The Red Rat's Daughter

Guy Boothby

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Chapter I

If John Grantham Browne had a fault—which, mind you, I am not prepared to admit—it lay in the fact that he was the possessor of a cynical wit which he was apt at times to use upon his friends with somewhat peculiar effect. Circumstances alter cases, and many people would have argued that he was perfectly entitled to say what he pleased. When a man is worth a hundred and twenty thousand pounds a year—which, worked out, means ten thousand pounds a month, three hundred and twenty–eight pounds, fifteen shillings and fourpence a day, and four–and–sixpence three–farthings, and a fraction over, per minute—he may surely be excused if he becomes a little sceptical as to other people's motives, and is apt to be distrustful of the world in general. Old Brown, his father, without the "e," as you have doubtless observed, started life as a bare–legged street arab in one of the big manufacturing centres—Manchester or Birmingham, I am not quite certain which. His head, however, must have been screwed on the right way, for he made few mistakes, and everything he touched turned to gold. At thirty his bank balance stood at fifteen thousand pounds; at forty it had turned the corner of a hundred thousand; and when he departed this transitory life, a young man in everything but years, he left his widow, young John's mother—his second wife, I may remark in passing, and the third daughter of the late Lord Rushbrooke—upwards of three and a half million pounds sterling in trust for the boy.

As somebody wittily remarked at the time, young John, at his father's death and during his minority, was a monetary Mohammed—he hovered between two worlds: the Rushbrookes, on one side, who had not two sixpences to rub against each other, and the Brownes, on the other, who reckoned their wealth in millions and talked of thousands as we humbler mortals do of half–crowns. Taken altogether, however, old Brown was not a bad sort of fellow. Unlike so many parvenus, he had the good sense, the "e" always excepted, not to set himself up to be what he certainly was not. He was a working–man, he would tell you with a twinkle in his eye, and he had made his own way in the world. He had never in his life owed a halfpenny, nor, to the best of his knowledge, had he ever defrauded anybody; and, if he *had* made his fortune out of soap, well—and here his eyes would glisten—soap was at least a useful article, and would wash his millions cleaner than a good many other commodities he might mention. In his tastes and habits he was simplicity itself. Indeed, it was no unusual sight to see the old fellow, preparatory to setting off for the City, coming down the steps of his magnificent town house, dressed in a suit of rough tweed, with the famous bird's–eye neck–cloth loosely twisted round his throat, and the soft felt hat upon his head—two articles of attire which no remonstrance on the part of his wife and no amount of ridicule from the comic journals could ever induce him to discard. His stables were full of carriages, and there was a cab–rank within a hundred yards of his front door, yet no one had ever seen him set foot in either. The soles of his boots were thick, and he had been accustomed to walk all his life, he would say, and he had no intention of being carried till he was past caring what became of him. With regard to his son, the apple of his eye, and the pride of his old age, his views were entirely different. Nothing was good enough for the boy. From the moment he opened his eyes

upon the light, all the luxuries and advantages wealth could give were showered upon him. Before he was short–coated, upwards of a million had been placed to his credit at the bank, not to be touched until he came of age. After he had passed from a dame's school to Eton, he returned after every holiday with sufficient money loose in his pocket to have treated the whole school. When, in the proper order of things, he went on to Christ Church, his rooms were the envy and the admiration of the university. As a matter of fact, he never knew what it was to have to deny himself anything; and it says something for the lad's nature, and the father's too, I think, that he should have come out of it the honest, simple Englishman he was. Then old John died; his wife followed suit six months later; and on his twenty–fifth birthday the young man found himself standing alone in the world with his millions ready to his hand either to make or mar him. Little though he thought it at the time, there was a sufficiency of trouble in store for him.

He had town houses, country seats, moors and salmon–fishings, yachts (steam and sailing), racehorses, hunters, coach–horses, polo–ponies, and an army of servants that a man might very well shudder even to think of. But he lacked one thing; he had no wife. Society, however, was prepared to remedy this defect. Indeed, it soon showed that it was abnormally anxious to do so. Before he was twenty–two it had been rumoured that he had become engaged to something like a score of girls, each one lovelier, sweeter, and boasting blood that was bluer than the last. A wiser and an older head might well have been forgiven had it succumbed to the attacks made upon it; but in his veins, mingled with the aristocratic Rushbrooke blood, young John had an equal portion of that of the old soap–boiler; and where the one led him to accept invitations to country houses at Christmas, or to be persuaded into driving his fair friends, by moonlight, to supper at the Star and Garter, the other enabled him to take very good care of himself while he ran such dangerous risks. In consequence he had attained the advanced age of twenty–eight when this story opens, a bachelor, and with every prospect of remaining so. But the Blind Bow–Boy, as every one is aware, discharges his bolts from the most unexpected quarters; and for this reason you are apt to find yourself mortally wounded in the very place, of all others, where you have hitherto deemed yourself most invulnerable.

It was the end of the second week in August; Parliament was up; and Browne's steam–yacht, the *Lotus Blossom*, twelve hundred tons, lay in the harbour of Merok, on the Gieranger Fjord, perhaps the most beautiful on the Norwegian coast. The guests on board had been admirably chosen, an art which in most instances is not cultivated as carefully as it might be. An ill–assorted house party is bad enough; to bring the wrong men together on the moors is sufficient to spoil an otherwise enjoyable holiday; but to ask Jones (who doesn't smoke, who is wrapped up in politics, reads his leader in the *Standard* every morning, and who has played whist every afternoon with the same men at his club for the last ten years) and De Vere Robinson (who never reads anything save the *Referee* and the *Sportsman*, who detests whist, and who smokes the strongest Trichinopolis day and night) to spend three weeks cooped up on a yacht would be like putting a kitten and a cat–killing fox–terrier into a corn–bin and expecting them to have a happy time together. Browne, however, knew his business, and his party, in this particular instance, consisted of the Duchess of Matlock, wife of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, and her two pretty daughters, the Ladies Iseult and Imogen; Miss Verney, the beauty of the season; the Honourable Silas Dobson, the American Ambassador; his wife and daughter; George

Barrington–Marsh, of the 1st Life; and little Jimmy Foote, a man of no permanent address, but of more than usual shrewdness, who managed to make a good income out of his friends by the exercise of that peculiar talent for pleasing which rendered him indispensable whenever and wherever his fellow–creatures were gathered together. In addition to those I have mentioned there was a man whose interest in this story is so great that it is necessary he should be described at somewhat greater length.

Should you deem it worth your while to make inquiries at any of the Chancelleries in order to ascertain whether they happen to be acquainted with a certain Monsieur Felix Maas, you would probably be surprised to learn that he is as well known to them as—well—shall we say the Sultan of Turkey himself? though it would be difficult to mention in exactly what capacity. One thing is quite certain; it would be no easy task to find a man possessed of such peculiar characteristics as this retiring individual. At first glance his name would appear to settle his nationality once and for all. He would tell you, however, that he has no right to be considered a Dutchman. At the same time he would probably omit to tell you to which kingdom or empire he ascribes the honour of his birth. If you travelled with him you would discover that he speaks the language of every country west of the Ural Mountains with equal fluency; and though he would appear to be the possessor of considerable wealth, he never makes the least parade of it. In fact, his one and only idea in life would seem to be always irreproachably dressed and groomed, never to speak unless spoken to, and at all times to act as if he took no sort of interest whatever in any person or thing save that upon which he happened to be engaged at the moment. When necessity demands it he can be exceedingly amusing; he never allows himself to be seen with a man or woman who would be likely to cause him the least loss of prestige; he gives charming little dinners *à la fourchette* at his rooms in town twice or thrice during the season, and is rumoured to be the author, under a *nom de plume*, of one of the best works on Continental politics that has seen the light since Talleyrand's day. So much for Felix Maas.

At one time or another there have been a number of exquisite yachts built to satisfy the extravagances of millionaires, but never one so perfect in every detail, and so replete with every luxury, as Browne's *Lotus Blossom*. The state–rooms were large and airy; beds occupied the places of the usual uncomfortable bunks; the dining–saloon was situated amidships, where the vibration of the screw was least felt; the drawing–room was arranged aft; and a dainty boudoir for the ladies extended across the whole width of the counter. The smoking–room was in a convenient position under the bridge, and the bathrooms, four in number, were luxury and completeness itself. Add to the other advantages the presence of Felicien, that prince of *chefs*, and little Georges, once so intimately connected with the English Embassy in Paris, and it is unnecessary to say more.

Browne himself was an excellent host; and by the time the Norwegian coast had been sighted the party had settled down comfortably on board. They visited Christiania, the Bukn, Hardanger, and Sogne, and eventually found themselves at anchor in the harbour of Merok, on the Gieranger Fjord. It is in this lovely bay, overshadowed by its precipitous mountains, that my story may be properly said to commence.

It is sometimes asserted by a class of people who talk of the Eiffel Tower as if it were a bit of natural scenery, and of the Matterhorn as though it were placed in its present position

simply for the entertainment of Cook's tourists, that when you have seen one Norwegian fjord you have seen them all. But this statement is, as are the majority of such assertions, open to contradiction. The Ryfylke bears no sort of resemblance, save that they are both incomparably grand, to the Hardanger, or the Fjaerlands to the Gieranger. There is, of course, the same solemnity and the same overwhelming sense of man's insignificance about them all. But in every other essential they differ as completely as Windermere does from the Bitter Lakes of Suez—shall we say?—or the Marble Arch from the Bridge of Sighs.

"Knowing what we know, and seeing what we see," Maas remarked confidentially to the Duchess of Matlock as they sat in their chairs on deck, gazing up at the snow–capped mountains at the head of the fjord, "one is tempted to believe that Providence, in designing Europe, laid it out with the express intention of pleasing the British tourist."

"I detest tourists," replied her Grace, as she disentangled the straps of her field–glasses. "They cheapen everything, and think nothing of discussing their hotel bills in the Temple of the Sphinx, or of comparing and grumbling at their *dhobie's* accounts under the façade of the Taj Mahal."

"The inevitable result of a hothouse education, my dear Duchess," said Jimmy Foote, who was leaning against the bulwarks. "Believe a poor man who knows, it is just those three annas overcharge in a *dhobie's* bill that spoil the grandeur of the Sphinx and cast a blight over the Great Pyramid; as far as I am personally concerned, such an imposition would spoil even the Moti Masjid itself."

"People who quarrel over a few annas have no right to travel," remarked Mrs. Dobson, with the authority of a woman who rejoices in the possession of a large income.

"In that case, one trembles to think what would become of the greater portion of mankind," continued Miss Verney, who was drawing on her gloves preparatory to going ashore.

"If that were the law, I am afraid I should never get beyond the white walls of Old England," said Jimmy Foote, shaking his head; "it is only by keeping a sharp eye on the three annas of which we have been speaking that I manage to exist at all. If I might make a suggestion to the powers that be, it would be to the effect that a university should be founded in some convenient centre—Vienna, for instance. It would be properly endowed, and students might be sent to it from all parts of the world. Competent professors would be engaged, who would teach the pupils how to comport themselves in railway trains and on board steamboats; who would tell them how to dress themselves to suit different countries, in order that they might not spoil choice bits of scenery by inartistic colouring. Above all, I would have them instructed in the proper manner of placing their boots outside their bedroom doors when they retire to rest in foreign hotels. I remember a ruffian in Paris some years ago (truth compels me to put it on record that he was a countryman of yours, Mr. Dobson) who for three weeks regularly disturbed my beauty sleep by throwing his boots outside his door in the fashion to which I am alluding. It's my belief he used to stand in the centre of his room and pitch them into the corridor, taking particular care that they should fall exactly above my head."

"It seems to me that I also have met that man," observed Maas quietly, lighting another

cigarette as he spoke. “He travels a great deal.”

“Surely it could not be the same man?” remarked Mrs. Dobson, with an incredulous air. “The coincidence would be too extraordinary.” A smile went round the group; for an appreciation of humour was not the lady’s strong point.

“To continue my proposal,” said Foote, with quiet enjoyment. “In addition to imparting instruction on the subjects I have mentioned, I would have my pupils thoroughly grounded in the languages of the various countries they intend visiting, so that they should not inquire the French for Eau de Cologne, or ask what sort of vegetable *pâté de foie gras* is when they encountered it upon their menus. A proper appreciation of the beautiful in art might follow, in order to permit of their being able to distinguish between a Sandro Botticelli and a ‘Seaport at Sunrise’ by Claude Lorraine.”

“A professor who could give instruction upon the intricacies of a Continental wine list might be added with advantage,” put in Barrington–Marsh.

“And the inevitable result,” said Browne, who had joined the party while Marsh was speaking, “would be that you might as well not travel at all. Build an enormous restaurant in London, and devote a portion of it to every country into which modern man takes himself. Hang the walls with tricky, theatrical canvases after the fashion of a cyclorama; dress your waiters in appropriate costumes, let them speak the language of the country in which you are supposed to be dining, let the tables be placed in the centre of the hall, have a band to discourse national airs, and you would be able to bore yourself to death in comfort, for the simple reason that every one would talk, eat, drink, and behave just as respectably as his neighbour. Half the fun of moving about the world, as I understand it, lies in the studies of character presented by one’s fellow–creatures. But, see, the boat is alongside; let us go ashore while it is fine.”

Beautiful as Merok undoubtedly is, it must be admitted that its amusements are, to say the least of it, limited. You can lunch at the hotel, explore the curious little octagonal church, and, if you are a walker, climb the road that crosses the mountains to Grotlid. The views, however, are sublime, for the mountains rise on every hand, giving the little bay the appearance of an amphitheatre.

“What programme have you mapped out for us?” inquired Miss Verney, who, as was known to her companions, preferred an easy–chair and a flirtation on the deck of the yacht to any sort of athletic exercise ashore.

Browne thereupon explained that the Duchess, who was dressed in appropriate walking costume, had arranged everything. They were to visit the church, do the regulation sights, and, finally, make their way up the hillside to the Storfos Waterfall, which is the principal, and almost the only, attraction the village has to offer. The usual order of march was observed. The Duchess and the Ambassador, being the seniors of the party, led the way; the lady’s two daughters, escorted by Barrington–Marsh and Jimmy Foote—who was too obvious a detrimental to be worth guarding against—came next; Maas, Mrs. and Miss Dobson followed close behind them; Miss Verney and Browne brought up the rear.

Everything went merrily as a marriage bell. After those who had brought their cameras had snap–shotted the church, and made the usual mistake with regard to the angles, the party climbed the hill in the direction of the waterfall. It was only when they reached it

that those in front noticed that Miss Verney had joined the trio next before her, and that Browne had disappeared. He had gone back to the boat, the lady explained, in order to give some instructions that had been forgotten. From her silence, however, and from the expression of annoyance upon her beautiful lace, the others immediately jumped to the conclusion that something more serious must have happened than her words implied. In this case, however, popular opinion was altogether at fault. As a matter of fact, Browne's reason for leaving his guests to pursue their walk alone was an eminently simple one. He strolled down to the boat which had brought them ashore, and, having despatched it with a message to the yacht, resumed his walk, hoping to overtake his party before they reached the waterfall. Unfortunately, however, a thick mist was descending upon the mountain, shutting out the landscape as completely as if a curtain had been drawn before it. At first he was inclined to treat the matter as of small moment; and, leaving the road, he continued his walk in the belief that it would soon pass off. Stepping warily—for mountain paths in Norway are not to be treated with disrespect—he pushed on for upwards of a quarter of an hour, feeling sure he must be near his destination, and wondering why he did not hear the voices of his friends or the thunder of the fall. At last he stopped. The mist was thicker than ever, and a fine but penetrating rain was falling. Browne was still wondering what Miss Verney's feelings would be, supposing she were condemned to pass the night on the hillside, when he heard a little cry proceeding from a spot, as he supposed, a few yards ahead of him. The voice was a woman's, and the ejaculation was one of pain. Hearing it, Browne moved forward again in the hope of discovering whence it proceeded and what had occasioned it. Search how he would, however, he could see nothing of the person who had given utterance to it. At last, in despair, he stood still and called, and in reply a voice answered in English, "Help me; help me, please."

"Where are you?" Browne inquired in the same language; "and what is the matter?"

"I am down here," the voice replied; "and I am afraid I have sprained my ankle. I have fallen and cannot get up."

Browne has since confessed that it was the voice that did it. The accent, however, was scarcely that of an Englishwoman.

"Are you on a path or on the hillside?" he inquired, after he had vainly endeavoured to locate her position.

"I am on the hillside," she replied. "The fog was so thick that I could not see my way, and I slipped on the bank and rolled down, twisting my foot under me."

"Well, if you will try to guide me, I will do all in my power to help you," said Browne; and as he said it he moved carefully towards the spot whence he imagined the voice proceeded. From the feel of the ground under his feet he could tell that he had left the path and was descending the slope.

"Am I near you now?" he asked.

"I think you must be," was the reply. And then the voice added, with a little laugh, "How ridiculous it all is, and how sorry I am to trouble you!"

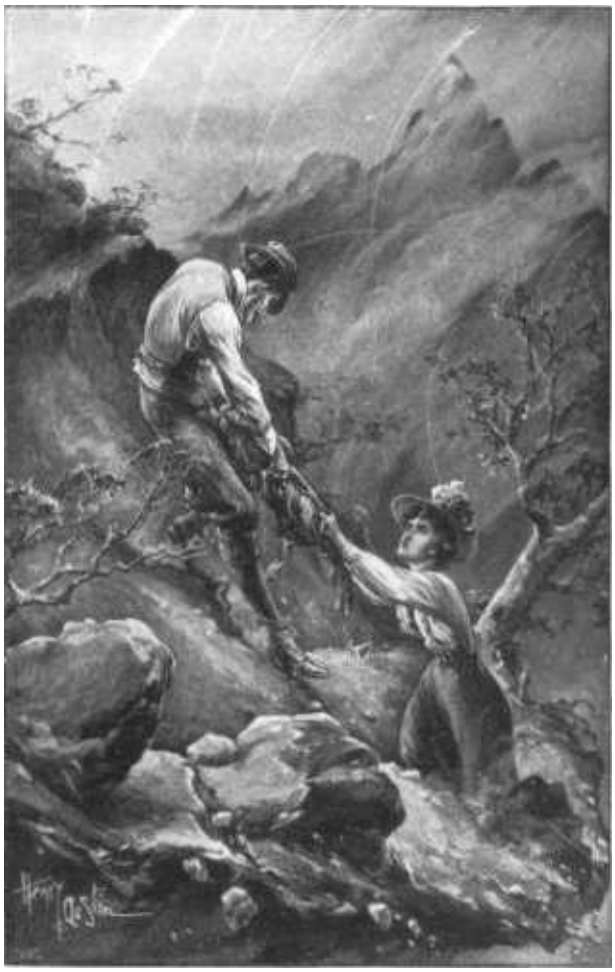
Had she known to what this extraordinary introduction was destined to lead, it is very doubtful whether she would have considered it so full either of humour or regret as her

words implied.

Inch by inch Browne continued his advance, until he could just distinguish, seated on the ground below him, and clinging with both her arms to a stunted birch–tree, the figure of the girl for whom he was searching. At most she was not more than five feet from him. Then, with that suddenness which is the peculiar property of Norwegian mists, the vapour, which had up to that moment so thickly enveloped them, rolled away, and the whole landscape was revealed to their gaze. As he took in the position, Browne uttered a cry of horror. The girl had wandered off the path, slipped down the bank, and was now clinging to a tree only a few feet removed from the brink of one of the most terrible precipices along the Norwegian coast.

So overwhelmed was he with horror that for a moment Browne found himself quite unable to say or do anything. Then, summoning to his assistance all the presence of mind of which he was master, he addressed the girl, who, seeing the danger to which she was exposed, was clinging tighter than ever to the tree, her face as white as the paper upon which I am now writing. For a moment the young man scarcely knew how to act for the best. To leave her while he went for assistance was out of the question; while it was very doubtful, active as he was, whether he would be able, unaided, to get her up in her injured condition to the path above. Ridiculous as the situation may have appeared in the fog, it had resolved itself into one of absolute danger now, and Browne felt the perspiration start out upon his forehead as he thought of what would have happened had she missed the tree and rolled a few feet farther. One thing was quite certain—something must be done; so, taking off his coat, he lowered it by the sleeve to her, inquiring at the same time whether she thought she could hold on to it while he pulled her up to the path above. She replied that she would endeavour to do so, and thereupon the struggle commenced. A struggle it certainly was, and an extremely painful one, for the girl was handicapped by her injured foot. What if her nerve should desert her and she should let go, or the sleeve of the coat should part company with the body? In either case there could be but one result—an instant and terrible death for her.

Taken altogether, it was an experience neither of them would ever be likely to forget. At last, inch by inch, foot by foot, he drew her up; and with every advance she made, the stones she dislodged went tinkling down the bank, and, rolling over the edge, disappeared into the abyss below. When at last she was sufficiently close to enable him to place his arm round her, and to lift her into safety beside himself, the reaction was almost more than either of them could bear. For some minutes the girl sat with her face buried in her hands, too much overcome with horror at the narrowness of her escape even to thank her preserver. When she *did* lift her face to him, Browne became aware for the first time of its attractiveness. Beautiful, as Miss Verney was beautiful, she certainly could not claim to be; there was, however, something about her face that was more pleasing than mere personal loveliness could possibly have been.



“At last … . he drew her up.”

“How did you come to be up here alone?” he inquired, after she had tried to express her gratitude to him for the service he had rendered her.

“It was foolish, I admit,” she answered. “I had been painting on the mountain, and was making my way back to the hotel when the fog caught me. Suddenly I felt myself falling. To save myself I clutched at that tree, and was still clinging to it when you called to me. Oh! how can I thank you? But for you I might now be—”

She paused, and Browne, to fill in the somewhat painful gap, hastened to say that he had no desire to be thanked at all. He insisted that he had only done what was fit and proper under the circumstances. It was plain, however, from the look of admiration he cast upon her, that he was very well satisfied with the part he had been permitted to play in the affair.

While, however, they were progressing thus favourably in one direction, it was evident that they were not yet at an end of their difficulties, for the young lady, pretend as she might to ignore the fact, was undoubtedly lame; under the circumstances for her to walk was out of the question, and Merok was fully a mile, and a very steep mile, distant from where they were now seated.

“How am I to get home?” the girl inquired. “I am afraid it will be impossible for me to walk so far, and no pony could come along this narrow path to fetch me.”

Browne puckered his forehead with thought. A millionaire is apt to imagine that nothing in this world is impossible, provided he has his cheque–book in his pocket and a stylographic pen wherewith to write an order on his banker. In this case, however, he was compelled to confess himself beaten. There was one way out of it, of course, and both knew it. But the

young man felt his face grow hot as the notion occurred to him.

“If you would only let me carry you as far as the main road, I could easily find a conveyance to take you the rest of the distance,” he faltered.

“Do you think you *could* carry me?” she answered, with a seriousness that was more than half assumed. “I am very heavy.”

It might be mentioned here, and with advantage to the story, that in his unregenerate days Browne had won many weight–lifting competitions; his modesty, however, prevented his mentioning this fact to her.

“If you will trust me, I think I can manage it,” he said; and then, without waiting for her to protest, he picked the girl up, and, holding her carefully in his arms, carried her along the path in the direction of the village. It was scarcely a time for conversation, so that the greater portion of the journey was conducted in silence. When at last they reached the mountain road—that wonderful road which is one of the glories of Merok—Browne placed the girl upon the bank, and, calling a boy whom he could see in the distance, despatched him to the hotel for assistance. The youth having disappeared, Browne turned to the girl again. The pain she had suffered during that short journey had driven the colour from her face, but she did her best to make light of it.

“I cannot thank you enough for all you have done for me,” she said, and a little shudder swept over her as the remembrance of how near she had been to death returned to her.

“I am very thankful I happened to be there at the time,” the other replied with corresponding seriousness. “If you will be warned by me, you will be careful for the future how you venture on the mountains without a guide at this time of the year. Fogs, such as we have had to–day, descend so quickly, and the paths are dangerous at the best of times.”

“You may be sure I will be more careful,” she replied humbly. “But do not let me keep you now; I have detained you too long already. I shall be quite safe here.”

“You are not detaining me,” he answered. “I have nothing to do. Besides, I could not think of leaving you until I have seen you safely on your way back to your hotel. Have you been in Merok very long?”

“Scarcely a week,” the girl replied. “We came from Hellesylt.”

Browne wondered of whom the *we* might consist. Was the girl married? He tried to discover whether or not she wore a wedding–ring, but her hand was hidden in the folds her dress.

Five minutes later a cabriole made its appearance, drawn by a shaggy pony and led by a villager. Behind it, and considerably out of breath, toiled a stout and elderly lady, who, as soon as she saw the girl seated on the bank by the roadside, burst into a torrent of speech.

“Russian,” said Brown to himself; “her accent puzzled me, but now I understand.”

Then turning to the young man, who was experiencing some slight embarrassment at being present at what his instinct told him was a wigging, administered by a lady who was plainly a past mistress at the art, the girl said in English:—

“Permit me to introduce you to my guardian, Madame Bernstein.”

The couple bowed ceremoniously to each other, and then Browne and the villager between them lifted the girl into the vehicle, the man took his place at the pony's head, and the strange cortège proceeded on its way down the hill towards the hotel. Once there, Browne prepared to take leave of them. He held out his hand to the girl, who took it.

"Good–bye," he said. "I hope it will not be long before you are able to get about once more."

"Good–bye," she answered; and then, with great seriousness, "Pray, believe that I shall always be grateful to you for the service you have rendered me this afternoon."

There was a little pause. Then, with a nervousness that was by no means usual to him, he added:—

"I hope you will not think me rude, but perhaps you would not mind telling me whom I have had the pleasure of helping?"

"My name is Katherine Petrovitch," she answered, with a smile, and then as frankly returned his question. "And yours?"

"My name is Browne," he replied; and also smiling as he said it, he added: "I am Browne's Mimosa Soap, Fragrant and Antiseptic."

Chapter II

When Browne reached the yacht, after bidding good–bye to the girl he had rescued, he found his friends much exercised in their minds concerning him. They had themselves been overtaken by the fog, and very naturally they had supposed that their host, seeing it coming on, had returned to the yacht without waiting for them. Their surprise, therefore, when they arrived on board and found him still missing was scarcely to be wondered at. In consequence, when he descended the companion ladder and entered the drawing–room, he had to undergo a cross–examination as to his movements. Strangely enough, this solicitude for his welfare was far from being pleasing to him. He had made up his mind to say nothing about the adventure of the afternoon, and yet, as he soon discovered, it was difficult to account for the time he had spent ashore if he kept silence on the subject. Accordingly he made the best excuse that occurred to him, and by disclosing a half–truth induced them to suppose that he had followed their party towards the waterfall, and had in consequence been lost in the fog.

“It was scarcely kind of you to cause us so much anxiety,” said Miss Verney in a low voice as he approached the piano at which she was seated. “I assure you we have been most concerned about you; and, if you had not come on board very soon, Captain Marsh and Mr. Foote were going ashore again in search of you.”

“That would have been very kind of them,” said Browne, dropping into an easy–chair; “but there was not the least necessity for it. I am quite capable of taking care of myself.”

“Nasty things mountains,” said Jimmy Foote to the company at large. “I don’t trust ‘em myself. I remember once on the Rigi going out with old Simeon Baynes, the American millionaire fellow, you know, and his daughter, the girl who married that Italian count who fought Constantovitch and was afterwards killed in Abyssinia. At one place we very nearly went over the edge, every man–jack of us, and I vowed I’d never do such a thing again. Fancy the irony of the position! After having been poverty–stricken all one’s life, to drop through the air thirteen hundred feet in the company of over a million dollars. I’m perfectly certain of one thing, however: if it hadn’t been for the girl’s presence of mind I should not have been here to–day. As it was, she saved my life, and, until she married, I never could be sufficiently grateful to her.”

“Only until she married!” said Lady Imogen, looking up from the novel she was reading. “How was it your gratitude did not last longer than that?”

“Doesn’t somebody say that gratitude is akin to love?” answered Foote, with a chuckle. “Of course I argued that, since she was foolish enough to show her bad taste by marrying somebody else, it would scarcely have become me to be grateful.”

Browne glanced at Foote rather sharply. What did he mean by talking of life–saving on mountains, on this evening of all others? Had he heard anything? But Jimmy’s face was all innocence.

At that moment the dressing gong sounded, and every one rose, preparatory to departing to their respective cabins.

“Where is Maas?” Browne inquired of Marsh, who was the last to leave.

“He is on deck, I think,” replied the other; but as he spoke the individual in question made his appearance down the companion–ladder, carrying in his hand a pair of field–glasses.

For some reason or another, dinner that night was scarcely as successful as usual. The English mail had come in, and the Duchess had had a worrying letter from the Duke, who had been commanded to Osborne among the salt of the earth, when he wanted to be in the Highlands among the grouse; Miss Verney had not yet recovered from what she considered Browne’s ill–treatment of herself that afternoon; while one of the many kind friends of the American Ambassador had forwarded him information concerning a debate in Congress, in order that he might see in what sort of estimation he was held by a certain portion of his fellow–countrymen. Never a very talkative man, Browne this evening was even more silent than usual. The recollection of a certain pale face and a pair of beautiful eyes haunted him continually. Indeed, had it not been for Barrington–Marsh and Jimmy Foote, who did their duty manfully, the meal would have been a distinct failure as far as its general liveliness was concerned. As it was, no one was sorry when an adjournment was made for coffee to the deck above. Under the influence of this gentle stimulant, however, and the wonderful quiet of the fjord, things brightened somewhat. But the improvement was not maintained; the pauses gradually grew longer and more frequent, and soon after ten o’clock the ladies succumbed to the general inertness, and disappeared below.

According to custom, the majority of the men immediately adjourned to the smoking–room for cards. Browne, however, excused himself on the plea that he was tired and preferred the cool. Maas followed suit; and, when the others had taken themselves off, the pair stood leaning against the bulwarks, smoking and watching the lights of the village ashore.

“I wonder how you and I would have turned out,” said Maas quietly, when they had been standing at the rails for some minutes, “if we had been born and bred in this little village, and had never seen any sort of life outside the Geiranger?”

“Without attempting to moralize, I don’t doubt but that we should have been better in many ways,” Browne replied. “I can assure you there are times when I get sick to death of the inane existence we lead.”

”*Leben heisst träumen; weise sein heisst angenehm träumen*,” quoted Maas, half to himself and half to his cigar. “Schiller was not so very far out after all.”

“Excellent as far as the sentiment is concerned,” said Browne, as he flicked the ash off his cigar and watched it drop into the water alongside. “But, however desirous we may be of dreaming agreeably, our world will still take good care that we wake up just at the moment when we are most anxious to go on sleeping.”

“In order that we may not be disillusioned, my friend,” said Maas. “The starving man dreams of City banquets, and wakes to the unpleasant knowledge that it does not do to go to sleep on an empty stomach. The debtor imagines himself the possessor of millions, and wakes to find the man–in–possession seated by his bedside. But there is one cure; and you should adopt it, my dear Browne.”

“What is that?”

“Marriage, my friend! Get yourself a wife and you will have no time to think of such things. Doesn’t your Ben Jonson say that marriage is the best state for a man in general?”

“Marriage!” retorted Browne scornfully. “It always comes back to that. I tell you I have come to hate the very sound of the word. From the way people talk you might think marriage is the pivot on which our lives turn. They never seem to realise that it is the rock upon which we most of us go to pieces. What is a London season but a monstrous market, in which men and women are sold to the highest bidders, irrespective of inclination or regard? I tell you, Maas, the way these things are managed in what we call English society borders on the indecent. Lord A. is rich; consequently a hundred mothers offer him their daughters. He may be what he pleases—an honourable man, or the greatest blackguard at large upon the earth. In nine cases out of ten it makes little or no difference, provided, of course, he has a fine establishment and the settlements are satisfactory. At the commencement of the season the girls are brought up to London, to be tricked out, regardless of expense, by the fashionable dressmakers of the day. They are paraded here, there, and everywhere, like horses in a dealer’s yard; are warned off the men who have no money, but who might very possibly make them happy; while they are ordered by the ‘home authorities’ to encourage those who have substantial bank balances and nothing else to recommend them. As the question of love makes no sort of difference, it receives no consideration. After their friends have sent them expensive presents, which in most cases they cannot afford to give, but do so in order that they may keep up appearances with their neighbours and tradesmen, the happy couple stand side by side before the altar at St. George’s and take the most solemn oath of their lives; that done, they spend their honeymoon in Egypt, Switzerland, or the Riviera, where they are presented with ample opportunity of growing tired of one another. Returning to town, the man usually goes back to his old life and the woman to hers. The result is a period of mutual distrust and deceit; an awakening follows, and later on we have the *cause célèbre*, and, holding up our hands in horror, say, ‘Dear me, how very shocking!’ In the face of all this, we have the audacity to curl our lips and to call the French system unnatural!”

“I am afraid, dear Browne, you are not quite yourself to–night,” said Maas, with a gentle little laugh, at the end of the other’s harangue. “The mistake of believing that a marriage, with money on the side of the man and beauty on that of the woman, must irretrievably result in misfortune is a very common one. For my part, I am singular enough to believe it may turn out as well if not better than any other.”

“I wasn’t aware that optimism was your strong point,” retorted Browne. “For my part I feel, after the quiet of this fjord, as if I could turn my back on London and never go near it again.”

He spoke with such earnestness that Maas, for once in his life, was almost astonished. He watched his companion as he lit another cigar.

“One thing is quite certain,” he said at length, “your walk this afternoon did you more harm than good. The fog must have got into your blood. And yet, if you will not think me impertinent for saying so, Miss Verney gave you a welcome such as many men would go through fire and water to receive.”

Browne grunted scornfully. He was not going to discuss Miss Verney’s opinion of himself

with his companion. Accordingly he changed the subject abruptly by inquiring whether Maas had made any plans for the ensuing winter.

“I am a methodical man,” replied the latter, with a smile at his companion’s naive handling of the situation, “and all my movements are arranged some months ahead. When this charming voyage is at an end, and I have thanked you for your delightful hospitality, I shall hope to spend a fortnight with our dear Duchess in the Midlands; after that I am due in Paris for a week or ten days; then, like the swallow, I fly south; shall dawdle along the Mediterranean for three or four months, probably cross to Cairo, and then work my way slowly back to England in time for the spring. What do you propose doing?”

“Goodness knows,” Browne replied lugubriously. “At first I thought of Rajputana; but I seem to have done, and to be tired of doing, everything. They tell me tigers are scarce in India. This morning I felt almost inclined to take a run out to the Cape and have three months with the big game.”

“You said as much in the smoking–room last night, I remember,” Maas replied. “Pray, what has occurred since then to make you change your mind?”

“I do not know, myself,” said Browne. “I feel restless and unsettled to–night, that is all. Do you think I should care for Russia?”

“For Russia?” cried his companion in complete surprise. “What on earth makes you think of Russia?”

Browne shook his head.

“It’s a notion I have,” he answered; though, for my own part, I am certain that, until that moment, he had never thought of it. “Do you remember Demetrovitch, that handsome fellow with the enormous moustache who stayed with me last year at Newmarket?”

“I remember him perfectly,” Maas replied; and had Browne been watching his face, instead of looking at the little hotel ashore, he would in all probability have noticed that a peculiar smile played round the corners of his mouth as he said it. “But what has Demetrovitch to do with your proposed trip to Russia? I had an idea that he was ordered by the Czar to spend two years upon his estates.”

“Exactly! so he was. That accounts for my notion. He has often asked me to pay him a visit. Besides, I have never seen Petersburg in the winter, and I’m told it’s rather good fun.”

“You will be bored to death,” the other answered. “If you go, I’ll give you a month in which to be back in England. Now I think, with your permission, I’ll retire. It’s after eleven, and there’s something about these fjords that never fails to make me sleepy. Good–night, *mon cher ami*, and pleasant dreams to you.”

Browne bade him good–night, and when the other disappeared into the companion, returned to his contemplation of the shore. The night was so still that the ripple of the wavelets on the beach, half a mile or so away, could be distinctly heard. The men had left the smoking–room; and save the solitary figure of the officer on the bridge, and a hand forward by the cable range, Browne had the deck to himself. And yet he was not altogether alone, for his memory was still haunted by the recollection of the same sweet

face, with the dark, lustrous eyes, that had been with him all the evening. Do what he would, he could not endow the adventure of the afternoon with the common–place air he had tried to bestow upon it. Something told him that it was destined to play a more important part in his life's history than would at first glance appear to be the case. And yet he was far from being a susceptible young man. The training he had received would have been sufficient to prevent that. For upwards of an hour he remained where he was, thinking and thinking, and yet never coming any nearer a definite conclusion. Then, throwing away what remained of his cigar, he bestowed a final glance upon the shore, and went below to his cabin, to dream, over and over again, of the adventure that had befallen him that afternoon.

Whatever else may have been said of it, the weather next morning was certainly not propitious; the mountains surrounding the bay were hidden in thick mist, and rain was falling steadily. After breakfast the male portion of the party adjourned to the smoking–room, while the ladies engaged themselves writing letters or with their novels in the drawing–room below.

Browne alone seemed in good spirits. While the others were railing at the fog, and idly speculating as to whether it would clear, he seemed to derive a considerable amount of satisfaction from it. About ten o'clock he announced his intention of going ashore, in order, he said, that he might confer with a certain local authority regarding their proposed departure for the south next day. As a matter of politeness he inquired whether any of his guests would accompany him, and received an answer in the negative from all who happened to be in the smoking–room at the time. His valet accordingly brought him his mackintosh, and he had put it on and was moving towards the gangway when Maas made his appearance from the saloon companion.

"Is it possible you are going ashore?" he inquired in a tone of mild surprise. "If so, and you will have me, I will beg leave to accompany you. If I stay on board I shall go to sleep, and if I go to sleep I shall wake up in a bad temper; so that, if you would save your guests from that annoyance, I should advise you to take me with you."

Though Browne could very well have dispensed with his company, common politeness prevented him from saying so. Accordingly he expressed his pleasure at the arrangement, and when they had descended the gangway they took their places in the boat together. For the first time during the excursion, and also for the first time in the years they had known each other, Browne felt inclined to quarrel with Maas; and yet there was nothing in the other's behaviour towards him to which he could take exception.

Maas could see that Browne was not himself, and he accordingly set himself to remedy the trouble as far as lay in his power. So well did he succeed that by the time the boat reached the tiny landing–stage his host was almost himself again.

"Now you must do just as you please," said Maas when they had landed. "Do not consider me in the matter at all, I beg of you; I can amuse myself very well. Personally I feel inclined for a walk up the mountain road."

"Do so, then, by all means," said his host, who was by no means sorry to hear him arrive at this decision. "If I were you, however, I should stick to the road; these mists are not things to be taken lightly."

“I agree with you,” said Maas. Then, bidding the other good–bye, he set off on his excursion.

Browne, who was conscientiousness itself, walked along the hillside to the residence of the functionary whom he had professedly come ashore to see, and when he had consulted him upon the point at issue, made his way in the direction of the hotel. Accosting the manager in the hall, he inquired whether it would be possible to obtain an interview with Madame Bernstein.

“Most certainly, sir,” the man replied. “If you will follow me I will conduct you to her.”

So saying, he led the way down the long wooden passage towards a room at the further end. Into this Browne was ushered, while the man departed in search of the lady. What occasioned the delay it is impossible to say, but fully a quarter of an hour elapsed before madame made her appearance. She greeted him with a great appearance of cordiality. Taking his hands in hers, she held them while she thanked him, in fluent French, for what she called his bravery on the preceding afternoon.

”*Mon Dieu!*” said she. “What should I have done had you not been there to help her? Had she been killed I should never have known happiness again. It was such a risk to run. She is so reckless. She fills me with consternation whenever she goes out alone.”

This was not at all what Browne had bargained for. However, under the circumstances, it would not only have been unwise, but practically impossible, for him to protest. You cannot save a young lady’s life and expect to escape her relatives’ thanks, however much you may desire to do so. After these had been offered to him, however, he managed to discover an opportunity of inquiring after her.

“The poor child is better this morning,” Madame replied, solemnly wagging her head. “But, alas! it will be several days before she can hope to put her foot to the ground. She begged me, however, to thank you, monsieur, should you call, for your goodness to her.”

Try as he would to conceal it, there could be no sort of doubt that Browne was pleased that she should have thought about him. He begged Madame Bernstein to inform her that he had called to inquire, and then bade her good–bye. He had hoped to have discovered something concerning the girl’s history; but as it was plain to him that Madame was not one who would be easily induced to make disclosures, he abandoned the attempt.

He had passed down the passage, and was in the act of leaving the hotel, when a voice reached him from a room on the right which caused him no little surprise. At the same instant the door opened, and no less a person than Maas stood before him.

“Why, my dear Browne, really this is most charming,” he cried, with a somewhat exaggerated enthusiasm. “I had not the very least idea of finding you here.”

“Nor I of seeing you,” Browne retorted. “I understood that you were going for a walk up the mountain.”

“I did go,” the other replied, “but the mist was so thick that I changed my mind and came in here for a glass of Vermouth prior to going on board. Believe me, there is nothing like Vermouth for counteracting the evil effects of fog. Will you let me persuade you to try a glass? What they have given me is excellent.”

Browne thanked him, but declined. He did not like finding the man in the hotel; but as things were, he could not see that he had any right to complain. He only hoped that Maas knew nothing of his reason for being there. Conversant, however, as he was with his friend’s peculiarities, he felt certain he would say nothing about it to any one, even supposing that he had discovered it.

Leaving the hotel together, they made their way down to the boat, and in something less than a quarter of an hour were on board the yacht once more. The fog still continued, nor did it lift for the remainder of the day.

On the following morning they had arranged to leave Merok for Aalsund, and thence to turn south on their homeward journey. Fortunately the weather had cleared sufficiently by the time day dawned to admit of their departure, and accordingly at the appointed hour, dipping her ensign to the village in token of farewell, the yacht swung round and headed for the pass under the Pulpit Rock. Browne was on the bridge at the time, and it was with a sensible feeling of regret that he bade farewell to the little village nestling at the foot of the snow–capped mountains. Never did he remember having experienced such regret in leaving a place before. Whether he and Katherine Petrovitch would ever meet again was more than he could tell; it seemed to him extremely unlikely, and yet— But at this juncture he shook his head very wisely at the receding mountains, and told himself that that was a question which only Fate could decide.

Chapter III

Six months had elapsed since the *Lotus Blossom* had steamed out of the Gieranger Fjord and its owner had taken his last look at the little village of Merok. During that interval Browne had endeavoured to amuse himself to the best of his ability. In spite of Maas's insinuation to the contrary, he had visited Russia; had shot bears in the company and on the estates of his friend Demetrovitch; had passed south to the Crimea, and thence, by way of Constantinople, to Cairo, where, chancing upon some friends who were wintering in the land of the Pharaohs, he had been persuaded into engaging a *dahabîyeh*, and had endured the tedious river journey to Luxor and back in the company of a charming French countess, an Austrian archduke, a German diplomatist, and an individual whose accomplishments were as notorious as his tastes were varied. A fortnight in Monte Carlo and a week in Paris had succeeded the Nile trip; and now the first week in March found him, free of engagements, ensconced in the luxurious smoking–room of the Monolith Club in Pall Mall, an enormous cigar between his teeth, and a feeling of regret in his heart that he had been persuaded to leave the warmth and sunshine of the favoured South for what he was now enduring. The morning had been fairly bright, but the afternoon was cold, foggy, and dreary in the extreme. Even the most weather–wise among the men standing at the windows, looking out upon the street, had to admit that they did not know what to make of it. It might only mean rain, they said; it might also mean snow. But that it was, and was going to be still more, unpleasant, nobody seemed for an instant to doubt. Browne stretched himself in his chair beside the fire, and watched the flames go roaring up the chimney, with an expression of weariness upon his usually cheerful countenance.

