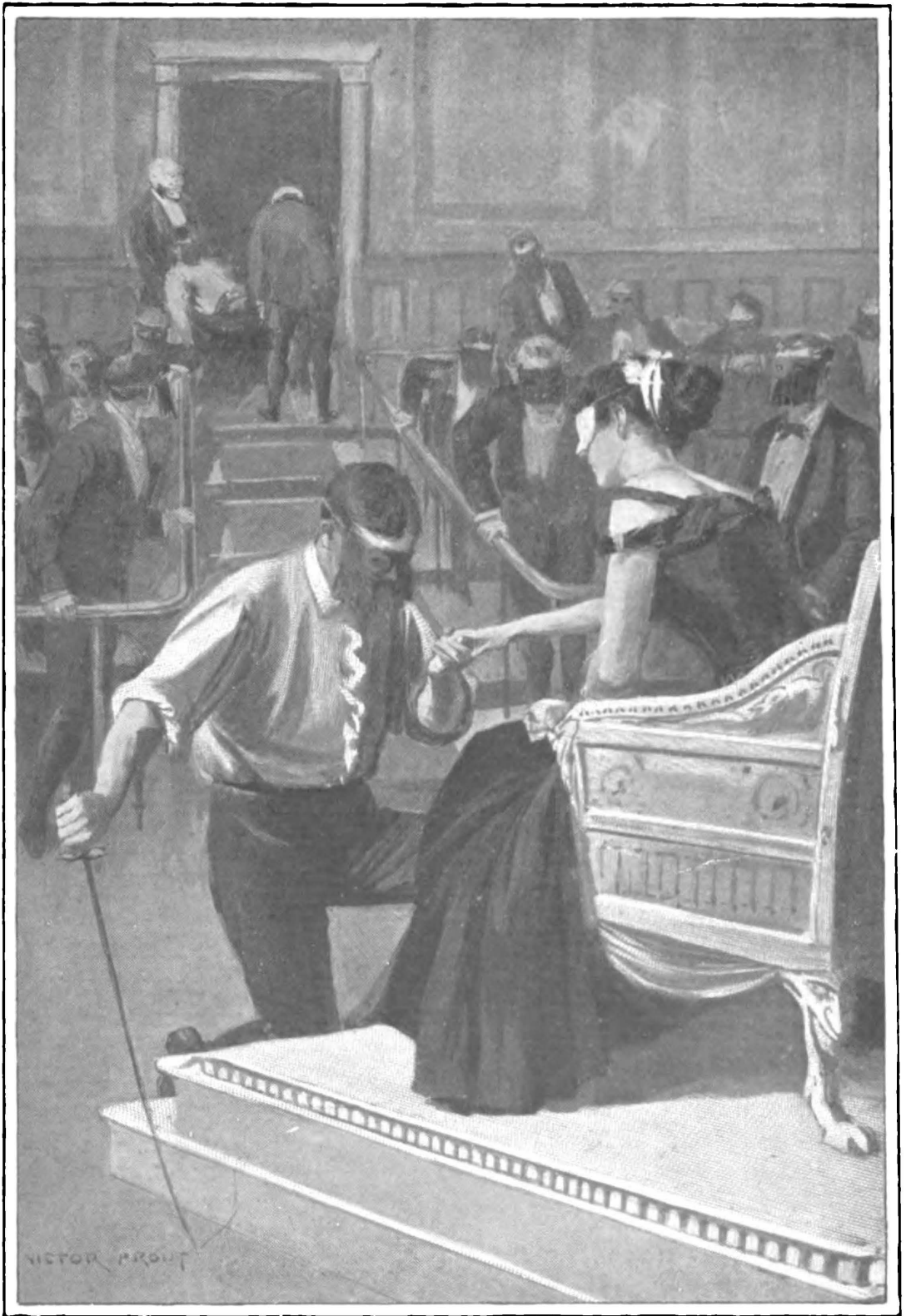


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The Woman of Death



The victor was kneeling upon the first step of the throne kissing the hand of the woman.

The Woman of Death

BY

GUY BOOTHBY

AUTHOR OF "DR. NIKOLA," ETC, ETC.



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THE WOMAN OF DEATH



CHAPTER I

“**M**ILORD MIDDLESBOROUGH est un bon garçon, mais c'est dommage qu'il trouvé le monde si ennuyant,” said the pretty Countess de Chevillac as she leant over the parapet of the terrace of Middlesborough's Villa and dropped a rose-leaf into the clear water of the Mediterranean below.

“If at the advanced age of thirty-two one reduces oneself by one's own exertions to the condition of the Great Alexander, one should not complain if the world *does* prove a little wearisome,” replied her companion, the witty Duc de Rheims. “Middlesborough is like a child surfeited with sweetmeats ; he has tired of his *pralines* and his *nougat*, and he would give anything for a new sensation.”

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“He is altogether annoying,” the lady added, and as she said it she gave a vicious little tug at the petals of the rose she held in her hand. “Nothing interests him, nothing amuses him. He will lose fifty thousand francs at roulette with the same expression on his face that it wears when he orders his carriage. On the day that he won the Grand Prix nobody could tell whether he was pleased or annoyed at his success. The other afternoon, when we were caught in that terrible storm off Cape Camarat, and thought the yacht must inevitably founder, he was barely interested. It was a bore, no doubt, but it couldn’t be helped. If we had gone to the bottom, he would doubtless have made his adieu beneath the waves with a cigarette in his mouth and the same expression of gentle resignation upon his face that always makes me long to shake him.”

“You must admit, however, that he is at least thorough in his failing,” said her companion. “While some men affect it, Middlesborough’s *ennui* is quite genuine. Did you ever hear what that dainty little American dancer, who took all Paris by storm last year, said of him? I think she put the case better than any one else has done.

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‘Lord Middlesborough,’ said she, speaking with that indescribable accent of her country, ‘from what I’ve seen of you, I reckon you’re just fairly tired of livin’; and yet you haven’t enough “*get up and get*” about you to go and kill yourself. You’ve got the dibs—why don’t you pay a hired man to put you out of your misery?’ ”

“I have not heard that story before,” the other answered. “And pray what was our friend’s reply?’ ”

“He smiled sweetly, as he always does, and told her that he had no doubt the suggestion was an excellent one in every way, but so far as he was concerned, it was unfortunately impracticable, for the simple reason that he could not muster up sufficient enthusiasm to go in search of the necessary man.”

“That is so like him. Oh dear! what a dreary world it must be when one has outlived one’s enthusiasm! How much more pleasant is it to be like de Trailles, who is eighty, and has not yet outgrown his boyish love for rice-pudding. But, see! here is the man himself, coming down the path. We have been talking of you, Lord Middlesborough, for the last fifteen minutes.”

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The individual addressed bowed gracefully. He was tall, possibly an inch and a half above six feet, and very graceful.

“In that case it is my duty, as your host, to offer you my apologies for a very uninteresting quarter of an hour,” he answered, as he seated himself on the balustrading. “I trust, however, that I have had the good fortune to secure you for my champion?”

The lady laughed musically. She was quite one of the prettiest women in Europe, and she had the advantage of knowing that he was aware of the fact.

“You would never forgive me,” she said, “if you could have heard how I have been abusing you. The Duke and I have come to the conclusion that you resemble Alexander the Great.”

“Alexander the Great? Good gracious! in what way?”

“For the reason, that the Duke thinks you sigh because you have no more worlds to conquer.”

“What a charming idea!” he said. “I fear, however, that you pay me too high a compliment. The positions should be reversed.. I sigh, not for

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the reason that I have no more worlds to conquer, but because the world has conquered me. Edison, or some other man, should really invent a new universe in which everything would be changed.”

“What a delightful idea!” said the Duke. “A new world in which everything would be changed? Pray tell us with whom you would people it?”

Middlesborough smoked thoughtfully for a few moments before he answered.

“The election of course would be by ballot, after the manner of the clubs,” he replied. “Equally of course there would be no politicians, or, at least, only the nice ones, and they would have to abandon their politics on election. There would be no money, in consequence, no moneyed men; and, above all, there would be no match-making mammas, and for the reason that there would be no marrying or giving in marriage.”

The Countess made a little *moue* as she put the question—

“Then there would be no love?”

“Certainly,” Middlesborough replied, with decision. “That is the one essential to the

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success of my scheme. Every one would love, and in the most intricate fashion possible."

"Your world would be too charming," the Countess replied. "I hope you will make it a stipulation that I am to be admitted. Like the monks of Medmenham, you will have to inscribe over your portals, 'Fay ce que voudras.'"

"Scarcely," said Middlesborough, "for to be compelled to do only as one pleased would imply the existence of a restraining hand, or, at any rate, of a dominating influence; neither would be permitted in my world. But while we are arranging these details, I am forgetting the commonplace motive of my presence here. Nina Larrandale and the others are anxious to drive into the Casino to-night, Countess. Will you permit me to be your charioteer? You will accompany us, of course, Duke?"

His companions having expressed their delight, they returned together to the house. A shudder ran through Middlesborough as he thought of the hot rooms of the Casino and the struggling specimens of humanity he would meet at the tables. He would far rather have spent the evening wandering in the orange groves, whispering soft

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nothings into the shell-like ear of the Countess de Chevillac. However, he was their host, and if his guests chose to amuse themselves in this way he could only consent. Accordingly he climbed the box of his coach, helped Madame de Chevillac to a seat beside him, and tooled his party into Monte Carlo with the workmanlike skill that had given him the reputation of being one of the best whips in Europe.

However sad it may be to have to confess such a thing, it must be admitted that his friends, when they had discussed him upon the terrace that afternoon, had not maligned him.

Evelyn Charles Devereux-Ducie, seventeenth Baron Middlesborough, was one of Fortune's favourites. Born to the inheritance of an old and honoured name, immense wealth, and a singularly handsome person, it would seem that the gods had done all in their power to make his path smooth through life. And yet the very advantages they bestowed upon him were destined ultimately to prove his chief affliction. At Eton and Christchurch he had been immensely popular; he left both institutions, however, without achieving the reputation of a worker. He excelled in every

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branch of athletics, yet when the annual University Sports came round his name was invariably absent from the list of competitors. He was offered an oar in the Dark Blue boat, but declined it for the reason that he had suddenly lost all interest in matters aquatic. On attaining his majority he took his seat in the House of Lords, where he made a good impression, and it was supposed by some of his father's old friends that he might, in the course of time, develop into a power. Unfortunately for their hopes, however, he tired of politics as he tired of everything else, and by the time he was twenty-six he was scarcely to be seen in the House at all. He was a finished and fearless horseman, and for three seasons in succession he hunted the family pack ; he collected a big stud at Newmarket and backed his horses to an extent that caused the greybeards to wag their heads and prophesy that even his wealth would not bear the strain.

Then one day he found that he was tired of hunting and racing ; his horses and hounds were accordingly advertised for sale, and he himself departed on a yachting cruise round the world. The circumference of the globe was not attained, how-

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ever, for, by the time they reached Japan, he was weary of the sea. The yacht's head was accordingly turned, and within an hour of arriving at this decision, he was on his way to South Africa, where he proposed to devote a year to shooting big game. Eventually he reached England, looking very brown and well, but, if possible, even less interested in the world, and its affairs, than he had been when he had first set out.

To do him justice, it was not because he was lazy, or that he in any way despised his neighbours, it was only a peculiar inability to enjoy amusement when the first novelty had worn off. An attachment to a hobby is often endangered by the lack of means to indulge it to its full. With almost unlimited wealth at his command, Middlesborough was able to commence where others, less favoured, were perforce compelled to leave off. It is possible, and more than probable, since his constitution possessed a considerable amount of obstinacy, that had he had more difficulties to contend with, he would not have tired of each amusement so quickly. Even deer-stalking—to quote a certain well-known writer—would pall as an amusement if one could

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shoot a "royal" every five minutes throughout the day. The world that criticised him so freely was apt to forget this, when it said that Lord Middlesborough "was as unstable as the wind, and as changeable as the shadows of an April day."

Middlesborough had been entertaining a large house party for upwards of a fortnight, and this was the last day of their stay. On the morrow the Countess de Chevilhac was to go on to visit certain friends at Bordighera; de Trailles would travel as far as Rome, where he had an audience with the Holy Father; Anstruther and his pretty wife were returning to the fogs of England, while the Duke de Rheims and Middlesborough intended making their way to Paris in search of such amusements as the Gay City could discover for them. After that, the villa overlooking the blue Mediterranean would be given over to the hands of caretakers, and it might be months, or even years, before it would see its master again.

The play that evening at the Casino was of the usual description. Middlesborough began by winning and ended by losing. At last, having found no satisfaction in it, he rose from the table and resigned his chair to the man who, up to that

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moment, had been waiting so patiently behind him. He discovered that he had only followed the example of de Rheims, who was now standing at some little distance watching the players.

“So you have tired of it,” said the latter, as his host joined him.

“The room is stifling, let us go out and smoke in the gardens. What people can see in this sort of thing passes my comprehension.”

At the door their progress was delayed by the entrance of a small crowd of people. Middlesborough, whose thoughts were elsewhere, did not give very much attention to them, but when they had passed he noticed that a lady, who, accompanied by a gentleman, had been the last to enter, had dropped one of the gloves she had been taking off. He picked it up and followed her.

“Permit me to restore you this,” he said in French when he reached her.

She took the glove and, as she did so, looked up at him. Middlesborough saw a pale, sweet face, with large and serious eyes. She thanked him and then, with a bow, passed on.

“Surely she is not going to play like the rest?” he said to himself, as he watched the retreating

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figure. "She looks more fitted for the Sacred Heart than for the Casino. I wonder who she can be?" In his life he had seen many beautiful women—more perhaps than he could remember, but he did not know that he had ever seen a face the memory of which haunted him as did this one. And yet, if the truth must be told, it was not altogether beautiful. The mouth was a little too large, the forehead a trifle too high, for it to find merit in the eyes of many connoisseurs. Rejoining his friend, he passed into the cool night outside. A moment later de Rheims was accosted by a man who was about to enter the building. They stopped for a few minutes, while Middlesborough continued his walk down the path. When his companion joined him again there was an air of excitement about him that had not been there a few minutes before.

"My dear fellow," he said, "we are certainly in luck's way. Do you know that Madame d'Espère is at Monte Carlo?"

Middlesborough smiled at his friend's excitement.

"*Cher ami*," he said, "I can safely assure you that I did not know it, and for the very simple

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reason that I had never heard of Madame d'Espère before. Who is she? Pray enlighten me."

"She is Madame d'Espère," his companion replied, "and when you've said that you've said everything. I had forgotten for the moment that it was possible you might not know her. When a man voluntarily goes off to the end of the earth and remains there for years at a time, he must not blame any one if he discovers on his return that new people have come to the front, new beauties dawned upon the world, and that So-and-so, who was probably starving in a garret when he left, is now one of the most sought-after people in Europe."

"I am to understand, then, that Madame d'Espère is a celebrity?" replied the other. "I am afraid I am rather tired of celebrities. May I inquire what is her particular claim to notoriety?"

"She has a hundred claims," de Rheims answered enthusiastically. "But if you like you shall judge for yourself. I am sufficiently acquainted with her to be able to introduce you to her presence, if you would care to accompany me. Her villa is only a short distance from here,

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and our friends will not be looking for us for another couple of hours at least. What have you to say to my proposal?"

"That it is an admirable one, in every way," Middlesborough replied. "By all means introduce me to this wonderful creature who has the good fortune to interest you so strongly. Are you quite sure, however, that you would not prefer to go alone? If so, do not hesitate to tell me. I have no desire to be *de trop*."

"You need have no fear on that score," said the Duke. "I shall be only too glad to take you with me. We have often spoken of you, and I promised her I would take the first opportunity of making you known to her. As you can see for yourself, that opportunity has now arrived."

With that they passed out of the grounds of the Casino, and made their way in the direction that the Duke had indicated.

"*Facile decensus Averni*," says the old Latin proverb, but easier still is the road that leads to Danger. In something less than ten minutes after they had left the Casino, Middlesborough found himself following his companion into the drawing-room of Madame d'Espère's villa. It was a finely

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proportioned room, and, at the moment of their entrance, contained at least a dozen people who were scattered here and there in little groups. On hearing the name of her visitors their hostess, who had been seated beside a well-known French diplomatist, at the further end of the room, rose, and came forward to greet them.

“Monsieur de St. Bérim was telling me less than five minutes ago that you were in Monaco,” she said to de Rheims, as she shook hands with him. “It is indeed kind of you to come and see me, and particularly to bring Lord Middlesborough with you.”

She seated herself in a comfortable chair and signed to the two men to follow her example. Of one thing there could be no sort of doubt: she was an extremely beautiful woman. It was a face that might have changed the destiny of a Cæsar, have subjugated an Anthony, or caused a Paris to break the bonds of hospitality. That she possessed the power of catering for the intellectual, while she challenged physical admiration, was evidenced by the characters and professions of the men about her. In one corner was Prince Gologoffski, whose socialistic tendencies had brought

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him into trouble with his own Government, and had been the means of driving him into exile ; talking to him was Herr Volker, the no less famous German scientist ; while, on the further side of the room, conversing with a French military attachè, was a well-known English financier, and a famous member of the Austrian Bar.

Most of these present were known more or less well to Middlesborough, and remembering this fact he marvelled that he had never heard from them of the woman beside whom he was seated.

“You are a great traveller, Lord Middlesborough, I believe ?” said Madame d’Espère ; “I have been told that you know the world as we know the Elysées Champs. How pleasant it must be to feel that you have conquered all the barriers of Distance, that you have only to give your orders and to be transported from Paris to Peking, or Vienna or Fiji, without trouble or inconvenience to yourself ! Is it your intention to remain in Europe very long ?”

“My friends would tell you that I seldom remain anywhere very long,” Middlesborough replied.

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“I am afraid you have been too long away from Paris. The Duke here is inconsolable if he is absent for more than a month from his beloved boulevards. Are you not, monseigneur?” she added, turning to de Rheims.

“Only since I have known you, Madame,” the other replied, with a bow.

She tapped his arm playfully with her fan.

“I thought it was one of our strictest rules never to pay compliments,” she said.

Compliment or no compliment it seemed to Middlesborough that there was another meaning underlying de Rheims' speech. In days to come that meaning was destined to be only too clear to him. For the present, however, he was too much in the dark concerning the present life and antecedents of Madame d'Espère to venture upon even a conjecture. For want of something better to say, he remarked that he had not seen her at the Casino.

“I never gamble,” she answered. “At least not in that way. You may scarcely credit it, but I have the most abject horror of losing money. When I tell you that five years ago I was an unknown woman, penniless and starving, that to-day I am rich, and in consequence I have

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many so-called friends, you will perhaps be able to understand it. I owe it all to the fact that I have hoarded every *sou* I could scrape together. I believe if I were tempted, there is scarcely anything I would not do for money. Where other people want fame, honour, and advancement, I want only wealth—to have the knowledge always with me that I shall never again be as I once was.”

She said this with a sincerity that left no mistake as to her words. While she had been speaking de Rheims had risen and crossed the room to speak to Gologoffski, leaving them alone together.

Middlesborough could not deny that he was supremely interested in his companion. He noticed the beautiful poise of her head, her wealth of hair, the colour of her skin, and the exquisite moulding of her hands. Her voice was full and musical, and her eyes had the peculiar faculty of being able to retain attention when once it had been aroused. That she was accomplished above the average of her sex was a fact of which there could be no doubt, but it struck Middlesborough that there was something more behind it all than he could at present understand.



"You carry your fate in your face."

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While he was talking to her it seemed to him that he was under a spell, that he was being influenced by a will stronger than his own.

She had been silent for a moment. When she spoke again her voice had changed a little. There was a shade of awe in it which he knew could not have been of him.

“Has it ever struck you, Lord Middlesborough, that you carry your Fate in your face?” she asked abruptly.

“Do we not all do so?” he inquired with a smile. “It is an accepted fact, is it not, that you may read a man’s character in his face? If his character, why not his Fate? One is in a great measure dependent on the other.”

“Yes,” she replied gravely, as if she were pondering over what he had said, “but how few are there who can see it. Do you believe it is possible for us to foretell the Future?”

“If you mean by palmistry, necromancy, or the wheel of life,” Middlesborough replied, “I must confess that I do not.”

“And yet I almost think you should,” she answered, “for if I am not mistaken you were afforded an illustration once that should have

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served to teach you that there is something more in it than meets the eye.”

Middlesborough started. It was quite true, but how did she know it? “I am afraid I do not quite understand,” he said. “To what do you refer?”

“You were travelling in India at the time,” she said. “You had with you a friend who was young and high-spirited. At the termination of your visit to the Viceroy in Calcutta you were to go up-country where you were to be entertained by a native prince. Before leaving you showed a kindness to a poor fakir, who, in return bade you warn your friend that if he left the capital he would be dead within a week. You laughed at the notion, and resolved on no account to tell your companion, for fear it might make him nervous, and he might decline to go. What was the result?”

By this time Middlesborough’s suspicion had vanished and he was genuinely moved. He could well recollect the horror of that time.

“Your friend died of cholera in a tent by the roadside before you reached your destination,” she continued, still looking straight at him and

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speaking in a voice that was little above a whisper.

Middlesborough could not repress a shudder. The incident she had described had actually occurred. Every detail was correct. It was perhaps the most grizzly secret of his life, and the one he least liked to remember. Over and over again in the years that had elapsed since it happened, he had told himself there could not possibly have been anything in the fakir's warning. Yet how terribly true it had proved to be! But how had Madame d'Espère become aware of it? he asked himself. He had been alone at the time that he received the warning; the fakir was a wandering Hindoo who could not possibly have seen or dreamt of this beautiful Parisienne. To Middlesborough himself it had been a memory too painful for him ever to speak about it to any one. How, therefore, she could have become acquainted with it was a mystery he could not solve. He tried to question her upon the subject, but she only shook her head.

"Did I not tell you," she said, "that you carry your Fate in your face?"

"You did certainly say so," Middlesborough

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answered, "but you did not add that I carry the fates of my friends there also."

"Then I was right in what I told you," she continued. "I am glad of that."

She said this as if she attached far greater importance to it than he could understand.

"I wonder if you would believe, Lord Middlesborough," she said even more seriously than she had yet spoken, "that it is fate that has brought you to me to-night? When I left Paris, a few days ago, I felt quite convinced in my own mind that it was to advance another step towards the completion of my destiny. You may think I am talking in a very strange way, at our first meeting, when I say that I firmly believe that our two lives, and that of one other person, are inextricably interwoven. You smile, but believe me it is so. Do not jest about it, for pity's sake! You little know what may be before you.

Middlesborough saw that this was no acting; she was genuinely affected. Whatever her manner may have been before, it is quite certain that it was all seriousness now. For a moment he could have sworn that she trembled; then, with an effort, she pulled herself together, and her composure came back to her.

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“Forgive me,” she said in a different voice. “How absurd I am! We have all of us our little failings, and I had forgotten for a moment that this was our first meeting. You will think me an hysterical schoolgirl.”

At this moment de Rheims crossed the room to them. Middlesborough took this as a signal that the other thought it time they made their *adieux*. He accordingly rose from his chair. When he spoke, de Rheims noticed that there was a significant change in their manner towards each other.

“You are returning to Paris to-morrow, I hear,” she said, after Middlesborough had bade her goodbye. “I hope, if I have not frightened you too much to-night, that you will come and see me there. Monsieur de Rheims will be able to give you my address.”

Middlesborough expressed the pleasure it would give him to do so, and then followed his friend out of the room. He had not been in the house half an hour, and yet it seemed to him as if he had known Madame d’Espère for a lifetime.

“Now that you have seen her, how did Madame

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strike you?" the Duke inquired as they passed down the street in the direction of the Casino.

"She is certainly a very beautiful woman," said Middlesborough. "But I must confess I don't know what to think of her."

"Nobody ever does," his companion replied. "She is perhaps the greatest enigma of the day. She did not happen to tell you anything about your Past, I suppose? Any circumstance that you thought was known only to yourself?"

"She did! She described a thing to me of which I am prepared to swear I have never spoken to any living soul. It made me feel quite superstitious for a moment. I wonder how she does it?"

"The strange part of it is," the Duke continued, without answering his companion's question, "that she affects every one in a different way. Do you remember little Pontevicchi?"

"Perfectly," Middlesborough replied. "What about him?"

"As a rule he is a self-contained fellow enough, but when he was introduced to her, he acted like a madman. You cannot imagine how he behaved. He became almost hysterical, raved like a lunatic,

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vowed that she had the Evil Eye, and that it was death for any man to remain in her presence. There was quite a scene, and the man who brought him into her house had to get him away as quickly as possible. Nothing would induce him to go back again. I can well remember my own sensations when I was introduced to her. It was in Naples, and I had been yachting with Perrambino. As we entered the harbour, he turned to me and said, 'Mark my words, Madame d'Espère is here.' Like you I inquired who the lady in question might be. He answered that she was a new comet in the firmament of Europe, and that she had an extraordinary influence over man. So enthusiastic was he in his praise of her, that I made him promise that he would introduce me to her as soon as we got in. It was not until we did get in, and found that she had only arrived that afternoon, that I inquired how it was he had been so certain that she was in the city. We had been yachting for a fortnight before, and I did not see how he could have become aware of the fact.

"'I cannot say how I knew it,' was his reply. 'I felt it, that is all. If she were in Paris or Vienna, and I arrived in either city, I should

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know it just as well. Think what you please, you can only admit that, in this instance, I was right.'

"Paul Delvitto says that when he is with her he always feels as if he must tell her all his secrets, good, bad, and indifferent. For her sake, as well as his own, I hope he does not."

"And how does she affect you?" Middlesborough inquired.

"Very happily," the other replied. "When I am with her I feel conscious of a pleasant exhilaration. She affects me like a rare vintage of champagne, that is all."

"Do you know where she hails from? What countrywoman is she?"

"That is a question nobody but herself can answer," de Rheims replied. "She is a mystery. She appeared first in Vienna, I believe, but she is neither an Austrian nor a Hungarian. Then she went on to St. Petersburg, where they believe her to be Russian, afterwards to Paris, where they feel sure she is French."

"Is she wealthy?"

"That is another question I cannot answer," said the Duke. "The villa she is occupying here belongs to Max Durrer; but in Paris she keeps

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an excellent establishment. When I tell you that Guillaume Pérès is her chef you will understand that she does not do things by halves. Her dinners are delightful, and the nicest men in Paris are to be met at her receptions."

"She is certainly very interesting," said Middlesborough, "and in the present state of society a woman who is that, is a *rara avis*. When she returns to Paris I shall hope to see something more of her."

The Duke looked at him sharply.

"I wonder if it would be wise?" he said to himself as they turned in at the gates and made their way up the path towards the Casino, but why it was he wondered he did not say.

They entered the rooms just in time to discover their friends leaving the tables. They had all lost, so the pretty Countess de Chevilhac informed Middlesborough, and in consequence they were quite ready, if not eager, to go home. "There never had been such luck," the Countess declared. "People were winning all round her, but court as she would, the Sun of Fortune would not smile upon her."

"I'll never play roulette again," she cried

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angrily. "It's an odious game and I'm bored to death by it."

She had recovered her spirits, however, when they reached the villa once more and sat down to the charming little supper which Middlesborough's admirable Georges had prepared for them. Only one thing was wanting. Try how he would to rouse himself, their host could not fall into line with them. The introduction to Madame d'Espère had exercised a greater effect upon him than he had at first supposed. He found himself continually recalling his conversation with her, and the oftener he did so, the further removed he was from understanding it. What had she meant when she had said that their destinies were entwined with those of another person? Feeling as he did, even the animated chatter of Madame de Chevilhac, who, while being a great lady, possessed a tongue as sharp as a *grisette*, seemed distasteful to him. He wanted to be alone, to think.

When his guests, tired after their evening's play, bade him good-night and departed to their respective bedrooms, he lit a cigar and went out for a stroll in the garden. Eventually he found

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himself standing on the terrace overlooking the sea, at the spot where he had discovered the Countess de Chevilhac and de Rheims that afternoon. The ripple of the waves below him, and the rustling of the wind in the shrubs behind was infinitely soothing. He could not remember ever in his life having felt as he did then. How was it that this woman had so suddenly fascinated him? He had known many more beautiful women than she, to whom he had not given a second thought. When he had smoked his first cigar he lit another, and, as soon as that was finished, returned to the house, where he bade his man get him to bed as quickly as possible.

He had scarcely closed his eyes before he was asleep. Then he began to dream; and it was a curious phantasy that his brain conjured up for him. He appeared to be alone in a wild and deserted country that was quite unlike any other he had seen before. If ever he had had a path he had lost it, and was now stumbling about amongst rocks and morasses in constant peril of his life. At every turn some fresh danger menaced him, and he was giving up all

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hope of reaching safety again, when, far ahead, twinkling like stars, two lights appeared. One was faint, but persistent in its advance, the other was bright, but moved with will-'o-the-wisp gyrations, now luring him this way, now that, but always dazzling in its brilliance. Which should he believe in? At first he followed the brighter, but it only led him into greater danger. Still, however, the other light burnt steadily but dimly on. Discarding the one he had hitherto been following, he quickened his pace towards the other. Guided by it, he passed from the treacherous pitfalls, and between the sharp rocks, up to a place of safety. Little by little the way grew plainer, until at last, wearied but unharmed, he stood in the fair country on the other side. Then, as he sat down, it seemed to him that the lights he had followed came closer, and grew gradually larger until they took upon themselves the semblance of human faces. He looked at that he had likened to a will-o'-the-wisp, and to his surprise discovered that it was the face of the woman he had met for the first time that evening — Madame d'Espère. She had lured him on to ruin, but the

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other had rescued him and helped him back to safety. Almost nervously he turned to examine the face of his saviour. A cry of astonishment escaped him. *It was the face of the woman whose glove he had picked up and restored that evening!*

CHAPTER II

UPWARDS of a fortnight had elapsed since Middlesborough's return to Paris from Monte Carlo. During that time he had occupied himself with what was popularly supposed to be a round of reckless gaiety. If the truth were told, however, he had found it difficult to kill time. Since he had tired of everything, one enjoyment was much the same as another to him. He knew every one who was worth knowing, saw everything that was worth seeing, heard everything that was worth hearing, and was at last compelled to confess that he could find no satisfaction in anything. As far as he was concerned it was all Dead Sea fruit.

Not once, but a hundred times he had thought of the curious interview he had had with Madame d'Espère at Monte Carlo. He had also endeavoured to discover the girl for whose face he had

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taken such a strange liking at the Casino the same evening. All his attempts, however, to find her, were in vain. No one could tell him anything about her. She seemed to have vanished out of his life as suddenly as she had appeared in it.

One afternoon Middlesborough had returned from a reception at the British Embassy, which he had felt compelled to attend, not so much for diplomatic reasons as for the fact that the wife of the ambassador was a connection of his own, to find the Duke de Rheims in his chambers. He apologised for having kept him waiting, and as he did so wondered what the other's presence could betoken at such an unusual hour. It was not long before the Duke enlightened him.

“*Cher ami,*” he said, “I have come to inform you that Madame d’Espère has returned to Paris. I met her this afternoon driving in the Bois, and she inquired with particular kindness after you. She has asked me to bring you with me to her reception to-night. Have you any objection?”

“On the contrary, I should enjoy it immensely,” Middlesborough replied, only to regret, a moment later, that he had been so impulsive. If the truth must be told he had been thinking of

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Madame d'Espère for some considerable time past, and had been wondering when he would be permitted an opportunity of seeing her again. After the commonplace life he had led for the past few weeks, it came like a breath of fresh air even to think that he should soon be seeing some one so original.

“What time is the reception?” he inquired of his friend. “And how shall I find her house?”

“The reception is at ten o'clock,” the Duke replied, “and if you like I will pick you up here, or if you prefer it at the Amphitryon.”

“Let us say the club,” Middlesborough replied. “I have an appointment with Jimmy Foote, who crossed from London this morning. I would not miss him for worlds. He is always charged with the latest scandal, and it is occasionally diverting to fire him off, particularly when you have been absent some time from England. You learn, then, how many of the suspicions you once formed have been verified, you hear what the reasons are that induced Benedict to go suddenly shooting big game in South Africa, and why Beatrice has taken it into her head to spend six months with a

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maiden aunt in the north of Scotland. Believe me, it is diverting when you can see behind the scenes."

"I have no doubt about that," said the Duke. "Scandal is like alcohol, when you have once acquired the craving for it, it's hard to live without it. Well, I will pick you up, then, at the *Amphitryon* at half-past nine."

When the other had left him a change came over Middlesborough. Being in a speculative mood he tried a fall with his understanding, and endeavoured to convince himself that he did not in reality care very much whether he saw Madame d'Espère again or not. He had been interested in her when he had met her at Monte Carlo, and he had often thought of her since as one of the most remarkable women he had ever seen. That, however, was probably the result of *ennui*, not of any more sober attraction. Nevertheless, he found his eyes continually wandering towards the clock, and his friend Jimmy Foote, with whom he dined that evening, has since been heard to declare that he found him, for once in his life, an unusually *blasé* and uninteresting companion. At half-past nine, punctual almost to the moment, the

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Duke put in an appearance, whereupon Middlesborough bade Jimmy Foote good-night, and they passed into the street in search of his cab. When the two young men had entered the vehicle the Duke gave the order to the coachman and they set off. They passed through the Place de l'Opéra and along the Boulevard de la Madeleine, then down the Rue Royale into the Champs Elysées. For the first time for many years Middlesborough experienced a sensation of novelty as he drove through the streets of Paris. He was like a schoolboy on the way to his first pantomime, for, in spite of his arguments of the afternoon, he was compelled to acknowledge that his introduction at Monte Carlo had only served to whet his curiosity for what was to follow.

