

THE THRILLER

THE PAPER WITH A THOUSAND THRILLS

2d



*A Book-length
Mystery Novel -*

Midnight

by
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R.E. POYNTER

'MIDNIGHT'



As Mostyn stepped forward to meet the girl, a shot rang out from the half-open doorway and he staggered back with a bullet in his arm.

Chapter 1. TRAGEDY.

The one man was small and stout, black-haired, sallow-complexioned, with a drooping moustache and almost a Mongolian cast of features; the other gawky, loose-limbed, hatchet-faced, with his long legs straddled across the gangway and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. His smaller *vis-à-vis* clasped his knees in his hands, entwining his short, plump fingers, while he stared steadfastly out of the window at the drifting landscape.

The compartment contained one other

occupant—an elderly man of staid appearance, grey-bearded and spare of figure—seated in the further corner. The pages of a vellum-bound book absorbed his attention—so, at least, it seemed—and he held the volume close to his bespectacled eyes, for the light was bad and he appeared to be somewhat short-sighted.

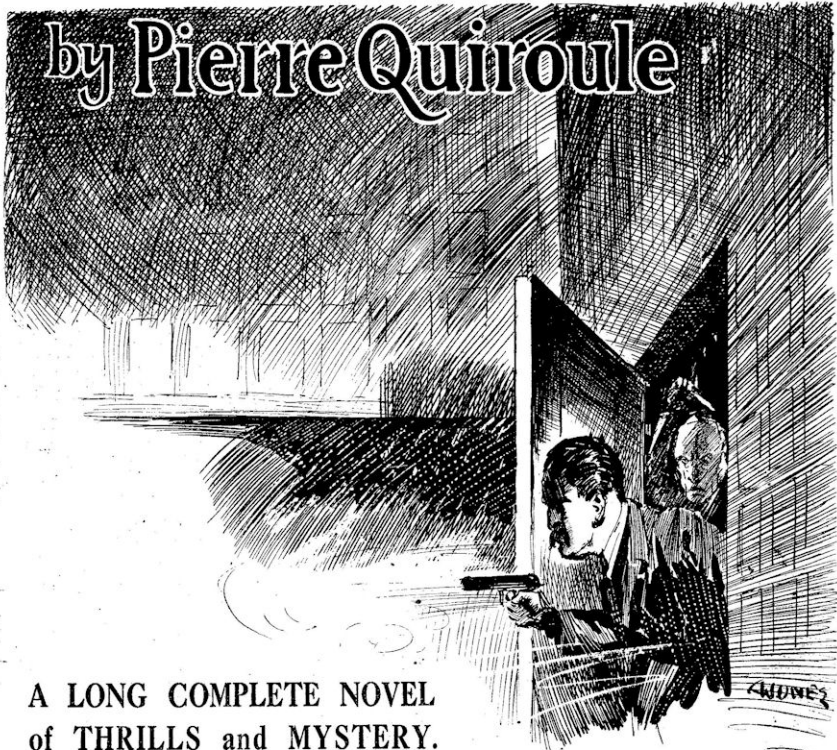
Rumpity-rumpity-rump-rump! That monotonous reiteration filled the air; the pounding wheels sang ceaselessly the same sleepy refrain. But, in spite of the persistent clamour, a strange silence seemed to pervade this first-class compartment, a

stillness that was something other than physical, a watchful silence, so it seemed, an atmosphere of concealed vigilance.

Yet none of its three occupants appeared to betray any interest in his two fellow travellers, none spoke or exchanged a mutual glance. The big fellow lounged in his corner with drowsy eyes, the stout man stared out of the window, the elderly man remained absorbed in his book.

There was a trace of moisture in the stout man's face, as if he were feeling uncomfortably warm. Certainly both windows of the compartment were shut. He might

by Pierre Quiroule



A LONG COMPLETE NOVEL of THRILLS and MYSTERY.

have opened the one at his elbow, but he made no effort to do so—merely sat there in an uncomfortable attitude, clasping his knees in his hands.

The big fellow appeared more at ease, lounging in his corner with half-closed eyes and legs astraddle. Yet one might almost have imagined that his air of indolence was merely a pose; it became a little too negligent and obtrusive—as if it might be costing him an effort.

Only the elderly man in the further corner seemed serenely unconscious of himself and his fellows, his thoughts evidently entirely absorbed in the printed page held so closely to his eyes. Yet the same page kept him engrossed for many long moments; he did not turn to the next. Perhaps some abstruse proposition induced him to read that same page over and over again.

Rumpity-rumpity-rump! Still that monotonous chant continued its harsh rhythm! And then suddenly it changed, became engulfed in a sullen rumble of thunder, as swiftly the compartment was plunged in impalpable darkness. The train had entered a tunnel.

Moments passed—long, drawn-out moments that each seemed an appreciable measure of time in the obliterating darkness of the carriage. Then, just as suddenly, the rumble of thunder vanished, gave place again to that monotonous rumpity-rumpity-rump! The compartment was flooded with light once more.

The abrupt exit into day appeared to have caught both men unawares. In the brief interval of darkness both had made a movement. The stout man had unclasped his hands; the big fellow sat bolt upright with his legs crooked beneath him; one hand thrust into his pocket, the other pressed up or been in the act of rising. They found themselves watching each other warily, as if in the darkness both had been peering across to discover the other's presence.

Now for a brief space they did not shift their gaze, but remained eyeing each other with the same air of furtive inquiry. The big fellow was the first to relax. A faint, self-conscious smirk crossed his face, and he sat back in his seat. At the same time he shot a glance to the further corner.

His companion's gaze instinctively turned in the same direction—and as he looked he involuntarily drew a sharp breath.

The third occupant of the compartment was no longer absorbed in his book; it had fallen to the floor with the pages all crumpled. The man himself lay half-sprawling across the seat, his one arm doubled under him, the other flung out with nerveless fingers, his grey hair slightly dishevelled, his face white and passive, resting half-turned upon the upholstered seat. From the grey hair that fringed his forehead a thin red streak of blood was trickling.

Rumpity-rumpity—the crazy insistence of those grinding wheels! A note of mockery seemed to have crept in upon their discordant chant. As if they knew—and chuckled hideously at their stealthy secret—knew of the grim drama that the darkness of the tunnel had obliterated.

Still the eyes of the two men remained riveted on that crumpled figure in the further corner. The atmosphere of the narrow compartment appeared insufferably hot; streaks of perspiration glistened on the stout man's face. His companion's expression was one of queer, strained intentness.

Presently the stout man shook himself and glanced swiftly at his companion. The movement broke the spell; the other also turned, and their eyes met. For a moment they gazed meaningly at each other; then stealthily the big fellow withdrew his hand from his pocket, grasping in his fingers an automatic pistol. Deliberately, cautiously he reached along the seat and gently placed the weapon in the limp hand of the prostrate man.

The stout man licked his lips; he was about to speak, when, with a harsh grinding of brakes, the train began to slow down.

Both men sprang to their feet. The big fellow hastily lowered the window and glanced out. A dense screen of trees crept close up to the railway track; but there was no station in sight. Yet the train was

stopping—as if some sudden emergency had caused the brakes to be applied. What other emergency than that the grim secret of this first-class compartment had been discovered.

The unspoken thought was in both men's eyes, mingled with a glint of fear. Suddenly the big fellow grasped the bag on the rack above, flung open the door, and leapt out. He was gone—before even his companion could grasp at his jacket, as he had attempted to do.

He gripped the swaying door, threw an apprehensive glance over his shoulder, hesitated a moment, and then also hastily made his escape.

THE MISSING BODY.

"HALLO, you're back again!" Mostyn said.

Cogan had not heard him enter the room. He stopped the typewriter at an unfinished word and rose abruptly to his feet.

"Yes, I was just going," he said hurriedly. "I've an appointment at the Maubert at seven."

"You've got exactly five minutes," Mostyn broke in. He stood with his heels propped on the tiled hearth—so that the flickering fire peeped between his long straight legs—and glanced quizzically at the younger man. "What's the excitement?" he asked.

Cogan's face was a trifle flushed, his hair ruffled. Hastily he gathered together the typewritten sheets on the table and shook them into some semblance of order.

"Can't stop to talk, old man," he answered briefly. "But it's all typed out here—just as it happened. The queerest thing I've ever struck up against. It's a real live story. If you feel like licking it into shape do so. But probably I'll know more when I come back. Can't stop another moment."

"He was already at the door."
"Is there a woman in it?" Mostyn asked.

"There is—dashed attractive woman, too!"

"Remember you've left a wife in London!" Mostyn flung after him.

He took out a cigarette, tapped it thoughtfully on the case, and walked leisurely across to the window. A drizzle of rain was falling outside, the night was dark and a trifle misty.

A black saloon car was standing by the kerb below. As Cogan emerged the chauffeur leaned from his seat to accost him. Cogan exchanged a brief word, then stepped on to the running-board, pulled open the door, and—

Swiftly Mostyn leaned forward, peering down below with quickened interest. Cogan was inside the car now—funny how he had appeared suddenly, to draw back, then precipitate himself into the interior—and the door swung violently shut. Was it imagination? How queerly the vehicle trembled, as if someone were tumbling about inside. And the nearside window—what the deuce—had Cogan put his elbow through it?

Already Mostyn was across the room, had flung open the door, was springing down the narrow winding stairs. As he dashed into the street he caught a glimpse of the car turning the corner. The next instant it had vanished.

No one was about; the narrow thoroughfare appeared silent and deserted. For a moment Mostyn stood glancing after the vanished car, then his gaze went to the kerb at his feet. Something glittered there; he stooped and picked up a piece of broken

glass. There was a number of other fragments in the gutter.

So Cogan had put his elbow through the window!

"The deuce!" muttered Mostyn, and abruptly turned on his heel.

He climbed the stairs to the flat on the second floor and closed the door. The half-dozen typewritten folios lay on the table,



Kneeling on the cushions, the girl peered through the peep-hole and gasped in terror.

where Cogan had left them. Mostyn picked them up and proceeded to read:

"DEAD MAN WHO VANISHED."

Mystery of a French train.

By SYDNEY COGAN.

(Paris representative of the "Morning Telegram.")

The mysterious circumstance which I am about to relate occurred while I was returning from a brief tour of the old battlefields of the Somme.

Firstly, it must be explained, that the trains of the Nord Railway serving the smaller towns of Northern France off the main Paris route are somewhat ancient; they have no corridors, but the first and second-class compartments have two small triangular windows like peep-holes fitted into the partition wall just beneath the rack, through which one may peer into the adjoining compartment if one so desires.

It was one of these first-class compartments that I entered at Dorbigny, and it then contained four other occupants—one of them a woman, whom I idly supposed might be the wife of the man sitting next to her. At the moment of my entry, however, I scarcely glanced at her. Later on the man, whom I took to be her husband, got out, and as no word passed between them I then concluded that the lady was travelling alone.

It was soon after this that I took out my pipe, and, in common politeness, turned to the lady to ask her permission. She was occupying the other corner seat, on the same

side as I was sitting, so that I had not the occasion to regard her before without appearing rude. Now, as I turned to her to put the question, I found that she was much younger than I had supposed and exceedingly attractive.

This fact, however, did not account for my sudden interest. It was rather because of the fact that at the moment I had addressed her she had started, positively started, and had turned her head sharply, regarding me with wide, apprehensive eyes.

Her agitation, however, was only momentarily. She quickly recovered herself and nodded a smiling assent to my request, then turned her attention again to the magazine on her knees, with an appearance of cold reserve.

But I did not light my pipe. My curiosity was aroused. That quick, apprehensive glance perplexed me. I was quite certain that I had not been mistaken. For a brief instant fear had shone in her eyes. And then her whole attitude—I sort of sensed that she was all tense and strung up. Intuitively I felt that she was labouring under some deep mental distress.

Not that she was outwardly agitated. Her demeanour was composed enough. There were two Frenchmen occupying the opposite seat, who chatted together noisily all the time and were apparently quite oblivious of the fact that anything was amiss.

One little incident I remembered afterwards. The lady suddenly rose from her seat—I say "suddenly" because she jumped up in an impulsive fashion—and remained for a moment trifling with an attaché-case on the rack above. I think she took out a magazine and replaced the one she had been reading. It was later, however, that I appreciated the significance of her action.

We were then, I think, some little distance beyond a place called Brieux, and the two Frenchmen were still chattering noisily when the train suddenly entered a tunnel, plunging the compartment in darkness.

The tunnel is quite a short one—probably it does not take much more than a minute to pass through—but in the darkness it appeared longer. At all events, while we sat there, quite invisible to each other, I had an eerie feeling that something dramatic was about to happen. The two loquacious Frenchmen had stopped talking, and there was a queer stillness, in spite of the din of the train in the tunnel. Then we were through, and out into the daylight again.

The two Frenchmen immediately continued their conversation—and at that moment the lady rose from her seat, with that same quick, impulsive movement, to reach to the attaché-case on the rack above. For a moment she knelt on the cushions as though to ease down the case, then suddenly she uttered a smothered cry and swayed back with blanched face—just as I sprang to my feet and caught her in my arms.

This caused some commotion; the two Frenchmen at once became flutteringly solicitous and excitedly offered their advice and assistance. But a queer suspicion had flashed upon my mind. At the very moment that the girl had reached for her attaché-case I had happened to take a quick glance at her from out the corner of my eye. And I felt certain that she had deliberately peered through the small triangular window above the seat that gave a view into the adjoining compartment.

What had she seen to have caused her sudden, uncontrollable agitation? This question was uppermost in my mind, and I took the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity. Even as she swayed into my arms I craned my neck to take a swift glance through the little window. It was only a momentary

glimpse, but I saw quite enough to confirm my most sinister suspicions.

In the opposite corner of the adjoining compartment a man was lying half-huddled upon the seat, with one arm doubled beneath him and the other flung out with his fingers all queer and stiff. His face I saw quite clearly; it was pressed sideways against the seat, and there was a thin trickle of blood oozing from his forehead. His spectacles were lying on the seat. He appeared to be a man of about sixty.

So much I saw during that momentary glance. But no scrap of doubt entered my mind—he was dead, I felt certain—he had been shot. Prompted by this conviction—that a grim crime had been enacted in the adjoining compartment—I snatched instinctively at the alarm bell.

All this occupied the space of a few brief seconds. The girl had swooned away, and my attention was engaged with her for the next few moments. I laid her gently on the seat and—aided by the two Frenchmen—tried to bring her round. We rather got in each other's way, however, and our clumsy efforts were not very successful—when the train came to a stop.

The guard immediately came running along and, attracted by the cries of the two Frenchmen, clambered into our compartment. Following him closely crowded other passengers of the train, curious to know the reason of this unexpected diversion, so that we were quickly the centre of an excited, gesticulating, chattering throng.

Mustering up my best French, I shouted in the guard's ear that a man had been shot in the next compartment, and, forcibly elbowing my way through the crowd, I clambered along the footboard, hung open the adjacent door and precipitated myself inside.

To my astonishment the compartment was empty. Never had I felt so blankly dumb-founded in all my life—never before experienced such a feeling of stark, stupid mystification. A blow of a feather would have stunned me as I stood there staring around with incredulous eyes. There was no sign of a dead man—or even of a live one. The compartment was unoccupied.

Recovering from my first shock of surprise, I refused to believe the evidence of my senses, and began—rather stupidly—looking under the seats and pulling up the cushions. The guard and several of the passengers had followed me into the compartment, and they also poked about, as if they were searching for hidden treasure.

I tried to explain that only a few brief moments before there had been a dead man lying on the seat, but they appeared to think that I was playing a joke on them. In fact, the guard presently became quite crusty and, before departing, treated me to a perfect torrent of indignation, even threatening to prosecute me for having pulled the alarm-bell without sufficient justification. The others quickly followed him, leaving me to solve the problem as best I could.

I began prodding about again, refusing yet to believe that the compartment was unoccupied, even though the fact was quite obvious to a blind man. And presently I made a significant discovery. Just below the window-ledge where the dead man had been huddled I found a small, round puncture. It had been made by a bullet; in fact, the bullet was still embedded in the wood. I was attempting to probe it out with my knife when the engine gave a screech and the train began to move on again. Not wishing to be separated from my baggage, I made a quick exit and clambered back into my own compartment next door.

There I found the two Frenchmen lightly

discussing the recent disturbance, but to my surprise the lady who had been the cause of all the commotion was no longer present. In answer to my inquiry, my fellow-travellers explained that she had removed to another compartment higher up; that a friend of hers, a gentleman, happened to be travelling on the train; that on recognising him she had quickly recovered from her indisposition, and that he had taken charge of her.

