

THE CARDINAL MOTH

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CARDINAL MOTH

Produced by Al Haines.

[image]

”The Cardinal Moth,’ Frobisher said, hoarsely.” (Chapter I.)

THE CARDINAL MOTH

BY
FRED M. WHITE

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"The Corner House," etc., etc.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER

- I.—FLOWERS OF BLOOD
- II.—ANGELA
- III.—CROSSED SWORDS
- IV.—A DUSKY POTENTATE
- V.—AN INTERRUPTED FEAST
- VI.—BIT OF THE ROPE
- VII.—A GRIP OF STEEL
- VIII.—THE WEAKER VESSEL
- IX.—A WORD TO THE WISE
- X.—A WORD TO THE WISE.
- XI.—BORROWED PLUMES

- XII.—A MODEL HUSBAND
 XIII.—THE QUEEN OF THE RUBIES
 XIV.—"UNEASY LIES THE HEAD—"
 XV.—HUNT THE SLIPPER
 XVI.—DIPLOMACY
 XVII.—A FRIEND IN NEED
 XVIII.—A DEFENSIVE ALLIANCE
 XIX.—WHAT DID SHE MEAN?
 XX.—CHECK TO FROBISHER
 XXI.—DENVERS LEARNS SOMETHING
 XXII.—STRANDS OF THE ROPE
 XXIII.—A LUNCH AT THE BELGRAVE
 XXIV.—A WOMAN'S WAY
 XXV.—A STRIKING LIKENESS
 XXVI.—A BAD QUARTER OF AN HOUR
 XXVII.—MRS. BENSTEIN INTERVENES
 XXVIII.—NEMESIS
 XXIX.—THE TIGHTENED CORD

THE CARDINAL MOTH

CHAPTER I. FLOWERS OF BLOOD.

The purple darkness seemed to be filled with a nebulous suggestion of things beautiful; long trails and ropes of blossoms hung like stars reflected in a lake of blue. As the eye grew accustomed to the gloom these blooms seemed to expand and beautify. There was a great orange globe floating on a violet mist, a patch of pink swam against an opaque window-pane like a flight of butterflies. Outside the throaty roar of Piccadilly could be distinctly heard; inside was misty silence and the coaxed and pampered atmosphere of the Orient. Then a long, slim hand—a hand with jewels on it—was extended, and the whole vast dome was bathed in

brilliant light.

For once the electric globes had lost their garish pertinacity. There were scores of lamps there, but every one of them was laced with dripping flowers and foliage till their softness was like that of a misty moon behind the tree-tops. And the blossoms hung everywhere—thousands upon thousands of them, red, blue, orange, creamy white, fantastic in shape and variegated in hue, with a diabolical suggestiveness about them that orchids alone possess. Up in the roof, out of a faint cloud of steam, other blossoms of purple and azure peeped.

Complimented upon the amazing beauty of his orchid-house, Sir Clement Frobisher cynically remarked that the folly had cost him from first to last over a hundred thousand pounds. He passed for a man with no single generous impulse or feeling of emotion; a love of flowers was the only weakness that Providence had vouchsafed to him, and he held it cheap at the money. You could rob Sir Clement Frobisher or cheat him or lie to him, and he would continue to ask you to dinner, if you were a sufficiently amusing or particularly rascally fellow, but if you casually picked one of his priceless *Cypripediums*—!

He sat there in his bath of brilliant blossoms, smoking a clay pipe and sipping some peculiarly thin and aggressive Rhine wine from a long, thin-stemmed Bohemian glass. He had a fancy for that atrocious grape juice and common ship's tobacco from a reeking clay. Otherwise he was immaculate, and his velvet dinner-jacket was probably the best-cut garment of its kind in London.

A small man, just over fifty, with a dome-like head absolutely devoid of hair, and shiny like a billiard-ball, a ridiculously small nose suggestive of the bill of a love-bird, a clean-shaven, humorous mouth with a certain hard cruelty about it, a figure slight, but enormously powerful. For the rest, Sir Clement was that rare bird amongst high-born species—a man, poor originally, who had become rich. He was popularly supposed to have been kicked out of the diplomatic service after a brilliant operation connected with certain Turkish Bonds. The scandal was an old one, and might have had no basis in fact, but the same *Times* that conveyed to an interested public the fact of Sir Clement Frobisher's retirement from the *corps diplomatique*, announced that the baronet in question had purchased the lease of 947, Piccadilly, for the sum of ninety-five thousand pounds. And for seven years Society refused to admit the existence of anybody called Sir Clement Frobisher.

But the man had his title, his family, and his million or so well invested. Also he had an amazing audacity, and a moral courage beyond belief. Also he married a lady whose social claims could not be contested. Clement Frobisher went back to the fold again at a great dinner given at Yorkshire House. There it was that Earl Beauregard, a one-time chief of Frobisher's, roundly declared that, take him all in all, Count Whyzed was the most finished and abandoned

scoundrel in Europe. Did not Frobisher think so? To which Frobisher replied that he considered the decision to be a personal slight to himself, who had worked so hard for that same distinction. Beauregard laughed, and the rest of the party followed suit, and Frobisher did much as he liked, ever after.

He was looking just a little bored now, and was debating whether he should go to bed, though it was not long after eleven o'clock, and that in the creamy month of the London season. Down below somewhere an electric bell was purring impatiently. The butler, an Armenian with a fez on his black, sleek head, looked in and inquired if Sir Clement would see anybody.

"If it's a typical acquaintance, certainly not, Hafid," Frobisher said, sleepily. "If it happens to be one of my picturesque rascals, send all the other servants to bed. But it's sure to be some commonplace, respectable caller."

Hafid bowed and withdrew. Down below the bell was purring again. A door opened somewhere, letting in the strident roar of the streets like a dirge, then the din shut down again as if a lid had been clapped on it. From the dim shadow of the hall a figure emerged bearing a long white paper cone, handled with the care and attention one would bestow on a sick child.

"Paul Lopez to see you," Hafid said.

"Lopez!" Frobisher cried. "See how my virtue is rewarded. It is the return for all the boredom I have endured lately. Respectability reeks in my nostrils. I have been longing for a scoundrel—not necessarily a star of the first magnitude, a rival to myself. Ho, ho, Lopez!"

The newcomer nodded and smiled. A small, dark man with restless eyes, and hands that were never still. There was something catlike, sinuous, about him, and in those restless eyes a look of profound, placid, monumental contempt for Frobisher.

"You did not expect to see me?" he said.

"No," Frobisher chuckled. "I began to fear that you had been hanged, friend Paul. Do you recollect the last time we were together? It was——"

The voice trailed off with a muttered suggestion of wickedness beyond words. Frobisher lay back in his chair with the tangled ropes of blossoms about his sleek head; a great purple orchid with a living orange eye broke from the cluster and hung as if listening. Lopez looked round the bewildering beauty of it all with an artistic respect for his surroundings.

"The devil has looked after his dear friend carefully," he said, with the same calm contempt. Frobisher indicated it all with a comprehensive hand. "Now you are jealous," he said. "Hafid, the other servants are gone to bed? Good! Then you may sit in the library till I require you. What have you got there, Paul?"

"I have a flower, an orchid. It is at your disposal, at a price."

"At a price, of course. What are you asking for it?"

Paul Lopez made no reply. He proceeded to remove the paper from the long cone, and disclosed a lank, withered-looking stem with faded buds apparently hanging thereto by attenuated threads. It might have been nothing better than a dead clematis thrown by a gardener on the dust-heap. The root, or what passed for it, was simply attached to a slap of virgin cork by a couple of rusty nails. Frobisher watched Lopez with half-closed eyes.

"Of course, I am going to be disappointed," he said. "How often have I gone hunting the eagle and found it to be a tit? The rare sensation of a new blossom has been denied me for years. Is it possible that my pets are going to have a new and lovely sister?"

He caressed the purple bloom over his head tenderly. Lopez drew from his pocket a great tangle of Manilla rope, yards of it, which he proceeded to loop along one side of the orchid-house. Upon this he twisted his faded stem, drawing it out until, with the dusty laterals, there were some forty feet of it.

"Where is your steam-pipe?" he asked.

Frobisher indicated the steam-cock languidly. Ever and again the nozzle worked automatically, half filling the orchid-house with the grateful steam which was as life to the gorgeous flowers. Lopez turned the cock full on; there was a hiss, a white cloud that fairly enveloped his recent work.

"Now you shall see what you shall see," he said in his calm, cool voice. "Oh, my friend, you will be with your arms about my neck presently!"

Already the masses of flowers were glistening with moisture. It filled up the strands of the loose Manilla rope, and drew it up tight as a fiddle-string. Through the dim cloud Frobisher could see the dry stalks literally bursting into life.

"Aaron's rod," murmured Frobisher. "Do you know that for Aaron's rod, properly verified, and in good working order, I would give quite a lot of money?"

"You would cut it up for firewood to possess what I shall show you presently," said Lopez. "See here."

He turned off the steam-cock and the thin, vapoury cloud rapidly dispelled. And then behold a miracle! The twisted, withered stalk was a shining, joyous green, from it burst a long glistening cluster of great white flowers, pink fringed, and with just a touch of the deep green sea in them. They ran along the stem like the foam on a summer beach. And from them, suspended on stems so slender as to be practically invisible to the eye, was a perfect fluttering cloud of smaller blossoms of the deepest cardinal red. Even in that still atmosphere they floated and trembled for all the world like a palpitating cloud of butterflies hovering over a cluster of lilies. Anything more chaste, more weird, and at the same time more bewilderingly beautiful, it would be impossible to imagine.

Frobisher jumped to his feet with a hoarse cry of delight. Little beads of perspiration stood on his sleek head. The man was quivering from head to foot

with intense excitement. With hesitating forefinger he touched the taut Manilla rope and it hummed like a harp-string, each strand drawn rigid with the moisture. And all the moths there leapt with a new, hovering life.

"The Cardinal Moth," Frobisher said hoarsely. "Hafid, it is the Cardinal Moth!"

Hafid came, from the darkness of the study with a cry something like Frobisher's, but it was a cry of terror. His brown face had turned to a ghastly, decayed green, those lovely flowers might have been a nest of cobras from the terror of his eye.

"Chop it up, destroy it, burn it!" he yelled. "Put it in the fire and scatter the ashes to the four winds. Trample on it, master; crush the flower to pieces. He is mad, he has forgotten that dreadful night in Stamboul!"

"Would you mind taking that tankard of iced water and pouring it over Hafid's head?" said Frobisher. "You silly, superstitious fool! The Stamboul affair was a mere coincidence. And so there was another Cardinal Moth besides my unfortunate plant all the time! Oh, the beauty, the gem, the auk amongst orchids! Where, where did you get it from?"

"It came from quite a small collection near London."

"The greedy ruffian! Fancy the man having a Cardinal Moth and keeping it to himself like that! The one I lost was a mere weed compared to this. Name your price, Paul, and if it is too high, Hafid and I will murder you between us and swear that you were a burglar shot in self-defence."

Lopez laughed noiselessly—a strange, unpleasant laugh.

"You would do it without the slightest hesitation," he said. "But the orchid is quite safe with you, seeing that the owner is dead, and that his secret was all his own. And the price is a small one."

"Ah, you are modest, friend Paul! Name it."

"You are merely to tell a lie and to stick to it. I am in trouble, in danger. And I hold that hanging is the worst use you can put a man to. If anything happens, I came here last night at ten o'clock. I stayed till nearly midnight. Hafid must remember the circumstances also."

"Hafid," Frobisher said slowly, "will forget or remember anything that I ask him to."

Hafid nodded with his eyes still fixed in fascinated horror on the palpitating, quivering, crimson floating over its bed of snow. He heard and understood, but only by instinct.

"I was at home all the evening, and her ladyship is away," said Frobisher. "I was expecting a mere commonplace rascal—not an artist like yourself, Paul—and the others had gone to bed. And you were here for the time you said. Is not that so, Hafid?"

"Oh, by the soul of my father, yes!" Hafid said in a frozen voice. "Take it and burn it, and scatter it. What my lord says is the truth. Take it and burn it, and scatter it."

"He'll be all right in the morning," Frobisher said. "Lopez, take the big steps and festoon that lovely new daughter of mine across the roof. You can fasten it to those hooks. To-morrow I will have an extra steam valve for her ladyship. Let me see—if she gets her bath of steam every night regularly she will require no more. Aphrodite, beautiful, your bath shall be remembered."

He kissed his fingers gaily to the trembling flowers now hooked across the roof. Already the loose Manilla rope was drying and hanging in baggy folds that made a more artistic foil for the quivering red moths. It was only when the steaming process was going on that the thin, strong ropes drew it up humming and taut as harp-strings.

"Ah, that is like a new planet in a blue sky!" Frobisher cried. "Lopez, I am obliged to you. Come again when I am less excited and I will suitably reward you. To-night I am *tête montêe*—I am not responsible for my actions. And the lie shall be told for you, a veritable *chef-d'oeuvre* amongst lies. Sit down, and the best shall not be good enough for you."

"I must go," Lopez said in the same even tones. "I have private business elsewhere. I drink nothing and I smoke nothing till business is finished. Good-night, prince of rascals, and fair dreams to you."

Lopez passed leisurely into the black throat of the library, Hafid following. Frobisher nodded and chuckled, not in the least displeased. He had not been so excited for years. The sight of those blossoms filled him with unspeakable pleasure. For their sakes he would have committed murder without the slightest hesitation. He had eyes for nothing else, ears deaf to everything. He heeded not the purr of the hall bell again, he was lost to his surroundings until Hafid shook him soundly.

"Count Lefroy to see you, and Mr. Manfred," he said. "I told them you were engaged, but they said that perhaps—"

Frobisher dropped into his chair with the air of a man satiated with a plethora of good things.

"Now what have I done to deserve all this beatitude!" he cried. "An unique find and a brother collector to triumph over, to watch, to prick with the needle of jealousy. But stop, I must worship alone to-night. Say that I shall particularly

desire to see them at luncheon to-morrow.”

CHAPTER II.

ANGELA.

Frobisher sat the following morning in the orchid-house chuckling to himself and waiting the advent of his two guests to luncheon. Heaven alone could follow the twists and turns of that cunning brain. Frobisher was working out one of his most brilliant schemes now. He took infinite pains to obtain by underground passages the things he might have obtained openly and easily. But there was the delight of puzzling other people.

He looked up presently, conscious of a presence beyond his own. In the dark Frobisher could always tell if anybody came into the room. He crooked his wicked head sideways with the air of a connoisseur, and in sooth there was good cause for his admiration. Here was something equal at least to his most beautiful and cherished orchids, a tall, graceful girl with shining brown hair, and eyes of the deepest, purest blue. Her complexion was like old ivory, and as pure, the nose a little short, perhaps, but the sweet mouth was full of strength and character.

”I came for the flowers that you promised me, Sir Clement,” she said.

”Call me uncle and you shall have the conservatory,” Frobisher grinned. ”I am your uncle by marriage, you know, and your guardian by law. Angela, you are looking lovely. With the exception of a peasant woman I once met in Maremma, you are the most beautiful creature I ever saw.”

Angela Lyne listened with absolute indifference. She was accustomed to be studied like this by Sir Clement Frobisher, whom she loathed and detested from the bottom of her heart. But Lady Frobisher was her aunt, and Frobisher her guardian for the next year, until she came of age, in fact.

”Give me the flowers,” she said. ”I am late as it is. I have sent my things on, for I shall dine with Lady Marchgrave after the concert, and come home alone. Hafid will let me in.”

”Better take a latchkey,” Frobisher suggested. ”There! Let me pin them in for you. I’ll show you an orchid when you have time to examine it that will move even you to admiration. But not now; she is too superb a creature for passing admiration. Now I think you will do.”

There was no question of Frobisher’s taste or his feeling for arranging flow-

ers. The blossoms looked superb and yet so natural as they lay on Angela's breast—white orchids shot with sulphur. They were the theme of admiration an hour later at Lady Marchgrave's charity concert; they gleamed again on Angela's corsage as she sat in the Grosvenor Square drawing-room at dinner. Five-and-twenty people sat round the long table with its shaded lights and feathery flowers. There were distinguished guests present, for Lady Marchgrave was by way of being intellectual, but Angela had eyes for one man only. He had come a little late, and had slipped quietly into a chair at the bottom of the table—a tall man with a strong face, not exactly handsome, but full of power. The clean-shaven lips were very firm, but when the newcomer smiled his face looked singularly young and sweet. Angela's dinner partner followed her glance with his eyes.

"If it isn't that beast Denvers," he muttered. "I thought he had been murdered in the wilds of Armenia or some such desirable spot. You ought to be glad, Angela."

"I am glad, Mr. Arnott," Angela said coldly. "Permit me to remind you again that I particularly dislike being called by my Christian name; at least, at present."

The little man with the hooked nose and the shifting, moist eye, put down his champagne glass savagely. For some deep, mysterious reason, Sir Clement favoured George Arnott's designs upon Angela, and if nothing interfered he was pretty sure to get his own way in the end. At present Angela was coldly disdainful; she little dreamt of the power and cunning of the man she was thwarting. She turned her head away, absently waiting for Lady Marchgrave's signal. There was a flutter and rustle of silken and lace draperies presently, and the chatter of high-bred voices floating from the hall. A good many people had already assembled in the suite of rooms beyond, for Lady Marchgrave's receptions were popular as well as fashionable. Angela wandered on until she came to the balcony overlooking the square. She leant over thoughtfully—her mind had gone back to such a night a year or so before.

"Mine is a crescent star to-night," a quiet voice behind her said. "I seemed to divine by instinct where you were. Angela, dear Angela, it is good to be with you again."

The girl's face flushed, her blue eyes were full of tenderness. Most people called her cold, but nobody could bring that accusation against her now. Her two hands went out to Harold Denvers, and he held them both. For a long while the brown eyes looked into the heavenly blue ones.

"Still the same?" Denvers asked. "Nobody has taken what should be my place, Angela?"

"Nobody has taken it, and nobody is ever likely to," Angela smiled. "There is supposed to be nothing between us; you refused to bind me, and you did not write or give me your address, but my heart is yours and you know it. And if you

changed I should never believe in anything again.”

”If I should change! Dear heart, is it likely? If you only knew what I felt when I caught sight of you to-night. My queen, my beautiful, white queen! If I could only claim you before all the world!”

Angela bent her head back behind the screen of a fluttering, silken curtain and kissed the speaker. He held her in his arms just for one blissful moment.

”It seems just the same,” he said, ”as if the clock had been put back a year, to that night when Sir Clement found us out. The son of the man whom he had ruined and his rich and lovely ward! There was a dramatic scene for you! But he only grinned in that diabolical way of his, and shortly after that mission to Armenia was offered to me. I never guessed then who procured it for me, but I know now as well as I know that Sir Clement never intended me to come back.”

”Harold! Do you really mean to say that—that—?”

”You hesitate, of course. It is not a pretty thing to say. Life is cheap out there, and if I was killed, what matter? Let us talk of other and more pleasant things.”

”Of your travels and adventures, for instance. Did you find any wonderful flowers, like you did, for instance, in Borneo, Harold? Where did you get that lovely orchid from?”

A single blossom flamed on the silk lapel of Denvers’ coat—a whitish bloom with a cloud of little flowers hovering over it like moths. It was the Cardinal Moth again.

”Unique, is it not?” Harold said. ”Thereby hangs a strange, romantic tale which would take too long to tell at present. What would Sir Clement give for it?”

”Let me have it before I go,” asked Angela, eagerly. ”I should like to show it to Sir Clement. He has some wonderful flower that he wants me to see, but I feel pretty sure that he has nothing like that. I shall decline to say where I got the bloom from.”

Denvers removed the exquisite bloom with its nodding scarlet moths and dexterously attached it to Angela’s own orchids. The thing might have been growing there.

”It seems strange to see that bloom on your innocent breast,” Harold said. ”It makes me feel quite creepy when I look at it. If you only knew the sin and misery and shame and crime that surrounds the Cardinal Moth you would hesitate to wear it.”

Angela smiled; she did not possess the imaginative vein.

”You shall tell me that another time,” she said. ”Meanwhile you seem to have dropped from the clouds.... Are your plans more promising for the future?”

”A little nebulous for the present,” Denvers admitted, ”though the next ex-

pedition, which is not connected with Sir Clement Frobisher, promises well for the future. There is a lot to be done, however, and I am likely to be in London for the next three weeks or so. And you?"

"We are here for the season, of course. My aunt is staying at Chaffers Court till Friday, hence the fact that I am here alone. If you are very good you shall take me as far as Piccadilly in a taxi. I must see a good deal of you, Hal, for I have been very lonely."

There was a pathetic little droop in Angela's voice. Harold drew her a little closer.

"I wish I could take you out of it, darling," he said. "For your sake, we must try and make the next venture a success. If we can only start the company fairly, I shall be able to reckon on a thousand a year. Do you think you could manage on that, Angela?"

"Yes, or on a great deal less," Angela smiled. "I could be happy with you anywhere. And you must not forget that I shall have a large fortune of my own some day."

Other people were drifting towards the cool air of the balcony now, George Arnott amongst the number. It was getting late, and Angela was tired. She whispered Harold to procure her a cab, and that she would say good-night to Lady Marchgrave and join him presently. The cab came, and so did the lights of Piccadilly all too soon. Denvers lingered on the steps just for a moment. He was going down to a big country house on Saturday for the week-end. Would Angela come if he could procure her an invitation? Angela's eyes replied for her. She was in the house at length by the aid of her latchkey. The dining-room door opened for a moment; there was a rattle of conversation and the smell of Egyptian cigarettes. Evidently Sir Clement was giving one of his famous impromptu dinner-parties. Angela took the spray of orchids from her breast and passed hurriedly in the direction of the orchid-house. The bloom would keep best there, she thought.

As she passed along the corridor the figure of a man preceded her. The stranger crept along, looking furtively to the right and the left. From his every gesture he was doing wrong here. Then he darted for the orchid-house and Angela followed directly she had recovered herself. She would corner the man in the conservatory and demand his business. In the conservatory Angela looked about her. The man had vanished.

He had utterly gone—he was nowhere to be seen. Angela rubbed her eyes in amazement. There was no other way out of the conservatory. She stood there with the Cardinal Moth in her hand, aware now that she was looking into the scared face of Hafid.

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," he said in a dazed kind of way. "Take it

and burn it at once. Dear lady, will you go to bed? Take it and burn it—my head is all hot and confused. Dear lady, do not stay here, the place is accursed. By the Prophet, I wish I had never been born.”

CHAPTER III. CROSSED SWORDS.

Hafid came into the library and pulled to the big bronze gates of the orchid-house like the portals of a floral paradise. There were flowers here: stephanotis climbing round the carved mantel, ropes of orchids dangling from the electroliers, in one corner a mass of maiden-hair fern draped the wall. Even the pictures in their Florentine frames were roped with blossoms.

Frobisher glanced beyond the carved and twisted gates with a peculiar smile after Angela had departed. His luncheon guests were late. He looked more like a mischievous bird than usual. There was an air of pleased anticipation about him as of a man who is going to witness a brilliant comedy.

There came to him a tall man with a heavy moustache and an unmistakable military swagger. If Frobisher resembled a parrot, Lefroy was most unmistakably a hawk. He passed in society generally as a cavalry officer high in favour of his Majesty the Shan of Ganistan; more than one brilliant expedition against the hill-tribes had been led by him. But some of the hill-men could have told another tale.

”Well, Lefroy,” Frobisher exclaimed, genially. ”This is a pleasure, a greater pleasure than you are aware of. Mr. Manfred, take a seat.”

Lefroy’s secretary bowed and sank into a deep chair. His face was absolutely devoid of emotion, a blank wall of whiteness with two eyes as expressionless as shuttered windows. Most people were disposed to regard Manfred as an absolute fool. The hill-men at the back of Ganistan muttered in their beards that he was, if possible, worse than his master.

Lefroy reached for a cigar, lighted it, and looked around him. The white-faced Manfred seemed to have lapsed into a kind of waking sleep. A more utter indifference to his surroundings it would be hard to imagine. Yet he was a kind of intellectual camera. He had never been in Frobisher’s library before. But a year hence he could have entered it in the dark and found his way to any part of the room with absolute certainty.

"I came to see you over that central Koordstan Railway business," Lefroy said.

"Precisely," Frobisher smiled. "I might have guessed it. As an Englishman—though you have so picturesque a name—you are anxious that England should receive the concessions. In fact, you have already promised it to our Government."

Lefroy made a motion as who should move a piece on a chess-board.

"That is one to you," he said. "Yes, you are quite right. Whereas you?"

"Whereas I am interested on behalf of the Russian Government. I tried our people here two years ago, but they refused to have anything to do with me."

"Refused to trust you, in point of fact."

Frobisher laughed noiselessly. The wrinkled cunning of his face and the noble expanse of his forehead looked strange together.

"Quite right," he said. "They refused to trust me. Any man who knows my record would be a fool to do so. But in that instance I was perfectly loyal, because it was my interest to be so. Still I bowed with chastened resignation and—immediately offered my services to Russia. Then you slipped in and spoilt my little game."

"There is half a million hanging to the thing, my dear fellow."

"Well, well! But you have not won yet. You can do nothing till you have won the Shan of Koordstan to your side. Whichever way he throws his influence the concession goes. And He of Koordstan and myself are very friendly. He dines here to-night."

Lefroy started slightly. He glanced at Frobisher keenly under his shaggy brows. The latter lay back smoking his filthy clay with dreamy ecstasy.

"Yes," he went on, "He dines here to-night to see my orchids. My dear fellow, if you and Manfred will join us, I shall be delighted."

Lefroy muttered something that sounded like acceptance. Manfred came out of his waking dream, nodded, and slipped back into conscious unconsciousness again.

"That picturesque and slightly drunken young rascal has a passion for orchids," said Frobisher. "It is the one redeeming point in his character. But you know that, of course. You haven't forgotten the great coup so nearly made with the Cardinal Moth."

"The plant that was burnt at Ochiri," Lefroy said uneasily.

"The same. What a wax the old man was in, to be sure! Ah, my dear Lefroy, we shall never, never see a Cardinal Moth again!"

"If I could," Lefroy said hoarsely. "Your chances with the Shan of Koordstan wouldn't be worth a rap. With that orchid I could buy the man body and soul. And the plant that was stolen from us at Turin is dead long ago. It must be, such

a find as that couldn't possibly have been kept quiet."

"I'll bet you a thousand pounds that orchid is alive," Frobisher said dryly.

Lefroy sat up straight as a ramrod. The waxed ends of his big moustache quivered. He turned to Manfred, anxiety, anger, passion, blazing like a brief torch in his eyes. Manfred seemed to divine rather than know that he was under that black battery, and shook his head.

"I fail to see the point of the joke," Lefroy said.

Frobisher signed to Hafid to throw back the gates. Lefroy was on his feet by this time. He breathed like one who has run fast and far. Manfred followed him with the air of a man who is utterly without hope or expectation.

"There!" Frobisher cried with a flourish of his hand. "What is that you see beyond the third tier of ropes? Ah, my beauty, here comes another lover for you!"

Lefroy's black eyes were turned up towards the high dome of the orchid-house. Other tangled ropes and loops of blossoms met his gaze and held it as he glanced in the direction indicated by Frobisher. And there, high up above them all he could see the long, foamy, pink mass of blooms with the red moths dancing and hovering about them like things of life.

"The Cardinal Moth," he screamed. "Manfred, Manfred, curse you!"

He wheeled suddenly round in a whirl of delirious passion, and struck Manfred a violent blow in the mouth. The secretary staggered back, a thin stream of blood spurted from his split lip. But he said nothing, manifested no feeling or emotion of any kind. With a handkerchief he staunched the flow with the automatic action of a marionette.

"The Cardinal Moth," Frobisher said as genially as if nothing had happened. "The gem has but recently come into my possession. It will be a pleasant surprise for our friend the Shan to-night."

Just for an instant it looked as if Lefroy were about to transfer his spleen from Manfred to his host. But Frobisher had been told enough already. The cowardly blow said as plainly as words could speak that Frobisher had obtained the very treasure that Lefroy was after. He imagined that his secretary had played him false. And, moreover, he knew that Frobisher knew this.

"You've got it," he said. He seemed to have a difficulty in swallowing something. "But you could not bring yourself to part with it. You couldn't do it."

"My good Lefroy, every man has his price, even you and I. My beloved Moth may not be a very good trap, but I shall find it a wonderfully efficient bait."

"I dare say," Lefroy returned moodily. "Can I examine the flower closer?"

"Certainly. Hafid, bring the extending steps this way. Be careful of those ropes and tangles. An active man like you could climb up the stays and bracket to the roof."

Lefroy was a long time examining the flower. He was torn by envy and

admiration. When he came down again his face was pale and his hands trembled.

"The real thing," he said, "the real, palpitating, beautiful thing. But there is blood upon it."

"Born in blood and watered with the stream of life. No, I am not going to tell you where I got it from. And now, my dear Lefroy, what will you take for your Koordstan concessions?"

Lefroy said nothing, but there was a gleam in his downcast eyes. Then presently he broke into a laugh that jarred on the decorous silence of the place.

"The game is yours," he said. "White to play and mate in three moves. Still there may be a way out. And, on the other hand, you must be very sure of your game to show me that. Lord, I'd give twopence to have you alone in a dark corner!"

He rose abruptly, turned on his heel, and made for the door, followed by the white automaton with the bleeding lip. He could hear Frobisher's diabolical chuckle as the big bronze gates closed behind him. It was perhaps the most silent meal ever partaken of at Frobisher's. He was glad at length to see the last of his luncheon guests.

Once in the streets Lefroy's manner changed. He looked uneasy and downcast.

"I'm sorry I hit you, Manfred," he said. "But when I caught sight of that infernal plant I felt sure that you had sold me. But even you couldn't have carried the thing off quite so coolly as that. And yet—and yet there can't be two Cardinal Moths in existence."

"There are not," Manfred said impatiently. "That is the same one I hoped to have had in my possession to-night. Didn't Frobisher say it had recently fallen into his hands?"

"I recollect that now. Manfred, I'm done. And yet I regarded it as a certainty."

"You were a great fool to strike me just now," said Manfred, thoughtfully, and without resentment. "Why? Because the blow told Frobisher that he had gained possession of the very thing you were after. It was as good as telling him that you thought I had betrayed you. To-night when the Shan dines——"

Lefroy grasped Manfred's arm with crushing force.

"He isn't going to dine with Frobisher to-night," he whispered. "We shall dine there, but his Majesty will be unfortunately detained owing to sudden indisposition. In other words, he will be too drunk to leave his hotel. Let's go into your lodgings and have a brandy and soda. I've got a plan ready. There is just a chance yet that I may succeed."

Manfred let himself into a house just off Brook Street. In a modest room upstairs, a box of cigars, some spirits, together with a silver jug of water, and

a box of sparklets were put out. On the round table lay an early edition of an evening paper that Manfred opened somewhat eagerly for him. He glanced over a late advertisement in the personal column and shook his head.

"It is as I thought," he said. "See here. 'The butterflies have gone away and cannot be found. My poor friend has broken his neck and I have gone on a journey'—That is addressed to me, Lefroy. It is a message from my man that somebody has stolen the Cardinal Moth, and that my man's confederate has met with a fatal accident. Also it seems likely that there will be a fuss over the business, so that my correspondent has gone somewhere out of the way. We will look for some account of the tragedy presently; it is sure to be in this paper. Now tell me what you propose to do."

Lefroy poured a brandy and soda down his throat without a single movement of his larynx.

"I'm in a devil of a mess," he said frankly. "I made certain of getting the Cardinal Moth."

"So did I. But that is a detail. Go on."

"I wanted money badly. The concession seemed to be as good as mine. With the Moth as a bribe for the Shan it would have been all Lombard Street to a green gooseberry. So I lodged the charter with a notorious money-lending Jew in Fenchurch Street, and got twenty thousand pounds on account."

"My dear Lefroy, you hadn't got the concession to lodge!"

"No, but I had the man's letters, and I had the draft contract. So I forged the Charter, hoping to exchange it for a more broad and liberal one later on, and there you are!"

"And where will you be if you stay in the country forty-eight hours longer?"

"I understand," Lefroy said grimly. "But there is a chance yet. The Shan does not go to Frobisher's dinner this evening and we do. You are suddenly indisposed and sit out. At a given signal I make a diversion. Then you hurry into that orchid-house and steal the flower."

"The thing is absolutely impossible, my dear fellow!"

"Not at all. There is a much smaller Moth growing side by side with the larger one. I found that out to-night. You have only to snap off a small piece of cork and unwind the stems. Then you hurry off to my place with it and put it amongst my orchids. The old man does not expect anything beyond a small plant; those we had before were babies compared to the one yonder. Then we get the Shan round the next day and give him the vegetable. I shall have the concession ready. And it's any money Frobisher never knows how he has been done."

"I'll make the attempt if you like," Manfred said without emotion. "We can discuss the details in the morning. And now let me see what happened to my

man. There is sure to be an account in this paper.”

Manfred came upon it at length:

”Mysterious Occurrence in Streatham.

”Yesterday evening Thomas Silverthorne, caretaker at Lennox Nursery, Streatham, was aroused by hearing a noise in the greenhouse attached to the house. Silverthorne had not gone to bed; indeed, only a few hours before his employer had died, leaving him alone in the house. On entering the greenhouse the caretaker discovered the body of a man lying on the floor quite dead. Silverthorne thinks that it was the dull thud of the body that aroused him. Some plants in the roof had been pulled down—rare orchids, according to Silverthorne, who, however, is no gardener—but there was no means to show how the unfortunate man got there, as there is no exit from the greenhouse to the garden. The man was quite dead, and subsequent medical examination showed that he had been strangled by a coarse cloth twisted tightly round his throat; indeed, the marks on the hempen-cloth were plainly to be seen. An inquest will be held to-morrow.”

”Well, what do you think of it?” Lefroy asked.

Manfred pitched the paper aside in a sudden flame of unreasoning passion.

”Accursed thing!” he cried. ”It is the curse that follows the pursuit of the Cardinal Moth. It is ever the same, always blood, blood. If I had my way—”

”Drop it,” Lefroy said sternly. ”Remember what you have got to do.”

Manfred grew suddenly hard and wooden again.

”I have passed my word,” he said. ”And it shall be done, though I would rather burn my hand off first.”

CHAPTER IV. A DUSKY POTENTATE.

A very late breakfast, past two o'clock, in fact, was laid out in one of the private sitting-rooms of Gardner's hotel that self-same afternoon. Gardner's only catered for foreign princes and ambassadors and people of that kind, the place was filled with a decorous silence, the servants in their quiet liveries gave a suggestion of a funeral of some distinguished personage, and that the body had not long left the premises. But despite the fact, some queer people patronised Gardner's from time to time, and His Highness the Shan of Koordstan was not the least brilliant in that line.

It was nearer three when he pushed his plate away and signified to the servant that he had finished his breakfast. A morsel of toast and caviare assisted by a glass of brandy and soda-water is not a meal suggestive of abstemious habits, and, indeed, the Shan of Koordstan by no means erred in that direction.

He looked older than his years, and had it not been for his dusky complexion and yellow eyes, might have passed for a European of swarthy type. His features were quite regular and fairly handsome; he was dressed in the most correct Bond Street fashion, the cigarette he held between his shaky fingers might have come from any first-class club.

"I've got a devil of a head," he said, as the servant softly crept away with the tray. "I shall have to drop that old Cambridge set. I can't stand their ways. If anybody comes I am out, at least out to everybody besides Mr. Harold Denvers; you understand."

The servant bowed and retired. He came back presently with a card on a salver, and he of Koordstan gave a careless nod of assent. The next moment Harold Denvers came into the room. He sniffed at the mingled odour of brandy and cigarette smoke, and smiled. Koordstan was watching him with those eyes that never rested. Their side gleam and the hard set of the grinning mouth showed that a tiger was concealed there under a thin veneer of Western civilisation.

"You've got back again, Denvers," he said. "'Pon my word, you're devilish lucky. They had quite meant to put you out of the way this time."

"Your Highness is alluding to Sir Clement Frobisher, of course," Harold said.

Koordstan crossed over to an alcove and pushed the curtain back. Beyond was a small conservatory filled with choice orchids. They were a passion with him as with Frobisher. One of his chief reasons for coming to Gardner's was because it was possible to fill the small conservatory with a selection of his favourites. The atmosphere was damp and oppressive, but the Shan seemed to revel in it.

"That's about the size of it," he said. "Frobisher found out that you were *épris* of his lovely ward, and he had other views for her. The young lady has a will of her own, I understand."

"If you could see your way," Harold murmured, "to leave Miss Lyne out of the discussion—"

"My dear chap, I have not the slightest intention of erring against good taste. I like you, and out of all the men I come in contact with, you are the only honest man of the lot. Now I have stated why you were to be got out of the way I can proceed. Can't you see that there is somebody else who is your mortal enemy besides Frobisher?"

"I cannot call any one particularly to mind at present."

"Oh, you are blind!" Koordstan cried. "What about George Arnott? Now I know that, like a great many people, you regard Arnott as a fool. He has the laugh of a jackass, with the silly face of a cow. But behind the mooncalf countenance of his and that watery eye is a fine brain, and no heart or conscience. He and Frobisher are hand in glove together: they have some fine scheme afloat. And the price of Arnott's alliance is the hand of a certain lady, who shall be nameless."

"Do you mean that Arnott, when I went out to Armenia, actually—"

"Actually! Yes, that is the word. I shall be able to prove it when the time comes. And now you have come about those concessions that I was to consider with a view—"

"Begging your pardon—the concessions which your Highness has promised to my company."

"Drop that polite rot, old chap," Koordstan said, with engaging frankness. "You speak like that, but you regard me as a sorry ass who is building his own grave with empty brandy bottles. *Entre nous*, I did promise you those concessions, but you can't have them."

