

Le Queux William

The Count's Chauffeur



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CHAPTER I

A MOVE ON THE “FORTY”

In Paris, in Rome, in Florence, in Berlin, in Vienna – in fact, over half the face of Europe, from the Pyrenees to the Russian frontier – I am now known as “The Count’s Chauffeur.”

An Englishman, as my name George Ewart denotes, I am of cosmopolitan birth and education, my early youth having been spent on the Continent, where my father was agent for a London firm.

When I was fourteen, my father, having prospered, came to London, and established himself as an agent in Wood Street, City, representing a great firm of silk manufacturers in Lyons.

At twenty I tried City life, but an office with a high stool, a dusty ledger, and sandwich lunches, had no attraction for me. I had always had a turn for mechanics, but was never allowed to adopt engineering as a profession, my father’s one idea being that I should follow in his footsteps – a delusive hope entertained by many a fond parent.

Six months of office life sufficed me. One day I went home to Teddington and refused to return again to Wood Street. This resulted in an open quarrel between my father and myself, with the result that a week later I was on my way to Canada. In a year I was back again, and, after some months of semi-starvation in London, I managed to obtain a job in a motor factory. I was then entirely in my element. During two years I learned the mechanism of the various petrol-driven cars, until I became classed as an expert driver and engineer.

At the place I was employed there was manufactured one of the best and most expensive makes of English car, and, being at length placed on the testing staff, it was my duty to take out each new chassis for its trial-run before being delivered to a customer.

Upon my certificate each chassis was declared in perfect running order, and was then handed over to the body-makers indicated by the purchaser.

Being an expert driver, my firm sent me to drive in the Tourist Trophy races in the Isle of Man, and I likewise did the Ardennes Circuit and came in fourth in the Brescia race for the Florio Cup, my successes, of course, adding glory and advertisement to the car I drove.

Racing, however, aroused within me, as it does in every motorist, an ardent desire to travel long distances. The testing of those chassis in Regent’s Park, and an occasional run with some wealthy customer out on the Great North Road or on the Bath or Brighton roads, became too quiet a life for me. I was now seized by a desire to tour and see Europe. True, in my capacity of tester, I met all classes of men. In the seat beside me have sat Cabinet Ministers, Dukes, Indian Rajahs, Members of Parliament, and merchant princes, customers or prospective purchasers, all of whom chatted with me, mostly displaying their ignorance of the first principles of mechanics. It was all pleasant enough – a merry life and good pay. Yet I hated London, and the height of my ambition was a good car to drive abroad.

After some months of waiting, the opportunity came, and I seized it.

By appointment, at the Royal Automobile Club one grey December morning, I met Count Bindo di Ferraris, a young Italian aristocrat, whose aspect, however, was the reverse of that of a Southerner. About thirty, he was tall, lithe, and well dressed in a dark-brown lounge suit. His complexion, his chestnut hair, his erect, rather soldierly bearing, his clean-shaven face, and his open countenance gave him every appearance of an English gentleman. Indeed, I at first took him for an Englishman, for he spoke English so perfectly.

When he had examined my testimonials and made a number of inquiries, he asked —

“You speak French?”

“Yes,” was my reply; “a little Italian, and a little German.”

“Italian!” he exclaimed in surprise. “Excellent!”

Then, while we sat alone, with no one within hearing, he told me the terms upon which he was willing to engage me to drive on the Continent, and added —

“Your salary will be doubled – providing I find you entirely loyal to me. That is to say, you must know how to keep your mouth closed – understand?”

And he regarded me rather curiously, I thought.

“No,” I answered; “I don’t quite understand.”

“Well, well, there are matters – private family matters – of which you will probably become cognisant. Truth to tell, I want help – the help of a good, careful driver who isn’t afraid, and who is always discreet. I may as well tell you that before I wrote to you I made certain secret inquiries regarding you, and I feel confident that you can serve me very much to our mutual advantage.”

This puzzled me, and my curiosity was further aroused when he added —

“To be plain, there is a certain young lady in very high society in the case. I need not tell you more, need I? You will be discreet, eh?”

I smiled and promised. What did it all mean? I wondered. My employer was mysterious; but in due course I should, as he prophesied, obtain knowledge of this secret – a secret love affair, no doubt.

The Count’s private affairs did not, after all, concern me. My duty was to drive on the Continent, and for what he was to pay me I was to serve him loyally, and see that his tyre and petrol bills were not too exorbitant.

He went to the writing-table and wrote out a short agreement which he copied, and we both signed it – a rather curiously worded agreement by which I was to serve him for three years, and during that time our interests were “to be mutual.” That last phrase caused me to wonder, but I scribbled my name and refrained from comment, for the payment was already double that which I was receiving from the firm.

“My car is outside,” he remarked, as he folded his copy of the agreement and placed it in his pocket. “Did you notice it?”

I had not, so we went out into Piccadilly together, and there, standing at the kerb, I saw a car that caused my heart to bound with delight – a magnificent six-cylinder forty horse-power “Napier,” of the very latest model. The car was open, with side entrance, a dark green body with coronet and cipher on the panels, upholstered in red, with glass removable screen to the splashboard – a splendid, workmanlike car just suitable for long tours and fast runs. Of all the cars and of all the makes, that was the only one which it was my ambition to drive.

I walked around it in admiration, and saw that every accessory was the best and very latest that money could buy – even to the newly invented gas-generator which had only a few weeks ago been placed upon the market. I lifted the long bonnet, looked around the engine, and saw those six cylinders in a row – the latest invention of a celebrated inventor.

“Splendid!” I ejaculated. “There’s nothing yet to beat this car. By Jove! we can get a move on a good road!”

“Yes,” smiled the Count. “My man Mario could make her travel, but he’s a fool, and has left me in a fit of temper. He was an Italian, and we Italians are, alas! hot-headed,” and he laughed again. “Would you like to try her?”

I assented with delight, and, while he returned inside the Club to get his fur coat, I started the engine and got in at the steering-wheel. A few moments later he seated himself beside me, and we glided down Piccadilly on our way to Regent’s Park – the ground where, day after day, it had been my habit to go testing. The car ran perfectly, the engines sounding a splendid rhythm through the Regent Street traffic into broad Portland Place, and on into the Park, where I was afforded some scope to

see what she could do. The Count declared that he was in no hurry, therefore we went up through Hampstead to Highgate Station, and then on the Great North Road, through East End, Whetstone, Barnet, and Hatfield, to Hitchin – thirty-five miles of road which was as well known to me as the Strand.

The morning was dry and cold, the roads in excellent condition bar a few patches of new metal between Codicote and Chapelfoot, and the sharp east wind compelled us to goggle. Fortunately, I had on my leather-lined frieze coat, and was therefore fully equipped. The North Road between London and Hitchin is really of little use for trying the speed of a car, for there are so many corners, it is mostly narrow, and it abounds in police-traps. That twenty miles of flat, straight road, with perfect surface, from Lincoln to New Holland, opposite Hull, is one of the best places in England to see what a car is worth.

Nevertheless, the run to Hitchin satisfied me perfectly that the car was not a “roundabout,” as so many are, but a car well “within the meaning of the Act.”

“And what is your opinion of her, Ewart?” asked the Count, as we sat down to cold beef and pickles in the long, old-fashioned upstairs room of the Sun Inn at Hitchin.

“Couldn’t be better,” I declared. “The brakes would do with re-lining, but that’s about all. When do we start for the Continent?”

“The day after to-morrow. I’m staying just now at the Cecil. We’ll run the car down to Folkestone, ship her across, and then go by Paris and Aix to Monte Carlo first; afterwards we’ll decide upon our itinerary. Ever been to Monty?”

I replied in the negative. The prospect of going on the Riviera sounded delightful.

After our late luncheon we ran back from Hitchin to London, but, not arriving before lighting-up time, we had to turn on the head-lights beyond Barnet. We drove straight to the fine garage on the Embankment beneath the Cecil, and after I had put things square and received orders for ten o’clock next day, I was preparing to go to my lodgings in Bloomsbury to look through my kit in preparation for the journey when my employer suddenly exclaimed —

“Come up to the smoking-room a moment. I want to write a letter for you to take to Boodle’s in St. James’s Street, for me, if you will.”

I followed him upstairs to the great blue-tiled smoking-room overlooking the Embankment, and as we entered, two well-dressed men – Englishmen, of aristocratic bearing – rose from a table and shook him warmly by the hand.

I noticed their quick, apprehensive look as they glanced at me as though in inquiry, but my employer exclaimed —

“This is my new chauffeur, Ewart, an expert. Ewart, these are my friends – Sir Charles Blythe,” indicating the elder man, “and Mr. Henderson. These gentlemen will perhaps be with us sometimes, so you had better know them.”

The pair looked me up and down and smiled pleasantly. Sir Charles was narrow-faced, about fifty, with a dark beard turning grey; his companion was under thirty, a fair-haired, rather foppishly dressed young fellow, in a fashionable suit and a light fancy vest.

Then, as the Count went to the table to write, Sir Charles inquired where we had been, and whether I had driven much on the Continent.

When the Count handed me the letter, I saw that he exchanged a meaning glance with Sir Charles, but what it was intended to convey I could not guess. I only know that, for a few seconds, I felt some vague distrust of my new friends, and yet they treated me more as an equal than as a mere chauffeur.

The Count’s friends were certainly a merry, easy-going pair, yet somehow I instinctively held them in suspicion. Whether it was on account of the covert glance which Sir Charles shot across at my employer, or whether there was something unusual about their manner, I cannot tell. I am only aware that when I left the hotel I went on my way in wonder.

Next day, at ten punctually, I ran the car from the Strand into the courtyard of the hotel and pulled up at the restaurant entrance, so as to be out of the way of the continuous cab traffic. The Count, however, did not make his appearance until nearly half an hour later, and when he did arrive he superintended the despatch by cab of a quantity of luggage which he told me he was sending forward by *grande vitesse* to Monte Carlo.

After the four-wheeler had moved off, the hall-porter helped him on with his big fur coat, and he, getting up beside me, told me to drive to Piccadilly.