My two fellow-travellers made no reference to the mysterious circumstance that was uppermost in my mind; they had remained behind in the confusion, and were evidently unaware of our search of the adjacent compartment. Obviously they understood that the girl's sudden fainting fit was responsible for my pulling the alarm-bell and stopping the train. And although I was prompted to do so, on second thoughts I did not enlighten them further. To tell the truth, at that moment I was entertaining grave doubts as to the evidence of my own senses.

The more I pondered the matter, however, the more I became convinced that I had not been dreaming. This girl had been apprehensive of something queer happening in the next compartment; she had peered through after the train had passed

encountered her and her companion on the platform of the Gare du Nord. He was a man of about fifty-five, I should think, clean-shaven and spare of figure, but his hat was pulled down over his eyes, so that I only caught a glimpse of his face. The girl's hand was slipped under his arm in an intimate fashion.

She looked straight at me and through me, betraying not the slightest sign of recognition. But I was determined not to be put off so easily, and as we pressed through the barrier I took the opportunity of slipping my card into her hand.

Even then she made no sign, but I felt that there was a secret understanding between us. I watched them go off in a cab, and having decided—

BLUFF!

COGAN'S narrative ended here abruptly at the unfinished word, but for a moment Mostyn did not lift his eyes from the page. Subtly he seemed to hear from far-away Fleet Street the muffled rumble of machinery, of giant rotary presses greedily running off the day's news—which, in a few hours' time, would be just as greedily devoured by a million readers.

It was a good story—fact or fiction, it



One of the three occupants in the next compartment lay sprawled across the seat, his face white, and an ominous stain spreading in his grey hair.

the tunnel, had seen that dead man lying huddled in the corner, and had fainted away at the sight. So I was convinced—and the evidence of that bullet embedded in the wood clinched the matter.

But this conviction only increased my perplexity. If a dead man had actually been there, how in the name of reason had he been spirited away in those few brief moments without leaving a trace behind of his presence? Even if he had been merely wounded, his disappearance was no less unaccountable, for he could not have fallen out on to the line without the facts being discovered—and, furthermore, when I had entered the compartment I had found both doors shut.

In any case, the circumstance itself was sufficiently intriguing, quite apart from the baffling fact of his disappearance, and the mysterious event continued to occupy my thoughts until we arrived at Arras.

There I endeavoured to obtain a further glimpse of the woman and her companion, but I failed to do so in the few moments at my disposal, and hurriedly boarded the Paris express.

On reaching Paris, however, I made the discovery that the girl had also travelled by the same train. Quite unexpectedly I

did not matter either way. And that muffled rumble of machinery whose murmur was ever in Mostyn's ears—hungry for just such a story as this, ready in a moment to press it into print, to scatter it broadcast up and down the land. Mostyn had only to make the decision.

Instead, he turned to the bureau in the corner, unlocked the drawer and placed the manuscript inside. As he was about to shut the drawer again he noticed the little weapon lying there. He slipped it into his pocket with a faint smile, locked the drawer and, lifting the telephone receiver, asked for the car. Putting on his hat and overcoat, Mostyn went from the room.

The double-six Daimler was just drawing up to the kerb when he came out into the street.

"Hotel Maubert, Loftic," he said, and climbed in.

The car turned the corner, turned again, and came out on the Grands Boulevards—teeming with life, throbbing with motion, the quick, electric pulse of human effort and activity—crossed the Place de l'Opera, and in a few moments drew up outside the Hotel Maubert. The half-hour was just striking.

It was quieter here, although within a

stone's-throw of the beating heart of Paris. Mostyn alighted and entered the hotel. His manner betrayed no hesitation.

"Is there a message for Sydney Cogan?" he asked at the reception-office. "I'm afraid I'm a little late—"

It worked better than Mostyn had anticipated. At the least he had been prepared for further parley, with the probability then of drawing a blank.

"The lady couldn't wait, m'sieur," said the reception-clerk, casually reaching to one of the pigeon-holes. "She left a note."

Mostyn took the missive and, without turning away, proceeded unhurriedly to open it. The envelope bore only the inscription, "Monsieur Sydney Cogan," in a thin, feminine handwriting. Inside was a folded half-sheet of the hotel notepaper. On it in that same feminine hand was written: "I have gone to the Chateau d'Ysotte, near Corville." That was all.

Suddenly Mostyn turned—abruptly, carelessly—so carelessly that he trod on the foot of a short, stout man who chanced at that moment to be in his very near vicinity. Mostyn trod heavily, too—more heavily than the accident necessitated. The stout man squealed with pain.

Profusely Mostyn apologised, but his victim only glowered vindictively. Mostyn bowed and lit a cigarette, then strolled leisurely across to the writing-table on the further side.

There was a wall-mirror just above. Mostyn, without appearing to look—saw the little stout man standing there watching him with vengeful, suspicious eyes. He sat down at the table, took a sheet of notepaper from the rack and tore it in half, his broad back concealing his movements from prying eyes.

"Come at once to Doctor Bourillier, 14, Boulevard Suisse, Gentilly," he wrote, so slowly and laboriously that he might never have held a pen before. He tried again,



The door opened silently, and a hand reached stealthily for the switch.

and a third time, then gave a brief nod of satisfaction. It was a quite fair forgery of that thin feminine handwriting. He folded the half-sheet, slipped it into the torn envelope addressed to Sydney Cogan, and pushed back his chair.

Mostyn's back no longer concealed his movements. Casually he took the missive from the envelope, glanced at it meditatively, faintly shrugged his shoulders and, crumpling both envelope and missive in his hand, tossed them into the fire burning close by. Apparently his aim was bad, for the crumpled ball of paper fell just short, and rolled in the tiled hearth.

Not that Mostyn noticed it, however; already he had turned towards the cloak-room on the left, removing his overcoat as he went. He pushed open the door and it swung shut behind him—but not quite shut, for the compressed air shock absorber stayed it.

Mostyn had slipped to one side, straightening himself against the wall and holding the door with the toe of his shoe, so that it remained scarcely an inch ajar.

He could see out into the entrance hall, across to the mirror on the right-hand wall, in which the fireplace was clearly reflected. Almost at the same moment the little stout man came into the picture, making a bee-line for the fireplace. Mostyn watched him pause in front of it, take out a cigarette, remove a spill from the vase on the mantel-shelf, stoop down, thrust the spill into the fire, and light the cigarette. Then he straightened himself, crossed the hall with ill-concealed haste towards the entrance doors and vanished. So had the crumpled ball of paper that Mostyn had thrown in the hearth a few brief moments before.

Mostyn smiled dryly and emerged from his hiding-place. He also crossed the hall towards the exit, but did not hurry his steps. Lottie saw him coming and started the engine with a pressure of his finger. He glided off as Mostyn dropped comfortably into his seat, turning his head for further instructions.

"Doctor Bourillier, Boulevard Suisse. Urgent case, Lottie!" said Mostyn briefly, with his lips to the tube.

Lottie nodded and applied himself to his job. He asked no questions, as he had asked none ten years and more ago, when he had been driving the self-same master along the post-marked roads of Flanders.

A quarter of an hour, twenty minutes, perhaps a trifle more, and the car drew up abruptly outside a large house lying back of the road. There was a brass plate on the door-post bearing the inscription "Infirmière," and underneath "Docteur Claude Bourillier."

Mostyn got out. "Just pull up a little further along on the other side, Lottie," he said as an after-thought, and turned into the gate.

A red electric bulb glowed over the porch, casting its ruddy light on the gleaming brass of the knocker, the bell-push and on the mouth of the speaking-tube—and on the brass buttons of the discreet manservant who opened the door to Mostyn.

"Doctor at home, Jean?" he asked. "The doctor himself answered—emerging at that moment from a room on the right of the hall.

"The voice of Mostyn—*mais, oui*, I am not mistaken!" he cried, with a note of cordiality.

"Only staying a moment," Mostyn mildly expostulated, as Jean's deft fingers proceeded to relieve him of his overcoat. But Jean would not be denied. Mostyn yielded; he had the feeling that if he did not escape from Jean's attentions he might be let in for a disinfectant bath.

"Wouldn't pass without dropping in on you, doctor," he explained, as the latter ushered him into the room on the right. "Going on to Corville and thought I'd look in to pay my respects."

The door closed and Mostyn dropped his voice confidentially.

"Listen, Bourillier," he said, "you may shortly have a visitor whose identity is quite unknown to me and whose visit is concerned with a lady whose identity is equally quite unknown to me. I don't know—but he may suspect that she is staying under your hospitable roof. Well, let him think so—keep him thinking and guessing—and

get all you can out of him. A game of bluff, you understand? If you play it as skilfully as you do a hand of bridge you'll be doing me a great service."

"Anything you've omitted?" Bourillier asked unemotionally.

"Only that he will probably be a short, stout man with a somewhat Oriental cast of features and a drooping dark moustache. On the other hand, he may not—he may send an accomplice. Also I am not certain that the object of his inquiries will be a woman—it may be a man whom he is after. That's for you to discover."

"You're getting quite explicit," Bourillier observed. "Anything more?"

"Only that—"

Mostyn paused as a knock sounded on the door. It opened discreetly, disclosing Jean's stolid face.

"A M'sieu Duval to see you by appointment," he announced. "Says it's very urgent."

"What is?" Bourillier asked. "His business is, m'sieu, I take it. He did not explain."

"I don't recollect the appointment, Pierre. Tell him I shan't keep him many moments."

Monsieur Duval, however, apparently did not wish to be kept even one moment. Also he was a very pushful gentleman, for he pushed past Jean and entered uninvited.

"You must excuse me, doctor," he began, speaking French with a faint accent.

"I will not," said Bourillier firmly; and a queer little pause followed. Even as he spoke he had recognised his visitor from the brief description Mostyn had given, while at the same moment the intruder had become aware of Mostyn's presence.

The latter nodded amiably. Something like a snarl appeared momentarily beneath Monsieur Duval's drooping moustache.

"All right, Jean," Bourillier motioned. "M. Duval made a quick movement, as if to retreat, but Jean had already closed the door.

"Take a seat," the doctor invited. Duval relaxed, but declined the proffered chair. He was watching Mostyn with stealthy, cat-like vigilance.

"There is no need to be seated, doctor," he said. "But I see you are engaged. I ask your pardon. The matter was of some urgency."

"Let us hear all about it," suggested Bourillier pleasantly.

Duval hesitated, still watching Mostyn out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't let me intrude," Mostyn said, making a movement towards the door.

"No, no," cried Duval somewhat stridently; "there is no occasion, monsieur. My business will only take a moment."

Mostyn had not paused; he hadly wanted to get to the door—between the door and the strange intruder. He achieved his purpose; it required only a few steps. Yet those few steps verged close on a crisis; he sensed at each step that the other man was only just holding back from making a tigerish spring at him.

He reached the door and turned with his back to it.

"Of course, if you insist," he said. "I tell you my business will take only a moment," the other reiterated, addressing himself to Mostyn rather than the doctor.

"Then the moment is at your disposal," said Bourillier dryly.

"It is a matter of some urgency," Duval proceeded to explain. "Had it not been so urgent, I would not have intruded. I have said it, and I ask your pardon."

He was playing for time, Mostyn thought, and rapidly sized up the possibilities of this curious encounter.

"Well, monsieur, I am listening," prompted Bourillier.

"It is an urgent matter—a case you would call it, doctor. There has been an accident—a smash of a car—two cars—"

Neither Mostyn nor the doctor saw the handle of the door almost imperceptibly turn.

"—the car came smash into the other car. It was a very bad collision."

The door moved—crept furtively ajar. Still neither Mostyn nor the doctor saw.

"And my friend was hurt—he was hurt very badly."

Stealthily a hand slid through the crack in the door. And at the same moment Bourillier saw it.

"Look out!" he cried, starting into activity.

The switch clicked over before the warning had escaped his lips, plunging the room into darkness. Even as Mostyn started forward a violent blow caught him between the shoulders, sending him staggering to his knees. He grabbed at Duval and clutched the tail of his jacket, but it slipped through his fingers. Before he could recover himself the door slammed violently, while Bourillier added to the confusion by tripping over his friend's long legs.

They wasted a precious moment in extricating themselves. The street door slammed as they both clutched excitedly at the handle of the door of the room. Mostyn tore it open and darted across the hall, followed closely by the breathless doctor.

"The bottom one," Bourillier gasped, as Mostyn fumbled with the two locks; and again a precious moment was wasted.

Mostyn took the flight of steps at a leap, and sped down the path to the front gate.

"Got away!" he snapped a moment later, as the doctor joined him. "No use attempting to follow."

He chuckled softly and slipped his hand in Bourillier's arm.

"Puffed, old friend?" he muttered. "Bit out of form, eh? Come on inside."

The doctor said nothing, only breathed a little noisily.

A startled nurse was standing at the head of the stairs when they re-entered the hall. Another poked her head over the banisters. "My coat," said Mostyn sharply—it had vanished from the peg on which Pierre had hung it a brief while before.

Bourillier glanced at the vacant peg and then swiftly around.

"Where's Jean?" he asked, and cried sharply. "Jean, Jean!"

Jean neither replied nor made his appearance.

Again Bourillier shouted his name. Then his attention was attracted to the heavy plush curtain that hung in front of the door of the ante-room.

He crossed with quick steps and dragged it aside. Jean was lying huddled in the recess behind, with his head and shoulders enveloped in Mostyn's overcoat, the empty sleeves tied tightly across his chest.

THE SILENT CHATEAU.

SWIFTLY Bourillier loosened his hapless manservant, putting a supporting arm about his shoulders. Jean's face was waxen, and his head lolled sideways in a lifeless fashion.

"Dead?" muttered Mostyn with a grim tightening of his lips.

"No," Bourillier said, after a moment's scrutiny. "Banged over the head. Soon pull him round, I think. Nurse, just give me a hand."

They carried the unconscious man into the adjoining room, where capable hands were quickly attending to him.

The doctor joined Mostyn outside in the hall. The latter was holding his overcoat



Mostyn peered cautiously through the entrance of the mysterious Chateau d'Ysotte, where the grim tragedy was to be enacted at the hour of midnight.

by the collar, searching eagerly through each pocket.

"Lost anything?" Bourillier asked.

"They've got it, the rascals!" Mostyn grunted, and his face betrayed his aggravation. "A letter, Bourillier—just a brief note—but it was most important. Stupid of me to have left it in this coat."

He slipped it on with an air of decision.

"Round number one," he said, "now for round number two. Don't ask me to explain now, old friend—it's touch and go. They've already got a good start."

"Where're you off to?"

"The Chateau d'Ysotte, near Corville. You know it?"

"Vaguely. Stands off the road about a mile beyond the town, if I remember rightly."

"Thanks; I'll find it. Good-bye for the present."

Mostyn wrung the other's hand and went down the steps with a laugh.

A little distance along the road Loftie was waiting by the car.

"Anything to report?" Mostyn asked.

Loftie looked a trifle puzzled.

"Don't quite get you, sir," he said.

"All right, Loftie. Off we go—the Chateau d'Ysotte's our next address. About a mile beyond Corville. And, Loftie, this time it's really neck or nothing. Got me?"

"Nuff said, sir!" muttered Loftie.

The car got into her stride in less than twenty yards. Loftie plainly understood what was required of him.

At double that distance she was really travelling—when bang went the car off-side tyre.

It took all Loftie's skill to keep her to the road. He pulled her into the kerb, muttering all the imprecations he had ever learned in his soldiering days. Mostyn jumped out with tightly shut mouth; he thought a lot, although he exercised greater control over his feelings.

Loftie had run round to the punctured tyre and was feeling swiftly with his fingers.

"Darn me eyes!" he muttered, suddenly peering close. There was a clean cut quite three inches long in the rubber below the studded tread. The tube was protruding through. It must have been swelling out in a blister when the car had started off a moment before.

"Slashed with a knife," commented Mostyn, and clenched his hands. For the first time he felt rattled.

Loftie stared blankly, and suddenly indulged in unprintable language.

"The crafty devil!" he cried, becoming intelligible. "It must have been him. I saw him creeping off across the road. I wondered what his game was—it was just before you came back, sir—but I didn't think—"

"No use thinking now, Loftie. Get a move on. The spare wheel—quick!"

Loftie sprang to it. Together they effected a speedy exchange. But Mostyn chafed at the delay. Rarely had he experienced such an intensity of impatience.

They sped onward again, the road melting beneath the bonnet of the car.

Loftie spoke without turning his head.

"Is that what you meant, sir," he said, "when you asked if I'd anything to report?"

"Something like that, Loftie."

"Sorry, sir; won't catch me napping again," Loftie muttered apologetically.

