

# The Complete Crockett

*The Galloway Raiders*

*digital edition*

New British fiction



THE LADY OF  
100 DRESSES

S.R.CROCKETT

# Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

*First Published by Eveleigh Nash in 1911.*

The Galloway Raiders ‘Complete Crockett’ digital edition was part of a decade long project (2012-2022) to bring the works of Samuel Rutherford Crockett (1859-1914) together in one place. The collection comprises 66 published works, re-edited and re-formatted by volunteer labour to the highest standard.

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In 2025 the S.R.Crockett online museum was established and the Galloway Raiders Digital Edition works are now all available for free download from <https://srcrockett.omeka.net> The museum offers a virtual space to contextualise and interpret Crockett’s works.

To find out more about Crockett’s life, literature and legacy you can also visit The Galloway Raiders website [www.gallowayraiders.co.uk](http://www.gallowayraiders.co.uk) and The Galloway Raiders YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@gallowayraiders>

# THE LADY OF THE 100 DRESSES

## INTRODUCTION

This story is unashamedly popular fiction, written with the contemporary market clearly in mind. While many of the themes are familiar to Crockett's earlier work, *The Lady of 100 Dresses* shows what publishers wanted from him and as such reflects some of the fashions of the immediately pre-War, Edwardian age.

The very conceit of the Lady who has 100 dresses – a woman who will never wear the same dress twice – can be seen as Crockett critiquing fashion across the board, including in publishing. While he acknowledged in a speech in 1906 that he did not like to cover the same ground repeatedly, in his fiction, preferring to write his best and then move on, *The Lady* shows that in order to keep in step with publishing demands, he went to some perhaps uncomfortable places. For those who love Crockett's boys' own adventure stories, or the history adventure romances, this contemporary shift can be equally uncomfortable.

However, this novel represents not a failing in Crockett's literary or creative skill, so much as an insight into the bedfellows one must make in order to keep 'making siller'. Crockett observed early in his career: *'Time brings changes. The observation is not exactly new, yet we may venture to repeat it. For the man who is listened to is the man who is not afraid to say old things over and over again in his own way.'* We are aware of the vast changes in clothing fashion between Victorian 1870s and Edwardian 1910s. And we should not be surprised that fashions in Edwardian fiction were as different from the High

Victorian novel milieu in which Crockett first found fame. Throughout *The Lady* Crockett explores and reveals the changes in society which have occurred – simply by writing of the contemporary scene around him with his usual keen observation and humour. The scenery and fashion have changed. The writer changes with them where he must, but keeps his sense of perspective, and adapts his skills to the changing scenery.

The novel begins harshly, with an indictment on the cruelty of poverty among the working classes. In this respect it is just as sternly critical of its time as *Cleg Kelly* (1899) and *Kid McGhie* (1905) were in their day. *The Lady* also offers a close, contemporary insight of society around 1910. The story can be dated as occurring during the Presidency of Teddy Roosevelt which was between 1901 - 1909. The reference to motor cars places this novel firmly in the latter part of this period and the assumption is that it presents an entirely contemporary picture.

The plot, with all its twists and turns revolves around jewellery. Crockett's classic stock in trade of smugglers is brought up to date. Baron Altmayer, while a rather shadowy figure, is of the same stock as Hector Faa (*Dark o' the Moon*, 1902) and Lazun Palafox (*The Smugglers*, 1911). It is quite likely Crockett was working on *The Smugglers* and *The Lady* at more or less the same time. Indeed, during this phase of his life, Crockett writes many novels which use smuggling as a trope for various social and political ills. Another is *The Moss Troopers* (1910), in which the Hanoverian Royal Princes are cast as 'people' smugglers.

In *The Lady* smuggling is explored in the context of the international jewellery trade. Social class is a

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significant marker and the distinction between 'business' and smuggling is often hard to distinguish. From the first moral crisis, the hero John Eames' life is put under the microscope and in the process of engaging with his actual and emotional journey, the reader may call into question their own views on aspects of society which they might previously not have considered.

There is, as often with Crockett, a minor, or parallel plot presented by Agnes Allison. This young woman 'on the make' from Dunfermline, is there for humour, but a deeper critique of her aspirational choices adds more than flavour to the story soup. Crockett's 'small' characters rarely play small parts in his fiction. And while we can clearly see the Lady's behaviours as frivolous, the dresses which cannot be worn more than once are representative of a whole world view – one that Crockett does not admire. For the full picture, one needs to look more closely at the underlying message, a suggestion that money and riches are corrupting influences which turn honest men (and women) into smugglers.

Bearing in mind that this novel is set at the time of the birth of socialism offers a different perspective. Crockett's first clear critique of capitalism came in *Vida* (1908) which itself grew out of a story written in response to a real social iniquity (The Mauricewood Pit Disaster, 1889) and through his fiction one can trace something far less frivolous than might be seen on the surface. Jewels are also significant in *Cinderella* (1901) and generally Crockett is critical of society which values money or treasures above honesty and love.

The setting moves from London to France and Holland, though these are now unrecognisable from

the settings of novels such as *Lochinvar* and *The Black Douglas*. There is also, somewhat 'offstage' travels into South America. Here Crockett perhaps plays fast and loose with 'truth' conflating some historic events, but his goal is to show the casual attitudes of the 'class' who become South American Dictators, profiting from revolutions sparked by working class poverty. The mere bringing together of the two places, and those who are 'leaders' in both places, offers the reader the opportunity to join some dots for themselves and come up with a conclusion which is far deeper than a popular novel might suggest.

It is always a mistake to dismiss Crockett's fiction as light. There are deeper levels if one is prepared to look for them, and to confront the often uncomfortable truths they reveal.

The language in *The Lady* is contemporary, which can seem jarring to those used to *The Raiders*, but simply reflects again the changes in reading, writing and publishing over a twenty year period. This in itself is illustrative of the great period of social change. As such, real insights can be gleaned from what at the time were simply casual descriptions of what Crockett saw around him. So even if the modern reader is not gripped by the story, there is much to recommend this novel. If one is interested in Crockett's own writing career and trajectory, it also has a significant part to play. In his real life around the time this was written, Crockett's own finances were suffering (from the requirements of up-keeping a middle class family) and indeed in 1911 he sold off a large part of the library he had collected since his student days. Taken as a story on its own, *The Lady* may seem slight and of its time,

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but fitting it into the pantheon of Crockett's oeuvre, it can point towards his familiar creative choices as well as to his flexibility in writing for an ever changing market.

*Cally Phillips*

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CHAPTER ONE

A PILLAR OF FIRE BY NIGHT

'You'll be sure to bring home some money, John?' Eames's wife said to him anxiously at the door of their fifth-floor flat up beyond the big Scotch stations.

'Yes, Annie,' John Eames promised smilingly. But he descended the stairs slowly, thinking of what she had said to him the night before, when the landlord made a disturbance at the door on account of the rent: 'I had much better have married Fred Travis, as mother wanted me to!'

Eames sighed softly. He was only first counter salesman in the Jewellers' Retail Union — or rather, he had been, for owing to the crisis in trade and the Stock Exchange men buying motor-cars instead of diamond necklaces, he had been six months out of a job. He had saved a little money when the firm told him that they would be compelled to dispense with his service — a very little, and soon gone. They had had two children, of whom only one, a boy, remained. But Annie had aged under these rude trials and her temper had taken on a certain edge during the last months.

'One would think, to hear you,' he had said on one occasion, 'that I have only to open the window for the money to come flying in.'

'So it would,' she retorted, 'if you had been another man — if I had married the man my people wanted me to.'

He choked down the hot, 'I wish to God you had!'

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which rose to his lips; for in his way he loved his wife and knew that with prosperity her old kindness would return. Also he was heart-sorry for her, especially since the doctor had ordered all manner of strengthening foods and jellies for little Hugo, who had now been sick for three months and lay smiling vaguely and wistfully as if across a great valley.

Eames had been a straight man all his life. He had been used to handling gold and jewels almost from boyhood, but he had never been tempted to lay finger upon a pennyworth. He had been a church member, even a church-goer — a difficult thing for a man who is often kept up late on Saturdays verifying stock-books.

But now hunger and desperation were dissolving the little polite and politic shams which hitherto he had mistaken for morality.

'Possibly,' muttered Eames as he descended the stair, 'honesty is the best policy, but if policy won't help Annie or save little Hugo — why, then - '

He did not finish his sentence, but he was thinking hard. Thirty-five years of honesty had fallen from him like a garment under his wife's reproach, and the man stood savage and desperate the woad-painted savage, his ancestor, peering out, winter-famished, on the rich and well-provided encampment of a neighbouring tribe.

Yet to look at Eames you would never have thought it. He wore his high hat carefully brushed, a good overcoat concealed the rather threadbare suit beneath, an umbrella was in his hand. He had kept these when everything else went to the pawnbroker, because he knew that without such tokens of respectability he had no chance of another billet; and, indeed, he had always a hope that some

morning Mr. Wentworth, acting director of the Jewellers' Retail Union, would send for him to call round.

Eames, therefore, came out on the rush and hoot; and sparkle of a London evening at the hour when traffic is at its fullest. Annie and he lived in York Street, on the farther side of Euston, and he had to walk down many brilliantly lighted streets before he came to the world's centre in Piccadilly Circus.

He stood a while almost dazed. That day he had been at Hatton Garden, looking for a job as expert in precious stones; but had been told in thick accents to 'Ged out!' for the excellent reason that in the wholesale trade every Semite is his own expert.

As he stood on the kerb a pickpocket's hand insinuated itself into the pocket of his overcoat. Instinctively John Eames reached down and gripped the wrist. He seemed back again at the 'set stones' counter in Regent Street. He saw the hunger-pale, leaden-eyed face of the thief. Then he smiled at him and shook his head.

'Nothing there,' he said in a low tone. 'Wrong man.' And he let go the thief's wrist.

There came a grin about the wicks of the weak mouth and the man winked appreciatively.

'The best on us makes mistakes, don't they?' he said. 'I didn't twig you were in the business. Thought you was a toff. So long, matey!'

'Good-bye!' said Eames, without shame at the mistake. And in his ears there kept dinning: 'Annie and Hugo; Hugo and Annie!' Other words, too, common words which the doctor had used: 'Beef juice and a dessert-spoonful of wine; calf's-foot jelly!' Oh Lord, there was some in that window now!

Eames stopped, crossed the road, and regarded.

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In intention he was already a thief; in potentiality a manslayer. He saw a sturdy shopman at a nod from his master turn a shivering woman from the door; but Eames was well dressed, and him the shopman stood regarding deferentially as a possible customer.

'Anything we can do for you to-night, sir?' said the man in the white apron, smiling like toffee.

'Anything! Ah—' John turned away muttering.

'Thank you, sir; another time,' said the shopman politely, and went indoors snarling: 'Sulky dog! No more manners than a — Here, you, get out of that!' And he flung a condemned two-pound weight of old iron at a street boy who was greedily spying out the fatness of the land.

Eames went round by Charles Street, where a little crowd was collected about that under-staffed post office. On the way he passed several fine-art shops, where pictures isolated on dark blue velvet backgrounds and set with footlights glowed in the fog like the gems he knew so well in their cases at the Jewellers' Retail Union.

Once he had a glimpse of the high buildings to the south of Trafalgar Square, where the Bovril electric advertisements tick themselves out vainly against the sky. He was surprised to see the 'vрил' stop short before the well-known flourish. He waited a second or two, and still all was dark. As he looked away towards Regent Street and the Haymarket somehow everything seemed unwontedly colourless. The yellow of the gas lamps grew brighter, but here and there were blanks. Every street was gap-toothed wherever electricity was used.

From the purlieus of Leicester Square came a rush, from theatres and music-halls closing early, loud laughter and shrill screaming. It passed, and

the streets to the west were still. Policemen strode along; now and then Eames saw stalwart figures in the gloom. But most of them had gone east, where there was a chance of disturbance. Those who were left looked mostly in the same direction. About Eames the mist deepened; in colour it was anything from pea-soup to a bluish orange, particularly distasteful to the educated stomach.

Eames trod upon other people's toes, and begged pardon. Some cursed him, others seized his arm. He left both behind. At street corners policemen and employees of the various district boards organised 'flares.'

Eames continued on up Regent Street. He had no particular object clear in his mind. To look into the great double windows of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., of which in the days of his pride he had directed the decoration, might give him an idea. He remembered how extraordinarily suggestive they had always been. That speech of his at the church social on 'Kleptomania *versus* Common Theft,' which had made his reputation as a debater through all St. Pancras, had been thought out there. Ah, the multitude of strange things he had seen and handled! And even now, though others decorated the windows, Eames loved to pass that way. There was an emerald behind the bars which gleamed at him like an old friend. His hand had put the price in hieroglyphics upon the setting. He wondered it had never been sold. The crisis again — everybody poor. No jewels selling, and hard-working men out of places!

Now the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., was a great corporation, organised on the most modern lines. It was locked up, certainly, but there was a caretaker

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in the rear, and for the rest the policemen on the beat had keys of the front door, and it was their duty, as well as their interest, to look within each time they passed the shining frontage, of which the illuminates plate-glass was protected only by a wickerwork of slender steel rods. The whole of the interior was disclosed at a glance. The counter showcases were covered with dark green baize, but the taller wall cupboards were only locked, and every article could be seen as clearly as by day. Such on ordinary occasions was the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd.

Eames had thought no more about the sudden check of the flourishing advertisement writing on the sky. 'Something wrong with the mechanism,' he had thought at the moment; and then: 'I wonder how they do it.' For it was in the infancy of electric advertising, and what is now taught in Board Schools was then a matter of expert knowledge. He added: 'Some lucky fellow has the berth. Poor chap, he may lose it if he does not get it going again sharp!'

He trod the pavement. That part of London was exceedingly still. The fog and the theatres had driven the promenaders to Shaftesbury Avenue and along the Strand. Regent Street was strangely dark, chill, and deserted; but in a moment he would stand before the vast illumination of the Jewellers' Union, and there, if anywhere, there would be a crowd.

It would be at the next corner. Surely the fog was thicker than he had thought, for no sign of it could he discern. All was dark. For the first time in his life the Jewellers' Retail Union was blind, blank and still: not a black coat, not a flaunting feather in front of it, not even a newsvending urchin pausing to look

at 'them bright stones and goold' which were worth such unknown 'pots of money.'

Eames stood motionless on the kerb. His hands had been in his pockets, but now he took out the right and placed it over his heart, which had suddenly begun to beat fiercely.

Eames forgot his church attendances, the sermons of his minister, the broad, flat Bible which he carried twice a-Sunday (relic of some old Exeter Hall advice, given he had forgotten by whom). He was in the grip of a terrible temptation. It had come with the sight of the black unregarded windows, and the thought of all he knew lying waiting within.

Knew? Why, he knew it all, case by case, like the palm of his hand! What was there to hinder him? There was only old Sugg, the caretaker. He would be asleep in his bunk at the back, drunk most likely. Then there came a gush of warmth over Eames as he stood. He felt in his pockets. There was the key of the little side door by which the chiefs passed in and out. The way was through the room where Sugg slept. He would be asleep long ago. For as a prudent man, even in his cups, Sugg laid in a stock during the day, and as soon as the last of his 'bosses' was gone he set about his nightly pleasure. He had, they said in the shop, 'Wentworth under his thumb!' At any rate, drunk or sober, he was irremovable— 'So faithful, you know!'

'I will now get drunk,' he was wont to say, '*but slowly!*'

To Eames it appeared Sugg was no more than a slight obstacle in the way of an infinite good. Sugg – what was Sugg, anyway? A drunken old dotard, who did good to nobody, least of all to himself; wifeless, childless, conscienceless.

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Eames had still the pass-key of the private door. He had meant to give it up, but day after day had retained it, half hoping to be called back by Mr. Wentworth, half perhaps from a kind of weak spite.

'Well, they turned me away. Let them make another if they want it!'

He had even stood on Westminster Bridge with it poised in his hand, but for some unknown reason (honesty, as he thought then) he had put the pass-key back in his pocket.

He was glad now. Annie should not reproach him any more, and Boy Hugo should have the whole contents of that Italian warehouseman's shop, and get better in no time.

Sugg, indeed! A drunken beast, for years an offence in the nostrils of every honest man; but, as before, 'So faithful, you know!' said Wentworth.

John Eames called himself an honest man as he turned up Queen's Lane, where, under an archway of solid unhewn stone was the little side door which led past the caretaker's rooms to the unlighted halls of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd.

Eames had, indeed, been an honest servant of the company, but now he was a servant no longer. Honesty — well, there were little Hugo and Annie at home, and all that they needed was to be had on the Euston Road.

A thief! Eames knew thieves. He had watched for them often when suspicious characters bent over his showcases. But now the model servant had other ideas in his head — not for his own sake, God knew, but for Hugo's sake and Annie's — a little less for Annie.

He waited till the street was bare of traffic, till the last policeman had tramped past. The windows

opposite in the Lane gazed down at him blind and blank. The fog, however, was a great comfort. Sugg! Yes, he thought about Sugg, and that part was unpleasant. But, after all, what did Sugg matter? There was that on the fifth floor in the house of York Street, N.W., which mattered more — oh, a thousand times!

It was astonishing to John Eames how soon he stood within the dusky shelter of the archway. The key came of itself from his pocket; it felt warm in his fog-chilled fingers. But when he put it to the keyhole it seemed to grit unnecessarily, and for a moment Eames was on the point of giving up. He would go back home; but then there was Annie to face. He had told her he was going to collect money due to him - he would surely bring something home. And the vision of the Italian warehouseman's window, with the jellies and wines which would save Hugo's life, swam up before him, causing him to see things as through a red haze.

Eames was a common enough man, with little hold on moral systems in the abstract; but Hugo, and in a less degree Annie, were very concrete indeed. At least for the moment they constituted a very active morality.

He turned the key and smelt the warmer breath of the passage.

Sugg had been frying onions. Beast! John Eames hated onions, especially fried. They filled him with loathing, and he had less pity for Sugg than ever. He closed the door. All his thoughts were ahead of him. Already he was imagining the frowsy figure of the watchman poking out, a lantern in his hand. But the sleeping room and kitchen lay further on and to the right. From the more distant came a red dim

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glow. The stove, left to itself, Eames conjectured.

And he sniffed more strongly the odour of burned onions and scarified steak. Clearly Sugg had been feasting; he might not be so drunk as he had hoped. His hand touched an open door; blank blackness inside, to Eames's imagination as dangerous as the mouth of a cannon.

He gave a gasp, collected his energies, said a prayer involuntarily (yes, a prayer, for he had gone to church regularly enough for that) and stepped within. No noise; not a rat, though he listened hard. He put his hand down. It touched a board with long scratches hatched every way across it. His fingers glided along. Owing to his business Eames possessed a light hand. He touched something cold and keen – a knife? Yes, a knife in a wooden handle! He gripped it instinctively, with no clear sense of what he was to do with it. He held it firm in his right hand, lifted a little at about the level of the first button on his overcoat. Then, with his left, he felt the way onward.

The dull glow strengthened and there was an odour as of the smoky wick of a paraffin lamp. The red glow was the stove, cooling down with the door open and some of the coals fallen on the floor, smouldering. Eames trod these out instinctively and looked about.

Where was Sugg? Sugg was nowhere to be seen. Eames felt the tumble of clothes on the bed. No Sugg. The drunken old beast! Doubtless he was somewhere down-cellar, inanimate, huddled and stertorous. Eames knew Sugg. He had often wondered why the governors kept him on, especially Mr. Wentworth, who certainly must know his habits.

Eames felt for the moment all the righteous glow

of the old and trusted servant of the company, disgusted with misconduct of one less worthy, whom it was his duty to report; but a forefinger that strayed on to the cold back of the knife recalled him. With the chill of the steel the thought of Annie and Hugo returned to him.

Eames shuddered. He remembered why he was there and what he meant to do with the knife. However, he gripped himself, and his purpose reassured itself. No suicide would do any good. He had no insurance worth anything; he had not even had money to keep up his society payments. No, there was no other way. So Eames went on.

He knew the road, each step up or down, each hardly perceptible slant and down grade. With the custom of years his feet took them instinctively. Presently he was at the door. Beyond that were the little cabins where repairing work was done. It was Sugg's duty to sweep them out; perhaps he might be there. Yet he could discern no light round the edges of the door, no ray through the keyhole. He put his hand forward to touch the knob, and it stretched out into emptiness, touching nothing.

His heart stood still for a moment. He saw before him, apparently across a vast space, dim and vague illuminated discs that winked yellow and brown like the phosphorescent eyes of great fishes many fathoms under water, passing and repassing.

Then his ears were filled with the thrill and rumble of the street, as it were noises heard in the ears of the deaf — thunder, and cannonade, and waterfalls, but all distant and dull.

Then it occurred to Eames that somehow the door into the showrooms had been left open. It ought to have been locked. Sugg kept one key, Mr.

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Wentworth the other. So as he stood in the doorway he was looking across the shrouded cases to the great unshuttered plate-glass windows. The diamonds and precious stones sometimes winked when a 'trailer' cab edged painfully along the kerb or a boy with a torch flitted by in the fog.

But why was there no electricity? It could not be on account of the fog. He passed through the door and smelt the curious smell of the serge coverings — a reminiscent perfume, very lingering, which brought back to him the days when he went to Longtown Grammar School and the girls' school-bags smelt just like that. There was one -

But Eames checked himself. The familiar ways, the odour of the *salle*, the glimmering eases — he found himself at home. He could open any one of them with the little bundle of keys in his pocket — and, indeed, the windows themselves.

He went towards the one on the left, turning behind the cases with something of his old professional gait, and then he stooped to look over. He spread his fingers out in the same persuasive way as when addressing customers; he smiled.

There was something black and lumpy lying upon the end of the diamond safe. Like small flour bags they were, made to hold a stone or two. He went towards them, and at the same moment his foot tripped upon something soft. A hand gripped his ankle, and he heard a voice. Eames suppressed a painful cry of fear. The next moment he realised that he was in a trap. The knife which had been on the level of his top overcoat button rose above his head, as a hand, rising out of the darkness behind the counters, clawed at his waistbelt.

Another moment and he would have struck, for

with his left he held the man's head back away from him. The light of a passing cab showed him the white of the neck underneath the beard. But as the knife reached its highest point, sudden as the pillar of God's fire seen by night across the Red Sea, the whole great salon of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., was filled with amazing light. The strike in the electrical works was over; it had only been a threat at the most. The electricity had been switched full on.

So for one tremendous moment John Eames stood with the knife held on high in attitude to kill, while outside the black windows flowed the tide of Regent Street traffic.

The next the knife fell from his hand. He saw Sugg at his feet, blinking drunkenly up at him, and on the counter, gathered from every accessible source, bags of jewels and all the available treasure of the showcases! The windows only were still intact.

With a grunt Sugg curled himself up under the lee of the bench to sleep. John took one glance at him to make sure that the brute could not be seen from without, and then calmly emptied out all the gathered treasures upon the green baize.

In a moment, as he stood in the glare of that tremendous light, he became again the model servant, a senior of seniors among the staff, and murder and theft had passed utterly out of his heart.

In the interest of his work he even forgot Annie and little Hugo. He forgot his purpose to steal at whatever cost. He remembered only that the things must be put back in their places. So he laid his hat carefully top downwards on the closed cash-desk, turned up his cuffs, and with a strong movement of

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disgust searched Sugg's pockets for the bunch of keys, which were, he knew, much more complete than his own. He found them at last, and when he rose there was a real elation in his heart. He went to and fro humming and smiling. No doubt at the great moment when he had stood murderously revealed in the white glare no one had been passing, or at least, looking within.

But now women trolloping along the street and peering black silhouettes with high coat-collars and glistening cylinders of tall hats paused and looked. They remarked the prices on the articles on the window mostly between the clean-cut black of the steel bars; but they were doubtless also conscious of the model employees kept late putting away what had been brought out during the day, or perhaps new stock which had been delivered late.

To and fro went John Eames, swiftly and systematically getting everything into its place. One bag was soon empty, then another; then all was right — right even if Mr. Wentworth had happened to walk in.

Eames breathed more freely. If he had come nigh to making an end of drunken Sugg he had also saved him.

Now as to himself. It was time to do what remained to be done. The light had shone into the heart and conscience of Eames; the darkness was gone, he saw clearly. He stooped and replaced the keys in Sugg's pocket. He picked up the knife and let it slide first up his sleeve and afterwards into the pocket of his overcoat. Then he took his hat and went quietly and in the most matter-of-fact way down the stairs. He replaced the knife in the back kitchen where he had found it - on the hatched

board, that smelled so of onion.

Then John Eames went down the passages, not quietly, but coughing a little and as one who had a right. He closed the outer door behind him, listened for the click of the patent lock, and found himself run into by a passenger hurrying belated homewards.

The man growled. John Eames begged his pardon. The man pushed rudely on and was lost in the gloom. Eames had the light still burning within him. He was the good servant, careful of his master's goods. He turned down a side street and went directly to the nearest police station. The inspector was sitting at his desk, writing hard. He looked up with a frown, which presently gave way to a smile of recognition.

'Why, Mr. Eames' he said. 'Take a seat. You look flurried. Nothing wrong at the Retail Company's?'

And without sitting down John started to tell tale. He began from the beginning, but had not got far when the inspector stopped him.

'I don't think you are quite yourself to-night, Mr. Eames,' he said. 'If I were you I would go home.'

'You don't believe me, inspector, but it is true, every word.'

'Yes, yes,' said the inspector. 'It's the weather — I feel it myself. Well, go into my room and take a rest on the sofa till you feel better.'

'I tell you, I swear to you. I am, in intention at least, a murderer and thief. I want to see Mr. Wentworth - '

'Certainly, anything!' said the inspector. 'Go and lie down. It will be all right.'

'Will you send for Mr. Wentworth?'

'I will if you like, but I warn you he won't be best

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pleased this hour of the night.'

'Very well,' said John, and marched into the inspector's private room, where he stretched himself on the sofa, tired out with emotion and want of food.

The inspector followed him with a glass and brown blanket. He had sent a couple of constables and his pet sergeant across to the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd.

'All nonsense, of course, but we can't send him home to his wife in this state. A decent fellow, known him years and years. Given us good hints many a time.'

He bent over John Eames and said kindly: 'Take this over, old chap, and lie down. It will be all right -'

'When Mr. Wentworth comes?' John insisted before drinking.

'Yes, when Mr. Wentworth comes,' said the inspector; 'just sent for him.'

He wrapped Eames in the brown blanket and made up the fire with the swift readiness of an expert.

'We're all taken like that sometimes,' murmured the policeman. 'It would be a poor world if we couldn't feel for one another sometimes, even if - well, it hurts business.'

The officers were back again in a few minutes with suppressed grins on their faces.

'All right over there, sir. Electricity going full tilt and old Sugg snoring inside -'

'We could hear him, sir.'

'And drunk as -'

'That will do,' said the inspector. 'But I suppose we had better notify the manager. It looks more business-like, and if anything were wrong, — why, it's us that would be blamed. You know where he

lives — Cromwell Road.’ He glanced out at the fog. ‘Better take a hansom,’ he said. ‘Go yourself, sergeant. The old bird won't like turning out.’

So John Eames slept the sleep of the just. The inspector scribbled and mumbled at the end of his pen-handle; he chewed one into wood pulp every two days.

It was a very white waistcoat, port wine coloured, peppery Mr. Wentworth who came back and stood over John Eames.

‘Bit off his . . . head, sir,’ said the inspector, with a halt in the middle as he remembered that he might be talking to a magistrate. ‘Says he went into your place prepared to murder any one who stood in his way; that he ransacked the place in the dark, and then he came here to give himself up. It isn't likely, is it, sir?’

‘Um — um!’ said Mr. Wentworth. ‘I think I smell — ah — spirits! Was he — ah — sober when he came in here?’

‘Perfectly, perfectly — not the slightest odour,’ said the inspector hastily, recalling what he had given Eames to drink. But, indeed, even that was sufficiently veiled by the full-flavoured breath of Mr. Wentworth himself, who had dined and ‘topped off’ with something extra strong, as he rose reluctantly to go forth into the fog at the bidding of the sergeant.

‘He'll be all right there, I suppose?’ he asked, as he glanced at Eames, still asleep. ‘We had better go over our place and make sure.’

‘Right as the mail, sir,’ said the inspector.

They went across with the couple of brawny constables behind, walking at a respectful distance. The little door under the archway was opened by the inspector after Mr. Wentworth had fumbled some

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time with the keys, declaring he must have brought the wrong bunch from home,

There was a knife on a chopping block in the little scullery to the right.

'He's been having fried onions,' said the inspector, sniffing. 'Goes bad with what he's been drinking.'

'Who?' demanded Mr. Wentworth sharply.

'Sugg,' responded the inspector. 'There he is snoring, with his head within two feet of the stove. He'll have apoplexy, that's what he'll have. And an empty bottle — 'Anchor Inn' brand, two-and-six! What can you expect, sir?'

They went through the premises carefully, Everything was in its place, all the cases locked, windows all clear and intact in the blending light. They found nothing, but at the sight of the uniforms there were soon plenty of gazers between the painted steel cage-work.

'Look well after that crib, Bill,' said one citizen in a peaked cap to another with ear-flaps.

'Ah, bless 'em,' returned the ear-flaps, ironically, 'they never gives a thought to the likes of us! We may starve for aught they care! Talk of charity,' he added as an afterthought, 'and 'umanity!'

They came back to the station, where Mr. Wentworth, warmed with his dinner and the anticipation of getting back to Cromwell Road not so late after all, bent over John.

'Eames,' he said kindly, 'Eames, I want to speak to you!'

'Mr. Wentworth!' gasped Eames, rising up suddenly. 'You know — you know all!'

'Yes, yes,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'You've had a hard time and I fear things have not gone too well at home. You're not quite yourself. Come round on

Monday and you can have your old berth. The new man doesn't know the customers and. seems incapable of learning.'

'But — but,' cried John, 'I must explain!'

'No time,' said Mr. Wentworth, drawing the tails of his overcoat out of John's detaining fingers. 'I must be at Cromwell Road in a quarter of an hour. Here's five pounds to account. Mind you report to the cashier first thing on Monday. Good night!'

'But I must explain!' cried John wildly.

'Yes, yes, poor fellow. You'll be all right after a sleep. See him home, somebody, and get his wife to put him to bed. My fault — my fault as much as anybody's. Good servant of the firm! Buck up now, Eames!' And, clapping him on the shoulder, he left.

The inspector sent a plain-clothes man with a message to Mrs. John Eames from Mr. Wentworth. Her husband had had some sort of slight attack or chill and had better be put to bed, with warm drinks and external appliances. The messenger also took possession of the five-pound note, whereupon Eames objected, affirming that it was 'for Annie and little Hugo.'

'They shall have it,' grinned the plain-clothes man. 'He might a-made it a tenner when he thinks so much of you!'

Whereupon John glanced across at him to see if he spoke ironically. However, his face betrayed only sympathy.

So John Eames brought home all he went out to seek — money and his place given back to him.

His wife was not in the least astonished, and took the five-pound note as calmly as she was wont to take his weekly wage.

John never knew how Sugg got back to his bed,

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whether by the good fortune of those in his condition, or perhaps something in the energetic qualities of the 'Anchor Brand' at two-and-sixpence a large bottle. At any rate, Sugg touched his gold-banded cap as usual on Monday and said 'Good morning, Muster Eames! Glad to see *you* back again with us. Never had a gen'leman in the saleroom like you sir. I heard the boss say it hisself - 'allus on the spot, sir, allus on the spot!'"

But John Eames only nodded and responded briefly 'Thank you. Good morning, Sugg!'

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LADY OF THE HUNDRED DRESSES

‘There’s something wrong about Eames,’ said Mr. Wentworth, Managing Director of the Jewellers’ Retail Union, Ltd., of Regent. Street. He was in most sacred morning conference with Mr. Moore, the chief buyer for the firm, and Mr. Salmon, who occupied the place of the man who on less dignified premises would have been called the ‘shopwalker.’ Mr. Salmon, however, was really a gentleman of conduct and position.

As may be easily understood, the business of the Jewellers’ Retail Union, Ltd., was of a very special kind, and the watch which a high-class bank keeps upon the manners, customs, and particularly morals (including expenditure) of its staff is trifling and grand-maternal to the knowledge which the heads of the Jewellers’ Union had of its employees.

And if you think a moment you will see that it had to be so. These men, young and middle-aged, were daily handling multitudes of infinitely small and infinitely valuable things — many of them unset stones of great price, which no one but an expert could distinguish from other multitudes of exactly similar stones lumbering the showrooms and repairing shops.

‘Wrong about Eames — John Eames?’ said Moore the chief buyer and Salmon the front superintendent together. ‘Why, old John’s as steady as a rock!’

‘He does not spend more than sixpence a week for pipe tobacco. I have made a practice of walking

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home with him; he lives up my way.'

'Oh, I know all about that,' said Mr. Wentworth, shaking his head. 'I almost wish it were. But he is not the man he was. I can see that. If we don't find him a change, and that quickly, he will be snuffing himself out one of these fine days. No, the firm won't lose any cash by him. I don't mean that; that is not his kind. But the fact is he has never been the same since the death of his wife and child.'

'Ah,' said Moore quickly, 'I never heard of that! I was abroad probably. She was rather a Tartar, wasn't she — Madame Eames?'

For the 'big bonnets' of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., interested themselves in all the domestic arrangements of their people, believing that you remained as much a servant of the Union during the hours you spent outside Nos. 492-496 Regent Street as when, with your best smile on, you clicked the showcases and tinkled the rich sparkling things within.

'A Tartar?' said Mr. Wentworth thoughtfully. 'Well, I don't know. At any rate, Eames was fond of her, and he would have died for the boy. But anyway, I guess her Tartaring was of the kind that we are all the better for sometimes, when the chalk-line we are walking begins to wobble. At any rate, they were knocked down at the corner of Euston Road by a motor carrying luggage from one of the great stations. And — well, they had no time for suffering, that's one comfort.'

'It must have been a comfort to poor Eames,' said Moore sympathetically. 'But what of the scorching fiend who did it?'

'Oh,' said Wentworth, with an ironic curl of his upper lip, 'he was severely dealt with — forty

shillings and costs, with benefit of the First Offenders Act — for all but the costs! One of our best clients since he got his beer barony!’

‘If I had been Eames I would have shot him as he came out of the court!’ said Moore, whose hot Irish blood rose easily to a high temperature.

Wentworth's hands went up in horror.

‘That's your confounded foreign travel!’ he cried. ‘Don't you know that you are a citizen of a plutocratic country? It's such don't-care-a-hang millionaires who have the right to run over people. If it were not for pill-makers made peers and ennobled brewers, how could we get through the winter without the Americans? I ask you that.’

‘What is the matter with Eames?’ the Superintendent of the Front asked, to change the subject. ‘He seems a little dull, but he does his work as well as ever. Have you had anything to complain of, Mr. Wentworth?’

‘Why, yes,’ said Mr. Wentworth quaintly. ‘I complain when one of my best men forgets his lunch-hour and goes on serving customers from nine in the morning to six at night without ever remembering to take sustenance.’

‘There are few of that sort!’ said Mr. Moore. ‘I would not worry about such a curio. Eames is a fancy variety. He will not reproduce his kind — not in this establishment!’

‘That's just the point,’ said Mr. Wentworth. ‘I want to keep a good man when I have him. I hate to see him committing suicide, and what he wants is to get away from that dull house and the bed on which they laid out his Hugo and Annie when they were waiting for a belated doctor — ’

‘Here, don't, Wentworth! What blood-curdling

tastes you have got!' said the superintendent, who was a quiet family man without imagination, save for what might happen to diamonds and to their sellers. 'Eames has always been a little unfortunate; though as good a fellow as ever stepped in leather. But I don't think it is anything like so bad as you say. He buys the *Globe* every night, and amuses himself with reading that till he goes; to bed.'

'Just so,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'I would rather hear of his going to the theatre. Music-hall even wouldn't shock me — not to kill.'

'I thought you did not approve of such things often,' said Mr. Superintendent Salmon gravely. He liked to go himself, but had so large a family that he had to count the money in his pocket pretty often before indulging his desire.

'No more I do — for the young fellows, as I have told them often. They get into what *they* call 'larks,' but I call 'complications,' and sooner or later money drips through their fingers. We have never made a rule against it, but we have certainly always discouraged it among our juniors.'

'They go all the same though — at least, I did,' said Moore, laughing.

'I dare say,' Mr. Wentworth sighed; 'but still, you took care; and so will they when they know that their future depends upon their carefulness. But Eames — what are we to do with him, that is what I should like to know?'

'Hand him over to me,' suggested Moore; 'he knows enough French and a good deal of German. We want a steady, good man on the short Calais-Amsterdam route — not one of your pick-up-acquaintance young fellows with a moustache and an engaging smile.'

'I hardly see how we can do without him in the front,' said Mr. Salmon slowly. 'There are many customers who ask for him, and I don't think the staff like it when they are sent forward as second choice.'

'Give him to me,' said Moore emphatically, passing over Salmon's protest.

'He that giveth to the Moore lendeth to the — humph! we won't see him back again in a hurry, that is all. But I dare say it will be best, after all.'

Mr. Wentworth meditated.

'It certainly would take him out of his groove, and we could tell him that he had better give his house in York Street up to the firm. I suppose he has a lease of sorts. We could put that young fool Kershaw into it. He got married last week, and I believe is honeymooning in lodgings.'

'I shifted him into the office immediately,' said the superintendent. 'He is attending to the daily 'ads.' His Oxford degree ought to help him in that.'

'And if anything can spur a fellow on, it ought to be a pretty young wife,' said Salmon, the married man, thinking of his daughters.

'Yes,' said Wentworth the ironist, 'especially if she gave up twenty pounds a week in musical comedy to go shares in Kershaw's weekly wage!'

'Well,' interjected Moore, 'I must be 'putting.' Am I, or am I not, to have John Eames?'

The other two home-staying heads looked at each other, and Wentworth said slowly, 'Well, as I began about the thing, I suppose you must, though where we are to get another man, even passable, for the coloured stone counter is more than I can say.'

'All right! *Nunc dimittis. Ainsi soit-il!* I'll speak to the victim on my way out,' cried Moore; and, seizing

his hat, he made for the door, lest they should think better of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

As these stories concern the business career of John Eames, and especially his relations with the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., the matters relative to his home life may be easily dismissed. He had drifted into rather than chosen the holy estate of matrimony. Annie, pretty and piquant in the first days, had sharpened and grown bitter under the pressure of her husband's constant ill-luck and failure to improve his position. She was no manager, and till Hugo came John Eames found no great happiness at home. But Hugo paid for all, and the bitterness of the blank when both were gone stunned and amazed him. He had not thought he would care so much. But most of all Hugo made the difference. Besides, now there was nothing to work for any more.

Yes, there was the work itself. Mr. Wentworth had been right. Work was the great anodyne, perhaps the only one. So at the moment John Eames thought; and when he was called from the 'front' to undertake a commission abroad, it seemed to him all the same whether he went to Amsterdam or Timbuctoo.

Mr. Wentworth explained.

'Yes, Mr. Eames,' he said, 'it is a delicate business, and we have only you whom we can trust. Certain well-known jewels have been put into our hands to be recut and set. Oh, they are very properly come by — trust us for that! But old families have their secrets — even folk higher up

than the strawberry leaves. Briefly, these jewels have been taken from their settings. The gold has gone into the melting-pot, but some of the stones are so big and so remarkable that we might have them on our hands for a century in their present condition. They must be conveyed to Amsterdam, but not by the ordinary channels. You need a holiday, John Eames — a little holiday in the north of France or Belgium, ending up at Amsterdam where you can join Cook's people at the 'Bible hotel.' that's where they go, a hundred at a time.'

John Eames nodded. A caravan in Africa would have suited him just as well, or a dash for the Pole — if any Poles had been left worth a dash.

'I need not warn you to be careful,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'Our customer has needy relatives who would be glad to keep the jewels in the family. In fact they would not be at all particular as to the means. Yes, we are quite satisfied as to our client's right to sell - to do what he chooses with his own. The Jewellers' Union could not afford to do business otherwise. Other people may have characters; jewellers and bankers *must* have them. Perhaps that is why we were the first bankers.'

'I wonder —,' said Moore. 'But that's not the question just now. This young man belongs to me, and I will equip him as the perfect, intelligent traveller with an interest in Gothic cathedrals. First there is the Kodak — no use going to the expense of an 'N. & G.'; that's for after, if he goes on with it — *and* a case to hang it over his shoulder. To make all snug, he had better have a lesson or two at Eastman's or the Stereoscopic, they give them into the bargain. Yes, go to the Stereoscopic, it's nearer, and there's the politeness.'

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They will put him through his third degree in no time. Interest in cathedrals, a little book on ecclesiastical architecture — Fergusson is too big to carry about; say Bannister or Parker's — that good old Oxford one — Palmer, I think, though that's rather vehemently British for foreign consumpt.'

So while the jewels were being made ready John took his lessons at the Stereo. Company; not where the crowd stations itself in permanence about the photographs of the pretty actresses but, as it were, away up in the flies. Here a smiling man with a pointed black beard and a certain weariness in his eyes explained the ABC of photography as if for the first time; and John Eames thought how kind that man must be to his wife, how long-suffering to his children, and what a large salary the company ought to pay him for not swearing.

At last he had got everything, even to his new travelling cases, home from Messrs. Duncannon and Co., just round the corner from the big hotel in Trafalgar Square. He admired the 'J. E.' done in red on the sides, and especially the little kit-bag of dusky, unobtrusive leather, in which the jewels were to be wrapped in tissue paper, snug under their doubly-lined bottom.

He felt some youngish thrill of expectation as he started, more than he had ever expected to experience again. Still he seemed somehow to be very lonely on the wind-swept platform of Charing Cross Station; but so soon as he grew conscious of the telegraph poles streaming back, the force came to him, and he was elbowing the past behind him with the strokes of a lusty swimmer. Why, it was years since he had seen a market garden, let alone the real country. Kent seemed a wilderness to him.

He had not dreamed that anywhere in the world there could be so few people.

At Dover, that forlorn jumping-off place of a pier station struck him somehow as his last grip upon the stir and bustle of home. He thought of abandoned York Street and the crowds he threaded through going and coming every day, for ever tramping along, from noon to midnight, from midnight to noon. He gripped his little bag very tightly in his hand and adjusted the Kodak, which, being all sharp angles, had an unpleasant tendency to swing against his left elbow till he pushed his travelling rug through the strap. This gave him a free hand for tickets and tips.

