

Thorne Guy

The City in the Clouds



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Thorne G.

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C. Ranger Gull

The City in the Clouds

TO SIR GRIFFITH BOYNTON, Bt

My Dear Boynton,

We have had some strange adventures together, though not as strange and exciting as the ones treated of in this story. At any rate, accept it as a souvenir of those gay days before the War, which now seem an age away. Recall a Christmas dinner in the Villa Sanglier by the Belgian Sea, a certain moonlit midnight in the Grand' Place of an ancient, famous city, and above all, the stir and ardors of the Masked Ball at Vieux Bruges. – Haec olim meminisse juvabit!

Yours,

C. R. G.

NOTE By Sir Thomas Kirby, Bt

The details of this prologue to the astounding occurrences which it is my privilege to chronicle, were supplied to me when my work was just completed.

It forms the starting point of the story, which travels straight onwards.

PROLOGUE

Under a gay awning of red and white which covered a portion of the famous roof-garden of the Palacete Mendoza at Rio, reclined Gideon Mendoza Morse, the richest man in Brazil, and – it was said – the third richest man in the world.

He lay in a silken hammock, smoking those little Brazilian cigarettes which are made of fragrant black tobacco and wrapped in maize leaf.

It was afternoon, the hour of the siesta. From where he lay the millionaire could look down upon his marvelous gardens, which surrounded the white palace he had built for himself, peerless in the whole of South America.

The trunks of great trees were draped with lianas bearing brilliantly-colored flowers of every hue. There were lawns edged with myrtle, mimosa, covered with the golden rain of their blossoms, immense palms, lazily waving their fans in the breeze of the afternoon, and set in the lawns were marble pools of clear water from the center of which fountains sprang. There was a continual murmur of insects and flashes of rainbow-colored light as the tiny, brilliant humming birds whirred among the flowers. Great butterflies of blue, silver, and vermilion, butterflies as large as bats, flapped languidly over the ivory ferns, and the air was spicy and scented with vanilla.

Beyond the gardens was the Bay of Rio de Janeiro, the most beautiful bay in all the world, dominated by the great sugar-loaf mountain, the Pão de Azucar, and studded with green islands.

Gideon Morse took a pair of high-powered field-glasses from a table by his side and focused them upon the harbor.

A large white yacht, lying off Governador, swam into the circle, a five-thousand-ton boat driven by turbines and oil fuel, the fastest and largest private yacht in existence.

Gideon Morse gave a little quiet, patient sigh, as if of relief.

He was a man of sixty odd, with a thick thatch of white hair which came down upon his wrinkled forehead in a peak. His face was tanned to the color of an old saddle, his nose beaked like a hawk, and his mouth was a mere lipless cut which might have been made by a knife. A strong jaw completed an impression of abnormal quiet, and long enduring strength. Indeed the whole face was a mask of immobility. Beneath heavy black brows were eyes as dark as night, clear, but without expression. No one looking at them could ever tell what were the thoughts behind. For the rest, he was a man of medium height, thick-set, wiry, and agile.

A brief sketch of Gideon Mendoza Morse's career must be given here. His mother was a Spanish lady of good family, resident in Brazil; his father an American gentleman of Old Virginia, who had settled there after the war between North and South. Morse was born a native of Brazil. His parents left him a moderate fortune which he proceeded to expand with extraordinary rapidity and success. When the last Emperor, Dom Pedro II., was deposed in 1889, Gideon Mendoza Morse was indeed a rich man, and a prominent politician.

He took a great part in establishing the Republic, though in his earlier years he had leaned towards the Monarchy, and he shared in the immense prosperity which followed the change.

His was not a paper fortune. The fluctuations of stocks and shares could hardly influence it. He owned immense coffee plantations in Para, and was practically the monopolist of the sugar regions of Maranhao, but his greatest revenues came from his immense holdings in gold, manganese, and diamond mines. He had married a Spanish lady early in his career and was now a widower with one daughter.

She came up upon the roof-garden now, a tall slip of a girl with an immense quantity of lustrous, dead-black hair, and a voice as clear as an evening bell.

"Father," she said in English – she had been at school at Eastbourne, and had no trace of Spanish accent – "what is the exact hour that we sail?"

Morse slipped out of the hammock and took her arm in his.

"At ten to-night, Juanita," he replied, patting her hand. "Are you glad, then?"

"Glad! I cannot tell you how much."

"To leave all this" – he waved his hand at what was probably the most perfect prospect earth has to offer – "to leave all this for the fogs and gloom of London?"

"I don't mind the fogs, which, by the way, are tremendously exaggerated. Of course I love Rio, father, but I long to be in London, the heart of the world, where all the nicest people are and where a girl has freedom such as she never has here."

"Freedom!" he said. "Ah!" – and was about to continue when a native Indian servant in a uniform of white linen with gold shoulder knots, advanced towards them with a salver upon which were two calling cards.

Morse took the cards. A slight gleam came into his eyes and passed, leaving his face as impassive as before.

"You must run away, darling," he said to Juanita. "I have to see some gentlemen. Are all your preparations made?"

"Everything. All the luggage has gone down to the harbor except just a couple of hand-bags which my maid has."

"Very well then, we will have an early meal and leave at dusk."

The girl flitted away. Morse gave some directions to the servant, and, shortly after, the rattle of a lift was heard from a little cupola in one corner of the roof.

Two men stepped out and came among the palms and flowers to the millionaire.

One was a thin, dried-up, elderly man with a white mustache – the Marquis da Silva; his companion, powerful, black-bearded and yellow-faced, obviously with a touch of the half-caste in him – Don Zorilla y Toro.

"Pray be seated," said Morse, with a low bow, though he did not offer to shake hands with either of them. "May I ask to what I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"It is very simple, señor," said the marquis, "and you must have expected a visit sooner or later."

The old man, speaking in the pure Spanish of Castille, trembled a little as he sat at a round table of red lima-wood encrusted with mother-of-pearl.

"We are, in short," said the burly Zorilla, "ambassadors."

They were now all seated round the table, under the shade of a palm whose great fans clicked against each other in the evening breeze which began to blow from the cool heights of the sugar-loaf mountain. The face of Gideon Morse was inscrutable as ever. It might have been a mask of leather; but the old Spanish nobleman was obviously ill at ease, and the bulging eyes of the well-dressed half-caste, with his diamond cuff links and ring, spoke of suppressed and furious passion.

In a moment tragedy had come into this paradise.

"Yes, we are ambassadors," echoed the marquis with a certain eagerness.

"A grand and full-sounding word," said Gideon Morse. "I may be permitted to ask – from whom?"

Quick as lightning Don Zorilla held out his hand over the table, opened it, and closed it again. There was a little glint of light from his palm as he did so.

Morse leant back in his chair and smiled. Then he lit one of his pungent cigarettes.

"So! Are you playing with those toys still, gentlemen?"

The marquis flushed. "Mendoza," he said, "this is idle trifling. You must know very well – "

"I know nothing, I want to know nothing."

The marquis said two words in a low voice, and then the heads of the three men drew very close together. For two or three minutes there was a whispering like the rustle of the dry grasses of the Brazilian campos, and then Morse drew back his chair with a harsh noise.

"Enough!" he said. "You are madmen, dreamers! You come to me after all these years, to ask me to be a party in destroying the peace and prosperity our great country enjoys and has enjoyed for more than thirty years. You ask me, twice President of the Republic which I helped to make – "

Zorilla lifted his hand and the great Brazilian diamonds in his rings shot out baleful fires.

"Enough, señor," he said in a thick voice. "That is your unalterable decision?"

Morse laughed contemptuously. "While Azucar stands," he said, "I stand where I am, and nothing will change me."

"You stand where you are, Mendoza," said the marquis with a new gravity and dignity in his voice, "but I assure you it will not be for long. You have two years to run, that's true. But at the end of them be sure, oh, be very sure, that the end will come, and swiftly."

Morse rose.

"I will endeavor to put the remaining two years to good use," he said, with grim and almost contemptuous mockery.

"Do so, señor," said Zorilla, "but remember that in our forests the traveler may press onward for days and weeks, and all the time in the tree-tops, the silent jaguar is following, following, waiting – "

"I have traveled a good deal in our forests in my youth, Don Zorilla. I have even slain many jaguars."

The three men looked at each other steadily and long, then the two visitors bowed and turned to go. But, just as they were moving off towards the lift dome, Zorilla turned back and held out a card to Don Mendoza. It was an ordinary visiting card with a name engraved upon it.

Morse took it, looked at the name, and then stood still and frozen in his tracks.

He did not move until the whirr of the bell and the clang of the gate told him the roof-garden was his own again.

Then he staggered to the table like a drunken man, sank into a chair and bowed his head upon the gleaming pearl and crimson.

CHAPTER ONE

When my father died and left me his large fortune I also inherited that very successful London newspaper, the *Evening Special*. I decided to edit it myself.

To be six-and-twenty, to live at high pressure, to go everywhere, see everything, know everybody, and above all to have Power, this is success in life. I would not have changed my position in London for the Premiership.

On the evening of Lady Brentford's dance, I dined alone in my Piccadilly flat. There was nothing much doing in the way of politics and I had been playing golf at Sandown the whole of the day. I hadn't seen the paper until now, when Preston brought it in – the last edition – and I opened it over my coffee.

There were, and are, few things that I love better than the *Evening Special*. I claim for it that it is the most up-to-date evening newspaper in England, bright and readable from the word "go," and singularly accurate in all its information.

There was a long time yet before I need dress, and I sat by the balcony, with the mellow noises of Piccadilly on an early summer's evening pouring into the room, and read the rag through.

On one of the last pages, where the society gossip and women's chat appear, I saw something that interested me. Old Miss Easey, who writes the society news, was one of my most valued contributors. With her hooked nose, her beady black eyes and marvelous coffee-colored wig, she went everywhere by right of birth, for she was connected with half the peerage. Her news was accurate and real. She faked nothing, because she got all her stuff from the inside, and this was known all over London. She was well worth the thousand a year I paid her, and the daily column signed "Vera" was an accepted fact in the life of London society.