As we were crossing Trafalgar Square into Pall Mall, he turned to me, saying —

“Remember, Ewart, your promise yesterday. If my actions – I mean, if you think I am a little peculiar sometimes, don’t trouble your head about it. You are paid to drive – and paid well, I think. My affairs don’t concern you, do they?”

“Not in the least,” I answered, nevertheless puzzled.

He descended at a tobacconist’s in Bond Street, and bought a couple of boxes of cigars, and then made several calls at shops, also visiting two jewellers to obtain, he remarked, a silver photograph frame of a certain size.

At Gilling’s – the third shop he tried – he remained inside some little time – quite twenty minutes, I should think. As you know, it is in the narrowest part of Bond Street, and the traffic was congested owing to the road at the Piccadilly end being partially up.

As I sat in my place, staring idly before me, and reflecting that I should be so soon travelling due South over the broad, well-kept French roads, and out of the gloom and dreariness of the English winter, I suddenly became conscious of a familiar face in the crowd of hurrying foot-passengers.

I glanced up quickly as a man bustled past. Was I mistaken? I probably had been; but the thin, keen, bearded countenance was very much like that of Sir Charles Blythe. But no. When I looked back after him I saw that his figure was much more bent and his appearance was not half so smart and well groomed as the Count’s friend.

At one moment I felt absolutely positive that the man had really been watching me, and was now endeavouring to escape recognition, yet at the next I saw the absurdity of such a thought. Sir Charles’s face had, I suppose, been impressed upon my memory on the previous evening, and the passer-by merely bore some slight resemblance.

And so I dismissed it from my mind.

A few moments later a man in a frock-coat, probably the jeweller’s manager, opened the door, looked up and down the street for a few moments, shot an inquisitive glance at me, and then disappeared within.

I found that the clock on the splashboard required winding, and was in the act of doing this when my eyes fell upon a second person who was equally a mystery. This time I felt convinced that I was not mistaken. The fair-moustached young man Henderson went by, but without recognising me.

Did either of the pair recognise the car? If so, what object had they in not acknowledging me?

My suspicions were again aroused. I did not like either of the two men. Were they following my master with some evil intent? In London, and especially in certain cosmopolitan circles, one cannot be too cautious regarding one’s acquaintances. They had been slightly too over-dressed and too familiar with the Count to suit me, and I had resolved that if I had ever to drive either of them I would land them in some out-of-the-world hole with a pretended breakdown. The non-motorist is always at the mercy of the chauffeur, and the so-called “breakdowns” are frequently due to the vengeance of the driver, who gets his throttle stuck, or some trouble which sounds equally serious, but which is remedied in one, two, three, or four hours, according to how long the chauffeur decides to detain his victim by the roadside.

I wondered, as I sat ruminating, whether these two men were really “crooks”; and so deep-rooted were my suspicions that I decided, when the Count returned, to drop him a hint that we were being watched.

I am not nervous by any means, and, moreover, I always carry for my own protection a handy little revolver. Yet I admit that at that moment I felt a decidedly uncomfortable feeling creeping over me.

Those men meant mischief. I had detected it in their eyes on the previous night. By some kind of mysterious intuition I became aware that we were in peril.

Almost at that moment the shop door was opened by the manager, and the Count, emerging, crossed to me and said —

“Go into the shop, Ewart, and wait there till I return. I’m just going round to get some money,” and seeing a boy passing, he called him, saying, “Just mind this car for ten minutes, my boy, and I’ll give you half a crown. Never mind the police; if they say anything, tell them I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

The lad, eager to earn a trifle, at once consented, and descending, I entered the shop, the door of which was being still held open for me, while the Count hailed a hansom and drove away.

The shop is one of the finest in Bond Street, as you know. At that moment there were, however, no other customers. The manager politely invited me to be seated, saying —

“His lordship will only be a short time,” and then, standing with his hands behind his back, he commenced to chat with me.

“That’s a very fine car of yours,” he said. “You ought to be able to travel pretty fast, eh?”

“Well, we do, as a matter of fact,” I replied.

Then he went to the door, and looking over the panes of frosted glass, asked what horse-power it was, and a number of other questions with which non-motorists always plague the chauffeur.

Then, returning to me, he remarked what a very nice gentleman his lordship was, adding that he had been a customer on several occasions.

“Have you been long in his service?” he inquired.

“Oh yes,” I replied, determined not to be thought a new hand. “Quite a long time. As you say, he is a very charming man.”

“He’s very wealthy, according to report. I read something about him in the papers the other day — a gift of some thousands to the Hospital Fund.”

This rather surprised me. I never remembered having seen the name of Count Bindo di Ferraris in the papers.

Presently I got up, and wandering about the shop, inspected some of the beautiful jewels in the fine show-cases, many of them ornaments of enormous value. The manager, a pleasant, elderly man, took me round and showed me some of the most beautiful jewellery I had ever seen. Then, excusing himself, he retired to the office beyond the shop, and left me to chat with one of the assistants.

I looked at the clock, and saw that nearly half an hour had elapsed since the Count had left. A constable had looked in and inquired about the car, but I had assured him that in a few minutes we should be off, and begged, as a favour, that it might be allowed to remain until my master’s return.

Another quarter of an hour elapsed, when the door opened, and there entered two respectably dressed men in dark overcoats, one wearing a soft brown felt hat and the other a “bowler.”

They asked to see the manager, and the assistant who had been chatting to me conducted them through the shop to the office beyond. Both men were of middle age and well set up, and as they entered, I saw that a third man, much younger, was with them. He, however, did not come in, but stood in the doorway, idly glancing up and down Bond Street.

Within the office I distinctly heard the manager utter an exclamation of surprise, and then one of the men, in a deep, low voice, seemed to enter into a long explanation.

The elder of the two strangers walked along the shop to the door, and going outside, spoke some words to the man who had accompanied them. On re-entering, he passed me, giving me a sharp glance, and then disappeared again into the office, where, for five minutes or so, he remained closeted with the manager.

Presently the last-named came out, and as he approached me I noticed an entire change in his manner. He was pale, almost to the lips.

“Will you step into my office for one moment?” he asked. “There’s – well, a little matter upon which I want to speak to you.”

This surprised me. What could he mean?

Nevertheless, I consented, and in a few moments found myself in a large, well-lit office with the manager and the two strangers.

The man in the brown felt hat was the first to speak.

“We want to ask you a question or two,” he said. “Do you recognise this?” and he produced a small square photograph of a man upon whose coat was a white ticket bearing a bold number. I started when my eyes fell upon it.

“My master!” I ejaculated.

The portrait was a police photograph! The men were detectives!

The inspector, for such he was, turned to the jeweller’s manager, and regarded him with a significant look.

“It’s a good job we’ve arrested him with the stuff on him,” he remarked, “otherwise you’d never have seen the colour of it again. He’s worked the same dodge in Rome and Berlin, and both times got clear away. I suppose he became a small customer, in order to inspire confidence – eh?”

“Well, he came in this morning, saying that he wished to give his wife a tiara for the anniversary of her wedding, and asked that he might have two on approval, as he was undecided which to choose, and wished her to pick for herself. He left his car and chauffeur here till his return, and took away two worth five thousand pounds each. I, of course, had not the slightest suspicion. Lord Ixwell – the name by which we know him – is reputed everywhere to be one of the richest peers in the kingdom.”

“Yes. But, you see, Detective-Sergeant Rodwell here, chanced to see him come out of the shop, and, recognising him as the jewel-thief we’ve wanted for months past, followed his cab down to Charing Cross Station, and there arrested him and took him to Bow Street.”

I stood utterly dumbfounded at this sudden ending of what I had believed would be an ideal engagement.

“What’s your name?” inquired the inspector.

“George Ewart,” was my answer. “I only entered the Count’s service yesterday.”

“And yet you told me you had been his chauffeur for a long time!” exclaimed the jeweller’s manager.

“Well,” said the elder of the detectives, “we shall arrest you, at any rate. You must come round to Bow Street, and I warn you that any statement you may make will be taken down and used as evidence against you.”

“Arrest me!” I cried. “Why, I haven’t done anything! I’m perfectly innocent. I had no idea that –”

“Well, you have more than an idea now, haven’t you?” laughed the detective. “But come along; we have no time to lose,” and he asked the manager to order a four-wheeled cab.

I remonstrated in indignation, but to no avail.

“What about the car?” I asked anxiously, as we went outside together and stepped into the cab, the third police-officer, who had been on guard outside, holding open the door, while the constable who had been worrying me about the car stood looking on.

“Diplock, you can drive a motor-car,” exclaimed the inspector, turning to the detective at the cab door. “Just bring that round to Bow Street as quick as you can.”

The constable took in the situation at a glance. He saw that I had been arrested, and asked the detectives if they needed any assistance. But the reply was negative, and with the inspector at my side and the sergeant opposite, we moved off towards Piccadilly, the jeweller’s manager having been requested to attend at Bow Street Police Station in an hour, in order to identify the stolen property. By

that time the charge would be made out, and we should, the inspector said, be up before the magistrate for a remand before the Court rose.

As we drove along Piccadilly, my heart fell within me. All my dreams of those splendid, well-kept roads in the sunny South, of touring to all the gayest places on the Continent, and seeing all that was to be seen, had been shattered at a single blow. And what a blow!

I had awakened to find myself under arrest as the accomplice of one of the most expert jewel-thieves in Europe!

My companions were not communicative. Why should they have been?

Suddenly I became aware of the fact that we had driven a considerable distance. In my agitated state of mind I had taken no notice of our route, and my captors had, it seemed, endeavoured to take my attention off the direction we had taken.

Collecting my scattered senses, however, I recollected that we had crossed one of the bridges over the Thames, and looking out of the window, I found that we were in a long, open road of private houses, each with a short strip of railed-off garden in front – a South London thoroughfare evidently.

“This isn’t the way to Bow Street!” I exclaimed in wonder.

“Well, not exactly the straight way,” grinned the inspector. “A roundabout route, let’s call it.”

I was puzzled. The more so when I recognised a few minutes later that we had come down the Camberwell New Road, and were passing Camberwell Green.

We continued up Denmark Hill until, at the corner where Champion Hill branches off, the inspector called to the cabman to stop, and we all descended, the detective-sergeant paying the fare.