At Calais he got hastily out, and with some trouble recovered his all too glossy baggage. Now, everybody who does not go on to Paris is treated as a nonentity at Calais — till, that is, the metropolitan train starts, when, having extracted booty, the glistening, genial robbers condescend to fall upon your neck in the faint hope of stray after-gleanings.

From John Eames they won no great spoil. He made his way into the big, narrow hotel at the end of the pier where the water reflects the Customs buildings and is unquiet all night long, while overhead sweeps the five-rayed brush of fire which is the new Calais lighthouse — *swish, swish swish!* It pushes the darkness before it, and yet between each stroke the tide of night surges ever the higher.

But in the hotel John Eames heard nothing but the terrible English travelling voice, grumbling about its accommodations, calling for its maid, its water-bottles, and even more intimate informations. We are the only people who have to shout all over a hotel in order to install ourselves. John Eames

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retreated. A Calaisian shandrydan with lamps of an orange hue stood at the corner just across some rails, and with the driver John Eames bargained.

'Did he know any other good hotel?'

He knew 'beaucoup.' There was his special friend of the 'Tapis Vert,' and his other friend who was head bottle-washer at Dessein's. But John would have none of these. The firm had insisted on good houses, and this in John's mind suggested railway hotels where possible. Oh yes, there *was* one of these at Calais Ville. But few people except gentlemen of commerce went there. It was not well frequented. The meals were expensive, having to be ordered from the restaurant below, and *à la carte* at that. Monsieur would know what that meant. Monsieur did know; but then, after all, that was not his affair, but that of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd.

He arrived at the railway hotel of Calais Ville after some desperate bumps over irregularly laid tramlines. A pale youth from the café came forward hurriedly, seemingly much surprised that a cross-Channel passenger should declare his intention of staying at the town hotel.

'The English hotel is on the pier,' he declared.

'And the English prices,' said John, getting out.

The young man grinned amicably. Clearly here was no common tourist, thought the café waiter as he showed John Eames and his bag, 'This way, please.'

He noted the camera and looked for the sticks and straps of an artist's baggage.

But John Eames had not the look of a poor devil who made pictures for money. Still, he asked the strangest questions, such as 'What churches were there in Calais?'

'There were no churches in Calais,' the waiter answered promptly; 'but there is a good casino, two music-halls, sometimes a theatre, and many, very many, too many, cafés.'

But John Eames knew better. Mr. Joseph Pennell had drawn the churches, and had nearly been run in as a spy on that account in the old days before the *Entente*. Children had mobbed him, but he had stuck to it, and finished his sketch with 'even more care than usual.' If so, Monsieur knew better about Calais than he, the pallid waiter did. He was of Paris (he himself), and knew little about such a heaven-abandoned hole as the — 'Oui, Madame, this is a guest, a client from London, studying churches, architecture; a painter, a photographer — all, without doubt, for his own pleasure.'

And because he had some washing-up to do before he could betake himself to his favourite *beuglant* where 'somebody' (in a white hat trimmed with roses) would be waiting for him, he left John Eames to the tender mercies of Madame. Madame was pale, but not so pale as Monsieur, who had apparently anticipated the general resurrection — a thin, weedy, incomprehensible person, who obviously had not fitted into any niche in the universe of workaday men and things. If he had caught him hanging about the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., trailing one toe after the other heel, scraping the walls, John Eames would have given him into custody without a scruple. But Madame was of another type. She was pale certainly, but she had eyes that were round as marbles and black as pools of ink. She smiled cheerfully, too, and the entire house, vast and empty as it was, never rested from the clatter of her pattens, the shrill treble of

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the voice in which she issued her commands to her husband, the *fluff-fluff* of her broom, the clitter-clatter of her dish-cleaning, the *yawp* of her baby (the palest of the three), and the rush of the whole establishment to the townward windows each time anybody took a cab.

Outside 'The Sentimental Journey' and memories of Mrs. Pennell's book, 'In the Footprints of Sterne,' there is indeed little to be gleaned at Calais. John would have walked on the Dunes, but the black handbag daunted him. He dared not leave it behind, yet to take it abroad inevitably attracted attention.

Finally he compromised by strapping the satchel about him with the Kodak attachments and carrying the instrument, which he faithfully clicked at appropriately architectural façades, but always without conviction as to the result — a not unusual state of mind with young photographers incapable of doing their own developing.

But John Eames found himself not alone of his country and city in Calais. He was always meeting two ladies on his walks, evidently English by their conversation, though one must have been educated abroad, for more than once he had heard her speaking French with a point and fluency which left his own correctly concocted sentences far behind. They were staying at the Pier Hotel, and for a moment John, suffering from the first nostalgic symptoms of his life, contemplated migrating thither also. It struck him that the taller and handsomer of the two must be a customer. He had certainly seen her before.

He wrote a letter to the firm, however, asking for directions, and awaited events. Mr. Wentworth wired that Rossendaal or Ostend would be good for John's

health; and that very night, with a certain feeling of unexpected holiday, John settled with Madame the pale, bade good-bye to Monsieur the paler, attempted to caress Bébé the palest of all, while the waiter from Paris waited rather contemptuously for his tip.

Early that night John found himself in the courtyard of the 'Cheval Blanc' at Rossendaal, a great brick building in the old town, sufficiently far from the quay where the ships jostled each other in tiers and half the maritime population of the Nord, smelling of yesterday's catch of fish, called each other liars and thieves while they sold to-day's.

Once the 'Cheval Blanc' had been called the 'White Mule,' in memory of a Cardinal Archêveque, whose tasselled red hat, a little battered, was still sculptured over the entrance gate. There he had dwelt with fish-ponds, and (so they said) many fair ladies had come to consult his Excellency for their souls' good. But now it was an inn with an acre of brick courtyard all set about with trees in vast red pots, and in the north corner a delightful reading-room, to which you had to scurry (with uplifted collar or skirts, according to sex) between the sweeping Channel blasts. Smoking was allowed here, and the rattle of the hail on the roof, the lashing of the unfortunate potted palms in the courtyard, and the fat figure of the landlord scudding with flapping coat-tails for the shelter of his bureau, all made for a sense of friendliness among the readers.

John soon found that each traveller at the 'Cheval Blanc' was expected to provide his own literature, and he must bring it from a distance too; for in Rossendaal only two serial works were purchasable

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— daily, *Le Petit Journal*, and, fortnightly, *Femina*. John had not been trained to subsist on either, and his first wet afternoon at the 'Cheval Blanc' was dismal in consequence. But at dinner all was changed. The two English ladies from the Calais Pier Hotel sat at the next table to him. Each brought down with her a Tauchnitz novel. Beautiful personally, and dressed with a taste which John did not always find in his customers, the handsomer of the two wore a dark green evening robe with a raised pattern of gold lace as thick as her little finger. John knew the price of gold lace of that quality, and found himself doing sums in his head. There was also a rope of pearls about her neck, too, which John's fingers itched to appraise. If it came from the J. R. U. there would be a private mark upon it for certain.

Her friend was more simply attired in a dark dress with white fluffy tulle about the neck. She it was who had spoken the good fluent French. Both drank milk only, but in the eyes of the younger and less handsome abode a slumbering fire which — well, John Eames somehow felt obscurely that handsome dresses were not everything.

After dinner John, as their only countryman, was on hand with an umbrella, and as he saw them pause uncertain at the dining-room door, gathering their skirts and watching the skelping down-drive of the broad drops, he ventured to offer his escort - first to the lady of the dark green and gold, and afterwards, returning, he convoyed across the tall young lady with the white fluffy lace and that eye which halted a man, flamed a moment, and then drooped.

It was not with the best grace in the world that the elder accepted. John Eames felt as if

unwarrantably intruding, and but for the warm, steady pressure of the hand of the younger upon his arm he would have spoken no more. But there was no mistaking the kindness of that.

John excused himself once more. He ran to find the landlord, still at his bureau, and was able to consult the register. His new friends were Mrs. and Miss Altmayer, from Paris. They had many trunks, and Miss Altmayer could beat down a Calais cabman's prices. John returned to find Mrs. Altmayer and her sister-in-law silent over their books. They had evidently made up their minds not to speak to him again that night. But as they rose to leave the reading-room, while Mrs. Altmayer passed with the slightest of nods, her sister-in-law smiled, and pushed towards him a volume of English stories. She made the little frown of the eyebrows and pursing of the lips which indicated to John that he was not to thank her aloud. Then she smiled — a soft, far-away, encompassing smile.

Women know instinctively when a man is 'their meat.' So the elder and more handsome lady paid no further attention to John Eames. Now this is not a love story, and John had no intention of replacing Annie then; but the dark conscious eye and direct gaze of Miss Altmayer touched something aboriginal which lies in the background of every man who happens to be born of the masculine sex — which last is by no means invariable.

'Mrs. and Miss Altmayer, Paris' — that was all he knew about them — that and the name 'Claire' written clearly across the cover of that volume of Wells's short stories containing 'The Star' and 'Davidson's Eyes,' than which the author has never written anything nobler, or at least more real.

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But in spite of Wells and his marvellous imaginings John Eames was restless. He had locked up his little bag in the strongest of his new trunks, and so far felt safe. For all that he was strangely unquiet. Somehow he was out of his element. He had often escorted ladies to their cars and cabs. That was part of his duties to good customers, but, though a mere shopman, he had been led into assuming a kind of equality which ill became him. The thought of the green-and-gold woman's hauteur made his face burn. She at least had seen through him.

But then there was that warm pressure on his arm, and at the thought John Eames expanded like a pussy adroitly stroked. It did him good for once to be treated as a man. It seemed to make the burden of the past lighter. Dingy York Street, N.W., swam away and away till he was not sure whether or no there was such a place, or ever had been. Specially — and here came the greatness of the relief — he did not see any more that drizzling afternoon the dark cemetery in which he had laid away Annie and Hugo.

Nevertheless, John Eames hurried up to his room, and hardly was the door shut before he assured himself that the big solid leather portmanteau had not been tampered with. He breathed more freely when, unlocking it, he found the little black bag safe with the closely packed jewels in their tissue paper under the false bottom.

Then, as the salt storm water from the Channel and North Sea lashed the window of his chamber John lamented his haste and foolishness. There was only a single candle in that big desert first-floor room of the 'Cheval Blanc.' Well, never mind, he

would ring and ask for another. The boy disappeared, and after a delay of half an hour brought one spare candlestick with the manager's compliments. There was already a candle there and if the gentleman wished for more they must be charged for in the bill.

Laughing a little, John Eames slipped a franc into the boy's hand and bade him go out and buy others. On his return he made an illumination. There were candles on the mantelpiece and on the table, and when all the available candelabra were filled John extemporised others by melting the flat bottoms of the candles and setting them on the lids of biscuit boxes, to which they adhered as firmly as if they had grown there.

So at last his room was bright. He could devote his attention to Mr. Wells and that glorious climax when, from his chair in the midst of whispering students and rustling notebooks, the professor, weary with sleeplessness and drugs, opened his lecture with the startling and immortal words, 'Man has lived in vain.'

*[When the story of 'The Star' appeared in some Christmas Number or another, the present writer had first place with a story of his own, coloured pictures and all, but after reading 'The Star,' he felt wiped off from the face of the earth! Which things are personal and ought not to be written. Yet he writes them, because he does not know Mr. Wells, who may even have forgotten the title tale]*

At any rate that was the story which John Eames read, and we grieve to state that it only bored him. He would much have preferred the latest sixpenny or a good all-round detective story - and this in common with the majority of his race.

## THE LADY OF THE 100 DRESSES

More than once he yawned and stretched his legs. Then, rising, he tried the bolts of the outer door and those on either side. That which opened on the corridor was all right, but the side doors leading to adjoining rooms left something to be desired. To the left there was a bolt certainly, but it did not fit into its slot owing to some contraction of the wood; while to the right the key was lacking, and the door locked on the other side.

Still John Eames had confidence. No one in the hotel dreamed of his identity. To the eye he was the complete English tourist of the solitary, intelligent sort, even to the interest in architecture and the halting, severely syllabled French. As for his double-bottomed bag, no one except the three privy councillors of the J. R. U. knew of that. Even his fellows of the 'front cases' only thought that the firm were behaving pretty decently to John Eames, and the first 'diamond' counter man, who hated his wife to the point of frenzy, said, 'I'd throw in the kid to have his luck with Bella!'

This trip was John Eames's holiday — for all but John Eames. Yet in the old inn that had once belonged to the famous Cardinal of Rossendaal John Eames kept his black bag close beside him and quaked.

But the next day the feeling began to ease off a little. For one thing, he saw the ladies. Mrs. Altmayer, in a new and marvellous walking-dress of pearl grey, accentuated the nod which she had favoured him with the night before. Claire Altmayer received him with a quiet smile of content, and, without any more formal introduction, asked him how he had liked 'The Star.'

John lied. But not so cleverly as not to be found

out.

Claire Altmayer held up a reproachful finger, and 'Oh, you don't like my 'Star'!' she cried. 'You are only pretending. I don't believe you have read it at all!'

'I don't understand it,' said John Eames bluntly.

Then Claire Altmayer explained, and if her astronomy was weak, at least her enthusiasm was superabundant.

In the hotel of the 'Cheval Blanc' they called the senior of the two 'the Lady of the Hundred Dresses.' And indeed Mrs. Altmayer travelled with dresses for every occasion or for none. It was said that she spent the best part of every day shut up with her maid arranging these, taking them out, admiring them, and putting them back into specially lined boxes.

Rossendaal was a big new seaport, and the 'Cheval Blanc' was the resort of the captain and officers of important liners waiting for cargo or their dates of sailing. They lunched there. They came early and sat long absorbing *aperatif*. They donned their extra-special brass-bound full-dress uniforms and dined there.

At first, John Eames was inclined to be a little jealous of 'his ladies.' But a little cautious observation convinced him that Mrs. Altmayer alone was the object, of the attention of the 'Lloyders' and the officers of the 'General Navigation Company.' For her alone was that little rustle after the soup, when all the world turned on its chair to catch a glimpse of the goddess in her robes of the evening. Never did she wear the same dress twice. She had one which all the world hoped for again — a flutter of thinnest crimson crape over close-fitting bodice and tight, skirt of creamy white. Another was of rich autumnal

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orange opening out upon pale blue, from which her stately head lifted itself, pale and refined as the calyx of a lily. Then behind, in the same short skirt and clear blouse, a black leather strap carelessly belted about her waist, and on her wrist an old-fashioned watch in a pigskin military bracelet, came Claire Altmayer, carelessly striding to her seat in the rear of the little 'Ah!' of admiration and head-turning which was her sister's twice-repeated daily reward. Perfume, *frou-frou* of silken skirts, the open admiration of the men, the grave, unconcerned attention of the appropriated women to their plates — Claire Altmayer had no part in these. But, to look at her, she cared not a straw. 'Ah, if they could just see her at work on the parallel bars!' she thought to herself.

But the masculine admiration of her sister-in-law continued. The women asked where she came from — a question which none could answer. But she had many dresses, trays full of jewels, and apparently unlimited command of money. 'But,' said the women, 'what was she doing in Rossendaal, a quiet place with quiet people, with such a trousseau? If it had been Ostend or Trouville, now, one could have understood.'

What they could have understood remained unsaid.

Some of the more enterprising followed her on her promenades at a distance, but she only looked in a shop window or two and then returned. She went neither to the 'Little Horses' nor to the Casino; she drank milk, and her complexion looked like it.

Of masculine admiration she took little heed. John Eames saw with joy the futile attempts of a swarthy, thick-set captain of a long-distance

'Lloyder' to win a word. There was evidently a race for the prize among the four officers at the next table to be first in the favour of the Lady of the Hundred Dresses. It must be said for her that she appeared supremely unconscious of their devices.

She had always a large bowl of shrimps brought fresh from the tidal pools along the shore. And while talking with Claire she would often lose patience with these while picking them, and so in a pretty temper push the whole aside.

The stalwart Lloyder captain who was the leader of the little band of four entered the dining-room one morning a quarter of an hour before the others. John Eames was there behind a screen busy with his correspondence, which he always got off early and took to the General Post Office himself before the luncheon-bell rang from its red-and-white belfry at the top of the bricked Flemish yard.

The short-bearded captain went to the table of the Lady of the Hundred Dresses, and, with a look at the door, he began to prepare her dish of shrimps. He did not see John behind a screen, and after he had continued this small attention for some time he put out his hand and drew the pile of Mrs. Altmayer's morning letters towards him, reading the addresses rapidly and apparently speculating on the personality of the writers.

He had only time to restore them when the wailer entered round the corner, and the captain, with a humorous nod and a shrug of the shoulders as from man to man, indicated his occupation. The head waiter acquiesced with the air of a man who is surprised at nothing, and presently, with a noise of discussion and the brawl of merry voices, the door burst open and in trooped the three other captains,

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who stood speechless at the occupation of their leader. The swarthy Lloyd continued his work with the utmost nonchalance, but after the others had taken in the situation they laughed loud and long. Presently all were in their places. Only the table of the ladies remained vacant, the chairs tipped up against it and the two tall glasses of milk waiting.

But even in his place the captain patiently continued his work. He would turn round, take a plateful of the shrimps, carefully and dexterously disarmour them, let them drop into a sheet of clean writing paper, and from thence convey them to the plate of the lady behind him.

The others, aware of his stratagem, watched with interest. Smiles passed - also time. At first there had been some jealousy that the Lloyd's man had hit upon so simple a way of pleasing the goddess, but irony grew up as the places of the ladies remained empty. At last a waiter came and removed the huge glasses of milk, a litre in each, and with a smile of respectful mockery (if there is such a thing) handed the plate of prepared shrimps across to the captain with a shake of the head which meant 'She will not come to-day, my friend.'

Whereupon the three captains, delighted at their comrade's downfall, laughed till they wept into their large parti-coloured silk handkerchiefs.

But John Eames did not laugh. Something like the ghost of a terrible suspicion went through his heart. He left his wine and Vichy Celestins untouched and, tossing his serviette on the chair, hastened from the dining-room and darted up the stairs.

It was a little dark in the passage. It seemed to John that he heard the swish of lingerie and the soft

closing of a door. At any rate, that of his room was open. He made a dash for the big square Duncannon bag. It was locked, but the bottom had been skilfully slit out, and — the little black leather bag had disappeared!

The terror of his situation flashed upon John Eames. He could not expect that a second time Mr. Wentworth would see things in so kindly a light. Then there was Moore. He was responsible to Moore. Moore also might lose his place.

A temptation came upon him suddenly. He was a lonely man with a revolver in his hip-pocket. No one would believe him if he protested his innocence. No one would be the worse if — well, *if* - He pulled the slide back to see that all was right. It was a new model Mauser given him by Wentworth, and the dangerous green pencil-cases lay piled slim and close in the narrow magazine. As he held the spring down with his forefinger he noted with interest which would rise first and glide well-oiled into the rifled tube, which owing to the flatness of the trajectory was as accurate at a thousand yards as at one.

John Eames slipped the pistol back. He would spoil no man's carpet, and it was in no way the fault of the landlord of the 'Cheval Blanc' that he had been a fool. He would go to the bathroom and — turn on the water. He knew from reading the details of a famous military inquest how the thing could be done most surely and efficiently. A few words had remained in his mind. You put the muzzle to a certain spot and you would have time to fire three times at least before brain paralysis set in. You would feel no pain. The whole was as clear as a recipe — one of those snippets which poor Annie

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was always cutting out of the ladies' column of the daily paper.

He peered out cautiously to see if any one was about. It would be so foolish to make a mistake now.

Nobody!

John Eames ventured one hand behind him, the other he kept before him, feeling uncertainly as though he were making his way along a dark passage. Yet it was not dark at all. Only to John Eames there seemed to have descended across his eyes a greyish misty blur shot with red and green flashes, as if he had too long looked at the sun.

Half way down the passage a door stood open. He caught a glimpse of a dark skirt and a light blouse. Instantly he became himself again, and determined at all costs, even at that of taking life, to do his duty by Mr. Wentworth.

The pistol came into his hand, but quite heedlessly the girl slipped up noiselessly close to him, and as he drew away the Mauser from her she whispered in his ear:

'In there! Take the little brown dressing-bag. Run for it! I will stay and do the best I can.'

John Eames hesitated, but the information seemed definite, and he penetrated into the chamber, the air of which was heavy with a scent of perfumed soaps. Mrs. Altmayer was kneeling among her dress boxes. She was surrounded by huge Saratogas like a breastwork. With the strength of a man she was strapping one of these for departure. On the floor sat a brown dressing bag, ladies' shape, square and compact — one of the sort which, being opened, throws up embankments of cut-glass bottles and silver-backed brushes.

Without a moment's hesitation or saying a word,

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John Eames lifted the bag and fled with it down the stairs.

Behind him he heard hoarse cries, the noise of voices in dispute. But John escaped. He had a sense that it was no use to go to the station. He would certainly be caught, and, moreover, he was in France, where if a man is accused of stealing the towers of Notre Dame or the 'Transbordeur' of Marseilles it is, in the opinion of the best jurists, better for him to flee the country without stopping to explain.

At the outermost dock John found a tug with an English captain, fussing and fuming about at the delay of a certain big cargo boat which was wasting his coal and keeping him under steam. Playing the giddy goat, he called it.

'See here,' said John, 'if you put me ashore somewhere in Essex, at Hayling Island or Maldon Bay, and come up with me to the Jewellers' Retail Union in Regent Street, you shall have fifty pounds down, and get back in time for your old cargo boat after all!'

'Been stealing?' inquired the captain, pushing his cap back from his brow so that he might scratch the remainder furze which came down in a peak between his eyebrows.

'If I had, would I be likely to go to the Jewellers' Union?'

'No, I suppose not,' said the captain thoughtfully. 'It's the risks I am troubling about — over yonder, you know.'

'It's not that,' said John; 'it's this blessed French law! They will take away my bag and lock me up for a year while the other people are off to Central Africa!'

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The captain nodded and set some bells jangling.

'You don't want to kiss anybody good-bye, I suppose? I can let her go any moment — I only came in to tow that blessed five-master for the Horn traffic.'

'No,' said John rather untruthfully, 'kissing is not in my line — go ahead!'

'Fifty, I think you said!' the captain interjected, lifting his hand from a lever, 'and our exes.?' —the coal, wages, and so on? Your people won't make any difficulty about a little thing like that?'

'How much?' said John Eames, watching the receding shore.

The captain glanced at him keenly, diagnosed honesty, decided to be moderate, and said, 'Another twenty-five.'

'All right,' said John, 'they are good for that.' Which was certainly an understatement.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had a rough time in the Essex marshes. They lay two days on the Danbury Commons. Twice they saw policemen crossing the country in heavy-heeled haste. Once a handbill, staring out at them from a tree at the corner of a blacksmith's shop, demanded the immediate surrender of one John Paterson Eames. This caused them to retreat.

'Paterson! Was I called Paterson?' said Eames to himself, for he had forgotten.

'You have been stealing after all!' muttered the captain fiercely. 'If you get me into trouble I'll wring your neck!'

'Wait till I get there and it will be all right,' said John, who was past argument.

And they 'got there 'in the yellow dusk of a London fog, when the assistants of the J. R. U. were standing gloomily staring out at the swirl of the pea-soup and watching the ghostly crawl of the traffic outside.

'Hey, out of thet!' cried Cookson, the second left counterman authoritatively. '*Why, in the name of all that's holy, Eames!*'

'They say you are a thief, Eames!' called out a second — a mere youngster he, who ought not to have spoken.

'Where's Mr. Wentworth?' demanded John Eames hoarsely.

They opened the door of the manager's room for him, and blind, scratched, and bleeding, John dumped down Mrs. Altmayer's dressing-bag on the crowded desk.

'A thief! There!' cried John Eames. 'I could not get to Amsterdam this time with the stones, but they are there; and I'll have another try, if I am shot for it!'

Mr. Wentworth, manager of the Jewellers' Retail Union, opened the pigskin bag, and the assistants crowded around unrebuked.

John had not forced the bag, first because he trusted the word of Claire Altmayer, and, secondly, because he dared not trust that of the captain of the steam tug.

Yet he might have been as wrong in both cases, as assuredly he was in the second.

For there on the top, close to the corner slides and the little central lever lock, lay in their tissue wrappings the stones with which John Eames had been charged. But they constituted but a small part of the whole contents. The bag was full as it could

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hold of the finest pearls, rubies, and emeralds which had ever entered the doors of the Jewellers' Retail Union.

'Eames.' said Mr. Wentworth, shovelling back the contents of the bag, 'it strikes me that you are a thief after all. But it is time to go down to Scotland Yard. Call a 'taxi,' Cookson. You have run across one of the cleverest gangs working on the Continent, and probably they have been watching you from the start. At any rate, we must get on the right side of the law.'

They were going out with the obliging Cookson holding the door for them, when the way was barred by six-foot-and-a-half of solid seaman.

'Where are you off to?' he demanded. And on being invited to accompany them he thrust out a grimy paw.

'No Scotland Yard for me, if you please! Seventy-five pounds sterling I want, cash down, and then I'll shove. That's all I yearn for from the gentleman and his pals. Besides, there's that five-masted clothes-line of a Horner waiting for me over at Rossendaal.'

Mr. Wentworth looked at John. John nodded, and the money was paid 'on the nail,' as the captain of the tug said. It had been earned.

## CHAPTER THREE

### OBTAINING JEWELS UNDER FALSE PRETENCES

Somewhat hastily they made it a hundred to the captain of the tug. They looked at each other — and spoke no more of going down to Scotland Yard.

‘No,’ said Mr. Wentworth, ‘that would involve us in a year of procedure; and, though on a grand scale advertisement is good for trade, that is not the kind.’

And in imagination he saw piles of reporters one after the other taking up his entire morning with interview after interview, each of which would be reported differently; and then the explanation required of him at the general meeting.

No — on the whole, no! Mr. Wentworth must think, and meanwhile John Eames must go and take a bath - ‘On the premises, mind you,’ interrupted Mr. Wentworth. ‘Better go to my rooms. You will not be disturbed there. The housekeeper will give you what you need in the way of underthings out of my drawers; and, I say, better put on one of my suits also. You will find it rather roomy, I dare say, but it will be better than having you in Holloway by the afternoon. You know we are a sort of castle here, and if the worst comes to the worst we will put you in the strong room and — forget the combination!’

All which Mr. Wentworth was quite capable of doing. For, though a thoroughgoing Tory in politics, he hated the least interference of the law with his own affairs, or (what was more on his mind) with those of the Jewellers' Retail Union. At such times

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he became perfectly anarchistic, in practice if not in theory.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning they took counsel together, Mr. Wentworth, the Superintendent of the Front, and Moore, who had been summoned from Paris by telegraph, and was in a very bad temper with John Eames.

'I have never had such a thing happen to me in my life,' said Moore, who was called in the North, where they do not mince such matters as personal appearance, 'the Tatie Bogle' — which is to say, 'the scarecrow in the potato field.'

'To take up with a pair of regular hotel rats! Why, any bagman in olive-oil samples could have told him better than that. But he, John Eames, charged with a mission of the utmost importance to me and to the J. R. U.! Better ring up a messenger-boy at once and be done with it!'

Thus Moore, angry at being called back from Paris where he found himself comfortable, or perhaps still suffering from the effects of a bad crossing. But, fortunately, Mr. Wentworth had infinitely more authority.

'I do not see that Eames is to blame,' he said; 'he was obeying orders in going by an indirect route to Amsterdam. Besides, it would have created far more suspicion of the kind we wish to avoid had he carried the jewel-case everywhere with him. It is true that he lost them for some minutes. But he found them again — and a great many more with them, unfortunately. That is what bothers me. We cannot, considering our clients and the instructions given

us, hand the matter over to the police. The women seem to be on a higher plane than ordinary criminals -'

'One of them,' interrupted John Eames, 'was not a criminal at all. She showed me where the stolen stuff was. I shall be grateful to her all my life.'

The three men looked at each other, and Wentworth shook his head gently, yet with a certain tolerance, as if he had passed that way himself.

'Mr. Eames,' he said, 'in our business it is part of our duty to suspect. When you show goods to the Grand Duchess of Augustenstein, why does Cookson stand at the opening of the counter? To help you? Not a bit of it! To see that the lady is not taken unawares with a fit of kleptomania.'

'But Claire Altmayer -' began John.

'Altmayer!' exclaimed the three inquisitors in chorus, 'Altmayer!'

'Yes,' said John undauntedly, 'that, I am sure was the young lady's name. Claire Altmayer. Is there anything remarkable in that?'

'Only,' said Mr. Wentworth quietly, 'that it is the name of the most famous and daring diamond-robber in the world - holder-up of banks and bank messengers, prison breaker, inventor of the *coup du telephone* - and - and (here Mr. Wentworth became excited) it is almost a certainty that we have got hold of the total of his swag! It was always a question what he did with it.'

'I see,' interrupted Moore. 'he invested it in the Lady of the Hundred Dresses!'

'And his sister fell in love with you, John, and helped you to get away with the lot,' said the Superintendent of the Front, who had passed for a gay dog in his day. 'What luck! They come of a good

family.'

But I can't take the money,' cried John.

'No; but the lady? *She* must be a spirited one. Faith, I wish I were younger,' said Moore, 'I would stop earning an honest salary right here, when such a girl would risk her life to help me away with millions!'

'Risk to her life!' repeated John, glancing from one to the other. 'Why should she risk her life?'

'You would make a famous dux-boy of a kindergarten, John,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'What do you suppose Altmayer would say to the loss of all his little profit — or Madame of the Hundred Dresses to the girl who showed you the whereabouts of her jewels?'

'Then I must go back at once,' said John. 'Give me all that does not belong to the firm, I will return them. I do not care what happens, but Claire shall not suffer because of me!'

"No hurry," said the carpenter; "they thanked him much for that," quoted Mr. Wentworth. "Nothing of the kind. We are not going to steal the jewels. We are the Jewellers' Retail Union. We will take what is our own, and we will communicate privately with the other prominent dealers of the world. There are not so many who can handle pearls and stones like these. They will give descriptions and private marks, and in due time — quite privately you understand — we will restore them their property. In the meantime we will say nothing, and keep on saying nothing. The stones in Madame Altmayer's bag will remain till called for in our big safe. We will not be worried by police inquiries; and in the meantime we would advise you, if you value your life, to keep away from back streets, and, if you can bring your mind to it,

sleep on the premises.'

'No, no!' said John. 'I don't care for the risk, and no one else must take these jewels to Amsterdam. I never failed yet, and this is my first real chance.'

'Yes,' interposed Moore sharply, 'of a knife between your shoulder-blades! The Altmayers would not stick long at that, If it is the sister-in-law you want to see — well, *I've* a sister-in-law with a devil of a tongue. I would not say a word against your stepping over and taking her off my hands. I guarantee you against knives at least. As for sharp speeches, they don't kill a man. I've even been getting fat on them for ten years.'

Still John Eames asserted that it was his 'job,' this trip to Amsterdam, and that it was certain that Madame Altmayer had not seen him; while Claire - he would venture his life for Claire! Had she not ventured it for him?

'Yes,' said Wentworth, softly slapping his great thigh, 'but how about the jewels of the J. R. U. and the distinguished clients who have put their confidence in us? What of them, Eames?'

'To Jericho!' cried John Eames. 'My place and my life upon it that I can take those stones safely to Amsterdam!'

'Very well, Eames,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'Remember you risk both.'

He rose from his seat and went towards the window in token that the interview was at an end.

'You know, John, that I am a quiet man. Strange babes can play with my best hat. But when it comes to a question of the J. R. U. I am not playing. If you fail, you quit, understand!'

'I understand,' agreed John, with equal gravity. 'I understand and accept.'

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'In the meantime,' continued Mr. Wentworth, 'you had better stay indoors till the fuss dies down here. We don't even know whether they may not have stirred them up at Scotland Yard, At any rate, it is certain that Altmayer himself will be on the job.'

'What was his last sentence, Moore?' said the Superintendent of the Front.

'Fourth time to 'perpetuity,'" said Moore with relish, 'after his third escape from the Ile de Rè. He's a game chicken, I tell you!'

'What, has he got off again?' cried Wentworth, incredulous.

'No,' said Moore — 'that is, he had not a week ago. But there is no saying. Nothing holds him more than ten days or so.'

'Warders?' said Wentworth, cocking his eye at the speaker.

'Not always,' said Moore. 'The man's a regular Baron Trenck — and he would be a Casanova if it were not that, instead of a hundred women with hardly a dress among them, he has a handsome wife with a hundred dresses by Paquin and Worth.'

'I don't know anything about that,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'Some of your nasty French yellow-backs? Now, I believe in honest, wholesome British fiction. If every man took home a new novel in his coat-pocket each Saturday afternoon, as I do — six shillings for four-and-six — authors could live and be good customers of the J. R. U. — that is, some of them.'

\* \* \* \* \*

And so John Eames was left for the next fortnight to one of the most agreeable tasks of his life — the

scientific weighing, measuring, and valuing of the Altmayer treasure. He used a strong glass for flaws and private marks, and arranged and catalogued everything under its proper heading. But the classification had evidently been previously done by an expert.

'Somebody who knows his work has been here or hereabout,' said John to Mr. Wentworth, as the latter bent over his work-table and glanced at the long alignment of his check-sheets. 'We could do with some of these fellows at counter No.1 he added. 'Why, I could sell a hundred thousand pounds' worth of them to three or four customers I could name.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Wentworth, 'it's a nasty thing the eighth Commandment! And fourteen years 'with' would never do for a man of my age and figure. You might risk it, John Eames, and live it down; but I'm too old and too rotund not to stay honest.'

'But we might buy them,' suggested John Eames casually.

'Hardly in the circumstances,' said Mr. Wentworth, 'one of our men running off with the lot! We need not give them back unless we like; but it would look too like blackmail to beat down their price with the goods, as it were, up our sleeve. What do you say, Moore?'

Moore, who had come in equipped for travel, revolved the eight vertical reflections of his newly ironed tall-hat.

'Wouldn't do,' he said, 'worse luck! Some ripping good stuff there! Lor', why weren't you a real thief, Eames, and ready to go halves with me? I could have sold the lot for you, and nobody — not even Altmayer — a penny the wiser. I know the only

## THE LADY OF THE 100 DRESSES

chaps in the world big enough to handle these beauties — and they will take some handling too, sonny, even in an honest way.’

It was clear three weeks before it was thought safe for John Eames to move from the defenced premises of the J. R. U. Even then he went, as it were, under guard, through streets crowded with hurrying people and solemnised by the ‘bobby’s’ official blue dotted here and there. However, there was no disturbance, and the private detectives engaged by Mr. Wentworth had an easy task — chiefly confined to wiping their mouths after forced draught.

Consequently, in about a month John Eames considered that he might safely take passage for Amsterdam. Mr. Wentworth made no objections, but furnished him with a lady typewrist and stenographer, Miss Allison, a tall and self-possessed girl from Dunfermline, who was pretty enough to despise public libraries, and knew all about Mr. Andrew Carnegie.

Perhaps some far-off hope swayed Mr. Wentworth in his choice that Miss Agnes Allison, clad in serviceable dark blue, closely buttoned Burberry waterproof and a straw hat with a ribbon (genus *canotier*), might keep John Eames, one of his most trusted and useful aids, from making a fool of himself.

This, however, was wholly beyond the lady’s power, or even wish. If there had been no Donald Ross in the grey city which looks southward across the windy trough of the Forth; if there had been no first-seen, life saving Claire Altmayer, sister of a man who had committed all the crimes that were (except cowardly ones), perhaps, then, something

might have come of it.

But as it was, Miss Allison had her skirt and petticoat, her corsets and under-pinnings heavily wadded with cotton wool and unset stones of price. It spoilt her figure somewhat, but since no Donald Ross was there to see, it mattered little to the tall lady with the lint-white locks blowing above the blue of her close double-breasted blouse, and of her many-buttoned Burberry.

They went straight to Antwerp this time by boat, and from thence in a crowded third-class compartment to Amsterdam. Mr. Wentworth had Dutch detectives on the platform, but they detected nothing.

The jewels were safely transferred and receipted for one by one as Miss Allison 'changed' in a little compartment off the manager's room. She tossed packet after packet out to the two men waiting, each with his verifying list. They wanted her to be quicker and throw them out a garment at a time, but, like a decent Scots lassie, she demurred.

'It's no' that I care for myself,' she said; 'but it's a risky job, and as like as not might get into the papers. And then what would Donald Ross be saying in Dunfermline?'

So, like most maidens of her country and type, Miss Agnes got her own way — by taking it.

And then, her business done, Miss A. Allison returned to London by the next boat, and in twenty hours was clicking away in Mr. Wentworth's office as if she had never moved from her place. But she wrote Donald that she had been entrusted with an important commission by the J. R. U., and that she was going to strike the firm next month for a rise of salary. She never once mentioned John Eames.

What was the use? She still remembered what a fuss Donald made the first time he knew that Mr. Wentworth was a bachelor; as if a Dunfermline girl were not capable of earning her living and taking care of herself at the same time.

What did she care if there were a score of girl typists in the law-office where Donald worked! Had she not seen them on the tennis ground, flocks of them, and not cared a button, though Donald was 'a young man with a future'?

Still, Miss Allison understood. Men were different, and there was no need to say anything about John Eames. *He* was in love with somebody else anyway. Miss Agnes Allison knew that from the way he had of helping her on with her cloak — absent-minded, and as if he were sheeting down the counters on Saturday nights. Yet she was conscious of having quite nice shoulders, and her way of looking her thanks was considered unique even in Dunfermline.

So Miss Allison went straight back to the office of the J.R.U. and said nothing about anything. John Eames only said that he would not return just yet. There were several things which he must attend to. Miss Allison pretended that she understood this to mean that he had a commission to wait for the recutting of the stones and to see that they were done according to specification.

Of course, in her heart of hearts she thought nothing of the kind. It was all 'that girl'; and the firm had forbidden John Eames to have anything to do with the Altmayers. But Miss A. Allison possessed the interest of intrigue, and she thought of Donald's improving position. Now if her brother, the U.F.C. elder, were so far to forget himself as to be four times sentenced to imprisonment for life, it would

undoubtedly be hard on Donald, who was also a deacon, though not yet 'set up in business for himself.' So perhaps the Altmayer girl was as innocent as she herself would be, supposing that her brother the elder broke into four separate banks as Altmayer had done. The logic was defective maybe, but the heart of Miss A. Allison was all there, ticking away up to time in the right place, sound as a bell. If the young foreign woman had sought to deflect Donald Ross from his duty – ah! that would have been another matter! Her badness would have been evident to every beholder. But as to John Eames, he had been married before and could look after himself. At any rate, it was no business of hers to go talking about what did not concern her. Girls and boys are taught that lesson early in the North, and it stands them in good stead all their days.

So Miss A. Allison focussed her shorthand with short-sighted pince-nez, ticking away at her Universal keyboard.

\* \* \* \* \*

As for John Eames, his case was very different. First of all it came of this. No one ever thought of calling him Mr. Eames, which in itself explains a lot. The humblest packer on the ground floor of the J. R. U. would speak of the head showman of No. 1 Counter as 'John,' and even (if Eames were at a distance) as 'Our Johnny.' The girls in the correspondence department called him 'John' to his face, and asked him to fetch them boxes of candy — which proves quite other things. They would not have dared thus to encourage young Cookson, who had only a pound a week and pretty curls all about

his forehead, just like their own only shorter. Of John Eames, however, they made every possible use, till some of the more compassionate said it was a shame, only to be overwhelmed with the almost unanimous cry, 'It doesn't matter, it is only John Eames!'

And that, indeed, was a proposition which nobody could deny — nor indeed ever thought of denying — so harmless was 'old John Eames.'

Yet what was John Eames doing at that very moment? John Eames, who had never been known to address a word to a girl in his life except in the way of business, who never considered the possibilities of dusky places behind doors, or 'lagged' for anybody at closing time — safe old John Eames - stupid John Eames! What of him?

Well, at that moment he was mounting the stone steps of the 'Cheval Blanc' at Rossendaal. He had gone straight there when he had seen Miss Allison (no one except Donald ever left out the 'Miss' in *her* case. Scots girls earning their living appear have been born with it, and to have worn it ever since they were promoted out of baby clothes.)

'There was nothing to be done at Amsterdam,' John told himself. 'There would be nothing to report on for full three weeks. No use going home only have to come back, besides the explanation to that beast Moore who liked to stay in Paris without being asked why.'

So John Eames returned to the 'scene of his crime' as naturally as in the last detective story. For this he had no reason and did not endeavour to discover any. He simply 'wanted to' — so he went.

Rossendaal was, if anything, brighter and whiter and more freshly gilded than ever (being on the

frontier of Belgium). The glitter, combined with the difficulty of breathing fine-blown dune-sand, took John Eames by the throat — that is, till he grew accustomed to the normal local conditions.

John Eames was uncertain of the welcome he might find awaiting him at the 'Cheval Blanc.' So he left his travelling bag at the station 'till called for.' and started out to view the land. He fingered the massive hilt of the Mauser in his hip-pocket. He knew very well that to be thus armed was no more than a moral support. For, if anybody 'wanted him' they could easily 'get him' from the first convenient window. It was, John thought, a long time since the Portuguese taught Europe anything, but how to kill kings is a lesson which will 'stop taught' for all time. In fact all monarchs and unpopular persons in authority ought to have their salaries trebled at once, because of the new risks of the business.

So John Eames knew that if anybody wanted to kill him they could do it if he were guarded by cavalry, and cased in safe-deposit steel. And the very thought put iron into his veins as he entered the courtyard and mounted the steps of the 'Cheval Blanc,' which he had quitted last as a self-revealed thief — in a hurry — with a lady's bag in his hand.

To most men the cheek of the thing would have been impossible, but John Eames did it, as he did all other things, naturally and simply.

An elderly young man of distinguished appearance was smoking on what, in Holland, is termed the 'stoop.' He smiled amicably as John Eames came towards him.

'Ah,' he said, lifting his hat with graceful ease, 'Mr. Eames — Mr. John Eames from London, I presume.'

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Now it is difficult to take off your hat gracefully just after having climbed a steepish flight of stairs, and naturally John was at a disadvantage. Still he had served too many persons of high degree quite to forget his manners. So he lifted his hat with his right hand and said, 'I beg your pardon!' in an uncomprehending kind of way.