To-day the old girl had let herself go. It seemed – of course there had been paragraphs in the papers for some days – that the great Brazilian millionaire, Gideon Mendoza Morse, had exploded in society like a bomb. He had taken a whole floor of the Ritz Hotel, and it was rumored that he was going to buy an empty palace in Park Lane and astonish town. Every one was saying that he had wealth beyond the dreams of avarice – which is, of course, awful rot when you come to think of it, because there are no bounds whatever to avarice.

"Vera" was not expatiating upon the Brazil Nut's wealth, but upon his only daughter. It was put in a veiled way, and that with well-bred reticence for which we paid Miss Easey a thousand a year – no cheap gush, thank you, in the *Evening Special* – that Miss Morse was a young girl of such superlative loveliness that there was not a débutante to come within a mile of her. I gathered, also, that the young lady's first very public appearance was to be made to-night at the house of the Marchioness of Brentford in Belgrave Square.

The news certainly gave an additional interest to the prospect of the evening, and I wondered what the girl was really like.

I had motored up from Sandown and sat down to dinner as I was. Perhaps I was rather tired, but as I sat by the window and dusk came over the Green Park while all the lights of Piccadilly were lit, I sank into a sort of doze, assisted by the deep, organ-like hum of the everlasting traffic.

Yes, I must really have fallen asleep, for I was certainly in the middle of some wild and alluring adventure, when I woke with a start to find all the lights in my dining-room turned on, Preston standing by the door, and Pat Moore shaking me violently by the shoulder.

"Confound you, don't do that!" I shouted, jumping up – Pat Moore was six feet two in height, and the heaviest man in the Irish Guards. "Hallo, what are you doing here?"

"It's myself that has looked in for a drink," he said. "I thought we'd go to the ball together."

I was a little more awake by this time and saw that Pat was in full evening kit, and very grand he looked. He was supposed to be the handsomest man in London, on the large swaggering side, and

certainly, whether in uniform or mufti, he was a very splendid figure. Nevertheless, he had no more idea of side than a spaniel dog, and he was just about as kind and faithful as the sportsman's friend. He possessed a certain downright honesty and common sense that endeared him to every one, though his own mother would hardly have called him clever. At an earlier period of our lives he had caned me a good deal at Eton, and it was difficult to get out of his dear, stupid old head that he had not some vague rights over me in that direction still.

"Now, Tom," he said, pouring himself out a mighty drink – for his head was cast-steel, "you go and make yourself look pretty and then come back here, 'cos I have something to tell you."

I went obediently away, bathed, shaved, was assisted by Preston into evening clothes and returned to the dining-room about a quarter to ten.

"What have you got to tell me, Pat?"

He thought for a moment. I believe that he always had to summon his words out of some cupboard in his brain – "Tom, I've seen the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Then leg it, Pat, hare away from temptation, or she'll have you!" – Pat had ten thousand a year and had been a dead mark for all sorts of schemes for the last two years.

"Don't be a silly ass, Tom, you don't know what you're talking about. This is serious."

"I don't know who *you're* talking about."

He was heaving himself out of his chair to explain, when the door opened and Preston announced "Lord Arthur Winstanley."

"Hallo, what brings you here?" I said.

"Thought I'd come in for a drink. Saw you were going to mother's to-night, Tom, thought we might as well be going together. Hallo, Pat. You coming along too?"

"Thought of doin' so," said Captain Moore.

Arthur threw himself into a chair – slim, clean shaved, with curly black hair and dark blue eyes, his clean-cut, clever face alive with youth and vitality.

"Tom," he said to me, "to-night you are going to see the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Hallo!" Pat shouted, "you've seen her too?"

"Seen her? Of course I have. Mother's giving the dance for her to-night."

Then I understood.

"Oh, Miss Morse?" I said.

"Jooaneeta!" said Pat in his rich, Irish voice.

"Generally pronounced 'Whanita' soft – like tropic moonlight, my old geranium," said Arthur.

"Sure, your pronunciation won't do at all, at all."

Pat twirled the end of his huge mustache, then he heaved a cushion. "You and your talk!" he said.

"Well, I've not seen her," I remarked, "but I'm quite willing to take the word of two experts. Isn't it about time we went?"

Winstanley produced a platinum watch no thicker than a half-crown from the pocket of his white waistcoat.

"Well, perhaps it might be," he said. "We can take up strategic positions, and get there before the crush. Although I don't live at home, I've got a snug little couple of rooms they keep for me, and mother will see that –"

He smiled to himself.

"Now look here," I said, "fair does! You are already half-way up the course with the fair Brazilian, but do let your pals have a chance. I suppose all the world will be round her, but do see that Pat and I have a small look in."

"Of course I will. We've done too much hunting together, we three. I tell you, Tom, you will be bowled clean over at the very sight of her. There never was such a girl since Cleopatra was a flapper. Now, send old Preston for a taxi and we'll get to cover side."

It was about half-past ten as we entered the hospitable portals of Brentford House in Belgrave Square. There was a tremendous crush; I never remember seeing so many people at Lady Brentford's, for, though everybody went to her parties, they were never overcrowded, owing to the immense size of the famous old London House.

Pat Moore and I kept close to Arthur, who, as a son of the house, knew his way a great deal better than we did, and we soon found ourselves at the top of the staircase and close to the alcove where Lady Brentford and her daughter, Lady Joan Winstanley, were standing, while I saw the bald head of the marquis, who was as innocent of hair as a new laid egg, shining in the background.

Dear Lady Brentford greeted Pat – who had formed a sort of battering-ram for us on the staircase – with marked kindness. It was thought that she saw in him a prospective husband for Arthur's sister. After greeting his mother and asking a question, Arthur went off at once and my turn came.

"My dear Sir Thomas, I am so glad to see you. Are you like all the other young men in London to-night?"

"I sincerely hope not," I told her, though I knew very well what she meant.

We were old friends, and she was not deceived for a moment. "I understand you perfectly, you wicked boy."

"Well then, Lady Brentford" – I lowered my voice – "has she come?"

Her eyes gleamed.

"Not yet, but I am expecting her every moment. Now, I am going to be kind to you. You wait here, just a little behind me, and I'll introduce you at once."

I hope I looked as grateful as I felt, for I confess my curiosity was greatly aroused, and besides it would be such a score over Pat and Arthur. There's something in power after all! Had I been merely Tom Kirby whose father had received a baronetcy for, say, soap, Lady Brentford would not have been nearly as nice, even though Arthur and I had been bosom friends at Oxford. But you see I was the *Evening Special* and that meant much, especially in a political house like this.

I waited, and talked a little with Lord Brentford, that sterling, old-fashioned member of more Cabinets than one would care to count. He said "hum," and then "ha," and then "hum" again, which was the extent of his conversation on every occasion except that of a specially good dinner, when he added "ho."

And then, I suppose it was about eleven o'clock, there was a stir and a movement all down the grand staircase. Except that the band in the ballroom did not burst into the strains of the National Anthem, it was exactly like the arrival of royalty. Coming up the staircase was a thick-set man of medium height with white hair, a brown face, and good features, but of such immobility that they might have been carved in sandstone. By his side, very simply dressed, and wearing no ornament but one rope of great pearls, came Juanita Morse.

If I live for a thousand years I shall never forget that first vision of her. I have seen all the beauties of London, Paris and Rome, danced with many of them, spoken at least to the majority, but never before or since have I seen such luminous and compelling loveliness. It is almost impossible for me to describe her, a presumption indeed, when so many abler pens than mine have hymned her praises. The poets of two Continents have lain their garlands of song at her little feet. She has been the theme of innumerable articles in the Press, the heroine of a dozen novels. And yet I must give some impression of her, I suppose. She was slender and tall, though not too tall. Her hair, which must have fallen to her feet and enveloped her like a cloud of night, was dead black. But it was not the coarse, lifeless black of so many women of the Latin race. It was as fine as spun silk, gleaming, vital and full of electricity – a live thing of itself, so it seemed to me. Her father's eyes were unpolished jet, but hers were of a deep blue-black, large, lustrous, and of unfathomable depth. They were never the same for two moments together and the light within them was forever new. But what's the good

of a catalogue – after all, it expresses very little. There was not a feature of her face, not a line of her form that was not perfect, and her smile was the last real enchantment left in the modern world...

In two minutes, I, I – Tom Kirby, was walking towards the ballroom with her hand upon my arm. How all the women stared, nodded and whispered! how all the men hated me! I caught sight of Pat and Arthur, and, lo! their faces were as those who lie in wait, who grin like dogs and run about the city – as I told them some hours afterwards.

Thank heavens that all the vulgar modern dances were not only perishing of their own inanity at that time, but had never been allowed in Brentford House. The best band in town had begun a delightful waltz, and we slipped into it together as if passing through curtains into dreamland.

I don't remember that we said very much to each other – certainly I was not going to ask her how she liked London and so forth. She did not seem the sort of girl to appreciate the farthing change of talk.

But, somehow or other, we conversed with our eyes. I was as certain of this as of the fact that I was dancing with her, and, long after, in a situation and moment of the most deadly peril, she confessed it to me.

Towards the end of the dance, when the flutes and violins glided into the last movement, I said this – "Miss Morse, I know that I am doing the most dreadful thing. All London wants to dance with you to-night, and I have had the great privilege of being the very first. But could you, do you think you possibly could, give me just one more dance later on in the evening?"

"Of course I will, Sir Thomas," she said, and her voice was as clear as an evening bell. "I think you dance beautifully."

We circled round the room for the last time and then I resigned her to Lady Brentford, who was looking after the girl, with an eloquent look of thanks. Immediately she became swallowed up by a regiment of black coats, and I saw her no more for a time.

I am extremely fond of dancing, but I sought out no other damsel now, but went to a buffet and drank a long glass of iced hock-cup – as if that was going to quench the fever within! Then I found my way to a lonely spot in one of the conservatories and sat thinking hard. I will say nothing as to the nature of my reverie – it may very easily be guessed. But from time to time I concentrated all my powers in living over again the divine moments of that dance. I was finally, irrevocably, passionately in love. It seems the maddest thing to say for a hard-headed, level-minded man of the world such as I was. I suppose I had known her for just about quarter of an hour, and yet I knew that there would never be any other woman for me and that when my days were at an end her name would be the only one upon my lips.