"What a fool you were, my lad, to come back to this sort of thing!" he said to himself. "You might have known the sort of welcome you would receive. In Cannes the sun has been shining on the Boulevard de la Croisette all day. Here it is all darkness and detestation. I've a good mind to be off again to–night; this sort of thing would give the happiest man the blues."

He was still pursuing this train of thought, when a hand was placed upon his shoulder, and, turning round, he discovered Jimmy Foote standing beside him.

"The very man I wanted to see," said Browne, springing to his feet and holding out his hand. "I give you my word, old fellow, you couldn't have come at a more opportune moment. I was in the act of setting off to find you."

"My dear old chap," replied his friend, "that is my métier: I always turn up at opportune moments, like the kind godmother in the fairy tale. What is it you want of me?"

"I want your company."

"There's nothing I'd give you more willingly," said Jimmy; "I'm tired of it myself. But seriously, what is the matter?"

"Look out of the window," Browne replied. "Do you see that fog?"

"I've not only seen it, I have swallowed several yards of it," Foote answered. "I've been to

tea with the Verneys in Arlington Street, and I've fairly had to eat my way here. But why should the weather irritate you? If you're idiot enough to come back from Cairo to London in March, I don't see that you've any right to complain. I only wish Fate had blessed me with the same chance of getting away."

"If she had, where would you go and what would you do?"

"I'd go anywhere and do anything. You may take it from me that the Bard was not very far out when he said that if money goes before, all ways lie open."

"If that's all you want, we'll very soon send it before. Look here, Jimmy; you've nothing to do, and I've less. What do you say to going off somewhere? What's your fancy—Paris, south of France, Egypt, Algiers? One place is like another to me."

"I don't want anything better than Algiers," said Jimmy. "Provided we go by sea, I am your obedient and humble servant to command."

Then, waving his hand towards the gloom outside, he added: "Fog, Rain, Sleet, and Snow, my luck triumphs, and I defy ye!"

"That's settled, then," said Browne, rising and standing before the fire. "I'll wire to Mason to have the yacht ready at Plymouth to–morrow evening. I should advise you to bring something warm with you, for we are certain to find it cold going down Channel and crossing the Bay at this time of the year. In a week, however, we shall be enjoying warm weather once more. Now I must be getting along. You don't happen to be coming my way, I suppose?"

"My dear fellow," said Jimmy, buttoning up his coat and putting on his hat as he spoke, "my way is always your way. Are you going to walk or will you cab it?"

"Walk," Browne replied. "This is not the sort of weather to ride in hansoms. If you are ready, come along."

The two young men passed out of the club and along Pall Mall together. Turning up Waterloo Place, they proceeded in the direction of Piccadilly. The fog was thicker there than elsewhere, and every shop window was brilliantly illuminated in order to display the wares within.

"Oh, by the way, Browne, I've got something to show you," said Foote, as they passed over the crossing of Charles Street. "It may interest you."

"What is it?" asked Browne. "A new cigarette or something more atrocious than usual in the way of ties?"

"Better than that," returned his companion, and as he spoke he led his friend towards a picture–shop, in the window of which were displayed a number of works of art. Occupying a prominent position in the centre was a large water–colour, and as Browne glanced at it his heart gave a leap in his breast. It was a view of Merok taken from the spot where he had rescued Katherine Petrovitch from death upwards of seven months before. It was a clever bit of work, and treated in an entirely unconventional fashion.

"It's not by any means bad, is it?" said Foote, after Browne had been looking at it in silence for more than a minute. "If I had the money— But I say, old chap, what is the

matter? You are as pale as if you had seen a ghost. Don't you feel well?"

"Perfectly well," his friend replied; "it's the fog."

He did not say that in the corner of the picture he had seen the artist's name, and that that name was the one he had cherished so fondly and for so long a time.

"Just excuse me for a moment, will you?" he said. "I should like to go into the shop and ask a question about that picture."

"All right," said Jimmy. "I'll wait here."

Browne accordingly disappeared inside, leaving Foote on the pavement. As it happened, it was a shop he often visited, and in consequence he was well known to the assistants. When he made his business known to them, the picture was withdrawn from the window and placed before him.

"An excellent bit of work, as you can see for yourself, sir," said the shopman, as he pulled down the electric light and turned it upon the picture. "The young lady who painted it is fast making a name for herself. So far this is the first bit of her work we have had in London; but the Continental dealers assure me they find a ready market for it."

"I can quite believe it," said Browne. "It is an exceedingly pretty sketch. You may send it round to me."

"Very good, sir; thank you. Perhaps you will allow me to show you one or two others while you are here? We have several new works since you paid us a visit last."

"No, thank you," Browne replied. "I only came in to find out whether you could tell me the address of the young lady who painted this. She and I met in Norway some months ago."

"Indeed, sir, I had no idea when I spoke, that you were acquainted. Perhaps you know that she is in London at the present moment. She honoured me by visiting my shop this morning."

"Indeed," said Browne. "In that case you might let me know where I can find her."

"I will do so at once," the man replied. "If you will excuse me for a moment I will have it written out for you."

He disappeared forthwith into an office at the end of the shop, leaving Browne staring at the picture as if he could not take his eyes off it. So engaged was he with the thoughts it conjured up that he quite forgot the fact that he was standing in a shop in London with hansoms and 'buses rolling by outside. In spirit he was on the steep side of a Norwegian mountain, surrounded by fog and rain, endeavouring to discover from what direction a certain cry for help proceeded. Then the fog rolled away, and, looking up at him, he saw what he now knew to be the sweetest and most womanly face upon which he had ever gazed. He was still wrapped in this day–dream when the shopman returned, and roused him by placing on the counter before him an envelope upon which was written:—

Miss KATHERINE PETROVITCH.
43, *German Park Road, West.*

“That is it, sir,” said the man. “If it would be any convenience to you, sir, it will give me the greatest pleasure to write to the young lady, and to tell her that you have purchased her picture and would like her to call upon you.”

“I must beg of you not to do anything of the kind,” Browne replied, with the most impressive earnestness. “I must make it a condition of my purchase that you do not mention my name to her in any way.”

The shopman looked a little crestfallen. “Very good, sir; since you do not wish it, of course I will be sure not to do so,” he answered humbly. “I thought perhaps, having purchased an example of her work, and being such a well–known patron of art, you might be anxious to help the young lady.”

“What do you mean by helping her?” inquired Browne. “Do you think she needs assistance?”

“Well, sir, between ourselves,” returned the other, “I do not fancy she is very well off. She was in a great hurry, at any rate, to sell this picture.”

Browne winced; it hurt him to think that the girl had perhaps been compelled to haggle with this man in order to obtain the mere necessaries of life. He, however, thanked the man for his courtesy, and bidding him send the picture to his residence as soon as possible, left the shop and joined Foote on the pavement outside.

“Well, I hope you have been long enough,” remarked that gentleman in an injured tone, as they proceeded up the street together. “Have you purchased everything in the shop?”

“Don’t be nasty, Jimmy,” said Browne, with sudden joviality. “It doesn’t suit you. You are the jolliest little fellow in the world when you are in a good temper; but when you are not —well, words fail me.”

“Don’t walk me off my legs, confound you!” said Jimmy snappishly. “The night is but young, and we’re not performing pedestrians, whatever you may think.”

Browne was not aware that he was walking faster than usual, but he slowed down on being remonstrated with. Then he commenced to whistle softly to himself.

“Now you are whistling,” said Jimmy, “which is a thing, as you are well aware, that I detest in the street. What on earth is the matter with you to–night? Ten minutes ago you were as glum as they make ‘em; nothing suited you. Then you went into that shop and bought that picture, and since you came out you seem bent on making a public exhibition of yourself.”

“So I am,” said Browne; and then, suddenly stopping in his walk, he rapped with the ferrule of his umbrella on the pavement. “I am going to give an exhibition, and a dashed good one, too. I’ll take one of the galleries, and do it in a proper style. I’ll have the critics there, and all the swells who buy; and if they don’t do as I want, and declare it to be the very finest show of the year, I’ll never buy one of their works again.” Then, taking his friend’s arm, he continued his walk, saying, “What you want, Jimmy, my boy, is a proper appreciation of art. There is nothing like it in the world, take my word for it. Nothing! Nothing at all!”

“You’ve said that before,” retorted his friend, “and you said it with sufficient emphasis to

amuse the whole street. If you're going to give me an exposition of art in Regent Street on a foggy afternoon in March, I tell you flatly I'm going home. I am not a millionaire, and my character won't stand the strain. What's the matter with you, Browne? You're as jolly as a sandboy now, and, for the life of me, I don't see how a chap can be happy in a fog like this and still retain his reason."

"Fog, my boy," continued Browne, still displaying the greatest good humour. "I give you my word, there's nothing like a fog in the world. I adore it! I revel in it! Talk about your south of France and sunshine—what is it to London and a fog? A fog did me a very good turn once, and now I'm hanged if another isn't going to do it again. You're a dear little chap, Jimmy, and I wouldn't wish for a better companion. But there's no use shutting your eyes to one fact, and that is you're not sympathetic. You want educating, and when I've a week or two to spare I'll do it. Now I'm going to leave you to think out what I've said. I've just remembered a most important engagement. Let me find a decent hansom and I'll be off."

"I thought you said just now this was not the weather for driving in hansoms? I thought you said you had nothing to do, and that you were going to employ yourself entertaining me? John Grantham Browne, I tell you what it is, you're going in that hansom to a lunatic asylum."

"Better than that, my boy," said Browne, with a laugh, as the cab drew up at the pavement and he sprang in. "Far better than that." Then, looking up through the trap in the roof at the driver, he added solemnly: "Cabby, drive me to 43, German Park Road, as fast as your horse can go."

"But, hold on," said Foote, holding up his umbrella to detain him. "Before you do go, what about to–morrow? What train shall we catch? And have you sent the wire to your skipper to have the yacht in readiness?"

"Bother to–morrow," answered Browne. "There is no to–morrow, there are no trains, there is no skipper, and most certainly there is no yacht. I've forgotten them and everything else. Drive on, cabby. Bye–bye, Jimmy."

The cab disappeared in the fog, leaving Mr. Foote standing before the portico of the Criterion looking after it.

"My friend Browne is either mad or in love," said that astonished individual as the vehicle disappeared in the traffic. "I don't know which to think. He's quite unnerved me. I think I'll go in here and try a glass of dry sherry just to pull myself together. What an idiot I was not to find out who painted that picture! But that's just like me; I never think of things until too late."

When he had finished his sherry he lit a cigarette, and presently found himself making his way towards his rooms in Jermyn Street. As he walked he shook his head solemnly. "I don't like the look of things at all," he said. "I said a lunatic asylum just now; I should have mentioned a worse place—'St. George's, Hanover Square.' One thing, however, is quite certain. If I know anything of signs, Algiers will not have the pleasure of entertaining me."

Chapter IV

While Foote was cogitating in this way, Browne's cab was rolling along westward. He passed Apsley House and the Park, and dodged his way in and out of the traffic through Kensington Gore and the High Street. By the time they reached the turning into the Melbury Road he was in the highest state of good humour, not only with himself but the world in general.

When, however, they had passed the cab–stand, and had turned into the narrow street which was his destination, all his confidence vanished, and he became as nervous as a weak–minded school–girl. At last the cabman stopped and addressed his fare.

"The fog's so precious thick hereabouts, sir," he said, "that I'm blest if I can see the houses, much less the numbers. Forty–three may be here, or it may be down at the other end. If you like I'll get down and look."

"You needn't do that," said Browne. "I'll find it for myself."

It may have been his nervousness that induced him to do such a thing—on that point I cannot speak with authority—but it is quite certain that when he did get down he handed the driver half–a–sovereign. With the characteristic honesty of the London cabman, the man informed him of the fact, at the same time remarking that he could not give him change.

"Never mind the change," said Browne; adding, with fine cynicism, "Put it into the first charity–box you come across."

The man laughed, and with a hearty "Thank ye, sir; good–night," turned his horse and disappeared.

"Now for No. 43," said Browne.

But though he appeared to be so confident of finding it, it soon transpired that the house was more difficult to discover than he imagined. He wandered up one pavement and down the other in search of it. When he did come across it, it proved to be a picturesque little building standing back from the street, and boasted a small garden in front. The door was placed at the side. He approached it and rang the bell. A moment later he found himself standing face to face with the girl he had rescued on the Gieranger Fjord seven months before. It may possibly have been due to the fact that when she had last seen him he had been dressed after the fashion of the average well–to–do tourist, and that now he wore a top–hat and a great coat; it is quite certain, however, that for the moment she did not recognise him.

"I am afraid you do not know me," said Browne, with a humility that was by no means usual with him. But before he had finished speaking she had uttered a little exclamation of astonishment, and, as the young man afterwards flattered himself, of pleasure.

"Mr. Browne!" she cried. "I beg your pardon, indeed, for not recognising you. You must think me very rude; but I had no idea of seeing you here."

“I only learnt your address an hour ago,” the young man replied. “I could not resist the opportunity of calling on you.”

“But I am so unknown in London,” she answered. “How could you possibly have heard of me! I thought myself so insignificant that my presence in this great city would not be known to any one.”

“You are too modest,” said Browne, with a solemnity that would not have discredited a State secret. Then he made haste to add, “I cannot tell you how often I have thought of that terrible afternoon.”

“As you may suppose, I have never forgotten it,” she answered. “It is scarcely likely I should.”

There was a little pause; then she added, “But I don’t know why I should keep you standing out here like this. Will you not come in?”

Browne was only too glad to do so. He accordingly followed her into the large and luxuriously furnished studio.

“Won’t you sit down?” she said, pointing to a chair by the fire. “It is so cold and foggy outside that perhaps you would like a cup of tea.”

Tea was a beverage in which Browne never indulged, and yet, on this occasion, so little was he responsible for his actions that he acquiesced without a second thought.

“How do you prefer it?” she asked. “Will you have it made in the English or the Russian way? Here is a teapot, and here a samovar; here is milk, and here a slice of lemon. Which do you prefer?”

Scarcely knowing which he chose, Browne answered that he would take it *à la Russe*. She thereupon set to work, and the young man, as he watched her bending over the table, thought he had never in his life before seen so beautiful and so desirable a woman. And yet, had a female critic been present, it is quite possible—nay, it is almost probable that more than one hole might have been picked in her appearance. Her skirt—in order to show my knowledge of the technicalities of woman’s attire—was of plain merino, and she also wore a painting blouse that, like Joseph’s coat, was of many colours. To go further, a detractor would probably have observed that her hair might have been better arranged. Browne, however, thought her perfection in every respect, and drank his tea in a whirl of enchantment. He found an inexplicable fascination in the mere swish of her skirts as she moved about the room, and a pleasure that he had never known before in the movement of her slender hands above the tray. And when, their tea finished, she brought him a case of cigarettes, and bade him smoke if he cared to, it might very well have been said that that studio contained the happiest man in England. Outside, they could hear the steady patter of the rain, and the rattle of traffic reached them from the High Street; but inside there was a silence of a Norwegian fjord, and the memory of one hour that never could be effaced from their recollections as long as they both should live. Under the influence of the tea, and with the assistance of the cigarette, which she insisted he should smoke, Browne gradually recovered his presence of mind. One thing, however, puzzled him. He remembered what the shopman had told him, and for this reason he could not understand how she came to be the possessor of so comfortable a studio. This, however, was soon

explained. The girl informed him that after his departure from Merok (though I feel sure she was not aware that he was the owner of the magnificent vessel she had seen in the harbour) she had been unable to move for upwards of a week. After that she and her companion, Madame Bernstein, had left for Christiania, travelling thence to Copenhagen, and afterwards to Berlin. In the latter city she had met an English woman, also an artist. They had struck up a friendship, with the result that the lady in question, having made up her mind to winter in Venice, had offered her the free use of her London studio for that time, if she cared to cross the Channel and take possession of it.

"Accordingly, in the daytime, I paint here," said the girl; "but Madame Bernstein and I have our lodgings in the Warwick Road. I hope you did not think this was my studio; I should not like to sail under false colours."

Browne felt that he would have liked to give her the finest studio that ever artist had used a brush and pencil in. He was wise enough, however, not to say so. He changed the conversation, therefore, by informing her that he had wintered in Petersburg, remarking at the same time that he had hoped to have had the pleasure of meeting her there.

"You will never meet me in Petersburg," she answered, her face changing colour as she spoke. "You do not know, perhaps, why I say this. But I assure you, you will never meet me or mine within the Czar's dominions."

Browne would have given all he possessed in the world not to have given utterance to that foolish speech. He apologised immediately, and with a sincerity that made her at once take pity on him.

"Please do not feel so sorry for what you said," she replied. "It was impossible for you to know that you had transgressed. The truth is, my family are supposed to be very dangerous persons. I do not think, with one exception, we are more so than our neighbours; but, as the law now stands, we are prohibited. Whether it will ever be different I cannot say. That is enough, however, about myself. Let us talk of something else."

She had seated herself in a low chair opposite him, with her elbows on her knees and her chin resting on her hand. Browne glanced at her, and remembered that he had once carried her in his arms for upwards of a mile. At this thought such a thrill went through him that his teacup, which he had placed on a table beside him, trembled in its saucer. Unable to trust himself any further in that direction, he talked of London, of the weather, of anything that occurred to him; curiously enough, however, he did not mention his proposed departure for the Mediterranean on the morrow. In his heart he had an uneasy feeling that he had no right to be where he was. But when he thought of the foggy street outside, and realised how comfortable this room was, with its easy chairs, its polished floor, on which the firelight danced and played, to say nothing of the girl seated opposite him, he could not summon up sufficient courage to say good–bye.

"How strange it seems," she said at last—"does it not?—that you and I should be sitting here like this! I had no idea, when we bade each other good–bye in Norway, that we should ever meet again."

"I felt certain of it," Browne replied, but he failed to add why he was so sure. "Is it settled how long you remain in England?"

“I do not think so,” she answered. “We may be here some weeks; we may be only a few days. It all depends upon Madame Bernstein.”

“Upon Madame Bernstein?” he said, with some surprise.

“Yes,” she answered; “she makes our arrangements. You have no idea how busy she is.”

Browne certainly had no idea upon that point, and up to that moment he was not sure that he was at all interested; now, however, since it appeared that madame controlled the girl’s movements, she became a matter of overwhelming importance to him.

For more than an hour they continued to chat; then Browne rose to bid her good–bye.

“Would you think me intrusive if I were to call upon you again?” he asked as he took her hand.

“Do so by all means, if you like,” she answered, with charming frankness. “I shall be very glad to see you.”

Then an idea occurred to him—an idea so magnificent, so delightful, that it almost took his breath away.

“Would you think me impertinent if I inquired how you and Madame Bernstein amuse yourselves in the evenings? Have you been to any theatres or to the opera?”

The girl shook her head. “I have never been inside a theatre in London,” she replied.

“Then perhaps I might be able to persuade you to let me take you to one,” he answered. “I might write to Madame Bernstein and arrange an evening. Would she care about it, do you think?”

“I am sure she would,” she answered. “And I know that I should enjoy it immensely. It is very kind of you to ask us.”

“It is very kind of you to promise to come,” he said gratefully. “Then I will arrange it for to–morrow night if possible. Good–bye.”

“Good–bye,” she answered, and held out her little hand to him for the second time.

When the front door had closed behind him and he was fairly out in the foggy street once more, Browne set off along the pavement on his return journey, swinging his umbrella and whistling like a schoolboy. To a crusty old bachelor his state of mind would have appeared inexplicable. There was no sort of doubt about it, however, that he was happy; he walked as if he were treading on air. It was a good suggestion, that one about the theatre, he said to himself, and he would take care that they enjoyed themselves. He would endeavour to obtain the best box at the opera; they were playing *Lohengrin* at the time, he remembered. He would send one of his own carriages to meet them, and it should take them home again. Then a still more brilliant idea occurred to him. Why should he not arrange a nice little dinner at some restaurant first? Not one of your flash dining–places but a quiet, comfortable little place—Lallemand’s, for instance, where the cooking is irreproachable, the wine and waiting faultless, and the company who frequent it beyond suspicion. And yet another notion, and as it occurred to him he laughed aloud in the public street.

“There will be three of us,” he said, “and the chaperon will need an escort. By Jove! Jimmy called me mad, did he? Well, I’ll be revenged on him. *He shall sit beside Madame*

Bernstein.”

Chapter V

If Browne had ever looked forward to anything in his life, he did to the dinner–party he had arranged for the evening following his visit to the studio in the German Park Road. On more than one occasion he had entertained royalty at his house in Park Lane, and at various times he had invited London society to functions which, for magnificence and completeness, had scarcely ever been equalled and never excelled. Upon none of these affairs, however, had he bestowed half so much care and attention as he did upon the dinner which it is now my duty to describe. Having written the formal invitation, he posted it himself; after which he drove to the restaurant which was to be honoured with Katherine Petrovitch's presence, and interviewed the proprietor in his own sanctum.

"Remember, Alphonse," he said to that delightful little man, "good as the others have been, this must be the very best dinner you have ever arranged for me. It must not be long, nor must it be in the least degree heavy. You know my taste in wine, and I give you *carte blanche* to ransack London for what you consider necessary in the way of rarities. Reserve 'No. 6' for me, if it is not already engaged; and make it look as nice as you possibly can. I will send the flowers from my house, and my own man shall arrange them."

Alphonse chuckled and rubbed his hands. This was just the sort of order he delighted to receive.

"Ver' good; it shall be done, M'sieu Browne," he said, bowing and spreading his hands apart in his customary fashion when pleased. "I have made you many, many dinners before, but I give you the word of Alphonse that this shall be the best of all. *Ma foi!* but I will give you a dinner zat for its betterment you cannot get in England. Ze cost I will—"

"Never mind the cost," answered the reckless young man; "remember, it must be the best in every way. Nothing short of that will do."

"I will satisfy you, m'sieu; never fear that. It is my honour. Perhaps it is royalty zat you have to come to my house?"

"It is nothing of the sort," Browne replied scornfully. "I am asking two ladies and one gentleman."

Alphonse's face expressed his surprise. It looked as if his beautiful dinner was likely to be wasted.

Having arranged the hour and certain other minor details, Browne returned to his cab once more, and drove off in search of Jimmy Foote. It was some time before he found him, and, when he did, a considerable period elapsed before he could obtain speech with him. Jimmy was at the Welter Club, playing black pool with two or three youths of his own type. From the manner in which their silver was changing hands, it certainly looked as if that accomplished young gentleman was finding his time very fully taken up, picking half–crowns off the rim of the table, placing them in his pocket, and paying them out again.

"Hullo, Browne!" said Bellingham of the Blues, after the black ball had disappeared into

the top pocket and while the marker was spotting it again. “Are you coming in?”

“Not if I know it,” said Browne, shaking his head. “Judging from the anxious expression upon Jimmy’s face, things are getting a little too hot with you all.”

At the end of the next round, the latter retired from the game, and, putting his arm through that of his friend, led him to the smoking–room on the other side of the hall.

“I hope you have calmed down, old fellow,” said Jimmy as they seated themselves near the fire. “To what do I owe the honour of seeing you here to–night?”

“I want you to do me a favour,” Browne returned, a little nervously, for he was afraid of what Jimmy would say when he knew everything.

“Anything you like in the world, old man,” said the latter. “You have only to ask. There is nothing wrong, I hope?”

“Nothing at all,” replied Browne. “Rather the other way round, I fancy. The fact of the matter is, I have asked two ladies to dine with me to–morrow evening at Lallemand’s, and to go to the Opera afterwards. I want you to make one of the party.”

“The young lady is the painter of that charming Norwegian picture,” said Jimmy, with imperturbable gravity, “and the other is her chaperon.”

“How on earth did you know it?” asked Browne, blushing like a schoolboy, for the simple reason that he thought his secret was discovered.

“It’s very plain that you never knew I was a wizard,” returned his companion, with a laugh. “You old duffer; put two and two together for yourself—that is to say, if you have any brains left to do it with. In the first place, did you not yesterday afternoon invite me to accompany you on a delightful yachting trip to the Mediterranean? You were tired of England, you said, and I gathered from your remarks that you were counting the hours until you could say ‘good–bye’ to her. We went for a walk, and as we passed up Waterloo Place I happened to show you a picture. You turned as white as a sheet at once, and immediately dived into the shop, bidding me wait outside. When you reappeared you acted the part of an amiable lunatic; talked a lot of bosh about preferring fogs to sunshine; and when I informed you that you were on the high–road to an asylum, said it was better than that—you were going to the German Park Road. Our yachting cruise has been thrown to the winds; and now, to make up for it, you have the impudence to ask me to play gooseberry for you, and try to propitiate me with one of Lallemand’s dinners, which invariably upset me for a week, and a dose of Wagner which will drive me crazy for a month.”

“How do you know I want you to play gooseberry?” asked Browne savagely. “It’s like your impudence to say such a thing.”

“How do I know anything?” said Jimmy, with delightful calmness. “Why, by the exercise of my own common–sense, of course—a commodity you will never possess if you go on like this. You are spoons on this girl, I suppose, and since there’s another coming with her, it’s pretty plain to me somebody must be there to keep that other out of the way.”

“You grow very coarse,” retorted Browne, now thoroughly on his dignity.

“It’s a coarse age, they say,” Foote replied. “Don’t I know by experience exactly what that second party will be like!”

“If you do you are very clever,” said Browne.

“One has to be clever to keep pace with the times,” Jimmy replied. “But, seriously, old man, if you want me, I shall be only too glad to come to your dinner; but, mind, I take no responsibility for what happens. I am not going to be called to account by every London mother who possesses a marriageable daughter.”

“You needn’t be afraid,” said Browne. “I will absolve you from all responsibility. At any rate you assure me that I can depend upon you?”

“Of course you can, and anything else you like besides,” Foote replied. Then, laying his hand upon Browne’s shoulder, he added: “My dear old Jack, in spite of our long acquaintance, I don’t think you quite know me yet. I talk a lot of nonsense, I’m afraid; but as far as you are concerned you may depend the heart’s in the right place. Now I come to think of it, I am not quite certain it would not be better for you to be decently married and out of harm’s way. Of course, one doesn’t like to see one’s pals hurried off like that; but in your case it’s different.”

“My dear fellow,” said Browne, “as you said just now, you certainly do talk a lot of nonsense. Whoever said anything about marriage? Of course I’m not going to be married. I have never contemplated such a thing. It’s always the way; directly a man shows a little extra courtesy to a woman, talks to her five minutes longer than he is accustomed to do, perhaps, or dances with her twice running, you immediately get the idea that everything is settled between them, and that all you have to do is to wonder what sort of wedding present you ought to give them.”

“When a man gives himself away as completely as you have done in this particular instance, it is not to be wondered that his friends think there is something in the air,” said Jimmy. “However, you know your own business best. What time is the dinner?”

“Seven o’clock sharp,” said Browne. “You had better meet me there a few minutes before. Don’t forget we go to the Opera afterwards.”

“I am not likely to forget it,” said Jimmy, with a doleful face.

“Very well, good–bye until to–morrow evening.”

There was a little pause, and then Browne held out his hand.

“Thank you, Jimmy,” he said with a sincerity that was quite inconsistent with the apparent importance of the subject. “I felt sure I could rely upon you.”

“Rely upon me always,” Jimmy replied. “I don’t think you’ll find me wanting.”

With that Browne bade him good–bye, and went out into the street. He hailed a cab, and bade the man drive him to Park Lane.

Once it had started, he laid himself back on the cushions and gave free rein to his thoughts. Though he had to all intents and purposes denied it a few minutes before, there could be no doubt that he was in love—head over ears in love. He had had many passing fancies before, it is true, but never had he experienced such a strong attack of the fever as

at present. As the cab passed along the crowded street he seemed to see that sweet face, with its dark eyes and hair; that slender figure, and those beautiful white hands, with their long tapering fingers; and to hear again the soft tones of Katherine's voice as she had spoken to him in the studio that afternoon. She was a queen among women, he told himself, and was worthy to be loved as such. But if she were so beautiful and so desirable, could she be induced to have anything to do with himself? Could she ever be brought to love him? It was consistent with the man's character to be so humble, and yet it was strange that he should have been so. Ever since he had been eligible for matrimony he had been the especial prey of mothers with marriageable daughters. They had fawned upon him, had petted him, and in every way had endeavoured to effect his capture. Whether or not Katherine Petrovitch knew of his wealth it was impossible for him to say. He hoped she did not. It was his ambition in life to be loved, and be loved for himself alone. If she would trust him, he would devote his whole life to making her happy, and to proving how well founded was the faith she had reposed in him. Vitally important as the question was, I believe he had never for one moment doubted her. His nature was too open for that, while she herself, like Cæsar's wife, was of course above suspicion. The fact that she had confessed to him that her family was prohibited in Russia only served to intensify his admiration for her truthful qualities. Though he knew nothing of her history or antecedents, it never for one moment caused him any uneasiness. He loved her for herself, not for her family. When he went to bed that night he dreamt of her, and when he rose in the morning he was, if possible, more in love than before. Fully occupied as his day usually was, on this occasion he found it more than difficult to pass the time. He counted the hours—nay, almost the minutes—until it should be possible for him to set off to the restaurant. By the midday post a charming little note arrived, signed Katherine Petrovitch. Browne was in his study when it was brought to him, and it was with the greatest difficulty he could contain his impatience until the butler had left the room. The instant he had done so, however, he tore open the envelope and drew out the contents. The writing was quaint and quite un–English, but its peculiarities only served to make it the more charming. It would give Madame Bernstein and the writer, it said, much pleasure to dine with him that evening. He read and re–read it, finding a fresh pleasure in it on each occasion. It carried with it a faint scent which was as intoxicating as the perfume of the Lotus Blossom.

Had the beautiful Miss Verney, who, it must be confessed, had more than once written him letters of the most confidential description, guessed for a single moment that he preferred the tiny sheet he carried in his coat–pocket to her own epistles, it is certain her feelings would have been painful in the extreme. The fact remains, however, that Browne preserved the letter, and, if I know anything of human nature, he has it still.

Chapter VI

The dinner that evening must be counted a distinct success. Browne was the first to arrive at the rendezvous, and it was not wonderful that he should have been, considering that he had spent the whole of his day waiting for that moment. The owner of the restaurant received him personally.

“Well, Lallemand,” said Browne, with an anxiety that was almost ludicrous, “how are your preparations? Is everything ready?”

“Certainly, monsieur,” Lallemand replied, spreading his hands apart. “Everything is ready; Felix himself has done ze cooking, I have chosen ze wine, and your own gardener has arranged ze flowers. You have ze best men–servants in London to wait upon you. I have procured you four kinds of fruit that has only a few times been seen in England before; and now I give you ze word of Lallemand zat you will have ze most perfect little dinner in ze city of London.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Browne. “I am exceedingly obliged to you for the trouble you have taken in the matter.”

“I beg you will not mention ze trouble, monsieur,” replied Lallemand politely. “It is ze pleasure of my life to serve you.”

He had scarcely spoken before a cab drew up before the door, and Jimmy Foote made his appearance, clad in immaculate evening–dress. He greeted Browne with a somewhat sheepish air, as if he were ashamed of himself for something, and did not quite know what that something was.

“Well, old man,” he said. “Here I am, you see; up to time, I hope. How d’ye do, Lallemand?”

“I hope you are most well, Monsieur Foote,” replied Lallemand, with one of his inimitable bows.

“I am better than I shall be after your dinner,” Foote replied, with a smile. “Human nature is weak. I am tempted, and I know that I shall fall.”

Browne all this time was showing signs of impatience. He glanced repeatedly at his watch, and as seven o’clock drew near he imagined that every vehicle pulling up outside must contain the two ladies for whom he was waiting so eagerly. When at last they did arrive he hastened to the door to greet them. Madame Bernstein was the first to alight, and Katherine Petrovitch followed her a moment later. She gave her hand to Browne, and as he took it such a thrill went through him that it was wonderful the young man did not collapse upon the pavement.

Having conducted them to the room in which they were to take off their wraps, Browne went in search of Foote, whom he found in the dining–room.

“Pull yourself together, old chap,” said Jimmy as he glanced at him; “you are all on the jump. What on earth is the matter with you? Take my advice and try a pick–me–up.”

“I wouldn’t touch a drop for worlds,” said Browne, with righteous indignation. “I wonder you can suggest such a thing.”

Instead, he went to the table and moved a flower–vase which was an eighth of an inch from the centrepiece farther than its companion on the other side.

“This is as bad a case as I ever remember,” said Foote to himself; and at the same moment Katherine Petrovitch and Madame Bernstein entered the room. A somewhat painful surprise was in store for Browne. There could be no doubt about one thing: Madame Bernstein had dressed herself with due regard to the importance of the occasion. Her gown was of bright ruby velvet; her arms were entirely bare; and while her bodice was supported by the most slender of shoulder–straps, it was cut considerably lower than most people would have considered compatible with either her age or her somewhat portly appearance. Round her neck and studded in her hair were many diamonds, all so palpably false as to create no suspicion of the means by which she had obtained them. Her companion’s costume, on the other hand, was simplicity itself. She was attired in black, unrelieved by any touch of colour; a plain band of velvet encircled her throat, and Browne confessed to himself afterwards that he had never in his life seen anything more becoming. He presented Foote to the ladies with due ceremony; and when their places had been allotted them they sat down to dinner, madame on Browne’s right, Katherine on his left.

Despite the knowledge that the dinner had been prepared by one of the most admirable *chefs* in the world, and the fact that Lallemand himself had given his assurance that everything was satisfactory, Browne was nevertheless exercised in his mind lest anything should go wrong. He might have spared himself the anxiety, however, for the dinner was perfection itself. One other thing troubled him, and that was that the person he was most anxious to please scarcely touched anything. But if she did not, Madame Bernstein made ample amends for her. She allowed no dish to pass her untasted; the connoisseur was apparent in her appreciation of the wines, while her praise of the cooking was volubility itself. From what he had seen of her, Browne had been prepared to dislike her intensely; to his surprise, however, he discovered that she improved on acquaintance. Seemingly, she had been everywhere and had seen everything; in her youth she had known Garibaldi personally, had met Kossuth, and been brought into contact with many other European liberators. For this reason alone her conversation could scarcely have failed to prove interesting. Katherine, on the other hand, was strangely quiet.

The dinner at an end, the ladies withdrew to put on their cloaks; and while they were absent Browne ascertained that his carriage was at the door. In it they drove to Covent Garden. The box was on the prompt side of the house, and was the best that influence and money could secure. Madame Bernstein and Katherine Petrovitch took their places in the front, while Browne managed to manoeuvre his chair into such a position that he could speak to Katherine without the others overhearing what he said.

“You are fond of music, are you not?” he inquired as the orchestra took their places. He felt as he said it that he need not have asked; with such a face she could scarcely fail to be.

“I am more than fond of it,” she answered, playing with the handle of her fan. “Music and painting are my two greatest pleasures.”

She uttered a little sigh, which seemed to suggest to Browne that she had not very much

pleasure in her life. At least, that was the way in which he interpreted it.

Then the curtain went up, and Browne was forced to be silent. I think, if you were to ask him now which was the happiest evening of his life, he would answer, “That on which I saw Lohengrin with Katherine Petrovitch.” If the way in which the time slipped by could be taken as any criterion, it must certainly have been so, for the evening seemed scarcely to have begun ere it was over and the National Anthem was being played. When the curtain descended the two young men escorted the ladies to the entrance hall, where they waited while the carriage was being called. It was at this juncture that Jimmy proved of use. Feeling certain Browne would be anxious to have a few minutes alone with Katherine, he managed, with great diplomacy, to draw Madame Bernstein on one side, on the pretence of telling her an amusing story concerning a certain Continental military attaché with whom they were both acquainted.

“How long do you think it will be before I may venture to see you again?” Browne asked the girl when they were alone together.

“I cannot say,” she replied, with an attempt at a smile. “I do not know what Madame Bernstein’s arrangements are.”

“But surely Madame Bernstein does not control all your actions?” he asked, I fear a little angrily; for he did not like to think she was so dependent on the elder woman.

“No, she does not altogether control them, of course,” Katherine replied; “but I always have so much to do for her that I do not feel justified in making any arrangements without first consulting her.”

“But you must surely have some leisure,” he continued. “Perhaps you shop in the High Street, or walk in the Park or Kensington Gardens on fine mornings. Might I not chance to find you in one of those places?”

“I fear not,” she answered, shaking her head. “If it is fine I have my work to do.”

“And if it should be wet?” asked Browne, feeling his heart sink within him as he realised that she was purposely placing obstacles in the way of their meeting. “Surely you cannot paint when the days are as gloomy as they have been lately.”

“No,” she answered; “that is impossible. But it gives me no more leisure than before; for in that case I have letters to write for Madame Bernstein, and she has an enormous amount of correspondence.”

Though Browne wondered what that correspondence could be, he said nothing to her on the subject, nor had he any desire to thrust his presence upon the girl when he saw she was not anxious for it. It was plain to him that there was something behind it all—some reason to account for her pallor and her quietness that evening. What that reason was, however, he could not for the life of him understand.

They had arrived at this point when the carriage reached the door. Madame Bernstein and Foote accordingly approached them, and the quartette walked together towards the entrance.

“I thank you many times for your kindness to–night,” said Katherine, looking shyly up at Browne.

“Please, don’t thank me,” he replied. “It is I who should thank you. I hope you have enjoyed yourself.”

“Very much indeed,” she answered. “I could see *Lohengrin* a hundred times without growing in the least tired of it.”

As she said this they reached the carriage. Browne placed the ladies in it, and shook hands with them as he bade them good–night. He gave the footman his instructions, and presently the carriage rolled away, leaving the two young men standing on the pavement, looking after it. It was a beautiful starlight night, with a touch of frost in the air.

“Are we going to take a cab, or shall we walk?” said Foote.

“Let us walk, that is if you don’t mind,” Browne replied. “I feel as if I could enjoy a ten–mile tramp to–night after the heat of that theatre.”

“I’m afraid I do not,” Foote replied. “My idea is the ‘Périgord’ for a little supper, and then to bed. Browne, old man, I have been through a good deal for you to–night. I like the young lady very much, but Madame Bernstein is—well, she is Madame Bernstein. I can say no more.”

“Never mind, old chap,” said Browne, patting his companion on the shoulder. “You have the satisfaction of knowing that your martyrdom is appreciated; the time may come when you will want me to do the same thing for you. One good turn deserves another, you know.”

“When I want a turn of that description done for me, I will be sure to let you know,” Foote continued; “but if I have any sort of luck, it will be many years before I come to you with such a request. When I remember that, but for my folly in showing you that picture in Waterloo Place, we should by this time be on the other side of the Eddystone, *en route* for the Mediterranean and sunshine, I feel as if I could sit down and weep. However, it is *kismet*, I suppose?”

Browne offered no reply.

“Are you coming in?” said Foote as they reached the doorstep of the Périgord Club.

“No, thank you, old man,” said Browne. “I think, if you will excuse me, I will get home.”

“Good–night, then,” said Foote; “I shall probably see you in the morning.”

Having bidden him good–night, Browne proceeded on his way.

Next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, he betook himself to Kensington Gardens, where he wandered about for upwards of an hour, but saw no sign of the girl he hoped to meet. Leaving the Gardens, he made his way to the High Street, with an equally futile result. Regardless of the time he was wasting, and of everything else, he passed on in the direction of Addison Road. As disappointment still pursued him, he made up his mind to attempt a forlorn hope. Turning into the Melbury Road, he made for German Park Road, and reaching the studio, rang the bell. When the door was opened he found himself confronted with an elderly person, wearing a sack for an apron, and holding a bar of yellow soap in her hand.

“I have called to see Miss Petrovitch,” he said.

“She is not at home, sir,” the woman replied. “She has not been here this morning. Can I give her any message?”

“I am afraid not,” Browne replied. “I wanted to see her personally; but you might tell her that Mr. Browne called.”

“Mr. Browne,” she repeated. “Very good, sir. You may be sure I will tell her.”

Browne thanked her, and, to make assurance doubly sure, slipped five shillings into her hand. Then, passing out of the garden, he made his way back to the High Street. He had not proceeded more than a hundred yards down that interesting thoroughfare, however, before he saw no less a person than Katherine herself approaching him.

They were scarcely a dozen paces apart when she recognised him.

“Good–morning, Miss Petrovitch,” he said, raising his hat and speaking a little nervously. “I have just called at your studio in the hope that I might see you. The woman told me that she did not know when you would return. I thought I might possibly meet you here.”

It was a poor enough excuse, but the only one he could think of at the moment.

“You wanted to see me?” she said in a tone of surprise.

“Are you angry with me for that?” he asked. “I did not think you would be; but if you are I will go away again. By this time you should know that I have no desire save to make you happy.”

This was the first time he had spoken so plainly. Her face paled a little.

“I did not know that you were so anxious to see me,” she said, “or I would have made a point of being at home.”

All this time they had been standing on the spot where they had first met.

“Perhaps you will permit me to walk a little way with you?” said Browne, half afraid that she would refuse.

“I shall be very pleased,” she answered promptly.

Thereupon they walked back in the direction of the studio.

At the gate they stopped. She turned and faced him, and as she did so she held out her hand; it was plain that she had arrived at a decision on some important point.

“Good–bye, Mr. Browne,” she said, and as she said it Browne noticed that her voice trembled and her eyes filled with tears. He could bear it no longer.

“Miss Petrovitch,” he began, “you must forgive my rudeness; but I feel sure that you are not happy. Will you not trust me and let me help you? You know how gladly I would do so.”

“There is no way in which you can help me,” she answered, and then she bade him good–bye, and, with what Browne felt sure was a little sob, vanished into the studio. For some moments he stood waiting where he was, overwhelmed by the suddenness of her exit, and hoping she might come out again; then, realising that she did not intend doing so, he turned on his heel and made his way back to the High Street, and so to Park Lane. His

afternoon was a broken and restless one; he could not rid himself of the recollection of the girl’s face, and he felt as sure as a man could well be that something was amiss. But how was he to help her? At any rate he was going to try.

The clocks in the neighbourhood were striking eleven next morning as he alighted from his hansom and approached the door of the studio. He rang the bell, but no answer rewarded him. He rang again, but with the same result.

Not being able to make any one hear, he returned to his cab and set off for the Warwick Road. Reaching the house, the number of which Katherine had given him, he ascended the steps and rang the bell. When the maid–servant answered his summons, he inquired for Miss Petrovitch.

“Miss Petrovitch?” said the girl, as if she were surprised. “She is not here, sir. She and Madame Bernstein left for Paris this morning.”

Chapter VII

When Browne heard the maid's news, his heart sank like lead. He could scarcely believe his ill–fortune. Only a moment before he had been comforting himself with the thought that he would soon be standing face to face with Katherine, ready to ask her a question which should decide the happiness of his life. Now his world seemed suddenly to have turned as black as midnight. Why had she left England so suddenly? What had taken her away? Could it have been something in connection with that mysterious business of Madame Bernstein's of which he had heard so much of late? Then another idea struck him. Perhaps it was the knowledge that she was leaving that had occasioned her unhappiness on the previous afternoon. The maid who had opened the door to him, and whose information had caused him such disappointment, was a typical specimen of the London boarding–house servant, and yet there was sufficient of the woman left in her to enable her to see that her news had proved a crushing blow to the man standing before her.

"Can you tell me at what hour they left?" Browne inquired. "I was hoping to have seen Miss Petrovitch this morning."

"I can tell you what the time was exactly," the girl replied. "It was on the stroke of nine when they got into the cab."

"Are you quite certain upon that point?" he asked.

"Quite certain, sir," she answered. "I know it was nine o'clock, because I had just carried in the first floor's breakfast; and a precious noise, sir, he always makes if it is not on the table punctual to the minute. There were some letters for Madame Bernstein by the post, which the other girl took up to her bedroom. As soon as she read them she sent down for Mrs. Jimson and called for her bill. 'I leave for Paris in an hour's time, Mrs. Jimson,' says she, sort of short–like, for I heard her myself; 'so make me out my bill and let me have it quickly.'"

"And did Miss Petrovitch appear at all surprised or put out at having to leave London at such short notice?" Browne asked, not without a little trepidation.