Where were they taking me? I wondered. I asked, but they only laughed, and would vouchsafe no reply.

Together we walked up the quiet, semi-rural Champion Hill, until we reached Green Lane, when at the sharp right angle of the road, as we turned, I saw before me an object which caused me to hold my breath in utter amazement.

The car was standing there, right before me in the lonely suburban road, and in it, seated at the wheel, a man whom I next second recognised as the Count himself! He was evidently awaiting me.

He was wearing a different motor-coat, the car bore a different number, and as I approached I noticed that the coronet and cipher had been obliterated by a dab of paint!

“Come on, Ewart!” cried the Count, jumping down to allow me to take his place at the steering.

I turned to my captors in wonder.

“Yes, away you go, Ewart,” the inspector said, “and good luck to you!”

Without another second’s delay, I sprang upon the car, and while the Count, as he jumped up at my side, shouted good-bye to my captors, I started away towards Lordship Lane and the open country of Surrey.

“Where shall we go?” I inquired breathlessly, utterly amazed at our extraordinary escape.

“Straight on through Sydenham, and then I’ll tell you. The sooner we’re out of this, the better. We’ll run along to Winchester, where I have a little house at Kingsworthy, just outside the city, and where we can lie low comfortably for a bit.”

“But shan’t we be followed by those men?” I asked apprehensively.

“Followed – by them? Oh dear no!” he laughed. “Of course, you don’t understand, Ewart. They all three belong to us. We’ve played a smartish game upon the jeweller, haven’t we? They had to frighten you, of course, because it added a real good touch of truth to the scheme. We ought to be able to slip away across the Channel in a week’s time, at latest. They’ll leave to-night – in search of me!” and he laughed lightly to himself.

“Then they were not detectives?” I exclaimed, utterly staggered by the marvellous ingenuity of the robbery.

“No more than you are, Ewart,” was his reply. “But don’t bother your head about them now. All you’ve got to look after is your driving. Let’s get across to Winchester as quickly as possible. Just here! – sharp to the right and the first to the left takes us into the Guildford road. Then we can move.”

CHAPTER II

A SENTIMENTAL SWINDLE

Count Bindo's retreat near Winchester proved to be a small, rather isolated house near Kingsworthy. It stood in its own grounds, surrounded by a high wall, and at the rear was a very fair garage, that had been specially constructed, with inspection-pit and the various appliances.

The house was rather well furnished, but the only servant was a man, who turned out to be none other than the yellow-haired young fellow who had been introduced to me at the Cecil as "Mr. Henderson."

He no longer wore the light fancy vest and smartly-cut clothes, but was in a somewhat shabby suit of black. He smiled grimly as I recognised him, while his master said —

"Got back all right, Henderson — eh?"

"I arrived only ten minutes ago, sir. All was quiet, wasn't it?"

"Absolutely," replied the Count, who then went upstairs, and I saw him no more that evening.

For nearly a fortnight the car remained in the garage. It now bore a different identification-plate, and to kill time, I idled about, wondering when we should start again. It was a strange *ménage*. Count Bindo was a very easy-going cosmopolitan, who treated both Henderson and myself as intimates, inasmuch as we ate at table with him, and smoked together each evening.

We were simply waiting. The papers were, of course, full of the clever theft from Gilling's, and the police, it appeared, were doing their utmost to track the tricksters — but in vain. The Count, under the name of Mr. Claude Fielding, seemed to be very popular in the neighbourhood, though he discouraged visitors. Indeed, no one came there. He dined, however, at several houses during the second week of his concealment, and seemed to be quite confident of his safety.

At last we left, but not, however, before Sir Charles Blythe had stayed one night with us and made some confidential report to his friend. It being apparent that all was clear, some further alteration was made both in the appearance of the car and in the personal aspect of Count Bindo and myself, after which we started for the Continent by way of Southampton.

We crossed and ran up to Paris, where we stayed at the Ritz. The Count proved a devil-may-care fellow, with plenty of friends in the French capital. When with the latter he treated me as a servant; when alone as a friend.

Whatever the result of the clever piece of trickery in Bond Street, it was quite clear that my employer was in funds, for he spent freely, dined and supped at the expensive restaurants, and thoroughly enjoyed himself with his chums.

We left Paris, and went on the broad good road to Lyons and to Monte Carlo. It was just before Christmas, and the season had, of course, not yet commenced. We stayed at the Hôtel de Paris — the hotel where most men *en garçon* put up — and the car I put into the Garage Meunier.

It was the first time I had seen "Monty," and it attracted me, as it does every man and woman. Here, too, Bindo di Ferraris seemed to have hosts of friends. He dined at the Grand, the Métropole, or the Riviera Palace, and supped each night at Ciro's, indulging in a little mild play in the Rooms in the interval between the two meals.

He did not often go out in the car, but frequently went to Nice and Cannes by train. About a fortnight after our arrival, however, we ran, one bright morning, along the lower road by Beaulieu to Nice — bad, by the way, on account of the sharp corners and electric trams — and called at a small hotel in the Boulevard Gambetta.

The Count apparently had an appointment with a tall, dark-haired, extremely good-looking young French girl, with whom he lunched at a small restaurant, and afterwards he walked for an hour on the Promenade, talking with her very earnestly.

She was not more than nineteen – a smart, very *chic* little Parisienne, quietly dressed in black, but in clothes that bore unmistakably the *cachet* of a first-class dressmaker. They took a turn on the Jetée Promenade, and presently returned to the hotel, when the Count told her to go and get a close hat and thick coat, and he would wait for her.

Then, when she had gone, he told me that we were about to take her over to the Bristol at Beaulieu, that great white hotel that lies so sheltered in the most delightful bay of the whole Riviera.

It was a clear, bright December afternoon. The roads were perfect, though dusty as the Corniche always is, and very soon, with the Count and his lady friend, I swung into the curved drive before the hotel.

“You can go to the garage for an hour or so, Ewart,” my employer said, after they had descended. Therefore I turned the car and went to the huge garage at the rear of the hotel – the garage which every motorist on the Riviera knows so well.

After an hour I re-entered the hotel to look for the Count and receive orders, when I saw, in the great red-carpeted lounge, my employer and the little Parisienne seated with the man whom I knew as Sir Charles Blythe, but who really was one of Count Bindo’s confederates.

We exchanged glances, and his was a meaning one. That some deep and ingenious game was in progress I felt certain, but what it was I had no idea.

Blythe was smartly dressed in a grey flannel suit and white shoes – the costume *de rigueur* on the Riviera – and as he smoked his cigar, easily reclining in the wicker lounge-chair, he presented the complete picture of the English aristocrat “putting in” a month or two for sunshine.

Both men were talking earnestly in French with the dark-eyed little lady, who now and then laughed, or, raising her shoulders, looked from one to the other and protruded her chin in a gesture of uncertainty.

I retired and watched closely. It was quite plain in a few moments that the young lady was entirely devoted to the handsome Bindo. Both manner and glances betrayed it. I saw him look at Blythe, and knew that they were working in accord towards some prearranged end.

Presently a noisy party of American girls who had just returned from “Monty” entered and sat close to them, calling for tea. Therefore the trio rose and went out into the evening dusk. They wished, it seemed, to talk in private, and they did so until, half an hour later, I received orders to bring round the car, and drove them all three back to Nice, which we reached in plenty of time for dinner.

“Now, you will not forget, Gabrielle? You’re sure?” said Bindo in French as he handed her out of the car and shook her hand as he bared his head.

“I have promised, m’sieur,” was her reply in a low, rather musical voice. “I shall not forget.”

And then she bowed to Blythe, ascended the steps, and disappeared into the hotel.

Her quietness and neatness of dress were, to me, attractive. She was a dainty little thing, and yet her plain black dress, so well cut, was really very severe. She had the manner of a lady, sweet and demure. The air of the woman-of-the-world was, somehow, entirely absent.

Well, to confess it, I found myself admiring her very much. She was, I thought, delightful – one of the prettiest, sweetest girls I had ever seen.

Evidently our run to Beaulieu and back was her first experience of motoring, for she laughed with girlish delight when, on an open piece of road here and there, I put on a “move.” And as she disappeared into the hotel she turned and waved her tiny black-gloved hand back at the handsome Bindo.

“Done, my dear chap!” chuckled Blythe in a low voice to his companion as the neat figure disappeared behind the glass swing-doors. “The rest is easy – if we keep up pluck.”

“It’s a big thing, of course; but I’m sanguine enough,” declared my employer. “That little girl is a perfect brick. She’s entirely unsuspecting. Flatter and court a woman, and if she falls in love with you she’ll go any length to serve you!”

“You’re a splendid lover!” declared Sir Charles as he mounted into the car beside the Count, while the latter, laughing lightly, bent to me, saying —

“Back to Monte Carlo, as quick as we can get.”

I slipped along out of Nice, through Villefranche, round Beaulieu, slowing up for the corners, but travelling sharply on the open road, and we were soon back at the Paris.

Having put the car into the garage, I walked round to the hotel, transformed myself from a leather-coated chauffeur into a Monte Carlo lounge, and just before ten o’clock met the Count going across the flower-scented Place to the Rooms.

He was alone, and, recognising me, crossed and said —

“Ewart, let’s walk up through the gardens. I want to have a word with you.”

I turned on my heel, and strolled with him.

“You know what we’ve done to-day – eh? You stand in, so you can just shut your eyes to anything that isn’t exactly in order – understand? There’s a big thing before us – a very big thing – a thing that’s simply dropped from the clouds. You want money, so do I. We all want money. Just keep a still tongue, and obey my orders, and you’ll see that we’ll bring off the biggest *coup* that the Riviera has yet known.”

“I know how to be silent,” I said, though I did not at all like the aspect of affairs.