A little later on in the evening, before my second and final dance with his daughter, I had the opportunity of a talk with Mr. Morse himself. I say at once, and I am not letting myself be colored by what happened afterwards and the intimate relations into which I was thrown with him, I say at once that I found him charming. There was an immense force and power about him, but this was not obtruded upon one, as I have known it to be in the case of other extremely wealthy and successful men, both English and American. This super-millionaire had all the graces of speech and courtesy of manner of the Spanish great gentleman. And curiously enough, he took to me. I was quite certain of that. Whether he wanted to use me in any way – and nine-tenths of the people I met generally did – I could not have said. At any rate I determined that if he did I was very much at his disposal.

We watched Miss Morse dancing with old Pat, who, for all his sixteen stone, was as light as a cat on his feet.

"Do you know who that is dancing with Juanita?" Morse asked simply.

"Oh, yes. Captain Moore, Patrick Moore, of the Irish Guards. He is one of my most intimate friends and one of the best fellows in the world."

Then Morse said a curious thing, which I could not fathom just then. He said it half to me and half to himself in a curiously, thoughtful way.

" – A fine fellow to have with one in an emergency."

Well, of course, I didn't like to tell him that dear old Pat, while he had common sense enough to come indoors while it rained, had no mind – in the real sense of that word – whatever. It did not occur to me for a moment that Gideon Morse might have been speaking simply of Pat's *physical* qualities.

Pat's face was marvelous to look upon. It was one great, glowing mass of happiness. He did not take the least trouble to disguise his ecstasy, and if ever a man showed he was in paradise, Pat Moore did then. It was different when Juanita danced with Arthur. His handsome, clever face was not in repose for a moment. It was sharpened by eagerness, and he talked incessantly, provoking answering smiles and flashes from the girl's wonderful eyes. My heart sank. I knew how Arthur Winstanley could talk when he chose – as all England was to learn two or three years later when he entered the House of Commons.

"And that man?" – the low, resonant voice of Mr. Morse was again in my ears, for I had been neglecting my duties to all the girls I knew, most dreadfully, and remained with him for the space of three dances.

"Oh, that's another friend of mine, Lord Arthur Winstanley. He is a son of the house, the second son. Charles, the heir, is with his regiment in India."

Mr. Morse thanked me and soon afterwards two very great people indeed came up, and I melted away. I went to my seat in the conservatory again. I did not care how rude it was, how I was betraying Lady Brentford's hospitality – being known as a dancing man and expected to dance – but I was determined not to touch any other girl that night until Juanita Morse and I had danced again together.

It came and passed. Afterwards I slipped downstairs, got my hat and overcoat and left the house, without, I think, being observed by any one.

The night air was fresh and sweet and I determined to walk before I reached home, for my mind was in a whirl of sensation. I turned into the great, dark cañon of Victoria Street, which was almost empty, and heard my footsteps echoing up the cliff-like sides of the houses. I caught a glimpse of the moon silvering the Campanile of Westminster Cathedral, and when I reached the Abbey, it and the Houses of Parliament were washed in soft and brilliant light. And yet, somehow, I could not think. I could not survey, with my usual cool detachment, the situation which had suddenly risen in my life. I remember that the predominant feeling was a wish that I had never gone to Lady Brentford's, that I had never seen or spoken to Juanita Morse. What was the use after all? She was as much above my hopes as a Princess of the Royal House, and yet I knew that without her I should never be really happy again.

It was in a sort of desperation that I hurried up Parliament Street and through Trafalgar Square, feeling that I was a fool and mad, wanting to hide my shame in my own quiet rooms, where at any rate I should be alone.

I opened the door with my Yale key and ran lightly up the stairs to the flat on the first floor which I occupied. As I went into the lounge hall and took off my overcoat, Preston, whom I had not told to wait up for me, came from the passage leading to the servants' quarters carrying a tray.

"I shan't want any supper, thank you, Preston," I said in surprise.

"Thank you, sir, very good sir," he replied, "but his lordship and Captain Moore are here and have just asked for something."

My first emotion was one of unutterable surprise, and then I scowled and felt inclined to swear. What on earth were those two doing here at this time of night, just when I would have given almost anything to be left alone?

I hesitated for a moment and then walked into the smoking-room.

Pat was seated in a lounge chair smoking a cigar. Arthur was pacing up and down the carpet. Neither of them appeared to have been talking, and, as I came in, they looked at me curiously, and I saw that their faces in some subtle way were changed.

They were my best friends, for years we had been accustomed to treat each other's quarters and possessions as if they were our own, and yet now I felt as if they were intruding strangers, though I tried hard to be genial.

"Hallo," I said in a voice that cracked upon the word, "didn't expect to see you again. Anything special?"

Preston was putting his tray of sandwiches and deviled biscuits on the table, so we could not say much, but directly he had left the room old Pat got up from his chair. He held out his hand, pointing at me with a trembling finger. His face was purple.

"You, you danced twice with her," he said.

So that was it! I grew ice-cold in a moment.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand to what you refer," I said, "but what the devil is that to you?"

"Pat, don't be a fool!" Arthur whipped out, though the look he gave me, which he tried to disguise, was not a friendly one.

"Fool is hardly the word," I said. "Kindly explain yourself, Moore, and forget that you are my guest if you like – I don't mind."

The huge man trembled. Then he turned away with a sort of snarl, snatched his handkerchief from his cuff and mopped his face.

I sat down and lit a cigarette.

"Can you explain this, Arthur?" I asked.

He sat down too, and began to tap with his shoe upon the carpet.

"Oh, I don't know," he said sullenly. "You were the only man in the room, Kirby, to whom she gave more than one dance."

"That's as may be. I suppose you don't propose to expostulate with the lady herself? And, by the way, I always thought that it wasn't exactly form to discuss these things in the way you appear to have been doing."

That got Arthur on the mark. His face grew very white and he sat perfectly still.

Then Pat heaved himself round.

"She's not for you, at any rate," he said. "They will marry her to a duke or one of the Princes."

Suddenly the humor of all this struck me forcibly and I lay back in my chair and burst into a peal of laughter.

"That's quite likely," I said, "though I don't think, what I have seen of Mr. Morse, that he is likely to have ambitions that way, and I am quite certain that Miss Morse will marry the man she wants to marry and no one else, whether he is a thoroughbred or hairy at the heels. I think all this talk on your part – remember you began it, Pat – is perfectly disgraceful, to say nothing of its utter childishness. As for your saying that a young lady whom I have met for the first time to-night and danced with twice, is not for me, it's a damnable piece of impertinence that you should dare to insinuate that I look upon her in the way you suggest."

I jumped up from my seat and knew that I was dominating them all right.

"Supposing what you say is true, I admit that my chance isn't worth two penn'orth o' cold gin, though it's every bit as good, and probably better, than yours, all things considered. You are certainly a fine figure of a man."

I was furious, mad, keen to provoke him to an outburst. The calculated insult was patent enough.

I thought he was about to go for me, and I stood ready, when "What about me?" came in a dry crackling voice from Arthur.

"Oh, I should put you and me about level," I said, "with the courtesy title as a little extra weight. It is a pity you should be the second son."

"Damn you, Kirby!" he burst out, blazing with anger.

I lifted up my hand and looked at both of them.

"I came in here," I said, "to my own house and find my two best friends, that I thought, waiting for me. A few hours ago I should have thought such a scene as this utterly impossible. I will ask you both to remember that it has not been provoked by me in any way, and that directly I came in you turned on me in the most atrocious and ill-bred way. Of your idea of the value of friendship I say nothing at all – it is obvious I must say nothing about that. Now you have forced the pace I will say this. To marry that young lady – I don't like to speak her name even – is about as difficult as to dive in a cork jacket or keep a smelt in a net. But I mean to try. I mean to use every ounce of weight I've got. I shall almost certainly fail, but now you know."

"Since you have said that," Pat broke in, "handicaps be damned! I'm a starter for the same stakes, and it's hell for leather I'll ride, and it's meself that says it, Tom."

Arthur Winstanley spoke last.

"I'm a fellow of a good many ambitions," he said quietly, "though I've never bothered you chaps with them. Now they are all consolidated into one."

Then we all stood and looked at each other, the cards on the table, and in the faces of the other two at least there was uneasiness and shame.

Just at that moment a funny thing happened. Preston had brought in an ice pail full of bottles of soda water. The heat of the night, or something, caused one of the corks to break its confining wire and go off with a startling report, while a fountain of foam drenched the sandwiches.

"Me kingdom for a drink!" said Pat. "Oh, the sweet, blessed, gurgling sound!" and striding to the table he mixed a gargantuan peg.

Arthur and I met behind Pat's back and he held out his hand to me, biting his lower lip.

"We've behaved abominably, old soul," he said.

The big guardsman turned round and raised his glass on high.

"Here's to the sweetest and most lovely lady in the world, bedad!" he shouted, accentuating his Irish brogue. "May the best man win her, fair fight, and no favors, and may the Queen of Heaven and all the saints watch over the little darlint and guide her choice aright!"

So all our midnight madness passed like a fleeting cloud. An extraordinary accession of high spirits came to us as we pledged the dark-haired maiden from Brazil. And it was Pat, dear old Pat, who welded us together in a league of chivalry against which nothing was ever to prevail.

"Tom," he said, "Arthur – we are all like brothers, we always have been. Let there be no change in that, now or ever. I have something to propose."

"Go on, Pat," said Arthur.

"Sure then, since we all love the same lady, that ought to bind us more together than anything else has ever done. But since we cannot all marry her, let us agree, in the first place, that no outsider ever shall."

"Hurrah!" said Arthur – I could see that he was fearfully excited – throwing his glass into the fireplace with a crash.

"I am with you, Pat!" I cried. "It's to be one of us three, and we are in league against all the other men in London. And now the question is –"

"Hear my plan. This very night we'll draw lots as to which of us shall have the first chance. The man who wins shall have the entire support of the other two in every possible way. If she accepts him, then the fates have spoken. If she doesn't, then the next man in the draw shall have his chance, and the rejected suitor and the poor third man shall help *him* to the utmost of their ability. Is that clear?"

He stopped and looked down at us from his great height with a smiling and anxious face.

Dear old Pat, I shall always love to think that the proposal came from him, straight, clean and true, as he always was.