"Well, sir, that was exactly what I was a–going to tell you," the girl replied, dropping her voice a little, and glancing back over her shoulder into the house, as if she were afraid of being overheard. "She did seem precious put out about it; at least so the other girl says. Jane tells me she feels certain Miss Petrovitch had been crying, her eyes were that red, and when she went into the room she and madame were at it hammer and tongs.

"I suppose they left no message for any one?" Browne inquired, refusing to comment on what the girl had just told him.

"Not as I know of, sir," the young woman replied. "But if you will just wait a minute I'll go in and ask Mrs. Jimson. She will be sure to know."

Browne contained his patience as best he could for some five or six minutes. Then the girl returned and shook her head.

“There’s no message of any sort, sir,” she said; “at least not as Mrs. Jimson knows of.”

“Thank you,” said Browne simply. “I am much obliged to you.”

As he said it he slipped half a sovereign into the girl’s hand. The bribe completed the effect the touch of romance, combined with his pleasing personality, to say nothing of his smart cab drawn up beside the pavement, had already produced. Not only would she have told him all she knew, but, had she dared, she would have gone so far as to have expressed her sympathy with him.

Browne was about to descend the steps, when another idea occurred to him, and he turned to the girl again.

“You do not happen to be aware of their address in Paris, I suppose?” he inquired. “I have a particular reason for asking the question.”

“Hush, sir!” she whispered. “If you really want to know it, I believe I can find out for you. Madame Bernstein wrote it down for Mrs. Jimson, so that she could send on any letters that came for her. I know where Mrs. Jimson put the piece of paper, and if you’ll just wait a minute longer, I’ll see if I can find it for you and copy it out. I won’t be a minute longer than I can help.”

Feeling very much as if he were being guilty of a dishonourable action, Browne allowed her to depart upon her errand. This time she was somewhat longer away, but when she returned she carried, concealed in her hand, a small slip of paper. He took it from her, and, once more thanking her for her kindness, returned to his cab.

“Home, Williams,” he cried to his coachman, “and as quickly as possible. I have no time to spare.”

As the vehicle sped along in the direction of the High Street, Browne unfolded and glanced at the paper the girl had given him. Upon it, written in a clumsy hand, was the address he wanted, and which he would have fought the world to obtain.

“Madame Bernstein,” so it ran, “35, Rue Jacquarie, Paris.”

“Very good,” said Browne to himself triumphantly. “Now I know where to find them. Let me see! They were to leave London in an hour from nine o’clock; that means that they started from Victoria and are travelling *viâ* Newhaven and Dieppe. Now, there’s a train from Charing Cross, *viâ* Dover and Calais, at eleven. If I can catch that I shall be in Paris an hour and a half after them.”

He consulted his watch anxiously, to find that he had barely an hour in which to pack his bag and to get to the station. However, if it could be done, he was determined to do it; accordingly he bade his man drive faster. Reaching Park Lane, he rang for his valet, and when that somewhat stolid individual put in an appearance, bade him pack a few necessaries and be ready to start for the Continent at once. Being a well–drilled servant, and accustomed, by long usage, to his master’s rapid flittings from place to place, the man offered no comment, but merely saying, “Very good, sir,” departed to carry out his instructions.

Two minutes to eleven found Browne standing upon the platform at Charing Cross Station. It was not until he was comfortably installed in the carriage and the train was

rolling out of the station, that the full meaning of what he was doing struck him. Why was he leaving England? To follow this girl. And why? For one very good reason—*because he loved her*! But why *should* he have loved her, when, with his wealth, he could have married the daughter of almost any peer in England; when, had he so desired, he could have chosen his wife from among the most beautiful or most talented women in Europe? Katherine Petrovitch, attractive and charming as she was, was neither as beautiful, rich, or clever as a hundred women he had met. And yet she was the one in the world he desired for his wife.

So concerned was he about her that, when they reached Dover, his first thought was to examine the sea in order to convince himself that she had had a good crossing. He boarded the steamer, the lines were cast off, and presently the vessel's head was pointing for the Continent. Little by little the English coast dropped behind them and the shores of France loomed larger. Never before had the coast struck him as being so beautiful. He entered the train at Calais with a fresh satisfaction as he remembered that every revolution of the wheels was bringing him closer to the woman he loved. The lights were lit in the cafés and upon the boulevards, when he reached Paris, and as he drove through the crowded streets in the direction of the hotel he usually affected the city seemed all glitter, gaiety, and life.

Familiar as he was with the city, it seemed altogether different to him to–night. The loungers in the courtyard of the hotel, the bustling waiters, the very chambermaids, served to remind him that, while in the flesh he was still the same John Grantham Browne, in the spirit he was an altogether separate and distinct individual from the man they had previously known. On reaching his own room he opened the window, leant out, and looked upon Paris by night. The voice of the great city spoke to him, and greeted him as with the sweetest music. Once more he was sharing the same city with Katherine Petrovitch, breathing the same air, and hearing the same language.

Shutting the window at last, he washed off the stains of travel, changed his attire, and descended to the dining–hall.

Having no desire to lose time, he resolved to institute inquiries at once about the Rue Jacquarie, and to seek, and if possible to obtain, an interview with Katherine before she could possibly depart from Paris again. How was he to know that Madame Bernstein's plans might not necessitate another removal to Rome, Berlin, or St. Petersburg?—in which case he might very easily lose sight of her altogether. He had never trusted madame, and since her departure from England he was even less disposed to do so than before. There was something about her that he did not altogether appreciate. He had told himself that he did not like her the first day he had met her at Merok, and he was even more convinced of the fact now. What the link was between the two women he could not think, and he was almost afraid to attempt to solve the mystery.

Dinner at an end, he rose and went to his room to put on a cloak. In love though he was, he had still sufficient of his father's prudence left to be careful of his health.

Descending to the courtyard once more, he called a fiacre, and, when the man had driven up, inquired whether he knew where the Rue Jacquarie was. The man looked at him with some show of surprise.

"Oui, m'sieu," he replied, "I know the Rue Jacquarie, of course; but—"

“Never mind any buts,” Browne replied, as he jumped into the cab. “I have business in the Rue Jacquarie, so drive me there at once.”

“To what number?” the man inquired, in a tone that implied that he was not over–anxious for the job.

“Never mind the number,” said Browne; “drive me to the corner and set me down there.”

The man whipped up his horse, and they started *viâ* the Rue Tronchet. Turning into the Rue St. Honoré, and thence into the Place de la Madeleine, they proceeded in the direction of Montmartre. For some time Browne endeavoured to keep tally of the route; eventually, however, he was obliged to relinquish the attempt in despair. From one street they passed into another, and to Browne it seemed that every one was alike. At last the driver stopped his horse.

“This is the Rue Jacquarie,” he said, pointing with his whip down a long and somewhat dingy thoroughfare.

Browne bade him wait for him, and then proceeded down the street on foot in search of No. 35. After the magnificent quarter of the city in which he had installed himself, the Rue Jacquarie seemed mean and contemptible in the extreme. The houses were small and dingy, and it was plain that they were occupied by people who were not the possessors of any conspicuous degree of wealth. He walked the whole length of the street in search of No. 35, and, not finding it, returned upon the other side. At last he discovered the house he wanted. He thereupon crossed the road, and, standing on the opposite pavement, regarded it steadfastly.

Lights shone from three of the windows, and Browne’s pulses beat more quickly as he reflected that it was just possible one of them might emanate from Katherine’s room.

It was now close upon ten o’clock, and if all had gone well with them the girl should now have been in Paris some three hours. It was extremely unlikely that, after such a journey, she would have gone out, so that he had every reason for feeling certain she must be in the house before him. In spite of the thin rain that was falling, he stood and watched the building for some minutes. Once a woman’s shadow passed across a blind upon the second floor, and Browne felt his heart leap as he saw it. A few moments later a man and a woman passed the concierge. They paused upon the doorstep to wish some one within “good–night”; then, descending the steps, they set off in the same direction in which Browne himself had come. Before doing so, however, they turned and looked up and down the street, as if they were afraid they might be observed. Seeing Browne watching the house, they hastened their steps, and presently disappeared down a side thoroughfare. For an ordinary observer this small event might have had little or no significance; but to Browne, in whose mind indefinable suspicions were already shaping themselves, it seemed more than a little disquieting. That they had noticed him, and that they were alarmed by the knowledge that he was watching the house, was as plain as the lights in the windows opposite. But why they should have been so frightened was what puzzled him. What was going on in the house, or rather what had they been doing that they should fear being overlooked? He asked himself these questions as he paced down the street in the direction of his cab. But he could not answer them to his satisfaction.

“Drive me to the Amphitryon Club,” he said, as he took his place in the vehicle once

more; and then continued to himself, “I’d give something to understand what it all means.”

Chapter VIII

Now the Amphitryon Club is situated in the Avenue de l'Opéra, as all the world knows, and is one of the most exclusive and distinguished clubs in Europe. Browne had been a member for many years, and during his stays in Paris was usually to be found there.

It was a fine building, in which everything was done in the most sumptuous and luxurious fashion. You might lunch there on bread and cheese or a Porter–house steak; but the bread, the cheese, and the steak, while unpretentious in themselves, would be the very best obtainable of their kind. What led him there on that particular evening Browne did not quite know. It was Destiny! Blind Fate had him in hand, and was luring him on to what was to be the most momentous half–hour of his life. He knew he was pretty certain of finding some one there with whom he was acquainted; but he was certainly not prepared for the surprise, which greeted him, when he pushed open the swing–doors and passed into the smoking–room. Seated in a chair by the fire, and looking into it in the meditative fashion of a man, who has dined well and feels disinclined for much exertion, was no less a person than Maas.

"Mon cher ami," he cried, springing to his feet and holding out his hand, "this is a delightful surprise. I had no notion you were in Paris."

"I only arrived this evening," Browne replied. "But I might return the compliment, for I thought you were in St. Petersburg."

"No such thing," said Maas, shaking his head. "Petersburg at this time of the year does not agree with my constitution. To be able to appreciate it one must have Slav blood in one's veins, which I am discourteous enough to be glad to say I have not. But what brings you to the gay city? Is it on business or pleasure? But there, I need not ask. I should have remembered that business does not enter into your life."

"A false conclusion on your part," said Browne as he lit a cigar. "For a man who has nothing to do, I have less leisure than many people who declare they are overworked."

"By the way," Maas continued, "they tell me we have to congratulate you at last."

"Upon what?" Browne inquired. "What have I done now that the world should desire to wish me well?"

"I refer to your approaching marriage," said Maas. "Deauville was in here the other day, *en route* to Cannes, and he told us that it was stated in a London paper that you were about to be married. I told him I felt sure he must be mistaken. If you had been I should probably have known it."

"It's not true," said Browne angrily. "Deauville should know better than to attach any credence to such a story."

"Exactly what I told him," said Maas, with his usual imperturbability. "I said that, at his age, he should know better than to believe every silly rumour he sees in the press. I assured him that you were worth a good many married men yet."

As he said this Maas watched Browne's face carefully. What he saw there must have satisfied him on certain points upon which he was anxious for information, for he smiled a trifle sardonically, and immediately changed the conversation by inquiring what Browne intended doing that night.

"Going home to bed," said Browne promptly. "I have had a long day's travelling, and I've a lot to do to–morrow. I think, if you'll excuse me, old chap, I'll wish you good–night now."

"Good–night," said Maas, taking his hand. "When shall I see you again? By the way, I hope, if it's any convenience to you, you'll let me put my rooms at your disposal. But there, I forgot you have your own magnificent palace to go to. To offer you hospitality would be superfluous."

"You talk of my house as if I should be likely to go there," said Browne scornfully. "You know as well as I do that I never enter the doors. What should I do in a caravanserai like that? No; I am staying at the usual place in the Place Vendôme. Now, good–night once more."

"Good–night," said Maas, and Browne accordingly left the room. When the swingdoors had closed behind him Maas went back to his chair and lit another cigarette.

"Our friend Browne is bent upon making a fool of himself," he said to his cigarette; "and, what is worse, he will put me to a lot of trouble and inconvenience. At this stage of the proceedings, however, it would be worse than useless to endeavour to check him. He has got the bit between his teeth, and would bolt right out if I were to try to bring him to a standstill. The only thing that can be done, as far as I can see, is to sit still and watch the comedy, and step in like the god out of the machine, when all is ready."

Having thus expressed himself, he lit another cigarette, and went off in search of the supper Browne had declined.

Browne's first night in Paris was destined to prove a restless one. Whether it was the journey or his visit to the Rue Jacquarie that was responsible for it, I cannot say; one thing, however, is quite certain: do what he would, he could not sleep. He tried all the proverbial recipes in vain. He walked about his room, drank a glass of cold water, tried to picture sheep jumping over a hedge; but in vain. Do what he would, the drowsy god would not listen to his appeal. Indeed, the first beams of the morning sun were stealing into his room before his eyelids closed. When his man came in to dress him he felt as drowsy as if he had not closed his eyes all night. He was not going to lie in bed, however. During breakfast he debated with himself what he should do with regard to the Rue Jacquarie. Should he loiter about the streets in the hope of intercepting Katherine when she went abroad? Or should he take the bull by the horns and march boldly up to the house and ask for an interview? Anxious as he was to see her, he had no desire to thrust his presence upon her if it was not wanted. He knew that she would be the first to resent that, and yet he felt he *must* see her, happen what might. As soon as breakfast was finished he put on his hat and set out for a stroll. The clouds of the previous night had departed, the sky was blue, and the breeze fresh and invigorating. Many a bright eye and captivating glance was thrown at the healthy, stalwart young Englishman, who carried himself as if fatigue were a thing unknown to him. Then, suddenly, he found himself face to face with Katherine

Petrovitch!

He lifted his hat mechanically, but for a moment he stood rooted to the spot with surprise, not knowing what to say or do. Great as was his astonishment, however, hers was infinitely greater. She stood before him, her colour coming and going, and with a frightened look in her eyes.

“Mr. Browne, what does this mean?” she asked, with a little catch of the breath. “You are the last person I expected to see in Paris.”

“I was called over here on important business,” he replied, with unblushing mendacity; and as he said it he watched her face, and found it more troubled than he had ever yet seen it. “But why, even if we are surprised to see each other, should we remain standing here?” he continued, for want of something better to say. “May I not walk a short distance with you?”

“If you wish it,” she replied, but with no great display of graciousness. It was very plain that she did not attach very much credence to his excuse, and it was equally certain that she was inclined to resent it. Nothing was said on the latter point, however, and they strolled along the pavement together, he wondering how he could best set himself right with her, and she combating a feeling of impending calamity, and at the same time trying to convince herself that she was extremely angry with him, not only for meeting her, but for being in Paris at all. It was not until they reached the Rue des Tuileries that Browne spoke.

“May we not go into the Gardens?” he asked a little nervously. “I always think that the children one sees there are the sweetest in Europe.”

“If you wish,” Katherine replied coldly. “I shall not be able to stay very long, however, as Madame Bernstein will be expecting me.”

Browne felt inclined to anathematise Madame Bernstein, as he had done several times before; but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself. They accordingly crossed the road and entered the Gardens by the Broad Walk. Passing the Omphale by Eude and the statue of Æneas bearing Anchises through the flames of Troy, they entered one of the small groves on the right, and seated themselves upon two chairs they found there. An awkward silence followed, during which Katherine looked away in the direction they had come, while Browne, his elbows on his knees, dug viciously into the path with the point of his umbrella, as if he would probe his way down to the nether regions before he would let her get an inkling of his embarrassment. Three children with their attendant *bonnes* passed them while they were so occupied, and one small toddler of four or five stopped and regarded the silent couple before him. Katherine smiled at the child’s chubby, earnest face, and Browne took this as a sign that the ice was breaking, though not so quickly as he could have wished.

“I am afraid you are angry with me,” he said, after the child had passed on his way again and they were left to each other’s company. “How have I been unfortunate enough to offend you?”

“I do not know that you have offended me at all,” the girl replied, still looking away from him. “After all your kindness to me, I should be very ungrateful if I were to treat you so.”

“But there can be no doubt you *are* offended,” Browne replied. “I could see from the expression on your face, when I met you on the boulevard just now, that you were annoyed with me for being there.”

“I must confess I was surprised,” she answered; “still, I certainly did not wish you to think I was annoyed.”

Browne thereupon took fresh heart, and resolved upon a bold plunge. “But you were not pleased?” he said, and as he said it he watched her to see what effect his words produced. She still kept her face turned away. “Don’t you think it was a little unkind of you to leave London so suddenly without either saying good–bye or giving the least warning of your intentions?” he continued, his spirits rising with every word he uttered.

“I was not certain that we were to leave so soon,” the girl replied. “It was not until yesterday morning that we found it would be necessary for us to set off at once. But how did you know that we *had* left?”

Browne fell into the trap unheedingly.

“Because I called at your lodgings an hour after you had left, in the hope of seeing you,” he answered promptly. “The servant who opened the door to me informed me that you and Madame Bernstein had departed for Paris. You may imagine my surprise.”

“But if you were there within an hour of our leaving, what train did you catch?” she inquired, with a simplicity that could scarcely have failed to entrap him.

“The eleven o’clock express from Charing Cross *viâ* Dover and Calais,” he replied.

“You admit, then, that your important business in Paris was to follow us?” she answered, and as she said it Browne realised what a mistake he had made. She rose without another word, and made as if she would leave the Gardens. Browne also sprang to his feet, and laid his hand upon her arm as if to detain her.

“Again I fear I have offended you,” he said; “but believe me, I had not the least intention of doing so. I think at least you should know me well enough for that.”

“But you should not have followed me at all,” she said, her womanly wit showing her that if she wished to escape she must beg the question and attack the side issue. “It was not kind of you.”

“Not kind?” he cried. “But why should it not be? I cannot see that I have done anything wrong; and, even if I have, will you not be merciful?”

Large tears had risen in her eyes; her manner was firm, nevertheless. It seemed to Browne later on, when he recalled all that had happened on that memorable morning, as if two emotions, pride and love, were struggling in her breast for the mastery.

“Will you not forgive me?” he asked, more humbly than he had probably ever spoken to a human being in his life before.

“If you will promise not to repeat the offence,” she replied, with a feeble attempt at a smile. “Remember, if I *do* forgive you, I shall expect you to adhere to your word.”

“You do not know how hard it is for me to promise,” said Browne; “but since you wish it, I will do as you desire. I promise you I will not follow you again.”

“I thank you,” she answered, and held out her hand. “I must go now, or madame will be wondering what has become of me. Good–bye, Mr. Browne.”

“But do you mean that I am never to see you again?” he inquired in consternation.

“For the moment that is a question I cannot answer,” she replied. “I have told you before that my time is not my own; nor do I know how long we shall remain in Paris.”

“But if I am to promise this, will you not promise *me* something in return?” he asked, with a tremble in his voice that he could not control.

“What is it you wish me to promise?” she inquired suspiciously. “You must tell me first.”

“It is that you will not leave Paris without first informing me,” he answered. “I will not ask you to tell me where you are going, or ask for an interview. All I desire is that you should let me know that you are leaving the city.”

She was silent for a moment.

“If you will give me your address, I will promise to write and let you know,” she said at last.

“I thank you,” he answered. Then, refusing to allow him to accompany her any farther, she held out her hand and bade him good–bye. Having done so, she passed up the Broad Walk in the direction they had come, and presently was lost to his view.

“Well, I am a fool if ever there was one,” said Browne to himself when he was alone. “If only I had kept a silent tongue in my head about that visit to the Warwick Road, I should not be in the hole I am now. I’ve scored one point, however; she has promised to let me know when she leaves Paris. I will stay here until that time arrives, on the chance of meeting her again, and then—. Well, what matters what happens then? How sweet she is!”

The young man heaved a heavy sigh, and returned to his hotel by the Rue de Rivoli.

From that moment, and for upwards of a week, he neither saw nor heard anything further of her. Although he paraded the streets with untiring energy, and even went so far as to pay periodical visits on foot to the Rue Jacquarie, he was always disappointed. Then assistance came to him, and from a totally unexpected quarter.

Upon returning to his hotel, after one of his interminable peregrinations, he found upon the table in his sitting–room a note, written on pale–pink paper and so highly scented that he became aware of its presence there almost before he entered the room. Wondering from whom it could have come, for the writing was quite unknown to him, he opened it and scanned the contents. It was written in French, and, to his surprise, proved to be from Madame Bernstein.

“My dear Monsieur Browne,” it ran, “if you could spare a friend a few moments of your valuable time, I should be so grateful if you could let me see you. The matter upon which I desire to consult you, as my letter would lead you to suppose, is an exceedingly important one. Should you chance to be disengaged to–morrow (Thursday) afternoon, I will remain in, in the hope of seeing you.— Always your friend, and never more than now,

“SOPHIE BERNSTEIN.”

Browne read this curious epistle three times, and each time was farther from being able to

understand it. What was this matter upon which Madame Bernstein desired to consult him? Could it have any connection with Katherine? If not, what else could it possibly be? And why did she call herself his friend, and wind up with “and never more than now”? It had one good point, however; it would, in all probability, furnish him with another opportunity of seeing the girl he loved. And yet there were twenty hours to be disposed of before he could possibly keep the appointment. Never in his life had time seemed so long.

Punctually to the minute he arrived at the door of the commonplace building in the Rue Jacquarie. The *concierge* looked out from her cubby–hole at him, and inquired his business. In reply he asked the number of Madame Bernstein’s rooms, and, having been informed, went upstairs in search of them. He had not very far to go, however, for he encountered madame herself on the landing half–way up.

“Ah, monsieur!” she cried, holding out her hand with an impetuous gesture, that was as theatrical as her usual behaviour, “this is most kind of you to come to see me so promptly. I know that I am trespassing both upon your good nature and your time.”

“I hope you will not mention that,” said Browne politely. “If I can be of any use to you, I think you know you may command me.”

“It is not for myself that I have asked you to come,” she answered. “But do not let us talk here. Will you not accompany me to my rooms?”

She accordingly led the way up the next flight of stairs and along a corridor to a room that was half drawing–room half boudoir. Madame carefully closed the door, and then bade him be seated. Browne took possession of an easy–chair, wondering what was going to happen next.

Chapter IX

“Now, Monsieur Browne,” said Madame Bernstein, as she seated herself with her back to the window, “we can talk in comfort, and, what is better still, without fear of being disturbed. It is indeed kind of you to come and see me, for I expect you were considerably surprised at receiving my poor little note yesterday. What you must have thought of it I dare not think; but I must console myself with the reflection, that it was written in the interests of another person, whose happiness is dearer to me than I can make you understand. To tell you the truth, it is a most delicate matter. I think you will admit as much when you have heard what I have to say.”

Browne accordingly reserved his judgment. His distrust of the woman, however, was rapidly coming back upon him, and he could not help feeling that, plausible as her words were, and desirous as she appeared to be of helping a third person, she was in some way attempting to deceive himself.

“I beg that you will not consider me at all in the matter,” he said, seeing that he was expected to say something. “I am, as you know, only too glad to do anything I can to help you. Perhaps it is regarding Mademoiselle Petrovitch that you desire to speak to me?”

“You have guessed correctly,” said madame. “It is about Katherine. The poor child, as I have reason to know, is in terrible trouble just now.”

“I am indeed sorry to hear that,” said Browne, a fear of he knew not what taking possession of him. “But I hope the trouble is one that can be easily set right.”

“It is possible it may,” madame replied. “But I think it depends, if you will permit me to say so, in a very great measure upon yourself.”

“Upon me?” cried the young man, this time with real surprise. “How can that be? I should never forgive myself if I thought I had made Miss Petrovitch unhappy.”

“Not perhaps exactly in the sense you mean,” said madame, moving a little nearer him, and speaking in a tone that was low and confidential; “but still you have done so in another way, Monsieur Browne. Before I go any further, however, it is necessary that I should remind you that I am an old woman.” Here she smiled a little coquettishly, as if to remind him that her words, in this particular instance, must not be taken too literally. “I am an old woman,” she continued—“old enough to be your mother, perhaps; at any rate, old enough to be able to say what I am going to say, without fear of giving offence, or of having my motives misconstrued. Monsieur Browne, as you are well aware, Katherine is only a young girl, and, like other young girls, she has her dreams. Into those dreams you have come, and what is the result? I will leave it to your common–sense, and perhaps a little to your vanity, to read between the lines. Had you been differently situated it would not have mattered. At the time that you rendered her that great service on the mountains above Merok, she had no idea who you were. But later on, when you were so kind to us in London, though you did your best to prevent it, we discovered all about you. Immediately, as is often the way with young girls, a change came. She is simplicity itself. She is also the soul of honour. She feared to let her true soul be seen, lest you might think that we were

cultivating your acquaintance for the sake of your wealth."

"I never dreamt of such a thing," Browne replied indignantly. "That is the worst part of being a rich man, Madame Bernstein. One–half of the world preys upon you for your money, while a large number will not be friendly to you lest they may be supposed to be doing the same. I should be a cad of the first water if I had ever thought for a moment, that Miss Petrovitch was capable of such a thing."

From the way he spoke Madame Bernstein saw that she had overshot her mark, and she was quick to make up for her mistake.

"I do not think I said that we thought so, Monsieur Brown," she said. "I only remarked that I feared my ward was afraid lest you might do so."

"She might have known me better than that," said Browne a little reproachfully. "But perhaps you will tell me what it is you wish me to do?"

"Ah! In asking that question you bring me to the most difficult point in our interview," she replied. "I will show you why. Before I do so, however, I want you to give me your promise that you will not be offended at what I am about to say to you."

"I will certainly promise that," Browne answered.

"I am going to put your friendship to a severe test," Madame continued. She paused for a moment as if to collect her thoughts. When she spoke again it was with an abruptness that was most disconcerting. "You must be blind indeed," she said, "if you cannot see, Monsieur Browne, that Katherine loves you."

The revulsion of feeling caused by her announcement of this fact was so strong that, though Browne tried to speak, he found he was incapable of uttering a word. And yet, though she seemed so certain of what she said, there was something in the way she said it that did not ring quite true.

"Monsieur Browne," she went on, leaning a little forward and speaking with still greater earnestness, "I feel sure you will understand how much all this means, not only to her but to me. Since my poor husband's death she has been all I have had to live for, and it cuts my heart in pieces to see her so unhappy."

"But what would you have me do?" inquired Browne.

"That is the very subject I wished to speak to you about," Madame replied. Then, shaking her head sadly, she continued: "Ah, Monsieur Browne, you do not know what it is to love, and to love in vain. The favour I am going to ask of you is that you should go away; that you should not let Katherine see you again."

"But, madame," said Browne, "why should I go away? What if I love her as you say she loves me?"

The lady uttered a little cry as if of astonishment.

"If you loved her all would be different," she cried, clasping her hands together—"so very, very different."

"Then let it be as different as you please," cried Browne, springing to his feet. "For I do love her, and with my whole heart and soul, as I should have told her, had she not left

London so suddenly the other day."

Looking back on it now, Browne is obliged to confess that the whole scene was theatrical in the extreme. Madame Bernstein, on hearing the news, behaved with a most amiable eccentricity; she sprang from her chair, and, taking his hand in hers, pressed it to her heart. If her behaviour counted for anything, this would seem to have been the happiest moment of her life. In the middle of it all the sound of a light footstep reached them from the corridor outside.

"Hush!" said Madame Bernstein, holding up her finger in warning. "It is Katherine! I implore you not to tell her that I have said this to you."

"You may depend upon my not doing so," Browne answered.

An instant later the girl, whose happiness they appeared to be so anxious to promote, entered the room. Her surprise and confusion at finding Browne there may be better imagined than described. But if the position were embarrassing for her, how much more so was it for Browne! He stood before her like a schoolboy detected in a fault, and who waits to be told what his punishment will be.

"Monsieur Browne was kind enough to take pity on my loneliness," said Madame Bernstein, by way of explanation, but with a slight falter in her voice which told the young man that, although she wished him to think otherwise, she really stood in some awe of her companion. "We have had a most interesting discussion on modern French art. I had no idea that Monsieur Browne was so well acquainted with the subject."

"It is the one thing of all others in which I take the greatest possible interest," replied Browne, with corresponding gravity. But he dared not look at Katherine's face, for he knew she was regarding him with a perplexed and somewhat disappointed look, as if she were not quite certain whether he was telling the truth. She did not know how to account for his presence there, and in some vague way it frightened her. It was plain, at any rate, that she placed no sort of reliance in her guardian's somewhat far–fetched explanation.

Seeing that she was likely to be *de trop*, that lady made an excuse and left the room. After she had gone, and the door had closed behind her, things passed from bad to worse with the couple she had left behind. Browne knew exactly what he wanted to say, but he did not know how to say it. Katherine said nothing at all; she was waiting for him to make the first move.

At last Browne could bear the silence no longer. Advancing towards the girl, he managed to obtain possession of her hands before she became aware of his intention.

Holding them in his, he looked into her face and spoke.

"Katherine," he said, in a voice that trembled with emotion, "cannot you guess why I am here?"

"I understood that you came to see Madame Bernstein," she faltered, not daring to look up into his face.

"You know as well as I do that, while I made that the excuse, it was not my real reason," he answered. "Katherine, I came to see you because I have something to say to you, which must be said at once, which cannot be delayed any longer. I would have spoken to you in

London, had you vouchsafed me an opportunity, but you left so suddenly that I never had the chance of opening my lips. What I want to tell you, Katherine, is, that I love you with my whole heart and soul; God knows I love you better than my life, and I shall love you to the day of my death."

She uttered a little cry, and endeavoured to withdraw her hands from his grasp, but he would not let them go.

"Surely you must have known all this long since," he continued with relentless persistence. "You believe, don't you, that I mean what I say?"

"I must not hear you," she answered. "I cannot bear it. You do not know what you are saying."

"I know all I want to know," said Browne; "and I think, Katherine, you on your part know how deeply in earnest I am. Try to remember, before you speak, that the whole happiness of my life is at stake."

"That is exactly why I say that I cannot listen to you," she answered, still looking away.

"Is my love so distasteful to you, then, that you cannot bear to hear me speak of it?" he said, a little reproachfully.

"No, no," she answered; "it is not that at all. It is that— But there, I cannot, I must not hear you any further. Please do not say any more about it; I beg of you to forget that you have ever told me of it."

"But I *must* say more," cried Browne. "I love you, and I cannot and will not live without you. I believe that you love me, Katherine; upon my honour I do. If so, why should you be so cruel to me? Will you answer me one question, honestly and straight–forwardly?"

"What is it?"

"Will you be my wife?"

"I cannot. It is impossible," she cried, this time as if her heart were breaking. "It is useless to say more. Such a thing could never be."

"But if you love me, it both can and shall be," replied Browne. "If you love me, there is nothing that can separate us."

"There is everything. You do not know how impossible it is."

"If there is a difficulty I will remove it. It shall cease to exist. Come, Katherine, tell me that you love me."

She did not reply.

"Will you not confess it?" he repeated. "You know what your answer means to me. Say that you do, and nothing shall part us; I swear it. If you do not, then I give you my word I will go away, and never let you see my face again."

This time she looked up at him with her beautiful eyes full of tears.

"I *do* love you," she whispered; and then added, in a louder voice, "but what is the use of my saying so, when it can make no difference?"

“It makes all the difference in the world, darling,” cried Browne, with a triumph in his voice that had not been there a moment before. “Now that I know you love me, I can act. I am not afraid of anything.” Before she could protest he had taken her in his arms and covered her face with kisses. She struggled to escape, but he was too strong for her. At last he let her go.

“Oh! you do not know what you are doing,” she cried. “Why will you not listen to me and go away before it is too late? I tell you again and again that you are deluding yourself with false hopes. Come what may, I can never be your wife. It is impossible.”

“Since you have confessed that you love me, we will see about that,” said Browne quietly but determinedly. “In the meantime, remember that I am your affianced lover. Nothing can alter that. But, hark! if I am not mistaken, I hear Madame Bernstein.”

A moment later the lady in question entered the room. She glanced from one to the other as if to find out whether they had arrived at an understanding. Then Browne advanced and took her hand.

“Madame,” he said, “I have the honour to inform you that mademoiselle has decided to be my wife.”

“No, no,” cried Katherine, as if in a last entreaty. “You must not say that. I cannot let you say it.”

Madame Bernstein took in the situation, and adapted herself to it immediately. In her usual manner, she expressed her delight at the arrangement they had come to. There was nothing like love, she averred, in the world.

“I always hoped and prayed that it would be so,” she went on to say. “It has been my wish for years to see you happily married, Katherine. Now I can feel that my work in life is done, and that I can go down to my grave in peace, knowing that, whatever happens, you will be well protected.”

Could one have looked into her brain, I am inclined to believe it would have been found that, while she gave expression to these beautiful ideas, they were far from being a true record of her feelings. Such sentiments, however, were the proper ones to use at that particular moment, and, having given utterance to them, she felt that she had done all that could reasonably be expected of her.

“With your permission, madame,” said Browne, to whom the idea had only that moment occurred, “Katherine and I will spend the whole of to–morrow in the country together. I should like to take her to Fontainebleau. As you are aware, there are a number of pictures there, which, according to your own argument, it is only fit and proper I should study in order to perfect myself on the subject of modern French art.”

After this Parthian shot, Madame, although she knew that such a proposal was far from being in accordance with the notions of propriety entertained by the parents and guardians of the country in which they were at present domiciled, had no objection to raise. On the contrary, she had her own reasons for not desiring to thwart Browne at the commencement of his engagement, and just when he was likely to prove most useful to her. Accordingly she expressed great delight at the arrangement, and hoped that they would spend a happy day together. Having said this, she wiped away an imaginary tear and heaved a sigh,

which, taken in conjunction, were doubtless intended to convey to the young people the impression that she was dwelling on the recollection of similar excursions in which she and the late lamented Bernstein had indulged at a similar period.

“To–night we must all dine together to celebrate the event,” said Browne enthusiastically, taking no notice whatsoever of the good lady’s expression of woe. “Where shall it be?”

Katherine was about to protest, but she caught Madame’s eye in time, and desisted.

“I am sure we shall be charmed,” returned Madame. “If you will make the arrangements, we will meet you wherever you please.”

“Shall we say the Maison Dorée, then, at eight? Or would you prefer the Café Anglais, or Au Lion d’Or?”

“The Maison Dorée by all means,” said Madame, “and at eight. We will make a point of being there in good time.”

Seeing that it was impossible for him to stay any longer, Browne bade Madame good–bye, and went across the room to where Katherine was standing by the window.

“Good–bye,” he said, and as he did so he took her hand.

Looking into her eyes, which were filled with as much love as even he could desire, he put the following question to her, so softly that Madame, standing at the other end of the room, could not hear: “Are you happy, Katherine?”

“Very happy,” she answered in a similar tone. “But I cannot help feeling that I am doing very wrong.”

“You are doing nothing of the sort,” the young man answered dogmatically. “You are doing just the very best and wisest thing a woman could do. You must never say such a thing again. Now, *au revoir*, until we meet at eight. I shall count the minutes till then.”

CHAPTER X

How Browne got back to his hotel is a mystery to this day. He had an insane desire to tell every one he met of his good fortune. He wanted to do something to make other people as happy as himself, and, for the reason that he could find no one else at the moment, had to be content with overtipping his cabman, and emptying all his spare change into the hands of a beggar in the Place Vendôme. The afternoon was gray and cold; but never had the world seemed so fair to him, or so full of sunshine. He told himself over and over again that he was the luckiest man on earth. He had already built himself several castles in the air, from the battlements of which the banner of Love was waving gaily. What a difference he would make in Katherine's life! She had been poor hitherto; now his wealth, the proper use of which he had never before realised, should be devoted to giving her everything that a woman could dream of or desire. In his satisfaction with himself and the world in general, he even forgot his usual dislike for Madame Bernstein. Was it not due to her action, he asked himself, that the present happy state of affairs had been brought about? In return he would show her that he was grateful. As for the morrow, and the excursion to Fontainebleau, he would send his man at once to arrange for a special train, in order that they might run no risk of being disturbed or inconvenienced by other tourists. On second thoughts, however, he changed his mind. He would not do anything so absurd. He might be a *parvenu*, in a certain sense, but he did not want to prove himself one to her. No; they would go down quietly, sensibly, and unostentatiously like other people. They would enjoy the outing all the more if they did not attract unnecessary attention. Then another idea struck him, and he acted upon it immediately. Putting on his hat once more, he left the hotel, and proceeded in the direction of a certain jeweller's shop. Having entered it, he approached the counter, and asked for a plain gold ring of heavy pattern. He had at first been tempted to buy her one set with diamonds and a bracelet to correspond—two articles that should be so perfect that even millionaires' wives should envy. That time, however, would come later on. At present all that was wanted was something good, plain, and in perfect taste. He felt sure she would understand his action, and think the better of him for it.

Anticipating a large order from the wealthy young Englishman, whom he recognised immediately, the shopkeeper was a little disappointed. But he tried not to show it. With his precious purchase in his pocket, the happy young man returned to his hotel to dress for the evening's entertainment. Needless to say, he was the first to arrive at the rendezvous, but it was not very long before Madame Bernstein and Katherine put in an appearance. Browne met them at the door and conducted them upstairs to the room he had reserved. If the dinner he had given them in London had proved a success, this one was destined to prove much more so. Madame and Browne were in the highest spirits, while Katharine, though a little shy and reserved, had improved considerably since the afternoon. Before they separated, arrangements were completed for the morning's excursion. Browne, it was settled, was to call for Katherine in time to catch the early train, and, in return for the trust reposed in him, he pledged himself to return her safely to her guardian before nine in the evening. Before he retired to rest that night he opened the window of his bedroom and

studied the heavens with an anxious face. A few clouds were to be seen away to the north–west, but elsewhere the stars were shining brightly. Taken altogether, there seemed to be every reasonable chance of their having a fine day for the excursion.

But, alas! how futile are human hopes, for when he woke next morning a grievous disappointment was in store for him. Clouds covered the sky, and a thick drizzle was falling. A more miserable and dispiriting prelude to the day could scarcely be imagined. His disappointment was intense; and yet, in a life that seemed as dead to him now as the Neolithic Period, he remembered that he had gone cub–hunting in England, had fished in Norway, and shot over his deer–forest in the Highlands in equally bad weather, and without a grumble or a protest. On the present occasion, however, everything was different; it seemed to him as if he had a personal grievance to settle with Dame Nature; and in this spirit he dressed, ate his breakfast, and finally set off in a cab for the Rue Jacquarie. Whether Katherine would go out or not he could not say, but he half–expected she would decline. Having passed the *concierge,* he made his way upstairs to Madame Bernstein's sitting–room. Neither of the ladies was there, but, after he had waited for a few minutes, Katherine put in an appearance, dressed in a tight–fitting costume of some dark material which displayed her slender figure to perfection.

"What a terrible day!" she said, as she glanced out of the window. "Do you think we can go?"

"I will leave it for you to decide," he answered. "If you consider it too wet we can easily put it off for another day."

Something in his face must have told her how disappointed he would be if she refused. She accordingly took pity on him.

"Let us go," she said. "I have no doubt it will clear up later on. Must we start at once?"

"If we wish to catch the train we should leave here in about ten minutes at latest," he answered.

She thereupon left the room, to return presently with a cup of steaming chocolate.

"I made this for you myself," she said. "It will keep you warm. While you are drinking it, if you will excuse me, I will go and get ready."

When she returned they made their way to the cab, and in it set off for the railway station. Rain was still falling as the train made its way along the beautiful valley of the Yerès, and it had not ceased when they had reached Melun. After that Dame Nature changed her mind, and, before they reached their destination, the clouds were drawing off, and long streaks of blue sky were to be plainly observed all round the horizon. They left the station in a flood of sunshine; and by the time they had crossed the gravelled courtyard and approached the main entrance to the palace, the sun was as warm and pleasant as on a spring day.

It would be difficult to over–estimate the pleasure Browne derived from that simple excursion. He had visited Fontainebleau many times before, but never had he thought it so beautiful or half so interesting as he did on the present occasion. When she had overcome the first novelty of her position, Katherine adapted herself to it with marvellous celerity. Side by side they wandered through those rooms of many memories, in the wake of the

custodian, whom they could not persuade to allow them to pass through alone, even under the stimulus of a large gratuity. Passing through the apartments of Napoleon, of Marie Antoinette, of Francis the First, they speculated and mused over the cradle of the infant king of Rome, and the equally historic table upon which Napoleon signed his abdication.

The wonders of the palace exhausted, they proceeded into the gardens, visited and fed the famous carp, tested the merits of the labyrinth, and marvelled at the vineries. Finally they returned to the village in search of luncheon. The afternoon was devoted to exploring the forest, and when dusk had descended they dined at the Hôtel de France et d'Angleterre, and afterwards returned to Paris. It was during the homeward journey, that Browne found occasion to carry out a little scheme, of which he had been thinking all day. Taking from his pocket the ring he had purchased on the previous evening, he secured Katherine's hand and slipped it on her slender finger.

"The symbol of my love, darling," he said softly. "As this little circlet of gold surrounds your finger, so my love will encompass you on every side throughout your life. Wear it in remembrance of my words."

Her heart being too full to answer him, she could only press his hand, and leave it to him to understand.

Faithful to his promise, he delivered Katherine into the keeping of her guardian before nine o'clock. Both declared that they had had a delightful day, and Madame Bernstein expressed her joy at hearing it. It seemed to Browne, however, that there was an air of suppressed excitement about her on this particular evening which he could not understand. When he bade them good–bye he returned to his hotel, feeling that he had come to the end of the happiest day of all his life.

Next morning he was standing in the hall preparatory to going out, when his servant approached him and handed him a note. One glance at the address was sufficient to tell him from whom it came. He had only seen the handwriting once before, but every letter had been engraved upon his heart. He tore it open, delighted at receiving it, yet wondering at her reason for communicating with him.

"Dear love," it began, "when you asked me the other day to be your wife, I tried so hard to make you see that what you wished was quite impossible. Yesterday we were so happy together; and now I have had some news which makes me see, even more clearly than I did then, that I have no right to let you link your life with mine. Hard as it is for me to have to say it, I have no choice left but to do so. You must forget me; and, if you can, forgive me. But remember always this promise that I give you: if I cannot marry you, no other man shall ever call me wife.—KATHERINE PETROVITCH."

Browne stood for some moments, like a man dazed, in the hall among the crowd of happy tourists, holding the letter in his hand, and staring straight before him. His whole being seemed numbed and dead. He could not understand it; he could not even realise that she was attempting to put herself out of his life for ever.

"There must be some mistake," he whispered to himself; and then added: "She admits that she loves me, and yet she wants to give me up. I will not allow myself to think that it can be true. I must go to her at once, and see her, and hear it from her own lips before I will believe."

He thereupon went out into the street, called a cab, and set off for the Rue Jacquarie.

Chapter XI

When Browne reached the Rue Jacquarie, after his receipt of the letter which had caused him so much pain and consternation, it was to learn that Katherine was not at home, and to find Madame Bernstein in her sitting–room, sniffing vigorously at a bottle of smelling–salts, and on the verge of hysterics. Seeing Browne, she sprang to her feet with a cry that was half one of relief, and half of fear.

“Oh, Monsieur Browne,” said she, “Heaven be praised that you have come! I have had such terrible trouble this morning, and have passed through such a scene with Katherine that my nerves are quite unstrung.”

“Where is Katherine?” Browne inquired almost angrily, and quite ignoring the description of her woes; “and what is the meaning of the letter she wrote me this morning?”

“You must not be angry with her,” said Madame, approaching and laying her hand gently upon his arm, while she looked up into his face, with what was intended to be a piteous expression. “The poor child is only doing what she deems to be right. You would not have her act otherwise, I know.”

“You understand my feelings, I think,” Browne replied bluntly. “At the same time, I know how over–conscientious she is apt to be in such matters. Cannot I see her? Where is she?”

“She has gone out,” said Madame, with a sigh. “She and I, I am sorry to say, had a little disagreement this morning over her treatment of you. I know it was very wrong of me, and that you will hate me for it; but I could not help it. I could not let her spoil her own life and yours without uttering a protest. As a result, she did what she always does—that is to say, she put on her hat and cape, and went for a walk.”