Reaching Madame d'Espère's residence, they entered the courtyard by means of two elegantly wrought gates. The cab drew up at the steps and they alighted. Vehicles were entering behind them, while others were passing out through the gates upon the further side. From the accomplished manner in which her servants regulated the traffic it was plain to Middlesborough that

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Madame d'Espère was in the habit of receiving many visitors. In the hall soberly attired men-servants of approved decorum relieved them of their hats and cloaks, and afterwards passed them on to others, who in turn conducted them to the *salon* in which the reception was being held. As he passed up the stairs Middlesborough made good use of his eyes. He was anxious, if possible, to obtain some clue from the appointments of the house as to the taste and habits of its mistress. What he saw astonished him. The hall itself contained several fine statues and a large number of pictures, many of them of great value. The staircase was lined with some undeniable tapestries, while the woodwork was black and exquisitely carved.

Drawing back the curtains the *major domo* entered the room and announced the two young men.

“Ah, Lord Middlesborough,” said Madame d'Espère, after she had shaken hands with the Duke, and bade him welcome to her house, “so M. de Rheims was able to persuade you to come to-night? Can it be possible that you have been in Paris so long and are not tired of her?”

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Middlesborough smiled. He remembered what she had said to him at their last meeting.

“No,” he answered, “for once in my life I am proving constant to my divinity. I must confess, however, there are times when my patience is sorely tried.”

“How so?” inquired his hostess, when she had welcomed a prominent member of the Senate, and had paid a compliment to a somewhat pompous general of division. “Do you find your life so uninteresting that you get no pleasure out of it?”

“Very little,” Middlesborough answered. “Has not M. de Rheims informed you that it is consistent with my character to grow tired of everything?”

“Monsieur de Rheims is a good friend, and points only to your good qualities,” she answered. “He leaves me to discover the others for myself. But seriously, am I to understand that you find your life so very dull?”

“I say it in all seriousness,” Middlesborough replied. “I am half thinking of sailing for South America. There is always some chance of excitement there. What with earthquakes, murders,

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and revolutions, a man never knows when he rises in the morning whether he will be alive at sunset."

"And are you so weary of life that you crave excitement of that kind?" asked Madame d'Espère, as she slowly fanned herself.

"Why not?" Middlesborough replied. "The greater the risk, the greater the enjoyment. That is as much a rule of life as it is of arithmetic."

"Suppose it were possible then to help you to a little excitement of the kind you seek? What would you say?"

"I should be thoroughly grateful. I cannot give you a better answer."

"In that case I will see what I can do," she replied.

"And when shall I be permitted to hear the result?" Middlesborough inquired with a smile, for he still believed her to be jesting.

"I am unable to say," she answered. "Remember I commit myself to nothing. I will do what I can for you, but before you take any step, consider well what you are doing. After that, if anything happens, do not hold me responsible."

"I will promise to absolve you from all blame,"

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he replied. "I am already under an obligation to you, for you have done something for me that no one else has accomplished—you have aroused my curiosity."

At this juncture he was compelled by the arrival of more visitors to leave her. He accordingly made his way across the room in search of de Rheims. It was a magnificent apartment, large and lofty, and furnished in a fashion that showed its owner to be the possessor not only of taste but also of considerable wealth. The pictures on the walls were modern without exception, but they were by the best masters. Middlesborough noticed, however, that there was a sameness about the subjects chosen. One near the door depicted Saul consulting the Witch of Endor; that on the left of the fireplace showed an Egyptian magician reading the stars, while Pharaoh reclined upon a couch another portrayed Mephistopheles upon the Brocken with the lightning playing round his head and a host of little devils peeping at him from among the rocks. Middlesborough remembered the conversation he had had with his hostess, and also the stories de Rheims had told

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him at Monte Carlo, and after that her curious choice of pictures seemed in keeping with her character. He was studying the last of the works named, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and, turning, he found himself face to face with a man he had not seen for many years. He was a celebrity now, for he had lately penetrated into the heart of Africa, and had written a book of travels which had taken literary Europe by storm.

“My dear Fritz,” Middlesborough cried as he took the other’s hand, “I had no idea you were in Europe, and still less that I should find you in Paris. I thought you were on the other side of Albert Nyanza. Pray when did you return?”

“I have been at home nearly two months,” the other replied.

He was a fine-looking man, in the prime of life, bronzed with travel, and carried with him the air of one who had been accustomed to encounter life in its wildest moods. Middlesborough slipped his arm through the other’s and led him to a comfortable settee at the side of the room.

“I want you, Fritz,” he said, when they had talked for a while on other subjects, “to tell me

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how long you have known Madame d'Espère, and, in fact, to give me all the information you can about her."

"I'm afraid that will not be very much," the other answered. "I was introduced to her just before I left for Africa three years ago. When I returned she was one of the first to welcome me. Yesterday she heard I was in Paris and invited me to call upon her, hence my presence here."

"And what can you tell me of her private history?"

"No more than any one else can," the other replied. "She is a mystery, which to my thinking adds to her attractiveness. But you don't mean to say that she interests you? I thought it was beyond the power of any human being to do that."

"My dear Fritz," said Middlesborough, "I am afraid your sojourn in Africa has made you sarcastic. I am quite as ready to study my fellow-man as you are, but you must agree with me that the usual run of people one meets are so devoid of anything but the commonplace, that it would require an Ibsen or Maetterlink to find anything of interest in them. Our hostess, however, is

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quite different. There is something about her that fascinates me. She, like you, has accused me of having lost all interest in my surroundings, and she has promised, only this evening, to remedy the defect as soon as possible. She is going to discover a new form of excitement for me ; a panacea that will not fail to effect a cure."

His companion gave a start of surprise.

"Then you do not know?" he said. "I thought, since you were in the house, that you knew everything."

Middlesborough shook his head.

"What is it that I should know?" he inquired. "Every one seems to think I am aware of something, when, as a matter of fact, I know nothing. Will you not let me into the secret?"

"Not for worlds," said the other. Then with unusual seriousness he continued, "My dear Evelyn, for Heaven's sake be careful what you are doing. Have no more to do with this woman than you can help? Above all, do not let her find you any amusement. If you do, I give you my word you will regret it to the end of your life."

"My dear old friend," answered Middles-

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borough, "this sort of thing is really delightful, at the same time it is slightly annoying. What does it mean? Is Madame d'Espère a female vampire, that you should warn me against her with so much seriousness? You have added fuel to my curiosity and whatever happens I must really go on. Come, make a clean breast of your story or let us drop the subject altogether."

"I cannot," his friend replied. "I have pledged my honour not to reveal anything. But once more I implore you to follow my advice. Go away, return to England, do anything, but on no account let her find you amusement."

They had both risen by this time and the traveller was speaking with more than usual earnestness. So occupied were they, indeed, that they did not notice the approach of their hostess, who was close upon them before they became aware of her presence.

"Ah, Monsieur Fritz," she said, "why are you so cruel as to endeavour to prevent me from having the pleasure of ministering to Lord Middlesborough's happiness?"

"You must not be vexed with Fritz," Middlesborough replied. "He does not mean half he

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says. As a matter of fact he has been talking in fables.”

“Why in fables?” Madame d’Espère inquired.

“He remembers the story of the boy and the frog, you see. He thinks that what may very probably seem enjoyment to you, may mean death to me.”

He spoke in jest, without the least idea of causing trouble, but he noticed that both his hostess and Fritz gave a start of astonishment.

Madame d’Espère looked at him curiously.

“Perhaps you are trying to pay me a compliment,” she said a little nervously, as if she were not quite sure of her ground.

“That was my intention,” Middlesborough replied, as he realised that he had made an unfortunate remark and that this was the best way out of the difficulty.

A few moments later he had thanked her for her hospitality, had made his *adieux* and was in the street once more. He was conscious of a pleasant titillation of the senses for which he could not account. He endeavoured to analyze it, as his neat little brougham drove along the Faubourg in the direction of his residence, but in vain. He

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had not solved it when his manservant, an individual of superhuman discreetness and experience, bade him a respectful good-night and closed his bedroom door upon him an hour and a half later.

Next morning, his letters were brought to him with his chocolate. His mail was generally a large one, and this morning it was even more so than usual. Invitations sufficient to occupy all his waking moments twice over poured in upon him ; tradesmen implored his patronage ; horsedealers desired to bring under his notice the merits and perfections of animals which, more by fortune than by good management, so it would appear, had fallen into their hands ; charitable organizations endeavoured to persuade him that to endow homes for dilapidated drunkards and institutions for the reclamation of inveterate thieves by purely personal influence, was a better way of spending money than by wasting it upon long excursions to foreign lands that did no good to himself and for that matter to nobody else. More often than was altogether wise there were delicately scented little notes, which it was necessary should be reduced to ashes as soon as their contents had been perused. Middlesborough had tossed the begging letters

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aside to be answered later on, when he returned to England, and was about to get out of bed, when a somewhat bigger envelope than the rest caught his eye. The writing was bold, masculine, and quite unknown to him. Before he opened it he turned it over and examined it carefully. What was the reason of it he could not say, but his instinct told him as plain as any words could speak that it had some connection with Madame d'Espère. At last he tore it open and withdrew the contents. These proved to be a letter and a small ebony counter or disc, upon which a Greek word was inscribed. The document read as follows :—

“If Lord Middlesborough desires to avail himself of an opportunity of joining a club which has for its sole object the dissipation of that *ennui* which has settled itself upon him, let him be standing before the Rameses monument in the Place de la Concorde, punctually at ten o'clock this evening. As the clock strikes the hour a brougham will drive up, a man will look out and speak to him. On being shown the accompanying talisman he will conduct him to a certain place where he can satisfy himself as to the attrac-

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tions of the institution in question. Should Lord Middlesborough intend to avail himself of the privileges accorded him, it must be plainly understood that he pledges his word of honour that he will at no future date reveal to any one, either the object of his visit, or anything he may see or hear during his stay within the walls."

That was all! He scrutinised the writing carefully; it told him nothing, however. To the best of his belief he had never seen it before. He then examined the postmark, with the same result. All that he could discover was that it had been posted at the General Post Office in the Rue du Louvre before midnight the night before. Then he read it through again. It was an extraordinary epistle and it also contained an extraordinary suggestion. He was fond of an adventure. The question for him to decide was whether he should go or not? What was this Society which had founded itself solely for the destruction of *ennui*? It sounded original enough, while there was an air of mystery about the arrangement that appealed forcibly to his imagination. Weary as he was of the continual round of modern amusements, however, he had still sufficient prudence left

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in his constitution to prevent him committing himself to any definite action before he knew what was to follow. He therefore locked the letter up in his cabinet with the ebony talisman and resolved to decide upon his line of action sometime during the day. But, as he soon discovered, it was one thing to pretend to banish the matter from his mind, and another to do so.

As a result, by midday he had decided that the prospect of an adventure was more than he could withstand.

When he returned to his residence that evening to dress for dinner, he took from the cabinet the letter and disc he had received that morning. He stood looking at the latter meditatively. Engraved upon it in Greek was the word "Oblivion." Dropping the disc into the pocket of his waistcoat, he resolved that the hour of ten should find him at the rendezvous. Happen what might he was determined to see the adventure through.

CHAPTER III

PRECISELY at the appointed hour Middlesborough turned from the Quai des Tuileries into the Place de la Concorde. He crossed the Square, passed the fountains, and approached the spot where once the best blood of France had been spilt. Having reached the Obelisk he looked about him, expecting to see the carriage and the man who was to meet him there, and who would explain the mystery surrounding the letter he had that morning received. With the exception, however, of a Sergeant de Ville who was interrogating a ragged match-seller, that particular portion of the Square was deserted. Anxious to be sure that he had made no mistake, he walked to the nearest lamp post and took from his pocket the letter, which he carefully perused. No! There could be no doubt about it. He was to meet the messenger at this spot

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punctually at ten o'clock. He accordingly returned to the Obelisk, and once more took up his position before it. He had scarcely done so before a neat, single-horse brougham came through the Place and pulled up opposite the place where he was standing. A moment later the window nearest him was lowered and a man's voice said :—

“Have I the honour to address Lord Middlesborough?”

The other immediately reassured him upon that point.

“Possibly,” said the new-comer, “you may have something with you that will prove you the person whom I am to meet?”

By way of reply Middlesborough produced from his pocket the small ebony disc which had been sent him that morning.

“A thousand thanks,” the other replied, and as he said it he opened the door and invited Middlesborough to enter the carriage. The latter, on his side, however, was not prepared to do so until he had convinced himself of the messenger's *bonâ fides*.

“I should be glad if you would tell me where

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you are going to take me," he said. "So far, I know nothing, except what the letter I received this morning told me."

"I am afraid I cannot give you any information upon that head," the other replied. "My instructions were to meet you here and to escort you to a certain house in the suburbs. If, however, you have any fear for your safety, let me at once assure you that you may abandon it. All I ask in return is, that you will give me your word that nothing you may see or hear during the time you are there shall pass your lips. That once done, the rest is easy."

"I will give you that assurance with pleasure," said Middlesborough. "But I must confess I should like to know something more of what I am to do. However, as you cannot tell me that, I suppose I must do without it."

So saying he entered the carriage and took his place beside the man. Immediately he had done so they started and passed out of the Place de la Concorde, along the Champs Elysées through the Place de l'Étoile and the Avenue de la Grande Armée, and finally crossed the Seine by the Pont Neuilly. They had been

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driving for upwards of five minutes before either of them spoke. Then Middlesborough begged permission to light a cigarette. He took his case from his pocket, and having opened it tendered it politely to his companion. The latter, however, respectfully declined the offer. Middlesborough thereupon placed one in his mouth, and was about to strike a match, when the other stopped him.

“Permit me,” he said, and as he did so he took from his pocket a small silver box. There was a clicking sound, and a little electric spark became visible inside. Middlesborough obtained a light from this, and also made a mental note of the circumstance. He had hoped, in lighting the cigarette, to be able to obtain a glimpse of his companion’s face. The other, however, had forestalled him with his clever little invention which threw the light, like a policeman’s lantern, only in one direction. It was evident that he was not the sort of person to be caught napping.

“We are crossing the Seine, I see,” said Middlesborough. “Then our address must either be Neuilly, Nanterre, Reuil, or Bougival?”

“Your Lordship must forgive me if I do not

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answer that question," the man replied. "Under the circumstances it would perhaps be as well if we confined ourselves to subjects of more general interest. I am under orders, you see, and must be pardoned if I obey them."

"Of course," Middlesborough answered. "I congratulate Madame d'Espère on being so well served."

To this the man returned no reply, and Middlesborough saw that this shot also had failed to reach its mark. It did not prevent him, however, from trying to keep a watchful eye upon the country through which they were passing. Unfortunately, however, the night was dark, and a sharp storm of rain rattled against the window-panes, rendering it impossible for him to see anything of their direction.

"Whatever our adventure may prove to be," said Middlesborough to himself, "it is quite evident that they and the weather are taking great pains to prevent my finding my way to the place again. It is to be hoped that the end will justify the means."

"Have we very much further to drive?" he inquired of his conductor, when they had once

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more been sitting in silence for upwards of a quarter of an hour.

“In less than ten minutes we shall be at our destination,” his companion replied. “I regret that your Lordship should find the time hang heavily upon your hands. I trust, however, that your evening’s amusement may compensate for that.”

“I sincerely hope it will,” Middlesborough returned. “Are you aware whether Madame d’Espère will be present herself?”

“I know no such person,” the other replied, but in a tone which led his companion to believe that his assertion was not altogether in accordance with the truth. Then they relapsed into silence once more and waited for the ten minutes to pass by. When five of their number had departed Middlesborough’s companion suddenly showed signs of animation.

“Your Lordship was kind enough before we started to give me your assurance that whatever you may see or hear to-night, you will never reveal upon any consideration. I presume, therefore, that you will have no objection to attaching your signature to a written promise?”

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“I have given you my word,” said Middlesborough stiffly, “but if that is not sufficient, I will do as you request. It is quite unnecessary, however.”

“I am aware of that,” the other answered, “but unfortunately in this matter we are compelled to act with more than usual caution. A written promise is exacted from every member before he is admitted to the privileges of the club of which you will be an honorary member to-night.”

“Are there any other restrictions? If so, please acquaint me with them, for I have no desire to commit a solecism.”

“As you are, for this evening at any rate, only an honorary visitor, we will make no further demands upon your generosity, save to ask you to preserve your incognito. Here is a mask, my Lord, which you will be kind enough to wear during the time you are in the house.”

With that he produced from his pocket a small square of black velvet fringed with lace, which he invited Middlesborough to place upon his face. At first the other felt inclined to demur, but when he was informed that admittance

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to the club was impossible without it, he waived his objection and did as he was ordered. A moment later the coachman stopped his horse, there was a sound of opening gates, and then the carriage rolled in between them and passed along an avenue of sighing trees. The rain was still beating down, and, as Middlesborough told himself, there had hitherto been plenty of mystery but very little cheerfulness in the adventure. The darkness of the carriage, the beating of the rain outside and the general air of gloom must have affected his spirits, for he began to wonder whether he had been running his head into a trap. Only a week before, as he remembered, a young foreigner had been decoyed into a house in the suburbs and there murdered under particularly revolting circumstances. What was to prevent the same fate befalling himself? He thanked his stars that he had at least taken the precaution to slip a small revolver into the pocket of his coat before leaving the house. With that he would be able to give two or three of his enemies a fair *quid pro quo* before they brought him down.

“Your house stands a long way back from the

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road," he said to his companion, after they had been driving for upwards of five minutes along the avenue. "Nor, from what I can see of it, does it appear to be a particularly cheerful sort of place."

"You will alter your opinion in a moment," the man replied. "One must not judge everything by externals. I have known many a dull prologue precede an extremely witty play."

"I am glad to see that you have some sense of humour," said Middlesborough. "Now perhaps you will tell me how I am to find my way home again when the entertainment, to which you are conducting me, is at an end!"

"You need not distress yourself on that score," the other answered. "Everything has been arranged and I shall myself have much pleasure in conducting you back to Paris."

He had scarcely said this before the carriage once more pulled up, and Middlesborough was invited to alight.

He did so to find himself standing on a flight of steps leading up to a large house, which appeared in the darkness to be of interminable length.

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Upwards of fifty windows overlooked the terrace, but not a light in either showed one of them. The adventure, at this point, appeared even less satisfactory than it had done in the carriage, and Middlesborough could have found it in his heart to have said "goodbye" to his companion there and then, and, by taking himself off, have surrendered any chance of amusement with which the evening might otherwise have furnished him. At the same moment, however, his hand came in contact with the pistol in his pocket, and the cold metal of the barrel gave him a confidence he had not before possessed. Whatever the cost might be he was resolved to see the matter through. By this time the man who had accompanied him from Paris had inserted a pass-key in the lock of the front door, and had opened it.

"Enter, my Lord," he said, turning to Middlesborough, who was standing on the steps below him.

The other did as he was ordered, to find himself in a large vestibule, or outer hall, the ceiling of which rose in the centre in the form of a dome. The hall itself was flagged with black and white marble in geometrical patterns; on either side

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were handsome statues, while at the further end, so he afterwards discovered, was a door, which, for the present, was concealed by a pair of heavy curtains.

“If you will permit me, I will lead the way,” said the elder man.

“Do so by all means, my dear sir,” Middlesborough replied. “We have been a considerable time coming from Paris, and I am anxious to discover the inducement which can have justified you in bringing me so far.”

While he was speaking the other had drawn aside the curtains and opened the door to which I have referred. They thereupon passed into a larger hall beyond. Prepared as he was by the long drive, the dark, cheerless aspect of the house, and—well, might I say—the austerity of his curious companion, Middlesborough expected to find himself in a building poorly furnished and considerably fallen to decay. To his surprise, however, he discovered a large and handsomely furnished room. A thick carpet covered the floor, pictures of more than average merit decorated the walls, while at the further end was a handsome staircase, at the foot of which were two statues

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holding bouquets of electric lights in their hands. After the cheerless vestibule through which they had lately passed it was like fairyland. Middlesborough was about to comment upon it when his companion held up his hand in warning.

“Your pardon, my Lord,” he whispered, “but I omitted to inform you that while you are in this house conversation is strictly prohibited. On the first occasion of offending, a member is warned ; on the second he is invited to tender his resignation.”

“The deuce he is,” said the young man to himself. “Things seem to grow stranger every moment. This is certainly the most extraordinary club of which I have ever been the guest. I wonder what fresh surprises are in store for me?”

At the foot of the stairs his companion touched the button of an electric bell. Almost instantly a dignified servant, wearing a mask as white as his own powdered hair, made his appearance, and relieved them of their hats and cloaks, vanishing again as soon as he had done so. Middlesborough's guide then beckoned to him to follow him upstairs. When they had reached the spacious landing they were confronted by two

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more menservants, who, like their colleague below, were also closely masked. At a signal from Middlesborough's conductor they drew the curtain and opened the door for them to pass through. With a continued sense of expectation, which had been by no means blunted by his previous discoveries, Middlesborough followed his companion into a large and lofty room, as softly carpeted as the hall outside. At the further end was another door, and before this the old man paused as if to listen. What he heard must have reassured him, for he presently opened the door and invited Middlesborough to enter. Having done so he found himself standing in one of the most extraordinary rooms he had ever seen in his life. Its length might have been anything from a hundred and twenty-five to a hundred and fifty feet, while its breadth could scarcely have been less than half that amount. It was brilliantly illuminated, and at the moment of his entrance might have contained upwards of a hundred people, all men, and all masked like Middlesborough himself. Unlike him, however, they were dressed in a black costume that reminded him, almost ironically, of what he had himself worn at Court. In the

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centre of the room was an enclosed space resembling an arena, and round this, on every side, rose the chairs of the spectators, tier upon tier.

When he had conducted him to a chair and had seen him comfortably seated, the man who had brought him from Paris bowed and withdrew, leaving Middlesborough to his own reflections as to what was to follow. With a very natural curiosity he studied the men about him, but, for the simple reason that their faces were hidden like his own, he could make very little of them. They sat in silence, and the newcomer, watching the person nearest him, noticed that his hand, which rested on the chair in front of him, trembled violently. What was the cause of this silence and of this emotion? The silence he attributed to the same reason that necessitated the use of the mask, that is to say, to a fear of being recognised; the emotion he could not in any way account for. He was not destined, however, to be left very long in doubt, for while he was still pondering the question, the sharp rattle of an electric bell sounded through the room. The effect upon those present was widely different. Some sat bolt upright, others leant forward with

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their hands clasped upon the backs of the chairs before them, while not a few did their utmost to appear as though they had not noticed it. Middlesborough observed, however, that every face turned immediately towards the enclosed space in the centre of the room. Then a breathless pause ensued.

Thirty seconds or so after the bell had ceased to sound, the doors on either side of the room opened, and two men, in every respect attired like their companions, entered and met in the arena. They were followed by two servants, each of whom carried in his arms upwards of a dozen duelling rapiers. From these the two men in black proceeded to choose weapons, bending, twisting and trying each in turn. As soon as they had made their selection the servants withdrew with the remainder, while the men themselves took up their positions at either end of the enclosed space. Once more the bell sounded, and once more a thrill ran through those present. This was intensified when the doors opened once more and from each a man emerged, clad in black satin knee breeches and stockings, and a white cambric shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled up

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above the elbow. Like the rest of the assembly, however, both wore masks to conceal their features.

Having met in the centre of the arena they bowed to their seconds, and afterwards to the assembled company. Then each received from his second the sword which had been chosen for his use, and stood waiting with it in his hand. At this stage of the proceedings there was a short pause, and Middlesborough wondered what would happen next. Presently the door, through which he himself had entered the room a few minutes before, opened, and a woman advanced into the room. She was taller than the generality of her sex, and was clad entirely in black. As Middlesborough could see, she possessed an exquisite figure, and that this might be the better appreciated she was dressed to perfection. To conceal the upper half of her face she wore a white mask, but below it a beautiful mouth and chin, and a long, slender throat were visible. Middlesborough gazed at her in amazement. The figure was that of Madame d'Espère, but was it she? With a low bow to those assembled in the room, she passed down the

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gangway and made her way to an elevated seat, almost a throne, which overlooked the arena. The combatants lowered their sword points before her, after which they took their places and exchanged salutes with each other. By this time the excitement was intense. It seemed to Middlesborough he could hear the breathing of the men seated three or four feet away from him. Upon himself, the silence, the long drive, the precautions taken to prevent his locating the house, the crowd of masked faces, the combatants in the ring, and the beautiful woman seated upon the throne, combined to produce an effect that was unlike anything he had felt before.

That both men were past masters of the art they were expounding was evident as soon as they had crossed their blades. Middlesborough had himself studied the science under the best tutors of the day, and for an amateur was an exceptionally clever swordsman. Now he watched the glittering blades with a fascination he had never known before. The man furthest from him was, if anything, the superior, and more than once he pressed his opponent to a disadvantage, but on each occasion the other managed

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by a stroke of fortune to elude the glittering point. Then at a signal from the throne the seconds intervened and the combatants paused for breath. Middlesborough noticed that a thin stream of blood was trickling down the arm of the man nearest him, while the other, up to that time, did not appear to have received a scratch.

Again the Woman nodded, and once more the men faced each other. The blades crossed, and the combat recommenced. Having seen something of the mettle of his adversary, the man nearest him now fenced with greater caution, and for some time contented himself with parrying his adversary's thrusts. The excitement was almost more than could be borne. Like his neighbours, Middlesborough could not withdraw his eyes from those two white-shirted figures in the arena. He felt as if he had never known what it was to live until that moment. Then, in a flash, and almost before he knew it, the taller of the men slipped through his adversary's guard, the glittering point sped remorselessly on, and a moment later the other was a quivering mass upon the floor. A murmur ran through the audience ; still no word was spoken. Mid-

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dlesborough passed his hands across his eyes as if to assure himself that he was awake, not dreaming. When he looked again, the servants were carrying the wounded man out by the door by which he had entered, and the victor was kneeling upon the first step of the throne, kissing the hand of the woman seated upon it. Then he, in his turn, rose and left the room and the excitement was at an end.

The whole affair had not lasted ten minutes, but it had left an indelible impression upon the mind of at least one man who had been present. Middlesborough had long craved a new excitement; here, indeed, was one to his hand. The callousness, the deliberation, the machine-like progress of the whole matter almost passed belief; it revolted while it fascinated him. This, then, was the amusement Madame d'Espère had promised him. While this thought was passing through his brain, a hand was placed upon his arm, and, turning, he found the man, who had conducted him to the house, standing at his elbow. Seeing that he beckoned him to accompany him, Middlesborough accordingly rose and followed him from the room. His blood was coursing through

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his veins like liquid fire ; his ears retained the click of the swords as they touched each other, while in his mind's eye he could still see the vanquished man stretched out, sword in hand, upon the floor, a thin, red line of blood trickling from his side. He had a hundred questions to ask, but he remembered the rule of silence that had been imposed upon him.

Having crossed the ante-room once more, they found themselves in a smaller apartment, where refreshments of all descriptions were to be procured from the same impassive servants he had seen on the landing as he entered. Feeling that he required a stimulant of some description he swallowed a bumper of champagne, and then accompanied his conductor down the stairs to the hall. The same noiseless servant appeared and handed him his hat and cloak. Then, led by the man who had admitted him, he passed through the tesellated vestibule to the front door.

The night had certainly not improved. The wind met him with a buffet as he stepped out into the darkness, while the rain still poured relentlessly down. The carriage was drawn up at the foot of the steps, and in this they took

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their places once more. They had left the drive and passed out through the gates into the Public Road before either spoke.

“The obligation of silence ceases now, I presume,” said Middlesborough, a little scornfully, taking a cigarette from his case and removing his mask. “I have kept my promise, and in return I hope you will enlighten me upon a few points.”

“I will tell you all I am at liberty to reveal,” the other replied. “What is it you wish to know?”

“In the first place, I want to be informed as to the condition of the man who was wounded this evening?” said Middlesborough.

“He is dead,” his companion answered quietly. “He died before they could convey him to his dressing-room.”

“Dead!” cried Middlesborough, with horrified surprise. He had expected something of the kind, but he had not dared to put his fears into words. “Do you really mean that he is dead?”

“And why not?” inquired the other. “It is one of the rules of the society that the duel shall in every case be to the death.”

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“And how often do these little affairs take place?” he asked, trying to speak coolly.

“On every alternate Friday,” the little man answered.

“And the combatants? How are they chosen, and by whom?”

“They are selected by the Woman of Death.”

Middlesborough determined on a random shot.

“When you say the Woman of Death, I presume you mean Madame d’Espère?” he said.

“I do not know her by that name,” the other replied.

After that it was useless to say more.

“Am I to understand, then, that since you have introduced me to-night, I may consider myself a member of your club *en permanence*?” he inquired.

“That depends very much upon circumstances. As you can see for yourself we are unable to accept members haphazard. There are certain conditions to be fulfilled and certain promises to be made before it is possible for an election to take place. If you are prepared to give your unqualified adherence to the rules which govern the Club, I have no doubt it will be

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possible for you to become a member, not otherwise.”

“And these conditions and promises?”

“Are, that you should pledge yourself, in the first place, to inviolable secrecy; in the second, that you pay an entrance fee of twenty-five thousand francs.”

“Both simple and reasonable enough requests. But surely they cannot be the only rules?”

“No—there are others,” his companion replied. “I will furnish you with a copy.”

Thereupon he produced a small stiffly-bound book from his pocket and handed it to Middlesborough. Chief among these rules, he explained, was one by which it was insisted that while each member had the same opportunities as the others, no one should be permitted to resign until he had fought one duel, and only then on a payment of one hundred and twenty thousand francs.

“But surely that seems a trifle arbitrary, does it not?”

“Not at all. It is a very necessary precaution, as you will see for yourself when you have inquired into it more closely. There are, of course, certain little necessary liabilities connected with

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the scheme. For this reason it is imperative that each member should be involved to a corresponding degree.”

“In plain words you mean that you do not intend a member to leave the club unless he is implicated as fully as his fellows, and only then upon the understanding that he has made it worth your while to let him go.”

“That may possibly be so. I do not admit it, and I do not deny it. As great precautions are taken in electing a member as in permitting him to resign. You cannot blame us, therefore, if we make him pay us handsomely for our trouble.”

“I do not blame you, I was merely remarking the subtlety of the idea.”

If the drive out had been long and tedious, the drive home, in comparison, seemed only a matter of a few minutes. Middlesborough had so much to think of, and so many questions to ask, that he had scarcely reduced his thoughts to order when they rattled over the Pont de Neuilly and entered Paris. Once more they passed down the Champs Elysées, and again they approached the Place de la Concorde.

“Should you make up your mind to become a

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member, perhaps you will communicate with me,' said his companion, as they passed the Rond Point.

"I must have time to think it over before I come to a decision," said Middlesborough.

"Take as much time as you please," the other replied, with composure. "It is purely a matter for your own amusement; there is no necessity for haste. Should you, however, desire to give us the pleasure of your society, you have only to advertise in the daily papers the word engraven upon the tablet you received this morning, and the necessary arrangements will be made."

At the moment the carriage drew up beside the pavement opposite the Obelisk of Luxor, and his companion opened the door for him to alight.

"I have the honour to wish your Lordship good-night," he said.

"Good-night," Middlesborough replied. Then, raising his hat, he turned upon his heel and passed across the Square in the direction of his own residence.

When he reached it he went direct to his bedroom, and after he had dismissed his man, took up the small ebony disc to which his late companion had referred, and examined it. It told him

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nothing, but while he held it in his hand the fascination of that terrible combat came over him again. He could see the combatants in the ring, the rows of silent spectators on either hand, and the beautiful woman, styled by his conductor "The Woman of Death," seated on the throne giving the fatal signal. Should he join the club or not? He wondered whether any of the members were friends of his own, and also whether the man who had been killed that evening was known to him.

Next morning when he awoke he could scarcely believe that what he had witnessed the night before was not a dream. It seemed too strange, too impossible to be true. Had he really met the old man in the Place de la Concorde and driven out to the suburbs in the direction of St. Germain with him? Had he really visited a country house put to such strange uses? And had he seen that duel to the death? Then he went to his dressing-table only to find the black disc looking up at him like an evil eye. After he had breakfasted, he ordered his carriage and drove to the Amphitryon Club. He had made an appointment to lunch there with the young Vicomte de Chamberêt, and his watch told him

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he was already ten minutes after the appointed hour.

“My dear de Chamberêt,” he said as he entered the smoking-room, “I owe you ten thousand apologies for keeping you waiting in this fashion.”

“Don’t apologise, my dear fellow,” the other replied. “Have you heard the terrible news?”

“I have heard no news of any sort. What have you to tell me?”

“De Rheims is dead!”

“De Rheims dead? Surely you must be mistaken. Why, we were lunching here together only yesterday.”

“Nevertheless he is dead. Varvilliers told me so himself. He has been to the house to make inquiries.”

“But what did he die of? He looked as well and strong as possible yesterday.”

“He was killed in a duel,” de Chamberêt replied. “And the strange part of it is that no one seems to know with whom or where it took place.”

Middlesborough gave a start. He had no reason for jumping to such a conclusion, but his instinct told him that, improbable as it might seem, his

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surmise was, nevertheless, a correct one. He had thought when at the Club that the figure of the taller of the duellists reminded him of some one with whom he was acquainted. Was it possible it could have been de Rheims?

“This is terrible news indeed,” he said, speaking only a little above his breath. “I can scarcely credit it. Are you quite sure that you have made no mistake?”

“Quite sure,” the other replied. “Every one knows it. Besides, as I say, Varvilliers has been to the Hôtel de Rheims, and the servants did not deny the truth of the story.”