Harold knew his man too well to rage and storm or show his anger. He had counted on this matter. He had seen his way through dangers and perils of the fertile valleys of Koordstan and a fortune and perhaps fame behind. The hard grin on the face of the Shan relaxed a little.

"I'll tell you how it is," he said. "You know a lot about my people and what a superstitious gang they are. And you have heard the history of the Blue Stone of Ghan. As a matter of fact it's a precious big ruby, and is a talisman that every Shan of Koordstan is never supposed to be without. Now if I sold that stone or gave it away, what would happen to me when I got home?"

"They would tear you to pieces and burn your body afterwards."

"Precisely. Now that is a pretty way to treat a gentleman who merely has the misfortune to be hard up. And I have been most infernally hard up lately, owing to my unlucky speculations and those tribe troubles. Can't get in the taxes, you know. So the long and short of it is, that I pledged the Blue Stone."

Harold started. The statement did not convey much to the Western ears generally, but Denvers realised the true state of the case. The Shan was not a popular monarch; he was too European and absentee for that, and if the fact came out the priests would ruin him.

"That was a most reckless thing to do," Harold said.

"It was acting the goat, wasn't it?" Koordstan said carelessly, as he pared his long nails. "There was a new orchid or something that I had to buy. Sooner or later I shall recover the Blue Stone. But unfortunately for you, Lefroy and his set are after those concessions, and in some way Lefroy has discovered that the precious old jewel is no longer in my possession."

"So that is the way in which he is putting the pressure on you?"

"That's it," the Shan said with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Mind you, he is too good a diplomat to say out and out that he has made that important discovery. The Blue Stone is engraved on one side, and that side is used as a seal for sealing important state documents. Lefroy is desolate, but his people will do nothing until they get from me a wax impression of the seal; he told me that here. And he smiled. It was very near to the last time he smiled at anybody. If we had not been in London!"

Koordstan checked himself and paced up and down the small conservatory as like a caged tiger as a human being could be.

"Your answer to that was easy," Harold said. "You might have declined on the grounds that it would have been too easy to forge a die from that waxen impression."

"Good Lord, and I never thought of it!" Koordstan cried. "By Jove, that opens up a fine field for me! But it will take time. In the meantime a smiling face and a few of those previous subterfuges that men for want of a better name call diplomacy. You shall have your concessions yet."

Harold muttered something that might have been thanks, but he had his doubts. The Shan was favourably disposed towards him, but he would not have trusted the latter a yard so far as money was concerned. But there was another and better card yet to play.

"I have not forgotten your promise," he said. "When I showed you the Cardinal Moth."

"Afterwards subsequently destroyed. Ah, that we shall never see again. If you could give me that, you could make any terms with me. By heaven, I would have all Koordstan back at my feet if I could show them the 'Moth'! Denvers, you don't mean to say that you have come here with the information——"

He paused as if breath had suddenly failed him. The yellow face was quite ashy.

"Indeed I have," Harold said quietly. "That was one of the reasons why I came home. I got scent of the thing on the far side of the Ural mountains. My adventures would fill a big book. But I came home with the 'Moth' packed up in a quarter-pound tin of navy cut tobacco."

"You have kept this entirely to yourself?" the Shan asked hoarsely.

"Well, rather. I meant to have brought you a bloom as a guarantee of good faith. The plant is at present hidden away in the obscure conservatory at a nursery in the suburbs. If you would like——"

Harold paused as a soft-footed servant came in with a card on a tray. The Shan glanced at it and grinned.

"Tell him to come again in half an hour," he said. "Denvers, you had better

depart by the Green Street door; it's Lefroy, and it would be as well for him not to know that you had been here. Go on."

"If you would like to see the 'Moth' I can make arrangements for you to do so. Only not one word of this to anybody. We can steal away down to Streatham and—"

Koordstan bounced to his feet, anger and disappointment lived on his face.

"Streatham, did you say!" he cried. "There seems to be witchery about the business. Don't tell me that you left the plant in care of a man called—"

The Shan grabbed for an early edition of an evening paper which fluttered in his hand like a leaf in a breeze. He found what he wanted presently and began to read half aloud.

"Yesterday evening Thomas Silverthorne, caretaker at the Lennox Nursery, Streatham— Look here, Denvers, read it for yourself. At the Lennox nursery a man was found dead, murdered by having a rope placed round his neck, and held there till he was strangled. Silverthorne says there was a rare orchid or two in the house, and that one of them had been pulled down and probably stolen. Now if you tell me that your 'Moth' was placed there, I shall want to murder you."

Harold rose, his face was disturbed and uneasy.

"It is as you imagine," he said. "I did place the 'Moth' there the night before last. And I would have taken my oath that nobody knew that the plant was in England, I'll go to Streatham at once; I'll get to the bottom of this strange mystery."

"Count Lefroy is sorry," murmured the soft-footed servant, as he looked in, "but he hopes your Highness will see him now as he can wait no longer."

CHAPTER V.

AN INTERRUPTED FEAST.

To Frobisher's *pêtit dîner* the same evening of that eventful day ostensibly to meet the Shan of Koordstan, Lefroy came large and flamboyant, with a vivid riband across his dazzling expanse of shirt and a jewelled collar under his tie. There was an extra gloss on his black moustache, his swagger was a little more pronounced than usual. He looked like what he was—a strong man weighed down by not too many scruples.

There were less than a dozen men altogether, a couple of well-known mem-

bers of the Travellers', a popular K.C., and a keen, hatchet-faced judge with a quiet manner and a marvellous faculty for telling dialect stories. The inevitable politician and fashionable doctor completed the party. As Lefroy and his secretary entered the drawing-room most of the men were admiring a portfolio of Morland's drawings that Frobisher had picked up lately.

Hafid stepped noiselessly across the floor with a telegram on a salver. Frobisher read it without the slightest sign of annoyance.

"The Shan is not coming," he said. "Koordstan is indisposed."

"So I gathered when I called professionally this afternoon," Dr. Brownsmith said dryly.

"Champagne," Frobisher laughed whole-heartedly. "All right, Sir James. I won't question you too far. So white is not going to mate in three moves this evening, Lefroy?"

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders carelessly. The Shan of Koordstan was safe for the present. He had seen to that. Manfred had dropped quietly into a chair with just the suggestion of pain on his face. A smooth-voiced butler announced that dinner was served.

"Where does Frobisher get his servants from, Jessop?" Sir James Brownsmith asked the judge, as the two strolled across the hall together. "Now there's a model of a butler for you. His voice has a flavour of old, nutty sherry about it. By Jove, what are those flowers?"

There were flowers everywhere, mostly arranged by Frobisher himself. In the centre was a rough handful of green twigs bound together with a silver cord, and the whole surmounted by a coil of the pinky-white orchid with its fringe of trembling red moths.

"Orchids," said the politician. "Something fresh, Frobisher? What do you call it?"

"The specimen is not named at present," Lefroy said meaningly.

Frobisher glanced at the speaker and smiled.

"Lefroy is quite right," he said. "The specimen lacks a name. It came in the first place from Koordstan, and there were three spines of the original plant. It is a freak, there never was anything like it before, and there will probably never be one like it again. That self-same orchid was very near to being the price of a kingdom once upon a time."

"Only it is unfortunately impossible to tell the story," Lefroy remarked.

Once again Frobisher glanced at the speaker and smiled. Most of the guests by this time were busy over their soup. They were not the class of men to waste valuable sentiment over flowers. It was only Frobisher who glanced from time to time lovingly at the Cardinal Moth. Manfred seemed to avoid it altogether. He sat at the table eating nothing and obviously out of sorts with his food.

"I've a bilious headache, Sir Clement," he explained. "The mere sight of food and smell of cooking makes me sick to the soul. Would you mind if I sat in the drawing-room in the dark for a little time? I am confident that the attack will pass off presently."

"Anything you please, my dear fellow," Frobisher cried hospitably. "A strong cup of tea! A glass of champagne and a dry biscuit? No? If you ring the bell Hafid will attend to you."

Hafid salaamed as he dexterously caught a meaning glance from Frobisher. Lefroy brutally proclaimed aloud that a good dinner was utterly wasted upon Manfred. Brownsmith with his mouth full of aspic was understood to say something anent the virtues of bromide. So the dinner proceeded with pink lakes of light on the table, the flowers and the cut glass and quaint silver. And there were blossoms, blossoms everywhere, thousands of them. Frobisher might have been a great scoundrel—that he was a man of exquisite taste was beyond question. The elaborate dinner dragged smoothly along, two hours passed, a silver chime proclaimed eleven o'clock.

The cloth was drawn at length, as the host's whim was, the decanters and glittering glass stood on a brown glistening lake of polished oak, with here and there a dash of fruit to give a more vivid touch of colour. Hafid handed round a silver cigarette-box, a cedar cigar cabinet on wheels was pushed along the table. Over the shaded electric lights a blue wrack of smoke hung. The silver chime struck twelve.

"Hafid; you have made Mr. Manfred comfortable?" Frobisher asked.

Hafid replied that he had done all that a man could do. Mr. Manfred was reclining in the dark near an open window. All the other servants but himself had retired. The butler had seen that everything necessary was laid out in the smoking-room.

"Always send the servants to bed as soon as possible," Frobisher explained. "What with the spread of modern journalism, I find it necessary. You never know nowadays how far one's butler is interested in the same stock that you are deeply dipped in. And a long-eared footman has changed the course of diplomacy before now."

"If everybody pursued the same policy, George," Baron Jessop murmured, "I and my learned friends of the Bench would have more or less of a sinecure."

"And Lord Saltaur, yonder would not have lost a beautiful wife," Lefroy said loudly.

A sudden hush seemed to smite the table. Lord Saltaur whitened to his lips under his tan; his long, lean hands gripped the edge of the table passionately. His own domestic scandal had been so new, so painful, that the whole party stood aghast at the brutality of the insult.

"Frobisher," Saltaur said, hoarsely. "It is not pleasant to be insulted by a blackguard—"

"What was that word?" Lefroy asked quite sweetly. "My hearing may be a trifle deficient, but I fancied his lordship said something about a blackguard."

Frobisher interfered as in duty bound. As a matter of fact he was enjoying the situation. Lefroy had drunk deeply, but then he had seen Lefroy's amazing prowess in that direction too many times for any fears as to his ultimate equilibrium. No, Lefroy was playing some deep game. As yet only the first card had been laid upon the table.

"I think that the apology lies with you, Count," Frobisher said tentatively.

"A mere jest," Lefroy said, airily. "*A jeu d'esprit*. Lord Saltaur's wife."

"You hound!" Saltaur cried passionately. "Whatever I have been, you might leave the name of a pure woman out of your filthy conversation. If you don't apologise at once, I'll thrust your words down your throat for you."

A contemptuous reply came from Lefroy. There was a flash of crystal and a glass shattered on the Count's dark face, leaving a star-shaped wound on his cheek. A moment later and he and Saltaur were struggling together like wild animals. Frobisher had so far forgotten himself as to lean back in his chair as if this were a mere exhibition got up for his entertainment.

"Is this part of the evening's amusement, Sir Clement?" the judge asked coldly.

Frobisher realised his responsibilities with a sigh for his interrupted pleasure. His civilisation was the thinnest possible veneer, a shoddy thing like Tottenham Court Road furniture.

"Come, you chaps must drop it," he cried. "I can't have you fighting over my Smyrna carpet. Saltaur, you shall have your apology. Lefroy, do you hear me?"

Strong arms interfered, and the two men were dragged apart. Lefroy's teeth glistened in a ghastly grin; there was a speck of blood on his white shirt front. Saltaur's laboured breathing could be heard all over the room.

"I take you all to witness that it was no seeking of mine," he cried. "I was foully insulted. In a few days all the world will know that I have been made the victim of a discharged servant's perjury. Frobisher, I am still waiting for my apology."

Lefroy paused and passed his handkerchief across his face. He seemed to have wiped the leering expression from it. He looked a perfect picture of puzzled bewilderment.

"What have I done?" he asked. "What on earth have I said?"

"Beautiful," Frobisher murmured. "Artistic to a fault. What is he driving at?"

Baron Jessop explained clearly and judiciously. He was glad to have an opportunity of doing so. Viewing the thing dispassionately, he was bound to say that Count Lefroy had been guilty of a grave breach of good taste. But he was quite sure that under the circumstances—

"On my honour, I haven't the slightest recollection of it," Lefroy cried. "If there is one lady of my acquaintance I honour and respect it is Lady — the charming woman whom Lord Saltaur calls his wife. A sudden fit of mental aberration, my lord. An old wound in the head followed by a spell in the sunshine. This is the third time the thing has happened. The last time in Serbia nearly cost me my life. My dear Saltaur, I am sorry from the bottom of my heart."

"Funniest case I ever heard of," the puzzled Saltaur murmured. "All the same, I'm deuced sorry I threw that wine glass at you."

"Oh, so you chucked a wine glass at me! Laid my cheek open, too. Well, I should have done exactly the same thing under the same circumstances. From this night I touch nothing stronger than claret. If I'd stuck to that, this wouldn't have happened."

The good-humoured Saltaur muttered something in reply, the threads of the dropped conversation were taken up again. Hafid, who had watched the sudden quarrel with Oriental indifference, had gone off to the conservatory for hot water to bathe Lefroy's damaged face. There was just a lull for a moment in the conversation, a sudden silence, and then the smash of a crystal vessel on a tiled floor and a strangled cry of terror from Hafid. He came headlong into the room, his eyes starting, his whole frame quivering with an ungovernable terror.

"Mr. Manfred," he yelled. "Lying on the floor in the conservatory, dead. Take it and burn it, and destroy it. Take it and burn it, and destroy it. Take it——"

Frobisher pounced upon the wailing speaker and clutched him by the throat. As the first hoarse words came from Hafid the rest of the party had rushed headlong into the orchid-house. Frobisher shook his servant like a reed is shaken by a storm.

"Silence, you fool!" he whispered. "You didn't kill the man, and I didn't kill the man. If he is dead he has not been murdered. And it is no fault of yours."

"Allah knows better," Hafid muttered, sulkily. "You didn't kill him, and I didn't kill him, but he is dead, and Allah will punish the guilty. Take it and burn it, and——"

"Idiot! Son of a pig, be silent. And mind, you are to know nothing. You went to get the hot water from the orchid-house and saw Mr. Manfred lying there. As soon as you did so you rushed in to tell us. Now come along."

The limp body of Manfred had been partly raised, and his head rested on Sir James Brownsmith's knee. The others stood waiting for the verdict.

"The fellow is dead," the great doctor said. "Murdered, I should say, un-

doubtedly. He has been strangled by a coarse cloth twisted about his throat—precisely the same way as that poor fellow was murdered at Streatham the night before last.”

A solemn silence fell upon the group. Hafid stood behind, his lips moving in silent speech:

”Take it and burn it, and destroy it. Take it and burn it, and destroy it, for there is blood upon it now and ever.”

The drama was none the less moving because of its decorous silence. The great surgeon knelt on the white marble floor of the orchid-house with Manfred’s head on his knee. Though Sir James Brownsmith’s hand was quite steady, his face was white as his own hair, or the face of the dead man staring dumbly up to the tangle of ropes and blossoms overhead. There the Cardinal Moth was dancing and quivering as if exulting over the crime. A long trail of it had broken away, and one tiny cloud of blossom danced near the surgeon’s ear, as if trying to tell him the tragedy and its story.

”A ghastly business,” the judge murmured. ”How did the murderer get in here?”

”How did he get out?” Frobisher suggested. ”There is no exit from here at all. All the servants have been in bed long ago, and the front door is generally secured, at least the latch is always down.”

”But what brought poor Manfred in here?” Saltaur asked. ”I understood from Hafid that he was lying down in the drawing-room. Oh, Hafid! Wake up, man!”

”Take it and burn it, and destroy it,” Hafid said mechanically.

Frobisher shook him savagely, shook the dreamy horror off him like a garment. He was sorry, he said, but he could tell the excellent company nothing. A quarter of an hour before and Mr. Manfred had appeared to be asleep on the drawing-room sofa. Hafid had asked him if he needed anything, and he had made no reply.

”Very strange,” Sir James murmured, still diagnosing the cruel stranded pattern about the dead man’s throat. ”Perhaps Count Lefroy—where is the Count?”

”He went back into the dining-room,” said Saltaur.

Frobisher brought his teeth together with a click. For the moment he had quite forgotten Count Lefroy. He passed from the library and into the dining-room. Lefroy stood by the great shining table close against the fluttering pyramid of red moths, a thin-bladed knife in his hands.

”And what might you be doing?” Frobisher asked softly.

Lefroy smiled somewhat bitterly. He was perfectly self-possessed with the grip of the man who knows how to hold himself in hand. And he smiled none the less easily because there was murder raging in his heart.

"I am cutting my nails," he said.

"Oh, I'll cut your claws for you!" Frobisher said. "Don't do that, what will your manicure artist say? And a social superiority (feminine) tells me that you have the finest hand of any man in London. You are unhinged, my dear Count. This little affair—"

"This cold-blooded murder you mean. Oh, you scoundrel!"

Lefroy had dropped the mask for a moment. There was contempt, loathing, horror in the last few words. Frobisher, counting the nodding swarm of crimson moths, merely smiled.

"Twenty-seven, thirty-one, thirty-nine," he said. "You haven't stolen any of my flowers yet. Not a bad idea of yours to purloin a cluster, and send it to our tin Solomon yonder, as an earnest of good intentions later on. And why do you call me scoundrel?"

"You are the most infernal villain that ever breathed."

"Well, perhaps I am. It is very good of you to admit my superior claims, dear Lefroy. But I am getting old, and you may live to take my place some day. Why—"

"Why did you kill Manfred?"

"My dear fellow, I didn't kill Manfred. You think he has been murdered in the ordinary sense of the word. Manfred has not been murdered, and nobody will ever be hanged for the crime. That you may take my word for. It is the vengeance of the Crimson Moth, death by visitation of God; call it what you will. And it might have been yourself."

Frobisher's whole manner had changed, his eyes were gleaming evilly as he hissed the last words warningly in Lefroy's ear. The latter changed colour slightly.

"I don't understand what you mean," he stammered.

"And yet you are not usually slow at understanding. I repeat that it might have been yourself. If you had attempted the raid of the Cardinal Moth, instead of Manfred, you would have been lying at the present moment with your head on Brownsmith's knees, and the mark of the beast about your throat."

"And if I tell those fellows yonder what you say?"

"You are at liberty to say anything you please. But you are not going to say anything, my dear Lefroy; you are too fine a player for that. You are going to wait patiently for your next innings. Come back to the others. And perhaps I had better lock this door."

Lefroy, like a wise man, accepted the inevitable. But the rest of the party were no longer in the orchid-house. They had carried the dead man to the back dining-room, where they had laid him out on a couch. Frobisher rang up the nearest police-station on the telephone with the request that an inspector should

be sent for at once.

"By gad, this is a dreadful thing, don't you know!" Saltaur said with a shudder. "Fancy that poor fellow being murdered whilst we were wrangling in the dining-room. I suppose there is no doubt that it is murder, doctor?"

"Not the shadow of a doubt about it," Sir James replied. "Poor Manfred must have been admiring the flowers when the assassin stepped behind him and threw that coarse cloth over his head. A knee could be inserted on his spine, and the head forced backwards. The cloth must have been twisted with tremendous force. It is quite a novel kind of murder for England."

"Oh, then you have heard of something of the same kind before?" Frobisher asked.

"In India, frequently. I had a chance to examine more than one victim of Thuggee, yonder. You remember what a scourge Thugism used to be in India some years ago. A Thug killed Manfred, I have not the slightest doubt about it."

"But there are no Thugs in England," the judge protested.

"My dear fellow, I have had an unfortunate demonstration to the contrary. And this crime is not necessarily the work of a native. Thuggee is not dead in India yet, and some white scoundrel might have learnt the trick. Your own servant, Hafid—"

"A robust bluebottle would make a formidable antagonist for Hafid," Frobisher interrupted. "Hafid, somebody is ringing the bell. If it's a policeman, ask him in."

Inspector Townsend came in, small, quiet, soft of manner, and undoubtedly dressed in Bond Street. He listened gravely to all that Frobisher and Brownsmith had to say, and then he asked permission to view the body, and subsequently examine the premises.

A close search of the house only served to deepen the mystery. All the servants slept on the top floor, and that part of the house was bolted off every night after the domestic staff had retired. This was a whim of Sir Clement's, a whim likely to increase his unpopularity in case of fire, but at present that was a secondary consideration. There was no exit from the orchid-house, no windows had been left open, and despite the fact that there were guests in the house, the front-door latch had been dropped quite early in the evening. A rigid cross-examination of Hafid led to no satisfactory result. The man was almost congealed with terror and shock, but it was quite obvious that he knew nothing whatever about the mystery.

"There will be an inquest to-morrow at twelve, Sir Clement," Townsend said. "It will probably be a mere formal affair at which you gentlemen will be present. Good night, sirs."

"We had better follow the inspector's example," Lefroy cried. "Good night,

Frobisher."

"My dear fellow, I wish you a cordial adieu," Frobisher cried. "And I can only regret that our pleasant evening has had so tragic a termination. Townsend, you have locked up the back dining-room and taken the key? Good! I want no extra responsibility."

The big hall-door closed behind the last of them. Frobisher took Hafid firmly by the collar and led him into the orchid-house.

"Now, you rascal," he asked, "what on earth do you mean by it?"

"Take it and destroy it, and burn it," Hafid wailed, with a wriggling of his body. He seemed to be trying to shake off something loathsome. "Oh, master, what is to become of us?"

"You grovelling, superstitious fool," Frobisher said lightly. "Nothing will become of us. Nobody knows anything, nobody will ever know anything as long as you remain silent. We haven't murdered anybody!"

"Allah looking down from Paradise knows better than that, master!"

"Well, he is not likely to be called in as a witness," Frobisher muttered grimly. "I tell you nothing has happened that the law can take the least cognisance of. Mind you, I didn't know that things would go quite so far. When I rang up the curtain it was comedy I looked for, not tragedy. Take the key and go into the dining-room. Remove those orchids and burn them, taking care that you destroy thirty-nine of the red flowers. Then you can go to bed."

Hafid recoiled with unutterable loathing on his face.

"I couldn't do it," he whispered. "I couldn't touch one of those accursed blossoms. Beat me, torture me, turn me into the street to starve, but don't ask me to do that, master. I dare not."

He cowered abjectly at Frobisher's feet. With good-humoured contempt the latter kicked him aside. "Go to bed," he said. "You are a greater coward than even I imagined. Put the lights out, and I'll go to bed also."

The lights were carefully put out, except in the smoking-room, where Frobisher sat pondering over the strange events of the evening. He was not in the least put out or alarmed or distressed; on the contrary, he looked like a man who had been considerably pleased with an interesting entertainment. For Manfred he felt neither sorrow nor sympathy.

He did not look fearfully round the room as if half expecting to see the shadow of Manfred's assassin creeping upon him. But he smiled in his own peculiar fashion as the door opened and a white-robed figure came in. It was Angela with her fine hair about her shoulders and a look of horror in her eyes.

"So you've found out all about it," Sir Clement said. "I'm sorry, because it will spoil your rest. How did you come to make the discovery?"

"I had just come in," Angela explained. "I let myself in with my latchkey. I

did not come near you because I could hear that you were entertaining company, so I went straight to bed. Then I heard Hafid's cry, and I came to the head of the stairs where I could hear everything."

"You mean to say that you stood there and listened?"

"I couldn't help it. So far as I could judge there was an assassin in the house. Just for the moment I was far too frightened to move. That raving madman might have come for me next."

"Well, you can make your mind quite easy on that score. As you know, the whole house has been most thoroughly searched from top to bottom, and there is nobody here but the servants and ourselves now. If I were you I should keep out of it. Go to bed."

Sir Clement barked out the last few words, but Angela did not move.

"There will be an inquest, of course?" she asked.

"Oh, Lord, yes! The papers will reek of it, and half the reporters in London will look upon the place as a kind of public-house for the next week. Take my advice and keep out of it. You know nothing and you want to continue to know nothing, so to speak."

"But I am afraid that I know a great deal," Angela said slowly. "When I came in I was going into the conservatory to place a flower that I had given me to-night. It is a flower that I am likely to be interested in another time. And there I saw a strange man walking swiftly the same way. From his air and manner he was obviously doing wrong. My idea was to follow and stop him. And when I reached the conservatory, to my intense surprise, he was nowhere to be seen."

Frobisher bent down to fill his pipe. There was an evil, diabolical grin, so malignant, and yet so gleeful, as to render the face almost inhuman.

"It may be of importance later on," he said. "Meanwhile, I should keep the information to myself. Now go to bed and lock your door. I'm going to finish my pipe in my dressing-room."

Frobisher snapped out the lights, leaving the house in darkness. For once in her life Angela did lock her door. She could not sleep; she had no desire for bed and yet her eyes were heavy and tired. She pulled up the blind and opened the window; out beyond, the garden was flooded with moonlight. As Angela stood there she seemed to see a figure creeping from one bush to another.

"It is my fancy," she told herself. "I could imagine anything to-night. And yet I could have been certain that I saw the figure of a man."

Angela paused; it was no fancy. A man crept over the grass and looked up at the window as if he were doing something strictly on the lines of conventionality. To her amazement Angela saw that the intruder was in evening dress, and that it was Harold Denvers.

"Harold," she whispered. "Whatever are you doing there?"

"I came on the chance," was the reply. "I have heard strange things to-night, and there is something that I must know at once. I was going to try and rouse you with some pebbles. Dare you go down to the garden-room window and let me in? Darling, it is a matter of life or death, or I would not ask."

Angela slipped down the stairs noiselessly, and opened the window.

CHAPTER VI. A BIT OF THE ROPE.

Sir James Brownsmith thought that on the whole he would walk home from Piccadilly to Harley Street. The chauffeur touched his hat, and the car moved on. The eminent surgeon had ample food for reflection; it seemed to him that he was on the verge of a great discovery. Somebody accosted him two or three times before he came back to earth again.

"That you, Townsend?" he asked, abruptly. "You want to speak to me? Certainly. Only as I am rather tired to-night if you will cut it as short as possible, I shall be glad."

"I am afraid I can't, Sir James," Inspector Townsend replied. "Indeed I was going to suggest that I walked as far as your house and had a chat over matters."

Sir James shrugged his shoulders, and Harley Street was reached almost in silence. In the small consulting-room the surgeon switched on a brilliant light and handed over cigars and whisky and soda.

"Now go on," he said. "It's all about to-night's business, I suppose?"

"Precisely, sir. You've helped us a good many times with your wonderful scientific knowledge, and I dare say you will again. This Piccadilly mystery is a queer business altogether. Do you feel quite sure that the poor fellow was really murdered, after all?"

Brownsmith looked fixedly at the speaker. He had considerable respect for Townsend, whose intellect was decidedly above the usual Scotland Yard level. Townsend was a man of imagination and a master of theory. He went beyond motive and a cast of a footmark—he was no rule-of-thumb workman.

"On the face of it I should say there can be no possible doubt," said Sir James.

"Murdered by strangulation, sir? The same as that man at Streatham. As you have made a careful examination of both bodies you ought to know?"

"Is there any form of murder unknown to me, Townsend?" Sir James asked.

"Is there any trick of the assassin's trade that I have not mastered?"

"Oh, I admit your special knowledge, sir! But it's a trick of mine to be always planning new crimes. I could give you three ways of committing murder that are absolutely original. And I've got a theory about this business that I don't care to disclose yet. Still, we can discuss the matter up to a certain point. Both those men were destroyed—or lost their lives—in the same way."

"Both strangled, in fact. It's the Indian Thug dodge. But you know all about that, Townsend?"

"We'll admit for the moment that both victims have been destroyed by Thugee. But isn't it rather strange that both bodies were found in close juxtaposition to valuable orchids? We know, of course, that Sir Clement's orchids are almost priceless. The Streatham witness, Silverthorne, says that a very rare orchid was recently placed in the Lennox conservatory. Now, isn't it fair to argue that both murdered men lost their lives in pursuit of those orchids?"

Sir James nodded thoughtfully. He had forgotten the Cardinal Moth for the moment.

"I see you have pushed your investigations a long way in this direction," he said. "This being so, have you ascertained for a fact that the Lennox nursery really contained nothing out of the common in the way of Orchidacæ? You know what I mean."

"Quite so, sir. That I have not been able to ascertain because the proprietor of the Lennox nursery has no special knowledge of his trade. His great line is cheap ferns for the London market. But he says a gentleman whom he could easily recognise left him an orchid to look after—a poor dried-up stick it seemed to be—with instructions to keep it in a house not too warm, where it might remain at a small rent till wanted."

"Oh, indeed! You are interesting me, Townsend. Pray go on."

"Well, Sir James, I wanted to see the flowers after the murder, not that I expected it to lead to anything at that time. Seeing what has happened this evening, it becomes more interesting. Would you believe it, sir, that the flower in question was gone?"

"You mean that it had been stolen? Really, Townsend, we seem to be on the track of something important."

"Yes, Sir James, the flower had gone. Now, what I want to know is this—has Sir Clement Frobisher added anything special to his collection lately?"

Sir James shot an admiring glance at his questioner. Seeing that he was working almost entirely in the dark, Townsend had developed his theory with amazing cleverness.

"It's a treat to work with you," the great surgeon said. "As a matter of fact, Sir Clement had got hold of something that struck me as absolutely unique. It's

a flower called the Cardinal Moth. A flower on a flower, so to speak; a large cluster of whitey-pink blossoms with little red blooms hovering over like a cloud of scarlet moths. Sir Clement is very pleased about it."

"From what you say I gather that he has not had it long, sir?"

"Oh, I should say quite recently! But you are not going to tell me that you suspect Frobisher?"

"At present, I don't suspect anybody, though Sir Clement is an unmitigated rascal who would not stop at any crime to serve his own ends. I don't go so far as to say that he had a hand in the business, but I do say that he could tell us exactly how the tragedy took place."

Sir James shot an admiring glance in the direction of the speaker. Frobisher's elfish interest in the crime, and his amazing *sang-froid* under the circumstances, had struck the surgeon unpleasantly. Townsend looked reflectively into the mahogany depths of his whisky and soda.

"It's one thing to know that, and quite another to make a man like Sir Clement speak," he said. "I am more or less with you, sir, over the Thugee business, but was the crime committed with a rope? I shall not be surprised to find that it was done with a bramble, something like honeysuckle or the like. But at the same time as you seemed so certain about the rope, why—"

Townsend waved his hand significantly. Sir James rose and unlocked a safe from which he produced an envelope with some fibrous brown strands in it. These he placed under a powerful microscope.

"Now, these I took from the throat of the poor fellow who was killed at Streatham," he explained. "I was rather bored by the case when you called me in first, and even up to the time I gave my evidence at the inquest. After the inquest was over I examined the body over again, and I confess that my interest increased as I proceeded. After what you have just told me I am completely fascinated. I made a most careful examination of the dead man's neck once, and had discovered that he had died of strangulation, and bit by bit I collected these. They are fibres of the rope with which the crime was done."

Townsend nodded so far as Sir James had proved his case.

"Have you done as much with the poor fellow at Sir Clement's residence?" he asked.

"No, but I shall do so in the morning. This is a curious sort of stuff, Townsend, and certainly not made in England. It is not rope or cord in our commercial sense of the word, but a strong Manilla twist of native fibre. Thus we are going to introduce a foreign element into the solution."

Townsend smiled as he produced a little packet from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"You are building up my theory for me, wonderfully, sir," he said. "I also

have something of the same sort here, only I have more than you seem to have collected. Here is the same sort of fibre from Mr. Manfred's collar-stud, so that he must have been strangled over his collar, which means a powerful pressure. I didn't think it possible for human hands to put a pressure like that, but there it is."

"My word, we've got a powerful assassin to look for!" Sir James exclaimed. "Like you, I should not have deemed it possible. Did you find all that on Manfred's collar-stud?"

"Not all of it, sir. The collar-stud was bent up as if it had been a bit of tinfoil. But I found the bulk of this under the dead man's finger-nails. They are long nails, and doubtless in the agony of strangulation they clutched frantically at the cord. I am quite sure that you will find this fibre to be identical with that which you took from the neck of the Streatham victim."

"And this caretaker you speak of. Is he a respectable man? Silverthorne you said his name was, I fancy?"

"That's the man, sir. He has been in his present employ for one-and-twenty years, a hard-working, saving man, with a big family. Oh, I should take his word for most things that he told me!"

Sir James revolved the problem slowly in his mind, as he inhaled his cigarette smoke. If the Lennox nursery had been deliberately made the centre of a puzzling murder mystery, it was quite sure that neither the nursery proprietor nor his man knew anything whatever about it. And yet it had been necessary, for some reason, that a glass-house should play an important part, for both murders had taken place under glass, and both suggested that the orchid was at the bottom of it. Again, Townsend was not the kind of man to make reckless statements, and when he boldly averred that Sir Clement Frobisher could tell all about it if he liked, he had assuredly some very strong evidence to go upon. A great deal depended upon the analysis of the red, liquid stain on the fibre taken by Townsend from the body of Manfred.

"If these little bits of stuff could speak what tales they could tell," Sir James said, as he carefully locked up both packets of fibre. "I'll get up an hour earlier in the morning and have a dig at these, Townsend. And meanwhile as my days are busy ones, and it's past one o'clock, I shall have to get you to finish your drink and give me your room instead of your company."

Townsend took the hint and his hat and retired. But though Sir James had expressed his intention of retiring almost immediately, he stretched out his hand for another cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully. Was it possible, he wondered, if Sir Clement Frobisher really could solve the mystery? And had he anything to do with it? Not directly, Sir James felt sure; Frobisher was not that kind of man. He was much more likely to get the thing done for him. He was secretive, too,

over the Cardinal Moth; he had behaved so queerly over that business of Count Lefroy and his insult of Frobisher's guest. Brownsmith pitched his cigarette into the grate, and switched off the electric light impatiently.

"Why should I worry my head about it?" he muttered. "I'll go to bed."

CHAPTER VII.

A GRIP OF STEEL.

Sir Clement had not gone to bed yet. He sat over a final pipe in his dressing-room, the fumes of the acrid tobacco lingered everywhere. The owner of the house leant back, his eyes half closed, and the smile on his face suggestive of one who is recalling some exquisite comedy. A shocking tragedy had been enacted almost under his very eyes, and yet from Frobisher's attitude the thing had pleased him, he was not in the least disturbed.

He began to kick off his clothing slowly, the filthy clay pipe between his lips. He touched a bell, and Hafid slid into the room. There was terror in his eyes enough and to spare. He might have been a detected murderer in the presence of his accuser. He trembled, his lips were twitching piteously, there was something about him of the rabbit trying to escape.

"Well, mooncalf," Frobisher said with bitter raillery. "Well, my paralytic pearl of idiots. Why do you stand there as if somebody was tickling your midriff with a bowie knife?"

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," Hafid muttered. The man was silly with terror. "Take it and burn it, and destroy it."

"Oh, Lord, was there ever such a fool since the world began?" Frobisher cried. "If you make that remark again I'll jamb your head against the wall till your teeth chatter."

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," Hafid went on mechanically. "Master, I can't help it. My tongue does not seem able to say anything else. Let me go, send me away. I'm not longer to be trusted. I shall run wild into the night with my story."

"Yes, and I shall run wild with my story in the day-time, and where will you be then, my blusterer? What's the matter with the man? Has anybody been murdered?"

"No," Hafid said slowly, as if the words were being dragged out of him. "At

least, the law could not say so. No, master, nobody has been murdered.”

”Then what are you making all this silly fuss about? Nobody has been murdered but an inquisitive thief who has accidentally met with his death. Other inquisitive thieves are likely to meet with the same fate. Past master amongst congenial idiots, go to bed.”

Frobisher shouted the command backed up by a sounding smack on the side of Hafid’s head. He went off without sense or feeling; indeed, he was hardly conscious of the blow. Frobisher sat there smiling, sucking at the marrow of his pipe, and slowly preparing for bed. His alertness and attention never relaxed a moment, his quick ears lost nothing.

”Who’s moving in the house?” he muttered. ”I heard a door open softly. When people want to get about a house at dead of night it is a mistake to move softly. The action is suspicious, whereas if the thing were openly done, one doesn’t trouble.”

Frobisher snapped out the lights and stood in the doorway, rigid to attention. Presently the darkness seemed to rustle and breathe, there was a faint suggestion of air in motion, and then silence again. Frobisher grinned to himself as he slipped back into his room.

”Angela,” he said softly; ”I could detect that faint fragrance of her anywhere. Now what’s she creeping about the house at this time for? If she isn’t back again in a quarter of an hour I shall proceed to investigate. My cold and haughty Angela on assignation bent! Oh, oh!”

Angela slipped silently down the broad stairway, utterly unconscious of the fact that she had been discovered. She was usually self-contained enough, but her heart was beating a little faster than usual. In some vague way she could not disassociate this visit of Harold’s from the tragedy of the earlier evening. And to a certain extent Harold was compromising her, a thing he would have hesitated to do unless the need had been very pressing. By instinct Angela found her way to the garden-room window, the well-oiled catch came back with a click, and Harold was in the room. They wanted no light, the moon was more than sufficient. Harold’s face was pale and distressed in the softened rays of light.

”My dearest, I had to come,” he whispered in extenuation. ”It was my only chance. I could not possibly enter Sir Frobisher’s house by legitimate means, and yet at the same time it is important that I should see certain things here. If I could only tell you everything!”

”Tell me all or as little as you like,” Angela whispered. ”I can trust you all the same.”

”It is good to hear you say that, Angela. It was wrong of me to come, and yet there was no other way. Did you show Sir Clement those blossoms that I gave you?”

"My dear, there was no possible chance. I placed the spray in the conservatory, intending to give my guardian a pleasant surprise to-morrow, and then the tragedy happened. But of course you know nothing of that."

