselves."

"Can't say fairer than that," the film magnate observed. "I have made up my mind, Mr. Spenser. I am going to have a look at those bungalows."

"So headstrong he is!" Mrs. Leonidas murmured resignedly.

"The price of the one I should recommend would be twelve *mille* a month with furniture, crockery, plate and linen. Any service from the house is extra."

Mr. Leonidas waved his fat white hand, keeping the palm extended so that the house-agent could observe his ring, which was not the vulgar diamond affair flaunted by so many of the leaders of his industry but a large, very handsome signet ring with a coat of arms deeply engraved. It had cost him seven pounds in the Caledonian Market and he was very proud of it.

"The price is of no consequence," he declared. "It is value I look for. If the value's there we deal. That's the way I engage my artistes. If they ask five hundred pounds a week and they are worth it they get it from me. If they ask five pounds and are not worth it I have nothing to do with them."

"Sound business principles," Spenser admitted, closing and locking his desk. "I was thinking of running out to Grassleyes and if you'd like to come with me I'll show you the way."

"That suits me," Mr. Leonidas agreed. "We have a Rolls Royce outside."

"All you will have to do, then, is to follow me."

"You can come along with us, if you like," the other suggested.

Spenser shook his head.

"I never move without my own car," he said. "I have heaps of places around I might want to visit. I like to be perfectly free to slip off when I want to. I'll go slowly and have a word with your chauffeur before we start."

"Don't you forget to go slowly, young man," Leonidas insisted. "I have no fancy for being twisted about round these mountain roads."

"I'll remember," the house-agent promised as he showed them out. "Woodley," he added, turning to his manager, "I shall be away for an hour or so. If you want me ring up the Manoir, but don't send any one else up there without speaking to me first."

"Very good, sir."

The chauffeur outside, wearing an imposing grey uniform, flung open the door of the Rolls Royce and in a few moments Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas, in the wake of Spenser, started out on their expedition.

* * * * *

Samuel Leonidas, a few hours later, signed his name with a hard, black flourish at the bottom of the agreement at which he had only glanced. His wife looked at him curiously. There was something unfamiliar in his face, something which she had only seen there once or twice before—a dull, far-away gleam in his brown eyes, a set line round his mouth, a sort of wistfulness in his expression which took him back through the ages. One could have imagined him, in different clothes, leaning upon a staff at the head of his family tribe, his eyes searching for the Promised Land from the mountain top. Jane Grassleyes also watched him curiously. For a few moments, at any rate, he seemed to have shed his vulgarity as though it had been an unclean garment.

"When do you wish to take possession, Mr. Leonidas?" she asked, with a new interest in her tone.

"At once," he answered. "I shall sleep here to-night. My valet will bring my clothes. My wife will go back with the car and find some servants."

"What, me alone?" Mrs. Leonidas demanded.

"You alone. I need rest. I shall drag my wicker chair from the bungalow front to the little clearing in the wood. Josephs can come up with the papers about the Shelten deal and I will go through them here and give him instructions."

"Well I never!" his wife exclaimed. "He's like that, Miss Grassleyes. He either takes a week to make up his mind about a thing or a minute. I'm not so sure that I'm satisfied to be cut off from the world like this, Samuel. I like the band in the morning. I like the people on the promenade opposite the Negresco. It was only yesterday you were saying what a sight it was."

Mr. Leonidas waved her away. He made one of his occasional lapses in the English language.

"I have took a fancy to this place," he said, and all the harshness had gone from his voice. "You can engage what servants you want down at Nice and bring them back with you."

"Well I never!" she cried again, opening her vanity-case and looking at herself thoughtfully. "Sometimes you do take my breath away, Samuel. You'll be making a film up here next."

"He certainly will not," Jane interposed firmly.

"You don't care for films, young lady?" Mrs. Leonidas asked, closing her case with a snap.

"I do not," Jane replied. "I have only seen one or two in my life and I never wish to see another. I don't, as a rule," she added, "if you will excuse my saying so, care for the men and women who act in them."

"A shoddy lot," Leonidas agreed. "I have made a few million dollars in the business, Miss Grassleyes, and I understand it as few other people do, but it's a poor profession for the actors and actresses. If I had a girl—"

"If you had a girl, indeed!" his wife interrupted. "Well, what about me? You were glad enough to read the notices when I was playing in New York, and glad enough to cash in at the box-office."

"You were a clever actress," he admitted.

"Were!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Listen to him, Miss Grassleyes. Talking like that to Rachel Phillipi. That is my stage name, you know. Why, I am having offers every week. He doesn't put me in his own pictures and I'll tell you why. He's jealous. He can't stand it when they begin to talk of him as Rachel Phillipi's husband. The man's crazy!"

"They were showing 'The Promised Land' in Nice this week," Spenser said from the background where he stood watching the conclusion of this very satisfactory transaction. "You were great in it, Mrs. Leonidas."

She smiled graciously upon the young man, who had been quite at his best during the last hour or so.

"They all thought it was one of my star parts," she agreed. "He's a nice one is Samuel to be running down the profession. You made your pile at it, my man, and you have made it out of those who've worked for you."

Leonidas seemed to come back from a complete detachment.

"You know just what you want in Nice," he said. "Mr. Spenser will give you the address of the office where you can find a married couple, and you have already your own maid and I my valet. I don't know where we are going to put the servants, I'm sure."

"We have what we call 'the compound,'" Jane suggested. "Some of the people who have too many servants lodge them there. Mrs. Leonidas can look it over at any time."

"I'll have a look at it now, if it's not putting you out, Miss Grassleyes," the lady decided, rising to her feet. "I shall know then what to say to the people I interview. I'm not quite sure that I can get back in time for dinner. If not I'll send the car back for you, Samuel, and we'll go to the Casino. If you are ready, Miss Grassleyes," she added, picking up her bag, "we'll get along."

Her husband watched her departure without a word.

"Can I offer you a whisky-and-soda or cigar, sir?" the house-agent asked.

Leonidas shook his head.

"Thank you, I am not much of a drinker. I am going to walk back to the bungalow and take a short rest there. By the by, Mr. Spenser, has Madame di Mendoza been here long?"

"A week or so," Spenser answered. "She has been singing at the Méditerranée. She's singing to-night, I believe. It's all the old stuff, but she has a wonderful voice, you know."

"I have heard her in 'Delilah,'" the film magnate observed. "I had no idea," he added after a moment's pause, "that she had a young sister."

Spenser, who had a few disagreeable reminiscences of Carlotta stored in the back of his mind, frowned.

"The most beautiful child I ever saw in my life," he remarked, "but bad-tempered and ill-mannered."

"I have never spoken to her," Leonidas said, looking thoughtfully over the top of the trees. "I saw her in the distance. She left her sister just as we came up."

"The sort of thing she would do. Never talks to any one if she can help it. All the same, she's beautiful. I should say she'll make a sensation sometime or other in the film world or on the stage."

Leonidas rose to his feet and took up his hat.

"Maybe," he admitted. "Nothing more in the way of business, Mr. Spenser?"

"Nothing," the other replied. "We will send in our account. Ten per cent is our usual commission."

"My secretary will see to it," Leonidas agreed as he took his leave. "I wish you good afternoon. I am going down to have another look at my bungalow."

Spenser subsided into a chair to wait for Jane's return. His brows were knitted and he had the air of a man deep in thought. As a matter of fact he had plenty to think about.

* * * * *

"Forty years old," Samuel Leonidas soliloquized as he walked across the grassy path which led to his new habitation. "Thirty-nine, one might say. It is nothing. I am not like those others in the game. Thank goodness I never have been."

He walked with his hands behind him, his head thrown back, and through his brain there floated the memories of beautiful women who had posed for him, angled for him, laid seductive snares into which he might fall. Anything to trap the great man who could give them fame, jewels, a career. Leonidas was an autocrat in his profession, a man whose word was law, a man who could make a woman a queen in her own world or a beggar without the gates if his mind lay the other way. The thought of them all now gave him confidence. He drew himself up, drank in the sweetness of the late afternoon and looked around him with real appreciation.

"It is a grand spot to have found," he murmured. "If I let Rachel play in Sherwell's stuff she'll have to go to Paris. I wonder ..."

Then he turned the corner of the little wooden paling round "The Lamps of Fire" and came to a sudden standstill. Lounging in a wicker chair with her feet up on another was Madame di Mendoza's young sister.

CHAPTER XI

Everything that happened to him during the next few moments seemed to Samuel Leonidas perfectly automatic, and it was with amazement that he remembered afterwards the absolute naturalness with which he spoke and acted.

"You are Miriam di Mendoza's sister, are you not?" he asked, approaching Carlotta with his hat in his hand.

"I am," she replied.

There was no hint of invitation in her tone, nothing of cordiality. She looked at him as at an intruder. Nevertheless, he stepped over the paling and approached her.

"Is this where your and your sister live?"

"It is not."

"It seems to me to be a sort of little commonwealth here," he went on. "Even if we are all under separate roofs we are all surrounded by the same wall. I have just taken a bungalow here."

"Indeed. Not this one?"

"No, not this one."

"Then I think you had better not stop," she advised. "Mr. Granet is rather a peculiar man. He does not like strangers about the place."

"An old friend of yours, then?"

"Is that your business?" she retorted a little insolently.

"I suppose it isn't," he acknowledged. "You see, I am well acquainted with your sister. I have sometimes considered filming an opera and giving her a part in it. A profession like mine is far-reaching, you know. It takes in every one who has any connection with the arts."

"Dear me," she yawned, "what a bore that must be!"

"Why?"

"To have so many acquaintances. You could not possibly call them friends."

Leonidas looked at her for a moment in silence. There was not a line of her body that was not beautiful, not a single feature with which fault could be found. Yet her red lips were at that moment distinctly pouting and there was a frown upon her ivory-white forehead. The grey-blue eyes were inclined to be angry. Her expression was sulky.

"Don't you like having friends?" he asked.

"I dislike too many acquaintances. It is so stupid to have to be polite to people you do not care for at all. That is why I very seldom go out with my sister. She likes everybody. I like no one. It makes me a little angry when people talk to me without invitation."

"Like me?"

"Like you."

"Well, I am very sorry," he apologized, "but I don't see what there is about me that should offend you. I have been a very successful man in life. I am rich and I am powerful. I love beautiful places and beautiful people. You are beautiful, Miss di Mendoza."

"Thank you," she said. "I know that quite well. It is impertinent of you, however, to tell me so."

"There is a manner of doing all these things," he continued, and still there was that far-away note in his voice.

It was the voice of a different man. He knew that it was queer. He knew that it was scarcely raised above a whisper. But he hated the thought of what it might have been if it had not been controlled by something which was quite inexplicable. Carlotta was watching him and for the first time there was a flicker of interest in her eyes.

"Perhaps you are tired," she said.

He shook his head.

"No. Thankful."

"Thankful?"

"That I found you here."

She looked up towards the Manoir.

"I do not know what Mr. Granet will say if he finds you, an uninvited guest, wandering about his property," she remarked.

"You are here, too," he reminded her.

"How do you know that I am not invited?"

He considered the matter.

"Well, you may be, of course," he admitted. "When he comes he may be angry and he may turn me out, but I shall go quite amiably. Your sister was going to introduce you but you were in such a hurry to be off. Still, I am a family acquaintance, at any rate. This is a little colony of people living at close quarters. I have become one of you."

"Terrible!" she murmured.

"Aren't you a little rude?"

"The best-bred dogs bark at strangers. My sister's friends are not mine. Miriam likes any one who will talk to her, praise her singing; any one who understands music, cocktails and the best brand of champagne; any one who can paint, sing or play the violin."

"Plenty of scope," he commented. "I can do none of those things."

"Neither can I, except perhaps sing a little," she confessed.

"Well, it seems to me, then, that after all we are of the same world."

Carlotta was fast relapsing into her former state of irritation. She was on the point of saying something very rude indeed when Leonidas smiled. She watched the slow movement of his lips as one fascinated. There were many people who declared that Leonidas was a noisy bounder with no manners. There were just one or two who said that on very rare occasions he had been found to possess charm. It was his smile which now kept Carlotta dumb.

"Why did you come in here to talk to me?" she asked at last.

"I was looking for you," he said. "I have taken a bungalow here because you are living here. I came down this path hoping that I should see you. I was not in the least surprised when I did."

"But why? You are not the sort of person I should like to make friends with at all. You are much, much older. You are the second famous film man I have met and when I saw you first I came to the conclusion that you were just as abominable as the other one. That is why I hurried away. Why did you want to talk to me?"

"I am older than you," he acknowledged. "I was brought up in a rougher school. I have no manners, very few graces. But like many of my people, I worship beauty. It is a rare quality to find in this world. In a human being there is generally something that spoils it. You are too young to have had that happen to you."

She looked at him speculatively.

"Anyway," she decided, "I think you had better go. This is not our bungalow, you know. It belongs to Mr. Granet. I am waiting here hoping he may come."

"Why?"

"I want to see him."

"Why do you want to see him?"

"You have no right to ask me all these questions," she said.

"I have a right, and you know that I have," he answered. "You have little knowledge and no experience but you have consciousness."

"I think," she declared deliberately, "that you are crazy."

"Precisely. I am crazy. I should not dream of denying it. Any one who knows me well and heard me talk to you would admit that I was crazy. Gone off my head, they would say. Especially if they knew I had taken a bungalow here simply to be near you."

"I wish you would go," she said with an impatient gesture. "I do not want to hear you talk like that. It is silly and yet in a way it disturbs me."

Leonidas shook his head.

"I'll tell you what it is that disturbs you," he confided. "It is because I am being truthful, and the truth is generally terrifying. You don't meet with it very often in life. You don't meet with it very often in film people. I don't remember ever having told the truth for so long before. I was reading a manuscript by a great American author the other day and he had a new phrase for truth. He called it 'the modern bewitchment.'"

Carlotta looked wistfully up towards the Manoir.

"If Mr. Granet does not come soon," she decided, "I shall go away. Did you say that you had taken a bungalow?"

"I have taken 'Meadowsweet.'"

"Was that your wife I saw with you in the great Rolls Royce car?"

"It was. She will not be here long. She will be going to Paris."

"I hope you will be going with her," she said simply.

"You may not hope that when you know me better," he told her. "Now why are you waiting here for Mr. Granet? Is he an old friend?"

"I have only seen him once in my life."

"You have a fancy for him?"

"A fancy!" she cried scornfully. "It is not a fancy, it is a *grande passion*."

Leonidas smiled.

"It will pass."

"It will do nothing of the sort," she declared angrily, "and what do you know about it, anyway? Why are you staying here worrying me when I wish you to leave me alone?"

He was silent for a moment. With a faint smile upon his lips he seemed to be considering some weighty problem. Carlotta became suddenly uneasy.

"Go away! I cannot bear you anywhere near me. Something about you frightens me."

"I am sorry," he sighed. "You will get over that. I will go now but you will see me again soon."

He turned away with a strange, almost graceful little gesture of farewell. He seemed to walk with a new spring, to have acquired a new spirit of youth. Against her will Carlotta raised her eyes and watched him as he disappeared down the path which led through the pine-trees to the other bungalows.

* * * * *

When Granet drove up a few minutes later he found Carlotta leaning forward in her chair, her elbows upon her knees, her face half-covered with her hands, weeping hysterically. She jumped impetuously to her feet and stopped short. Granet's attitude towards her was certainly not encouraging.

"What are you doing here, Carlotta?"

"Waiting for you," she sobbed.

"What on earth are you in this condition for? Please wipe your eyes at once and tell me what is the matter."

"He frightened me."

"Who?"

"A film man—Mr. Leonidas."

"Never heard of him," Granet said sharply. "You mean that the fellow has been here?"

"Yes."

He looked around.

"Where is he now?"

She caught at his hand.

"No, please! Do not look like that," she begged. "I suppose it was not really his fault. He was quite polite, never in the least rude, but he simply frightened me—that is all."

"How?"

"He talked so strangely. He did not touch me or come very near. There was nothing wrong about his behaviour but he said such strange things."

"What sort of things?"

She looked at him through her tear-dimmed eyes. There was a feeble smile on her lips.

"He said just the sort of things I should like you to say to me," she told him, her voice still a little broken. "From him they sounded all wrong. From you they would have filled me with happiness."

"Where is your sister?"

"Down at the bungalow."

"I shall go and talk to her," he decided.

"Do not!" she begged. "Please do not think of doing that, Mr. Granet. I should be sent away."

"But, my dear child, I think it would be better if you were sent away. This is no place for you."

She dried her eyes.

"There is something queer about it all, of course," she admitted.

"Please run away home now, that's a good girl."

She moved reluctantly towards the gate.

"Walk down to the bungalow, then, with me, please," she implored. "I am rather afraid of that little wood."

Granet looked at her doubtfully for a moment.

"I don't believe you are afraid of anything," he said severely.

She took hold of his arm.

"I am afraid of being left alone," she confided, "and, besides, this is the way to Mr. Leonidas' bungalow and if I met him I should be very frightened indeed."

"You told me a minute or two ago—" he began.

"Oh, I know," she interrupted. "He said nothing that was ill-mannered, did nothing he should not have done. But cannot you understand that people are sometimes so different? I am frightened at things many people would not think terrible at all, and if it is anything quite serious I am really very brave. He just stood there quite calmly and I felt as though he were—but how can I explain?—it was as though I were a violin and his fingers were trying to draw music from me, but he chose always the wrong notes.... There now, you think I am really mad, do you not?"

"Pretty well," he admitted. "Still, you are quite charming when you don't talk nonsense."

She was happy again and danced a few steps from one of the recent ballets. They passed through the little straggling copse with its clumps of wild roses and orchids and here and there an olive tree, its gnarled trunk intermingled with the pines. When they arrived at the bungalow, "Falling Roses," Carlotta indicated with a nervous gesture a slightly larger one forty yards lower down.

"That is 'Meadowsweet,' which Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas have taken, only Mr. Leonidas said that his wife was going to Paris."

"Better stay and look after her husband, I should think," Granet muttered. "However, here you are safely home, child. There is the open gate for you. There is your sister waving to you from the window."

"She wants you to come in," Carlotta cried eagerly.

"Well, you will have to excuse me."

It was too late, however. Madame di Mendoza had already emerged from the bungalow, her hands outstretched, a very smart *négligé* over the somewhat obvious foundation of her evening toilet.

"What a neighbourly person you are, Mr. Granet!" she exclaimed, smiling. "You have brought my little sister home, I see. She is such a wanderer I can never make sure of her. Please come in and let me give you a glass of sherry, or shall I bring it out here?"

"You are very kind," Granet said. "I really ought not to stop, though. But I must admire your view for a moment."

"It is very beautiful," she acknowledged, "but it is very lonely. Of course, if Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas decide to stop it will be altogether a different matter. So nice to have neighbours, I always think. Mr. Leonidas," she added in a tone almost of awe, "is one of the most important men in the film world."

Granet turned away a little impatiently, for it seemed to him that he had heard more than enough of Mr. Leonidas for one day. Then there emerged from the wood, running with quick, even footsteps, Postralli, the younger of the two foreign servants from the Manoir. He came straight towards them and halted without the faintest sign of fatigue. He addressed himself to Granet.

"It is the Englishman from Nice," he announced, "who has little flag on front of motor car. He wishes to speak with gentleman."

Granet ignored Carlotta's clutch at his arm and took leave of her sister.

"A very important person," he remarked. "I mustn't keep him waiting. *Au revoir*."

With a wave of the hand he turned back towards his own bungalow, Postralli walking respectfully in the rear. As soon as they had reached the shelter of the trees Granet turned to him.

"The gentleman is alone?"

"There is a French gentleman with him," Postralli replied. "He was with French doctor when he came out this morning."

"Police?"

Postralli shook his head.

"Know nothing," he said. "He ask great many questions."

"Where is he? Up at the Manoir?"

The boy shook his head again mysteriously.

"He waits now at 'The Lamps of Fire.'"

CHAPTER XII

Colonel Henry Dryden, British Consul in Nice and the district immediately surrounding it, was a man who took his duties seriously. He had never, however, appeared so weighed down with responsibility as when, from the front of "The Lamps of Fire," he greeted Granet. His car stood outside, his chauffeur was making

some slight adjustment to the engine and a man in dark clothes and a black Homburg hat sat with folded arms in the back seat.

"Sorry I was in Nice when you came this morning, Colonel Dryden," Granet said as they shook hands.

"I should have telephoned," the Consul replied. "As a matter of fact I had no idea that the matter was so serious."

"Anything fresh?"

"The affair seems to have taken a very queer turn," Dryden explained. "Of course, Lady Grassleyes—an old friend of ours, by the by, when she lived in the East—is just one of these tough-looking women who might go off suddenly, but it appears from the medical examination that they cannot make up their minds as to the technical possibilities of her condition. May I step inside for a moment? There is our friend in the car, too. He is a celebrated French detective. Let's get along. That damned boy is listening to every word we say."

"By all means."

The Consul beckoned to the passenger in the car and presented Granet in a few brief words.

"This is Detective Inspector Suresne," he went on. "He has flown over from Marseille to try and help the police here. You knew, I suppose, that Lady Grassleyes' body was removed from the Manoir last night?"

"I've heard something about it," Granet acknowledged. "Rather sudden, wasn't it?"

"Very sudden indeed, and unexpected. So was the result of the examination. It appears that the doctors are absolutely undecided as to the cause of her extraordinary collapse."

"Who gave the orders for the removal?" Granet asked.

"Ah!" the detective murmured.

"At present that is not clear," the Consul replied. "We have sent for the police commissary who is in charge up here. We shall know that from him. He will be at the Manoir by the time we arrive there. There will be a brief examination of practically every one in a few minutes, but Monsieur Suresne thought he would like a word with you first."

"It is," the detective explained, "because monsieur was the first person to discover the body of the unfortunate lady."

"Quite true," Granet replied. "I should never have taken her for a dead person myself until I spoke to her."

"You came up to see about hiring a bungalow here, I think?"

"That is so."

"Can you tell me—this is not quite a formal examination but it is very important—at what time you arrived at the Manoir and who let you in?"

"I arrived at something like twenty minutes past four in the afternoon. The foreign butler called Pooralli let me in and announced me. I approached the table where Lady Grassleyes was seated and I must have been within a few yards of her when I spoke. I said how do you do or something of that sort and began to explain my business. Then I stopped short. I saw at once that she had had some kind of a fit, or worse. I rang the bell. The butler returned. He hurried off and fetched Miss Grassleyes."

"You had no previous acquaintance with Lady Grassleyes?"

"I never saw or heard of her before in my life."

"And your sole object was to enquire about the bungalows?"

"Absolutely."

"A delightful place to live," the detective murmured, looking out of the window, "especially if one had friends amongst the other *locataires*."

"I knew no one here or in the neighbourhood. I came simply upon the recommendation of the manager of Spenser & Sykes, the house-agents."

"I see," Suresne continued. "Mr. Spenser is sometimes in the habit of bringing prospective tenants out, I believe."

"Maybe," Granet replied. "He brought some out this afternoon, I think. He didn't bring me, however. I came out alone."

"This is all quite informal," the detective said courteously. "I ask no more questions. I wished to know the time of monsieur's visit here, whether he had any previous acquaintance with Lady Grassleyes and who it was who announced him and who was first in the room afterwards. That I have now been told. As soon as you like, Colonel Dryden, we will proceed to the Manoir. You have sent out messages, I believe, to the other tenants to be there."

"They have all been notified. I'll run you up in my car, Granet."

They all three stepped into the waiting automobile and reached the Manoir in a moment or two. Jane met them in the hall and led them at once into the large room in which her aunt had been accustomed to receive callers. Granet looked about him curiously. The late-afternoon sunlight which found its way in through blinds and curtains alike made it hard to reconcile the place with his last night's adventure. The furniture was all primly arranged. There was even a bunch of fresh flowers on the desk at which Lady Grassleyes had sat.

Jane was introduced to the French detective.

"This is not in any way to be a formal affair, my dear," the Consul explained. "Monsieur Suresne wishes to say just a few words to any of the tenants who may be on the estate."

"They are all coming," she told him. "Even those who were not tenants until to-day."

"Just what I wish," the detective said in his soft, rather lazy voice. "One word and away they go. I am not inquisitive. Just the little ideas that are in my head. Here comes, if I do not mistake, a very famous man."

The door had been opened and Mr. and Mrs. Leonidas were being shown in. They halted for a moment and Jane went to meet them and introduced Monsieur Suresne and Colonel Dryden.

"We are still without any definite news as to the cause of my aunt's sudden collapse," she explained simply. "Monsieur Suresne is a detective from Marseille. He is here to make just a few enquiries. It is his wish to examine briefly some of those who were here after the tragedy as well as those who were in residence at the time. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least," Mrs. Leonidas declared. "What is there we can tell Monsieur Suresne about it, I wonder? We were at Cannes at a dinner party last night."

"And finished up with drinking bad champagne at a night club in Nice," the film magnate confessed.

"Ah, is that so?" Suresne observed. "Well, we all do it sometimes. Then I take it, Mr. Leonidas, that neither you nor your wife were tenants yesterday?"

"Never been near the place until this afternoon," Leonidas replied. "That goes for both of us. We were looking for a quiet spot in which to spend a few weeks and Mr. Spenser told us about the trouble up here but said if that didn't put us off he thought the place might suit us. We drove out and found it did suit us. We have taken a bungalow."

"Just so," the detective observed. "Well, I take it, then, that you never visited the place before. No previous correspondence with Lady Grassleyes? Nothing of that sort?"

"Not a line. We just knew that the place existed because a friend of ours, Madame di Mendoza, has a bungalow here. It was simply chance, though, that made us go to Mr. Spenser's office in the ordinary way of business."

Suresne nodded pleasantly. He had no notebook or pencil and he stood, indeed, with his hands in his pockets smiling amiably upon them all. He looked a little curiously, however, at Madame di Mendoza and her sister as they were ushered in—a curiosity which soon became merged in the admiration a Frenchman seldom fails to feel and display towards beautiful members of the other sex.

"We have here," he whispered to Granet, "something of interest. The elder lady was singing in Marseille not long ago."

Jane moved a few steps forward to meet the newcomers.

"It is nice of you to come, Madame di Mendoza," she said. "I cannot tell you how sorry we are to disturb you."

"It has inconvenienced me not at all," was the somewhat flamboyant reply. "You see, I was dressing for a dinner. To-night I do not sing until ten o'clock. I permit myself, in such cases, a light meal first in the town. Now what can we do for you?"

Jane introduced Colonel Dryden and Suresne. The Consul offered a few words of explanation.

"This is an absolutely informal conversation," he said. "In case this affair should turn out seriously, as I am afraid seems possible, Monsieur Suresne here from Marseille would like to ask just one or two questions of any one who was in residence before and after the trouble."

Madame di Mendoza raised her eyebrows. She raised her shoulders also. She extended her hands. She was indeed a creature of gestures. She liked to live up to her reputation—a woman of great vivacity.

"But what is there that I can tell monsieur?" she asked. "Madame sat in her place day by day to receive complaints or requests but I have never made any. It is a fortnight since I have even seen her, and that was when she drove out in that old-fashioned carriage of hers with her dogs and her maid to collect the rents."

Suresne bowed amiably. He was by way of admiring Madame di Mendoza. He wished her to understand that he was a man of gallantry.

"Useless, then, to trouble madame," he declared. "It is only those who were in contact with the poor lady at a certain hour yesterday whose statements might be interesting."

She relapsed into a chair.

"The gentleman there?" the detective suggested, indicating Spenser, who had just entered.

Spenser nodded.

"Certainly," he acknowledged, "next to her niece and the servants I am the one who saw most of Lady Grassleyes. There were matters of business between us nearly every day. In a sense I may be said to be a partner in the running of this estate."

"Ah, that is interesting," Suresne commented. "Tell us, then, when last you saw the poor lady."

"Yesterday morning. I called to bring news of two possible new tenants and to consult her about building a few more bungalows. Also there was a question of augmenting the staff."

"You found her well?"

"I found her exactly as she always seemed. She was not a woman who had many interests outside this place. She had sunk most of her money in it and was anxious to make it a success."

"Her *avocat*?"

"He is on his way down from Paris," Spenser said briefly.

"*Parfaitement*," Suresne murmured. "From your knowledge of the affairs of Lady Grassleyes you would not consider she had any matters of grave anxiety weighing upon her?"

"Certainly not," was the prompt reply. "The domain is thriving as an investment and, as I have told you, we were considering the question of building some more bungalows."

"Thank you," the detective said. "Now if I may have a word with Miss Grassleyes?"

Jane rose to her feet and took a chair a little nearer the table.

"You will understand, mademoiselle, that this is an utterly informal investigation. If it seems to you better not to answer any question I ask you, leave it unanswered. I only want to get a clear view of the various possibilities and until I build up the story itself things seem, naturally, to me, a stranger, a little involved."

"I quite understand," she replied. "There seems nothing, however, to conceal."

"I was interested, on my arrival," Suresne continued, "in the curious servants about the place. Perhaps you can tell me—where did they come from?"

"They were in the employ of Sir Jarvis when he had an establishment in Calcutta. They went on with him to Rangoon and when he returned to England they both begged to be allowed to come too. The younger one, when I first knew them, was little more than a child. But that was some ten years ago."

"They are good servants—dependable?"

"They are excellent servants. They have to be kept in a little compound of their own, of course, away from the Europeans but they are content with very little and they cost much less to board than any of the other servants."

"Of what race are they?" Suresne asked curiously.

"They come from a small settlement somewhere in the north of China who drifted down to Burma," she said. "They were called 'The Running Footmen.'"

"I must have a word or two with them presently. I understand that the elder of the two admitted Mr. Granet when he called yesterday afternoon, brought him to the door of this room but just announced him and withdrew in a way that seems rather curious to us. It gives one the idea that he knew something was wrong with his mistress but wished Mr. Granet to discover it for himself. Is not that so, Mr. Granet?"

"Yes, I do think so," Granet agreed. "Certainly it is not the usual way to announce a visitor."

"I must ask him about that point," the detective said. "Now, am I correct in saying that there is no one here present with whom I have talked who saw anything of Lady Grassleyes after midday yesterday? I am not, of course, counting Mr. Granet."

A young man who had been sitting by himself in a distant corner of the room rose to his feet. He had been listening to the proceedings with obvious interest and once or twice it seemed as though he were on the point of intervening. He had once even half risen to his feet. He was a nervous-looking youth, with flaxen hair and eyes of pale blue, dressed in a beach suit of pale-yellow trousers and blue coat. He spoke French slowly and apparently with some difficulty.

"Monsieur Suresne," he said, "I am a little puzzled as to the exact meaning of this conference. It seems to be a sort of informal court set up by yourself without any definite purpose."

"It is just an attempt," the detective explained with a kindly smile, "to help me a little in what might prove to be rather a difficult task. The question of Lady Grassleyes' condition will come before a judicial tribunal during the course of the next few days. The affair will then be conducted officially. I have been consulted by the police here and asked to attend that investigation, and I felt that I could be of more use if I made some sort of contact first with Lady Grassleyes' neighbours and heard what they had to say."

"That seems quite all right," the young man said, "and I must tell you that I know nothing about these affairs except that I am rather a student of crime and mystery stories written in my own language, which is English."

A little shiver ran through the audience.

"Crime has not been suggested," Suresne reminded him in a shocked tone.

"Pardon me," the other replied, "I think that notwithstanding your suave manner crime has been suggested from the very moment you invited us to meet you here. I, for instance, came with the others and I find my position a little difficult."

"Can I help you, sir?" the detective asked. "Who is this gentleman?" he enquired of Spenser in an undertone.

"His name is Paul Oliver. He rents one of the smaller bungalows here and has been in residence, I think, some three or four months."

"Very nearly six months," the young man put in. "I very seldom move out of the place. I am a writer by profession and much engrossed in my work. Monsieur Suresne a few minutes ago addressed a question to the whole assembly. He asked whether any one had seen Lady Grassleyes yesterday afternoon."

"That is so."

"I make no assertion," Oliver continued, "but I should like to say this. If I had seen Lady Grassleyes within an hour or so of her mysterious collapse I should not consider this the proper time to admit it."

There was a little buzz of whispering. Every one stared at the young man. He seemed indifferent to their scrutiny but he remained standing.

"You may have perfectly good reasons, sir, for taking up that attitude," Suresne declared. "Let me put the question to you. Frankly, did you or did you not see anything of Lady Grassleyes at any time yesterday?"

"I am willing to accept a subpœna to appear at the court of enquiry," he replied, "but I shall not answer that question at the present moment."

"We may take it, then, that you did?"

"You may take anything you like for granted. You cannot put words into my mouth, however, which I have not spoken."

Suresne again appeared shocked.