“Yes, you do. I give you credit for that. One word of this and I go to *durance vile*. Silence, and the whole of us profit and get the wherewithal to live. I often think, Ewart, that the public, as they call it – the British public – are an extraordinary people. They are so confoundedly honest. But, nowadays, there surely isn’t any honesty in life – at least, I’ve never found any. Why, your honest business man who goes to church or chapel each Sunday, and is a model of all the virtues, is, in the City, the very man who’ll drive a hard bargain, pay a starvation wage, and button his pockets against the widow! Who are your successful men in business? Why, for the most part, the men who, by dint of sharp practice or unscrupulousness, have been able to get in front of their competitors. Therefore, after all, am I very much worse than the successful City man? I live on my brains – and I’m happy to say I’ve lived very well – up to the present. But enough of this philosophy,” laughed the easy-going young scoundrel. “I want to give you instructions. You stand in with us, Ewart. Your share of the Gilling affair is to your credit, and you’ll have it before long. At present, we have another little matter in hand – one which requires extremely delicate handling, but will be successful providing Mademoiselle Gabrielle doesn’t change her mind. But women are so often fickle, and the morning brings prudence far too frequently. You’ll see some strange happenings to-morrow or the next day. Keep your eyes and ears closed; that’s all you have to do. You understand – eh?”

“Perfectly,” was my reply, for my curiosity was now thoroughly whetted.

There was a desperate project in the air, and the spirit of adventure had now entered thoroughly into me.

Early next morning I drove the Count back to Nice, where, at a quiet spot beyond the Magnan, he met the pretty Gabrielle clandestinely.

When we drew up to where she was apparently awaiting us, I saw that she was annoyed at my presence.

“Ewart, my chauffeur,” he explained, introducing me, “will say nothing about this meeting. He knows how to be discreet.”

I raised my peaked motor-cap, as our eyes met. I thought I detected a curiously timid glance in them, for in an instant she dropped her gaze.

That she was an intimate friend of the Count was shown by the instructions he gave her.

“You two walk along the Promenade des Anglais, and I’ll meet you at the other end, by the Hôtel Suisse. I’ll take the car myself on to the garage.”

This meant that I was to walk with her a full three-quarters of an hour along the whole of the beautiful sea-front of Nice. Why? I wondered.

“But, Bindo, can’t you come?”

“I’ll meet you outside the Suisse. It’s better to do that,” was his answer. “Go along; you’ll find Ewart a clever fellow. He’ll tell you how to drive a motor-car.”

She laughed lightly, and then, as Bindo mounted into the car again and turned away, we strolled together on the broad asphalt back towards the town.

The morning was delightful, with bright sunshine and blue sea. The sweet-smelling wallflowers were already out, and the big palms waved lazily in the soft breeze.

I quickly found my companion most charming, and envied the Count his acquaintanceship. Was she marked down as a victim? Or was she an accomplice? I could not grasp the motive for being sent to walk the whole length of the Promenade with her. But the Count and his companions were, they admitted, working a “big thing,” and this was part of it, I supposed.

“This is the first time you have been in Nice, eh?” she asked in her pretty broken English as she stopped a moment to open her sunshade.

“Yes,” I answered; “but the Count is an old *habitué*, I believe?”

“Oh yes,” she laughed; “he knows everybody. Last year he was on the Fêtes Committee and one of the judges at the Battle of Flowers.”

And so we gossiped on, walking leisurely, and passing many who, like ourselves, were idling in the winter sunshine.

There was an air of refined ingenuousness about her that was particularly attractive. She walked well, holding her skirt tightly about her as only a true Parisienne can, and displaying a pair of extremely neat ankles. She inquired about me – how long had I been in the Count’s service, how I liked him, and such-like; while I, by careful questioning, discovered that her name was Gabrielle Deleuse, and that she came to the Côte d’Azur each season.

Just as we were opposite the white façade of the Hôtel Westminster we encountered a short, rather stout, middle-aged lady, accompanied by a tall, thin, white-haired gentleman. They were well dressed, the lady wearing splendid sables.

My companion started when she recognised them, instantly lowering her sunshade in order to hide her face. Whether the pair noticed her I cannot say. I only know that, as soon as they passed, she exclaimed, in annoyance —

“I can’t think why Bindo sent you along here with me.”

“I regret, mademoiselle, that my companionship should be distasteful to you,” I replied, mystified.

“No, no, not that, m’sieur,” she cried anxiously. “I do not mean that. You do not know – how can you know what I mean?”

“You probably mean that you ought not to be seen walking here, on the Promenade des Anglais, with a common chauffeur.”

“If you are a chauffeur, m’sieur, you are also a gentleman,” she said, looking straight into my face.

“I thank mademoiselle for her high compliment,” I said, bowing, for really I was in no way averse to a little mild flirtation with such a delightful companion. And yet what, I wondered, was my *rôle* in this latest piece of complicated trickery?

She quickened her pace, glancing anxiously at everyone we met, as though wishing to arrive at the end of our walk.

I was sorry our little chat was drawing to a close. I would like to have had her at my side for a day’s run on the car, and I told her so.

“Perhaps you will take me for a long trip one day – who knows?” she laughed. “Yesterday it was perfect.”

A few moments later we arrived before the Suisse, and from a seat on the Promenade Count Bindo rose to greet us. He had left his motor-coat and cap in the car, and stood before us in his grey

flannels and white soft felt hat – a smart, handsome figure, such as women mostly admire. Indeed, Bindo was essentially a lady's man, for he seemed to have a bowing acquaintance with hundreds of the fair sex.

“Well, Gabrielle, and has Ewart been saying lots of pretty things to you – eh?”

“How unkind of you!” she protested, blushing slightly. “You really ought not to say such things.”

“Well, well, forgive me, won't you?” said the Count quickly; and together we strolled into the town, where we had an *aperatif* at the gay Café de l'Opéra, opposite the public gardens.

Here, however, a curious *contretemps* occurred.

She accidentally upset her glass of “Dubonnet” over her left hand, saturating her white glove so that she was compelled to take it off.

“Why!” ejaculated the Count in sudden amazement, pointing to her uncovered hand. “What does that mean?”

She wore upon her finger a wedding ring!

Her face went crimson. For a moment the pretty girl was too confused to speak.

“Ah!” she cried in a low, earnest tone, as she bent towards him. “Forgive me, Bindo. I – I did not tell you. How could I?”

“You should have told me. It was your duty to tell me. Remember, we are old friends. How long have you been married?”

“Only three weeks. This is my honeymoon.”

“And your husband?”

“Four days ago business took him to Genoa. He is still absent.”

“And, in the meanwhile, you meet me, and are the merry little Gabrielle of the old days – eh?” remarked Bindo, placing both elbows upon the marble-topped table and looking straight into her face.

“Do you blame me, then?” she asked. “I admit that I deceived you, but it was imperative. Our encounter has brought back all the past – those summer days of two years ago when we met at Fontainebleau. Do you still remember them?” Her eyelids trembled.

I saw that, though married, she still regarded the handsome Bindo with a good deal of affection.

“I don't blame you,” was his soft reply. “I suppose it is what anybody else would have done in the circumstances. Do I remember those days, you ask? Why, of course I do. Those picnics in the forest with you, your mother, and your sister Julie were delightful days – days never to return, alas! And so you are really married! Well, you must tell me all about it later. Let's lunch together at the London House.” Then he added reflectively, “Well, this really is a discovery – my little Gabrielle actually married! I had no idea of it.”

She laughed, blushing again.

“No; I don't suppose you had. I was very, very foolish to take off my glove, yet if I had kept up the deception any longer I might perhaps have compromised myself.”

“Was it not – well, a little risky of you to go to Beaulieu with me yesterday?”

“Yes. I was foolish – very foolish, Bindo. I ought not to have met you to-day. I ought to have told you the truth from the very first.”

“Not at all. Even if your husband is away, there is surely no reason why you should not speak to an old friend like myself, is there?”

“Yes; I'm known in Nice, as you are well aware.”

“Known as the prettiest woman who comes on the Riviera,” he declared, taking her hand and examining the wedding ring and the fine circle of diamonds above it. Bindo di Ferraris was an expert in gems.

“Don't be a flatterer,” she protested, with a light laugh. “You've said that, you know, hundreds of times before.”

“I've said only what's the truth, and I'm sure Ewart will bear me out.”

“I do, most certainly. Madame is most charming,” I asserted; and it was undoubtedly my honest opinion. I was, however, disappointed equally with the Count to discover that my dainty divinity in black was married. She was certainly not more than nineteen, and had none of the self-possessed air of the matron about her.

Twice during that conversation I had risen to go, but the Count bade me stay, saying with a laugh —

“There is nothing in this that you may not hear. Madame has deceived us both.”

He treated the situation as a huge joke, yet I detected that the deception had annoyed him. Had the plans he had laid been upset by this unexpected discovery of the marriage? From his demeanour of suppressed chagrin I felt sure they had been.

Suddenly he glanced at his watch, and then taking from his pocket an envelope containing some small square hard object, about two inches long by one inch broad, he said —

“Go to the station and meet the twelve-fifteen from Beaulieu to Cannes. You’ll find Sir Charles Blythe in the train. Give him this from me, and say that I’ll meet him at the Beau Site at Cannes at four o’clock. Have the car ready at two. I’ll come to the garage. You haven’t much time to spare, so take a cab.”

I rose, raised my hat to the dark-eyed little woman, who bowed gracefully and then, mounting into a *fiacre*, drove rapidly up the Avenue de la Gare.

The situation was decidedly interesting. My ideal of that sunny morning had been shattered. Gabrielle of the luminous eyes was already a wife.

I met the train, and discovered Sir Charles looking out for me. I handed him the packet, and gave him the Count’s message. I noticed that he had some light luggage with him, and presumed that he was moving from Beaulieu to Cannes – to the tea-and-tennis Beau Site.

Then, when the train had moved off, I wandered across to a small restaurant opposite the station, and lunched alone, thinking and wondering about the dainty little girl-wife who had so completely fascinated me.

That she was still in love with Bindo was quite clear, yet he, on his part, was distinctly annoyed at being deceived.

At two o’clock, almost punctually, he entered the garage, flung his hat into the car, put on his cap, goggles, and motor-coat, and without a word I drew the forty “Napier” out into the road.

“To Cannes – quick!” he snapped. “Round to the right into the Rue Magnan, then straight along. You saw Blythe?”

“Yes; I gave him the packet and the message.”

