

The Clue of the Silver Spoons

ROBERT BARR

When the card was brought in to me, I looked upon it with some misgiving, for I scented a commercial transaction; and although such cases are lucrative enough, nevertheless I, Eugene Valmont, formerly high in the service of the French Government, do not care to be connected with them. They usually pertain to sordid business affairs that present little that is of interest to a man, who, in his time, has dealt with subtle questions of diplomacy upon which the welfare of nations sometimes turned.

The name of Bentham Gibbes is familiar to everyone, connected as it is with the much-advertised pickles, whose glaring announcements in crude crimson and green strike the eye everywhere in England, and shock the artistic taste wherever seen. Me, I have never tasted them, and shall not, so long as a French restaurant remains open in London; but I doubt not they are as pronounced to the palate as their advertisement is distressing to the eye.

If, then, this gross pickle manufacturer expected me to track down those who were infringing upon the recipes for making his so-called sauces, chutneys, and the like, he would find himself mistaken, for I was now in a position to pick and choose my cases, and a case of pickles did not allure me. 'Beware of imitations,' said the advertisement, 'none genuine without a facsimile of the signature of Bentham Gibbes.' Ah, well, not for me were either the pickles or the tracking of imitators. A forged cheque: yes, if you like, but the forged signature of Mr Gibbes on a pickle bottle was not for me. Nevertheless, I said to Armand:

'Show the gentleman in,' and he did so.

To my astonishment there entered a young man, quite correctly dressed in dark frock-coat, faultless waistcoat and trousers, that proclaimed the Bond Street tailor. When he spoke his voice and language were those of a gentleman.

'Monsieur Valmont?' he enquired.

'At your service,' I replied, bowing and waving my hand as Armand placed a chair for him and withdrew.

'I am a barrister, with chambers in the Temple,' began Mr Gibbes, 'and for some days a matter has been troubling me about which I have now come to seek your advice, your name having been suggested by a friend in whom I confided.'

'Am I acquainted with him?' I asked.

'I think not,' replied Mr Gibbes; 'he also is a barrister with chambers in the same building as my own. Lionel Dacre is his name.'

'I never heard of him.'

'Very likely not. Nevertheless, he recommended you as a man who could keep his own counsel; and if you take up this case I desire the utmost secrecy preserved, whatever may be the outcome.'

I bowed, but made no protestation. Secrecy is a matter of course with me.

The Englishman paused for a few moments, as if he expected fervent assurances; then he went on with no trace of disappointment on his countenance at not receiving them.

'On the night of the twenty-third I gave a little dinner to six friends of mine in my own rooms. I may say that so far as I am aware they are all gentlemen of unimpeachable character. On the night of the dinner I was detained later than I expected at a reception, and in driving to the Temple was still further delayed by a block of traffic in Piccadilly, so that when I arrived at my chambers there was barely time for me to dress and receive my guests. My man Johnson had everything laid out ready for me in my dressing-room, and as I passed through to it, I hurriedly flung off the coat I was wearing and carelessly left it over the back of a chair in the dining-room, where neither Johnson nor myself, noticed it until my attention was called to it after the dinner was over, and everyone was rather jolly with wine.

'This coat had an inside pocket. Usually any frock-coat I wear at an afternoon reception has not an inside pocket, but I had been rather on the rush all day. My father is a manufacturer, whose name may be familiar to you, and I am on the directors' board of his company. On this occasion I had to take a cab from the city to the reception I spoke of, and had not time to go and change at my rooms. The reception was a somewhat Bohemian affair, extremely interesting, of course, but not too particular as to costume, so I went as I was. In this inside pocket rested a thin package, composed of two

pieces of pasteboard, and between them five twenty-pound Bank of England notes, folded lengthways, and held in place between the pasteboards by an elastic rubber band.