"My dear young sir," he said, "consider for a moment. Have I made a single note at this gathering? Have I written down a single line? Ours has been just a little conversation with a view to helping an official—myself—to work with greater ease. I do not ask for your aid unless you give it voluntarily and cheerfully. You understand that, I hope."

"Quite."

"And you have nothing to tell me that you think might be of assistance?"

"Nothing."

"You are within your rights," Suresne declared. "I will see that you have a notice to attend the court."

The young man resumed his seat. A babble of voices followed. Every one seemed to be talking at the same time. Spenser crossed the room and sat on the arm of Paul Oliver's chair. Whatever he said to him was apparently pleasant and good-humoured, but nearly every one was out of hearing. Suresne ignored them completely and looked round the apartment closely. His eye rested on Mr. Johnson, who rose at once to his feet.

"If you are looking for some one else to put through the mill, sir," he said, "here am I. My name is Johnson. I live in 'The Olive Tree' bungalow. I have not seen Lady Grassleyes for a fortnight to speak to, but she drove past my bungalow yesterday morning. The young gentleman who has got something up his sleeve has the next bungalow to mine. 'Sweet Waters' they call it. It has a stream running through the garden."

Suresne held up his hand in warning.

"Thank you, Mr. Johnson. That will do, if you please. We may probably ask you a question at a more formal period of this investigation."

Somewhat abashed, Johnson resumed his seat. The detective's eyes wandered round the room as though seeking out any one who had hitherto escaped his notice. Spenser, looking very serious indeed, left his place by Oliver's side and came up to Suresne. The two talked together for a few moments in a low tone. Suresne showed signs of irritation, if not anger. His companion remained persistent. Finally, the detective swung round and addressed the little company.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "Mr. Spenser informs me that he has just received an urgent message from the hospital to which the body of Lady Grassleyes was taken for further examination. He appears to think that in the circumstances our little talk should be brought to an end."

There was a moment's silence. Then Johnson's voice boomed forth.

"May we know what those circumstances are?" he demanded.

There was a drawn look about Spenser's face as he turned towards him. He held in his fingers the oblong slip of paper which Postralli, who had entered and left the room almost unnoticed, had slipped into his hand. His tone lacked its usual pleasant ring.

"I have just received a special message from the surgeon at the clinic in Nice. Their examination of the body is now proceeding. They are of the opinion—" he broke off in his speech, his voice seeming to fail him—"they are of opinion that whether Lady Grassleyes died from its effects or not, she was suffering from the effects of poison either self-administered or administered by some other person. The examination, I should add, is not yet closed and the doctor in charge is not willing to commit himself to the statement that it was a fatal dose."

There was for a moment an intense silence in the room. It was broken by a little shriek from Madame di Mendoza, followed by a hysterical cry from the young man with the flaxen hair.

CHAPTER XIII

Granet was the first to disentangle himself from the small group of people who were eagerly discussing this last ambiguous pronouncement. He was anxious to get away rather than face any sort of conversation

with Spenser. The latter, however, had other ideas. He broke away from the little crowd who were besieging him with questions and caught up Granet just outside the front door.

"I want a few words with you, Mr. Granet."

"I should hesitate about that, if I were you. I think we are better apart, for the moment."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that if it is true that Lady Grassleyes' condition gives rise to even the barest suspicion that she is dead, and that she met her death in some unnatural manner, the explanation of your extraordinary behaviour last night becomes a little difficult. I would rather not hear it in private."

"Don't take that line, Granet," Spenser begged, laying his hand upon his arm. "Listen to what I have to say before you make up your mind about this affair, anyhow. I admit that I was off my head last night. But remember, it is since that scuffle in the dark that I discovered from Colonel Dryden who you really were. For all I knew before that you were just a sort of adventurer who might have been guilty of anything."

"What were you doing searching the drawers of Lady Grassleyes' desk?" Granet asked sternly.

"In return, let me ask you this," Spenser retorted. "What did you really want at the Manoir at that time of night?"

"I told you that at the time. I came to ask you a simple question, to satisfy an hysterical girl. You behaved like a madman."

"Listen to me. I behaved like a man who was guarding his own property. You perhaps don't believe that I am a partner with Lady Grassleyes in this bungalow business. Not only that, but we had a much larger enterprise on the tapis which was on the point of development. I wanted the keys and I wanted some papers. I had a perfect right to be there."

"All this may be quite right," Granet admitted, "and so what?"

"I simply want you to keep your mouth shut until the time comes to speak," Spenser declared eagerly. "I agree that I was over-excited last night, that I had had too much to drink, but remember, I have a long-established position to keep up in Nice. I can't have people even suspicious of my position with regard to the Manoir."

"I am not a gossip," Granet assured him. "I shall answer questions only when I am asked them officially. When that time comes I shall say exactly what happened, neither more nor less."

"I suppose I must be content with that," Spenser said reluctantly, "but believe me, Granet, there's more in this affair than you know of at present. Don't make things more difficult, please. The English butler here has just told me that that young fellow Oliver called here the night before last and Lady Grassleyes refused to see him. He went off in a furious temper. That's another one who's trying to make mischief."

Granet turned away.

"I have no wish to make things more difficult for any one," he said a little shortly. "If the young man did call he was a fool not to have said so at the examination. Before we part I will even give you a word of advice. Stop that habit of carrying a gun about with you at night. I have not heard of any burglaries in the neighbourhood and it is a habit that might be misunderstood."

The people were beginning to trickle out from the Manoir. Amongst the foremost came Madame di Mendoza and Carlotta. Between them was walking Paul Oliver. He was talking earnestly to his two companions but Madame di Mendoza alone seemed to be listening to him. Carlotta's eyes were fixed upon Granet, who was by this time some distance ahead, hurrying towards his own bungalow. He went straight to the garage, unlocked the door, started up his car and drove out. He was just in time to avoid Madame di Mendoza and her sister, and he remained brutally indifferent to Carlotta's wistful cry. At the western entrance to the grounds, however, which led onto the Grasse road, he found his progress checked. A gendarme was standing there holding up his hand.

"*Route barrée, monsieur*," he announced, planting himself in the middle of the rough road.

Granet brought his car to a standstill.

"What do you mean, '*route barrée*'?" he demanded.

The man laid his hand upon the side of the car and his foot upon the running board.

"Monsieur must understand," he explained, "that a notice has just been issued by the police at Cannes, Grasse and Nice. A guard has been placed at all the gates leading from the Manoir. No one is allowed to leave without a pass."

"Why?"

"It is not my affair," the gendarme replied.

"From whom do I obtain a pass?"

"The Commissioner of Police is on his way from Grasse. Others from the *gendarmérie* are on their way from Cannes. The orders are absolute and must be obeyed. Monsieur must understand that he cannot pass."

Granet recognized the voice of authority. He slipped into reverse gear and went slowly back along the stony, narrow road. He was approaching the turning leading to his bungalow when he became aware of the glittering of metal, the noise of an engine being driven at full speed with its exhaust open and the honk-honk of an on-coming vehicle. Round the corner, at a perilous angle, came a powerful motor-cycle, upon which the flaxen-haired youth in the strange raiment of the afternoon beach lounge was seated. A yellow-clad leg shot out sideways, there was a grating of brakes and the young man came to a standstill.

"What the hell are you taking all the road for?" he demanded, slipping from his machine and glaring angrily at Granet.

"I might ask," was the curt reply, "why you are riding along a private road like a lunatic."

"I ride as I choose," was the furious retort. "Be so good as to move into the side so that I can get by."

"It will do you no good if I do," Granet assured him. "This road leads only to the side entrance and through that you will not be able to pass."

Paul Oliver's appearance became more unpleasant than ever. He scowled at Granet whilst his foot played with the pedal of his machine.

"Who's going to stop me from passing?" he demanded. "I am going to Grasse."

"I doubt it. As you turn the next bend you will see standing across the entrance, with the gate closed behind him, a swarthy gendarme."

"It'll take a regiment to stop me," Oliver blustered. "I've had enough of this place. I've left my luggage at the bungalow. They can get their fortnight's rent out of that."

"So that's the trouble, is it? That was why you were angry with the French detective who asked you questions about Lady Grassleyes."

The young man stared at Granet and seemed suddenly to recognize him. He pulled off his goggles. Granet bowed ironically.

"So you were at that damned meeting," Oliver muttered.

"I was there, Mr. Paul Oliver," Granet admitted. "I have heard, also, that you paid a call at the Manoir late the other night and that Lady Grassleyes refused to see you."

"She broke her promise to me."

"So you refused to pay your rent?"

"It is none of your business. We all run short sometimes, especially if you lead my sort of life. I am going to Grasse now to telephone for some money."

"You won't be allowed to pass, you know. A more determined-looking person than the gendarme guarding the gate I never saw. I am in sympathy with you about leaving the place, although I am quite ready to pay my bill, but I don't think either you or I will get to Grasse, or anywhere else, to-night."

"They cannot make prisoners of us," the other declared wildly. "I shall go to the main entrance and insist upon passing."

"Don't let me keep you," Granet begged. "I really don't care where you go to. I'll move my car into the side so that you can get past."

The young man silently watched the operation from his seat on the motor-cycle.

"Now pass on, my gaily attired neighbour," Granet invited, "and if you wish to return my kindness in leaving the road open for you close that filthy exhaust."

Oliver rode off and Granet made his way slowly back to his bungalow. He garaged the car and went into the house. He finished unpacking his despatch case, laid some formidable piles of stationery upon the table, filled two fountain pens and produced from one of the parcels various bottles and a few wine glasses. Then he took off the telephone receiver and pressed the button which connected him with the Manoir. Almost immediately a faint voice answered.

"That is Mr. Granet? You want something? I come down, if you wish."

"I was thinking about dinner."

"No dinner left," was the cheerful reply. "Every one ordered dinner. Pooralli, my brother, has taken orders for everything we have. Now he has gone away for two hours. No one is allowed to leave the place and

the tradespeople can come no farther than the gates. Very bad business, Mr. Granet. Some of us will go hungry to-night."

"Well, I certainly shall unless you help me, Postralli. I am content with simple things but biscuits alone do not satisfy me. Is there nothing left in your larders?"

"Master," the boy said, "we have prepared dinners for fourteen people. The great English gentleman, the British Consul, is invited by Mr. Spenser."

"Where did you say your brother was?"

"He gone away. Come back later. Martin, the English butler, he taken round food that people wish cook themselves. Madame di Mendoza she has very good cook. Mr. Johnson, too. Six cutlets and a basketful of vegetables his woman has fetched. All very busy here, Mr. Granet, but no more food to spare."

"Will you telephone me," Granet asked, "if the police open up the place?"

"I let master know, but the shops in small places and even in Cannes will soon be closed."

"Seems to me that I shall go to bed hungry."

"Master eat more to-morrow," the boy answered consolingly, ringing off.

* * * * *

Granet was philosopher enough to count a dinnerless evening as amongst the very small inconveniences of life. He sat sorting his papers and writing letters until nearly eight o'clock. Then he selected two of his favourite biscuits and mixed himself a cocktail. He stepped outside on to his miniature terrace. In the acacia trees almost opposite his gate a nightingale was singing. A little farther away a solitary owl every now and then croaked out his tribute to the otherwise voiceless night. The Manoir was a blaze of light through the trees. He had just commenced his second cocktail when he paused and set the glass down. He heard that quaint sound which was like nothing else on earth: the padding of feet upon the grass in unbroken rhythm. Each footfall was inevitable as the slow swing of a pendulum. Granet rose quietly and peered out into the semidarkness. He perceived a dark form advancing, and presently Postralli, unruffled, presented himself.

"Gentleman," he announced, "is invited to dinner at the Manoir."

"Very kind of somebody, I'm sure," Granet acknowledged. "Who asked me? Who sent the message?"

"The young-lady mistress," Postralli told him, "but there are others. Mr. Spenser, he stays; Colonel Dryden, he stays; the Sub-Commissioner of Police from Nice and the Commissioner of Grasse, they also there. Monsieur Suresne there, too. He talks a long time with Colonel Dryden. They wish for master to come now, and black coat he is not necessary."

Granet reflected for a moment. Suresne and Dryden together again; Suresne, whom he had watched during the afternoon every now and then casting that queer look of interrogation across the room at Jane.

He turned suddenly towards the open door.

"I will come immediately," he announced.

Postralli, without another word, started off in the direction of the Manoir. Granet followed him a few minutes later.

Martin, the English butler, of whom Granet had as yet only caught a fleeting glimpse, received him and ushered him into an apartment on the other side of the house with stone-vaulted ceiling and walls and an old-fashioned built-in fireplace. Spenser, after a moment's hesitation, advanced to meet him, but from the moment of his entrance Granet was convinced that whoever was responsible for his invitation the house-agent had nothing to do with it.

"Not much of an occasion for hospitality, I'm afraid," Spenser said. "You know every one, I think, except our Grasse Commissioner, Monsieur Grisson."

Granet shook hands with a cadaverous-looking man with tired expression and dressed almost in the funeral garb of an undertaker.

"We heard a rumour," Spenser went on, "that you had been left dinnerless by the stupid behaviour of the police to-night."

"Quite true," Granet assented. "On the other hand, one does not think very much about the ordinary functions of life at times like these. I was trying to imagine that I should be perfectly content with a couple of biscuits and a cocktail. Very kind of any one who happened to think of me, I'm sure."

Martin came in with glasses of sherry and various apéritifs and the gloom of the company seemed for a few minutes somewhat lightened.

"Miss Grassleyes is, of course, your hostess to-night," Spenser explained, standing before the fireplace in the centre of the little group, "but you will naturally excuse her presence. I have," he went on, "as you will some of you probably hear before long, a certain claim to take her place, as I am really a partner in this enterprise."

"A very successful one, I understand," Dryden observed.

Spenser stroked his moustache.

"Yes, I suppose it might be called successful," he conceded. "Her ladyship knew all about the running of large estates and she was thoroughly at home with all the French tradespeople. Then she was an extraordinarily clever gardener. The walled kitchen gardens are very productive and the small herb garden which she never allowed a soul to enter except herself is full of specimens of plants which have never been successfully grown in this hemisphere before. She told me once that she had even been successful in producing phrosin, which, as I dare say you know, has many of the qualities of opium without its evil effect."

"Very interesting, very interesting," the Consul murmured. "I have heard of the herb garden, of course, but when I asked Lady Grassleyes to let me see it she flatly refused, and Marc, whom I suppose you would call the head gardener here, when I wanted to talk about it one day, simply walked away. He apologized afterwards and said that the cultivation of it was one of his mistress' pet hobbies which she refused to share with any one."

"A most expensive hobby, too, I can assure you," Spenser said gloomily. "She thought nothing, sometimes, of paying hundreds of pounds for a few bulbs and slips which had to be sent over specially packed from some native firm of herbalists in Bombay. Still even that hasn't prevented Grassleyes' paying. It needed capital when I took some interest in it and of course the sort of recommendation I was able to

give was what it needed more than anything. If it is continued we shall have to seriously consider expanding. We have six bungalows now. They are always full and I should like to see a score of them. There's plenty of room. The estate extends all the way up to Grasse on one side and nearly to Opio on the other."

"Yes, that's all right," Dryden said, "but we always thought that the reason Lady Grassleyes made such a success of the place was because people could come here and live and never see a sign of any one else. They had the real feeling that they were in the heart of this beautiful country and away from the world. If you had a dozen more bungalows, say, you would never be able to keep them so wonderfully secluded. As it is at present, whether you come in from the Grasse entrance or the Cannes gates or the entrance from the Nice road, you never see a sign of any other building except the Manoir."

"Quite true," Spenser admitted, "but, as I was saying, there is plenty of land untouched yet."

"All the same," Granet pointed out, "you would never be able to continue this queer idea of serving meals from the house if the bungalows were much farther away."

"We might improve upon that," Spenser replied. "Our two 'Running Footmen,' who are part of the picturesque charm of the place, do all the necessary service now, but we could have a system of provision carts which could get round the place in no time."

"Has Lady Grassleyes much of a family?" Suresne asked, his head a little on one side and that inquisitive gleam back in his eyes which had been so apparent during the afternoon.

"There's only her niece, Jane," Spenser replied, "and a couple of nephews who are very seldom here. One of them is in the Civil Service, I think, and the other out in New York. Miss Grassleyes has cabled them but of course they would not be able to get here for a week or so."

There were no servants in the room at that moment. Grisson, Commissioner of Grasse, after a glance round came a little closer to Spenser.

"I am sorry it was not possible for me to be here this afternoon," he said. "I understand, of course, that the formal examination is to take place later, but cannot you tell me the nature of the doctors' report?"

"I think, perhaps," Spenser answered with a slight frown, "that it would be best to leave such matters alone for the moment."

Tortoni, the Sub-Commissioner of Nice, nodded approvingly.

"I regret very much that I could not get here in time to listen to my friend Suresne's informal examination of the residents here," he said. "However, we shall go into all that later on."

"I think myself," Spenser remarked quietly, "that some of our friends in the medical profession are inclined to be sensationalists. But it is scarcely a subject for us to discuss, especially in their absence. We shall all hear what they have to say later on."

Martin came into the room and there was silence while he announced the service of dinner. Postralli held open the door and they passed into the *salle-à-manger*, another room on the same side of the house. A round table under the central chandelier had been prepared for the meal.

"Sit wherever you please," Spenser suggested with a wave of the hand. "You have no host or hostess. Granet, Colonel Dryden is an old acquaintance of yours, I understand, and you would probably like to

exchange reminiscences. Suresne, you and Grisson have met before, I believe, and Tortoni, of course, you both know. Mr. Clunderson, the family lawyer, is on his way from Paris and will be here any moment, so I will leave a place for him on my left. There we are. One place too many, I see."

Postralli was standing with his hands resting on the back of the chair between Dryden and Granet. The door was opened. Jane Grassleyes came quietly in.

"I hope," she said, "you will all excuse me if I join you. You cannot help discussing a little the terrible thing which has happened. I fancy I am more interested than any one else—more interested even than you gentlemen who will have so much to do with it."

Those who had taken their places rose at once and every one made a polite little speech of welcome except Spenser. He alone stood perfectly still for a moment and there was a flash in his eyes which was certainly not one of welcome. Without a word Jane sank into the chair which Postralli had been holding.

CHAPTER XIV

"I suppose," Granet remarked to his unexpected neighbour, "you would not care to explain why you have chosen to give us the pleasure of your company at this classic feast?"

"Why should I?" she replied, smiling. "For a man of the strong, silent type, Mr. Granet, I find you a little inquisitive."

"I never claimed to be of the strong, silent type," he answered. "Curiosity, on the contrary, is one of my besetting sins. I am so intrigued by this place that I can't make up my mind to behave like a sensible man—to pack my bag and depart."

"You couldn't, if you wanted to. As a matter of fact, I thought you had made a sort of effort in that direction."

"*Touché*," he confessed with a smile. "But I wasn't taking my luggage with me. My idea was to have looked up your friend, Mr. Clunderson, in Paris and discussed this little affair with him."

"A very profitless effort yours would have been. You would not have seen him as at the present moment he is flying here from Paris. And I should not allude to it as a 'little affair,' if I were you. You may change your mind before you have satisfied that breathless curiosity of yours and found out all about it."

"I think you might recognize the fact," he complained, dropping his voice, "that such interest as I might have displayed has been genuinely and solely on your account."

"You flatter me! Still, I would remind you that I have not asked for your aid. I have asked no one's aid. There is a perfect avalanche of trouble that might descend upon one or two of us seated at this table at any moment. I prefer to accept my portion of it without help from any one. At the same time, believe me, I am grateful for your interest."

"Nature seems to have made you into a fairly independent sort of person," he remarked quietly.

"Nature did nothing of the kind," she answered. "I was born and grew up with a gentle and plastic disposition. You may not believe it but it's true. It is the fault of circumstances alone that I am here, that I

am suffering the indignity of being what I am—an unwelcome member, under my own roof, of this motley company of policemen, doctors and house-agents. You must be the only man here without any professional standing except Colonel Dryden."

Granet nodded.

"That comes of my curiosity," he observed dryly. "I am a looker on at the feast—a listener."

Jane looked at him thoughtfully. Their eyes met for a moment and the vague mantle of irritation fell away from him. He saw the lines under her beautiful eyes, dark and eloquent with misery. He realized that she was suffering acutely. He found time, too, to admire the smooth elegance of her braided hair and the sensitive charm of her quivering lips.

"I wish that one could help you," he said quietly. "The failing you have jeered at as curiosity is the outcome of a genuine sympathy for you, Miss Grassleyes. You have not asked for it. You may even consider it as an impertinence. But it is there."

"You must not talk to me like that," she begged, her voice dropping almost to a whisper. "I have been through much during the last few hours and even during the days that preceded them. I am proof against everything except kindness."

"That is rather a bitter speech, because I have nothing but kindness in my heart for you."

Colonel Dryden claimed her from the other side. He had little enough to say but his tone and manner were sympathetic.

"Is this not rather a grim ordeal for you, Jane?" he asked.

She drank half a glass of the country wine with which they had been served before she answered him.

"It is not exactly a feast of pleasure, is it? On the other hand, every one has a professional or family interest in what is going on, and in the circumstances it seemed to me that my place was here."

"The whole affair," Colonel Dryden remarked, "seems to me to be in such a state of confusion. I scarcely wonder at your desire to understand what every one has to say about it. You must be a very brave young woman, all the same, to face a gathering like this."

"I am not brave at all. I am just afraid and when I am afraid I hate to be alone."

"Many brave deeds have been done under the influence of fear. The only V.C. man I ever knew intimately told me that he performed the feat which won him his cross in a state of abject terror."

"That is much more reasonable than it sounds," she sighed.

"Do you wish to talk about the topic of the moment?" he asked a little bluntly perhaps but still gently. "Or would you rather leave it alone?"

"I came to listen," she said. "To make up my mind whether it was my duty to say certain things."

"Advice would not help you? I am getting to be an old man, you know, my dear, and I have seen a good deal of the world."

"Advice," she told him, "would not help me."

"Why not?"

"Because advice, to be valuable, could only come from some one who knew and understood all that is involved."

"That rules me out, then, I'm afraid. I am only present because Spenser is a well-known Englishman in these parts and seems to be somehow involved in Lady Grassleyes' affairs. Of Harriet herself, apart from our personal friendship, I only knew that she was supposed to have a very profitable undertaking here which she managed with a considerable amount of skill, and that she had contrived somehow or other to make herself exceedingly unpopular with the whole of the medical faculty of the Riviera."

"That is quite true, I'm afraid," Jane admitted. "My aunt was a brilliantly clever woman and some of her articles on the cultivation of Oriental herbs and abstraction of drugs have been translated into almost every language in the world. The doctors round here mostly disliked her because she laughed at their old-fashioned methods in treating some of the everyday complaints. She claimed, you know, to be able to cure catarrh and sleeplessness in a month if her patients would only trust her, and only four days ago she told me that she was on the verge of a discovery which would make her famous all over the world."

"That is extraordinarily interesting," Dryden acknowledged. "I wonder whether it has occurred to you that she might have been making experiments on herself and gone a little too far?"

"Don't let us talk about it, please," she begged. "I cannot tell you how that idea has terrified me."

"Well, don't think any more about it for the moment," he advised. "If this inquest they are talking about comes to anything—"

"Don't!"

"Not another word," he promised. "Clumsy fellow I am, anyway. Tell me," he went on, "before I received my present appointment I used to hear that your aunt took a considerable interest in the social life of these parts. Is that a fact?"

"I believe that it is quite true. Anything else?"

Dryden coughed.

"I have been told that at times she was a gambler."

Jane for a moment was thoughtful.

"I suppose if any one enters into the life of the place they become more or less a gambler. I remember when I first came and we went out much more, a great deal of the entertaining was done at the Casinos."

"It is still. I saw a man only the other day, whom I have always looked upon as a most austere person and whom I was surprised to see in a Casino at all, take the bank at baccarat at the Méditerranée and win something over two hundred thousand francs."

A sad little smile played for a moment at the corners of her lips.

"I don't believe my aunt ever played for sums like that," she murmured. "I think she speculated sometimes in stocks and shares but she kept all that very much to herself. On the whole," she concluded, "I consider that she was one of the most secretive people I ever met."

"So I always thought," the Consul agreed.

Spenser leaned across the table. He had pushed his glass of country wine on one side and had helped himself freely to the champagne which had taken its place. He was tearing into small pieces a slip of paper.

"Clunderson may be here at any moment," he announced. "I have just received a message. He was on the plane which landed half an hour ago."

Jane rose slowly to her feet.

"I think, if you will excuse me ..." she murmured, turning to her two neighbours.

"You are not leaving us, Miss Grassleyes?" Spenser put in quickly. "It was your own choice to come here. You can't leave in the middle of dinner like this."

"I leave or not as I choose, Mr. Spenser," she retorted with uplifted eyebrows. "I think you rather forget yourself."

"Why do you wish to leave?" he persisted. "Is it that you want to speak to Clunderson before any one else can get at him?"

There was a dead silence in the room. Spenser had risen to his feet, his cheeks flushed, his tone angry.

"If I do it is entirely my own affair," Jane replied. "I am the only relative present. Mr. Clunderson will naturally expect to see me immediately upon his arrival. I am sure you will all appreciate that," she added, with a glance round the table.

Every one joined in prompt and courteous agreement and Jane, with a sad little wave of the hand, passed on her way to the door.

Spenser flung his napkin on to the table, strode across the room and reached the door before her. He stood with his face to the room, his hands behind him clutching the handle.

"We are all interested in this matter," he said. "We all want to know the truth about the Lady Grassleyes mystery. I have reason to believe that I am one of the executors of her will. If that is so I shall appeal to Clunderson to take a certain course of action of which Miss Grassleyes would probably not approve. It is in the interests of every one that this young lady has no previous communication with him. I regret being forced into this position—"

"You are making a fool of yourself, Spenser," Dryden interrupted. "You don't know if you are an executor or not. You have no authority here until the will is produced. Miss Grassleyes is the only relative of Lady Grassleyes in the house and she has a perfect right to talk to the lawyer as much as she desires."

Spenser's bulky frame still blocked the doorway. Jane remained within a foot of him, calm and collected but insistent.

"I am determined to see Mr. Clunderson upon his arrival, and nothing you can do will stop me," she said defiantly.

The men round the table had mostly risen to their feet. Granet was the only one, however, who had left his place. He was coming slowly over towards the door. Spenser watched him apprehensively.

"Monsieur Grisson, I appeal to you," he cried. "Monsieur Tortoni, too. You should recognize my point of view. Mr. Clunderson will arrive with an exaggerated notion of his prerogatives, as English lawyers always have. He will recognize this girl as Lady Grassleyes' niece and probably take any action which she suggests. I warn you that this is no ordinary case we have come over to discuss. It might even be a case of murder. If you do anything to assist a meeting between this girl and Clunderson before the whole case has been laid before the authorities you will be serving the cause of one person only—the criminal."

Jane was fast losing her composure. As she shrank away she found Granet just behind her. She gripped his arm.

"Mr. Spenser has had a word with you gentlemen. Let me have one," Granet suggested. "Mr. Spenser is a house-agent well known in this neighbourhood as a successful man of business, and no doubt he means well. But what has he to do with this unfortunate happening? We have only his word for it that he is Lady Grassleyes' executor and the only person here with any authority whatever is her niece. And for a third person, who is not related or connected in any way with the affair, to try and keep the family solicitor from the sole representative of that family is utterly foolish. Miss Jane Grassleyes has a perfect right to see Mr. Clunderson when and how she chooses. I hope you will all agree with me."

Suresne now detached himself from the little crowd at the table.

"I am an impartial person," he proclaimed. "It is my business in life to detect crime. Miss Grassleyes will probably not object if I am present when she interviews her lawyer?"

There was the sound of a car drawing up outside. Jane moved impetuously forward, only to find herself repelled by Spenser's outstretched arms. Then, from some unseen place, out stepped Pooralli, unruffled, calm of speech, pale as ever. He slipped in front of Granet, who had also taken an impetuous step forward.

"The young mistress wishes to see gentleman who arrives?"

"I do!" Jane cried passionately. "This is, for the moment at any rate, my house. No one has the right to direct my actions."

"Whilst I am here you will not pass, Miss Grassleyes," Spenser said. "I suggest that you return to your seat. I propose to interview Mr. Clunderson myself."

"Mistress wish go?" Pooralli asked quietly.

"I do!" she cried again. "I do! I will go!"

There was no one in the room who could tell how it happened, no one but Pooralli, who had spent many years where such things were easy. Spenser towered over the little man standing before him, then suddenly the huge, bulky figure seemed to become a heaving mass of legs and arms being lifted as though by a giant clean off the ground. Pooralli looked over his shoulder.

"Mistress pass out," he enjoined.

Jane left the room just as Spenser was lowered from his perilous position to the floor. It was Pooralli now who stood with his back to the door. The smile was still on his lips. Spenser struggled to his feet but made no movement towards him.

"You will end your days in prison for indulging in these filthy tricks," he gasped.

Pooralli shook his head.

"No, not me, Mr. Spenser," he said. "Never prison for me. Another, perhaps. But not for me."

CHAPTER XV

Mr. William Clunderson, certainly the best-known English lawyer in France, seemed a little puzzled by the air of mystery and suppressed excitement prevailing at the Manoir. He was a small, grey-haired man, carefully dressed, with wizened features and steel-grey eyes unprotected by any form of spectacles. He had relinquished his coat and hat in the hall to Martin but he carried with him a small black bag of old-fashioned type with which he refused to part. He shook hands with Jane and declining any form of refreshment accompanied her into her private room and accepted a chair by the side of the desk. His bag he held on his knees in front of him.

"I have flown from Paris at your request, Miss Grassleyes," he said, "but I found it a most uncomfortable form of locomotion, and, if you will forgive my saying so, I cannot see that the necessity for such haste is apparent."

Jane was a little taken aback.

"But Mr. Clunderson," she explained, "there is this business of managing the bungalows to be seen to, and we have no idea, without the will, who is to be placed in a position of responsibility with regard to them. Remember, Aunt Harriet was a very secretive woman and there were details about her life which I never thoroughly understood. We are perfectly helpless without your presence or advice. I have not even authority to draw a cheque. Then, as your agent here, Mr. Doubleday, pointed out, even if the worst has happened my aunt is not legally dead until the doctors have signed the certificate."

"That certainly is a most extraordinary situation," Mr. Clunderson acknowledged, "but it is one which will be settled, without a doubt, in a matter of hours."

"I am afraid so," she sighed despondently. "Still, if you had seen her, Mr. Clunderson, as I saw her just before she was removed from here to the clinic, you would have been amazed at her appearance. I cannot explain it because I have never seen a dead person, but there was something—oh, don't let us talk about it!" she broke off suddenly. "There are four doctors who say that she is dead and one who simply refuses to sign the certificate. And he is the one who counts, Dr. Bertoldi.... Anyhow, with the majority of the doctors against him I suppose one has to believe that there really is no hope."

"I am afraid," Clunderson admitted, "that except from a strictly legal point of view we shall have to take Lady Grassleyes' decease for granted. Doubleday met me at the air-port and he seems to think there is no doubt but that the doctors will satisfy themselves as soon as the result of the tests is forthcoming. However, if there should be any delay, the question of finance can easily be settled," he went on, selecting a key from the end of the chain which he had withdrawn from his pocket and unlocking the bag. "I will

admit, though, that Lady Grassleyes' dispositions might be considered slightly eccentric. Is there a person of the name of Spenser, a house-agent, I believe, living in the neighbourhood?"

"There is," Jane assented calmly.

"He appears to be associated with you," he continued, "in the management of the property, provided, of course, Lady Grassleyes is deceased. But your authority does not commence at once."

"Do you mean that we are joint executors of Aunt Harriet's will?"

"That may possibly happen but there are certain unusual conditions which have to be observed. Your aunt does not wish her will proved or any disposition made of her property for thirty days after her death. During those thirty days her bank balance can be dealt with, but only by you. If more money is needed for running the place your aunt points out that a considerable sum in cash will be found in the safe."

"Why this month's delay? Isn't that a little unusual?"

"Everything your aunt did was unusual," the lawyer replied dryly. "I myself have at times been bewildered by her various instructions. Those with regard to her death, however, are fortunately clear. I am to open a letter, which I shall find in the safe, in your presence."

Jane leaned from her chair and there was a note of appeal in her voice.

"You don't want me to send for Mr. Spenser, do you?" she pleaded. "He is actually here at the moment. His behaviour has been so strange during the last couple of days. I don't understand the situation in the least. Tell me my aunt's last wishes."

Clunderson considered the point and came to a decision.

"If Mr. Spenser is indeed on the premises, Miss Grassleyes, I think you had better send for him."

Jane pressed the bell which stood upon her desk. It was answered in an incredibly short space of time by Pooralli.

"Pooralli," she said, "please ask Mr. Spenser to step this way."