“Good! then we haven’t any time to lose. Get a move on her whenever you can.”

On we flew, as fast as the sharp corners would allow, until presently we slipped down the long hill into Cannes, and passing through the town, pulled up at the Beau Site, where we found Sir Charles awaiting us.

The latter had changed his clothes, and was now in a smart blue serge suit, and was idly smoking a cigar as we swept round to the entrance.

The two men met enthusiastically, some words were exchanged in an undertone, and both burst out laughing – a laugh of triumph. Was it at the expense of poor little Gabrielle?

I was left outside to mind the car, and waited for fully an hour and a half. The wind blew bitterly cold at sundown, as it always does on the Riviera in December, and I was glad of my big fur coat.

Whatever was the subject of discussion it was evidently a weighty one. Both men had gone to Blythe’s room and were closeted there.

A little after five Blythe came out, hailed a cab, and drove away into the town; while the Count, whose appearance was so entirely changed that I scarcely knew him, sauntered slowly down the hall after his friend. Blythe had evidently brought him some fresh clothes from Monte Carlo, and he had

used his room as a dressing-room. He looked very much older, and the dark-brown suit he now wore was out of shape and ill-fitting. His hair showed grey over the ears, and he wore gold spectacles.

Instantly I saw that the adventurous scheme was still in progress, so I descended and lit the big head-lights. About a dozen idlers were in the vicinity of the car, and in sight of them all, he struggled into his big motor-coat, and entering, gave me orders to drive into the centre of the town. Then, after we had got clear of the hotel, he said —

“Stop at the station; we have to pick up Blythe.”

Directed by him, we were soon at the spot where Sir Charles awaited us.

“I’ve got it!” he exclaimed in a low voice as he took out a big coat, motor-cap, and goggles. “Quick work, wasn’t it?”

“Excellent!” declared the Count, and then, bending to me, he added, “Round there to the left. The high road is a little farther on – to Marseilles!”

“To Marseilles?” I echoed, surprised that we were going so far as a hundred odd miles, but at that moment I saw the wide highway and turned into it, and with our big search-lights throwing a white radiance on the road, I set the car westward through St. Raphael and Les Arcs. It commenced to rain, with a biting wind, and turned out a very disagreeable night; but, urged on by both men, I went forward at as quick a pace as I dared go on that road, over which I had never before travelled.

At Toulon we pulled up for a drink – for by that time we were all three chilled to the bone, notwithstanding our heavy leather-lined coats. Then we set out again for Marseilles, which we reached just after one o’clock in the morning, drawing up at the Louvre et Paix, which every visitor to the capital of Southern France knows so well. Here we had a good hearty meal of cold meat and bock. Prior, however, to entering Marseilles, we had halted, changed our identification-plate, and made certain alterations, in order more thoroughly to disguise the car.

After supper we all got in again, and Bindo directed me up and down several long streets until we were once more in the suburbs. In a quiet, unfrequented road we pulled up, where from beneath the dark shadow of a wall a man silently approached us.

I could not distinguish his face in the darkness, but from his voice I knew it was none other than Henderson, the servant from Kingsworthy.

“Wait here for half an hour. Then run the car back to that church I pointed out to you as we came along. The one at the top of the Cannebière. Wait for us there. We shall be perhaps an hour, perhaps a little more,” said the Count, taking a stick from the car, and then the trio disappeared into the darkness.

Fully an hour elapsed, until at length, along in the shadow the three crept cautiously, each bearing a heavy bundle, wrapped in black cloth, which they deposited in the car. The contents of the bundles chinked as they were placed upon the floor. What their booty was I knew not.

Next instant, however, all three were in, the door was closed, and I drew off into the dark open road straight before me – out into the driving rain.

The Count, who was at my side, seemed panting and agitated.

“We’ve brought it off all right, Ewart,” he whispered, bending to me a few minutes later. “In behind, there’s over twenty thousand pounds’ worth of jewellery for us to divide later on. We must get into Valence for breakfast, and thence Henderson will take the stuff away by train into Holland.”

“But how – what have you done?” I asked, puzzled.

“I’ll explain in the morning, when we’ve got rid of it all.”

He did explain. Blythe and Henderson both left us at Valence with the booty, while Bindo and myself, in the morning sunshine, went forward at an easy pace along the Lyons road.

“The affair wanted just a little bit of delicate manœuvring,” he explained. “It was an affair of the heart, you see. We knew that the pretty little Gabrielle had married old Lemaire, the well-known jeweller in the Cannebière, in Marseilles, and that she had gone to spend her honeymoon at Nice. Unknown to either, I took a room next theirs at the hotel, and, thanks to the communicating doors

they have in foreign hotels, overheard her husband explain that he must go to Genoa on pressing business. He also left her his safe-keys – the duplicates of those held by his manager in Marseilles – with injunctions to keep them locked in her trunk. I allowed him to be absent a couple of days, then, quite unexpectedly, I met her on the Promenade, pretending, of course, that I was entirely unaware of her marriage with old Lemaire. In case of accident, however, it was necessary that the little woman should be compromised with somebody, and as you were so discreet, I sent you both yesterday morning to idle along the whole length of the Promenade. In the meantime, I nipped back to the hotel, entered Gabrielle's room, obtained the two safe-keys, and took impressions of them in wax. These I put into a tin matchbox and sent them by you to Blythe at the station. Blythe, with his usual foresight, had already engaged a locksmith in Cannes, telling him a little fairy-story of how he had lost his safe-keys, and how his manager in London, who had duplicates, had sent him out impressions. The keys were made to time; Blythe took a cab from the hotel, and got them, rejoined us at Cannes station, and then we went on to Marseilles. There the affair became easier, but more risky. Henderson had already been reconnoitring the shop for a week and had conceived a clever plan by which we got in from the rear, quickly opened the two big safes with the copied keys, and cleared out all old Lemaire's best stock. I'm rather sorry to have treated little Gabrielle so – but, after all, it really doesn't hurt her, for old Lemaire is very rich, and he won't miss twenty thousand pounds as much as we're in need of it. The loving husband is still in Genoa, and poor little Gabrielle is no doubt thinking herself a fool to have so prematurely shown her wedding ring.”

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF A SECRET

This story of a secret is not without its humorous side.

Before entering Paris, on our quick run up from Marseilles after the affair of the jeweller's shop, we had stopped at Melun, beyond Fontainebleau. There, a well-known carriage-builder had been ordered to repaint the car pale blue, with a dead white band. Upon the panels, my employer, the impudent Bindo, had ordered a count's coronet, with the cipher "G. B." beneath, all to be done in the best style and regardless of expense. Then, that same evening, we took the express to the Gare de Lyon, and put up, as before, at the Ritz.

For three weeks, without the car, we had a pleasant time. Usually Count Bindo di Ferraris spent his time with his gay friends, lounging in the evening at Maxim's, or giving costly suppers at the Americain. One lady with whom I often saw him walking in the streets, or sitting in cafés, was, I discovered, known as "Valentine of the Beautiful Eyes," for I recognised her one night on the stage of a music-hall in the Boulevard de Clichy, where she was evidently a great favourite. She was young – not more than twenty, I think – with wonderful big coal-black eyes, a wealth of dark hair worn with a *bandeau*, and a face that was perfectly charming.

She seemed known to Blythe, too, for one evening I saw her sitting with him in the Brasserie Universelle, in the Avenue de l'Opéra – that place where one dines so well and cheaply. She was laughing, and had a *demi-blonde* raised to her lips. So essentially a Parisienne, she was also something of a mystery, for though she often frequented cafés, and went to the Folies Bergères and Olympia, sang at the Marigny, and mixed with a Bohemian crowd of champagne-drinkers, she seemed nevertheless a most decorous little lady. In fact, though I had not spoken to her, she had won my admiration. She was very beautiful, and I – well, I was only a man, and human.

One bright morning, when the car came to Paris, I called for her, at Bindo's orders, at her flat in the Avenue Kléber, where she lived, it appeared, with a prim, sharp-nosed old aunt, of angular appearance, peculiarly French. She soon appeared, dressed in the very latest motor-clothes, with her veil properly fixed, in a manner which showed me instantly that she was a motorist. Besides, she would not enter the car, but got up beside me, wrapped a rug about her skirts in a business-like manner, and gave me the order to move.

"Where to, mademoiselle?" I asked.

"Did not the Count give you instructions?" she asked in her pretty broken English, turning her great dark eyes upon me in surprise. "Why, to Brussels, of course."

"To Brussels!" I ejaculated, for I thought the run was to be only about Paris – to meet Bindo, perhaps.

"Yes. Are you surprised?" she laughed. "It is not far – two hundred kilometres, or so. Surely that is nothing for you?"

"Not at all. Only the Count is at the Ritz. Shall we not call there first?"

"The Count left for Belgium by the seven-fifty train this morning," was her reply. "He has taken our baggage with his, and you will take me by road alone."

I was, of course, nothing loth to spend a few hours with such a charming companion as La Valentine; therefore in the Avenue des Champs Elysées I pulled up, and consulting my road-book, decided to go by way of Arras, Douai, St. Amand, and Ath. Quickly we ran out beyond the fortifications; while, driving in silence, I wondered what this latest manœuvre was to be. This sudden flight from Paris was more than mysterious. It caused me considerable apprehension, for when I had seen the Count in his room at midnight he had made no mention of his intention to leave so early.

At last, out upon the straight highway that ran between lines of high bare poplars, I put on speed, and quickly the cloud of white dust rose behind us. The northerly wind that grey day was biting, and threatened snow; therefore my pretty companion very soon began to feel the cold. I saw her turning up the collar of her cloth motor-coat, and guessed that she had no leather beneath. To do a day's journey in comfort in such weather one must be wind-proof.

"You are cold, mademoiselle," I remarked. "Will you not put on my leather jacket? You'll feel the benefit of it, even though it may not appear very smart." And I pulled up.

With a light merry laugh she consented, and I got out the garment in question, helped her into it over her coat, and though a trifle tight across the chest, she at once declared that it was a most excellent idea. She was, indeed, a merry child of Paris, and allowed me to button the coat, smiling the while at my masculine clumsiness.