“But have you no notion where I could find her?” asked Browne, who was beginning to feel that everything and everybody were conspiring against him. “Has she any usual haunts, where I should run a moderate chance of coming across her?”

“On that point I am afraid I can say nothing,” answered Madame. “She seldom takes me into her confidence. Yet, stay; I *do* remember having heard her once say that, when she was put out by anything, the only thing that could soothe her, and set her right again, was a visit to the picture galleries at the Louvre.”

“You are sure you know of no other place?”

“None whatever,” replied the lady. “The pictures at the Louvre are the only things in Paris in which she seems to take any interest. She is insane on the subject.”

“In that case I’ll try the Louvre at once,” said Browne, picking up his hat.

“But let me first explain to you the reason of all that has happened,” said Madame, stretching out her hand as if to detain him.

“Thank you,” Browne returned, with greater coldness than he had ever yet spoken to her; “but, if you do not mind, I would rather hear that from her own lips.”

With that he bade Madame good–bye, and made his way down to the street once more. From the Rue Jacquarie to the Louvre is not more than a ten minutes' drive at most—that is to say, if you proceed by the Avenue de l'Opéra,—and yet to Browne it seemed as if he were hours in the cab. On entering the museum he made his way direct to the picture galleries. The building had not been long open, and for this reason only a few people were to be seen in the corridors, a circumstance for which Browne was devoutly thankful. It was not until he reached Room IV. that he knew he was not to have his journey in vain. Standing before Titian's "Entombment of Christ," her hands clasped before her, was Katherine. Her whole being seemed absorbed in enjoyment of the picture, and it was not until he was close to her that she turned and saw him. When she did, he noticed that her face was very white and haggard, and that she looked as if she had not slept for many nights.

"Oh, why have you followed me?" she asked piteously.

"I have come to acknowledge in person the letter you sent me this morning," he answered. "Surely, Katherine, you did not think I should do as you asked me, and go away without even bidding you good–bye?"

"I hoped you would," she answered, and her lips trembled as she uttered the words.

"Then you do not know me," he replied, "nor do you know yourself. No, darling; you are my affianced wife, and I refuse to go. What is more, I will not give you up, come what may. Surely you do not think that mine is such a fair–weather love that it must be destroyed by the first adverse wind? Try it and see."

"But I cannot and must not," she answered; and then she added, with such a weight of sorrow in her voice, that it was as much as he could do to prevent himself from taking her in his arms and comforting her, "Oh, you can have no idea how unhappy I am!"

"The more reason that I should be with you to comfort you, darling," he declared. "What am I here for, if not to help you? You do not seem to have realised my proper position in the world. If you are not very careful, I shall pick you up and carry you off to the nearest parson, and marry you, willy–nilly; and after that you'll be obliged to put the management of your affairs in my hands, whether you want to or not."

She looked at him a little reproachfully.

"Please don't joke about it," she said. "I assure you it is by no means a laughing matter to me."

"Nor is it to me," answered Browne. "I should have liked you to have seen my face when I read your letter. I firmly believe I was the most miserable man in Europe."

She offered no reply to this speech, and perhaps that was why a little old gentleman, the same old man in the threadbare black cloak and old–fashioned hat who haunts the galleries, and who entered at that moment, imagined that they were quarrelling.

"Come," said the young man at last, "let us find a place where we can sit down and talk unobserved. Then we'll thrash the matter out properly."

"But it will be no use," replied Katherine. "Believe me, I have thought it out most carefully, and have quite made up my mind what I must do. Please do not ask me to break

the resolutions I have made."

"I will not ask you to do anything but love me, dear," returned Browne. "The unfortunate part of it is, you see, I also have made resolutions that you, on your side, must not ask me to break. In that case it seems that we have come to a deadlock, and the only way out of it is for us to start afresh, to discuss the matter thoroughly, and so arrive at an understanding. Come along; I know an excellent corner, where we can talk without fear of being disturbed. Let us find it."

Seeing that to protest would be useless, and deriving a feeling of safety from his masterfulness, she allowed him to lead her along the galleries until they reached the corner to which he had referred. No one was in sight, not even the little old man in the cloak, who was probably gloating, according to custom, over the "Venus del Pardo" in Room VI.

"Now let us sit down," said Browne, pointing to the seat, "and you must tell me everything. Remember, I have a right to know; and reflect also that, if there is any person in this wide world who can help you, it is I, your husband in the sight of God, if not by the law of man."

He took her hand, and found that it was trembling. He pressed it within his own as if to give her courage.

"Tell me everything, darling," he said—"everything from the very beginning to the end. Then I shall know how to help you. I can see that you have been worrying yourself about it more than is good for your health. Let me share the responsibility with you."

She had to admit to herself that, after all, it was good to have a man to lean upon, to feel that such a pillar of strength was behind her. For this reason she unconsciously drew a little closer to him, as though she would seek shelter in his arms and defy the world from that place of security.

"Now let me have your story," said Browne. "Hide nothing from me; for only when I know all, shall I be in a position to say how I am to help you."

He felt a shudder sweep over her as he said this, and a considerable interval elapsed before she replied. When she did her voice was harsh and strained, as if she were nerving herself to make an admission, which she would rather not have allowed to pass her lips.

"You cannot imagine," she said, "how it pains me to have to tell you my pitiful tale. And yet I feel that I should be doing you a far greater wrong if I were to keep silence. It is not for myself that I feel this, but for you. Whatever may be my fate, whatever may come later, I want you always to remember that."

"I will remember," her lover replied softly. "But you must not think of me at all, dear. I am content to serve you. Now tell me everything."

Once more she was silent for a few moments, as though she were collecting her thoughts; then she commenced her tale.

Chapter XII

“To begin with, I must tell you that my name is not Petrovitch at all: it is Polowski; Petrovitch was my mother’s maiden name. Why I adopted it, instead of bearing my father’s, you will understand directly. I was born in Warsaw, where my parents at the time had a temporary home. Though she died when I was only seven years old, I can distinctly remember my mother as a tall, beautiful Hungarian woman, who used to sing me the sweetest songs I have ever heard in my life every evening when I went to bed. Oh, how well I can recall those songs!” Her eyes filled with tears at the recollection. “Then there came a time when she did not put me to bed, and when I was not allowed to see her. Night after night I cried for her, I remember, until one evening an old woman, in whose charge I had often been left, when my father and mother were absent from the city, told me that I should never see her again, for she was dead. I did not know the meaning of death then; but I have learnt since that there are things which are worse, infinitely worse, than merely ceasing to live. My recollections of that period are not very distinct; but I can recall the fact that my poor mother lay in a room at the back of the house, and that old Maritza wept for her continually. There was much mystery also; and once an old gray–haired man said to some one in my presence, ‘*Do you think he will be fool enough to come when they are watching for him at every turn?*‘ To which the other replied, ‘*I am sure he will come, for he loved her.*‘ Then came the funeral, a dark and dreary day, which, when I look back upon it all now, seems like the beginning of a new life to me. I was only a little child, and when they brought me home from the cemetery I fell asleep almost before my head touched the pillow. In the middle of the night I was awakened by a loud cry, a trampling on the stairs, and a moment later the noise of men fighting in the corridor outside my room. Terrified almost out of my senses, I crouched in my little bed and listened. Then an order was given by some one, followed by the sound of more trampling on the stairs, and after that all was silence. Though, of course, I did not know it then, my father had been arrested by the police as a dangerous Nihilist, and, a month later, was on his way to Siberia. It was not until I was old enough to understand, that I heard that he had been concerned in an attempt upon the life of the Czar. From what was told me then, and from what I have since learnt, there seems to have been little or no doubt but that he was connected with a dangerous band of Nihilists, and that he was not only mixed up in the affair for which he was condemned to penal servitude for life, but that he was one of the originators of the plot itself. And yet the only recollection I have of him is of a kind and loving father who, when he was at home, used to tell me fairy stories, and who declared his wife to be the sweetest woman in the world.”

“Poor little girl,” said Browne, pressing the hand he held, “you had indeed an unhappy childhood; but you have not yet told me how you came to be placed under the guardianship of Madame Bernstein.”

“She was an old friend of my father’s,” Katherine replied; “and when my mother died, and he was sent to Siberia, she adopted me. I owe her a debt of gratitude that I can never repay; for, though she is perhaps a little peculiar in some things, she has been a very good and kind friend to me.”

“And have you always been—well, shall we say—dependent on her?” asked Browne, with a little diffidence, for it was a delicate matter for a young man to touch upon with a proud and high–spirited girl.

“Oh no,” Katherine replied. “You see, soon after my mother’s death it was discovered by some one—I cannot remember who—that one of her brothers was dead, and that by his will I, as his sole heiress, inherited his money. From your point of view it would be nothing, but to me it meant a great deal. It was carefully invested, and it brings me in, in English money, just three hundred pounds a year. Of course we cannot do much with such a sum; but, as we have no expensive tastes, Madame Bernstein and I find that with it, and the sum I make by my painting, we are just able to make both ends meet.”

On hearing this Browne pricked up his ears. This was putting a new complexion on the affair.

“Do you mean to say that Madame Bernstein has no income of her own, and that all these years she has been living upon you?”

“Yes. And why not? You cannot realise what a wonderful manager she is. I should not be able to do half as much with it if I had the sole control of my money.”

“This is a matter which will have to be attended to in the near future,” said Browne to himself. Then, aloud, he added, “Never mind, little woman; when you are my wife Madame shall retire in luxury. She shall not find us ungrateful, believe me. But continue your story. Or, I fancy, you had better let me finish it for you. You have told me that you have lived with Madame Bernstein, or rather, to be correct, that she has lived with you, for many years. You have travelled from place to place about Europe; for some reason or another you have had no fixed home; then you began to paint, and during the whole time you have denied yourself all sorts of things in order that Madame should live in the lap of luxury. Oh, don’t dispute it, for I know what has happened as well as if I had been there to see. In the course of your peregrinations you went to Norway. There we met. Six months later you came to London, during which time I had been wondering whether I should ever see you again. Fate arranged that we should meet. I found you even more adorable than before, followed you to Paris, proposed and was accepted, and, like all pretty stories, ours must, and shall end with the music of wedding bells.”

“Impossible,” she answered. “From what I have already shown you, you must see that it could not be. Had my life been differently situated I should have been proud—you do not know how proud—to be your wife; but, as it is, it is quite out of the question. Some day you will see that yourself, and will thank me for having prevented you from spoiling your life by a foolish marriage.”

Browne saw that she was in deadly earnest. He was about to argue the question with her, but the look upon her face stopped him. For the moment he was frightened in spite of himself, and could only stammer out, “I shall never see it.”

“You *must* see it,” she answered. “There is a task I have set for myself, which I must finish, come what may.”

“Then, whatever it may be, I will share it with you,” said Browne. “You must doubt my love, Katherine, if you refuse to let me help you.”

“I do not doubt your love,” she answered, “but it is quite out of the question that I could avail myself of your assistance in this matter.”

“I will not believe it,” he continued. “You are only saying it because you do not wish to inculpate me. But I *will* be inculpated, come what may. Tell me what it is you have to do, and I will help you to carry it through to the best of my ability; helping you where help is needed, and counselling you where you stand in need of advice. In other words, I place myself and all I have in the world at your disposal, darling, to do with as you will.”

“You are too noble,” she answered; “too good and true. What other man would do as much?”

“Any man,” he answered, “who loves a woman as I love you.”

“There can be but few who love so well,” she replied softly, for her heart was touched more than she could say; “and yet, good as you are, I cannot accept your help. You do not know what I am about to attempt.”

“I do not care what it is,” he answered; “it makes no sort of difference to my promise.”

“But it would afterwards,” she said. “Why, do you not remember that I am the daughter of a convict; that my father was sent to Siberia to live in chains to the end of his days? He remained there for many years. Afterwards he was despatched to the island of Saghalien, where he now is. News has reached us within the last few days that he is ill, and that unless he leaves the island he will not live another year.”

“How did you hear that?” Browne inquired.

“Through Madame Bernstein,” Katherine replied. “Ever since my father was first arrested she has managed somehow or other to obtain news of him.”

“And what is it you intend to do?”

“To help him to escape,” the girl replied.

“But it would be impossible,” said Browne, horrified at her declaration. “You must not dream of such a thing.”

“But I do more than dream of it,” she replied. “Remember, he is my father, my own flesh and blood, who is ill and suffering. You say you love me?”

“I think you know by this time that I do,” said Browne.

“Then what would you do if I were seized and carried away to a terrible island, where my life would be one long torture? Would you not do your best to rescue me?”

“Of course I would,” said Browne indignantly. “You need not ask that.”

“Very well, then, you can see now how I feel. I do not say that he was right in his beliefs or in what he did; on the contrary, I think that he was distinctly wrong. The fact, however, remains that he is my father; and, however great his faults may have been, he has at least been punished for them. Can you picture what his existence must have been these many years? But of course you cannot. You do not know anything of Russian prisons. They have been described to me, however, by one who has seen them, and the account has filled me with such terror as I have never known in my life before.”

“But it would be sheer madness for you to attempt to rescue him,” said Browne. “You could not possibly succeed. Your effort would be foredoomed to failure.”

“It is very probable,” she answered; “but would you have me for that reason draw back? It is my duty to make the attempt, even if I fail. You would have done the same for your own father, I know, had he been in the same position. Why should I not therefore do it for mine?”

“Because—why, because it is too preposterous,” said Browne, at loss for a better reason. “I never heard of such a thing. You have not the least idea of the magnitude of the danger of what you are attempting.”

“Perhaps not,” she said. “But if all those who make an attempt could foresee the result, I fancy only a very small percentage would continue to strive. No; if you love me, you will not try to make a coward of me, just at the time when I am trying to do what I consider right.”

Browne took counsel with himself. The position was the most extraordinary he had ever faced. In his life he had met with many peculiar people, but never had he been brought in contact with a young girl who was willing to give up love, wealth, comfort, every prospect of happiness, even life itself, in order to attempt what was neither more nor less than a hopeless and impossible undertaking. And yet, short as his acquaintance with Katharine had been, he felt that he knew her well enough to be convinced that she would not abandon her purpose without a struggle. “Loyalty before all” was his motto where she was concerned. He loved her, and if it was her desire to assist a by no means respectable father to escape from the prison in which he was very rightly confined, he must help her to the best of his abilities, without considering the cost to himself. It would be a terrible business; but, at any rate, he would then be able to assure himself that she did not come to any harm.

“And you are determined to carry out this foolish scheme?” he asked. “Is there nothing I can say or do that will be at all likely to dissuade you from your purpose?”

“Nothing at all,” she answered slowly, looking him steadily in the face. “My mind is quite made up.”

“Very good, then,” he continued; “in that case I will not oppose you further. Tell me how you propose to set about it.”

She shook her head. “I do not know yet,” she answered. “But you may be sure I will do it somehow. There must be a way, if I can only find it. At any rate, I am not afraid to look for it.”

Browne glanced at the pale yet determined face before him, and noted the strength of the mouth and chin. There was sufficient strength of mind there to carry the matter through, provided the needful opportunities were supplied. But would they be forthcoming? One thing was quite certain, she could not possibly manage with the limited means at her disposal. There at least she would be compelled to apply to him.

“Katherine,” he said at last, “I have told you repeatedly that I love you, and now I am going to try to prove it to you. You say you are desirous of rescuing your father. Very good; then I am going to help you to do so. It will at least demonstrate the sincerity of my

love for you, and will show you that all the assertions I have made are not merely so much idle chatter, but what I really feel."

"You would help me?" she gasped, staggered for the moment at the magnitude of his proposal. "Surely you do not know what you are saying?"

"I mean what I say," he answered. "If you are bent on rescuing your father I will help you. But I only offer my services on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That as soon as this business is finished you become my wife."

"But I cannot let you do it," she answered. "Why should I draw you into it?"

"I do it because I love you, and because you love me," he answered. "Surely that is sufficient reason."

"But—"

"We'll have no more *buts*, if you please," said Browne. "If it is a bargain, say so. This is going to be a genuine business contract, of which the terms are, that I am to do my best to assist your father to escape, and in return you are to be my wife as soon as the work is completed."

She looked at him almost tearfully. Though she felt it was her duty as a daughter to help her father, she nevertheless could not reconcile it to her conscience to draw the man she loved into danger. By this time they had risen from the seat, and were standing facing each other.

"Is it to be a bargain, Katherine?"

She did not answer, but, drawing his face down to hers, she kissed him on the lips.

"I understand," he said; "then we'll count it settled. I'll commence work to–day, and let you know what arrangements I am able to make. You trust me, Katherine, do you not?"

"With my whole heart and soul," she answered. "Who has ever been so good to me as you have been?"

"That has nothing at all to do with it," he said. "Now I'll take you down to the street, put you in a cab, and send you home to Madame to tell, or not to tell her, as you think best, the arrangement we have come to."

"She will thank you as I have done," said Katherine.

"I hope not," said Browne, and, as he said it, he laughed.

She saw his playful meaning, and followed his example. Then Browne conducted her to the street, and, having placed her in a cab, sent her home, promising to call later on in the day to report progress. When she was safely on her way he glanced at his watch, and, finding it was not yet twelve o'clock, turned into the Amphitryon Club. He found Maas in the hall putting on his fur coat preparatory to leaving.

"My dear Browne," he said, "where on earth have you hidden yourself since your arrival in Paris? We have seen nothing of you here."

“I have been too busy,” Browne replied, with an air of great responsibility. “If you only knew all that I have gone through this morning you would be very much surprised.”

“My dear fellow,” said Maas, “I believe I should be nothing of the kind. Vellencourt was married yesterday, and since I heard that news I am past being surprised at anything. I leave for London to–night. When do you return?”

“I scarcely know,” Browne replied. “It may be to–day, and it may not be for a week. I am sick of Europe, and am half–thinking of arranging a yachting trip to the Farther East.”

“The deuce you are!” said Maas. “What on earth has put that notion into your head?”

“What puts notions into anybody’s head?” Browne inquired. “I have often wanted to have a look at the Japanese Sea and the islands to the north of it. How do you know that I don’t aspire to the honour of reading a paper on the subject before the Geographical Society—eh?”

“Geographical fiddlesticks!” replied the other; and, when he had shaken Browne by the hand, he bade him “good–bye,” and went down the steps, saying to himself as he did so, “Madame Bernstein, her adopted daughter, and the islands to the north of Japan. It seems to me, my dear Browne, that when you start upon this wonderful cruise your old friend Maas will have to accompany you.”

Chapter XIII

It may very safely be taken for granted, I think, that the happiness or unhappiness, success or non–success, of one's life is brought about not so much by deliberate education or design, if I may so express it, as by some small event, the proper importance of which is far from being recognisable at the time. For instance, had Browne not undertaken that yachting cruise to Norway when he did, it is scarcely probable he would ever have met Katherine Petrovitch. In that case he would very possibly have married the daughter of some impecunious peer, have bolstered up a falling house with his wealth, have gone into Parliament, received a title in due course, and would eventually have descended to the family vault, in most respects a mediocre man. But, as Fate willed, he *did* go to Norway—met Katherine, fell in love with her, and now— But there, with such a long story before me, it will scarcely do for me to risk an anti–climax by anticipating. Let it suffice that, after he had said "good–bye" to Maas, he lunched at the club, deriving a certain amount of pleasure meanwhile from the knowledge that he was engaged in a business which, should it become known, would undoubtedly plunge him into a considerable amount of hot water! And when you come to think of it, how strange is the pleasure the human mind finds in the possession of a secret! In our childhood it is a joy second only to the delight of a new toy. Anarchism, Nihilism, Fenianism, and indeed the fundamental principle of every order of secret society, is the same thing, only on a larger and more dangerous scale, carried out by perverted imaginations and in the wrong direction. The fact, however, remains, that Browne, as I have said, derived a considerable amount of satisfaction from the feeling that he was, in a certain sense, a conspirator. Plainly as he had expressed himself to Katherine, however, it is extremely doubtful whether he himself realised how difficult and dangerous the task he had taken upon himself was likely to prove. The Russian Government, at the best of times, is like dynamite, a thing to be handled carefully; and one minute's consideration was sufficient to show him that the work he had pledged himself to undertake was not one that, in the event of things going wrong, would entitle him to the sympathy of his own Government. He thought of the Duke of Matlock, and wondered what he would say if it should ever become known that he, John Grantham Browne, had assisted in the escape of a Russian Nihilist from the island of Saghalien. He could very well imagine the pious horror of the Duchess when the various rumours, which would be certain to go the round of the clubs, should reach her ears. And this suggested a still more unpleasant reflection. What if he should fail in his attempt to rescue the man, and should find himself in the clutches of the Russian Bear? What would his fate be then? His own country could scarcely demand his release, seeing that he would, in all probability, be caught red–handed. He put the thought away from him, however, as having nothing to do with the case. It was Katherine's father who stood in need of assistance, and it was Katherine's happiness which was at stake. That was enough for him. With the remembrance of her gratitude, and of the look he had seen in her face, when he had promised to help her, still fresh in his mind, such a thing as counting the cost was not to be thought of. Having finished his lunch, he returned to his hotel, to find a note upon his sitting–room table. It was from Katherine. He opened it, with a feeling that was half eagerness and half fear in his heart, and read as follows:

“DEAR LOVE,—How can I make you see how good I think you are, and how little I deserve such treatment at your hands! There is no one else in the world who would do what you have done, and I shall thank God always for sending you to my assistance. Believe me, I know how much you are risking, and how much you are giving up, and are willing to forfeit, for my sake. Oh, if I could only repay you as you deserve! But, come what may, you will always have my love, and my life–long gratitude. To–night an old friend will be with us, who in happier days knew my father. Will you not come and let me introduce you to him?”

The letter was signed, “Your loving Katherine,” and to Browne this seemed to be the pith and essence of its contents. How different it was from the note he had received that morning! They were as different as light and darkness, as black and white, as any simile that could be employed. In one she had declared that it was impossible for her ever to become his wife, and in the other she signed herself, “Your loving Katherine.” Of course he would go that evening, not because the old man had been acquainted with her father, for he would have gone just as willingly if he had had a bowing acquaintance with her grandmother. All he wanted was the opportunity of seeing Katherine, of being in the same house and room with her, of watching the woman he loved, and who had promised to be his wife.

Accordingly, that evening after dinner, he hailed a cab and drove to the Rue Jacquarie. As he passed along the crowded thoroughfares, he could not help contrasting the different occasions on which he had visited that street. The first time had been on the night of his arrival in Paris, when he had gone there in order to locate the house; the next was that on which he had repaired there in response to the note from Madame Bernstein; then, again, on the morning of that happy day they had spent together at Fontainebleau; while the last was after that miserable letter he had received from Katherine, in which she bade him give up the idea that she could ever become his wife.

On this occasion it was indeed a happy young man who jumped out of the vehicle and nodded to the *concierge* as he passed her and ran up the stairs. When he knocked at the door of Madame’s sitting–room, a voice from within told him to enter. He did so, to find Katherine, Madame, and an old gentleman, whom he had never seen before, seated there. Katherine hastened forward to greet him. If he had not already been rewarded for all the anxiety and pain he had experienced during the last few days, and for the promise he had given that morning, the look upon her face now would have fully compensated him.

“I thought you would come,” she said; and then, dropping her voice a little, she added, “I have been watching the hands of the clock, and waiting for you.”

But, even if Katherine were so kind in her welcome to him, she was not destined to have the whole ceremony in her hands, for by this time Madame Bernstein had risen from her chair and was approaching him. Browne glanced at her, and his instinct told him what was coming. Knowing the lady so well, he felt convinced she would not permit such an opportunity to pass without making the most of it.

“Ah, Monsieur Browne,” she began, her voice trembling with emotion and the ready tear rising in her eye, “you cannot understand how we feel towards you. Katherine has told me of your act of self–sacrifice. It is noble of you; it is grand! But Heaven will reward you for

your goodness to an orphan child."

"My dear Madame Bernstein," said Browne, who by this time was covered with confusion, "you really must not thank me like this. I do not deserve it. I am not doing much after all; and besides, it is for Katherine's sake, and that makes the difference. If we succeed, as I hope and trust we shall, it will be an adventure that we shall remember all our lives long." He stopped suddenly, remembering that there was a third person present who might not be in the secret. Being an ingenuous youth, the thought of his indiscretion caused him to blush furiously. Katherine, however, was quick to undeceive him.

"You need have no fear," she said; "we are all friends here. Let me introduce you to Herr Otto Sauber, who, as I told you in my letter, is an old friend of my father's."

The old man, sitting at the farther end of the room, rose and hobbled forward to take Browne's hand. He was a strange–looking little fellow. His face was small and round, his skin was wrinkled into a thousand furrows, while his hair was snow–white, and fell upon his shoulders in wavy curls. His age could scarcely have been less than seventy. Trouble had plainly marked him for her own; and if his threadbare garments could be taken as any criterion, he was on the verge of actual poverty. Whatever his nationality may have been, he spoke French, which was certainly not his mother–tongue, with considerable fluency.

"My dear young friend," he said, as he took Browne's hand, "allow me, as an old man and a patriot, to thank you for what you are about to do. I sum up my feelings when I say that it is an action I do not think you will ever regret." Then, placing his hand on the girl's shoulder, he continued: "I am, as I understand Katherine has told you, an old friend of her father's. I remember him first as a strong, high–spirited lad, who had not a base thought in his nature. I remember him later as a man of more mature years, whose whole being was saddened by the afflictions and wrongs his fellow–countrymen were suffering; and still later on I wished him God–speed upon his weary march, with his brother exiles, to Siberia. In God's good time, and through your agency, I look forward to welcoming him among us once more. Madame Bernstein tells me you love the little Katherine here. If so, I can only say that I think you are going the right way to prove it. I pray that you may know long life and happiness together."

The old gentleman was genuinely affected. Large tears trickled down his weather–beaten cheeks, and his voice became thick and husky. Browne's tender heart was touched by this unexpected display of emotion, and he felt a lump rising in his throat, that for a few seconds threatened to choke him. And yet, what was there to account for it? Only a young man, a pretty girl, a stout middle–aged lady in a puce gown, and a seedy old foreigner, who, in days long gone by, had known the young girl's father. After this little episode they quieted down somewhat, and Madame Bernstein proposed that they should discuss the question they had so much at heart. They did so accordingly, with the exception of the old gentleman, who sat almost silent. It was not until he heard her expound the subject, that Browne became aware of the extent and thoroughness of Madame's knowledge concerning Russia and her criminal administration. She was familiar with every detail, even to the names and family histories of the various governors and officers; she knew who might be considered venal, and whom it would be dangerous to attempt to bribe; who were lenient with their charges, and who lost no opportunity of tyrannizing over the unfortunates whom Fate had placed in their power. Listening to her one might very well

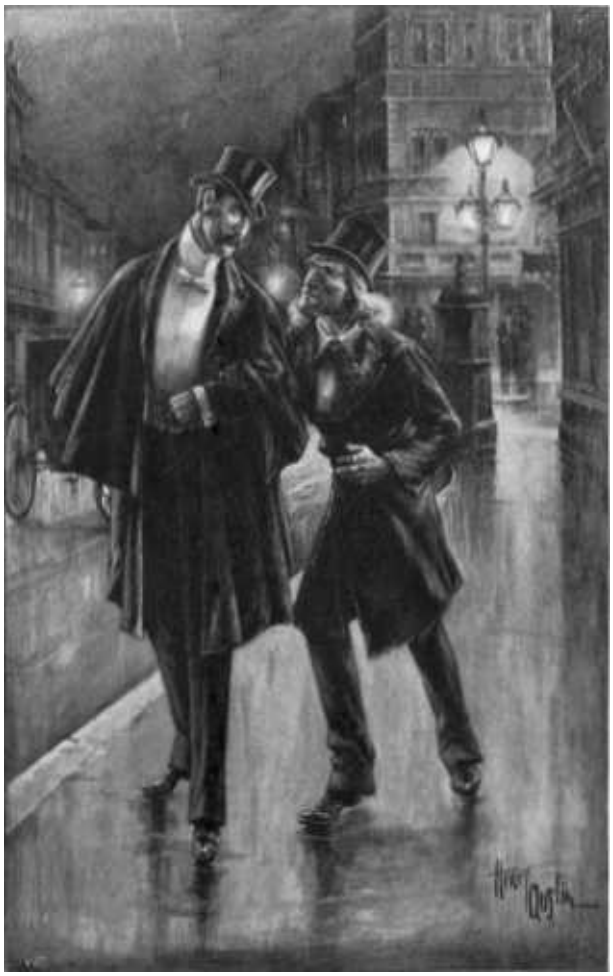
have supposed that she had herself travelled every verst of that weary road. Plan after plan she propounded, until Browne felt his brain reel under the strain of it. A little before midnight he rose to leave, and Herr Sauber followed his example.

“If Monsieur Browne is walking in the direction of the Rue de l’Opéra, I should be glad of his company,” he said. “That is to say, if he has no objection to being hindered by a poor old cripple, who can scarcely draw one foot after the other.”

Browne expressed the pleasure such a walk would afford him; and, when they had bidden the ladies good–night, they set off together.

Chapter XIV

Once in the street the old man slipped his arm through that of his companion, and hobbled along beside him. “My dear young friend,” he said, when they had been walking for some few minutes, “we are out of the house now, and able to talk sensibly together without fear of making fools of ourselves or of being overheard. First and foremost, tell me this: have you any notion of what you are doing?”



“‘Have you any notion of what you are doing?’”

“Of course I am not very well up in it,” Browne replied modestly; “but I think I know pretty well.”

“Then, let me tell you this, as one who is probably more conversant with the subject than any man living: you know absolutely nothing at all!”

After this facer Browne did not know quite what to say. Herr Sauber stopped and looked at him.

“Has it struck you yet,” he said, “that you, a young Englishman, without the least experience in such things, are pitting yourself against all the organization and cunning of the Great Russian Bear?”

“That point has certainly struck me,” Browne replied.

“And do you mean to say that, knowing the strength of the enemy you are about to fight,

you are not afraid to go on? Well, I must admit I admire your bravery; but I fear it is nearer foolhardiness than pluck. However, since you are determined to go on with it, let me give you a little bit of advice that may be of service to you. I understand you have not long enjoyed the honour of Madame Bernstein's acquaintance?"

Browne stated that this was so, and wondered what was coming next. He was beginning to grow interested in this queer old man, with the sharp eyes, who spoke with such an air of authority.

"Before I go any farther," continued the old gentleman, "permit me to remark that I yield to no one in my admiration for the lady's talent. She is an exceedingly clever woman, whose grasp of European politics is, to say the least of it, remarkable. At the same time, were I in your position, I would be as circumspect as possible in my behaviour towards her. Madame is a charming companion; she is philosophic, and can adapt herself to the most unpleasant circumstances with the readiness of an old campaigner. In matters like the present, however, I regret to say, her tongue runs riot with her, and for that reason alone I consider her little short of dangerous."

This may or may not have been the exact thought Browne had in his own mind. But the woman was Katherine's friend; and, however imprudent she might be, that circumstance alone was sufficient, in a certain sense, to make him loyal to her. Herr Sauber probably read what was passing in his mind, for he threw a glance up at him in his queer sparrow–like way, and, when he had eyed him steadfastly for a few seconds, continued what he had to say with even greater emphasis than before.

"I do not want you to mistake my meaning," he said. "At the same time, I have no desire to see the mission you have taken in hand turn out a failure. I have been acquainted with Madame Bernstein for more years than either she or I would probably care to remember, and it is far from my intention or desire to prejudice your mind against her. At the same time, I have known Katherine's family for a much longer period, and I must study them and their interests before all."

"But what is it of which you desire to warn me?" Browne inquired. "It seems to me that Madame Bernstein is as anxious to assist Katherine's father to escape as any of us."

"I sincerely believe she is," the old man replied. "In spite of the life she has led these twenty years, she still remains a woman, and impetuous. You must see for yourself that, in a matter like the present, you cannot be too careful. Let one little hint reach the Russian Government, and farewell to any chance you may stand of effecting the man's escape."

"But what am I to do to prevent her from giving them a hint?" asked Browne. "She knows as much as I do, and I cannot gag her!"

"But you need not tell her of all your plans," he answered. "Tell Katherine what you please; she has the rare gift of being able to hold her tongue, and wild horses would not drag the secret from her."

"Then, to sum up what you say, I am to take care that, while Katherine and I know everything, Madame Bernstein shall know nothing?"

"I do not say anything of the kind," said Herr Sauber. "I simply tell you what I think, and I leave it to your good sense to act as you think best. You English have a proverb to the

effect that the least said is the soonest mended. When the object of your expedition is accomplished, and you are back in safety once more, you will, I hope, be able to come to me and say, ‘Herr Sauber, there was no necessity to act upon the advice you gave me’; then I shall be perfectly satisfied.”

“I must confess that you have made me a little uneasy,” Browne replied. “I have no doubt you are right, however. At any rate, I will be most careful of what I say, and how I act, in her presence. Now, perhaps, you can help me still further, since you declare you are better acquainted with the subject than most people. Being so ignorant, I should be very grateful for a few hints as to how I should set to work.” In spite of the old man’s boast, Browne thought he had rather got the better of him now. He was soon to be undeceived, however.

“You intend to carry this through yourself, I suppose?” asked his companion. “If I mistake not, I heard you say this evening that you proposed to set sail at once for the Farther East. Is that so?”

“It is quite true,” Browne replied. “I leave for London to–morrow afternoon, and immediately upon my arrival there I shall commence my preparations. You will see for yourself, if the man is so ill, there is no time to waste.”

“In that case I think I can introduce you to a person who will prove of the utmost assistance to you; a man without whom, indeed, it would be quite impossible for you to succeed in your undertaking.”

“That is really very kind of you,” said Browne; “and, pray, who is this interesting person, and where shall I find him?”

“His name is Johann Schmidt,” said Sauber, “and for some years past he has taken up his residence in Hong–kong. Since we are alone, I may as well inform you that he makes a speciality of these little affairs, though I am not aware that he has done very much in that particular locality in which you are at present most interested. New Caledonia is more in his line. However, I feel sure that that will make little or no difference to him, and I do not think you can do better than pay him a visit when you reach Eastern waters.”

“But how am I to broach the subject to him? And how am I to know that he will help me? I cannot very well go to him and say straight out that I am anxious to help a Russian convict to escape from Saghalien.”

“I will give you a letter to him,” replied Herr Sauber, “and after he has read it you will find that you will have no difficulty in the matter whatsoever. For a sum to be agreed upon between you, he will take the whole matter off your hands, and all you will have to do will be to meet the exile at a spot which will be arranged, and convey him to a place of safety.”

“I am sure I am exceedingly obliged to you,” said Browne. “But will you answer me one more question?”

“I will answer a hundred if they will help you,” the other replied. “But what is this particular one?”

“I want to know why you did not tell us all this, when we were discussing the matter at the house just now.”

“Because in these matters the safest course is to speak into one ear only. If you will be

guided by me you will follow my example. When no one knows what you are going to do, save yourself, it is impossible for any one to forestall or betray you."

By this time they had reached the corner of the Rue Auber. Here the old gentleman stopped and held out his hand.

"At this point our paths separate, I think," he said, "and I have the honour to wish you good–night."

"But what about that address in Hong–kong?" Browne inquired. "As I leave for England to–morrow, it is just possible that I may not see you before I go."

"I will send it to your hotel," Herr Sauber replied. "I know where you are staying. Good–night, my friend, and may you be as successful in the work you are undertaking as you deserve to be."

Browne thanked him for his good wishes, and bade him good–night. Having done so, he resumed his walk alone, with plenty to think about. Why it should have been so he could not tell, but it seemed to him that, since his interview with the old man, from whom he had just parted, the whole aspect of the affair to which he had pledged himself had changed. It is true that he had had his own suspicions of Madame Bernstein from the beginning, but they had been only the vaguest surmises and nothing more. Now they seemed to have increased, not only in number, but in weight; yet, when he came to analyse it all, the whole fabric tumbled to pieces like a house of cards. No charge had been definitely brought against her, and all that was insinuated was that she might possibly be somewhat indiscreet. That she was as anxious as they were to arrange the escape of Katherine's father from the island, upon which he was imprisoned, was a point which admitted of no doubt. Seeing that Katherine was her best friend in the world, it could scarcely have been otherwise. And yet there was a nameless something behind it all that made Browne uneasy and continually distrustful. Try how he would, he could not drive it from his mind; and when he retired to rest, two hours later, it was only to carry it to bed with him, and to lie awake hour after hour endeavouring to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

Immediately after breakfast next morning he made his way to the gardens of the Tuileries. He had arranged on the previous evening to meet Katherine there, and on this occasion she was first at the rendezvous. As soon as she saw him she hastened along the path to meet him. Browne thought he had never seen her more becomingly dressed; her face had a bright colour, and her eyes sparkled like twin diamonds.

"You have good news for me, I can see," she said, when their first greetings were over and they were walking back along the path together. "What have you done?"

"We have advanced one step," he answered. "I have discovered the address of a man who will possibly be of immense assistance to us."

"That is good news indeed," she said. "And where does he live?"

"In Hong–kong," Browne replied, and as he said it he noticed a look of disappointment upon her face.

"Hong–kong?" she replied. "That is such a long way off. I had hoped he would prove to be in London."

“I don’t think there is any one in London who would be of much use to us,” said Browne, “while there are a good many there who could hinder us. That reminds me, dear, I have something rather important to say to you.”

“What is it?” she inquired.

“I want to warn you to be very careful to whom you speak about the work we have in hand, and to be particularly careful of one person.”

“Who is that?” she inquired; but there was a subtle intonation in her voice that told Browne that, while she could not, of course, know with any degree of certainty whom he meant, she at least could hazard a very good guess. They had seated themselves by this time on the same seat they had occupied a few days before; and a feeling, that was almost one of shame, came over him when he reflected that, in a certain measure, he owed his present happiness to the woman he was about to decry.

“You must not be offended at what I am going to say to you,” he began, meanwhile prodding the turf before him with the point of his umbrella. “The fact of the matter is, I want to warn you to be very careful how much of our plans you reveal to Madame Bernstein. It is just possible you may think I am unjust in saying such a thing. I only hope I am.”

“I really think you are,” she said. “I don’t know why you should have done so, but from the very first you have entertained a dislike for Madame. And yet, I think you must admit she has been a very good friend to both of us.”

She seemed so hurt at what he had said that Browne hastened to set himself right with her.

“Believe me, I am not doubting her friendship,” he said, “only her discretion. I should never forgive myself if I thought I had put any unjust thoughts against her in your mind. But the fact remains that, not only for your father’s safety, but also for our own, it is most essential that no suspicion as to what we are about to do should get abroad.”

“You surely do not think that Madame Bernstein would talk about the matter to strangers?” said Katherine, a little indignantly. “You have not been acquainted with her very long, but I think, at least, you ought to know her well enough to feel sure she would not do that.”

Browne tried to reassure her on this point, but it was some time before she was mollified. To change the subject, he spoke of Herr Sauber and of the interest he was taking in the matter.

“I see it all,” she said; “it was he who instilled these suspicions into your mind. It was unkind of him to do so; and not only that, but unjust. Like yourself, he has never been altogether friendly to her.”

Browne found himself placed in somewhat of a dilemma. It was certainly true that the old man *had* added fresh fuel to his suspicions; yet he had to remember that his dislike for the lady extended farther back, even as far as his first meeting with her at Merok. Therefore, while in justice to himself he had the right to incriminate the old man, he had no desire to confess that he had himself been a doubter from the first. Whether she could read what was passing in his mind or not I cannot say, but she was silent for a few minutes. Then,

looking up at him with troubled eyes, she said, “Forgive me; I would not for all the world have you think that I have the least doubt of you. You have been so good to me that I should be worse than ungrateful if I were to do that. Will you make a bargain with me?”

“Before I promise I must know what that bargain is,” he said, with a smile. “You have tried to make bargains with me before to which I could not agree.”

“This is a very simple one,” she said. “I want you to promise me, that you will never tell me anything of what you are going to do in this matter, that I cannot tell Madame Bernstein. Cannot you see, dear, what I mean when I ask that? She is my friend, and she has taken care of me for so many, many years, that I should be indeed a traitor to her, if, while she was so anxious to help me in the work I have undertaken, I were to keep from her even the smallest detail of our plans. If she is to be ignorant, let me be ignorant also.” The simple, straightforward nature of the girl was apparent in what she said.

“And yet you wish to know everything of what I do?” he said.

“It is only natural that I should,” she answered. “I also wish to be honest with Madame. You will give that promise, will you not, Jack?”

Browne considered for a moment. Embarrassing as the position had been a few moments before, it seemed even more so now. At last he made up his mind.

“Yes,” he said very slowly; “since you wish it, I will give you that promise, and I believe I am doing right. You love me, Katherine?”

“Ah, you know that,” she replied. “I love and trust you as I could never do another man.”

“And you believe that I will do everything that a man can do to bring about the result you desire?”

“I do believe that,” she said.

“Then let it all remain in my hands. Let me be responsible for the whole matter, and you shall see what the result will be. As I told you yesterday, dear, if any man can get your father out of the terrible place in which he now is, I will do so.”

She tried to answer, but words failed her. Her heart was too full to speak. She could only press his hand in silence.

“When shall I see you again?” Browne inquired, after the short silence which had ensued. “I leave for London this afternoon.”

“For London?” she repeated, with a startled look upon her face. “I did not know that you were going so soon.”

“There is no time to lose,” he answered. “All our arrangements must be made at once. I have as much to do next week as I can possibly manage. I suppose you and Madame have set your hearts on going to the East?”

“I could not let you go alone,” she answered; “and not only that, but if you succeed in getting my father away, I must be there to welcome him to freedom.”

“In that case you and Madame had better hold yourselves in readiness to start as soon as I give the word.”

“We will be ready whenever you wish us to set off,” she replied. “You need have no fear of that.”

Half an hour later Browne bade her good–bye, and, in less than three hours, he was flying across France as fast as the express could carry him. Reaching Calais, he boarded the boat. It was growing dusk, and for that reason the faces of the passengers were barely distinguishable. Suddenly Browne felt a hand upon his shoulder, and a voice greeted him with, “My dear Browne, this is indeed a pleasurable surprise. I never expected to see you here.”

It was Maas.

Chapter XV

Why he should have been so surprised at meeting Maas on board the steamer that evening Browne has never been able to understand. The fact, however, remains that he was surprised, and unpleasantly so. The truth of the matter was, he wanted to be alone, to think of Katherine and of the work he had pledged himself to accomplish. Even when one is head over ears in love, however, the common usages of society may claim some moderate share of attention; and, all things considered, civility to one's friends is perhaps the first of these. For this reason Browne paced the deck with Maas, watching the lights of Calais growing smaller each time they turned their faces towards the stern of the vessel. Every turn of the paddle–wheels seemed to be taking Katherine farther and farther from him; and yet, was he not travelling to England on her errand, was he not wearing a ring she had given him upon his finger, and was not the memory of her face continually with him? Maas noticed that he was unusually quiet and preoccupied, and attempted to rally him upon the subject. He was the possessor of a peculiarly ingratiating manner; and, much to his own surprise, Browne found himself, before they had been very long on board, telling him the news, that was destined sorely to trouble the hearts of mothers with marriageable daughters before the next few weeks were out. "I am sure I congratulate you most heartily, my dear fellow," said Maas, with a fine show of enthusiasm. "I have had my suspicions that something of the kind was in the air for some considerable time past; but I did not know that it was quite so near at hand. I trust we shall soon be permitted the honour of making the young lady's acquaintance."

"I am afraid that will not be for some considerable time to come," Browne replied.

"How so?" asked Maas. "What are you going to do?"

"As I told you the other day, I am thinking of leaving England on a rather extended yachting cruise to the Farther East."

"Ah, I remember you did say something about it," Maas continued. "Your *fiancée* will accompany you, of course?"