"Indeed I do, Angela. I know all about it. Jessop, the judge, who dined here to-night, came into the club full of it. Manfred, Count Lefroy's secretary, wasn't it?"

"The same man. I cannot understand it. Harold. There was a man in the conservatory, or rather there was a man going towards the conservatory, who had no business there. Anybody could see that from his manner. My idea was to place the spray there and to ask the intruder what he was doing. When I reached the conservatory the place was empty. Absolutely empty, and yet I had seen the man enter! There is no exit either. I went back to my room not knowing what to think. And shortly afterwards I heard Hafid cry out. From the top of the stairs I heard all that was going on. And the man who had been strangled in the conservatory was the very man I had seen."

Denvers said nothing for the moment. He was breathing hard and his face was pale with horror. Angela could feel his hand trembling as she laid her own upon it.

"I think you understand," she whispered. "I fancy that you know. Harold, tell me what all this strange mystery means."

"Not yet," Denvers replied. "You must wait. Nobody ever heard the like of it before. And so long as you are under the same roof as—but what am I talking about? But this much I may say: the whole horrible problem revolves round the Cardinal Moth."

"Round the flower that you gave me to-night, Harold! And that so innocent looking and beautiful."

"Well, there it is. I have been on the fringe of it for some time. Angela, you must give me back that spray of blossom, you must not mention it to Sir Clement at all. And now I must have a look into the conservatory, indeed I came on purpose."

"You came expecting to find something, a clue to the mystery there?"

"Well, yes, if you like to put it that way," Denvers murmured, avoiding Angela's eyes for the first time. "I had a plant of that Cardinal Moth which I deemed safely hidden in Streatham. Why I had to hide it I will tell you in due course. It had a great deal to do between myself and the Shan of Koordstan, with whom I hoped to do important business. I mentioned it to him and he showed me a paragraph in a paper which for the moment has scattered all my plans. As soon as I read that paragraph I felt certain that my Moth had been stolen, though it cost one life to get it. When I heard of the tragedy here to-night, I was absolutely sure as to my facts. Angela, my Moth is in the conservatory here, and Manfred

lost his life trying to steal it for somebody else.”

Angela listened with a vague feeling that she would wake presently and find it all a dream. A new horror had been added to the house in the last few minutes.

”Let us hope you are wrong,” she said with a shudder. ”Come and see at once. But what do you propose to do if you find that your suspicions are correct?”

Denvers hardly knew; he had had no time to think that part out. He reached out to find a switch for the light, but Angela’s gentle hand detained him.

”The moon must suffice,” she said. ”Sir Clement has eyes like a hawk. What’s that?”

A thud in the hall followed by an unmistakable cry of pain. It was only just for an instant, and then there was silence again. Angela drew her lover back into the shadow of the curtain.

”That was Sir Clement,” she whispered. ”Whether he has found me out, or has merely come down for something, I can’t say. Probably he kicked against something in the dark. Harold!”

For Harold had darted out from the curtain and gripped something that looked like a shadow. As he dragged his burden forward the moon shone on the dull features of Hafid. Taken suddenly as he had been, he did not display the slightest traces of fear.

”My beautiful mistress is watched,” he said smoothly. ”I came to warn her. Sir Clement has gone up to his dressing-room for his slippers. He struck his illustrious toe against a marble table and——”

”Then follow him and lock him in,” Harold said hurriedly. ”Do that and you shall not be forgotten. Lock the dressing-room door whilst you are pretending to look for the slippers.”

”You could do me no greater service,” Angela whispered sweetly.

Hafid hastened off as noiselessly as a cat. There was nothing short of murder that he would not have done for Angela. There was no light in Frobisher’s dressing-room, by the aid of the moon he was fumbling for his slippers. He turned as Hafid entered.

”My master was moving and I heard him,” Hafid said. ”Is there anything that I can do?”

”Yes,” Frobisher said crisply. ”You can hunt round and find my confounded slippers. That fool of a man of mine never puts things in the same place twice.”

Hafid came back presently with the missing articles. The key of the dressing-room was in his pocket, he slipped through the bedroom and locked that door also. Frobisher stood listening a minute or two with a queer, uneasy grin on his face. Evidently this little accident had not frightened the game away. He turned the handle softly, but with no effect. He shook the door passion-

ately. Something seemed to have gone wrong with the lock. That Hafid should have dared to play such a trick never for one moment entered Frobisher's mind. With his well-trained philosophy Frobisher sat down and filled his pipe. What a woman had done safely once, she was certain to attempt again, he argued, perhaps try and attempt a better move. And there were other light nights before the moon had passed the full. Denvers stood listening, but no further sound came. The attempt must be made now or never.

"Show me the conservatory," he whispered. "There are long folding steps, of course? Then you can stay in the doorway till I have finished, My darling, I am truly sorry to expose you to all this, but—"

Angela led the way. It was fairly light in the great glass tank with its tangle of blooms, but as Denvers entered a great gush of steam shot up from the automatic pipe and filled the dome with vapour. Harold quickly drew the long steps to the centre and mounted. He disappeared in the mist and was quickly lost amongst the tangle of ropes and blossoms. He had to wait for the periodical cloud of vapour to pass away before he could make a searching examination. So far as Angela could see, nobody was in the roof at all, it was as if Denvers had disappeared, leaving no trace behind.

There was another gush of steam followed by a shower of falling blossoms, and a quick cry of pain from the dome. As Angela darted forward the cry of pain came again, there was a confused vision of a struggling figure, and then Denvers came staggering down the steps holding his right arm to his side, his face bedabbled with a moisture that was caused by something beyond the heated atmosphere.

"What has happened?" Angela asked hurriedly. "Have you had an accident with your arm?"

Denvers stood there gasping and reeling for a moment. The steam had all evaporated now, and there was nothing to be seen in the dome but a tangle of blossoms on their rigid cords. At Denvers' feet lay a spray of the Cardinal Moth. Despite his pain he placed it in his pocket.

"Look here," he said hoarsely. "This is witchcraft. Somebody grasped my arm, some unseen force clutched me. I managed to get away by sheer strength, but look here."

There was a ring of blood all round Denvers' wrist, the flesh had been cut almost to the bone. It seemed almost impossible for a human hand to grasp like that, but there it was. And up in the dome now there was nothing to be seen but

the tangled masses of glorious blooms.

CHAPTER VIII. THE WEAKER VESSEL.

Like most men of his class, Frobisher had a perfect knowledge of the art of using others. To study their weakness was always the first stage of the game, and therefore in an early stage of their acquaintance the little baronet learnt the fact that Paul Lopez was criminally extravagant with his money. How Lopez got rid of it Frobisher neither knew nor cared, the weakness paid him, and there was an end of it.

Therefore Frobisher paid his henchman liberally. There was no generosity about it, nothing but policy. That was the secret of Lopez's life, and beyond that Frobisher never attempted to penetrate. Perhaps he knew that Lopez must not be pushed too far.

Paul Lopez had contented himself with the result of his labours for the day. He was a plain, simply-dressed man himself, and gave no suggestion of a liking for the luxuries and good things of this life. All the same, he was seated now at a most perfectly-appointed table, clad in most immaculate evening-dress, and looking across a table in the centre of which was a veritable bank of flowers. Two opal electric swans floated upon what was meant to resemble a miniature lake, and these gave the only light to the dinner-table.

The dining-room was small but exquisitely furnished, for Lopez had a pretty taste that way. There were no servants in the room now, for coffee had been served, and Lopez was leaning back with the air of one who has dined wisely and well.

On the other side of the table a girl sat. She was slight and fair, with a pretty, petulant face, the spoilt look not in the least detracting from her Greuze-like beauty. Her eyes were the eyes of a woman, and her expression that of a child. Lopez called her simply Cara—not even his most intimate acquaintances knew her other name—and she was popularly supposed to be the child of some dead and gone friend. No daughter had ever had more care and love bestowed upon her than Cara, she was the one soft spot in Lopez's life. Perhaps she cared for him in a way; perhaps she had come to regard him and all these luxuries as a matter of course; certain it was that Cara lacked nothing many times when Lopez

had to go without.

There was a queer, half-ashamed look on his face now, as he pulled at his cigarette. Cara had been scolding him, and he looked like a detected schoolboy.

"You have been gambling again," she said, sharply. "Why do you do it? You would be a rich man by this time if you would only let those wretched cards alone. And you always lose. You are so headstrong and rash, you seem to lose your senses over the card-tables. And you distinctly promised to take me to Pau this year."

Lopez admitted the fact with a sigh. Nobody else under the sun would have dared to speak to him as Cara was doing at this moment. It never occurred to him to suggest that Cara might be doing something for a living. He had promised her a good time at Pau, instead of which he had been gambling, and had lost all his money.

"No trouble at all getting cash," he murmured.

Cara crushed a grape between her white, strong teeth. "That sounds very pretty," she said. "But I have had no money for a week, and some of the tradespeople are beginning to ask about their books. If I am to be worried I shall go away. Did you get those tickets for the opera to-morrow night?"

Lopez nodded. He had not forgotten them; in fact, he never forgot anything of that kind. He looked furtively at the clock, and Cara sighed.

"You are going out?" she demanded. "Which means that I am to have a long, dull evening at home. I am sick of these long, dull evenings at home."

"How long since you had one?" Lopez asked, good-naturedly. "My dear, there are few girls who have as good a time as you. And business must be attended to. I have to go out for a little time, but I shall be back by eleven o'clock. And when I come back I'll take you to the Belgrave to supper."

A little smile broke out on Cara's pretty, petulant face. Already she was debating in her mind what dress she should wear. When Lopez made a promise of that kind he always fulfilled it. Cara rose, and now gave her guardian a loving embrace. She smiled engagingly as she lighted a cigarette for him.

"Then be off at once," she cried, "and then you will have no excuse for being late. It will save time if I meet you at the Belgrave. You are to get that little table opposite the door for 10.45. And you will wait for me in the corridor."

Cara issued her commands in the most imperial way, and Lopez listened meekly. He had been used to command and make use of men all his lifetime, but he never rebelled when Cara was concerned. He passed into the road leading to Regent's Park presently, and hailed a passing taxi. In the course of time he was set down at the corner of Greenacre Street.

A little way down that quiet, dignified thoroughfare he stopped, and took a latchkey from his pocket. The door of the house where he paused was closed, a

feeble light glimmered over the fan, everything looked most quiet and respectable and decorous.

In the hall was an umbrella-stand, two carved oak chairs and a Turkey carpet. Beyond it was a dull baize door, and beyond that an inner hall magnificently furnished. A gorgeous footman took Lopez's hat and coat, and he proceeded to make his way up the marble staircase. There were more baize doors, and as Lopez paused, the murmur of voices grew louder. Lopez came at length to a magnificent double drawing-room, where the electric lights were low and dim under crimson shades, and where a score or two of men were gambling. There was a roulette-table, which was well patronised, with tables for other games. There was no laughter or badinage; from the players' faces the stakes were evidently high; indeed, the proprietor of the Spades' Club looked with a cold eye upon the gambler who preferred moderate stakes. The place was comparatively new, and as yet the police had no idea of its establishment, and only a favoured few knew where heavy play was to be found.

Lopez helped himself to an excellent cup of coffee and a liqueur, and stood smoking placidly, and waiting for a chance to join the roulette-table. Most of the men round were well known to him as great lights in the world of fashion, who were killing an hour or so after dinner before proceeding to one social function or another. They would, most of them, return in the small hours.

Another man was waiting, a little, lithe, active man, who suggested the East. His dress was quite modern and Western, but his dark eyes and dusky skin told their own tale. Lopez gently touched the spectator on the shoulder, and he turned round sharply.

"Haven't you been playing at all?" Lopez asked.

"I had my turn," the other man said. "I'm dead out of luck, Lopez. I shall have to help myself to some of my master's jewels if this goes on."

"Only unfortunately, he of Koordstan has already anticipated you," Lopez laughed. "You will have to think of a better plan than that, Hamid Khan."

Hamid Khan smiled sourly. On the staff of the Shan and sent over on a secret, political mission, the dark-eyed man was a deadly enemy of the man he called his master. He had all the vices and extravagances of his imperial employer, and he would have done anything for the wherewithal to carry on the campaign. Lopez and he had been more or less friends for many years, and many a piece of shady business had they transacted together.

"The Shan is hard up?" Lopez suggested.

"The Shan is at the end of his resources," Hamid Khan growled. "Of course, it is always possible for him to raise money on those concessions. But for the present he's what you call hard up. Still, he's not without brains, and he may be worth backing."

"If I were you I should back him for all he is worth," Lopez said, as he thoughtfully watched the rolling marble on the roulette-table. "I know that you are in the opposite camp, and that you have elected to throw your lot in with what is called the progressives in Koordstan. But the man you want to make Shan is a friend of Russia, and the English Government may not stand it. Besides, the present Shan is no fool, and I happen to know that he is well advised here. If you can, get a grip on him."

"Oh, I've got the grip fast enough!" Hamid Khan said moodily. "Perhaps I should like to do what you suggest, but I'm too deeply plunged to the other side now. I am forcing the old man's hand now; I came over on purpose. The Blue Stone—"

Lopez suppressed a little cry. He affected not to be listening.

"If you will favour me with your attention," Hamid Khan said stiffly.

"My dear fellow, I beg your pardon. But red has turned up ten times in succession, and I was counting up the theory of chance. Do you mean to say the Shan had sold the Blue Stone?"

It was cleverly done, and the shot was an admirable one. Hamid Khan fell into the trap at once.

"The Shan's not quite such a fool as that," he said. "If he did that and the fact became public property he wouldn't be on the throne for a week. But I happen to know that he hasn't got the stone at present, and I'm going to work that fact."

Lopez listened to all that Hamid had to say; indeed, he went further, and made several suggestions as if he had been advising a friend in the most disinterested manner possible. At the same time, he had learnt a valuable piece of news, and he was trying to find some way to use it to the best advantage. There came a gap in the table presently and Lopez changed a handful of notes into counters. These notes were all the money in his possession, but the fact troubled Lopez not at all. Once the gambling fever possessed him, common sense went to the winds.

He played on for some time with varying success, everything else forgotten. He was fairly temperate at first, but the fever began to turn in his veins, and he started gambling in earnest. Surely it was time for black to have a turn after so marvellous a run of the red. But according to scientific authorities, this is nothing to go by, and the chances are quite equal even after a record run, and the end of an hour saw the last of Lopez's gold-lettered counters swept with a careless movement into the clutches of the bank, and he rose with a sigh.

The proprietor of the club, a tall man, with the bland air of a cabinet minister, came up to him and proffered his condolences. Lopez lighted a cigarette with a steady hand.

"I thought you were playing very well," the proprietor said.

"Nobody plays very well at this game," Lopez said with a smile. "There

are some of England's best intellects gathered here, well knowing that the odds are on the bank. And yet such is the egotism of the human nature that every individual expects that he is going to be more fortunate than his fellows, and get the best of a dead certainty. My dear Bishop, if it came to a battle of wits between you and myself, the disaster to you would be great. And yet we come here and you grow richer and richer at our expense!"

"If a small cheque is any good?" the other insinuated.

"It would go the same way. Besides, I cannot stay to-night. I have a call elsewhere. I am taking a lady to supper at the Belgrave, where unhappily they give no credit. In the temporary insanity of the moment I have gambled myself dry. A five-pound note——"

The note was immediately forthcoming, with an urgent request that Lopez would take what he liked. He took a further note, and rammed it carelessly into his pocket. Hamid Khan rose at the same time from the other side of the table, his dark eyes gleaming. He helped himself somewhat liberally to champagne from the side-table.

"You also, my friend," Lopez laughed. "Let us depart and console ourselves upon the road. If you have not anything better to do walk with me as far as the Belgrave. I can't ask you to join me, because it is my privilege to be supping with a lady there. Come along."

They passed presently into Piccadilly, and from thence by degrees through Grosvenor Square. A great party was going on in one of the big houses there, and the road was blocked with smart conveyances. The lights shined on many lovely women, and Lopez carelessly admired them. There was one lady in a car alone, a tall woman with a wonderfully regular face and black hair glowing with diamonds.

"My word, but she is lovely!" Hamid Khan exclaimed. "Who is she? Looks English, but there is a decided suggestion of the East about her."

"A wonderful woman," Lopez said. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, she is going to be one of the big sensations of the world here. She is the wife of Aaron Benstein, the financier. The old chap is in his dotage now, and, of course, she married him for his money. As a matter of fact——"

Lopez broke off suddenly; he was going to say that he had known Mrs. Benstein pretty intimately at one time, but there was no reason to tell Hamid that much. The block of carriages broke up at once, and the dazzling beauty with the diamonds in her hair was gone.

"I know the name of Benstein," Hamid said. "He is the old man whom the Shan has had so many dealings with lately. I shouldn't wonder——"

It was the turn of Hamid to break off suddenly, and Lopez smiled. Under the big portico of the Belgrave, the curiously-assorted couple parted. Lopez lingered

a moment to finish his cigarette. In an ordinary way he watched the well-dressed crowd flutter up the steps.

"By no means a bad night's work," he muttered. "I've picked up a piece of priceless information, at least I hope so. Unless I am greatly mistaken my dear little Cara is going to ruffle it with the best of them at Pau yet."

CHAPTER IX.

A WORD TO THE WISE.

A soldier of fortune like Lopez was not easily elated by the smiles of the first goddess, but he felt on very good terms with himself as he stood there finishing his cigarette. Most of the people who passed him up the flight of marble steps were familiar to him, and Lopez amused himself by marking them off one by one. He was in an indolent mood now, but his glance grew brighter as a smartly-appointed motor-car drove up and a lady alighted.

She had no covering to her marvellous dead-black hair, though her dress was hidden by a long wrap. She was quite alone, her air was absolutely self-possessed as she looked around her. As she came up the steps she became conscious of Lopez's presence.

She smiled in a slow, languid way, and half held out her hand. "One always meets you in unexpected places," she said. "The last time we came together the conditions were very different to these."

"That is quite true, Isa," Lopez said gravely.

"Mrs. Benstein, if you please," the woman said, with not the faintest trace of annoyance in her tones. The smile was almost caressing. "We had better observe the proprieties. Do you remember the last time we met, Paul Lopez?"

Lopez bowed gravely. His mind had travelled back a long way. He had never forgotten the marvellous beauty of this woman; it seemed strangely heightened by the dress and the diamonds.

"You were not Mrs. Benstein then," he said.

"No. My ambitions did not lie in that direction. I had no liking for a fortune ready made. I always made up my mind to carve out one for myself. But since then I have learnt how hard it is for a woman to do so."

The great, dark eyes grew thoughtful for a moment, then the woman laughed.

"We are all puppets of fate," she went on, "even the strongest of us. I am a philosopher, or at least I imagine myself to be one, so it comes to the same thing. I am tired of the contemplation of my splendour, so I am going to make use of it. I shall go into society."

"I am quite sure you will go anywhere you please," Lopez said.

"Yes," the woman spoke as if it were a matter of course. "To-morrow I begin. The wife of Aaron Benstein, the money-lender. How they will sneer and mock at me!"

"And how they will envy you from the bottom of their shallow hearts!"

Mrs. Benstein laughed as she walked up the shallow steps.

"That will give salt to the dish," she said. "I came here to-night because I was tired of my own company. Let us sup together and talk of old times."

Lopez was desolated, but he had to decline. There was a girl waiting for him here, a simple girl who was not used to this kind of thing. It seemed dreadfully rude, but Mrs. Benstein would have to excuse him. The woman with the dark eyes smiled meaningly.

"As you will," she said. "Then I will sup alone and study human nature uninterrupted. Good night."

She passed on to the grand salon where the band was playing, and hundreds of soft-shaded lights played upon the banks of flowers and on the jewels that glittered there; Cara had secured her favourite table, and was busy looking over the menu when Lopez came up.

"I began to think that something had happened," the girl said. "I feared lest you had gambled all your money away."

"So I did, as a matter of fact," Lopez said coolly, as he unfolded his serviette. "I had to borrow ten pounds for the supper. But you need not fear—the information I got was worth the price. Now let me see what there is to eat."

"Tell me what you have discovered," Cara demanded imperiously.

"That I shall not do, my child," Lopez replied. "Suffice it, that you have the benefit of my labours. Besides, it all refers to a closed chapter in my life. I have found a way to put money in my purse, so that you will ruffle it with the best of them at Pau."

Cara smiled contentedly. She finished her meal presently, and then she had time to study the other guests. It was always a fascination to her to try and read the history of other people. As a rule, her guesses were fairly shrewd, and when she was wrong Lopez corrected her.

"Who are those people at the third table?" she asked. "The man looks like a gentleman; he might have been in the army. But there is a certain fierce swagger about him that tells a story. There is a man who is rather cold-shouldered at his clubs. His wife is pretty, but shallow, and not at all too straightforward. The boy

with them is dreadful. Probably rich, though.”

Lopez smiled as he lay back in his chair.

”You are correct,” he said. ”That is Colonel Fairford and his wife. They are the hero and heroine of that Lawton Lodge diamond scandal. Of course nothing was ever proved, but we have our ideas. The Colonel sticks to his clubs, but he has had a bad time there, and nobody will play cards with him. The young man comes from Australia. He is rich at present, but the Colonel will see that he does not long remain troubled with superfluous cash.”

A gratified little smile played about the corners of Cara’s mouth.

”If the worst comes to the worst, I can call myself by a fancy name and turn palmist,” she exclaimed. ”We are very clever people, you and I. On the whole, the people here to-night are not particularly interesting. Who is the lady with the glorious diamonds?”

Cara indicated Mrs. Benstein sitting all alone, self-possessed and languidly interested in all that was going on around her.

”The recently-married wife of Aaron Benstein, the great financier,” Lopez explained. ”The old man is more or less in his dotage, and they say there is nothing that he will not do for his beautiful wife.”

”The diamonds are absolutely superb,” Cara said.

”Why should they not be? Benstein is supposed to have two-thirds of the jewels of society in his charge at one time or another. That is the way in which your high dame raises the wind. Most of those stones are kept at Benstein’s own house. Doubtless his wife knows all about them. Then, if she wishes to wear this or that precious gem, why shouldn’t she?”

Cara laughed merrily. Mrs. Benstein seemed to fascinate her.

”It is no bad thing to be the wife of a big financier,” she said. ”Those diamonds and emeralds together are absolutely superb. Who was Mrs. Benstein?”

Lopez was understood to say that she was a brilliant mystery. Nobody quite knew where she came from, and nobody cared. But she was rich and beautiful and clever, and if she made up her mind to play the game of society, nobody could stop her. All this Lopez explained as he sipped his liqueur. Cara took Mrs. Benstein in steadily.

”She would make a good enemy,” she said. ”Who is the vulgar woman who is having supper with that handsome man with the red beard?”

”Oh, that is Lady Beachmore!” Lopez explained. ”Beachmore is a man of a good family, he has a good name, and his career as a soldier was an honourable one. There are phases of human nature that beat me entirely, Cara. A case like that makes me feel how little I know. Lady Beachmore was on the variety stage, with nothing piquant about her but her vulgarity. She is plain, she is horribly made up, and yet Beachmore married her.”

"Is he a rich man?"

"As things go, yes. He is one of the peers who has enough for his wants and a little to spare, as the old song has it. Why did he marry her, Cara?"

Cara admitted that the problem was beyond her. Lady Beachmore was vulgar enough, in all conscience; she talked loudly and she drank a great deal of champagne. She was extravagantly dressed, but she wore no ornaments—which was unusual in a woman of her class.

"She ought to be smothered in stones," Cara said.

"Bridge," Lopez explained sententiously. "Lady Beachmore is one of the most reckless gamblers in society. Probably that is why she is tolerated in good houses. Everybody knows what a gambler she is except her husband. If I were to hazard a guess I should say that the Beachmore jewels are all in the possession of Aaron Benstein."

Cara nodded. The salon was gradually getting empty. Lord Beachmore said something to his wife, who shook her head, and then he sauntered slowly from the room. Lady Beachmore looked across to the seat where Mrs. Benstein was reclining, and her coarse face grew red with anger. By some kind of magnetic influence the eyes of the two women met, and the former rose. She crossed over to Mrs. Benstein's table, a few low words followed before Mrs. Benstein rose also.

Her eyes were flashing and her breast was heaving. She made a motion towards the jewels in her hair, and then seemed to change her mind. A few of the low, angry words reached Lopez's ears. A sardonic smile was on his lips.

"A curious coincidence," he muttered. "She is actually wearing Lady Beachmore's diamonds! Well, the information should prove valuable. I'll go and see Frobisher to-morrow. The mere hint of what can be done should be worth five hundred pounds."

"What are you muttering about?" Cara asked impatiently. "Take me home, I'm tired of all this light and glitter. Sometimes I wish that I had never left the country. All the same, I would give a great deal to know what those people are talking about."

CHAPTER X. A WORD TO THE WISE.

Sir Clement stood before a looking-glass in the library surveying himself with a certain saturnine humour. He was just as fond of analysing himself as other people, and he had just come to the conclusion that there was a deal to be said from the Darwinian point of view.

"Is it the morning-coat or the top-hat?" he asked himself. "How terribly like a dissipated old ape I look, to be sure! And yet in a velvet dinner-jacket I am quite—well, picturesque. On the whole, that is better than being handsome. Ah, somebody is going to suffer for this! Come in."

The door opened, and Paul Lopez came almost inaudibly into the room. Not for a moment did Frobisher discontinue his critical examination.

"I'm going to a garden-party," he explained. "I'm taking my womenfolk to the Duchess's afternoon affair. I was just saying to myself that somebody would have to suffer for this."

Lopez dropped into a chair and lighted a cigarette quite coolly.

"Nobody would suspect you of this personal sacrifice without some ultimate benefit," he said.

"Spoken like a book, my prince of rascals," Frobisher cried gaily. "I see they have adjourned those two inquests again."

The two men looked at one another and smiled. They were not pleasant smiles, and Frobisher's teeth bared in a sudden grin that was not good to see. He crossed to the table near which Lopez was seated, and began to play with a cheque-book.

"Artistic things, these," he said. "Observe the beauty of the watermark, the fine instinct of the oblong; note the contrast between the pale pink of the legend and the flaming red of the stamp. My Lopez, a cheque, properly verified, and engagingly autographed, is veritably a joyful thing."

"A study in itself," Lopez said without emotion. "What are you after, you rascal?"

"My Lopez, you are taking liberties. I am a baronet of old creation, whereas you are what you are."

"Arcades ambo. You sent for me, and I am here; my time is money. Once more, what are you driving at?"

"I'm puzzled," Frobisher replied, still ogling his cheque-book lovingly. "Frankly, I'm puzzled. If I were not so busy with the big things I'd soon solve the little ones. Are you ever puzzled, Lopez?"

"Occasionally," Lopez replied. "When people tell me the truth, for instance. There was one man who had everything to gain by lying to me, and he didn't do it. That was a tough job."

Frobisher did not appear to be listening. With a pen in his hand he wrote the words "Paul Lopez" on the top line of a cheque. The cosmopolitan's eyes

flashed for a moment.

"Well, I am going to tell you the truth," Frobisher went on. "Such a course under the circumstances will save me a lot of trouble. Mind you, I am going to tell the absolute truth. You know all about the Shan of Koordstan, of course. He promised me certain things, and now he is trying to wriggle out of his bargain. At the same time, he wants to complete it. There is some obstacle in the way because I am prepared to pay him more money than any one else, and he wants all the cash he can get. Now, if it were worth my while, I could get to the bottom of this business very soon, but you don't want sprats on the hook that you have baited for a whale. You must find this out for me."

"And if I promise to find this out for you, what then?"

Frobisher wrote the words "five hundred pounds" under the name of Paul Lopez on the cheque and appended his queer, cramped signature. As he lay back with a smile, Lopez coolly reached over, tore the cheque from the counterfoil and placed it in his pocket.

"Good," he said. "The money is already mine. I've had a few of your cheques in my time, and I have earned every one of them. I have earned this already."

Frobisher displayed no surprise or emotion of any kind. Lopez was worth his money, and he never boasted. The information needed would be cheap at the price. He waited for Lopez to speak.

"The Shan of Koordstan is generally hard up," the latter said. "He is a precious rascal, too. I have already dogged and watched him because he might be a profitable investment some day."

"Precisely," Frobisher chuckled, "precisely as you have studied me. Well, you are quite welcome to all the milk you can extract from this cocoanut. You are interesting me, beloved spy."

"Koordstan has been unlucky lately in his many dealings. The tribes are fighting shy of him. And in the depths of his despair he found a friend and philanthropist in Aaron Benstein. In other words, he must have given Benstein really good security for his money. Mind, I am speaking from personal knowledge."

"You are earning your money," Frobisher croaked. "Do you know what the security is?"

"I know that it isn't the concession you are after, because there is another game on over that. And Benstein is not likely to say anything, nor is the Shan, for that matter. But one thing is wrapped up in another, and there you are. Shall I show you how I have earned all that cheque?"

"Rascal, you are puzzling me. If Benstein had any kind of weakness——"

"He has. He is the hardest man in London, the most clever and greedy financier I know, and yet he has his weak point. He is old and his mind is not what it was. And he has a young wife, a kind of beautiful slave that he has purchased

of recent years. The fellow is infatuated with her to the verge of insanity. She has no heart and no brains, but cunning and infinite beauty, to say nothing of an audacity that is thoroughly Cockney in its way. I dare say you have seen her?"

Frobisher nodded thoughtfully. Benstein's wife was one of the stars of London. She kept a *queue* of young men in her box, but no faint breath of scandal touched her fair fame. Benstein was too old to run risks like that.

"We don't seem to be getting any further," Frobisher suggested.

"Indeed! The subtle play of your mind is not in evidence to-day, and perhaps the morning-coat has unsettled you. My friend, men tell their wives everything—everything."

"Not every man," Frobisher said, with one of his wicked grins. "I don't, for instance."

"If you did your wife wouldn't stay here for a day," Lopez said coolly. "Pshaw, I don't mean things of that kind; I mean business things, successful deals, how you have got the best of somebody else; in fact, the swaggering boasting that man indulges in before the woman of his choice. Not a single secret of that kind does Benstein keep from his wife—he couldn't if he wanted to."

"In other words, Mrs. Benstein has the secret that I would give a small fortune to possess?"

"Precisely. The game is in your own hands, *mon ami*. That woman is trying to get into society. And, with her natural audacity and the money she has behind her, she will succeed. In a year or so she will be turning her back upon women who won't look at her now. Only up to now she had got hold of the wrong leaders. But she is going to your Duchess's to-day. The Duke is in Benstein's hands."

"That's a good tip," Frobisher chuckled. "I'll get an introduction to her."

Lopez bent across the table and lowered his voice confidentially.

"Get Lady Frobisher to take her up," he said. "Quite as great ladies will be doing it before long. Mark my words, but Mrs. Benstein will be the fashion some day. Nothing will keep her out. If your wife holds out a helping hand—why, it seems to me that I shall have more than earned my money."

Frobisher lay back in his chair, and laughed silently. He was quite satisfied that he had found a most profitable investment for his five hundred pounds. In great good-humour he pressed cigarettes upon Lopez.

"We are a fine couple," he said gaily. "With my brain to plot and yours to weave, we might possess the universe. Again, it shall be done; Lady Frobisher shall take up Mrs. Benstein. Lord, what a pleasant time I shall have at luncheon!"

He lay back in his chair chuckling and croaking long after Lopez had departed. The second luncheon gong sounded before he rose and made his way to the dining-room. Lady Frobisher, tall and slim and exquisitely patrician, had

already taken her place at the table. Angela came in a moment later with a murmured apology for keeping the others waiting.

"You have both been out?" Frobisher asked in his politest manner. "Riding, eh? Is there anything new?"

Lady Frobisher was languidly of opinion that there was nothing fresh. Most people were looking fagged and worn out owing to the heat of the season; she was feeling it herself.

"It's a treat to see some suggestion of the open country," she said in her languid way. "For instance, we met Harold Denvers. He was like a whiff of the sea to us."

Frobisher shot a lightning glance at Angela. Try as she would, she could not keep the colour from her face. And in that instant Frobisher knew the meaning of Angela's secret visit downstairs a night or two before. Angela also knew that he guessed; the flame on her cheek grew almost painful.

"So he's back," Frobisher said, with a suppressed chuckle in his voice. "Don't you ask him here."

"As if he would come," Angela exclaimed indignantly. "I am sure Lady Frobisher would not do anything of the kind. She would as soon ask that impossible Benstein woman!"

A queer light flamed into Frobisher's eyes. Luck had given him an opening sooner than he had expected. He was prepared to lead up to his point by tortuous means.

"Is there anything impossible in society nowadays?" he asked. "Mrs. Benstein is beautiful and audacious, and her husband is fabulously rich. What more could you have?"

"She was actually wearing diamonds this morning," Angela murmured.

"Well, what of that? Next year, next week, it may be the thing to wear diamonds in the morning. After all, fashion is dictated by the tradesman you buy your stockings from, men with Board School education for the most part. Ain't you photographed in evening dress and picture-hats? After that atrocity any thing is possible. Mrs. Benstein will be at the Duchess's party to-day."

"Really, my dear Clement, I can't see how that can possibly interest me."

Frobisher laughed again, and the quick grin bared his white teeth. He liked his wife in these moods, he liked to bring her down from her high pedestal at times.

"It means a good deal to you," he said gaily. "*Ma chérie*, I have a mood to take Mrs. Benstein up. The woman fascinates me, and I would fain study her like one of my valued orchids. Of course, I don't make a point of it, but I shall be glad if you will get an introduction to Mrs. Benstein, and ask her to your fancy dance next week."

"Clement, you must be mad to insult me by such a suggestion!"

"Not in the least, my dear. The Duchess is complacent, and why not you? It is my whim; I have said it. Or perhaps you would prefer me to bring the lady to you this afternoon."

"If that woman ever sets foot in this house," Lady Frobisher gasped. "If she ever comes here—"

"You will be polite and amiable to her, I am sure," Frobisher said in a purring voice, though his eyes flashed like little pin-points of flame. "Or perhaps I had better ask the Bensteins to dinner. Sit down."

Lady Frobisher had risen, and Sir Clement did the same thing. Angela sat there breathlessly. With a slow, gliding movement Frobisher crept round the table to his wife's side. He took her two hands in his and gazed steadily into her face. Her eyes were dilated, her lips were parted, but she said nothing. Just for an instant she had one glance into the flame of passion and evil that Frobisher would have called his soul.

"You are not going to make a scene," he said, in the same caressing, silken voice that made Angela long to rise and lay a whip about his shoulders. "After all, Mrs. Benstein has a great pull over many women that you nod and smile to and shake hands with across afternoon tea-tables—she is quite respectable. Besides, this is part of my scheme, and I expect to be—well, we won't say obeyed. As a personal favour, I ask you to meet me in this matter."

Lady Frobisher dropped into a chair and her lips moved. Her voice came weak and from a long way off.

"I'll do as you wish," she said. "Of course, it would be far better if somebody else—"

Frobisher skipped from the room whistling an air as he went. The sudden grin flashed all his teeth gleamingly.

"She is going to cry," he muttered, "and I cannot stand a woman's tears. If there is one thing that cuts me to my shrinking soul, it is the sight of a lovely woman's tears."

CHAPTER XI. BORROWED PLUMES.

Frobisher's highly sensitive nature demanded a flower as a little something to

soothe his nerves. He passed into the conservatory where the Cardinal Moth was flaming overhead, he climbed like an over-dressed monkey up the extending ladder, and broke off a spray of the blooms. He patted them gently as he fixed the cluster in the silk lapel of his coat. Hafid looked in and announced that the car was ready. Hafid's face was white and set like that of a drug victim. Frobisher was at his most brilliant and best as the car flashed away. Presently the scene changed from the hot air and dusty glare of the streets, to green lawns and old trees and the soft music of a band of some colour and doubtful Hungarian origin. But there was the clear flow and the throbbing melody of it, and Frobisher's gloved hand beat gently to time. There were little knots of kaleidoscope colours, graceful and harmonious in graceful shades and the emerald green for a background. Here, too, was the Duchess with a swift, pecky smile for each guest, as if she had been carelessly wound up for the occasion, and something had gone wrong with the spring.

Frobisher slipped in and out of the various groups with his hands behind him. There were still certain people who seemed to be smelling something unpleasant as the wicked little baronet passed, but this only added zest and piquancy to his studies. It was some time before he found the object of his search—a study in yellow, and a large black hat nodding with graceful plumes. Something round her slim, white neck seemed to stream and dazzle, there was another flash of blue fire on her breast.

Yet the diamonds did not seem in the least out of place on Mrs. Benstein. There was something hard and shaky about her beauty that called for them—blue black hair drawn back in a wave from her forehead, a complexion like old ivory, and eyes suggestive of mystery. Frobisher thought of the serpent of old Nile as he looked at her critically.

A marvellously beautiful woman beyond all question, a woman without the faintest suggestion of self-consciousness. Yet she was practically alone in that somewhat polyglot gathering, and she knew that most people there were holding aloof from her. Frobisher strolled up in the most natural way in the world. He had had one or two dealings with Benstein, had dined with the man, in fact, but he had contrived not to see Mrs. Benstein in public till to-day. He dropped into a chair and began to talk.

"You feel any attraction to this kind of thing?" he asked.

"Well, not much," was the candid reply. "I came here out of curiosity. The Duchess would not have asked me, only that my husband is useful to the Duke. So you have got a Cardinal Moth?"

Frobisher fairly gasped, though he dexterously recovered himself. He smiled into the dark, swimming eyes of his companion. Their strange mystery irritated as well as fascinated him.

"And what can you possibly know about the Cardinal Moth?" he asked.

"Well, I know a great many things. You see my father was a merchant in the Orient, and my mother had some of the Parsee about her. We gravitate to strange things. But I see you have the Cardinal Moth, and, what is more, I know where you got it from."