'I had thrown the coat over the chair in such a way that the inside pocket was exposed, and the ends of the notes plainly recognizable. Over the coffee and cigars one of my guests laughingly called attention to what he termed my vulgar display of wealth, and Johnson, in some confusion at having neglected to put away the coat, now picked it up and took it to the reception room, where the wraps of my guests lay about promiscuously. He should, of course, have placed it in my wardrobe, but he said afterwards he thought it belonged to the guest who had spoken. You see, he was in my dressing-room when I threw my coat on the chair in making my way thither, and, of course, he had not noticed the coat in the hurry of arriving guests, otherwise he would have put it where it belonged. After everybody had gone, Johnson came to me and said the coat was there, but the package was missing, nor has any trace of it been found since that night.'

'The dinner was fetched in from outside, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'How many waiters served it?'

'Two. They are men who have often been in my employ before; but, apart from that, they had left my chambers before the incident of the coat happened.'

'Neither of them went into the reception room, I take it?'

'No. I am certain that not even suspicion can attach to either of the waiters.'

'Your man Johnson——'

'Has been with me for years. He could easily have stolen much more than the hundred pounds if he had wished to do so, but I have never known him to take a penny that did not belong to him.'

'Will you favour me with the names of your guests, Mr Gibbes?'

'Viscount Stern sat at my right hand, and at my left Lord Templemore; Sir John Sanclere next to him, and Angus McKeller next to Sanclere. After Viscount Stern was Lionel Dacre, and at his right was Vincent Innis.'

On a sheet of paper I had written the names of the guests, and noted their places at the table.

'Which guest drew your attention to the money?'

'Lionel Dacre.'

'Is there a window looking out from the reception room?'

'Two of them.'

'Were they fastened on the night of the dinner party?'

'I could not be sure; Johnson would know, very likely. You are hinting at the possibility of a thief coming in through a reception room window while we were somewhat noisy over our wine. I think such a solution highly improbable. My rooms are on the third floor, and a thief would scarcely venture to make an entrance when he could not but know there was a company being entertained. Besides this, the coat was there but an hour or so, and it seems to me whoever stole those notes knew where they were.'

'That sounds reasonable,' I had to admit. 'Have you spoken to anyone of your loss?'

'To no one but Dacre, who recommended me to see you. Oh, yes, and to Johnson, of course.'

I could not help noting that this was the fourth or fifth time Dacre's name had come up during our conversation.

'Why to Dacre?' I asked.

'Oh, well, you see, he occupies chambers in the same building, on the ground floor. He is a very good fellow, and we are by way of being firm friends. Then it was he who had called attention to the money, so I thought he should know the sequel.'

'How did he take your news?'

'Now that you call attention to the fact, he seemed slightly troubled. I should like to say, however, that you must not be misled by that. Lionel Dacre could no more steal than he could lie.'

'Did he seem surprised when you mentioned the theft?'

Bentham Gibbes paused a moment before replying, knitting his brows in thought.

'No,' he said at last; 'and, come to think of it, it almost appears as if he had been expecting my announcement.'

'Doesn't that strike you as rather strange, Mr Gibbes?'

'Really, my mind is in such a whirl, I don't know what to think. But it's perfectly absurd to suspect Dacre. If you knew the man you would understand what I mean. He comes of an excellent family, and he is—oh! he is Lionel Dacre, and when you have said that, you have made any suspicion absurd.'

'I suppose you had the rooms thoroughly searched. The packet didn't drop out and remain unnoticed in some corner?'

'No; Johnson and myself examined every inch of the premises.'

'Have you the numbers of the notes?'

'Yes; I got them from the bank next morning. Payment was stopped, and so far not one of the five has been presented. Of course, one or more may have been cashed at some shop, but none have been offered to any of the banks.'

'A twenty-pound note is not accepted without scrutiny, so the chances are the thief may have some difficulty in disposing of them.'

'As I told you, I don't mind the loss of the money at all. It is the uncertainty, the uneasiness, caused by the incident which troubles me. You will comprehend this when I say that if you are good enough to interest yourself in this case, I shall be disappointed if your fee does not exceed the amount I have lost.'

Mr Gibbes rose as he said this, and I accompanied him to the door, assuring him that I should do my best to solve the mystery. Whether he sprang from pickles or not, I realized he was a polished and generous gentleman, who estimated the services of a professional expert like myself at their true value.