Browne scarcely knew what reply to offer to this speech. He had no desire to allow Maas to suspect his secret, and at the same time his conscience would not permit him to tell a deliberate untruth. Suddenly he saw a way out of his difficulty.

"We shall meet in Japan, in all probability," he answered; "but she will not go out with me."

"What a pity!" said Maas, who had suddenly become very interested in what his companion was saying to him. "There is no place like a yacht, I think, at such a time. I do not, of course, speak from experience; I should imagine, however, that the rippling of the water alongside, and the quiet of the deck at night, would be eminently conducive to love–making."

To this speech Browne offered no reply. The train of thought it conjured up was too pleasant, and at the same time too sacred, to be shared with any one else. He was picturing

the yacht making her way across a phosphorescent sea, with the brilliant tropical stars shining overhead, and Katherine by his side, the only sound to be heard being the steady pulsation of the screw and the gentle lapping of the water alongside.

At last the lights of Dover were to be distinctly seen ahead. The passage had not been altogether a smooth one, and for this reason the decks did not contain as many passengers as usual. Now, however, the latter were beginning to appear again, getting their luggage together and preparing for going ashore, with that bustle that usually characterises the last ten minutes on board a Channel steamer. Always an amusing and interesting companion, Maas, on this particular occasion, exerted himself to the utmost to please. By the time they reached Charing Cross, Browne had to admit to himself that he had never had a more enjoyable journey. The time had slipped by so quickly and so pleasantly that he had been permitted no opportunity of feeling lonely.

“I hope I shall see you again before you go,” said Maas, as they stood together in the courtyard of the station on the look–out for Browne’s hansom, which was awaiting its turn to pull up at the steps. “When do you think you will be starting?”

“That is more than I can tell you,” said Browne. “I have a great many arrangements to make before I can think about going. However, I am certain to drop across you somewhere. In the meantime, can I give you a lift?”

“No, thank you,” said Maas. “I shall take a cab and look in at the club before I go home. I could not sleep until I have heard the news of the town; who has married who, and who has run away with somebody else. Now, here is your cab; so let me wish you good–night. Many thanks for your society.”

Before Browne went to bed that night, he ascended to his magnificent picture gallery, the same which had been the pride and glory of his father’s heart, and, turning up the electric light, examined a picture which had lately been hung at the farther end. It was a Norwegian subject, and represented the mountains overlooking the little landlocked harbour of Merok. How much had happened since he had last looked upon that scene, and what a vital change that chance meeting had brought about in his life! It seemed scarcely believable, and yet how true it all was! And some day, if all went well, Katherine would stand in the self–same hall looking upon the same picture, mistress of the beautiful house and all it contained. Before that consummation could be brought about, however, they had a difficult piece of work to do. And what would happen supposing he should never return? What if he should fall into the hands of the Russian Government? That such a fate might befall him was far from being unlikely, and it would behove him to take all precautions in case it should occur. In his own mind he knew exactly what those precautions would be. Waking from the day–dream into which he had fallen, he glanced once more at the picture, and then, with a little sigh for he knew not what, made his way to his bedroom and retired to rest. Next morning he was up betimes, and by nine o’clock had telegraphed to Southampton for the captain of his yacht. At ten o’clock he ordered his hansom and drove to his lawyers’ office in Chancery Lane. The senior partner had that moment arrived, so the clerk informed him.

“If you will be kind enough to step this way, sir,” the youth continued, “I will conduct you to him.”

Browne did as he was requested, and followed him down a passage to a room at the farther end. Browne's visits were red–letter days in the calendar of the firm. When the lad returned to his high stool in the office, it was to wonder how he would spend his time if he were the possessor of such enormous wealth. It is questionable whether he would have considered Browne so fortunate had he been made acquainted with all the circumstances of the case. He was an irreproachable youth in every way, who during the week wore a respectable black coat and top–hat, and lived at Blackheath; while on Sundays he rode a tandem bicycle with the girl of his heart, and dreamt of the cottage they were to share together, directly the firm could be persuaded to make the salary, on which it was to be supported, a little more elastic.

"How do you do, my dear Mr. Browne?" inquired the lawyer, rising from his chair as Browne entered, and extending his hand. "I understood you were in Paris."

"I returned last night," said Browne. "I came up early because I want to see you on rather important business."

"I am always at your service," replied the lawyer, bringing forward a chair for Browne's use. "I hope you are not very much worried."

"As a matter of fact, Bretherton, I have come to see you, because at last I am going to follow your advice, and—well, the long and the short of it is, I am going to be married!"

The lawyer almost jumped from his chair in surprise. "I am delighted to hear it," he answered. "As I have so often said, I feel sure you could not do a wiser thing. I have not the pleasure of knowing Miss Verney; nevertheless—"

Browne held up his hand in expostulation. "My dear fellow," he said, with a laugh, "you are on the wrong scent altogether. What on earth makes you think I am going to marry Miss Verney? I never had any such notion."

The lawyer's face was a study in bewilderment. "But I certainly understood," he began, "that—"

"So have a great many other people," said Browne. "But I can assure you it is not the case. The lady I am going to marry is a Russian."

"Ah, to be sure," continued the lawyer. "Now I come to think of it, I remember that my wife pointed out to me in some ladies' paper, that the Princess Volgourouki was one of your yachting party at Cowes last summer."

"Not the Princess either," said Browne. "You seem bent upon getting upon the wrong tack. My *fiancée* is not a millionairess; her name is Petrovitch. She is an orphan, an artist, and has an income of about three hundred pounds a year."

The lawyer was unmistakably shocked and disappointed. He had hoped to be able to go home that night and inform his wife, that he was the first to hear of the approaching marriage of his great client with some well–known beautiful aristocrat or heiress. Now to find that he was going to espouse a girl, who was not only unknown to the great world, but was quite lacking in wealth, was a disappointment almost too great to be borne. It almost seemed as if Browne had offered him a personal affront; for, although his client was, in most respects, an easy–going young man, still the lawyer was very well aware that there

were times when he could be as obstinate as any other man. For this reason he held his tongue, and contented himself with bowing and drawing a sheet of note paper towards him. Then, taking up a pen, he inquired in what way he could be of service.

“The fact of the matter is, Bretherton,” the other began, “I have a communication to make to you which I scarcely know how to enter upon. The worst of it is that, for very many reasons, I cannot tell you anything definite. You must fill in the blanks according to your own taste and fancy; and, according to how much you can understand, you can advise me as to the best course for me to pursue.”

He paused for a moment, and during the interval the lawyer withdrew his glasses from his nose, polished them, and replaced them. Having done so, he placed his finger–tips together, and, looking at Browne over them, waited for him to proceed.

“The fact of the matter is,” said the latter, “before I marry I have pledged myself to the accomplishment of a certain work, the nature of which I cannot explain—I have given my word that I will reveal nothing. However, the fact remains that it will take me into some rather strange quarters for a time; and for this reason it is just possible that I—well, that you may never see me again.”

“My dear Mr. Browne,” said the lawyer, aghast with surprise, “you astonish me more than I can say. Can it be that you are running such risk of your own free–will? I cannot believe that you are serious.”

“But I am,” Browne replied; “perfectly serious.”

“But have you considered everything? Think what this may mean, not only to the young lady you are about to marry, but to all your friends.”

“I have thought of everything,” said Browne.

The lawyer was, however, by no means satisfied. “But, my dear sir,” he continued, “is there no way in which you can get out of it?”

“Not one,” said Browne. “I have given the matter my earnest attention, and have pledged myself to carry it out. No argument will move me. What I want you to do is to make my will to suit the exigencies of the case.”

“Perhaps it would not be troubling you too much to let me know of what they consist,” said the lawyer, whose professional ideas were altogether shocked by such unusual—he almost thought insane—behaviour.

“Well, to put it in a few words,” said Browne, “I want you to arrange that, in the event of anything happening to me, all of which I am possessed, with the exception of such specific bequests as those of which you are aware, shall pass to the lady whom I would have made my wife had I not died. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” said the lawyer; “and if you will furnish me with the particulars I will have a fresh will drawn up. But I confess to you I do not approve of the step you are taking.”

“I am sorry for that,” Browne replied. “But if you were in my place I fancy you would act as I am doing.” Having said this, he gave the lawyer the particulars he required; and, when he left the office a quarter of an hour or so later, he had made Katherine Petrovitch the

inheritor of the greater part of his enormous wealth. Whatever should happen to him within the next few months she would at least be provided for. From his lawyer’s office he drove to his bank to deposit certain papers; then to his tailor; and finally back to his own house in Park Lane, where he hoped and expected to find the captain of his yacht awaiting him. He was not disappointed. Captain Mason had just arrived, and was in the library at that moment. The latter was not of the usual yachting type. He was short and stout, possessed an unusually red face, which was still further ornamented by a fringe of beard below his chin; he had been at sea, man and boy, all his life, and had no sympathy with his brother–skippers who had picked up their business in the Channel, and whose longest cruise had been to the Mediterranean and back. He had been in old Browne’s employ for ten years, and in that of his son after him. What was more, he had earned the trust and esteem of all with whom he was brought in contact; and when Browne opened the door and found that smiling, cheerful face confronting him, he derived a feeling of greater satisfaction than he had done from anything for some considerable time past.

Chapter XVI

“Good–morning, Mason,” Browne said, as he shook hands. “I am glad that you were able to come up at once, for I want to consult you on most important business. Sit down, and let us get to work. You were not long in getting under way.”

“I started directly I received your message, sir,” the man replied. “Perhaps you would not mind telling me what it is I have to do.”

“I’ll very soon do that,” Browne replied; “and, if I know anything of you, you will be glad to hear my needs. I want to see you with regard to a cruise in Eastern waters. I am tired of the English winter, and, as you are aware, I have never yet visited Japan, I’ve suddenly made up my mind to go out there. How soon do you think you could be ready to start?”

“For Japan, sir?” the captain replied. “Well, that’s a goodish step. Might I ask, sir, how long you can give me? Are you in a very great hurry?”

“A very great hurry indeed,” Browne said. “I want to get away at the shortest possible notice; in fact, the sooner you can get away, the better I shall be pleased. I know you will do all you can.”

“You may be very sure of that, sir,” said the captain. “If it is really necessary, I fancy I could be ready—well, shall we say?—on Monday next. Would that suit you, sir?”

“It would do admirably,” said Browne. “I may count, then, on being able to sail on that day?”

“Certainly, sir,” said the captain. “I will catch the next train back, and get to work without loss of time. Your own steward, I suppose, will accompany you?”

“Yes,” said Browne, for he was convinced that the man was one in whose honesty and courage he could place implicit reliance, which was just what would be wanted on such a voyage.

“And how many guests will you be likely to have, sir?” inquired the captain. “I suppose you will fill all the cabins as usual?”

This was a question to which Browne had not yet given any proper consideration, though he had practically decided on one person. The voyage from England to Japan, as all the world knows, is a long one, and he felt that if he went alone he would stand a very fair chance of boring himself to death with his own company.

“I am not able to say yet who will accompany me; but in any case you had better be prepared for one or two. It is more than possible, however, that we shall pick up a few others in Japan.”

“Very good, sir,” said Mason. “I will see that all the necessary arrangements are made. Now I suppose I had better see about getting back to Southampton.”

Having consulted his watch, he rose from his chair, and was about to bid his employer good–bye, when Brown stopped him.

“One moment more, Mason,” he said. “Before you go I have something to say to you, that is of the utmost importance to both of us.” He paused for a moment, and from the gravity of his face the captain argued that something more serious was about to follow. “I wanted to ask you whether you had any sort of acquaintance with the seas to the northward of Japan, say in the vicinity of the island of Yesso and the Gulf of Tartary?”

“I cannot say that I have any at all, sir,” the other replied. “But I could easily make inquiries from men who have sailed in them, and procure some charts from Potter, if you consider it necessary.”

“I should do so if I were you,” said Browne; “it is always as well to be prepared. In the meantime, Mason, I want you to keep what I have said to yourself. I have the most imperative reasons for making this request to you. A little mistake in this direction may do me an incalculable amount of harm.”

Though he did not in the least understand what prompted the request, the captain willingly gave his promise. It was easy for Browne, however, to see that it had caused him considerable bewilderment.

“And there is one other point,” Browne continued. “I want you to be more than ordinarily careful that the crew you take with you are the best men procurable. I am not going to say any more to you, but leave you to draw your own conclusions, and to bear in mind that this voyage is likely to be one of the most, if not *the* most, important I have ever undertaken. You have been with me a good many years now, and you were with my father before me—it is not necessary for me to say not only as captain, but also as a man who is an old and well–tried friend.”

“I thank you, sir, for what you have said,” said the captain. “In reply, I can only ask you to believe that, happen what may, you will not find me wanting.”

“I am quite sure of that,” said Browne, holding out his hand.

The captain took it, and, when he had shaken it as if he would dislocate it at the shoulder, bade his employer good–bye and left the room.

“So much for breaking the news to Mason,” said Browne to himself, when the door had closed behind the skipper. “Now I must see Jimmy Foote, and arrange it with him.”

He glanced at his watch, and found that it wanted only a few minutes to twelve o’clock. Ringing the bell, he bade the footman telephone to the Monolith Club, and inquire whether Mr. Foote were there; and if he were not, whether they could tell him where it would be possible to find him. The man disappeared upon his errand, to return in a few moments with the information that Mr. Foote had just arrived at the club in question.

“In that case,” said Browne, “beg the servants to tell him that I will be there in ten minutes, and that I want to see him on most important business. Ask him not to leave until I come down.”

The appointment having been duly made, he ordered his cab and set off in it for the rendezvous in question. On reaching the club—the same in which he had seen Jimmy on that eventful night, when he had discovered that Katherine was in London—Browne found his friend engaged in the billiard–room, playing a hundred up with a young gentleman,

whose only claim to notoriety existed in the fact, that at the time he was dissipating his second enormous fortune at the rate of more than a thousand a week.

“Glad indeed to see you, old man,” said Jimmy, as Browne entered the room. “I thought you were going to remain in Paris for some time longer. When did you get back?”

“Last night,” said Browne. “I came over with Maas.”

“With Maas?” cried Jimmy, in surprise. “Somebody said yesterday that he was not due to return for another month or more. But you telephoned that you wanted to see me, did you not? If it is anything important, I am sure Billy here won’t mind my throwing up the game. He hasn’t a ghost of a chance of winning, so it will be a new experience for him not to have to pay up.”

Browne, however, protested that he could very well wait until they had finished their game. In the meantime he would smoke a cigar and watch them. This he did, and as soon as the competition was at an end and Jimmy had put on his coat, he drew him from the room.

“If you’ve nothing you want to do for half an hour or so, I wish you would walk a little way with me, old chap,” he said. “I have got something to say to you that I must settle at once. This place has as long ears as the proverbial pitcher.”

“All right,” said Jimmy. “Come along; I’m your man, whatever you want.”

They accordingly left the club together, and made their way down Pall Mall and across Waterloo Place into the Green Park. It was not until they had reached the comparative privacy of the latter place that Browne opened his mind to his friend.

“Look here, Jimmy,” he said, “when all is said and done, you and I have known each other a good many years. Isn’t that so?”

“Of course it is,” said Jimmy, who noticed his friend’s serious countenance, and was idly wondering what had occasioned it. “What is it you want to say to me? If I did not know you I should think you were hard up, and wanted to borrow five pounds. You look as grave as a judge.”

“By Jove! so would you,” said Browne, “if you’d got on your mind what I have on mine. It seems to me I’ve got to find some jolly good friend who’ll see me through as delicate a bit of business as ever I heard of in my life. That’s why I telephoned to you.”

“Very complimentary of you, I’m sure,” said Jimmy. “But I think you know you can rely on me. Come, out with it! What is the matter? Is it a breach of promise case, or divorce, or what is it?”

“Look here, old man, before we go any farther,” said Browne, with great impressiveness, “I want to ask you not to joke on it. It may seem humorous to other people, but I assure you it’s life and death to me.”

There was a little silence that might have lasted a minute; then Jimmy took his friend’s arm. “I’m sorry,” said he; “only give me a decent chance and I’m sure to make a fool of myself. I had no idea it was such a serious matter with you. Now then, what is it? Tell me everything from beginning to end.”

“I will,” said Browne. “But I ought to tell you first that I am not supposed to say anything about it. The secret, while it is mine in a sense, concerns another person more vitally. If I were the only one in it I shouldn’t care a bit; but I have to think of others before myself. You may remember that one night—it seems as if it were years ago, though in reality it is only a few weeks—you and I were walking down Regent Street together. You told me you had seen a picture in a shop window that you wanted to show me.”

“I remember the incident perfectly,” said Jimmy, but this time without a smile. “It was a very foggy night, and you first kept me waiting half an hour outside the shop, and then acted like a lunatic afterwards.”

“Well,” said Browne, without replying to his friend’s comments upon his behaviour on that occasion, “you may remember that the night following you dined with me at Lallemand’s, and met two ladies.”

“Madame Bernstein and Miss Petrovitch,” said Jimmy. “I remember. What next?”

Browne paused and looked a trifle sheepish before he replied, “Well, look here, old man; that girl, Miss Petrovitch, is going to be my wife.” He looked nervously at Jimmy as if he expected an explosion.

“I could have told you that long ago,” said Jimmy, with imperturbable gravity. “And, by Jove! I’ll go further and say that I don’t think you could do better. As far as I could tell, she seemed an awfully nice girl, and I should think she would make you just the sort of wife you want.”

“Thank you,” said Browne, more pleased with Jimmy than he had ever been before.

“But that only brings me to the beginning of what I have to say,” he continued. “Now I want you, before we go any further, to give me your word as a friend that, whatever I may say to you, you will not reveal to any one else. You cannot think how important it is, both to her and to me.”

“I will give you that promise willingly,” said Jimmy. “You can tell me whatever you like, without any fear that I shall divulge it.”

“Your promise is all I want,” said Browne. Then, speaking very slowly, and as earnestly as he knew how, he continued: “The truth of the matter is that that girl is by birth a Russian. Her father had the misfortune to get into trouble over an attempt upon the Czar’s life.”

“A Nihilist, I suppose?” said Jimmy.

Browne nodded. “Well, the attempt was discovered, and Katherine’s father was arrested and sent to Siberia, condemned to imprisonment for life. He was there for many years, but later on he was drafted to the island of Saghalien, on the eastern coast of Siberia, where he now is.”

Jimmy nodded. “After that?”

“Well, on the morning of the second day after that dinner at Lallemand’s, Miss Petrovitch and Madame Bernstein left for Paris, on some important business, which I now believe to have been connected with the man who was exiled. I followed her, met her, and eventually proposed to her. Like the trump she is, she did her best to make me see that for me to love

her was out of the question. Thinking only of me, she tried to put me off by telling me how impossible it all was. But instead of doing what she hoped, it only served to show me what a noble nature the girl possessed."

"She is not rich, I suppose?" asked Jimmy.

"She has not a halfpenny more than three hundred a year assured to her," the other replied; "and she shares that with Madame Bernstein."

"And yet she was willing to give up a hundred and twenty thousand a year, and the position she would have in English society as your wife?"

"She was," said Browne.

"Then all I can say, is," said Jimmy, with considerable conviction, "she must be one in a million. But I interrupted you; I'm sorry. Go on."

"Well," continued Browne, "to make a long story short, she finished by telling me the sad story of her life. Of course she said that she could not possibly marry me, being the daughter of a convict. Then she went on to add that news had lately come to her—how I cannot say—that her father is dying. It seems that he has been in failing health for some years; and at last the terrible climate, the roughness of the living, and the knowledge that he was hopelessly cut off for the rest of his existence from all he held dear in the world, has resulted in a complete collapse. To hope to obtain a pardon from the Russian Government would be worse than futile. All that remains is to get him away."

"But, surely, my dear old Browne," said Jimmy, who had listened aghast, "it cannot be possible that you dream of assisting in the escape of a Russian convict from Saghalien?"

"That is exactly what I *do* think," replied Browne, with unusual earnestness. "Come what may, if it costs me all I am worth in the world, I am going to get the man out of that hell on earth. Try to think, my dear fellow, how you would feel if you were in that girl's place. Her father, the man whom she has been brought up to believe has been sacrificed for his country's good, is dying. She declares it is her duty to be with him. How can I let her do that?"

"I admit it is impossible."

"Well, what remains? Either she must go to him, or he must come to her."

"In plain words, she wants you to risk your good name, all you have in the world, your happiness, your very life indeed, in order to get a fanatic out of the trouble he has brought upon himself."

"You can put it how you like," said Browne; "but that is practically what it means. But remember she is the woman who is to be my wife. If I lose her, what would life be worth to me?"

This was the crucial part of the interview. For the first time it struck Browne that he was figuring before his friend in rather a selfish light.

"I wanted to see you," he began, "in order to find out whether you would care to accompany me to the Farther East. Remember, I don't want you to pledge anything. All that I ask of you is to say straight out whether you would care to come or not. I shall sail

in the yacht on Monday next for Japan. We shall touch at Hong–kong *en route*, where I am to have an interview with a man who, I believe, has brought off one or two of these little affairs before. He will tell me what I am to do, and may possibly do it for me. After that we proceed to Japan, where we are to pick up Madame Bernstein and Miss Petrovitch. From that moment we shall act as circumstances dictate."

"And now I want you to tell me one thing," said Jimmy; "what is your reason for wanting me to accompany you?"

"I will tell you," said Browne. "I want you to come with me, because I am anxious to have one man on board, a friend, in whom I can place implicit confidence. Of course Mason will be there; but, as he will have charge of the boat, he would be comparatively useless to me. To tell the truth, Jimmy, it will make me easier to know that there is some one else on board the boat, who will take care of Miss Petrovitch, in the event of anything happening to me."

"And how long do you propose to be away from England?" his friend inquired.

"Well, that is a very difficult question to answer," said Browne. "We may be away three months, possibly we may be six. But you may rest assured of one thing; we shall not be absent longer from England than is absolutely necessary."

"And when do you want an answer from me," said Jimmy.

"As soon as you can let me have one," Browne replied. "Surely it should not take you long to make up your mind?"

"You don't know my family," he answered. "They say I can never make up my mind at all. Will it do if I let you know by seven o'clock to–night? I could arrange it by then."

"That would suit me admirably," said Browne. "You don't think any the worse of me, old chap, for asking so much of you, do you?"

"Angry with you?" answered the other. "Why should I be? You're offering me a jolly good holiday, in excellent company; and what's more, you are adding a spice of danger too, which will make it doubly enjoyable. The only question is whether I can get away."

"At any rate, I'll give you until to–night to make up your mind. I shall expect to hear from you before seven o'clock."

"You shall hear from me without fail," said Jimmy; "and, if by any chance I can't manage it, you will understand—won't you?—that it is not for any want of feeling for yourself."

"I know that, of course," said Browne; and thereupon the two young men shook hands.

A few moments later Browne bade him good–bye, and, calling a hansom, drove back to his own house. As soon as he had lunched he wrote to Katherine to tell her how things were proceeding. The afternoon was spent in the purchase of various articles which he intended to take with him. For this reason it was not until after six o'clock that he returned to his own house. When he did, the butler brought him a note upon a salver. He opened it, and found, as he expected, that it was from Jimmy.

"Dear old man," it ran, "I am coming with you, happen what may.—Always your friend, J. FOOTE."

“That is another step upon the ladder,” said Browne.

Chapter XVII

In the morning following the receipt of the letter from Foote, as described in the previous chapter, Browne was walking from his house in Park Lane in the direction of Piccadilly, when he saw Maas coming towards him.

“This is a fortunate meeting, my dear Browne,” said the latter, after they had greeted each other; “for I was on my way to call upon you. If you are walking towards Piccadilly perhaps you will permit me to save time by accompanying you.”

Browne was not feeling particularly happy that morning, and this may have been the reason that he was glad of Maas’s company. He stood in need of cheerful society. But though he wanted it, he was not destined to have it. It was a bleak, dreary morning, and once or twice during the walk the other coughed asthmatically. Browne noticed this, and he noticed also that Maas’s face was even paler than usual.

“I am afraid you are not very well, old man,” he said.

“What makes you say that?” asked Maas.

Browne gave him his reasons, and when he heard them the other laughed a little uneasily. “I am afraid you’ve hit it, my friend,” he said. “I am not well. I’ve been to see my doctor this morning, and he has given me some rather unpleasant news.”

“I am sorry indeed to hear that,” said Browne. “What does he say is the matter with you?”

“Why, he says that it is impossible for me to stay in England any longer. He declares that I must go away for a long sea voyage, and at once. To tell the truth, I do not come of a very strong family; and, by way of making me feel better satisfied with myself, he tells me that, unless I take care of myself, I may follow in their footsteps. Of course it’s all very well to say, ‘Take care of yourself’; but the difficulty is to do so. In a life like ours, what chance have we of guarding against catching cold? We dance in heated rooms, and sit in cold balconies between whiles: we travel in draughty railway carriages and damp cabs, and invariably eat and drink more than is good for us. The wonder to me is that we last as long as we do.”

“I’ve no doubt we are awfully foolish,” said Browne. “But our fathers were so before us.”

“A small satisfaction, look at it how you will,” returned Maas.

“And so you’re going to clear out of England, are you?” said Browne very slowly, after the pause that had followed his companion’s speech. “Where are you thinking of going?”

“Now, that was just what I was coming to see you about,” replied his friend. “You may remember that in Paris the other day, you spoke of undertaking a trip to the Farther East. I laughed at it at the time, for I thought I should never move out of Europe; since then, however, or rather since the doctor gave me his unwholesome news this morning, I have been thinking over it. I dined last night with the Rocktowers, who, as you know, are just back from Japan, and found that they could talk of nothing else. Japan was this, Japan was that, possessed the most beautiful scenery in the world, the most charming people, and the

most perfect climate. So fascinated was I by their description that I went home and dreamt about it; and I've got a sort of notion now that, if I could only get as far as Japan, all would be well with me."

Now, from the very first moment that Maas had spoken of leaving England, Browne had had an uneasy suspicion that something of the kind was coming. In his inmost heart he knew very well what his companion wanted; but, unfortunately for him, he did not see his way to get out of it. When he had told Maas in Paris that he intended taking a yachting cruise to the Farther East, and had laughingly suggested that the latter should accompany him, he had felt quite certain in his own mind that his invitation would be refused. To find him now asking to be allowed to accept after all was almost too much for his equanimity. Pleasant companion as Maas undoubtedly was, he was far from being the sort of man Browne would have taken with him on such an excursion, had he had the choice. Besides, he had already arranged that Jimmy should go with him. Therefore, like the ingenuous youth he was, he took the first way of getting out of his difficulty, and in consequence found himself floundering in a still greater quagmire immediately.

"You have not booked your passage yet?" he inquired, as if the matter of the other's going with him had never for a moment crossed his mind.

Maas threw a searching glance at him. He had a bold stroke to play, and he did not quite know how to play it. Though he had known Browne for some considerable time, and was well aware that he was far from being an exceptionally clever young man, yet, for a reason which I cannot explain, he stood somewhat in awe of him.

"Well, to tell the truth," he said, "that was just what I was coming to see you about. I wanted to find out, whether you would permit me to withdraw my refusal of your kind invitation, in favour of an acceptance. I know it is not quite the thing to do; but still our friendship is old enough to permit of such a strain being placed upon it. If, however, you have filled your cabins, do not for a moment consider me. It is just possible I may be able to secure a berth on one of the outgoing mail–boats. Get away, however, I must, and immediately."

Browne scarcely knew what to say in reply. He knew that every person he added to the party meant an additional danger to all concerned; and he felt that, in common justice to Maas, he could not take him without giving him some hint of what he was about to do. Maas noticed his hesitation; and, thinking it betokened acquiescence to his plan, was quick to take advantage of it.

"My dear fellow," he said, "if I am causing you the least inconvenience, I beg of you not to give it a second thought. I should not have spoken to you at all on the subject had you not said what you did to me in Paris."

After this speech Browne felt that he had no opening left, save to declare that nothing would give him greater pleasure than to have the other's society upon the voyage.

"And you are quite sure that I shall not be in the way?" Maas inquired.

"In the way?" Browne replied. "Not at all; I have only Jimmy Foote going with me. We shall be a snug little party."

"It's awfully good of you," said Maas; "and I'm sure I don't know how to thank you.

When do you propose to sail?”

“On Monday next from Southampton,” answered Browne. “I will see that you have a proper notice, and I will also let you know by what train we shall go down. Your heavier baggage had better go on ahead.”

“You are kindness itself,” said Maas. “By the way, since we have come to this arrangement, why should we not have a little dinner to–night at my rooms as a send off? I’ll find Foote and get him to come, and we’ll drink a toast to the Land of the Rising Sun.”

“Many thanks,” said Browne, “but I’m very much afraid it’s quite out of the question. I leave for Paris this afternoon, and shall not be back until Saturday at earliest.”

“What a pity!” said Maas. “Never mind; if we can’t celebrate the occasion on this side of the world, we will do so on the other. You are turning off here? Well, good–bye, and many, many thanks to you. You cannot imagine how grateful I feel to you, and what a weight you have taken off my mind.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Browne; and then, shaking him by the hand, he crossed the road and made his way down St. James’s Street. “Confound it all!” he said to himself, as he walked along, “this is just the sort of scrape my absurd mania for issuing invitations gets me into. I like Maas well enough as an acquaintance, but I don’t know that he is altogether the sort of fellow I should have chosen to accompany me on an expedition like this. However, what’s done cannot be undone; and it is just possible, as his health is giving way, that he will decide to leave us in Japan; then we shall be all right. If he doesn’t, and elects to go on with us—well, I suppose we must make the best of it.”

As he came to this philosophical conclusion, he turned the corner from St. James’s Street into Pall Mall, and ran into the arms of the very man for whom he was in search. Foote was evidently in as great a hurry as himself, and, such was the violence of the shock, that it was a wonderful thing that they did not both fall to the ground.

“Hang it, man, why don’t you look where you’re going?” Foote cried angrily, as he put his hand to his head to hold on his hat. As he did so he recognised Browne.

“Hullo, old chap, it’s you, is it?” he cried. “By Jove! do you know you nearly knocked me down?”

“It’s your own fault,” Browne answered snappishly. “What do you mean by charging round the corner like that? You might have known what would happen.”

They stood and looked at one another for a moment, and then Foote burst out laughing. “My dear old fellow,” he said, “what on earth’s wrong with you? You don’t seem to be yourself this morning.”

“I’m not,” said Browne. “Nothing seems to go right with me, do what I will. I tell you, Jimmy, I’m the biggest ass that walks the earth.”

Jimmy whistled softly to himself. “This is plainly a case which demands the most careful treatment,” he said aloud. “From what I can see of it, it will be necessary for me to prescribe for him. My treatment will be a good luncheon and a pint of the Widow to wash it down. Come along.” So saying, he slipped his arm through that of his companion, and led him back in the direction of the Monolith Club. “Now, Master Browne,” he said, as

they walked along, “you will just tell me everything,—hiding nothing, remember, and setting down naught in malice. For the time being you must look upon me as your father–confessor.”

“In point of fact, Jimmy,” Browne began, “I have just seen our friend Maas.”

“Well, what of that?” replied the other. “How has that upset you? From what I know of him, Maas is usually amusing, except when he gets on the topic of his ailments.”

“That’s exactly it,” said Browne. “He got on the subject of his ailments with me. The upshot of it all was that he reminded me of an invitation I had given him in Paris, half in jest, mind you, to visit the East with me.”

“The deuce!” said Jimmy. “Do you mean to say that he has decided to accompany us, now?”

“That’s just it,” said Browne. “That’s why I’m so annoyed; and yet I don’t know exactly why I should be, for, all things considered, he is not a bad sort of a fellow.”

“Nevertheless, I wish he were not coming with us,” said Jimmy, with unwonted emphasis. “Did you tell him anything of what you are going to do?”

“Of course not,” said Browne. “I did not even hint at it. As far as he knows, I am simply visiting Japan in the ordinary way, for pleasure.”

“Well, if I were you,” said Jimmy, “I should let him remain in that belief. I should not say anything about the real reason at all, and even then not until we are on the high seas. Of course I don’t mean to imply, for an instant, that he would be likely to say anything, or to give you away in any possible sort of fashion; but still it would be safer, I should think, to keep silence on the subject. You know what we are going to do, I know it, Miss Petrovitch knows it, and Madame Bernstein also. Who else is there you have told?”

“No one,” said Browne. “But I dropped a hint to Mason that the errand, that was taking us out, was a peculiar one. I thought he ought to know as much as that for more reasons than one.”

“Quite right,” said Jimmy; “and what’s more, you can trust Mason. Nevertheless, say nothing to Maas.”

“You may depend upon it I will not do so,” said Browne.

“Now here’s the club,” said Jimmy, as they reached the building in question. “Let us go in and have some luncheon. After that what are you going to do?”

“I am off to Paris this afternoon,” the other replied. “Madame Bernstein and Miss Petrovitch leave for Japan in one of the French boats the day after to–morrow, and I want to see them before they go.”

After luncheon with Foote, Browne returned to his house, wrote a letter containing the most minute instructions to Captain Mason, and later on caught the afternoon express for Paris. The clocks of the French capital were striking eleven as he reached his hotel that night. He was worn out, and retired almost immediately to bed, though it would have required but little persuasion to have taken him off to the Rue Jacquarie. As it was, however, he had to content himself with the reflection, that he was to see her the very first

thing in the morning.

Chapter XVIII

Nine o'clock on the following day, punctual almost to the minute, found Browne exchanging greetings with the *concierge* at the foot of the stairs, who, by this time, had come to know his face intimately. The latter informed him that Mademoiselle Petrovitch was at home, but that Madame Bernstein had gone out some few minutes before. Browne congratulated himself upon the latter fact, and ran upstairs three steps at a time. Within four minutes from entering the building Katherine was in his arms.

"Are you pleased to see me again, darling?" he inquired, after the first excitement of their meeting had passed away.

"More pleased than I can tell you," she answered; and as she spoke Browne could see the love–light in her eyes. "Ever since your telegram arrived yesterday, I have been counting the minutes until I should see you. It seems like years since you went away, and such long years too!"

What Browne said in reply to this pretty speech, it does not behove me to set down here. Whatever it was, however, it seemed to give great satisfaction to the person to whom it was addressed. At length they sat down together upon the sofa, and Browne told her of the arrangements he had made. "I did not write to you about them, dear," he said, "for the reason that, in a case like this, the less that is put on paper the better for all parties concerned. Letters may go astray, and there is no knowing what may happen to them. Therefore I thought I would keep all my news until I could tell it to you face to face. Are you ready for your long journey?"

"Yes, we are quite ready," said Katherine. "We are only waiting for you. Madame has been very busy for the last few days, and so have I." She mentioned Madame's name with some little trepidation, for she feared lest the old subject, which had caused them both so much pain on the last occasion that they had met, might be revived. Browne, however, was careful, as she was, not to broach it.

"And when will your yacht leave England?" she inquired, after he had detailed his arrangements to her.

"On Monday next at latest," he answered. "We shall not be very far behind you."

"Nevertheless it will be a long, long time before I shall see you again," she continued in a sad tone. "Oh, Jack, Jack, I cannot tell you how wicked I feel in allowing you to do so much for me. Even now, at this late hour, I feel I have no right to accept such a sacrifice at your hands."

"Stop," he replied, holding up his finger in warning. "I thought we had agreed that nothing more should be said about it."

At this juncture there was the sound of a footstep in the passage outside, and a few seconds later Madame Bernstein entered the room. On seeing Browne she hastened forward, and greeted him with all the effusiveness of which she was mistress. "Ah, Monsieur Browne," she said, "now that I see you my courage returns. As Katherine has

doubtless told you, everything is prepared, and we are ready to start for Marseilles as soon as you give the order. Katherine is looking forward to the voyage; but as for me— Ah! I do hate the sea more than anything in the world. That nasty little strip of salt water which divides England from France is a continual nightmare to me, and I never cross it without hoping it may be the last time."

Browne tried to comfort her by telling her of the size of the vessel in which they were to travel, and assured her that, even if she should be ill, by the time they were out of the Mediterranean she would have recovered. Seeing that no other consolation was forthcoming, Madame was compelled to be content with this poor comfort.

Though Browne had already breakfasted in the solid, substantial English fashion, he was only too glad to persuade Madame Bernstein and his sweetheart to partake of *déjeuner* at one of the famous cafés on the Boulevards. After the meal Madame returned to the Rue Jacquarie in order to finish a little packing, which she had left to the last moment; while Browne, who had been looking forward to this opportunity, assumed possession of Katharine, and carried her to one of the large shops in the Rue de la Paix, where he purchased for her the best dressing–bag ever obtained for love or money; to which he added a set of sables that would have turned even Russian Royalty green with envy. Never had his money seemed so useful to Browne. These commissions executed, they returned to the Rue Jacquarie, where they found Madame Bernstein ready for the journey. The express was due to leave Paris for Marseilles at 2.15 p.m. Twenty minutes before that hour a cab drove up to the door, and in it Browne placed Madame Bernstein and Katherine, following them himself. Wonderful is the power of a gift! Browne carried the bag, he had given Katherine that morning, down to the cab with his own hands, and without being asked to do so, placed it on the seat beside her. He noticed that her right hand went out to take it, and held it lovingly until they reached the station, where she surrendered it to him again.

When they made their appearance on the platform an official hurried forward to meet them, and conducted them forthwith to the special saloon carriage Browne had bespoken for their use that morning. As she stepped into it Katherine gave a little grateful glance at her lover to show that she appreciated his generosity. Poor as she had always been, she found it hard to realize what his wealth meant. And yet there were many little signs to give her evidence of the fact—the obsequious railway officials; his own majestic English servant, who brought them a sheaf of papers without being instructed to do so; and last, but by no means least, the very railway carriage itself, which was of the most luxurious description. On Madame Bernstein entering the compartment she placed herself in a corner, arranged her travelling–rug, her smelling–salts, her papers, and her fan to her satisfaction; and by the time she had settled down the journey had commenced. The train was an express, and did not stop until it reached Laroche at 4.40. Here afternoon tea was procured for the ladies; while on reaching Dijon, two hours and a half later, it was discovered that an unusually luxurious dinner had been ordered by telegraph, and was served in the second compartment of the carriage. Having done justice to it, they afterwards settled themselves down for the night. It is a very significant fact that when Browne looks back upon that journey now, the one most important fact, that strikes his memory, is that Madame Bernstein fell asleep a little after eight o'clock, and remained so until they had passed Pontanevaux. During the time she slept, Browne was able to have a little private conversation with Katherine; and whatever trouble he had taken to ensure the

journey being a successful one, he was amply compensated for it. At ten o'clock the polite conductor begged permission to inform mesdames and monsieur that their sleeping apartments were prepared for them. Browne accordingly bade the ladies good–night.

As the young man lay in his sleeping compartment that night, and the train made its way across France towards its most important sea–port, Browne's dreams were of many things. At one moment he was back in the Opera House at Covent Garden, listening to *Lohengrin*, and watching Katherine's face as each successive singer appeared upon the stage. Then, as if by magic, the scene changed, and he was on the windy mountain–side at Merok, and Katherine was looking up at him from her place of deadly peril a few feet below. He reached down and tried to save her, but it appeared to be a question of length of arm, and his was a foot too short. "Pray allow me to help you," said Maas; and being only too grateful for any assistance, Browne permitted him to do so. They accordingly caught her by the hands and began to pull. Then suddenly, without any warning, Maas struck him a terrible blow upon the head; both holds were instantly loosed, and Katherine was in the act of falling over the precipice when Browne awoke. Great beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead, and, under the influence of this fright, he trembled as he did not remember ever to have done in his life before. For upwards of an hour he lay awake, listening to the rhythm of the wheels and the thousand and one noises that a train makes at night. Then once more he fell asleep, and, as before, dreamt of Katherine. Equally strange was it that on this occasion also Maas was destined to prove his adversary. They were in Japan now, and the scene was a garden in which the Wistaria bloomed luxuriously. Katherine was standing on a rustic bridge, looking down into the water below, and Maas was beside her. Suddenly the bridge gave way, and the girl was precipitated into the water. Though she was drowning, he noticed that Maas did nothing to help her, but stood upon what remained of the bridge and taunted her with the knowledge that, if she were drowned, her mission to the East would be useless. After this no further sleep was possible. At break of day he accordingly rose and dressed himself. They were passing through the little town of Saint–Chamas at the time. It was a lovely morning; not a cloud in the sky, and all the air and country redolent of life and beauty. It was a day upon which a man might be thankful for the right to live and love. Yet Browne was sad at heart. Was he not about to part from the woman he loved for nearly two whole months? Brave though he was in most things, it must be confessed he feared that separation, as a confirmed coward fears a blow. But still the train flew remorselessly on, bringing them every moment nearer and nearer their destination.

When they reached it they drove direct to an hotel. Here they breakfasted, and afterwards made their way to the steamer. Browne's heart was sinking lower and lower, for never before had Katherine seemed so sweet and so desirable. Once on board the vessel they called a steward to their assistance, and the two ladies were shown to their cabins. As they afterwards found out, they were the best that Browne could secure, were situated amidships, and were really intended each to accommodate four passengers. While they were examining them Browne hunted out the chief steward, and the stewards who would be likely to wait upon his friends. These he rewarded in such a way that, if the men only acted up to their protestations, the remainder of the passengers would have very good cause to complain. Having finished this work of bribery and corruption, he went in search of the ladies, only to be informed by the stewardess that they had left their cabins and had

gone on deck. He accordingly made his way up the companion–ladder, and found them standing beside the smoking–room entrance.

“I hope you found your cabins comfortable,” he said. “I have just seen the chief steward, and he has promised that everything possible shall be done to make you enjoy your voyage.”

“How good you are!” said Katherine in a low voice, and with a little squeeze of his hand; while Madame protested that, if it were possible for anything to reconcile her to the sea, it would be Monsieur Browne’s kindness. Then the warning whistle sounded for non–passengers to leave the ship. Madame Bernstein took the hint, and, having bade him good–bye, made her way along the deck towards the companion–ladder, leaving the lovers together. Katherine’s eyes had filled with tears and she had grown visibly paler. Now that the time had come for parting with the man she loved, she had discovered how much he was to her.

“Katherine,” said Browne, in a voice that was hoarse with suppressed emotion, “do you know now how much I love you?”

“You love me more than I deserve,” she said. “I shall never be able to repay you for all you have done for me.”

“I want no repayment but your love,” he answered.

“Si vous n’êtes pas un voyageur, m’sieu, ayez l’obligeance de débarquer,” said a gruff voice in his ear.

Seeing that there was nothing left but to say good–bye, Browne kissed Katherine, and, unable to bear any more, made for the gangway. Five minutes later the great ship was under way, and Katherine had embarked upon her voyage to the East.

Chapter XIX

As soon as the mail–boat, which was carrying Katherine and Madame Bernstein to the East, was out of sight, Browne turned to his man, who was waiting beside him, and said: “Now, Davis, a cab, and quickly too. We must not miss that train for London whatever happens.”

As it was, they were only just in time. He had scarcely taken his seat before the train began to move out of the station. Placing himself in a corner of the carriage, he endeavoured to interest himself in a book; but it was of no use. Though his material body was seated in the carriage being whirled away across the green plains of Southern France, his actual self was on board the great mail–boat, which was cutting its way through the blue waters, carrying Katherine mile by mile farther out of his reach. Dreary indeed did Europe seem to him now. It was a little before twelve o’clock when the train left Marseilles; it was nearly four next afternoon when he sighted the waters of the Channel at Calais. Much to his astonishment and delight, Jimmy Foote met him at Dover, and travelled back to town with him. During his absence Browne had entrusted their arrangements to his care; and in consequence Jimmy carried about with him an air of business, which at other times was quite unusual to him.

“I have been down to Southampton,” he reported, “and have seen Mason. He was hard at work getting the stores aboard, and asked me to tell you he will be able to sail without fail early on Monday morning. When do you think we had better go down?”

“On Sunday,” said Browne. “We may as well get on board as soon as we can.”