The last words came with a quick indrawing of the breath that faintly suggested a hiss.

"Paul Lopez is by way of being a relation of mine," Mrs. Benstein went on. "At one time we were engaged to be married. I was much annoyed when he changed his mind. Sir Clement, why do you choose to be so amiable to-day?"

The quick audacity of the question stirred Frobisher's admiration. This woman was going to get on. With his fine instinct, Frobisher decided to be frank. Frankness would pay here.

"Well, I am a great admirer of courage," he said. "I admire your splendid audacity in coming here in broad daylight wearing diamonds."

A wonderful smile filled the eyes of the listener.

"Why shouldn't I wear them if I like?" she demanded. "The stones are wonderfully becoming to me. And, after all, it is only a matter of what these chattering parrots here call fashion. See how they are all watching me, imagine the things they are saying about me."

"And I am quite sure you do not mind in the least?"

"Not I. I must be doing something out of the common, something daring and original."

"It was anything but original, but certainly very daring, for one so beautiful to marry a man as—er, mature, as Aaron Benstein," Frobisher murmured. It was an audacious speech, and Mrs. Benstein smiled. "You might have had a duke or even a popular actor."

"Well, you see, I was sick of being poor. It is not my fault that I was born an artist with a second-hand clothes shop in Hoxton for a home. I don't look the part, do I? And Aaron came and fairly worshipped the ground I stood on. Except for money, and the making of it, he is perfectly childish."

"Therefore he tells you all his secrets like the dutiful husband that he is?"

"Oh, yes. I find some of the secrets useful. There is the Countess of Castlemanor yonder, who has stared at me in a way that would be vulgar in the common walk of life. And yet, if I went up and whispered a word or two in her ear, she would gladly drive me home in her car."

Frobisher laughed silently. Here was a woman after his own heart—a woman who studied society and despised it. And Frobisher was going to make use of her, as he made use of everybody, only this was going to be one of his finest efforts. Isa Benstein was no ordinary pawn in the game.

"I should like to see you do it," he chuckled.

"What is the use? She is a poor creature, despite her title and her marvellous taste in hats. Can't you give me a similar hold on Lady Frobisher? There would be some fun in humbling her."

Again Frobisher laughed. The splendid audacity of the woman fascinated him. The people he made use of as a rule were not amusing. And here was a power. It pleased his vanity to know that he was bending a power like this to his will.

"I am angry with myself to think of what I have lost," he said. "My dear Mrs. Benstein, it can all be arranged without annoyance to the lady who does me the honour to rule my household. I will bring my wife to you presently, and she shall ask you to her fancy dance next week."

"That will doubtless be a great pleasure to Lady Frobisher," Mrs. Benstein smiled. "I shall like her, but I shall like Miss Lyne a great deal better. And if you try to force her to marry that detestable little Arnott I shall do my best to spoil your hand."

Frobisher's teeth flashed in one of his uneasy grins. He felt like a man who has discovered a new volcano quite unexpectedly. What an amazing lot this woman knew, to be sure; what an extraordinary fascination she must exercise over her doting husband. He followed her glance now to a distant seat under a tree where Angela and Harold Denvers were talking together.

"Would you like to match your wits against mine at that stake?" he asked.

Mrs. Benstein declined the challenge. She was only a woman after all, she declared.

"I like the look of the girl," she said thoughtfully. "She's honest and true. And he's a man all through. Now go and bring Lady Frobisher to me, and we will talk prettily together, and she shall show me how much it is possible for a society woman to hate another woman without showing it. You want to make use of me or some subtle purpose, but it suits my mood for the present to comply."

Frobisher went off chuckling to himself. The creature was absolutely charming, so clever and subtle. But she was neither subtle nor clever enough to see his game, Frobisher flattered himself. In a profound state of boredom Lady Frobisher was nibbling a tepid strawberry dipped in sippy cream. She was tired to death, she said, and wanted to go home.

"It's a tonic you need," Frobisher said, with one of his quick grins. "Come along, and have your mental shower-bath. I'm going to introduce Mrs. Benstein to you."

Lady Frobisher rose stiffly. Her little white teeth were clenched passionately. But she made no protest. Under the eyes of fashionable London she crossed over to the place where Mrs. Benstein was seated. She knew perfectly well that

her action would be the theme of general conversation at a hundred dinner-tables to-night, but she moved along now as if she were sweeping the primrose path of conventionality with her lace gown. There was some little seed of consolation in the fact that Mrs. Benstein made no attempt to shake hands. On the whole, she was perhaps the coolest and most collected of the two.

"My wife very much desires to make your acquaintance," Frobisher said in his smoothest manner. "Didn't you say something about a fancy-dress ball, Norah?"

Lady Frobisher was understood to murmur something that suggested pleasure and a wish fulfilled. She was not quite sure whether she had proffered the invitation or not, but it was a small matter, as Frobisher was not likely to permit the card to be omitted.

"It is very good of you, and I shall come with pleasure," Mrs. Benstein said. "I am not sure, but I fancy that society is going to amuse me. Of course, it is all a matter of time, though I could have pushed my way here before. You see, the Duchess asked me here of her own volition. My dear Lady Frobisher, do you see how Lady Castlemanor is glaring at you? Yes, I will do it. I will go and dine with that lady as honoured guest on Monday night. And you shall come and see my triumph."

Lady Frobisher turned feebly to her husband for support, but he was too frankly enjoying the performance to interfere. Here was a new farce, a new source of amusement.

"You will be a success," he predicted. "You must come to the dance as 'diamonds' or something of that kind. You would carry off any amount of jewels, and nothing becomes you better. You see we are already becoming the centre of attraction."

People were passing by with studied inattention. A great society dame paused and put up her glasses. In anybody else the stare would have been rude. The great lady's face flushed crimson with anger, much as if her own cook had been found masquerading in that select assembly. She took a step forward, paused, and then walked hurriedly away. Frobisher turned away to hide the mirth that he found difficult to control. He had come here practically on business, therefore the unexpected pleasure was all the more enjoyable. With a bow and a smile Lady Frobisher turned and took her husband's arm.

"Well, I suppose you are satisfied now," she said, with a fierce indrawing of her breath. "With your saturnine cleverness, perhaps you will tell me why the Marchioness behaved so strangely."

"The thing is obvious," Frobisher chuckled. "Benstein is a money-lender in a big way, old plate and jewels, and all that sort of thing. And he's got all her ladyship's diamonds. Probably takes the best of them home and shows his wife.

Being weak and doting, she has them to play with. And Mrs. Benstein is wearing the old lady's collar and star this afternoon. And people say there's no comedy in society!"

Lady Frobisher turned away mortified and cut to the quick. And this was the class of woman that she had actually asked to her dance, one of the great social functions of the season! Frobisher threw himself into a deck-chair and gave way to his own amused thoughts.

"Clever fellow, Lopez," he chuckled. "On the whole, he earned that cheque. But I don't quite see what he meant by saying that Mrs. Benstein—by gad, I've got it! Lopez, you are a genius! It's any money that my grip on the Shan is in Benstein's house, and she can get it."

Frobisher rose and strolled back to Mrs. Benstein's side. It would have been impossible to guess from his face of the fiendish elation that burnt within him.

"I've been thinking over that jewel idea I gave you," he said. "Are you disposed towards it?"

"Yes," Mrs. Benstein said, thoughtfully. "I am very favourably disposed towards it indeed."

"Then wear rubies," Frobisher urged. "Rubies will suit you splendidly. I have the greatest fancy to see you decked out in rubies. If you can get hold of some large ones. I'll come round and have tea with you to-morrow, and we can discuss the matter thoroughly."

CHAPTER XII. A MODEL HUSBAND.

Isa Benstein drove in her closed car thoughtfully homewards, a little less conscious than usual of the attractions caused wherever she went. On the whole she had enjoyed herself; she had got on far better than she had expected. It was characteristic of her self-reliance and strength of character that she had gone to the Duchess's party quite alone and knowing nobody there, whilst she herself was familiar by sight and reputation to everybody who would be present.

She had directed her husband to obtain that invitation out of a pure spirit of curiosity. She had read paragraphs touching the great social function in the smart papers, and Isa Benstein had smiled to herself as she remembered that but for her husband and his money-bags the great gathering could not possibly have

taken place at all.

By instinct, by intuition, by observation, Isa had pretty well gauged modern society. She had seen it at Ascot and Cowes, at Hurlingham and Covent Garden, but as yet she had never actually been in it. And now her first experience was over.

She had almost come to the conclusion that the game was not worth the candle, when Frobisher came up and spoke to her. With her natural astuteness she had not long to see that Frobisher had some intention of making use of her. That being so, the game should be mutual. Not for one moment was Mrs. Benstein deceived—by some magnetic process Lady Frobisher had been forced to be polite, and ask her to that fancy-dress ball. Mrs. Benstein had smiled, but she had seen the rooted repugnance in Lady Frobisher's face, the constrained look in her eyes.

"I wonder how he managed it?" she asked herself as she drove along. "And what does that little creature with the brow of a Memnon and the mouth of a tom-cat want to get out of me? Money is at the root of most things, but it can't be money in that quarter."

Berkeley Square was reached at length, and for the moment Mrs. Benstein banished Frobisher from her mind. All she required now was a cup of tea and a cigarette. Most society women would have sacrificed a great deal to know the secret of Mrs. Benstein's complexion, but the secret was a simple one—she ate sparingly, and she never touched intoxicating drinks in her life. The tea was waiting in the drawing-room, the water was boiling on the spirit-kettle. A slight, dark man rose as Mrs. Benstein entered.

"I'll take a cup with you, Isa," he said. "Nobody makes such tea as yours."

"Paul Lopez," the hostess said. "I have not been honoured like this since the day when you and I—"

"Agreed to part. Who was wise over that business, Isa? No sugar, please. I loved you too well—"

"Never! You are incapable of loving anybody, Paul. I gave you the whole of my affection—and a scarlet, flaming plant it was—and you trampled it down and killed it. Not so much as a cutting remains. And why? Because you were ambitious and I had no money."

Lopez waved the accusation aside with his Apostle spoon.

"It was the wiser part," he said calmly. "I shall never be rich like Aaron, for instance, though I have ten times his intellect. My love of perilous adventure prevents that. And when I look round me, I am quite pleased with myself. Persian carpets, Romneys, Knellers, Lelys, Louis Quinze furniture, Cellini silver, even Apostle spoons. Have you got a complete set?"

"So I understand," Isa Benstein said carelessly.

"And there you have the keynote of this wonderful house. The exquisite pleasure you must have had in the collecting of all these beautiful things! And yourself?"

Mrs. Benstein smiled queerly as she bent over the teapot. When the time came she was going to be even with this man, though, characteristically, she had no flaming anger against him. She had loved him once, and let him see it, and he had weighed the possibilities, and coldly told her it was not good enough, or words to that effect. The secret was theirs alone.

"You cannot say that you are not happy," Lopez said after a long pause.

"Well, no. Happiness is but a negative quality, after all. I am probably a great deal happier than if I had married a scoundrel like yourself, for instance. That is Aaron's voice in the hall. I suppose you have come to see him on business, or you would not be here at all."

Lopez gravely accepted his dismissal. All this wonderful beauty and intellect would have been his had he at one time chosen to take it. Slowly and thoughtfully Mrs. Benstein went up to dress for dinner. She chose her gown and her jewels and her flowers with the utmost care; she might have been going to a state concert or dance, from the nicety of her selection.

"Madame is going out to-night?" the maid suggested.

"Madame is going to do nothing of the kind," Isa said, with one of her seductive smiles. "I am going to stay at home and dine *tête-à-tête* with my husband. Always look as nice to your husband, Minon, as to other people. You will find the trouble an excellent investment."

Benstein was late. He had been detained so long that Isa was in the dining-room before he arrived breathlessly and full of apologies. With his fat, fair face, and heavy, pendulous lips, he made an almost repulsive contrast to his wife. His dress-suit was shabby and ill-fitting, suggesting that it had been bought second-hand like his large pumps. The red silk socks bore a pleasing resemblance to the cyclist's trousers when confined to the leg with those inevitable clips; they bulged over at the ankles. Benstein wore no diamonds; he had not even a large stud in his crumpled shirt. It was a great deprivation, and the financier mourned over the fact in secret. But Isa was inexorable on that point. The man was hideously common enough, without jewels. Besides, Isa's interference in the matter was by way of being a compliment. It showed at least that she took some sort of interest in the man she had married.

"Kept by business," Benstein wheezed. He raised his dyed eyebrows. He flattered himself that the dye took from his seventy years, whereas the deception merely added to them. "Nice you look! Lovely!"

His little eyes appraised her. Despite his many limitations, Benstein had a keen love of the beautiful—*qua* beautiful. Isa stood before him a vision of love-

liness in a dress of green touched here and there with gold. The shaded lights rendered her eyes all the more brilliant.

"Give me a kiss," Benstein said hoarsely. "When you look like that I can refuse you nothing. I am getting into my dotage, men say. Well, perhaps. Good thing some of them can't see me now."

The elaborate dinner proceeded in that perfect Tudor dining-room. Not a single article of furniture was there that lacked historic interest. The old oak and silver were priceless, and every bit of it had been collected under Isa Benstein's own eye. No dealer had ever succeeded in imposing on her.

The silk slips were drawn at length from the polished dark oak with the wonderful red tints in it, so that the nodding flowers were reflected from a lake of thin blood. Here and there the decanters gleamed, a Tudor model of a Spanish galleon mounted on wheels was pushed along the table, its various compartments filled with all kinds of cigarettes.

"No, a Virginian for me," Isa said, as the servants withdrew. The drawing-room was a dream of beauty, but she preferred the dining-room. For restfulness and form and artistic completeness there was no room like the Tudor hall, she declared. "Give me good, honest tobacco."

"How did you get on to-day?" Benstein asked.

"I didn't. I sat and watched the procession. Sir Clement Frobisher came and made himself agreeable to me, and so did his wife—under compulsion. But she asked me to her dance, and I am going."

"Hope that they won't ask me, too," Benstein said uneasily.

"You need not go, in any case; in fact, I'd rather you didn't. I've been scheming out my dress, Aaron; do you happen to be strong in rubies just now?"

Benstein nodded his huge head and smiled. More or less, he had the jewels of the great world in his possession. It was his whim to keep them at home. He trusted nobody, not even a bank. Besides, nearly every day brought something neat and ingenious in the way of a jewel fraud.

"I can rig you out in anything," he said. "Yes, I could pretty well cover you in rubies. They're all on diamonds just for the moment, so that they bring their emeralds and rubies to redeem the white stones. Wonder what some of those big swells would say if they knew you had got their jewels to wear, Isa?"

Isa smiled at some amusing recollection, but she held her peace. Humour was not Benstein's strong point. He puffed away to the library, followed by his wife, and once there locked the door. Here was a large iron sheet that, being opened, disclosed something in the nature of a strong-room. There were scores of tiny pigeon-holes, each filled with cases and bags all carefully noted and numbered, for method was Benstein's strong point.

"More papers," Isa exclaimed. "A fresh lot since yesterday. Is it some new

business, Aaron?"

"Count Lefroy," Benstein wheezed. "Valuable concessions from the Shan of Koordstan. Shouldn't wonder if those papers don't become worth half a million. Queer-looking things. Like to see them?"

Isa expressed a proper curiosity on the point. The papers were in Hindustani and English, with some cramped-looking signature and the impression of a seal at the bottom.

"Those signatures are both forgeries," Mrs. Benstein said, after careful examination. "And that seal, I feel quite sure, is a clumsy imitation of something better."

"Doesn't matter if they are," Benstein said without emotion. "If they are real, I only get a finger in the pie; if they are forged I bag the whole of the pastry. Let me once get Lefroy under my thumb like that, and I'll make a pocket borough of Koordstan. Leave your Aaron alone for business, my dear. Now let us see what we can do in the way of rubies, though I am a great fool to—"

"It's too late in the day to think of that," Isa said sharply. "Turn them out."

The shabby cases began to yield their glittering contents. The electrics glowed upon the piled-up mass of rubies, bracelets, brooches, tiaras, armlets—the loot of the East, it seemed to be. Isa's slim fingers played with the shining strings lovingly.

"This is even better than I expected," she murmured. "I shall be able to trim my dress with them, I can have them all over my skirt, I can cover my bodice. I am going simply as 'rubies.' Give me that tiara."

She placed the glittering crown on her head, she draped her neck and arms with the beautiful stones. Benstein gasped, and his little eyes watered. Was there ever so lovely a woman before? he wondered. When Isa looked at him like that he could refuse her nothing. It was criminally weak, but—

"The thing is almost complete," Isa said. "Now haven't you got something out of the common, some black swan amongst rubies that I could attach to the centre of my forehead, something to blaze like the sun? Aaron, you've got it; you are concealing something from me."

The financier laughed weakly, still dazzled by that show of beauty. In a dazed way he unlocked a little compartment and took a huge stone from a leather bag. His hands trembled as he handed it to his wife.

"You can try it," he said hoarsely; "you can see how it goes. But you can't have that to wear, no, no. If anything happened to it, they would make an international business of it, my life wouldn't be worth a day's purchase. You are not to ask me for that, no, no."

He meandered on in a senile kind of way. With a low cry Isa fastened on the gem. She pressed it to her white forehead, where it blazed and sparkled. The

effect was electric, wonderful. She stood before a mirror fascinated and entranced by her own beauty.

"I shall have it," she said. "I couldn't go without this, Aaron. You are going to have it set into the finest of gold wires for me. Come, I won't even ask you where you got it from. And from what you say, nobody in England is likely to recognise it. Aaron, do, do."

Her smile was subtle and pleading. Nobody could have withstood it. Benstein gabbled something, his cheeks shook.

"Oh, Lord," he groaned. "If anything does happen! Well, well, my darling! Unlock the door and stay here till I come back. What artful creatures you women are! My dear, my dear. Positively I must go into the dining-room and treat myself to a liqueur-brandy!"

CHAPTER XIII. THE QUEEN OF THE RUBIES.

The faint sobbing of violins sounded from somewhere, giving the artistic suggestion of being far off, the dominant note of the leader hung high on the air. Now and then a door opened somewhere, letting in the splitting crack of Piccadilly, the raucous voices of news-boys more or less mendaciously. Sir Clement Frobisher stood before the glass in his smoking-room setting his white tie. Over his shoulder he could see the dark, smileless face of Lopez looking in.

"What do you want here to-night?" he asked. "What are you thinking about me?"

"I'd give a good round sum—if I had it—to know what you are thinking about," Lopez retorted.

"Money isn't worth it. I was wondering if I really looked like a waiter, after all."

"Well, you don't. There is something too infernally sardonic and devilish about your head for that. May I take a cigarette? I dare say you wonder how I got here to-night? I—well, I just walked in. That kind of audacity always pays. Also you wonder why I came."

"Indeed I don't. You want me to lend you one hundred pounds. What do you do with your money, friend Lopez? Not that it is any business of mine."

"That being so, you have answered your own question," Lopez said dryly.

"Every man has his weakness, even the strongest chain has its breaking-point. Let me have one hundred pounds. And pay yourself ten times over, as you always do for your accommodation. Did I earn my last five hundred pounds?"

"Indeed you did," Frobisher said frankly. "A wonderful woman, Mrs. Benstein."

"About the most wonderful I ever met. None of your dark schemers about her, none of your flashing eyes and figures drawn up to their full height. But there is the rare mind in its beautiful setting. You are going to make use of that woman? We shall see."

Both men smiled meaningly. The plaintive wail of the violins rose and fell, from the great hall beyond came the murmur of voices. Lady Frobisher's great function had commenced. Frobisher glanced significantly at the clock. He was in no fancy-dress himself, presumably he was disguised as an honest man, as Lopez suggested. He laughed heartily at the gibe, and pushed Lopez outside the door with a cheque in his pocket.

Quite a crowd of cloaked and dominoed women had gathered there. Lady Frobisher had reverted to the old idea of a masked ball and the uncovering after the last dance before supper. The masks appeared to be walking about as they generally did, for Shepherd strolled up to Chloe and Adonis to Aphrodite in a manner that might have suggested collusion to the sophisticated mind. One tall woman, closely draped, touched Frobisher on the arm as he threaded between the silken mysteries.

"I have no flowers," she said. "My man stupidly dropped mine and somebody trod on them. Take me to your conservatory, Sir Clement, and give me my choice."

Frobisher offered his arm; he did not need to ask who the speaker was. Those low, thrilling tones, with the touch of power in them, could only have belonged to Isa Benstein. There was nobody in the conservatory which was devoted to orchids, and nobody was likely to be, for that part of the house was forbidden ground. Mrs. Benstein looked out from under her cloud—only her eyes and nose could be seen.

"May I not be privileged to see your dress?" Frobisher pleaded.

"Certainly not," Isa Benstein laughed. "Why should you be specially favoured? Get me two long sprays of orchid. I shall be content with nothing less than the Cardinal Moth."

It was something in the nature of extracting a tooth, but Frobisher mounted the steps and tore down the two sprays asked for. Isa Benstein whipped them under the folds of her cloak. There was a subtle fragrance about her that a younger man than Frobisher would have found heady.

"I must fly to the dressing-room," she said. "And then to pay my respects

to my hostess. Do you think that she is likely to recognise me?"

Frobisher thought not. He lingered over his cigarette, making not the slightest attempt to play the host, though the dance was in full swing now, and the house echoed to the thud of feet in motion. At the same time, Frobisher was looking forward to plenty of amusement presently, before supper, when everybody unmasked. He grew a little tired of his own company presently and strolled into the ballroom. There the electrics were festooned and garlanded with ropes of roses, the plaintive band could not be seen behind a jungle of feathery ferns, a bewildering kaleidoscope of colour looped and twisted and threaded in a perfect harmony.

A few of the younger and consequently more *blasé* men lined the walls. A cavalier of sorts with a long, thin scar on the side of his lean head was watching the proceedings. Frobisher touched him on the arm.

"Not dancing, Lefroy?" he said. "Are you past all those fleeting joys?"

"It's an old wound in my thigh," Lefroy explained. He was just a little chagrined to discover that his host had so easily detected him. Frobisher's superior cleverness always angered him. "It is my amusement to spot the various women, and I have located most of them. But there is one! Ciel!"

"One that even meets with your critical approval! Good. She must be a pearl among women. Point her out to me and let us see if our tastes agree."

Lefroy's eyes glittered behind their mask as they swept over the reeling crowd. A moment or two later and he just touched Frobisher on the arm.

"Here she comes," he whispered. "On the arm of General Marriott. No mistaking his limp, and his white hair like a file of soldiers on parade. What a costume and what a cost! That scarlet band across her brow over the mask is wonderfully effective. That woman is an artist, Frobisher. And she has the most perfect figure in Europe. Who is she?"

Frobisher made no reply; he was studying Isa Benstein's costume—lustrous black from head to foot, with white seams fairly covered with rubies. There were rubies all over her corsage, bands of them up her arm, a serpent necklace round the milky way of her throat. The whole thing was daring, bizarre, and yet artistic to a point. The scarlet band across the brows struck a strong and vivid note. The rubies were not so bright as the woman's eyes. As she came nearer the tangle of blossom across her bosom showed up clearly. Lefroy gasped.

"A mystery in a mystery," he said. "She is wearing the Cardinal Moth. Who is she?"

Frobisher laughed, and protested that each must solve the problem for himself. He liked to puzzle and bewilder Lefroy, and he was doing both effectively at the present moment. The Count would have liked to take the little man by the shoulders and shake him heartily.

"I believe you know who she is," he growled. "Come, Frobisher, gratify my curiosity."

"I will refresh it if you like," Frobisher said with one of his sudden grins. "I am not positively sure, but I fancy I can give a pretty shrewd guess as to the identity of Madame Incognita. But would it be fair to give her secret away before supper-time? Patience, my fire-eater."

The lady of the rubies passed along leaning on the arm of her companion. She gave one glance in Frobisher's direction, and Lefroy looked eagerly for some sign of recognition. But the dark eyes were absolutely blank so far as the master of the house was concerned.

Lefroy turned and followed the couple in front. As Frobisher lounged back to the smoking-room for another cigarette, he almost ran into his wife.

As hostess she was wearing no mask. Her beautiful face was just a little set and tired.

"Seems to be all right," Frobisher croaked. "They appear to be enjoying themselves. And yet half of them would like better to come to my funeral. Some pretty dresses here, but one head and shoulders over the others.

"You mean the ruby guise," Lady Frobisher exclaimed, with some animation. "Is it not superb! So daring, and yet in the best of taste. Everybody is asking who she is and nobody seems to know. I declare I feel quite proud of my mystery."

"An angel unawares," Frobisher laughed silently. "You never can tell. And you mean to say that you can't guess who it is that is exciting all this attention?"

Lady Frobisher looked swiftly down into the face of her husband. The corrugated grin, the impish mischief told her a story. It seemed very hard that the woman she most desired to keep in the background was actually creating the sensation of the evening.

"Mrs. Benstein," she whispered. "Clement, do you really think so?"

"My dear, I am absolutely certain of it. And why not? Isn't Mrs. Benstein as well-bred as a score of American women here to-night? Doesn't she carry a long pedigree in that lovely face of hers? Some folks here to-night suffer from a pedigree so old that even their grandfathers are lost in the mists of antiquity. What short-sighted creatures you women are! Can't you see that a creature so rich and daring and clever as Mrs. Benstein will be riding on the crest of the wave within a year? And you will gain kudos from the mere fact that your house saw her *début* into 'society'—Heaven save the mark!"

Lady Frobisher had no more to say. There was a great deal of cynical truth in Frobisher's words. Mrs. Benstein was going to be a brilliant success as far as the men were concerned, therefore her presence at the assemblies of the smart set would become almost necessary. Lefroy came back at the same time, having learnt little or nothing in the refreshment room. Lady Frobisher might have

gratified his curiosity if he had asked her, only she gave him no opportunity. She detested the man thoroughly; with her fine instinct she had detected the tiger under his handsome, swaggering exterior.

"No luck?" Frobisher laughed. "Well, it is nearly twelve o'clock, and then you will know. Come with me and smoke a cigarette till the clock strikes. It will soothe your nerves. A small soda and a drop of 1820 brandy, eh? Don't give my general run of guests that liqueur."

Lefroy nodded carelessly. He would have it appear that he had dismissed the matter from his mind. But he had finished his cigarette and brandy as the clock chimed the midnight hour, and then, with a fine assumption of indifference, he returned to the ballroom. The band was playing something weird from Greig, the guests stopped just where they stood, and each cast their masks upon the floor.

The swashbuckler was in luck, so it seemed to him, for the lady of the rubies stood smiling by the side of her military escort just opposite. The scarlet band had gone with the mask, revealing a fillet of rubies round the smooth white brow, a fillet with one huge ruby in the middle, so large and blazing that Lefroy stood aghast. He staggered back, and something like a stammering oath escaped him. The vulgarism was lost for the moment, and people congregated round the stranger. That many people there did not know who Mrs. Benstein was only gave piquancy to the situation.

"My God!" Lefroy muttered, "who is she? Where did she get it from? It's the real thing. I would swear to it amongst a million imitations. And I dare swear that, despite his air of mystery, Frobisher— But he must not see it, I must prevent that, anyway."

Lefroy hastened back to the smoking-room. His limbs were trembling under him now, a little moisture broke out on his forehead and trickled down his face. He had made a discovery that wrenched even his iron nerves. And at any cost Frobisher must not know.

He was smoking and sipping brandy as Lefroy entered. If he saw anything strange or strained about the face of Count Lefroy, he did not betray the fact. He looked up gaily.

"Come to fetch me?" he asked. "Want me to see the lady of the rubies? Well, was the face worthy of the setting? Did you recognise her?"

"Never saw her in my life before," Lefroy said hoarsely. He stammered on, saying anything to gain time, anything to keep Frobisher where he was. "I've lost interest in the whole thing. Let's stay here and smoke, and talk about old times. What do you say?"

Frobisher said nothing. He studied Lefroy's white face intently. Outside was a babel of laughter and chatter and the swish of drapery. A clear, calm voice

announced a late visitor.

"His Highness the Shan of Koordstan," the footman said.

Frobisher glanced at Lefroy's face. In itself it was a tragedy.

CHAPTER XIV.

"UNEASY LIES THE HEAD—"

As a matter of fact, His Highness the Shan of Koordstan had not intended to go to Lady Frobisher's dance at all, though he had been graciously pleased to accept the invitation. His present intention was to go to bed early and be a little more careful for the future. There was a shakiness about the ruler of Koordstan that told its own tale, a shakiness that would not have conduced to his popularity with his subjects in the Far East.

An interview with a recently-arrived minister of his had changed his plans entirely. In place of bed he had a cold bath and a cup of strong coffee, and sat down, as far as his aching head would allow him, to review the situation. The final outcome was a fit of utter despair and an express letter to Harold Denvers, who fortunately was at home and ready to respond to the invitation.

The Eastern potentate was smoking moodily as he arrived. Harold significantly declined the offer of refreshment of a spirituous description.

"Meaning that I have had enough already," the Shan said moodily. "But I'm sober as a judge now, had enough to make me. The shocking luck I've had lately!"

He tossed a cigarette across to Denvers, and lighted a fresh one of his own.

"So I sent you to give me a leg up if you can. You are the only honest man of the lot. Denvers, I'm in a fine mess over the Blue Stone. If I don't produce it at once I'm done for. It would be madness for me to show my face at home again."

"Somebody has discovered that your Highness has parted with it?"

"That's it. Lefroy is the rogue in the play. The game is Koordstan; for years he has been trying to get rid of me and put my cousin in my place. Even my own ministers are against me. And now I feel positive that Lefroy has given me away. They don't ask me to show the stone, or accuse me of parting with it—they are too deep for that. A minister comes with a lot of literature which he calls important documents of State which require to be sealed immediately. That rascal has been in my cousin's pay for years. And the worst of it is, the whole thing looks so

natural and straightforward that I can't refuse, especially as everything has my sanction."

"The document must be sealed with the Blue Stone?" Harold asked.

"Inevitably. It has been the custom for generations. Any deviation from this rule would do for me at once. Hamid Khan was here this afternoon, and I put him off this time by saying I was ill, which was no more than the truth. What shall I say when he comes back presently? If my confounded head did not ache so, I might find some way out of the difficulty, but as it is——"

The Shan smote his fist passionately on the table. Nothing was any good, nothing could save the situation but the immediate production of the twenty thousand pounds needed to recover the jewel from Benstein. At the present moment the Shan had no resources whatever; he had always mortgaged his income, and most of his personal property had been dissipated in his brilliant pursuit of pleasure.

"But that's more or less beyond the point," he groaned. "The stone must be redeemed at once. I could not possibly put Hamid Khan off after to-night, even if I can manage that."

"That will give us time to think," said Harold. "Let your man know that you don't keep so sacred a jewel at your hotel. You have heard of Chancery Lane Safe Deposit?"

The Shan's eyes twinkled. His subtle mind rose to the suggested deception. For the present, at any rate, he saw his way to a pleasing subterfuge. He was pondering over the matter when there came a timid knock at the door, and a slim brown figure came humbly in.

"Hamid Khan," the Shan explained. "Why do you worry me again to-night? Didn't I say I was too ill to be troubled with state business?"

Hamid prostrated himself at his master's feet. He was desolate and heart-broken; might any number of dogs defile his father's grave for his presumption, but the thing had to be done.

"I haven't got the stone," the Shan said, "I haven't been well enough to fetch it myself, and I dare not trust anybody else. Dog, do you suppose I should keep the jewel here? There is a place of vaults and steel chambers and strong rooms guarded night and day by warders, where the wealthy keep their valuables. The place is called the Safe Deposit, and is hard by where the learned lawyers argue. That is where the stone is, in proof of which I show you the key."

The Shan gravely held up a latch-key. Acting though he was, there was a dignity about him that quite impressed Denvers. Hamid was impressed also, or his face belied him. He was sorry to have offended his royal master, but he was only obeying orders. Should he come again on the morrow?

"Ay, at midday," the Shan said loftily. "Now take your miserable body from

my presence.”

The Shan’s dignity collapsed as the door closed behind Hamid Khan. He looked to Harold for assistance. He had not more than fourteen hours or so—and most of them the hours of the night—to find salvation. All the time Harold was leisurely turning over matters in his mind. If he could manage this thing for the Shan his future was made. He had his finger on the centre of an international intrigue almost. The Shan had always been favourable to England, his tastes and inclinations, his very vices, were English, whereas the new aspect leant towards Russia. The British Government doubtless would have stood by the Shan at this juncture had they known.

”There’s only one thing for it,” Harold said after a long pause. ”We must try and work on Benstein’s cupidity. He knows you, he is well aware that your name is good for a large sum of money, only he will have to wait for it. And of your integrity there is no doubt.”

”Your Foreign Secretary does not think so,” the Shan groaned.

”I am not speaking of morals now, but stability. For the time you are hard up. If you will eschew champagne for a time, not to mention other things, you could make it worth Benstein’s while to wait for a few weeks. Ask him to let you have the Blue Stone for a few days, after which it will be returned to him until it is properly redeemed. For this accommodation you are prepared to pay a further two thousand pounds.”

The Shan nodded greedily. He was prepared to promise anything. His lips were twitching with excitement. He rose and put on his coat.

”Let us go at once,” he said. ”But stop, do you know where Benstein lives? And if we do find him it’s long odds that stone is deposited with his bankers.”

”Benstein lives in Berkeley Square,” Denvers explained. ”He is growing old and senile, he has come to that cunning stage when he does not trust anybody. He keeps all his valuables in a big strong-room at his house. That I know for certain. He is sure to be at home.”

”Then we’ll go at once. It’s a forlorn hope, but still—come along.” Denvers checked his impulsive companion. Common prudence must not be forgotten.

”Your Highness forgets that you are certain to be watched,” he said. ”Your friend Hamid or some of his spies are sure to be pretty close. I’ll go away from the hotel and wait for you in Piccadilly. Then you steal out by the side door and meet me.”

The Shan nodded approval. His head was too bad for him to think for himself. Harold stood on the steps of Gardner’s Hotel, and hailed the first taxi that passed. The cabman was to drive to Piccadilly and there wait.

Progress in Piccadilly was slow in consequence of the block of carriages before Frobisher’s house. The guests were arriving in a steady stream, and Den-

vers amused himself by identifying most of them. One of the last comers was Lord Rashburn, Foreign Secretary, and his wife. Harold smiled to himself as he wondered what his lordship would give for his own private information. It might be necessary to appeal to Rashburn presently, and it was a good thing to know where to find him. Only it would be useless for Denvers to try and obtain admission to Frobisher's house.

The Shan came up presently, and Berkeley Square was reached at length. Benstein was at home, and the footman had no doubt that he would see his visitors, late as it was. Many a bit of business with people who needed money in a desperate hurry had Benstein done between the dinner-hour and midnight. He was seated in his library now with a fat cigarette between his teeth and poring over a mass of accounts. To reckon up his money and to gloat over his many securities was the one pleasure of Benstein's life.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen—glad to see you," he said, rubbing his puffy hands together. "If there is anything that I can do for your Highness, it will be a pleasure."

"His Highness wants to put two thousand pounds into your pocket," Denvers said. "It is the matter of the Blue Stone of—"

A queer sound came from Benstein's lips, and his mottled face turned as pale as it was possible.

"You don't mean to say that you want the stone to-night?" he gasped.

"Why else are we here?" Harold demanded. The air was full of suspicion and he had caught some of it. "It is absolutely necessary that we should have it back, for a time at least. It was distinctly understood, I think, that the stone was to be returned at any hour of the day or night that we required it?"

Benstein's big head swayed backwards and forwards pendulously, his thick lips were wide apart, and showing the gaps in the yellow teeth beyond. Harold's suspicions became a certainty. Benstein had parted with the stone.

"Do you want it now?" Benstein said, as if the words had been dragged from him.

Harold intimated that he did want the stone immediately. Slowly Benstein was recovering. The rich red blood was creeping into his face again.

"It is impossible," he said. "Usually I keep most of my valuables here. But I recognised the political as well as the pecuniary value of the Blue Stone, and I did not dare. The stone is at the Bank of England, and I cannot get it before ten to-morrow. It is very unfortunate."

"Very," Harold said dryly. "But we must make the best of it. I have a pretty shrewd idea where the stone is, but my guess would not have been the Bank of England. We don't propose to redeem the gem; we suggest that you should let the Shan have it for two or three days on the understanding that when the business

is completed your charge is increased by the sum of two thousand pounds.”

”But this is not business,” Benstein pleaded. ”Under the peculiar circumstances—”

”Precisely,” Harold interrupted dryly. ”Under the peculiar circumstances you are going to accommodate us. Mr. Benstein, I fancy that you and I understand one another.”

Benstein’s eyes dropped, and the fat cigarette between his fingers trembled. He muttered the talisman word ”business” again; but he was understood to agree to the terms offered. He was shakily eager to offer his distinguished guests refreshments of some kind, but Denvers dragged the Shan away. Once in the street, the latter stopped and demanded to know what the pantomime meant.

”It’s pretty plain,” Harold said. ”Old Benstein hasn’t got your jewel at this moment.”

”Hasn’t got it? Do you mean to say that he...? Preposterous! But in the morning—”

”In the morning it will be all right again. In the morning you will see quite another Benstein—a Benstein who has changed his mind, and will refuse to part with the Blue Stone so long as a single penny remains unpaid. I startled him to-night. I got astride of that figment of a conscience of his. But I am going to help you to clench the business. Come along.”

”Where are you going to?” the Shan asked feebly.

”Back to your hotel. You are going to dress up in your State war-paint and proceed at once to Lady Frobisher’s dress-ball. I suppose you’ve any amount of dresses and that kind of thing—I mean you could rig out a staff, if necessary?”