After this news and the inferences he was compelled to draw from it, Middlesborough’s luncheon was only a farce. He swallowed his food mechanically, and when his guest addressed him replied only in monosyllables. He had been genuinely attached to the dead man; they had known each other for many years, and had been thrown into each other’s company more than usually falls to the lot of two inhabitants of such widely different countries.

Their meal at an end, Middlesborough proposed that they should call at de Rheim’s residence themselves and make personal inquiries. De Chamberêt

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assented, and they accordingly made way into the street, where they hailed a cab and directed a man to drive them to the house in question. They passed the gate-keeper and made their way to the front door, which was opened to them by the ancient *majordomo*, who had known and loved his master since the time when the latter was a curly-headed boy.

“This is sad news indeed, Baptiste,” said Middlesborough. “I only learnt it an hour ago. Can you give me any particulars?”

Tears streamed down the old man’s cheeks as he solemnly shook his head.

“We know no more, my Lord, than is generally known,” he said. “The Duke left here last night at ten o’clock as happy as a man could be. It was just seven o’clock this morning when the police brought him home in an ambulance.”

“The police?” cried de Chamberêt in surprise. “Where did they find him?”

“In the garden of a deserted house at Mont-rouge,” the servant answered. “He was discovered lying in the centre of a grass plot, quite dead, with a sword thrust through his lungs. Oh, my master, my master, if only I might have died for you.”

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The old man broke down completely at this point. He wrung his hands in an ecstasy of grief. Middlesborough, seeing that it would be useless to question him further, spoke a few words of sympathy to him, and then, followed by de Chamberêt, returned to the street. He determined to make his way to the house of Madame d'Espère at once, and, under the pretence of paying a simple call, to see how she received the news of the death of their mutual friend. If it were as he suspected, surely she would be affected, and would betray herself.

Bidding de Chamberêt goodbye at the corner of the Rue Royale and the Avenue Gabriel he proceeded in the direction of the house he had visited two evenings before. On reaching it he inquired of the servant who opened the door to him whether Madame d'Espère was receiving that afternoon. He had half expected to receive an answer in the negative, but to his surprise he was informed that Madame was at home, and the man felt sure would consent to see him. She was in her studio, the servant said, and "if milord would condescend to follow him, he would conduct him to her presence!"

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“Can she have expected me to call?” Middlesborough asked himself, as he followed the man along the softly carpeted hall. “It certainly looks like it. But why?”

On entering the studio he found Madame d'Espère at work upon a model of a dancing child. Her costume was hidden by a clay-stained blouse. When the door opened her back was towards him, but on hearing his name she turned, and put down what she had in her hand.

“Ah! Lord Middlesborough,” she said, coming towards him with that inimitable grace that always characterised her, “I felt sure I should see you this afternoon. Is it not sad indeed about Monsieur de Rheims?”

Her tone betrayed such genuine grief that Middlesborough did not know what to think.

“It is sad indeed,” he answered with peculiar emphasis. “I have just called at his house. They tell me that he was killed in a duel and that his body was found lying in the garden of a deserted house at Montrouge.”

“So I have already been informed,” she replied. “To me it seems an inexplicable affair. It has affected me more than I can say. Has he spoken

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to you of any duel in which he was likely to be a combatant !”

“Never once,” Middlesborough replied, still keeping his eyes intently fixed upon her face. “On the contrary, we had made arrangements to spend this evening together.”

“It is altogether incomprehensible,” she continued. “With whom could he have fought? I have never heard that Monsieur had any enemy. He was of such a placid, easy-going disposition. With whom, then, would he have been likely to quarrel?”

“Has it not struck you, Madame,” Middlesborough began slowly, and all the time looking her steadily in the face, “that he might have perished by other means than in a quarrel?”

Their eyes met, but hers did not flinch. She was as calm and collected as she had been when she had received her guests at her reception two nights before.

“You surely do not imagine that he took his own life?” she inquired. “No, no, I feel sure you must be wrong. Monsieur de Rheims was gifted with a sense of humour, and he would scarcely have been likely, even had he intended to

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destroy himself, to do it in the garden of a deserted house at Montrouge. It was Montrouge I think you said ? ”

Middlesborough felt that she must either be a consummate actress or that she really knew nothing of the means by which the dead man had met his fate. While he was turning this over in his mind he looked at Madame d'Espère. He noticed the beauty of her face and the shapeliness of the hands that patted and moulded the clay she had again taken up. As he watched her he recalled the woman as he had seen her on the previous evening, reclining in her great chair and giving the signal for the fatal combat to commence. How easy it would have been to solve the mystery and to set matters right at once, had he not been bound by his word of honour to reveal nothing of what he had seen or heard while in the house. Under the circumstances he knew that he was powerless to proceed further. One bolt, however, remained in his quiver, and that he proposed to let fly at once, on the chance that it might prove successful. She had given him a chair, and had offered him one of her own dainty cigarettes.

“ Might I remind you,” he said, “ that at your

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reception the other evening you were kind enough to promise to find me an amusement that would not pall? Knowing my wretchedness, you may imagine how much the fulfilment of that promise means to me. Would it be indiscreet to ask how soon you propose to embark upon my reformation? ”

He thought, but he was not sure, that he detected a look of astonishment upon her face.

“ I have not forgotten,” she answered. “ Had I not seen you now I should in all probability have written to you this evening concerning it. You see for yourself how I am engaged at this moment, Lord Middlesborough? It is one of my happiest relaxations. What I am going to propose is that you should do something of the sort. I know that you paint, for I have seen some of your pictures. In fact, I have one in my possession now. It is altogether charming. I am trying to organise a small exhibition, to consist solely of the works of friends, for the benefit of a charity. Why should you not exhibit? ”

Middlesborough could scarcely repress a smile. He felt certain that this was not the form of excitement she had really intended for him. And

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yet it was impossible for him to say anything in contradiction of her assertion.

“ I fear, Madame, you do me too much honour,” he said gravely. “ Even if my daubs were worthy of the fate you propose for them, it would be impossible. I have lost all interest in painting. Forgive me if I say that I had hoped that the excitement you proposed for me would be a little more original, may I say a little more biting.”

“ In that case I fear I cannot help you,” she answered, with a shake of her head. “ Unless you fall in love, Lord Middlesborough, or travel in Central Africa, I do not see where you are to find the sort of amusement you require.”

“ I have travelled in Africa,” he answered, “ and have found it all barren. Livingstone, du Chalet, and Stanley must be somewhat differently constituted, for I could not discover the faintest enjoyment in it.”

“ Then only love remains.”

He shook his head.

“ More wearisome than either,” he replied. “ It is bad enough to have to find amusements for oneself; it must be doubly so to have to do so for another.”

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She had seated herself on a chair closer to him and was regarding him with eyes in which there was a light that spoke for the smouldering fires within.

“May there not be some people left in the world who are old-fashioned enough to take love seriously?” she inquired.

“Very possibly,” he answered. “Unfortunately, however, I am not one of them. My life to me is worth exactly what the day brings forth for it. I have no ambitions, and, I trust, but few illusions. I am the last of my race, and when I die the Middlesboroughs will be extinct. I have, therefore, no one to consider but myself. I have not had so much enjoyment out of my life hitherto, that I need seek to link my fate with that of another. Taken altogether, I am one of life’s notes of interrogation, an enigma to the world; if you like, a hopeless riddle to myself.”

She placed her elbows on her knees, and rested her chin upon her clasped hands. It was a beautiful face, full of power, and one against which few men would have been proof. Fortunately for himself, however, Middlesborough happened to be one of those few. Her character

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and disposition interested him as a study, but there was no trace of any tenderer feeling.

Seeing that he had failed in the object of his visit, and prompted by a feeling of prudence that seldom animated him, he talked the ordinary chit-chat of the day for a few minutes, and then rose to take leave of her.

“*Au revoir*, Madame,” he said. “I thank you for permitting me to see you. I only regret that it should have been occasioned by so melancholy a business.”

“You came, then, to tell me of Monsieur de Rheims’ death?”

She spoke as if she felt some surprise. Middlesborough realised that he had betrayed himself.

“I thought, since it was he who did me the honour to introduce me to you, that, if you had not heard of his death, it would come more gracefully from my lips. Poor de Rheims, it seems only the other night that he first spoke to me of you at Monte Carlo. However, I do not know that we should feel altogether sorry for him. It was no disgrace to be beaten by such a man.”

This time he was not mistaken. Madame

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d'Espère *did* allow a little start of surprise to escape her.

“Pardon me,” she said, “but you know then, who it was that killed him? I thought you said that he was found in the garden of a deserted house at Montrouge, and that the police have declared that his death is shrouded in mystery? How, therefore, do you know anything about it? If I were you, Lord Middlesborough, I should be careful what admissions I made.”

Once more had he failed to score.

“It was purely a matter of conjecture upon my part,” he said. “You will agree with me that, if he were killed in a duel, he could scarcely have met his death, unless by foul play, at the hands of any one less accomplished than himself. Remember he was one of the most expert swordsmen in France.”

“I misunderstood you,” she answered, as he made as if he would leave her. “Must you go? Then *au revoir!* You will bear in mind the fact that I am always at home to my friends on Wednesday and Saturday evenings.”

When he found himself in the street once more Middlesborough considered the interview he had

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had with her. Try how he would to understand it he could not do so. He still felt convinced in his own mind that she was the woman he had seen at the house at St. Germain. And yet he was not able to prove it. He would have given anything to know who the man was that had killed de Rheims, but from the care that was taken to conceal all traces of his identity, this appeared impossible. One question recurred to him continually. Should he or should he not avail himself of his privilege and visit the club once more? Why should he not? There was nothing to prevent him.

CHAPTER IV

THAT evening Middlesborough was in one of his restless moods. Nothing seemed to please him. He hungered for an excitement that would relieve his overstrung nerves. De Rheims' death had distressed him more than he cared to admit. Partly out of respect for his friend, and partly because he did not feel in the humour for the society of his fellow-man, he dined at home and alone. Finding, however, that his own society reduced him to a level of even greater despondency, he went out afterwards to a club, an establishment in the neighbourhood of the Avenue de l'Opéra, noted both for its exclusiveness and its high play. For the first hour that he wooed the fickle goddess he won repeatedly. Then his luck changed, and eventually he rose from the table some fifty thousand francs poorer than when he had sat down.

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“If you will excuse me,” he said, as he pushed his chair back, “I think I will leave off now. Cards bore me to death. I owe you thirty thousand francs, de Gonville, and you eighteen, de Chamberêt. You must give me my revenge some other time. Now I’ll be off to bed. Good-night!”

His friends bade him good-night, and he strolled into the adjoining room in search of refreshment. Only little Jimmy Foote, who had been watching the game, followed him.

“Have a brandy and soda, Jimmy?” Middlesborough inquired, as he dropped into an easy-chair, and lit a cigarette.

Jimmy, who was good nature itself, accepted his invitation, and, when the servant had left them, turned to his friend. Unlike the remainder of his family he was gifted with a fair share of worldly wisdom, and he saw that on this occasion Middlesborough was not quite himself.

“I say, old man,” he blurted out, “I hope you won’t think I’m meddling in what does not concern me, but—but—well, the fact of the matter is, we were at Eton together, weren’t we? and that gives a man a sort of right to say things he

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wouldn't have uttered otherwise. I've been watching you to-night, and I've noticed that——”

Middlesborough interrupted him.

“You've noticed that I have an ink spot on my left cuff,” he said abruptly. “I saw it myself, when I was dealing the first round. Dangerous thing, ink, makes mischief in all directions. Avoid it, Jimmy! Ah, here are the drinks. Well, good luck to you!”

“And better luck to you,” said Jimmy, who was shrewd enough to see that in Middlesborough's present humour it would be useless for him to say more.

Five minutes later, the latter was in his cab on the way home. His mind was made up on one point.

“I'll try it,” he said to himself. “I'll put an advertisement in the *Figaro* to-morrow. At any rate it will be a vast improvement on this humdrum existence.”

Two days later an advertisement, consisting of the one Greek word engraved upon the disc, appeared in the paper mentioned.

He had not to wait very long for a reply, for that evening when he returned home to dress for dinner, he found a letter awaiting him, in

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which he was instructed to be at the rendezvous in the Place de la Concorde at the same time on the following Friday week.

As on the previous occasion, the clocks of Paris were striking ten when he reached the appointed spot and set himself to wait for the man to put in an appearance. Again the carriage crossed the Square, and pulled up before the railings of the Obelisk. The window was let down, and the same curious voice that he remembered so well invited him to enter. He did so, and the carriage immediately proceeded on its way.

“Permit me to congratulate you upon the decision you have arrived at,” said the man beside him, as they started. “If you desire excitement, such as you can obtain nowhere else, I venture to think you will discover it where you are now seeking it.”

“As the Duc de Rheims found it, I have no doubt,” Middlesborough answered quietly.

“Every one is conversant with the Duke’s lamentable death,” the other replied gravely. “But I know as little as you do of the cause that occasioned it. As I think I informed you before, we have no identities. The Duke may have been

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a member or he may not. Each of our members is known only by a number ; you will figure upon the list as number 384. Such is the rule, and we adhere to it religiously.”

Once more they crossed the Seine, and once more, after a considerable interval, they reached the gates leading into the long avenue which approached the house. The carriage drew up before the steps, whereupon Middlesborough's companion alighted and invited him to follow his example. As on the occasion of his last visit, the building was in total darkness. His conductor handed him his mask, after which he unlocked the front door, and they entered the vestibule, through which they passed into the hall beyond. A servant relieved Middlesborough of his hat and cloak, and when this had been done, he followed his guide upstairs and through the curtains into the apartment which formed the ante-chamber of the Hall of Combat. To-night, however, there was a slight change in the order of procedure. Instead of going direct to the room, he was conducted to a small dressing-closet in which a suit of clothes of the same description as those worn by the members was duly laid out for him. They fitted him exactly.

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It was while he was making the change in his toilet that his companion explained to him the ceremonial of initiation that was about to take place. When he was ready Middlesborough entered the adjoining room to find it even more crowded than before. Every member was in his place, and the Woman of Death was seated upon her throne. The gaze of the whole assembly was fixed upon himself. In accordance with the instructions he had received, he passed boldly down the gangway between the chairs and approached the throne upon which the Woman was seated. At the same moment a servant presented her with a silver bowl into which she put her hand. When she withdrew it, it contained a small disc upon which was a number. Placing it upon another salver, the servant made his way to the seat indicated, the occupant of which immediately rose and passed into the arena. It had fallen to his lot to test the capabilities of the candidate for election. Buttoned foils were produced, and all that remained was for the Woman to give the signal for the test to commence. Middlesborough was an expert fencer. His father had been one of the best swordsmen of his day, and it had been one

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of his peculiarities that he had considered a knowledge of fencing as necessary to a gentleman's education, as dancing and an acquaintance with the Latin and Greek classics.

As soon as the Woman had given the signal they engaged. His adversary was of his own size and build, but from the moment their foils crossed Middlesborough could see that, while the other was a good swordsman, he was no match for himself. At first they fenced without either obtaining an advantage, but after a couple of dozen passes had been exchanged Middlesborough scored point after point in rapid succession. Then the Woman lifted her hand and the combat ceased. A moment later the man who had conducted him to the house, rose, came to the middle of the room, and addressed the audience.

"Messieurs," he said, "I have the honour to introduce to you a candidate for admission to your ranks. You have seen his skill. It is my duty, therefore, to ask whether you deem him worthy of such privileges as you can confer. Monsieur fully appreciates the honour you do him, and has promised absolute obedience to the rules. On his behalf I await your answer."

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When he had finished speaking the members, without exception, held up their hands in token of approval. Whereupon the man turned to Middlesborough again, and bowing low, said—

“Monsieur, it affords me pleasure to be the means of informing you that you are duly elected a member of this Club.”

Having made this announcement, he led him to the steps of the throne, where the Woman extended her hand to him, and he knelt and kissed it. As he did so, he noticed that it was as cold as ice, and that it trembled violently. When he had paid his homage he was conducted to a seat and then the business of the evening commenced. As on the previous occasion, the seconds entered the room and selected the swords with which the combat was to be decided. This having been done, the opponents made their appearance and gravely saluted each other. Then the swords clashed and the duel commenced.

On this occasion the fight was longer and certainly of a more desperate description than that of the previous week. Twice the swords broke, and twice new ones were furnished by the ever-watchful seconds. The men were

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fighting for their lives and knew that the least mistake would be fatal. The excitement was overwhelming. Every eye was centred upon the glittering blades, and every movement was watched with breathless interest. On the second occasion that they paused to rest, Middlesborough noticed that the man nearest him staggered, and, for a moment, appeared as if he were about to fall. He recovered himself, however, and, after a brief interval, the signal was given for the combat to recommence. The men stood up and faced each other. This time they fought with greater caution. Neither could afford to throw away a chance. Then suddenly, after a brilliant rally, the man furthest from Middlesborough lunged, the other parried as quick as lightning, and, in his turn, thrust. His sword passed through the other's guard, and, almost before any one was aware of it, had pierced his adversary's chest and the latter had measured his length upon the floor. The prolonged sigh that escaped the audience showed how great the tension had been. At a signal the attendants entered the arena and removed the dying man, while as before, the victor was led by his second to the Woman, whose hand

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he kissed. Then the entertainment was at an end.

During his drive back to Paris, Middlesborough was furnished with the address of the Club House, he was also informed as to where he could find the secretary in the event of his desiring to communicate with him.

“Inquire for Monsieur Chartes at the little chemist’s shop on the right-hand side of the Rue Thebes,” said the man beside him—“I am always to be heard of there.”

* * * * *

When Middlesborough in these later days considers the life he led for the two months following the evening I have described, he is filled with a great wonderment. The fascination of the new amusement had taken such a hold upon him, that he never by any chance missed being in his place for a single evening. One by one the men around him were summoned to the arena, but so far the choice had never fallen upon himself. It was gambling carried to its extreme limits, and the excitement that prevailed until the numbers were known was, perhaps, the most intoxicating part of the whole affair.

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Then, one morning, an urgent message reached him from his lawyers, calling him to England. He detested business of every description, but this summons was so imperative that it was not to be denied. Before starting he called at Madame d'Espère's house to bid her farewell. In the weeks that had elapsed since de Rheim's death he had been a constant visitor there. Its owner exercised an influence over him that he could not account for. She was quite unlike any other person he had met, and each time he saw her he seemed less capable than ever of understanding her. Her moods were as variable as the wind : one day she would be sympathetic, anxious to please and to amuse ; the next wrapped in a mantle of impenetrable gloom. When he was admitted to her presence on this occasion Middlesborough found her in her studio, putting the finishing touches to a bust she had been making of himself. She was in a charming humour, and received him with a graciousness that would have been highly dangerous to a more susceptible man.

“ Must you really go to England ? ” she asked, when he had acquainted her with the reason of his visit.

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“I fear so,” he answered sorrowfully. “My lawyers say they must see me at once, so I suppose there is nothing for it but to go. Why cannot they let me alone? I am quite happy as I am. Shall I find you here when I return, in a fortnight or so?”

“I do not know,” she replied dubiously. “I may be here, in Rome, in Constantinople, or in Bagdad. One never knows what may happen in a fortnight. It is an Eternity.”

Had he watched her closely he would have seen that her mood had changed, and that there were danger signals in her eyes. She drew a little closer to him.

“How nice it must be to be able to declare that one is entirely happy,” she said, as if she were resuming an interrupted conversation. “I suppose you are. You have everything you want: wealth, friends, beautiful houses—in fact all that the world can give. But are you sure that there is nothing else left?”

Then Middlesborough saw the look in her eyes. He had recognised for some little time past that her treatment of himself differed somewhat from that accorded to other men, but she had never shown it so plainly before.

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“I do not know that there is anything else,” he answered, with an attempt at gaiety; “unless it is to be allowed to go my own way undisturbed.”

The colour had entirely left her face, and her breathing was quicker than it had been. Middlesborough rose from his chair; but she was too quick for him.

“Forgive me,” she said, impetuously holding out her hands to him. “I must speak to you while I have the opportunity. Do you remember what I told you on the night of our first meeting? Did I not inform you then that I possessed the fatal gift of being able to see further into the Future than other people? Will you believe me when I say that your Fate and mine are involved in this sudden call to London? It is the cross current, and for me the beginning of the end. At Monte Carlo I told you that in meeting you I had advanced another step towards my Destiny. The controlling influence which has brought me so far upon my way, tells me now that another stage has been reached. Must you really go? Can you not stay in Paris, and so save me from my Fate?”

Never had she looked more beautiful than at that moment. There was an indescribable some-

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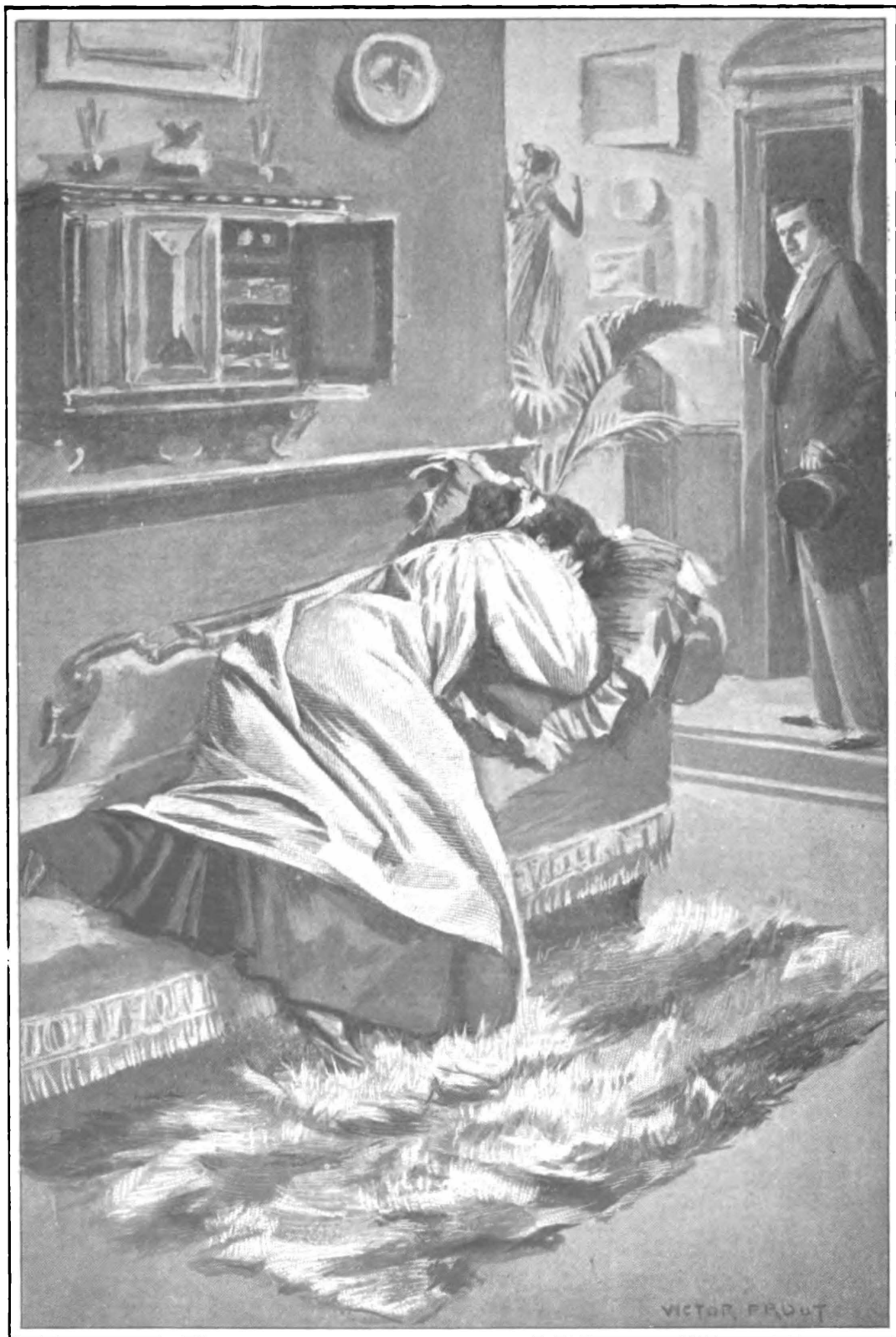
thing about her then that he had never been conscious of before. He was about to speak, but she stopped him abruptly.

“No! no!” she cried, as if she were forcing herself to utter the words. “Forget that I spoke. Why should I ask such a thing of you—you, who want nothing save to be undisturbed? It is too late now. What must be must. It is my Kismet, and who shall change it? Go! Leave me! I—I wish you a pleasant journey. Goodbye!”

“Goodbye,” he said, almost mechanically, for he had not yet recovered from the surprise her strange behaviour had caused him. “May I let you know when I return?”

“You need not do so,” she answered. “I shall know it as soon as you arrive. Come and see me then, that is, if it is not too late.”

He bowed and left the room without another word. As the door closed behind him he paused irresolutely. He had an uneasy feeling that he had not been sympathetic—in fact, that he had been almost rude. Should he go back and express his regret, and try to be of some assistance to her in her distress? It was with this intention that he pushed the door open, but what



Madame d'Espère was lying upon the couch, sobbing convulsively.

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he saw there, when he stood inside, induced him suddenly to change his mind. Madame d'Espère was lying upon the couch at the further end of the room, her face buried in a cushion, sobbing convulsively. To have approached her in this state would only have made matters worse. He accordingly closed the door as softly as he had opened it, and a few seconds later had left the house. That night he slept in London.

CHAPTER V

IT was the height of the season when Middlesborough reached London, and at the Duchess of Laverstock's beautiful house in Eaton Square, perhaps the most fashionable ball of the season was in progress. Though he had long since ceased to find any pleasure in dancing, he felt compelled to put in an appearance. The Duke and he were neighbours in two Counties, and only that morning the affable old peer had encountered him at his club, and had insisted upon his accepting their hospitality that evening.

“The fault I have to find with you, my dear Middlesborough,” he said, “is that you spend so much of your time out of England. Now, that should not be. You have your duty to yourself and to your country to consider. If you will take an old fogey's advice you will marry some nice girl and settle down. They tell me

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your estates are going to rack and ruin for want of a master's controlling hand."

"Very probably," Middlesborough replied ; "the pity of it is, however, that I detest the majority of my properties almost as much as I dislike the trouble of looking after them. Besides, there is another way of looking at it. Providence, realizing the necessity, has furnished us with servants. Should we then take the work out of their hands? As for the girl I am to marry, well, to tell you the truth, I have not so far made her acquaintance. You have no daughters, my dear Duke?"

"It is plain that you've picked up the contemptible habit of paying compliments from our neighbours across the Channel," the other answered. "However, I'll give you a Roland for your Oliver by promising that if you don't come to us to-night our ball will not be complete. Who knows but that you may meet there the young lady of whom we have been speaking?"

"I fear not," said Middlesborough, shaking his head. "I will give myself the pleasure of attending your ball, nevertheless."

Faithful to his promise he made his ap-

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pearance at Eaton Square that evening, and was most graciously received by his hostess ; he danced once with Royalty, and sat out another with the recognized beauty of the season. After that he felt that he had done his duty, and began to wish himself out of it. When therefore he encountered young Mandever, who proposed that they should go along together to Middlesborough's abode for a smoke and a chat, he had no objection to raise to the proposal. They accordingly slipped quietly away, descended to the street, and hailed a hansom.

Mandever and Middlesborough had been at Eton together, and had always been friends. The former had tried the Army in a crack cavalry regiment, but had resigned his commission for the reason, he was wont to say, that his uncle, who was Prime Minister at the time, had declined to enter upon a European war in order to afford his nephew a distraction. Since then he had been engaged in dissipating a splendid fortune at the rate of thirty thousand a year—in which endeavour, it might be added, he was, for the first time in his life, achieving a very considerable amount of success.

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“What is the use of half-doing it?” he would say, when his relatives upbraided him, almost tearfully, for his extravagance, “the sooner the coin is gone, the sooner will these old women give up pestering me. From what I can see of it, a fellow is a marrying man so long as his money lasts; when that’s gone he might as well be in Timbuctoo.”

Then the wiseacres would shake their heads, as wiseacres do, and prophecy unutterable troubles.

Middlesborough’s house was situated in a quiet thoroughfare leading out of St. James’ Street. It had been one of his fancies, when he left Oxford, to purchase this old house, and he had expended a small fortune upon it in order to make it one of the most artistic abodes in London. It was small, but from cellar to garret it was perfection itself. Every room was a gem, but a gem in a different setting. He had discovered an architect and a decorator of genius, had given them an idea of what he wanted, and *carte blanche* to carry it out. The result filled his friends with envy. As Lady Ullswater said, “it had only one drawback, and that was that its owner did not occupy it often enough.”

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“It is not the house that I object to,” said Middlesborough in explanation of his conduct, “but London itself. When I am here I am Lord Middlesborough. On the Veldt or in the Rockies, I am plain Mr. Brown, or Mr. Thompson, or whatever else you please. If I were Mr. Thompson in London, without this house and my rent roll, I should be left alone ; on the Veldt and in the Rockies I am somebody, for the reason that I am a fair shot and don’t grumble too much when there is a deficiency in the commissariat.”

To him this seemed a conclusive argument. What he hungered for, and what he had never yet been able to do, save in a few isolated instances, was to win regard for himself, as a man, alone. As a child his nurses had flattered and indulged him, for the reason that he was the future Lord Middlesborough, heir to enormous wealth and great estates ; the tutor who had prepared him for Eton had done most of the lad’s work himself, and was lenient in matters scholastic, for the reason that he had in continual remembrance that his pupil would some day be a power in the land, with benefices to bestow. Even the

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old vicar of the village in which he was born, and whom, at one time, he had looked upon as the fairest of men, had boxed a ploughboy's ears for daring to assert that, after all, the young lordling was only flesh and blood like himself. Gifted with a shrewdness beyond his years, the lad had the wit to see through all this, and had come gradually to derive his ideas of mankind in general therefrom.

During their drive from Laverstock House Mandever had regaled him with a *réchauffé* of the most interesting scandals that had monopolised the attention of Society since they had last met. Middlesborough allowed it to be supposed that he was interested; as a matter of fact he was thinking of something entirely different. He was wishing himself back in Paris. When the cab stopped and they alighted, he let himself and his friend in with his latch-key, and they proceeded to the study. His well-trained servant, to whom half-past two in the morning was in many respects the equivalent of midday, brought cigars and brandy and sodas, and suggested supper, which both declined.

“Now, old man,” said Mandever, when his

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cigar was once fairly alight, "I want to have a serious talk with you. What do you propose doing this autumn? It has struck me that it would be by no means a bad idea if you and I were to share a moor. We could get Carthwaite's place if we were quick about it, and we could put in a fairly good time there for six weeks or so. I am rather keen on the notion myself."

"I'm afraid, as far as I'm concerned, it's out of the question," said Middlesborough. "My time is fully taken up until the end of the year. Then I'm half-thinking of going to South America. They tell me there is likely to be trouble in one of the Southern States, and shooting men is, to my thinking, a far more interesting pastime than slaughtering unoffending grouse."

"To say nothing of running the risk of being shot yourself," Mandever returned. "But if you really mean it and want a companion, I'm on. It's just the sort of chance I've been hoping to get for years. Say the word, and I'm with you."

"Oh, you mustn't count upon me," Middlesborough replied. "I've decided upon nothing definite yet. You know how my notions change."

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I may be off to Central Siberia in a week's time."

"You are just like Billy Bellew," said Mandever. "I met Billy at a club one night. 'Holloa, Jim, my boy,' says he, 'you're just the man I've been looking for. What do you say to three months among the big game in Bechuanaland? I'm starting by the next boat.' 'Just the sort of thing I've been looking for, old boy,' I said. 'I'll book my berth to-morrow morning, first thing.' We sat down there and then and made out a list of the tackle we should have to take with us. By Jove! I was so excited over the notion that I couldn't sleep that night. First thing after breakfast next morning I wired down to the country for my guns, called upon old Scroggins and told him to rush me up an outfit, issued invitations for a farewell luncheon, said goodbye to half a dozen people, and refused an invitation to one of the jolliest places in the Highlands. After that I went on to the Shikarri for luncheon. There I found Billy warming himself before the smoking-room fire. 'Morning, Billy,' I said, 'there's nothing like taking time by the forelock. I've been gathering

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my things together this morning. Bought a ripping new gun, and no end of other contraptions. By the way, while we're on the subject, which of us is to be in charge of the commissariat?' I couldn't help thinking that Billy looked a bit foolish. 'I'm afraid there's been a mistake, old chappie,' he said. 'Since I saw you yesterday, I've discovered that I shan't be able to go to Bechuanaland after all. The fact of the matter is, my offer was only conditional upon another thing not happening. I went to Lady Kilbraddon's hop last night, and—well, to make a long story short, I shan't be able to go with you, because, you see, *I'm going to be married in six weeks' time*. Won't you wish me luck?' You should have heard the way I talked to him. I called him every name I could lay my tongue to, but a lot he seemed to care. He could only think of Ermentrude Vansittart. Asked me in sober earnest whether I'd be his best man! And so I was done out of my big game shooting in Bechuanaland. Mark my words, if you're not very careful, all your talk of going to South America will end in a similar fashion. Ever since I've known you, you've never been of the same mind for two days together."

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“That’s better than having no mind at all,” retorted Middlesborough, pointedly. “I always thought Billy Bellew was a weak-minded ass. Your story proves it conclusively. However, he’s a married ass now, and his punishment is upon his own head, so let him rest.”