I shall not give the details of my researches during the following few days, because the trend of them must be gone over in the remarkable interview I had somewhat later, and there is little use in repeating myself. Suffice it to say, then, that an examination of the rooms and a close cross-questioning of Johnson satisfied me that he and the two waiters were innocent. I was also convinced that no thief made his way through the window, and I came to the conclusion that the notes were stolen by one of the guests.

Further investigation convinced me that the thief was no other than Lionel Dacre, the only one of the six in pressing need of money at that time.

I had Dacre shadowed, and during one of his absences made the acquaintance of his man Hopper, a surly, impolite brute who accepted my golden sovereign quickly enough, but gave me little in exchange for it. But while I conversed with him, there arrived in the passage where we were talking together, a large case of champagne, bearing one of the best-known names in the trade, and branded as being of the vintage of '78. Now, I know that the product of Camelot Frères is not bought as cheaply as British beer, and I also had learned that two short weeks before Mr Lionel Dacre was at his wits'

end for money. Yet he was still the same briefless barrister he had ever been.

On the morning after my unsatisfactory conversation with his man Hopper, I was astonished to receive the following note, written on a dainty correspondence card:

3 and 4 Vellum Buildings,
Inner Temple, E.C.

Mr Lionel Dacre presents his compliments to Monsieur Eugene Valmont, and would be obliged if Monsieur Valmont could make it convenient to call upon him in his chambers tomorrow morning at eleven.

Had the man become aware that he was being shadowed, or did the surly servant inform him of the enquiries made? I was soon to know. I called punctually at eleven next morning, and was received with charming urbanity by Mr Dacre himself. The taciturn Hopper had evidently been sent away for the occasion.

'My dear Monsieur Valmont, I am delighted to meet you,' said the young man with more effusiveness than I had ever noticed in an Englishman before, although his very next words supplied an explanation that did not occur to me until afterwards as somewhat far-fetched. 'I believe we are by way of being countrymen, and, therefore, although the hour is early, I hope you will allow me to offer you some of that bottled sunshine of the year '78, from la belle France, to whose prosperity and honour we shall drink together. For such a toast any hour is propitious,' and to my amazement he brought forth from the case I had seen arrive two days before a bottle of that superb vintage.

'Now,' said I to myself, 'it is going to be difficult to keep a clear head if the aroma of that nectar rises to the brain. But, tempting as is the cup, I shall drink sparingly, and hope he may not be so judicious.'

Sensitive, I already experienced the charm of his personality, and well understood the friendship Mr Bentham Gibbes felt for him. But I saw the trap spread before me. He expected, under the influence of champagne and courtesy, to extract a promise from me which I must find myself unable to give.

'Sir, you interest me by claiming kinship with France. I had understood that you belonged to one of the oldest families of England.'

'Ah, England!' he cried, with an expressive gesture of outspreading hands truly Parisian in its significance. 'The trunk belongs to

England, of course, but the root—ah! the root, Monsieur Valmont, penetrated the soil from which this vine of the gods has been drawn.'

Then, filling my glass and his own, he cried:

'To France, which my family left in the year 1066!'

I could not help laughing at his fervent ejaculation.

'1066! Ah, that is a long time ago, Mr Dacre.'

'In years, perhaps; in feelings but a day. My forefathers came over to steal, and, Lord! how well they accomplished it! They stole the whole country—something like a theft, say I—under that Prince of robbers well named the Conqueror. In our secret hearts we all admire a great thief, and if not a great one, then an expert one, who covers his tracks so perfectly that the hounds of justice are baffled in attempting to follow them. Now, even you, Monsieur Valmont—I can see you are the most generous of men, with a lively sympathy found to perfection only in France—even you must suffer a pang of regret when you lay a thief by the heels who has done his task deftly.'

'I fear, Mr Dacre, you credit me with a magnanimity to which I dare not lay claim. The criminal is a danger to society.'