”I’ve got all the mummery for going to Court, if that is what you mean.”

”Good,” Harold cried. ”I’ll just step into this chemist’s and get a few pigments necessary to the successful performance of my little comedy. You are going to the dance as the Shan of Koordstan, and I am going carefully disguised as Aben Abdullah, your suite.”

CHAPTER XV. HUNT THE SLIPPER.

A fine perspiration stood out on Lefroy’s face, he swayed to and fro like one in an advanced stage of intoxication, the Count was utterly unmanned for the

moment. As his brain and eye cleared presently, Frobisher came out of the mist in the semblance of a man who was manifestly enjoying himself.

"I pray you sit down," he said in his silkiest manner. "My dear Count, the heat has been too much for you. The hero of a thousand adventures succumbs to a high thermometer—it is possible to choke a Hercules with an orange pip. A little of the old brandy, eh?"

Frobisher's face was perfectly grave now, only the dilation of his pupils and the faint quivering of his lips denoted his amusement. Lefroy forced a smile in reply. He was conscious of the fact that that little demon opposite was reading his inmost thoughts.

"Just a little of the brandy," Frobisher said coaxingly. "The kind that I keep for my very dear friends. Ah, I am sure that is better. Now let us sit down and smoke, and forget the giddy side outside."

Lefroy nodded. The course suggested suited him admiringly. When he was best pleased Frobisher chatted most, and he seemed to be exceedingly pleased about something now. Lefroy would have time to recover his scattered thoughts and define some line of action.

"You have solved the problem of the lady of the rubies?" Sir Clement asked.

"I have," Lefroy replied carelessly. "From a romantic point of view the solution is disappointing. I expected to see a regal personage at the very least, whereas—"

The speaker shrugged his shoulders insolently. The other smiled expectantly.

"Go on, my dear Lefroy. I am all attention, I assure you. The lady of the rubies is—?"

It was on the tip of Lefroy's tongue to snarlingly reply that Frobisher knew perfectly well, but that was bad policy under the circumstances.

"You are typical of the spirit of the age," he said. "All the same, I hardly expected to see the wife of a moneylender under your roof. Lady Frobisher—"

"Has progressed rapidly of late in the cult of the proletariat. So Mrs. Benstein is the lady of the rubies. I half expected it from the first—only the wife of a moneylender could sport jewels like that. But she is a beautiful woman, Lefroy, and she is going to make a great social success."

Lefroy could only mutter something in reply. He had one great aim in view at the present moment—to get back to the ballroom and persuade Frobisher to remain where he was. Did the Count but know it, Frobisher was just as eager to reverse the order of the procedure. But no suggestion of this escaped him, he sat there smiling as if he and a double meaning were strangers.

"I am very partial to rubies myself," he said. "In a modest way I am a collector, and my uncut stones are worth an inspection. My wife also has the same

weakness, which is another of the many strong bonds that bind us together. I'll show them to you."

"Don't trouble," Lefroy said hastily. "Any other time will do. If you have to fetch them—"

"Sit down. Positively you must have another drop of the brandy. Your nerves are better, but not what the nerves of a bold warrior should be."

So saying, Frobisher produced a case from a drawer and laid the contents before Lefroy's eyes. In spite of himself he could not but admire. He did not see the keen, alert look on the face of his host as he bent down to examine the gems. People were passing the open door; there was a light ripple of laughter and conversation. Frobisher darted into the hall.

"This way a moment," he whispered, as he caught his wife by the arm. "Come with me and do as I tell you. You are to keep Lefroy in yonder room for half an hour."

He was back again before Lefroy had missed him. Lady Frobisher's scornful eyes softened as they fell upon the tray of gems.

"We have a taste in common, then, Count," she said.

Lefroy replied suitably enough. He had a strong admiration for the white, cold beauty of this woman; he watched her slim fingers as she toyed with the gems. Some of them were unnamed, whilst others had histories of their own. Frobisher pitched his cigarette into the grate.

"You can amuse the Count, my dear," he said. "He has had some little touch of illness, and should be kept quiet. The gems will interest him. Meanwhile, I will endeavour to take your place."

It was all done so quickly and naturally that Lefroy could do or say nothing. Did Frobisher really know anything or not, he began to wonder. If there was any conspiracy Lady Frobisher knew nothing of it, it only needed a glance at that scornful, beautiful face to feel that. She was talking now easily and naturally enough with one of the stones in her pink palm, and Lefroy had perforce to listen. To leave the room now would have been an unpardonable rudeness—a *gaucherie* Lefroy never allowed himself to commit.

Meanwhile Frobisher had mingled with his guests. He was in no hurry. Lefroy was safely out of the way for a time, and Frobisher always preferred to hunt his game leisurely. Besides, the crush of dancers and guests generally was so great that progression was a matter of some difficulty. He came across Angela presently attired in white and with a pair of gauze wings suggestive of Peace or something of that kind.

"Stop a bit," he said, "and tell me all about it. Upon my word, you are looking exceedingly nice. By common consent, who is the success of the evening?"

"Oh, Mrs. Benstein, without doubt," Angela replied, with sincere admira-

tion. "She is lovely, and those rubies are simply superb. Everybody is talking about them."

"And the fortunate woman herself? How does she wear her blushing honours?"

"Very well indeed. You know, I rather like her. Everybody is asking for an introduction now, but at first people held aloof. I have had a long chat with Mrs. Benstein, and she quite fascinated me. She is going to be a great success."

"Of course she is with her cleverness and audacity, to say nothing of her beauty and her jewels, it could not be otherwise. I must go and pay my respects to her. Where is she?"

But Angela had not the slightest idea. Something like a thousand people were scattered about the long suite of rooms, and there were shady alcoves and dim corners for easy conversation *à deux*. Mingled with the brilliant throng of uniform and fancy dresses the jewelled turban of the Shan of Koordstan stood out. He came up with his companion similarly attired, and held out his hand.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, your Highness," said Frobisher. "I heard that you were not quite——"

"Sober," the Shan said frankly. "I have been leading a deuce of a life lately, Frobisher. My servant here, Aben Abdullah, insisted upon my putting in an appearance here to-night. He has been bullying me as he would never dare to do at home. When we get back I shall have to bowstring him gently. He is a very valuable servant, but he knows too much."

Aben Abdullah bowed and smiled. The Shan extended his patronage to Angela.

"My servant knows a little English," he said. "My dear young lady, would it be too great a trespass on your kindness to ask you to act as his cicerone for a time? I have a little business to discuss with Sir Clement. Aben is very intelligent, and he is a noble in his own country."

Angela expressed her pleasure. She was always ready to sacrifice herself to others; besides, she had rather taken a fancy to this handsome young foreigner, who reminded her somehow of Harold Denvers.

"What would you like to do?" she asked, as they strolled off together.

Aben murmured something about the flowers that he had heard so much about. Could he see them? Angela would be delighted. They stood in a large conservatory at length in the dim light, and then Aben smiled down into Angela's face.

"I feel sure of my disguise now, darling," he whispered. "If I could deceive you, I am not in the least afraid that Sir Clement will find me out."

"But what does it mean, Harold?" Angela asked. "You certainly reminded me of yourself; but I should never have penetrated your disguise. But the Shan

must know all about it.”

”Of course he does. It is a little scheme that we have hatched together. I have no time to tell you everything now; indeed, with so clever a man to deal with as Frobisher it is far better that you should not know. But the Shan has done a very foolish thing, and his very throne is in danger. Both Frobisher and Lefroy know this, and they will do all they can to keep him under their control. If I can defeat that plot and free the Shan, then I need not trouble about the future.”

Angela’s eyes lighted up eagerly. All her quick sympathies had been interested.

”You will let me help you?” she exclaimed. ”Harold, I am quite sure that you want my assistance. I am a great deal stronger and braver than you imagine. Try me.”

”I am going to try you, my dear little girl,” Harold whispered. ”I should like to kiss you at this moment, but I dare not take any risks. For the present your task is a very simple one. I want you to get a certain lady in here and sit under the shaded lamp yonder. You must get here and keep her talking till I come back. If I hold up my two hands your task is finished; if I come forward, you must know that I want to speak to the lady alone.”

”It all sounds very mysterious, Harold. Who is the lady?”

”They have christened her the lady of the rubies here. I was very pleased just now to hear that you had, so to speak, made friends with her. Will you go at once?”

Angela made off hurriedly, and, for the time being, Harold returned to the ballroom. On the whole, he was not particularly enamoured of the part he was playing: the idea of forcing himself into a house where he had been forbidden by the host was repugnant to his finer feelings; but, on the other hand, any scheme was worthy which had for its end the defeat of a scoundrel. As the Shan caught Harold’s warning eye he left Frobisher and moved towards his ally.

”So far there is not much the matter,” Harold replied. ”Miss Lyne knows exactly what she has to do, and she will do it well. You are going to have a pretty big surprise just now, but whether it will turn out a pleasant one or the reverse I cannot say as yet. Stand here and pretend to be interested in the pictures.”

Angela had been more successful in her search than Frobisher. A prosy peer had buttonholed his host and the latter could not get away for the present without using actual violence. Angela had found the lady of the rubies sitting in a dim corner alone. She looked a little dazed and tired.

”I am not used to it,” she said frankly. ”And I can’t stand all their silly folly. I sent my partner for an ice on purpose to get rid of him. My dear young lady, you are very kind, and I’ve taken a great fancy to you because you are the first person I have spoken to to-night who is honest and true. All the same, I really

want that ice, and if you can find some quiet corner—”

”I know the very thing,” Angela cried eagerly, delighted at the way fate was playing into her hands. ”Come along. There, what do you think of that? Sit down near the light and I’ll go and get the ice.”

Mrs. Benstein protested, but Angela was already out of earshot. The Shan and his companion were deeply engrossed in a pair of Romneys as Angela passed them.

”I have secured your bird,” she whispered. ”She is exactly where you asked me to place her.”

Harold touched his companion on the arm, and they strolled away leisurely in the direction of the great conservatory. It was fairly quiet here, with few people about. Under the lamp sat a rarely beautiful woman whose dress from head to foot was one mass of rubies. Another one flamed across her forehead.

”What do you think of her?” Harold whispered. ”And what do you think of that big stone that is attached to her forehead by those thin gold wires?”

The Shan started violently. He rubbed his hands across his red bloodshot eyes.

”The Blue Stone of Ghan,” he whispered hoarsely. ”By Allah, she is wearing the sacred jewel!”

CHAPTER XVI.

DIPLOMACY.

As the Shan stood there watching the graceful, unconscious form of Mrs. Benstein, a great rage seized him. In one moment his thin veneer of Western civilisation had vanished. He was Baserk, savage, hard and cruel, from his glittering eyes and long fingers that crooked as if on the woman’s throat. He swayed against Denvers with the passion that thrilled him.

”Close in on her,” he hissed. ”Drag the jewel away. If you steal behind her and hold her by the throat—” He could say no more for the present. There was safety and freedom close to his hand, and only a frail woman between himself and his desires.

”Oh, rubbish!” Harold said coolly. ”My good sir, you will kindly forget that you are the Shan of Koordstan for a moment, and recollect that you are a guest here. I can give a pretty shrewd guess how the stone came here—indeed, I should

have been disappointed had I not seen it. Benstein is old and feeble, and he dotes on his wife. But there is a better way than yours. Can I trust you?"

The Shan nodded. He was recovering himself slowly.

"Then stay here, but do not be seen. Miss Lyne will be back presently, and she is on our side. Ah, here she comes. I have a few words to say to her."

Angela came up at the same moment, her eyes shining blue interrogation points. Harold drew her aside a little way and rapidly whispered a few words in her ear.

"Questions presently," he smiled. "We have only time for action now. Ask Mrs. Benstein to remain where she is, and say you will be back in a moment. Meanwhile, I must get you to present me to Lord Rashburn, the Foreign Secretary. Can you manage this?"

Angela was under the impression that she could manage this quite well. Rashburn was a close connection of Lady Frobisher, and a great admirer of her own; indeed, the handsome, courtly Foreign Secretary was an avowed admirer of the sex generally. It was some little time before Angela contrived to get possession of the great man and it required all her fascination to induce him to listen to the handsome young man who represented the Shan's suite.

"I'll give him five minutes," he said. "Where is the intelligent young foreigner?"

Harold came up at a sign from Angela. Lord Rashburn was courtly as usual, but bored. He particularly disliked intelligent young foreigners. He hoped that Aben Abdullah knew some English.

"I am English, my lord," Harold said coolly. "I assure you that I shall not bore you; indeed, I propose to interest you extremely. I heard your lordship in a recent speech observe that you derived a lot of good from reading healthy fiction; indeed, you went on to say that, under altered circumstances, you would have been an author yourself. I should like to discuss a little plot with you."

Rashburn was unaffectedly interested. Mystery and intrigue of any kind appealed to him; he was fond of building up stories from conventional surroundings. And there was some mystery here.

"Go on," he said, courteously. "I feel I shall be interested. In the first place, is the plot a—er—murder one?"

"Eventually, my lord. We will begin here in this very room, describing the house and the occasion, not forgetting the host. Our host, my lord, should make a fascinating study of a character given to—shall we say—to diplomatic methods?"

"Why not stretch a point and make him an unscrupulous rascal?" Lord Rashburn said dryly.

"That is a most excellent suggestion, my lord. We will go on to say that he has designs against my master; that he desires certain concessions that my

master has promised elsewhere, say to a young Englishman who knows the past, and who, under an assumed name, is part of his suite. Sir Clement has a hold on my master, and I want to save him. In virtue of his office my master has in his possession a precious jewel called—called anything you like.”

”The Blue Stone of Ghan!” Rashburn cried incautiously. ”I know all about that.”

”Let us call it a magic diamond,” Harold smiled. ”We must not be too realistic. After all said and done, this is no more than the plot of a story.”

”To be sure,” Rashburn said hastily. ”I had forgotten that. Pray go on.”

”My master is extravagant, which is a mild way of putting it. At the risk of losing everything, his head included, he raises money on the—er, diamond, pledges it, in fact, with a miserly old moneylender, who has a wife that he fairly dotes on. My master’s enemies, including Sir Clement, and another called Count Lefroy, find this out. They cook up some story to the effect that the sacred—er, diamond is wanted to seal certain State papers. There, for the present, we must leave my master in the dilemma into which he has got himself and go forward, merely premising that he has promised to produce the stone and seal those documents to-morrow morning.”

”One of the most ingenious plots I have heard of for a long while,” Rashburn murmured.

”I flatter myself that the best part is to come,” Harold proceeded. ”My suggestion is that the moneylender should be seen and asked to let us have the stone for an hour or two, and add two thousand pounds to his charges. We called for that purpose, and the old man thinks we want the gem back. He is in such a state of pitiable terror when we call, that instantly I know that he has parted with the stone. From what he says its recovery is only a question of a few hours. He says something about the stone and the Bank of England, but that is all nonsense. I guess what he has done. He has lent the stone to somebody, and I also have a shrewd guess who that somebody is. Then I suggest that we come here.”

”Capital!” Rashburn cried. ”You are interesting me exceedingly. Go on.”

”We come here. And here we find that a great sensation has been created by a lady who is dubbed the lady of the ru—I mean the queen of the diamonds. She is the wife of the great financier my master and I have been so recently interviewing. Remember he is old and senile, and dotes on her. It is inevitable that he has lent her the great diamond as a kind of glorious finish to her toilette.”

”In fact, we may assume that you have seen it blazing on her—shall we say forehead?” Rashburn asked.

”You have guessed it exactly, my lord,” Harold went on. ”Here, then, is a beautiful complication—my master has to get the gem back, and incidentally is ready to commit murder to do so; here is the host who may come along at any

time, and recognise the gem. That is as far as I have developed the story as yet, but I might at this point bring in yourself and your Government and make an international matter of it. If this thing leaks out, the Shan, who is favourable to England, goes, and his cousin, who is from Russia, steps on to the throne. Would it be fair to ask the Government to lend my master two hundred thousand pounds under the circumstances?"

Lord Rashburn glanced admiringly into the face of his companion, and shook his head.

"It would be a foolish thing to mention the affair directly to the Foreign Secretary at all. Officially I could not listen to you for a moment. I can only listen to you now because I am interested in stories of any light kind. But if you are asking my advice purely to get your local colour right——"

"That's it," Harold said eagerly. "If it were true, which is the proper course to pursue?"

"I see you are a born novelist," Rashburn smiled shrewdly. "Well, in these matters there are intermediaries, rich men who are ready to sacrifice their purse for their country. Most of these men have strong claims on the Government of the day. Some of them become Commissioners, of this, that, and the other, and have letters after their names. Some become baronets, or even members of the Upper House. There is Mr. Gerald Parkford, for instance. He is over there talking to the lady in the yellow satin. I understand that he is deeply interested in problems of this kind, and has frequently done the State some service, at a considerable loss to himself. Some day his wife will wear a coronet. Purely out of regard for your story I will introduce you to Parkford, and then you will be able to bring the tale to a logical conclusion. Of course you will see that if this were anything but fiction it would have been a gross impertinence of you to have mentioned it to me."

"Of course, my lord," Harold said humbly, and carefully avoiding Rashburn's eyes. "If your lordship will be so kind as to make me known to Mr. Parkford——"

"I will do that with the greatest possible pleasure. I shall catch his eye presently. Ah, I thought so."

The little keen, brown-faced man opposite looked up presently, and at a sign from Rashburn excused himself to his fair companion, and crossed the floor. Rashburn explained the situation in a few words.

"I understand you are fond of adventures of this kind," he said. "For the sake of my friend here, and for the sake of his book, you will give him the benefit of your advice. My dear young friend, I am quite fascinated by your interesting story. Good night."

Rashburn turned upon his heel in the most natural manner, and plunged at

once into a flirtation with a pretty girl in pink. Nobody would have guessed that he had just listened to a thrilling piece of information that might mean a new move for him in his Eastern policy. The little keen-eyed man looked at Harold and nodded his head interrogatively.

"Of course, Rashburn has to play his game," he said. "It would never do for him to know anything about the thing officially, unless the Shan approached him personally, which is not in the least likely. Because, you see, we have got to get that ruby back—no reason to split hairs between you and I—and by fair means or foul. Personally, I should prefer to settle the business on prosaic business lines—go to Benstein very late, tell him we know everything, and tender him a cheque for the money and bring away the ruby on an authority from the Shan to do so."

"Not a written authority," Harold said hastily.

"Of course not. You could come along if you liked. That's one way of settling the business out of hand. A day or two after, Rashburn would ask me how the story was going on, and I should say that I had showed you a flaw in it, and that as the money had been forthcoming the affair was finished on much too matter-of-fact lines to give an interesting finish. He would understand."

"And his diplomacy would be unspotted," Harold smiled. "But I fancy we are not going to be allowed to finish quite in this light-hearted way. We have Frobisher to deal with—Frobisher who suggested that Mrs. Benstein should appear in the role of the Queen of the Rubies. He knew that Benstein had the Blue Stone; he knew that Mrs. Benstein is in the habit of borrowing gems left with her husband for security; and he calculated on her borrowing that pearl amongst rubies for to-night. Do you suppose, knowing Frobisher's character, that he means that stone to leave the house?"

"I know that he is an utterly unscrupulous scoundrel," Parkford said freely. "Oh, he is quite capable of this kind of thing. Do you happen to know anything of Miss Lyne?"

"I am engaged to be married to her," Harold said quietly.

The little brown-faced man whistled softly, but his features expressed no astonishment.

"I thought your English was uncommonly good for a native," he said. "Of course, I know all about you now. My wife, who knows the history of everybody in London, I believe, told me about Harold Denvers and Miss Lyne, and how you had been forbidden the house and all that kind of thing. I seem to remember, too, that at one time your father and Frobisher were by the way of being friends."

"To my father's cost," Harold said with some little bitterness. "He robbed and ruined my father, and he died a broken man. That was before Frobisher put money in his purse by so shamefully abusing his position in the diplomatic service. As to Miss Lyne—"

"Miss Lyne may be of the greatest possible service to us," Parkford said.

"She is of use at the present moment," Harold said. "Of course she knows I am here and why, though I should be kicked out of the house if discovered. Miss Lyne is keeping Mrs. Benstein out of the way for the moment—out of Frobisher's way, that is."

Parkford jerked his thumb over his right shoulder and nodded. As Harold looked up he saw the shifting figure of Frobisher passing through the crowd. His eyes were narrow and eager, he seemed to be looking furtively and greedily for some one.

"The bloodhound is astir," Parkford muttered. "We must cross his trail without delay."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Angela took her place by Mrs. Benstein's side as if they had been friends of standing. She had a game to play, and not too many instructions as to how it was to be played, but, at the same time, she was strangely moved to the financier's wife. In spite of her beauty and intelligence there was an atmosphere about her that was just a little pathetic. She reminded Angela of some white mountain-peak stretching away far above its fellows, solitary, beautiful and alone.

The light shimmered upon her jewels as they gently heaved upon her breast. Her fine eyes were just a little interrogative as they turned upon Angela.

"It is very good of you to interest yourself in me," she said. "I wonder why you do it?"

Angela coloured slightly; after all, her attentions were not quite disinterested.

"Perhaps it is because you fascinate me," Angela said frankly. "I have never seen any one like you before. I love character. And yet, you seem quite lonely, as if you were apart from the rest."

"Well, so I am," Isa Benstein replied. "The men on occasions like this count for nothing. I never see a lot of men crowded round a pretty woman without a strong temptation to laugh. They look so foolish. And yet your women here rather avoid me—they are not quite sure of my position. But I could lead the whole lot of them if I chose to do so."

Angela did not doubt it. She had only to look in that beautiful face and see that the boast was no idle one. The brilliant light died out of the speaker's eyes.

"But what is the good of it?" she said. "I don't believe there is any society worthy of the name to-day. Money seems to be everything. Your poor aristocrat sneers at the monied people. But ain't they just as ostentatious themselves! Don't they rob their creditors and neglect their bills to appear like other people? It seems such a dreadfully snobbish thing to do."

The fine eyes were looking round contemptuously, the breastplate of rubies heaved slowly. The words sounded strange from one so superbly attired, and Mrs. Benstein laughed as she caught Angela's smile.

"You are thinking that I am no better than the rest," she went on. "Well, perhaps not. But, then, my plumes are borrowed ones. You see my husband is what is called a money-lender. There are lots of great ladies here to-night who come to him for assistance, they bring their jewels and he lends them money. I am wearing nearly all borrowed plumes to-night."

Angela gave a little gasp at the audacity of the confession.

"Oh, of course it is wrong," Mrs. Benstein proceeded. "It's like a laundress who keeps back a silk blouse from somebody else's washing to wear on a Sunday. I've done that myself."

Angela listened in dazed fascination. Such a confession from one so stately and beautiful was amazing.

"You have learnt the art of jesting with a perfectly serious face," she suggested.

"My dear, I am telling you the exact truth. I suppose it is the impish spirit in my blood that prompts me to do such things. In the day of my early Sunday holidays things were different. But you can't expect a high morality in a little Shoreditch second-hand clothes shop."

"You will tell me that you served in one next," Angela laughed.

"My dear, I did," was the reply. "Do you know, I have not the slightest idea who my parents are. All I know is that I am not a Jewess, though I was brought up as one. I used to run about the streets. I grew up somehow. And then I drifted into that shop. I educated myself pretty well, for the simple reason that I cannot forget anything. My husband took me away and married me. I would have married any one to get away from that blighting desolation. I was going mad for the want of colour and brightness in my life. And—and there you are."

"Nobody could possibly tell that you have not been used to this life always," Angela said. "There have been jealous eyes round you to-night, but they found no flaw."

"I had no intention of them finding a flaw," Mrs. Benstein said coolly. "I have intuition and observation. And yet, till this very night, I have never sat and

chatted with a lady before. I like you, Miss Lyne, and I would do anything for you. I like your kind face and those thoughtful eyes."

Angela was glad to hear it. The confession made her task all the easier.

"I am going to ask you to help me," she said. "I felt sure from the first that I could rely upon you. May I not be personal just for a little longer? You say your plumes are borrowed ones. Have you any idea of the identity of the ruby you are wearing on your forehead?"

"Not the least. My husband never mentions his clients by name—or, at least, very seldom. I took a fancy to this stone as a kind of climax to my costume, and with great reluctance my husband let me have it. Your eyes are telling me strange things, Miss Lyne."

"My tongue is going to tell you stranger," Angela whispered. "To think that you should be ignorant of the fact that you are wearing the sacred Blue Stone of Ghan."

"The Shan of Koordstan's Royal gem!" Mrs. Benstein exclaimed. "Oh, I know all about that. There is very little underground political history that I don't know. Koordstan and the Cardinal Moth and the—the rest of it. Our host to-night would give me something for the stone."

"Our host of to-night means to have it," Angela said under her breath.

"I see, I see. What an intellect the man has! It was he who persuaded me to come as Queen of the Rubies. For his own ends he got me invited here. He felt pretty sure that my husband would let me have the Blue Stone to wear. I am in danger."

"I don't think you are exactly in danger," Angela said.

"Oh, yes, I am. You don't know everything, I can see. The Shan of Koordstan is here to-night."

"He is here with one of his suite called Aben Abdullah, who, by the way, is my beloved one in disguise. He is Harold Denvers, who is aiding the Shan."

"A romance, a veritable romance, with danger and difficulties clinging to it like an aroma. So I am to play the part of one of Sir Clement's puppets! We shall see. Now tell me everything."

Angela proceeded to explain that she was going much beyond Harold Denvers' hurried instructions. But from the first her instinct had told her that she could make a friend of the woman. She concealed nothing, she spoke of the difficult position of the Shan, and what Harold had to gain by a recovery of the sacred jewel.

"I'm glad you told me," Mrs. Benstein said slowly. "Very glad. But there is more danger here than you anticipate, danger to me and to all of us. Sir Clement Frobisher is one of the greatest scoundrels on earth; he is cunning into the bargain, a perfect master of trickery and intrigue. Do you know anything of the

Cardinal Moth?"

Angela shook her head. She was practically ignorant on that point. Mrs. Benstein indicated the nodding, trembling spray of blossom on her breast.

"These flowers are in it," she said. "The Cardinal Moth must play its part with the rest. There will be no rest until the Moth is back again over the altar in the temple of Ghan. You wonder perhaps how I know all these things, but the blood of all nations contrives to make the mystery that is called Isa Benstein. Now I want you to bring General Pearson to me; I want you to stay here whilst we go away for a dance together. Sir Clement, and perhaps another man, will be looking for me. Say that I shall be back here in ten minutes to see you. You need say no more than that."

Angela went away, wondering but obedient. The handsome old soldier would be delighted. He had been looking for his next partner for a long time. He was quite distracted by her absence. They walked away together, leaving Angela behind. Presently in the distance she could see the figure of Frobisher wandering in and out of the crowd. Angela walked smiling up to him.

"Hide-and-seek," she cried gaily. "You are looking for somebody?"

"Even the Queen of the Rubies," Frobisher responded in a similar strain. "A handsome reward will be paid to anybody giving information as to her present whereabouts."

"You may keep your beloved money," Angela said. "I am above such things. Mrs. Benstein is dancing with General Pearson, and in ten minutes she has asked me to meet her under the lamps yonder. And here comes Count Lefroy, as if he were looking for somebody, too."

Angela slipped away as Lefroy came up, showing his teeth in a queer, uneasy smile. He was trembling, too, as if he had run a long distance. Frobisher suppressed a disposition to snarl.

"You have finished, then?" he asked. "My rubies were worthy of a closer inspection."

"And would have had the closer inspection only Lady Frobisher was called away," Lefroy replied. "Her ladyship would have left me alone with them but I implored her not to place so fierce a temptation in my way. She does not know that I share your passion for those stones, especially large ones."

"Like the Blue Stone of Ghan, for instance?" said Frobisher, with a sharp indrawing of his breath. "It would be good to get hold of that, eh?"

Lefroy's eyes grew a trifle harder and more uneasy. He seemed to be miserably uncertain in his mind, divided in opinion as to whether he should stay where he was or go away on some errand of his own. The crowd became slightly more thick as the strains of music ceased and the dance came to an end. In spite of everything, the rooms were growing unpleasantly warm, and the guests were

seeking cool corners. Mrs. Benstein came presently, leaning on the arm of her military escort. Her face was turned away, so that neither of the two men watching her could see her features.

Lefroy drew a deep, long breath. The time had come, he would have to stand up and fight Frobisher, the secret that he had half deemed his own was on the verge of exposure.

"Mrs. Benstein is going into the conservatory," he said meaningly. "I propose to follow her wise example and do the same thing. A sybarite like you does not care for robust air. I presume, therefore, that you are going to stay where you are."

Frobisher hooked his arm quite affectionately through that of his companion.

"On the contrary, I feel that a tonic would do me good," he said sweetly. "I am distressed for your sake. There is a nervousness about you to-night that alarms me; I could not enjoy myself thinking about it. What should I do, where should I be without my Lefroy? Orestes and Pylades, Damon and Pythias *et hoc*, where are you all alongside of Lefroy and Frobisher?"

He led the way into the conservatory close to where Mrs. Benstein and her companion were seated. By accident or design, Isa Benstein had her back to them. She seemed to be chatting gaily and without a trouble in the world to the General, who rose presently and proceeded back in the direction of the ballroom on ices bent. Then Mrs. Benstein rose and sauntered to the door of the conservatory. Both the men there watched her breathlessly—the time had come, and they both of them knew it.

She wheeled round suddenly as if conscious of their presence and smiled gloriously.

"I am admiring the flowers," she said. "They are exquisite. But I must have a word with Miss Lyne, whom I see in the distance. If my distracted General misses me, pray tell him that I shall be back at once. I trust you to do this for me, Sir Clement?"

Frobisher nodded with his mouth wide open, even he felt at a loss for words. There stood the lady of the rubies, her dress glistening with the gems, but her fair broad brow was clear as day, there was no vestige of a stone to mar its pure symmetry.

"It's a wonderfully warm night," Frobisher gasped.

"Sultry," Lefroy said meaningly, "very sultry. Deprives you of your wits, doesn't it? Weren't you saying something just now about the Blue Stone of Ghan? Or did I dream it? Come along."

"Where to?" Frobisher asked, like a man in a dream.

"Why, to the smoking-room, to be sure," Lefroy said with polite mockery.

"As you told me just now with such tender consideration for others, you are not quite yourself. A little brandy, the brandy you know, and a small soda. You seem to want it badly."

"Egad," Frobisher burst out bitterly; "egad, I fancy we both do!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DEFENSIVE ALLIANCE.

Lefroy's face, on the whole, was the more composed of the two. It was not often, in public at any rate, that Frobisher allowed his passion to get the better of him, but for the moment he was utterly taken aback. He had planned his scheme so neatly, the whole cunning skein had reeled off so splendidly that the startling disappointment was all the more maddening.

"Nothing like the old brandy," Lefroy sneered. "You will find it a sovereign cure."

But Frobisher was recovering himself slowly. He was not the man to show his hand for long. The dry, hard smile was on his face now, the passionate desire to hurt something had passed away. Ignoring Lefroy's remark, he passed on in the direction of Mrs. Benstein.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," he said. "One does not usually have to hunt for the sun, but in this case the planet would seem to be a retiring one. Does my house afford such poor attraction that you should bore yourself in this lovely spot?"

"I am not in the least bored," Mrs. Benstein said, with one of her most brilliant smiles. "On the contrary, I have been enjoying myself immensely. I am merely resting."

Frobisher said something appropriate. Nobody could do that kind of thing better when the mood was upon him. At the same time, his deep-set eyes were looking for signs, that might be conspired into something useful. Lefroy contented himself by standing behind and smiling vaguely.

"Your gems are all I expected them to be," Frobisher went on. "I felt certain that rubies would suit you to perfection. But you want something, a certain finish. A star or cluster on the forehead to finish. Don't you agree with me, Count?"

He flashed a wicked grin at Lefroy, who said nothing. Isa Benstein gave no

sign. She smiled as she arranged the flowers, the Crimson Moth that seemed to fascinate Lefroy.

"I thought so at first," she said. "In fact, I was wearing something of the kind when I came here. But on mature consideration I decided that it looked too overpowering. Several of your splendid mirrors confirmed that impression; consequently, I removed it."

"It is in a safe place, I trust?" Lefroy said carelessly.

"Really, I suppose so. Not that it matters, seeing that it is of no particular value. It was the only sham thing that I had about me. It is with my fan somewhere."

Lefroy urged the point no further. It was not policy to say too much. The two men went off together presently, as Isa Benstein was claimed for another dance.

"The man who finds that fan will be lucky," the Count said meaningly.

"The man who finds that fan will find nothing else," Frobisher replied. "How on earth it has happened I don't know, but that woman has discovered everything. Did you see her face as we were leaving? I did. She came here in blissful ignorance of the little comedy or tragedy, or whatever you like to call it; but she has had a warning from somebody since supper. Lord bless you, she knows all about it. We couldn't ask any prying questions without arousing her suspicions, though I am of opinion that she is quite aware of the way that she has baffled us. Oh, she is a clever woman."

"Clever as they make them. But she is only a woman, after all, my friend, and liable to make mistakes like the rest of her sex. She has got that stone about her."

Frobisher's eyes gleamed. He had been thinking much the same thing. Followed by Lefroy, he repaired to the smoking-room and proffered his hospitality. For some time the Count smoked and drank in silence, waiting for a lead from his host. There was bound to be some kind of explanation between them, and Lefroy preferred the lead to come from the other.

"Silence is golden," Frobisher said, with one of his sudden grins.

"In this case," the other said. "Perhaps you would like to deal the first hand. I shall sit tight for the present."

"I fancy it is my play," Frobisher said thoughtfully. "Fate and the other players push us a long way off our line of policy sometimes. For instance, I never imagined that I should be dragged into an offensive and defensive alliance with you. But for the present it is absolutely necessary. We must get that precious gew-gew—"

"Call it the sacred Blue Stone of Ghan and have done with it," Lefroy growled.

"Very well, though it is hardly diplomacy. Mrs. Benstein came here wearing the Blue Stone. You found it out quite by accident, and it was your game to prevent me from knowing. You tried very hard, but you were a little too much taken by surprise, especially when the Shan was announced."

"That was a very awkward moment for me," Lefroy admitted.

"It was. Directly you came in here I guessed exactly what had happened. As a matter of fact, I had not the least intention of your coming here to-night, indeed I didn't know you were coming. As a matter of fact, also, my wife cordially dislikes you, and I suppose she only asked you out of compliment to me."

"We'll let that pass," Lefroy said. "I was startled when Mrs. Benstein dropped her mask and the Blue Stone stood revealed. Of course, I knew that the stone was pledged to Benstein, and that Mrs. Benstein having it was natural enough. The doting old fool had been wheedled out of it for the evening. But I didn't know that you knew that, and I was most anxious to keep the information from you. But directly I came face to face with you here, I knew that you had some deep scheme, and that you guessed that I had got wind of it. I have worked that out."

Frobisher smoked and sipped his brandy with infinite relish.

"I always like to study a subtle mind, Count," he said. "Will you explain your meaning?"

"Certainly, especially as I shall lose nothing by so doing. Why did you get your wife to ask that woman here at all? I knew you had to use something like force to bring it about. You did it because you knew where the Blue Stone was. You advised Mrs. Benstein as to her dress, you gave her hints on that head. You were quite aware of the extent of Benstein's senile devotion to his wife. And you calculated that if she adopted the ruby suggestion she would borrow the Blue Stone."

"Excellent," Frobisher said cordially. "A capital piece of reasoning. And a very pretty scheme, though I say it myself. It came off, and only your presence prevented my coup. Pray go on."

"There isn't much more to say. Once Mrs. Benstein was here wearing the Blue Stone, you had no intention of her leaving with the gem in her possession. I don't mean to say that you would have used brutal force to get it, but I do mean to say that you would not have hesitated at that if needs must. Once you had the stone you would have forced those concessions from the Shan."

"And exposed the forged ones that you deposited with Benstein," Frobisher said sweetly.

Lefroy winced, and the glass chattered against his teeth. He had not expected that stroke, and his dark face indicated the fact for a brief moment.

"That is certainly one to you," he said. "Only that is not the point for the

present. The point is, that your plot has failed, that the woman who came here to-day wearing the Blue Stone out of pure vanity and with no kind of *arrière pensée* whatever, has been warned of her danger, which she has promptly removed. She knows pretty well everything—the way she received us showed that. She is an exceedingly clever woman, and has a shrewd idea how to take care of herself. Has she got the stone still?”

Frobisher nodded gravely. Lefroy’s point was worthy of consideration.

”You mean, has she passed it on to somebody else?” he said. ”She might have done that, but I don’t fancy so, and I’ll tell you why. She has seen enough of the world to teach her not to trust anybody. Naturally enough, she does not want her husband to be ruined, as would be the case unless the stone was restored to Benstein’s safe keeping without delay, and so she would trust to her own shrewdness to get away without robbery. On the whole, she has not parted with the stone.”

A little reflection assured Lefroy of the soundness of this reasoning. The thing resolved itself into a game of hide-and-seek with a fortune at the end of it with any luck. Up to a certain point these men were compelled to act together, but the alliance might end at any time.

”I can’t very well abduct Mrs. Benstein till she parts with the gem,” he said.

”No, we can’t do it, but we might find somebody who could,” Frobisher smiled. ”There’s the Shan’s minister and treacherous servant, Hamid Khan, for instance. He has scant respect for the laws of this or any other country, and he knows quite well that his master has parted with the stone. If we could put our hands upon the amiable Hamid at this moment—”

”Nothing is easier. Hamid is watching in Piccadilly at this very moment.”

”So you have got a little scheme afoot, too,” Frobisher laughed. ”Upon my word I need all my wits to enable me to get the better of you, Count. How long has this been going on?”