Pooralli bowed and disappeared. In a very short while he ushered Spenser into the room. The latter had straightened his tie, brushed his hair and generally pulled himself together, but the geniality of his expression was distinctly forced. He shook hands with the lawyer and without waiting for an invitation drew up a chair to the desk.

"Glad to have you here, sir," he said. "You have brought all the papers dealing with the estate, I hope?"

"I have brought the keys of the safe," Clunderson replied, "in which I trust, according to Lady Grassleyes' instructions, we shall find her will, a considerable sum of money, a casket of Oriental jewels—some of them heirlooms, and others collected in the East, and as yet unmounted—also her Formula Book with details of all the plants in her forcing house, laboratory and walled garden. There should also be a letter of instructions addressed to Miss Grassleyes. I have to inform you that the will is not to be proved until thirty days after decease, although from what Lady Grassleyes says I believe that you and Miss Grassleyes are to be joint executors. Miss Grassleyes has authority to use the balance standing at the bank to conduct the affairs of the estate."

"What's the idea of not having the will proved for a month?" Spenser asked brusquely.

The lawyer coughed.

"It is not possible," he said, "for us to divine the reasons for many instructions we receive from our clients. I cannot, therefore, answer your question."

"No sense in it," Spenser muttered. "Besides, how much is this balance?"

"The balance lying at the Crédit Lyonnais, which I am entitled to use at Miss Grassleyes' request," the other replied in his dry, metallic voice, "is well over a million francs. There is also a considerable amount of cash which we shall find in the safe which can be used if required."

Spenser whistled softly to himself.

"And I thought the old lady was hard up!"

"You were mistaken," the lawyer remarked. "Lady Grassleyes was a person of considerable wealth, unless she has devised some means of getting rid of her fortune unknown to myself. My task now is to open the private safe, take out the will, which I am to preserve for the thirty days stipulated, and read to Miss Grassleyes the letter addressed to her. Will you lead the way to the safe, Miss Grassleyes?"

Jane rose to her feet. The two men followed her down the two stairs into the adjoining apartment.

"So you had the keys in Paris all the time," Spenser observed. "How was Lady Grassleyes able to open her own safe, then?"

"I have always understood," Clunderson replied, "that she had another set of keys concealed about her person and that there was also a spare one in Miss Grassleyes' possession."

Neither he nor Jane took any notice of the single word muttered by Spenser, but to Jane, whose hearing was exceedingly acute, it sounded very much like "Jezebel!"

* * * * *

It took Clunderson only a few moments to open the safe door and commence his methodical search amongst the papers. He first of all handled the leases of the different bungalows, then with a perplexed air he lifted and replaced some other documents of even less importance. He glanced at the private ledger and returned it to its place. Then very slowly he turned round.

"I am looking, I imagine, in the wrong portion of this safe, Miss Grassleyes. What about the other side?"

"The other side?" Jane repeated in a puzzled tone. "I don't understand."

The lawyer stepped a little back. The safe was of curious construction and consisted apparently of two wings similar from the outside and separated by a solid slab of metal.

"This safe," Clunderson said, "contains nothing of any importance except the leases of the bungalows, various policies and the private ledger. Neither the will, the letter, the jewels, the Formula Book nor the money is here. They must all be in the other side."

"But there is no other side," Jane told him. "What you see there is a dummy portion. There is not even a keyhole."

Clunderson followed her gaze. He moved a step or two along the front of the safe, tapping as he went. There was nothing there, so far as he could discover, but solid metal. There was no keyhole even to what seemed to be the duplicate of the safe he had opened. He turned once more to Jane.

"Have you another safe in your bureau?" he asked. "Or anywhere here or in Lady Grassleyes' bedroom?"

"There is no other safe in the house of any sort," she declared.

Clunderson reopened the portion of the safe which he had already examined. Once more he looked through everything in the shape of documents which it contained. Spenser watched his every movement with feverish eyes. He seemed to have absolutely lost control of himself. His fists were clenched; the sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Look here, young woman," he shouted at Jane, "if you think you're going to get away with a fool's trick like this you're wrong. You know all about the other side of the safe. You have probably got the key for it in a safe place. Pinched the money, have you? Hidden the Formula Book? Collared the jewels and very likely tampered with the will!"

Jane sank into a chair.

"Mr. Clunderson—" she began.

"You leave Mr. Clunderson alone!" Spenser interrupted. "Now, sir, you listen to me!"

The lawyer seemed to have passed for a moment or two into a kind of stupor. His eyes were fixed upon vacancy. Then, with a visible effort, he pulled himself together.

"There is nothing whatever of that description in the safe, as you can see for yourself," he declared. "There is the private ledger only, but there is nothing in the shape of a personal message from Lady Grassleyes to you or to me or to any one else."

"But, Mr. Clunderson," Jane interposed, "you say that my aunt told you that all those things were in the safe. What reason did she give you for this wait of thirty days after her death before the will is proved?"

Clunderson leaned heavily against the side of the desk near by; then he slowly made his way to the chair in which Lady Grassleyes had been accustomed to sit, the uncrowned Queen of the Manoir. He sat down and leaned towards Jane. Somehow or other, although such a thing seemed impossible, there was a more ghastly tinge of pallor in his parchmentlike skin.

"Miss Grassleyes," he began, "your aunt told me, not a month ago, that I should find everything I have spoken to you about in that safe. As for the thirty days' delay before the will should be proved, she gave me no explanation of it, although I twice begged her to tell me at least what her idea was. She was a very extraordinary woman. She has done a very extraordinary thing. I must beg you, please—" he hesitated—"I must beg of you," he continued, gripping the arms of his chair, "to ring for some one or fetch me a little brandy. I am not a strong man. I feel ill. The shock of finding nothing that I expected has been too much for me."

"I'll get you something," Spenser cried quickly. "I won't be a minute."

He hurried from the room. Jane drew a stool to Clunderson's side and placed a cushion behind his head. She felt his hand. It was deadly cold. Her fingers strayed to his pulse. It was scarcely beating.

"The brandy will be here in a moment, Mr. Clunderson," she said. "You will feel better when you have had that. Tell me—is this the first time you have had this sort of attack?"

"Yes," he murmured. "But perhaps it will pass. I feel very ill."

Spenser came hurrying in with the brandy bottle, a glass and some water. He mixed a little and Jane held it to the lawyer's lips. He sipped it gently and leaned back in his chair.

"I think I'll fetch Mr. Granet from the other room," Jane suggested.

"Please fetch no one," Clunderson begged faintly. "I am already feeling better. In a moment or two I will talk to you. Give me a little more brandy."

She held the glass to his lips. This time he took it into his own hands. Jane could feel the warmth returning to his fingers. They waited in silence whilst he leaned back and rested. Presently he opened his eyes and spoke. His tone was more natural but the effect of the shock was apparent in the uncertainty of his speech.

"Mr. Spenser," he said, "and Miss Grassleyes. I regret—I am very sorry—it was the shock. Lady Grassleyes, the last time I saw her, assured me with her own lips that I should find in her safe the letter, her will and some important instructions concerning what we all know to have been the great hobby of her life—the herb garden. This is besides the considerable amount of money she spoke of and the jewels. There is not a single document there of the slightest importance except the leases, the few policies and the private ledger."

"That's a damnably nice thing to come here and tell us," Spenser said harshly. "What object do you suppose she could have in making fools of us all like this?"

"I only know what she told me," the lawyer repeated. "Of course, she may have changed the place in which she kept her valuables and meant to tell me about it."

"The house must be searched to-morrow from top to bottom," Spenser declared.

"But the Formula Book?" Jane asked in a bewildered tone. "That was her bible. She read it for hours every day. She was reading it only the night before she was taken ill—reading it for two hours before she went to bed. Are you sure that you have looked in every corner of the safe?"

"You can search it for yourself," the lawyer replied. "I can only tell you that this is the greatest shock I have ever experienced in my life. I can remember the contents of her will, I can tell you the contents of that letter, I know what her wishes were with regard to the estate—"

"Not worth a damn," Spenser broke in. "I have one last question to ask you, Miss Grassleyes. Are you going to stand in the way of our conducting a search through every room in this place?"

"Certainly I am not," Jane replied. "For once in our lives we agree, Mr. Spenser. You can come here to-morrow at what time you like. You can go into whatever rooms you like and you can search where you will. I can say no more than that."

"Come, that sounds more reasonable," Clunderson said, taking another sip of his brandy. "After all, perhaps we are being a little foolish. She was a woman of secret habits, of secret manner of thought. There

must be many places in the Manoir, in her own suite, for instance, where these things could be hidden.... Yet may I remind you that within twenty-four hours we shall know whether the will, at any rate, is an important document or not. I beg of you—do not rifle the house, do not disturb Lady Grassleyes' secret possessions until the doctors can tell you finally and absolutely the truth."

Spenser turned disgruntled to the door.

"All I can say is," he said, looking back from the threshold, "those doctors had better be quick about it."

CHAPTER XVI

There was a sudden silence in the dining-room when, about half an hour later, without any previous intimation of their coming, Jane Grassleyes, followed by Spenser and Mr. Clunderson, entered the room. Martin, who had been serving coffee, approached Jane for instructions.

"Bring us some fresh coffee," she ordered.

"And brandy," Spenser added. "Don't forget—the XO, Martin."

The man bowed and hurried away. Jane's eyebrows were slightly raised.

"Being co-executors, Mr. Spenser," she said quietly, "does not necessarily mean that we are co-distributors of my aunt's hospitality. I should prefer to give the orders, if you don't mind."

"What the dickens does it matter?" he muttered.

"It matters to me, at any rate. Until things are properly cleared up I shall consider myself alone in authority here."

Spenser turned away without another word. Jane resumed her seat and Colonel Dryden, passing his arm through Clunderson's, led him to the farther end of the table.

"Forgive my butting in," he said in a low tone, "but you know that I am an old friend of the family, Mr. Clunderson?"

"Perfectly well," the lawyer replied. "You can proceed with anything you wish to say."

"What really disturbs me," the Consul continued, "is the fear that something has gone wrong in my old friend Harriet Grassleyes' affairs. You all looked thunderstruck when you came back to the room just now."

The lawyer glanced round the table. They were well out of hearing of any one.

"I came down," he confided, "to hand over the will, a letter of instructions addressed to Miss Grassleyes and the volume which Lady Grassleyes told me more than once was the most wonderful manuscript volume in the world."

Dryden raised his eyebrows.

"I say, that sounds exciting!"

"The exciting part of it is this," Clunderson went on. "That marvellous volume which I know Lady Grassleyes valued more than anything else in life, the letter of instructions to Jane Grassleyes and the will, have all disappeared. Not only that, but there was also a very large sum of money in five-*mille* notes which I procured from the bank specially, and a casket of very valuable jewellery."

"God bless my soul!" the Consul exclaimed. "Why? Are you in earnest, Clunderson?"

"In earnest? I don't mind telling you, Dryden, that I nearly fainted when I put my hand into the back of the safe where, less than a month ago, Lady Grassleyes assured me that she had placed the will and the other things. I found nothing but an empty space, and, in the front, copies of the leases and the private ledger amongst various unimportant papers and photographs."

"How many keys are there to the safe?"

"I can't say exactly. Lady Grassleyes had one set, of course, and her niece had another."

Colonel Dryden struck a match, lit a cigarette and looked thoughtfully round the table. His eyes lingered for a moment or two upon Spenser, who had resumed his former seat and was balancing between his fingers a large brandy glass. His face was flushed and he was talking volubly.

"This is a pretty serious affair, Clunderson," the Consul said quietly.

"You need not tell me that, Dryden," the lawyer agreed. "When I thrust my hand into the safe and found what I did I felt nearer fainting than ever before in my life. Even now I feel the need of repose. I am growing old and I am tired. Flying upsets me. I am going to ask our young hostess to excuse me. For the moment, may I ask you to keep what I have told you a secret?"

"You do not need to ask me that," the Consul replied. "What about Spenser, though?"

"He will talk, I suppose. It cannot be helped. Good night, Dryden. I shall be seeing you in the morning—officially, I expect."

He rose to his feet. Jane left her chair hurriedly, came towards him and drew her arm through his.

"A room has been prepared for you here in the Manoir," she said. "If my guests will excuse me for a moment," she added, "I will show you the way."

"I shall be very grateful," Clunderson acquiesced.

They left the room together. Spenser set down his glass, pushed back his chair and followed them out into the hall. He laid his hand upon the lawyer's shoulder.

"One moment, Mr. Clunderson," he said harshly. "You seem to be trying to slip out of your responsibilities very easily. According to you there has been a robbery here at the Manoir under our noses."

"It would appear so."

"The will, the letter and Lady Grassleyes' marvellous Formula Book, which is probably worth more than the others put together, have disappeared?"

"Precisely—also a large sum of money in five-*mille* notes and valuable jewellery."

"You have no idea what has become of them?"

Jane intervened. She drew her arm a little more tightly through her companion's.

"Mr. Spenser," she insisted, "please go back to the dining-room. Mr. Clunderson is not in a fit state to answer questions just now."

"He will have to answer one or two," Spenser declared. "You are not the only one interested in this robbery. I want to know, Mr. Clunderson, what your course of action will be."

"I shall report the decease of Lady Grassleyes to the proper authorities as soon as the doctors have signed the certificate, and her estate will be administered according to French law," Clunderson said. "That is assuming, of course, that the will is not found within a reasonable time."

"That," the other blustered, "would be ridiculous. The only beneficiary would be the French Government."

"It is unfortunately true," the lawyer admitted. "I cannot alter the existing position, Mr. Spenser. If I knew where to look for the missing will, the letter and Lady Grassleyes' Formula Book, the money and the jewellery, I should certainly try to find them. Incidentally, I happen to know that amongst the provisions of the will is a legacy of two thousand five hundred pounds for myself. I am not a rich man and I should not relinquish that gladly."

"You won't have to relinquish it," Jane said, patting his arm. "The will will turn up in the course of a few days. Aunt Harriet may have had it out to look at just before she was taken ill. She may have pushed it into a drawer somewhere."

"According to you, Mr. Clunderson," Spenser persisted, "the safe must have been opened either by Lady Grassleyes herself or by some one who obtained the key from her."

"Or by Mr. Spenser," Jane interposed. "You appeared to be in possession of a key a short time ago."

Spenser was speechless.

"I?" he stammered. "What is it you are accusing me of now, Miss Grassleyes?"

"Nothing, at this moment. We shall have to talk about it to-morrow, Mr. Spenser, but you seem to have forgotten that I saw you with the key in your hand and making use of it. Please go back to the dining-room."

Spenser hesitated, then he turned on his heel.

"You will have to answer for that to-morrow morning, Miss Grassleyes," he said. "You seem to have lost your head altogether."

"But not my memory," she replied. "Come, Mr. Clunderson. This way, please."

Jane led her guest away. They crossed the hall together and turned down the opposite corridor. Spenser watched them in stupefied silence.

* * * * *

Mr. Clunderson accepted with a little sigh of gratitude all the arrangements which had been made for his comfort. There were flowers upon the dressing table and his toilet requisites duly set out in the bathroom, the door of which stood open. There were a small bottle of brandy, a glass and a bottle of Evian carefully placed by the side of his bed. He sank into an easy chair, shook hands with Jane and waved her away.

"My dear young lady," he said, "this is perfect. To-night I shall sleep well. To-morrow, when I have rested, I shall be entirely recovered and I will give you a clearer outline of your position. For the moment, the only advice I can give you is this. In the absence of the will you are clearly, as the next of kin, the person in possession. Do not suffer any outside interference. As for that fellow downstairs, don't worry about him. You seem to have caught him tripping just now and if he has been up to anything I promise you this—he shan't get away with it."

* * * * *

Jane came to a sudden standstill, her fingers upon the latch of the door which led into her own little suite. From somewhere within a few yards of her she heard the sound of a man's soft breathing. Before she could speak Pooralli had slipped noiselessly out of the darkness. He bowed his apologies.

"What are you doing here, Pooralli?" she asked sternly. "You know this part of the house is forbidden."

"Waiting for young mistress," he explained.

"What do you want?"

"Better come see."

"Come where?"

"I show. Please follow."

His agitation was infectious. She followed him without protest into the part of the house spreading out into the gardens, a part which her aunt had kept sacred and which even she had been accustomed to enter only with a special invitation. They passed under the glass dome of what was called the winter garden, passed into an atmosphere curiously exotic, yet sweet with the mingled perfumes of strange plants and night-flowering shrubs. At the end was a door which Pooralli quietly unlocked.

"What are you doing here?" Jane asked. "You know very well this is all forbidden ground."

"Not to young mistress," he answered. "Not to Pooralli. Young mistress will understand."

He opened the door softly. Jane found herself in the apartment, half study, half laboratory, where her aunt had been accustomed to spend hours of each day. "My library," she had often called it, but her books were plants. The shelves held a seemingly interminable number of bottles and for the first few seconds the perfume of distilled flowers—a strange but marvellously sweet perfume it was—almost stifled Jane. To all appearance the room was empty. Pooralli closed the door behind them and locked it. Then he turned on the electric light and pointed to the sofa. Jane gave a little cry of horror. A young man, perfectly motionless, was lying there, his limbs outstretched, his eyes closed.

"Paul Oliver!" she gasped. "What is he doing here?"

"He very sick man," Pooralli answered. "Mistress used to give him medicine."

"But how did he get in here? This place is always kept locked."

"Quite right," Pooralli agreed. "Yale keys all very strong. He came through window. I hear and I come. He very ill. Say must have medicine or die. I give him some mistress was preparing. No good. He die."

Jane, who had only once before been permitted to enter the room, looked around her with half-fearful curiosity. In addition to the number of bottles there were at least a dozen shelves laden with little brown pots, each with a label written in her aunt's fine handwriting. There was also a collection of small, squat bottles filled with thick, oily liquid.

"Why did you try to give medicine, Pooralli?" Jane exclaimed angrily. "You may have poisoned him."

"Yes, I think he die," Pooralli agreed, looking at the young man's motionless form. "Pooralli sorry. What could I do? Mistress never liked her herbs talked about and he very ill."

"Where did you get the stuff that you gave him?"

He pointed to a jar of what looked like the gum from a cactus and a bottle filled with pure-white liquid.

"Mistress was mixing these last morning here. She made up small bottle and tasted it end of finger. Note came from young man there. Mistress angry. She tore up note and poured away medicine. She ordered me out and locked door. Mr. Oliver he come here to-night very ill. When I come he tells me mistress angry with him, not give medicine. He gave me gold watch," Pooralli concluded, producing it and swinging it by its chain. "I mix just little how I thought mistress did. Miss Grassleyes now go fetch clever man Mr. Granet. Perhaps he help. If not, perhaps they hang Pooralli."

Jane smiled at him consolingly.

"There is nothing amongst these herbs, I am sure, that could kill any one. You wait here. If Mr. Granet has not left I will fetch him."

She hurried back to the dining-room. Granet had changed his place and was sitting side by side with Suresne, who was as usual talking. Jane tapped Granet on the shoulder and he rose at once to his feet.

"Please come outside with me for a few minutes, Mr. Granet," she begged.

He made a gesture of excuse to Suresne and walked with her towards the door.

"More trouble," she sighed when they reached the hall.

"I am sorry," he murmured with real sympathy in his voice. "Can I help?"

"Listen. Pooralli was waiting for me when I came out of Mr. Clunderson's room. You remember the wild-looking youth with the absurd clothes?"

"Could any one ever forget him?" Granet smiled. "As a matter of fact, I had words with him only this evening."

"Well, he is lying in my aunt's laboratory, where she keeps some of her plants and mixes up herbal cures for people who believe in them. He is unconscious on the sofa, looking simply terrible. Pooralli gave him something my aunt had been mixing and he believes he has killed him. It was entirely Pooralli's idea," she added, "that I came to you. He seems to have a feeling that you know something about medicine. Do you?"

"A little," Granet admitted. "No one can live in the tropics without learning something about it."

Jane led the way down the corridor and opened the door of the laboratory. Paul Oliver was still lying on the couch but he was now emitting faint groans. Pooralli was standing by his side.

"Him been sick," he announced cheerfully. "I think he will not die."

Granet bent over the recumbent figure, felt his pulse and heart and made a further brief examination.

"No," he decided, "this young man will not die. No sign of it at present, at any rate. Show me what you gave him, Pooralli."

Pooralli pointed to the half-empty phial on the table.

"I make mixture same as mistress did."

"Which bottles did she use?"

Pooralli pointed to a jar and a bottle standing on the table. Granet took out the stoppers, smelt the contents and held the bottles up to the light. Then he turned to Jane with a smile of encouragement.

"You have nothing whatever to fear," he assured her. "I had no idea that your aunt's studies had progressed to this extent, though."

"Oliver isn't poisoned, then?" she demanded eagerly.

"Not he. The stuff that looks like water is distilled phrosin, a very valuable herbal drug used in heaps of patent medicines. The sticky liquid is also a mixture of herbs. I am sure there is autopin in it, which isn't grown in England and is very difficult to grow anywhere. But it's entirely wholesome, made from the bark of a shrub which grows in Cochin China and seldom lives more than three years."

Jane drew a long sigh of relief.

"This room has been a terror to me," she confided. "Do you know what I was afraid of?"

"I don't know, but I can guess."

"Well, I was afraid that Aunt Harriet was supplying some of these people in the bungalows not with ordinary herbal medicines but with synthetic drugs and taking some of them herself."

"Nothing of the sort," he declared confidently. "I don't believe there is a thing in any of these bottles that isn't thoroughly harmless. In fact, the two distillations which she apparently used in prescribing for this young man were far too valuable to be wasted on him. I imagine that she had been giving them to him regularly and Pooralli, who must have known something about it, had a shot at mixing the same thing for him. He just missed it by a hair's-breadth, that's all. Too much of the sedative and too little of the excitant. I'll have to guess a lot, of course, but I'll try and put it right."

For a few minutes he was very busy with the bottles. He searched round the shelves and found something else he needed. Then he discovered a mixing bowl, turned up his coat sleeves and set to work. He held up the result of his labours to the light and smiled as he watched it clear. Then he went over to the couch, opened the young man's mouth with a sudden movement and poured the draught down his throat.

"You needn't be afraid that I have done him any harm," he said, wiping his hands upon the small towel which Pooralli had given him. "That dose is what he's been hanging round for. Lady Grassleyes must have had a reason of her own for holding it back. Fortunately he is just able to retain it."

"But I still don't understand," Jane confessed.

"It isn't easy, of course," he agreed, throwing the towel on one side and lighting a cigarette. "The young man has probably been a drug addict at some time or other. Lady Grassleyes was curing him and I should say she was well on the way to success. Only how she has collected all these herbs and some of those exotic plants I see in the hot-houses beyond I can't imagine. They are worth a fortune to any chemist."

"How do you know all about this?" Jane asked him, with a new wonder in her eyes.

"Oh, I am a professor of chemistry, in a way. Doesn't sound romantic, does it—but curiously enough the study of some of these exotic and non-flowering plants I am sure your aunt has is what brought me my professorship ... Hello, look at our young friend!"

Paul Oliver was sitting up. There was a tinge of colour in his cheeks and his eyes were open and quite bright.

"Who gave me that dose?" he demanded anxiously.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I did," Granet confessed. "Pooralli had a shot at it but he hadn't the mixture right. That is what knocked you out. Fortunately I happen to know something about these herbs."

Oliver drew a long breath.

"I feel a different man," he declared. "I apologize, Mr. Granet, for being such a ruffian earlier this evening. I behaved very badly, but, believe me, I felt as though I were going mad. Knowing what had happened to Lady Grassleyes made me lose my head completely. It is terrible. I am still three doses short of my course."

"Course for what?"

"Forgive me," the young man begged, and his tone was absolutely gentle. "I say too much and I am pledged to secrecy. If you will excuse me, Miss Grassleyes, I will go back to my bungalow."

"Are you fit to go back alone?" Jane asked.

"Perfectly. Please have no more anxiety. I am so sorry to have disturbed you. As for you, sir," he said, turning to Granet with an almost pathetic expression of gratitude in his face, "I cannot thank you enough. I only hope something can be arranged."

"We will see," Granet said. "I make no promises. This is a dangerous business for any one to undertake and I am, after all, little better than an amateur. I should recommend you now to go home, as you suggested. You are quite well enough to go alone but Pooralli had better walk down with you."

The two left the room together, Pooralli walking with buoyant footsteps and his head in the air. At the closing of the door Jane suddenly forgot everything else in the world and clung to her companion's arm.

"Mr. Granet," she cried, "are you a magician?"

He smiled down at her.

"Not in the least, my dear. I am a fairly capable scientist who has made many experiments in the treatment of herbs but although I am not exactly a poor man I have never had the money to go into the subject on a large scale. You must let me look over this place to-morrow, but I warn you that so far as I can see its possession is going to add a great deal to your responsibilities."

"Why?"

He shook his head.

"I cannot tell you now. Will you take my advice?"

"Of course."

"For the moment, lock up this room, lock up the hot-house and keep that little walled garden absolutely barricaded. Make the whole of these rooms and the walled garden a fortress, and above all don't breathe a word to any one of my interference here and of Oliver's sudden recovery. Keep your own counsel, especially as regards that fellow Spenser."

She looked steadily into his eyes; very straightforward, kindly eyes they were with just a gleam of the mystic. Perhaps the change that came was in reply to her own passionate but unspoken prayer. Suddenly they grew soft. The touch of his arms around her was magical. All the horror of those last unnatural hours seemed to pass away as she felt the eager searching of his lips for hers. She lay in his arms entirely and wonderfully content.

CHAPTER XVII

Jane and David Granet were seated next morning opposite to one another at one of the stone balcony tables of the Colombe d'Or, the famous Old World restaurant at St. Paul. A light breeze was stealing down from the mountains in the background, bending back the leaves of the orange and olive trees, rustling every now and then like ghostly footsteps in the pines. The sky overhead was a faultless blue. It was only in the far distance that there were little flecks of white cloud, a gossamerlike boundary to the rich, glowing landscape. The umbrella directly above Jane and Granet was scarcely sufficient protection from the midday sun. The tantalizing puffs of wind with their faint suggestion of the distant snows were like little breaths from Paradise.

Jane laid down the menu which had been placed in her hand.

"Anything that they choose to bring," she murmured. "Except that I am hungry it seems almost desecration to eat. What a divine place!"

"You are saved the task of ordering, anyway," Granet said. "This is not a restaurant de luxe. They give you what they have, and that is always the same: hors d'œuvres of fresh vegetables, the only intrusion

being the sardine; trout from the stream below; chicken of their own feeding; a soufflé which is the chef's one vanity."

"Perfect," she murmured.

"The apéritif, too," he continued, "is perhaps another slightly alien note. The wine is made in the valley below and if you ask for the wine list and look through the ordinary Château wines your waiter leaves you in sorrow and serves you with a sigh. I have not risked any trouble of that sort."

"You are a very knowledgeable person," she told him. "Why did you ask me here to lunch with you?"

"Out of curiosity."

"What about?"

"Us."

"You intrigue me," she confessed.

"Why should I? In plain words, I wanted to know what it felt like to lunch with the girl I was engaged to marry."

The colour flowed into her cheeks. She looked at him in most becoming confusion.

"Please—what do you mean?"

"Isn't it clear?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eyes, and holding her hand across the table in the most brazen fashion. "I was just thinking last night how wonderful it would be to set to and help you out of all this muddle when a succession of unspeakable and delightful incidents decided the whole matter for us."

"You mean—?"

"I mean those few minutes before Pooralli came back. I call what happened during that brief space of time a complete answer to my speculation."

"Do you really want me to be engaged to you?"

"Of course I do."

"Very well, then, we are—until," she added, glancing at the approaching waiter, "we have arrived at the soufflé."

"You are showing," he complained, "inclinations towards frivolity."

Her eyes danced with pleasure.

"Who can wonder at it? Haven't we had enough of serious life for the last day or two?"

"Too much, by a long way," he agreed. "I suppose you don't realize the fact, but it is a wonder we are not both in prison."

She shook her head.

"Not you. Not the great scientist, the professor, the famous chemist! They wouldn't dare to imprison you. Pooralli and I were the only ones in danger if that young man had had the bad taste to die on our hands."

"Actually we were none of us in the slightest trouble," he assured her. "I don't suppose you know it, but I was up at half past four this morning and I made Pooralli take me round the whole of Lady Grassleyes' herb garden, forcing houses, walled garden and laboratory, before any one was stirring. All I can tell you is that, if it were for sale, I would give a million francs for her Formula Book if it could be found."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. There are at least a dozen herbs there which I searched for all over Burma."

"Didn't you have one awkward moment," she asked, "when you came across that distilled phrosin?"

"Not even then," he assured her. "There is not the slightest evidence that at any time Lady Grassleyes' experiments have been in the direction of producing synthetic drugs or anything of that sort. She was apparently treating a few patients for nervous diseases and treating them very skilfully, too. The only trouble is that now they have been left suddenly in a sort of half-cured state, and one scarcely knows how to deal with them. That young fellow, Paul Oliver, is an example of what I mean."

"But he responded to your treatment marvellously."

"Quite true," he assented, "but I had to take a risk. What we want, Jane, is your aunt's Formula Book."

"Do you like calling me 'Jane'?" she asked blandly.

"I like it immensely," he assured her. "Perfect ass I should be, shouldn't I, if I called you by anything else but your Christian name when we are engaged!"

"I suppose so. What am I expected to call you, then?"

"'David,' of course."

She pushed back her plate and sipped the country wine thoughtfully.

"How did you grasp the fact that I had fallen desperately in love with you?"

"I haven't grasped it, yet," he answered. "I am waiting for you to tell me so."

"Well, I haven't."

"Try and make the best job you can of it, then," he begged. "You see, Jane, I am really very fond of you, although I think I have known you barely three days. I love your pluck, but I tell you this: You need a strong man to get you out of this muddle. If you and Spenser tried to work this bungalow show alone I can't imagine what would become of you. Spenser can't get it out of his head that your aunt was making a fortune in some mysterious way. That shows he must have got at her bank account. He hasn't a single scruple, that blackguard hasn't, and even if he believed that all the contents of Lady Grassleyes' gardens and laboratory were poison he would still like to go on turning it out, only on a much bigger scale. Incidentally, I had a caller this morning—Mr. Johnson. He was up at the Manoir before seven o'clock. He was very persistent indeed. He wanted a headache cure and, when he found that didn't go, he asked

permission to walk through the walled garden to study some of the herb-growing. He assured me that Lady Grassleyes had allowed him to go into the forcing houses whenever he liked."

"I'm glad you had Mr. Johnson to deal with," Jane confessed. "That man frightens me. He is so rough and so determined. He tried to force his way in once before. How did you get rid of him, David?"

Granet looked away for a moment at a very beautiful break in the mountains. He pointed it out to his companion.

"Exquisite," she agreed. "But I want to hear about Mr. Johnson."

"Well," he went on slowly, "Mr. Johnson, I gathered, is used to rough methods. I was obliged to convince him that they were useless on this particular occasion. One thing struck me as being rather curious. When he had quietened down and was convinced that he had nothing to gain by hanging around, he only asked for one favour before he took his leave."

"Yes?"

"He begged me not to say a word to Spenser of his visit."

"That seems quaint," she admitted. "I remember now, though, that it was Mr. Spenser who sent him here and persuaded Aunt Harriet to let him have a bungalow. Tell me, David, what do you think about Pooralli?"

"He is a mystery. All of his race are the same. Is he honest? I do not know. On the other hand, I have had some experience of his type and I have never known one of them who was not faithful. He may be making up his mind to sell his services to the highest bidder, but, after all, you must remember, there is a terrible lot of surmise about all this. I admit the Manoir fascinates me, because I would never have believed that such a collection of herbs existed, but I sometimes wonder whether you had not better leave the winding up of the whole place to Clunderson, come off with me, get married somewhere quietly and take a honeymoon trip round the world."

"But I don't know whether I want to go for a honeymoon trip round the world with you," she objected. "I'm not at all sure that I know you well enough."

They were very much alone in the little place with its striped umbrellas and primitive surroundings. Even the one waiter had disappeared into the bar and the sole remaining client was making a rough sketch of the pigeons strutting about in search of crumbs. David took Jane's willingly offered hand into his and leaned across the table.

"We might feel a little awkward at first," he admitted smiling, "but I suppose we should get over it in time. Other people do," he added hopefully.

She scrutinized him, with that fascinating smile of hers hovering at the corners of her lips. In his light-grey flannel suit, soft collar, faultless linen and black-and-white-check tie, he was certainly a very attractive figure. She liked the humorous twinkle which flashed every now and then into his eyes. She also rather liked that stern look and the crispness of his tone when he was very much in earnest. He was a man, of course, very much of a man. She counted up on her fingers how long she had known him.