'True, true; you are in the right, Monsieur Valmont. Still, admit there are cases that would touch you tenderly. For example, a man, ordinarily honest; a great need; a sudden opportunity. He takes that of which another has abundance, and he, nothing. What then, Monsieur Valmont? Is the man to be sent to perdition for a momentary weakness?'

His words astonished me. Was I on the verge of hearing a confession? It almost amounted to that already.

'Mr Dacre,' I said, 'I cannot enter into the subtleties you pursue. My duty is to find the criminal.'

'You are in the right, Monsieur Valmont, and I am enchanted to find so sensible a head on French shoulders. Although you are a more recent arrival, if I may say so, than myself, you nevertheless already give utterance to sentiments which do honour to England. It is your duty to hunt down the criminal. Very well. In that I think I can aid you, so have taken the liberty of requesting your attendance here this morning. Let me fill your glass again, Monsieur Valmont.'

'No more, I beg of you, Mr Dacre.'

'What, do you think the receiver is as bad as the thief?'

I was so taken aback at his remark that I suppose my face showed the amazement within me. But the young man merely laughed with

apparently free-hearted enjoyment, poured more wine in his own glass, and tossed it off. Not knowing what to say, I changed the trend of conversation.

'Mr Gibbes said you had been kind enough to recommend me to his attention. May I ask how you came to hear of me?'

'Ah, who has not heard of the renowned Monsieur Valmont?' and as he said this, for the first time there began to grow a suspicion in my mind that he was chaffing me, as it is called in England, a procedure which I cannot endure. Indeed, if this young man practised it in my own country he would find himself with a duel on his hands before he had gone far. However, the next instant his voice resumed its original fascination, and I listened to it as to some delicious melody.

'I have only to mention my cousin, Lady Gladys Dacre, and you will at once understand why I recommended you to my friend. The case of Lady Gladys, you will remember, required a delicate touch which is not always to be had in this land of England, except when those who possess the gift do us the honour to sojourn with us.'

I noticed that my glass was again filled, and as I bowed my acknowledgements of his compliment, I indulged in another sip of the delicious wine; and then I sighed, for I began to realize it was going to be difficult for me, in spite of my disclaimer, to tell this man's friend he had stolen the money.

All this time he had been sitting on the edge of the table, while I occupied a chair at its end. He sat there in careless fashion, swinging a foot to and fro. Now he sprang to the floor and drew up a chair, placing on the table a blank sheet of paper. Then he took from the mantelshelf a packet of letters, and I was astonished to see they were held together by two bits of cardboard and a rubber band similar to the combination that had held the folded banknotes. With great nonchalance he slipped off the rubber band, threw it and the pieces of cardboard on the table before me, leaving the documents loose to his hand.

'Now, Monsieur Valmont,' he cried jauntily, 'you have been occupied for several days on this case—the case of my dear friend, Bentham Gibbes, who is one of the best fellows in the world.'

'He said the same of you, Mr Dacre.'

'I am gratified to hear it. Would you mind letting me know to what point your researches have led you?'

'They have led me to a direction rather than to a point.'

'Ah! In the direction of a man, of course?'

'Certainly.'

'Who is he?'

'Will you pardon me if I decline to answer you at the present moment?'

'That means you are not sure.'

'It may mean, Mr Dacre, that I am employed by Mr Gibbes, and do not feel at liberty to disclose to another the results of my quest without his permission.'

'But Mr Bentham Gibbes and I are entirely at one in this matter. Perhaps you are aware that I am the only person with whom he discussed the case besides yourself.'

'That is undoubtedly true, Mr Dacre; still, you see the difficulty of my position.'

'Yes, I do, and so shall not press you further. But I have also been interesting myself, in a purely amateurish way, of course. You would, perhaps, have no disinclination to learn whether my deductions agree with yours.'

'Not in the least. I should be very glad to know the conclusion at which you have arrived. May I ask if you suspect anyone in particular?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Will you name him?'