”Ever since the stone left the Shan’s possession. Ever since then he has been dogged and watched. Let me go and call Hamid in to our discussion. He knows what has happened, for I scribbled a few lines on a sheet of paper just now when I left your wife, and handed it to one of the smaller spies who are loafing outside. The night is hot, and our absence will not be noticed. Now slip on our coats and assume to be going to smoke a cigar in the garden. From thence we reach Piccadilly by the back way, and surprise Hamid in his dreary vigil. Then he comes back with us here. What do you say?”

Frobisher nodded gleefully; it was an intrigue after his own heart. They passed into the cool air of the garden, and from thence into the narrow lane at the back of the house. It was very late now, and Piccadilly was growing quiet, so that the few lounging figures there were easily seen. A slender, brown-faced

man in a dust coat and evening dress came along smoking a cigarette. He did not appear to be in the least interested in anything only for his restless eyes.

"I want you," Lefroy said. "There's work to be done, Hamid."

"Indeed, I am glad to hear that," said the other in a remarkably English tone of voice. "I'm getting sick to death of this eternal loafing. But Sir Clement Frobisher and Count Lefroy together! My dear Count, what are you doing in that galley?"

"Any galley is good enough when your own has been temporarily wrecked," Lefroy growled. "But ask no questions for the present and come with us."

They went back again presently in the smoking-room without having attracted the least attention, or so at least Sir Clement Frobisher flattered himself. It would never do for the Shan to know of Hamid Khan's presence in the house. But there were other watchful eyes besides those of the Shan of Koordstan. Mrs. Benstein had seen the two men go into the garden, and she had seen three return. She was not quite quick enough to get sight of the third, but she had a pretty shrewd idea who he was. She waited till she could have a word with Angela.

"I want you to do something for me, at once," she said. "Sir Clement Frobisher and Count Lefroy are in the private smoking-room with a third person. I want you to open the door and rush in with Sir Clement's name upon your lips as if you are in a hurry for something. Then you can stammer an apology and close the door behind you. The great thing is to get a quick mental photograph of the third person."

Angela nodded, she wasted no time in idle questions. In the most natural fashion she burst open the door and fluttered into the smoking-room, calling upon Frobisher as she did so. Then she stammered an apology and gently closed the door again. The third person had been seated directly opposite to her so that she had a perfect view of his face.

"I see you were perfectly successful," Mrs. Benstein said.

"Oh, absolutely," Angela replied. "It is a slender man with a deep mahogany face and curly hair, quite a handsome Asiatic, in fact; but what struck me more were his eyes, which are a clear light blue. Fancy, blue eyes in a face like that!"

"Capital," Mrs. Benstein murmured. "It is exactly as I expected. No, I am not going to say any more for the present, because I don't want to spoil your enjoyment. Now go off and flirt with that handsome young fraud, called Aben Abdullah, when you have the chance. Only don't go where I shall have to hunt

for you in case of dire necessity.”

CHAPTER XIX. WHAT DID SHE MEAN?

Harold was on the look out for Angela, so that she had not much trouble in finding him. His stolid Asiatic indifference was admirably feigned, and showed nothing of the anxiety within. There was just an interrogative gleam in his eyes for the moment.

”Isn’t there somewhere where we can be really quiet for a few minutes?” he said. ”I have successfully disposed of my royal rascal for the time, and I want badly to speak to you. Unless I am greatly mistaken, you can give me a good deal of information, Angela.”

Angela’s smile indicated that she could. There was a small passage behind some heavy curtains leading to a suite of rarely-used rooms, and Angela led the way there. She put the light up for a few moments and disclosed a cosy corner lounge, then she snapped off the switch again.

”I’ve pulled the curtain back so that it is possible to see without being seen,” she explained. ”We must not stay long, Harold—I am sure that Mrs. Benstein will want me before long.”

Harold slipped his arm round the girl’s waist, and kissed her. Stolen moments like this were very sweet. There was just an interval of blissful silence.

”Now tell me what you know,” Harold asked presently, ”about the Blue Stone.”

”I know nothing about the Blue Stone,” Angela explained. ”Mrs. Benstein has done something with it. All the mischief arose from the fact that she had no idea of the traditional value of the gem. She had not asked her husband about it. As a matter of fact a cunning idea of Sir Clement’s—”

”I know all about that,” Harold interrupted. ”It was very cunning, and came near success, only I nicked in, and you and I spoilt it between us. Lefroy spotted the stone first and tried to keep the knowledge from Frobisher, which was practically impossible. Then luck conspired to force those fellows to make an offensive and defensive alliance. But where is the stone?”

”My dear boy, I haven’t the remotest idea. All I know is that it has disappeared from Mrs. Benstein’s forehead, and that she seems to be enjoying the

comedy.”

Harold listened uneasily. He knew perfectly well that Frobisher and Lefroy would not stick at murder even to regain possession of the Blue Stone. If the sacred gem was still in Mrs. Benstein’s possession she would never be allowed to reach home with the thing intact.

”I suppose we must wait on events,” he said after a pause. ”For the present the Shan is not likely to interfere. I have placed him safely at a bridge-table, and there he will sit so long as there is a game, though his kingdom was toppling about his ears. Still, it keeps him sober, and that is the main thing. I suppose Mrs. Benstein did not tell you what she proposed to do?”

”I didn’t ask her, Harold. She is so marvellously cool and clever that I felt quite easy in my mind. But there is another foe to fight. I quite forgot to tell you about him.”

”Did Mrs. Benstein tell you, or did you find it out yourself?”

”No. It was Mrs. Benstein. She said somebody was closeted in the private smoking-room with Sir Clement and Count Lefroy. I was to pretend that I didn’t know, and blunder into the room, taking care to get a good sight of the stranger before apologising. I did it very well.”

Harold squeezed Angela’s waist affectionately. She laid a loving hand on his.

”Perhaps you know the man,” she went on. ”He looks like a true Asiatic, but at the same time he has blue eyes. It struck me as such a singular thing.”

”I know him perfectly well,” Harold muttered. ”This thing goes deeper than I expected. The man who is still plotting with these two rascals is Hamid Khan, who calls himself one of the Shan’s ministers. He is perhaps the most dangerous foe my pseudo-master has. If he can only prove that the Blue Stone had been out of the Shan’s possession there will be a change of dynasty in Koordstan. This is the worst piece of news I have heard to-night.”

”I don’t quite see why you should be so deeply interested,” Angela said softly.

”My darling, there is a good deal of self at the bottom of it,” Harold admitted candidly. ”I shouldn’t take all this trouble and run all this risk for a worthless creature like the Shan, unless I could see some benefit in it. I want to pin him down over those concessions, which will make my fortune. They will give me control over one of the richest tracts of land in Koordstan. In a year or two I shall be wealthy.”

”Just as if it mattered,” Angela whispered, rubbing her cheek against Harold’s, ”just as if it mattered, when I shall have so much. But don’t forget that you have Mr. Benstein to deal with. You can’t rob him of the stone which he has come by honestly in the way of business.”

"Oh, I know that. And we must have the stone by ten o'clock to-morrow. But I have found a way out of that difficulty. Between ourselves, Lord Rashburn showed me the way. We have a rich Englishman who will advance the money and benefit politically and secretly at the same time. He runs no risks of losing his capital either, because he is certain to get it back from the Shan in time. When Mrs. Benstein has gone home we shall follow and settle the business out of hand. I wish she would go now."

"I should trust her," Angela said thoughtfully. "She will go in her own time and her own way; she will baffle those scoundrels yet, I am certain of it. My dear boy, do be careful. If you are found out——"

Angela paused significantly. There was a risk of the mine being fired at any moment. There was no more dangerous or cunning foe in Europe than Sir Clement Frobisher, all the more dangerous in that he had Count Lefroy for an ally. And the time before the Shan was getting perilously short.

"Wait upon events a little longer," Angela urged as she arose. "We must go back again, it is not wise to stay here any longer. Mrs. Benstein may want me."

Harold made no demur, pleasant as it was to linger by Angela's side. She held his face between her hands and kissed him, then he walked towards the curtain. The band was playing some passionate love waltz; there were murmurs of conversation and light laughter. It seemed almost impossible to identify intrigue and danger with so fair a scene.

The two wandered on together past the dancers and the couples sitting out, talking quietly together as if they had been no more than casual acquaintances. Harold was a dull-dogged Asiatic again, but he kept his eyes about him. The crowd grew less; it was more quiet in the region of the card-rooms. Several parties were deep in bridge here, the Shan of Koordstan amongst the number. There was a pile of gold before him; from the satisfied glitter in his eyes he was winning heavily. Harold gave a sigh of relief. He was free still to follow his own plans without the added responsibility of keeping the Shan away from the champagne. He had a passion for wine, but a deeper passion for play, and so long as the cards were on the green baize, he would think of nothing else.

"His whole soul seems to be wrapped up in it," Angela whispered.

"Of course it is," Harold said contemptuously. "If I went to him now and told him that he had only to step across the room to recover his sacred gem he would ask me to come back in an hour. Doubtless he has quite forgotten why he came here. Look, here comes Frobisher."

Frobisher came into the room rubbing his hands together and smiling softly. A glance at him told Harold that he had not only made his plans, but was perfectly satisfied with them. Somebody hailed Frobisher with a suggestion that he should come in and make up a table, but he excused himself. He strolled off down the

corridor, and as he did so Angela caught sight of Mrs. Benstein's flashing gems in the distance.

"I'll follow her," she whispered. "She's gone towards the big conservatory."

But Frobisher was on the same errand. He caught Mrs. Benstein up and made some remark. She smiled back at him as if there was nothing hidden under the surface.

"Oh, yes, the orchids," she said. "I have been promising myself a treat with your orchids. I will conveniently forget that I am engaged for the next dance. I want to see your Cardinal Moth in full bloom."

"I want to know how you are so *au fait* with the Moth," Frobisher grinned.

"That is my secret, sir," Isa Benstein laughed. "There is Eastern blood in my veins. But I know all about it. You will certainly be murdered if you keep that orchid long enough."

"That, to my mind, is just the added charm," Frobisher said coolly enough. "I love the flower passionately. But the Cardinal Moth is unique, it has such a cruel, bloody history. Still I am not going to part with it for all the priests of Ghan."

Isa Benstein was forced to admit that there was something in Frobisher's fascination as she looked up at the graceful ropes of blossoms. There had been one of the periodical bursts of steam which had just cleared away, so that the cloud of delicate white-pink bloom with its fluttering red satellites overshone in refulgent perfection.

"It is indeed the queen of flowers," a deep voice came from behind.

Mrs. Benstein looked round into the dark, inscrutable face of Lefroy. She and her host and the Count were alone in the big conservatory. The door was open, but they were too far away for any one to hear or to hear any one else. That she had been lured there Isa Benstein knew without anybody to tell her. She had the Blue Stone of Ghan in her possession, both these men knew it, and they were both desirous of gaining possession, but they were both utterly unscrupulous in their methods.

If it came to a personal struggle they were equal to that. They would both declare afterwards that the story of violence was a pure fabrication, and that it had existed in a hysterical woman's imagination. And for the sake of her husband Mrs. Benstein would say nothing. How could she stand up and tell the world that she had been wearing the Blue Stone at Lady Frobisher's dance, when the thing had been pledged to cover a money advance?

These thoughts flashed through the woman's nimble brain like lightning. But the smile never left her face; she did not show for a moment that she knew or felt anything. She was quite ready.

"They are lovely," she said. "I am filled with envy, though I have some

perfect orchids of my own. Miss Lyne, won't you come and worship at the shrine of Flora?"

Isa Benstein raised her voice in the hope that Angela might be near. It was a sort of danger signal and might prove efficacious. The next moment Angela walked in. She understood perfectly, but she made no sign. Just for a moment Frobisher's eyes flashed like electric points.

"I don't care for orchids," Angela said. "There is something uncanny about them."

"Not all," said Mrs. Benstein, as she bent and broke off a spray of deep blue blossom. Frobisher winced as if somebody had struck him a painful blow. "Look at these blooms; they are sweet and tender enough. Count Lefroy, I want you to arrange this spray in Miss Lyne's hair. You can reach better than I can, and I can trust your taste. Place this flat under the coil at the side."

Angela made no demur, though she would far rather have done it herself. Lefroy did his work gracefully enough and stepped back to admire the effect, as did Isa Benstein. Frobisher, still snarling for the loss of his beloved flowers, looked on with his teeth bared in an uneasy grin.

"Perfect!" Mrs. Benstein cried, as if she had only one thought in her mind. "All this evening I have been racking my brains to know what little final touch was lacking. I beg of you as a personal favour not to remove those flowers till you go to bed. Now will you promise me?"

Angela gave the promise lightly enough. Lefroy drew Frobisher a little on one side.

"We are wasting valuable time," he growled. "Get rid of that girl."

"One moment. Her presence here is quite an accident. Our fair friend has no suspicion. I shall find a good pretext to get rid of Angela in a moment. Yes, it is a fine flower and quite unique."

The last few words were spoken aloud. But if Lefroy had seized his chance for a word with Frobisher, Isa Benstein had not lost her opportunity. "I am going to make a remark," she said, "though I only dare to give you a hint. Sir Clement has ears like a hare. When I speak you are to give a laugh as if I had made a brilliant joke. You are quite sure neither of these men are really listening to us?"

"I think you can venture to go on," Angela murmured. "I am quite ready to laugh."

She broke out into a rippling, amused smile as Mrs. Benstein slightly bent her head and said:

"Be sure that you take down and brush out your hair to-night!"

CHAPTER XX. CHECK TO FROBISHER.

The whole thing struck Angela as strangely unreal. It hardly seemed possible that this swiftly-moving drama could be played amongst the settings of her daily life in this fashion. There was the dreamy music of the band—the Scarlet Bavarian Band of so many big social functions—the familiar fuss and flutter of drapery, the sound of well-known voices. Mrs. Benstein was smiling in the most natural way, the two men appeared to be quite at their ease. And yet here was a moving drama that any one moment might flare into tragedy. Still, Angela played the game mechanically.

A light laugh rippled from her lips so naturally that she was quite surprised. She had not the slightest idea what Isa Benstein meant by the strange caution, but she had every intention of carrying it out to the letter. Frobisher sauntered back to his beautiful guest's side. Angela lingered, waiting for the next move. She saw Mrs. Benstein's eyes glance towards the door with a significant look. As she made some excuse for leaving the others together she saw a flickering smile of approval.

"May we smoke?" Frobisher asked, as he closed the door behind Angela. "We are all enthusiasts, and we don't want any dilettantes here."

"You may do just as you please," Mrs. Benstein said. "Probably you would follow that course in any case. You are a bold man to keep the Cardinal Moth here."

"What do you know about it?" Frobisher asked.

There was a dry chuckle in his voice as he put the question. Mrs. Benstein looked up at the cloud of glorious blossoms over her head.

"I know a great deal," she replied. "I have lived with some strange people in my time and I have heard some strange things. There are certain quarters in the East End where they speak queer languages and where they know things that would startle the authorities. Amongst these people I was brought up. I learnt their ways and their methods. Ah, it was a good school for a girl who has a treacherous world to fight."

The speaker flung herself into a chair and hung her long white arms by

her side. The light gleamed upon her sparkling jewels and the dark eyes that sparkled more brightly still. Frobisher watched her with something more than artistic admiration; his thin blood was stirred.

"You speak like a Sibil," he laughed. "If you know all about the Cardinal Moth you also know all about the Blue Stone of Ghan, I presume?"

Frobisher's voice was low and hoarse and persuasive. He had flung down the challenge, and Isa Benstein was ready to receive it. She raised her large dark eyes slowly, and they seemed to float over the faces of her antagonists. She noted the leering grin on Frobisher's features, the truculent bullying expression of Lefroy's.

"I have heard of that also," she said in the same level tones. "The two are inseparable."

"Or ought to be," Frobisher went on. Evidently he was to be the spokesman. "But if the Moth has flown far, why not the sacred jewel? Have you ever seen it, fair lady?"

The question was a direct threat, and Isa Benstein rose to it. She sat there swinging her long arms idly, and glancing with perfect self-possession at her companions. They meant to have that jewel, as she knew; they were not going to stick at anything to gain possession of it.

"I have seen it," she said quietly; "in fact, I wore it here on my forehead to-night."

Frobisher started. He fairly beamed with admiration. What a woman! What a nerve! he thought. Anybody else would have denied the thing point blank. But here was a woman prepared for any emergency. There was going to be a battle of wits here, and Frobisher rose to the fray.

"Surely a rash thing to do," he murmured.

"Wasn't it?" Isa Benstein asked with a swift and glorious smile. "But ignorance is bliss, you say. That being so, there ought to be a great deal more happiness in the world than there is. Count Lefroy, won't you sit down? No, in that other chair, so that I can see your face."

Lefroy bowed and complied. All this waste of time annoyed him, but Frobisher, on the other hand, was enjoying himself exceedingly. Nothing that was straight or open ever appealed to him. He would rather have obtained a shilling by crooked means than a sovereign by holding out his hand for it.

"You came here wearing the Blue Stone without knowing it?" he asked. "I am interested, fascinated, and amazed. Incidentally, I am a little amused into the bargain."

"Possibly," Isa Benstein smiled brilliantly. "But you are not half so amused as I am."

Frobisher grinned at the way in which his challenge had been flaunted back

into his teeth. With the quick subtlety of the polyglot the woman had grasped his scheme and what he wanted.

"It is good to feel that my guests are thoroughly enjoying themselves," he said politely. "I should like to know how the Blue Stone came into your possession at all."

"Problems seem to be in the air," Isa Benstein murmured. "Your flattering interest is very soothing to my vanity. You know what a conjurer means when he speaks of forcing a card on a spectator? Of course you do. The expert with his quickness and his patter can make the spectator he selects draw any card he chooses. The conjurer in this case chose me to force his card upon. But all the same when I came here I had no notion that I was wearing anything half so historic as the Blue Stone of Ghan."

"But you found it out after you got here?" Frobisher said keenly.

"Yes. That was a piece of good luck. And when I did so I removed it. That was a piece of caution."

"Then you had worked it all out in your mind, I suppose?"

"Yes. I worked it out in the best possible way—backwards. I worked it out so completely that I was in a position to read another person's mind. Shall I read that other person's mind?"

Frobisher bowed and smiled in one of his quick grins. Lefroy shifted uneasily in his chair. Isa Benstein's lips were parted, her arms played idly by the side of her chair, there was no sign of fear in her eyes. When she spoke again it was quite calmly and slowly.

"We will begin with the conjurer," she said. "After all, he has succeeded in forcing the card that is destined to lead up to the brilliant trick that dazzles and astonishes everybody. We will assume, for the sake of argument, that you are the conjurer and I am the silly heedless spectator who is marked out as the involuntary accomplice."

"The mind could not grasp you in that senile capacity," Frobisher murmured.

"Then give your vivid imagination free run for once, Sir Clement. The card in this case represents something that you very much desired, call it the Blue Stone of Ghan. The sacred jewel is hidden in a certain place. Your great idea is to conjure that somewhere else, and being a master of your trade, you have to make use of a third party who shall make the transfer for you without knowing anything of the matter. Only a prince among conjurers could hope to bring off so brilliant a coup as that, but there is no great success without great audacity. But Count Lefroy is looking at his watch. I am afraid that he is not interested."

"It matters nothing about Lefroy," Frobisher said. "I am deeply interested. Pray go on."

"Of course, our conjurer knows where the stone is. It is in the custody of an old man who has a young wife. The old man with the young wife has countless gems for safe custody. From time to time he lends these gems to his wife to wear, though, with the characteristic caution of his tribe, he never says anything to the owners. Well, here is the conjurer's card forced from him, so to speak. All he has to do now is to design an occasion when the transfer may be made. We will say it is to be at a brilliant party—a fancy-dress ball, where gems may play a leading part. The victim will be there. As the Blue Stone of Ghan is a ruby, he naturally suggests rubies, much as the common conjurer with his magic bottle induces his assistant on the stage to choose the kind of liquid he wants to dispense. Says he to himself, that old man will offer his young wife the Blue Stone as a kind of crown of glory, and she will take it, not knowing what it is. Once she arrives at the fancy-dress ball the rest is easy. Do I interest you so far?"

"Wonderfully," Frobisher croaked. "Fancy finding the conjurer out like that. But though you have spoiled the trick, he must have the forced card, in this case represented by the—but why complete the phrase?"

"Why, indeed?" Isa Benstein asked serenely. "The brilliant trick as a brilliant trick has failed, for the simple reason that the involuntary medium has been too clever for her part. But I see that the conjurer is not so disconcerted as he might be, because he can always fall back upon his bully method whereby he sometimes disguises failure and leads up to a success in a fresh line. Is it to be the bullying policy, Sir Clement?"

Sir Clement bent forward and nodded eagerly. His yellow teeth were all exposed in a wide grin. Lefroy sat regarding him with open contempt. A clock somewhere struck two; the strains of the band floated in.

"I should like to borrow the Blue Stone," Frobisher said hoarsely.

"We will discuss that presently," Isa Benstein went on. "Perhaps I had better finish my train of logical reasoning. There was danger of the trick failing, in so much as the Blue Stone might have been recognised. And here was a further resource open to the conjurer. It was open to him to put aside the tricks of his trade and take the stone, take it with violence, if necessary. He would argue that his victim dared not speak, that she would put up with the loss rather than tell a story that nobody would believe. The idea of a man robbing his guest with violence under his own roof—and such a roof!—would be scouted by any common-sense person. Again, the unconscious medium would have her husband to consider. If the true facts of the case came out he would be ruined; there would be a scandal that might end in a gaol. Of course, when the desired mischief had been worked, the stone would be restored again, discreetly found before it was lost. Really, gentlemen, my imagination makes me nervous. As I sit opposite you, I am inwardly alarmed lest you should fall upon me and despoil me of a thing I

would not have touched had I been aware of the true history of the case. I know I am foolish—”

”Madame,” said Frobisher, rising with a bow. ”You cruelly malign yourself. I have had some experience of clever people, and you are by far the cleverest woman I have ever met. Your insight is amazing, of your courage there can be no doubt. But don’t carry your courage too far.”

Mrs. Benstein had risen in her turn, the critical moment had come, but she gave no sign. Frobisher stood also, shaking his head doggedly.

”You deem discretion to be the better part of valour,” the woman said. ”The English profess never to know when they are beaten! Surely that is carrying the thing too far. The man who knows when he is beaten is the most valorous foe, for the god of war is always on the side of heavy battalions. You want the stone?”

”I must have it,” said Frobisher.

”Must is not a nice word, but—”

”But it’s got to be used,” Lefroy spoke for the first time. ”All these words are so much air. Will you be so good as to lend us the Blue Stone for a time, or—”

”Stop!” Mrs. Benstein cried. ”Let us quite understand one another. If I do not lend you the stone you are prepared to go to extreme measures to get it?”

Frobisher nodded and grinned till his teeth flashed again. He advanced with his hands outstretched and a look of greed in his eyes. Lefroy stood by as if apart from the discussion.

”A few more words,” Mrs. Benstein said, with a steady smile, ”a few more words, and then you may do as you please. I am forced to allude to the conjurer again and his forced card. That card is in the possession of the involuntary medium. The success of the experiment depends upon the ability of the conjurer to force the card when and how he will. But suppose the involuntary ally determines to frustrate the trick, and say that he has lost the card or changed it for another, what then?”

A wicked, brutish oath sprang from Frobisher’s lips. All his pretty cynicism and flippant hardness had gone and the original savage looked out of his eyes. Just for a moment he panted with a rage that was unconquerable. He was a murderer in his heart at that moment.

”You mean,” he gasped—”you mean to say that you—”

”Precisely. As I said before, I had thought the matter out. Am I the woman to be any man’s puppet? The card has disappeared, the conjurer is baffled. If you can find the card, well and good; if not, the trick fails. The card is no longer in my possession.”

And Frobisher, looking into her eyes, knew that she spoke the truth.

CHAPTER XXI. DENVERS LEARNS SOMETHING.

Frobisher was first to recover himself. There were beads of moisture on his forehead, his teeth were ground together, but he forced a smile to his lips. Then he laughed in a low chuckling fashion, as if something subtle had greatly amused him. Lefroy stood there, glowering.

"I'm not going to be put off like that," he said. "The thing's impossible."

Isa Benstein ignored the speaker altogether. She was lying back in her chair as if bored with the whole proceedings. The lights were gleaming on her jewels and her beautiful, tranquil face.

"Don't lose your head," Frobisher said, still laughing in the same noiseless way. "Surely you're not so accomplished a liar that you haven't learned to know the truth when you see it. I pay Mrs. Benstein the compliment of believing every word that she says. We have exposed our hands for nothing, and been outwitted by a very clever woman. You'll gain nothing by losing your temper."

"Who could she have passed the jewel on to?" Lefroy growled.

"Ah, that is the point! Knowing nobody here and all! Madame, I kiss your hand. You have made Clement Frobisher look and feel like a fool. It is a sensation I have not experienced since I left school. I believe every word that you say, nay, if I let myself go I could be furiously angry with myself. Lefroy, you had better go, there is nothing to be gained by staying here. After all——"

Frobisher paused, and Mrs. Benstein, with her head serenely tilted upwards, finished the sentence.

"After all, the Shan of Koordstan is in no better plight than he was before. Whoever has possession of the stone, it is assuredly not the Shan."

Lefroy strode off and clanged the door behind him. Frobisher lighted a fresh cigarette. He had been found out in a singularly rascally action, but that did not disturb his equanimity in the least.

"You must be having a particularly pleasant evening," he said.

"The most enjoyable I ever remember." Isa Benstein smiled frankly. "In the first place, I have created a sensation and scored a most decided success. To a woman that is like a foretaste of Paradise. Then, again, I have been involuntarily

forced to become the central figure of a most exciting intrigue. I love intrigues and mystery to my finger-tips. I was to have been the puppet, and yet I have beaten you all along the line. Oh, yes, I am likely to remember this evening for some time to come."

"I suppose so," Frobisher grinned. "If I had known I would have lent you a prize ruby and the Blue Stone might have remained where it was. If I had made you my ally—"

"Impossible," Isa Benstein said, curtly. "I should never have trusted you."

Frobisher laughed as if the candour appealed to him.

"I bear no malice," he said. "I love a strong foe. But I wish I had lent you my big ruby, all the same. You must accept a souvenir of that kind in memory of this eventful evening. I'll fetch you some uncut stones from which I shall be proud for you to make your choice. Meanwhile I shall leave you to admire my orchids. You can't very well run off with my Cardinal Moth."

"I should like to examine it closer," Isa Benstein said.

It was easily done. Frobisher merely pulled a lever and the framework upon which the Cardinal Moth was roped came down to within a few feet of the ground.

Mrs. Benstein caressed the blossoms tenderly. Such a wealth of bloom had never been seen before. She stood with them all about her like the goddess Flora, the ropes touched her bare arms, the flowers nodded in her face.

"I'll not be long," Frobisher croaked as he stooped and touched one of the shining taps near the floor. "My word, what a picture for an artist you make!"

He crept away gently, leaving his guest amidst the nodding blooms. They were so fascinating that Mrs. Benstein could think of nothing else for the moment. She had quite forgotten the events of the evening. She turned her lips to a cluster of the glorious blooms.

"They are like beautiful, fascinating snakes," she said to herself. "No wonder the man dares run the risk of having this bewildering beauty in his house. Like lovely snakes, the hiss and all complete."

There was a sudden hiss of escaping steam, and the whole of the dropped trellis-work was enveloped in mist. The mass seemed to move as if it had been endowed with life or as if a strong breeze had swept over it. Then without the slightest warning a grip like a vice caught Isa Benstein below and above the elbow, pressing her forearm and causing her to wince with the horrible pain.

So tight was the grip that she could not turn or move. She stood there writhing in agony, and yet too fascinated to call out. The bones creaked and cracked, and still the pain grew greater; it seemed impossible that any human fingers could grip flesh and blood like that. Were all the weird legends clinging round the Cardinal Moth true, Isa Benstein caught herself wondering in a faint,

dizzy way?

Then she braced herself up and struggled violently. It was characteristic of the woman that she uttered no cry. As she drooped and her eyes grew cloudy she had a faint vision of a face under a turban, and then there came a sound of swiftly rushing feet. The platform seemed to rise with a sudden jerk. Isa Benstein was wrenched from her feet, the weight of her body told, the arm came away with a cruel drag from the vice-like grip, and she fell a huddled, shimmering heap on the floor.

"I hope you are not much hurt," a voice whispered in her ear. "It was dreadful."

Isa Benstein scrambled to her feet breathless, dizzy, and writhing with pain. But her quick eyes were clear now, and she recognised the Shan's companion, whom she knew to be Angela's lover. His face was white and quivering; there was a nameless horror in his eyes.

"You saw it," Mrs. Benstein said. "What was it?"

"I cannot tell you yet," Harold said. "It was too dreadful, too awful. The shock of discovery almost unmanned me for a moment. We will speak about that presently. How did you happen to be just where you stood?"

"I was admiring the flowers. Sir Clement pulled down the frame for me, so that I could see better. He went away to get something that he wanted to show me, then there was that sudden grip."

"Which seemed to come out of a vapouring mist, did it not?" Harold asked hoarsely. "By accident I loosened the spring, and as the frame rose your weight released you. Is not that so?"

Mrs. Benstein nodded; she had no words just for the moment. Now that the reaction had come she was feeling sick and faint with the pain. Harold's eyes were still distended with the horror of some awful discovery.

"It is very strange," he said. "Sir Clement did not mean to come back to you, for he has just left the house. He slipped out with some companion whose face I did not see. But your arm is painful. Nothing broken, I hope?"

Isa Benstein raised her lovely white arm to prove that such was not the case. But there was a round red band, and here and there a thin red stream came from the broken skin.

"Would you mind keeping this to yourself for the present?" Harold asked. "Believe me, there are urgent reasons why you should do so, reasons so urgent that I cannot go into them now. If you are silent we shall bring one of the greatest scoundrels to the gallows. If not——"

"I will be silent," Mrs. Benstein said, between her white set teeth. "But if you could get me away to see a doctor, or if there is a doctor here whom I could trust——"

"Of course there is, I must have been a fool not to have thought of it before. Sir James Brownsmith is the very man, and he is interested in the case too. Nobody is likely to come in here."

Harold hurried away in search of Brownsmith, whom he had seen a little while before. He found Angela and explained what he desired to her. He had hardly got back to the great conservatory before the great surgeon bustled in. Coolly enough Harold locked the door. There was no chance of Sir Clement coming back yet. In a few words he gave a brief outline of what had happened.

"It's part of the mystery," he said. "The same horrible mysterious force that brought that poor fellow at Streatham and Manfred to their death."

"Good God!" Sir James cried. "Do you mean to say that you have solved that mystery?"

"Certainly I have. That is why I wanted you above all men to see Mrs. Benstein. Oh, never mind who I am for the present. To the world I am merely Aben Abdullah attached to the suite of the Shan of Koordstan, and I am popularly supposed to know very little English. Look to your patient, man."

Sir James passed the rudeness from a young man to one of his exalted position. Very tenderly and gently he examined the wounded arm. But his vivid interest was more than strictly professional.

"This is very strange," he said. "There are no bones broken, I am glad to say—nothing worse than a severe bruise. But I could not believe, I should utterly refuse to believe that a human hand could make such a mark like that. Why, it would have to be as large as a shoulder of mutton to grip the forearm and deltoid like that. Did you see your assailant, Mrs. Benstein?"

"I saw nothing at all," Mrs. Benstein said, with a faint smile. "There was nobody to see."

Sir James shook his head, but Harold nodded as if he quite approved of the remark. Sir James was still carefully examining the round white arm.

"The thing tallies," he said. "There are the same cruel marks, the same indentations as from a coarse cloth. And also we have the same great force used. In the name of God, what is it, sir?"

Brownsmith spoke with a sudden horror upon him. Harold shook his head.

"I can sympathize with your feelings, Sir James," he said. "I came very near to fainting myself when the full force of the thing dawned upon me. But for the present I prefer to keep silence. And I will ask you to be silent also. You would be playing into the hands of an utter scoundrel if the slightest inkling of Mrs. Benstein's accident were to leak out."

Brownsmith pursed up his lips and nodded.

"Then the best thing Mrs. Benstein can do is to go home," he said. "Plenty of hot water fomentations for the present and something to follow. I'll see that

it is delivered to-night. But, seeing that Mrs. Benstein has to say good-night to her hostess, and seeing that her dress is so low in the sleeves——”

Isa Benstein solved the problem in her own swift, characteristic fashion. She tore her dress from the shoulder so that the gauzy fabric hung over and hid the cruel red seam on her arm.

”Ask Lady Frobisher to come here,” she said. ”Then call my car and fetch my wraps. I quite see the necessity of making the thing look as natural as possible.”

It was all done so smoothly and easily that no suspicion was aroused. Mrs. Benstein had simply had an accident with her dress, an accident that necessitated her immediate return home. She had had a charming evening, one that she was likely to remember for a long time. Her manner was easy and natural; she gave no impression of one who has escaped a nameless horror, perhaps a cruel death.

”I can slip away, thank you very much,” she said. ”Perhaps the gentleman who has been so kind will see me to my car. May I ask your arm?”

Harold bowed profoundly. It was just the opportunity he required. They threaded their way through the guests along the brilliantly-lighted corridor into the street where the car was waiting. Isa Benstein held out her hand in a warm and friendly grip.

”I am going to help you and Miss Lyne, if I can,” she said. ”Ask Miss Lyne to come and see me the first thing in the morning. After she has gone to bed to-night she will know and appreciate my request. Have you really solved the mystery of the two tragedies?”

”I am absolutely certain of it,” Harold replied. ”See, there is Sir Clement and that fellow—Hamid Khan, the man who was in the smoking-room, you know.”

Mrs. Benstein looked eagerly out of the window. Her big eyes gleamed. ”It is as I expected,” she said. ”I have made a discovery also, Mr. Denver. If you will call on me after eleven to-morrow you will hear of something greatly to your advantage. Strange how fate seems to be playing into our hands to-night.”

The car moved forward, the speaker was gone.

CHAPTER XXII.

STRANDS OF THE ROPE.

Denver returned to the ballroom with a feeling that he would be glad to get away. The whole thing sickened him, the light laughter and frivolous chatter

jarred upon his nerves. He had been very near to a dreadful tragedy; he had learnt a hideous truth, and he had not got himself in hand yet. He wanted to know the whole truth without delay. Angela awaited him anxiously.

"My aunt tells me that Mrs. Benstein is gone," she said. "She had an accident with her dress. Harold, you look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I have seen the devil, which is much the same thing," Harold murmured. "My dear girl, never again shall I flatter myself that I have no nerves. I dare not go into the refreshment-room and demand strong drink, but I shall be more than grateful if you will smuggle me a glass of champagne into the little alcove where we first met to-night. There I can tell you something."

But it was not very much that Harold had to tell. The terrible discovery he had made must be kept to himself as far as Angela was concerned. Mrs. Benstein would like to see Angela in the morning. She had a new design for a costume that might suit the girl, so that she was to be sure and wear the blue orchids that Angela had at present in her hair.

"It sounds very mysterious," Angela smiled.

"Well, it does," Harold admitted. "But I'm sure Mrs. Benstein has good reasons for the request. Taking her all in all, she is the most brilliantly intellectual woman I have ever met, and if I mistake not she can supply the missing piece of the puzzle. Now I really must say good-night, dear old girl, and drag my master home. I have much to do before I go to bed."

"What did Mrs. Benstein do with the ruby?" Angela asked.

"I don't know. She utterly baffled Frobisher and Lefroy. At first it occurred to me that she had passed it on to you, but she would argue that your tell-tale face would give you away. I expect she acted as the hero of Poe's 'Purloined Letter' did—place the gem in a place so simple and commonplace, that nobody would ever dream of looking for it there. However, I am quite sure that the jewel is safe."

In the card-room the Shan was just finishing a rubber of bridge. He had won a considerable sum of money, and was in the best of spirits. As two of the players quitted the table, Harold drew his pseudo-master aside.

"You are not going to play again," he said, curtly, "you are coming home. If you refuse to come home I shall take no further interest in your affairs. Do you hear?"

The Shan nodded sulkily. Like the spoilt child that he was, he had no heed for the morrow. But Denver's stern manner was not without its effect. He wanted a glass or two of champagne first, but Denver fairly dragged him into the street. There was no car waiting, so perforce they had to walk.

"You're carrying it off with a high hand," the Shan growled. "Anybody would think you had the Blue Stone safe in your pocket. Have you done any-

thing?"

"I have done a great deal; on the whole, it has been a most exciting evening. Still, so far as things go I am quite satisfied with myself. The rest depends upon you. It will be your own fault if you don't see your own back to-morrow. No drink, mind; you are to go to bed quite sober."

"Confound you!" the Shan flashed out, passionately. "Do you know who I am? A servant like yourself—"

"I am no servant of yours," Harold replied. "And I know quite well who you are. You are a dissolute, drunken fool, who is doing his best to bring himself to ruin. And I am doing my best to save you at a price. If you like to go your own way you can."

The Shan muttered something that sounded like an apology.

"You see, I am greatly worried about the Stone," he said. "The Stone and the Moth. You promised to tell me to-night where the Moth had vanished to."

"The Moth is hanging up in Sir Clement Frobisher's conservatory," Harold Denvers said. "Frobisher would have shown it to you to-night only he had a more interesting game to play. It is the very plant that was stolen from Streatham. You can imagine the price Frobisher would ask for its restoration. You would grant the price, and then he would have found some way to repudiate all the wicked story of that infernal flower."

"Of course I do, my dear chap," said the Shan, now thoroughly restored as to his temper. "It has been whispered fearsomely round firesides in Koordstan for a thousand years. The Cardinal Moth guarded the roof of the Temple of Ghan. All the great political criminals were sentenced to climb to the roof and pick a flower from the Moth. The door was closed and the temple seen to be empty. When the priests outside had finished their prayer the door was open and the criminal lay on the floor dead with the marks of great hairy hands about him. Sometimes it was the neck that was broken, sometimes the chest was all crushed in as if a great giant had done it, but it was always the same. Ay, they dreaded that death more than any other. It was so mysterious, horrible."