"Nearly three days," she declared. "That's pretty well the length of my acquaintance with you, David. Do you really think it is long enough to justify my handing my life's happiness into your keeping?"

"It is my honest opinion," he pronounced, "that you are going to get into a terrible mess here if you don't. I am not absolutely clear myself as to the manner in which I am going to get you out of it. We are through the first stage and I can't tell you how near we came to being sent to a French prison. Anyhow, putting that on one side, I am not so bad, Jane. I have never had much to do with your sex. I care for you far more than I have ever cared for any other woman. I'm not at all sure that I haven't got that curious feeling in my blood for you which novelists call 'love'! I should consider myself a good risk as a husband. I wouldn't hesitate a minute, if I were you!"

She flashed him a warm and wonderful smile and there was a most attractive shyness in the faint pressure of her fingers twined in his. Then, just as Granet was wondering whether he dared risk the horror of the rather remote and very absorbed artist at the table and lean a little closer to Jane's lips, they heard the grinding of brakes outside the wide-open gates which led into the restaurant, the shout of a familiar voice, and saw the figure of Spenser, bare-headed, coatless and wearing slacks, striding across the courtyard. Just behind him was Suresne. He was calm enough but he also showed signs of excitement. Spenser had lost his high colour and was pale with fury. Granet laid down his knife and fork and a very grim look came into his face as he watched the approaching couple.

"I have had very nearly enough of this fellow Spenser," he muttered. "Do you mind, dear, running inside for a minute or two?"

The girl shivered after her single glance at the intruders.

"David," she begged, "for my sake, please—"

He pressed her fingers in reassuring fashion.

"I'll be careful, dear," he promised. "Perhaps," he added, as the two men approached the table, "Spenser really has something to say this time."

* * * * *

Probably Spenser had it in his mind that the artist, the waiter and the little party of newcomers who had followed them in, were all French. At any rate, he did not spare his language.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, Granet?" he demanded. "What devilish trick are you up to now?"

"Enjoying a very excellent luncheon, which I hope you are not going to spoil," was the calm reply. "You needn't shout like that, either. I have perfectly good hearing."

"Where is Lady Grassleyes?"

Granet did not attempt to frame a reply to the astonishing question. Whatever it was he had expected, it certainly was not this.

"I ask you again," Spenser shouted, "what is this tomfoolery you have been up to?"

"Monsieur Suresne," Granet begged, "would it be asking too much of you to tell me what this lunatic means?"

"Mr. Spenser is naturally very much upset," the detective explained. "It is probably not news to you to hear that Lady Grassleyes has disappeared."

"Do you mean that her body has disappeared?"

"That is precisely what I do mean. Lady Grassleyes, owing to a dispute amongst the doctors, was prepared for an examination to be made upon her at the Nice Central Clinic this morning. She had two nurses in attendance last night. One of them, it is true, evaded her duty and went out. The other was discovered fast asleep. The body was removed from the Clinic at some hour between two and five o'clock this morning."

"And were you, may I ask, expecting to find Lady Grassleyes alive and taking lunch with us here?"

Even Suresne was for a moment nonplussed. Spenser, too, was incapable of speech.

"I admire your insouciance, Mr. Granet," Suresne said quietly, "but it is surely a little ill-timed."

"Scarcely as ill-timed as your visit," was the prompt rejoinder. "However, since you are here, let's come to an understanding. Do I gather that you are telling me seriously that Lady Grassleyes has disappeared from the Nice Clinic?"

"Precisely."

"Then she must be alive."

"Why?"

"Of what value do you suppose the dead body of her ladyship would be to any one?"

"Ransom," Suresne snapped out. "We have had several cases in this country this last year. It is common enough in the States, as you know."

"Well, I think you are wrong," Granet declared calmly. "If Lady Grassleyes has disappeared from the Nice Clinic she is alone and has left of her own free will."

"Impossible!" Spenser shouted. "She was dead. Every doctor except Bertoldi was ready to sign the certificate."

"No one in this world is infallible. Dr. Bertoldi may have been the only one in that little company of doctors who guessed the truth."

"What the devil do you know about it?" Spenser demanded.

"Do please moderate your language! I know nothing about it but I can divine a good deal by deduction, if what you are telling me is the truth."

"Deduction!" Spenser scoffed. "We are wasting time, Suresne. I know the owner of this place. I am going to have it searched."

"I should do nothing so foolish, if I were you," Granet advised. "First of all, why not speak to the porter outside. He will assure you that Miss Grassleyes and I drove up in my two-seater Bugatti and that we brought with us no suspicious belongings. You can also search any other car outside. Wherever Lady Grassleyes may be—and I give you my word of honour that I don't know, and I'll speak for Miss Grassleyes that she doesn't know either—she is there of her own volition. I never saw her in my life except for those few seconds, but I am making bold to say now that the doctors who pronounced her dead were probably wrong from the first."

"What reason have you for saying so?" Suresne asked.

"Because," Granet explained, "at the request of Miss Grassleyes here," holding out his hand to Jane, who was approaching the table, "I have been examining the contents of Lady Grassleyes' laboratory and I have also examined the most wonderful collection of herbs that has ever been brought together under one roof. I am a chemist. With the help of those herbs I could easily concoct a mixture which, without the slightest risk to the person who took it, would give him the appearance of having ceased to exist. There are dozens of doctors all over the world at the present moment working on the problem of an anæsthetic free from danger and with a more lasting effect than anything hitherto discovered. Lady Grassleyes may have been the one to have made that discovery and also made the mistake of trying it upon herself."

"Ridiculous!" Spenser fumed.

"It is not any more ridiculous," Granet retorted, "than the disappearance of Lady Grassleyes' body which you have come here to report. Doctors have been deceived before now, you must remember. They have, I believe, been deceived again. When her ladyship thought that she had achieved her purpose, whatever it may have been, she pulled herself together in the Clinic, communicated with a confederate, perhaps, or anyhow found her way to wherever she wanted to go. Where that may be I do not know, Miss Grassleyes does not know, you do not know. But unless something has happened to her since she stole away or was spirited away from the Clinic you can take my word for it that she is alive now."

Jane leaned across the table.

"You really believe that, David?"

"Yes, my dear, and if I were you I should finish my luncheon before everything gets cold."

CHAPTER XVIII

The matron of the famous Nice Central Clinic, Mrs. Theobald, came hurrying into her sitting-room within a few moments of her visitors' arrival. She shook hands with Jane and exchanged a formal bow with David Granet.

"My dear Miss Grassleyes," she exclaimed, "I feel ashamed to look you in the face! The whole thing is too dreadful. I can't tell you how sorry I am that such a thing should have happened here, where I flatter myself our discipline is, if anything, over strict."

"I have not come to complain," Jane said quietly. "It is an amazing thing to have had happen, of course, and you can understand my anxiety. Mr. Spenser seems to have heard that I was lunching with Mr. Granet up at the Colombe d'Or and he brought us the news. We decided to come straight on here and see you."

"Any information I can give you," the matron assured them, "anything you like to ask me—"

"Tell me, then," Jane begged, "do you believe that my aunt was dead or alive?"

"I will tell you exactly how it seems to me," the other explained. "The whole thing is almost impossible to put into words, but I will try. This is the conclusion I have come to. Your aunt was brought here in a state of coma, and I believe that she was alive enough somehow or other, with outside help, to get away from this place. I am sure you have that other horrible idea lurking at the back of your mind—that she very

nearly met her death at the hands of our surgeon. Nothing of the sort. There was never the slightest risk of that. Dr. Bertoldi, the Grasse doctor who refused to sign the certificate, had a perfectly clear understanding with Dr. Brodie, our surgeon. The examination, begun last night, that they were to have held to-day was to have been purely an external one."

"Did Dr. Bertoldi tell you his reasons for refusing to sign the certificate?" Jane asked.

"To me, in confidence, he did. His reasons were that the condition of Lady Grassleyes lacked two of the usual symptoms of death. He fenced about the thing for some time but at last he acknowledged that he did not believe she was dead at all. He has been here most of the morning holding a sort of private examination of the nurses, both of whom, by the by, will be dismissed, and he told me he had come to the conclusion that it was not a dead body which had been spirited away but a living woman suffering from the effects of an unknown intoxication. I wonder, Miss Grassleyes—I knew your aunt so slightly—should you have said that she was likely to run risks with some of those herbal remedies which she—er—dabbled in?"

"I can think of no one less likely to do such a thing," Jane declared vigorously. "Dr. Bertoldi knows that himself, although he was very angry with my aunt sometimes because of her faith in herbal remedies."

The matron nodded sagely.

"Well, there was a scene down here, I can tell you, this morning. We rang up the Manoir, of course, but they told us that you and Mr. Granet had gone out in his car. Your lawyer from Paris came straight down here. A dear old gentleman. He was in a terrible state. I imagine it does complicate things a little for him."

"More than a little," Granet put in. "Still, there is just one point about it all which must be rather a relief to him. Lady Grassleyes left instructions that the will was not to be proved for a month after her death."

"Interesting, that," Mrs. Theobald commented. "One might almost imagine that she had something in her mind about disappearing for a time."

"But why?" Granet asked. "What could be the point of it?"

The matron sighed.

"Haven't I been trying to think that out?"

There was a knock at the door. A precise-looking nurse in a very stiff uniform entered.

"May I have one word with you, Matron?" she begged.

"You may have it before the young lady and gentleman," was the gracious reply, "especially if it has anything to do with Lady Grassleyes."

"Dr. Bertoldi and Dr. Brodie are both here, Matron."

"Have they brought any news?" Jane asked eagerly.

The nurse shook her head.

"There is no news," she said. "They heard that Miss Grassleyes was here and they thought she might like to have a word with them."

"I should like to very much," Jane said.

"Ask them to step this way," the matron ordered.

The two men were ushered in. Dr. Brodie was introduced. He addressed himself at once to Jane.

"Bertoldi and I are the two rebels," he announced smiling, "who refused to sign the certificate of death. And I must tell you at once, Miss Grassleyes, that in the absence of this certificate no autopsy could possibly have been allowed."

"Well, I must say," Jane confessed, "that makes the whole affair seem less gruesome."

"My decision was given last night after the preliminary examination had taken place," Bertoldi explained. "I decided that your aunt should be left exactly in the condition she was found in until there was some change. We decided to keep her under observation night and day and Matron here engaged two extra night-nurses to take turns in watching for any signs of life. As you have heard, when we arrived—well, the patient had taken French leave. How she did it, where she is, what was the matter with her are now police matters."

"I quite understand," Jane declared, "and I think you have acted very wisely and considerately from the first, Dr. Bertoldi."

"Thank you, Miss Grassleyes," the doctor replied with a little bow. "I hope your aunt will think so, if ever we have the pleasure of welcoming her back again. As you know, I have strong views about her meddling with all those herbs and the collection of strange plants she had sent her from abroad. Likely to do herself or any one else a lot of harm meddling with them."

"Mr. Granet here," Jane observed, "is of the opinion that she might possibly have been experimenting upon herself and found trouble."

"Very possible, very possible indeed," Dr. Bertoldi agreed. "Lady Grassleyes would not have me near the place, as you know, lately, but if anything further transpires I am going to ask you to let me go through some of the herbs and plants which make up her collection, Miss Grassleyes. I should probably recommend their destruction, but there is no need for you to take my advice."

"You must arrange that with Mr. Granet," Jane said. "He is looking after the laboratory for the present."

"One thing that might interest you, sir," Granet confided, "is that Lady Grassleyes had actually extracted phrosin and autopin from some of her plants. The phrosin she has certainly made use of in some of her mixtures."

"Humph!" Bertoldi grunted.

"Very interesting," the surgeon murmured.

They took their leave and a few minutes later Jane and her companion prepared to follow suit. In the act of shaking hands, Jane uttered a little exclamation. She was looking at a photograph on the matron's desk.

"What a good picture of Mr. Spenser!" she cried. "Is he a friend of yours, Matron?"

Mrs. Theobald was visibly disconcerted. She handled the situation badly. She affected surprise, which she rather overdid, and she was a trifle laborious with her explanations.

"I can't go so far as to say that," she confided. "Mr. Spenser visits the Clinic sometimes, in fact I think there's an idea of having him on the committee. I can't remember, for the moment, though, how I came into possession of his photograph."

Jane was still examining it curiously.

"He was a great friend of my aunt's," she said. "A business friend, perhaps, but still he was a frequent visitor."

"I remember!" the matron exclaimed suddenly. "I know where that photograph came from. He sent a dozen for our last bazaar and I bought one. Very good picture, don't you think?"

"Marvellously like him," Jane assented. "Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Theobald, and good afternoon."

"I can't persuade you to stay and have a cup of tea?" the matron asked as she led them out. "Mr. Granet might be interested in looking over the place."

"Another time," Granet said. "I know that Miss Grassleyes will be anxious to get back to the Manoir. I had hard work persuading her to leave it for an hour or so as it was."

Mrs. Theobald indulged in a little grimace as she bade Jane farewell.

"You leave me now," she confided, "to a very disagreeable rendezvous. The Commissioner of Police is due in five minutes."

* * * * *

Jane was a little thoughtful after they had settled down in the car. When they reached the long stretch of road which bordered the race course Granet glanced at her curiously.

"Something on your mind?"

She nodded.

"I am wondering about that photograph, for one thing. You couldn't see, I think, but it was inscribed: '*With love from Fred.*' That isn't the usual way a photograph is autographed for a bazaar, is it? Then, there was another thing. There was the smell of Turkish cigarettes in the room. Now very few people smoke Turkish cigarettes here. Amongst those few that I know is Mr. Spenser, and did you notice a large brown tortoiseshell case on the edge of the table?"

"I think I did," Granet acknowledged.

"That was Mr. Spenser's cigarette case."

CHAPTER XIX

Mr. Clunderson, very spick and span in a white-flannel suit but still disturbed in his manner and general appearance, was an early visitor at the Manoir on the morning of the following day. He found Jane with a

pile of correspondence addressed to Lady Grassleyes seated at the writing-table in her bureau, and Granet, who had apparently just arrived from his bungalow, walking restlessly up and down the room. Pooralli announced the newcomer tersely.

"Lawyer gentleman from Paris."

He had done his duty. As was usual when he had introduced a visitor, he bowed to the occupants of the room and took his leave. Jane welcomed Mr. Clunderson with a little sigh of relief.

"They told us you had left yesterday when we got back," she said, installing him in an easy chair. "I was afraid you had deserted us and gone back to Paris."

"Not at all," Clunderson explained. "I simply thought it was better to take a room at the Negresco in Nice. I had my things packed when the telephone message from the Clinic arrived. I went straight there, of course."

"The matron told us she had telephoned and that you had been there," Granet confided. "Spenser found out where we were lunching and brought us the news. We went at once to the Clinic."

The lawyer rose from his seat and brought over the morning edition of the *Éclaireur de Nice* to Jane.

"You see the headline here," he pointed out. "Mysterious Rumours Concerning Lady Grassleyes. There's a page of rubbish there but the long and the short of it is that Lady Grassleyes disappeared yesterday from the Clinic. That is the only thing we know for certain."

"Very well," Granet agreed. "Then I would suggest that, whether we accept the probability of Lady Grassleyes' having met with her death or the possibility of her being still alive, you give Miss Grassleyes full power to carry on the business of the bungalows and any other business in which her mysterious aunt may have been concerned. Whether Lady Grassleyes comes back to the world or not, no one could complain of your action."

"I agree," Clunderson declared, "and I accept the proposition. It shall be as you suggest. But in the meantime that is, so far as I am concerned, only a passive position. What am I to do concerning one of my oldest clients who appears to be dead one moment and alive the next, who has left me no coherent instructions as to the management of her affairs? We don't know in whose hands she is; we don't know whether she is a partner in these strange proceedings or the victim of a plot. I am not content, as her lawyer, to sit down and accept as gospel these hare-brained stories in the papers. I dislike the situation enormously but my convictions are that we must give our whole confidence to the police and demand their help."

"The great Suresne himself—" Jane began.

"I know all about that," Clunderson interrupted. "Suresne is still on the spot, fortunately, only he seems to have attached himself to your friend Mr. Spenser."

"Not my friend," Jane murmured.

"And certainly not mine," Granet echoed.

"Now listen, Miss Grassleyes," the lawyer proceeded. "I have put you in possession here. I have been to your aunt's bankers and I have given them my authority to honour cheques with your signature only until

the present balance is exhausted. Long before then the truth of this matter should come out, but I warn you that it is my opinion that your aunt is not acting according to her own free will, but is in dangerous hands."

"You mean that her life is still in danger?" Jane asked anxiously.

"Her reason or her life beyond a doubt."

"But why?" Jane persisted. "She has no enemies that I know of. How could she have enemies?"

"It is not our enemies only who rob us," was the quiet rejoinder.

"Of whom are you thinking?" Jane asked bluntly.

"Mr. Spenser, the house-agent. I find that he was in the habit of visiting your aunt almost every day and there is not the slightest doubt but that they were on friendly terms up to the day of her collapse."

"But you yourself do not trust Spenser," she reminded him.

"I do not," he admitted. "I trust no one in this affair except yourself, and I advise you to adopt the same attitude."

"I have to trust Mr. Granet," she said demurely, "because I am engaged to marry him."

"Since when?" the lawyer demanded.

The colour rose slowly to her cheeks. She glanced towards Granet, who nodded calmly.

"Tell him the truth, my dear Jane," he enjoined.

"Since yesterday."

"As you are the family solicitor, Mr. Clunderson," Granet said, "may I suggest that you apply to the British Consul at Nice for my pedigree and life history? He will probably flatter me but you will lose any suspicions you may have as to my designs upon the family estate."

"I will see Colonel Dryden this afternoon," the lawyer promised. "I was hoping you would suggest something of the sort, Mr. Granet. I feel sure that the information I shall receive will relieve me of a portion of my responsibility. Now I am going to step beyond the local outlook. Your aunt, Miss Jane, was my dear friend. I had an affectionate regard for her. I have known her for many years. I am worried and anxious about her. I feel more than professional anxiety. I feel that having known her late husband, having been her friend for forty years, I cannot go back to my office and leave things in this state. I should like, as well as giving the police every scrap of information we can, to employ Suresne. He will cost us a great deal of money but the estate can afford it."

"You may find yourself forestalled," Granet warned him. "Suresne was with Spenser when they burst in on us at the restaurant where we were lunching yesterday."

"Suresne is a man to be trusted," Clunderson assured them. "If he was with Spenser, so much the better. To-night he will tell us what he thinks of the fellow. I promise you this—Suresne will never work hand in hand with any criminal. If he suspects him of blackmail or of abduction or any similar peccadillo he will have nothing to do with Spenser."

"I have sometimes thought," Jane said hesitatingly, "that my aunt had a sort of affection for Spenser. She allowed him greater privileges than any other person who came here and I know he drew a very considerable sum in commissions. The letting of every one of the bungalows passed through his hands."

The lawyer nodded understandingly.

"Well, we know how we stand about Spenser," he said. "Now we come to the two people who, to my mind, are the most mysterious of all. Who are these two extraordinary Malay or Indian servants of your aunt's who seem to do most of the work of the place?"

"I can only tell you," Jane replied, "that my uncle and aunt brought them over when my uncle retired, that they have been here many years, that they have never failed in a duty, never shown the slightest trace of dishonesty, have worked without a word of complaint for hours when an English servant would have shuddered."

"I remember Pooralli, of course, for many years," the lawyer remarked. "There is nothing against him but his name and his manners and the quaintness of him. Neither of them even move about like ordinary human beings."

"Well, I have told you what I know about them. They never make a mistake, they are the cleanest people in the compounds and if we were to accuse them of any sort of fraud I honestly believe my aunt would turn in her grave if she were dead, or would find some way of coming back here to prove their innocence if she were alive."

"That's something like a eulogy," Clunderson said smiling. "Personally, of course, I think they are wonderful, only naturally when you find them living practically in the midst of a garden of priceless herbs as the servants of a mysterious lady like Lady Grassleyes, and that lady disappears—well, they sort of drift into it, don't they?"

"You will never find them the villains of the piece," Jane declared. "The night before last I had a great desire to see you before you were interviewed by Spenser. Spenser would not hear of it and he stood in front of the dining-room door and refused to let me pass. He was beside himself with anger. Pooralli, without turning a hair, threw him over his shoulder and held him suspended there whilst I slipped out of the door and came to you in the hall. It is the old Oriental ju-jitsu, of course, but it took every one's breath away."

"Interesting," the lawyer muttered. "Very."

"They are the guardians of the place," she went on. "The younger of the two waits on Mr. Granet, the elder one seemed to do everything for my aunt. He is in her confidence, to a certain extent, with her herbs. Some day, when we three are alone together again, I will tell you both some stories about Pooralli that will astonish you."

It seemed like a miracle—not one of the three had heard the knock at the door, seen it open, yet there stood Pooralli on the threshold smiling at them.

"Madame di Mendoza, Miss Grassleyes, wants see Mr. Granet."

"You may show her in," Jane replied. "Do not go away, Mr. Clunderson. Remember that anything that goes on amongst us should be interesting to you."

Miriam di Mendoza, as she swept into the room, would probably have been interesting to any one. Her jet-black hair, faultlessly coiled, was arranged as only her Spanish maid could have arranged it. Her satin skirt was exquisitely cut, her scarlet pullover of embroidered silk was an astonishingly brilliant flame of colour, her white hands, agleam with beautiful jewels, were thrown out towards the little company in a gesture of absolutely natural appeal. Her smile won everybody's heart.

"I come," she cried, "to beg for the truth. That terrible Mr. Johnson, he has frightened me. He tells me that we must all go. I do not wish to go. I have never been so happy. Miss Grassleyes, you would not be so cruel as to turn us all out!"

"No idea of it, madame," Jane assured her. "Mr. Granet here has promised to help me and I hope to be able to carry on."

Miriam di Mendoza swung round towards Granet.

"Ah, you were so kind to my little sister," she cried.

Granet, with a keen recollection of that poignant hour of embarrassment, could only bow.

"Carlotta is so impulsive," her sister confided. "She, too, wishes to stay. Please let me have the latest news, Miss Grassleyes."

"There is no definite news of my aunt," Jane told her, "but this gentleman is Mr. Clunderson, who is our family solicitor and whose advice we are following. I shall look after the bungalows. Mr. Granet is taking an interest in my aunt's marvellous collection of herbs and her garden. The greatest chemist of our day is coming to tell us all that Mr. Granet does not know about them, but we are hoping all the time to find my aunt's Formula Book. I know that she used to make up a sleeping draught for you."

"It was very good," Madame di Mendoza replied, "but I can do without that if I am allowed to stay in the bungalow and if the wind which blows through my open windows at night brings always that perfume of the pines. I think it is that which is almost as good as your aunt's mixture."

"Well, you need worry no more," Jane assured her. "You may stay."

"But Lady Grassleyes' disappearance?" she demanded. "There are so many different stories. There are people even in the Manoir who have said that she was dead, others that she had been to the Clinic and had left unexpectedly. What is the truth, Miss Grassleyes?"

"I hope I shall not surprise you very much if I tell you that I do not know myself. My aunt is one of the most eccentric women who ever lived but of one thing I am absolutely certain. You will see her back again very soon."

Madame drew a long sigh of relief.

"I am happy. There remains only one thing which I desire to say: There are charming people who live in your bungalows, Miss Grassleyes, but there is one whom I do not like—two, I may say, really. One is Mr. Johnson."

"I'm sorry," Jane replied. "Have you any definite complaint to make?"

"He is not in what you call the atmosphere."

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

"It was Mr. Spenser who specially recommended him to my aunt," she said. "Mr. Johnson has broken none of our regulations. He has a servant who sleeps in the compound—a very dull, ordinary sort of person—and I don't think we have ever received any definite complaint about either of them."

"Well, you have one now," Madame di Mendoza said with a happy smile. "I do not like him. It is not enough, perhaps? Then there is no more I can say. I go to Nice presently. I sing at an afternoon concert. It is for a charity. Please all buy tickets. I have none myself so you cannot say that I am a beggar. I return late. I dine with a grand signior at Monte Carlo."

"You are lucky, madame," Jane declared.

She swept them all a slight curtsy as she turned away.

"If you would like some more of your sleeping mixture, madame," Granet said, "I can give you some. 'Cordavia' seems to have been Lady Grassleyes' rather picturesque name for it. It is just a mixture of two Syrian herbs. Thousands of dozens of bottles of it are sold in the States, I believe, in rather stronger form."

"I will ask for it when my first bad night comes," Madame smiled. "It is a joy, though, to think that I may procure it if I suffer any more."

Granet held the door open for her.

"Lady Grassleyes did you one good turn, madame," he said. "She mixed you up one of the most perfect sleeping draughts possible. It is composed of herbs, pure and simple. There is not a suggestion of a drug or anything bad for the system in its composition."

She smiled up at him.

"The few people for whom Lady Grassleyes has made up medicine from her wonderful herbs," she said, "all say the same thing. She should have been a great physician."

She took her leave of them all finally.

"A woman of mystery, my aunt used to call her," Jane remarked. "She goes out a great deal, of course, and sometimes she stays away for two or three days. But the only friends who visit her are people of distinction. Her young sister is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen."

"There are no people in the bungalows suggesting leaving, I suppose?" Granet asked.

"Not one. All these notes seem to be from people who want to be sure that they can stay on. The one exception is a note from Mr. Leonidas. He sends just a few lines to say that his wife is accepting a rôle in a film, the first part of which will be made near Paris, but that it does not affect his tenancy of the bungalow as he will be staying on himself."

"I wonder why?" Granet reflected.

"It is not our concern," Jane remarked.

There was the honk of a motor horn from the private road outside. Clunderson strolled to the window and watched the approaching car swing round the corner.

"Our friend Spenser, once more," he observed dryly. "I do not know what he is after this morning but I am pretty certain of one thing: It is not house-estate business that brings him here."

"I expect you have the same idea as I have," Granet remarked. "If there is one person who could solve what the newspapers are beginning to call 'The Grassleyes Mystery' it is our friend Spenser."

CHAPTER XX

Spenser made his entrance in a distinctly exaggerated spirit of bonhomie. He drew off his motor gloves, wished every one good morning and sank into an easy chair without waiting for an invitation.

"Still here, Mr. Clunderson?" he remarked. "I thought you were in a hurry to get back to Paris."

"I have decided," the lawyer announced, "that it is my duty to stay in these parts for the present."

"Haven't found the will, by any chance, have you?"

"I have not," the other said. "I doubt whether, in the present condition of things, we could use it if I did. Our friend, Mr. Granet, has told us some very interesting things about these herbs her ladyship was so fond of experimenting with. We have come to the conclusion that she is alive and may be descending upon us at any moment."

"I shouldn't think there is the least doubt about it," Spenser agreed. "There is no one in the world who could get any good out of carting her dead body around. The thing is—what is she doing it for? It is all very well," he went on, studying his finger nails closely, "to remind one another that she is an eccentric old lady, but, after all, she is not mad and she is not so very old."

Granet looked up curiously.

"What is her age, I wonder?"

"Between sixty and sixty-five, I should say," Spenser speculated.

"A great deal older, I believe," Jane said. "But does it really matter?"

"Not much," Spenser admitted. "She has as much energy, at any rate, as any one of us. Perhaps she has gone back to her gambling again."

"I trust not," the lawyer said.

Jane opened a drawer of her desk and produced a card, a shrivelled-up ancient affair. Spenser leaned over and took it from her eagerly.

"It's an old roulette card!" he exclaimed. "Twenty years old, at least, I should say, by the look of it."

The card was passed round. There were some hieroglyphics in the left-hand corner.

"Roulette was her favourite game," Spenser went on.

"It takes money to play roulette," Jane reminded them.

"A great deal of money," Clunderson put in.

"The Casino," Spenser suggested, "is the easiest place in the world to cash a cheque."

"The roulette might be a hint for Suresne, at any rate," Clunderson observed. "In nearly every one of the famous cases of disappearance which I remember, the lost person, if ever found, has been discovered because he or she returned to some form of pursuit or hobby which had at one time filled a place in his daily life."

"What about the great horticultural shows?" Granet ventured. "Granted that she has made a miraculous disappearance from the midst of us all here, it may some day be accounted for quite simply, and one of the first things she would do when she felt the desire to return to her normal life would be, I should think, to visit one of these shows."

"That is quite reasonable," Jane reflected. "I don't know whether you know, Mr. Clunderson, the extraordinary prices she paid for rare plants and orchids and herbs to the importers. She would think nothing of giving four or five hundred pounds for a sprig of something growing in a pot!"

"There's one thing," Spenser put in. "Suppose she is somewhere struggling to find her way back to normal life, she could do nothing without money. Which reminds me," he added coolly. "Can you give me an idea of what her ladyship's balance is, Miss Grassleyes?"

"I could if I chose, I dare say," Jane answered. "The simple truth is that I do not feel inclined to. Why should I? It is no concern of yours."

"So you are going to take up that line, are you? You won't believe that I have an interest in the Grassleyes estate?"

"Certainly not."

"Permit me," Clunderson interposed, "to say a word or two upon that matter. There is not the slightest evidence of Lady Grassleyes' ever receiving any money from any one. There is no trace of capital having come from the bank or from any outside person. On the other hand, in Lady Grassleyes' last year's bank-book there are some very considerable sums paid out to you which need explanation, Mr. Spenser. I have taken it for granted, for the moment, that they were loans, but in any case they will have to be accounted for."

"In what way?" Spenser demanded gruffly.

"By an examination of Lady Grassleyes' private ledger which I shall make in a few days," the lawyer replied. "Yours is a firm of long standing and repute, Mr. Spenser. Your books are, without doubt, properly dealt with by your accountants. I shall invite you to help us in the investigations."

"The sums you speak of," Spenser asserted, "were probably the repayment of capital which I had advanced at different dates for the building of the bungalows."

"If that turns out to be the case," Clunderson said, "all will be well."

Spenser rose to his feet. He had the air of an injured man. He ventured upon one last appeal to Jane.

"Miss Grassleyes," he said, "we used to be pretty good friends. Are you joining in this—this cabal against me?"

"I think, Mr. Spenser," she said, looking at him frankly, "your behaviour since a few hours after this trouble began has been simply extraordinary."

"I have done everything I could to help," he protested. "I seem to have become the victim of the most absurd suspicions on the part of every one, inspired, I believe, by you, sir," he added, turning to Granet.

"An excellent guess," Granet agreed. "Miss Grassleyes has lost confidence in you, Mr. Spenser, and I myself never had any. I have had a conversation with Pooralli since I took over the laboratory and you will probably find, when you leave this morning, that Pooralli will ask you for any keys you possess to the premises. He tells me that you have once or twice tried to obtain the keys of the walled garden and the laboratory for the purpose of showing them to Mr. Johnson, who has a bungalow here."

"He can ask as many times as he likes," Spenser retorted angrily. "Not a single key that I have shall I part with. The only person I shall give them up to will be Lady Grassleyes, and she, I know, will never ask for them."

"A somewhat sinister saying," the lawyer commented.

"Oh I know you are all against me here. Fortunately the police and the doctors are both on my side. But that can go for a moment. I didn't come up here to gossip. I came in the ordinary way of business to ask Miss Grassleyes to prepare the last of the bungalows and to give me the keys—she can come with us if she likes—and allow me to show Mr. Johnson over the herb gardens and the laboratory. Wait a moment, please," he added savagely. "I can see Mr. Granet ready to jump down my throat. Let me tell you this. Johnson wished his presence here to be kept a secret, because he has very dangerous competitors in his line of business, but I can tell you this much on my own account. He is the chairman of directors of the largest firm manufacturing patent medicines in the world. He has twice or three times written Lady Grassleyes for permission to come and make her a business offer. He had one reply some short time ago—a stiff little note saying if he was in the neighbourhood he might call. Nothing more. He decided to come down and see if he could make any progress with the old lady himself. He took a bungalow, or rather I took it for him, and three or four times already he has tried to open up negotiations with Lady Grassleyes. Each time she has put him off. Now an opportunity has arrived. Johnson would make a cash offer which, if I were to mention the amount, would stupefy you, for all these productions of Lady Grassleyes and her *Formula Book*, if he were satisfied that she possesses the herbs she claimed some time ago in an article to the *Chemical Journal*. The amount is enough to make every one of us rich who have the slightest interest in the place. There! I have given the show away. You know now how anxious I am about Lady Grassleyes and how interested I am in this herbal stuff."

Clunderson straightened his tie. He looked over at Jane. She nodded.

"We will accept all that you have said, Mr. Spenser,—as being in good faith," he said, "but I know that Miss Grassleyes is anxious that I should express to you our disgust that you should come and make offers of this sort at such a moment. There is not the slightest proof that Lady Grassleyes will not some day return and manage her own affairs. If this should unfortunately not be the case it will be quite time enough for you to make any business propositions you wish to the person who inherits the estate. But—"

The lawyer hesitated. Jane continued.