The man kept both hands in the side pockets of his lounge coat, and with a complete alteration of voice he said. 'Now I've got you, Mr. John Eames. I have you covered with a revolver in each pocket. Yours is out of reach. Keep that left hand on your watch chain. Fumble with it naturally and carry your hat with the other. Otherwise these useful articles in my coat pockets will be liable to go off. Now straight ahead, and first turn to the right! My room is on the ground floor!' And so simple did his capture appear to John Eames, that it seemed now as if he had expected it from the first — expected, and hardly tried to avoid it.

John entered the room to the right, which was chiefly furnished with a desk and many boxes and portmanteaux, all entirely clear of labels and checking tickets.

The elderly young man with the shaven face and tightly pressed lips had never for a moment ceased smiling.

He motioned John to be seated, and without taking his right hand from the jacket pocket of his flannel lounge suit, he poured out a tot of whiskey for John and one for himself.

'Now we can talk agreeably, our elbows on the table. No ladies being present. *I* will excuse you. Better though, hold your hat till I relieve you of the weight in your hip pocket. Butt shows, to my eye,

wood of no use. If a man is a thousand yards away, you go there and look him up. Much better! I put my trust in Browning – a compliment to your countrymen, Mr. Eames, and the more to be prized because I am a patriotic German!’

He laid the flat, wicked-looking pistol close to his hand, out of John Eames's reach, and turning chill grey eyes upon him, remarked in the most casual tone, ‘I have been expecting you, sir. You have not disappointed me. I have not, indeed, had the pleasure of your personal acquaintance, but my wife is a good judge of character and knows a ‘man’ when she sees him. Now where have you put those jewels of mine?’

‘The stones which belonged to the firm I represent are at present in their possession,’ said John Eames firmly.

‘I do not doubt it,’ said the elderly young man, ‘the question is, what has become of the others which belong to *me*?’

He sat fingering his flat-chested Browning with casual interest. It was pointed in John's direction and there was no reason in the world why it should not go off. But there was a sort of dull determination working in John's heart, a lack of care of consequences, which is the courage of many who have never thought of being particularly courageous.

‘Mr. Wentworth, our manager, has them,’ said John, stolidly telling the truth.

‘And why?’ said the other with his eternal smile, ‘does your manager detain what is not his?’

‘What right have you to ask me questions?’ John growled.

The man with the clean-shaven face and square jaw, significantly tapped the Browning and then

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shook his head reproachfully at John.

'We don't take high moral grounds in our profession,' he said. 'I don't - neither need you! I stole your uncut diamonds. You stole mine — with your own little packets on top. You took the top of the class, that was all. Now it is my turn. A little information, *if you please!*'

'I'll see you 'hanged' first!'

John had been a Sunday School teacher when he was courting Annie (at the same school) but 'hanged' was not the word he used. If he had been Superintendent, it would have been just the same.

The man continued softly, still smiling:

'As far as I am concerned, you are probably right. I abandon my future to your experienced judgement. But here below I am accustomed to be a law to myself. Accordingly a good many petty jurisdictions have started out to prevent me. I am Earnest Altmayer, called Baron Altmayer - '

'But you are no German,' cried John, 'you speak more like - '

'Like an American - yes. I saw several Fourths of July on that continent; but people of our profession have no delicacy, no art over there — Jesse James and holding up trains, or the Charlesworth brothers and shooting down bank officials are what they consider the top of the tree!'

'But what would you do?' said John Eames, becoming interested.

'Why, *be* a bank cashier, as I was one time, or, like you, confidential man at the Jewellers' Retail Union. Then a man has a chance. You have one now!'

'Well, what is it?' John Eames asked.

'Get me back all that belongs to me and we will

call quits or — continue our career of practical socialism together.'

'You must prove your right to the stones first,' persisted John Eames.

'Who made you a judge or a divider,' retorted the other; 'and if it comes to that, who gave you authority to steal my wife's jewels — not to speak of those belonging to my sister?'

John was not quick with words. So he had perforce to be silent. Altmayer went on.

'I have some right to be called a reasonable man,' he said, 'if I had been a violent fool I should have shot you at sight. You were out of breath coming up that flight of steps, and you did not know me. My wife and my sister were waiting for me in this hotel. You have left us all in pawn, sir, without enough to pay our reckoning with the landlord. Of course, there were your traps in your rooms. It would have been an easy business to lift those any dark night. Even now, if you have the ticket, I should be able to send a porter and get your new portmanteau in the usual way. I could have cut your throat or blown out your brains in your hotel in Amsterdam. But I took my sister's advice and waited here for your arrival. We are, in fact, your guests but we have been careful of your money. Rest assured of that!'

'Mr. Wentworth has sent printed descriptions of the stones, prepared by me, to all the great dealers in the world,' John's voice was hoarse and unequal with the strain.

'Very thoughtful of him, I am sure — yes —,' he fumbled in his pocket-book, 'he was good enough to send me one. Here it is!'

And he produced the eight-paged, close-printed pamphlet which John knew so well. Altmayer

scratched his chin as he looked over the entries.

'Very admirably done indeed,' he said. 'Sir, I compliment you — a little weak perhaps on the 'clear ones' - diamonds rather, below par, specially Brazilians, but unequalled as to pearls and Twopence -Coloured generally. The emeralds, specially, are better done than I could have done it myself.'

John felt vaguely flattered, but he stuck to his guns.

'The stones are not yours,' he said. 'We are trying to return them to their owners without application to the police.'

'Very right — very right indeed!' acquiesced Altmayer. 'Keep the cheap-jacks of the law out of any real business. But now that you know the jewels belong to my wife and sister, you will doubtless do your best to get them back for them!'

'But how can I be sure?' said John, who felt the underlying threat.

'Look here,' said Altmayer quickly, 'I don't expect you to take my word, but possibly you may take theirs. My wife knows nothing about my little business affairs — my sister only that I have been a prodigal son. To them I am really the Baron Altmayer, a gentleman well off indeed, but with a curious mania for diamond dealing and long voyages. I tell you this because I am going to introduce you presently, and you will be good enough to remember that I have nothing in common with the Altmayer of whom you have doubtless heard — that is so far as the Baroness is concerned.'

'But my stones,' said John anxiously, 'if what you say is true, how came they to be in Madame's dressing-bag along with a king's ransom of other

jewels?’

‘I abstracted your bag during the first five minutes of my stay here, emptied it, and having returned with no lockfast conveniences of my own, I placed the little packages among those which belonged to my wife and sister.’

John shook his head.

‘I wish I could believe it,’ he said with a curious dullness, ‘it would make many things clearer to me!’

The Baron cast a quick look at him, but this time he did not smile.

‘See here,’ he snapped, ‘did your Mr. Wentworth get any of his jewels identified? Have any been lost in the least like those?’ He rapped on the printed pamphlet with his knuckles. ‘You know yourself that these are not ordinary gems. *Not one*,’ he continued in a stronger, more assured tone, ‘and the reason is, none have been stolen, none lost. All belonged to the two women to whom I am about to introduce you — honestly, honourably their own. They will tell you so.’

And before John had time to say a word, the Baron had pocketed the two revolvers on the table, his own Browning and John's Mauser, and opening a door which led into a larger room, he called out:

‘Hermance! Claire! I have somebody here who has come from very far away to see you!’

There was a simultaneous cry of ‘Here we are, Earnest! We can't leave our work. Come and help us to hold wool. We are both so cross, we have nearly got to tearing each other's eyes out.’

The heart of John Eames was stirred as it had not been since, at the mature age of eighteen, he asked Annie to go with him to the next church social. It was Claire who had spoken. He entered, Altmayer

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came behind him and, through a kind of haze of strange heady perfumes, John saw the Baroness Altmayer in a princess robe of purple violet lavishly trimmed with turquoises, and behind her surrounded with a kind of halo was Claire, in the same dark skirt and cream-coloured blouse as of old.

'Mr. Eames!' cried the Baroness, clapping her hands joyfully, 'now surely we shall get our jewels back again. You saw the thing and gave chase. Did you catch him? Why did you not send us word? You thought we had left here, perhaps?'

'It is all right, dears,' said the Baron, smiling and rubbing his hands. 'Mr. Eames will help us to get them all back. *He knows the thief!*'

'Oh,' cried the Lady of the Hundred Dresses, 'I hope he will be quick, then. I can't wear half my dresses because I haven't the jewels to go with them! Besides, it should not be difficult. Claire caught a glimpse of the thief as he made off (here John's heart beat thickly) — a shortish, squat man, very dark, and with long black hair.'

Claire Altmayer looked steadily at the floor and, as he watched her, John remembered that he was tall and fair, with short-clipped hair and a long moustache. He wished he could thank her, but half turning he met the glittering irony under the long oriental lashes which half hid the eyes of the Baron Altmayer.

*He* was not taken in, and for the first time in his life John Eames had not a straight tale to tell. The Baroness had really been robbed. Claire had first shown him where his jewels were, and then in spite of her own loss, had lied to give him a chance to get away. He longed for the impossible — like a child for

the moon — that he might throw himself at her feet and tell her — he was not sure what! Something, at any rate, quite un-Eamesian, quite out of keeping with his character. Annie and Hugo crossed his mind like people recollected out of the *débris* of dreams. Had there ever been a 461 York Street, N.W., ever an Annie, ever a Hugo? They were certainly of the stuff that dreams are made of, not real like Claire and that downcast look of hers.

Even that commonplace hotel chamber, and the strange intimate atmosphere of life and dainty womanhood took him by the throat. He was so far from Annie and her daily shrill quarrels, vain and sordid. Rich women these, delicate women, with the low voices which are so excellent in such. Nothing common or vulgar! Had he really ever swilled the yard, his bare feet wet and wind-whipped, sending goose-flesh clean up to his shoulders, while Annie in dirty dressing-gown directed him crossly from the first-floor back.

And they were depending on him to give them back their own — their own which he had stolen! Which two out of the three knew that he had stolen!

So Eames promised, and in the meantime, without saying anything to any one, drew on the Paris agents of his bank for a hundred pounds, with which he paid the landlord for the Altmayer's bill. He was their English agent, and it seemed quite natural. At any rate the money was good.

In small places abroad England is accepted as the very fountain-head of riches. Every English person is rich, and can be variously induced to part with those riches - a soft head being the counter-balance allowed by providence to be set against the possession of so much money.

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The Baron smiled and nodded agreeably as John handed him the receipted bill. The researches of the police seemed in no way to disquiet him. The ladies were content and went freely about with John, glad of an escort, pointing out to him objects of interest. The Baron took occasional brief excursions across the frontier into Belgium, but as he was known to operate largely on the Exchange and Amsterdam diamond market, no one thought anything about the matter.

At the Baron's dictation John had written a letter to his manager confirming one from a certain 'James Fernandez et Cie' of Amsterdam.

'I have gone into the case on the spot,' John wrote to Mr. Wentworth, 'and I am of opinion that the stones supposed to be stolen really belong to clients of the above firm. I have seen these clients. They are as yet unaware of their loss and have satisfied me that the stones they confided to Messrs. James Fernandez, Brazilian Merchants, of 31 Leyden Street, are those which (by inadvertence) I brought across hastily along with our own. The bag is, I am told, marked under the interior leather flap with the word 'Hermance' which is the name of one of these two clients. If, therefore, no other claims have been received in answer to your circulars, I think it would be safe to send over Miss Allison with instructions to deliver the goods to me, either at our agent's or, considering the need of secrecy, at the Bible Hotel where I am staying.'

This brought an imperative inquiry by wire:

*No claims here. You are sure Fernandez is genuine?*

WENTWORTH.

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Now John was wholly certain that the 'Fernandez' aforesaid was anything but genuine, but on the other hand he would have risked his head for the genuineness of every word of Claire Altmayer, so he wired back the report:

*Scintillating, London.*

*Have sifted claims to bed-rock. Entirely genuine. The thief is known here as in your employ. Wire directions.*

EAMES.

The reply came back in a couple of hours, while John cooled his heels in the roomy General Post Office of Amsterdam:

*Miss Allison starts at once. See to her return.*

*(signed)* SCINTILLATING, LONDON.

It was on this errand that Miss Allison (late of Dunfermline, N.B.) made her second journey to Amsterdam. She came by boat, and John met her on the quay. She was chilly, but rapturous as to scenery. They had had a fine passage and she had stayed on deck all night. 'The Company might have paid for a cabin! They can well afford it!' said John, sympathetically.

'Maybe,' said Miss A. Allison, 'but you see there were more folk on deck, and the first mate was a lad from Kirkcaldy. Eh, but this is a wee wee world after all! Him and me got to the talking, and we were among the windmills and sluices before we thought of looking at our watches!'

'Have you the jewels safe?' said John anxiously.

'I wager,' said Miss A. Allison, 'I never stirred frae his side all nicht — and him a lad frae Kirkcaldy!'

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She looked at John for a moment.

'I'm instructed to deliver them to you in your hotel. It's a queer do,' remarked Miss A. Allison, 'if it had not been just you, John Eames, and the hotel the Bible Hotel, not one foot would I have set within its doors. It's not a job for a respectable girrl, as I telled Mr. Wentworth, and her engaged to be married to a U.F. deacon (and a rising man at the law) forbye being jealous, as you can tell by his reddish hair. What kind o' room have ye got to receive me in at your Bible Hotel?'

'Just a bedroom — nothing else to be got,' said John Eames, peacefully.

'As I thought,' snapped the messenger of the J. R. U. 'had it been any person else but you, John Eames, Mr. Wentworth might have sucked his thumb. But expecting nothing else, I'll just tell you what I did. I put on two petticoats (one a wylliecoat o' my grandmither's) and in the under-most I made pockets for the 'stuff.' This very moment I am feeling like a diving bell — that heavy — but I'll gang inside, and with a pair of scissors I'll cut the waist-belt. The whole will then fall to the ground. I will step clear, first out of my granny's wylliecoat, and then afterwards out of your bedroom in the Bible Hotel. For a decent lass, engaged to a U.F. deacon *can not* be over-careful. You will take the shears and run over the check-lists before ye hand me back my granny's wylliecoat. I will wait without the door till I get your receipt.'

Thus were the jewels belonging to Hermance and Claire Altmayer brought back to the Bible Hotel, Amsterdam, where the owners were waiting to receive them.

And as for Miss A. Allison, she went back calmly

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to her typewriter, thinking of what Donald Ross would have said if he had known that she had taken off the under petticoat (which was her grandmother's, decent woman!) in a gentleman's bedroom far away in a foreign country.

But after all was over she consoled herself (as they do in the U.F. Church) under three heads:

First, it was a blessing that Donald did not ken anything about it, and that he had small chance of learning from Miss Allison.

Second, it was a yet greater blessing that John Eames was John Eames.

Third, and last, as to Donald Ross being jealous – well - jealousy was none so great a fault in a man nowadays. Wise little woman, she knew many married women who would like nothing better than that their husbands should show a little more of it. And Miss A. Allison from Dunfermline, a perfectly adequate young female, turned over in her bunk and went to sleep. She had no use now for the lad from Kirkcaldy, who was first mate and had changed his watch on purpose.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONDONATION OF FELONY

Then began the strangest life for John Eames. So soon as the parcels of precious stones had been received from the conscientious hands of Miss A. Allison (of Dunfermline, N.B.), or extricated from her grandmother's 'tumultuous petticoat,' the Baron Altmayer disappeared. At first this struck a chill through John, but he took a turn each morning along the dam in order to behold with his own eyes the firm of James Fernandez & Co., Brazilian Merchants, in full swing. It is true that the 'patron' was not at home, but that seemed quite normal, and the acting heads of the firm, whom John Eames recognised at once as men of the stamp of Wentworth and Salmon, model chiefs of departments, gave him every information — consistent, that is, with their duty to the absent Baron.

'Established 1728' was written clear over the door, and it struck John Eames at once that Altmayer had bought the goodwill of an old-established house and, for the sake of appearances, kept on the staff. He asked questions at his own agents, but in Amsterdam, as in Scotland, references of this kind are always answered *couleur de rose* to be on the safe side in case of an action for defamation. For of all nations under the sun your Dutchman is likest to the Lowland Scot, which is the reason why Scots novels find their best continental market among the dunes and dykes.

John was no little relieved when he received from his London house a commission for that of James Fernandez. It concerned unusual colours of diamonds, and was promptly executed to the satisfaction of all but Moore, who grumbled fiercely (from the longitude of Paris) at opening up of business relations with new houses, as if the old were not good enough — the real reason being that Moore resented anything being done without him as to the foreign relations of the J. R. U.

Paris, so he maintained, was the place to buy stones — a maxim which may have had to do with his liking for the boulevards. Amsterdam was only for cutting them, a secondary operation, which could quite as well be left to subordinates. He counted John Eames a good man, serious, trustworthy, but too honest ever really to be fit for continental business.

‘Mind you,’ Moore was wont to say, ‘I don't run down honesty. The J. R. U. never lost a penny by me, but the fellows one meets over here have got to be fought with their own weapons.’

But perhaps the straightforwardness of John Eames answered every whit as well. At any rate, his firm were pleased with what he had done for them at the house of James Fernandez, and entrusted him with further commissions — some of which, when Moore heard of them, made that Irish *boulevardier* very angry indeed. He had brought John Eames away to do him a good turn, but he had no idea of being replaced in his calling and occupation.

Nevertheless, John's business engagements took up but little of his time. Every day Madame proposed an excursion — not a set guide-book sight, marked with three stars in Baedeker. Of these she

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had, as it soon appeared, a horror. Claire went willingly with her sister-in-law. For her she was full of *provenances* and little attentions, almost lover-like indeed, yet always retaining her own position.

But she tended the Lady of the Hundred Dresses (as she had been called in the old days of Rossendaal) with something of the tenderness which one shows to an invalid during a long convalescence, bearing with her brusqueness, smiling at her sharp speeches and watching over her with the most inexhaustible patience.

And then began for John Eames a period upon which he ever afterwards looked back to as the awaking of a new life. Stump-legged, broad-breeched Dutchmen stood and looked after them open-mouthed, at which John and Claire always exchanged glances. These were sympathetic. Each was telling the other how well Hermance was looking to-day and what fun it was to take her about. John had discarded his revolver; it seemed to be so useless in well-groomed, well-swept and specially well-garnished Holland, where dogs are trained to go outside the city to perform the most ordinary cares of their toilette.

Then such happiness as they had on the canals and in the dyke-side eating-houses — wooden barracks of one or two storeys ranked about still with quaintest pleasure-grounds stretched mathematically round them. Ah, it was just not to be told!

John felt that surely he could not be in the same world with York Street, N.W. They sat leisurely down to table, while John sought for and arranged the footstool of Madame Altmayer. Then he hung up her cloak where he could keep an eye on it. Her fan —

yes, it was there! Her satchel, handkerchief, spare handkerchief, powder puff, looking glass, smelling bottle, eau-de-Cologne — yes, all were there. Then the lady could sigh, lean back and contemplate the slow golden slant of the sunlight upon the landscape of Claude.

After which John and Claire would also sigh a little sigh of thankfulness and smile at each other more warmly with a kind mutual understanding, for they heartily agreed, without the utterance of a word, that it is no joke to valet, maid of honour and dry-nurse a goddess, especially one who, having been so long in high-priced America, fancies that she is made of Dresden china and is not sure what she wants from one moment to another.

No one looked at Claire except John Eames, but then he made up by looking a great deal. And there was a kind of sympathetic warmth in the air because one was conscious of the other. They could not, according to custom in such cases, relate to each other the story of their lives, for though the Lady of the Hundred Dresses was manifestly sailing through a dream-world of her own, she would have come out of it quickly enough if any confidences of that kind had been exchanged. She had a real reverence for her husband, quite justified so far as he was known to her, and she counted it a sacred duty to look after his only sister.

‘Of course,’ she explained after the tongues had been put on an easy-going middle gear by the first glass of champagne which followed the oysters, ‘it is not as if Claire had never been outside of Europe.’ ‘To all intents and purposes Claire is an American girl, and as such she has, of course, more personal liberty than I should think it right to allow her if

there had been no America.'

Accordingly John Eames was grateful to Columbus, and the year 1492 became marked with red in his bede-roll from that moment, but he was naturally a shy and diffident young man, with none of the methods of a hussar about him. Still, he had gone so far as to confide to Claire his exact position, the amount of his salary, his bereavement and his prospects for the future, none of which seemed to move her except whether he had cared much for his wife and what colour was her hair. When, however, he had monologued for half an hour concerning Hugo, she seemed to lose interest in the subject and thought long and quietly with her eyes drowned as deep in the twilight as her sister's. Then, speaking in a low voice, while Madame had gone to the balustrade to look out over the green river at the glories of the crimson deepening through aerial parallels into invisible rose and violet, the Girl with the White Blouse said, 'I think you had better not say anything about what you have told me to Hermance.'

'And your brother?' inquired John Eames, who did not wish to be on a false footing.

'Oh,' said Claire carelessly, 'you can never surprise Ernest. He is sure to know already. He knows everything. At any rate, he would not think any the worse of you. I suppose it's being a business man that makes the difference.'

'Perhaps,' said John. 'It's a comfort to me, anyway. I hate sailing under false colours.'

'Oh,' laughed Claire, with her eyes upon her sister-in-law, 'make no mistake. Ernest must have known all about you before he would have let you take us about like this. He had never done it before.'

And with any one so striking as Hermance the post is no sinecure.'

'You say nothing about yourself,' said John Eames slowly.

The Girl with the White Blouse regarded him steadily and squarely.

'That's all right,' she said as the result of her scrutiny, 'you don't mean to be rude. You are not used to it, that is all. But when you want to pay a girl a compliment don't shoot it at her out of a gun, remember that. Besides, you had better practise on Hermance, she will never notice. Compliments are her daily bread, and she gets them without praying for, either, which is always a saving.'

'I am sorry,' John murmured penitently. 'I really meant -'

'Thanks, that will do. Whatever you meant won't spoil by keeping. There's Hermance's gun-metal purse; take the money and settle our share of the treat. It is time we were getting back to the hotel. And, mind you, practise on Hermance. There's no hurry about me.'

But John was far too shy, knowing that he would be listened to by a second pair of mocking ears. So they took their ways home, rather a silent company.

It troubled John Eames no little to make out how much Claire knew of her brother's real position. She seemed so easy about his long absences; she accepted his sudden calls so readily, she showed such absolute confidence in his return to the day that finally John decided that she was as much in the dark as her sister-in-law. Still, there was various little things which pointed to an opposite conclusion. A faint flavour of mockery had crept into John's voice when on one occasion he spoke of

Altmayer as 'the Baron.'

At which Claire turned quickly and said, 'My father was one before Ernest. He has as much right to the title as you have to call yourself 'Mr.' He does not do so often, because it interferes with his business. People think they can cheat you easier if you are a baron — that is, unless you are a Jew from Frankfort, which Ernest is not.'

At the shop they would have laughed, as they said, 'more than a bit,' if they had seen Old John holding up shoulder wraps or carrying rugs out of cavernous boats and double-shafted shandrydands of Dutch solidity. Not that John Eames would have cared. He was now far beyond that. He had conveyed a portion of the truth to Mr. Wentworth direct, without passing it through Moore. And Mr. Wentworth, a bachelor with experience, rather wished that he could get away also. It was as well that he did not, for Altmayer (Ernest, Baron) had a police of his own, and though perfectly satisfied with and even deeply grateful to John Eames, he would not have tolerated Mr. Wentworth for a moment.

It was evident to the meanest observer that Eames cared nothing for the society of the Lady of the Hundred Dresses — nor what was equally important, she for his. Mrs. Altmayer accepted all his services as her due. She had never met any man who refused them. So John fulfilled his mission in the hope of being repaid with a beaming smile from Claire, who, of course (being a woman) understood perfectly. There was nothing which Claire and John did not seem to understand about this period, when they looked at each other. Also they looked at each other a great deal and found the view mutually

agreeable. The sordidness of York Street, N.W., and the dismal day when John had laid away little Hugo under the soot-splotched cemetery grass had passed away. The beginning of it was when he had told all to Claire and she had reached out her hand to him in the sympathy which was the beginning of consolation.

Yet I am not sure that Claire meant anything more by it than that she was sorry for our luckless John. Not consciously, at any rate. But, saith the Wise Man, the woman who would deeply influence a man must never mean it. Purposeful women set up a man's monkey; they make him belligerent. Whereas, the other sort of women get what they want by not seeming to want it. Which thing is a great mystery, but worketh surely, like the Urim and Thummim in the breast-plate of the Jewish High Priest.

All the same, Claire and John Eames dropped into that habit of talking over Madame (the Inevitable Gooseberry) which has drawn more couples together than all balls, concerts and other more fashionable means of devising unity. They talked extensively of Madame. They made plans for Madame; they discussed her ailments, her weaknesses, her belief that the world was created and run exclusively for her honour and glory, comfort and advantage.

These things became a most intimate bond to them. If they had spoken complainingly or in a bitter or contemptuous spirit it might have been different; but the fine continuous humours of the Baroness, the eye-to-eye play behind her back when (as was sometimes the case) she excelled even her own watermark of selfishness, became an unailing bond

of union to her two slaves.

They laughed outright one day when, Claire having gone to find a chemist's from a waterside inn, she returned to discover John Eames out on the balcony brushing the dust from a silken rustling underskirt belonging to her sister-in-law. Claire laughed outright, John also, while Hermance, on the sofa by the open window, with a smelling bottle to her languid nostrils, murmured reproachfully: 'I am accustomed to this from you, Claire, but from a gentleman I *did* expect a little more consideration.'

That was the scene which remained for ever in John's memory, clear as the coloured picture which shows itself so delusively upon the ground glass of the camera. There was the slow green water, the barges with their red sails, the innumerable church steeples half sunk on the wide Plain of Flowers betwixt Haarlem and the Amstel; the wide balconies with their cream-painted iron chairs, the marble-topped tables, the square Dutch gas-lamps, the exceedingly green plants in exceedingly red pots, protected by yet more emerald wickerwork. Best of all, the Girl of the White Blouse looking at him from under her straw hat, with its dark blue ribbon tilted rather forward over the prettiest and straightest nose in the world! While beside her, in a robe which had never before been worn, the Baroness Hermance, large, florid and exquisitely complaisant as to her appearance, reposed on the sofa in the wide, parquetted dining-room. Under the reproachful gaze of her eyes there came a sudden lull in the conversation. Silence fell upon them. The joint laugh was instantly stilled as when two naughty children are taken in a fault.

John did not forget, and he had to run many

errands, fetch and carry many parcels, adjust many footstools and partake of pie so humble as to be lowly before he attained again to the favour of the offended Hermance.

But it was quite clear, though John did not like to think of it, that the time was at hand when all this must come to an end. He must leave Claire to look after Hermance; he must go back to 'Front No.1 Counter' on the main side of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd. Every day he was expecting notice from the diamond cutters in Amsterdam that the stones were ready. He must abandon the Altmayers and take up the heavy dreariness of life as it was in Regent Street. Now, his showcases had never seemed dreary to him before. He had infinitely preferred the life there to York Street, because in the last days Annie had taken to punishing him for fancied griefs by sending Hugo early to bed and forbidding him to go up to disturb him. This, therefore, had been a new life to John, so full and sweet that he shuddered at having to give it all up and go back to the old.

Then something happened. Altmayer came back; and the manner of his coming was strange and characteristic. It was one night at Ruiksdyk, a little village on the big North Sea canal (by which large Amsterdam ships escape the terrors of the Zuider Zee). The women had been out with John admiring the glorious sunset and watching the wondrous lighting up of the great new waterway. Straight lines of huge electric globes on forty-foot poles suddenly flashed out between ordered squares of garden garth, tulip and rose and lily, as far as the palish ground-glass haze low on the easternmost horizon which was Amsterdam. These shining globes

changed to green on both sides, and then to red as a steamer advanced or receded. The Krabendyk lighthouse swept the multi-coloured checkerboard plain with concentric rays. All at once Hermance had grown vaguely uneasy, whereupon the three walked home without speaking, as was their wont when the Baroness was out of sorts.

At dinner little had been said. Claire and John exchanged glances, that was all. Hermance was in one of her moods; nothing more could be done till it should pass off. The two women went to bed early and John sat by the window of his room smoking thoughtfully and looking out at the many twinkling lights which outlined the coast of Holland and nearer at hand made a procession along the great canals, shining also upon the fawn-coloured dunes which ramparted the flower fields from the mud-coloured thunders of the German Ocean.

As he leaned out John was hardly conscious of any human neighbourhood, so deeply was he thinking of Claire, when from the balcony underneath came a voice.

‘Steady, Eames,’ it said. ‘Give me a light.’

Instinctively John found and extended his matchbox. Then he remembered.

‘I’m steady enough,’ he said sharply, ‘but who the devil are you?’

‘Altmayer,’ said a voice from without. ‘Open your window quietly. I must come in. I need help badly.’

John Eames swung the white sashes inward noiselessly, and out of the many-coloured dusk, starred with the flicker of white, green, and crimson carbons, a figure swung itself. With a groan the man stumbled on the smooth tiling of John’s room and would have fallen but that John caught him in his

arms.

'Altmayer,' he said, 'what is the matter?' And he would have carried him to the bed in the Corner.

'No,' said Altmayer. 'Give me one of your nightshirts to tear up for bandaging. I can't mess that bed-spread without questions being asked in the morning, Eames. You will need to look after Hermance and Claire. If they get me it's a life sentence. Real, this time! If they don't, it will be good-bye to this quiet Dutch life for many years, and what Hermance is to do God knows!'

John was dumb, He watched Altmayer strip himself of his coat and waistcoat. He saw dim flicks of torn linen fly this way and that as the bandaging of an invisible arm and shoulder proceeded. Then Altmayer wrapped John's rug about him and asked for something to drink.

'What we have to arrange has got to be done quickly,' he said. 'It is a blessing your all being here in this little inn on the dunes. I've been in hiding two days, but dared not venture to come near, for I knew they were watching the English packets and the Amsterdam hotels.'

'What's the matter?' said John shortly.

'Matter,' groaned Altmayer with uneasy mirth. 'My sins have found me out, that's all. Nothing new. Only everything has piled itself up at a time. The old sentences are up in judgment against me. I am to be extradited to three countries at once — that is, if they can catch me!'

John was silent. Twenty years at the Jewellers' Retail Union does not make for ready sympathy with a great diamond robber. Even for Altmayer John Eames certainly felt none at that moment. But his next words changed everything.

## THE LADY OF THE 100 DRESSES

'I don't care for myself,' said Altmayer, 'but there's Claire — and Hermance! Maybe I've not been quite a good husband to her you will say, but I never let her want for anything ever since she married me, and it has become a habit with her — to have what she wants. She will miss me — unless, that is, you - ' He seemed to hesitate.

'I can't have anything to do with what's not square,' said John quickly. 'No, just let me finish. But so far as my salary runs I shall gladly look after — the two ladies.'

'You can say 'Hermance' and 'Claire,' if you like,' Altmayer struck in. 'Remember they know nothing of my old exploits. My grandfather was a parson's son, in Hanover. Claire is my younger sister. Why, I might have been teaching little children their catechism to this day but for some drop of wild blood that was in me. So I went abroad early, and for long none of the family ever heard that I was searched for in every land. Claire never knew till she was grown up, and Hermance — If any woman ever did, Hermance needed some one to look after her. Well, I did it. During these last weeks I have committed her to you. But I have watched — oh, you need not start, Eames. I know you: I have found a *man!* I thought the race was extinct. If I had been like you — there need have been none of this running like a frightened fox before the pack.'

Altmayer sat in the dusk, bitterly chewing the cud of silence, and as John knew not what to say the roar, lapse and sough of the outside surge at the canal breakwater scarcely broke the immense quiet. At least, it did not break it to Altmayer, whose thoughts were evidently elsewhere. At last he spoke.

'There is one ray of light which I can see,' he said,

'that is, if you will consent, and I see only one reason why you should. Look here, Fernandez & Co. is all right. Not a penny of ill-gained money has gone into it. With Claire's money and my father's I have used my knowledge, that is all. Now I will make the business over to you. Indeed, I have done so already — for value received. I have taken the liberty of having the papers all properly drawn up and signed. Hermance need know nothing about it. I have never mentioned it to her - my connection with Fernandez, I mean. All you have got to do is to go to my lawyer, to whom you are already known. He can witness your signature. I have told the heads of the house that you are to be the master henceforward. You will find that all is ready for you to take hold.'

'But the Jewellers' Retail Union?' stammered John.

'You will be a great help to them. If you like you can get their work done at Amsterdam prices; but if you do I would ask for a small partnership as a certainty in return. I think they were satisfied enough with the little our firm did for them. Money? The firm's account is in your name at this moment at the Amsterdam Bank. At this moment you have a right to sign cheques for 'James Fernandez & Co.' I gave in the signature written at the top of your order sheet more than a month ago. One has to be ready, you see. Where am I supposed to be? Oh, dead or in Brazil, and either way you will tell no lie. One is as likely as the other. But if I live I shall see the monkeys swinging far up the Amazon before three months are out. Oh, you mean money for myself. Thanks! Well, I cannot draw from the Fernandez account. A couple of hundred will do me. You are a brick, John Eames. You trust me with all this and

you don't know now whether I am not cheating you. Why do you do it?'

'For Claire's sake!' said John Eames, hoarsely. 'I love her. It is as well you should know before you go. I will keep her sacredly and protect them both with my life.'

'I am scarcely the man with whom you could wish to shake hands,' said Altmayer, 'but if you would it might do me good.'

So the two men shook hands gravely and simply.

'Then Claire loves you?' her brother inquired.

'Oh, that I do not know,' said John, flushing in the dark, 'I have not felt at liberty to ask her.'

'What, are you a married man?' The voice of the great prison-breaker grew harder, but even then contained no hostility, only a sense of added difficulty.

'Oh, no,' said John. 'Only, you see, I had been placed by you in a position of responsibility. I would not abuse your confidence.'

'That all?' inquired Altmayer sharply.

'That is all. I have told you so,' said John quietly.

Altmayer said no further word, but resumed his coat, shook John again by the hand, laid his fingers on the rail of the balustrade of the little inn at Ruiksdyk on the North Sea canal, and, with his head only visible, whispered: 'You had better take Claire into your confidence and devise all sorts of amusements for her. Here is the cheque-book of the firm with your own way of writing the name cut from your letter about the blue diamonds pinned inside. It will be as well to copy that signature pretty carefully the first two or three times; but the Amsterdam Bank will soon acquire confidence when you begin to send in the daily drawings of James

Fernandez & Co.'

He had already one leg over the lower bar when he turned, and reaching a hand back for the last time, whispered: 'It's a lot to ask, but God bless you . . . and Claire! You can tell her, if you like, but for God's sake let Hermance keep on believing in me!'

John hardly knew how the shadow ceased from the window. He stood, eased of the two hundred pounds, which left him very little in his cash-box to carry on with. But his fingers were fumbling with the long fluttery oblong of the Fernandez cheque-book. Was it real? Were there assets behind it?

All that night John could not sleep. His business training told him that he had been 'done.' His habits of carefulness reproached him with the same thing. Two hundred pounds — that represented a fortune to John Eames. And apparently he had also two women to provide for. He had indeed seen a sheaf of notes in the gun-metal purse-bag belonging to Hermance. Claire had a little money of her own, she told him, just enough to keep her from starving if any day Hermance took it into her head to quarrel with her and find another companion. She had said this carelessly and with a smile.

'But,' she had added, 'I am always sure of my livelihood, for I can always take a cook's place and have one night a week out with my best young man.'

All the same, the coming and disappearance of Altmayer had been so unexpected, what he took for granted so stunning, that John could only stretch himself and await the day with the liveliest apprehension. The vanished two hundred pounds rode him like a nightmare. He was not a man to think about money for its own sake, but now, having

just written off a year's salary — to be charged with the care of two ladies, one of them accustomed to a hundred dresses and the other — a certain Claire Altmayer, who was ready to go out and become a cook — John felt himself ill-fitted for the charge, and, indeed, the task was singularly complicated.

The morning came slowly. At five John took a cold bath to tone him up for all he had to go through that day. Then breakfast-time arrived, and in the little red-tiled kitchen, with its blue bricks painted with conventional windmills and heavy-sailed canal boats, Claire and John found themselves together.

John heaved a sigh of thankfulness. Claire and not he would have to break the news to the Baroness. How much should he tell? He remembered the permission given him to make the situation clear to Claire. But he thought it safer first to spy out the land upon the premises of James Fernandez & Co., as well as to interview the bank manager and the lawyer before venturing upon anything definite.

'You are dull this morning,' said Claire, smiling at him over the coffee cups. 'What is the matter?'

'I have to go by the first train to Amsterdam,' said John. 'Business is imperative.'

'Ah, I had forgotten,' she said. 'You also are in business.' Women bow instinctively to that severing word.

'For twenty years,' said John, 'and with one firm all the time.'

Claire looked at him inquiringly.

'In America we would say, 'Why don't you have a firm of your own?' I am sure you are clever enough.' She smiled easily, as if such a thing as capital did not exist in the world.

John shook his head and answered nothing for a moment. Then, with some earnestness, he asked whether Claire's sister-in-law would wait at Ruiksdyk for his return, or if they should all go back to Amsterdam together. The landlord was a good steady man, and Hermance and Claire would be quite safe in the care of Hans Polder and his three stalwart sons. But Claire said she would go upstairs and find out.

Yes, Hermance would stay where they were — unless, that is, she should receive a telegram from her husband. Ernest was so hasty and thoughtless he never let her know anything till the last moment.

As John strode away towards the white railway station of Haarlem he was ashamed at the farewells of the two women — innocent, confident, and forsaken — for his heart was full of a great doubt.

The morning had brought counsel, but in no wise was his way cleared nor were his fears diminished. The man who had taken the jewels of the J. R. U. had equally eased him of his hard-earned two hundred pounds. He would have to write Wentworth for an advance. But, swindled or not, these two waiting women were yet deeper in than he, and as a victim of Altmayer he arrived a very bad third.

He thought deeply during the half-hour which carried him to Amsterdam. Then as the test came nearer he took a better hold upon himself.

He went to see the lawyer first — a man of a rosy, wintry-pippin face, who stood with his hands in his pockets and talked very fast in Dutch — apparently for his own satisfaction. At last, weary of not understanding, John gave him his choice of English or French, and at once the lawyer answered with a purity of accent that would have shamed many an

Englishman born.

'You are the new partner in James Fernandez & Co.'s, and not know Dutch! Why, sir, you will be cheated at every turn!'

'I think not,' said John Eames, 'not in a matter of stones.'

'Ah,' said the pippin-faced lawyer, 'you have then learned the business. May I ask where?'

'I have been twenty years with the Jewellers' Retail Union of Regent Street, *London*.' John added the last word with a kind of shame, as if apologising for anyone in the world who should not know where Regent Street is to be found. There is but one world, and in it but one Regent Street.

'I congratulate — ah — Messrs. Fernandez and Co.,' said the lawyer, bowing solemnly. 'I suppose we had better witness the papers you bring. The Baron informed me of your probable visit before his departure for — Burmah, I think he said.'

John Eames bowed and produced the passport with which he had taken care to arm himself before leaving London. But the lawyer waved it aside.

'I have already assured myself of your identity,' he said with a smile. 'I think you will find all in order at Messrs. Fernandez's. I shall go down and introduce you myself. William, my hat! The Baron is so constantly away that a permanent head of your experience is exceedingly desirable.'

Accordingly they went down, and John Eames shivered when he saw the stately bureaux, the shining mahogany counters, and experienced the Bank of England hush of solemnity with which great Amsterdam houses are wont to surround their operations. Even the lawyer spoke in an undertone. The high, far-reaching spaces were full of the dim

light of coloured glass. Dull mahogany, exquisitely polished, was everywhere, and here and there, set in a black ebony frame, some gem of modern art — Maris or MacGeorge — detached itself with startling effect. One saw how and why the gem-like pictures of the early Dutch school were produced — also who paid for them.

The heads of departments, whom he had seen afar off before when he had come as a humble buyer of oddly coloured stones for the J. R. U., were there, bowing profoundly before the new master. The chief of them all - a venturesome man in a white waistcoat with pearl buttons — went before and with silent reverence marshalled him to the acting partner's chambers.

'I hope,' he said, 'that we will see you frequently. It is often difficult to decide immediate questions in the absence of principals.'

'I hope to be here every day,' said John 'that is' — a sudden thought striking across his content — 'as soon as I can make my private arrangements in England.'

'You acted,' said Herr von Ingen, 'for the Jewellers' Retail Union, of London - a good house?'

'None better,' said John.

'If I may venture to advise, I trust you do not think of any amalgamation,' said Mr. Von Ingen. 'It is always a mistake. That is, if I may be permitted to express an opinion.'

'I suppose, however,' John answered, smiling, 'that this house would have no objection to the whole or a portion of the London business.'

'Oh, on the contrary,' said Mr. Von Ingen. 'A good house, a very good house, and money always paid the day after delivery, with bank interest deducted.'

An extremely sound house!’

‘Here, sir, is the mail for to-day,’ said another, deferentially in the pause - a tall, white-moustached, rather monumental man, who was correspondence clerk, bringing in an armful of papers.

‘I am really afraid,’ said the lawyer, ‘that for to-day I must snatch your new principal away. There are some other things to witness. Oh, mere matters of detail, yet which must be of attended to.’

Next they found themselves in the Amsterdam Bank, one of the solemnest buildings upon earth. They waited awhile to see the manager. Even the new principal of James Fernandez & Co., Brazilian Merchants, felt himself here but a minnow among the Tritons. The lawyer gave him detailed information as they sat on a padded bench and waited.

Dusky pepper rajahs and suave viceroys, Ministers of the Crown, heads of the Colonial Departments of great spice islands, multi-millionaires of bluff and hirsute aspect, young men with prominent chins at whom the lawyer shook his head, the heritors of great wealth who had come to arrange for the more rapid dispersion of the paternal hoards in drafts upon Paris, flitted rapidly before their eyes.

At last they were admitted. John was introduced and the great financier rose and shook hands vaguely but cordially.

‘We have received all instructions, and with the small formality of signing your own name and writing the signature which you propose to use for the firm's cheques, your account is open, The credit of Fernandez & Co. is of the highest; we shall have the pleasure of honouring your drafts. You have, I

see, hitherto belonged to the Jewellers' Retail Union of London, with which honourable company we have had many and important dealings.'