"So be it," Arthur echoed solemnly. "The league shall begin this very night. Do either of you chaps know any Spanish, by the way?"

We shook our heads.

"Well, I do," he continued, "and we'll form ourselves into a Santa Hermandad – 'The Holy Brotherhood' – it was the name of an old Spanish Society of chivalry ever so many years ago."

"Santa Hermandad!" Pat shouted, "and now to shake hands on it. I think we'll not be needing to take an oath."

Our three hands were clasped together in an instant and we knew that, come what might, each would be true to that bond.

"And now," I said, "to draw lots as to who shall be the first to try his chance. How shall we settle it?"

"There's no fairer way," said Arthur, "than the throw of a die. Have you any poker dice, Tom?"

"Yes, I have a couple of sets somewhere."

"Very well then, we'll take a single one and the first man that throws Queen is the winner."

I found the dice and the leather cup and dropped a single one into it. Poker dice, for the benefit of the uninitiate, have the Queen on one side in blue, like the Queen in a pack of cards, the King in red and the Knave in black. On two other faces, the nine and the ten.

"Who will throw first?" said Pat.

"You throw," I said.

There was a rattle, and nine fell upon the table. I nodded to Arthur, who picked up the little ivory square, waved the cup in the air, and threw – an ace.

My turn came. I threw an ace also, and Arthur and I looked at Pat with sinking hearts.

He threw a King. I don't want another five minutes like that again. We threw and threw and threw and never once did the Queen turn up. At last Arthur said:

"Look here, you fellows, I can't stand this much longer, it's playing the devil with my nerves. Let's have one more throw and if Her Majesty doesn't turn up, let's decide it by values. Ace, highest, King, Queen and so on. Tom, your turn."

I took up the box, rattled the cube within it for a long time and then dropped it flat upon the table.

I had thrown Queen.

CHAPTER TWO

About a fortnight after the memorable scene in my flat when the league came into being, I was sitting in my editorial room at the offices of the *Evening Special*.

I had met Juanita once at a large dinner party and exchanged half a dozen words with her – that was all. My head was full of plans, I was trying to map out a social campaign that would give me the opportunity I longed for, but as yet everything was tentative and incomplete. The exciting business of journalism, the keeping of one's thumb upon the public pulse, the directing of public thought into this or that channel, was most welcome at a time like this, and I threw myself into it with avidity.

I had just returned from lunch, and the first editions of the paper were successfully afloat, when Williams, my acting editor, and Miss Dewsbury, my private secretary, came into my room.

"Things are very quiet indeed," said Williams.

"But the circulation is all right?"

"Never better. Still, I am thinking of our reputation, Sir Thomas."

I knew what he meant. We had never allowed the *Evening Special* – highly successful as it was – to go on in a jog-trot fashion. We had a tremendous reputation for great "stunts," genuine, exclusive pieces of news, and now for weeks nothing particular had come our way.

"That's all very well, Williams, but we cannot make bricks without straw, and if everything is as stagnant as a duck pond, that's not our fault."

Miss Dewsbury broke in. She was a little woman of thirty with a large head, fair hair drawn tightly from a rather prominent brow, and wore tortoise-shell spectacles. She looked as if her clothes had been flung at her and had stuck, but for all that Julia Dewsbury was the best private secretary in London, true as steel, with an inordinate capacity for work and an immense love for the paper. I think she liked me a little too, and she was well worth the four hundred a year I paid her.

"I," said Miss Dewsbury, "live at Richmond."

Both Williams and I cocked our ears. Julia never wasted words, but she liked to tell her story her own way, and it was best to let her do so.

"Ah!" said Williams appreciatively.

"And I believe," she went on, "that one of the biggest newspaper stories, ever, is going to come from Richmond. It is something that will go round the world, if I am not very much mistaken, and we've got to have it first, Sir Thomas."

Williams gave a low whistle, and I strained at the leash, so to speak.

"I refer," Miss Dewsbury went on, "to the great wireless erections on Richmond Hill."

For a moment I felt disappointed. I didn't see how interest could be revived in that matter and I said so.

"Nearly a year ago," I remarked, "every paper in England was booming with it. We did our share, I'm sure. No one could have protested more vigorously, and it was the *Special* that got all those questions asked in Parliament. But surely, Miss Dewsbury, it's dead as mutton now. It's an accepted fact and the public have got used to it."

"There's nothing," said Williams, "more impossible than to reanimate a dead bit of news. It's been tried over and over again and it's never been a real success."

Miss Dewsbury smiled, the smile that means "When you poor dear, silly men have done talking, then you shall hear something." I saw that smile and took courage again.

"Suppose," said Miss Dewsbury, "that we just look up the facts as a preliminary to what I have to say."

She went to a side table on which was a dial with little ivory tablets, each bearing a name – Sub-editor's room, Composing room, Mr. Williams, Library, etc., and she pulled a little handle over the last disk, immediately speaking into a telephone receiver above.

"Facts relating to great wireless installment on Richmond Hill."

A bell whirred and she came back to the table where we were sitting. In twenty seconds – so perfect was our organization at the *Special* office – a youth entered with a portfolio containing a number of Press cuttings, photographs, etc.

Miss Dewsbury opened it.

"A year ago," she said, "the real estate market was greatly interested to learn that Flight, Jones & Rutley, the well-known agents, had secured several acres of property on the top of Richmond Hill. The buyer's name was not discovered, but an enormously wealthy syndicate was suggested. At that time, opportunely chosen, many leases had fallen in. Others that had some time still to run were bought at a greatly enhanced value, while several portions of freehold property were also purchased at ten times their worth. Houses immediately began to be demolished, immense compensation was paid to those who hung out and refused to quit the newly purchased area. Pressure, it is hinted, of a somewhat unwarrantable kind, was also applied. The sum involved was enormous, but every claim was cheerfully settled, with the result that this area of several acres was entirely denuded of buildings and surrounded by a high wall, in an incredibly short space of time."

"The most beautiful view in England spoiled forever!" said Williams with a sigh.

Miss Dewsbury turned over a few leaves.

"Of course you will both remember the agitation that went on, the opposition of the local and County Councils, the rage of Societies for preserving the ancient monuments and historic places of interest, etc., etc. The newspapers, including ours, took up the matter vigorously. Then, with a curious unanimity, all opposition began to die away. It is quite certain that huge sums were spent in buying over the objectors, though no actual proof was ever discovered. The matter was altogether too delicate a thing and was far too skillfully worked.

"Then the unknown purchaser began to build the three great towers now approaching completion. An army of workmen was gathered together in a new industrial city between Brentford and Hounslow. Fleets of ships bearing steel girders and so forth arrived from America, together with a hundred highly trained engineers, all of them Americans. It was given out that the most powerful wireless station in the whole world was to be constructed. Again much opposition, appeals to the Government, questions to the Board of Trade and so forth. I remember that very much the same sort of thing happened in Paris, when the Eiffel Tower was first constructed. England's agitation was opposed by the scientific bodies of the day, and there were other forces behind which brought pressure to bear on the Government. That also is certain, though nothing has actually transpired as yet in this regard. Now we've three monstrous towers, *each of nearly two thousand feet in height*— twice the height of the Eiffel – dominating London. Every day almost we, who live in Richmond and the surrounding towns, see these monsters shooting up higher into the air. Often half of them is veiled by clouds. The most tremendous engineering feat in the history of the world is nearly accomplished."

Now all this was quite familiar to me and in common with many Londoners I had begun to take a sort of lazy pride in the gaunt lattice-work of steel which seemed climbing to heaven itself. All the same I saw no great journalistic opportunity and I said so.

"Let us consider a little," continued the imperturbable Julia. "These towers are *not* Government owned. They are the property of some private syndicate. The secret has been kept with extraordinary success. All the Marconi shareholders of the City, all the big financial corporations, even foreign Governments, have been trying to get at the root of the matter. Each and all have utterly failed. Yet our own Government knows, and sooner or later a pronouncement will have to be made. If we could anticipate this, then the interest of the public would rise to fever heat again, and we should have a scoop of the first magnitude."

I saw that immediately, and so did Williams, but as it was obvious Miss Dewsbury hadn't quite finished we just nodded and let her go on.

"Now I have reason for thinking," she said, "and I am not speaking lightly, Sir Thomas, that there's something behind this affair of a totally unexpected and startling nature. Some day, no doubt, the towers will be used for scientific purposes, but there's a deep mystery surrounding everything, and one very different from what we might suppose. I think we can penetrate it."

"Splendid!" I cried, for I knew very well that Julia Dewsbury would not say as much as she had unless there was certainty behind her words. "And how do you propose to start work?"

As I was looking at her she flushed, and I nearly fell off my chair. It had never occurred to me that Miss Dewsbury could blush, in fact, that she was human at all, I am afraid, and I wondered what on earth was the matter.

"May I make a little personal explanation, Sir Thomas?" she said. "I live in a quiet street at the foot of Richmond Hill, where I occupy a large and comfortable bed-sitting room in 'Balmoral,' Number 102, Acacia Road. The house is kept by an excellent woman, who only takes in one other lodger. You pay me a very handsome salary, Sir Thomas, and I might be expected to live in a more commodious way – a flat in Kensington or something like that. But I have other claims upon me. There are two young sisters and a brother to be educated, and I am their sole support. That's why I live in a small lodging house at Richmond, which, again, is the reason that I have recently come into contact with some one who may be of inestimable value to the paper."

She blushed again, upon my soul she did, and I heard Williams gasp in astonishment. I kicked him, under the table.

"The other bed-sitting room at 'Balmoral' has recently been occupied by a young man, perhaps I should rather say a youth, Mr. William Rolston. He seemed very lonely and quite poor, and on discussing him with Mrs. O'Hagan, my landlady, she informed me that she more than suspected that he had at times to economize grievously in the matter of food. I myself used to hear the click of a typewriter across the passage, sometimes continuing till late at night, and from the frequency with which bulky envelopes arrived for him by post, it was easy to deduce that he was an unsuccessful author or journalist. This naturally excited my interest. Mrs. O'Hagan has no idea that I am connected with the *Evening Special*, she thinks I am typist in a city firm of hardware merchants. And when I made my acquaintance with Mr. Rolston, as I did some time ago owing to his back number Remington going wrong, I told him nothing but that I myself was a typist and stenographer. I was enabled to put his machine right and we became friends. Am I boring you, Sir Thomas, and Mr. Williams?" she said suddenly, with a quick look at both of us.