"But, Mr. Spenser, nothing in the world would induce me to dispose of any portion of this property to your friend Mr. Johnson."

"Quite right," Clunderson agreed. "In the interests of the estate I agree.... If the property should come into the possession of Miss Jane, even if she wished to dispose of it, I should advise her before she did so to have specialists in this sort of thing here and obtain a valuation."

"You want her to be robbed when she has a chance of making a great fortune simply with the help of her friends?" Spenser asked furiously.

"Mr. Spenser," Jane said a little wearily, "the matter does not even admit of discussion. If it did I should tell you that I consider Mr. Clunderson and Mr. Granet the two best friends I have in the world. You, on the other hand, are not my friend. I should never trust you a yard and I should enter into no business transactions with you outside the letting of the bungalows."

"You won't see Johnson yourself?"

"Let Mr. Clunderson talk to him—Mr. Granet, too, if you wish. Can you not understand this? These gardens, everything connected with them, were my aunt's great hobby and interest in life. How can you even dream of suggesting that her lawyer or her niece should entertain any thoughts of disposing of them when it is not even certain that she may not come back to us?"

"I don't see any harm in talking over the preliminaries," Spenser persisted doggedly.

Jane rose to her feet.

"Mr. Spenser," she said, "I have spoken my last word as regards your offer and Mr. Johnson's. Is there anything else in connection with the estate you have to say? If not, I am going to ask you to leave us."

"Yes, there is," Spenser answered, with quite unexpected restraint. "I came up on two important matters. The one you have disposed of for the minute brutally and foolishly. The other is, as I think you will admit, an affair which I am entitled to put before you. I came up to ask you to prepare 'The Three Cypresses'—the last available bungalow and the most difficult to let—for a very distinguished tenant to whom I have proposed it."

"You have let 'The Three Cypresses'?"

"Let, for an excellent rental and to wonderful tenants."

"Who gave you permission to let bungalows on the estate without reference to us?" Jane demanded.

"I have always had it and very grateful your aunt used to be to me," Spenser replied. "It was I who let Paul Oliver's bungalow, the Mendozas', Johnson's and within the last few days Mr. Granet's and the Leonidas'. All those have come through my agency, besides many tenants who have been and gone."

"That is quite true," Jane admitted, "and you will receive your commission for each one of them, if you have not already done so. It is my aunt or I who have let the bungalows, however, and you who have sent the prospective tenants up. You have not the right to let a bungalow on your own account. Who is this person to whom you say you have already let 'The Three Cypresses'?"

"My clients are paying a visit of inspection probably this afternoon. They are the Marquis and the Marquise de Fallanges, and subject to their approval I have let them the bungalow for twenty-five guineas a week, and they bring their own servants, who will live in the compound. I think you will admit, Miss Grassleaves, that that is a better stroke of business than has been done before."

"Is that the bungalow upon the hillside?" Granet asked.

"Yes, that is the one," Jane replied doubtfully. "Of course, in the ordinary way we should be very glad to let it. It has never yet been occupied. I shall require references and a personal interview both with the Marquis and the Marquise before they come in."

Spenser choked down his anger.

"I will give myself the pleasure of introducing your new tenants this afternoon," he concluded. "They are people of wealth and well-known all over Europe. I shall be up this afternoon at whatever time my friends can arrange to come. You will not be able to find a word against them or their references. Good morning, everybody."

The response to Spenser's farewell was a very half-hearted affair. Clunderson went to the window and watched him drive down the avenue.

"You know," he said when he returned, "I don't as a rule take violent likes or dislikes to any one but I have had the same feeling about that fellow ever since I first met him. I don't trust him."

"Neither do I," Jane agreed.

"I think that I dislike him," Granet pronounced, "as much as any one I have ever met in my life. If I am anything of a psychologist he is a wrong 'un and, furthermore, I believe he knows more about this disappearance than he is willing to tell us."

Jane shivered a little in her chair.

"Do you know, David," she confided, "I cannot help feeling that myself when he talks about her."

"I should like to make a suggestion," Clunderson said thoughtfully. "We three share definite dislike and distrust of this man. He finds Granet and me very much in the way here or I am perfectly certain he would be asking for the books of the estate and probably do his best to prevail upon Miss Jane to allow him to take them away. I propose, Miss Jane, that you allow me to reopen the safe and take possession of the private ledger."

Jane hesitated for a few moments. She was evidently in some distress. She drummed with her fingers upon the desk. Her eyes were fixed feelingly upon the lawyer.

"I—I don't know, Mr. Clunderson," she said. "You know how peculiar my aunt always was about the books."

"The more she valued them," the lawyer pronounced, "the more it becomes my duty to guard them in her absence. Need I remind you of what has happened? From somewhere in this house your aunt's will, the Formula Book which was the book she valued more than anything else in the world, the letter addressed to you, a casket of jewellery and a large sum of money have vanished."

"I have searched every corner of my aunt's room, her wardrobes and every possible place I can think of," Jane confessed hopelessly. "I can't find a trace of anything. Of course," she went on, "this place is not like a bungalow. We have rooms which no one ever enters. There are two secret passages, for instance, that no one has ever discovered and there must be many hiding places that I have not had time yet to explore. But there it is—up till now I have not found a trace of any of these missing things."

"I have a conviction," Clunderson said, "that the very next thing you will find missing will be that private ledger. Let me ask you another question, Miss Jane. The firm of Spenser & Sykes is a very old-fashioned one, is it not?"

She nodded.

"I believe so," she admitted indifferently. "Spenser's father was a very different type of man and extraordinarily popular everywhere. His grandfather, too, had a great following upon the coast. For some years he used to occupy the Manoir here."

"So that our friend," Clunderson went on, "knows this house inside out?"

"I should think every corner of it," she agreed. "He probably knows of a dozen hiding places."

"He seems to make every excuse, too," he continued, "for coming up so often. He is not hanging about the whole of the time for nothing, I'm sure. I have an idea that I did see one volume which reminded me of the private ledger when I was searching for the will. It was behind all the copies of the leases. I should like—if you don't mind, Miss Jane—I should like you to open the safe and see if it is still there. If so, you might allow me to take it to the bank."

Jane looked across at Granet, who did not hesitate for a moment.

"I think Mr. Clunderson is perfectly right," he said. "I think it is your duty to remove the private ledger, Jane. There is no need for us to open it. The time has not come for any investigation into your aunt's affairs. I should simply have it deposited in a sealed parcel at the bank."

Jane rose to her feet.

"I'll fetch the keys," she announced.

She left the room. The lawyer walked up and down with his hands behind his back.

"It's a damned unpleasant business, this, Granet," he said, coming to a standstill in front of him. "I know how Miss Jane feels. By the by, a charming girl, that, Granet. I do most heartily congratulate you. Quite a miracle you should have turned up just at this time but you make all the difference to her."

"Thank you very much," Granet replied, and there was a great deal of feeling in his tone. "It is good of you, sir, to take me so much for granted as you do."

Clunderson smiled.

"A little sudden, wasn't it?"

"I suppose it was," Granet assented. "Anyhow, it was, if I may say so, extraordinarily natural. It just came. I was not looking for a wife or anything of the sort. I cannot explain it."

"Well, it is a jolly good thing for both of you," the lawyer said. "I am not an impetuous person myself," he went on with his queer little smile, "nor, I should think, are you given that way very much, but there are times when one does not have to hesitate and I should think this was one of those times for you. Poor child, I know she hates having us take the private ledger away."

"You are doing the right thing," Granet said firmly. "I don't know whether Spenser has a key to the safe or not, but twice I have come into this room a little unexpectedly, perhaps, and found him hanging round. I believe he is only waiting for an opportunity to get at it himself."

The door was opened and closed. Jane came towards them and led the way through to the adjoining room. They approached the safe and she handed the keys to Clunderson, indicating the correct one with her forefinger. The lawyer fingered for a moment the plate, inserted the key and turned it. He drew out the calf-bound volume on which was stamped in gold letters: Private Ledger, Grassleyes Estate. Granet, who had returned to the little bureau for a moment, reappeared with brown paper, string and sealing wax. Between them the two men wrapped up the volume, tied it with the string and sealed it in four different places. Granet addressed it at Clunderson's dictation.

"I shall now," the lawyer said, "go down to Nice and deposit this at the bank. The key, as you see, is attached to the back of the ledger. When you are going thoroughly into your accounts, Miss Grassleyes, we shall need it, of course, for other reasons, but I think that we all have the same idea. We must get rid of it so long as Mr. Spenser is hanging round all the time."

"I cannot tell you," Jane said, "what a relief it will be to me to know that it is no longer in the house. I will order the car for you whenever you say."

"Now," Clunderson decided.

The lawyer made his way to the next room where he collected his hat and his sun umbrella. Jane and Granet accompanied him to the front door and watched him take his place in the limousine with the parcel under his arm.

"From here to the bank," he announced. "Afterwards a stroll along the Promenade des Anglais. Shall I come back to lunch, Miss Jane, or would you rather give the housekeeping a rest?"

"Do come back," she begged. "If you come I will press Mr. Granet to stay, too."

"I will come back, then," he promised as he drove off.

Granet and Jane returned to the reception room.

"I am going to post up the day book," Jane said. "A dreary task, but there are some accounts here that must be paid. Will you come back at about half past twelve and I will make you a wonderful Martini?"

"Without even that inducement," he assured her, "I could not stay away longer than two hours and a quarter—the time now being, I see, a quarter past ten. I am going to answer a few letters down at the bungalow and if I finish in time I may come up and go through some of those pet herbs of your aunt's in the forcing house."

"You are like a child with a new toy," she laughed. "What were you and Mr. Clunderson talking about while I was upstairs?"

"You."

"Anything else?"

"Me."

"Anything else?"

"He approves."

"Really? Tell me what he said."

"He gave me a word of advice."

"What was it?"

"He said he was glad that there was some one here to look after you just now."

"Nice man."

"He also said, or was going to say, that he didn't approve of long engagements."

Jane looked happily away towards the mountains.

"Aunt Harriet used to say that his advice was always right."

Granet held her wrist for a moment and slipped a ring from her finger.

"I'll go into Cannes and see about it this afternoon."

CHAPTER XXI

Granet strolled down to his bungalow and found Carlotta lying in a nest of cushions in one of his chairs, her feet up on the other. She was looking a little fragile and she greeted him with a very wistful smile. Her eyes shone with pleasure, however, as he came towards her without any visible signs of annoyance.

"I heard of you this morning," she confided. "My sister has been up to the Manoir."

"Look here, young lady," he protested, waving her remark on one side, "is this my bungalow or yours?"

"Ours," she told him with a mischievous, rather impish grin. "Why do you fight so blindly against your fate?"

"My fate seems to be that I have to fetch another chair," he remarked as he let himself in and dragged one out. "I am going to sit here for a few minutes only, child. I can't spare any more time to frivol with you this morning. I have to write to my lawyers, three family letters and then spend half an hour or so before lunch pottering about with some of those marvellous plants of her truant ladyship's."

"You seem to be always doing things for other people," she complained passionately. "Why can't you be content to do things for me? I should like to swim this morning and have a little lunch somewhere by the sea and then I should like to be read to in your own little wood there—read to all the afternoon until the evening mistral arrives."

"Do you want to make a lotus-eater of me?"

"I would not change you. You are terribly nice, if you only did not know it, and if you could believe that I am not such a child as you think I am."

"Well, I cannot do any of the things you propose to-day," he told her. "I will take you swimming one morning soon—but not just yet. I will perhaps read Browning to you one afternoon—but not just yet. You see, I have a girl of my own up at the Manoir."

"That sweet, placid-looking Jane Grassleyes!" she murmured with a pout. "I cannot think why I am not enough for you, David."

"Who told you you could call me 'David'?"

"It will not be any good anybody telling me I may not, because I shall," she replied. "I love the name. I always knew that if ever I fell in love with any one his name would be 'David.'"

"Are you trying to persuade yourself that you have fallen in love with me?" he asked.

"Of course I have fallen in love with you."

"What does it feel like?"

"Wonderful, but oh! so painful!"

"That's queer," he remarked. "I am in love with my own girl but it is not painful at all. I am very happy with you here but I shall be happier still when at half past twelve I go up to the Manoir and she comes out to meet me and mixes me a cocktail."

"I will make you one here."

"Not the same thing at all. Oh, Carlotta, why can't you be a little more sensible?"

"I am really perfectly sensible," she assured him. "I am not going to throw myself in the stream or plunge a dagger into my side, but naturally I am a little sad. It is the first time, remember, that I have ever been in love. That foolish boy in the coloured trousers worked very hard for several days saying nice things to me, but he gave it up in despair. Not a flicker of interest could I feel! A nice name, too, he had."

"Paul Oliver?"

She nodded.

"He is quite nice," she continued, "but he is different. He just does not count. Miriam has been worrying all the morning about Lady Grassleyes. I believe she is very fond of her. She loves those little bottles of herb medicine. They do her good, too. I wish some one would give me something to do me good."

"You don't need anything."

"I am very tired and I do not sleep. I awake in the night and I want to get up and go somewhere and dance, but I want to dance with some one I like, with some one I am fond of like you. I danced the other night and it was all just stupid. I did not enjoy anything, not even the glass of champagne Miriam made me drink. Take me out to dance one night, David."

"Look here," he said firmly. "I cannot do anything of the sort, nor do I wish to. Didn't I tell you a few minutes ago that I had a girl of my own—grown-up girl—not a child like you?"

Carlotta sighed.

"Always the same! A child! You are as bad as that lank-faced, stupid Mr. Leonidas who comes posturing round here and wants to make a great actress of me. I do not want to be a great actress, David. I want to live in a bungalow like this—with you."

"Well, you can't," he told her curtly.

"Why?"

"Because I am twice your age, for one thing."

"I should not mind that. So long as you were nice to me and did not always look so severe I should not mind at all how old you were.... Tell me what you think has become of Lady Grassleyes."

"My child," he said earnestly, "I do not know. I believe I have a fair amount of intelligence. I have been in and out of the Manoir continually ever since the trouble began. I was the first to see her after it happened. I have been to the Clinic from which she has disappeared and talked with the matron. I have talked to detectives, doctors and lawyers, and honestly I have not one single idea as to what can have become of her, not even whether she is alive or dead. If you could tell me that, now, I might consider trying to fall in love with you."

Carlotta's eyes seemed to grow larger as she leaned forward in her chair.

"Do you mean that?"

"Well, I suppose I do. I do seriously want to know what has become of Lady Grassleyes. There are some people shaking their heads and whispering that she mixes drugs, which she never has done in her life so far as I know. There are other people who say that she has been done away with because she has a great fortune, and there are others who say that she has faded away because all her money has gone and she does not want to face poverty. No one knows the truth. So there we are."

"And if I find out where Lady Grassleyes is you will fall in love with me?"

"My dear, don't be silly," he begged. "One cannot fall in love like that, not grown men like me. I think it would be very nice to love you and if I were the age of Paul Oliver and if there were no Jane Grassleyes in the world and you kept looking just as beautiful as you do now—why, I should let myself go head over ears in love with you, pick you up and carry you to the clouds or the sea or anywhere you wanted to go to; talk nonsense with you like this all through the summer days, lie in the little wood and listen to the bees and wait for the nightingales when the darkness came."

"May I come and watch the fire-flies with you one night?"

"You may if you will let me go and write my letters now."

"I shall come every night," she threatened, "and you will promise, will you, that you will be outside sitting here?"

"I promise you I shall never be inside, these wonderful nights," he said, "but I can't promise to be here all the time."

"Then I shall not go," she decided, leaning farther back in her chair. "You can bring your letters out here and write."

Granet looked round at the sound of approaching footsteps. Leonidas was standing the other side of the paling. Carlotta made a little grimace. Granet nodded a good morning.

"You have come from the Manoir?" Leonidas asked. "I was wondering whether there was any news."

"None whatever," was the curt reply.

"That is sad," Leonidas sighed. "The poor young lady must be suffering from this dreadful uncertainty. There are such strange reports in circulation, too."

"I should not listen to them," Granet advised. "No one knows what has happened to Lady Grassleyes."

"It is true," the other persisted, "that she disappeared from the Clinic?"

"I am not in a position to answer any questions."

"I suppose you are right," Leonidas admitted reluctantly, "only, believe me, mine is no vulgar curiosity. I do not know Lady Grassleyes, but her story fascinates me. You see, I have made a great fortune, Mr. Granet, because I am one who listens to stories and wonders about them, builds them up and then turns them into something that every one may come and see. Yes, stories have a strange interest for me. I fear that I disturb you?"

"I am just going in," Granet answered. "I have some letters to write. You can stay and entertain mademoiselle, if you like."

Leonidas stepped blithely over the paling but Carlotta leaped from her chair with an amazing demonstration of energy. She passed her arm through Granet's.

"I come to help you write," she announced. "I am a very good secretary. You forgive, Mr. Leonidas? This gentleman here, Mr. Granet, works too hard. I must help him just a little."

Leonidas regarded them sadly for a moment, then he bowed and stepped back over the paling.

"I look for you again some time soon, mademoiselle?" he asked wistfully.

"As you please," she answered. "So long as you do not bother me now."

She waved her hand, but when she turned round the door of the bungalow was closed. Granet had disappeared.

* * * * *

Within ten minutes of settling down to his correspondence Granet was disturbed by the summons of the telephone which stood at his elbow. He looked at the receiver doubtfully.

"If it is that little minx again," he muttered, "she shall really know what it means to talk to a man in a temper."

He lifted the receiver. His interjection was certainly not promising.

"Well?" he asked abruptly.

"Do not be cross with me, please. I had to ring you up, David."

Jane's voice. That was a very different matter.

"My dear Jane!" he exclaimed. "Forgive me! I am here and all attention."

"Please don't think me too silly," she begged, "but I want you to come back again to the Manoir at once. I have just received a note. You must help me decide. Please come."

"I shall be with you," he replied, "in less than five minutes."

Jane was seated on the broad southern verandah when Granet arrived. She threw a cushion on to the chair by her side and handed him a note. It was in Spenser's sprawling handwriting and written apparently in great haste from the offices of Spenser & Sykes, Nice.

My dear Miss Grassleyes,

The Marquis and Marquise de Fallanges are already here. They arrived early this morning in their yacht from Bandol. I went straight on board to see them after I had got back from the Manoir. It was fortunate I did as I found the Duchesse de Saye there endeavouring to persuade them to take her château for their stay here. They explained that they had promised me to look at one of the Grassleyes bungalows, but I think that my arrival was just in time to stop their going off to the Saye château, which, as you know, is a very charming and attractive place.

I wish to repeat that they are most desirable tenants and should they decide to settle down here their rental will be a great help to the estate. I know that your aunt would have welcomed them and treated them with every courtesy and civility. I have, therefore, in your name, ventured to ask them to come to luncheon to-day at the Manoir at half past one. They can then inspect "The Three Cypresses" at their leisure, and if they find it unsuitable they can go on to Saye. I know that you do not wish to entertain just now but you might ask Madame di Mendoza and her sister and, I suppose, Mr. Granet.

I shall take your acceptance of this proposition for granted but please telephone to the office and let me know that all is in order. If there is anything you wish brought up from Nice I will see to it.

Sincerely yours,
Fred Spenser

P.S. There is no fresh news from either the Clinic or the police.

"Sounds all right," Granet remarked. "Do you know anything of these people beyond what Spenser told us this morning?"

"The name is quite familiar and they are in the social register," Jane confessed. "What shall I say?"

Granet considered the matter for a moment.

"I think," he decided, "I should let Spenser bring them. You and I know that there is something wrong about the fellow but this is an outside matter of business, after all. I had a look at the bungalow on my way up. It is much larger than I thought."

Jane laid down the letter and touched the bell.

"I will have some one telephone to say that I will receive them, then. Thank goodness you are here, David! I should never venture to do it on my own account."

"Why?"

"Sheer instinct. Nothing else. As I told you, I looked them up and found them in the social register. Wealthy people, I should think. Hotel in Paris, château in Savoy, eleventh Marquis."

She gave a message to Martin, the English butler, who had made his appearance.

"I must now go and speak to the chef," she added, turning to Granet. "You might get hold of some of these other people, if you can."

"Are you sure that your staff will be able to manage, at such short notice?" he asked. "Clunderson will be back, too, you know."

"We can manage all right," she assured him. "The chef never has half enough to do. You get the others together, if you can, and I will see to the luncheon."

"I rather hope that Clunderson does not fail us," he observed.

"Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. Two judgements are better than one, you know. I don't quite understand Spenser's bringing up new people to move in here just at the present moment for the sake of twenty-five guineas a week."

Jane laughed softly as she moved towards the French window.

"For a man," she declared, "you are very suspicious, David. You are almost worse than I am."

"Perhaps I have met more men of Spenser's type."

"It is not Spenser I am thinking of. It is the eleventh Marquis de Fallanges, whose wife, by the by, was a Bourdon."

"Almost royalty," he murmured in an awed tone. "You ought to have told me, Jane. I must go and change these blue-linen slacks."

"Snob!" she laughed. "You won't change a thing you have on. You can go and have a wash if you want to. If you change even your coat or put on a tie I shall appear in pyjamas."

"They are quite attractive," he assured her.

She picked up a volume she had been studying with a page turned down.

"Read that," she said. "It is the French Debrett. When you have finished with it tell Pooralli to put out the cocktail things. I must go and interview Monsieur Henri. He will be very excited. He loves to cook for the Great World. *Au revoir*, my sweet!"

"Au revoir, chérie!"

CHAPTER XXII

The guests duly arrived and there was no trouble about the luncheon itself. It was delightfully served in delightful surroundings, the food was good, the Manoir wine pronounced excellent and the gently shaded sunlight in which they sat pleased everybody. Yet somehow or other there was from the first a faint element of uneasiness amongst both the guests and their charming young hostess. Jane did her best to dispel it. She talked well and with spirit and the Marquis, who sat on her right, was as agreeable a companion as any one might wish for. With easy, pleasant manners he seemed to have the gift of including every person at the table in the circle of his listeners when now and then he talked about his travels and some of his personal adventures. The Marquise, a dazzling blonde, petite, almost spiritual in appearance, was, for her nationality, a little silent, but she explained herself with great good humour.

"When Maurice talks," she told them, "I am always silent. I know then that he is happy because, although he would not admit it, he loves to talk. I know, too, that he has travelled far more than I have. I am a little better-looking, perhaps, nicer to look at—yes?" she asked with a smile at Granet, "but he is much better to listen to."

"My wife likes, as I think you say in English, to pull my leg," the Marquis complained. "She does that often. In fact we lead a quarrelsome life. On one point I think we shall find ourselves agreed—we like your atmosphere up here, Miss Grassleyes. We find it charming. What I cannot understand is—where are these wonderful bungalows of yours? I feel myself in the garden of a beautiful château, shut off from the world, which is what I love."

"That is where I think my aunt was very clever," Jane told them. "Each bungalow was built so that it was shaded either by a slight eminence, a little forest of trees, a dip in the ground, perhaps, yet they are all here and all within a very short distance. Yours you will see almost directly you pass out of the Manoir—yours, that is to say, if you decide to take it."

The Marquis helped himself to some more chicken.

"I have decided," he said, "amongst other of my vices, Miss Grassleyes, that I am a greedy man. I believe you have your own chicken run, I am convinced that these mushrooms came from your own meadows and that you grow your own salads. Am I mistaken?"

Jane shook her head.

"No, that is quite true," she admitted. "Fruit, flowers, dairy produce and all the simple things are our own. Perhaps that is why my aunt was supposed to make Grassleyes pay."

"Am I speaking in bad taste," he enquired, "or may I ask whether news has been received this morning of Lady Grassleyes?"

"We have received no news at all," she replied. "Somehow or other, I cannot tell why, we do not seem to be half so anxious as we were. I suppose it is because we have got over the first shock. Mr. Granet and I were talking just before lunch in my aunt's laboratory here. We both feel absolutely convinced that one day, very soon perhaps, she will walk in and explain everything."

"I think she is a very naughty lady," the Marquise observed, "to give you all this trouble and anxiety, especially if it is, as so many people seem to think now, just a temperamental whim."

Somehow or other, it was that simple question of the Marquis's which seemed to place the luncheon party upon a different footing. From that moment every one seemed more friendly.

"Nothing so strange," Miriam di Mendoza murmured, "has ever happened within my memory. Even now, if ever I am alone or with my sister, whatever we wish to talk about or think about we go always to the subject of Lady Grassleyes. We ask ourselves what has become of our neighbour, and we indulge in new speculations."

The Marquis toyed for a moment or two with his dark moustache.

"It could not be otherwise," he agreed, "especially in a small centre like this. The disappearance of so prominent a person must leave you all feeling a little strange."

"And talking of disappearances," Jane said suddenly, "I wonder what has become of Mr. Clunderson?"

"Some one telephoned," Granet told her, "just as we were having our cocktails. Mr. Clunderson wished us not to wait. He was detained in Nice, he said."

A shadow passed across Jane's face.

"That is not like him," she remarked.

"This is another friend of yours, perhaps?" the Marquis enquired politely.

"He is my aunt's lawyer," she explained. "He has come down from Paris to help us put matters in order."

"Not much loss at a luncheon party, though," Spenser observed. "He is the typical lawyer—dried up, uncommunicative and absolutely without imagination."

"I don't agree," Jane said. "He has the gift of silence, and that is something. Personally, I think that he has ideas of his own about Lady Grassleyes and is getting ready to talk about them."

Spenser moved uneasily in his place.

"Anyhow, it is a profitless subject for conversation," he declared.

"I am surprised that you find it so," the Marquis remarked. "I think it is a very dramatic happening in a quiet neighbourhood and I am inclined to wonder myself how you can think or talk of anything else."

"My husband," the Marquise said lazily, "is devoted to mystery stories. He lies awake at night reading them. I warn you, Miss Grassleyes, you will have something to put up with from him. He will be coming to you with fresh theories every other day. Myself I do not believe in amateur detectives. I think that they are very much in the way. I think, too," she went on, as she accepted some fruit from the dish which was being passed to her, "that they do a great deal more harm than good."

"I am not so sure," Granet observed. "I travelled halfway across America once with a very well-known detective from the New York police force. I only knew who he was by accident. As soon as he found out that I had recognized him he talked quite freely. It was an interesting case he was on. I forget the particulars now, but years afterwards I met him in Paris, and he told me that it was just a stupid little remark I happened to have made during the course of dinner one night which gave him the idea he had been waiting for. It was a sheer fluke. I had devoted no time or thought to the matter at all but he built up the culmination of his case on it. History might repeat itself."

"As how?" Spenser asked contemptuously.

"Why, one of us—Miss Carlotta there, perhaps, or Mr. Oliver, or even you, Spenser—might, in talking about this disappearance of Lady Grassleyes, say something which a mind trained in such matters might take hold of and find the finger-post to the truth. Improbable, of course, but possible."

Pooralli trotted round the corner and presented a strip of paper upon a silver salver to Jane. She glanced at it and as though unwittingly looked across the table at Clunderson's empty place. Then she turned over the piece of paper and the Marquis, who had eyes which seemed at times to be wandering in many different places, addressed her sympathetically.

"I think," he said, "that we have not very much tact in discussing a subject which must be somewhat painful to our hostess. I think, perhaps, if we focused our thoughts upon the wonderful singing of Madame di Mendoza and talked a little of those high notes of hers which remind one so much of Tetrizzini, it would be pleasanter."

Jane glanced at him gratefully.

"It is only when one is reminded of the possibly serious side of an episode like this that one is for a few moments unhappy," she said. "You have heard Tetrizzini sing, Marquis?"

"Alas, no," he replied, "but my father was one of her greatest admirers. I have always been fond of music. I have heard madame here sing in Paris at the Opéra Comique last December. Oh, I have been a very faithful follower of hers. She may not remember, but I once very nearly had the pleasure of meeting her in Milan."

"You knew my master, perhaps?" Madame di Mendoza asked. "Lornetti?"

"All the world who loved music knew him," the Marquis assented.

Cigarettes were passed round. Coffee and liqueurs followed. The Marquise showed a little more animation.

"It comes very near the time," she observed, "when we are to see the bungalow. I am glad. I am impatient, besides which I have a small errand in Cannes—some friends at the Carlton to visit."

"To break up so charming a party," the Marquis remarked in his soft, pleasant voice, "involves a pang, but my wife speaks the truth. We can perhaps be entrusted with the keys, Miss Grassleyes?"

"I am hoping to hand them over to you," Jane replied, "but I shall certainly show you the place myself. It will give me pleasure. It is perhaps a quarter of a mile from the entrance here. Your chauffeur will doubtless have lunched by now, or you might care to walk or we have a car which is always ready."

The little company trooped towards the house. The Marquis glanced backwards at Clunderson's vacant place at the table.

"My sympathies," he said, "are with your absent guest, Miss Grassleyes. He is unfortunate indeed to have missed so charming a repast."

"I hope very much that Mr. Clunderson will have returned before you leave," Jane ventured. "I do not share Mr. Spenser's opinion of him. I find him an interesting and kindly man and my aunt was—or is—devoted to him. The telephone message I received just now was to say that he was obliged to lunch at Nice but would come up here immediately afterwards. So he may be here before you go."

"In saying farewell to the subject, Miss Grassleyes," he said, pausing for a moment to admire a cataract of falling roses which were hanging from an olive tree on their way, "a stranger may be permitted to offer you his very sincere hopes for a speedy termination to all your anxieties?"

"That is very kind of you," Jane said gratefully.

* * * * *

"I wonder whether we have done wisely," Jane reflected an hour or so later as Granet and she watched the new tenants drive away.

"So long as they were here," he answered, "I don't see what else we could do. A more determined and at the same time charming couple I never came across. I wish I could remember a little more about them."

"I should never have been likely to have met or known of them," Jane declared frankly. "I haven't been out here long enough."

"Well, apparently it's a North of France family," Granet reminded her, "and they admit that they have never had much fancy for the Riviera. Still, I should never have been likely to come across them. I have been abroad myself most of the time for the last twelve years."

"We have the references," Jane murmured.

"That's so. Lloyd's Bank should be good enough, and the firm of French advocates are well-known, I believe. I should have liked, for your sake, though, a personal reference or to have had one of our friends know something about them."

"Suspicious again," she smiled.

"I can't really see what there is to be suspicious about," he confessed. "The only thing is that they come to you through Spenser and I'm hanged if I can stand Spenser at any price. I always have the feeling, you know, that when this mystery is straightened out we shall discover something more about the fellow than we know now. I wonder, by the by, where they came across him."

"I can tell you that. The Marquis told me at luncheon that he met him once or twice at the Travellers' Club in Paris."

"That seems likely enough," Granet remarked. "It's a great meeting place for cosmopolitans."

"Well, anyhow," Jane sighed, "so long as we consented to have them here and show them the place we couldn't do anything else but accept them as tenants. It seems, too, that Spenser had more or less fixed things up before they came. We have their cheque for the first month's rent, we have the references they have given us and we shall have them installed here, apparently, as soon as they can get away from their yacht. Four servants, too, to say nothing of the maid. They must have plenty of money."

"Heaps, I should think," he agreed. "I can't think, though, why a man wants to travel round with two valets, a secretary and a butler."

"One of the men, he told me," she confided, "is the chief steward from the boat. Whenever they land for a few weeks they bring him along. He acts as butler to the Marquis. No one who is up to any mischief would come to a place like this, anyway. I don't suppose the whole of our personal belongings, if we were sold up here, would realize as much as the Marquise's pearls."

"Perhaps they are artificial."

She smiled.

"A man might think that," she replied, "but a woman is not so easily deceived. They are family stuff, I suppose, but if the Marquis was thinking of making his wife a present of those to-day they would cost him thirty thousand pounds, at least. I know something about pearls. Did you ever realize that I was a typist before I came out here? I was with the firm in Hatton Garden for three weeks."

"Get the sack?"

"Exactly what I did get—but in the cause of honour, my dear David. A luncheon at the Savoy was involved—with a very disagreeable Brazilian, too."

"The scoundrel!" Granet exclaimed.

"So ugly, too," she sighed. "Never mind, dear. It was just one of those stupid little adventures an honest girl has to deal with in life.... David, I wish that Mr. Clunderson had got back for luncheon."

"To tell you the truth," he replied, "I wish that he would come along now."

"You are not really anxious?" she asked.

"What is there to be anxious about?" he protested.

"Nothing in the world, of course," she admitted. "It's just that one can't help being apprehensive now."

He passed his arm through hers.

"Jitters," he declared. "Do you realize, Jane, that the premises of the bank are on the Promenade des Anglais, and so are the offices of Doubleday & Brown, the lawyers who are Clunderson's agents. He does not need to move off the Promenade. Do you honestly think it would be possible to kidnap a person of Mr. Clunderson's distinguished appearance in the midst of all that gay crowd?"