Then we continued on our way, and a few moments later were going for all we were worth over the dry, well-kept, level road eastward, towards the Belgian frontier. She laughed and chatted as the hours went by. She had been in London last spring, she told me, and had stayed at the Savoy. The English were so droll, and lacked *cachet*, though the hotel was smart – especially at supper.

"We pass Douai," she remarked presently, after we had run rapidly through many villages and small towns. "I must call for a telegram." And then, somehow, she settled down into a thoughtful silence.

At Arras I pulled up, and got her a glass of hot milk. Then on again, for she declared that she was not hungry, and preferred getting to Brussels than to linger on the road. On the broad highway to Douai we went at the greatest speed that I could get out of the fine six-cylinder, the engines beating beautiful time, and the car running as smoothly as a watch. The clouds of whirling dust became very bad, however, and I was compelled to goggle, while the talc-fronted veil adequately protected my sweet-faced travelling-companion.

At Douai she descended and entered the post-office herself, returning with a telegram and a letter. The latter she handed to me, and I found it was addressed in my name, and had been sent to the Poste-restante.

Tearing it open in surprise, I read the hastily pencilled lines it contained – instructions in the Count's handwriting which were extremely puzzling, not to say disconcerting. The words I read were: —

"After crossing the frontier you will assume the name of Count de Bourbriac, and Valentine will pass as the Countess. A suitable suite of rooms has been taken for you at the Grand Hotel, Brussels, where you will find your luggage on your arrival. Mademoiselle will supply you with funds. I shall be in Brussels, but shall not approach you. – B. DI F."

The pretty Valentine who was to pose as my wife crushed the blue telegram into her coat-pocket, mounted into her seat, wrapped her rug around her, and ordered me to proceed.

I glanced at her, but she was to all appearances quite unconscious of the extraordinary contents of the Count's letter.

We had run fully twenty miles in silence when at last, on ascending a steep hill, I turned to her and said —

"The Count has sent me some very extraordinary instructions, mademoiselle. I am, after passing the frontier, to become Count de Bourbriac, and you are to pass as the Countess!"

"Well?" she asked, arching her well-marked eyebrows. "Is that so very difficult, m'sieur? Are you disinclined to allow me to pass as your wife?"

"Not at all," I replied, smiling. "Only – well – it is somewhat – er – unconventional, is it not?"

"Rather an amusing adventure than otherwise," she laughed. "I shall call you *mon cher* Gaston, and you – well, you will call me your *petite* Liane – Liane de Bourbriac will sound well, will it not?"

"Yes. But why this masquerade?" I inquired. "I confess, mademoiselle, I don't understand it at all."

“Dear Bindo does. Ask him.” Then, after a brief pause, she added, “This is really a rather novel experience;” and she laughed gleefully, as though thoroughly enjoying the adventure.

Without slackening speed I drove on through the short winter afternoon. The faint yellow sunset slowly disappeared behind us, and darkness crept on. With the fading day the cold became intense, and when I stopped to light the head-lamps I got out my cashmere muffler and wrapped it around her throat.

At last we reached the small frontier village, where we pulled up before the Belgian Custom House, paid the deposit upon the car, and obtained the leaden seal. Then, after a liqueur-glass of cognac each at a little café in the vicinity, we set out again upon that long wide road that leads through Ath to Brussels.

A puncture at a place called Leuze caused us a little delay, but the *pseudo* Countess descended and assisted me, even helping me to blow up the new tube, declaring that the exercise would warm her.

For what reason the pretty Valentine was to pass as my wife was, to me, entirely mysterious. That Bindo was engaged in some fresh scheme of fraud was certain, but what it was I racked my brains in vain to discover.

Near Enghien we had several other tyre troubles, for the road had been newly metalled for miles. As every motorist knows, misfortunes never come singly, and in consequence it was already seven o'clock next morning before we entered Brussels by the Porte de Hal, and ran along the fine Boulevard d'Anspach, to the Grand Hotel.

The gilt-laced hall-porter, who was evidently awaiting us, rushed out cap in hand, and I, quickly assuming my *rôle* as Count, helped out the “Countess,” and gave the car over to one of the employés of the hotel garage.

By the manager we were ushered into a fine suite of six rooms on the first floor, overlooking the Boulevard, and treated with all the deference due to persons of highest standing.

At that moment Valentine showed her cleverness by remarking that she had not brought Elise, her maid, as she was to follow by train, and that I would employ the services of one of the hotel valets for the time being. Indeed, so cleverly did she assume the part that she might really have been one of the ancient nobility of France.

I spoke in English. On the Continent just now it is considered rather smart to talk English. One often hears two German or Italian women speaking atrocious English together, in order to air their superior knowledge before strangers. Therefore that I spoke English was not remarked by the manager, who explained that our courier had given him all instructions, and had brought the baggage in advance. The courier was, I could only suppose, the audacious Bindo himself.

That day passed quite merrily. We lunched together, took a drive in the pretty Bois de la Cambre, and after dining, went to the Monnaie to see *Madame Butterfly*. On our return to the hotel I found a note from Bindo, and saying good-night to Valentine I went forth again to keep the appointment he had made in a café in the quiet Chaussée de Charleroi, on the opposite side of the city.

When I entered the little place I found the Count seated at a table with Blythe and Henderson. The two latter were dressed shabbily, while the Count himself was in dark-grey, with a soft felt hat – the perfect counterfeit of the foreign courier.

With enthusiasm I was welcomed into the corner.

“Well?” asked Bindo, with a laugh, “and how do you like your new wife, Ewart?” and the others smiled.

“Charming,” I replied. “But I don't see exactly where the joke comes in.”

“I don't suppose you do, just yet.”

“It's a risky proceeding, isn't it?” I queried.

“Risky! What risk is there in gulling hotel people?” he asked. “If you don't intend to pay the bill it would be quite another matter.”

“But why is the lady to pass as my wife? Why am I the Count de Bourbriac? Why, indeed, are we here at all?”

“That’s our business, my dear Ewart. Leave matters to us. All you’ve got to do is just to play your part well. Appear to be very devoted to La Comtesse, and it’ll be several hundreds into your pocket – perhaps a level thou’ – who knows?”

“A thou’ each – quite,” declared Blythe, a cool, audacious international swindler of the most refined and cunning type.

“But what risk is there?” I inquired, for my companions seemed to be angling after big fish this time, whoever they were.

“None, as far as you are concerned. Be advised by Valentine. She’s as clever a girl as there is in all Europe. She has her eyes and ears open all the time. A lover will come on the scene before long, and you must be jealous – devilish jealous – you understand?”

“A lover? Who? I don’t understand.”

“You’ll see, soon enough. Go back to the hotel – or stay with us to-night, if you prefer it. Only don’t worry yourself over risks. We never take any. Only fools do that. Whatever we do is always a dead certainty before we embark upon the job.”

“Then I’m to understand that some fellow is making love to Valentine – eh?”

“Exactly. To-morrow night you are both invited to a ball at the Belle Vue, in aid of the Hospital St. Jean. You will go, and there the lover will appear. You will withdraw, and allow the little flirtation to proceed. Valentine herself will give you further instructions as the occasion warrants.”

“I confess I don’t half like it. I’m working too much in the dark,” I protested.

“That’s just what we intend. If you knew too much you might betray yourself, for the people we’ve got to deal with have eyes in the backs of their heads,” declared Bindo.

It was five o’clock next morning before I returned to the Grand, but during the hours we smoked together, at various obscure cafés, the trio told me nothing further, though they chaffed me regarding the beauty of the girl who had consented to act the part of my wife, and who, I could only suppose, “stood in” with us.

At noon, surely enough, came a special invitation to the “Comte et Comtesse de Bourbriac” for the great ball that evening at the Hôtel Belle Vue, and at ten o’clock that night Valentine entered our private salon splendidly dressed in a low-cut gown of smoke-grey chiffon covered with sequins. Her hair had been dressed by a maid of the first order, and as she stood pulling on her long gloves she looked superb.

“How do you find me, my dear M’sieur Ewart? Do I look like a comtesse?” she asked, laughing.

“You look perfectly charming, mademoiselle.”

“Liane, if you please,” she said reprovingly, holding up her slim forefinger. “Liane, Comtesse de Bourbriac, Château de Bourbriac, Côtes du Nord!” and her pretty lips parted, showing her even, pearly teeth.

When, half an hour later, we entered the ballroom we found all smart Brussels assembled around a royal prince and his wife who had given their patronage in the cause of charity. The affair was, I saw at a glance, a distinctly society function, for many men from the Ministries were present, and several of the Ambassadors in uniform, together with their staffs, who, wearing their crosses and ribbons, made a brave show, as they do in every ballroom.

We had not been there ten minutes before a tall, good-looking young man in a German cavalry uniform strode up in recognition, and bowing low over Valentine’s outstretched hand, said in French

—
“My dear Countess! How very delighted we are to have you here with us to-night! You will spare me a dance, will you not? May I be introduced to the Count?”

“My husband – Captain von Stolberg, of the German Embassy.”

And we shook hands. Was this fellow the lover? I wondered.

“I met the Countess at Vichy last autumn,” explained the Captain in very good English. “She spoke very often of you. You were away in Scotland, shooting the grouse,” he said.

“Yes – yes,” I replied for want of something better to say.

We both chatted with the young attaché for a few minutes, and then, as a waltz struck up, he begged a dance of my “wife,” and they both whirled down the room. Valentine was a splendid dancer, and as I watched them I wondered what could be the nature of the plot in progress.

I did not come across my pretty fellow-traveller for half an hour, and then I found that the Captain had half filled her programme. Therefore I “lay low,” danced once or twice with uninteresting Belgian matrons, and spent the remainder of the night in the *fumoir*, until I found my “wife” ready to return to the Grand.

When we were back in the salon at the hotel she asked —

“How do you like the Captain, M’sieur Ewart? Is he not – what you call in English – a duck?”

“An over-dressed, swaggering young idiot, I call him,” was my prompt reply.

“And there you are right – quite right, my dear M’sieur Ewart. But you see we all have an eye to business in this affair. He will call to-morrow, because he is extremely fond of me. Oh! if you had heard all his pretty love phrases! I suppose he has learnt them out of a book. They couldn’t be his own. Germans are not romantic – how can they be? But he – ah! he is Adonis in the flesh – with corsets!” And we laughed merrily together.