And so, extremely satisfied with his reception, John Eames was bowed from the door. The lawyer took his leave, assuring him of his readiness to serve him at any moment, night or day.

John was left alone, a dull kind of stupor stealing over him. He must write to Mr. Wentworth; he must assure him that in no way would his loyalty to the J. R. U. be affected. Accordingly, he entered a café, and with a glass of absinthe (which he loathed) at his elbow, he called for much writing-paper and set about his correspondence.

Pudding-faced waiters watched him out of the corners of their inscrutable eyes. He had not touched his 'Pernod Fils,' and lo! already he was breaking out into a perspiration. Perhaps he was a revolutionary, an Anarchist — who could tell? And at the thought the ranks of the *garçons* scattered out more widely, attending the explosion. Some one suggested going for the manager, and when John asked for a piece of blotting-paper the café was mysteriously empty — there was none to answer.

In spite of these drawbacks John wrote to Mr. Wentworth as best he knew how, starting half a score of times, growing disgusted with the baldness of his phrasing, tearing the sheets up and putting the fragments away in his pocket, which more than ever revealed his dangerous quality to the 'Peeping Toms' in aprons and short alpaca jackets looking over the screens or crouching behind the keyholes of the service doors. At last John finished a letter which, though very far from satisfying him, was the best he could compass in the circumstances:

## THE LADY OF THE 100 DRESSES

DEAR MR. WENTWORTH [it ran], — I have had the good fortune to be unexpectedly appointed manager of the well-known Amsterdam house of James Fernandez & Co., with which the J. R. U. has already done some business — I think I may say, to your satisfaction. I am aware that, if you so require, you have the right to call me back to finish my time of notice; but as you have been good enough to grant me so long leave of absence, I can only hope that you will see fit to prolong it. Meantime I am giving every attention to the cutting of the stones with which you entrusted me, and I hope you will allow me to continue to serve you on every occasion as your very faithful and grateful servant.

The house of James Fernandez & Co. is entirely wholesale. I can, therefore, be of use to you in obtaining everything in the Amsterdam market at the very lowest prices exactly as if I were still one of your, I hope, trusted servants.

The position, I need not say, was entirely unsolicited by me. Practically the whole concern will be in my hands, Senor Fernandez being dead, and the present beneficiaries, in addition to myself, two ladies, who are quite unable to carry on such an undertaking. In a manner of speaking it was the card forced. I could not, as a man, honest and generous, refuse.

I trust, therefore, that you will pardon what may at first seem carelessness of your interests. It is not really so. My heart is with the J. R. U. as firmly as ever, and if you honour me with a confidence of any nature whatever you will do me the immense service of enabling me to prove it.

I am, Dear Sir, always your very obdt. servant,

‘JOHN EAMES.’

No, it was certainly not a very good letter, but it was decidedly Eamesian, and the writer felt that of a certainty Mr. Wentworth would understand.

The day had been one of extraordinary triumph, and John was eager to get back to the little inn at Ruiksdyk, where two women would be waiting for him. He hastened to the station, already thinking of the dewy walk across the dunes and the clear sift of the air drawing across from the German Ocean, lifting with it like a perfumed it the day's heat-mist from off the acres upon acres of flowers which separate Haarlem from the mouth of the North Sea Canal.

John, walking happily, his hands in his pockets and humming a light opera air (every one hums in Holland, out of office hours, that is) came up to the platform from which the Bulb Express, as the Haarlem non-stopping is called. At the barrier a hand was laid upon his shoulder and a voice said in his ear as solemnly as a Dutch Calvinist pastor giving out his text: ‘Sir, I arrest you in the name of the law!’

‘And why?’ demanded John, astonished.

The detective spoke in Dutch, but the familiar ring of the words in spite of the gutterals caused the two men to understand each other well enough. Behind the sharp little man with the ferret eyes four huge policemen loomed up.

‘You are the Ernest Altmayer,’ said the detective. ‘It is useless to deny it. We have been following you all day.’

‘My name is John Eames,’ said John. ‘I am a

## THE LADY OF THE 100 DRESSES

British subject. I am here upon an important mission for the Jewellers' Retail Union of London.'

The detective laughed pleasantly.

'Come, Altmayer,' he said, 'we are old friends. We know that it is you in disguise. See, I will prove it to you!' And with both hands he took hold of John's long blonde moustaches — almost the only thing he was proud of in the world in the way of personal appearance.

And the next moment John Eames, who had not fought with his knuckles since boyhood, had knocked the greatest detective in the Low Countries flat on his back.

The four big policemen threw themselves upon him, as was, indeed, their duty; but they handled him tenderly, both then and when they bore him prisonwards. For, as usual, they had no goodwill to the distinguished detective at whose disposal they had been placed; besides which, the name of Britain and British subjects have not yet ceased to be talisman anywhere on the farther side of the narrow seas.

So instead of recrossing the dewy fields, compact with the scent of flowers, to the two watching women in the inn at Ruiksdyk, John Eames, after being asked a great many questions (which he disdained to answer) by a square-breeched police sergeant, was consigned to a solitary cell, where, in the company of indignation, anger and solitude, he was reduced to sitting on the edge of his hard plank-bed and muttering: 'Oh, if Claire only knew! — *if* she only knew, I should not care!'

But Claire knew more of the risks that John had been incurring than John knew himself, and that night the Girl in the White Blouse slept as little as

John did himself — perhaps less. A fact which would certainly have comforted him had he known.

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### A PRISON-BREAKER AND HIS DOUBLE

The acting head of James Fernandez & Co., Brazilian Merchants, was in prison in Amsterdam, not in the big new model prison, but outside on the way to Möön, in one of the little cells which adjoin the Palace of Justice, where suspects are, according to rule, guarded at the disposal of the examining magistrate. It was ridiculous, of course; but then, generally speaking, the men of the police know best. At least, John Eames had assaulted a notable detective in the exercise of his functions; and that is a crime which Dutch law does not deal with in any spirit of levity.

That night Claire had walked half-way across the meadows to the station in order to meet John. She wanted a private talk with him as to Hermance. It was quite obvious that Hermance suspected something. Also that, sooner or later, she would have to be told. It was as to how she would take it, and how Claire and John were to take her taking it, that Claire wished to consult John Eames.

But John came not. A night-jar pursued his prey so closely that he brushed the dew from the solid squares of flowers with his wings. Dor-beetles abused familiarity by first banging into Claire's eyes and then crawling out upon her hair, which was by

much the greater sin. Aeronautic bats in curved monoplanes balanced and swooped overhead, recovering themselves at the last possible moment from the peril of a bad fall.

But there came no John.

Claire stood five minutes on the white-painted bridge, then ten, then twenty, every moment more chilled by the dew, scented by flower-acres, and pelted by insects. But no John. She felt vaguely inclined to blame him. What had kept him in the city, knowing his responsibilities — these two women in lonely Ruiksydk, so sacredly confided to his care? She could see the late *Bulb Rapide* steam into the tiny station, pause a moment, and then hurry away to the south, leaving behind it only one leathern-legged seed-grower, who crossed the fields towards her, whistling and tapping his leg with a useless riding-whip. Distances are so short between stations in flat, well-populated Holland that horses are seldom used. But the country Jacks, with comfortably lined pockets and no more than the strict modicum of brains (*'hobereaux,'* as the French admirably call them), have never given up carrying the riding-whip.

At the sight of Claire this honest fellow, who had no other fault than that the last bottle reamed a little too freely in his noddle, gave a view-hallo and took after her. He thought he had spied some village maiden — even in Holland there are such - like Amaryllis, taking to the dunes, but desiring to be first seen.

But when suddenly at the corner of a wood he came upon this tall, slender girl, distant and haughty as a queen, he could only clumsily uncover and make his excuses.

'What a fool,' he said to himself, 'thus to run after one of the ladies from Amsterdam!'

He could talk glib talk readily enough to the country girls of Lääken and Ruiksydyk, but instinctively he felt that though this mettle was more attractive it was not for him. He did not even know the formula of address. He was a dumb dog, and as he went off did not tap his leathern leggings with his whip any more.

Claire stood a while watching him depart. She had no sense of triumph. She wanted something — somebody — to come to her across the dewy fields. Not a '*hobereau*,' but just London-bred John Eames, alert and smiling. Why had he not come? His business should long ago have been over, hours before that last Bulb Express which she had just seen hurrying through the fields of flowers, shaking behind it white plumes of steam, which vanished quickly in the cool, receptive night air.

Claire turned and walked home very thoughtfully. There was something the matter with John. And her mind turned instinctively to her brother's half-understood absences. She knew how he had begun his career by cheating his own father, though the details had been kept from her. It was true that it had been for a woman's sake, but his father had not accepted that excuse; far from it. Ernest had posted a letter to the old Baron from a distant town. He was (affirmed the letter) an old soldier, an officer in retreat, medalled, respected, full of years, honour, and zeal for the family good name. His son, assistant on one of the *ambulants*, or travelling railway post-offices attached to the *rapides*, had stolen a letter containing one of the Baron's cheques and had somehow managed to cash it. Then the young man

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had confessed to his father, who in his agony had united the family in full council. He was a poor man — all officers with only their half-pay are poor — nevertheless his family would make good the loss, if only time were given them.

Kindly Baron Altmayer consented to wait, and to this day has been awaiting the first instalment. It was not till his son had gone farther afield and been condemned for offences of greater gravity, but no less ingenuity, that the Baron learned how his son had robbed him. Then quite quietly he died of the knowledge. After this Ernest Altmayer had cast himself upon the world under many names. Latterly he had even given proof of the consummation of criminal ability by leading a wholly honest and a wholly dishonest life at the same time. James Fernandez & Co. was not only a genuine but a respected and money-making concern. So had been the office of the first Baron in which young Ernest had made his *début* in crime.

Notwithstanding, he had known through all how to retain the love of his sister. After his father's death Ernest had cared for Claire like a model of brothers.

It was true that of late he had given her second place to Hermance. But he had also told her more, being surer of her love, and perhaps not daring to risk that of Hermance. Indeed Ernest Altmayer had trusted his sister instead of his lawfully wedded wife.

It was therefore with some knowledge of her brother's misdemeanours that Claire had come to visit John Eames in his prison. He had spent his time sending telegram after telegram to London - publicly to the firm, privately to Mr. Wentworth -

and a sharp demand for recognition to lazy Moore at Paris, which John Eames counted upon to bring him over the frontier by the night express, fuming but serviceable.

Still, it was Claire who was with him first.

‘I have committed Hermance to the care of a friend of mine in Haarlem,’ she said, ‘Yungfrau Ten. You have heard me speak of her. If you saw her you would certainly fall in love with her straw-coloured hair, all one floss of ringlets, and her eyes as green as dark emerald. Oh, I *am* thinking of you! Yes, truly. Why should I be here else? But how much happier would you be if it were only Yungfrau Ten? She is not so handsome as Hermance, but, oh, so much lovelier — I only come because you and I can understand each other better. Also you are nearer to me, because — you are suffering because of Ernest.’

‘As you have suffered?’ suggested John Eames.

‘Not at all,’ said the girl quickly. ‘He would have done for me what he has done for Hermance, had I allowed him. But I am happier as I am, living on the little money my father made and left to me. Ernest had never meddled with that. He has been a good brother to me, as he has been a good friend to you, and I cannot and will not say otherwise. But I do not doubt that there is something wrong at the house of Fernandez, of which you may have to bear the blame.’

‘I think not,’ said John. ‘I have been carefully through the books there. They are all in order, and the cashier is a good man. The stones have all been properly come by in the ordinary course of business. The men are good old servants, if a little stiff. I know the breed. No, it is not that.’

‘Then,’ said Claire, with a sudden fall of her

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countenance, 'it must be on our account. Doubtless the police know that I am the daughter of the Baron William, and they may have taken you for my brother. You have been much with us.'

'Luckily for me I have been permitted some happiness in this life.'

Claire gazed at him a moment severely as he stood with one arm on the edge of the white porcelain stove permitted to prisoners not yet condemned — 'preventatively,' as they say over there.

'I must introduce you to Yungfrau Ten, I can see that,' she said emphatically. 'You cannot be foolish enough to wish to get into more trouble because of the sister of Ernest Altmayer, prison-breaker.'

'I could think of no greater happiness,' John answered quietly.

A quick, brightening flush passed over the face of Claire, as if she had been relieved of a secret fear; and then, as if pressing on to another subject, she said, 'You will, of course, find no difficulty in proving that you are not my brother.'

'Why,' laughed John, 'an avalanche of evidence is preparing to descend upon the Dutch police to witness that I am an English citizen, and that till lately I have never been outside my own country; nor, for that matter, inside a prison of any kind.'

'Is there none of the police of London who might recognise you?' demanded Claire.

'Yes' — John recalled the case — 'there is an inspector at Charles Street Station; but -'

'But what?' cried Claire.

'But once I confided to him my intention of committing one crime — perhaps two.'

'What were they?' said Claire. 'I thought you had

told me everything.'

'Oh, they do me no judicial discredit, since the policeman did not believe me; and, indeed, I did *not* commit them. They were robbery and breach of trust.'

And he told her all about the night when first he had stood unveiled to himself in the great pillar of fire so near to the Red Sea of blood. Yet instinctively he said nothing about Sugg's body found on the floor, or Sugg's knife uplifted in his hand as he felt the tense fingers in the darkness clutch his ankles.

'Speak low,' said Claire, as she listened to the laboured breathing of an official listener at the wide keyhole of the cell. And then all at once her voice took on a clearer and more distinct tone. She seemed to syllable her words.

There is one way to disprove your identity with the escaped prisoner Altmayer, whose name unhappily is that of our family. He has been twice or thrice in prison in Paris. No doubt he has been 'Bertilloned' there. Ask for his measurements and description. Your lawyer will get them for you. He is only waiting till I have done to come in to you. If Altmayer is in the least like you — well, all that I can say is that he has greatly changed since I saw him when I was a little girl. And, especially as the head of the firm of Fernandez & Co., English subjects, I should certainly make those police pay sweetly for their stupid mistake.'

This time both Claire and John could hear the rustle at the door, and then the heaving breathing of a man as he backs on all fours out of an uncomfortable position.

'That message will put a double fear on them,' said Claire. 'Here in Amsterdam they are afraid of

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the French detectives mixing in the affair and discovering what asses they can make of themselves. And then the fact that you are the head of Fernandez & Co., with a good bank account and English citizenship, will make them quake to their marrows. Besides, it will prepare them for the coming of your visitors from London.'

But before Claire had time to go, the noise of a discussion in vehement French and elementary Dutch was heard outside. It was not the lawyer who entered. His was not the language which sounded like hailstones on a tin roof.

Instead of him, John and Claire saw Moore come in, his hat tilted on the back of his head, his mouth breathing threatenings and slaughters, not against the Dutch police but to the address of John Eames for being such a fool. But the sight of Claire stopped him dead.

'I beg your pardon,' he said, taking off his hat; 'they are not always so thoughtful where I come from. Well, John Eames, what do you propose to do? I must get back to Paris by the first train. Business, sir — important business.'

It was a peculiarity of Moore's to believe that the very existence of the J. R. U. would be imperilled if he remained twenty-four hours out of smell of the boulevards. He always came to London with a rush, and retained his cabin on the way over for the return journey. Accordingly he was immediately loud and vehement with John, imperative with the chief gaoler, contemptuous of the charges, so that he finished by making himself so objectionable that the authorities, convinced that they had made a mistake, were on the point of allowing their prisoner out on bail. But at that moment from England there

arrived Miss A. Allison, together with the famous Scotland Yard detective Cassidy. Miss A. Allison was the bearer of many valuable orders for the firm of James Fernandez & Co., all of which were to pass through the hands of their esteemed colleague and friend John Eames, as a slight mark of the confidence subsisting between them for twenty years. At this Moore, who felt his prerogatives encroached upon, could hardly be brought to read Mr. Wentworth's letter, but stamped his way back to the station, vowing that he would never, never do a kind action again.

Miss A. Allison said nothing, but yielded the floor to Mr. Cassidy, a vigorous, lissom man with hard, uneasy eyes, of whom the Dutch police seemed to stand in immense awe. Did he not speak their language — which in itself was a marvel?

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘I have all the pieces and photographs of Mr. John Eames, for twenty years first assistant with the Jewellers' Retail, Union of Regent Street, London, W. If necessary, the head of that great concern will come over and bear witness himself. But I think the papers and evidence which I bring will be sufficient — and this friendly method cost less to the Dutch Government, which naturally will have to pay the costs of an action for false imprisonment.’

At this the Amsterdam law folk quaked, knowing that they would be sharply dealt with in high quarters if by their ignorance such damages had to be paid.

‘But how did this Englishman come into possession of the properties of the firm of James Fernandez & Co.?’ they asked.

‘Presently, presently; one thing at a time is our

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London rule,' said Cassidy, putting them down like troublesome children with an easy motion of his hand. 'That is this young lady's part.'

'And right willing am I to speak when such is required of me,' said Miss A. Allison, with the air of one who bides her time and is too sure of success to hasten the matter in hand.

The Scotland Yard detective swept on.

I have also received from our correspondent in Paris - I may say our highly appreciated colleague - Dr. Jacques Bertillon, the photographs and measurements of the late *détenu* Altmayer. He was good enough to send along one of his best assistants with the compliments of Monsieur Lépine himself. He is now below, waiting to be called. We had better let him get off again to Paris. Monsieur Lépine only lent him to me in order to put this little matter right.'

So the photographs of Altmayer in the Conciergerie of Paris and at the Ile de Rè were exhibited. Search was made for certain duly catalogued marks on John's body. He was required to print his fingers, and especially his thumbs, in a sticky black substance like printers' ink. Not one of these indications bore the least resemblance to those of Altmayer. Whereupon the assistant from the Anthropological Bureau of Paris bowed, and went out with scornful smiles breaking through his courtesy of diplomat. Not thus did they order things in France.

'And now, if you please, Miss Allison,' said Mr. Cassidy, who alone of all present had been shaken hands with by the Frenchman, murmuring as he did so, 'We in London will do as much for you the next time.'

'Au revoir! 'Mr. Lépine's agent had answered as he smilingly cast a contemptuous eye over the Dutch officers before shrugging his shoulders and going out with his papers in his pockets. It almost seemed as if these two distinguished foreigners were conducting the affair, and certainly the Amsterdam police (men of peace) acquiesced without a question.

'Some time ago I brought over very large orders for coloured diamonds from the house of Fernandez & Co.,' said Miss A. Allison. 'Here are the invoices, receipts, and other papers. They were so well filled that our Mr. Eames, who has been with the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., ever since I was a bairn sucking milk from a bottle through a thrippeny rubber tube, bought the goodwill of Fernandez & Co. and took possession. I am now sent over with another hundred thousand pounds' worth of our orders for the coming season, of which every penny will pass through the hands of Mr. John Eames, here present, standing before me. Know him? Do I know him?' she exclaimed in answer to a sudden question. 'I know him as well as a respectable lass from Dunfermline, engaged to be married to a rising lawyer, can be supposed to know any man that she sees a hundred times in the day. And this I will say for Mr. Eames, that it is the unanimous opinion of the lady members of the staff that John Eames has behaved himself infinitely better than any bulge-waistcoated, red-nosed, fringe-faced - '

'That will do, thank you, Miss Allison,' interrupted the detective sharply, just in time to stop the too clinching substantive which would have followed this array of double-barrelled adjectives.

'And me just coming to the interesting part!' said Miss Allison disappointedly. 'It would have been a

blessing of Providence to you Dutchmen to have heard God's truth juist once from the lips of a truth-speaking, even-doon lassie from Dunfermline.'

'Better not,' said Mr. Cassidy, smiling; 'but I am sure that Mr. Eames will be grateful to you all the same. As I certainly am.'

'That's a' richt,' said Miss A. Allison, 'as long, that is, as he says nocht about me having come so often overseas to meet with him. For it was all in the way of business, Mr. Cassidy. But you, being Irish, will no doubt understand the feelings of Donald Ross, him being red-headed and jealous by nature. For I have read in a book that the Heelanters are sib to the Irish, which, asking your pardon, Mr. Cassidy, may God. Forbid! At the same time, I'll be best pleased, at any rate till the house furnishings are in and the bit operation before the minister brought to a satisfactory conclusion, if nothing of my wanderings gets to the ears of Donald Ross. Jealousy is a cankersome evil, though *I* would not be jealous of a score of Donald Rosses — me kennin' two-three other lads that would be glad of the chance at me. But in a man it's juist a feeling the poor craiturs cannot help. Bless me, they make a sang ye never hear the end o' about the least bit naething — a thing a well-brought-up Scots lass would have mair judgment than ever to mention at all, except maybe in the way o' 'cast-up,' after a year or two's experience.'

'You can keep your mind quite easy,' said Superintendent Cassidy. 'Mr. Eames will be, as usual, discreet; and as for me, it is my business. Besides, it is the only way to keep us Irish quiet, to enlist us to hunt with the hounds.'

Under the able guidance of Mr. Superintendent

Cassidy of Scotland Yard, marred rather than aided by cohorts of Dutch policemen, all now eager to save their faces, the complete state of affairs of Messrs. James Fernandez & Co. was laid bare.

Originally established by a branch of the great Jewish banking house of Fernandez of Bayonne and Bordeaux, it had risen to its widest extension under a convert to Christianity. On his death it had been bought with the estate money of the late Baron Altmayer, since when it had been left largely under the hands of trustworthy subordinates, with no interest in the concern but that of drawing their salaries. Consequently the profits had considerably fallen away. Still, it could not be shown that on any occasion the present Ernest Altmayer had had any difficulties with Dutch law. The business was duly registered in his sister's name, with the recent addition of that of John Eames. The capital upon which it was conducted was that of the late Baron. Even the appearances of that amateur in crime, the present Baron Ernest, had been few and far between. It was the opinion of the staff, as well as that of the lawyers and bankers, that a London professional with a clean record and twenty years' experience had been placed in the director's chair to defend the interests of Miss Claire Altmayer, as well as the property which had come down to her from her father.

Accordingly the charges against John Eames fell to the ground, and many persons in that neat little dried-up Puddocks' Pond which is the capital city of Holland were required to alter their ideas as often as Cassidy's Irish temper got the better of him. But the explanation of the whole did not appear till, on board the *Princess Victoria*, flying British colours

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and commanded by Captain Andrew McCosh from Port Glasgow, Mr. Cassidy calmly divested himself of his wig and general make-up under the astonished eyes of John Eames.

*'Every man his own dectective!'* he explained calmly as he packed the things into the flat leathern bag which he disposed upon the broad belt about his waist. 'Now, if you and Claire do not see what remains for you to do,' he added, 'why, I shall have to become a Dutch orthodox parson and come here and marry you by force!'

'Then all that you proved to these Dutchmen was a lie!' gasped John, who, having begun to feel his feet on firm ground again, all at once knew himself swimming over incredible depths.

'Of course every word of it was true,' said Altmayer cheerfully. 'I had the papers, that was all, and they were good for the face of them. I pointed out the truth because it was known only to me, you see. The lawyer, the banker-man, the people from the house of Fernandez swore to the truth because it *was* the truth.'

'Then the money does really belong to Claire, and came to her from her father?'

'Certainly,' said Altmayer; 'the old man could look out for himself, but I was always scrupulous about Claire. But in the meantime I shall expect you to be good to Hermance, and let her run up quite a little account against you in the matter of new dresses. I will settle with the house as soon as I get to Brazil or Bolivia. It's a gem of a place, La Paz! Still better Potosi. You can live well and grow fat on a shilling a day in Cochabamba. Rather hilly maybe, but considerably out of the world. Now at least you owe it to me to look after Hermance till the day when I

wire you to meet me at Fishguard. Then you will charter a tug, put all the hundred dresses on board, together with Hermance herself. Claire and you will come along to see us off. I count on you not to go back single. In fact it will be my duty as a loving brother (whom business may detain some time out of Europe) to witness the ceremony.'

'But suppose,' said John mournfully, 'that Miss Claire will not have me?'

'Have you asked her?' said the brother, lathering away at his face.

'No,' said John, still more lamentably.

'Then take it for granted. That is generally the easiest way, and what women like the best.'

'But how?' said John, still timidly.

'Why, when you get my wire, say to her very casually, I am taking Hermance over to Fishguard to her husband. You are to come also, to be fitted out for being left in my charge.'

'How so?' she will say.'

'By getting a husband who will teach you to stop at home and look after the property while your brother Ernest gets himself made Dictator of Bolivia!' And, believe me, she will come at a word.'

John shook his head sadly, as if he greatly doubted the excellent prophesy. But Altmayer finished shaving, and began to dab his chin with some of Hermance's powder, taken from his small packet of make-up.

'There is no use shooting your pet lamb,' he said sententiously, 'when it will follow you home.'

At this moment Captain Andrew McCosh allowed a warning roar to escape from the syren of the British packet-ship *Princess Victoria*, and John made a wild dash for the plank which led shore-ward.

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'I have made him promise to look after Hermance,' Altmayer chuckled to himself. And knowing into what a fruitful soil his words would fall, the sham detective laughed as the vessel backed out, turned widely, and began to head for Harwich.

But John Eames, safe on shore and still panting after his rapid escape, muttered to himself, 'It is all very easy to talk about taking things for granted. Still, her brother, clever as he is, does not know Claire as I do.'

*But did he?*

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE MURDER IN THE PRÉ CATALAN

It is strange that of all the adventures of John Eames that which seemed to him the most terrible (save only that of the Pillar of Fire) was brought about by something very slight in itself. Hermance had not nearly enough dresses, and those she had were not of the latest fashion. To supply this want it was necessary that she should go to Paris, and also, consequently of equal necessity, that Claire should accompany her.

The visit was not to be a long one. Ordering, fitting on, even finishing, could all be done in a week by a little arrangement and by choosing the stuffs beforehand. Given ten days all told, they could be back again at the Central Station in Amsterdam well on time. Such at least was the plan.

But when Paris gets hold of two fine young women with money to burn, plans are apt to go by the board. It was not the fault of Hermance — at least, not directly. It certainly was no ways the fault of Claire. But cutters-out and tryers-on, *modistes* and milliners, finding that Hermance had a sound account at the agency of Fernandez & Co. of Amsterdam, opened wide their hospitable doors to let the pair in, and after many insistencies reluctantly bowed them out. John Eames knew well this kind of customer, and after one of these visits he had even ventured to exchange a surcharged and covert wink with the great Mr. Salmon himself.

Now, in his new position of financier to the party,

the reports of the drafts of the Baroness Hermance upon the Paris agency of James Fernandez & Co. caused John Eames to add his solemn shake of the head to the serious face of his cashier, who as part of his duty laid the statement before him.

'It is drawing somewhat seriously on our reserves,' ventured grey-haired Hendrik Roos, 'and it is not possible to take the amount from current account.'

John rubbed his chin and was silent. He saw no present means of stopping the leakage. He might indeed write to Claire, but he was not at all certain that Hermance would listen to a word from her sister-in-law.

'The sub-director at the bank said to me the other day,' continued Hendrik Roos, 'that he hoped our new head was not launching into any doubtful speculations.'

'Well?' said John Eames.

'I answered that you were not the man for that — that you had far too thorough a knowledge of the English market. This quieted him, but I could see that he was uneasy.'

And it was this knowledge which made John Eames pack up his traps and take the afternoon express for Paris. He had thought first of sending a wire to Claire to advise her of his coming, but on the whole he resolved that it was better to be summoned on business, and then simply to call upon the ladies.

He had no doubts of Claire, but sundry items in the Paris account had caused him to suspect that all was not going well with Hermance. As to this he resolved to be fixed before going farther. He arrived therefore at the Hotel Seguin on the Elysées, where

the ladies were staying, rind took possession of the room which had been reserved for him on the same floor.

As he superintended the removal of his baggage from the 'galleried' four-wheeler in which he had come from the station, he saw on a seat in the hall a tall, dark-eyed man with curls of unnatural blue-black. He was attired in a frock-coat suit of that particular brand of newness which goes with the adjective 'ready-made.' The man was fumbling nervously with a cigarette, which the regulations of the hotel forbade him to light. The cashier watched him from his desk, and the call-boy, in league with his comrade of the lift, squinted at him round corners in the hope of improving his position at the Seguin by a timely warning. They had already searched his umbrella in the outer hall for bombs, but found nothing except a couple of large rents, through which, it is true, the bombs might have fallen. But of this the two enterprising youths had no proof. It was a serious thing for them, therefore, when they were both called away at once. The 'anarchist' might escape, or, again, the cashier might be the lucky man, springing upon him in their absence just as he was about to demolish the chandelier.

At the Seguin John Eames received such scant attention that he was compelled to ask the reason. The man in the hall was waiting for the Baroness Hermance!

At first John Eames thought (and naturally) of Ernest Altmayer and his many disguises. But this man was six good inches taller; and, besides, Altmayer would have known better than to wait for his wife under the fire of a dozen pairs of suspicious

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eyes in the hall of a Parisian hotel, with the agents of Monsieur Lépine passing in couples every minute.

John looked over the banisters, which were tapesteried instead of being made of plain, clean mahogany as in an English hotel.

The man below was still in waiting, twiddling with another cigarette, though the *débris* of a dozen others lay unsmoked at his feet. He was obviously nervous as to the coming interview, and yet somehow determined.

Strangely enough, John also was stricken with sudden loathing of the man. with the shining ringlets and white nervous hands, on the long fingers of which sham jewels sparkled. He could almost have sworn that he had found the cause of the leakage in the Mynheer Hendrik Roos's Paris accounts. John was the last man in the world to play the spy. But on this occasion he went down immediately, and a little commerce with the head porter permitted him the use of a small ticket-office with a glass door, from which he could see the whole of the ground floor of the Hotel Seguin, the flight of steps up which the ladies must come, the waiting nervous messenger, the spying domestics, and even M. Seguin himself seated at bezique with his wife in their own comfortable parlour.

As time passed, the watcher on the sofa grew more uneasy. He had doubtless some vague presentiment of danger. Once or twice he reached for his hat as if to flee. Once or twice he made a step towards the cashier's bureau as if to ask a question. But he abandoned both intentions without carrying them further.

However, he did continually pass his swift and delicate fingers through his hair and beard with an

instinctive caressing gesture. His eyes, shaded with long black lashes, showed in the early gas-light like a woman's darkened with kohl. Through them he kept glancing continually at the glass door and at the heads of the people ascending and descending the steps of the Hotel Seguin.

At last from the poplar-fringed avenue below there came the sound of a carriage stopping. Then quick voices made John's heart beat, a ripple of laughter (which was Claire's), and the glass doors of the Hotel Seguin opened as it were of themselves. The junior call-boy (Alphonse-Pierre) and the senior manager of the lift (Leopold-Marie) held the two halves wide, saluting as the ladies entered. They would not have missed the show for a week's wages, and it was possible that something might even yet come their way.

Hermance swept in, superb in her beauty, turning her head neither to right nor to the left. Behind, her arms full of parcels, and laughing at some jest of which the flavour had not yet evaporated, Claire Altmayer appeared.

At sight of Hermance the man in waiting rose, but as Claire came behind with the parcels he sank back again into his seat.

It is probable that he might have waited another occasion for speech with her had not Hermance herself assisted him. She paused at the window of the cashier's desk to give some directions as to parcels, dresses, and hats yet to be delivered. Some were to be paid for by the hotel on arrival, others were to be sent to her room.

Meanwhile Claire had passed on to their apartments on the first floor. The lift-boy, seeing her so ready at carrying parcels, had conceived so low

an opinion of her that he consistently kept out of her way, and allowed her to climb to her chamber unassisted. For which neglect our active Claire cared not a button. Indeed, she had been so long accustomed to yield the first place to Hermance that she hardly noticed the lift-boy's cutting omission.

But on this occasion, after giving her instructions to the cashier and waving a friendly greeting to Monsieur and Madame, who had looked up from their game, the Baroness made a rapid signal to the man on the seat to approach. If she felt any awkwardness, it was certainly not evident on the expression of Hermance's face.

On the other hand, the man trembled violently as he rose to obey.

'It is none of my fault, Madame,' he said. 'I was made to come here. He would have killed me else. I wish you no harm.'

'He? Who?' said the Baroness haughtily.

'The man you once knew,' murmured the nervous waiter, clasping his hands together, 'who says that he loved you once, and you him. He has letters to prove it. I do not know. How should I?'

'How much does he want this time?' Hermance spoke calmly. 'A thousand francs — two thousand? No, I will not ask for the letters. Of course he has had them photographed. But bid him be careful. I have a husband who does not stick at trifles!'

'None who dares show his face in this country,' was what he bade me say. I beg your ladyship's pardon, but that was the message I was to give you when you mentioned your husband. He knew you would.'

Hermance walked steadily to the cashier's desk, borrowed a pen, and, extracting a cheque-book from

her handbag, wrote a cheque to a name which the eager *cassier* could not read. Then she took it up without blotting and crossed the floor, waving the narrow oblong to and fro in her fingers till it was dry. Then she handed it to the man who had been waiting, as one who gives alms

He glanced at it a moment, and blotted it carefully on a scrap of much-used reddish pad out of his pocket-book.

Lastly, after stowing away the cheque in his inside pocket, he added in a tone lower than before, 'I was to tell you, Madame, that you are to meet him at the Pré Catalan, where you will go with your maid or your sister to drink milk to-morrow morning at eight. You must not be late.'

'Anything else?'

'Nothing else.'

Hermance bowed slightly and was gone, but the whole conversation had passed so near to the glass door behind which stood John Eames that he had not lost one word.

Slightly ashamed of the part he had played, but harking back upon the theologically erroneous but entirely human proposition that the end justifies the means, John came forth and followed the man to the door of the hotel. But he was not quick enough. The messenger had already vanished, cutting across the steady surging traffic till his long dark figure was lost among the trees behind the Palais de Glace.

There was nothing for it but to return. John was never fitted, either by nature or training, to play hide-and-seek with such a man in the crowded and tumultuary streets of Paris.

A few minutes later John sent a note to Hermance asking when Claire and she would be ready to

receive him. He would, he said, leave all news to be told when he saw his friends again. A verbal message came back to ask if he could be ready in a quarter of an hour to dine with them in their own apartments.

It took John all his time to unpack and dress for dinner. But his natural carefulness in keeping everything in its place and his acquired swiftness of manipulation enabled him to be on time, his boxes stowed under the bed, and even his shaving apparatus put neatly away. He took one swift glance at himself in the mirror, and with some slight approval allowed that no one who had seen the starving man of York Street or the tragic figure which had stood one tremendous instant with uplifted knife in the full glare of electricity in the J. R. U., Ltd., could possibly have recognised the well-groomed man with the finely-cut features who locked his door behind him and pocketed the key before going across to rap at No. 10 at the hour arranged.

Claire was already on her feet, moving impatiently about the room, but Hermance was calm. She only smiled up at him in her queenly way, extended a hand, and said carelessly, 'You have come just in time. Claire and I were talking of going to drink warm milk to-morrow morning at Pré Catalan. Will you come and take care of Claire? As for me, I follow the treatment of Doctor Cassin. I rest for an hour or so after drinking down my two demi-litres. But that need not hinder you. I prefer to be alone.'

And then John Eames, who had thought in common with his sex that because a woman is beautiful she must of necessity be brainless, began to conceive a fresh idea of the Baroness's powers.

Never had they spent so radiant an evening. Claire indeed was quietly happy, and appeared satisfied with the explanation which John gave of his sudden appearance among them. She had always been brought up among business people, and the word to her mind covered a multitude of appearances and disappearances, equally inexplicable.

Never had Hermance appeared so strikingly beautiful. Yet John Eames preferred Claire and honestly thought her the more attractive. But never before had he seen Hermance sitting opposite to him in evening dress, a froth of coral-white neck and creamy lace, her rounded chin sunk in her palms, and her eyes dark and wonderful expressive black eyes — the rarest of all — fixed upon him. It was a memorable time for John Eames, and had he not known the fidelity of Hermance to her husband he might have thought strange things.

Yet in spite of the beauty of the Baroness it was to Claire that his eyes turned. Once or twice he caught up and treasured a similar glance before she had time to look away. And John was grateful, for he felt himself able to protect the two women he cared for most in the world.

As Hermance said, he had indeed arrived *apropos*. Now John was not by any means a fool. He was aware that Hermance knew nothing of the life of her husband, of his crimes, or his prison adventures. She knew him only as the good and over-indulgent husband, and it struck John how possible it was that, though she was now the best and most faithful of wives, Ernest Altmayer knew as little of his wife's past life as she did of his. A thought that he would do well to take his revolver

with him to-morrow to the Pré Catalan mingled with the lightness of his talk, occasionally replying to Claire but mostly to Hermance. She was a wonder, that woman, and it was with the utmost difficulty that John could persuade himself of the reality of what he had heard from behind the door of the summer excursionists' ticket-office.

As may be imagined, John Eames slept but little that night. On going up he had at once examined his Mauser pistol, only to find that by some strange oversight he had left it unloaded, and, further, had omitted to bring any of the little packets of aluminium 'carriers' with him.

Nevertheless John resolved to take it. Few men, he thought, will risk the off-chance of an unloaded revolver directed at their chests. In the morning very early he could hear the quick, nervous footsteps of Claire and the gay laughter of Hermance as they made themselves ready for their distant pleasuring.

John Eames could not tell what to think. Obviously Hermance had made an appointment to go to a rendezvous without the knowledge of either her husband or his sister. Yet she was as gay and cheerful as if she were really only going to drink milk and gather flowers among the Catalan Meadows, as these are understood near the great Paris racecourse.

The carriage came to the door — one belonging to the hotel, with a coachman in a sort of livery.

'It is better if we have to keep him long waiting,' Hermance explained gaily. 'He does not swear.' But John, thinking of his promise to Mynheer Hendrik Roos, cashier to James Fernandez & Co., thought sadly of the bill which would have to be met at the Hotel Seguin.

They drove rapidly past the Waterfall to the show dairies upon the Pré Catalan, whither great and celebrated society ladies (and others yet more celebrated), drove each morn to partake of the produce of one particular cow. These patient animals might have been proud of the names stencilled in blue at the entrance of their stalls. For the proprietor entered into a covenant (which he occasionally kept) that the whole remaining produce of that cow should be delivered during the day at the lady's house. Such, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were the amusements of cow-keepers and ladies' physicians. There were also, as in the present instance, ladies who went thither purely out of curiosity, as one might go to a *matinée* or to a picture gallery.

'Tell the man to wait for us at the Waterfall,' said Hermance. 'I shall stroll quietly back by myself and join you there. You two won't mind, I know.'

But as soon as she was gone John could sit still no longer. He asked Claire point blank, 'Is there no one whom you know here under whose care I could leave you?'

Claire looked surprised and a little indignant.

'I presume I have been long enough in the world to look after myself,' she said quickly.

'Go! I am certainly not keeping you.'

'It is to follow Hermance,' he explained, 'to see that — that no harm overtakes her.' John stammered as he spoke.

'Ah, then go — a thousand times go!'

'I promised her husband,' said John.

'Indeed!' said Claire, 'even when it is obvious that Hermance wishes to be alone? I should have thought, if she had needed anybody, I might have

been considered the proper person.'

Then John Eames, who had so strongly reasoned with himself, and so firmly decided that in no case would he say a word to Claire, cut the string of the package and laid the whole secret before her.

Claire heard him to an end, and it was with a very serious face indeed that she laid her hand upon John's and said, 'I beg your pardon — forgive me! Let us both follow Hermance at once.'

She rose from the little marble-topped table and they passed out together.

Hermance was nowhere to be seen. But, then, she was not a personality to escape unnoticed, walking alone. So John Eames, slipping a piece of a hundred sous into the hand of a man in a bottle-green suit with yellow facings and brass buttons (like a Great Northern Hotel attendant), asked for news of the tall and handsome lady who had entered in their company, but who had left them to walk back to the carriage at the Waterfall. They had rather thoughtlessly allowed her to go on alone. But now (John continued) this lady — her sister — was growing anxious about her. The man glanced keenly at the two, but the hard definiteness of the five-franc piece in his pocket decided him to point out a path in a direction at right angles to the direct way to the carriage.

It became instantly obvious to both of them, though Claire as yet had said nothing about her side of the case, that Hermance had taken this woodland path in order to escape them.

John's thought was that she had gone to meet her husband, whom he knew to be in France, a man banned and tracked. But at this easy explanation Claire shook her head.

‘There is somebody — somebody whom she knew before her marriage, some one who has power over her,’ she said. ‘I have known it a long while. Ernest does not know. She does not spend all the money she draws from the bank on her dresses. She makes a cloak of that. But there is something else. What it is she will tell no one, but I can hear her sobbing late in the night.’

‘It shall be our business to find out and rid her of the terror,’ said John.

‘There are cases where we may only do harm,’ said Claire; ‘every woman knows that — and Earnest is so fierce and sudden. We must be careful to spoil her life by drawing suspicion upon her. Be sure that it has nothing to do with Earnest. It is only some hold which an unscrupulous man has over her, perhaps from the days of her childhood.’

Paths run very close together at that part of the woods, and it occurred to John and Claire to separate a little in order that they might see farther on either side, but without, however, quite losing sight the one of the other.

It was John who first caught sight of Hermance. So signalling Claire to stand still where she was, he felt that his empty pistol was in his hip-pocket, and so began to dodge, with his eye on every tree thick enough to protect him, and ducking into the tufted underbrush where in summer afternoons the *gardes champêtres* watch for their prey.

Claire had remained in her place, waiting, feeling probably that this was an affair of the other sex. As he came closer, Hermance threw herself on her knees at the feet of a man — not the man of the oily locks, but a strong, clean-shaven, burly man of forty-five or fifty, with the permanent crowsfoot of a

frown deep on his brow. They had evidently been discussing something, and Hermance had got the worst of it.

'It will not do,' John heard him say in loud tones. 'I have had enough of mere promises. You must pay me half a million francs, dismiss the Englishman from Fernandez & Co. (which is my place, at any rate) and install me there with a free hand, or — by the head of your mother, I will deliver up your husband to the police. You will never see him again. He is too great a prison-breaker even to be sent to Ile de Rè. He will go straight to Guyenne, and there he will die or be shot trying to escape. You have heard my financial terms, but in addition you owe me something more. This which I have asked is a mere matter of detail. I do not ask for the paltry gold for its own sake, but in order that I may be able to support you as I could not do in the old days. Remember that I am still your husband. You are my wife. I can claim you when I will. You may be mine again sooner than you think. I am not the man to say one thing and do another. I demand that you shall return to me, and that as soon as I am put in possession of what is as good as my own — the place of master at Fernandez & Co.'s!'