The drizzle of rain had ceased. The wet road dissolved into a wall of darkness that fled ever beyond the glare of the headlamps. The engine sung like a spinning top, to the sharp, swirling accompaniment of the spinning wheels. Loftie was doing his best to make some atonement.

About a mile beyond the sleepy town of Corville they passed a signpost standing at the cross-roads, and some little distance

ADDON

further on a high wall almost concealed by trees and creepers.

"Slow down, Lottie," Mostyn said, and a moment later: "This'll do. Pull up off the road."

Lottie obeyed, running the car on to the grass at the side and switching off the lights. It was concealed here, except from the most enquiring eyes, by a thick copse of trees.

"Just going to make a call at the chateau here, Lottie," Mostyn explained. "May not be long. But a spanner's sometimes a handy weapon—you know what I mean. Don't want another puncture to-night, eh."

"I'd like 'em to try, sir," Lottie breathed earnestly, opening the tool-box.

Mostyn granted and, leaving him without further remark, went quickly back along the road to the two iron entrance-gates set in the boundary wall. They were flung open, and just inside was the concierge's lodge; it was in darkness, and appeared to have been unoccupied for some considerable time.

The chateau itself was just visible from the road; it lay well back in a wooded estate, and was approached by a curving avenue of elms. Mostyn proceeded up it, keeping to the turf at the side, where his feet made no sound. Instinctively he had become cautious; there was an air of neglect and abandon about his surroundings, and the profound darkness thrown by the avenue of trees added a touch of mystery.

The chateau came in view as he reached a bend in the drive, looming up vague and uncertain in the darkness. It was a quite imposing mansion, but that same air of neglect hung about it. No glimmer of light showed in any of the windows, and as Mostyn drew near he saw that on the ground floor they were all shuttered.

He paused about a stone's-throw from the front porch, still keeping in the shadow of the trees. The place was wrapped in silence; no sound came to his ears to suggest the presence of a living creature.

Something, however, was lying in the circular roadway about midway between the porch and where Mostyn stood—a vague, indistinct, almost shapeless thing. For a long moment Mostyn's eyes were riveted on it, but it did not move.

Stealthily he approached and stooped down. It was a dog lying there—a great wolfhound. The creature's head had been shattered, evidently by a shot at close range, and the body was still warm.

Mostyn straightened himself and stepped back into the shadow of the trees. And again his gaze roved over the silent chateau, searching for a key to the enigma. Some queer drama had been enacted here, and within a very brief space of time.

Yet the mansion's grim exterior gave not a whisper of a clue to the shrouded secret that its walls concealed; it remained wrapped in an air of mysterious solitude.

Mostyn decided to reconnoitre the back, and proceeded cautiously to move towards the right wing. The detour took him past some stables and outhouses which wore the same deserted appearance. They apparently had fallen into disuse for many a long day.

The rear of the chateau was soon disclosed. At the first swift glance it seemed to him that its appearance was no more encouraging than the front. That same air of forbidding gloom brooded over it.

But as Mostyn looked searchingly, his attention was attracted to the casement doors that opened on to a low terrace running the length of the left wing as far as the flight of steps that gave access to the main doors. From these casement doors

he was almost persuaded that a gleam of light was creeping.

He approached, darting swiftly forward on his toes, and stooping low. Cautiously he raised his head above the terrace. The casement doors were now only a few feet directly in front of him. The shutters were closed behind them, but they did not reach to the faintly above, across which two heavy curtains were drawn, meeting in the middle to within an inch. It was from this narrow chink that the light was creeping.

For a moment Mostyn listened, but he heard no sound. Lightly he climbed on to the terrace and crossed it. With his car pressed against the crevice of the doors, he fancied he heard a man speak from within, but silence followed the brief, unintelligible utterance.

Mostyn reached up, gripped the wooden crosshead and raised himself. The chink between the curtains gave him a glimpse into the room behind—a lofty, rambling apartment that the massive pedestal oil-lamp, hung with a large parchment shade, only insufficiently illuminated.

But its light was enough to reveal to Mostyn the queer little scene that was being enacted. The central character of this strange drama was a gaunt old man with snow-white hair, who was minus his coat and collar. His face was ashen and he was securely bound, while his arms were stretched out on either side of him by cords knotted to his thin, bony wrists. His hands wriggled frantically, clenched and unclenched with spasmodic impotence, as they slowly roasted in the flame of the two burning tapers that were placed directly beneath each.

Two other characters took part in this little drama, both apparently being content to play the rôle of impassive spectators of the old man's agony. The one was a big fellow who remained only partly visible; the other was—Monsieur Duval.

So much Mostyn saw at a swift glance. Experiencing a queer tingling of his blood, he dropped to the terrace, drew back, lurched his shoulders and hurled himself forward, summoning up every ounce of strength and weight. The casement doors flew open with a shattering of wood, the shutters behind momentarily resisted, then burst inward, precipitating Mostyn into the room.

He sent one of the tapers spinning with a kick of his foot while he staggered impetuously forward, fell on his knees, and managed somehow to extinguish the other one.

Startled ejaculations had greeted his unexpected entry. Violent hands were laid on him as he attempted to rise. Mostyn thrilled to their grasp with strange excitement; never before had he felt that fierce, passionate instinct to kill. He gripped the big fellow by the head, reaching up as he crouched there, and threw him violently so that he turned a somersault, then sprang to his feet to close with the other man.

Monsieur Duval, however, preferred not to come to handgrips. He fired from his hip, turned, and fled through the open doors. Something seared Mostyn's arm like a scorching needle, but he was scarcely aware of it. He darted in pursuit, caught a glimpse of a fleeing figure vanishing to the left, and took up the chase.

Rounding the left wing of the house, he again glimpsed his quarry plunging into the thicket of trees. Mostyn redoubled his efforts; he very badly wanted to overtake the elusive Monsieur Duval. For a few moments he heard the man crashing through the undergrowth just ahead, then the sounds suddenly ceased.

A moment later Mostyn came out into a narrow track running right and left. There he paused, glancing swiftly about him; but

it was too dark to determine which way his quarry had gone. Realising that further pursuit was futile, he turned and proceeded to grope his way back, breathing heavily from his exertions.

As he came in view of the chateau, however, he saw a vague figure furtively slip behind a tree almost in his immediate path. Mostyn was upon him in a moment, had gripped him by the throat and was shaking him savagely.

The helpless man struggled impotently, gasped and spluttered, choking out unintelligible expostulations. Suddenly Mostyn released his grip, peering close, and grasping the half-strangled man's coat collar to support him.

"You, Bourillier!" he muttered, and chuckled a little queerly.

MYSTERY HOUSE.



THE doctor could not speak; he had great difficulty in finding his breath. And Mostyn at that moment could not find words adequately to express his emotions. He chuckled again and, with his arm about Bourillier's shoulders, proceeded towards the chateau.

On the terrace they both paused and faced each other.

"I followed you," Bourillier muttered unsteadily. "I couldn't resist being present at the second round."

"You were nearly counted out, old friend," Mostyn said grimly. "But there's a queer kettle of fish here. Come and see. We'll talk afterwards."

He cast a searching glance about him as he turned to the open casements, from which he had made such a frantic exit a short while before. But there was no sign of the big fellow, whom he had handled with such violence in that first fierce moment of encounter. Apparently he had also made good his escape—not without some physical souvenir of the occasion, Mostyn fervently hoped.

He stepped into the room with the doctor close behind him, and found himself confronted by the strange old man, whom he had left securely bound. He had freed himself in the interval and was now standing with his scorched hands held out helplessly in front of him, facing the open doors, as if he were patiently awaiting a renewal of the mysterious attack that had been so dramatically interrupted.

His head was thrust a little forward, but he made no movement at Mostyn's entry, nor did he shift the queer, intent gaze of his almost colourless eyes. His attitude was that of one straining his ears to catch the slightest sound—it struck Mostyn as being remarkably odd.

So also did the fact that he had succeeded in freeing himself of his bonds. A cut piece of cord hung from the leg of the massive mahogany table, and a similar piece from the bar of the firegrate. By means of these cords his wrists had been secured, stretching his arms wide apart. He had been trussed up so as to render him absolutely helpless. Even a young and vigorous man might have experienced considerable difficulty in extricating himself from such a predicament. Then how had this feeble old man managed to free himself in so short a space of time—handicapped as he was by his blistered hands?

There could be only one explanation—some other person had come to his assistance.

"Who else is here?" Mostyn asked. The old man made no reply, did not even shift his steadfast gaze—only thrust

forward his head a little more, stretching his stringy neck like an ostrich.

Bourillier suddenly approached and deliberately waved his hand in front of the old man's eyes.

"You're blind?" he said sharply.

"And deaf, too, I fancy," Mostyn muttered. He raised his voice and shouted in the old man's ear.

"Can you hear me—we are your friends; have no fear! Who are you?"

The old man jerked back his head, facing his questioner.

"Alphonse," he said in a rasping voice. His sightless eyes were fixed so steadfastly on Mostyn's face that the latter felt queerly disconcerted.

"Don't be afraid," he shouted again; "we are here to help you. Are you the concierge?"

Old Alphonse nodded briefly.

"Right; I'll fetch him," said the doctor. Mostyn turned to old Alphonse again.

"I am George Mostyn," he said, "of the London 'Morning Telegram.' Here is my card. There—I've stuck it in your pocket, my friend. Convey my compliments to your mistress. I will wait here."

But the old man did not move.

"There is no one here but myself, m'sieu," he reiterated.

"Then where is your master?"

"I have not seen him, m'sieu."

"You would not see him—naturally—since you are blind. Where is your master?"

"I don't know, m'sieu."

"You mean, he has gone? He was here this evening—a short while ago?"

"I know nothing about that, m'sieu."

"Very likely not. But it is very urgent that I should see mademoiselle. Tell me where she is?"

"I can tell you no more than I have, m'sieu."

"Bah! I can see that you are determined to tell me nothing."

Mostyn gave it up. He felt hoarse through shouting. But there was no getting past this old man's wooden obstinacy. What was the nature of this strange secret that he was resolved so jealously to guard?

Bourillier returned a moment later with lint and a phial of oil. Old Alphonse submitted weakly to his attentions. Mostyn stood silently by, his brows knitted thoughtfully.

"Listen to me, Alphonse," he said, when at length the doctor had finished; "I think the police would be interested to make a search of this chateau. What do you say to that?"

"It is for m'sieu to say." If Mostyn expected old Alphonse to show any sign of anxiety he was disappointed.

"No, it is for you to say."

"I don't understand."

"Then I will put it plainer. Either I call in the police, or you will voluntarily show me over the chateau."

Old Alphonse nodded without hesitation and turned to the door. They followed him out into the hall, which was in darkness.

"Not so fast, my friend," Mostyn protested. "We are not blind; we must have a light."

He ran back, picked up a taper from the floor and lit it. Holding it aloft, he rejoined the two in the hall.

The flickering flame flung dancing shadows on the walls with eerie effect. But its feeble light was extinguished in the darkness that crept within a few yards of them.

A wide, curving staircase led up to the floors above. Old Alphonse proceeded to climb it with shuffling tread. It is blindness was obviously no

handicap, for he appeared to know every inch of his surroundings.

He did not pause until he reached the top floor.

"Would m'sieu wish to begin with the roof?" he asked.

Mostyn glanced at the iron stepladder that ran up to the skylight above.

"No, this will do," he said, and proceeded to follow old Alphonse along a narrow corridor. There were doors on either side giving entrance to garrets tucked close up under the sloping roof, with huge beams and rafters supporting the massive joists. They were empty, however, save for here and there a heap of lumber or a broken piece of furniture, and the cobwebs that had apparently remained undisturbed for many a long year.

The floor below also yielded nothing of interest.

They descended to the second floor, which at once took on a more habitable appearance. A faded strip of carpet muffled the tread of their feet along the main corridor, and the first room they entered more resembled a museum than anything else.

The door of the adjacent room was locked.



With a crash, Mostyn burst through the French windows and hurled himself at the two who had been torturing the old man.

"And who else is here?" Mostyn asked.

"No one, m'sieu!"

"But you are not in this house alone? Come, come, my friend, where is your master or mistress?"

"There is nobody but myself," old Alphonse stubbornly insisted.

Mostyn turned to Bourillier:

"I left him trussed up like a chicken a few moments ago," he said in low tones. "He couldn't have freed himself. See, the cords have been cut with a knife. What'd you make of it?"

"Can't say; you've got me at a disadvantage," Bourillier answered. "What's the matter with his hands—they're all blistered?"

"They were slowly roasting them when I interrupted the proceedings," Mostyn explained; "our friend, Monsieur Duval and another rascal—doubtless the one who banged Jean over the head. Can you do anything for the old chap—it must be pretty painful?"

"Got some oil and lint in the car. I'll get it."

"And, Bourillier, you might just trouble on your horn. Lottie's waiting about twenty yards along the road."

"He has been gone a long time, m'sieu." "But he returned this evening?" Mostyn insisted.

"I know nothing of his movements, m'sieu."

"Then why are you all alone in this chateau—if you are really alone, as you say? And what were those two fellows up to just now—the two rascals who were roasting your hands?"

"They demanded money, m'sieu."

"And since you would not give it to them they proceeded to apply a little persuasion, eh?"

"They would not believe that there was no money here, m'sieu."

"You knew these two men who came here to-night?"

"I have never seen them before, m'sieu." "Huh! I admit that you haven't seen them. Tell me, who is your master?"

"I know only M'sieu Rouberitz."

"And mademoiselle—she has been here to-night." Mostyn thrust his hand into his pocket, but suddenly remembered with chagrin that the note containing his brief message was no longer in his possession. "I had a message from mademoiselle," he said, "asking me to meet her here."

"Where is the key?" Mostyn demanded.
 "They have taken it, m'sieu."
 "Who? The two rascals I encountered to-night?"

"Yes, they took the bunch of keys from me, m'sieu."

"And are all the doors locked on this floor?"

"Some of them, m'sieu."

"Surely you have duplicate keys?"

"No, m'sieu."

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

"What can one do, m'sieu, except have fresh keys cut?"

"Um-m" granted Mostyn, and moved along the corridor.

One of the doors yielded to his touch. The room behind contained a massive mahogany bed and other old-fashioned furniture. The bed had been freshly made, Mostyn noticed, as if in readiness for an occupant, and the oil-lamp on the night-table bore traces of having quite recently been filled.

"Who sleeps here?" Mostyn asked.

"No one, m'sieu," old Alphonse answered.

"But the bed has been freshly made."

"The room is always kept in readiness for visitors, m'sieu."

"Then you were expecting visitors to-night?" Mostyn insisted.

"Not necessarily to-night, m'sieu."

There was no getting anything out of this queer old man, Mostyn decided, nor did it appear that his tour of inspection would throw any light on the mysterious affray. He had a feeling that he had

missed something—that this old chateau contained many hidden recesses whose existence might easily remain unsuspected even under the most prying examination.

He passed on quickly, finding most of the doors locked, as were those on the floor below.

The taper was now burning low, and Mostyn decided that it was futile to pursue the search further. As, however, they were returning along the main corridor towards the head of the stairs, he was aware suddenly of a breath of faint, fragrant perfume.

At that moment Mostyn had just passed the door of a room. He stopped abruptly and reached out his hand.

"It is locked, m'sieur," old Alphonse cried, as if he had sensed Mostyn's intention, and some sharp note in the old man's tone caused Mostyn to change his mind.

"All right, my friend," he said shortly, and passed on.

They came down the wide staircase into the main entrance-hall.

"Is m'sieu satisfied?" old Alphonse asked.

"Very far from satisfied," Mostyn answered, with a trace of irritation. "You had better be frank with me, old man. I ask you again for an explanation of what has happened here to-night."

"I have already told you all I know, m'sieu."

"Bah! You are a very stupid old man. Come, Bourillier, we are only wasting our time. Which way do we go?"

"This way, m'sieu."

Old Alphonse approached the massive

front door and began to fumble with the heavy bolts. Mostyn brushed him aside, shot back the bolts and flung open the door.

"Stubborn old beggar!" Mostyn muttered, and asked: "Well, Bourillier, what do you make of it?"

"Even less than you, it seems," answered the perplexed doctor. "I have yet to hear the story."

"So you have. Well, let us get off. We'll talk as we go along."

Loftie had brought the car along to the lodge gates; the doctor's coupé was standing just inside.

"Drive back to the Boulevard Suisse, Loftie," Mostyn said. "I shall follow on with the doctor."

Loftie obeyed, while Bourillier started up the engine of his coupé.

"In you get," he said, seeing that Mostyn made no movement to enter.