'No, I shall copy the admirable reticence you yourself have shown. And now let us attack this mystery in a sane and businesslike manner. You have already examined the room. Well, here is a rough sketch of it. There is the table; in this corner the chair on which the coat was flung. Here sat Gibbes at the head of the table. Those on the left-hand side had their backs to the chair. I, being in the centre to the right, saw the chair, the coat, and the notes, and called attention to them. Now our first duty is to find a motive. If it were a murder, our motive might be hatred, revenge, robbery, what you like. As it is simply the stealing of money, the man must have been either a born thief, or else some hitherto innocent person pressed to the crime by great necessity. Do you agree with me, Monsieur Valmont?'

'Perfectly. You follow exactly the line of my own reasoning.'

'Very well. It is unlikely that a born thief was one of Mr Gibbes' guests. Therefore we are reduced to look for a man under the spur of

necessity—a man who has no money of his own, but who must raise a certain amount, let us say by a certain date, if we can find such a man in that company. Do you not agree with me that he is likely to be the thief?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Then let us start our process of elimination. Out goes Viscount Stern, a man with twenty thousand acres of land, and nobody quite knows what income. I mark off the name of Lord Templemere, one of His Majesty’s judges, entirely above suspicion. Next Sir John Sanclare; he also is rich, but Vincent Innis is still richer, so the pencil obliterates his name. Now we have Angus McKeller, an author of some note, as you are well aware, deriving a good income from his books, and a better one from his plays; a canny Scot, so we may rub his name from our paper and our memory. How do my erasures correspond with yours, Monsieur Valmont?’

‘They correspond exactly, Mr Dacre.’

‘I am flattered to hear it. There remains one name untouched; Mr Lionel Dacre, the descendant, as we have said, of robbers.’

‘I have not said so, Mr Dacre.’

‘Ah, my dear Valmont, the politeness of your country asserts itself. Let us not be deluded, but follow our inquiry wherever it leads. I suspect Lionel Dacre. What do you know of his circumstances before the dinner of the twenty-third?’

As I made no reply, he looked up at me with his frank boyish face illumined with a winning smile.

‘You know nothing of his circumstances?’ he asked.

‘It grieves me to state that I do. Mr Lionel Dacre was penniless on the night of the dinner on the twenty-third.’

‘Oh, don’t exaggerate, Monsieur Valmont,’ cried Dacre, with a laugh, ‘he had one sixpence, two pennies, and a halfpenny. How did you know he was penniless?’

‘I knew he ordered a case of champagne from the London representative of Camelot Frères, and was refused unless he paid the money down.’

‘Quite right; and then when you were talking to Hopper you saw the case of champagne delivered. Excellent, excellent, Monsieur Valmont. But will a man steal, think you, to supply himself with even so delicious a wine as this we have been tasting—and, by the way, forgive my neglect. Allow me to fill your glass, Monsieur Valmont.’

'Not another drop, if you will excuse me, Mr Dacre.'

'Ah, yes, champagne should not be mixed with evidence. When we have finished, perhaps. What further proof have you?'

'I have proof that Mr Dacre was threatened with bankruptcy, if on the twenty-fourth he did not pay a bill of seventy-eight pounds that had long been outstanding. I have proof that this was paid, not on the twenty-fourth, but on the twenty-sixth. Mr Dacre had gone to the solicitor and assured him he would have the money on that date, whereupon he was given two days' grace.'

'Ah, well, he was entitled to three, you know, in law. Yes, there, Monsieur Valmont, you touch the fatal point. The threat of bankruptcy will drive a man in Dacre's position to almost any crime. Bankruptcy to a barrister spells ruin. It means a career blighted; it means a life buried with little chance of resurrection. I see you grasp the supreme importance of that bit of evidence. The case of champagne is as nothing compared with it; and this reminds me that in the crisis I shall take another sip, with your permission. Sure you won't join me?'

'Not at this juncture, Mr Dacre.'

'I envy your moderation. Here's to the success of our search, Monsieur Valmont.'

I felt sorry for the gay young fellow as with smiling face he drank the champagne.