"And you have no idea how it was done?" Harold asked.

"Not a bit of it. The priests kept that secret. Of course they pretend to something occult, but I have been in the West too long to believe that. Still, it is pretty horrible."

"You would perhaps like to know how it is done?"

"Of course I should, Denvers. The priests are too cunning for that."

"Doubtless. All the same, I know how it is done, and, what is more to the point, Frobisher knows. It was the way that Manfred died, also that poor fellow at Streatham. And, but for a miracle, Mrs. Benstein, with your sacred jewel presumedly in her possession, would have been a further victim. Frobisher

deliberately planned the last thing to close the mouth of a woman."

The Shan's eyes fairly rippled with curiosity, but Harold shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. "I must be absolutely certain of my facts first. Now I am going to see you into bed, and come round to keep you out of mischief in the morning. Meanwhile, I am going to restore myself to a Christian garb and call up Sir James Brownsmith, late as it is. Between us we might be able to put all the pieces together."

To his great satisfaction, Harold saw his dusky friend not only in bed, but fast asleep before he had finished his own change. Everything seemed to promise fair for the morrow. It was past two, and Harold hurried along in the direction of Harley Street, and he was glad to see a gleam over the fanlight of the surgeon's front door. He was pulling the bell for the second time when Sir James Brownsmith appeared.

"What do you want?" he asked, testily. "A consulting physician like myself—"

"How is Mrs. Benstein?" Harold asked coolly. The question was quite effective. "When I saw you a little time ago, Sir James, I passed as one of the Shan's suite. Clothed and in my right mind, I am Mr. Harold Denvers, at your service. I have the solution of the Manfred mystery in my pocket."

"And altogether I have no doubt that you are a most remarkable young man," Sir James said. "Pray come in. I ought to be in bed, but I have not the faintest inclination for sleep. Come in."

Brilliant lights gleamed in Brownsmith's cosy study, where books and scientific instruments made up the bulk of the furniture. The famous surgeon proffered cigarettes what time he looked keenly into the face of his younger companion. He lighted one of the thin paper tubes himself.

"I am just from Mrs. Benstein's house," he explained. "I saw her alone, her husband knows nothing; it is her great desire that he should know nothing, that the matter should be kept a profound secret, in fact."

"It must be," Harold exclaimed. "Not a word of it must leak out. You made a certain examination of the wound. What did you find? Was there any blood?"

"I'm not quite sure. When I came to wash the arm there was no blood there. But there were the fibres of the rope, and they seemed to be impregnated with blood the same as those from the throat of Manfred, and the body of that poor fellow who was strangled at Streatham."

"Are you quite sure that it is blood, Sir James?"

"Well, I could hazard the suggestion, though I have not made a careful analysis yet. No blood on the victim, but blood on the strands of the rope. Strange, isn't it?"

"If it were true, yes," Harold said, dryly. "But it isn't. Look here, Sir James."

From the vest-pocket of his dress-clothes Harold took one wilted bloom of the Cardinal Moth. He crushed it between his fingers, and immediately they were covered with a rosy sticky bright red substance exactly like blood. No paint or pigment of any kind could have counterfeited the original so well.

"Well, that's interesting," Sir James cried. "I see your meaning. When the victim was strangled one or two of those amazing blooms must have been twisted round the rope."

"In other words, the rope that did the mischief was the rope that held up the Cardinal Moth," Harold said. "It was the same at Streatham; it was the same with poor Manfred; according to your own showing, Mrs. Benstein met with her accident under precisely similar circumstances."

Sir James rose and walked up and down the room in a fit of unusual excitement.

"You mean to infer that it was not an accident at all?" he asked.

"You have precisely taken in my meaning, Sir James. The Cardinal Moth is at the bottom of the whole thing. I must tell you a little of its history. The Cardinal Moth is unique amongst flowers; for centuries it guarded, or was supposed to guard, the Temple of Ghan. It had magical powers: it was used for the destruction of political prisoners. They were shut in with it to pick a flower, and always were they found dead, crushed to death. This part is no legend, as the Shan of Koordstan will tell you.

"The fame of the orchid got whispered about, and many were the tries to get it. At last a party of three men managed it; they divided the orchid in three parts and fled. Frobisher was with one part, and narrowly got off with his life at Stamboul. Lefroy got away with another part, but he lost it and almost his life as well in a fire at Turin, a fire that was no accident. The third man vanished, but his orchid remained intact till I came across it and brought it to Streatham, when it was stolen. My idea was to give it back to the Shan of Koordstan in exchange for certain concessions."

"Do you know who stole the plant from Streatham?" Sir James asked.

"I have a very shrewd idea," Harold said. "But that we can go into later. At the present moment I want to show you a little experiment, and when I have done so you will know as much as I do about the mystery. I am going to prove to you that the Cardinal Moth has been a terrible power in the hands of the priests of Ghan, but I am also going to prove that the power is exercised in quite a mechanical way. To-night I managed to bring away a very small piece of the rope that sustains the Cardinal Moth. You see, it is exceedingly dry and hard, and yet under certain conditions it thickens up like a cheap sponge. We will tie this end to this leg of the table and that end to the other leg, leaving it to sway a little, and not making it too tight."

Harold tied the rope as he had indicated under the eyes of Sir James, who watched him with breathless attention. The thing looked so simple, and yet there was a strange mystery behind it all, a mystery that was about to be explained. The two knots were made tight at length.

"Now, despite the warmth of the night, I shall have to get you to light a fire," Harold said. "It is absolutely necessary that we should boil a kettle."

"No occasion to do that," Sir James said. "You shall have your kettle in five minutes. See here."

From under the table he produced a copper electric kettle, filled it, and plunged the plug into the wall. In a little less than five minutes a long trail of steam issued from the spout. By reason of the long flex Harold could carry the kettle from place to place without cutting off the connection, so that the water continued all the time to boil and fizzle.

"Now watch this," he said. "I place this jet of steam under the rope here, and there you are! The effect is practically instantaneous. See what a simple thing it is." Sir James jumped back, horror and enlightenment in his eyes. His voice shook as he spoke.

"Infernal! Diabolical!" he cried hoarsely. "And you mean to say that Fro-bisher knew this! Damnable scoundrel; he is not fit to live, still less to die."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LUNCH AT THE BELGRAVE.

Mrs. Benstein received Denvers as arranged the next morning as if the events of the previous night had been forgotten. She was looking wonderfully fresh and bright; a tailor-made gown fitted her figure to perfection. She motioned Denvers to a chair.

"I am glad you came," she said. "Now you are to please listen to me carefully and put the past out of your mind altogether. Since I saw you last night I have learnt a great deal touching the history of the Blue Stone of Ghan."

"Which I trust is quite safe," Harold murmured.

"Oh quite," Mrs. Benstein said, with a queer little smile. "I have even satisfied my husband on that point, though he has not yet recovered from the shock of your visit—I mean the visit of yourself and the Shan last night. You want to borrow the stone for a day or so?"

"That was the suggestion we ventured to make, Mrs. Benstein."

"For the purpose of throwing dust in the eyes of certain persons who are interested in an attempt to deprive the Shan of his throne. Mind, that is merely surmise, but I fancy it is correct. But I may tell you that my husband could never have hardened his heart to that extent."

"It doesn't matter now," Harold explained. "We are in a position to redeem the gem. Of course, under the circumstances, I need not conceal anything from your Mr. Gerald Parkford—"

"Capital!" Mrs. Benstein cried. "His name is good enough for anything. Now the path is quite clear. I want you and Miss Lyne to lunch with me at two o'clock at the Belgrave. The Shan must come along, that is imperative. He is to leave a note for his minister Hamid Khan to join him there at that meal, and bring the document that requires sealing along. Also I am going to ask Sir Clement Frobisher; only I want Hamid Khan to be a little late. Do you understand?"

"Most brilliant of mysteries; I'll try to," Harold smiled. "And the Blue Stone—"

"The Blue Stone will be in evidence when the time comes. See Mr. Parkford and ask him to bring that cheque along. My husband is too ill to attend to business to-day, so I shall transact it for him."

"He has had a great deal on his mind the last few hours," Harold smiled.

"That is it, Mr. Denvers. A corner in rubies, so to speak. Now will you go and settle up this business for me without delay? I understand that the Shan wants looking after if one desires to keep him in a condition to bestow his mind on business affairs."

"I'll take the hint and my departure," Harold laughed. "I suppose you have written all your notes. And I quite forgot to ask if you feel any the worse for last night's adventure."

Mrs. Benstein had written all her notes, and on the whole she felt little inconvenience from her accident.

"Not that I am at all satisfied," she said. "Mr. Denvers, I was in great danger last night?"

"Terrible danger!" Harold said gravely. "But I have got to the bottom of the mystery now, and the same thing is not likely to happen again. I can't tell you now; in fact, if I did there would be no luncheon-party at the Belgrave to-day. But your curiosity will not be unduly tried."

By the use of the telephone and a cab, Harold managed to carry out Mrs. Benstein's desires. Parkford was waiting in his chambers, having just breakfasted.

"I expected you," he said. "Any news of the ruby?"

"Mrs. Benstein says it is all right," Harold replied. "She wants you to lunch

with her at two at the Belgrave, and I was to ask you to put the cheque in your pocket. It sounds flighty and very unbusinesslike, but there are other matters mixed up with this one, and Mrs. Benstein is not the woman to do a thing of this kind without some very good reason. Will you come?"

"With pleasure," Parkford replied, "and bring the cheque along. Before very long an invitation from Mrs. Benstein will confer a mark of distinction."

The ruler of Koordstan was dressing as Denvers arrived, and suggesting something in the way of champagne and soda-water as a means of an appetite for breakfast. He had gone to bed painfully sober for him, and he resented the interference of Harold accordingly.

"Pon my word, you seem to forget yourself," he said. "If a man can't do as he likes in my position——"

"It is precisely a man in your position who cannot do as he likes," Harold said coolly. "Leave that stuff alone till after lunch, when you can do as you please. If you want your stone back——"

"I had forgotten all about the confounded thing!" the Shan growled. "Let me see, what had you arranged? I was so interested in my bride last night that I forgot all about it. Wasn't there a man called Parkford who promised to do something to get me out of my scrape?"

"He promised a cheque," Harold explained. "He is ready to redeem the stone for us, and Mrs. Benstein has promised that it shall be produced at the proper time. I have seen her already this morning, and she wants you to join her luncheon-party at the Belgrave at two."

"Count me in!" the Shan said eagerly. "A monstrous fine woman, Denvers; and a beautiful one, into the bargain. But you forget I promised to see Hamid Khan here in an hour's time."

"Well, you are not going to meet him here," Harold said. "Mrs. Benstein has got some little scheme on, and I am here an involuntary ally in the matter. You will be good enough to leave a note here for Hamid Khan, explaining that you have been called out on business, or pleasure, or whatever you like; so that Hamid Khan is to meet you at the Belgrave at two for luncheon, after which you will seal his papers. This is not my idea, but Mrs. Benstein's. I am looking forward to a very pretty comedy presently."

The Shan scrambled off his note and presently departed with Harold, who had no intention of losing sight of his dusky friend till the luncheon-party was over. To the Shan's suggestion of the club and billiards he assented, but to a feeble suggestion of modest liquids he turned a deaf ear. On the whole, Denvers was glad to find himself on his way to the Belgrave.

Mrs. Benstein had already arrived, accompanied by Angela. She had fetched the latter, she explained, so that she would have no time for an excuse.

A spray of the Cardinal Moth flashed and trembled on Mrs. Benstein's breast; the same spray of purple orchid that Angela had worn the night before in her hair, was tucked into her belt. Mrs. Benstein was frank and easy and charming as usual, but there was just a touch of colour in her cheeks, and her eyes had a brighter sparkle than usual.

"I have managed everything myself," she cried, gaily. "I have even arranged the flowers on the table. A strange thing, is it not, that we English people can arrange flowers!"

"Ah, here is Mr. Parkford."

Parkford came up, alert, quick, and self-possessed as usual. Denvers gave him an inquiring glance, at which he smiled and tapped his breast-pocket significantly.

"No flowers, any of you!" Mrs. Benstein cried in affected surprise. "Here is one for Mr. Parkford, and there is one for Mr. Denvers. Positively, I see nothing of the shade to suit the colouring of His Highness the Shan. Ah, here is the very thing! Excuse me, Miss Lyne."

The speaker bent down and broke off a little spray of one blossom of the purple orchid from Angela's belt, and herself fixed it in the lapel of the Shan's immaculate coat.

"Who can say that it is not in perfect taste?" she cried. "It is the very shade. We will sit down, and unless Sir Clement Frobisher turns up in time we will proceed without him."

Angela looked a little disappointed at the mention of Frobisher's name. A couple of waiters busied themselves over the table, a basket of gold-foiled bottles attracted the Shan's admiring gaze. As the big Empire clock over the doorway of the great red and gold saloon struck the hour Frobisher appeared. He drew up grinning and smiling with perfect self-possession; even the presence of Denvers did not disconcert him. He affected to ignore Harold altogether. But though he smiled, there was just the suggestion of a puzzled pucker between his eyes. There was something going on that he did not understand. He made a mental note of the fact that Angela and Denvers were not to meet again.

"A pleasant party," he murmured, "and full of sweet surprises. But I always was partial to a dainty salad. Do you expect any further guests, dear lady?"

"I understand that His Highness the Shan is waiting for someone," Mrs. Benstein murmured. "It is a matter of business, I believe. Is not somebody hunting for you over there, your Highness?"

"Hamid Khan, sure enough," the Shan exclaimed. "He sees us at last. He is coming this way."

Hamid came leisurely along, smiling deferentially as he caught sight of his master. The Shan introduced his minister more or less *en bloc* as Hamid mur-

mured something. Then his face suddenly changed, a sickly yellow showed under his tan as he looked up and met the slightly-mocking glance of his hostess.

"Hamid Khan and I have met before," Mrs. Benstein said serenely. "It was some years ago, but I have not forgotten."

"Egad, our friend does not duly appreciate his blessings," Frobisher chuckled as his keen eye detected the sickly pallor of the newcomer. "Try one of these liqueurs."

"The heat, the walk in the sun," Hamid murmured. "London often affects me in this way. If my master will excuse me, I will get my business done and go away. My unworthy presence—"

"Luncheon first," Mrs. Benstein gaily cried. "For the sake of old times, I cannot be refused. I confess I am very curious to see that Blue Stone and the way State documents are sealed. You will perform the operation in our presence after luncheon, will you not, Shan?"

The Shan nodded stolidly. If some play was going on he might take his part, he thought, especially with so brilliant a lady to lead him. Frobisher's restless little eyes roved from face to face, but he could read nothing. The meal proceeded gaily enough, the only silent person being Hamid Khan, who seemed restless and ill at ease. Hardly was the coffee on the table before he rose.

"Mrs. Benstein must excuse me," he said. "But I have much to do. If your Highness will produce the stone I will lay out the necessary papers and—"

He shrugged his shoulders. The Shan put down his glass and nodded. It was impossible from his stolid features to guess that he was as utterly puzzled as Frobisher, which was saying a great deal. A sudden silence, a burst of expectation had fallen on the party. A burst of laughter from an adjoining table seemed out of place, incongruous. The papers were crackling under Hamid Khan's shaky hand.

"Has anybody a wax-match?" he asked. "Thank you, sir. I will get the seals ready."

He proceeded with the aid of a vesta to melt a piece of white wax on a plate. These he laid neatly on a round patch on the paper before him.

"And now for the seal," Mrs. Benstein cried gaily. "Pray produce it, your Highness. I hope you are not so indiscreet as to carry it loose in your pocket."

"I have too many enemies for that," the Shan said, carelessly. "I have to hide it carefully—in fact, I ought not to be in the street with it at all. Now guess where it is?"

Mrs. Benstein's eyes fairly caressed the speaker. He wanted an opening lead, and he had contrived to ask for it in such a manner as to utterly throw Frobisher off the scent.

"I fancy I can tell," Mrs. Benstein went on. "Yes, you are not so clever as you imagine. You are like the man who hid his bank-note in his tie, and called the

attention of the thieves who dogged him to the fact by tapping the tie nervously all the time. I have seen you glance frequently at the purple orchid in your coat. I guess that the Blue Stone is fixed in the calyx of the orchid."

"A most amazing and clever woman," the Shan murmured as he removed the flower from his coat and looked gravely into the calyx of the bloom. "By the prophet, there is some foreign substance here! I remove it between my thumb and forefinger, and behold the Blue Stone."

A queer cry broke from Frobisher, who instantly suppressed it. Hamid Khan looked up with dilating eyes and shot a glance almost murderous at Frobisher. As to the Shan, he smiled with the air of a man who has brought off some new and brilliant feat of conjuring.

"One of Frobisher's orchids too," he said. "Frobisher, if you drink so fast you'll choke yourself."

CHAPTER XXIV. A WOMAN'S WAY.

Frobisher sat there grinning with his teeth showing in a kind of smiling snarl. The shining dome of his head exuded a beady moisture, his hand crooked upon the haft of a dessert-knife, as if it had been a dagger of melodrama. A dog sometimes looks like that when he is being whipped on the chain. Nobody spoke for the moment.

There was not the faintest shadow of triumph on Mrs. Benstein's face. She merely smiled with the delighted air of a child who watched some new and fascinating game. In a businesslike way the Shan reached for Hamid Khan's document and called for the wax.

"That is a very pretty and ingenious hiding-place," Mrs. Benstein said at length. "No enemy would think of looking for it there. Your Highness has many enemies?"

"Ask Hamid Khan yonder," the Shan said crisply. "He can tell you."

The wretched Hamid wriggled and bowed. It was evident that he had been taken quite by surprise. The Shan sealed the documents and carelessly tossed them across the table. The Blue Stone glittered there well within the reach of Frobisher, and his fingers itched for it.

"Put the jewel away," he said hoarsely. "It is dangerous to leave it there."

"A fresh hiding-place," the Shan laughed. "I feel quite nervous. Suppose that I get Parkford to take care of it for me until I get home. He is a man to be trusted, and not a man lightly to molest. Sir, will you do me the favour?"

Parkford coolly dropped the gem into his waistcoat pocket. At the same time he passed a folded strip of paper to Mrs. Benstein and nodded significantly. Then he rose.

"I am desolated," he said, "but really I have to leave. Denvers, a word with you."

The luncheon-party broke up upon this, Mrs. Benstein alone remaining. She had arranged to wait here for a friend, she explained. Frobisher slid away, followed by Hamid Khan, and outside Denvers put Angela into a passing taxi. He had work before him this afternoon.

"That was very neatly done," Parkford said to the Shan. "It was a pleasure to see Frobisher's face. You saw me pass my cheque over to Mrs. Benstein, who will hand it to her husband. If you take my advice you will allow me to deposit the Blue Stone with my bankers for the present. I am going that way, and I shall see that it is all safe."

"Put it where you like," the Shan said, recklessly. "It's all the same to me, knowing as I do that I have an honest man to deal with. This rigid virtue of mine is undermining my constitution. I'll go off to the club, and try and get a game of bridge. Dine with me to-night, Denvers?"

Denvers excused himself on the plea of urgent business; besides, it was strongly probable that His Highness of Koordstan would be beyond entertaining by dinner-time.

"You've got our dusky friend out of a tight place," Harold suggested.

"So I suppose," Parkford said, indifferently. "I like this kind of intrigue, and I have a fancy for acting unofficially for the Government. Sometimes the hobby proves expensive, sometimes the information is valuable. In this case I am going to make a good thing out of it. I am very glad, for your sake, that you told Lord Rashburn all about it. It's given me a grip upon the Shan, and I'll see that you get your concessions. But we must discuss that another time."

Harold went on his way with hope rising high within him. He began to see his way clear now, once the mystery of the Cardinal Moth was fathomed. Lefroy passed him presently, and turned into the Belgrave. Harold wondered if this was the friend whom Mrs. Benstein was expecting.

It was. Lefroy came up to the table where Mrs. Benstein was seated and took a chair by her side. There was no smile of welcome on her face.

"I am charmed to come at your summons," the Count said, placidly.

"That is very good of you," Mrs. Benstein said. "Whether you remain in that frame of mind is quite another matter. I asked you to meet me here because

my time is limited, and I have business close by. As you see from the table I have had guests to luncheon."

"I envy them from the bottom of my soul," Lefroy murmured.

"I would not waste envy on some of them, Count. For instance, Frobisher and Hamid Khan. The Shan of Koordstan came here as my guest; he put off important affairs of State to please me. But I was thoughtful. I said that Hamid Khan should come on here and bring the papers that he required sealing with him."

"The documents that required the impress of the Blue Stone?" Lefroy asked.

"The same. Here is the wax cool and hard now upon the Limoges plate, and with which the deed was done. On the whole it was an interesting ceremony, and nobody was more interested than Clement Frobisher. Never has that most beautiful smile been so much in evidence."

Lefroy coloured slightly. He was not so obviously at his ease now.

"Hamid Khan was also deeply moved," Mrs. Benstein went on. "Really, I believe that both of the men I have mentioned expected that the Blue Stone would not be produced in evidence. But it was. And where do you think it came from? You can never guess, of course."

Lefroy muttered something to the effect that his talents did not lie in that direction. He was conscious of a steely glitter in the eyes of the woman he was near.

"Then I had better tell you," she went on. "He took the stone out of a great purple orchid he was wearing. It was all the more strange that just before I broke that very flower from a cluster worn by Miss Lyne. Do you remember placing a cluster of those flowers in her hair at my request last night?"

"I remember that circumstance perfectly well, Mrs. Benstein."

"Well, it was one of the same cluster of flowers. And I feel quite certain now that when at my request you adorned Miss Lyne last night in the conservatory, the Blue Stone was hidden in that very blossom. Does that intelligence appeal to you in any way, Count Lefroy?"

"You are an exceedingly clever woman," the Count said hoarsely, but with sincere admiration. "So that is the way you baffled us last night. And all the time I had actually the Blue Stone in my hand. And I'll swear that Miss Lyne was not in the secret."

"She was not; her face would have betrayed her. Now you can imagine the pleasure with which I watched Sir Clement and Hamid Khan across the luncheon-table. And you call Frobisher a clever man!"

"He is by far and away the cleverest man I ever met, Madame."

"He is nothing of the kind," Mrs. Benstein said contemptuously. "For depth and cunning he has no equal, I admit. But intellect he has little, and imagination

none at all. The fellow generally scores because his plots, as a rule, are laid against honest people. But I saw through him from the first. He was going to make use of me—me! I would pit myself against him and win every time. If he had not been prepared to play the bully and the coward last night I would have spared him, but not now. Before long that man will stand in the dock, and take heed lest you stand there by his side.”

Mrs. Benstein’s voice had sunk to a hissing whisper, her eyes flashed with passion.

”It is hard to know what I have done,” Lefroy murmured.

”It would be hard to say what you have not done,” was the swift reply. ”You, too, were ready last night to apply force to a desperate woman. But I beat you, and it is part of my revenge to tell you how the trick was done. You will never have another chance to get possession of the Blue Stone and ruin the Shan by your plots together with Hamid Khan. You would have made use of me, now I am going to make use of you. Here comes my husband. When he has done with you I shall dictate my terms. Meanwhile, if your nerves are not equal to the strain there are many kinds of wines here.”

Lefroy declined the proffered hospitality. He began to feel like one of his own puppets as Benstein nodded ponderously and sat down. The interview had evidently been arranged for.

”I am glad of this opportunity for a little chat,” Benstein said, ponderously. His fat cheeks were shaking, his hand was not quite so steady as it might have been. He seemed to be fumbling for something in the capacious pocket of a coat far too large for his bulky figure. ”I was going to look you up, but my wife said she would arrange the matter.”

”We have had a lot of business transactions together,” Lefroy suggested.

”But there is going to be no more, my friend,” Benstein said. ”You are too dangerous—you are too many for the old man whose sight is not what it used to be. It is about those Koordstan possessions that you pledged with me for a large sum of money. I keep them by me, I regard them as good business, until one day I show them to my wife. And what does she say?”

”It is impossible to hazard the suggestion what so clever a woman would say,” Lefroy murmured.

”She says that the whole thing is forgery. Then I look quietly into the matter, and surely enough I find that the whole thing is a forgery. I stand to lose ten thousand pounds. My first impulse is to go off to the police and ask for a warrant to issue against you. When you take my money you take part of my body. Still, if you pay me the money now, I say nothing further.”

Lefroy nodded thoughtfully. He was not in the least abashed; he made no attempt to deny the truth of Aaron Benstein’s accusation. He would have to find

the money, but how, was quite another matter.

"If you give me a little time," he said, "I shall hope to see my way."

"Ah! ah!—a little time—seven years perhaps the Judge will say. But I leave it to my wife—she is the clever one. My dear, what shall I do?"

"At the present moment put on your hat and go back to the City," Mrs. Benstein said. "I fancy I shall know how to deal with Count Lefroy. You can't have your money back and your revenge as well. I fancy you can safely leave me to settle matters."

Aaron Benstein was certain of it. He beamed proudly at his wife and kissed his fingers as he put on his hat and most obediently waddled out of the room. For a long while neither party at the table spoke.

"I'm afraid that I don't quite understand you," Lefroy ventured at length.

"You are not meant to understand me," Isa Benstein retorted. "For the present you are going to be my puppet and dance when I pull the strings. Play me fair, and you shall not suffer for the wrong you have done my husband; play me false, and you shall stand in the dock within an hour after. Come, sir, it is the turn of the woman towards whom you and another scoundrel last night would have shown personal violence had you dared. For the present I shall be content with plain replies to plain questions. Do you know from whence Frobisher obtained the Cardinal Moth?"

"I am not quite sure, but I can give a pretty good guess," Lefroy said.

"We shall come to that presently. Was Manfred well acquainted with the properties of that accursed flower?"

"I should say not. Of course he had a good idea of its value and what one could do with it."

"Quite so. Then I suppose that I am correct in assuming that on the night of his death Manfred was party to a conspiracy to steal the orchid from Sir Clement Frobisher; in other words, he acted as your agent, and he was killed in the act of purloining the flower?"

Lefroy wriggled uneasily and muttered something. But Mrs. Benstein pinned him firmly down.

"I shall abandon you to your fate unless you speak frankly," she said. "Was Manfred trying to steal the Cardinal Moth when he met with his death?"

"You may take that for a fact," Lefroy said, as if the words were dragged from him.

"Very good. Manfred was going to steal the Moth which previously had been stolen by Sir Clement's agent from somebody else. Who sold the Moth to Sir Clement?"

"I am not quite certain, but I believe it was Paul Lopez," said Lefroy.

Mrs. Benstein rose from her seat, and flicked a solitary crumb from her

dress. On the whole she did not seem displeased with the day's work.

"Enough for the present," she said. "Take me out and see me into a swift taxi."

CHAPTER XXV. A STRIKING LIKENESS.

Frobisher had passed a bad night, and he looked as if he were likely to have an equally unpleasant morning. A small dealer out St. Alban's way claimed to have found three new orchids in his last speculative parcel, and Frobisher had set his mind on seeing them before some other soulless and selfish collector stepped in. But a slip of blue paper, humorously accompanied by a shilling, told him that his presence was imperative at the adjourned inquest on the body of the man unknown, who had been found murdered in the greenhouse at Streatham.

"Now what possible connection can I have with that?" he grumbled, as he ate his breakfast. "It was bad enough for Manfred to thoughtlessly lose his life in my conservatory: And here's a letter from George Arnott. He has a great deal of complaint about you, Angela."

"I am properly flattered by his consideration," Angela said coldly.

"Oh, that's all very well, young lady. But you are going to marry George Arnott all the same. That young scoundrel Denvers had better make the most of his time."

"He will do that without any encouragement from you," Angela replied. "Mr. Arnott is an unspeakable little cad, and I would as soon marry your butler. Indeed, I insult the butler by comparison."

An ugly smile crossed Frobisher's face, but he carried the conversation no further. He was puzzled and bewildered, and neither feeling was palatable. He had been outgeneralled by a woman, and the reflection was bitter. But he was going to have his own way over this matter, as Angela would discover.

"Mr. Arnott to see you, sir," the butler announced. "In the library, sir."

Arnott seemed to be anxious about something. He was fussing up and down the library with a mass of papers in his hand. His manner was hardly flattering.

"Well, you have made a nice mess of it," he said, "you and Lefroy between you. He's bolted." Frobisher chuckled for the first time since he rose.

"Bet you a penny old Benstein had found out all about those forgeries," he said. "Lefroy didn't know that I was *au fait* as to that transaction. So Lefroy has retired discreetly—urgent business on behalf of the master, and all that kind of thing, eh? That leaves the field clear for us."

"To a certain extent, perhaps. But you won't get the concessions. Hamid Khan has been utterly beaten by Mrs. Benstein and your friend Harold Denvers. It appears that Mrs. Benstein knew Hamid Khan years ago, he being no more of a Koord than you or I. The Shan has dismissed him, and at the present moment is on his way to Paris with Denvers."

A round rasping oath shot from Frobisher's lips. "So that young blackguard was in it," he exclaimed. "I fancied so."

"In it! In it up to his neck. I bribed one of the Shan's servants. Why, Denvers, calling himself Aben Abdullah or some such name, and beautifully disguised, was in your house the night before last at your wife's dance. It was he who stopped your little game and enabled Mrs. Benstein to turn the tables on you. Those concessions are as good as in Denvers' pocket."

"But where did the money come from to get that gem out of Benstein's clutches? I know for a fact that the Shan is desperately hard up for the moment."

"What does that matter?" Arnott asked irritably. "You were at Mrs. Benstein's luncheon-party at the Belgrave yesterday. Who was there besides the actors in the game? You are losing your wits, Frobisher. What do you suppose Parkford was doing there?"

Frobisher slapped his bald head helplessly.

"I never thought of that," he said blankly. "I'd go to Paris myself, only I've got to attend an inquest. Come and dine quietly to-night and discuss the plan of campaign. I shall find some way out yet. Now just you toddle off and keep your tongue between your teeth."

"And what about Miss Lyne?" Arnott asked.

"That's going to be all right—you can safely trust the young lady to me. She doesn't realise what I am capable of. Though why you should want to marry a girl who hates you and despises you from the bottom of her heart is more than I can comprehend. Eight o'clock sharp to-night."

Frobisher travelled down to Streatham a little later, and devoutly hoped that his own evidence would be a matter of form. But the hall in which the inquest was to be held was crammed with curious onlookers, for the dual sensation caused by two mysterious deaths under similar circumstances had not been forgotten by the public. Frobisher but rarely glanced at the newspapers except *The Times*, or he would have known that "the orchid mystery," as it had been called, was the sensation of the hour. Only by the aid of two friendly policemen did he reach a seat in court.

The proceedings were drawing on, evidence of a formal nature only being called at present. Frobisher nodded to Inspector Townsend, whom he recognized as an old acquaintance.

"Something horribly nasty about perspiring humanity," he said. "I should like to turn a garden-hose on to the gallery yonder. What on earth do you want me for, Townsend?"

Townsend admitted that there might be one or two points on which Sir Clement's evidence might prove material. He was not quite sure what the bar-rister for the authorities had in his mind. Frobisher glanced at his watch from time to time impatiently; he had forgotten his surroundings utterly, when the sound of his own name brought him back to the present with a start. Leisurely and with perfect self-possession he entered the box and was sworn.

"I want to ask you a few questions," the Crown counsel said. "You have read something of the case, Sir Clement?"

"I have heard of it, though I am afraid I shall be of very little use to you."

"We shall see. This man, whom I shall call the unknown for the reason that he has not yet been identified, was found dead, murdered in a greenhouse at Streatham. He had been strangled by means of a hair rope twisted about his neck and pulled tight with great force from behind."

"That you are perfectly sure of?" Frobisher said with a suggestion of a grin.

"At any rate, it will serve for a theory at present. In that greenhouse, upon the authority of Thomas Silverthorne, was a valuable orchid which had been placed there by a stranger some time before. After the murder of the unknown that orchid had absolutely disappeared."

"Very strange," Frobisher said indifferently, "but of no particular interest to me."

"Perhaps we shall make it more interesting presently," Counsel retorted.

"We are inclined to believe that two people were after the orchid—the man who was killed and the man who killed him and took the orchid away. The plant must have been singularly valuable and possibly unique in its way to induce a crime like this. The whole thing is very strange and singular, and it is rendered more so by the fact that a precisely similar crime was committed in your conservatory the same night. You have valuable orchids, Sir Clement?"

Frobisher nodded. He was not quite so cool now, and an irritating lump was working at the back of his throat. His quick mind began to see what was behind these apparently innocent questions.

"I have probably the finest collection in England," he replied.

"Many of them would tempt a thief, I suppose?"

"Well, I dare say. There are orchid collectors all over the world, you see. Once a man gets hold of that passion it seldom leaves him. A valuable stolen

orchid would be a marketable commodity.”

”The same as stolen books or prints, eh? The commercial morality of all collectors is supposed to be low. What you mean to say is that an orchid of repute would be bought by some collectors well knowing that it had been obtained by questionable means?”

”I’ve no doubt about it,” Frobisher admitted. ”I have known such cases.”

”Then here we have a motive for the crime. Let me refer to your own case for a moment. What do you suppose Mr. Manfred was doing in your conservatory at the time he died? He refused to dine under plea of a headache; he was supposed to be lying down, and yet he was found dead near your flowers. Do you think he was after one of them?”

”The inference is a fair one,” Frobisher said, guardedly.

Counsel smiled as he stroked his moustache. He was getting to the point now.

”Did you or do you suspect Mr. Manfred was after a particular plant?” he asked.

Frobisher started. He saw the trap instantly. The smiling little man with the bland questions knew a great deal more than he had told as yet. He was not so much asking questions as inviting the witness to make admissions. He had been primed doubtless by Mrs. Benstein and Denvers. The lump in the back of Frobisher’s throat grew large, the easy smile flickered and died on his face.

”I have a score that are almost unique,” he said. ”Under the circumstances—
—”

Counsel waved the point aside. His experience told him that he was alarming his witness. He started on another tack which was destined to be even more disturbing to Frobisher’s peace of mind.

”Let me put it another way,” he said in his silkiest manner. ”We are pretty certain that a valuable orchid was stolen from Streatham. You tell me that commercial morality among collectors is not high, and that a plant like that would be a marketable commodity. Would you buy it, for example?”

”I would go a long way in that direction,” Frobisher said with a touch of his old cynicism.

”You would! Now I am going to ask you a direct question. I need not tell you the hour at which the unknown was murdered at Streatham because you know that as well as I do. Now since that time have you added to your collection an orchid of extraordinary interest?”

Frobisher gasped. He had not expected the question. He was like a man who suddenly sees before him a deep and yawning precipice in the path of flowers. And the chasm was so deep and yawning that he could not see to the bottom of it. He hesitated and stammered.

"I certainly bought a valuable orchid the same night," he admitted.

"Ah! Now we are getting on, indeed. The orchid you bought was unique!"

"Well, that is a fair description of it. Nothing like it has been seen before."

"An orchid the like of which has never been seen before! Come, this is very interesting. Can you tell us if the plant in question has any particular name?"

"It is called 'The Cardinal Moth,'" Frobisher admitted slowly. The words seemed to be dragged from him; he half wondered what had become of his voice. "It came originally from Koordstan."

"Stolen," the Counsel cried. "The orchid, sir, is unique. It was used to guard the Temple of Ghan. It is supposed to possess certain sinister qualities. Criminals who were sent into the place where the Moth hung never came out alive, they always died, as the two unhappy men whose cases we have under consideration perished. The sentence was to pluck a flower from the Cardinal Moth. The flowers were plucked, and when the great gates were thrown back the criminal was dead, strangled. Sir Clement, I presume that you knew all about this before you purchased the Cardinal Moth the other night."

"Every collector of intelligence knows the story," Frobisher admitted.

"So when the treasure came in your way you could not resist the temptation of purchase. Now, pray be careful. Did you not buy the Cardinal Moth about an hour or two, say, after the unknown was found murdered in that conservatory at Streatham?"

Frobisher wiped his shining head; his hand was shaking slightly.

"If you put it that way, I did," he said. "It was brought to me and offered for sale that night and I bought it."

"What did you give for it?"

Frobisher gaped open-mouthed at the question. It came back to him with sudden force that he had not given anything for the Moth at all, he had only promised for Lopez's sake to tell a lie and stick to it. Counsel rapped sharply on the table before him.

"I asked you what you gave for the Cardinal Moth?" he exclaimed.

"A trifle," Frobisher admitted. "Well, nothing in money at all. You see, the man who sold it to me——"

"Can you see the man in court? Look round and let us know if he is here."

Frobisher slowly looked round the court, not so much to find Lopez as to

regain his own scattered wits.

CHAPTER XXVI. A BAD QUARTER OF AN HOUR.

Frobisher passed a handkerchief over his shining head slowly, with a feeling that he was going through the ordeal of a Turkish bath. It was a long time before he was quite sure that the vendor of the Cardinal Moth was not in court. The little questioner smiled as Frobisher shook his head. Evidently he had a powerful reserve behind him. He switched off on to another track presently.

"You know all about the history of the Cardinal Moth?" he asked.

"Every collector does," Frobisher replied. "It has been known for centuries. Times out of number adventurers have tried to obtain the whole plant, or, at any rate, a small portion of it, but without success. Generally the attempt has ended in disaster to the adventurers."

"You mean that usually they have been killed?"

"Precisely. They have died of strangulation as—as Mr. Manfred did."

"Quite so. You don't suggest that there is anything Satanic or diabolical about the Moth? No cruel force from an unseen world, or anything of that kind?"