Though he spoke in this casual way, he knew that in his heart he was waiting the hour of departure with an impatience, that bordered almost on desperation. He longed to see the yacht’s head pointed down Channel, and to know that at last she was really in pursuit of the other boat, which had been granted such a lengthy start. On reaching London they drove together to Browne’s house. It was Saturday evening, and there were still a hundred and one things to be settled. Upon his study table Browne discovered upwards of fifty invitations from all sorts and conditions of people. He smiled cynically as he opened them, and, when the last one had been examined, turned to Jimmy.

“Thank Heaven, I can decline these with a clear conscience,” he said. “By the time the dates come round we shall be on the high seas, far beyond the reach of dinners, dances, and kettledrums. I wonder how many of these folk,” he continued, picking up one from the heap and flicking it across the table to his friend, “would have me in their houses again if they knew what I am about to do?”

“Every one of them, my boy,” the other replied; “from the Duchess of Matlock downwards. You might help a thousand Russian convicts to escape from Saghalien, and they will pardon you; but you are doing one other thing for which you must never hope to be forgiven.”

“And what may that be?” Browne inquired.

“Why, you are marrying Miss Petrovitch,” answered Jimmy. “If she were a famous beauty, a great heiress, or even the daughter of a peer, all would be well; but you must remember that no one knows her; that, however much you may love her, and however worthy she may be, she is nevertheless not chronicled in the *Court Guide*. To marry out of your own circle is a sin seldom forgiven, particularly when a man is a millionaire, and has been the desire of every match–making mother for as long as you have.”

“They had better treat my wife as I wish them to, or beware of me,” said Browne angrily. “If they treat her badly they’ll find I’ve got claws.”

“But, my dear fellow, you are running your head against the wall,” said Jimmy. “I never said they *would* treat her badly. On the contrary, they will treat her wonderfully well; for, remember, she is your wife. They will accept all her invitations for dances in London, will stay with her in the country; they will yacht, hunt, fish, and shoot with you; but the mothers, who, after all is said and done, are the leaders of society, will never forget or forgive you. My dear fellow,” he continued, with the air of a man who knew his world thoroughly, which, to do him justice, he certainly did, “you surely do not imagine for an instant that Miss Verney has forgotten that—”

“We’ll leave Miss Verney out of the question, Jimmy, if you don’t mind,” replied Browne, with rather a different intonation.

“I thought that would make him wince,” murmured Jimmy to himself; and then added aloud, “Never mind, old man; we won’t pursue the subject any further. It’s not a nice one, and we’ve plenty else to think about, have we not? Let me tell you, I am looking forward to this little business more than I have ever done to anything. The only regret I have about it is that there does not appear to be any probability of our having some fighting. I must confess I should like to have a brush with the enemy, if possible.”

“In that case we should be lost men,” Browne replied. “No; whatever we do, we must avoid coming into actual conflict with the Authorities. By the way, what about Maas?”

“I saw him this morning,” Foote replied. “I told him what arrangements we had made, and he will meet us whenever and wherever we wish. He seemed quite elated over the prospect of the voyage, and told me he thought it awfully good of you to take him. After all, he’s not a bad sort of fellow. There is only one thing I don’t like about him, and that is his predilection for wishing people to think he is in a delicate state of health.”

“And you don’t think he is?” said Browne.

“Of course I don’t,” Jimmy replied. “Why, only this morning I was with him more than an hour, and he didn’t cough once; and yet he was continually pointing out to me that it was so necessary for his health—for his lungs, in fact—that he should go out of England at once. It is my idea that he is hypochondriacal.”

“Whatever he is, I wish to goodness he had chosen any other time for wanting to accompany us. I have a sort of notion that his presence on board will bring us bad luck.”

“Nonsense,” said his matter–of–fact friend. “Why should it? Maas could do us no harm, even supposing he wanted to. And he’s certain not to have any desire that way.”

“Well,” answered Browne, “that is what I feel, and yet I can’t make out why I should do

so.” As he said this he pressed the ring Katharine had given him, and remembered that that was his talisman, and that she had told him that, while he wore it, he could come to no harm. With that on his finger, and his love for her in his heart, it would be wonderful indeed if he could not fulfil the task he had set himself to do.

It is strange how ignorant we are of the doings, and indeed of the very lives, of our fellow–men. I do not mean the actions which, in the broad light of day, lie in the ordinary routine of life, but those more important circumstances which are not seen, but make up, and help to weave the skein of each man’s destiny. For instance, had a certain well–known official in the office of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who stood upon the platform of Waterloo station, waiting for the train that was to carry him to the residence of a friend at Woking, dreamt for an instant that the three gentlemen he nodded so affably to, and who were standing at the door of a saloon carriage in the same train, were leaving England next day, in order to cause considerable trouble to a Power that, at the moment had shown signs of being friendly, what would his feelings have been? He did not know it, however; so he seated himself in his comfortable smoking–carriage, lit a cigar, and read his Sunday paper, quite unconscious of the circumstances.

It was nearly eight o’clock before they readied Southampton. When they did they made their way to the harbour, where a steam–launch from the yacht was awaiting them. The *Lotus Blossom* herself lay off the Royal Pier; and when they reached her, Captain Mason received them at the gangway.

“Well, Mason,” said Browne, “is everything ready for the start to–morrow?”

“Everything is ready, sir,” Mason replied. “You have only to say when you desire to get off, and we’ll up anchor.”

Browne thought that he would like to get under way at once; but it could not be. He looked along the snow–white decks and upon the polished brasswork, and thought of the day that he had left the boat when she was anchored in the harbour of Merok, to accompany his guests on their walk to the falls, and of the wonderful things that had happened since then. Before many weeks had passed over their heads he hoped that Katherine herself would be standing on these self–same decks. He pictured the delight he would feel in showing her over his trim and beautiful vessel, and thought of the long conversations they would have on deck at night, and of the happiness they would feel when they were speeding towards safety once more, with the rescued man on board. What they were to do with her father, when they had got him, was one thing he wanted to leave to Katherine to decide. He was awakened from these dreams by Foote, who inquired whether he intended to allow his guests to remain on deck all night, or whether he was going to take them below.

“I beg your pardon,” said Browne. “It’s awfully rude of me to keep you standing here like this. Come along.”

They accordingly made their way down the companion–ladder to the saloon below. Everything had been prepared for their reception, and the stewards were already laying dinner as they entered. Having finished that important meal, and drunk the toast of a pleasant voyage, they ascended to the deck once more, when Foote and Maas made their way to the smoking–room, while Browne went up to the bridge to have a talk with the

captain. When he descended again, he announced to his guests that the yacht would be got under way as soon as it was light in the morning, and that the first coaling–place would be Gibraltar.

“Bravo!” said Jimmy, rapping the table with his pipe. “Thank goodness, by midday we shall be well out in the Channel.”

At the same moment Maas’s cigar slipped from between his fingers and dropped on the floor. He bent down to pick it up, but at first could not find it. By the time he had done so the conversation had changed, and Browne had drawn his watch from his pocket. A cry of astonishment escaped him: “Have you any idea what the time is?”

They confessed that they had not.

“Well, it’s nearly twelve o’clock,” he said. “If you won’t either of you take anything else, I think the best thing we can do is to get to bed as soon as possible.”

So tired was Browne that night that he slept without waking until well on in the following morning. Indeed, it was past nine o’clock when Davis, his man–servant, entered and woke him; he sat up, and rubbed his eyes, as if he could very well have gone on sleeping for another hour or two.

“By Jove! we’re under way,” he said, as if he were surprised to find the yacht moving. “Where are we, Davis?”

“Off Swanage, sir,” the man replied. “Captain Mason couldn’t get away quite as early as he hoped to do; but he’s making up for lost time now, sir.”

“What sort of a day is it?” Browne inquired.

“Beautiful, sir; it couldn’t be no better if you’d ordered it special,” said Davis, who was a bit of a wag in his way, and was privileged as such. “There’s just a nice bit of swell running, but no more. Not enough to shake the curls of a schoolmistress, in a manner of speaking.”

This Browne discovered to be the case, when he ascended to the deck. The yacht was bathed in sunshine, and she sat as softly as a duck upon a large green swell, that was as easy as the motion of a rocking–horse. Far away to starboard the pinewood cliffs of Bournemouth could be descried; while a point on the starboard–bow was Poole Harbour and Swanage headland, with Old Harry peering up out of the sunlit waves. Browne ascended to the bridge, to find Foote and Captain Mason there. The latter touched his cap, while Foote came forward and held out his hand.

“Good–morning,” said Jimmy. “What do you think of this, my boy? Isn’t it better than London? Doesn’t it make you feel it’s worth something to be alive? I wouldn’t change places this morning with any man in England.”

“And you may be very sure I would not,” said Browne; then, turning to the skipper, he inquired what the yacht was doing.

“Thirteen knots good, sir,” the latter replied. “We shall do better, however, when we’ve put Portland Bill behind us.”

As he spoke the breakfast–bell sounded, and simultaneously with it Maas appeared on

deck. Browne and Foote descended from the bridge to greet him, and found him in excellent spirits.

“I feel better already,” he said, as they went down the companion–ladder and took their places at the table. “How beautiful the air is on deck! Alchemists may say what they please, but this is the Elixir of Life. What a pity it is we cannot bottle it, and introduce it into the crowded ballrooms and dining–rooms during the London season!”

“That’s rather an original notion,” retorted Jimmy. “Fancy, after a waltz with a heavy partner, taking her off to a room set apart for the purpose, seating her in a chair, and, instead of asking her the usual insipid question, whether she would have an ice, or coffee, or claret cup, inquiring what brand of air she preferred—whether she would have a gallon of Bournemouth, which is relaxing, or Margate, which is bracing, or Folkestone—shall we say?—which is midway between the two. It could be laid on in town and country houses, and, combined with the phonograph, which would repeat the nigger minstrel melodies of the sands, and the biograph, which would show the surrounding scenery, would be a tremendous attraction. Having purchased one of these machines, paterfamilias need not trouble his head about taking his family away for the annual trip to the seaside. Rents would not affect him; he would be free from landladies’ overcharges. All he would have to do would be to take his wife and bairns into a room, turn on the various machines, and science would do the rest.”

“Perhaps, when you have done talking nonsense,” said Browne, “you will be kind enough to hand me the *pâté de foie gras*. I remember so many of your wonderful schemes, Jimmy, that I begin to think I know them all by heart.”

“In that case you must admit that the majority of them were based upon very sound principles,” replied Jimmy. “I remember there was one that might have made a fortune for anybody. It was to be a matrimonial registry for the upper ten, where intending Benedicts could apply for particulars respecting their future wives. For instance, the Duke of A—, being very desirous of marrying, and being also notoriously impecunious, would call at the office and ask for a choice of American heiresses possessing between five and ten millions. Photographs having been submitted to him, and a guarantee as to the money given to him, meetings between the parties could be arranged by the company, and a small commission charged when the marriage was duly solemnized. Then there was another scheme for educating the sons of millionaires in the brands of cigars they should give their friends. For a small commission, Viscount B—, who has smoked himself into the bankruptcy court, would call at their residences three times a week, when he would not only show them how to discriminate between a Trichinopoli and a Burma Pwé, which is difficult to the uninitiated, but also between La Intimidad Excelsos of ‘94 and Henry Clay Soberanos, which is much more so.”

“I remember yet another scheme,” said Maas quietly, as he helped himself to some caviare from a dish before him. “You told me once of a scheme you were perfecting for forming a company to help long–sentenced burglars of proved ability to escape from penal servitude, in order that they should work for the society on the co–operative principle. If my memory serves me, it was to be a most remunerative speculation. The only flaw in it that I could see was the difficulty in arranging the convict’s escape, and the danger, that would accrue to those helping him, in case they were discovered.”

Chapter XX

Had a bombshell fallen through the skylight of the saloon and settled itself in the centre of the table, it could scarcely have caused greater consternation than did Maas's simple remark. Browne felt that his face was visibly paling, and that guilt must be written on every inch of it. As for Jimmy, his mouth opened and shut like that of an expiring fish. He could scarcely believe he had heard aright. He had certainly once in an idle moment joked in the fashion Maas had attributed to him; but what had induced the latter to remember and to bring it up now, of all times, when their nerves were so tightly stretched? Maas's face, however, was all innocence. He seemed not to have noticed the amazement he had caused, but ate his caviare with the air of a man who had said something worthy, the point of which had fallen a trifle flat. It was not until the meal was over, and they had ascended to the deck once more, that Browne found an opportunity of having a few words with Jimmy.

"What on earth did he mean by that?" he asked. "Do you think he can have heard anything? Or do you think he only suspects?"

"Neither," said Jimmy. "I'll tell you what I think it was; it was a perfectly simple remark, which by sheer ill–luck just happened to touch us in the wrong place. It was, as the shooters say, an unintentional bull's–eye. But, by Jove! I must confess that it made me feel pretty bad at the moment."

"Then you think we need not attach any importance to it?"

"I'm quite sure we need not," his friend replied. "Look at it in this way: if the man had known anything he most certainly would not have said anything about it. If we had suspected him of knowing our secret, and had put ourselves out in order to bring him to the point, and he had kept silence, then we might have thought otherwise; as it is, I am positive we need not be afraid."

As if to reassure them, Maas said nothing further on the subject. He was full of good–humour, absorbed the sunshine like a Neapolitan, and seemed to enjoy every hour he lived. He also did his best to make the others do likewise. He talked upon every conceivable subject, and did not feel in the least annoyed when the others appeared occupied. They passed Plymouth soon after twelve next day, and said good–bye to Old England shortly afterwards. How little those on board guessed what was to happen before they could see her shores again? Five days later they were at Gibraltar, anchored in the harbour beneath the shadow of the batteries. Though he grudged every minute, and though he had seen the Rock a dozen times before, Browne accompanied them ashore, explored the Galleries, and lunched at the Officers' Mess.

"What rum beggars we are, to be sure!" said young Bramthwaite, of the 43rd Midlandshire, to Browne, as they lit their cigars afterwards. "Here are you, posting off for the East, and as anxious as you can be to turn your back on Old England; while I, poor beggar, am quartered here, and am longing to get home with all my might and main. Do you think, if I had your chance, I would go abroad? Not I."

“Circumstances alter cases,” returned Browne. “If you were in my place you would want to be out of England. You should just have seen London as we left. Fogs, sleet, snow, drizzle, day after day, while here you are wrapped in continual sunshine. I don’t see that you have much to grumble at.”

“Don’t you?” said his friend. “Well, I do. Let us take my own case again. I am just up from a baddish attack of Rock–fever. I feel as weak as a cat—not fit for anything. And what good does it do me? I don’t even have the luck to be properly ill, so that I could compel them to invalid me. And, to make matters worse, my brother writes that they are having the most ripping hunting in the shires; from his letters I gather that the pheasants have never been better; and, with it all, here I am, like the Johnny in the heathen mythology, chained to this rock, and unable to get away.”

Browne consoled him to the best of his ability, and shortly afterwards collected his party and returned to the yacht. The work of coaling was completed, and Captain Mason, who resembled a badly blacked Christy Minstrel, was ready to start as soon as his owner desired. Browne, nothing loath, gave the order, and accordingly they steamed out of the harbour, past the Rock, and were in blue seas once more. They would not touch anywhere again until they reached Port Said.

That night on deck Browne was lamenting the fact that the yacht did not travel faster than she did.

“My dear fellow,” said Maas, “what a hurry you are in, to be sure! Why, this is simply delightful. What more could you wish for? You have a beautiful vessel, your cook is a genius, and your wines are perfect. If I had your money, do you know what I would do? I would sail up and down the Mediterranean at this time of the year for months on end.”

“I don’t think you would,” replied Browne. “In the meantime, what I want is to get to Japan.”

“I presume your *fiancée* is to meet you there?” said Maas. “I can quite understand your haste now.”

There was a silence for a few moments, and then Maas added, as if the idea had just struck him: “By the way, you have never told me her name.”

“Her name is Petrovitch,” answered Browne softly, as if the name were too precious to be breathed aloud. “I do not think you have ever met her.”

“Now I come to think of it, I believe I have,” Maas responded. “At least, I am not acquainted with her personally, but I have met some one who knows her fairly well.”

“Indeed!” said Browne, in some astonishment. “And who might that some one be?”

“You need not be jealous, my dear fellow,” Maas continued. “My friend was a lady, a Miss Corniquet, a French artist. Miss Petrovitch, I believe, exhibited in the Salon last year, and they met shortly afterwards. I remember that she informed me that the young lady in question showed remarkable talent. I am sure, Browne, I congratulate you heartily.”

“Many thanks,” remarked the other; and so the matter dropped for the time being.

Port Said and the work of coaling being things of the past, they proceeded through the

Suez Canal and down the Red Sea; coaled once more at Aden, and later on at Colombo. By the time they reached Singapore, Browne's impatience could scarcely be controlled. With every day an increased nervousness came over him. At last they were only a few hours' steam from Hong–kong. It was there that Browne was to interview the famous Johann Schmidt, of whom Herr Sauber had spoken to him in Paris. What the result of that interview would be he could only conjecture. He wanted to get it over in order that he might have his plans cut and dried by the time they reached Japan, where Katharine and Madame Bernstein must now be. If all went well, he would soon join them there.

At ten o'clock on a lovely morning they entered the Ly–ee–moon Pass, steamed past Green Island, and at length they came in sight of the crowded harbour of Victoria. Once at anchor, the steam–launch was slung overboard and brought alongside, Browne and his friends took their places in her, and she forthwith made her way to the shore. None of the men had seen the wonderful city, they were now visiting, before, so that all its marvels, its wealth, and its extraordinary mixture of races were new to them. Though they had encountered him in his American hybrid condition, it was the first time they had been brought into actual contact with their marvellous Yellow Brother, who in Hong–kong may be seen in all the glory of his dirt and sumptuousness. Reaching the Praya, they disembarked, and ascended the steps. Accosting an English inspector of police whom they met, they inquired in what direction they should proceed in order to reach the Club. He pointed out the way, and they accordingly set off in search of it. Turning into the Queen's Road, they made their way along it until they reached the place in question. Browne had a letter of introduction to one of the members, given to him in London, and he was anxious to present it to him in order to learn something, if possible, of Johann Schmidt before going in search of him. Leaving his two friends outside, he entered the Club and inquired for the gentleman in question. The servant who received him informed him that the member was not at the time in the building.

"Can you tell me his address?" said Browne. "It's just possible I may find him at his office."

The man furnished him with what he wanted, and showed him how he could reach it. Rejoining his companions, Browne proceeded down the street, passed the Law Courts, and went in the direction of the Barracks. At last he reached the block of buildings of which he was in search. The name of the man he wanted was to be seen on a brass plate upon the door. He entered, and accosting a white–clad Englishman in an enormous solar topee, whom he found there, inquired if he could tell whether his friend was at home.

"I believe he is," the man replied. "At any rate, if you will wait a moment I'll soon find out." Leaving them, he departed down the passage, to return presently with the information that the person they wanted to see was in his office.

Foote and Maas remained in the street, while Browne entered a cool and airy room at the farther end of the passage. Here, seated at an office–table, was another white–clad Englishman. He had a cigar in his mouth, and possessed a handsome face and a close–cropped beard.

"Mr. —?" said Browne, after he had thanked his conductor for his courtesy.

"That is my name," the gentleman replied. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for

you?”

“I have a letter of introduction to you,” said Browne, producing the document in question from his pocket, and handing it across the table. “I believe we are common friends of George Pellister?”

“George Pellister!” cried the man. “I should rather think so; when I was home three years ago he was awfully kind to me. So you are a friend of his? Pray forgive my not having come out to greet you. Come and sit down. How long have you been in the island?”

“Only an hour and a half,” Browne replied.

“An hour and a half!” the other repeated. “I had no idea there was an English mail–boat in. The P. & O. only left yesterday.”

“I didn’t come in a mail–boat,” said Browne. “I’ve got my own tub. We left London on the 7th of last month.”

The man behind the table opened his eyes in surprise. Gentlemen who travelled as far as Hong–kong in their own steam–yachts, were few and far between, and had to be treated with proper respect. He accordingly found an opportunity of opening the letter of introduction. Had Browne been watching his face, he would have seen the expression of astonishment that spread over it, as he realized that his visitor was no less a person than the fabulously wealthy John Grantham Browne, of whose doings in the social and sporting world he had so often read.

“I am very glad indeed that you have called on me,” he said, after he had somewhat recovered from his astonishment. “While you are here you must let me do the honours of Hong–kong, such as they are. Of course I can put you up at the Club, if that’s any use to you, and show you all there is to be seen, though I fear it will bore you fearfully after London. How long are you staying?”

“Well,” answered Browne, “I’m afraid I shall not be able to remain very long on the outward voyage. I should not have called here at all, but that I had some rather important business to transact. I’m on my way to Japan.”

“Indeed!” exclaimed the other. “Well, I shall be only too happy if you will let me help you in any way I can.”

“It’s not a very big matter,” replied Browne. “All I want to know is the address of a certain person living in Hong–kong whose name is Schmidt—Johann Schmidt.”

“Johann Schmidt?” asked the other. “I am not quite certain that I know this particular one; there are so many of that name here, and I dare say a large proportion of them are Johanns. However, I will send some one to find out; and if you will take tiffin with me at the Club, my clerks shall make inquiries while we are doing so.”

Browne thereupon explained that he had two friends travelling with him, with the result that the other replied that he would only be too happy if they would join the party. They accordingly adjourned, and, picking up Maas and Foote in the street, proceeded to the Club. Tiffin was almost at an end, when a servant entered and placed a card beside their host’s plate. He glanced at it, and, turning to Browne, he pushed it towards him.

“If I’m not mistaken, that is the man you want,” he remarked. “I think it only fair to tell you that I know the fellow, and he is rather an extraordinary character. Between ourselves, he does not bear any too good a reputation.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter to me in the least,” responded Browne. “My business with him is purely of a commercial nature.”

After that no more was said on the subject, and, when they rose from the table, Browne proposed that he should go in search of the man in question. “I am anxious, if possible, to leave Hong–kong at daybreak to–morrow morning,” he said; and then added, by way of explanation, “I am due in Japan, and have no time to spare.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” returned the other. “I had hoped you would have stayed longer. However, while you are away, your friends had better remain with me. I will do my best to amuse them.”

Browne thereupon rose to take leave. His host accompanied him to the street, and, having put him in a *rickshá*, told the coolie where he was to take him.

“I am exceedingly obliged to you for your kindness,” said Browne, as he shook hands. “Will you not let me return it by asking you to dine with us on board my boat to–night? She is the *Lotus Blossom*. I don’t suppose you will have much difficulty in finding her.”

“I shall be delighted,” replied the other. “At what time do you dine?”

“At half–past seven,” answered Browne.

”*Au revoir*, then, until half–past seven.”

They waved hands to each other, and Browne laid himself back in the *rickshá*, mumbling as he did so, “Now for our friend Johann Schmidt.”

Chapter XXI

Leaving the Club, the *rickshá* coolie proceeded in the opposite direction to that which Browne had followed, when in search of the gentleman to whom he had presented the letter of introduction. At first, and while he remained in the Queen's Road, there was but little difference to be observed; the thoroughfare was a fine one, broad and commodious. After one or two turnings, however, matters changed somewhat, and he found himself in a labyrinth of narrow, tortuous streets, the shops on either side of which were small and mean, the names over the doors being for the most part in the Celestial characters. The confusion that existed in the streets was indescribable. Here the Mongolian was to be seen in all his glory. But, in addition to the Chinamen, almost every nationality known to the Asiatic world was represented; while through it all, towering head and shoulders above the crowd, stalked the stately Sikhs on patrol duty. At last, after a drive that had occupied perhaps a quarter of an hour, the coolie drew up, before what was probably the largest shop Browne had yet seen in the neighbourhood. It was built in the Chinese fashion, and, in order that West and East may meet on an equal footing, had two names over the door, one in Chinese writing, the other plainly printed in English characters: "Johann Schmidt." Browne alighted, and, having told his coolie to wait, entered the shop. He was greeted on the threshold by a stout Chinaman, who was plainly in charge.

"What for you piecee look see?" inquired the latter.

Browne, not being adept at pidgin–English, replied to the effect that he desired to see and speak with Herr Schmidt. Whether the man comprehended or not he could not tell; at any rate he left him alone in the shop, while he disappeared behind a curtain at the farther end. When he returned, a few seconds later, he was accompanied by a portly individual, whose nationality the veriest tyro could not mistake. As if to make it doubly sure, he carried in his hand an enormous pipe fashioned after the pattern of the Fatherland. His face was large and almost spherical; his hair was close–cropped, as was his beard; he was attired in white trousers, a flannel shirt, which would have been none the worse for a wash, and a black alpaca coat. The Teutonic stolidity was certainly well developed in him. On seeing Browne he stopped and sucked contentedly at his pipe, but said nothing. The younger man was the first to speak.

"You are Herr Schmidt, I believe?" said Browne, in English. The other nodded his head, but still did not venture upon speech. "I bring a letter of introduction to you," said Browne, dropping his voice a little, as though he were afraid of being overheard. "It is from a certain Herr Otto Sauber, whom I met in Paris about two months ago. He told me that you would do all you could for me in a certain matter."

"Herr Sauber?" inquired the German. "I cannot dink that I am mit him acquainted."

Browne's disappointment was plainly discernible on his face. He had fully expected that, immediately he presented the letter Sauber had given him, this mysterious Johann Schmidt would understand and arrange everything. This, however, did not appear to be the case. The man before him sucked stolidly at his pipe, and watched him with eyes that had no

expression in them. The position was embarrassing, to say the least of it. Was it possible that his mission was going to prove futile after all, and that, for the good he was to get out of it, he might just as well not have wasted his time by calling at Hong–kong at all? For upwards of thirty most uncomfortable seconds the two men stood watching each other. Then Browne spoke.

“You are quite sure, I suppose,” he asked, “that you do not know the gentleman in question? I certainly understood from him that you had been acquainted with each other for many years.”

The German shook his head. Then he said slowly, “Perhaps, mein frien, if you would mit me come, I will talk mit you ubon the madder. So many men do say dot they know Johann Schmidt. But Johann do not know dem. If you to mine office would come, we will talk mit each other dere.”

Browne accordingly followed him behind the curtain to which I have alluded. There he found, to his surprise, a most comfortable and, I might almost add, luxurious apartment. The walls were hung with pictures of considerable merit, interspersed with innumerable curios, collected from almost every country in the Farther East. In any other place the room might have ranked as a fairly noteworthy apartment; but here, surrounded by so much that was sordid—nay, almost barbaric—it was little short of unique. Pointing to a long bamboo chair which fitted a corner beneath an enormous Cantonese dragon, used for burning pastilles, the German bade Browne seat himself. Before the latter did so, however, he handed the German the letter with which Herr Sauber had furnished him. The other took it, cut the flap of the envelope with a jade paper–knife, and, drawing forth the contents, placed an enormous pair of spectacles upon his nose, and read them thoroughly. Upwards of five minutes had elapsed between the time Browne had given him the letter until he spoke again. These long delays were having a bad effect upon the young man’s temper; they strained his nerves to breaking–pitch. He felt that this phlegmatic individual would not hurry himself, even if another’s existence depended upon it. To all intents and purposes he had united in his person the apathy of the Asiatic with the stolidity of the Teuton.

“Now dat I look ubon it, I do remember Herr Sauber,” the other replied. “It was once dat we very good friends were, but it is many years dat I heard of him.” The old fellow wagged his head solemnly until his glasses shook upon his nose. The recollection of the incident, whatever it was, seemed to afford him considerable satisfaction, though why it should have done so was by no means apparent to Browne.

“But with regard to what he says in the letter?” the young man at last exclaimed in desperation. “Will you be able to help me, do you think?”

“Ah! I know noddings about dat,” answered Schmidt. “I do not understand what dis business is. If it is Chinese silk, or curios, or gondiments of any kind, den I know what you want. Dere is no one on dis island can subbly you so goot as Johann Schmidt.”

Browne did not know what to say. For his own sake he knew that it would not be safe to broach such a delicate subject to a man, like the one seated before him, whose only idea in life seemed to be to cross one fat leg over the other and to fill and smoke his pipe until the room was one large tobacco–cloud, unless he was quite certain of that person’s identity

with the individual, to whom he had been directed to apply.

“To put the matter in a nutshell,” said Browne, lowering his voice a little in order that it should not carry farther than the man seated before him, “I understood from Herr Sauber that if any one happened to have a friend, who had the misfortune to be compelled to stay rather longer in a certain place, than was quite conducive to his health or peace of mind, by applying to you an arrangement might possibly be made, whereby his release might be effected.”

Herr Schmidt for the first time took the pipe out of his mouth and looked at him. “Bardon, mein frien, but I do not understand what is meant by dat speech,” he replied. “If de place, where dat frien of yours is living, is not to his health suited, why does not he elsewhere go?”

Though Browne felt morally certain that the man understood what he meant, he did not feel justified in speaking more plainly at the moment. He had to feel his way before he definitely committed himself. However, a little reflection was sufficient to show him, that it would be impossible to make any progress at all unless he spoke out, and that even in the event of his doing so, he would not be placing himself in any way in the other’s power. He accordingly resolved upon a line of action.

“The truth of the matter is, Herr Schmidt,” he began, leaning a little forward, and speaking with all the emphasis of which he was master, “I happen to have a friend who is at the present time confined on a certain island. He is in delicate health, and his friends are anxious to get him away. Now, I have been informed that, if suitable terms can be arranged, it would be possible for you to effect this escape. Is this so?”

“Mine goot frien,” returned the German, “let me tell you dat you speak too plain. The words dat you talk mit me would make trouble mit my friens de police. Besides, dere is no esgaping from der jail ubon dis island.”

“I did not say anything about the jail upon this island,” retorted Browne; “the place I mean is a very long way from here.”

“Well then, Noumea, perhaps?”

“No, not Noumea,” answered Browne. “If I am to enter into more explanations, I might say that my friend is a Russian, and that he is also a political prisoner.” He stopped and watched Herr Schmidt’s face anxiously. The latter was sitting bolt upright in his chair, with a fat hand resting on either knee; his spectacles were pushed on to the top of his head, and his long pipe was still in his mouth. Not a sign escaped him to show that he understood.

“I dink dat mein old comrade, Herr Sauber, must have been drunken mit too much schnapps when he talk mit you. What should Johann Schmidt have to do mit Russian bolitical brisoners? His piziness is mit de curios of China, mit silk, rice, ginger, but not mit de tings you do speak to him about.”

“Then I am to understand that you can do nothing to help me?” said Browne, rising from his chair as if to take leave.

“For mineself it is not possible,” returned the other, with great deliberation. “But since you

are a frien of mein old comrade Sauber, den I tink over tings and gause inquiries to be made. Dis a very strange work is, and dere are many men in it. I do not tell you dat it gannot be done, but it will be difficult. Perhaps dere may be a man to be found who will gommunicate mit your friend."

The meaning of this speech was perfectly clear to him. In plain English, it, of course, meant that, while Herr Schmidt was not going to commit himself, he would find some one else who would.

"I should be under a life–long obligation if you would do so," answered Browne. "And what is more, I may as well say now I am not afraid to pay handsomely for the service rendered."

This time there was a twinkle to be seen in the German's eye. "I know noddings at all about what you speak; you will remember dot," continued he. "But I will do de best I can. If you write me now on a paper de name of your frien, and de place where he is—what shall we say?—now staying, I will let you know what de price would be, and when der work can be done. It will be—how you call it?—a ready–money transaction."

"I desire it to be so," replied Browne a little shortly.

There was silence between them for a few moments. Then Schmidt inquired where Browne's yacht was anchored. Browne informed him; and as he did so, it struck him that this was a rather curious remark upon his companion's part, if, as he had led him to believe at the beginning of the interview, he knew nothing whatever about his coming to Hong–kong. However, he did not comment upon it.

"Dat is goot, den," said Schmidt. "If I find a man who will run de risk, den I will gommunicate mit you before den o'clock to–night."

Browne thanked him; and, feeling that they had reached the end of the interview, bade him good–bye and passed through the shop out into the street once more. His coolie was still seated on the shafts of his *rickshá*; and, when Browne had mounted, they returned at a smart trot, by the way they had come, to the Club. Here he found his friends awaiting him. They had done the sights of the city, and were now eager to get back to the yacht once more.

Chapter XXII

“Did you find your friend Schmidt?” inquired their host of Browne as he seated himself in a chair and lit a cigar.

“Yes,” the latter answered, “I found him, and a curious character he is. He has some wonderful curios in his shop, and I could have spent a day there overhauling them.”

“I should be very careful, if I were you, what sort of dealings you have with him,” said the other, with what struck Browne as a peculiar meaning. “He does not bear any too good a reputation in these parts. I have heard some funny stories about him at one time and another.”

“Oh, you need not be afraid on my account,” replied Browne. “As I told you in your office, my dealings with him are of a purely commercial character, and I don’t think he has robbed me of very much so far. Now, what would you say if we were to make our way to the yacht?”

They accordingly adjourned to the boat. Perhaps, as the result of his interview that afternoon, Browne was in the highest of spirits. He did the honours of his table royally, and the new–comer, ever since that day, has been wont to declare that it was the jolliest dinner of which he has ever partaken in his life. How little he guessed the tragedy that was overhanging it all! Of the quartette, Maas was the only one in any way silent. For some reason or another *he* seemed strangely preoccupied. It was not until some months later that Browne heard from Jimmy Foote that that afternoon, during their perambulations of the city, he had excused himself, and having discovered the direction of the telegraph station, had left them for upwards of three–quarters of an hour.

“I am not quite myself to–night,” he remarked, in reply to a remark from Browne. “But I have no doubt I shall be all right again to–morrow.”

Dinner being at an end, they adjourned to the deck, where they settled down to coffee and cigars. The myriad lights of the city ashore flashed out, and were reflected like countless diamonds in the still waters of the bay. Browne was irresistibly reminded of another harbour–scene. At another momentous epoch of his life, he had sat on this self–same deck, and looked across the water at the lights ashore. And what a different man he had been then to the man he was now! So much had happened that it seemed scarcely possible it could be the same.

Their friend of the afternoon proved a most interesting companion. He had spent the greater portion of his life in the Farthest East, and was full of anecdotes of strange men he had met, and still stranger things he had seen. They reclined in their deck–chairs and smoked until close upon ten o’clock. Then the new–comer thought it was time for him to see about getting ashore. He accordingly rose from his chair, and was commencing the usual preparatory speeches, when a hail from alongside reached their ears. A quartermaster went to the bulwark and inquired who was calling, and what he wanted. A voice answered him in educated English:—

“Can you tell me if this is the *Lotus Blossom*?” it said.

“Yes,” answered the quartermaster. “What do you want?”

“I want to see Mr. Browne, if he is aboard,” the other answered.

“He is aboard,” returned the quartermaster. “But I don’t know whether he can see you. I will inquire.”

“Who is he?” asked Browne. “Tell him to give you his name.”

The quartermaster hailed the sampan again. “He says his name is MacAndrew, sir,” he replied after a short pause, “and if you will see him, he says he will not detain you many minutes.”

“Let him come aboard, then,” said Browne. “Just tell him to look sharp.” Then, turning to his guests, he continued, “I wonder who the fellow is, and what he wants with me at this hour of the night.” In his own heart he thought he knew pretty well.

“By the way,” remarked his guest, “I should advise you to keep your eyes open while you are in this port. You can have no idea what queer sort of people you will have to do with; but when I tell you that it is the favourite meeting–place for half the villains of the East, you will have some very good notion.”

“Thanks for the warning,” returned Browne. “I’ll bear it in mind.”

He had scarcely finished speaking, before the figure of a man appeared at the top of the gangway and came towards them. He was tall and slimly built, was dressed entirely in white, and wore a helmet of the same colour upon his head. From an indescribable something about him—it may possibly have been his graceful carriage or the drawl in his voice when he spoke—he might very well have passed for a gentleman.

“Mr. Browne?” he began, lifting his hat, and, as he did so, looking from one to another of the group.

“My name is Browne,” said the young man, stepping forward. “What can I do for you?”

“I should be glad if you would favour me with a few minutes’ private conversation,” answered the other. “My business is important, but it will not detain you very long.”

“I can easily do that,” replied Browne, and as he said it his guest of the evening came forward to bid him good–bye.

“Must you really go?” Browne inquired.

“I am afraid I must,” the other responded; “the boat has been alongside for some considerable time, and to–morrow the homeward mail goes out, and I have my letters to finish. I must thank you for a very jolly evening. My only regret is that you are not staying longer in Hong–kong. However, I hope we shall see you on the return voyage, when you must let us entertain you, in a somewhat better fashion, than we have been able to do to–day.”

“I shall be delighted,” said Browne as he shook hands; but in his own heart he was reflecting that, when he did return that way, there would, in all probability, be some one with him, who would exercise such control over his time and amusements, that bachelor

pleasures would be out of the question. The man having taken his departure, Browne begged his friends to excuse him for a few moments, and then passed down the deck towards the tall individual, whom he could see waiting for him at the saloon entrance. “Now, sir,” he began, “if you wish to see me, I am at your disposal.”

“In that case, let us walk a little farther aft,” replied the tall man. “Let us find a place where we shall run no risks of being disturbed.”

“This way, then,” said Browne, and led him along the deck towards the taffrail. He climbed up on to the rail, while his companion seated himself on the stern grating. The light from the after–skylight fell upon his face, and Browne saw that it was a countenance cast in a singularly handsome mould. The features were sharp and clear cut, the forehead broad, and the mouth and chin showing signs of considerable determination. Taken altogether, it was the face of a man who, having embarked upon a certain enterprise, would carry it through, or perish in the attempt. Having lit a cigarette and thrown the match overboard, he began to speak.

“It has been brought to my knowledge,” he began, “that you are anxious to carry out a certain delicate piece of business connected with an island, a short distance to the north of Japan. Is that so?”

“Before you go any farther,” continued Browne, “perhaps it would be as well for you to say whether or not you come from Johann Schmidt.”

“Johann Schmidt!” replied the other, with some little astonishment. “Who the devil is he? I don’t know that I ever heard of him.”

It was Browne’s turn this time to feel surprised. “I asked because I understood that he was going to send some one to me this evening.”

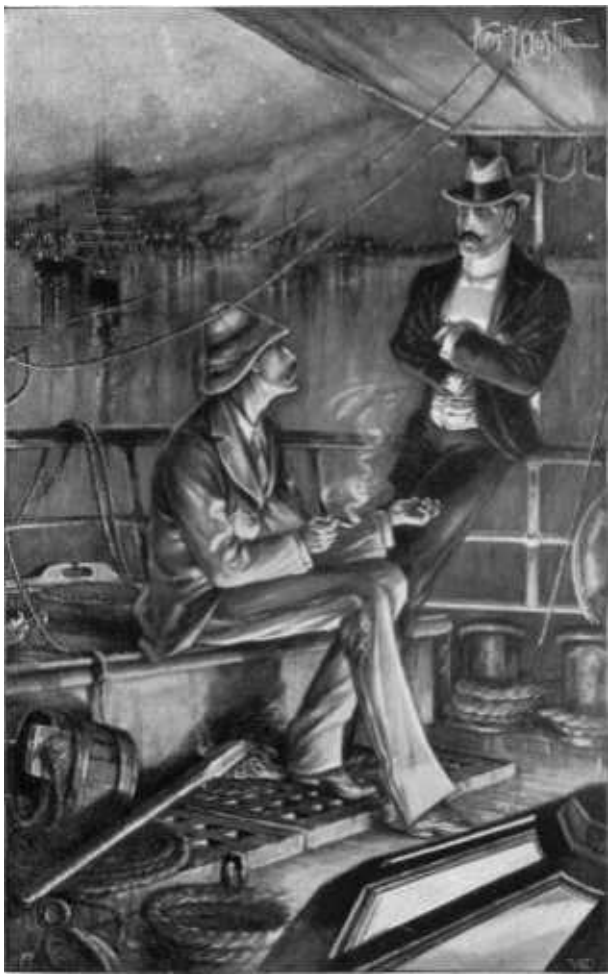
“That is very possible,” MacAndrew answered; “but let me make it clear to you that I know nothing whatsoever of him; in matters like this, Mr. Browne, you will find it best to know nothing of anybody.”

After this plain speech, Browne thought he had grasped the situation. “We will presume, then, that you know nothing of our friend Johann,” he said. “Perhaps you have a plan worked out, and can tell me exactly what I ought to do to effect the object I have in view.”

“It is for that reason that I am here,” resumed MacAndrew, with business–like celerity, as he flicked the ash from his cigarette. “I’ve got the plan fixed up, and I think I can tell you exactly how the matter in question is going to be arranged. To begin with, I may as well inform you that it is going to be an expensive business.”

“Expense is no difficulty to me,” replied Browne. “I am, of course, quite prepared to pay a large sum, provided it is in reason, and I am assured in my own mind, that the work will be carried out in a proper manner. How much do you think it will cost me?”

“Five thousand pounds in good, solid English gold,” answered MacAndrew; “and what is more, the money must be paid down before I put my hand to the job.”



“Five thousand pounds in good, solid English gold.”

“But, pardon my alluding to it, what sort of a check am I going to have upon you?” Browne next inquired. “How am I to know that you won’t take the money and clear out?”

“You’ve got to risk that,” said MacAndrew calmly. “I see no other way out of it. You must trust me absolutely; if you don’t think you can, say so, and I’ll have nothing whatever to do with it. I won’t make you any promises, because that’s not my way; but I fancy when the business is finished you’ll be satisfied.”

“I hope so,” returned Browne, with a smile. “But can you give me no sort of guarantee at all?”

“I don’t see that I can,” muttered MacAndrew. “In cases like this a guarantee is a thing which would be a very unmarketable commodity. In other words, we don’t keep them in stock.”

“It’s to be a case of my putting my money in the slot, then, and you do the rest?”

“As the Yankees say,” said the other, “I reckon that is so. No, Mr. Browne, I’m very much afraid you must rest content with my bare word. If you think I’m straight enough to pull you through, try me; if not, as I said just now, have nothing more to do with me. I cannot speak fairer than that, I think, and I shall now leave it to you to decide.”

“Well, I must see your plan,” continued Browne. “When I have done that it is just possible that I may see my way to undertaking the business.”

“The plan, then, by all means,” replied the other, and, as he did so, he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out an envelope, which he handed to Browne. “Here it is. I have

roughly sketched it all out for you. You had better read it when you are alone in your cabin, and after you have got it by heart be sure to burn it carefully. I wrote it down in case I should not be able to see you, and also fearing, even if I did have speech with you, I might not be able to say what I wanted to, without being overheard. I will come off at daybreak to–morrow morning for your answer. In the meantime you can think it over. Will that suit you?"

"Admirably," said Browne. "I will let you know my decision then without fail."

"In that case, good–night."

"Good–night. I shall expect you in the morning."

"In the morning."

A quarter of an hour later Browne was alone in his own cabin. Having locked his door, he took the letter, the other had given him, from his pocket and opened it. A half–sheet of note–paper, upon which scarcely five hundred words were written, was all he found. But these words, he knew, meant all the world to him. He read and re–read them, and, as soon as he had got them by heart, lit a match and set fire to the paper, which was reduced to ashes. Then he returned to the deck, where Maas and Foote were still seated, and settled himself down for a chat. They had not been there many minutes before Maas found, that he had smoked the last cigar of a particular brand he affected, and rose to go to his cabin in search of another. He had not been very long absent before Browne remembered that he had left the envelope of MacAndrew's letter on his dressing–table. Accordingly he set off in search of it, intending to destroy it as he had done its contents. Having reached the companion, he was descending to the saloon below, when a sound resembling the careful, though hurried, closing of a door attracted his attention. A moment later he stepped into the saloon, to find Maas there, who, for once in his life, appeared to be flurried and put out by something.

"I have lost my cigar–case, my dear Browne," he said, as if in explanation. "Is it not annoying?"

Browne felt sure that this was not the truth. However, he did not say so, but when he had condoled with him, entered his own cabin, where a surprise was in store for him. The envelope he had come down to burn, and which he distinctly remembered having placed upon the table less than half an hour before, was missing. Some one had taken it!