'Now, monsieur,' he went on, 'I am amazed to learn how much you have found out. Really, I think tradespeople, solicitors, and all such should keep better guard on their tongues than they do. Nevertheless, these documents I have at my elbow, and which I expected would surprise you, are merely the letters and receipts. Here is the letter from the solicitor threatening me with bankruptcy; here is his receipt dated the twenty-sixth; here is the refusal of the wine merchant, and here is his receipt for the money. Here are smaller bills liquidated. With my pencil we will add them up. Seventy-eight pounds bulks large. We add the smaller items, and it totals ninety-three pounds, seven shillings, and fourpence. Let us now examine my purse. Here is a five-pound note; there is a minted sovereign. Here is twelve and sixpence in silver; here is twopence in coppers. Now the purse is empty. Let us add this to the amount on the paper. Do my eyes deceive me, or is the total exactly a hundred pounds? There is the stolen money accounted for.'

'Pardon me, Mr Dacre,' I said, 'but there is still a sovereign on the mantelpiece.'

Dacre threw back his head, and laughed with greater heartiness than I had yet known him to indulge in during our short acquaintance.

'By Jove!' he cried, 'you've got me there. I'd forgotten entirely about that pound on the mantelpiece, which belongs to you.'

'To me? Impossible!'

'It does, and cannot interfere in the least with our hundred pound calculation. That is the sovereign you gave to my man, Hopper, who, believing me hard pressed, took it that I might have the enjoyment of it. Hopper belongs to our family, or the family belongs to him, I am never sure which. You must have missed in him the deferential bearing of a man-servant in Paris, yet he is true gold, like the sovereign you bestowed upon him, and he bestowed upon me. Now here, monsieur, is the evidence of the theft, together with the rubber band and two pieces of cardboard. Ask my friend Gibbes to examine them minutely. They are all at your disposition, monsieur, and you will learn how much easier it is to deal with the master than with the servant when you wish information. All the gold you possess would not have wrung these incriminating documents from old Hopper. I had to send him away today to the West End, fearing that in his brutal British way he might have assaulted you if he got an inkling of your mission.'

'Mr Dacre,' said I slowly, 'you have thoroughly convinced me——'

'I thought I would,' he interrupted with a laugh.

'—that you did not take the money.'

'Oh, this is a change of wind, surely. Many a man has been hanged through a chain of circumstantial evidence much weaker than this which I have exhibited to you. Don't you see the subtlety of my action? Ninety-nine persons in a hundred would say, "No man could be such a fool as to put Valmont on his track, and then place in Valmont's hands such striking evidence." But there comes in my craftiness. Of course the rock you run up against will be Gibbes' incredulity. The first question he will ask you may be this: "Why did not Dacre come and borrow the money from me?" Now there you have a certain weakness in your chain of evidence. I know perfectly well that Gibbes would lend me the money, and he knew perfectly well that if I were pressed to the wall I should ask him.'

'Mr Dacre,' said I, 'you have been playing with me. I should resent

that with most men, but whether it is your own genial manner, or the effect of his excellent champagne, or both together, I forgive you. But I am convinced of another thing. You know who took the money.'

'I don't know, but I suspect.'

'Will you tell me whom you suspect?'

'That would not be fair, but I shall now take the liberty of filling your glass with champagne.'

'I am your guest, Mr Dacre.'

'Admirably answered, monsieur,' he replied, pouring out the wine; 'and now I shall give you the clue. Find out all about the story of the silver spoons.'

'The story of the silver spoons? What silver spoons?'

'Ah, that is the point. You step out of the Temple into Fleet Street, seize by the shoulder the first man you meet, and ask him to tell you about the silver spoons. There are but two men and two spoons concerned. When you learn who those two men are, you will know that one of them did not take the money, and I give you my assurance that the other did.'

'You speak in mystery, Mr Dacre.'

'But certainly, for I am speaking to Monsieur Eugene Valmont.'

'I echo your words, sir. Admirably answered. You put me on my mettle, and I flatter myself that I see your kindly drift. You wish me to solve the mystery of this stolen money. Sir, you do me honour, and I drink to your health.'