'You are a very devil!' said Hermance, standing up and facing him. 'How often have I paid your brother for my poor freedom, my little happiness? A hundred times at least! I married Ernest when I thought you were dead. You yourself sent me the lying notice of your death.'

The man laughed.

'A good trick,' he cried, 'for a poverty-stricken husband when he knows that there is a rich Baron Altmayer waiting to marry his wife!'

It was then that John interfered. He stepped forward with his Mauser in his hand, the bolt drawn and his finger on the trigger. But, though brave personally, John Eames had no idea of the swift decision of the class of international adventurers to which the man belonged.

He had leaped sidelong in a moment and hidden his slim body behind a tree. The next the shining muzzle of a revolver peeped out, and from under the crotch of a branch John could see the chill blue eye of his enemy peering at him. Then the man spoke, with a slight Teutonic accent.

'Now I will show you what I will do, Mr. Principal-Partner-and-Managing-Director Eames. In our country we have one punishment for spies, and as a lesson to this lady she shall now inflict it upon you. There is nothing in your pistol. And why? Because you did not fire when you had a chance. The Mauser is a weapon of extreme precision — in the right hands. Hers are the right hands. I have taught her myself. I will therefore take it and load it carefully. I have what you call 'the carrier' ready in my pocket. I can empty pistols, though I do not usually steal diamonds; but it was certainly careless to leave your large portmanteau unlocked in your chamber. The manager of James Fernandez & Co. ought to have known better! Hands up there, or you are a dead man! Now let your pistol fall to the ground. I shall charge it, and then this lady will have the extreme goodness to blow out your brains. They are little use to yourself, and can be none to anybody else!'

John, knowing that there was nothing else for it, let his pistol fall. He had some hope of keeping his end up, if the man held to his promise of charging the Mauser. At any rate he would exchange shots;

and who could say with whom the luck would finally remain?

The tall, broad-shouldered man lifted the pistol. Calmly and feathly he thrust the cartridges down into the steel embracement of the spring-bottomed reservoir.

'Now,' he said, handing the loaded pistol to Hermance, 'have the goodness to shoot that man dead! You used to be an obedient wife. I should ask you to do the same to Ernest Altmayer, but that it is a sweeter vengeance to send him to the glaring hothouse sheds on the Devil's Island! Now, I shall count one, two, three, as we used to do in the old target cellar till the reek of the powder made you sneeze. Ah, those days, good wife, they will come back again! You have been a false widow too long - '

*'Then I shall make her a true one, torturer of women!'* a voice cried behind John Eames — a voice not loud but vivid rather with the stern intensity of an executioner.

And, lo! there flashed from beneath the armpit of John Eames, still standing with his hands above his head, a long triangular knife. John heard the hilt strike dull and heavy against the man's breastbone. A revolver went harmlessly off, and Hermance, letting fall John's Mauser, fell in a swoon into the arms of John Eames.

This time she was a widow indeed.

And as John bore her to the carriage where Claire was already waiting for them she partly recovered, and walked the last two hundred yards on her own feet. As they drove homewards John thought of the dead blackmailer lying among the fallen leaves with the triangular knife-thrust in his breast. He had indeed seen no one, but the voice was the voice of

the Baron Ernest Altmayer. And though one cannot swear to voices, John felt that the sooner the whole party found itself back at Ruiksdyk or Edam in the Zuider Zee the less trouble would be likely to arise.

Luckily his conscience was good — so far, that is, as Hermance was concerned — but the thought of the unseen watcher, ready with knife and pistol, made his nerves quiver, and he wondered if he had rightly chosen when he left the Counter No. 1 at the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., for the chiefship of Messrs. James Fernandez & Co.

Not many business men had such a sleeping partner. And yet in some ways this was a comfort to John Eames, for he reflected that Altmayer, having made so sudden an end of his enemy, was not the man to let suspicion fall upon the three innocent folk whom alone he loved.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DONALD ROSS'S FOREIGN TRAVELS

Mr. Wentworth, manager of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., was, in his line of life, an important man. He was no mere servant at so much a year. He had a great deal of money well invested, and was one of the largest shareholders in the company itself. He was also a bachelor, and for all family belongings he possessed but one nephew, long forbidden his doors, whom he called 'Son of the Horse-leech.' Wentworth junior was a young man who knew what rich bachelor uncles were for. He cherished a deep spite against his Uncle George because he so thoughtlessly and with such uncalled-for brutality of manner refused to fulfil his part of the bargain. Such people do not deserve to have nephews with expensive tastes in dress and billiard-playing.

Now Mr. Wentworth was a highly estimable gentleman, and it is not fitting that he should bear up any longer under the imputation which was unintentionally thrown out in the first of John Eames's adventures — to wit, that Sugg the watchman, who dozed on the back premises during the day and got drunk there at night, held a painful secret over his head. At least the secret was not personal to Mr. Wentworth.

Yet in a certain way it was true. For Herbert Wentworth had found himself compelled to marry the daughter of Sugg, to whom (for life has ever its contradictions) he behaved on the whole very

decently. It was his uncle who had done the compelling, yet had sternly and without due cause refused Mr. Herbert what he considered the reward of virtue — a suitable allowance. On the contrary, what did this perverse and reprobate old man do but send the money weekly to his wife, and require from her grocer's and butcher's receipts as to how it was spent. Lack of natural affection could surely no further go.

Mr. Wentworth had, furthermore, forbidden his nephew Herbert to come near the J. R. U. on any pretext - a command which, of course, made the lighted windows on Regent Street the constant goal of Mr. Herbert's nightly airing.

Besides, he had to wait outside till his wife Mary Ellen Wentworth (late Sugg) had finished her conference with *his* uncle or *her* father. Herbert was certain that they were discussing him to his discredit, and the thought goaded him almost to madness. He, the nephew of the most prominent man at the J. R. U., the sole relative, and, as it were, heir-apparent to the goodwill, to be compelled to pound up and down the greasy back street into which the lodge of his father-in-law Sugg opened, while Mary Sugg, his wedded wife, sat snugly inside pretending not to like the flavour of warm scotch with which her father's chamber was perfumed.

It might certainly have been called hard on any man, and Herbert would often have burst in upon the comfortably chatting pair, except for the fact that Mr. Wentworth senior would certainly have been informed of his visit on the morrow.

For Sugg was now a true and faithful servant of the firm. He had not forgotten that terrible night

when, falling on the floor just in time, in a drunken stupor half real and half feigned, he had been kicked under the table by John Eames. Yet it was not Sugg but Herbert Wentworth who had opened the cases and done up the jewellery into compact packets for carrying off. He had (so the watchman believed) deliberately kept sober himself in order to get his father-in-law into trouble. This was the 'unpardonable sin.' So ever afterwards Sugg would have nothing to do with his son-in-law, Mr. Herbert Wentworth. He debarred his access to the back door of the J. R. U. as strictly as his uncle forbade him the front.

And yet Herbert Wentworth felt himself peculiarly fitted to conduct just such a business. His fingers itched for the clears-cut facets of the cut stones, the neat piles of gold in the safe, the docketed sheaves of banknotes — even the old settings, thrown aside in the repairing shops like so much dirt, attracted him. Ah, if only — he knew a place — yes, and not so far off either. And as he slouched away, Leicester Square and its brilliant northern purlieus drew him invincibly.

He looked into a window full of artificial gems, and when after a moment a hand tapped him on the shoulder, Herbert Wentworth jumped a yard. He had never had any dealings with the police, owing principally to the saving power of his uncle, which had eased various little matters of irregular finance when Herbert Wentworth was a clerk at the J. R. U. Well might the Union be proud of Mr. Wentworth. Not vain was his boast that 'it never lost a penny by him.' But on several occasions his private purse had suffered considerably owing to the ingenious manipulations of his nephew. Or course, that could

not go on. Mr. Wentworth was not the man to involve himself with his beloved J. R. U. So a day had come when he had implacably bidden his nephew go forth and do his own stealing like a man.

But it is certain that Master Herbert would have suffered more severely than he did if the matter of pretty Mary Sugg's liking for the rascal had not come out at the time. Mr. George was sorry for Mary, and so the matter was adjusted on the basis of a weekly allowance and weekly house accounts received and submitted — a dastardly plan, which Herbert in vain tried to turn to his advantage by visiting the tradesmen to arrange for a percentage on expenditure. But all in vain. His cruel uncle had been there before him. Yes, in some men there are such depths of guile.

But the hand that was laid on Herbert Wentworth's shoulder was neither that of a burly detective nor that of a stout man in official blue.

He saw a tall man with glossy hair, so long that it was almost in ringlets, with a hesitating manner, a pale and bloodless face, and a ready-made frock-coat suit, ending in very bad boots.

'You Mr. Wentworth?' said the man deferentially.

'What if I am?'

'The nephew of Mr. George Wentworth of the Jewellers' Retail Union?'

'And much good it has done me!'

The last sentence came with a snarl from the lips of Herbert Wentworth.

'Aye, aye,' said the man soothingly. 'We don't all get our deserts in this here world. It would be a better one if we did.'

'I must know you better before I can say,' snapped Herbert. 'But look here, what do you want?'

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You did not tap me on the shoulder because of your love for my uncle. Come, out with it!

The slender, ringleted man sidled and coughed, indicating by a series of nods that the matter was really too delicate for that public place where they found themselves.

'I have a message,' he began, 'but - '

'Well, what is it?' said Herbert, who with difficulty kept the natural violence of his temper intact when any stranger appeared to meddle with his private and often dusky concerns.

'It concerns others than myself,' said the ringleted man; 'but there's a public-house just round the corner that might suit.'

'You pay?' inquired Herbert, the state of whose finances scarcely allowed of treating himself, still less chance strangers encountered at shop windows. The house appeared a perfectly respectable one, so Herbert followed the long-haired man in and sat down. He had no particular morals (except being kind to his wife), and for him 'Thou shalt not steal' had only the Spartan gloss: 'Don't let anybody catch you at it — particularly your uncle!'

He anticipated, therefore, that some proposition would be made to him involving the use of his name and standing with the Jewellers' Retail Union. There were people silly enough for that. Of course if there were any advantage to be gained he, Herbert Wentworth, would keep it for himself. But no such possible advantage existed. His uncle, as he often reflected, was an exceedingly wideawake old cock, and the only chance he ever got was owing to the electric strike, while even that turned out a frost. So he sat expectant, waiting for the man with the curls to open out his batteries.

At any rate there was the drink. That was always so much to the good, and he would not go out to the pawnshop with Mary's mantelpiece ornaments under his coat, which had always been a painful necessity, for in his way he was fond of Mary.

But the tall, frock-coated man was long in coming to the point. He fluttered about it. He made timorous essays. Herbert, who had a kind of phlegmatic manner caught from gamblers, never quitted him with his eyes for a moment.

'I see,' said the man at last, 'that you are not the sort of man to give something for nothing. So I may as well be plain with you.'

'It might be as well on the whole,' said Herbert Wentworth, without taking his eyes off his host. They were sitting in a tidy, reposeful corner, and no neighbouring table was occupied.

'Well, this is it,' said the shiny man in the cheap frock-coat suit, making a dash at his business. 'You have been badly used by your wealthy uncle, Mr. George Wentworth of the Jewellers' Retail Union, Ltd., and you are married to the daughter of the watchman of that establishment.'

'Well?' said Herbert Wentworth, raising his eyebrows threateningly.

'You understand we do not wish to do you the least harm,' said the man, bending his head closer to his guest.

'That is the most sensible thing you have said yet,' sneered Wentworth.

'Nor to embroil you with your uncle,' he continued, 'nor -'

'Never mind the things you *don't* want me to do,' growled Herbert; 'get to what you *do!*'

'Only to deliver a parcel of goods quietly at the

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Jewellers' Retail Union,' the glistening man whispered anxiously. 'You could fetch your wife and leave the parcel. Your father-in-law would never know the difference - if, that is, it were sufficiently late at night.'

'What's your game? Cleanly, now, and the truth. No newspaper posters for me!'

Herbert's voice had kept the definite, clear decision of tone which the gentleman loses last of all, and enables him in a railway navvies' hut to offer a brimming glass of Eno's Fruit Salt to the parson on the general principle that hospitality is a duty and that anything stronger would be an insult.

'Is it dynamite you are hinting at?' continued Wentworth, seeing that his man was too infirm of purpose to come to the point.

The man jerked his arms suddenly out.

'I wouldn't touch the stuff, nor ask you to,' he said hoarsely. 'I shall have to risk it,' he interpolated, half to himself. 'There's an Englishman in Amsterdam who killed my brother, or had him killed — it comes to the same thing. Now my brother was a man — he might have been a great man if he had had his dues — but this fellow took his place, and — and — I want to ruin him.'

'Who is the man?' said Herbert, still fixing him with his eyes. The conspirator writhed and wrung his hands under that silent inspection.

'John Eames,' said the ringlets at last, with a nervous twitch of his sallow features.

'John Eames!' cried Herbert Wentworth. 'Why, he took the position I ought to have held at this moment with my uncle! What is he doing in Amsterdam?'

'Nothing like the luck of some people!' said the

man suddenly relieved. 'I thought that would fetch you.'

And he told the story of the sudden rise in prosperity of John Eames.

'And he means to marry a rich woman too — the Baron Altmayer's widow,' said the tempter. 'There's a lot of money behind that. Don't you understand?'

'No, I don't,' said Herbert Wentworth. 'Speak up! Tell me everything.'

'Stolen money!' whispered the man in young Wentworth's ear. 'Altmayer is the boldest first-flighter, the highest-flying 'crook' in Europe. What became of him nobody knows. Yet when all's said and done he only stole for the love of it.'

'I thought you said the 'Baron Altmayer.'"

'And so he is — or was, if he is dead — and his wife, or widow, is the Baroness. All in 'Hozier' and the 'Gotha Almanach,' if ever you look at such things.'

'Then what made him steal?' said Wentworth, who certainly had not climbed to the philosophy of the art as expounded in recent fiction.

'Because to steal on a large scale was his life. Because he was as happy thinking out a great project as other men when writing a great work — something to date from, something that would live! There was that *coup de telephone*. From his father's office he called up a friendly firm, asked if they would care to discount a bill bearing to good name. Certainly. Then quite neatly he stole the bill, disguised himself, received the money, and was back in his own clothes working away in his father's office as hard as ever without anybody being a penny the wiser. And all that, too, when he was a mere lad — as it were, before he had taken his degrees.'

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And the shyster's face lit up with the joy of an expert gloating over some unique work of art. They parted nevertheless without Wentworth having agreed to anything definite. He desired, he said, to think the matter over, and also to know more of Mr. Egbert Plantagenet Owen, who had given him his card on parting. The address written in pencil, was the 'Cosmopolitan Club, Greek Street,' which did not tend to increase the confidence of Mr. Wentworth junior in his new acquaintance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yet the plan which the brother of the late Richard Pellew Owen had conceived was really a simple and excellent one, easy to work out to the satisfaction of all parties, except, perhaps, that of John Eames and the other members of the firm of James Fernandez & Co., Amsterdam.

The packet of jewels was to be secured en route, exchanged for another of precisely similar aspect sealed with the seals of Fernandez & Co., most cleverly imitated by Mr. E. P. Owen, an artist in such matters. Then the whole would be put into the hands of the experts of the Jewellers' Retail Union, who of course would discover the fraud in a twinkling. Result, John Eames would lose his character and standing with his most important clients. The firm of James Fernandez would be ruined in the effort to make good the loss, while the real jewels would remain in the possession of the younger Owen. Lastly but not least, half of the profits would go to Herbert Wentworth if he lent his aid and co-operation to the scheme.

But the best-laid plans of mice and men are apt

to trip up on the very slightest and least foreseen of circumstances. Now it chanced to be a dull time in the firm of lawyers in Dunfermline for which Donald Ross took the court cases with strong Scottish good sense if not conspicuous ability — the latter being a quality which in Scotland is rather looked upon as a reason for immediate emigration. And they argue fairly on the matter. Given distinguished ability, the possessor would go away and make something of it. If he stays at home — well, is not that a proof that he does not possess it at all? *Q.E.D.*

But Donald Ross was of Dunfermline, born there, brought up at Dunfermline, a don at his lessons, medallist at the Academy, and now a promising junior at sheriff courts. It was no wonder that he got so many cases. No one expected to be carried away by the torrent of his eloquence. If they had, he would soon have gotten the name of a ‘windy body’ — a quality which, bearable in a minister, is death to a lawyer. But Donald Ross never made that mistake. His words were few and well ordered, and he always remembered that sheriffs, members of quarter sessions, and others whose word decided cases — including members of juries — had trains to catch.

‘Therefore,’ argued Donald Ross, ‘the verdict is not to the long-winded, but to the short and sweet.’ So he spent good and valuable hours in cutting down his arguments till he had them clean, hard, and well struck as a shilling new out of the Mint. Consequently, though Donald lacked enthusiasm, he won cases, and his name and fame grew so great in the land that the firm of MacCaa and Mc Ara offered him a partnership, lest he should go and set up for himself; which a certain Miss Allison had already advised him to do, offering to help him with

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money out of her hoards if necessary, as indeed in duty bound — that is, on good security and at the usual rate of interest.

So Donald Ross's long vacation, forced on him by his seniors at the close of a long period of successful pleading in the surrounding courts of the county, happened to coincide in time with a third journey of Miss A. Allison, that trusted envoy of the J. R. U., to Amsterdam. To tell the truth, Miss Allison, though liking Donald's granitic dourness in its own proper place — which was Dunfermline — could have done without him at Amsterdam. She, too, liked a little holiday all to herself as well as any one, and if she married Donald she foresaw that she would have quite enough of him; for a lawyer has always to be on the spot.

'I will hae my hands full with him,' she complained to herself, 'and he will be wanting everything on the continent to be juist like Dunfermline, and finding fault if they don't juist fit. I mind myself the first time I came among thae foreigners.'

To that northern race which early in the teens 'does for itself,' it did not seem any great thing that two young engaged people should travel the world together. It did not occur to either of them that in a certain sense, they might be supposed to be anticipating their honeymoon. Certainly Miss A. Allison was quite devoid of any such sentiment; and all that made her heart beat the faster as they set out to take the Amsterdam boat was only that she would be able to keep an eye on Donald, and from his expenditure be able to tell what sort of a husband he would be likely to turn out.

But, so far as the boat was concerned, this plan

was prevented by the arrant sea-sickness of the subject. In Miss A. Allison's opinion, it would not have been seemly to have gone quite together. What would the old maids have said at the 'Aibbey kirk on Sabbath?' So it was therefore resolved, upon Miss Allison's initiative, that they should travel one first and the other second-class. It was Donald who won. And so Miss Allison, second-class passenger, not being able to nurse and console the sufferer, had perforce to go on deck. Here she talked with her old friend the mate, who was of course exceedingly glad to see her. He was, she allowed to herself, a fine protection and a decent laddie from Kirkcaldy forbye.

'That young chap in the first will be your brother?' he asked, to make sure of his ground before launching out; for he, too, came from Fife.

'Oh, they *do* say at Dunfermline that there's a family likeness. I never could see it mysel', observed Miss A. Allison judiciously; and so passed on to other subjects.

Miss Allison enjoyed the talk she had with her fellow countryman so much that the first mate nearly ran into a rusty, thirty-year-old Hamburg' steamer. The Teuton gave vent to guttural cries of distress, which did not matter in the least. But what was more serious, the mate disregarded a request to know who he was and why the devil he was about steering wild on the high seas, from no less a source than the flagship *Sapphire* of the Channel torpedo squadron.

So great is the influence of a kindred province among those of Scottish birth that, though the mate was promised a stinging report as soon as the *Sapphire* arrived in Plymouth, even through the

speaking-trumpet his trained ears recognised the snell, east-windy toot of the Nuik accent, and promptly offered his Governmental enemy to settle the question after the manner of the 'Kingdom.'

'Man, I'll gie ye a stroke a hole on Leven Links!' he said.

'Done!' cried the sub-lieutenant, who was keen on the game. [There is but one!] 'St. Andrews would have suited me better, but Leven will be good business enough.'

'A sov. I think you said,' continued the man-o-war's-man, booking the bet.

'Yes, and the winner to stand a dinner for two at the club!' said the wily merchantman.

'Are you a member?' cried the sub-lieutenant.

'Yes, of Leven!' shouted Miss Allison's friend, as the distance increased. 'Ask the fellows for Bob Berry. I owe them all money!'

'My name is Coghill,' shouted the man on the *Sapphire*. 'You can write to the R. and A. at St. Andrews when you get home.'

'Gee-whiz! are you a member there?' cried the Leven man.

'No; but my father is. I was a St. Aiden's boy.'

The mate whistled.

'That's a sov. gone sure,' he said under his breath to Miss A. Allison. 'But after all it's a sight better than being reported to the Admiralty and getting into all sorts of trouble with the owners.'

'If I were you,' suggested the tempter woman, 'I would take no notice when he writes. He will think you still at sea.'

'No fear,' said the mate, 'he reads Lloyds' List!' And then he confided to her Fifer bosom the thought of a kindred Fifer.

'You see,' he said, 'if *he* wins — which he will — he will have to stand a dinner. And the sort of dinner that two chaps fresh from the sea and fresher from holes on the golf-course will be eating won't leave him a penny out of his twenty shillings. *And the odds will come out of his pocket*'

'You should both be ashamed of yourselves,' said Miss Allison, 'wasting money like that! Very likely it is some poor lad. How much have you in the bank?'

'Eight or nine hundred,' said the mate stolidly.

'I would be pleased to see the deposit receipts,' said the naïve Miss Allison. 'A lad that wagers his siller on silly golf matches through speaking trumpets mostly banks in his trousers' pocket! I have the advantage of brothers at home in Dunfermline.'

Now the mate was so pleased with this far-sightedness that he was on the point of proposing to his companion on the spot; and indeed he did slip his brawny arm about her waist, to preserve her from the racking sway of the short seas. What might have happened, there and thereafter, it is no good speculating upon; probably a box on the ear of the mercantile man, in the first place. But, then, such boxes are but embassies of love ere he comes into the heart's garret there to screw down his chest for life.

However, at that very moment a form, dark and haggard, forced its way between them. It did not speak, swinging and clinging to the bulwarks. Its eyes seemed to regard the little chopping seas that rustled along the vessel's sides like a lady's skirts in a narrow passage. But it seemed interested — strangely interested. It did not speak, but simply with an air of authority separated Mr. Robert Berry,

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first mate of the *Lowlands Low*, from Miss Allison, of the firm of the J. R. U., Ltd., of Regent Street, London, W., England.

It was the lawyer from Dunfermline, and Mr. Berry felt vaguely that some excuse was necessary. But first of all he resolved to finish a little question of discipline which arose. He wondered what, with a sister on the second-class forward deck, a brother had any business to be lying snug and comfortable in the first cabin.

'Show your ticket!' he said sharply.

And with the well-disciplined promptitude of the law, which is always being required to produce papers, Mr. Donald Ross handed out the yellowish slip of paper entitling him to a first-class return passage between Amsterdam and the port of Leith upon the mail steamer *Lowlands Low*.

'Then it's an ashamed man you should be!' said the mate severely.

'Why?' gasped the seafarer for pleasure. 'Is it not — not — in order?'

He asked the question because it was evident that he himself was not. It is one thing to address juries and quite another to cross the North Sea — or German Ocean.

'Your ticket is perfectly in order,' said Mr. Robert Berry; 'but you are the first brother I have ever seen who lets his sister travel second class, practically as a deck passenger, while he, calling himself a man, takes his ease in the first cabin!'

'His ease! Oh lor!'

murmured Donald Ross. Then, with a firmer grasp upon the rail, he turned upon his tormentor.

'And who may you be?' he asked, with great solemnity of manner.

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The mate called a man who was meandering round with a mop and bucket.

'Do your duty,' he said; 'and while you are doing it tell this gentleman who I am.'

'Who you are!' exclaimed the astonished A.B. 'Why, everybody kens that ye are Robert Berry, from Kirkcaldy, first mate of this ship, with a captain's certificate from the Leith School of Navigation in his box!'

'Thank you; that will do. Proceed!' said the mate. 'Now for you, sir. A pretty-like brother you are!'

But Miss A. Allison had managed to nudge her *fiancé*, and took up the case for the defence herself; for Donald Ross seemed somehow to have lost his notable glibness of tongue.

'We tossed for it, and I lost,' she explained. 'Forbye, I prefer it.'

A soft answer, a glance subdivided, accompanied by explicative arm-pressures on this side and that, effectually turned away the wrath of both the young men. For the first mate, in the few moments in which the man of pail and bucket was doing his duty, had crossed over, so that now Miss A. Allison stood between the rival candidates for her affections. These were never impulsive.

She had always wondered what it felt like to have two strings to one's bow. Now she knew, and she could not say that the sensation was anything but agreeable. Of course it would require a careful study of Mr. First-Mate Berry's assets before she could even consider him as eligible. On the other hand, she had always known everything about Donald Ross, from the time when he had taught her how to make blisters on her arms, chiefly on the soft skin near the elbow on the under side, by rubbing the

place with the juice of the marsh marigold or water buttercup.

For these marks, sufficiently rubbed and multiplied, resembled amazingly something infectious, and constituted an excuse for being kept away from school. So because of this Miss A. Allison cherished a continual gratitude to Donald Ross. Though, of course, she would just like to see any of her own bairns — when, D.V., she got any — coming to *her* with any such pretences! So good it is for possible fathers and mothers to have been minutely instructed in youth! My, how she would warm them! And so, equally of course, would - But that was looking a little too far ahead. As for Mr. Robert Berry, he might be first mate with a captain's certificate. But what of that? He would as like as not teach the children to climb telegraph poles and the riggings of houses. Besides, she — Miss A. Allison — had her own thoughts about that eight hundred pounds. She would not be too sure till she had seen and handled those deposit receipts.

Never was there a more doubting Thomasina!

But all the same, as she had said before (to herself), there is no doubt that, being practically in command of the ship, with everybody looking up to him, and he coming to stand out his watch below looking at the stars, also giving her free lessons in astronomy, First Mate Berry of Kirkcaldy was distinctly a useful person; and so long as she was on the ship, or accustomed to go to and fro on this dingy ocean, made in Germany, she would do well to keep friends with him.

The difficulty was how also to keep friends with a rather hard and formal young man from Dunfermline, of a jealous, exacting temperament, as

anybody could see from the colour of his side whiskers. The shape of these might be legal. Miss Allison did not doubt it. But if ever she married Donald, the first thing she would do would be to make him shave them off. But he was a really good tennis player, town clerk at twenty-six, and in a tussle Miss Allison really could not have told beforehand which would have had the best of it. What a wicked girl she was even to let such thoughts pass through her mind! Then she remembered the times of gallant knights with tournaments and things, upon whom the bright eyes of ladies rained influence; who fought for their sakes and were afterwards rewarded with crowns of flowers. Well, perhaps after all, she could not tell — well, certainly not just then — the reckless mariner with the captain's certificate might get the crown of flowers. At any rate she had no objection whatever to be the Queen of Love and Beauty. Only she must see his bank-book before she committed herself.

And so the night passed, and with it the sadness and silence that had fallen upon Donald Ross. As the dawn came racing up green and pink, with high-lying wind clouds shredding the colours small as they rose out of the east, Miss A. Allison moved a little farther from the first mate and looked more kindly at Donald Ross, whose face also began to be less tinged with green and chalky white — that wistful colour of snowdrops lifting their heads after a night of storm.

They passed down the North Sea Canal and were signalled from the semaphore at Ruiksdyk, where in the glimmering row of white houses Hermance and her sister-in-law were still safe asleep in their beds.

With the morning came Amsterdam and the

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cheerful bustle of the quay. As they stepped on shore the first mate called out, too late for any refusal, 'You will dine with me at the Bible Hotel to-night, both of you? I expect it.'

And Donald Ross was checked in the middle of telling him in what particular place (which lawyers do not like to think upon in this world) he would see him first, when Miss A. Allison touched his arm. 'Donald,' she said, 'he thinks we are brother and sister; and, besides, he will have to pay for the dinner instead of you!'

Whereupon, touched in his most tender spot, Donald Ross looked up and answered: 'Very well, then, we will expect you a few minutes before seven. I shall order the dinner.'

'And the flowers,' added Miss Allison, with a sweet smile.

Whereat the mate, being sportive by nature, waved his hearty concurrence with both proposals. He would have to see cargo out, anyway, and the arrangement would save him a cab fare down to the hotel.

On the whole, they understood each other pretty well, these three. For the kingdom of Fife is known of its children, and its children to one another.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### BREACH OF PROMISE

During these days the care which Claire took of her sister-in-law had been unremitting. She had spent herself without counting for Hermance. But now that she found herself more at liberty, owing to the preoccupations of the Baroness, Claire sought another interest. Hermance had received a letter from her husband, posted from Colon, in which he hinted the necessity of being ready to join him whenever she should receive a cable message. His destination was given, somewhat vaguely, as South America, without indicating degrees of latitude or longitude between Aspinwall and Puntas Arenas, or even which of the scatter of irregular republics continually dealing out battle, murder, and sudden death over areas tropical and polar, was to be his goal.

It was certain, however, that the intention of Ernest Altmayer was to settle himself where his peculiar gifts would prove of the most use to him. Politics, doubtless, would be his choice. There his contempt for danger, his rare audacity, his genius for intrigue, the magnificent scale of his disregard for thin-drawn distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*, his fidelity to his partisans if not to his promises, would assure him a place in the mutually inimical republics which are known in good Iberian French under the general name of *Rastaquoéria* — the Galilee of the ten wandering tribes of 'Rastas,' ring-wearing, black-eyed, cigar-tinted people with the

appearance of money but no honest visible means of sustenance.

The Baron had all their qualities and a dozen others, first and most unusual of which was the command of unlimited money — though, perhaps, the less said about his method of obtaining it, apart from his interest in the house of James Fernandez & Co., the better.

So Hermance was content to make more and more frequent calls upon the house of Fernandez. For her first expenses, those which had so alarmed the just accounting soul of Hendrik Roos, had been met by a draft from the Havanna, sent through the great house of Rothschild. It had come personally to John Eames, and he had handed it over at once to the firm. Old Hendrik nearly danced.

‘A draft on Rothschild!’ he exclaimed looking at it with a kind of awe. ‘I will present it myself in person!’

So neither Claire, who had her money in the concern, nor John Eames whose honour and responsibility were at stake, had a word to say when Hermance declared her set opinion, after a thorough overhaul of her wardrobe, that ‘she actually had not a dress fit to put on.’ Some had been worn as often as twice.

Besides, Claire began to find a new interest. She was helping John Eames to conduct and extend the business of Fernandez & Co. She insisted on beginning at the beginning, learning shorthand and type-writing, and receiving only so much money as her services were worth to the house. It was while she was busy receiving lessons in ‘speed’ from a professional stenographer that the long-expected wire came for Hermance to take ship. It was

therefore clearly necessary that John should accompany Hermance to Fishguard in Pembrokeshire, and there board the big Cunarder which now passed twice a week. There was no more than time. John was so pressed with the difficulties of the passage, the arrangement of berths, and all the formalities of forwarding Hermance and her gowns to Colon (where Altmayer was to meet her), that not till the second last day did he tell Claire of the plan which her brother had conceived. They two were to see Claire off and return to Amsterdam as man and wife.

But Claire only laughed and shook her head.

'Ernest always loved his joke!' she said, adding half caressingly, 'You good old John,' and returning to her practise of 'Come into the garden, Maud! For the black bat, Night, hath flown,' with greater attention than ever to the emphasis.

It did not seem to John Eames that Claire was very angry. Indeed, there was a slight humorous droop at the corner of her mouth as she finished her thought with the words 'Let Ernest manage his own affairs. He will have plenty of work cut out for him with Hermance in tow, to keep her out of mischief - *I* am quite competent to attend to my own business . . . if I *am* still slow at reading my own shorthand.'

So it chanced that the outgoing steamer which crossed that conveying Miss A. Allison of Dunfermline and her sea-battered friend Donald Ross, carried with it in the direction of Harwich, and ultimately Fishguard, Hermance Altmayer and our dear John Eames, the latter, from his worried aspect, still hard on the search of unchronicled crimes.

And this is why Miss A. Allison, dividing the swift

mind betwixt a life of peace and dignity with Donald Ross, the tempting wonder of the unseen bank-book of Chief Mate Robert Berry of the Leith, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam line, and — what with her was at present the strongest influence (Donald *had* looked such a sight!) the sweets of her present free, untrammelled maiden life — came to the house of James Fernandez to see John Eames. An old friend of hers, John! True, he had no more brilliancy in *rappartee* than a conversation lozenge scraped clean. Why, if a good looking girl had asked him for his thumb to suck, he would put it unsuspectingly between her teeth. But there was no fear with Old John Eames! Too little perhaps! The girls she knew liked a man to be a man. At Dunfermline, even, they preferred them with a spice of the devil. But there was no gainsaying the fact that if any one of them all was in a difficulty, John Eames, wise old John, stodgy old John, was altogether the safest person to get them out.

Every girl on the staff allowed that, and John was made use of accordingly. He never wanted anything in return. . . . Though they did say of Kate Leslie that she would not have been unwilling to do something in the way of consolation. And there were others. . . . But this was scandal and as a girl 'on her own' that was a luxury which Miss A. Allison never allowed herself. People at Dunfermline and elsewhere could say what they liked about her. They could be 'cats' if so it seemed good to them. She at least would not let drop a 'cattish' word nor think a feline thought.

So Miss Allison communed with herself as between the 'Bible Hotel' where she had in vain sought for her friend, she pattered with the smart,

emphatic heel-gait of a business woman who had no time to spare, along the Dam to the offices of Messrs. James Fernandez & Co. All outside was solid red brick, with grey stone fronting, wrought iron gates and palings, and on the door itself broad mirrored brass and a three-hundred-year-old knocker — a gargoyle with a ball between his toothless lips.

She pushed the double-swing door which John had had fitted, and inside she found, installed in the typist's place and rising to receive her — the Girl of the White Blouse, Claire Altmayer.

For the first time in her life Miss A. Allison was distinctly jealous — causelessly so, but certainly and professionally jealous. She found out that you cannot regulate these things with a stop-watch. But to see that Girl there - well it gave her — the words were used in the typewriting department (having come boxed up with the machines, from New York, U.S.) THE GRAND HUMP!

As for what happened within the spirit of Claire, that would take a canto all to itself. The wind-gauge shifted instantly to 'squally.' The barometer fell with a thud into the mercury well. There were signs of a storm. Tempests were announced by the Weather Bureau from all the four cardinal and of the intermediate points of the compass.

And Claire Altmayer, after looking up and down the rash visitor who asked for 'John Eames' (without the 'Mr.') said icily, 'Well?'

Whereupon Miss A. Allison, with one glance at Claire's typewriting, picked out the amateur quality, turned up her nose, and with a little shrug of her shoulders remarked 'Ah!'

It was then that Claire Altmayer felt like crying

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sending for the police and taking her visitor into a private room there to compel her to confess what she wanted with John Eames — under torture — all three at once, if necessary.

\* \* \* \* \*

But there was another player with his stake in the game. Donald Ross had followed Miss Allison to the Bible Hotel and had found out from the polyglot head-porter that a young lady - English - had been there and had asked for a Mr. John Eames. She had been referred (price two shillings) to his place of business — James Fernandez & Co. on the Dam.

Donald repeated this simple address in a more strident tone of voice than seemed wholly needful, and — started in pursuit. The polyglot head-porter, deceived in his hopes of a tip, followed him out upon the stoop, repeating his information with the additional numerical adjective 'hundert tousand,' which was certainly a mistake. Donald Ross, however took no notice of him. He was already hurrying Dam-wards, and his practice in affairs taught him that the easiest way abroad was not to ask for an address which would almost certainly be differently pronounced, but to write it in clear clerkly letters and present it to the first policeman he might meet.

Thus it was that Donald Ross found his affianced Miss Allison apparently about to try conclusions with Claire Altmayer. The sight calmed him instantly. He was in a land where his legal status would be disregarded, though vouched for by the faculty of law in Edinburgh. His skill in addressing juries on behalf of the defendant (Miss Allison) in

this aggravated and apparently unprovoked case of assault, would lose its value, because a Dutch jury, drawn by the hazard of the lot, could not be expected to be roused by the subtleties of Dunfermline English.

It was time to withdraw his client, whom any local practitioner worth his salt could put in the wrong without any doubt. Donald well remembered getting off a Scottish gypsy who had smashed an English rival's toffee-stand, by a happy reference to Bannockburn and the Wallace monument frowning roughly-hewn from the Abbey Craig down upon the links of the Forth.

A similar fate with unknown costs, would overtake Miss Allison (and deplete her savings) if in Holland she allowed her feelings to overpower her

So he addressed himself with all the suavity of his jury manner to the task of sweetening the embittered waters. He was reasonably good-looking. So was Claire Altmayer, and with John away and an interesting (if ruddy-whiskered) young man of practised address to talk to, it was certainly no small pleasure for Claire to be able to ignore this vehement young female intruder.

So completely did Claire Altmayer succeed, and thoroughly interested did Donald Ross show himself, that if by hazard John Eames had met Miss Allison on her way back, she would have proposed marriage to him on the spot. Or better still, if only the 'lad from Kirkcaldy,' Chief Mate Mr. Bob Berry, had known it was his hour! Ah, if only!

Instead, however, like a wise little woman, Miss Allison recalled that a note scribbled by John Eames was in her pocket. It was a memorandum in answer to a query of Mr. Wentworth's. She put her hand

into the swinging pocket (the sight of which always caused the passing Dutch housewives to smile approval. For each had one of the same kind knocking against her own right knee as she walked). Miss Allison stood a moment deciphering the curious name 'Ruiksdyk' when a man stopped her, clad in the rough Harris tweed of the British tourist, umbrella in one hand, red-clad Baedeker under the other armpit. Mr. Wentworth himself!

Miss Allison showed herself in no way abashed. She had one of the firm's invoices in her hand, and merely said, as if she had been in Regent Street, 'Good morning, Mr. Wentworth, I can't make out this entry. Is it a request for rebate or an offer of discount for cash?'

As a matter of fact the bulk of the communication was the work of the fingers of Mynheer Henrik Roos, now getting a trifle stiff and shaky in the service of James Fernandez & Co. The accompanying note alone had been dated, place-marked, and signed by John Eames.

'My dear - Ag - Miss Allison I mean, I want nothing to do with business when I am on this side of the water,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'Ah, if I had been wise in time, I need not have called you 'Miss Allison.'"

Miss Allison kept her countenance, and fixed her attention upon the Fernandez invoice, but her spirit was roused within her, and she was murmuring, 'Does the old fool mean to be candidate No.3? He need not trouble - I would sooner have the sailor lad from Kirkcaldy!'

Then she paused, contemplating the invoice between her finger and thumb as if it had been a bank-note the paper of which she was verifying.

‘Yet he might be useful, too,’ she said softly to herself. And then aloud, ‘Where are you staying, sir?’

Her inquiry caused a dry pinkish flush to overspread the London pallor of Mr. Wentworth's cheeks.

He coughed and said with a kind of chirrup, ‘Ha, I was thinking of going to the Bible Hotel, my . . . Miss Allison, I mean. A good many of our people put up there, and I am a lonely old fellow!’

‘There is a young lawyer from Scotland staying there at present,’ remarked Miss Allison, coldly. ‘He comes from Dunfermline, and his name is Donald Ross. I have little doubt but that you and he will find means to pass the time!’

‘And yourself?’ cried the startled Mr. Wentworth.

‘I have friends,’ said Miss Allison, ‘at least one lady friend.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Mr. Wentworth ironically, ‘she comes from Dunfermline too.’

‘She just does that!’ said Miss Allison. ‘Any commissions, Mr. Wentworth?’ And the young woman marched off murmuring, ‘If Agnes Allison frae Dunfermline is no her ain best friend, I do not ken who is!’

And having located Ruiksdyk on a big chart in the waiting room of the Haarlem station, she got her ‘traps’ out of the left-luggage office, and, in the duskiest corner of the waiting room, waited for the Bulb Express, with her veil doubled. She was not afraid of anybody. Only she wanted to find John Eames, not because of any foolishness, but because he *was* John Eames, to whom all the girls took their cut fingers. Old John who could even be trusted (in spite of that forward Miss Leslie) to take a grain of sand out of the eye of the prettiest girl in the office!

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John had last written from Ruiksdyk and she might find him there still. At any rate, she would get the information which she would not deign to ask from the Girl who did bad typewriting and cultivated insufferable manners at the house of James Fernandez & Co.

Yes, insufferable! Who was she to arrogate to herself such airs? Because some one (possibly John) had out of kindness given her a machine and a job. She had nothing to do with the matter, of course. John Eames could please himself whom he employed, but after all these years she did think that John . . . *Et cetera!*

Remark that she took Donald Ross too much for granted to waste a thought upon him, and as for the chief mate from Kirkcaldy, he simply did not exist. Yet men will tell you they understand women. Perhaps a twice-bereaved widower may remember a little for a few weeks after he attains his veteran's status, but the grass soon grows. He forgets, and is as other men.

Not Miss A. Allison herself could have told what she wanted with John Eames. Men would have made a mistake — ignorant, conceited creatures that they are, and women would have had no doubt at all. But consciously Miss Allison knew that both would have been wrong, and actually Miss Allison was right. She was tired of Donald Ross — 'sick, tired, footsore and weary,' as the play says. She could manage him at Dunfermline, but he ought not to have followed her abroad.

Then why — because she was a servant of the J. R. U., had Mr. Wentworth a right to be a father to her and almost to call her 'Agnes, dear'? All the father she had any use for was tucked away under

the Abbey Kirkyard sward. Indeed she paid 7s. 6d. a year for the sodding of the borders and extra for a few flowers to be bedded out there in the summertime. She knew a decent man, McNish, in Dunfermline who made a speciality of that — he called it on his bills: 'To one year's upkeep of stone (Abbey Kirk) with flowers (ordinary) in their season . . . 7s. 6d.'

No one could say that was dear at the price. For before closing with him, Miss Allison, who had made the tour of the florists and nurserymen, knew that she was in for a bargain. She had tried McNish again and again by falling upon him unexpectedly. But the flowers were always there. She was a wise lass even for Dunfermline, she did not know that McNish had a son a porter at the station, and that whenever she was reported at the ticket platform, McNish Senior promptly did a little transplanting from other prepaid tombs. He was what is called in these parts 'a forehanded man.'