Chapter XXIII

Taking one thing with another, Browne's night after the incident described at the end of the previous chapter was far from being a good one. He could not, try how he would, solve the mystery as to what had become of that envelope. He had hunted the cabin through and through, and searched his pockets times without number, but always with the same lack of success. As he lay turning the matter over and over in his mind, he remembered that he had heard the soft shutting of a door as he descended the companion–ladder, and also that Maas had betrayed considerable embarrassment when he entered the saloon. It was absurd, however, to suppose that he could have had any hand in its disappearance. But the fact remained that the envelope was gone. He rang for his valet, and questioned him; but the man declared that, not only did he know nothing at all about it, but that he had not entered the cabin between dinner–time and when he had prepared his master for the night. It was a singular thing altogether. At last, being unable to remain where he was any longer, he rose and dressed himself and went up to the deck. Day was just breaking. A cloudless sky was overhead, and in the gray light the Peak looked unusually picturesque; the water alongside was as smooth as a sheet of glass; the only signs of life were a few gulls wheeling with discordant cries around a patch of seaweed floating astern.

Browne had been pacing the deck for upwards of a quarter of an hour, when he noticed a *sampan* pull off from the shore towards the yacht. From where he stood he could plainly distinguish the tall figure of MacAndrew. He accordingly went to the gangway to receive him. Presently one of the women pulling brought her up at the foot of the accommodation–ladder, when the passenger ran up the steps, and gracefully saluted Browne.

"Good–morning," he said. "In spite of the earliness of the hour, I think I am up to time."

"Yes, you are very punctual," answered Browne. "Now, shall we get to business?"

They accordingly walked together in the direction of the smoking–room.

"You mastered the contents of my note, I suppose?" asked MacAndrew, by way of breaking the ice.

"Perfectly," replied Browne; "and I was careful to burn it afterwards."

"Well, now that you have perused it, what do you think of it?" inquired the other. "Do you consider the scheme feasible?"

"Very feasible indeed," Browne replied. "With a decent amount of luck, I think it should stand a very good chance of succeeding.

"I'm very glad to hear that," returned MacAndrew. "I thought you would like it. Now, when the other preliminaries are settled, I can get to work, head down."

"By the other preliminaries I suppose you mean the money?" queried Browne.

MacAndrew looked and laughed.

“Yes; the money,” he admitted. “I’m sorry to have to be so mercenary; but I’m afraid it can’t be helped. We must grease the machinery with gold, otherwise we shan’t be able to set it in motion.”

“Very well,” rejoined Browne; “that difficulty is easily overcome. I have it all ready for you. If you will accompany me to my cabin we may procure it.”

They accordingly made their way to the cabin. Once there, Browne opened his safe, and dragged out a plain wooden box, which he placed upon the floor. MacAndrew observed that there was another of similar size behind it. Browne noticed the expression upon his face, and smiled.

“You’re wondering what made me bring so much,” he remarked. How well he remembered going to his bank to procure it! He seemed to see the dignified, portly manager seated on his leather chair, and could recall that worthy gentleman’s surprise at the curious request Browne made to him.

“But how do you propose to get it ashore?” said the latter to MacAndrew. “It’s a heavy box; and what about the Customs authorities?”

“Oh, they won’t trouble me,” answered MacAndrew coolly. “I shall find a way of getting it in without putting them to the inconvenience of opening it.”

“Do you want to count it? There may not be five thousand pounds there.”

“I shall have to risk that,” MacAndrew replied. “I haven’t the time to waste in counting it. I expect it’s all right.” So saying, he took up the box, and followed Browne to the deck above.

“You quite understand what you’ve got to do, I suppose?” he asked when they once more stood at the gangway.

“Perfectly,” said Browne. “You need not be afraid lest I shall forget. When do you think you will leave?”

“This morning, if possible,” MacAndrew replied. “There is no time to be lost. I’ve got a boat in my eye, and as soon as they can have her ready I shall embark. By the way, if I were in your place I should be extremely careful as to what I said or did in Japan. Excite only one little bit of suspicion, and you will never be able to rectify the error.”

“You need have no fear on that score,” rejoined Browne. “I will take every possible precaution to prevent any one suspecting.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” MacAndrew returned. “Now, good–bye until we meet on the 13th.”

“Good–bye,” said Browne; “and good luck go with you!”

They shook hands, and then MacAndrew, picking up his precious box, went down the ladder, and, when he had taken his place in the well, the *sampan* pushed off for the shore.

“A nice sort of position I shall be in if he should prove to be a swindler,” reflected the young man, as he watched the retreating boat. “But it’s too late to think of that now. I have gone into the business, and must carry it through, whatever happens.”

When Jimmy Foote put in an appearance on deck that morning he found that the city of

Victoria had disappeared, and that the yacht was making her way through the Ly–ee–Moon Pass out into the open sea once more.

It was daybreak on the morning of the Thursday following when they obtained their first glimpse of Japan. Like a pin's head upon the horizon was a tiny gray dot, which gradually grew larger and larger until the sacred mountain of Fujiyama, clear–cut against the sky–line, rose from the waves, as if to welcome them to the Land of the Chrysanthemum. Making their way up Yeddo Bay, they at length cast anchor in the harbour of Yokohama. Beautiful as it must appear to any one, to Browne it seemed like the loveliest and happiest corner of Fairyland. He could scarcely believe, after the long time they had been separated, that, in less than half an hour, he would really be holding Katherine in his arms once more. During breakfast he could with difficulty contain his impatience, and he felt as if the excellent appetites which Foote and Maas brought to their meal were personal insults to himself. At length they rose, and he was at liberty to go. At the same moment the captain announced that the steam–launch was alongside.

"Good luck to you, old fellow," said Jimmy, as Browne put on his hat and prepared to be off. "Though love–making is not much in my line, I must say I envy you your happiness. I only wish I were going to see a sweetheart too."

"Madame Bernstein is a widow," remarked Browne, and, ducking his head to avoid the stump of a cigar which Jimmy threw at him, he ran down the accommodation–ladder, jumped into the launch, and was soon steaming ashore.

Reaching the Bund, he inquired in which direction the Club Hotel was situated, and, having been informed, made his way in that direction. He had reached the steps, and was about to ascend them to enter the verandah, when he saw, coming down the passage before him, no less a person than Katherine herself. For weeks past he had been looking forward to this interview, wondering where, how, and under what circumstances it would take place. Again and again he had framed his first speech to her, and had wondered what she would say to him in return. Now that he was confronted with her, however, he found his presence of mind deserting him, and he stood before her, not knowing what to say. On her side she was not so shy. Directly she realized who it was, she ran forward with outstretched hands to greet him.

"Jack, Jack," she cried, her voice trembling with delight, "I had no idea that you had arrived. How long have you been in Japan?"

"We dropped our anchor scarcely an hour ago," he answered. "I came ashore the instant the launch was ready for me."

"How glad I am to see you!" she exclaimed. "It seems years since we said good–bye to each other that miserable day at Marseilles."

"Years!" he cried. "It seems like an eternity to me." Then, looking up at her, as she stood on the steps above him, he continued: "Katherine, you are more beautiful than ever."

A rosy blush spread over her face. "It is because of my delight at seeing you," she whispered. This pretty speech was followed by a little pause, during which he came up the steps and led her along the verandah towards two empty chairs at the farther end. They seated themselves, and, after their more immediate affairs had received attention, he

inquired after Madame Bernstein.

“And now tell me what you have arranged to do?” she said, when she had satisfied him that the lady in question was enjoying the best of health. “I received your cablegram from Hong–kong, saying that everything was progressing satisfactorily. You do not know how anxiously I have been waiting to see you.”

“And only to hear that?” he asked, with a smile.

“Of course not,” she answered. “Still, I think you can easily understand my impatience.”

“Of course I understand it, dear,” he replied; “and it is only right you should know all I have arranged.”

He thereupon narrated to her his interview with MacAndrew, speaking in a low voice, and taking care that no one should overhear him. When he had finished he sat silent for a few moments; then, leaning a little nearer her, he continued, “I want to remind you, dear, to be particularly careful to say nothing at all on the subject to any one, not even to Madame Bernstein. I was warned myself not to say anything; but in your case, of course, it is different.”

“You can trust me,” she returned; “I shall say nothing. And so you really think it is likely we shall be able to save him?”

“I feel sure it is,” said Browne; “though, of course, I, like you, am somewhat in the dark. Every one who is in the business is so chary of being discovered, that they take particular care not to divulge anything, however small, that may give a hint or clue as to their complicity.”

For some time they continued to discuss the question; then Katherine, thinking that it behoved her to acquaint Madame Bernstein with the fact of her lover’s arrival, departed into the house. A few moments later she returned, accompanied by the lady in question, who greeted Brown with her usual enthusiasm.

“Ah, monsieur,” she cried, “you do not know how *triste* this poor child has been without you. She has counted every day, almost every minute, until she should see you.”

On hearing this Browne found an opportunity of stroking his sweetheart’s hand. Madame Bernstein’s remark was just the one of all others that would be calculated to cause him the greatest pleasure.

“And now, monsieur, that you are here, what is it you desire we should do?” inquired Madame, when they had exhausted the topics to which I have just referred.

“We must be content to remain here for at least another fortnight,” said Browne. “The arrangements I have made cannot possibly be completed until the end of that time.”

“Another fortnight?” exclaimed Madame, in some astonishment, and with considerable dismay. “Do you mean that we are to remain idle all that time?”

“I mean that we must enjoy ourselves here for a fortnight,” Browne replied. Then, looking out into the street at the queer characters he saw there—the picturesque dresses, the *jinrickshas*, and the thousand and one signs of Japanese life—he added: “Surely that should not be such a very difficult matter?”

“It would not be difficult,” said Madame, as if she were debating the matter with herself, “if one had all one’s time at one’s disposal, and were only travelling for pleasure; but under the present circumstances how different it is!” She was about to say something further, but she checked herself; and, making the excuse that she had left something in her room, retired to the house.

“Do not be impatient with her, dear,” said Katherine softly, when they were alone together. “Remember that her anxiety is all upon my account.”

Browne admitted this, and when he had done so the matter was allowed to drop.

Chapter XXIV

That afternoon they boarded the yacht, and Katherine renewed her acquaintance with Jimmy Foote. Maas was also introduced to her, and paid her the usual compliments upon her engagement. Later she explored the yacht from stem to stern, expressing her delight at the completeness of every detail. The pleasure she derived from it, however, was as nothing compared with that of her lover, who never for one instant left her side.

“Some day,” he said, as they stood together upon the bridge, looking at the harbour and watching the variety of shipping around them, “this vessel will be your own property. You will have to invite whoever you like to stay on board her with you. Do you think you will ever let me come?” He looked into her face, expecting to find a smile there; but, to his astonishment, he discovered that her eyes were filled with tears. “Why, my darling,” he cried, “what does this mean? What is the reason of these tears?”

She brushed them hastily away, and tried to appear unconcerned. “I was thinking of all your goodness to me,” she replied. “Oh, Jack! I don’t know how I can ever repay it.”

“I don’t want you to repay it,” he retorted. “You have done enough already. Have you not honoured me, dear, above all living men? Are you not going to be my wife?”

“That is no return,” she answered, shaking her head. “If you give a starving man food, do you think it kind of him to eat it? I had nothing, and you are giving me all. Does the fact that I take it help me to repay it?”

What he said in reply to this does not come within the scope of a chronicler’s duty to record. Let it suffice that, when he went below with her, he might very well have been described as the happiest man in Japan. The history of the following fortnight could be easily written in two words, “love and pleasure.” From morning till night they were together, seeing everything, exploring the temples, the country tea–houses, spending small fortunes with the curio dealers, and learning to love each other more and more every day. In fact, there was only one cloud in their sky, and that was the question of what was to be done with Maas. Up to that time, that gentleman had shown no sort of inclination to separate himself from the party. Browne could not very well ask him to leave, and yet he had the best of reasons for not wanting him to go on with them. What was to be done? He worried himself almost into a fever to know what he should do. Then, almost at the last minute, Maas settled the question for them, not in an altogether unexpected fashion. Finding his host alone in the verandah of the hotel one evening, he asked outright, without pretence of beating about the bush, whether he might, as an old friend, continue to burden them with his society. Browne found himself placed in a most awkward position. Though he did not want him, he had known Maas for so many years, and they had always been on such a footing of intimacy together, that he felt he could do nothing but consent. He accordingly did so, though with scarcely the same amount of grace, that usually characterized his hospitality. Jimmy Foote, however, expressed himself more freely.

“Look here, Jack, old man,” said the latter to Browne, when he was informed what had taken place, “you know as well as I do that Maas and I were never the greatest of friends. I

tell you this because I don't want you to think I am saying, behind his back, what I would not say to his face. At the same time, I *do* think that you ought to have told him straight out that he couldn't come."

"How on earth could I do that?" asked Browne. "Besides being exceedingly rude, it would have given the whole show away. What possible sort of excuse could I have made for not wanting him on board?"

"I don't know what sort of excuse you could have made," replied Jimmy; "all I know is that you ought to have made it. You have other people besides yourself to consider in the matter."

The deed was done, however, and could not be undone. For this reason, when the yacht said good–bye to the lovely harbour of Yokohama, and Treaty Point was astern, Maas stood upon the deck watching it fade away and drop below the sea–line.

"And now that we are on our way again, my dear Browne," said Maas when the others had gone below, "what is our destination?"

"Of our ultimate destination I am not yet quite certain," answered Browne, who was anxious to gain time to think before he committed himself. "But at first we are going north to have a look at the Sea of Okhotsk. My *fiancée's* father has been residing on an island there for many years, and it is our intention to pick him up and to bring him home, in order that he may be present at our wedding."

"In other words," put in Maas, "you are conniving at the escape of a Russian convict from Saghalien. Is that so?"

Browne uttered a cry that was partly one of astonishment, and partly one of terror. He could scarcely believe he had heard aright. This was the second time, since they had been on board the yacht, that Maas had played him this sort of trick, and he did not want to be taken in again. Was the other really aware of what they were going to do, or was this, as on the previous occasion, a shot fired at random?

"My dear fellow," he began, as unconcernedly as his excitement would permit, "what on earth do you mean? Help a Russian convict to escape? Surely you must have taken leave of your senses."

"Look here," said Maas with unusual emphasis, "what is the use of your attempting to keep a secret? Nature never intended you for a conspirator. You may not have guessed it, but I have seen for some considerable time past, long before we left Europe in fact, that there was trouble in the wind. Otherwise, why do you think I should have accompanied you to the East, so many thousand weary miles from Paris and civilization?"

"Because your health was bad," Browne replied. "At least, that is what you said yourself. Was that not so?"

"My health is as good as your own," the other answered. "No, Browne, I invented that excuse because I wanted to come with you; because I had some sort of notion of what you were about to do."

"But, even supposing it should be so, how could you have known it?"

“I will tell you. Do you remember the night at the Amphitryon Club when you told me that you were thinking of taking a trip to the Farther East?”

Browne admitted that he did remember it.

“Well, I happened to know who the lady was to whom you were paying such marked attention. I happened to mention her name one day to an old friend, who immediately replied, ‘I know the young lady in question; she is the daughter of the famous Polowski, the Nihilist, who was sent to Siberia, and who is now confined upon the island of Saghalien.’ Then you spoke of your yachting voyage to the Farther East, and I put two and two together, and resolved that, happen what might, I would see you through the business. You see how candid I am with you.”

“And do you mean to say that you knew all the time what I was going to do?”

“All the time,” said Maas. “Did not I give you a hint at breakfast on the morning following our joining the yacht at Southampton? I am your friend, Browne; and, as your friend, I want to be allowed to stand by you in your hour of danger. For it is dangerous work you are engaged upon, as I suppose you know.”

“And do you really mean that you are going to help me to get this man out of his place of captivity?” inquired Browne, putting on one side the other’s reference to their friendship.

“If you are going to do it, I’m certainly going to stand by you,” Maas replied. “That’s why I am here.”

“And all the time I was wishing you at Hanover, because I thought, that if you knew, you would disapprove.”

“It only goes to show how little we know our true friends,” continued Maas. “If you feel that you can trust me now, do not let us have any more half–measures. Let me be with you hand and glove, or put me ashore somewhere, and get me out of the way. I don’t want to push myself in where I am not wanted.”

Browne was genuinely touched. “My dear old fellow,” he answered, putting his hand on Maas’s shoulder, “I must confess I feel as if I had treated you very badly. If you are really disposed to help me, I shall be only too glad of your assistance. It’s a big job, and a hideously risky one. I don’t know what on earth I shall do if we fail.”

Then, in the innocence of his heart, Browne told him as much of their arrangements as he had revealed to Jimmy Foote. Maas expressed his sympathy, and forthwith propounded several schemes for getting the unhappy man to a place of safety, when they had got him on board the yacht. He went so far as to offer to land on the island, and to make his way into the interior in the hope of being able to render some assistance should it be necessary.

“Well, you know your own business best,” said Jimmy Foote to Browne, when the latter had informed him of the discovery he had made. “But I can’t say that I altogether like the arrangement. If he had guessed our secret, why didn’t he let us know that he knew it? It seems to me that there is a little bit of underhand work somewhere.”

“I think you are misjudging him,” returned Browne; “upon my word I do. Of one thing there can be no sort of doubt, and that is, that whatever he may have known, he is most anxious to help.”

“Is he?” exclaimed Jimmy, in a tone that showed that he was still more than a little sceptical concerning Maas’s good intentions. “I don’t set up to be much of a prophet; but I am willing to go so far as to offer to lay a hundred pounds to a halfpenny, that we shall find he has been hoodwinking us somewhere before we’ve done.”

Jimmy spoke with such unusual gravity that Browne looked at him in surprise. “Oh, you may look,” answered Jimmy; “but you won’t stare away what I think. Browne, old man,” he continued, “you and I were at school together; we have been pals for a very long time; and I’m not going to see you, just when you’re booked to settle down happily with your wife, and become a respectable member of society, upset and spoil everything by a foolish action.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” said Browne. “I know you mean well by me; but, at the same time, you must not let your liking for me make you unjust to other people. Maas has proved himself my friend, and I should be mean indeed if I ventured to doubt him.”

“All right,” replied Jimmy; “go your way. I’ll say no more.”

That evening Browne realized his long–felt wish. He and Katherine promenaded the deck together, as the yacht sped on its way, across the seas, towards their goal, and talked for hours together of their hopes and aspirations. When at last she and Madame Bernstein bade the gentlemen good–night, the latter adjourned to the smoking–room to discuss their plan of action. Maas had been evidently thinking the matter over, for he was prepared with one or two new suggestions, which struck the company as being eminently satisfactory. So sincere was he, and so anxious to be of service, that when at last they bade each other good–night, and he had retired below, Jimmy turned to Browne, who was standing beside the bulwark, and said:—

“Jack, old boy, I believe, after all, that I’ve done that man an injustice. I *do* think now that he is really anxious to do what he can.”

“I’m glad indeed to hear you say so,” Browne rejoined; “for I’m sure he is most anxious to be of use. Forgive me if I was a bit sharp to you this afternoon. I cannot tell you how grateful I feel to you for all your kindness.”

“Fiddlesticks!” muttered Jimmy. “There’s no talk of kindness between us.”

Fourteen days after leaving Yokohama, and a little before sunset, those on board the yacht caught their first glimpse of the Russian island, of which they had come in search. At first it was scarcely discernible; then, little by little, it grew larger, until its steep and abrupt rocks could be distinctly seen, with a far–away line of distant mountain–peaks, stretching to the northward.

Katharine, Madame Bernstein, and the three young men were upon the bridge at the time. Browne, who held his sweetheart’s hand, could feel her trembling. Madame Bernstein appeared by far the most excited of the group. Advanced though the time of year was, the air was bitterly cold. But, for once in a way, the Yezo Strait, usually so foggy, was now devoid even of a vestige of vapour. The season was a late one, and for some hours they had been passing packs of drift ice; but as they closed up on the land it could be seen lying in thick stacks along the shore.

“That is Cape Siretoko,” said Browne. “It is the most southerly point of Saghalien.”

CHAPTER XXV

Three weeks had elapsed since that memorable afternoon, when the party on board the yacht, had obtained their first glimpse of the island of Saghalien. In pursuance of the plan MacAndrew had revealed to him in Hong–kong, Browne had left his companions upon the vessel, and for upwards of forty–eight hours had domiciled himself in a small log–hut on the northern side of the Bay of Kroptskoi, awaiting news of the man whom they had come so far, and undertaken so much, to rescue. It was the night of full moon, and the scene which Browne had before him, as he stood, wrapped up in his furs, outside the door of the hut, was as miserable as a man could well desire to become acquainted with. The settlement, as I have said, was located at the northern end of a small bay, and had once consisted of upwards of six huts, built upon a slight eminence, having at its foot a river still ice–bound. At the back rose a still more precipitous hill, densely clothed with *taiga*, or forest. So impenetrable, indeed, was it, that even the wolf and bear found a difficulty in making their way through it. To the right, and almost unobservable from the huts, was a track that once connected with the coal–mines of Dui, but was now overgrown and scarcely to be distinguished from the virgin forest on either side.

On this particular evening, Browne was the reverse of easy in his mind. He had left the yacht buoyed up by the knowledge that in so doing he was best serving the woman he loved. It had been arranged with MacAndrew that they should meet at this hut, not later than the thirteenth day of that particular month. This, however, was the evening of the fifteenth, and still neither MacAndrew, nor the man they were endeavouring to rescue, had put in an appearance. Apart from every consideration of danger, it was far from being the sort of place a man would choose in which to spend his leisure. The hut was draughty and bitterly cold; the scenery was entirely uninviting; he had no one to speak to; he had to do everything—even his cooking—for himself; while, away out in the bay, the ice chinked and rattled together continually, as if to remind him of his miserable position. It was nearly nine o'clock, and he could very well guess what they were doing on board the yacht. His guests would be in the drawing–room. Katharine would be playing one of those soft German folk–songs, of which she was so fond, and most probably thinking of himself; Madame Bernstein would be knitting in an easy–chair beside the stove; while the gentlemen would be listening to the music, and wondering how long it would be, before they would be at liberty to retire to the smoking–room and their cigars. He could picture the soft electric light falling on a certain plain gold ring on Katherine's finger, and upon the stones of a bracelet upon her slender wrist. Taken altogether, he did not remember to have felt so home–sick in his life before. As if to add to his sensation of melancholy, while he was pursuing this miserable train of thought, a wolf commenced to howl dismally in the forest behind him. This was the climax. Unable to bear any more, he retired into the hut, bolted the door, and, wrapping himself up in his blanket, laid himself down upon his bed and was soon asleep. When he looked out upon the world next morning he found himself confronted with a dense fog, which obscured everything—the forest behind him, the ice–girdled shore in front, and, indeed, all his world. It is, of course, possible that, in this world of ours, there may be places with more unpleasant climates than Saghalien, but

it would be difficult to find them. On the west coast the foggy and rainy days average two hundred and fifty–three out of every three hundred and sixty–five, and even then the inhabitants are afraid to complain, lest it might be worse with them. As Browne reflected upon these things, he understood something of what the life of Katherine's father in this dreadful place must be. Seeing that it was hopeless to venture out, and believing that it was impossible the men he expected could put in an appearance on such a day, Browne retired into his hut, and, having closed the door carefully, stirred up the fire, and, seating himself before it, lit a cigar. He had another day's weary waiting before him. Fortunately, when his boat had brought him ashore from the yacht, it had also brought him an ample supply of provisions and such other things, as would help to make life bearable in such a place. On the rough table in the centre of the hut were arranged a collection of books of travel and adventure, and, since he did not pretend to be a blue–stocking, a good half–dozen novels, yellow–back and otherwise. One of the latter, a story by Miss Braddon, he remembered purchasing at the Dover bookstall the day he had returned from Paris with Maas. As he recalled the circumstances he could see again the eager, bustling crowd upon the platform, the porters in their dingy uniforms, the bright lamps around the bookstalls, and the cheery clerk who had handed the novel to him, with a remark about the weather. How different was his position now! He opened the book and tried to interest himself in it; the effort, however, was in vain. Do what he would, he could not rivet his attention upon the story. The perilous adventures of the hero in the forests of Upper Canada only served to remind him of his own unenviable position. Little by little the sentences ran into each other; at length his cigar dropped from his fingers, his head fell forward, and he was fast asleep. How long he slept it would be impossible to tell, but when he rose again and went to the door the fog had drawn off, darkness had fallen, and the brilliant northern stars were shining in the firmament above. Once more his hopes had proved futile. Another day had passed, and still he had received no news of the fugitives. How long was this to go on? Feeling hungry, he shut the door and set about preparing his evening meal. Taking a large piece of drift–wood from the heap in the corner, he placed it upon the fire, and soon the flame went roaring merrily up the chimney. He had made his tea, and was in the act of opening one of his cans of preserved meat, when a sound reached him from outside, and caused him to stop suddenly and glance round, as if in expectation of hearing something further. It certainly sounded like the step of some one who was carefully approaching the hut. Who could it be? The nearest civilization was the township of Dui, which was upwards of a hundred versts away. He had been warned, also, that the forest was in many places tenanted by outlaws, whose presence would be far from desirable at any time. Before he went to the door to draw the bolts he was careful to feel in the pocket of his coat for his revolver. He examined it and satisfied himself that it was fully loaded and ready for use. Then, turning up the lamp, he approached the door, and called out in English, "Who is there?"

"The powers be thanked, it's you!" said a voice, which he plainly recognised as that of MacAndrew. "Open the door and let us in, for we're more dead than alive."

"Thank God you're come at last," exclaimed Browne, as he did as the other requested. A curious picture was revealed by the light which issued from the open door.

Standing before the hut was a tall man with a long gray beard, clad in a heavy cloak of the same colour, who held in his arms what looked more like a bundle of furs than a human

being.

“Who are you?” cried Browne in astonishment, for this tall, gaunt individual of seventy was certainly not MacAndrew; “and what have you got there?”

“I’ll tell you everything in good time,” replied the other in English. “In the meantime just catch hold of this chap’s feet, and help me to carry him into the hut. I am not quite certain that he isn’t done for.”

Without asking any further questions, though he was dying to do so, Browne complied with the other’s request, and between them the two men carried the bundle into the hut and placed it in a chair before the fire.

“Brandy!” said MacAndrew laconically; and Browne immediately produced a flask from a bag and unscrewed the lid. He poured a quantity of the spirit into a cup, and then placed it to the sick man’s lips, while MacAndrew chafed his hands and removed his heavy boots.

“I have been expecting you for the last two days,” Browne began, as soon as they had time to speak to each other.

“It couldn’t be managed,” returned MacAndrew. “As it was I got away sooner than I expected. The pursuit was so hot that we were compelled to take to the woods, where, as ill–luck had it, we lost ourselves, and have been wandering about for the last four days. It was quite by chance that we reached here at all. I believe another day would have seen the end of this fellow. He knocked up completely this morning.”

As he spoke the individual in the chair opened his eyes and gazed about him in a dazed fashion. Browne looked at him more carefully than he had yet done, and found a short man with a small bullet head, half of which was shaven, the remainder being covered with a ferocious crop of red hair. Though he would probably not have confessed so much, he was conscious of a feeling of intense disappointment, for, from what he had heard from Katherine and Madame Bernstein, he had expected to see a tall, aristocratic individual, who had suffered for a cause he believed to be just, and whom sorrow had marked for her own. This man was altogether different.

“Monsieur Petrovitch,” said Browne in a tone, that might very well have suggested that he was anxious to assure himself as to the other’s identity; “or rather, I should say, Monsieur—”

“Petrovitch will do very well for the present,” the other replied in a querulous voice, as if he were tired, and did not want to be bothered by such minor details. “You are Monsieur Browne, I presume—my Katherine’s affianced husband?”

“Yes, that is my name,” the young man answered. “I cannot tell you how thankful your daughter will be to have you back with her once more.”

To this the man offered no reply, but sat staring into the fire with half–closed eyes. His behaviour struck Browne unpleasantly. Could the man have lost his former affection for his daughter? If not, why was it he refrained from making further inquiries about the girl, who had risked so much to save him? MacAndrew, however, stepped into the breach.

“You will have to be a bit easy with him at first, Mr. Browne,” he said. “They are always like this when they first get free. You must remember that, for a good many years, he has

never been asked to act or think for himself. I have seen many like this before. Once get him on board your yacht, away from every thought and association of his old life, and you will find that he will soon pick up again."

"And Madame Bernstein?" asked the man in the chair, as if he were continuing a train of thoughts suggested by their previous conversation.

"She is very well," said Browne, "and is also anxiously awaiting your coming. She has taken the greatest possible interest in your escape."

"Ah!" said the man, and then fell to musing again.

By this time Browne had placed before him a large bowl of smoking beef–extract, which had been prepared by a merchant in England, who had little dreamt the use it would be put to in the Farthest East. As soon as the old man had satisfied his hunger, Browne led him to his own sleeping–place, and placed him upon it, covering him with the fur rugs. Then he returned to the table, and, seating himself at it, questioned MacAndrew, while the other stowed away an enormous meal, as if to make up for the privations he had lately endured. From him Browne learnt all the incidents of their journey. Disguised as a Russian fur merchant, MacAndrew had made his way to the town of Dui, where he had made inquiries, and located the man he wanted. At first it was difficult to get communication with him; but once that was done the rest was comparatively easy. They reached the forest and made for the coast, with the result that has already been narrated.

"Between ourselves," said MacAndrew, "our friend yonder is scarcely the sort of man to travel with. He hasn't the heart of a louse, and is as suspicious as a rat."

Browne said nothing; he was thinking of Katherine, and what her feelings would be, when he should present this man to her as the father she had so long revered. He began to think that it would have been better, not only for the man himself, but for all parties concerned, if they had left him to meet his fate on the island.

Chapter XXVI

“Now, what about the yacht?” inquired MacAndrew. “We mustn’t be caught here. It is impossible to say how soon the troops may be after us. There is a guard–house in Aniwa Bay; and they are certain to know before long, that a man has escaped from Dui and is heading this way.”

“The yacht will be within signalling distance of this hut to–night at midnight,” said Browne. “And you can see for yourself there are some rockets in that corner which I can fire. Then, within half an hour, she will send a boat ashore.”

“Good,” he remarked in a tone of approval. “Very good. You are the sort of man I like to do business with. For my part, I shall not be sorry to get out of this.” He pointed to his disguise.

“I dare say you will not,” answered Browne. “You have succeeded wonderfully well. I cannot tell you how much obliged I am to you.”

“I am equally obliged to you,” said MacAndrew, “so we can cry quits. I flatter myself that, all things considered, it has been a pretty good escape; but I could tell you of one or two which have been better. We mustn’t shout too soon, however; we are not out of the wood yet.” As he spoke he mixed himself another glass of grog and lit a cigar, the smoke of which he puffed through his nose with the enjoyment of a man, to whom such a luxury had been forbidden for some time past. Browne followed his example, and the two men smoked in silence, while the ex–Nihilist snored on the bed in the corner. Hour after hour they talked on. As Browne had suspected, MacAndrew proved the most interesting companion in the world. His life had been one long series of hairbreadth escapes; he had fought both for civilization and against it; had sold his services to native sultans and rajahs, had penetrated into the most dangerous places, and had met the most extraordinary people. Strange to relate, with it all, he had still preserved the air of a gentleman.

“Oxford man?” asked Browne after a moment’s pause, without taking his eyes off the fire, and still speaking in the same commonplace tone. The other mentioned the name of a certain well–known college. Both felt that there was no more to be said, and they accordingly relapsed into silence.

“Rum thing this world of ours, isn’t it?” said MacAndrew after a little while. “Look at me. I started with everything in my favour; eldest son, fine old place in the country, best of society; for all I know I might have ended my days as a J.P. and member for my county. The Fates, however, were against it; in consequence I am sitting here to–night, disguised as a Russian fur–trader. It’s a bit of a transformation scene—isn’t it? I wonder what my family would say if they could see me?”

“I wonder what some of my friends would say if they could see me?” continued Browne. “If I’d been told a year ago that I should be doing this sort of thing, I should never have believed it. We never know what’s in store for us, do we? By the way, what’s the time?” He consulted his watch, and discovered that it only wanted ten minutes of twelve o’clock. “In ten minutes we’ll fire the first rocket,” he said. “It’s to be hoped it’s clear weather. Let

us pray that there's not another vessel outside, who, seeing our signal, may put in and send a boat to discover what is the matter."

"You're quite sure that the yacht will be there, I suppose?" asked MacAndrew.

"As sure as I can be," replied Browne. "I told my captain to hang about at night, and to look round this coast at midnight, so that if we did signal he might be ready. Of course, there's no saying what may have turned up; but we must hope for the best. How is our friend yonder?"

MacAndrew crossed the hut and bent over the man lying on the bed. He was still sleeping.

"Poor beggar! he is quite played out," said the other. "It will be a long time before he will forget his tramp with me. I had to carry him the last three miles on my back, like a kiddy; and in that thick scrub it's no joke, I can assure you."

Though Browne was quite able to agree with him, he did not give the matter much consideration. He was thinking of Katherine and of the meeting, that was shortly to take place between the father and daughter. At last, after what seemed an infinity of waiting, the hands of his watch stood at midnight. Having acquainted MacAndrew with his intention, he took up a rocket, opened the door of the hut, and went outside. To his intense relief, the fog had drawn off, and the stars were shining brightly. Not a sound was to be heard, save the sighing of the wind in the trees behind the hut, and the clinking of the ice on the northern side of the bay. To the southward it was all clear water, and it was there that Mason had arranged to send the boat.

"To be or not to be?" murmured Browne, as he struck the match and applied it to the rocket. There was an instant's pause, and then a tongue of fire flashed into the darkness, soaring up and up, until it broke in a myriad of coloured lights overhead. It seemed to Browne, while he waited and watched, as if the beating of his heart might be heard at least a mile away. Then suddenly, from far out at sea, came a flash of light, which told him that his signal had been observed.

"They see us," he cried in a tone of delight. "They are getting the boat under way by this time, I expect, and in less than an hour we shall be on board. We had better get ready as soon as possible." With that they turned into the hut once more, and MacAndrew shook the sleeping man upon the bed.

"Wake up, little father," he cried in Russian. "It's time for you to say good–bye to Saghalien."

The instantaneous obedience, which had so long been a habit with him, brought the man to his feet immediately. Browne, however, could see that he scarcely realized what was required of him.

"Come," said Browne, "it is time for us to be off. Your daughter is anxiously awaiting you."

"Ah, to be sure—to be sure," replied the other in French. "My dear daughter. Forgive me if I do not seem to realize that I shall see her so soon. Is it possible she will know me after all these long years? When last I saw her she was but a little child."

"Her heart, however, is the same," answered Browne. "I can assure you that she has

treasured your memory as few daughters would have done. Indeed, it is to her, more than any one else, that you owe your escape. But for her endeavours you would be in Dui now. But let us be off; we are wasting our time talking here when we should be making ourselves scarce."

"But what about these things?" asked MacAndrew, pointing to the books on the table, the crockery on the shelf, and the hundred and one other things in the hut. "What do you intend doing with them?"

"I scarcely know," replied Browne. "The better plan would be for us to take with us what we can carry and leave the rest. If they are of no other use, they will at least give whoever finds them something to think about."

"I wish him joy of his guesses," rejoined MacAndrew, as he led the old man out of the hut.

Browne remained behind to put out the lamp. As he did so a smile passed over his face. How foolish it seemed to be taking precautions, when he would, in all human probability, never see the place again! The fire upon the hearth was burning merrily. Little by little it would grow smaller, the flames would die down, a mass of glowing embers would follow, then it would gradually grow black, and connection with the place would be done with for ever and a day. Outside it was brilliant starlight, and for this reason they were able easily to pick their way down the path towards the place where Captain Mason had promised to have the boat.

So weak was the old man, however, that it took something like half an hour to overcome even the short distance they had to go. He could scarcely have done as much had not MacAndrew and Browne lent him their support. At last they reached the water's edge, where, to their joy, they found the boat awaiting them.

"Is that you, Phillips?" inquired Browne.

"Yes, sir, it's me," the third mate replied. "Captain Mason sent us away directly your signal was sighted."

"That's right," said Browne. "Now, just keep your boat steady while we help this gentleman aboard."

The boat's crew did their best to keep her in position while MacAndrew and Browne lifted Monsieur Petrovitch in. It was a difficult business, but at last they succeeded; then, pushing her off, they started for the yacht. For some time not a word was spoken. MacAndrew had evidently his own thoughts to occupy him; Katherine's father sat in a huddled–up condition; while Browne was filled with a nervousness that he could neither explain nor dispel.

At last they reached the yacht and drew up at the foot of the accommodation–ladder. Looking up the side, Browne could see Captain Mason, Jimmy Foote, and Maas leaning over watching them. It had been previously arranged that the meeting between the father and daughter should take place in the deckhouse, not on the deck itself.

"Is he strong enough to walk up?" the captain inquired of Browne. "If not, shall I send a couple of hands down to carry him?"

"I think we can manage it between us," said Browne; and accordingly he and MacAndrew,

assisted by the mate, lifted the sick man on to the ladder, and half–dragged, half–carried him up to the deck above.

“Where is Miss Petrovitch?” Browne asked, when they reached the deck.

“In the house, sir,” the captain replied. “We thought she would prefer to be alone there. She knows that you have arrived.”

“In that case I will take you to her at once,” said Browne to the old man, and slipping his arm through his, he led him towards the place in question. When he pushed open the door he assisted the old man to enter; and, having done so, found himself face to face with Katherine. She was deadly pale, and was trembling violently. Madame Bernstein was also present; and, if such a thing were possible, the latter was perhaps the more agitated of the two. Indeed, Browne found his own voice failing him as he said, “Katherine, I have brought you your father!”

There was a moment’s hesitation, though what occasioned it is difficult to say. Then Katherine advanced and kissed her father. She had often pictured this moment, and thought of the joy she would feel in welcoming him back to freedom. Now, however, that the moment had arrived it seemed as if she could say nothing.

“Father,” she faltered at last, “thank Heaven you have escaped.” She looked at him, and, as she did so, Browne noticed the change that came over her face. It was as if she had found herself confronted with some one she did not expect to see. And yet she tried hard not to let the others see her surprise.

“Katherine, my daughter,” replied the old man, “do you remember me?”

“Should I be likely to forget?” answered Katherine. “Though I was such a little child when you went away, I can remember that terrible night perfectly.”

Here Madame Bernstein interposed, with tears streaming down her face. “Stefan,” she sobbed, “Heaven be thanked you have at last come back to us!”

Thinking it would be as well if he left them to themselves for a short time, Browne stepped out of the house on to the deck, and closed the door behind him. He found MacAndrew, Maas, and Jimmy Foote standing together near the saloon companion–ladder.

“Welcome back again,” began Jimmy, advancing with outstretched hand. “By Jove! old man, you must have had a hard time of it. But you have succeeded in your undertaking, and that’s the great thing, after all—is it not?”

“Yes, I have succeeded,” returned Browne, in the tone of a man who is not quite certain whether he has or not. “Now, the question for our consideration is, what we ought to do. What do you say, MacAndrew; and you, Maas?”

“If I were in your place I would get away as soon as possible,” answered the former.

“I agree with you,” put in Jimmy. “By Jove! I do.”

“I cannot say that I do,” added Maas. “In the first place, you must remember where you are. This is an extremely dangerous coast about here, and if anything goes wrong and your boat runs ashore, the man you have come to rescue will be no better off than he was

before. If I were in your place, Browne—and I'm sure Captain Mason will agree with me—I should postpone your departure until to–morrow morning. There's nothing like having plenty of daylight in matters of this sort."

Browne scarcely knew what to say. He was naturally very anxious to get away; at the same time he was quite aware of the dangers of the seas in which his boat was, just at that time. He accordingly went forward and argued it out with Mason, whom he found of very much the same opinion as Maas.

"We have not much to risk, sir, by waiting," said that gentleman; "and, as far as I can see, we've everything to gain. A very strong current sets from the northward; and, as you can see for yourself, a fog is coming up. I don't mind telling you, sir, I've no fancy for manoeuvring about here in the dark."

"Then you think it would be wiser for us to remain at anchor until daylight?" asked Browne.

"If you ask me to be candid with you," the skipper replied, "I must say I do, sir."

"Very good, then," answered Browne. "In that case we will remain." Without further discussion, he made his way to the smoking–room, where he announced to those assembled there, that the yacht would not get under way till morning.

"'Pon my word, Browne, I think you're right," continued Maas. "You don't want to run any risks, do you? You'll be just as safe here, if not safer, than you would be outside."

"I'm not so sure of that," retorted Jimmy; and then, for some reason not specified, a sudden silence fell upon the party.

A quarter of an hour later Browne made his way to the deck–house again. He found Katherine and her father alone together, the man fast asleep and the girl kneeling by his side.

"Dearest," said Katherine softly, as she rose and crossed the cabin to meet her lover, "I have not thanked you yet for all you have done for—for him and for me."

She paused towards the end of her speech, as if she scarcely knew how to express herself; and Browne, for whom her every action had some significance, was quick to notice it.

"What is the matter, dear?" he asked. "Why do you look so sadly at me?"

She was about to answer, but she changed her mind.

"Sad?" she murmured, as if surprised. "Why should I be sad? I should surely be the happiest girl in the world to–night."

"But you are not," he answered. "I can see you're unhappy. Come, dear, tell me everything. You are grieved, I suppose, at finding your father so changed? Is not that so?"

"Partly," she answered in a whisper; and then, for some reason of her own, she added quietly, "but Madame recognised him at once, though she had not seen him for so many years. My poor father, how much he has suffered!"

Browne condoled with her, and ultimately succeeded in inducing her to retire to her cabin, assuring her that MacAndrew and himself would in turns watch by her father's side until

morning.

“How good you are!” she said, and kissed him softly. Then, with another glance at the huddled–up figure in the easy–chair, but without kissing him, as Browne had quite expected she would do, she turned and left the cabin.

It was just two o’clock, and a bitterly cold morning. Though Browne had declared that MacAndrew would share his vigil with him, he was not telling the truth, knowing that the other must be worn out after his travels of the last few days. For this reason he persuaded Jimmy to take him below, and to get him to bed at once. Then he himself returned to the deck–house, and set to work to make Katherine’s father as comfortable as possible for the night.

Just after daylight Browne was awakened by a knocking at the door. He crossed and opened it. It proved to be the captain. He was plainly under the influence of intense excitement.

“I don’t know how to tell you, sir,” he said. “I assure you I would not have had it happened for worlds. I have never been so upset in my life by anything.”

“But what has happened?” inquired Browne, with a sudden sinking at his heart.
“Something has gone wrong in the engine–room,” replied the captain, “and until it has been repaired it will be impossible for us to get under way.”

At that instant the second officer appeared, and touched the captain on the shoulder, saying something in an undertone.

“What is it?” asked Browne. “What else is wrong?”

“He reports that a man–o’–war can be just descried upon the horizon, and he thinks she is a Russian!”

Chapter XXVII

The horror which greeted the announcement that a man–o'–war had made its appearance upon the horizon may be better imagined than described.

"By heaven, we have been trapped!" cried MacAndrew, as he ran out of the smoking–room in Browne's wake, and gazed out to sea.

They formed a small group in front of the door: Browne, MacAndrew, Maas, Jimmy Foote, the captain, and the chief–engineer. Day was scarcely born, yet the small black spot upon the horizon could be plainly descried by every one of the party, and was momentarily growing larger. Without doubt it was a man–o'–war. What was more to the point, she was coming up at a good rate of speed. The position was an eminently serious one, and what those on board the yacht had to decide was what should be done.

"If she's a Russian, we're in no end of a hole," said MacAndrew; "and, when you come to think of it, she's scarcely likely to belong to any other nationality."

"Let us come into the smoking–room and talk it over," replied Browne; and as he spoke he led the way into the room he mentioned. Once inside, they seated themselves, and fell to discussing the situation.