'To yours, monsieur,' said Lionel Dacre, 'and here is a further piece of information which my friend Gibbes would never have given you. When he told me the money was gone, I cried in the anguish of impending bankruptcy: "I wish to goodness I had it!" Whereupon he immediately compelled me to accept his cheque for a hundred pounds, of which, as I have shown you, alas! only six pounds twelve and eightpence remains.'

On leaving Mr Dacre I took a hansom to a café in Regent Street, which is a passable imitation of similar places of refreshment in Paris. There, calling for a cup of black coffee, I sat down to think. The clue of the silver spoons! He had laughingly suggested that I should take by the shoulders the first man I met, and ask him what the story of the silver spoons was. This course naturally struck me as absurd. Nevertheless, it contained a hint. I must ask somebody, and that the right person, to tell me the tale of the silver spoons.

Under the influence of the black coffee, I reasoned it out in this way. On the night of the twenty-third some one of the six guests there present stole a hundred pounds, but Dacre had said that one of the actors in the silver spoon episode was the actual thief. That person, then, must have been one of Mr Gibbes' guests at the dinner of the twenty-third. Probably two of the guests were the participators in the silver spoon comedy, but be that as it may, it followed that one at least of the men around Mr Gibbes' table knew the episode of the silver spoons.

Perhaps Bentham Gibbes himself was cognizant of it. It followed, therefore, that the easiest plan was to question each of the men who partook of that dinner. Yet if only one knew about the spoons, that one must also have some idea that these spoons formed the clue which attached him to the crime of the twenty-third, in which case he was little likely to divulge what he knew, and that to an entire stranger. Of course I might go to Dacre himself and demand the story of the silver spoons, but this would be a confession of failure on my part, and I rather dreaded Lionel Dacre's hearty laughter when I admitted that the mystery was too much for me. Besides this, I was very well aware of the young man's kindly intentions towards me. He wished me to unravel the coil myself, and so I determined not to go to him except as a last resource.

I resolved to begin with Mr Gibbes, and, finishing my coffee, got again into a hansom and drove back to the Temple. I found Mr Gibbes in his room, and after greeting me, his first enquiry was about the case.

'How are you getting on?' he asked.

'I think I am getting on fairly well,' I replied, 'and expect to finish in a day or two, if you will kindly tell me the story of the silver spoons.'

'The silver spoons?' he echoed, quite evidently not understanding me.

'There happened an incident in which two men were engaged, and this incident related to a pair of silver spoons. I want to get the particulars of that.'

'I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about,' replied Gibbes, thoroughly bewildered. 'You will have to be more definite, I fear, if you are to get any help from me.'

'I cannot be more definite, because I have already told you all I know.'

‘What bearing has all this on our own case?’

‘I was informed that if I got hold of the clue of the silver spoons I should be in a fair way of setting our case.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Mr Lionel Dacre.’

‘Oh, does Dacre refer to his own conjuring?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sure. What was his conjuring?’

‘A very clever trick he did one night at dinner here about two months ago.’

‘Had it anything to do with silver spoons?’

‘Well, it was silver spoons or silver forks, or something of that kind. I had entirely forgotten the incident. So far as I recollect at the moment, there was a sleight-of-hand man of great expertness in one of the music-halls, and the talk turned upon him. Then Dacre said the tricks he did were easy, and holding up a spoon or a fork, I don’t remember which, he asserted his ability to make it disappear before our eyes, to be found afterwards in the clothing of someone there present. Several offered to make him a bet that he could do nothing of the kind, but he said he would bet with no one but Innis, who sat opposite him. Innis, with some reluctance, accepted the bet, and then Dacre, with a great show of the usual conjurer’s gesticulations, spread forth his empty hands, and said we should find the spoon in Innis’ pocket, and there, sure enough, it was. It was a clever trick, but we were never able to get him to repeat it.’

‘Thank you very much, Mr Gibbes; I think I see daylight now.’

‘If you do, you are cleverer than I, by a long chalk,’ cried Bentham Gibbes, as I took my departure.

I went directly downstairs, and knocked at Mr Dacre’s door once more. He opened the door himself, his man not yet having returned.