“There are a good many asses of that description knocking about, old man,” said Mandever, shaking his head sagaciously. “Be careful you don’t degenerate into one. In any case, remember if you *do* go to South America, I’m going with you, that’s settled— isn’t it? Ever since that old idiot, my uncle, muddled up things with the French in the way he did, I haven’t had a chance of seeing any fighting. Revolutions in South America are ripping fun, they tell me. Plenty of hand-to-hand scuffling, with the Southern Cross blazing overhead, palm-trees rustling, and bright-eyed señoritas playing guitars, and glancing at you through green shutters. By Jove! it reminds one of Lever’s novels.”

“With the mosquitoes left out,” said Middlesborough. “I’m afraid, old chap, your notions of South America are a trifle hazy. The truth is

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not so alluring. It sometimes happens that you're alive and kicking at midday and dead by sundown. There is such a thing as yellow fever, you know !”

Mandever's face lengthened somewhat.

“By Jove ! you're a cheerful sort of a fellow !” he answered. “If a man were to listen to you he'd shut himself up in his house, and never go out for fear of catching a cold in his head. In any case, I'm willing to risk it. Now I'm going home to bed. I'm going down to Newmarket at eleven. You wouldn't care about coming, I suppose ?

“I'm afraid not, old man,” Middlesborough replied. “I'm supposed to be in town on business, and as soon as that's finished I shall return to Paris. Must you go ? Well, then, good-night.”

He accompanied Mandever to the front door and shook hands with him there. The hansom that had brought them from the Duke of Laverstock's house was still waiting beside the pavement.

“Don't forget about South America,” Mandever cried, as he sprang into it. “Cork Street, cabby,

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and look sharp. Night, night, old boy! Remember Billy Bellew."

A moment later the hansom was round the corner and out of sight.

While he was bidding his friend goodbye Middlesborough had noticed a man standing on the other side of the street. He was about to retire into the house, when he saw that the individual in question was making a move in his direction.

As he approached, he bowed and said in French: "I believe I have the honour of addressing Lord Middlesborough?"

"That is my name," the other replied, perhaps a little stiffly. "What can I do for you?"

"If you would bear with me for a few moments I would ask the honour of an interview," said the other. "I have a communication to make to you of considerable importance."

Middlesborough looked at his watch. It was close upon three o'clock.

"Perhaps you are not aware of the time?" he said, with a touch of sarcasm. "In England three o'clock in the morning is scarcely looked upon as a calling hour, except by firemen and

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policemen. Would it not be better for you to go home and sleep? Then, if you are still of the same mind, you could come and see me after breakfast? I shall be at home until midday."

The other shook his head. It was plain that he was a man who was not to be easily put off.

"I have a train to catch at five o'clock," he answered. "That being so I have no option but to throw myself upon your lordship's generosity. Think what you will of my importunity, but permit me to speak to you in private for ten minutes."

Middlesborough did not know what to say. At first he had been of the opinion that the stranger had been dining, and that he had no real errand with himself. He was by this time, however, quite disabused of that idea. The man was as rational and sober a being as could be found anywhere. What the business might be that was of sufficient importance to keep him hanging about until such an hour on the chance of seeing him, Middlesborough could not imagine.

"Well, since you insist, I suppose I *must* see you," Middlesborough replied, but not too graciously. "Perhaps you will come in?"

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“I thank you,” said the other, and immediately followed him into the hall.

It was only when the stranger had removed his hat and cloak, and was standing before him, clad in immaculate evening dress, that Middlesborough was able to see the sort of man with whom he had to deal. He was tall, graceful, and his age might have been between fifty and fifty-five years of age. Of his nationality there could be no sort of doubt. He was French to his fingertips. Middlesborough led him to his study, and when there invited him to take a seat, at the same time handing him a box of cigars. The other selected one, and while he was cutting it looked round the room with calm, critical eyes. As his host was destined to discover later, he was a man who drew his inferences from surrounding objects quickly and unerringly.

“Now perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me what I can do for you?” Middlesborough inquired. “I shall be obliged if you will do so in as few words as possible for I have had a hard day, and am anxious to get to bed.”

“In the first place I must apologise for keeping you up,” said the other, “but I will detain you no

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longer than is necessary. Permit me to preface my business by declaring that I am well acquainted with your family history, your title, your wealth, and your career. We have many friends in common, whose names it is unnecessary I should bring into the discussion at this stage, but who, I have no doubt, will be glad to guarantee my authenticity when the time arrives."

"No doubt that is all very interesting," said Middlesborough, "but seeing that it is past three o'clock, and that, as I have already said, I am very tired, you must forgive me if I ask you to tell me to what it is leading?"

The other held up his hand in mild deprecation of such haste.

"If you will refrain from interrupting me you shall know everything in a few moments," he answered. "I have often heard it said that you complain of the monotony of your life. With your permission I propose to remedy that defect."

As he said this he produced from his pocket a small leather case, from which he took a miniature. This he handed to the astonished young man seated before him, who glanced at it, and then

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almost dropped it in surprise. It was none other than the likeness of the girl he had seen entering the Casino at Monte Carlo on the night that he had first met Madame d'Espère ; of the girl who in his dream had been his saviour, and whose identity he had in vain endeavoured to discover. He looked at it again. No, there could be no doubt about it. The likeness was unmistakable. There was the same expression about the eyes and mouth, the same high-bred carriage of the head. He glanced from it to the man seated opposite him.

“It is a charming face,” he said, endeavouring to give his voice a note of indifference ; “still, I do not see why you should bring it to me at this hour in the morning.”

“Permit me to continue my explanation,” replied the other. Then after a short pause he added, “That young lady is my daughter. She is motherless, and for reasons that do not concern this history, it is certain that any moment she may lose me. As you know by this time, my nationality is French, and, if you doubt it, I will give you good assurance that my birth is equal to your own.”

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He paused once more, whereupon Middlesborough interposed—

“If you will only come to the point it may facilitate matters,” he said, still holding the miniature in his hands as if he were loth to part with it.

“I am about to do so,” the stranger replied, without any sign of irritation. “Let me, however, assure you first, in case you should doubt it, that all I have to say to you is in the most deadly earnest. It is essential that there should be no misconception upon that point.”

“I am quite prepared to take that for granted,” Middlesborough answered. “Now will you kindly proceed?”

“To put the case in a nutshell,” said the stranger, addressing Middlesborough, “you are a bachelor, wealthy, and the owner of a good name. On the other hand, here is a young girl, beautiful, as you can see; accomplished; of birth equal to your own, and capable of conferring great happiness upon whom she bestows her hand. At any moment it may be necessary for me to leave England, and, if I am not to mince matters, Lord Middlesborough, I may add that I believe I go to my death. Once I am taken from her, she

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will be without a relation or indeed a friend in the world. She will have no one to protect her, no one to think of her, and no one to love her.”

Middlesborough glanced at the miniature before he replied. The face appealed to him with its beautiful eyes.

“What you tell me is exceedingly sad,” he said. “But I do not quite see how I am to remedy it.”

The other leant a little towards him and almost held out his hand.

“I am here to propose that you should marry her,” he said, slowly and distinctly.

Middlesborough uttered an exclamation of astonishment. He could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. Was this a joke that was being played upon him, or was his first supposition that the other had been dining a correct one after all? And yet the man appeared quite sober.

“My good sir,” began Middlesborough, a moment later, “you surely don’t mean to tell me that you have come here, at three o’clock in the morning, to propose that I should marry a lady of whom I know nothing, and whom I have only seen for a few seconds in my life?”

“That is exactly what I *do* mean,” the stranger

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replied, and as he said it he rose from his chair. Then he repeated very slowly, "I am here to propose that you shall marry my daughter."

"In that case, all I can say is," Middlesborough continued, "that, to put it mildly, you must be either intoxicated or insane. I have never heard anything more preposterous in my life."

"In common fairness, then, you must confess that you are indebted to me for my visit to-night, inasmuch, as I for once have helped you across the borders of the Commonplace. But we are wasting time, and you are tired. Do not let us misunderstand each other. As I told you just now, I am standing face to face with Death. It may only be a matter of a few days, or may be a few hours, before the summons comes. Then go I must, whether I will or no. My girl, however, must be placed in a strong man's keeping first. Believe me, I have not made this proposal haphazard. Before deciding upon you I have considered the claims of half the great names of Europe."

"You pay me a great compliment, no doubt, but I fear you do not know me, or you would scarcely do so."

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“I know you better than you know yourself,” the other replied.

Middlesborough shook his head. “I am afraid not,” he said, “or you would not have come to me with such a request. Come, my friend, admit that you have been dining, and that your proposition has no foundation save in a superior vintage.”

“Alas! I grieve to say that what I have said is only too true,” he answered. “How true, you can have no idea. But can we not come to an understanding without further argument? Perhaps if you were to see my daughter you would be more amenable. What would you say to putting aside prejudice and accompanying me into the country? There is a train at five o’clock. It could do you no harm, and, if it is nothing else, it will at least be the beginning of an adventure.”

For a man who was always lamenting the monotony of his humdrum existence here was an opportunity indeed.

“Upon my word,” said Middlesborough, in a bantering tone which was intended to conceal his desire to make the acquaintance of the owner of the glove he had picked up at Monte Carlo, “you

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are really a most agreeable man. You choose three o'clock in the morning to pay a call ; then, having induced me to let you in, you calmly propose that I shall marry a woman of whom I know nothing. Now you suggest that I should abandon what is left of my rest in order to accompany you into the country at such an unearthly hour as five o'clock."

Here his eyes returned to the miniature, which he still held in his hand. He was gradually coming to the conclusion that after all it might prove an amusement to see what the end of the adventure would be.

"To what part of the country is it you desire to conduct me?" he inquired. "I must know that before I promise to go with you."

"To the village of Todthorpe-by-the-Sea, on the Essex coast," the other replied. "It is a quiet little place, but just what I require. No one knows me, and none of the inhabitants, when once they have settled down, ever seem to think of leaving it again. For that reason there can be no gossip with the outside world. There is a train from Liverpool Street at five o'clock, and if we catch it I shall be able to give myself the

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pleasure of introducing you to my daughter. You can breakfast with us and be back in London by lunch time, if you please. Will you come with me or not?"

Middlesborough looked at the miniature again, as if to obtain inspiration from it. There could be no doubt of the relationship existing between the original and the man standing before him.

"The eyes have done it," he said to himself. "I'm going to see this adventure through, if only for their sake."

Then, turning to his visitor he said aloud: "For the humour of the thing I am willing to do as you ask, that is to say, so far as accompanying you to the place you mention goes. I don't pledge myself to anything further, remember that."

"I will remember," said the other gravely. "For some reason or other I did not think you would decline. Now let me wish you *au revoir*, until we meet upon the station platform at five o'clock."

"Until five o'clock, then," said Middlesborough; and then, when he had again apologised for having

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disturbed him at such an unseemly hour, the other took his departure.

When he had let him out, and had shut the door behind him, Middlesborough returned to his study and rang for his man. When the latter put in an appearance he informed him that he wished to catch a train at Liverpool Street at five o'clock.

"Very good, my Lord," the man replied, and, without a trace of astonishment upon his face, departed to give the necessary instructions.

Middlesborough looked at his watch. It was now nearly a quarter to four.

"No use thinking of sleep," he said, with a yawn. "When people arrange these sort of things for one's amusement they should really have more respect for the time of day. I hope I shall be able to get a nap in the train, or I shall be fit for nothing when I get to Todthorpe-by-the-Sea."

Then he added as an afterthought, "I wonder what the end of this absurd business will be?"

CHAPTER VI

THE hands of the clock stood at five minutes to five when Middlesborough alighted from his brougham in the courtyard at Liverpool Street Station. He purchased his ticket and inquired of a sleepy porter where he was to find the platform from which the train for Todthorpe-by-the-Sea would start. When the man had directed him he set off in search of it. At such an hour the station was well-nigh deserted, and when he reached the platform in question only one figure was to be seen upon it. In this individual, however, Middlesborough had no difficulty in recognizing his visitor of two hours before.

“I feel that I owe you ten thousand apologies for bringing you out at such an unearthly hour,” the latter said, when they had greeted each other ; “but the urgency of the case, however, must be my excuse.”

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Middlesborough noticed that his companion had changed his attire since he had last seen him, and that in place of the cloak he now wore a long blue overcoat of fashionable shape. From this he gathered that he must be the possessor of rooms in town. One other point had also struck him, and that was the fact that the other had not yet told him his name. He said as much to him.

“I intentionally withheld it,” the man replied. “It would have been detrimental to my interests had I declared my identity, and you had decided not to accede to my request. Now, however, I am at liberty to tell you. My name is De Tarvenac, and I believe it has the honour to be known in French history. As I have already told you, my daughter, Cécile, is the last of our race.”

“So the name of the original of the miniature is Cécile,” said Middlesborough to himself. It was a pretty name, and he found himself repeating it.

While they had been talking the train had crept into the station, and after they had made inquiries of the guard, they entered a carriage and took their seats. For the first hour they discussed a variety of subjects, but as the train rolled across the Essex Marshes, Middlesborough found himself smiling at

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the absurdity of his position. Had it been suggested to him twelve hours before that he would be accompanying an absolute stranger to a seaside village in Essex in order to inspect a woman of whom he had never even heard, with a view to marriage, he would have laughed the notion to scorn. As such, however, was the case, he was determined to get as much amusement out of the adventure as possible, and, having come to this conclusion, he settled down in his corner to sleep and to await further developments.

To his dismay, he found that it was a longer and more tedious journey than he had expected. An hour after leaving London, and in the chilliest of dawns, they changed and embarked upon the little branch line which was to carry them to their destination. It is just possible, but it will be in the very far future, that Todthorpe-by-the-Sea may develop into a fashionable watering-place. At present, however, it possesses but few claims to popularity. The outlook when one leaves the railway station is an eminently cheerless one. It consists for the most part of the grey-green waters of the North Sea, a range of wind-tossed sandhills and a few stunted trees, behind which a village,

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consisting of perhaps fifty tiny cottages, nestles, as if hiding from the cutting breezes that sweep over it at all times of the year from the continent of Europe. Last, but not least, there is one long white road, which begins on the edge of the northern horizon and stretches across to the south. Half a day's journey distant is Harwich with its fleet of fishing vessels and its much-advertised Continental service. There is as great a difference, however, between the two places as exists between that town and its Dutch *confrère* across the water.

“This is scarcely the sort of place in which you would care to settle down, is it, Lord Middlesborough?” said de Tarvenac, as they left the station and started to walk along the dusty road towards the village.

Middlesborough laughed and shook his head.

“I fear not,” he answered. “I am of the world, worldly. But there—who knows what a man may do? It is just possible I might be able to settle down even here, if I possessed the proper incentive. There have been times when I have found the silence of African forests and the gloom of the Rockies soothing beyond expression. After

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all, happiness and contentment in this world are only matters of environment. On the prairies I can eat and enjoy pemmican ; in Paris I should in all probability turn up my nose at truffles and caviare."

"I wonder if you really believe that?" said de Tarvenac, almost as if he were speaking to himself. "For my part, I disagree with you. In my opinion it is a question entirely of the Past. That which we sow in youth we reap in old age, and our sins are visited upon those who least deserve to be punished for them. But pardon me for talking in this fashion. I am offering you a sorry welcome to my house."

They passed through the village and walked to a point upwards of half a mile on the other side of it. Then suddenly they found themselves confronted by a pair of large iron gates, on one side of which was to be seen all that remained of a building that had once been a lodge.

Seated on the doorstep of the latter was a small boy, who nursed a child almost as big as himself. Still side by side, Middlesborough and de Tarvenac passed up the drive, and approached the picturesque Elizabethan building they could see peeping through the trees.

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“It is fortunate that my daughter is fond of a quiet life, is it not?” said her father, as they came face to face with the house itself. “I am afraid, however, she finds it very dull, poor girl.”

“I should think so,” Middlesborough replied, with conviction, and as he said it he thought instinctively of their first meeting at Monte Carlo. He remembered that when he had returned her glove to her he had been unable to reconcile her pale, sweet face with the roulette tables and the crowd that surrounded them. He was still recalling that evening when they reached the house.

“Permit me to offer you a hearty welcome,” said de Tarvenac as they stood together on the threshold.

Like most large dwellings of the period, this house was the possessor of a fine oak-panelled hall. From it a noble staircase ascended to the next floor, on the landing of which was a stained-glass window, through which a stream of colour descended to the hall below. Middlesborough was admiring the effect thus produced, when his ear caught the sound of a footstep on the polished steps of the stairs. A moment later he became

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conscious of a tall and graceful figure descending. The girl, for she was little more, was dressed from head to foot in white ; she wore a white lace *fichu* round her neck, and long sleeves, which enveloped her arms above the elbow. As she stood before him, framed in the dark background of the staircase, with one hand resting on the old oak balustrade, and the point of a dainty foot peeping beneath her white dress, Middlesborough thought he had never seen a fairer picture. Carolus Durand might have painted her ; no one else would have done her justice. Her father met her at the foot of the stairs, and took her hands in his.

“How is it that you have returned so soon ?” she asked, as she kissed him. “I did not expect you until this evening.” Then her eyes fell upon Middlesborough, and she gave a start of astonishment.

“Can it be possible that you have met before ?” said her father, as he noticed her confusion.

“We met at Monte Carlo,” the young man replied. “Your daughter dropped her glove, and I was fortunate enough to pick it up. That is all. I am glad to see, Mademoiselle, that you have done me the honour of remembering me.”

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“I remember you quite well, Monsieur,” she replied, without a trace of embarrassment.

The formal ceremony of introduction having been accomplished, they passed into a room on the further side of the hall. It was a charming apartment, wide and lofty, while, like the hall, the walls were panelled from floor to ceiling. The furniture of the house must have been handed down from generation to generation intact, though there were certain little French touches here and there that Middlesborough instantly recognised and accounted for. Opposite the door were three large window-recesses with cushioned seats, and through the panes the morning sun streamed brightly in, falling upon the polished floor, and making the antique fender shine like so much gold. Outside, across the stretch of lawn and the fields beyond, the heavy foliage of a wood gave just the touch of coolness to the landscape that was wanting. There was an old-world air about it all, with which the tall, graceful figure in white harmonised very pleasantly.

“We left London at five o'clock this morning,” said de Tarvenac by way of explanation, “and we are consequently hungry. Do you think it would

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be possible to persuade your servants to push the breakfast forward.”

“It shall be served as soon as possible,” she replied.

With that she asked Middlesborough to excuse her, and departed from the room, and left the men alone together. After she had gone Middlesborough rose from his chair and strolled across the room to examine the handsomely carved mantelpiece. He considered himself a connoisseur of old oak, but he made this move more for the purpose of hiding his face from his companion for a few moments than for any other reason. De Tarvenac, who had noticed everything, said nothing. He had no desire to appear to be thrusting his daughter upon Middlesborough. Such a course would be fatal. He had managed to lure him down from London, and he was prepared to leave the rest to Cécile's own personal charms. He proposed that they should walk in the garden while breakfast was being prepared.

When they were out of earshot of the house, Middlesborough stopped and turned to his companion.

“I want you to answer one question,” he said.

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“ Does Mademoiselle de Tarvenac know the reason of my presence here ? ”

“ She does not,” her father replied. “ I will pledge you my word upon that. She thinks that you are, and what I took the liberty of describing you as, a friend.”

Middlesborough was glad to hear this. Before he had seen her he had had an idea that possibly she might have been acting in collusion with her father. For upwards of half an hour they paraded the grounds. In days gone by it must have been a delightful old place ; now, however, it had fallen grievously from its high estate. The park was sadly neglected, while of the Lady’s Rose Garden, once so trim and neat, only a straggling wilderness remained. In the stables, where in days of yore a dozen horses might have found comfortable quarters, rats scuttled before the intruder’s foot, while the orchard and fruit garden were so overgrown that it was impossible to distinguish the places where once the boundaries had been.

“ To my thinking there is nothing sadder,” said de Tarvenac, as they leaned upon the rickety gate of the latter enclosure, and surveyed the general desolation, “ than an old house of this class. Let

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us try to realise what it means. That ruin to our right was probably the dairy; there are the remains of the stables. At this gate Will, the groom, and Moll, the dairymaid, must have flirted two hundred years ago. In yonder garden my lady walked and dreamed her dreams of that long line of descendants, who were to carry on this place through years and years, as yet unborn. And here we have the result. My lady and her lord, and Moll and her husband, lie in yonder churchyard, with even their great grandchildren's graves forgotten, and still the old house stands, looking towards the cold, grey sea, as in all probability it will continue to do long after you and I have passed away and are as far removed from memory as they of whom I have just spoken."

Middlesborough looked at him in surprise. He had not expected such a flow of sentiment, and he was about to say something to his companion to that effect, when the flutter of a white dress in the shrubbery attracted his attention.

"It must be Cécile come to summon us to our *déjeuner*," said her father. "Let us go in."

They passed through the wicket gate, and crossed the lawn towards the house. Cécile met them on

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the threshold, and, putting her arm through her father's, led them to the dining-room.

It is probable that if Middlesborough were asked to-day to describe the meal to which they then sat down, he would find it difficult to do so. He would perhaps remember that there was an omelette which was so light that he felt sure Cécile had prepared it with her own hands, and also that there was some coffee which she herself poured out, and which was, in consequence, like nectar from the gods. It is unlikely that he could tell you more, for the simple reason that he was too much absorbed in watching the girl seated opposite him to pay much attention to what he was eating.

The meal at an end, they returned to the garden. This time Cécile accompanied them. On the further side of the lawn there was an old pond, filled with water lilies ; beyond this a rustic temple which the Comte de Tarvenac used as a writing-room on warm days, and which, in consequence, had been placed in some sort of repair. They seated themselves under the shadow of the lime-trees and talked of Paris, of the sunny Mediterranean, and of the thousand and one other places with which

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they were familiar. The sunshine filtered through the leaves, and touched the white and gold of the lilies in the pond, upon the broad, green leaves of which the dragon-flies poised themselves like creatures of a fairy world. Cécile had brought her needlework with her, and Middlesborough stole many a covert glance at her as she sewed. It was difficult to realize the grotesqueness of the situation. It cost him, at least, an effort to believe that de Tarvenac had really called upon him at three o'clock that morning, and that he had only been introduced to Cécile two hours before. It seemed to him that he had known her for years.

After a while de Tarvenac made an excuse and went into the house, leaving them alone together.

"I fear you must find Todthorpe very lonely, Mademoiselle," said Middlesborough, after the little pause that followed. "I really believe it is one of the dullest spots I have seen in all my wanderings."

"It is certainly a little quiet," Cécile replied, looking up from her work. "But when my father is with me, I do not mind that very much ;

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I act as his secretary, and that keeps me well employed. I cannot say, however, that I shall be altogether sorry when we return to France.”

“And have you any idea when that will be?” Middlesborough enquired.

“Not the slightest,” she answered. “As yet my father has said nothing to me about it. He is waiting for news, I think, which may come at any moment.”

The conversation then branched off into other channels. They talked of the theatres, few of which she had visited, of music, of books, both French and English. The latter language, he discovered, she talked and read with ease. Then the conversation came somewhat nearer home.

“Lord Middlesborough,” she said, “I hope you won’t think me very rude, but I should so much like to ask you why you have never written a second book. Your first was so successful that surely it should have spurred you on to greater efforts.”

“I fear, Mademoiselle, that as yet you are not aware of my failings,” Middlesborough replied, idly stripping the bark from a willow twig as he spoke. “I am stubbornness personified. Had

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my first effort been less successful I might have tried again. But for the reason that it received, to my mind, such unmerited praise, I tired of literary work, and resolved never to try my hand at it again. In those few words you have the story of my life.”

She looked at him gravely.

“You scarcely do yourself, or your talents, justice,” she said. “I have noticed, even in the short time I have known you, that you continually belittle yourself in the eyes of other people.”

“It may be so,” he answered. “But you must not err upon the other side. Let me assure you that I am neither humble nor modest. Far from it, as I fear you may presently find out. If the truth must be told, I am a riddle even to myself. As the Turkish proverb says, ‘Man is a bundle of contradictions, tied together with fancies.’”

“Is it not a Persian saying?” she asked, without any pretence of appearing learned.

“Of course it is,” he answered. “You are quite right. It was foolish of me to make the mistake.”

For some reason her correction pleased him.

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More than once he had noticed the extent of her learning, and now he could not refrain, rude as it might seem, from commenting upon the fact.

“I owe it all to my father,” she said gravely. “He is a great scholar, and has directed my studies since I was a child.”

“You are fortunate in possessing such a parent,” Middlesborough continued. “Few people have such an opportunity.”

When de Tarvenac returned, Middlesborough looked at him with a new interest. Clever man as he had hitherto supposed him to be, he had no idea that he had employed his learning to so much advantage. They talked for a while, after which Middlesborough looked at his watch, and was surprised to find that the greater portion of the morning had slipped away. If he desired to return to town, it was little more than an hour before his train would start. As ill-luck would have it, there was not another until late in the afternoon.

“I fear I really *must* go,” he answered reluctantly in reply to de Tarvenac’s cordial invitation to remain. “I have an appointment this afternoon which it is most important I should keep. May I ask, Mademoiselle,” he added with a

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humility that was by no means customary with him, "if you will permit me to pay you another visit?"

"We shall be very glad to see you," the girl replied.

"If you will allow me I will walk with you as far as the station," said de Tarvenac. "Perhaps, since you must catch this train, we had better be starting."

Middlesborough bade Cécile goodbye, and a few minutes later they were strolling along the highroad in the direction of the railway station. It was not until they had reached the platform, however, that de Tarvenac returned to the object of his guest's visit.

"I am going to ask you, point blank, Lord Middlesborough," he said, "whether, now that you have seen my daughter, you are prepared to accept my offer or not?"

"I scarcely know what to say," the other replied, drawing patterns in the gravel with his stick. "It is all so sudden—so unexpected, that I am unable to weigh the matter carefully. You must give me more time. When may I see your daughter again?"

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“Whenever you like,” de Tarvenac replied. “The sooner the better. As I have already pointed out to you, there is no time to lose. It is impossible to say when I shall have to leave England. For all I know to the contrary, it may be this week.”

“In that case, if you will allow me, I will come down to-morrow. I will not disguise from you, sir, that I am extremely interested in your daughter. When you placed your offer before me this morning, I treated it in the light of an adventure, and resolved to see it through in that light. Since I *have* seen her, however, I have become more serious in my attentions. I pay you the compliment of saying that I have never met any one who I would so willingly make my wife.”

“I am glad to hear that,” replied the Count gravely. “Come down to-morrow by all means. Afterwards you may be able to give me a more definite answer.”

A few minutes later Middlesborough took his place in the carriage, the whistle sounded, the train started, and he was on his way back to London. When he reached town he drove direct to his club, lunched, and then went on to his

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lawyers' offices. For upwards of two hours he was compelled to give his attention to business, which appeared to his solicitors of paramount importance, but which bored him consumedly. From where he sat he could look through the wire blinds into a dingy little courtyard, black with the soot and dirt of London. In his mind's eye he was picturing a garden in which there was a pond where the water-lilies grew. On one side of the pond was a summer-house, before which sat a girl dressed in white, hemming a cambric handkerchief. He had been thinking of that girl a good deal since he had left her, and was gradually coming to the conclusion that, after all, his loss of rest on the previous night had been well repaid by his visit to the seaside. He could not remember ever having seen a face so fair, or to have heard a voice so sweet.

“The computed rent of the three farms, therefore, at that reckoning would be eleven hundred pounds,” his lawyer was saying ; “while the sum offered by the company in question would amount to—but I see your lordship is not listening to me. If I might suggest a little——”

“My dear Bennett, I must beg your pardon,”

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said Middlesborough, with great suavity ; “ I confess for the moment my thoughts were elsewhere. Your arguments are, of course, irrefutable, and I beg you will act in the matter as you may think best for my benefit. I know I can leave myself in your hands.”

“ I thank your Lordship for the compliment you pay me,” Bennett replied, “ but, as you are aware, the responsibility is a very great one, and it is not of yourself alone I have to think. We must bear the fact in mind that, in all probability, you will some day marry. In that case, if all goes well, as I trust it may, you will probably have a son, whose interests, as your heir, must of course be considered. That is why I am endeavouring to prove to you the advisability of adopting the course I suggest.”

Middlesborough started. He had not looked at the matter in this light. It was a new idea, and for some reason it was not altogether distasteful. The thought of marriage had, as may be imagined, come before him on many different occasions, but hitherto it had always been disagreeable to him. He argued that he had never yet discovered the woman he would care to make

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his wife. A fashionable lady who attended Drawing Rooms, and who would be as willing to live in Greenland for six months as out of London for three, would be unbearable ; the daughters of country squires, who wore thick boots, who could tell the weight of a pig at a glance, and whose talk was redolent of the stables and the kennels, disgusted him ; while the literary woman, the blue stocking, or the artless child of nature, were out of the question altogether. How different was Cécile !

That evening he dined with the Home Secretary, and went on to a reception at the French Ambassador's afterwards. When he left Todthorpe he had had no intention of going, but he had suddenly changed his mind. The truth was he wanted to ask a question of the Ambassador, a question which had suddenly come to be of paramount importance to him. To find the opportunity, however, when he got there, was somewhat more difficult. The crush was so great, and the Ambassador was kept so constantly engaged, that it was not until late in the evening that Middlesborough obtained the opportunity he wanted.

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“By the way, Baron,” he said, when they were standing alone together for a few moments, “I have a question to ask you. If there is any man who can answer it, you are he.”

“I’ll answer half a hundred with pleasure, if you like,” replied the polite representative of La Belle France. “What is the particular question?”

“I want you to tell me whether, by any chance, you happen to be acquainted with an individual named de Tarvenac?” Middlesborough asked, almost nervously. “If so, I am anxious to hear all you can tell me about him.”

“I have known the man for many years,” the other replied. “He is of good family, and was at one time the possessor of considerable wealth. The greater portion of his fortune, however, has, I believe, since been lost. He is an inveterate gambler; and if what I have lately heard of him is correct, he is at present on the verge of ruin. The case is the sadder for the reason that I understand he possesses a beautiful daughter.”

The Ambassador glanced at Middlesborough’s face as he said this.

“Ah, my young friend,” he said to himself, “I

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think I can understand the reason of these inquiries. It looks as if the *blasé* Middlesborough has been caught at last. Well, well, I always said it would be so." Then he added aloud: "Pray, where did you happen to meet the man we are discussing?"

"I made his acquaintance for the first time this morning," the other replied. "He struck me as being a particularly interesting individual."

"He is a most interesting man," the Ambassador replied. "At one time it was thought that he would have come to the front in the political world. But fate was against him. He lacked the one necessary quality — patience. Now, if you will excuse me, I must return to my duties. If I can help you in any other way, you have only to command me."

Having no further reason for remaining, Middlesborough left the Ambassador's residence. There were several other houses open to him, but he did not avail himself of his privilege. When his footman inquired in which direction he desired to be driven, he replied, "Home," and then settled himself down in the corner of the brougham to think. It seemed to him that in the last twenty-

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four hours the whole current of his life had been changed. Never before had a woman obtained such an influence over him. Combat it as he would, argue with himself as diplomatically as he might, the fact remained that he had at last met the one woman of all others he would care to make his wife.

Reaching his house, he went into the study and lit a cigar. As the smoke rose into the air, strange thoughts filled the young man's brain. At last he rang the bell for his valet.

"Perkins," he said to that staid individual, "I am leaving London to-morrow morning. Have my things ready by eight o'clock, will you?"

"For Paris, sir?" the man inquired.

"No," his master replied, "not for Paris. I am going down to a little village on the Essex coast, called Todthorpe-by-the-Sea. It is not a very lively place, I believe, but such as it is, you must make the best of it. I don't know how long we shall be away, but you had better prepare for a week."

The man bowed and left the room. He would have packed for Spitzbergen with as few words.

"I wonder what he's up to now?" he said to

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himself as he made his way upstairs. "Todthorpe-by-the-Sea—who ever heard of such a place? Well, well, I suppose I shall find out what it's all about before very long."

A man may be no hero to his valet, but there are times when he may become a very big mystery to him.

When Middlesborough retired to bed he reviewed the situation for the hundredth time. There was only one thing which caused him uneasiness. Remembering the unquestioning obedience that French daughters are accustomed to render their parents in such matters, he had every reason to suppose that, should he do as de Tarvenac desired, he would be successful in his suit; in that case, what would Madame d'Espère say when she heard of his marriage?

CHAPTER VII

THE morning was well advanced when Middleborough stepped from the train on to the platform of the station of Todthorpe-by-the-Sea. During the journey down he had been permitted plenty of opportunity of thinking over the step he was taking. As a proof that his stock of common sense had not yet entirely forsaken him, he argued that it was merely the glamour of Cécile's beauty, and perhaps the touch of romance which surrounded his introduction to her, that had captivated him so strangely. As if to excuse his behaviour he was compelled to confess that he had never met any one he liked better ; on the other hand, to set the balance true, he had never before experienced a desire to become a married man. Putting one against the other he thought on the whole it would be better to leave things to chance and to let the Fates decide for him.

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A fresh breeze was blowing in from the sea, and the sandhills were slowly removing themselves to the station platform. The venerable station-master touched his hat and disappeared into his private residence; the one and only porter stationed himself at the exit door in order to take the tickets of the five passengers who had travelled by the train; while Perkins was left standing near the guard's van waiting for the luggage, and gazing disconsolately upon the surrounding scenery. During the years he had served his master he had visited many strange places, but he could not recall one that boasted so cheerless an exterior as Todthorpe-by-the-Sea. He approached Middlesborough and inquired to what address the luggage should be sent.

“When I was here yesterday I noticed a small hotel on the left-hand side of the main street,” the other replied. “We had better try to obtain rooms there.”