"We'll presume, for the sake of argument, that she is Russian," began Browne. "Now what is to be done? Mr. M'Cartney," he added, turning to the chief–engineer, "what was the cause of the breakdown in your department?"

"A bit of foul play, if I know anything about such things," replied the other. "Early this morning, or last night, somebody removed the main crosshead–pin of the high–pressure engine."

"With what result?" inquired Browne.

"That we're as helpless as a log, sir," answered the chief–engineer. "Until it has been replaced it would be useless for us to attempt to get any steam out of her."

"But surely you have some duplicate pins," said Browne a little testily. "Why not put one in, and then let us get ahead again without further loss of time?"

"For the simple reason, sir, that all the duplicates have been taken too," the old man returned. "Whoever worked the plot must have the run of the ship at his fingers'–ends. I only wish I could lay my hands upon him, that's all. I'd make him smart, or my name's not M'Cartney."

"Surely such an important point can easily be ascertained," remarked Maas. "Will you leave it to me to make inquiries?"

"Oh, don't you trouble," responded Browne. "I shall sift the matter myself later on." As he said this he noticed that Jimmy Foote had not entered the smoking–room with them. In an idle sort of a way he wondered at his absence.

"How long will it take you to repair the damage, do you think?" Browne inquired of the

chief–engineer.

“Well, sir, it all depends upon circumstances,” said that officer. “If we find the duplicate pins we can do it in less than an hour; if we cannot, it may take us twelve hours, and it may take us twenty–four.”

“And how long do you think it will be before that boat comes up?” asked Browne, turning to the captain.

“Oh, a good hour at least, sir,” the captain replied. “She has seen us; and I’m afraid it would be of no use our even thinking of trying to get away from her.”

“But how do you know that she wants us?” Maas inquired. “Being aware of our own guilt, we naturally presume she knows it too. As Shakespeare says, ‘Conscience doth make cowards of us all.’”

“I don’t think there can be very much doubt, but that she’s after us,” said Browne lugubriously. “Her appearance at such a time is rather too much of a coincidence. Well, Mr. M’Cartney, you’d better get to work as soon as possible. In the meantime, Captain Mason, keep your eye on yonder vessel, and let me know how she progresses. We,” he continued, turning to MacAndrew and Maas, “must endeavour to find some place in which to hide Monsieur Petrovitch, should the commanding officer take it into his head to send a boat to search the ship.”

The captain and the engineer rose and left the room; and, when the door had closed behind them, the others sat down to the consideration of the problem, which Browne had placed before them. It was knotty in more points than one. If, as Browne had the best of reasons for supposing, the warship was in search of them, they would hunt the yacht from stem to stern, from truck to keelson, before they would be satisfied that the man they wanted was not on board. To allow him to be found would be the most disastrous thing that could possibly happen to all of them. But the question that had to be settled was, where he could be hidden with any reasonable chance of safety. They had barely an hour in which to make up their minds on this point, and to stow the fugitive away before the man–o’–war’s boat would arrive. In vain they ransacked their brains. Every hiding–place they hit upon seemed to have some disadvantage.

“The only place I can think of,” said Maas, who was lolling in a corner smoking a cigarette, “would be in one of these lockers. He might manage to crouch in it, and they would scarcely think of looking for him there.”

“It would be one of the first they would try,” retorted MacAndrew scornfully. “No, Mr. Browne; the only spot I can think of is in the tunnel of the tail shaft. We might squeeze him in there, and I could go with him to take care that he makes no noise.”

“The very idea,” Browne replied. “There’s plenty of room, and no one would ever suspect his presence there. If you will take charge of him, and get him down there at once, I will go off and see Miss Petrovitch, and tell her what has happened, and what we intend to do.”

“And is there nothing I can do to help?” Maas inquired, raising himself to a sitting posture.

“Oh yes,” continued Browne. “You can keep your eye on the warship, and warn us when

she gets too close to be pleasant. By the way, I must confess I should like to know where Jimmy Foote is. It's not like him to be out of the way, when there's trouble in the wind."

Without waiting for a reply, he ran down the companion–ladder and made his way along the saloon in the direction of Katherine's cabin. On reaching it he rapped upon the panel of the door, and bade Katherine dress as quickly as possible, and come to him in the saloon. The girl must have gathered from his voice that something very serious had occurred, for it was not long before she made her appearance with a scared look upon her face.

"What has happened?" she asked. "I can see something is the matter. Please tell me everything."

"Something very unpleasant," Browne replied. "In the first place, some evilly–disposed person has tampered with the engines so that we cannot go ahead for the present; but, worse than that, a man–o'–war—presumably a Russian—has come up over the horizon, and is steaming towards us."

"A Russian man–o'–war?" she exclaimed, with a look of terror in her eyes. "Do you mean that she has come after us?"

"I cannot speak positively, of course," said Browne, "but since she is here, it looks very much like it."

"Oh, Jack, Jack," she cried excitedly, "what did I tell you at the beginning? This is all my fault. I told you I should bring trouble and disgrace upon you. Now my words have come true."

"You have done nothing of the kind," Browne answered. "There is treachery aboard, otherwise this would never have happened."

Afterwards, when he came to think it all over, it struck Browne as a remarkable fact that on this occasion her first thought was not for her father, as was her usual custom, but for himself. What did this mean? Had she been disappointed in her parent, as he had half–expected she would be? Her quick womanly intuition must have told her what was passing in his mind, for her face suddenly flushed scarlet, and, clenching her hands together, she said slowly and deliberately, as if the question were being wrung from her, and she were repeating something she had no desire to say:—

"But if it is a Russian man–o'–war, what will become of my poor father?"

"We are going to hide him," returned Browne. "MacAndrew has taken him below to a certain place where he will be quite safe. He will remain there, while the ship is in sight, and rejoin us when she has disappeared again. Believe me, dear, they shall not get him, whatever happens."

There was a little pause, and then Katherine said, as if she were following up the conversation:—

"It would be too cruel if he were to be captured, just as he has got away."

"He shall not be captured; never fear," continued Browne. "And now, dear, you had better go and tell Madame Bernstein all that has happened. I think you had better both remain in your cabins for the present. When the Russian officer arrives, if all turns out as I am very

much afraid it will, I will ask you to dress and come on deck, for they will ask to be allowed to search your cabins for a certainty."

"I will go to Madame at once," she answered; "but I think—"

She was about to say more when a footstep sounded upon the companion–ladder, and a moment later Jimmy Foote, his face surcharged with excitement, looked down upon them.

"For heaven's sake, Browne," he cried, as he held on to the brass hand–rail, "come up to the smoking–room at once! There is not a moment to lose."

"What on earth has happened?" Browne inquired, as he left Katherine's side and bounded up the ladder.

"Just what I suspected," said Jimmy. "I never could have believed such villainy could be possible."

Having reached the deck, they hastened towards the smoking–room. As he did so, Browne glanced out to sea, and noticed that the man–o'–war was now so close that her hull could plainly be distinguished. At most she could not be more than eight or nine miles away.

Chapter XXVIII

It was a curious sight that met Browne's gaze, when he entered the snug little cabin, in which he and his friends had spent so many happy hours together. The skipper was standing near the door, M'Cartney was next to him, the second engineer in the corner opposite, and half–seated, half–forced down on the cushioned locker under the starboard port–hole was Maas, with MacAndrew, revolver in hand, leaning over him. Browne glanced from one to another of the group, but failed to take in the situation.

"What does this mean?" he cried, and, as he did so, he looked at Jimmy Foote, as if for explanation.

"It's a bad business, Browne, old chap," Jimmy replied; "a very bad business. I wish to goodness I had not to say anything to you about it. But it must be done, and there is very little time in which to do it. While you were away on shore a small incident occurred which aroused my suspicions. I determined to watch, and did so, with the result that they were confirmed. I saw that our friend Maas was a good deal more familiar with your officers and crew than I thought was good, either for them or for himself. I did not know he was the traitorous cur he is."

By this time Maas's usual sallow face was ashen pale. His lips seemed to be framing words which were never spoken.

"For heaven's sake, Foote," cried Browne, in an agony of impatience, "get on with what you have to say! What have you discovered?"

Jimmy turned to the second engineer, who was almost as pale as Maas. "Tell him everything," he said; "and see that you speak the truth."

"I scarcely know how to tell you, sir," the young fellow answered. "I only wish I'd never lived to see this day. What made me do it I don't know; but he, Mr. Maas there, got round me, sir, and—well, the long and short of it is, I gave in to him, and did what you know."

"You mean, I suppose, that you and he between you are responsible for this break–down in the engine–room this morning? Is this so?"

"Yes, sir," the man admitted.

"And, pray, what reason did Mr. Maas give you for desiring you to do this?"

"He told me, sir," the young man continued, "that he had your interests at heart. He said he happened to know that, if you had started for Japan at once, as you proposed, you would be running the yacht into a certain trap. He said that, though he had pleaded and argued with you in vain, you would not listen to him. You were bent on going on. The only way, he said, that he could stop you, was for me to do what I did."

"Surely, my dear Browne," interposed Maas, speaking for the first time, "you are not going to believe this cock–and–bull story, which is quite without corroboration. Your own common–sense should show you how absurd it is. What can have induced this man to trump up this charge against me I cannot say. Our friendship, however, should be proof

against it. Knowing the amount of worry you have upon your shoulders at the present time, I have no desire to add to it; at the same time, I cannot permit your servant here to insult me before your face."

Browne took no notice of what he said. Turning to the engineer, he continued:—

"How much did Mr. Maas offer you, or what inducement did he bring to bear, to get you to do what you did?"

"He offered me five hundred pounds, sir," the other returned. "I told him, however, that I wouldn't take his money. You have been very good to me, sir, and I did not want to be paid for doing, what I thought was a kindness to you. It wasn't until Mr. M'Cartney told me about that cruiser having put in an appearance, that I saw what I had been led into doing. Then I went straight to him and made a clean breast of everything."

"It was the best course you could have pursued," said Browne, "and I shall remember it, when I come to deal with your case later on. In the meantime, gentlemen, what are we to do?"

As he spoke the second officer descended from the bridge and made his appearance at the cabin door.

"The cruiser, sir, has signalled that she intends sending a boat," he reported, touching his cap.

"Very good," answered Browne; and when the officer had taken his departure he turned to Maas.

"So it is as we suspected," he began, very slowly and deliberately. "While we have been trusting you with our secret, you have been playing the traitor all round. Maas, I can scarcely believe it. I did not think a man could fall so low. However, there is no time to talk of that now. Come, gentlemen, what are we to do?"

Ever since the second officer had announced that the man–o'–war was about to send a boat, Maas had undergone a complete change. Though he had been found out, he still felt himself to be master of the situation; and with every minute's grace his pluck returned to him. Springing to his feet, he cried:—

"You ask what you should do, do you? Then I will tell you. You can do nothing at all. You are in my power, one and all. Remember that I represent the Russian Government, and, if you attempt anything against my safety, I shall place myself in the hands of the commander of the cruiser you can see over there. You must surely see that the game is hopeless, and that further resistance would be as foolish as it would be futile."

"Well, if anybody had told me—" Browne heard Jimmy remark; then MacAndrew struck in:—

"I think I take in the position," he said. "I have met with a similar case once before. Perhaps you would not mind leaving it in my hands, Mr. Browne?"

"What do you mean to do?" inquired Browne.

"I will very soon show you," replied MacAndrew. "Perhaps Mr. Foote will assist us?"

"I will do anything you like to be even with him," returned Jimmy vindictively.

“That’s the sort of talk,” answered MacAndrew. “Now let us make our way to his cabin. Mr. Maas, I shall have to trouble you to accompany us.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort,” responded Maas. “I decline to be left alone with you.”

“I’m very much afraid you’ve no option,” remarked MacAndrew calmly; and as he spoke he gave a little significant twist to the revolver he held in his hand. “Come, sir,” he continued more sternly than he had yet spoken. “On to your feet, if you please. Remember you are playing with desperate men. If by hesitating you get into trouble, you will have only yourself to thank. Your friend, the cruiser, is still a couple of miles away, as you must be aware, and a revolver–shot would scarcely be heard as far.”

Seeing that there was nothing for it but to obey, Maas rose to his feet and passed out of the smoking–room, along the deck, and down the saloon companion–ladder to his own cabin. Once there, MacAndrew handed his revolver to Jimmy, with the request that he would be good enough to watch the prisoner during his absence, and to put a bullet through his skull if he should attempt to escape or give the alarm.

“For my part,” resumed MacAndrew, “I’m going to test the resources of Mr. Browne’s medicine–chest.”

Five minutes later he returned with an ounce or so of some dark fluid in a graduating–glass.

“Good heavens! You’re surely not going to poison him,” exclaimed Browne; while Maas stared at the glass with frightened eyes.

“Poison him?” answered MacAndrew coolly. “My dear fellow, is it likely I should do anything so absurd? No; I am simply going to place him in a position of safety, so that he cannot harm us during the time the warship is in sight. Now, Mr. Maas, I shall have to trouble you to swallow this.”

“I’ll do nothing of the kind,” asserted Maas sturdily. “You shall not persuade me to put my lips to it.”

“In that case, I’m afraid there will very probably be trouble,” replied MacAndrew. “If I were you, sir, I should make up my mind to the inevitable. Remember there are unpleasant arguments we could bring to bear, should you still remain obdurate.”

Maas gasped for breath. He looked right and left, as if for some loophole of escape, but could find none. He was surrounded on every side by inexorable faces, which gazed upon him without pity or remorse, while on the table before him stood the small glass half–full of the dark–coloured liquid.

“Come, sir,” said MacAndrew, “I shall be glad if you would toast us. Let me remind you that there is no time to lose. It always pains me, in cases like the present, to have to apply physical argument when moral might produce the same result. In the event of your not drinking, as I request, perhaps Mr. Browne will be kind enough to permit us the use of his galley fire. The method, I admit, is barbarous; nevertheless it is occasionally effective.”

The perspiration rolled down Maas’s cheeks. Bantering as MacAndrew’s tones were, he could still see that he was in deadly earnest.

Browne glanced out of the port–hole, and noticed that the man–o'–war's boat had left its own vessel. In less than a quarter of an hour it would be alongside, and then— But he did not like to think of what would happen then.

"I will give you one more minute in which to drink it," rejoined MacAndrew, taking his watch from his pocket. "If you do not do so then you must be prepared to take the consequences."

Silence fell upon the group for a space, during which a man might perhaps have counted twenty.

"Half a minute," murmured MacAndrew, and Browne's heart beat so violently that it almost choked him.

"Three–quarters of a minute," continued MacAndrew. "Mr. Foote, would you mind giving me the revolver and standing by that door? I am afraid that we shall be driven into a tussle."

Jimmy did as he was requested, and another pause ensued.

"Time's up," said MacAndrew, shutting his watch with a click. "Now we must act. Mr. Browne, take his legs if you please."

They moved towards their victim, who shrank into a corner.

"I give in!" he cried at last, affecting a calmness he was far from feeling. "Since there is no other way out of it, I will do as you desire, provided you will give me your assurance that the stuff is harmless."

"It is quite harmless," replied MacAndrew; and then, with an air of braggadocio that could be easily seen was assumed, Maas tossed off the decoction, and, having done so, seated himself on the settee. A quarter of an hour later he was in his bunk, fast asleep, and Jimmy was sitting by his side in the capacity of sick–nurse.

"You had better bear in mind the fact that he has been ill for the past week," MacAndrew remarked, before he left the cabin. "He caught a chill through falling asleep on deck, and pneumonia has set in. Now I shall retire to join my friend in the tunnel, and leave you to your own devices. Don't forget to let me know, Mr. Browne, as soon as the Russian has bidden you farewell."

"You may depend on me," Browne answered; and, as he spoke, the captain hailed him from the deck above, to inform him that the boat was coming alongside.

Chapter XXIX

It would be idle to say that Browne will never forget his feelings, when the hail reached him from the deck, announcing the fact that a boat from the Russian man–o'–war was coming alongside. It was the most desperate moment of his life; and there are times, even now, when only to dream of it is sufficient to bring him wide awake with a cold sweat upon his forehead. As he heard it, he turned to Jimmy, who was leaning over the bunk in which Maas lay, and said anxiously:—

"I suppose I may leave him to you, Jimmy? You will take care that they don't get any information out of him?"

"You may trust me for that," Jimmy replied, and there was a look of determination in his face as he said it, that boded ill for any attempt Maas might make to communicate with the enemy. "I hope for his own sake that he won't wake while they are here. Jack, my son, this is going to be a big deal for all of us. Keep your head while they're aboard, or you'll be in Queer Street."

Thereupon they shook hands solemnly.

"Thank Heaven, I've got you with me, old chap," continued Browne fervently. "You don't know what a relief it is to me to know that. Now I must go and warn Miss Petrovitch and Madame Bernstein."

"Good–bye, old fellow," said Foote. "Good luck go with you."

Browne glanced again at Maas, then he went out, closing the door behind him, and made his way through the saloon in the direction of Katherine's cabin. He had scarcely knocked at the door before she opened it. From the pallor of her face he guessed that she knew something of what was happening. This proved to be so; for Browne afterwards discovered that the cruiser had all the time been plainly visible from her port–hole.

"I have just seen a boat pass," she said. "Have they come to search the yacht?"

"Yes," answered Browne. "You need not be afraid, however; they will not find him. He is hidden in a place where they would never think of looking; and, to make assurance doubly sure, MacAndrew is with him."

"But what was that noise I heard just now? It sounded as if you were struggling with some one, and trying to drag him down into the saloon."

Browne informed her in a few brief words of what had occurred, and bade her, in case she should be questioned, keep up the fiction that Maas was seriously ill. Then, bidding her inform Madame Bernstein of what was going on, he left her and returned to the deck. Simultaneously with his arrival the Russian officer made his appearance at the gangway. He was a tall, handsome man of about thirty years of age. Having reached the deck, he looked about him as if he scarcely knew whom to address; then, seeing that the captain looked to Browne as if for instructions, he saluted him, and said in French:—

"Your pardon, monsieur, but this is the yacht *Lotus Blossom*, is it not?"

“It is,” replied Browne, “and I am the owner. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you? You find us in rather a fix. We have had a break–down in the engine–room, and, as you can see for yourself, it has left us in a by no means pleasant position.”

“I have to present the compliments of my captain to you, and to request that you will permit me to overhaul your vessel.”

“To overhaul my vessel!” cried Browne. “Surely that is a very curious request For what reason do you wish to inspect her?”

“I regret to say that we have heard that an attempt is being made to rescue an escaped convict from the island yonder. From information received, it is believed he is on board your vessel.”

“A runaway convict on board my yacht?” exclaimed Browne in a tone that suggested complete surprise. “You must excuse me if I do not understand you. You surely do not suppose that I make it my business to go about the world, assisting convicts to escape from captivity?”

“That is no business of mine,” answered the officer. “All I have to do is to obey my instructions. I should, therefore, be glad if you would permit me to inspect your vessel.”

“You may do so with pleasure,” said Browne. “But let it be understood, before you commence, that I resent the intrusion, and shall, immediately on my return to civilization, place the matter before my Government to act as they think best. You have, of course, considered what the consequences of your action will be?”

“It is not my business to think of the consequences,” responded the other. “All I have to do is to obey the orders I receive. May I therefore trouble you to permit me to carry them out? I should be loath to have to signal to my ship for assistance.”

“Such a course will not be necessary,” rejoined Browne, with all the dignity of which he was master. “If you persist in your absurd demand, I shall raise no further objection. Only, I should be glad if you could do so with as little delay as possible. I have a friend below who is seriously ill, and I am anxious to return to him.”

“In that case, it would be as well for us to proceed without further loss of time,” continued the officer.

Turning to Captain Mason, who was standing beside him, Browne gave the necessary orders. The Russian officer immediately called up a couple of hands from his boat alongside, and then, escorted by Browne, set off on his tour of inspection. Commencing with the men’s quarters forward, he searched every nook and cranny, but without success. Then, little by little, they worked their way aft, exploring the officers’ and engineers’ quarters as they proceeded. The engine–room and stoke–hole followed next, and it was then that Browne’s anxiety commenced. The convict, as he had good reason to know, was the possessor of a hacking cough, and should he give proof of its existence now they were ruined indeed.

“I presume you do not wish to look into the furnaces,” ironically remarked the chief–engineer, who had accompanied them during their visit to his own particular portion of the vessel. “Should you desire to do so, I shall be pleased to have them opened for you.”

“I have no desire to look into them,” answered the officer, who by this time was beginning to feel that he had been sent on a wild–goose chase.

“In that case let us finish our inspection, and be done with it,” said Browne. “It is not pleasant for me, and I am sure it cannot be for you.” As he spoke he turned to the officer, and signed him to make his way up the steel ladder to the deck above. Just as he himself was about to set foot on it, the sound of a smothered cough came from the spot where the men lay hidden, and at the same instant the officer stopped and looked round. Browne felt his whole body grow cold with terror. Fortunately, however, even if he had heard it, the other failed to place the proper construction upon it, and they left the engine–room without further comment. Then, having explored the smoking–room and deck–house, they made their way aft to the drawing–room by way of the main companion–ladder.

“I have two ladies on board, monsieur,” said Browne as they reached the drawing–room and stood for a moment looking about them, “also the sick friend of whom I spoke to you just now. Perhaps you would not mind waiving your right to inspect their cabins.”

“Monsieur,” returned the officer, “I must see every cabin. There must be no exceptions.”

“In that case,” replied Browne, “there is no more to be said. Will you be kind enough to accompany me?”

So saying, he led him forward a few paces, and, having shown him the pantry and stewards’ quarters, the storerooms, bathrooms, and other domestic offices, took him to the cabin in which Maas was undergoing his involuntary confinement. Browne knocked softly upon the door, and a moment later Jimmy Foote opened it, with his finger on his lips as if to warn them to be silent.

“Hush!” he whispered. “Don’t wake him; he has been asleep for nearly half an hour, and it will do him a world of good.”

Browne translated this speech to the officer, and, when he had done so, they entered and approached the bedside. The representative of Imperial Russia looked down upon Maas, who was sleeping as placidly as a little child; at the same time his eyes took in the rows of medicine bottles on the table and all the usual paraphernalia of a sick–room. It was plain not only, that he imagined Jimmy Foote to be the doctor in charge, but also that he knew nothing of the identity of the man before him.

“What is the matter with him?” he asked a little suspiciously of Browne.

“Pneumonia, following a severe chill,” the other replied. “We want to get him down to Yokohama as quickly as possible in order that we may place him in the hospital there. I presume you are satisfied that he is not the man you want?”

The officer nodded his head. “Quite satisfied,” he answered emphatically. “The man I want is a little, old fellow with red hair. He is thirty years this gentleman’s senior.”

Thereupon they passed out of the cabin again, and made their way along the alley–way towards the drawing–room once more.

When they reached it they found Katherine and Madame Bernstein awaiting them there. Browne, in a tone of apology, explained the reason of the officer’s visit.

“However, I hope soon to be able to convince him that his suspicions are unfounded,” he said in conclusion. “We have searched every portion of the yacht, and he has not so far discovered the man he wants.”

“Do you say that the person you are looking for is a Russian convict?” continued Madame Bernstein, who felt that she must say something in order to cover the look of fear, that was spreading over Katherine’s face.

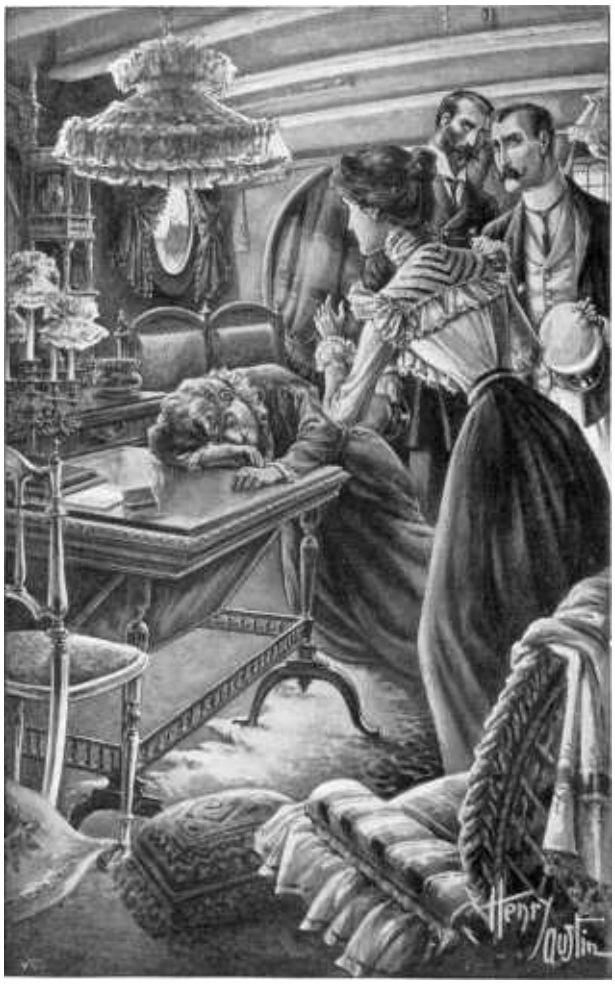
“Yes, Madame,” the officer replied. “He is a most dangerous person, who in his time has caused the police an infinity of trouble.”

“A Nihilist, I suppose?” remarked Browne, as if he thought that that point might be taken for granted.

“Indeed, no,” continued the officer. “His name is Kleinkopf, and he is, or rather was, the most noted diamond–thief in Europe.”

“What?” cried Browne, startled out of himself by what the other said. “What do you mean? A diamond—”

What he was about to add must for ever remain a mystery, for at that moment Madame Bernstein uttered a little cry and fell forward against the table in a dead faint. With a face as ashen as a cere–cloth, Katherine ran to her assistance, and Browne followed her example. Together they raised her and carried her to a seat.



“Katherine ran to her assistance.”

“You see, sir, what mischief you have done,” said Browne, addressing the Russian officer,

who stood looking from one to another of them, as if he scarcely knew what to say or how to act. “You have frightened her into a faint.”

Picking her up in his arms, he carried her to her cabin, and laid her in her bunk. Then, resigning her to the care of Katharine and the stewardess, whom he had summoned to his assistance, he rejoined the officer outside.

“If you will come with me, sir,” he began, “I will show you the remainder of the vessel, and then I think you will be able to return to your ship and inform your commander that, on this occasion, at least, he has committed an egregious blunder, of which he will hear more anon.”

“I am at monsieur’s disposal,” replied the officer; and together they entered Katherine’s cabin. Needless to say there was no sign of any fugitive there. Browne’s own cabin followed next, with the same result. At last they reached the deck once more.

“You are satisfied, I presume, sir, that the man you want is not on board my yacht?” asked Browne, with considerable hauteur.

“Quite satisfied,” replied the other. “And yet I can assure you, monsieur, that we had the best reasons for believing that you were conniving at his escape.”

“I am very much obliged to you, I am sure,” retorted Browne. “I fancy, however, that, even presuming I contemplated anything of the sort, I have convinced you that I have not carried it out yet. And now I have the honour to wish you a very good morning. My engineer informs me that the break–down in the engine–room has been repaired; and, if you have any suspicions left, you will have the satisfaction of seeing us get under way without further delay. I tell you this in case you should imagine, that I intend hanging about here, in the hope of picking up the man to whom you allude. By the way, did you say that his name is Kleinkopf, and that he was originally a diamond–thief?”

“He was the most expert diamond–thief in Europe, monsieur,” the officer replied. “Now, permit me to offer my apologies for the trouble to which I have put you, and to bid you farewell. At the same time, if you will allow me to do so, I will give you a little advice. If I were in your place I should leave this coast as soon as possible.”

“I shall do so within a quarter of an hour, at latest,” Browne answered.

With that the officer saluted once more and disappeared down the companion–ladder. A few moments later his boat was to be seen making her way in the direction of the man–of–war. Browne stood and watched her, scarcely able to realize that all danger was now passed and clone with. Then he turned to go in search of his friends, and as he did so a thought came into his mind, and brought him to a standstill once more. What could the officer have meant when he had said that the escaped convict’s name was Kleinkopf, and that he was not a Nihilist, as they had been informed, but a diamond–thief; not a man who plotted and risked his life for the welfare of his country, but a common felon, who lived by defrauding the general public? Was it possible that Katherine’s father could have been such a man? No; a thousand times no! He would never believe such a thing. But if it were not so, what did it all mean? Madame Bernstein had recognised the fugitive as Katherine’s father, and the man himself had rejoiced at being with his daughter again after so long a separation. There was a mystery somewhere, upon which he would have to be enlightened

before very long.

As he arrived at this conclusion Captain Mason approached him.

“The chief–engineer reports that all is ready, sir,” he said. “If you wish it we can get under way at once.”

“The sooner the better, Mason,” Browne replied. “I shall not be happy until we have put the horizon between ourselves and that gentleman over there.”

He nodded in the direction of the cruiser, which the boat had just reached.

“I agree with you, sir,” answered the captain. “I will get the anchor away at once.”

“Before you do so, Mason,” said Browne, “just get those two men out of the tunnel and send them aft. Don’t let them come on deck whatever you do. They’re certain to have their glasses on us over yonder.”

“Very good, sir,” Mason returned, and went forward to execute his errand.

Anxious as he was to go below, Browne did not leave the deck until the screw had commenced to revolve. When he did, it was with a great fear in his heart—one that he would have found it extremely difficult either to describe or to account for. As he argued with himself, it was extremely unlikely that the Russian Authorities would make a mistake; and yet, if they did not, why had Madame Bernstein always been so anxious to assure Katherine that the man, he had saved, was her father? And, what was still more important, why had she fainted that morning when the officer had given his information concerning the fugitive? When he entered the drawing–room, to his surprise, he found Katherine alone there. Her face was still very white, and it struck Browne that she had been crying.

“What is the matter, dear?” he inquired, as he placed his arm round her and drew her towards him. “Why do you look so troubled?”

“I do not know,” she answered, burying her face in his shoulder, “but I am very, very unhappy.”

He did his best to soothe her, but without success. A weight was pressing upon her mind, and until it was removed relief would be impossible. For some reason Browne made no inquiry after Madame’s condition. It seemed, for the moment, as if he had forgotten her very existence. At last he bade Katherine put on her hat and accompany him to the deck. The fresh air would revive her, he said. She accordingly departed to her cabin, and in five minutes rejoined him. In the meanwhile Browne had visited the cabin on the starboard side, and had informed Foote of all that had transpired. Maas was still sleeping quietly in his bunk.

“Thank goodness they’ve cleared out,” said Jimmy. “Now our friend here can wake up as soon as he pleases.”

“The sooner the better,” Browne replied. “In the meantime, Jimmy, I’ve something awfully important to say to you.”

In a few words Browne told him what he had discovered, and what he suspected. Foote listened with attention, and when he had finished, scratched his chin and regarded his own

face in the mirror opposite, looking the very figure and picture of perplexity.

“What did I always tell you?” he remarked at last. “I was as certain then, as I am now, that the woman was playing some underhand game, though what it is I cannot say. However, I’ll find out somehow or another. Upon my word, when we return to civilization, I think I shall embark upon the career of a private inquiry agent.”

Feeling that there was nothing more to be said upon the subject just then, Browne left him, and returned to the drawing–room in search of Katherine. He found her ready to accompany him to the deck above.

“The fresh air will soon bring the roses back to your cheeks,” he whispered, as they made their way along the drawing–room in the direction of the companion–ladder.

She was about to reply, when the sound of footsteps reached them from the port alley–way, and, before they had set foot upon the first step, MacAndrew and the fugitive stood before them. Browne noticed that Katherine instinctively shrank away from the latter. He accordingly slipped his arm round her, and, telling MacAndrew that he would like to speak to him in a few minutes, led her to the deck above.

Chapter XXX

Their first business when they reached the deck was to glance in the direction whence they had last seen the cruiser. Then she had been a living and very present reality to them; now she was only a tiny speck upon the horizon, and in a quarter of an hour, or even less, she would have vanished altogether. They made their way aft to the taffrail, and stood there leaning on the rail, looking at her. Both felt that it was a crisis in their lives, that had to be tided over, and knew that, if ever they desired to be happy together, they must fight the next ten minutes on their merits. For this reason, perhaps, they began by being unusually silent. It was Katherine who spoke first.

“Dearest,” she commenced very slowly, “I want you to listen to me and not to speak until I have finished. I have something to say to you, and I don’t quite know how to say it. I don’t want you to think that I am capricious, or that I think only of myself. In this I am thinking of you, and of your happiness only.”

“I can quite believe that,” Browne replied, trying to force down the lump that was rising in his throat. “But I must hear you out before I can say more. What is it you have to say to me?”

“I want you”—here she paused as if she were fighting for breath—“I want you to give up any idea of marrying me, and to put me ashore at the first port at which you call. Will you do this?”

Nearly a minute elapsed before Browne answered. When he did his voice was curiously husky.

“Katherine,” he said, “this is just like you. It is like your noble nature to try and make my path smoother, when your own is so difficult that you can scarcely climb it. But you don’t, surely, suppose that I should do what you ask—that I should give you up and allow you to go out of my life altogether, just because you have been tricked as I have been?”

She glanced up at him with a face as white as the foam upon which they looked. What she would have replied I cannot say; but at that moment MacAndrew, accompanied by Jimmy Foote, appeared on deck. The latter approached them and asked Browne if he could spare him a few minutes. Not being averse to any proposal, that would tend to mitigate the severity of the ordeal he was then passing through, Browne consented.

“What is it you want with me?” he asked, as savagely as if he were being deliberately wronged. “For Heaven’s sake, Jimmy, be easy with me! You can have no idea what the strain of the last few minutes has been.”

“I know everything, my son,” rejoined Jimmy quietly. “Do you think I haven’t been watching you of late? That is exactly what I am here for. Poor old boy, you’ve been on the rack a shade too long lately; but I think I can put that right if you’ll only let me. I’ve great news for you.”

“I don’t know what sort of news you can have that will be acceptable to me,” replied Browne lugubriously. “I’m carrying about as much just now as I can possibly manage.

What is it?”

“Do you think you’re altogether fit to hear it?” he asked. “And what about Miss Petrovitch? Can you leave her for a few moments?”

“I will speak to her,” Browne answered, and accordingly went back to Katherine. A moment later he rejoined Foote.

“Now then, what is it?” he cried almost fiercely. “What fresh treachery am I to discover?”

“Come to the smoking–room,” Jimmy began. “I can’t tell you here on deck, with all the world trying to overhear what I have to say.”

When they reached the cabin in question Browne discovered MacAndrew there, sitting on one of the marble tables and smoking a cigarette.

“I don’t know what you think about it, Mr. Browne,” remarked the latter; “but it strikes me now, that we have come very well out of that little encounter with our Muscovite friend over yonder. The idea they’ve got in their heads is that the runaway and myself are not on board; and if I know anything of their tactics, they will patrol the coast for the next week or ten days in the expectation of your coming back to pick us up.”

“I wish them joy of their stay,” Browne replied. “By the time they’re tired of it we shall be safely out of reach. But what is it you have to say to me, Jimmy? You didn’t bring me here to talk about the cruiser, I suppose?”

“I did not,” said Jimmy, with a great show of importance. “I brought you to talk about something far more interesting. Look here, old man, I don’t, of course, know what your feelings may be; but I’ve got a sort of a notion that—well, to put it in plain words—that you’re none too pleased with your prospective father–in–law. He doesn’t quite come up to your idea of the man whom you had been told suffered martyrdom for his country’s good—eh?”

“I have never said that I disapproved of him,” Browne retorted. “I don’t know why you should have got this notion into your head.”

“You’re very loyal, I must say, old man,” continued Jimmy; “but that cat won’t fight—not for an instant. Any one could see that. No, no; I know as well as if you had told me, that you’re as miserable as a man can well be, and so is Miss Petrovitch. I don’t wonder at it. I expect I should be as bad if I were likely to be blessed with such a papa. I should be inclined to wish him back again in the wilds of Saghalien.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake, get on with what you’ve got to say!” cried Browne. “Why do you keep me on the rack like this?”

Jimmy, however, was not to be hurried. He had never had such a hand to play before, and he was determined to make the most of it.

“It was MacAndrew there who made the discovery,” he replied. “I only came in at the end, like the Greek Chorus, to explain things. The fact of the matter is, Browne, when our friend here and the little red–haired gentleman were shut up together in the tunnel, the former elicited the information (how he managed it I am not prepared to say) that the name of the ex–convict is not Polowski or Petrovitch, but Kleinkopf; that he is not a

Nihilist, as we have been led to believe, but a diamond–thief of the first water."

He paused to hear what Browne would say, and, if the truth must be confessed, he was mortified to find that the other betrayed no sort of surprise.

"I know all that," answered his friend. "Have you discovered nothing else?"

"A heap more," continued Jimmy; "but perhaps you know that, too. Are you aware that the convict is the famous Red Rat, who once defied the united police of Europe? Well, he is! He is also—and, mark you, this is the greatest point of all—he is no less a person than *Madame Bernstein's husband*!"

"Madame Bernstein's husband?" cried Browne, in stupefied surprise. "What on earth do you mean by that? I warn you not to joke with me. I'm not in the humour for it."

"I'm not joking," Jimmy returned, with all gravity. "I'm telling you this in deadly earnest. The Red Rat is Madame Bernstein's husband. He was sentenced to transportation for life in St. Petersburg, was sent to Siberia, and later on was drafted to Saghalien."

"Is this true, MacAndrew?" inquired Browne. "You should know."

"It is quite true," said MacAndrew. "For my part, I always thought he was the man you were trying to rescue. If you will look at it you will find that he tallies exactly with Madame's description of the man we wanted."

"Oh heavens! how we have been deceived!" groaned Browne. Then, as another thought struck him, he added, "But if this is so, then Miss Petrovitch's father is still in captivity."

"No," said MacAndrew; "he has escaped."

"What do you mean? When did he escape?"

"He is dead. He died early last year."

A silence that lasted upwards of five minutes fell upon the trio.

"The more I think of it the farther I am from understanding it," Browne said at last. "Why should I have been singled out for the task of rescuing this man, in whom I don't take the least bit of interest?"

"Because you are rich," muttered Jimmy. "Why, my dear fellow, it's all as plain as daylight, now that we've got the key to the puzzle. Madame was aware that Miss Petrovitch would do anything to rescue her father, and so would the man she loved. Therefore, when you, with your money, your influence, and, above all, your yacht, came upon the scene, she took advantage of the opportunity Providence had sent her, and laid her plans accordingly. You know the result."

"And while Miss Petrovitch has been wearing her heart out with anxiety to save her father, this heartless woman has been deceiving her—to whom she owes everything—and adapting our means to secure her own ends."

"It looks like it—does it not?" said Jimmy. "Now, what do you intend doing? Remember, you have two traitors to deal with—Madame Bernstein and Mr. Maas."

"I don't know what to do," replied poor Browne, "It is sufficiently vexatious. I shall have to tell Miss Petrovitch, and it will break her heart. As for Maas, we must consider what is

best to be done with him. I'll have no mercy on the brute."

"Oh yes, you will," argued Jimmy. "Whatever you are, you are not vindictive, Jack. Don't try to make me believe you are."

Leaving the two men together, Browne went in search of his sweetheart. When he found her, he summoned up all the courage he possessed and told her everything from the beginning to the end. She was braver than he had expected, and heard him out without comment. Only when he had finished, she rose from her seat, and asked him to excuse her, saying that she would go to her cabin for a little while.

A little before sunset that afternoon a small brig was sighted, five miles or so away to the south–west. A course was immediately shaped to intercept her. Her attention having been attracted, she hove to and waited for the boat, that Mason warned her he was sending. When she put off the third officer was in charge, and MacAndrew was sitting beside him in the stern sheets. They returned in something under an hour, and immediately on his arrival on board MacAndrew made his way to the smoking–room, where he was closeted with Browne for upwards of an hour. After that he went below with Jimmy Foote.

The orb of day lay like a ball of fire upon the horizon when they reappeared. This time they escorted no less a person than Maas himself, who looked as if he were scarcely awake. Without inquiring for them or asking leave to bid his host and hostess farewell, he disappeared down the accommodation–ladder, and took his place in the boat alongside, and his traps were bundled in after him. Half an hour later the boat returned, but this time Maas was not in her. MacAndrew ascended to the deck, and once more made his way to the smoking–room. He found Browne and Jimmy there as before.

"They will land him at Tomari in the Kuriles in three months' time," he reported, with what appeared to be considerable satisfaction.

"Tomari is the capital of Kunashiri Island," said Jimmy, who had turned up a copy of the *China Sea Directory* during the short silence that followed. "It has a permanent population of about one thousand five hundred souls, which is largely increased in summer time by fishermen."

"You are sure he will be quite safe," asked Browne. "Scoundrel and traitor though he is, I shouldn't like to think that any harm would befall him."

"You need not be afraid," replied MacAndrew. "He is quite able to look after himself. Besides, the skipper is an old friend of mine, and a most respectable person. He will take every care of him, you may be sure. You have paid him well enough to make it worth his while."

After that, for the remainder of the voyage, the name of Maas was never mentioned by any of the party. Even to this day Browne scarcely likes to hear it spoken. Nor does he permit himself to dwell very often upon what happened a few days later, when, after a most uncomfortable interval, the yacht rounded Hakodate Headland and came to an anchor in the harbour.

"Leave everything to me," said MacAndrew, when he went into the smoking–room to bid Browne farewell. "I know how painful an interview would be for you all, and I think you can very well dispense with it. I believe they are ready to go ashore."

“In that case, let them go. I never wish to see their faces again.”

“I can quite understand it; and now I must bid you farewell myself. I am sorry our adventure has not turned out more successfully; but at any rate you have had a run for your money, and you have seen something of life in the Far East.”

“I have, indeed,” said Browne. “Now, tell me of the arrangements you have made concerning these two miserable people. What will happen to them eventually?”

“They can do as they think best,” replied MacAndrew. “They can either stay here or go wherever they please. The Nippon Yusen Kwaisha Line call here thrice weekly; and from Yokohama you can reach any part of the known world.”

“But they are practically penniless,” said Browne. Then, taking an envelope from his pocket, he handed it to MacAndrew. “If you can find an opportunity of delivering it, will you contrive to let them have this? There is something inside that will keep the wolf from the door, for a time at least.”

MacAndrew looked at him a little curiously. He was about to say something, but he checked himself, and, stowing the envelope away in his pocket, held out his hand.

“You were not inclined to trust me when first we met; but I hope you are satisfied now that I have done my best for you.”

“I am more than satisfied,” replied Browne. “I am very grateful. I wish you would let me do something to help you in return.”

“You *have* helped me,” MacAndrew answered. “You have helped me amazingly; more perhaps than you think. Now, good–bye, and may good luck and every happiness go with you.”

“Good–bye,” said Browne; and then the tall, graceful figure passed along the deck in the direction of the main companion–ladder. A few moments later the sound of oars reached his ears; and when they could no longer be heard Browne went in search of Katherine and Jimmy Foote.

“Well, old man,” asked the latter when the screw had begun to revolve once more, “what now? What is the next thing?”

“The next thing,” Browne replied, seating himself beside Katherine as he spoke, and taking her hand, “is Yokohama, and a wedding, at which you shall assist in the capacity of best man.”

That night the lovers stood on deck, leaning against the bulwarks watching the moon rise from behind a bank of cloud.

“Of what are you thinking, sweetheart?” Browne inquired, looking at the sweet face beside him. “I wonder if I could guess.”

“I very much doubt it,” she answered, with a sad little smile. “You had better try.”

“You were thinking of a tiny land–locked harbour, surrounded by snow–capped mountains, were you not?”

“Yes,” she replied; “I certainly was. I was thinking of our first meeting in Merok. Oh,

Jack! Jack! how much has happened since then!”

“Yes,” he continued slowly. “A great deal has happened; but at least there are two things for which we should be thankful.”

“And what are they?”

“The first is that we are together, and the second is that you are not THE RED RAT’S DAUGHTER!”

THE END.