\* \* \* \* \*

'Eh, but it's a queer place, this!' was what Miss Allison remarked when she sought the shelter of Hans Polder's ancient inn among the dunes. The sky was lilac and blue in planes as if the colour of the flower-fields was shining upwards. Miss Allison knew no Dutch, but she managed to make Hans understand that, in some way not to be translated, she belonged to John Eames. She repeated the name over and over, partly as a talisman and partly because she thought how mad it would make 'that other Girl.'

The young Polders, hiding a smile at the number

of pretty girls who seemed to claim their absent guest, replied with vague signs, and — benevolently ushered Miss A. Allison into the room where John Eames had received Altmayer. John's neatly folded silk pyjamas lay on the bed, hanging limply over the side. These were a vain thing in Dunfermline, where after 10 P.M. they still flaunted to the Ochil breezes the white banner of their ancestors. Besides, there is but one textile fabric in Dunfermline, which is a linen town. Silk pyjamas are therefore an abomination to all who live by flax. Still worse, if possible, was the sight of John's innocent shaving-glass nailed up against the window shutter, and in the corner, half concealed from public view, but horribly apparent to Miss A. Allison, John's box with the initials J. E. done in worn brass nails on the black cover. A sheaf of letters on a file, a calendar with notes in John's hand against sundry dates all gave Miss Allison such a feeling of uncertainty that she began to 'get the quakes.' When her own luggage was installed, the huge grinning Polder brothers each carrying a piece, Miss Allison felt more out of place than ever.

At that moment (she told herself) John Eames might return, and the sight of her trim black hatbox, portmanteau, and demure handbag in such a place (all from the High Street of the Grey Town) made her cheeks burn with shame. She resolved to keep on her boots and sit up all night. It would look more ladylike. She could not possibly go to bed. The very thought made her sit up more straight-backed, and stiffen her ears, listening for footsteps on the stairs.

Indeed, she heard them — a quarter of an hour after the passage of the last Bulb Express — sharp, clean-cut footsteps, too dainty and clipping for those

of a man, the noise of voices, somebody asking questions in Dutch, general apoplectic murmurings from the Polders replying, and then the light click-clack on the stairs. The door was opened wide without any preliminary knocking and there face to face with Miss Allison stood . . . *That Girl!*

No, not John Eames. That would have been bad enough, but the girl from the House of Fernandez who did such bad typing with so much 'side' in the doing of it.

'What are you doing here?' demanded Claire, more sharply than perhaps she intended.

'Apparently just what you are doing yourself — ' retorted Miss A. Allison, her gaze chill as when she contemplated a viper or an inhabitant of Alloa — 'running after John Eames?'

'Why are you in his room?' demanded Claire, her face aflame and her ears singing, 'your things there too? I will have you searched by the police. You have no business to be in . . . in Mr. Eames's rooms!'

Miss Allison gazed long in wonderment.

'Well, I never!' she said, 'I could not have believed it of Old John. Lassie, you're jealous!'

'Jealous?' cried Claire with the tears close behind her lids. 'I never dreamed of such a thing in my life, and I have no cause to be!'

'Have ye no?' said Miss Allison swiftly, 'then let me tell you that you have one great softy for a lad!'

'John Eames is no softy,' cried Claire stamping her foot, 'he is the bravest, the - '

'There you are,' said Miss Agnes, sitting down comfortably on the worn black leather trunk with the worn brass nails, 'I kenned I would get it out o' ye! It's John Eames ye are jealous of!'

'I'm *not!* I'm *not!*' sobbed Claire, ready to weep for

sheer anger.

'I never suffer from the trouble myself,' said Miss Allison philosophically, 'and it's no catching, so far as I have heard. But there's a friend of mine, a lawyer from Dunfermline, red-haired and thinking a heap of himself, who has been taken with it badly. And if he kenned that I was here!'

Miss Allison paused to let her imagination run over what Donald Ross would say and do at the sight of those silk pyjamas ignobly displayed on the edge of the bed-spread.

Then in a flash Claire Altmayer saw her opportunity. She was no angel. At least her halo had not yet grown so big as to inconvenience her seriously.

'Donald Ross is the name of the jealous young man, I think you said,' she bent toward Miss Allison sitting easily with her fingers plaited about one knee and her foot swinging. Miss Allison nodded.

'A red-haired, long-faced, beaky young man named Donald Ross — comes from Dunfermline?' said Claire viciously as only women can speak to each other.

Instantly Miss A. Allison stood up.

'I said Donald Ross of Dunfermline, lawyer, and clever at his business,' she rejoined. 'It is true he is jealous, but then he had something to be jealous of. As for 'long-faced' and 'beaky,' Donald is nothing of the kind. He is noted through the whole countryside for having fine, handsome, well-marked features!'

'Yes, of course you would not notice!' said Claire, giving back scorn for scorn. 'But permit me to show you this!'

She pulled out a neat little jewelled pill-box made of leather, sprang it open and flashed a diamond of

three horse power in the face of the astonished girl.

'That's from Waterstone's,' said Miss Allison, 'I know his class of goods. I've had two or three pass through my hands, but I always gave them back when it was over. I come of a self-respecting family myself. But who gave *you* that?'

'Donald Ross!' said Claire Altmayer sweetly, pushing the ring off and on her finger and holding it variously to the light.

'Donald Ross,' murmured Miss Allison, 'and what for did he send such a thing by you — I think he might have been his own messenger.'

'He gave it to me,' said Claire, 'he put it on my finger himself!'

'What? — say that again!' cried Miss Allison, suddenly frigid.

Claire gravely repeated her statement.

'What did he say?' she interrupted.

Claire Altmayer pretended to hide a blush and proceeded with apparent diffidence, 'He only said that it was a poor token of his belated admiration — he might even use a deeper word and say 'adoration.' But he ended by asking me to accept of this as a gift from one who would never forget me. He was unfortunately bound to another in honour - '

Miss Allison gritted her teeth.

'Bide a wee — I'll honour him! Go on, will ye?'

Claire obeyed, still turning and twisting the engagement ring from Waterstone's in the High Street of Dunfermline.

'He said that the young woman was highly respectable and it would seriously damage his business if he were to throw her over now. A breach of promise against a practising lawyer, I think he said, was always bad for a young man! Especially

when Town Clerk!

'Breach of promise!' softly said Miss A. Allison. 'Oh, Donald Ross, wait till I get my tongue about your ears, and maybe my hands, I'll gie ye a' the breach o' promises ye will want on this earth. Bide ye, my lad!'

Then all suddenly, and for the first time since her mother stopped whipping her (as all Scottish mothers do, 'for her good'), Miss A. Allison began to cry.

Claire Altmayer clapped her hands.

'There — there,' she said, 'I have made you jealous - the same as you said of me!'

'I'm not — I tell you I'm not!' sobbed Miss Agnes from Dunfermline, pushing away her proffered sympathy.

'Oh, Donald, Donald!' she wailed, 'I didn't much believe in myself! But oh, Donald Ross — I did believe in you — a deacon in the Kirk and all!'

But Claire was not to be gainsaid. She took Miss Allison in her arms, and the sleeves of the White Blouse encircled her.

She whispered, 'It is partly true. I think he did make a little, just a little — !'

'I understand!' mourned Miss Allison bitterly, 'he is a man.'

'I think,' so Claire ventured, deceived by the Scottish quiet with which she took it, and perhaps a little disappointed also, 'that it was for you he brought the ring so far.'

'Give it me, then!' said Miss A. Allison.

In the expectation of some outburst of anger, Claire delivered the ring.

'What will you do with it?' she said.

But Miss A. Allison sank into a silent flood of

Scottish tears.

'Oh I'm *that* ashamed — I'm *that* ashamed — before you too!' she added.

Claire petted her quiet again as only one girl can another.

'Fling it away,' she counselled. 'Think no more about it. Men are all alike.'

'Fling it away! Faith no!' cried Miss Allison. 'I ken a way to punish him worse than that — far worse. I'll send it back to Waterstone's in Dunfermline and put the money to my own savings bank account!'

'It's not that I want to be mean,' continued Miss Allison after Claire had expressed her strong dissent, 'but that will be the way to make Donald Ross feel it worse. Let it be a lesson to him for life, every time he passes either Waterstone's or the savings bank. Neither Donald Ross nor any other man shall have the power to say he made me greet for nothing. Not that I care!'

'But he brought us together,' objected Claire.

'That's something,' said Miss Allison, 'it's fine to be friends with a lass like yoursel' — somebody ye can like without them ever wanting to marry you and calling you all sorts of names when you say 'No' plump and plain!'

Claire shook her head and said a little sadly, 'I do not blame them. I'm sure I should do the same if I were a man. You don't know your mercies, Agnes. I have been walking in the shadow of Hermance ever since I grew up, and nobody ever loved me except John Eames. That was what frightened me so much when I saw you. I was sure he would fall in love with you!'

'You could not have been safer if I had been six feet down in the Abbey Kirkyaird. He was

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inoculated, as you may say, seeing me every day at the J. R. U. He did not 'take' and could not - '

'But how about Mr. Wentworth?' demanded Claire, who saw the weak point of this reasoning.

'Well, at any rate, he never cared for anybody till he met you,' said Miss Allison, 'excepting, maybe, his little boy who died. Even when the minx Miss Leslie held a sprig of mistletoe over her own head the day before Christmas, old John only looked at her as wise as an owl, and said it was forbidden to take away the decorations from the Children's Present Department! I am sure he must have been waiting for you, Claire!'

At which Claire, who had no Scottish reserve to hamper the expression of her feelings, put her arms about Miss Allison's neck, and declared that she was an absolute angel of sweetness — a statement which a considerable number of young men knew to be wholly contrary to the fact.

Then Miss Allison had a final idea worthy of her name and country.

'I wonder,' she said, 'if you could not get Donald to write you a letter or two, and then I could sue him for breach of promise. That would be even better than getting the money back from Waterstone's for the ring! They would read the correspondence in court.'

And Miss Allison was surprised that Claire would by no means agree.

CHAPTER NINE

THE ABDUCTING OF MISS ALLISON

When two young people of opposite sexes lay their heads together generally nothing happens affecting any one but themselves; but when two girls, late embattled enemies, lay their heads together, there is always trouble cooking up for a third person.

This time Mr. Donald Ross (Dunfermline, N.B.) was to be the scapegoat. Miss A. Allison was particularly full upon the question of giving him a lesson, one he would not forget in a hurry. Claire, though she felt his iniquity less, had perforce to lend herself to the punishment. She was sorry for Donald Ross, but clearly in the present mood of Miss Allison this was no time to express any sympathy.

Miss Allison's vengeance took the form of a great solicitude for Donald Ross's future. 'She's a fine lass yon,' she said guilefully the first evening after Donald Ross had been invited down to keep them from wearying at the Hotel Polder in Ruiksdyk. With the darkest plottings in her heart and the most enticing smiles on her lips, Miss A. Allison had gone to the station to meet the Bulb Express. She went right in, saying to the solemn individual who asked for her ticket: 'I've no ticket. I've just come to take charge of a lad from Dunfermline.'

Miss Allison was allowed to pass. She always was. She never allowed the least doubt on that subject to exist. If any trouble arose, she argued with the man in good round Scots with a Fife accent, fresh from the German Ocean, and the Dutch, recognising something kindred in the twang, allowed the exact

meaning (and Miss Allison) to pass. Also her smile helped her amazingly. It was a precious auxiliary. She could say under her breath to a defaulting comrade: 'Ye are a bold-faced, impudent, good-for-nothing, backbiting little Jezebell!' and retain all the time her famous slow, soft, sweet smile on her lips. This may serve to explain how hard it was for an ordinary man, not to say lawyer like Donald Ross, to get to the bottom of Miss A. Allison's meaning and purposes.

'Who — oh, Miss Altmayer?' stammered Donald Ross, glancing uneasily at his companion. Could she be jealous? (this to himself). No, certainly not. Look at that smile on her face. He had never seen it brighter, even when she gave him to understand that her salary was raised. 'Yes,' Donald continued, conscious that a pair of fine but exceedingly sharp eyes were upon him, 'as you say, she is a fine lass.'

'I never said anything of the kind, Donald Ross,' said Miss Allison, dropping the smile like a hot potato. 'It was nobody but yourself: and what's more, Donald Ross, I'm not the only one ye have said it to.'

'To whom else?' He was getting anxious now, and so more careful about his grammar. And well he might, for there was an ominous gentleness in Miss Allison's voice.

'Ye said to herself, Donald Ross. Do you ken what they would call that in your profession?'

Donald knew, but he knew much too well to say.

'Have no fear, Mr. Donald the Writer,' Miss A. Allison continued with swift suavity, 'your sort are not so hard to find for a lass like me that's worth my wages, forbye a' that I have in the bank. Agnes Allison is the last person to stand in your light,

Donald; in fact, I will say a good word for you when I can. I have done so already even. To tell the truth, her and me's rayther pack!'

Donald Ross's hands went up to Donald Ross's hair as in troublous times they always did, making a permanent bottle-brush crest in consequence all along the ridge of a head as long as is possessed by any town clerk or local solicitor in Scotland.

'I—I—I wish nothing of the kind, Agnes,' he said hastily. 'You and me - '

'Never mind about 'you and me,' Donald Ross,' interrupted the trim and capable personality before him, 'there's no need. I was thinking of another placement for my goods. Ye are rather various for me, Donald.'

'Somebody has been telling you lies! I'll - ' began Donald Ross, threateningly.

But Miss Allison put up a hand which imposed silence. She had a way with her, Miss Agnes Allison, and not even a lawyer should put her down.

'And I do not blame you, Donald,' she said. 'Far be it from me to blame ye. She will be an ornament to you anywhere, and they tell me has a share in a good-going business — something to the tune of £30,000 a year clear profit. I know, Donald, for this is the third time I have brought across an order to the extent of a hundred thousand - '

'Why, Agnes, ye never breathed a word of these journeys. That was *not* like you!' said Donald from Dunfermline.

'I had my reasons, business reasons,' retorted Miss Allison. 'Neither did you tell me what you said to Miss Claire, though *that* was no doubt only private and personal. But I see now how right you were. The part owner of a rich wholesale Amsterdam

merchant's establishment is not to be picked up every day. And the £30,000 will doubtless help you to submit to your lot, Donald.'

'Who was speaking about such a thing?' burst out Donald Ross like one who cries under torment.

'Well,' replied Miss Allison calmly, 'I really think you were right not to go quite that length the first time; but now when we have discussed the subject -

'I'll do nothing of the sort!' burst out Donald, driven to his last entrenchments.

Miss Allison's hand went up again, imposing silence.

'What have you against the lady?' she demanded, turning upon him.

'Oh, nothing, just nothing,' said Donald, his fingers drilling like harrows among the red furze, 'nothing in the world.'

'What then is to prevent you speerin' her? Ye will never get a better chance. Everything quiet here. The sandhills they caa' dunes ' lying about like big bunkers on a golf-course. Man, ye could lose yourselves among them in no time! I'm speakin' for your good. Then I'll help. It's a sort o' reward for giein' me my liberty, Donald. I desire to show my gratitude!'

'Your what?' cried Donald fiercely. 'If you are thinking of anybody else, God help him! I'll twist his neck!'

Up went the hand again — this time, however, in reproach.

'That ever I should hear you speak such words, and you a deacon in the Aibbey Kirk and once on the short leet for elder! I'm fair shamed for you, Donald Ross!'

'I see what it is, Agnes Allison,' said the 'writer.' 'It's a plot. Ye want rid of me! Where's my hat?'

'No, no,' said Miss Allison decidedly, 'you are here to protect two lonely women, and — come one step nearer and, as sure as you're a solicitor, I'll sit on your best hat!'

'It cost twenty-one shillings, Agnes, in London — a shameful price!'

'Jewels are cheaper at Waterstone's in the High Street, but the quality is raither different!' retorted Miss Allison, tilting her nose till the proud little nostrils showed all dilated with scorn.

'It's no my hat I care for, Agnes Allison, but my character,' said Donald Ross. 'Ye can easy buy a new hat, but a new character — they are just not to be bought for siller — at least, in Dunfermline.'

'Aye, it's a precious thing — character!' sneered Miss Allison. 'What would the minister of the Aibbey say if he kenned that one of his deacons was distributing jewels and precious stones among the young women of Amsterdääm, and them bought at Waterstone's under pretence that they were for his intended — him being a full communicant, a member of the choir, Bible class and, for aught that I ken, mothers' meeting!'

'Neither you nor I have any business at that last that I ken of,' retorted Donald Ross, all the Highland blood within him rising insurgent. Then, instantly calming himself, he remembered that whatever advantage he might draw from words Miss A. Allison was in a position to draw tenfold more from facts.

'No, no,' he added, coming closer to Agnes, who held a strong defensive position at the corner of the same white-painted bridge on which, in the midst of the flower acres, Claire had formerly waited in vain

for John Eames, 'she may be all you say,' he said, trying to take her hand, 'but think of the position of a lawyer's wife in Dunfermline. She would never do for Fife. Look at her hats and the way she dresses.'

'Ye are blind, Donald Ross,' cried Miss Allison, truthful even when most resolved on torment, 'She has fewer than me and plainer made.'

Donald harked back upon the general question.

'I tell you she would never do for Dunfermline,' he repeated decidedly but perhaps rather mournfully. 'No, no, you are the woman' — (he pronounced it wumman) — 'for me, Agnes. There's maybe better-looking, I am not saying to the contrary, but ye will look fine in the breast of the laft at the Aibbey Kirk. And there has never been a word said against you. Nobody could utter a word to your discredit.'

'Don't you be so sure of that, Donald Ross,' said Miss Allison. 'It's not pinned to your coat-tail I have been all these years, and ye maunna think, Donald, that a bit rambling fit now and then is ony perquisite of yours. Seven years in London, Donald, and never a soul in Dunfermline the wiser from the moment a lass takes her third-class ticket at the North British Station!' Donald considered a long time, and then said gravely:

'There's matter in what you put before the jury, Agnes — I mean, before me — and maybe it may be as ye say. But ye see for yourself, Agnes Allison, it's ower late now to think of changing. Ye must think of the clients, Agnes, and to tell you the truth, though Miss Claire is a fine lass and has the name of siller, it would look bad, Agnes. Folk would be sure to talk. I ken Dunfermline. It will be better to overlook one another's faults, however grave yours may have been. You may be sure I'll never mention them to

the session when I am an elder, and, what's more, I will never cast them up to you unless you begin.'

Fire flashed from the eyes of Miss Allison. They had reached the door of the inn, but she stood a moment in the early shining of the crescent moon, as angry a girl as ever tapped a typewriter.

'Faults . . . grave faults . . . never mention them when you are an elder . . . never cast them up! Certes, it's you that has the face. There's the road, my man! The back train to Amsterdam passes within half an hour. No, ye need not think of Miss Claire. There's a lad before you. She was only playing pretending with you. She would not look at you, nor your likes, Donald Ross! Go back and think of your clients, your precious clients, but never set eyes again on one of the family of Allison! Man, you and your clients! Ye are a fair scunner! The very Allison headstones would turn their backs to hear you, ye snivellin', deed-writin', reid-headed disgrace!' And with these loving words Miss Allison slammed the door of Hans Polder's inn in the face of Mr. Donald Ross.

He stood awhile with his mouth open, gazing at the knocker, and then solacing himself with the proverb that 'nipping and scartin' are Scots folks' wooing' he turned and walked slowly away in the direction of the station.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now it came to pass that about this time the main stream of the story received a curious tributary. Mr. Wentworth, director of the Jewellers' Retail Union, was not at all a man to take 'No' for an answer. He was tired of dining at clubs, tired of bearded and

blue-shaven faces, and especially tired of the thought of leaving all his wealth to his nephew Herbert. He had often remarked the quiet, dependable, silent and entirely adequate manner of Miss Agnes Allison from Dunfermline. He was an elderly man, but he still felt quite capable of horsewhipping the man who should call him 'old.'

'Of course,' said Mr. Wentworth, full of meditation, 'a girl like that is sure to have younger admirers — sweethearts perhaps — but none of them could give her such a home as I could.' And he thought long and carefully of the new flats near the clubs, looking out on the river, with the barges passing, and all the panorama of shot-towers and lights and bridges. His mind even went on to the furnishing, and devised a heavy dark mahogany sideboard; and butlers, appropriate and venerable, full of dignity, with whiskers corresponding to the sideboard.

Then there were drawing-rooms and morning-rooms and boudoirs, about which Mr. Wentworth did not know much; but he knew where to go to be informed, also he was prepared to pay. Then there would have to be a country house, with gardens, hot-houses, and an arbitrary Scotch gardener who gave orders to his master and did not listen to a word his mistress said. His friends had told him of such, and he smiled to think of the tug-of-war there would be when the Scotch gardener tackled Miss Allison of Dunfermline! He would be on hand with a shorthand writer and a photographer! Greek meeting Greek would be a mere friendly game to that!

From what he knew of Miss Allison, he judged it would be little use to offer that young lady his

heart's deepest affection. So, which came easier, he prepared a balance-sheet. He included his whole financial position, and the total was certainly of an imposing kind when lined out in plain figures. He came at an auspicious moment, too, for after the interview she had had with Donald Ross, Miss Allison felt herself not only 'open to offers,' but also on the most affectionate terms with Claire. So that Mr. Wentworth had struck that tide in the affairs of women which is as Solway or Fundy to the sluggish Mediterranean of men.

It was the hour, but was *he* the man? Mr. Wentworth looked at his grizzled locks, and doubted. He looked at the comfortable totals of his income on the fourth page of his notebook, and believed. He had no near relations to advise him as to 'making a social position' and 'getting into the swim,' and, indeed, Herbert had pretty well sickened him of relatives — he would gladly have cut them off without a shilling. He was not exactly in love: he was too shrewd a business man for that. Besides, at his clubs he had speculated too long on the follies which love causes men to commit. But he wanted a companion, and he considered that Miss Agnes Allison's bright face and spirited tongue would go far to make home happy. He would not lean over the balusters any more listening to the laughter of the servants in the basement and wishing that he could go down and join them.

'How silly!' was what Miss Allison said to herself the next morning, when, having found the way to Ruiksdyk, Hans Polder appeared with broad smiles to announce that 'Another gentleman' was waiting below to see Miss Allison.

She had now taken her 'things' out of John

Eames's room and shared Claire's chambers, occupying that in which Hermance had once stored a small part of her hundred dresses. The girls, however, slept in the same room and talked half the night. Claire was much struck with her new friend's descriptions of the good Grey Town. She heard with enthusiasm about Lime Kilns and Aberdour. The Heart of Bruce and Scotland's ancient capital became familiar to her. She conceived low ideas of Edinburgh — a modern, ill-built place — *castellum, puellarum* — a mere girls' school to Dunfermline in the days of Scotland's royal greatness.

Meanwhile Mr. Wentworth waited, and for something to do, took to casting up his totals. He found an error of six shillings to the good, and was cheered up. He almost felt as if he had gained the first trick.

He was, however, taken aback, as much as an honourable English bachelor merchant can be, when Miss Allison descended, bringing with her Claire Altmayer. The introductions were made, Mr. Wentworth standing a little stiffly with his pocket-book closed in his hand, but his forefinger keeping the place.

'I have some business with you, Miss Allison,' said the Managing Director of the J. R. U. after the weather had been discussed and dismissed.

Claire was on her feet in a moment and making for the door, but her friend stopped her.

'Bide where ye are,' said Miss Allison, 'that is, till I know whether Mr. Wentworth's business concerns the firm or is of a personal nature.'

Now Mr. Wentworth was a man of the highest honour, his probity was proverbial; but if ever he felt inclined to tell a lie it was then. Still, he stood to his

guns, and said plainly and clearly: 'The business I have with you, Miss Allison, concerns the firm in so far as it concerns myself, but not otherwise.'

'Thank you,' said Miss Allison. 'You can stay, Claire. In Dunfermline we think that such things are best said before witnesses. Once a friend of mine, a sensible lass, made two young lawyers witness each other's proposals of marriage.'

'I see,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'Now I understand what are the qualities which have made you such a valuable and valued servant of the firm. Well, I am too old to beat about the bush. I shall not grow any younger waiting for you if you cannot make up your mind to take me. I propose, therefore, that instead of returning to your office work in London you should accept my hand in marriage.'

'Oh!' said Claire, whom anything of the kind excited. 'I had better go! Indeed, I must!'

'By no means,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'Stay and hear an honest man speak his mind. I am too old for you, Miss Allison. To a less sensible person that might appear an objection. But I can promise you careful attention to your wishes, a more than sufficient income, one house in town and another in the country, and — I will settle a considerable sum upon you for your own behoof on our marriage day.'

'And how much were ye thinking of?' said Miss Allison calmly.

'I do not know,' said Mr. Wentworth, with equal businesslike brevity, 'whether you will care to accept me as a makeweight, but I thought in case of success of settling a hundred thousand upon my wife, and I dare say my widow might find herself in possession of some four times that amount.'

There was a short silence, during which Mr.

Wentworth fumbled in his breast pocket for his notebook, and Miss Allison sat on the arm of a brown oak Dutch chair, apparently ticking out silent exercises upon an invisible typewriter.

'There are the figures,' said Mr. Wentworth, laying the book on the table and flattening it out with his hand with a motion which was very familiar to Miss Allison in the office.

She looked up at him and noticed that the hearty country squirelike manner for which he was celebrated in clubs seemed to have forsaken him. He was pale and shaken, so that Claire's heart ached for him. But if Miss Allison's did she certainly did not show her emotion. She passed her finger along the lined columns and automatically checked an addition, then she nodded and closed the book. She returned it to Mr. Wentworth and looked her wooer straight in the face.

'In books,' she said, 'girls always say, 'You are doing me a great honour' — and so on; but that's not just how I look at it. You want something, I suppose, or you would not ask for it. It does not seriously matter whether it is a blue diamond or an honest girl; indeed, the balance is on the side of the girl. I think, sir, that my market value as a stenographer, typist *and* private secretary is about two pounds a week; but out of office hours I am not in the market. You are a good man, Mr. Wentworth, and there are lots of girls who would jump at the chance, only I know also that you are not the man to think less of me for not jumping.'

'Then you refuse?' said Mr. Wentworth, gathering up his notebooks and jottings with a darkening blow.

'I do not refuse a business offer so hurriedly,' said

Miss Allison. 'I should make you as good a wife as I have made you a private secretary — that is, if I accepted. But I will be plain with you. There is a young lawyer from Dunfermline who has taken it upon him to think that I am trysted to him.'

'And are you?' said Mr. Wentworth, looking for his hat.

'Such has never been my own opinion,' remarked Miss Allison. 'A lass who can earn her own living has no need to consider herself not free till the minister slips the ring on her finger. Besides, there's a lad from Kirkcaldy, the first mate of a steamer, with a captain's certificate, and money in the bank. Oh, and two-three others, as it were, all marking time till I have made up my mind.'

'But,' said Mr. Wentworth, 'is it not a little cruel to keep so many on the tenterhooks?'

'Not a bit, sir,' said Miss Allison. 'I never in my life wanted any man to come pestering me to marry him; at the same time, if he does — well, he has his chance like another. I have no great need to be in a hurry. If the men are — why, then there is a clear road for them out at the front door. But a lass from Dunfermline does not need to jump at the first man she meets like a burnt trout at a well buskit fly!'

'I understand,' said Mr. Wentworth. 'I have no desire to take you hastily. I will renew my offer in a week. Good morning!' And bowing to the ladies he went downstairs, irradiated by the concentrated gaze of the entire Polder establishment, and so across the fields to the station where the Bulb Express paused breast-deep in bloom.

'Oh, the poor man!' cried Claire pensively when he was gone. 'You were not very kind to him. I do not really think you were.'

'Hoch!' said Miss Allison, tossing her head. 'If I were always kind to menfolk in the way they want I should very soon find myself in the Central Criminal Court for bigamy, and — besides the worrit of it — that's a crime that was only lawful in the Auld Testament!'

'But his heart,' mourned Claire. 'He may never get over it!'

'Tuts! Mr. Wentworth is a decent man, but what he wants is a housekeeper, and maybe a nurse. He is prepared to pay high for a particular specimen, that's all, Claire. Dinna you fret, lassie. Men's hearts are mostly made of india-rubber and their terrible sufferings rub out quicker than a wrongly-typed letter under the inky-razor!'

Now Mr. Wentworth, being no fool, but on the contrary a very clever man, had been thinking of Miss Allison's former words about the young Scotch lawyer. He brooded over the subject in the train.

'So he is staying at the Bible Hotel,' he meditated. 'It might be useful to look him up. I am sure he is by no means worthy of such a treasure.'

A glance at the register satisfied him that a certain Mr. Donald Ross (of Dunfermline, N.B.) was the man. The head-porter pointed him out, and a slight service rendered in the smoking-room paved the way to a long talk, a moonlight walk and, finally, a midnight entrance.

Donald Ross had intended to betake himself down to Ruiksdyk on the morrow, but the discovery of the importance of the man he had been talking to reminded him of what he was not liable to forget, that 'business was business.' He had been stimulated to this resolution by a casual observation of Mr. Wentworth's to the effect that the Jewellers'

Retail Union was considering a project to establish branches in the principal towns of Scotland. Mr. Wentworth also sounded Mr. Donald cautiously on some of the differences between Scotch and English law, at which he shook his head. He more than hinted that the advice of a skilled conveyancing and 'court' lawyer would be a first necessity.

'I suppose you never go to Edinburgh?' Mr. Wentworth asked insidiously.

'Two or three times a week,' Donald answered promptly. 'It is quite a short distance now that we have expresses across the Forth Bridge; indeed, I am there for consultations almost every day.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Wentworth, yet more delicately, 'but if you are to get married, as I understand is your intention, you would have to stay nearer home, and I fear — I regret — that such an arrangement as I had hoped for would in that case be impossible!'

'Eh, no! Who told you such a thing?' said Donald, with consternation in his eye. At the smallest reckoning the legal business of the J. R. U. and its branches would be worth — well, he supposed, from a rapid casting-up of the table of fees, a thousand a year. 'But,' said Ronald Ross, finding that a policy of humility would not bring matters to a point, 'I was given to understand that you were very well satisfied with — Miss — Miss Agnes Allison. She comes of a very respectable family, who pay their taxes to a day at the town clerk's office.'

Mr. Wentworth smiled gently upon his victim.

'So valuable do we consider the services of Miss Allison that we would not care for her marrying — at least, not at a distance from us; in fact, if she married, I imagine the scheme for the Scotch branches would require to be given up.'

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'D'ye tell me so?' cried Donald, pulling fiercely at his ruddy whiskers as if to elongate them by main force.

Mr. Wentworth nodded most convincingly.

'Then the thing must not be thought of in the meanwhile,' said Donald.

'What, the new business in Scotland?'

'No,' cried Donald, '*my mairriage!*'

'But is not this a great privation to you?'

'Och, no!' said Donald, recovering hold on himself. 'Indeed, it has always been in my mind that I was meant by Providence for a bachelor, and now I am more persuaded of it than ever.'

But, all the same, Donald Ross was a faithful man, and thought it his duty as a lawyer to go down to the Polder's Inn by the Bulb Express — not, of course, to signify to Miss Allison the change in his affections — he knew better than that — but rather to put the transaction in what appeared to him a reasonable and 'East Nuik' point of view, for albeit the Grey Town is not strictly East Neuk, it is so in its habits of thought.

Claire had a headache and was lying down, while Miss Allison, whom it had suddenly struck that she had often intended to read Shakespeare (which owing to work and lovers she had been hitherto prevented from doing) was deep in 'The Merchant of Venice.' Being in business herself the title attracted her. She had tried 'Romeo and Juliet' first owing to some early memory of Dicksee's picture, but she soon abandoned it, finding the play to be concerned with love altogether too youthful to meet the ripe taste of Miss Agnes Allison.

'If they had been obliged to earn their own weekly wage it would have been better for them.' Which

dictum is, perhaps, the final and sad truth concerning the psychology of much modern writing about lovers and love. 'They just don't know what they would be at.'

However, the careful and mercantile character of Shylock appealed to Miss Allison as a citizen of that one country where no Jew can make a fortune, and she vehemently denied the possibility of such a man being taken in by so paltry a device as the missing drop of blood in the bond. Miss Allison merely considered Shylock as swindled, which he was. She was even deciding that Portia's pleading was clap-trap and that Donald Ross could have done far better, when through the open window of the Polder's Inn she saw that able rising young lawyer advancing towards her.

Now the fear of man did not oppress Miss Allison in any degree. She was more sensitive to ridicule, however. So, to escape the equatorial smiles on the faces of the Polder brothers and their domestics, she rose hastily, with the book in her hand, and hastened down the path between the dunes and the flowers to meet him.

'Donald, is it you again?'

'Aye, Agnes. It's me again.'

And after this effusive greeting they turned and walked away among the dunes, side by side. To Claire's eye there was something almost tender in the sight. She thought they were far better suited to each other than 'the old man with the grey beard who might be Miss Allison's father'; but squire and maid both coming from Dunfermline they were really quite fitted to understand each other.

They reached the high ridges of the sand where the 'bent' and 'spirry grass,' as Miss Allison called

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the binding plants devised by the Forestry School of Nancy for keeping the sands in its place. Then Miss Allison turned upon him, without a single glance at the glory of the sea or the outward sweep of the ships from the canal mouth.

'Well, Donald,' she said, 'what has brought you down this time?'

It was an unpromising beginning enough, but Donald Ross was equal to it.

'I have come to congratulate you, Agnes. I started as soon as I heard of your great good fortune, and to say that you must not allow a thought of me to stand in your way.'

'Ye may depend on that, Donald Ross!' said Miss Allison briskly. 'But what might the great good fortune be?'

'That you have the right to look forward to being a rich woman and to riding in your carriage.'

'Oh,' said Miss Allison, with grave aplomb, 'that's it, is it? And pray who might have taken so much upon themselves?'

'I had it from Mr. Wentworth himself,' said Donald Ross, with some pride in the unimpeachableness of his authority. 'And I am sure that you could not do better. I have come to clear your mind of any doubts and fears about me.'

'Thank you,' said Miss Allison. 'Pray consider my mind quite clear.'

'I do not doubt it,' went on Donald, 'but I thought that, considering the purpose for which I came here, you might have some scruples about the third-class return ticket (and first on board the boat). But, as it is, I freely forgive you, and I have no doubt that when the Scottish branches are established you, with your influence at headquarters, will be able to

make up the loss in some other way.'

'The Scottish branches! What branches?' inquired Miss Allison sharply.

'The branches which the Jewellers' Retail Union are going to establish in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Aberdeen,' said Donald. 'Oh, it's a great thing! The legal business alone will be worth £1000 a year at least. Besides, he's an old man. Mind that, Agnes, and though it would be wrong to keep my affections fixed upon you while ye are Mrs. Wentworth, it may not be for long, and I am quite ready to wait upon any dispensations of a kind Providence. When ye are a widow, Agnes, ye will find me faithful and willing, and with a little more invested cash to feather our nest.'

'I dare say,' said Miss Allison indignantly, 'but what about me? And do you think I would take a man who is ready to give me up — not that he ever had me — for £1000 a year and the pickings?'

Donald, who saw nothing out of the way in the proposal save a sort of friendly settlement, meditated a little before adding: 'I believe you are right, Agnes, about the 'pickings.' The less leads to the more and to them that have shall be given. We have Scripture for that. I dare say it might run to twelve or thirteen hundred!'

Miss Allison indicated to her disinterested wooer the nearer way to the station.

'Thank you kindly, Donald,' she said gravely. 'I'll remember about the cost of the third-class return.'

'Oh, no hurry, no hurry!' said Donald Ross. And he took his unembarrassed way back to the little station, where on a bench, with a conscience at ease, he studied the documents in the eminently Scottish case of Drochils *v.* Pitmilley, which involved

a right of way from a place where nobody lived to another place to which nobody wanted to go.

When Claire came down with her headache gone she found John Eames talking to Miss Allison. He greeted her with more than his usual quiet gravity, but, continued to hold her hand in his as he talked to Miss Allison. 'It's a disgrace,' Miss Allison was affirming. 'Mr. Wentworth offered Donald a thousand a year for his rights on me, and he had the face to come and tell me! More than that, I was to marry him when I was a rich widow! It's a blessing that my tongue was kept from telling him what I thought of him. But I'll never go back to the J. R. U., and — and' — (here the young lady broke down) — 'I'm out of a job!'

'Why not marry one of the others?'

'Marry,' said Miss Allison. 'I've had my fill of marrying for one while, thank you kindly. If it were not for Claire there I'm not saying but that I might have ventured to propose such a thing to yourself, John, just for a change; but no, Claire, Agnes Allison of Dunfermline is not the lass ever to take another's lad. But it's a pity that there are not enough Johns to go round. However, I'll have to be off to London and look for a new place.'

'You will do nothing of the kind,' cried Claire, with her arms about her friend's neck. 'You will come straight to Fernandez and Company and teach me typewriting. You shall have a desk in the private office and we will look after John between us. He is inclined to grow a trifle light-headed with everybody making so much of him.'

So that very night the rooms at Hans Polder's Inn were vacant. John Eames and Claire had between them abducted Miss Allison. The J. R. U. had lost

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the best private secretary it ever possessed, and John Eames, once so lonely, had two young women perfectly competent and even determined to look after him.

The marriage was to be next week. Miss Allison, in hiding from her too numerous lovers, could not very well be bridesmaid, but she promised to have tea ready for them when they came back and she would look after the business of Fernandez & Co. during the honeymoon.

CHAPTER TEN

THE WIFE OF AN EX-DICTATOR

Hermance said little when John Eames and Claire met her on the dreariest day of a dreary December at the west end of the Liverpool landing stage. She seemed older, wearied, distraught. Her complexion, radiant always as the young summer, had grown matt and wan. There were greenish shadows about her eyes, and in these a restless, hunted look went and came.

They were at the Adelphi Hotel before either John or Claire asked a question. John busied himself with details of baggage. But the great cases of dresses and hats, for which the Rue de la Paix had been searched and the coffers of James Fernandez & Co. depleted, were now represented only by one solitary leather portmanteau. John hurried this on a hansom and was at the hotel almost as soon as his wife and sister-in-law.

Claire wanted Hermance to sleep. She could hardly eat a mouthful at the dinner which they had had served in their sitting-room. Instead, she sat crumbling bread pellets, and glancing sharply up every time the waiter came to the door.

Presently the two women went up together. The fire was burning brightly in Hermance's bedroom, and the wide spread-down of the hotel bed invited to repose.

'She will speak to-morrow,' whispered Claire to John in the passage. 'Go away. I will do everything.'

But even when soothed by the gentleness of

Claire's hands and her little murmured expressions of tenderness, Hermance started at every sound. She did not want to go to bed, she said at last. She could not sleep; she knew she could not. At most she would accept a dressing-gown and slippers, and sit in an armchair by the fire.

'But John Eames must come in too,' she said. 'He is your husband now, is he not? Or is he only going to be?'

'I cannot think how you knew,' said Claire, 'but he is my husband.'

'Knew!' exclaimed Hermance. 'I always knew. It was only a question of time.'

Yes, John must come. She would feel safer. Everybody always did feel safer with John. She smiled very faintly, and then her face relapsed into its hopelessly dull expression, belied only by the quick, suspicious eyes.

When John came in he did not say much, but his very presence seemed to quiet Hermance.

'Oh, you big, simple, silent man, I love you!' she cried, with a faint crow of cheerless laughter. 'Tell me, are you always the same - never any different?'

'He is always the same,' said Claire, giving his coat a pull to settle her husband's collar. 'There — that is better. But he needs such a lot of looking after.'

If only Hermance could be got to smile, to join in their old foolish pleasantries, she might lose that strained, terrified look which went wistfully to both their hearts.

So Claire spoke of Ruiksydk and the Polders' Inn. She gave little amusing details of the *amourettes* of Hans the younger. But Hermance first gazed at her wonderingly, and then quite suddenly put up her

hands as if to ward off a blow.

John Eames and his wife hastily circled her with their arms.

'Tell her she is safe with us,' whispered Claire — 'safe, whatever happens. She will listen to you.'

And John did so, though he began to realise that their quiet days alone together — his and Claire's — were over. John locked the door and laid the key on Hermance's lap. She fingered it wonderingly, as if it had been something unknown, turning it over and printing the wards on the back of one hand with the palm of the other.

'No one can come in now, can they?' she asked childishly.

'No one,' said John. 'We are on the fourth storey, and the door is locked. You have the key in your hands.'

'The key?' she said, like one stricken by aphasia striving hard to get back the meaning of words. 'Ah, yes, as you say, the key!'

Then quite suddenly the rigidity went out of her body. She softened under Claire's touch, and putting her hands up to her face, she wept through her fingers like a child who thinks itself unjustly dealt with by its elders.

Claire glanced across at John to enforce the order that Hermance was to be let alone. She was to have her 'cry out' according to the formula of women all over the world. Accordingly John effaced himself so that Claire might minister alone. This she did with little semi-articulate dove-like cooings and motherly encouragements. She knew Hermance of old, though she had never seen her in an attack like this before.

Time was needed — time and the flowing of good easy tears. Claire knew that every drop which

pattered on her arms would help. Therefore she encouraged the overflow of grief, where a man would have said, 'Don't! You must not. You will do yourself harm.' But Claire knew better; and so communicative are such tears that presently she, too, wept for sheer company.

Gradually Hermance sobbed more slowly. She lifted her head and looked for the absent John, despatched elsewhere by that 'wireless' from his wife. Claire felt that the time for confidences was come. So she settled Hermance (and incidentally herself) more comfortably and waited for her to speak.

'It was all lovely on board the ship,' she said, 'that is, at first, till we got to the Isthmus. There were lots of people who were kind to me — people going south prospecting in search of gold and beaky men wanting mining concessions. They were nice to me because of my husband. They thought Ernest would help them. But at Colon came the first rumours of trouble. I did not hear the whole truth at the time, for Senor Rosario, who had been sent to Panama to fetch me, only laughed, and said, 'There is always news of trouble at Colon, but you will find your husband Dictator of Bolivia all right. He has squared the 'metas' and the Indians are for him to a man. He can wipe out everybody.'