"Not exactly," she answered after a slight hesitation. "On the other hand, more than one murder has been committed there actually within sight of a thousand people. Something of the sort happened last year. I read about it in the *Éclaireur*. The man slipped away through the crowd and was never caught."

"Yes, but he was not carrying a brown-paper parcel with seals all over it," Granet reminded her. "Carrying anything at all is what makes the getaway so difficult in these quick crimes. Now supposing you just set that dainty little heel of yours upon these nerves of yours and glance down the avenue."

"The car!" she exclaimed. "David, it is the car—and Mr. Clunderson."

"The wanderer returned," Granet observed. "But what is it that he has picked up on the way?"

"Stupid!" Jane laughed. "Don't you recognize him? It is Suresne, the French detective."

There was no answering smile for a moment on Granet's lips. He leaned farther forward. Then the relief came. Clunderson certainly was looking a little pale, otherwise he showed no signs of any sort of adventure. He waved his hand but when the two men descended there was a slight surprise in store for the two young people. Clunderson was carrying the brown-paper parcel with which he had left the Manoir early that morning. Jane stared at it with wide-open eyes.

"Has anything happened?" she demanded.

Suresne smiled beneficently upon them.

"No, nothing has happened," he declared. "What, in a busy place like Nice, could happen that was contrary to the law—and in the middle of the morning! All is well, Miss Grassleyes, all is very well indeed. We make progress in the task of unravelling this little problem of yours."

There was something in Suresne's eyes which spoke more clearly than any gesture, than any word of warning. Jane, without turning her head, glanced at the chauffeur. He had changed his position slightly and he was looking into the mirror, watching with a set, eager gaze.

"I have had a very pleasant morning," Clunderson declared. "I happened to run across Monsieur Suresne and he invited me to lunch. I knew you would excuse me. Our lunch was indeed excellent, but, Miss Jane, everything that is British in me is clamouring for just one single cup of tea."

"Come along," Jane said. "Pooralli," she added, turning to the man who was standing upon the threshold with a smile of welcome upon his lips, "Mr. Clunderson would like some tea. Better serve it for every one in my bureau."

They made their way there, Clunderson still carrying the parcel. Jane closed the French windows which looked out on to the back terrace and drew the bolt of the door connecting the apartment with the main reception room.

"Mr. Clunderson," she asked, turning round, "tell me now why you have brought back the Grassleyes-estate private ledger."

CHAPTER XXIII

Clunderson made no immediate reply to Jane's question. He was choosing his place with almost meticulous care. He moved a chair into the corner facing her, facing, too, the French windows on his right. Opposite to him was the door opening from the corridor and on his left the door leading into the main reception room. He placed the brown-paper parcel with its conspicuous seals on the table before him and kept one hand on it whilst he was speaking.

"Suresne can explain this business even better than I," he confided. "I think we have acted wisely. I hope it may turn out so, at any rate. But first let me ask you a question. I understand that the Marquis and Marquise de Fallanges have been lunching here. That is so?"

"Yes," Jane assented, "and we found them both perfectly charming. They have gone back to the yacht, they will dine on board and come up here directly afterwards, complete with staff."

"Complete with staff?"

Jane nodded.

"Complete with staff," she said. "They have taken 'The Three Cypresses' for a month and paid a cheque for one hundred guineas in advance. Now don't tell us, Monsieur Suresne, that it won't be honoured!"

"My dear young lady," was the confident reassurance, "you need be under no misapprehension. Any cheque the Marquis gave you will certainly be met."

"He really is the Marquis de Fallanges?"

"Absolutely. We passed them on our way up. His wife was a Princess de Bourdon, although she prefers to bear her husband's name."

"Thank heavens!" Jane exclaimed. "I was beginning to wonder whether my beautiful lunch had been wasted. Now go on with your story, please."

Suresne bowed. He took a chair, smoothed his hair with both hands and stroked his short imperial. Everything was apparently in place. He was in the act of commencing, when the door was quietly opened. Jane glanced over her shoulder and leaned forward with uplifted finger.

"For a few minutes," she enjoined, "we speak of other things."

A tea table was dragged in and Pooralli and Martin busied themselves arranging the little dishes of scones, bread and butter and jars of preserves. A beautiful Georgian teapot was placed in the exact centre of an equally beautiful tray. A copper kettle was hung from a tripod by the side of Jane's chair. The two servants made their bow and took their leave.

"Not another word," Jane insisted as she took her place at the head of the table. "Mr. Clunderson, here is the tea for which you have been longing. Monsieur Suresne, you are joining us, I hope?"

"With great pleasure," he declared. "I love a family tea. It is good for the brain, and sometimes when we consider problems of this sort we feel that the brain needs stimulation."

"I am rather inclined to welcome Miss Grassleyes' prohibition," Granet remarked as he helped himself to toast. "I need a brief rest from thought. I shall admire this beautiful Sèvres tea service and let my fancies drift."

"I shall, with our young hostess' permission, remain in my corner," Clunderson announced.

"You are a wise man, Mr. Granet," Suresne said. "A silent meal is good for one. That is why the doctors have started their latest cult of no wine with meals. Wine unlocks the tongue. A silent meal where the alcohol flows is barely possible. Tell me, Miss Grassleyes, you really grow your own wine here?"

"A great deal of it," she answered. "That was one of my aunt's great pleasures. She took almost as much interest in her vines as her herbs."

Suresne smiled.

"Her herbs are indeed famous," he acknowledged. "At the principal pharmacy in Nice I discovered a notice that certain herbs—santonin was one, I think—were grown on the famous Grassleyes estate."

Jane nodded.

"My aunt was always very proud of her old Provençal furniture," she remarked, "but I remember her saying one day that her gardens of herbs alone, apart from the small shrubs and plants she kept in the forcing house, were worth more than the whole of the furniture on the estate. I know I discovered in an old ledger enormous sums of money she paid for transport of tiny little pots of herbs from the most impossible places. One man in the Malay States had a salary of four hundred pounds a year for doing nothing but watch in the correct season for certain exotics and ship them to her."

No one seemed inclined to eat any of the delicate trifles with which the table was laden. Cigarettes were passed round. There was a general air of restlessness, although every one in his turn tried to make conversation. Then Jane summoned Pooralli and Martin. Everything was cleared away noiselessly and swiftly. Suresne watched the service of the men with amazement.

"You allow always your wonderful china to be handled like that by a native servant?" he asked.

Jane laughed.

"I have been here for two years and a half," she confided, "and most afternoons my aunt and I have had tea together served by those two and during all that time there has never been a single chip on any piece of china, no clatter of plates, not a single drop of anything spilt."

"Your aunt, without a doubt," Suresne acknowledged, "was a woman who dealt in miracles."

The room was itself again, the door and the French windows were closed. Jane drew a sigh of relief.

"I think the time has come now when we might ask a few questions," she said. "What do you think, David?"

"I should commence with this one," he replied. "If the contents of this private ledger are of such enormous significance, why, Mr. Clunderson, when you were within twenty yards of a strong room and absolute security, have you brought it back here again?"

"In everything I did to-day," the lawyer confessed, "I was guided by Monsieur Suresne. He made no mistake. He was swift and yet kindly. You do not know this, perhaps. As we turned out of the gates this morning he suddenly appeared and stopped the car. The chauffeur was annoyed but Monsieur Suresne begged for a lift into Nice. I find my own manner of speech a little prolix compared to Monsieur Suresne's. I beg that you will let him answer the rest of your questions."

"We have not taken quite as much risk as seems to you apparent," Suresne declared. "Mr. Clunderson, will you produce the ledger?"

Clunderson cut the strings, broke the seals and drew out the volume. He unlocked it and spread it open before Jane, who had moved to his side. Suresne's hand stole towards his hip-pocket. He was not a man to take risks.

"Just glance through that quickly, Miss Grassleyes," he said. "Tell us now, do you perceive anything unusual or unfamiliar in that ledger?"

"Well, I have only seen it open three times in my life," she replied. "Everything seems to me to be the same."

"Turn to the index," Suresne suggested. "Find on what page the account of Spenser & Sykes begins."

She did as she was told but searched in vain.

"Why, it says page ninety-two but page ninety-two is not here!" she exclaimed.

She passed the volume to Granet. He examined it carefully.

"There are seven pages missing," he said, "ninety-two through ninety-eight. The whole of Spenser & Sykes' account has disappeared."

"So you see," Suresne pointed out, "we are not exposing you to the risk you fear. As Mr. Granet says, the pages of Spenser & Sykes' account with Grassleyes have been cut from that ledger, and with amazing skill."

"How did you discover this?" Jane asked.

"When we handed over the parcel to the bank manager," Suresne explained, "he declined to receive it for safekeeping without examining its contents, and the moment he handled the ledger he discovered that it had been tampered with. He was shocked when he saw whose account had been mutilated. He asked us both to verify its condition, tied up the parcel again, sealed it and was willing to accept it. I thought it best, in the circumstances, to bring it back. The possession of this ledger ought to make our dealings with Mr. Spenser a little easier in the event of his trying to make trouble."

There was a moment or two's silence, then Suresne went on.

"You will see that about one thirty-second of an inch is left, in order that the ledger should present the same appearance superficially. The fact remains, however, that these pages have been cut out and whatever transactions were recorded in them will be difficult to trace. Here, however, at the bottom of page ninety-nine are some figures which might represent the total: frs. 9,740,000 in very faint crayon. How the figures got there one cannot imagine. It is a fair guess that that was the debit balance. Perhaps, in the circumstances, it will not be difficult to imagine the history of those missing pages."

"How much did you say the amount was?" Jane asked in stupefaction.

"Frs. 9,740,000."

"That sounds like a good round sum of money," a familiar voice declared. "Some one left me a fortune, eh?"

Suresne and Clunderson simultaneously laid their hands upon the ledger. Spenser had entered noiselessly from the verandah. He looked at them all with a sneer upon his face. His attitude was more than confident. It was defiant.

"We were just wondering," Jane said, "whether that could possibly represent a sum which you owe to the estate."

Spenser was across the room in a couple of strides. The sneer had gone from his lips; his eyes were blazing with passion.

"What have you got there?" he demanded.

"What we have," Clunderson said in his dry, precise tone, "is the private ledger, or rather its mutilated remains, of the Grassleyes estate. We were wondering who could have cut out some of its pages, Mr. Spenser."

Spenser literally threw himself at the desk. One hand reached the ledger, the other sent Suresne sprawling to the floor.

"You devils, all of you!" he shouted. "So that's what you've been up to. My God!"

He met the full force of Granet's fist on the point of the jaw and reeled backwards. He stood for a moment panting. Granet motioned Jane out of the way. He faced Spenser.

"Look here," he began, "if you want trouble ..."

Spenser lowered his head and rushed forward. Once more he almost reached the ledger, when he felt Granet's arm around his neck. The struggle was a matter of seconds. Spenser was swung around and fell heavily, this time to lie motionless on the carpet. Granet stood over him watching.

"Clunderson," he directed, "take Jane away and take the ledger with you. There won't be any more trouble here just yet."

CHAPTER XXIV

It was about half an hour later when Granet strolled out on to the wide verandah which encircled the Manoir. Jane, with Clunderson and Suresne, was seated in a corner at the farther end. He made his way towards them.

"Trouble all over," he said lightly. "Our friend—now slightly battered—has gone home in the service car. He was scarcely fit to drive his own."

"Is he very much hurt?" Jane asked.

"Not half as much as he ought to have been," was the grim reply. "However, we have wiped him out for an hour or two, I think. He is very subdued but I think he would set the Manoir on fire to get that private ledger. What are we going to do with it?"

"I'll take it to police headquarters," the detective said. "It will be perfectly safe there."

"What do you say, David?" Jane asked.

"An excellent idea," he agreed.

"Excellent," Clunderson echoed, handing over the volume. "By the by, have you seen who's here?"

Jane turned round. A moment later, preceded by Pooralli, the Marquis de Fallanges strolled down towards them. He had changed into slacks and a silk shirt and looked cool and debonair. He made them a little bow as he accepted a chair.

"I come to ask for the kindness of my keys," he said. "My wife and I are here. We came in by the Grasse entrance. My servants follow close behind. You see we have wasted no time, mademoiselle," he added, with a little bow to Jane. "Your harbour at Nice has no air. We were stifled. When we thought of what it had been like up here at luncheontime—well, we set our servants to work packing. We are taking up our abode as soon as we can."

Jane disappeared for a moment and returned with the keys.

"Pooralli will show you the compound for your staff," she said. "Two, I think you proposed, would sleep there, two in the bungalow. Would you like me to come and open up for you?"

"If you please, not," the Marquis begged. "We are ashamed of the trouble we have given you already and we have come earlier than was arranged. To-night we shall spend a domestic evening sitting out on the terrace enjoying the quiet. To-morrow we are not obtrusive but we shall probably meet. My chief steward, who is my butler when I am on shore, has made cocktails in Jamaica, New York and Rio. We can perhaps let him match his skill against your own myrmidon. With these keys, Miss Grassleyes," he added, rising to his feet, "I wish you good evening, and you gentlemen, and I thank you for your wonderful luncheon. Very soon, when our chef is installed, I invite you all to see what we world picnickers can do for you. It is bad to be such wanderers, in one way, but one picks up things, learns all the time."

His bow had just the right amount of ceremony; his smile was friendly without being familiar. He strolled away from them, swinging the keys lightly in his hand. They sat for a few moments watching him as though fascinated. Pooralli led him around by the side of the Manoir behind which his car was waiting. He disappeared round the corner with a farewell wave of the hand. Suresne drew a little breath of relief.

"I ask your pardon, mademoiselle," he said a moment or two later. "I am in the service of Mr. Clunderson here. Mr. Spenser is still a dangerous consideration. I examine every inch of Grassleyes. I make my plans."

He left them; and Jane and Granet—perhaps the lawyer, too, in a lesser degree—watched him curiously. There was a certain strange similarity between himself and the Marquis in their effortless swiftness of movement, their quietness. Suresne passed through the failing light almost like the shadow of his predecessor of a few moments before. He seemed to be looking in all directions. He stood for a few minutes gazing at the spreading front of the Manoir before he re-entered it, and it seemed as though he were counting even the bolts on the windows. Once or twice as the others lingered there watching the sun, now free from the long golden masses of clouds behind which it was sinking, they saw his face appear at one of the windows. There seemed at no time any purpose in what he was doing. He was just sauntering aimlessly and yet one felt that he was remembering.

"They say that these trained detectives," Granet remarked, "have a certain second nature for taking note of things that are important. I would be almost inclined to bet that Suresne could stand a cross-examination on the window-bolt fastenings of the Manoir."

"I shall be glad when it is all over," Jane confessed with a sigh. "As the time drags on the very moments seem filled with something threatening. Every newcomer frightens me. Those men—Suresne, and even the Marquis—fill me with fear. I looked into Suresne's eyes just before he left us. He is an insignificant-looking person in his way but day by day I could almost swear that his eyes have grown larger. That alert light, always seeking for something, seems to have gone. They seem fixed now just as though they are looking inwards, just as though they are concentrated upon something behind them—and in a way they are terrifying. Of course you will laugh at me but I could almost fancy that behind his gaiety and *joie de vivre* I could catch a faint flash of the same look on the Marquis's face."

"Let us forget all these grisly ideas for a while," Granet proposed with a smile. "It's too early for cocktails. Suppose we all walk down to 'The Lamps of Fire' and have a whisky-and-soda and you, Jane, some of my priceless sherry."

"A glorious idea," she assented, springing to her feet. "Come on! I've had enough of the Manoir for a few hours. Are you too tired, Mr. Clunderson?"

"A walk is just what I should like," the lawyer replied.

They strolled across the open park land and Pooralli, whom Jane had summoned from the house, ran on ahead. Chairs and table, whisky and ice, sodawater, sherry and glasses—all were ready even before they got there. The twilight which always threatens but never comes, half-grey, half-lavender, stole down upon them even before the glasses were filled. One nightingale was singing lazily in the grove; there was a distant chorus of frogs. The air was so motionless that every leaf upon the trees seemed painted against the sky.

"Every moment of this silence," Jane declared, "is a joy. David, I think I shall change houses with you. You shall go up and deal with these bloodthirsty people and the half-ruined estate, squeeze money out of Spenser and chase those wild ideas out of Suresne."

The window of the lounge was pushed open. Carlotta leaned out, a strange picture with her hair floating down, her lips sulky, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"Please, you woke me up," she complained. "And Mr. Granet, will you tell Miss Grassleyes that she cannot have this bungalow. It belongs to us. I am going to share it with Mr. Granet."

"Really?" Jane laughed. "I might have something to say about that."

"Because you are our landlady, I suppose? Well, that does not matter. This is the most comfortable bed of any on the estate. I do not like mine. I prefer Mr. Granet's very much. I have been fast asleep for three hours. May I come and have a drink, please?"

"God bless my soul!" Clunderson exclaimed, staring hard at Granet. "Who is the young lady?"

"Quite harmless, but attractive," Granet assured him. "She was to have sat next to you at lunch if you had turned up."

"I am coming to have a drink," Carlotta said. "I see Pooralli there. Get a wine glass for me, Pooralli, and a tumbler. I want a glass of water and a glass of sherry. I should like David to come in and brush my hair but I do not suppose he will."

She floated out with a little yawn and passed her arm affectionately through Granet's.

"He is such a nice man," she went on, looking up at him. "Why are you not fonder of me?"

"Because you are taking my character away," he said. "You must not tell people that you sleep on my bed. In fact, if it comes to that you must not sleep on my bed at all. How dare you?"

Carlotta drank her water steadily, set down the empty glass and laughed at him.

"I have told everybody why," she said. "It is the most comfortable bed at Grassleyes. Thank you, Pooralli," she added as he brought her a chair. "May I sit down with you for a few minutes?"

"Where is your sister?" Granet asked.

"She went down to Nice after lunch to sing at an afternoon concert and she is dining at Monte Carlo. Mr. Leonidas wants me to go for a walk with him but I told him I never went for walks and that I was going to sleep on your bed and he went away angry."

"Carlotta," Jane said sternly, "you are a very bad girl. You cannot go and sleep on gentlemen's beds at Grassleyes. It is not done."

"I did once before," the girl admitted. "I loved it and he was so angry."

"Of course he was. He has been very nicely brought up."

Carlotta yawned.

"You are all very dull," she declared. "I hoped Mr. Granet would come back alone. I wanted to ask him if I could call him 'David' always."

"Well, you can't," Jane declared. "He belongs to me and it is time you went home, young lady."

"My sister will not be home for a long time. Tell me about the new people. They looked down this road and I think they thought this bungalow was empty. I lay quite still and I could hear them talking."

"What did they say?" Granet asked.

"It was about you."

"Tell me what they said," he begged.

She sat on the side of his chair and put her arm around his neck.

"The Marquise said she thought you were rather good-looking. I had a good mind to put my head out of the window and tell her to mind her own business. You are good-looking, though. Are you not, David?"

"Marvellous," he answered impatiently. "Are you sure there was nothing else?"

"Not a thing," the girl replied. "Are they going to take a bungalow?"

"They are going to stay," Granet told her, "until it is cool enough for them to go back to their yacht."

"Then I hope the rain comes to-night!"

CHAPTER XXV

There was no time when Victorine, Marquise de Fallanges, looked more entrancing than when—and it was a favourite gesture of hers—she leaned back upon the music seat, her beautiful fingers still poised upon the notes, stretched her neck, opened her lips and called softly to a person not too far away.

"Maurice!" she half called, half whispered. "I am in need of a little affection. Come close to me upon the seat here."

The Marquis threw away his cigarette and was by her side in a moment. His arm went round her slim waist. She submitted with due resignation to the proffered salute.

"You have something wild in your mind, Victorine," he murmured. "You wish to practice upon me. Your lips are as ever adorable but your eyes are far away."

She sighed and leaned a little nearer to him.

"Maurice," she said, "do you realize how long we have been here in this bungalow?"

"I do indeed," he sighed. "I thought of it when I was shaving this morning."

"We have been here a fortnight—to be exact, a fortnight and a day."

"I have been lazy," he admitted. "But oh, my sweet, the heat! This has been a glorious refuge."

"It is true," she agreed. "The time has slipped by very pleasantly. Still, it is time, Maurice. It is very nearly time."

He nodded with a little gesture of resignation.

"Yes, I have thought the same thought. Within a few days there will be action. Miss Jane and that quiet grey creature, the lawyer, and the stern Englishman who seldom smiles—they are all standing by. We know what is in their minds. They have made no secret of it. Until the third of July they wait. Afterwards, from one end of France to the other, the search will begin.

* * * * *

MISSING from her home, a tall, elderly lady wearing steel-rimmed glasses, handsome, cold of speech and appearance, incredibly wealthy, incredibly reserved. Believed to have wandered from a clinic in Nice early in the morning—"

"Yes, yes, my dear," she interrupted. "We know all about that, but I ask myself whether the time is not close at hand when you should make your effort, if it is worth while your making it at all. She may suddenly reappear, forgive everybody and shower her millions in every direction—except upon this bungalow. Where shall we be then, Maurice?"

The Marquis stroked his wife's beautiful hair thoughtfully.

"Quite right, my angel," he murmured. "But you know how it is with me. When I act I act like a flash of lightning. I pounce. It is all over. People look around. Where is that beautiful woman with the glorious eyes and golden hair? Where is that man with the voice like a caress, the movements of a tiger? Gone."

"Now I want you to think sensibly," she begged, patting him on the back of the hand. "We have been here fifteen days; we are on the brink of our adventure. Is there any one besides those people we have mentioned whom you have to fear?"

He shook his head. With a careless little gesture he closed the open window. His eyes flashed round the room. He lowered his voice.

"You are right," he said. "It is time to compare notes. Spenser is impatient. So is the girl impatient for action, but from a different point of view. Mr. Clunderson, after his flying visit to Paris, is back again and ready. Granet, the Englishman—well, he has an admirable gift of self-concealment but my impression is that he, too, wishes action. The yacht is ready if flight becomes necessary and one by one I have collected all that I require of my belongings. I have a night next week in my mind, Victorine. It is Friday. Friday has always been a day of good omen with us."

"Stop!" she exclaimed. "The others?"

"There is no one whom we need to take into account," he said. "The young man, Paul Oliver, I gave some thought to. He is harmless. Madame di Mendoza is our friend. The little girl—a witch in her way, with a strange passion for Granet—she thinks nothing of us. The man Johnson with whom I have talked has only one idea in the world and I think I am the only man, except Spenser, to whom he has confided it. He is after the Formula Book. If this collection of herbs and plants is really so amazing, he wants to buy the place. He is a partner in a great firm of chemists somewhere in England. He raises his hat when we pass and asks after the health of the Marchioness."

"There is the little man who does water-colours, Monsieur Suresne," she reminded him. "He does nothing but watch this bungalow."

"A typical bourgeois Frenchman, my dear, retired from his business."

"But have you seen his water-colours? They are so bad that they make one suspicious."

"Probably he does not know how bad they are. He seems to have no friends from outside. He is not even the possessor of a bungalow here and there are days when he does not come near the place."

"What does he do those days, I wonder?" the Marquise speculated.

"Nothing, I think, that need concern us. Leonidas accepts us for what we are. He seems to be crazy about the little sister of Madame di Mendoza."

"So that the only man you think you have to fear," she said softly, "is Granet."

"Why do you think we have to fear him?"

"Instinct. He watched us the first day at lunch. He has never left off watching us."

"Well, he has not found out anything," her husband rejoined carelessly. "*En effet*, there is nothing to find out."

"I do not think that he ever will," she agreed, "but do not dismiss him from your thoughts, Maurice."

"Why not?"

She toyed for a moment with her pearls. The fingers of her other hand were straying over the notes of the piano, drawing forth some faint strain of mysterious melody.

"Last week," she said, "you may remember that I dined at that strange little place in Beaulieu with Clara. You remember that it was your idea, and a very good one. One should be seen occasionally with well-known people. There is nothing better for preserving your identity. Every one knew her; every one saw me with her. She may not be of the Great World, but she is, after all, a Duchess."

"What has this to do with Granet?"

"Granet was there dining with another man and, curiously enough, the same thing happened to both of us," she went on, a faint smile parting her lips. "One of Clara's admirers came for her and carried her away. I was left alone. Mr. Granet's friend was fetched away by a telephone call. He paid his bill and, passing my table, stopped to say how do you do. We had previously exchanged bows. I am not an ugly woman, Maurice, and I was wearing the new Chanel frock that even you admire. It pleased me to talk gaily. Mr. Granet made a remark that passing on the road he had noticed the yacht lit up in the bay. He thought it looked charming. So it did. I looked up at him. Have I nice eyes, Maurice?"

"Divine."

"What should you do if you were not my husband and you met me at a restaurant and you knew that I had a yacht with no husband on board lying in the harbour?"

"I should beg to be allowed to pay you a brief visit there," the Marquis declared. "You might suggest, perhaps, a glass of wine, a little talk in your saloon."

"What a wonderful man you are, Maurice dear," she sighed. "It is exactly what I did and I looked at him. Of course my eyes may be failing, but I fancied that they would bring that invitation."

"They did not?"

"They did not."

"Blockhead!" he exclaimed. "It is an insult. I will fight a duel with him."

"Ah no, dear Maurice, you must not do that. I tell you this story because I never trust a man who could refuse an offer like that. That is why I do not quite trust Mr. Granet."

"You do not understand the British race as well as I do, my dear," her husband told her. "Besides, he is just engaged. That is not a reason which would weigh with you or me. It would with him. Oh, it would weigh very heavily with him."

"You do not think he will give trouble?"

"He will not have a chance. If he attempts anything he will fail. It is a matter of brains. He is honest, he is clever, but he is stupid. Now there is something for you to think about, my dear. Everything that I have said is true."

"Well, life is odd," she reflected. "That little sister of Miriam di Mendoza's would give her soul for him. She has eyes as beautiful as mine. He is all the time unkind to her. I know, because I watch and in her dumb way she has told me.... Friday of next week. That is in your mind?"

He nodded.

"Somewhere about then. You will admire the plan, I think. It does not admit of any risk and it will bring about all that we desire."

"You are always so wonderful, dear Maurice," she murmured.

* * * * *

The Marquis, amongst his other weaknesses, thoroughly revelled in the luxury of his evening bath. That particular evening he was perhaps even more liberal than usual with the exquisitely perfumed bath salts which his valet had laid out for him. He sniffed at them with joy as he stretched himself lazily in the long bath tub, and when at last he stepped out a little reluctantly and touched the bell, he was absolutely content with life—a man who had not an anxiety in the world. He rubbed himself slowly and even did a few harmless exercises in front of the looking-glass. They had been talking about Granet and the cold, stupid Clunderson. They would have to go if they stood in his way. So easy. He chuckled to himself as he thought how easy. In not many more days to come he would be taking his bath in just as leisurely a fashion, taking no notice of any hubbub there might have been in the day—perfectly safe with a few more million francs to his credit.... There was the usual discreet knock at the door and Antoine presented himself with white-silk underclothes upon his arm and black-silk socks in his hand. It was Antoine indeed, but not quite the same Antoine. His master looked at him curiously.

"Anything the matter?" he asked.

The man laid down the articles he had been carrying. The Marquis looked at him almost in amazement. He had never felt fear himself and he scarcely recognized it in other people.

"Is anything the matter, Antoine?" he repeated. "Speak up! I demand."

Antoine looked behind him as though to be certain he had closed the door. Then he came up to his master's side.

"*Monsieur le Marquis*," he said. "Eleven years ago in Paris—it was after the affair of the rue Cambon—there was a young Frenchman, a junior he was then in the *Sûreté*. His father had the misfortune to meet with his death in the rue Cambon. His name was Suresne."

"Well?"

"The young one stayed on in the *Sûreté*," Antoine continued. "This evening, when I got off my bicycle, I saw him outside the bungalow painting. It was a hideous daub of a picture that he was painting. He just looked up as I passed. I said '*Bon soir, monsieur*' and he replied and I recognized the voice as well as the man."

"Do you think," the Marquis asked, "that he recognized you, Antoine?"

"He gave no sign of it, monsieur, but who knows? His reputation has grown. They say that he never forgets a face."

"Well, it will be healthier for him if he forgets mine," the Marquis remarked, beginning to put on his underclothes. "Why do you let these little incidents disturb you, Antoine? Eleven years ago and all our alibis for that evening perfect. Come, come, there is nothing to fear."

The man looked at his master and there was genuine admiration in his face.

"Monsieur," he faltered, "you have the courage of Beelzebub. We are not all like you. It is true that our alibis are perfect but there was a murder done that night."

"There is a murder committed every night in the streets of Paris, Antoine," his master reminded him. "This man, if I remember rightly, was a coal-dealer, a man of very small account although he happened to own a good many thousand francs more than was good for him. Who would associate us with those times? I, the undoubted member of a noble family. Give me my socks, Antoine, and shake off this weakness."

"The weakness has passed already, monsieur," the man faltered.

"*Je m'en doute*," the Marquis murmured under his breath.

* * * * *

Dinner was served to the Marquis and his wife at five minutes past eight. The latter raised her eyebrows a little as her husband offered his arm.

"It is regrettable, my dear," he said as they took their places, "that Antoine has lost his nerve. He fancies that the little man who is doing daubs around the estate is a figure from the past. He was three minutes longer than usual over my change of clothes. He has not recovered."

"Poor Antoine," she murmured languidly. "However, he was the one of your retainers whom I liked least. He has to go, I suppose?"

"Indeed yes," the Marquis replied. "You know that it is one of my axioms of safe living—never a nervous person amongst my little company. If I felt your pulse beat as his was beating a few minutes ago and your fingers as cold and the terror lurking in your eyes you would have to go, my dear. That would be one of the greatest blows of my life, but it would be a stern necessity."

"The same thought has come to me sometimes, my beloved, with regard to you," she smiled. "The moment fear comes to you we part."

* * * * *

Antoine received his orders and silently obeyed them. At nine o'clock he was seated in the coupé of the Mercedes; at a quarter to ten he stood in attendance upon his master on the deck of the yacht. They were moving out of the harbour. The Marquis was studying the charts in the wheelhouse. Antoine was outside leaning over the rail. He felt a tap on his shoulder. The Marquis, his hands carefully gloved, stood by his side.

"No, Antoine," he said, "not yet. You have another twenty minutes. If you jump overboard here your body would be returned somewhere down the beach. Clumsy work, that."

"I can still serve monsieur," Antoine pleaded. "It was a momentary spasm only. I am myself again."

The Marquis sighed.

"Antoine," he said, "the man who once loses his nerve, who looks at fear and feels it steal into his blood, is finished. For our life he no longer exists. This little trouble had to come, perhaps. It is just as well to get it over."

"I have served monsieur well and faithfully."

"If you had not you would not be here now, Antoine. My servants are my care until they fail me. When they fail me they are my servants no longer. Take heart, Antoine. You may find, after all, that down in the caverns or up beyond the clouds there is another life and another master."

"Monsieur mocks me," the man groaned.

The Marquis made no reply. With his night glasses before his eyes he was sweeping the empty seas. They were travelling at a tremendous pace, leaving a long trail of foam behind them.

"No, my friend," he said at last, lowering his glasses and carefully replacing them in the case, "I am not mocking you. I am a very clever man and I see far but there is a wall—there is always a wall, you know. In ten minutes—sooner, perhaps—in ten seconds—sooner, perhaps—you will have climbed it."

There was scarcely a sound. The silencer on the Marquis's small gun was a wonderful contraption. The man who had been lurking in the background raised the rail. He flung the crumpled-up body out to sea. The Marquis recharged the gun, replaced it in his pocket and strolled forward towards the bows. The moon was shining more clearly now through a little bank of mist and a feeble trail of light stretched away towards Antibes. He watched for a few moments, then stepped back to the wheelhouse and from there passed into the saloon. He pulled down one of the tubes and gave a brief order to the navigating captain. Then he summoned a steward.

"Half a glass of the '68 brandy," he ordered.

The steward hurried away. The captain presented himself. The Marquis considered him thoughtfully.

"It will be next week, Thursday or Friday, Olaf," he announced. "From sunset onwards you are to be ready to start in thirty seconds. The festivities which may be going on mean nothing to you."

"There will be no mistake about that. There has never been a mistake yet in one of monsieur's orders," the man replied.

The Marquis looked at him narrowly. There was no flinching in that hard, grim face with the weather-beaten skin and small, cruel eyes. No nerves there. No sense of fear. The Marquis was satisfied. He sipped his brandy and dismissed him.

"I leave you at the steps," he announced. "The watch continues."