“He thinks you are fond of him – eh?”

“Why, of course. He made violent love to me at Vichy. But he was not attaché then.”

“And how am I to treat him when he calls to-morrow?”

“As your bosom friend. Give him confidence – the most perfect confidence. Don’t play the jealous husband yet. That will come afterwards. *Bon soir, m’sieur;*” and when I had bowed over her soft little hand, she turned and swept out of the room with a loud *frou-frou* of her silken train.

That night I sat before the fire smoking for a long time. My companions were evidently playing some deep game upon this young German, a game in which neither trouble nor expense was being spared – a game in which the prize was a level thousand pounds apiece all round. I quite appreciated that I had now become an adventurer, but I had done so out of pure love of adventure.

About four o’clock next afternoon the Captain came to take “fif-o’-clock,” as he called it. He clicked his heels together as he bowed over Valentine’s hand, and she smiled upon him even more sweetly than she had smiled at me when I had helped her into my leather motor-coat. She wore a beautiful toilette, one of the latest of Doeillet’s she had explained to me, and really presented a delightfully dainty figure as she sat there pouring out tea, and chatting with the infatuated Captain of Cuirassiers.

I saw quickly that I was not wanted; therefore I excused myself, and went for a stroll along to the Café Métropole, afterwards taking a turn up the Montagne de la Cour. All day I had been on the look-out to see either Bindo or his companions, but they were evidently in hiding.

When I returned, just in time to dress for dinner, I asked Valentine what progress her lover was making, but she merely replied —

“Slow – very slow. But in things of this magnitude one must have patience. We are invited to the Embassy ball in honour of the Crown Prince of Saxony to-morrow night. It will be amusing.”

Next night she dressed in a gown of pale rose chiffon, and we went to the Embassy, where one of the most brilliant balls of the season was in progress, King Leopold himself being present to honour the Crown Prince. Captain Stolberg soon discovered the woman who held him beneath her spell, and I found myself dancing attendance upon the snub-nosed little daughter of a Burgomaster, with whom I waltzed the greater part of the evening.

On our return my “wife” told me with a laugh that matters were progressing well. “Otto,” she added, “is such a fool. Men in love will believe any fiction a woman tells them. Isn’t it really extraordinary?”

“Perhaps I’m one of those men, mademoiselle,” I said, looking straight into her beautiful eyes; for I own she had in a measure fascinated me, even though I knew her to be an adventuress.

She burst out laughing in my face.

“Don’t be absurd, M’sieur Ewart,” she cried. “Fancy you! But you certainly wouldn’t fall in love with me. We are only friends – in the same swim, as I believe you term it in English.”

I was a fool. I admit it. But when one is thrown into the society of a pretty woman even a chauffeur may make speeches he regrets.

So the subject dropped, and with a mock curtsey and a saucy wave of the hand, she went to her room.

On the following day she went out alone at eleven, not returning until six. She offered no explanation of where she had been, and of course it was not for me to question her. As we sat at dinner in our private *salle-à-manger* an hour later she laughed at me across the table, and declared that I was sitting as soberly as though I really were her dutiful husband. And next day she was absent again the whole day, while I amused myself in visiting the Law Courts, the picture galleries, and the general sights of the little capital of which Messieurs the brave Belgians are so proud. On her return she seemed thoughtful, even *triste*. She had been on an excursion somewhere with Otto, but she did not enlighten me regarding its details. I wondered that I had had no word from Bindo. Yet he had told me to obey Valentine’s instructions, and I was now doing so. At dinner she once clenched her little hand involuntarily, and drew a deep breath, showing me that she was indignant at something.

The following morning, as she mentioned that she should be absent all day, I took a run on the car as far as the quaint little town of Dinant, up the Meuse, getting back to dinner.

In the salon she met me, already in her dinner-gown, and told me that she had invited Otto to dine.

“To-night you must show your jealousy. You must leave us together here, in the salon, after dinner, and then a quarter of an hour later return suddenly. I will compromise him. Then you will quarrel violently, order him to leave the hotel, and thus part bad friends.”

I hardly liked to be a party to such a trick, yet the whole plot interested me. I could not see to what material end all this tended.

Well, the gay Captain duly arrived, and we dined together merrily. His eyes were fixed admiringly upon Valentine the whole time, and his conversation was mainly reminiscent of the days at Vichy. The meal over, we passed into the salon, and there I left them. But on re-entering shortly afterwards I found him standing behind the couch, bending over and kissing her. She had her arms clasped around his neck so tightly that he could not disengage himself.

In pretended fury I dashed across to the pair with my fists clenched in jealous anger. What I said I scarce remember. All I know is that I let forth a torrent of reproaches and condemnations, and ended by practically kicking the fellow out of the room, while my “wife” sank upon her knees and implored my forgiveness, which I flatly refused.

The Captain took his kicking in silence, but in his glance was murder, as he turned once and faced me ere he left the room.

“Well, Valentine,” I asked, when he was safely out of hearing, and when she had raised herself from her knees laughing. “And what now?”

“The whole affair is now plain sailing. To-morrow you will take the car to Liège, and there await me outside the Cathedral at midnight on the following night. You will easily find the place. Wait until two o’clock, and if I am not there go on to Cologne, and put up at the Hôtel du Nord.”

“Without baggage?”

“Without baggage. Don’t trouble about anything. Simply go there and wait.”

At midday on the following day the pretty Valentine dressed herself carefully, and went out. Then, an hour later, pretending that I was only going for a short run, I mounted into the car and set out for Liège, wondering what was now to happen.

Next day I idled away, and at a quarter to twelve that night, after a run around the town, I pulled up in the shadow before the Cathedral and stopped the engines. The old square was quite quiet, for the good Liègois retire early, and the only sound was the musical carillon of the bells.

In impatience I waited. The silent night was clear, bright, and frosty, with a myriad shining stars above. Time after time the great clock above me chimed the quarters, until just before two o'clock there came a dark female figure round the corner, walking quickly. In an instant I recognised Valentine, who was dressed in a long travelling coat with fur collar, and a sealskin toque. She was carrying something beneath her coat.

“Quick!” she said breathlessly. “Let us get away. Get ready. Count Bindo is following me!” And ere I could start the engines, my employer, in a long dark overcoat and felt hat, hurriedly approached us, saying —

“Come, let’s be off, Ewart. We’ve a long journey to-night to Cassel. We must go through Aix, and pick up Blythe, and then on by way of Cologne, Arnsburg, and the Hoppeke-Tal.”

Quickly they both put on the extra wraps from the car, entered, and wrapped the rugs about them, while two minutes later, with our big head-lamps shedding a broad white light before us, we turned out upon the wide high road to Verviers.

“It’s all right,” cried Bindo, leaning over to me when we had covered about five miles or so. “Everything went off perfectly.”

“And M’sieur made a most model ‘husband,’ I assure you,” declared the pretty Valentine, with a musical laugh.

“But what have you done?” I inquired, half turning, but afraid to take my eyes from the road.

“Be patient. We’ll explain everything when we get to Cassel,” responded Valentine. And with that I had to be content.

At the station at Aix we found Blythe awaiting us, and when he had taken the seat beside me we set out by way of Duren to Cologne, and on to Cassel, a long and bitterly cold journey.

It was not until we were dining together late the following night in the comfortable old König von Preussen, at Cassel, that Valentine revealed the truth to me.

“When I met the German at Vichy I was passing as Countess de Bourbriac, and pretending that my husband was in Scotland. At first I avoided him,” she said. “But later on I was told, in confidence, that he was a spy in the service of the War Office in Berlin. Then I wrote to Count Bindo, and he advised me to pretend to reciprocate the fellow’s affections, and to keep a watchful eye for the main chance. I have done so – that’s all.”

“But what was this ‘main chance’?” I asked.

“Why, don’t you see, Ewart,” exclaimed the Count, who was standing by, smoking a cigarette. “The fact that he was in the Intelligence Department in Berlin, and that he had been suddenly appointed military attaché at Brussels, made it plain that he was carrying out some important secret-service work in Belgium. On making inquiries I heard that he was constantly travelling in the country, and, speaking French so well, he was passing himself off as a Belgian. Blythe, in the guise of an English tourist, met him in Boxtel two months ago, and satisfied himself as to the character of the task he had undertaken, a risky but most important one. Then we all agreed that, when completed, the secrets he had possessed himself of should become ours, for the Intelligence Department of either France or England would be certain to purchase them for almost any sum we liked to name, so important were they. About two months we waited for the unsuspecting Otto to complete his work, and then suddenly the Countess reappears, accompanied by her husband. And – well, Valentine, you can best tell Ewart the remainder of the story,” added the audacious scoundrel, replacing his cigarette in his mouth.

“As M’sieur Ewart knows, Captain Stolberg was in love with me, and I pretended to be infatuated with him. The other night he kissed me, and my dear ‘Gaston’ saw it, and in just indignation and jealousy promptly kicked him out. Next day I met him, told him that my husband was a perfect

hog, and urged him to take me from him. At first he would not sacrifice his official position as attaché, for he was a poor man. Then we talked money matters, and I suggested that he surely possessed something which he could turn into money sufficient to keep us for a year or two, as I had a small income though not absolutely sufficient for our wants. In fact, I offered, now that he had compromised me in the eyes of my husband, to elope with him. We walked in the Bois de la Cambre for two solid hours that afternoon, until I was footsore, and yet he did not catch on. Then I played another game, declaring that he did not love me sufficiently to make such a sacrifice, and at last taking a dramatic farewell of him. He allowed me to get almost to the gates of the Bois, when he suddenly ran after me, and told me that he had a packet of documents for which he could obtain a large sum abroad. He would take them, and myself, to Berlin by that night's mail, and then we would go on to St. Petersburg, where he could easily dispose of the mysterious papers. So we met at the station at midnight, and by the same train travelled Bindo and M'sieurs Blythe and Henderson. In the carriage he told me where the precious papers were – in a small leathern hand-bag – and this fact I whispered to Blythe when he brushed past me in the corridor. At Pepinster, the junction for Spa, we both descended to obtain some refreshment, and when we returned to our carriage the Captain glanced reassuringly at his bag. Bindo passed along the corridor, and I knew the truth. Then on arrival at Liège I left the Captain smoking, and strolled to the back end of the carriage, waiting for the train to move off. Just as it did so I sprang out upon the platform, and had the satisfaction of seeing, a moment later, the red tail-lights of the Berlin express disappear. I fancy I saw the Captain's head out of the window and heard him shout, but next instant he was lost in the darkness.”