"On the contrary," I replied, "you are paying us a great compliment, Miss Dewsbury, in allowing us to know something of your own private affairs in order that you may explain how you propose to do the paper a signal service."

I can swear that the little woman's eyes grew bright behind her tortoise-shell spectacles and she went on with renewed confidence of manner.

"I have been associated with journalism for eight years now," she said. "During that time innumerable journalists have passed before me. In my own way I have studied them all, and I believe I can detect the real journalist almost as well as Mr. Williams can."

"A good deal better, I should think," said the acting editor, "considering the people I have trusted and the mistakes I have sometimes made."

"At any rate, I can say, with my whole heart, that Bill – I mean Mr. Rolston – though he is only twenty-one and has never had a chance in his life yet, has the makings in him of the most successful journalist of the day. He will rise to the very top of the tree. But as we all know, though great merit will come to the surface in time, chance is a great element in retarding or accelerating the process. I think that Mr. Rolston's chance has come now."

"You mean?" I asked.

"That this boy, utterly unknown, with hardly a left foot in Fleet Street as yet, has had the acumen to see, right to his hand, one of the greatest journalistic sensations of modern times. I refer to the

three towers on Richmond Hill. We have been for evening strolls together and the boy has poured out his whole heart to me – as he might to a mother or any older woman" – and here poor Julia blushed again, and I thought I saw her lips quiver for a moment.

"The day before yesterday he said to me: 'Miss Dewsbury, of course you don't understand anything about journalism, but I'm on the track of the very biggest thing you could possibly imagine. I have been lying low and saying nothing. I'm hot on the scent.' He hinted at what it was, without giving me very many details, though these were quite sufficient to show me that he was making no idle boast. Then he said: 'But what use is it? If I went with what I've got already to any of the papers, I might or might not get to see some unimaginative news-editor who'd squash me into a cocked hat in five minutes. That's the worst of being absolutely unknown and without any pull. If only I could get to see a real editor of one of the big papers, a man who would give me a patient hearing, a man with imagination, I would engage to convince him in ten minutes and my fortune would be made.'"

She stopped, leant back in her chair and looked at me inquiringly.

"Good heavens!" I cried. "Have him up *at once*. I am quite certain that you could never have been deceived, Miss Dewsbury. You have not been with me for four years without my knowing how valuable your intuition is. Send him to me at once."

Miss Dewsbury gave a dry, gratified chuckle.

"I may have stretched things a little far in having too much confidence in my position here," she said, "but I was determined to gamble on it, and I've won. This morning, before I left for the office, I gave Mrs. O'Hagan a little note for Bill – he has an unfortunate habit of lying in bed in the morning. The note told him that by an odd coincidence, I thought I might put him in the way of writing an article for the *Evening Special* and that he was to be in the café at the corner by three o'clock, precisely."

She looked at her wrist-watch.

"It's five minutes to now. I will send for him at once."

"Rolston, did you say the name was, Miss Dewsbury?" said Williams.

"Yes, – Rolston. But the messenger can't mistake him. He's about five feet two high, very slim, with an innocent, baby face, and very dark red hair. Oh, and his ears stick out at the sides of his head almost at right angles. Please say nothing about my part in the matter, as yet at any rate," Miss Dewsbury asked as she went away, and some minutes afterwards a page boy ushered in one of the most curious little figures I have ever seen.

Mr. Rolston was short, slim and well proportioned. He looked active as a monkey and tough as whipcord. He was rather shabbily dressed in an old blue suit. His face was childish only in contour and complexion, and for the rest he could have sat as a model for Puck to any painter. There was something impish and merry in his rather slanting eyes, and his button of a mouth was capable of some very surprising contortions. His round-shaped ears, like the ears of a mouse, stood out on each side of his head and completed the elfish, sprite-like impression.

"Sit down, Mr. Rolston," I said, pointing to a chair on the other side of the table.

The little man bowed very low and slid into the chair. I had an odd impression that he would shortly produce a nut and begin to crack it with his teeth. I could see that he was in a whirl of amazement and at the same time horribly nervous, and I tried to put him at his ease.

"I understand," I said, "that you are a journalist, Mr. Rolston."

"Yes, Sir Thomas," he replied, in a cultivated voice, though with a curious guttural note in it, and I marked that he knew my name.

"I also understand – never mind how – that for some time past you have been wishing to see the editor of a large London daily, to penetrate right to the fountain head, so to speak. Well, here you are, I am the editor of the *Evening Special*. What have you to propose to me?"

I passed a box of cigarettes over the table towards him, but he shook his head.

"It's about the three great towers now approaching completion at Richmond."

"You have some special information?"

"Some very startling information, indeed, Sir Thomas. An idea came to me some months ago. I thought it worth while testing, and it's proved trumps."

"If you have anything in the nature of a scoop, Mr. Rolston, I need hardly say that it will be very well worth your while. If, when I have heard what you have to say, I cannot use your information, I will give you my personal word that all you tell me shall be kept an entire secret."

"That's good enough for any one," he answered with a sudden grin. "Well, sir, these towers will eventually lapse to the British Government as a gift from the private individual who has erected them, but they will remain his property and be used for his own purposes until his death. And these purposes are not wireless telegraphy, or even scientific in any shape or form. Indeed, wireless telegraphy is expressly forbidden."

Well, at that I sat upright in my chair. Here was news indeed – if it were true.

"That's big stuff," I replied at once, "if you can substantiate it."

"I think you will believe me when I have finished," he replied quietly. "I have risked my life more than once to get at the facts. My father, Sir Thomas, was a missionary in China. I was brought up to speak the Chinese language as well as English. I am one of the very few Europeans who do so fluently. Moreover, I kept it up till I was sixteen and came to England, and I have never forgotten it. You have heard, I suppose, that there's a gang of Chinese coolies at work on the towers, and some of the Trade Unions have been making themselves nasty about it, and the American labor?"

"Yes, there was some agitation."

"In addition to these coolies, there are many Chinese officials of a much higher class, people who will remain when the towers are finished, as they will be in an incredibly short space of time, for the work is being carried on both by day and night. Speed, speed, speed! is the order, and nothing in the world is allowed to stand in the way of it."

"You interest me very much. Please continue."

"Speaking Chinese as I do, being perfectly familiar with Chinese dress and customs, it has not been difficult for me to disguise myself – blacken my hair, assume a yellow complexion and so forth.

"By this means I have penetrated to the very heart of the workings at night, and," he blushed faintly, "I have listened to conversations of an extraordinary character, lying on the roof of a certain office building for hours. Details you shall have, and in plenty, but here is the sum of my discoveries. There is no syndicate. There never was. The work, upon which millions have been spent, has been, from the very first, designed and originated by one individual, with the specialized help of the most famous engineers of America."

"And his motive?" I asked, and I don't mind saying that I was almost trembling with excitement.

"The dream of a genius, or the whim of a madman," Rolston answered in a grave voice. "The world will call it one or the other without a doubt. At any rate it's the product of a colossal imagination. For myself, I am dead certain that there's some deeper and stranger motive beneath it all, but that can rest for the present. Sir Thomas, between those three great towers, two thousand feet up in the air, will very shortly come into being a fantastic pleasure city like a dream of the Arabian Nights! It will be unique in the history of the world, and already the preparations are so far advanced that it will be completed with extraordinary rapidity."

"A pleasure city!" I gasped. "A Pleasure City in the Clouds!"

"On two stages right up at the very summit, suspended by a system of cantilevers of the most intricate modern construction and of toughened steel. I understand that a triangle measuring in all four acres will support a marvelous series of palaces, a Lhasa of the air!"

"Why Lhasa, Mr. Rolston?"

"Because," he replied, "it's to be a Forbidden City, which no one will be allowed to penetrate or see. It is a marvelous conception only possible to enormous wealth and the vision of a superman."

I left my chair and began pacing up and down the room as the freakish grandeur of the conception burst fully upon me. Towering over London, dwarfing Saint Paul's to a child's toy, a City in the Clouds!

I stopped suddenly, wheeled round and shouted: "But who, Mr. Rolston, is the madman, genius or superman who has imagined this and actually carried it out in sober twentieth-century England?"

"That's the greatest secret of all," he said, looking round the room as if frightened.

Then he slid from his chair and was at my side in a moment.

"It's a Mr. Gideon Mendoza Morse from Brazil," he whispered.

CHAPTER THREE

Rolston's revelation, utterly unexpected, came to me with the suddenness of a blow over the heart. For a few seconds I was incapable of consecutive thought, though I don't think my face showed anything of it.

The lad was watching me anxiously and I had to do something with him at once. Fortunately, I thought of the obvious thing.

"Leave me now, Mr. Rolston," I said. "Go to the room down the passage marked 'Mr. Williams' on the door, and ask him to put you into a room by yourself. Then please, as quickly as possible, write me out a newspaper 'story' setting out fully all the facts you have told me. Remember that you've got to interest the public in the very first paragraph in what is undoubtedly a most sensational piece of news."

"How many words, sir?" he asked me – I liked that, it was professional.

"A thousand. And when you've done that bring it straight in to me."

He was out of the room in a minute and I sat down to think.

In the first place I didn't doubt his story for a moment, there was something transparently honest about the boy, and, unless I was very much mistaken, there was great ability in him also. When there was time for it I expected I should hear a breathless story of his adventures in the search of this stuff. He had hinted that his life had been in danger... I began to think – hard. Assuming that was true, that Morse had been seized with this extraordinary whim, how did I stand in the matter? At a first view it appeared that I was rather badly snookered. Morse, always assuming young Rolston was correct, had spent a huge fortune in keeping his secret. Moreover, the Government was in it with him. It would hardly be the way to recommend myself to Juanita's father – whose good opinion I desired to gain more than that of any other person in the world, save one – by giving his cherished secret to the world in order to increase the prestige and circulation of the *Evening Special*.