CHAPTER XXVI

The heat wave persisted. Towards evening everybody on the clematis-hung balcony of the bungalow "The Three Cypresses" drew a little breath of relief. The moment for escape from a heat and languor almost

intolerable had arrived at last. Pooralli, standing just outside and watching the fierce passing of the sun behind the lavender-blue mountains, held up his hand. The other servants stooped forward. The blinds flew up. The little company seemed suddenly plunged into a sort of scented twilight, the magnolia and white tobacco plants unfurling their leaves as though by magic. The perfume of the roses was almost overpowering, and, as if some one had opened a secret vault, a soft breeze stole up through the pines, through the terraced gardens into that very sweet little stretch of country round Grassleyes.

The Marquise, lying at full length upon a chaise longue, attired in a diaphanous white *négligé*, threw out her beautiful arms and gave a little cry of joy. David Granet, whose white ducks looked cool enough, fanned himself vigorously. The Marquis, in white tussore, made a sign to his servant and the gentle tinkle of ice was suddenly heard in the background. Nearly every one from the bungalows was collected there for an evening *apéritif*. Very reluctantly the word had gone out that morning. The time was at hand now for the Marquis and the Marquise to take their leave. Carlotta, in her linen beach suit, crept a little nearer to Granet's chair and stole one of his cushions. Her sister lazily reproved her. The Marquise laughed softly.

"In Saigon," she declared, "never have I known heat greater than to-day's."

"It is the hottest day I ever remember here in my three summers," Jane reflected.

"It is the most glorious breeze that ever crept from the caverns of the Estérels," the Marquis murmured lazily.

"All our sufferings are forgotten," Madame di Mendoza sighed. "This atones for everything."

The servants, all in white linen, swift-footed and attentive, were carrying around the little dishes of fruit and savoury trifles, the long glasses of frosted yellow wine and the smaller ones into which had been poured the contents of the silver shakers.

"I forget my manners," their hostess declared with a glass in either hand. "I am recklessly, horribly greedy. Look, I drink to quench my thirst from this exquisite fruit cup which Ambrose learnt to make in Jamaica, and with my other hand I hold the only cocktail from the East worth drinking. I excuse myself for bringing it to the attention of all of you that it was I who found the limes and brought them back in the car this morning—a great basketful just unshipped."

"Your passage into heaven, my dear, is assured," her husband said. "We awake to a new and I hope a less languid life. When I think that my friend Mr. Granet has played tennis this afternoon I gasp. *C'est incroyable!*"

"Half the time at tennis but a good other half in the sea," Granet confessed.

Jane was gazing down the winding road, a strip of white ribbon across the green pine-dotted stretch of open ground.

"Here is a visitor," she announced. "Mr. Spenser's Lancia, I believe."

The Marquise sighed languidly.

"He is a trying man," she murmured. "So boisterous. I think he drinks too much."

"You can forgive him for a good deal, Victorine," her husband reminded her. "It was he who introduced us to the bungalows."

"For that," she admitted, "we shall always have gratitude. But he should learn to talk more quietly. An evening like this, for instance. It is superb. Soon the lights will fade and we can all go down to Mr. Granet's bungalow where the fire-flies dart about like little fairies and we can go and sit in Miss Grassleyes' herb garden and smell sweet things and afterwards we can finish up at the bungalow 'Falling Roses.'"

"Don't forget my tobacco plants," Paul Oliver begged. "About midnight they are sweet enough to steal away the senses. I have, too, some old Tokay which is a fragrant incentive to folly."

"By midnight," the Marquise yawned, "I should like the great violet-black clouds to cover the skies, and to lie stripped upon the grass and feel the first few drops of thunder rain upon my body."

"Of that there is no hope," her husband sighed. "There is not a cloud in the sky. Stars you will have and a great blazing moon but no clouds. Spenser is coming here, I see. Miss Grassleyes, I wish you nothing but good in the world but I would rather you were his hostess to-night."

"I do not feel in the least hospitable," Jane declared. "I was even thinking of sending David home."

"You can't do that," Granet protested. "I have ordered no dinner and hot weather always makes me hungry."

"You can dine with me," Carlotta suggested. "I can cook trifles divinely."

"But I cannot dine off trifles," Granet told her. "An hour after sunset I am hungry. Two hours after I am ravenous."

"There is always fruit and ice," she went on. "I can steal Miriam's peaches. She has an admirer who sends her twenty or thirty a day. Then there are melons, too."

He shook his head.

"I need sustenance," he insisted. "Chicken salad is the minimum."

She sighed.

"I have the chicken," she said. "I can cook him but he would not be cold.... Mr. Spenser is beautifully dressed but he makes me warm to look at him."

Spenser brought his car to a standstill a few yards from the gate. He was wearing a spotless white-flannel dinner suit with a negligé shirt and drooping tie.

"If you turn your head, Victorine," her husband said, "you will lose your heart."

"It would be lovely to do that on such a night," she reflected, "but I suppose I choose strangely. Not here or in any other world could I ever lose anything so precious as my small but very sweet heart to Mr. Spenser."

Granet looked at the newcomer curiously as he made his way amongst them, dispensing greetings on every side. He had lost most of his high colour, his face was almost pinched and there were dark lines under his eyes. His visits to Grassleyes during the last few weeks had been very few and far between.

"Fortunate people," he declared as he sank into a chair and accepted a drink. "I wave my hands to all of you and I wish you joy, but I wish also that you have no time to pass in an inferno like Nice on a day like this. We closed the office at five. The boards of the floors were cracking. Can't think why they didn't catch fire! Your health, my charming friends! Marquis, it is worth while," he added, setting down his glass empty, "it has been worth your while to spend half your life travelling in the tropics to have collected servants who mix drinks like these."

"Better than to shiver at an English dining-table while the rain streams from your windows and you drink heavy port, eh?" the Marquis murmured.

"Is this an errand of business, Mr. Agent?" Jane asked. "Because I tell you frankly that we cannot manage another tenant. Every one up here is taking six baths a day and a shortage of water would ruin us. In any case there isn't a bungalow free. Now the Marquis and the Marquise say they are going things may be different but even then I don't want any one else at the moment."

Spenser shook his head.

"I have no more tenants for you," he said. "Our friend Suresne drops in several times a week to hear what the prospects of a bungalow are but I always tell him he can find out better up here. He is next on the list, anyway."

"There is a man," the Marquis observed languidly, "who is wasting valuable hours of his life in attempting the impossible. He plays the artist and he produces the most impossible daubs I ever saw."

"Oh, I am not quite so sure, my dear," his wife murmured. "What the English call hypo-impressionism and surrealism may sometimes meet. There may be a new school. Perhaps we are ignorant. I only know that the man's pictures give me a headache so I do not look at them. Maurice has a sort of fatal curiosity which draws him always to his side when he is at work. He comes away looking like one who has seen a ghost."

Carlotta gazed into Granet's face with a smile.

"I think that he paints very badly. What do you think, Mr. Granet?"

"I think that he might occupy his time a great deal better."

The Marquis raised his hand and there was activity amongst the white-clad servants.

"The thought of that man's work has brought back my partially quenched thirst," he announced. "I take one more drink. My friend, Mr. Spenser, he takes one more drink. Then he and I go underneath our sun umbrellas if he will go as far as the top of that grass hillock. It is about one hundred metres—as far as any sane man should walk on a day like this. From there, Spenser, I will show you the exact position on this estate where, if ever I scrape enough money together to interest you and Miss Grassleyes, I shall ask that you build me a bungalow which will be mine always."

"Take no notice of him," the Marquise murmured. "We already own, besides our inherited property, two châteaux, a fishing lodge, a shooting lodge, a lighthouse in England and a tower in Guernsey. It is a craze of Maurice's. It must be checked. Mr. Spenser, they say that you are a brilliant man of affairs. Talk to my husband sensibly, please."

"I will try," Spenser promised, "but he is a difficult man to persuade."

"As long, my dear," the Marquis remarked, "as I do not interfere with your little transactions in the rue de la Paix you should not object to my only hobby."

"His only hobby!" she murmured beneath her breath.

A few minutes later the Marquis and Spenser crossed the drive together and climbed the little hillock. There was only the outside rim of the sun left but the Marquis still carried his umbrella. He gesticulated as he walked. Spenser was fanning himself with his Panama hat.

"Already I begin to ask myself," the Marquise said lazily as she watched them, "what they can find to talk about—those two."

Granet's keen eyes had followed their every movement.

"It might be interesting," he murmured.

* * * * *

The Marquis settled himself comfortably upon his umbrella—plus—shooting-stick. He made a gesture with his hand towards the country beyond the boundary of Grassleyes.

"More impossible things might happen, my dear Spenser," he said, "than that I should come and settle here. I have many abodes and none of them pleases me completely. In the meantime, our little affair has to be dealt with. I have already selected my date for action. It is to be Friday night."

"Friday night!"

"You see, I am not a suspicious man," the Marquis went on, "but the little man Suresne is quite unmistakable. He is even, if I remember rightly, using his own name. He is one of the great force of French detectives. He sits on a campstool and sketches from morning till night. He is watching me."

"Suresne is a police agent all right," Spenser admitted. "That is why I am surprised you have not made your little effort before."

"Laziness, my dear Spenser, sheer laziness," the other yawned. "Unfortunately, however, one of my domestics has displeased me by indulging in a fit of nerves. He also had recognized Suresne. I dare not have in my entourage a man who is afflicted by nervous fears. I have therefore had to—er—dispose of him. He will never be heard of again, but his continued absence might excite the curiosity of our pseudo-artist. I never run risks. You know that, my friend."

"Your only fault that I can see is that you talk too much," Spenser said irritably.

"I do not waste my time when I talk," was the emphatic response. "I watch always my listener. I form my opinion of his judgement and his courage from the effect of what I have to say upon him. I gather that you are a little nervous about my attempt now that it is to be made."

"I am only wondering whether you have not created a certain amount of suspicion during your stay here," Spenser replied. "I have every confidence in you, however. Friday night you say is your night. On the morning afterwards, then, you will deliver to me the result of your labours."

"Without a doubt," the Marquis promised. "At some hour which we can fix upon later I shall bring you the Formula Book which you have described to me so accurately, the will, the jewels, the letter addressed to Miss Grassleyes and anything else of value which I discover in the left-hand side of her ladyship's double-fronted safe. The will may make a rich man of you or a great heiress of Jane Grassleyes. As it will pass through your hands, however, I look upon the latter possibility as non-existent."

"The money," Spenser put in eagerly. "Don't forget that."

"The money, as a matter of course," the Marquis assented. "Have no fear. I forget nothing. I have it tabulated in my mind."

Spenser threw his cigarette away savagely and lit another.

"I might have something to say about the collection of money you find there, Marquis," he grunted.

"You would be well advised to keep silent," the other replied. "I am not one who stoops to petty thefts. Your knowledge of me should have told you that years ago. A few hundred thousand francs for a small packet of love letters, addressed by an unsuccessful suitor to my wife, I might think should be atoned for by a slight addition to the sum which you are paying for this gay adventure. That depends very much upon how much I find. I am a reasonable man—always reasonable."

There was a vicious look in Spenser's eyes, a flush of colour in his cheeks.

"I don't know what the devil you are talking about," he declared hotly.

"What a stupid denial!" the Marquis exclaimed, examining the contents of his case and carefully selecting a cigarette. "As though I minded. My wife is an exceedingly attractive woman. I do not see how the ordinary *boulevardier*, amongst whom I suppose you would class yourself, could resist making those somewhat flamboyant efforts. May I tell you, though, that, if there had been the faintest chance of their being successful, a few minutes in the Bois de Boulogne or, if your conscience did not permit that, a thrashing in the lobby of the Travellers' Club would have been my reply. I am not a selfish man, Mr. Spenser. I will not say that I should be utterly discontented to share some portion of Victorine's favours with the right man, but you would not be the right man so you would suffer for your success."

"Damn it all, shut up!" Spenser cried. "I hate your venomous tongue and all the rot you talk when you are in the humour for it. Your wife—"

"Perhaps," the Marquis interrupted, "you will live longer and more happily, my friend, if you leave my wife's name out of this discussion. The little affair of business which we are conducting together I shall hope to bring to a happy conclusion somewhere between two and three on Saturday morning. Later on in the day these objects which you so greatly desire shall be made over to you in your office—No. 19A, I think, on the Promenade des Anglais.... Wait one moment. I must think whether there are any other questions to ask you. Yes, I knew there was one."

"What is it?"

"These two extraordinary servants of the house—Pooralli and Postralli. What is their attitude towards the powers that reign over it?"

"You are cleverer than I am if you can find out," Spenser growled. "On one or two occasions they could have been useful to me when Lady Grassleyes was here. Pooralli would listen to everything I had to say, he would bow most profoundly, but never once did he carry out even the slightest order of mine, never

once was he anything but the very dutiful and faithful servant of Lady Grassleyes. If you want to fail on Friday night try and make Pooralli your accomplice. It was in my mind to warn you against him the first day we talked of this affair."

"My instinct again," the Marquis remarked complacently. "I knew it. You will be relieved to hear that I have left possible aid from that weird character out of my plans. All that I troubled myself to ascertain were his habits and the position of his sleeping quarters. Now, Mr. Spenser, having selected the site of my possible future habitation, I think we will return. I may possibly have the pleasure of offering you what you call in England a stirrup cup, or you might prefer—even to a jaded husband my wife is looking charming to-night—"

"I have stood all I can stand of your damned sneering," Spenser declared angrily. "I—"

He met the Marquis's swift glance and the words died away on his lips.

"There is a limit, Mr. Spenser, which is permitted to such people as you. Do not, I pray you, be foolish.... So we return," he continued in an altered tone. "Be content, all of you dear people," he added as they neared the little company. "Two sites are there. Either would suit me. Concerning one, however, there is that eternal matter of water. Victorine, our visitor will take one small drink before he goes."

Jane rose to her feet.

"I think you and I will walk down a few yards with Mr. Spenser," she suggested to Granet. "There is something we have to say to him."

Spenser drained the glass which had been presented to him, made his adieus with a very poor effort at graciousness and turned away.

"I know," he said, as soon as they had reached the road, "what you wish to say. It is something of importance."

"You must realize that, Mr. Spenser," Jane said. "In a few days' time the month expires which my aunt stipulated should pass before her will was opened or her wishes made known."

"I know, I know that quite well," Spenser assented. "And when that will is opened I shall take the opportunity of expressing to whoever may be present my opinion of the way you and Clunderson have treated your aunt's confidential adviser during this anxious period."

"Your threat does not greatly concern me, Mr. Spenser," Jane answered. "You have been paid all the commission that became due to you every time you have earned it and the larger sums which you have once or twice asked for I cannot see that you have the slightest right to at all."

"It is you, I presume," Spenser said, turning with an angry gesture towards Granet, "whom I have to thank for putting these ideas into Miss Grassleyes' head."

"Without a doubt," Granet replied. "My advice has always been at her disposal."

"I should like to know what business you had to interfere, anyway," Spenser continued furiously.

"Is not this discussion a little unnecessary?" Jane intervened. "The most important thing of all is—have you found any trace—I notice you have made some extensive searches, Mr. Spenser—anywhere about the

Manoir of the will, the letter, the jewels, the money or the Formula Book? You would not, of course, find the private ledger. That is in our safekeeping."

"I haven't found a damn' thing. Unless they turn up by some miracle on the thirtieth day after your aunt's disappearance we shall be just in the same trouble that we are now. I warn you, though, that I shall resist any attempt of Mr. Clunderson's to administer the estate in the absence of a will, and I shall place the offer I have received for the Manoir on Lady Grassleyes' account before the courts."

"You are very mysterious about that offer," Granet remarked. "Do you mind, Jane, if I ask how much it is?"

"Not a bit."

Spenser hesitated for a moment.

"Mind you," he announced, "there's something to be deducted in place of commission for me and the court keeps a considerable portion back for taxes but the offer, as I have told you before, comes from one of the largest firms of patent medicines in the world and the amount is ten million francs."

"For the Grassleyes estate," Granet said calmly, "including, I presume, the walled garden and Lady Grassleyes' store of herbs?"

"You know that well enough," Spenser replied.

"If I have any voice in the matter," Jane declared, "I shall refuse the offer. If the court decides that I have nothing to say I shall appeal."

"Some more of your advice, I suppose," Spenser growled, turning to Granet.

"Certainly," Granet acquiesced. "Miss Grassleyes and I have agreed that the domain shall not be sold."

Spenser turned abruptly away. He stepped into his car but threw back a parting word as he took the wheel. First of all, though, he was careful to look around and see that no one else was within hearing.

"I warn you both, then, if I catch sight of the will it's going where those missing pages from the private ledger have gone. And that's that!"

CHAPTER XXVII

The Marquis and Marquise de Fallanges have pleasure in inviting all their neighbours in the domain of Grassleyes to a dance and supper on board "M/Y Joy Bell" in the Port of Nice on Friday evening, the second of July.

P. P. C.

11—3

Beach or fancy dress

"These really are the most extraordinary people," Jane declared as she threw her card over to Granet. "The Marquise spoke of this the day before yesterday but I thought she was only joking, and here it is all in print and marvellous things going to happen, I expect."

"The Marquis spoke to me about it yesterday," Granet confided. "He wanted to know if there was any one who could be trusted to do the electric lights on the yacht in twenty-four hours. The band it seems he has already engaged. The famous orchestra from the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo is coming over."

"They must have heaps of money," Jane remarked. "You see the date, David? It is the night before our troubles are to come to an end."

He nodded.

"A pleasant little celebration for us," he observed. "We've never danced together yet, Jane."

"We must have the wireless going to-night," she suggested. "I'm really getting quite excited about it."

"A clever little lady, the Marquise," Granet went on. "I believe she was thinking this out the other evening on her terrace. You girls ought to welcome the fancy-dress part of it. She was imagining herself, I think, dancing as a dryad."

"Well, she won't be able to do anything of that sort," Jane said dryly. "The deck of a motor yacht—even a large one—will scarcely afford space for it. Never mind, beach costume or fancy dress gives us plenty of latitude. I wonder what all our neighbours will have to say about it."

* * * * *

There was a ripple of excitement all round the domain. Carlotta was one of the first visitors at the Manoir and she still carried her card in her hand.

"How little are you going to wear, Miss Grassleyes?" she asked. "There is a warning in the *Daily Mail* this morning that the heat wave is to be more intense during the next few days. Normal clothes are becoming an impossibility. David—"

"I don't allow you to call him 'David,' you young hussy," Jane interrupted.

"I have to," the girl sighed. "You will let him dance with me once or twice?"

"If you behave yourself. You are so terribly blatant in your preferences, you know, Carlotta. Remember, David and I have only been engaged for about three weeks."

"You have not really known him any longer than I have," Carlotta pointed out. "I ought to have been the one to show him the bungalow. Are you going to make your own dress, Miss Grassleyes?"

"I certainly am not," was the firm reply. "I am far too busy looking after all you people here. I shall go into Cannes this morning and see what I can find. There is one thing that's a blessing for all of us—men and women—a climate like this makes anything possible. What about your sister, Carlotta?"

"She is so excited she cannot sit still. She has written already to the theatre to say that she will not be able to sing that night or the night before or the night after. Fortunately, Paul Oliver has improved a great deal in his dancing. He has quite a fair idea of it now."

Spenser rang up presently.

"Well, don't say that I have not sent you some wonderful tenants," he growled at Jane. "I hear they are entertaining the whole colony at a farewell party a night or two before they go. I've just had my card."

"I think they are perfectly wonderful," she agreed.

"I suppose all Grassleyes is going?"

"I am perfectly certain they will. The Mendoza girl has just come up in a terrific state of excitement."

"Ought to be a good show," he said. "I will say this for the Marquis—he is a little difficult at times but he does things well.... Have you any idea whether Clunderson has got any surprise up his sleeve for us?"

"I haven't heard from him at all," Jane replied. "I daren't even think of his coming."

"I don't think you will find anything to be terrified at," Spenser replied. "You will miss the de Fallanges up there."

"We certainly shall. All the same, it would have been necessary to increase the staff if they had stayed any longer. Some one has to go to market every morning for them as it is. They must spend heaps of money."

"They can afford it," was Spenser's farewell remark.

Paul Oliver was the next to ring up. He was anxious to know whether Miss Grassleyes thought he could venture to go as Shelley, in a beach costume of a few generations ago. Jane had nothing to say about the matter.

Mr. Johnson paid one of his rare visits to the Manoir to ask Jane whether he would be considered too old if he accepted and went in fancy dress. She reassured him and reminded him of the first time the Marquise had spoken of a farewell party. Every one on the estate would be welcome. Mr. Leonidas also telephoned to say that his last company had left the whole of their wardrobe behind and any one was welcome to go through it if he chose. He admitted, however, that the costumes were mostly mediæval.

"Shows what babies grown men and women can be," Jane remarked later. "Every one here—the men, too—is worrying about costumes and counting the hours until the party."

"What is every one doing this morning?" Carlotta asked.

"I shall go into Cannes," Jane told her.

"I am working," Granet announced.

"May I sit in front of your bungalow, please?" Carlotta asked wistfully. "I would not bother you but really Miriam is so excited. She wanted me to cut out patterns and do all sorts of things for her and she has a dressmaker in the place now. They were buried in fashion books when I left."

"Poor child," Granet sympathized. "If Jane says you may, of course you may."

"I will allow it this time," Jane answered, "or else she may come into Cannes with me if she likes."

"I would rather read in the shade for an hour or so," Carlotta replied. "If Paul comes and asks me very nicely I may go down to the Cap and bathe with him at twelve. Do you like my green-linen frock, Miss Grassleyes? Miriam is not sure."

"I love it. The green underbrim to your hat, too, is delightful. You dress altogether too well for the depths of the country."

"I am always hoping," Carlotta sighed, "that Mr. Granet will notice what I wear some day."

"Not a chance," Jane declared briskly. "He has no time to spare looking at children's frocks. He has a grown-up woman to say pretty things to. Run away now, there's a dear. I have some business letters I want to ask David about."

* * * * *

During the morning, the Marquis, with his sun umbrella under his arm, walked into Spenser's office. The latter greeted him with a look of grudging admiration.

"I must hand it to you, Marquis," he said. "You do think things out."

"Forethought," the other declared, settling down in a cool wicker chair, "has always been one of my best qualities. I hear that without an exception every one at Grassleyes is coming to our party on the yacht."

"It makes things easier," Spenser observed.

The Marquis glanced round the bureau. They were securely enclosed.

"Supposing one of the documents I find is the old lady's will cutting you out of things altogether?"

"I shall know what to do with such a document if it comes into my hands," Spenser said dryly. "As a matter of fact, I am counting upon it."

"H'm. I do not like the sound of that."

"Well, you don't honestly suppose I should hand it over with a smile and a bow, do you? What, after all, are we out for? You are the cleverest man at this sort of thing in the world. You are going to open a safe in not only an empty house but an empty domain—a thing which you would be able to do with your eyes shut. You are going to sort out what is there. I expect you will help yourself to what you consider is your share of the notes and that is the end of it. If there is less than a half a million I have promised to make it up. I am not doing all this to benefit Jane Grassleyes. I am doing it for myself. I don't want there to be a will. I want the court to administer the estate, then I'll get our offer accepted for it and make the biggest commission any one has ever handled yet."

The Marquis yawned.

"It is this languorous Southern air," he said, "which numbs one's commercial instincts. I am no more of a philanthropist than you are, Spenser. If I find notes amounting to, say, a million, I shall treat you generously and leave behind half a million. If the amount is ten millions the same principle will cover my action."

"Fifty-fifty," Spenser pronounced.

"It is generous but equable," the Marquis murmured.

"Chosen your costume?"

The Marquis smiled.

"My dear man," he said, "it is in the costume that I excel myself. It is at the back of my whole plan. It is the stroke of genius which makes the enterprise a delightful romance. May I take it for granted that your knowledge of Florentine history is—not great, in fact negligible?"

"I don't know a thing about it," Spenser admitted.

The Marquis established himself a little more comfortably in his chair and carefully lit a cigarette.

"There has been produced in Moscow," he recounted, "within the last few years, a ballet founded upon an ancient chapter of Italian history. The Executioner of Florence was, in the Fourteenth Century, a famous and a dreaded figure. He was reported to be a nobleman who had accepted the post out of sheer love of bloodshed. He walked the streets of Florence at stated intervals and to speak to him was death. It is I, Spenser, who will present myself to my guests as that executioner."

"Sounds cheerful," the other observed.

"My costume will be black—black silk, tightly fitting. I wear a mask. I carry a pike cunningly curved for cutting off the heads of my victims. As in the old days, to address me when I walk abroad means death—death to a man, rape and then death to a woman. I have two costumes made. I tell you no more. It might spoil your enjoyment of the evening."

"You need not be afraid that I shall speak to you," Spenser assured him. "I won't go within a dozen yards of the prick of your weapon."

"And if you are wise," the Marquis advised him, "you will exhort your fellow guests to follow your example. I do not threaten," he continued, knocking the ash from his cigarette, "that I should go so far as my illustrious predecessor of those days but if you can hint that something rather alarming in the shape of a practical joke might happen to any one breaking the unwritten law of the night, it might be as well. Now listen, Spenser. There will be two costumes; there will be two executioners. One will be seated on the roof of the Captain's wheelhouse upon a sort of dais; the other will occupy himself with your affairs, my friend. At a certain hour the dumb figure on the Captain's wheelhouse will disappear. He will vanish into the galley and no one will see him again. At that same hour—no, at that same minute—the other executioner of Florence will join his guests. The rest is understood."

There was not a grain of insincerity in Spenser's loudly expressed approval. The Marquis smiled.

"The enterprise which I have undertaken to carry through for you, my friend, was already a simple and easy affair for a person of my special gifts. I have now made it—to use a word of your eloquent English language—foolproof. Is it not so?"

"It is indeed."

"The minor details," the Marquis concluded with a wave of his delicately gloved hand, "are not worth a word of explanation."

"I take it for granted," Spenser observed, "that you have a member of your crew of the same stature as yourself."

"I have one who seven years ago was able to impersonate me without even the help of a costume. Furthermore, if I needed it there is a character in the original manuscript, a sort of seneschal, who guarded the executioner and allowed no one to approach him. Any one of my other men could play that part. He would stand at the door of the wheelhouse with drawn sword. There I sit enthroned for every one to see. Where the Marquis de Fallanges will really spend the greater part of the evening will be in a deserted Manoir, and you and I will be the only two who know it."

"*Monsieur le Marquis*," Spenser declared with a new note of respect in his voice, "you are without doubt a genius."

"It appears to me that you speak with reason," the other acknowledged.

* * * * *

The self-satisfaction of the Marquis lasted throughout the entire day. It survived even the broiling heat of another tropical sunset. He dined alone with Victorine in a sheltered corner of the terrace and, as generally happened, they were charming companions.

"My sole regret," he told her, "as regards the festivities of to-morrow night, is that I shall not have the joy of dancing a minuet to that divine ballet music with the one woman with whom I find it an ecstasy to dance."

He sighed as he sipped his coffee.

"I regret it the more," his wife confessed with gently raised eyebrows, "because you have not provided me with a substitute. There are at least a dozen men between Cannes and Monte Carlo whom we met often at Le Touquet and Deauville and with whom you might have renewed your acquaintance. There are those two Dutchmen of whom I am really fond; there is the English banker whose wife is a Princess and beautiful, but whose heart, as he told me last time we met, is still free. I came so near a little affair with him, Maurice."

"The discovery," he replied, "would not have amused me."

She sighed.

"And yet," she went on with a shrug of the shoulders, "what do you provide for me here in the way of amusement while you work out your wonderful schemes? You offer me a moody poet who writes me sonnets and lurks always in the shadow of the woods; a stern, grim Englishman who could be well enough in his way but must choose the few weeks he is spending here to become the fiancé of his landlady's niece. I might have succeeded with him in time, though. Then there is that terrible man Spenser. My dear Maurice," she concluded, glancing at the mirror in her vanity-case, "even if you rob him of a million, I should not have thought it was worth your while to have had dealings with such a person."

"Wipe him from your mind, dear Victorine," the Marquis replied with a flourish of his beautiful fingers. "I may have dealings with such persons if it profits me, otherwise they do not exist. The Englishman—well, he is the only one to be considered seriously. Your reference to him, Victorine, was strange. Do you happen to remember, four years ago in Spain, a midnight visit I paid to the Palace of Don Miguel of Braganza?"

She nodded.

"I remember it. I still have one of the emeralds."

"You had tea with him that afternoon. Do you remember how you occupied yourself?"

She leaned back in her chair and laughed.

"What a memory! I had a fear of that man for you, Maurice. He left the room where he was showing me some of his family treasures to fetch some miniatures. I saw a hideously modern weapon in his desk, took it up out of curiosity and found it fully loaded. Why I had that sudden impulse I do not know, but I extracted the cartridges, dropped them into my bag and replaced it."

"I remember, of course, I remember," he said smiling. "His hand was trembling so that I am sure he would have missed me, but there were a few seconds when I would have given a thousand pounds to have known that the wretched thing was empty."

"Well, I know a man," she confided, leaning forward, "whose hand would not shake and who would not miss if he were playing with firearms. It is the Englishman of whom you have spoken."

"Marvellous!" he murmured. "Such insight, such instinct! If I were interrupted to-morrow night, Victorine, which is impossible, he is the one man whose weapon I should prefer not to find turned in my direction. There is little fear of it, however. He is engrossed in his new love, besides which nature has made him unsuspecting."

"If only I had had a week longer!" she sighed.

"Conceited little minx! Do you honestly believe, my treasure, that you are irresistible?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "Only with men like that it takes time."

He laughed gaily.

"Well, you need not worry. Granet will never leave the festivities to play the policeman. Suresne might, but with Suresne I shall know how to deal. Besides, he will think that I am within the orb of his vision all the time. I can see him now. He will watch my supposed self seated there with my pike in my hand, whilst all the time the little business is being done up at the Manoir!"

"How is it you are so convinced of that, my love?"

"Suresne stays at the village café," the Marquis confided. "He has made friends with our chauffeur, Jean. He has been very inquisitive about our entertainment. Jean, after his second bottle of wine—pooh! he could drink six without stammering—Jean told him that the moment his master quits the dais he must be on duty to bring him back to Grassleyes. Suresne will watch me all the time I sit there—the me, I mean, that will not be me—and when my effigy goes to the galley he will slip away and follow my car up here. Jean will lead him a chase, slip out of the back gates and return, but Suresne will be concealed in the reception room waiting for me. He is full of conceit, that man. He thinks that he has outwitted a great master of schemes by bribing his servants! Anyhow, he is safely disposed of."

"What a brain, my sweet!" she murmured. "I find myself partaking of your enthusiasm for this adventure. It will be a happy night for us. I shall turn the heads of all the men who kiss my fingers—the Préfet, the

Mayor, the General—all of them—but my only embrace I shall keep for my brave Maurice when all is well and we are rushing through the darkness."

"My Victorine!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Never, within the memory of the oldest inhabitant of Nice, had its men, women and children been offered, without cost, trouble or anxiety, such a marvellous spectacle. Rumours that something amazing was on foot began to creep around soon after nine o'clock when the motor yacht, *Joy Bell*, ablaze with lights and decorations, slowly left her moorings in the Port of Nice and with a long, graceful curve took up a position a few hundred yards out at sea from the Jetée Casino Pier and dropped anchor. For hours a great crowd had been gathered round the Port watching the preparations, watching the arrival of the guests, watching the brilliant little scene under the crimson draperies generously pulled on one side. A dozen large motor boats, also illuminated and decorated in the fashion of ancient galleys, plied backwards and forwards from the steps of the Esplanade, where a score of gendarmes helped other officials examine the invitation cards and assist to their places in the boats the stream of guests. The Marquise, an exquisite figure in the costume of a great lady of the Renaissance with her small group of ladies in waiting, all dressed by a great couturière who had flown down from Paris only two days before, moved backwards and forwards amongst her guests on the yacht, listening to the music and occasionally dancing. The excitement reached its highest point, however, when the raised dais over the ordinary wheelhouse was suddenly occupied by a grim yet curiously attractive figure—a man in skin-tight black costume—a skull cap on his head—partly masked and carrying in his hand a mediæval weapon with a steel head which shone like a mirror in the moonlight. Copies of the ballet had been printed at a moment's notice and distributed amongst the guests and even the crowd on the shore, and there were cries of applause and shouts of "Bravo, the Executioner!" as the grim figure with the black mantle thrown over him took his place in a high chair and, leaning upon his dreadful implement with one hand, sat there in sinister abstraction. Occasionally he rose in dignified fashion to his feet and bowed to the arriving guests, but chiefly he ignored them. The little of his face that could be seen was as white as a Pierrot's but the dark eyes every now and then flashed out from behind the black-silk mask as he seemed to recognize some friend in the crowd below. The wife of the Préfet, who was amongst the guests, grasped the Marquise by the wrist.