His valet's face grew longer every moment. They were not going to a country house, then, as he had supposed. Indeed, it looked as if his master himself did not know where he was going. From Perkins's point of view village inns

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were impossible places, and he began to have serious doubts as to his master's sanity. However, he knew him too well to venture upon any remark. He accordingly carried the bags as far as the exit door, where he gave up his own and Middlesborough's tickets, and interrogated the porter as to the best accommodation to be found in the village. The yokel scratched his head as if he did not quite understand the question put to him. Then a light broke upon his dull brain and he answered—

“There bain't none, not as I knows on, but there be the Black Bear Inn, sure enough. 'Tis Widow Brown's house, and ye'll find the beer none so bad.”

Perkins bestowed a look of contempt upon him. Matters seemed to be going from bad to worse. Could it be possible that the great Lord Middlesborough, one of the most fastidious men in Europe, would condescend to patronise a village pothouse? He could not believe it. However, something had to be done, and he accordingly looked about him for a vehicle in which to convey the luggage to the village.

“Haven't you any cabs?” he inquired of the

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porter, in a tone that suggested that he considered that official responsible for the lack of vehicles.

The porter shook his head.

“I don’t know as I ever seed one,” he said at last. “But there’s the barrer back there on the platform, ye can take that, if ye’ve a mind to bring it back again.”

Middlesborough was forced to turn away in order to hide a smile. His wildest flight of fancy could not picture the stately Perkins pushing a hand-barrow along that dusty road.

“Never mind,” he said at last. “We won’t trouble about the barrow. You can carry a couple of the bags and I’ll take the rest. If we can’t ride we must walk, and make the best of it. I should say it is not more than a quarter of a mile.”

“Very good, my Lord,” said Perkins, resignedly. “If you don’t mind, m’lord, of course it’s not for me to object.”

They accordingly picked up the bags and started. It was a warm morning, and the luggage was by no means light. By the time they had reached the main, and, indeed, the only street,

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both were hot and dusty, and one had suffered considerably in his temper.

“ If I’m not mistaken that is the Black Bear Inn,” said Middlesborough, pointing to a house some fifty or sixty yards down the street.

They made their way towards it to discover, from the announcement above the door, which set forth the fact that Martha Brown was licensed to sell beer and spirits, and also from the picture of the strangely constructed animal depicted on a board hanging from a post opposite, that his conjectures were correct.

Perkins accordingly entered the little passage which led past the bar-parlour, and inquired for the landlady, while Middlesborough went into the parlour and sat down.

A moment later a bustling, buxom creature, whose corkscrew curls danced on either side of her ruddy cheeks as she walked, appeared from a room at the end. Perkins made her a bow, and inquired whether it would be possible for her to find accommodation for a few days for a gentleman and his servant? From her reply it was very evident that she took Perkins for the gentleman.

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“If you wouldn't mind, sir, having things a bit rough, like, I've no doubt I can manage it,” she said. “But it's only a small place, you see, and it's not once a year we have a gentleman like yourself asking for a room. A commercial now and again, sir, or a Lloyd's agent when a vessel goes ashore on the beach. That's all. Is your servant here, sir?”

Middlesborough heard Perkins cough apologetically.

“His lordship is in the bar-parlour at this minute,” he said; and then added, “this is a terrible place of yours, we could get no carriage and no help in carrying the baggage up here. Consequently we had to do it ourselves, his lordship assisting. I don't know that I ever saw things worse managed.”

The fact that she was going to have a live lord for her guest proved too much for the landlady. On hearing the news she fled precipitately to the kitchen, where she might have been heard, a moment later, adjuring some one to fly upstairs and get the front room ready for his lordship, “just as quick as ever you did a bit of work in your life, Sarah Jane, and you remember that.”

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Having thus arranged matters for his master's comfort, Perkins returned to the bar-parlour.

"It's a terrible poor sort of a place, my Lord," he said, "I don't like to think what the commissariat department will be like. Perhaps your Lordship would wish me to telegraph to London for a few delicacies."

"There is not the least necessity, my good Perkins," Middlesborough replied. "I can rough it very well for a few days. Let me have lunch as soon as possible."

When, half an hour later, a round of beef made its appearance, Middlesborough discovered that he possessed a good appetite. He drank success to his visit in a glass of excellent ale, and when he had lighted a cigar, felt as contented as he had ever done in his life.

He had now to decide when he should pay his first visit to the Manor House. He wondered what Mademoiselle de Tarvenac would say when she saw him, and whether she would be pleased or annoyed at his reappearance. His cigar finished, he put on his hat, and, taking a stick, set off up the road. Away to the right, over the sandhills, he could hear the waves breaking

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upon the beach, and the voices of fishermen hauling up their boat ; on his left, when he had left the village behind him, the only human being in sight was a boy scaring crows.

Reaching the gates of the Manor House, he was about to enter the drive, when he witnessed what might have been a deplorable accident. From the further side of the lodge shouts of laughter were to be heard. A moment later a small boy, the same he had seen on his previous visit, came into view, dragging behind him a wooden box on wheels, in which a baby was seated. Unfortunately for the safety of the vehicle, he took the corner at two sharp an angle ; the cart skidded on one wheel, and then overbalanced altogether. The boy tripped and fell forward, while the infant was thrown headlong into the long grass by the roadside, where it lay kicking and bellowing lustily. Middlesborough ran and picked it up, and when he had brushed away the dust, endeavoured to soothe the frightened child. He was still engaged in this work when a light step on the path attracted his attention, and he looked up to find Cécile de Tarvenac standing before

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him. At first she was too much surprised at seeing him to say anything. Then her astonishment gave place to amusement.

“How do you do, Lord Middlesborough?” she said. “I hope the poor little fellow has not hurt himself?”

“I fancy not,” Middlesborough replied, as he handed the child to its brother, who by this time had scrambled to his feet and was staring open-mouthed at Mademoiselle de Tarvenac. “He is more frightened than hurt, I think.”

Then, having slipped a shilling, unperceived by Cécile, into the boy’s hand, and thus making him wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice, he continued his walk up the drive at the girl’s side.

“I hope I have not offended you by making my appearance here again so soon,” he said, as they approached the house.

“Why should I be offended?” she answered. “We have not the monopoly of Todthorpe-by-the-Sea.”

He stole a glance at her as she said it. Her face, however, told him nothing.

“Papa will be very pleased to see you, I am

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sure," she added. "He enjoyed your visit yesterday so much. I cannot tell you how much brighter and happier he seemed afterwards."

Middlesborough thought he could guess why. He expressed his pleasure at her news, and his willingness to do all that lay in his power to amuse her father.

"You are very kind," she said simply. "I hope you will believe that I am grateful."

They then entered the house together.

The seven days that followed made up a week of almost unalloyed happiness for Middlesborough. Poor as was his lodging at the inn, he, who had hitherto been accustomed to all the luxuries that the best hotels could furnish, was never heard to grumble. The greater portion of his time was spent at the Manor House, and in Cécile's company. They sat by the lily pond together, they walked for miles upon the beach, while in the evening, Cécile played and sang to them in the quaint old pannelled drawing-room, where dainty ladies must have sung to their cavaliers two hundred years before. Never, since he was a lad, had Middlesborough led so simple an existence. The only person who found life unendurable was

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Mr. Perkins. He, it must be confessed, was entirely out of his element. It is true that he never grumbled openly, but from early morn to dewy eve his face was one long picture of dejection.

“If only I could see what good there was in it, I wouldn’t so much mind,” he would say to himself by the pig-stye in the inn garden, as he idly scratched the back of a porker with a stick. “He can’t surely be thinking seriously of that French girl when there’s so many of the greatest ladies in Europe as would be only too glad to have him?” At this point Mr. Perkins would shake his head solemnly, and tell himself that Middlesborough’s doings were too deep a mystery for even his great mind to solve.

One afternoon the latter reached the house to find de Tarvenac alone in the garden. He was reading a French newspaper which had arrived by the morning post ; when his visitor appeared, however, he placed it on the ground beside him.

“Cécile has gone into the village to see a sick woman,” he said, in explanation of his daughter’s absence. “In advance of the times as she is on other matters, she still retains the feminine love

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of a sick-room. By the way, what progress are you making with her? ”

“I am really unable to say,” Middlesborough replied. “Sometimes I think she likes me, at others I am afraid she merely tolerates me for your sake.”

De Tarvenac drew in some smoke and then puffed it slowly out again.

“Would you wish me to use my influence with her? ” he asked.

“No, no,” Middlesborough replied hastily. “If I am to win her at all, I must do so in my own fashion. I have no desire for a wife of any one else’s choosing. You have said nothing to her yet, I hope? ”

“Not a word,” de Tarvenac answered. “But I must confess I have found it difficult to account to her for your presence here. She is not a girl to be easily hoodwinked. Have you made up your mind when you mean to speak to her? ”

“This evening—that is, if I can find a suitable opportunity,” Middlesborough replied.

“May every success attend you,” said her father. “If you could only know what a weight will be lifted off my mind, when I know that she

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is provided for, you would be able to understand my feelings. I have a continued presentiment that the end, of which I spoke to you at our first meeting, cannot be very far off. When I was in London I called upon a famous specialist. He examined me and informed me that my heart was in a sad condition. He did not say that there was any immediate danger, but he gave me his solemn assurance that a sudden shock might kill me. In that case, what Cécile would do here in a strange country, I do not know.”

“Let us hope that nothing will happen to you,” Middlesborough answered.

“Still one must remember that there is always the possibility,” said the other. “I have to think of her, not of myself.”

De Tarvenac rolled the leaf of his cigar meditatively.

“Forgive the question, but—but—well, to put it bluntly, is it possible that you have come to love her in so short a time?”

“It is more than possible—it is quite true,” said Middlesborough frankly. “I have jested and laughed at love all my life, but the Blind Boy

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has proved too much for me at last. If Cécile will take pity on my useless life, I will do all that a man can do to make her happy. But she must take me of her own free will, and without coercion of any kind."

"You need not fear that she will do anything else. She is not a woman to be forced into doing anything. Dine with us to-night and speak to her afterwards."

Middlesborough agreed, and, after an hour, seeing that Cécile did not return, he made his way back to his hotel.

It is popularly supposed that the few hours which precede a proposal are not the happiest in a man's existence. In Middlesborough's case it was certainly so. From the moment that he told de Tarvenac of his intention he was a different being. Until then he had been good temper itself, now nothing pleased him, he could not rest, nor could he settle to anything. His landlady's voluble tongue irritated him beyond measure, the song of a tipsy loafer in the bar aggravated him to the verge of madness, while even Perkins's silent movements in the small bedroom, as he laid out his master's things, jarred upon his overstrung nerves.

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“There is something in the wind, sure enough,” said Perkins to himself, as he brushed an almost imperceptible speck of dust off one of the boots. “That French girl’s been pitching into him, I suppose. Well, I don’t much mind if it gets me out of this hole back to Town. I’ve had enough of Todthorpe-by-the-Sea to last me all my life.”

“Hurry up there, Perkins, can’t you?” said Middlesborough irritably; “I don’t want to be all night dressing. Why on earth are you so slow?”

“Everything is quite ready, m’lord,” said Perkins, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

Thereupon Middlesborough began to dress.

“I am afraid you’ve had rather a slow time, Perkins,” he said at last, feeling that he had not been quite just to his faithful henchman.

“To tell the truth, my Lord, it’s not exactly lively,” the other replied. “There is nothing to do, and the society is scarcely what I have been accustomed to. Pilchards and herrings are the only things they seem able to talk about, and I can’t say I’m familiar, so to speak, with either article in its rough state.”

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“I thought you were more cosmopolitan, Perkins,” said Middlesborough, with a smile.

“No m’lord,” the other answered gravely. “I cannot say that I know anything about the sect you mention. But I have a cousin who was once a guard upon the Metropolitan. He used to say that it was the healthiest occupation in London.”

Middlesborough slipped on the coat the other was holding, put a handkerchief in his pocket, and then surveyed himself in the small mirror. He could have wished he were not quite so sallow, that his expression were different ; in fact, that he were altogether a handsomer man, and one more likely to take a maiden’s eye. But, as he could not change himself, there was not much satisfaction to be got out of wishing, so he bade Perkins give him a light overcoat, and, when he had put it on, he set out for the Manor House.

It was a glorious evening, and as he left the inn the sun was sinking in a mass of golden splendour behind the sandhills. In the evening light even Todthorpe-by-the-Sea might claim to be considered beautiful. Reaching the lodge, he passed through the gates, nodded to the

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boy, who by this time considered him an old acquaintance, and made his way up to the Manor House. The aged woman-servant opened the door to him, and informed him that *Miss Cécile* was in the drawing-room. He accordingly made his way thither, to find her standing by the big window watching the sun dropping to his rest behind the trees.

“How lovely it is!” she said, when they had greeted each other. “When I was a little girl I used to think that heaven must be like that, all silence and beautiful colouring.”

It is probable that she would have been shocked, or would have pretended to be, had she known what Middlesborough's idea of Heaven at that moment was. He would have told her that it was to be with her.

An intense longing to confess what was in his heart, and to know his fate, was taking possession of him. Should he run the risk and win or lose it all? He thought he would, but he had no sooner arrived at this decision than his courage deserted him, and he resolved to postpone consideration of the matter until after dinner.

“You are very quiet this evening, Lord

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Middlesborough," Cécile remarked after they had been standing for some minutes side by side.

Here was the opportunity he wanted, and, almost before he knew what he was doing, Middlesborough had entered upon his explanation.

"I am quiet because I have been thinking that it will be necessary for me very soon to bring my stay here to a close," he said.

"That means that you have tired of Todthorpe-by-the-Sea, I suppose," she answered. "And yet you surprise me, for you said only yesterday that you were so fond of its quiet, that you might stay for weeks."

"It is not that I am weary of it," he answered. "It is because I am beginning to think that it would be better for me to go away, because—well, because it is not quite safe for me to remain here any longer."

"Not safe?" she asked, a startled look making its appearance in her face. "Why should it not be safe for you to remain here?"

Then the real meaning of his speech must have struck her, for next moment her face had flushed as crimson as the sky outside.

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“I can see that you have guessed my reason,” he continued, drawing a little closer to her. “Yes, Cécile, that is why I think it would be better for me to go away. I love you with my heart and soul. There is no other woman in the world for me. Is it possible that you can feel for me any of the love I have for you?”

He took possession of her hand. She lowered her head, but only for a moment. Then she looked proudly up at him.

“Why should I deny it?” she said simply, but fearlessly. “I love you. I think I have done so always.”

Middlesborough stooped and kissed her hand.

“Thank God,” he said, and that was all.

Ten minutes later de Tarvenac entered the room. It is possible he had suspected what was going on and had remained away on purpose, for he looked from one to the other, as if to make sure of his ground. Then Middlesborough, taking Cécile’s hand, went forward to meet him.

“Sir,” said the former, “I have some news for you. Your daughter has done me the honour of promising to be my wife.”



"I do love you. I think I have loved you always."

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De Tarvenac took the girl in his arms and kissed her blushing face.

“Cécile, my darling,” he said, “you have made me more than happy. As for you, Lord Middlesborough, though she is my daughter, I think you are to be congratulated on your choice of a wife. May you both be as happy as you deserve!”

Middlesborough, relieved of his anxiety as to whether Cécile loved him or not, was a very different person from the man who had chided Perkins for his slowness at the “Black Bear” an hour and a half before. He was on the best of terms with himself and with the world in general.

Dinner at an end, Middlesborough and Cécile left de Tarvenac in his study writing letters, and passed into the garden. Night had fallen, and the young moon hung like a silver sickle above the tree-tops. Bats darted hither and thither among the trees, and round the gables of the old house, while far away the sound of a belated cuckoo could be heard wishing the world a monotonous good-night. Middlesborough wondered whether the old garden had ever seen a man as happy as he. It seemed almost unbelievable that he had only

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known Cécile a week, and equally impossible that there could have ever been a time when they had been strangers to each other. A smile played upon his face as he thought of what the Great World would say when it heard the news of his engagement. But he told himself that he did not care for Public Opinion. Time after time they made the circuit of the garden, talking of the Future, and all it had in store for them.

Once Middlesborough reminded Cécile of their meeting at Monte Carlo. As he did so the memory of the dream he had had that fateful night came back to him. It was then that he thought for the first time for many days of Madame d'Espère. To think of her was to think of the house of St. Germain. And as he did so it was as if an icy hand had been laid upon his heart. How did he stand with regard to the club? Instead of being glad to gamble with his life, he was now only too anxious to preserve it.

It was nearly nine o'clock by this time, and they had passed the pond, and were once more approaching the house. It was their intention to enter by means of a side door, and to do this it was necessary for them to pass de Tarvenac's

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study windows. The evening was warm and they were still open. To their surprise, as they drew nearer, the sound of voices reached them from within. It was plain that de Tarvenac had a visitor.

A second later Middlesborough stopped, paralysed with horror and astonishment. There could be no mistake, and yet—? His face grew pale as death as the thought entered his brain. Could there be two men whose voices were exactly alike? If not, then the man in the room talking to Cécile's father was none other than de Chartres, the man who had escorted him from the Place de la Concorde to that terrible house at St. Germain. In that case what was his business here? Cécile noticed the look upon his face.

"You are ill?" she said anxiously, seeing that he stopped in his walk and made an involuntary gesture with his hand.

"Only a sudden twinge of pain," Middlesborough answered confusedly. "It was nothing more, and I am all right now. It was foolish of me to frighten you. Let us come into the house, the dew is falling, and you must not catch cold."

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But though he did his best to carry the matter off unconcernedly, some minutes elapsed before he recovered his presence of mind. Why was the man there? What was his business with de Tarvenac? He was convinced in his own mind that he had not been mistaken. There were certain peculiarities in the other's voice that gave it a distinction of its own. He would have recognised it among a hundred. Half an hour later de Tarvenac joined them in the Drawing Room. As he came within the circle of the lamp's light, Middlesborough noticed that his face was unusually pale.

"You have had a visitor, papa," said his daughter, as she crossed the room and seated herself beside him.

"Yes, dear," her father replied. "A visitor from Paris. I am sorry to say he has brought me news which will necessitate our crossing the Channel to-morrow."

Middlesborough watched his face and made a mental note of the expression upon it. Whatever the news may have been that the stranger had brought, it was quite certain that it had unnerved the man who had received it.

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“I am sorry to hear that,” said Middlesborough. “When do you think you will return to England?”

“It is impossible for me to say,” the other replied; and then he added, as if to himself, “Quite impossible!”

Then Cécile inquired at what time it would be necessary for them to start on the following day.

“We must catch the boat from Harwich,” her father replied.

“In that case I must make my arrangements to-night,” Cécile answered.

“If I can be of any assistance to you, I hope you will let me help,” said Middlesborough. “And what is more, if my company will not inconvenience you, I should like to cross with you to-morrow. I have nothing to detain me in England when you are gone; in fact I should have returned to Paris this week, but for another circumstance.”

Cécile guessed to what he alluded.

“And now,” he continued, rising from his chair, “as you are likely to have a hard and tiring day to-morrow, it would be as well for me to bid you good night.”

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“Good night,” said de Tarvenac, as he shook hands, and then he added in a voice that had suddenly grown curiously husky, “I am glad to think that we shall have the pleasure of your company on the journey to-morrow.”

He had scarcely said this before he uttered a little cry and staggered back with his hand upon his heart. He stretched out his hand for a chair ; but not finding it, fell backwards in a swoon. Fortunately, however, Middlesborough was able to spring forward and catch him before he reached the floor.

“Bring me a glass of water quickly,” he cried to the terrified girl beside him. “Do not be afraid, he has only fainted. He will be himself again in a few minutes.”

Cécile fled from the room to obey his order, and while she was absent, Middlesborough, who had had some little experience in these matters, loosened his tie and unfastened his collar. Almost immediately de Tarvenac opened his eyes.

“What has happened ?” he asked in a startled tone. “Ah, I remember !”

He passed his hands across his eyes and looked about him for his daughter ; not seeing

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her in the room, he whispered hoarsely to Middlesborough—

“Has the end come at last? Thank God you have settled matters with Cécile in time. Lord Middlesborough,” he continued, taking his companion’s hand and holding it tightly in his own, “promise me that you will not forsake her, whatever may befall me.”

“I give you my word of honour that I will not,” Middlesborough replied. “Whatever may happen to you she will be safe in my keeping.”

De Tarvenac was about to say something else, when Cécile returned carrying the glass of water for which Middlesborough had sent her. Delighted as she was to find that her father was conscious once more, she still watched him with anxious eyes. Then Middlesborough, seeing that they might safely be left alone, bade them good-night, promising to be with them first thing in the morning.

When he reached the Black Bear Inn he found Perkins sitting on the bench before the door, smoking. He rose on seeing his master and placed his pipe in his pocket.

“Did you meet the gentleman on the road, my Lord?” he inquired.

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Middlesborough gave a start.

“To whom do you refer?” he asked, with a sudden sinking of the heart.

“A French gentleman,” Perkins replied. “He called here about a quarter of an hour ago, and said he wanted to see your Lordship.”

“And what did you tell him?”

“I said that you were at the Manor House, m’lord,” Perkins replied. “When he heard that, he said he would not bother you, and went off up the road.”

“How long ago did you say it was since he spoke to you?” Middlesborough inquired.

“Between ten minutes and a quarter of an hour, m’lord,” the other replied. “I heard the clock in the bar go half-past when he bade me good-night.”

Middlesborough examined his watch. It wanted about three minutes to a quarter to eleven.

“Did you say that he went up the road?” he asked.

“Straight up the road, m’lord. Shall I hasten after him? I might catch him.”

“No,” said Middlesborough. “You need not trouble, I’ll go myself. It is a beautiful night for

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walking, and if I am lucky I may be able to overtake him.”

He lit a cigar, and then walked quickly down the road in the direction the other had taken. As he made his way along he reviewed his position in all its bearings. He was a member of the club of which de Chartres was secretary, and in joining he had promised implicit obedience to its rules. One of these, and probably the most important, second only to that of secrecy, was the rule that made it a condition that no one should cease to be a member until he had fought one duel and had paid a fine amounting to one hundred and twenty thousand francs to the funds of the club. In the event of his declining to fight the duel the Woman of Death would choose a member by lot, to whom the identity of the erring member would be made known, he would insult him in a Public Place, and insist upon a meeting; should this take place and the recalcitrant one be successful, another would step into the breach, and so on until the malcontent was removed from the face of the earth. Under these circumstances, to escape for very long would be practically impossible. There was nothing for it,

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therefore, but to fight and pay. If one could not pay, then one must continue to fight until three duels had taken place, after which permission to retire was granted, and the matter was at an end. It was plain to Middlesborough that de Tarvenac was a member, and, as he was aware, the other was practically penniless. Was it possible, therefore, that he was endeavouring to get out of the Club by fighting, and that de Chartres had crossed the Channel to summon him to another combat? It looked as if such a thing were not only possible, but exceedingly probable.

By the time Middlesborough reached the end of the village he had given up the pursuit as hopeless. He looked along the white road that led to Harwich, but could see no sign of his man upon it. He accordingly turned, and retraced his steps to the hotel. What was to be the outcome of his last night at Todthorpe-by-the-Sea?

CHAPTER VIII

MIDDLESBOROUGH'S first thoughts on waking next morning were certainly happy ones. He was the betrothed lover of Cécile, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had won her on his own merits and without any extraneous assistance. It was only when he recalled the events of the preceding night that his spirits sank again. He remembered the visit paid by the man, who he now felt sure was de Chartres, the secretary of the club at St. Germain, and the agent of the Woman of Death ; and also his fruitless endeavours to overtake him later in the evening. While he dressed, he informed Perkins of his decision to leave for Paris that day, and bade him make the necessary arrangements. The latter's satisfaction knew no bounds. After Todthorpe-by-the-Sea, the French capital would be like Paradise. His face was as

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radiant as it was possible for the countenance of a well-trained servant to be. While Middlesborough was eating his breakfast, he heard him whistling as merrily as a blackbird in the room overhead.

As soon as he had finished his meal Middlesborough made his way to the Manor House, and with a feeling, that was not far removed from a foreboding, in his heart, walked up the drive. Thanks to Cécile, who had been hard at work since daybreak, he found them almost ready for the journey.

“I am proud of my morning’s work,” she said. “In less than an hour all our preparations will be complete.”

“You have certainly worked hard,” Middlesborough replied; “but you have not told me whether you will be sorry to leave this old house.”

“I shall be very sorry to say goodbye to it,” she answered. Then looking up at him, she added, “I should not have minded leaving it a week ago, but now everything is different.”

Before Middlesborough could reply to this speech, de Tarvenac entered the room. He

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looked white and heavy-eyed, as though he had spent a sleepless night.

Middlesborough expressed the hope that he was feeling better.

“ I feel as well as ever I have done in my life,” de Tarvenac replied, in a tone which suggested that, comforting as the assurance might sound, it was scarcely the truth. “ Are you still determined to accompany us to Paris ? ”

“ Quite determined,” Middlesborough answered. “ My man was packing when I left the inn. I am looking forward to spending a very pleasant time with you across the Channel.”

De Tarvenac turned away with a sigh that was not lost upon his companion. Middlesborough noticed also that Cécile watched her father continually with anxious eyes. He had changed a great deal of late, she said. At one time he was never happy anywhere but in Paris. Now it was quite different ; he could scarcely bear to hear the name mentioned. Times out of number she had endeavoured to induce him to tell her the reason of the change, but it was always in vain. He declined to admit that his feelings had altered in any way. The eyes of Love, however, are seldom

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to be deceived, and Cécile felt certain there was something behind it all, and she waited for time to show her what that something was.

Towards midday the one and only vehicle in Todthorpe was chartered, the luggage was collected, Perkins was appointed to the post of courier, and they set off in the direction of Harwich. As they drove along the dusty road, they turned to take a last look at the place they were leaving. Touched by the wizard hand of Sentiment, even the sandhills and the rush-covered plain beyond seemed almost picturesque. Then the road turned abruptly to the left, and the village was lost to view.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock next morning when they reached Paris. Throughout the journey Middlesborough had done all in his power to promote the comfort of his friends, and the thanks he received from Cécile, when they reached their journey's end, more than rewarded him. Strange to relate, they had no sooner set foot in Paris than de Tarvenac became a different man. He was no longer the moody, irritable individual that Todthorpe knew, but was once more the witty, cynical man of the world, who

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had called upon Middlesborough that evening in London.

“I trust we are not going to lose sight of you altogether?” he said, as they stood upon the platform of the Gare du Nord. “You have our address, I fancy, and I can only say that we shall be very pleased to see you whenever you can spare the time to call upon us.”

“It is probable you will see more of me than you care about,” Middlesborough replied, with a laugh. “If I were you, I would not put too much temptation in my way.”

He escorted his friends to a cab, saw their luggage placed in another, and then bade them goodbye.

A telegram had been sent to his servants from Harwich notifying his coming. He accordingly left Perkins to collect his luggage, and, calling another cab, bade the man drive him to his residence. When he arrived there his butler opened the door to him as if he had only been out to pay a morning call. He bathed, changed his travelling suit, and then breakfasted. A pile of letters lay upon his writing-table, over which he glanced impatiently. The first was a gossiping

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epistle from the Countess de Chevilhac, who was yachting in the Ionian Islands; another invited him to a shooting party in Russia. The writing of the third seemed strangely familiar to him. Turning over the page he glanced at the signature. He was not mistaken. It was from Madame d'Espère, and ran as follows :

“ CHAMPS ELYSÉES.

“ CHER AMI,—I have a belief, why I do not know, that you will be in Paris when this reaches you. Should I be right, may I hope that you will come and see me?

“ Toujours à vous,

“ STEPHANIE D'ESPÈRE.”

“ How could she have known that I should be in Paris to-day ? ” he asked himself almost angrily.

Under existing circumstances he had no desire ever to see her again. He could only think of her in connection with the woman he had seen at the house in St. Germain, a far from pleasant association as matters then stood. Then it struck him that it was possible he might discover something about de

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Tarvenac if he called upon her, though he was well aware that if the latter were a member of the Club it was hopeless to expect that she would be communicative. He postponed consideration of the matter, however, for a while, and sat down to breakfast, wondering how he should kill time until it would be permissible for him to call upon Cécile. He could not help feeling that it would not be possible for him to see so much of her as he had done in the quiet Essex village. In consequence he, perhaps the only person who has ever done so, looked back upon Todthorpe-by-the-Sea with almost a regret.

At last, when he had finished breakfast, mastered the remainder of his correspondence, and skimmed the morning papers, he left the house and walked in the direction of the Amphitryon Club. It was a bright morning, and in consequence the Boulevards were crowded. He had always been one of the Gay City's most ardent devotees, and he felt that if only he were the husband of Cécile, and that house at St. Germain did not exist, he would be content to spend the remainder of his life in it.

Presently he found himself in the hall of his

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favourite club. He had come there with a definite purpose, and to further this he made his way upstairs to the Secretary's office. The latter was a man who numbered among his acquaintances most of the celebrities of Europe. Indeed, it was mainly due to his connection with its management, that the *Amphitryon* occupied the place it did.

"Ah, Lord Middlesborough," said the latter when the other had been ushered into his presence. "This is a pleasure indeed. I understood from de Chamberêt that you were in England. When did you return?"

"Only this morning," Middlesborough answered. "I came by Antwerp and Harwich for a change. There is nothing like varying your route occasionally."

"I can quite believe it," the other replied. "And now what can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"Since you are a sort of social detective, and know the movements of every one in the world of politics or fashion, I want you to tell me whether Sir William Ballister is in town, and, if so, where I shall be likely to find him? I saw in yesterday's

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Morning Post that he was on his way from Vienna to London, travelling *viâ* Paris.”

“He arrived this morning,” the other replied. “Personally, I have not seen him yet, but I believe he has looked in here. As you are aware, he usually stays at the Bristol, but if it will be any convenience to you, I will find out where he is and let you know in the course of a quarter of an hour.”

“I should be vastly obliged to you if you would,” Middlesborough replied, and then made his way to the smoking-room, where he waited until the information he wanted should be brought to him. At the end of ten minutes a servant entered the room with a card upon a salver. Upon the former Middlesborough read the name of the hotel at which his friend was staying. He accordingly left the club, and set off in the direction indicated. On reaching the hotel he inquired for Sir William Ballister.

“If Monsieur will furnish me with his name, I will have it conveyed to His Excellency, who will doubtless see Monsieur at once,” the hall porter answered.

Middlesborough did so, and a few minutes later

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followed the man up the grand staircase to the suite of rooms which the ambassador was occupying.

“My dear Middlesborough, it is indeed a pleasure to see you,” said Sir William, as he hastened forward to greet his friend. “It is a long time since we met.”

“You so seldom come to Paris,” Middlesborough replied. “But that does not seem to have any ill effect upon your health. I never saw a man fitter in my life. I wish you would tell me your secret.”

“You are welcome to it,” said the other. “It is very simple, and it would do you a world of good to try it. Plenty of work, a fair amount of play, always in bed and asleep by midnight, and a cruise on the high seas every autumn. It is only when the newspapers manage to goad us into some wretched complication that I feel older than a schoolboy. But you have not come here to talk to me about politics or my health. Tell me what I can do for you?”

“I want you to give me some information,” Middlesborough replied. “I fancy you can do it, if you will.”

“You know very well that I will do anything

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I can to serve you," Ballister answered. "What is the information you require?"

The other paused for a moment before he replied.

"It is rather difficult to explain," he began at last. "I scarcely know how to commence. I have a secret to reveal to you, Ballister, which, so far, I have not told to any one. The fact of the matter is, I am about to be married."

Ballister showed some signs of surprise.

"My dear fellow, let me congratulate you most heartily," he said. "You could not have given me better news. Would it be discreet to inquire the name of the young lady? Perhaps I am acquainted with her."

"I do not think so," the other answered. "She is Mademoiselle de Tarvenac."

"Surely not the daughter of Bouverie de Tarvenac?—the man who wrote 'The Confessions of a Misanthrope'?"

"His daughter," said Middlesborough, laconically.

"But I was given to understand that he had been—well, to put it mildly, rather tabooed by Parisian Society."

"Indeed," said Middlesborough. "I was not

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aware of that. I know that he has lost whatever wealth he may once have had. But surely that does not affect his daughter ? ”

“ Of course not,” Ballister replied. “ Fortunately for us all, a father may be somewhat of a scapegrace without its being compulsory for his daughter to follow his example. Now what can I do for you ? Am I to act as best man, or do you wish me to be a trustee for your marriage settlement ? ”

“ You have very nearly guessed it,” said his companion. “ I want you to be a trustee, but scarcely in the manner you propose. To tell the truth, Ballister, I am in a bit of a scrape. I do not actually anticipate disaster, but still there is always the possibility hanging over my head that something may happen ; in other words, I—well, we won’t beat about the bush, that I may die before my wedding day.”

“ Good Heavens ! ” cried Ballister, this time in genuine surprise. “ What do you mean by that ? Is your heart affected ? or what is the matter with you ? You look well enough.”

“ There is nothing the matter with me in that way,” Middlesborough replied. “ My heart is

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sound enough, I believe. It is not that that worries me. It is something else. Unfortunately, I have given a pledge of secrecy so I cannot tell you more. All that I want you to do for me is, to give me your promise that in the event of anything happening to me, you will take care that Mademoiselle de Tarvenac's future is assured."

"But why cannot her father see to that? Surely he would be the man."

"Her father would be the person, of course, if he, himself, were all right," Middlesborough answered, "but he is *not* right. His heart, the doctors say, is seriously affected. No, I want you to promise me that if anything should happen to me before I am married, you will be my executor so far as she is concerned. I have arranged that the sum of forty thousand pounds shall be placed in trust for her, and my lawyers have the fullest instructions in the matter. Should it be necessary, they will render you all the assistance in their power. I come to you as my oldest friend to implore your assistance. If you have any objection, I'll look elsewhere, but I must confess I shall be bitterly disappointed. Will you do it for me?"