"I'm going back—just for a moment," Mostyn replied. "Don't argue—wait for me a hundred yards along the road."

Muttering a remonstrance, Bourillier somewhat reluctantly slipped in the clutch.

Mostyn turned and, keeping to the cover of the trees, sped lightly back along the avenue. He made his way round to the back of the chateau by the same narrow path skirting the right wing.

The lamp still burned in the room on the terrace, and, approaching cautiously, Mostyn crept up to the *porte-fenêtre* which he had burst open a short while previously. The doors were now shut, but no attempt had been made to repair the broken fastenings. They yielded to his gentle push, and he stepped inside.

No one was in the room. Mostyn listened a moment, and, hearing no sound, tip-toed out into the hall, groping his way to the foot of the stairs.

Again he paused, listening intently. Still he heard nothing. He felt for the catches in his pocket, and on second thoughts decided not to use them. Cautiously feeling each step, he proceeded to ascend the staircase.

Then abruptly he stopped, stiffening involuntarily. A strange cry had smote on his ears, a low, inarticulate moan that sounded scarcely human. Mostyn was holding his breath, straining his ears with painful intensity while he gripped the handrail. But the sound was not repeated.

Had his ears tricked him? Something seemed to have gone wrong with his pulse; it was fluttering queerly. Mostyn pulled himself together, feeling a firm irritated. He ascended again with a trife tread and turned into the main corridor.

Lightly feeling the wall, he crept forward, peering into the darkness. It was a little further along—the room whose faint, fragrant perfume had aroused his curiosity—thirteen steps from the head of the stairs.

Mostyn counted them mentally—one, two, three—had made half a dozen steps when again he stopped, turned swiftly—instinctively raised his arm as if to ward off a blow.

What stupidity was this? Was he afraid of the darkness? No one was there. And yet—Mostyn was gripping the matchbox in his pocket. He took it out, fumbled for a match, and struck it.

The light flickered momentarily on old Alphonse, on his scarecrow face twisted with an expression of murderous malignancy, on his blind staring eyes, on his upraised arm grasping a heavy brass candlestick—just in the very act of striking.

THE BLOW.

THE blow missed Mostyn by a hair's breadth. His instinct of self-preservation was swifter than the process of thought. Somehow in that breathless



Letters to the Editor should be addressed to "The Thriller" Office, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.A.

LOOKING AHEAD! THE EDITOR GREET'S YOU!

NEXT week's issue will contain another fine book-length novel, "The Green Feather," by Edmund Snell, the author of "The House of Fear," a story which met with such overwhelming approval among our readers. These enthusiasts who wrote to me asking for another yarn by this author as soon as possible, will be delighted with his latest effort. It is literally a masterpiece of thrilling detective-adventure, and the mysterious crimes booked to the account of "The Green Feather," together with the grim efforts of Scotland Yard to pierce the defence of this master-criminal, will grip you all.

Summer is now well upon us, and the time is appropriate, I think, for me to give you some idea of the astounding programme which I have prepared for your weekly perusal in THE THRILLER. Holidays and long evenings suggest pleasant hours with really first-class stories that you are certain will hold you enthralled from the minute you commence them. You have learnt to expect such stories week by week in THE THRILLER, and now to meet this extra demand for even better stories, I have got

together a collection of specially strong yarns to maintain the keen interest through out the summer months; not one of these stories should be missed. Hugh Cleveley has been putting all he knows into a batch of absolutely top-notch "thrillers," to say nothing of our ever-popular Leslie Charteris, creator of "The Five Kings," who have caused so much comment, and a host of others, all leaders of modern "thriller" fiction. Without doubt during the summer THE THRILLER will prove more thrilling than ever before. And then a little later there is a big surprise in store for you. But that will keep for a while. In the meantime, make sure of your orders, for THE THRILLER is out to break all its own previous records.

Yours sincerely,

The Editor

moment he managed to grasp the old man's wrist and avert the blow that would without a doubt have dashed out his brains.

"What are you doing, you old fool?" he shouted, locking his arms about him.

Old Alphonse relaxed, recognising the voice.

"It is you, m'sieu?" he said, without much surprise. "You have returned for your hat? You left it downstairs."

His manner was straightway imperturbable; it seemed impossible that his dull stolidity could have been moved to that murderous frenzy of passion of a moment ago. Mostyn went back along the corridor with him, it was costing him an effort to steady his thoughts. And yet this old man—what an enigma!

They descended the stairs and entered the room opening on the terrace.

"Here is your hat, m'sieu," said old Alphonse.

Mostyn took it in silence and departed without a word. As he went down the avenue he was aware that he lurched in his gait. He found Bourillier hovering anxiously by the lodge and caught hold of his arm a little heavily.

"Are you hurt?" the doctor asked sharply.

"My pride is," Mostyn answered.

Bourillier glanced searchingly at him, but made no further comment. Together they went along the road to where Bourillier had left the car.

Bourillier took the wheel, Mostyn dropping into the seat beside him. Neither spoke during the first few miles of the return journey. Mostyn sat silently pondering a certain minor problem. How was it that old Alphonse had managed to creep upon him so stealthily in that darkened first-floor corridor of the chateau?

How had he come there—within a few inches of where Mostyn had paused? Mostyn had not heard his approach; a vague, intuitive sense of peril had warned him. Besides, he felt perfectly convinced that old Alphonse had not approached. Neither had he passed him in the corridor.

Yet he had been suddenly revealed there in the spluttering flame of the match—a menacing figure crouching just before him with upraised arm in the very act of swinging the heavy candlestick. And to the wick of the candle there had still clung a breath of blue smoke; that small detail had engraved itself on Mostyn's mind. The candle had obviously only just been snuffed.

A moment before, therefore, it had been alight. But there had been no light in the corridor, no light behind him or in front—of that Mostyn was absolutely certain.

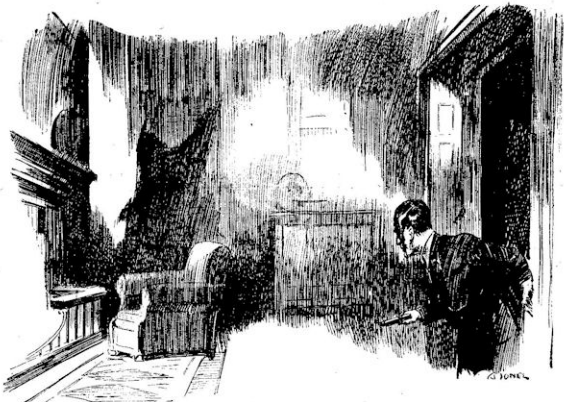
There seemed only one explanation—old Alphonse must have emerged from one of the rooms just as Mostyn had passed, extinguishing the candle before he opened the door.

A most feasible explanation were it not for one fact. That was that the first door along the corridor was thirteen steps from the head of the stairs. That fact, and he had only taken half a dozen steps when the strange encounter had occurred. Therefore old Alphonse could not have emerged from one of the rooms close by; there was no room in the immediate vicinity.

Then how had he come there? A most intriguing problem! Mostyn left it unsolved for the time being. He glanced at his companion.

They had reached the outskirts of Paris by the time Mostyn had acquainted his friend with the earlier events of the evening.

"Any comments to make?" Mostyn asked, having finished his narrative.



Gun in hand, Mostyn paused in the doorway of the darkened room. He saw the mysterious shrouded Thing slide off against the further wall.

"H'm," Bourillier muttered, "fact and fiction seem a little mixed up. It is necessary to sort them out. Your friend's story of the dead man in the train, for instance, sounds a little too imaginative."

"Yes, I must find Cogan," Mostyn said. "You will not inform the police?"

"If I am assured that he is in any danger."

The car drew up outside the doctor's nursing-home. Lofie was already waiting there.

"I am coming in," Mostyn said. "That bullet grazed my shoulder; I think it has bled rather freely."

"What—and you have said nothing about it! Come, I must have a look at the damage."

"You will not inform the police?" the doctor asked again.

"Not at once; I will think it over. I can rely on your discretion in the matter?"

"I must either be very discreet or make myself look very foolish."

"Just so. We will leave it at that for the time being."

MIDNIGHT!

MOSTYN was rather more tired than he cared to acknowledge. Lofie found him dozing in the car when a little later he pulled up outside the flat in the Rue de Rivolet. He helped him up to his rooms.

"Don't let me sleep later than eight," Mostyn said, but he inwardly cursed when Lofie—almost before he had tumbled into bed, it seemed—obeyed the injunction to the minute.

The matinal tub, however, acted as a physical and mental restorative. The events of the night, which on waking had seemed so remote and unreal, now took on an aspect of dramatic urgency. Mostyn suddenly experienced a very real anxiety concerning Cogan's safety.

The appetising odour of hot rolls and coffee, however, reminded him that he had missed last night's dinner. He sat down to the repast, alertly planning his next move in this queer intrigue in which he had become involved, while casually he glanced through the morning's mail.

A dainty, pale blue missive immediately attracted his attention. The envelope was sealed with a blue wax of darker shade, and it had apparently been delivered by hand, for it was unstamped. It was addressed to Mostyn in a thin, feminine handwriting—he

did not need to take a second glance to recognise the caligraphy.

As he tore it open and extracted the sheet of letter-paper just the merest breath of that familiar fragrant perfume crept to his nostrils.

"If you are a friend," he read, "return at once to the Château d'Yvette and remain there until twelve o'clock to-night. A woman's honour depends on your discretion."

A curious request! Rather, it was an entreaty—an entreaty that was absolutely genuine. Mostyn was convinced of that. And because of this conviction he had already made up his mind to obey. But he permitted himself to experience a very lively sense of curiosity. Fact and fiction—the two were becoming even more interwoven.

Puzzling over the meaning of this brief cryptic message, Mostyn finished his repast. He was about to call Lofie when the latter entered with a telegram.

The wire had been sent from Louvieux more than an hour ago and read: "Meet me here, Café Venosa. Will explain everything. Am quite safe. Come yourself.—COGAN."

Mostyn stared attentively at the message, and then turned up the map. Louvieux was a small town about ninety miles south of Paris, and some twenty-five miles distant from Lyons, the nearest town of importance. It was off the main route, and would necessitate a tedious railway journey. By road would be quicker, but even then he could not expect to be back before nightfall.

What, at all events, was Cogan doing at Louvieux? Mostyn glanced suspiciously at the telegram—"Come yourself . . ." Why so pressing? Was not "meet me at Café Venosa" enough? In any case, why was it so essential that Mostyn should go to Louvieux instead of Cogan's returning to Paris?

Mostyn already had a sufficient answer—at least, it was sufficiently plausible to serve his own reasoning. If he obeyed the request of the telegram, he must ignore the entreaty contained in the blue missive. If he went down to Louvieux he could not proceed at once to the Château d'Yvette and remain there until midnight.

Was it merely a coincidence that this telegraphic request should conflict with the entreaty that concerned the honour of a woman. Put it that way, and there was no need of further indecision. Of course, the entreaty must have precedence.

Still, Cogan might be—

Mostyn turned to Loftie, holding out the telegram.

"Just read it, Loftie," he said, "and listen. That wire may not have come from Cogan; it may be merely a trick to prevent my returning to d'Ysotte, as I intend. I can't tell you the ins and outs of this funny little affair now, but all you've got to do is to take the car down to Louvieux and return as quickly as possible to d'Ysotte, either with or without Cogan. I shall remain at the chateau until twelve o'clock to-night. . . . Anything more you particularly want to know?"

"Nothing I can think of at the moment, sir."

"Then I'll be ready in ten minutes. You can drop me at Bourillier's."

The doctor was expecting Mostyn's visit when the latter arrived about half an hour later.

"I have made arrangements to take the morning off," he said.

"Good. Is the car free?"

"My car? Yes, certainly."

"Good again. Then if you'll have it ready we will return to d'Ysotte together. I'm sending Loftie off on some other errand."

Mostyn returned to have a word with Loftie.

"Know what you're to do?" he asked.

"All serene, sir."

"Then off you go."

Bourillier brought his coupé along while Mostyn was still standing on the pavement watching Loftie retrace up the road. Mostyn got in beside him.

"Well?" Bourillier asked, as the car settled down on the road.

"Two interesting developments," Mostyn said; "one an entreaty, the other a request."

Bourillier listened and nodded thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"A woman's honour!" he said. "Ah, now we know what all the trouble's about."

"Then you know more than I do."

"No, not even as much—only that a woman's honour is concerned. And that is sufficient to justify the most furtive intrigue, the most sinister crime, and the worst infamy. But this is your affair; what do you intend to do?"

"To stay at d'Ysotte until twelve o'clock to-night."

"I wish I could keep you company. Unfortunately, I must be back at mid-day."

"It is just as well. By the wording of that message I think the invitation is only extended to me. But if you are not engaged round about midnight, and are not feeling too sleepy, you might feel disposed to drop in. At any rate, I take upon myself the liberty of inviting you."

Bourillier chuckled softly.

"I shall probably take you at your word," he said.

In the light of day the Château d'Ysotte lost something of that air of mystery that had enshrouded it last night. Bourillier slowed down when approaching the gates.

"Are we making a surreptitious entry?" he asked.

"No, I think not, since I have been invited. We will declare ourselves boldly. Drive right up to the front porch, and leave the rest to me."

Bourillier nodded and turned into the drive. The chateau came in view a moment later, with its wide facade of shuttered windows. To Mostyn's searching glance it revealed no further signs of occupancy than on the previous night.

The car drew up in front of the porch, and he alighted.

"Follow me," he said, ascending the broad flight of steps, and he beat a loud tattoo on the door.

Most unexpectedly it was opened at once; M. Duval's face looked out. Momentarily it clouded menacingly, while involuntarily he made a movement to close the door shut. He had on his hat and coat, as if he had either just arrived or were just departing. Evidently he had been expecting someone.

But he recovered himself instantly—before even Mostyn had got the better of his first quick surprise. An ingratiating smile spread over his florid face.

"I was expecting your visit, gentlemen," he lied suavely. "Pray enter."

"Sorry we're late," said Mostyn. "Hope we haven't kept you waiting. Is everything ready?"

It was a ruse that he had often practised to advantage—when disconcerted, make the other fellow feel more disconcerted.

Duval looked puzzled.

"Is everything ready?" he queried, eyeing Mostyn warily.

"Yes. You got my note?"

"Your note, m'sieur?" Duval's perplexity increased.

"Ah, then apparently you didn't get it. That's strange. But it doesn't matter now. Well, how is the patient?"

"The patient? I do not quite understand."

"You don't? Come, come, you have a short memory, my friend."

Mostyn felt master of the situation now, and was quite prepared to continue the purposeless argument had not old Alphonse at that moment made a stealthy appearance.

Duval turned on him with a startled expression and stifled an exclamation.

"Ah, here's our patient," said Bourillier. "Well, how are the blisters? Let me have a look at them."

Old Alphonse's mask-like face betrayed no emotion; meekly he held out his hands. The doctor proceeded to remove the bandages, making more of a business of it than was really necessary.

"Getting on nicely," he said. "Still a bit painful, eh? Well, you'd better be careful the next time you play with candles."

Mostyn grinned amiably at Duval, but the latter only scowled.

"A little more oil," continued the doctor. "Yes, yes, we must make them comfortable."

Let me see, how did it happen? You were playing with the candles, and then you slipped—or was it the candle that slipped—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Mostyn outright, and facetiously poked Duval in the ribs.

"You are taking liberties, monsieur," exclaimed the latter hotly, and, turning abruptly, he walked away.

Mostyn watched him open the front door and depart.

"We haven't seen the last of him," he said to Bourillier. "I certainly didn't expect him to have the infernal cheek to turn up here again after what happened last night. Getting quainter than ever, this little intrigue—eh, Bourillier?"

The doctor nodded, and frowned at old Alphonse.

"Got anything to say?" he demanded, and repeated the question with his mouth close to the old man's ear.

"Eh, yes, a fine day, m'sieur," croaked old Alphonse.

"Tcha!" exclaimed Bourillier impatiently, but Mostyn gently squeezed his arm.

"The walls may have ears," he muttered. "I fancy the old chap is not quite so stupid as he appears. Better leave him alone."

"Then what will you do?"

"Just stay on here until midnight and see what turns up."

Old Alphonse had shuffled away, vanishing somewhere down below. Bourillier looked after him.

"Now whose side is he on?" he asked in perplexity.

"Mine," Mostyn said. "Remember, he could have brained me last night had he wished. Don't you worry; I think we have a secret understanding—old Alphonse and I."

"Well, well, I must be off. And you don't want my company even if I could stay."

"You haven't been invited to join the little party, Bourillier."

"Appears to be the custom here to walk in uninvited," commented Bourillier, as they came out into the porch.