"My dear!" she exclaimed. "It is the most thrilling figure I have ever seen—that of your husband—and to think that within a mile or two of our home you wonderful people have been living and we knew nothing of it!"

"This is not our last visit to Grassleyes," the Marquise announced graciously. "We came for rest and tranquillity after much travelling. My husband is charmed with the place. We shall return."

"It is pleasant news," Madame said cordially. "Tell me, will your husband leave his stately position at any time, for instance when supper is served?"

"All this is of his planning," the Marquise confided. "He has been a great supporter of the ballet in several capitals. We have asked him very few questions. There is a master of ceremonies here who flew specially from London. He will direct the proceedings but, believe me, they are very simple. Soon we eat and we drink, then we give ourselves up to the joy of dancing and they tell me that all of a sudden, when we least expect it, the Executioner of Florence will have left his place and be amongst us."

"Do you know, this is the most amazing private entertainment which has ever been given in Nice," the Mayor of the city said as he bowed over his hostess' fingers. "Your husband is a miracle worker, Marquise. There are one or two artists here of my acquaintance and they are unanimous. Here is a perfect representation of the dress, bearing and colourings of the Renaissance. The fable of the great nobleman, one of the Medicis, they say, who filled the post of the executioner for more than two years is perfectly true. I do not think that there could be a more lifelike representation of such a personage than the one your husband gives us."

Wine was being handed round freely in goblets of old silver. A dance from the ballet upon a small raised stage was a huge success. Miriam di Mendoza, accompanied by the *chef d'orchestre* of the Nice Opera Company, sang two arias from a composition of the latter's and was overwhelmed with compliments. Carlotta achieved the desire of her life and danced with Granet. It was all very wonderful, everybody was extraordinarily happy and when the stars came out and the moon rose slowly from a clear horizon the scene was almost perfect.

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Grassleyes, also bathed in the softening moonlight, presented a wonderful spectacle of colour and perhaps less flamboyant beauty. In the dark shadows of the cypresses thousands of fire-flies floated and darted about swinging their fairy lanterns. The bungalows were silent and darkened buildings. Inside the Manoir a single shaded lamp upon the desk in Lady Grassleyes' reception room shone with a pale light upon a fantastic spectacle. Comfortably established in a high-backed chair, with a strange collection of articles on the table before him, was the exact duplicate of the famous Executioner of Florence. He sat enthroned, his pike of gleaming steel resting against the chair, his face concealed by a silken mask save for the eyes—brilliant and menacing. Upon the table were two long, strangely official envelopes covered with seals; lying face downwards was a calf-bound volume, the Chubb lock of which was unfastened; next to it was a large iron casket, open, the top tray exposing to view a very wonderful assortment of jewels in curious old-fashioned settings; by the side of the casket was a thick package of what appeared to be five-mille notes. The man seated before these objects had apparently just concluded a brief examination of them. The result seemed to have plunged him into a state of doubtful meditation. With careful fingers he removed the mask from his face and laid it by his side. Then he rolled back the black-silk sleeve of his shirt until he found his wrist watch. Apparently satisfied he drew the letter addressed to Jane Grassleyes towards him as though with the idea of reading it. The fingers, however, which would have opened the envelope became suddenly rigid. The man's body became stiff and tense. He turned his head slightly—listening. From somewhere outside there had come a strange sound. He could compare it in his mind with nothing he had ever heard before. It was like the padding of rubber hoofs upon some hard surface. He listened to it puzzled and without understanding. His hand, however, drew a revolver—previously laid upon the desk covered with a black handkerchief—from out of hiding. He readjusted his mask and waited. The padding noise had ceased, but something strange was happening. The man continued to listen, his right-hand fingers clutching the butt of his small but famous gun. He made no movement, attempted to put nothing away. He sat there as silent as his prototype on the yacht, only whereas the latter was listening lazily to the swish of the sea, the Marquis was listening for the next sound which might come. It arrived in a few moments and it surprised him. Some one had either made his way from the back premises of the Manoir or had entered the place through one of the windows and was now in the hall. The bolts of the front entrance were being very softly drawn back. The door was swinging open. Still motionless, the Marquis watched the locked door of the reception room. A few moments passed and then there was a faint metallic sound. The key fell from its place in the lock, pushed by some object from the other side. There was the sound of the turning of another key and the door was opened. A voice as soft as velvet—very, very subdued but very distinct—spoke.

"Madame will enter. She need not fear. Pooralli is here. Postralli is close behind and between our fingers the message of death."

The person who entered with the two strange little men by her side looked indeed as though she had never known fear. She wore a long black coat, and a black silk handkerchief tied under her chin, keeping in place her smoothly parted hair. A pair of steel-rimmed spectacles rested upon the bridge of an aquiline nose and her features, though hard, were fine and regular. She had earned the reputation, through a considerable number of years, of being a woman without nerves. The sight of a masked man in strange attire seated in her famous chair, his piercing eyes fixed steadily upon her, upset for a moment, however, Lady Grassleyes' imperturbability. She gave a little cry and grabbed at Pooralli's sleeve.

"What in heaven's name is this?" she exclaimed.

Pooralli could only gasp. There was really nothing else he could do, for the Marquis's disguise was impenetrable. His forefinger and thumb, however, were gripping tightly the little shaft of sharp steel he carried in his right hand. Speech of any coherent sort was left to the Marquis, and he availed himself of the opportunity.

"Whom have I the pleasure of addressing?" he enquired, his sinister eyes fixed upon Lady Grassleyes.

She returned his gaze steadily and once more took in the details of his rich and magnificent ensemble, the paste buckles on his shoes, his silk stockings, the lustrous gleam of the black cape thrust on one side with its lining of scarlet silk. It was not for nothing that the Marquis had studied an ancient book on the costumes of the period.

"Well, for one thing," she replied, "I am the owner of this house of which you seem to have taken such unwarranted possession. I am the owner of that safe which you appear to have rifled. The book of formulæ dealing with herbs and medicines and that pile of five-*mille* notes, to say nothing of my heirlooms which you seem to have left within convenient reach—all belong to me. Those two envelopes also are my property."

"*Ma foi*, this is going to be a shock to some of our friends here! You must be Lady Grassleyes!"

"Evidently you have the quick intelligence of the Mephistopheles—is it Mephistopheles you are meant to represent?"

"Alas, no, madame," the Marquis answered regretfully. "That is where you fail. I am very proud of my costume, too. It is the dress worn by the Executioner of Florence in the Fourteenth Century. There are rumours that a Medici accepted the office through sheer passion for bloodshed. There are other rumours that the Medicis employed for their own private use a personal executioner. Take it whichever way you choose. I represent that man."

"Are you connected in any way with the tomfoolery that is going on down in Nice?" Lady Grassleyes asked.

"A trifle harsh, that," he remonstrated. "I am giving a farewell party on board my yacht which has been lying in Nice Harbour. I was just thinking that in a very few minutes I am due to return there."

"And what did you propose to do with the copy of my will, the letter to my niece, my priceless Formula Book, the jewels and that beautiful pile of notes?"

The Marquis sighed.

"If, as something tells me, you are speaking the truth, Lady Grassleyes—if you are indeed that lady—the only thing that I can do is to replace the various articles you have mentioned, which I shall do with great care, relock your safe and apologize for my intrusion."

"What a man!" she exclaimed. "Pooralli, leave off fidgeting with that weapon of yours. I don't think this gentleman means us any harm."

"Harm, my dear lady? Until to-night I was the tenant of your highest-priced bungalow."

"What, 'The Three Cypresses'?"

"Precisely."

"What rent have you been paying, may I ask?"

"Twenty-five English guineas a week, madame, and numberless extras."

"Too cheap," she said, shaking her head. "As regards the extras, you are doubtless a rich man and able to afford them. Considering our somewhat intimate relations as landlady and tenant," she continued, "I might perhaps take the liberty of enquiring your name?"

The Marquis rose to his feet. With his right hand over his heart he bowed low.

"Madame," he announced, "I am the Marquis de Fallanges. My wife and I have, with the greatest pleasure, occupied your bungalow 'The Three Cypresses' for nearly a month."

"I had it fitted with a new system of water supply," Lady Grassleyes reflected. "I trust that it was satisfactory?"

"Everything about the bungalow was satisfactory," the Marquis assured her. "I even ventured to ask your charming niece whether she thought that you, if you returned in person, or she, in the regrettable possibility of her being your successor, would care to sell me the property. I met with a very firm refusal."

"My niece was carrying out my wishes," she declared. "You will find it laid down in my will, supposing you have not already examined it, that not one of the bungalows nor one hectare of the land is to be sold. By the by, if your story is a true one, Marquis, these two servitors of mine must know you quite well by sight."

De Fallanges removed his mask.

"They know me quite well," he answered graciously. "Pooralli, as your cellarman, has been a frequent visitor to my bungalow. He has served us well, as also has his brother. I imagine, from the fact that they have escorted you here, that they are also your faithful dependents."

"They are the only two human beings who have known of my movements during the past month. They come of a race with whom fidelity is ranked far above religion. Will you forgive me now, *Monsieur le Marquis*, if we pass on to more practical concerns? What were you doing with that collection of my treasures on the table?"

"I am embarrassed," the Marquis said gently, "and yet the truth is always so simple. I was searching for your will, as a favour to the agent who let me the bungalow."

Lady Grassleyes was silent for several moments. Her eyes never left the Marquis's.

"Spenser?" she asked.

"That, without a doubt, is his name."

"He might have waited another day," she remarked. "How does it happen that you are in a position to open an invulnerable safe, my friend?"

"Your words contradict themselves," the Marquis replied. "If the safe had been invulnerable I could not have opened it."

"And what connection is there between your solitary proceedings here this evening and the great fête which you are giving on your yacht?"

He smiled.

"Lady Grassleyes," he said, "a career which might well have been a brilliant one, even though from me that would sound like a boast, has been always hampered by a diabolical, a most infernally uncomfortable sense of humour. The party on my yacht believe that their host sits on a carefully erected dais on the top of the navigator's wheelhouse. You would find him, if you were on board my yacht, at the present moment dressed exactly as I am, masked as I was masked, armed as I am armed."

He lifted his pike and swung it gently backwards and forwards. Pooralli's arrow came gliding out of his sleeve once more.

"Tell me some more," her ladyship invited.

"I was willing to oblige my friend Spenser, but I wished to do so in the grand fashion," the Marquis explained. "I have no fancy for making use of the gifts with which nature has endowed me as a back-door thief. I could open any door, any safe, any secret hiding place in the world with ease. You will understand that I should never dream of doing so for purposes of plunder."

Lady Grassleyes' eyes met his. For several seconds there was silence. She was watching that queer, sardonic smile, that strange twinkle in the fierce eyes.

"Perhaps," she said, "we had better leave that question for a time. In any case, I think that you would be a most amusing neighbour, Marquis."

"It is a matter," he suggested, "which we must discuss. An idea!"

He stood suddenly upright, leaning slightly on his pike.

"Your ladyship," he continued, "I regret that, owing to the unfortunate uncertainty as to your address, it is just possible that you did not receive your invitation to my party to-night."

"My return," she assured him, "was purely accidental. I had no foreknowledge of your intention to gratify the curiosity of Spenser, nor was I aware, until a short while ago, that festivities such as you have been describing were taking place."

"I venture to make a suggestion, Lady Grassleyes, to one who I believe has a certain kinship in temperament with myself. Let me offer a personal, if belated, invitation to my party. Let me offer you myself as escort."

"It certainly is an idea," she reflected.

"The affair is simplicity itself," he went on. "In exactly half an hour from now the servant who is taking my place on the dais will leave it, will descend by the Captain's private ladder and disappear in the bowels of the yacht. His place will be empty. *Voilà*. My barge waits attached at the Jetée Casino Pier. We should arrive there at the precise moment. We are pulled to the gangway, my boatman will blow a horn and swing a green lantern. We mount the steps together. Dear Lady Grassleyes, I beg of you—consider the situation! You have a presence, a dignity; you are inimitable. You are yourself. I should have just disappeared from the dais. We arrive on the deck. I ask you—no words of mine could help you to realize what the position will be. Your niece may not faint, but she will scream. After that she will believe. Spenser's language I dare not think of, but as he has shown signs lately of developing a very high blood pressure I think he will have a fit. As for the others—"

"Too wonderful!" Lady Grassleyes interrupted. "Show me the way to your car, but before we leave either you or I must lock away those things. Which shall it be?"

The Marquis stood back and bowed. Lady Grassleyes shook her head.

"If you can replace those articles in the left-hand side of the safe, Marquis," she said, "I shall believe fervently and entirely in your satanic origin."

He stepped lightly towards the safe. The right-hand portion he opened with the key which was already in the lock. He waved to his companion. She moved eagerly to his side. Head and shoulders disappeared in the safe. His finger tips pressed its left-hand side. They moved this way and that. Here he tapped a little, there he drew his nail along the side. At last there came what apparently he was waiting for. The first finger of his right hand found a certain place in the heavy metal. He pressed. A little bell sounded. There was silence. Then his other fingers spread themselves slowly in a small compass here and there across the thick metal. A smile parted the lips of the woman who stood by his side. The time, the movement, the slow grace of those ivory-white fingers seemed to hypnotize her. Very quietly there stole out into the room the melody of the opening bars of Chopin's famous Nocturne. She listened entranced. Three bars the Marquis played and withdrew his fingers. He raised his hand. There was a little click and then, one by one—a disc here, a disc there—appeared little fairy openings. The fingers went back. The first finger disappeared, touched something in a hidden place. The whole side of the safe began to creep slowly back. He stretched out his hand. One by one he replaced in that great yawning gulf the will, the letter to Jane, the casket of jewels, the Formula Book. Last of all he came to the money. He looked at it and then at Lady Grassleyes.

"Five-*mille* notes," he murmured. "I have never before seen a million francs look so attractive."

She smiled and waved her hand.

"The entertainment was well worth the money," she said.

The Marquis's left hand reached backwards and raised her fingers to his lips. With his right hand he replayed the little tune. The safe was closed. The notes were in the Marquis's pocket.

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"My car is waiting in the cedar grove," the Marquis said, addressing Pooralli. "Her ladyship accepts my hospitality upon the yacht. You may accompany us, riding with Jean."

Pooralli bowed gravely, wiped some very unpleasant black substance from the end of his arrow and passed it to his brother. He threw open the door. The Marquis blew a silver whistle and his car drew noiselessly up to the entrance.

CHAPTER XXIX

There was no doubt whatever that this almost extempore fête on board the *Joy Bell* was going extraordinarily well. The Marquise, exquisite as the pale and delicate lilies which she carried in her hand, wore her richly brocaded gown with a grace and dignity which no Medici could ever have surpassed. Her court consisted chiefly of the General commanding the troops of the district, the Mayor and various local notabilities. Spenser, in spite of several snubs, had shouldered his way into a prominent position in the gathering, occasionally conveying the Marquise's wishes to the leader of the orchestra or the director of the festivities, and making the various announcements necessary in English and French. The figure of the supposed Marquis carried out his part excellently. At no time did he change countenance or lose his air of haughty composure. He made no movement to leave his place until Spenser, after many visits to the side of the yacht and anxious gazings towards the Promenade, with an air of relief wiped the perspiration from his forehead, conversed for a few minutes with the Marquise and mounted the small platform.

"*Mesdames et Messieurs*," he announced. "The Marquise, your gracious hostess of this evening, invites you after the next dance, which will be a very short one, to take supper with her below. The orchestra will now play the famous waltz from the Trigitzoff Ballet. At its conclusion, will you kindly make your way aft, where directions will be given to you as to the seating."

Almost immediately the music commenced and the company, so far as was possible, danced. Spenser once more leaned over the rail of the yacht. From a certain place on the Promenade des Anglais a green lantern was being flashed. A similar green lantern was hanging over the side of the yacht. Spenser's expression was almost seraphic. He stood for a moment bare-headed, a little apart from the gay crowd. Very slowly and with great dignity the Executioner was rising to his feet. In his right hand he clasped his weapon, with his left he threw his cape over his shoulder. Spenser watched the approaching galley. He felt himself a personage in this, one of the most fantastic episodes in local history. He hurried towards a small buffet where champagne was being handed out and he drank a glass without a moment's hesitation. He had no more anxiety. The Marquis's amazing fantasy had succeeded. Already the galley with the green light had put off from the Casino Pier, already the lay figure who had impersonated the Marquis had left his place on the dais. In a moment or two the Marquis himself would be amongst his guests, his mission accomplished, and before very long the will, which undoubtedly gave authority and a fortune to Jane Grassleyes, and the letter of instructions addressed to her, would no longer exist. The Formula Book, with the fortune which it represented, would also be in his hands. Spenser drank two more glasses of champagne at the buffet in rapid succession and made his way to greet his host at the special gangway which had been rigged up forward. The chug-chug of the motor was like music in his ears. The motor galley swept round the stern of the yacht, its engines now shut off, and came stealing through the dim light up to the improvised gangway. Now Spenser could make out the shapes of the people in the boat. A flash of light from one of the portholes was reflected from the steel of the weapon the Marquis was carrying. There was some one seated by his side, partly hooded, a woman who lifted her head as they drew nearer. Spenser felt every nerve in his body taut. A great giddiness seemed to have seized him. It was that last glass of champagne, he told himself wildly. He caught at the rails and peered with horrified gaze over the side. He was having a vision, of course! It was the sudden lessening of the tension of the last few hours.

What he saw, or seemed to see, could have no possible real existence. It was the shadow which had so often haunted him, the shadow of the woman whom those doctors had thought dead. What was the meaning of this diabolical trick that some one was playing upon him? He leaned over the side. Why was she there? She was wearing the same severely cut black clothes, the same steel spectacles. He heard her voice as she asked her companion a question. She stood up, prepared to leave the galley. Spenser's cry was lost amidst the hubbub of the grappling chains. The world swung away from under his feet. He felt the gurgling of water in his ears, saw the panorama of death before his eyes. But stronger even than the shock of finding the dead come back to life was the suffocating fear of death itself, that grisly fear which he was carrying with him deep down into the icy wilderness.

* * * * *

On the whole, the return of Lady Grassleyes to sanity and life was accepted with a certain amount of bewilderment, otherwise as an astonishing but perfectly natural happening. There was a great deal of wild gossip amongst the guests, of course, but the sensation of finding a person who had escaped from the forgotten world was pleasing.

"These newspapers," a well-known editor, who had made a great success in the costume of a famous Renaissance painter, declared severely, "must really take a little more care in their statements. I read in cold black print, in my own journal, that Lady Grassleyes had passed away."

"I distinctly saw somewhere," a frivolous young "lady in waiting" observed, "that her body had been removed to the Nice Clinic for examination. She was supposed to have something very mysterious the matter with her."

"Narrow squeak for her they say," a perspiring musketeer remarked. "She had been sampling her own wonderful medicines. Very clever herbal doctor she is, according to all reports."

"No one in this country understands herbs," a Professor from a Swiss university observed. "The old witch of the Fourteenth Century knew more about them than the best medical brains of to-day. They say that Lady Grassleyes could have made a great fortune selling her herbs to manufacturing chemists."

"A dangerous sort of business," some one else declared.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the elderly lady who was the subject of all this almost stupefied gossip sat on the right hand of the Marquis, sipped her champagne with much appreciation and made an excellent meal. The congratulations which were continually being offered to her she waved on one side.

"No questions," she declared. "No explanations. Here I am. I was never better in my life and why I chose to disappear for a time is my business and nobody else's. Glad to see you all again, though; and your supper, Marquis, is the best meal I have tasted for weeks."

"Your aunt," Granet whispered to Jane, "is the most amazing woman I have ever come across!"

CHAPTER XXX

Lady Grassleyes' reinstatement at the Manoir was perfectly easy, natural and a source of pleasure to herself and everybody. She spent the morning after the party in bed, as was only natural, considering that she returned home between four and five o'clock. She lunched, according to her usual custom, alone, and spent the early part of the afternoon in her herb garden, wandering through her glass-houses, taking careful note of the growth of her specimen plants and later on asking questions about the general running of the estate during her absence. She was served with her cup of tea at five o'clock and afterwards took up her place at her desk in the general reception room. Jane rejoined her there. Pooralli and Postralli took up their accustomed places behind her chair. So far, her conversation and general attitude entirely ignored any break in the regular routine of her life. She had offered no explanation of her disappearance, had avoided even the most casual reference to it.

"Mistress quite well now," Postralli declared with a beaming smile. "We all take good care of the herbs. One bad herb somewhere in mistress' last mixture. Mr. Granet—he find him."

Lady Grassleyes at once betrayed her interest.

"That's lucky," she said. "Who is this Mr. Granet, Jane?"

"He is very clever and quite nice," Jane confided. "I hope you will like him, Aunt Harriet, because I am going to marry him."

"Time you found some one," was the equable reply. "For a good-looking girl I think you have held off long enough. If he is really a clever chemist it will be a wonderful thing to have him in the family."

"You met him last night, Aunt, at the party," Jane reminded her.

"So I did," Lady Grassleyes reflected. "I remember. Very handsome. Nice strong face. I shall probably accept him for you with pleasure, child. The two who bother me, though, are these," she added, pointing to Pooralli and Postralli. "Do you know that at the Clinic in Nice when I began to recover consciousness—do you know that one of them was always at my side practically wherever I went? Sometimes I had fits of being half unconscious for quite a number of days but when I woke up one of them was always watching over me."

"Never leave mistress," Pooralli said with a smile. "Not both of us together. One come back to the Manoir, one stay. Then change places. Very simple."

"How did they do it?" Lady Grassleyes went on. "I am almost afraid to ask them. It seemed as though they must have crept through keyholes. I shan't tell any one where I have been until I feel inclined to but I had a week's very comfortable stay at an hotel near Aix-en-Provence. One of them was in the hotel the whole of the time waiting upon me."

"So that is where you have been!" Jane murmured.

"Oh, I have been in other places besides Aix. I was in Marseille for three or four days. I went to the great distillery of herbs there. Professor Hilary St. Maur was terribly interested in my condition. He made me stay in his private home for several days. I knew what to do, though, just as well as he could tell me."

"I come back from Marseille three times," Postralli explained, with something which was almost like a smirk upon his face. "I find the right herb, I mix him up and bring him."

"You are getting to know too much, you two," his mistress said graciously. "You may as well be told the whole truth, Jane," she went on. "I was making experiments in suspended animation which some day or

other will take the place of anæsthesia for every operation on the human body, trivial or otherwise. I shall have a great deal more to say about that presently ... Every one been paying their rents?"

"Every one," Jane replied. "Even Mr. Oliver is out of our debt at last."

"How is that young man?" her aunt asked curiously. "I thought he looked the picture of health last night. I was surprised, because I rather fancied that I had made a slight error in one of his prescriptions."

"He came up here desperately ill soon after you—er—left us, Aunt. Mr. Granet cured him. By the by, this is David, Aunt. Mr. David Granet."

Lady Grassleyes welcomed Granet, who had just entered through the open windows, affably.

"Glad to see you back in your old place again, Lady Grassleyes," he said smiling. "You gave me a shock the first time I saw you, though. You were seated almost exactly as you are now, but completely unconscious. I came from Spenser & Sykes to enquire about one of your bungalows."

"I was suffering from the results of a stupid error," she confided. "I took too much of that bruised cholere. Finest medicine in the world for producing a certain measure of suspended animation but it needs just a touch of hermaline. However, we will talk about that later on.... I hear you want to marry my niece."

"I hope you do not object?"

"Object? Not I! Every girl over twenty is better for being married. Don't leave this neighbourhood too soon, though. If you really know anything about herbs and chemistry, which my niece tells me you do, you can amuse yourself here for quite a long time."

"It is delightful to hear you say that, Lady Grassleyes," Granet replied earnestly, "because I have never seen such a fine collection of exotics and Oriental plants in my life. There are many there which, when I was living out East—I was Professor at Bombay University for some time—I tried to get myself but failed, and I have a book—a manuscript book, that is to say—of suggested prescriptions for treating various diseases which I shall be very anxious to compare with some of those in your Formula Book. Then there is this question of suspended animation without permanent damage to the vital organs. I came very near being in your condition with one of my experiments years ago. The hermaline that you speak of was my chief trouble."

"This is wonderful," Lady Grassleyes declared enthusiastically. "We must have an hour or two together, Mr. Granet, as soon as possible. Jane, why has not the Marquis been to present his compliments this afternoon?"

Jane looked at Granet, who shrugged his shoulders.

"I think that the Marquis," he confided, "has left us for a time. He disappeared from the party, after he had said good-bye to most of his guests, a little abruptly."

"Great heavens, I hope he has not really gone off! The most charming, the most delightful creature I ever met in my life. Don't tell me that he wishes to give up his bungalow?"

"Only for a time," Jane murmured. "It seems that he is just a little unpopular with one or two people."

"I would not believe a word against him," Lady Grassleyes declared firmly, "if you talked until you were black in the face."

Jane and Granet exchanged troubled glances. The main door of the reception room was opened to admit Mr. Clunderson. He was looking very grave indeed.

"Feeling all right to-day, Lady Grassleyes?" he asked anxiously.

"Fit as a fiddle," she assured him. "The best champagne I ever drank in my life. What a night we had!"

"What a morning I have had!" the lawyer groaned. "I am sorry to say that I have some rather bad news for all of you. Your friend Spenser—"

"He is no longer my friend," Lady Grassleyes interrupted. "A perfect scoundrel, that fellow, if you like. I have finished with him. I don't know how many millions he hasn't had from me at different times. He will never set foot in this place again, I can promise you that."

"As a matter of fact, he will not," Clunderson said solemnly. "It seems that he disappeared last night and this morning his body was washed ashore. He must have fallen overboard from the yacht."

There was a moment's shocked silence.

"Poor wretch!" Lady Grassleyes murmured. "Well, I am sorry for him, although he used to make me very angry. Do you mean that he was at the fête, then?"

"He certainly was," Jane declared. "He was taking quite a prominent part in it, too. He disappeared just as you arrived—at least that's the last time I saw him."

"He took too prominent a part, I am afraid," Clunderson sighed. "The authorities are keeping the matter as quiet as possible but there is no doubt whatever but that he had drunk a great deal too much wine. Several of the sailors report that they saw him in an almost helpless condition."

"Well, that's bad news," Lady Grassleyes pronounced. "*De mortuis* and all the rest of it, of course. If things are as you say, though, Mr. Clunderson, the less said about it the better. I shall tear up that letter I wrote to Jane about him. Can any one tell me where the Marquis is?"

"I saw him at the police station only an hour or so ago," Clunderson said. "He was one of those who were sent for to identify Spenser."

"I cannot understand why he has not paid his *devoirs* to me," Lady Grassleyes said almost pettishly. "His last words when we stepped into the barge this morning were that he should give himself the pleasure of paying me a visit this afternoon."

Again the door of the room swung open. The Marquis de Fallanges made his entrance.

"Milady," he said, as he approached with extended hands, "my late arrival is unforgivable, but it was, alas, a matter over which I had no control. An unfortunate incident happened at the fête last night—"

"I know," Lady Grassleyes interrupted. "You are forgiven, of course, Marquis, and you are doubly welcome now."

He bent over her fingers and kissed them. He looked round at the little company and smiled. In his grey-tweed suit with a small rosebud in his buttonhole he was a very attractive figure, notwithstanding a slight air of fatigue.

"It is a great pleasure to me, Lady Grassleyes," he said, "to see you re-established here."

She smiled at him very pleasantly indeed.

"Marquis," she proposed, "we shall celebrate this little occasion, forgetting, so far as we can, any unfortunate incident which might cast a shadow over the memory of our delightful evening. Pooralli, the best wine in the cellar and your most famous cocktails. Let them be served in the smaller reception room. We have a toast to drink."

Pooralli hurried away. He passed Suresne on the threshold. The latter lifted his hand.

"Do not announce me for a moment," he said quietly. "I have a word to say to Mr. Clunderson. Mine is not exactly a visit of ceremony."

Pooralli passed on. Suresne took Clunderson by the arm and drew him a little on one side. Whilst talking to the lawyer, under cover of the general conversation, Suresne never let his eyes wander for a moment from the debonair figure of the Marquis. Clunderson listened to all that his companion had to say, then he nodded a somewhat unwilling assent and took a few steps forward.

"Lady Grassleyes," he said, "before we proceed to these celebrations might I ask you one question?"

"One?" was the good-natured reply. "I thought you would have been asking me a hundred before now. However, I am at your disposition for ten minutes."

"This, Lady Grassleyes," Clunderson began, "is the thirtieth day after you left your place here. This was the day upon which your niece and I were to open your will."

"Quite right."

"I regret to say, Lady Grassleyes, that neither Miss Jane nor myself have the faintest idea where the will is, to say nothing of the letter addressed to Miss Jane and the other things which were to be found with the will. We possessed the key to the right-hand side of the safe but there we found nothing of any great importance to us. The left-hand side appears to be a dummy structure, and yet, after searching every possible place in the Manoir, we have come to the conclusion that the will and the other things must be in this other part of the safe."

"God bless my soul!" Lady Grassleyes exclaimed. "Did I forget to tell Jane how to open the left-hand side?"

"I can assure you," Clunderson replied, "she had not the faintest idea how to do it—nor had I."

"Well, I'm sorry," Lady Grassleyes said. "I really am sorry, Mr. Clunderson. It was stupid of me. However—"

"I beg that you will open the left-hand portion of the safe now, Lady Grassleyes," he interrupted.

"If you wish it—with pleasure," she assented. "I make only one condition. Every one else must go out on the verandah for five minutes."

They trooped away. Lady Grassleyes stepped down from her chair, felt in her bag for some keys, opened the first part of the safe and half disappeared in the interior. Presently there came the sound of the little bell and then that queer strain of music. There was the click and then the openings appeared. The solid

wall of steel which guarded the contents of the second portion slowly slipped back. Lady Grassleyes leaned over and handed the contents of the shelves to the lawyer, who was staring over her shoulder in stupefaction.

"Here we are," she announced. "The last will and testament of Harriet Anne Grassleyes, signed and duly witnessed in your presence. There is also my Formula Book which, alas, needs a little correction but otherwise is worth a great deal more to me than anything else. There is the letter addressed to Jane, written at a time when I first had certain suspicions concerning our friend Spenser. And here is my casket of jewellery. That is all, I see, exactly as I left it. Are you satisfied, Mr. Clunderson?"

The lawyer stood quite still for a moment. He glanced at the envelope which contained the will; he looked at the letter addressed to Jane.

"Everything here," Lady Grassleyes repeated, "is exactly as I left it."

Clunderson stroked his chin thoughtfully. He seemed more than a little puzzled.

"I understood," he said, "that there was a large sum of money left here in *five-mille* notes in case Miss Jane might require it."

"I changed my mind at the last moment," she explained. "I decided that the money was not necessary."

Clunderson bowed and turned away.

"I thank you, Lady Grassleyes," he said, "for gratifying an old man's curiosity."

"And I thank you, Mr. Clunderson," she replied, "for keeping vigilant watch upon my possessions during my brief absence—and," she added after a moment's pause, "for your discretion, which I much appreciate."

* * * * *

The door was thrown open. In single file there appeared Pooralli, Postralli and Martin, the English butler, all carrying huge silver trays agleam with the glory of beautiful glass, gold-foiled bottles, shining cocktail shakers and piles of fruit and sandwiches. Lady Grassleyes, from the midst of the reassembled party, smiled benevolently.

"Jane, my dear," she said, "it is a pleasure to me to think that you have not permitted the reputation for hospitality which I believe the Manoir has always held even to flicker. Do please make yourselves comfortable, every one. Marquis, is it my fancy or do I see one person here present—a friend of Mr. Clunderson's, perhaps—" she added graciously—"who has not been presented to me yet?"

Suresne felt himself suddenly confronted with the problem of his life. He was, after all, a man of gracious instincts. He remembered those strange rumours of the double who through life had dogged the footsteps of the Marquis de Fallanges. It was a story which many others had accepted. He bowed his head to fate.

"This is our friend Monsieur Suresne," Clunderson announced a little nervously. "He came here to help us solve some of our problems."

Lady Grassleyes held out her hand.

"A very charming attention on the part of monsieur," she acknowledged.

Suresne bowed over her fingers.

"Milady," he said, "my search has ended happily for all, I trust."

"Monsieur Suresne," the Marquis intervened with a charming little bow, "has also other gifts besides those which belong to his profession of detective. He is an artist. I trust, monsieur, that if ever you should hold an exhibition of your works you will allow me to become the purchaser of your charming little water-colour of the bungalow 'The Three Cypresses.'"

Suresne looked at the Marquis and the Marquis returned his gesture of admiration.

"The trifle you mention, *Monsieur le Marquis*," Suresne declared, "is yours. I shall deliver it with my own hands at 'The Three Cypresses' to-morrow morning. It will be a happy memento of my failure."

THE END

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