"If you wish it," the other replied slowly, and

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with a proper appreciation of the responsibility he was incurring. "But I must say that I sincerely trust it is a sinecure with which you are endowing me. I am not going to ask you what mischief you have been getting into. But for Heaven's sake, my boy, be careful."

"It is too late now," Middlesborough answered. "I've been a fool, and if necessary I must pay the price of my folly. Have you anything particular to do this morning?"

"Nothing," the Ambassador replied. "I have paid my respects to those in authority, and my time is my own."

"In that case perhaps you will let me take you to the Rue Josephine and present you to Mademoiselle de Tarvenac? I shall feel safer when I know that you have seen her."

He asked this favour with such earnestness that Ballister felt he could not very well refuse.

"I will accompany you with great pleasure," he replied. "I am not quite certain, however, that the Count de Tarvenac will care very much about renewing his acquaintance with me. We met many years ago over rather an unpleasant affair, and since then, though I am sorry to have to con-

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fess it, I have rather gone out of my way to avoid him. Now, if you will excuse me, I will make my toilette, and then we will set off together.”

While his friend was absent from the room, Middlesborough went to the window and stood looking into the street. It seemed as if Providence had sent Sir William Ballister to him just at the moment that he wanted him most. Now he had the satisfaction of knowing that if by chance anything evil should befall himself, Cécile's future would at least be provided for. She would receive nothing, he knew, from her father.

Half an hour later they reached the house in the Rue Josephine, and learnt from the *concièrge* that Mademoiselle de Tarvenac was at home. They thereupon ascended the stairs. As good fortune had it, the Count himself was absent, so that Ballister's fears lest he should not be a welcome guest were needless.

When they were ushered into the tiny drawing-room, Cécile was seated by the window, reading. She rose with a little cry of pleasure on seeing Middlesborough, and then drew back abashed when she discovered that he was not alone.

“Cécile, let me present you to one of my

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oldest friends, Sir William Ballister," said her lover.

She bowed to the grey-haired man with that old-world grace that was such a continual delight to Middlesborough. Ballister was struck by her fresh young beauty, and congratulated them most heartily on their engagement. When they left the house an hour later he took Middlesborough's arm.

"My dear boy," he said, "allow me to say that I do not think you could have done better. If I know anything of women, she will make you a good wife."

"And I have your promise that, should necessity demand it, which I sincerely trust it may not, you will do as I ask?"

"I will," Ballister answered gravely. "You may rest assured of that. But, as I said to you before, be careful. Think of that young girl who loves you. Should anything happen to you it would break her heart."

They shook hands and bade each other goodbye.

That afternoon, as he had nothing to do until the time should arrive for him to dress for the dinner he was giving Cécile and her father,

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Middlesborough strolled along the Champs Elysées in the direction of the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. It was a perfect afternoon, and the finest street in Europe was crowded with smart equipages. He had reached the Place de l'Étoile, and was weaving plans for the future he was to spend with Cécile, when he became aware that some one was endeavouring to attract his attention. He looked up to see before him an exquisite victoria drawn by a pair of chestnut Arab horses. In it, lying back upon her cushions, and holding a dainty parasol above her head, was Madame d'Espère. She was dressed in the height of fashion, and, as Middlesborough was compelled to admit, looked more beautiful than ever. For the reason that she had observed him, there was nothing for it but for him to speak to her. He accordingly crossed the road and approached her carriage.

“Welcome back to Paris,” she said, as she held out her hand to him; “though why you should have come by way of Bâle instead of the more direct and quicker route, *via* Dover, I cannot understand.”

“My reason was not a very mysterious one

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after all," he answered. "The explanation lies in the fact that I happened to be staying near Harwich at the time. But you have not told me how you discovered by which route I travelled."

"By this time you should know me well enough not to ask me how I become aware of anything," she replied. "Did I not tell you on the day we bade each other goodbye that I should know the exact hour of your arrival in Paris? Call it second-sight, or whatever you will, the fact remains that I not only did know it, but that I was also aware that I should see you here this afternoon. May I take you home with me and give you a cup of tea?"

Middlesborough saw nothing for it but to accept her invitation. He accordingly entered the carriage, and the horses continued their progress down the Champs Elysées.

Madame d'Espère's boudoir had won for itself the reputation of being perhaps one of the most attractive in Paris. On reaching the house she begged Middlesborough to go direct to this apartment while she retired to change her toilette. When she rejoined him she was all lace and filmy whiteness. The windows were open, and the sun-

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blinds drawn ; in consequence the room was filled with delightful shade and the perfume of many flowers. Middlesborough inquired in what manner she had been spending her time since he had last seen her.

“I could not tell you,” she replied. “I keep no account of my days. One is like another. I have amused myself as far as possible. And you? Was your business in England successful?”

“I believe so,” said Middlesborough. “If wading through endless parchments and spending more hours than I care to think of in a dingy back office, amid a stack of tin boxes and the reek of musty records makes for success, I have accomplished wonders.”

“I sympathise with you,” she returned. “Surely, however, you had something to compensate you for all this?”

She waved her fan slowly to and fro, and looked at him over the top of it as she put the question.

“One must amuse oneself somehow,” he answered apologetically. “But I am not altogether certain what the term ‘amusement’ implies. I was compelled to attend the Duchess of Laverstock’s ball because the Duke and I are neighbours.

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Fear of giving offence induced me to accept three invitations to dinner, which I afterwards regretted.”

She still fanned herself slowly. A smile was hovering round her mouth.

“And was that all?” she inquired. “In that case my dreams have misled me. It is strange, for they so seldom fail.”

“Is it possible that you did me the honour to dream about me?” Middlesborough asked.

“Yes, I confess, weak as it may seem, I did. In my dream I saw you walking in an old-fashioned garden.”

Middlesborough started. When he saw that she had noticed it, he could have cursed himself for his stupidity.

“And pray what was I doing in the garden, Madame?” he inquired.

“You had a companion, a young girl, dressed in white. There was a look in your face as you spoke to her that I have never seen there. If I had not known you so well I should have imagined that you had at last been weak enough to fall in love.”

Middlesborough returned his cup to the tray

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before he replied. Was it only a dream, or had she met de Tarvenac and wormed it out of him?

“Must one necessarily be in love because one walks in an old garden with a young girl who happens to be dressed in white?” he asked.

“Not necessarily,” she answered; “but, in this case, probably. Are you prepared to assert that what I saw in my dream did not really occur?”

Then, in a flash he saw how she had become aware of it. How blind he had been not to think of it before. He remembered the voice he had heard in the room when he and Cécile had been walking in the garden. De Chartres was there, and on his return to Paris he had told the Woman of Death. If, as he felt certain was the case, Madame d'Espère was identical with the latter, here then was the explanation of her marvelous dream. He resolved to test his supposition.

“I was sorry not to have seen de Chartres when he visited Todthorpe,” he said as nonchalantly as possible. “He called at the inn where I was staying, but unfortunately I was not home at the time.”

Though he watched her face closely he could see

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no change on it. She fanned herself as leisurely as before.

“And pray who is Monsieur de Chartres?” she inquired. “I am afraid I do not remember his name upon my visiting list.”

Middlesborough was about to reply, but before he could do so she had sprung from her chair and was standing before him. All her apathy, all her listlessness, all her implied cleverness, was gone, scattered like chaff before the wind.

“Have you no pity?” she cried, “that you speak to me like this? Can you not see what you are doing? You are driving me mad. I believe I *am* mad, that I have been mad ever since I first saw you. No! no! don't speak. Everything that you did in England is known to me, and all your hopes and aspirations are as plain to me as noonday. Can you not see what you are doing? Can you not realize the mistake you are making? Why will you throw yourself away upon a child when—when——”

She suddenly dropped on her knees and seized his hands before he could withdraw them.

“When I love you?” she added, in a voice that was but little louder than a whisper.

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He tried to rise, but she held him so tightly that it was impossible for him to do so without using actual violence to her.

“No, no,” she said. “You must hear me out now. It is too late now to draw back. Can you not see that I love you ; that I love you as I believe no man has ever been loved before. Think of it! Is it nothing I am offering you? You do not know me or my power. Have you a desire in life? Then I can gratify it. You have wealth, you have a great name, power, and social success. Love me, and you shall be anything else you please. Look at me. Am I not beautiful?”

He was compelled to admit that she was radiantly, wonderfully fair.

“You admit it? Say but the word and I am yours,” she whispered as fiercely as if she would compel him to take her against his own will. But by this time he had recovered from the first shock of her onslaught, and was able to decide upon his course of action. It was no time for half measures. He thought of Cécile, and that gave him strength.

“Forgive me, Madame,” he said, as coldly as he knew how to speak, “if I say that, while I am

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appreciative of the compliment you pay me, what you say is impossible. Since it is evident that you have heard of my engagement, I need not tell you why."

For a moment she stood immovable and speechless. Her face was very white, but her eyes blazed with a fire that looked as if it would ultimately consume her. She was fighting for breath. When she got it the storm broke upon him in all its violence. Never before had he seen such a look of rage upon the human face.

"So," she hissed, advancing towards him as she spoke, "it has come to this between us? I have offered you love, and you have received that offer with scorn. I would have been to you more than a lover, more even than your second self; you prefer me as an enemy. So be it. Go to that child and warn her that from this moment I am her enemy."

"As you please, madame," said Middlesborough. Then, taking up his hat, he moved towards the door. But she did not permit him to reach it. He was not half-way across the room before her manner once more changed, and she staggered towards him and threw her arms about

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him. She was weeping now, and the violence of her sobs well nigh choked her.

“No, no,” she cried, “you must not go like this. I cannot let you go. I was wrong to speak as I did, for pity’s sake forgive me. I did not mean it. I—I——”

A moment later she had fallen in a dead faint at his feet. He picked her up and carried her to the nearest couch. Placing her upon it, he rang the bell, and then went out into the corridor to await the coming of a servant.

“Madame d’Espère has fainted,” he said to the man who appeared in answer to the summons. “You had better send her women to her.”

Then he, himself, went down the stairs and left the house.

“There is the hand of Fate in this,” he said to himself as he walked along the crowded pavement.

CHAPTER IX

THE little dinner to which Middlesborough had invited his bride-elect and his future father-in-law at the Café des Ambassadeurs that evening could scarcely be regarded in the light of a success. Cécile was tired after her journey, de Tarvenac was by no means in an amiable mood, while he, himself, had not as yet recovered from his scene with Madame d'Espère. He was annoyed with himself for not having exercised more diplomacy in his treatment of her. He should have smoothed her ruffled plumes, he told himself, instead of angering her. It is always bad policy to make enemies where it is possible to avoid doing so. Had he never met Cécile he would not have cared very much ; now, however, he dreaded lest he might have done something that would ultimately have the effect of injuring her.

As I have already remarked, de Tarvenac that

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evening was not in a good humour. He was excited and morose in turns, ate little and drank less. His host noticed also that he examined his watch repeatedly, as if he were recalling an appointment and was afraid of missing it. What that appointment was Middlesborough could easily guess. Ever since he had heard de Chartres' voice in the study at the Manor House his suspicions had been steadily growing. He remembered also that this was Friday evening, and that it was also the evening of the fortnightly duel at the club.

Shortly after ten o'clock they left the restaurant and returned to the Rue Joséphine.

"I fear that in half an hour I shall be compelled to leave you," said de Tarvenac, as they entered the drawing-room. "I have an important appointment at eleven o'clock. In the meantime, Middlesborough, I should be grateful if you could spare me a few moments' private conversation."

On hearing this, Cécile immediately glided from the room, leaving the two men alone together.

"Do you remember what I said to you on the evening that I first had the pleasure of making

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your acquaintance?" the elder man inquired, after a pause that had lasted some few moments.

"I can recall every incident of that evening," Middlesborough replied. "What is the particular one you desire to bring to my recollection?"

"You may recollect that I told you then that something might very shortly occur to separate me from my daughter. That something is now about to happen. To be plain with you, I am not well. My heart has been troubling me a great deal of late. In obedience to the summons I received in England, I am proceeding to-night to a certain place where it is just possible that I may receive a shock, which can certainly do me no good, and may bring about the end of all things, so far as I am concerned."

Middlesborough saw that the other was trying to prepare him for the fatality that might occur.

"But must you go?" he inquired. "Is it wise, situated as you are, to run so great a risk?"

"I must," de Tarvenac answered. "I have no option. My honour is involved."

"Then what am I to do?"

"My desire is to remind you of your promise to take care of Cécile," de Tarvenac replied.

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“That you love her, I know. That you will be a good husband to her, I feel sure. Should I, by any untoward chance, not come back, I want you to break the news of my death to her as gently as you can. She loves me, poor child, she loves me.”

His voice shook with emotion. Sinking into a chair he covered his face with his hands. In a few moments, however, he had recovered his composure, and was able to talk freely once more.

“I may rely upon your doing what I ask?” he inquired.

“You may,” Middlesborough answered. “But I wish I could persuade you to let me know something more of what you are about to do. I do not like the idea of your running such a risk. It is impossible for you to tell me where you are going?”

The other shook his head.

“I cannot tell you anything more,” he returned. “I fear I have told you too much already. And now let me call Cécile.”

He left the room, and a few moments later Cécile entered. When she crossed to her lover, he saw that she had received a shock.

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“Evelyn,” she said, “I want you to tell me what is the matter with my father? His manner is so strange to-night. It frightens me. He says he is going out, and does not quite know when he may return. What can he be going to do?”

“He is probably going to some political meeting,” Middlesborough replied, who scarcely knew what answer to give her. “Do not worry, dearest. He will be with you, safe and sound, in the morning.”

“I pray that he may,” she faltered. “Nevertheless, I am anxious about him. Evelyn, would you do something for me?”

“Anything that lies in my power,” he answered. “In what way can I serve you?”

“Do you think you could find out where he is going, and follow him, in order to see that he comes to no harm?”

“If you really wish it I will do so,” he replied. “But I do not know whether I have the right to spy upon him, and even if I do, whether I should be able to do much good.”

“It would relieve my heart of such a load of anxiety,” she said, “if you would. You know how dearly I love him.”

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“In that case, I will do as you ask.”

“I thank you,” she said; “you are very good to me, Evelyn.”

He took her in his arms, and looked into her eyes. Was his own and her father’s folly to recoil upon her innocent head? He prayed that it might not.

Presently de Tarvenac returned, dressed for going out.

“Good-night, Cécile,” he said, drawing his daughter to him. Then he added once more, but very slowly, “Good-night, my own dear child.”

“I am afraid I must be going too,” Middlesborough remarked. “Good-night, Cécile, and remember that to-morrow morning we are going shopping together in the Rue de la Paix.”

She tried to smile, but the attempt was not very successful. A moment later de Tarvenac and Middlesborough left the room together.

“In which direction are you going?” Middlesborough inquired, when they stood upon the pavement before the house. “I shall take a cab. If you are going my way I might give you a lift.”

“My destination is at the opposite end of the

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town," said the other. "I am afraid I have not much time to spare. If you will permit me I will wish you a good-night."

They stood facing each other for a moment. Then Middlesborough said very earnestly: "Think of your daughter, Count. Whatever it is you are about to do, remember that her happiness is in your hands."

"There is no need to fear that I shall forget her," de Tarvenac answered bitterly. "I hope you, in your turn, will remember the implicit trust I place in you."

"You may rest content upon that score," said Middlesborough; and then they shook hands and parted. The younger man watched the other walk away down the pavement, then he called a cab and bade the man drive him home as quickly as possible. Happen what might, he knew that he must reach St. Germain in time to witness the duel that was to take place that night. But, as he asked himself, what good could he do if he did go? If de Tarvenac were killed he would be powerless to interfere. He had promised Cécile that he would follow her father, and in that case how was he to explain what had really occurred?

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On reaching his own residence he procured his mask and the disc, which was his proof of membership, and then returned to the cab. It was only with the assistance of a bribe, that he was able to persuade the cabman to drive him such a distance beyond the fortifications, but at last he succeeded and they started on their journey. When they reached St. Germain he stopped him at the cross-roads, a hundred yards or so from the lodge gates, and alighted, waiting until the man had turned his horse and was driving Pariswards before he moved. Then he walked on to the gates, rang the electric bell, and was presently confronted by the gatekeeper. In response to the other's inquiry as to what he wanted at such an hour, he produced the small disc which he had brought with him for that purpose, whereupon the man bowed and respectfully invited him to continue his walk to the house. It was a beautiful night, and the moon, now upwards of a week old, sailed in a cloudless sky. He remembered how Cécile and he had stood watching it in the old garden in Essex, and as he recalled that evening he seemed once more to be able to smell the sweet perfume of

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the flowers, and to hear the nightingale singing in the copse beyond the garden fence.

Having reached the house, he was about to ring the bell, when the door was opened to him by one of the impassive servants he remembered so well. Thus escorted, he crossed the vestibule and passed into the hall beyond. According to custom, he dressed as quickly as possible and made his way upstairs to the room in which the duels were conducted. Everything was just as he had seen it on his previous visits. While waiting for the combatants to enter the room, he thought of Cécile, who at that moment was probably thinking of her father. How bitterly he regretted ever having become a member of the Club, I must leave you to imagine. He felt that he would willingly have given all he possessed in the world never even to have heard of it. Then he recalled his interview with Madame d'Espère that afternoon, and as he did so his heart sank within him. Knowing her as he did, he could scarcely believe that she would be likely to pardon his treatment of herself. A slight a woman may sometimes forgive, but the chances are against it when that slight is the outcome of the man's love for another. He

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was still thinking of this when the bell sounded for the seconds to enter the room. They were followed by the servants carrying the swords.

As on previous occasions the same parade was made of examining the weapons. The bright steel blades bent and quivered under the strain placed upon them, until a sufficient number had been declared to be perfect. Then the bell once more sounded ; the doors on either side of the room opened, and the combatants entered the arena. The man who made his appearance from the right was of middle height, broad in shoulder, and as unlike de Tarvenac as it was possible for a human being to be. With a feeling of hope in his heart that he might have been wrong in his suspicions Middlesborough glanced at the man's antagonist. Knowing him so well as he did, even the mask and the change of costume were not sufficient to conceal his identity. There was no mistaking the shape of the head and the contour of that long, slender body. Motionless as statues, the two stood waiting for the appearance of the Woman who was to give the fatal signal. That evening, however, she was a little later than usual. At last she entered and

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passed slowly down between the lines of masked spectators to her chair. With a grace there was no mistaking, she bowed to the assembled company, and as soon as she had seated herself, and the combatants had in their turn saluted her, gave the signal for the duel to commence. By the time their swords had crossed Middlesborough had experienced many sensations. A sickening fear had taken possession of him and, for the first time in his life, he was testing that anxiety for another, which is perhaps the keenest torture a man can endure. He gripped the rail of the seat before him, and watched the two black figures in the arena as if he were turned to stone. He heard the swords click, and watched the first few passages in a state of half stupefaction. Then a curious fascination, indescribable, yet enthralling, took possession of him, and even had he tried to, he could not have looked away. One thing was certain, de Tarvenac was an ideal swordsman, and luck, on this occasion at least, proved kind to him. His opponent, while being a good fencer, was by no means his equal. At last the seconds interposed, and called upon the combatants to rest, after which the duel was

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renewed with increased vigour. As before, Middlesborough hung breathlessly on every turn and twist of the swords. Then the idea dawned upon him that de Tarvenac was only playing with his man. More than once he was presented with an excellent opportunity of terminating the struggle, yet on each occasion he declined to avail himself of the advantage. It was like a cat playing with a mouse. There was a refined cruelty about it that was unmistakable. Middlesborough's gorge rose at the man, and he noticed that several of the members in his vicinity moved uneasily in their seats. The strain was becoming more than human nerves could endure. Why did he not put the poor wretch out of his misery, instead of keeping him at the sword's point, holding Death before him, yet never permitting himself to strike? After a time, however, he came to the conclusion that the farce had lasted long enough. Then, in a flash, his sword slipped within the other's guard; his wrist turned, and a second later there was the sound of a heavy fall, and the duel was at an end. Middlesborough could bear no more. He did not wait to see the victor make his bow, nor to see the wounded

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man carried out, but rose to his feet and staggered into the ante-room, where he swallowed an amount of brandy that would have intoxicated him at any other time, and hurried to his dressing-room. Then, when he had changed his things, he left the house, filled with an intense loathing of himself, and also for the man who was Cécile's father. When he reached the main road he removed his mask, and examined his watch. To his surprise he found that it was nearly one o'clock. He had no carriage, and for that reason it would be necessary for him to walk back to Paris. He did not mind, however, he wanted a sharp walk to brace up his nerves after what he had seen.

The clocks were striking two as he reached his own residence. A heavy shower had fallen and his clothes were wet and splashed with mud. But he paid no attention to them. He was thinking of de Tarvenac's return, and was wondering whether he would feel any remorse when he found himself under the same roof with his daughter, and thought of the man he had killed that night. In his sleep he went through the whole of that dreadful scene again and again, and woke in the morning feverish and unrefreshed. Never, he

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vowed, happen what might, would he enter those unhallowed doors again.

It had been arranged that he should spend the following morning with Cécile. He had promised her one of the prettiest necklaces to be found in Paris, and they were to visit a shop in the Rue de la Paix together in order to choose it. Yet, try to overcome it as he would, he felt a repugnance in going near de Tarvenac's residence. In vain he tried to make himself see the injustice of such a proceeding. Whatever his feelings might be towards the father, however, it was not fair to inflict punishment upon the daughter. Accordingly, after breakfast he drove to the Rue Joséphine and climbed the stairs to the flat occupied by the Count de Tarvenac and his daughter. For the reason that he was shown into Cécile's boudoir, he began to hope that he would not see de Tarvenac. But he was destined to be disappointed. When he entered the room it was to find the Count seated at the writing-table in the window, busily engaged upon his correspondence. On hearing Middlesborough's name he rose from his seat a very different man to what he was

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when the other had wished him goodbye on the previous night. Then he had been like a man under the sentence of death, now he reminded his visitor of one who had won for himself a new lease of life.

“*Bon jour*, my Lord,” he said heartily. “Is it not a lovely morning? Cécile has gone to her room to prepare for the excursion. She is looking forward to it like a schoolgirl fresh from the Sacred Heart.”

Middlesborough looked at the man before him, and thought of him as he had last seen him, standing in the arena looking down upon the prostrate antagonist. He felt that he must refer in some way to the other's fears of the previous night, yet he scarcely knew how to approach the matter.

“Since I see you in such good spirits this morning,” he remarked at last, “I can only suppose that the business, of which you spoke last night, passed off better than you anticipated?”

“Very much better,” de Tarvenac replied. “I frightened myself unnecessarily. One of the most defective arrangements of our system is

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the fact that we cannot see further ahead into the Future.”

Middlesborough was about to offer some reply to this ambiguous speech when Cécile entered the room. She was dressed for walking, and her lover experienced a thrill of pride as he greeted her.

“I trust you will spend a happy morning together,” said de Tarvenac, with a suspicion of a sneer, as he bade them farewell. “Paris has more amusements to offer than Todthorpe-by-the-Sea, has it not, my Lord?”

“I think we are all happier than we were last night,” Middlesborough returned.

De Tarvenac threw a glance at him; the other's face, however, told him nothing. By the time he had convinced himself of this Cécile had drawn on her gloves, and this important operation having been satisfactorily accomplished, they set off on their excursion.

It was the first time that Middlesborough had had Cécile to himself in Paris, and he was going to make the most of the opportunity presented to him. It was a lovely morning, and for this reason they decided to walk in preference to

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driving. They accordingly made their way on foot to the Rue de la Paix, where, as many a lover and husband has found to his cost, are to be found some of the most tempting shops in all the world.

Here the necklace which Middlesborough had seen and promised to Cécile was tried, and finally purchased. It consisted of a double rope of large pearls, and her lover found that he could easily imagine how they would become that fair young throat. From one shop they passed on to another, purchasing some souvenir at each, until Cécile stood aghast at the amount her lover had spent upon her. To her simple mind it seemed almost sinful to squander so much upon articles of mere personal decoration. Retracing their steps along the Rue de la Paix, they turned into the Place Vendôme, intending to make their way to the Palais Royal by means of the Rue Saint Honoré.

“How quiet you have suddenly become, dear!” said Cécile, after they had been walking for some little time in silence. “Is anything the matter?”

“Nothing at all,” he answered with a forced smile. “Forgive me if I have been dull. I

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am rude enough to confess that at the moment I was thinking of something else.”

The truth was, an indescribable feeling of depression had suddenly taken possession of him. Try how he would to shake it off, he could not rid himself of the notion that something unpleasant was about to happen to them. As it turned out he was not far wrong, for as they approached the Rue de Pyramides, Middlesborough descried a well-known figure walking along the pavement towards them. *It was no less a person than Madame d'Espère!* Had there been time to do so, he would have turned back in order to have avoided her, but a glance showed him that it was too late. She had seen them.

“I wonder what she will do?” he said to himself. “Heaven send she does not make a scene in the street.”

As they approached each other Madame d'Espère uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and then came forward with outstretched hand.

“Ah, Lord Middlesborough,” she said, as if the meeting were one that gave her unmistakable

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pleasure. "I had a presentiment when I set out this morning that I should meet you. May I ask you to present me to Mademoiselle de Tarvenac? As one of your friends, I am anxious to have the opportunity of offering her my heartiest congratulations."

Middlesborough hesitated for a moment. He would have preferred to have kept Cécile away from her, but under the circumstances it was impossible.

"Cécile, dear," he said, turning to his sweetheart, seeing there was nothing for it but for him to consent, "permit me the honour of presenting you to Madame d'Espère?"

Cécile bowed gravely, and as she did so Middlesborough noticed that her face was very white, and that there was a frightened look in her eyes.

"I am an old friend of Lord Middlesborough's," said Madame, as she watched the girl's face and noticed the expression upon it. "He told me when he called upon me yesterday of the honour you had done him. Now that I have seen you, perhaps you will let me add that I think he is indeed to be congratulated?"

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The compliment uttered so sweetly was but little better than an insult.

Cécile murmured something in reply, then her lips quivered, and for a moment she looked as if she were about to faint.

“You are not feeling well, I fear,” said Madame d’Espère, who was still watching the girl’s face. “Were I in your place, Lord Middlesborough, I think I should take Mademoiselle home at once. It is very warm for walking, and perhaps she is tired. Do not let me detain you.”

With a low bow she continued her walk, leaving Middlesborough too greatly concerned about his sweetheart’s condition even to notice her departure. He proposed to call a cab at once in order to convey her back to the Rue Joséphine, but Cécile shook her head.

“I am much better now,” she said. “I wonder what it could have been that upset me? I felt quite well until I spoke to Madame d’Espère. Then I seemed to grow cold all over. I have never met any one like her before.”

“She is a strange woman,” Middlesborough replied. “And she effects people very strangely.”

“Have you known her long?” Cécile inquired,

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with what was almost a touch of fear and jealousy combined. "She spoke of herself as your old friend."

"Scarcely six months," he answered. "I was introduced to her by the late Duc de Rheims at Monte Carlo last winter."

"I am afraid of her," said Cécile. "You will think me foolish, I know, but all the time she was looking at me it seemed as though I could see blood dripping from her hands. Of course it was the wildest fancy, and yet so vivid was the delusion, that it made me feel quite faint and ill. What could it have been, I wonder?"

"I cannot think," Middlesborough replied. "However, she is gone now, and you must forget all about her. In all probability you will never see her again."

"I sincerely hope I shall not," Cécile answered. "She has frightened me more than I can say."

After that they continued their walk, and, to distract their thoughts, talked of other things as they did so. At intervals, however, Middlesborough noticed that his sweetheart gave little shudders, as if she had not yet been able to rid

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herself of the remembrance of her introduction to Madame d'Espère.

On their return to the Rue Joséphine, they found de Tarvenac preparing to go out. He was still in excellent spirits.

“Cécile could not be happier if you had presented her with the contents of all the jewellers' shops in the Rue de la Paix,” he said as he patted his daughter's cheek. “There is nothing that can gladden a woman's heart so quickly as a judicious expenditure in jewellery.”

“I am afraid Evelyn wasted a great deal of money upon me,” said Cécile. “I told him that I was not accustomed to such extravagance. It had no effect on him, however.”

“If you are wise you will make hay while the sun shines,” Middlesborough replied, with a laugh. “I have heard it said that a man is extravagant with his sweetheart, but mean with his wife.”

“I don't think you will ever be mean,” she answered, with a smile at her lover.

Then, before he could warn her, Cécile had entered upon a description of their meeting with Madame d'Espère.

“Madame d'Espère?” cried de Tarvenac, with

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a face that in an instant had grown as ashen as his daughter's had been in the Rue des Pyramides: "Do you mean to say, Middlesborough, that you introduced Cécile to that woman?"

"I am sorry to say that I could not help myself," Middlesborough replied. "We met Madame d'Espère, and she solicited the honour of an introduction to Cécile. But what do you know of her?"

An awkward silence fell upon the trio; it was broken by de Tarvenac, who, turning to his daughter, said:—

"Cécile, for your own sake as well as for mine, I implore you never to let that woman come near you again. She is one of the Devil's agents, and if you give her an opportunity, she will drag your pure soul down to the hell in which she rules. Do not let her approach you. Spurn her, drive her away from you as you would the Foul Fiend, her master. Remember this, if she obtains any influence over you, you will never know happiness again."

Cécile stared at her father aghast. Never in her life before had she heard him talk like this.

"Come, come, my dear Count," said Middles-



"I implore you never to let that woman come near you again."

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borough, who saw that Cécile was being frightened, "it is not quite so bad as that. Madame d'Espère may be a very singular woman, but it cannot be said that she is as wicked as your words imply."

"In that case it is easily seen that you do not know her as well as I do," answered the Count. "I am glad to hear it, for if you did, marriage between yourself and Cécile would be impossible."

His daughter uttered a little cry.

"Forgive me," said de Tarvenac, putting his arm round her and looking at Middlesborough as he did so. "Perhaps I spoke with too much warmth. My dislike to Madame d'Espère carried me beyond the bounds of prudence. Nevertheless, she is a person with whom, if I were you, I should have as little to do as possible."

Then, making the excuse that he had an important appointment, for which, if he did not hurry, he would be late, he left the room.

"How foolish it was of me to have said anything to him about our meeting with that woman!" Cécile began, when they were alone together. "I am always so thoughtless."

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“You were not to blame,” replied her lover. “How were you to know that your father was acquainted with her? But there, let us forget all about it. She has caused us enough unhappiness, and, as I said in the Rue des Pyramides, in all probability we shall neither of us see her again.”

Feeling that she must be tired, and that it would be better for her to be alone for a while, he kissed her and bade her goodbye. When he reached his own house, his *majordomo* inquired whether he had seen the Vicomte de Chamberêt, who had called about ten minutes before? Not being successful in finding Middlesborough at home, the latter had asked to be allowed to write a note. When it was handed to him Middlesborough tore it open and scanned the contents. It contained an invitation to dinner for that night, but ended with a sentence that made the other's heart stand still for a moment. It ran as follows :—

“Is it not sad about poor de Gonville? By this time you have doubtless heard that his body was found this morning floating in the Seine, near the Pont de Neuilly. Like de Rheims he must have been killed in a duel, for there is the mark

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of a sword thrust through the chest. I am told that his family are distracted with grief.”

Middlesborough walked slowly to his study. When he endeavoured to remember the figure of the man who had fought de Tarvenac, the previous evening, he could recall the fact that he very much resembled de Gonville. If that were so, the latter was another of the Woman of Death's victims. Through her agency two of his best friends had met their deaths, and one of them, without doubt, at the hands of Cécile's father. Overwhelmed by the news, he ordered his carriage, and drove to one of his clubs to make further inquiries. From what he learnt there, he gathered that de Gonville had last been seen alive a little before eleven o'clock on the preceding evening, when he had appeared to be in excellent health, but in somewhat low spirits. Nothing was known of his movements after that, until a brief intimation from the Police Authorities reached his family to say that his body had been found by some boatmen, floating in the Seine, a little below the Pont de Neuilly. It was still in evening dress, and it was plain that he had not been killed for the purpose of robbery, for the reason that his

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watch and chain and money still remained in his pockets. On examining the body later, a wound, which had apparently made by a duelling rapier, was found on the left side.

“And this led to a curious discovery,” said Middlesborough’s informant.

“From the nature of the wound it was plain that he had been killed in a duel ; it was also certain that, at the time he fought it, he must have been dressed in other clothes.”

“What makes you think so ?” inquired Middlesborough, in a voice that, try as he would, he could not keep steady.

“*Because there was no rent or cut in the clothes he was wearing when they took his body out of the Seine,*” answered the other, with the air of a man who offers an irrefutable argument.

“Then it is as I supposed,” said Middlesborough to himself very slowly, as he went down the steps of the club a few minutes later. “Poor, poor de Gonville. I wonder who will be the next victim ?”

CHAPTER X

ON the day following that upon which Middleborough was so unfortunate as to be compelled to present Cécile to Madame d'Espère, the same on which he had learnt the news of de Gonville's death, nothing of great importance occurred. Again and again, as if to salve his conscience, he had endeavoured to convince himself that while de Tarvenac had, without a doubt, been the cause of the catastrophe, yet no greater blame was attachable to him than that he had fought the duel and had come successfully out of it. He argued that if de Tarvenac had not had the misfortune to be chosen by the ballot, some one else would have been responsible for the death of the young man. It was at this point, however, that his argument broke down. He could not rid his mind of the cruelty his father-in-law elect had displayed in the encounter, and each time he

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recalled it he found that his dislike for the man increased. On the other hand, de Tarvenac himself, after his outburst concerning Madame d'Espère, endeavoured by every means in his power to conciliate his future son-in-law. But under it all there was a veiled hostility that was none the less active because it was concealed. The reason of it, however, was not very difficult to guess. The Count was passionately attached to his daughter, and was jealous of the influence Middlesborough was obtaining over her.