"Well, take care of yourself, my friend," he added, and went down the steps without further remark.

Mostyn stood watching the car until it vanished at the bend in the drive, then turned back into the house.

He stood in the hall listening a moment while he lit a cigarette, but no sound came to his ears, nor did old Alphonse reveal his whereabouts.

Leisurely Mostyn crossed to the staircase, quietly ascended to the first floor and turned into the main corridor. A loaded window at the further end showed a coloured patch of light, but the



greater part of the corridor remained in semi-darkness.

Thirteen steps along on the right was the door of the first room. It was about midway between this and the head of the stairs where he now stood that the startling encounter with old Alphonse had occurred last night.

Mostyn moved forward, scanning the wall on either side, seeking to discover a door to a room that he might previously have overlooked, which would account for old Alphonse's unexpected appearance in the corridor. But the first door was thirteen steps along. Gently he tried the handle; it was locked.

Turning, he proceeded to retrace his steps—when a queer sound brought him to a sudden halt. Quite distinctly a soft, quick pattering as of running feet had smote on his ears—so distinctly that for the moment he was half persuaded that some creature had fled past him unperceived along the darkened corridor.

Surprised and mystified, Mostyn stood there, glancing swiftly to and fro. But he saw nothing, heard no further sound. Extra-

ordinarily queer! What could be the meaning of this strange phenomenon?

Mostyn had no time to seek for an answer, for at that moment he heard Duval's voice from down below and the tread of feet crossing the hall.

Not wishing to be found in the corridor, Mostyn turned back to the head of the staircase and proceeded to descend in a leisurely fashion.

Duval and his tall companion of the previous night were just entering one of the rooms leading out of the hall. The former happened to glance up and catch sight of Mostyn. He paused with a quick exclamation.

"What are you doing here?" he cried angrily.

"You behold me in the act of negotiating the stairs," Mostyn airily answered, continuing his leisurely descent.

"But your doctor friend has gone!"

"Yes; you doubtless saw him leave not five minutes ago."

"Then why are you still here?"

"Why are you, my friend?"

An angry retort was on Duval's lips, but

he checked himself as he felt a gentle nudge from his companion.

Mostyn had now reached the hall. He nodded amiably to Duval's companion.

"We have met before," he said.

The other bowed politely.

"You have me at a disadvantage, sir," he said; "I cannot quite recollect." He spoke in excellent English, although Mostyn had addressed him in French.

"Come, come, you have a short memory, sir. It was last night. Certainly our introduction was of a somewhat—er—informal character."

The other smiled indulgently; he did not appear to be the least disconcerted.

"I now recollect the occasion," he said.

"It was a little informal, as you say. Perhaps my friend here will be good enough to complete our nodding acquaintanceship."

"This is Mr. Ferenc Lopec, the well-known Prague lawyer," said Duval, none too graciously.

Lopec again bowed punctiliously.

"And I have the honour of addressing Mr. George Bulford Mostyn, the distinguished English journalist and war correspondent of—"

"You flatter me, sir," Mostyn broke in with a laugh.

"Not at all, Mr. Mostyn; I merely recognise and respect your powerful calling. It is for this latter reason that I am glad of the opportunity of meeting you here this morning—to give you the explanation to which, I readily admit, you are perfectly entitled. Last night you interrupted a certain—er—little ceremony that must naturally have appeared exceedingly strange to you. The explanation is very simple. Briefly the old concierge here is an ex-gaol bird, whose criminal career has frequently brought him in contact with the police. In the interests of justice we endeavoured last night to extract certain information from him, but finding him obstinate, we decided to try a little—er—gentle persuasion. You need not, however, entertain any anxiety lest we should again resort to such persuasive methods. There is no longer any need, for we have obtained the information that was so urgently required in the interests of justice. You may, therefore, rest assured that this old man will not be further molested."

Lopec had spoken with easy assurance. Whether he were a lawyer or not, he certainly possessed the plausible tongue of the advocate. Mostyn appeared entirely satisfied with his statement.

"Pray do not trouble to explain further," he said cordially. "I fully appreciate the position. Believe me, I had no intention of circumventing the ends of justice. Let me not detain you further, gentlemen; you may rely on my discretion."

He stood aside as he spoke and motioned to the front door. Neither Lopec nor his companion, however, responded to his plain invitation.

"Let me not detain you," Mostyn insisted. "There is no further need, I assure you."

Still the two did not move. Duval was about to speak, when Lopec again restrained him.

"Thank you, Mr. Mostyn," he said. "But I think it is rather we who are detaining you."

"Not at all. I am in no hurry."

"And neither are we."

"Then we shall have the opportunity of prolonging our acquaintance."

"To our mutual advantage may I venture to suggest?" Lopec remarked, and a faint threatening note lurked beneath his suave tones.

Duval was more openly aggressive, and demanded:



Lopec and Duval rushed madly upon him. Drawing an automatic, Mostyn backed quickly up the staircase. "Careful, gentlemen!" he threatened. "Another step—"

"What is your game, Mr. Mostyn, may I ask?"

"Tut, tut!" insinuated Lopece. "I am sure that we are only too pleased to welcome Mr. Mostyn as our guest so long as he remains under this roof. Naturally, however, we are interested to know his intentions since we are to have the pleasure of his unanticipated company."

"Uninvited company," Duval bluntly corrected.

"Obviously that was our omission," Lopece intimated.

Mostyn felt for another cigarette and tapped it thoughtfully on the case.

"Let us quit bluffing, gentlemen," he suggested, "and exchange confidences. I propose staying at this chateau, probably until to-morrow morning. Well, what about it?"

Duval and his companion remained silent for a moment; the same strained expression showed in each man's face. Then Duval cried angrily:

"This is sheer impudence! You can't force your way in here and—"

"No, no, let us not quarrel," Lopece interrupted. "I think this is a pure misunderstanding. I put it to you, Mr. Mostyn, that you would not come here uninvited and insist on remaining against the rightful owner's wishes?"

"Not unless I was prepared for him to call in the police and have me turned out."

"Exactly. But you would not be so stupid as to go to such lengths. And it is not necessary. I can assure you that my friend Count Roubertiz, who owns this chateau, does not at the moment desire your further presence, much as he would be honoured by your company at some future date."

Mostyn blew the smoke of the cigarette between his lips.

"You are his spokesman?" he inquired.

"I am his legal adviser, and speak with his full authority."

"Without disputing your authority, I prefer in this matter to deal directly with Count Roubertiz."

"Then you can't!" Duval blurted out.

But Lopece drew him aside.

"Pardon me a moment," he said, and the two conversed in undertones while Mostyn sauntered away with his hands thrust in his pockets.

"Very well, Mr. Mostyn," Lopece announced at length, "we have decided to accede to your request. Count Roubertiz is not far away, and M. Duval will go and fetch him. The count, however, is in poor health, and I must ask you not to cause him any undue irritation. Shall we wait in the library? We shall find it more comfortable."

Mostyn nodded nonchalantly. The library was situated in the left wing of the chateau—a large, sombre room with its walls lined with bookshelves, and a massive oak writing-table in the centre. It was in semi-darkness when they entered, and, crossing to one of the windows, Lopece opened the shutter which gave a view on to the park. Even then the greater part of the room remained in gloom.

"We must get a fire lighted here," said Lopece, pushing forward a heavy saddlebag chair. "The place has remained unoccupied for some time. Will you have a cigar?"

"Another cigarette, if you don't mind."

"Then try one of these."

Mostyn helped himself from the proffered case, struck a match and held it out to Lopece, then dropped back into his chair, lifting the burning match to the cigarette between his own lips—when the match suddenly puffed out.

At the same moment he realised with a start of surprise that old Alphonse was standing beside his chair.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Lopece cried in angry, startled tones.

The old man motioned to the fireplace, while stealthily his hand reached down and closed over the cigarette in Mostyn's lips.

"Yes, light the fire," Lopece cried irritably. "It's confoundedly chilly here—in fact, the whole place is damp and musty."

Instinctively Mostyn had slipped his hand in his pocket, found one of his own cigarettes and stuck it between his lips. He struck another match as old Alphonse shuffled off.

"Yes, it is certainly rather chilly here," he assented, leaning back comfortably and glancing casually across at his companion.

Lopece nodded. There was a curiously intent expression in his eyes, almost one of suspicion. Then he relaxed and smiled.

"That old man moves about so furtively that he gets on my nerves," he said with a short laugh.

"He certainly has the stealthy tread of the crackman," Mostyn agreed.

But as if to mock at his statement, old Alphonse returned at that moment with his arms full of logs, which he dropped at intervals with an infernal clatter as he shuffled across the room.

Kneeling down at the great open fireplace, he proceeded clumsily to arrange the fuel, but he took rather a long time to get it kindled. Finally he shuffled off.

Lopece remained staring abstractedly at the crackling flames. Presently he shook himself and glanced across at his companion, and at once his attention became arrested. The stub of the cigarette had fallen from Mostyn's fingers; he lay back in his chair, his head lurching sideways, his eyes closed. He was breathing somewhat irregularly.

For a long moment Lopece watched him with that same strained expression. Then a smile fitted across his face, and, rising stealthily, he crept quietly across to the apparently unconscious man.

He leaned over him and stared into his face. Apparently he was satisfied with his scrutiny, for, dropping his air of circumspection, he proceeded lightly to run his fingers over Mostyn's clothes, pausing as he felt the automatic pistol in the pocket of his jacket.

Hastily he slipped his hand into the pocket; his fingers closed about the little weapon—when suddenly Mostyn spoke.

"I think that is my property," he observed dryly.

COUNT ROUBERTIZ.

Lopece recoiled as if he had been shot, and his face went livid.

"I—I thought," he cried inarticulately, and with a supreme effort controlled himself.

"How you startled me!" he exclaimed.

"I thought you were ill. You fell back in your chair. I was quite alarmed. Are you sure you are not ill?"

"Nothing to speak of," Mostyn assured him. "I came over a bit sleepy, that's all. I fancy your cigarette was a wee bit strong."

He smiled up at the other with faint irony. Lopece avoided his gaze and dropped back into his chair. For the moment he had been shaken out of his habitual self-possession.

"I have been taken that way myself," he remarked lamely, and suddenly lifted his head: "Ah, here is Duval, I think," he added with evident relief.

From the front of the chateau a door banged; voices sounded in the hall, followed by approaching footsteps. A moment later Duval entered the library alone. He paused at the door, and it appeared to Mostyn that as he shot a quick glance from him to Lopece a shadow of disappointment crossed his face.

"Well, did you persuade the count to come?" Lopece asked hastily.

"Yes."

"He is here?"

"Yes, he's here."

"Then——" Lopece paused, and to Mostyn it seemed that the two badly wanted to have a word in private, but were afraid of arousing his suspicions. "Yes," Lopece said, "I think we will have the interview in here, if the count will be good enough to step this way."

Duval hesitated, shot a meaning glance at his friend and abruptly turned on his heel.

Lopece leaned forward, his expression a little tense.

"You will remember that Count Roubertiz is in poor health," he urged. "Please do not agitate him, I beg of you."

"There should be no need," Mostyn observed, while the tread of feet came to his ears.

Lopece turned expectantly towards the door. He was gripping the elbows of his chair, his face betraying ill-concealed anxiety. He rose quickly to his feet as Duval entered in the company of two other men.

The one was a burly red-haired fellow more than six feet in height clad in a rough serge suit. Between him and Duval walked a younger man, somewhat toppishly dressed, slight of stature, thin-faced, his nose long and aquiline, his mouth weak and drooping open beneath his black silky mustache.

As he approached, Mostyn noted significantly that the two kept close on either side as if in the manner of an escort, and more significant still, that the burly red-haired fellow was surreptitiously gripping the younger man's sleeve.

"Allow me to introduce you," Lopece said fustily. "Count Roubertiz—Mr. George Mostyn."

Mostyn had already risen from his chair. He bowed and said urbanely:

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Count Roubertiz."

For answer the count laughed shrilly—a mirthless, discordant laugh.

"No, no, you are not pleased," he cried.

"You do not say what you think. No one says what he thinks. You want to write stories in the newspapers about me. Oh, yes, I know. But you won't get me to talk. You shan't stay here—forcing yourself upon me. I don't like it. I won't have it. Go away—do you hear? I insist on your leaving at once."

He ended a little breathlessly, nervously smoothing back his sleek black hair with a white soft hand. He had spoken rapidly, like a child repeating a carefully rehearsed part. But Lopece bit his lip as if the rehearsal had not been quite successful and made a motion to the red-haired man.

"All right, Blondin," he muttered, and the big fellow fell back.

Mostyn swiftly appraised the situation.

"I can assure you, Count Roubertiz," he said earnestly, "that you entirely misjudge my motives. Allow me to recall to your memory the slight service I was able to render to your gracious mother, the countess, in Vienna, some ten years ago, on that night when the hungry mob broke loose in the Ballplatz."

The young man's restless eyes scrutinised Mostyn with sudden interest; a faint recollection seemed to be stirring in his disordered brain. But it may have been merely a whim of his unstable intellect that caused his sudden change of front.

"My dear friend," he cried effusively, grasping Mostyn's hand, "why did you not say who you were? They lied to me—they said you had come here to do me an injury." He glared angrily from Lopece to Duval and shouted vengefully: "Let me see, Duval, I am being deceived and treated like a child. I won't have it, do you hear me?"

"Probably there was a misunderstanding," Mostyn amiably suggested. "I wished merely to stay here until to-morrow—to remain the night under your hospitable roof."

"You shall, indeed. What! mayn't I invite my friends to stay with me if I wish? Who dares to gainsay me? Come, I should like to know!" The young man's attitude had become dangerously excited; he turned from Duval to Lopece with flashing, crazy eyes: "Do you dare to contradict me?" he demanded.

Duval had been restlessly twirling his

moustache. He suddenly dropped his hand with a decided gesture.

"Enough of this foolery," he said harshly. "The count is ill; he doesn't know what he is saying. No use will be served by prolonging this interview."

"What's that you say?" hissed Rouberitz, and raised his hand to strike.

"But Duval caught his wrist and held it firmly, while Blondin stepped up from behind and grasped the young man in his powerful hands.

At once Rouberitz became demented. Struggling frantically, he emitted a series of piercing screams while the white frocked his lips. Then with a strangled cry he collapsed in a fit, and Blondin and Duval bore him hurriedly from the room.

It was all over in a few swift seconds. Mostyn had not moved; he saw that it was futile to offer assistance to the unfortunate count. He glanced inquiringly at Lopece who had stayed behind. The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what is your decision, Mr. Mostyn?" he asked.

"I shall accept the count's invitation."

"You insist on remaining?"

"That is my intention."

"You saw that this poor young man is not responsible for his actions?"

"Some such impression was conveyed to me. Nevertheless, I propose to accept his invitation."

"Um-m!" With another shrug of his shoulders Lopece walked across to the window and glanced out.

Mostyn casually followed him and, looking over his shoulder, caught a glimpse of Duval and Blondin with their still enormous burden just vanishing beyond the trees on the left of the park.

"Where are they taking him?" he asked.

"To the pavilion a short distance away," Lopece answered without hesitation. "You need have no anxiety; it is more comfortable there than here, and he will be well looked after."

"By the red-headed fellow?"

"Blondin is very gentle with him."

"So I should imagine," Mostyn remarked, and turned away.

He sauntered leisurely from the library and along the corridor, his hands thrust into his pockets, his brows wrinkled in thought. It was a puzzling situation; although his life had been full of incidents, Mostyn did not remember when he had been involved in a more intriguing adventure. He found it decidedly interesting. Yet there was nothing to be done but for him to play a passive rôle and await further developments.

His aimless steps led him to the right wing of the chateau, along a narrow stone-flagged passage, apparently passing what had once been the domestics quarters. There was a small door at the end, and Mostyn slipped back the heavy iron bolts. It opened into a sunken asphalt path skirting the chateau walls, with close in front a few feet of brick embankment, topped by a screen of shrubbery.

Mostyn paused on the threshold, idly surveying his immediate surroundings. He was practically hidden from view here, save to anyone entering the narrow passage.

To the right, the path vanished beyond the wing of the chateau; to the left, a few yards farther along it terminated abruptly at the foot of the wall abutting on the colonnaded porch and terrace.

This wall projected to the width of some four feet at right angles to the main building, so that from where he stood it was directly visible to Mostyn. It contained three small, narrow windows, he noticed, corresponding to the first, second, and third floor of the chateau. The first and third floor windows were closely shuttered. The shutter of the middle window—that on the second floor—was slightly ajar.