If I did publish it, it was odds on that I never saw Juanita again. One thing occurred to me with relief – it wasn't a case in which I *had* to publish, in the public interest. By suppressing news I was not failing my duty as an editor, only losing a big scoop, though that was hard enough. What was to be done? As I asked myself that question I confess that for a brief moment – thank Heaven it did not last long – it occurred to me that I was now in a position to put considerable pressure upon the millionaire. I could hold out inducements...

Fortunately, I crushed all such ugly thoughts without much effort, and then the real solution came. When I had questioned Rolston a little more and was bedrock certain that he was right, I would see Morse at once and tell him all I had learnt without reserve. I would present the thing to him as one in which I claimed no personal interest, and my attitude would be that I felt he ought to be warned. I would engage to publish nothing without his wish, but he must look to it – if he wished to preserve his secret – that other people were not upon the same track. That could do me no harm whatever. It was the straight thing to do, and at the same time it would certainly help me with him. I thought, and think still, that this was a fair advantage to take. It is only a fool who throws away a legitimate weapon in love or war.

I rang up the Ritz Hotel and asked for Mr. Morse. There was some little delay at the Hotel Bureau, and then I was switched on to the telephone of the private apartments.

"Who's that?" asked a cold, characterless voice.

"Sir Thomas Kirby of the *Evening Special* speaking. Who are you?"

"Secretary to Mr. Morse" – now the voice was a little warmer.

"Is Mr. Morse at home?"

"I can see that he gets a message very shortly, Sir Thomas, if the matter is of importance."

"It is of very considerable importance or I shouldn't have troubled to ring Mr. Morse up, especially as I shall be meeting him in a day or two at a social engagement."

"Wait a moment, please."

I knew by this that I had struck lucky and that Morse was in the hotel, and within a minute I heard his calm, resonant voice in my ear.

"Good afternoon, Kirby. My secretary says you wanted to speak to me."

"Thank you, I am most anxious to have a conversation."

"Well, shall we hold the wire?"

"I daren't discuss my business over the wire, Mr. Morse."

There was a short silence and then:

"Please forgive me, but you know how busy I am. Could you give me the least indication of what you wish to talk to me about?"

I had an inspiration.

"Towers," I said in a low voice.

A quiet "Ah!" came to me over the wire, and then:

"I think I understand, Sir Thomas, you wish – ?"

"To tell you something that I feel sure you ought to know, in your own interests."

"Pass, *Friend!*" was the reply, followed by a little chuckle in which I thought – I might have been mistaken – I detected a note of relief.

"When shall we meet?" I asked.

"Look here, Kirby," was the reply, "can you come here at eleven to-night? I'll give orders that you are to be taken up to my rooms at once. I can't guarantee that I shall be in at the moment. I also have something of considerable importance on hand, but if you will wait – I'm afraid I'm asking a great deal – I'll be certain to be with you sooner or later. My daughter may be at home and, if she is, no doubt she'll give you a cup of coffee or something while you wait. Do you think you can manage this?"

"I shall be delighted," I answered, trying to control my voice, and I hardly heard the quiet "Good-by" that concluded our conversation.

Well, I had done better for myself than I had hoped, and, so vain are all of us, I felt a kind of satisfaction in having "played the game" and at the same time won the trick. I did not reflect till afterwards that if Morse had been some one else and not the father of Juanita, I should not have hesitated for a moment to fill the *Special* with scare headlines.

I sat down again in my chair, ordered a cup of tea, drank it with splendid visions of a *tête-à-tête* with Juanita that very night, and was leaning back in my chair lost in a rosy dream when the door opened and the odd little man with the red hair appeared at my side, holding two or three sheets of typewritten copy.

"The story, sir," he said.

I took it from him mechanically, it would never be published now, in all probability, but it would at least serve to show Morse how much I knew. I began to read.

At the end of the first paragraph I knew that the stuff was going to be all right. At the end of the second and third I sat up in my chair and abandoned my easy attitude. When I had read the whole of the thousand words I knew that I had discovered one of the best journalistic brains of the day! The boy could not only ferret out news, but he could *write!* Every word fell with the right ring and chimed. He was terse, but vivid as an Alpine sunset. He made one powerful word do the work of ten. He suggested atmosphere by a semicolon, and there were fewer adjectives in his stuff than one would have believed possible. There were not four other men in Fleet Street who could have done as well. And beyond this, beyond my pleasure at the discovery of a genius, the article had a peculiar effect upon me. I felt that somehow or other the matter was not going to die with my interview to-night at the Ritz Hotel. The room in which I sat widened. There was a glimpse of far horizons...

I folded the copy carefully and placed it in my breast pocket.

"Mr. Rolston," I said, "I engage you from this moment as a member of my regular staff. Your salary to begin with will be ten pounds a week, and of course your expenses that you may incur in the course of your work. Do you accept these terms?"

Poor Bill Rolston! I mustn't give away the man who afterwards became my most faithful friend and most daring companion in hours of frightful peril, and a series of incredible adventures. Still, if he *did* burst into tears that's nothing against him, for I didn't realize till sometime afterwards that he was half starved and at the very end of his tether.

He pulled himself together in a moment or two, took a cup of tea and let me cross-question him. What he told me in the next half-hour I cannot set down here. It will appear in its proper place, but it is enough to say that in the whole of my experience I never listened to a more mysterious and more enthralling recital.

I think that from that moment I realized that my fate was to be in some way linked with the three towers on Richmond Hill, and the sense of excitement which had been with me all the afternoon, grew till it was almost unbearable.

"Now, first of all," I said, when he had told me everything, "you are not to breathe a word of this to any human soul without my permission. While you have been absent I have already been taking steps, the nature of which I shall not tell you at present. Meanwhile, lock up everything in your heart."

I had a flash of foresight, well justified in the event.

"I may want you at any moment," I told him, "and therefore, with your permission, I'm going to put you up at my flat in Piccadilly, where you will be well looked after and have everything you want. I'll telephone through to my man, Preston, giving him full instructions, and you had better take a taxi and get there at once. Preston will send a messenger to your lodgings to bring up any clothes and so forth you may require."

He blushed rosy red, and I wondered why, for his story had been told to me in a crisp, man-of-the-world manner that made him seem far older than he was.

Then he shrugged his shoulders, put his hand in his trousers pocket and pulled out – one penny.

"All I have in the world," he said, with a rueful smile.

I scribbled an order on the cashier and told him to cash it in the office below, and, with a look of almost doglike fidelity and gratitude, the little fellow moved towards the door.

Just at that moment it opened and Julia Dewsbury came in.

Rolston's jaw dropped and his eyes almost started out of his head in amazement, and I saw a look come into my secretary's eyes that I should have been glad to inspire in the eyes of one woman.

"There, there," I said, "be off with you, both of you. Miss Dewsbury, take Mr. Rolston, now a permanent member of the staff, into your own room and tell him something about the ways of the office."

For half an hour I walked up and down the editorial sanctum arranging my thoughts, getting everything clear cut, and when that was done I telephoned to Arthur Winstanley, asking him, if he had nothing particular on, to dine with me.

His reply was that he would be delighted, as he had nothing to do till eleven o'clock, but that I must dine with him. "I have discovered a delightful little restaurant," he said, "which isn't fashionable yet, though it soon will be. Don't dress; and meet me at the Club at half-past seven."

My dinner with Arthur can be related very shortly, for, while it has distinct bearing upon the story, it was only remarkable for one incident, though, Heaven knows, that was important enough.

I met him at our Club in Saint James' and we walked together towards Soho.

"You are going to dine," said Arthur, "at 'L'Escargot d'Or' – The Golden Snail. It's a new departure in Soho restaurants, and only a few of us know of it yet. Soon all the world will be going there, for the cooking is magnificent."

"That's always the way with these Soho restaurants, they begin wonderfully, are most beautifully select in their patrons, and then the rush comes and everything is spoiled."

"I know, the same will happen here no doubt, though lower Bohemia will never penetrate because the prices are going to be kept up; and this place will always equal one of the first-class restaurants in town. Well, how goes it?"

I knew what he meant and as we walked I told him, as in duty bound, all there was to tell of the progress of my suit.

"Met her once," I said, "had about two minutes' talk. There's just a chance, I am not certain, that I may meet her to-night, and not in a crowd – in which case you may be sure I shall make the very most of my opportunities. If this doesn't come off, I don't see any other chance of really getting to know her until September, at Sir Walter Stileman's, and I have to thank you for that invitation, Arthur."

He sighed.

"It's a difficult house to get into," he said, "unless you are one of the pukka shooting set, but I told old Sir Walter that, though you weren't much good in October and that pheasants weren't in your line, you were A1 at driven 'birds.'"

"But I can't hit a driven partridge to save my life, unless by a fluke!"

"I know, Tom, I don't say that you'll be liked at all, but you won the toss and by our bond we're bound to do all we can to give you your opportunity. I need hardly say that my greatest hope in life is that she'll have nothing whatever to say to you. And now let's change that subject – it's confounded thin ice however you look at it – and enjoy our little selves. I have been on the 'phone with Anatole, and we are going to *dine* to-night, my son, really *dine*!"

The Golden Snail in a Soho side street presented no great front to the world. There was a sign over a door, a dingy passage to be traversed, until one came to another door, opened it and found oneself in a long, lofty room shaped like a capital L. The long arm was the one at which you entered, the other went round a rectangle. The place was very simply decorated in black and white. Tables ran along each side, and the only difference between it and a dozen other such places in the foreign quarter of London was that the seats against the wall were not of red plush but of dark green morocco leather. It was fairly full, of a mixed company, but long-haired and impecunious Bohemia was conspicuously absent.

A table had been reserved for us at the other end opposite the door, so that sitting there we could see in both directions.

We started with little tiny oysters from Belon in Brittany – I don't suppose there was another restaurant in London at that moment that was serving them. The soup was asparagus cream soup of superlative excellence, and then came a young guinea-fowl stuffed with mushrooms, which was perfection itself.

"How on earth do you find these places, Arthur?" I asked.

"Well," he answered, "ever since I left Oxford I've been going about London and Paris gathering information of all sorts. I've lived among the queerest set of people in Europe. My father thinks I'm a waster, but he doesn't know. My mother, angel that she is, understands me perfectly. She knows that I've only postponed going into politics until I have had more experience than the ordinary young man in my position gets. I absolutely refused to be shoved into the House directly I had come down with my degree, the Union, and all those sort of blushing honors thick upon me. In a year or two you will see, Tom, and meanwhile here's the Moulin à Vent."