More than once Middlesborough had thought of that stately old mansion, "Burgrove," and had even pictured Cécile in all her girlish beauty moving, as its mistress, about the grand old rooms and corridors. Behind these pleasant day-dreams, however, always lurked the spectre of the Woman of Death, and the remembrance of the solemn vow he had made. He had pledged his word that until he had fought one duel, he would not cease to become a member of the Club. That encounter had still to take place. During the afternoon he made it his business to call upon de Tarvenac. Cécile had told him that she would not be at home, and it struck him that this would be an

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excellent opportunity for speaking to her father on a certain matter. He found the latter in his study, busily engaged upon the concluding chapter of a book. On his guest being announced, he rose to greet him.

“I fear I am interrupting you,” said Middlesborough by way of apology, as they shook hands. “The truth is, I want to have a little conversation with you.”

“I am always delighted to see you, as you know,” the other replied, in a tone which suggested that he would rather have been permitted to continue his work undisturbed. “But what can you have to say to me that Cécile must not hear?”

“I want to know when you think my marriage can take place?” said Middlesborough. “If you have no objection to raise, I should like it to be as soon as possible. Our lawyers have arranged the settlements, and all that now remains is for Cécile to fix the day and for the ceremony to take place.”

De Tarvenac smiled.

“Forgive my saying so,” he returned, “but I can remember a time when you were not quite so anxious to be married.”

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“ I had not met Cécile then,” Middlesborough returned.

“ And when you are married, where do you propose to reside ? ” the other inquired. “ In your own country or this ? ”

“ That depends very much upon circumstances,” Middlesborough answered. “ If, as Cécile wishes, I am to take life a little more seriously in the future, which, I presume, means that I am to return to politics once more, and give my attention to the welfare of my estates, I suppose I shall spend the greater part of the year in England. The remainder, we shall divide between Paris and the Mediterranean.”

“ You will permit me to see something of you, I hope ? ” said de Tarvenac drily. “ As you may suppose, I shall feel my daughter’s loss. She has been everything to me for so many years.”

“ I can quite understand that you will miss her,” Middlesborough replied. “ But perhaps she will not be so lost to you as you imagine. We shall hope to persuade you to spend much of your time with us.”

“ You are kind,” de Tarvenac replied. “ When you have reached my age, however, you will find

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that it is better not to attempt to arrange for the Future. But to return to the object of your visit. Cécile must settle the date of your marriage. Whatever arrangements she may make, I will pledge myself to agree to. Like you, I think the sooner it is settled the better. As I have told you on several occasions, it is my desire to make Cécile's safety assured."

"That has been definitely arranged for," Middlesborough replied. "In the event of my death she will be my sole heiress and executrix. I am the last of my house, and everything I have will pass to her."

A close observer might have noticed that a faint smile flickered round the corners of de Tarvenac's mouth as the other said this.

"You have been most generous," he remarked. "I am under a great obligation to you."

"I may leave it to you, then, to ask Cécile to settle the question of the date?"

"I will do so as soon as she returns, and will let you know the result."

Then Middlesborough, seeing that de Tarvenac was anxious to resume his work, rose to take his leave.

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That evening, between the first and second acts of "Fidelio" at the Opéra House, the date for the marriage was definitely settled. In three week's time Cécile was to become Lady Middlesborough. It was to be a quiet affair in every way, without excitement of any sort, only de Chamberêt, who was to act as Middlesborough's best man, and those immediately concerned, were to be present at the ceremony. They had arranged to spend their honeymoon at Middlesborough's villa, near Monte Carlo, and to pay a visit to his English estates afterwards. As a little memento of the occasion the bridegroom elect took from his pocket a leather case, and from it a magnificent diamond bracelet which he clasped upon his *fiancée's* wrist.

"You spoil me terribly," she said, "and must not give me anything else for a long time. A month ago my jewel case contained only a few little mementoes of my mother. Now it groans under the weight of diamonds and pearls."

"You have not seen half your treasures yet," he answered, with a smile. "The famous Middlesborough jewels will come to you. They have lain in the safe at the bank for nearly twenty years,

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and it is about time they saw light. You will have to wear them when you are presented at Court.”

This news caused her some little alarm.

“Shall I really have to be presented?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied. “You have all your troubles before you. However, I am sure you will be quite capable of overcoming them. I should like to see the faces of those present at the first Drawing Room when my Lady Middleborough sweeps up to make her curtsey. I shall be the most envied man in London from that moment.”

“You are a sad flatterer, I’m afraid,” she said, shaking her head at him. Then, dropping her voice to a whisper, she added, “No woman there will be prouder of her husband than I shall be of mine.”

“God grant you may,” he said, with an earnestness that was by no means usual with him.

The next fortnight was spent in a bustle of preparation. A thousand things had to be thought of. There were papers to sign and inquiries to be made. Somehow or other the news had leaked

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out, and congratulations showered in upon the bridegroom from all classes of society. His own Royal Family sent presents, as did other crowned heads; the important manufacturing town in the Midlands, of which he owned upwards of a third, despatched an illuminated address; while his tenants, from all parts of the country, united in the presentation of a massive piece of plate. Cécile, on her side, received but few gifts. A distant connection of her mother's sent her an antiquated coral necklace; while the nuns, who had had the care of her education, forwarded her a little gift, which served to remind her of the old convent looking down upon the Mediterranean.

In his great happiness Middlesborough had no time to think of anything that did not closely concern the question of his marriage. He scarcely thought of Madame d'Espère, who, he discovered incidentally, had left Paris for Vienna. Her hatred of Cécile and her threatened vengeance had not, as yet, taken active form, and, if he could prevent it, it never should.

On the evening preceding his wedding-day Middlesborough reached home somewhat earlier



Madame d'Espère had left Paris for Vienna.

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than usual. He had dined with Cécile and her father, but, feeling that they would prefer to spend their last evening together, he had left them soon after the meal was ended. Now he sat in his study, smoking, and thinking of what was to happen on the morrow. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. He bade the person outside "come in," whereupon his butler entered to inform him that a gentleman had called who would like to speak with him.

"Who is it?" he asked a little irritably.

The man replied that the stranger had refused to give his name.

"He would not detain his Lordship very long, he said, if he would permit him an interview."

"Have you ever seen him before?" Middlesborough inquired.

The latter confessed that he had not. The man, whoever he was, was quite unknown to him.

"Oh, well! show him in," said Middlesborough.

The butler withdrew. Presently he returned to usher in a man somewhat below middle height. He was the possessor of iron grey hair, a clean-shaven, and somewhat wizened face. He wore a frock coat, tightly buttoned, and his hands, which

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were small, were irreproachably gloved. Middlesborough looked at him, but could not remember that he had seen him before.

“Good evening,” he said. “To what do I owe the honour of a visit at such a late hour?”

“I have come upon an errand that I fear may not altogether commend itself to you,” the other replied, and, as he spoke, Middlesborough recognised the voice. It was de Chartres, the secretary of the Club at St. Germain, who hitherto he had never seen without a mask. He pulled himself together sufficiently to ask what the other wanted of him.

“I am here,” said de Chartres, slowly and impressively, as if he were anxious that every word should be impressed upon the listener, “to inform you that last night your number was drawn in the ballot, and that, consequently, you become one of the combatants at the meeting to be held on Friday next.”

For a moment Middlesborough scarcely realized the meaning of what he heard. It was as if all the blood in his body had rushed to his head, while his heart beat as if it would choke him. Then, with an effort, he regained his self-posses-

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sion. He was not going to let this man think that he was unnerved.

“I am much honoured that the Club should deem me capable of giving them sufficient amusement,” he said without a falter in his voice. “I fear, however, that it will be impossible for me to attend. You are not aware, I presume, that I am to be married to-morrow?”

“I am *quite* aware of it,” the other replied, “and I regret the inconvenience the summons I have just given you must necessarily cause you. What you say, however, about not being able to be present on Friday next, is, as you know, out of the question. Marriage, I fear, was not taken into consideration when the rules of the Club were framed.”

“Is there no way in which I can arrange this matter,” Middlesborough inquired. “I do not, of course, wish you to think that I am endeavouring to avoid the consequences of the promise I gave, but, if I *must* fight, would it not be possible for the duel to take place at a later date?”

His companion shook his head.

“The rules of the Club admit of no postponement,” he replied. “May I therefore, to avoid

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further discussion remind you that your fellow-members hope to have the pleasure of your society on Friday evening next, at the usual hour?"

Middlesborough did not answer. His promise, and the iron rules of the society, held him as in a vice.

"Well, if you can do nothing else," he said at last, "you can at least tell me with whom I am to fight."

"That is a question I am not at liberty to answer," said de Chartres. "As you know, it is one of our most stringent rules that one combatant shall not be aware of the identity of the other."

"You can give me no sort of information on that head?"

"None whatsoever. I regret having to be so curt, but you have heard my reason."

"Is there any one besides yourself who knows the names of those who have been chosen?" he inquired.

"Not one," de Chartres replied. "I alone keep the records of the Society, and in consequence I only am aware to whom the numbers have been allotted."

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“Madame d’Espère, therefore, does nothing but draw the numbers and watch the combats?”

“I think I have told you on a previous occasion, my Lord, that I know of no such person,” de Chartres answered.

“But Madame d’Espère and the Woman of Death are one and the same,” Middlesborough asserted. “It is useless for you to deny the fact.”

“If, as you say, it is useless, I will not waste my time in such unprofitable employment,” the other replied, as he prepared to take his departure. “I can only repeat the assurance I gave you on the last occasion that we met. And now if you will permit me I will wish you *au revoir* until next Friday evening.”

Middlesborough tried to answer him, but his voice died away in his throat. He thought of Cécile, and all his courage deserted him. Scarcely conscious of what he was doing, he walked to the fireplace, where he stood with his elbows leaning upon the mantelpiece, looking down at the ferns that masked the ironwork. When he turned again he discovered that he was alone. De Chartres was gone. What was he to do? Was

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there no way in which he could escape? Surely there must be one, if only he could find it. An hour before he had been so happy, thinking of Cécile and of the life they were to spend together. How little he had dreamed then, that in a week, in all probability, their married life would be at an end. He began to pace the room with feverish haste. In his mind's eye he could see the arena in the house at St. Germain, the rows of masked faces, and the Woman of Death giving the signal for the combat to commence. Every detail of the ceremony was presented to him with pitiless accuracy. The clash of the swords sounded in his ears, and after a few passes had been exchanged, he saw himself lying stretched upon the floor, with his life-blood oozing from him. When he did not come home, search would certainly be made for him, and eventually the police would discover his body in the garden of a deserted house, in the river, or in some place in which it would be difficult, if not quite impossible, to account for its presence. By reason of his oath, he could give no warning to anybody; he had pledged his word of honour that nothing should induce him to speak of the Club, or his connection with it, to any living soul.

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With his brain still in a whirl, he went to bed, to find that sleep was out of the question. It seemed a waste of time even to close his eyes, for every moment was of importance to him now. At last, unable to lie still and endure any longer the agony of regret from which he was suffering, he rose, dressed himself, and went downstairs. Then, taking a hat and stick, he let himself out into the street. It was nearly half-past one o'clock, and, as he reflected grimly, this was his wedding morn.

The night was fine, and the cool wind infinitely refreshing. Without caring which way he went, he strode forward, passed over the Pont Neuf, and then walked on and on, until at last he found himself standing on the hill of Montmartre. Day was just breaking, and the vast panorama of Paris lay spread out before him. Then descending the hill once more, he prepared to return to his house.

If his long walk had served no other purpose, it had, at least, helped him to recover his self-possession and to understand properly how he stood.

By the time he reached home he was as near composure as could be expected under the circumstances. Fortunately, his servants were still in bed, and for this reason he was able to let himself

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in without his absence being discovered. It is questionable what his staid butler would have thought, had he seen his master enter the house at such an hour, dusty, haggard, and dishevelled, as he was. It was nearly five o'clock, and Bennett was to breakfast with him at eight. He accordingly threw off his clothes, and went to bed, resolved, if possible, to forget his troubles in sleep. His head had scarcely touched the pillow before he was sound asleep. When he awoke again it was to find Perkins rapping at his door. At the moment he was dreaming that he was back in England, that it was a hunting morning, and that Cécile was to ride the new horse he had purchased for her. Then slowly, but with a pain that cut like a knife, the recollection of all that had occurred on the previous evening came back to him. It was his wedding-day, and within a week, for all he knew to the contrary, he might be dead, slain by some man who not only felt no animosity towards him, but whose only reason for fighting was, because he desired to find an amusement that would bite sufficiently deep. Could there have been a more hideous travesty of pleasure? Middlesborough thought of de Rheims and de Gonville,

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and wondered how they had received the fatal summons. In their cases, however, there was a difference. They were neither married nor in love.

When Middlesborough descended to the breakfast-room half an hour later, he discovered a pile of letters and telegrams awaiting him there. They contained messages of congratulation emanating from half the countries of Europe. Under happier auspices he would have been pleased by the thought that so many friends remembered him, but as things stood now, it seemed like a heartless jest for any one to wish that his married life might be long and happy. Among the letters was one from an old lady in England, who had always taken a great interest in his welfare. She had loved his father in her youth, and when he died she had transferred her affections to his son. "I pray for your happiness," she said at the end of her letter; "if you have found a good woman—and I hope and trust that you have—and you really love her, your life can scarcely fail to be happy. You will then have everything the world can give; try, in return, to remember that there are others who are not so fortunate. We are accustomed to think that if we are happy, others must be so also,

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and we forget that, individually, we are only atoms in the immensity of the world.”

He stopped and walked to the window, holding the letter in his hand.

“Only atoms in the immensity of the world.”

He repeated the words. In less than a week he and another atom were to come together out of that Immensity to attempt to kill each other. And Cécile’s heart, if not her life, was the stake for which they would fight.

A few moments later Bennett was announced.

“Good morning, Bennett,” said Middlesborough, shaking him by the hand. “I am glad you were able to come over.”

“I made a special point of it,” the lawyer replied. “It would have been strange, all things considered, had I not done so. But I hope you will excuse me, my Lord, if I say that I do not think you are looking particularly well.”

“I have passed rather a bad night,” the other answered, as he endeavoured to avoid the lawyer’s eyes. “I suppose it’s only natural under the circumstances. It is the correct thing, is it not, for a bridegroom to sleep badly on the night before his wedding-day?”

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“I only know that I didn’t sleep well for a week before mine,” Bennett replied, with conviction. “I can well remember how confoundedly nervous I was.”

They sat down to breakfast, and when the meal was finished, made their way to Middlesborough’s study, where the lawyer put before him innumerable papers for his signature. They were employed in this fashion until ten o’clock, when it was time for Middlesborough to dress for the service. Punctually at a quarter to eleven, de Chamberêt put in an appearance. He had officiated in a similar capacity on many such occasions, and, in consequence, was well versed in the etiquette of marriage. Owing to the bridegroom’s fear lest they should be late, they reached the church nearly half an hour before the time appointed. The bride and her father, however, were more punctual. Middlesborough vowed to himself that Cécile had never looked more beautiful than she did when she took her place beside him in the chancel of the church. Then, Evelyn, Baron Middlesborough, took to himself Cécile, daughter of the Comte de Tarvenac, for his wife, promising to love her and cherish her so long as they two might live. When

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the necessary papers had been signed, and Bennett and de Chamberêt had congratulated the happy couple, they entered their carriages and drove to the British Embassy, where the second portion of the ceremony was to be performed. At first, the Ambassador, who was an old friend of the Middlesborough family, had been anxious to hold a reception in their honour. The other, however, had prevailed upon him not to do so, and, in consequence, only the Ambassador's wife and daughters, and the *entourage* of the Embassy were present. To save her the delay of returning to the Rue Joséphine, a room had been placed at Cécile's disposal, and, when the necessary formalities were at an end, she retired to it to change her wedding gown for the dress she was to wear on the journey to the South of France. Half an hour later, with the congratulations and best wishes of their friends ringing in their ears, they entered the carriage and drove off to the railway station.

“Can you grasp the fact, dear, that we are really and truly married?” Middlesborough inquired, as the train rolled out of the station on its way towards the sunny Mediterranean.

“Scarcely,” she answered, placing her hand in

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his. "How little we thought on that evening when we first met at Monte Carlo, that the next time we should visit it it would be as man and wife!"

Middlesborough had such a good reason, apart from Cécile, for remembering the visit, that he immediately changed the subject. Had he not gone to the Casino that night, he would not have met Cécile, nor, in all probability, would he have met Madame d'Espère. In the latter case he would not be in the predicament he now was.

"You are very quiet, dear," said Cécile, after a little pause. "Are you happy?"

"Happy?" he answered, with almost a quaver in his voice, "God knows how happy I am. Cécile, darling, I want you to promise me that you will remember this hour all your life long. Will you always try to think of me as you know me now? As the man who loves you better than all the world, better than life itself!"

"I shall always remember that," she answered, simply. "Is it likely I should forget it? I will promise you that when we are both quite old I will remember you as you are now, sitting by my side, and holding my hand. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes, dear, in that case I shall be quite satisfied," he answered, with an earnestness that

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made her look at him again. She made no remark, however.

Then he thought of the journey he would have to make over the same line in less than a week's time, and he wondered with what result. An intense hatred for the man he was to fight was rising in his heart. His own happiness, and even Cécile's life, depended upon the manner in which he acquitted himself then. What did the death of the other matter when he had so much at stake? He knew a man in Monte Carlo who was an adept swordsman. He would find him out and practice with him. It would be strange, with his natural gift, and his knowledge of what he was fighting for, if he could not come out of the struggle a victor.

At last he roused himself and looked at his wife's face.

"What are you thinking about, dear?" he inquired.

"I was thinking," she replied, "how very thankful we should be for our great happiness. While other people have so much to trouble them, we seem to have nothing at all. You have no troubles, have you, husband mine?"

"Is it possible that I could have any?" he answered gallantly. "Are you not my wife?"

CHAPTER XI

IT was a warm morning and Cécile reclined in a long, low chair under a silk awning on the terrace of Middlesborough Villa outside Monte Carlo. The blue Mediterranean sparkled and danced before her, and she was filled with a great content. She had been married three days and not a shadow, not even the faintest suspicion of a crumpled rose-leaf, had been allowed to disturb her peace. Middlesborough had driven into Monte Carlo that morning on business and she did not expect him to return until after mid-day. When, therefore, he made his appearance somewhat sooner than was expected, and she heard his step upon the terrace, she rose to greet him with a surprised and happy look upon her face. How sweet and graceful she was as she stood before him, dressed from head to foot in white and with an antique silver girdle encircling her waist !

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“You have not been long,” she said. “Your horses must have travelled very quickly?”

“I grudge every moment I spend away from you,” he answered. “In that case one must employ fast horses.”

She patted his hand lovingly.

“You talk like this and you have already been three days married?” she said, with a smile. “Three whole days! Why, it scarcely seems as many hours.”

“You are happy, then, Cécile?”

“More than happy,” she replied. “I am so happy that sometimes it seems to me as if it were too good to last.”

Middlesborough winced, and her quick eyes saw that, for some reason her answer troubled him. She questioned him upon the subject.

“There is nothing the matter,” he answered. “It pains me to think that you should even suppose that there might ever come an end. I must not leave you alone again.”

“I suppose I am very foolish,” she said. “But, Evelyn, you do not realise how much you are to me. What you could ever have seen in me to make you love me as you do I cannot think. You

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have seen and known so many far more beautiful women. No," she said, holding up her hand, "don't interrupt me. You are going to say that there can be none so beautiful as I am. But that is not true. There is Madame de Chevilhac, Princess Petrovski, Lady Gwendoline Westford. They are all far more accomplished than I am. Why did you not marry one of them?"

"For several reasons," he answered. "Madame de Chevilhac is already married, and, while a most delightful companion, she is scarcely the lady I should choose for my wife. Princess Petrovski is of royal blood, and would have nothing to do with me, even if I were to ask her; Lady Gwendoline Westford is out of the question altogether. As for your judgment upon their abilities, I am not going to permit you to depreciate yourself. If you are not careful you will have to be punished."

"And how will you punish me, my Lord?" she inquired, looking up at him with the lovelight shining in her eyes.

"By giving you even more of my company than I have so far," he answered.

At that moment a servant made his appear-

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ance on the terrace with their morning mail. There were at least a dozen letters for Middlesborough, and perhaps half as many for his wife.

“Lady Middlesborough,” said Cécile, reading the address upon an envelope. “How strange it sounds! I have not yet got over the novelty of it. I suppose, however, in a few weeks’ time I shall scarcely notice it.”

Middlesborough thought of all those few weeks might bring forth, and busied himself opening his letters in order that his agitation might not be noticed.

“Nothing very interesting,” he said, as he withdrew the contents of the last envelope. “One from Bennett, who cannot even let me alone on my honeymoon. The furnishers, he says, want to know what colour you would prefer for your boudoir at ‘Burgrove,’ and he reminds me that as I am now married I shall want some carriage horses for you. He says that those we have are not suitable for a lady’s use.”

“Whatever you used,” she answered, “will be more than good enough for me.”

“I am afraid not,” he replied. “I should live

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in a constant state of terror lest any accident should befall you.”

“And are those the sort of horses to which you have trusted yourself, Evelyn?” she said. “I am glad indeed that I know it. You must promise me never to have anything to do with them again. You do not know what agonies I should suffer if anything were to happen to you.”

Middlesborough rose from his chair, and walked across the terrace to the parapet. Every turn of the conversation seemed to bring them to an *impasse*. She rose and came over to where he was standing. “Evelyn,” she said, “you have something on your mind this morning. What is it, dear? Will you not tell me? Remember I have a right to know and share your worries.”

She seated herself on the stone wall beside him and took possession of his hand.

“My dear Cécile, I have told you before that there is nothing the matter with me,” he said this time almost irritably; for the strain he was enduring seemed more than he could bear.

Tears rose in her eyes. He had never spoken to her in that tone before.

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“Forgive me, dear,” she said softly. “I had no intention of worrying you. It was only because you looked so unhappy that I asked the question. Only let me help you and I shall be quite content.”

“I am a brute,” he answered, “I don’t know what it was that made me speak to you as I did. Will you try to forgive me, Cécile?”

“I have nothing to forgive,” she answered, simply. “I love you too well, dear, for such a thing to be necessary.” Then, to change the conversation, she selected a letter from the number she had in her hand.

“Here is a note from papa,” she said. “In it he tells me that he finds it will be possible for him to get away from Paris for a day. He wants to know whether we will take him in to-morrow for one night. He must return, without fail, next day, he says.”

“Of course we can take him in,” Middlesborough replied. “It will be your first opportunity of playing your part as hostess. I envy his delight in seeing you in your new *rôle*. You see that I am capable of being jealous, even of your own father.”

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“You must never be jealous of any one,” she answered. “To be jealous would imply distrust. You trust me, do you not?”

“I trust you with my whole heart,” he said. “It would be strange if I did not. Ah, that is the luncheon gong. Let us go in.”

Side by side they strolled up the path, under the palms, to the house. As I have already said, Middlesborough's villa was one of the most charming along the length of the Riviera. It had sheltered many clever and beautiful women, but its owner thought, as he sat at the head of the luncheon-table, with Cécile opposite him, that it had never seen one so charming as his wife. He recalled the night that he had first met her, and the supper he had given in this self-same room afterwards. Then he remembered that when his guests had retired for the night he had gone into the garden to smoke, and this brought to his recollection the dream he had had that night. Cécile had certainly proved herself his good angel, and Madame d'Espère the opposite. The one had ennobled him, the other had done her best to drag him down into the Depths. Which would be successful in the end?

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On the day following the receipt of his letter, de Tarvenac arrived. He travelled from Paris by the night train, and when he reached the villa was quite worn out. This may, in a measure, have accounted for his appearance, but it certainly struck both Middlesborough and Cécile that in the few days that had elapsed since they had said goodbye to him, he had changed visibly for the worse. His face was more haggard than when they had last seen him, and his eyes more sunken. Cécile was truly shocked at his condition, and said as much to her husband.

“I am afraid he misses your controlling hand,” said the latter. “You must keep him here with you if you can, and look after him for a while.”

If, however, there were any doubt about the state of de Tarvenac's health, there could be no doubt about the fact that he was decidedly pleased to be with them again. He complimented Middlesborough upon Cécile, remarking that he never remembered to have seen her looking so well.

“One has only to look into her face to see that she is happy,” he continued ; “and you are aware what that means to me. Only those who

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have known sorrow can properly appreciate another's gladness."

"Are you not happy, then, that you talk like this?" Middlesborough inquired.

"Happiness and I said goodbye to each other many years since," de Tarvenac replied. "Mine has been a wasted life, and all that is left me now is remorse."

He spoke with such bitterness that Middlesborough could not but be touched by it. Since he had loved Cécile he had come to have a greater sympathy with others. Until then, his naturally sweet disposition had been soured and embittered by the chicaneries, the deceits, and petty cruelties of his world; under her gentle influence, however, he was gradually becoming both morally and physically a better man. Though he had long known that de Tarvenac was devoted to his daughter, he had never seen him show such affection to her as he did during his short visit to the South. He scarcely left her side. They strolled through the gardens, sat upon the terrace together, and from the manner in which he behaved towards her, he might have been about to embark on a long journey which would occupy many years. Once

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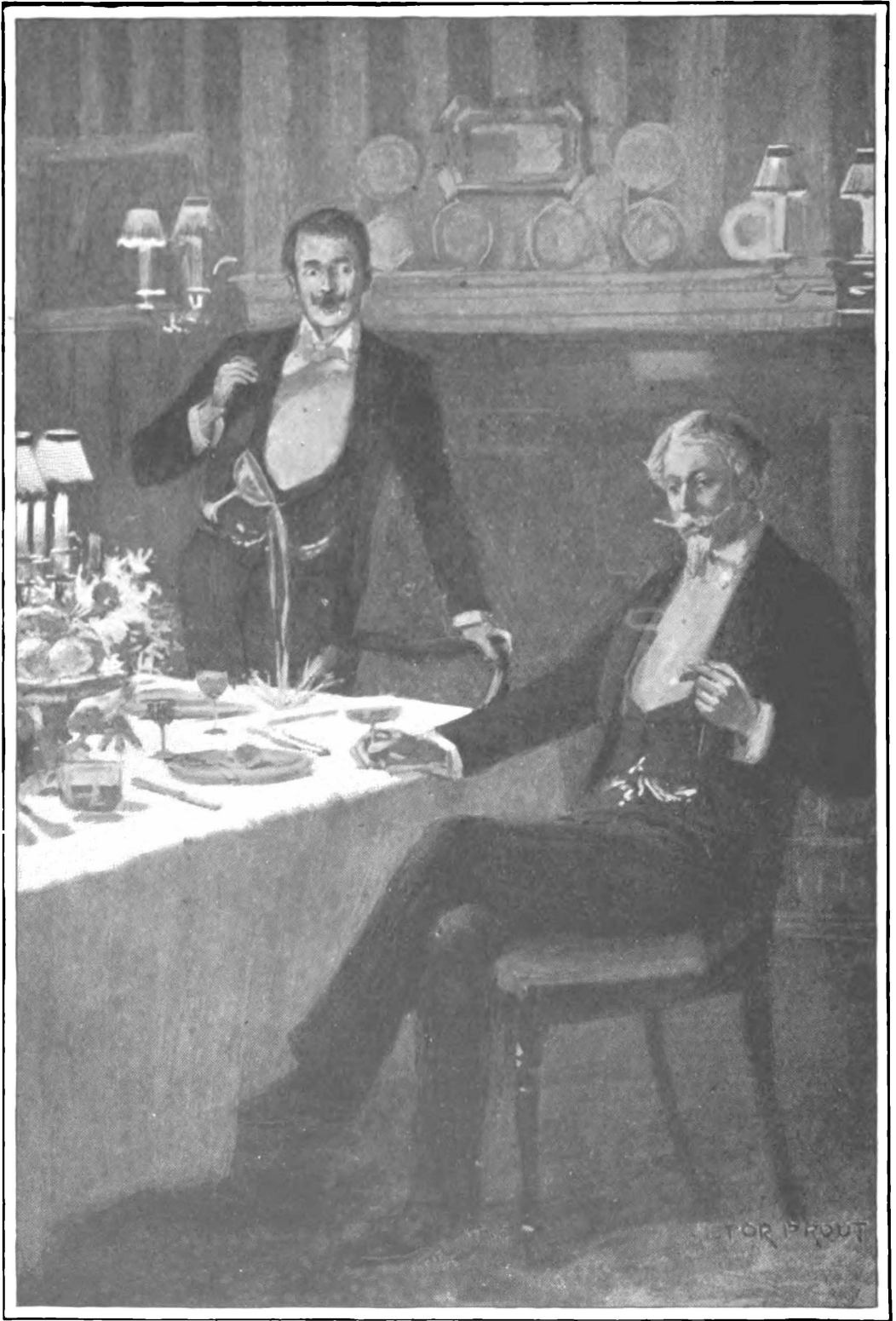
when he was alone with him for a few moments, Middlesborough said as much in a jesting way. De Tarvenac laughed a little bitterly.

“One never knows what a day may bring forth,” he said. “You see the state of my health. I am alive now, but in five minutes the valve upon which my life depends may fail to act, and I shall be dead. My life is a gamble from minute to minute.”

“I hope you have said nothing of this to Cécile?” Middlesborough asked anxiously. “I do not mean, of course, that you would do so with the intention of giving her pain, but she loves you so devotedly, and is so anxious concerning your health, that she might attach an exaggerated importance to your words.”

“No, I have said nothing to her,” her father replied.

Next day, by dint of much pressing, de Tarvenac was prevailed upon to remain another night. Cécile thought the change was doing him good, and at dinner that evening she endeavoured to persuade him to prolong his visit for another week. Her husband seconded her efforts. He remembered his own dread appointment, and it



The glass fell from his hand.

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struck him that it would be better for Cécile, in the event of anything happening to himself, that her father should be with her when she received the intelligence.

“Why will you not stay?” he inquired. “Unfortunately, it is necessary for me to return to Paris at the end of the week on important business, so that you might take care of Cécile during my absence.”

“Impossible, impossible,” said de Tarvenac. “I, too, have a most important engagement in Paris, and one that it is absolutely imperative I should keep. At all hazards I must be there by Friday evening.”

Middlesborough was in the act of lifting a glass of champagne to his lips; suddenly his fingers relaxed their grip upon the slender stem; the glass fell from his hand, and the wine was spilt upon the cloth. The room swam before his eyes. A sudden fear, so awful, so intense, that for a moment it deprived him even of the power of thinking, had taken possession of him. What could it mean? Like a man in a dream he saw the butler come to his side, and remove the broken glass, while a footman mopped up the wine that had been spilt.

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Then, little by little, he recovered his self-possession, but for the remainder of the meal he sat almost silent, battling with a fear, beside which that of his own death was a mere bagatelle. When they rose from the table and de Tarvenac joined Cécile in the drawing-room, Middlesborough went out into the cool night air. Almost unconsciously he made his way down to the spot where they had been seated that afternoon. The waves broke against the walls with gentle rhythm, and the melancholy cry of a sea-bird came from across the water. He had no attention to spare for either, however. He was fighting a suspicion that was worse than Death itself. Could there even be the wildest possibility in the thought that had come to him at dinner? If so, what should he do? In two days' time he would be standing in the arena of that house at St. Germain, to fight his duel. Who was the man to kill whom he had been practising so assiduously of late? He could not but remember his old suspicion that de Tarvenac, not being the possessor of sufficient means to pay the fine imposed, had determined to effect his release by fighting the number of duels required by the

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rules of the Club. He had evidently fought one before he had defeated de Gonville—could this be the last of the series? Presently he returned to the house, and, knowing that if he remained longer away his wife would think that something was amiss, made his way to the drawing-room. At the moment he entered, Cécile was playing a little lullaby of Grieg's, and, as he heard it Middlesborough felt that the air would haunt him until he died.

“Where have you been, dear?” his wife inquired as she rose from the piano. “We have missed you.”

“I have been for a stroll on the terrace,” he answered. “I had a headache at dinner, and thought that the night air might cure it; it is a lovely night.”

When Cécile slipped her arm through his and led him to the window he found that it cost him almost an effort to refrain from drawing away from her. If his terrible suspicions were correct, it would be sacrilege to let her touch him.

Half an hour later Cécile bade them good-night; she was tired, she said, and thought she would retire to bed. When she had left them,

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Middlesborough led de Tarvenac into the verandah. He had something to say to him, and it seemed as if his life depended on the answer he should receive.

“I am going to ask a favour of you,” he said to his guest when they were alone together. “I shall be under an eternal obligation to you if you will grant it.”

“If it is possible you may be sure I will do so,” the other replied. “What is it you want me to do?”

“It is absolutely necessary that I should go to Paris to-morrow,” said Middlesborough, after a moment’s hesitation. “My lawyer is there, and says he must see me.”

This, in a great measure was true, for he had received a letter from Bennett that morning, asking him if he should happen by any chance to be in Paris, to let him know in order that he might call upon him. He was, however, only desirous of finding out whether his suspicions were correct.

“And what is it that you wish me to do?” de Tarvenac inquired.

“I want you to remain with Cécile during my absence,” Middlesborough replied. “I shall

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return on Saturday, if all goes well. The change is doing you good, and another few days will probably make all the difference in the world to you. Is it possible for you to do what I ask?"