And as Mostyn's gaze rested on it, the face of a woman looked out, smiled down at him, and vanished. The shutter closed surreptitiously.

TRICKED.

MOSTYN had only been vouchsafed a fleeting glimpse. He remained staring up, his eyes half-persuaded that they had been deceived, his mind still retaining the memory of a pretty face, of a pair of eyes

that had spoken to him a momentary, enigmatic message.

He had not been deceived; he had really all along suspected her presence. And yet he was genuinely surprised, because of her fresh youthfulness. She was merely a girl—unless his eyes had indeed deceived him. Whereas she had quite convinced himself that she must be a woman of mature years who had long since spent the romantic fervour of youth, a woman of the world, sophisticated in its secretive intrigues.

Such a woman seemed more appropriate to the circumstances of this strange adventure. But this girl—Mostyn had a difficulty in fitting her in. Suddenly he found it necessary to retrace the whole structure of the drama.

She it was, of course, who had written him that brief message of entreaty. But if so—

Mostyn did not complete the thought, but turned suddenly. Lopece was at the door; just behind him. He had crept up unawares; he also was staring up at that window. Had he also seen?

He shifted his gaze to Mostyn, making an effort to smother the suspicion in his eyes.

"The chateau interests you?" he inquired.

"Yes; it is rather a queer old place."

"You haven't seen much of it?"

"Oh, yes; I explored it pretty thoroughly last night."

"You did?" Lopece's tones were slightly startled. He bit his lip to hide his chagrin, appeared to be contemplating a further statement, then walked off up the passage, muttering something below his breath.

Had he seen? Mostyn again asked himself. He slowly strolled along the path towards the right wing of the chateau pondering the question. As he turned the corner he glanced back momentarily up at that little window on the second floor, but he did not pause.

The asphalt path terminated at the foot of a narrow flight of stone steps leading up to a small wooden gate. Mostyn approached it, walking in the shadow of the chateau wall. Big spots of rain were beginning to fall; black,

low-lying clouds were massing in the sky, threatening a steady downpour.

He hurried his steps, and at the same moment an inarticulate, choking cry sounded from just above, and some heavy object went hurtling into the thick growth of shrubbery that crept close upon the path. Mostyn looked up sharply. Three feet above him was an open window.

With swift suspicion he stooped, groped in the shrubbery, and drew out a heavy iron poker. Mostyn's lips tightened grimly as he eyed the sinister weapon, while some inkling of the truth crept upon his mind. Quickly laying the poker at his feet, he made a nimble spring, caught the sill above with his fingers, drew himself up on a level with the open window, and peered cautiously inside the room.

Old Alphonse was just shuffling out of the door; he vanished even as Mostyn looked. On the floor, close to the window, Lopece was sitting, tenderly fingering his throat, and looking somewhat dishevelled and shaken.

Mostyn lowered himself without being seen. It did not require much reasoning to reconstruct that little drama—of Lopece at the open window stealthily preparing to strike, of old Alphonse sidling up behind him and gripping his throat in the very act. It was a narrow escape. For the second time old Alphonse had opportunely intervened.

Deciding to exercise greater vigilance, Mostyn ascended the steps and opened the small wooden gate. It brought him out into the circular drive in front of the chateau. A flash of lightning at that moment rent the sky, followed by the ominous rumble of thunder, and immediately a torrent of rain descended.

Not wishing to be drenched, Mostyn hastened his steps in the direction of the main entrance. He found the great iron-studded door closed, and was about to beat on it when the noise of the heavy bolts being shot on the other side came to his ears.

The sound vaguely disturbed him. Instead of endeavouring to attract attention, he turned

In the flickering light of the match, Mostyn saw the old man, a heavy brass candlestick raised above his head, in the very act of striking.



and dashed back the way he had just come, intending to gain entrance by the rear door of the chateau.

As he ran along the sunken asphalt path, however, Mostyn suddenly recollected the window just above, from which a few moments before the stealthy attack had been made upon him. With the thought he stopped abruptly, sprang at the sill, and hoisted himself up. The window was still open. Mostyn dropped inside, noiselessly crossed the room, and stepped into the hall.

Old Alphonse was standing motionless near the main door, facing Lopece, a few feet away, and blinking owlishly at the heavy revolver with which the latter was threatening him. Lopece's back was turned to Mostyn, and to the latter's ears came the sound of the shooting of bolts in the rear door of the chateau. A cunning ruse! Certainly they had very nearly succeeded in shutting him out!

Mostyn resolved to act before Duval made his appearance.

"Don't move, Mr. Lopece," he said quietly. Lopece did move—jerked his head in a startled fashion, and stared at the little automatic in Mostyn's hand. Giving him no time to recover from his first surprise, Mostyn approached and relieved him of his weapon.

"Curse you!" Lopece hissed, and gathered himself together as if to spring.

"Gently!" Mostyn admonished, playfully nudging him in the ribs with the barrel of his own weapon, and Lopece subsided, with a snarl.

Mostyn paused, briefly considering. At any moment Duval would appear; he must be prepared to get in the first blow, or the position might easily be reversed.

"Take this!" he said to old Alphonse, thrusting the automatic pistol in the old man's hand. "Hold it so, pointing straight at Mr. Lopece's stomach. Mind it doesn't go off—unless, of course, Mr. Lopece insists on committing suicide."

Old Alphonse quite understood. Apparently this was not the first time he had handled a gun. Mostyn backed across the hall, still covering Lopece, his ears had caught the sound of approaching footsteps.

The daylight had fled before the approach of the storm, and the interior of the chateau was now almost in semi-darkness, which the better served Mostyn's purpose. He reached the angle of the stairs and crouched back, awaiting Duval's arrival.

A moment later the latter appeared, pushing hurriedly through the swing doors behind.

"We must make sure of the windows!" he cried, advancing unsuspectingly, and he had drawn level with Mostyn before a vague intimation came to him that something was amiss.

He stopped abruptly and, turning his head, stared at the weapon within a few inches of his face.

"Don't move—keep your hands just where they are!" Mostyn threatened.

Already his fingers were deftly exploring Duval's pockets. And he soon found what he wanted—a revolver of the same heavy pattern as he had taken from Lopece. He pocketed both weapons.

"Now I'm feeling just like an arsenal, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "Well, suppose we have a little friendly chat?"

Lopez swore unintelligibly, and ignoring Alphonse, rushed at Mostyn waving his arms wildly. Chattering with rage, Duval also made a threatening movement.

BRIBERY.

GRIPPING one of the automatics, Mostyn had backed quickly and mounted half way up the staircase. He looked down on the two angry men.

"Careful, gentlemen!" he urged. "I've a pocketful for each of you."

A vivid flash of lightning came immediately on his words, momentarily illuminating the meeting face of Lopece and his companion with Mostyn towering above. The rolling peal of thunder that followed seemed to shake the chateau to its foundations.

It appeared to have a sobering effect upon Lopece. He relaxed with a half-hysterical chuckle.

"You've got the better of us, Mr. Mostyn,"

he said grudgingly. "I congratulate you on your cleverness. Let us talk it over as you suggest."

"Yes, we will discuss the matter," Duval assented, but it was only with an effort that he could speak coherently.

"Now you're talking sense," Mostyn remarked. "Supposing we adjourn to the library. And—really it's long past lunch-time—what about a bite to eat, Alphonse?" He flung the question again at Alphonse, and with an understanding nod the old man shuffled off.

"Lead the way, gentlemen," Mostyn added. "Don't worry about me. I shan't get lost."

Lopez took the initiative; reluctantly Duval followed his companion's lead. As they were about to turn into the corridor there came another flash of lightning and after it the peal of thunder. The momentary silence that followed was disturbed by a subdued ghostly howl that seemed to come from somewhere just above.

All three men paused involuntarily before they entered the library.

The logs that old Alphonse had kindled in the great open fireplace were now blazing merrily. In their ruddy, flicking light the rambling room took on an air of warmth and comfort which was accentuated by the beating rain outside. Mostyn was feeling quite cheerful.

"Let us make ourselves comfortable, gentlemen," he suggested, drawing up chairs to the fire and placing his own advantageously. "Now for our little friendly talk!"

Lopez had dropped easily into his chair; he was quickly recovering his habitual suavity of manner. Duval, however, was still smarting under his defeat; he sat there stiffly, with his hands gripping the elbows of his chair and his eyes staring vindictively. But neither appeared ready to open the discussion.

"I'm listening, gentlemen," Mostyn prompted.

Still neither accepted the invitation. Silence again followed, except for the sighing wind outside, the spattering of rain on the windows and every now and then a peal of thunder. In the midst of it old Alphonse stood in with bread and cheese and a bottle of wine.

It was a rude repast, but Mostyn enjoyed it. He was feeling hungry. The other two scarcely ate at all, but helped themselves liberally to wine, more especially Duval.

This had the effect of loosening his tongue; he became somewhat noisy of speech.

"Well, let us hear what you've got to say," he said suddenly.

"Nothing," Mostyn answered him. "I'm the audience in this little act. You're to do all the talking."

"And what shall we talk about, Mr. Mostyn?" Lopez asked suavely.

"Anything you like; it will, doubtless, help to pass the time."

Are you sure that there is not one particular subject that might interest you?"

"Possibly. And what is the subject?"

Lopez leaned a little forward and assumed a confidential air.

"I think you have a saying, 'every man has his price'?"

"Yes?"

"And what is your price, Mr. Mostyn?"

Mostyn felt inclined to laugh, but he remained outwardly serious. He was interested to know how far Lopez would go.

"Shall we start at three figures?" he suggested.

"That is one hundred pounds."

"You have chosen the minimum."

"It was your choice."

"No, I merely said three figures; one short of a thousand is still three figures."

"Then shall we say the maximum—one thousand pounds?"

"And what do you get?"

"That is my business."

"Strictly concerned with furthering the interests of justice," Mostyn dryly observed.

"I have said so. Well, what is your decision?"

Mostyn thought a moment.

"One thousand pounds," he murmured, and asked, "Is that the highest bid?"

"Absolutely."

"And what precisely do you ask of me in return?"

"I ask you merely to leave this chateau at once and not to meddle any further with matters that do not concern you in the slightest."

"And what if I refuse?"

"You will not refuse a thousand pounds in return for so little."

"It is not enough," Mostyn said with an air of decision.

Lopez drew a quick breath, and rose to his feet. He spoke with a trace of suppressed excitement.

"Five thousand pounds," he said. "It is the maximum. Not a penny more. Come, come, call it a bargain. You would not be so stupid as to refuse five thousand pounds."

"Um-m!" Mostyn grunted, and sucked at his pipe.

Lopez stood looking down at him, anxiously scrutinising his face.

"Five thousand pounds—it is a lot of money," he said persuasively; "and in return we ask nothing of you. Come, my friend, I am waiting for your accept."

Mostyn removed his pipe from his mouth.

"I refuse," he said.

"This was too much for Duval, who had maintained a reticent silence throughout the dialogue.

"The devil you do!" he cried angrily, springing to his feet. "Then let me tell you that your friend, Cogan—"

"Silence, you fool!" Lopez hissed, and Duval sullenly subsided.

"And what of my friend, Cogan?" Mostyn asked.

"Not the slightest harm shall come to him," Lopez said in conciliatory tones. "You need have no anxiety on his behalf. He is in no danger; I give you my word for that."

"It's just as well for you," Mostyn said grudgingly.

But Lopece made a deprecatory gesture.

"There is no need of threats," he said. "We are discussing just a little matter of business. My offer is still open, Mr. Mostyn. Five thousand pounds. No, no, I will not accept your refusal. There is no immediate hurry. Think it over carefully. An hour, two hours—take your time. In the meanwhile, I think we will stretch our legs."

He nodded pleasantly and, lightly touching Duval's arm, turned towards the door.

Mostyn got up and leisurely followed them into the hall. Lopez turned to meet him as he emerged from the corridor, while Duval disappeared through the door at the rear.

"Your friend leaving you?" Mostyn asked.

"For a short while; he has some business to do in the village. Shall we continue our talk in the library?"

"I prefer to stay here."

"It is not very comfortable."

"No, it is strategical," Mostyn rejoined dryly.

Lopez frowned, then shrugged his shoulders.

"As you will," he said, and turned away.

Mostyn took a turn up and down the hall. He had meant it when he referred to this as the strategical point. The hall occupied the central position in the chateau, and also it gave access to the main staircase. It was the key position. Mostyn resolved to hold it, and to await developments.

A lull had come in the storm, but the rain still fell outside in a steady downpour. The darkness had not lifted, and the appearances indicated a rough night. Mostyn continued to pace slowly and ad fro, watching warily for the slightest sign of treachery.

The afternoon wore on; the lingering vestiges of daylight dissolved swiftly in the fall of night. Mostyn found himself pacing up and down the hall in impenetrable darkness. He paused suddenly, experiencing a quick sense of uneasiness. The stillness seemed unnatural.

Where was old Alphonse? Why didn't the old fellow bring a light?

Mostyn was about to raise his voice, but he checked himself. With swift suspicion his thoughts turned to Lopece. What mischief was brewing? Had Lopez and Duval prepared a trap for him?

Lopez had gone to the library. Had he? It was some hours ago. Surely he would not have remained there all this time! Mostyn could not stifle his uneasiness. Luckily he had



Mostyn caught sight of a girl's face gazing at him through the half-shuttered window. For a moment only. Then the shutters snapped to, and she was gone.

possessed himself of the two revolvers; his fingers closed about them with a comforting sense of security.

Cautiously he crept towards the swing doors and groped his way along the corridor. The library door was just ajar; Mostyn peered inside.

Only a few smouldering embers remained in the great open fireplace. They threw out a faint red glow that scarcely crept to the chair in which Lopece was reclining—his hands lightly resting on the arms, his head lolling sideways, his mouth wide open—fast asleep.

But there was something else. It puzzled Mostyn, arrested his attention. Something hovering over the sleeping man—a shrouded, shapeless thing that yet bore a monstrous resemblance to a living form. It reached out to the unconscious Lopece, lightly swept his face.

Lopece awoke—sleepily stretched himself and yawned. Suddenly the yawn froze on his mouth, an incredible fear crept into his eyes, his body stiffened with fright. Then with a terrified cry he wrenched himself from his chair, fled desperately across the room, flung open the door, and collided violently with Mostyn.

BAFFLED.

It was only by an effort that Mostyn managed to keep his feet, but Lopece fell somewhat heavily. He picked himself up, trembling and shaken, and made as if to continue his flight. Mostyn, however, caught his arm.

"You're in the devil of a hurry, my friend," he said.

"It is you!" Lopece cried in startled tones. "Whom else did you expect?"

Already Lopece was recovering from his unreasonable fright. He was not instinctively a coward.

"I—I am rather confused," he stammered.

"I must have been dreaming. I fell asleep. Did I hurt you?"

"Nothing to speak of; although you certainly barged into me pretty violently."

Lopece chuckled somewhat self-consciously, and cast a secretive glance through the open door.

"I must have been dreaming," he muttered again.

"Sure it was a dream?" Mostyn asked innocently, stepping back into the library and glancing casually around.

His interest was more than casual, but the darkened room revealed no further sign of the mysterious apparition that had so startled Lopece. Mostyn crossed and threw a log on the fire, then came slowly back.

Lopece was standing there peering around with ill-concealed curiosity. He shrugged his shoulders suddenly as if throwing over a baffling problem, and took out his watch.

"What, nearly seven o'clock?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, you have had a long sleep."

"But Duval—where is he?"

"How should I know?"

"He has not returned?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Lopece seemed puzzled at this information. He followed Mostyn back along the corridor in silence. A lamp was now burning in the hall, and old Alphonse was just shuffling off. Mostyn cast a searching glance at him, but the old man paid no attention to their entry.

The rain was still beating down outside; the wind had also risen and was howling mournfully about the chateau.

Mostyn offered Lopece a cigarette, and lit up himself.

"Rotten night," he observed.

"Probably your friend's taken cover in the pavilion."

"He should be back," Lopece muttered with a preoccupied air, and added abruptly: "I think I'll return to the library—it's more comfortable there."

He went off hurriedly, rather in the fashion of a man who suddenly recollects that he has forgotten something. So it appeared to Mostyn. He glanced after him suspiciously. Why had he so abruptly decided to return to the library? Was he up to some mischief?

Determining to answer the question for himself, Mostyn slipped after him. He heard the sound of shutters being opened as he approached the library, and at the same moment there came a dull thud and a funny little startled cry.

Mostyn had reached the door of the library. He paused there, and peered into the darkened room. For a fleeting moment he was almost persuaded that he caught a glimpse of that mysterious shrouded thing sidling off against the further wall. Then a man spoke from the open window.