Anatole poured out that delightful but little known burgundy for us himself, and it was a wine for the gods.

"A little interval," said Arthur, "in which a cigarette is clearly indicated, and then we are to have some slices of bear ham, stewed in champagne, which I *rather* think will please you."

We sat and smoked, looking up the long room, when the swing doors at the end opened and a man and a girl entered. They came down towards us, obviously approaching a table reserved for them in the short arm of the restaurant, and I noticed the man at once.

For one thing he was in full evening dress, whereas the only other diners who were in evening kit at all wore dinner jackets and black ties. He was a tall man of about fifty with wavy, gray hair. His face was clean shaved, and a little full. I thought I had never seen a handsomer man, or one who moved with a grace and ease which were so perfectly unconscious. The girl beside him was a pretty enough young creature with a powdered face and reddened lips – nothing about her in the least out of the ordinary. When he came opposite our table, his face lighted up suddenly. He smiled at Arthur, and opened his mouth as if to speak.

Arthur looked him straight in the face with a calm and stony stare – I never saw a more cruel or explicit cut.

The man smiled again without the least bravado or embarrassment, gave an almost imperceptible bow and passed on towards his table without any one but ourselves having noticed what occurred. The whole affair was a question of some five or six seconds.

He sat down with his back to us.

"Who is he?" I asked of Arthur.

He hesitated for a moment and then he gave a little shudder of disgust. I thought, also, that I saw a shade come upon his face.

"No one you are ever likely to meet in life, Tom," he replied, "unless you go to see him tried for murder at the Old Bailey some day. He is a fellow called Mark Antony Midwinter."

"A most distinguished looking man."

"Yes, and I should say he stands out from even his own associates in a preëminence of evil. Tom," he went on, with unusual gravity, "deep down in the soul of every man there's some foul primal thing, some troglodyte that, by the mercy of God, never awakes in most of us. But when it does in some, and dominates them, then a man becomes a fiend, lost, hopeless, irremediable. That man Midwinter is such an one. You could not find his like in Europe. He walks among his fellows with a panther in his soul; and the high imagination, the artistic power in him makes him doubly dangerous. I could tell you details of his career which would make your blood run cold – if it were worth while. It isn't.

"But I perceive our bear's flesh stewed in Sillery is approaching. Let's forget this intrusion."

Well, we dined after the fashion of Sybaris, went to the Club for an hour and smoked, and then Arthur returned to his chambers in Jermyn Street to dress. I went back to mine, found from Preston that little Mr. Rolston was safely in bed and fast asleep, changed into a dinner jacket and walked the few yards to the Ritz Hotel, my heart beating high with hope.

I was shown up at once to the floor inhabited by the millionaire, and knew, therefore, that I was expected. The man who conducted me knocked at a door, opened it, and I entered. I found myself in a comfortable room with writing tables and desks, telephone and a typewriter. A young man of two or three and twenty was seated at one of the tables smoking a cigarette.

He jumped up at once.

"Oh, Sir Thomas," he said, "Mr. Morse has not yet returned, and I think it quite likely he may be some little time. But the Señora Balmaceda and Miss Morse are in the drawing-room and perhaps you would like to – "

"I shall be delighted," I said, cutting him short, but who on earth was Señora Balmaceda? The chaperone, I supposed, confound it!

The obliging young man led me through two or three very gorgeously furnished rooms and at last into a large apartment brilliantly lit from the roof, and with flowers everywhere. At one end was a little alcove.

"I have brought Sir Thomas, Señora," he said, looking about the room, but there was no one remotely resembling a Señora there. Nevertheless, directly he spoke, some one stepped out of the conservatory from behind a tropical shrub in a green tub, and came towards us.

It was Juanita, and she was alone. The secretary withdrew and I advanced to meet her.

"How do you do, Sir Thomas," she said in her beautiful, bell-like voice. "Father said you might be coming and I'm afraid he won't be in just yet. And it's so tiresome, poor Auntie has gone to bed with a bad headache."

"I'm very sorry, Miss Morse," I answered as we shook hands, "I must do what I can to take her place," and then I looked at her perfectly straight.

Yes, I dared to look into those marvelous limpid eyes and I know she saw the hunger in mine, for she took her hand away a little hurriedly.

"What a charming room! Is that a little conservatory over there? It must look out over the Green Park?"

"Yes, it does," she replied almost in a whisper.

"Then do let's sit there, Miss Morse."

Was I acting in a play or what on earth gave me this sense of confidence and strength? Heaven only knows, but I never faltered from the first moment that I entered the room. Oh, the gods were with me that night!

We went to the alcove without a further word, and she sat down upon a couch. I have described her once, at Lady Brentford's ball, but at this moment I am not going to attempt to describe her at all.

For half a minute we said nothing and then I took her hand and pressed it to my lips.

"Juanita," I said, "there are mysterious currents and forces in this world stronger than we are ourselves. This is the third time that I've seen you, but no power on earth can prevent me from telling you – "

She was looking at me with parted lips and eyes suffused with an angelic tenderness and modesty. My voice broke in my throat with unutterable joy. I was certain that she loved me.

And then, just as I was about to say the sealing words – remember, I had invoked the gods – there was the sound of a door opening sharply.

I stiffened and rose to my feet. From where we sat we could survey the whole, rich room. Through the open door – I must say there were several doors in the room – came a tall man, *walking backwards*.

He was in full evening dress with a camellia in his button-hole.

He stepped back lightly with cat-like steps, his arms a little curved, his fingers all extended.

I saw his face. It was convulsed with the satanic fury of an old Japanese mask. Line for line, it was just like that, and it was also the face of the bland and smiling man I had seen two hours before at the restaurant of The Golden Snail.

I felt something warm and trembling at my side. Juanita was clinging to me and I put my arm around her waist. Through the open door there now came another figure.

A quiet, resonant voice cut into the tense, horrible silence.

"Quick, Mark Antony Midwinter – that's your door, quick – quick!"

The big man paused for an instant and a hissing spitting noise came from his mouth.

There was a sharp crack and a great mirror on the wall shivered in pieces. There was another, and then the big man turned and literally bounded over the soft carpet, flung himself through the door and disappeared.

Gideon Mendoza Morse advanced into the drawing-room, smiling to himself and looking down at a little steel-blue automatic in his hand.

Then Juanita and I came out of the alcove, hand in hand, and he saw us.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gideon Morse still had the little steel-blue automatic pistol in his hand. He was actually smiling and humming a little tune when he turned and saw Juanita and myself coming out of the alcove.

In a flash his hand dropped the pistol into the pocket of his dinner jacket and his face changed.

"Santa Maria!" he said in Spanish, and then, "Juanita, Sir Thomas Kirby!"

"You remember you gave me an appointment to-night, Mr. Morse," I stammered.

"Of course, of course, then – "

He said no more, for with a little gasp Juanita sank into a heap upon the floor. We had loosened hands directly the millionaire turned towards us and I was too late to catch her.

Morse was at her side in an instant.

"The bell," he said curtly, and I ran to the side of the room and pressed the button hard and long.

Wow! but these money emperors of the world are well served! In a second, so it seemed, the room was full of people. The young secretary, a couple of maids, a dark foreign-looking man in a morning coat and a black tie whom I took to be the valet, and finally a gigantic fellow in tweeds with a battered face as big as a ham and arms which reached almost to his knees.

The maids were at the girl's side in a moment, applying restoratives. Morse rose, just as another door opened and in sailed a stout elderly lady in a black evening dress with a mantilla of black lace over her abundant and ivory white hair. Morse said something to her in Spanish and I wished I had been Arthur Winstanley to understand it. Then I felt my arm taken and Morse drew me away.

"It is nothing serious," he said, "just a little shock," and as he said it he made a slight gesture with his head.

It was enough. The secretary, the valet, and the huge, vulgar-looking man in tweeds faded away in an instant, though not before I had seen the latter spot the broken mirror, and a ferocious glint come into his eyes. Nor did he look surprised.

Juanita began to come to herself and she was tenderly carried away by the women. Morse accompanied them and spoke in a rapid whisper to the distinguished old lady, who, I knew, must be the Señora Balmaceda.

The two of us were left alone, and for my part I sank down in an adjacent chair quite exhausted in mind, if not in body, by the happenings of the last ten minutes. Up to the present – I will say nothing of the future – I had never lived so fast or so much in such a short space of time; and you've got to get accustomed to that sort of thing really to enjoy it!

"I'm afraid your visit has been somewhat exciting," said my host, in his musical, level voice. His eyes were as dark and inscrutable as ever, but nevertheless, I saw that the man was badly moved. He took a slim, gold cigarette case from his waistcoat pocket and his hand trembled. Moreover, under the tan of his skin he was as white as a ghost – there was a curious gray effect.

I laughed.

"I confess to having been a little startled. Your secretary brought me in here and I was talking to Miss Morse in the conservatory when – " I hesitated for a moment.

He saved me the trouble of going on.

"I guess," he said, "you and I had better have a little drink now," and he went to the wall.

I don't pretend to know how the service was managed – I suppose there was a sergeant-major somewhere in the background who drilled the host of personal and hotel attendances who ministered to the wants of Gideon Morse. At any rate, this time no one entered but one of the hotel footmen, and he brought the usual tray of cut-glass bottles, etc.

Morse mixed us both a brandy and soda and I noticed two things. First, his hand was steady again; secondly, the brandy was not decanted but came out of a bottle, on which was the fleur-de-lys of ancient, royal France, blown into the glass.

There was a twinkle in his eye when he saw I had spotted that.

"Yes," he said, "there are only three dozen bottles left, even in the Ritz. They were found in a bricked-up cellar of the Tuileries," and he tossed off his glass with relish.

So did I – Cleopatra's pearls were not so expensive.

"Now look here, Sir Thomas," Morse said, sitting down by me and drawing up his chair, "you've seen something to-night of a very unfortunate nature. You've seen it quite by accident. If news of it got about, if it were even whispered through a certain section of London, then the very gravest harm might result, not only to me but to many other persons also."

"My dear sir, I have seen nothing. I have heard nothing. You may place implicit reliance upon that," and I held out my hand to him, which he took in a firm grip.