"I am sorry to say it is quite out of the question," said de Tarvenac, vehemently. "As I have already told you, I also have a most important appointment in Paris on Friday. Why not take Cécile with you? She would be happier there, than remaining here alone."

This was an aspect of the case that had not struck Middlesborough. As a drowning man is said to clutch at a straw, so he grasped at any opportunity of having Cécile with him, if only for a few hours longer. In his own heart he felt quite certain that de Tarvenac was the man he was to fight. Otherwise, why should he be so anxious to return to Paris on this particular day?

"Is it settled, then, that Cécile returns to Paris with us?" her father inquired. "For of course, since we are leaving here upon the same day, we shall travel together?"

As he said it, Middlesborough noticed that there was an eager look in the other's face; it

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showed him that his own craving was being reflected in the heart of his father-in-law. Looked at in the bare and naked light of truth, how futile and absurd it all was. Why should he fight de Tarvenac, and why should de Tarvenac fight him? They had no quarrel with each other; on the contrary, they had the best of reasons for remaining friends. Why could they not speak openly to each other and so settle the matter? If he could only say to de Tarvenac, "I, the husband of your daughter, am the man you are hoping to kill on Friday night," the other would probably answer, "For her sake you shall not do it. It would break her heart." Against this, however, there was the ever present knowledge that he had pledged his word never to do or say anything, either directly or by insinuation, to any living person, concerning the Club of which he was a member. He might tell de Tarvenac if he chose, and refuse to fight, but in that case how much better off would he be? He would be branded as a man who had broken his oath, would be insulted in a public place, and would have to go on fighting until he was killed. He had far better get it over once and for all. In

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this diabolical arrangement he thought he could trace the hand of Madame d'Espère. Doubtless this was the vengeance she had vowed against him? It looked like it as the matter stood, for whichever man was killed, the effect upon Cécile would be the same. She, poor child, as Middlesborough was well aware, would suffer in either case.

“Perhaps she had better come with us after all,” said Middlesborough, in answer to the question de Tarvenac had put to him. “It will be rather early for her to start, but I’ve no doubt, under the circumstances, she will not mind that.”

A bitter smile flickered across his face as he thought of the irony contained in that apparently simple phrase “under the circumstances.”

“Having arranged our difficulty so satisfactorily, my dear Middlesborough,” said de Tarvenac, rising from his seat, “if you will permit me I will wish you good-night, it is growing late.”

“Good-night,” his host replied, and as he spoke he took the other’s outstretched hand. It was cold as ice.

When he was alone once more, Middlesborough

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went into the garden. From the path before the house he could see the light shining from his wife's bed-room windows. He could picture her lying there, with her sweet face upon the pillow, her beautiful hair making a fitting frame for the lovely head. With a morbid probing into the very heart of his pain, he wondered which loss would affect her the more. That she loved himself passionately he had no doubt. On the other hand, he remembered what she had said to him, in the old garden at Todthorpe, on the night that her father had fainted—"If anything were to happen to my father, I believe it would kill me," and he knew that she had meant it. Seldom had it fallen to the lot of a father to be loved as was de Tarvenac.

For more than an hour Middlesborough paced the garden paths—thinking, thinking, thinking. It was a tangled skein he had to unravel, but at last he accomplished it and came to an understanding with himself. Cécile loved her father passionately, and her father loved her with an equal fervour. Until he, Middlesborough, had appeared upon the scene, they had been all in all to each other. Why should they not be so in the future?

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By his death Cécile would be a rich woman ; on that score he had nothing to fear. If he, her husband, loved her, how could he give her better proof of his affection than by saving her father's life for her. If no other way could be found out of the difficulty, he would meet de Tarvenac and accept his fate at his hands. Nothing, he vowed, should induce him to make an attempt on the other's life. He would defend himself as long as was possible, then take his *coup-de-grâce*, and say farewell to Cécile and the world. That neither she nor her father would know of his sacrifice, or of the circumstances connected with his death, did not affect him in the least. It was sufficient for him to feel that in doing what he proposed he was promoting Cécile's happiness so far as lay in his power. Strange though it may appear, he had no sooner arrived at this decision than a peace such as he had not known since de Chartres had called upon him that night in Paris fell upon him. Then he went into the house, and before passing to his dressing-room entered his wife's room. There she lay, exactly as he had pictured her, sleeping peacefully, one little hand resting upon the coverlet. He bent and kissed her, and

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at the touch of his lips she woke, and smiled up at him as happy as a little child.

“I was dreaming of you,” she said. “We were back in the old garden at Todthorpe, and you were telling me once more how much you loved me. Oh, Evelyn, what a happy woman I am to have the love of two such men !”

“No one could help loving you, Cécile,” he said in a voice that was curiously low and husky.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN they reached Paris, de Tarvenac informed Middlesborough that he had made up his mind to remain in his old quarters in the Rue Joséphine, instead of continuing his visit to them as Cécile had endeavoured to persuade him to do. He had his library there, he said, and all the other necessaries for his work. Besides, as he further explained, they were so newly wed that it would be scarcely fair for a third party to intrude upon their happiness at such an early date.

“You make an ideal husband, my dear Middlesborough,” he had said to the latter as they stood upon the platform of the station at Monte Carlo, and saw the manner in which the other had arranged for his wife’s comfort on the return journey to Paris. “It was indeed a fortunate day for Cécile when I persuaded you to accompany me to our house at Todthorpe.”

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Middlesborough returned his thanks for the compliment the other paid him, but he wondered what de Tarvenac would have said had he known everything.

In Paris they parted on the platform of the railway station, and Middlesborough and his wife drove to their own house, where, on their arrival, the *majordomo* threw open the door with a smiling face to receive them. He was an old retainer of the Middlesborough family, and this was the moment he had been looking forward to ever since his master had been a lad. His happiness was complete when Cécile thanked him for his kind wishes.

After luncheon Middlesborough excused himself to Cécile and went out to meet Bennett at his hotel. Most of his preparations were complete, but a few arrangements still remained to be made.

He found Bennett smoking in the verandah, which ran along the courtyard of his hotel. On seeing his client alight from his cab, he rose from his chair and came down the steps to greet him. His first feeling was one of shocked surprise.

“How wretchedly ill you are looking, my

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Lord!" he said. "Your face frightens me. I hope you have seen a doctor?"

"That is what brings me here," Middlesborough replied. "I want to tell you the result. Have you a room in which we can be alone? There are too many people here?"

Bennett led the way to an apartment on the first floor.

"Nobody will disturb us here," he said, as he shut the door behind him. "Now, my Lord, I beg of you to tell me your news. I hope it is nothing serious."

"It is more serious than you imagine, Bennett," Middlesborough replied. "I have come to you on a very grave matter indeed. In fact, it could scarcely be graver. To tell you the plain truth I am in such a state that I may go off at any minute."

The lawyer gave a gesture of alarm.

"Is your heart, then, affected?" he asked, anxiously, for he could not but remember the wild life the other had led in bygone days.

"Yes, my heart is very seriously affected," Middlesborough replied, but with a somewhat different meaning. "It is a terrible position for

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for a man to find himself in who has only been married a week, is it not?"

"You alarm me beyond measure," the other replied.

"I thought it would affect you," Middlesborough answered gravely. To-night, however, I shall know exactly what my lease of life is. You are not leaving Paris to-day, I hope?"

"I was thinking of doing so," Bennett replied. "But if you wish me to remain I will gladly do so."

"I should be very much obliged if you would," said the other. "Perhaps you would call at my house to-morrow morning at half-past ten?"

"I will do so, of course, if you wish it," the lawyer replied. "I sincerely hope you may have better news to tell me then."

Middlesborough rose to leave. Then, as if a thought struck him, he turned to Bennett again.

"My dear old friend," he said, taking his hand. "One never knows what may happen, even in a few hours, and it is best, under such circumstances, to say things while one thinks of them.

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I am your debtor for a thousand kindnesses in the past. I hope you will believe that I am not ungrateful.”

“It has always been a pleasure to serve you, my Lord,” returned Bennett, in whose eyes the tears had suddenly risen. “Our house has worked for yours for generations, and, if you will allow me to say so, there is something more than a mere business liking behind all that.”

“There certainly is,” said Middlesborough. “Now, goodbye. By the way, in case anything *should* happen to me, I suppose there is no doubt about the validity of my settlements upon Lady Middlesborough?”

“None whatever,” the other answered. “You may rest assured on that score.”

“That lightens the load considerably,” said Middlesborough, and then, bidding the lawyer goodbye, and begging him to remember his appointment for the following morning, he left his hotel.

On reaching his own residence once more he wrote a letter to Sir William Ballister, reminding him of the promise he had given him on the day that he had introduced him to Cécile, and this he

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placed, with one he had already written Cécile, in the drawer of his writing-table, where both would be found when the lock should be forced in order to discover his papers.

“All my preparations are now complete, I think,” he said to himself as he stood before the fireplace, holding in his hand the key of the drawers he had just locked.

In the drawing-room which adjoined his study he could hear Cécile playing one of the “Lieder ohne Wort.” The music had a touch of mockery in it that he had never noticed before. Unconscious of what was taking place in the adjoining room, Cécile played on. Then, knowing that her husband was in the house, and wondering why he did not come to her, she left the drawing room and entered the study in search of him.

“I have come to look for you,” she said. “I heard you return, but you did not come to see me. What have you been doing?” He was sitting before his table and she placed her arms round his neck and bent over him to kiss him.

“I have been writing letters,” he answered.

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“They accumulate so rapidly unless one takes them in time.”

“Were they so important that you could not leave them to come to me?” she asked, with a smile. “I shall be jealous of your correspondents, if that is so.”

“I thought I had better get them disposed of in time for the post,” he answered, not knowing quite what to say. “I wanted to have as much time with you as possible this evening. Do you know, Cécile, I am afraid that it will be necessary for me to go out this evening at eleven? I have an important appointment.”

“An important appointment at eleven?” she repeated, with a puzzled look on her face. Then recollecting herself, she continued, “But I am wrong to say anything about it. You would not go, of course, unless it were necessary. I am so selfish that I always want to keep you with me. I forget that others want you too. Go then, but come back to me as soon as you can.”

The remainder of the day was one of unspeakable horror to Middlesborough. He had no fear concerning the end that would come at the Club; no fear either as to the manner in which his body

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would be disposed of afterwards. The most trying part of the ordeal was that of waiting, the attempt to appear unconcerned, the necessity of discussing the trivialities of the day, and the arrangements for the morrow in an even tone, when he felt that, so far as he was concerned, there would be no to-morrow.

They had dined and were in the drawing room, where he was endeavouring to talk composedly to Cécile, when the man he least desired to meet, and whom he had least expected to see, de Tarvenac, was announced. A moment later he entered the room.

“My dear father,” said Cécile, moving forward to meet him, “how kind of you to come to see us!”

“I am here to tell you that I have been called into the country for two or three days,” de Tarvenac answered, when he had kissed his daughter. “I thought I would let you know in case you should wonder why you do not see me.”

Middlesborough looked at him searchingly while he was speaking. Save, however, for the fact that he was, if possible, a little paler than usual there was no change in his appearance.

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“At what time does your train leave?” Middlesborough inquired.

“At half-past ten,” the other answered. “As you can see, I have not much time to spare.”

They talked for upwards of a quarter of an hour on trivial matters, and then de Tarvenac apologising for such a hasty visit, rose to leave. He took his daughter in his arms and kissed her fondly. After that he had followed Middlesborough downstairs. In the hall the servant handed him his hat and cloak, and, when he had put them on, he stopped and held out his hand to his son-in-law. “Goodbye,” he said, and it seemed to Middlesborough as if there were a greater significance in his voice than the words usually implied.

When he had seen him drive away in his cab, the other returned to the drawing-room. It was time for him to take leave of Cécile. Over the agony of parting it will be better if I draw a veil. He had no desire to rouse any suspicion in his wife’s mind, and for this reason it was necessary for him to act, even though his heart were breaking, as if he were only going to his club to keep an appointment, after which he would return.

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“Good-night, dear love,” she said. “Do not be longer away than you can help, as you know I shall long for your return.”

“I shall long for your return,” he muttered to himself as he went down the stairs. When would he return ?

CHAPTER XIII

AS the clock struck midnight, Middlesborough stood in the handsomely furnished dressing-room which was his own private property at the house at St. Germain. He had exchanged the evening dress he had worn when he left Paris for the uniform of the Club, but on this occasion the latter varied, in as much that, in place of his member's coat of solemn black, he wore a white cambric shirt, which, with deadly significance, he had found laid out for him upon a chair. As he stood waiting for the summons which was to take him to the arena, he took a locket from about his neck and looked at Cécile's portrait which it contained. He had known her now less than six weeks, but in that short space of time she had diverted the current of his life into another channel, and he had come to love her with a love that knew no bounds. From Cécile his

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thoughts passed to de Tarvenac. He wondered whether the other would feel any remorse when, on the morrow, he should hear that his son-in-law was dead, and whether he would guess by whose hand he had met his fate. He crossed to the dressing-table and regarded his own reflection in the glass. He could not see that he was showing any sign of fear, his face was certainly pale, but when he put his hand upon the table it did not tremble. While he was satisfying himself on this point the bell above his door sounded with that imperative summons which is the peculiar property of electric alarms. As the bell of St. Sepulchre's has tolled the knell of many a despairing wretch in Newgate, so this ingenious production of the nineteenth century rang out for him.

It had scarcely finished, and he had barely time to don his mask, before the door opened, and one of the same noiseless servants with whose appearance he was by this time so familiar, entered, and bowed before him. Middlesborough took this as an intimation that he was to follow him ; he accordingly did so, passing in the other's wake down a thickly carpeted corridor towards a door at the further end. The curtains covering the door

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were pulled aside, and, almost before he knew he had left the passage, he found himself standing in the room he knew so well. Rows of silent spectators sat on either side, while beside him was his second, who, on his entering, bowed and handed him his sword. As he took it he looked for the first time at his opponent. Always behind his settled conviction that it was de Tarvenac with whom he was to fight, there existed a faint hope that it was possible he might be mistaken. Now, however, he saw in a glance that he was not. The man standing opposite him, sword in hand, was the same individual who had killed poor de Gonville. He had no difficulty in recognising the tall figure, so elegantly proportioned, and with such a peculiar length of arm.

For upwards of a minute they stood confronting each other. Then the bell sounded once more and the Woman of Death entered the room. As on the previous occasions that he had seen her in her dread capacity, she was dressed entirely in white, the upper half of her face being concealed by a mask of the same colour. With that grace which characterised her movements, she passed down the room and approached her throne. Middles-

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borough watched her and he noticed that as she placed her foot upon the first step of the dais, she swayed a little, as if she were not quite certain of her balance. A second later, however, she had recovered her self-possession, had bowed to the company, and had taken her seat. There was another period of silence, during which the two opponents saluted her and each other, after which she gave the fatal signal.

Both men immediately stepped forward and took their places. The swords crossed and a moment later the combat had commenced. Middlesborough had been permitted an opportunity of judging something of his adversary's skill on the occasion that the other had killed de Gonville, and from what he had seen then he felt sure that de Tarvenac must be one of the finest swordsmen in Europe. Though he himself was no mean exponent of the art, he knew that he was no match for the other.

Strange though it may be, a dozen passes had not been exchanged before Middlesborough found himself deriving an actual, though peculiar, delight from the encounter. It was that lust of fighting which, it is said, takes possession of the veriest

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coward as soon as the battle has actually commenced. Time after time de Tarvenac attempted to get within his guard, but always without success. Every attack was met with a parry, but there was no attack in return. The whole assemblage was beginning to wonder what this singular behaviour could mean.

At last the seconds, acting on a concerted sign, gave the order to disengage, whereupon the combatants separated. When they returned to their places in the centre of the room and the signal was again given for the duel to commence, Middlesborough discovered that his opponent was adopting different tactics. He had taken a leaf out of his adversary's book, and, by furnishing him with sufficient opportunities of striking, was endeavouring to induce Middlesborough to relinquish the defensive and assume the aggressive. But the other was not to be drawn. On more than one occasion he permitted admirable opportunities to escape him of striking his opponent, and as they noticed this the wonderment of the spectators increased.

At last, de Tarvenac, wearied by his futile attempts to achieve his purpose, returned to his former

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line and pressed the attack with such vigour and dexterity that Middlesborough more than once found himself in a position of considerable danger. Once, so close was the other's sword point, that it actually pierced the folds of his loose cambric shirt. An inch and a half further to one side and nothing could have saved him. A heavy perspiration covered his forehead as he realized this, and discovered that his wrist, tired by his long and obstinate defence, was gradually losing its strength and suppleness. Resolved as he was, however, to persevere until the very last, he still doggedly defended himself, knowing all the time that it could only be a few moments before the deadly point would find him out, and lay him low for ever.

Once more the seconds interposed. The spectators who, so far, had watched them as if fascinated, moved in their seats. Middlesborough looked at the Woman of Death. She was leaning forward in her chair, supporting her chin in the hollow of her hand. During the time they rested, she did not move, nor did she do so when for the third time the duel commenced. Once more the signal was given and once more the two men

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stood face to face with each other in the centre of the arena. Their swords crossed and a second later de Tarvenac made a feint, the other parried, and then, almost before the weapons had ceased to touch, Middlesborough's opponent uttered a little cry, staggered, and then fell prone upon the floor. For a moment Middlesborough could scarcely realize what had happened. In a dazed fashion he saw the seconds bend over the fallen man. One of them felt his pulse, while the other placed his hand inside his shirt upon his heart. Then followed an agonising period of uncertainty which lasted while a man might have counted fifty ; after which one of the men rose to his feet and said in a voice that could be heard throughout the room, "Messieurs, he is dead." On hearing this Middlesborough's own overwrought brain gave way and he fell fainting into his attendant's arms.

How long he remained unconscious he had no idea, but when he recovered his senses and opened his eyes he was not in the arena, or even in his dressing-room. Moreover, he felt strangely cold and cramped. He sat up and looked about him. What he saw induced him to rub his eyes

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in order to find out if he were awake or dreaming. Nor, all things considered, was his surprise to be wondered at. He found that he was lying in what appeared to be an enormous stone archway. His head ached consumedly. At last he struggled to his feet, determined at all hazards to find out where he was.

As he stepped from beneath the archway into the open, a man approached him. His uniform proclaimed him a Sergeant de Ville. "Come, my friend, what are you doing here?" the latter began, suspiciously. Then noticing the other's evening dress he became somewhat more polite. Evidently this was a swell who had been dining not too wisely but too well, and his experience led him to reflect that under such circumstances swells are usually more free with their money than at other times.

"I have met with an accident," said Middlesborough. "My head seems quite dazed. Would it be troubling you too much to tell me where I am?"

As he said it he produced a ten franc piece which he handed to the sergeant, who immediately became politeness itself.

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“I regret that Monsieur should have been so unfortunate,” he said. “Surely Monsieur recognises that this is the Arc de Triomphe in the Place de l’Étoile. Perhaps Monsieur will permit me to escort him a short distance upon his homeward journey?”

Middlesborough reflected a minute before he replied.

“The Place de l’Étoile?” he said to himself. “How in the name of all that’s wonderful did I get here?”

But the longer he thought of it, the further he seemed to be from solving the mystery. Had he been drugged after the fight and brought here in order that he should not make any scene at the Chateau? That seemed the most feasible explanation. One thing was certain, however, he must now get home to Cécile as quickly as possible. He looked at his watch and discovered that it was after two o’clock. Nearly two hours had elapsed since he had seen de Tarvenac, lying dead upon the floor of that hateful room.

“I hope Monsieur is feeling better now,” said the Sergeant. “Perhaps with a little searching it would be possible to find a *fiacre*?”

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“You need not trouble, thank you,” Middlesborough answered. “I would rather walk home. I think it will revive me. Good-night, my friend, and many thanks to you.”

“Good-night to Monsieur, and a pleasant walk,” said the officer, who immediately entered the Arch in order to make sure there was no other person concealed there.

Leaving the Place de l'Étoile, Middlesborough passed down the Avenue des Champs Elysées, through the Place de la Concorde, not without a shudder as he thought of what his first meeting with de Chartres on that spot had led to, over the Bridge de la Concorde, and then down the Boulevard St. Germain to his own house.

As he walked, the effects of the opiate, that he felt sure had been administered to him, began to work off, his head cleared, and he looked at matters in a new light. One thought was uppermost in his mind: he was free. Free! to go where he pleased. Freed from his oath in connection with that awful club—and above all free to devote the remainder of his life to Cécile. Never had he dreamt that there was so much joy to be found in the world. Then another thought

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struck him and sobered him once more. What was he to say to Cécile if she should ask him about her father?

After a time he came to the conclusion that it would be better to defer all consideration of the matter until he discovered what excuse would be made for the other's death upon the morrow. Having reached his own residence he turned the key and let himself in.

Before leaving the house that evening he had expressly ordered the servants not to sit up for him, and now he was glad that he had done so. When he had removed his hat and cloak he made his way upstairs, treading as softly as a thief. He was about to pass his wife's door in order to proceed to his dressing-room, when the former was suddenly opened, and Cécile stood before him.

"Oh, thank God, you have come back!" she said in a voice overflowing with thankfulness. "You cannot think how frightened I have been concerning you!"

"Frightened concerning me?" Middlesborough repeated as if in surprise. "What does this mean?"

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He led her back into her room and placed her in a chair. She was still trembling violently.

“I have had such a terrible dream,” she said. “Ever since it woke me up I have been praying for your return.” She paused for a moment and then continued, “I dreamt, Evelyn, that you were dead ; in fact that you had been murdered.”

“But why, darling, should you let a mere dream frighten you like this?” he answered, not, however, without a shudder. “Who would be likely to murder me, and for what reason?”

“I dreamt that it was done at Madame d’Espère’s instigation,” she answered. Then covering her face with her hands she continued, “*and it was my own father whom she employed to do the deed.*”

Middlesborough gazed at her in horror. He was not a believer in dreams, but here was something that was likely to shake his doubt for the remainder of his existence.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER Cécile's description of her dream, and the remembrance of the events of the night through which he had just passed, it is small wonder that Middlesborough found it impossible to sleep. At last he rose and went to his room to dress. Cécile was slumbering peacefully once more, and remembering how restless she had been before, he was anxious not to disturb her. When he had dressed he descended to his study.

The morning sun streamed in through the windows as he opened the shutters, and they were like rays heralding the birth of a new life for him. How little had he expected to see this day?

Unlocking the drawer of his writing-table, he took from it the two letters he had written on the previous evening. Then he placed them on the hearth and set fire to them. Only when they

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were reduced to ashes was he satisfied. The last flickering flame had scarcely died down before the sound of a bell, ringing in the basement, reached him, followed by a loud knocking at the front door. A few moments later the butler, who had only that moment made his appearance downstairs, knocked at his door and entered, with a serious face.

“A Police Commissary is at the door, my Lord,” he said. “He would be glad if he could see you for a few moments on a matter of grave importance.”

Middlesborough endeavoured to assume a look of astonishment as he asked what the man wanted. He had expected that the intelligence that de Tarvenac’s body had been found would arrive during the day, but he had no idea that it would come so soon. “Show him in,” he said. “You say you have no idea what his business is with me?”

“No, my Lord,” the man replied. “He only said that it was most important, otherwise he would not have troubled your Lordship at such an hour.”

“Very well, show him in.”

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The servant departed to presently return with the officer in question. The latter bowed gravely.

“My butler says you desire to see me on a matter of grave importance?” Middlesborough began.

“Pray what is it that brings you here so early?”

“I regret having to inform your Lordship that I have some exceedingly sad intelligence to impart,” the man replied.

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Middlesborough. “What is it?”

Though he did his best to appear calm, his voice shook a little.

“I understand, my Lord, that the Comte de Tarvenac is your father-in-law.”

“That is so. What can you have to tell me concerning him?”

The other paused for a moment to consider how he should break the intelligence.

“I must beg your Lordship to be prepared for some very unhappy news,” he said.

“I am quite prepared,” Middlesborough replied. “I beg of you to tell me at once. Can it be possible that he has met with an accident?”

“I have to inform you that Monsieur le Comte was found this morning quite dead, lying before

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the high altar of the Church of St. Paul in the Rue des Marmousets," said the Commissary.

"In the Church of St. Paul in the Rue des Marmousets?" cried Middlesborough, unable to conceal his astonishment. "Good Heavens! how did he get there?"

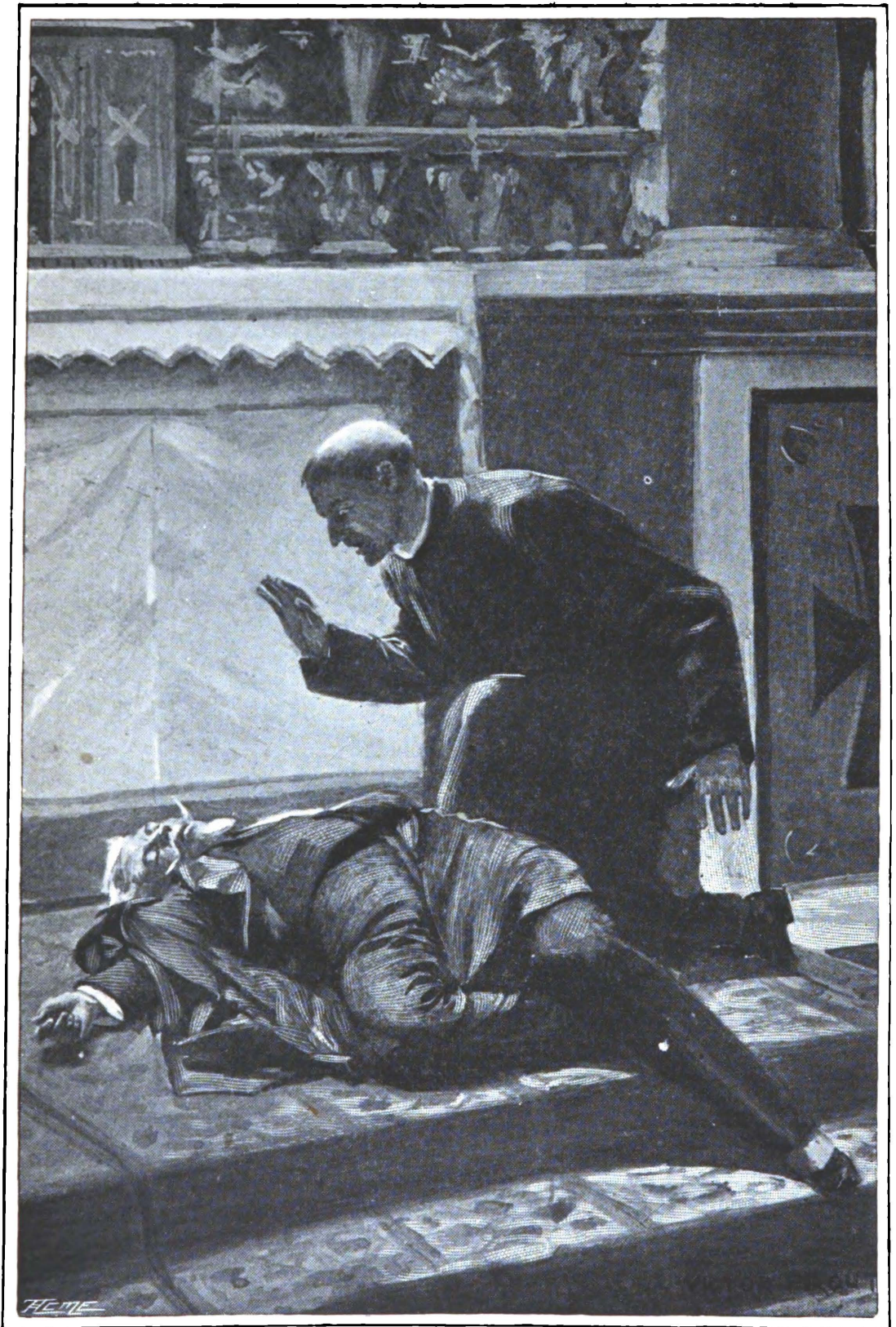
"That is a mystery we cannot solve," the Police Officer answered. "However, the fact remains that he was found there by the Sacristan when he entered this morning to prepare the church for early Mass. He immediately communicated with us. When we arrived we found on the body a card bearing the dead man's name and address. Remembering that Milady Middlesborough was his daughter, we thought we had better communicate with you at once."

"This is sad intelligence, and I am greatly shocked at it," said Middlesborough. "As you may suppose, it will have a most distressing effect upon my wife. What have you done with the body?"

"We have conveyed it to the deceased's residence in the Rue Joséphine," the officer replied.

"I trust we did right?"

"You did very right," Middlesborough replied.



He was found there by the Sacristan.

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“I will go there at once. In the meantime I must thank you for the promptness you have shown in communicating with me.”

The officer withdrew, leaving Middlesborough alone. Then he considered what he should do. One thing was quite certain, Cécile must be told, and at once. He accordingly ascended to her room and, with the utmost gentleness, broke the news of her father's death to her. To his surprise her grief was not so extreme as he had feared it might be. She declared that she had been prepared for it by her dream.

“Take me to him,” she said simply. “I must go to him at once.”

Middlesborough accordingly ordered a carriage to be prepared, and when she had dressed they set off together for the Rue Joséphine. There Middlesborough left her alone with her dead.

When, half an hour later, he returned for her he found her much calmer. They accordingly returned to their own home, and, after they had breakfasted Middlesborough once more went out. He drove to the Rue Thebes, a street which in all probability his coachman had never entered before, and having discovered the little

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chemist's shop on the right-hand side, entered, and inquired from the middle-aged assistant behind the counter where he would be likely to find a certain Monsieur de Chartres.

“Monsieur de Chartres occupies a room upstairs,” the man replied. “If Monsieur will have the goodness to wait for one moment, I will ascertain whether he is at home and can see him.”

The man departed and Middlesborough waited patiently for him to return. When he did so, he invited the other to accompany him. At the top of the first flight of stairs the man stopped and knocked at a door. A voice from inside bade him enter. Middlesborough did so to find himself in a room such as he had not expected to see. The walls were lined with bookshelves, the floor was softly carpeted, and an excellently painted window shut off the world outside. In the centre of the apartment stood a writing-table and at this sat Monsieur de Chartres.

“Good morning, Lord Middlesborough,” said the latter, rising and bowing to his guest. “You are abroad early this morning. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?”

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In reply Middlesborough took from his pocket an envelope, which he handed to the man before him.

“Last night,” he said, “I fought my first and only duel. I am now here to pay the amount of the fine imposed by the rules, and to inform you that henceforth I shall cease to be a member of the Club.”

De Chartres took the envelope and withdrew the cheque it contained. Having examined it carefully he opened a drawer and placed it inside.

“I am to understand, then,” he said, “that you pay me this amount in return for certain services I have had the happiness of rendering you. Is that not so?”

“Provided I have your receipt and your assurance that I shall never be called upon to have anything to do with the Club or its affairs again, you may certainly put that construction upon it,” Middlesborough replied.

Drawing a sheet of notepaper towards him, De Chartres wrote something upon it. This he handed Middlesborough.

“Here is your receipt,” he said.

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Middlesborough scrutinized it carefully. What he read was as follows: "Received from Lord Middlesborough the sum of one hundred and twenty thousand francs, which amount secures his release from any agreement he may have entered into with me."

"I thank you," said Middlesborough. "And now one other question."

"What is that?"

"I want you to tell me where I can find the person you call the Woman of Death?"

"She has left Paris," the other replied, "and she will never return. I am quite sure of that. Is there anything more I can do to serve you? No! Then I have the honour to wish your Lordship good-morning and goodbye."

When Middlesborough had once more taken his place in his cab he bade his coachman drive him home by the way of the Champs Elysées. He wanted to see if what de Chartres had told were true. It certainly appeared to be so, for when the carriage reached Madame d'Espère's residence he noticed that the shutters were up at the windows and that the house had the appearance of being unoccupied.

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It wanted five minutes to half-past ten o'clock when Middlesborough reached his own house. At the half-hour his lawyer was to call upon him.

“ Good morning, Bennett,” said Middlesborough, when the latter made his appearance. “ You have heard the sad news, I suppose, concerning my father-in-law ? ”

“ I have heard no news at all,” the lawyer replied. “ Pray tell me what has happened.”

Middlesborough thereupon made him acquainted with the news of de Tarvenac's death.

“ It is very sad,” the lawyer replied. “ Particularly for Lady Middlesborough, who will feel her loss acutely. I sympathise with her. At the same time I am glad to see that you are looking much better this morning. I hope the news your medical man gave you was more satisfactory than you anticipated ? ”

“ I am glad to be able to report that my condition is not nearly so serious as I imagined,” Middlesborough answered. “ If I lead a quiet life for the future and take ordinary care of myself, there is no reason that I should not live to be ninety.”

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“I thank God for that,” said Bennett solemnly.

* * * * *

True to the promise he had made to himself on the morning after his terrible adventure, Middlesborough and his wife crossed to England immediately after de Tarvenac's funeral, to take up their residence at “Burgrove.”

In the years that have elapsed since that terrible night when he last saw the house at St. Germain, Middlesborough, as every one knows, has made his personality felt in English politics. He takes an overwhelming interest in all that appertains to his estates and tenants, and above all he loves his wife and children with an affection that grows stronger every day.

“There is only one subject upon which we differ,” his wife tells her friends, with a mock regret that has perhaps a touch of seriousness in it. “Try how I will, I cannot persuade him to remain for more than a week in Paris. He seems to have taken a dislike to the place.”

To this Middlesborough invariably answers that he has tired of the Gay City. He does not tell her that he can never dissociate the French

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capital in his memory from his acquaintance with a person of whom he has never since heard, but who was once known to himself and certain other people by the sobriquet of

“THE WOMAN OF DEATH.”

THE END.