"I've been whistling here for nearly an hour," he growled in complaining tones.

It was Duval; he appeared above the window-sill as he spoke, and climbed into the room, then he stumbled and gave vent to a quick exclamation.

"What the devil's the matter?" he cried, stooping to the floor.

It was Lopece lying there; he climbed unsteadily to his feet, with Duval supporting him.

"What has happened?" the latter demanded again with a sharp note of inquiry.

"Something struck at me," Lopece muttered in a dazed fashion.

"Something? What do you mean?" Duval cast a swift glance about the darkened room, and turned again to his companion.

"Talk sense," he urged. "What has happened, and why didn't you open the window

before. All the doors are locked. I'm wet to the skin. Come, pull yourself together!"

Lopece appeared to make an effort to do so.

"I was struck at from behind," he said. "It stunned me for the moment. Let's get out of here—this infernal room is getting on my nerves. Shut the window—arent you wet enough as it is?"

Duval made a surly response and noisily closed the shutters.

"Come on," Lopece insisted, "let us get out of here."

"Why? Are you afraid of the darkness? Pooh! We can talk here as well as anywhere else."

Duval struck a match and held it aloft, then approached the mantelpiece and lit the candle standing in the heavy brass stick.

Mostyn had drawn back. He heard Duval crossing the room to the door, and flattened himself against the wall, hoping the darkness would conceal his presence. Duval closed the door without noticing him there.

For a moment Mostyn remained motionless, then he crept back to the door and listened. Subdued voices reached his ears. Duval and his companion were talking together in low, earnest tones. Mostyn had no doubt that they were hatching some stealthy plot. But he could not distinguish what was said. They finished at length, and Mostyn heard them approaching the door. Hastily he retraced his steps back to the hall.

He was pacing casually up and down when a moment later the two made their appearance. Lopece still looked a little shaken, and was tenderly fingering the back of his head. He dropped his hand, however, and assumed an amiable manner.

"Well, Mr. Mostyn," he asked, "what is your decision?"

"You have already had it."

"And you have not changed your mind?"

Mostyn answered with a shake of his head. Lopece and his companion received this intimation with apparent indifference. Obviously they had been expecting it. Duval spoke with an assumption of cheerfulness.

"No more quarrelling, gentlemen," he said.

"Since we're to endure one another's company, let us make the best of it. I haven't had a square meal to-day. Where's this old man? We'll see if he's got anything to eat. I can supply the liquid refreshment."

He winked his eye with sly good-humour, and tapped the bulging pocket of his greatcoat.

"It was worth the trouble," he added, and went off in search of old Alphonse.

Lopece lingered behind. He appeared to be contemplating making a further statement, but evidently thought better of it.

"It's a rough night," he said conventionally, and, nodding pleasantly, sauntered away.

Mostyn remained pacing up and down the hall, patiently awaiting further developments. He had a feeling that events were moving towards a crisis; that Duval and his companion were preparing a final effort to circumvent him. More than half an hour went by, however, before anything further happened. Then Duval appeared.

"Dinner's served," he announced. "Will you join us, Mr. Mostyn?"

"Where're you eating?"

"Down below in the kitchen. It's cosier there."

Mostyn shook his head.

"I prefer to remain here," he said.

A shade of irritation crossed Duval's face.

"But you can't starve," he expostulated. "Come—be sociable! We've prepared a nice little feed."

"Then I'll have my share up here."

"As you wish," Duval said shortly, and turned abruptly on his heel.

But he returned a few moments later, this time accompanied by Lopece.

"What is this?" the latter cried in amiable protest. "You won't join us, Mr. Mostyn?"

"So I have already told your friend."

"But this is not very companionable of you."

"I am sorry to appear unsociable. Pray do not think that I object to your company."

"Then what is the objection?"

"The kitchen. Bring your dinner up here,



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and I shall have much pleasure in sharing it with you."

"What—you wish to eat up here in the hall?"

"That's the idea."

Lopez shot a swift glance at his companion. "Very well," he said, with a shrug. "We will dine in the hall. Better tell the old man, Duval. We can use this table"—he proceeded to pull the heavy mahogany side-table away from the wall—"but we shall want some chairs."

Mostyn smiled inwardly as he watched these preparations. Whatever might be the nature of the plot that had been hatched, he knew that he had temporarily outmanoeuvred it.

Old Alphonse presently shuffled up from below with the dinner on a tray—"bifteck" and hot potatoes that certainly had a most appetising odour. He laid the cloth with an expression of stolid indifference, as if he were serving the meal in the most casual circumstances.

The three of them sat down to the repast. Duval had brought with him a couple of bottles of Château-Yquem, with which he filled the glasses.

"Here's success to ourselves!" he said, and added, smacking his lips: "Ah, I went to some trouble to get this, but it was worth it!"

Mostyn scarcely sipped his wine; he was remembering that drugged cigarette earlier on in the day. He noticed that Lopez also drank sparingly, but Duval drained his glass and filled it—this time from the second bottle, which he kept at his elbow. Yet the first bottle was still only half empty.

Lopez chatted in an inconsequential fashion about nothing in particular, while at each successive glass Duval became more convivial. Mostyn also added his quota to the small talk—and at the same time watched from the corner of his eye the contents of the second bottle of Château-Yquem disappearing down Duval's throat.

Was it merely a matter of thirstiness that Duval should have appropriated the entire contents of the second bottle to himself? An interesting speculation! At all events, he had apparently drunk rather in excess of the strict limits of sobriety. His speech was fuddled; he stumbled over his words, and was inclined to chuckle at the slightest provocation.

Lopez, however, conducted himself soberly—almost with an air of restraint. At moments he appeared preoccupied, and would then make an effort to conceal his inattention. Once he glanced furtively at his watch, then stole a sideways glance at Mostyn which the latter affected not to notice.

It was a queer repast—the three of them seated there in the dimly-lit hall of this old chateau, with the rain beating outside and the wind howling mournfully. Old Alphonse's scarerow appearance added to the oddity of the occasion—and also served as a butt for Duval's drunken humour.

Once there came a disturbing intrusion, immediately following on a more violent gust of wind that noisily rattled the window shutters. That strange moan again came echoing from above.

A momentary silence descended on the three men. Even Duval appeared subdued. Both he and Lopez were listening intently. Then Duval made some jesting remark, and broke into a laugh. Lopez again took a surreptitious glance at his watch.

"Well, we've dined under somewhat unconventional circumstances, to say the least," he observed with an attempt to sustain the conversation. "Probably we shall remember this occasion. I am reminded of an incident that occurred many years ago now—"

He rambled on, proceeding to relate a somewhat dull story, while Duval frequently punctuated his remarks with humorous trivialities, at which he chuckled in a stupid fashion. Mostyn nodded attentively. He felt pretty certain that Lopez was talking for the sake of talking—was merely whiling away the time.

At last he came to the end of his discourse.

"Now, Mr. Mostyn," he said, "you have led an adventurous life. Let us hear some of your interesting experiences."

Mostyn looked thoughtful.

"I had an interesting experience quite

recently," he said, "although, of course, you might not find it interesting."

"Tell us about it."

"It happened in a train, while I was journeying from Durbugny to Arras. We had just passed through a tunnel when I had occasion to rise from my seat to get a book from the rack above."

Mostyn paused to light a cigarette. Lopez was watching him with a fixed expression on his face. Duval's eyes were closed; he was nodding drowsily, as if he were overcome by the wine he had drunk.

"As I got up," Mostyn continued, "I happened to glance through the little triangular window just below the rack into the next compartment. To my startled surprise, I saw a dead man lying huddled in the corner. He had been shot; there was a thin trickle of blood oozing from the corner of his eye. At once I pulled the alarm-bell and brought the train to a stop. In the commotion that followed, I clambered along to the adjoining compartment and entered. To my surprise it was empty; the dead man had vanished."

Mostyn paused again, and met Lopez's fixed stare with a look of serious inquiry. "The dead man had vanished," he repeated, "leaving not a trace behind. Yet both doors were shut when I entered. He could not have tumbled out on the line. He had mysteriously disappeared—been spirited away. Not a sign of his presence could be discovered. What do you make of it?"

Lopez did not reply, only sat there stiffly alert with an air of sterner expectancy. Duval was now breathing fitfully.

"Rather a queer affair, eh?" Mostyn observed. "I must confess that I was completely baffled—but not beaten. I have made it my business to solve the mystery of that dead man who vanished. That is why I happen to be at this chateau. Am I being explicit, Mr. Lopez?"

"Perfectly!"

It was Duval who spoke. He was suddenly awake-wide awake and alert. No trace of his inebriety remained. His hand was perfectly steady, the finger crooked threateningly about the catch of the weapon that peeped just above the edge of the table. He regarded Mostyn with a sardonic smile.

"Baffled and beaten!" he mocked. "Just draw his teeth, Lopez."

Mostyn's arms were resting on the table. At that moment he experienced only a mild surprise—that the crisis which all along he had been expecting should have caught him thus unprepared. Duval's inebriety had been all a bluff; that second bottle of Château-Yquem had contained nothing stronger than lemonade.

Lopez grinned triumphantly and cautiously reached out; his fingers groped for the revolver in Mostyn's pocket.

And at that moment Mostyn thrust at the table—shoved it forward with every ounce of effort.

MIDNIGHT APPROACHES.

THE heavy table caught Duval a violent blow, knocked him backwards and toppled over on top of him. Mostyn's attention was already fully occupied with Lopez. The latter had managed to retrieve the revolver from Mostyn's pocket; he fought desperately to retain possession of the weapon. Mostyn succeeded in wrenching it from his grasp and flung him back.

Duval had picked himself up from the floor. There was murder in his eyes. He fought blindly; but he was badly wounded and his hand was shaky. Mostyn gave him no second chance, but kicked the weapon from his grasp.

"Shall we call a truce, gentlemen?" he asked, cautiously backing towards the staircase.

The two men glowered sullenly. Duval appeared to be meditating a further onslaught; he was not yet ready to admit defeat.

Mostyn was just wondering why old Alphonse had not shown himself, when the door at the rear of the hall was pushed open and the old man appeared, dragging after him a heavy burden which bore some resemblance to a sack.

The sack, however, proved to be none other

than the red-headed giant Blondin. Old Alphonse unconsciously dragged him across the hall by the coat collar. "Tumbled from the ladder," he exclaimed, and gave vent to a harsh chuckle.

Something of the truth flashed across Mostyn's mind. Apparently Duval had arranged for Blondin to make a stealthy entry by way of one of the windows in the corridor above; had carefully timed the event to take place at the moment when he himself covered Mostyn with the revolver. And Blondin had tumbled from the ladder—or rather, old Alphonse had tumbled him from it. There was no doubt of that.

Blondin lay there groaning to himself; he appeared to be badly injured, and made no attempt to rise.

"I fancy your friend has broken his leg," Mostyn said. "Hadden't you better attend to him."

As he spoke there came the sound of a car stopping in the drive outside, and a moment later an impatient knocking on the main door. Old Alphonse unlocked it and Bourillier stepped inside.

"You are quite safe?" he cried, catching sight of Mostyn, then glanced around with curious eyes. "Seigneur, is this an execution?" he exclaimed.

"It might very easily have been a massacre," Mostyn answered with a laugh. "But, fortunately, there has only been one casualty. This fellow here has hurt himself. You have arrived at an opportune moment, doctor."

Bourillier came forward and stooped over the prostrate man, at which Blondin groaned the more distressingly.

"Pooh! A few bruises and a sprained ankle," Bourillier remarked, after a brief scrutiny. "Wrap his foot in a cold-water bandage."

Lopez and Duval had been briefly conferring together in low tones. Their ardour was somewhat dampened; both men were looking thoroughly discomfited. Lopez approached Mostyn.

"The game is yours, Mr. Mostyn," he said with a wry smile. "We propose to make our departure. Have you any objection?"

Duval was already helping Blondin to his feet. Mostyn glanced across at the two.

"No objection to your two friends leaving," he said, "but I must regard you as a hostage."

"I do not quite understand you. A hostage for what?"

"For the safety of my friend Sydney Cogan."

"You will find him in the pavilion," said Lopez; "perfectly safe, I assure you, although perhaps a little indignant."

"Then have him released at once. When he arrives here you will be at liberty to go, but not before."

Lopez nodded and spoke to Duval, who went off on his errand.

He was not absent very long, and returned with a closed-in car. At the vehicle came to a stop, a man flung open the door, sprang out and dashed up the stone entrance steps. It was Sydney Cogan—looking somewhat dishevelled and very indignant.

He stopped abruptly in the hall and glared around, then recognised Mostyn standing there.

"You here, Mostyn!" he exclaimed. "What the deuce does it all mean? I've been kept tied up in a little stuffy room with a lunatic raving next door. He smoothed a hand over his fevered brow, and his glance fell upon Lopez and Duval making for the door, supporting Blondin between them.

"What! You're not going to let the rascal's escape?" he cried.

The two men and their injured companion had already reached the door. Seeing that his protest went unheeded, Cogan turned on them in sheer exasperation and administered to each a hearty kick.

"I'm jiggered if I can figure this out," he exclaimed, and sank breathlessly into a chair. Mostyn dropped a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't try to figure it out, old chap," he said, "your brain won't stand it now. You'll feel better after you've had a good sleep."

Bourillier had remained an interested spectator of these successive events.

The next item proved to be Lofie. An expression of disgust swept into his face as his gaze rested on Cogan.

"So he's here all the time," he said in aggrieved tones, addressing his remarks to Mostyn, "and I've been chasing him half over France, sir."

Cogan lifted a tired face; his excitement had now evaporated; evidently he had had not a wink of sleep since the beginning of his adventure.

"Where are we? What the dickens is this place?" he asked somewhat peevishly. "Shucks! My brain is in a whirl. But here, Mostyn, I have a yarn to tell you. Whilst I was tied up, those two scoundrels who have just left came into the room of the raving lunatic next door to me to talk over their plans. I am not quite clear as to just what they were after, but the yarn runs something like this:

"Apparently, their stunt is to get this lunatic Johnny to propose to a girl named Roubertiz before midnight to-night. Why, heaven only knows. Seemingly they are prepared to go to any lengths rather than be thwarted. As far as I can make out it is something to do with a will made by an old bird named Roubertiz, who was an Austrian count. He had an only

chap." Mostyn assured him. "We'll get the doctor to take care of you. Come along, there's a good fellow. We'll compare notes in the morning."

Cogan yielded with a faint show of protest, and Mostyn gently guided him down the steps to the doctor's coupe.

Mostyn watched the doctor drive off down the avenue, and then turned back to the house.

He lit a cigarette and proceeded to pace up and down the hall. The rain had ceased outside, the wind had dropped; an intense stillness pervaded the chateau. Old Alphonse had shuffled off somewhere—was probably downstairs in the kitchen.

Mostyn now and again stole a glance at his watch. As the hands crept nearer to zero a subdued excitement possessed him. At midnight his vigil would be finished! he had faithfully responded to that strange note of expectancy.

Fifteen—ten—five minutes to midnight!

For a certainty now the two hands of the watch in his pocket had reached the zenith of the dial. Had he miscalculated? Mostyn wondered! Had he figured it out all wrong? Was this vague expectancy that so affected him but a romantic folly of his own imagination?

Stealthily Lopez leaned over the unconscious figure of Mostyn and gently drew the automatic from his pocket.



child named Karl, and was mighty keen that this lad should marry his ward. So he made a will bequeathing a legacy to Karl, but leaving the bulk of his fortune to his ward, with the proviso that if within five years of his death Karl should in person make a serious offer of marriage to the girl, then his fortune was to be divided equally between them. It was his dying wish that the two should marry.

"Now, what all this has to do with Lopez and Duval heaven only knows. The only thing clear in my mind is that they are determined to get this fellow Karl to propose marriage to the girl before midnight to-night. Seeing that Karl appears to be a raving lunatic I can only think that these two dirty dogs intend to make free with his share of the legacy the moment he has fulfilled the conditions that will bring it into his hands.

"That is all I know, Mostyn, and it seems to me we are only getting deeper into the mire. At the same time, I thought you ought to know."

Mostyn nodded his approval.

"Thanks, Cogan," he said. "You are not very lucid, but your story does help a bit. I will be glad to have a chance to think it over."

"A good night's rest will put you right, old

No—it was no romantic folly.

Mostyn did not hear the rear door in the angle of the staircase that crept furtively ajar, did not observe Duval's stealthy appearance, the weapon in his hand take murderous aim—old Alphonse creeping up behind him with his hand raised to strike.

Mostyn was looking up to where the staircase curved to the right; had eyes at that moment only for the woman who passed there, in the act of descending, looking down at him with a faint flush on her face, half-anxious, half-inquiring.