"Thank you, Sir Thomas," he replied simply. "It was a question," he hesitated for the fraction of a second, and I knew he was lying, "it was a question of impudent blackmail. I had expected something of the sort and was prepared. You saw how the cowardly hound ran away."

"Quite so, Mr. Morse. Of course a man in your position must be subject to these things occasionally."

"Ah, you see that," he said briskly, and I knew he was relieved. "You are a man of the world, and you see that. Well, I am thankful for your promise of silence. I am the more annoyed, though, that Juanita should have been present at a scene which, though really burlesque, must have seemed to her one of violence."

I had my own opinion about the burlesque nature of the incident, but I made haste to reassure him.

"Of course," I said, "it must have been distressing for any lady, but it was the suddenness that upset her, and I'm sure Miss Morse's nerves are far too good for it to have any permanent effect."

"Yes," he answered, and in his voice there was a caress, "I can explain it all to Juanita, and the memory of this evening will soon go from her."

Again I had my own private opinion, which I forbore to state. Personally, I had very little doubt but that Juanita would remember this evening as long as the darling lived! It would not be my fault if she didn't! But I saw that this was no moment to tell him that I loved her. Perhaps, if we had been granted five minutes more in the conservatory and I had said all I meant, and heard from her all I hoped, I should have spoken then. As it was I could not, though in my own mind I was certain she cared for me.

We were silent for a few moments, and then Morse seemed to recall himself from private thought.

"I had nearly forgotten!" he said. "You specially wanted to see me to-night, Sir Thomas, and you've very kindly waited in order to do so."

Then I remembered the errand upon which I had come, and pulled myself together mentally. I liked Morse. He was of tremendous importance to me, and yet at the same time it behooved me to be wary. Already I was certain that he was playing a game with me in the matter of Mark Antony Midwinter, whose name I kept rigidly to myself. I must play my cards carefully.

Please understand me, I don't for a moment mean that I felt he was my enemy, or inimical to me in any way. Far from it. I knew that he liked me and wouldn't do me a bad turn if he could help it. At the same time I was perfectly sure that if necessary he would use me like a pawn in a mysterious game that I couldn't fathom, and I didn't mean to be used like a pawn if I could help it. My hope and ambition was to serve him, but I wanted a little reserve of power also, for reasons I need not indicate.

"Yes," I said, "I telephoned you."

"And you mentioned a certain word which rather puzzled me."

"I did. 'Towers' was the word."

"I believe we are going to meet at The Towers at Cerne in Norfolk," said Mr. Morse. "Sir Walter Stileman told me that you were to be of the shooting party in September."

At that I laughed frankly, really he was a little underestimating me. He grinned and understood in a second.

"Tell me, Sir Thomas, exactly what you *do* mean," he said.

"Well, you know I am a newspaper proprietor and editor."

"Of the best written and most alive journal in London!"

I bowed, and produced from an inside pocket Master Bill Rolston's astonishing piece of copy.

"An unknown journalist who was introduced to me to-day," I said, "brought a piece of news which would be of absorbing interest to the country if it were published and if it were true. Perhaps you would like to read this."

I handed him the typewritten copy and prepared to watch his face as he read it, but he was too clever for that. He took it and perused it, walking up and down the room, and I began to realize some of the qualities which had made this man one of the powers of the world.

More especially so when he came and sat down again, his face wreathed in smiles, though I could have sworn fury lurked in the depths of his black eyes.

"Well, now," he said, "this is interesting, very interesting indeed. I am going to be quite frank with you, Sir Thomas. There's an amount of truth in this manuscript that would cause me colossal worry if it were published at present. Another thing it would do would be to quite upset a financial operation of considerable magnitude. Personally, I should lose at the very least a couple of million sterling, though that wouldn't make any appreciable difference to my fortune, but a lot of other people would be ruined and for no possible benefit to any one in the world except yourself and the *Evening Special*."

"Thank you," I said, "that's just why I came. Of course nothing shall be published, though I'm quite in the dark as to the nature of the whole thing."

"I call that generous, generous beyond belief, Sir Thomas, for I know that it is the life of a newspaper to get hold of exclusive news. I would offer you a large sum not to publish this story did I not know that you would indignantly refuse it. I am a student of men, my young friend, if I may be allowed to call you so, and even if you were a poor man instead of being a rich one as ordinary wealth goes, I should never make such a proposition."

I glowed inwardly as he said it. It was a downright compliment, coming from him under the circumstances, at which any one would have been warmed to the heart. For here was a great man, a Napoleon of his day, one who, if he chose, could upset dynasties and plunge nations into war. Yet, as I knew quite well, Gideon Mendoza Morse wasn't a member of the great financial groups who control and sway politics. In a sense he was that rare thing, a pastoral millionaire. He owned vast tracts of country populated by lowing steers for the food of the world. In the remote mountains of Brazil brown Indians toiled to wrest precious metals and jewels from the earth for his advantage. But from the feverish plotting of international finance I knew him to stand aloof.

"I very much appreciate your remarks," was what I told him, "and you may rest assured that nothing shall transpire."

"Thanks. But all the generosity mustn't be on your side. You shall have your scoop, Sir Thomas, if you will wait a little while."

"I am entirely at your service."

"Very well then," he said, and his manner grew extraordinarily cordial, "let's put a period to it! I hope that, from to-day, I and my daughter are going to see a great deal of you – a great deal more of you than hitherto. You know how we are" – he gave a little annoyed laugh – "run after in London; and what a success Juanita has had over here. What I hope to do is to form a little inner circle of friends, and you must be one of them – if you will?"

How my luck held! I thought. Here, offered freely and with open hands, was the only thing I wanted. I am glad to think that I found a moment in which to be sorry for Arthur and dear old Pat Moore.

"It's awfully good of you," I stammered.

He made a little impatient gesture with his hand.

"Please don't talk nonsense," he said. "And now about the towers on Richmond Hill. I have told you that I cannot explain fully until September. I will tell you, though, that your clever little journalist – what, by the way, did you say his name was?"

"Rolston."

"Of course – has ferreted out much that I wished to conceal, but he isn't entirely upon the right track. I *am*, Kirby, at the bottom of the whole thing, and I have spent goodness knows how much to keep that quiet."

He lit another cigarette, leant back in his chair and laughed like a boy.

"I've bribed, and bribed, and bribed, I've managed to put pressure, actually to put pressure upon the British Government. I've employed an untold number of agents, in short I've exercised the whole of my intellect, and the pressure of almost unlimited capital to keep my name out of it. And now, you tell me, some little journalist has found out one thing at least that I was determined to conceal until September next! The plans of men and mice gang oft a-gley, Kirby! This little man of yours must be a sort of genius. I hope there are no more people like him prowling about Richmond Hill."

I was quite certain that there was not another Bill Rolston anywhere, and I amused Morse immensely by detailing the circumstances of the little, red-haired man's arrival in Fleet Street. I never realized till now how human and genial the great man could be, for he even expanded sufficiently to offer to toss me a thousand pounds to nothing for the services of Julia Dewsbury!

I saw my way with Juanita becoming smoother and smoother every moment.

It was growing late, nearly one o'clock, when Morse insisted on having some bisque soup brought in.

"I think we both want something really sustaining," he said. "Do you begin and I'll just run up and see my sister-in-law, Señora Balmaceda, and find out if Juanita is all right."

He left the room, and, happy that all had gone so well, I sipped the incomparable white essence, and gave myself up to dreams of the future.

I was to see her often. In September, at Sir Walter Stileman's, Morse was to take me into his fullest confidence. That could only mean one thing. Within a little less than three months he would give his consent to my marriage with his daughter. Another opportunity like this of to-night, and Juanita and I would be betrothed. It would be delightful to keep our secret until the shooting began. I would follow her through the events of the season, watch her mood, hear her extolled on every side, knowing all the time she was mine. A vision came to me of Cowes week, the gardens of the R. Y. Squadron, Juanita on board of my own yacht "Moonlight."

I think I must have fallen asleep when I started into consciousness to find myself staring into the great broken mirror over the mantelpiece and to find that Mr. Morse had returned and was smiling down upon me.

"She's all right, thank heavens," he said, "and has been asleep for a long time. And now, as you seem sleepy too, I'll bid you good-night, with a thousand thanks for your consideration."

It was nearly two o'clock I noticed when I stepped out into the cool air of Piccadilly and walked the few yards to my flat. I must have been asleep for quite a long time, and dear old Morse had forborne to waken me.

I peculiarly remember my sense of well-being and happiness during that short walk. I was in a glow of satisfaction. Everything had turned out even better than I had expected. What did the scoop for the paper matter after all? Nothing, in comparison with the more or less intimate relations in which I now stood with Gideon Morse. I was to see Juanita constantly. She was almost mine already, and fortune had been marvelously on my side. Of course there would be obstacles, there was no doubt of that. I was no real match for her. But the obstacles in the future were as nothing to those that had been already surmounted. I began to smile with conceit at the diplomatic way in which I had dealt

with the great financier; not for a single moment, as I put my key into the latch, did I dream that I had been played with the utmost skill, tied myself irrevocably to silence, and that horrible trouble and grim peril even now walked unseen by my side.

When I got into the smoking-room I found things just as usual. I had hardly lit a last cigarette when the door opened and Preston entered.

"Good heavens!" I said, "I never told you to wait up for me, Preston. There was not the slightest need. You ought to have been in bed hours ago."

"So I was, Sir Thomas," he said looking at me in a surprised sort of way, and I noticed for the first time that he was wearing a gray flannel dressing-gown and slippers.

"What do you mean?"

"Until the telephone message came, Sir Thomas."

"What telephone message?"

"Why, yours, Sir Thomas."

"I never telephoned. When do you mean?"

"Not very long ago, Sir Thomas," he said, "I didn't take particular notice of the time, somewhere between one o'clock and now."

I was on the alert at once, though I could not have particularly said why.

"Are you quite sure that it was I who 'phoned?"

"But, yes," he answered, "it was your voice, Sir Thomas. You said you were speaking from the office."

"From the *Evening Special*? I've not been there since late afternoon. And when have I ever been there so late? There's never more than one person there all night long until six in the morning. It's not a morning paper as you know."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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