“As soon as you had both got out at Pepinster Blythe slipped into the compartment, broke the lock of the bag with a special tool we call ‘the sniper,’ and had the papers in a moment. These he passed on to me, and travelled past Liège on to Aix.

“Here are the precious plans,” remarked the Count, producing a voluminous packet in a big blue envelope, the seal of which had been broken.

And on opening this he displayed to me a quantity of carefully drawn plans of the whole canal system, and secret defences between the Rhine and the Meuse, the waterway, he explained, which one day Germany, in time of war with England, will require to use in order to get her troops through to the port of Antwerp, and the Belgian coast – the first complete and reliable plans ever obtained of the chain of formidable defences that Belgium keeps a profound secret.

What sum was paid to the pretty Valentine by the French Intelligence Department for them I am not aware. I only know that she one day sent me a beautiful gold cigarette-case inscribed with the words “From Liane de Bourbriac,” and inside it was a draft on the London branch of the Crédit Lyonnais for eight hundred and fifty pounds.

Captain Otto Stolberg has, I hear, been transferred as attaché to another European capital. No doubt his first thoughts were of revenge, but on mature consideration he deemed it best to keep his mouth closed, or he would have betrayed himself as a spy. Bindo had, no doubt, foreseen that. As for Valentine, she actually declares that, after all, she merely rendered a service to her country!

CHAPTER IV

A RUN WITH ROSALIE

Several months had elapsed since my adventure with “Valentine of the Beautiful Eyes.”

From Germany Count Bindo di Ferraris had sent me with the car right across Europe to Florence, where, at Nenci’s, the builders of motor-bodies, I, in obedience to orders, had it repainted a bright yellow – almost the colour of mustard.

When, a fortnight later, it came out of the Nenci works, I hardly recognised it. At Bindo’s orders I had had a second body built, one made of wicker, and lined inside with glazed white leather, which, when fixed upon the chassis, completely transformed it. This second body I sent by rail down to Leghorn, and then drove the car along the Arno valley, down to the sea-shore.

My orders were to go to the Palace Hotel at Leghorn, and there await my master. The hotel in question was, I found, one of the best in Italy, filled by the smartest crowd of men and women, mostly of the Italian aristocracy, who went there for the magnificent sea-bathing. It was a huge white building, with many balconies, and striped awnings, facing the blue Mediterranean.

Valentine had travelled with me as far as Milan, while Bindo had taken train, I believe, to Berlin. At Milan my pretty companion had wished me adieu, and a month later I had taken up my residence in Leghorn, and there led an idle life, wondering when I was to hear next from Bindo. Before we parted he gave me a fairly large sum of money, and told me to remain at Leghorn until he joined me.

Weeks passed. Leghorn in summer is the Brighton of Italy, and everything there was delightfully gay. In the garage of the hotel were many cars, but not one so good as our 40-h.p. “Napier.” The Italians all admired it, and on several occasions I took motoring enthusiasts of both sexes out for short runs along the old Maremma sea-road.

The life I led was one of idleness, punctuated by little flirtations, for by Bindo’s order I was staying at the Palace as owner of the car, and not as a mere chauffeur. The daughters of Italian countesses and marchionesses, though brought up so strictly, are always eager for flirtation, and therefore as I sat alone at my table in the big *salle-à-manger* I caught many a glance from black eyes that danced with merry mischievousness.

Valentine, when she left me in Milan, had said, laughingly —

“I may rejoin you again ere long, M’sieur Ewart, but not as your pretended wife, as at Brussels.”

“I hope not, mademoiselle,” I had answered quite frankly. “That game is a little too dangerous. I might really fall in love with you.”

“With me?” she cried, holding up her small hands in a quick gesture. “What an idea! Oh! la la! *Jamais*.”

I smiled. Mademoiselle was extremely beautiful. No woman I had ever met possessed such wonderful eyes as hers.

“*Au revoir, mon cher*,” she said. “And a pleasant time to you till we meet again.” Then as I mounted on the car and traversed the big Piazza del Duomo, before the Cathedral, she waved her hand to me in farewell.

It was, therefore, without surprise that, sitting in the hall of the hotel about five o’clock one afternoon, I watched her in an elegant white gown descending the stairs, followed by a neat French maid in black.

Quickly I sprang up, bowed, and greeted her in French before a dozen or so of the idling guests.

As we walked across to Pancaldi’s baths she told her new maid to go on in front, and in a few quick words explained.

“I arrived direct from Paris this morning. Here, I am the Princess Helen of Dornbach-Laxenburg of the Ringstrasse, in Vienna, the Schloss Kirchbühel, on the Drave, and Avenue des

Champs Elysées, Paris, a Frenchwoman married to an Austrian. My husband, a man much older than myself, will arrive here in a few days.”

“And the maid?”

“She knows nothing to the contrary. She has been with me only a fortnight. Now you must speak of me in the hotel. Say that you knew me well at Monte Carlo, Rome, Carlsbad, and Aix; that you have stayed at Kirchbühl, and have dined at our house in Paris. Talk of our enormous wealth, and all that, and to-morrow invite me for a run on the car.”

“Very well – Princess,” I laughed. “But what’s the new scheme – eh?”

“At present nothing has been definitely settled. I expect Bindo in a few days, but he will appear to us as a stranger – a complete stranger. At present all I wish to do is to create a sensation – you understand? A foreign princess is always popular at once, and I believe my arrival is already known all over the hotel. But it is you who will help me, M’sieur Ewart. You are the wealthy Englishman who is here with his motor-car, and who is one of my intimate friends – you understand?”

“Well,” I said, with some hesitation. “Don’t you think all this kind of thing very risky? Candidly, I expect before very long we shall all find ourselves under arrest.”

She laughed heartily at my fears.

“But, in any case, you would not suffer. You are simply Ewart, the Count’s chauffeur.”

“I know. But at this moment I’m posing here as the owner of the car, and living upon part of the proceeds of that little transaction in the train between Brussels and the German frontier.”

“Ah, *mon cher!* never recall the past. It is such a very bad habit. Live for the future, and let the past take care of itself. Just remain perfectly confident that you run no risk in this present affair.”

“What’s your maid’s name?”

“Rosalie Barlet.”

“And she knows nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

I watched the neat-waisted figure in black walking a little distance ahead of us. She was typically Parisienne, with Louis XV. shoes, and a glimpse of smart *lingerie* as she lifted her skirt daintily. Rather good-looking she was, too, but with a face as bony as most of the women of Paris, and a complexion slightly sallow.

By this time we had arrived at the entrance to the baths, where, on the asphalt promenade, built out into the clear crystal Mediterranean, all smart Leghorn was sitting in chairs, and gossiping beneath the awnings, as Italians love to do.

Pancaldi’s is essentially Italian. English, French, or German visitors are rarely if ever seen, therefore the advent of the Princess, news of whose arrival had spread from mouth to mouth but an hour ago, caused a perceptible flutter among the lounging idlers of both sexes.

My companion was, I saw, admired on every hand, while surprise was being expressed that I should turn out to be a friend of so very distinguished a person.

In the brilliant sundown, with just a refreshing breath of air coming across the glassy sea, we sat watching the antics of the swimmers and the general merriment in the water. I lit a cigarette and gossiped with her in French, ostentatiously emphasising the words “your Highness” when I addressed her, for the benefit of those passing and re-passing behind us.

For an hour she remained, and then returning to the hotel, dressed, and dined.

As she sat with me at table that night in the handsome restaurant, she looked superb, in pale turquoise chiffon, with a single row of diamonds around her throat. Paste they were, of course, but none of the women who sat with their eyes upon her even dreamed that they were anything but the family jewels of the princely house of Dornbach-Laxenburg. Her manner and bearing were distinctly that of a patrician, and I saw that all in the hotel were dying to know her.

Yes, Her Highness was already a great success.

About ten o'clock she put on a wrap, and, as is usual with the guests at the Palace, at Leghorn, we went for a brief stroll along the promenade.

As soon as we were entirely alone she said —

“To-morrow you will take me for a run on the car, and the next day you will introduce me to one or two of the best people. I will discover who are the proper persons for me to know. I shall say that you are George Ewart, eldest son of a Member of the English Parliament, and well known in London – eh?”

As we were walking in the shadow, through the small leafy public garden lying between the roadway and the sea, we suddenly encountered the figure of a young woman who, in passing, saluted my companion with deep respect. It was Rosalie.

“She’s wandering here alone, and watching for me to re-enter the hotel,” remarked Valentine. “But she need not follow me like this, I think.”

“No,” I said. “Somehow, I don’t like that girl.”

“Why not? She’s all right. What more natural than that she should be on the spot to receive me when I come in?”

“But you don’t want to be spied upon like this, surely!” I said resentfully. “Have you done anything to arouse her suspicions that you are not – well, not exactly what you pretend yourself to be?”

“Nothing whatever; I have been a model of discretion. She never went to the Avenue Kléber. I was staying for two nights at the Grand – under my present title – and after engaging her I told her that the house in the Avenue des Champs Elysées was in the hands of decorators.”

“Well, I don’t half like her following us. She may have overheard something of what we’ve just been saying – who knows?”

“Rubbish! Ah! *mon cher ami*, you are always scenting danger where there is none.”

I merely shrugged my shoulders, but my opinion remained. There was something mysterious about Rosalie – what it was I could not make out.

At ten o'clock next morning Her Highness met me in the big marble hall of the hotel dressed in the smartest motor-clothes, with a silk dust-coat and the latest invention in veils – pale blue with long ends twisted several times around her throat. Even in that costume she looked dainty and extremely charming.

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