‘Ah, monsieur,’ he cried; ‘back already? You don’t mean to tell me you have so soon got to the bottom of the silver spoon entanglement?’

‘I think I have, Mr Dacre. You were sitting at dinner opposite Mr Vincent Innis. You saw him conceal a silver spoon in his pocket. You probably waited for some time to understand what he meant by this, and as he did not return the spoon to its place, you proposed a conjuring trick, made the bet with him, and thus the spoon was returned to the table.’

‘Excellent, excellent, monsieur! That is very nearly what occurred, except that I acted at once. I had had experiences with Mr Vincent Innis before. Never did he come to these rooms without my missing

some little trinket after he was gone. I am not a man of many possessions, while Mr Innis is a very rich person, and so, if anything is taken, I have little difficulty in coming to a knowledge of my loss. Of course, I never mentioned these disappearances to him. They were all trivial, as I have said, and, so far as the silver spoon was concerned, it was of no great value either. But I thought the bet and the recovery of the spoon would teach him a lesson; it apparently has not done so. On the night of the twenty-third he sat at my right hand, as you will see by consulting your diagram of the table and the guests. I asked him a question twice to which he did not reply, and, looking at him, I was startled by the expression in his eyes. They were fixed on a distant corner of the room, and following his gaze I saw what he was looking at with such hypnotizing concentration.

‘So absorbed was he in contemplation of the packet there so plainly exposed, that he seemed to be entirely oblivious of what was going on around him. I roused him from his trance by jocularly calling Gibbes’ attention to the display of money. I expected in this way to save Innis from committing the act which he seemingly did commit. Imagine, then, the dilemma in which I was placed when Gibbes confided to me the morning after what had occurred the night before.

‘I was positive that Innis had taken the money, yet I possessed no proof of it. I could not tell Gibbes, and I dare not speak to Innis. Of course, monsieur, you do not need to be told that Innis is not a thief in the ordinary sense of the word. He has no need to steal, and yet apparently cannot help doing so. I am sure that no attempt has been made to pass those notes. They are doubtless in his house at Kensington at this present moment. He is, in fact, a kleptomaniac, or a maniac of some sort. And now, Monsieur Valmont, was my hint regarding the silver spoons of any value to you?’

‘Of the most infinite value, Mr Dacre.’

‘Then let me make another suggestion. I leave it entirely to your bravery; a bravery which I confess I do not myself possess. Will you take a hansom, drive to Mr Innis’ house in the Cromwell Road, confront him quietly, and ask for the return of the packet? I am anxious to know what will happen. If he hands it to you, as I expect he will, then you must tell Mr Gibbes the whole story.’

‘Mr Dacre, your suggestion shall be immediately acted upon, and I thank you for your compliment to my courage.’

I found that Mr Innis inhabited a very grand house. After a time he

entered the study on the ground floor, to which I had been conducted. He held my card in his hand, and was looking at it with some surprise.

'I think I have not the pleasure of knowing you, Mr Valmont,' he said, courteously enough.

'No. I have called on a matter of business. I was once investigator for the French Government, and now am doing private detective work here in London.'

'Ah! And how is that supposed to interest me? I have nothing that I wish investigated. I did not send for you, did I?'

'No, Mr Innis; I merely took the liberty of calling to ask you to let me have the package you took out of Mr Bentham Gibbes' frock-coat pocket on the night of the twenty-third.'

'He wishes it returned, does he?'

'Yes.'

Mr Innis calmly went to a desk, which he unlocked and opened, displaying a veritable museum of trinkets of one sort and another. Pulling out a small drawer, he took from it the packet containing the five twenty-pound notes. Apparently it had never been undone. With a smile he handed it to me.

'You will make my apologies to Mr Gibbes for not returning it before. Tell him I have been unusually busy of late.'

'I shall not fail to do so,' said I, with a bow.

'Thanks so much. Good morning, Monsieur Valmont.'

'Good morning, Mr Innis.'

And so I returned the packet to Mr Bentham Gibbes, who pulled the notes from between their pasteboard protection, and begged me to accept them.