I did not know quite what he meant, but he seemed so easy and certain that somehow he made me feel at ease also. Only when we got to Iquique Senor Rosario said that we had better not land there, but go further down the coast, where a gunboat would be waiting for us. So there was, near Arica. But when he saw the little ship close-to, Senor Rosario went a faint kind of greenish-white

under his depth of mahogany tan. And he said, 'Madame, there has been big trouble, and it will be better to stand off a bit.'

'But is not the gunboat waiting for us?' I asked him anxiously, as you may guess, for seeing my husband depended upon that.

He had very white teeth, and they flashed at that almost like a watch-dog snarling. He was a good man, Senor Rosario, and a true friend to my husband always. So I asked him what was the matter, and if he was sure that the gunboat (it looked such a little thing bobbing in the water) could not take all my dresses and trunks. He looked very grimly out to sea.

'It is not that,' he said. 'She is the *General Sucre*, and she is flying a white flag. If your husband had sent her she would have showed a red one.'

This did not sound much to me. You see I was pretty new to the game of Dictatorship as they play it in South America. I thought that if we told them they would fly a red flag, supposing always that they knew who I was, or if I got a chance to speak to the captain. People were generally kind to me. I have always had everything I liked to ask for.

But Senor Rosario shook his head, and said that it was all different away down there. As far as he could do it for me, I should want for nothing, but if General Altmayer was beaten in Bolivia, Peru would be up in arms demanding a slice of more territory to make up for what Chili had taken; and as for himself — well, he would not be worth more than the clothes he stood up in.

He said this so quietly that I did not quite believe him. They take things so much as a matter of course down among the republics. At Arica most of the

surveyors and gold-dusters guano-men and concessioners, got off. But I noticed that they kept their eyes on the gunboat, and not a single one of them came anywhere near me. Then a boat's crew from the *General Sucre* stopped them one after the other, and the big, long cannon that had been looking wickedly over the bows kept pointing in their direction till everybody was examined — 'for arms and things,' Senor Rosario explained. After they were all gone, the *General Sucre* came sneaking towards the big English liner till we could look right down upon her deck. Rosario bade me sit down on the camp-chair from which I had risen, but he himself stood looking calmly over the side.

'After a while he came and sat down beside me. As he lighted a cigarette he said, smiling, 'Their teeth are watering to let go their six-inch at us.' Then he sighed, and added: 'I only wish they would!'

I asked him why they did not. He pointed to the big red English mercantile flag with the little half-invisible criss-crossing crowded into the corner. We had been seeing others just like it all the time whenever a ship had crossed us on the way out. You would have thought that all the other flags had lost their way on the seas — all except that insolent red rag, calling out, 'Way there!' to everything that floats.

Then he continued, speaking as much to himself as to me:

"Not that the States would really allow the British to do anything on land, on account of their precious Monroe Doctrine. But at least if the *General Sucre* misbehaved, or stopped us on the high seas, down Teddy Roosevelt or Billy Taft would have to come with his big stick. And it is because of that, most

gracious lady, that we will proceed in peace and quiet to Valparaiso. Then, if the saints be good to us, we shall have news.'

"So we glided on down the coast to Valparaiso. But the pleasure had somehow gone out of things. My heart was anxious for word from Ernest. He was in danger. I had heard about his famous march on La Paz, and how his officers, Indians and half-breeds, had shot many of their prisoners, including the late president. Such was the rule — so, at least, I was told on board the vessel at the Isthmus.

I hated the idea even at the time, but comforted myself by thinking that my husband certainly had nothing to do with the matter. He was too kind. I knew it; for had he not been good to me and to everybody, as you know?

'But now it was all different. If the gunboat was against him, it was likely because he had not been able to keep the upper hand. I might find him a fugitive; or if he had fallen into the hands of the enemy — well, what his own officers had made of President Diaz!

I could not believe, not even when Senor Rosario affirmed on oath upon the head of his mother and the Holy Virgin, that I need be in no fear for my husband. The men who were with him knew the whole country from Illimani to the Lake better than any Blanco that ever lived. What could a Blanco know? They never set foot outside their plantations, where they drilled their soldiers with German rifles, or beyond the range of their ships' guns. But the Indians and the 'metas,' men of the hills and the wilderness, could be trusted to take the Dictator safe through an encampment of Blancos in broad daylight.

I heard, but I was not greatly comforted, except by his confidence in Ernest's star. That helped, for in that I had confidence too.

'So we came to Valparaiso and they began to land the mails. Afterwards they put my boxes on shore, nearly a full load of the tug. Oh, what a fool they must have thought me! What a fool I thought myself!

'All those boxes full of dresses, which you, Claire, and John Eames had paid for — and perhaps my husband lying shattered with bullets beside some adobe wall on the way to La Paz!

'We were, every one said, quite safe in Chili, for the Chilians hated the Peruvians and (for their own ends) wished well to the party which had made my husband Dictator of Bolivia.

'But what to do with all this luggage? I could not leave it to be a laughing-stock on the quay. Smart young men kept coming down from the water-front merchants' offices to take stock and nudge each other. Hateful! Luckily a *prima donna* was to come by the next boat, and the news went round that she had arrived before she had been expected. But I had not enough money to go to a hotel — at least, not one which would be in keeping with all these clothes.

'But as usual Rosario took everything into his charge. He would have the honour of conducting me to a hotel, where in time I should see my husband. He would bring him to me, and also he would cause to disappear these mountains of mockery on the quay. For myself, I was so ashamed of them that I did not care if he dropped them into the sea.

'Rosario took me far up the northern slopes of the hill to a beautiful suburb town, all hotels and fine houses, Viña de Mar it was called, and he told me it

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had been the scene of the last great Balmaceda battle, when the people had triumphed over the usurper.

“But,” he added hastily, as if struck by a resemblance, “the people are now on the side of your husband.”

I was glad to hear English spoken all about me, both on the water-front and up at Viña de Mar. Yet the image of the gliding gunboat tracking us steadily down the coast made me shudder,

“The people?” I said. “What people are on my husband's side? Not these English?”

Rosario looked a little put about by my question, but he answered quickly enough, “The people of Bolivia, and the Chilians also in whose country we are. They know the benefit of a good settled government on their inner frontiers.”

I said no more, for I did not understand these things. I wanted only to see my husband. The Hotel Santiago was large, and had cool, dusky stone arcades like a monastery. From these you could overlook the bay, the outer tier of great ships which could not come close in because of the shallowness, and the dense inner covey of small craft huddled together inshore for fear of the wind from the north.

When Rosario went out he bade me lock my room, and keep away from the window till I should hear his voice. He was going, so he said, to bring my husband to me. But I could not help thinking, if everything was so safe, what need of all these precautions.

Before leaving the quay he had asked me which of my boxes would be the most useful to me. The one I had picked out had been brought up with my dressing-bag and wraps. They were placed neatly in

a row in a corner of the chamber. As for the others, Rosario declared that he would warehouse them after passing them through the Customs.

I had had nothing to eat since I left the ship in the forenoon, and very little at breakfast that morning. I had had other things to think of. Yet I remembered the warnings of Rosario. I must not ring or open the door till he should return. But instead I made me a nest behind the curtains, pulled up a chair, and sat down to watch the dusky-skinned, eagle-faced folk who went by with their listless, over-dressed women. It made me sigh for the Paquin wonders in the big Saratogas which Rosario was stowing uselessly away in the warehouses of Valparaiso. I ached to show them what it was to be well dressed. But that grace is denied to a woman who has for husband an ex-dictator, pursued by gun-boats and hated by the people of his own race and colour.

It was weary enough waiting, but the time passed somehow. Over the Hotel Santiago brooded the silence of an afternoon of peace. Only the swallows circled ceaselessly about, and the swishing of their wings sounded pleasantly through the open windows.

'At last came the southern dusk. It invaded the lower town and spread upwards. The streets of the city lit up. Two long avenues ran parallel to the bay, curving to its shape, with many narrow, steep streets climbing up to the heights. On the farther side the sunlight lingered red on a circle of hills, tufted with sage and juniper — or so at least they seemed from the hotel windows — with aromatic herbs at any rate. Save for a light or two about the servants' quarter, the empty hotel remained

obstinately dark.

It was wondrously like gloaming in a Devonshire village. Farthest out was the sleeping sea, then the red-roofed town, and nearer a patchwork of leaves, inky black against a vivid sky. Suddenly, however, I heard a roaring, like the sound of an angry sea. I was shaken out of the chair in which I was sitting. The house shook, and a chimney opposite my window toppled and fell crashing. Something seemed to pass beneath me with a rasping, grinding roar. It rushed onward towards the north like a headlong train. A strange benumbed feeling came over me. Ten minutes after I still seemed to feel the rocking of the Hotel Santiago. Then I remembered I was in Valparaiso — that vale of Paradise where the earth and sea are never quiet. But it was only when I saw the black sprinkle of ships in the harbour sucked back, the waters beyond gathering themselves together into a heap and pausing thus as it seemed a full minute, then bursting in a long thunder of destruction along the shore, sweeping the quays and reducing the nearer boats to piles of wreckage, that I recognised the earthquake. The house still quivered as after the passage of a train, but I could not take my eyes off the filmy white confusion of the sea, from which now the *débris* of a mast and now the black silhouette of a steamer's chimney was flung up for a moment black against the creaming white.

I was sitting thus waiting, while below the people were shrieking in the streets to all the saints, when quite silently my husband was at my side. How he came in I do not know. Rosario had brought him as he had promised. But my good friend had gone silently away, leaving us alone, and was no doubt

waiting for Ernest below.

'As for Ernest, in spite of earthquakes and revolutions, he seemed gayer than ever I had seen him. He was no longer Dictator. True; but what of that? He had been chased by their foolish Bolivian police — he who had measured wits with the keenest-scented sleuths of the Old World. Why he had not even taken the trouble to adopt a disguise! Only for the moment he was penniless. But in Valparaiso on a night of earthquake no one needed -- Here he paused, and I besought him to let me do what I could.

'You!' he said, astonished. 'What can you do?'

'I will sell my silly dresses,' I said. 'I have some thousands of pounds' worth — that is, if you can get them through the Customs.'

He thought a moment, and then suddenly did what he had never done before — came and kneeled in front of me. He kissed my hand tenderly, separating the fingers.

'Hermance,' he said, 'you are an angel. Better for you if they had shot me up at La Paz.'

'But I told him that I was not an angel, but only a poor, very foolish woman trying to be a good wife.

'Hermance, Hermance,' he groaned, 'if only I had met you sooner and had been content to play the game straight! I had ten times the ability, but I couldn't go slow like John Eames — not if they made me Czar of all the Russias!'

He kept on stroking my hand, and in the dark I fancied — it could only have been fancy — that I heard a sob. I laid my head against his breast. How he must have suffered! There was no light in the room, but the glimmering of a conflagration caused by some fallen houses in the lower town showed me

that there were streaks of white in his hair. I went on hastily, lest I should break down.

“I may not be good for much, Ernest,” I said, “but I have an eye for good dressing, and with the aid of a seamstress I can alter my things for anybody who will buy.”

“At first he would not hear of such a thing. It would be too much for me; he had sent for me to come out there for something better than that. But I said, ‘What better than to be a help to you, be you dictator or street-sweeper? Let us earn our money honestly.’”

“This seemed to strike him. I could feel him quiver as he sat with my hand in his. ‘You have the right of it, Hermance, as always,’ he said. ‘I am unworthy. But I shall not be — no, I shall not be!’”

“He leaped suddenly to his feet and went out on the balcony. As for the Customs, Rosario shall see to that. Rosario!” he called.

I could hear voices. They were talking softly. Presently my husband came back to me.

“It is all arranged,” he said, returning. “After all, why should you not? It was a noble thought. It makes me better too. I also have a plan, but we had better keep each to our own line of business. After all, ex-dictators and their friends are plentiful hereabouts — a Balmaceda, once a secretary of embassy, clerks in Leylands’ office. An ancient president of Paraguay sells coal, and a nephew of Dom Pedro, Braganza to his toe-nails, is interested in the shipping of guano! Rather *passe* that for royalty!”

“He laughed lightly, and continued: ‘After all, it will be an experience for you.’ Then he sat down and talked of his victories and the love the Indians and

half-breeds had for him.

“It was as good as ‘Another for Hector,’ or the devotion of the clans for Bonnie Prince Charlie,’ he said. ‘Why, Hermance, a whole tribe was wiped out to the last man, fighting against the Blanco rebels, just to give me time to cross the river and get away. Fine, wasn't it? I should rather think so! No, I will not desert such men. I shall have another try. If the Blancos think they have done with me — well, the wish is the father to the thought. Why, the very sight of you and the knowledge of what you are doing for me makes me a new man. I only wish I had my life to live over again, for your sake.”

“I am content with you as you are.”

“I wonder,” he said very soberly, and restraining himself, stopped on the verge of telling me something important. Doubtless he had his reasons; he always had.

“Well, the very next morning Ernest and I took a walk together into the business quarter of the city. Everybody was busy cleaning up after the earthquake, much as housewives would if a water-pipe had burst with the frost and flooded the lobby and cellar. Paint-pots and white-washing brushes were abroad, and then I came to a fine double-fronted shop, which was being repainted. The sign-decorator was standing on the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets, looking at the effect of his work. I read:

“MADAME HERMANCE. MODES DE PARIS”

“And in the newly fitted windows a smart young man was arranging my poor Paquin dresses on lay figures — busily, but oh, so stiffly, not as I would have worn them!

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“It will all be ready by the afternoon,” said my husband smilingly, “but Madame Hermance will not receive customers till to-morrow. By that time I shall also be ready to race you. We shall start fair.”

For all that he would by no means tell me what his intentions were. Nor did I know anything till the next morning, when on my way to the business premises of Madame Hermance I read on a huge announcement beside a kiosque where the electric trains stopped:

‘ONLY EUROPEAN BOOTBLACKER IN THE CITY.  
His Excellency Ernest Altmayer.  
Late Dictator of Bolivia.’

I could hardly get to the door of the booth. It was open to the street, and there on a plank was a row of men, English and American mostly, reading the papers while waiting their turn. Ernest, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was finishing the boots of a shipping merchant. Rosario, with a wary eye and a revolver ready to hand, received the money, and called. ‘Next!’ exactly as in a hairdresser’s.

Ernest must have seen my shadow on the hard-trodden earth, and spared the time to look up and give me a smiling nod.

“Ladies’ department open to-morrow, madame. Rather belated owing to earthquake,” he said, and so continued his work with complete matter-of-factness.

At the ‘Modes Hermance,’ as people began already to call it, there was a black swarm of Valparaisians looking over each other’s shoulders at the dresses. Nothing like the display had ever been seen before on the Pacific coast — that is, farther

south than San Francisco. For all that, my heart sank within me. For after these dresses were sold, where was I to get the material to make others? And though I could advise very well, I had no confidence in the powers of Chilian sewing women to finish after the manner of Paquin.

‘At the same time I had little chance of accumulating dark thoughts that day. A dozen of ladies were already in waiting. Now, I am not an easily moved person,’ interjected Hermance, looking towards Claire, ‘but the first interview was a trial. However, I had been served too long to have lost remembrance of the grand manners assumed by the heads of such places. I adopted, therefore, an air of condescension, and though I decided everything myself, I found an able assistant in the widow of a ship's officer, who happened to be that rare bird, an adaptable Londoner.

‘Altogether we got through the afternoon pretty well, and as it was our day of first choice prices ruled high. I could also have taken several orders; but not being yet sure of myself or of my assistants, I chose rather to blame the disarrangement of business material caused by the earthquake. The ladies could come back next week, but in the meantime most of them found something to suit them, the hardest part of the shopkeeping consisting in persuading people with money to spend to cross the threshold.

‘After tea Mrs. Watson took me round several of the big furnishers of dress materials, suggesting that I should set the sewing girls (of whom she knew many) to work on copies of the unsold dresses in cheaper materials.

‘She offered to superintend, and I never had the

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least reason to regret my choice. She is conducting the 'Modes Hermance' now, and, I do not doubt, doing exceedingly well. She has the business knack, that little Londoner. She only wants the eye for colour and appropriateness to be perfect. But by sticking to the specialities which I introduced from Paris and using the name of 'Madame Hermance' there is little fear that they will find her out — at least, not in Valparaiso.

'On my way home I saw several specimens of the 'Only European bootblack' advertisement, each more flaming than the other. Booths of cane and planed wood were being run up near the railway stations, and a good many of the unemployed whites, mostly Oxford and Cambridge men with no care for local prejudices, had gladly accepted a job. I came upon my husband showing one how — while the Trinity Hall man stood and watched, his fingers twitching to be at it. Midway the second boot Ernest relinquished the brushes and stood by to criticise, more than once resuming the burnishers himself with a brusqueness which would have offended any one less well bred than his new assistant.

'The next day we were in a fair way to succeed. I had plenty of money by the end of the week. For, to begin with, having paid cash, I admitted only cash transactions. No bad debts were to be feared. Ladies mostly brought their husbands, or some less official male representative; and I soon learned that when men mix themselves in such transactions it generally ends in something much more expensive being bought. Nor is there any beating down of price. The cash is paid on the nail.'

Here Claire and John nodded approval. They knew well how it is in the jewellery business, where

no sight is so welcome as a pretty young lady accompanied by a plain-headed, rather elderly gentleman.

Ernest had not, of course, cleared his building and installation expenses, his profits being naturally on a smaller scale than mine. So he accepted a loan out of my full purse, and was certain that he would 'be all right in ten days, and able to sell as a going concern within the month.' In either case I should have my money back.

It was a very happy time. I had never worked before, and the interest of business, of going down to interview a file of eager waiting ladies, was wine in my veins. Ernest cabled to Buenos Ayres for new supplies of material for me, and even now the fabrics of the Rue de la Paix were nosing a way through the Andean passes to fill the engagements of the house of Madame Hermance.

In the days which followed I had such a glimpse as never before of the marvellous adaptability of my husband. He would be gone long before I was awake in the morning, passing out like a shadow so as not to wake me. During the day I would catch glimpses of him now and again, directing gangs of dusky, white-clad poster carriers darting from one booth to another, or pacing slowly with Rosario in serious talk, but never speaking to me or allowing me to come near him till the evening. Then he would regain his own chamber like a ghost, and the first I would hear of him would be a wallowing in the bathroom from which presently he would appear, calm and correct in evening dress, bending to kiss my hand like a visitor entering a drawing-room. Rosario, too, would mostly look in, bringing with him several other pleasantly spoken, dusky

conspirators in swallow-tails and fine linen.

It was as Ernest had said. In a fortnight he had paid everybody off. His cane and timber installations had not been expensive. He insisted that I should take his money to pay my furnishers of material and so get the benefit of paying cash. And as this was really necessary if the gaps made by my sales were to be filled up, I allowed him to telegraph money to the wholesale French houses in Buenos Ayres.

Through all I could not sufficiently admire the constancy of Rosario. For he had many offers of pardon made to him. His estates would all be given back if only he would betray Ernest into the hands of the Blancos. And indeed he would have suffered little in reputation, such things being done every day. Indeed this was the ordinary mode of making one's peace. But Rosario remained close at hand, because in our present straits he could be useful to his friend and benefactor. Also he had that something in his blood which makes a good conspirator.

Then Ernest told me of the terrible nature of civil war in a half-savage country. How hordes of Indians rode into towns already sacked; how death and worse were the portion of all who were found. Hiding-places in the neighbourhood were dug out of the sides of hills. Clumps of cane-brake were undermined, and no man passed another without holding his gun at the ready and his finger upon the trigger. 'But,' said Ernest, 'after all, we of the Reds have the right end of the string, and I shall again be Dictator. It is only a first success that does it, and in the end I have never failed yet. If only once I had you safe with John and Claire, or established somewhere in the West End with your late experience (and John

to guide you through the business part), I should try again.'

'By this time we were living in a house in Villa de Mar, which had been found for us by Rosario. But the end came all too soon. I never was so happy before, and never expect to be again.

'It came on us like a thunderclap. It happened thus. Quite unexpectedly Peru and Chili resolved to make up their differences, to use their influences to pacify Bolivia. And as a first step they recognised the Blanco Government established by General Sucre the younger. Moreover, they promised to deliver up Ernest to his enemies.

'But we had notice. Old General Morazan, once president of the Federal State of Central America, was still living in Valparaiso. He, too, had been crushed by three armies coming upon him at once — Hondurans, Guatemalans, and the rebels of his own St. Salvador. He had fled to Chili, where he lived an esteemed and quiet life a little lower down the slope than ourselves. But, then, Bolivia was near at hand and needed to be considered, while the lands where General Morazan had fought were far away. Nevertheless he had kept enough of his old authority to give us warning. We disposed of our businesses for what they would fetch. I have no doubt that little Mrs. Watson, from the Harrow Road, will send me my money by instalments; but Ernest found himself almost as poor as ever. However, he rose high above all trials.

'He shipped on board of a San Francisco liner — the same in which he had booked me a place as a first-class passenger. Of course I only saw him in his fireman's trim, grimy with coal and still hot from the inferno of the stokehole in which he had been

shovelling coal.

I was put off by Rosario at Colon, but Ernest went on to San Francisco. It would not have been safe for him to land in any Spanish-speaking port. So here I am, as poor as a rat, but not an idle woman any more. I have a business now which I know I can work — that is, if Ernest gets back in time, or — if John and you will help me.'

John Eames and Claire looked at one another. They smiled. After all, why not? It would deliver them from the ennui of having an idle woman on their hands. And, so far as money went, the venture, carefully managed, would not take very much; while their books told them that the firm of James Fernandez & Co. was making a record year.

So they said together, 'You can count on us, Hermance.'

So it came about that Madame Hermance started business in Regent Street, nearly opposite to the offices of the Jewellers' Retail Union, and (what does not matter at all at present) exactly in the line of vision of Mr. Wentworth when he stopped while dictating letters to his new confidential clerk.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### LOVE AND WIZARDRY

Miss Agnes Allison was weary of this world. She had never taken much stock in Donald Ross, but he had helped to fill her life. He had connived at her playing truant from school; once she had been able to climb telegraph poles better than he and had mocked him from the midst of the buzzing china cups. She had liked him because he was the champion of the Dunfermline Lawn Tennis Club, but in wider fields there are other champions. His manœuvres with Mr. Wentworth left her under no sort of illusions as to the degree or kind of his affection for her; indeed, as they said locally, Miss Agnes Allison was 'not caring.' She had an even mind one way or the other. Menfolk were not so rare a breed on the earth. She had had enough of them, and she only laughed at John's idea of passing in review the entire staff of Fernandez & Co. in order that Miss Allison might take her pick.

'I've had enough of men running after me for one while,' said Miss Allison. 'They have not an idea how to set about it; either they are ready to sell you for sixpence-halfpenny because you are worth only sixpence to them, or they would like to carry you off and bury you as a dog does a bone!'

'But what, then, do you propose to do?' demanded Claire, who just then saw all things from the married point of view. 'There are no convents about Dunfermline that ever I heard of.'

'Besides,' John said, 'I am not sure that the life

would suit you.'

Miss Allison glanced at him sharply, but her suspicions fell in a moment. John's good faith was always manifest whatever he might say. It was a great gift, and there are men who would have given all they possessed for the miracle of simplicity that illuminated John's face each time he spoke.

'The life of a convent not suit me!' cried Miss Allison. 'I dare say no! There have been no Papists in my family since honest John Knox preached to the townsfolk on the very site where the Gillespie Memorial now stands. Convents, indeed! Nunneries! Faith, a lass that cannot look after herself with as many years of London, not to speak of Amsterdam, should be put in gaol, not into any convent!'

John was astonished to see that Claire nodded assent to this most subversive proposition, and nevertheless he hastened to appeal to Miss Allison's common sense.

'We hope that you are not dissatisfied at the office — ' he began.

But Miss Allison, who never allowed anybody to have the last word and generally managed to have the first one also, interrupted him.

'Have I said that I was in any sense dissatisfied, John Eames? Surely you have known me long enough to be sure that when I want a rise I can ask for it. Patient I may be by nature, but not long-suffering. Maybe I am not of the sort who are always falling on your neck and damping your collar to express their gratitude. I have no need; Agnes Allison is worth her wage — and her keep — any day. Not but what you and Claire have been as good as new potatoes with butter and as sweet as Kincardine honey. But I have thought over this

'man' question, and I am convinced that the only way for me is to pick one out early and rear him to my own liking! Then I may suit myself, or, if not, I shall only have myself to blame.'

'Miss Allison!' cried John Eames, horrified.

'Agnes!' murmured Claire, more softly. 'Supposing I had gone and sought for John.'

'So I warrant you did!' Miss Allison the incorrigible retorted. 'At least, I knew him before you did, and I am sure he would never have come near you of his own accord. He did not know enough.'

'But to seek a husband and tell him that you — you - Oh!' the wedded pair murmured, ill at ease about their friend, for Miss Allison was, like Renan's Habbakuk, 'capable of anything.'

'Oh,' that forceful young person explained off-handedly, 'I don't mean to raid the orphan asylums. I have a better plan. All I want is that you should give me a few weeks to myself about the end of March and I promise to report progress when I get back. I am not leaving the firm.'

John Eames and Claire were forced to submit with as good a grace as possible, for the excellent reason that leave, if not granted, would have been taken.

After careful and thoughtful examination of sailings Miss Allison took the Leith boat — the one on which Mr. Robert Berry was not to be found. She discovered, however, that the captain was a nice well-mannered man and polite to ladies, as became one who had been thrice married and was not very certain (owing to state-law differences in America) whether he was so a fourth time or not. However, so far as his passengers were concerned (if they were young and pretty enough) Captain Parry was not the

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man to let a little doubt like that stand in the way.

It happened, therefore, that Miss Allison, to prevent a repetition of the star-gazing of former voyages, was compelled to beat an early retreat to the ladies' cabin. Here she struck up a useful friendship with the stewardess, who came from Leslie, where (she confided to Miss Agnes) she buried five of a family and a husband who, according to his wife, 'was not worth a dockan owing to the drink.'

'Ye should have reared him,' said Miss Allison, before she thought.

'Eh?' exclaimed the bewildered stewardess. 'Ye cannot rear men like poultry — not to marry them, at any rate.'

But deep within herself Agnes Allison murmured, 'You think not. But if I'm spared I will show you!'

\* \* \* \* \*

It was late in June when Miss Agnes Allison returned. She had, therefore, greatly overstayed her leave. But the firm of James Fernandez & Co. had such need of her, especially its senior (but not exclusively sleeping partner, Claire Eames), that not a word of reproach was said to her. Indeed, Miss Allison was the most difficult person in the world to reprove. Besides, even John (whom Claire was rapidly teaching to be as curious as herself and nearly as fond of hearing gossip) wanted immensely to listen to the tale of her adventures.

And about these Miss Allison was nothing if not outspoken. So that it was with a great deal of expectation and almost a fever of anxiety that John Eames and Claire awaited their guest's good

pleasure, for Miss Allison was now constantly about the house and had (as she put it) 'a room to herself and the use of the bath.'

It is a foregone conclusion to any one who knows the nature of Miss Allison that she refused to accept these advantages without payment, so that she and Claire performed miracles of finance every Saturday night over the regulation of the weekly accounts. Still, this was good for Claire, for besides fighting like a tiger to see that Mrs. Eames (creditor) was not cheated by Miss A. Allison (debtor) the boarder very wisely cast an eye over the bills of the butcher, the baker, and other doubtful servants of the public to see that Claire was not taken in by 'thae Dutch folk.' If a lass from Fife declined to use her natural faculties for money saving, it was ridiculous to think that yon duffle-breeched men and multi-petticoated women should rush in where Fife disdained to tread.

This naturally led to words, and eventually to Miss Allison's acquiring the Dutch language, especially such words and expressions as are used in the highways and market-places of Amsterdam. This was also useful for correspondence in the vernacular, though occasionally the Biblical vigour of Miss Allison's commercial style startled (and enlivened) a dull counting-house in Rotterdam or Antwerp.

All this, however, was a small matter. At the worst she made herself understood. And now to the matter of her tale. It was told in an appropriate twilight in a house overlooking miles and miles of garden garth, each plot cultivated to the finest line of demarcation, no room for hedges and dykes or ditches and walls in such a land, where the amount of overhang of one man's daffodils above another

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proprietor's dahlia-bed had to be settled by the higher mathematics.

In the twilight John Eames and Claire sat furtively hand in hand, John secretly shamed by the proceeding, which had been initiated by Claire. That young woman was already sighing with anticipation of the sentimentality in Miss A. Allison's story. Perhaps also the scene reminded her of sundry happy nights at the little inn of Hans Polder, when sundry people sat thus hand in hand, with the additional thrill of uncertainty pervading them, because they were not yet married and might never be.

Now that they were it was all easy, but not nearly so interesting. Still, John's hand in hers gave Claire an illusion of the old time.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Before rearing begins,' said Miss A. Allison calmly, 'you have got to hatch your bird, or catch him. I had decided that mine was to be a blackbird, so I went where these spend their evenings when released from the Hebrew Lexicon and the arid road metal of Kurz's Church History.'

'Lord!' cried John Eames, who rarely used a word so strong. 'Agnes Allison, you were never thinking of -'

'You wait and hear,' snapped Miss Allison, while his wife squeezed John's hand and frowned him down at one and the same time, by which duplicate manoeuvre he understood that though she wished him to be silent he had not wholly lost her heart's innermost affection.

Miss A. Allison began the tale of her adventures.

'I was fair determined,' she said, 'when I set out to have nothing to say to a man in business. If the shop is his own he wears a chin beard and cultivates a town councillor appearance below the third button of his waistcoat. If he is an 'any other article, Miss?' — well, I've seen enough of them to last me my lifetime. But to get to my tale. I was thinking that it was about the season for the conversaziones of the Edinburgh Divinity students.

They have them in the Library Hall, and the principal and professors are there — for a while, at least — just to give the young lads time to say that the stars are shining bright and that it's a fine time for looking forth from the balcony on the beauteous city beneath.

'As you know, I have an aunt from near Lochgelly who married a professor, and though he died of reading the same lectures over every year for four and a half months on end she always gets an invitation to the conversazione. So she got one for me, too, while she was about it.

Now, I had cast over in my mind all the businesses that could be managed on a small capital, and it came to me in the night that there is nothing so sure as rearing a minister and then marrying him. Of course, you had to make sure of your man.

'For, you see, a minister's wife with a little money and no need to get the furniture on the three years' system is a power in the land. She can pay the monthly books herself and have a little over to pay for a summer holiday without letting the manse to folk from Pollokshields. She can get the name of being charitable without spending a great deal, and yet she will have a better chance, if the folk who

come about the manse are aware that she is on no account to be imposed upon.

'Oh, it's a fine business — a minister's wife with a little something of her own so as not to be altogether dependent on the goodwill of the congregation or having to do without a new winter frock the years when the Sustentation Fund is low or the Tiends slow in coming in.

'Of course, there's the minister, and that's whiles a drawback — at least, at first sight. But as the barefoot beggar-man said about the nail in his heel, *'ye can use wi' onything!*'

'Especially it turns out all right if ye catch them young — ministers, I mean — and educate them to suit. That was what I meant to do when Mrs. McCombish bade me go and get into my things because the Knox College Social was in half an hour and whiles the cabs refused to go up the Mound.

'However, I know, among other things, how to talk to cabmen. So we got to the big iron doors without a grumble, though the horse zigzagged between the kerbstones like a beetle climbing a ashlar wall. The library was a fine place, with more books than I ever saw together at one time — all vellum and leather-backed and closed in with doors behind criss-cross brass wires — to keep the divinity students from pocketing the folios, maybe.

'There were senior students in dress suits and shirt fronts that shamed the lily. My aunt, Mrs. McCombish, that had been the professor's wife when he was alive (and lived on saps and his memory down at Pomburn now that he was dead) introduced me to some of her dear departed's former students.

'There's Mr. Hume-Home,' she whispered, as a tall moon-faced young man passed with a tan-speckled,

long-necked girl on his arm. He did not do it well, but still better than most. For, after all, what can you expect? The poor laddies get only this one chance in the year to find out what their arms are for. Still, Mr. Hume-Home (he pronounced them both alike, for no reason that I could see) had doubtless caught a glimpse of us, for he bowed to Aunt McCombish and with the tail of his eye 'associated me with the motion,' as became the President of the College Philosophical Debating Society.

Now Mr. Hume-Home was a young man who took himself very seriously.

"Good evening, Mrs. McCombish," I heard him pontificating after he had delivered over the Freckled One to an ungrateful family. 'I saw you as you came in, but being one of the stewards I was so much occupied, as you may understand, that I had first of all to sacrifice duty to polite-ness.'

'Aunt McCombish was about to introduce me when Mr. Hume-Home, who was not a youth to want encouragement, congratulated her on having been able to obtain a card for her young lady friend.

"They're scarce," he said. "You have no idea of the difficulty the stewards have to satisfy the perfectly surprising number of applicants.'

"Oh, yes," said I, for I was a little nettled. 'I have a card, it is true, but up to the present there is nothing on it. I have not been engaged for a single dance.'

"Hush!" said Aunt McCombish. 'Agnes Allison, is this a place to be speaking about dancing?'

"No," said I, 'maybe not, Auntie; but what of that? The carpet is not lifted nor the floor waxed, but there's a heap of young men. And many is the fine

dance I have had on a carpet — aye, and better still, on a well-swept barn floor! It's a wonder what one can enjoy when the spirit is willing and the flesh far from weak.'

'Mr. Hume-Home fairly gasped, but he recovered himself sufficiently to inquire with a superior smile that pleased me greatly: 'The young lady is from the country?'

'If you call London and Amsterdam the country — why, then, you've hit it,' says I. 'If there's no dancing maybe there's refreshments.'

'You will find tea in No. 12 committee room,' he said, 'where I have the honour to preside over the weekly meetings of the Philosophical Society of this college. I have been president for four consecutive sessions.'

'It must be a holy place then,' said I, 'a regular Mecca! But still we might go on pilgrimage since there's nothing but promenading here, and I'm so on edge with the honour that my feet will be dancing a reel by themselves presently if I do not take care. They've got the *ditherums*. Did you ever have the *ditherums*, Mr. Hume-Home — Home-Hume, I mean?'

'Agnes Allison,' said Aunt McCombish, 'think where you are!'

'I'm thinking, Aunt,' I said, 'and if I had kenned half an hour before it's somewhere else I should have been.'

By this time we were in the tea-room, where various meek youths were arranging stiff-backed oak chairs of committee pattern for ladies apparently built to match.

'What will you take?' said Mr. Hume-Home affably, 'tea, coffee, chocolate?'

“Oh, a green chartreuse or a sherry cobbler. I'm not particular!” I said as languidly as I could.

I had seen the names of these drinks on advertisements or whiles when waiting outside a post office for my comrade of the day. Outside the West Regent Street office there is a shop with many interesting-looking foreign bottles in the window, and I used to read the labels over and over so that I might be able to spell the words if ever they occurred in typewriting. Mine is a profession that makes for observation. Also in the little head sunning over with curls which belongs to Miss A. Allison (late of Dunfermline, N.B.) there exists, among other determinations, one

which causes me to make the best of everything.

Mr. Hume-Home smiled disdainfully. He did not see anything humorous in the request of a young lady chaperoned by a dignified professor's widow for either of these drinks. It seemed to him merely improper.

“I repeat,” he said, “that there have been provided tea, coffee, chocolate.”

“These are *most* unwholesome beverages which keep you from sleeping,” I said. “The gentleman does not seem to have travelled very much.” Here I rose to my feet. “I think we really ought not to keep the steward any longer,” I added, “somebody might be wanting that cocoa.”

After he had gone my aunt read me a severe lecture. Mr. Hume-Home was a very important young man indeed. No, not self-important! He had an uncle with a title who was one of the largest givers to the Sustentation Fund, besides having a Mission Station called after him in China, or perhaps South America. A most superior young

man.

‘I should say so,’ I remarked, abstractedly. ‘Are there any others a little less so? If so, tell me, Auntie.’

‘So successively I was introduced to a red-moustached, fierce-looking colonial in somebody else's evening suit, who told me that his ideal of life was to go back to the logging camp in Canada where for three years he had worked all the week and preached every Sunday.

‘And I tell you, Miss Allison,’ he said, ‘that a man needs to be handy with his fists out there — not six, but seven days of the week. Every man his own policeman, and all interruptions made at the interruptor's proper peril!’

This was better, but somehow, with my ideas of a quiet life, I did not see the possibility of successfully educating this backwoodsman. He might be inclined to carry his own policing a shade too far, and I felt that even in the backwoods it would not do for a minister's wife to use a Browning revolver on her husband. It might interfere with the preparation of the sermon, besides causing talk in the congregation.

‘So the backwoodsman was dismissed even more promptly than Mr. Hume-Home. He was doubtless a noble savage, but the taming of savages did not enter into my present plans.

‘A tall blonde young man came next with the most earnest and child-like blue eyes in the world — eyes which cried aloud an innocence and inexperience which, however, his first words dissipated.

‘He made love with a pressing directness and point which made even me look about at the lighted library hall in order to feel reassured by the moving

mass of male black and white, of puce-clad dowagers and white-and-cream *ingénues*.

‘Before I knew where I was or how we got there, we found ourselves alone as if by magic in the shadow of a huge curtain. Here the tall youth with blue eyes and the well-made clothes, who did everything with the ease and assurance of a master of ceremonies, said things shameless and wonderful about the eyes of a certain Miss A. Allison — her smile, her expression, her hands, her very lips. Never before had I found a lover so expeditious. He seemed to be speaking all the time scarcely above his breath, yet in the most natural and quiet manner in the world he seemed to take possession of one.

‘So much so, that I was actually angry with myself that I could by no means feel angry with him. Why, I did not even know his name, and I never had even a chance to ask Mrs. McCombish as to his record. I knew him only as the youth who, earlier in the evening, having recited some neat verses of welcome to the guests, had then bowed and eclipsed himself.

‘I shall be angry in a minute, I know I shall,’ I kept saying to myself, ‘if this poet goes on as he is doing.’

‘I thought of asking him to take me to my aunt. But this notion I rejected as wholly unworthy of one who had shouldered her way for eight years among the crowds of London, not to speak of Amsterdam and other foreign Babylons. And this smilingly audacious, blue-eyed laddie — yes, he was nothing else — what right had he to put me into an uncertainty as to my own feelings? What business had he to keep his eyes upon me like that, not

appealingly (that would not have mattered), but with a kind of smiling and tender masterfulness for which I could have boxed his ears! That is if I had had full control of my hands at the time. The poet, however, had somehow taken charge of one of them, and as the fold of the heavy curtain had at the same moment mysteriously reached out to protect us from the gaze of the curious I, Miss A. Allison, did not seem to mind it quite as much as I would have anticipated. All the same, the young man's assurance struck me dumb.

'Surely in those eight years I had gained some experience, slight but sufficient; but this calm taking possession of one's will and person in the simplest and most efficient manner, without even the excuse of a simple 'By your leave!' paralysed me and struck the hot words from my lips.

The longer I left my hand in his — allowed it to remain, rather — the more I wondered at myself and, what was more to the point, the more I wondered at him. Then I grew ashamed, and yet somehow wasn't. To do all this in the face of these people, as simply and naturally as if he had been accustomed to nothing else from his earliest youth, showed no common man. Yet his manner was astonishingly gentle and reassuring. He seemed not only to forget himself, but to have the faculty of making me do so also. This was new, certainly.

'A kind of pleasant don't-care-ativeness, a *laissez aller* stole over me — if it was to be after all, why not? This youth was certainly a change. I did not know then that they called him (out of some early Victorian book) 'The Cool of the Evening.' But I could see that he was a man of influence among his comrades, for who should look in upon us but Mr.

Hume-Home, with his speckly local beauty again upon his arm. My poet merely moved his head a little to the side as one who wishes to intimate that there is accommodation elsewhere, and so fell again to talking. He was saying that any one so pretty as I had better not be told that they had any soul.

I was not angry, curiously, but I told him that, soul or no soul, I had practised shorthand and run a typewriter for eight years in London.

‘He looked at me with a new interest.

‘Yes, I knew it by your finger-nails,’ he said.

‘How?’ said I, not so very pleased.

‘Because,’ he said gently and lifting my hand up as if to look — he must have been very short-sighted, for he actually kissed my finger-tips — ‘because I can see that the nails have once been almond-shaped and have been cut so as to let the little finger-cushions alone touch the ivory of the keys.’

‘You are a young man of a great deal of perception,’ I said crossly. ‘You observe wonderfully. Perhaps you could tell me what it is I want most at this moment?’

‘This,’ he said, and stooping as if to look at the stars out of the oriel window, he kissed me lightly but satisfactorily on the cheek. I was never more taken aback in my life.

‘Sir!’ I cried indignantly, but not too loud, having regard to our situation.

‘Do you know, that’s quite eighteenth century,’ he said; ‘indeed, grandisonian. But you mustn’t faint, as the girls do in the old novels. Eight years of London ought to have cured you of that; besides, I can do better. I can divine by my black arts what you want next best in the world.’

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“To be taken back to my aunt!” I said clutching at my dress. I dare say my eyes were flaming with anger. But I dared not let it be seen, for I am sure he had some secret control over the illusive curtain, and might in a moment have exhibited me to the whole assembly, chaperons, professors and all.

“No,” said he, “what you want next best after — after *what you have had* — is a sherry cobbler. A man is waiting with it at the door which leads out of the hall upon the High Street. Come!”

He was really wonderful, and the proof is that I followed him obediently, like a little chidden child, and, what is more, drank the abomination at his bidding.

“It will do you good after your emotions,” he said. “I cannot share with you, I am sorry. I am a temporary abstainer. But it will do you no harm after all you have experienced to-night.”

“Experience! Emotions! What do you mean?” I demanded after he had sent the Café Royal messenger away.

“Oh, I was talking to your aunt — a good creature — and she was telling me of your plans. They were interesting, so I thought I would help. It is a real Ruth and Boaz idyll. I once wrote a homily on that subject. So I thought that to save you trouble I should offer myself as the victim.”

“You know too much,” I said, “too much by a great deal.”

“I know that you like this Boaz here present,” he said, “and we would make a fine couple gleaning in the harvest field together. It was very nice behind the curtain. You found it so.”

“I never did.”

“Then why did you stay?” he rejoined, quick as a

flash. We made our way back in the direction of the library. Just before entering he stopped a moment under the big dark portico.

“Were you ever engaged before?” he asked with infinite simplicity.

“I am not engaged now!” I answered indignantly.

“Oh yes you are, Miss Allison!” And somehow as if by magic a thin rim of metal glittered on the third finger of my right hand. It seemed to have grown there.