"Certainly not," Frobisher said with the suspicion of a sneer. "Although such a thing is firmly believed in Koordstan and elsewhere."

"Then there is some trick, some danger. Now, Sir Clement, listen to me carefully. You knew all about this strange fatality that clings to the Cardinal Moth, you know that Mr. Manfred met his death by that terrible way, and that tragedy at Streatham was more or less a repetition of the thing that happened under your roof. You can't deny that."

"Have I made any attempt to do so?" Frobisher retorted.

"I didn't suggest anything of the kind," Counsel snapped. "But I do say that you suppressed, deliberately suppressed, what you knew to be facts of the deepest import. Why did you not tell all this to the police? Why didn't you mention it to Sir James Brownsmith and other friends?"

Frobisher mumbled something in reply. It came to him suddenly that he was older than he ought to be, that his nerve was no longer what it once had been. He called to mind the many brilliant knaves who had from time to time stepped jauntily into a witness-box contemptuous of the inferiority of the cross-

questioner, and who had an hour later tottered from the court a broken man. How much did this little keen-eyed man know? he asked himself. He would have given half his fortune to be quite clear on that point. But he could not answer the question satisfactorily.

"Nothing could have been gained by that course," he said.

"And you want the court to believe that?" Counsel cried. "Here were you with something like a correct solution in your mind and you keep silence. When did you buy the Cardinal Moth?"

"It was on the night of the Streatham tragedy," Frobisher admitted.

"Indeed! Was the man you purchased that plant from a stranger to you?"

"No. On the contrary, I have known him for years. He was with me the night before as well."

"Worse and worse," Counsel protested. "Tell me, Sir Clement, have you ever made an attempt to raid the Cardinal Moth in person or in conjunction with others?"

"I laid a plot to get possession of it," Frobisher admitted coolly enough. He felt that he could afford to be cynical and frank on this point. "But my plans miscarried. The plant was divided into three portions. One was lost sight of, in America, I fancy; the other was lost at Stamboul, where I came very near to losing my life as well. And the third plant was burned at Turin."

"Was that by accident or design?"

"Design, doubtless. The hotel was deliberately set on fire."

"Interesting," Counsel murmured. "What was the name of your ally at Turin?"

"I'm sorry I cannot remember. In the many busy incidents in a life like mine——"

"One moment, if you please. And don't forget that you are on your oath. Now wasn't the name of your partner who got as far as Turin Count Lefroy?"

Frobisher snarled out something that sounded between an affirmative or an oath. He was clinging to the rail of the witness-box now; there was a perceptible stoop in his shoulders and his lips quivered. The little man went on with his merciless questions, smiling as he scored one point after another.

"Count Lefroy has been your partner in many a financial venture?" he asked. "But you have dissolved partnership of recent years; you could not trust one another?"

"The steel was too finely tempered in us both," said Frobisher, with a touch of his old humour.

"And so you parted. Now let us get on a little further. Of late you have been very anxious to obtain certain concessions from the Shan of Koordstan. Count Lefroy was equally anxious. And the Shan, not being so very popular with his

subjects at present, would have liked to get the Cardinal Moth back again. Now were you prepared to change the Moth for the concessions?"

"I confess that some such idea was in my mind," Frobisher admitted.

"In which case was it not dangerous to ask Count Lefroy to your house? I mean to luncheon to show him the Moth, and afterwards the invitation to the fatal dinner?"

"I can't say," Frobisher replied. "I really can't see what—"

"Oh, yes you can; a clever man like yourself can see everything. The Count was as anxious to have the Moth as you were, also with an eye to these concessions. He was more anxious because he had already mortgaged the so-called concession to Mr. Aaron Benstein for a large sum of money. Did you know of that?"

Frobisher hesitated a long time before he replied. He had grown singularly hot and confused; he could see no more than that a trap was being laid for him, but the bait was invisible. There was nothing for it but to tell the truth and trust to chance.

"I was quite aware of what Count Lefroy had done," he said.

"And yet you showed him the Cardinal Moth. He was very angry and he struck Manfred in your presence. He gave you to infer that he had by the merest chance lost the Moth itself. In other words, the man who had stolen it brought it to you instead of to Count Lefroy."

Frobisher nodded. He was smiling recklessly and a little hysterically now, wondering how many hours he had been standing there under the rigid fire of questions. As he glanced up at a big clock over the coroner's head, to his intense surprise he saw that it was barely twenty minutes.

"Count Lefroy had made up his mind to steal that plant," Counsel went on. "Didn't you guess that?"

"I felt pretty sure that he would make the attempt, yes."

"As a matter of fact, we contend that the attempt was made. It was all arranged. The night of your dinner, Mr. Manfred sat out under the pretence of a bad headache. The house was quiet and you were engaged with your guests, and Manfred knew exactly where to go. He made the attempt, and in doing so lost his life."

"It looks very much like it," Frobisher said, hoarsely.

"Do you know exactly how he lost his life?" Counsel asked.

The question came quick and short like the snapping of a steel trap. Frobisher understood the import of it, nobody else practically did. He glanced at Townsend, who appeared to be deeply interested in a newspaper; the Coroner was gazing at the painted ceiling. An unconquerable rush of rage possessed the witness.

"Hang you, find out," he cried. "To the devil with you and your questions. How should I know the secret that the priests of Ghan have kept so closely all these centuries? All I know is, that anybody who tampers with the Moth under certain conditions dies, and—"

The Coroner suddenly woke up and sternly rebuked the witness. He listened humbly enough now, for he was spent and broken again, only longing passionately to be away.

"I am truly sorry, sir, but the question irritated me," he said. "Anybody would think that I had a hand in the death of poor Manfred."

"Nobody has suggested anything of the kind," Counsel went on as smoothly as if nothing had happened. "All I contend is, that you can practically solve the problem if you choose. But let us hark back a little way again. What is the name of the man who sold you the orchid?"

"His name is Paul Lopez," Frobisher said in a tone so low that he was asked to repeat it again. He passed his tongue over his dry lips. "I can tell you no more than that."

"Is he a stranger to you, or have you known him a long time?"

Sorely tempted to lie, Frobisher hesitated a moment. But once more the cruel uncertainty of the knowledge possessed by the little man opposite forced the truth from him.

"I have known Paul Lopez for years," he said. "He has done many little things for me. But I swear to you now—as I am prepared to swear anywhere—that the Cardinal Moth came to me as a complete surprise. I never expected it, and I was absolutely astonished when I saw it."

"Then you have no idea whence it came?"

"Not the slightest. It never occurred to me to ask any questions."

"The wise man does not ask questions," Counsel said dryly. "Possibly your curiosity would not have been gratified, in any case. But I suppose that you had an idea, eh? You feel pretty sure now that the plant was stolen from Streatham?"

"That is mere conjecture on your part," Frobisher replied.

"Oh, no, it isn't. I shall be in a position to prove the fact when the time comes. You can step down for the moment, Sir Clement, though I shall have to trouble you again. Call Paul Lopez."

Townsend put down his paper and stood up.

"It will be quite useless, sir," he said. "Lopez has disappeared. My information tells me that he has gone in the first instance as far as Paris. Perhaps later on we may be able to produce him, but that will require more than the usual subpoena."

The Coroner woke up again, and his eyes came down from the ceiling. Yet he had missed nothing of what was going on, as his next question showed.

"That is rather unfortunate, Inspector," he said. "What do you propose to do now?"

"Ask for an adjournment till Thursday, sir," Townsend said. "Then I hope to call Sir James Brownsmith, who I am sure will have a great deal to say. If that course is quite convenient to you—"

The Coroner snapped out a few words, and the crowd in the gallery began to fade away. In a kind of walking dream Sir Clement Frobisher found himself outside. He felt as if many years had been added to his life; he was shaking from head to foot. The gold sign of a decent hotel caught his eye. The white legend, "Wines and spirits," allured him. Somebody was speaking to him, but he did not heed.

Then he became conscious that Mrs. Benstein was standing before him. She had been in court, but he had not seen her. He muttered some commonplaces now, he tottered across the street and into a bar which was empty. The smart girl behind looked at him curiously as he ordered a large brandy-and-soda. The soda he almost discarded, he poured the strong spirit down his throat, and a little life crept into his quivering lips.

Meanwhile Mrs. Benstein stood by the door of her car. She appeared to be waiting for somebody. From the bar window the now resuscitated Frobisher watched and wondered. He saw Townsend come out of court; he saw Mrs. Benstein stop him as he touched his cap.

"I'd give a trifle to hear what they are saying," Frobisher muttered. "I wish I had never seen that confounded woman. I am growing senile. Fancy being beaten by a woman!"

Mrs. Benstein had very little to say to Townsend, but that little was to the point.

"If you can lay hands on Lopez, what shall you do?" she asked.

"Arrest him on suspicion of the Streatham murder," Townsend said promptly.

"Which he never committed. Still, it is the proper thing to do. Now tell me where I can give you a call upon the telephone about ten o'clock to-night."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MRS. BENSTEIN INTERVENES.

Mrs. Benstein was dining alone and early, for Benstein had an important engagement later, and usually he made a point of being in bed betimes. He had had a good day, which was no uncommon thing for him, and he was loquacious and talkative as usual. From the head of the table Mrs. Benstein smiled and nodded, but, as a matter of fact, she had not the least idea what her husband was talking about. Not until the coffee was on the table and the cigarettes going round did she speak. She always liked her coffee in that perfect old Tudor dining-room—the dark oak and the silver and the shaded lights all made so restful a picture.

"Now I want to give you half an hour," she said. "You will be in plenty of time to see Lord Rayfield afterwards. Did you read the account of the Streatham inquest in the *Evening Standard* as I asked you?"

"Read every word of it whilst I was dressing," Benstein said.

Mrs. Benstein smiled. From the way her husband was dressed, the paper in question had monopolized most of his attention. At any rate, he seemed to have grasped the case.

"What did you think of it?" she asked.

"Well, it's a queer business," Benstein said, thoughtfully. "Seems to me to be a lot of fuss to make about a paltry flower that any accident might destroy. Never could understand Frobisher wasting his money over that sort of trash."

"No, you wouldn't," Mrs. Benstein said, quietly. "But mind you, that flower is more or less of a sacred thing, and the Shan of Koordstan would have given his head to get it. He's Oriental through and through, despite his thin veneer of polish and his Western vices. I suppose those concessions that the Shan has to dispose of are valuable?"

Benstein's deep-set little eyes twinkled.

"Give a million for 'em and chance it," he said. "So you think that Frobisher—"

"Precisely. Much as he loves orchids, he didn't want the Cardinal Moth for keeping, as the Americans say. With that lever he meant to get hold of those concessions. Now I have discovered that it was young Harold Denvers who found the Cardinal Moth and brought it to England. He took it down to Streatham, thinking that it would be safe there. But Paul Lopez got to know about it, and so did another man, apparently—I mean the man who was murdered."

"You think that he was murdered by Lopez, Isa?"

Mrs. Benstein made no reply, but smiled significantly. She might have startled her husband with some strange information, but she did not care to do so at present.

"That will be the general impression after to-day's proceedings," she said. "And Paul Lopez has disappeared. But I feel pretty sure that he has not left England."

"I am certain of it," Benstein chuckled. "Lopez has never got any money. He tried me for a loan only yesterday to take him away. Guess I could put my hand upon him in an hour."

"You think he is to be found at that gambling club you are so interested in?"

"Certain of it, my dear. Lopez is friendly enough with old Chiavari, who has found him a bed and food before now. Rare good customer to Chiavari he has been. If Lopez is not hiding at 17, Panton Street, I'm no judge. Do you want to see him?"

Mrs. Benstein intimated that she did, at which Benstein said nothing and evinced no surprise. He had the most profound, almost senile confidence in his wife and her intelligence, and she did exactly as she liked, and her obedient husband asked no questions.

"Very well, my dear," he said, as he rose and looked at the clock. "I'm going past Chiavari's and I'll look in. If Lopez is there, expect him in half an hour."

Benstein waddled out of the room and presently left the house. Something seemed to amuse Mrs. Benstein as she sat in the drawing-room before her piano. Half an hour passed, the clock was striking nine, and the footman opened the door to admit a stranger.

"A gentleman to see you, madame," he murmured. "He says you would not know his name."

Isa Benstein signalled assent. She closed the door as Lopez came in and led the way to a small room beyond, furnished as a library more or less. There was an American roll-top desk and a telephone over it. Isa Benstein pushed a box of cigarettes towards her companion.

"How did you guess where to find me?" he asked.

"I didn't guess," Isa Benstein said, quietly. "I never guess anything. You were near the Coroner's court this morning, because I saw you. You did not deem it prudent to appear, so you had a friend who gave you the news *en passant*. After that you would deem it prudent to go away for a little while beyond the range of the police. But unfortunately as usual you have no money."

"Correct and logical in every detail," Lopez cried. "What a couple we should have made."

"You indeed! The brilliant wife and the equally brilliant husband who would have gambled everything away as soon as it was made. Strange, too, a man so clever could be such a fool. So here you are stranded in London without a feather to fly with."

"Correct again. Unless you are going to help me."

"Why should I help you? You are friendless as well as penniless. There is only one man in London who would be glad for his own sake to supply you with funds, and that is Sir Clement Frobisher. But you dare not go near him or write

to him or have any communication with him for fear of the police.”

”Once more absolutely correct, Isa. Truly a wonderful woman. If you fail me—”

”We shall come to that presently. What do you know of that Streatham business?”

”Very little indeed. If you want me to swear on my oath that I had nothing to do with the crime I am prepared to do so.”

”But you know perfectly well who the man is. He was lying dead on the floor of the conservatory at Streatham, at the very time when you stole the Crimson Moth placed there by Mr. Denvers.”

Lopez started and turned colour slightly. He did not know that this was mere conjecture on the part of his questioner, but it was. Speaking from her intimate knowledge and calculating by time she felt sure that she had not been far wrong. And here was the face of Lopez confirming her impressions.

”You need not trouble to deny it,” she went on. ”I know pretty well everything. Mr. Denvers had not left many minutes before the accident happened. Was there an automatic steam-pipe in the conservatory?”

”Of course. And you may be quite certain that—but do you really know everything, Isa?”

”Absolutely. I can speak from experience. I did not know till the night of Lady Frobisher’s party, but I found out then. If you don’t believe me, look here.”

Mrs. Benstein bared her arm, and displayed the cruel circular wound above the elbow. She was very pale now, and her eyes were dark. Very slowly she pulled her sleeve down again.

”Now you can tell how much I know,” she said. ”Who was the man who lost his life at Streatham?”

”I don’t know his name, but he appeared very familiar to me. He was a Greek, a tool of Lefroy’s and that queer fellow Manfred. He was too adventurous, and he died.”

”And Manfred was too adventurous and he died also. I was a little curious, and I nearly met the same fate. That fate was deliberately planned for me by Frobisher; in intent that scoundrel is as guilty of murder as if he had fired at me from behind cover. He thought to trick me, to make me his puppet and tool, and by flattering my vanity obtain possession of the Blue Stone.”

”Only the scheme did not come off,” Lopez grinned.

”It failed, because I have ten times Sir Clement’s brains and none of his low cunning. But the scheme would never have been tried at all had you not suggested it.”

”I!” Lopez stammered. ”Do you mean to say—”

”You suggested it; you told Frobisher where the Blue Stone was. His quick

brain did the rest. Now perhaps you begin to guess why I sent for you to-night."

"I thought perhaps you intended to help me," Lopez said with his eyes on the carpet.

"Why should I help you? To put money into your purse you did not hesitate to ruin me and my husband, knowing that my one poor vanity induced me to deck myself out in borrowed plumes. As a girl you asked for my heart and I gave it you; I gave all the love I had for any man. I have never been able to feel the same since. Don't flatter yourself that I care the least for you; the flower has been dead many years. I forgave you that. I did not get you crushed and broken, as I could easily have done. And now you dare drag me once again into your net. I sent for you to-night to make conditions; the whole truth must be told. You are to stay in London, and on Friday you are to give your evidence at the adjourned inquest."

"You are never going to have it all out?" Lopez said blankly.

"Indeed I am. Whether you and Frobisher are actually guilty of crime in the eyes of the law I don't know or care. But you both have a deal to answer for. Don't you play me false."

Lopez looked up and down again swiftly. He was thinking how he could turn this thing to advantage and go his own course at the same time. He did not hear the tinkle of the telephone-bell behind him; he took no heed as Mrs. Benstein placed the receiver to her ear.

"Yes," she said. "I am home. See you in ten minutes. Ask him to wait outside the drawing-room door. Oh, yes, the messenger came quite safely. Good night."

If Lopez heard all this it was quite in a mechanical way. He spoke presently, urging the uselessness of the proceedings that Isa Benstein suggested. She said something in reply, something cold and cutting, but she was taking no further interest in the matter. She was listening for something, the ring of the front-door bell and a step outside. It came at length, and she rose.

"My mind is quite made up," she said. "And I am not going to give you a chance to go back upon me. Will you open that door, please? I thank you. Inspector Townsend, will you be so good as to step in? As I told you over the telephone, the messenger arrived quite safely."

Lopez's hand shot swiftly behind him; then he dropped it to his side and smiled. He had been beaten, but he showed no emotion or the slightest sign of anger.

"I think you had better come quietly," he said. "I have plenty of assistance outside. The charge is wilful murder over that affair at Streatham. Shall I call a cab for you?"

Lopez nodded. As he passed out of the house Isa Benstein went to the telephone again, and called up the office of the *Evening Banner*. There was a hurried conversation, then the communication was cut off. It seemed to Mrs.

Benstein that she had every reason to be pleased with her evening's work. "It would be good to see Frobisher's face when he knows that," she said. "And he will know to-night."

It was getting late now, but some of the evening papers were running extra specials. There had been a big railway accident in the North, and there was a little capital out of that. Frobisher heard the raucous cry of the boys as he came out of his club. He was restless and ill at ease; he could not sit down and contemplate the beauty of his orchids to-night.

"Terrible accident," a boy screamed as he passed. "More about the Streatham 'orror. Arrest of Paul Lopez to-night. Arrest of the missing witness. Speshul."

"Here, boy, let me have a paper," Frobisher called out. "Never mind the confounded change. Give me a paper, quick." His hand trembled as he took the still damp sheet, his legs shook as he made his way back to the quietude of the conservatory. He must see to this at once.

Yes, there it was, a few short pregnant lines to the effect that Paul Lopez had been arrested by Inspector Townsend a little after nine that night. It looked cold and bald enough in print, but it thrilled the reader to his marrow.

"The fool!" he hissed. "The fool had no money to get away with. Why didn't he come to me or send? I'd have given him all he wanted if it had been half my fortune."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NEMESIS.

Frobisher raged furiously up and down the conservatory for a time. Everything seemed to have gone wrong with him all at once. His favourite clay pipe would not draw; as he jammed a cleaner down the stem angrily it came away in his hand. The case of spare pipes he could not find anywhere. It crossed his imagination suddenly that some of the more delicate orchids in the roof were looking a little stale. He touched the gauge of the automatic steam-pipe that threw off vapour at regulated intervals and found it out of order. He shook the spring tap angrily as a terrier might shake a rat.

"Confound the thing," he cried. "Everything seems to be wrong to-night. Here is a job for Hafid."

Hafid came in trembling at the long ring of the electric bell. He had not seen his master in such a dark mood for many a day. Why had he not come before? Where had the fool been? Hafid bowed before the storm.

"I'm going out, you congenial idiot," Frobisher muttered. "Something has gone wrong with the automatic steam-tap in the conservatory. Turn it on for a minute at eleven o'clock and again at twelve if I am not back. As you value your skin, don't forget it."

Hafid bowed again, and his lips formed hoarse words that Frobisher could just hear.

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," he said. "Take it and burn it, and—"

"You chattering simian," Frobisher cried. He sprang on Hafid and shook him till his teeth chattered. "You besotted ass. Are you going to do what I say or not?"

Hafid abased himself and promised by the name of the Prophet. There was a slight hiss in the conservatory beyond that Frobisher did not notice. There was nothing wrong with the steam-valve, after all; perhaps it had stuck somewhere for a moment, but at any rate it was working again now. But Frobisher was too passionately angry to see that.

"Eleven o'clock," he commanded. "Don't forget the time. Now find my pipes for me. Find them in a minute, or I'll kick you from here to your kennel."

Hafid was fortunate enough to discover the cases of pipes precisely where his master had placed them. Then he slipped away discreetly enough before worse befell him. For some time Frobisher smoked on moodily. He looked like being beaten all along the line, and he hated that worse than losing his money. If the whole truth came out, and it could be proved that he tacitly permitted these tragedies, no decent man would ever speak to him again. Also, he was a little uneasy as to whether the law held any precedent for murder by proxy. Again, if Lopez was forced to speak to save his own skin, the Cardinal Moth would have to go. There was torture in the thought beyond the bitter humiliation of defeat. Beyond doubt, Mrs. Benstein was at the back of all this. Frobisher wondered if she quite knew everything. At any rate, if he could see her he might pick up a useful hint or two. Women always talk if properly encouraged, and a triumphant woman could never quite keep her triumph to herself.

"I'll go to-night," Frobisher muttered as he laid aside his pipe. "I dare say I can invent some ingenious excuse for calling at this time of night."

He passed from the conservatory into the hall and from thence to the drawing-room. Lady Frobisher was there, and Angela standing before the fire-place drawing on a long pair of gloves. The big Empire clock over the mantel chimed the three-quarters past ten.

"Where are you going at this time of the night?" Frobisher asked.

"Lady Warrendale's," Lady Frobisher said without looking up from her paper. "We are waiting for Nelly Blyson. We shall not start before eleven."

"Then you can take me and put me down at the corner of Belgrave Square," Frobisher said. "I've got a little business in that direction. Didn't I hear Arnott's voice?"

Lady Frobisher said nothing; she seemed to be deeply engrossed in her paper. Angela lifted her dainty head just a little bit higher.

"He certainly called," she said, "to see me. But he is not likely to come again."

Frobisher's teeth showed behind one of his sudden grins. He wanted to grip those white arms, to leave the small marks of his fingers behind. But there were better ways than that.

"So you mean that you have refused him?" he asked.

"Definitely and finally," Angela replied. "I paid him the compliment of treating him like a gentleman, but I might have spared myself the trouble. If you ask that man here again when I am present, I shall be compelled to leave the house and take up my quarters elsewhere."

Frobisher grinned again. He could pretty well picture to himself the way in which Arnott would take his rejection. And the man was not a gentleman. Frobisher's own breeding showed him that.

"Very well," he said. "Go your own way for the present. Ask Parsons to give me a call when the car comes round. I shall be amongst my flowers."

He strode back to the conservatory, hating everybody in the world, himself most of all. Hafid was crossing in the direction of the conservatory, a big old clock in the hall was close on the hour of eleven.

"Where are you going to, you black thief?" Frobisher demanded.

"My master gave certain directions for eleven o'clock," Hafid said, timidly. "I was going to—"

"I'll do it myself. But don't you forget twelve o'clock if I have not returned. Go back to your room."

The black shadow departed, Frobisher went on muttering. There was time for half a pipe, and then—then a brilliant idea came to him. He grinned and laughed aloud.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll take the Cardinal Moth down and hide it. The thing will dry and shrivel for a time, and come back to all its beauty when it feels the grateful moist warmth again. Denvers shall not have the laugh on me. I'll be robbed. It shall go out to the world that the famous Cardinal Moth has been stolen from my conservatory. And I'll do it now, by Jove."

Then, with this design, Frobisher pulled up the extending steps. A minute later and his body was thrust into a tangle of looped ropes on which the Cardinal

Moth hung. It was like untying a multitude of loose knots. The folds were all about Frobisher like a snake. So intent was he upon his work that he did not hear the hiss of the steam-valve below. The air was growing suddenly warmer and moister, but Frobisher did not seem to heed. Then, without any warning, something caught him by the wrists and held him as in handcuffs. He struggled and looked down. A cloud of steam was slowly ascending.

"My God!" Frobisher burst out. "That valve was all right, after all. Here, Hafid, help!"

But Hafid was some way off, and nobody seemed to notice. Frobisher struggled, then another loop caught him round the chest, as he fought frantically, slipped up and pinned him round the throat. A thousand stars danced before his eyes; he could hear voices in the distance. In the hour of his peril he caught the sound of Harold Denvers' voice and wondered what he was doing here.

There was a last despairing cry, a choke and a snort and a long shudder of the powerful limbs. The thousand stars went out as if suddenly swept off the face of the heavens by a passing cloud; it was dark with patches of red in it, and Frobisher grew still after a long shuddering sigh. Then he hung for the space of a few minutes—ten, at the outside—before the strain relaxed and he fell crashing to the floor.

There was light laughter in the hall, the fresh sound of a young girl's voice, the firm tones of Harold Denvers demanding to see Sir Clement Frobisher on urgent business. Hafid came forward like a shadow.

"My master is going out," he said. "The car is waiting."

"Tell him I must see him at once," Harold said curtly. "Lady Frobisher, you had better go without your husband, as our business is likely to take some time."

"I must hear my lord and master say so," Lady Frobisher replied. "What is that?"

A long wailing cry from the conservatory, a yell of horror in Hafid's voice. A strange light leapt into Harold's eyes as he dashed forward. He had guessed by instinct what had happened. Hafid was bending over the dead form of his master muttering to himself.

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," he wailed. "Ah, if they had taken and burnt, and—"

"Hush," Harold commanded sternly with a hand over Hafid's mouth. "I see that you know quite as well as myself what has happened. Stay here a moment and be silent."

Harold hastened back to the hall just in time to intercept Lady Frobisher and Angela. From the expression of his face they knew that some tragedy had happened.

"It is my husband," Lady Frobisher said, quietly. "He is dead. Do not be

afraid to speak the truth.”

”I—I am afraid so,” Harold stammered, ”He—he has fallen from the roof of the conservatory. He must have died on the spot. Lady Frobisher, I implore you to go back to your room. Angela, will you go along! If you will leave it to me, I will do everything that is necessary.”

Lady Frobisher went away quite calmly. The sudden shock had left her white and shaking, but after all she had nothing but contempt and loathing for the man who had fascinated her into matrimony. Harold drew all the servants away with the exception of Hafid, and hurried to the telephone. He gave a minute, and a voice replied.

”Is that you, Sir James?” he asked. ”I am very glad to hear it. I am Harold Denvers, speaking to you from the residence of Sir Clement Frobisher. He is dead. I found him dead in the conservatory a few minutes ago. What? Oh, yes, he died in precisely the same manner as poor Manfred. Will you come at once, please? Thank you very much. I am going to ring up Inspector Townsend now.”

Inspector Townsend was at Scotland Yard, and would be there immediately. Harold turned to Hafid, and led him back to the conservatory again.

”How did it happen?” he asked, sternly. ”Tell me the truth.”

”All I know,” Hafid muttered. ”My master thought the steam-valve was wrong. I was to turn on the tap at eleven o’clock, but my master said that he would do it himself. He must have been up with the Moth when the valve worked. The rest you know, sir. The rest I could not tell you. The tap was not out of order, after all, and my master is dead.”

”It was a fitting end for such a scoundrel,” Harold said, sternly.

He glanced up to where the Cardinal Moth still danced and nodded. Some of the long sprays nearly reached the ground. The clinging spirals were untwisted here and there. And Harold understood.

”He was removing the Moth,” he told himself. ”He was going to take it away and hide it, possibly to pretend that he also had been the victim of a robbery. He knew that I should claim it soon. Knave and trickster to the last! What a sensation this will make.”

Sir James Brownsmith came presently, followed by Townsend. There was nothing to be said, nothing to be done beyond certifying that Sir Clement was dead, and that he had perished in the same mysterious manner as Manfred and the still unrecognised victim at Streatham.

”It’s a mystery to me, and yet not a mystery,” Townsend said. ”I’ve pretty well worked it out. But how did Sir Clement manage to get caught like that?”

”An accident,” Harold exclaimed. ”He thought that the steam-pipe was not in working order, and he was mistaken. But all England will have the explanation of this amazing mystery to-morrow. We will have the inquest here, and I shall

be in a position to show the jury exactly what has happened. But, knowing what Frobisher knew, he was morally guilty of the death of Mr. Manfred."

There was no more to be said and nothing to be done beyond laying the body decently out, and locking the door of the conservatory, which Townsend proceeded to do. As Harold was going out Angela stopped him.

"Was it murder again?" she asked.

"It has not been murder at all, dearest," Harold said. "To-morrow you will know everything. Before long I shall hope to take you from this dreadful house altogether."

Angela murmured something. Her eyes were steady, but her face was very white.

"I shall be ready, Harold," she whispered. "Only not yet, not till my aunt.... And indeed it is a merciful release for her. Only I know what she has suffered. Good night."

She touched her lips to Harold's and was gone.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE TIGHTENED CORD.

London had seldom had a more thrilling hour over the morning paper. The sensational section of the press had lost nothing in the making of what was called the orchid mystery; some of them had even obtained more than an inkling of the true history of the Cardinal Moth, and many were the ingenious theories propounded as to the mysterious deaths at Streatham and in Frobisher's conservatory.

And here was another victim in the person of Sir Clement himself. As the thousands of business men poured into London by trains, 'buses and trams, nothing else was talked about. It became known presently that there would be an inquest at ten o'clock, and some time before the hour traffic opposite Frobisher's house was practically stopped. But people who had gathered there hoping to get in were disappointed. Doubtless the inquest would be adjourned to some more suitable place, but the public were rigidly excluded from a private house.

Nevertheless the conservatory was pretty well full at the time the inquest commenced. The pressmen were quite a large body in themselves, to say nothing of the jury and the police and a sprinkling of doctors. Both Sir James Brownsmith and Harold Denvers had arrived early.

Angela came down to meet Denvers, looking white and subdued by contrast with her black dress.

"Lady Frobisher is well, I hope?" he asked.

"My aunt is satisfactory," Angela replied. "She slept fairly well, and she is getting over the shock. Of course it is absurd to say that she is overwhelmed with sorrow; it would be mere hypocrisy to say so. Nobody knows what a life she has had."

"Why did she marry him?" Harold asked.

"Why, indeed? She was not happy at home, and Sir Clement had an extraordinary fascination when he cared to exercise it. It was a miserable business altogether. Harold, is there ever going to be a solution of this terrible mystery? It gets on my nerves."

"The whole thing is going to be solved within the next hour," Harold replied.

"There is nothing very terrible to hear, so that you can be present if you choose. We shan't want Lady Frobisher."

In the big conservatory the proceedings had already commenced. The Coroner had addressed the rather frightened-looking jury, and then had waited for Inspector Townsend to call the witnesses. Hafid dragged himself into the box and was sworn on a Koran. He had very little to say except that he had heard a cry and found the body of his unfortunate master as he had found the body of Mr. Manfred. Beyond that he knew nothing. For the way he looked around him he might have been the criminal himself.

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," he said. "Take it and burn it, and destroy it."

"And what do you mean by that remark?" the Coroner asked sharply.

"We can explain that presently, sir," Sir James Brownsmith said, suddenly breaking off the whispered conversation with Townsend. "The poor fellow is half beside himself with terror. I know I am quite irregular, sir, but this is an extraordinary case. If I may make a suggestion—"

"Would it not be better to call the next witness?" the Coroner asked. "Inspector Townsend tells me he has a full solution of this strange affair."

There was a visible flutter among the pressmen present. Without further ado Harold Denvers was called. From his place he could see Angela's black figure in the doorway. The same barrister who had represented the Crown at the inquiry into the Streatham affair faced Harold with a smile. It was quite evident that he knew the whole history.

"You were present here last night when Sir Clement's body was found?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I had called to see Sir Clement on important business. I called here to desire the return of the Crimson Moth you see close above you."

All eyes were turned upwards to where the scarlet crowd of blossoms hovered. The stranded ropes sagged and bagged now so that some of the blooms were almost in reach. A little later there was a hiss of steam, and the cords tightened to the moisture as if some human hand had raised the beautiful garlands. As to the loveliness of the Cardinal Moth there was only one opinion.

"So that is the strange bloom," Counsel said. "Do orchids of that class require constant moisture?"

"Some of them do," Harold explained. "You see the Cardinal Moth came originally from a hot swamp, probably in Borneo or on the West Coast of Africa. You see that is on a very coarsely-woven Manilla rope."

"Are we not wandering from the point?" the Coroner suggested.

"On the contrary, sir, we are sticking very closely to it," the barrister retorted. "Now tell me, is not this same Cardinal Moth supposed to be endowed with magic powers?"

"That is the idea. Perhaps I had better say once more what I have already stated elsewhere. For generations the Cardinal Moth guarded or was supposed to guard the inner temple of Ghan in Koordstan. The form and beauty of the Moth travelled until it was known to most collectors. Two or three people made up their minds to steal it; it matters little who they were. They did steal it and divided it into three portions. Two of these portions were lost, and the third came into my hands. The plant above your head is the one that was stolen from the greenhouse at Streatham, where I put it for safe custody."

"Have you any idea who stole it?"

"Yes, it was taken away by Paul Lopez after the death of Count Lefroy's representative, who had nearly stolen a march on Lopez."

"But Lopez never murdered that man."

"You think somebody else did?"

"Indeed, I don't. That man was not murdered at all, neither was Manfred, or Sir Clement Frobisher."

A murmur of astonishment followed this speech. It seemed hard to believe, but Harold spoke quietly, though in tones absolutely emphatic.

"Perhaps I had better explain," he went on. "I told you that the Moth used to guard the inner temple at Ghan. It was the punishment of high political criminals that they should go into the inner temple and pluck from the trail a single blossom. They went in, but they never came out alive. When the gates were thrown back they lay dead with strange marks about their throats or their breast bones broken. It was a terrible and awesome punishment, and one that gave the priests immense power. Nobody knew how death came, nobody was meant to know, but we shall all in the room know in a few minutes. It was the work of the Moth."

Again the murmur of astonishment arose. Harold signed to the policemen to open the window; As a dry air came in the long strands of the Manilla rope stretched as the moisture warmed out of it, a climber of the Moth dangled over the head of an inspector who pushed it aside, as if it had been poison. Harold produced something that looked like an oblong sack filled with firewood. He proceeded to tangle it in the loops and folds of the rope.

"We will suppose that is a man," he said, "a man who has climbed up to the roof to steal the Moth which is all tangled up. He puts his arm through one loop and his head through another, thinking no evil, when suddenly the steam-hose is turned on. Now watch."

Harold crossed the room and touched the steam-tap. As the moisture struck the very coarse Manilla rope it suddenly tightened with the moisture till it hummed again. The same effect was to be seen with a clothes-line after a shower of rain. But the almost diaphanous character of the rope and the heavy discharge of moisture brought the strands up so tight that they seemed to hum in the air.

"There!" Harold cried, "there is the mystery—there is the secret of the priests. The man climbs until he is in a maze of loose rope; the steam is discharged and he is strangled—the life pressed out of him by those cruel cords; one cry and all is over. Listen."

As the rope drew up the wood within the sack was heard to crack as if a vice had a grip on it. Gradually at the same time the whole mass lifted higher and higher. Presently as the air dried the loops again slackened and the sack came to the ground. Nobody said anything for a long time. But practically the proceedings were over; there was very little to say or do.

The gentlemen of the pencil began to file out. After all, the extraordinary tragedy that had thrilled London as it had not been thrilled since the days of Jack the Ripper had resolved itself into a mere accident. One or two of the more fanciful element stayed, for they could see the making of a fine story here. After all, there was never a murder or a set of murders planned like this before.

"The explanation is quite satisfactory," the Coroner said. "If you propose to go any further—"

Inspector Townsend shook his head. There was no occasion to rake up any mud. Sir Clement was dead, and the other two men had lost their lives in attempted robbery. But that the trap had been deliberately laid for Manfred, and that Sir Clement was morally guilty of murder, the Inspector did not doubt. Then the proceedings collapsed almost before they had begun, and the usual prosaic verdict was returned.

"I'm glad it was so simple," Angela said when everybody had gone. "But how Sir Clement—"

"He was going to take the Moth away," Harold hastened to explain, "so

that I should not recover possession of it. He thought the steam-cock was out of order, and it wasn't. That is the bald truth. That plant belongs to me, and I have no doubt that Lady Frobisher will let me take it away. Ask her on the first favourable opportunity. It's no time to talk of business, but the sooner I can hand that accursed thing over to the Shan, the sooner I shall have those concessions. And now, is there anything I can do for you, sweetheart?"

It was late before Harold saw the Shan. He had been reading the morning's proceedings in the early edition of some evening paper. He welcomed Harold effusively.

"Glad to see you," he said. "Upon my word, you are the only honest and straightforward one of the lot. By the way, if you don't want the Moth—"

"I came here to offer it you," Harold said, "but after the way the trick has been exposed—"

"Bless you, that will not make any difference in Koordstan. Nobody reads papers there, and the priests will be pretty sure to keep their mouths shut. Besides, I shall have them on my side now that I know the whole game. Now sit down and we'll settle the business of those concessions."

* * * * *

It was a month later, and the season was drawing to an end. Lady Frobisher was back in town for a few days, to make arrangements for her trip abroad, and Angela had come along. Harold had been dining there. He was prosperous now, and pretty certain to become a rich man.

"When is Lady Frobisher going?" he asked.

"Not till August," Angela replied. "That is nearly two months. And in the meantime—"

"In the meantime we are going to be married and have a long honeymoon," Harold said. "Then I have to go out to Koordstan for a spell, and Lady Frobisher can come along. It is a lovely country, and it will be a complete change for her. What do you say to that, Angela?"

Angela smiled and did not draw herself away as Harold kissed her. She appreciated his kindness and thought for others.

"Always unselfish," she murmured. "Harold, it shall be as you say."

Harold stooped and kissed Angela again, and then there was silence between them, the blissful silence of a perfect understanding.

* * * * *

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