Impulsively he held out his arms.

"It is past midnight," he cried. "Tell me—you are safe now, there is nothing more to fear!"

A smile crept into her face. She hastened lightly down the staircase—ran to meet him—just as Duval fired and old Alphonse struck savagely from behind.

Something hurt Mostyn's left arm like the blow of a hammer; it dropped uselessly by his side. Still he paid no heed.

"You are safe now?" he repeated.

"Yes, yes, but you!" she cried. "Your arm—oh, my poor, brave friend—"

Hoarse shouts drowned her words. There

came the sounds of a fierce scuffle, and Lope precipitated himself into the hall. He flung the sphinxes roughly aside as the latter tried to grapple with him, and advanced threateningly on Mostyn. There was an ugly gleam in his eyes as if he meditated one last desperate mischief.

Mostyn stood there swaying helplessly, striving to retain his senses, while he could do nothing but await Lope's next move. The latter had paused, confronting him, while he momentarily recovered his wind. A sneer of triumph twisted his lips; the hand hunched in his pocket spoke only too plainly of his sinister intent.

The girl divined his evil purpose and, with a stifled cry, made a protecting gesture towards Mostyn; but Lope thrust her savagely aside. The movement jolted Mostyn—jolted his helpless arm against the wall. He leaned there, desperately biting his lip to still the pain, while he fought to retain consciousness.

Again Lope faced him with that twisted, malevolent smile on his lips. Stealthily he withdrew his hand from his pocket and took deliberate aim. But the girl flung herself upon him, frantically striving to wrest the weapon from his grasp. Brutally he beat her to her knees, enraged that he might be cheated of his revenge. And Mostyn could only totter there, helpless, in need of assistance.

At that moment Bourillier, stumbling through the front door with Lottie, who had returned to the car, following close behind.

Bourillier lurched unsteadily to his feet and glared vaguely around. But Lottie had already taken to the situation—had flung himself upon Lope. Bourillier quickly came to his assistance.

Mostyn watched the three swaying figures—saw old Alphonse join in the fray, dimly perceived that Lope was now on the floor, still fighting like a tiger-cat. But he was outnumbered—the game was up!

With a satisfied grunt Mostyn closed his eyes, and did what he had never done before—fainted away in the arms of a woman.

REVELATIONS!

BOURILLIER gave a deprecatory shrug. "If you will talk, my friend—why, then you will," he said. "But you have a fortepature."

"You know you are just thirsting for information," Mostyn answered. "As a matter of fact, there's not much to say. Just loosen this sling a little before I begin."

Bourillier did as he was bid, gently shifting the pillow beneath the bandaged arm.

"That's more comfortable. What was I saying? Yes, there are stranger coincidences in real life than ever one reads of in the story-books, Bourillier. What I am going to tell you is a case in point. About ten years ago, soon after the Armistice, I was in Vienna on a certain confidential mission. One night in the Ballplatz I chanced to render some slight service to a lady whose car was being held up by the hungry mob.

"The car contained two other occupants, apart from the chauffeur and the countess—one a young man of about twenty-three, and the other a pretty girl of fifteen perhaps, whom I took to be the son and daughter of the lady in question.

"On yesterday day I had reason to recall it, and that was when I heard mention of the name of Roubertiz. Then that half-forgotten incident of ten years ago came back to my mind. I recollected that the lady I had assisted in the Ballplatz that night was the Countess Roubertiz.

"More than that. When I returned to the Château d'Ysotte yesterday, I was already convinced that a woman was in hiding there. I was now exceedingly curious to know her identity. Was she none other than the Countess Roubertiz, whom again I was to help in stranger circumstances even than before, after an interval of ten years?

"When, later on, however, I caught a glimpse of her face at one of the windows, I at once realised that my deductions were wrong, for this exceedingly attractive young woman could not possibly be the Countess Roubertiz, who would now be a woman of at least sixty years of age. Besides, the girl in the train had obviously been young.

"I felt somewhat disconcerted at realising this. For a moment I was inclined to believe that the coincidence of the name of Roubertiz bore no significance whatever. On further consideration, however, another plausible explanation began to take shape in my mind: The pretty girl who had been in the car with the Countess Roubertiz—whom I had almost forgotten until this moment—she must be an attractive woman of about twenty-four or twenty-five now. Was it she whose face I had momentarily glimpsed at the window?

"But I knew that I should know the truth in the space of a few brief hours; that at midnight I should have fulfilled the service that had been asked of me; that then I should doubtless meet her face to face, and resolve the question of her identity.

"But I will confess that those few hours of waiting seemed interminably long. I have never known the time to drag past so slowly, Bourillier."

Mostyn paused in his recital, and glanced half-challengingly at his friend.

"Then it was she?" Bourillier asked quickly.

"Yes," said Mostyn.

A brief silence had fallen upon the two men. Both were experiencing that same shy sense of reserve—were a trifle embarrassed by that masculine timidity of anything savouring of sentiment.

The doctor suddenly shook himself and laughed softly.

"My dear friend," he said, "so it is like that! Now I understand why you have remained a bachelor for thirty-seven years. No, no, there is nothing more to say—not on that subject. Tell me, is she not coming here at eleven-thirty?"

"I am expecting her, Bourillier."

"Why, then, you have less than half an hour to work your face up into a smile. What a man! She'll think she has come to your funeral. That's not the way to win her. Come, look a little more cheerful. And, remember, if you still have a temperature I'll cancel the engagement. *Voilà!*"

With this final threat Bourillier stalked from the room, leaving Mostyn alone in his own contemplations. He watched the clock ticking away on the wall in front of him. It seemed to him that those hands moved with a more tedious slowness than on the previous occasion when he had awaited the coming of midnight.

Yet now it was not the same doubt that assailed him. For the first time that he could remember he lacked confidence in his own resource. Hitherto strength, determination, and courage had been the weapons on which he relied to achieve his purpose, and never had they failed him. Now, however, such qualities availed him nothing. This decision that so vitally affected his welfare was no longer to be determined by his own judgment. It depended entirely on the will of another. And she a fragrant, slender woman!

Mostyn heard the door open and close—rose to meet her. And all at once his indecision vanished; he was his imperturbable self again—the captain of his soul.

"He looked down into her face with sturdy resignation and experienced a sense of gladness—as one who beholds a beautiful flower that blooms out of reach in another man's garden.

"I am happy to see you," he said. "I mean it. Thanks so much for coming."

"How could I not come?" she asked, and there was surprise almost a protest, in her eyes. She lowered them a little shyly, meeting his steadfast gaze, and added quickly: "Your arm—how it must be hurting you?"

"Not a bit," he broke in. "A mere scratch; it will soon be mended."

"But it is fractured, the doctor says. You must sit down and rest, please."

"It is I who am keeping you standing. Wait—Lydia, before you speak there is something I must know. Look at me; I want your answer. Is it by accident that our paths have crossed again? Tell me!"

"It was written," she said, regarding him with steady eyes.

"It was," he agreed with firm conviction. "But what further is written? I am impatient to know, I must know. You shall tell me now. Lydia, what else is written, that you and I should part again, like driftwood flung in momentary contact upon the purposeless currents of life's ocean? I cannot believe it—I will not believe it except from your own lips. I will you never to drift from me again; I ask you to be my wife. Now, tell me what is written?"

Still her eyes did not waver.

"You shall first hear my story," she said.

"No, no; it does not matter, it can make no difference. First your answer!"

"You shall answer—you shall decide what is written. And whichever you decide, I will accept—when you have heard my story."

"No, no," said Mostyn, "there is no need for that. I know the main facts. I met them from Cogan. You were the ward of Count Roubertiz, who died five years ago. In his will he left the bulk of his fortune to you, with the proviso that you should marry his son Karl in the event of the latter making you an offer of marriage within five years of the count's death."

"That is so, but Karl developed signs of unstable intellect, the symptoms became worse and he had to be placed under restraint. After that we lost touch, and failed to live some little distance outside Vienna with a certain M. Lubrissy, once a well-known actor and personal friend of the count's.

"The Château d'Ysotte was part of the property being held in trust for me, but was allowed, for various reasons, to drift into state of unrepair. Alphonse and wife, Marie, were left in charge until it was sold or until the time came when we wished to live there at any time. I had to do something about something happened which caused us to make a drastic move.

"M. Lubrissy was visited by M. Lope, who described himself as a lawyer and stated that he had called to convey to me Karl's formal offer of marriage.

"But this startling proposal, M. Lubrissy assured me, had not resulted from Karl's own initiative; he was convinced that it had been made at Lope's instigation with the object of procuring his return to the country. To defeat this crafty effort and to decide to go to the Château d'Ysotte and wait there until the five-year period was past. We made hurried arrangements for our departure.

"The journey, however, soon proved eventful. At the last moment M. Lubrissy said he had an appointment in Vienna, and arranged to meet me at the station. He arrived a few moments before the train was due to depart, and I was startled to find that he had disguised himself by wearing a false beard. Until he accosted me I did not recognise him. He had suddenly changed his mind, and, hiring a car, we sped off to Douai. Fortunately our heavy luggage had been registered straight through to Paris from Vienna, so that we were unencumbered.

"Nevertheless, when we reached Douai and were about to enter the train for Arras, he insisted that we should travel in adjacent compartments. I rose once, on the pretext of getting something from the rack above, and glanced through the window. I saw M. Lubrissy sitting reading in the opposite corner, and for a while my anxiety was allayed.

"But a vague feeling of disquietude again began to disturb me, which suddenly became an unreasonable fear in the darkness of the tunnel through which we were passing at that moment. As we emerged into daylight once more, I saw the lady, and took another glimpse through into the compartment. My heart, my anguish I saw M. Lubrissy huddled there in the corner, apparently dead, with the blood trickling down his forehead. I must then have fainted away.

"When I came to again, the train had

stopped and there was a great deal of commotion in the carriage. I started up with a half-hysterical cry, to find M. Lubrissy holding me in his arms, and in my joy I did not notice until afterwards that he had shed his false beard.

"Quickly I recovered my composure. Thoroughly perplexed as I was, I yet had the instinct to keep silent. I accompanied M. Lubrissy to a carriage farther along, and as soon as the train started off again, he began to chuckle to himself as if he were enjoying some huge joke.

"He then explained to me the strange thing that had happened. One of the two men whom I had seen clamber into the adjoining compartment as the train started off from Douai had been Lopee, and the other evidently his accomplice—this man Duval.

"Their unexpected entry had thoroughly frightened M. Lubrissy, and he now revealed to me the fact that Lopee had previously used dire threats against him should he interfere with his plans.

"Gradually, however, M. Lubrissy became worked up into a state of nervous excitement, until he momentarily expected a savage attack to be made on him. The suspense at length grew intolerable; he felt he could stand the strain no longer; and at that moment the train entered the tunnel.

The sudden darkness added to M. Lubrissy's terror. He felt certain that he would not emerge from the tunnel alive. His straining ears persuaded him that one of the men was sidling towards him; each instant he expected to be shot. Then, on an unreasoning impulse, he started up, grasped the handle of the door and thrust it open.

"But the rush of air in the tunnel forced the door shut again, and in so doing caught M. Lubrissy a violent blow on the head. It stunned him, and he remembered no more until, on recovering his senses, he found himself lying huddled on the seat.

"He sat up, and was surprised to find that he was now the only occupant of the com-

partment; the other two men had vanished, and the door on the opposite side was swinging open. To M. Lubrissy's further perplexity, he noticed a small automatic pistol lying on the seat beside him. Instinctively he slipped the weapon into his pocket, and at the same moment became aware of the fact that the train was slowing down.

"His head was throbbing dully. He raised his hand, and saw blood on it. This somewhat alarmed him, but he quickly assured himself that the injury was slight—only the skin was broken. With that his habitual alertness reasserted itself; hastily he removed his false beard, wiped the blood from his forehead, and pulled the brim of his hat down low. Then he quietly slipped out of the open door on the further side, and closed it behind him just as the train came to a standstill.

"Immediately windows were lowered, doors flung open, and M. Lubrissy was quickly joined by other passengers, all curious to know why the train had been brought to a stop. M. Lubrissy affected to be as perplexed as the rest, as indeed he was, and no one apparently connected him in any way with the curious circumstance.

"All this M. Lubrissy explained to me with great satisfaction at the dramatic turn of events. The presence of the pistol lying on the seat somewhat puzzled him, but his theory was that Lopee or his companion had actually fired at him in the darkness of the tunnel, and had then become alarmed and made their escape, leaving the weapon behind in their haste, and probably thinking he was dead. At all events, he felt certain that the two had been outwitted, that they had been left behind; and he was confirmed in this belief when, on changing for the Paris express at Arras, he saw no signs of the two.

"I was now safe, he said, for Count Rouberitz had died five years ago to-morrow, and therefore at midnight on the morrow the solemn pledge I had made to him, as well as the proviso in his will, expired. Strange as it may seem, I had never given a thought to

this, and I suddenly realised in a flash the real motive that had inspired M. Lubrissy to take me away from Vienna—in order that a meeting with Karl might be avoided until the fifth year of the count's death had passed.

"Without further incident we reached Paris, but at the Gare du Nord I came face to face with your friend Mr. Cogan. I pretended not to recognise him, but he slipped his card into my hand as we were passing through the barrier.

"We reached our hotel, but at about half-past six M. Lubrissy hurriedly entered my room, and immediately I saw his face I knew that something was amiss. We had been followed to the hotel, he said, and must leave at once.

"This we did, leaving the hotel unperceived by the side entrance, after I had scribbled a hasty message to Mr. Cogan, which I left at the reception office, asking him to come on to the chateau. The excitement and strain, however, now proved too much for M. Lubrissy; in the cab on the way to the chateau he had a heart attack, and arrived there in a state of prostration. Old Alphonse and his wife immediately took charge of him, and got him to bed.

"We hoped that we were now safe from pursuit, at least for the time being, but as a precaution we decided to remove M. Lubrissy to a concealed recess adjoining one of the rooms on the first floor, which communicated with a kind of secret passage running parallel with the corridor and descending by a narrow flight of stairs to a sliding panel in the wall of the library.

"We had scarcely completed our arrangements when a loud knock sounded on the main door of the chateau, and I thought it must be Mr. Cogan. M. Lubrissy, however, earnestly besought us to remain with him and not to betray our presence, while old Alphonse went down to ascertain who our visitor was.

"This old Alphonse did, taking with him his faithful wolfhound, Sultan. Our visitors proved to be Lopee and his friend Duval, but we did not know what passed between them and old Alphonse until later. On discovering the identity of his visitors, old Alphonse tried to shut the door on them, but was prevented. Sultan then sprang at Duval, who fled in fear, and then turned and deliberately shot the dog.

"You know what followed.

"All this while we remained in hiding, wondering what was happening down below. Once hearing nothing, Marie crept downstairs, and found old Alphonse tied up by the hands. She cut him free, and he then insisted on her returning to us and remaining concealed until the danger had passed.

"It was afterwards that I learned of your arrival, when I took from old Alphonse the card you had thrust into his pocket.

"We had no further interruptions that night, but we felt that we had not yet seen the last of our enemies; and in the morning old Alphonse brought us the disquieting news that Lopee and Duval were at the pavilion, a short distance away, accompanied by Karl himself. With stubborn determination old Alphonse insisted on our remaining concealed, saying that he was quite able to deal with the situation, and to this M. Lubrissy added his persuasions. I decided, however, to send that brief request to you, knowing for a certainty that you would respond.

"You are acquainted with the events that followed, and old Alphonse has told me of your bravery and resource—as well as his own ghostly jest that so frightened Lopee in the library. There remains nothing more but for me to thank you with all my heart, for the great service you have rendered me."

Lydia finished her strange narrative; still she looked away past Mostyn. He reached down and gently lifted her head, looking into her eyes.

"Tell me," he said softly. "You were glad when you read the name on my card? You did not remember me after all these years?"

"I have never ceased to remember you," she replied, regarding him with frank eyes.

"Then it was written!" Mostyn murmured, and reverently touched her hair with his lips.

"THE GREEN FEATHER MYSTERY!"

That was what the papers called it. Strange and mysterious; baffling, even to the experts at Scotland Yard. The newspapers were full of it. . . . "The body of an unknown man was taken from the water at Limehouse Reach by the river police this morning. Although the body had, apparently, only been in the water a few hours, the features were unrecognisable. Nothing it is understood, was found by which to identify the body. In the right hand was tightly clutched a green feather. . . ." And this was the fifth similar crime. What was the terrible mystery of "The Green Feather?" Don't miss Edmund Snell's amazing tale in next week's issue of



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