“Well, of all the —” I began.

“Now don't throw that out of the window,” he continued, smiling quite gently. It was my mother's, so I know you will not lose it. And, by the way, what time does your aunt take her afternoon nap to-morrow? Or — no, better still, is not to-morrow the committee day for the Ladies' Missionary Association? I shall therefore find you alone.’

“No you won't!” I said, stamping my foot. ‘I am going to the Association with my aunt.’

“I think not,” he said, smilingly fixing me with his quiet blue eyes. ‘You see, it would not be honest. I have something to ask you to return to me, something I gave you — by mistake. Under the circumstances you would not retain it, I am sure.’

“Why not let me give it back to you here?” I said, my toe still tapping the carpet.

‘He smiled pensively and shook his head.

“No curtain!” he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

‘And after I had ascertained from Aunt McCombish that my friend was no other than Mr. Henry Cairnryan, Senior Bursar and Chalmers

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Fellow of Knox College, I was on the point of saying that whatever sort of fellow he might be he was the most impudent one I had ever met in the whole varied course of my life. But I bit my tongue and kept it in, for I knew Aunt well enough to know that in certain circumstances she was capable of putting off her committee meeting and staying at home next afternoon. I was not going to be a coward — at least, not then. I would see it bravely through alone.

To lack the support of Aunt McCombish in such a trial was, no doubt, terrible, but even that I thought I could bear. Wonderful the courage that comes to lonely girls sometimes in the battle of life!

\* \* \* \* \*

‘Oh yes, I know it was horrid! But how could one ever think of meeting such an overwhelming young man at a professors’ *conversazione* and with an amply protective Aunt McCombish in the background? Of course, he was a poet, and that explained a lot of things. I had never known a poet before — a real one, that is, with a book published in print, though of course there were many ‘Verses to A’ in the Poet’s Corner of the *Dunfermline Herald and Mercury*. Only I did not call these poetry, nor their authors poets; I called them donkeys.

‘But Mr. Cairnryan, he was the first man who ever made me do as he told me, and, curiously, I rather like the sensation. But I had it out with my Aunt McCombish, for all that.

‘What business had she to give away my intentions to any young man? Least of all to one so masterful as Mr. Henry Cairnryan! Sometimes I thought that I would put my things together, call a

cab and drive to the railway station. I would take the first train, no matter where, so long as I did not have that awful ordeal of to-morrow afternoon to go through.

It never struck me how much simpler it would have been to ask Aunty to see him instead. I put his ring on a little gold chain that I found at the bottom of my handbag. Nobody could see it there — I mean, round my neck — and I called myself a silly little fool for feeling romantic. I called myself lots of names these days.

I don't think I was long in going to sleep that night. It happens so in books, but to a healthy girl who has had a good deal of new experience that day, including a sherry cobbler, sleep comes with its usual pleasant naturalness.

'At any rate, I slept much as on any other night, and about seven the clack of Aunt McCombish's tongue awakened me, as for the four-hundredth time she reproved the tendency of Jenny, her maid-of-all-work, to clatter trays, break china, shuffle her feet on the stairs, answer 'comin', mem!' together with other misdemeanours which, in Scottish phrase, were with Jenny 'habit and repute.'

I was not expected to work at Aunt McCombish's, but it will be a weariful day when I cannot find a use for my ten fingers. Satan will find it for me, certainly; so much so, that Sunday in Scotland has always been a day of playing hide-and-seek with my conscience, finding works of mercy if not of necessity. In England and abroad there is no trouble about the matter, but in Scotland one has to.

*'And so he came!* Of course he came; I knew it from the penetrating steadiness of his blue eyes. I ought to have told Aunt when I saw her getting her

stiff mantle of black silk ready and the best widow's bonnet which always meant something solemn in connection with works of charity. Oh, I knew I should! It was all my fault. I meant to speak every moment, but when at last I saw her back going down the street after a last instruction to Jenny to remember the hour of my tea and not to break any more cups I jumped for joy. Yes, I did, and I am far from being proud of it. Man may be a free creature, but all I can say is that woman, even the most sensible — she is a fool to think herself even that — is a slave. It was wicked of me, 'horrid wicked,' as Jenny always said when mourning over her breakages but after Aunt was gone I went down and gave Jenny five shillings to help buy her winter hat, and being a kindly soft lump from the Solway shore, never properly hardened by the east winds of Fife, what must the creature do but plump down in a cane chair and begin to cry.

"Oh, miss," she blubbered, "I'm that grateful, I am indeed! Your aunt — the mistress, I mean — had ta'en that off my wages for the breakages; not, she said, because the money represented anything like the value of the cheena, but to learn me — and I don't like to be learned! It's the money I care about, for there's the Post Office Order to send home once a month and me to look smart for — for a sort of cousin o' mine that walks me out on Sabbaths! And oh, miss, it's that kind o' ye!"

Then I, Agnes Allison, became lost to all sense of shame, and I said to Jenny, looking her squarely in the eye — well, the amazing sentence which follows:

"Now, Jenny, supposing that there was a sort of cousin of mine who was coming to see me this afternoon, do you think you could manage to give us

both tea together without — without — ’

“Not another word,” cried Jenny triumphantly, ‘It shall be laid in the small parlour, what she calls the morning-room. It has two doors, one into the hall, that he can come in by, and another into the kitchen lobby, that he can skip off by if the auld — I mean, if the leddy of the house happens to come in before her time!’

I could not quite conceive the tall, blue-eyed, dignified Henry Cairnryan skipping up Jenny's area stairs like a ram on the mountains of Bether, but no more could I imagine him being put out by any happening whatever. So with great feebleness and considerable gratitude I accepted Jenny's offer. Then I went upstairs to — compose my mind and make myself look as pretty as possible.

I suppose I must have succeeded to some extent, for Jenny's first words on seeing me come down were: ‘Oh, Miss Agnes, he *will* be pleased!’

“Do you think so really?” I said, for it is curious that when we get one compliment we always expect it to be followed immediately by another. Did you never notice this? I have. So I repeated, with that stupidity which is the best sounding-line of the pit into which I had descended: ‘Do you think so, Jenny?’

Then, of course, Jenny asked me questions, and I answered. I seemed to be infatuated. Perhaps it was all ordained so that I might know by actual proof what an idiot I could make of myself. Some I remember.

“Is your cousin dark or fair?”

“Fair,” said I.

‘At this Jenny clapped her hands.

‘So's mine. He's a joiner, and I got to know him

just last Friday.'

"But, Jenny," I remonstrated, 'you said he was your cousin!'

"So he is," retorted the unabashed Jenny '*the same as yours!* Bless me, there he is — yours, I mean, and me with my best apron not out of the drawer!'

"Run!" I cried. 'You must not keep him waiting, he might go away.'

"No fears," said the experienced Jenny, 'not if he's the right kind, the sort worth having. He will no be a joiner?' — this doubtfully.

"He's Senior Bursar of Knox College, and Chalmers Fellow," I said proudly. 'But haste you, Jenny.'

"Save us," said Jenny, 'all that! Will he be in uniform?'

'At last, the apron being found, Jenny was persuaded to open the door. Alas! it had only been a 'runaway' ring.

"If I had had my hand on the shank of the yard brush that comes loose easy," said Jenny threateningly, 'I would have livened up that laddie!'

'And so it happened that the Senior Bursar of Knox College, in irreproachable afternoon calling attire, was welcomed on the doorstep by a wrathful Jenny armed with a bare besom shank!

'She related afterwards that she nearly had a stroke; so still more nearly had the Senior Bursar. The broom handle clattered down the steps, but was immediately picked up and handed to its wielder by Mr. Henry Cairnryan, who only smiled and let the mild, steady light of his blue eyes (I think I said they were blue) rest upon Jenny, the maid of Solway.

"Is Mrs. McCombish at home?" he asked with rigid

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regard to the *convenances*, fingering at the same moment his right waistcoat pocket where reposed his card case.

“Mistress McCombish is at the missions, as you ken very well,” said the ever unexpected Jenny, “but your cousin is in the small parlour. She’s been waitin’ for you near an hour, and if the auld crab-apple comes in sudden-like I’ll let ye ken!”

“Manlike, Mr. Henry Cairnryan, conscious of his Seniority, hesitated.

“Oh, ye need not be feared o’ me!” said Jenny, motioning him inside and shutting the door before he knew. “I have a cousin of my ain; he’s a journeyman joiner to trade, and I ken how to manage auld spoil-sports!”

\* \* \* \* \*

‘But already my story is over-long,’ thus concluded Miss A. Allison. ‘I need not tell you all that happened. He became ‘Harry’ in exactly five minutes, and, indeed, he behaved as if we had really been engaged from the first moment. The hours passed like minutes and nothing did I see but the light of his eyes and nothing did I hear but how he loved me. It was better than doing typing on a new aluminium machine with the latest improvements.

‘Jenny rapped four times and nearly coughed herself hoarse, but for all that I was still leaning on his shoulder, showing him a finger that once had had a thorn in it when Jenny put down the tea and, instead of pretending not to see (as she would have done if properly trained), she volunteered the information that her cousin the joiner ‘just gaed on like that.’ She would even have pointed out

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improvements if I had not stopped her in the nick of time. Then we had tea together, he and I.

'Oh, just *together!* But that was a sweet word. It had never seemed so before. We were both agreeing upon this when Jenny ran in crying: 'Oh, Miss Agnes, I could not help it, but yonder she's coming down the street with three or four ither auld *commytees!* Haste ye fast! Out by the back door, laddie, and up the area steps! They'll never see you. The gate opens on a side street. It's most awesome convenient, my cousin says so!'

'But the Senior Bursar was calm.

'If,' he said, 'you will help this tumultuous but efficient young person to carry off these dishes I shall have great pleasure in receiving your good aunt myself.'

'And I actually ran — yes, I scurried like Jenny. And, all trembling, we did the washing up in the back kitchen. But when I came tip-toeing cautiously back as I was passing the drawing-room door I recognised the voice of Mr. Henry Cairnryan:

'In the name of my committee and of the professors and students of Knox College I have the honour of asking permission to place your name on the list of the lady patronesses of the College Dining Society.'

'And my aunt, no doubt pigeoning and pouting with pleasure before all her friends, who had not been so solicited, gave her consent with a tremor in her voice.

'And that's how I became engaged to be married,' concluded Miss A. Allison, 'though when one comes to tell it I don't seem to have had much to do with it.'

'One never has,' sighed Claire, 'not unless you find a John Eames. All the same, he must be a very

forward young man.'

At that very instant of time and no other a tall young man, perfect in correction and self-possession was shown in. He bowed and looked about for some one.

'Henry!' cried Miss Allison, flinging herself towards him.

'Agnes!' smiled he, patting her gently on the head.

'How came you to be here?' we all exclaimed in a breath.

'I was on my way to Germany, to the University of Heidelberg, you know,' said the Senior Bursar of Knox College, 'so I looked in to make the acquaintance of those who have been so kind to my little Agnes.'

And Miss A. Allison only smiled. She did not even wince when she heard herself called 'his little Agnes.' And to those who have known Miss A. Allison (of Dunfermline, N.B.) that says more than many volumes of closely printed commentary, all bound in dark green ribbed cloth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FIGHT FOR THE INCAS' BLUE DIAMOND

The University of Heidelberg did not interfere with the regularity of Miss A. Allison's attendances at the offices of Messrs. Fernandez & Co. She was as immaculate with her letters, and equally exact as to her stenography. She never idled a minute, nor was late by the fraction of one.

Still, it could not be denied that in private Claire and John saw less of her. Miss Allison went to her room after dinner, and there she composed in the utmost secrecy what seemed to be infinite journals, or rather volumes on volumes of manuscript. She refused the use of a typewriter, though both Claire and John offered her the latest model from the office.

'I believe she is writing a romance,' said John Eames, with awe.

His wife looked at him to see if by any chance he were trying to make a joke, but his calm face and gentle manner convinced her that he was speaking with his usual seriousness.

'A romance?' she answered, smiling at him a little pityingly. 'Yes, very likely. But there is no English publishing house in Heidelberg.'

'But there is Mr. Cairnryan,' said John triumphantly. 'I see it now! They are collaborating. Authors frequently do that, don't they, Claire?'

'They used to,' said Claire, 'until the trick was found out. I have heard my brother say that one author always did all the work, while the other

looked over his shoulder and criticised. This was called division of labour.'

John always believed whatever Claire told him, and now he only marvelled at the foolishness of the aforesaid 'fellow who did the work.'

There was a rush of Christmas business in the house of Fernandez & Co. This resulted mainly in increased work for the office staff. The lights were kept lit later at night, and John Eames himself waited to lock up the big strong-room with its time-lock and letter combination. Miss Allison stayed also. Her sense of duty was so great that she must see the last letter ready for the pillar-box before she would consent to quit her typewriter.

Nevertheless, they had organised an excursion together because it was as Christmas Eve. Claire had gone down in the afternoon to have all ready for them at Hans Polder's, where they had resolved to spend the week-end. Claire was to send the rickety, shambling, ancient waggon to meet them at the station, with Hans himself to bring them safe through the snow. And, if horses would not do it, there was the whole army of Polder brothers to lift the conveyance bodily out of the ruts and carry it through the wreaths.

The wide Dam of Amsterdam was particularly unpleasant that Christmas Eve. That is why good burghers hurrying homeward pulled tighter the white woollen 'Zeeland' knitted comforters about their necks, depressed the brims of their hats, and plodded along with ears sunk level with their shoulders and only the frosty tips of noses pointing homewards, true as the needle to the pole — or even truer, because dinner was in question, and also their own good repute in the eyes of their wives.

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The snow piled up ever deeper. The tramway service worked intermittently or not at all. The Amsterdam students, the noisiest in the world (when you want to sleep in the Bible Hotel), had gone home for the holidays, and were now looking dove-like and domestic at Delft and Shiedam, or full of natural piety at Edam by the Shallow Sea.

Outside a white stickiness ran along the thick telephone wires, and clung to those still thicker which conveyed the electric light, threatening to break them down. Indoors John glanced now and then at the clock, speculating what the railway track out of Amsterdam to Ruiksdyk would be like, and if the last train (now their only chance) would run through to Haarlem. The work was never so long in getting finished, and if it had not been for the Blue Diamond of the Incas, which the Dictator had sent home to be cut and sold, John would have shut up the place at once and been off with Miss Allison to the little station on the Dunes where Hans Polder and Hans Polder's horses were waiting.

But he refrained, first of all because Miss A. Allison never once lifted her head, absorbed in her work (and, truth to tell, he was rather afraid of Miss A. Allison, and would not have married her for, say, the Blue Diamond itself). Secondly, that important gem was to be brought that night from the famous cutting establishment of Koog and Veltzen, and it would be his duty to give a receipt for it and lock it in the big safe of Messrs. James Fernandez & Co.

For once Koog & Veltzen were late. Though they had that day sent a message that the Blue Inca should be in John's hands by six o'clock, it was now nearly eight and still not a footstep. Footsteps, indeed, could not be heard; for on the Dam the snow

lay thick, falling noiseless on all the window ledges, sifting in under the tightest-fitting glass doors, and even forming little ridgy peninsulas under the great swing portieres, now all shut but one. John Eames thought of Claire's anxiety; and his own mounted steadily as he glanced stealthily at the clock on the wall, which ticked away with more than its usual arrogant nonchalance.

It was Time; but what was time to it? John, when he thought of Claire and the snug room — first-floor front, formerly Hermance's — with its fire of driftwood burning clear, and the little supper things laid out, could have smashed its cheerful face. Why should no Blue Diamond come, and why should the spidery black hands move so fast towards the hour appointed by the time-table for the last train to Ruiksdyk?

At last!

Here was Koog & Veltzen's manager, and (what struck John as unusual in the trade) here were four sturdy warehousemen and a city policeman to guard the precious gem to its place of security. John knew that in Amsterdam it was the safe and ancient custom to carry the most costly stones in bits of newspaper dropped into the waistcoat pockets, and hand them over like a twist of tobacco or a chocolate cream.

Still, no doubt Koog & Veltzen had their reasons. Something of the Inca's rarity or the mysterious interest attached to it might have leaked out in the cutting shops. And doubtless Koog & Veltzen wished to clear themselves of responsibility. Well, after all, the main thing was that there was still time for shutting up shop and being off to the Haarlem station in time for the last train. He would see the

fire-lit room after all.

He signed the receipt after a careful examination of the stone; for, however preoccupied by visions of comfortable rooms at Polder's, John's eye could not in such things be other than severe and professional. Still, his inspection was hastened by the necessity of catching the train, and John made out the receipt for Koog & Veltzen's manager with a running pen. Instantly the six men vanished into the night. John made haste to enter the strong-room in order to put the precious 'Blue Inca' into the safe called 'Open Sesame!' – a new installation with special arrangements and combinations, which, wonder of wonder among safes, had the sides and back as strongly guarded as the front.

John Eames had arranged everything to his satisfaction. He noted the combination letters 'DER,' the last syllable of the name of Hans Polder; then the circular number on the outer wheel and the time attachment, all in his head – for in such things he trusted not to notebooks – when his attention was attracted by a slight noise from the outer room.

It was the particular exclamation, a sort of impatient protest, to which Miss Allison was wont to give vent when something went wrong with her machine or the difficulties of the copy caused the loss of half a minute to decipher an ill-written word.

John smiled, thinking rather triumphantly to himself that it was a long way to the University of Heidelberg, and pitying poor Miss Allison because – well, she had no one to welcome her home; at least, not as Claire welcomed John. He was going out of the main strong-room when he suddenly felt a soft muffler of fine silk envelope his throat. A shawl of similar material was thrown over his head, and he

was pulled backward, falling heavily. He had only one glimpse of the private office of Fernandez & Co. It appeared to be entirely filled with men. Several were stooping over Miss Allison. He felt a knee on his breast. He breathed something that smelled of hospitals, dreamily sweet — cloggy, in fact.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christmas Eve had been chosen for the grand *coup* which was to go down to posterity as the affair of the Blue Diamond of the Incas. The new President of Bolivia, Sucre the younger, suspected that the Dictator had carried off with him the famous diamond. At least, he judged so from researches which had been made at Potosi and Cochambamba. But, then, Bolivia had always been full of tales of dictators, presidents, governors, who, dismounted from their several jurisdictions, had recouped themselves tenfold by carrying off the Blue Diamond of the Incas.

True, nobody had ever actually seen it. But the tales of its size and value had not grown fewer or less striking in the course of fifteen generations since it had last flamed on the forehead of that Inca who, when the Spaniards came, lost his life but kept his secret and his diamond.

Only this time the tale happened to be true. His Excellency Ernest Altmayer had indeed found the Blue Diamond. It chanced that, at some peril to his own life, he had saved an old woman living on the foot hills near Illimanya from torture at the hands of some of Sucre's levies. This, because of his blood, he had done as a matter of course, and thought no more about it. But the old woman reappeared the

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following day to bid the now hard-pressed fugitive farewell. She was of the oldest Indian blood, for the clean-cutting of her features and her almond-shaped eyes proved that the stock had never been mixed.

Altmayer had always been the favourite of her people. They would, she said, fight to the death for him, now or again. He had saved her life — more, that of her daughter, a true daughter of the Incas!

Altmayer paid no particular attention. The claim is common enough in the mouths of the Bolivian and Peruvian natives.

But she added: 'Now I am going far away to the other side of the mountains. I am old and shall never see you again — you or my country. My daughter is well-born and she will marry; but it is not for a lonely one' — she meant an orphan — 'to have the care of this.'

And without further speech she reached out a hand still rounded and soft like that of a bishop of her religion, and in the palm of the ex-Dictator of Bolivia reposed the Blue Diamond of the Incas.

Her claim to a thousand descents had been true. She was the last of the native custodians of the Blue Inca. In order to keep it safely she had lived a lifetime of exile and loneliness upon the slopes of the Andean volcanoes. She had feigned poverty. And now, because she would be at rest and live quietly 'on the other side of the mountains,' she gave to the friend of the Indians the great Inca treasure.

'May it do you good!' she said. 'Perhaps in changing hands luck may change also; for till now it has wrought nothing but evil. But you have the pure white man's skin, yet within the heart of the Incas. With love I give it to you. Good may it do you!'

And this is why, many thousands of miles away

on a Christmas Eve, John Eames lay on the floor of his own private office listening to the tread of men's feet, to curses muttered in a strange tongue, to the cry of wild birds driven inland by the swirling sea-drift to seek the shelter of the warm garbage-laden canals of Amsterdam. A dog barked somewhere near the door. Then came a far-extending chorus of his kind. Evidently there were watchers outside, for blows rained thick on the snowflakes and the yelpings died away in the distance.

John was uncomfortable. His body was corded like a package of military fodder. The bonds were drawn tight about his elbows, about his wrists, his ankles, his knees. Presently some one came to him out of the strong-room, which he had not had time to shut. He felt the cold rim of a revolver muzzle grimly against his temple and the click of the Smith & Wesson 'dog' as the thumb behind fetched it to the 'ready.'

'Now, Señor,' a purring voice spoke in his ear, 'we know that the Blue Diamond has been delivered here to-night, and that you have given your receipt for it. You have locked it away in the big new safe which even with your keys we cannot open. Dynamite is uncertain and dangerous. Tell us the combination — the word which is not in your pocket-book. Or else, Señor, we are not men to stand upon such a trifle as your life! For this we have come many thousand leagues. We have been silent and watchful long. But if you do not help us, then we will send you — ah, Señor, ours would be the regret! — infinitely farther than the slopes of Illimani, where your brother-in-law found the stone!'

'What stone?'

'There is only one stone that we of the Central

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State would come so far to seek. Do not trifle. The Blue Diamond of the Incas. But we are putting off time. The combination, quick — or this may go off!

The muzzle bored chilly into the skin of his left temple.

'If it does,' said John Eames quietly, 'you will never know.'

Instantly the man become brutal, his voice taking on little whistling sounds when it attacked the sibilant English words.

'We are here from General Sucre,' the voice hissed in John's ear. 'You must speak! If not, we of Bolivia have little ways of making you — ways unknown in your old Europe.'

They lifted up John, bound as he was, and placed him on his own office table.

Others had done the same for Miss Allison, and when the leader of the gang drew the silk scarf from John's eyes he saw the girl, tied hand and foot, quite near him.

'Ah,' said the swarthy man, 'this lady is your wife! Is it not so — the sister of the arch-thief Altmayer?'

'No,' said John; 'she is only one of my secretaries. Look at the papers on the desk. You will see her signature, 'A. Allison, for Messrs. James Fernandez & Co.''

'You are very anxious that she should not be harmed,' said the man sneeringly, 'to be only a secretary! You must surely be exceedingly fond of her. I wonder your wife allows it.'

Another ruffian bent and whispered something in the same unknown dialect to the chief inquisitor.

'Ah, very likely,' laughed the man, 'he might be more willing to give up the secret for the pretty secretary's sake, with whom he is all alone on

Christmas Eve, than for the safety of his own wife — especially if in features she resembles our late Dictator!’

The men laughed with little chuckling murmurs of approbation.

‘There is a gas-cooker in the back premises,’ the man suggested. ‘We will get the irons heated easily.’

And he gave an order to one of his subordinates.

During all this while dark-skinned, spare men had been coming and going out of the strong-room; while the jingle of tools and the low cursing of the workers told that the new Inglesmore ‘Good-All-Round’ safe was keeping up its name and reputation. John heard the word ‘dynamite,’ which is the same in all languages.

‘We will try the other method first,’ said the chocolate-coloured leader with eyes like cold gravy or the metallic glitter on a snake’s belly.

By this time Miss A. Allison had come to herself and to the full, or nearly the full, knowledge of her danger.

‘Don’t tell them anything,’ she whispered. ‘Never mind me.’

‘I could not open the safe now even if I wanted to and had my hands free,’ said John aloud. ‘It is set for ten o’clock on Monday morning, by which time the staff will be here.’

‘Then perhaps these gentlemen will call again,’ said Miss Allison, to whom — except, indeed, with Mr. Henry Cairnryan — irony was natural speech.

One of the chief operators, who had been coming and going most frequently with steel implements arranged in a little roll of leather which he wore swung about his neck, evidently knew a little English, for in answer to his chief’s inquiring glance

he nodded acquiescence.

'What he say is possible. We have look everywhere.' He spoke haltingly. 'Dynamite make noise. Perhaps we lose the Blue Inca after all. Great big fool thing — dynamite! Cannot control.'

'At any rate,' said his leader, 'we may as well finish with these people. There is a chance that the stone is not in the safe after all, and that they may confess. Bring the wires as soon as they are heated.'

John tried to break his bonds, straining till he felt the blood go to his head.

'Steady, Mr. Eames!' said Miss Allison. 'Likely it is only a threat.'

But very evidently it was no threat, for the instruments of torture were brought — two white-hot wires, thin and straight, each giving off little scintillating sparks. With a jerk of the thumb the chocolate-tinted man ordered Miss Allison to be turned over upon her right side. It was evident that they were going to begin with her, so that John might see the horror, and so be moved to give up any secret he might possess.

Just then from without came a couple of heavy reports, dull and snow-muffled. John thought that some of the dynamite cartridges had been used, or had gone off by mistake. As, however, nobody moved or seemed interested, the part of his mind which could be kept away from the tragedy about to be enacted on the cash-desk concluded that the sound was only a fall of snow from the roof.

The Bolivians had laid the heated wires on a small spirit lamp which John and Claire used occasionally in the room where they made tea on afternoons when there was no chance of getting out owing to press of business. The lick and flicker of

the blue flames, as well as the familiar smell of the wood spirit, fascinated John.

With eyes that almost started from his head he saw the two torturers take each one white-hot wire in a pair of pincers and bend over Miss Allison. He heard her say, 'Never mind what they do to me, John. Don't tell them anything.'

Then came a cry of 'Henry! Henry!' And the next moment it seemed that he too cried out.

For quick as the lightning falls the office of James Fernandez & Co. was filled with noise and confusion. A figure he knew very well stood against the inner door — a tall man with fierce eyes, a hard-bitten face, and the most determined jaw in the world. His head was bare, and his clothes whitened on the shoulders with melting snow. But in his hand he held a Mauser repeating pistol, his eye glancing along the barrel. He was leaning far forward; his other hand he kept behind him in the attitude of a practised fencer. That hand held the hilt of another weapon of the same kind. Quite calmly he turned in a half circle, marking down his men before firing. Every time the pistol adjusted itself the sharp, short bark of the cordite cartridge rang out and a Bolivian went headlong on the carpet of the office.

'Hands up, you others!' he cried. 'Into the strong-room with you — all who want to save your lives!'

And he repeated the same thing in Spanish.

'I am Ernest Altmayer, Dictator of Bolivia, and you know my justice!' He stood a little apart, aside from the open door of the strong-room, bestriding the body of the chocolate-coloured man.

'Throw out your weapons, your cartridges, your tools, the keys — the keys of the firm — all of them, and quick, or to perdition you go!'

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'Ruez has got them, Excellency!' The voice came from within.

'You there, Ruez?' called out the ex-Dictator. 'Well, you are not so bad as the rest. Come out with nothing in your hands. Up with them! Stand close to me. Let me feel you. There! Now stoop and find the keys. I know better than to stoop while that door is open!'

The man with the tool satchel of yellow leather bent over the dead leader, found the keys, and offered them to Altmayer.

'Now, sir,' said the Dictator, 'I will adjust this Mauser behind your ear. Thus! Now march. Close the strong-room door — yes, do as I bid you — with all the others inside. They can look for the stone. They can try the dynamite if they like. Only lock them in. The combination word? Well, 'Sold' sounds too frivolous, 'Death' too long. 'Fate' let it be. I have won the second trick. The rubber shall be mine also when Sucre and I fight it out!'

The man Ruez stood up rather sheepishly before the Dictator. Apparently he wanted to explain that he was sorry to be found where he was. But in Bolivia, what was a poor fellow to do? He had never fought against his Excellency on the field. But when he was gone, none knew whither, one must either join with Sucre or face a firing-party stuck like a horseshoe against the next adobe wall. Now, however, he would serve his Excellency faithfully.

Ernest Altmayer nodded carelessly, and with a swift motion of the hand directed his former partisan to loosen the bonds of his brother-in-law and of the young lady beside him.

'Lucky for you and the others in there that I came in time,' he said; 'for if they had touched a hair of

their heads I would not have left a rascal of you alive!

Ruez smiled and nodded his head. He was most profoundly convinced of the truth of this. But he swept his hand round the semicircle of dead who lay in all manner of crumpled-up positions among the tables and official bureaux, the typewriters glittering fresh and unharmed above all.

'Clean shot, Excellenza!' said Ruez appreciatively. Then he chuckled, 'No time waste!' It was not hard for Ruez to revert to his former loyalty. He had about him a good many evidences of the advisability and even necessity of a change.

John Eames and Miss Allison stood up tottering on their feet. Miss Allison was the first to speak connectedly.

'I am glad,' she said, 'that you did not tell them anything; but I am afraid that the new office carpet is spoiled!'

'I beg your pardon,' said the ex-Dictator, 'but there will be wondrously few stains. The little green pencil-cases which these countrymen of mine call Mauser cartridges make very neat work. However, the sooner the police are on the spot the better; only first Ruez and I must have time to get away! I must get over to England. Hermance is there.'

John had been trying to crush down an unprecedented tendency to hysterical weeping, not so much for his own deliverance, but when he thought of what might have befallen Miss Allison. He repeated over and over to his brother-in-law, while striving to express his gratitude, 'She said, 'Don't tell them, whatever happens to me!''

His Excellency the Dictator darted a keen look at him.

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'Where is Claire?' he demanded.

'She is out at Hans Polder's inn, waiting for us. The Blue Diamond kept us late in the office. We had only just receipted for it when these fellows arrived'

'Then somebody swallowed the gooseberry at Moog & Veltzen's!' said Altmayer. 'Well, I hope he has got another sort of green pill!'

There was, of course, no way of getting any news to Claire till the morning. The last train had long gone, and yet it was impossible to leave Miss Allison in the bloodstained premises of Messrs. Fernandez & Co.

'Take her across to the Bible Hotel,' said Altmayer. 'Give her a sleeping draught. There, crush and dissolve four of these. See that she takes them. Ruez and I will keep guard till you come back. Then you must give us an hour to get away before you fetch the police. I cannot have international complications in my affairs — not at this juncture.'

The district commissioners of police in Amsterdam are a slow-moving set. And, indeed, on Christmas Eve they were far from expecting any such haul. But the scarcity of serious crimes during the year and the hope of individual distinction caused Mynheer District Commissioner van Wirgman to bestir himself. He ordered in brigades of police from half the city. He surrounded the premises of Fernandez & Co.; the thieves were still within — alive, and probably armed. They were known to possess dynamite cartridges. Some had been killed in the struggle, but by far the larger number remained — Bolivians, an unknown race, rendered desperate by their position. It was a time for an imposing display of force.

And with as many stalwart men the ex-Dictator of

Bolivia would not have scrupled to attack the entire forces of General Sucre the younger!

But District Commissioner van Wirgman meant to sell his life dearly, and if wounded on the field of honour he meant to have plenty of witnesses — and also rescuers.

It was not a cheerful business, however, mounting the steps which led to the inner office. The District Commissioner, pale as a bag of wheat flour, followed a couple of yards behind John Eames, who held the keys in his hand; and then, very solemn and convincing, came the tramp, tramp of the police, in boots and heel-plates of iron adapted to the abominable cobblestones of Amsterdam.

Chief Commissioner van Wirgman cheered up when he found how indubitably dead were the men whom fate and the clean shooting of the ex-Dictator had 'arranged' in as neat a semi-circle as the desks and typing tables would allow.

Nevertheless, his eye kept wandering all the time towards the shut door of the strong-room. There were men on the far side of that with dynamite in their possession. He was a man with a family, and though he would dearly have loved to be Chief of Police, still there were prices that were too high to be paid without forethought.

But John Eames, with the Englishman's overriding determination to get the worst over, marched straight to the door.

'Ready?' he called back.

And the police, massed behind, drew long breaths while they pointed their revolvers at and around John's broad shoulders. Who could tell what would happen in the next five minutes when that iron door was opened.

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John aligned the letters of the keyword 'Fate,' and, with a final glance over his shoulder, turned the key in the lock, and, working the lever handle at the same moment, the door swung back. At first nothing at all could be seen in the dusky cavern.

'Come out!' cried John; and, snatching a lantern, he stepped forward to the door and peered within. The Bolivians were huddled in a corner, some kneeling and praying to the saints, others with their hands held high and empty above their heads. From the crowd arose a cry for mercy — to which in Bolivia no attention would have been paid. They would have been shot where they stood, as they had shot others. And, indeed, the levelled revolvers of the police seemed to promise them no better fate.

'Come out one by one!' cried John again. 'You, long man, get up off your knees, stop praying, and step out here to be tied up!'

The man understood the meaning if not the words, and he came obediently enough. The Chief Commissioner of the Dam district slipped the handcuffs upon his wrists. The others followed in a scattering file. Lastly, the Commissioner went within and took notes of the burglars' tools left scattered, the clean-edged borings, and the broken fragments of the jemy edges which had been tried upon the 'Good-All-Round' safe.

Half a dozen cartridges of dynamite were discovered, and a policeman was despatched in haste to sow them here and there in the canal. There was no place to keep them, said the Commissioner, at the Amsterdam police office, and certainly he was not going to take them home with him on Christmas Eve.

Then through the snow an ambulance was

brought for the dead. Magistrates and authorities of the city began to arrive, to the disgust of the Chief Commissioner, who feared that his authority would be superseded, and that so he would lose the credit which was clearly his due. But the 'big bonnets' seemed glad to find that all was over. They were chiefly eager to get home to their card tables and supper parties. The thieves were safe coffered in the State prison. Others were at the Morgue. Some shooting had been done, but done in a good cause; and John's fortunate recognition of one of the prisoners as a witness to the transfer of the Blue Diamond seemed to promise interesting developments. So the vigilant District Commissary set a guard upon the place of the tragedy. The strong-room was again locked up — empty save for the big safes, the iron filings, and the chips of the tool edges that had been tried in vain against the 'Good-All-Round' Inglesmore.

The Commissioner himself went off to push his inquiries as to the *personelle* of Messrs. Koog & Veltzen; while John betook himself to the general office of Posts and Telegraphs to see if a message could be sent through to Claire.

Many cables were being received and sent at and from Amsterdam. It is a great centre for foreign and colonial news. There was no difficulty as to communicating with Batavia or Buitenzorg, Canton or Port Moresby, but it was quite impossible to get a message through that night to the inn of Hans Polder, a dozen miles away.

'Think of it — Christmas Eve! The post-masters must have some repose. It was logical.'

Whereupon John said something about the post-masters of Holland altogether undeserved by these

weighty, full-bodied, and conscientious officials.

A message was sent at the earliest possible moment next morning to Claire; while Miss Allison found means to spend twopence a word upon an urgent summons launched southward, which, being delivered in Heidelberg, caused a rapid and hard-working young gentleman to put together a dozen chapters of his first romance, count up what remained of his senior bursary (paid quarterly), and, sallying forth with a bag in his hand, take the cheapest ticket on the fastest train directing itself towards Cologne and the frontier of Holland.

As Miss Allison said to herself, John Eames was all very well; but she foresaw for some time he would be too fully occupied with Claire and the great business of the fight for the Blue Diamond of the Incas to give her any attention. Now, she liked attention. She had renounced flirtation. And so Mr. Henry Cairnryan would just fill the bill. At any rate, he would not hesitate a moment as to what was best to be done. He would know while he was winking one blue eye — not that really he would ever think of doing such a thing. It was only Miss A. Allison's way of speaking.

It was a full fortnight before the house of James Fernandez & Co., even with the assistance of Mr. Wentworth of the Jewellers' Retail Union of London — a glory of the trade — could succeed in placing the Blue Inca. The usual American millionaire was, of course, on hand. But he knew that if the news of such an acquisition reached the ears of his own Government he would be stripped and searched by the very Customs officers whom he had subscribed such large sums to elect. So he held off till the ex-Dictator himself, on his way to Bolivia, offered to

place the gem in the hands of the multi-millionaire in any town of the States, and to wait for the price till the Blue Inca was in safe and unaccustomed keeping.

Dictators Altmayer did a good deal of private business while in London, but, so far as the public was concerned, he kept himself carefully retired in the deeper shades of the capital. A pavement merchant with jumping-jack dolls carrying over their shoulders Union Jacks and Stars and Stripes amicably intertwined, paraded up and down Regent Street or stationed himself in front of Madame Hermance's till moved on by the police. This happened as often as a dozen times in a day; indeed, till the man was seriously warned. Whereupon he disappeared entirely, and a tall and distinguished-looking foreigner, with a ribbon in his button-hole and a French guide-book under his arm, interested himself in the state of Madame Hermance's commerce. So much so that Detective Sergeant Spence, from Aberdeen, was detailed to watch him. But as nothing happened in two long afternoons Detective Sergeant Spence acquired the certainty that the tall gentleman merely had his eye on one of Madame Hermance's exceedingly pretty young show ladies — a thing which might happen to anybody, even to a detective sergeant from Aberdeen.

In fact the ex-Dictator was all unsuspected while thus taking his farewells of his wife. He did not call upon her because, till he was really Dictator of Bolivia, he did not want again to compromise her, nor to repeat the fiasco of Valparaiso. But he arranged with John Eames (and by intermediary with the American buyer) that five thousand pounds of the price should remain in the hands of

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Fernandez & Co., to be paid over to Madame Hermance for the benefit and increase of her business in Regent Street so soon as the Blue Inca should become art and part of the most marvellous collection in all the Americas.

Ex-Dictator Altmayer also wrote to the police of Amsterdam a letter fully explaining how, as senior partner in the house of James Fernandez (though no longer an active one), he had intervened with effect when his public affairs as late president of the Republic of Bolivia had endangered the prosperity of the firm by bringing down upon it, and upon peaceable Holland, a gang of murderers, to all of whom he hoped and expected justice could be dealt out in full.

Holland, which always halts leaden-footed before a diplomatic incident, even with a South American State, kept the matter as private as possible, and assured the captured Bolivians and her own solitary Dutchman from Koog & Vertzen's the benefits of lifelong sojourn in the Acheen peninsula, where they would have the honour of helping to conduct the three hundred-year-old war with certain lively tribes of North Sumatra.

So it was ordered and so it was done. The hold of a dirty troopship received them, and it was not till they were passing the cane-brakes and mango swamps of the sticky Eastern seas that the disappointed Bolivians found that they were not bound for Dutch Guiana, which they considered as but a step from their dear native Bolivia, the famous Locked Land of the Andes.

Consequently there was peace in Amsterdam, and specially on the Dam there was peace. Mr. Henry Cairnryan wished for a highly qualified typewriter to

make three copies of his invaluable poems and tales, so he refused to go back to Heidelberg without one. The marriage took place at Hans Polder's. Whereat Claire wept, while the three sons of Hans the First clattered plates and cheered in the wrong places. John Eames said nothing, but tipped the officiating clergyman of the village and parish of Ruiksydk at least twenty times his proper fee.

'Oh, Agnes,' Claire whispered between her sobs, 'I don't know what we shall do without you! Indeed I don't!'

'Never heed,' said Mrs. Cairnryan (late Miss A. Allison). 'To tell you the truth, I do not see how we are to live by literature. And maybe if things do not turn out with the publishers as he hopes I shall come back to my own desk, and we will put him in the office till he turns out a Shakespeare or a Robbie Burns. He is just not to be trusted as a minister!'

'But will he consent?' stammered Claire, astonished. 'I thought he was masterful. How will he take with it?'

'Aye,' said Mistress Agnes (late Allison), 'so he is masterful; and that is what I liked about him as a courting lad. But once married, faith, I'll buckle to, and we will see if he cannot be managed like the rest! Nothing takes the masterfulness out of them like a family to provide for.'

\* \* \* \* \*

Little more remains. The ex-Dictator duly delivered the Blue Inca to a very damp gentleman in the Cave of the Winds under the falls of Niagara. Hermance received the five thousand pounds, and with the remainder of the price President Altmayer

fitted out his last wonderful expedition, the details of which are, of course, still fresh in all memories — how a battle was fought on the beach of Tacna, how Arica was taken; then the great northward march, the last desperate forlorn hope led by the Dictator in person; his capture and instant execution by the Peruvians in revenge for his semi-official arrangement with Chili; the Chilian war which followed; and the sacking of the sugar plantations that necessitated the intervention of England.

As for Mr. Wentworth, he resolved to retire from the managing directorship of the Jewellers' Retail Union. But finding time hang heavy on his hands, he could not bring himself to disinterest himself in commerce altogether. He interested himself therefore, first of all, in that of his handsome neighbour Madame Hermance; and then — such are the charms and recompenses of modern business — in Madame Hermance herself. They were married, and in their house out Hampstead way, looking upon the Heath, Hermance knows at last a peace which she never tasted as the wife of the adventurous but conscienceless Ernest Altmayer — that handsome Ishmael whose hand had ever been against every man, yet who died, after deeds alternately deserving the gallows and the Victoria Cross, in an international quarrel with which personally he had nothing to do.

By the way, Claire and John have recently added to their house a large and well-equipped nursery chamber, with double floors and specially deafened walls, so that the solemn hush which characterises the bureaux of James Fernandez & Co. may be in no wise disturbed.

As to Miss A. Allison and her husband, of them

anon.

And if her adventures and daring speech be as much tasted by the public as by the present chronicler, he will set them forth more at length. The Scot abroad is interesting, but how much more so when the Scot is 'a lassie on her own'!

Good be with you, excellent though crime-stained English John, and you, cosmopolitan Claire, own sister to Ernest, the great and conscienceless! But especially with you (so lately Miss A. Allison) who stooped to conquer and in stooping conquered!

We love you not only for the sake of the grey town overlooking the Forth on its northerly side, but for your own snell, bitter-sweet flavour, like that of rowanberry jelly from the braes of Dunfermline or the woods of Pitfour.

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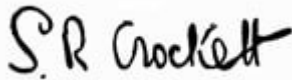
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### POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

- 1915 Hal o' the Ironsides
- 1917 The Azure Hand
- 1920 The White Pope
- 1926 Rogues' Island
- 2016 Peter the Renegade

*'Mayhap that is the best fortune of all – to be loved by a few greatly and constantly, rather than to be loudly applauded and immediately forgotten by the many.'*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. R. Crockett". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.